

IN THE NAME OF THE GOSPEL? PENTECOSTALISM, CHILD WITCHCRAFT, AND DELIVERANCE IN NIGERIAN CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

As this research is still in process at this stage, comprehensive key findings cannot be given until the completion of the fieldwork. Hence, in this paper, the theoretical approach of the research will be covered. First, I introduce the concept of witchcraft accusations against children to provide a background for the continuous deluge of Pentecostalism in Africa, notably in Lagos and Akwa Ibom States in Nigeria. Its belief and praxis of exorcism take a new pathetic form through inculcating children as witches and evil possessed. Second, I highlight the several factors of child vulnerability for an accusation, the indicators of the abuse, and the devastating effects, such as torture, family rejection, bodily harms, psychological damage, and labelling, on the child.

Key words: Child Witches, Disabilities, Exorcism, Witchcraft – Beliefs and Practices.

INTRODUCTION

Belief in witchcraft is alive, even said to be thriving, in many African societies (Hallen & Sodipo, 1997, p. 95). Nigeria is no exception. This paper focuses on Nigeria for two reasons. First, it is one of the African countries where witchcraft accusations against children is especially prominent. Second, Pentecostalism and its doctrines have succeeded in carving out a significant, dominant position in Nigeria such that the movement has the largest followers on the African continent.

The research is significant because it focuses on the relatively new and growing problem of accusations of child witchcraft that has not been studied in depth before. Some research has been conducted on accusations of child witchcraft within Pentecostalism in the United Kingdom, but no research to date has considered the problem of accusations of child witchcraft in the context of Pentecostalism in Nigeria.

The phenomenon of accusation of child witchcraft in Nigeria linked to the rise in occultism in Nigerian churches, in the context of socio-political and economic problems, is a relative new worrying trend. As at the time of the documentary film *Saving Africa's Witch Children* (Gavan & Valk Van der, 2008), it was estimated that fifteen thousand children in the Niger Delta have been branded as witches or wizards. To Ikpe-Itauma (Gavan & Valk Van der, 2008) "5 to 6 children are branded as witches every day". Witchcraft accusations and inculcation used to be levelled against adults, particularly women. The more recent shift to accusing children of witchcraft significantly denotes child maltreatment and compromises the psychosocial well-being of the child. Article 24 (3) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) speculates on the state's obligation to protect the child from practices that cause significant harm. To quote Geschiere, Africans seem so "obsessed with the supposed exuberance of new forms of occult aggression that they use the term *witchcraft* as a sort of passe-partout for any perceived danger." Pentecostalism (Marshall, 2009) offers the sole escape from these unseen dangers from witchcraft and other occults.

Being a witch covers a multitude of meanings—causing harm as well as possessing gifts of clairvoyance and healing. A belief in spirit possession and witchcraft may not necessarily lead to harmful practices (Metropolitan Police Services Project Violet Team, 2012, p. 2) as witchcraft can be a way of protecting the family (Aguilar Molina, 2003-2005, p. 19). Is a witch, then, someone who uses sorcery or magic (Illes, 2004, p. 6) mainly for diabolical means? Goodman et al. (1998, p. 279) contend that although religion makes many positive contributions to society, it can also contribute to, and be used to justify, multiple forms of child abuse.

Lagos is the capital of Lagos State in southwestern Nigeria and serves as the centre of operations for many Nigerian Pentecostal megachurches. Uyo is located in Akwa Ibom State, which has the highest prevalence of witchcraft branding of children in Nigeria. Akwa Ibom is in the Niger-Delta region of Southern Nigeria. The social-economic disparity in these cities is wide. Poverty, poor land planning, inadequate infrastructures (Jideonwo, 2014, p. 6), unequal distribution of resources, pollution crises, and environmental imperilsments endanger citizens' lives (Olowoporoku, Longhurst, & Barnes, 2012, p. 481). The poverty in these areas likely contributes to the popularity of witchcraft accusations as a means to explain and then correct misfortune in people's lives.

