

CHILDREN ACCUSED OF PRACTICING WITCHCRAFT IN AKWA IBOM, NIGERIA: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF ONLINE NEWS MEDIA

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Abstract: This essay analyzes online news media reactions to the labeling and stigmatizing of children as witches in Eket, within the state of Akwa Ibom, Nigeria. The paper was triggered by Governor Godswill Akpabio's August 30, 2010, appearance on CNN, during which he stated that the situation of these stigmatized children is exaggerated. This essay seeks to understand what perspectives the online news media created in response to Akpabio's interview. Three themes – the children accused, the behavior of the gatekeepers (i.e., among others, parents, guardians, religious leaders, and government officials), and the practice of witchcraft – emerge from the data. The results reveal the following: (a) the Governor is defensive and in denial, (b) the involved pastors are opportunists, and (c) the accused children are abandoned, maltreated, and sometimes murdered. Results also show that none of the analyzed online news media specifically blame the parents of the accused children; rather they blame the Governor and pastors, and specifically Helen Ukpabio. Further analysis indicates that poverty is not necessarily the root of the problem as the Governor claims. The essay recommends acknowledgement of folk belief systems in the training of gatekeepers.

Keywords: children accused of practicing witchcraft, pentecostalism, online news media

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On August 30, 2010, the Cable News Network (CNN) interviewed Chief Godswill Akpabio¹, Governor of the Akwa Ibom state in Nigeria, regarding children accused of practicing witchcraft². Akpabio responded that the child abuse associated with witchcraft is exaggerated and that the real problem is poverty and not witchcraft, a response that triggered much criticism (Ezeamalu, 2010; Fakoya, 2010b; Ndibe, 2010; Onwumere, 2010). In addition, Akpabio accused charitable organizations of using the children who have been accused of practicing witchcraft as tools to obtain donations, which they use for their own benefit and to tarnish the image of the Akwa Ibom state (CNN, 2010). The governor, who has five children, said that he would never allow children to be abused or stigmatized (CNN, 2010). Although there are reports and reactions in the news that address children accused of witchcraft in the state (Foxcroft, 2009; Schnoebelen, 2009; UNICEF, 2010; Ezeamalu, 2010; Fakoya, 2010b; Igwe, 2011a, 2011b; Ndibe, 2010; Okon, 2010), there is no known study of the media content addressing this issue since Governor Akpabio's interview on CNN.

This research, therefore, seeks to understand the nature of the content of online news media, primarily Nigerian, by analyzing the characterization of the children accused of practicing witchcraft, the gatekeepers (including but not limited to include parents, guardians, religious leaders, and government officials), and the practice of witchcraft in the news. This study defines witchcraft as a belief in the manifestation of supernatural powers which may be innate in a person, inherited, or acquired in several ways (Mbiti, 1975/1991). The author, who grew up in the Eastern part of Nigeria, and currently resides in the United States, has lived the culture and has first-hand knowledge regarding the seriousness of witchcraft accusations.

The purpose of this essay is to determine how the children accused of practicing witchcraft, the gatekeepers, and the practice of witchcraft itself were characterized by the online news media that appeared on selected news websites between the August 30, 2010 airing of Governor Akpabio's interview with CNN, and 12 days after the arraignment of Mr. Sam Ikpe-Itauma by the governor on January 11, 2011, for accusations of fraud and of defaming the Akwa Ibom state³. In constructing this paper, three themes (children accused, behavior of gatekeepers, and practice of witchcraft) and six subthemes (physical harm, structural harm, being deceitful, terrorizing, superstition, and evil) were generated. Secondly, this essay aims to draw attention to the fact poverty is not necessarily the root of witchcraft accusations, as claimed by Governor Akpabio.

¹ Two versions of this article were presented at the 2012 Eastern Communication Association Conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as a top-four student paper and at the 2011 Howard University Graduate Symposium.

² The interview can be seen on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pkc70_RzbkE

³ Her picture can be seen on the Child's Right And Rehabilitation Network's page (Warning: Graphic Image):

<http://www.facebook.com/CRARN#!/photo.php?fbid=184518944924590&set=a.184514471591704.38385.184502538259564&type=1&theater>

