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Witchcraft, Indigenous Deterrence and Social Control in Combating Insecurity in Nigeria: The Nupe Perspective

Ilyasu Yakubu Ahmed PhD
Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria.
ilyasuyakubu1988@gmail.com
Iliyasu@ibbu.edu.ng

Ismaila Yusuf Usman PhD
Department of History & Diplomatic Studies, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.
ismailayusman@nsuk.edu.ng
yusufkeffi29@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2249-4469

Maryam Yakubu PhD
Dr. Umaru Sanda, College of Education, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.
maryamyakubu55@gmail.com

Abstract

Insecurity has become one of the most persistent challenges confronting societies across the world, with significant consequences for social stability, political order, economic development and the general well-being of communities. In Nigeria, the persistent incidence of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, armed robbery and other forms of violent crime has continued to challenge the capacity of conventional security institutions. Successive governments at the federal, state and local levels have committed substantial resources to the recruitment and training of security personnel, intelligence gathering, acquisition of arms and other security equipment, and the deployment of security forces. Despite these efforts, the problem of insecurity remains a major concern. It is against this background that this study examines witchcraft and indigenous strategies for combating insecurity in Nigeria, with particular reference to the Nupe perspective. The study explores the historical place of beliefs in witchcraft and related supernatural practices within Nupe society, with particular emphasis on their perceived roles in deterring deviant behaviour, regulating social conduct, protecting the community and maintaining social order. The study adopts a historical research design and relies on qualitative analysis of oral traditions, interviews, archival materials, published literature and other relevant secondary sources. The findings indicate that, within the traditional Nupe worldview, beliefs in supernatural powers constituted part of a broader system of indigenous social regulation in which moral sanctions; communal authority, spiritual beliefs and traditional institutions interacted to discourage behaviour perceived as harmful to individuals and the wider community. The study further argues that such beliefs should be understood within their cultural and historical context rather than treated as a scientifically established substitute for modern policing, intelligence or military operations. It concludes that a critical examination of indigenous security traditions can contribute to a broader understanding of how African communities historically developed mechanisms of deterrence, social control and communal protection, while contemporary responses to insecurity should remain grounded in constitutional, evidence-based and accountable security practices.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Indigenous Deterrence and Social Control, Combating Insecurity, Nupe.

INTRODUCTION

The Nupe occupy a significant position within the Middle Niger region of West Africa. The Middle Niger refers broadly to the tract of land along the middle course of the River Niger, extending from the Niger–Benue confluence at Lokoja southwards towards Timbuktu in the north, and covering communities on both sides of the river. Within present-day Nigeria, the area extends towards Kuta in

the east and Kaiama in the west. The traditional Nupe homeland developed around the Niger–Benue confluence and along both banks of the River Niger towards the frontiers of Borgu and the lower basin of the River Kaduna, covering approximately 11,200 square kilometres. Its strategic location facilitated agriculture, fishing, transportation, trade and interaction with neighbouring societies.

Nadel describes Nupe territory as lying "in the heart of Nigeria, in the low basin that is formed by the valley of the two rivers Niger and Kaduna," with the Niger forming a major geographical feature of the territory. This location was central to the historical development of Nupe society, as the river and surrounding plains facilitated population movement, commerce, cultural exchange and political interaction. In present-day Nigeria, the Nupe are predominantly found in Niger and Kwara States, particularly within the traditional emirates of Bida, Agaie, Lapai and Patigi. Nupe communities also occur in Zugurma, Ebe in Kontagora Emirate, Shonga and Share districts, and Eggan in the Koton Karfe area of Kogi State.

The Nupe maintained extensive relations with neighbouring peoples, including the Kamberi, Kamuku and Hausa to the north, the Gbagyi to the north-east and east, the Kakanda towards the south-east, and the Yagba, Yoruba, Borgu and Bussa towards the west and north-west. These relationships involved trade, migration, intermarriage, warfare, political alliances and cultural interaction, all of which contributed to the development of Nupe political and social institutions.

