



Explaining Abuse of “Child Witches” in Africa

Powerful Witchbusters in Weak States

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Abstract

Thousands of African children have been accused of witchcraft, physically abused, and thrown out of their homes or killed over the last twenty years. Analyzing this phenomenon with the same model used to explain the pre-modern European witch hunts allows us to avoid contributing to the heart-of-darkness stereotype about Africa. Accusations of witchcraft against African children are prevalent where state authority is fragmented and open to pressure at the local level, in those areas with intense witch beliefs and sense of crisis stoked by zealous clergy acting as witchbusters. As in Europe for accused women, a perceived transgression of social roles by African children, due to increasing numbers of orphans due to the HIV crisis, has made them vulnerable to scapegoating. A focus on the Niger delta region, through examination of Nigerian and regional newspapers, indicates that witch hunts aimed at children can occur in weak or corrupt states, not only in collapsed states experiencing catastrophic crisis. In the wake of a 2008 BBC documentary, local Nigerian officials persecuted the activists who gave children shelter, apparently due to the political connections of the pastors who make money by labelling children as witches or demoniacs.

Keywords: child witches, witchcraft, Nigeria, weak states, witch hunts, child abuse

Introduction

In several African countries, thousands of small children have been accused of being witches or demoniacs, subjected to agonizing exorcisms, and driven from their homes or killed. McVeigh’s reporting from Nigeria gives a sense of the problem. Mary’s mother, for example, forced poison down the little girl’s throat.

If that didn't kill her, her mother warned her, then it would be a barbed-wire hanging. Finally, her mother threw boiling water and caustic soda over her head and body, and her father dumped his screaming daughter in a field. Drifting in and out of consciousness, she stayed near the house for a long time before finally slinking off into the bush. . . [Gerry's] mother cursed him, his father siphoned petrol from his motorbike tank and spat it over his eight-year-old face. Gerry's facial blistering is as visible as the trauma in his dull eyes. He asks every adult he sees if they will take him home to his parents. . . Nwaeka's wound on her head where a nail was driven in looks to be healing well. Nine-year-old Etido had nails, too, five of them across the crown of his downy head. It's hard to tell what damage has been done. Udo, now 12, was beaten and abandoned by his mother. He nearly lost his arm after villagers, finding him foraging for food by the roadside, saw him as a witch and hacked at him with machetes. Magrose is seven. Her mother dug a pit in the wood and tried to bury her alive. Michael was found by a farmer clearing a ditch, starving and unable to stand on legs that had been flogged raw.

One challenge is to analyze this phenomenon without reinforcing “the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination,” i.e., that of a “heart of darkness” (Achebe), already so prevalent in representations of the African occult (Geschiere). To avoid positioning Africa as the benighted and mystical opposite of the rational enlightened West, one needs to examine African witchcraft beliefs cross-culturally (Ellis), cross-temporally (Gaskill), and from an inter-disciplinary perspective (Garrett). A second challenge is to explain the outlying case of Nigeria, given that the prevailing explanations for the persecution of “child witches” focus on collapsed states. Cimpric, Aguilar Molina, and de Boeck, in their respective examinations of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), compellingly argue that this phenomenon is rooted in profound changes in how society perceives children in general, due to the dramatic increase in street children as well as the shocking appearance of child soldiers, all in a context of a cataclysmic social crisis. Rather alarmingly, however, a closer look at Nigeria indicates that witch hunts directed at children can spring from much less extreme circumstances.

Both challenges can be met by employing a modified version of the model widely used to explain the frequency, density, and targets of the European witch trials. Levack argues that in areas of Europe where state authority was effectively centralized, prosecutions for witchcraft and resulting executions were rare. They were more common where local officials were influenced by grassroots pressures to hunt witches, due to strong local witch beliefs and a crisis mentality fed by zealous clergy acting as witchbusters, as Simpson terms them. The targets were mostly women, who in pre-modern Europe had attained a symbolic identity of deviance, due to their perceived violation of proper social roles. Similarly, examination of national and regional newspapers indicates that in the Niger delta, an area with widespread witch beliefs and a history of witch hunts, religious leaders have stoked an atmosphere of crisis, already palpable due to widespread poverty and increasing numbers of street children, and thereby made a tidy profit by scapegoating children. These pastors are not representative of an exotic African religious tradition; on the contrary, they employ a theology largely imported from their American godfathers. Because of their wealth, these pastors in the Nigerian states of Cross River and Akwa Ibom have apparently established a

significant degree of political protection, the effects of which can be seen in the local political response caused by international attention to the predicament of Nigerian children in 2008-2011. Instead of protecting children and prosecuting their accusers, local officials persecuted those NGOs and child-rights activists who gave shelter to the mistreated children, thereby enabling further accusations and abuse.

