



A Review of Nigerian Christians' Response to the 2019 Witchcraft Conference

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Abstract

For centuries, witchcraft was a major part of religious belief in many cultures, including those in Africa. It was the focus of the much-contested conference of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 2019. Many Nigerian Christians publicly debated the relevance of a conference on witchcraft and demanded its cancellation. This paper is a personal contemplation of the reactions of Nigerian Christians to the conference. Data for the paper is drawn from interviews, newspaper publications and the social media. I argue that an academic study of witchcraft is not out of tune with any religious creed, including Christianity; and that the vehemence against the conference by the Christian community in Nigeria, to which I belong, calls into question our understanding of our faith. In effect, the paper probes the public reaction to the conference, considers its unintended outcomes, and draws out the lessons that can be learned about Nigerian Christians and Christianity in Nigeria.

Introduction

Belief in witchcraft is a global phenomenon. Its existence was a major part of religious belief in many cultures, dating back to ancient times (Mitchison, 2019, p. 6; Dewar, 1934, p. 4-10). This fact was captured as follows:

So universal is the belief in spiritual influences, and more especially in their malignant influences, that no race of men, no period of time, no region of the globe, have been exempt from it. It meets us in the remote antiquity of Asiatic life, in the comparatively recent barbarism of the American aborigines, in the creeds of all the nations who branched off thousands of years ago eastward and westward from their Caucasian cradle, in the myths, the observances, and the dialects of nations who have no other affinity with one another than the mere form of man. ... No nation, indeed, can



reproach another nation with its addiction to magic without in an equal degree condemning itself (Moir, 1852, p. iv-v).

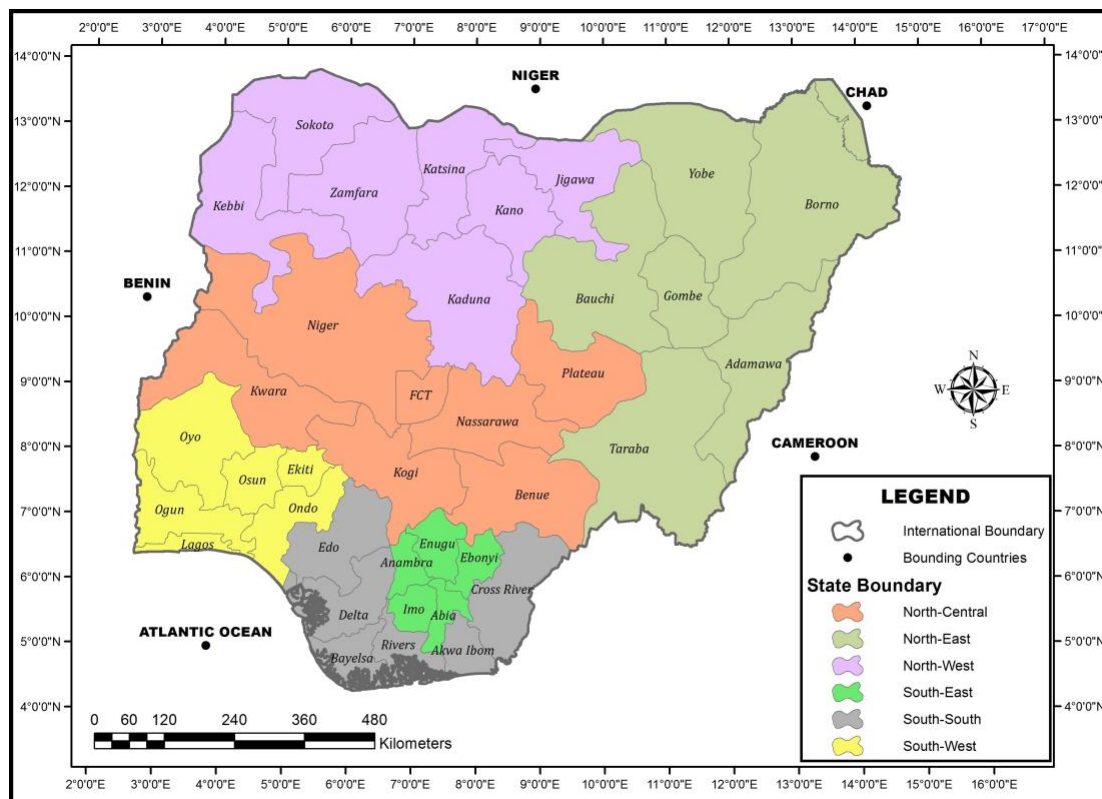
It is this same phenomenon – witchcraft – that was the focus of the much-contested conference of the Centre for Policy Studies and Research, University of Nigeria, in 2019. The conference was put together to investigate the subject of witchcraft in Nigeria and the social ills emanating therefrom. The deafening outcry against the theme of the conference compelled the university administration, in its bid to calm nerves, to request the organisers to come up with another theme. The conference was consequently hosted under the theme: “Dimensions of Human Behavior”.

