

Priest, F & VP Chukwuma 2026, 'Violence against Children Accused of Witchcraft in Nigeria and Its Impact on Their Wellbeing: An Empirical Analysis of Cases in Akwa Ibom and Lagos States', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1 pp. 167-190

Violence against Children Accused of Witchcraft in Nigeria and its Impact on Their Wellbeing: an Empirical Analysis of Cases in Akwa Ibom and Lagos States

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Abstract

Witchcraft accusations have been on the rise across various regions of Nigeria. Unfortunately, those often accused are not just the adults, but also children. Rather than being protected, provided for, and loved, these children are accused and dehumanised. Some of these children have been abandoned on the streets, tortured with hot objects, had acid poured on them, and even been killed. Shockingly, their accusers are often not strangers, but close family members including parents, step-parents, siblings, and cousins. This study analyses three accounts of witchcraft accusations against children, the horrendous violence it attracted to the accused, and its impact on their wellbeing in order to identify factors responsible for witchcraft accusations and violence against children. A qualitative research method was adopted through face-to-face interviews and empirical analysis of documented cases of witchcraft accusations in Nigeria. The findings reveal that cultural beliefs, the portrayal of children as witches in movies, a prevailing witchcraft mentality, the teachings of religious institutions on witchcraft, and ignorance are key factors responsible for witchcraft accusations and violence against children. Furthermore, the findings

show that witchcraft accusations and violence against children affect them in five domains: their health, material wellbeing, education, risk, and relationships. The study recommends that the biblical passages that Nigerian pastors use to validate witchcraft accusations be interpreted within the context intended by the original writers, that movies depicting children as witches be banned or strictly regulated, and that those who interact with children in the five domains be trained and equipped to reduce the effects of accusation and violence on the children.

Introduction

The birth of a child in Africa is sacred and treasured. When a child is born to a family, parents and the people living in the community celebrate and praise God for the blessing given to the community. In West Africa, people value children for several reasons: They keep the family memory alive after they die. They are blessings that elevate parents' social status in the community. They help in farming activities like planting, harvesting, and managing households. And they grow into responsible adults who help care for their parents in old age.

Given that children are blessing to parents and the community, why is there an increasing rate of violence against children accused of witchcraft in contemporary times. Several studies on witchcraft accusations in Africa have revealed cases where husbands killed their wives; fathers, their children; children, their parents; and siblings, their sisters or brothers. Religious institutions have given false prophecies to accuse vulnerable children and women of witchcraft in order to take advantage of them for money, fame, molestation, and self-gratification. It has affected the well-being of the accused and caused the loss of many lives in Nigeria. (Salihu 2021, Eboiyehi 2017; Onuzulike 2013; Priest 2017).

Witchcraft accusations in Nigeria have affected the well-being of children. There is a need for both the government and members of the communities to rescue children who are violated by their accusers so that they may find relief and fulfil their destinies. The National Human Rights Commission of Nigeria (n.d.), saddled with the responsibility to ensure total compliance with the

Child's Rights Act (2003), recently reported that '24 out of 36 states of Nigeria have adopted the CRA as a state law. Therefore, twelve (12) states in Nigeria have yet to adopt the CRA in their laws of the 36 federation states'. The Child's Rights Act (2003) defines a child as any person under 18, who has the right to be protected and be free from discrimination, who is not to be subjected to any physical or emotional harm by parents and other members of the family, who should not be sexually harassed, and who should not be subjected to torture under any circumstances. Children have the right to be protected under Nigeria's legal framework. All citizens are expected to comply with the Child's Rights Act to save the lives of children.

Violence against children accused of Witchcraft is against the biblical understanding of children as a blessing from God: 'Children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; they will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate' (Ps. 127:3-5 NIV). Such violence is also contrary to the cultural and moral values of the African people. It defies the Child's Rights Act (2003), which was enacted in compliance with the provisions of the United Nations and the African Charter on the Right and Welfare of Child.