Accusing Children of Practicing Witchcraft

The phenomenon of accusing children of practicing witchcraft is relatively new as women and the elderly have been popularly accused in the past (Cahn, 2006; Foxcroft, 2009; Schnoebelen, 2009). Cahn (2006) notes that “children are generally accused of witchcraft by two different groups: churches or the families of the children themselves” (p. 422). Cahn further notes that “children may be labeled as sorcerers by the preachers themselves, who blame the failure of their prophecies on interference by a child sorcerer, or who, in attempting to explain a family’s misfortune, blame a child” (p. 422). Witchcraft belief differs from one culture to another, but it is relatively the same when it comes to the belief that it is “harmful actions carried out by persons presumed to have access to supernatural powers” (Adam Ashforth, as cited in Veroff, 2010, p. 27). According to Foxcroft (2009), “numerous cases of children being accused of witchcraft and horrifically abused have been highlighted in the Democratic of Congo, Angola and, most recently, Nigeria” (para. 22). Foxcroft notes that “abuses of children’s rights linked to witchcraft are not isolated to Africa” (para. 23). For example, “Pakistani police have found the body of a child with his throat cut in a town where two men were arrested earlier this year for allegedly murdering four children to use their blood in witchcraft, police said today” (Religion News Blog, Herald Sun, 2004, para. 1). Foxcroft (2009) further notes these children were not accused of witchcraft, rather they were used for witchcraft sacrifices:

Since the late 1990’s a new witch hunt has taken place in this region. The massive boom in Pentecostal churches preaching the gospel of child witchcraft, demonic possessions, deliverance and exorcisms has led to a huge rise in accusations of witchcraft against children. A significant number of Pentecostal pastors are helping to create a terrible new campaign of violence against young Nigerians. Children and babies branded as evil are being abused, abandoned and even murdered while the preachers make money from the fear of parents and communities. (para. 32)

This statement demonstrates how children are vulnerable in certain regions in Nigeria when it comes to witchcraft accusations. According to the written statement submitted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), a non-governmental organization in special consultative statutes to the United Nations, films such as Ukpabio’s *End of the Wicked* (Benson, 1999; False Prophet Nigeria, 2008) depict children as witches. Fakoya (2010a, para. 3) notes that in Ukpabio’s (1996) book, *Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft*, she writes “that a child under the age of two that cries at night and has poor health is ‘an agent of Satan’” (p. 3). Foxcroft (2009) states that research done by Stepping Stones Nigeria found that this film is “one of the significant contributory factors behind the spread of the belief in child witches” (para. 26). Even though the child witchcraft accusations and sacrifices are not isolated to Africa (Foxcroft, 2009), the children accused of witchcraft practices in Eket, Akwa Ibom deserve attention due to reports by the media of significant child abuse related to the accusations (CNN, 2010; Sahara Reporters, 2011a).

Witchcraft in Akwa Ibom State

According to Offiong (1983a), for the Akwa Ibomites (the Ibibios), witchcraft “is the psychic act through which socially disapproved supernatural techniques influence events” (p. 82). He goes further to say that they clearly visualize witchcraft as evil in the sense that it destroys life through supernatural activities, as well as by “eating the soul of their victim, thereby causing that person’s death” (p. 82). By his definition, witchcraft is a belief in the possession of some mystical powers by which evil or harm can be done to someone (Quarcoopome, 1987). In addition, Awolalu (1979) articulates:

[A] witch is a wise person [who is] supposed to possess supernatural powers in consequence of forming a league with the devil or evil spirits, and through such an evil alliance and co-operation the possession of the craft which enables her [or him] to perform supernatural acts which, in most cases, are destructive. (p. 80)

In some African societies, notions about witchcraft consist of a belief that the spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands to wreak havoc on other individuals. It is usually believed that witches can communicate with the world of the dead or with supernatural forces. Adult witches are said to bewitch children by giving them “witch” in the food and then using them to achieve their evil objectives by bringing misfortune to their families and enemies, causing illnesses, bad luck and death (Mbiti, 1975/1991; Quarcoopome, 1987). As Mbiti (1969/1999) states, “in Africa villages, disease and misfortune are religious experiences, and it requires a religious approach to deal with them” (p. 165). Although the above assertion may not be true across all African societies, it may help to explain why many citizens of Eket attribute their misfortune to their children. This mindset is what the parents in Eket adopt when abusing and abandoning their children.

On January 11, 2011, in Akwa Ibom, a team of police officers rescued an eight-year-old girl who was abandoned by her family after being accused of witchcraft. She had started sleeping in the market square and was eventually kidnapped by a 40-year-old man believed to be mentally ill. Since 2010, she had lived with him in a shanty house, where he raped her repeatedly (Igwe, 2011b). Despite the violent nature of this incident, according to Sahara Reporters (2011a), Governor Akpabio was concerned only about the image of his government. Akpabio vehemently opposed the witchcraft stigmatization of his state and, as a result, ordered the eviction of two leading NGO employees who were providing shelter for abandoned children.

