
RETHINKING OCCULTISM AND CRIME: SATANISM, THE OCCULT AND YOUTH GANG SUBCULTURES IN THE GLOBAL AND SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between occultism and crime has often been explored in the criminological literature within the context of ritualistic crimes. In many instances, such crimes have been linked to Satanism and the occult (in its various guises). In the United States (US), Perlmutter's (2004) text on religious terrorism and ritualistic crimes sought to provide some insights into the ritualised context of occult-related crimes and identified various subgroups whose criminal activities are underpinned by specific religious and ritualistic beliefs and practices. In the South African context, various scholars have explored occult-related crimes ranging from Satanism-related crime to African witchcraft-related crime. However, in the South African context, little work has been done on the relationship between the occult and crime within the context of youth gang subcultures. This discussion seeks to contribute to this under-researched issue by arguing for a rethinking of occultism and crime. It is argued that the emergence of occult beliefs and practices among youth gangs in South Africa necessitates a new way of approaching the occult and crime relationship, one that seeks to apply perspectives on this relationship to gang subcultures. This suggested rethinking of the occultism and crime relationship is timely, especially considering the apparent rise in occult-related dynamics among youth gang subcultures in South Africa and elsewhere.

Keywords: *African witchcraft; Satanism; occult; occult-related crimes; youth gang subcultures.*

INTRODUCTION

As far as mainstream criminology is concerned, scholars such as Perlmutter (2004) attempted to clarify the relationship between occultism and crime by focusing on the ritualised context of these crimes. Hence, what can be called 'ritualistic crimes' became a broad category under which various subgroups, believed to be involved in such crimes, were subsumed (Perlmutter, 2004).

This article seeks to contribute to the mainstream literature on occult-related crime by introducing an emphasis on occultism and crime among youth gang subcultures, with reference to the South African context. The emphasis on youth gang subcultures emanates from the current challenges that youth gangs pose for law enforcement authorities and the communities where they are found. For example, a report by Thaw (2018: np) indicated that almost one thousand people had been killed in gang-related violence throughout the country in the past financial year. Furthermore, the same report claimed that in the Western Cape, forty-five percent of murders had occurred in policing precincts identified as those that were the hardest hit by gang activity. In this article, various examples of youth gangs are discussed that illustrate the influence of occult and ritualistic activities. These examples suggest, therefore, that the influence of occult beliefs in youth

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gangs is a relevant issue for scholars to explore. While youth gangs already pose a formidable challenge to law enforcement authorities, the impact of occultism adds another dynamic to the youth gang challenge, one that is significantly under-researched.

It should be noted that the authors understand occult-related crime in a context-specific manner. The authors recognise that, in the South African context, occult-related crime includes not only Satanism, but also traditional African beliefs in magic and witchcraft. The South African Police Service (SAPS) defines occult-related crime as follows:

“any human conduct that constitutes any legally recognized crime, the *modus operandi* of which relates to or emanates primarily from any belief...in the occult, witchcraft, Satanism, mysticism, magic, esotericism and the like. Included in the scope of occult-related crime are ritual muti/medicine murders, witch purging...” (Petrus, 2009: 139).

While much of the discussion focuses on the South African context of occultism and youth gang subcultures, some discussion of the global or international context is also provided. The main reason for this is that social phenomena, including those related crime, do not occur in a vacuum, and are often not only limited to a specific geographical region or location. The link between occult-related crime and youth gangs is an internationally relevant issue, as illustrated below. Hence, perspectives on occultism and youth gangs in the South African context can benefit from global perspectives on these phenomena. Although the South African context may differ in certain important respects from the global situation, there are also similarities.

Considering the above, the argument raised in this article is that perspectives on the relationship between occultism and crime should be reframed to include the influence of occultism on youth gang subcultures, particularly in South Africa. This argument is made in relation to the international scholarship on occultism and crime, and their relevance to the South African context. This rethinking of occultism and crime could help to shed some light on a little understood issue in South African youth gang subculture studies.

METHODOLOGY

The points raised in this discussion are based predominantly on a focused literature study and review. Key secondary sources included both international and South African scholarship on occult-related crime, as well as youth gang subcultures that possess an occult character, either in terms of structure or *modus operandi*. In addition, relevant news articles were included in order to illustrate cases of occult-related crimes perpetrated by youth gangs in various contexts.

A cursory comparison of the international and South African scholarship on occult-related crime in general reflects a similar chronological trajectory. As shown below, the international scholarship appears to have started in the late 1980s, with a proliferation of literature emerging into the 1990s to mid-2000s, and a general tapering off of literature from about 2005. Not much scholarship appears to be produced currently (over the last five-year period), save for a few sparse research articles here and there. The South African scholarship appears to have followed a similar pattern, with much of the literature being produced in the 1980s and 1990s, and a general decline in scholarship into the 2000s. Significantly, although in both the global and local contexts the scholarship on occult-related crime has not grown exceptionally post-2000, media reports on occult-related crime, specifically as perpetrated by youth gangs, have consistently appeared. Various international and local examples to this effect are discussed.

