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## **Convicted without Evidence: Elderly Women and Witchcraft Accusations in Contemporary Nigeria**

By Friday A. Eboiyehi<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Concern about persecution of person(s) accused of witchcraft practices has long been recognized as a major issue in sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, the persecution of elderly women suspected to be witches is predominantly widespread, and has been identified as one of the most important obstacle to the attainment of the December, 1993 Declaration of the UN General Assembly on elimination of violence against women on the continent. Torturing and various forms of violence against elderly women accused of witchcraft without evidence against them implies major infringements of their fundamental Human Rights as enshrined in Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which stipulates that no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Despite this and other similar instruments, persecution of elderly women suspected of witchcraft remains unabated in Nigeria. Furthermore, there is little scholarly work and insufficient government policies in Nigeria to address this issue. This paper is an attempt to bridge this gap.

*Keywords:* Elderly women, Nigeria, Government policies, Witchcraft

### **Introduction**

Across Africa, a war is being waged on women - but we are refusing to hear the screams. Over the past fortnight, I have travelled into the secretive shadow world that mutilates millions of African women at the beginning of their lives, and at the end. As girls, they face having their genitalia sliced out with razors, to destroy their "filthy" sexuality and keep them "pure". As old women, they face being hacked to death as "witches", blamed for every virus and sickness blowing across the savannah (The Independence, 2009).

Africa has long standing history of complex phenomenal as they relate to belief system, especially in the existence and powers of witches which pervades every segment of the society. Such beliefs have commonly resulted in persecution, social rejection, discrimination and violence toward those who are believed to be or who identify themselves as witches (Liepe, 2016). In many African societies, elderly women much more than the elderly men are often accused of witchcraft practices (Chilimampungwa and Thindwa, 2011). They are the extreme example of the so-called "evil" or "eccentric" person against whom the members of their families, local community, and the entire society have always taken punitive action. The justification to physically and emotionally persecute them reclines in the "interests of social harmony". It is not surprising therefore that all over Africa, thousands of elderly women accused of witchcraft have been burned,

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buried alive, hacked to pieces and tortured to death. In the Republic of Tanzania, for instance, more than 2,585 elderly women were reportedly killed between 2004 and 2009 due to witchcraft accusations (HelpAge International (HAI, 2010). In Zimbabwe, more than 20 elderly women were hacked to death between 2010 and 2011 over witchcraft allegations. Many others were physically, sexually, psychologically abused, banished and deprived of food assistance (ibid). Not too long ago, President Mugabe of Zimbabwe sacked his deputy, Mrs. Joy Mujuru over a witchcraft accusation (African Review December 4, 2014). Mugabe accused Mrs. Mujuru (now over 60 years old) of being a witch who wanted to assassinate him. Similarly, in 2011, a court in Cameroun convicted an elderly woman accused of practicing witchcraft based on the testimony of traditional healers (Harrop, 2012). In Burkina Faso, hundreds of elderly women accused of witchcraft (called *les mangeuses d'ames*, or soul eaters) were either killed or banished (HAI, 2010). Consequently, a large number of them fled their homes and communities to avoid being accused and then killed. Many of them ended up living destitute in urban areas (ibid). In northern Ghana, over 1,000 elderly women alleged to be witches are living in several intolerable “witch” camps (Igwe, 2011). In the Central African Republic (CAR), many of the accused elderly women are languishing in various jails. The interim president of that country who herself is a woman was in 2014 quoted as saying that, “in CAR witchcraft is real. Some 60 percent of female prisoners were sent to jail for witchcraft” (Hill, 2014).

In Nigeria, witchcraft accusations are a critical factor in the violation of elderly women’s rights. They also generate wider problems in families and communities. What has also become a disturbing reality is the kind of abuses that are, on daily basis, meted out on them. The major reasons for the abuse are the beliefs that they have the evil propensity to harm innocent persons in inexplicable concealed manner; possess the magical powers to fly at night and travel far and wide to kill innocent people; cause disease in humans, sudden death, impotence, sickness in animals, bad luck, and other such misfortunes (Sambe, Yander and Abanyam, 2014). It is also generally believed that when they want to harm their victims, they transform from human beings into animal, birds, reptiles, and insects (Machangu, 2015). It is therefore not surprising that witches are blamed and punished for strong winds, drought, hunger, misery, and all other disasters (Secker, 2012). In many communities, the services of soothsayers or witchdoctors are often required by those who have suffered a misfortune, illness, or death in the family, to identify who in the community has been “bewitching” them (Secker, 2012). In most cases, accusing fingers are often pointed to elderly women who then bear the consequences.

