Bitter Harvest

The Organ-Snatching Urban Legends

Many urban legends are harmless, such as stories of microwaved poodles and giant alligators lurking in sewers. Others, however, can have serious consequences. The organ-snatching urban legend and its variants have been taken seriously in some places and caused real harm.

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The idea of having parts of one's body removed is frightening enough: no one looks forward to an amputation or surgery. Even those people who must undergo surgery do not necessarily want the affected organ or part removed, just the malady itself. The idea of having a part of the body *forcibly* taken is much more horrific. This is the basis for the organ-snatching urban legend, and references to it are common. For example, the 1978 film *Coma*, starring Michael Douglas, told a story of unethical doctors taking organs from the comatose. An episode of the television show *Law and Order* also featured the theft of a kidney. Airing April 2, 1991, it was titled "Sonata for Solo Organ." According to Barbara Mikkelson of the Urban Legends

Reference Page, the show's writer said he had heard it from a friend, and the friend assured him that the story was a true account that had come from a newspaper (Mikkelson 1998a).[1] More recently, a 1992 film titled *The Harvest* involved a screenwriter in Central America who uncovers a black market in kidneys. And a Brazilian film released in late 1998 titled *Central Station* featured a young boy threatened by organ snatchers. It won a Golden Bear Award for Best Film at the 1998 Berlin Film Festival and was nominated for this year's Oscar as best foreign language film. There is even a rock band named the Kidney Thieves.

Urban legends are becoming more common in today's society, and the World Wide Web helps spread rumors and legends at an unprecedented rate. With the touch of a few keys, lies, rumor, conjecture, truth, fabrication, and any mix thereof can be sent to millions of people through the Internet (see, for example, Wallich 1998). The ability to correctly identify urban legends extends beyond the realm of folklorists; a modern sophistication has developed in which stories of old ladies microwaving their poodles are frequently identified as the tales that they are. But it must be remembered that, at one time, such well-known urban legends were taken seriously and believed (and many are to this day, by some people). It is with this perspective that the organ-snatching legend must be examined.[2] Many people really do believe that organ-snatching does occur, just as many believe in organized satanic conspiracies and cults. The legend has several facets and myriad roots.

Variants of the Legend

The Adult Traveler

There are several variations of the basic organ-theft urban legend. The most common one goes something like this:

> A business traveler in New Orleans takes a break from a long day and has a drink in a hotel bar. A prostitute approaches him, and they flirt. They end up in his hotel room, where he soon blacks out. He wakes up the next morning in the room's bathtub to find a note taped to the wall instructing him to call 911 from a nearby telephone. He does, and the 911 operator instructs him to feel for a tube protruding from his lower back. He finds one, and begins to panic. He is told to lie still, that one of his kidneys has been removed, and an ambulance is on the way. He is later told of a vicious gang of kidney thieves who sold his kidney to the highest bidder in a clandestine organ market.

In some cases the tub is filled with ice; in others the man discovers the sewn-up incision on his own, without a note or 911 telephone call. The city may be Las Vegas or New York, but is almost always in the United States (Mikkelson 1998a).

The Kidnapped Child

A second type of organ-snatching urban legend involves harvesting organs from children. This legend is made all the more horrifying because the victim is not simply a randy American businessman in a bar, but a defenseless third-world child. A typical claim is that children in India, the Phillipines, and Latin America (most typically Guatemala, Honduras, and Brazil) are being kidnapped and sold to rich Americans or Europeans for their organs (Brunvand 1993). The most commonly claimed thefts are those of kidneys and corneas. Several important distinctions can be drawn between the child and adult organ-theft claims (Mikkelson 1998b). For example,

It must be remembered that, at one time, well-known urban legends such as microwaved poodles were taken seriously.

- The traveler-wakes-up account is always told as a *story*, a narrative of how the unfortunate man got lured into the hotel and woke up with a kidney missing. The child-snatching scenario, however, is presented as a frightening *fact*. In some accounts, a police-led warehouse raid uncovers huddled, frightened children held captive, but that is about as detailed as the story gets.