THE OCCULT AND CRIME: A BRIEF OUTLINE OF INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

There is much international literature on the link between the occult and crime (see, for example, Langone & Blood, 1990; Jenkins & Maier-Katkin, 1992; Ross, 1995; Bottoms, 1991; Richardson *et al.*, 1991; Perlmutter, 2004; Pulling & Cawthon, 1989; Forsyth & Olivier, 1990; Valdemar, 2008: np; Knox & Robinson, 2000; Pokines, 2015). Similar to the South African context (see, for example, Dunbar & Swart, 2012), much of this literature on the occult/Satanism and crime appears to have proliferated during the late 1980s and 1990s, fuelled no doubt by the sensationalised stories in the mass media at the time (see Shewan, 2015; Rossen, 2016; Hughes, 2017). Nevertheless, the number of scientific publications focusing on the relationship between occultism and crime, as well as the increasing numbers of official police investigative studies and reports on this type of crime, encouraged the notion that occult-related crime was in fact a real phenomenon (see Clark, 1988; Bottoms, 1991; Acklin, 2001). After the 1990s and into the 2000s, scholars continued to focus attention on the phenomenon, leading to texts, such as that of Perlmutter (2004), and, most recently, a case report on an occult-related crime scene as described by Pokines (2015). In addition, the phenomenon still enjoys much attention in the American media where, among other examples, a true crime television show entitled *Occult Crimes* began airing on Netflix in 2015 (Internet Movie Database (IMDB), 2018: np).

International studies on occult-related crime, and the groups involved in them, focused on separating the empirically verifiable issues from the sensationalist assumptions prominent in the popular media. Scholars and law enforcement practitioners grappled with complexities of conceptualisation, with some, for example, referring to occult-related or occult crime (see California Office of Criminal Justice Planning, 1990; Kahaner, 1988; Clark, 1988; Crews, 2015), and others referring to ritual or ritualistic crime (Perlmutter, 2003/2004: 1-43; 2004; Garret, 2004: 63; Bennett & Hess, 2007: 551-552; Lanning, 1989). The complexity of occult-related or ritualistic crime necessitated further distinctions between the crimes themselves. Hence, scholars and practitioners began to distinguish between ritual abuse (see for example La Fontaine, 1994; Ross, 1995; Nathan & Snedeker, 2001; Mulhern, 1994) and ritual homicide (Ferracuti & DeMarco, 2004; Perlmutter, 2004: 139). Furthermore, not all crimes categorised as ‘ritual crimes’ necessarily involved an occult or satanic element. For example, in their analysis of serial sexual homicide, Schlesinger *et al.* (2010: 239) describe ritual as “repetitive crime scene behaviors that have been found to occur in serial sexual homicide.” In this context, the ritual element is found in the repetition of behaviour by the perpetrator, rather than being influenced by an occult or religious belief.

The identification of various groups and subgroups believed to be involved in occult-related or ritualistic crimes became a critical factor in criminal profiling and establishing occult-related crime typologies. While the media focused more on Satanism-related cases, law enforcement scholars and practitioners identified a range of occult-related cases that were categorised according to a range of groups, subgroups and subcultures. For example, Perlmutter (2004) identified several types of occult-related subgroups and subcultures including satanic groups (109-142); vampiric subcultures (145-176); and subgroups belonging to syncretic religions such as Santería, Voodoo, Brujería and Palo Mayombe (181-222; see also Pokines, 2015). Each of these subgroups demonstrated ritualistic activities that involved occult-related crime including ritual homicide, typically in the form of human sacrifice. The classification of Satanism-related groups as one of several types of occult-related groups was significant, especially since any mention of occult-related crime usually led to the automatic assumption that it involved Satanism.

This consequently led to the erroneous assumption that it was only Satanism that was the basis of occult-related crimes.

The above discussion, while not exhaustive, serves to briefly outline the international context of occult-related crime, specifically in relation to some of the scholarship on the subject. In the South African context, while certain similarities could be identified with what occurred in the US context, there are also some significant differences, as the discussion below suggests.

OCCULTISM AND CRIME IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT: SATANISM AND WITCHCRAFT

The challenge in current criminological research is the Africanisation of theory in order to decontaminate discourses from a purely colonial paradigm. The epistemology of contemporary criminology is largely vested in the Western paradigm of positivism, stemming from a secular worldview. Consequently, dealing with phenomena such as spirituality outside of theology is often frowned upon. As Beiden, (2007: 1) argues, if a phenomenon is not verifiable or falsifiable through the scientific method, and cannot be measured; it is simply opinion, belief, or fantasy. It cannot be known and sensibly talked about and, hence, should be relegated to the private sphere. For Mastin (2008: np), positivistic empiricism is the only method of enquiry. This scepticism can be addressed in criminology, as a science that draws knowledge from other disciplines, and is ideally suited to broaden enquiry into human behaviour. Specifically, the relationship between criminology and philosophy, particularly as they relate to human world-views and metaphysics, is pertinent. Landauer and Rowlands (2001: np) confirm this role of philosophy when they address the foundation of philosophy, namely metaphysics:

“At the root is Metaphysics, the study of existence and the nature of existence. Closely related is Epistemology, the study of knowledge and how we know about reality and existence. Dependent on Epistemology is Ethics, the study of how man should act. Ethics is dependent on Epistemology because it is impossible to make choices without knowledge” (Landauer & Rowlands, 2001: 1).

