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**Violence Against People with Albinism:**

**Urgent Solutions Needed**

**Paper presented by Gary Foxcroft, Executive Director, Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN) at Expert Meeting / Round Table Discussion on persons with albinism: violence, discrimination and way forward (OIF – OHCHR)**

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***www.whrin.org***

1. **Organisational Background**

The Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN) was launched in 2013 in response to the widespread violations of human rights that take place around the world due to belief in witchcraft, spirit possession and other malevolent spiritual beliefs. Our work aims to raise awareness and understanding of these issues, so that solutions may be developed to prevent further abuses from taking place. WHRIN does this by carrying out the following:

* **Training** – Enabling frontline practitioners to gain the skills and confidence needed to work on cases of human rights abuses that take place due to belief in witchcraft and spirit possession.
* **Information** - Providing an up-to-date information service and on-line resource centre with relevant NGO, UN and academic reports, press coverage and videos.
* **Research** - Encouraging and supporting practitioners around the world to carry out research in order to help find solutions and prevent further human rights abuses from taking place.
* **Networking** - Promoting networks and information exchange between key individuals and organisations.
* **Advocacy** – Providing a platform for advocacy campaigns run by local NGOs and community groups and linking such groups with an international audience.

The organisation is currently run by a small group of volunteers based in the UK and Portugal. We have a growing number of member organisations who share our vision of a world where all people can live freely without fear of their rights being abused due to the belief in witchcraft, spirit possession and other malevolent spiritual beliefs.

One of the members of WHRIN is Under the Same Sun (UTSS), who have been at the forefront of the fight to put a stop to the killings of persons with albinism in Africa and who have produced a great deal of research in this field. It is not the intention of this report to duplicate the evidence already submitted by UTSS to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Rather WHRIN hopes that this report may compliment and support UTSS’s wider work on these issues.

**2. Understanding Terminology**

The misuse and misunderstanding of terminology is a significant challenge faced by practitioners working on the issues contained within this report. As such, we will attempt to clarify WHRIN’s position on some key terminology below:

**Persons With Albinism (PWA)**

WHRIN supports Under the Same Sun’s call for the abandonment of the use of the term “albino” and support their call for greater dignity for persons with albinism by using the term “Person with Albinism (PWA)” throughout this report and all future communications.

**What is witchcraft?**

There is no universally accepted definition of witchcraft and the term means different things to different people in different places. Primarily witchcraft can be seen as a negative, malevolent force, which is used by people – witches – in the spirit realm to bring about harm in the physical realm. It is the art of doing evil by means of spiritual powers.

**What is juju?**

Juju is a West African term for the use of black magic. That is, magic that is used for a negative end. Belief in the power of juju is deeply held by the majority of people in this region.

**What is muti?**

Muti is a word used in Southern Africa to refer to magic that enables people to gain power or wealth. It literally translates to “medicine”. The most extreme form uses human body parts and people may be killed to provide them.

1. **Introduction**

This paper will provide an overview to the belief systems that lead to People with Albinism (PWA) being murdered for their body parts to be used in magic. WHRIN classifies such acts as muti murders and they are part of a much wider pattern of horrific human rights abuses that take place across the world due to beliefs in witchcraft, spirit possession and in the power of muti and juju. It will also focus on an area that has received little attention to date. This is the potential role that Nollywood movies play in the spread of the harmful superstitious beliefs that lead to PWA being tortured and killed. This paper will also look to situate the muti murders of PWA in the wider global context of these forms of abuse and outline potential solutions to put a stop to them.

