

“CHILD WITCHCRAFT” ABUSE IN NIGERIA: SUSPICION, TRAUMA, HOSTILITY
OR FEAR AND THEIR LEGACIES

Rose Onwanma Madu¹

¹ Federal Ministry of Information, Radio House² Herbert Macaulay Way, Area 10, Abuja,
Nigeria

Abstract: In Nigeria, as in other African countries, there is a deep belief in witchcraft practice and this belief cuts across various ethnic groups and communities.

Victims of the unproven accusation of witchcraft practice are usually babies and children, who inevitably, are grossly abused, psychologically devastated, and in many cases even get lynched.

The fear of “child witches” is relatively new in Nigeria and awareness of the phenomenon dates back to the 1990s following the emergence of churches whose “self proclaimed ‘deliverance’ pastors combine traditional beliefs with evangelical preaching” (**BBC News, Thursday, 04 December, 2008**).

This paper aims to analyse suspicion, trauma, hostility or fear and their legacies, associated with “child witchcraft” accusations, assess the role or interventions of Government, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and Faith-Based Organisations in stemming the unproven accusations, and eliminating the abuse on children.

Witchcraft is generally perceived to be “a spirit spell transferred to a person through food and drink. The soul of the person who eats the spell will leave the body to be initiated in a gathering of “witches” and “wizards”. This process is usually referred to as “meeting” or “sailing” among some ethnic groups in Nigeria. “The initiated person possesses power to wreak havoc, cause diseases ...” (**Stepping Stones, Nigeria, 2008**).

In order to address the issue of suspicion, trauma, hostility or fear and their legacies as regards ‘child witchcraft’ geared towards the elimination of the abuse on Nigerian children, a well planned and packaged communication strategy aimed at achieving behavioural and social change among community members, remains paramount. Communication for Development (C4D) is vital in ensuring participation and understanding of communities in issues which concern them. This enhances the realization of desired goals.

C4D involves evidence-based research studies (Knowledge, Attitude and Practice, KAP Study or Baseline) that should be undertaken before developing a Communication Strategy

Access to Television, Radio (recently Community Radio), Social media, Internet and GSM phones is high nationally. A multimedia approach is important in disseminating information messages to change people’s attitude and belief.

Social media promotes information creation, sharing and exchange. Most organisations now deploy social media in sharing information on diverse issues. My Ministry for instance, has a website to which search engines direct internet traffic. The Minister commented that the additional deploying of social media – Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, etc to engage the you and the Diaspora was “much more justified and rewarding to communication efforts” during the 2012 fuel subsidy crisis in Nigeria (**Maku, L, 2013**), and on the negative media report on polio vaccine effects, resulting to “zero percent of new polio infections” in 1st Quarter, 2013 (**Muhammad, Ado, 2013**). Social media are being deployed in terrorism battle too. Videos and photographs on NGOs’ websites exposed the “child witches” issue now attracting Interventions.

Partnership with NGOs and FBOs enhances monitoring and evaluation of interventions.

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Community Dialogue, Town Crier, Churches and Mosques are also channels.

Introduction

Witchcraft belief is a universal phenomenon but over the years, the issue of witchcraft especially the “child witches” have constantly been in the news in Nigeria especially in the Southern geo-political zones.

Deep belief in witchcraft is usually borne out superstition, suspicion or accusation.

Oftentimes, parents and family members attribute their misfortunes, sickness and deaths to the handiwork of witches and wizards who are mainly children. Most of the children tagged “witches” end up “abandoned and abused in the streets” (**CNN, November 08, 2008**).

Tagging a child as “witch” violates his rights and is an abuse on his/her personality. The Child Rights Act, 2003 which has been adopted by 23 States in Nigeria clearly stated “the rights of children to protection against any form of abuse, and restores their confidence and self esteem, improves their status; enables children living with disabilities; to enjoy their rights fully, and provides special care and protection” (**Child Rights Act, 2003**).

