

# WITCHCRAFT IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURIES IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS

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## **Abstract**

This article is aimed at discussing the incidence of witchcraft during the colonial and post-colonial periods in Nigeria, and shows some basic reasons why people were or are indulged in witchcraft. It also discusses the significant impacts of witchcraft in the socio-cultural and technological development of the Nigeria society Witchcraft became a crime as the various communities advanced in technology because of exposure to western education and industrialization. Some communities experienced an intense period of witch-hunting while their neighbours were hardly aware of witch-hunting. Many individuals freely admitted to being witches. Such individuals were often non-conformists who felt constrained or alienated, by the plethora of oaths, sanctions and taboos. A witch was believed to be an individual in whom dwelt a distinctive wickedness which harmed people in mysterious secret ways. They were regarded as antisocial and wicked. The witch myth was and is still recognized and affirmed as opposition to moralities. The witch, as an incarnate, always symbolized evil in contrast to the basic goodness of the society. Penalties for witchcraft vary widely in different parts of Africa. In Nigeria, nearly all witchcraft penalties were harsh and rather arbitrary. Witches in pre-colonial, Nigeria were rarely completely rehabilitated and accepted back into the society. Research findings shows that, things changed in the present day Nigeria where witches having confessed or renounced openly, were ably accepted into their community and freed to take part in community affair as normal persons.

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**Keywords:** Witchcraft, witch, mysteries, supernatural, wickedness, penalty for witchcraft

## **Introduction**

Witchcraft is the supernatural interference in the natural community lifestyle and behaviour. It is a universal phenomenon which has a strong root in community beliefs. Before civilization and technology, almost all community cultures permitted the use of supernatural means of assistance. This assistance was in form of consultation with supernatural groups like the witches, to enquire or atone any phenomenon that surpassed the communities' physical explanations. Such phenomena were generally on economic, war, health and political issues. Witchcraft was globally very common for the great majority of people who lived around during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, America and Africa, where supernatural on interference was an ordinary part of their everyday life.

In the pre-colonial days, what is now known as Nigeria consisted of several ethnic groups with different culture and customs. Nigerian communities embraced witchcraft as a consultative medium of getting explanations to incomprehensible phenomena within their areas. The peoples were unaware of the causes of diseases and other natural phenomenon, hence, they consulted with supernatural groups or societies like the witches for explanations. Besides, some Nigerian communities especially the Yoruba and Igbo speaking tribes and people in the Southwest and Southeast, were known for the worship of Esu (the devilish supernatural). They believed that witchcraft was created by God (the goodness supernatural) to maintain balance in the world system. The coming of Christianity and the spread of Islam in the modern time, seemed not to have any significant impacts in the belief system of Nigerians in witchcraft. Therefore, this article aims to compare issues surrounding the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries witchcraft practices in Nigeria and shows how the beliefs in the supernatural power of witchcraft as part of our lives could be removed to enable Nigerians pay more attentions to industrial and technological advancements and face the physical realities associated with the modern time and development.

Witchcraft had long been central to British social anthropologists working in Africa. The landmark study by Evans-Pritchard (1937) on witchcraft in Africa gave insight into the sociology and cultural history before and during colonization. Before the coming of the colonial masters, witchcraft had been part of the culture and beliefs of the people. One of the key conflicts degenerated into what was known as witch-hunting. Witch-hunting was not only based on religious issues, but, economic and trade were some of the underlying motives for witch-hunting.

Witchcraft became a discourse of power in the communities in which it was present as both conceptualization and action. Sexual jealousy of a new co-wife was often assumed to be inspiration for the use of witchcraft. The way women's use of witchcraft was perceived to express men's fear of

women's active agency and resistance. There was also a typical association of witchcraft with crime and violation of law.