Whilst the role that the UNHCHR has played in arranging today’s meeting and helping place the issue of muti murders of PWA on the agendas of other UN bodies must be warmly commended, this report also wishes to highlight the urgent need for concrete steps to be identified and taken to stop further abuses from taking place. Much has been written and discussed on the killings of PWA over recent years. Now is the time for real, tangible, solutions to be identified and for adequate support to be provided to the agencies working on the frontline to protect, save and transform the lives of PWA. The position taken by WHRIN in this paper is that the primary contributory factor in the muti murders of PWA is the malevolent spiritual belief that their body parts can be used in magic in order to bring greater wealth or power to the beneficiary. Whilst most agencies appear to reluctant to challenge such malevolent spiritual beliefs, WHRIN advocates that challenging such beliefs is critical and must form a central component of any future interventions. It is WHRIN’s hope that this report will therefore help to support such developments and ensure that we help put a stop to one of the most horrific forms of human rights abuses witnessed in the 21st Century.

1. **Money Magic (Muti)**

The perceived power of specific human body parts in magic (known as muti) has resulted in murder and mutilation. This particular form of magic is believed by its adherents to be especially effective in terms of increasing personal wealth, power and prestige. The findings in WHRIN’s 2014 Report: “21st Century Witchcraft Accusations and Persecution”[[1]](#footnote-1) make clear that the practice has been linked to murders and mutilation of children and adults in at least twelve countries in 2013, all of them in Africa. South Africa has the highest reported rates of this form of abuse.

Muti killings may be undertaken by practitioners of magic or else by third parties specifically commissioned for this purpose. They may be strangers to their victims since the killing is not motivated by specific inter‐personal conflict. This creates particular challenges for law enforcement in terms of identifying perpetrators whose only motive is financial gain. In Tanzania and many other countries, people with albinism have been specifically targeted for killing and mutilation by such practitioners of magic.

The belief that is the primary contributory factor in the muti murders of PWA is that the body parts of PWA contained special magical powers that can be used in order to create good fortune by enabling:

* People to gain greater wealth and prosperity
* Political elites to gain power via winning local and/or national elections
* Fishermen to catch more fish
* Miners to source greater wealth via striking more gold or other valuable minerals

Differing body parts of PWA are used in a variety of ways in order to create such fortune. For example, the hair of PWA may be woven into fishing nets or arms, legs, skin, eyes, genitals, and blood may be used in other forms of magic.

**The Power of the Witchdoctor**

The key player in supplying the magic is the witchdoctor, who is often a powerful community leader, revered by many for his perceived supernatural powers and ability to carry out magic. Such practitioners have commercial interests in promoting both the notion that PWA carry certain supernatural powers and also that their body parts can be used in their charms, potions and incantations in order to bring about the desire outcome for the customer. The witchdoctor will incorporate different parts of the body of the PWA into his work in order to bring about the desire change for the purchaser.

In addition to this, witchdoctors may also charge for other services such as the provision of explanation for an individual’s misfortune or fortune and are able to, allegedly, identify both the human and supernatural causes for virtually any circumstance or conundrum.

**The Mystification of PWA**

As is the case with witchcraft accusation and persecution, where disabilities and illnesses are often seen as signs of witchcraft, PWA exhibit physical ailments that make them differ from other supposedly “normal” people around them. They are seen throughout many countries as mythical, mystical human beings who contain a variety of magical powers. Whilst such beliefs are likely to have been endemic within society for many years, recent beliefs seem to have arisen that suggest that they may be fluid and may be crafted by other factors. For example, a recent phenomenon suggests that the belief that having sex with a PWA can cure HIV/AIDS has been noted in a number of countries.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Other more traditional beliefs suggest that PWA:

* Are ghosts who administer curses[[3]](#footnote-3)
* Will bring ill fortune if you come into contact with them
* Never die[[4]](#footnote-4)
* Have albinism as the result of a curse put on the family[[5]](#footnote-5)

Whilst all of these differing beliefs highlight the mystification of the PWA, for the purpose of this report, the primary belief that we are concerned with, is the one that a charm or potion made by a witchdoctor from the body parts of a PWA will bring the purchaser greater wealth, power and/or success.

