

# Diabolical Infestation



## *The devil in Lake County, Illinois*

by Mark Kodesch, Ph.D.

In 1952, the local diocese completed the construction of a new convent and Catholic elementary school in Lake County, Illinois. Little did anyone know that in this quiet, suburban area, a perfect example of what the Roman Catholic Church calls Diabolical Infestation was about to occur.

Diabolical Infestation is where the devil affects material objects around a person or a group of people. Usually, Diabolical Infestation is the first manifestation in a pattern leading up to Diabolical Obsession, where a person or a group of people are affected by the devil either internally or exter-

nally. The final manifestation is Diabolical Possession, where the devil actually acts in and through a person.

This is the story of one of the sisters who helped open this convent and school, as retold to the author and his family by herself, her father, and her stepmother.

Sister Mary joined the convent in the late 1940s, after graduation from high school. Before joining the convent, she had been brought up a very strict Roman Catholic, praying the Rosary each evening with her father, stepmother, and brother, and attending Sunday Mass faithfully. She attended a Catholic grammar school in the near western suburbs of Chicago prior to attending a large, all-girl Catholic high school in Chicago. After finishing her studies and novitiate training out-of-state at the Order's Mother House, she was assigned to the new convent in Lake County. Her responsibilities would include teaching in the convent's elementary school.

### **Misplaced Objects**

Shortly before the building was completed, the pastor contacted the sisters' Mother House to tell them they would be allowed to move in early. Sister Mary was included in the small group who would go to ready the convent so the other sisters could settle right in upon the building's completion.

As the sisters began moving in, strange and unsettling things began to happen. Objects went missing, or were found broken. At first, these events were passed off as an accident, attributed to the normal chaos

of a move. But as the occurrences increased the sisters became upset, and some of them suspected the construction workers of stealing and breaking things.

After a few weeks, it was clear that such unexplained events could no longer be attributed to accidents or too many people working in the same space. The builders had completed their work, and could no longer be blamed for things being broken, moving around, or disappearing. Some of the sisters were becoming frustrated and angry. Tempers flared as they began to suspect each other of playing childish pranks and moving objects around. But it was harder to explain the broken things, especially religious articles like statues, prayer books, and Bibles. No one could imagine one of their fellow sisters, no matter how immature, desecrating sacred objects.

### **Unexplained Noises**

The convent's Superior contacted the order's Mother General during the first week about the strange occurrences. As the phenomena increased, the Superior continued to contact the Mother General for advice and consultation.

The infestation entered a new phase. Strange noises began to emanate out of nowhere during the day, and they filled the sisters' rooms at night. This first occurred while the sisters were sitting down to supper late one summer afternoon. The sound of something breaking emanated from another room. Upon checking, none of the sisters could figure out what made the noise.

One night a few days later, as the sisters were almost asleep, each of them heard loud noises in her room. They got up, exchanged stories, and went back to bed. Another night about the same time, every door in the building opened and closed with a slam, waking the entire convent up in a terrible fright.

If the Superior was at all startled or unnerved by these events, she never showed it. Her training and experience had prepared her very well for such occurrences. Sister Mary said that the religious were used to things like this happening when the devil didn't want a place built to teach about God. Diabolical interference would take on all kinds of manifestations, among them exactly what the sisters were experiencing. Worse yet would be a possession, which the sisters prayed would never happen.

### **Blessing Proves Eventful**

The Mother General requested that the Superior monitor the situation and keep her abreast of all the major occurrences. The Mother General was also in contact with the convent's pastor, but prudence prevented him from doing anything more than a blessing inside the convent, which he performed reluctantly prior to the building's completion.

The blessing proved eventful, as the devil expressed displeasure with the ritual. As the pastor walked through the convent, praying with the sisters and blessing the structure with Holy Water, dishes flew out of cabinets in the kitchen, pots and pans

banged into each other in midair, appliances turned on and off, chairs flew around the rooms, and doors slammed open and shut.

The pastor told the Superior he was afraid to attempt any additional blessings for fear they would stir up whatever was infesting the convent. Perhaps leaving it alone would cause it to go away. Although he was inexperienced in such matters, the pastor believed the spirits to be diabolical in nature because they responded so negatively to the Holy Water and prayers.

After the blessing, things quickly got worse. Objects were thrown around by unseen forces and doors slammed open and shut day and night. Lack of sleep and fear of the unknown kept most of the sisters on edge day and night.

