

Witchcraft stigmatization in Nigeria: Challenges and successes in the implementation of child rights

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Abstract

Witchcraft stigmatization is increasingly identified as a growing human rights concern. The stigmatization of children as witches and resultant child rights abuse is particularly prevalent in Nigeria, and has been recognized as a major barrier to the effective implementation of child rights in this state. Witchcraft-related abuse entails significant violations of a range of children's rights, and is yet to receive adequate or effective policy responses from government. Whilst Civil Society Organizations have attempted to address this issue, significant practical and conceptual challenges to their work remain.

Keywords

child rights, civil society, government policy, Nigeria, witchcraft

Introduction

Beliefs in the existence and powers of witches have a long and diverse history and are found across a huge range of cultures and traditions. Such beliefs have commonly – although by no means always – resulted in persecution, social rejection, discrimination and violence towards those who are believed to be or who identify themselves as witches. Accusations of

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witchcraft usually target already vulnerable groups, such as women, children and the elderly, and have been documented in a large number of countries around the world including: Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, India, Ghana, Uganda, and Tanzania (see for example, Adinkrah, 2004; Bussien et al., 2011; Schnoebelen, 2009; Singh, 2011; Sleep, 2011).

However, despite being a growing contributory factor to human rights abuses, witchcraft stigmatization has historically received little attention within the human rights discourse from the UN, academia or civil society. This results primarily from the combination of a lack of knowledge concerning the existence of the issue and the lack of understanding of it as a form of human rights abuse by governments and communities. There has more recently been increased recognition of witchcraft accusations as a growing concern for the human rights community (see Alston, 2009; Cimpric, 2010; Jahangir, 2008). However, it remains under-researched and there is consequently a clear need for increased attention from government, academia and civil society in order to fully understand the contributory factors to witchcraft-related human rights violations and to develop and implement policies and programmes to address this form of abuse.

Over the past decade children have been increasingly falling victim to allegations of witchcraft and suffering significant violations of their rights as a result (Schnoebelen, 2009), with reports of accusations of witchcraft against children coming from numerous African states including Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria and Gabon (Cimpric, 2010). It should also be noted that witchcraft-related child rights abuse is not limited to Africa; for example, Stobart (2006) has identified cases of child abuse linked to witchcraft within the UK. The following analysis considers witchcraft accusations against children and the consequent children's rights abuse in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Section 1 examines the nature of the phenomenon and identified causative factors. Section 2 considers the ways in which witchcraft accusations negatively affect children's rights. Section 3 critically analyses legal, governmental and civil society efforts to address this problem. Finally, section 4 assesses recommendations for future action. The discussion concludes by considering how the issues raised by witchcraft accusations against children in Nigeria may have wider application to other child rights concerns.

1. Accusations of witchcraft against children in Nigeria

Belief in witchcraft is central within Nigeria society and particularly in the Niger Delta region. In relation to the Ibibio peoples of south-eastern Nigeria, Chineyemba comments, 'Urban and rural dwellers are entrapped in the deep

rooted fear of witches. . . Ibibio society is organized around an intrinsic fear of witchcraft. . . it is enshrined in communal consciousness' (2010: 1). Although the specific nature of witchcraft beliefs within Nigeria is inevitably variable, some commonalities concerning the belief in witches may be identified. The 'witch' is usually thought to have become possessed by an evil spirit which will force them to cause harm to other family and community members (Foxcroft, 2009; Molina, 2005); a 'witch' is therefore essentially understood as an individual possessed by demons and devils who uses magic to harm the innocent (Omunukuma, 2010).

The stigmatization of children as witches in Nigeria, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon, being considered to have only become widespread in the early to mid-1990s (Foxcroft, 2009; Nwadinobi, 2008). It remains unclear why children have become the specific focus of witchcraft accusations in Nigeria. The traditional focus of witchcraft accusations has in many cultures been on the elderly and particularly elderly women, as was the case in Medieval Europe, and this remains the focus of witchcraft belief in certain societies including Ghana and India. A number of suggestions to explain this phenomenon have been suggested.

