

## Trial by therapy

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Full Text:

Across the country, the innocence of small children is being destroyed by unwanted knowledge of bizarre sexual activities. But who is doing the destroying?

On the afternoon of May 10, 1991, Dale Akiki sat on his regular homeward-bound bus from downtown San Diego, chatting with his seatmate, a mentally retarded boy. As the bus approached his stop Akiki said goodbye, gathered up his sackful of aluminum cans, and stepped to the curb. Suddenly, a voice from behind bellowed: "Halt! Drop the cans!"

His fellow passengers, some of whom had ridden the bus with Akiki for years, must have been startled, to say the least. Akiki himself didn't know whether it was a sad mistake, or a bad joke. "The guy on the bus had partners in a car outside. He handcuffed me and put me in the back seat," Akiki, 35, said recently in an interview at the San Diego County Jail.

"I said, [What's going on?] He told me I was under arrest for child molestation. I was shocked. They didn't say much else and they waited until we got to their office to read me my Veranda [sic] rights."

A simple-minded man beset since birth with a range of severe physical deformities, Dale Akiki was about to be charged with a multitude of despicable crimes against children. If many of his fellow travelers didn't know his name just then, they soon would. His case has made headlines across the nation.

On weekdays, Akiki rode the bus to his job as a civilian clerk at a Navy installation in San Diego. He had worked there for ten years after being hired in a program for the handicapped. On Sunday evenings for one year during that period - from April 1988 to April 1989 - he volunteered as a teacher's aide in a Bible class for preschoolers at his church, Faith Chapel in suburban Spring Valley.

It is at the sprawling Assemblies of God church, home to 3,500 worshippers, that "Mr. Dale" is said to have committed these crimes against dozens of three- and four-year-olds: sodomy with various objects; rape; oral copulation; naked sex games with children; mutilating and killing animals for the purpose of ritual and terror; water torture; forcing children to eat feces and drink urine; urinating on them; gun play for the purpose of terror; engaging in child pornography; frightening children with videotapes; tying children up or locking them in cupboards.

He is also accused of kidnapping groups of children from beneath the noses of their parents and church workers and driving them in a van or truck to a house where they were sexually abused and tortured. The counts against Akiki, 38 in all, feature the claim that he threatened to kill the children and their families if they told, which is why he has spent more than two years in jail without bail.

And after Dale Akiki is convicted and sentenced, prosecutors say, similar charges may be filed against his thirty-year-old wife, Sharon, and another woman, both of whom minded children in the nursery with him while parents attended services in the sanctuary down the hall. Children say the two women either participated with Akiki in the bizarre abuse or stood lookout while it happened. (Neither woman has a criminal record, nor has Akiki.)

Conspicuously lacking in the prosecution's case against Dale Akiki, however, is physical evidence. No blood, urine, feces, semen, animal remains, photographs, videotapes, or cameras were ever found at Faith Chapel, or at Akiki's one-bedroom condo in nearby La Mesa. No guns or knives were ever found. The house where Akiki supposedly took the children has never been found.

No child was ever seen to have bruises, rope burns, or stained clothing. No parent reported that a child smelled of urine or feces. And despite charges that Akiki dunked children's heads into feces-filled toilets and held them under shower faucets, no parent - even those of girls with very long hair - ever reported that a child's hair was damp after Sunday school. No child was found to have genital trauma, despite the allegations of rape, sodomy, and torture with such objects as a toy-truck ladder, a knife, and a hot curling iron.

As for the kidnapping charges, Akiki has never been licensed to drive a car. His friends say a special three-wheel moped designed for the disabled is the only vehicle he has ever mastered. (A few church members, however, came forward after Akiki's trial began this April to claim they remember seeing him drive, information they never revealed

during a four-year investigation.)

It has yet to be explained how Akiki sneaked groups of youngsters out of Faith Chapel, took them somewhere, brutally abused them, and returned them to class in the space of about ninety minutes with no one noticing.

No child or parent reported any claim of abuse during the year in which Akiki volunteered in the preschoolers' classroom. And no one in adjacent rooms or in a busy hallway ever reported hearing screams of pain. The horrors that supposedly occurred were disclosed many months - even years - later, after repeated question/answer sessions with therapists and parents.

Akiki has passed both a lie-detector test and a sodium brevitol (truth-serum) test administered by experts hired by his lawyer. He has a standing offer to the prosecution to take such tests from an expert of their choosing, but Deputy District Attorney Mary Avery has declined.