Igwe (2011a) points to CNN’s documentation of the churches’ role in child victimization. He says that CNN offered an opportunity to Akpabio’s government to defend itself regarding the child witchcraft phenomenon in his state, “but it blew it” (para. 7). Igwe contends that the governor instead blamed the NGOs for utilizing the same image to attract sympathy and funds from international donors. The governor says that he introduced the 2008 Child Rights Act as a comprehensive safeguard for the rights of children, specifically those stigmatized as witches and wizards, but Igwe (2011a) notes that no one has been convicted since the enactment of the law.

Neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches' Implications

According to Smith (2001), “in many respects, [P]entecostal Churches in Nigeria have positioned themselves against the social forces perceived to be responsible for inequality, forces that are locally understood to be supernatural as well as political and economic” (p. 588). He argues that the popularity of Pentecostalism is connected with mass dissatisfaction “over poverty and inequality *and* with people’s aspirations to achieve wealth and prosperity” (p. 588, emphasis in original). “Much of the literature on the proliferation of witchcraft in modern Africa has focused on the dramatic nature of contemporary inequality” (Bayart, 1993, as cited in Smith, 2001, p. 593). In his article, Akrong (2000) argues that witchcraft in Ghana took on a new dimension and reintegrated itself into the African way of life. He notes that the importance attached to witchcraft in the neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches is increasingly “crediting what can be described as a revived witchcraft mentality in popular Christianity” (p. 1). By borrowing Akrong’s understanding of the similar Ghanaian situation, the consequence is that:

[In Nigerian] popular culture, Christianity is perceived as a religion with the power to deal with the old threat of witchcraft. The result is the emergence of what might be called a neo-witchcraft mentality in the neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches, which uses witchcraft as an interpretative scheme for dealing with misfortune. (p. 1)

This statement indicates that these churches perceive themselves as a tool for eradicating witchcraft in the lives of their congregations. Furthermore, as Akrong argues, “the ideological framework and the cultural infrastructure for the construction and maintenance of this new witchcraft mentality of the Charismatic movement ... [are] deeply embedded in the traditional African metaphysical construction of the world” (p. 2). The statement shows that recent beliefs that witchcraft exists were engineered by the Charismatic movement as a way to connect with beliefs rooted in African culture and how it perceives the world. As Mbiti (1975/1991) notes, Africans are very religious and their cultures are intertwined with religion. Their worldview of the supernatural is unique, making it easier for pastors with motives beyond what is traditionally acknowledged to impose their ideology on less-educated African peoples. This analysis supports the intent of popular Christianity to repack the African traditional witchcraft mindset into Christian rhetoric, which could result in child abuse. It is not uncommon for online news media outlets to join the debate when it comes to socio-cultural or socio-religious issues, as in this case (Fakoya, 2010a; Igwe, 2011a, 2011b; Ndibe, 2010; Okon, 2010).

Online News Media

Research on the use of online news media continues to increase (e.g., Mitman, Nikolaev, & Porpora, 2012; Yoo, 2011), especially concerning adults who use the Internet to keep abreast of the news (Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll, & Casey, 2005). Scholars have explored the significance of national online news coverage as well as reader comments (Glenn, Champion, & Spence, 2012). Even though online news media have accelerated the spread of information, they also raise troubling issues. According to Abdulla et al. (2005):

Multiple concerns about online news and information have emerged in the past decade. These include fear about public access to private information, but also about publication of rumors online, inclusion of personal and institutional biases, the general levels of trust of online news, and the accuracy of information rapidly posted to Web sites during the cycles of breaking news stories. (p. 147)

In political news, for example, it is common to find bias in liberal, conservative, moderate, and corporate media (Doumit & Minai, 2011). Even though bias within online news media appears to be pervasive, traditional news media also invest in online news media. Salwen (2005) notes that print and broadcast news organization which have online news media, can use this outlet to “contribute to public knowledge about news and public affairs issues by carrying original news of social consequence” (p. 47). He further observes that one of the advantages of online news media over print media includes “unlimited space and the ability to report the news at any time”. Consequently, “when media users can fulfill a majority of their goals and needs through a particular medium, they become not only dependent on that medium, but also affected by that medium” (McKeague & Leidman, 2010, p. 37), a statement indicating the impact of media on the lives of their audiences.

On the basis of this discussion of online news media, this essay aims to understand the nature of media content by analyzing how online news media characterized children accused of practicing witchcraft, the gatekeepers, and the practice of witchcraft. In order to do this, the following questions are posed:

- 1: How were the children accused of witchcraft characterized by the online news media?
- 2: How was the behavior of the gatekeepers characterized in the online news media?
- 3: How was the practice of witchcraft characterized in the online news media?