In criminological research, the relationship between the visible and observable reality on the one hand, and the invisible and unobservable reality on the other, is most often pronounced in the context of occult-related crime. Particularly in the African context, occultism and occult-related crime are based on beliefs and practices related to African witchcraft. Various scholars (including Petrus & Bogopa, 2007; Petrus, 2009) have described the belief system of indigenous African cultural groups, and where the belief in witchcraft and evil spirits fits in. Traditionally, the belief in witchcraft (or sorcery in some contexts) was an integral part of the cosmological systems of African cultures (see, for example, Petrus, 2009: 54-55; Pauw, 1994: 128; Osei, 2003). Witchcraft fulfilled a specific function, being the mechanism through which seemingly inexplicable events or misfortunes could be explained. However, one of the key characteristics of traditional African beliefs in witchcraft was that it was almost always the malevolence of an individual that was the cause of someone else’s misfortune (Olivier, 1981: 81; Pauw, 1994: 128; Petrus, 2009: 60-61). The only other possible reason for misfortune was the failure to properly venerate the ancestors. Traditional healers were often consulted to determine whether witchcraft or ancestors were the cause of misfortune. It was believed that both traditional healers and witches had access to supernatural power or magic, that in itself was completely neutral. It was how that magic was used, as well as the motive behind its use, which determined whether it was used for good or evil (Petrus, 2009: 58).

African people have a reverence for the spiritual world, and the veneration of ancestral spirits (*amathongo* or *amadlozi* among the Southern Nguni groups) is common practice. South African indigenous people, such as the Xhosa-speaking groups in the Eastern Cape Province (see Petrus, 2009), are known to believe in evil spirits such as *uThikoloshe*¹ and the lightning bird or *impundulu*.² However, in earlier times, and in many cases even in the present, these spirits were not directly associated with Satanism *per se*, but were instead linked to the malevolent intentions of individuals (that is, witches) who wished harm upon others.

In the African and South African context, the concept of Satanism, and particularly its relationship to crime, is influenced by the African cultural context. The Western conceptualisation of Satanism emerged mainly within a Judaeo-Christian framework. Hence, with the advent of missionary Christianity in Africa, the notion of an entity known as Satan became conflated or combined with traditional African conceptions of evil (Petrus, 2009: 71-72 & 75). Consequently, the African context influenced Western Christian notions of Satanism, and *vice versa*.

In South Africa, the 1990s saw significant national interest in Satanism, due largely to the reported increase in occult-related crimes that were labelled as Satanism. The subject of Satanism even led to the publication of popular articles and books, such as that of Gardiner and Gardiner (1990), Du Rand (1995), Seale (1990) and others. The proliferation of texts and articles in popular media reflected the impact of reports of Satanism on South African society at the time.

Frequent media reports across the country, as well as apparent crimes linked to Satanism also prompted the creation of a special investigation unit in the police service. The SAPS' Occult-related Crime Unit (ORCU) was established in 1992 under the leadership of Kobus Jonker. The unit was established predominantly to investigate Satanism-related crimes, but it expanded its scope to include witchcraft-related crimes such as *muti* murder (Petrus, 2008: 145). The ORCU was somewhat controversial and was criticised from various quarters, apparently leading to its disbandment (Steven, 2013: np). The unit was accused of being unconstitutional, in that it 'infringed on the constitutional right to religious freedom which even accommodate(s) Satanism as a legitimate religion.' (Steven, 2013: np; see also Rousseau, 2013: np; Fumarola, 2012: np; Harvey, 2014: np). Opposition to the unit came mainly from pagan rights groups in South Africa. Despite the opposition to the unit, it seems to have been revived under a new name, the "Harmful Religious Practices Unit" (Smillie, 2014: np).

The revival of the unit in 2012 appears to have been a response to the apparent re-emergence of occult-related crimes in South Africa (Cornelius, 2014: np). In the province of Gauteng, it was reported that "There has been an increase in occult-related crimes" (SAPA, 2014: np). The article cited a case of two teenagers from the Dobsonville area who "were murdered in a suspected Satanic ritual". The victims "had cuts on their hands and necks", while "...[t]here were black candles and two new razor blades found at the scene" (SAPA, 2014: np). The report further stated that occult-related murders were found nationally, and not only in Gauteng. This was substantiated by another report from the Eastern Cape Province. According to Harvey (2014: np), Eastern Cape police established an occult-related crime task team "as part of a national drive by the SAPS to crack down on muti murders and other crimes that may occur during the practising of Satanism, witchcraft and even vampirism". Similar task teams were established throughout each of the nine provinces, and officers were trained to investigate the following:

- Witchcraft-related offences (including black magic, witch finding and witch purging);
- Voodoo practices intended to cause harm;
- Vampirism and joint infringement of human tissue [*cf* Amendment Act 51 of 1989];
- Human sacrifice leaving evidence of occult involvement; and
- Rape allegations involving a *Thikoloshe* spirit (Harvey, 2014: np)

From the above, it is clear that the SAPS used a broad categorisation of occult-related crime that included Satanism-related activity, as well as activity involving traditional African witchcraft-related beliefs and practices. However, Petrus (2008) provides an in-depth analysis of possible problems that could occur due to the conflation of Satanism and witchcraft-related issues. For example, one problem was the “mistaken association of *muti* murder with Satanist-ritual homicide...due to the similarities in the *modus operandi* of these crimes” (Petrus, 2008: 145). In addition, there was the initial criticisms of occult crime units, namely from pagan practitioners, who felt that their constitutional rights were being violated. A third problem is the apparent lack of properly researched data on the phenomenon of occult crime, especially in the post-2000s. This has been a problem that has dogged the occult unit since its inception, as it was criticised as being heavily biased in favour of orthodox Christianity, even expecting its members to be confirmed Christians (see Kemp, 2015: np; Keita, 2014: np).