Witches were associated according to Latour (1982 & 1984) to people who did things that were not in society's best interest. For instance, a detailed account was given on the pre-colonial era of witchcraft in the northern part of Nigeria. It was concluded from the study that Northern Nigeria was booming economically, and wealth had a strong association with witchcraft.

The spread of Islam however, slightly altered the peoples' beliefs in the culture. In this area of subsistence agriculture and barter exchange, religious authority was in the hands of indigenous priest and elders while political management was entrusted to the Sokoto Caliphate. When the educated elite, in the north, intended on carving out a distinct identity, turned to Islam, Islam became increasingly associated with *arziki* (wealth, good-fortune and well-being), status and power – Nicolas (1975). In this region, economic and trade were in the hands of Muslims, who largely succeeded in silencing the practice of witchcraft for wealth and riches accumulation. Administrative positions were also monopolized by Muslims whose prosperity and modernity were proof that the social veneer provided by Islam was an indispensable dimension of success when building a career in commerce or politics. The prosperity of respected Alhaji (pilgrims) was a powerful incentive to turn to prayers for those who associated a Muslim's identity with economic success outside the practice of witchcraft.

A similar occurrence took place in the Southern part of Nigeria (Southwest, Southeast and South-south). The coming of Christianity to Nigeria in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century did not alter greatly the cultural and lifestyle of the people. The first Christian mission was only established in 1842 in Badagry town in Lagos state. Similar to Islam, Christianity also labelled witchcraft as an antisocial. This led to many crusades on the eradication of witchcraft in the society. A more detailed account on the activities of Christian crusaders to eradicate witchcraft were reported by many scholars - TerHaar (2007), Meyer (2004), Bastian (2001), Offiong (1983) among others.

Nowadays and, due to modernization and civilization more and more people in Nigeria were opposed to the use of torture to obtain confessions, not necessarily because it was cruel but because it was not a reliable way of gaining information. Increasingly, people would not accept confessions unless they were voluntary and not obtained by torture. People became skeptical about the so-called spectral evidence. Some supposed victims of witchcraft claimed they were being tormented by the 'specters' of the people who bewitched them. Also, many argued that witches had no support from the Holy books (both Quran and Bible). Many people still believed that

witches existed but did not believe the more ludicrous stories about them. Moreover, most people also became skeptical about cases where witches were supposed to have used supernatural power to kill people.

From what have been written so far and the available literature on witchcraft, it could be deduced that Nigerians actually believed in the existence of witchcraft. People knew that witches were anti-social members of their communities. According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1978), people knew that witches were the implacable enemies of the society in which they live. Witches were said to be very potent and were thought to be responsible for all sorts of misfortunes, accidents, still-born children, sudden deaths, poverty, bareness and a host of other human misfortunes and miseries in both centuries under review.

It was the believe of Nigerians according to Bastian (2001) that witches could not be fought openly unless after the witch had confessed of possessing such powers that killed or maimed people that the community could react to the person. Some people who claimed to be witches were stoned or flogged to death by irate people in the community whose house must have been touched

One thing that is clear in this research is that witches and witchcraft had being with the different ethnic peoples of Nigeria in time immemorial. The people lived in harmony with their law, culture, tradition and community norms, until they decided to find unscientific solutions to the various challenges confronting them. The following deductions had been advanced for the paper:

- Witchcraft in both centuries appears to be a way of life. The various communities used it to find solutions to their day-to-day life and activities;
- Every Nigerian believed in the existence of witches and witchcrafts in their areas.
- The new religions, (Islam and Christianity), live side-by-side with the traditional form of religion.
- People admitted that there was no remarkable and positive differences between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries witchcraft practices in Nigeria,
- Islam and Christianity never had any positive influence on witchcraft. These religions promoted the existence of witchcraft as their leaders created tensions and fears about it in the peoples` minds.
- Muslim and Christian religious leaders seemed to have the same spiritual ideology on witchcraft - detection of witches, mounting crusades against witches, performing miracles, invoking and rebuking the unseen powers.

