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Evil and Superstition in Sub-Saharan Africa: Religious Infanticide and Filicide

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Abstract

A distinct category of women has been identified in different parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, those who commit extreme forms of violence and murder against their children in order to fulfil their religious obligations or to protect themselves from perceived magico-spiritual harms from their children. The whole of Africa is currently witnessing a heightened level of witch-hunting. Historically, some African witch-hunting incidents are triggered by witch-doctors who are keen to protect their clients from any perceived diabolical effects of witches while others are triggered by mere gossips or rumours from neighbours. However, dramatized preaching on witchcraft by revivalist Christian prophets and prophetesses whose major occupations are the 'sale' of exorcisms to the bewitched has become the latest trend in the region. These prophets and prophetesses are keen to teach their followers the importance of the 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' biblical passage in their lives as well as how 'the Kingdom of God suffereth violence'. By means of case study analysis, this paper presents a new pattern of evil that is perpetrated in the form of abandonment, torture, mutilation and murders of children by their mothers, those women who should protect their children from such evils. It also presents the cases of another group of women (prophetesses) who preach and deliver prophecies purportedly from God about particular children who are the alleged witches. This latter category also decides the nature of evil to be committed against such children – all in the name of fulfilling their religious obligations.

Female Patterns of Aggression and Homicide across Cultures

Issues surrounding female aggression and homicide have continued to generate heated debate. While some scholars report that females are less violent than males (Buss & Shackelford, 1997), others report that females are slightly more physically aggressive than males (Archer, 2000). Harned (2001, p.269) found that 'rates of physical violence were similar across genders' among 874 graduate and undergraduate students whom she studied. The reports of women killing their lovers and spouses with several weapons in various circumstances had made regular newspaper headlines in the British press, for instance (Birch, 1993). Female serial killing has been viewed as non-existent but evidence abounds to suggest its existence (Gavin & Porter, in press). Aileen Wuornos, the first female serial killer identified by FBI was convicted of killing 7 men (Basilio, 1996). Myra Hindley, a female serial killer accompanied a male serial killer, Ian Brady in the assaults and murders of 5 children in Saddleworth Moor, England (Gavin, 2009). Rosemary West, a female serial killer became infamous as an accomplice to her husband, Fred West in the rapes and murders of 10 females in Gloucester, England (ibid).

Female multiple murderers can also be found. Beverly Allitt, an enrolled nurse was convicted of murdering 4 children and inquiring 9 others in Grantham and Kesteven District General Hospital, England (MacDonald, 1996), is just one of them. Repper (1995) reports the case of a nurse, simply identified as *Nurse '7'* who was convicted of a second-degree murder and attempted murder following the deaths of 12 patients in Florida Nursing Home, United States. In Texas, United States, *Nurse '32'* was also convicted of murdering 6 babies in a private clinic

and was also investigated in connection with 10 other murders (ibid). Repper (1995) refers to existing literature to show that between 1975 and the time of his publication, at least 14 nurses were charged with the murder of those under their care, although it is not clear from her report whether those nurses were all females or not. He, however, acknowledges that the official statistics may not provide the actual figure of such acts. Females have also been linked to mass murders on a genocidal scale. Pauline Nyiramasuhuko of Rwanda and Irith Leng of Cambodia are two women who are known to have engaged in such acts (Gavin & Porter, in press). The linking of women to such mass murders seems to support Steans' (1999) (cited in Gavin & Porter, in press) argument that given the opportunity, women are capable of committing serious crimes like men.

Understanding female patterns of aggression and/or homicide is, however, confusing. Women, according to Birch (1993, p.1), 'do not often kill'. Only about 14 per cent of the entire homicide suspects in England and Wales between 1983 and 1990 were women (ibid). Kellermann and Mercy (1992) found that out of the 215,273 homicides committed in the United States between 1976 and 1987, only 14.7 per cent of them were committed by females. At the time of Kellermann and Mercy's (1992) study, female population in the United States doubled that of males, yet only 14.7 homicides were committed by females. The murder rate for males in the United States in 2011 was 7.4 homicides per 100,000 males while that of females was only 2.0 homicides per 100,000 females (Smith and Cooper, 2013). Females were responsible for only 7.5 per cent of 133 homicide-suicide cases committed in Dade County, United States (Fishbain et al., 1985). Earlier in the same Dade County, Wilbanks (1983) found that males committed 189.6 per cent of the homicides recorded in the area in 1980 while females committed only 48.7 per cent.

