

Fighting Witch Hunts in Modern Africa

By Leo Igwe Ph.D Religious Studies (Bayreuth).
Director Advocacy for Alleged Witches



Good evening,
Ladies and gentlemen

I began writing this presentation in the early hours of January 18, shortly after arriving from Owerri in Imo State, southern Nigeria.

Map of Nigeria



I was anxious because I had a brush with the local police. I almost got into trouble because I was secretly taking some photos to illustrate my visit, and one police officer saw me and reported to the commanding officer. The officer was furious with me, he wanted to detain me, but later changed his mind. He asked other officers to delete the photos, and then let me go. I went to this city to intervene in a case of witch hunt, for lack of a better term in English.

Founding and vision

JUSTICE FOR
MRS MARTINA OKEY ITAGBOR



Bassey Otu
CROSS RIVER STATE GOVERNOR

GOVERNMENT OF CROSS RIVER AND
COMMISSIONER OF POLICE

#Justice4MartinaItagbor
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/76034187780783>

ARREST, PROSECUTE ALLEGED KILLERS NOW
Advocacy For Alleged Witches

ADVOCACY FOR ALLEGED WITCHES (AFAW)

**2020 - 2030 DECADE OF ACTIVISM
AGAINST WITCH PERSECUTION
IN AFRICA**

**ALLEGED WITCHES ARE HUMAN BEINGS.
THEIR RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS**

HOTLINES:
(+234) 07037793312, (+234) 08136968164
(+234) 09039908664 (TEXT ONLY)

E-MAIL: advocacyforallegedwitches@gmail.com, nskepticleo@yahoo.com
VISIT OUR WEBSITE: <https://advocacyforallegedwitches.law.blog>

My organization, the Advocacy for Alleged Witches, has been intervening in similar cases in an effort to end witch hunts in Africa. In 2020, we launched a decade of activism against witch persecution and abuses linked to magical beliefs and ritual attacks. In the past few years AfAW has responded to over 300 hundred cases of witch hunts and ritual attacks.

Accused: Jo and Wife(Nigeria) vs Accuser(US)



In January, I went to intervene in the case of Mr Joseph Ottih, a blind man from Oguta, in Imo state. His case highlights the interplay of global and local forces in the manifestation and management of occult fears and anxieties. The main accuser, a young man named Hilary, lives in the United States. Many Nigerians living overseas are witchcraft believers. Hunted by occult fears and imaginaries, they often accuse relatives back home in Nigeria. In trying to situate this phenomenon, the European scholar, Peter Geschiere, noted that witchcraft in Africa was no longer an in-house phenomenon. That it had gone global.

So this young man returned for a vacation in December and was distraught. He noticed some traditional ritual objects locally known as agbara, or agwu in the compound. His relative, Joseph Ottih, kept these objects. Joseph told me that the ritual items were healing facilities for their son, who was battling a strange ailment. In 2024, the young man collapsed during a football match and was foaming at the mouth. I suspected it was a case of epilepsy. But the family suspected a spiritual attack, not a medical issue that could be treated in a hospital. Following the collapse, the parents took their son to several traditional healers, churches, pastors, and prophets for prayers and 'treatment'. Joseph listed names of persons and places that they visited including a native doctor in Naze charged 250 thousand naira (175 dollars), in Mbaise, a Winners' Chapel pastor forced them to cough up 170 thousand naira(119 dollars) for prayers. Two native doctors, a man and a woman, charged them 250 thousand naira(175 dollars) and 350 thousand naira (246 dollars) respectively. In Omuma, one native doctor charged them 750 thousand naira(527 dollars); another one, an Ezenwanyi (a prophetess), collected 560 thousand naira(393 dollars). Another, who did some ritual called Agwu for the son and wife, charged 950 thousand(668 dollars) and 250 thousand naira(175 dollars).

These charlatans performed various rituals, including breaking bottles, killing goats, and chickens in the course of 'treatment'. They carried out some ritual sacrifice and extorted significant sums of money from this poor family. The US-based relative told Joseph to remove the ritual accessories from the compound. But Joseph and his family refused.

Traditional religious ritual.....



