

*Full Length Research*

# **Witchcraft stigmatization and abuse of children in Akwa-Ibom state, Nigeria**

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**In this age of intellectual progress and technological advancement, strange beliefs are still rife, and misfortunes are blamed on witches in many societies. In the past, the avowed witches were the aged. Lately, focus has shifted to vulnerable and defenseless children who have become victims of witchcraft stigmatization and abuse. In Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria, hundreds of children have been labeled as witches and thus subjected to series of violations that have left them physically and verbally abused, psychologically traumatized and sexually molested. Studies on child abuse have paid greater attention to child labour, child trafficking and sexual molestation but the labeling of children as witches has scarcely been conceived as a form of abuse and examined in scholastic (particularly in anthropological victimological) enquiry. This paper examines why children rather than adults have become the targets of such abuse in Akwa-Ibom State. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources. Demonological and labeling theories were adopted as theoretical frameworks and narrative analysis employed. Findings revealed 'intimate others' as perpetrators of these heinous acts. It showed that capital accumulation as the underlining reason why children are converted into objects of wealth that could be easily exploited by all stakeholders. It also revealed the roles of the NGOs in reuniting families and restoring order in the society. The paper poised that witchcraft labeling, and violence meted to children is a serious indictment, contradicting moral expectation of parents as care givers. It recommends that existing laws and regulations on child rights should be implemented to protect the rights of children.**

**Key words:**Witchcraft, exploitation, labelling, violence, abandonment.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Child abuse and violence is a global phenomenon drawing concerns of scholars, human and child rights activists, government and non-governmental organisations, and all those concern about the welfare of children. These phenomena are mostly targeted at vulnerable groups -mainly women and children who are

incapable of defending themselves (UNICEF, 2001). Although there are several laws protecting the rights of children, such as the Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC), the abuse of children has continued unabated. Cases of child abuse range from child trafficking, child labour, abduction, stealing and operating a baby factory

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are commonly reported by the media (This Day Newspaper 2013; Vanguard Newspaper; 2014). Witchcraft stigmatization as a form of child abuse is recent and common in Akwa Ibom and Cross River states of Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Hanson and Ruggiero, 2013; Mungai, 2014; Iwenwamme, 2018). Recently, a new dimension of child abuse and stigmatization has emerged in Akwa Ibom and neighbouring Cross-River states of Nigeria – the ‘Child witchcraft’. These are children labeled as witches by the Church, otherwise known as prayer houses. The children, once labeled are subjected to violations that leave them physically and verbally abused, psychologically traumatized and sexually molested (Chineyemba, 2014). It incites violence, stigmatization and hostility from family members and the community that regard witchcraft as odious and life threatening (Madike, 2008). It thus must be exorcised, else the labeled is ostracized, rejected and abandoned to the street.

In the past, Akwa-Ibom/Cross River states had perpetuated iniquitous act of violence on children born as twins, because they were considered abominable and were mercilessly killed or abandoned in the evil forest to die (Enodien, 2008). It took the messianic intervention of a Scottish missionary, Mary Mitchell Slessor to abolish the obnoxious practice (Edigho, 2018). The child-witchcraft phenomenon seems to be a reappearance of same ruthlessness that subject vulnerable children to severe beating, taunting, maiming and lynching. Witchcraft labeling is often associated with extreme cruelty, violence, and abuse. In most cases, it leads to abandonment of children unto the street, where they face hardship in the bid to fend for themselves. They are exposed to sexual molestation, abduction, trafficking and child labour that have stereotypically portrayed the state as disreputable for child abuse (Chineyemba, 2014).

The increase in the volume of media reports and scholastic studies on child abuse, mirror the magnitude of the problem and the concerns expressed by all towards child abuse (Choji, 2013; Eyo, 2013; Umukoro, 2016). Literature is replete on studies on witchcraft (Offiong, 1991; Geshiere, 1997; Ajala and Ediomu-Ubong, 2010; Babalola, 2010), but the labeling of children as witches and the conception of child witch as a form of child abuse and stigmatization require attention that necessitates this ethnographic study. In view of this, this paper is aimed at investigating the phenomenon of child witchcraft. Specifically, the objective is to explore the perception of witchcraft held by Eket people and examine it underscores the stigmatization and abuse of labeled children. It will also highlight the relevance of intervention in mediating/curbing child witchcraft labeling and child abuse generally.

This study has become relevant as it constitutes additional volume in the growing literature on the phenomenon of child stigmatization, abuse and victimization. Lessons from the interventions and outcries

of the NOG and the state government can be gleaned from in the fight against child abuse and victimization generally. The study is also useful as it points to the relevance of mediation and restorative justice system in conflict management and resolution.

## LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In contemporary times, beliefs in witchcraft are still rife and have been documented in different countries. In Africa, Ghana, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic, but also in Nepal, Bolivia, India, Guatemala, Haiti, Thailand, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, Europe and the U.S. (Hanson and Ruggiero, 2013). However, in the last decade, witchcraft accusations have become more of an intergenerational antagonism against children who have become victims of witchcraft accusations, violence and abuse. This trend has become rampant in Akwa-Ibom and neighbouring Cross River states of Nigeria and has also transcended national borders to the Democratic Republic of Congo where Tonda (2002) reported cases of children accused by men of God of practicing witchcraft. In Britain, for instance, eight-year-old Victoria Climbié, was reported to have been murdered in February 2000 owing to witchcraft accusation. Another eight-year-old ‘Child B’, also suffered serious abuse in 2005 due to witchcraft accusations as well (Barker, 2010). Suffice to say, however, that child-witch labelling is not a universal practice because the Tonga people of Zambia for instance, never suspects nor label children as witches. They believe children do not have the resources to obtain witchcraft nor the magic it requires to practice the craft (Colson, 2000).

Among the Efik/Ibibio and other places where the execution of, and approach to, children has become common, the reasons for doing so are not entirely clear. However, witchcraft is predicted on culture, and as a cultural factor, it responds to changes and challenges in the social system that upsets and destabilizes social order (Chineyemba, 2014). Such changes include political instability, economic regression, health challenges, family breakups, religious profiteering, ignorance, poverty, natural disasters and individual and systemic failures all of which are usually explained by people through the idiom of witchcraft (Ajala and Ediomu, 2010; UNICEF, 2001; Joselow, 2012; MacLean, 2014; Chineyemba, 2016). The concept of chance or accident is rare in Ibibio discourse of misfortune, so witchcraft subsumes that which is planned and intentional caused by a living object or a spirit. Were it to be a living object, such an object possesses some mystical powers to access the spiritual world (Chineyemba, 2014). This is so because the Ibibio believe there are two cosmological worlds, the physical and the spiritual worlds. The spiritual/physical world is mediated by two forces or spirits. The good spirit (*Edisanga*-spirit), and the evil

spirit (*Ekpo*). The good spirit originating from God (Abasi), is one that is accessed through prayer (akam), and the evil spirit (ekpo) coming from Satan can be caught anywhere. The belief is that it takes some mystical powers to access the spiritual world. Witches, though humans, reside in the physical world but operate from the spiritual realm because of the inherent supernatural powers they possess (Chineyemba, 2014; Itauma). The witch collaborates with the evil spirit that possessed the individual (Offiong 1991, Igbo 2008). Therefore, the popular conception of witches as destructive, hardhearted, envious and jealous is widespread among the Ibibio (Ekong, 2001; Ajala and Ediomu, 2010).

### **Child-witches: The Akwa-Ibom experience**

Witchcraft accusation is age-long, child witchcraft phenomenon is relatively new, noticeably the last decade. It became prominent in Akwa-Ibom state in 2001, when a few children were seen walking the streets of major towns in the state (Chineyemba et al., 2010). In Eket, they were in some designated locations like the market, Mobil filling station, the sports stadium and along hospital road where they had a make shift apartment. The phenomenon as alleged by the media emerged in connection with the activities of some churches that label children as witches and pose as exorcists to whom parents had recourse. They exorcise the spirit of witchcraft from the children and for their work, charge prices which are high or low relative to the value of 'trading'.

One thing that appears to have triggered the labeling of children as alleged in a documentary "Saving the African witch children" is a film, titled- "The end of the wicked" produced in 1999 by liberty films, an affiliate of Liberty Gospel church. The film graphically portrayed children in witchcraft coven practicing the craft. Further, the founder of the church in one of her books titled Unveiling the mysteries of witchcraft, identified signs to look out for in children (0-18 years) susceptible to witchcraft labeling. They include screaming at night, always feverish, lack of appetite, unusual boldness, lying, stubbornness, being destructive like spoiling electrical appliances in the house (Ukpabio, 2003: 76). This was the social climate in which fears of child witches emerged, because it raised public consciousness to the existence of child witchcraft. It was further heightened by the activities of some men of God who now capitalized on the charged atmosphere and offered prophecies that indicted children as witches- all in the bid to charge high cost of exorcism (Chineyemba, 2016). Subsequently, parents who became suspicious of their children/wards when they manifest some of the signs mentioned above began to view them as witches and began to take them to churches where men of God could pray and drive out the witchcraft.

## **THEORETICAL FRAME WORK**

### **Demonological theory**

Demonological theory believes that people that commit crime are possessed and controlled by evil spirits or demons (Igbo, 2008). They act under the influence of evil/demonic spirits when they commit crime or deviancy. The theory hinges on two assumptions- one, on the victim as a pawn in the hand of the devil who manipulates and controls him to commit crime or deviate from societal norms. Two, the notion of witchcraft, in which the victim deliberately and consciously collaborates with the demon or evil spirit to perpetuate malevolent acts. They believe that treatment of the deviant can be attained either through banishment or exorcism of the evil spirit. One way of achieving this, according to the theory, is through 'trephining' which entails cutting through the skull of the individual to create an opening for the evil spirit to escape, or through exorcism -which involves giving concoction or capital punishment to make the body of the possessed unpleasant for the evil spirit to reside (Igbo 2008).