This paper seeks to respond to the problem of witchcraft accusations against children by examining the concept of witchcraft and the factors responsible for witchcraft accusations and violence against children, by discussing how witchcraft accusations and violence affect children's well-being, and by suggesting appropriate measures on how to deal with witchcraft accusations to protect the lives of children. According to Salihu (2021:2):

Witchcraft allegations and violence in Nigeria are under-researched. Therefore, urgent attention from the government, security agencies, civil society organisations, religious bodies, and academic researchers is needed to explore this phenomenon, understand the contributory factors to witchcraft-related violence, and recommend policies and approaches to address the issue.

The need to address witchcraft allegations and violence against children prompted this study to raise awareness of its effects on the children accused and recommend ways to tackle the challenges.

The methodology adopted in this study is a case study approach, which primarily focuses on three cases of witchcraft accusations against children in Nigeria. Both primary and secondary data were collected. Two of the three cases analysed were from online sources, while one was retrieved through face-to-face interviews. In the literature review, the researchers consulted relevant articles, textbooks, and online materials via Google Scholar to examine the various aspects of witchcraft accusations. Content and thematic analyses were adopted to interpret data appropriately on the subject of witchcraft accusations against children.

Explaining Witchcraft

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the term *Amosu* refers to a witch. There are two types of *Amosu*: a black and a white witch. Black witches are described as evil, antisocial, and malicious to people. In contrast, 'white witches are known in Igbo societies to be benevolent. In the Igbo worldview, white witches are believed to usually use their own vision and wisdom in different talents and in different fields to help neighbours and the community' (Ejeh and Ugwu 2021:19).

In Igbo cosmology, witchcraft is perceived as 'an art of those who have the "second sight". It refers to perceiving things hidden from the ordinary person through a spirit's power. It may be negative or positive depending on the individuals possessing such second sight and the use of it' (Ejeh and Ugwu 2021:19). Although a witch could be classified as good or bad, the indigenous logic about them is that they cause supernatural harm. Priest, Ngolo, and Stabell (2020:6) explain that the word 'witch' refers to something that is 'malevolent and powerful, the mysterious cause of misfortune and death in those around them. A related term for their practice or power is witchcraft, while "bewitch" describes their harmful act'. Thus, 'witch', 'witchcraft', and 'bewitch' are accusatory words used for those who harm others through diabolical means.

Witchcraft is associated with ‘supernatural activities believed to bring about negative or evil consequences for individuals and families’ (Akrong 2007:53). It is the skill or craft of usurping power to manipulate and control people, events, or situations through sorcery or magic. Mbiti (1975:165) defines witchcraft as ‘a manifestation of mystical forces which may be inborn in a person, inherited or acquired in various ways’. Evans-Pritchard (1937:347) describes it as ‘the belief that humans are capable of invoking, practising and exercising a psychic force for the primary purpose of hurting or killing other humans, and engaging in other malevolent activities’. These definitions portray witchcraft as being evil and harmful. Because witchcraft is deemed harmful, it enables Africans to explain why evil occurs. Kunhiyop (2008:377) state that the idea of witchcraft is ‘a serious philosophical attempt to deal with the question of evil’.

The Concept of Witchcraft in the Bible

In the Bible witchcraft is consistently presented as something opposed to God’s will. Both the Old and New Testaments address witchcraft explicitly, warning against practices like sorcery, divination, and seeking supernatural power outside of God. Some biblical passages are used to validate violence against children accused for witchcraft. For example, ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’ (Exod. 22:18, KJV). This passage has been misused as social justification for the destruction of persons accused of witchcraft. But as Madueme (2020:84) writes: ‘the biblical passages often cited by Africans do not support witch-demonology, i.e., the idea that the devil empowers witches to inflict harm on others and, therefore, that Christians should engage in deliverance ministries to liberate those in demonic captivity ... None of the standard passages support the distinctive African concept of witch causality (e.g., Exod. 7:11;22:18; Lev. 19:31, etc)’. A careful analysis of each of these passages shows that none of them sanctions the idea of an ‘evil person (male or female) said to harm others through inborn psychic power’ (Madueme 2020:84).