Among the Igbo ethnic community in South-East Nigeria (see Map 1 below), where the conference held, and in other parts of Africa, witchcraft embeds the belief in the ability to harm others through diabolical means (Kounine, 2018). But, indeed, this is generally believed of witchcraft. As Kounine (2018) declared: “witchcraft, at its most fundamental, involves wishing harm to others.” A witch or wizard is considered to both possess and exercise the power to harm, kill, cause misfortune, accident, barrenness and a host of other imaginable and unimaginable harm.

This paper derives its motivation from the uproar that greeted the announcement of a conference on the meanings, factors and practices of witchcraft organised by the Centre for Policy Studies and Research of the University of Nigeria in November 2019. The hypothetical underpinning of the paper lies in the fact that religion is central to people’s identity and experience; and that religious values frame social change, cohesion and conflict everywhere in the world (Dimock, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/religion/>). Religious belief was presented as the reason for condemning the theme of the conference and demanding its cancellation. Several Christian opponents of the conference argued that the Judaeo-Christian text, the Bible, which they subscribe to, has zero tolerance for witchcraft; and that a conference on witchcraft is an avenue to encourage its practice. Public reaction to the planned conference was most fierce in the South-East geopolitical zone, Nigeria’s Christian heartland, where the hosting institution is sited; and among Christians of all creeds and professions including those in the academia. Nigerians in the diaspora also lent their voices to the debate. Generally, Christians blacklisted the conference.



Map 1: Nigeria's geopolitical zones showing the South-East zone, the epicentre of the uproar against the 2019 Witchcraft Conference.¹



Many dictionary definitions of witchcraft seem to support both the Igbo and global perceptions of this phenomenon. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2022) defined witchcraft as “the use of sorcery or magic,” “communication with the devil or with a familiar spirit,” “an irresistible influence or fascination,” and “the use of supernatural powers to influence or predict events.” The *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary* (2022) also defined it as “the activity of performing magic to help or harm other people.

Synonyms for witchcraft include bewitchery, bewitchment, conjuring, devilry, diablerie, enchantment, ensorcellment, magic, mojo, necromancy, sorcery, thaumaturgy, voodooism, witchery and wizardry. While words commonly linked to witchcraft are “abracadabra, amulet, charm, fetish, mascot, periapt, phylactery, talisman, conjuration, incantation, spell, curse, hex, jinx, augury, crystal gazing, divination, forecasting, foreknowing, foreseeing, foretelling, fortune-telling, predicting, presaging, prognosticating, soothsaying, sortilege, the black art, hexerei, hoodoo, occultism, spiritualism, augur, omen, exorcism, conjuration, thaumaturgy, theurgy, witchery, witching, wizardry, and Wicca” (*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2022). These may differ across cultures, but

¹ Created by the author.

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they comprise what is commonly held as, or associated with, witchcraft across the globe, and that includes in Nigeria as well. Some of these words—example: bewitchment, devilry, necromancy, sorcery and wizardry, for instance—conjure situations that are potentially harmful, or which could be deployed to harm others. Buttressing this, Rick Nesbitt, a Briton and practicing Magician wrote the conference chair to sympathize with their plight. He affirmed that some “magicians are evil.” And added:

I can understand why there are a number of Abrahamists who voiced opposition toward the event (thus prompting a change in name to a conference on ‘Human Behavior’). It is because there are certain forms of Witchcraft which have become associated with criminal activity – with desecration of the Dead, kidnapping, body-part harvesting and murder (R. Nesbitt, personal communication, November 29, 2019).

Early Europeans to Africa used words that fall within the gamut of practices associated with witchcraft to describe indigenous religious practices they observed in South-East Nigeria. Among them were fetishism—from fetish, “a Portuguese word meaning witchcraft” (Dewar, 1934, p. 8), juju, magic, voodoo and witchcraft (Baike, 1856, p. 311; Kingsley, 1899, p. 156; Partridge, 1905, p. 116-7; Basden, 1921; Sparks, 2004, p. 12). Consequently, heathenism and paganism became popular ascriptions for African indigenous religions (Perharm, 1937, p. 202, 216-7). The common assumption that witchcraft connotes the deployment of occult powers, activated through engagement in visible, tangible anti-social acts in order to gain such desirable ends as power or influence over other people has some verifiable basis (Ferdinando, 2007, p. 428). However, Africa’s pre-colonial religious activities cannot exactly be summed up as magic or witchcraft as defined above because the idea of the occult was absent in the African primordial religious worldview that promoted the worship of a supreme being through various intermediaries. Those practices, to indigenous pre-colonial Africans, were simply religious acts until foreign colonial observers imposed their own values on them what is undeniable is that belief in witchcraft as a social practice was central to the day-to-day experience of Africans and remains so for all religious creeds in the continent—Christian, Muslim and traditional. Similarly, belief in witchcraft permeates every aspect of life in the continent (Kim 2013), notwithstanding refutations by some scholars of the reality of witchcraft because it cannot be scientifically proven. Meanwhile, Moir (1852, p. iii), in *Magic and Witchcraft* maintains that witchcraft is a verifiable practice, not mere superstition or unscientific reality. He asserts:

For gross and painful as the details of superstition may be, yet superstition, by its very etymology, implies a dogma or a system of practice standing upon some basis of fact or truth: and however vain or noxious the superstructure may be, the foundation of it is in some way connected with those deep verities upon which rest also the roots of philosophy and religion.