Methodological Approach

The study utilizes frequencies from qualitative analysis to indicate how the online news media stories or opinion pieces interpreted and responded to Governor Akpabio’s interview with CNN regarding the children accused of practicing witchcraft in Akwa Ibom state. It basically seeks to understand the perspectives the online news media used or created in response to Akpabio’s interview. As a result, three variables examined in this essay were *children accused*, *behavior of the gatekeepers*, and *practice of witchcraft*. The author was in part guided in these choices by his own knowledge and background as a Nigerian who grew up in that culture.

Sample Selection

With the keyword combination “Helen Ukpabio AND Godswill Akpabio AND children accused of practicing witchcraft in Akwa Ibom state,” the author used the Google search engine to locate news accounts published between August 30, 2010 and January 11, 2011. This time frame was chosen because it encompasses Governor Akpabio’s interview with CNN on August 30, 2010 through to the arraignment of Mr. Sam Ikpe-Itauma by the governor for fraud and the defaming of the Akwa Ibom state on December 30, 2010. To select the news articles, the author utilized criteria of whether an article emphasized reaction to the governor’s interview or the

arraignment of Itauma. Out of 66 Nigerian online news stories identified, 23 emphasized reactions to the governor’s interview and the arraignment of Itauma. Twenty of the 23 selected articles were from Nigerian online news media (some of which are diaspora-based) and three were from Western news media, including the CNN posting that carried the interview in question.⁴

Procedures

Stories were coded for topics, words, and phrases used by the online news media in relation to Governor Akpabio’s interview with CNN and witchcraft (see Table 1). After reading each commentary or opinion piece several times, the author determined its relevance and identified three recurring attributes, used as three separate themes, from which the six subthemes emerged. The following were the emerged three themes and six subthemes: (a) The theme *children accused* generated the two subthemes of *physical harm* and *structural harm*; (b) the theme *behavior of gatekeepers* generated the two subthemes of *being deceitful* and *terrorizing*; and (c) the theme *practice of witchcraft* generated the two subthemes of *superstition* and *evil* (see Table 1). All of the 23 analyzed online news media are opinion pieces authored by critics, except for the CNN interview given by Governor Akpabio.

Table 1. Themes, subthemes, and codes

Themes	Children accused		Behavior of gatekeepers		Practice of witchcraft	
Sub-themes	Physical harm	Structural harm	Being deceitful	Terrorizing	Evil	Superstition
Codes	Burned Beaten Bathed in acid Killed	Abandoned Indirect economic and cultural violence	Manipulation Fake Exaggerated Minimal	Gunmen Militancy Arrest Firing sporadically	Misfortune Exorcism Blood-sucking	Magic Supernatural Mysterious forces

⁴ See also the following: 234 Next, 2010; Akwaibomites News, 2010; Baudiicrocz, 2009; Emma, 2012; Front Line, 2011; Holyreg, 2010; Muller and Brimelow, 2010; Oloye, 2010; P. M. News, 2010; Rahaman, 2010; Sahara Reporters, 2011b, 2011c; Umanah, 2010.

Results

Theme 1: Children Accused

The first research question addresses how the *children accused* of witchcraft were characterized by the online news media. The analyzed online news media characterized *children accused* of witchcraft as *physical(ly) abuse(d)* and *structural(ly) abuse(d)*.

There were some words and phrases denoting *physical harm*, including “burned”, “beaten”, “bathed in acid”, and “killed”. Example of words and phrases utilized in coding *structural harm* include “abandoned”, “stigmatized”, “emotional injury”, and “emotional and psychological torture of children”. Examples of comments used in coding *structural harm* include “unidentified [persons] ransacked the CRARN centre in the night, ostensibly in the search for Mr. Ikpe-Itauma, leaving the young children traumatized” (Sahara Reporters, 2010c, para. 9); and further, “the Ministry was also ignorant of the activities of NGOs in the state which took up the challenge of providing for the children who were stigmatized, and who found themselves abandoned and neglected by the government and society” (Sahara Reporters, 2011a, para. 5).



Figure 1: Children accused of practicing witchcraft (Photo by Robin Hammond).

The analyzed online news media characterization of *children accused physical(ly) abuse(d)* and *structural(ly) abuse(d)* is associated with burned, beaten, abandoned, and neglected (Fakoya, 2010b; Ndibe, 2010; Onwumere, 2010).