OCCULTISM AND CRIME IN YOUTH GANGS: THE GLOBAL PICTURE

The relationship between occultism, crime and gangs has been a feature of occult-related crime in the global context, and, according to various media and law enforcement reports, it continues. For example, Valdemar (2008: np) argues that: “Throughout the long history of Los Angeles street gangs, their members have flirted with the dark side of evil...This...can be seen in the mixture of religious and demonic symbols depicted on their tattooed bodies.” The history of criminal gangs in Los Angeles reveals how Central and South American gang members brought occult beliefs, practices and subcultures into mainstream US society. Again, with reference to Valdemar (2008: np), in the 1980s, Cuban *Marielitos* and Mexican drug cartels became associated with occult symbols relating to Santería, Voodoo, Palo Mayombe and Brujería, and *botanicas* (occult pharmacies or shops) that sold the items necessary for rituals involving these beliefs and practices, “sprang up in every community.” In this period, a new type of gang formation emerged that rivalled the existing *Cholo* formations. These new gang types became known as ‘Stoners’, and from them emerged groups such as the Hole Stoners, ELA Stoners and MS Stoners (which later became MS-13 or *Mara Salvatrucha* 13) (Valdemar, 2008: np; see also Miller, 2017b: np).

MS-13 has become one of the most notorious and feared gangs in the US, and part of this profile is due to its members’ use of occult rituals and practices in their activities. In September 2017 it was reported that a mutilated victim had been found buried in a shallow grave in Maryland’s Wheaton Regional Park. The crime was labelled a “satanic murder” and was attributed by police to MS-13 (Miller, 2017b: np). This 2017 report supports the argument made by Valdemar (2008: np) above, namely that MS-13 was founded on occult beliefs and practices (specifically Satanism). The report also argues that these beliefs and practices are still a fundamental part of the gang’s subculture:

“Some of the gang’s founders were devil-worshipping metal heads, according to experts. And although the connection has waned over the past 30 years, it can still be seen in MS-13’s use of satanic nicknames, tattoos and other imagery. The gang’s devil horns hand sign is known as ‘la garra’, a Spanish reference to Satan’s claws. And some MS-13 members have told investigators that they committed their crimes at the behest of ‘la bestia’ or the Beast” (Miller, 2017b: np).

In another example, this time from India, it was reported that villagers in the Jodhpur district were living in fear following attacks by an “occult gang harvesting women’s hair” (Miller, 2017a: np). According to the report, residents reported a strange smell prior to attacks, thereby leading to speculation that they were being drugged by the perpetrators. In addition, “Many of the victimized women...awoke with red tridents [perhaps a representation of the Devil’s pitchfork] branded onto their skin” (Miller, 2017a: np). However, Indian officials were of the view that village elders (*bhopa*) were deliberately spreading panic for their own gain (Miller, 2017a: np).

In a third example, this time from the West Midlands area of Birmingham in the UK, it was reported in 2008 that “gangsters are turning to black magic to protect themselves from harm” (Sunday Mercury, 2008: np). According to the report, gang members used occult rituals not only to protect them during gang fights, but apparently also to protect them from bullets. A senior gang expert was quoted in the report as claiming that this behaviour was possibly influenced by “the allegedly occult lyrics and symbols used by [American] rap stars Jay-Z and Kanye West” (Sunday Mercury, 2008: np).

Gangs are a global phenomenon (Hagedorn, 2005: 153, 163; Petrus & Kinnes, 2018: 2). They are known to employ ritualistic behaviours and practices that characterise their formations as distinct from other groups or formations in society. The use of rites of passage for members to advance from one level or status in the gang to another, or the use of initiation rituals to incorporate new members into the gang, are typical examples of such ritualistic behaviour. Rasband ([sa]: np), as well as Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1964) opine that a rite of passage, consisting of three phases, namely separation, transition (liminality) and incorporation, marks a time when a person enters a new and significant change in life, and in many instances, this is celebrated with ceremonies or rituals. In similar fashion, these three stages may be used for initiation into alleged occult groups and secret societies. With reference to examples, such as the Freemasons and Skull and Bones in the US, both of which are believed by some to be secret societies based on occult ideologies, Dewey (2017) remarks that:

“[Among] Freemasons, the candidate is blindfolded and then led around by a rope around his neck. As the candidate approaches the oath of secrecy, the sharp point of a sword is placed against his left breast. The Skull and Bones secret society at Yale puts a new member into a coffin. Members chant at him and he is ‘reborn’ into the society” (Dewey, 2017: 1).

Ritualistic behaviour holds much symbolic significance for gang formations. It firmly entrenches gang member linkages to each other, almost creating a type of kinship bond between them (incidentally, some gangs even refer to themselves as brotherhoods); it instils and promotes unquestioning loyalty to the group; it firmly establishes the status hierarchy between individual members, as well as between various levels in the gang structure; it encourages a sense of mystery or aura; and it induces fear, not only among gang members themselves to ensure loyalty, but also among outsiders. These aspects of ritualism appear to be somewhat common to gangs across all regions and contexts. This is one reason why gangs are considered ‘subcultures’, because it is these

ritualistic behaviours that create a particular way of life for gang members, and that govern their ways of thinking and acting (see Petrus, 2013: 71).