Labeling theory on the other hand, argues that no act is inherently criminal, that the badness of an act does not emanate from its intrinsic content but on the definition and reaction of the society to such acts. The labeling theorists would argue that the critical issue is the manner or form by which the children are labeled. Tannenbaum (1938) specifically argued that most acts of delinquency common among adolescents is a normal part of their street life; that children engage in them for fun, excitement and adventure but the society interprets it as evil. He noted that if such acts become more frequent, it is redefined, that is, emphasis is shifted from the act as bad to the individual that engages in such acts as evil. He termed this process the 'dramatization of evil', and added that when this happens, all the acts of the individual come under scrutiny and further proof of his nature.

Becker (1974) has, in fact, argued that social group creates deviance by making rules whose infraction constitute deviance, and by applying those rules to people and labeling them as outsiders. He asserts that labeling is a matter of social definition, that the badness of an act is based on peoples' definition of the act relative to the situation and in respect to the people involved.

These perspectives significantly apply to this study. Demonological theory's explanation of witchcraft as a willful act fits into Ibibio perception and succulently explains the stigmatization and abuse that accompany witchcraft labeling. The exorcism, including trephining some of them are subjected to derives from the assumption of demonological theory. Tannenbaum's argument, that witchcraft label transcends the description of the children's acts as delinquent and bad to the redefinition and designation of their personality as evil also applies, because witchcraft in Ibibio perception is evil and malevolent and poses threat to individual's lives

and the cooperate existence of the entire community (Ekong, 2001; Offiong, 1991). Thus defined, they have become what Becker (1974) calls "master status" having lost other statuses that had otherwise defined him. Their identity as children that should be loved, cared for and protected by their families and community is beclouded by witchcraft stigmatization. Therefore, they are not considered as victims that should be pitied but are perceived and responded to as witches that should be abhorred, hounded, abused, violated, ostracized and abandoned to the street as is the case in Akwa-Ibom state.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted in Eket community and specifically covered three churches (prayer houses), the streets in Eket where some label children were abandoned and the Child's Right and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN), a rehabilitation center located at Ikot-Afaha, in Eket Local Government Area. The center has been given considerable media coverage by local and international media that report the ordeals of the inmates of the Centre. Eket was chosen for this study because it gained popularity through a "child witch" saga, a broadcast that brought her to the fore of national and international scandals. The broadcast was by a British television channel, a "C4" documentary titled "Saving the African Witch Children" sponsored by Stepping Stone; a UK based Non-governmental organization.

### Characteristics of the sample

The demographic data sought from the informants include family background, gender, age and place of origin/resident. The sample cuts across all social boundaries- age, sex, education and socio-economic status. The age distribution of the sample is broadly categorized into adults and children. A total of 110 adults, which comprised 55% of the total sample, were interviewed. 90 children (45%) of the entire population were interviewed; they comprise street children within and outside CRARN Centre. The children's age range was between 2-18 years (statutory age).

### Sample procedure and method of data collection

Eket community constitutes the study population and comprised of the indigenes and residents of Eket, inclusive of the street/labeled children. The age distribution of the sample is broadly categorized into adults and children. The sample includes ninety children selected for observation and interview. Ten were drawn from the streets (the number of children on the street could not be ascertain but 10 children labeled as witches were singled out for this study) and eighty, were drawn out of the two hundred and fourteen children (214 children, 108 male and 106 females) from CRARN, as of the time of study. Forty-five males and forty - five females were purposively sampled in all. The age distribution of the children ranged between 2 and 18 years (statutory age). The criterion used for the children was that they had been labeled as witches. The rationale behind this choice is to know their experiences and the abuse and violence they were subjected to because of witchcraft label. Adults are critical stakeholders both in the labeling act and in the management of the social malaise, therefore, their opinions were also considered. One hundred and ten adults were randomly and purposively sampled.

In the community, 95 adults were randomly selected for in-depth

interview. Random sampling is inclusive and offers every member of the community equal chance of being selected for interview. Informants include parents, community leaders, social workers, market women, health workers, artisans, pastors and members of three churches selected for the study and indigenes and residents of Eket. They gave information relating to the children, their activities, attitudes, public perception, treatment and other relevant information about the children.

Four key informants were purposively selected from the adult sample for interview. Two from among the staff of CRARN, the resident officer living with the boys in the hostel and the staff serving as administrative officer saddled with the responsibility of taking the life history and keeping the records of the children. Two other key informants were selected from Eket community. They were royal fathers of the host communities of CRARN. They are vast in the culture of the Eket people, and gave relevant information relating to their norms and values. They also explained the roles expected of children in the family and the community.

Two sessions of focused group discussions were held, one with pastors and another with some members of the community. Five pastors were drawn from different denominations. They were reached through the assistance of a pastor friend, who was the secretary (at that time) of the Christian association of Nigeria (CAN), Eket chapter. It was necessary to include pastors because of the significant role they played in the child witchcraft episode. Information relating to why children were labeled, processes involved in exorcism, the role they played in detecting witches and other relevant information were sought from them. The second section of focused group was drawn from members of the community, six members were drawn from the community. It comprised of a police officer, commercial motorcycle rider, a nurse, a market woman, a social worker and a fuel attendant working at a filling station where some of the children spend most of their time. This group was reached through personal effort of the researcher. The composition of this group was carefully selected to cover the category that encounter the children the most, especially for the ones outside CRARN Centre, as they engage in their daily routines on the street. Information relating to the activities of the children on the streets and the attitudes of members of the public towards them were elicited from this group.

