

# Babajide A. AKINPELU

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Trends and patterns of  
fatalities resulting from  
cult societies and belief in  
witchcraft in Nigeria (2006–  
2014)



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*Nigeria Watch Project`*

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**Trends and patterns of fatalities resulting  
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*Nigeria Watch Project*

*Executive Summary*

As a result of the voracious appetite and interest of the average Nigerian in anything metaphysical, the media tend to over-sensationalize the issues of witchcraft and cult societies. Religious bodies also tend to overemphasize sorcery as a major source of misfortune and poverty, creating fear in the hearts of the common man. Relying on the Nigeria Watch database data recorded since 1 June 2006, however, this study reveals that witchcraft accounted for only 661 violent deaths in the last eight years, or 1 per cent of the total number of fatalities reported during the period under review. Moreover, most deaths attributed to sorcery occurred in the southern part of the country. The same pattern applies to cult societies, opposing the South to the North. In the North, eight states did not experience any ritual killings in the last eight years. Though the belief that politics is related to cult societies is strong, the number of violent incidences leading to death is low. Therefore, evidence of such a relationship remains vague and nebulous.

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\*Babajide Akinpelu has an MA in Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Ibadan. He presently works as a Research Officer with Education Liaison Office, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps. Any errors remain the sole responsibility of the author. Contact: emailbabajide@yahoo.com

## INTRODUCTION

Nigerian newspapers report almost daily on incidences of witchcraft and occult activities. The aim of this research is thus to analyse the trends and patterns in which violent deaths attributed to sorcery or cultism occur in the country. The purpose is not to argue for or against the existence of occult powers. The research uses scientific and statistical description to shed light on the phenomena of witchcraft and cult societies according to the available data of the Nigeria Watch Project, which has collected data since June 2006.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first section gives a historical perspective of witchcraft and cult societies in the Nigerian political, economic, and social context. The second section provides data on locations where occurrences of ritual killings abound and explains why they are more prevalent in some parts of Nigeria. The third part analyses the role cult groups play in politics. As shown by the available data, political issues rank high in the causes of violent deaths involving cult societies. Further findings are discussed before a conclusion is drawn.

## AFRICAN BELIEF IN WITCHCRAFT AND CULT SOCIETIES: THE NIGERIAN VIEW

The appropriate point to begin with is a definition of witchcraft. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, witchcraft is “the exercise or invocation of supernatural powers to control people or events, typically involving sorcery or magic”. It is often associated with human beings who meet secretly in the night, indulge in cannibalism and wickedness, organize rites and rituals with ‘the Devil’, and perform black magic. Witchcraft is a

global phenomenon that has existed for centuries in nearly all societies of the world.

According to Okon (2012):

*“Witchcraft is a constant problem in Africa. Africans of all classes, poor and rich, illiterates and the educated classes all have one or two bad experiences to say about witchcraft as a nefarious and destructive spirit that is hindering human and social development in the continent. [...] Africans have unconsciously developed witchcraft mentality—which is a permanent condition of living helplessly in fear, intimidation, mental torture and spiritual insecurity. Witchcraft has not only weakened the social bond, but it has forced the African to embrace pseudo spirituality and diabolic religious rituals. Spiritual vigilance and protection against witchcraft attack has become a vital aspect of socialization in Africa. The average African child grows with the fear of witchcraft.”*

Though the belief in sorcery predates colonial rule and interaction with Western civilization, new forms of cult groups have emerged in the face of urbanization. Violence by and against alleged witches represent but one aspect of multifarious urban insecurity. Witchcraft today is also commoditized. It is a product on the market, whose power is increased through human sacrifices and reduced through ‘deliverance’. The modern witch is, in microeconomic terms, a rational economic agent motivated by non-satiation and greed (Essia 2012). Thus the commercial distribution of human body parts involves sophisticated networks and relies on ‘abattoirs’ such as the ‘Ibadan house of horrors’, which was discovered in March 2014. Another contemporary dimension to the issue of witchcraft can be found in the new Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which generally depict godliness and success in terms of overcoming the Devil. These movements have popularized the thinking that material fortune is universally available, but access to it is

inhibited by the Devil, and all it takes to appropriate success is to get witches out of the way (*ibid.*).

#### THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF WITCHCRAFT AND CULT SOCIETIES

Secret cult groups often interact with politics, although they are openly outlawed by the country's 1999 constitution. Scholars allude to the fact that cult societies already played important roles in the governance of pre-colonial Nigeria, especially with the Ibo and the Yoruba in the South (Ellis 2008; Okunola and Ojo 2012). No such influence seems to have developed under the emirate system in the North. However, Olurode's (1990) work on the Nupe people of Bida shows that cult societies existed in some parts of the North. In the South, the influence of such occult groups was somewhat retained by colonial indirect rule, despite the introduction of new religion and a Western form of governance. For the British, indigenous institutions could be allowed to function inasmuch as they gave prestige and support to the Native Authorities, which were the key organs of indirect rule. In the southern part of the country, however, the colonial administration introduced artificial warrant chiefs and destroyed some shrines.

*"It was the half-tolerance, half-suppression, of older systems of governance that made Indirect Rule so thoroughly ambiguous, the official organs of Indirect Rule being shadowed by institutions such as shrines whose actual powers often exceeded those they were officially deemed to have."* (Ellis 2008)

The influence of cultism and witchcraft could also be felt in the creation of political parties right from their inception. Indeed, the nationalist movement interacted with indigenous religious institutions and initiation societies in Nigeria's Eastern and Western Regions. Moreover, secrecy and hidden powers were to provide a form of legitimacy and protection for politicians with

influence. After independence, for instance, military leaders were also reported to have kept an arsenal of sorcerers, fortune-tellers, and Islamic marabouts around them. This shows that the belief in sorcery has overshadowed every form of government in Nigeria, be it civilian rule or military dictatorship. Modern and traditional rulers alike had to understand and speak the language of ritual violence to guarantee their power in the state.

### THE ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF WITCHCRAFT AND CULT SOCIETIES

The economic context also plays a role. Belief in witchcraft shapes perceptions and provides an answer to ‘why me?’ when misfortune strikes:

*“Unexpected hardship or bad luck, sudden and incurable diseases, all can be accounted to the actions of evil people; to magical forces the diagnosis of witchcraft opens up the possibility of combating the causes of hardship.”* (Schnoebelen 2009)

Witchcraft beliefs satisfy a deeply rooted desire to be sure that the world is concerned with us, our fate, and our happiness, and that nothing happens simply by chance. The acceptance of a domain of life where malevolent forces, like the witch, can be defined and attacked makes it possible to bear a universe devoid of such design.

Despite its oil wealth, Nigeria still ranks amongst the poorest in the world on the basis of per capita income. The country has witnessed a plundering of her wealth by its leaders; Nigerian office holders are considered among the most flamboyant in the world. The cult groups have profited from the patronage of these corrupt leaders. In his analysis of the patrons of the Okija shrine, for instance, Ellis (2008) observed that the cult industry remains very lucrative even in contemporary times:

*“Analysis of the names indicated that most patrons were from the southeast of the country and that they included doctors, lawyers, engineers, politicians and company directors. Some of these litigants were reported to have paid very large sums, even hundreds of thousands of naira, the equivalent of thousands of dollars, to the chief priest of Okija. Contrary to priests’ claims that the fees were paltry, the lowest recorded payment was 5,000 naira (\$38 at 2004 values). The highest payment recorded was over 100 times that amount. The Anambra State police commissioner, Felix Ogbaudu, who led the 2004 raid on the Okija shrine, stated that he knew of one person who claimed to have paid 800,000 naira (\$6,070). Moreover, litigants who subsequently died, and whose corpses were brought by their families to the forest, had their goods confiscated by the shrine. This meant that very considerable amounts of money were involved in the shrine’s affairs.”*

