CULTURE AND CHILD WITCH STIGMATIZATION IN UYO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, AKWA-IBOM STATE

Abstract

This paper examined the cultural practices of the UYO people towards child witch stigmatization as well as the consequences on the child. Keywords were defined explicitly while labelling theory was adopted as a theoretical framework. Looking at culture as a determinant factor in promoting child witch stigmatization, primary and secondary data were used. However, the study applied a descriptive study design as a form of methodology. An In-depth study was conducted at the Divine Home Orphanage (a home for stigmatized children), in Uyo. An aggregate of 100 children were interviewed at the orphanage home, including one paramount ruler. Findings revealed that lots of children are stigmatized without considering the traits (restlessness, stubbornness and messy, etc.) associated with childhood for witchcraft even in this 21st century, children are abused emotionally, physically, psychologically, and socially all in the name of culture. The study concludes by providing Several recommendations amongst which is government intervenes through the hosting of public lectures, seminars, and reorientation of families, against omen of child witch stigmatization, expectant mothers should be trained on child behavioural patterns while victimized children be given utmost attention that will incorporate them into becoming better adults, children should also be educated more about their rights, as the stigmatization of any sort, is in violation of human rights.

Keywords: Culture, Child witch, stigmatization

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I. INTRODUCTION

Belief in the existence and powers of witches has a long and diverse history and is found across a huge range of cultures and traditions. Accusations of witchcraft usually target already vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and the elderly, and have been documented in a large number of countries around the world, especially Nigeria (Adinkrah, 2004; Bussien et al, 2011; Schnoebelen, 2009; Singh, 2011; Sleap, 2011).

The concept of witchcraft is universal and as such, belief in its existence in diverse forms has persisted worldwide and throughout history among cultures and religions of the world (Browne 2005). A witch is culturally understood to be the epitome of evil and the cause of all misfortunes, diseases and death. Everywhere witches exist, they are usually feared. They derive their malevolent powers from a special relationship with evil spirits and have the ability to use a variety of magical means to achieve their evil goals as well as the capacity "to exercise powers through animal familiars(assistants or agents) such as dogs, cats, owls, rats, wall geckos'' (Russell 2007).

Hitherto, everywhere, including Uyo witchcraft practice was largely an adult affair, focus was on adults. Malevolent witchcraft associated with men was rarer than that ascribed to women. "older women, women especially those not protected by a male family member, were more frequently accused of casting malicious spells than younger women and children(Esema 2002). In art, literature, theatre and films, women are mostly depicted as witches. In media reports such birds always turned into a woman, children hardly came into the picture.

All that has changed with the advent of the new Christian Pentecostal movement and other factors. Children, not adults, became the focus. The teachings and religious practices of many fanatical Pentecostal church leaders and preachers who have incorporated African witchcraft beliefs into their brand of Christianity have contributed to child witch stigmatization (Foxcroft 2018). Such church leaders and preachers indulge in witchcraft related issues because they want to be seen and to gain popularity (Igwe,2012). Pastors who preach for the belly instead of the heart, pastors who manipulate religion for the lure of wealth and fame target vulnerable, defenseless children and portray them as having taken over the witch world to wreak havoc on human society (Effiong 2003).

According to Foxcroft (2018) about 30% of children are branded by pastors, while about 70% occur as a result of family breakdown. Studies have shown that the new phenomenon of child witch stigmatization which started in the 1990's in Akwa- Ibom has become widespread and even attracted national and international attention. As a result, hundreds of children have been accused of being witches while many more, have been tortured or even killed (Utibe, 2016). Stories and reports of deaths over witchcraft accusations are real in Akwa- Ibom state due to severe torture of accused children in order to extract confessional statement from them(Mboho, 2003).

The orphanage home set up by family life enhancement initiative, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) was pioneered by Mrs. Ekaette Unoma Akpabio, wife of the then Akwa- Ibom state governor (Straight News, 2018) assumed the arduous

responsibility of rescuing these abused and abandoned children from the streets and providing them with a safe haven in a home. To help with the rescue and rehabilitation efforts, Stepping Stones foundation a united kingdom based NGO headed by Mr. Gary Foxcroft, a British national, partnered with Sam Itauma a resident in Eket (Straight News, 2018).

