

# Hunting Witches

GARY FOXCROFT



**L**ANCASTER, England—More than 400 years ago, King James of Scotland amended *Exodus 22.18* to read: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

By changing the word “poisoner” to “witch,” he made women the primary target of persecution. Perhaps more than any other line of sacred text, this biblical edict

has been used to justify horrific human rights violations and fuel the epidemic of witchcraft accusations and persecution across the globe. Widespread abuses have been recorded across all continents and, like the medieval witch hunts, can be seen as part of a wider campaign of violence against women conducted overwhelmingly by men in positions of authority.

Fast-forward four centuries, and I’ve received a phone call alerting me to a case of modern-day witch hunting in my hometown of Lancaster. The charity I co-founded, Stepping Stones Nigeria, has supported hundreds of victims of witchcraft accusa-

tions and persecution. Appreciating the global scale of the problem, I’m hardly surprised to discover a case in the backwaters of Northern England. However, the irony of it being unearthed during the 400th commemorative year of the hangings of the Lancashire Witches in 1612 is not lost on me. The victim, Annie, is hardly atypical. Her story is that of poverty, ruthless exploitation, and the failure of religious, political, and community leaders to safeguard vulnerable children and young women—accused by patriarchal groups of witchcraft as a means to ensure that they are kept firmly in their place.

Now, 18-years-old, she bears the obvious emotional scars of trauma. Annie was trafficked from Nigeria to Britain four years earlier and had worked as a domestic servant, or modern day slave, ever since. Thousands of young Nigerian women are trafficked to Europe each year to act as sex workers or domestic servants. Many are forced to undertake *juju* (black magic) oaths before they travel to protect the traffickers and ensure their compliance. Domestic servants feature prominently in many Nigerian families, and this system had previously provided good opportunities for poor rural dwellers to move to the city and gain an education in exchange for their labor. All too often, however, this system is being exploited by couples such as Annie’s “Auntie” and “Uncle,” who brought her into Britain simply to look after their children and house in Lancaster. Like many Nigerians, Annie’s masters became members of one of Africa’s largest Pentecostal churches, which provides both




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spiritual guidance and a sense of community in a place far from home.

Belief in and preaching about the existence of witchcraft has become a core tenet of many such Pentecostal churches, which are springing up across the country. Since 2005, there has been a 50 percent increase in the numbers of people attending Pentecostal churches in London—a phenomenon explained by a large influx of immigrants from Africa during that period. There are currently no legal requirements for minimum levels of theological training or commitment to child protection to establish such a church. Simply stated, anyone can start a Pentecostal church.

Initially, Annie's beatings were mild, but they gradually became more severe and, as her family's life became more difficult, accusations of witchcraft were leveled at her as a means of explaining their misfortune. Over the years, she alleges she was whipped, scolded, starved, and incarcerated. Annie was frequently taken to the church for "deliverance" of her perceived witchcraft by the pastor and her uncle, who by now had become the assistant pastor. When this failed to cure her, she was beaten repeatedly. One day she ran into the streets, where she was rescued and sheltered by a kind Nigerian couple also living in Lancaster.

Annie, in many ways, is one of the lucky ones. She was referred to an agency working to help such victims. They moved her to a safe haven far from Lancaster, where she settled and had her immigration status arranged. Others, such as Victoria Climbié, who was labeled a witch before she was tortured and killed in London in 2000, and Kristy Bamu who had 101 wounds on his body when he was murdered after the same accusation in 2012, have not been so fortunate.

The preachings of Pentecostal pastors are alleged to have played a key role in both of these gruesome murders.

Annie's aunt and uncle were eventually arrested, but Lancaster's small African diaspora community quickly closed ranks and, when the police failed to find sufficient evidence to prosecute, they were eventually set free. Annie's uncle is now the head pastor at the church where he continues to deliver weekly sermons. Her case highlights a number of chronic failures in a political system that fear accusations of racial and religious discrimination. This failure extends from the social workers and teachers who failed to intervene, to the police, who did not truly understand the issues behind the abuse, to legislators who continue to allow such churches to be established with no commitments to child protection or minimum standards of theological training.

