

2.9. Individuals accused of witchcraft

COMMON ANALYSIS

Last update: February 2019

*Minor updates added October 2021

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.

COI summary

[[Targeting](#), 3.9]

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, as 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.

Akwa Ibom state and Cross River state are the Nigerian states considered to be the epicentre of witchcraft-related incidents, particularly affecting children [[Security situation 2021](#), 2.34.2.1].

Risk analysis

The acts to which individuals under this profile could be exposed 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 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), infertility, etc.

Nexus to a reason for persecution

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.