

Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Child Witchcraft Labelling Among the People of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

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Abstract: *The study investigated Socio-cultural factors affecting child witchcraft labeling among the people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The simple random and cluster sampling techniques were used for the selection of three hundred and fifty respondents used as sample for the study. The questionnaire and focused group discussions were instruments of data collection. Analysis was done using the frequency and percentages, correlation and multiple regression. The results of the findings revealed that there exist significance relationship between social factors and child witchcraft labeling. Cultural factors were discovered also to have influence on child witchcraft labeling. Based on the findings, it is recommended that deliberate and proactive steps must be taken to curb the excesses of the perpetrators of this evil act of child witchcraft labeling. Most of the cultural beliefs should be reframed in line with modernization.*

Keywords: *Social, Cultural, Factors, Witchcraft labeling.*

I. Introduction

Witchcraft is defined as “the exercise or invocation of alleged supernatural power to control people or events typically involving sorcery or magic” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1999). It can be likened to the work of human beings who is believed meet secretly in the night, indulge in cannibalism, wickedness and organizes rites and rituals with the devil and perform black magic (Maduagwu, 2010). However, witchcraft accusation or labeling is not confined to particular countries, cultures or religion but a global phenomenon. Scientifically, there is no basis for existence of witches but witchcraft now exist as a socio-cultural reality and gives life to child witch stigmatization (UNICEF, 2010). There scarcely exist any culture or society of the world where belief in witchcraft does not exist. Witchcraft or belief in witches has become very potent over the years. The thinking that such “superstitious belief” will fade with development, urbanization, modernization education, or the adoption of Christianity or Islam is clearly not the case. Far from fading away, these social and cultural representations have been maintained, transformed and adapted according to contemporary realities and needs. Its presence and especially the threat it represents is still part of what the French anthropologist Jean (1989) calls “the reality of others”. This “reality” is based largely on perceptions that are always difficult to prove or define, and it is this socio-cultural reality that gives material substance to child witch stigmatization.

Witchcraft is no longer limited to the domain of the secret or unspoken, it is present in every aspect of daily life. It has become a common place particularly among Christians and people talk about it all the time. The witchcraft discourse has taken over not only the private sphere but through mass media, receiving front page coverage in weekly magazines, radio programmes, broadcast, confessions and personal experiences of witchcraft, and churches and schools and hospitals increasingly deal with witches or the scare of it. Today, it is omnipresent in the daily lives of many African populations who are regularly reminded that the next person can be a witch or wizard.

In most part of Nigeria, for example, there is nothing like “natural death”, nobody dies a natural death (Onyejekwe, 2003). Even if an individual who cannot swim gets drowned, he/she is killed by a witch or wizard; something or somebody is behind the person’s death. It is even believed that there is no pathological disease condition which does not have a spiritual connection. Every disease is a function of a bewitched origin before its manifestation. Any and every death is attributed to someone and most times to enemies, witches and evil persons within and outside the family circle. This explains why witchcraft accusations and labeling are rife and has destabilizing functions in our society.

It is important to note that witchcraft is not “traditional” to Africa. The French notions of “Sorcellerie”, as well as the English equivalents, “Witchcraft” and “Sorcery”, were introduced to Africans by the European explorers, colonialist and missionaries. The translation of local terms for local realities by the single term “witchcraft” was strongly influenced by European history. The notion of witchcraft covers multiple terms in

local languages referring to various phenomena whose interpretation relies heavily on their context. Nevertheless, this ethnocentric terminology has now become integrated into African languages and is used in daily languages to refer essentially to “occult or mystical forces”.

The relationship between witchcraft, power and wealth is emphasized. This attitude is undoubtedly reinforced by the evangelical, Pentecostal and revivalist churches who have integrated witchcraft into their own discourse by associating it with the devil and have generally depicted godliness and success in terms of overcoming the “devil”, during which members must periodically offer human sacrifices. The contemporary Witch can operate over longer distances, thanks to travelling by the invisible “aeroplanes” even though the family context remains the most popular zones of operation, (Geschiere 2000). Attacks can now come from a neighbor, friend or colleague, and whereas the witch’s power was formerly innate and inherited from father to son and from mother to daughter, now it can be brought or transferred to anyone. “Witchcraft is for sale”, confirmed by a student in Bangu. This witch who is motivated by personal objectives to the detriment of others (their health, money and power), has for Alain (1997) become symbolic of people who have become “too individualized” and capitalistic.