In situations where females were found culpable of homicide, they are often responding to domestic abuse (Kethineni, 2001) or threats by men (Jurik and Winn, 1990). Additionally, they are often viewed as mentally ill (Fishbain et al., 1985; Bennett et al., 2009), under the influence of alcohol (Spunt et al., 1998) or that they are assisting a male perpetrator (Kethineni, 2001). A study of 74 female murderers in India found that most of these women were keen to end 'cycles of domestic abuse' (Kethineni, 2001, p.1). The vast majority of the 14 per cent homicides suspected to have been perpetrated by women in England and Wales between 1983 and 1990, was committed within a domestic setting (Birch, 1983). Seventy seven per cent of the homicides perpetrated by women took place within a domestic setting while men committed only 27.6 per cent within a domestic setting (Adler, 2002). Women are '3.5 times more likely to kill a spouse, 3.8 times more likely to kill a (non-spouse) relative, and 1.8 times more likely to kill a lover' (ibid, p.870).

However, women do kill for a variety of other reasons – 'greed, love or the sheer pleasure derived from killing' (Gavin & Porter, in press). Evidence of acting alone among such killers is clear (Mann, 1990). In fact, an act, such as infanticide is more predominantly perpetrated by females relative to males (D'Orban, 1990; Porter and Gavin, 2010). However, mothers who kill their children are more likely to be suffering from diminished responsibility (D'Orban, 1990) which is consistent with the findings that mental disorder is part of the reasons why females kill.

Female Infanticide and Homicide Perpetrators in Sub-Saharan Africa

Cases of females abusing or murdering their family members, including mothers torturing or murdering their own children, are repeatedly reported in several parts of Africa. This development is mainly caused by indigenous African belief on witchcraft and the proliferation

of profiteering revivalist/Pentecostal churches in Africa (Agazue, 2013). A heightened level of witch-hunting has been going on in many parts of Africa (Federici, 2008; 2010; Agazue, 2013). Women were predominantly persecuted as witches in early modern Europe (Levack, 1987), Africa (Wilson, 2011), Asia (Chaudhuri, 2012) and in other parts of the globe. In contemporary Africa, women are active persecutors of the alleged witches, although they are equally the victims.

Bever (2002, p.955) argues that the reason why women were persecuted as witches in early modern Europe was because they were more likely to behave like witches by resorting to 'witch-like behaviours ranging from premeditated poisoning and surreptitious assault through ritual malefic magic to spontaneous displays of intense anger' as a way of defending themselves. There are other explanations available however. Based on analysis of cases in India, Chaudhuri (2012) has argued that women's lower positions in political, cultural and social matters contribute to their vulnerability. This marginalisation may have a way of leading to frustration which may in turn precipitate aggression. Honegger (1979) blamed women's persecution in Europe on men who were keen to destroy gynocracy. This is somewhat consistent with Levack's (1987) report that women who were deemed wise, such as folk healers, were the targets of witchcraft persecution in medieval Europe. It is also argued that senility caused by old age made some women particularly the target of witch persecution in Europe (Levack, 1987). Although witchcraft practices were more conventionally attributed to females than males, more males than females were executed in some of the early modern societies (Apps and Gow, 2003).

Unlike in early modern Europe where women were mainly victims of witchcraft beliefs, in contemporary Africa, they are active perpetrators. Bever (2002) has argued that female aggression made them the targets in early modern communities. However, in contemporary Africa, this same female aggression is showing its reverse side. Female aggression is displayed in the form of women assaulting or murdering people around them, particularly their children who are believed to be witches. Another group of women who are active are those attributed 'the prophetess' or female pastors. Female pastors have spread in Africa – a development which can be attributed to the emancipation of women. It can be argued that the restriction of women to private spheres during the past centuries contributed to their victimization as witches in early modern societies. Conversely, their current presence in public sphere has contributed to them being active in witch persecution, particularly in contemporary Africa. The African Pentecostal female revivalist pastors are powerful and are highly respected by their ardent followers as possessing the divine power to detect witches and to offer what the people believe to be a lasting solution to the witchcraft menace – a solution which in many cases transform into violence or murder of the accused witch.