Witchcraft serves a variety of purposes in many societies in Africa and elsewhere. Besides the proven actuality of the practice attested to by many authors (Moir, p. 1852; Partridge, 1905; Basden, 1921; Sparks, 2004; Bastian, 2002; Kim, 2013), witchcraft is used in Africa for accumulation of power, prestige, wealth, scapegoating of rivals or unfortunate persons, which sometimes result in the social exclusion of victims who often include the poor, physically weak and voiceless members of the society (Moore & Sanders, 2001, p. 227; Simpson, 1996, p. 6; Dewar, 1934, p. 4-10).



Method

This paper is qualitative in its design. It combines the narrative, inductive and descriptive historical approaches in examining the reactions of Nigerian Christians to the witchcraft conference of 2019. Data was sourced from newspaper publications on the event, correspondences on social media, specifically Facebook, interviews conducted by the author and reported with pseudonyms, and email correspondences. The research spanned the period before, during and after the conference. This report probes the reaction of the Christian community in Nigeria, including Christian leaders, to the conference and discusses what they reveal about Christians and Christianity in Nigeria. Although the South-East geopolitical zone was the epicentre of the opposition, Christians from all over Nigeria weighed in on the matter. The paper is divided into three sections: the introduction, which establishes the pervasive nature of witchcraft beliefs globally and its indications in Nigeria; then a discussion of the lessons that emerge from the uproar and how these reflect on the practice of Christianity in South-East Nigeria especially, and the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

This work is built upon the theory of classical conditioning and its presupposition of the effectiveness of behavioural engineering. This theory seeks to explain how conscious beings learn, acquire and change behaviours. It argues that a living organism can be conditioned to respond to a specific stimulus in a particular way; that a conscious being (like an animal or a human being) can be led to link a specific discernible response to a particular type of object he or she observes. Behavioural conditioning is made possible by associating a response with an object of a subject's attention (an external stimulus) and reinforcing it by repeating the act of pairing. A neutral stimulus must be paired with an unconditioned trigger/stimulus, and this pairing must continue until the subject begins to elicit and continues to elicit almost unconsciously a particular behaviour in relation to that stimulus different from and lying outside itself (Kalat, 2017).

Notwithstanding the fact that Pavlov's work (Kalat, 2017) focused on animals and Skinner's research (Kalat, 2017) dwelt on human beings, both thinkers advocated the principle of automatic, or unconscious, learning. Classical conditioning rests on the assumption that human beings have no innate ideas or knowledge in opposition to Aristotle's and Locke's idea (Duschinsky, 2012) that the human soul is an empty space, a vacuum available to accept data; this makes for the possibility of the human soul to receive data in the course of interacting with things outside itself. In relation to the present discourse on fear of witchcraft amongst scholars and Christians, we note that fear in itself is a natural, non-rational emotional complement of human nature that has no necessary connection to witchcraft just as witchcraft is a reference to a practice external to human nature (body, soul and spirit). To respond with fear to witchcraft requires associating and reinforcing the human emotion of fear with witchcraft to a point where the two stimuli (fear and witchcraft) become necessarily linked within the subject's perceptual frame and neural system such that awareness, or a suggestion, of witchcraft elicits fear even when there is little or no reflective thought about its reality per se. This conditioning could easily happen in any environment that has institutions and structures (for instance: schools, churches, mosques, media houses, and entertainment industries) that promote such pairing either intentionally or unintentionally.

The Argument

The central argument of this paper is that an academic study of witchcraft is not out of tune with Christian teachings because the Bible encourages learning. The Old Testament book of Proverbs (16:



p. 16) [using the King James Version (1611)²] states: “How much better *is it* to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!” In the New Testament, on the other hand, immediately after urging Christians: “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth,” it warned them: “But shun profane *and* vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness” (2 Timothy 2: 15-16). What this calls for is that a Christian should strike the proper balance between knowledge acquisition and knowledge application. The Bible eschews any knowledge that tends to ungodliness, a signification of something inherently revulsive to the human core, but not knowledge that liberates or knowledge that corrects social ills such as what the contested witchcraft conference set out to accomplish.

To hush knowledge that would potentially improve the living experiences of people makes the actors accomplices in anti-social acts several of which abound in Nigeria and revolve around traditional understandings of witchcraft (Cimpric, 2010, p. 31). Further, it borders on duplicity for some Christian leaders in Nigeria (*The Nation*, 2019; *P. M. News*, 2019) to condemn public academic investigation of the phenomenon of witchcraft but commonly teach on witchcraft during church services as can be seen from the flyer in Figure 1).