- The traveler's account nearly always takes place in a U.S. city, whereas the children are invariably taken from a third world country. This is a very important distinction, as the child-kidnapping legend feeds latent anti-American sentiment throughout Latin America.

- The traveler is an adult man who can be said to have taken his chances by accompanying the prostitute. In this view the adult kidney-theft urban legend is also a morality tale of sorts about the dangers of casual sex. The victim in the child snatching is of course an innocent, defenseless child. How the kidnappers actually get the child is not part of the story because it is assumed that he or she could be easily snatched off the street.

- In the traveler's account, care is taken to preserve the man's life. In most cases, only one kidney is taken, and the incision has been professionally sewn up and pre-

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pared. The snatched child, on the other hand, is almost always presumed killed.

In the traveler's tale, the main concern is for the man who was so horribly assaulted. But the child-snatching factoid focuses more on the kidney itself and what happened to it. The fate of the child is almost incidental to the story.

Although the identities of children snatched for their kidneys are usually unknown, several children have come forth with stories of having had their corneas removed. Frequently these claimants are tracked down by newspaper or television reporters looking for a story. One famous case was that of Pedro Reggi, a boy who claimed that his corneas had been forcibly removed during his stay at the Montes de Oca mental institution in Argentina. The claim surfaced in a British/Canadian television program titled "The Body Parts Business," and was later broadcast on a French television program titled "Organ Snatchers." On November 25, 1993, four days after the original claim was broadcast, Reggi and his half-brother, Mario Barretto, went on the Argentine television program *Hora Clave* to retract the allegation. Barretto revealed that an opthamologist examined Reggi earlier that day and found that his corneas were in fact intact, but they had been damaged by disease. Subsequent investigation uncovered Reggi's medical records, which confirmed that the sight loss was due to natural causes (Leventhal 1994).

A second claim that aired on the "Body Parts Business" was that of eight-year-old Honduran Charlie Alvarado. The boy claimed that he was kidnapped by foreigners who wanted to sell his organs, but he managed to escape after four days. The documentary producers apparently felt that they had sufficient information and aired no critical examination of the boy's claims. That fell to Spiegel television in Germany, which also examined the organ-theft claims, including that of Charlie Alvarado. As Todd Leventhal, formerly of the United States Information Agency (USIA), reported, "According to a June 20, 1993, Spiegel television broadcast on this subject, an investigation of Alvarado's claims by the Honduran courts 'revealed that Charlie's story was a fabrication.' Alvarado could not remember the day on which he was allegedly kidnapped, he had no bruises from the ropes with which he claimed he had been bound tightly for days, and the two foreign workers he accused of kidnapping him were released for lack of evidence" (Leventhal 1994). Despite such serious oversights, "Organ Snatchers" won France's prestigious Albert Londres journalism prize in 1995 (Barry 1995).

The "Organ Snatchers" documentary also featured a Colombian woman, Mrs. Luz Dary Vargas, who claimed that her young son, Weinis Jeison, had also been the victim of this horrible crime. She said that when Jeison became ill she took him to a local hospital, where his corneas were forcibly removed—a terrifying story indeed. But when the Colombian Office of Human Rights investigated the theft, the story began

High Andes Indians in Peru. These Quechua are among the Indian groups who share a belief in the *lik'ichiri*, an entity that stalks the high plains and supposedly steals fat from its victims. (Photo by Jeff Radford)

to unravel. In a report issued February 4, 1994, the office found that in fact Jeison had gone blind due to natural causes. In early February 1993, the boy was hospitalized with numerous health problems, including "severe bilateral eye infection," which led to complete blindness well before the allegations of cornea theft were made. The report also stated:

> The mother of the minor Weinis Jeison, Mrs. Luz Dary Vargas, received the sum of 40,000 [Colombian] pesos (about $60 U.S. dollars) from the French journalist . . . for the version of the story she gave regarding the child. . . . We note that the aforementioned journalist did not question the verbal testimony given by the humble peasant mother about the minor in question at any of the health institutions where the child was attended to . . . nor were health officials . . . or the medical records consulted either, as would have been hoped. (Leventhal 1994)

A few other claimants have surfaced, but the same pattern of allegation, investigation, and subsequent repudiation is repeated. Frequently the original, alarming claim will receive international attention, but the more sober follow-up, refuting the claims, will only make local news. This leads to an availability bias problem for researchers, who are likely to overlook smaller, local stories.