Accusations and persecution of witches is not limited to Africa alone. Anthropological, historical, and other evidences in terms of varied cultures are documented in the pioneering work of Evans- Pritchard (1937) and many others (Liepe, 2016). This evidence shows how different cultures in Europe, America, and elsewhere have also displayed varied expressions and discourses around the concepts of witchcraft (Stewart and Strathern, 2004; Liepe, 2016). These studies have also revealed the equivalent of what is now occurring in Africa with regards to witch-hunting. However, while witchcraft beliefs and violent behaviour against alleged witches have drastically reduced in much of the developed countries of Europe and America, the same cannot be said of sub-Saharan Africa where the belief is still very strong and deeply rooted. No wonder that while describing the plights of “witches” in Africa, Philip Alston, a Special Rapporteur on Judicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions stated in a report to UN Human Rights Council that, “in too many settings, being classified a witch is tantamount to receiving a death sentence” (HAI, 2010).

For several decades, the United Nations (UN) and other international bodies have recognized the plights of women all over the world. Consequently, in 1981, it declared November

25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (United Nations, 2013). The premise of setting the day apart is to raise awareness that women around the world are subjected to various forms of violence. Inspired by the brutal assassination ordered by the Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo in 1960, of the Mirabal sisters, political activists in the Dominican Republic, it was believed that the implementation of this declaration would at least reduce all forms of violence against women if not totally eradicate them. However, this declaration and other subsequent ones, totally ignore the plight of elderly women who are being accused of witchcraft practices and continue to suffer myriad forms of violence in many developing countries. Sadly, the Nigerian government and law enforcement agencies that are supposed to protect the lives of elderly women accused of witchcraft only make arrests, but fail to persecute the perpetrators of these heinous acts even when these violent behaviours are openly carried out in the presence of bystanders. Thus, despite the persecution of the already weak members of the Nigerian state and the abuse of their rights; the extent and nature of witchcraft-based violence against elderly women has received little scholarly attention within the gender-based violence discourse. Instead, most studies on witchcraft persecution focus on children and women of child-bearing age. This study therefore, is an attempt to bridge this gap. Section 1 of the paper examines the concepts of elderly woman and the witch. Section 2 considers witchcraft beliefs, accusations and persecution of elderly women in Nigeria. Section 3 briefly looks at women and witchcraft. Section 4 examines the consequences of witchcraft accusations on elderly women's rights. Section 5 explores efforts put in place by the Nigerian government to address the situation while the last part focuses on conclusion and policy recommendations for future action.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Social scientists and researchers in Africa have long had an interest in witchcraft practices on the continent. Evans-Pritchard's (1937) *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande People of the Upper Nile*, is the foremost ethnography on the topic. His research centres on beliefs concerning magic and how it influences and replicates the social organization of the community. Principally, this work revolves around beliefs of witchcraft and how the Azande put blame, respond to, and ascertain witchcraft and witches (Explore, 2016). Since this paper revolves around the concept of elderly women, witches and witchcraft practice, it is pertinent to briefly define these key terms to aid our discourse.

The first natural question to ask is, "who is an elderly person?" or in this case, who is an elderly woman? There is no universally accepted standard to numerically define who an elderly person or woman is. This is because the perception of ageing differs by individual, community, and societal context (Mazurana, Benelli, Gupta and Walker, 2011). Most developed countries take the age 65 years or older as the definition of an old person whether male or female (Egunyomi, 2012). This age is when an individual becomes eligible for pension benefits (Togonu-Bickersteth, 2014). However, this figure is by no means universally applicable as a number of factors determine when a person will be perceived as old. Some of these factors may be cultural as most societies have a set of social markers that determine who is old (Togonu-Bickersteth, 2014). Glascock and Feinman's (1980) study of the definition of old age in developing countries, in which Nigeria was included, categorized the definition of old age into three groupings: chronological age, change in social roles, and change in capabilities. In her study of age identification among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, Bickersteth (1986) found that there was a strong relationship between chronological definition of old age and some social markers, particularly for women. According

to her, women were more likely to be defined as old if they have attained menopause and have grandchildren. From the social definition of disability, this paper advances a definition of old age that recognizes the social construction in place of chronological age due to the fact that the global population reaches “old age” at considerably different rates (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Population Division, 2015). For the purpose of this paper, an elderly woman is defined as one whose age is 60 years or over and who is unable to perform an internationally accepted set of activities of daily living (IADLs). This is a period when Nigerian society makes the distinction and considers women as “old” and treats them as such (Togonu-Bickersteth, 2014).

The second important question to consider is who or what is a witch? According to the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN, 2013), “a witch is an evil person who has the ability to bring about all manner of harm. For William West (1963, p.13) witches are people who are in league with the devil not only to cause a tempest and ruin crops, but to fly to distant places to spend all night in devilish lust. Middleton and Winter (1963, p. 273) see witches as the personification of evil and as a group of an innately wicked people who do harm. The Free Dictionary defines a witch as a person, especially a woman, claiming or popularly believed to possess magical powers and who engage in the practice of sorcery. An African definition or perception of a witch seems to be in agreement with this latter definition which has been rhetorically associated or programmed to be identified with ‘woman’. In the Nigerian context, witchcraft practices are mainly associated with elderly women compared to their male counterparts. In Nigeria, somebody is a witch if members of the community suspected her (or him) of practicing witchcraft, has confessed to practicing the art, or has been identified by witch doctors, spiritualists, or fellow witches (Offiong, 1991).