The lack of evidence raises serious questions about whether any abuse took place at all. In fact, some observers wonder if in their zeal to "protect the children," prosecutors and psychotherapists may have led a group of frightened parents into abusing their own children by placing these horrors in their minds.

### Beginning of a Nightmare

In April 1989, Dale Akiki stopped minding the children on Sunday nights. Three Faith Chapel mothers had gotten together and talked about common behaviors in their three- and four-year-olds, such things as bed-wetting, nightmares, and aggression. They decided "Mr. Dale's" odd appearance might be frightening their children, so they urged Pastor Charlie Gregg to kindly ask Akiki not to help out any more.

Akiki is certainly an odd-looking man. He was born with Noonan's Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder leaving him with a concave chest, club feet, droopy eyelids, woolen hair, limited use of his elbows, and other problems. He also suffers from hycirocephalus and has had nine operations since childhood, including one to insert a brain shunt to drain fluid into his bloodstream. He has tested "dull normal" on various intelligence tests.

The first allegation surfaced in late August 1989, just as Dale and Sharon Akiki were returning from their honeymoon. One of the Faith Chapel mothers told another that her daughter was seen crying in a hallway and wondered if Sharon Akiki might have spanked her. The mother questioned her daughter. When the child finally agreed she had been spanked, the mother pressed her to reveal anything else that might have happened. The child cried for an hour, according to the mother's notes and court testimony, before blurting out: "He showed me him's penis."

The case against Dale Akiki had taken root.

The mothers' prophetic fears were fulfilled over the following months and years, during which time the children were questioned, observed in "play therapy," and repeatedly urged by parents, therapists, investigators, and prosecutors to "disclose" what had happened to them. Most of the children named as victims in the case had undergone more than one hundred hours of questioning about sexual abuse before ever testifying in front of a jury.

Four years after he quit teaching Sunday school, Dale Akiki is being tried on charges that could lead to his being sentenced to 120 years in prison, in a trial which will run the full length of the 1993 baseball season. And the children - virtually all of whom initially denied that anything at all had happened to them - now remember their 1989 preschool class as a bizarre horror show.

Children and their parents have testified that Akiki killed live rabbits, a chicken, a turtle, a puppy, several babies, and even an elephant and a giraffe in the classroom, and that Akiki or his fiancee drank the animals' blood afterward. Some of them say that Akiki used a Freddy Krueger mask to terrify the children into silence.

One mother testified that her child drew a picture of the mystery house, where he was hanged by his ankles from a chandelier. The fact that her son never had any marks or rope burns on his ankles, she explained, must be owing to Akiki's having wrapped a towel around the boy's legs before tying the rope. The boy, however, testified that he did not recall ever telling such a story.

Another child, who described several baby killings and the death of the elephant and the giraffe, was relating events he perceived to be real, his therapist insisted. She theorized that Akiki faked the slaughter of babies and zoo animals in his campaign of terror.

The prosecution would have had no case if forced to rely solely on the testimony of Akiki's alleged victims. Their stories are inconsistent, erratic, and often impossible. Instead, Miss Avery and co-counsel John Williams have called dozens of experts to caution jurors not to take literally everything their witnesses are saying. Instead, the focus has

been on certain "changes in behavior," such as bed-wetting, nightmares, fears, and aggression, that parents now remember noticing in their children but attached little significance to at the time.

Akiki's attorneys, Kathleen Coyne and Susan Clemens, note that most of the behaviors are entirely normal for three- and four-year-olds. They are being exaggerated, or even imagined, because the parents have been told they are evidence of abuse. The defense attorneys insist their client is a victim of hysteria, fueled in part by the false notion of a ritual-abuse conspiracy in America.

One man who once believed that such a conspiracy had spread to Faith Chapel is the Reverend Charlie Gregg. Gregg's son made more abuse allegations against Akiki than almost any other child. But the boy later recanted, causing a dozen charges against Akiki to be dropped.

Charlie Gregg, who refused the prosecution's request that his son testify, says he has gone from considering the notion of satanic ritual abuse to dismissing it. "I operate from the standpoint that some minor abuse may have occurred," said Gregg, who left Faith Chapel last year and works now as a family counselor. "I don't know the truth and I may never know it.

"The fact that I refused to let my son be part of a process of trying to convict this man, to send him away for life, speaks for itself."

