Conventional practices of Witchcraft in Hausa Society: Methods, beliefs and cultural Significance

By

Uba Aliyu
Department of Linguistigs and African Language
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo
ubaaliyu556@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper discusses the customary witchcraft in Hausa society (*maita, tsafi* and *kambun-baka*) as it is practiced, the practices and beliefs and importantly its purpose in the culture. A qualitative descriptive design was used to gather data based on in-depth interviewing, focus group discussions, participant observation, and analysis of the documentary with the participants who were elders, traditional healers, accused people and community members. The results indicate that witchcraft is still a strong belief system and plays an explanatory and controlling role in Hausa cultures. Women, children and the old are the groups that are charged with witchcraft disproportionately resulting in social exclusion, stigma and mobility limitations. The ancient belief entails rituals, natural remedies, protective amulets, and spiritual advice; this emphasizes the practical purpose of witchcraft in alleviating ill fate and social union. The paper also concludes that the contemporary forces of the influence of Islam, formal education and the media are more or less redefining the perceptions, even though traditional values still exist especially in the rural regions. The concept of witchcraft is thus a two-sided system because, although it maintains cultural identity and social order, it sometimes brings conflict and weakness. The researcher concludes that the culturally sensitive interventions such as community education, cooperation between legal and traditional authority and gender-based research should be used to reduce the negative effects of the situation without encroaching on the Hausa cultural heritage.

Keywords: social control, Hausa society, witchcraft, cultural beliefs, gender vulnerability.

Introduction

Danfulani (1999) states that Hausa cosmology is traditionally aware of an invisible world inhabited by spirits, ancestors and mystical powers that mediate human experiences. In this type of world view, witchcraft (*maita)* serves as a powerful explanatory paradigm of misfortune, sickness and even social warfare. In spite of the fact that Islam strictly denounces the witchcraft, most Hausa people still believe in its presence and potency, which depicts the stronghold of pre-Islamic cultural beliefs (Adamu, 2008).

The lack of *maita* practices in modernization, Western education and urbanization has not been able to end practices that are still widely mentioned in everyday speech, conflict resolution, and community mistrust (Sulaiman, 2018). The cases of women of old age being abused or thrown out due to witchcraft allegations are also still common in Northern Nigeria, which proves that it is still active, affecting social relationships (Bello, 2019). As such, the importance of learning about the practice and perception of witchcraft in the modern day would be important in expounding on the modern Hausa culture.

This paper focuses on classic practices, cultural logic, and any social meaning to witchcraft beliefs, and the way they are still affected by contemporary forces. This paper has been organized in a logical sequence starting with the context and beliefs to modern changes and implications.

Statement of the Problem

According to Ibrahim (2020), Fears of witchcraft is an effective social force in Hausa communities that governs behaviour. Nonetheless, allegations of *maita* often lead to stigma, psychological trauma and violence particularly against women, children and the elderly. The modern literature does not provide detailed investigations regarding the way witchcraft is practiced, justified and adapted nowadays.

Thus, there is a major gap in the research as it offers the modern empirical evidence of the techniques, beliefs and cultural roles of witchcraft within the Hausa society.

Research Questions

The traditional practice of witchcraft in Hausa communities?

- What are the beliefs and cultural interpretations upholding these practices?
- What are some cultural and social roles that are ascribed to witchcraft?
- What are the effects of religion, globalization and urbanization on such practices today?

Objectives of the Study

General Objective:

To discuss the cultural meaning, beliefs, and traditional practices of Hausa society of witchcraft.

Specific Objectives:

- To define and tell about ways of practicing witchcraft among the Hausa.
- To investigate cultural beliefs of witchcraft practice.
- To examine the social cultural aspects of witchcraft and accusations.
- To investigate recent developments in understanding and practice of witchcraft.

Importance of the Research.

The study contributes to the academic knowledge of Hausa native belief systems and offers useful information to implement policy changes to minimize violence associated with witchcraft beliefs. It also helps preserve cultures, which are at danger of being lost or forgotten by writing down

practices (Yusuf, 2017). Besides, the research will help the religious leaders, community workers, and NGOs to sensitively approach conflicts based on belief.

