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Chima Agazue
University of Huddersfield, chima.agazue@gmail.com

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Abstract

The belief that certain humans are spiritual entities and the belief that some people are spiritually possessed can be found across histories and cultures. While these individuals are not always viewed in the negative or treated inhumanely, cases abound whereby degrading and inhumane treatments are meted out to some of them. In the African continent, certain groups of people, particularly children are linked to certain mischievous spirits due to their unusual appearance, aberrant behavior, disability, chronic illness, psychopathology or exceptional ability. Some are also suspected and consequently mistreated due to events surrounding their birth. Such children are known by different names in different parts of Africa. In this article, three groups of children (ogbanje, abiku and spirit children) considered as partly spirits and one group (child witch) considered as spiritually possessed, were explored. Each of these groups was described based on the traditional lore of the particular society where they are so labeled. The abuses, neglect and in some cases homicide against the children connected to the belief, were critically discussed. The article explored how the children are abused, neglected or killed due to the genuine belief that they pose a spiritual threat to their parents or carers and in some cases, the entire community. However, the article also provided insights into how such belief also serves as justification for parents with children present with any of the aforementioned characteristics to eliminate such a child through filicide for altruistic purposes. The article also explored how some parents and guardians exploit the belief to eliminate children seen as a burden. The cases of adult relatives who exploit the belief to eliminate orphans in their care for the purposes of inheriting properties belonging to the orphans' parents were also explored. Recommendations were made on how to address these social problems.

Keywords

Children, abuse, neglect, violence, filicide, ogbanje, abiku, spirit child, child witch, belief.

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CHILDREN AS MISCHIEVOUS SPIRITS: LEGITIMIZING CHILD CRUELTY AND FILICIDE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

Chima Agazue
University of Huddersfield, UK
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2995-00179

ABSTRACT

The belief that certain humans are spiritual entities and the belief that some people are spiritually possessed can be found across histories and cultures. While these individuals are not always viewed in the negative or treated inhumanely, cases abound whereby degrading and inhumane treatments are meted out to some of them. In the African continent, certain groups of people, particularly children are linked to certain mischievous spirits due to their unusual appearance, aberrant behavior, disability, chronic illness, psychopathology or exceptional ability. Some are also suspected and consequently mistreated due to events surrounding their birth. Such children are known by different names in different parts of Africa. In this article, three groups of children (ogbanje, abiku and spirit children) considered as partly spirits and one group (child witch) considered as spiritually possessed, were explored. Each of these groups was described based on the traditional lore of the particular society where they are so labeled. The abuses, neglect and in some cases homicide against the children connected to the belief, were critically discussed. The article explored how the children are abused, neglected or killed due to the genuine belief that they pose a spiritual threat to their parents or carers and in some cases, the entire community. However, the article also provided insights into how such belief also serves as justification for parents with children present with any of the aforementioned characteristics to eliminate such a child through filicide for altruistic purposes. The article also explored how some parents and guardians exploit the belief to eliminate children seen as a burden. The cases of adult relatives who exploit the belief to eliminate orphans in their care for the purposes of inheriting properties belonging to the orphans' parents were also explored. Recommendations were made on how to address these social problems.

KEYWORDS

Africa, children, abuse, neglect, violence, filicide, ogbanje, abiku, spirit child, child witch, beliefs

THE BELIEF THAT CHILDREN COULD BE POSSESSED by certain mischievous spirits or belong to spiritual comradeship had existed in Africa for centuries. There are *abiku* children (Ilechukwu, 2007; Mobolade, 1973) among the Yoruba in Nigeria and beyond (see Soliman, 2004). There are *ogbanje* children among the Igbo and other Nigerian tribes (e.g., see Agazue, 2015; Asakitikpi, 2008; Ilechukwu, 2007; Onunwa, 2010). *Ogbanje* is also recognized in Sierra Leone (e.g., Schneider, 2017) and

conceptualized in similar ways as those in Nigeria. There are spirit children among the Nankani in Ghana and in Guinea-Bissau (Denham, 2017). There are "children of the gods" in Cameroon who are said to be "affected by the gods of the earth to which they yearned to return in death" (La Fontaine, 2009, p.118). Children are conceptualized in different ways depending on the tribe. Although these spirits are linked to children, adults, and in particularl women, are not entirely free from the stigmatization linked to these mischievous spirits. These adults are believed to have conquered a supposedly premature death over the spirits, or refused to disappear from the earth as children. The suspected adults continue to suffer from stigmatization and humiliation attached to this for almost their entire lives.

The latest addition to the belief in the spiritual possession of children is the notion of "child witches." While the belief that children could be possessed by witchcraft spirits is at least 100 years old on the African continent (Covington, 2015), the belief was restricted to a few tribes, such as the Bangwa (Cameroon) in the 1950s (Brain, 1970), the Maka (Cameroon) in the 1960s (Fisiy & Geschiere, 1990), the Sudanese Azande (Central African Republic, CAR) in the 1970s (Evans-Pritchard, 1976) and a few others. In addition to being confined to specific clans or tribes, the existence of some of these child witches was also short lived. Then in the 1990s, a "new" type of child witch emerged on the continent as observed in different countries, such as the DRC (Javier, 2005), Malawi (van der Meer, 2013), Nigeria (Agazue, 2021a) and also in other countries, more recently where the child witches are linked to catastrophic events in their families and communities, and consequently abused or killed (Agazue, 2015, 2021a; Agazue & Gavin, 2015; Cimpric, 2010; Cookey, 2019; Javier, 2005; La Fontaine, 2009, 2016; van der Meer, 2013). This practice subsequently becomes widespread, crossing tribal and national boundaries, and has also spread to other continents (e.g., Europe) where cases of persecution of children as witches have been reported (see Agazue, 2015; Keeble, 2010; La Fontaine, 2009, 2016).

The linking of children to these mischievous spirits promotes child abuse, neglect and filicide by the parents or carers of the children (Agazue, 2015, 2021a; Azumi et al., 2018; Denham, 2017, 2020; Ilechukwu, 2007), including significant others, such as pastors, spiritualists, votaries and diviners who are often consulted by the natives (see Agazue, 2021a; Amenga-Etego, 2008; Denham, 2017; Schneider, 2017) due to the belief that these individuals hear from God or spirits (Agazue, 2016a). The abuses, neglect and filicide against these children violate international conventions and some domestic legislation on children's rights. According to the United Nations' General Assembly in its Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), children have the right to life, protection, healthcare, education, shelter, good nutrition and more. These same rights are also emphasized in the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

Many African countries have signed/ratified the above treaty. Ghana was the first country in the world to ratify it in 1990 (UNICEF, n.d.). South Africa ratified it in 1995 as its first international treaty (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, n.d.). Nigeria domesticated the provisions of the UNCRC by promulgating the Nigerian Child Rights Act 2003 (Aransiola et al., 2009). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1990) is another relevant instrument in this matter. The ACRWC seeks to uphold the rights of children just like the UNCRC (e.g., right to life, education, health, nutrition, protection, etc.) but also takes into account certain issues peculiar to Africa (e.g., apartheid) even though such issues are not generalizable to African societies. Despite these developments, violations of the above children's rights remain endemic on the African continent.

