

Left to die: Tales of woe from Nigerian children branded 'witches'

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Ekong and Mary (before rescue)

ARUKAINO UMUKORO, in the first part of a two-part series, writes about the tradition of branding children witches in Akwa Ibom and Cross River states in Nigeria

It was plain murder at sunset. The heart-rending screams of 10-year-old Effiong Ita-Freddy shattered the uneasy peace in Atakidiang Ebughu, a sleepy community in Mbo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom state.

About 20 members of the same family gathered together inside the family compound to watch the gory spectacle; the continued trial of a young boy who had been sentenced to death.

Before then, the boy was tortured for several days, beaten with sticks and cutlasses, until several parts of his body bled. They ignored his cry for help and mercy.

For them, his crime was too abominable to forgive — he was accused by his family members of being a witch. They claimed that his witchcraft had caused the deaths of two family members, as well as the sickness of some of his siblings.

After eking out his final confession on that fateful day in late 2010, his family members gathered to watch him die. They gave him 'esere,' a poisonous bean-like seed which is usually found in deep forests. Its poison damages the liver and body organs, and inflicts a violent death on the person.

SUNDAY PUNCH gathered that 'esere' is administered to a person suspected of witchcraft. It is a long-standing tradition among people in the southern part of Nigeria, particularly in Akwa Ibom State, where it is rife in Oron nation, the third largest ethnic group in the predominantly Christian state.



Ekong (now), Mary (now)

They believe the death or survival of anyone who ate 'esere' was confirmation that the person was a witch or not.

Effiong finally slumped and died in excruciating pains while his family watched; some with glee,

others with pity.

Witnesses to murder, tales of torture

When confronted with the allegation of murder, Effiong's mother and relatives could not deny it. One of his uncles said the boy had confessed to being a witch and that he was responsible for the sicknesses of his family members.

His mother had a look of guilt and helplessness on her face as she bowed her head, when our correspondent asked why she would allow any of her children go through such torture until he died.

When our correspondent visited the Ita-Freddy's house, Effiong's elder brother, Edet, now 25-years old, said his brother had confessed to being a witch.

"The whole family came together as witnesses to his confession. I was there too, but I couldn't do anything about it then because I was still young. Effiong said the first wife of my late father 'gave' him the witchcraft, and then he also passed on the spell to his three other siblings."

The younger siblings are Grace, 11; Williams, 8; and Victoria, 5.

Not able to bear the pain of watching her other children suffer or face the same end like Effiong; the mother finally summoned courage and sought for the help of a chief in one of the nearby communities. The chief housed the children for a few months, until they were rescued by a non-governmental organisation in Uyo, in 2014.

Last week, when *SUNDAY PUNCH* met the three siblings in Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State capital, they were still traumatised by witnessing their brother's murder six years ago.