

**Untrammelled Travail of Witchcraft Belief in Okulosho: A Perilous Odyssey
towards Peaceful Co-Existence in Africa
By**

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Abstract

Belief, custom, culture and tradition have lasting impacts in shaping the life style and destiny of a people. Witchcraft belief in Okulosho has affected peaceful co-existence as it creates a cold war, moral and psychological disharmony among the people for ages. The perceived witches seem to live in their own world of comfort since the community conceives them as scoundrel. The unhealthy rivalry between the perceived witches and other members of the community has led to accusations and counter-accusations that ended up in the traditional courts located 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 of Dagbala, Ojah, Ojirami and Makeke. These mentioned villages that made up 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. Witchcraft in Okulosho conjures a negative omen and something sinister, because the practitioners are considered as haters of the society who go after the retrogression of other members of the society. 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 in a painful manner. Even at death, perceived witches are treated in an inhuman way 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 physical human community and aboard of the ancestors. For a proper understanding of this paper, a phenomenological methodology will be adopted.

Witchcraft Phenomenon in Okulosho

According to Aberemu (2022), shortly after the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970 with its devastating effects on the Okulosho people whose forest was used as a battle field by the Biafra and Federal troops, witchcraft phenomenon became a topical issue in Okulosho. Like unexpected and uncontrollable explosion in harmattan season, suspected witches began to confess freely and at randomly during an outbreak of measles epidemic that led to a high rate of infant mortality. However, witchcraft belief in Okulosho is untraceable to a particular period in history since its existence as a community; but this belief became a public manifestation in the 70s. There were series of confessions made by perceived witches alleging to have been responsible for the outbreak of the measles epidemic and other heinous crimes in the community.

Before the 1970 witchcraft saga, Momodu (2022), claims that suspected witches were ostracized, and some of them died out of frustration, social segregation and stigmatization. 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 prior to their initiation. He attributes social-economic and political bankruptcy in Okulosho to witchcraft activities. This idea is in line with Omayajowo's (1974) notion of witches when 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, Ishelowo (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 the world, and also an instrument for self-defense. He opines that witches have contributed to the protection of the Okulosho community at the time of crises in the past when the Nupe slave merchants were constantly attacking the community and the entire Kukuruku region in search for 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 power to bring fortunes to the community and to some individuals, or inflict pains and sorrows on those who wish them evil.

Aruogo (2022), disassociates himself from Ishelowo's view that witchcraft is not an evil practise. He points out that it is dangerous to appreciate the activities of witchcraft either good or bad in the community; such appreciation will intensify the practise of evil in the 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 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 spirit takes possession of the witches they act irrationally; and it is this same evil spirit that gives them power to operate. If they are rational and act rationally, some of them would not have agreed to kill their children, or close relatives, or retard the progress of their relatives or community they directly benefit from. According to Aruogo, it has never happened in the history of Okulosho that a witch had 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 considered to be vulnerable. They hold that parents, friends and close relatives play a leading role in initiation. 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 witches.

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. 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 on its neck waiting for sacrifice.

In Okulosho, witches are believed to have 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. 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 to animals to destroy farms by night.

Witches are also believed to cause sterility to women by turning their wombs upside-down. Jumoke (2022), emphasized 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.

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.

Spiritual Powers Attributed to Witchcraft in Okulosho

A lot of mysterious powers are attributed to witchcraft practise where witchcraft belief thus exists. Okulosho like so many societies attributes mysterious powers to witchcraft. However, Amiowu (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 during initiation. She also points out that a society that does not tolerate and always fight against witches cannot benefit anything positive from the witches. She opines that when witches are not disturbed, they would make effort to develop the society

they belong to through their power. According to her, witches have power to do many things such as: transforming 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 her explanation, the power of transforming into any form of animal or insect or object depending on the mission at hand is given to a member after the eating of the witchcraft substance. Okerepo (2022), a renowned hunter at Ojirami, narrates how he heard an antelope talking in human language commanding other animals in 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 Aimiwu (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 people who are spiritually strong, they seek advice from the spirits the best ways to attack such people. 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 that they are aware that some members have to 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 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 Okulosho 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 Aimioiwu, members have 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 airplanes in the coven. She comments that some people alleged that witches use plantain or banana leaves as their airplanes 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 fastness and safety. She emphatically says that when their technology becomes obsolete, they would transfer it to the physical world.

Aimioiwu also points out the healing power of the witches. Aimioiwu reveals that some spirits teach some of their lucky members the use of some leaves as herbs in the bush. Martello (1975), *Witchcraft: The Old Religion*, 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; that witches at times punish people with incurable sicknesses. He goes further to say that they benefit 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 use 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 Okulosho. 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 metamorphosed into

animal forms, they mix up with animals in the bush, and in the process they show 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 meeting in a particular spot, 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 with 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 to your village? Be careful another time."

Okpafioko (2022), refers to this power as 'ABIKORO' (the power to make one invisible to others). He says 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 fellow 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. Few warriors who are friendly with witches are also given this power too, 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 mark 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 actually take their shares home and hide it 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 for 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 from the children.

It is also alleged in Okulosho that witches have power to give and draw wealth from people. For those they love according to Irooroaze, they make them prosper in whatever they do for 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 which five are medical doctors who are based in different parts of 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.

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 that they 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 completely in any human society, that which was impossible during Mediaeval period in Europe with their wide spread 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. Witchcraft as a society or religion has its own right to exist as long as other spiritual forces are allowed to exist by the creator. Nothing that exists that 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 attest 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).

Based on the fact that every man likes power and easily been 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 is to seek for such powers to fight against our 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 spiritual house.

As we have observed in our discourse here, not all mysterious powers are met for evil purposes; some are to even ward off evil. There are some people who are not witches but they seek for such powers from sorcerers for sinister reasons. We should therefore realize that whoever uses spiritual power for destruction is not better than the witches we so much condemned.

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 to something beneficiary to the entire community while we bury our hatchets. This is the only way we can achieve a lasting peace and progress in Okulosho community.

Conclusion

Witchcraft phenomenon always attract lots of attentions because of the aura, and mysteries surrounding it especially as many Africans are not willing to openly discuss and debate on it like other topic issues. The clandestine nature in which it is been practiced has created painful blackmails, stigmatization and rejection for the practitioners. Often times, the practitioners have been accused of using their mysterious powers to cause untold and horrific havocs in the community or society. The manner in which witches are treated in Okulosho like the mediaeval era in Europe and some societies in Africa has resulted to hatred and possible destruction of one another. It is the submission of this paper therefore that for peace to reign, there is 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.

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