While several factors may play roles in these violations, the focus of this article is how the belief in spiritual possession or comradeship plays a part. While the belief in spiritual possession is so strong it motivates abuse and homicide by adults who genuinely believe in this, this article will also demonstrate how the belief in itself has provided leeway for adults with ulterior motives to abuse and/or eliminate children under their care by simply linking children to these mischievous spirits as a way of justifying their actions.

The current article is considered as a valuable tool for forensic and criminal psychologists, criminologists, sociologists, social workers and law enforcement agents to understanding the motives of adults who abuse and kill children in connection with spirit possession. It will enable them to understand both the physical and behavioral characteristics of children who are stigmatized as spiritually possessed and, in some cases, the profile of the abusers and killers. This will be particularly helpful to investigators who face difficult tasks of establishing motives for abuse, neglect and homicide against children in multicultural societies where the investigators are not members of the native communities of the perpetrators or are unfamiliar with the cultural beliefs and practices of the perpetrators.

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

The qualitative research paradigm was adopted for this current article. The qualitative approach lays emphasis on meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Willig, 2013). Thus, it is indispensable when there is a need to understand the complexities of human behavior that demand answers to "why" and "how" questions (Lakshman et al., 2000). The current article aimed to answer complex questions relating to why children are perceived as spiritual entities or believed to be possessed in different parts of Africa. It also aimed to establish why the children's parents and guardians see abuse and homicide as the ultimate way of dealing with such children. Understanding these required an in-depth analysis of relevant events and circumstances. This justified the choice of the qualitative research paradigm for this article.

RESEARCH DATA

Secondary data was adopted in this article. There are numerous benefits attached to secondary data. For instance, the researcher can reach the "unreachable" by drawing on existing sources of information (Billingham, 2018). This was particularly the case in the current article. Although the children discussed in this article are not entirely unreachable, reaching them would require a lot of planning and procedures due to their status as children or members of a vulnerable population. This could also mean more time, costs and other inconveniences to the researcher. Secondary data analysis saves the researcher time and resources (Dunn et al., 2015). Already, much has been documented about these children. The current researcher drew on those existing documents to produce a new piece of work that shows the nature and extent of this social problem as well as the consequences to the children in question.

SEARCH TERMS AND STRATEGY

Basic search strategy was employed to obtain relevant materials via the Google Scholar website. Separate searches for materials on each of the concepts (i.e., *ogbanje, abiku*, spirit child and child witch) used to represent the spiritual status of the children were made. Each search yielded over 1,000 results on each of the phenomena. The term *ogbanje* yielded 1,750 results; *abiku* came up with 2,600 results; spirit child produced 2,690,000 results; while child witch yielded 193,000 results. The

researcher then screened the results by going through the titles of the publications to see if they were suggestive of what he was interested in. Once the search outputs appeared, publications with suggestive titles (i.e., titles that the researcher believed were relevant to his research project) were clicked on and their abstracts were perused in order to decide whether they were relevant for the analysis or not.

Some of the publications were included for containing the definitions/descriptions of the concepts and/or the belief system involved while others were included for being able to demonstrate how the stigmatized children are treated as well as the reasons for such harsh treatments. Due to the huge pile of literature produced by these search terms, the researcher simply stopped checking the titles of the publications when he believed that he had acquired a sufficient number of materials that could enable him to address his research questions. Nevertheless, the researcher also included some publications he was already familiar with, such as those he had previously utilized during his previous research projects, including his previous publications.

TYPES OF MISCHIEVOUS SPIRITS

Ogbanje

Ogbanje is a term used to describe people who are believed to engage in a cycle of birth and death (Ilechukwu, 2007; Onunwa, 2010; Schneider, 2017), the so-called "mischievous transmigrating children" (Onunwa, 2010, p.100) with born-to-die syndrome (Agazue, 2015). Ilechukwu (2007, p.239) claim that the *ogbanje* child is "repeatedly born by the same mother" and although he might be correct based on the fact that his work focuses on the Igbo culture, this is not universal considering that ogbanje is not limited to the Igbo tribe. *Ogbanje* exist in Sierra Leone and other West African societies (Schneider, 2017). In Sierra Leone, it is believed that one *ogbanje* can be born by multiple mothers (Schneider, 2017), that is, transmigrating through another woman after dying initially.

Ogbanje persons are mostly children (see Asakitikpi, 2008; Onunwa, 2010; Schneider, 2017) as they usually die early. Explanations for such early death are provided in the paragraphs below. *Ogbanje* persons are believed to be sent to earth following a contractual agreement (Schneider, 2017) with their spiritual comrades (Ilechukwu, 2007) to cause suffering to the family, particularly the mother. In Igbo culture, such a spiritual group is often referred to as *ndi otu* (Ilechukwu, 2007). *Ogbanje* persons are often said to be responding to their *ndi otu* (spiritual comrades) when they exhibit certain behaviors. For example, when an *ogbanje* girl ignores important advice from an adult, the girl is said to have done so in response to counter advice from her *ndi otu*.

In some cultures, *ogbanje* is seen as a punishment to the mother for a certain offense, such as adultery or abortion (see Schneider, 2017 for conceptualizations in Sierra Leone). Thus, *ogbanje* children are viewed as "impermanent spirit children who cause pain amongst those they leave behind in their spiralling cycles of life and death" (Schneider, 2017, p.135). Schneider, however, acknowledges that the conceptualization in Sierra Leone is more than this as some are believed to successfully grow into adulthood and may exhibit other characteristics as well. Nzewi (2001, p.1401) uses the term "revenge-driven" to describe the perceived punishment meted out by *ogbanje* children to their families within the Igbo culture. The idea of punishment to the family is partly connected to the chronic illness that often characterises the *ogbanje* child (Nzewi, 2001), which is linked to the early death of the *ogbanje*. In fact, a history

of frequent death of children in the family is an indicator of the presence of *ogbanje* in such families (Nzewi, 2001).