Witchcraft accusations against children in the Niger Delta was highlighted with the release in 1999 of *End of the Wicked* (Ukpabio, 1999), one of several feature films produced and directed by Helen Ukpabio. The movie shows only one effective measure against witchcraft: Pentecostal Christianity (Ukah & Echtler, 2009). Prophetess Ukpabio (as she is popularly called) is one of Nigerian's witch-hunting Pentecostal pastors. She founded the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries with the primary goal to detect and deliver child witches (Cimpric, 2010, p. 36). Ukah & Echtler (2009, p. 84) conclude that, though Ukpabio

controls the means of production, including the content of her movies, she has no control over what consumers make of the films.

It is important to clarify that the concept of witchcraft in general or occurrences of witchcraft accusations against children specifically are not restricted to the African or Nigerian Pentecostal churches. Witchcraft beliefs extend further than the African continent and from Christianity as a religion. A one-sided perspective to witchcraft as a ravelling subject (Russell, 1985, p. 199) will engender thorough apprehension of its aspects. Once completed, this research aims to put forward significant policies for child professionals working with children who are victims of abuses related to faith-based beliefs, irrespective of the categories of religion.

Foremost, the phenomena of witchcraft have been viewed in different ways by anthropologists and historians, and there is debate on whether, indeed, the belief in witchcraft or the witchcraft as a subject itself connotes the gateway for mystical abilities. Russell (1985, p. 199) disjoins sorcery into two divisions: benevolent and malevolent. The question of why and what led to that notion of witchcraft as related to the embodiment of a dark force with negative power to cause harm cannot be provided unless or until the establishment of why gender attribution has been for long connected to it. While Russell (1985, p. 196) acknowledges the role of belief in witchcraft is to discern a scapegoat, he also recognises women are often labelled as significant culprits, not only in Africa but likewise in Asia and Europe (see p.199). To this end, he attributes misogyny (see p. 167) as the underlying factor. This has been true for centuries. In Roman antiquity, while men were believed predisposed to stealing, and women were likely to adhere to witchcraft and poisoning (Baroja, 1993, p. 22).

Viewing this from a heterogeneous angle, African religion, as Martin (2003, p. 133) asserts, has remained changeable. Thus, there is the likelihood of easy adaptation or possible adjustment to whatever new form of religion emerges. To Martin, Africans interpret the Bible to suit their current situation. Such similarities collude with the Azandes in Evan Pritchard's book (1976). Though witchcraft belief in the Zande communities serves as the means of yielding meanings to unfavourable occurrences (Stewart & Strathern, 2007, p. 90), the Azandes also invoke witchcraft to unravel specific questions that are in general left unsettled (Marwick, 1973, p. 62) and, hence, perceived a witch as a "superhuman force of evil", as Russell (1985, p. 199) explains.

There is no doubt of differences in terms of beliefs or adherence to ideas related to specific cultures. Although Africans seek solutions in witchcraft for relief from adverse or personal circumstances, this should not be categorised as exclusive to the Africa and its people. Others from different continents may practice dissimilar modes, especially within the context of their religion, in response to their problems. For example, worldwide, biblical texts are seen as holding potential answers to life's problems.

Short-term ethnography applies as the methodology for this ongoing research in both above-mentioned cities, seeking to analyse the different political, theological, ethnographical, and socio-economic factors that give rise to this disturbing new phenomenon, in the context of a constructivist approach to culture and religion. Adopting a social constructionist stance, the design frames employ emergent multi-method qualitative approach. Methods are ethnographic semi-structure interviewing (plus incorporation of vignette in the topic guide) and participation observation (which will include analysis of church media products such as books, magazines, audio CDs/DVDs, and video films the church produced, and church webpages).

A complete topic guide and a list of open-ended questions are developed for two sets of participants. All contain open-ended questions intended to draw out viewpoints (Creswell, 2014, p. 190). The set of questions are for participants with too little time for extensive interview responses, while the topic guide is for participants who do have adequate time to answer. These participants consist of Pentecostal church leaders, related child service protection NGOs (if any), tribal leaders, law enforcement officials, and members of the local authorities in Lagos Metropolitan and Uyo. They constitute individuals of diverse races and socioeconomic backgrounds. Each participant's age group is confirmed. For ethical reasons, participants must be at least 18 to participate in the interviews. The total sample size is 30 participants, 15 from each city. Where possible, the interviews will be conducted face to face. Email, Web-based (Skype), and telephone interviews will be conducted where participants are not physically available or are difficult to reach.