Lik'ichiri: Fat Stealers of the Andes

Stories of child organ-snatching are common in Central and South America, but they are not the only tales of bodily theft. The urban legend of the *lik'ichiri*, said to haunt the *altiplano* (highlands) of the Andes mountains, is another. *Lik'ichiri* means "fat stealer" in the language of the Aymara, one of the prominent indigenous groups of the Andes. It is a well-known figure among the Quechua, Aymara, and other native Andean

cultures. While in La Paz, Bolivia, in 1996, I interviewed Eulogio Chavez, an ethnolinguist at the Ethnology and Folklore museum about the *lik'ichiri*. According to Chavez, the *lik'ichiri* attacks people as they sleep on the *altiplano*, cutting long, thin slits in the victims' sides and removing their fat. The extraction is painless, and the wound promptly heals without the victim being any the wiser (Radford 1996).

While at first a *lik'ichiri* attack might appear to be a cheap and efficient method of weight loss, according to the legend the eventual results are much graver: unless treatment is given promptly, the victim will die. Treatments include the clandestine administration of a potion called *achacachi*. Although the extraction of fat may seem trivial, it is important to realize that in the frigid Andean highlands fat helps keep people insulated and alive. Anyone left in the cold of the high rugged mountains without protection, including natural body fat, is indeed in real danger.

Although Chavez (1996) believes that the *lik'ichiri* legend is very old (originating before the Spanish Conquest in the 1630s), the urban legend has clearly been updated. Most reported attacks occur in the mountains and high plains, but people are also said to be attacked in the cities as well. In La Paz, Bolivia's capital and largest city, hapless bus riders are said to be attacked late at night. Supposedly one can avoid a *lik'ichiri* attack by traveling only during the day, avoiding walking alone at night, and eating garlic, which is supposed to dilute the fat, making it less appealing or unusable to the *lik'ichiri*.

Although some sources claim that the *lik'ichiri* is a spirit or imaginary entity, most people I interviewed in La Paz, including Mr. Chavez, believe it is a real person, or group of people, who have special skills or abilities. Such powers include the ability to put their victims to sleep and make painless, surgical incisions. Note that many of the powers ascribed to the *lik'ichiri* are not necessarily assumed to be supernatural; many people today believe that hypnosis, for example, can make others fall asleep at will, follow commands, or dull the pain of a cut. The *lik'ichiri*, then, is less of a supernatural monster than a normal person with an odd vocation. "It's not necessarily evil," Chavez notes, "but a profession. It's an economic question."

Unlike tales of native children's organs being harvested for implantation into rich foreigners' children, the *lik'ichiri* supposedly sells the fat he collects to international corporations — mostly American companies— to be used for various purposes, including plastic surgery and the development of anesthetics. According to Chavez, unscrupulous company representatives supposedly buy the fat from the *lik'ichiri* knowing that it was taken from innocent victims in the high plains. Chavez compared the situation to the history of quinine: Just as the Whites (and their companies) took quinine from the Andes and developed it for profit, the same is being done to the Andean people's life-preserving fat.

Similar urban legends elsewhere in the region include the *pishtacos* and the *sacaojos* of Peru. In the case of the *sacaojos* ("eye-stealers"), rumor spread in the Peruvian capital city of Lima that bands of foreigners had taken to the streets to kidnap children, later throwing them back on the pavement with their eyes gouged out. The eyes were said to be sold overseas at a lucrative profit.