First, religious beliefs are considered to play a key role in increasing witchcraft accusations against children. Children are primarily accused of witchcraft by either their families or church leaders/prophets, often from revivalist Pentecostal churches (Cahn, 2006). Case data from Akwa Ibom State in the Niger Delta shows that in 31 percent of cases the child was accused of witchcraft by a pastor (Foxcroft and Secker, 2010), and Molina considers that 'the boom in revivalist churches is undoubtedly closely related to the accusations of witchcraft against children' (2005: 24). Following an accusation, a church leader will usually be paid to 'deliver' the child, usually by means of an exorcism or deliverance ceremony which is often violent or abusive (Akhilomen, 2006). Cimpric further identifies that 'the persecution of witches has become a lucrative "business" for many pastor-prophets' (2010: 3) and Adegoke agrees that 'the ideology of witchcraft is one of the lucrative doctrines in Pentecostal Christianity' (2010: 47).

Second, Cimpric (2010) suggests that the breakdown of traditional, hierarchical family and community relationships, and the rise of individualism, have contributed to the questioning of authority based on age, and that accusations of witchcraft against children represent the reassertion of the authority of elder members of society. The traditional Nigerian perception of the child places them at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with obedience and respect for adults being paramount. The traditional Yoruba family structure privileges seniority, with junior members of society expected to provide services in a submissive and deferent manner (Falola, 2001). Traditional

social stratification within southern Nigeria (an area where witchcraft accusations are particularly prevalent) accords children the lowest social status (Akhilomen, 2006). Understanding witchcraft accusations against children as a response to challenges to traditional family and community power hierarchies is therefore certainly plausible in the Nigerian context.

Cimpric (2010) also identifies societal tensions, including the growing centrality of youth in the popular consciousness, poverty and ongoing economic and political instability as contributing factors to witchcraft accusations against children. Similarly, children from poor communities or current or post-conflict situations have been identified as being at a higher risk of witchcraft accusations (Schnoebelen, 2009). Belief in spiritual explanations for both good and ill fortune has been identified as an inherent part of certain African social worldviews (Onyinah, 2002; see also Molina, 2005). In consequence, death, illness, poverty and other misfortunes are in many parts of Nigeria attributed to metaphysical causes (Falola, 2001; Smith, 2001), rather than being understood as a result of economic mismanagement, environmental degradation or social exploitation. This perception is encouraged and perpetuated by certain strands of Christianity (Oha, 2000), particularly those with an emphasis on exorcistic or deliverance activities (Onyinah, 2002) and who combine Christian doctrines with traditional African beliefs. Nigeria has seen decades of corruption, civil war, state-sponsored and militant violence, and widespread human rights abuses. Despite recent improvements, life in Nigeria remains unstable and unpredictable. Within the Niger Delta region, high rates of poverty and environmental degradation are especially prevalent (UNDP, 2006). To some extent 'child witches' are simply an easy target to blame for the frequent misfortunes that befall families and communities in this region.

Accusations of witchcraft have also been identified as resulting from a disruption in the family (Cahn, 2006) and the growing numbers of orphans and children in step-families (Cimpric, 2010). Analysis of cases of witchcraft accusations against children in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria identified that in 70 percent of cases the child was either an orphan, had one parent who had died, and/or had one or more step-parents (Foxcroft and Secker, 2010). In consequence, children from poor and deprived communities or from families which have experienced deaths or marital breakdown are those most at risk of witchcraft stigmatization.

In addition, children with disabilities are considered to be at particular risk of witchcraft accusations, as certain medical conditions such as having a hunchback, deafness or epilepsy are often considered to be evidence of witchcraft (Molina, 2005; Ogunjuyigbe, 2004). Children in an area with a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS also face increased risk of being stigmatized

as witches. Evidence from the DRC indicates that HIV/AIDS has been attributed to witchcraft, and children who are stigmatized as witches will then be blamed for the infection and/or death resulting from HIV/AIDS (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Whilst mental and physical disabilities remain misunderstood and feared in both children and adults within Nigeria, the factors discussed above illustrate why disabled children are likely to be accused of witchcraft, whereas disabled adults are not.