Lastly, participant observation was carried out at CRARN and three churches chosen from the community. The researcher attended three sections each of the church programmes relating to fasting and prayer meetings, deliverance service and counselling sessions. At the Centre, the researcher was actively involved in the daily activities of CRARN throughout the duration of the study which lasted over one year. She was involved in teaching, counselling, playing, cooking, reconciliation, advocacy and town hall meetings organized by CRARN.

Primary data were collected through the above-mentioned methods while secondary data were sourced through books, magazines, and the internet. Some responses drawn from data were quoted verbatim in the language of the interview. Verbal consent of all informants and that of the institution (CRARN) were sought and obtained by the researcher. Pseudonyms were used to refer to informants. This is to keep up with the promise of anonymity and confidentiality assured them. All excerpts cited as vignettes of the children are from primary data obtained from the field by the researcher. All information gathered was recorded using audio tapes and field notes. The data were examined for content and meaning and presented as narratives in the analysis done in this work in line with the research objectives.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Several themes emerged from the research work that

produced this paper. However, its focus is on three that are related to stigmatization of children witches and the efforts to curb the abuse that results from it. They include: Abuse stemmed from the belief that witchcraft is a metaphor of evil. Stigmatization and abuse of children witches elicit confession from them. Intervention of CRARN and the action of the government ameliorated the child witchcraft crisis. It therefore follows that lessons from Akwa-Ibom experience can be gleaned from in the resolution of child abuse and other social problems in the society

Findings revealed that in Eket, there are two kinds of witches, the black (*abudbit*) and the white (*afia*) witches. Similarly, Eket perceive witchcraft in two senses. First, *ifu-awe adikuho see-etang, or ifu-awe nsung-iboho* (that is, a witch that does not 'hear word' or refuses to listen). It refers to anybody who behaves mischievously, including being wicked, stubborn, destructive, greedy, acting mean, hard-hearted, insolent, disrespectful, eating in dreams, crying at night. Such behaviours are believed to contradict *offong* or deviate from communal norms and values. Witchcraft from this point of view is linked to image characterization which is crucial in identity formation. 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/spiritualist or a pastor. Abuse and stigmatization of witchcraft stems from the need to elicit confession, which is requisite for successful exorcism, because confession incapacitates the witch as informants hinted. Stigmatization on the other hand, is an attempt to disassociate from the witch, since witchcraft is evil, nobody wants to be linked with it. This explains why abandonment or banishment is adopted when exorcism fails. Lastly, the study revealed that the intervention of CRARN and SSN ameliorated the child witchcraft problem in Akwa Ibom state.

### **Stigmatization stemmed from the belief that witchcraft is a metaphor of evil**

Generally, people accused of witchcraft are stigmatized and abused in Eket community. This stemmed from common conception of witchcraft as evil. But the sources of evil vary from one society to another, and very much so on the template of personal and cultural perceptions, such that variations of interpretations exist. Some people ascribe evil to the devil and perceive witchcraft as demonic (Demonological approach). To the Ibibio people, evil can be linked to fate. But they similarly recognize other sources of evil which originates from human nature, wicked intentions, bitterness, envy, slander, hatred among others (Offiong, 1991: 8). Witchcraft is, however, a more convenient idiom through which evil is expressed probably because, as Haviland (2002) opined, witchcraft, other than other explanations of misfortunes, elicit more

sympathy and more satisfying explanation of the causes of inexplicable developments.

To them, witchcraft, is of two types- white and black witchcraft. White witchcraft is mostly associated with influential and wealthy people as Mr. Udo, one of the key informants hinted. He said that in the olden days, people acquired white witchcraft and could boast of possessing it because it was more of a status symbol used by influential people for personal protection. The people who possessed it were respected members of the community. Thus, they relate witchcraft to the dimensions of wealth and power. Thus conceived, witchcraft expresses the obsession and need of the wealthy and powerful to protect and maintain their wealth and power. This will agree with modernists' conception of witchcraft, which contends that witchcraft is an outcome of inequality (Geshiere, 1997.). Thus viewed, one will assume that white witchcraft is harmless. Contrary to this assumption, Mr. Okon, an informant and indigene of Afaha-Eket, confirmed the existence of white witchcraft, but noted that it is rare these days due to the influence of Christianity, noting that people no longer want to be linked with witchcraft whether white or black. Another informant, *Obong-awang*, Akwawo, women leader of Okon, maintained that witchcraft is evil. Speaking further on white witchcraft, she stated that even white witchcraft is evil because it stems from selfishness, greed and excessive quest for power and dominance in the materialistic society. Her view will collaborate Taussig's (1980) theory of commodity fetishism, devil belief model, in which he conceived capitalism and exploiting capitalist as evil because their mode of production is flavoured with evil and the devil, the personification of its acts/intensions. Similarly, the Ibibio perceive witchcraft as evil because it involves the invocation of the devil (the personification of the witch) in ordering social relations. Acquiring wealth and power is good, but it could also be bad when it creates problem for relationships, when it encourages individualistic value and the domination of others, which is at variance with Eket normative ethos of brotherhood and the culture of communalism which the community indorse.