Cookey’s (2015) work provides a helpful analysis of Exodus 22:18, which is commonly misused. He provided the meaning of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin words for ‘witch’. In Hebrew, the word, which is feminine, refers to a woman who practices evil, a sorceress or a magician. The Greek work, a masculine plural, including diviners, enchanters, wizards, sorcerers, spell-casters, and

magicians. The Latin word, which is also a masculine plural, means ‘evildoers, those who do evil, obnoxious, and vile things’ (Cookey 2015:5) Cookey (2015:8) argues that the Hebrew term does not imply someone harming others through evil powers—an idea held by Nigerians and other Africans, but foreign to Biblical Hebrew culture and worldview—but rather refers to ‘magico-religious professionals, who, among other things, divine dreams and perform power display.’ (Cookey 2015, 8) The magico-religious professionals were not hidden entities but public entities known and consulted. For example, they were part of Pharaoh’s entourage of magico-religious professionals invited to display their power in Exodus 7:11. In Daniel 2:2, King Nebuchadnezzar asked his magicians to interpret his dream.

It is important to note that those referred to as ‘witches’ in the KJV and some other English Bible translations are ... never portray[ed] ... as causing misfortune, death, infertility, sickness, barrenness, and other types of physical harm to others through the use of invisible power, as Nigerians believe witches do (Priest 2017:55).

The Concept of Witchcraft in Nigeria

According to Priest (2017:53), many Nigerians define a witch as ‘someone assumed to possess and exercise an invisible power to kill or harm. Such persons are feared, avoided, condemned, punished, or even killed’. Children are not excluded from the definition of witches as evil. Stobart (2009) states that ‘witch means a child invested with evil forces to harm others’. These definitions show that some Nigerians believe that evil forces can empower children to perpetrate harm on people. Therefore, they should be severely punished upon exposure.

Witchcraft is further conceptualised as using ‘magic or enchantment to cause harm to another person, often invoked by making a pact with the devil or manipulating natural elements, like herbs and plants. Magic or witchcraft can be described as a practice that uses charms, spells, and rituals, to disrupt the natural order of events to achieve a desired outcome’ (Ally and Yew-Siong 2020:52). Magic is synonymous with witchcraft, and it involves the use of charms to harm innocent people.

Nyirongo (2018:86) notes how Africans ‘ascribe all the ills, misfortunes, sickness, accidents, tragedies, sorrows, dangers and confusing mysteries they encounter or experience to the mystical power in the hands of a sorcerer, witch or wizard’. We can conclude that in Nigeria, and much of Africa, witchcraft is seen as a means of altering the course of nature through the use of evil powers to accomplish personal gain and desire. A witchcraft accusation involves accusing a person of harming others through diabolical means. Those accused of witchcraft are often alleged to cause misfortune, illness, death, accidents, unemployment, and other adverse events.

Violence against Children accused of witchcraft in Nigeria

Violence against children is a global phenomenon that is attracting the attention of scholars, human rights activists, non-governmental organisations, Christian leaders, educators, and those concerned with children's welfare (Isioma 2019). The children targeted are not often from wealthy backgrounds. They are often not education, nor do they have educated parents. Instead, the accused are often those unable to defend themselves, the vulnerable, the poor, and those with uneducated parents.

Historically, women were often accused of being witches and wizards. But in recent times, children have also been accused of witchcraft. This is a relatively new phenomenon. When child-witches are discovered, they are subjected to excruciating violence such as rubbing chilli pepper in their eyes, being beating or abandoned, experiencing verbal abuse, psychological traumatising, sexual molestation, and emotional abuse. Many are exploited and neglected. Some even die. (Secker 2013; Onuzulike 2013; Isioma 2019; Adinkrah 2004).

Ally and Yew-Siong (2020) tell the story of Jeremiah, a young boy accused of witchcraft when the pastor's wife's claimed that he was responsible for the family's difficulties because he caused a loss of job and evil happenings in the home. At first, Jeremiah was locked up and starved for days in the pastor's house as part of the way of casting the evil spirit. When he returned home, his parents subjected him to another punishment: they tied a rope around him, dragged him to the school compound, and flogged him. For several weeks, Jeremiah was tortured by his father. His father, not satisfied with the torture, decided to pour fuel on his face to set him ablaze. Although Jeremiah escaped

death, he was left with permanent scars that will forever remind him of the witchcraft accusation from his parents.