Witchcraft today is therefore a product on the market, whose power can be increased through human sacrifices and decreased through “deliverance”. One can only become a witch by sacrificing a member of one’s close family. The “modernity of witchcraft” therefore constitutes a rejection of evolutionist theories that focus on witchcraft’s own internal processes and historical nature of its practices (UNICEF, 2010).

Witchcraft is a discourse that renews itself constantly, adapting to new situations. Far from being a set of irrational beliefs alone, they are also forms of collective consciousness and social diagnostic. Increasingly however, representations of the “good” witch are losing ground to the “evil” witch, who is driven to commit harm by the irresistible force that may be the product of jealousy, envy, maliciousness, ambition, an irrepressible and excessive thirst for power and possession, or increasingly a desire to acquire wealth exclusively for oneself, or to misappropriate socially approved authority for personal gains.

It is necessary to distinguish between belief in witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft. The fact of believing in witchcraft, that is, in the extraordinary power of certain people, does not pose any particular problem. According to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance”. But witchcraft accusations that end in extreme violence require a different response. Not only do such acts pose serious problems for civil society and African state institutions, but also for those who defend human rights.

The phenomenon of children suspected or accused of witchcraft is not a new development. In many African societies, notably in the Bight of Benin region, accusations of witchcraft against newborns appear to be an ancient practice and sometimes still occur. There are typically based on the circumstances of the delivery or congenital deformities. However, the present discussion of “child witches” refers to the recent phenomenon in urban areas, which concern older children and those on the verge of adolescence who are already in difficult situations. The phenomenon of “child witches” is indeed of recent date and occurs in urban areas, where it has grown constantly in the last thirty years. Thousands of children accused of witchcraft have been thrown out of their homes and are currently living in the streets. In Nigeria, a large number of children accused of witchcraft have also been documented in Akwa Ibom State in the South-South Nigeria.

Child witch labeling in Akwa Ibom State became popular at the turn of the millennium where there were few cases of children stigmatized by witchcraft. But since then the number have grown at alarming rate and have reached an estimate 15,000. Some Nigerians blame the increase on one of the country’s wealthiest and most influential evangelical preachers, Helen Ukpabio, a self-styled prophetess of the 150 – brand Liberty Gospel Church, who made a film, widely distributed, called “End of the Wicked” in 2004. It tells, in graphic detail, how children become possessed and shows them being inducted into covens, eating human flesh and bringing chaos and death to their families and communities. Ukpabio, also wrote a popular book “Seat of Satan Exposed” (2002) which tells parents how to identify a witch for children under two years old, she says, the key signs of a servant of satan are crying and screaming in the night, high fever and worsening health-symptoms that can be found among many children in an impoverished region with poor health care.

Equally, Akwa Ibom State belongs to the oil Niger Delta area where the wealth circulates only in few hands, while majority live and die poor. While many local churches and pastors blame hardships on the Devil, the peoples mindset is structured to blame “the others” and “witches” for failure to get rich and increasingly, witches are believed to recruit children as agents, hence the labeling and torture of child witches.

The State Governor, chief Godswill Akpabio, is laying blame for these tortures squarely on the shoulders of churches and spiritual homes. To that effect, he has promised to “destroy and demolish every church that is engaged in any stupid vision in Akwa Ibom State”. The Child Right Law has been domesticated in

the state (Section 274 and 275 Child Rights Law Akwa Ibom State, 2008), but so far no pastor has been prosecuted and no churches has been demolished.

