

The Social Construction of Reality: Analytical Study of the Effect of Nollywood Movies

**Church S. Akpan
&
Chukwudi J. Anyianuka**

Abstract

This work investigated the social construction of reality: analytical study of the effect of Nollywood movies using the survey method. The researcher isolated Nollywood's (the Nigerian home video industry) themes which portray human sacrifices as efficacious in money making or in attaining success and examined their effect on the viewers' perception, interpretation and production of reality. Questionnaires were administered to a simple random sample population of Nollywood movie viewers in Enugu metropolis. Data accruing was analyzed and the result show that Nollywood movies exert effect on people's perception, interpretation and (re)production of reality.

Introduction

Among the mass media of communication television is seen as the most influential. By combining pictures with sound, TV can communicate messages which are impossible to convey as effectively by radio and or print. Again, it is essentially and fundamentally different from other mass media in that it requires no reading ability, mobility or cash.

Baran (2009. p. 429) posits that television is the central cultural arm of society, as a culture's primary story teller. It is the chief creator of entertainment and information for heterogeneous mass publics. Highlighting on the important role of television in society, *Awake* in its October 2006 issue, in an article entitled "TV the subtle instructor" submits that "...television captures the lives of people in both tragedy and triumph, it entertains, instructs and even inspires".

Much of television programming is neither wholesome nor educational and its main critics decry its abundant and graphic portrayal of violence and sex.

Nearly all families in Nigeria have television sets and TV viewing in the country is pervasive. Though there is hardly any statistics to show the amount of time the average Nigerian spends watching TV, we can glean this from the report of an article in the *Awake* issue earlier cited. According to the report titled "TV: a thief of time?":

The time that many people devote to television is astonishing. Recently, a global study showed that on average, people watch TV for just over three hours each day. North Americans watch four and

a half hours daily, while the Japanese top the list at five hours per day.

Thus, many Nigerian families spend several hours of their daily lives consuming television content which substantial part is made up of films or movies. When Television programming ceased to satisfy the audience quest for films and their accompanying graphic sex and violence, media devices like DVD and VCD players are resorted to, for viewing video DVD or VCD films that litter Nigerian markets and neighbourhoods today.

Movies are the avenue for portraying social reality. This is based on their audio – visual functions as well as their influential power to make an impact on the viewer. This was succinctly captured by Gerbner (1980) cited in Griffin (1991. p. 301) when he stated *inter alia*:

...TVs power comes from the symbolic content of the real life drama shown hour after hour, week after week. At its root, television is “story” and a society’s stories give a coherent picture of what exists, what is important, what is related to what and what is right.

Until the early 1990’s foreign films or movies dominated the local scene. This changed with the production of the home video *Living in Bondage* in 1992 by Kenneth Nnebue; Nollywood, the Nigerian home video industry, has its history in this development. Suddenly, Nigerians’ appetite for local films became insatiable and producers cashed in on this, and an average of 100 home videos or films, according to National Film and Video Censors Board records, were churned out monthly.

These Nollywood movies, as they are today called, fed its audience with a steady dose of violence. Quite marked was its dramatization of human ritual killings which transport poor characters to states of untold riches. *Living in Bondage*, the first film to give local productions the break that gave birth to Nollywood, not surprisingly was the first to dramatize how Andy, the key character, used his wife for money making rituals and became rich thereby.

A common thread that runs across this genre of film is that majority of the characters go unpunished for engaging in this evil acts, indeed going on to “enjoy” the riches and fame this practice confer on them, even after the movie seem to have ended (as the ritualists/characters who led Andy into ritual murder appear to have).

Today, cable television, which is becoming widespread in society, also have dedicated stations which transmit Nollywood movies round the clock. Thus, Nigerians continue to feed daily on Nollywood’s dramatization of human ritual sacrifice for money making and the effect this is having on them becomes a subject of concern, given the rising incidents of human ritual killings as witnessed today in society.

Hence, there is the need to understand whether the effect created by media contents make audience members to perceive them as reality or distortion of reality; as well as to know if such effect lead the audience to commit atrocities such as ritual killings?

According to Baran (2004. p. 159) movies are make-believe and not reality. In other words, movies may really not be a recreation of society's experience. But then events as captured by the media show that ritual killings for money making exist, even as dramatized by Nollywood movies. Hence, are media contents constructs or reality?