Black witchcraft on the other hand, is believed to be malevolent and evil. They are mean, amoral, and wicked. They cause accidents, barrenness and sickness and even kill their victims, hence the term *ifu amme ataha-awe* (that is, witches that kill people). This is the category people believe the children belong to. Informants believe that black witches are on the increase due to increasing wickedness. They believe that witches kill people because of the evil/witchcraft spirit dwelling in them. The spirit enables them to transform to snake, owl, bat and cockroach to perpetuate their wicked acts as informants opined. Like snake, witches possess venom that harms their victims. Like the owl, witches are detestable because they are sign of a bad omen. As cockroach, witches are beyond spatial bounds and can reach their

victims anywhere irrespective of distance. Like bats, they are more active at night, when they fly to their covens to perpetuate their evil acts. Witchcraft is associated with darkness and so is evil. Proceeding with a cosmology of darkness, in the assumption that night correlates with darkness, because evil is associated with darkness, they engage witchcraft as a dark force. It is practiced at night when people are asleep and oblivious of their acts. Little wonder the bible stated that when men slept, the enemy sow tares (Matthew, Chapter 13, verse 25). Witches, whatever the category, are perceived as enemies within. They are jealous and resentful of others' good fortune. The jealousy, most times, is covert, as victims are oblivious of it. It resides in the heart where it breeds bitterness and hatred, what (Ashforth, 1998: 18) described as 'the fuel that drives the engine of witchcraft'. They are thus dangerous, debased, destructive and undesirable as evidenced in utterances, gestures and attitudes observed during interviews and focused group discussions. Tannenbaum's theory and the concept of the 'dramatization of evil', vividly captures the evil metaphor, as the image of the children transcend their acts as delinquent, as confirmed by the resident officer at CRARN, to the redefinition of their personality as evil that should be parried, abandoned/banished or outrightly killed. The clan head succulently elucidates the evil image when he queried the location of CRARN in his community:

"Why should Sampi (the founder of CRARN as he is popularly called in the village) harbour witches if not that he is a witch himself? All the people in that vicinity (of CRARN) are witches; if not why didn't they protest the location of that place? I hate them, they are evil. If they come here, I will kill them (he demonstrated the act of killing them with a gesture of his hand across his neck). As the clan head, I have written to the state house in Uyo, to come and take them away".

The position of the Clan head shows the animosity some members of the community express towards the children as being evil. To them, the evil of witchcraft manifest in wicked intentions, malicious jealousy and resentment of others good fortune, being destructive and hardhearted (the attributes associated with a non-conforming child, as the village head of Ikot-Odiong mentioned). They are *ifu*, a word synonymous with evil. It is thus, better to extricate the spirit through exorcism. But, when exorcism fails, stigmatization and abandonment of the labeled becomes imperative as the paramount ruler disclosed during the interview.

Although opinions are not unanimous on the issue of exorcism, observation and interviews revealed that the stigmatization of the children remained even after exorcism. This is because the people are adamant about

their views on the evil of witchcraft. The overwhelming assertion of the informants is that it is safer to keep a distance from alleged witches, as no physical evidence exists to prove the fact of having been delivered. Mr. Ubong, an indigene of Eket, puts the situation thus: *umo-udiala mkpo mme awe idiomu, ana akana ayan ikpang* (meaning when you eat with a trickery person, you eat with a longer spoon). Eating with a longer spoon implies being cautious because there is suspicion and distrust of the other, and it is all because the exorcism conducted on the witch cannot be proved empirically. When Mrs. Asuquo, a resident of Eket, was asked if she would allow her children to play with an exorcised child-witch, she declined, stating that "for the benefit of doubt, in case the thing is still there, I will not allow them, because I cannot be so sure if the spirit had actually left". Similar uncertainty was expressed by Mr. Essien, an informant, who said he cannot give out his child in marriage to an exorcised witch because, as he reasoned,

The evil spirit (witchcraft) can be transferred into my own family through such union. And, even if he has been delivered, how will he prove it? How will the community see me afterwards? People will think it is because of money that I am doing it. So, it is difficult, I cannot do it (Personal interview).

The overwhelming view of the informants is that witchcraft is evil, contaminated, and contagious, transferring from one body to another, and not necessarily by birth, but by association and through food as the belief is that witchcraft can be acquired through food. It is therefore better to isolate a witch either through abandonment or outright killing as is evident with the children witches in Akwa Ibom.

### Stigmatization as a form of child abuse

Since witchcraft is evil and must be abhorred, stigmatization and abuse became inevitable for children accused of witchcraft. The abuse and mistreatment meted to them stem from the assumption that the ill-treatment of witches elicits confession. Thus, the children are subjected to severe torture and beatings aimed at eliciting confession from them. Some of them bear scars and deformations that evidenced the torture they passed through. The president of CRARN, in an interview stated that the belief is that "if you torture a witch, he/she would no longer be able to attack or harm you. And until they are ill-treated, confession cannot be elicited from them".