Child abuse related to witchcraft accusations is not limited to Africa, but has also been documented among the African diaspora. Briggs and Whittaker (2018:4-6) narrate various horrific instances of violence against children related to witchcraft accusations in the UK. The abuse includes starvation to death, beating with sticks and metal bars, cuts with objects, rubbing chilli in the eyes, scrubbing their skin with sandpaper, forcing them to drink dangerous substances including their own their faeces, and drowning them. The perpetrators of this violence are often African migrants, including Christians, Muslims, and mixed religionists, residing in the UK.

Accusers of children of witchcraft include parents, relatives, pastors, and native doctors (Salihu 2021; Priest 2017; Ally and Yew-Siong 2020). Alleged child-witches are often accused of being stubborn, deceptive, withdrawn, manipulative, of talking in their sleep, of making a blood covenant with the devil, and of causing sickness, misfortune, death, or the loss of a job (Briggs 2002; Roper 2000).

Research reveals several factors that are responsible for violence against children including 'deformity, twins, premature infant, family structure, resources, poverty, family size, parental stress, history of abuse and violence in the home, culture, social conflicts, and even wars' (Ally and Yew-Siong 2020:51). These factors are often misunderstood and used to stigmatise children, leading people to suspect supernatural causes for unfortunate events. When families struggle with poverty or conflict, their children may receive less protection or support, making them easy scapegoats. In a culture that contains beliefs associating unusual traits or events with witchcraft., communities tend to accuse these vulnerable children of being witches, blaming them for misfortune as a way to explain things they cannot otherwise understand. This damages the children's reputation and often leads to further isolation, discrimination, or even violence against them.

Other factors that contribute to accusations against children include cultural beliefs that evil spirits can easily possess women and children due to their feeble nature (Afigbo 1991; Okonkwo et al. 2021). Furthermore, it is culturally

believed that children are prone to various forms of sickness and often demonstrate anti-social behaviours such as laziness, mood swings, stubbornness, withdrawal from people, sleepwalking, bed wetting, and soliloquy. Children who depict such behaviours are alleged to be witches. Isioma (2019:44) notes that 'it responds to changes and challenges in the social system that upsets and destabilises social order. Such challenges include political instability, economic regression, unhealthy challenges, family breakups, religious profiteering, ignorance, poverty, natural disasters, and individual and systemic failures, all of which are usually explained by people through the idiom of witchcraft'.

Other factors responsible for violence against children include religious institutions that label children as witches and validate suspicions and accusations of children as witches. (Priest 2017) Depiction of children as witches in Nigerian movies validates the witchcraft belief and charge against children, resulting in violence against them. (Eboiyehi 2017; Onuzulike 2013) Furthermore, a book by Helen Ukabio in which she detailed several indicators of a child-witch has greatly influenced witchcraft accusations against children. Ukabio's indicators include 'screaming at night, always feverish, lack of appetite, unusual boldness, lying, stubbornness, being destructive like spoiling electrical appliances in the house' (Ukpabio 1996:76).

Reasons for witchcraft accusations include ignorance, governance, and inadequate health services (Onuzulike 2013), as well as 'failure of the churches in authentic prophetic ministry, unemployment, youths restiveness, as well as the proliferation of churches which equal commercialisation of religion and the self-enrichment) of the purveyors of prayers and miracles for money and prosperity in Southeast Nigeria' (Essien and Ben 2011:48).

Evidence of witchcraft accusations and violence against children in Nigeria

This section describes three cases of witchcraft accusations against children from River and Lagos states in Nigeria.

Case 1—‘They Flogged Us with Hot Machete to Admit We’re Witches’: 3 Orphans

Imabong, the eldest of the siblings, a 13-year-old girl, explained that she and her sisters are not witches, but that their grandmother forced them to confess that they were. After their parents died—their father in 2014 and their mother in 2016—they dropped out of school. Imabong said that they did not belong to any witchcraft world but are just normal children. Their grandmother made them sell sachet water each day, and they were only allowed to eat once a day after selling.

According to Imabong, their grandmother would bring people, including a man called Uncle Aniekan, to punish them with a hot machete. He would heat the machete in the fire and then flog them with it. They were beaten and pressured to admit that they were responsible for their grandmother’s sickness, even though they were not. Out of fear and intimidation, they eventually said they were witches. (Uchechukwu 2018).

