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## **Gender Disparities in Witchcraft Beliefs: A Challenge to Nigerian and African Historiography**

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### **Abstract**

The understanding of how gender roles are assigned to abstract issues like witchcraft beliefs, remains a challenge to contemporary African historians. Witchcraft as a significant area of humanistic study, has not sufficiently engaged historians and literary critics. Scholars in Religious and Cultural Studies in Nigeria have made efforts to interpret witchcraft as an aspect of the tradition of various Nigerian groups. In this paper, witchcraft is examined as a phenomenon and a historical assumption based on gender disparity. Combining primary sources from the National Archives of Nigeria and secondary sources in books and journals, this research dissects witchcraft stigmatizations in the light of historical truism. African historiography and literary scholars could benefit from researches on witchcraft by placing it properly in historical chronology and perspectives but most importantly by situating witchcraft phenomenon properly as a frontline and burning topic in understanding the gender politics of the African past and present.

*Keywords:* Witchcraft, Gender, African historiography, African past, Tradition, Stigmatization.

### **Introduction**

Many scholarly works point to various forms of witchcraft stigmatizations, with special emphasis on elderly women, but this study specifically points to the better understanding of gendered constructs in witchcraft beliefs in Nigeria and African history. In addition, this paper contextualizes how witchcraft as a phenomenon, challenges basic assumptions about gender in African historiography. The mission hangover theory has been carefully selected for this study to buttress further the level of historical ignorance exhibited by academics during and after the

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November 2019 conference on witchcraft held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. This is to give a broader view on how the Nigerian society perceives witchcraft since academics in ivory towers appear to be ill informed on the matter. Sadly, historical development in form of the witch craze which took place in Europe is no lesson for educated people in Nigeria whose sense of judgment have been beclouded by Pentecostal and post-colonial deceit in the absence of History as a school subject in Nigerian primary and secondary schools for so many years. This development makes witchcraft so important an issue that it is worth studying, instead of being placed as an intangible heritage of a society yearning for rapid growth. Witchcraft needs to be studied to enhance the state of our knowledge. There is a need to explore its modus operandi, traditional humanistic living, and colonial public policy and finally see how it fares when placed beside witchcraft practices in Classical Europe. The social dilemma in Nigeria and indeed Africa is all too clear.

The rise of the renaissance and industrial revolution saw the end of witchcraft question in Europe. Although scholars still maintain that some aspects of witch- magic form part of capitalist growth, it does not form part of the social life of the people of the Western world the way it has occupied center stage in African daily living. Comaroff and Comaroff (2000:310-312) for emphasis, argued that global proliferation of occult economies exist in South Africa with rising cases of ritual killings and witchcraft; theft of human parts in Latin America, Africa and Asia, kidnapping of street urchins in Germany by “Russian gangs” for organ harvesting and exportation and similar cases of sale of human parts in Western Europe, the Americas, Japan, China and in the USA were pilfering of human bodies and parts for profit has been reported.

Our focus on Nigeria and other parts of Africa reveals that the idea of witches are historical assumptions and as such possess much difficulty in African historiography. It is difficult to interpret witchcraft especially in assisting the historian’s craft. Scholars have made attempts to describe witchcraft practice. Nyabwari and Kagema (2014:11) for example, attempted a description of witchcraft practices as follow:

Witches were people with an inherent power by means of which they can abandon their bodies at night to meet with others (witches) or to suck or eat away the life of their victims. The stories of their mystical powers and exploits are difficult to substantiate. In a broad sense witchcraft describes all sorts of evil employment of mystical power generally in a secret fashion.

Elsewhere, sorcery and witchcraft have been described as human-centric, relational ways of understanding health, well-being, and social processes (Rio, MacCarthy, Blanes 2017:4). Witches are believed to possess supernatural powers which enable them to travel physically and spiritually to torment and harm their victims (Ernest Samuel, 2015:46). Witchcraft practice is a phenomenon associated with the people of Africa both at home and in Diaspora. Around 1720, there was a serpent cult in Whydah, present-day Benin Republic (NAI, Notes on Witchcraft,3). Similarly, the Voodoo Obeah, associated with witchcraft was responsible for the Haiti slave revolt of 1760 as well as the slave rebellions in Jamaica (NAI, Notes on Witchcraft,17). This last instance represents one of the claims of Nigerian witchcraft practices in the Diaspora.

Witchcraft functions both as a profession and popular belief. In pre-colonial times, especially, among the Nupe and Benin people of Nigeria, people possessed with witchcraft could be hired to defend the dignity of the King’s office, his authority or religion (NAI, Notes on Witchcraft, 12). Ikpe drew our attention to the legendary IyobaIdia, the mother of Oba Esigie, a powerful Benin Monarch in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. IyobaIdia in Ikpe’s account used her extraordinary

power of witchcraft to lead troops during the Benin-Idah War of 1515, which went in favour of the Benin Empire (Ikpe, 1997:251). In some other clime, it is believed that misfortunes could befall a society or an individual as a result of witchcraft practice (NAI, Notes on Witchcraft, 12).

