

## TEXAS: On a Visit to the U.S: a Nigerian Witch-Hunter Explains Herself

Written by Mark Oppenheimer  
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HOUSTON — At home in Nigeria, the Pentecostal preacher Helen Ukpabio draws thousands to her revival meetings. Last August, when she had herself consecrated Christendom's first "lady apostle," Nigerian politicians and Nollywood actors attended the ceremony. Her books and DVDs, which explain how Satan possesses children, are widely known.

So well-known, in fact, that Ms. Ukpabio's critics say her teachings have contributed to the torture or abandonment of thousands of Nigerian children — including infants and toddlers — suspected of being witches and warlocks. Her culpability is a central contention of "[Saving Africa's Witch Children](#)," a documentary that will make its American debut Wednesday on HBO2.

Those disturbed by the needless immiseration of innocent children should beware. "Saving Africa's Witch Children" follows Gary Foxcroft, founder of the charity [Stepping Stones Nigeria](#), as he travels the rural state of Akwa Ibom, rescuing children abused during horrific "exorcisms" — splashed with acid, buried alive, dipped in fire — or abandoned roadside, cast out of their villages because some itinerant preacher called them possessed.

Their fellow villagers have often seen DVDs of "End of the Wicked," Ms. Ukpabio's bloody 1999 movie purporting to show how the devil captures children's souls. And some have read her book "Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft," where she confidently writes that "if a child under the age of 2 screams in the night, cries and is always feverish with deteriorating health, he or she is a servant of Satan."

Visiting Houston last week to lead a four-night revival for a [local church](#), Ms. Ukpabio, 41, had no idea that "Saving Africa's Witch Children," which brought protesters out to greet her in London, was about to be shown in the United States. But she was eager to defend herself.

"Do you think Harry Potter is real?" Ms. Ukpabio asked me angrily, in the lobby of the Holiday Inn Express where she was staying. "It is only because I am African," she said, that people who understand that J. K. Rowling writes fiction would take literally Ms. Ukpabio's filmic depictions of possessed children, gathering by moonlight to devour human flesh.

Still, "Saving Africa's Witch Children" makes clear that many rural Nigerians do take her film seriously. And in her sermons, Ms. Ukpabio is emphatic that children can be possessed, and that with her God-given "powers of discernment," she can spot such a child. Belief in possession is especially common among Pentecostals in Nigeria, where it reinforces native traditions that spirits are real and intervene in human affairs.

In Nigeria, many preachers not only identify possessed children but charge dearly to perform exorcisms. To redeem their children's souls — and to keep the child from being killed or

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banished by neighbors — parents scrimp or borrow to pay the preacher.

Ms. Ukpabio argued that “Saving Africa’s Witch Children” exaggerates or invents the problem of child abandonment. Asked how she could be so sure, she said, “because I am an African!” In Africa, she said, “family ties are too strong to have a child on the street.”

The Children’s Rights and Rehabilitation Network, a school for abandoned children run by Sam Itauma and featured in Mr. Foxcroft’s documentary, is “a 419 scam,” Ms. Ukpabio said, referring to the section in Nigeria’s criminal code that deals with fraud.

She said the children’s gruesome scars and wounds, shown in the documentary, are not real — or perhaps they are real, “but there are many ways children can get maimed.” And if the injuries are the result of witchcraft accusations against the children, she said, those accusations could not have been made by Pentecostal Christian preachers, but by charlatans.

Since “Saving Africa’s Witch Children” was first shown in Britain, in 2008, Mr. Itauma’s home state has adopted a law against accusing children of witchcraft. But Ms. Ukpabio went on the offensive by suing the state government, Mr. Foxcroft, Mr. Itauma and Leo Igwe, a Nigerian antisuperstition activist.

In the lawsuit, Ms. Ukpabio alleges that the state law infringes on her freedom of religion. She seeks 2 billion naira (about \$13 million) in damages, as well as “an order of perpetual injunction restraining the respondents” from interfering with or otherwise denouncing her church’s “right to practice their religion and the Christian religious belief in the existence of God, Jesus Christ, Satan, sin, witchcraft, heaven and hellfire.”

In other words, in the name of religious freedom, Ms. Ukpabio seeks a gag order on anyone who disagrees with her.

The lawsuit also reiterates Ms. Ukpabio’s contention that Stepping Stones Nigeria and Mr. Itauma’s school are not charities but extortionate front organizations. According to Ms. Ukpabio, Mr. Foxcroft and Mr. Itauma aim not to educate abandoned children but “to use the said funds to blackmail.”

“We’re a registered charity in the U. K., so we publish our accounts,” said Mr. Foxcroft by phone in England. “She can come in and see how much money we raised and where we spend it.”

In Houston, Ms. Ukpabio reiterated that the state should close Mr. Itauma’s school. To the children living there — who, according to her, may be actors or witches, but if witches, they were not abused, and if abused, then certainly not by Christians — Ms. Ukpabio offered the services of her own church.

The school “does not understand demonic possession,” she said. “If they understood, they would take the children to Liberty Gospel.

“We would deliver them!”

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[Mark.Oppenheimer@nytimes.com](mailto:Mark.Oppenheimer@nytimes.com) , markopp1 on Twitter

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