Moreso, over the years one of the leading child witch defenders and child right and advocacy organization: African Children's Aid Education and Development Foundation (ACAEDF)/ Dinnoedhjaelp Eket, Akwa Ibom State, this organization has rescue over 70 children who was label and stigmatized witches and wizard from the street and their parents. It is pertinent to note that most of these children who are labelled witches and wizard undergo various types of abuses from their accusers and are abandoned with wounds and cut from knife and other sharp object without care. Thus, is on this backdrop that this study sought to investigate the cultural pattern and witch stigmatization of children in Uyo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. **Labeling Theory (Becker and Lemart):** In sociology, labeling theory is the view of deviance according to which being labeled as a "deviant" leads a person to engage in deviant behavior. Originating in Howard Becker's work in the 1960s, labeling theory explains why people's behavior clashes with social norms. The literary approaches to labeling take different twists and turns. The labeling theorists would argue that the critical issue is the manner or form by which the individuals are labeled. For them labeling is a process by which individuals are marked or "tagged" as deviant. Becker (1974) has, in fact, argued that social group creates deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. This hold for those children that are stigmatized/labeled as witches, consequently, they are rejected as undesirable and social outcast pitched against the family.

   Labeling theorists hold that deviance depends on which rule the society chooses to enforce, in which situation, and with respect to which people. This buttresses the labeling of children by traditional healers, men of God who by virtue of offices/positions as 'oracles' can, and do impose definitions of morality on people.

2. **History of Child Witch Stigmatization in Akwa Ibom State:** Witch hunting is not new to Akwa-Ibom State. In the one-man purge crusade of 1978, (by Edem Edet Akpan alias Akpan Ekwong) focus was mainly on adults. Witch stories in the media, even up till now, always point at elderly people especially women and we are familiar with print media headlines such as Bird lands or turns into a witch; 'old women mobbed/killed confessing to witchcraft". "Child kills mother suspected to be behind his problem, etc. It has been women, women and women until recently. Writing in the telegraph (2008) Harrison said, looking back (ten) years ago, there were few cases of children stigmatized by witchcraft. But since then the numbers have grown at an alarming rate and have reached an estimated 15,000 in Akwa- Ibom state alone. Harrison(2008) by now the figure must have gone much higher.

Generally, people hold the Pentecostal churches responsible for the explosion in child witch stigmatization. In particular, the people of Akwa- Ibom state, including writers and commentators blame Helen Ukpabio; the popular Evangelist and prophetess of Liberty Gospel Church for the astronomical increase through her films and publications which portray children as witches. In interviews, Helen always fights back, denying that her teachings and films could encourage "child abuse". Through her publications and films, Helen Ukpabio is said to suggest that (babies) crying and screaming at night, high fever, and worsening health symptoms are some of the identification marks of the servants of Satan (babies). Aside from Pentecostal churches and Helen Ukpabio, the mixture of irrational decisions (by adults) led to the emergence of the child witch hunt which is an effort to identify children who are witches Harrison (2008) . In Akwa- Ibom state of Nigeria the trend became widespread since the early 1990's with hundreds of children labeled, tortured and even killed. The process of stigmatization according to Lewis(2005), begins with suspicion, continues through, rumor and accusations to convictions. But where adults were involved, "overwhelming majority of processes, however went no further than the rumor stage. For, actually, accusing someone (adult) of witchcraft was (and still is) an expensive business. Accusations originated with the ill-will of the accuser or more often the accuser's fear of someone having ill-will towards him.

3. **Cultural Pattern and Child Witch Stigmatization:** A unique trait of the human species is that our personalities and worldviews are shaped by an accident of birth namely, the culture into which we are born (Pagel 2012). Gabrilla Van Rij (2016) asserts that no matter what we do, culture is part of the society we live in a country or place that has its own beliefs, a way of life.