Centuries of Christian evangelism and Islamization have resulted in demonization and witchcraftization of traditional religious beliefs, practices, and objects. While many African Christians indulge in traditional religious rituals to spiritually 'fortify', 'heal' and protect themselves from harm and diseases, Christian or Islamic outsiders regard these rituals as forbidden practices, as expressions and codifications of evil or occult schemes.

Witchcraft and Politics in Africa

- Two men found guilty of witchcraft plot to kill Zambia's president.....were found to be in possession of a live chameleon and other "assorted charms", including a red cloth, an unidentified white powder and an animal's tail.
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/15/two-men-found-guilty-of-witchcraft-plot-to-kill-zambias-president>
- Seychelles opposition leader Patrick Herminie charged with witchcraft....including possession of items intended for use in witchcraft, conspiracy to perform witchcraft and procuring services related to witchcraft...
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66992504>

Christians and Muslims respond with hate and hostility towards these African traditional beliefs and practices. They accuse believers and practitioners of traditional religion of harmful magic. There have been accusations of witchcraft against individuals caught with traditional religious objects in Seychelles and Zambia. In Zambia, they were accused of trying to kill the president; they were tried in the state court and given prison sentences.

The Agwu/witchcraft Evacuated By Armed Police



- <https://x.com/Leolgwe/status/2013011693299785887/video/2>

In reaction, this US-based relative mobilized local vigilante and police officers; they invaded the compound, beat up Joseph, his wife and children, who tried to resist them, and forcefully took away the Agwu or deity. The police later arrested the wife of the man. She said the police put her in the trunk of a car and drove to the station. The police detained her for 5 days and later released her. But that was after she coughed up 150 thousand naira (105 dollars). While at the police station, relatives contacted one of our advocates in the state, informing her about the plight of Joseph's wife.

She went to the police station, signed the bail bond, and the woman was released to her. When she came to secure the bail, our advocate stated that a police officer and a female lawyer, Vivian Ottih, a relative of the US-based man, harassed and tried to intimidate her. She said Ms Vivian threatened to "reduce her to nothing" for coming forward to sign the bail bond. The police asked the accused to report back to the station at a later date with other family members.

Intervention: Supporting Advocates and Victims



Before the next date with the police, I travelled to Imo state and met with victims and advocates. They recounted all that happened. Joseph, the wife, and children showed me scars on their bodies from the beating and gunshots. I saw images of houses and other property destroyed by the police and a local mob. The wife was traumatized and intermittently broke down crying while recounting their ordeal.

This wooden item(deity) caused the crash



The following day, I was at the anti-kidnapping unit of the state police command, also known as the Tigerbase, to understand how the police were handling the matter. This police unit is notorious for torture and extrajudicial killing of suspects. I met the investigative police officer, Chikadibia, also known as Kill and Bury. Yes, that is how this officer is known. That name, Kill and Bury, sent cold chills down my spines. The police officer tried to justify their action, their evacuation of Agwu. He showed me videos of their invasion and confrontation with the family including the photo of a police vehicle that crashed on their way back from the community.

I told him that the police action had no basis in law because that operation was not within their mandate. Police officers were commissioned to fight crimes no deities or spirits. The police officer, after some intense argument, agreed. But he insisted that it had some basis in tradition. He said he was not only a police officer but also a traditional title holder and went on to explain how the police invasion and forceful removal of the Agwu traditionally made sense. His explanation sounded very stupid and absurd. At a point he asked me: Are you not an Igbo person? I replied Yes, I am Igbo. He then asked: "Don't you know about Agwu?" I said I did not know that he should explain it to me. He became furious, and turned his face away from me and tried to explain others in the room how ritual sacrifice could fuel fears and panic in the community.

At the end of the meeting, he took me to a dump site where they kept the deities or Agwu packed away in plastic bags. Yes, deities, pieces of wood kept in bags. He explained that they were exhibits that they intended to present in court. In court? I chuckled. He said yes, that they plan to prosecute Joseph Ottih.

Mr Ottih and his family had been displaced since the incident happened. They fled the community and have been squatting with relatives. The mob destroyed their house, farm, and trees. Based on previous experiences, the police might not charge the case in a court, as the officer stated. The police intervened to appease the petitioner, who had paid and mobilized them with huge sums of money. While at the police station, the officer showed me a petition written by one Vivian Ottih against Joseph Ottih's wife, alleging attempted murder. It was not clear how the police would prove that case in court.