Limitations and Scope of the Study.

The study will concentrate on the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria, and the cultural rationality and societal significance of *maita* practices, but not scientific appraisal of purported mystical outcomes. All the elders, suspected witches, healers, traditional hunters, and religious leaders will be involved to have varied perspectives. But, as Sulaiman (2018) observes, the practice of witchcraft is very secretive, and it is hard to have access to the correct information. The threat of retaliation can also doom the respondents willing to talk over the matter.

Also, there is also the possibility of bias due to the language translation and cultural interpretation, but the research

Literature Review

This examines the academic views on the subject of witchcraft as a cultural, social, and spiritual phenomenon in African society and specifically the Hausa. It relies on classical anthropological theories, current African studies, and empirical studies to explain essential concepts and demonstrate the way the beliefs about witchcraft influence the human social relations, moral order and daily life. Another aspect that is pointed out in the review is that the Hausa metaphysical categories, including those of *maita, tsafi a*nd *iskoki* have general African cosmological meanings, but retain distinct cultural significance. Moreover, the section investigates the role of witchcraft in the Hausa society in the context of healing systems, community control and socio-political organizations. Lastly, it finds major gaps surrounding the contemporary change, legal aspect, and the understanding of witchcraft in the modern world, which is the basis of the rationale to conduct the study.

Conceptual Issues

Witchcraft, sorcery and magic are different concepts of African cosmology according to Evans-Pritchard (1937). Witchcraft is inborn magical ability that is thought to enable people to harm other people without the use of physical means, whereas sorcery can be referred to the ability to use things, spells and rituals to control the spirit forces. Witchcraft in Hausa culture is referred to as *maita*, which is a latent power that some people have, the power that is most frequently invoked at night (Bello, 2019). Locally, there are also *kambun-baka* (verbal hexing*), tsafi* (ritual magic), and *iskoki* (spirits) which depict the variation of Hausa thinking in metaphysics (Adamu, 2008).

Such terms emphasize the distinction of the Hausa between natural spiritual damage and the rituals based on the usage of materials or incantations.

Witchcraft within African Studies.

Durkheim (1915) suggests that supernatural beliefs are cultural instruments that elucidate misfortune and ensure morality. The African way of life has been characterized by witchcraft to be applied in explainable misfortunes like sudden sickness, infertility, and poverty. According to

Hausa people, *maita i*s frequently mentioned when events seem to be inexplicable or unfair to guarantee the preservation of the moral level in the community and caution against antisocial conduct (Yusuf, 2017).

In such a way, witchcraft is a form of psychological coping, as well as a form of social enforcement.

Past researches in Hausa Society.

As Danfulani (1999) notes, traditional healing involves the beliefs in witchcraft where any suspected mystical attacks are approached in terms of divination, herbal curatives, or rituals. Also, the accusations of witchcraft lead to moral discipline, as the stigma of a witch is extremely devastating, deterring ill deeds in the society (Sulaiman, 2018). The Hausa people have traditional rulers who in secret seek the advice of healers or spiritual experts to protect themselves against threats of witchcraft (Ibrahim, 2020).

These examples show that witchcraft is still actively incorporated into the Hausa culture and spiritual life, forming the relationships between people, as well as the organization of the community.

Identified Gaps

Notwithstanding the available literature, Mustapha (2021) notes that modern changes, particularly, the role of Islam, globalization, and digital media in changing the perception of witchcraft in the Hausa. Few studies have also been done to deal with legal and human rights issues related to the allegation of witchcraft, such as violence and unfair treatment of the disadvantaged.

Thus, additional research should be conducted, which should concentrate on recent practices, social effects, and the changing understanding of witchcraft within the contemporary Hausa society.

Theoretical Framework

This research is being founded on the framework of well established sociological and anthropological theories which assist in explaining the continuity, role as well as social meaning of the belief in witchcraft among the Hausa community. The framework offers theoretical understanding of how witchcraft interpretations modify communal reactions to misfortune, uphold moral rules and maintain social order through the use of Functionalism and Social Control Theory. These theories help us see that the cultural rationale of divination, ritual cleansing, moral sanctions, and other practices is embraced within supernatural accounted frameworks and social organization and regulation. The theoretical framework thus, provides a frame to which the study examines the psychological as well as societal roles of witchcraft in the modern Hausa society.