### Salem Revisited?

Child abuse, particularly sexual abuse, was for decades discussed in whispers, if discussed at all. That has changed. It is commonly accepted today that the abuse of children is widespread.

The crimes often occur without witnesses and are often committed by someone the child loves and trusts, a parent or other family member who pressures the child to keep the secret. And it is not uncommon for genital evidence of sexual abuse to be lacking, especially in older children.

Last year, 2.9 million reports of child abuse were made in the United States; 59 per cent of those reports were judged unsubstantiated, 21 per cent were considered neglect cases, often due to poverty, and about 6 per cent were substantiated cases of sexual abuse. Most observers agree that the vast majority of cases where criminal charges are brought are valid. And undoubtedly, many thousands of child molesters commit their crimes with impunity.

On the other hand, some experts argue that more people are falsely accused - and even convicted - of child abuse than of any other crime. And even allegations proven false stick; some adults falsely accused of molesting children have said they would rather have been accused of murder.

The Akiki case has generated considerable interest in San Diego and makes compelling copy for newspaper readers there. And that's where it would rest if this were an aberration. But Dale Akiki may well be a victim of what many experts in the legal and mental-health fields are calling the new witchhunt sweeping North America three hundred years after the Salem trials.

It began a decade ago with the infamous McMartin Preschool case in Manhattan Beach, California. Since then, similar cases have emerged all over the United States: in Carson City, Nevada; Jordan, Minnesota; Bucks County, Pennsylvania; Maplewood, New Jersey; Bouse, Arizona; West Point, New York; and Fort Bragg, California; as well as in Miami, El Paso, Cincinnati, and Chicago. Some have resulted in long prison terms; others have resulted in convictions which have been overturned. Many others, however, have resulted in acquittals, or in authorities deciding not to bring charges.

Despite growing skepticism, cases continue to be filed. Seven people (five of them women - highly unusual in verified sexual abuse of children) have been charged in the Little Rascals day-care case in Edenton, North Carolina. In that case, the main social worker eliciting satanic allegations from children had previously given lectures around town on satanic ritual abuse. (Two defendants, one man and one woman, have actually been convicted there so far, though some jurors have since denounced their guilty votes.) There are also trials under way in Austin, Texas, and in Martensville, Saskatchewan.

### Where It Started

The McMartin case, at seven years and \$15 million, was the longest and costliest criminal trial in American history. It ended in the acquittal of Raymond Buckey and his mother, Peggy McMartin Buckey, and the dismissal of charges against five others. But not before Raymond Buckey had spent five years in County Jail and his mother had spent three years there, and their family fortune (estimated at \$3 million) had been exhausted in legal fees.

The small Manhattan Beach Police Department felt overwhelmed and unequipped to handle investigating a sexual-abuse case potentially involving many children. That job was turned over to the nearby Children's Institute International. Social worker Kee MacFarlane, who at the time held only a driver's license in California, conducted hundreds of hours of videotaped counseling sessions with the McMartin children.

These sessions have been criticized by some mental-health professionals as suggestive and leading to an extraordinary degree. Jurors cited the coercive nature of the MacFarlane therapy sessions as the main reason they acquitted the Buckeys. (Miss MacFarlane, one of the first people anywhere to promote the idea of a national child-abuse conspiracy, now lives in San Diego County and is married to Harry Elias, who was head of the district attorney's child-abuse unit when Dale Akiki was arrested and is now a municipal-court judge.) The McMartin case, critics say, is the perfect example of why police should never hand over an investigation to therapists, who often begin with an assumption of abuse and have a natural conflict in their roles as counselor and detective.

Conversely, the 1990 case at the Breezy Point Day School in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, is distinguished by the fact that the police and district attorney refused to relinquish their investigation to parents and therapists. In this case, children and parents reported brutal sexual abuse, animal killings, trips to local motels, and other allegations common to ritual-abuse cases. "My first reaction," said District Attorney Alan M. Rubenstein, "was that this was the crime of the century." After a five-month investigation, however, he decided the accusations were "the uncorroborated fantasies of four-year-olds fueled by their parents' hysteria." His conclusion: "This is the Salem Witch Trials revisited. This stuff never happened."