Mufuzi (2014:55) insists that witchcraft practice in Africa is in four main categories namely: offensive, defensive, communicative, and divination and in all these, special objects are used by witches in the execution of their activities. Surprisingly, over 70% of the population in the sub-Saharan region is made up of Christians and Muslims, noted Lumwe (2017:90), witchcraft beliefs and practices are still very present and thriving. In Europe, science and technology suppressed belief in witchcraft, but references could only be drawn to it as part of medieval history. Fayemi (2020:21), for example, concurs with the view that the Catholic Inquisition, which lasted for four centuries, saw to the burning of thousands of women at stakes based on witchcraft accusations, but this gave way to scientific innovations orchestrated by the Industrial revolutions. Louise (1995:64), recalling the experience of women during this era, insists that leading questions were asked of the women accused of witchcraft in order to rope them in. Furthermore, depriving the accused of sleep was sometimes used as a method of coercion against the accused to accept that they were witches. In Europe, during the era of the Roman Catholic pontificate, an estimate of 60,000 people was burnt, hanged, decapitated, or lynched for suspected witchcraft (women and men). The number of executed and punished witch-priests was also on the high side. Voltmer (2019: 2-3) recalled that Renata Maria Singer von Mossau was the 'last witch' from Franconia who was put to death in the Holy Roman Empire in 1749, while protestant ministers, on the other hand, lived safer lives until the mid-17th century, when only four accused witches namely: John Lowes in Sussex (1645), Kaspar Dulichius in Saxony (1655), Andreas Koch in Lemgo (1666), and George Burroughs in Salem (1692) got punishment by execution.

### **Theoretical Basis of Understanding Witchcraft and Existing Knowledge on the Subject**

Witchcraft is a global phenomenon. Previous studies on witchcraft in Africa relied on one theory or another. In Europe, science and technology have suppressed beliefs in witchcraft, but references could only be made to it as part of medieval history. Samuel P. Huntington in the book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remarking of World Order* notes thus:

The cultural bifurcation of the world division is still less useful. At some level, the West is an entity. What, however, do non-Western societies have in common other than the fact that they are non-Western? Japanese, Chinese, Hindu, Muslim and African civilizations share little in terms of religion, social structure, institutions, and prevailing values (Huntington,1996:33)

The emphasis here is that no existing ideology of oneness is established between Christians in Europe or America and their counterparts in Africa. There is no feeling anywhere by any of the aforementioned continents that heaven will be a home for both blacks and whites. We have proposed the *Missionary Hangover theory* of explaining the 21st-century African dilemma in witchcraft beliefs. The theory is that Africa opened its doors to all manner of cultural infiltration, such as, Christianity and Islam. As a result, when the proponents of those cultures left, Africans began to battle with their own way of striking a balance between aspects of their culture and Western import. Witchcraft arguably was in Africa before the coming of these cultural imperialists with their scriptures of the Bible or Koran which helped amplify the existence of witches.

However, one wonders why the binding and casting of demons, witches and wizards, became less important in Europe while Africa became the hub. Furthermore, the elites among the clergy are aware that if scientific driven theology is introduced, their exploitation of indigent church members under the guise of casting out witchcraft would be challenged. They therefore engage in activities that will further mystify witchcraft and most importantly, ensure that the people remain ignorant. There is paucity of liberation theology which would have fostered meaningful development.

The text, *Witchcraft in the 20th and 21st Centuries in Nigeria: An Analysis* by Jayeola-Omoyeni et al examines the practice of witchcraft in Nigeria in colonial and post-colonial times. The authors note that both Islam and Christianity promote the existence of witchcraft as their leaders create tension and fear in the minds of the people. In addition, they traced the reason behind witchcraft practices to various factors such as domestic tension, jealousy and egotism. These authors agree, like present writers, that a knowledgeable society in science and technology could help address the problem of witchcraft belief (Jayeolla-Omoyemi et al, 2015:361-373). In his study of the Mystical Powers of Witchcraft Among the Gbagyis, Adeola Kehinde Adedayo and Ayuba Yusuf Larry Sanda argue that the belief that every injury or natural disaster are caused by witches still persists in spite of the fact that Islam and Christianity have existed for many decades among the people of Gbagyis in Central Nigeria, an ethnic group of about five million people (Adedayo and Ayuba, 2011:77-92). This helps situate the theoretical position of this paper.

In his study of *Magic and Witchcraft*, Kohnert (1996) examined the correlation between the practice of witchdoctors and political witch hunting. His argument is that the political culture of the African society made witchcraft beliefs and accusations to co-exist with modernity because the elites and political class see it as part of their challenges. The essence of retaining post-colonial witchcraft beliefs is to use it as a weapon for weakening some people and making others stronger. Federici (2008:32) sees the new witch hunt as a way of negotiating modernity. Esther P. Archibong et al examined the impact of cultural theory of witchcraft in the healthcare delivery system of Nigeria. Instead of allowing their ailments to undergo proper scientific and empirical diagnosis, some patients believe that the human soul could exist as an independent material body and that witchcraft manipulations are responsible for infirmities, they therefore defy medical examination. This hampers proper medical treatment. This paper presents the useful theatre of analysis especially in pregnant women in Cross River State, the South-South of Nigeria, whose belief in Traditional Birth Attendants militates against orthodox medical practices (Archibong et al, 2017:24-48).

The work, *Witchcraft Stigmatization and Abuse of Children in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria* by Chieyelumba Lydia Isioma uses the Demonological and Labeling theories to explain the excruciating pains of children that were labeled as witches, especially, in the absence of efficient child right laws in Nigeria. The Demonological theory states that people commit crime or witchcraft practice due to the possession by demons and evil spirits which control their actions. The Labeling theory suggests that frequent actions of a child could attract being labelled as a witch though it could be part of acts of juvenile delinquency (Chieyelumba, 2019). Friday A. Eboiyehi's paper titled "*Convicted Without Evidence: Elderly Women and Witchcraft Accusations in Contemporary Nigeria*" investigates why many elderly women accused of witchcraft continue to be victims of gender-based violence despite efforts by the international community to protect the rights of women. (Eboiyehi, 2017:247-265). This paper insists that this development takes place because the mundane mindset which is yet to be suppressed by superior intelligence is yet to come. Bastian (2002) examined witchcraft, Christian missions, domestic slavery and social life in

Onitsha during the British colonial rule in Nigeria. The focus of the paper is the confession of an accused witch and former domestic slave in the Waterside area of Onitsha.

