

UNTRAMMELLED TRAVAIL OF WITCHES IN OKULOSHO COMMUNITY: A PERILOUS ODYSSEY TOWARDS PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to unveil the resultant effects of the Okulosho concept of witchcraft. Belief, custom, culture, and tradition have lasting impacts in shaping the lifestyle and destiny of a people. This paper found that witchcraft beliefs in Okulosho have affected the peaceful co-existence among the people, as it creates a cold war and psychological disharmony over the years. The perceived witches seem to live in their own world of comfort and accept their fate since the community conceives them as scoundrels. This paper further discovered that the unhealthy rivalry between the perceived witches and other members of the community has led to accusations and counteraccusations that ended up in the traditional courts at the community shrines. It is observed in this paper that there is a sharp dichotomy between perceived witches and non-witches in the community. The perceived witches feel rejected and treated in a disdainful and esoteric manner even after death. This paper attempts to investigate the best way to reconcile both parties and enthrone peace in the community. This paper will adopt a phenomenological methodology to avoid any form of bias in addressing the key issues in our discourse.

KEYWORDS: Travail, Witchcraft, Belief, Perilous, Odyssey, and Peaceful Co-Existence.

INTRODUCTION

Okulosho is a heterogeneous community in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. It comprises Dagbala, Ojah, Ojirami, and Makeke. The mentioned villages that make up the Okulosho community claim the same ancestry origin traced to the ancient City of Benin (Bini). Oral history had it that they migrated during the reign of Ogiso Owodo due to the tyrannical and despotic system of governance of the Ogiso. Hence, witchcraft in Okulosho conjures a negative omen and something sinister, because the practitioners are considered haters of society who seek the retrogression of other members of the community. The Okulosho community is practically not friendly with perceived witches, and the only thing the people have not done against suspects is to publicly execute them painfully. Even at death, perceived witches are treated inhumanely by carelessly depositing their corpses in the bush to be devoured by wild animals and their bones consumed by wild harmattan fire; a sign of

total annihilation from both the physical human community and the ancestors. For a proper understanding of this paper, a phenomenological methodology will be adopted.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE WITCHCRAFT PHENOMENON IN OKULOSHO

According to Aberemu (2022), shortly after the end of the Nigerian civil war in January 1970, with its devastating effects on the Okulosho people, whose forest was used as a battlefield by the Biafra and Federal troops, the witchcraft phenomenon became a topical issue in Okulosho. Like an unexpected and uncontrollable explosion in a hot summer noon, suspected witches began to confess freely and at random during an outbreak of measles epidemic that led to a high rate of infant mortality. However, witchcraft belief in Okulosho is not traceable to a particular period in the history of the people since its existence as a community, but this belief became a public manifestation in the 70s. There was a series of confessions made by perceived witches, alleged to have been responsible for the outbreak of the measles epidemic and other heinous crimes during the same period in the community.

Before the 1970 witchcraft saga, Momodu (2022) claims that suspected witches were ostracised, and some of them died out of frustration, social segregation, and stigmatisation. Then, suspected witches could not attend social gatherings with their age grades because of the belief that they might poison their mates with witchcraft substances. Omunagbe (2022) says that witchcraft is a practical evil that some born-evil men and women practise. He claims that those who voluntarily submitted themselves for initiation into witchcraft already had evil tendencies before their initiation. He attributes the socioeconomic and political bankruptcy in Okulosho to witchcraft activities. This idea is in tandem with Omayajowo's (1974) notion of witches who engage in destructive activities and always make attempts to retard the progress of the community, or of some individuals who, in the past, offended them.

Nevertheless, Ishelowoh (2022), who claims to be one of the reliable good witches in Okulosho community, states categorically that witchcraft helps an individual to understand the mysteries of nature and is also an instrument for self-defence. He opines that witches have contributed to the protection of the Okulosho community in times of crises in the past, when the Nupe (Izalomo) slave merchants were constantly attacking the community and the entire Kukuruku region in search of young, able-bodied men and women for slavery. Iselowo therefore asserts that since the witches have been blackmailed as enemies of the community, they decided not to cooperate with other members of the community to fight for a common goal for the benefit of all. He still holds that witchcraft is not evil, because witches have the power to bring fortunes to the community and to some individuals or inflict pains and sorrows on those who wish them evil.