In contemporary Nigeria, the idea of *ogbanje* as born-to-die syndrome has reduced significantly (e.g., Onunwa, 2010). Parents' participants in child welfare and health education programs established by the authorities to reduce child morbidity and mortality rates (Asakitikpi, 2008; Rhode, 1980) and the establishment of several healthcare programs, such as sickle cell clinics, neonatal departments and similar schemes have contributed to the drastic reduction of the conditions perceived as *ogbanje*. This supports the claims that *ogbanje* children are children with sickle cell anemia (Ameh et al., 2012; Onunwa, 2010). Nzewi's (2001) empirical study (hemoglobin analysis) shows that 70 of 100 children he describes as "malevolent ogbanje" had sickle cell disease.

Although *ogbanje* is viewed negatively, it is also important to acknowledge that this phenomenon also has some positive aspects to it. Schneider (2017), for instance, refers to cases in Sierra Leone to explain how this belief enables families to cope with children's deaths: "If a child dies, the explanation that he must have been an *ogbanje* is often heard and serves as one coping mechanism for such untimely deaths" (Schneider, 2017, p.137). This relief could also be understood on the basis that the *ogbanje* children are most often children with severe medical or psychological conditions, which often pose a burden to their parents. Although some parents are still happy to live with their child despite the burdens, this is not the case with all parents and for the latter, the child's natural death becomes a relief.

Abiku

Abiku is another mischievous spirit to which children are connected. Mobolade (1973, p.62) defines *abiku* child as "any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family." Just like the *ogbanje*, *abiku* is similarly seen as born-to-die syndrome (see Ilechukwu, 2007), which reflects the fact that they too often die early. Ogunyemi (2002, p.664) describes *abiku* as the "Yoruba state of consciousness regarded with trepidation because of its links with death." This also supports Mobolade's (1973, p.62) account that the life span of an *abiku* is "very short." Mobolade further describes *abiku* as an "elusive child" who not only gets his/her parents disoriented but also his/her community due to the child's repeated "incarnations and cultural pluralism." *Abiku* is linked to spiritual comrades and thus believed to inhabit two worlds simultaneously (Mobolade, 1973) just like the *ogbanje*. The striking resemblance of *abiku* to *ogbanje* often leads scholars to (e.g., Ilechukwu, 2007; Ogunyemi, 2002; Okonkwo, 2004; Soliman, 2004) compare or discuss both together. Okonkwo (2004, p.664) captures this striking resemblance in his work as follows:

> In brief, "ogbanje" and "abiku" are Igbo and Yoruba names respectively for a spirit-child or spirit-children who are said to die early only to be reborn again and again to the same mother (Okonkwo, 2004, p.653).

Although Okonkwo mentioned spirit-children being born to the same mother, this is not always the case in certain cultures as previously noted. *Abiku* is very popular among the Yoruba in Nigeria, in just the same way *ogbanje* is very popular among the Igbo. Just like *ogbanje* child, the *abiku* child is also seen as causing immense affliction and suffering to the mother (Soliman, 2004). The affliction and suffering caused by both the *ogbanje* and *abiku* children also go beyond the mother to include the father and sometimes, the entire community to which the child belongs (Soliman, 2004).

With the striking resemblance between *abiku* and *ogbanje* in the ways they are conceptualized and the characteristics associated with them, it can be argued that the linguistic terms constitute one of the major differences between the two. This has proven to be the case when one compares *ogbanje* and *abiku* in terms of the perception of their existence and their characteristics. One would also expect that differences in religious inclinations among tribes may also account for some of the minor differences considering that the religious belief in the supernatural and the interconnections between the spiritual and physical realms are the basis for suspecting certain individuals as belonging to the spiritual world or possessed by spirits. Further, as the natives rely on votaries or traditional priests to guide them on these issues (e.g., Adinkrah, 2011; Agazue, 2015, 2021a; Cookey, 2019; Cimpric, 2010; La Fontaine, 2009; 2016), it is also expected that the subjective views of the world by these influential figures based on their differing sociocultural environments may equally contribute to how different tribes perceive the existence and behaviors of the individuals so labeled.

Just as the *ogbanje* phenomenon is linked to chronic illnesses, particularly sickle cell anemia previously discussed (Ameh et al., 2012; Nzewi, 2001; Onunwa, 2010), *abiku* is also linked to such conditions (e.g., Ameh et al., 2012), including pathologies caused by incompatible blood between couples (Mobolade, 1973) known medically as hemolytic disease or rhesus disease. As far back as the early 1970s, Mobolade (1973, p.64) observed that the concept of *abiku* had already started fading gradually in metropolitan areas of the Yoruba land and among the educated natives in Lagos and Ibadan – a development he attributed to the embracement of medical explanations for chronic illnesses and the practice of hygiene among this class of natives compared to those he describes as the "illiterate group of natives." Ilechukwu (2007) similarly observed this more recently. The *abiku*, according to Mobolade (1973, p.64), "are most commonly talked about and held in awe among the illiterate, conservative, medically unschooled, socially unadulterated and less informed traditional folk."

Presently, belief in *abiku* has abated much more, reflecting huge advances in education and science in more recent decades. However, the debate over whether chronic illness can adequately explain the concepts of *ogbanje* and *abiku* has continued, with some arguing that there are supernatural manifestations in the lives of the individuals (see Okonkwo, 2004 for the debates on this). Further, the claims that new *abiku* children are sometimes born with scars reflecting the injuries made on the body of the deceased *abiku* (e.g., Mobolade, 1973; Odebode & Onadipe, 2011), including stumpy fingers when the deceased *abiku's* finger was cut and more (e.g., Mobolade, 1973), is also another development that tends to support those who consider the phenomenon as supernatural.

Spirit Child

Children regarded as spirits are known with different names in the societies where they exist, such as *chuchuru, kyinkyiringa, sinsireko, kolkpaare, kontome* (Awedoba & Denham, 2013), *chinchirigo* (Amenga-Etego, 2008) and possibly more. They are common among the Nankani (e.g., Amenga-Etego, 2008; Azumi et al., 2018; Denham, 2017), Kasena (Awedoba & Denham, 2013; Azumi et al., 2018) and other tribes in Ghana. Their presence in Guinea-Bissau is also acknowledged by Denham (2017). Due to the different native names used to refer to this phenomenon, the term "spirit child" is used to discuss the phenomenon collectively in this article. A spirit child is "a simulacrum of a human, a spirit that only appears to be a human." (Denham, 2017, p.92) The child is considered as cunning, deceptive, elusive and destructive

(Denham, 2017). They are then feared as spirits who took a human form, with the intention of causing misfortune and destroying the family. However, spirit children are not always evil. They are linked to a series of good deeds (Awedoba & Denham, 2013; Amenga-Etego, 2008; Denham, 2017). They can be tricked to gain a foresight, such as improvements in medicine and farming (Awedoba & Denham, 2013). They can help their families prosper (Denham, 2017) and guide lost people back home (Amenga-Etego, 2008).