The increasing number of children labeled as “witchcraft children” in Akwa Ibom state is worrisome and alarming. This has led to a higher incidence of children aged 8 – 14 years to be neglected and abandoned by their parents. This situation has brought untold physical, emotional, social and spiritual challenges to these labeled and stigmatized children, thereby affecting their holistic development. Once a child is being accused of being a witch or wizard, the physiological torture he/she is subjected to ranges of abuse from stigmatization, discrimination, ostracism, severe beating, cutting and starving. Others are burnt, poisoned, raped, tattooed, murdered or buried alive. One cannot begin to mention all the abuses meted out to these children since some of them are unreported. It is important to note that, the effect of witchcraft accusation and labeling is a denial of the Fundamental Human Rights of the child to survival and development, family and private life, parental care, education and medical care. It was also observed that, until 10 – 20 years ago, it was women and the elderly who were accused and labeled as witches and wizards, but the labeling of children is relatively a modern development. These abandoned and neglected children are exposed to social and emotional hazards such as deprivation, hunger, poor or no education, rape, starvation and may exhibit psychotic or neurotic symptoms of feeling of ejection, low self concept and esteem, lethargic, apathy, amongst others. It is against this background that the study intends to examine the socio-cultural factors as determinant of child witchcraft labeling among the people of Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria and make some recommendations.

II. General Objective Of The Study

The general objective of the study is to examine the socio-cultural factors as determinants of child witchcraft labeling among the people of Akwa Ibom State.

III. Theoretical Framework

There are known theories of witchcraft; the Functionalist perspective on African witchcraft, Labeling Theory, Scapegoating theory and Modern witchcraft and Exchange Theory. This study is premised on the Labeling Theory and Modern witchcraft and Exchange theory for the explanation of witchcraft acts.

IV. The Labeling Theory

Labeling theory was propounded by Sociologists in the 1960's. Howard Saul Becker's book titled “outsiders” was extremely influential in the development of this theory and its rise to popularity. The main argument of the Labeling Theory (LT) is that, the expectations of others can be a major cause or influence of criminal behavior. According to Ellis and Walsh (2000), a broad perspective which focused on the factors controlling human behavior known as Symbolic Interactionism arose in the 1900s.

A basic premise of this perspective is that human beings come to see themselves through the eyes of those with whom they interact. This general theory of behavior gave birth to Labeling Theory specifically tailored to explain all sorts of behavior that is generally disapproved of. According to Labeling theory, once a person is stigmatized with a particular label e.g. criminal he/she tends to internalize the label. This internalization not only brings about a negative self concept, but also increases the chances that the individual will act in accordance with the label in the future (Weisheit & Culbertson, 1985).

Labeling Theory holds that deviance is not inherited to an act, but instead focuses on the tendency of majorities to negatively label minorities or those seen as deviant from standard cultural norms. The theory is concerned with how the self-identity and behavior of individuals may be determined by the terms used to describe or classify them and is associated with the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy and stereotyping. This theoretically builds a subjective conception of the self, but as others intrude into the reality of that individual's life, this represents subjective data which may require a re-evaluation of that conception, depending on the authoritativeness of the others' judgment. Family and friends may judge differently from random strangers. More socially representative individuals such as police officers or judges may be able to make globally respected judgments. If deviance is a failure to conform to the rules observed by most of the group, the reaction of the group is to label the person as having offended against their social or moral norms of behavior. This is the power of the group to designate breaches of their rules as deviant and to treat the person differently depending on the seriousness of the breach. The more differential the treatment, the more the individual's self-image is affected. This implies that any negative self-imager, even if they are not specific to being criminal or delinquent will increase the probability of violating the law. (Ellis & Wash, 2000).

Labeling process affects how others think about and behave towards someone who has acquired a particular label; and their behavior in turn serves as to reinforce the initial label (Becker, 1963). The end result is that, once a labeling process begins for whatever reason; it often cascades into a life of its own, with consequences which go far beyond the initial triggering incident. One of the proponents of labeling theory, Frank Tannenbaum (1983 - 1969) did observe that, identifying a person as a criminal sets the stage for him/her

becoming even more criminalized in future. This he calls “self fulfilling prophecy” which he used to refer to an erroneous definition of someone which becomes “real” simply because it is believed by others and eventually by the individual.

The application of this theory to this research goes a long way to prove that children accused of witchcraft accept their new status as witches because others believe so. They are coerced to confess to acts of killing, flying during the night, inflicting illness and pain on their victims. These are actions that would implicate them even more. They are accused of bringing bad luck to the family and community at large, therefore a total eradication of these children is always a perfect idea borne out of ignorance as it is obvious that these children are made scapegoats due to the fact that their behavior is considered strange and does not conform with the usual norms in the society.