On January 27, our advocate called to inform me that the police phoned, threatening to arrest her because Joseph Ottih and the family did not report back at the station as agreed. I messaged the police officer commanding the unit, volunteering to be the surety and to be arrested and detained on their behalf. We are waiting to hear from the police regarding my request.

Emerging Issues: Health, Strange Illness, Dementia.....



**DOG POOP: COMMUNITY
HELD HOSTAGE BY FEAR,
PARANOID, AND
SUPERSTITION, BY LEO
IGWE**

20

SAHARA
REPORTERS



Emerging Issues: Health, Superstition, and Exploitation

Witchcraft Accusation has a strong health dimension because witchcraft is a narrative to make sense of sickness, including dementia, diabetic sore etc and death. In a society where there is no health insurance and social welfare is virtually non-existent, ailment elicits so much fear and anxiety. Many people cannot afford medicine and treatment so they resort to traditional healers and prophets. They use witchcraft and the occult to make sense of their health conditions. In this case, the accused had a health condition that caused the family to go to pastors, prophets, and churches who extorted money from them. In a related incident, I met a man in December. He had a swollen hand, and when I inquired what happened to him, he claimed that he picked up poison while working at a farm. Does one pick up poison? He had gone to some traditional healers and pastors for treatment and it was not getting better.

I took him to a local hospital and joined him in the consulting room. The doctor told him that the condition had nothing to do with any spiritual poison. The doctor gave him some medicine. The swelling reduced but had not gone away by the time I left. I told him to return to the hospital for a check-up. He did an X-ray of the hand. After his third visit, he told me that the doctor told him to go to a traditional healer. I doubt if this happened.

Traditional or Christian healers administer spurious cures and remedies. As illustrated in the case of Joseph Otth, so-called healing rituals for some people are demonized and witchcraftized by others.

Advocates provide funds so that they can access evidence-based care. AfAW liaises with medical associations to educate and guide the public in the management of health challenges. Unfortunately, few medical experts and institutions work with us because most medical experts want to be paid before they can feature in our events. Whilst most medical institutions claim to operate a very tight schedule with no room for extracurricular health education and enlightenment programs.

Religious Performance and Manipulation



Religious Performance and Manipulation

Witch hunting is a religious expression and manipulation. It is a spiritual combat because witchcraft is designated as a malevolent spiritual and supernatural force. Hunters supposedly try to counteract and tackle these occult intruders and enemies within. Witch hunting is an effort to spiritually or religiously secure oneself or the community by eradicating, neutralizing, and purging malevolent agents and accessories. Religious actors, especially Christian and Islamic religious actors, called prophets, prophetesses, pastors, imams, sheikhs, marabouts, engage in witch-hunting activities.

They claim to purge the community of bad, evil, and fetish traditions and religious practices.

Witch hunting is an exercise in religious deceit and manipulation. Witch hunters are charlatans. They poison family relationships inciting members against themselves. Witch hunters exploit vulnerable members of the community, they get them to pay huge sums for religious theatrics, for carved items, pieces of red and white cloth, bones of dead animals, and sometimes smelly concoctions. They perform ritual dance, uncoordinatedly jump around pretending to be in a trance, but often under the influence of alcohol. Witch hunters stare at the skies, posturing to communicate with some forces out there. They talk to stones and coweries, ants and trees, dogs and birds, animal droppings and empty skies to justify their assumed knowledge and control of the supernatural and legitimize the fees charged for their fake service. The religious charade, Christian, Islamic, or traditional, that fuels and enables witch hunting must be called out and criticized without fear or favour.