Spirit children are believed to have sneaked into their mothers' wombs as spirits in similar ways as do *ogbanje* and *abiku*. Spirit children can grow into adulthood (Denham, 2017) in the same way *ogbanje* and *abiku* do. However, for spirit children, the development into adulthood is believed to occur when they have managed to conceal their identities (Ibid.). This is not the case with *ogbanje* and *abiku* who are almost always identified from childhood. Spirit children are often feared as spirits who took the human form with the intention of causing misfortune and destroying the family or the community in general (Denham, 2017; 2020). This again brings spirit children closer to *ogbanje* and *abiku*, which the applicable communities refer to in order to understand afflictions and suffering experienced by the family.

Denham's (2017) work based on the Nankani culture suggests that most often, women are suspected of attracting the spirit child. A spirit child finds its way into a family from the bush following an illicit sexual activity (taboo) committed by the mother of the child (Azumi et al., 2018; Denham, 2017). There are also other taboos by potential mothers that may attract the spirit, such as eating while walking along bush paths, urinating while standing and more (Denham, 2017). Denham (2017) attributes the above cultural practices to patriarchy, which attempts to regulate women's behavior. However, he also shows that a man can equally attract the spirits by engaging in certain careless and immoral behaviors too. This led Agazue (2018) to argue that Nankani culture is gender-balanced when it comes to using the fear of spirits to regulate behaviors.

Unusual biological characteristics and abnormal behaviors present at birth or noticeable during infancy are among the markers identifying a spirit child (Amenga-Etego, 2008; Denham, 2017). The children often display unusual abilities, incomprehensible deviant or antisocial behaviors, deformities, skeletal body, hydrocephalus, strabismus, facial hair, missing limbs, pubic hair/teeth/beards or other secondary sexual characteristics too early for their age (Denham, 2017). Disorders of sexual development including hermaphroditism, malformation or sexless characteristics, are also markers of identification (Amenga-Etego, 2008). Most narratives depict infants as walking or talking and performing actions beyond their developmental stage (Denham, 2017). This puts spirit children on par with *ogbanje* and *abiku* who have been consistently linked to chronic illnesses and psychopathology.

Spirit children are linked to a series of misfortunes, such as "illness or death, contagious epidemics, crop failure, drought and abnormal climatic events, death of livestock, or a period of conflict or bad luck in the family." (Denham, 2017, p.16) The mother's postpartum condition may also be considered, such as her feeling very weak or restless during the period, including having complications (Ibid.). The father's condition too may raise suspicion. It is a common belief that the child is responsible for these problems. However, the abnormalities in a child or misfortunes in the family may be insufficient to identify such a child as "no one form of evidence unequivocally proves the presence of a spirit." (Denham, 2017, p.106) Some children with some or even all the named illnesses may not be suspected initially but may be suspected after treatment fails over the long term. Likewise, not all disabled children are suspected,.

After all, both disabled children and adults can be found in the Nankani communities who are well accepted. Exceptional skills are another source of suspicion that a child could be a spirit child (Amenga-Etego, 2008; Denham, 2017). Spirit children, however, are not always evil. Denham (2017) found that good chichiriago children are believed to exist who help their families to prosper without causing them any harm. An attempt to kill a good spirit child usually fails and if the family ever succeeds, then the family will suffer calamities (Denham, 2017).

Like *ogbanje* and *abiku*, spirit children are also on the reduction. At present, the existence of spirit children and the roles of traditional healers are increasingly being challenged by the educated class and younger generation who view them as "remnants of the past" and "murderers only interested in food and money" (Denham, 2017, p.123). Spirit children are gradually vanishing in northern Ghana, partly due to Christianisation and the activities of modern religious activities, non-governmental organizations, police and legal systems, researchers and health workers (Denham (2017) notes that researchers have speculated that migration to southern Ghana often leads to the disappearance of the spirit children phenomenon. Again, this is similar to Mobolade's (1973) account of how the *abiku* phenomenon is uncommon among the educated natives and residents of Lagos and Ibadan (Nigeria) compared to the illiterate populations of poor-rural communities.

Child witch

Like spirit children, child witches are known by different native names. There are probably more names for the latter than the former because the latter is highly widespread as this phenomenon exists in many African countries, thus, the term "child witch" is used in this article for consistency purposes. Child witch seems to be the most infamous of the four phenomena discussed in this article in the sense that it is very widespread and in most societies where it exists, the children are openly beaten, tormented, abandoned or murdered (Agazue, 2015; 2021a; Agazue & Gavin, 2015; Javier, 2005; van der Meer, 2013) in families, religious houses, village squares and streets. The child witch phenomenon is also the most complex of all the phenomena discussed in this article due to its presence in both poor and wealthy families as well as poor and wealthy neighborhoods. The child witch is also distinct from the previous phenomena in that these children are considered normal human beings who are simply possessed. Thus, exorcisms are often arranged as a solution, although the exorcists sometimes assume that the witch spirit has become so powerful that exorcism could be ineffective (Agazue, 2021a; Nyika, 2020).

Traditionally, children were not usually associated with witchcraft practices in African societies (La Fontaine, 2009) as previously explained in the introductory part of this article. However, this later changed. The child witch phenomenon in its new conceptualization emerged in Africa in the 1990s as previously noted (see Agazue, 2021a; Javier, 2005; van der Meer, 2013)—a view by people of children as dangerous as adult witches and capable of causing misfortunes to their families and communities (Agazue, 2015, 2021a; Agazue & Gavin, 2015; Cimpric, 2010; Cookey, 2019; Javier, 2005; van der Meer, 2013) in what is regarded as "scapegoating" in relation to witch hunting (Evans-Pritchard, 1976). The emergence of the new child witches has led to an increasing hunt of children as witches in different parts of Africa. However, this social problem is not evenly distributed in countries where it exists. In Nigeria, for instance, this is mostly witnessed in two of the 36 states in the country. These states are Akwa Ibom and Cross River (see Agazue, 2015, 2021a; Cookey, 2019; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016). Incidents occasionally occur in some of their neighboring states, which reflect

the influences of the cultural beliefs and practices of these two states on their neighbors. The situation in other African countries follows a similar pattern. Forces of globalization have meant that the phenomenon of child witches in contemporary Africa and the consequent maltreatment and murder of children are also witnessed outside the African continent, particularly in the UK (see Agazue, 2015; Keeble, 2010; La Fontaine, 2009, 2016) where African revivalist neo-Pentecostal churches are known as a driving factor in this problem (e.g., Cimpric, 2010; Geschiere, 2019; Mildnerová, 2016; Nyika, 2020; Quansah, 2012; van der Meer, 2013) currently proliferate (Agazue, 2015). African pastors exercise considerable moral authority (Agazue, 2015; 2016a; Priest et al., 2020) due to these societies being deeply religious (Agazue, 2015).