Aruogo (2022) dissociates himself from Ishelowo's view that witchcraft is not an evil practice. He points out that it is dangerous to appreciate the activities of witchcraft, either good or bad, in the community; such appreciation would intensify the practise of evil in society. History has it, according to Aruogo, that the charms witches buried at the entrances of the Okulosho community to ward off the slave merchants

during the transatlantic slave trade were prepared with human blood. Aruogo goes further to ask if Ishelowo would have allowed his child to be used for the preparation of the charms. He claims that once the evil spirits/demons take possession of the witches, they act irrationally, and it is these same evil spirits/demons that give them power to operate (Jayeola-Omoyemi, Oyetade & Omoyemi, 2015). If they are rational and act rationally, some of them would not have agreed to kill their own children, or close relatives, or retard the progress of their own relatives, or the community they directly benefit from. According to Aruogo, it has never happened in the history of Okulosho that a witch has been stoned to death or beaten to a state of stupor. They rather fight against witches either through spiritual means; that is, by invoking the deities/divinities of the land, or ancestors to destroy them, or through psychological warfare; i.e., nobody interacts with suspected witches, they are not welcomed to any social gathering, they are treated as objects of ridicule, they are denied of their family chieftaincy titles, and their children cannot mix freely with their peer groups or get married to members of the community.

Children of suspected witches in Okulosho are treated as witches because they are vulnerable. They hold that parents, friends, and close relatives play a leading role in initiation (Cf, Jayeola-Omoyemi, Oyetade & Omoyemi, 2015). Therefore, those whose parents are suspected witches are also treated as suspects. Oshomowe (2022) is one of those who strongly oppose this idea of discriminating or scornfully maltreating the children of suspected witches. He says that there should be proven cases of those children's involvement in witchcraft activities before they are treated as the operations of witches and wizards in a particular society.

THE ACTIVITIES OF WITCHES IN OKULOSHO

It is a general belief, most especially in Africa and some other societies in the world where witchcraft belief is ominous, that the activities of witches are against the well-being of the society; also, mischievous and harmful for the peaceful co-existence and progress of any given human society. Owolayo (2022) rightly says that the anti-social activities of witches have put them outside the comity of civilized people. In Okulosho, many atrocities and heinous crimes are attributed to witches. For example, it is a common belief among the Okulosho people that witches practise spiritual cannibalism by feeding on human flesh (Jayeola-Omoyemi, Oyetade & Omoyemi 2015). It is also believed that they have their own festivals during which they engage in mass killings of non-members for their celebrations. According to Omokemi (2022), when a victim is captured, he/she is transformed into a goat and fastened to a tree with a rope around its neck, waiting for sacrifice.

In Okulosho, witches are believed to have a special taste for human blood and flesh. The effect on the victim whose blood they have so drained through spiritual means is that he becomes lean and wears away gradually till he finally dies. There is no evidence of real feasting on human flesh or drinking of human blood (Atata 2019). It is the soul that is eaten, and the pots which contain blood would (so it is said) appear to normal people as containing mere water. Again, in Okulosho, witches are believed to inflict material loss on people. Arishe (2022) says witches can make rich people waste

their money; they can help thieves to steal; they can make people turn into drunkards by placing (symbolically) tins of kerosene in their stomachs; they can perforate a man's pocket and so make him lose a big amount of money, always without his knowing that there is any hole there. Omoyajowo (1974) strongly shares the above view in his comment on witches' activities. He states that witches are believed to be the authors of accidents, tornadoes, falling trees, and snake bites. It is believed that they can change into animals to destroy farms by night.