Witch-hunt became necessary to purge and purify the religious life of the people from evil and wickedness

### **Global concept of witchcraft**

Witchcraft is the belief that there were vital forces or supernatural powers that could be tapped by those who acquired such powers to reshape the behaviour of man. Some people saw witchcraft as a supernatural magic which could be displayed at will by its owner, proponent or inflictor on any victim. Witchcraft was commonly dependent upon spiritual belief by people. Witchcraft was a feared phenomenon and according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), it was feared by all in a particular community because it was believed that the spirits of living human beings could be sent out of the body on errands to doing havoc to other person's body, mind and estate. Witches were those that possessed inherent psychic power to send out their spirits invisibly, or through lower creatures to harm others. Witches were said to operate in guilds, but also operated singly or individually. It was believed also that witches operated through birds or some other animal familiars. Witches were said to be mostly women, but men were found, especially at the head of the witches' guild. Witches usually inherited a nefarious art from their mothers. Some were born witches while others acquired witchcraft. Witchcraft could also be bought for a small amount of money or materials. It could be passed on through the consumption of food.

Witches were believed to meet and operate mainly at nights. The meeting could be regarded as cultic but it was usually spiritual. Such meetings of course, were mainly the activities of the souls because only the souls attended meetings. At night, witches were thought to leave their bodies asleep in their houses, while their souls fled off through the air to meetings. Witches were assumed to fly on the backs of birds, animals, or actually turn into birds and animals. It was believed if such animals were killed, the real bodies of the witches at home would die at the same time. Witchcraft according to Mbiti (1978) was a manifestation of the mystical forces which were inborn in a person, inherited or acquired in various ways. More often, it was believed that witchcraft and bad magic were combined and worked evil whether deliberately or involuntarily on the part of the witch or magician. A witch was one of the most hated and feared person in a community. People scared to associate with them, eat at their homes, or even quarrel with them in case they might 'bewitch' them. In every African setting or community, there were stories and discussions about witches and witchcraft that created great fears in the peoples. Witches were said to meet on top of trees like baobab, mahogany, obeche, and so on, where they performed various activities. They sucked the blood or ate the souls of their victims. Witches' food could be referred to as spiritual cannibalism. Close relatives were believed to be donated as victims. New members initiated must bring a victim usually a child of her own family. The witches cooked and ate the

body spiritually as they ate the heart or the liver of the victim, the victim was considered dead .

### **Witchcraft the Nigerian perspective in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries**

Witch and witchcraft appeared to emanate as a result of people seeking to find settlements in the various forests, regions, and other places of abode. In the quest to survive, the people assumed that there were unseen spirits that were behind the establishment of the area. The local spirits, were said to provide valuable assistance when human settlements were established. These local spirits played a central role in the survival of local communities in pre-colonial times, by protecting the inhabitants from enemies` attacks, droughts, and epidemics. Eventually, many of them evolved into more personal protectors. In the contexts of human-likeness, these spirits possessed people who were referred to as witches (Aje to the Yorubas and Maya to the Hausas), in Nigeria.

Witchcraft in Nigeria was as old as humanity itself. It had being an issue that affected the people greatly. It was rooted in the custom and lifestyle of each of the communities. Magic, sorcery and witchcraft, had always been part of tribal issues and religion which affected almost all the Nigerian peoples at some stages of their history and still is on-going. Witchcraft was without doubt one of the national human issues that kept unfolding because many phenomena were and are still scientifically unexplained. Because it was part of the history of the people, Nigerians never asked questions whether witchcraft was real or not. The people believed that witchcraft to them was real. Latour (1995) pictured witchcraft as an act of supernatural interference in the natural order of life to favour an individual. It was further pointed out that witchcraft was a supernatural endowment that was attached with a consequence.