Police Extortion and Impunity



- **1. N350,000 - mobilisation to Aguebele which they couldn't succeed 'cus of rain**
- **2. N50, 000 - for fuel augmentation back to Aguebele**
- **3. N250, 000 - Visit Scene of Crime**
- **4. N20, 000 - Files and Statements from three complainants and Five suspects**
- **5. N20, 000 - Photocopies of Statements into 4 copies each**
- **6. N20, 000 - Files triplicate**
- **7. N20, 000 - Police lawyer**
- **8. N10, 000 - Typing of case files deposit**
- **9. N20, 000 - Crack Squad for bringing suspect from Ezzangbo**
- **10. N5, 000 - feeding money for IPO**

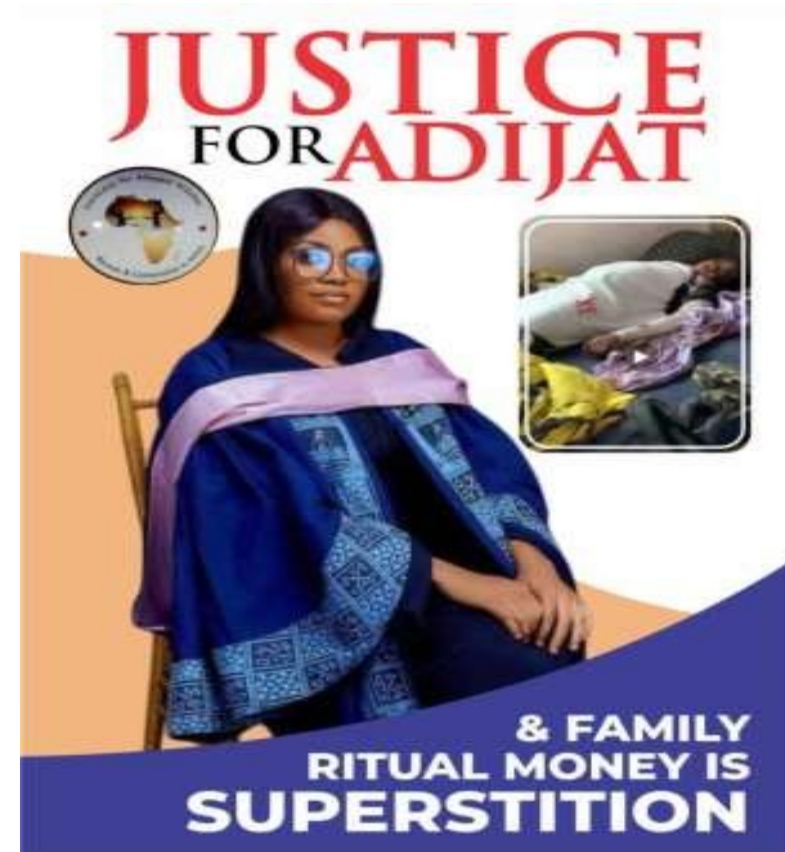
Police Corruption and Extortion

In Nigeria, police investigation is a form of business. Extortion drives the process. Police intervention goes to the highest bidder. Police officers use petitions and complaints to generate income and extort money from both complainants and suspects. Meanwhile, the police do not issue receipts for transactions or for monies collected from petitioners and suspects. Police officers are not interested in justice or in enforcing the law. They are mainly concerned with how much they could make from any petition brought to them.

Complainants pay hundreds of dollars to mobilize the police; otherwise, the matter is abandoned. Many accused persons do not take their matter to the police because they cannot afford to mobilize them. Those arrested spend huge sums of money to be granted bail, even though they tell us that bail is free. Police mobilization and bail money are negotiated over the counter. While at the police station, I saw petitioners discussing mobilization fees with police officers. In addition, police officers in Nigeria are not well-trained. They are largely appointed and commissioned based on ethnic and religious sentiments and affiliations.

In one of the cases in Ebonyi state, the police have extorted almost a thousand dollars from the accused person. The investigative police officer is still asking for more money from the accused. He delays charging the matter in a court. Instead he keeps inviting the accused to the station and every visit is an opportunity to extort money. Police officers compel the accused to pay for everything that they do, including the pen and paper that they use in writing, the cost of typing statements, the fuel and vehicles they used for arrests, etc. Many of the cases have not been charged in court because the accused are forced to abandon the matter when they can no longer afford to pay the police without obtaining any results. In Lagos state, Cross River, Rivers, Enugu, Ondo, and Ogun, the police are frustrating efforts to secure justice for the accused. Like this officer that I met, many of them have little understanding of the law. They mainly use torture and intimidation in their everyday operations.

Disappeared, Police Petitioned, No Action



Advocates support the accused in writing petitions and getting the police to investigate cases. Advocates facilitate the arrest suspects in situations where the accused want police interventions. AfAW pressures the police to charge cases in a court. Advocates take care of expenses necessary for police investigation and prosecution of cases.