Given the propensity for gang formations to employ ritual behaviour, it is not surprising that many gangs link occult beliefs and practices (themselves highly ritualised) to their activities. It has been argued that gangs are not isolated entities but are products of the wider social and cultural contexts in which they either may have originated, or in which they continue to exist. Petrus (2013: 71), for example, argues that gangs may be influenced by the same social and cultural dynamics of the communities in which they exist. The examples mentioned previously illustrate, to a certain extent, the influence of inherited occult-related beliefs and practices that are subsequently adopted by gangs and adapted to suit their specific objectives. The Latino gangs in the US, for example, show how beliefs related to traditional mainstream religious systems, such as Santería, Voodoo or Brujería, influence the activities in these gangs. Occult beliefs and practices thus fit in well with already existing ritualistic tendencies within gang formations. Linking their identities, rituals and activities to the occult serves to enhance their status, and, as they may believe, imbues them with supernatural power that may give them an advantage over their rivals. Swancer (2017) supports this view in an account of how MS-13 uses the occult as a fundamental part of its activities:

“According to insiders within the gang, MS-13 members have experimented with everything from using Ouija boards to extract information or gather names of who to target, to utilizing demonic rituals to go into trances in which they feel no pain and exhibit superhuman strength, to the full on summoning of demons” (Swancer, 2017: np).

The significance of occultism permeates the potential criminal activities that the gang may commit. As mentioned above, the ritual-occult link is designed, among other things, to instil fear among outsiders in the gang's power. However, it could also be argued that gangs who use ritualism and the occult in the perpetration of criminal acts do so to send a message to rival gangs. This may be why gangs such as MS-13 choose to severely mutilate victims through what appear to be satanic ritual homicides. In other words, the more brutally a gang deals with its victims, the more powerful and thus more fearsome that gang appears. Power that appears to be linked to the supernatural or the occult seems to be the apex of what these gangs may strive for. Hence, the more bizarre and ritualistic they can make their criminal acts appear, the greater the perception of fear and power that the gangs can create. However, it should also be noted that while gangs may intentionally use occult methods in their crimes to create perceptions of fear and power, many gang members may actually believe in the occult or supernatural powers that they believe they are invoking (Miller, 2017b: np). The significant influence of the occult and ritualistic behaviour on gangs in the international context, both in the past and in the present, suggests that this remains an area of important research in relation to gang studies.

THE OCCULT AND YOUTH GANGS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Much of what is known about occult-related crime in South Africa has followed two trajectories. On the one hand is the identification of groups and individuals linked to Satanism, one type of destructive occult ideology where practitioners (perpetrators) follow specific *modus operandi*, including the use of identifiable satanic symbols and paraphernalia at crime scenes. On the other hand, is the phenomenon of African witchcraft-related crimes, including witch-purging and *muti* murder. However, as indicated earlier, these distinctions appear to have become blurred in the media, as well as in police units, as both Satanism and traditional African magic and witchcraft beliefs appear to have become intertwined. Further, the resurgence of occult-related crime seems

also to be connected to existing and new youth gang formations that, as in the US, are now incorporating occultism into their gang subcultures.

As an example to illustrate the above, in Cape Town it was reported that a network of sex workers was allegedly “controlled by a pimp involved in gangsterism and satanism” (Dolley, 2016: np). According to the report, a shadowy underworld figure known as The Priest, was allegedly a gang leader who was believed to “recruit and groom sex workers to perform satanic rituals – done behind closed doors [and] unbeknown to clients – [and] which include[d] drinking blood, usually that of animals” (Dolley, 2016). It was also indicated in the report that these rituals formed part of the gang’s customs. However, the alleged involvement of sex workers in Satanism was disputed by the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) who “had not heard of sex workers involved in satanism” (Dolley, 2016: np).

The most prolific evidence, to date, of youth gangs utilising occultism in their activities is arguably to be found in the Free State Province. The discussion that follows provides an in-depth account of youth gangs in the Free State that are believed to be involved in occultism.

EXAMPLES OF OCCULT-INSPIRED YOUTH GANGS FROM THE FREE STATE PROVINCE

Even though youth gang formations in the Free State province is not a new phenomenon, their ties to the occult and African witchcraft distinguishes them from any other subcultural grouping (Phillips & Maritz, 2015: 53). In 1997, an investigation into occult-related practices led to the discovery of a devil-worshipping group that moved down from Northern Africa, and settled in Maseru, Lesotho. This group combined African witchcraft with theistic Satanism, and a new satanic movement spread rapidly across South Africa. Initially, these groups lacked structure, and mainly focused on ritualistic mysticism, blood sacrifices, and worshipping Satan as a deity. Over the course of the past two decades, these devil-worshipping subcultures evolved, and spread rapidly throughout the Free State province, affecting towns such as Fouriesburg, Clocolan, Welkom, Winburg, Brandfort, Bultfontein, Tweespruit, and Bloemfontein (Van Zyl, 2017: np).

