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20 November 2012

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Nigeria: Prevalence of ritual murder and human sacrifice; police and state response (2009-2012)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

According to various sources, ritual killings in Nigeria are performed to obtain human body parts for use in rituals (*Daily Trust* 21 June 2010; Osumah and Aghedo June 2011, 279; Sahara Reporters 3 July 2012), potions (*Daily Trust* 21 June 2010; *This Day* 26 Sept. 2010), and charms (*The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012; Sahara Reporters 3 July 2012). The Lagos-based newspaper *This Day* explains that "ritualists, also known as headhunters, ... go in search of human parts at the request of herbalists, who require them for sacrifices or for the preparation of various magical potions" (26 Sept. 2010). Similarly, the Abuja-based *Daily Trust* indicates that human body parts are brought to herbalists who perform the rituals (21 June 2010). Such rituals are reportedly motivated by the belief that they can bring power and wealth to an individual (*Leadership* 30 Apr. 2012; *The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012; *Daily Trust* 21 June 2010). Sources also indicate that charms are believed to make a person invincible (*The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012) and protect them from business failure, illness, accidents, and "spiritual attacks" (*Daily Trust* 21 June 2010).

According to Lagos-based newspaper the *Punch*, "many" Nigerians "have been made to believe" in the effectiveness of such rituals (10 Aug. 2012). The *Daily Trust* indicates that "many experts" attribute the prevalence of ritual murder to the "continuing belief among many Nigerians, ... even educated ones, in the supernatural" (21 June 2010). Similarly, an article published by Sahara Reporters, a Nigerian "online community of international reporters and social advocates" (25 July 2010), states that the belief in the power of ritual murder "is very strong among the local population [of southern Nigeria] including people of different faiths and educational backgrounds" and not only among "traditional fetish illiterates" (3 July 2012).

In an academic journal article on kidnapping in Nigeria, researchers from Ambrose Alli University in Ekpoma, Edo State, and the University of Benin in Benin City state that traditional targets of ritual kidnapping are "children, lunatics and the physically challenged" (Osumah and Aghedo June 2011, 279). Similarly, the Sahara Reporters article states that "vulnerable members of society," such as women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, as well as family members of ritualists, are targeted and killed (3 July 2012). According to a sociologist at Bayero University in Kano who was interviewed by Agence France-Presse, "fetish priests [in Nigeria] are known to favor children's body parts for get-rich-quick potions" (4 July 2009).

2. Prevalence

According to *This Day*, ritual murders are "a common practice" in Nigeria (26 Sept. 2010). This statement is partially corroborated by the Sahara Reporters article, which states that ritual murder is common in southern Nigeria (3 July 2012). The *Daily*

Trust writes that ritual killings continue to be practiced in Nigeria and have become more prevalent since 1999 (21 June 2010). Similarly, a 2012 *Daily Independent* article states that "in recent times, the number of ... brutal murders, mostly for ritual purposes and other circumstances, involving couples and their partners has been on a steady progression" (30 July 2012). In contrast, a research associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London who has researched and written on Nigerian religions stated in correspondence with the Research Directorate that, while ritual murder does occur in Nigeria, it is not a "systematic practice" (31 Oct. 2012).

According to a report published in *Leadership*, ritual murder is not limited to any specific part of the country and "every region, tribe and state has its own share of the scourge" (30 Apr. 2012). However, in 2009, *This Day* reported that a confidential memo from the Nigerian police to registered security service providers indicated that ritual killings were particularly prevalent in the states of Lagos, Ogun, Kaduna, Abia, Kwara, Abuja, Rivers, and Kogi (26 Oct. 2009). Corroborating information could not be found by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In 2010, one newspaper reported that dead bodies with missing organs were being discovered on a daily basis on a road close to Lagos State University that was described as a "hot spot for ritual killers" (*This Day* 26 Sept. 2010). A second newspaper reported in February 2011 that, in the same area, ten people had been killed in suspected ritual murders in the preceding two months (*Daily Times* 11 Feb. 2011). A 2009 article published by Agence France-Presse reported that, according to a state government official, the kidnapping of children for ritual murder was on the rise in Kano (4 July 2009).