Several incidents of human ritual killings for money making in Nigeria have been captured by the media. In most of the reports, sufficient evidence pointing to the perpetration of these acts were published leaving readers without doubt of the reality of such practices in the Nigerian society.

This study was designed therefore, to find out whether Nollywood's projection of such movies that depict ritual killing for money discourage or aggravate its practices.

Statement Of The Problem

There is a strong relationship between the rising incidents of ritual killing in the Nigerian society and Nollywood's dramatization of human sacrifice for money making. According to Folarin (1998. p. 70), in allusion to Gerbner's cultivation analysis, "...the more time people spend watching television, the more their world views will be like those spread by TV".

It is a well established fact that viewing violent – oriented movies on television increases aggression as well as affect the behaviour of the viewer. This is because film has a dramatic effect on the perception of viewers whether they are conscious or unconscious about this fact. This study therefore, attempts to find out if what we view in Nollywood movies is (are) responsible for social violence and decay in Nigeria, particularly as it affects the wasting of human lives in the name of rituals for riches.

Objectives Of The Study

The following are the objectives of this study;

- 1 To ascertain if Nollywood movies portray social reality.
- 2 To ascertain whether or not television alter individual's perception of reality.
- 3 To find out if Nollywood movies that depict ritual killings are responsible for such practices in Nigeria.
- 4 To find out if the building blocks for the construction of realities come primarily from the mass media.
- 5 To ascertain if the practice of violence and human sacrifice for money making has been in existence before Nollywood began to dramatize them.
- 6 To determine the role of culture in the practice of ritual killing for money making.

Significance Of The Study

Besides exposing the evil inherent in ritual killing because of the way Nollywood portrays it, the study will help Nollywood to play down on its dramatization of ritual killing and other

forms of violence. It will particularly help movie script writers to develop plots which show that those who engage in this act are caught and punished / destroyed.

Again, it will help to educate viewers to reject re-enacting scenes of rituals for money making. In addition, it will help the authorities in Nigeria to devise effective means of preventing crimes associated with movie viewing as well as helping the National Film and Video Censors Board, screen Nollywood movies properly before they are released for public consumption. It will also direct the country on how best to promote her socio-economic, political and other wellbeing using Nollywood movies. Very importantly the study will be a guide on how best to avoid the use of movie violence in real-life situation.

Literature Review

Effect of Movies on Audience

“Movies”, according to Rodman (2006. p. 212), “have been blamed for a wide range of societal trends and individual effects, including the distortion of reality, violence and stereotyping”. The influence of movies and their ability to construct social reality can be found in results of the following studies.

Black and Bevan (1992. p. 37-45) studied media violence by visiting movie theaters and administering questionnaires before and after participants had viewed a violent or non violent film. The researchers found that the audience that watched the violent movie had higher aggression scores than that which watched the non violent film, before and after viewing.

Mulin and Linz (1995. p. 449-459) carried out a study by repeatedly exposing adult participants to sexually violent films and determining their sensitivity to violence and sympathy for victims. After repeated exposure which lasted three days they found that participants displayed less sympathy for victims.

In their research, Sinclair, Lee and Thomas (1995. p. 818-837) showed either erotic, violent sexual or non violent sexual films to men and measured reports of their perception of degradation to women. Results indicate that subjects first rated the erotic film as less violent than others but when presented with a social cue said it was significantly more violent.

Bamidele (1998. p. 34-44) in his survey study on the impact of home video on Lagos, Nigeria residents, reports that video violence is a cause of subsequent aggressive tendencies in viewers and that other variables contribute in determining whether people behave aggressively or not. The researcher asserts that home video impact on aggression tends to be small as the precise impact of home video violence is affected by such factors as age, sex, family interaction and the way violence is presented on screen.

Chibugwu (1999. p. 38-51) who studied the effect of video films on Nigerian student's behaviour, found that young people crave movies with violent content and these affect their lifestyle, behaviour, thinking pattern and attitudes towards things.