Apter (2013) study of the Yoruba witchcraft *aje* linked it up to class struggle and envy. According to him, the envy at the family level probably between co-wives could make one of the wives accuse the other, in order to sabotage her rival. For example, in the case of a wife losing a child to disease, or fails to conceive could be attributed to the witchcraft of co-wife and in most cases the impotence of the husband is blamed on co-wives who do not want others to give birth. This is still part of the problems of the Nigerian sociology of the family. The persistent beliefs in witchcraft have been a source of worries to so many people. For instance, Fayemi (2020:21) argued that it is regrettable that Nigerians can be deeply rooted in Islamic and Christian religions, yet persistent witchcraft stigmatization is being encouraged. Existing knowledge about the belief in witchcraft in Nigeria have not been able to beam its search light on the role of men and women in the ivory tower to address and disabuse the minds of people on witchcraft stigmatization except for the 2019 conference held at Nsukka. Rather than contribute in nipping the problem on the bud, academics have always served as catalysts to exacerbate the problems further as we shall see later in this paper. The paper exposes the prejudice against women in a patriarchal dominated environment. Atata (2019) dealt with the implication of labeling aged women as witches and the social relations in Igbo society in South-Eastern Nigeria which tends to promote this philosophy.

### **Witchcraft: The State of Our Knowledge**

Societies have a way of assigning blame to the people based on their socio-economic status, especially, poor rural women. Women as witches are patriarchal scapegoats. Karl Marx's notion of class struggle among the bourgeoisie, proletariat, and the poor applies to the Igbo people of the South East. The Igbo society, as the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano asserts, had no beggars (Edwards, 1996:7). Igbo society is also reputed to be female gender friendly, yet there is a need to look at the position of women in the societal ladder. Bourgeoisie, proletariat and the poor co-exist but *Ogbenye onuntu*—the Igbo world for petite peasant is a term synonymous with women since they exist mostly as the wretch of the society because patriarchal control denies them access to land the major factor of production in agrarian society. Since Igbo society accommodates no form of begging, the persistence effort of aged helpless women to survive often as beggars in most cases brands them witches. Hence, difficulties in childbearing, failed marriages, hardship, unemployment, road accidents caused by drivers with no requisite knowledge of road traffic rules are considered to be the handiwork of witches.

Both in Europe and Africa, witch and witch hunting connote evil and are peculiar matriarchal terminologies while wizard and wizardry connote mastery in computer/finance and refers to a very impressive, skillful and clever achievement in electronics or goal scoring (Janzen, 1977:104). Zwissler (2018:105) painted a picture of European perception about women as follows:

Overall, European history and the mainline theories that grow from it have had very little to say about women. With the exception of occasional queens and villains, women generally do not come up as important historical actors. Witches provide one of the only options for including women in the narrative. That is, for this exceptional early modern period, religious and political elites pay a great deal of attention to women and their power, even if this attention is based in paranoid

misogyny and inversion. With so few models of women's power and agency from which to draw, the witch stands out starkly.

John M. Janzen admits the structural imbalance of African societies in analyzing processes of being a witch as follows: 'among the Kongo people of lower Zaire, witchcraft is believed usually to be inherited matrilineally and only rarely patrilineally. The paternal blessing is emphasized, by contrast, above that of the matrilineal side. (sic).' (Janzen, 1977:104). Among the Arusha people of Tanzania, a sort of Anti-witchcraft movement is carried out within a parish by women every two or three years depending on the rate of reported witchcraft practices. Reports have it that on such occasions, every separate homestead in the parish is visited by all the women together and a dancing and singing ritual is performed which is believed to kill any witches residing in the area. It is mandatory for all women as those who refuse to participate are declared witches refusing ritual cleansing (Kayode, 1984:59). Why is the emphasis of this culture more pronounced among women folks only? The aforementioned examples point to the gender ideologies that paints the picture of witchcraft as feminine.

Today we talk of computer wizard such as Philip Emegwali, wizards in football like Jay Jay Okocha of Nigeria, Diego Maradona of Brazil, or Kanu Nwankwo of Nigeria, mathematical wizards like Professor Chike Obi, wizard in African literature like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka or Ngugi Wa Thiongo, but only few things are said about witches in the positive perspective. Hence, witches and wizards are gendered ideologies supposedly with almost the same meaning but different in sex and manner of application.

In July 2019, Professor Egodi Uchendu, Director of the Centre issued out fliers for the BIC Ijomah Centre for Policy and Research University of Nigeria, Nsukka on Witchcraft as it was applauded by academics. However, a few weeks before the conference slated for November 2019, very narrow-minded clergy men made it their mission to protest the event in their sermon topics. For the clergymen, witches must not gather at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Another protest came regrettably from a fanatic Christian Professor. As the Dean of Students Affairs, he organized a shabby crusade titled *Exposing and Destroying the Powers of Witchcraft (Ephesians 5:11)* and put it on the same date of 26 November 2019 slated for the BIC Ijomah Conference on Witchcraft. The BIC Ijoma conference was a huge success but not without controversies. The various Nigerian security agents, the police, the State Security Service (SSS), Civil Defence and journalists were sent to monitor events expected to breach public peace but ended up one of the best academic gatherings in the university in recent times.

