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Witchcraft, Social Discontent and Child Abuse in South-South Nigeria: Ethnographic Description and Implications for Communication and Advocacy Campaigns

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Abstract

This study addresses witchcraft accusations and abusive practices against children in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. The study, which adopts a survey design, is based on qualitative data-base obtained from in-depth interviews with 24 key informants, including the victims, parents, pastors and social workers. Presented as ethnographic descriptions, emerging data suggest that the proliferation of witchcraft accusations against children is due to the dramatic nature of contemporary inequality, and the growth of capitalist economy which has produced wealth and disparity by means that are largely beyond the control of most people. Thus, discontents arising from perceived inequities are refracted onto children, who constitute the symbols of social structure that constrains social mobility. To stem this ugly tide, since witchcraft beliefs are largely superstitious, reorientation of beliefs, ethos and attitudes through strategic communication and advocacy campaigns are recommended.

Key Words: Witchcraft, Social Discontent, Child Abuse, Communication, Advocacy.

Introduction

Witchcraft is the symbol of evil in contemporary Nigeria. It is a common refrain in popular discourse, pervading every aspect of society from politics to domestic relations. Newspapers and magazines are replete with accounts of how wealthy businessmen, politicians and ordinary people use "monstrous means and freakish familiars to appropriate the life force of lesser compatriots in order to strengthen themselves or to satisfy consuming passions" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999). Similarly, Harnischfeger (2006) and Smith (2001) have documented increase in incidences of beheading, theft of vital body organs, such as the penis and breast, and other forms of ritual murder for black magic to obtain wealth and power in many parts of the country. A major consequence of this resurgence of the occult is widespread apprehension and insecurity throughout the country. It has also contributed to new forms of social conflicts in the society, involving slanders, aspersions and accusations of witchcraft among close relations. In some parts of the country, especially the south-south region, children have become the targets of witchcraft accusations and attacks by parents and guardians.

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A corpus has documented the socio-demographic characteristics of the children who are accused of practicing witchcraft. The bulk of these children are pre-adolescent or adolescents, who live in socially precarious circumstances and are thus vulnerable to stigmatization and abuse (De Boeck, 2000; Yengo, 2008 & Tonda, 2008). They are mostly between the ages of 8 to 14 years (D'Haeyer, 2004). Accusations target boys above all; it has been estimated that girls make up merely five percent of the population of accused children (Cimpric, 2010). Similarly, orphans of both parents, who have been sent to live with another relative according to rules of kinship (matrilineal or patrilineal), are at risk of accusation (d'Haeyer, 2004; & Molina, cited in Cimpric, 2010). Single parent orphans living in step-parent household are also susceptible to witchcraft accusation, often stemming from disagreements with the step□father or mother. Molina (cited in Cimpric, 2010) writes that children with disability, stigmatizing illness such as 'epilepsy', 'tuberculosis', 'autism', and 'down-syndrome', and gifted children have also been branded witches in some places.

Accusation of witchcraft against children is not peculiar to Nigeria. Available evidence indicates that thousands of children accused of witchcraft have been thrown out of their homes and are currently living on the streets in many other countries of Africa, including *Kinshasa*, *Mbanza Kongo* and *Lubumbashi* in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (d'Haeyer 2004), and *Uíge* and *Luanda* in northern Angola (LaFraniere, 2007). Cases have also been reported in *Douala*, Cameroon (Pirot, 2004), in the Republic of the Congo, between *Brazzaville* and *Pointe□Noire* (Yengo, 2008) and in the Central African Republic (CAR). The phenomenon appears to be gaining ground in countries that are geographically close, such as Cameroon, CAR, Gabon and Nigeria, as well as Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In Nigeria, Akwa Ibom State, which has recently become infamous for atrocious practices against children, provides a good laboratory for investigating abuses of child rights arising from accusations of witchcraft. In many communities of the state, children are accused of bewitching their parents and family members and have consequently been evicted, tortured and some even murdered, either by their parents or 'prophets'. The alleged witchcraft children are accused of possessing diabolical power, with which they are said to inflict harm on others, particularly their relatives. They are also accused of transmitting illnesses and bringing about general misfortune, poverty, unemployment, bareness among other problems. These accusations are often made by pastors and 'prophets', mostly of the Pentecostal and White Garment (*Aladura*) church denominations, during spiritual meetings, which often commands large attendance from the discontented, most of who are seeking solutions to their sundry problems.