"People say that children don't lie, but children do have wild imaginations and they do make up fantasies," said Rubenstein. He concluded that innocent comments by children "were magnified by the parents, twisted into the child being abused." For example, parents said their children had been locked in cages, a common ritual-abuse allegation. Rubenstein said he determined the children were referring to monkey bars. What was most frightening, the prosecutor said, was that "there is a great possibility, if we had gone ahead with the prosecution, these people would have been convicted."

The Carson City case, which resulted in the 1988 convictions of a babysitter and her nephew, began when a six-year-old girl, after being questioned by her mother, said she had been sexually abused two and a half years earlier at a day-care center owned by Martha Felix. Miss Felix's nephew, Francisco Ontiveros, occasionally worked there.

The investigation, the most extensive and costly in Carson City history, eventually grew to include allegations that as many as 19 children had been assaulted and had been forced to witness animal sacrifices, crimes involving blood, bones, urine, and feces, and multiple murders, hangings, and other crimes. Police dug up several sites, but found no evidence.

On March 18 of this year, the Nevada Supreme Court unanimously overturned the convictions of Miss Felix and Mr. Ontiveros, saying it had "serious questions about the reliability of the verdicts." The justices found that the events alleged by the children "appear to be more fantasy than fact" and "more incredible than credible."

While prosecutors often try to dismiss or minimize the most bizarre stories as misperceptions by young children, the Nevada justices found that unlikely or impossible accounts go to the heart of credibility. When much of a child's testimony is "inherently improbable," they said, "the child's competence to testify about those events is seriously challenged."

Also this March, a New Jersey appeals court overturned the conviction of Margaret Kelly Michaels in the notorious Wee Care Day Nursery case [see box, next page].

In 1988, the 26-year-old drama student from Pittsburgh began serving a 47-year sentence in state prison for allegedly abusing 19 preschoolers. Miss Michaels was accused, among other things, of licking peanut butter off children's genitals, assaulting them with knives, forks, spoons, and Lego blocks, forcing them to drink urine and eat feces, and playing "Jingle Bells" on the piano while nude.

In overturning the convictions, the appeals-court justices said Miss Michaels was denied a fair trial because Judge William F. Harth allowed an "expert witness" to testify about "Child Sex Abuse Syndrome," which purports to explain a wide range of reactions to sexual abuse, including bed-wetting, nightmares, and aggression. Judge Harth erred, the higher court ruled, in allowing prosecution witness Eileen Treacy to "lead the jury to believe that the process was rooted in science and thus was a reliable means of determining sexual abuse."

### Janet Reno to the Rescue

One of the more egregious false accusations occurred under the direction of Janet Reno, President Clinton's Attorney

General. The case involved a 14-year-old boy named Bobby Finje (pronounced Feen-yea), who spent nearly two years in jail on exceedingly dubious charges before being acquitted. Miss Reno, who has made child-abuse prosecutions a priority, saw to it that he was held in solitary confinement for much of his stay at the Dade County Juvenile Detention Center in Miami and that he was tried as an adult.

Finje's parents were Dutch civil servants who moved to Miami after completing a 25-year posting in Curacao, Netherlands Antilles. Bobby was five and his sister, Nanette, eight when the family joined Old Cutler Presbyterian Church in late 1981. His father, Bobby Sr., was a deacon in the church for three years; his mother, Vivian, was active in Bible classes and other church activities.

In 1988, both Finje children volunteered to mind young children in the church day-care center. Soon afterward, one mother complained that Bobby was too rough with the children. But a church investigation found most kids thought he was the "best babysitter in the world."

The Finjes thought that was the end of it. But after several mothers in one prayer group started taking their children to therapists, allegations of abuse began to emerge. Children began telling of orgies involving feces-eating and urine-drinking. One four-year-old detailed how Bobby had mutilated live animals; another said he was stabbed by Bobby and forced to dance naked on the roof, children were supposedly raped and sodomized with all sorts of objects; the FBI got involved, believing Bobby Finje headed an international pornography ring.

Initially, he was charged with 108 counts of abuse against 17 children. Many of the claims were so crazy, however, that he was to be tried for only 8 counts of sexual battery against 3 girls - each count carrying a life sentence. Then on the eve of the trial, Miss Reno's office dropped one of the victims; prosecutors were uneasy with the child's account of seeing a woman turn into a witch and fly off, and with her insistence that she had dug up a grave with Bobby, out of which the ubiquitous Freddy Krueger had emerged.