A broad range of behaviors and impairments are used to identify the child witches, such as being too dirty, disrespectful, stubborn, impolite, selfish, solitary, epileptic, sleepwalking, malnourished, domineering, mentally retarded and more (see Agazue, 2021a; Javier, 2005). Children are also targeted for being too crafty (Agazue, 2021a; Cookey, 2019; Javier, 2005).

Religion is one of the main driving factors of the child witch phenomenon (see Agazue, 2015, 2021a; Agyapong, 2020; Cimpric, 2010; Geschiere, 2019; Mildnerová, 2016; Nyika, 2020; Quansah, 2012; Priest et al., 2020; van der Meer, 2013). The leaders of neo-Pentecostal and syncretic churches in addition to traditional spirits are among the key players in this act of convincing parents and carers that their children or the children under their care are witches (Adinkrah, 2011; Agazue, 2015; 2021a; Cookey, 2019; Cimpric, 2010; La Fontaine, 2009, 2016). The biblical phrase "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus, 22:18) is widely quoted by pastors who promote child witch hunting (Adu-Gyamfi, 2016; Agazue, 2015, 2021a; Cookey, 2019) to convince their adherents that killing witches is a religious obligation in a way similar to how it was used by the Puritans to justify witch hunt in British America in the seventeenth century (Rosen, 2017) and in early modern Europe (Goodare, 2016). Although the reference to this biblical verse may seem to suggest that the pastors act on their genuine beliefs, this is not always the case.

While some pastors may genuinely believe that children are witches in line with the traditional lore as well as their poor level of understanding of the abnormalities and aberrant behaviors in children that partly motivate the child witch hunt (see Agazue, 2015, 2021a) many pastors draw on this extant belief to perpetuate fear and to capitalize on their adherents' fear of witches in order to make money (Agazue, 2015, 2021a; Cimpric, 2010; Javier, 2005). Cases abound whereby parents were charged huge sums of money by pastors in order to spiritually assess and/or exorcise their children. BBC News (2010) reported how a witch-hunting Nigerian pastor was arrested after demanding more than US $250 for each exorcism. A Nigerian mother was reportedly charged US $270 by her prophet who denounced her eight-year-old daughter as a witch and exorcised her (Huff Post, 2009). Another woman who tried to saw off the top of her daughter's skull following her denunciation by a pastor was charged US $60 for exorcism (Huff Post, 2009).

According to Javier's (2005, p.28) report for the Save the Children organization, based on a study conducted in the DRC, "We have not come across a single church in which exorcisms and/or healing for witchcraft is free." Exorcism is "a profit-making frenzy organized in response to parents' concerns" in the DRC (Javier, 2005, p.28). In 2009, 13 Pentecostal churches and about a hundred pastors of such churches were named in case files of a particular review involving child witch accusations in Nigeria (Huff Post, 2009). A similar report was also published about Angola where eleven fundamentalist churches were shut down because of this social problem (The New York

Times, 2007). Human Rights Watch (2006) counted approximately 2,000 churches performing exorcism ceremonies in Mbuji-Mayi (the DRC) alone, with a greater number of churches doing the same in Kinshasa (the DRC) in relation to child witchcraft. Several other cases of this nature are also detailed by Agazue (2021a) based on the views of aid workers in this field and on media analysis, which consistently suggests that the labeling is a source of money for the pastors. After eleven fundamentalist churches were shut down in Angola due to child witch labeling and committees formed by villages to protect children, the number of abused and abandoned children "dropped drastically" according to authorities (The New York Times, 2007).

These pastors succeed easily in these frauds because their adherents often believe that they hear from God and therefore respect them a great deal and treat their words as messages from God, even when there is nothing godly in their words (Agazue, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). The monumental fraud connected to the events in Angola, as well as the increase in advertisements by pastors, including movies produced with the purpose of spreading this belief in child witches (Agazue, 2015, 2021a) has made it the most infamous of all the cases of stigmatization of children as spiritual entities. Pastors' focus on material benefits has also enabled fraud by parents or guardians who deliberately consult pastors to obtain the witch label in order to enable them to eliminate an unwanted child (Agazue, 2021a). This will be discussed in the latter part of this article.

THE NATURE OF ABUSE AND FILICIDE

Children believed to be under the influences of any of the spirits described above face the risk of abuse, neglect or filicide. Even those who die on their own are not respected as dead children are normally respected with pleasant memories. A deceased *abiku*, for instance, may be denied a befitting burial and its body may be also be mutilated (Soliman, 2004). The corpse of an *abiku* is often tortured by parents as a punishment as well as a reflection of their frustration (Mobolade, 1973). However, the motive for this mutilation goes beyond punishment to the belief that mutilating the body could excommunicate the *abiku* from its spiritual comrades upon its appearance to them with these marks, reflecting its ordeal (Ibid.). It is believed this could lead to the termination of the *abiku* lineage in the family (Ibid.).

Ogbanje children are generally given names that suggest something out of the ordinary with the term *onwu* (death in the Igbo language) as a common prefix in such names. Common examples of such names are *Onwuchekwa* (death, please wait), *Onwurah* (death, leave the child alone) and more (see Nzewi, 2001). These names indicate the parents' wish that the new child should not be another *ogbanje* and should not to die like the previous child or children (Nzewi, 2001). Likewise, *abiku* children are given similar names. Odebode & Onadipe (2011) found that the Yoruba terms *iku* and *ku* (referring to death) were commonplace (occurring in six out of ten names among those studied) as prefixes or suffixes to names given to those believed to be *abiku*. An example of such a name is *Siwoku* (take your hands off, death), which is a command to the child to stop his/her journey to death (Odebode & Onadipe, 2011).

However, names given to *ogbanje* and *abiku* could also reflect other motives, such as the condemnation of death as opposed to imploring death to spare the child. There are also names such as those suggesting "deception" like *Yemiitan* (stop deceiving me) (Odebode & Onadipe, 2011). With this name, the *abiku* child is "tagged a deceiver and commanded to stop his deceptive act" (Odebode & Onadipe, 2011, p.131) This is related to the idea that an *abiku* child deceives its parents in the sense that the child often leaves them to join his/her spiritual comrades after all the parents' celebration

and sense of fulfilment for acquiring a new member of the family. However, the ineffectiveness of such names becomes obvious when eventually, the *abiku* "callously dies" (Mobolade, 1973, p.63) This is also the case with *ogbanje* as these names have not prevented the death of such children when more effective measures were not taken or failed.