The spread of Pentecostal Christianity in Africa has been fairly documented in existing literature (Gaiya, 2002; Robbins, 2004; Meyer, 2004 inter alia). A major characteristic of 'African Pentecostalism' is its recourse to indigenous beliefs and practices in the bid to help its devotees deal with the trajectories of everyday life in an under-developed economy. An important aspect of this process is protection from witchcraft, which was sought from priests, sorcerers and medicine men in the past (Onyinah, 2002). The management of witchcraft through exorcistic activities, referred to as 'deliverance', is germane to the popularity of Pentecostalism in Africa. Many of the children accused of witchcraft have been subjected to horrific and abusive treatments in attempt to exorcise witchcraft spirit from them. These practices, which include isolation, flogging, laceration and deprivation of food, violate children's rights and endanger their health and well-being.

The current study documents local witchcraft beliefs and representations relating to children and associated practices that are inimical to their well-being in order to inform

appropriate intervention programmes to address it. It relies on ethnographic materials emerging from field work in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria.

Witchcraft and Social Conflicts in Africa

In both the old and new literature on African witchcraft, the term is used broadly to encompass a range of practices related to the occult (Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Gluckman, 1955; Middleton & Winter, 1963; Marwick, 1965; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Geschiere, 1997 & Moore & Sanders, 2001). In the main, witchcraft refers to a variety of ideas held about mystical powers that people are thought to use in causing misfortunes such as sickness, death, automobile accidents, poor harvest, low grades in school, unemployment and marital disharmony (Offiong, 1983). Since Evans-Pritchard's (1937) pioneer study of witchcraft among the Azande, the phenomenon of witchcraft has become the touchstone of anthropological research in Africa. Scholars (Mitchell, 1956; Middleton & Winter, 1963; Marwick, 1965 & Douglas, 1970) have opined that witchcraft beliefs serve the function of releasing tensions from certain social structures. Others (Nadel, 1952; Gluckman, 1959 & Debrunner, 1959) argue that witchcraft belief results from social problems such as famine, economic distress and rapid social changes. Field (1937), using case studies of witches in Ghana, showed that witchcraft belief is a reaction to ill health and misfortune.

These interpretations informed the view among colonial missionaries and anthropologist that witchcraft is a pre-logical and superstitious belief that would vanish with modernization and the spread of the large monotheistic religion of Christianity. Thus, Parrinder (1958) stated that "an enlightened religion, education, medicine and better social and racial conditions will help dispel witchcraft beliefs". But as Onyinah (2002) has cogently argued, even with the growth of Christianity (Parrinder's 'enlightened religion'), belief in witchcraft has survived and even been revived.

Recent anthropological studies of witchcraft in Africa has shown that witchcraft is not just some sort of "a traditional relict that is seen as the very opposite of everything that is 'modern'" (Geschiere, 2005), but has become an integral part of people's vision of modernity (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993). It provides images by which people define modernity through local consumption of global commodities. Others (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Geschiere, 1997 & White, 1997) explore how emerging and exacerbated socio-economic inequalities in the region are articulated in discourses of witchcraft. They argue that witchcraft accusations respond to and address the social and moral consequences of selfishness, greed and excessive accumulation in societies organized around obligations of kinship and reciprocal exchange (Smith, 2001).

Although contemporary discourses of witchcraft and the occult in Africa are rooted in history (White, 1993 & Smith, 2001), the pervasiveness of witchcraft in contemporary Africa has been linked to broader social, economic and political transformations, including the changes and inequalities associated with the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Witchcraft accusations thrive in such conditions (Thomas, 2007 & Ashforth, 2001), because socio-economic inequalities are engendered by forces that are incomprehensible to and beyond the grasp of ordinary people. These processes are captured more comprehensibly in the idiom of witchcraft, which 'distills complex material and social processes into comprehensible human motives' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999).