Prince (1961) investigated the belief of the Yoruba tribe in Southwest Nigeria and indicated that the Yoruba people believed that witchcraft was a feminine art that had its power from the devil known as “Esu” popularly called the trickery god in Yorubaland. Thus, the tribe generally attributed witchcraft to older women, but young women or even girls were sometimes found to be involved.

Washington (2005) emphasized the same concept of witchcraft in the manifestation of Aje in Africana literature. Aje (commonly called witch) was seen as the personification of evil, as innately wicked people who worked harm against others. Witches were capable of their nefarious deeds through their possession of mysterious powers unknown and unavailable to ordinary people. Washington, pointed out that the full name given to a witch in Yorubaland is Iyami-Aje ( my mother witch). This suggested that the tribe attributed feminine personality to the representation of a witch. This equally justified the witch-hunts among

women and young girls in the Yoruba and Igbo speaking areas of Nigeria and Africa as a whole - Douglas ( 2013), Mgbako (2011), Schnoebelen ( 2009), Sanders (2003), Offiong (1983).

As the Yoruba and Igbo people in the Southwest and Southeast Nigeria attributed witchcraft as a feminine representation, a divergent concept was portrayed in the Northern Nigeria especially Bornu, Hausa, Fulani and Nupe speaking peoples in the area. A witch in the northern Nigeria is commonly called “Maya”. The word Maya could mean a soul-eater man. It was their believe that Maya were men that practiced witchcraft and thus, had the ability to possess other peoples` soul.

The reason why a man representation was attributed to witch in Hausaland was because of the belief that many people became witches in their quest for power, position and wealth Masquelier (2008). Thus, many men in the northern Nigeria became witches or the power of witchcraft was given to them in order to make them powerful, influential and wealthy in that community. Some of the Maya even used their power to attack travelers and strangers within the community to increase their wealth. The Maya engaged in nefarious, extractive activities for the sole purpose of accumulating riches. It was widely believed according to Geschiere (1997),that women`s involvement in witchcraft was induced by either their fathers or husbands as the case might be. Such Mayas were used as informants or servants to obey their Mayas` masters only. However, this concept of male dominance of witchcraft in the north, differed from the Eastern and Southern Nigeria – Harnischfeger (2006), Smith (2001), Offiong (1983 and (1991).

### **Witchcraft identification**

In Nigeria generally, a witch according to Offiong, (1991) was often referred to the person that the community suspected of practicing witchcraft or a person who had confessed to practicing the art, or a person who had been identified by traditional doctors, spiritualists, or fellow witches to be a witch. Once somebody confessed to being a witch or was identified as one, people were usually not surprised since such person demonstrated many anti-social or asocial characteristics. Since the characteristics believed to be associated with witches were well understood, anybody who possessed them was labelled as a witch. It is against this background that Offiong (1983), thus stressed that long before a confession or accusation of being a witch occurred, some people gossiped about the behaviour of the person. The people talked about seeing the individual making surreptitious visits to people who were known witches and the people believed the person chased, flogged, or whipped them in their dreams. Thus the people concerned, and in the opinion of Prince (1961), all these confirmed that the person was a witch. What this suggested was that witchcraft according to Dorglas

(2013) accusation followed a process of discussion and affirmation among relatives and friends before the accuser actually made the accusation.

There had been confessions of women to witchcraft and a lot of what were known of witchcraft came from such confessions. Such confessions according to Sanders (2003) were taken as valid since the confessors were not usually forced to do so. They confessed voluntarily. Although, there were cases when trial by ordeal led to confessions. There were cases of old women and men confessing their guilt on their death beds. Ter Haar (2007)

There were many different views and explanation on the concept of witchcraft in Nigeria, there were also many similarities in the identity of a witch. Nigerians believed that a witch was any person who behaved abnormally outside the expected patterns of societal behaviour Bastian (2001) is of the view that among abnormal behaviours likely to earn one the stigma of being a witch were manifestations of antisocial behaviour such as: not being fond of greeting people; living alone in an isolated area; enjoying adultery; exacting too much for sales of anything; committing incest; walking about in the night; crying at night (in cases of children); not showing adequate sorrow at the death of a relative; not taking proper care of one's parents, children, wife or wives; hard-heartedness.