The point is that these names inadvertently motivate child abuse even though the parents' motives may be positive and genuine. This is well captured by Odebode & Onadipe (2011, p.128) as follows: "Abiku names appeal to the emotions or tarnish the images of children in such a category." Members of the community who understand the meaning and significance of such names may begin to dissociate themselves from the individual or discriminate against them in certain ways even without knowing who they are. In other words, just as members of the child's community are likely to identify the child as *abiku* or *ogbanje*, non-members of such communities who do not know the child but understand the name, would also identify the child as *ogbanje* or *abiku* and may treat the child as an outcast. It is not uncommon to hear parents warning their children with words such as "I do not want to see you with that ogbanje girl anymore."

In certain cases, abuse and even infanticide are already premeditated before the child is born. For example, troubled pregnancies and births may be attributed to *ogbanje* (Schneider, 2017). Similarly, children "whose births were concurrent with tragic events" may be suspected of being spirit children (Denham, 2017, p.4). This suspicion could be enough to justify infanticide against a baby upon birth or to perpetuate extreme forms of abuse or neglect that could potentially contribute to early death when infanticide is not an option.

Denham (2017) found that abandonment of spirit children in pathways, forests and rocks was commonplace for twenty to thirty years preceding his research. These incidents have been reduced for the reasons previously described (e.g., medical intervention, education and law enforcement operations). However, there is no guarantee that children are no longer killed or endangered in such ways. Denham (2017) found that infanticide remains one way to deal with a spirit child. He details cases of mothers who abandoned their children for fear of their own safety. In the case of a child named N'ma, her biological mother abandoned her in their native community and fled to Kumasi because she was apparently "afraid that N'ma was trying to kill her." (Denham, 2017, p.20) Similarly, Azuma's mother lived in constant fear of being killed by Azuma, urging family members to "better take a second look at the situation or else the child could kill me." (Denham, 2017, p.81) Denham (2017) describes the justification of infanticide against a spirit child on the grounds that performing the correct rituals during the process would end the child's powers.

Denham (2017) found that spirit children are very rarely killed through strangulation or other physical violence. Rather killing is mostly done by administering to the child a concoction containing poisonous herbs. Occasionally, the decision to administer such a concoction might become very urgent after a family has reached a crisis point. Child maltreatment filicide may also apply to some of these cases. Child maltreatment filicide usually occurs by accident, with no deliberate attempt to kill the child (Resnick, 2016). In Nigerian cultures, the deliberate killing of *ogbanje* and *abiku* is uncommon, but maltreatment is common due to parents' fears and frustration as previously stated. Such children can die during the process of maltreatment or severe neglect. Denham (2017), for instance, observed that some spirit children die even before the deadly concoction is administered to them, which he links to the devastating effects of social exclusion or poor attention and care, especially when the child is

already very sick or malnourished. This is understandable as a result of the parents' fears, frustration and disappointments. These actions violate children's rights as enshrined in Article 21 of the ACRWC (1990) on "protection against harmful social and cultural practices" that may affect "normal growth and development of the child." The maltreatment, neglect and the administering of a deadly concoction are cultural practices for dealing with the children. The premeditated murder of those who die from this concoction violates Article 5 of the ACRWC on "survival and development" which stresses that "every child has an inherent right to life." It also violates Article 6 of the UNCRC (1989) on the "right to life, survival and development."

Although Denham (2017) states that physical violence against spirit children is rare, Azumi et al.'s (2018, p.2) account contradicts this when they state that "the Church socio-cultural practise promotes violence against children." The spirit children are the ones referred to Azumi et al. in this socio-cultural practice. While violent homicide is not endorsed in some of these cases, child witch cases are exceptional, with child withcesnot only murdered often but very brutally too. Academic reports from different parts of Africa consistently show that child witches are normally abandoned, maimed, tormented or killed (Adinkrah, 2011; Agazue, 2015; Agazue & Gavin, 2015; Cimpric, 2010; Cookey, 2019; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016; Javier, 2005). Acid baths, poisoning, slaughtering, drowning, live burial, live burning (Agazue & Gavin, 2015; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016), being tied to a tree (Cookey, 2019) and other inhumane treatments are commonplace. These are done as part of punishments or to extract confession (Agazue, 2021a; Cookey, 2019).

While many children are murdered following witchcraft-related accusations, others survive and for those who survive, particularly the abandoned ones, their childhood experiences are remarkably different from those of their peers. They are very likely to face stigmatization and discrimination for life (Agazue, 2021a; Cimpric, 2010). Many live on the street as a result (Agazue, 2021a; Cookey, 2019; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016; van der Meer, 2013). Stigmatized girls may resort to survival sex as a way to survive on the street (Agazue, 2021b; van der Meer, 2013). The accused children are also vulnerable to alcohol and drug abuse, physical and sexual violence, sexual exploitation and infections (Cimpric, 2010). Agazue (2021b) has explored how girls living on the streets of Akwa Ibom and Cross River (states of Nigeria), following their stigmatization as witches, are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, sexual violence, sex and labour trafficking, sexually transmitted infections, early pregnancy, and death from diseases. Both Article 3 of the UNCRC and Article 4 of the ACRWC emphasise the "best interest of the child" but all these dehumanizing treatments are contrary to this. The premeditated murder of these children is a violation of Article 6 of the UNCRC that stipulates the "inherent right to life" as well as Article 5 of the ACRWC on "survival and development."

The banishment of the child witches to the street in many parts of Africa is a violation of several rights of children. In all the cases above, these children are singled out from others as spiritual entities or possessed by spirits and then treated differently as a result. Such treatment is a violation of both Article 2 of the UNCRC and Article 3 of the ACRWC that prohibit "non-discrimination" of a child based on any kind of status. While all the children may face some kind of discrimination based on their perceived spiritual status, others may also face additional discrimination based on their disability since disability stands as one of the sources of suspicion of being *abiku, ogbanje*, spirit child or child witch. Discrimination on this ground is also prohibited by the above instruments.

The child witches are banished to the street and bushes for the purpose of preventing them from associating with members of their families and communities, which is a violation of Article 15 of the UNCRC and Article 8 of the ACRWC on the "freedom of association." The presence of child witches on many streets of Africa means that they are automatically deprived of education, which is a violation of Article 28 of the UNCRC and Article 11 of the ACRWC that advocate children's right to education. Their rights to healthcare (Article 14 of ACRWC) and protection (Article 16, 18 and 19 of ACRWC) are also violated as these children are vulnerable to different infections and violence while living on the street.