The Nupe homeland is traditionally known as Kin Nupe, meaning "the land of the Nupe". According to Sule, the expression dates to the fifteenth century and reflects the development of a stronger sense of collective Nupe identity. The people are collectively referred to as Nupencizhi, while an individual Nupe is called Nupenci. Traditional society also distinguished between the earliest inhabitants, known as Kintsozhi, meaning "owners of the land", and later migrants or settlers referred to as Egazhi. These distinctions reflected ideas of territorial precedence, belonging and social organisation.

The development of Kin Nupe was closely associated with the political expansion of the Nupe kingdom. Through migration, warfare, conquest, political consolidation and assimilation, Nupe influence expanded beyond its original nucleus around the Bini area into neighbouring territories. By the sixteenth century, expansion had reached areas associated with the Kamberi, Kamuku and Hausa, while further interaction and expansion towards Gbagyi, Ebira and Yoruba territories became particularly significant during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This process produced a politically and culturally diverse society that required mechanisms for maintaining authority, regulating behaviour and preserving communal order.

It is within this historical and socio-cultural context that indigenous beliefs, including beliefs in witchcraft, can be examined. In traditional Nupe society, social order was maintained through a combination of political authority, customary norms, communal sanctions, religious beliefs and moral expectations. Beliefs in supernatural forces could therefore influence perceptions of wrongdoing, punishment, protection and social responsibility.

This study examines witchcraft as an indigenous deterrence and social control mechanism within the Nupe worldview. Here, deterrence refers to the perceived capacity of supernatural sanctions and related beliefs to discourage behaviour regarded as harmful or socially unacceptable, while social control encompasses the beliefs, norms, sanctions and institutions through which communal behaviour was regulated. The study does not present witchcraft as a scientifically established substitute for modern policing, intelligence or military operations. Rather, it investigates how beliefs in witchcraft were historically understood and perceived to contribute to the regulation of conduct, deterrence of deviance and protection of the community.

The subject is particularly relevant to contemporary Nigeria, where terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts and other forms of insecurity continue to challenge conventional security institutions. Examining the Nupe experience therefore provides an opportunity to understand how indigenous societies conceptualised threats, sanctions, protection and communal order. The study argues that although indigenous beliefs cannot simply be transferred into modern security practice, their historical significance offers useful insights into traditional mechanisms of deterrence and social control and their place in the broader history of security in Nigeria.

Concept of Witchcraft

The term witchcraft has been variously defined because of its close association with magic, sorcery and other forms of supernatural belief. Etymologically, "witch" is often associated with the Anglo-Saxon witan, meaning "to know", while "craft" refers to skill, knowledge or practice. Witchcraft may therefore be broadly understood as the perceived capacity to employ supernatural knowledge or powers to influence persons, events or circumstances. However, no universally accepted definition

exists because its meaning differs across cultures and historical periods. While some societies use witchcraft and sorcery interchangeably, others distinguish between them by regarding witchcraft as an inherent or mystical capacity and sorcery as the deliberate application of acquired magical techniques.

For the purpose of this study, witchcraft is understood primarily as a culturally constructed belief concerning supernatural powers attributed to particular persons or forces and their perceived ability to affect human affairs. This definition is deliberately broad enough to accommodate variations in African societies while allowing the study to focus on the social consequences of such beliefs. The concern here is therefore not to establish the objective existence or efficacy of supernatural powers, but to examine how belief in them influenced behaviour, social relations, deterrence and perceptions of security among the Nupe.

An Overview of Witchcraft in African Society

Witchcraft has historically occupied an important place in the religious and social systems of many African societies. Its manifestations differ from one community to another, but it is commonly associated with perceived supernatural influence over illness, death, infertility, economic difficulties, crop failure, interpersonal conflict and other forms of misfortune. In some traditions, witches are believed to operate through spiritual associations or nocturnal gatherings and to direct their activities towards particular individuals or communities. These beliefs could consequently influence not only personal relationships but also wider perceptions of communal well-being and social stability.

Among the Yoruba and other West African societies, for example, witchcraft has traditionally been associated with nocturnal activities and gatherings in secluded places such as forests, riverbanks, and crossroads and around particular trees. Some traditions further attribute to witches the ability to assume animal or bird forms or to travel through supernatural means. Such accounts are best understood as expressions of indigenous religious beliefs through which unusual experiences and perceived threats were interpreted.

