

# Witchcraft in Africa



# Witchcraft in Africa:

## *Meanings, Factors, and Practices*

Edited by

Egodi Uchendu,  
Elizabeth Odachi Onogwu  
and Chukwuemeka Agbo

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



Witchcraft in Africa: Meanings, Factors, and Practices

Edited by Egodu Uchendu, Elizabeth Odachi Onogwu  
and Chukwuemeka Agbo

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2023 by Egodu Uchendu, Elizabeth Odachi Onogwu,  
Chukwuemeka Agbo and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without  
the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-9026-7

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-9026-7

To a special friend, Nath Ngerem, who told me decades ago to "always  
look up to Jesus..."  
As the uproar over the 2019 Conference on Witchcraft raged, that simple  
advice kept me focused.  
Nath, thank you...  
(Egodi)

To the memory of my loving mother, Mrs Esther Oka Onogwu.  
May your beautiful soul continue to rest.  
(Elizabeth)

I am grateful to my mother, Mrs Mercy Ndidiama Agbo, who taught me  
the power of meekness and demonstrated firsthand with her own life to me  
how to put strength under control. And to my father, Mr. Francis Chinedu  
Nwankwo Agbo, for exemplifying and demanding boldness and courage at  
home. Looking back, I realize that my life mirrors a constant and continuing  
effort to combine and balance their two lives in one—mine—with the major  
lesson of love, the antidote to witchcraft.  
(Chukwuemeka)



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword .....	ix
Introduction .....	1
Understanding Witchcraft in a Continuously Evolving Society: An Introduction <i>Egodi Uchendu, Elizabeth Onogwu and Chukwuemeka Agbo</i>	
Chapter One.....	11
Nigerian Christians and Witchcraft: Reflections on the 2019 University of Nigeria Witchcraft Conference <i>Egodi Uchendu and Chukwuemeka Agbo</i>	
Chapter Two .....	45
An Anthropological Analysis of the Phenomenon of <i>Falfala</i> ("Witchcraft"): A Case of Northern Kenya <i>Judy Wang'ombe</i>	
Chapter Three .....	66
The Phenomenon of Witchcraft in the <i>Ifa</i> Literary Corpus: A Philosophical Appraisal <i>Abubakar Yakubu Emeje and Solomon Kolawole Awe</i>	
Chapter Four .....	91
Witchcraft as Illustrated in <i>Ifá</i> Literary Corpus: Implications for Contemporary Africa(ns) <i>Emmanuel Ofuasia</i>	
Chapter Five .....	107
Witchcraft and Its Implications on Social Harmony and Development: An Examination of the Tiv People's Concept of Tsav <i>John Y. Jonah and Terna Akambe Nenge</i>	
Chapter Six .....	121
Magical Powers as a Cultural Heritage: The Impact of "Iriji Bende" on Tourism Development <i>Augustina Okwu Onyema and Veronica Akwenabuaye Undelikwo</i>	

Chapter Seven.....	137
Witchcraft and Underdevelopment in Modern Africa: Fiction or Reality? <i>Elizabeth Onogwu and Joshua Agbo</i>	
Chapter Eight.....	151
Witchcraft and Access to Healthcare: A Study of Persons with Disability in Eha-Alumona <i>Kingsley Osita Odo</i>	
Chapter Nine.....	167
Witchcraft and the Law: The Nigerian Perspective <i>Lawretta Ebelechukwu Okiche, Chimezie Ogenna Nwodo, and Solomon Ihezue Okekwe</i>	
Chapter Ten .....	189
Witchcraft: “Nwinching” and Career Development at The University of Nigeria, Nsukka <i>Egodi Uchendu, Amuche Nnabueze, and Simon Ezike</i>	
Epilogue One .....	201
A Christian Leader’s Perspective on Witchcraft <i>Echi Nwogu</i>	
Epilogue Two .....	208
Interpreting Professor Animalu’s Definition of Witchcraft <i>Jeff Unaegbu</i>	
Contributors.....	212
Index.....	218



## FOREWORD

Is it still possible to say something new about “witchcraft”? The present collection convincingly shows it is possible. A strong point is that the editors and the various authors write from direct experience of living in surroundings where “witchcraft” is an everyday reality. Another strong point is that they combine this experience with a broad, open view. Luckily, the editors are not trying to impose a strict definition of their key terms. Instead, they emphasize differences and varying interpretations, introducing the notion of ‘witchcraft’ by relating it to a broad array of local terms.

The reference in the very title of the book to “an evolving society” signals also their interest in the dynamics of these notions and their capacity to graft themselves to deep changes. Equally important is the editors’ warning that these terms do not necessarily impose consistency. One of the secrets behind the resilience of notions that people tend to summarize under the heading of “witchcraft”—in Africa but also in other parts of the world—might be their unsystematic character: their ambiguity that allows for varying and constantly new interpretations, and thus makes them impossible to falsify. In my experience, the world of “witchcraft” is marked by constant innovation and a frenzy for new borrowings that can have surprising effects.

These imaginations travel in time and space, producing constantly new forms of creative hybridization. What is confusing is that the people involved will often appeal to tradition, claiming an authenticity that masks such dynamics and entanglements. All the chapters in this book show most convincingly that any idea of “witchcraft” as a “traditional,” stable phenomenon has become completely untenable in view of the dynamics and constant innovation of these notions in present-day contexts.