Confession has become a necessary criterion for effective exorcism because the belief is that the craft thrives in secrecy. Therefore, once a witch confesses, he becomes incapacitated and can no longer fly to the coven to perpetuate his wicked acts. To buttress the belief in

confession, a parent that brought his grandchild (Esther) to CRARN, claiming the child is a witch, when interrogated, he said, *eyeh ada iwua esie etang* (the child has used her mouth to say it). Personal confession is obviously vital to being confirmed a witch, but while under duress and with limited options, one will be compelled to confess and be spared, or risk being killed. An admission of witchcraft is an escape route for some of the children, though one with unsavoury consequences.

Further on confession, a pastor during the focused group discussion identified confession as one of the necessary steps to exorcism. He stressed that for exorcism to be effective, the witch must confess his involvement in witchcraft, including his identity, that is, the name he bears in the coven and the havocs he has committed. This is deemed necessary because confession is believed to turn them into objects without true power to harm. It is thus necessary to ill-treat them to elicit confession. This belief undoubtedly accounts for the violence and torture meted to the children. The story of one of them, highlights this:

As I just came back from Calabar, I heard my Step-mother talking... so when my father come back, I just hear as he said, 'who allow that witch to enter my house'? At night, when I was lying down, my father thought I was sleeping, he drew out a machete to cut me, but I ran away into the bush. Later, when my grandmother came, she took me back to the house. In the house, they will be talking, if anything happen they will say I am the one that did it. One day, my father wife took me to one church. The pastor was prophesying, saying who has this spoilt child? Because they plan it, my father's wife stood up, but I was not the only child in the church o! The pastor asked her to come out, asking her if she remembered the television that spoiled in the house, the radio that sparked and when they collect car key from her husband who was a tanker driver, that I was the cause, that I took the car key and put it in a pot in witchcraft world. He said he will put me in fasting for one month, that I will only take lime and olive oil throughout the period. When we reach home, my step mother tell my father everything that happened, he beat me seriously. He threw me on top of the roof and use ladder to climb and push me down, I couldn't walk again. He sent me out of the house.

I left and stay in the bush. I went to school from the bush for one month.... I use to eat raw cassava and palm fruit or pluck peoples pawpaw and orange and eat. Later, I move to the market. But boys used to worry me there. So, I move to Eket town where I join other street children. We use to sleep in the afternoon because in the night, people use to worry us. We also look for

food. We use to beg or steal people's things to eat. The boys use to enter people's shop in the night to look for money or bread or anything. I sweep people shop in the market. Some will give me something, and some people too will pursue me and call me names. Men use to worry us. Sometimes they give us money. One day, one cyclist carry one of the girls and took her to that upstairs in the motor park and raped her and gave her five naira. It was not easy. People use to threaten us. One day some people come with knife to kill us because one woman that use to give us something die. They say we are the one that kill her; that we use her good to do her bad. They brought plank with nail to hit us. Later, somebody come and tell me that there is a place at Ikot-Afaha where people use to stay that is why I came here.

(Extract from personal interview conducted with a child at CRARN Center.)

Another child at CRARN Centre alleged that her father attempted burying her alive because she was labeled a witch by a pastor. This affirmed the position of an informant who argued that, "it is better to kill a witch than to exorcise him". This explains why labeled witches in Eket are lynched, maimed or outright killed as it was exemplified in 2001, during *nka-ukpotio* witch hunt at Effoi and other communities in Eket, when some group of youths emerged in various villages killing people suspected to be witches (Chineyemba et al., 2010).

The case of a young girl of about 15 years of age (as at the time of the interview), with rough scares on her forehead could draw the attention of any curious observer. According to her, the scares are the results of the ordeals she passed through, starting with her mother who poured caustic soda on her because she was said to have been responsible for the misfortunes that befell her family. She was labeled a witch at Qua Iboe church situated at Oron. Another labeled child interviewed at CRARN, is a classic example of such torture. She bears the scar of electric iron burnt, inflicted by her elder brother on her lap. The injury was inflicted because she was labeled a witch by a pastor. One of the labeled children on the street had hot oil meant to fry *akara* (beans balls) thrown on her ankle by her step mum. Another was tied to a tree by her father and was left there to die. She was found, half-starved, over a week later. A two years old child was made to sit on a burning stove by her step father who labeled her a witch. Nwaeka, who was at CRARN center when I first visited (prefield), had a large nail driven into her head because she was labeled a witch. She eventually died because of the brain injury sustained from the torture. Three siblings were abandoned by their parents to life on the streets after a prophetess said they were witches. Others interviewed confirmed they were beaten with *ekpin* (palm frond) and *mmiritan* (a type of grass similar to sugarcane) because it

is believed that the *ekpin* and *mmiritan* would incapacitate them and frustrate their witchcraft. The preceding accounts show that witches do not elicit sympathy among Eket people, even exorcism for them is cruel going beyond prayer to beating, trephining and abandonment or banishment as evident in the cases mentioned above and predicted by demonological theory.