Scapegoating and Witch Hunting

Scapegoating is the unmerited yet culturally plausible blaming of an individual or group for negative events, real or imagined, that befall the community. In an atmosphere of crisis, the scapegoat is given a role as the source of misfortune, the personified antithesis of popular understandings of the normal and the good. The elimination of this symbolic enemy makes problems seem comprehensible and controllable, and thereby brings some psychological relief to the community (Girard).

Analyzing how and why women are scapegoated as witches helps us understand how children can be similarly targeted. Both women and children, for example, often have low social status, and if they are economically costly when food is hard to come by, relatives and community members may be unwilling to support them. This problem is especially salient if the woman is isolated from her birth relations as in a patrilocal society, or when the child is vulnerable due to the death of one or both parents. In an atmosphere of intense or deepening poverty, those relatively well off, worried about their own fortunes, are less likely to help the poorest, despite any social and religious norms of mutual aid (Levack: 144-45). In such circumstances witchcraft accusations can serve to sever a financially burdensome relationship (Cohn: 225). This creates a nasty psychological mixture of “hostility and guilt” (Garrett: 465), and makes it more likely that the most vulnerable are targeted. But scapegoating is not just an economic calculation (cf. Miguel). For example, a woman accused of being a witch in colonial New England could not count on her wealth for protection if she did not have a husband to vouch for her. Indeed, Karlsen (4) argues that women were more likely to be persecuted if they had economic power that threatened patriarchal norms. In early modern Europe, too, a woman not subject to a father or husband “was a source of concern if not fear” (Levack: 155).

The most dangerous situation in a society with strong witchcraft beliefs is to be viewed as economically unproductive as well as transgressive of cultural norms. Whatever the provenance of Western misogyny, in pre-modern Europe the female gender seems to have “taken on new significance as a marker for ‘deviance’” (Whitney: 86). One apparent cause was an increase in the number of unmarried women, due in part to the plague, which frequently caused more deaths among men (Levack: 156). Many of these women entered the workforce, be it in production or prostitution, and thereby moved outside accepted social roles (Levack: 155-56; see also Goode and Ben Yehuda: 185-91). Just as accusations of witchcraft directed at women have helped to “set and police the boundaries of female normality and acceptability” (Reis: xii), so the hunt for “child witches” in Africa indicates the power of perceptions that children have contravened proper social boundaries. The most likely origin of this impression is the dramatic increase in children living outside the traditional family structure.

Due to deaths from HIV, between 1990 and 2009 the number of orphans in sub-Saharan Africa increased from fewer than 1 million to almost 15 million (Trinitapoli and Weinreb: 174); these children often suffer from stigma and discrimination from members of their communities, even from their own caregivers (Amde and Tadele: 174). Many of these children have ended up living primarily on the street, although hard numbers are difficult to come by. The massive growth of these street children is unsettling for a community in several ways. It is a challenge to the importance of community norms that emphasize the strength of kinship and mutual assistance, causing that dangerous combination of guilt and hostility. Further, these children lack an accepted role in wider society:

they are both “at risk” and “the risk”; dangerous and endangered, vulnerable and resourceful, needy and bold, naïve and street smart, miniature adults and child-like adults (Scheper-Hughes: 35).

Stephens employs Mary Douglas’ observation that things “out of place” in cultural terms are often regarded as dangerously and mysteriously powerful. Children on the streets are “people out of place.” They are associated with drug use, violence, and sexuality – all of which are taboo in regard to children. Street children, therefore, elicit violent reactions far out of proportion to any threat they may pose as petty criminals. Children breaking the law become a symbolic image, the opposite of the proper child, and can become “represented as malicious predators, the embodiment of dangerous natural forces, unharnessed to social ends” (12-13). Street children are often assigned the role of scapegoats because they are the personification of pressing and overwhelming social issues such as poverty, the changing composition of families, and women as single mothers (Aptekar: 384). Huggins and Mesquita report that murder of these children is not uncommon, because of their “presence on the streets that reinforces an image that they are devoid of civilizing family bonds and dangerous” (269). In their studies of the cultural effects of street children in the DRC, Waddington reports that they “are perceived as vermin: petty thieves, often supernatural, indolent and a security risk” (12), and Aguilar Molina says they “attract the population’s wrath . . . as the incarnation of social disintegration” (19).