Photograph from Field Work on 24 November 2019 at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka



Regrettably, Nigeria is still at the theological stage of development which emphasizes the coming of Jesus Christ for the second time and lofty stories about heaven. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which in my opinion is a political organization in the real sense of it, issued a warning to Christians for a one-day prayer by all Christians to avert the BIC Ijomah Centre conference. In a statement issued by the Chairman of CAN in the South-East zone, Bishop Dr Goddy Okafor, demanded that the BIC Ijomah programme be called off immediately. Another clergy who called himself Bishop Sam Zuga also expressed worries on why witches are conveying at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka ([https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/11/can-warns-unn-against-witchcraft-conference-declares-prayer/\(2019\)](https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/11/can-warns-unn-against-witchcraft-conference-declares-prayer/(2019)) accessed 24 November). Individuals in many social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and others spoke for and/or against the conference. Two days before the Conference, Professor Charles Igwe, the Vice Chancellor of the University, through the University Public Relations Officer, Dr Okwun Omeaku, on 23rd November 2019 issued the following statement through the electronic media platform of the University:



This is to inform the University Community in particular, and the General public, that the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Charles Igwe has directed that the TOPIC for the Interdisciplinary and International Seminar by the B.I.C. Ijeoma Center for Research scheduled for the 26th instant, be DROPPED forthwith. This is in response to the yearnings of the public that have erroneously misconstrued the ideas behind the choice of the topic, and a true demonstration of a Management with a listening ear. Other aspects of the programme will run its full course. All should please note (E-mail Communication from pro.unn@unn.edu.ng to uche.okonkwo@unn.edu.ng, 23 November 2019).

The Vice Chancellor must be acknowledged for his understanding that the very good intention of the conveners of the conference was hijacked by idle rumor mongers. However, he could have informed the rank and file of the clergymen that a university is a research institute that can pursue any topic of its choice be it Witchcraft, Native Doctors, Oracles and Judicial reforms, and any other topic of her choice. It would have been one way of differentiating between quacks and professionals.

The aforementioned developments capture the state of our knowledge about witchcraft in Nigeria. In the midst of the theft going on under the umbrella of tithes, offerings, giving of first fruits (in the form of a person's entire January salary), launching of Bishops Synod Address mostly by the poor, extortions by clergymen from members of the family of a deceased worshipper, obtaining under duress before baptism and confirmation could take place, tasking members in order to cast our demons and every other form of false pretense of sowing seeds, why has the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) kept silent about this brand of theft going on in the worship place? What type of witchcraft could be bigger than these aforementioned developments? Studies about witchcraft could help solve many puzzles and enigmatic assumptions surrounding it. Why is it that the affluent, in most cases, are not engaged in witchcraft? Why is it that the people often accused of witchcraft are the poverty-stricken old people, who may have one kind of ailment not yet subjected to scientific scrutiny? How come only the gainfully employed are those who are constantly bewitched? Are the successful entrepreneurs like the caliber of Alhaji Dangote, Mr. Femi Otedola, Tony Elumelu, Paschal Dozie, Ifeanyi Uba, Prince Arthur Eze, Sam Onyishi or any other big name in the Nigeria banking, transport or oil and gas sector engaged in witchcraft? Scholars must engage in studying witchcraft from the point of view of social stratifications. How many aeronautical engineers, pilots, serious minded Professors, Pharmacist, Medical Doctors or even successful technocrats are engaged or labeled witches? Thus, there was the need for the BIC conference on Witchcraft to explore some of these debates from an academic and logical point of view.

In 1978, a witch purge crusade led by EdemEdet Akpan, also known as Akpan Ekwong began in Akwa Ibom, South-South Nigeria. Akpan lost one of his eyes supposedly to witches but later traveled to UsuakEdet in Bakassi where he got supernatural powers to deal with witches. On his return to his hometown Uruan, the anti-Witch crusade began. Members of *Akpan Ekwong* moved around with palm frond *ekpin*, and suspected witches had their hands tied together with red pepper spread all over their body. In addition, large quantities of black ants, were poured on the accused (Offiong, 2009:112). This correlates with the theoretical foundation of this paper on the hangover of missionary beliefs of the colonial era since this is a post-colonial development.

Furthermore, members of this group stormed houses of identified witches to search for substances associated with witchcraft practice. In spite of the warning of the state Commissioner

of Police against this movement as a breach of public peace, it continued unabated (Offiong, 1983:107) Villages organized themselves as *NkaUkp 'Otio*-the fearless group in defense of the anti-witch crusade (Offiong,2009:115). With time, people were subjected to all manner of torture by the members of the *NkaUkp 'Otio* who were also in the constant habit of receiving bribes from those accused of being a witch so that their names could not be made public (Offiong,2009:118). Akpan Ekwong was later arrested and charged to court for murder, torturing people, and breach of public peace. He was defended by over twenty lawyers who believed him and was thus discharged and acquitted but was later arranged again in court for the murder of his domestic servant and was tried, convicted and hanged. The witches were also said to have fought back (Offiong, 2009:126)

Much later, a successful businessman Mr. E.E. Inyang of the Inyangette transport was branded a witch. It was alleged that Inyangette had some witchcraft concoctions *ekpin oi* at Uyo roundabout and that people passing there lost their money on a daily basis (Offiong,2009:112). All previous accidents involving Inyangette motors were attributed to his witchcraft practice. All transporters who were Inyangette's rival supported this allegation and convinced the public to boycott using his transport services (Offiong,2009:124). Inyangette was accused of being a witch because, according to his antagonists, he was a poor man in 1970 and by 1978 he was already a multimillionaire. Nobody believed Inyangette's story of borrowing from the bank and people did not care to study his business strategy of reducing his transport fare since he had bigger buses and as such attracted more customers (Offiong 2009, 124-125).

