

Witchcraft perceptions and branding of the aged among Efiks and Ibibios of Southern Nigeria

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Abstract

Witchcraft is one astounding and disturbing social phenomenon in southern Nigeria, particularly among the Efiks and Ibibios of South-South Geo-political Zone of Nigeria. More excruciating is the negative perceptions most persons have about witchcraft and the consequent branding of the aged as witches and wizards. In order to achieve the purpose of this study, five research objectives were developed namely: to determine the general perceptions about the aged involvement in witchcraft among the Efiks and Ibibios; ascertain the factors influencing the branding of aged as witches and wizards among the Efiks and Ibibios; identify the challenges faced by the aged arising from their branding as witches and wizards; find out the negative effects of witchcraft branding on social development agenda; ascertain the perceived curses of aging among the Efiks and Ibibios and to discover the measures that can curb witchcraft branding of the aged among the Efiks and Ibibios. This study adopted the mixed method, utilizing both theoretical (documentary) and qualitative approaches. The key informant interview was used to elicit responses from the aged, traditional rulers, community leaders, and caregivers. One hundred and fifty-two (152) responses were analyzed using the content analysis method and key informant indicators. The findings showed that the aged are labelled as witches and wizard which thus diminish their sense of dignity, self-worth, and quality of life. Among the Efiks and Ibibios, getting old attracts fear and psychological trauma to the extent that most of the elderly or aged have wished that death come early. The aged are often accused of witchcraft, and being responsible for the misfortunes and failures of their children, family, and society. This makes them susceptible to labeling, stigmatization, and abuse. This mislabeling social negative construct is ravaging the lives of the aged and is in direct violation and contravention of the fundamental human rights laws and protocols. Consequent upon this, the study among others provides grounds for social work advocacy and interventions through influencing direct policy formulation, social protection regulations, and safety nets to mitigate this ugly phenomenon within the study area with a multiplier effect on the entire country's social development curve.

Keywords: aged, branding, perception, witchcraft, social development, curse, blessing

Introduction

The aged all over the world are reservoirs of knowledge and custodians of cultural values, but today, they live in twilight of difficult conditions that limit their potentials and engagements, putting them in disadvantaged positions in society. Aging should be visited with a sense of respect because the aged/elderly are undeniably a critical mass that needs special attention. Every individual will certainly grow old one day since the curve of human development is from birth to death. This makes every individual in human populations a critical partner in the sustenance of societal values affecting the aged.

The problem of the aged and witchcraft branding is increasingly identified as a growing human rights concern globally. The number of the aged populations is growing steadily as a result of higher standards of living and life extension techniques developed by scientific innovations, medicine and environmentally friendly initiatives and programs. Seemingly, while the life expectancy of individuals increases, many traditional and indigenous efforts, and life sustaining and nurturing influences for the elderly people have been eroded (Friedlander & Apte, 1995). The complexities of life and the changes in the structure of society leave many of the elderlies with no viable and meaningful social roles within the family and society. Many of the aged and elderly become isolated socially, economically, spiritually, and are neglected and alienated.

Within the context of Africa, there exist a cultural belief that associate old age with witchcraft which is a breeding ground for mistreatment of the aged, stigmatization, labelling and sometime torture and neglect. Although this perception varies from society to society and most of these beliefs are ontological, anchored on supernatural, superstitions, cultural practices