1. **The Power of Nollywood**

In 2009 UNESCO issued a statement saying that: 'Nigeria surpasses Hollywood as the world's second largest film producer’ with Nigeria’s moviemakers, commonly known as Nollywood, coming out with 872 productions – all in video format – while the United States produced 485 major films.[[6]](#footnote-6)

There are a number of factors, which have contributed to the great success of Nollywood in recent years, such as low production costs and the huge popularity of watching Nollywood movies in home settings, largely due to almost a complete lack of cinemas. The popularity of satellite networks, such as DSTV, which are broadcast throughout Africa and, in particular, channels such as Africa Magic are of importance here. Indeed, if you go into an average Nigerian household in the evening there is a very good chance that people will be huddled round either watching a cheap (often pirated) copy of a Nollywood movie or watching one on Africa Magic. The fact that around half of all such movies are made in English, significantly contributes to their wide appeal and may explain Nigeria’s success in exporting its films to other African countries and around the world.

Another factor behind the huge success of Nollywood is that the majority of Nollywood movies have themes that deal with the moral dilemmas facing modern Africans today. Whilst some movies promote the [Christian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian) or [Islamic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic) faiths, and some movies are overtly evangelical,[[7]](#footnote-7) many also focus on more superstitious beliefs and explore the role that such beliefs play in the daily lives of Africans.

**4.1 Promoting the Belief in Witchcraft**

***“We are concerned that certain Nollywood films promote the belief in child witchcraft and that these popular films have immensely contributed to the increase in child witchcraft stigmatisation and resultant abuse, not only in Nigeria but also in other African countries such as the Tanzania, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo”-*** Stepping Stones Nigeria[[8]](#footnote-8)

One of the reoccurring themes in Nollywood movies revolves around the power of witchcraft and its omnipresence in African societies. Perhaps the most well know purveyor of witchcraft movies and books is the Nigerian Pentecostal Pastor – Lady Apostle Helen Ukpabio. Through her film company – Liberty Films - Ukpabio has produced a number of movies, which feature scenes of children becoming possessed by witchcraft and carrying out all manner of harm in the “witchcraft world”. Liberty films is part of the Liberty Gospel Ministries franchise,[[9]](#footnote-9) which has over 200 churches in Nigeria and a growing number in other countries including Cameroon and Ghana. The most famous of Liberty Film’s productions is 'End of The Wicked,' in which child actors are shown to eat human flesh and murder their parents. This film has been widely watched by communities throughout the Niger Delta region where Ukpabio hails from and has been linked to the widespread belief in child witches and subsequent horrific violations of their rights.[[10]](#footnote-10) Amongst the strategies adopted by local and international NGOs has been a campaign to pressure the Nigerian Film and Video Censors board to “censor all movies found to be promoting the belief in child witches”.[[11]](#footnote-11) In addition to this, the UK-based NGO – Stepping Stones Nigeria - has also produced its own Nollywood movie, the Fake Prophet, in order to fight such beliefs and exploitative practices.[[12]](#footnote-12)

It is also of importance to note that such movies are often pirated and distributed across Africa. As such, it is difficult to map out exactly where they may be viewed. What is clear though is that, for many viewers, these movies further support beliefs in witchcraft that may already be endemic within society. The line between fact and fiction often becomes blurred when watching such movies with many viewers believing that the, often gruesome, scenes capture real-life actions of supposed witches. Whilst no empirical evidence exists to prove the link between the viewing of such movies and human rights abuses being carried out, WHRIN would argue that they do indeed play a role in promoting the belief in child witches and the subsequent violations of the rights of children accused of witchcraft. Should this indeed be the case then there appears to be every chance that such movies may impact on perceptions of other vulnerable groups in Africa, most especially PWA.

**4.2 Promoting Belief in the Power of Juju and Muti**

***"The disturbing underlying message in most Nollywood movies is that one can get away with murder…..in order to realise earthly needs"*** - The Kenya Films Censorship Board Chief Executive, David Pkosing.

It is important to note that the killings of PWA does not take place due to the belief that they are witches or are practising witchcraft. Rather it takes place due to the belief that their body parts can be used in magic in order to benefit the beneficiary of the magic. In West Africa this is known as ‘juju’ and in South Africa and other places as ‘muti’.