Scholars have also argued that the proliferation of local cult groups is evidence of economic discontent by disaffected youth. This can be said to be the case in the Niger Delta, a region known for its oil wealth. The paradox of penury in the midst of plenty has exacerbated grievances, prompting local resistance and rebellion in which militia and cult groups have been critical actors, especially since the 1990s (Nyiayaana 2011). Thus, membership of cult groups has economic underpinning, yet is sometimes open to a specific class of people: the rich and influential. As observed by Elegbeleye (2005) and Egbochuku (2009) all over southern Nigeria, for instance, university cult societies include children of the higher strata of society.

The economic dimension of witchcraft can also be linked to urbanization and modernity. When considering reported cases of penis snatching or ritual killing for money, witchcraft seems to have evolved from the kinship stage to a new stage of anonymity in large cities.



*“Penis snatching, deadly alms and killer phone numbers all illustrate the dangers of anonymity. Anonymity stands out clearly as the most distinctive common denominator of these new forms of the occult, especially if contrasted with “family witchcraft”, which represents the archetypal form of witchcraft.”* (Bonhomme 2012)

Many Nigerians have left their rural villages, coming to modern cities such as Lagos and Abuja in search of greener pastures. In these cities, they realize that the grass is much greener at home, yet they cannot return to the village empty-handed. Thus, they resort to blaming witchcraft for their economic woes. Also, anyone successful in business or education is believed to be involved in one form of sorcery or the other. His/her wealth is due to ritual killing or to the use of body parts for money rituals. According to Korhnet (1996), for instance:

“Witchcraft accusations with a strong liberating, emancipative or egalitarian impetus are directed against enemies within their own community. Examples are witchcraft accusations directed against rich peasants and traders in East and West Africa, who accumulate large sums of grain or money individually, without due regard to their obligation—under the traditional solidarity-system of the village community—to assist the poor in case of hardship. In the latter case the rich are suspected quite correctly in the logic of a communitarian redistribute social system of obtaining their wealth through evil powers.”

## THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF WITCHCRAFT AND CULT SOCIETIES

Rooted in spirituality and religious practices, secret cult groups are not a new phenomenon in African social formations. Traditionally, they provided mechanisms and structures that defined the role and relationships of each member. They not only served the spiritual and social needs of their members, but also acted as institutions for social control through the execution of traditional customs, settlement of disputes, and the dispensation of justice (Offiong 1984). Furthermore, membership of a cult group was restricted to adults and represented an elevated status in traditional African society.

In Nigeria, cult groups were ethnically based. Accordingly, the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity, Ekpo, Okija Shrine, Amanikpo, and the Igbe secret cult groups, among others, have been found among the Yoruba, the Efik, the Igbo, the Ogoni, and the Isoko peoples of the south-western and south-eastern parts of Nigeria (Ellis 2001). At the same time, new forms of cult groups, the Pyrate confraternity, Panama, and Black Eye have also emerged as a response to changing social, political, and economic realities in Nigeria. These cults initially functioned as civil society organisations, but were later factionalised and transformed into violent groups (Nyiayaana 2011).

Just as cult groups were a source of control in pre-colonial African society, the same could be said of witchcraft. Stenberg (2010) asserted that “witchcraft operated, simultaneously, as a moral narrative and means of behavioural enforcement which facilitated social control, and maintained and restored damaged social orders.” Belief in witchcraft has shown resilience to change and, instead of dying out, has evolved to face new

situations in contemporary life. People have often resorted to cult societies because they lacked effective mechanisms to resolve conflicts. Having no access to independent central powers meant that any groups that got involved in a conflict were also burdened with the task of resolving that conflict among themselves (Harnischfeger 2006). Under such circumstances, the determination to have an oracle deciding matters may have been the best means of keeping or building peace. Thus, thousands of people in search of justice once came from all over Igboland to the famous shrine of Arochukwu in order to have their disputes settled there. For Westerners it is frightening to imagine that decisions of life or death should depend on such methods. For many Igbo, however, it is reassuring to know that judgment is rendered by alien, invisible powers, not by one's fellow humans, as human authority is scarcely to be trusted.