Witchcraft both stems from social inequalities and helps people manage them. This important insight has been the focus of a growing body of anthropological studies (Maxwell, 1995; Konhert, 1996; Geschiere, 1997; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999; Auslander 1993; Yamba, 1997; Englund, 1996; Moore & Sanders, 2003). Geschiere (1999) argues that witchcraft can be both a leveling force, undermining inequalities in

wealth and power, but also instrumental for individual accumulation and social mobility. Gluckman (1955), Milddleton & Winter (1963) and Marwick (1965) had earlier stressed the link between witchcraft and local notions of 'envy', misfortune and good fortune, and images of limited good. As Pfeiffer (2005) has suggested, whether in its power of explanation or in its instrumentality, witchcraft provides a lens for interpreting inequalities that both disrupts and animate social life. And as Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) thesised, "witchcraft is not simply an imaginative idiom. It is chillingly concrete, its micro-politics all-too-real". Its occurrence is explicable only with reference to its particular pragmatics; to the ways in which it permits the allocation of responsibility for, and demands action upon, palpable human inequities and misfortunes.

This study articulates witchcraft accusations and contemporary practices against children in Africa generally, and the research context in particular, following the above theoretical discussion. It is argued in this study that the proliferation of witchcraft accusations and other practices in Africa is due to the dramatic nature of contemporary inequality, and the fact that the growth of capitalist economy in post-colonial Africa, through policies of privatization and trade liberalization, have 'produced wealth and disparity by means that are largely beyond the view and control of most people' (Smith, 2001). These processes are comprehended through the idiom of witchcraft, which posits the malicious machinations of 'others' as the source of individual misfortunes. In contemporary Africa, the targets of witchcraft accusations are children, who represent to their parents 'the constraints of kinship obligations and the privileges of age' (Auslander, 1993). As Smith (2001) pointed out, discontent over inequalities is refracted back onto symbols of traditional social structure that people perceive as inhibiting their own participation in the dramatic appropriation of wealth and power by a privileged few. Contemporary practices against the so-called child witches of Akwa Ibom State follow a similar logic. We shall examine these practices and their implications for child well-being, beginning with a description of the research context and methods of study.

Research Setting and Methodology

The study evolves from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Eket, an urban centre in Ibibioland, Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria between the year 2008 and 2009. Eket is located within the heart of the tropical rain forest zone. It occupies latitudes $4^0 33^1$ and $4^0 45^1$ North and longitudes $7^0 52^1$ and $5^0 02^1$ East, within the south-central space of Akwa Ibom State territorial expanse. Eket shares border with *Nsit Ubium*, *Esit Eket*, and *Onna* and *Ibeno* LGAs on the North, East and South respectively. The city is one of the most densely populated areas in the region. The people of Eket, who constitute the Southern Ibibio group (Udo, 1982: 72), are organized into 4 clans and 75 villages.

Eket is popularly called the "oil city" because of the rich deposit of crude oil and natural gas in the area, which has been extracted by Mobil Producing Nigeria Limited since 1970. Oil extraction by Mobil has occasioned massive transformation in the area, which sees a shift away from agriculture and fishery to cottage industrialization and commercial activities. Today, Eket is one of the fastest growing urban centres in the South-South region of Nigeria. Small scale manufacturing, trade, banking services and commercial agriculture abound in the area. The level of industrialization and availability of employment opportunities notwithstanding, Eket has a significant level of poverty. Widespread poverty and illiteracy has led many youths in Eket into crime and prostitution. Child labour, including hawking and agricultural work is also widespread in the area.

The study adopted a non-systematic survey design. Following Nyamnjoh (2001), the rationale for adopting this design is that not all issues may be investigated with the rigour of a sample survey, since not all that can be counted counts and not all that counts can be counted. Besides this, there is no spatial limit to where data could be obtained for a study

of this nature. Key informants (here after referred to as 'interviewees') recruited through snowball sampling (Babbie, 2007), provided primary data for the study. Snowballing involved finding and interviewing few subjects who possessed the characteristics of interest (experience and knowledge of witchcraft), and asking them to refer the researchers to other people who they know who could answer questions on witchcraft and related themes (Barker, 1995). They included children accused of witchcraft (n=13); social workers (n=5); prophets (n=3) parents of the victims (n=3) and other knowledgeable persons on the subject. Various inter-subjective experiences involving the researchers, including personal experiences and observations of activities in spiritual churches, provided additional data for the study. Primary data where intersected with secondary data obtained from newspaper and magazine reports on the subject.