However, Evans-Pritchard (1937) avows that witches do not exist. According to him, witchcraft is an imaginary offence because it is impossible: a witch cannot do what s/he is supposed to do and has no real existence. Anne Marie (1968: 243) adds that witches utter no spells and possesses no medicine. Parrinder (1963, p. 16) posits that, “the belief in witchcraft is a tragic error, a false explanation of the ills of life and one that has only led to cruel and baseless oppression in which countless people have suffered”. Donoran (1992) states that most people suffer from psychological defeat which they attribute to witchcraft attacks. According to him, the belief in witchcraft in Africa is a mere psychological matter. Evans-Pritchard concludes that those accustomed with the life of the African people will realize that there is no end to possible misfortune in routine tasks and leisure hours alike, arising not only from miscalculations, incompetence and laziness, but also from causes over which “the African”, with his meagre scientific knowledge, has no control.<sup>2</sup> The question now is, if witchcraft is an imaginary offence and a witch has no real existence as affirmed by Evans-Pritchard (1937) why do the accusations and persecution of elderly women accused of such practices persist? This now brings us the next section: witchcraft beliefs, accusations, and persecution of elderly women in Nigeria.

### **Witchcraft Beliefs, Accusations and Persecution of Elderly Women**

In Nigeria, witchcraft beliefs have existed for centuries. For centuries, Nigerians lived close to Mother Nature and saw the natural environment as something controlled by spiritual forces

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Evans-Pritchard wrote during the height of the colonial period, when ethnocentric stereotypes of Africans abounded (as they still do), so that “laziness” and “incompetence” were normative racist terms associated with Africans across colonial regimes.

(Igwe, 2013). Witchcraft beliefs are worsened by the fear of occult, persistent poverty, desolation, and insecurities. The underlying causes of a belief in witchcraft are complex and cannot simply be ascribed to just one origin (Igwe, 2013). Igwe argues that the declining education standards and a high degree of religious indoctrination all play their part. He states further:

There is this belief that when something happens there is a spiritual entity behind it. It is believed that this spiritual realm can be manipulated by people who have spiritual powers. This is what lies behind the idea of witchcraft. If you get sick you don't think you ate something that caused problems with your biological system. Instead you spiritualize the problem. You think that somebody somewhere is manipulating your physiology and that is why you are sick.

He states further:

Nigerians are more worried about the imagined scale of witchcraft assaults, not witch persecution or the killing and abuse of alleged witches in the country. They spend much time worrying about the next 'witchcraft attack', not the maltreatment of alleged witches. And the witch imaginaries are recharged everyday at prayer meetings, house fellowships, at churches and mosques by pastors, and ministers, mallams and imams (Premium Times, 2016).

Arguing along this line, Abidde (2013) also affirms:

Nigerians do not take responsibility for their failures and shortcomings. Plane crashes and automobile accidents are, for the most part, attributed to evil forces. If your car malfunctions, you blame the witch; if you have a heart attack or stroke or other health challenges, you blame your father's second or third wife; if you do poorly in school or if you are denied admission to the school of your choice, you blame the woman down the road.

It is obvious from the above that in spite of age, religions, different educational backgrounds, or social positions, Nigerians strongly believe in the existence and influence of witchcraft (Di Domenico, 1982; Kohnert, 1996). Prince (1961) for instance, points out that among the Yorubas of south western Nigeria; it is believed that witchcraft is a feminine art that had power from the devil called "Esu" (the trickery god). Another name of a witch in Yoruba land is *Aje*. Washington (2005) argues that the full meaning of the name *Iyami-Aje* (my mother witch), suggests that the Yorubas attribute a feminine personality to the representation of a witch. Thus, generally, the Yorubas as in other African countries attribute witchcraft to women. This belief justifies the persecution of women including the older ones (Douglas, 2013; Mgbako, 2011). It is therefore, not surprising that for an average Nigerian, a typical witch is an old woman who has a reputation for being weird or anti-social. In the fairytales of many communities a witch is depicted as an old woman who causes mischief in the family and community. In rural Nigeria, they include the childless, the farmers, those aged women living alone, those with certain physical abnormalities such as having red eyes, a common feature of older women who spend their lifetime cooking for their families over smoky, inefficient stoves using poor quality fuel (Igwe, 2013; Eboiyehi, 2013). In the urban areas they are the destitute and traders who have been targeted and

accused by men who clearly perceive them as competitors or a threat to their power (Federici, 2010). It is not surprising that film producers used them as images in films and documentaries portraying them as witches. In such films they are perceived as followers of the Devil whose characteristics include the ability to fly at night and to take animal form in order to bring about harm (ibid). Every evil misfortune that seems to be incapable of rational explanation is attributed to them.