#### WITCHCRAFT, CULT SOCIETIES AND VIOLENT DEATHS IN NIGERIA SINCE 2006

Nowadays, witchcraft and sorcery account for a relatively small number of violent deaths in Nigeria (Figure 1). The Nigeria Watch database recorded a total of 61,241 violent deaths during the period under investigation, from June 2006 to May 2014. Crime and car accidents remain the major causes of fatalities in Nigeria, followed by political and religious conflicts. Despite many legends of blood-sucking witches killing thousands, sorcery accounted for only 661 deaths, which represents just 1 per cent of violent deaths reported. Yet the Nigeria Watch database records only fatalities and does not cover all the aspects of witchcraft. For instance, the press reports many cases of mutilated bodies where the violent cause of the death is not proven, and hence not recorded.

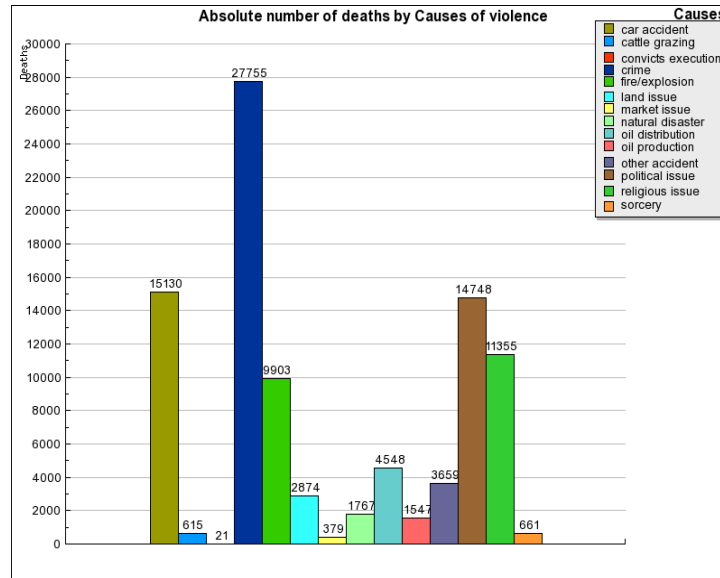


Figure 1 - Causes of violent deaths in Nigeria, cumulated figures, June 2006–May 2014

A look at the protagonists involved in lethal violence confirms that sorcery does not constitute an overarching cause of fatalities in Nigeria. Figure 2 shows that cult societies accounted for 1,862 deaths between 1 June 2006 and 31 May 2014. These figures seem low when compared with other protagonists such as armed gangs, political groups, and the police. However, women and children account for an important proportion of the victims, even if men and adults still represent the majority (Tables 1 and 2).