This rest of paper will cover the theoretical aspects of the research as it unfolds. The next sections of this paper present the determinants that create the risks for a child to be accused of being a witch or evil possessed, then focuses on the pointers for identifying abuses related to faith-based belief, and finally, distinguishes children who are likely to be targeted and victimized.

REVIEW OF FACTORS OF CHILD VULNERABILITY FOR AN ACCUSATION

a) *Nationwide Culture of Fear of Witchcraft*

In Africa, witchcraft is not so much a belief about the world as it is a patent feature of it, a force that is both self-evident and solemnly real to believers (Moore & Sanders, 2001). Witchcraft belief is established in the Nigeria community, irrespective of one's faith. And this cultural belief is not just restricted to the Lagos metropolitan and the Niger Delta regions of Nigeria. Every Nigerian believes in the existence of the kingdom of witchcraft as a place of evil, and once someone has been branded a witch, what will protect that person from being harmed lies largely in the hands of those present at that time. Talbot (2014, p. 57) quotes Chief Daniel Henshaw: "Witchcraft is a very deep thing among our people and there is nothing else so deep, and the dread of it darkens multitudes of lives". Smith (2001, p. 807) asserts that the stories of child kidnappings, ritual killings, trades in body parts, and other magical practices form part of a dynamic cultural complex in which witchcraft serves as a crude but widely

recognised label. To Hallen & Sodipo (1997, p. 89), in the face of a sudden calamity, witchcraft is the explanation to be used when no other is forthcoming and gives the victims a sense of doing something concrete about their misfortunes.

b) *Culture of Superstition*

The culture of superstition also contributes to the rise of this faith (Agazue, 2013, p. 12). Instead of looking up a specialist paediatrician, neurologist, or a child psychologist when, for example, a child is consistently bedwetting at night or performing poorly in school or epileptic, the typical Nigerian parents or guardians will first attribute any of these to possession by an evil spirit and turn to their pastors for solutions. Then the child is taken to the church and forced to confess to witchcraft (Foxcroft, 2009, pp. 5-6). After all, biomedicine to treat a sickness offers no answer because of the belief that even it can be used as a medium for witchcraft attacks (Ukah & Echtler, 2009).

c) *Child Exorcism and Pentecostal Prosperity*

Cimpric (2010, p. 15) recognises the connection of the Pentecostal movement to witchcraft accusations against children when he writes how these churches legitimatise fears related to witchcraft, particularly, child witches. Bahunga (2013, p. 15) asserts:

Once a faith leader brands a child, everyone else in the particular community or congregation believes this is the case . . . and she/he has to go through a process of deliverance/exorcism.

Ikpe-Itauma (Gavan & Valk Van der, 2008) argues that, “Exorcism is big business and Christianity in the Niger Delta is questionable . . . putting traditional religion and Christian religion mixed together to make nonsense of it.” Unlike in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where children accused of witchcraft, in certain circumstances, are often placed in secular institutions to have them delivered (Aguilar Molina, 2003-2005, p. 5), in Nigeria, the Pentecostal churches serve as the institutions for deliverance. To many, accusation becomes an efficient means of eradicating witches or of eradicating those so accused (Bastian, 2001), and in the context of Pentecostalism, witchcraft is taken as an advanced form of spirit possession (Onyinah, 2004, p. 336).

Pentecostal prosperity exists within the Pentecostal spheres because of the need to generate income through whatever means, even when it causes harm, divides families, and produces trauma. Agazue (2013, p. 144) explains that pastors do not hesitate to declare children to be possessed without any additional evidence since exorcism maintains a flow of income. He describes how violent forms of exorcism, coupled with labelling and stigmatisation, can destroy the life of the accused child. For these pastor-prophets, detecting child witches brings money, heightened social status, and popularity, which draws new members, victims, and yet more income (Cimpric, 2010, p. 40). Bishop Sunday Ulup-Aya (Gavan & Valk Van der, 2008) who said he charges four hundred thousand naira (£1301,31) for special exorcism from parents and uses a “poison destroyer” to extract witchcraft from children, boasted of killing 110 witches that were conveyed to him. In a region with the highest level of escalating poverty and the worst form of child-labour (Joseph-Obi, 2011), how does he manage to procure money from these parents?