Figure 1: Church Programme in South-East Nigeria on the theme of Witchcraft.³



My first exposure to witchcraft as a subject of discourse happened in a church service in 1997. Thereafter, I severally listened to sermons in different churches dealing with the operations of witches and wizards. The Customized Bible of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries titled *The Prayer and Deliverance Bible*, published in 2007, has in its appendix (p. 28-30) a prayer topic “Killing the Witchcraft in Your Destiny.” Since congregants could learn about witchcraft to pray against it, scholars could also study witchcraft to stop negative social and violent practices associated with it. The next section will look closely at what the Christian reaction to the conference reveals about the state of Christianity and its practitioners in Nigeria at the time.

² All scriptures are taken from the Authorised King James Version.

³ Created by the author.



Discussion: Probing Nigerian Christians' Reaction to the Witchcraft Conference

As noted in the introduction, most Christians in Nigeria believe that witchcraft is real and responsible for all kinds of ills in the society. Its existence is evidenced in the misfortunes that befall people, and these include things like infertility, sudden death, unemployment, occupational failure, accidents, sicknesses, and poor governance, among others (Gershman, 2022a; Gershman 2022b; Behringer, 2004, Bastian, 2002). Daily expressions of attributions to witchcraft activities or occurrences are heard in colloquial expressions that include the following: "Ndi a anwa m" – direct translation will be "they have tried me' but the actual meaning is "they have attacked me." Another expression is "my village people" or "African science" – suggesting that witchcraft is Africa's version of elevated scholarship (C. Chukwu and A. Udemé, personal communication, November 19, 2019).

Although witchcraft is intensely dreaded in many Nigerian communities, it would appear that people fear even more persons suspected to be witches or wizards. This fear also extends to talking about witches in public. Generally, the country's fear of anything remotely paranormal or the occult is palpable (Adibe, 2018). This dread for witchcraft showed up strongly across the nation in 2019 when it appeared on Facebook that a conference on "Witchcraft: Meanings, Factors, and Practices" was to be held at the University of Nigeria (Facebook post, June 1, 2019). The conference call was explicit that the goal was to interrogate public perception of witchcraft, but the organisers took this as a ruse to disguise the real intent of the conference. Notwithstanding, the call reads:

Metaphorically, "witchcraft" ("amusu" or "igbansi" in Igbo language, "Aje" in Yoruba, "Ohe" in Idoma, "Ifot" in Ibibio, "Pou" in Ijaw and "Opochi" or "enebe" in Igbira) has come to be associated with strange activities bearing on the supernatural, which affects the human world. Definitions of witchcraft differ from country to country and from community to community. Likewise, all cultures do not share a consistent pattern of witchcraft practice and beliefs. In Nigeria, for instance, the practice of witchcraft often intercepts with other concepts like magic, sorcery, esotericism, diabolism and even religion. From an interdisciplinary point of view, this conference seeks to find answers to pertinent questions such as: What is witchcraft? What factors influence witchcraft labelling in various communities? How does the practice of witchcraft affect society?

The organisers went ahead and listed the conference sub-themes as follows:

- Conceptual issues in witchcraft
- The philosophy of witchcraft
- Witchcraft in history
- Witchcraft in literature
- Folklore and witchcraft
- The science of witchcraft
- Witchcraft as an art
- Gender and witchcraft
- The Politics of witchcraft
- Secret cult and witchcraft
- Theology and witchcraft
- Sacred texts and witchcraft
- The economics of witchcraft



- Security and witchcraft
- Social work and witchcraft practice
- Witchcraft and social crisis
- Witchcraft in traditional African societies
- Witchcraft and governance
- Witchcraft and development
- Spirituality and witchcraft
- Witchcraft labelling
- And any other related topic.

From the foregoing, the conference sought to determine, among other things, the intelligibility of witchcraft and the impact of witchcraft on peoples' lives in different parts of the country and among different religious groups. Instead of being understood for what it is, a nation-wide protest against the conference ensued. The social media erupted with debates querying the usefulness of such a conference. Fear and anger were the chief emotional expressions identified in the reactions to the conference. Opponents resorted to, and enjoined, imprecatory prayer, resistance, accusation, threats, and instigation of religious activists to frustrate the conference. Bishop Goddy Okafor, chairman of the South-East Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Bishop Godwin Madu, chairman of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) circulated letters calling Christians to pray against the conference and demand its cancellation. Bishop Okafor's letter published in *P. M. News* (November 22, 2019) enjoined thus:

I call on all Heads of Blocks, State Chairmen and other Stakeholders of Christian Association of Nigeria South-East Zone to take up aggressive prayers against the planned convention of Witches and Wizards slated to hold on November 26 at UNN. This convention is not of God and must not hold in Jesus' name. Exodus 22:18 says 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'. I hereby direct all Christian churches in South-East of Nigeria to take up lamentation and pray against this evil movement in all our churches this coming Sunday. I also call upon all Christian Campus Fellowship Groups and other Christian Students' Associations to join in this effort and stand up for Jesus Christ Our Lord against this evil development in South-East of Nigeria.

We the Christian community reject in its entirety this attempt to hand over the UNN to the devil. This kind of thing cannot happen without some spiritual implications and effect and this is why we are saying 'No' to it. I join in calling on all Christians to hold fervent prayers to avert this looming danger. This is nothing but initiation through the back-door, and everything must be done to stop it. We urge the authorities of the UNN to avert the wrath of God by calling this conference off. It will not be of any advantage to the people but will end up in bringing calamity.