and traditional myths (Pritchard 1937; Offiong, 1983). Adults and children are abused and branded as witches every day and are often tortured into confessing non-existent crimes and sometimes forced to undergo exorcisms, while some are made to face ostracization, banishment and even death. In Africa witchcraft has been more often dismissed by scholars as an imaginary or unreal phenomenon (Offiong 1983, Geschiere 1997:2, 20). Mostly because of its complexity and cannot be proving scientifically. Miguel (2003:5) in his study, "Poverty and Witch Killing," mentioned a number of African countries where witchcraft beliefs are still practiced. Also, Gershman (2016:183) noted that concludes that witchcraft beliefs are still held in these countries based on the 2008–2009 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life in 19 sub-Saharan African countries. The countries surveyed represent 75% of the total sub-Saharan population. People who hold witchcraft beliefs in one way or another exist throughout Africa as a whole, regardless of their religious affiliation, political ideology, or geographical location. Equally the results of witchcraft accusations, which include witch killings and destruction of their property, is a call for action and a cry for help fear of bewitchment and punishment (Ekpimah, 2016; Onzulike, 2013; Miguel, 2003; Kgatla, 2007). Many people across Nigeria have positive attitudes towards the elderly and aging as a process which makes it distinctive and deserving to be old.

The growing concern of the plight of the aged has indeed created opportunity for those in the 'care services' especially social workers to develop and push for policies, imaginative social planning and social programs; retirement and pension benefits, economic, medical care, housing, transportation, social and recreational and support services that will protect and improve the quality of life of the vulnerable and aged in society (Essien, 2011; Middleton & Winter, 2004; Brown, 1992). Equally, to address these misconceptions is to harness extensive education, open dialogue, legislation, advocacy for changing the negative labels and stereotypes and promoting aging friendly environments that encourages inclusion of the well-being of the elderly and enhancing social development. The agonies, pain, torture, denial, mistreatment and neglect most of the aged face in society has actually necessitated the question as to whether 'aging is a blessing or curse.

Literature review

Concept of witchcraft

Despite the advances made in human and scientific innovations and development globally, there exist diversity in cultural and religious practices in form of belief patterns and ideologies. These different ideological orientations are fertile ground for the perception of witchcraft across cultures. The concept of witchcraft denotes the supernatural interference in the natural community lifestyle and behaviour with a strong root in community belief system (Offiong, 1983; Byrn & John, 2009; Jayeola-Omoyeni, Oyetade & Omoyeni, 2015). The causes of witchcraft accusation and branding of the elderly is usually unknown and unpredictable. However, historical, religious and cultural beliefs, practices and factors have predominantly contributed immensely in shaping the belief associating old age with witchcraft accusation and stigmatization. People, and in particular elderly women, children, or those 'who are somehow 'different', feared or disliked' might be accused of being witches (Offiong 1983; Essien & Ben, 2011; Aboderin, 2006; Horton 1972; Haralambos & Healds 1980; Miguel 2016). The phenomenon is more widely reported in the southern part of Nigeria, but also exists in other parts of the country.

In Nigeria the belief in witchcraft (or *juju*) is widespread and is rooted in the day to day lives of Nigerian. Traditionally, witchcraft and cult groups served as social control and conflict-resolution mechanisms in Africa, and witches are regarded as the common cause of misfortune (Essai, 2012; Offiong, 1983; Haralambos, & Heald, 2006; 1980). Witchcraft is the practice of

magic involving spell work, and a deep connection to nature and rituals, ancestors and gods. Witchcraft-related abuse entails significant violations of a range of individual's rights (adult and children), despite efforts by Civil Society Organizations and government in policy directions to address this disturbing phenomenon.

Among the Efiks and Ibibios of Southern Nigeria, witchcraft is largely attributed to supernatural occurrence and strange activities (Offiong, 1983; Onuzulike, 2013). These two ethnic groups were formally part of the then Cross River State which was separated in 1987 into two states, with same culture and linguistic characteristics of the Benue -Congo language group (Charles 2008). The Efiks are made of the Efiks, Efuts, Quas and kiong communities while the Ibibio comprises Anaang, Ibibio, Eket and Oron, and they are all agrarian communities. Metaphorically, witchcraft is known as '*ifot* in Efik' and Ibibio', '*amusu*' or '*igban*' in Yoruba, '*ohe*' in Idoma, '*pou*' in Ijaw, '*kutan*' in Yakurr (Yako). It is believed to represent darkness evil, chaos and conflict, and warped sense of morality deeming seemingly terrible harmful acts.