Among the Hausas of northern Nigeria, a witch known as “Maya” (soul-eater man) is believed to be a man who practices witchcraft and has the ability to possess people’s souls. The Hausas believed that people become witches in their quest for fame, power, position, and wealth (Masquelier, 2008). In the Hausa society, it is believed that men who became witches did so in order to become powerful, influential, and wealthy in their various communities and that women’s involvement in witchcraft was induced either by their fathers or husbands as the case may be (Geschiere, 1997).

Violence is common when allegations of witchcraft arise, both in obtaining confessions and in terms of punishment. In rural areas, these allegations are borne out of personal jealousy, hatred by family members, neighbours or members of the community. Others are based on deeply rooted cultural beliefs, gender and age based discrimination (HAI, 2010). Witchcraft accusations against older women are often instigated by family members, due to the low value placed on them within polygynous family systems. Di Domenico (1982) observes that among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, a majority of accusations are made by men, husbands, in-laws, children, and fellow co-wives as a pretext to banish them from their households and communities. Child mortality, miscarriage of pregnant women, eccentric behaviour, and outliving a husband are also key underlying factors for witchcraft accusations (HAI, 2010; Secker, 2012). If guilt is sufficiently established in the minds of the accusers, they will be punished. The punishments invariably involve severe beatings which may lead to the victim’s death. Before they are killed, the accused are paraded through the streets naked, forced to confess and eat excrement (Federici, 2010); or they are compelled to drink ‘medicines’ that are lethal (Secker, 2012).

In most Nigerian towns and cities, a lynch mob and other perpetrators take part in the violence against the accused. In the rural areas, traditional healers or soothsayers are often consulted by those who have suffered loss, misfortune, illness, or death in the family, to point out whom in the family or community has been “bewitching” them (Help Age International, 2011). In the urban areas pastors (men of God) point them out during “prophesy” or “deliverance”. Also, individuals regularly accuse elderly women of causing their ill luck, disease or death (Igwe, 2011).

Though the exact numbers of elderly women persecuted over witchcraft accusation are unknown due to lack of reporting, scholars generally agree that the number of such elderly women in the last decades is on the rise (Igwe, 2013). Startling accounts of torture over allegations of magical theft of genitals are also known (ibid). Often, mob attacks are instantly applied by the mob with onlookers witnessing a perceived infringement of social mores instigating the process of violence as a remedy of the perceived wrong. According to Igwe (2013) “this unlawful violence is triggered by a few actors who serve as the accuser, judge and executor. “They deploy slaps, sticks, stones, iron rods, machetes, petrol and other combustible substances in enforcing their slant of justice”. Witchcraft accusations also draw a lot of anger and vexation from the families of the victims against the accused person. The accusation justifies their killing, maiming, abandonment, maltreatment, stigmatization, and banishment by the family or community members in the name of exorcism. This paper therefore argues that witchcraft accusations and the consequent exposure

to degrading and inhuman treatment is one of the ugliest forms of discrimination that older women are subjected to in Nigeria without being given the opportunity for a fair hearing.

### **Persecution of Elderly Women Accused of Witchcraft: Examples from Nigeria**

Since quantitative data on witchcraft persecutions against elderly women in Nigeria is scant and receives very little scholarly attention, this section relies heavily on evidences from secondary data. Such accounts of witchcraft persecution in which elderly women are burnt, stoned, shot, hacked with machetes, or killed have been documented in newspapers, magazines, internet source based materials and some authors' research works (Ademowo, Foxcroft and Oladipo, 2010). Some of them are summarised below.

#### *Case I*

In May 2016, a 17 year-old boy, Agayo Iorzenda, was paraded by the Benue State Police Command over the murder of his mother. During the interrogation by the Police, he said:

I went to consult the oracle over my impotence and I was told that my mother used my manhood for witchcraft and rendered me impotent. She did not want me to be a man. So my friend advised me to kill her so as to use her blood to acquire spiritual powers that will help me become rich and do many other things. That was why I shot and killed her.” (Vanguard 04/05/2016).

#### *Case II*

The general prayer for the elderly in Nigeria is for their own children to take care of them while they are still alive and give them a befitting burial when they die. This makes an average elderly person wish to die before his children so that she could have her children bury her. In cases where such an elderly person witnesses the death of children or young adults in the family, the situation creates a lot of anxiety in the elderly as this might lead the children to have negative attitude towards their aged parents (Eboiyehi, 2008). A rural, aged woman aged 90 in Esan, south-south Nigeria stated the following, during an interview with the author as follows:

I had only three children that God gave me. We were all living happily together until early last year when the youngest of them died in a ghastly motor accident on his way to Benin. When they brought his corpse, the elders in my village insisted that they must find out who was responsible for his untimely death. They called a witch doctor who accused me of using witchcraft to kill my own son because he was not been sending money to me. The whole village has since isolated me. My children too have abandoned me because they see me as the one bewitching them (Eboiyehi, 2008).