Physical harm or violence is aimed directly at the victims, such as in the case of burning the children, pouring acid on them, and sometimes killing them. As Onwumere (2010) indicates, there are some reports that children have been taken to forests, bathed in acid, burned, and buried

alive following the accusation of witchcraft. In addition, Sahara Reporters (2011a) notes that Bishop Samuel Okon William is on trial for allegedly confessing “to the killing of over 100 child witches” in a documentary aired on BBC Channel 4 (para. 15). This alleged abuse and killing of innocent children indicates the kind of physical harm and death the stigmatized children face. However, “the governor [Akpabio] immediately ordered the Bishop’s arrest. The Bishop was later paraded at the State Police Headquarters, where he told reporters he did not kill the children as alleged, but merely destroyed spirits of witchcraft in them” (Ibrahym, 2013, para. 8).

Structural harm is indirect economic, political, and cultural violence. As Kent (2006) states, “structural violence is harm imposed by some people on others indirectly, through the social system, as they pursue their own preferences” (p. 54). As some of the news articles cited by Ndibe (2010) and Fakoya (2010b) indicate, the accused children are exposed to negligence, poverty, abandonment, stigmatization, homelessness, displacement, and denial of education. These types of structural violence affect the quality of their lives and deny them basic amenities.

Kent (2000) indicates that structural harm “produces a variety of harms to children, including the massive mortality of children throughout the world” (p. 2). Structural violence is indicated by Sahara Reporters (2010a): “Governor Godswill Akpabio of Akwa Ibom State has framed up two charitable organizations offering shelter to *abandoned children* on charges of fraud for ‘embarrassing Akwa Ibom state’ in the international community” (para. 1; emphasis added). Another example is provided by Ukah (2010), who states that “it is instructive to note that these spurious allegations and dehumanisation of children has gone on for years” (para. 17).

Theme 2: Behavior of Gatekeepers

The second research question inquires how the *behavior of gatekeepers* was characterized in the news. The news media characterized the *behavior of gatekeepers* as *being deceitful* and *terrorizing*. There were some words indicating *being deceitful*, which include “manipulation”, “fake”, “exaggerated”, and “minimal”. An example of a comment exemplifying *being deceitful* is “‘like I said, it’s a very, very minimal situation,’ said Akpabio about the incidence of witchcraft-related abuse in Akwa Ibom” (CNN Wire Staff, 2010, para. 3). There were some words and phrases denoting *terrorizing* including “gunmen”, “militancy”, “arrest”, “firing sporadically”, and “tormentor of children”. The following is an example of a comment signifying *terrorizing*:

[I]n Eket, the State capital on Sunday revealed that unidentified gunmen on the trail of officials of [the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network] CRARN invaded the centre run by the group for abandoned “child witches” late on Saturday and unleashed a reign of terror on the stigmatized children. (Sahara Reporters, 2010b, para. 2)



Figure 2. An accused child with face bathed by her mother because a prophet accused her of killing one of her younger brothers (Photo by Robin Hammond).⁵

As Kurtz (2011) puts it, “Governor Akpabio denied the very existence of the accused witch children that he addressed in his legislation” (para. 2). Upon the presentation of pictures of the victims, he says they are insignificant. He claims that it is a form of media propaganda to discredit him and his state. Furthermore, he refuted a report that was sent to the United Nations from Stepping Stones Nigeria, an NGO that provides shelter for abandoned children. He argues, “I need to know why the same set of children are [sic] being shown all over the world with the same story” (para. 11). He attributes the situation to poverty. However, Ndibe (2010) attests that the governor’s claims were deceptive, while Fakoya (2010b) proclaims that “contemporary history has also indicated that religion, especially Nigerian Pentecostalism, has been nothing but exploitative, deceitful and retrogressive” (para. 11). He describes this type of scenario as apparent across the nation but worse in areas that are more antiquated, such as Akwa Ibom state.

The online news media also indicate that direct and indirect participant/pastors, including Helen Ukpabio, “who accuses children of witchcraft and promotes their abuse” (Kurtz, 2011, para. 2), “Samuel Okon William, who is being prosecuted by the [Akwa Ibom] state [government] for stigmatising children accused of [practicing] witchcraft” (Sahara Reporters, 2011a, para. 4), and according to Ndibe (2010), “the governor and his commissioner are the ones making facile fiction out of a gory reality. The fact is that children, thousands of children, in Akwa Ibom are accused of witchcraft, and then beaten, burned, maimed and killed on the grounds of the unproven, ignorant charges” (para. 5). Surprisingly, the media reports show that the parents of children accused of practicing witchcraft are not blamed for the abuse. This fact may indicate that news articles focus on people who have influence in society instead of the immediate gatekeepers – the parents.