Witches are also believed to cause sterility in women by turning their wombs upside-down. Jumoke (2022) emphasised that witches can cause abortion by removing the child from a pregnant woman's womb and taking it to their nocturnal meetings to feast. They can similarly cause impotence for men by removing their testicles. Hence, it is a common belief in Okulosho, according to Adeleye (2022), that witches are the cause of all illness. Infant mortality, which is rife in Africa, as the obvious result of inadequate medical facilities, is attributed to witches. If a disease appears incurable, witches are held responsible. Bad dreams are said to be caused by them (witches). When there is an epidemic in a village or town, the dominant view is that witches brought the germs of the disease (Cf, Adelekun, 2023).

SPIRITUAL POWERS ATTRIBUTED TO WITCHES IN OKULOSHO

A lot of mysterious powers are attributed to witches, where the belief in witchcraft exists. Okulosho, like so many societies, attributes mysterious powers to witches. However, Amiwu (2022) remarks that witches can decide to use their power either positively or negatively. She makes it clear that witchcraft is attractive to members of the guild because of the power given to members at the point of initiation. She also points out that a society that does not tolerate and always fight against witches cannot benefit from anything positive from them (Jayeola-Omoyemi, Oyetade & Omoyemi 2015). She asserts that when witches are not disturbed, they would try to develop the society they belong to through their power (Nwata et al, 2020). According to her, witches have power to do many things such as: metamorphose to anything you can imagine, they can commune with the spirits, they can go on astral journey, they have healing power, they can make themselves invisible to those who are not members, they can turn a human being to any kind of animal, they have power to draw or hold rain and control storms, they have power to give wealth or draw people's wealth and make them poor, they have power to cause miscarriages, barrenness, impotency, accidents, deformity and so many other things.

In Amiwu's explanation, the power of metamorphosing into any form of animal, insect, or object, depending on the mission at hand, is given to a member after eating the witchcraft substance. Okerepo (2022), a renowned hunter at Ojirami, narrates how he heard an antelope talking in human language, commanding other animals on his farm what to do. He claims that he recognized the voice of the person who transformed into an antelope, but out of pity, he did not kill the antelope.

According to Aimiowu (2022), witches dialogue with the spirits and also get more power from them. Agbodi (2022) claims that witchcraft powers come from the spirits, most especially the evil spirits who send witches on various missions. According

to him, witches are agents of the evil spirits. The said witches, according to him, get to know the secrets of non-members through the spirits. Before they go out for certain operations, especially when they want to attack spiritually strong people, they seek advice from the spirits on the best ways to attack such people or distance themselves from the victims whose spiritual powers are enormous. Oshomojie (2022) claims that they consult and dialogue with the spirits of their dead members, especially when they are going out for a battle with an opposing coven outside their community or on dangerous missions where they are aware that some members must die. He affirms that once they have the backing of the spirits of their dead members, they come out successfully in any mission they embark on. Omokudu (2022) claims that every witch has the power to see spirits who are invisible to ordinary eyes because they also act as messengers to the evil spirits. The idea that witches have links with the spirits is not common with the Okuloshos alone. The Israelites of the Old Testament had such a notion and belief, too. For instance, in the first book of Samuel 28: 8 ff Saul asked the witch of Endor to consult a spirit for him. The witch of Endor brought out the spirit of Samuel for Saul to consult when he was in great distress. Saul complained to Samuel that God no longer answers him, either by prophets or dreams, and that the Philistines have encamped against him.

At night, according to Aimiwu, members have the power to travel to any part of the world to either attend meetings or carry out certain missions. With their spiritual technology, she alleged that they have the latest and best aeroplanes in the coven. She comments that some people allege that witches use plantain or banana leaves as their aeroplanes or means of transportation. According to her, it is false; rather, that is what they want people to see and think. In the actual sense, she claims that their transportation system cannot be compared with the ordinary world's transportation system in terms of speed and safety. She emphatically says that when their technology becomes obsolete, they will transfer it to the physical world.

Aimiowu also points out the healing power of the witches. Aimiowu reveals that some spirits teach some of their lucky members the use of some leaves as herbs in the bush. Martello (1975) states that modern medicine owes a great deal to medieval witches' brews. Without the witches' painstaking pioneering efforts, there would be no twentieth-century wonder drugs. Okpafioko (2022) says there is no sickness without treatment and that witches, at times, punish people with incurable sicknesses. He goes further to say that they benefit from many things from the spirits. However, according to him, some wicked spirits would not give any profitable thing to someone without compensation. He comments that all the leaves in the bush are medicinal, but you must know the combinations and the usage of those leaves. He claims that in the coven, they practise both orthodox and traditional medicines, and they are far ahead of us.