The other key theme that many Nollywood movies explore is the power of juju to bring about change in the lives of the customer.[[13]](#footnote-13) Indeed the Nollywood film that is credited to have invented Nollywood, Living in Bondage, was based on the use of juju for wealth creation. The movie chronicled a man who, through juju (specifically the ritual sacrifice of his wife) became wealthy. Similar such movies may also show how men and women go to the juju priest (sometimes also known as a witchdoctor), and get potions made out of all manner of ingredients, including human body parts. The potions are used in an attempt to earn the juju customer many desirable things such as luck, jobs, and above all, money. Most such potions are just referred to as such and there is, usually, no mention of its contents as making such knowledge public is believed to reduce the power of the juju.

A common thread that runs across this genre of film is that majority of the characters go unpunished for engaging in these acts, indeed going on to “enjoy” the riches and fame this practice confer on them. This has led to Nigerian academics arguing that: “There is a strong relationship between the rising incidents of ritual killing (muti murders) in the Nigerian society and Nollywood’s dramatization of human sacrifice for money making”[[14]](#footnote-14). According to Okwori: “Even in the age of Christianity, Islam and modernity the belief in efficacious “Charms” and rituals has not abated…more and more people are actually turning to rituals for protection from violence or, more proactively, for social or professional betterment such as promotion at work or success in business. It is this phenomenon which drives the popularity of the home-video movie among individuals”[[15]](#footnote-15).

 The conclusion can then be reached that Nollywood movies deliberately or inadvertently communicate to viewers that it is possible to engage in muti and become not only rewarded by it but also escape punishment.

Hence, one may accept Nollywood’s showing of rituals with humans as capable of making one attain success on the ground that he/she seeks an easy means to riches and is convinced that most people achieved riches this way. Again, people perceive issues as important due to the nature of coverage given to them. In other words the constant dramatization of human ritual sacrifice as able to transport one from poverty to riches by Nollywood will lead viewers to perceive this act as real and this may result in attitude change “to commit murder for riches”.

Results of this study are consistent with that of several others recapitulated in the literature review. There is no doubt that Nollywood movies portray ritual scenes which viewers use as the basis for their personal opinion formation. Watching violent oriented movies particularly those that portray ritual killings for money making is not the major cause of rituals in Nigeria today. But then they exert little effect and this can lead some people to commit ritual murder.

The fact that some Nollywood films promote such beliefs is, therefore, likely to lead to some of the human rights abuses that are witnessed today in these countries. Indeed according to Ikponwosa Ero – International Advocacy Director at Under the Same Sun: “There is likely to be a correlation between Nollywood and killings of persons with albinism (PWA). While I have not seen any studies on this correlation, it is reasonably foreseeable.[[16]](#footnote-16) She is not alone in this belief. According to some reports,[[17]](#footnote-17) a number of PWA in Tanzania fear the wave of killings targeting them is partly influenced by Nigerian movies. Although Nollywood movies are not solely to blame for the muti murders of PWA in Tanzania, recent police and media reports now link the murders to gruesome episodes in some of the Nigerian productions.[[18]](#footnote-18)

1. **Identifying Solutions**

Ultimately, we still do not know exactly where the solutions to the problem of PWA being murdered for muti may lie. Whilst there are many positive interventions taking place at the local level, little evaluation of the impact of these strategies appears to have taken place and more understanding will be needed if robust interventions are to be planned and implemented. Such understanding should also look to capture work being done by agencies on the issue of witchcraft accusations and persecution since this broadly shares a number of similarities.

The main focus of many interventions appears to be on the need to change legislation and ensure assailants are prosecuted. Yet no evidence that this makes a difference since the malevolent spiritual belief, in this case in the power of muti, will still exist. Whilst judges, police, lawyers, policy makers still hold such superstitious beliefs it is difficult to see how this approach alone will yield the desired results. For example, in 2008, the government of Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria criminalised the act of branding children as witches. However, to date there have been no successful prosecutions for this offence and cases of children being tortured still abound since the belief in child witches is still deeply held.