Functionalism (Malinowski)

According to Malinowski (1948), witchcraft has functional purposes in the society which includes the elimination of fears, explanation of misfortune and the management of social crisis. According to Hausa societies, *maita* or *tsafi* beliefs tend to emerge when some mysterious events like sudden diseases, crop failure, or deaths take place. These perceptions give a structure of comprehending

misfortune, bringing the anxiety levels down, and developing the coping mechanisms through rituals or prayers or visits to the traditional healers (Danfulani, 1999). To give an example, in case of recurrent harm in a family, older people can blame it on witchcraft and community members will come up with communal remedies like cleansing, which will normalize social order.

Social Control Theory

According to Hirschi (1969), the social order is realized when individuals internalize the norm as well as fearing sanctions to deviant behaviour. Witchcraft within the Hausa society serves as a type of informal social control in which fear of condemnation of being labelled as a witch or cursed is guaranteed to adhere to the societal norms. Women and children are particularly controlled with taboos (eg, no movement during pregnancy or at night) to enforce compliance and ethical conduct (Sulaiman, 2018; Yusuf, 2017). The legality of social stigma or supernatural revenge is therefore a threat that facilitates compliance.

Methodology

The methodological framework will be presented in the study. It describes the research design, population and sampling method, data collection methodology and data analysis method applied in exploring the beliefs, practices and cultural meaning of witchcraft within Hausa society. The ethical considerations receive special attention, so that the study is culturally sensitive and that ethical norms of dignity and confidentiality of participants are respected. The methodology is designed in a way that it presents a systematic and plausible method that validates the findings made.

Research Design

The research design that is embraced in this study is a qualitative descriptive research design to discover the practices, beliefs and cultural meanings of witchcraft among Hausa society. Qualitative research is suitable when the study focuses on phenomena that have a cultural context and the emphasis lies on meanings and interpretation rather than measurement using numbers (Creswell, 2014). This will help the researcher to collect rich and in depth information on personal, social, and community perceptions *of maita, tsafi*, and *kambun-baka* (Danfulani, 1999).

Population and Sample

The target population will include the elders, traditional healers, hunters, accused individuals, religious leaders, and other informed members of the community. The purposive sampling method was used since the respondents have to have first hand experience or direct knowledge in the practice of witchcraft (Bryman, 2016). As an example, the traditional healers and elders present information about the role of rituals in the past, and accused people can show how stigma affects society (Sulaiman, 2018). About 25-30 individuals were picked so as to have diversity of views in terms of gender, age and urban rural environment.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered using several qualitative instruments as a way of creating triangulation and reliability:

In-depth Interviews: To be carried out with old people, healers and the accused to inquire about personal experience and understanding of witchcraft (Kvale, 2007).

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Minor groups talked about beliefs, rituals, and social effects of *maita,* which provided the researchers with a chance to see what groups do and how they agree (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

Participant Observation: The researchers attended rituals and ceremonies as well as the community responses to the accusers of witchcraft to learn about practices at the time (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Documentary and Content Analysis: The local stories, proverbs, court records, and religious writings were analysed to give a historical and cultural insight into witchcraft (Yusuf, 2017).

These were some of the methods that assisted in capturing behavioural practices and cultural meanings related to witchcraft.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the data as it shows recurrent patterns, concepts and relationships in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The transcribed interviews, FGD notes and observation logs were coded into main themes including: fear, social control, ritual practices, gendered impact and communal responses. This was one of the approaches that enabled a systematic interpretation of the symbolic, functional and social facets of the witchcraft in the Hausa society.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics issues were addressed with attention. This ensured that the accused are not harmed socially because of confidentiality (Sulaiman, 2018). All the participants had to give informed consent and this was to ensure voluntary participation. Cultural sensitivity was also followed by researchers where they respected taboos and secrecy of witchcraft rituals (Danfulani, 1999). The observations and interviews were carried out in such a way that this did not inflict pain or offence to the community.