But, cruel treatment of supposed witches in Nigeria is not limited to Akwa-Ibom state. Luke Binniyat of Vanguard Newspaper of 30th November 2010 raised an alarm over the case of one Comfort Sunday in Akwanga, Nasarawa state who had an acid bath from her father for not confessing to the allegation of witchcraft leveled against her by one of her aunties. Similar cruelty was extended to eleven-year-old domestic help, Patience Ita Bassy, by her boss who stabbed her on her head over accusation of witchcraft in Calabar. The incident was reported in the National life Newspaper of 7th March 2010. In Lagos, the police reported the case of Damilola, who was set ablaze by her own mother, Bose Oluwole who claimed she was carrying out exorcism instructed by God on the child she claimed, is possessed with witchcraft spirit. Brisibe, (2017) of Vanguard news reported the case of Tobi Segun, a boy who was reported to have been burnt with hot iron and tied to a window protector for three days by his father, Mr. Austin Segun, because a church leader had labeled him a wizard. The child was rescued by a group of vigilantes in Ughelli, Delta-state. The step mother confirmed that the child had been previously burnt with hot iron on his palm and feet for the same issue.

The abuse of Akwa-Ibom child witches is not limited to their homes; it extends to the churches where help is sought through exorcism. The children interviewed disclosed that they were subjected to cruel treatments. They were made to fast for days or weeks and oftentimes beaten in the name of exorcism. Some pastors during the focused group discussion admitted that fasting and some other processes are involved in exorcism. In some cases, the children had concoctions placed on their eyes and ears to, supposedly, block them from seeing or hearing other witches when they come to call them to the coven, as the exorcist, Bishop Williams, claimed in the movie "saving the African witch children". He maintained that beating them with *ekpin* (palm frond) extricates them by driving out the evil or removing the substance that causes witchcraft from the body. If the substance fails to come out, it must be forced out, as one of the children asserted: "The pastor pressed my neck and punched my stomach to make me vomit".

Other forms of abuse also accompany child-witch labeling. Because the image of a witch is debased, wicked and evil, people want to disassociate from them. The labeled are often stigmatized and abandoned to the street and that opens them up to physical, psychological and emotional abuse and could even result to death. For instance, some admitted they were subjected to child labour, trafficking, prostitution, and other forms of

exploitation in attempt to fend for themselves. But the community sees it differently. Abandonment is the community's way of sanctioning witchcraft as the paramount ruler noted in his book, *Our way of life and death*. Rev Iyang, during the focused group discussion, claimed that abandonment limits their influence and exonerates the family from the atrocities and stigma that accompany the witchcraft label. Confirming this, a parent of three labeled children in an interview at CRARN center, said that he preferred to keep them there to save his face and to protect them from the hostility of members of the community. Abandonment of the children corresponds with the banishment proposed by demonological theory.

It is pertinent to state, though regrettably, that the abuse and violence originates from home and perpetuated by parents, siblings, uncles, family and community- the very group the children look up to for care, support and protection. Ironically, these are the same people that violate them. This goes to support Geshiere's (1997) assertion that witchcraft is in the realm of intimate violence. It thus breeds distrust as the children may find it difficult to trust the significant others in their lives. The labeled lose self-esteem and sense of worth as they perceive themselves in the light of others' estimation. They may thus accept what others say about them. This is significant because it may lead to what Becker (1974) regards as secondary deviance which is acting in accordance with others' estimation which may lead to further crime or deviancy.

True to Becker's prediction, the children have been lured into deviancy and criminality as abandonment on the street exposed them to hardship. One of them recalled how she lived in the bush, sleeping on tree tops, feeding on raw cassava, maize, and palm fruits. Once, she fell off the tree and woke up with bruises resulting from the fall. Many others confessed to stealing from peoples' farms to meet basic needs. The market served as an abode for ease of scavenging from the gutter and the dust bins for something to eat. They are prone to social vices like drug addiction, alcoholism, armed robbery and prostitution. Abandonment increased their vulnerability as they were left to stray into a world full of dangers. They became easy prey for traffickers and hoodlums who capitalize on their destitution to exploit them.

### **CRARN's restorative programmes**

Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network's (CRARN) cardinal agenda- rescue, rehabilitation and reconciliation greatly mediated the abuse of witchcraft-labeled children in Eket. Their rescue and rehabilitation programmes took the children off the streets. They thus reduced the hostility, brutality and vulnerability. These children were harboured and counseled at the center for some time before they were taken back to their parents. The



children themselves attested that they no longer engage in prostitution, stealing and drug use. This position was affirmed by the clan head who observed that the children at CRARN no longer stray into people's farms and steal their crops because the center provides for their basic needs- food, shelter, medical care, education and skill acquisition. By accommodating them, CRARN shields them from violence from members of the community, child traffickers and hoodlums that capitalized on their predicament to exploit them.

The reconciliation agenda achieved some measure of success as the children were taken back to their families after some time. In some cases, the success was enhanced when one or both parents come for the child themselves. One Sergeant, an officer with the Nigerian police, whose daughter had been labeled and had been at the center, did so. The reconciliation had to proceed in the presence of witnesses. Parents were required to bring a witness, preferably the village head or anybody of repute in their community, to stand as surety for them and as witness to the reconciliation exercise. One requirement for reconciliation is that the family should relocate from the village/compound where the child was labeled to a neutral place. This is to forestall stigmatization and discrimination of the child when he/she is eventually reconciled. The NGOs (CRARN and Stepping Stone Nigeria) support the families financially to meet this obligation. Other than the ones that come to the center for reconciliation, CRARN also take the children back to their parents. The researcher was involved in one of such reconciliation exercises. She went in the company of some staff of CRARN to Asakikang village, in Ebughu, Mbo local government area, the maternal home of James (pseudonym), one of the labeled children at CRARN. There, they met his maternal grandfather, and other family members. When they stated their mission, he accepted it in good faith but pleaded that they should return with the child pending his visit to the center.