Prosperity in the context of Pentecostalism, as Ojo (2006, p. 206) claims, comprises not just the prosperity of the soul but also acquisition of material wealth. To him, “prosperity is life on a big scale” (206). Additionally, Adedibu (2012, p. 151) notes how the massive sales of prosperity-related messages on audio CDs, books, and DVDs, not only in Africa but also in the western countries, made a significant contribution to the Africanisation of prosperity theology, which came from the American-mode of prosperity teaching. According to Smith (2007), the doctrines of the gospel of prosperity promise meaningful liberation from poverty and economic privileges. To La Fontaine (2016, p. 105), “the Pentecostal churches are supported by their members’ donations”. Consequently, some Pentecostal churches promote deliverance theology (also known as exorcism) where the exorcist purports to have the irrefutable solution—driving out Satan—but only after receiving payment for this service. Hence, deliverance ceremonies remain as the exclusive channels of acquiring and increasing material wealth.

d) *Poverty*

If we use the most recent poverty indicators such as illiteracy, access to safe water, the number of poor people, and other human development indices, Nigeria ranks below other countries like Kenya and Zambia (Okaba, 2005, p. 54). A vivid example is the Niger Delta, which remains a dangerous place of poverty, marginalization, and under-employment, combined with crime, corruption, and local communities whose members see few benefits from oil production (Boas, 2011, p. 111). Due to deepening poverty, most children in the region are forced into child labour (Joseph-Obi, 2011, p. 4073), street begging, hawking, and various demeaning activities. Understandably, poverty is by far the motivating factor. Okaba (2005, pp. 66-67) declares that poverty, as a state of deprivation, pressures people to engage in unsustainable and damaging practices in the effort to survive. And somehow, the neo-Pentecostal leaders seem to offer a quick way out of impoverishment by professing to Nigerians the prosperity redemption message from poverty and mediocrity (Golo, 2013, p. 370). For ministers of these churches, poverty is a curse and a detriment to growth (Diara & Onah, 2014, p. 396). The motto is that God is not a poor God and all his followers must be prosperous materially, physically, and spiritually if they “sow seed” to God (Ehianu, 2014, p. 75).

e) *Religious-Political Hybrid*

Another factor is the Pentecostal-political relationship in Nigeria. Pentecostalism, occultism, and politics in Nigeria operate as a triune; one cannot be separated from the other. This relationship is complex, and any discourse on witchcraft must be based on

an understanding of the interconnection of this triad. In the same way that religion plays an entrenching role in Nigeria—publicly visible such that it is not only spoken and practised but also displayed, sometimes out of proportion (Gaiya, 2013, p. 49)—Nigerian Pentecostalism has a strong attachment to the national political sphere. Many Nigerian political leaders are ‘Born-Again’ Pentecostals (Anderson, 2014, pp. 288-289). Ruth Marshall (2009) describes the Pentecostal movement as the “single most sociocultural force in southern Nigeria”. The strong influence of Pentecostalism among Nigerian political leaders, as well as in the general population, leads to a belief that the country’s escalating social-economic and environmental problems are the work of the devil. Hence, the belief arises from inside both the political and religious spheres that the devil needs to be attacked through deliverance services in order to wipe out the nation’s impoverishment (Ojo, 2006, p. 209). The popularity of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, as argues Smith (2007), constitutes the ‘lens’ by which the urban poor can elucidate the socioeconomic inequalities accredited to the nation’s corruption.