In Mitch Walrath's 2006 study on the impact of media violence on reality, published online, the researcher notes that "media violence influences aggression and crime as opposed to art imitating life" (www.mediaimpactresearch.com). The study showed that violent movies decreased people's appreciation of life in general and that persons who recreate such violence already have something wrong with them.

In a study on the impact of "super story" drama series on people's perception of reality, Okafor (2008. p. 59-62) records that results show that films exert influence on viewers as they perceive what they view as a representation of real life situation. The researcher reports that subjects say movies shape their opinions and are a means of portraying social ills.

In its cover title "Heavy Metal: Music to Murder By?" – *Newsweek*, December 4, 2000, reports that, the US supreme court allowed a law suit to proceed against the makers of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* when a couple went on a shooting spree after watching the violent film (Horn, 2000. p. 46).

The magazine also reported that a 15 year old girl named Elyse Pahler was murdered in 1995 by three acquaintances that lured her to a nearby grove near her parents' house. According to the publication's account:

What drove the teens to murder? The killers, devotees of the heavy metal band, 'Slayer', believed they needed to commit a "sacrifice to the devil" to give their garage band 'Hatred' the craziness to go professional.

The investigation carried out on the motive behind the murder revealed that graphic songs like "Dead Skin Mask" and "Post Mortem" gave the teenagers Royce Casey, Joseph Fiorella and Jacob Delashmutt step-by step instructions to rape, torture and murder. This is evidence that belief and practice in human ritual murder for success is not just an African thing.

Hornshoj-Moller (1997) presenting the findings of his study on the effects of film in society at the conference "Genocide and the Modern World", to the Association of Genocide Scholars, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, in June 11-13, 1997, stated that a film captioned *Der ewige Jude* was characterized as an x-ray of the decision- making process that led to the Holocaust caused by Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels and other Nazis who wanted to exterminate the Jewish race by all means. The movie (*Der ewige Jude*) which was produced in 1940 was described by many scholars in the study of Genocide as being part of social construction of reality for the German audience in the cinemas in 1940.

In summary, the influence of mass media on the audience shows that most of our conscious perception of the outer world is derived from our eyes. This means that our perception of reality is more and more shaped by visual information. A feat which can be used to describe the role of *Der ewige Jude* in construction of social reality that led to the "need" to kill all Jews in Europe by Hitler and his cohorts.

Wilson and Hunter (1983. p. 435-441) state cases of movie-inspired violence to establish the link between movies and real violence, they tell the story of a young man who murdered an

elderly female neighbour because he “could not distinguish illusion from reality... because he was involuntarily intoxicated by television”. In the authors chilling summation:

The hypothesis holds that an individual embraces certain strategies which permit his beliefs to persist, even when these beliefs are in error and encounter strong opposition. If a person searches for confirmation of his rational, invents flimsy explanations to maintain the plausibility of his beliefs and behaves in a fashion to fulfill his expectancies – these strategies and the individual’s emotional commitment will make it difficult to dissuade the believer from his course.

Nollywood’s Depiction of Human Rituals for Money

Mbiti (1969. p. 75) writes that the belief in the efficacy of rituals and an accompanying “superstition” has always been part of the indigenous people’s attempt to come to terms with incomprehensible phenomena. According to Okwori (2003. p. 21):

Even in the age of Christianity, Islam and modernity the belief in efficacious “Charms” and rituals has not abated...more and more people are actually turning to rituals for protection from violence or, more proactively, for social or professional betterment such as promotion at work or success in business. It is this phenomenon which drives the popularity of the home-video movie among individuals.

The list of rituals-for-money movies by Nollywood is legion and includes such titles as: *Living in Bondage*, *Blood Money*, *Rituals*, *Circle of Doom*, *I Hate My Mother*, *Dirty Deal*, *Battle Axe*, *Oganigwe*, *Magic Cap*, *Expensive Vow*, *End of Money* and *Final Money*. In all of these movies the ritual dimension is sustained while in some the focus shifts from envy, revenge or to utter wickedness or evil.

The one thing these movies share in common is their utilization of grotesque scenes to demonstrate how human rituals can be carried out for success or money. Again, they show that only the key character suffers loss in the end, as other ritualists continue reveling in their riches or success unaffected; and in sustaining this trend the movies leave the viewer with strong evidence that human ritual sacrifice are effective in attaining success. This therefore, aids in furthering the belief in the efficacy of rituals.