In the light of the above, one can confidently state that the intervention of NGOs, particularly that of CRARN ameliorated the plight of the children. CRARN's mediatory role sanitized a presumably challenging situation by taking the children off the streets and reuniting them with their parents. As it did this, it dealt with the label, stigmatization and rejection that had excluded the children. CRARN's three 'R's' could be said to have achieved some measure of success, because some of the reconciled children (visited) are living happily with their parents. Some were selling fruits with their mother in her stall when CRARN visited. Another child had adequately integrated back into his family and had resumed school as a boarding student in one of the secondary schools in the state.

### **Government actions**

Akwa-Ibom State Government made tremendous

contributions towards alleviating the sufferings of the children despite her initial skepticism over the child-witch phenomenon and the activities of the NGOs which the government described then as 'a big scam'. The Government initially accused the NGO's of using the situation in Akwa-Ibom State to dupe people. This distrust was expressed by the then commissioner for information, as reported in *The News magazine* of March 2010. The Government, during Governor Victor Attah's administration (1999-2007), built a four-room structure at CRARN Centre. Governor Godswill Akpabio made some donations to CRARN during his visit to the center. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2008, Governor Akpabio took drastic steps by adopting and signing into law the Child Right Acts which criminalizes the labeling of children. The Government further set up a commission of inquiry headed by Justice Godwin Abraham in November 2010, to investigate various child-witch related accusations and abuse in the State. The commission concluded its investigation on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2011.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2011, the Government took further measures by evacuating the children from CRARN to Uyo and assumed full custody of the children through the then Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Welfare, Mrs. Eunice Thomas. Recent report about them from a follow-up visit the researcher made to CRARN revealed that the children under the care of the Government are doing well. One of those that were taken to Uyo whom the researcher visited on the follow up visit said that the government took adequate care of them. She and some others learnt various trades through the sponsorship of the government and have been established on their trade. She also revealed that those in school are still being sponsored in various institutions in the State. She specifically mentioned that one of those interviewed previously at CRARN is currently studying law in one of the Universities in the country. The intervention programmes both from the NGOs and the State Government have thus rekindled hope for despondent children whose life and future would ordinarily have been truncated based on belief. The intervention of CRARN and the action of the government prove that though conflict is inevitable in social relations, mediations and conflict resolution can turn the tide in the right direction.

### **Conclusion**

In such critical situation where children are placed at enmity with their families and the community that perceive them as undesirable persons that should be rejected and abandoned unto the street, what should be done? Considering that attempts through legal/judicial system have not sufficiently checkmated the abuse of children believed to be witches, in a community so obsessed with the fear of witchcraft. How should this and

other related social problem be solved? We can glean from the experience of CRARN and resort to restorative justice system as alternative to legal/judicial system in conflict resolution.

Abandonment to the street subject the children to lack of necessities of life- food, clothing, shelter, care and guidance which the family should provide. But when the family fails, the government through social welfare policy should step in. However, in Nigeria, where the government does not prioritize such services, the intervention of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the rescue, rehabilitation and reconciliation policies of CRARN or kinship and communal support system becomes necessary to cater for the needy. Eket and its environs witnessed significant reduction in the number of street children following the intervention of CRARN in the children witchcraft issues. This implies that the problem of child abuse and endemic street children malady can be brought to appreciable reduction if the government and other organizations can emulate the example of CRARN. But, such initiatives are often met with resistance or oppositions by the government and the people as was the case of CRARN, especially as their position about the children seemed to negate the general belief about them as witches and evil that should be abhorred and parried.

It is equally pertinent, to highlight the invaluable impact of restorative justice in conflict resolution. Restorative justice affords parties involved in conflict the opportunity of presenting and resolving their grievances through mediation. CRARN sufficiently employed this in the management of the child witch crisis. Juvenile cases are sensitive, especially this that involves the family and is linked to witchcraft. Often, cases involving witchcraft is resolved outside the court for lack of empirical evidence to support the claims. The successes recorded by CRARN, confirm that restorative initiatives can prevent and/or eliminate the scourge of child-witchcraft labeling. It should therefore be supported, promoted and replicated in all jurisdictions where strange beliefs lead to the criminalization and victimization of vulnerable members of the society.

In addition to the adoption of the Child Rights Acts, which criminalizes the stigmatization and abuse of children, there is also the need for the government to strengthen the child protection system by ensuring the implementation of the Acts. This can be done by empowering the law enforcement agencies to apprehend and prosecute abusers of the children. Government is in the unique position to do this, since the abuse is perpetuated by significant others, the children may not have the will and the resources required to prosecute their abusers.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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