Religious groups and government officials have been accused of mistreating one of society’s most vulnerable groups – children (Fakoya, 2010b; Sahara Reporters, 2010c). For example, according to Ezeamalu (2010), Ukpabio uses her religious status to push her agenda – diagnosing children with witchcraft in order to enrich herself as she undermines vulnerable

⁵ This following YouTube video shows her: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=47IIdWrZDI0>

minds. The above assertion is consistent with Fortner (2007), who observes that “many Christians have tremendous faith in the power of messages”; as a result, Ukpabio uses buzzwords, sacred terms, animated characters, and movies to convey her ideology (p. 29). The news media characterized Ukpabio as “an organised businesswoman who discovered a working formula amongst the multitude of Pentecostal preachers” (Fakoya, 2010a, para. 3), utilizing witchcraft accusations to financially enrich herself while manipulating parents and the system (Fakoya, 2010a). This characterization is consistent with the warning of Apostle John Okoriko of Solid Rock Foundation Church in Nigeria and the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos, who “denounced pastors who are profiting from the witchcraft industry, condemning the falsehood, exploitation and inherent deception in modern-day Nigerian Pentecostalism which sees the gospel used to deceive the gullible” (Fakoya, 2010a, para. 2).

Terrorizing is coercion by intimidation. For example, as Sahara Reporters (2011a) noted, the Governor, while reacting to the CNN report in a radio broadcast “on the child witch syndrome in Akwa Ibom” (para. 5), ordered the arrest of operators of the shelter that cares for approximately 250 accused children (Sahara Reporters, 2011a). Sahara Reporters (2011a) reports:

The Commissioner of Police in Akwa Ibom, Mr Walter Rugbere, has been briefed to arrest the president of CRARN, Mr. Sam Ikpe-Itauma, and Mr. Garry Foxcroft, who heads Stepping Stones Foundation. But no sooner was the instruction given than they filtered to the duo. They immediately went underground. (para. 4)

In an earlier development, “the Nigerian police anti-kidnapping unit in Eket ... [around the same period] arrested and tortured Mr. Leo Igwe, a humanist associated with the child rights centre in the state, accusing him of “fraud” (Sahara Reporter, 2011a). Fakoya (2010b) indicates that, “the militancy that characterizes the phenomenon of child witchcraft in that state, actively championed by that Apostle of Doom, Helen Ukpabio, raises question[s] about the wickedness of man to man” (para. 11). He goes on to say that Ukpabio must be laughing at the absurdity of members of the state government while she continues to make money by diagnosing children with witchcraft. Although some credit the amiable governor for doing a wonderful job for the state (e.g., Fakoya, 2010b; also see a YouTube video)⁶, he failed the children (Ndibe, 2010). The above discussion suggests that the analyzed online news media characterized the behavior of the gatekeepers as evil, nonchalant, defiant, and opportunistic.

⁶This following YouTube video shows some transformative work of Governor Akpabio in Akwa Ibom State: “The New Uyo” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rN07cbRdT8>

Theme 3: Practice of Witchcraft

The third research question asks how the *practice of witchcraft* was characterized in the online news media. The analyzed online news media predominantly characterized the *practice of witchcraft* as *evil* and *superstitious*. There were some words and phrases denoting *evil*, which comprises “misfortune”, “exorcism”, “blood-sucking”, and “sickening cruelty”. An example of a comment signifying *evil* is “these pastors allege that illness and poverty are caused by witches who bring terrible misfortune to those around them” (Ukah, 2010, para. 3). There were some words and phrases denoting *superstition*, consisting of “magic”, “supernatural”, “mysterious forces”, and “causing misfortunes”. Fakoya (2010b) supplies one comment indicating *superstition*:

This governor readily admits that poverty is the bane of the issue in his state but missed the point in not connecting poverty with the exaggerated Pentecostal revivalism in his state and the geometric rise in the incidents of so-called orphans, some of whom were accused of *practicing magic*. (para. 7, emphasis in original)