The theory of witchcraft causation in African and Nigerian makes people believe that certain sicknesses and diseases like leukemia, mental disorders, epilepsy, and even dementia are caused by witches, even bed wetting or persistent (Ezeamalu, 2010; Hund 2000; García, 2013; Onuzulike, 2013). To buttress these disturbing phenomena, the national and international media have reported about these horrific cases in which aged (especially women) are being murdered by these mere accusations of being suspected witches (Ekpimah 2016; Quason, 2009; Brown, 1992).

Pritchard (1934) cited in Charles (2008) noted that most of the victims are wrongly accused as a result of misfortune due to errors, ineptitude, liquor and poor approaches and methodology to daily routines, while some people attribute their failures, backwardness and misgivings in life to witchcraft. Accordingly, Essai (2012), illustrated that when a person drowns in a river or stream due to swimming inability such occurrence may be attributed to witchcraft, and sometime they are accused of using witchcraft to become wealthy, highly educated, or politically influential; if they fail in their life endeavors, it is assumed that somebody else had cast a spell on them in order to put them down or to cause their sickness. If they are accused of witchcraft, they run the risk of being mercilessly killed (BBC News 2009).

The mysteries surrounding witchcraft can be divided into two categories: (a) misfortune and tragedies, such as sudden deaths, illnesses, crop failure, businesses problems and (b) good fortune and upward social mobility, which may include getting wealthy, acquiring higher education, success in politics, etc. People, who hold such beliefs are convinced that no death or sickness occurs without a malevolent agent behind it. They equally believe that no one can become wealthy or well educated without recourse to witchcraft (Horton 1972:21-23).

Across the length and breadth of Africa, witchcraft is strongly rooted in our culture and largely equated with evil; the mere mention of it instill fear, hate and the insatiable desire to ostracize the accused victims (Nyabwari & Kagema, 2014). There are notions that people can become a witch through inheritance (common among the Ga people of Ghana), picked or bought from specialized people, through edibles or adopted from other communities (Nyabwari & Kagema, 2014; Adegbola, 1983;). In Nigeria, the crusade on witchcraft accusation has been largely inspired by the deliverance ministries of Christianity especially in the face of rising Pentecostalism and false prophets (Van Eck Duymaer & Van Twist, 2009). In other words, churches, especially the Pentecostal and prophetic seeking churches play an important role in the legitimization of fears related to witchcraft, and particularly child witches and older women.

According to AFRUCA (2009), Schnoebelen, (2009); Onuzulike (2014), the belief in witchcraft is not necessarily problematic unless it leads to accusation that ignites persecution and other forms of abuse, which may be in the form of battery, rejection by parents, banishment etc. Unfortunately, according to Crampton (2013), women, the aged and children have increasingly been caught up in the crossfire of witch-hunt branding and persecution. In societies where witchcraft beliefs are widespread, the spirit of collegiality and brotherhood is diminished because of the erosion of social capital.

Nthamburi (1991) asserted that one intriguing aspects of the belief in witchcraft is witch confession (the claim that witches and wizards sometimes openly admit having indulged in occult and evil practices, either to harm or for protection). However, there is no empirical evidence to prove this assertion given that, the problem of an individual's confession of his/her involvement in witchcraft is more likely to be shrouded with subjectivity. In certain circumstances such confession may be made under duress or because the accused just want to stop the victimization even if it ends their life (Jayeola-Omoyeni, Oyetade & Omoyeni, 2015).

Witchcrafts branding and accusation are negative connotations that promotes discrimination, maltreatment stigmatization, labelling and alienation of the aged, as well as deprivation from their economic and social capital (Gerhman, 2016; Brody, 1977). Witchcraft accusation are product of human thoughts and actions, power dynamics social context and cultural orientations prevalent in the society (). It further magnifies that Pentecostalism is negatively influencing witchcraft accusation and branding since truth is relative and subjective in this case (Offiong 1983; Essien & Ben 2011; Aboderin, 2006; Miguel 2016). Pentecostalism, hearsay and prophecies in Nigerian religious circles and churches has caused a lot of such confession and maltreatment meted out to the elderly who may be innocent of such accusations (Aboderin, 2006; Miguel, 2016).