Proliferation of Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria is on increase each day, some of whose pastors mix traditional beliefs with the Christian teachings with the sole aim of making money from their faithful. Some of the parents and care givers who have deeply embraced the teachings of “powerful deliverance” pastors have recently developed stronger beliefs in the existence of “child witches”. Usually, these pastors who claim to “deliver” the children of ‘witchcraft’ in violent exorcism go on with no action taken against them“(Global Post **January 23, 2012**)

The mere accusation of a person as a witch results to treating the person as an outcast or a demon. The person is usually ostracized by the community and often strays to an unknown community. It is a very serious matter “as the witch is culturally understood to be epitome of evil and causes all misfortunes, diseases and death” (**Mbiti, 1975 and Moreau, 1990**).

‘Child Witchcraft’ Abuse In Nigeria

In the 1990s, belief in “child’ witchcraft assumed an alarming proportion in Nigeria, especially in the Southern geo-political zones. There were reported cases of children branded as ‘witches’. In Akwa Ibom and Cross River States, for instance, an aid group reported that 15,000 ‘children witches’ were abandoned and abused on the streets (**CNN, November 08, 2008**). These ‘child witches’ were traumatized due to the violent treatment meted on them. They were discriminated against, their bodies sliced with knives while some were bathed in acid, and in some cases, buried alive or even poisoned to death.

The advent of Pentecostal churches has really compounded the problem because the so called ‘powerful deliverance pastors’ combine Nigerian traditional beliefs with Christianity. Through ‘violent prayers’ accused ‘children witches’ are subjected to ‘deliverance’ sessions in order to ‘cast out demons’ possessing them. Usually, fear and intense deliverance session force the branded ‘children witches’ to ‘confess’ to save themselves of continued torture. “These evangelical pastors “make money out of fear, providing exorcism services for their parents and their communities” (**The Observer, 9 November, 2007**).

In 2008, a man named ‘Bishop’ was arrested in a church at Ibaka, Akwa Ibom State, South-South geo-political zone, for allegedly killing 110 ‘child witches’, claiming that “he has killed the witches inside them but not the children” (**BBC News, 2008; Telegraph, 8 November, 2008**). Pastors in their evangelical messages contribute in building deeper belief in witchcraft among members of communities to the extent that these children are often beaten to death to make them confess. Despite the trauma a “child witch” is subjected to during the deliverance, he/she does not easily integrate with his family later. The witch

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stigma remains indelible even among her relations. Relations of accused “children witch” resort to taking them to unknown destinations, ostracize and abandon them because of the perceived ‘havoc’ they have caused in their lives.

Religion, Tradition and Child Witchcraft Abuse

Religion is described as the “opium” of the people. Opium acts as a pain reliever and helps in relaxing one’s mind. Traditional beliefs contribute much to the way citizens or members of communities perceive, react to and/or do things. In Africa there is generally, a deep belief in witchcraft.

Witchcraft accusations in Africa are “a very serious matter as the witch is culturally understood to be epitome of evil and causes of all misfortunes, diseases and death” (**Mbiti, John, 1975; and Moreau, A. Scott, 1990**).

In Nigeria, most people have become too ‘religious’ with the advent of Pentecostal churches believed to be where “problems of life are immediately solved”. There seems to be a mass exodus of worshippers referred to as ‘believers’, from the orthodox churches (Protestant, Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, etc) to these Pentecostal churches since the 1990s. These new generation churches utilize phrases such as ‘deliverance’, “possessed” to create or instil fear on people. Every challenge, misfortunes, deaths, diseases, barrenness, amongst others, are therefore, attributed to the ‘handiwork’ of ‘witches’ or ‘wizards’.

Contrary to the preaching of Jesus Christ in the Holy Bible, the ‘powerful’ Pentecostal pastors combine them with traditional beliefs which include witchcraft. Their messages emphasize “destruction, calamities and deaths brought by ‘children witches’ to their families and their power to cast spells or initiate others” (**The Telegraph, November 08, 2008**).