“Child Witches” in Nigeria: Witchbusting in a Weak State

African children who suffer because of witchcraft accusations can be organized into four categories. The first encompasses children near the Bight of Benin, whose birth is seen as abnormal in some way, be it premature, in breech position, as twins, or with some physical deformity (Cimpric: 2). The second includes children with albinism, who are sometimes killed because of the belief in the magical power of potions made from parts of their bodies; this is perhaps especially prevalent in Tanzania (see e.g., Obulutsa). In the third category are those children who are suspect due to association with accused relatives. There are, for example, more than a thousand children in the north of Ghana, exiled to so-called witch camps for the supposed wrongs of their relatives there (Abagali). The final category, the focus here, is made up of children who are accused of acts of *maleficium*, i.e., harmful magic. Their most common characteristics can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of African Children Accused of Witchcraft (Cimpric; Aguilar Molina)

Physical	Behavioral	Family background
Ill-health, pot-bellied, scabies, red eyes, large head, deafness, ugliness, epilepsy, autism, Downs, stuttering.	Sleeps little or poorly, averts eyes, eats a lot, sexual, talks to him/herself, incontinent, sleep walks, withdrawn; steals; very clever/not clever.	Orphaned; stepchild; many young siblings; parent(s) unemployed; poverty.

These accusations are strikingly prevalent in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where tens of thousands of children have been abused and driven out of their homes since civil wars began in the 1990s (Dowden; Hoskins). There are several excellent studies that focus on the scapegoating of these children: De Boeck, Aguilar Molina, and the indispensable work by Cimpric compellingly argue that the accusations against children in the DRC is rooted in profound changes in how they are perceived and point to a huge increase in street children, and the shocking appearance of child soldiers, in the context of a severe humanitarian crisis among the most deadly and destructive ever documented.

The successive civil wars that began in 1996 in what was then Zaire have resulted in the deaths of some 5.4 million people, mass displacement, the collapse of health systems, and widespread food shortages (IRC: ii). Child soldiers made their horrifying appearance at the very start of this disaster, upon the fall of Kinshasa in May 1997, when as many as 20,000 of them dramatically marched into the city with Laurent Kabila’s army. These *kadogo* (Swahili for “little kids”) were widely thought, sometimes accurately, to be anointed with magic; memorably, President Kabila himself was later assassinated by a child soldier (Stearns: 178-81). These small but deadly soldiers, in a horrifying and traumatic social context, have contributed to a social perception of children in general as a real and dangerous power (de Boeck); they are viewed “as actors and aggressors, as a threat rather than [as those] needing to be protected” (Aguilar Molina: 19). Cimpric says that it is “no coincidence” that the persecution of children as witches is found in those countries, such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Angola, that have experienced massively destructive wars featuring child soldiers (15).

But this explanation does not fit Nigeria. While there has been political violence aplenty, there have been no child soldiers, except very recently and in the predominantly Muslim north, far from the Niger delta region where children are persecuted as witches. While it is true that the Niger delta has experienced “the uncertainties of political strife,” La Fontaine stretches the explanation too far when she argues that “this area, like that of the Congo basin . . . has been devastated” (121). While Nigeria is a weak and perhaps failing state, it has not seen the total political and social collapse that resulted from the civil wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, and the DRC (see the comparisons in Rotberg; IRC: 15). Cimpric glosses this difference by arguing that witch-hunts of children are “gaining ground in countries that are geographically close” to the Congo basin. But the problem is not merely “gaining ground” in the Niger delta: there have been as many as 15,000 children labeled as witches, roughly the same numbers as in the DRC (Karimi; see also Houreld). It seems, therefore, that the presence of child soldiers and cataclysmic social dislocation are not necessary to explain witch hunts of children in Africa. However, a central feature of the explanation for

persecution of children in the DRC still holds in Nigeria: there seems to have been a change in how children are viewed in general.