Case 2—Child-witches’ parents severely tortured

A 40-year-old man named John Friday Akpan from Akwa Ibom State was arrested after allegedly acting on the advice of an herbalist called Okokon. The herbalist had branded Akpan’s two children, 12-year-old Elisha and 6-year-old Esther, as witches responsible for his poverty. Believing this, Akpan subjected the children to horrific abuse. He nailed them to a plank and locked them in a thatched hut, leaving them without food for days.

Akpan said that the herbalist told him that his children had taken his money to their master in the witchcraft world and therefore did not deserve mercy. After weeks of starvation, the children were left emaciated and filthy, resembling starving children in famine-stricken regions. They later explained that they survived only because one of their half-sisters, Peace, secretly brought water to the hut whenever their father and stepmother were away from home.

Akpan believed that his children were blocking his progress in life. He claimed that they had tied his prosperity to the witchcraft world and complained that since he started working in his workshop, he had achieved nothing.

The children said the family had lived in Akpabuyo, where their father had initially enrolled them in a private school in Ikot Nkanda. But after their mother died and Akpan married a new wife, Iquo, things turned for the worse. According to the children, their stepmother told them that a herbalist had revealed that a former neighbour in Akpabuyo had once given them food laced with something that turned them into birds at night, allowing them to steal their father's money and deliver it to their master in the witchcraft world.

Elisha was accused of taking 4,000 Naira, while Esther was accused of taking 2,000 Naira. Their father and stepmother became furious, insisting the children had taken the money to their supposed master. From that point, the beatings intensified, and the children were frequently denied food as punishment for an alleged crime rooted in fear and superstition rather than fact. (Unah 2018).

Case 3—Babalawos (traditional healers or native doctors)

Ife is an 11-year-old girl who lives with her parents in Lagos. Her body carries many scars from years of beatings by her parents, pastors, and *babalawo* (a traditional healer or native doctor). She explains that her father and mother regularly beat her and gave her the marks all over her body. They often took her to spiritual churches or to the *babalawo* where she was also beaten because they believed she was a witch.

When asked how she came to see herself as a witch, Ife said she believed she was born that way. From the time she was very small, she heard voices in her head telling her to hurt people. Her parents constantly called her a witch, and whenever anything goes wrong in the family, they blamed her. They accused her of killing her two brothers and her sister, even though she is not sure what really happened to them. When her father's business started failing and her mother's work became unstable, they told her it was her witchcraft activities that were destroying their livelihoods. She did not deny their accusations, because each time she tried to resist, they would either beat her severely or take her back to the *babalawo* who flogged her and tied her to a tree without food for days.

Ife went through a brutal ordeal at the hands of both pastors and *babalawo* who claimed that they were trying to cast out the witchcraft spirit from her.

She describes the experience as terrible. Her parents threatened to send her back to these pastors and *babalawo* if she refused to do whatever they wanted. At one spiritual church, the pastor declared that she was a powerful witch who controlled many others. She was kept there for two weeks. On some days, they tied her with ropes and flogged her with canes. They gave her black substances to drink, saying it would drive out the witches. Sometimes she was denied food for almost three days and still beaten relentlessly.

She recalls that the time with the *babalawo* was the worst. The man repeatedly beat her and tied her to a tree at night, leaving her terrified. At times, he touched her breasts and put his hand on her private parts. When she resisted, he threatened to beat her so badly that if she died, no one would question him. Ife felt unable to tell her parents, believing they would not trust her or would simply say that her witchcraft was responsible for what was happening. The abuse and hopelessness pushed her to contemplate killing herself just to escape the suffering.

When asked directly whether, deep inside, she truly believed she was a witch, Ife's answer showed deep confusion and distress. She said she does not know whether she is a witch or not. The constant accusations, beatings, and repeated labelling by her parents made her feel as though she must be a witch, even though she had never consciously done anything that would prove it to her. Many of the things of which she was accused sound strange to her, and she cannot remember doing them. Yet she has learned to accept the label to avoid further beatings and being taken back to the pastors and *babalawo* who hurt her. (Akpata, 2015)

Case Analysis and Discussion

Profile of children accused of witchcraft

The children accused of witchcraft ranged from three to thirteen years of age. All were living in precarious situations. The children in the first case study were orphaned. They began to live with their HIV-positive grandmother who accused them grandchildren of being responsible for her sickness. They were forced to drop out of school.