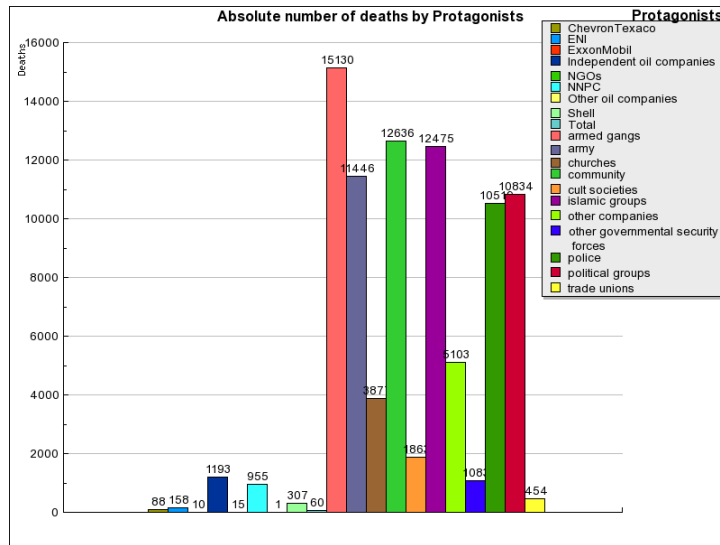


Figure 2 - Number of violent deaths per protagonist in Nigeria, cumulated figures, June 2006–May 2014

Sex	Male	Female	Undetermined	Total
Number	206	170	396	772
Percentage	26.7%	22%	51.3%	100%

Table 1 - Number of male and female victims killed because of the belief in sorcery, Nigeria, June 2006- May 2014

Category	Adult	Children	Undetermined	Total
Number	274	123	375	772
Percentage	35.5%	15.9%	48.6%	100%

Table 2 - Number of adults and children killed because of the belief in sorcery, Nigeria, June 2006-May 2014

Note: The total number in the tables above is slightly different from the number in figures 1 and 7 because it is based on actual texts of newspaper reports, while the Nigeria Watch database records averages according to different sources for each incident.

### A MAPPING OF WITCHCRAFT AND RITUAL KILLINGS IN NIGERIA

In trying to track the prevalence of witchcraft in Nigeria, available data also show a high prevalence in the southern part of the country compared with the North. States like Yobe and Sokoto experienced no occurrence of fatalities resulting from witchcraft deaths, while the others recorded less than five in the last eight years, except for Borno, where newspapers reported 44 deaths involving mutilation of body parts and credited these deaths to the Boko Haram insurgents (Figure 3).

In the South, Lagos witnessed the highest number of sorcery-related deaths (89), followed closely by Delta (84). In terms of frequency, Lagos also recorded more cases of ritual killings than in any other state, with 59 incidences in eight years. However, compared with its population, Delta State had a relatively higher number of such deaths, with a rate of 1.9 per 100,000 inhabitants, as against 0.8 in Lagos. Delta State was followed by Abia (1.7) and Kwara, which had the highest prevalence in the North, except for the special case of Borno because of the Boko Haram insurgency. The pattern of Kwara may be due to its location as a link between the southern and northern parts of Nigeria.

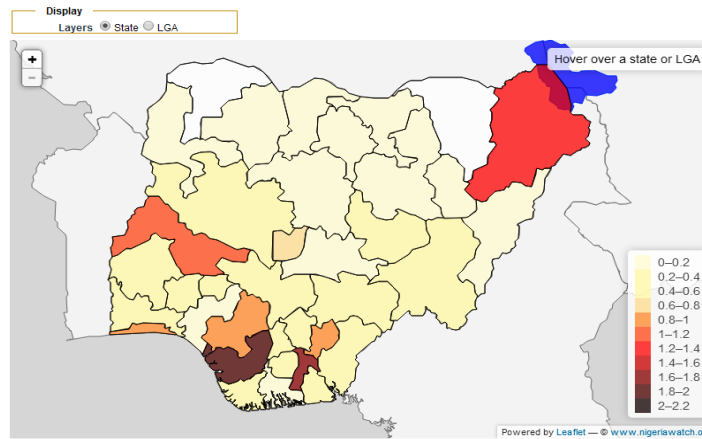


Figure 3 - Map of the rates of violent deaths caused by sorcery in Nigeria, June 2006–May 2014

In Lagos, the high prevalence of ritual killings can be attributed to the fact that the state is the commercial nerve centre of the country, a situation which exacerbates the belief in money rituals. The reported case of a multi-millionaire Pentecostal pastor involved in a case of ritual killing buttresses this argument. According to the press:

*“The General Overseer of a fast growing pentecostal church in Lagos has been arrested by the Police for alleged ritual murder. The pastor simply identified as Fireman has been detained at the State Criminal Investigation Department (SCID), Panti, Yaba, Lagos following alleged confessional statement of an 18-year-old boy, Ikechukwu, who was caught strangulating a 12-year-old girl identified as Bose.*

*Okechuku had told the Police that the Pastor had contracted him to kill a female virgin and bring her faeces for a N100,000 fee. The pastor was arrested after five days on the run. Ikechukwu, who was paraded at SCID, Panti by the state Police spokeswoman, Ngozi Braide, narrated how he strangulated the girl.*

*“I started attending the church in Surulere since 2011 when I heard how the man of God was performing miracles and I believed in the pastor. After Christmas*

*celebration, I was ashamed that I had nothing for the New Year celebration, especially clothes. The spirit moved me to approach my pastor for help and when I met with him, he promised to give me N100,000 if I could get the faeces of a strangled virgin.*

*“I agreed to get the faeces of a virgin. I remembered a food vendor’s daughter, who I suspected was a virgin and I went to the woman’s shed at Badagry. When I met Bose, I bought rice and plantain from her. She served me and after eating, I lured her to an uncompleted building on the pretense that I wanted to show her something. Immediately we entered the building, I held Bose on the throat until she defecated and died. I wanted to pack the faeces when I heard the shout of a man calling for my arrest and I tried to escape but I was arrested by some people.*

*“They wanted to kill me but a man begged that I should be spared so that I can be used as witness against the pastor. I thank God that my life was saved because the pastor would have denied that he sent me.”*

*Police spokeswoman, Ngozi Braide, said the pastor has been arrested after many days of being on the run. She said that though the case was being investigated, Ikechukwu had made confessional statement that the pastor sent him.*

*She said the pastor was being interrogated by detectives after which the police would determine the fact of the matter.” (Oji 2014)*

Another explanation for the higher prevalence of ritual killings in the southern part of Nigeria can be found in history. In Lagos, the first church was established in Badagry in 1842, while Islam was already well developed in the North before finding its way to the South. As we observed in our data, Sokoto State, revered as the seat of the caliphate, reported no case of violent deaths attributed to sorcery in the period under examination. Meanwhile, in the South, the indirect rule introduced by the British colonialists relied on some traditional structures that used to practise human sacrifice.



As shown in Figures 4 and 5, Rivers State, for instance, recorded the highest prevalence of cult killings per state in the last eight years. This was due to the activities of local cult societies and their frequent clashes with rival gangs and security forces. In fact, all the states in the South recorded at least one case of cult society killing. By contrast, eight northern states reported no cases of cult killing in the years under review. However, the local government area that suffered the highest number of fatalities related to cult activities (205), Lafia in Nasarawa State, was in the North. This is due to the emergence of a new cult group, Ombatse (lit. ‘time has come’), that claims to heal the region from corruption and poverty. The administration of Nasarawa State actually saw the group as a political movement of opponents, and many people were killed in a clash with security agents in May 2013.

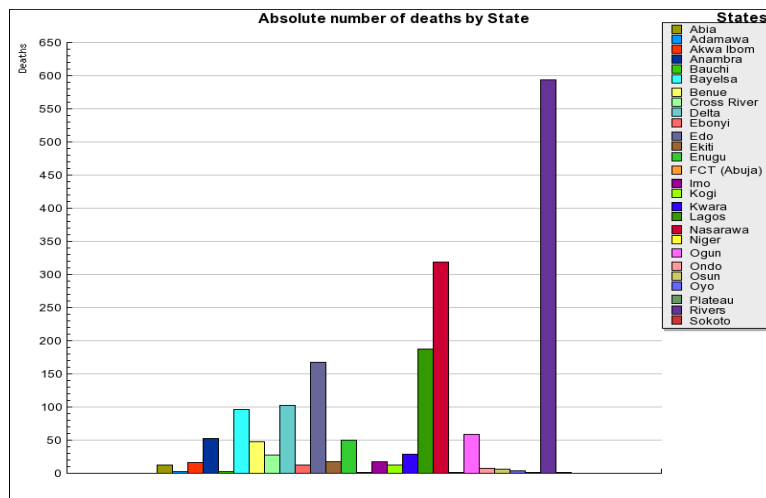


Figure 4 - Number of violent deaths in events where cult societies were involved, per state, cumulated figures, June 2006–May 2014