Concept of the aged

Defining who the aged are, is problematic and confusing because it is difficult to agree on one single definition of what constitute old age. Old age is usually considered as the twilight years, for some people and the longest phase of their lives. However, relatively some people are considered old at age 40 years, some 60 years and biblically 70 years, while others grow old up to 100 years and above. A lot of people have youthful life style and are healthy and strong up to 65 and 70 years of age. According Friedlander & Apte (1995), the definition of old age or the elderly must take into account the physical, mental or social perspectives, and nevertheless, 65 years has been designated by government as old age, however the government had pegged retirement from active service within the age brackets of 60 to 70 years depending on the profession in Nigeria.

The growing number of the aged along, with the prolongation of the period of dependence by adolescents and the younger adults has left many of the aged people as a stem of burden, coupled with the economic, social, spiritual, cultural and psychological conditions (Brody, 1977; Van der Geest, 2002a; 2002b; Brown, 1992). However, there still exist significant practical and conceptual challenges mitigating against the implementation of social policies that addresses the concerns of the aged.

Theoretical perspectives

The theoretical framework applied for this study is the social constructionism by Lev Vygotsky (1896-19800) and Nichol Onuf (Lynch, 2017), as well as the Ageism and the scape goat theory propounded by James George Frazier (1854–1941). The social constructionism holds that reality is constructed through social interactions and agreements which are fluid, dynamic and subject to change. The characteristics are typically a product of immutable and

solely biological, in terms of gender, race, and sexuality, class, ability are largely products of human definition and interpretations which are predominantly influenced by cultural and historical context and power relations. It explained that witchcraft accusation and branding occur as a result of social interaction and reinforced by the behavior of others, often in group, language and gender roles and rules of conducts that dictates people's actions and behaviour in a particular society.

Witchcraft branding is largely influenced by the societal norms, power dynamics and cultural orientations, and social consensus on the part of the people and community. The theory posits that our actions, knowledge and understanding of the world and human being are product of human thought, fear of the unknown, language, ethnicity, culture and interaction rather than grounded in an observable and definable external reality. Witchcraft accusation, stigmatization and labels therefore, occur without empirical proof and reality. Most often, the accusers are those who have power and authority of the victims and for economic reasons.

Also, the ageism is a paradigm that explains discriminations against older people because of the negative and inaccurate stereotypes that are embedded in our culture and most often than not, they are not noticed. Witchcraft accusation and branding are solely based on cultural stereotypes which are engrained in some institutions and actions policies of the society. Ageism is promoted by historical, religious and cultural beliefs, practices and factors predominantly contributing in shaping the belief associating old age with witchcraft accusation and stigmatization.

On the other hand, the scapegoat theory is deeply rooted in biblical and theological orientation, that individuals or groups are treated poorly or held liable for problems they did not cause (Jensen, 2007). The theory explains that when peoples' means of livelihood, health among others encounter setbacks or when faced with crisis, other people or occurrence are seen as scapegoat for their misfortune (Aadinkrah, 2004), power relations and dynamics reinforces the legitimization of accusation and labeling of witchcraft.

Objectives of the study

1. To determine the general perceptions about the aged involvement in witchcraft among the Efiks and Ibibios
2. To ascertain the factors influencing the branding of aged as witches and wizards among the Efiks and Ibibios
3. To identify the challenges faced by the aged arising from their branding as witches and wizards
4. To find out the negative effects of witchcraft branding on social development agenda
5. To ascertain the perceived curses of aging among the Efiks and Ibibios
6. To discover the measures that can curb witchcraft branding of the aged among the Efiks and Ibibios

Methods

This study adopted the mixed method, utilizing both theoretical (documentary) and qualitative approaches. The theoretical studies were done with documented data drawn from various peer reviewed articles, reports and other online sources. The qualitative aspect of the study was carried out with the use of key Informants Interview (KII). The key informants were selected from among the aged, traditional rulers, community leaders, and caregivers. One hundred and fifty-two (152) responses were analyzed using the content analysis method and

key informant indicators. The content analysis produced a few core themes and constructs for the study.