The clergies and spiritual deficit people that promote witchcraft stigmatization and beliefs in Nigeria are products of tertiary institutions. This leads us to the argument that the inherent philosophical knowledge and historical scholarship that will equip these categories of well-educated people in the ordinary sense of it is grossly inadequate. They have not studied in their entire life about witchcraft practice and how it was abolished in other climes of the world. On the existing influence of witchcraft beliefs in post-colonial Africa, Igwe (2016:6) reaffirms that changes in post-colonial Africa reinforced rather than weakened witchcraft beliefs. His argument is that dispelling magical imputation was a way of asserting power. This accounts for why the various church leaders and religious circles still retain the belief in witchcraft in order to remain powerful. Leo Igwe's major argument is that those pointing accusing fingers on others as witches are the witches themselves who benefit from the trade.

In Nigeria, many of the recorded cases of witchcraft accusations have targeted elderly women (Eboiyehi, 2017). Regrettably, those raising accusing fingers on these women are educated and a good number of them teach in the universities. The Biblical quotation of Exodus 22:18 which states, 'suffer not a witch to live' has always been invoked in each case of witchcraft accusation even in related cases of depression and mental imbalance (Iwenwanne, 2018). There are several factors responsible for this aspect of human right abuse but the removal of history from schools in Nigeria also played a major role in exacerbating this problem. At the end of the Nigerian Civil War, the political buccaneers who held the country hostage for more than three decades made sure that memories of the war and events that led to the war and history in general are not taught in primary and secondary schools. As a result, many people who teach in Nigerian universities at present know next to nothing about their history. There is no way people with requisite knowledge of European history, especially the Roman Catholic history on witchcraft Inquisitor, will continue to sustain such belief till present time, when they read about its iniquitous nature in the past. It was circumstances like this that led Federici (2008:32) to opine that the forces instigating the African witch-hunts are powerful and will not be easily defeated. The colonial education curriculum on the

subject of history only made references to the British conquests but did not expose the Europeans weakness like the Witch hunt periods already mentioned in this paper.

The manner academics exempted themselves from the witchcraft conference held at Nsukka in 2019 was frightening, and annoying. An academic who pleaded anonymity informed the authors of this paper that the power of darkness sponsored the conference (Anonymous, 2019). There was yet another claim that people who will be attending the conference will be initiated into the witchcraft cult (Okerefor, 2019). The various social media platforms were agog with misinformation about the conference. The organizer of the conference was placed under security watch from her arrival from the Federal Republic of Germany on research leave to the opening session of the conference. The keynote speaker of the conference, Professor David I. Ker, bowed to pressure and failed to attend the conference, leaving the two lead paper presenters, Professors P. J Eze and Damain Opata to handle his responsibility (Uchendu, 2019 Personal Conversation).

The conference was so successful that committed academics all over Nigeria were in attendance and the parallel sessions lasted up till late in the evenings for the two days mapped out for the conference. At the end of the conference, it was obvious that witches did not gather at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka but dedicated academics. The mood and understanding of Nigerian academics with regards to witchcraft as an aspect of historiography is very shallow and this is because history, as an academic discipline, was relegated to the background in Nigerian public schools (both primary and secondary) for a long time as already mentioned. Currently, efforts have been deliberately put in place to designate *Revolutions in History* as a core course of teaching in Nigerian universities. This makes it possible for a generation that does not have the orientation of opposing poor obnoxious practices of the government to be in existence. The direct implication is that cases of witchcraft that once terrorized Europe are not considered relevant for nation building in Nigeria.

### **Witchcraft in Nigerian Colonial History: A Template from the Atinga Witch Catchers Bandits in Oyo Province of Nigeria**

The manner and dimension of hiring witch hunters, bandits known as the *Atinga* cult, deserve scholarly attention, especially in trying to understand colonial public policy. The destruction of intangible heritage and unlawful deforestation activities of the witch hunters became a threat to the ecosystem. The Colonial state in Nigeria was in difficulty in determining cases of witchcraft because of the historical antecedents surrounding societal beliefs in the absence of evidence in most cases. In 1933 for example, Melland expressed worries about the condition of witchcraft practices as follows:

In Africa today our modern ideas and laws are imposed upon primitive races to whom witchcraft is a reality. In some colonies, at any rate, the District Officers are not allowed to convict a witchcraft even when those practicing it plead guilty (NAK,1933: Stalk 1733 SNP 17)

Witch hunters and their activities through the *Atinga* cult presents a sequence in the historical transformation of a segment of the Nigerian people in the Oyo Province of Western Nigeria during the colonial alien rule. A lot has been written by scholars and commissioned anthropologists about witchcraft practices, but few issues need to be addressed. First, the expectation that western education and some aspects of Euro-African relations will undermine or

disabuse the belief in witchcraft belief system in Nigeria was a successful failure. As a result, witchcraft became a burning debate that was brought to the center stage during the colonial Resident Conference of 1934. Part of the decisions reached after the deliberation of that conference was that the Native Court with the possible exception of Grade “A” courts should not try cases concerned with witchcraft practice (NAI,1934: Memorandum, No. 210534/34) Furthermore, the death penalty it was agreed should be exacted for cases of homicide and the conference re-emphasized that it will be unjust to inflict the death penalty on persons who are guilty of homicide through a belief in witchcraft practices. However, two factors were identified that will remedy the challenges of witchcraft accusations. They include influence on education and conversion to Christianity (NAI,1934: Memorandum, No.210534/34). The colonial government in Nigeria began to express dismay at the increasing rate of witchcraft accusations and harassments despite the presence of western education and Christianity. Mr. E. S. Pombleton the Colonial Resident Officer in charge of Benue Province in 1933 lends his voice to the debate as follows:

Any attempt to eradicate the belief in witchcraft within a few years, or even a few generations, simply by a harsh punishment is, in my opinion, bound to fail and in its failure is bound to affect adversely relations between primitive peoples and administration. In England the belief in witchcraft survived more than 1000 years of Christianity and it is certain that the more primitive tribes of Nigeria are today at least no further advanced mentally than were the people of England at the advent of Christianity. In my opinion the remedy lies in the spread of Christianity under the guidance of the missionaries spiritually and mentally qualified to preach it and in the general dissemination of modern scientific and, particularly medical knowledge. In the meantime, sympathetic, not harsh treatment is required (NAI, Pombleton,1933)

Since 1933 till date, the suggestion and ideas of this colonial administrator has not been harkened to. This is because many leaders of the church lacked the mental capability to lead. The emphasis of the church in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is still a rehearsal of the savagery and obnoxious practices of the European churches under papacy rule. The emphasis of the church as of today is centered on deceit such as tithe and offerings collected from the poor to advance unnecessary wealth, buying private jet for the clergies and building of all categories of schools (Primary, secondary and university) that those who gave those tithes and offerings cannot afford to pay the exorbitant school fees which will grant their children access to qualitative education.

There is a deliberate attempt therefore to preserve the pictures of witchcraft practices by the church as a way of deepening fears of those who profess and believe in Christianity. Both the church and the home video known as Nollywood industry are using this method in advancing their trade, entertaining their viewers and thus remaining in business. The more the pastors lay emphasis about unseen spirits the more relevant they are to the people they deceive and the more they retain the trust of their various congregations. Similarly, home videos that will advance evil spirit beliefs, satanic manipulations and witchcraft practices are kept afloat by producers and film marketers as a way to sell their films. According to Ernest Samuel (2015:53):

These representation shows that truly Nollywood film makers, like their audience, believe in the existence of witches and sorcerers in real life. However, their portrait

in Nollywood films seems a bit too outlandish and divorced from the reality of this traditional practice.

The manifestation of witchcraft practices in many places in Nigeria like in Calabar took the form of charm. E.A.M Otu of Palm Street Calabar in July 1954 brought a report against one Sunday Okodi to the Police for invading his home to have a carnal knowledge of a woman member of his household through witchcraft practice known as *Uben-Juju*. Uben according to the report is an evil practice in Calabar which through mystic powers a man could get entrance into a house by night and dose the inmates to sleep in order to have a carnal knowledge of the women's folk (NAC, File No. CAD 155,1954)

When Sunday's case was later brought to the District Officer, he referred it back to the Native Court in whose jurisdiction it was to entertain the case (NAC, Inyang of Native Court Calabar,1954). Finally, when the case got to the Native Court, Sunday was charged of breaking out of a dwelling house with intent, contrary to section 411(2) of the criminal code and being found in a building at night with intent, contrary to section 417(F) of the criminal code (NAC, Ass. Superintendent, 1954). On 18 August 1954, Sunday Okodi was sentenced to 6 months on each account of the offence and the jail term was supposed to run accordingly (NAC, Ass. Superintendent,1954) Sunday like many other cases of witchcraft was not entertained in the colonial courts.

*Atinga* is the Dahomey word for witch-hunters (NAI, File No. C226). The *Atinga* cult group came into parts of Yoruba land especially in the Oyo Province around the 1950 and taught young people how to detect witches. The *Atinga* cult did not operate except on invitation from the people and endorsed by the chiefs (Simpson, 1980:79). The first step to announce their arrival at any place was to build a small altar of mud at the foot of a tree. They engaged young people to beat drums and dance while each older man killed one Yoruba domestic animal and bird, letting some of the blood fall on the altar (Simpson,1980:79).

A report on witchcraft in the Okeiho-Iganna-Iseyin area by the 1950's admitted to the spread of *Atinga* cults to the towns of Ijio, Iwere, Iganna, Okeiho and Iseyin (NAI, Report on Witchcraft in Okeiho-Iganna-Iseyin Area,1950). At Ijio, alleged witches were publicly flogged, and this led to the death of one woman (NAI, Report on Witchcraft in Okeiho-Iganna-Iseyin Area,1950). Since the chiefs first endorsed the coming of the *Atinga* cult group from Dahomey, the colonial government, through the Resident of Oyo Province, advised the traditional authorities in Oyo Province—the *Alaafin* to ensure that the *Atinga* group returns to Dahomey (NAI, Report on Witchcraft in Okeiho-Iganna Iseyin Area,1950). From all indications, it appears that the chiefs at this period were not willing to cooperate with the colonial state to stamp out the operations of the *Atinga* cult in Oyo Province.