The mother of a 10-year-old Nigerian child, Mary Sudnad, threw boiling water and caustic soda over the girl's head as she attempted to murder her following a pastor's denunciation of the child as a witch (The Guardian, 2007). The Guardian (2007) also reported the story of another child – an 8-year-old girl named Gerry who was cursed by her mother while her father sprayed her with fuel in an attempt to set her ablaze following her denunciation as a witch by a prophetess (female pastor) during a night vigil. The mother of a 7-year-old Nigerian girl, Magrose attempted to bury her alive because the child was believed to be a witch (ibid). A 12-year-old boy, Udo was beaten and later abandoned by her mother who was acting on a prophecy that the boy was a witch and should be dealt with (ibid).

Two children (aged 8 and 6) were rescued by the Nigerian police in Eket, Nigeria after their parents abandoned them to mobs following a prophecy from revivalist prophets that the

children were witches (Daily Post, 2013a). Within the same period and in the same area, a middle-aged woman also reportedly dumped her 3 children on the street due to a prophecy that the children were all witches (Daily Post, 2013b). The children's bodies were full of wounds which they sustained from violent exorcisms (ibid). Ten-year-old Sarah, 14-year-old Esther and 11-year-old Samuel were also humiliated and abandoned by their parents in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria following their denunciation as witches (Nairaland Forum, 2009). A 6-year-old boy was reportedly dumped on the street by her mother in Kinshasa, Congo, following his denunciation as a witch (CRIN, 2006). The Child Rights And Rehabilitation Network's (CRARN) Coordinator, Sam Itauma updated the CRARN Facebook Timeline on January 7, 2014, with the stories of 2 abandoned children whom he picked up from a street in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The children had been assaulted and one of them was still bleeding from a wound in her head. The children were reportedly picked up from a street close to a market where 2 other traumatised children had been picked up two days earlier.

In March, 2012, the Nigerian Police arrested a man following abuse and abandonment of his child (Hawk Africa, 2012). Although this offence was committed by a man, this man was influenced by a prophecy from a woman – a prophetess who declared that the little boy was a witch and should be dealt with. Thirteen-year-old Edikan endured severe physical abuse from her mother in the company of her stepfather in Rivers State, Nigeria (Agazue, 2013). Hannatu Kwassa, a 12-year-old Nigerian girl was severely maltreated and starved for about a week by a couple whom she lived with, following a series of prophecies from different revivalist pastors who declared her a witch (Leadership, 2013). Agazue (2013) also observed how a little maid was severely abused by a woman she lived with in Onitsha, Nigeria following a prophecy from her pastor that the girl was a witch.

Denunciation of children as witches has become a growing problem in most part of Africa. In Nigeria, for instance, more than 15,000 children had been denounced in 2 states alone of which many of them were tortured and/or killed (Hourel, 2009). The founder and coordinator of CRARN in Nigeria, Sam Itauma, is of the view that in every 5 abandoned children discovered, 1 must have been murdered (The Guardian, 2007). Many bodies had reportedly turned up in forests and rivers in the Nigerian regions where children are denounced witches (ibid). In Ghana, the *Act!onaid* charity reports on its website (<http://www.actionaid.org.uk>) that it is currently offering accommodation to about 500 children who were accused of different witchcraft-related offences. In 2006, UNICEF estimated that 70 per cent of about 65,000 children abandoned throughout Congo, were denounced witches (CRIN, 2006). CRIN (2007) also revealed other African countries, namely; Zambia, Zimbabwe, Togo, Benin, Cameroon and Central African Republic where the denunciation of children as witches is common. The mothers of these children are determined to torture, mutilate, murder or abandon them on the streets following their denunciation (Agazue, 2013).

Although the child witch is not a new phenomenon; 25 per cent of the 160 witches executed in Wurzburg between 1627 and 1629 were indeed children (Midelfort, 1979, (cited in Levack, 1987). However, there is a difference regarding the views of children as witches in early modern Europe and contemporary Africa. In Europe, children were executed alongside their parents or guardians because the witch hunters believed that the children must have inherited the witchcraft skills or have learnt them from their parents or guardians (Levack, 1987). In Africa, the persecutors of today's children seem to believe that they are monsters who chose to learn witchcraft skills on their own and to use them to cause mayhem to their families and the society at large, hence, they should not be allowed to live (Agazue, 2013).