#### THE ROLE OF PENTECOSTALISM

The modern legacy of King James can be witnessed in the rapidly growing Pentecostal movement, whose literal interpretations of the King James Bible have fueled the epidemic of witchcraft accusations and persecution across Africa and in growing numbers of Western nations like Britain. The belief persists that witches are real, and the Bible is infallible.

Pentecostalism is a Christian evangelical movement that emphasizes a literal interpretation of the Bible, direct communion with God, and salvation through miracles, baptism, and faith. In 1900, Charles Parham, an American evangelist and faith healer, began teaching that speaking in tongues was the Biblical evidence of spirit baptism. The three-year-long Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, California, resulted in the spread of Pentecostalism

throughout the United States and the rest of the world as visitors carried the Pentecostal experience back to their home churches or felt called to the mission field. American Pentecostal missionaries arrived in Africa in the 1980s looking to save African souls, and they quickly made inroads in African communities.

Pentecostalism has now grown to be the second largest Christian denomination. With 17 percent of Africa's population and a total of 500 million followers globally, it is second only to Roman Catholicism. Comprising over 700 denominations and vast numbers of independent churches, there is no central authority governing Pentecostalism. While Anglican and Roman Catholic churches have rigid hierarchical structures that promote a degree of regulation of theology, most Pentecostal churches go without regulation. Pastors are free to preach that they are able to communicate directly with God, who has personally singled out individual witches.

A UNICEF report notes that "churches...play an important role in the diffusion and legitimization of fears related to witchcraft, and in particular, child witches. The pastor-prophet is an important figure in the process of accusing children of witchcraft, by effectively validating the presence of a witchcraft spirit. Pentecostals, for example, present their faith as a form of divine armour against witchcraft, and they participate actively in the fight against Evil that is incarnated through witchcraft."

A central tenet of Pentecostalism is spiritual warfare, which is the Christian version of taking a stand against supernatural evil forces. The foundation for this ideology is having a belief in evil spirits, which are able to intervene in human affairs. Pentecostal churches have developed a wide-range of practices to repel such

forces, based on their doctrine of Christian demonology, which is closely related to some of the content of the King James Bible. Common forms of spiritual warfare include prayer, deliverances, laying-on of hands, fasting, or anointing with oil, all of which are used to cast away demons and evil spirits.

One of the best-known proponents of spiritual warfare is Pastor David Oyedepo—a Nigerian Christian author, preacher, founder, and presiding bishop of Living Faith Church World Wide, also known as Winners Chapel. He is also reputed to be Nigeria's wealthiest pastor. Dubbed "the Pastorpreneur," among Oyedepo's fleet of aircraft are said to be a Gulfstream-1 and Gulfstream-4 private jets. *The Daily Mail* alleges that he and his wife, Faith, travel in expensive Jeeps flanked by convoys of siren-blaring vehicles. He is the senior pastor of Faith Tabernacle, a 50,000-seat auditorium in Lagos, reputed by the paper to be the largest church in the world, and runs a publishing company that distributes books carrying his message across the world.

He was accused in 2013 of slapping the face of a young woman he said was a witch, and a YouTube video confirms his abusive activity. The attack took place in a Winners Chapel super church in Nigeria, in full view of thousands of worshippers who then let out great shouts of approval. Oyedepo justified the assault by citing the Bible, wherein "witches" are condemned to death.

Other victims, like Comfort, have experienced even greater abuse. Suspicion

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that she may be a witch arose when her grandfather died after she had visited his home in rural Nigeria. When, two weeks later, her younger brother also died, a pastor was called in to identify the source of the misfortune in the family. The pastor quickly confirmed that Comfort was a witch and the cause of these deaths. According to Comfort: “The next day around 4 a.m., my father woke me up from bed and asked me to escort him to the village. During the journey, we got to an uncompleted building. He then asked me to stop and go into the building. I became afraid. He then asked me to kneel down. He then poured some liquid into a cup and asked me to drink it. He said if I am a witch, [I] am going to vomit; if I am not, I will not vomit. I tasted it with my tongue. It burnt me, so [I] bolted away. He chased me and poured the liquid on my head and leg. I fell down, and he dragged me back to the uncompleted building. I was pleading with him, but he insisted I drink the liquid, I refused...he kept sprinkling the liquid on me.” The liquid was battery acid.