The child, in traditional society, cannot escape his cultural and physical environment (Idang 2015). Quoting Salituro(2005), Fathma Rahman (2014) argues that "because you are part of your group, you are more likely to think in certain ways, behave in those ways and believe certain things. She further agrees that "culture shapes people's attitudes about other people or things and ideas and because people have these attitudes, it influences how they see themselves and things". Markman (2012) wraps it up when he observes that if your culture leads you to believe in or look at the supernatural, the magical, the diabolical, superstitious, then that will tend to direct your thought and to some extent your actions".

Witchcraft and witch hunt are universal phenomena which have strong root in community beliefs and in the custom and lifestyle of the people of each community. Magic, sorcery had always been part of the tribal issues and religion which affected almost all the Niger Delta people at some stages of their history (Jayeola- Omoyeni et al 2015).

The people of Uyo, like all Ibibios, have a belief system that supports the magical. They have intense belief in the supernatural, superstition, ancestral, non- ancestral spirits, and in witches who cause disorders in society through supernatural or magical means (Offiong 1991). Offiong, further informs us that the people generally believe in incantations and libations while patronizing sorcerers, diviners, traditional healers, and

native or witch doctors" all of whom have something (the magical, the inexplicable) in common with witches, magic, and witchcraft. They believe in "Mbian" a magically potent object used in divination possessing the supernatural ability to detect innocence and guilt and its potency in inflicting punishment. In the people's superstition, they believe hardly anything evil happens if some unseen evil forces or power (often witches) were not behind every occurrence. Their belief is that unseen spirits with supernatural powers that can influence a man cause various occurrences of diseases, miseries, misfortunes, disappointments, and even death. This belief establishes close links with the supernatural and the invisible, intangible world. (Offiong 1991)

There are some cultural beliefs, in Akwa-Ibom, among the Ibibio's and in particular Uyo people cannot be discussed in isolation. This is because "Ibibio religion has two dimensions, and (Esema 2012) says their culture and religion are intertwined among the people, worship of the god of earth, "centers on pouring of libation, worship, consultation, communication, and invocation through various invisible or spiritual entities".

No wonder, Esema(2002) opines that their (Uyo) worldview of the supernatural is unique. While the people believe in the existence of the supreme God and are mostly Christians, they equally carry themselves as subjects and messengers of the god of the Earth". Hence, they pour libations. The people of uyo, like the Ibibios" practice the two religious side by side worshipping with their unique shrines for different deities (Eseme 2012). In assessing social relations and witchcraft beliefs among the Ibibio, the Ibibio tribe of Nigeria, believes in one God and the Holy Ghost but they mostly run to the diviners or spiritualists for treatment due to the continuous process of blaming witchcraft for unexplainable problems. According to (Nakama 2009) witchcraft accusations against children are linked to certain cultural and religious reasons- Nakama: Unicef Nigeria 2009. Ironically, whereas Uyo is one of the heartlands of child witch abuse, "church signs sprout around every twist of the road…., churches outnumber schools, clinics, and banks put together". Mcveigh (2007) states: "almost everyone goes to church here, church every third or fourth house along the road. (Tracey Mcveigh: the Guardian, sun December 9, 2007, children are targets of Nigerian witchcraft Hunt).

To a large extent, Uyo can be regarded as a patriarchal society where old superstitions are still germane. To date, in spite of modernization and technology, people still believe that witches assume human or animal forms particularly female or child forms to wreak distinctive wickedness, which harms people in mysterious, magical, and secret ways (Esema 2002). The people believe witches manifest in the spiritual realm (dream) in the middle of the night to wreak havoc on victims and have the capacity to fly long distances by diabolical means. Among the people, there is the belief that witches are heartless to drink the blood of their family members, (Esema 2002). Child witch stigmatization to a large extent stems from the cultural belief in witches and witchcraft and the belief that witchcraft power can be transferred from one witch to another through food and drinks. These accusations tend to appear among communities who believe that problems in life have a spiritual origin (Safe Africa. nd) Better put, children are accused of witchcraft in societies that harbor beliefs about the existence of witches and black magic.