ABUSE AND FILICIDE FOR ALTRUISM AND ULTERIOR MOTIVES

While it is obvious from the accounts of some of the incidents above that ignorance of medical and psychological conditions is instrumental in promoting the cultural belief that children are spiritual entities or possessed by spirits, some of the abuse, neglect and homicide is motivated by the parents' or carers' agendas. Resnick's (1969, 2016) notion of altruistic filicide might apply in some of these cases. This type of filicide is usually committed "out of love" as opposed to hate or anger in order to save a child from suffering (Resnick, 2016, p.S205). Altruistic filicide by the parents and carers of the children labeled spirits are not uncommon. Chronic illness and disabilities have been previously described as factors leading to suspicion that a child could be a spirit or spiritually possessed (Ameh et al., 2012; Denham, 2017; Mobolade, 1973; Nzewi, 2001; Onunwa, 2010). Some of the parents and other carers who see their children writhing in pain for months or years may feel that the pain is too much for the child, therefore, the need to terminate the life of the child with the aim of saving the child from such suffering. This has been observed among the Kasena and Nankani people of Ghana with respect to spirit children where infanticide against chronicallyill or disabled children is not only supported by families of the child but also members of the community who do not see this as a murder, rather actions taken "in the best interests of the child, particularly in rural and resource poor areas." (Awedoba & Denham, 2013, p.43)

Unwanted child filicide (Resnick, 1969, 2016) is another important explanatory framework in these incidents. Unwanted child filicide occurs when a parent feels that the child is not needed, such as when the child is seen as a hindrance. In some ancient societies, unwanted children were abandoned with the hope that they would be picked up and raised by a passerby, die from exposure, or be devoured by wild animals (Porter & Gavin 2010). As observed by Denham (2017), infanticide against a spirit child frees the mother from the physical hardship and economic burden of caring for a very sick or disabled child. Similarly, Awedoba & Denham (2013, p.43) observed that the Kasena and Nankani people of Ghana engage in infanticide to save the family from the plight of living with a chronically ill child. The child immediately becomes an "unwanted" child as the family's affliction heightens, leading to the contemplation of infanticide.

Agazue (2021a) identified some ulterior motives on the part of parents and guardians who stigmatize children as witches in Nigeria, suggesting that religion is simply used for "legitimization" purposes by individuals who might not believe that the children under their care are witches. This study that focused on the activities of women as carers found that stepmothers wanting to eliminate their stepchildren; prostitutes who see their children as a burden; aunts who consider their orphaned relatives as a burden; spinsters, widows and divorcees desperate for new husbands; and biological mothers who are too poor to take care of their children often take advantage of this

extant belief to eliminate their children (Ibid.). Accusations initiated by stepmothers with the aim of eliminating their stepchildren stand out in these incidents. A similar observation has equally been made in the DRC by aid workers who understand this trend (e.g., Priest et al., 2020).

A previous investigation by the Human Rights Watch (2006, p.48) in the DRC found that children accused of being witches were orphans with relatives facing "increasing economic difficulties themselves." Save the Children had earlier identified the "material aspects" of witchcraft related accusations made against children by family members in the DRC (Javier, 2005, p.22). Van der Meer's (2013, p.134) study in Malawi found that orphans were labeled witches because their upkeep was "too much of a burden to the host family." Media reports (e.g., BBC News, 2005; Chicago Tribune, 2004) also show similar patterns in Angola, which was partly attributed to the 30 years of civil war in that country which produced many orphans who rely on their relatives for survival – the relatives who draw on the endemic belief in child witchcraft to eliminate them.

In Nigeria, the female carers studied by Agazue (2021a) were fond of taking their children to religious leaders, particularly pastors of revivalist churches, and suggesting to them that the child exhibits major characteristics attributable to child witchcraft in their communities in order for the pastor to label the child a witch (Agazue (2021a). The women seek the endorsement of these religious leaders because they are trusted as having the power to detect witches (Agazue (2021a). This endorsement is important because killing a child is a taboo that would normally attract the anger of community members but once the child is labeled by a person considered as an authority in the field (i.e., a religious leader), the perpetrator is very likely to evade justice. This means that not only would community members not question the offender, but they might not even report to the police or assist the police with the investigation if the police became aware of the incident.

Nigerian law prohibits murder for any reason. The country also has laws against witchcraft-related accusations. Both section 216 of the Penal Code 1960 and section 210 of the Criminal Code 2004, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria are explicit on witchcraft accusations: anyone who "accuses or threatens to accuse any person with being a witch or with having the power of witchcraft" is guilty of a misdemeanor and liable to imprisonment for two years. Although some African countries have pro-witchcraft laws while others have anti-witchcraft laws (see Agazue, 2021a), outright brutality or homicide against the accused is never supported even in the countries with pro-witchcraft laws. The abusers and killers of the child witches are simply confident that they will not be caught. Obtaininga label from religious leaders is important to evading justice because family and community members are usually the ones to notify police, but once the murder is justifiable on the ground that a witch was eliminated, they are unlikely to inform the police. Agazue (2021a) then argues that the extant belief in child witchcraft promoted by pastors and spiritualists in different parts of Africa is exploited by individuals to abuse, abandon or kill unwanted children or children considered to be a burden.

In Agazue's (2021a) interviews of aid workers working for children's charities in Nigeria, the aid workers consistently emphasized the role of stepmothers in many cases they had dealt with, noting that these women are often determined to remove a stepchild from the family or to kill the stepchild. They often succeed when they obtain the witch label from their pastors, which they then use to threaten their husbands with termination of the marriage if he refuses to agree to the removal or murder of

the child. The abuses and filicides committed by the stepmothers and aunts can be explained by evolutionary psychological theories. These theories suggest that stepparenting is linked to child abuse for several reasons. For example, stepparents may show less care and concern toward their stepchildren compared to the way biological parents treat their biological children (Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004), and less care in the form of neglect or emotional abuse automatically constitutes child abuse. Compared to biological children, stepchildren face a greater risk of homicide by their stepparents (Gavin and Porter, 2015; Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004). Harris et al.'s (2007, p.85) analysis of 378 cases of children killed by parents found that filicides by stepparents "were disproportionately common" and usually violent and following ongoing abuse.

Wilson et al. (1980) found that child abuse and neglect cases were minimal in households with two natural parents. In a National Youth Survey involving 1,725 children selected from 1,044 households, Fagan (2005) found that physical abuse victims were overrepresented in families without two biological parents. Killings by stepparents were found to be much higher than those committed by biological parents (West, 2007). An analysis of filicide data involving victims aged five and under and which accounted for 42 percent of 8,691 filicides committed in the United States from 1976 to 1994 found that stepparents were responsible for 51.2 filicides per million children per annum compared to genetic parents who were responsible for only 15.6 filicides per million children per annum (Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004). It is suggested that stepparents show fewer concerns toward their stepchildren because the stepparents do not reap the emotional benefits of spending their resources on children not genetically related to them (Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004). This can be explained by the evolutionary theories of resource competition, which suggest that non-biologicallyrelated offspring, including stepchildren, may be removed to prevent competition with biological children (Daly & Wilson, 1988).