In the second case study, the children lived with their stepmother and father after the loss of their mother at a tender age. The stepmother claimed that a herbalist revealed to her that a neighbour had offered the children food contaminated with witchcraft. After eating the food, the children metamorphosed into birds and took their father's money to their master in the witchcraft world, who made their father poor.

Although the child in the final case study lived with both parents, their lives were precarious. The parents had lost two sons and a daughter, the father had lost his job, and the mother's business was shaky. The child was accused of all the unfortunate incidents in the family.

The profile of children accused of witchcraft from the data concurs with the literature that the 'children accused of witchcraft are often pre-adolescent or adolescent, vulnerable and living in socially precarious circumstances' (Cimpric 2010:16). Furthermore, it aligns with several studies and surveys that identify indicators of children who are particularly accused of witchcraft. These indicators include:

- Children who have lost both parents and are sent to live with another relative.
- Children who have lost one parent and whose surviving parent has remarried. Disagreements with the step-parent may be the origin of an accusation.
- Children who live with a physical disability (any physical abnormality: large head, swollen belly, red eyes, etc.), those with a physical illness (epilepsy, tuberculosis, etc.) or psychological disorder (autism or Down Syndrome, etc., even those who stutter) or exceptionally gifted children.
- Children who show any unusual behaviour, such as stubbornness, aggression, thoughtfulness, withdrawal, or laziness. Witchcraft discourse defines a range of behaviours that appear unusual or abnormal within a specific context. (Cimpric 2010:17)

Unsurprisingly, in the case studies all of the accused children are from economically-challenged backgrounds, which is a Bartholomew notes (2023:4): ‘Accusations and abuse often took place in socio-economically challenging circumstances, coupled with highly enmeshed hierarchical relationships between the family, faith and other connected communities’.

Theme 1: Propagators of Child Witch Accusations

The data revealed that protagonists of witchcraft accusations and violence against children are often family members or religious leaders. Family members included both parents, a father and stepmother, a grandmother, and other relatives. Religious leaders included a pastor and a Babalawo (native doctor). This finding agrees with the literature that those who accuse children of witchcraft are often family members or religious leaders. The actions of mothers accusing their children of witchcraft and harming them are a radical shift from ‘a deeply rooted cultural model where women are considered creators, mothers, child-raisers, and by extension, as forces of regeneration for the socio-cultural fabric’ (Cimpric 2010:56).

Children are vulnerable and powerless because they are unable to protect and defend themselves. In Africa, they cannot stand up to their parents or talk back to them, because it is culturally unacceptable and considered disrespectful. When the accused children tried denying the accusations, they were beaten until they confessed to being witches or wizards. Sadly, their accusers were those who should have defended and protected the children. Instead, they became the children's worst nightmare. These children, as Briggs and Whittaker (2018) write, were from complex family structures where unhealthy, weak, hostile, and distant relationships existed between them and their primary caregivers.

The data equally demonstrates that some pastors and native doctors label children witches to explain family misfortune, hardship, poverty, or even death. These actions can be described as opportunistic, evil, unkind, negligent, and carefree. ‘Witchcraft accusations are exploited by revivalist, charismatic, or Pentecostal churches. Their pastor-prophets fight against witchcraft in the name of God, identifying witches through visions and dreams and then offering treatment – divine healing and exorcism – to the supposed witches. This “spiritual” work, often of a violent nature, reinforces beliefs in witchcraft and

increases accusations.’ (Cookey 2015:12) This was observed in the third case study where the pastor diagnosed Ife as a witch through a vision and offered treatment via exorcism by beating and flogging the child.