In the first stage of the sampling process, the study population is divided into two segments, corresponding to the two ethnic tribes (Efik and Ibibio) under investigation. This approach ensures that the research captures perspectives from both tribes, totaling 152 respondents, (that is drawing 76 participants from each ethnic tribe). By allocating equal representation to each tribe, the research aims to minimize potential bias related to tribal differences. The key informants were selected using the purposive sampling method. They were purposively selected based on their knowledge of the subject matter. The Key informants' responses were recorded based on their verbal consent and permission.

The demographic data characterization shows that out of 152 respondents, 46% were females while 54% were males. The higher number of males as compared to the females reflect the male dominance in a patriarchal society. The demographic data also shows that majority of respondents (67%) falls between the age bracket 46 years and above while the least respondents fell in the age bracket, 35-45 years. The higher number of respondents between the ages of 46 years and above clearly reveals the population that were mostly affected by the branding and had information to provide based on their experiences. Descriptive statistics-frequent counts, simple percentages, mean, standard deviation, standard error minimum and maximum were used in the analysis of data, summarized and presented in tables.

Results

Table 1 reveal the Mean and Standard Deviation of the general perceptions about the aged involvement in witchcraft among the Efiks and Ibibios. Analysis of data indicate that most aged are into witchcrafts ($M > 6.90$ $SD = 2.488$), most aged persons have sacrificed their relatives to witchcraft ($M > 6.29$ $SD = 2.231$) and witchcraft branding of the aged is a real offence ($M > 2.95$ $SD = 2.746$). it however did not support the claim that aging has connection with witchcraft ($M > 2.45$ $SD = 1.212$) and that only the aged were initiated into witchcraft ($M > 2.34$ $SD = 1.011$).

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of the general perceptions about the aged involvement in witchcraft among the Efiks and Ibibios (n=152)

Items	YES	NO	Don't know	Mean	Std. Deviation
Most aged are into witchcrafts**	110	31	11	6.90	2.488
Only the aged are initiated into witchcraft	33	106	13	2.34	1.011
Most aged persons have sacrificed their relatives to witchcraft**	98	36	18	6.29	2.231
Witchcraft branding of the aged is a real offence **	112	27	13	2.95	2.746
Aging has connection with witchcraft	41	96	15	2.45	1.212

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

** implies items with $M > 2.5$ reflecting the general perceptions about the involvement of the aged in witchcraft among the Efiks and Ibibios.

Table 2 reveal the Mean and Standard Deviation of factors that influences the branding of aged as witches and wizards among the Efiks and Ibibios. Among these factors include imaginative constructs ($M > 3.31$ and $SD = 2.821$), vulnerability ($M > 2.93$ and $SD = 2.744$) and cultural beliefs ($M > 2.67$ and $SD = 2.713$). However, data analysis did not support that deliverance doctrines of Pentecostals ($M < 2.29$ and $SD = 1.231$) and economic hardship ($M < 1.90$ and $SD = 1.108$) influences the branding of aged as witches and wizards among the Efiks and Ibibios.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of factors that influences the branding of aged as witches and wizards among the Efiks and Ibibios (n=152)

Items	YES	NO	Don't know	Mean	Std. Deviation
Economic hardship	21	118	13	1.90	1.108
Vulnerability **	101	23	28	2.93	2.744
Deliverance doctrines of Pentecostals	37	91	24	2.29	1.231
Cultural beliefs **	88	41	30	2.67	2.713
Imaginative constructs **	106	34	12	3.31	2.821

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

*** implies items with M>2.5, showing factors that exacerbate the branding of aged as witches and wizards among the Efiks and Ibibios.*

