Witch-Hunt in the Twenty-First Century. 
Helen Ukpabio’s Activity and Its Consequences – 
An Analysis of the Phenomenon

ARIADNA CIĄŻEŁA  
Instytut Wspomagania Rozwoju Człowieka i Edukacji,  
Wydział Nauk Pedagogicznych,  
Akademia Pedagogiki Specjalnej im. M. Grzegorzewskiej,  
ul. Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa,  
E-mail: ariadnaciazela@gmail.com

Abstract
The aim of the paper is to describe and analyze the activities of Helen Ukpabio, a Nigerian preacher, who operates in the Akwa Ibom state. She combines elements of Christianity with African traditions in order to induce the fear of witches in people. Her activities bring forth massive expulsions of the accused of witchcraft children from their homes and villages. The Nigerian’s actions have met with a protest of the humanitarian organizations defending human rights. The article attempts to analyze the phenomenon in the social and cultural context, as well as to reflect on it from the perspective of universal humanistic values.

Key words: children’s rights, Helen Ukpabio, human rights, Nigeria, violence against children, witchcraft, witch-hunt

INTRODUCTION

The witch-hunt is a phenomenon that has occurred many times in the history of humankind. Such situations occur in places where the fear of witchcraft is linked with hostility or hatred towards people accused of performing it, which in consequence leads to going after and punishing them (Evans-Pritchard 1976).
It has got a long tradition, also within the European cultural area, both in the pre-Christian times and in the period of its domination. At the end of the 15th century, when J. Sprenger and H. Kramer published their famous *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches), the repressions by the Catholic Church against alleged witches escalated. The book sparked the interest in witchcraft and in consequence sparked the best known wave of persecution of witches in history – the 16th and 17th century witch-hunt in Europe and its colonies. Among the most famous incidents in the latter are the processes that took place in Salem, Massachusetts at the end of the 17th century.

The treatise points at women as particularly vulnerable to the influences of evil. In the authors’ opinion, the very etymology of the Latin word *femina* means that women have less faith than men. One may also read there that they give their offspring to Satan. Since the devil’s activity may be overcome through sanctions towards his subordinates, the book also includes ways of identifying witches and further actions that should be undertaken at such an occasion (Sprenger, Kramer 1968; Michelet 1961).

In Europe, admittance of guilt by the accused person was considered to be the most important evidence of being a witch. On that account witchcraft trials involved intricate tools of torture such as the Iron Chair upholstered with spikes. During the trials other various methods were used like ordeal by water – if the person accused of witchcraft sank, they were considered innocent; if they floated, they were guilty. Another way of identifying a witch was piercing the body of the accused and looking for a supposed devil’s mark that would be impervious to pain (Levack 1995; Pilaszek 2008).

Nowadays, the term “witch-hunt” is used most often in the metaphorical sense, sometimes in the context of a situation bordering the ridiculous to emphasize the nonsense of accusations and that one is seeking someone to put the blame on them. In European culture, the “witch-hunt” became a symbol of manipulation and abuse of religious beliefs and superstitions to attain particular goals (Girard 1987). Currently, the term is used to describe directing social emotions towards a group of people that are unable to defend themselves – people who can easily become the subject of society’s anger and discontent in order to diver the attention from real problems and conflicts.

Today, the very idea of witch-hunt in the strict sense of the word seems unthinkable. However, while in Europe and North America witch-hunt is a thing of the past¹, in Africa there are still cases of persecution based on that idea.

¹ One should remember that nowadays there are lot of migrations, and in consequence many beliefs and traditions moves together with the migrants and refugees. That problem is well depicted in the documentary “Muti Murders”
The data was collected from the Internet sources, press releases, information published on webpages of humanitarian organizations, documentaries, and movies produced by Ukpabio. The information was gather for the aim of obtaining the fullest possible picture. The goal was to analyze the phenomenon from the cultural and social psychology perspective, as well as provide the reader with the knowledge about the state of affairs.