Witchcraft accusations and persecution of those accused have become sources of income generation for both some pastors and native doctors. Cookey (2015:12) argues that ‘the persecution of witches has become a lucrative “business” for many pastor-prophets. The actions of the pastor-prophets “complement” those of traditional healers who also fight against the malevolent forces of witchcraft by detecting supposed witches’. There is no biblical account in which children, elderly widows, or anyone else has been accused of being responsible for the misfortunes of others through supernatural evil powers. This serves as a critical test to determine whether small children or elderly widows are genuinely responsible for the evils of which they are accused.

Theme 2: Description of violence experienced by accused child-witches

In the case studies, different kinds of violence were carried out against the children accused of being witches. This included being beaten with a red-hot machete, flogged with kiboko and sharp objects, starved, threatened with death, forced to drink harmful potions, held captive, neglected, physical restrained, abandoned, separated from relatives, and abused sexually. Ife narrated how the Babalawo (native doctor) who meant to exorcise the witchcraft spirit from her would touch her breast and insert his finger in her private part. If she protested, he would threaten her and beat her, claiming that if she dies, nobody will question him. She was an 11-year-old child. Such abuse is physical, emotional, and sexual (Bartholomew 2023:100).

The violence described in the case studies agrees with other studies that revealed similar and more violence faced by children accused of witchcraft (BBC 2005; Barker, 2009; Dein, 2009). Briggs and Whittaker (2018:6) describe similar violence against children accused of witchcraft, including being ‘inflicted neglect and physical abuse, beating, burning, starvation and cutting, semi-strangulation, being tied up, and having to sleep in a bath... Children were isolated, not being allowed to eat meals with the rest of the family, and abandoned’. Though their work was conducted in the United Kingdom, the findings are similar to those of this study. It implies that cultural and religious

beliefs, including worldviews, may not be altered simply by migration. These diaspora Africans, although they live in a culture different from their own, still practice acts unacceptable in their host country. One encouragement is that such practices are outlawed in the UK and, whereas they are often accepted and even empowered in Africa.

Theme 3: Effects of Witchcraft accusation on children's well-being

The study data showed that witchcraft accusations and violence affect children's well-being and has a lasting impact on their development and lives. These effects include physical abuse, psychological and emotional abuse, discrimination, neglect, increased vulnerability, and self-doubt (Stop Child Witch Accusations, n.d.).

Physical abuse includes 'severe beatings, burns caused by fire or acid, poisoning, attempts to bury the child alive, having nails driven into their heads, cutting and imprisonment. In some cases, the extreme nature of this abuse means that it amounts to torture'(Stop Child Witch Accusations, n.d.). In this study, the children were whipped with a cane and sharp objectives and tied to a tree in a bid to exorcise the witchcraft spirit from them. These actions left several marks on the children's bodies, including swollen faces. The effects of this kind of violence on a child's physical appearance can result in low self-esteem.

Psychological and emotional abuse. All the children in the case studies were isolated from family and from society for weeks in an attempt to exorcise the witchcraft spirit. They were labeled witches and stigmatised, which affected their psychological and emotional well-being. One child stated that she was confused by the accusations and no longer willed to live. 'Due to the exclusion and isolation of the children from their family and community and the labelling of them as "evil" and "destructive", and the lack of respect and the lack of dignity experienced by the children', their psychology of self-esteem and emotional well-being were affected (Stop Child Witch Accusations, n.d.).

Discrimination includes denying children access to medical treatment, education, social welfare services, and to religious and family or social life. In the case studies, children dropped out of school to hawk sachets water on the street, were denied access to medical treatment after being injured with a hot

machete, and were denied access to family and social life while locked up in a room by a pastor and tied to a tree by a native doctor. This violence affected their outlook on life, creating doubt, fear, and loneliness.