In general, Mgbako (2011) indicated that witches were mean-looking, mean-acting, or otherwise socially disruptive people whose behaviour deviates significantly from cultural or community norms. Nigerians believed that witchcraft was a mystical or supernatural power that caused harm, including death. This power to them was purely psychic and evil. The art of witchcraft practices, was seen as a form of incorporeal vampirism because as stressed by Prince (1961) a witch as believed could remove the souls of their victims and transforming such souls into a goat, sheep, or cow (or any animal of their choice), thus causing a slow, wasting disease and death.

### **Witchcraft hierarchy in Nigeria**

Another stimulating issue in witchcraft practices in Nigeria was the hierarchy and leadership in the group. The headship of the witch group or society in the northern part of the country was the exclusive right of males, but the most experienced female witch was recognized leader of all female witches. To the eastern and western Nigeria as perceived by Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), a woman was the acknowledged head witch. The second order to the head was made up of the most senior witches in the group who mastered the art and science of the group and were capable of stepping into the position of headship. The third order was the beginners while the fourth order was those who were unconsciously conferred into the groups membership.



Those in the last order of the group were made up of members that were conferred without their knowledge, and were not fully aware of the activities of the group. They bewitched people and attended witch meetings, but they were not aware of what they did. The issues surrounding the fourth order in the witchcraft group remained debatable as Latour (1995) emphasised that some believed that the people in that order must give their consent to join the witch society. Others believed that no consent was requested when there was an identified mark of the witch society on the intending member. The mark of the group might not be on the victim directly, but placed on the family, property, spouse or transmitted to the victim

### **Conferment**

The conferment of a witch took many forms. The most common form in Nigeria in the period under reference, was by hereditary where ones` parent transferred the art of witchcraft to both born and unborn children. Offiong (1983) pointed out that the conferment of witches was more common with female witches compared to their male witches. Female witches always wanted their children to take their position within the witch-society. Also, some people willingly joined the group in search of supernatural powers of protection and wealth, as this was predominantly common in Nigeria. Others were consciously or unconsciously conferred into the witch society based on the recommendation by a senior member or the group who needed the person to serve a purpose.

After the conferment, the group implanted a physical substance into the body of the newly conferred member. The implanted substance was perceived to be "round, hairy ball with teeth" passed on from parent to child, with all the sons of a male witch and all the daughters of a female witch being witches. The substance allowed the members to be activated into their world and also permitted the soul to engage in errands during meetings or group`s activities. The substance symbolized the source of power of a witch and the group`s linkage to all her members. Witch group conferment in Nigeria had a well-defined system and regulation which all members followed strictly otherwise the consequence was punishment or death.

### **Motives for being a witch**

There are some reasons for people becoming witches in Nigerian communities. Some of the reasons are:

- a) Domestic tension
- b) Jealousy
- c) Egotism

- d) Domestic tension was bound to grow in any close knit community. For this, be-witching was always reported mostly among relatives and neighbours. It was assumed that a stranger might hardly bewitched another stranger should there be a dispute between neighbours or relatives, one party intended to get rid of the other by means of mystical forces.
- e) Should something goes wrong following a dispute and quarrelling, every one immediately suspected it was caused by the other party through witchcraft and evil/magic. At times people wished to get rid of others to inherit their properties or wealth, took revenge for the wrongs done, showed or displayed their power ridiculed or brought to disrepute such peoples in the communities.
- f) In the primitive traditional Nigerian society, people invented witchcraft to explain human experiences of pain, suffering and sorrow. These inventions were sometimes the fruits of many long experiences of life throughout the centuries. Since human beings, were curious, they satisfied people's search for explanation and solution to their problems. In modern Nigeria societies, the practices are still valid for many people in both the urban and the rural societies. People in desperation often appeal through rituals, to calm the unseen witches to have a lease of live!!