The collection also shows that it takes considerable courage to write about this topic from direct experience. The book’s chapters are based on papers presented at a conference at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 2019. In their chapter, two of the editors offer a challenging analysis of the stormy reactions toward the very idea of organizing a conference on “witchcraft” in an African setting. Some observers even concluded that the people involved must be witches themselves—who else would want to discuss this phenomenon?—so the conference must be an occasion for recruiting new

people to join them in their macabre activities. In my experience (from some decades ago) organizing a conference on the topic would be criticized by many as stemming from a wish to “primitivize” Africa, denying modernization and outing it back into the nineteenth century. But apparently, it now calls forth new and even harsher reproaches. We can read this as a clear answer to those who doubt the relevance of the topic now.

Apparently, it is most relevant: the criticisms of the idea of this conference highlight how much “witchcraft” is at the heart of people’s understandings of present-day changes.

This collection answers the challenge of dealing with this most constructively by a consequent comparative approach, combined with a determined interest in the link with the everyday realities of poverty and a struggle for survival. The editors’ constant emphasis on plurality and what they call “comparative dialogue” makes it possible to include a wide array of links without endangering the coherence of the collection. The chapters range from a “mythographic” analysis of witchcraft and a challenging comparison of the *Ifa* literary corpus with the Bible and its episteme to urgent practical problems, like the need for law-making on the topic or the impact of “witchcraft” on development, health care, disability and tourism projects. Other chapters address the context in which these ideas may (or may not) lead to public accusations.

In my view, the open approach of this collection to “witchcraft,” and the attention to its plurality and dynamics are most welcome contributions to making it debatable. We may need more of such “fearless speech” to combat the choking hold that these ideas can get over people’s minds, also in present-day contexts all over the world.

Peter Geschiere  
Emeritus professor for the anthropology of Africa  
University of Amsterdam  
Amsterdam, 21 February 2022

## INTRODUCTION

# UNDERSTANDING WITCHCRAFT IN A CONTINUOUSLY EVOLVING SOCIETY: AN INTRODUCTION

EGODI UCHENDU, ELIZABETH ONOGWU  
AND CHUKWUEMEKA AGBO

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences continue to reimagine the study of witchcraft in a multiplicity of ways. The existence in many African societies of indigenous words associated with the beliefs and practices of witchcraft point to the pervasiveness of the culture of belief in witchcraft on the continent. Witchcraft is known among the Igbo as *amusu* or *igbansi*; *maita* in Hausa; *tsav* in Tiv; *aje* in Yoruba; *ohe* in Idoma; *ifot* in Ibibio; *pou* in Ijaw; *ochu* in Igala; and *opochi* or *enebe* in Igbira. Witchcraft is often associated with strange activities bordering on the supernatural or metaphysical, which affect the human world.

Definitions of witchcraft differ from one country to another and from one community to another. Likewise, all cultures do not share a consistent pattern of witchcraft practices and beliefs. In Nigeria for instance, the practice of witchcraft often overlaps with other practices like magic, sorcery, esotericism, diabolism and even religion. In fact, beliefs in witchcraft have, over the years, shaped the nature of the interaction between individuals as well as among different groups with diverse interests.

As a worldwide phenomenon, the concept of witchcraft is controversial, and perspective driven. This is perhaps because of its metaphysical undertone and the difficulty of developing a scientific interpretation for it. Hence, while some people believe in the reality of witchcraft, many perceive it and the activities often associated with it as superstition. It is, therefore, difficult to offer a definition of witchcraft that would be generally accepted as scholars have yet to agree on this. Machangu has suggested that witchcraft

is the “belief in the practice of magic to make things happen. It has been historically applied to create influence on another person’s mind, body, or property against his or her will or sometimes to undermine the social or religious order.” He further adds that some people believe that magicians have the power to cause disease, sickness in animals, bad luck, sudden death, impotence, and other such misfortunes. Witchcraft is a system of cultural and social action, woven into the framework of life. Despite efforts to deny and eliminate it, it exists and many people in Africa act accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the origin of witchcraft is unclear, but one of its earliest records is found in the Bible. The book of 1 Samuel 28:3-25, thought to have been written between 931 BC and 721 BC,<sup>2</sup> tells the story of a distraught King Saul consulting the Witch of Endor. King Saul asked the witch to summon the spirit of the late Prophet Samuel from whom he wanted to seek guidance regarding a battle with the Philistines. The battle ended badly for Saul, but the witch’s prophesy came to pass. In Exodus 22:18, the Bible admonishes Christians as follows: “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”<sup>3</sup> In different parts of Africa, many Christians appear to adopt a hostile approach to witchcraft relying on the inspiration they claim to draw from this scripture.

The challenge, however, is that their often-unguided zeal in many cases results in the miss-application of this scripture. Many societies have recorded the breakdown of law and order in the process and in extreme cases, deaths. Hostility against witchcraft is not new in human history. The European witch hunts of the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries are one example. Between “1500 and 1660, up to 80,000 suspected witches were killed in Europe. Around 80 per cent of them were women thought to be in cahoots with the devil and filled with lust. Germany had the highest witchcraft execution rate at the time.”<sup>4</sup> Witch-hunting quickly spread from Europe to America. The Salem witch trial in Massachusetts and the Connecticut execution were held in 1692 and 1697 respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Witch hunts remain a major subject in twenty-first-century Africa. Africans interpret their lives through religion and culture. Persistent arguments within and outside the academia on witchcraft and the conflicts it generates

---

<sup>1</sup> H. M. Machangu, “Elderly Women and Witchcraft Killings among the Sukuma of Northern Tanzania: From the 1880s to the Present,” *Afrika Zamani*, 18 and 19, (2010-2011), 181-198.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.history.com/topics/folklore/history-of-witches>

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible*, King James Version (1611).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.history.com/topics/folklore/history-of-witches>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

suggest that although many do not believe in the reality of witchcraft, the daily lived experiences of Africans show that dialogue on witchcraft affects them in many ways. The introduction of Christianity and Islam into the continent has also contributed to these conflicts. With the growing increase in Western education, meanings and beliefs associated with witchcraft are further complicated. Daniel Offiong, a foremost witchcraft scholar in Africa asserts that:

Most of the modern world has forgotten about the fear of witches...For example, European witchcraft is now a forgotten reality that can be recaptured by a new effort of the imagination. This is unlike what happens in Nigeria and generally all over Africa. The fear of witchcraft and witches is very dominant, and many things are explained with the idiom of witchcraft.<sup>6</sup>

While witchcraft is not unknown in African societies before the introduction of Christianity and Islam—Christian missionaries for instance were confronted with practices that they considered “barbaric,” among which was witchcraft. It does appear that the rise of the Pentecostal movement in the 1970s tremendously began to redefine the cultural, philosophical, and ideological foundations that underpinned the beliefs and practices of witchcraft. As more and more people converted to Christianity, ideas of what witchcraft is and how it is practised started to change as people began to reflect on and judge witchcraft against the mirror of their new faiths.

The reconceptualization of witchcraft, however, did not only wear religious garb but also influenced politics at all levels: ethnic, family, and state. If government policies are not consistent with public interest or are considered by one group to be targeted against them, then the action behind those policies was considered witchcraft. When an individual in a family presents himself/herself as an obstacle to the progress of another/other member(s) of the family, even when the so-called obstacle does not present a spiritual argument, the action is labelled witchcraft. In the formal and informal sectors, policies and actions are quickly read as witchcraft if an opposing group is not happy with the idea.

At the state level, political affiliations, and the government’s disposition to them have recently attracted criticisms, some of which accuse officials of witchcraft practices where their ideas oppose the values of another group. In a country like Nigeria for instance, friction between Christians and

---

<sup>6</sup> Daniel A. Offiong, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic, and Social Order among the Ibibio of Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1991), iv.

Muslims and between practitioners of African religions and either Christians or Muslims often lead to accusations and counteraccusations, one group alleging that the other is intent on bringing it down by every means possible, including the use of witchcraft. It would be expected that scholars, who themselves study these beliefs and developments would not be involved in similar accusations. But this is far from the truth. When a professor refuses for whatever reason that appeals to him/her to allow another colleague to advance in his/her career, the action is almost always interpreted as witchcraft.

What is clear from the illustrations presented above is that the changing nature of actions, beliefs, and practices associated with witchcraft has now made the phenomenon difficult to define. When associated with the supernatural, how, and why would an undergraduate student connect their academic failure to witchcraft? It may be witchcraft because they believe that there are spiritual forces against their academic progress and destiny. On the other hand, if the student had turned down a professor's sexual advances in the past, it is witchcraft occasioned by a history that has no connection to spirituality. Witchcraft is difficult to define because a Pentecostalist would have a completely different meaning for the same or similar actions from the meaning that someone who believes in, and practices African religions would give the same actions.

As President Donald Trump of the United States of America fought to protect the country's borders and Mr. Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom campaigned to take the United Kingdom out of the European Union, both leaders were trying to solve problems partly created in their countries by immigrants. These problems ranged from insecurity to depleted healthcare facilities, and outright loss of jobs by citizens to immigrants or underemployment, among others. For people in Ghana, Cameroon, or Nigeria, who want to immigrate into either of these countries, but cannot because of the tightening of immigration laws, there may be forces of witchcraft opposing their progress in life. Thus, the outcome of this is that the meaning of witchcraft to Americans and Africans would be worlds apart.

When an African Christian uses the Bible to judge his neighbour who believes in African indigenous gods, how does that shape the relationship that will eventually develop between them? When Christians and Muslims fight over the kind of laws that should govern society—Islamic Sharia versus Christian or secular values, how does that reflect on the society that eventually emerges from this kind of relationship? It is, therefore, clear from

the above that witchcraft beliefs and practices have, when not properly managed, resulted in conflict situations.

Belief in witchcraft has also led to the targeting of vulnerable groups, particularly the physically disabled, elderly women, and, in some cases, children, in many parts of Africa. Several cases of witchcraft accusations and extrajudicial executions of mostly elderly women and disabled people abound.<sup>7</sup> Many people have had to endure brutal deaths just because they were accused of witchcraft. Some have been killed by hanging, others have been buried alive and left to die by suffocation. Many have been set ablaze without recourse to any kind of law whatsoever. Machangu presents a grim picture of the targeting of elderly women with spurious allegations of witchcraft which often results in their execution. According to him, witchcraft and the killing of elderly women have been the cause of many deaths and socio-economic problems in Tanzania. For many years they have had major effects on peoples' health, their right to life, their security, their emotional health, and the social well-being of their dependents.<sup>8</sup>

In a survey on witchcraft accusations and the killing of elderly women, Machangu laments that in Ghana thousands of women have been attacked or driven away from their villages in the past decade because of a mere suspicion that they may be witches. The historian Wolfgang Behringer, in his research on witchcraft accusations in Tanzania concludes that "between 1960 and 2000, about 40,000 people accused of practising witchcraft were murdered in Tanzania alone. While there are no laws against witchcraft in Tanzania, village tribunals often decide that certain individuals should be killed."<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the Tanzanian government has identified witchcraft practices and the extrajudicial killing of elderly women as serious social problems. Many cases of killing elderly people suspected of practising witchcraft have also been reported in Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and South

---

<sup>7</sup> Charlotte Muller and Sertan Sanderson report that the murder of the 90-year-old Akuah Dente has once more shown the deep-seated animosity against women accused of practicing witchcraft in Ghana, many of whom are elderly. See <https://www.dw.com/en/witch-hunts-a-global-problem-in-the-21st-century/a-54495289>