#### *Case III*

In the Isa Local Government Area of Sokoto State in northern Nigeria, a 65 old Muslim woman identified as Zainab Laboo, was tried and flogged with twelve strokes of the cane as punishment for practicing witchcraft. The Sun Newspaper reported that Zainab was flogged at the District Head's palace, in response to a complaint lodged against her by her daughter-in-law. She

alleged that her mother-in-law was aiding her son to maltreat her through diabolical means. The palace authority summarily tried the accused and found her guilty of the allegation.

Aggrieved members of the village later held a press conference where they stated that the woman was not the first victim to suffer such an unjust treatment by the palace authorities. They added that many residents had been invited to the District Head's palace and summarily tried for one offence or the other, including accusations of witchcraft. They accused the District Head of highhandedness. The apprehension between mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law is a common occurrence in many Nigerian families. From time to time, daughters-in-law accuse their mothers-in-law for whatever goes wrong in their families, particularly if they learn that they do not like them or did not approve of their marriages to their sons. For instance, the blame of having difficulty in conceiving or giving birth is put on the mother-in-law. They accuse them of using witchcraft either to destroy or block their wombs. Also, if daughters-in-law are not living happily with their husbands, they accuse their mothers-in-law of using their diabolical powers to block the heart of their sons and stop them from loving them. If they cannot get a job or their businesses fail, they think that the mothers-in-law have placed a curse on them particularly if they had at any point in time had some disagreement.

#### *Case IV*

In Nasarawa State, another northern state, Mr. Peter took his wife to court and demanded that the court grant him divorce. He said:

I am no longer in love with my wife. There is no reason to remain married to her. We had been married for so many years without a child. She has recently been asking me to sleep behind her on our matrimonial bed. Where I come from it is wrong for a man to lie behind a woman. So, each time I refused to do it the next morning I would wake up to find myself on the floor. If I ask her how I got to the floor she would retort, "Did I not tell you to be sleeping behind me?" This has happened several times and I cannot take it anymore. (*Leadership Newspaper*, 2012)

He states further:

Where I was sitting in my parlour one day, I was hit on my left shoulder by an unseen force. I had to go to the hospital because of the resultant pain and the hospital could not do anything about it. Then I had to resort to herbal medicine at home and was using it but when my wife saw it, she took it to her church and spoiled it. She then returned home and told me the medicine cannot work. Do I need to prove again that the woman I have been calling my wife is a witch? (*Leadership Newspaper*, 2012)

#### *Case V*

In November 2012, tragedy struck in Adamgbe community of Mbayongo in Vandeikya Local Government Area of Benue state, when a middle aged man identified as Tyoakaa Ijoho set ablaze, a 111 years-old blind woman popularly called Mama Martha Igyuse Bonka in her round hut. The ugly incident occurred when residents of the Adamgbe village went to places of worship on that fateful Sunday. The man who committed the crime, had few months earlier, lost his father

who was a retired army personnel who died of a snake bite when he was returning from his farm. The death was attributed to witchcraft by the son of the deceased who was said to have, in a few weeks after his father's burial, consulted an oracle to know the cause of his father's death and was told that it was the Igyuse Chafa family that killed him. On that fateful day, nobody except the late blind old woman was in the house when the culprit came to set ablaze 10 round huts including the late elderly woman and that another 78 years old woman (*Leadership Newspaper*, November 19, 2012). However, many wondered why the blind old woman was set ablaze in the house, an incident that lasted for about 40 minutes without anybody rescuing her.

#### *Case VI*

In Akoko Edo Local Government Area of Edo State of South-south Nigeria, two children reportedly lured their mother to a farm road and killed her. Omotayo and Taiye (children of the deceased) accused their mother of being a witch. Omotayo accused her mother of being the reason she had not prospered in life. She then tricked her into her untimely death appealing to her to accompany her to somewhere. She led her through the bush path to the farm and midway, the son brought out a machete and killed her (*Information, Nigeria*).

#### *Case VII*

In December, 1989 in the case of Ezekiel Adekunle versus the State, the Supreme Court of Nigeria up-held the murder conviction and death sentence of the appellant, Ezekiel Adekunle, for orchestrating and spearheading the murder of one Felicia Ejide, a seventy-year old woman whom the appellant accused of being a witch. Witnesses described how Adekunle jeered at the victim by calling her a witch before jostling her and causing her to fall while she was being carried home on her daughter's back. When the elderly woman fell, the appellant raised a public alarm about a witch being transported away. This action led a converging crowd to pelt the elderly woman to death with large pieces of cement block while chanting, "Kills the witch with stones" (International Center for Nigerian Law, 2005).