I will take up an analysis of the Bishop's message later. In the meantime, in response to this call, Nigerian Christians swung into action in opposition to the conference. Some prayed that God would "strike the organisers to death with thunder if they fail to call off the conference" (E. Nnaemeka, personal communication, November 25, 2019), while others rained insults on them. Several calls were sent to the Director of the Centre, the organising committee chair. Henry Kossi, president of the Joint Christian Body (JCB) in the University of Nigeria, the apex body of all Christian groups in the



University, and immediate past president of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries Campus Fellowship (MFMCF) threatened the Director that he would mobilise all Christian students for a public protest against the conference. This was extreme, Knowing the severity of student protests in the country. Heads of tertiary institutions in Nigeria do everything ethically possible to avoid student protests or to nip them in the bud before they escalate because of their propensity to turn violent at the cost of both human lives and existing infrastructure (Odion-Akhaine, 2009; Ngere, 2021). This was what Bishop Okafor considered the best way to suppress the conference. Meanwhile, there was no attempt by the Bishop to reach out to the Centre for Policy Studies and Research that was to host the conference or to dialogue with the organisers, who themselves were Christians. In obvious display of blind followership and crowd mentality but acting on the strength of a spiritual father's call, Christian undergraduate and postgraduate students decried the conference. It lavishly produced placards that were widely circulated and posted in strategic parts of the university bearing these messages:

"Say No to the meeting of witches and wizards!!! We are [a] Christian community. Don't pollute our environment please!"

"University of Nigeria belongs to Jesus. So, witches and wizards, No way!! No Vacancy!!!"

"We plead the blood of Jesus over the University of Nigeria. Hence [,] we reject all forms of witchcraft overtly or covertly in Jesus' Name, Amen."

Staff letterboxes were inundated with handbills with the same messages. On top of these, church groups and individuals outside the university environment and the Southeast geopolitical zone produced videos circulated on social media condemning the conference. A common image on the pages of newspapers and social media platforms depicted the Director of the Centre riding on a broom or supervising the content of a cauldron.

Outside the tumult caused by those opposed to the conference, can it be justifiably proven that it was necessary? Popular opinion and happenings within the country in the years leading up to the conference show that the conference was necessary. Insinuations of witchcraft and witchcraft happenings had pervaded the private and public spaces, including governance. State governors and federal military officers were openly recruiting anti-insurgency warriors from the ranks of persons with esoteric potentials (*Sahara Reporters*, 2019; *Vanguard*, 2019; *Associated Press*, 2019; *The Guardian*, 2018). These recruits were considered best qualified to battle Boko Haram on the strength of their esoteric powers. Unfortunate persons were commonly accused of witchcraft without any tangible evidence other than the fact that they were old or appeared to prosper more than their peers and competitors, among other malicious reasons.

Nine months before the conference, on April 9, 2019, at a different forum, the Director of the Centre had informed the general public—composed of academics, university students, politicians, and journalists, alongside other classes of society—of the need to interrogate the phenomenon of witchcraft against the backdrop of events in the country. She laid down reasons why it had become pertinent to probe the term "witchcraft" and its associated practices. Her speech reads:

For our first annual conference, which will hold in October 2019, the subject of engagement is: 'Witchcraft.' We shall put forward for reflection and consideration how that phenomenon has come to form large scale perceptions to life in Nigeria as



we answer questions like: What is witchcraft? What factors influence witchcraft accusations in different communities? What are the supernatural angles to the question of witchcraft? And many others. Yes, it will be all about witchcraft from different disciplinary angles for no ethnic and religious community in Nigeria is neither aware of, nor influenced by, this phenomenon. Very recently, precisely last week, *Sahara Reporters*, New York, carried the news that the government of Zamfara, one of Nigeria's sharia-compliant states, will 'recruit 1,700 local charmers to fight insecurity.' They will not be the first to do so. Same procedure was adopted in several parts of North-Central Nigeria as a solution to herders-farmers imbroglio in the last four years. What can we learn from this? Many of you may know more than I do about the recourse to esoteric sciences in attempts to find solutions to human problems. Let's come together and put these issues and practices on the front burner of scholarship and see where they will take us (Uchendu, 2019).

This statement at a public event appeared well received. No objections were raised; rather a resounding applause welcomed the idea. Seven months later, barely two weeks to the conference, a national outcry ensued from within the same location where the conference was introduced months earlier.

An institution of higher learning is automatically a place for unceasing knowledge production and learning. This fact was not lost on those Nigerians who weighed in on the national debate in favour of the conference. Adibe (2019), for instance, was of the opinion that the important thing about the conference "is the element of critical inquiry embedded in the decision by a research unit of a University to organise such a conference" and not necessarily whether witchcraft practitioners would gather or not. When it is also considered that witchcraft, either as a subject or perceived practice, featured regularly in the country's narratives (Nwakamma, 2019), it validates and makes necessary its academic study in a conference setting.