<sup>8</sup> H. M. Machangu. "Elderly Women and Witchcraft Killings among the Sukuma of Northern Tanzania," 1.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/witch-hunts-a-global-problem-in-the-21st-century/a-54495289>

Africa. Witchcraft accusation is also a problem confronting many young people in Congo, where thousands of children have been removed from their homes or killed by family members because they were suspected of being witches.<sup>10</sup> In southern Ethiopia, adults and children with any form of physical disability or abnormality are often considered impure and are thus declared to be witches.<sup>11</sup>

What are the kinds of conflict often associated with witchcraft? How do these conflicts impact society? For instance, how does belief in witchcraft influence governance, law, development, underdevelopment, health, illness, disability, gender, and poverty? The practice of witchcraft has a gender dimension leading to more women often being profiled as witches than males. What are the gender norms that shape the concept and belief in witchcraft in a patriarchal society? How have social phenomena such as witchcraft played a role in reshaping people's religious affiliations and practices? These, among others, are the issues that this book addresses.

Why is this new book on witchcraft still relevant in a twenty-first-century world? To answer this question, a summary of the reactions that followed the announcement of the conference that preceded this book is important. To investigate the phenomenon of witchcraft and its social implications in Nigeria, the B. I. C. Ijomah Centre for Policy Studies and Research at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), organised an international and interdisciplinary conference on the theme "Witchcraft: Meanings, Factors and Practices." Less than one month from the scheduled event, a great uproar ensued as people and groups from across the country, especially from the southeast geographical zone where the university is sited, as well as Nigerians in the diaspora, intensely debated the relevance and utility of such a conference. The majority blacklisted the conference as a gathering of practising witches and wizards and an attempt by the organisers to spiritually cede the university to witchcraft, pollute the land, attract God's wrath, attempt to blindfold, and initiate people into witchcraft cults, thus aggravating the social problems in the country.

---

<sup>10</sup> Robert Priest, "The Child Witches of Kinshasa DRC," (2015) <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2015/05/the-child-witches-of-kinshasa-drc/> (accessed 31 December 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Gezahegn Petros, *The Karo of the Lower Omo Valley: Subsistence, Social Organisation and Relations with Neighbouring Groups* (Addis Ababa: Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Administration, Addis Ababa University, 2000), 57.



The above reaction is only one out of hundreds of similar reactions across Africa. People have been killed for being accused of witchcraft and relationships have collapsed. It is puzzling that while belief in witchcraft remains a daily lived experience of Africans, many still live in denial of its existence or ignorance of its many components. Conflict has always been the result. This book represents an intellectual attempt toward understanding and solving this persistent problem. While there is a commendable body of works on witchcraft in Africa, part of this problem could be traced to the dearth or near-total absence of scholarship on the linkages between contemporary challenges in Africa and persistent belief in witchcraft. A good number of existing studies on witchcraft in Nigeria are clearly outdated, many appearing in the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Society has since changed, thus calling for studies that engage with its current realities. It should also be noted that not enough studies exist on witchcraft in Nigeria. A good number of the books on witchcraft in the country are embellished due to the religious affiliations of the authors.<sup>13</sup> This book engages with the present without losing sight of the history that shaped it.

Most of the body of literature on witchcraft in Africa lack the effort needed to bring together multiple case studies. The problem with this is that the current scholarship on witchcraft has not been able to push scholars to make the comparison needed to understand the different perspectives on witchcraft. While this book provides a platform to make a comparative analysis, it does not aim to homogenise the diversity of peoples' experiences. It seeks instead to enhance the appreciation of the plurality of worldviews between Africa and the rest of the world on the one hand, and among Africans on the other. Two things, therefore, highlight the uniqueness of this book—the comparative dialogue it is hoped to trigger among scholars and its engagement with current issues such as poverty,

---

<sup>12</sup> Daniel A. Offiong, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic, and Social Order among the Ibibio of Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1991); Dirk Kohnert, *Indicators of Social and Political Conflict in African Societies: On the Articulation of Witchcraft among the Nupe, Northern Nigeria* (Hamburg: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Dokumentation & Buch (DOBU), 2007); Greta Bloomhill, *Witchcraft in Africa* (London: Bailey Bros. and Swingen, 1962); Alastair Scobie, *Murder for Magic: Witchcraft in Africa* (London: Cassell, 1965); and Vernon A. Anderson, *Witchcraft in Africa: A Missionary Problem* (1942).

<sup>13</sup> D. K. Olukoya, *Dealing with Witchcraft Barber* (Battle Cry Christian Ministries, 2001); Olukoya, *Overpowering Witchcraft* (Presshouse/Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, 1999); Obed Uzodinma, *Christian Victory over Witchcraft* (Ibadan: Glory Tabernacle Ministries, 1998).

development/underdevelopment, religious fundamentalism, interpersonal relationships, and gender, among others.

This book covers a wide range of issues connected to the idea of witchcraft in Africa. Besides taking an interdisciplinary approach to the study of witchcraft, the contributors in this volume are drawn from diverse socio-cultural, political, economic, and religious backgrounds. The chapters in this book examine witchcraft from various disciplinary and empirical viewpoints. It does not only present salient historical and cultural idiosyncrasies on which the belief and practice of witchcraft are grounded, they take the conversation on the subject a step further by connecting the belief and practice of witchcraft to the current experience of many Africans. “Nigerian Christians and Witchcraft: Reflections from the 2019 University of Nigeria Witchcraft Conference” by Egodi Uchendu and Chukwuemeka Agbo is a reflection on the reactions that trailed the announcement of a conference on witchcraft at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 2019. Many who opposed the conference, including academics questioned its relevance to contemporary Nigerian society.