Table 3 reveal that Mean and Standard Deviation of the challenges faced by the aged arising from their branding as witches and wizards. Analysis of data showed the challenges to include: stigma (3.90 and SD=2.488), loneliness (3.18 and SD=3.043), physical torture (2.95 and SD=1.746), psychological trauma (2.83 and SD=2.111) and denial of care (2.79 and SD=1.931)

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation of the challenges faced by the aged arising from their branding as witches and wizards (n=152)

Items	YES	NO	Don't know	Mean	Std. Deviation
Stigma **	86	44	22	3.90	2.488
Physical torture **	97	32	23	2.95	1.746
Denial of care **	79	49	24	2.79	1.931
Loneliness **	95	42	15	3.18	3.043
Psychological trauma**	102	40	10	2.83	2.111

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

*** implies items with M>2.5, indicating the challenges faced by the aged arising from their branding as witches and wizards.*

Table 4 reveal the Mean and Standard Deviation of the negative effects of witchcraft branding on social development agenda. The analysis of data shows the effects to include: aged contribution to society's development is deaden (M>4.20 and SD=2.480), there is untapped wisdom of the aged by the young (M>3.15 and SD=2.467) and the likelihood of the younger generation being unguided by the aged was obvious (M>2.94 and SD=2.333). however, the items which states that the young will lack the vision to pursue goals (M>2.23 and SD=1.132) and problem solving skills may be lacking among the young ones (M>2.41 and SD=1.311) were not considered as tenable.

Table 4: Mean and standard deviation of the negative effects of witchcraft branding on social development agenda (n=152)

Items	YES	NO	Don't know	Mean	Std. Deviation
Aged contribution to society's development is deaden**	111	133	22	4.20	2.480
Untapped wisdom of the aged**	76	53	23	3.15	2.467
Likelihood of the younger generation being unguided by the aged**	56	63	33	2.94	2.333
The young will lack the vision to pursue goals	61	70	21	2.23	1.132
Problem solving skills may be lacking among the young ones	43	93	16	2.41	1.311

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

*** implies items with M>2.5, indicating the negative effects of witchcraft branding on social development agenda*

Table 5 reveals the Mean and Standard Deviation of the perceived curses of aging among the Efiks and Ibibios. Data analysis indicates that majority of the people perceive the curses to be in the following order: account for misfortunes in the society with (M>4.08 and SD=2.231), it was followed by destruction of lives (M>3.55 and SD=1.760), wickedness

($M>3.12$ and $SD=1.418$), the aged are a burden to humanity ($M>2.61$ and $SD=1.292$), and the aged have nothing good to offer to society ($M>2.52$ and $SD=1.134$).

Table 5: Mean and standard deviation of the perceived curses of aging among the Efiks and Ibibios (n=152)

Items	YES	NO	Don't know	Mean	Std. Deviation
Wickedness**	73	67	12	3.12	1.418
Destruction of lives**	108	31	13	3.55	1.760
Account for misfortunes in the society**	93	45	14	4.08	2.231
The aged are a burden to humanity**	87	52	13	2.61	1.292
The aged have nothing good to offer to society**	98	32	22	2.52	1.134

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

** implies items with $M>2.5$ indicating the perceived curses of aging among the Efiks and Ibibios

Table 6 reveals the Mean and Standard Deviation of the measures that can curb witchcraft branding of the aged among the Efiks and Ibibios. From the analysis, only 3 items can be used to curb witchcraft branding of the aged among the Efiks and Ibibios. These were public sensitization ($M>4.29$ and $SD=2.448$), awareness creation ($M>2.95$ and $SD=2.763$) and government policies and programs ($M>3.26$ and $SD=2.914$) were considered as capable of curbing witchcraft branding of the aged among the Efiks and Ibibios while enactment of legal instruments ($M<2.27$ and $SD=1.231$) and placement of the aged in homes of the aged ($M<2.36$ and $SD=1.161$) were not considered as such.