Anekoro (2022) says witches have opportunities to know more herbs than ordinary people. He claims that some wild animals in the forest also reveal to some hunters and members of the guild effective medicinal leaves for curing some contagious or protracted sicknesses, such as epilepsy, convulsion, and hiccup. He goes further to say that, in the 50s and early part of the 60s, epilepsy and convulsions were very common in Okuloshos. It was an antelope that was in labour about to deliver that showed the herbs to Aliu (a great hunter), who assisted the antelope to deliver without

killing it. He says when witches metamorphose into animal forms, they mix up with animals in the bush, and in the process, they teach them many herbs for protection and curing of diseases. According to him, only very few witches are willing to use those herbs given to them in the forest to assist the community, because they feel the community does not wish them well.

Aimiowu also says that witches have the power of making themselves invisible to non-members. That is why when they are holding nocturnal meetings at particular spots, people pass through their midst without noticing. Omoyajowo (1974) confirms this power based on his personal experience. He narrated how he was returning from another village with his mother one evening when the moon was bright in the sky. Just about a half mile from his village, he suddenly felt frightened, and he jumped involuntarily. On his way to school the following morning, one of his schoolmates of about the same age as him warned him sternly to stop travelling at night and declared, "But if not for me, you and your mother would be dead by now. You remember what you felt when you reached a spot (he described the spot) half a mile from your village? Be careful, another time."

Okpafioko (2022) refers to this power as 'Abikoro' (the power to make one invisible to others). He says that when a witch loves a hunter who is not a member, such power is given to him. When a hunter possesses the power of 'Abikoro,' in the bush, he makes himself invisible to animals and assists hunters for a good game, especially when hunting wild and ferocious animals. Those ferocious animals are very dangerous or violent when they are shot; so, hunters need such power (Abikoro) to hide from them. A few warriors who are friendly with witches are also given this power, and such power makes them return home from battles without getting hurt.

Another power attributed to witchcraft is that of turning a human being into an animal form before using it for sacrifice in the coven. Omolere (2022) claims that in the coven, the spirit of a victim that is already condemned by their court is summoned/invoked to appear before members in an animal form. Once the animal is slaughtered and consumed by members, that marks the end of the victim's life. For Omoyajowo, it is the souls of the victims that are eaten symbolically. For Amadi (2005), one method of killing that was widely attributed to witches was vampirism or blood-sucking. At night, using their mysterious powers, they were said to pass through closed doors to get to their sleeping victims, whose blood they drank. The victims became progressively weaker most times and eventually died unless the aid of an experienced medicine man was sought. However, Amadi's explanation of how witches get their victims is slightly different from Omolere, who presents the Okulosho's view of the same. For Omolere, it is the spirit of the victim they invoke in the coven and turn it into any form of animal of their choice, without necessarily going to the house of the victim to attack him/her at night. She further says not all the members eat their shares of the meat in the coven; some take their shares home and hide them from non-members. She says that those who take their shares home do so for two purposes. First, whenever they are asked to donate a relative they like, they simply go home and repackage the shares of the meat given to them in the coven and return everything to members, in which case he/she is not owing any members of the guild, and therefore they have no right to demand or request anything from such a member. The second reason is that the meat

can be used for initiation. Whoever eats from the meat knowingly or unknowingly automatically becomes a member of the guild. According to Omolere, people who keep such meat and do not want their children to be initiated keep it out of reach of the children.