3. Specific Incidents of Ritual Murder

Nigerian media sources report on the killing of a "hunchbacked" person in four separate incidents: in the capital of Ondo State in 2012 (*Leadership* 30 Apr. 2012), in the south of the country in 2011 (Sahara Reporters 3 July 2012), in Kogi State in 2010 (*Daily Independent* 24 Feb. 2010), and in Osun State in 2009 (*This Day* 27 Oct. 2009). The "hunch" of the victims was removed, reportedly for use in money-making rituals (*Leadership* 30 Apr. 2012; Sahara Reporters 3 July 2012; *Daily Independent* 24 Feb. 2010; *This Day* 27 Oct. 2009).

Media sources have documented the following incidents of ritual murder that resulted in arrests:

- In May 2012, in Kogi State, a convicted serial killer and former soldier killed a 22-year-old female student, intending to dismember her body for ritual purposes, before being arrested by police (APA 19 May 2012; *Vanguard* 2 June 2012). The killer had reportedly been convicted of murder and sentenced to death in 2003 but had later been acquitted and released (ibid.; APA 19 May 2012).
- In July 2012, two men from Nasawara State confessed to killing a seven-year-old boy, the child of neighbours, and severing his head for a man who had promised them 250,000 Nigerian Naira [C\$1,591 (XE 1 Nov. 2012)] for it (*The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012; Channel S TV 24 July 2012).
- In July 2012, two men were arrested in Lagos for killing and dismembering their brother and reportedly selling his body parts (*The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012; *Daily Times* 27 July 2012; Online Nigeria 28 July 2012).
- In August 2012, in Ebonyi State, seven people were arrested for kidnapping, killing, and dismembering a young girl, reportedly for money-making rituals; two of the suspects confessed to the crime (*Vanguard* 28 Aug. 2012; *Guardian* 31 Aug. 2012).

Media sources also document the following cases of suspected ritual murder that resulted in arrests:

- In 2012, in Osun State, a young man was found dead with his head and genitals severed from his body; a close friend of the man was reportedly arrested in connection with the murder (*Leadership* 30 Apr. 2012; *Nigerian Tribune* 22 Apr. 2012). One source indicates that a herbalist who reportedly performs money rituals and two other individuals were also arrested as suspects (*ibid.*).
- In 2012, in Abia State, two men kidnapped and killed two children, aged four and six, removed their vital organs and buried them, before being arrested (*The Sun* 18 June 2012; *Nigeria Newspoint* [2012a]).
- In June 2012, in Nasawara State, a man and a "witch doctor" were arrested for their involvement in what police suspected to be a ritual murder of the man's wife, whose body was found with some body parts missing (*The Nation* 26 June 2012; *Daily Trust* 26 June 2012).

Media sources also document the following cases of suspected ritual murder for which no suspects were apprehended:

- In February 2011, near Jos, Plateau State, an elderly couple was beheaded and their grandchildren were beaten to death in what police suspected to be ritual killing because the killers had left with the woman's head (Reuters 12 Feb. 2011; Press Trust of India 13 Feb. 2011; *Leadership* 30 Apr. 2012).
- In April 2012, a woman was found along an Abuja expressway with her head and genitals severed from her body (*ibid.* 30 Apr. 2012; *Weekly Trust* 14 Apr. 2012).
- In June 2012, in Imo State, a woman was killed by unknown assailants (*Nigeria Newspoint* [2012b]; *Leadership* 10 June 2012). Her head and some internal organs had reportedly been removed (*ibid.*).

Information on the outcomes of the above cases could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. State Response

According to the research associate at the University of London, "there is no recognised, institutionalised response [to ritual murders] from police or state" (31 Oct. 2012). The research associate added, further, that because of corruption in police and state institutions, "any action or inaction wouldn't necessarily be transparent" (31 Oct. 2012).