As in many areas of Nigeria, homeless children abound in Calabar, the capital city of Cross River state just across the river from Akwa Ibom, but this area has historically strong witch beliefs and a tradition of related violence. Regardless of gender, these children are known as “Skolombo boys” and seem to be viewed quite negatively, despite their misery and helplessness. One writer complains, for example, that “they are often seen defecating in the open and scrounging for food. And they go for days without taking a bath” (*Nation* 2016). Eyo reports that “many of them are under ten years of age,” and are forced to eat from “the dumpsites of the many eateries . . . blocking human and vehicular movement . . . [and] become a nuisance in the process.” Interestingly, while many were driven from their homes due to accusations of witchcraft, it seems that some have been so accused only *after* they began to live on the street. One child told a reporter: “When some of the spiritual churches preached that people should not give money because we’re witches and wizards, we started searching for discarded plastic materials and sold them to make money” (Isine). Inevitably, these children commit petty (and sometimes more serious) crimes to survive; in response, Governor Ben Ayade of Cross River state insisted that the state must use force against these groups of children he acknowledged were made up of children “between five and 17” (Eyo). As one reporter puts it, these children “constitute [a] societal embarrassment,” as they signify the “loss of the extended family system as Nigeria’s core socio-cultural value” (Akpan).

These children have become scapegoats in an area with one of the largest number of churches per capita in the world (Harrison), and there is general agreement that the role of local religious leaders is crucial to explain the persecution of African children for witchcraft (La Fontaine; de Boeck; Cimpric; Aguilar Molina). The question is where their persecutors flourish, and why. These are witchbusters, experts in evil, self-declared arbiters of the supernatural, who take advantage of a market for their services, which is enlarged by fears and rumors they stoke (Simpson: 15; see also Frankfurter: 35-42). In Italy in the sixteenth century they were known as *benandanti*, “who saw themselves as soldiers of Christ in a spiritual fight against evil.” As late as the early twentieth century, in Germany this person was known as the *Hexenbanner*, who beat children to break the spells on them. As do the witchbusters in modern Nigeria, they collected “large fees for their work, and claimed the authority of God and the Bible for what they did; anyone who doubted their power was no true Christian” (Simpson: 11).

These African religious leaders are not acting out a grotesque and exotic African tradition; on the contrary, the roots of their outlook and theology are found in the west. The notion of witchcraft as a purely evil force, for example, has been transplanted from Europe (Fisiy and Geschiere: 252; Ellis: 33); more specifically, the belief that demonic power lies behind all witchcraft is a Christian missionary import (Meyer). Indeed, the African Protestant sects that Robbins calls Pentecostal-Charismatic (P/C) churches are a remarkable example of the “cultural hybridizations that make up globalized modernity” (Richards: xvii). These churches began spreading in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Africa, expanded in the 1990s, and are now growing spectacularly (Ukah 2007). They often have two features in common. First, their Christianity is about success and plenty: if a Christian is not succeeding, it is a sign of something suspiciously awry. The second characteristic is a focus on spiritual warfare,

which sees the world as a battleground between Godly forces and demonic spirits. The two are combined in the teaching that the success due to every good Christian can be blocked by an evil force, which the witchbuster can drive off or exorcise. Both ideas are traceable to North American religious currents (Gifford 2004; 2006; Robbins). Copying their American televangelist godfathers, these churches are focused on growth, sometimes behaving more as economic empire builders than religious organizations (Ukah 2007).

These religious leaders are entrepreneurs, who flog a large variety of “videos, magazines, CDs, DVDs, books, booklets and pamphlets, stickers, key-holders and other religious memorabilia or ritual paraphernalia” (Ukah 2007: 16). Their market is extremely competitive (Gifford 1993: 154). Because of the proliferation of P/C churches, each attempts to carve out its own commercial niche. Some specialize in women with fertility problems; others claim to heal those suffering from HIV/AIDS; many cast out demons and deliver congregants from witches (Ukah 2007: 17). Labelling children as witches or demoniacs creates a profitable virtuous circle of church expansion. Trumpeting witchcraft accusations brings not only money – congregants often pay as much as a year’s income to be rid of a witch – but serve as advertising, which in turn draws new congregants and clients (Aguilar Molina; Cimpric). Sam Itauma of Nigeria, whose Children’s Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN) has protected and sheltered many accused children, said the exorcisms spread among churches to protect market share. “Even churches who didn’t use to ‘find’ child witches are being forced into it by the competition” (quoted in Houreld).

