

The witch-killing syndrome: The politics of tribe



Bongo Adi - March 20, 2019



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In 2005, Ted Miguel, a professor of economics at University of California, Berkeley, published a now famous paper in *The Review of Economic Studies* entitled *Poverty and Witch Killing*. Using evidence from Tanzania, Miguel investigated violence against the elderly, young children and the helpless and vulnerable members of the society who were labeled “witches”. As in many parts of Africa, including Nigeria, of course, witchcraft accusations are rife. There are similar cases in Nigeria where parents carry out dastardly acts of violence against their children whom they allege

to be witches. In the case of Tanzania, Miguel proved that incidents of such violence are driven by poverty and economic hardship which induce more able members of the community to unleash violence or even death on the less able members just so to reduce competition for reduced food rations.

Miguel showed that any year that experienced drought or over-drainage was also marked by a huge spike in incidents of witch-killing. In other words, witch-killing follows drought or yield-depleting, economic shocks. But this was not obvious, however. What seemed obvious is the heightened accusations of witchcraft which was reified as a supernatural phenomenon with the power to cause evil. Our objective for now is not to interrogate the potency or otherwise of witchcraft – that is matter for another day. However, Miguel was able to prove, using rigorous econometrics techniques, that drought or over-drainage caused crop failures such that affected households faced threats of poverty and food shortage. It is this impending doom that forced stronger members of the society to invoke witchcraft imaginations and deploy it as a rationalizing frame to unleash violence on the socially disadvantaged — elderly women in particular and other vulnerable and less productive members of the society. This is done chiefly to reduce the number of claims to already drastically depleted food rations.

Much earlier before the Tanzanian and African witch-killing syndrome, Medieval Europe's witch-hunting (from whence the word originated) enacted a process of violence and scapegoating that have directly been linked by recent researchers to similar mechanisms. Researchers have shown that deteriorating economic conditions brought about by severity in temperatures was the main reason for the European witch-hunt of the medieval Christendom in Europe. Although spuriously garbed as an ecclesiastical inquisition, medieval witch-hunting and witch-killing was instigated by challenging economic circumstances that forced the powerful to unleash death on the weak just to increase their chances of survival.

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We therefore understand the witch-killing syndrome as a symbolical metaphor employed to rationalize a scape-goating design in the pursuit of a political economic strategy of exclusion, marginalization or punishment of less opportune others. It is the cloaking of what is essentially a materialist struggle for resource control under the garment of other unrelated issues like the convenient invocation of tribe, social cleavages and sectarianism deployed to justify political contests in Nigeria. We have seen this in exasperated orchestration in recent elections.

Nigeria's 2019 election did not disappoint in its notoriously rancorous and acrimonious lead-up. As in 2015, the election stirred the putrid, murky waters that have deceitfully and tentatively covered the debris of Nigeria's cracks, allowing them to freely burst to the surface with unapologetic vehemence. All the pretenders to this spurious one-Nigeria ephemerality got the opportunity to yank off the mask of self-denial to bare their fangs and talons. From threats of eviction to historical revisions to outright physical attacks, the spurious identity of the Nigerian nonentity received resounding booing.

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Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the media axis of Lagos where some influential journalists, to the total dismay and disgrace of all the post-civil war integration efforts to which most of them are beholden threw all restraints and civility to the wind and presented their ugly dance of nudity and shame to the village market square. But It is interesting to note that the so-called “Igbo Question” or the “Nigerian Question” does not longer appear once at the eve of the four-year election cycle. It seems to have acquired a life of its own and continues to frame ethnic narratives and ultimately appear to shape behaviours. The “Lagoon threat” and other vicious threats of extermination no longer recede into hushed discusses, but seem to have galvanized ethnic fundamentalisms that place calls for pogroms against fellow citizens of other ethnic groups on the social media. Some would also argue that these rantings are beginning to materialize into policy exclusivism and reconstructions that especially manifest in evictions and demolitions of both markets and property.

Ethnic chauvinism and sectarianism are known to be potent political weapons that unscrupulous politicians deploy in service of selfish political ends. Okwudiba Nnoli in his 1978 seminal work — *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* — in which he interrogated the ethnic question, concluded that “ethnicity is not a critical variable” in the analysis of contemporary Nigeria. “It lacks explanatory potency. Its role in African politics, although sometimes considerable, is more apparent than real. Its potential as a force for changing the objective realities of African life is very minimal.” It therefore amounts to a futile exercise to associate the problems of social dynamics or economic problems in Nigeria, or any other African state for that matter, to the ethnic question. Politics merely invoke or weaponize ethnicity in the contest for the spoils of office which has, over time in Nigeria, been cast as largely a regional

conflict. Nigeria's failure to diversify its economy and develop other sources of revenue has perpetuated the dependence on single source of revenue, whose control now remains the singular objective of politics. Just as the Nigerian economy revolves around the oil in the Niger Delta, Nigeria's politics revolves around the control of this same resource. Our politics is simply about who gains control and who gains access to the oil proceeds. Regional coalitions are therefore, nothing but different teams competing for control of oil. It is not surprising therefore, that as our population and hence, the number of mouths to feed continue to boom and outstrip the increasingly scarce oil revenue, politics will continue to be hijacked by politicians who would always play the ethnic card. We are therefore caught in this web of instrumentalization of ethnicity for crass material purposes. This is the witch-killing syndrome.

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