Childhood in Transition in Ibibioland

Sociologist David Newman (1997: 109) aptly observed that conception of childhood and child rearing practices are shaped by socio-cultural forces, and in this case variation in cultural patterns over time is dramatic. This theoretical position finds its empirical equivalence in Ibibioland, where children, who were once valued are now abused and vilified. Traditionally, the Ibibio esteem children highly because they guarantee the survival of the lineage (*ekpuk*) and the continuity of the norms and traditions of the people. In the past, children were regarded as social security and economic assets because they provided requisite labour for agricultural work and were obligated by cultural norms to care for their parents in old age. The latter notion is expressed in the Ibibio idiom, *ayin odo okot udubok*, which means *when a child grows up, he/she is expected to take care of the parents*.

Uyoata (2006) has observed that the Ibibio people project themselves into the future through their children, in the sense that they regard their children as those who will perpetuate their name (*enying*) when they are gone. This is why childless couples were often chided for allowing their fathers name to fade into oblivion after their lifetime (*ayak ubon uso atre ye fo*). Children are seen as incarnate of their forbears or ancestors. This belief is reflected in some of the names parents give to their children, such as *eka-ette* (grand-mother) and *ette-ette* (grand-father). Such names are expressions of the loving memory of cherished relations and affirm the belief in reincarnation, which is integral to the Ibibio religious and cosmological worldview.

A large number of children were the norm in traditional Ibibio society due partly to high level of infant and child mortality. In such a situation, people preferred to have many of them so that even if many die there will still be enough of them to continue the lineage (*ubon*). Although contemporary socio-economic conditions have made large families economically unviable, and the current efforts to control fertility through modern contraceptives, have led to decline in the number of children in Ibibio households, the people still pride themselves in having many children. Even in contemporary times, the success of a marriage in Ibibio society is judged by the number of children produced by the union. Indeed, marriages are known to have been dissolved on account of childlessness (*unana ndito*).

Barren women (*ada*) are treated with contempt; they have no stake in their conjugal family and may be easily divorced, or evicted when the husband dies. Childlessness in a marriage is often attributed to witchcraft (*ifot*), curse (*isuno*), adultery (*efebe*) and pre-marital promiscuity (*efibe*) on the part of the woman. In the past, barrenness was said to be reversible by local herbalists, who used medications concocted with herbs (*ikong*) and roots (*odung*) to 'cleanse' a woman's womb of the filth that prevented her from conceiving. Today, most barren women go to prayer houses (*ufok akam*) and spiritual healing homes (*ufok ukok udongo*) seeking prayers and spiritualistic revelations (*nkukid*)

that will reverse their condition. All these underscore the value of children in the Ibibio culture.

Ironically, children are now objects of vilification and abuse by parents in some parts of Ibibioland, including Eket. In the context of contemporary economic conditions, they are perceived as the diabolical agents responsible for misfortunes in the household. Scholars (LeVine & White, 1992; Zelizer, 1985) agree that the social value of children is shaped by major economic transformations in the society. Current economic transformations, including widespread impoverishment associated with cuts in public sector spending engendered by the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), has revoltionalized cultural conception, including conception of children. From being perceived as 'dependents', children are now regarded as an economic burden. As LeVine & White (1992) argues, children are now economically 'useless', and parents begin to see them as downright costly to raise. As fertility rate remains high and households become increasingly incapable of raising children, easing the burden of child care becomes an attractive option for poor households. Contemporary practices against children in Akwa Ibom State may be partly explained by the above.

Ibibio Witchcraft Beliefs

Witchcraft beliefs form part of the religious worldview of the Ibibio people (Etim, 2005). These beliefs are highly developed and have been in existence for a greater part of the people's history (Haviland, 2003: 673). Western education and the influence of Christianity have not trammeled these beliefs; they continue to provide explanations of misfortunes, from failure in examination to illness and death[1]. Regarding illness for instance, biomedical knowledge of the role which micro-organisms play in disease causation does not foreclose witchcraft beliefs in the explanation of illness episodes; after all, it says nothing about why it had to be the particular person. Besides, other explanations of misfortune are not as satisfying, neither do not elicit nearly as much sympathy from others as does witchcraft discourse.