From the foregoing, there is hardly any doubt that culture plays a role in child witch stigmatization, such beliefs are an aspect of culture, and Uyo people's belief in witchcraft is part of their culture. Children are born into the system and without being told they imbibe it. They are groomed in the belief system. Since culture is often seen as the sum total of the peculiarities shared by a people, a people's values (beliefs) can be seen as part of their culture (Idang 2015).

III. WHY CHILDREN AND NOT AGED?

One of the main reasons why the focus has turned to children from adults is that, like women, "children are certainly the most economically, politically (even physically mentally) powerless in the society. So "when something goes wrong in the family or community, suspicion tends to fall on the most vulnerable and defenseless of the family or community". Sam Itauma (Lydia 2011) of the children's Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN), in an interview said "it is the most vulnerable children (the orphaned, sick, disabled or poor who are most often denounced (CBS News 2009).

A child is defenseless "when fatherless or totally parentless, a potential drain on the charity of the community he lives in. Sometimes he lacks any supportive close or distant family member. According to Stobart (2006), where there is family stress and or change in the family structure or fortunes, (child stigmatization) becomes a way of rationalizing the family or communal misfortunes. Quoting Martin Daive, spokesman for the United Nations Children fund, CBS News (2009) says when families are extremely poor, when communities come under pressure, they look for scapegoats. It plays into the traditional belief that someone is responsible for a negative change and that children are defenseless (CBS News 2009).

Poverty and socio-economic inequality is also said to be one of the likely reasons witchcraft accusation has shifted to children. Ironically, Akwa-Ibom state is a major oil-producing state, poverty is seen to loom large. Extremely poor families, with more children than can be adequately catered for, sometimes feel relieved to have one or two fewer mouths to feed. So, they willingly and gleefully accuse or accept a pastor's accusation of an unlucky innocent child and throw him or her to the street. Poverty, conflict, and poor education lay the foundation for accusation. Polygamous marriages and family breakdown exacerbate matrimonial insecurity and jealousy with accusations by stepmothers being particularly common often motivated by the desire to remove competition from another woman's child to promote the interests of her own children.

Yet another answer to "why the generational change in child witch stigmatization could be found in the fact that urbanization and technology have undermined the traditional motion of children being the responsibility of the whole community therefore making them owe members of the community respect and obedience. Because time and situations have changed the perception of young people, they no longer inspire protection but are perceived as threats to the community. Child witch stigmatization could therefore be the end product of a silent generational social conflict. In Uyo local government, in Akwa-Ibom state, tension and poverty have delivered an opportunity for a new and terrible phenomenon that is leading to abuse and the murder of hundreds, perhaps, thousands of children.

Most of these violations, in Akwa- Ibom are aggressively carried out by "professional witch hunters personalized by pastors, who specialize in finding witch children and performing rituals, to denature them for a price (Derbyshire 2017) even churches who did not use to "find" child witches are being forced into it in a bid to carve out a congregation, acquire fame and wealth in the midst of mushrooming churches. "And it is all being done in the name of Christianity" (Mcveigh 2007). Reider(2012) laments that targeting children classifies as unparalleled. No wonder (Foxcroft 2009) sees it as an "outrage what they (church leaders) are allowing to take place in the name of Christianity" A number of writers estimate that most common age for witchcraft accusations is between four and seven years old (Yengo,2008). Other sources refer to children between 8 and 14 years old (D'Haeyer, 2014).

IV. CHILD RIGHTS LAW AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

In 2003, Nigeria adopted the Child Rights Act to domesticate the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although this law was passed at the Federal level, it is only effective if State assemblies also start it. The Children's Rights Act 2003 (CRA) was created to serve as a legal documentation and protection of Children's rights and responsibilities in Nigeria.

The law has three primary purposes: To incorporate the rights of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights into the national law, to provide the responsibilities of government agencies associated with the law and to integrate children-focused legislation into one comprehensive law. It also acts as legislation against human trafficking since it forbids children from being "separated from parents against their will, except where it is in the best interests of the child.

