

Ojo Maduekwe's Crashing Stock

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By Okey Ndibe

Foreign Affairs Minister Ojo Maduekwe should be ashamed of himself. Any man who lies against children is contemptible, and that's exactly what Mr. Maduekwe did.

Early in March, Mr. Maduekwe had traveled to Geneva as head of the Nigerian delegation to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review on human rights. The event is used to survey the state of human rights across the globe.

Last November, Britain's Channel 4 TV had broadcast a documentary on Nigeria's "witch children." It was a harrowing look at the horrors visited on thousands of children in Akwa Ibom and elsewhere. These children are first stigmatized as witches and wizards and then subjected to excruciating torture.

In short, the program unmasked the human capacity for evil. Channel 4 took viewers on a graphic tour of some deranged churches and their so-called pastors and prophets who rake in huge profits from declaring children as witches. One of the featured "men of God" is a man named "Bishop" Sunday Ulup-Aya. A self-styled "poison destroyer," he openly boasts that he had physically liquidated 110 witches and wizards. Ulup-Aya's eyes appear glazed

and his slurry speech suggests drunkenness. He's shown ordering a child to drink a concoction meant to "destroy the poison" of witchcraft. Then the reporter informs us that the concoction is made of strong alcohol, a substance called "African mercury," and the "bishop's" own blood.

Hard as it is to imagine, the child who's shown drinking the strange concoction is one of the lucky ones. The program revealed that some of the children are simply killed. Some are driven out, forced to live in the open like wild animals. Some are tied to trees and starved for several weeks. Some are disfigured with acid, scalded with boiling water, or scarred with fire. The camera showed a young girl in whose skull some superstitious fool had driven a six-inch nail.

This chronicle of gruesome torture is still available online. To see this unflinching portrait of cruelty, just go to www.youtube.com and type in "Africa's witch children". But be cautioned: It's a stark, wrenching expose. The images are hard to watch and impossible to rub out of one's mind. When I first saw it four months ago, I sat before the computer and cried for a while. I shuddered with the shame of being a member of a society

that, out of deep and festering ignorance, would unleash such violence on children.

What does it say about us when we stand pat and permit nefarious elements among us to brutalize children, including toddlers? Were the police ignorant about the bloody goings-on? Are we not all implicated, to one degree or another, by the dehumanization of vulnerable children?

A teeming league of fake pastors and ignorant seers prey on children, I believe, because the child-victims are largely voiceless, with few or no options to stand up in their own defense.

It was natural that the question of Akwa Ibom's tortured children should come up at an international forum on human rights abuses. But when the question was put to Mr. Maduekwe, he reportedly replied that the "children were paid to say they were tortured."

That's a callous, despicable response. It's either the minister never bothered to watch the Channel 4 report - in which case, his fitness for a ministerial post should be called to question - or he somehow felt it was okay to discredit victims of heinous human rights abuses. In that event, we should wonder whether Mr. Maduekwe has a heart at all.

The larger crime here is that, after Channel 4's exposure of the shameful abuse of children, the Nigerian government pretended nothing was amiss. Mr. Maduekwe might have helped to mobilize a national effort to rescue the besieged children of Akwa Ibom. He

might also have persuaded Mr. Umaru Yar'Adua to send a tough bill to the National Assembly stipulating stiff punishment for those who harm children in the alleged name of combating witchcraft.

Since Mr. Maduekwe failed to do this, he had no leg to stand on when he was asked what Nigeria was doing to save children from mindless abuse. Caught in a bind, a good diplomat might have bought time by stating that his government was weighing a number of corrective measures. Instead, Mr. Maduekwe compounded his government's betrayal of these beleaguered children by painting them as rented scam artists.

This foreign minister took a low, cowardly road precisely because he knows that the children are in no position to counter his lie, much less drag him to court for defamation. Yet, in the court of public opinion - and especially in Nigeria's humane sector where conscionable men and women care about the fortunes of children - Mr. Maduekwe's stock has crashed to the bottom.

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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a Nigerian novelist, poet, and political commentator. He is the author of the critically praised novel, *Arrows of Rain*. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988 to be the founding editor of the *African Commentary*, an award-winning and widely acclaimed magazine published by the novelist Chinua Achebe. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. He is finishing work on a novel titled *foreign gods, incorporated*.

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