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2.9. Individuals accused of witchcraft or threatened in relation to ritual killings

COMMON ANALYSIS
Last updated: February 2019

Belief in witchcraft (or *juju*) is widespread in Nigeria. Traditionally, witchcraft and cult groups served as social control and conflict-resolution mechanisms in Africa. 'Witches' are regarded as the common cause of misfortune.

This profile refers to persons that might be accused of being 'witches'. It also refers to the issue of ritual killings. In addition, reference is made to persons with albinism and to persons refusing chieftaincy titles.

COI summary

[*Targeting,* 3.9]

■ **Accusations of witchcraft:** People, and in particular elderly women, children, or those 'who are somehow 'different', feared or disliked' might be accused of being witches. The phenomenon is more widely reported in the South of Nigeria, but also exists in the North. It is reported that churches, especially those belonging to the Pentecostal and prophetic movement, play an important role in the legitimisation of fears related to witchcraft, and in particular, child witches. Exorcism of evil spirits is practiced during services.

Witchcraft accusations are often directed towards persons who are related, such as neighbours, extended family members, even own children or parents. In some communities, twins (sometimes called 'badly born babies') are believed to have bad spirits that will bring misfortune upon their communities. Therefore, in several communities, twin babies (sometimes only one of them) are killed to avoid bad luck for their families. In other communities, the powers attributed to twins are regarded more ambiguously, as twins can see through hidden things and are respected and feared, being close to gods. Persons with visible physical disabilities (such as kyphosis) or severe mental disabilities are also potential targets. Elderly women may also be accused of witchcraft, for example in the case of the death of a child in the local community, miscarriage of a pregnant woman, 'eccentric' behaviour, outliving a deceased husband. Punishment may involve severe beating, burning or stoning, naked parading, being compelled to drink lethal 'medicines', lynch mob. Children accused of witchcraft may face infanticide, abandonment, physical

and sexual violence, stigmatisation. They may be denied schooling and risk being exposed to drugs and prostitution. They may also have to do illegal work or beg.

- **Albinism:** In Nigeria, some people with albinism suffer from discrimination, stigma and social exclusion, including by their families. However, in relation to accusations of witchcraft, skin colour (albinism) does not seem to represent a major factor.

- **Ritual killing:** Ritual killings occur in order to obtain human body parts for use in rituals. It appears to be an increasing phenomenon. It is reported that in the first five months of 2018, there have been 72 deaths related to ritual killings. Victims of ritual killings can include anyone, although reports often concern the ritual killing of women (specifically virgins) and babies.

It has been reported that deaths due to witchcraft and ritual killings account for 1% of all violent deaths between 2006 and 2014.

- **Persons refusing chieftaincy titles:** There are different levels of 'traditional' chiefs and some are part of the state administrative system and are appointed by the state government. The role is well-respected and sought-after. Nowadays, initiation rites do not include dangerous elements for the participants. There is strong competition for certain chieftaincy titles, and titles are rarely refused. However, some people do refuse them. Sources agree that there are no consequences when a title is refused. Being coerced into chieftaincy is conceivable, but not likely.

Risk analysis

Individuals accused of witchcraft could be exposed to acts which are of such severe nature that they would amount to persecution (e.g. killing, physical violence, sexual violence). Not all individuals under this profile would face the level of risk required to establish well-founded fear of persecution. The individual assessment of whether or not there is a reasonable degree of likelihood for the applicant to be accused of witchcraft and face persecution should take into account risk-impacting circumstances, such as: area of origin, gender, age (children and elderly women are generally at a higher risk), relevant events in the local community (e.g. death of a child, miscarriage of a pregnant woman), visible disabilities, 'unusual' behaviour or attributes (e.g. being intersex), family status (e.g. widow, orphan), barrenness, etc.

The act of **ritual killing** is of such severe nature that it amounts to persecution, however ritual killing may affect people indiscriminately and the risk for the individual applicant would normally not reach a reasonable degree of likelihood.

In the case of **persons with albinism**, the individual assessment whether or not discrimination could amount to persecution should take into account the severity and/or repetitiveness of the acts or whether they occur as an accumulation of various measures. Not all individuals under this profile would face the level of risk required to establish well-founded fear of persecution. The individual assessment of whether or not there is a reasonable degree of likelihood for the applicant to face persecution should take into account risk-impacting circumstances, such as: perception of the local community, perception of the family, etc.

For **persons refusing chieftaincy titles** there is no information of acts which would amount to persecution.

Nexus to a reason for persecution

In relation to **individuals accused of witchcraft**, available information indicates that in the specific local context, persecution may be for reasons of religion and/or membership of a particular social group. Relevant particular social groups could be defined, for example, with regard to their innate characteristics (e.g. twins, persons with visible physical or mental disabilities); and the distinct identity of these groups in Nigeria, because they are perceived as being different by the surrounding society.

In relation to **ritual killings**, available information indicates that there is in general no nexus to a reason for persecution, since the crimes are committed for profit and can affect anyone. This is without prejudice to individual cases where nexus could be established based on additional circumstances.

In relation to **persons with albinism**, available information indicates that persecution may be for reasons of membership of a particular social group, in particular with regard to an innate characteristic (albinism); of this group in Nigeria, because they are perceived as being different by the surrounding society.

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