Gang practices have shown an escalation circa 2011, with the Free State being identified as the province with the highest occurrence of destructive youth gang subcultures involved in African witchcraft, Satanism and occult-related practices (Phillips & Maritz, 2015: 59; Van Zyl, 2017: np). The paucity of statistics pertaining to youth gang formations and gang-related activities in the Free State can be attributed to their evasive nature, as they often attempt to avoid detainment and identification. However, based on the limited knowledge available, it is estimated that there are currently forty (40) known gangs operating in the province (SAPS, 2014: np). Although the number of gang members is unclear due to a dearth of research and unreported incidents by victims and gang members, there are an estimated five thousand (5000) active members in the Bloemfontein, Botshabelo, Boithuso, and Mangaung sectors alone. These members are usually between the ages of 8 and 24-years-old. The most notorious and prolific gangs in this region are the Triple 6 (666), the Born To Kill (BTK), the Natural Born Killers (NBK), the International Junior Portuguese (IJP), and the Maromas (Fouche, 2012: np; SAPS, 2014: np). Due to their involvement with the occult, participation in ritualistic practices, and their clandestine and enigmatic nature, these subcultural groupings are generally referred to as “devil-worshipping gangs” by functional therapists at the Auksano Christian Trauma Therapy Centre (Van Zyl, 2017: np). The Triple 6 gang reigns over other subordinate gangs, and is regarded as the religious governing body, to which all other occult-related groupings, such as the BTK and IJP, are accountable. Each smaller gang, which is subordinate to the Triple 6, has its own rules, regulations,

motives and rituals. However, all of them have a connection to the occult and African witchcraft (Phillips & Maritz, 2015: 60; SAPS, 2014: np; Van Zyl, 2017: np).

The Triple 6 (666) Gang

The Triple 6 gang is notorious for involvement in the occult and governs other devil-worshipping gangs. What sets them apart from conventional Satanism, as it is known globally, is the integration of African witchcraft in its practices and beliefs. This includes the use of *muti* (African traditional medicine), particularly prior to the commission of crimes (Phillips & Maritz, 2015: 60; Rossouw, 2011: np; SAPS, 2014: np).

At the top of the gang's hierarchy is the leader, who is known as the King. Each area has its own King, who selects his own female counterpart to act as Queen. The King and Queen are believed to be god-like entities who possess supernatural powers, and the ability of astral projection. The leaders select a range of female members, usually the most beautiful or popular, to serve under them as Princesses, and whose main role is to attract new members by using sexual manipulation and seduction (Phillips & Maritz, 2015: 60; Rossouw, 2011: np). New members are required to go through an initiation ritual in order to be accepted into the gang. During the ritual, the new member is expected to prove his worth and commitment to the gang by providing a blood sacrifice to the leaders. The initiate is required to murder a target selected by the gang leaders and is then obligated to consume the blood of the victim. The victim's genitals are then removed, mixed with *muti*, and buried during a ritualistic ceremony, which usually takes place in a cemetery (SAPS, 2014: np). After being successfully initiated, the new member is welcomed into the gang by being branded with the gang's insignia, in the form of three dots either tattooed or burned into the flesh with a cigarette. The dots respectively symbolise life, blood and prison. These dots are known as a 'barcode', and are seen as a spiritual doorway for the King and Queen, enabling them to use their abilities to access and manipulate the member's dreams and spirit. Tattoos of symbols related to occultism and Satanism, such as inverted crosses, are also common amongst members of the Triple 6 (SAPS, 2014: np).

With reference to criminal activity, the Triple 6s are usually involved in crimes of a violent nature. They also have the authority to commission subservient gangs to commit crimes on their behalf, which are usually of a profitable nature. This involves trading in stolen goods, burglary, kidnapping, armed robberies, and organ trafficking, which includes the harvesting of organs and body parts for *muti* and ritualistic purposes (Rossouw, 2011: np).

The Born to Kill (BTK) Gang

The BTK gang, although beneath the Triple 6s in hierarchy, holds their own in number and notoriety, and are known for violence and aggressive behaviour. Their structure, criminal involvement, beliefs and rituals are similar to those of the Triple 6s. The leaders of different regions are also seen as god-like entities who are worshipped by their members and are believed to possess abilities that include controlling demons and necromancy – communicating with the dead (Rossouw, 2011: np; SAPS, 2014: np).

Due to the violent nature of the BTK, new members are commonly recruited by means of force and threats. Instances of youths being branded with gang insignia and tattoos against their will have also been reported. Members of the gang are commonly branded with a tattoo of the letters 'BTK', or the numbers 2.20.11, which represent the letters' position in the alphabet. Male members are tattooed on the right upper arm, whereas female members are usually branded around the genital area. New recruits are required to go through an initiation ritual, where they are marked

with three dots, proving their allegiance to the Triple 6s. During the ritual, the new recruit is expected to drink the leader's blood, as this supposedly binds the recruit's spirit to that of the leader. After the ritual, the initiates are informed that they are expected to either kill their parents, or be sacrificed themselves (Rossouw, 2011: np; SAPS, 2014: np).

The International Junior Portuguese (IJP)

IJP members are also infamous for their violent and aggressive tendencies. There is a fierce rivalry between the IJPs and the BTKs, and numerous incidents of violence between these gang formations have been reported in youth detention centres, as the gangs battle to recruit new detainees (Coetzee & Phillips, 2012: 24; Rossouw, 2011: np). The gang is aligned to the Triple 6s and their ritualistic and occult-related activities. This is shown in their branding, which is usually the letters 'IJP' overlapped by three dots. Female members receive a tattooed dot on their forehead, which indicates that they are available for sexual intercourse with any male member of the IJP gang (Motshabi, 2017: np; Rossouw, 2011: np; SAPS, 2014: np). Their leader is known as a General, and all members of the gang are expected to worship him. Under his command, the gang is involved in a range of economic crimes and criminal syndicates. New members are usually lured to join the gang with the promise of the profits from the gang's criminal activities, usually including luxury goods and expensive clothing. These recruits are then expected to complete an initiation ritual which requires the commission of a murder, after which the initiate is branded with gang insignia. During this ritual, the recruit is not allowed to show any pain, fear or hesitation (SAPS, 2014: np). In certain cases, new members may also be forcefully branded with gang insignia, subsequently placing pressure on them to join the gang for protection and survival, as they may be perceived as "enemies" to rival gangs (Phillips & Maritz, 2015: 62).

