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Nigeria: Prevalence of ritual murder and human sacrifice and reaction by government authorities (March 2000-July 2005)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

An associate professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at Franklin and Marshall College, who has written extensively on socio-cultural issues in Nigeria and recently published an article entitled "'Diabolical Realities': Narratives of Conspiracy, Transparency and 'Ritual Murder' in the Nigerian Popular Print and Electronic Media," described the difference between ritual murder and human sacrifice as follows:

"Ritual murder" is actually a legal category, a holdover from the British colonial days that can be prosecuted under Nigerian law. It refers to the killing of human beings for ritual purposes (one of which might be characterized as human sacrifice). ... Ritual murder covers all delicts that relate to the murder of people and the use of human parts for any magical purpose, whereas in sacrifice the killing of a person to mollify deities is the point. A sacrifice seems more central to religious practice and even more dignified in some sense than what "ritual murder" is meant to cover (12 July 2005).

During a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor at the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University, who holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Jos, Nigeria, described the difference between human sacrifices and ritual murders (31 Mar. 1999). The professor explained that human sacrifices involve the participation of the community in a formalized manner, while ritual murders are individual acts, often performed following consultation or with the participation of a shaman or witch doctor, and are designed to call the favour of the gods onto an individual (Professor 31 Mar. 1999).

Perpetrators and Victims of Ritual Murders

The associate professor said that there is much speculation regarding the main perpetrators behind the majority of ritual murders, but suspects that both the wealthy elites and the "poor, ignorant peasants" profit from these practices (12 July 2005).

In a 28 February 2000 telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a Lagos-based lawyer and director of the civil rights group Constitutional Rights Project explained that ritual murders are not usually associated with any particular group. He said that ritual killings are perpetrated mainly by "native doctors who have been involved in this since time immemorial, mostly through traditional cultic practices that have nothing to do with modern-day cults (see also UN 30 June 2005). He added that those who perform ritual murders are individuals working for their own profit (Lawyer 28 Feb. 2000).

In an interview with representatives of the Danish Immigration Service and the British Home Office during their joint fact-finding mission to Nigeria, Muhammad Sani Usman, chief administration officer of the National Human Rights Commission (Nigeria), said that ritual killings are sometimes performed as an act of intimidation which may be related to local elections or control of people and money and which have also been linked to human trafficking (Denmark Jan. 2005, 11).

Media sources report that traditional healers use body parts to strengthen the power of charms used to cure ailments or protect their clients from misfortunes (BBC 17 Mar. 2005; *ibid.* 16 Oct. 2001). The associate professor suggests that there are those who "actually enact these supposed rituals in a desperate attempt to gain (more) wealth and power" (12 July 2005). As part of an income generation scheme, people reportedly commit murders in order to sell victims' body parts to these traditional healers (Associate Professor 12 July 2005; BBC 17 Mar. 2005). British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News reported that Jacob Wakfan, a 35-year old Nigerian man, confessed to murdering his friend in order to sell his body parts, namely the penis and tongue, for use in witchcraft rituals (17 Mar. 2005).

According to BBC News, Dr. Hendrick Scholtz, a South African pathologist who carried out the second of six post-mortem examinations (*The Guardian* 7 July 2004) on the torso of a five-year-old Nigerian boy found in the Thames River in September 2001, said that human sacrifices are performed for a small group of people seeking supernatural powers that they believe will help them succeed in areas such as business or politics (29 Jan. 2002). As a result of forensic tests, the British police determined that the boy was from Benin, Nigeria and was possibly smuggled to London by a human trafficking ring (*The Guardian* 7 July 2004; *Sunday Times* 3 Aug. 2003).

Regarding the potential victims of ritual murder, the associate professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at Franklin and Marshall College commented that

[a]nyone is a potential victim, although the old are thought to be less valuable for ritual murder purposes than the very young and fertile. Youthful women are seen as probably victims; children are definitely seen as victims. There are a few, well-known "cases" where creative artists were supposedly killed because of their talents. I've suggested in my analyses of these rumors that the best potential victim is someone with a lot of personal potential-someone who has a lot of life to live, money to make, children to bear ... (12 July 2005).