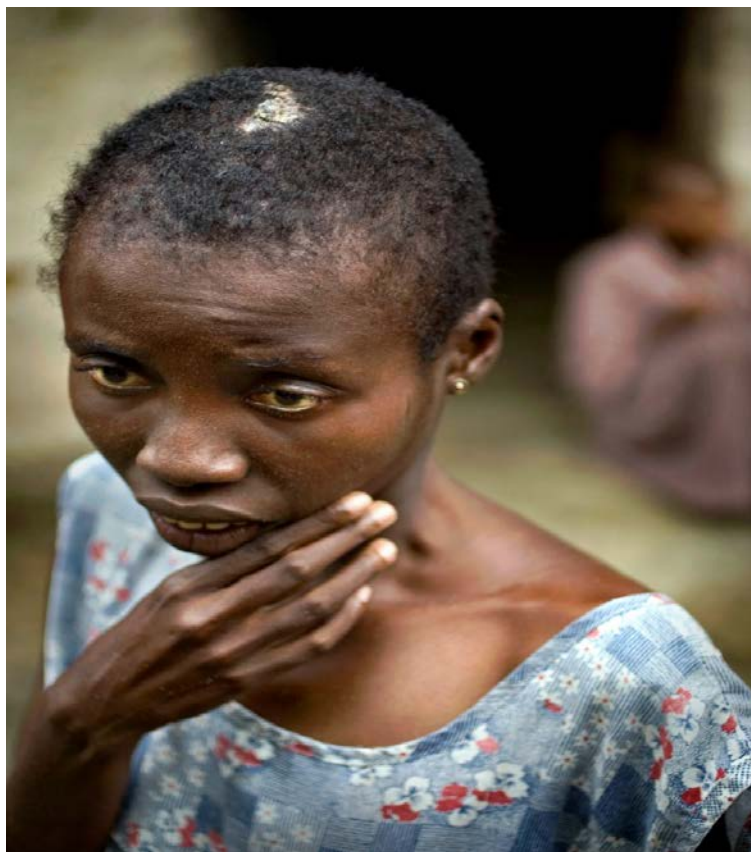


Figure 3. An accused child with a brain injury (Photo by Robin Hammond).⁷

⁷ Nwaeka is a teen girl into whose head a six-inch nail was driven based on a witchcraft accusation in Eket, Akwa Ibom. She later died of the brain injury. For details, click on <http://africanspotlight.com/2012/06/fresh-witch-hunting-in-akwa-ibom-state-govt-official-backs-witch->

The analyzed online news media characterization of the *practice of witchcraft as evil and superstitious* is associated with bad omens, magic, and immoral activities (Sahara Reporters, 2010c). As Ndibe (2010) observes, “[s]ome of the accused witches and wizards are still toddlers. Before they have learned to walk, they have been diagnosed as blood-sucking witches or wizards by this obviously deranged ‘bishop’ posing, like many other crazed miscreants, as ‘a man of God’” (para. 13). Ndibe is referring to Bishop Sunday Ulup-Aya, who nicknamed himself the “poison destroyer” (para. 13).

Evil is an immoral intention to cause injury. For example, Ukah (2010) characterized the practice of witchcraft as evil in the sense that it brings terrible misfortunes to families and neighbors.

Superstition is a belief or illogical fear of mysterious forces. For example, Onwumere (2010) says that in many African communities, “witchcraft is cultural art” (para. 1). He notes that whichever family engages in witchcraft, it is believed that the power to become a witch is transferred across family members from one generation to another. It is also believed that witches operate at night by changing “into birds, cats, rats, bats, cockroaches, etc[.] – to suck blood mysteriously and inflict harm on their victim” (para. 1). He further suggests that people flock to churches, believing that it is their only hope for protection against witchcraft. From the above conversations, the analyzed online news media characterized the practice of witchcraft as evil in the sense that it brings misfortunes to families. Also, it described the practice of witchcraft as involving superstition since it is an unnatural phenomenon.

Summary of Results

The purpose of this research was to understand how the online news media characterized the practice of witchcraft, the gatekeepers, and the children accused of practicing witchcraft in the Eket, Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria. The essay was triggered by Governor Akpabio’s interview with CNN, in which he claims that the issue is minimal, defended his state, and said that it was “media propaganda against the state” (CNN, 2010), and that witchcraft is not peculiar to Akwa Ibom but exists within every society. He stressed that the problem is poverty.

Analysis of the data revealed the following characterizations by the news media:

1. The Governor is in denial and defensive about his State in playing down the impact of the situation on the accused children; in addition, the implicated pastors are opportunists who care about money;
2. accusations of the practice of witchcraft are typically based on misfortunes in one’s life and can result in exorcism; and
3. the accused children are often abandoned, maltreated, and sometimes murdered. The data further characterized the gatekeepers as people who marginalized the children.

[hunters-photos/](#); Also, a YouTube video showing Nwaeka before her death can be viewed on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=47IIdWrZDI0>

Discussion: Poverty with Respect to Witchcraft Accusations

An important issue in this analysis is the role of poverty in the stigmatization of children as witches. This issue is important because some have argued that poverty is at the root of beliefs regarding the existence of witchcraft, as indicated by Governor Akpabio. In the interview with CNN (2010), he argued that the real problem in Akwa Ibom state “is not witchcraft, but poverty” (para. 7). He further claimed that “his government has established centers for orphaned children, cast out either because they [are] accused of practicing magic or because their families are too poor to care for them” (para. 7). This argument is not consistent with research by scholars who note that poverty is not the sole reason for accusations of child witchcraft; rather there are other issues responsible for these human problems, including poverty but also poor governance, ignorance, poor health services, “failure of the churches in authentic prophetic ministry, unemployment, youths restiveness, as well as the proliferation of churches which equal commercialization of religion and the [self-enrichment] of the purveyors of prayers and miracles for money and prosperity in Southeast Nigeria” (Essien & Ben, 2011).