1. WESTERN STANDARDS – ENLIGHTENMENT AND SCIENTISM

When discussing the current opinions about magic, it should be stated that the attitude towards it was created during the processes forming European culture. At first, it may seem to be an expression of Eurocentrism. One should keep in mind however that the legal and worldview standards imposed in the processes of colonial expansion up to today have played a decisive role in socio-political practice in the majority of states. Such a situation occurs even in societies that do not share the experiences European socio-political practices stemmed from.

Of course, the political dimension is only a part of the problem. Magic plays a large role in cultural tradition. It is an element of the broad spectrum of modern cultural phenomena as well as a very popular theme appropriated by mass culture and the entertainment industry. It stems from the fact that it has been the subject of continuous fascination as an important moment constituting the historical identity of the human being. The latter is strongly emphasized by cultural anthropology. Regardless whether one adopts its evolutionary-historical or functionalist-ahistorical interpretation, magic appears to be a phenomenon that has continually accompanied humankind and has been a reason for many deep emotions and dramatic events in its history.

In the European cultural area and the cultures conditioned by it, magic and witchcraft in the contemporary world are phenomena that are treated marginally and without any significant meaning. This is due to two main reasons. The first was an increase, at the beginning of the modern era, of the interest in magic as well as the fear of it that led to witch-hunts. The criticism of those “hunts” and unveiling the inhuman nature of the practices accompanying them became one of the sources of Enlightenment. Its message depreciated both the witch-hunts and their cause, i.e. the belief in the power of magical practices. The second factor that buried the belief in magic was the development of technology stemming from the success of mathematical and natural sciences in the 19th century. That development, which due to its achievements, went beyond all expectations about the possible effects of magical practices became the foundation of (directed by O.G. Becker, 2004), which shows an investigation conducted by Scotland Yard on a ritual murder that took place in the United Kingdom.
a new social consensus regarding recognizing science as the basic intellectual value of civilized societies.

After these experiences the magic of today is “tamed,” inscribed in the context of entertainment and culture of leisure time. Even if it is a reference point for existential searches and concerns, it exists in the framework enforced by the cultural capital that consists of the two above described experiences (Bourdieu, Passeron 2012). Furthermore, recognition of Western achievements became a premise to accept these standards outside of Europe in the colonial epoch (Appaduraj 2005). The currently dominating culture is based on the principle that the phenomena related to magic are treated as entertainment and going beyond that sphere is perceived as pathology that undergoes certain actions of the judicial system.

For such cultural mechanisms to be effective, there has to be a certain cultural consensus characteristic for the Western culture and the domination of its Enlightenment-scientific formula on a global scale. If horror and fantasy literature is created and read, or movies about magic are watched, or if someone reads horoscopes, buys talismans, or goes to a fortune teller, it does not mean that such a person will look for a hangman’s rope, light candles made of human corpses, or kill infants on an altar during “black masses.” If such an excess occurred, it would be treated as a manifestation of significant exceeding of social norms, but also as a rather bizarre case of alienation of individuals committing such crimes. Nowadays, no one seriously treats postulates to fight against black magic in the form of witch-hunts. Only conservative circles sometimes put forward demands for censorship, bans, etc. against such products of mass culture such as the series about the wizard Harry Potter (Krajski 2002), or point at a detrimental effect of wearing jewelry with certain symbols.

In Africa, there are still cases of magical practices that are truly shocking from the perspective of widely accepted standards of the modern world. The best known example of such practices are the so-called “albino hunts” in Tanzania – murders stemming from the belief about the magical power of people suffering from albinism (Pytko 2010; Stefanicki 2013). Parts of their bodies are stored and sold as talismans or lucky charms. It also happens that parts of the living victim’s body are cut off. Moreover, appallingly European point of view, such actions go sometimes unpunished due to social acceptance, and no actual action carried out by the authorities stemming from their acceptance of such practices. A consenting or inconsistent attitude of the governments hinders the eradication of the phenomenon. It was already the 20th century when Presidents Mobuto and Bokassa used magic during their rule (Nikodemski 2006).

Due to the presence of beliefs and practices of magical character and their consent by authorities, Nigeria, for example, became a fertile ground to foster the activity of the preacher
Helen Ukpabio as well as other preachers of the Pentecostal Church in that country. Their actions are a manifestation of blurring the existing boundaries of reality – using a peculiar mixture of magic and religion as well as the possibilities given by the contemporary technology.