Similarly, traditional narratives in different African societies have attributed illness, infertility, madness, economic hardship, agricultural failure and death to witchcraft. Some accounts describe these effects in terms of attacks upon the victim's soul or vital force, while others employ symbolic representations involving the consumption of blood, souls or vital organs. These descriptions reflect the cultural understanding of supernatural harm and should not be treated as empirically verified accounts of physical events.

The perceived methods of witchcraft also vary. They may include curses, charms, physical contact and other forms of alleged spiritual intervention. In societies where unexplained events were interpreted through religious categories, witchcraft could provide an explanation for otherwise difficult-to-understand experiences. Consequently, the belief had consequences beyond religion: it could shape interpersonal relations, influence responses to misfortune and reinforce accepted standards of conduct.

This broader African experience provides an important comparative background for understanding the Nupe. Rather than assuming that witchcraft has a uniform meaning throughout Africa, it is necessary to examine how the Nupe themselves interpreted supernatural beliefs within their particular historical, political and social environment.

Witchcraft in Nupeland and Its Mechanism

Among the Nupe, beliefs concerning witchcraft formed part of a wider religious worldview in which social, material and spiritual dimensions of life were closely connected. Traditional Nupe society possessed established structures of authority involving rulers, elders, family heads and other community institutions. Within this framework, supernatural explanations could be employed to interpret unusual misfortune, interpersonal hostility and threats to communal stability. Nadel's pioneering studies of Nupe religion and witchcraft provide an important foundation for understanding these beliefs.

Evidence from interviews conducted in 1976, 1982 and 1990 reportedly indicates that some informants believed witchcraft had become more prevalent since the beginning of colonial rule. They associated this perceived increase with the weakening of traditional mechanisms of social control and growing social and economic differentiation. Whether or not the actual incidence of witchcraft increased, the testimony is historically significant because it reveals how changes in Nupe society were interpreted through the language of supernatural belief.

The political significance of such interpretations can also be illustrated by events surrounding the 1983 gubernatorial elections in Bida Emirate. During the political tensions and conflicts of the

period, some members of the local population interpreted aspects of the crisis through ideas of witchcraft and occult power. This does not establish a supernatural cause of the political conflict; rather, it demonstrates how witchcraft provided a culturally familiar explanation for uncertainty, political rivalry and perceived hostility.

The endurance of these beliefs also illustrates the limitations of the colonial attempt to classify African witchcraft simply as superstition. Colonial authorities and Christian missionaries at various times attempted to suppress juju, witchcraft and anti-witchcraft practices through religious campaigns, administrative measures and legislation. Nevertheless, such beliefs continued to influence social perceptions. The persistence of belief across different educational and social categories further demonstrates that witchcraft was not confined exclusively to particular sections of African society.

Anthropological interpretations offer a useful explanation for this persistence. Witchcraft beliefs can provide communities with culturally meaningful ways of interpreting uncertainty, misfortune and social tension. In Nupeland, for instance, an unexplained illness, sudden death, crop failure, economic setback or persistent personal difficulty could traditionally generate suspicion of supernatural interference. Such interpretations could transform an otherwise uncertain event into a socially identifiable problem and, in some circumstances, direct attention towards a suspected individual.

The mechanism of witchcraft in Nupeland, therefore, operated principally through belief and its social consequences. Fear of supernatural sanctions could discourage behaviour regarded as harmful or immoral, while the possibility of being accused of witchcraft could influence reputation, conformity and interpersonal conduct. Elders, family heads and traditional authorities could become involved when such accusations produced disputes, thereby bringing supernatural beliefs into existing systems of social regulation.

This mechanism is particularly important in understanding the relationship between witchcraft and security. In traditional Nupe society, protection was not necessarily separated into the modern categories of policing, criminal justice and community security. Communal vigilance, traditional authority, religious beliefs, kinship obligations and social sanctions could operate together. Witchcraft beliefs formed part of this wider cultural environment by providing a perceived spiritual dimension to deterrence and protection.