Notwithstanding, the presence of Pentecostals in Nigerian politics does not diminish the ongoing, escalating socio-economic, environmental, and national insecurity controversies in the country. Rather than pursuing tangible solutions to socio-economic problems, most Nigerian Pentecostals prefer to demonise these problems and turn towards spiritual answers (Anderson, 2014, p. 288). The problem with this, as Onyinah (2012, p. 15) argues, is that too much attention through spiritual warfare is given to Satan. Hollenweger (1976, p. 379) holds a similar view that the phenomenon of possession is an unsolved problem in Pentecostal belief and practice. He concludes that ‘neither Pentecostals . . . are able to believe strongly enough that demons have been so far overcome that they have to leave the battlefield’. Here, the scenario depicts the continuum of spiritual warfare and deliverance to obtain prosperity, which may never materialise.

f) *Alteration of Life’s Circumstances as Evidence of Witchcraft*

Everything seems to be okay for a person until the arrival of a certain child. A sudden loss of job, illness, or financial problem often leads to the belief the new child is the carrier of evil, and therefore, the potential to impugn him or her is very high. Aguilar Molina (2003-2005, p. 17) states that any situation such as redundancy or accident is perceived as a trap concocted by a witch to eat up the victims. That correlates with Helen Ukpabio’s film, *End of the Wicked* (1999), where possessed children are shown assembled together and eating the flesh of their male victim.

g) *Weak Bond of Affection between the Guardian and the Accused Child*

Guardians may have developed a strong family relationship with someone other than the child, usually an adult, prior to the arrival of the child (Stobart, 2006). In her 2010 study, Aleksandra Cimpric attests:

In cases where the child has lost only one parent, the surviving parent usually begins a new family, with new children. Unlike their half-siblings, the orphans are often unable to attend school, suffer mistreatment on a daily basis, including neglect in the provision of health care, or physical and psychological violence. When some misfortune befalls the family, the orphan is a favourite target for witchcraft accusations. In some cases, the child may be accused of killing his parents (2010, p. 23).

h) *Child Believing the Accusation*

The child may believe he or she is cursed. And when families think a member is possessed, they may be terrified of him or her and feel everything (including their lives) is under threat (Metropolitan Police Services Project Violet Team, 2012). Further:

If a child is told by the people they love and respect that they are “witch”, this may result in the child believing it themselves and thus believing their exploitation is justified because they are “evil” (ECPAT UK (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children), 2009, p. 2).

The following is a conversation (Gavan & Valk Van der, 2008) between children charity worker and founder of Safe Child Africa (2005) (formerly known as Stepping Stones Nigeria) Gary Foxcroft (2009) and a Nigerian man in the Niger Delta.

Foxcroft: “How do you know they are witches? Look at them. . . . How? How do you know?”

Man: “It is because of what they did in their homes. You know in Nigeria here, we have some spiritual churches that knows all those things. So when they go, those prophets will remove them.”

Foxcroft: “So you believe the prophets?”

Man: “Yes.”

Foxcroft: “So you believe every word that is spoken by these prophets?”

Man: “No . . . but these ones are different from those prophets that are lying. Understand?”

Foxcroft: “How do you know these prophets that branded these children as witches were not lying?”

Man: “When the prophets talk and then they [children] too, confirm that is it true.”

Foxcroft: “If I torture you and I beat you and I abuse you, I mercilessly beat you and I don’t feed you and I don’t give you any water, I don’t look after you at all and I tell you that ‘you are a witch, you’re a witch, you’re a witch, you’re a witch’. After a while, I say to you, ‘What are you?’ You’ll say, ‘I am a witch’ because you are hungry. You have been beaten so much. You have been tortured.”

Man: “No, this one is quite different.”

Foxcroft: “No, this one is NOT quite different. It is exactly child abuse.”

INDICATORS OF ABUSE ASSOCIATED WITH WITCHCRAFT ASSOCIATIONS

Secker and Rehman (2013, pp. 22-23) opine on how documented accusations of witchcraft usually target already vulnerable groups of people, notably women, children, and the elderly. To East and Kenney (2007, p. 231), the basis of victimisation, which occurs within families, systems, and institutions, is an unequal balance of power, which, when taken further, becomes traumatic. In the report of the London Child Protection Procedures, some of the indicators of abuse are physical injuries, withdrawn or isolated child, deterioration of a child's personal care, arriving at school without food or food money, and a child reporting that he or she is being accused of being evil (London Child Protection Procedures, 2017). Children who are accused of sorcery are subjected to deleterious, traumatic experiences. Following is a list from Stobart (2006, p. 16) of the most frequent forms of abuse in ridding a child of an "evil spirit":

- Burning
- Beating
- Long-term malnutrition
- Semi-strangulation
- Threat of abandonment
- Neglect
- Bath sleeping
- Kept out of school
- Cutting
- Tying up
- Wanting the child removed.