In the case of attempted murder of the 10-year-old Sudnad reported above, a revivalist pastor declared the girl a witch following her brother's death and exorcism was conducted (The Guardian, 2007). However, an attempt was later made to murder the girl when the exorcism seemed not enough. The 13-year-old Edikan whose case is also reported above was maltreated because she was deemed responsible for her uncle's death as well as the oppression of other family members (Agazue, 2013). The 12-year-old Kwassa was denounced a witch and maltreated due to the hardship her guardians was passing through (Leadership, 2013).

The violence and homicides perpetrated by the African women as a result of witchcraft belief is, however, not restricted to children – women have been found to have killed their mothers or other close family members. Not long ago, a young Nigerian woman, Omolayo Ojeifo murdered her mother with the help of her younger (male) sibling (Vanguard, 2013). Ojeifo had always accused her mother of being the witch responsible for her life difficulties. Similarly, another young Nigerian woman, Olubukola Adefisayo murdered her mother as she accused her of being a witch (Nairaland Forum, 2011).

The denunciation and the consequent torture, murder, abandonment or ostracism of the accused usually follow a dramatic event in the family, such as sickness, death, house fire, failure in business or simply poverty, et cetera. This is the same for the numerous child witches. This observation suggests that such cases follow the same 'scapegoating' theory which several scholars on witchcraft persecution had earlier proposed (e.g. Trevor-Roper, 1969; ter Haar, 2006; Jie, 2009). Although other factors, such as envy and the need to eliminate social non-conformists have been reported in Africa (Agazue, 2013), these are more to do with the older witches than children. Ally (2009, p.2) has also observed how women, out of envy for their fellow women, join hands with men to persecute women, arguing that such women 'can be said to function from within a patriarchal ideology'.

Although the above factors seem credible, they do not seem enough to explain witchcraft phenomenon in contemporary Africa, particularly with respect to female involvement in the persecution. Female involvement has been observed to be more common in some particular locations (Agazue, 2013). In Nigeria, as an example, the torture and murder of children by their mothers, including female pastors are more common in states, such as Akwa Ibom and Cross River and their environs – a development which has been largely blamed on the ubiquity of revivalist Pentecostal pastors who specialise in detecting child witches and 'selling' exorcisms as the ultimate solution. Parents are charged huge sums of money for their children to be exorcised (The Guardian, 2007). A biblical passage – 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' has been found to be recurrently used by such exorcists to convince their clients that their work, that is, denunciation, torture and/or murder are God's work (Agazue, 2013). One more instrumental biblical passage is 'the Kingdom of God suffereth violence'.

A female evangelist, Helen Ukpabio who is based in the aforementioned areas of Nigeria is not only reputable for his relentless preaching on child witches, she is also reputed for her movie – *End of the Wicked* where children are clearly depicted as witches and responsible for a series of havocs in their society. When the BBC's (2013) Kevani Kanda travelled to Congo from London as she was set to investigate the increasing cases of child witch branding and abuse in the region, she clearly showed the role played by prophets in linking children to the deaths of their loved ones and so on. A Nigerian prophet simply known as *The Bishop*, confessed to have killed 110 people in the area where denunciation of children as witches is rampant (The Guardian, 2008). Although the preaching of this sort as well as movie reinforcing witchcraft belief may be a factor, it however, remains debatable whether such evangelization and movie are enough to create a sense of hatred in women towards their loved ones, particularly their

children to the extent that they could be determined to harm or even kill them. It is possible that the fear created by the recurrent preaching and movies on witchcraft may also contribute to this female aggression even among those who are not keen to evangelize.

Summary

Indigenous African belief on witchcraft and the proliferation of profiteering prophets in Africa have been a driving force behind the heightened level of witch-hunting which is currently going on in the continent. Women have been influenced by prophecies on witchcraft in such a way that they can physically abuse and/or kill the people around them once such individuals are denounced witches. The proliferation of revivalist female pastors as well as the power which they exercise also contributes to this newly emerging female pattern of aggression in the African continent. Aggression, infanticide and homicide are thus, justified as the necessary work of God. As this trend is relatively new and under researched, little is known regarding the extent to which evangelization can motivate such women. This calls for future research on this phenomenon.

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