Neglect includes withholding food, water, sanitation facilities, and clothing. All of the children in the case studies were denied food and water for many days, accompanied by beatings. It resulted in emaciation, sickness, and malnourishment, affecting their health. It also created a lack of sense of belonging, acceptance, trust, protection, and love. The child in the this case study could not inform her parents of her experiences with the native doctor and pastor for fear of being beaten again and accused further. She blurted out sadly, 'I could not tell my daddy and mummy because they would not believe me, or they would say that it is my witchcraft that is causing it'

Increased vulnerability. The children accused of witchcraft were vulnerable and, therefore, were easily taken advantage of. The native doctor sexually abused one, a father and stepmother abandoned two, and three were hawking on the street. Witchcraft accusations increase the vulnerability of children as they are left unprotected, defenceless, and not provided for, which can lead them to the streets and to join gangs. Stop Child Witch Accusations (n.d.) affirms this finding, stating that 'many children who are accused of witchcraft end up on the streets, as they are either abandoned by their parents or other caregivers or run away from home to escape the abuse. Once on the streets, they are vulnerable to sexual abuse and rape, involvement in gangs, trafficking, drugs and child labour'.

Self-doubt. Witchcraft accusations and violence against children breeds self-doubt and confusion. The child in the third case study reported feeling confused about her life: she did not know whether she was a witch. Her parents' frequent accusations of killing her siblings and causing financial difficulties in the family led her to believe that she was a witch. As a result, she started acting like one, claiming to hear voices in her head telling her to harm people. However, most of the things of which she was accused were strange, and she could not remember doing them. This resonates with Anane-Agyei's (2009) research, where 14-year-old Sebastian who was charged with spirit possession over and over started behaving like a possessed person, throwing himself against the wall.

Conclusion

Witchcraft accusations and violence against children in Nigeria is disturbing. Gifted children are being subjected to unethical treatment that affects their well-being. The accusations and violence are often caused by cultural beliefs, misinterpretation of behaviour, and self-interest to gratify desires. Children are the future of the nation. The damage to their mental health and physical bodies is substantial, which has a significant impact on the country's development and progress. The witchcraft ideology must be discredited through proper education and advocacy, and the perpetrators of these accusations and violence must be punished.

Recommendation

Based on the outcome of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Institutions, such as churches, family homes, hospitals, counselling centres, and police stations, should be places of refuge for children with spiritual problems and mental and physical health issues. All institutions should collaborate to rehabilitate and rescue children with difficulties. The family is the first contact for children. Parents and siblings should protect children. They should desist from labelling any family member as a witch or a wizard and torturing them unlawfully. Those with spiritual problems should be prayed for so that the power of Christ may free them. Some children may be suffering from health challenges that require medical attention. Pastors should send such cases to medical practitioners for medical help rather than taking the law into their own hands to maltreat innocent children with any form of violence.
2. Movies depicting children as witches should be banned by the National Film and Video Censors Board that regulates film production in Nigeria because what people watch can influence their actions in real life. Some of these movies promote violence against those accused of witchcraft. Also, academics specialising in media studies should research the impact of films portraying children as witches. They can

advocate for policy changes with regulatory bodies to promote responsible content that does not incite violence or perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

3. Governments are instituted to protect and care for all citizens. Cruel treatment against children, such as torture, starvation, verbal abuse, sexual molestation, exploitation, abandonment, and death should be condemned. Nigeria's leaders should rise to the task of defending the marginalised and persecuted individuals and religious institutions that perpetrate evil against children. They should implement the laws on domestic violence against children.
4. Academia – Theological education plays a major role in training pastors, missionaries, and evangelists in accurate interpretations of scripture. This is accomplished by incorporating critical studies of biblical hermeneutics and addressing misinterpretations of scriptural texts in curricula. Educators who train pastors and church leaders must teach them to interpret scripture responsibly. Workshops, seminars, and courses can be organised to raise awareness about the harmful implications of misusing religious texts, especially passages that Nigerian pastors use in validating witchcraft accusations.

In addressing these issues, academics can also collaborate with local churches to develop programs that promote children's rights, protect children, and ensure appropriate consequences for violations of government law. These efforts will keep everyone informed about the dangers of witchcraft accusations and encourage proactive measures to combat injustice, fostering an environment of peace and human dignity.

Furthermore, academia plays an important role in raising awareness about witchcraft accusations among children through distributing educational materials and pamphlets on how to protect children and how to seek government intervention to rescue children unfairly accused of witchcraft. More research on witchcraft involving children should be supported financially by higher institutions. This support can lead to greater community awareness, encouraging legal measures to

help children experiencing psychological trauma caused by witchcraft accusations, allowing them to find relief and healing through medical intervention.

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