The announcement also triggered suspicions and accusations against the organisers of the conference. Many accused them of being practising witches and wizards and using the conference as a smoke screen to recruit and initiate new members. Uchendu and Agbo’s chapter reflects on these issues, particularly the responses of Christians to the conference. They argue that scholars must investigate the subject of witchcraft in order to decipher it and resolve the social problems that have over time been created and sustained by this belief.

In her chapter, “An Anthropological Analysis of the Phenomenon of *Falfala* (“Witchcraft”): A Case of Northern Kenya,” Judy Wang’ombe offers an anthropological analysis of the Borana people’s beliefs and practice of *falfala*—the closest equivalent of witchcraft. She argues that although the Borana people practice witchcraft, there are no cases of witchcraft accusations among them. Empirical data from her interviews suggest that despite the prevalence of *falfala* in the community, witch accusations are relatively rare due to solidarity among the Borana people. This is regardless of the shifting tendency to a more sedentary life triggered by climatic changes witnessed over time. Subsequently, she advocates for a contextual examination of the phenomenon of ‘witchcraft’ for a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that contribute to “witchcraft” practices within a given society.

Abubakar Yakubu Emeje and Solomon Kolawole Awe in “The Phenomenon of Witchcraft in *Ifa* Literary Corpus: A Philosophical Appraisal” contend that *Ifa* literary corpus is a compendium of knowledge about everything that concerns the problems and solutions to human existential predicaments. According to them, the Yoruba believe that *Ifa* is the appropriate oracle to consult on matters relating not only to human existence but also to things that are non-human. They present a mythographic interpretation of the witchcraft phenomenon in *Ifa* texts. They further submitted that despite the various meanings attributed to the phenomenon of witchcraft, *Ifa* text is relevant in analysing the phenomenon of witchcraft, particularly among the Yoruba people. Thus, with critical and analytical methods, the socio-economic implications of the phenomenon of witchcraft in *Ifa* texts are discussed.

Emmanuel Ofuasia, writing in “Witchcraft as Illustrated in the *Ifá* Literary Corpus: Implications for Contemporary Africa(ns)” argues against the narrow perception that witchcraft is necessarily feminine, evil, or malicious. Ofuasia opines that the conception and connection of witchcraft to femininity is a Judeo-Christian text and European error borne out of ignorance, which eventually resulted in the lack of objective verification of witchcraft practice in Africa. Drawing insights from philosophical and linguistic arguments, he contends that belief in witchcraft and related practices are more culture and development bound and less inspired by divine agency. To make his point, he draws parallels and departures between Africa and Europe as well as between *Ifá* literary corpus and Judeo-Christian Bible.

John Y. Jonah and Terna Akambe Nenge writing in “Witchcraft and Its Implications on Social Harmony and Development: An Examination of the Tiv People’s Concept of Tsav” suggest that witchcraft is an art, a science, and a philosophy whose economics and politics are constant factors in every epoch of human civilization. They argue that witchcraft has contributed immensely to sabotaging the progress of the Tiv people, hence witches and wizards (*mbatsav*) are considered dangerously wicked souls among the people. Relying on empirical data and lived experiences, they conclude that the practice of witchcraft is inimical to the wholesome development of the human race and should, therefore, be reformed or abolished by the government as an anti-people cult.

Augustina Onyema Okwu and Veronica Akwenabuaye Undelikwo, discussing “Magical Powers as a Cultural Heritage: The Impact of Iriji Bende in Tourism Development,” argue that the use of charms and the

practice of magic during the Iriji Bende festival should not be equally associated with witchcraft as Iriji is focused on entertainment and cultural preservation. They also suggest that Iriji Bende could be developed into a tourist attraction, leading to massive income for the government and socio-economic development for the community.

Elizabeth Onogwu and Joshua Agbo in “Witchcraft and Underdevelopment in Modern Africa: Fiction or Reality?” sought to understand witchcraft in relation to the faltering development in Africa. For them, witchcraft is more than the meeting of witches and wizards, either in their covens or the forest, where they seemingly manipulate the fate of mankind, further submitting that its practice of magical powers, skills, and abilities to achieve evil ends, is socially or culturally condemned by the non-practitioners. They argue conclusively that people may not understand the African problem without recognizing the role of witchcraft in her underdevelopment—whether imagined, as fiction or reality.

Kingsley Osita Odo, in “Witchcraft and Access to Healthcare: A Study of Persons with Disability in Eha-Alumona” examines the connections often drawn between physical disability and witchcraft. Odo’s chapter highlights the common practice among the Eha-Alumona of often accusing physically disabled people of having connections to witchcraft and the experiences of stigmatization that they must put up with. Odo’s chapter brings forward a very important but neglected topic in contemporary African society. Physically disabled people do not always enjoy equal treatment in many African societies. Sadly, the political leadership across Africa has yet to give this problem the attention it deserves. People living with disability across Africa do not receive the support they need. The outcome is that many of them do not have the needed opportunities to harness and fully maximize their potential. The practice of constantly accusing them of witchcraft as in Eha-Alumona is only one instance of the many traumatizing situations they face daily across Africa.

Okiche, Nwodo and Okekwe’s chapter examine the challenges of engaging with the subject of witchcraft in Nigeria’s judicial system with conflicting positions on the subject. Theirs is an exploration of the difficulties that lawyers and judges must navigate whenever a case bordering on witchcraft is brought before a court of law in Nigeria. They suggest that Nigeria must come up with a codified law that not only recognizes the validity of the peoples’ cultures but also endeavours to find legal solutions to these issues to ameliorate the problems legal officials always run into whenever they have to deal with a subject such as witchcraft.