Comfort’s father was arrested at that time, but released shortly without trial, until the Legal Aid Council and Better Leven, an organization caring for the victim, put pressure on the police to prosecute him.

Another leader in promoting and exploiting the belief in witchcraft is Lady Apostle Helen Ukpabio, who heads the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries in Nigeria. What makes her case so unique, and especially shocking, is her expanded focus of persecution beyond adult women to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society—the children. In a world where it is primarily men who label women as witches in order to exert their patriarchal hegemony, the fact that Ukpabio is

herself a woman makes her actions of even more significance. A feminist role model she is not.

The brand of Ukpabio’s entire ministry has been built around promoting the mythical belief in child witches and her unique ability to both identify and cure such children from their perceived witchcraft. Despite the lack of Biblical basis for this belief, Ukpabio employs Nollywood films, literature, and music to sell her vision of an evil world where misfortune and suffering awaits those who do not engage in spiritual warfare and, of course, make offerings to her ever-growing church. Like King James 400 years earlier, Ukpabio’s publications are obsessed with demons, mermaid spirits, and the omnipresent threat of witchcraft. “There is hardly any family without witchcraft possession or attack—with many held in deep fear of witchcraft operations,” her website observes. In books, such as *Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft*, she asserts, “if a child under the age of two screams in the night, cries, and is always feverish with deteriorating health, he or she is a servant of Satan.” Her widely viewed Nollywood films, such as *End of the Wicked*, purport to show how the devil works to capture the souls of children and set them to work in the witchcraft world. She then appears at the end of the film to act as the salvation for those who have been tormented by the witches.

The majority of Ukpabio’s audiences are poor rural women who take her word as gospel and use her rhetoric to make sense of their challenging lives. When they fail to find answers, they use their children as scapegoats. Such practices are widespread in southeastern Nigeria, where it has been estimated that 10,000 to 15,000 children have been abandoned and where stories

abound of children being drowned, be-headed, set on fire, and buried alive.

Nigerian state and federal governments continue to turn a blind eye to the teachings of Ukpabio, while advocacy and human right groups struggle to save the lives of victims of witchcraft accusations that litter the streets of the region. Her Liberty Gospel Church is a powerful force, and the government relies on the votes and support of such pastors to maintain peace and order. Ukpabio herself, unapologetic and indifferent to the social consequences of her actions, continues mercilessly with her campaign of terror.

#### RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGE

The state's response to these ongoing violations of women and children tends to uphold the notion that religion is sacred and impervious to state influence. The few brave individuals and organizations who have confronted the role Pentecostalism plays in witchcraft accusations and persecution have suffered sometimes violent and abusive attacks.

Nigerian human rights activist Leo Igwe has been one of the most vocal critics of the ministries of such pastors as Ukpabio. Together with Stepping Stones Nigeria, Igwe has been on the receiving end of a vicious and relentless campaign of fear and intimidation. In addition to sending her supporters to raid a child rights conference Igwe had organized, defamatory websites have been opened, law suits have been filed (and successfully defended), and vicious articles have been published in the print press.

In response to the work carried out by a host of organizations in defense of women and children accused of witchcraft, the Akwa Ibom state government, to their great credit, criminalized the act of branding children as witches—with a punishment of up

to 10 years. The state's governor, Godswill Akpabio, also promised to shut down and seize the assets of any churches found to be promoting such beliefs. Though cases of this form of abuse persist, there have been no successful prosecutions, and no churches have been shut down. Ukpabio continues to hold her crusades against witchcraft in the state with impunity.

