

Witchcraft: Unending deaths from jungle justice

It is disturbing that in the 21st century, the act of torturing, maltreating and killing persons accused of witchcraft is still a norm in some Nigeria's societies. *Daily Trust Saturday* looks at some recent cases of lynching of suspected witches and reports.

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The continued lynching of elderly women, girls and others after labelling them as witches has been identified as one of the most important obstacles to attaining the 1993 declaration of the United Nations elimination of violence against women on the African continent. However, the belief in the existence of witchcraft has refused to die across societies and communities in Nigeria, even in the digital age.

Some persons accused of witchcraft in Akwa Ibom, Cross River and Rivers states, among others, have had to pay with their lives.

Children accused of witchcraft become homeless as they are abandoned by their parents or guardians to roam the streets, while others are subjected to cruelty, just to extract confessions from them. Some paid with their lives without an opportunity to defend themselves.



■ One of the elderly men set on fire in Cross River



■ Witchcraft billboard

Recently, some youths tortured two widows - Mrs Martina Oson and Mrs Rose Akom, to death after accusing them of witchcraft in Ebbaken community of Boje in Boki Local Government Area of Cross River State. Mrs Oson (a farmer) and Mrs Akom (a retired nurse), who have served the community, were lynched by the youth over allegation by another woman in the community that they appeared to her in her dream to initiate her into witchcraft, an allegation they denied.

The youth refused to let them go despite being members of the Catholic Church.

An eye witness said, "They were both tied with strong ropes and beaten in the rain all through the day until they died."

Sixty-eight-year-old Effiong Philip was killed by his 39-year-old son Monday over allegation that he (his father) was behind his wife's misfortune of not bearing children. Monday beat his father to death.

The 39-year-old bricklayer from Mbiakpan Atan in Ibiono Ibom Local Government Area, was said to have given his father some fist blows and pushed him down over complaints by his wife.

It was gathered that even after a neighbour had carried the sexagenarian into his room, Philip, who is said to be the only son of the old man, locked him up in his room and returned with a patent medicine dealer the next day, only to find his father dead in the room.

Ruling on the matter, an Uyo High Court presided over by Justice Bassey Nkanang, frowned at

the incident by convicting Monday Philip for manslaughter and sentenced him to imprisonment for life.

In 2020, about 20 elderly men in Oku community in Okundi town in Boki LGA of Cross River State, were rounded off, beaten and burnt alive on suspicion of witchcraft. The youths were ordered to torture the men on the order of Thomas Obi Tawo (General Iron), who was a former Special Adviser on Forest Security to the state governor, Ben Ayade.

Three of the men died before help came. Those that survived the fire burns were rushed to medical centres in Ikom and Ogoja where they spent several months. Upon recovery, they refused to return to the community for fear of General Iron.

The act of setting ablaze suspected persons sent shivers down the spines of many people particularly the elderly ones who had to flee Boki community.

General Iron was later killed last year by combined forces of the military, police and local vigilante.

In 2021, a 10-year-old primary six pupil was reportedly killed in Ekpat Iduot village, Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State by his father and stepmother, who accused him of being a wizard and the source of their misfortunes.

It was gathered that the father identified as Kufre and the boy's stepmother, Rita, mixed rat poison popularly called "otapiapia" and patiently waited for neighbours to leave for church service before perfecting their evil plan.

In most cases, accusation of witchcraft is without basis or proof. There is no proof that witches cause all manner of disaster or sickness and even death and a host of other misfortunes.

Religious bodies blamed for witch-hunting activities

Religious bodies, especially churches, have widely been criticized for their witch-hunting activities, sanctifying witchcraft imputations, and witch trials.

Some programmes have been linked to rampant cases of witch persecution and child witch stigmatization in the country.

The Advocacy for Alleged Witches (AFAW) recently raised concern over moves by some religious leaders to incite violence and hatred against family members through their alleged witch-hunting crusade.

Leo Igwe, the Director, Advocacy for Alleged Witches, in a press release, said witch-hunting activities, sanctifying witchcraft imputations and witch trials have been linked to rampant cases of witch persecution and child witch stigmatization.

The group, which campaigns to end the persecution of alleged witches in Africa, called the attention of authorities in Cross Rivers State to a recent move by Helen Ukpabio and her Liberty Gospel Church to relaunch their witch-hunting ministry in Calabar.

The group asked the government to take urgent, legal and administrative measures to restrain Ukpabio and her witch-finding church.

The group in the statement said it spotted a billboard in Calabar announcing a program, "Rescuing Families from Witchcraft Markets" slated to be held at the church headquarters in Calabar, Cross River State.

"The theme of this program is disturbing. It suggests that witches exist in families; that families are entrapped by witchcraft, and need to be rescued and released.

"Ukpabio claims to be an ex-witch on a divine mission to identify witches and exorcise witchcraft.

"She has written books and produced films on how children become and operate as witches. AFAW is concerned that this event will provide another forum for Ukpabio to brand children witches and incite violence and hatred against family members," the group said.

It said Ukpabio will use the event to spread occultic fears and anxieties and add to the growing problem of child and adult witch persecutions in the region.

"At a time when churches in Europe and America are apologizing and expressing remorse over their role in the persecution of alleged witches in early Modern Europe, it is disturbing and worrisome that a church in Nigeria is announcing a witch-hunting event.

"Witchcraft is superstition. Witchcraft markets are imaginaries and do not exist anywhere. Witch hunting ended in Europe centuries ago, and should have no place in 21st Century Nigeria," the

statement read.

Lynching of suspected witches archaic

A right activist and the President of Rivers State base Youths Environmental Advocacy Centre (YEAC), Fyneface Deunemene Fyneface, said lynching persons suspected of witchcraft in the 21st Century is archaic, unacceptable and condemnable.

He said such act violates the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental human rights of the victim, saying that those who practice it should be made to face the wrath of the law.

"If someone is suspected of being a witch or wizard, those who alleged this should gather evidence and take such persons to a court of competent jurisdiction over such matters like the Customary Court system established by law to handle cases that borders on the culture and traditions of the people as the said accusations cannot be scientifically proven," he said.

He condemned the act of lynching persons suspected of witchcraft without following due process of law, adding that the accused person should be given an opportunity to defend himself in a system that guarantees fair-hearing and freedom of expression.

Barrister James Ibor, a human rights activist and Justice Osai Ahiakwo of Regnum Chambers in Calabar condemned the act of burning alive suspected criminals.

Both strongly advised that the law courts are there for people to go and vent their grievances, stressing that jungle justice is against the law.