Ekwuazi (1997. p. 73) in his review of the movie *Living in Bondage* sums up what gives these movies their imaginative intensity and high emotional appeal:

In all these films the characters come to grief because they dislocate the balance of relationships in the community. The characters inordinate quest for achievement creates the context in which the forces of destruction can work.

So do the movies prove that rituals do not work? Okwori (2003. p. 19) thinks not. In his words, while analyzing *Living in Bondage*: “The film apparently presents incontrovertible evidence that cultism and rituals do work”. Buttressing this argument Okwori (supra) turns to the movie *Rituals* and states as follows:

“Rituals” tells us nothing about the other members of the cult whom the viewers have seen indulging in riches and splendor. Apart from Fosodu (the key character), life continues for the rest of the members- disturbed but not destroyed.

The conclusion can then be reached that Nollywood’s ritual-for-money movies deliberately or inadvertently communicate to viewers: 1) That it is possible to engage in ritual murder for money and become not only rewarded by it but also escape punishment. 2) That those who did not totally succeed in the act failed to meet all the aspects of the ritual as required by the cult, or have problems in their personal lives.

Theoretical Framework

Social Construction of Reality

The focus of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of their reality. According to Berger and Luckman (1966. p. 51) “...all knowledge, including the most basic taken – for - granted common sense knowledge of everyday reality, is derived from and maintained by social interactions”. Hence, Defleur (1971. p. 128) wrote: “The pattern of conceptualization and belief that exist in the individual’s social environment are principal sources from which he draws his own definition of reality”. In the author’s view “our senses, after all, provide us with only limited information about the world as it really is”.

Social construction of reality, according to Baran (1999. p. 332), argues that “people who share a culture also share an ongoing correspondence of meaning. Things generally mean the same to me as they do to you. A stop sign, for example, has just about the same meaning for everyone”. Hence, a headless body could signify ritual murder. This is because the society attributes such gruesome form of murder to mean a means of making money through rituals.

Cultivation Analysis

Cultivation analysis posits that people’s ideas of themselves their world and their place in it are shaped and maintained primarily through television. According to Baran (2009. p. 428):

Social construction of reality provides a strong foundation for cultivation analysis, which says that television “cultivates” or constructs a reality of the world that although possibly inaccurate becomes accepted simply because we as a culture believe it to be true. We then base our judgments about and our actions in the world on this cultivated reality provided by television.

Therefore, exposure to Nollywood movies that dramatize human ritual killings as efficacious in money making may lead to ones acceptance of this as true affecting such individual's judgment and actions and may result in the person engaging in such act to get rich.

Cultivation analysis which was developed by Gerbner and colleagues (1978, 1980, 1986) is based on five key assumptions: That television is essentially and fundamentally different from other mass media; That television is the "central cultural arm" of society as a culture's primary story teller; That television does not teach facts and figures but builds general frames and references; That the major cultural function of television is to stabilize social patterns in that culture are reinforced and maintained through television images (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli, 1978. p. 178); That the observable, measurable, independent contributions of television to the culture are relatively small.

Perception

Perception theory posits that the way an individual senses the world, sees, hears, smells, feels and tastes – is subjective and unique to his/her person and experience (Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth and Harter, 2003. p. 39). Thus, "people will interpret messages in a manner consistent with their preexisting attitudes and belief" (Baran, 2009. p. 419).

Hence, one may accept Nollywood's showing of rituals with humans as capable of making one attain success on the ground that he/she seeks an easy means to riches and is convinced that most people achieved riches this way. Again, people perceive issues as important due to the nature of coverage given to them. In other words the constant dramatization of human ritual sacrifice as able to transport one from poverty to riches by Nollywood will lead viewers to perceive this act as real and this may result in attitude change "to commit murder for riches".

Social Constructionism, Cultivation Analysis, Perception: The Relationship

According to Berger and Luckman (supra) "social constructs are in some sense human choices rather than laws resulting from divine will or nature" based on the promptings and cues provided by innate human nature. Wright (1994. p. 30) establishes the strong relationship between social constructionism and perception when he described perception as a subjective, internal process little affected by external influence.