Yet, many in the region continue to blame their misfortunes on witchcraft. Even though Akpabio’s government passed legislation in 2008 legally mandating that anyone who accuses a child of witchcraft is liable to a jail sentence (CNN, 2010), the legislation may be ineffective. Apparently, no one has been convicted since the law went into effect (Igwe, 2011a). In considering the complexity of witchcraft belief in the region Akpan and Oluwabamide (2010) indicate, “there is the likelihood that the ban on people from accusing children of witchcraft would receive some negative reactions. This is because the belief in witchcraft is entrenched in the people’s world view” (p. 192).

Another view suggests that poverty is not the chief reason for the children being accused of witchcraft. According to Offiong (1983b), the fear of witchcraft is not limited to the poor natives [the Ibibio] living in the state:

Because of the fear posed by witchcraft and other malevolent forces, most Ibibio – young and old, male and female, wealthy and poor, educated and uneducated – resort to the use of good medicine (or turn to spiritualists) for charms to protect themselves from jealous foes. (p. 109)

Even the wealthy Ibibio individuals “have to constantly inform the village of their sources in income, lest they be accused of amassing wealth through *unam okuk*, a form of witchcraft that brings money to its possessor” (Offiong, 1983a, p. 94). This fact suggests that witchcraft accusations are, in general, attributed to the poor as well as the rich in Ibibio/Eket community. Witchcraft accusations are embedded in the belief system of the people.

Concluding Comments

This paper found that online news media characterizations of or perspectives on children accused of witchcraft involved physical and structural abuse by gatekeepers, including parents, guardians, religious leaders such as Ukpabio, and government officials such as Governor

Akpabio – and involved evil and superstition. One striking aspect of the coverage was that none of the online news media blamed the parents directly for branding their children as witches or abusing them. Rather they blamed primarily the Governor, his government, as well as pastors like Helen Ukpabio and the Church.

Belief in the reality of witchcraft among many African societies has been the source of much debate. The author has been monitoring this debate on new media and social media; the author noticed that when, for example, witchcraft accusation result in the abuse of children or elderly women, people tend to comment on and question the reality of witchcraft. They tend to argue that the people who believe in the existence of witchcraft are uneducated and implicitly condemn African cultures while blaming Christianity. On the other hand, when someone posts something about witches wreaking havoc with and bringing misfortune to people's lives, numerous people reply by expressing their belief in the existence of witchcraft. Based on my personal observation of new and social media, witchcraft remains a serious issue and a common ground for understanding this phenomenon has not emerged. Irrespective of the belief systems on both sides of the aisle, children should not be blamed for the misfortunes that afflict a family and result in child abuse. As one pastor told me, "if a parent accuses his or her child of witchcraft, it means that the parent himself or herself is a witch, too" (O. Umenna, personal communication, June 7, 2012). A critical but culturally sensitive approach should be taken to educating these parents about the implications of accusing their children of witchcraft.

Recommendations

There are several studies that have provided recommendations to improve the situation in Akwa Ibom (e.g., Foxcroft & Secker, 2010; Secker, 2012). Consistent with the analysis here, I support Secker's (2012) recommendations, which in part advocate for "training for key government actors, addressing the cultural media which are considered to perpetuate the belief, regulation of churches and their leaders" (Secker, 2012, p. 32). This training should involve the articulation and acknowledgement of the intertwinement of folk beliefs and the broader culture. Cultural and religious considerations should not be flatly dismissed while in dialogue with people who live within that culture and hold those religious beliefs.

In addition, even though Stepping Stones Nigeria and Child Rights and Rehabilitation Centre (CRARN) are actively involved in attempts to alleviate the situation, more proactive organizations should get involved. For example, the Fahamu Pan-African Fellowship programme, with its policy supporting grassroots movements, could help. Its central message reads, "From the local to the continental, the Fahamu Pan-African Fellowship programme aims to nurture and support grassroots African activism - generating contemporary, energetic, visionary and innovative thought and activism" (fahamu.org, para. 1). Grassroots activism is essential in battling child abuse. Further, any NGOs that are involved in efforts to improve the lives of accused children should also utilize local media outlets and traditional mass media in Eket to educate parents about witchcraft in relation to their children so the parents will avoid accusing and abusing their children when misfortune afflicts their lives.

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