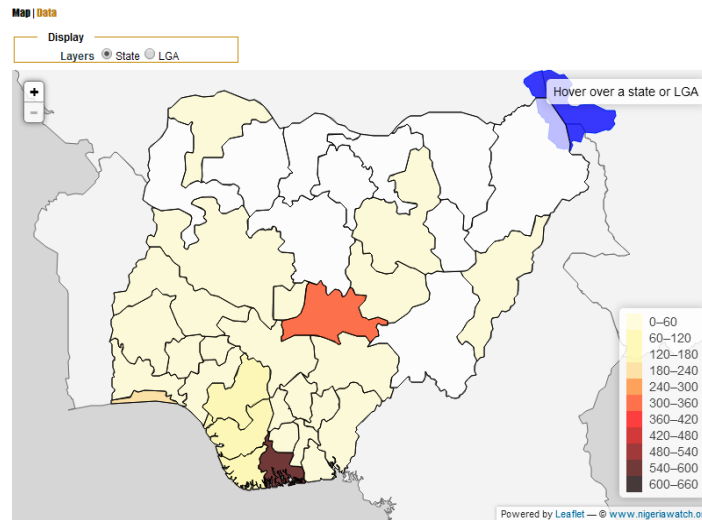


Figure 5 - Map of violent deaths in events where cult societies were involved, June 2006–May 2014

### THE LINKS WITH POLITICS

Cult activities often have political underpinnings. A total of 307 deaths attributed to cult groups were politically motivated in five states in the last eight years, as shown in Figure 6.

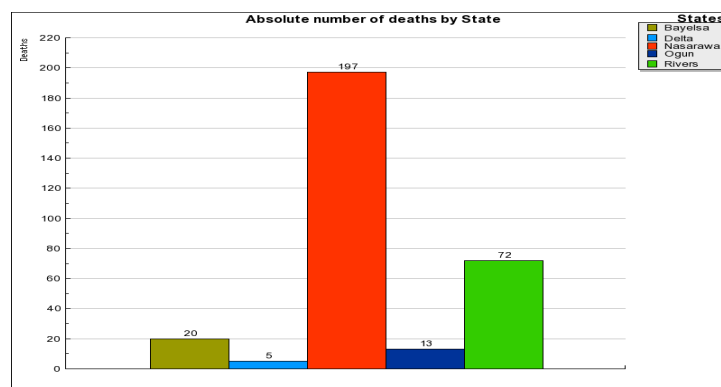
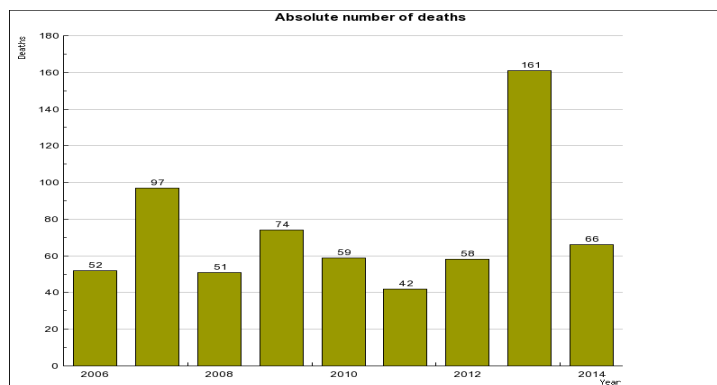