Before and during the trial, which cost \$3 million, the Finje family was urged by Miss Reno's office to accept a plea bargain. "We were told he would have AIDS within a week of entering prison," Bobby's father later wrote in an open letter to warn the American people about Janet Reno as her nomination was being considered by the Senate. "We were told what a horrible time he would have in prison. But we knew Bobby was innocent and refused to accept a plea bargain."

The jury found Bobby Finje not guilty.

### Spreading the Word

Several factors have combined to create an environment where bizarre theories about abuse conspiracies flourish. Prominent among these is the fact that police, prosecutors, and psychotherapists from across the nation have attended seminars where dubious therapy methods have been promoted.

Sherrill Mulhern, a french anthropologist and cult expert at the University of Paris, spent three years attending such conferences. Miss Mulhern found that they commonly feature proselytizing presentations in which attendees are asked to suspend their disbelief. "There are psychologists and psychiatrists who have made their reputations in child sexual abuse who are selling this stuff around the world," Miss Mulhern said in an interview.

In recent years, ritual-abuse training tapes - many sold by a small company called Cavalcade Productions in Ukiah, California - have circulated among social workers, therapists, and church groups throughout the United States and Europe.

Both the workshops and the tapes warn of a network of normal-looking people, including police officers, politicians, and pastors, who actually are secret satanists practicing rituals involving child sexual abuse, animal slaughter, and even human sacrifice.

Some fundamentalist religious groups endorse these allegations as "proof" of the devil's influence. In an unlikely alliance, some extreme feminists have joined them in decrying the supposed satanic horror committed against children and women.

The media - especially tabloid TV shows - have done scores of stories about the supposed conspiracy, and many more on specific investigations. Until recently, most of the reporting was distinguished by its lack of skepticism.

Legislators, shocked by the extreme nature of allegations made by children in such cases and by revelations regarding verifiable child abuse, have passed laws mandating that all suspected child abuse be reported under penalty of law. Virtual immunity is given to those making false allegations, as often happens in divorce cases involving child-custody disputes.

While belief in a nationwide conspiracy of satanists may sound like wild-eyed ravings from the fringe, the theory is accepted as established fact by many who work in the child-protection field. In a recent study, psychologist Martha Rogers, based in Tustin, California, asked 53 child-protection social workers in an unnamed California county if they agreed with this statement: "Satanic ritual abuse involves a national conspiracy or network of multi-generational perpetrators where babies, children, and adults are sexually assaulted, physically mutilated, or killed." Miss Rogers reports that 45 per cent agreed. Another 48 per cent agreed with this statement: "Thousands of missing children in the U.S. every year, who simply disappear and their bodies are never recovered, may be victims of satanic ritual abuse."

Despite a complete lack of evidence, some ritual-abuse promoters insist that as many as 50,000 people, mostly children and "breeder" infants, are killed in satanic sacrifices each year.

According to law-enforcement agencies, roughly 25,000 murders of all types are committed in the United States each year. The FBI estimates that between 43 and 150 children were kidnapped and murdered by strangers each year between 1976 and 1989. The agency says it has been unable to document a single case of a sacrifice committed by satanic conspirators, despite investigating hundreds of such claims.

Nonetheless, both Los Angeles and San Diego Counties established ritual-abuse task forces in recent years to fight the perceived satanic threat. The Los Angeles task force, consisting largely of therapists, was formed in 1988 by the Los Angeles Commission for Women and is still operating. (The group's credibility took a blow recently, however. Members called a press conference to announce that satanists were poisoning them with diazinon, a chemical used in bug spray, by pumping it into their homes, cars, and even the ventilation system at the county building where they meet.) The San Diego group, modeled after the one in L.A., was formed in 1991 by the county's Commission for Children and Youth, but has since disbanded.

The L.A. task force has distributed more than 17,000 copies of its handbook about satanic ritual abuse and held workshops for "assessment and treatment of ritual abuse." (Several therapists who belong to the L.A. task force appear on the Cavalcade Productions training tapes.)

Sherrill Mulhern warns that such beliefs can have frightening implications. She and other researchers blame the influx of American material for a series of ritual-abuse panics that have spread across England and Holland since 1990. "When people come to believe that anyone could be one of them, someone usually will be found," she says.