In contrast, the president of Cameroon, Paul Biya, has taken a much tougher approach to dealing with the growth in Pentecostal churches. Sparked by the death of a nine-year-old girl during deliverance at a branch of Oyedepo's Winners Chapel Church, the president used the military to shut down all Pentecostal churches in the nation's capital, Yaounde, and

the northwest regional capital, Bamenda, which have the nation's largest Christian populations. More than 50 churches have now been closed, with the government targeting nearly 100 in eight other regions. "We will get rid of all the so-called Christian Pentecostal pastors who misuse the name of Jesus Christ to fake miracles and kill citizens in their churches. They have outstretched their liberty," Mbu Anthony Lang, a government official in Bamenda, told CNN in August 2013.

#### THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Despite such perversions of the teachings of Jesus Christ, traditional churches have failed either to step up and condemn these practices or offer solutions to correct the

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### WOMEN ACCUSED OF WITCHCRAFT ARE BEATEN TO DEATH IN INDIA, MUTILATED IN SOUTH AFRICA AND UGANDA, AND BURNED ALIVE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA.

underlying theology. Both Anglican and Roman Catholic churches have been reluctant to intervene in a theological debate that risks being seen as an attack on African traditional beliefs and the wider Pentecostal movement. Fears that the African Anglican church could also split from the mother church over the issue of gay bishops at the very moment their followers are flocking to the new Pentecostals could also be contributing to this reticence.

By contrast, moved by the plight of those who have suffered abuse, two new Christian-led groups have recently formed to fight this menace. The first, made up of some 50 international pastors and scholars from seven African nations, convened in Nairobi last month to address the growing problem. The Carl F. Henry Centre for Theological Understanding at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School proclaimed at its launch that “this historic gathering marks the first large-scale, international, and interdenominational effort within the church and within the framework of Christian theology to address the growing presence of witch accusations and violence.”

In Britain, the Stop Child Witch Accusations group was formed in 2012—an alliance of individuals and agencies responding to the reality of children experiencing serious harm or the threats due to accusations of witchcraft. Their work aims to influence churches engaging in harmful beliefs and practices. The launch of both groups marks the first time the Christian community has looked to engage in these issues directly.

#### GLOBAL SCALE

Accusations and persecution for witchcraft are not isolated to Africa, nor would it be fair to create the impression that Pentecostalism is the only driving force behind such

abuses. Women accused of witchcraft are beaten to death in India, mutilated in South Africa and Uganda, and burned alive in Papua New Guinea, while elderly women die in their burning houses in Kenya. Small children and even babies may be subjected to cruel treatment and violence because of these misguided beliefs. The ideas may not be identical in form across all borders, but they resemble each other in that they lead to attacks, usually violent and often lethal, on the weaker members of society. Still, witchcraft accusations and persecution remain largely unrecognized—its extent and distribution largely unknown.

To establish a rough idea of the global spread of the various spiritual beliefs that result in brutal violations of human rights, the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network noted all reports involving these forms of human rights abuses. As far as is known, this is the first attempt to discover the extent of the violence. The Network documented over 400 cases of abuse linked to beliefs in witchcraft, spirits, black magic, and other forms of evil in 41 countries in its 2013 country report. And these cases are likely only the tip of the iceberg.

Outside of Africa, witchcraft accusations and persecution of women are most prevalent in India, where accused women are shaved of body hair, daubed in paint, paraded naked through their community, and forced to eat excreta. Many, such as a 40-year-old widow, Laxmi Devi, are also murdered. She was suspected of using black magic to kill her neighbor's son. When an exorcist confirmed this, the father of the boy waited for her to feed her cattle in a nearby field and strangled her to death. Similar cases are common in many parts of India and, in response to this ongoing campaign of violence against wom-

en, a number of Indian states have moved to curb the violence.

In January 2014, Odisha became the fourth state in the country after Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand to pass special legislation against the practice of witch hunting. Yet years after special laws had been introduced in these three states to combat the crime, witch hunts continue unabated. Bihar passed the special law in 1999, Jharkhand two years later, and Chhattisgarh in 2005. Between the years 2010-12, Chhattisgarh saw 51 such cases, while Bihar and Jharkhand witnessed 26 and nine incidents respectively, according to Partners for Law in Development. While such cases are often rooted in land disputes, jealousies, and tensions inherent in impoverished communities across the country, activists on the ground believe they may be driven by limited access to primary healthcare and education. Indeed according to some, such as Urmila of the Bihar chapter of the Mahila Samakhya Society, these incidents are significantly fewer in areas with a good government network of primary health care centers.