Because of the Superior's pleading, the pastor agreed to attempt a second blessing. When this proved unsuccessful, the pastor and the Mother General both contacted the bishop's office to request permission for further blessings to rid the convent of diabolical spirits. Shortly after the request was made, a small group of priests visited the convent and determined that the place was in fact inhabited by evil spirits that were trying to get the sisters to abandon the convent and its school.

Sister Mary said the priests who visited from the diocese were skeptical at first, but became convinced when they were treated to a rare performance by the spirits. As they walked in, every single door in the convent swung open and closed several times. Pots,

pans, dishes, and silverware floated in the air around the kitchen and dining room as if suspended by invisible strings. Religious statues and other articles in the chapel threw themselves onto the floor.

### **Too Horrific to Mention**

The visiting priests affirmed that further blessings were needed to rid the convent of the diabolical presence, and experienced priests were called in to perform the proper prayers and rituals to remove the infestation. The sisters remained in the convent and were instructed to pray constantly until the priests arrived.

Several days later, the experienced priests returned to perform the formal rituals. The whole process took nearly a year, and the priests returned nightly. As the priests and sisters prayed, the unexplained noises increased in volume as if in defiance.

Finally, during one night of prayer, the noises stopped, never to be heard again. The moving of objects also stopped, and as far as anyone knows, nothing else has taken place at the convent.

During holiday visits with family and friends, Sister Mary retold the stories of her early days, and always included this tale. She didn't like to tell it, but listeners requested to hear it over and over again. But Sister Mary said that she had never shared the whole story. Certain things that occurred in the convent in Lake County were too horrific to mention, but the basic story was terrifying enough. ☪

*Mark H. Kodesch, Ph.D., holds undergraduate degrees from a midwestern Catholic university in Roman Catholic biblical studies, church history, theology, and elementary education. He also holds Master's degrees in both library science and educational leadership, as well as a Doctor of Divinity degree. He is completing his second doctorate in educational leadership. He has been an elementary school educator, administrator, religious coordinator, research and reference librarian, and published local historian. He is currently a university graduate school professor. The names and exact locations in this article have been changed.*



# APPEASING

article and photos  
by Thomas J. Larson

*A ceremony of the  
Botswanan  
Hambukushu tribe  
drives away the spirits  
possessing a local man.*

The four of us were sitting comfortably in the screened porch of the riverside WENELA (Witwatersrand Native Labor Association) residence. As was the tradition after a hearty dinner in the lonely outposts of Africa, we were settling down to a sunset and a pleasant evening of conversation. It was one of those sultry and humid evenings typical of Ngamiland of the Bechuanaland Protectorate. The year was 1950 in September, just before the start of the rainy season.



Left to right:

Dugout canoes on the banks of the Okavango River near Shakawe.

A Hambukushu man brings reeds to be used for building houses.

Theyemba, a renowned traditional doctor, has the drums placed on him at the end of the ceremony.

# THE SPIRITS

The sun had set in a dazzling display of color. Now a full moon spread its soft radiance over the gardens and lofty trees around the residence. Through the canopy of overhanging boughs, the reflection of the moon blazed a path of shimmering gold across the Okavango River. The dark shadowy forms of fruit bats flapped lazily from one wild fig tree to another. The melancholy calls of these giant bats were distinct and clear, like tiny anvils. Their swift smaller cousins darted dexterously in pursuit of fluttering winged termites.

By daylight, the broad meandering river was the habitat of gorgeously plumed kingfishers, bee-eaters, sunbirds, and waterfowl of many species. It was also a busy highway for the African *mekoro* dugout canoes. By night the Okavango River was transformed into a sinister stream of lurking danger. Huge croco-

diles, which by day sunned themselves along the river banks and sandbars, cruised boldly on the surface and in the still waters of the many lagoons in search of food. Nearby we heard the deep bellowing and splashing of the hippopotami as they frolicked fearlessly in their watery playground. Savage sharp-toothed tigerfish leaped high out of the water in pursuit of insects or to escape the persistent crocodiles.

While we sat enthralled and meditative in the enchantment of the evening, secure in the enclosure that the walls and thin screens provided, the distant pulse of mysterious Africa awakened us from our thoughts. The thumping tattoo of Ham-bukushu drums rising and falling like our own heartbeats soon became a part of us.

As the portly Mr. Mathias motioned for Shorty, his Nyasaland houseboy, to pour us another round of brandies, I intruded upon the lull in our conversation.

"How long does this drumming usually last?"

"You, Larson, are hearing the beginning of a *Mandengure* ceremony, the appeasing of ancestors," replied our host. "Actually, the ceremony has been going off and on for



Above: Houses and mat wall enclosures typical of the period kept out hyenas, lions, goats, small scavengers, and evil spirits.