To Goodman et al. (1998, p. 274), religious overtones may add an additional layer of complexity to child abuse, further inhibiting a child's ability to cope with the trauma of maltreatment. The abused child may believe that the abuse is parentally, socially, or supernaturally sanctioned or is a punishment for his or her own sins (Greven, 2010).

CHILDREN TARGETED FOR WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS AND SUBSEQUENT CONSEQUENCES

a) Children with Disabilities

Targeted children are often those with peculiarities—physical or mental disabilities, rebellious nature, orphans (Stobart, 2006, pp. 20-21), even though children accused of witchcraft do not fit a single profile (Bussien, et al., 2011, p. 6). Disabilities may include learning disabilities, mental health, autism, stammering, and deafness (Home Office, 2007, p. 8). Cimpric (2010, p. 17) asserts children targeted often are those with a physical disorder (such as epilepsy or tuberculosis), physical disabilities (such as malformation of their bodies), or a psychological disorder (such as autism or Down's syndrome).

b) Children who are Albinos, Twins

Many recently published news articles on the Internet exposed the stigmatisation and discrimination against people with albinism, mostly in African countries like Tanzania, Kenya, DRC, Zimbabwe, with an escalating rate of violence towards the albinos in the United Republic of Tanzania (Cimpric, 2010, p. 27). Witch persecution can target those believed to possess magical properties, such as twins and albinos (Bahunga, 2013, p. 16), whose body parts supposedly bring prosperity and success when mixed in potions (Hobbs, 2013).

c) Step-Children

Alternatively, Secker & Rehman (2013), argue children in single-parent families are the most vulnerable in the Niger Delta. They elaborate that many accusations of witchcraft come from a step-parent, who uses it to avoid taking parental responsibility for a child that is not biologically his or hers. The accusation allows the step-parent to get the child out of the household. Akhilomen (Akhilomen, 2006, p. 237) affirm this—the step-parents do not have the investment in the genes and consequently have fewer stakes in the survival of another person's child. Perhaps this should not be a surprise as children are undervalued and placed in the lowest rung in the Nigerian society (Akhilomen, 2006, p. 241; Secker & Rehman, 2013, p. 3248).

a) Children Exhibiting Behavioural Issues

Disagreement with a step-parent or host family may trigger an accusation of those with disobedient, stubborn, aggressive, or lazy traits or forms of behaviour that seem out of the norm (Cimpric, 2010, p. 17).

b) Gender Dimension

In this condition, there is no gender dimension. The accused child can be a boy or a girl. Still, the girl-child is predisposed to child sexual abuse or trafficking. An example is Prophet Franklin Udoeyo of Covenant Global Mission (Gavan & Valk Van der, 2008). In the form of an investigation where he showed eight children that he had locked up in a dark room, he pointed at a teenage girl and said,

“She has grown up to the level of becoming Queen in the coven . . . until one day the Lord help me. I was able to remove the crown. Her power was subdued. So now we begin to administer to her but now she’s living with me directly. She’s [on] one side of me . . . in my bedroom.”

CONSEQUENCES

These inhuman practices of the Pentecostal leaders call us to ask what are the child protection measures of the Nigerian government to address the issue? On the grounds of exorcism, children accused of possessing the witchcraft spirit *oganje* (mermaid) or any other supernatural powers are subjected to bouts of beating, flogging, scolding, or maiming (Akhilomen, 2006, p. 246), sexual assaults, and even brutal death. Coupled with that, most of the accused children have been thrown out of their homes, becoming destitute. Such was the case of five-year-old Mary (Gavan & Valk Van der, 2008) who, thanks to Foxcroft, was rescued from a probable case of trafficking and abandonment. Her mother dead and her father having relocated to Cameroon for economic reasons, Mary was entrusted to the mercy of relatives that abandoned her at a village farther away from them. Foxcroft and Ikpe-Itauma’s effort to reunify her with her kinsmen did not yield any positive result; hence, Mary now lives at the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN) centre and continues her schooling.