The contemporary relevance of these beliefs can be observed in parts of Bida, Kutigi and the Lapai area, where traditional explanations of misfortune and danger continue to coexist with Islam, Christianity, modern medicine, formal law and conventional security institutions. In accounts of community responses to insecurity, some residents may interpret traditional spiritual practices as contributing to communal protection. Such accounts are valuable for understanding local perceptions and cultural responses, but they should be distinguished from independently verified evidence of supernatural intervention.

The significance of witchcraft in Nupeland consequently lies in its social effect rather than in an assumed scientific efficacy. Belief in supernatural sanctions could reinforce communal norms, discourage perceived wrongdoing and provide psychological reassurance during periods of uncertainty. Conversely, accusations could generate fear, stigma, exclusion and conflict. Witchcraft should therefore be examined as one component of a broader indigenous system of deterrence, social control and community resilience, rather than as a replacement for contemporary policing, intelligence, military operations or other evidence-based security institutions.

Witchcraft and Social Control in Nupeland

The operation of witchcraft beliefs in Nupeland should be understood within the broader structure of traditional social relations. Nupe communities experienced significant changes arising from political centralisation, economic differentiation, colonial rule and the subsequent transformation of local production and social institutions. The interaction of communal forms of production with the political and economic structures of the nineteenth-century Nupe state and the colonial order created tensions that could find expression through religious and supernatural interpretations.

In this context, witchcraft accusations could serve both as an explanation of misfortune and as a means through which social tensions were expressed. Accusations sometimes directed hostility towards particular individuals who were perceived to possess harmful powers. In this sense, witchcraft discourse could function as a social “safety valve”, allowing latent tensions to be expressed without directly confronting the wider structures responsible for them. At the same time, such accusations could produce serious consequences, particularly where they resulted in stigmatisation, social exclusion, violence or the destruction of livelihoods.

Nupe beliefs about the supernatural also reflect a worldview in which the visible and invisible

realms are interconnected. The spiritual world is traditionally understood as capable of influencing human affairs, and interaction with it is associated with rituals, religious specialists and culturally recognised forms of spiritual power. Within popular narratives, witches are believed to possess unusual abilities, including the capacity to operate at night, attend supernatural gatherings and inflict harm on their perceived victims. Such accounts should be understood as elements of Nupe oral and religious traditions rather than as empirically verified descriptions of supernatural activities.

These beliefs can nevertheless have tangible social consequences. Fear of witchcraft may generate suspicion among community members, particularly where unexplained illness, death, business failure, crop failure or other misfortunes occur. Successful individuals may fear accusations arising from jealousy, while unsuccessful individuals may interpret the prosperity of others through the language of witchcraft or sorcery. Such perceptions can weaken trust and social cooperation and may discourage economic and entrepreneurial activities where individuals fear attracting supernatural attacks.

Witchcraft accusations may also contribute to conflict and economic disruption when they develop into physical confrontation or social exclusion. Destruction of property, disruption of livelihoods and disputes within families and communities can undermine local development. Consequently, the study of witchcraft in Nupeland requires attention not only to supernatural beliefs themselves but also to their social effects.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises witchcraft as a cultural framework through which societies interpret illness, death, misfortune and other forms of uncertainty. Rather than treating such beliefs solely as manifestations of backwardness, scholars have examined their relationship with social change, modernity, inequality and power. In the Nupe context, this approach makes it possible to understand witchcraft as a historical and cultural phenomenon whose significance lies not in proving the existence of supernatural powers, but in examining how beliefs about those powers influence behaviour, social relationships and mechanisms of deterrence and social control.

Thus, witchcraft in Nupeland can be understood as a perceived indigenous mechanism of deterrence and social regulation. Fear of supernatural consequences could discourage certain forms of misconduct, while accusations and associated sanctions could reinforce prevailing moral expectations. However, the same beliefs could also generate fear, suspicion and conflict. The historical significance of Nupe witchcraft therefore lies in this dual character: it could serve as a mechanism, through which communities sought to regulate behaviour and protect social order, while, when misused, it could contribute to social tension and insecurity.