Nigerian pastors with large national followings, who are often strikingly wealthy, have carefully cultivated political connections, as would representatives of any successful industry (Marshall; Ukah 2008). At the local level, for example in the Niger delta region, they have established significant political protection, which apparently allows them to act with near impunity. But this is not just another interest group. Their link with the political world is symbiotic, because their theology nourishes the political fatalism by which corrupt leaders remain in power. These pastors preach that Nigerians will attain prosperity not through an efficient education system, functioning infrastructure, equitable taxes, and other fruits of good government, but rather by driving off evil spirits. In the face of massive corruption and mismanagement, they insist that citizens’ problems come from demons and witches, and the remedy is therefore not political participation or social activism, but prayer (Gifford 1991: 15). There are several famous witchbusters in Nigeria, and Pastor Isaac Dakup of the Solid Rock Gospel Church provides a synopsis of their views.

The Bible has commanded us not to let the witch live. So, if you know somebody is a witch and you have proofs, then she or he should not be allowed to live . . . [W]itches have no place in a society where God wants his people to prosper . . . So, if this deliverance is a bit tough, it is not because pastors are mean or wicked . . . (quoted in Choji).

At the national level, David Oyedepo, sometimes known as the “Pastorpreneur,” runs the multinational Living Faith Ministries/Winners’ Chapel, and was named as Nigeria’s richest Pastor by Forbes magazine in 2011 with an estimated net worth of \$150 million (Cocks). In addition to offering “deliverance from ancestral curses” (Williams), he dabbles in witchbusting. One Sunday in 2014, for example, after making an altar call for witches to be

saved, he apparently slapped a young woman who so identified herself. The moment was captured on video, and the Pastor responded to the resulting publicity by saying “it is my ministry to slap [witches] . . . If I see another witch, I’ll slap” (quoted in Ezeamalu). Pastor Umoh Ekwo, to take another example at the national level, is founder of Bible Standard Christian Ministry, and “has been in the forefront of battle against the practice of witchcraft and other evil powers” (Williams). Pastors more closely associated with the Niger delta region include Bishop Sunday Ulup-Aya, who sees a wide market for his services, estimating that more than half the population of Akwa Ibom state is made up of witches and wizards (Ubabukoh and Dada). Most famous is Prophet Helen Ukpabio of Calabar, a self-described former witch (Ukah 2007), who founded the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries, and whose specialty is the detection and exorcism of “child witches.” She is Nigeria’s most successful female preacher, and likely the richest, with over 250 franchises of her ministry (Arinze).

Sunday Ulup-Aya and Helen Ukpabio know well their markets in Akwa Ibom and Cross River states. “So many people here [in Akwa Ibom] believe that children can be possessed by demons that there is rarely any action taken against those who claim to deliver the children in violent exorcisms,” reports Sam Itauma of CRARN (BBC) In southern Nigeria, as in many parts of Africa, witchcraft beliefs are common, but most areas do not experience witch hunts. Around Calabar, however, the beliefs are more intense, and persecution has been more violent (Jones: 325-26). Jeffreys labels the area “notorious as a stronghold of witchcraft” (95). Until recently, most notable were the “witch purges” of 1978-79 in Cross River state led by Edem Edet Akpan. This witchbuster would travel from village to village in the region, asking all to assemble outdoors. When he arrived, Edem or one of his followers would accuse individuals of witchcraft and torture them until they confessed their crimes. The statutory authorities found it difficult to put a stop to this, as “the crusade was extremely popular and villagers defiantly fought against the police who tried to disperse or prevent such gatherings.” Hundreds were murdered (Offiong: 107-108). Even before Edem Edet Akpan, there was a tradition of witchbusting by those who would “try to detect the offending evil-doers and offer preparations (at a price) to free and protect the afflicted” (Hackett: 37-38); more recently, they use Christian symbols and language to save supposed victims of witchcraft (Offiong: 120).