Cultivation analysis finds its strong foundation on social construction of reality. Baran (2009. p. 428) in his submission on this theory maintains that "television cultivates or constructs a reality of the world that although possibly inaccurate becomes accepted simply because we as a culture believe it to be true..." Note the use/interchange of both concepts "cultivates" and "constructs reality", also the emphasis that what is cultivated or socially constructed may possibly be inaccurate. This establishes the link that what is most often cultivated from television or movies receive no concrete support or evidence from the real world.

In other words, people who view Nollywood movies and believe that its dramatization of human rituals for money is real and does make one rich do not base their judgment on facts. This is because there is yet no tangible proof that ritual murder brings about success or riches. Thus what is ultimately cultivated or socially constructed out of these movies is based

on the subjective assessment of the viewer or his or her perception. This strongly corroborates Gerbner and colleagues' key assumption on cultivation analysis "that television does not teach facts and figures but builds general frames and references".

The three theories share a convergence. They explain that though film (Nollywood) / television have effect on audience it does not primarily account for the way such audience interpret and (re)produce such acts in real life situations. Other factors contribute to their judgment; one of this is subjective- inexplicable, borne out of innate human nature.

Research Questions

The following research questions were asked:

1. Do Nollywood Movies portray social reality?
2. Do Nollywood Movies alter individual's perception of reality?
3. Are Nollywood Movies responsible for ritual killings in Nigeria?
4. Do the "building blocks" for the construction of realities come primarily from the mass media / Nollywood?
5. Are Nollywood movies a re-creation of the experience of the Nigerian society?
6. Does Nigerian culture permit ritual killings for money making?

Method Of Data Collection And Analysis

The researcher adopted survey research design and the random sampling technique in selecting a sample size of 400 respondents from the research population of viewers of Nollywood movies in Enugu metropolis.

A representative population and sample size were scientifically determined as the traditional mass media age ranges of 18 – 54 years were used for the study. Four areas which make up Enugu metropolis: Ogui Layout, New Haven, Independence Layout and Abakpa Nike, with a total population of 277, 119 (according to NPC 2006 census records) were given equal representation.

Of this population, Nollywood movie viewers, people 18 years and above, was assumed to be half the total, that is 138, 560. This figure was projected by 5%, to give room for the growth that had taken place since the census, thus, realizing a population study of 145,488.

The sample size of 400 was further determined from this population using the Taro Yamane formula as the scientific basis.

The researcher used the questionnaire as the basic instrument for data collection. Thus, a total of 400 questionnaires were administered to the respondents for their reactions or views on the social construction of reality about Nollywood movies.

Secondary sources employed in collecting data included manifest materials like information drawn from newspapers, magazines, books, journals and other printed materials, and the

internet. Also, Nollywood movies which dramatize ritual murder for money making were used. These materials were applied in reviewing related literature.

Simple percentages and tables were employed by the researcher to analyze data gathered for the study. Four hundred questionnaires were distributed to the research sample and all were completed and returned. 65% of respondents were males and 35% were females. 59% were aged 18 – 29 years; 24%, 30 - 44 years; and 25% were 45 years and over.

In the area of educational qualification, 4% were first school leaving certificate holders, 27% had 'O' level certificates, 13% held OND certificates, and 32% were B.Sc./BA/HND graduates. 10% of respondents wield MA/MSc. degrees or equivalent, whereas undergraduates made up 12% of the sample. Also, 12% of the respondents were civil servants, 2% were engineers, 1% were medical doctors and 4% were bankers. Other occupations and professions formed 71%. 48% of the respondents were married while 52% were single.

Research Question One: Do Nollywood Movies Portray Social Reality?

TABLE B1 – Nollywood's Portrayal of Social Reality

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	352	88%
No	40	10%
No comment	8	2%
Total	400	100%

Research Question Two: Do Nollywood Movies Alter Individual's Perception of Reality?

TABLE 2 – Nollywood's Effect on Audience Perception of Reality

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	228	57%
No	156	39%
No comment	16	4%
Total	400	100%

Research Question Three: Are Nollywood Movies Responsible for Ritual Killings in Nigeria?

TABLE 3 – Nollywood's Contribution to Ritual Killings in Nigeria

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	84	21%
No	316	79%
Total	400	100%

Research Question Four:

Do the Building Blocks for the Construction of Reality Come Primarily from the Mass Media?