Even at that, in many cases, the police refuse to arrest or prosecute suspects. They frustrate the accused, extort money from them to the point that the accused eventually abandon their cases. In a particular case, an elderly woman accused of witchcraft had not been seen for months. The case was reported to the police but the police had not taken any action because they are waiting for the petitioner to mobilize them.

Media Reports from Accused Vs Misreports from Accusers



- Bird turns to old woman in Lagos
- <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/05/bird-turns-old-woman-lagos/>
- <https://newsplanet.com.ng/oby-was-arrested-for-attempted-murder-not-deity-otti-family-reveals/>

Media War: Misinformation and disinformation about 'Witchcraft'.

Witch hunting is often characterized by misinformation about accusations and the accused. Medical conditions, or strange, abnormal behaviours, are defined as witchcraft activities. The accused are presented as bearers and embodiments of evil magic. Positions and perceptions of accusers and believers, who are often in stronger social and cultural positions, are reported and published in the media. These media reports reinforce witchcraft beliefs, fears, and anxieties. Advocacy against witch persecution entails correcting misinformation about the causes and causes of diseases and deaths. Advocates highlight views, positions, and perspectives of the accused, who, in all cases so far, deny and dismiss, challenge and contest witchcraft attributions and claims. Correcting misinformation about accusations results in a media war, pitching advocates against accusers and their sympathizers. In the case of Mr Joseph Ottih, his relative and one of the accusers, Vivian has been sponsoring publications to discredit his story. She has embarked on a futile attempt to change the narrative since the media reported the incident after interviewing the victims. Accusers, including governments, individuals, and groups, publish reports including social media posts and videos to make and 'prove' their case and to discredit the accounts of the accused.

In Zambia and Seychelles, people caught with traditional religious objects were accused of witchcraft, trying to kill the president (Zambia), and subsequently arrested. Thanks to the activities of advocates, the imbalance in reporting cases of witchcraft accusations, including the misinformation and disinformation therein, is being addressed. In social and mainstream media, advocates counter misinformation about alleged witches, sometimes elderly men and women with dementia, who are misrepresented as 'flying' witches, turning into cats or birds, and crash-landing on their way to a meeting at the coven.

Conclusions: A Global Responsibility...



Conclusions

As earlier noted, witch hunting Africa has gone global with health, religious, legal, and media aspects. The phenomenon wreaks havoc in the lives of Africans. A transnational approach is needed to tackle and address this campaign of violence, deceit and abuse. People impute witchcraft out of fear, ignorance and superstition, in making sense of diseases and health problems, in their quest for health solutions and answers. In Nigeria, the health infrastructure is weak and inefficient. Hospitals and doctors are few and far apart. Unable to pay for medicine or access treatment, many people in rural communities go to faith or traditional healers for treatment. They spiritualize their ailments and use supernatural idioms to interpret and make sense of their conditions. Low pay and poor working conditions, drive most qualified doctors and nurses to migrate and work overseas. Most African countries are left with more witch doctors than medical doctors, to take care of their everyday needs. The World Health Organisation should help in addressing health inequalities and ensure greater access to medical care for poor countries and constituents. As in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO should lead the campaign against health misinformation and disinformation linked to witchcraft beliefs.

There should be international consequences for police officers, justice departments, religious and media agencies that aid and abet witchcraft accusations and witch persecutions. Anthropologists who romanticize and legitimize witch hunting should be made to rethink their studies, theories, methodologies, and concepts. Such misguided scholarship has contributed in misrepresenting the phenomenon of witch hunts. It has misled and misinformed the world, hurting efforts to globally treat this violent campaign with the urgency that it deserves. International government and non-governmental agencies should abandon the patronizing approach predicated on the notion that witch hunting means one thing to Westerners and another thing to Africans. Witch hunting is a harmful practice for the western goose and the African gander.

Americans should not hold back in calling witch hunting in Africa by its name because they want to respect cultural sensibilities. Witch hunting is not a part of African culture, just as gun violence is not a part of American culture. Ending witch hunts is an unfinished task. And in an interconnected world, ending witch persecution has become a global duty and responsibility.

Thank you