The lively debate on the conference that developed on Facebook and other social media platforms brought to the fore how deeply and broadly witchcraft accusations had become common practices in many Nigerian societies at about the time the conference was scheduled. This exchange on the Facebook page of the Centre for Policy Studies and Research illustrates this point.

I. O. S.: I always ask myself 'if all our grandparents are witches and wizards, does it mean that we will also automatically become witches and wizards too when we also become grandparents'?

J. E. Z.: This is really very important. Our belief system has virtually affected every aspect of life. Even animals in the bush are not left out of it. Vultures have gone into extinction; cats are on the way [out] because of our belief system. The conference is timely.

Lessons from the Witchcraft Conference on Nigerian Christians and Christianity in Nigeria

Christianity is in its second functional century of existence in Nigeria. Outside of the fifteenth century Portuguese evangelisation of the Kingdom of Benin (Ediagbonya, 2015, p. 214-15) and the missionary effort of the Syndrum brothers in 1778 at Calabar (Sparks, 2004, p. 133-136), active missionary enterprise commenced in Nigeria in September 1842 with the arrival of Methodist Missionaries at



Badagry, near Lagos (Amadi, 1977). Within a century of Christian mission work under the auspices of several mission agencies, Christianity became Nigeria's dominant religion. Statistics from the World Religion Database and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012, p. 18-22, 48) indicate that in 2010, Christians accounted for 49.3% of the estimated 158,358,818 population of Nigeria, Muslims 48.8%, and other faiths 1.9%. In 2011, from an estimated national population of 162,471,000, Christians made up 50.8%, Muslims 47.8% and other faiths 1.4%. This was before the escalation of insurgency in North-East Nigeria in 2016, Notwithstanding the deliberate killing of Christians by Muslim insurgents (Omeni, 2020, p. 44 and 55; Ibrahim, 2021), it has not significantly altered the statistics.

Anchored on faith in Jesus Christ, as both God and Savior of the world, Christianity eschews fear except for Yahweh, Christians' triune God. More than 520 references to fear were found in the King James (1611) Version of the Bible. Psalm 32 (verse 4), attributed to Israel's King David, neatly captures the Biblical perspective on fear. It reads: "I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears." Talking of whom to fear and what to fear, Jesus Christ told His disciples in the Gospel of Luke (chapter 12, verses 4 - 7):

And I say unto you my friends, be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.

Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.

The Apostle Paul expressed in 1 Timothy 1:7 the common understanding of the evolving Church that abjures fear. He wrote: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." These scriptures, and numerous others besides, also popular among Nigerian Christians of all pedigrees – especially Orthodox, Pentecostal and Evangelicals – promote the absence of fear in the Christian believer. However, it was very glaring to observers that fear of witchcraft was the dominant emotion expressed by those who campaigned against the conference, who threatened the organisers and called for the immediate cancelation of the programme. According to medical science, fear "arises when sensory systems in the brain have determined that an external stimulus poses a threat. Outputs of threat detection circuits trigger a general increase in brain arousal and can result in altered threat processing: fear and anxiety disorders" (Rosenberg, 2017). This causes the body and the mind to switch to a resistance mode, which was the end result of the fear of a supposed meeting of witches at the University of Nigeria.

Thus, the fear of witchcraft and suspected repercussions from witches or wizards (E. Nnaemeka, personal communication, November 25, 2019) naturally undermined people's ability to mentally process the information about the conference that was publicly available months before the event and to identify the focus of the meeting. The misconceptions over the real intent of the organisers and the planned academic investigation took many shades. It became convenient to label the conference as a "meeting of witches and wizards," "an attempt to desecrate the land and hand the university over to the devil," and an effort "to blindfold others and cast spell that would attract God's anger upon the country." These utterances positioned Nigerian Christians up to that point in time as persons who did not take their scriptures seriously. If they did, they would have had no reason to fear those who had no power to destroy their souls in hellfire (cf. Luke 12: 4-7).



Another message conveyed to the public about Nigerian Christians, from the gamut of exchanges that trailed the conference, is that majority of the Christians, represented by those who voiced their opposition to the conference, had little or no confidence in the promises of their God. Even though Jesus Christ had said “But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered, Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows” (Luke 12:7), these followers of His and their leaders whose duty it was to guide them on the Christ’s prescribed path, sustained an outcry against a conference out of fear of unverified repercussions. Their reaction showed forth as a complete negation of both the promises above and others found in their scripture such as Jesus’ “Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall by any means hurt you” (Luke 10: 19). If this is not enough assurance to any sincere follower of Jesus Christ that his or her physical and spiritual safeties were secure, then they are likely confused, undeveloped or double-faced.

Christian leaders’ hostility to the conference and calls for national prayers against it further reflected the state of the Nigerian Church as one lacking in discernment, what the New Testament calls “test every spirit” – question, evaluate, assess. It was among the spiritual gifts recommended for Christians in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (12: 10). Proverbs 3: 21-24 contains another instruction to Judaeo-Christian subscribers about this gift that reads:

My son, do not lose sight of this: Preserve sound judgment and discernment. They will be life to your soul and adornment to your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you rest, your sleep will be sweet.