CURRENT TRENDS RELATED TO YOUTH GANGS IN THE FREE STATE

Youth gangs are known to be ever-changing in their characteristics and activities, with new trends constantly surfacing in their social interactions and criminal involvement. Evolving forms of ritualism and occult activities are further examples of the dynamic nature of these groupings.

Initially, the initiation ritual into these gangs took a more physical form, and comprised of three common methods, including stealing items to lure new members, the murder of one or both parents, or exchanging sexual favours (Phillips & Maritz, 2015: 61). A contemporary development regarding the initiation ritual for all subcultural groupings, including the Triple 6s, BTKs, and IJPs, involves the "spiritual initiation" of new members. This could take one of three forms: firstly, drinking human blood, secondly consuming human flesh, or thirdly inhaling the broth of soup made from human flesh (Van Zyl, 2017: np). It is believed that the consumption of human flesh equates to consuming the life essence of the victim. In addition, the completion of the spiritual initiation ritual makes the recruit susceptible to demonic possession and provides supernatural abilities such as astral projection, communicating with the dead, and manipulating the dreams and spirits of newer or lower-ranking initiates. In certain cases, the physical forms of initiation described above may be utilised to induct new recruits into the group. Once these recruits have proven their loyalty, the physical initiation may be followed by a spiritual initiation, which is regarded as a reward for loyalty shown, and is often associated with transcending to a higher level within the gang. In other cases, the physical initiation ritual may be circumvented in favour of the more contemporary spiritual initiation ritual. This form of initiation is also regarded as the preferred method, as it is harder to detect by both the authorities investigating incidents of potential gang-related transgressions, and service providers attempting to intervene or discourage youth

from persisting with their involvement (Motshabi, 2017: np; Ramsden, 2017: np; Van Zyl, 2017: np).

Youth who reported to the Auksano Christian Trauma Therapy Centre for counselling also re-counted that, after being spiritually initiated, their soul would travel, together with the King or Queen, to a “mountain” by means of a “bone taxi”. Their spirit would then allegedly transcend to the centre of the mountain or be immersed under water. In so doing, their physical body would be open to possession by supernatural entities which are then able to manifest at any point in time. This “demonic manifestation” may then complicate any attempts to investigate allegations of misconduct or the commission of suspected gang-related transgressions, as the authorities and other role players may encounter difficulties when trying to gain information from the youth. This phenomenon was not connected to any particular subcultural grouping, and it can therefore be assumed that it would apply to all the respective youth gangs as they are subordinate to the Triple 6 and are all affiliated with the occult (Van Zyl, 2017: np).

With reference to the BTK gang, female members who reported to Auksano also described a “spiritual button”, which is located between the index finger and thumb of the left hand. It is believed that when this “button” is pressed, the youth’s spirit is transported back to the “mountain”, and a demonic entity seizes command of their physical body. In addition to placing stress on investigations by the police, this also hinders attempts to rehabilitate and reintegrate youth back into their respective families and communities (Van Zyl, 2017: np). In other instances, gang-affiliated youth reported placing a hex or curse on specific intersections, traffic lights, or crossings. The purpose of this curse or hex would be to cause a collision in order to shed blood, which is then regarded as a sacrifice or offering to supernatural deities. This blood sacrifice would also be seen as a means of thanking the deity for bestowing supernatural abilities and is used to maintain or elevate one’s position in the supernatural realm (Van Zyl, 2017: np).

Although the police have made advances in gaining an understanding of the philosophy inherent to these groupings, much remains unknown, as gangs in general are regarded as secretive and self-regulated societies, even more so in the case of the destructive subcultural groupings immersed in occult-related ritualistic practices. Furthermore, increased numbers of youth are targeted for membership, particularly in schools, which have been described as “breeding grounds” for the recruitment of youth who remain vulnerable to manipulation and intimidation by more senior members of the BTK, IJP and Triple 6 (Motshabi, 2017: np; Ramsden, 2017: np; Van Zyl, 2017: np). As a result, membership continues to grow, subsequently highlighting the significance of understanding the motives for youth gang membership. These motives generally include, but are not limited to, acquiring power and material gain, developing and maintaining a sense of identity, and gaining respect and status – features which may be absent in other social contexts, such as the family, school, or community (Peacock, 2006: 49).