TABLE 4 – Nollywood’s Effect Vs Other Socializing Agents

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	232	58%
No	164	41%
No comment	4	1%
Total	400	100%

Research Question Five:

Are Nollywood Movies a Re-creation of the Experience of the Nigerian Society?

TABLE 5 – Nollywood’s Portrayal of the Nigerian Culture

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	196	49%
No	200	50%
No comment	4	1%
Total	400	100%

Research Question Six:

Does Nigerian Culture Permit Ritual Killing for Money Making?

TABLE 6 – Nigerian Culture and the Practice of Ritual Killing for Money

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	100	25%
No	300	75%
Total	400	100%

Discussion

The findings made from this study show that Nollywood movies do have effect on its viewers. The test of research question one establish that Nollywood portrays social reality. Hence, the media influence the way we think and view things within our society. This assertion is supported by the reaction to research question two which confirm that Nollywood movies alter individuals perception of reality. Hence, despite lack of evidence as to the efficacy of human rituals for money, respondents still believe this can make one rich.

Thus, as cultivation analysis explains, television, and in this case Nollywood, blurs, blends and bends a people’s perception. Put differently, people begin to believe that things happen in real life as they see dramatized or projected by Nollywood and may be persuaded to re-enact such in real life.

As to its contribution to ritual killings in Nigeria, test of research question three indicate that respondents believe Nollywood exerts a small effect and should not be held responsible; particularly as human ritual sacrifice for success pre-dates the Nigerian home video industry. Gerbner and colleagues however argue that though media effect may seem small and not be seen, they do occur and change culture in profound ways. They buttress their argument with an “ice-age” analogy.

Just as an average temperature shift of a far degree can lead to an ice age so too can a relatively small but pervasive influence make a difference. The “size” of an effect is far less critical than the direction of its steady contribution (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Sgnorielli, 1980. p. 14).

Regarding Nollywood’s influence on people as compared to other socializing agents, as expressed by research question four, respondents say it exerts more effect than do the other socializing agents as the home, school, church, peers, etc. Klapper’s reinforcement theory cited in Baran (2009. p. 123) states that mass communication functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences. He opined that,

These mediating factors are such that they typically render mass communication a contributory agent but not the sole cause in the process of reinforcing existing conditions.

Respondents, in their reply to research question five, said Nollywood has done justice in its portrayal of the Nigerian culture, as it recreates what takes place in society; though it portrays the culture in the negative by its exaggeration and over dramatization of human rituals, using grotesque scenes, as effective in money making.

Another important revelation which this study made is that though ritual killing for money is a phenomenon in the Nigerian society, its culture does not permit but abhors it. This was established in the test of research question six. Evidence to this assertion is found in the reaction of Nigerians to the celebrated “Otokoto Ritual Killing” by Chief Vincent Duru and his gang members in Owerri, Imo State of Nigeria. The matter generated so much controversy and public revulsion in 1996, resulting in riots and razing to the ground of Otokoto hotels, belonging to Duru, where human torsos were exhumed. Duru and his gang also faced the death penalty for their evil.

Although respondents’ were of the view that Nollywood’s portrayal of ritual killings for money in Nigeria are not enough to make someone go into ritual killing, there is however the possibility that some people who believe that engaging in human rituals can make them rich, might be tempted to re-enact what they have come to believe. And Nollywood movies may provide them with the step by step instruction of how to go about this evil act. This conclusion supports the work of Herbert Blumer where he found that participants reported “imitating the behavior they saw in movies and copying the actions of their favorite stars” (Hanson, 2005. p. 225). It may be for this reason that Defleur (1971:418) avers:

Even if a group of people are similarly exposed to a given communication and interpret it in similar ways, there is no guarantee that they will act uniformly in response to the communication.

Conclusion

Results of this study are consistent with that of several others recapitulated in the literature review. There is no doubt that Nollywood movies portray ritual scenes which viewers use as the basis for their personal opinion formation. Watching violent oriented movies particularly those that portray ritual killings for money making is not the major cause of rituals in Nigeria today. But then they exert little effect and this can lead some people to commit ritual murder.

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