In relation to the child witch saga, yes there is a child rights law that was enacted by the former Governor of Akwa –Ibom state in the year (December 2008) through Gary Foxcroft and Sam Itauma a non-governmental partner in charge of the CRARN center in Eket, which is to protect children in Akwa –Ibom and also punish offenders when caught. Many applauded the Governor for taking action. "Prescribes up to 15 years imprisonment without an option of a fine or both for offenders in child stigmatization, accusation of witchcraft or torture" (Emile Secker 2012).

1. **Methodology:** This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A descriptive survey was adopted because it helped the researcher to describe the belief system of the Uyo people. This research considered the Divine Home Orphanage at Atan Ofot, Uyo as its study area. There are approximately 200 registered children in Divine Home Orphanage, however, 100 samples were chosen via the use of the convenience sampling method and simple random sampling technique. All primary sources of data were gathered qualitatively with interviews with key informants.

2. **Findings:** The study revealed that child witch stigmatization is really a major problem in Uyo, as several children are victims of these uncalculated labels attached to them because the majority of these so-called witches are nothing more than innocent children who have been labelled as evil. Thus suffering emotionally, mentally, physically, and socially. This section of the paper is concerned with the presentation and analysis of data. Starting with

the demographic data presented in tabular form, and proceeding to the intent of the research objectives, norms and values were examined.

3. Presentation Of Demographic Data

Sex Distribution of the Informants

Table 1

Sex of Informants	Male	Female	Total
Number of Informants	45	55	100

Fieldwork, (2018).
From the table, 45% of the informants are male, while 55% are female. The sex distribution of female is higher than males.

Family background

Table 2

Family Background	Stable	Step Parent	Single Parent	Grand Parent	Total
Number of Informants	20	30	25	25	100

Fieldwork, (2018).
Interviews with the 100 labeled stigmatized revealed that most of them came from poverty-stricken homes. Most of their parents are low-income earners like security jobs and motorcycle riders, some are farmers and some are not employed. From the table above, (20%) of them are from stable homes. (30%) are living with step-parents. Some (25%) were raised by single parents (mum) because some were born out of wedlock; others their parents had separated and they were left with their mums. (25%) lived with their grandparents.

Place of Origin

Table 3

Place of Origin	Uyo	Other L.G.A.s	Other states	Total
No of Informants	80	10	10	100

Fieldwork 2018.
This table shows that most informants (100%) are of Akwa-Ibom origin, 80% are indigenes of Uyo and 10% are from other local government areas but reside in Uyo. 10% come from other states but are residents in Uyo.

V. CAUSE OF CHILD STIGMATIZATION

1. **Family Misfortunes:** Nigerians live in a depressed economy in which has emerged the threat of alienation and new institutional demands leaving many families in socio-economic disarray. The family has been destabilized as an institution and, so much so, as Akintunde (2009) opines, that it could no longer adequately take care of its wards. At Divine Home Orphanage, almost all the children interviewed linked their ordeals to 'father wife', and in some cases, it is the absence of the father.

   Culture is a man–made product and as much man believes so much in his culture and just like the Uyo people who believe so much in the culture. According to the paramount ruler (Edem Silas), the Uyo believe that nothing happens naturally, that it's done by someone i.e. death. Children are stigmatized in Uyo because of unpleasant events that happen around them. for instance, if a child is born and the mum does not survive, it is therefore accounted that such a child is evil and that child grows up with that mentality that he /she is evil(stigmatization) or the parents are not well to do they blame it on the child.

2. **Economic Reasons:** In every community, society, country or continent we have, the haves and the haves not. In addition, the problem of witchcraft has persisted because many people are struggling for advancement in life as one informant stated, therefore people blame their predicaments on witches and visiting pastors for solution. But if we look, it is only the poor children that are stigmatized as witches, but how we don't see or hear the rich men children. One of informant said "the stigmatization is a way of avoiding parental responsibilities".