Finally, the belief in child witchcraft is also considered to be reflected in and perpetuated by Nigerian cultural media. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) which work on this issue in Nigeria consider that certain books and films, often produced by Pentecostal churches, have played a key role in popularizing and disseminating the belief in specifically child witches (Nwadinobi, 2008), arguing that 'these. . . foster a climate of fear and doubt which immediately puts children into a vulnerable position' (Battarbee et al., 2009: 12).

2. The effect of witchcraft stigmatization on children's rights

Children who have been accused of witchcraft face significant and wide-ranging abuses of their human rights. Information from CSOs working in the field and local media reports illustrate how witchcraft stigmatization can negatively impact on a range of children's rights. The key rights affected are the right to be free from violence, abuse and neglect, the right to life, the right to be free from torture, the right to non-discrimination, the right to respect for the views of the child, the rights to food and shelter, and the right to education, although other rights, including the right to health, the rights to play and to cultural life, the right to family life and the right to protection against trafficking are also affected (Battarbee et al., 2009; Foxcroft and Secker, 2010).

First, witchcraft stigmatization has resulted in significant abuse and neglect of and violence towards children, with case data indicating that around one third of children accused of being witches suffer a severe form of violence (Foxcroft and Secker, 2010). Children who have been stigmatized as witches often become victims of violence, abuse and neglect both from their parents and from those into whose care they may be placed, such as church leaders and witchdoctors. Examples of abuse reported by CSOs and the media include severe beatings, burns caused by fire, boiling water or acid, poisoning by a local berry, parents or communities attempting to bury them alive, abandonment in forests or on the streets, rape, and trafficking for the purposes of forced labour and sexual exploitation (Bakare and Ibrahim, 2010;

Battarbee et al., 2009; Binniyat, 2010). Such treatment – unsurprisingly – can frequently result in the child being killed; witchcraft accusations having been identified as ‘tantamount to a death sentence’ (Alston, 2009, para. 43).

Witchcraft stigmatization has also in some cases led to children experiencing torture and/or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In addition to those activities already detailed, children who have been stigmatized as witches have suffered imprisonment, forced starvation, forced participation in psychologically damaging ‘exorcism’ ceremonies, being forced to ingest hazardous chemicals or substances such as cement, and having nails driven into their heads. These actions are undertaken by parents and church leaders with the specific aims of extracting confessions of witchcraft and of forcing the spirit of the witch out of the child (Battarbee et al., 2009; see also Akhilomen, 2006; Nwadinobi, 2008).

Thirdly, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions has identified that accusations of witchcraft often lead to ‘serious and systematic forms of discrimination’ (Alston, 2009, para. 51). Children who have suffered witchcraft stigmatization have been denied access to medical treatment, as doctors and hospitals will often refuse to accept children who are considered to be witches. They suffer particular discrimination concerning the enjoyment of the right to education, as many parents refuse to send their children to a school which is also attended by a child believed to be a witch and teachers often refuse to educate so-called child witches. They are denied access to family and community life, as they are rejected or abandoned by their family and community. The denial of access to education and to family and community life affects their ability to gain future employment, particularly for those children who have been abandoned and subsequently live on the streets. In consequence, the discrimination against a child resulting from an accusation of witchcraft has long-term negative effects on a range of their rights.

It is also important to note that children from already vulnerable groups, such as those with disabilities, or suffering from common illnesses, are particularly at risk from the additional discrimination resulting from witchcraft stigmatization. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has previously identified the prevalence of discrimination against children with disabilities, both within the family and within society in general in Nigeria (UNCRC, 2005, para. 46). This discrimination is exacerbated if children with disabilities are also stigmatized as witches.

Fourth, the stigmatization of children as witches also enhances the abuse of the child’s right to be heard. Rather than identifying children as autonomous agents with rights of participation (UNCRC, 2009a, para. 3), stigmatizing children as witches removes their identity as human beings and demonizes

and objectifies them. The stigmatization of child witches effectively stifles any chance for their voices to be heard both at the local and national levels. Furthermore, where children who have been stigmatized have denied involvement in witchcraft, or attempted to speak out in order to exercise their right to be heard, they have generally become more likely to suffer abuse.