## CHAPTER ONE

# NIGERIAN CHRISTIANS AND WITCHCRAFT: REFLECTIONS FROM THE 2019 UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA WITCHCRAFT CONFERENCE

EGODI UCHENDU AND CHUKWUEMEKA AGBO

### **Abstract**

Belief in witchcraft is deep-seated in Nigeria and manifests in interpretations of misfortune and death. The pervading consciousness of witchcraft has resulted in social stereotypes, labelling, and conflicts, including in many cases, mob action. To investigate and address the social problems caused by the belief and practice of witchcraft in Nigeria, the Professor B. I. C. Ijomah Centre for Policy Studies and Research at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), organised an international and interdisciplinary conference on the theme “Witchcraft: Meanings, Factors and Practices.” Less than one month to the scheduled event, a great uproar ensued as people and groups from across the country, especially from the southeast region where the university is sited, as well as Nigerians in diaspora, debated the relevance and utility of the conference. The majority blacklisted the conference as a gathering of practising witches and wizards and an attempt by the organisers to spiritually cede the university to witchcraft, pollute the land, attract God’s wrath, initiate innocent people into witchcraft and aggravate the country’s social problems. This chapter evaluates the reactions of Nigerian Christians and some of their leaders to the University of Nigeria 2019 conference on witchcraft. Data for the essay came from social media—Facebook, and the UNN academic staff’s WhatsApp groups, email correspondence, text messages, and publications in various Nigerian newspapers. This study of Nigerian Christians’ responses to the conference on witchcraft argues that an academic study of witchcraft is not out of tune with Christian teachings. Because of the social problems associated with the belief and practice of witchcraft, the phenomenon has become a common subject of discussions, sermons, and prayer meetings in many Nigerian churches. The opposition

against the conference which was largely championed by a category of Nigerian Christians, church groups, and religious leaders, calls to question the depth of their understanding of the Bible and the level of their appreciation and responsiveness to social problems. This study, therefore, concludes that academic investigation into the phenomenon of witchcraft is necessary to both demystify witchcraft and resolve the social ills that have over time been created and sustained by this belief.

**Keywords:** Nigerian Christians, Witchcraft, 2019 Witchcraft Conference, University of Nigeria.

## **Introduction: The Conference and its Controversies**

Reactions following the announcement of an academic conference on witchcraft at the University of Nigeria beg answers to a lot of questions, many of which were asked during the polemics that greeted the publicity of the conference. To probe these questions, it is important to begin this chapter with the following food for thought.

Truth often suffers more heat from the clenched fists of those who think they are protecting it than from the rejection of those who oppose it.<sup>1</sup>

The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.<sup>2</sup>

These quotes expose the failures of the Nigerian education system and the regrettable near-total absence of critical thinking among a class of Nigerian Christians and religious leaders. Sadly, the Nigerian academia is not immune to this social disease as academics who were expected to understand the relevance of academic conferences and more so, the timeliness of the advertised theme of the 2019 conference, joined the not-so-well educated to oppose an academic conference targeted at solving a persistent social problem.

In a little less than one month to the take-off date of the conference, a nationwide opposition, mostly masterminded by some Nigerian Christians

---

<sup>1</sup> Alter Christus, a UNN faculty on UNN faculty WhatsApp group. Evidently quoting William Penn's "Truth often suffers more by the heat of its defenders than the arguments of its opposers."

[https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/william\\_penn\\_122216](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/william_penn_122216)

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Toffler, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8800-the-illiterate-of-the-21st-century-will-not-be-those>

and Christian leaders, erupted across the country. Those opposed to the conference raised several claims and accusations. The conference was interpreted as a plot by witches and wizards to spiritually relinquish the university to the devil by using the programme to introduce witchcraft into the academic community. The organisers were accused of being practising witches and wizards themselves while also planning to use a supposed academic conference to initiate participants into the witchcraft cult. There were claims also that the University of Nigeria was affiliated with Jesus<sup>3</sup> and that a conference on witchcraft was not in line with the motto of the university, “to restore the dignity of man.”

**UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA  
BELONGS TO JESUS, SO WITCHES AND  
WIZARD, NO WAY!! NO VACANCY!!!**

Notices shared with university staff (November 2019).<sup>4</sup>

Edwin Omeje, a professor at the University of Nigeria and the Dean of Student Affairs, voiced his opposition to the conference in the following words:

Take it or leave it, we are aware of who is behind this evil. So, we need a conference on witchcraft so as to be educated? Who has bewitched us this way? We have failed as a people to solve basic problems but are willing to aggravate our troubles by opening demonic gateways. Of course, we know ourselves and it is not hidden. Even in the expression of freedom of speech, caution is very important. May God deliver us from this steaming shame and evil. I challenge each academic/Faculty in UNN to develop programs that will truly restore the dignity of man. Say no to manipulations no matter what you stand to gain.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> WhatsApp post by Professor Emeka Obe on the university faculty WhatsApp page. A flyer with same words was shared to all university staff.

<sup>4</sup> All images in this chapter were photographed by Egodi Uchendu.

<sup>5</sup> WhatsApp post by Professor Edwin Omeje (hereafter, Edwin Omeje), Dean of Student Affairs at the University of Nigeria, on the university’s faculty WhatsApp page.