The original, alarming claim will receive international attention, but the more sober follow-up, refuting the claims, will only make local news.

On a cultural level, the children, and by extension, the very future, of the native peoples are threatened by the *lik'ichiri*. In the *lik'ichiri* urban legend, the bodies themselves of the native population are being taken from them. This fuels xenophobia, and indeed "[T]he figure of the pishtaco is first of all that of a foreigner. This tall white—who drinks milk and sleeps by day—goes out at night carrying under his long coat a long knife with which he cuts up Indians. He uses their fat to oil his machines and their blood to sell to blood banks" (Shakespeare 1989).

Although the *lik'ichiri* is usually thought of as a native, foreigners are occasionally accused of being *lik'ichiri* and attacked. One American woman I spoke with in La Paz who worked on the *altiplano* said she had been warned not to be seen out at dusk or night because she might be attacked by locals, whose attitude is better safe than sorry concerning a *lik'ichiri* in their midst.

Despite the similarity of many motifs to the vampire legend (such as attacks that occur at night, the use of garlic to deter the predator, the draining of a bodily substance, an ability to put others to sleep and turn invisible, etc.), Chavez sees no parallels between the two: "One is fiction," he said. "The other occurs right here."

The Organ Trade in China and India

It would be naive to believe that there is no organ *commerce* in the world at all. There are many verified cases of organ selling; indeed, in some countries selling one's organs is perfectly legal. In the United States, it is against the law, although some have suggested that legalizing it would save lives and be beneficial to all involved.

In India, for example, some adults voluntarily sell one of their kidneys. Although the sale of kidneys is seen by many in the United States as morally objectionable, it should be remembered that in India, as in many developing countries, sophisticated medical equipment is rare and in many cases the resources simply are not available to extract and preserve

organs of those killed in accidents for later transplant. Few Indians who suffer from kidney failure can afford dialysis treatments, so they can either die or purchase a kidney. In 1994, the Indian parliament passed a law making it illegal to buy or sell human organs for transplantation, but, "A loophole in the law allows people who are related to the recipient only by ties of affection to donate organs with committee approval" (Cohen 1998).

One case of organ selling that made headlines in 1989 was that of Ahmet Koc, a Turk who traveled to Britain to sell one of his kidneys. In December 1989, Koc claimed that three months before, he had been brought to Britain with the promise of a job. When he went in for a medical check, he was given an injection which he believed to be a blood test, but woke up the next day to find that a kidney had been removed. He was told not to be upset, because he would be well paid for his loss.

It was later revealed that Mr. Koc was in fact one of four Turks who voluntarily sold their kidneys that day in September of 1989. He was apparently unhappy with the amount paid him, and went to the press with his story. Although transplanting brokered kidneys was legal at the time in Britain, three London doctors who participated in the transplant were found guilty of professional misconduct. The law has since been changed, presumably in large part due to the furor over the Koc case. Again, as frequently occurs, the original, bizarre claims received enormous publicity while the truth about Koc came only much later and was barely reported or noticed. It is likely that the Koc case did much to spawn the urban legend of adult organ snatching.

Organs taken from recently executed Chinese prisoners is another example. Although the Chinese government claims that such organ harvesting is rarely done and then only with the consent of the prisoners, several respected human rights organizations insist otherwise. A 1994 Human Rights Watch/Asia report concluded that executed prisoners are the "principal source" for transplant organs in China (Leventhal 1994); a similar conclusion was reached by Amnesty International.

The Urban Legend Gains Credibility

The organ-snatching legend reached a peak of popularity in the mid-1990s, when several prominent organizations gave the rumors credibility. As noted earlier, several media outlets ran stories about child organ trafficking, including the Brazilian newspaper *Correio Braziliense* and a book published in Spain titled *Niños de Repuesto* ("Spare-Parts Children").