The above cases demonstrate that in Nigeria, witchcraft is a form of control and dominance over women. Sadly, members of the society who subject them to abuse do not see them as weak and vulnerable members of the society but as extremely powerful and dangerous. This is compounded by lack of political will and rule of law in many African countries to hold accountable those perpetrating such violence which is orchestrated mainly by family members, neighbours and community members. This brings us to the question, why are women more accused of witchcraft?

### **Women and Witchcraft**

The questions that readily come to mind when discussing women and witchcraft are: was the witch-hunt intentionally carried out to persecute women? If yes, why were women persecuted and men spared? If no, what happened to the male witches? To date, scholars have not been able to provide unanimous answers to these questions. Margaret Murray's *Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921), was among the first set of books that induced the question of women and gender to the heart of witchcraft discourse (Natrella, n.d.). While some scholars believe it was intended to witch-hunt women (Levack, 1995: 21-26), others dismissed the witch-hunt theory as woman-hunting (Larner, 1984). Levack (1995: 21-26) argues that although both men and women were accused of witchcraft in Europe, about 80 per cent of the victims tried, persecuted, tortured and executed are women. Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) gives details of why women are more

prone to witchcraft than men. According to Kramer, the inherent features of the female sex are inferior to those of their male counterparts, giving them motive to access diabolical magic in order to increase their power. Kramer further states that this motive originates in the inherent carnality of women which, in addition to their credulity, makes them more susceptible to malevolent witchcraft. However, Christina Larner critically employed the subject of gender in witchcraft history. Her book titled *Enemies of God* (1984:56) provoked interdisciplinary scholarship that questioned the relationship about witchcraft and gender. She argued that witch-hunting was not women-hunting, but that certain women were believed to be witches. In the first part her book, *Witch Cult in Western Europe*, Margaret Murray argues that European witches were the vestiges of a pre-Christian fertility cult which came together in covens of thirteen (Murray, 1921). Murray suggests that witches were members of a pre-Christian agrarian cult which manipulated the theory that the witch hunt was the Church's attempt to totally wipe out the pagan religion and its worshippers.

Although feminist like Daly (1978) found Murray's study persuasive, her most important disapproval of Murray's work was that much of her proof emanated from witch-trial confessions, which she considered to be deficient in credibility since they were provided under torture. As a radical feminist, Daly's reason was to depict the misogynistic character of patriarchy by portraying five "righteous rites" which annihilated women (Larner 1981). Her major argument was that the intention of European witch-hunt was to smash and obliterate tough women, to tear apart and execute the Goddess, the divine spark of being in women" and to "purify society of the survival and of the possible continuation of such women (Larner, 1981). She was the first to refer to the witch persecutions as a "woman's holocaust" or "genocide" (ibid). Larner considered Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a "witch burning society", in which the mass execution of women was considered not only normal but also normative. She therefore, concluded that the witch hunts were, in fact, intentional women hunts (Larner, 1981).

In 1984, Christina Larner addressed the question of whether witch-hunting was woman-hunting. Her basic argument in her book titled: *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* was that patriarchy and misogyny were not the causes of witch hunts but rather circumstances or conditions that fostered the hunts (Larner, 1984). Larner also affirms in her book *Enemies of God* (1981), that witches were hunted primarily for ideological reasons (that witches purportedly revered the Devil and were thus, enemies of God). With these arguments, Larner was at variance with the other feminist scholars whose basic argument was that men hunted witches primarily because they were women (Larner, 1981). Thus, despite her understanding of patriarchy and consciousness of the historic oppression of women, Larner authenticated and then dismissed the theory that witch-hunting was woman-hunting (Barrow, 1994). Nonetheless, Larner (1981) argues that witchcraft is sex-related (rather than sex-specific) and proposes that women were more prone to suspicion because men considered the feminine nature to be malevolent, sensual, evil, and irrational. Supporting this line of argument, Clark (1996) and Briggs (2001) were of the view that if men are connected with positive attributes, then women must be associated with their negative counterparts. If God is the personification of good, and the Devil, His polar opposite evil, then men are innately closer to God and women to the Devil (ibid). This age-old argument has been asserted by Christians engaging a literal reading of the Bible: Eve's original sin in the Book of Genesis.

The main condemnation of the witch-hunt as woman-hunt lies in the fact that the persecution of witches could not have been a premeditated form of repression against women because women too also accused witches. This contention was opposed by Larner who explained

in her book, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (1984), that the patriarchal social structure separates women and the eccentricity of women threatens women who do obey the rules. Clive Holmes (2001) identified three means in which women take part in the proceedings against women including (1) giving evidence as possessed victims (2) accounting on the consequences of physical searches of the witch's body, and (3) testifying to their experience as the victims of witchcraft attacks. Holmes' basic argument to the discourse is that both men and women took part in the accusation of witches. She maintained that as far as women also accused witches, the witch-hunt could not have been a swathe for a deliberate and systematized mass execution of women. Convincingly, she states that since the society is really of the belief that witchcraft was real and witch trials were really intended to eliminate enemies of God and society, it makes sense that women also participated.