Witchcraft belief is not restricted to any social group. All classes of people in Ibibioland belief that witchcraft is the cause of most, if not all, calamities people experience in life. Witches (*Ifot*), in Ibibio conception, are persons who possess within them a special substance, acquired from other established witches (*nta ifot*) (Ajala & Nelson, 2010). Ibibio taxonomy recognizes two types of witchcraft namely 'black' (*obubit*) and 'white' (*afia*) witchcraft[2]. Black witchcraft is associated with a host of misfortunes such as disease, death, hardship and infertility. White witchcraft, on the other hand, is often used for protection from the wicked machinations of black witchcraft practitioners. The people believe that white witches do not practice ceremonial cannibalism, unlike their black counterparts. They are generally more benign in disposition, although they can be equally very dangerous if provoked. It is generally believed that white witches acquire their craft as a means of personal protection (*mkpo mkpeme idem*).

The Ibibio regard witchcraft as a substance that is acquired from another person and not as a quality that is inherent in individuals. This substance is said to be a physical concoction consisting of red, white and black threads (*idid*) and needles (*abiawen*)[3] (Haviland, 2003). Witches are said to swallow this substance, which then becomes the means by which they exercise diabolical powers to cause harm to others regardless of whether its possessor intends to do so or not. Occasionally, at the death of a known witch, the children may ask a traditional doctor or spiritualist (*abia idiong*) to remove the substance by cutting the stomach open. Not everybody can see the substance, since certain supernatural powers have to be used on the substance to make it visible to the uninitiated. This is similar to what obtains among the *Tiv* people of north-central Nigeria, who also believe in the existence of the substance called *tsav*, which they say grows in the hearts of human beings and some animals. It is said to look like the liver, and it may

be rounded or notched at the edges (Offiong, 1983). This substance is believed to be red, black, or white, and can be good or bad (Parrinder, 1963: 136). In sync with Evans-Pritchard's (1934) description of *Azande* witchcraft, in Ibibio thought the witchcraft power emanating from the substance is purely psychic and does not involve the performance of "bad medicine". Though tangible, this substance cannot be seen by the physical eyes. It can only be detected by divination. Folk tales posit that witchcraft can be transmitted through scarification, food and drinks (especially those served in dreams) and spell.

Furthermore, there is a widely held belief among the Ibibio that witches operate in ultra-physical bodies. They also use familiars such as cats (*anwa*) and dogs (*ewa*), which they take on after exiting their ethereal body on their bed in order to attend witches' meeting. The idea of bodily transformation and the use of familiars underscore the concept of metamorphosis and bi-location in local witchcraft beliefs (Ekong, 2001 & Etim, 2005). Witches are thought to congregate at their coven (*anwa ifot*), which could be a class room, church auditorium or the interior of a big tree (*ekamba eto*). They transform the ethereal body (*obuk idem*) of their victims into animals to be roasted and eaten as meat, while their blood (*iyip*) is drank as wine. This 'manipulation' results in the death of the person in the temporal world. It is also widely believed that a witch may donate a certain number of people to be eaten by the community of witches as a requirement for attaining a higher status or rank in the witchcraft world. In most cases, witches may donate their close relations, including parents, children, spouses and siblings. This explains why suspicion of witchcraft among people often emerges from and is directed at close relations[7].

Witches are identifiable by their conduct (*edu uwem*). A person whose behaviour is odd, out of the ordinary and at variance with local cultural norms is often suspected or labeled witches. As listed by Haviland (2003: 673) and Ajala and Nelson (2010), a combination of the following behaviour earns someone the label of a witch: living in solitude, away from where others dwell; not fond of greeting other people; charging exorbitantly for regular items; committing adultery or incest habitually; walking about at night alone; showing little or no grief over the death of a relation or other members of the community; not caring for ones parents, spouse or children; and being notoriously hard-hearted. Witches are apt to look and act mean and to be socially disruptive people in the sense that their behaviour often exceeds the range of variance considered acceptable. The behavioural traits of an archetypal Witch are antithetical to proper, culturally-defined behaviour, and persons who display these undesirable characteristics are generally the ones accused of witchcraft.

Although both men and women practice witchcraft, women are said to be the most dangerous and in the majority (Offiong, 1983 & Ekong, 2001). Children are also included in public discourse of witchcraft in Akwa Ibom State. They are viewed as prime targets for initiation by (older) witches. Children are often initiated through snacks such as groundnut (*mbansang*), biscuits and sweets. It is widely held that since most children are initiated involuntarily into witchcraft, child witches are potentially dangerous because they may hurt their closest relations unknowingly[4]. On account of this, parents often prohibit their children from eating anything offered them outside the home.