Further credibility was lent when the World Organization Against Torture issued a report by its director, Eric Sottas, in March of 1994. The paper, titled "Trade in Organs and Torture," listed six Latin American countries as confirmed traffickers in child organs. Sottas rehashed numerous accounts, many of them long since disproven, of organ trafficking. Sottas included, for example, the case of Pedro Reggi, the Argentine boy mentioned earlier who had lost his sight to disease, not cornea thieves (Sottas 1994).

The child organ-snatching legend even made it to the European Parliament. As Leventhal (1994) notes, the European Parliament adopted a "Resolution on Prohibiting Trade in Transplant Organs" on September 14, 1993. The resolution "calls for action to be taken to put a stop to the mutilation and murder of foetuses, children, and adults in certain developing countries for the purpose of providing transplant organs." The resolution was based on a report submitted by special rapporteur Leon Schwartzenberg, a former Minister of Health of France. Schwartzenberg's report was credulous about the organ-snatching legends, and the author based his conclusions on many dubious and recanted sources.

Rafael Matesanz, national coordinator for transplants of Spain's National Organization for Transplants, prepared a report in response to the resolution in which he stated: "The reference to [rumors of child organ trafficking] in an official document controlled by the European Parliament is improper from any standpoint, because it implies acknowledgement that such practices exist . . ." (quoted in Leventhal 1994).

Dubious Claims

With many and varied reports and rumors, as well as claimants to the organ-snatching urban legend, the myth seems reasonable to many people. After all, bizarre things happen all the time; why couldn't this be true?

The short answer is that, like all urban legends, yes, it could be true. It could be that at some point a little old lady really microwaved her poodle. And it is not technically impossible that giant alligators could roam the sewers of New York. But the evidence for organ snatching, just like the evidence for most urban legends, is simply not there. Because extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, the burden of proof is on those claiming that such a trade is in fact occurring. As yet, the evidence has fallen far short of the mark. To the contrary, many factors make organ-snatching claims suspect.

To begin with, it would be nearly impossible to conceal an entire organ-snatching ring. Kidney transplants are not simple procedures that can be done in someone's kitchen. Sophisticated medical equipment must be used, and donors and recipients must be carefully matched. Blood and tissue typing and histocompatibility tests must be done in advance. The operation would take between four and six hours and involve ten to twenty support staff, including three members of a surgical team, an anaesthesiologist, and two nurses. It would be a practical impossibility in America or the West to assemble a large team of highly trained medical personnel willing to engage in such illegal and unethical behavior. Highly paid medical staff here and abroad are unlikely to risk performing such operations, thus jeopardizing both their careers and reputations.

Dangers of Legends

The detrimental effects of the organ-snatching urban legend are manifold. Fear that organs are being forcibly taken from unsuspecting people decreases organ donations. For example, in the Cordobá region of Argentina, organ donations dropped 90 percent after Pedro Reggi's claims of cornea snatching circulated. And, according to Leventhal (1994), "After false charges of cornea theft in Colombia were publicized in a French television program in November 1993, cornea donations in Colombia plummeted, decreasing by 90 percent, according to the Pan-American Association of Eye Banks. Prior to the false charges, cornea donations in Colombia averaged 94 per month, but dropped to eight to ten per month after the program." This sort of public reaction costs people's lives, particularly in the case of kidneys. Every kidney, cornea, or other organ not donated is one less that could help someone to see or live another year.

In many poor areas, such as in the slums of Brazil, residents may avoid treatment in public hospitals out of fear that their organs may be taken (Scheper-Hughes 1998). The results can be tragic, since the poor are frequently those most in need of medical services.

The United Network for Organ Sharing issued a position statement on February 21, 1997, titled, "Debunking the Kidney Heist Hoax," which reads in part, "There is absolutely no evidence of such activity ever occurring in the U.S. . . . but it is possible that some believe it and decide against organ donation out of needless fear."