Table 6: Mean and standard deviation of the measures that can curb witchcraft branding of the aged among the Efiks and Ibibios (n=152)

Items	YES	NO	Don't know	Mean	Std. Deviation
Public sensitization**	121	19	12	4.29	2.448
Awareness creation**	101	41	10	2.95	2.763
Enactment of legal instruments	31	107	14	2.27	1.231
Placement of the aged in homes of the aged	40	101	11	2.36	1.161
Government policies and programs**	88	43	21	3.26	2.914

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

** implies items with $M>2.5$ showing the measures that can curb witchcraft branding of the aged among the Efiks and Ibibios.

Discussion

The general perceptions about the aged involvement in witchcraft among the Efiks and Ibibios has been that most aged were into witchcrafts. A greater percentage of respondents perceived that most aged persons have sacrificed their relatives to witchcraft. Therefore, they strongly believed that witchcraft branding of the aged is a reality. It was observed by the researchers that the allegation of witchcraft on the aged was selective. In other words, not all aged were accused of the offense. The emphasis was that more of the aged were initiated into witchcraft. For example, majority of respondents (66%) agreed that they have experienced witchcraft accusations and branding while (34%) have not experienced witchcraft accusation and branding. Example of responses from key informants attest to this:

Mr A. *Some many older adults are accused of witchcraft because of their lifestyle. Some of them neglected and abandoned their families and children, that is why some time the children abandon them'.*

Mr G. *'You can see an old about 90 years, if you sow good seed you will reap good seed, and if you sow evil you will equally reap evil, that is the law of nature. Some people because of their bad character they are suffering today, they may be witches or wizards. Yes, there is witchcraft in the land.*

The findings also reveal the factors that influences the branding of aged as witches and wizards among the Efiks and Ibibios to include imaginative constructs, vulnerability and cultural beliefs. The finding of the study further reveals that the aged branded as witches or wizards faced many challenges including stigma, loneliness, physical torture, psychological trauma and denial of care among others. For example, some of the key informants' responses are reproduced here below.

Mrs. O: *'My grandmother was accused of being a witch and was beaten, brutalized and died in the process. The pastor told my mother that my grandmother was witch and that she was responsible to the sickness of my uncle. Some group of women and men came to our house and asked her to confess. In a twinkle of time, they started beating her to comma and later died'.*

Mr. S. *'My son there evil in the land everywhere, some people kill their children or destroy others in their witchcraft world either to elongate their age, for jealousy or to hurt others especially if themselves are not doing well*

Mrs E. *'There are very bad people who don't want others to progress so they go to juju to cast spell of either sickness or backwardness to people they see as their enemies or rivals. Some even do it to their children who refuse to take care of them'.*

The witchcraft branding has negatively affected the social development agenda of the Efiks and Ibibio kingdom. The branding has demotivated many aged from contributing to society's development. It also implies that wisdom of the aged may not be tapped or utilized by the younger ones and the likelihood of the younger generation being unguided by the aged was equally obvious. The young ones felt when ones you are old, such an individual lack the vision to pursue and attain goals. Consequent upon this, the younger generation could not benefit from the wealth of experiences, wise counseling, favors, legacies and spiritual guidance that some of these branded witches or wizards were endowed with. It was however observed that whereas, aging among the Efiks and Ibibios, was visited with a sense of respect undeniably because they form a critical mass and partners in social development, but many persons amongst them view ageing with mixed feelings 'blessing or a curse'. This was caused by the general trend in the dethronement of cultural values that were ones held with respect and chastity in the society.

The perceived curses of aging among the Efiks and Ibibios include that it accounts for misfortunes in the society, resulted to destruction of lives, exacerbated wickedness, and that the aged are a burden to humanity have nothing good to offer to society. More excruciating of this phenomenon is the perception, stigmatization, labeling, maltreatment, neglect and torture of the aged as witches and wizards and sometime death. These inhuman treatment of the aged has prompted the question 'Is aging a curse or a blessing'.