Findings of the Study

This paper examined the history, norms, and cultural values of witchcraft (*maita, tsafi*) within Hausa community, through the qualitative research methods of interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. The most important findings were as follows:

The persistence of witchcraft beliefs is affected by the cultural environment in which the group resides and the kind of actions performed by the group's members.

Continuity of Witchcraft Beliefs

Continuity of Witchcraft Beliefs is influenced by cultural environment where the group is based and of what type of activities the members of the group are engaged in.

According to Danfulani (1999), witchcraft is one of the key explanatory systems within the Hausa culture, and this paper has validated the fact that the belief in *maita* is still prevalent. The respondents always said that witchcraft is used to clarify bad luck, sickness, or family contradictions. As an illustration, when a child dies suddenly, the family loses its fertility, or the crop fails, it is usually believed that there is some hidden spiritual powers at play, and as such, they resort to the services of traditional healer or undergo cleansing rituals. This observation shows that witchcraft continues to exist as a cultural construct of understanding the world as well as a coping mechanism (Bello, 2019).

Social and Gendered Impacts

Sulaiman (2018) notes that women, children, and elderly people were disproportionately vulnerable to accusations related to witchcraft. The researcher discovered that people accused of a crime usually experience social isolation, stigma and limited mobility. An example is the case of elderly women, who were suspected to practice *maita*, they were ostracized or denied access to community resources or, forced to move. On the same note, the pregnant women were restricted in terms of movement as they feared attacks by the spirits. The findings are consistent with the Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) in that witchcraft is used as a form of enforcing conformity and controlling behaviour, especially in marginalized groups.

Methods and Practices

The study has determined that there are various traditional practices employed in Hausa witchcraft such as amulets, herbal preparations, incantations and the place of worship. The functional component in the role of witchcraft in solving misfortune and ensuring social stability was exhibited by the description of rituals as a way of either invoking the supernatural powers or counteracting them by the elders and traditional healers (Malinowski, 1948). As an illustration, a family, which has a recurring sickness, may call on a healer to determine the cause of a spiritual assault and put undergoing cleansing rituals.

Impact of Islam, Education and Media.

According to Mustapha (2021), perceptions of witchcraft are being slowly transformed through the influence of external insiders like religion, formal education and media exposure. The research determined that the younger generation in urban canters was becoming more inclined to define misfortune in terms of religion or science as opposed to the supernatural. However, the participants admitted that in the countryside and at culturally specific occasions traditional practices are still in place which means that people are gradually adjusting to the changes and do not abandon the beliefs in witchcraft entirely.

Cultural Significance and Social Control

The discovery affirms that witchcraft is two-fold. On the one hand, it strengthens the social and cultural cohesion and gives moral incentives and prevents deviant behaviour. Conversely, it may foster social stress, particularly, when the accusations are not true or the intentions are personal

conflicts (Bello, 2019). Protective charms, communal purification rituals or even symbolic appeasement rituals are some of the rituals aimed at preserving communal harmony, which exemplifies the functionalist importance of the witchcraft in the Hausa community (Danfulani, 1999).

Summary of Findings

1.   Witchcraft is a strong belief system that is still in place to explain misfortune.

2.   The women, children, and the old are the most affected by accusations and the outcome is often social exclusion and stigma.

3.   The classical approaches involve religious ceremonies, natural medicine, and spiritual advice to alleviate the perceived paranormal damage.

4.   Traditional practices are not done away with by modern influences which are gradually transforming beliefs through Islam, education and media.

5.   Witchcraft acts as a cultural survival strategy, as well as a social control, and it is a balancing force between social cohesion and possible conflict.

Conclusion

As the results of this paper have shown, witchcraft (*maita, tsafi*, and other similar activities) is deeply rooted in the culture of Hausa people as being both a social and moral regulatory framework. Witchcraft as observed by Danfulani (1999) still offers explanations to misfortune, illness, interpersonal conflict and therefore directs the way the community should respond to this situation and how societal norms are formed. The Hausa culture has the fear of spiritual punishment and stigma that makes people obey the cultural values, especially when they relate to morality, obedience, and respect to the hierarchy (Sulaiman, 2018).