By 1951, the *Atinga* cult had gathered momentum at Iseyin, Okeiho, Iganna, Iroko and other places in Oyo Province. The reason behind this development is that the *Atinga* cult group has taught local people between the ages of 18-19 years the trade. As a result, it was reported that lorries going from Oyo to Iseyin were full of passengers wishing to be liberated from witchcraft paying the sum of 2/6 d entrance fee, 15/- and one bottle of gin (NAI, Memorandum No. C/9/48/21). The *Atinga* cult group was so organized that a political office holder in the capacity of a councilor—one Mr. Martins—acted as their treasurer (NAI, Memorandum No. C/9/48/21).

The conspiracies regarding the practice of the *Atinga* cult were so organized that the witchcraft catchers of the *Atinga* cult allegedly offered the *Alaafin* a bribe of £200 to enable them to continue their business especially at Iseyin. The *Alaafin* advised them to be paying taxes at a

flat rate in the District Oyo Province to enable him to secure their stay (NAI, Sgt. Akinade). Later, arrangements were being made by the *Alaafin* to secure the freedom of some of the arrested members of the *Atinga* by securing a lawyer, Thomas, to appeal their conviction (NAI, Sgt, Akinade). The *Atinga* cult was a problem to judicial interpretation because in many cases, it did not appear to fall within the category of *Juju* (Charms Ordinances) that was captured within the relevant section of the criminal code (NAI, AFFP News). Instead of collaborating with relevant authorities, the *Alaafin* gave an order expelling the *Atinga* after a period of 30 days (NAI, to the Resident File No.C.226,1951) When eventually the police began the massive arrest of the *Atinga* group, a group of eight representing the Hunters Society in Iseyin wrote a petition to the Resident Oyo Province in what they considered ill treatment of the arrested *Atinga* members. Part of their petition read thus:

There is peace and tranquility around the town. The witches that they caught confessed themselves and the Atingas got their calabashes or power of witchcraft. And that we shall not omit that the Antigas were invited to the town; on their arrival and before they started to work at all they demand and received the approval of the Aseyin and his chiefs and the councilors. This could not be denied at all(sic) (NAI, From WaibiAkanbi)

In spite of the ranting of the above petition, the colonial government intensified their arrests of the members of the *Atinga* group especially when they became severely female gender unfriendly. For example, they got a group of women they classified as witches beaten up at Ilua and had pepper put in their eyes and private parts (NAI, D.O to the Resident Oyo Province, 1951). The colonial government regretted not having stamped out the *Atinga* cult at its earliest stage (NAI, T.M Shakland,1951). They went further to warn that anybody worshipping the *Atinga* juju, possess any charm or making claim of the power of witchcraft or even accusing any one as a witch will face the law according to Order-in-Council No.16 of 1951(NAI, P.V Main,1951).

The greatest damage done by the members of the *Atinga* cult was their destruction of valuable heritage and the ecosystem in Oyo Province. In 1950 at Iganna, the *Atinga* witch hunters cut down large trees and particularly demolished the dispensary which led to the death of one man (NAI, Report on Witchcraft in Okeiho Iganna Isheyin Area,1950:2). In January 1951 at Ijio a large shade tree in the Catholic Mission was felled down because it was believed to contain witches (NAI, No. C9/48/21,1951). From their entrance in Nigeria through Dahomey and Ghana, they destroyed many Iroko trees suspected to harbour witches. The practice was that before felling trees the *Atinga* shot them with volleys of the magic kola from Dane guns. It was reported that in furtherance of their activities, younger people in the group ran into houses and destroyed domestic shrines, knocking down walls of *Orisa* house (Simpson,1980:79).

Apart from the destruction of the *Orisa*, the lodge of the Ogboni was broken and a gun shot from the magic kola was fired into their sacred drums (Simpson,1980:79). The activities of this group led to the increase in the price of kolanut in Oyo Province. Available records indicate that in Ijio, kolanut were being sold by the witch hunters at 2/4 d per piece as a charm against witchcraft (NAI, Report on Witchcraft in the Okeiho-Iganna-Isheyin Area,1950:2). The colonial state considered the activities of the *Atinga* group as criminal but did nothing to ensure that their destruction of the ecosystem received any punishment under the law. It was only the case of a single tree at Aiyetoro that was considered as an offence against the paragraph 210(b) of the

criminal code (NAI, Memorandum 40013/88, 1951). The persistent destruction of trees and Orisa worship houses continued unabated until it began to constitute a serious breach to public peace.

With time, people lost interest in the activities of the *Atinga* cult group. The full weight of the law caught up with this group and their activities. By 1955, the *Atinga* cult group was already a shadow of itself (Simpson, 1980:79) From the forgoing we have seen that why the *Atinga* cult lasted for the period it did was because they once had the support of the traditional institutions in Oyo Province led by the Alaafin. This view has been buttressed elsewhere by the Colonial Resident Officer in charge of Kabba Province in 1933 as follows:

I am of the opinion, however, that even the worst enlightened Emirs and Alkali, while they would not admit that they believe in witchcraft do undoubtedly, though possibly subconsciously fear it (NAK, W.O.P Rosedale).

The colonial authorities in Oyo Province seemed to have borrowed Mr. Pombleton's suggestions that sympathetic attitude be adopted to all cases of witchcraft, encouragement of the bewitched to appeal, seek medical attention and treating cases of witchcrafts based on its merit (NAK, Memorandum No.377V/28, Ekiti ½). Part of the challenges raised by witchcraft practice was how to situate the practice properly within the broader framework of the colonial legal system.

The arrival of the *Atinga* cult in Oyo Province further displaced the effort of the colonial state on the proposed moral civilization associated with their leadership. This is because few enlightened people could not learn from the European transformation process even though they were students of European history at various stages of their quest for western education. In all the various strategies orchestrated by the destruction of the ecosystem and intangible heritage by the *Atinga* cult group succeeded in exacerbating more problems for the colonial state but in the long run led to public detestation of the activities of the group.