### Conspiracy of Silence

The Theory of how ritual abuse supposedly works is particularly well suited for promoting hysteria. A book written by Pamela Hudson, a licensed clinical social worker from Mendocino, California, is typical of the ritual-abuse literature. This book, sold around the country at psychology conferences, includes a list of 16 rituals, including: children being kidnapped and taken to secret houses, churches, and graveyards; animal and baby sacrifices; children being hanged by their feet, locked in cages or boxes, and tortured with water; rituals involving feces and urine; children (or their parents) threatened with death if they tell.

Although Dale Akiki's prosecutors say their case has nothing to do with ritual abuse, the children he took care of have reported 13 of the 16 activities on Pamela Hudson's list during their four-plus years of therapy.

The Marquis de Sade could hardly have improved on this horror show. Yet promoters of the ritual-abuse threat insist that preschoolers will never spontaneously tell anyone what is happening to them.

Catherine Gould, a psychologist and member of the L.A. task force, says ritually abused children almost always enter therapy denying they've been abused because they have been "terrorized into silence." ("We are finding that you can abuse one hundred children ritually ... and pretty much one hundred children will keep the secret of their abuse until there is some intervention," Miss Gould claims on a Cavalcade training tape.) Their parents, meanwhile, are always oblivious to what is going on because, Miss Gould says, even at "open" preschools the abusers are able to post lookouts who warn them to knock it off when a parent arrives unexpectedly. Only the children's tell-tale behaviors and fears - viewed retrospectively - document the horror.

Miss Gould distributes a list of 106 of these, including: nightmares; bedwetting; fear of water; aversion to certain foods; fears of ghosts, monsters, witches, the devil; children locking pets or other children in closets; excessive fear of shots or of aggressive animals, such as crocodiles, sharks, or large dogs; destruction of toys; fear of visiting the doctor; fear of the color red or black; children resisting authority, having poor attention spans, or being easily agitated, hyperactive, or wild; girls claiming they're married or going to have a baby; resistance to toilet training.

Such behaviors, hardly uncommon in the most normal of childhoods, are at the heart of the case against Dale Akiki. This assault on common sense has, of course, no basis whatsoever in empirical study. Dr. Richard Gardner, a child psychiatrist at Columbia University, says using such behaviors to convince parents and the courts of abuse is "child abuse by therapists."

Perhaps the most prominent person to be closely identified with untested ritual-abuse theories is Dr. Roland Summit, a psychiatrist at the Harbor/UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles. Summit, who acted as a liaison for parents in the McMartin case, is well known for his 1983 article describing Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome. The controversial theory purports, among other things, to explain why children do not report abuse in family settings and why they often recant allegations. Summit, who does not treat children himself, appears on Cavalcade training tapes along with Catherine Gould, Pamela Hudson, and D. Corydon Hammond, a psychologist at the University of Utah. On the tapes and at seminars, Hammond claims that satanic programming techniques were invented by Nazi scientists and exported to the United States by a mysterious Dr. Green, with help from the CIA. Summit warns that the ritual-abuse conspiracy thrives because adults refuse to "believe the children." He rejected the idea that ersatz therapy and hysteria play any role in the phenomenon. "There's no way children have made these things up. There's no way therapists knew those stories before they heard them. There's no way parents knew those stories before they came out in nightmares," Summit says on a Cavalcade tape.

But critics say this ignores the scores of books, magazine articles, and television programs - not to mention Cavalcade's tapes - which over the past ten years have disseminated the common details of ritual abuse. Indeed, testimony reveals that some of the parents and therapists involved in the Akiki trial - including figures who were key in convincing others at Faith Chapel - had attended conferences, seen videos, or read literature on satanic-ritual abuse.

Summit has been taking a more moderate stand in recent months. In a letter to one of the authors, he said, "With ten years of intense scrutiny without material evidence, the first alarms must yield to greater caution. At the same time, the glib presumption that all such reports are iatrogenic [caused by therapy] is even further from observable fact. . . ."

But Special Agent Kenneth Lanning doesn't buy that. Lanning, the FBI's top child-abuse expert, has examined hundreds of cases alleging satanic-ritual abuse in the past decade. He believes most of these cases begin with some "seed of truth." That seed might be actual abuse, or it could be something as simple as a child getting spanked. In either case, "if all the ingredients are right, it grows into this monstrosity."

Lanning makes three key points in his 1992 Investigator's Guide to Allegations of "Ritual" Child Abuse: 1) Police investigators must carefully evaluate contamination of children's accounts. 2) Police should never turn control of an investigation over to therapists. 3) A jury should be asked to believe only what the police investigation can corroborate.