Although these beliefs have been persistent, the study too ascertains that there are moves that are transforming traditional perceptions on witchcraft, courtesy of modern forces such as Islamic teaching, formal education, globalization and exposure to media. According to Mustapha (2021), younger generations and urban populations become skeptical about supernatural causes and find scientific (or religious) explanations of misfortune. In the same vein, Yusuf (2017) points out that the trend of health seeking behaviour is slowly turning out of the ritual intervention towards medical interventions. However, these Western influences are influencing and not destroying the traditional practices, which means that they are undergoing a cultural process of adaptation and not extinction.

The paper finds that witchcraft is a two-sided system: it maintains social unity and cultural identity, and at the same time creates vulnerability, particularly to women, children, and the elderly, most commonly the accused or marginalized (Bello, 2019). This is why it is extremely important to find some middle ground approaches that would not harm the Hausa cultural identity but, on the contrary, would help to mitigate the adverse effects. Such interventions involve community teaching, cooperation with traditional leaders, scientific literacy, and human rights protection as some of the measures to reduce stigma, social exclusion, and violence.

In nutshell, Hausa witchcraft is a cultural heritage, as well as a social mechanism- and its continuation is significant to the need to introduce culturally sensitive interventions without undermining identity.

Recommendations

In the light of the conclusions made during the current research, it is proposed that the following recommendations could be made to resolve the issues with the beliefs about witchcraft in Hausa society without interfering with the cultural identity:

Community Education and Sensitization.

Danfulani (1999) points out that the ground and base of the destructive witchcraft accusation is fear and misinformation. Thus, the community educational programs are to be created to educate people about the social and psychological outcomes of false accusations. As an example, it may be local youth and women groups to be used in workshops and explain them about the difference between traditional beliefs and the current legal systems. These intervention programs may help to diminish stigma, and avoid social marginalization of suspected people, and promote the community to employ rational and humane attitude towards misfortunes (Sulaiman, 2018).

Co-operation between the Leaders of Culture and the law.

According to Mustapha (2021), the cooperation of the traditional authorities and the formal legal systems is the key to an effective intervention. Traditional leaders who in many cases arbitrated on the issues concerning witchcraft can be trained on how to discourage the harmful practices and refer to relevant legal or social services. As an illustration, when the elderly women are being accused *maita,* the leaders should mediate and maintain protection and support instead of letting ostracism and violence prevail (Bello, 2019). This kind of collaboration can balance the cultural norms and human rights requirements.

Studies on Gender and Populations at risk.

According to Yusuf (2017), the elderly, women, and children are unfairly represented in the witchcraft accusation. The experiences of these groups should be given more attention in future studies to understand the intersection of gendered and age related vulnerabilities with cultural beliefs. As an illustration, researches may be conducted to examine the impact of accusations on the economic activities of women or the school attendance of children, which will present evidence others can use in their policy interventions to ensure the vulnerable members of the society are not threatened.

References

Adamu, A. U. (2008). *Society and culture in Northern Nigeria*. Kano: ICON Publishers.

Bello, M. (2019). Supernatural beliefs as conflict management tools in Hausa society. *Journal of African Cultural Studies, 31*(2), 145–158.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Danfulani, U. H. D. (1999). Factors contributing to the survival of Bori spirit possession cult in Northern Nigeria. *Numen, 46*(4), 454–494.

Durkheim, E. (1915). *The elementary forms of religious life*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1937). *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. University of California Press.

Ibrahim, S. (2020). Social sanctions and behavioral control in Hausa culture. *Sociology Today, 12*(3), 88–102.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Sage.

Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. Sage.

Malinowski, B. (1948). *Magic, science and religion*. Doubleday.

Mustapha, A. (2021). Gender, religion, and superstition in Muslim societies. *African Gender Review, 15*(1), 60–75.

Sulaiman, H. (2018). Witchcraft accusations and female vulnerability in Northern Nigeria. *African Studies Review, 61*(1), 95–112.

Yusuf, F. (2017). Belief systems and traditional healing in Hausa communities. *International Journal of Anthropology, 5*(2), 33–47.