Another academic opposed to the conference wrote: “my dear brothers and sisters, we need to embark on this spiritual battle immediately. This people are craftily planning but God will show them that this university belongs to Him.”<sup>6</sup> The conference was profiled as a planned attack on Christianity with the goal of polluting the altar of God in the university. Edwin Omeje continued his attack as follows:

I agree that no knowledge should be inhibited but the process must (sic) of acquisition MUST NEVER POLLUTE THE ALTAR OF GOD. THAT IS MY STAND. The proponents of romance with necromancy and idolatry have always had their clear mission. They are either under manipulation or are on the payroll as a way of transient satisfaction. At this age, we cannot play politics with our lives. I am not against any realm of knowledge as far as the Spirit of God is not injured.<sup>7</sup>

By these words, the author ended up reducing the Spirit of God to a powerless being. The conference was thus perceived from the beginning as an attack on Christianity and, Omeje, who was obviously concerned about the possible impact it would leave on Nigerian Christianity asked, “why must I watch a known enemy to attack my faith when it is easier to avoid it?”<sup>8</sup>

Besides the conference being interpreted as an assault on Christianity, some academics did not also see any possibility that it would make any meaningful contribution to the economic development of the country.<sup>9</sup> They shared Edwin Omeje’s view that:

Any academic exercise that contains elements inimical and unethical to the intended end users must be vehemently opposed. Listen, if you people care, what is the gain of this particular conference? Researches (sic) on genetically modified products (GMOs) continue to receive attacks on ethical issues. This noise about witchcraft has sinister agenda and I am certain because it is not unusual but timely unnecessary!<sup>10</sup>

To further prove that those who opposed the conference were fighting a “good fight” with the aim of protecting the university from a perceived evil, Edwin Omeje in different posts added: “knowledge of witchcraft is

---

<sup>6</sup> WhatsApp post by an unidentified group member.

<sup>7</sup> WhatsApp post by Edwin Omeje. Emphasis his.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> These persons include Dr. Mrs. F. Okparaku, Godwin Eze, and Reverend Dr. Omaka K. Ngele.

<sup>10</sup> WhatsApp post by Edwin Omeje.



definitely not a component part of the fourth industrial revolution that will drive the globe economically,” “[the] University of Nigeria, Nsukka, is our own and all of [us] must genuinely and sincerely protect her;” and, “witchcraft is a complete affront to God Almighty. An attempt to go in this direction will lead to disaster. Be warned ahead of time.”<sup>11</sup>

Some opponents of the conference also based their attack on their own personal conclusion that there was nothing to learn from the conference and that serious Christians should only learn from Jesus Christ rather than give attention to such a conference. Emmanuel Ibuot, a professor at the university and one of the conference organisers, attempted to provide some clarifications for the theme of the conference but was greeted with very fiery reactions. The following quote from a WhatsApp conversation on the faculty WhatsApp page highlights some of the views expressed in response to his clarification.

Brother EJ, I am sure you know in your heart that the topic of the conference is about the instrument of Satan, witchcraft. What is a child of God going to learn from a conference of that nature? What new thing would you be seeking from a conference on witchcraft which God, in different parts of the Bible, hates. Go and learn more about light rather than darkness. Read Isaiah 8:19-20. Always seek light [from] Jesus and attend conferences on Jesus. He has all knowledge. A man who refused to attend such conferences is not fearful but knows how to define boundaries and guard his mind.<sup>12</sup>

Within the University of Nigeria community, the fight against the conference did not stop with the faculty. Some graduate students at the university, operating under the umbrella of their faith-based organisation, the Graduate Students’ Fellowship (GSF), joined their professors in the fight. The Student Affairs Department of the university, headed by Edwin Omeje, collaborated with the Graduate Students’ Fellowship to organise a two-day prayer conference as a counter-event to the advertised conference on witchcraft. The prayer conference, with the theme, “Exposing and Destroying the Powers of Witchcraft (Ephesians 5:11),” was planned to hold on exactly the same days that the conference organisers had scheduled the conference on witchcraft, November 26-27, 2019.

Venerable Dr Moses Omeke, a very senior Anglican clergyman and physician, was invited as a guest speaker. This move by graduate students and the Student Affairs Department further divided members of the

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> WhatsApp post by Reverend Sister T. Akamigbo.

university on this issue. Those who saw merit in the conference spared no word in their condemnation of the opposition while the challengers of the conference stuck to their guns and refused to backdown.



Banner advertising the prayer conference organised by the Student Affairs Department of the University of Nigeria and the Graduate Students Fellowship (GSF).

This stiff opposition to the conference and the prayer conference planned by the Department of Student Affairs and the Graduate Students' Fellowship to disrupt the event fell short of being sincere and nothing demonstrates the hypocrisy of the organisers like the graduate students' prayer conference. Egodi Uchendu, the Director of the B. I. C. Ijomah Centre for Policy Studies and Research and the convener of the conference, in her opening and welcome speech at the conference, took time to promote the prayer conference and encouraged participants to attend. One of the people who attended her conference reported being at the prayer conference on the first day. According to him, "it was poorly attended and instead of the Freedom Square<sup>13</sup> venue originally announced for the conference, the organisers used Ekpo Refectory—an auditorium much smaller in size to the

<sup>13</sup> A field at the University of Nigeria usually used for mass gatherings.

initial venue.”<sup>14</sup> On the second day of the prayer conference, Egodi Uchendu attended the prayer meeting herself. She met only the organisers, about ten people in all, boarding their vehicles to leave. It appeared to her that nobody attended the meeting on that day. When she spoke to the organisers, they simply told her they were leaving. The insincerity and lack of commitment to their supposed course demonstrated by those who opposed the B. I. C. Ijomah Centre conference on witchcraft are, therefore, open for all to see. Many people accused Egodi Uchendu and others on her team of “desecrating the land” by organising the conference and were praying for her death. But when a forum was created for the cleansing of the land, through prayer, they did not show up. This was clear evidence of dishonesty. If they cared enough for the land, they should not have abstained from this great opportunity offered to them to cleanse the land through Christian prayer, which they all claimed to believe in.