2. HELEN UKPABIO AND WITCH-HUNTS IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

Helen Ukpabio is a charismatic preacher leads the Evangelical Gospel Liberty Church in the Nigerian state of Akwa Ibom. She enjoys the status of a celebrity in Nigeria. She participates in mass events. She has released i.e. records of gospel music. She is one of the wealthiest and most influential women in the country. Ukpabio is involved in the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries organization, which she has founded.

The preacher’s activities focus on identifying and tackling witches (both male and female), who, in her view, are possessed children. Helen Ukpabio is also the author of books and films addressing the topic of alleged demonic possession, which results in children becoming witches who pose a threat to their families and the whole community (Foxcroft 2014).

Identifying witches leads to undertaking rather expansive countermeasures in the form of exorcisms. It happens quite often however that parents, whose children were thought of as possessed, and who do not have the means to cover the cost, expel them from their homes in the name of alleged care for their safety and the safety of the whole community (Gavan, van der Valk 2008).

Helen Ukpabio’s actions in Nigeria, and especially in the Akwa Ibom state, have brought about persecution of children accused of service to the powers of evil. The children have become victims of psychological and physical violence. They are stigmatized, maimed, beaten, and expelled from their homes by their own parents. Their parents spend sums of money significantly exceeding their monthly income on exorcisms. It is estimated that the number of children thrown out – the victims accused of witchcraft since 1998 may amount to 5000. Another problem is that the success of Ukpabio’s activities encourages others to undertake similar actions – other preachers of the Pentecostal Church have also adopted such practices. The problem accusations of witchcraft was a rather marginal phenomenon twenty years ago, but now – due to the actions described above – it has become a serious social problem.

2.1. SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Today, Nigeria is a dynamically developing African country with the largest economy on the continent. Since 1999, it also has been a country where democracy, as the political system, has stabilized. However, the benefits of economic development have not been distributed in a just
way. They end up in the hands of only a few, while the majority often bears the costs of the deterioration of living conditions due to extensive exploitation of the natural environment. Moreover, Nigeria is a country with a very high population growth.

In 1960, there were 46 million inhabitants and in 2010 – 158.5 million. From 2000 to 2010, the population grew by 35 million. Such a sharp increase is directly related to the fact that the majority remains poor. In 1990s, when the problem started to occur, most of the people there were deprived of basic goods and social services, such as health care, public transport and education (Falola, Heaton 2008).

In such conditions, the level of education of the majority of people remains very low. Traditional views and beliefs fall on fertile ground and are widely accepted. The consequences of lack of knowledge and education have been well shown, for example, in a documentary entitled Saving Africa’s Witch Children (Gavan, van der Valk 2008). When there are no fish in the sea, the Nigerians do not associate it with oil spillage into the water, but rather explain the phenomenon by referring to evil powers.

Helen Upkabio’s actions, in such circumstances, has caught the attention of many international charity organizations that monitor the humanitarian situation in Nigeria.

2.2. HOW HELEN UKPABIO WORKS?

Helen Ukpabio’s activity is based on skillfully inducing the feeling of being threatened. In her actions, Ukpabio combines Christian contents with traditional African beliefs. She emphasizes the ideas related to magic, wizardry, and witchcraft described in the Bible and the Christian tradition of possessions and exorcisms, which she skillfully associates with autochthonic African belief in magic, spirits of predecessors, and water ghosts – sirens. In that way her activity falls within the area of the work of religious communities and she is able to use legislation they fall within.

It is worth mentioning that the Christian religion in Africa is combined with some elements of African faiths (McVeigh 2007). The phenomenon of blending elements and interweaving of traditions is nothing exceptional. One should remember that similarly, in times when Christianity was gaining in popularity, many pagan traditions were assimilated. The name of Easter in English and German derives from the name of the goddess Eostre (Matthews, Matthews 1988). Some elements of her cult were also adopted, like for example, Easter bunnies. The holiday of Yule related to the winter solstice, correspondingly, has a great influence on the way Christmas is celebrated. Among traditions belonging to the Yule celebration were decorating a fir tree and adorning the house with mistletoe and holly. Nowadays they are typical components
of Christmas celebrations in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The evidence of the confluence of the traditions is seen in placing the Christian cross and Germanic Thor’s hammer on an amulet. There are numerous other similar examples.