On December 29, 1998, Howard Nathan, executive director of the Delaware Valley Transplant Program, issued a plea for "Internet users to make New Year's resolutions not to forward false e-mail messages about a supposed organ snatching scheme." In a press release he stated, "The Internet story continues to be circulated and has a negative and harmful impact on the public's perception of the medical community and the organ donor program. . . .We shouldn't have to compete with false and outrageous organ donation stories on the Internet or anywhere else."

Inter-country adoptions suffer as well. Thousands of children who would otherwise be adopted by loving American or European families remain in orphanages throughout South America. Local adoption agencies are nervous about incurring their communities' wrath and suspicions that they are in collusion with traffickers of babies and baby organs.

While a decrease in organ donations may kill people indirectly, even worse can happen when unsubstantiated rumors spread and are acted upon. Unprovoked attacks on foreigners have occurred, many in the mid-1990s. In March of 1994, Melissa Larson, a woman from New Mexico, was hiking in Guatemala when she was taken to jail for routine questioning. Rumors quickly spread in the town of Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa that she had been detained for selling babies and baby organs. When she was transferred to a larger jail, townspeople rioted, believing that she had bribed guards to be let free. The riot left sixty people hospitalized and led to fifty arrests (Morello 1994).

The following month, Alaska native June Weinstock was beaten unconscious and stabbed by a mob of about 300 angry villagers in western Guatemala. The 52-year-old woman suffered multiple stab wounds, three skull fractures, a broken arm, and a broken leg. She fell into a coma shortly thereafter and, as of 1994, had recovered from the coma but remained severely impaired. Weinstock was accused of abducting an eight-year-old boy who was actually at a religious procession and later returned home (Canto 1994).

In a letter to a travel magazine, James Sleeman of the U.K. writes, "[In Peru] we met Indians from the village where two Americans had stopped and been shot in 1995. The Aguaruna are very superstitious and most believe in mythical bogeymen called 'pishtacos.' . . . The Americans apparently were travelling by raft and decided to camp at dusk on an island which they did not realize was near a village; the locals panicked and shot them" (Sleeman 1997; for a fuller account, see Cahill 1995).

The child organ-snatching legend even made it to the European parliament.

Despite the dangers of such rumors, the allegations still circulate. In July 1998, Mexican Cardinal Juan Sandoval Iñiguez was quoted in *El Informador*, a leading Guadalajara daily newspaper, as saying that 20,000 Mexican children have been snatched and transported abroad so that their vital organs could be harvested. The cardinal failed to provide any evidence of his assertion or to name which country he believed was importing the children (Forbes 1998).

It is important to remember that urban legends are not necessarily harmless, and in fact can cause serious harm to innocent people. Rumors, urban legends, and misinformation can easily lead to disaster, and it serves us all to subject them to skeptical inquiry.

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Notes

1. This sort of report is quite common, particularly in the spread of

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works that define and contextualize them, which, from an epistemological standpoint, is terminally naive (Clark 1991). Most of what passes for intelligent discourse about NAGPRA consists of what I would call "psychodrama," and betrays a near-total ignorance of evolutionary biology on the part of nearly all concerned. Psychodrama is the stuff of religious belief (and politics), and has no place in science. A direct consequence of the national paroxysm of guilt surrounding the quincentenary, NAGPRA is bad law. It is in the interests of Indians and Anglos alike that it be repealed.

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urban legends. The term for the phenomenon is "source amnesia." It occurs because factual information is apparently stored in a different part of the brain than the source of that information. So while the information itself is retained, the source may be misremembered or lost, and of course the source is essential for determining the credibility of the information.

2. Some of the body parts mentioned here, such as corneas and fat, are not organs. The distinction is important because corneas, as nonvascular tissue, need not be implanted in a recipient immediately. They remain viable for between one and two weeks, while a kidney must be implanted within approximately two days. Because of this, claims that kidneys are taken from rural areas in Latin America and shipped to Europe, for example, are highly suspect; the kidneys would likely be unusable when they arrived. In the case of fat theft, the usual reason for the harvesting is not transplanting, so such considerations are not applicable.

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