Finally, several rights of provision are affected by witchcraft accusations against children. Children who have been stigmatized as witches are frequently abandoned or rejected by their parents, with case data indicating that around 80 percent of children are abandoned or forced out of their home following an accusation of witchcraft (Foxcroft and Secker, 2010). Abandonment resulting from witchcraft stigmatization is consequently a contributing factor to the numbers of street children (Alston, 2009); a local CSO reported that 85 percent of street children in one area had been accused of witchcraft (Foxcroft and Secker, 2010). Abandoned children who have been stigmatized as witches therefore suffer a denial of access to food, water, shelter, education and healthcare, as neither local community members nor government agencies are willing to care for them due to the belief that they are witches. In addition street children also become vulnerable to crime, rape and trafficking, with some children being trafficked both within and outside of Nigeria for the purpose of forced labour, domestic servitude or prostitution. The failure of the state to provide alternative care facilities for such children, including measures to promote their physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration, further constitutes a violation of their rights.

It is therefore evident that witchcraft stigmatization has a negative effect on the enjoyment of a range of rights as protected under international, regional and national human rights law (see section 3). Furthermore, witchcraft stigmatization does not affect the enjoyment of rights in isolation from each other. It is causative both of initial abuse and of the promotion and exacerbation of already abusive or discriminatory situations, and has long-term and wide-ranging consequences for the enjoyment of children's rights, which extend beyond the original abusive activities. It is also clearly a common theme which links the abuse of different rights. Accusations of witchcraft against children should therefore be considered a significant barrier to the effective implementation of child rights in Nigeria due to their inherent entailment of a broad range of rights violations.

3. Legislative and policy responses

The rights discussed above are protected under international, regional and national human rights law, via the United Nations Convention on the Rights

of the Child 1989 (CRC), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) 1999 and the Nigerian Child Rights Act (CRA) 2003 respectively. However, although these legal regimes clearly prohibit the forms of children's rights abuse which result from accusations of witchcraft, the legality of actually making accusations of witchcraft against a child remains contested, particularly at the international level. There is no mention of witchcraft accusations in either the CRC or the ACRWC, although it is clear that the rights abuses which result from such accusations would contravene the protections offered by these instruments.

Under Nigerian law, the Criminal Code 2004 (Section 210) does prohibit accusations of witchcraft against both adults and children, but the child rights-specific CRA does not. Furthermore, within Nigeria the legal protection of child rights and therefore of children accused of witchcraft remains geographically variable. To date, only around two-thirds of the 36 states within Nigeria have domesticated the CRA. It is notable that Akwa Ibom State in the Niger Delta included specific provisions concerning child witch stigmatization when domesticating the CRA, including a specific clause to criminalize accusations of witchcraft against children and make this offence punishable by a custodial sentence of up to 10 years (Akwa Ibom State Child Rights Law, 2008, Sections 274–5) but it is to date the only state in Nigeria to have included these extra provisions concerning the specific illegality of child witch stigmatization. This lack of legal clarity on witchcraft accusations does little to encourage effective action by the police and judiciary to address this issue. Furthermore, relying solely on a formal legal response to a cultural phenomenon would be problematic; as discussed further below (section 4), the efficacy of such responses is unclear, particularly in a society where belief in child witches is reported as widespread amongst police and judiciary.

However, this cannot be considered the most significant barrier to effective child rights protection in Nigeria. The key problem, common to all human rights provisions, is not a lack of applicable legal mechanisms, but of the political will to ensure their effective implementation. There have to date been no known successful prosecutions of the perpetrators of child rights abuse resulting from accusations of witchcraft against children. There is consequently a significant lack of accountability for both those who make the accusations and those who carry out the abuse. Case data indicate that this is due to the reluctance by police and government to investigate issues which are culturally controversial combined with a lack of willingness from families and communities to provide evidence (Foxcroft and Secker, 2010).