Ritual Practices and Ceremonies

With regard to the practices and ceremonies performed during ritual killings, the associate professor provided the following information:

The basics according to rumor discourse are that there are sharp implements involved, lots of blood shed (or drunk or otherwise ingested), [and] the "liberation" of "human spare parts" for further ritual use, especially human heads and genitalia. One hears a lot about candles, cauldrons or pots, cannibalism, etc. It sounds a good bit like the European witches' sabbath or similar kinds of horror stories told in other parts of the world, wherever there are supposed to be necrophagous (dead-eating) witches. In the tabloids, I've read reports of people who claim to have been charmed by the use of magical handkerchiefs (it's put over their faces or mouths, and they lose consciousness), only to wake up in the hands of these ritual murderers (12 July 2005).

In the case of the torso that was found in the Thames River, *The Guardian* reported that the boy, who the police have named Adam, was given a potion that

contained the poisonous calabar bean just prior to his death (7 July 2004). The bean supposedly causes paralysis but does not cause the victim to become unconscious (*The Guardian* 7 July 2004). According to *The Guardian*, victims are kept conscious until they die because their screams are said to waken the ancestors who empower the ceremony (7 July 2004). Similarly, a BBC report suggests that body parts are removed while the victim is alive because their screams are thought to increase the potency of the medicines (16 Oct. 2001).

Prevalence

Academics, human rights activists and media sources say that ritual murders are common throughout Nigeria (Associate Professor 12 July 2005; *Post Express* 25 Oct. 2000; Denmark Jan. 2005, 20; BBC 17 Mar. 2005; *Christian Today* 20 May 2004; AFP 20 Nov. 2000; UN 30 June 2005). The associate professor said that the attention given by the Nigerian press to the issue of ritual killings suggests that it is a phenomenon which is "fairly widespread from south to north, east to west [and that]...[t]here are some places where it is supposedly endemic (parts of the Igbo areas, Benin/Bendel State, wherever the government bureaucrats are located...)" (12 July 2005). The Research Directorate found numerous media reports of ritual killings carried out in various Nigerian states, including Anambra, Ogun, Bauchi, Enugu, Imo, Kano, Oyo, Delta, Ondo, and Lagos between 2000 and 2005 (AFP 20 Nov. 2000; *ibid.* 26 Aug. 2003; *This Day* 8 Dec. 2003; *ibid.* 1 Feb. 2003; *ibid.* 20 Aug. 2004; *ibid.* 17 Sept. 2004; *Vanguard* 24 June 2002; *ibid.* 9 Mar. 2005; *ibid.* 18 Feb. 2005; *Daily Champion* 21 Sept. 2004).

Reaction by Government Authorities

Several of the media reports mentioned above refer to police investigations, post-mortems, arrests, and interrogations of those suspected of ritual killings (*Vanguard* 24 June 2002; *ibid.* 9 Mar. 2005; *This Day* 8 Dec. 2003; *ibid.* 1 Feb. 2003; *ibid.* 20 Aug. 2004; AFP 20 Nov. 2000) as well as the imposition of a curfew in Enugu State (*This Day* 8 Dec. 2003). As well, *Vanguard*, a Nigerian daily, reported that the OgwashiUku High Court in Delta State handed down the death sentence to three people convicted of the ritual killing of an albino infant boy (18 Feb. 2005).

In a highly publicized case, over 30 priests were arrested on 4 August 2004 after 50 mutilated bodies and 20 skulls were found in the forests near the Okija shrines in Anambra State (UN 30 June 2005; *Daily Champion* 2 Dec. 2004; *This Day* 19 Aug. 2004). The priests were accused of committing human sacrifices and using body parts for ritual purposes (UN 30 June 2005). The priests were released on bail in December 2004 (*Daily Champion* 2 Dec. 2004), while the results of an enquiry into the case, originally launched by the government following their arrests, is pending (*This Day* 1 June 2005).

One of the most widely known cases of ritual killings occurred in Owerri, Imo State in 1996 (*This Day* 2 Aug. 2002; *ibid.* 24 Jan. 2003). As a result of what is known as the "Otokoto saga" after the alias of one of the convicted murderers, Chief Vincent Duru, seven people were sentenced to death by hanging for the ritual killing of an 11-year-old boy and for "masterminding the secret killing of many others" (*ibid.*).

When asked how effective the authorities are in investigating ritual murders, the associate professor provided the following response:

In the past, there have been few arrests-but a lot of splashy press coverage. In the Otokoto "Saga," however, there were some quite important people arrested, several of whom were executed. According to published reports, there have been a few, other cases where arrests have been made as well. But mostly the idea of ritual murder sits

there and people fear it, not least because they think the police and courts have been co-opted by the wealthy murderers (12 July 2005).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection.

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