This particular finding agrees with Gerhman (2016), Haralambos and Head (1980), Brody (1977) that asserted that the aged all over the world are reservoirs of knowledge and custodians of cultural values, but today, they live in difficult conditions that limit their potential and engagements, putting them in disadvantaged positions in society. The negative perceptions, accusation, stigmatization and labeling of the aged as witches and wizard among the Efiks and Ibibios diminish their sense of dignity, self-worth, and quality of life and longevity. This finding further corroborates Apt (1996) who opined that the indignation and pain these categories of people are made to go through daily and the dehumanizing conditions the aged

face, getting old attracts fear and psychological trauma to the extent that most of the elderly or aged have wished that death come early.

Among the Efiks and Ibibios, the aged are often accused of witchcraft, and seen as being responsible for the misfortunes and failures of their children, family, and society. This makes them susceptible to inhuman treatment, labeling, stigmatization, abuse, neglect, abandonment and even death. This mislabeling social negative construct is ravaging the lives of the aged and is in direct violation and contravention of the fundamental human rights laws and protocols.

The most striking finding was that witchcraft accusations are often directed towards persons of the same lineage or were related, such as children, parents, grandparents, extended family members, and neighbours. If for example, a child dies, accusing fingers are often directed to the aged in the family circle. Similarly, the miscarriage of a pregnant woman, sickness, death of a spouse especially, it would be the aged in the family that are usually accused of being responsible to these misfortunes. The general belief was that the aged possess mystical powers to prolong their lives by sacrificing the younger ones.

In most cases the punishment meted out to these accused aged persons would be jungle justice without corresponding trial. The punishment sometime may include severe beating, burning or stoning, parading the individual naked, compelled to drink lethal concoctions, lynching by mob action, or even death by killing. Some of the aged were neglected and abandoned by their families. Some may end up as street beggars while some do illegal and menial jobs to survive. This finding supports Essien and Ben (2011); Offiong (1983) who postulated that most accusers do not even know that, accusing people of witchcraft without proof violates the fundamental human rights of the accused including right to life, liberty, security, freedom of association, prohibition against torture among others.

With regards to the measures that can curb witchcraft branding of the aged among the Efiks and Ibibios, respondents had suggested public sensitization, awareness creation and government policies and programs as crucial and quintessential.

Conclusion and recommendations

Life generally is characterized in stages, from birth to adulthood and death. The problem of the aged and witchcraft accusation and branding are increasingly identified as a social problem, and a fundamental human right violation attracting global concern. The complexities of life and the changes in the structure of society leave many of the elderlies with no viable and meaningful social capital within the family and society. Some intrinsic and extrinsic factors of cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and spiritual factors have been isolated as the root causes of witchcraft accusation and branding. Within the context of Nigeria particularly, among the *Efiks* and *Ibibios* of Southern Nigeria, there exist a cultural belief that associate old age with witchcraft which is a breeding ground for mistreatment stigmatization, labelling and sometime torture and neglect, and even death of the aged in the society. Many people across Nigeria have positive attitudes towards the elderly and aging as a process which makes it distinctive and deserving to be old. The growing concern of the plight of the aged has indeed created opportunity for those in the 'care services' especially social workers to develop and push for policies, imaginative social planning and social safety nets; and the need to strengthen retirement and pension policies, economic, medical care, housing, transportation, social and recreational and support services that will protect and improve the quality of life of the vulnerable and aged in society. Equally, to address these misconceptions is to harness extensive education, open dialogue, legislation, advocacy for changing the negative narratives,

labels and stereotypes and the promotion of aging friendly environments that encourages inclusion and well-being of the elderly.

The study among others recommends that social work advocacy and interventions through influencing direct policy formulation, social protection regulations, and safety nets to mitigate this ugly phenomenon within the study area with a multiplier effect on the entire country and beyond. Challenge dominant narratives and cultural orientations that promotes witchcraft accusation of the elderly through legislations as well critical examination of power dynamic structures in the society. Human right violations of witchcraft accusation of the elderlies should be seen as a crime against the State.

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