### **Positive aspect of witchcraft**

People who did not belong were scared when the word witchcraft was mentioned in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. As evil as witchcraft was, there were some elements of fair goodness for the peoples of the communities at one time or the other. Even now-a-days witchcraft is condemned by everybody except those who possessed the art from the survey conducted by the authors, the following items were some of the result found to be some positive aspects of witchcraft in some of the communities in Nigerian:

- (i) Beliefs in the mystical powers helped people to find explanations when things go wrong.
- (ii) People were not satisfied with knowing only how misfortunes or diseases occurred and were caused, they wanted to know who caused them to occur.
- (iii) People were able to have answers which appeared to them satisfactory. Such answers harmonised with the view of the universe, recognized that there were many invisible forces at work that were available to human beings.
- (iv) Once people feared that their neighbours and relatives could apply witchcraft against them, they were likely to

refrain from certain offences like stealing, rudeness, committing crimes, or deliberately offending their neighbours and relatives.

- (v) The belief became a tool for stabilizing relations among relations, neighbours and members of the community.
- (vi) In our traditional society in Nigeria, witchcraft portended a mirage or assumptions. Since the witches made use of supernatural powers, people in the communities always fear the feats of witch crafting and thus repulsed doing evil all the time

### **Witchcraft confession**

In recent years a number of people had confessed to witchcraft. Vulnerable people confessed to serious crimes due to torture or fear. The majority of the confessor identified, were usually female but a significant minority were men. The consequences of witchcraft accusations as seen by Mgbako (2011), violated a wide range of human rights. Attacks against the accused violated fundamental rights including the right to life, liberty, security, the right to hold property, and in some cases, the prohibition against torture. In some industrialized countries, the violence against witchcraft as noted by Mgbako reduced because many people feared they were punishing and torturing victim of witchcraft inhumanly and, innocent people were being killed. Witchcraft trials where recognized, became more rigorous and higher standards of evidences were demanded.

In Europe, America and many industrialized world, the concept of witchcraft, magic etc. had fizzled out in their territories as a result of scientific break-through and industrialization. But before then, there were always the use of torture to extract confessions provided what was taken to be convincing evidence of guilt, and these confessions confirmed the superstitious belief and ignorance of the people. However, Ogenbo (2006), observed that witch-hunting became a mania and the climax came in England, Scotland and America, in the 17th century where great numbers of people in these areas were cruelly put to death by burning. But next century witnessed the beginning of technology and industry which brought about a more skeptical attitude towards witchcraft practices in those countries – Washington (2006)

### **Recommendation**

From the written piece, it is noted that the art of witchcraft was / is a universal system, it is recommended that.

- a. Nigerians should focus more attention on science, technology and real physical objects rather than mysterious things.

- b. Nigerian religious leaders should stop creating fear and tensions of witches and witchcrafts in peoples` minds.
- c. Nigerian communities and its peoples should not based their lives on what the unseen powers of the universe have for them, rather they should promote scientific break-through industry and technology like the advanced countries of the world.
- d. The religious leaders should encourage the promotion of modern science rather than promoting the efficacy of witchcraft to threaten the existence of fellow Nigerians in the bid to become popular and rich in their mosques and churches.

### **Conclusion**

From the article, it has been shown that in many Nigerian societies, people continued/continue to live in fear of witchcraft. This is seen to be as a result of illiteracy and ignorance of modern technology. But, as people advanced in modern western education, industrial and technological activities, perhaps, involvement and belief in witchcraft would be drastically reduced in Nigeria, as it is in the industrialised countries of the world. It is the opinion of the authors that it is through science, technology and industry rather than religion that the Nigerian societies would be relieved of witchcraft fears and tensions.

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