### **Witchcraft Assumptions and Understanding Gender in African Historiography**

Gender roles in Nigeria and indeed in Africa are clearly defined. Regrettably, African history has been adumbrated by men in order to remain in control. This also exists in the ivory towers. The Ibadan School of History upon which Nigerian historiographical tradition was built was a patriarchal school of thought in the ordinary sense of it. The Ibadan School was a nationalist school founded by Professor K.O. Dike-the first black Vice Chancellor of the premier University of Ibadan formerly the University College Ibadan affiliated to the University of London. The idea of the Ibadan School of History was to promote the fact that the absence of written records does not imply absence of history. Through oral traditions and other records, the African experience was placed on records to debunk the claim made by Professor Trover Roper of Oxford University that Africa is darkness and that darkness is not a subject in history (Okuseinde, 2001:56-57). The Ibadan School paraded only men like K.O. Dike already mentioned S. O Biobaku, JFA Ade Ajayi, J. D. Omer Cooper, Adiele Afigbo, Obaro Ikime, E.A.Ayandele and so many other men and obviously excluding women. As a result, women's plight, experiences, success and pains were not considered relevant in designing the pedagogy of teaching history in Nigeria at its early stage as women were grossly omitted (Okonkwo, 2020:172-184).

With the arrival of the various Schools of History at Zaria, Dakar, Uganda and Dar Salam, there was emphasis on the political and economic history alone. The Social History that will capture the voiceless and lowly placed in the society like women and children were downplayed

thus giving room for Pentecostal apologists to continue promoting the idea of women as witches in order to remain relevant in trade. The Nigerian and indeed African female historians like Bolanle Awe, Nina Mba, Eno Blankson Ikpe, Funke Adeboye, Egodi Uchendu and others have done a lot of research to portray women experiences in history except their sufferings from witchcraft accusations. It was this inherent lacuna in existing scholarship that prompted Professor Egodi Uchendu- the convener of the BIC Ijomah conference on witchcraft that took place at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka to host the conference.

The accusation of being a witch exists mostly as part of the patriarchal construct that is yet to be properly challenged. As we have shown, the witchcraft accusations that took place in Europe cut across gender and even the ordained, like the clergies in the medieval churches in Europe, were also not exempted from witchcraft accusations. The historical import as it applies to Africa and Nigeria specifically is that those who are afraid of competitions are the ones pointing accusing fingers on their perceived threats as witches. This was the plight of Mr. Inyangaette a transport business magnet of South-South Nigeria labeled a witch earlier on mentioned in this paper. His transport business empire that once flourished was brought down as a result of witchcraft accusations by those who felt threatened by his growing fame in transport business.

The Nigerian perception of placing women as weaker sex makes it much easier for women to be those ones mostly accused. The nationalist historians that emerged from the 1950s, were interested in writing a nationalist history based on the quest to see that African decolonization process was pursued to a logical end. On the other hand, the colonial leadership knew that a witchcraft accusation that was ongoing at the time was not driven by any convincing logic or empirical driven evidence. At its best witchcraft accusations is a hypothesis. The emphasis is that the experiences of women uprising like Aba women riot of 1929 and 1948 women protest in Abeokuta indicates that women as a group and not as individuals are the most powerful group to deal with (Rodney,1972:274). The colonial regime adopted a cosmetic approach in addressing witchcraft accusations especially making sure that public peace was maintained. At the end of the colonial regime, Africa was left to sort itself out on burning issues such as witchcraft accusations. The persistent tolerance of the colonial regime of allowing the stigmatization of women through witchcraft accusation was one way of making sure that women across all levels never got united. This is because the unity of women will further encourage anti-colonial resistances.

Witchcraft stigmatizations, up to the point of this writing, are strong factors considerable in the everyday life of the African people. The failures recorded in business, academics, sports, entertainment and every sphere of life is blamed on witches. Like Alagoa (2014:24) pointed out: 'it is the hallmark of all good historical writing that is relevant to the concerns of society and the historians select from the past what elements have a meaning for the present'' The social historian craft in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should serve as one way of disabusing peoples mind about witchcraft accusations. The lessons from European history are not yet anything meaningful because for a long period such knowledge was excluded from the school curricular. Witchcraft accusations could be part of class struggle and those who promote the idea of stigmatization are fully aware that they would be out of trade if they do not adopt such a strategy.

## **Conclusion**

Accusations of witchcraft are at the heartbeat of gender disparities, since women are the ones mostly tagged as witches. Nigerian and African historical scholarship can advance its craft in this direction. As we have seen, the reactions of the Christian Community in South Eastern Nigeria



with respect to the BIC Ijomah Centre Conference on Witchcraft at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka which took place on 26 and 27 November 2019 was appalling and unscholarly.

Nigeria and other African nations must rise above negative primitive beliefs and practices and begin to create new philosophies, thoughts, and ideologies that can aid developments. Efforts should be put in place to re-channel the energies devoted to visiting too many spiritual houses, attending crusades, night and day vigils into meaningful productive activities that will aid economic development. Through proper sensitization of the Nigerian masses which can be done through the electronic, print and non-print media in the forms of drama, poetry, stories, folklores, historical accounts, etc., the masses would be exposed to the negative effects of witchcraft beliefs and practices. The researchers believe that this knowledge will go a long way in re-ordering people's mind from seeing witchcraft as skewed towards the female gender and thereby, cause them to avoid stigmatization of innocent people.

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