Nigerian Christians and their leaders presented themselves as seriously lacking in discernment. Otherwise, they would have known by divine intuition the true intentions of the organisers of the conference as well as the possible outcomes of the gathering. They would not have relied on negative conjectures and gainsaying that later became an embarrassment.

It was also easy to observe from the reactions of many Christians that many have disconnected themselves from their God-assigned responsibilities. Apart from purpose and responsibilities, any system must evidence a shadow of itself. The media is frequently inundated with news showing that the current generation of Nigerian Christians prioritises the pursuit of ostentatious lifestyle over their divinely assigned duties (Trend with Khama, 2022, January 11, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/xK-xrRdlCWo>). Some publicly brag about their material acquisitions in the same way that their leaders openly discuss how to out-possess their rivals in private jets, lush homes, private universities, oversized church auditoriums, and other pleasurable conveniences (*Vanguard*, 2012; *The Ripples*, 2019). Meanwhile, the Synoptic Gospels and the lifestyles of the first generation of Jesus’ disciples are in accord with the fact that the primary duty of Christians is to make “disciples of all men” – also referred to as the “ministry of reconciliation” or “soul winning” – and not loving the world and the things of this world (cf. I John 2: 15). The “ministry of reconciliation” is well understood to imply bringing men to the Way of Christ. The following scriptures attest to this responsibility:

Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you (John 20:21).

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I



have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matthew 28: 19-20).

And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5: 18-19).

The task of soul-winning did not exclude any category of Jesus' followers. If Christians in and outside the South-East who cried out against the witchcraft conference had their priorities right, they would instead have seen the abundant opportunity the conference provided them for reaching out to "witches" assuming it was a gathering of witches. Their imagination did not transcend their fears to see the possibilities presented by the conference. Fear also blocked their minds from anything they could have learned from the conference. We see from this the debilitating power of fear and can appreciate why the apostle Paul reminded his co-worker, Timothy, and by inference all Christians, that "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." Modern science agrees with the Bible, that fear robs its victims of a sound mind by impairing the functioning of the mind. To put this in perspective, a 2021 article from the University of Minnesota titled "Impact of Fear and Anxiety" reads:

Fear can interrupt processes in our brains that allow us to regulate emotions, read non-verbal cues and other information presented to us, reflect before acting, and act ethically. This impacts our thinking and decision-making in negative ways, leaving us susceptible to intense emotions and impulsive reactions. All of these effects can leave us unable to act appropriately (Delagran, 2021).

At the same time the damage to human memory was captured thus:

Fear can impair formation of long-term memories and cause damage to certain parts of the brain, such as the hippocampus. This can make it even more difficult to regulate fear and can leave a person anxious most of the time. To someone in chronic fear, the world looks scary and their memories confirm that (Delagran, 2021).

When Bishop Okafor, the state chairman of CAN, referred to the conference as "the planned convention of Witches and Wizards," which "is not of God and must not hold in Jesus' name;" and made the additional remark that "the Christian community reject in its entirety this attempt to hand over the UNN to the devil," three traits emerge: (i) Indulging in false accusation, (ii) Passing mistruth as truth, and (iii) Presumptuousness – an attempt to speak for God when actually God did not say what was claimed. These behaviors, pretty common among many Christians, are disapproved of in the Bible. This warning is explicit in Deuteronomy 18:20, which reads: "But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die." It bordered on irresponsibility for a Christian leader to claim that an academic investigation he knew nothing about "will not be of any advantage to the people but will end up in bringing calamity." The conference was hosted successfully. No evil, injury or harm to any person, who attended the conference, was recorded or reported.

The unquestioned compliance of many Christians to their Bishops' orders show how today's followers of Christ in Nigeria have bequeathed the place of God in their lives to their human spiritual lords. The



most surprising display of this form of coerced compliance was manifested by the conference keynote speaker, a two-time former Vice Chancellor of two Nigerian universities – Benue State University and Veritas University. Following the ecclesiastical threat of a bishop from his state of origin, Bishop Sam Zuga of House of Joy Ministry, he withdrew from the conference, leaving the organisers and the conferees without a keynote lecturer. Bishop Zuga’s denunciation widely circulated on social media was captured in the print media as follows:

Prof. David Ker, I can’t be a servant of the Most High God from Benue State and allow you to go and be the international teacher of witchcraft, you are only not attending that conference, tell your host, the international conference of witchcraft cannot hold anywhere in Nigeria (*The Nation*, 2019).

Blind obedience to human authority was nowhere enjoined in the Bible. On one hand, it could be likened to murdering one’s conscience to please spiritual superiors. On the other hand, it is a manipulative weapon enforced by spiritual superiors on their flocks, which stifles creativity, suffocates genuine spiritual growth and enthrones a quasi-master-slave relationship. In a sense, that is a form of witchcraft, akin to the type Paul spoke of when he rebuked the Galatians (cf. Galatians 3:1) on being manipulated to abandon the truth that they knew aforetime (Neyrey, 1988), which is something diabolic in the sense of what pulls apart (May, 1976, p. 153). Employing the imagery of the Pharisees and the Jews of his time (Matthew 15:14b), Jesus warned his followers: “if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.” When church leaders resist academic investigation into social issues, they implicate support for blindness, disorder and disharmony; but disharmony is both a synonym of diabolic and of the persona called Devil or Satan. Fear has so far been identified as a major factor in explicating opposition to the 2019 conference into the narratives and experiences of witchcraft in Nigeria. But the matter is more complex than can be explained by recourse to fear alone. The overall explanatory thesis is that fear, in combination with the organisational and systemic leadership model adopted in running the Church and ideological intolerance led to the surprising reactions to the conference (Mentan, 2016, p. 100, 103; Turley, 2022).