Lanning says ritual-abuse allegations are poison when introduced into a child-abuse investigation. The common result is that innocent people are falsely accused and all hope of determining what abuse, if any, occurred is lost.

#### How Could They Make It Up?

One irate Faith Chapel mother called a San Diego newspaper to criticize a story skeptical of the prosecution's case against Dale Akiki. "My child has been severely affected and so have some of these other children," she said. ". . . I think some of the things that have been said, a lot of the things, how in the hell could they have been made up?" New research serves to answer that question.

In a series of studies reported recently on page one of the New York Times, researchers Stephen Ceci and Maggie Bruck found that persistent questioning can indeed lead young children to give elaborate descriptions of events that never occurred. Ceci, a psychologist at Cornell University, emphasizes that young children can be good witnesses, but only if adults do not corrupt or contaminate their memories.

In one Ceci study, children in a preschool class were told a story about a man named Sam Stone. They were told Sam Stone was not nice, that he sometimes took things that didn't belong to him and broke toys. Then Sam Stone came into their classroom, simply wandered around for a few minutes, and left. He said nothing beyond hello and goodbye; he touched nothing.

Over the next ten weeks, the children were placed in four simulated "therapy" sessions lasting just two minutes each. (In actual cases, Ceci notes, children are in therapy for an hour or two a week for months, even years, as they have been in the Akiki case.) During these sessions, the "therapist" asked one or two intentionally suggestive questions, such as, "Do you remember the time Sam Stone visited your classroom and spilled chocolate on that white teddy bear? Did he do it on purpose, or was it an accident?"

At the end of ten weeks, children were questioned by a forensic interviewer; 72 per cent of the three- and four-year-olds reported Sam Stone doing the fictional misdeeds suggested in the questioning. When pressed, 44 per cent said they had actually seen these things happen.

A significant minority of the children, about one-fifth, went on to describe fictional events that were not even suggested, Ceci said. Some of the accounts were quite elaborate and filled with perceptual details and appropriate emotions. "They will say such things as, 'Yeah, when he came in the teacher yelled at him and put him in time out . . . and then when he was in time out, he snuck out when the teacher wasn't looking. He took a book, and he went into the bathroom. He filled the sink up with water until it got very wet. Then he went outside and got mud, and he smeared it on the book,' and on and on," Ceci said in an interview.

Most disturbing, Ceci says, is that when shown videos of the questioning, experts can't tell the difference between children relating real events and children discussing false ones.

Some clinicians and researchers suggest that memories of a personally experienced event such as sexual abuse could not be so easily created. Ceci, however, said he has conducted studies in which children were coaxed into telling an elaborate story of getting their fingers caught in a mousetrap and being taken to a hospital, events which never occurred.

### A Prayer for the Children

The prosecution of Dale Akiki comes at a time when research, decisions by appeals courts, and debunking of satanic myths in the press may be combining to ease the hysterical atmosphere of such cases.

Some observers of the trial say Dale Akiki both benefits and suffers from what has gone before. His lead attorney, Kathleen Coyne, is able to use the latest research by Ceci and others to expose the dubious nature of revelations made by the Faith Chapel children. But lead prosecutor Mary Avery has the advantage of seeing how the complete videotaped record in the McMartin case destroyed the prosecution. The therapists put on the stand by Miss Avery have revealed relatively little of what went on in sessions between them and Faith Chapel children. Video and audio tapes are almost nonexistent; sketchy notes, often in undecipherable longhand, are virtually all that remains of the thousands of hours of therapy.

Kathleen Coyne says her best evidence is Dale Akiki himself. "No one who has ever met Dale comes away thinking he is guilty," said Miss Coyne, a public defender who has had her share of slam-dunk losers in a ten-year career. "We're going to have him on the stand a long time. We're going to let these jurors really get to know Dale. They are going to see that he has been victimized right along with the children in this case."

Dale Akiki, who has passed three wedding anniversaries, two Christmases, and two birthdays in jail, said his ordeal has not weakened his faith in God. "When I'm not in court, I spend a lot of time reading the Bible and praying," Mr. Akiki said. "I pray for my wife and mother and my family and I pray for the children and their families.

"But I can't say I pray for the therapists or the prosecutors. That would be a lie."

Mr. Sauer and Mr. Okerblom are staff writers for the San Diego Union-Tribune.

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