It is important to recognize that this is characteristic of the official approach to child rights protection in Nigeria. As Akhilomen (2006) identifies, there is

a significant lack of adequate social welfare schemes and institutions for child victims of abuse, and a lack of well-known, effective and enforceable legislation for the protection of child rights. In addition, endemic corruption within the police and judiciary, combined with societal reluctance to bring private matters into the public realm, has entrenched a culture of impunity for child rights violations. Very few child rights offenders are ever brought to justice, and there is little knowledge within society of the legal protections offered to children. This lack of accountability for child rights violations is intensified for children who have been accused of being witches. The entrenched nature of witchcraft belief and the process of stigmatization as a witch results in such children becoming dehumanized and devalued. They are therefore considered less- or un-deserving of care and are consequently extremely unlikely to receive assistance from the very limited facilities that are available.

Furthermore, witchcraft-related child rights abuse is absent from current Nigerian government policy documents on child rights. This is typified by the 2009 Nigerian report to the UNCRC, which makes no mention of witchcraft accusations as a child rights concern; nor does the National Plan of Action for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Nigeria 2009–13 address witchcraft accusations. Little or no data collection has been conducted on the problem and as a result there are no official statistics on child rights abuse resulting from witchcraft accusations in Nigeria (Battarbee et al., 2009).

This lack of governmental policy and legislative development and implementation concerning accusations of witchcraft in Nigeria is a result of both a lack of awareness of the problem and a historical attitude of denial. This is similar to many other states both within and without Africa, where witchcraft-related human rights abuses occur. In the absence of specific data collection, governments are unable to assess the scale of the problem and to develop appropriate policies. Furthermore, the controversial nature of the issue and its potential to encourage socio-cultural tensions concerning conflicts between the right to freedom of thought and belief and the rights of children and/or other vulnerable groups means that governments are reluctant to become involved and consequently pursue a strategy of avoidance. The Nigerian government response should therefore be seen as typical.

There are, however, indications that the government in Nigeria has begun to recognize the need to take action. The federal government convened a three-day technical meeting on witchcraft accusations against children in June 2011 and for the first time made a public statement on the need to address the issue (Amusan, 2011). At state level within Nigeria, the Akwa

Ibom government established a Commission of Inquiry in November 2010 which heard evidence from a range of sources on the issue (Ogbulafor, 2011), although it has to date not publically reported on its findings. Whilst these activities are yet to develop into concrete policy responses at either state or federal level, they suggest a developing perception of value in addressing rather than continuing to avoid the issue.

The historic lack of policy response from government has resulted in actions to address witchcraft-related child rights abuses in Nigeria to date being primarily undertaken by civil society. Published information from relevant CSOs demonstrates a focus on high level advocacy combined with grassroots awareness-raising techniques, production of culturally relevant publicity materials and use of the international media. For example, two CSOs submitted Shadow Reports to the UNCRC in 2009 concerning this issue, two television documentaries have been produced and screened and a Nollywood film and children's book have been developed which address the nature and effects of witchcraft accusations (Battarbee et al., 2009; Foxcroft and Secker, 2010).

There are, however, a number of key problems faced by CSOs when addressing these forms of child rights abuse. First, there exist significant challenges concerning logistics and resources. There are very few international child rights organizations operating in the Niger Delta region, due to the difficulty and danger inherent in working in this area. This is compounded by the lack of capacity of local organizations, particularly concerning access to international funding, which to a great extent results from the reputation of Nigeria and Nigerians as corrupt. As a consequence, the scope of CSOs' work, particularly that of grassroots level organizations, on witchcraft-related child rights abuse remains limited.

Second, due to the widespread and entrenched nature of the belief in child witches and the lack of governmental recognition of the problem, the work of CSOs has faced significant opposition both from local communities and from government. This has resulted in attacks on local staff, calls from government for the arbitrary arrest of CSO personnel and judicial action initiated by religious institutions who argue that their rights to freedom of belief are being violated (Robbins, 2011). This further limits CSO action and results in time and resources being diverted to address threats to the organizations, rather than the issue itself. The question of child rights abuse resulting from witchcraft accusations remains contested and controversial and, in combination with the inherent challenges in working in Nigeria, means that CSO activities remain partial and restricted.

