

2.17. Individuals accused of witchcraft

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Nigeria's Criminal Code (Sections 210–213)[782] and Penal Code (Sections 207–209)[783] prohibit witchcraft-related acts, including self-identification as a witch, accusations of witchcraft, and use of charms or *juju*.[784] A recent witchcraft-related case in Bauchi State sparked legal debate over the treatment of such cases under state law. During judicial proceedings, the Chief Judge of Bauchi State expressed concerns about the growing number of witchcraft accusations, stating that such cases are difficult to prove and often rely on confession. The Chief Judge remarked that 'If you are not a witch, you cannot identify as one'.[785] Prominent human rights advocate Leo Igwe[786] criticised the statement as legally baseless and harmful, warning it could promote witch-hunting. Igwe noted that ambiguity surrounding witchcraft in Nigerian law continues to fuel harmful beliefs and practices. He clarified that Nigerian law does not criminalise witchcraft itself but instead prohibits accusations under laws such as Section 210 of the Criminal Code, urging the judiciary to rely on evidence-based reasoning and reject superstition to uphold justice and human rights.[787]

Amnesty International found that incidents involving individuals accused of witchcraft revealed consistent patterns of discrimination against women and children.[788] In 2024, the same source documented an escalation of mob violence against individuals accused of witchcraft, many of whom were 'beaten, tortured, or killed', including numerous cases involving women.[789] Individuals with mental health conditions or psychosocial disabilities were more exposed to mob violence, often accused of witchcraft or labelled as wizards. Their behavioural symptoms, such as confusion or silence, were frequently misinterpreted as signs of guilt, making them easy targets for attacks.[790] According to National media, widows experiencing mental health challenges following the loss of their spouses were particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations.[791] The UN Security Council reported cases of women with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, in particular older women, being killed in North-East Nigeria due to accusations of witchcraft.[792]

Epilepsy in many African communities, especially in Nigeria and Cameroon, is often associated with witchcraft, demonic possession, or curses.[793] These superstitions result in people with epilepsy, particularly women, being stigmatised, isolated, and subjected to traditional rituals instead of receiving medical care. Widespread belief in witchcraft deters families from seeking medical help, reinforcing stigma and discrimination. The stigma is so severe that some are denied education, employment, or marriage, and many women face abuse or rejection within their families and communities.[794]

Witch-related accusations often lead to humiliation as well as assault, or death. In April 2024, a teenage girl and her father in Benue State were accused of witchcraft and forced by a community mob to sit near a fire until she falsely confessed. The victim was eventually rescued, and legal proceedings was initiated, although one alleged perpetrator remained at large.795 In July 2024, a 75-year-old widow in Edo State was publicly assaulted by a traditional leader over witchcraft allegations. The attack caused serious facial injuries, while bystanders did not intervene and a witness's attempt to film it was suppressed.796 In August 2024, a 33-year-old man was beaten by a mob in Benue State after being accused of making a boy's penis disappear through witchcraft. The victim lost his job due to the stigma, and a video of the attack later circulated on social media.797 Such claims are often linked to Koro syndrome, a psychiatric condition involving the fear of genital disappearance.798

Religious beliefs and cultural practices also contribute significantly to the persistence of witchcraft accusations.799 On 30 August 2024, a church in Imo State advertised a deliverance service with the slogan 'That Witch Must Die.' Despite efforts to stop the event, including petitions and media articles, the event took place.800

Although Nigerian law prohibits accusing someone of witchcraft, prosecutions and convictions are rare.801 Nigerian authorities have reportedly failed to carry out effective investigations or implement safeguards, especially in rural areas where women are often targeted to settle personal or family disputes.802 On 4 December 2024, the Jigawa State High Court sentenced four relatives to death for the murder of a neighbour they had accused of practicing witchcraft. 803 In 3 February 2025, five men in Kano State were sentenced to death for killing a 67-year-old woman they accused of witchcraft.804 These cases drew national attention and highlighted the dangers of superstition-driven violence,805 'with many expressing mixed feelings about the cultural and legal implications'.806

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