It is also alleged in Okulosho that witches have the power to give and draw wealth from people. For those they love, according to Iroroaze (2022), they make them prosper in whatever they do for a living (farming, politics, business, etc.). Julie (2016) claims that her mother used her witchcraft positively, because she made all her children prosper before her death. The said woman had seven children, of whom five are medical doctors who are based in different parts of the United States. The only two daughters in Nigeria are graduates of petroleum engineering working in Mobil Oil Company. She says that when her mother was accused of making her children prosperous, she admitted that her own witchcraft is for progress, and to better the lives of her children. Hence, Omokemi (2022) admits that witches can make one wretched in various ways. She says that there are some people who are financially rich, but they are not organized to spend the money wisely. It is a spiritual problem created by witches. She claims that there are some people cursed in the coven who would never spend their money wisely, and the curse will follow such people. According to her, it is when a rich man uses his money to oppress a member of the guild that warrants such a curse. Ordinarily, witches do not curse an innocent rich man who never uses his wealth to oppress them (witches).

THE MEETING POINT

Like every established human institution, witchcraft has come to stay and dwells among us. It appears like a mirage or utopia for any attempt to destroy or annihilate witchcraft in any human society, which was impossible during Mediaeval period in Europe with their widespread and unalloyed Christianity at that time. Europe and America only won the war against witchcraft by incorporating and integrating them into the society they lawfully belong to (Sasa, 2011). Witchcraft, as an association or secret society or religion, has its own right to exist if other spiritual forces are allowed to exist by the creator. Nothing that exists is totally useless; every living being has a purpose to fulfill in the world of existence; that was why Jesus did not destroy the demons, but only asked them to relocate. The Gospel of St. Luke Chapter 8: 26-32 attests to this above fact that Jesus did not exterminate demons during his ministry, but commanded them to relocate from their victims to elsewhere (desert, sea/animals).

Since every man likes power and is easily attracted to wonders, magic, and miracles, there is no reason whatsoever why the Okulosho people should detest witches because of their acclaimed mysterious powers. The reasons we mostly go to spiritual houses for worship or offer sacrifices are to seek such powers to fight against both foreseen and unforeseen enemies and evil forces. A spiritual house that is anti-miracle or spiritual power and blessings is as dry and dusty a spiritual house. As we have observed in our discourse here, not all mysterious powers are met for evil purposes; some are even to ward off evil (Sasa, 2011). Some people are not witches, but they seek such powers from sorcerers for sinister reasons (cf. Scriven, 1997). We should therefore realise that whoever uses spiritual power for destruction is not better than the witches

we so much condemned (Uduigwomen, 2011). Hence, there should be a meeting point of reconciliation to eradicate the cold war between the witches and non-witches in the community to give peace a chance. This meeting point should be based on tolerance of one another while we synergize to move the community further. If truly the acclaimed mysterious powers exist, those who possess such powers should channel them into something beneficial to the entire community while we bury our hatchets. This is the only way we can achieve a lasting peace and progress in the Okulosho community.

CONCLUSION

Witchcraft phenomenon always attracts a lot of attention because of the aura and mysteries surrounding it, especially as many Africans are not willing to openly discuss and debate it like other topical issues. The clandestine nature in which it is practiced has created painful blackmail, stigmatization, and rejection for the practitioners. Oftentimes, the practitioners have been accused of using their mysterious powers to cause untold and horrific havoc in the community or society. The way witches are treated in Okulosho, like the medieval era in Europe and some societies in Africa, has resulted in hatred and possible destruction of one another. It is the submission of this paper, therefore, that for peace to reign, there is a need to tolerate each other because, like any other human institution, witchcraft has come to stay and dwell among us like other religious denominations or secret cults.

To resolve the problem of misconceptions about witchcraft in the Okulosho community, this paper recommends the following:

1. Education is certainly needed. Enlightenment as to the processes by which belief in witchcraft develops, and understanding the soil in which it flourishes, is a first step. Though education alone cannot root such a deep-seated belief.
2. There should be a spirit of tolerance between members and non-members of witchcraft for peaceful co-existence. The spirit of tolerance will usher in development in all spheres of life in the community.
3. Perceived witches should be given freedom to practice their craft so long as it does not impair or jeopardize the lives of non-members.
4. The power they claim to have possessed should be channelled toward positive things that open the way for progress and development in the community.
5. Finally, initiation into this craft should be made voluntary and not imposed on individuals who are not enthusiastic about it.

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