### **The Consequence of Witchcraft Accusations on Elderly Women's Rights**

Elderly women accused of witchcraft suffer significant and wide ranging violations of their human rights. These violations have been described by Igwe (2013) as a sexist device, a weapon of power, and a mechanism for the oppression of females who are in weak socio cultural positions in patriarchal societies. The consequences of the abuses are physical and psychological damages, such as relationship problems or lack of self-confidence. The most common include:

1. Inflicting pain such as burning, stoning, chaining to objects like chairs or beds. In some cases they get killed in the process;
2. Isolation, abandonment, labelling the elderly woman a witch;
3. Neglect which includes refusing to take the suspected elderly woman to see a doctor, lack of personal hygiene, depriving her of meals or clothes. It will not be surprising that the elderly women accused of witchcraft suffer malnutrition and emotional distress.

They also suffer violation of rights which range from the right to be free from violence, abuse and neglect, the right to life, the right to be free from torture, the right to non-discrimination, the right to respect the views of the elderly accused of witchcraft, the rights to food and shelter to the right to protection (Foxcroft and Secker, 2010). Other infringements on their fundamental human rights include abuses, abandonment, and neglect, beatings, banishment into the evil forest or on the streets and murder (Igwe, 2013). Others suffer imprisonment, forced starvation, forced participation in psychologically damaging 'exorcism' ceremonies--being forced to ingest hazardous chemicals or substances such as cement, and having nails driven into their heads some of which are undertaken by family and community members with the specific objectives of extracting confessions of witchcraft and of forcing the spirit of the witch out of them (Secker, 2012; Battarbee et al., 2009; Akhilomen, 2006; and Nwadinobi, 2008). Abandonment resulting from witchcraft accusations is consequently a contributing factor to the numbers of destitute in major towns and cities (Alston, 2009). The failure of the state to provide alternative care facilities for those accused of witchcraft activities further constitutes a violation of their rights to be catered for or protected.

They are also refused access to family and community life, as they are rejected or abandoned by their own children, family and community members. This affects their ability to integrate to the society (Di Domenico, 1982). Di Domenico (1982) observes that among the

Yoruba of southwest Nigeria, many elderly women accused of witchcraft fled to urban areas in order to avoid ill-treatment. This situation can further cause them role strain, depression and even severe mental health problems in trying to cope with the parallel worlds of tradition and modernity (Di Domenico, 1982). Fleeing from their rural homes was found to be a major contributing factor to the high numbers of destitute in most Nigerian cities (Eboiyehi, 2013).

It is therefore evident that witchcraft accusations have a negative effect on the enjoyment of a range of rights as protected under international, regional and national human rights law (see section 3). This has constituted a significant barrier to the effective implementation of the international human rights treaties in Nigeria due to their inherent entailment of a broad range of rights violations.

### **Preventive Measures Taken by the Nigerian Government**

The question to ask at this juncture is: What has the Nigerian Government been doing about the persecution of those accused of witchcraft practices? Like many countries of the world, Nigeria is a signatory to many of international agreements guaranteeing basic human rights to everybody. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) is one of the best-known agreements and the most influential of the agreements. Human rights impose duties on the State to ensure fair and appropriate treatment of her citizens. They also oblige the State to make sure that it protects its citizens from undue interfering with their rights (William, 2011).

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifically makes reference to right to security in the event of old age. Under the Bill of Rights, are the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, CTODITP (1984); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006); and the Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006). These rights are widespread and non-negotiable of every individual that falls within the category of people who should enjoy certain rights and therefore are applicable to everyone regardless of their sex, age, religious affiliation, disability, sex, etc. (Araromi, 2014). In addition, the Bill of Rights is an international document that protects the rights of all persons, including the aged. Article 25(1) of the UDHR specifically provides that everyone has the right to security and a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being (ibid). Therefore, the continuous use of violence against elderly women under the disguised of witchcraft accusations implies lack of a specific UN Convention to protect older people in Nigeria.

Though there is nowhere in the Nigerian 1999 Constitution where persecution of elderly women is specifically spelled out or outlawed in any of its provisions, the constitution and other criminal legislations explicitly identify respect for the integrity of every Nigerian citizen, including freedom from arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life. Section 36(1) of the constitution also guarantees in all instances the right to fair hearing; Section 33(1) of the same constitution assures every Nigerian citizen the right to life and punitively prohibits the deprivation of life except in execution of a court sentence or other approved circumstances and Sections 252 and 253 of the Criminal Code outlaw assault in all its manifestations. Thus, there are enough laws in the Nigerian legal corpus prohibiting violent act. However, older women particularly, those accused of witchcraft practices are often subjected to abuse which may include physical, psychological, sexual and verbal attack. The most vulnerable to abuse are the indigent and disadvantaged ones in both rural and urban areas; though the educated and the uneducated ones are not free from such abuse (Adeniji, and Oladejo, 2012).