In October 2012, the Governor of Zamfara State, in response to "reports of incessant killings and disappearances of persons," especially children, reportedly warned "ritual killers and cultists" in a public address to leave the state, adding that they would be subject to the death penalty if found guilty of murder (*Daily Trust* 20 Oct. 2012). Further information on the response by state authorities to ritual killings could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4.1 Legislation

According to the *Criminal Code* (1990) of Nigeria, a person who commits a murder will be sentenced to death (Nigeria 1990, Sec. 319(1)). Similarly, subjecting a person to a "trial by ordeal" that results in death is also punishable by the death sentence (*ibid.*, Sec. 208). A person found in possession of a human head or skull within six months of its removal from a body or skeleton can be sentenced to five years in prison (*ibid.*, Sec. 329A(1)).

The *Criminal Code* also states that:

Any person who-

- a. by his statements or actions represents himself to be a witch or to have the power of witchcraft; or
- b. accuses or threatens to accuse any person with being a witch or with having the power of witchcraft; or
- c. makes or sells or uses, or assists or takes part in making or selling or using, or has in his possession or represents himself to be in possession of any juju, drug or charm which is intended to be used or reported to possess the power to prevent or delay any person from doing an act which such person has a legal right to do, or to compel any person to do an act which such person has a legal right to refrain from doing, or which is alleged or reported to possess the power of causing any natural phenomenon or any disease or epidemic; or
- d. directs or controls or presides at or is present at or takes part in the worship or invocation of any juju which is prohibited by an order of the State Commissioner; or
- e. is in possession of or has control over any human remains which are used or are intended to be used in connection with the worship or invocation of any juju; or
- f. makes or uses or assists in making or using, or has in his possession anything whatsoever the making, use or possession of which has been prohibited by an order as being or believed to be associated with human sacrifice or other unlawful practice;

is guilty of a misdemeanour, and is liable to imprisonment for two years. (ibid., Sec. 210).

Sources indicate that the *Criminal Code* is applicable to the southern states of Nigeria (*Vanguard* 28 July 2011; *Leadership* 5 Aug. 2011).

In the 19 northern states of the country, the *Penal Code* of Nigeria applies (ibid.; *Vanguard* 28 July 2011). According to an article in the 2007 and 2008 volume of the *University of Ilorin Law Journal*, the *Penal Code* criminalizes the act of representing oneself as a witch, accusing another person of witchcraft, possessing any juju, drug or charm for use in witchcraft rituals, and invoking "unlawful" juju (Etudaiye 2007 and 2008, 4, note 14). It also reportedly criminalizes trial by ordeal, cannibalism, and the unlawful possession of a human head (ibid. 5-6).

4.1.1 Enforcement of Legislation and Prosecution

Information on prosecutions for ritual murder was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to *Leadership*, the number of unsolved cases of ritual murder is "troubling" (30 Apr. 2012). The *Punch* indicates that many victims of ritual killings disappear and are never found (10 Aug. 2012). Newspapers report that, in December 2011, a man was sentenced to death in Kano for killing and beheading a woman in 1992 (*Nigerian Tribune* 7 Dec. 2011; *Vanguard* 7 Dec. 2011). The murder was reportedly performed for ritual purposes (ibid.).

Sources report that a former information commissioner of Jigawa State was convicted in January 2010 of the ritual killing of two children and sentenced to life imprisonment (*Leadership* 30 Apr. 2012; *The Will* 6 Jan. 2010). However, he was reportedly acquitted in 2012 due to "lack of direct evidence or proof" (*Daily Independent* 25 July 2012).

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. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: A professor at the University of Oxford was unable to provide information for this Response.

Internet sites, including: All Africa; Amnesty International; Australia Refugee Review Tribunal; *Blueprint*; Child Rights Information Network; eoi.net; Factiva; Freedom House; *The Huffington Post*; Human Rights Watch; International Center for Not for Profit Law; International Humanist and Ethical Union; Ireland Refugee Documentation Centre; Nigeria — Ministry of Justice, National Bureau of Statistics, Police Force; Think Africa Press; United Kingdom Border Agency; United Nations — Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld; United States Department of State.