Historically, in the delta region “anyone displaying behavior considered to be abnormal or threatening to the social order was potentially a witch” (Hackett: 37), including children. According to one early account, for example, local beliefs in the Calabar area held that witches passed down their powers to their children. If childless, they put magical substances in food, gave it to the child of another, and thereby made that child a witch (Talbot: 151); indeed, the notion that witchcraft is passed to children through food is still strong in Akwa Ibom (Nwadinobi: 5). Offiong reports that in the Ibibio language, the figurative use of the word witch (*ifoi*) includes “a child who behaves badly,” and those “abnormal behaviors likely to earn one the stigma of being a witch [include] crying at night” (110). Witchbuster Helen Ukpabio plays on these beliefs and traditions when she warns parents “a child under two years of age that cries at night and deteriorates in health is an agent of Satan” (quoted in Foxcroft and Secker).

The children accused of witchcraft and exiled to the streets of Akwa Ibom and Cross River states “become easy prey for the numerous traffickers that operate in the region” (Madike). Indeed, this area is a noted source of child prostitutes and plantation workers, often shipped abroad. In fact, Akwa Ibom State leads Nigeria in the rate of child trafficking and child labor; in many urban areas of Nigeria, child trafficking, servitude, and labor are synonymous with the inhabitants of Akwa Ibom (Foxcroft). In at least one case, the connection between “child witches” and child trafficking was strikingly close. In 2010, the Nigerian National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons found 23 children who had been accused of witchcraft stashed in a house run by Pastor Bawa Madaki. It is not uncommon for witchbusters to confine children whose parents are not quickly able to pay, and Pastor Madaki apparently had been hiring out the children to exploitative workplaces, and collecting their wages (Salkida).

At the national level, the most wealthy and famous preachers have close links to the political world. Attending a recent birthday of Pastor David Oyedepo, for example, was former President Olusegun Obasanjo and ex-dictator Yakubu Gowon. “You can see that everything this man touches turns to gold,” Nigeria’s Agriculture Minister told partygoers (quoted in Cocks). What is true in the capital is also true in the provinces. When, due to the bad publicity, Governor Godswill Akpabio of Akwa Ibom state was briefly willing to criticize the witch hunts targeting children, Pastor Helen Ukpabio uttered a public warning: the Governor, she said, should keep in mind that Charles Taylor of Liberia, despite his seeming invincibility, fell from power, and to “remember what happened to Saddam Hussein in Iraq” (quoted in Ekah). This was not an empty threat, given that political violence in Nigeria is often carried out by armed gangs who are paid to attack their employers’ political rivals, intimidate voters, and rig elections (Human Rights Watch). In fact, according to local journalists, Helen Ukpabio unleashed just such gangs on the NGOs that protected children accused of witchcraft.

Two non-governmental organizations, Safe Child Africa (SCA; formerly Stepping Stones) and Child’s Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN), based in the Niger delta, began cooperation in 2006 to protect Nigerian children accused of witchcraft (*Nation* 2008). Their work, and the plight of these children, became worldwide news when the documentary “Dispatches: Saving Africa’s Witch Children” was shown in November 2008 on BBC (Gaven and van der Valk). Helen Ukpabio featured prominently in the film; Sunday Ulup-Aya announced on camera: “I have killed up to 110 people who were identified to be children witches. . . These children eat human flesh.” In the media clamor that resulted, Ulup-Aya was arrested; but he explained at police headquarters that he had not meant it literally, and was soon released (Ubabukoh and Dada). The release of Ulup-Aya was symptomatic of the political dynamic that resulted from the attention caused by the BBC documentary. Political influence of local pastors forestalled any real state efforts to protect abused children in the Niger delta; instead, the government of Akwa Ibom engaged in “witch-hunting the NGOs” and child rights activists who sought to protect children (Igwe 2011).

Victor Attah, governor of Akwa Ibom from 1999-2008, had dismissed the importance of witchcraft beliefs, and took no steps to address the related persecution of children (Igwe 2011). Governor Goodswill Akpabio, however, facing a storm of negative publicity in the

wake of the BBC broadcast, quickly signed the Akwa Ibom State Child Rights Law in December 2008, which prescribes penalties for accusations of witchcraft, and which, he insisted soon thereafter, “brought the situation immediately under control” (quoted in Purefoy). One can only speculate what happened behind the scenes, but the tone from state politicians soon changed, and NGOs were threatened and attacked. In February 2009, for example, Nigeria’s Foreign Affairs Minister Ojo Madueke told reporters that the children in the BBC documentary were paid to say that they had been tortured. In July, Helen Akpabio sent a group of off-duty police officers, accompanied by Mrs. Akpabio’s lawyer, to a CRARN shelter giving refuge to 150 children. Pretending to be donors to gain admittance, “the invading police beat up several of the children . . . and arrested several CRARN personnel, including [Sam] Itauma’s wife” (Sahara Reporters 2009a). Later that month, Mrs. Ukpabio’s supporters attacked attendees at a conference organized by SCA on “Child Rights and Witchcraft” (Sahara Reporters 2009b). Police did nothing, having received orders, according to sources, to stay “in the good books of Pastor Helen Ukpabio” (Sahara Reporters 2009a).