The people regard witchcraft as the embodiment of all that is abhorrent in the society. The abusive treatments meted out to children accused of witchcraft is a contemporary manifestation of these undying cultural attitudes. Furthermore, witchcraft is regarded as serious an atrocity as murder, and a summary judgment and possible cremation awaits witches who are caught in their craft or detected by diviners (*mbia mfa*). The cruel and abusive treatments to which contemporary 'child witches' have been

subjected is explicable by the historical belief that witchcraft is a deadly sin against the community.

Children and Witchcraft in Popular Discourse

The belief that children possess strange and diabolical powers to cause untold destruction for people is currently pervasive in local communities of Eket Local Government Area, the research area. Anecdotal evidence supports the belief that children in this part of the country are dreaded by all and sundry. An interviewee told us: *ntok eyen eyo-ami edo nkpo ndik* (today's children are dreadful). Others were of the opinion that most children have almost completely lost their innocence and have become very treacherous. It is widely believed that many children have been initiated into witchcraft by aged witches, who seek young children to transfer their 'craft' to before they die. Young children are prime targets of witchcraft initiation because they are gullible and can be relied upon to execute the wicked desires of aging witches (*nkan Ifot*).

Children are said to be initiated into witchcraft through dreams. According to some interviewees, during their meeting (*esop ifot*) in the coven (*anwa ifot*) at night, witches conjure the spirit of children to their meeting and serve them human flesh (*obuk idem*) as meat and blood (*iyip*) as wine (*ukod*), thereby initiating them into witchcraft. Others were of the opinion that children are initiated through food. They pointed out that witches use children's favourite snacks such as biscuit and groundnut to achieve this wicked end. These snacks are said to be 'poisoned' with witchcraft spirit (*spirit ifot*) and when children eat them they ingest the witchcraft substance (*edia ifot*).

Interview accounts further show that children who have been initiated are usually given wings to fly to the witches' coven to attend meetings in the company of older witches. During such meetings, children are endowed with witchcraft powers (*odudu ifot*) and are sent on a mission to afflict people with disease (*udono*), poverty (*nsad ubok*) and barrenness (*ada*). Close relations of the children, including parents and siblings, bear the brunt of these malicious attacks, since they are most likely to provoke them to jealousy, the dominant motive behind witchcraft attacks in Ibibio perception. Interviewees attributed misfortunes that have befallen individuals and households in their community to the malicious activities of child witches (*ndito ifot*). An interviewee told us:

Many children have been given witchcraft power and they go about causing problems for their owners and neighbours. If you look at them with your natural eyes (*nkanga enyin*), they look innocent and you won't even suspect anything. But they are the cause of your problem ... They can tie your hands (*ubok uwana*) and you will work and sweat but you will still remain poor (Fieldwork, 2009: Personal Interviews).

Interviewees also narrated various experiences they've had with 'deadly child witches'. One recalled a dream she had in which a horrible looking lady with long hairs and nails tried to drown her baby in the river. Upon looking closer she discovered that the 'witch' was her housemaid (*ayen ufok*). Others spoke of young children who confessed in churches that they were witches sent to infiltrate the ranks of young children and initiate them into witchcraft, using snacks.

Witchcraft Exorcism and Child Abuse

Interview account shows that most of the accused children were branded witches by spiritualists, who also accused them of causing the problems bedeviling their family. The narratives we collected in the course of fieldwork indicates that these spiritualists, who self-identify as prophets, claim that they possess supernal powers to deal with spiritual problems, including detecting and exorcising witchcraft spirits in children. Most of them are pastors of churches while others operate syncretic religious groups called prayer houses (*ufok akam*). They also organize special programs or services, often called 'deliverance services', dedicated to exorcism and alleviating 'spiritual problems'. One of

the spiritualists we interviewed told us that he is *anointed to break ancestral curses and covenants working against people and to heal the sick and deliver those who are bound by witchcraft spirits.* Another self-styled prophet made it clear that he has been sent by God to deliver children who are oppressed by witchcraft spirit. In his own words:

> I have conducted deliverance for many children who were harassed by witchcraft spirits. These spirits used to attack them, especially in the night. Some of them will just sit like this and suddenly they will scream 'snake! snake!!' All those things were witchcraft manipulations. But when I prayed and used 'liquid fire' (that is olive oil) on them, those things died (Fieldwork, 2009: Personal Interviews).