Ukpabio invokes the authority of religion and undertakes actions aimed at creating credibility and her own image as a trustworthy source. To this end she uses respect that is commonly enjoyed by the clergy. In her talks the preacher emphasizes that all she does is for God’s glory and that she fulfills his mission (Encomium 2016). She also claims that she herself in her teenage years was destined to become Lucifer’s wife (Kurkowski 2008). The image of ecclesiastical authority is completed by the whole entourage, such as elegant outfit and the interior of the church.

Helen Ukpabio is a public persona. She is not afraid of visibility; on the contrary, she aspires to obtain the position of a well-known and respected person, who represents the official world of religious life and the establishment of the Akwa Ibom province. Undoubtedly, this status guarantees her impunity and results in a lack of decisive actions from the government that could stop her activities (Foxcroft 2014).

What is also worthwhile mentioning, when analyzing the personage of Helen Ukpabio, is the fact that she is a woman, what is somehow exceptional in the world, where usually it were men who accused women of being witches, also in order to strengthen the patriarchal order. On that account, her actions gain in significance in the eyes of her followers (Foxcroft 2014).

By inducing fear and the feeling of threat, she creates not only by her “pastoral” activity. Helen Ukpabio is an author of books and films that address the alleged demonic possession of children, who then become witches also are dangerous for their parents and communities. In her publication dedicated to black magic, the book *Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft* one may find pieces of advice, life e.g., the information that when a child under two screams at night, has constant fever and they health worsens, it means that they are servants of Satan and soon will direct their activity against the parents, whom they, following the orders of their lord, will murder and even feed on them. Ukpabio describes various magical practices, including necromancy, i.e., communicating with the dead, clairvoyance, or putting spells on people. Witches’ Sabbaths take place at night. One may obtain magical powers not only by being possessed, but also by i.e. cutting the body, reading occult books, and volunteering and purchasing magic. The author distinguishes four main princes of darkness responsible for evil and wrongful conduct of humanity: Lucifer, Satan, Belial, and Leviathan. The preacher argues also that over 60% of fertility problems in Nigeria is caused by witches (Humanist against Witch Killing and Stigmatization, 2009).
Furthermore, Ukpabio harnesses the mass culture by producing suggestive movies, an example of which may be a 1999 blockbuster *End of the Wicked*. Europeans would classify it as a B-Class primitive horror movie. However, in the case of the discussed phenomenon, we witness a manipulation consisting in the blurring of genres and transforming a horror movie into a documentary, or even a popular science or educational film that joins together the information with instructions how to deal with the shown cases. The preacher employs technological means used in filming horrors and simultaneously emulates the style of documentaries by including the real people, i.e., Ukpabio herself in the role of the preacher performing exorcisms.

In the movie magical practices are presented: Sabbaths with the presence of Satan, flying and transforming people into animals. Witches put spells on innocent and unaware people. There are also scenes of attacking people in their sleep, macabre murdering and maiming people, and even incidents of eating human flesh. All that serves to convince people that witches and Devil’s servants are responsible for diseases and calamities (Benson 1999).

The message that invokes fear in the viewers is more effective, when they are given the way to be saved and how to avoid the threat. Hence, Helen Ukpabio encourages to use her services, such as performing exorcisms, freeing from possession, or freeing from the spirits of ancestors.

There are no doubts that including the means of mass culture into the “pastoral” or “religious” conduct is nothing original. Nonetheless, it is significant how persuasive is the communication. In spite of the primitive means, the message turns out to fall onto fertile ground. Moreover, the parents of the allegedly possessed child are anxious of not only the supposed threat from their offspring, but also, in case of not undertaking the proper action, a negative reaction of other members of their community. Thus, the family has no other option but to call for an exorcist of expel the child (McVeigh 2007).