Typically, an *ojha*, or traditional village healer, diagnoses an illness as the curse of a “witch,” prompting a witch-hunt. “If doctors are made available in rural areas, incidents of witch hunting can come down,” says Urmila. There is a strong argument for more focus on government failures in providing access to education and health care if such barbaric practices are to be halted.

Others, such as Narendra Dabholkar, have stressed that the belief system itself is the root of the problem and have chosen to attack those who promote such superstitious beliefs for their own self-gain. Dabholkar established the *Maharashtra Andhrasbraddha Nirmoolan Samiti* (Ma-

harashtra Committee for Eradication of Blind Faith) in 1989 to help eradicate superstitious beliefs in witchcraft, black magic, and human sacrifice—the latter also prevailing across large stretches of India, where young children are slaughtered as sacrifices to Hindu gods. Dabholkar’s state-wide movement targeted religious practitioners who profited from promoting such beliefs. Through the years, numerous lawsuits have been filed against him, vitriolic slurs heaped upon him, and a host of death threats leveled by right-wing Hindus who saw his work as “anti-God.” Still, he carried on with his work, refusing police protection as he pushed the Maharashtra State Assembly to enact legislation criminalizing the act of accusing women of witchcraft and other superstitions.

Dabholkar was well aware of the risks involved in exposing the “godmen,” as he called them, and their so-called miracles. But on August 20, 2013, he was assassinated by two gunmen as he left for his morning walk. The assassination was condemned by a broad spectrum of political leaders and social activists. As yet, though, there has been little progress in identifying his murderers. In response to Dabholkar’s death, the state government rushed through the “Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act,” which he had drafted 18 years earlier and had struggled for 14 years to win approval in the Maharashtra State

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Assembly. Movements are now sweeping other states to approve similar laws. Still, a host of Hindu fringe groups have begun whipping up movements against such legislation. The *Dharmika Swatantra Rakshana Samithi* (Religious Rights Protection Committee) has dubbed such measures “Anti-Hindu Bills,” which they charge would curtail religious rights of Hindus across India—but with no reference to the rights of women who are so often the victims.

#### A VISION FOR 2414

Much more concerted action needs to be taken by governments, UN agencies, faith leaders, and civil society if the current scourge of witchcraft accusations and persecution is not to continue for another 400 years. The United Nations has a key role to play in combating this ongoing campaign of violence and terror against women, children and the elderly. However, there appears to be considerable reluctance to intervene in areas that impinge on people’s faith.

While such issues as female genital mutilation and child soldiers have been banned, and substantial funds have been invested in developing interventions to combat them, witchcraft accusations and persecutions have slid beneath the radar.

The fact that this issue is closely tied to religious beliefs and practices means that many in the international community fear being seen as contravening Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 guarantees freedom of belief, conscience, and religion. However, policy makers need

to understand that this right does not supersede other human rights, such as the right to life, which is being violated daily across the world—largely because of the belief in witchcraft. A global conference to convene key stakeholders working on the issue would be a good starting point here.

Enacting and enforcing laws, improving literacy levels, and enabling access to public health may all contribute significantly to putting a stop to these forms of human rights abuses. However, ultimately, it is patriarchal belief systems that fuel these evil practices. While civil society, government, and UN bodies must work together more effectively to prevent human rights violations, it is faith groups and their leaders who need to play a more proactive role in bringing about this change. Be they Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu, more compassion, stronger leadership, and greater courage are needed to confront this disturbing phenomenon.

Deeply flawed theology, based on edicts made over 400 years ago, must not go unchallenged. Fraudulent faith leaders who deceive and exploit the ignorance of people must not be allowed to persist with impunity. Those challenging such beliefs and practices must not be labeled “anti-God,” but rather as advocating for human and women’s rights. The sacrosanct natures of religion and religious teachings must be challenged if we are to ensure that our descendants are not being identified and falsely accused of acts of evil 400 years from now. ●