CONCLUSIONS

The key findings for this study will be updated after the termination of the research. Augmenting current studies of Nigerian Pentecostalism (see Ojo (2006), Burgess (2008), Ukah (2008), Marshall (2009), and Wariboko (2014)) and Pentecostal exorcism (Onyinah, 2012), this research will contribute significantly in two areas. First, it will fill the gap about this phenomenon strictly in the context of Nigerian Pentecostalism, as to date, there are no in-depth studies of witchcraft accusations against the Nigeria children. Undeniably, this will expand the existing cognition about witchcraft accusations against children not only in Africa but also across the globe where children are often targeted, named, and abused under the guise of culture, religion, and other faith-based praxis. Second, examining the distinct role that the power dynamic of the Pentecostal leaders plays—and if it can be mitigated—is a priority for tackling child abuse linked to faith-based belief. Much more is needed to assure the protection of children.

Terry (2007, p. 45) opines, “Customs and traditions are not sacrosanct, and culture, whether we like it or not, are changing all the time as people develop and adapt new ideas, some from within their own societies and some from outside.” This supports the campaigns of national governments, grassroots organizations, and private international and local NGOs in addressing the witchcraft accusations of children. Their persistent efforts can help eradicate this form of child abuse. This calls also for church leaders, notably in the Pentecostal church, to address the cause. The need to examine the role that power in culture and faith play, plus the power dynamics of Pentecostal church leaders’ teachings and deliverance practices in relation to witchcraft branding—and if they can be mitigated, is a priority for tackling child abuse linked to faith-based belief. Hence, my ongoing research on this phenomenon, which is the first of its kind that focuses extensively and solely on the two selected cities in Nigeria, aims to address the theological, cultural, political, and socio-economic factors that influence Nigerian Pentecostal beliefs about witchcraft.

Prior research has examined the rapid expansion of the Nigerian Pentecostal megachurches at the national and global levels, the plethora of prosperity gospel and doctrines, and their somewhat recent involvement geared towards social and political engagements. However, this research will be original by deepening existing knowledge in that there is no in-depth study on the power dynamics of Pentecostal church leaders’ teachings and deliverance practices in relation to witchcraft branding based on an analysis of Lagos Metropolitan and Uyo. My focus will be on the concept of prosperity theology, occultism, belief, and charismatic leadership from a new perspective. While the aim is not to come up with a new model for child safeguarding and protection within the religious setting in Nigeria, the empirical data from this study could be used to contribute to recommendations for such a new model.

One of the crucial objectives of this research is to investigate how Nigerian Pentecostal churches are responding to the problem of child abuse associated with witchcraft accusations.

There appears the necessity to apply caution and indicate that not all Nigerian Pentecostal churches accuse children of witchcraft or demonic possession or perform child exorcism. For example, the international, widely known Nigerian megachurch Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), among others, engages in caring for street children in Lagos, and the church has never been in the limelight regarding any issues about child exorcism or accusation (Udodiong, 2017).

On witchcraft accusations against children in Nigeria where there is yet a failure of government to even recognise this as a form of child abuse, although there are NGOs advocating for this from a children’s rights perspective. However, as seen in the retraction of sound guidance related to witchcraft accusations in the Home Office’s What to Do if You’re Worried a Child is Being Abused: Advice for Practitioners for 2013 versus the same for 2010, advancement in helping children in such cases is not assured. This study suggests further research that focuses on understanding the influence of cultural attachment: why do some people hold onto traditions even when harmful, whereas others can let go of them, find a freedom to create new ways of being and relating to others? Findings from this study aim to expose the danger traditional customs pose for the safety of children.

Pearl (2002) suggests:

Child Abuse prevention depends on neither a program nor a system of services . . . it must be founded on a society that values its children and provides resources to sufficiently support children and families, and as such, society must make changes at the individual, family, community and cultural levels . . . These changes must come from both the public and private sectors, as well as religious community (p.379).

One strong recommendation from AFRUCA is that accusing a child of being a witch should be made a criminal offence. This might offer a route—as happened with FGM some twenty years ago—to use this as a lever to in developing awareness and prevention at all the levels noted above.

Children have no voice in their government. It is up to concerned adults to recognize the problem of child abuse tied to the practices of the Pentecostal churches and take appropriate action.

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