Nigerian police and prosecutors all but ignored the 2008 law, and this disinterest amidst the continued abuse of children was the focus of a CNN report in August 2010, which created another spate of international attention (2010a). This apparently angered Gov. Akpabio, who assumed that child rights activists in the state were behind the second critical report (Igwe 2011). The Governor reportedly exclaimed that “heads will roll,” worried that the negative publicity and would endanger his reelection campaign (Naagbantoni; Igwe 2011). Only two days after the CNN report, armed men fired their weapons in front of Sam Itauma’s residence and at the CRARN refuge (Ogbonnaya). The Governor soon accused CRARN and SCA of fraud. “These children are being used for monetary reasons,” Akpabio said in August 2010 (CNN 2010b). Similarly, Aniekan Umanah, Information Minister for Akwa Ibom, labeled as a smear the reports of abused children, and claimed it was all “a ruse, they [the NGOs] are making money” (quoted in Purefoy). In September, Gov. Akpabio ordered the arrest of officials of Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (Vanguard News), and in November he created a Commission of Inquiry “to determine the veracity of the allegations of witchcraft accusations” (Daily Champion). The testimony of those called before the Commission focused primarily on attacking those who worked to protect children (Igwe 2011). In January 2011, Gov. Akpabio filed charges against Sam Itauma of CRARN, accusing him, ironically, of violating the 2008 Child Rights Law by accusing people of witchcraft (Sahara Reporters 2011a). Leo Igwe (a speaker at the disrupted 2009 SCA conference, who was beaten by supporters of Helen Ukpabio) was arrested January 11, 2011 while attempting to rescue two children accused of being witches. This was apparently part of Gov. Akpabio’s effort to begin “clamping down on activists involved in the rescue of children accused of witchcraft” (Sahara Reporters 2011b). In April and May 2011, armed police aggressively evacuated more than 200 children from the CRARN shelter and moved them to a facility run by the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare (Sahara Reporters 2011d, 2011e). Reporters found that there was no money budgeted for the upkeep of the rescued children transferred to state control (Sahara Reporters 2011c). Indeed, Leo Igwe reported after visiting over twenty such state-run institutions that “many of the kids looked sick, unkempt, malnourished and emaciated” (2011).

In early 2016, there was more international publicity about children accused of witchcraft in the Niger delta when a two-year old baby boy was found on the side of the road by a Danish aid worker. He was filthy and emaciated, riddled with worms and suffering from severe kwashiorkor after living on his own for eight months; the photo essay of his rescue was reproduced all over the world. In response to the media attention, Akwa Ibom’s Information Minister Aniekan Umanah (who in 2010 had labeled NGO reports of such abuse a “ruse” and a “smear”) said: “There may be isolated cases. We have always encouraged people to report such cases” (quoted in Umukoro).

Conclusion

The witchbuster, a religious figure familiar in Western history, finds a ready market in the Niger delta, an area with strong witch beliefs and a tradition of persecuting those accused of witchcraft. As they did in pre-modern Europe, these entrepreneurs have helped foment an atmosphere of crisis, perhaps most obviously personified by increasing numbers of street children, and thereby make quite a good living by engaging in scapegoating. Due to their wealth and influence, they have cultivated a significant degree of political protection, the effects of which can be seen in the response to the international attention that resulted from a BBC documentary focused on the plight of children accused of witchcraft. Rather alarmingly, events in Nigeria indicate that the scapegoating of children as witches can happen not just in collapsed states experiencing catastrophic crises, but in weak or failing ones, where local officials are liable to persuasion by powerful social actors.

One might read about the sufferings of African children accused of witchcraft “wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse” (Achebe: 255). Indeed, this horrifying phenomenon, at first glance, might seem based in grotesque and exotic African occult beliefs. But those abusing children are rational representatives of a globalized modernity: they are steered by the profit motive, and wield a theology profoundly influenced by their American godfathers.

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