Narratives further reveal that witchcraft accusations and exorcism are part of a broader program of spiritual emancipation promoted by these 'prophets'. When visiting some of these churches in the course of fieldwork, the researchers observed that their religious meetings are usually well-attended. They attract people from all works of life, who come in search of solutions (*uboko*) for problems such as infertility, unemployment, sickness and poverty. Politicians and business men/women also flock these churches in search of spiritual power to guarantee success in their business and political endeavours. In 'ministering' to the attendees at their meetings, spiritualists rely on such elements as anointing oil (*edisana adan*), water (*mmon*) and salt (*inun*). Spiritual ministrations usually begin with a diagnosis of the problem, which involves the use of divinations to determine the person(s) or force(s) responsible for the condition. In most cases, these malicious agents are said to be close relatives of the afflicted person, including spouse, parents, in-laws, and their offspring.

Children accused of bewitching their parents and causing misfortunes in the family are frequently subjected to horrifying rituals in the bid to 'cast out the devil' from them. The procedures for effecting deliverance often include marathon fasting (*utide udia*) and prayers (*akam*), and ingestion of olive oil (*uwon adan*). Narratives collected during conversational interviews with attendees of these churches show that as part of the process of exorcising the witchcraft spirit, the children may be flocked, lacerated with machetes or drawn in the river (in cases where the child is said to be possessed by marine spirit [*ndem mmon*]). A young woman who took her cousin to a spiritual church for deliverance told us that the 'prophet' and members of the prayer band took the boy through two weeks of fasting and prayers (*utire udia ye ubon akam*) inorder to deliver the boy from witchcraft spirit. She recounted: "I bought many bottles of olive oil (*edisana aran*) and other items for the deliverance. Then the prophet prayed and commanding the spirit to leave him and it eventually left" (Fieldwork, 2009: Personal Interviews).

It is however believed that the witch must confess his or her practices, otherwise deliverance will be elusive. A spiritualist told us that confession (*uyara*) is a prerequisite for deliverance from witchcraft spirit, because, according to him: 'awo ikemeke edi bo uboko ke enye mi ikana ifot' (nobody can be delivered without denouncing witchcraft). Confessing witchcraft is more than merely admitting involvement in witchcraft; it also involves recounting most (if not all) the havocs (*idiok mkpo*) that one has perpetrated with diabolical powers. The confessor must be honest (*atan akpan iko*) otherwise the deliverance may not be effective. It is widely believed that incomplete confession puts the confessor at risk of malicious attack by other witches who he or she has both exposed and denounced.

Concluding Thoughts
Witchcraft accusations against children indicate weakening family cohesion due to widespread insecurity and declining condition of living. Popular discontents over

emerging inequalities in wealth and power are played out in accusations of witchcraft against close relations, since witchcraft is thought to operate within close quarters. Comaroff & Comaroff, (1999) argue that "the most spirited witch-findings occur where conditions are most straitened and where raw inequality has become most blatant". Contemporary inequalities in Nigeria therefore provide the right historical condition for witchcraft accusations to flourish. Children are assailed with accusations of witchcraft partly because they represent the 'constraints of kinship obligations and the symbol of the traditional family structure that people perceive as restraining them from participating in the appropriation of wealth and power by a privileged few' (Smith, 2001). The abuses they experience on account of this portends negative consequences for their well-being and development.

Children who have suffered maltreatment will have problems with their social, emotional, and physical development (Putnam, 2006). As adults, they will experience far greater problems with mental illness, substance abuse, and poor physical health than their non-abused peers (ibid). Edward, Holden, Felitti & Anda (2003) posit that depression is at least 3 to 5 times more common in individuals with histories of child mal-treatment. Adverse childhood experiences increases individuals' risk of developing chronic medical conditions such as heart and cardiovascular disease, and of dying at a younger age than someone without these experiences. Although these medical conditions are not the direct result of abuse, they stem from the dysfunctional and addictive behaviours in which most child abuse survivors engage (Putnam, 2006). Similarly, eviction and abandonment of children accused of practicing witchcraft to the streets, renders them vulnerable to trafficking for various forms of hazardous work, including drug peddling and prostitution.