Right: Joseph Matenga, magician of Mohembo, treats a patient.



two days already. It might even be another day before all the native beer is finished and the possessed madman they are trying to save is either dead or has been persuaded to come down from the baobab tree he is in."

My interest was aroused immediately.

"Why is someone up in a tree?"

"That is not unusual around these parts," Mathias replied. "If you had been living here as long as I have, you would either get accustomed to it or go crazy. You know, it isn't just anyone who can take living in this remote place."

The ceremonies, he said, took place annually: "Every year after the millet has been harvested, the Hambukushu start brewing their precious beer. It is then when their Mandengure ancestral spirit ceremonies begin in earnest. Another ceremonial dance is sure to start in a few more days."

Mathias paused for a moment. Now the drumming was louder as more musicians added their enthusiastic talents to the crescendo of the booming and pulsating intonations. Wild screams and the

shrill ululations of women pierced the air.

Suddenly all was silent. Then, after a few moments of suspense, the drums slowly resounded as they gathered momentum. Soon the ceremony reached a climax of wild ecstasy.

"It appears to be an extra special occasion this time," continued Mathias. "Just a few days ago I was told down in Shakawe that one of the Hambukushu went berserk. He went completely off his rocker. He was screaming and running around through the village like a wild baboon and threatening to kill anyone who got in his way. Finally he ran out of Shakawe. He had been away for two days already without any food or water."

"How do the Hambukushu treat a person who has gone mad?" I asked.

"In a case like this one, the relatives of the possessed man usually hire a famous witch doctor from across the river someplace. These *nganga*, as the local witch doctors are called, are paid to drive out and appease the evil spirits of the ancestors by these Mandengure ceremonies. Now if this madman doesn't fall out of the tree and break his neck, his relatives and the *nganga* may have

him down by morning."

Mathias was in his element as his audience listened, spellbound.

"The Hambukushu and other tribesmen living here in Ngamiland really enjoy their Mandengure ceremonies. It gives them a good excuse to have a big party. They can forget their troubles and have something new to talk about. During the growing season they have no time for leisure activities. But as soon as their crops have been harvested they have time on their hands. It is then that the ceremonies begin. It is a great event and everyone from up and down the river who visits Shakawe can take part in the dancing and beer drinking."

### I Investigate Further

"Well, I've had it for today, chaps," said Mr. Ramsland, an elderly trader. The party was coming to an end. We all thanked Mathias for his hospitality and departed. Lionel Palmer, the third guest,



Left to right:

The *nganga* is a witch doctor, diviner, and medicine man.

Joseph Matenga conducts a ceremony to appease the ever-restless ancestral spirits.

The *nganga* who conducted the ceremony described in the article.

The author in 1997.

and I groped our way to the WENELA guest rondoal to get some much-needed sleep. But the throbbing of the Hambukushu drums set my mind on fire. Aroused and curious, I lay wide awake.

The sobbing friction drums, rising and falling like the throaty coughing of the leopard, harmonized with the deeper tones of the long *ngoma* drums. No longer could I resist the call. I hastily pulled on my sweaty clothes in the dark. After inspecting my boots for scorpions, I pulled them on and stepped out into the night with flashlight in hand.

Cautiously I followed a broad trail through the heavy sand which led to Shakawe. The red glow of evening campfires silhouetted the frontier settlement a half mile down the road. Furious drumming and wild singing erupted from the vicinity of a large fire which lit up the forest at the western side of Shakawe.

Not wishing to be seen by the participants of the ceremony, I groped my way through the sandbelt forest bordering the town. It would not be wise for a strange white man to appear suddenly in the midst of the Mandengure dance.

As I took cover behind some bushes, grotesque shadows leaped out at me. The drumming and screaming sent chills through my spine. My heart thumped furiously.

Approaching still closer, I lay prone behind a huge baobab tree. Before me, about thirty yards away, more than a hundred Africans had gathered in an opening

in the forest. The center of attention was on one magnificent figure. This was the *nganga*, the magician and master of ceremonies. It was he who could placate the restless spirits of the ancestors.

Powerfully built, he stood well over six feet tall. In the prime of his life, he wore the spectacular costume of the respected profession of the *nganga*. Treated with special potions, the sword-like plumes of the secretary bird head-dress were believed by the Okavango River peoples to have great spiritual and magical qualities.