There appears to be a real reluctance on the part of UN bodies, faith groups and NGOs to challenge such harmful beliefs, presumably due to concerns about impacting upon people’s right to freedom of belief. However, WHRIN believes that failure to develop strategies that challenge malevolent spiritual beliefs may lead to continuation of these forms of abuse and, as such, interventions will need to address this issue if long-term solutions are to be found. The key therefore will be to use education as the tool to fight such harmful beliefs and practices. In particular the demystification of medical conditions, such as albinism, needs to be addressed via community level advocacy and training. Faith and community leaders will be part of the solution and should be encouraged to spread positive messages. This should include engaging with witchdoctors and traditional rulers. The work of the African International University[[19]](#footnote-19) and the Stop Child Witch Accusations[[20]](#footnote-20) groups to educate and train pastors could potentially act as a catalyst here.

In Malawi, Sightsavers International and Coventry University have been working on a project that looks to train teachers about albinism and disseminate positive messages to communities via radio programmes. In Nigeria, Nollywood films and children’s books have been developed to challenge the belief in child witches and publicise the enactment of the Child Rights Act. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, local NGOs have produced drama plays to fight these harmful beliefs and practices. Such community level focused interventions are likely to be a central part of any solution to the muti murders of PWA.

1. **Recommendations**

***“Education—of both of PWA and among the wider population—is the only way to fight back in what has become a battle for survival”* –** Tanzania Albinism Society**.**

Ultimately, WHRIN also contends that education is the key to putting a stop to the muti murders of PWA. It is also our position that attempts to prevent this form of violation of human rights must be flexible, able to adapt to local circumstances, and should not depend on finding the same events and the same causes everywhere. In particular, WHRIN would like to see action taken in the following areas in order to help prevent further human rights abuses taking place:

**6.1 International Level Responses**

**Production of Demystification Toolkit**

UN bodies, such as UNHCHR and UNHCR, should look to collaborate with the World Health Organisation and NGOs to produce a training toolkit to demystify conditions associated with beliefs in witchcraft and the power of muti. It should be produced in a manner that will allow for it to be adapted and used in different cultural settings in order to demystify albinism and various other public health conditions, such as ebola, epilepsy, autism etc. This toolkit should enable communities to cultivate scientific answers and explanations for the problems that they face and enable them to solve their own problems rather than seek assistance from witchdoctors.

**Continuity With Advocacy Efforts**

Whilst the UNHCHR’s efforts to raise awareness of the muti murders of PWA should be warmly commended, we must not be under any illusion that these practices will stop soon. There needs to be constant and vigorous advocacy by UN bodies and NGOs to ensure that the ground-breaking resolutions on albinism passed by the Human Rights Council and African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights are properly implemented.

**Importance of the Role of Faith Leaders**

To date the voices of faith leaders on these issues have yet to be heard loudly. More dialogue with prominent leaders needs to take place so that they may be encouraged to spread positive messages and help fight malevolent superstitious beliefs.

**Provision of Linkages for Funding**

The NGOs working on to protect, save and transform the lives of PWA on the ground in Africa are all working on the smallest budgets imaginable. Greater efforts need to be made by all stakeholders to link these organisations up with potential funders. In Geneva alone, with its stupendous wealth and opulence there must exist opportunities to provide linkages with philanthropists. Efforts made in this regard will go a long way to speeding up the process of putting a stop to these abuses.

**6.2 National Level Responses**

**Greater Protection for PWA and Implementation of Existing Legislation**

WHRIN believes that all state parties should be encouraged to enforce existing domestic and international laws. State parties should also clarify their position that the use of body parts in muti equates to murders. Successful prosecutions of those found guilty of muti murders of PWA should be publicised widely via tv, radio and print press. Importantly, whilst more work is carried out to prevent further abuses, PWA must be provided with safe and secure spaces where they are able to live a dignified life, free from the omnipresent fear of attacks.