Incidences of ‘child witches’ accusations have been alarming and have attracted interventions such as provision of shelter by Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Development Partners. According to reports, 150 branded ‘child witches’ in Akwa Ibom State were lucky to be provided with shelter by Humanist Association for Peace and Social Tolerance Advancement (**Shelter Nigeria, 2003**). Also, Child’s Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN), an NGO established through the funding by United Kingdom, UK Charity Stones, Nigeria, through its research, stated that the number of ‘child witches’ stood at 15,000 in 2008. Such statistics really attracted interventions from government, NGOs, CBOs, amongst others.

Traditional belief seems to be static while every other day-today endeavour is dynamic. Most people tied to deep belief in witchcraft subject the tagged ‘child witches’ to torture, abuse, beating with sharp objects and abandonment in unknown places which is a violation and abuse of a child’s. A rescued ‘child witch’ in Akwa Ibom State reportedly commented: “every night he (my father) will tie my legs and hands and hang me on the roof while beating me with wire and sticks ... took me and dropped me in a place I did not now. I began to walk around streets ...” (**Naija Gists.com**).

Belief in ‘child witchcraft’ has given rise to coined phrases originating from “extremist evangelical deliverance pastors”. These include “demonic attack”, ‘sent’ misfortunes, diseases, illnesses and failures. Gullible faithful or worshippers thus, continue to seek for the pastors’ assistance for any perceived attacks by ‘witches’ through violent prayers.

Researches have shown that the belief in ‘child witches’ in Nigeria is linked to the “widespread viewing of Nigerian home movies popularly known as Nollywood, which promotes superstitious beliefs such as child witchcraft” (**Stepping Stone, Nigeria, 2008**). One example of such movies is titled “End of the Wicked” produced by Helen Akpabio, a self-styled prophetess of Liberty Gospel Church, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. Apart from the movie,

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she also wrote a book on how parents could identify a witch. In an interview, she said that “her teachings and film could not child abuse” (**Stepping Stones, Nigeria, 2008**).

Tackling Suspicion, Trauma, Hostility Or Fear and Their Legacies Towards Eliminating ‘Child Witchcraft’ Abuse In Nigeria

Ignorance and superstitious belief such as witchcraft breed suspicion. Parents and other members of the family persistently suspect or blame other people, mostly children, for being architects of their failure and other life misfortunes. Mere accusation of some one of witchcraft automatically, ostracizes him from his people.

Branded ‘child witches’ for instance, deprived of the opportunity for self explanations, are traumatized as a result of violent and wicked actions their parents and relations subject them to. Such children become very fearful that they confess to atrocities which they do not comprehend.

Poverty and illiteracy especially among the rural population encourage deep belief in witchcraft. The poor and those faced with life challenges often would spend their last money to access worship centres in order to seek religious solutions. Religious profiteering is therefore, on the increase among communities. ‘Powerful’ pastors through their teachings results in parents showcasing hostility on children. They instil fear on both the parents and the accused ‘child witches’ to wrongly enrich themselves in the name of ‘deliverance’ or casting out demons. Some parents resort to severe beating and abuse on their children and in some cases would prefer their deaths.

Abandonment, deprivation of rights, abuse and violence against children are further perpetuated by this belief in ‘child witchcraft’. ‘Child witches’ are tortured, maimed and beaten to death. Integration with their family members poses much problem, even after their deliverance. They are stigmatized and discriminated against because of the perception that they possess demonic powers. As a result, the population of street children is on the increase. “Street children and the ‘Almajiris’ account for 10 million of the nation’s population of over 167 million people” (**Education Survey, 2011; National Housing and Population Census, 2006**).

Branding or accusing a child to be a “witch” is a violation of his/her rights, an abuse and violence against him/her. Fortunately, Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (CRWC) and the Child Rights Act passed in 2003. Though only twenty-three (23) out of the thirty-six (36) States have adopted the Child Rights Act, efforts towards its implementation have been encouraging. For instance, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme, under the Transformation Agenda and the National Vision 20:2020, makes it compulsory and free for every Nigerian child to undergo Nursery, Primary and up to Junior Secondary School Education. Every child benefits, including abandoned, street children and children with disabilities. The abandoned branded ‘child witches’ in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States are being taken care of under this scheme and their traumas, stigmatization and fear addressed.