4. Recommendations for future action

In relation to the Nigerian context, CSOs have developed a number of key recommendations concerning how best to address witchcraft accusations against children. These have emphasized confirming and implementing specific provisions on the illegality of witchcraft accusations, training for key government actors, addressing the cultural media which are considered to perpetuate the belief, regulation of churches and their leaders, and the development of appropriate care, rehabilitation and reintegration procedures for children who have been accused of witchcraft (see Battarbee et al., 2009; Cimpric, 2010; Foxcroft and Secker, 2010). The UNCRC (2010) in its most recent Concluding Observations on Nigeria has also identified these as key recommendations for the Nigerian government. CSO and UNCRC recommendations concerning witchcraft accusations against children in the DRC also display a considerable degree of conformity with these approaches (see for example, Molina, 2005; UNCRC, 2009b).

However, there exists significant debate concerning how far some of these recommendations are effective and appropriate. First, the efficacy of legislative responses remains contested. For example, Slep (2011) argues that specific legislation criminalizing accusations of witchcraft is unlikely to provide greater protection to those accused, because it goes against popular belief, is often seen to unfairly protect witches and is unlikely to be enforced. All of these factors are characteristic of the current situation in Nigeria. Slep (2011) therefore considers that greater emphasis should be placed on the use of existing criminal laws, including specific training for law enforcement officials and the judiciary, and non-legal interventions at the community level. However, other researchers consider a robust legal system which clearly criminalizes witchcraft accusations as essential for challenging the belief and ensuring children's right of access to justice (Cimpric, 2010). Given the limited resources of CSOs in Nigeria and the ongoing context of widespread police corruption and lack of judicial efficacy, the utility of focusing on legislation and prosecutions as an essential component of strategies to address witchcraft accusations against children should be re-evaluated.

Furthermore, the degree to which the belief itself could or should be challenged, rather than limiting action to addressing the abuse which results from the belief, remains controversial. Attempts to suppress or criminalize the belief in child witches risks violating the rights to freedom of expression and belief, as protected under national, regional and international human rights laws. However, anecdotal CSO evidence suggests a strong conviction that without removing or modifying the belief system,

the cycle of abuse will be perpetuated. Previous interventions have included work with churches and church leaders to educate them on how best to address accusations of witchcraft against children in a manner consistent with child rights principles, and public enlightenment campaigns with parents and communities which focus on alternative explanations for phenomena such as HIV/AIDS and disabilities formerly considered to be evidence of witchcraft.

This debate further highlights inherent tensions within the human rights discourse concerning the promotion of a universal culture of human rights which may conflict with localized values, and the resulting perception of human rights as an imposition of specifically Western values (see for example, Brown, 1997; Cerna, 1994; Donnelly, 2003; Harris-Short, 2003; Ibanwoh, 2001). Challenges to the belief in child witches in Nigeria, which have come partially but not exclusively from Western CSOs, have therefore been perceived as the enforcement and prioritization of foreign value systems over local principles and practices. This argument can furthermore be used in a more cynical manner to justify continued abuse; resistance to 'neo-colonial' impositions having more resonance and popular support than attempts to defend the abuse of children. Whilst universal human rights principles provide an effective means to delegitimize the abuse of children believed to be witches, it is clear that such values cannot be imposed from an external source, but must be seen of value within societies in order to be accepted. Greater education about child rights principles and work to link these to existing social norms and practices coming primarily from Nigerian CSOs is therefore essential in creating a sustainable human rights culture in Nigeria and in addressing the abuse suffered by children believed to be witches.

Conclusion

The issue of witchcraft accusations against children in Nigeria is clearly a growing human rights concern requiring increased attention and action from government, CSOs and academia. This issue has parallels with a number of other practices which have negative effects on child rights enjoyment in Africa, including child marriage, child labour and female genital mutilation. In particular, the resistance to CSO action from government and communities and the controversies over challenging local belief systems which result in child rights abuse highlight the need for increased collaborative work on the most appropriate and effective ways to address such issues and for joint evaluations from all relevant actors on the development of policies and interventions.

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