   Most children in Divine home orphanage are from poor families as it was found out during the interview with them, they have gone through excruciating experiences of poverty, stemming from deteriorating economic condition and the accompanying strain of systematic failure resulting in parents' inability to fulfill basic obligations to their children. The poor parents use stigmatization as escape route, because it offers cogent explanation for wanting to abandon their children on the streets as sacrifices for their failure in the class struggle. So, witchcraft stigmatization is tactically used to denigrate children who have become an additional burden to their families.

3. **The concept of a witch in Uyo:** Uyo sees a witch as a perpetrator who does evil and brings misfortune to the family and community. The Uyo have the belief in the good spirit (edisanga- spirit), originating from God (Abasi), and the evil spirit (ekpo) coming from Satan can be caught anywhere. Witches, though humans reside in the physical world and operate from the spiritual realm because of the inherent supernatural powers they possess. The popular conception of witches is as wicked, destructive, and jealous, and this deviant attitude in society (personal communication). The individual (witch) does not have mercy even to loved ones; Ifot is the Uyo version of a witch, is used in two senses. First, it refers to anybody who behaves mischievously, including being wicked, stubborn, destructive, greedy, acting mean, insolent, disrespectful, eating in dreams, and crying at night. In the second usage, a witch is one who, in addition to possessing the above attributes, has confessed, or has been indicted by another witch, a traditional doctor

(Offiong, 1991). In Uyo, there are two kinds of witches, the black (abudbit) and the white (afai) witches. Black witches are malevolent and evil; they cause accidents, barrenness and wickedness. This is the category that the key informant believes the stigmatized children belong to. White witchcraft, on the other hand, is more of a status symbol associated with prominent people, who are wealthy or influential and use it for personal protection.

The key informant, also told the researcher that Owl, cockroach, bat, cat and snake are some of the common familiar symbols used to depict witches in Uyo. Like the Owl, witches can fly, and they are a sign of bad omen. They are detestable. Like the bat, they are mostly active at night, when they carry out their evil acts. Like the snake, they possess venom that harms their victims. As a cockroach, witches are beyond spatial bounds and can reach their victims anywhere irrespective of distance.

4. **Harsh Reality of the Stigmatized:** Based on the information gathered from an In-depth interview with the paramount ruler of Uyo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, the researcher was able to gather that the belief of the uyo people is to disassociate the stigmatized children from the rest of the community. Also, the uyo people believe that children with traces of witchcraft are best dealt with by either abandoning them, burning them alive, starving them or completely isolating them from interacting with other members of the community. In addition to that, the stigmatized children are left homeless and uncared for.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Witchcraft stigmatization could not have strengthened social order in Uyo/Ibibio society, even though it supports indigenous values by condemning deviation and defining acceptable behaviors. The recent child-witch problem, as captured in this work, is not merely the effort of the community to recapture and reinforce waning communal norms and values, but equally an expression of the waning value of brotherhood, mutual assistance and genuine care for the afflicted due to exploitation of economic reality and misuse of power, privileges and positions. In the long run this work is a serious indictment of arbitrary principles. Thus, the persistence of child stigmatization and abandonment, in spite of the enactment of the Child Rights Act by the state government the child witch stigmatization has yet been eradicated. Cultural belief has also made difficult/impossible for the child right laws/acts to be well implemented.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus, for effective combating of child-witch stigmatization, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Government should strengthen its child protection system by ensuring the implementation of the child rights acts that were adopted by the Akwa Ibom state government, and by creating awareness of the existence of the act. Further, educate children on their human rights.

2. Poverty eradication and economic empowerment programs that will boost the finances and enhance the economic emancipation of families should be instituted to combat the excruciating poverty that initiated the child menace.

3. Children, on their part, should obey their parents and abide by their instructions.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Abasi   God
Abudbit   black
Afia   white
Esere   a leguminous beans given to witches that induces them to vomit the witchcraft substance
Ifot   witch
Mbiam   is any potent object used in swearing oaths.