As a vision of life, Christianity has to be taught and learned. The two verbs “taught” and “learned” attest to actions requisite of subscription to Christianity. This positions Christian leaders as foremost vision preservers and propagators, whose followers would function as subordinate propagators sooner or later. The implication of the leadership and followership, since both constitute the Church, is that “truth” is their culture and heritage, and not the preserve of the leaders alone. Paul, in his first letter to Timothy (3:15) wrote “the house of God ... is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” Of course, Christian leaders have pre-eminent responsibility in coordinating and disseminating the Christian doctrine; failure of which generates fear even of witchcraft. Inability to transmit the Christian doctrine leads followers to imbibe error because they failed to understand that the system had an in-built checkmating component whereby subscribers are expected to vet whatever they are taught for accuracy – a function of intellectual diligence and critical thinking, indicative of the reasonable or rational dimension of Christian faith as demonstrated by the Berean Christians (cf. Acts. 17:10-11; 1 Peter 3:15). The Biblical model of leadership, therefore, encourages faith claim verification unlike the organisational leadership approach in which generality of the Church in Nigeria have been steeped (Elford, 2016, p. 1-4, 7; Stewart, 2008).

From what can be seen, the teaching system of the Christian Church in Nigeria has majored on faith dissemination from the leaders to the followers without equally inculcating adequate verification of



faith claims in the latter. Failure of the followers to confirm any faith claims coming to them from anyone including their leaders underpins the abidance to flawed directives from the latter, as was the case during the conference on witchcraft. Meanwhile, classic Biblical model of organising the Christian community requires leaders to be responsible for the thoughts and beliefs they propagate, and followers responsible for beliefs they subscribe to. Interestingly, this responsibility is distinctly conversational in character whereby both the leader and the follower administer the faith to each other by mutual openness to questions and answers meant to establish clarity of doctrine. Jesus consistently transmitted the faith by the conversational, interrogative approach, forbidding none.

But why has the Church in Nigeria failed to raise adequate followers committed to, and capable of, interrogative, critical assessment and confirmative approach to faith acquisition and transmission (cf. 1 John 4: 1-5; Jeremiah 50:6; Jeremiah 28; 1 Kings. 13)? It would seem that training Christians along this model is tantamount to stripping away (unsanctioned) power from Christian leaders, thereby robbing them of relevance. “Radical perspectivism,” to use the words of Turley (2022), completes the explanation needed here by testifying against the assumption that something is inaccurate because the Church hierarchy was not part of it. In summary, fear follows from blindness or ignorance of Biblical truth by its followers.

The conference held successfully. The public discussion of witchcraft went a long way in demystifying the concept and practice for many participants and observers. It led to a more altruistic perspective the unsavory practices that derived therefrom. It was clear to all that the conference was not a gathering of witches. Thus convinced, many tendered their apologies to the organisers for demonizing them over the conference.

Conclusion

The outburst against the 2019 conference on witchcraft re-echoes the centuries-old observation that anyone who explores the paranormal is vulnerable (Mantel, 2019, p. 58). Nonetheless, the conference gave scholars and activists from all across the country a much-needed opportunity to publicly probe the phenomenon of witchcraft in twenty-first century Nigeria and to expose social ills that have long been tolerated out of fear of witchcraft. Another important positive outcome of the event was the opening it gave to shine the light on Christianity, Christians and Christian leaders in Nigeria. This unplanned attention, an outcome of the nation-wide hostility against the conference, exposed some excesses of Christians that exceed the limits set by their Holy Book and to commonsense. The reflections in these pages serve the double purpose of calling them to return to, and live by, the stipulations of their guidebook, the Bible. Spirituality and scholarship can co-exist with mutual understanding. Standing in blind opposition to secular knowledge will not advance Christianity anywhere. It is a fact of history that Christianity developed several societies, from the Middle East to Rome and to other parts of world, courtesy of a partnership between Judaeo-Christian faith that bequeathed faith and morals (Jerusalem), reason and arts (Greece), and the law, legal ordering of society (Rome) to the West (Daniels, 1968, p. 25-26; Benedict XVI, 2006, p. 4-5). Christians should rather see scholarship as a platform for championing the cause of Christ. They should take the lead in sponsoring national debates on social and cultural issues that hurt humanity, while upholding the position of the scriptures on those matters. This should be done outside the walls of the church in order to attract all social classes and religious groups. Sustained academic investigation into the phenomenon of witchcraft will deepen the demystification of witchcraft and further confront the social ills attendant on that belief.



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