V. Modern Witchcraft and Exchange Theory

Witchcraft is a power that is passed from one generation to the next. Tainto & Akenji (2005) stated that elders can transfer magical power to their young ones but the “modernization of witchcraft” has made it possible to buy witchcraft powers. However, the act of acquiring this power voluntarily remains a “privilege” reserved for adults and the rich. Children acquire witchcraft involuntarily from adults through transmission by food or drink. The elderly person is still an important figure in the witchcraft act, since he/she is the one who transfers the power to the child. Generally, by accepting the bread, tea or mango, the child “signs a contract” with the witch figure. Witchcraft has thus been transformed into the form of a gift, albeit a poisoned one (De Boeck, 2000).

The inability to reciprocate contravenes the principle of reciprocal exchange formulated by Marcel Mauss. In the study of polynesian culture, Mauss suggested that gift giving implies a double obligation; to give a gift and to reciprocate. According to this theory, all social life is based on this principle of reciprocity, including maintaining kinship bonds, in this sense, the witch appears to demand reciprocation for his/her gift, and since the obligation cannot be met, the child becomes indebted to the adult “guardian witch” and is compelled to do his/her bidding. According to accounts of children accused of witchcraft, the nocturnal voyages are often initiated by the guardian witch “and accompanied by other witches, both adult and children. During these trips, they participate in nocturnal feasts where they eat human flesh and drink blood; they also visit “mystic markets” when the child accused of witchcraft makes his confession, he does not hesitate to accuse in turn the person who supposedly transmitted the witchcraft power to him. These public accusations have serious consequences for adults, who are usually women, or “mothers”. This indicates women’s growing active role in society and the number of female headed house-holds in both rural and urban areas (Ezembe, 2009). Abandoned or mistreated children will accept food from a “witch mother”, who tries to make up for what the first mother could not offer. This “witch mother” may be someone the child knows, or does not know. According to De Boeck (2000), the magic of the “witch mother” constitutes a radical departure from “a deeply rooted cultural model where women are considered as creators, mothers, child-raisers, and by extension, as forces of regeneration for the socio-cultural fabric” (De Boeck, 2000). For example, the “witch - mother” who is initially a provider of food, soon turns into a monstrous, cannibalistic mother during the nocturnal voyages. At the human-flesh-eating-feasts, the child is supposed to eat his/her mother (or another family member or neighbour).

VI. Methodology

The design adopted for the study is the description survey design in which questionnaire was administered to collect data from respondents on the phenomena of interest.

A mixture of simple random and cluster sampling were used to select the three hundred and fifty (350) respondents used as sample for the study from Eket and Uyo Local Government Areas. The questionnaire was pretested to test for validity and reliability. The questionnaire contained five sections, 3 sections as the main questionnaire and 2 sections for the Focused Group Discussions. The content of the questionnaire includes Bio-data, social factors, Cultural factors affecting witchcraft labeling. Descriptive, Correlation and Multiple regression analysis were employed in analyzing the Data.

VII. Data Analysis

The result in table 1 shows that 129 male representing 36.86% were used while 221 representing 63.14% were females. Similarly, the age bracket for 10 – 20 had 43(12.29), 21 – 30, 54 (15.43%), 31 – 40, 62 (17.71%), 41 – 50, 78 (22.29%), 51 and above, 113 (32.29%). In the same vein, 172 representing 49.14% are married, 97 (27.71%) are single, another 34 (9.71%) are divorced, while 47 (13.43%) are widowed.

On occupation, while a total of 53 representing 15.14% are civil servants, 94 (26.86%) are farmers, 16 (4.57%) are students, 100 (28.57%) are into business, while 87 (24.86%) are unemployed.

Educationally, a total of 21 representing 6.0% have no formal educational, 118 (33.71%) had primary education, another 161(64%) have secondary education. While in terms of religious affiliation, 340 representing 98.86% are Christiana, 4 (1.14%) are African traditionalist and none muslims.