Sadly, lawmakers in Nigeria have not been sensitive to the scope, nature, and seriousness of older persons' plights; neither, are they sensitive to the broad economic and social development implications of leaving these problems unaddressed in the context of rapid population ageing (Asagba, 2005; Araromi, 2014). Lack of political will and different priorities are the factors directly underlying Nigeria's failure to ratify let alone implementing the draft National Ageing Policy. Its effectiveness as it relates to those accused of witchcraft practices is therefore questioned. Also worrisome is the sorry situation in Nigeria particularly, as it relates to failure of the justice system. A good example is the mob justice where criminal justice system in Nigeria has failed to efficiently manage the processing of criminal case (Igwe, 2013). In other words, there is obvious low public confidence in the capacity of the security forces and the judicial system to fairly and independently punish crime according to law. A particular tragic incidence was the case of 86 years old woman in Kebbi State in northern Nigeria, who was burnt to death after a mob had accused her of witchcraft. The State police commissioner in the State confirmed that the residents of the town accused the old woman of going from house to house in the name of begging for alms to steal their souls. Many of those who persecute cases like this—police officers and judges lack political will to persecute these witchcraft related killings as many of them are witchcraft believers. Consequently, many of them are afraid of tinkering with this 'cult crime'.

Though some States in South-South Nigeria have in recent times made such accusations illegal, astonishing accounts of torture, starvation, abandonment and death involving elderly women and children have been documented (Secker, 2012). Accused witches have been executed by hanging, drowning and burning, with paraffin or petrol thrown at them to ignite the fire. Some may be forced to drink 'medicine' that has serious and lethal effects (Secker, 2012). Many of them who ran away from their homes to survive in the street, further face the risk of being starved to death, used by money ritualists or get killed.

Unfortunately and surprisingly, those involved in these horrific abuses are prominent people in the communities such as traditional rulers and community leaders who have so much power and influence in the community and are considered 'untouchables'. It is therefore not surprising that governments and local authorities lack the political will to bring these 'powerful and influential individuals' in the community to justice particularly in matter concerning witchcraft persecution. Even when courts want to persecute the perpetrators of this atrocious act, there is a lot of pressure from the witch believing populace on police and court officials to misapply and misinterpret the law by presenting the accused and acquitting the accusers.

### **Some Conclusions**

Many elderly women accused of witchcraft in Nigeria continue to be victims of gender-based violence despite the international community's efforts to protect the rights of women. While other continents have made giant strides to improve the lives of women including the elderly, it is absolutely lugubrious that there still exists the practice of witchcraft accusations that are not only oppressive but dehumanizing to women, particularly the elderly ones.

Witchcraft accusations and victimization of elderly women suspected to be witches are negatively affecting the enjoyment of their fundamental human rights as protected under international, regional, and national human rights law (section 3). The suffering they endured as they are subjected to various forms of abuses is horrendous. The irrational beliefs in witchcraft combined with disparaging long-established traditions and practices against women have successfully dragged the African continent backward and have served as major obstacles to the

successful implementation of women rights in Nigeria owing to their intrinsic entailment of a broad range of human right violations. In order to eradicate this evil practice, the following recommendations are made:

1. Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs), Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) should raise awareness of the negative impacts of violence against persons accused of witchcraft. Information on causes and consequences will assist in developing broad based intervention strategies to tackle elder abuse;
2. Deliberate and concerted efforts should be made to educate and change the attitude of the Nigerian populace about their erroneous beliefs in witchcraft practices to address this social problem;
3. Elderly women should be educated about their rights, responsibility and support to exercise their rights;
4. The National Assembly should enact legislation that would prohibit torturing of persons accused of witchcraft. Such legislation will aid in protecting the rights of the elderly women accused of witchcraft but also the teeming population of the aged in Nigeria;
5. There is the need for older people to participate in policy discussion to express how it affects them, ways of prevention and how to seek redress;
6. Both federal and State governments should ensure an all-inclusive elder protection policy;
7. There is also the need to involve the mass media. For instance, radio programmes concerning elder abuse should be aired in local languages;
8. There is the urgent need for countries all over the world to formulate policies on the issue of elder abuse;
9. The Nigerian government should enact and enforce stronger laws and strategies to address all aspects of this under-acknowledged social, public health, and human rights issue. In doing so, they should uphold the rule of law without fear or favour to combat witch killing and related abuses and;
10. Finally, for laws to be effective in addressing problems such as persecution and killing of elderly women, there is the need for the police to enforce the law and court magistrates and judges to interpret them.

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