The National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), a parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Information, is a regulatory body for films and video produced by the Nollywood industry. Partnership between the agency and the private sector is yielding remarkable results in ensuring that cultural or traditional beliefs that could militate against the well being of the citizens, especially children, are edited out before the release of such films and video to market or distribution outlets. Also, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is not resting on its oars. People abused; those whose rights are violated or community members

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who observe that someone's rights are being violated, freely lodge such complaints to any of their branches and website in the 36 States for prompt interventions.

The National Agency for Prevention of Trafficking In Persons (NAPTIP) continues to beam its searchlight on the six Zones ensuring the integration of abandoned children with their parents to protect them from being victims to child traffickers.

Communication for Development (C4D) is evidence-based and thus encourages research studies such as Baseline and Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP). Such researches are being jointly undertaken by government and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to unravel the 'child witches' abuse in communities prone to such practice. As a result, community members can now speak out through text messages and social media when they notice such practices.

Campus Radio which is a type of Community Radio now transmits in most of Nigerian universities. The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), a broadcasting regulatory agency, have commenced the issuance of licenses (free of charge), for setting up of Community Radio stations. This has added a great boost to community broadcasting and would enhance the eradication of 'child witchcraft' abuse. Community broadcasting is "broadcasting for, by and about the community, whose ownership and management is representative of the community, which pursue a social development agenda, and which is non-profit" (**The African Charter on Broadcasting, 2001**).

Access to GSM phones with Internet, television, radio, video, social media has facilitated communication among communities in Nigeria. Apart from the Radio and Television, people can browse the internet to get information more easily and faster. Social media in particular, have contributed immensely to the creation, sharing and exchange of information on various issues in Nigeria. In a paper presented at workshop organised for Information Communication Technologist, Social media was defined as a "mutual comfortable exchange of information" (**Oladele, Rotimi, 2013**). Their tools are readily available to the public at little or no cost – just own a telephone handset! Social media is being accessed by a vast population of Nigerians both in urban and rural communities because who own GSM phones.

Social media were successfully deployed to mobilise youths for protest during the 2012 fuel subsidy crisis which paralysed commercial activities in Nigeria, and to trigger a demonstration titled "Occupy Nigeria", led by Adams K. Unaji, a member of the Civil Liberty Organisation, as a follow up to the protest in Nigerian Missions in United Kingdom, Europe and North America.

Deployment of Social media is yielding remarkable results in mobilising the Youth to join the Youth Joint Task Force (Youth JTF), an association of Borno State youth volunteers was formed to partner with the Joint (Military) Task Force (JTF), to rid the State of terrorists (**National Television Authority, NTA News, 01 June, 2013**). The Youth JTF is succeeding in arresting Boko Haram members who they hand over to the JTF.

Furthermore, the acceptance of immunization of children against childhood preventable diseases: polio, Diphtheria, Tuberculosis, etc is attributed to the deployment of social media alongside with other forms of media – television, radio, Community radio, GSM phone, amongst others. Through a multimedia approach therefore, messages discouraging 'child witchcraft' abuse would be disseminated and feedback garnered to measure the gaps, successes of interventions.

In addition, Faith and Community-based Organisations (FBOs and CBOs) have critical roles to play in ensuring their members; especially Christian pastors, adhere to preaching devoid of superstitious beliefs. For example, a coalition of churches in a meeting with an NGO which campaigns against child witchcraft abuse stated that "it is an absolute scandal how the teachings of Jesus are skewed to commit 'child abuse'; the practices contrast with the original teaching" (**Battarbee, Lynda, 2009**)

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CBOs should equally maintain a common front to de-emphasize cultural/traditional beliefs that would undermine the rights of children. The organization comprises members of the community members, especially the children.

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