**Nigerian Film and Videos Censor Board (NFVCB) to Regulate Nollywood More Effectively**

More work needs to be done to be done in order to assess the capacity of the NFVCB to properly regulate the Nollywood film industry. It appears that piracy is one of the primary challenges that the NFVCB may face here and their efforts to counter this should be supported by the UN and International governments. At the same time, the NFVCB need to be pressured to take immediate and effective action to ban films that promote beliefs that lead to the abuses of the human rights of PWA and other vulnerable groups.

UNICEF Nigeria can help play a key role by encouraging Nollywood filmmakers to develop a more socially responsible approach to producing movies and encouraging them to focus more on positive themes that uphold the rights of children with albinism. In particular, WHRIN recommends that UNICEF seek to arrange a regional meeting on this issue that looks to bring together academics, NGOs, activists, NFVCB and Nollywood film makers to see how these issues may be addressed. Ideally, funds would also be made available in order to encourage the production of several movies, which feature some prominent Nollywood actors, contain a clear denouncement of harmful juju practices and showcase PWA in positive roles.

**Incorporation of Albinism Education into Teacher Training Curriculum**

Teachers should receive training both in how to support the education of visually impaired children, such as those with albinism, and also in how to educate communities around the scientific explanations of albinism. Part of the previously outlined demystification toolkit should look at this area in more depth.

**6.3 Community Level Responses**

Greater attention will need to be placed on supporting community level public enlightenment campaigns to demystify albinism if more muti murders of PWA are to be prevented.

**Implementation of Demystification Toolkit**

The previously outlined demystification toolkit should be shared with practitioners working in the field of public health, social work, faith groups, NGOs and UN bodies. Support and encouragement should then be provided in order to ensure that the training from the toolkit reaches key stakeholders in communities such as women’s groups, traditional rulers, witchdoctors etc.

**Creative Use of Media**

In particular more concerted effort needs to be made to support the use of street theatre, comedy and music to challenge the belief in muti and juju. Other popular media such as radio and TV should be used to broadcast adverts to demystify perceptions of PWA and promote positive stories about PWA.

**Engaging with Traditional Rulers and Witchdoctors**

Community leaders, of which witchdoctors may be considered as such, will play an important role in putting a stop to these abuses. Traditional rulers, in particular, hold much power within communities and can act as important partners to fight superstitious beliefs. Whilst there appears to be some reluctance on the part of agencies working on these issues to engage with witchdoctors, they too hold much sway in communities and, as such, cannot afford to be ignored when planning and implementing community level responses.

1. Available at www.whrin.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.underthesamesun.com/sites/default/files/UTSS%20report%20to%20UN%20-%20REPORT_0.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/saving-fellow-albinos-from-killings-in-africa-87755027.html?device=mobile&c=y> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.unicef.org/sowc2013/perspective_hosea.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7327989.stm> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=30707#.Ug5Q3pI3uSo> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_Nigeria> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www.ssncef.org/witchcraft_accusation.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ukpabio has also published her views in several books. An example is 'Unveiling The Mysteries of Witchcraft', in which she states that: “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” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://www.steppingstonesnigeria.org/witchcraft.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. www.makeapact.org/documents/NFVCB.pd [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See trailer here - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBfZQqTh2Fw> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <http://nollywood.codewit.com/nollywood-fashion-news/nollywood-overloaded-with-traditional-igbo-religion-0508065> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Anyianuka, C and Akpan, C. The Social Construction of Reality: Analytical Study of the Effect of Nollywood Movies, University of Nigeria. (2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Okwori, J. Z. (2003). A Dramatized Society: Representing Rituals of Human Sacrifice as Efficacious Action in Nigerian Home Video Movies. Journal of African Cultural Studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Email communication 12th August 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?articleID=1143997775&story\_title=The-curse-that-is-Nollywood [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. As above [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See http://news.tiu.edu/2013/04/08/witch-accusations/ [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See http://stop-cwa.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-20)