From the bright light of the fire I could see that he wore two black necklaces from the manes of the zebra. Naked above the waist, he wore a short black skirt. In each hand he held a magical wand of wildebeest tails. On the side of his left leg two rows of seed pod rattles accentuated his every step.

Three young men attired only in scanty leather breechcloths straddled long wooden drums held to their backs by rawhide thongs. Each thumped a different rhythm with his hands. Another musician crouched over a short drum held at an angle on the ground. This was the friction drum, the *vukuvuku*. Back and forth he slid his hand along a greased stick attached to the inside of the drumhead.

A circle of women formed the chorus. They were adorned with numerous strands of ostrich eggshell beads and copper bracelets and leg bands. They were nude above the waist, and the backs

of their leather skirts were heavily decorated with broad bands of beads. These swished with each movement as they swayed to the rhythm of the drums. Long greased stringlets of artificial hair, the *yitho*, fell over their backs and breasts as they clapped flat pieces of wood together.

Of all the actors in the grim ceremony, the *nganga* was the dominant character. While the chorus watched for his every cue, the *nganga* lent his many talents to drive away and appease the evil spirits of the dead ancestors who possessed the soul of the madman off in a tree in the dark forest.

I gazed at the marvelous dancer. His ebony body, glistening with a magical salve of lion fat mingling with his perspiration, moved effortlessly in its intricate shuffling dance steps.

Suddenly he leaped high into the air. Once again, he resumed his dance. The frenzied drumming and the wild contortions of his body continued. Then came a brief lull. The drums stopped. Springing through the fire, the plumed figure of the *nganga* fell to a crouch. A hush fell over the audience. Slowly he sat up.

Reaching into his bag of magically treated medicines and divining instruments, the great wizard pulled out a *shimvuvwi*, the long horn of a gemsbuck. Slowly rising to his feet, he held the base of the horn in his hands and pointed it toward the ground. Mumbling incantations, he rotated it in a circle. Suddenly it began to shake violently. All eyes were glued intently upon the *nganga* and his divination instrument.

Slowly he moved the *shimvuvwi* with-



# POSESION

in the dancing circle. Again it vibrated violently and pointed toward the sky. He was attempting to pick up the trail of an evil sorcerer, a *morothi*, who was believed to have cast the spell upon the madman. I hardly believed my eyes as the quivering gemsbuck horn slowly moved down in my direction. Then, to my alarm, it pointed directly toward me.

Startled into action, I quickly retreated into the deep shadows of the forest. Making a wide circuit, I came up behind a big tree on the opposite side of the fire.

Still clutching the *shimvuvwi*, the magician slowly stalked toward the tree where I had been hiding. A score or more of the African tribesmen followed close at his heels. Much to my relief, they did not stop at my former hiding place. They soon disappeared from sight.

The musicians thumped their drums in renewed fury. The women screamed loudly, clapped their sounding boards, and clicked iron hoe blades with great enthusiasm. Now many of the men who had been sitting around big earthen beer pots rushed into the dancing circle. Cavorting energetically, each dancer tried to outdo all the others.

Soon the *nganga* and his followers returned through the dusky shadows of the forest. Held high over their shoulders was the prostrate form of a naked man. The limp figure was unceremoniously dropped to the ground in the dancing circle. Slowly the madman pulled himself together into a sitting position. Gaunt and exhausted from his two-day ordeal, he hung his head in bewilderment. The *nganga* stepped up to him and sprinkled some magical powder into his eyes. Two young apprentice magicians restrained the madman by his arms and shoulders while the *nganga* forced medi-

cine into his mouth. He shook fitfully as he began to froth at the mouth. A few minutes later he vomited a vile green substance.

This indicated to all that the evil spell had been broken. The evil spirit, the *Mongu*, had been forced out of the body of the victim. While the *nganga* and his devoted audience spent their remaining energy in one last frenzied dance, I quietly slipped away. Suddenly the drummers ceased their pounding. The clapping and screaming stilled. Only jackals, hyenas, and the shrill chirping of crickets broke the tranquility of early morning.

The following day I reluctantly left Shakawe behind me. This was truly a haven far away from the encroaching industrialization of America, my country. Even Maun, the capital of Ngamiland and an oasis in the Kalahari wilderness, seemed tame in comparison with this Hambukushu town and its stirring rhythms. ■

*Thomas J. Larson is a teacher, explorer, and anthropologist who lived in Africa for 14 years. He has written dozens of articles about his work and travel. He is an honorary rain chief of the Hambukushu tribe of Botswana.*



**Left: Another appeasement ceremony.**  
**Right: The possessed man from Shakawe.**