### **The Precedent**

Those opposed to the conference seemed to draw their inspiration from a faceoff between a late Nigerian cleric, Archbishop Benson Idahosa and practising witches who had planned to hold a world witches’ conference in his city of Benin in the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> A television guest had announced that the world’s witches would hold a conference in the city of Benin in southern Nigeria. The famous pastor, whose church was located in the same city, as a co-guest on the same programme, replied that their meeting would not hold. The witches in turn responded to Idahosa’s position and said that their meeting would not be stopped by anyone, not even God. Idahosa on his part challenged them and said that God did not need to come down to stop the meeting because he (Idahosa) was in Benin. The meeting eventually did not take place, and many Nigerian Christians largely believe that Idahosa used his spiritual powers to stop the meeting.

---

<sup>14</sup> University of Nigeria’s convocation auditorium, which is far smaller in size and capacity compared to the Freedom Square.

<sup>15</sup> Leke Beecroft, “Confrontation between Benson Idahosa and the World Witches,” 18 April 2017, <https://churchgistinfor.blogspot.com/2017/04/confrontation-between-benson-idahosa.html>, accessed 23 June 2021.



Protest posters placed in strategic locations all over the university in the two weeks before the conference (November 2019).

Drawing inspiration from this event, many of the Christians who opposed the 2019 conference made references to the Idahosa story convincing themselves that if Idahosa, who is considered the father of Nigerian Pentecostalism did it, they could also do it. Bishop Sam Zuga, the head of the House of Joy Ministry and founder of the Samzuga Foundation in Nigeria, addressing Professor David Ker, who was invited to serve as the keynote speaker at the conference, said, “I can’t be a servant of the Most High God from Benue State and allow you to go and become the

international teacher of witchcraft, you are only not attending that conference, tell your host, the international conference of witchcraft cannot hold anywhere in Nigeria. Archbishop Benson Idahosa stopped it before. I am his grandson; it cannot hold even now.”<sup>16</sup> Several other people made comments and references to Idahosa claiming that they were following in his footsteps and that nothing associated with witchcraft would be allowed in the country.

Echi Nwogu, a very senior Anglican clergy, however, had a different opinion on the Idahosa story. Reverend Canon Nwogu highlighted the differences between the world conference of witches and the academic conference on witchcraft planned by the research centre in Nsukka. He writes as follows:

How can one who is learned claim that the witches convocation planned for Benin to make Benin the world headquarters that Bishop Idahosa decreed against and IBB cancelled the visas of all the international delegates is the same with this UNN academic conference to enlighten the people and demystify the fear of witches in the land? How can it be said to be the same? One convocation was planned by witchcraft practitioners and this one was planned by non-witchcraft people to debunk many of the fables and let people know the facts and the fiction about the phenomenon of witches that has taken hold of all of us today. I remain amazed at us and our fears that discussing in public the same witches we teach people [are] the adversaries of our life and prosperity in church and prayer vigils will infect us and unleash the world of witches on us. Haba! What have we gotten into? To accuse the organisers of this UNN witches academic conference as witchcraft devotees is lying. It is uncharitable. It is high wired deception founded on ignorance and lack of discernment.<sup>17</sup>

Canon Nwogu’s argument is very clear, the opponents of the conference did not do a good job of distinguishing between a conference of witchcraft practitioners and an academic conference targeted at understanding the phenomenon of witchcraft and its social dynamics.

---

<sup>16</sup> Rita Okoye, “Bishop Sam Zuga condemns UNN International witchcraft conference, vows to stop it,” *Vanguard*, 20 November 2019, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/11/bishop-sam-zuga-condemns-unn-international-witchcraft-conference-vows-to-stop-it/>

<sup>17</sup> WhatsApp post by Reverend Canon Echi Nwogu on the Christian Union, UNN, alumni platform. The Christian Union is a fellowship of undergraduate students at the University of Nigeria.

## Society and Witchcraft: Why these Controversies?

The next thing to consider is: why is witchcraft such a controversial topic in Nigeria and, indeed, across the continent of Africa? Witchcraft has long been a source of social tension and civil unrest in Nigeria. As the concept of witchcraft is continually being expanded, so do the social crisis deriving from it. Various aspects of the ritual practices associated with indigenous African religions have progressively been classified as witchcraft. Also, as the social problems of the twenty-first century evolve, people are now increasingly drawing connections between other people's actions and the character traits often associated with witchcraft.

The challenge with this is that the meaning of witchcraft progressively takes on fluid interpretations. To students at the University of Nigeria, the difficulties they face in their studies are partly the result of witchcraft activities. A young lady who is ready to marry but is not able to attract suitors interprets this as the work of witches and wizards. University professors who have been denied promotion often point to human agents of witchcraft in their departments or faculty as their oppressors. The list of what qualifies as witchcraft in present-day Nigeria is not only long but endless.

Jidefor Adibe, an alumnus of the University of Nigeria, in a very long piece he wrote about the conference, drew attention to a very tragic situation that occurred in Kwara State, central Nigeria, in 2009, as well as in other parts of the country. According to him,

In 2009, the police in Kwara State brought opprobrium to the country by 'detaining' a black and white goat, which some vigilantes seized and accused of being an armed robber who used black magic to transform himself into an animal after trying to steal a Mazda 323 car. Years ago, some people in different parts of the country were lynched because they were accused of mystically stealing some men's manhood just by shaking hands with them. Beliefs like these are common across the country, justifying the witchcraft conference—whether academic or not: if those who claim they practice witchcraft or juju say they want to organise a conference, that will be fine with me, provided we will have magicians and others who can understand the principles of their assumptions to interrogate them. This is what the spirit of critical inquiry is all about.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Jidefor Adibe, "Much Ado about the Witchcraft Conference at UNN," see <https://thenews-chronicle.com/much-ado-about-the-witchcraft-conference-at-unn/>.