Agazue's (2021a) findings support the above with respect to the abuse and murder of child witches in Nigeria. Although Agazue's study was based on qualitative data, the participants drew their conclusions following years of experience as aid workers dealing with incidents of cruelty and homicide against the child witches in families, churches, police cases and court cases. Whilee referring to the crimes against child witches by their stepmothers, an aid worker with over a decade of experience with these incidents stated that "we have not seen any particular case that the husband and wife are together and taking care of the children" (Agazue. 2021a, p.91). A previous study in Nigeria made similar findings and then concluded that there "were no children who lived with both parents" (Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016, p.24). In the DRC, a report by the Human Rights Watch (2006) that refers to the case of a Catholic priest who provided shelter to street children in Kinshasa shows that of the 630 children surveyed by the priest, only seventeen had both parents living. The two latter reports, however, did not focus on stepmothers but all adults taking care of orphans or children from broken homes.

Agazue's (2021a) study found that stepchildren and orphans were often targeted by stepmothers for the purposes of removing them from the family to prevent competition with their own children. Relatives of orphans sometimes eliminate these children for the purposes of acquiring properties owned by the children's parents. Human Rights Watch (2006) referred to an observation made by an official in the Division of Social Affairs in Kinshasa to describe how orphans whose parents died of AIDS were victims of witchcraft-related persecutions by their extended family members who were determined to acquire properties belonging to the orphans' parents.

In early modern Europe, witchcraft and magic became fashionable at the cultural level, so that the individuals exploiting them might not believe in them, yet used them to achieve their objectives (Briggs, 2002), such as the targeting of women (Levack, 1987; Zwissler, 2018), morally-bankrupt persons (Levack, 2006), heretics (Briggs, 2002) and social non-conformists (Bailey, 2006; Briggs, 2002; Burns, 2003; Bailey, 2006; Trevor-Roper, 1969). In a like manner, contemporary African religious leaders use their influence to enable women to exploit the belief in witchcraft to eliminate unwanted children. With the ubiquity of churches in Africa and the increasing sermons on child witches and the havoc they purportedly wreak, abuses and homicide against the accused are legitimized (Agazue, 2021a).

The abuse and filicide committed by widows, divorcees and unmarried women against child witches was mostly connected to the desire to attract husbands (Agazue, 2021a). Divorcees and widows murdered their children to avoid suitors seeing them as burdens (Agazue, 2021a). Unmarried women also murdered their children for the same reason but also for the purposes of avoiding stigma attached to "illegitimacy." (Agazue, 2021a.) Throughout history and across cultures, childbearing outside marriage comes with a sort of stigma for both the mothers (Agazue, 2016a; Barone, 2016) and the children who might be seen as "illegitimate." (Fuchs, 1982; Oberman, 2004) There were laws in the nineteenth century England to deter "bastardy" by unwed mothers, although there were also those who opposed such laws, describing them as unfair and inhumane (Davison, 1984; Taylor, 2017). The situation in North America with respect to illegitimacy was similar at the time (e.g., Maldonado, 2011; Murray, 2011). Academic literature consistently suggests that illegitimacy promotes filicides by mothers (e.g., Oberman, 2004; Lancy, 2015; Esteves, 2014; West, 2007; Pitt & Bale, 1995; Malherbe, 2007). Among Ayoreo foragers of Bolivia, babies considered illegitimate are quickly buried after their birth (Lancy, 2015).

Although attitudes toward unmarried mothers with so-called illegitimate children have been changing in many societies, they persist in other societies. In many African societies, childbearing outside marriage remains a contentious issue (e.g., Agazue, 2016a; Burman & Preston-Whyte, 1992; Delaunay, 2011). This, however, is also changing in many African societies. Agazue (2021a) identifies illegitimacy as one of the factors promoting abuse, abandonment and filicide in connection to the child witch phenomenon in Nigeria, where unmarried women approach religious leaders with their children to put pressure on the religious leader to label the child a witch in order for them to kill the child with ease. By so doing, they would appear childless to any potential suitors.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how the belief that children are partly spirits or possessed by spirits promotes child abuse, neglect and filicide in contemporary Africa. The fear of uncertainty faced by families who genuinely believe that their children are spirits or possessed by spirits puts pressure on such families to violate the rights of the child in several ways. Although the children are not always killed, abuse and neglect are always commonplace among those who genuinely believe in this phenomenon. While some parents genuinely believe in the spiritual comradeship or possession of children, others might not believe in them but pretend that they do to advance their agenda. In such cases, the notion of spiritual comradeship or possession is exploited to eliminate unwanted children more easily in a way that enables members of the community to see the act as cleansing their community of mischievous spirits as opposed to committing evil.

In reality, the belief that children are spirits or possessed by spirits contributes to a type of child murder that is often difficult for authorities to spot or investigate. One of the solutions to this social problem is the enlightenment of members of the communities where these beliefs are commonplace. As previously noted, education, access to healthcare, socioeconomic empowerment and law enforcement actions have contributed to the reduction of the belief and the abuse and filicide connected to them. However, success remains difficult in more rural communities where natives struggle to have access to the above. Law enforcement is often not present in some of these communities, thus, the people are hardly deterred by potential legal punishments.

Although education and other developments mentioned above have worked in reducing this social problem and are likely to reduce it more or even eradicate it entirely, this is not without some difficulties--even if the rural communities become suddenly developed and gain access to the modern facilities they lack. These difficulties are due to the fact that the belief itself works for families who simply exploit it to achieve their agendas. This is particularly the case with incidents connected to child witchcraft, which are witnessed in both rural and urban areas in particular countries where they occur. In these cases, the more effective action could be enlightening law enforcement operatives on how such belief is exploited by certain adults. Law enforcement operatives should be enlightened on the typical profiles of the adults, including parents, guardians and religious leaders who exploit the belief systems fraudulently to enable law enforcement to do a more thorough investigation of homicides and abuse of any children under their care.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Chima Agazue https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2995-0179 is a UK-based British-Nigerian scholar with teaching and research interests in the areas of psychology, criminology, and criminal justice. He has taught criminology and criminal justice at the Blackpool University Centre and psychology at Bath Spa University. His research interests include sexual exploitation and abuse of vulnerable women and children; child cruelty and homicide by mothers and female caregivers; witchcraft-motivated violence and homicide; ritually motivated crimes; the perception of children as spiritual entities or possessed by certain mischievous spirits; bystander intervention in violent emergencies; the changing patterns of female criminality, particularly criminal violence and homicide; and the Nigerian notion of "one-chance" robbery.

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