The Socio-Demographic Characteristics Of The Respondents

GENDER		
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	129	36.86
Female	221	63.14
Total	350	100.00
AGE		
Age (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
10 – 20	43	12.29
21 – 30	54	15.43
31 – 40	62	17.71
41 – 50	78	22.29
51 and above	113	32.29
Total	350	100.00
EDUCATION		
Educational Status	Frequency	Percentage
No of formal education	21	6.00
Primary	118	33.71
Secondary	161	46.00
Tertiary	50	14.29
Total	350	100.00
OCCUPATION		
Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Student	16	4.57
Civil servant	53	15.14
Business	100	28.57
Farming	94	26.86
Unemployment	87	24.86
Total	350	100.00
MARITAL STATUS		
Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
Single	97	27.71
Married	172	49.14
Divorced	34	9.71
Widow	47	13.43
Total	350	100.00
RELIGION		
Affiliation	Frequency	Percentage
African tradition	4	1.14
Christians	346	98.86
Muslims	0	0
Total	350	100.00

Source: Fieldwork.

TABLE 2 indicates that there was a significant relationship between social factors and child witchcraft labeling with $r = 0.34$, $n = 350$, $p < 0.05$.

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	n	R	p	Remark
Social factor	23.34	3.58	350	0.34	0.002	Sig.
Child witchcraft labeling	18.56	3.15				

Source: Fieldwork.

TABLE 3 has shown that there is a significant relationship between cultural factors and child witchcraft labeling with $r = 0.44$, $N = 350$ and $p < 0.05$.

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	n	R	p	Remark
Cultural factor	19.78	3.18	350	0.44	0.001	Sig.
Child witchcraft labeling	18.56	3.28				

Source: Fieldwork

In TABLE 4, R^2 value of 0.84 revealed that about 84 percent changes in the dependent variable “child witchcraft labeling” is caused by changes in the cultural factors. The F – value of 48.78 which is significant confirmed the fact that there is a significant relationship between the dependent variable child witchcraft labeling and independent variables social factors and cultural factors. The estimated coefficient for social $B = 0.15$ and cultural factors $B = 0.015$ are all positive indicating that there exists a direct relationship between the dependent variable child witchcraft labeling and the independent variables cultural and social factors. These results significant at 0.05 level of significance.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	20.246	.500		40.521	.000
Social factors	.138	.031	.155	4.446	.000
Cultural factors	.768	.162	.015	4.74	0.002

Source: Fieldwork.

VIII. Discussion Of Findings

Finding revealed that there is a significant relationship between social factor and child witchcraft labeling. This is in support of the studies carried out by the UNICEF in selected African countries including Nigeria as well as anthropological studies (De Boeck, 2000; Yengo, 2008; Tonda, 2008) which showed that children accused of witchcraft are often pre-adolescent or adolescent, vulnerable, and living in socially precarious circumstances. This factor is so much pronounced in Akwa Ibom State and is aggravated by high poverty level of parents which expose their children to street hawking and other social vices which increase children contact with the outside world, and hence any outrageous behavior emanating from the children can be termed witch-craft, even when such behavior can be as a result of hunger and deprivation.

Also observed in the study is the correlation between cultural factors and child witchcraft labeling. This result corroborates with the study of Tracey & Walter (1998) who found that child witchcraft labeling is highly associated with a number of cultural factors. Bond and Ciekawy (2001) have observed that African witchcraft can be understood as a metonymy of complex configurations, with multifaceted.

Semiology, intertwined in various fields, philosophical, cultural and social. Witchcraft refers to a wide variety of representations and practices, which vary according to different socio-cultural groups. This condition is worsened with video/television display of African culture as a characteristics of witchcraft and ritualism.

The general function of the family and “African solidarity”, and questioning of authority based on age has turned who are already living in a vulnerable situation, particularly orphans are most often accused of witchcraft. Whether the orphans has lost one or both parents, the child most often finds himself in a reconstituted family, that is, with a relative who already has children. In this “host” family, the child may have a feeling of awkwardness or be treated differently from the couples other children. When some misfortune befalls the family, the orphans is a favorite target for witchcraft accusations. In some cases, the child may be accused of killing his parents.

IX. Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, it could be said that witchcraft labeling in children in Akwa Ibom State has been influenced by social and cultural factors. Children have been abused in several ways ranging from child-labour to child abandonment. With the increase in orphan hood resulting to greater percentage of parents’ mortality due to the upsurge of HIV/AIDS pandemic, it is believed that until some cultural practices are abolished, and the fight against HIV/AIDS intensified, the vulnerability of children labeling “witchcraft” will continue to be on the increase.

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