In view of this, action should be taken to stem this problem and guarantee the rights of children. This will involve many sectors of the society, including parents, teachers, policy makers, community and religious leaders, social workers and law enforcement agents. Relevant legislations penalizing witchcraft accusations and child abuse and rehabilitation programmes for abused children should be promoted. However, a pivot intervention is to enlighten the public on the ills of these practices.

The Relevance of Communication and Advocacy Campaigns

To stem this problem, public enlightenment campaigns addressing local cultural attitudes towards children should be the primary intervention. Such campaign should target relevant families, communities and relevant institutions such as schools, churches and the legal system. At the community level, innovative communication strategies should be adopted to change witchcraft beliefs and representations, especially those that implicate children. Similarly, the negative consequences of witchcraft beliefs should be boldly highlighted, including the fact that it is a form of blame-shifting by which individuals dodge personal responsibility. As Brain (1982) observed that, "witchcraft (accusations provides) a scapegoat for misfortune, for illness and death, for one's own failures and the success of others, and so allow people to resign themselves to a life of ill-health, poor diet and no luxuries". The specific communication strategies that could serve this purpose include songs aired on the television and radio (specifically composed to condemn accusations and abuse of children), documentaries, vignettes and radio and television drama programs which show-case the ills of these beliefs and practices. Public enlightenment campaigns seeking to raise awareness through the use of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials such as flyers, posters and booklets should also be mounted.

It is important that community education and sensitization be carried out in partnership and dialogue with the communities rather than in a top-down style. It must be implemented in a manner that allows for exchange of ideas and views between the community and programmers. It should also adopt effective strategies to discuss child

well-being in a culturally-sensitive manner that will make it locally acceptable. In this regard Cimpric (2010) argues that, "community dialogue can help in bridging the gaps between local social and moral norms on the one hand national and international human rights norms on the other".

At the institutional level, there is need to advocate to religious leaders, traditional rulers and school authorities. In this respect, intervention programs should support dialogue with pastors and spiritualists, community leaders, traditional healers and teachers in order to identify common grounds for combating witchcraft accusation and child abuse. There is also need to enlighten law enforcement agents and legal aid workers on their role in curbing the problem.

Intervention at the family level should involve negotiation and mediation between church leaders, families and accused children, and organizations that protect the rights of abused children. Mediation of this kind is necessary for effective reintegration of stigmatized children into the family and community. Dialogue serves to promote mutual understanding and consensus building, which will pave the way for cooperation in the provision of care and support to child victims of accusation and abuse. Church leaders are important opinion leaders and exert considerable influence in local matters. Indeed, at the local level the opinion of religious leaders has more weight than legal and human rights arguments. Their active involvement is therefore important if interventions will be effective.

Communication and advocacy campaigns seeking to address this problem should be anchored on findings from anthropological research on witchcraft beliefs and practices as well as research in the areas of development communication and traditional communication systems. Adequate funding for the conduct of such researches should therefore be prioritized.

Notes

1. Highlighting the centrality of witchcraft belief in the explanation of everyday occurrences in Ibibioland, Haviland (2003: 673) caricatures that 'a rat that eats up a person's crops is not really a rat but a witch that changed into one; if a young enterprising man cannot get a job or fails an exam, he has been bewitched; if someone's money is wasted away or if the person becomes sick, is bitten by a snake, or is struck by lightning, the reason is always the same-witchcraft'.
2. The Ibibio also use other terms to qualify witches in terms of their machinations, including *Asaksak ifot* (pure bred witch), *Nnan ifot* (Blind witch) among others
3. An informant told me that a relation of his who sought unsuccessfully to be-witch him accused him of swallowing sharp edges of the palm kernel (*nkom eyop*) as a witchcraft substance.
4. I have heard many stories of people who had dreams where they eat food served them by strangers. They often worried that they have been initiated into witchcraft.
5. It is widely believed that big trees are covens of witches, hence most religious prayers against witchcraft involve metaphors of big trees and established witches. I once heard a native pray thus: *Abasi kek ekamba eto aduok owo mbada*, which means *God, pull down every big tree that drops dew on the shrubs beneath it*.
6. In popular discourse of witchcraft, close relations are referred to as *mkpatian ukot* which means those who come from the same loins.
7. This comment was made by a middle aged informant I interviewed at her shop in Uyo LGA in January 2009

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