With reference to gang formations in the Free State province, the aforementioned motives apply, in addition to the appeal of wielding supernatural power and having the ability to “control demons” (Phillips & Maritz, 2015: 62). Subsequently, it is apparent that youth may not initially join gangs to gain supernatural powers, yet due to the enigmatic nature of these formations it inevitably becomes a core feature amongst these groupings. Potential recruits may thus be converted by the allure of power concomitant of the “supernatural” or “mystic” realm, while some may submit solely due to the fear associated with these unorthodox practices. Youth gang subcultures also remain a multi-faceted and far-reaching social issue, causing affected individuals to live in fear as gang-related activities commonly involve violence and intimidation (SAPS, 2014: np). Although the mysticism related to these new spiritual developments sound far-fetched and

surreal, the frequent terrorisation of societal members leads to feelings of intense distress and panic. Numerous youths from different geographical areas, various age groups, and different levels of emotional and intellectual capabilities have also alluded to similar experiences and beliefs, adding merit to the seemingly implausible and bizarre allegations of the youth involved. Therefore, regardless of the accuracy of the dark and mystic nature, and the perplexity related to the occult and ritualistic nature associated with these destructive subcultures, their impact on schools, families, and communities remains real in its consequences (Motshabi, 2017: np; Ramsden, 2017: np; Van Zyl, 2017: np).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the information presented thus far, it is apparent that the challenges related to youth gang subcultures are perplexing, and thus require a multi-disciplinary approach from all governmental and non-governmental sectors. It is envisioned that a three-pronged system be implemented in order to assist in the prevention and reduction of gang-related transgressions. This system should include initiatives on a primary, secondary, and tertiary level. With reference to the primary level, the initiatives should be aimed at youth who are not yet exposed to risk factors for gang membership, so as to reduce their initial risk of gang involvement. As such, this should involve their families, schools, and communities. Within the family domain, key concerns would include strengthening the bond with caregivers, providing training to parents regarding the management of disruptive and deviant youth, as well as ensuring cohesion within the family unit. Schools generally function as secondary socialisation agents tasked with reinforcing the morals and values established in the family unit. Thus, it is crucial that schools review their punitive policies, provide tutoring to learners who underperform, facilitate interpersonal skills training, and provide both educators and learners with the necessary knowledge on the modus operandi of gang formations, the consequences associated with joining a gang, and the unique risk factors motivating gang membership. Educators should also be made aware of the warning signs for gang involvement. Furthermore, the community-level supervision of youth should be improved, pro-social recreational activities should be made available to youth, and communities should receive state-assistance with regards to socio-political and economic challenges (Phillips & Maritz, 2015: 63).

Secondary-level initiatives should ideally focus on those youth at high risk for gang membership due to their exposure to risk factors, such as weak parental attachment, family conflict and interpersonal violence, poor academic achievement, substance abuse, and association with deviant peers. In this regard, more formalised responses should be implemented, including anger management, mentorship, life skills, and substance abuse programmes. To achieve this, families, schools, and communities would again perform a key function. The South African Police Service could augment this through improved social crime prevention initiatives, such as educating schools and communities about the dangers inherent in gang involvement.

Tertiary responses should focus on youth who have already become part of a gang and have come into conflict with the law as a result. Not-for-profit organisations such as NICRO and KHULISA, as well as governmental departments, including the Department of Correctional Services, the Department of Social Development, and the Department of Education are in an ideal position to facilitate the effective rehabilitation and societal reintegration of detained youth. Increased efforts should be made to improve the quality and presentation of rehabilitation programmes within Secure Care and correctional centres. This should also include life skills training and entrepreneurial courses prior to release. There should also be a symbiotic relationship between these government departments and academic institutions in order to facilitate and further

research initiatives pertaining to gang activity, contemporary developments, reduction measures, and changes in the modus operandi of these subcultural groupings.

CONCLUSION

Investigating the relationship between the occult, crime and youth gangs has been an issue of interest in international studies of gangs for a long time. However, South Africa lags behind somewhat, as far as this phenomenon is concerned. The authors have attempted to contribute towards addressing this issue. From a practical perspective, while it appears that occult-inspired youth gangs are predominantly located in the Free State province, it is advisable that scholars and law enforcement practitioners focus attention on this because it may spread to various youth gang formations throughout the country (if it has not already done so). The Free State examples illustrate that these youth gangs are highly organised, with much of that organisation based on ritualistic and occult practices. Obtaining as much information as possible about these sophisticated formations may assist scholars and officials in developing proactive strategies to address these gangs in an effective manner, and, perhaps more importantly, to limit the spread of occultism to other gangs in other regions in the country. While it is acknowledged that these issues cannot be separated from abstract debates surrounding constitutional freedoms regarding religious and cultural beliefs and practices, the reality is that the youths caught up in these gangs are engaged in very real and dangerous practices, if not on a spiritual level (for those who may not believe in the existence of demons or the supernatural), then definitely on a psychological, emotional and social level. Freedom of association, as well as freedom of religion, are two fundamental freedoms protected by the Constitution of South Africa. Indeed, it is the protection of these freedoms that has underpinned existing debates about the constitutionality of a specialised police unit dealing with occult-related crimes. However, while the debates continue, and while the existence of such a specialised unit remains in limbo, occult-inspired youth gangs continue to negatively impact on youths, communities and society at large. In order to address these phenomena, there is much that can be learnt from the global context of occult-related youth gangs. More research is needed in order to separate fiction from fact, and to avoid, as far as possible, emotive arguments and reactions.

ENDNOTES

1. A diminutive evil spirit, normally associated with lust, that can be manipulated by evil witches.
2. Also called a fire bird that, according to folklore, lays its eggs where lightning has struck and can also attack people. It is typically used as a witchcraft familiar that can be "sent" to a victim and attacks him/her in their sleep.

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