Figure 6 - Violent deaths caused by political issues in events where cult societies were involved, June 2006–May 2014

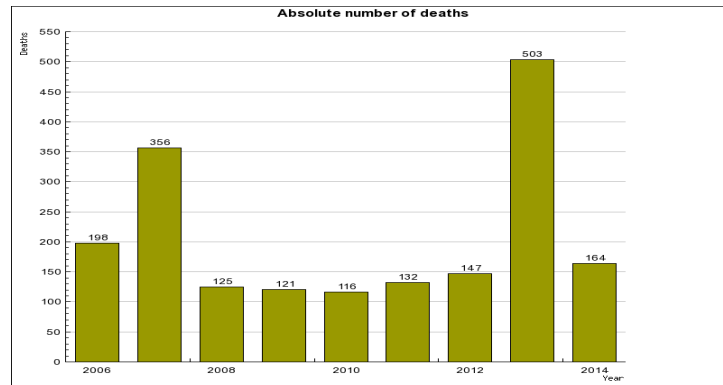
The situation in these areas is actually quite complex:

*“Cult gangs are active within community youth associations as enforcers, to defend the interests of their members, increase their influence and for protection.... Cults have served as a gateway into all kinds of criminality and violence, including militancy.... These groups and networks of groups had wide geographical penetration and were heavily armed. But further complicating the structure is the fact that many youth associations at the community level also have ‘cult groups’, some of which take their names from the larger organizations with whom they may or may not have direct or indirect linkages. So the entanglements and overlap between university confraternities, street gangs, youth groups, and ethno-nationalist militias are not easily unraveled.” (UNLock Nigeria 2012: 9)*

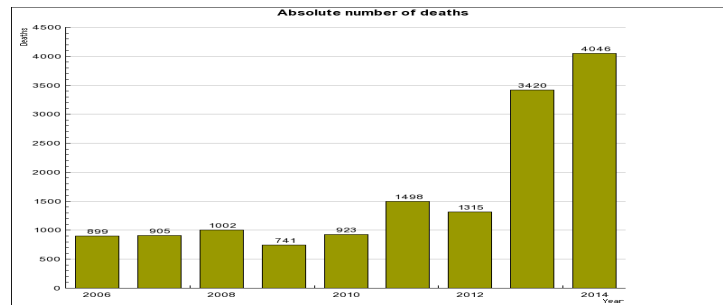
Nationwide, no significant correlation seems to exist between witchcraft or cult society fatalities and election years in 2007 and 2011 (Figures 7, 8 and 9). Though there is a steady climb yearly in violent deaths related to political issues because of the Boko Haram crisis in the North-East, there was no visible increase in the number of fatalities attributed to sorcery in 2011, an election year. However, the trend seems to be on the increase, especially for the year 2013 and the first five months of 2014 (Figures 7 and 8).



*Figure 7 - Number of violent deaths in Nigeria caused by sorcery, per year, June 2006–May 2014*



*Figure 8 - Number of violent deaths in events where cult societies are involved, per year, June 2006–May 2014*



*Figure 9 - Number of violent deaths caused by political issues, per year, June 2006–May 2014*

## CONCLUSION

Though the media has been accused of fuelling the belief in witchcraft and cults, fatal cases reported by newspapers are as real as the threat associated with witchcraft in the mind of the African. The Nigeria Watch database shows that witchcraft-related violence is more prevalent in the South than in the northern part of Nigeria. The main reason for this can be found in the history, traditions, and culture of these areas, and in the introduction to a foreign monotheistic religion, which occurred earlier in the North than in the South. In the case of cult killings, fatalities and incidents are highest in Rivers State. Although cult-related killings are also to be found in Nasarawa, Kwara, and Benue states, eight northern states were totally free of the problem, while in the South, all the states recorded at least one incidence of cult killing. However, empirical evidence connecting witchcraft and cult societies to violent deaths is low compared with the widespread belief in occult phenomena.

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