Witchcraft in the Fight against Insecurity in Nupeland

Long before the emergence of contemporary security challenges, Nupe communities developed indigenous mechanisms for protecting their people, territories and livelihoods. This traditional security system combined communal vigilance, local authority, spiritual beliefs, traditional medicine and other forms of social control. In recent years, these mechanisms have continued to influence community responses to insecurity in parts of Nupeland, particularly in the face of banditry and other forms of criminal activity in Niger State.

Within the Nupe worldview, belief in witchcraft and other supernatural forces has historically been associated with the protection of communities against perceived external and internal threats. During the historical conflicts between the Nupe and Yoruba in the present-day Kwara area, for instance, Nupe communities reportedly employed a combination of traditional norms, spiritual practices and indigenous strategies in defending their territories, with witchcraft believed to have played a role in the broader system of protection. Such accounts demonstrate the cultural importance attached to supernatural forms of protection during periods of conflict.

Similar beliefs have featured in more recent community responses to insecurity. In Kutigi, for example, local narratives concerning attempts by bandits to penetrate the community associate the protection of the area with the combined efforts of traditional authorities, vigilantes and indigenous spiritual practices. According to these accounts, the perceived supernatural protection created confusion among the attackers, enabling community vigilantes to apprehend some of them. While such claims should be understood as part of local belief and oral tradition rather than as independently verified evidence of supernatural intervention, they reveal the continuing influence of indigenous belief systems on community security practices.

A related example is found around Bgashimi Forest in the Lapai area, where bandit camps reportedly became a source of insecurity for surrounding communities. Local vigilantes, community leaders and traditional actors mobilised various indigenous strategies to confront the threat, contributing to the destruction of several bandit camps. Local interpretations may attribute part of this

success to spiritual or witchcraft-related mechanisms. Nevertheless, the outcome also reflects the importance of community mobilisation, local intelligence, vigilance and knowledge of the terrain.

These examples suggest that witchcraft, within the Nupe cultural context, is best understood not as a scientifically established substitute for conventional security measures, but as one component of a wider indigenous deterrence and social-control system. Belief in supernatural protection may strengthen communal confidence, discourage hostile actors and reinforce cooperation between traditional authorities and local vigilantes. At the same time, reliance on such beliefs can produce fear, suspicion or accusations if not regulated by accepted community institutions. The Nupe experience therefore demonstrates how indigenous beliefs, communal solidarity and local security practices have historically interacted in responding to threats and maintaining social order.

CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that the Nupe possess a rich repertoire of indigenous norms, values, institutions and belief systems that have historically contributed to the protection of their communities and the maintenance of social order. The geographical position of Nupeland, its history of political interaction and conflict, and the strength of its communal institutions encouraged the development of security practices that combined traditional authority, communal vigilance, spiritual beliefs and indigenous knowledge.

Within this broader security framework, belief in witchcraft occupied an important place in the Nupe understanding of protection and deterrence. Historical accounts of Nupe–Yoruba conflicts, as well as more recent community narratives from areas such as Kutigi and Lapai, indicate that supernatural beliefs were incorporated into local interpretations of threats and responses to insecurity. In Kutigi, for example, local narratives associate the protection of the community from bandit incursions with a combination of vigilance, traditional authority and perceived spiritual intervention. Similarly, the response to bandit camps around Bgashimi Forest in the Lapai area illustrates how community leaders, vigilantes, local knowledge and indigenous beliefs could operate together in confronting insecurity.

The significance of witchcraft in this context therefore lies less in establishing its supernatural efficacy than in understanding its social and psychological functions. Belief in supernatural sanctions could generate fear among perceived wrongdoers, strengthen communal solidarity, reinforce accepted norms and provide communities with culturally meaningful explanations of danger and misfortune. In this sense, witchcraft formed part of a wider indigenous system of deterrence and social control rather than functioning as an independent substitute for organised security institutions.

The Nupe experience also offers a broader lesson for the study of African security history. Indigenous belief systems should not be dismissed simply as superstition, nor should they be presented uncritically as alternatives to modern policing, intelligence or military institutions. Rather, they should be examined within their historical and cultural contexts as elements of community resilience, social regulation and local responses to insecurity. The study consequently concludes that understanding the interaction between traditional institutions, communal vigilance, indigenous beliefs and contemporary security practices can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how communities in Nupeland have historically confronted threats to their security and social order.

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