3. THE REACTION OF THE WORLD PUBLIC. THE FIGHT OF HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS AGAINST HELEN UKPABIO’S ACTIVITY

The activity of Helen Ukpabio has met with a decisive protest of the humanitarian organizations that monitor the observance of human rights. Publicizing and exposure of the preacher’s actions have become the goal of many humanitarian organizations, including the British Humanist Association (BHA) and Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN) that keep track of her endeavors to use magical and religious beliefs to induce the feeling of threat among the people of black Africa (Owen 2014). Gary Foxcroft, the founder of WHRIN, created a shelter for the expelled children in Nigeria (Gavan, van der Valk 2008). In Great Britain an
information campaign was organized that showed Helen Ukpabio’s activities and called for banning her from entering the UK (Brown 2004).

Ukpabio claimed that her films do not encourage people to harass and refuses to accept the charges against her. In her opinion, “white people understand nothing.” She is she convinced about the harmful character of the Harry Potter series (Gavan, van der Valk 2008). She invokes the idea of multiculturalism and argues that her activity is of a very different nature, and that she is a victim of misunderstanding. The campaign against Helen Ukpabio resulted in banning her from entering the United Kingdom in 2014. The preacher, who also runs a large-scale business in the UK and USA, in response, brought a case for defamation and demanded legal redress for abuse she had suffered in the horrifically high amount of 500 million GBP from the organizations attacking her (Owen 2014).

Unfortunately, the problem of witch-hunt is still present in Nigeria. In 2016 a photo of a Danish aid worker, Anja Ringgren Lovén with a 2-year-old boy accused of witchcraft and expelled by his family became famous. The little boy, who was later named Hope, was emaciated and riddled with worms (Polityka 2016, Whitnall 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

Having analyzed Helen Ukpabio’s activities and methods on the basis of the available information, the conclusion has to be drawn that she uses her authority of a religious persona and celebrity to strengthen her position and to grow even richer. From the perspective of human rights her actions are directed against children, i.e. people, who are unable to defend themselves.

Helen Ukpabio’s activities and their results are a warning that in the contemporary world the problems, which from the European perspective seem long ago overcome and anachronistic may turned out to be an actual threat. Although at first sight the phenomena like hunting alleged witches or albinos in Tanzania may not appear as a very significant margin, they may become potentially dangerous in the world where education and progress often lose against poverty and constantly growing social inequalities.

Would such phenomena also be possible in the world of well-established western standards and values? Not likely, because it is linked not only with cultural differences, but with the usually higher level of education and wealth as well. It does not mean however that representatives of the western cultures behave entirely rationally.

Although we perceive science as a value and believe in it, in the new world of digital media we face progressively larger problems indistinguishing the difference between scientific and pseudo-scientific facts, between true and untrue information. Not everyone possesses
sufficient knowledge in, e.g. biology to critically analyze the content of particular information. Some information would be simply too difficult to verify. Sometimes the source itself, such as the Internet, television, or a person communicating a message, is perceived as sufficient to establish the credibility of the information. Often chain letters and urban legends become popular in that a way.

A well-known and documented case of massive spreading of information from a pseudo-scientific source is the so-called brochure from Villejuif, which has been in circulation in France and some other European countries since 1976. The origin of the leaflet is not known. It allegedly came from a “hospital in Paris” or a “hospital in Villejuif” (a town near Paris). It contained a list of substances written in the E330 type of notation. It falsely informed about carcinogenicity or harmlessness of particular substances. Believing in the authority of the broadly recognized hospital many people stopped buying products containing the allegedly harmful substances (Aronson, Pratkanis 1992).

Not many people are seriously afraid of magic, although many out of caution try to avoid the number 13, or tie a red ribbon to the baby stroller that supposed to keep the baby safe. Many people, however, show far more modern fear of the influence of hidden subliminal conditioning, which one is not aware of, and which is impossible to defend against. Proponents of conspiracy theories would see hidden propaganda, erotic and satanic contents in many places. Some would even see hidden messages in songs audible when played backwards (i.e. backmasking). Allegedly even cartoons for children are full of subliminal contents that influence unaware consumers and hence form them from an early age.
REFERENCES


