

It is Gross Violation of Rights to Stigmatize Children as Witches

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A cursory perusal of electronic references suggest that the belief in witchcraft is very strong in Northern Ghana, and that the region is home to over 10 extensive witch camps—each is reportedly holding up to 1000 people. Also, stories have it that there are many additional camps in the region that are specifically designated to accommodate “child witches.” One striking problem that can also be gleaned from current information on the matter is that all the accused witches (mostly children and elderly persons) are ostracized from the larger society, denied almost all basic human rights, and lack access to legal remedy following their arbitrary condemnation as undesirable elements in society.

The scope and depth of brutality against “child witches” in Nigeria can be equally disconcerting, when one considers the story that has been told many times about “Mary,” who lives at a refuge in Akwa Ibom State (South Eastern Nigeria). She is said to be living with 150 other children who have been branded witches, blamed for causing hardships in their family, and abandoned to the mercies of ignorant, superstitious communities. Before kicking them into the streets, many are reportedly beaten, slashed with knives, or thrown into fires—these are typical forms of punishment devised ostensibly to induce confessions from them to being possessed. An equally horrific story is presented of a young girl, Uma, who had a three-inch nail driven into her skull.

Reviews of the situation on electronic media indicate that the world’s attention was drawn to this particular case by a British charity worker, Gary Foxcroft, who had returned to South East Nigeria to expose widespread cruelty to children accused of witchcraft by community leaders. We understand that he has since produced a documentary film on the problem and has set up Stepping Stones, a non-governmental organization committed to helping Nigerian children who were branded witches—sometimes by re-uniting them with their families.

A combination of factors is responsible for the branding of children in West Africa. Belief in witchcraft is associated with superstitious orientations among the mostly illiterate and ignorant communities across the region; and poverty is key factor sustaining the problem. Quite a few evangelical leaders keep the belief alive; as they draw selectively from Bible passages and give literal interpretations of the scripture to convince their ill-informed and largely uneducated followers about the potency of witchcraft in the contemporary West African society.

It is worth repeating and emphasizing that subjecting thousands of children to physical, emotional and psychological traumatic conditions—in situations where they are branded as witches—would definitely erode, arrest and eventually destroy the future development of West Africa’s intellectual capital, that is, the growing population of its children and youths. The passing of the Child Act into law in Nigeria recognizes the implications and it is meant in part to address this problem.

In similar effort to address the problem, the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly passed the Child Rights Bill into law in December 2008. Along with enforcing the Child Act, however, I believe that all governments in Nigeria and in the region must seek to eliminate widespread illiteracy and poverty—these twin conditions are critical to sustaining all backward belief systems that are also injurious to society. Concurrently, strategies must be fashioned to properly reintegrate stigmatized children into their family units. It has been shown that most “ex-child witches” are suicidal; considering this, post trauma treatment for them must include comprehensive counseling by professionals including psychologists, social workers and educationists. Collective intervention by governments, civil society and international normative institutions is required to begin reversing the ugly trend of stigmatizing and punishing innocent child victims of primitive belief systems.

-Ngene, Seno