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Breaking the cycle: investigating the Social drivers of child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse in contemporary Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Reports, including empirical research, indicate that violence directed toward children accused of being witches (termed ritual abuse) has intensified in contemporary Africa. The phenomenon of ritual abuse has its roots in the medieval period where certain behaviors exhibited by children were labeled as non-normative and associated with supernatural beliefs. Over time, these beliefs have been influenced (both positively and negatively) by societal factors, with some of the negative influences leading to extremely violent behaviors toward children accused of being witches. Consequently, this study utilized narrative vignettes as a stimulus to interview 20 young people in Kumasi-Ghana on the contemporary societal factors that enforce or prevent ritual abuse in Ghana. The findings revealed religious leaders, traditional healers, and the media (movies), among the key factors that enforce child witchcraft beliefs and ritual abuse. Mallams (Islamic leaders), and concoction men (traditional healers) were reported as those who substantiated and provided directives on how accused child witches should be treated. In contrast, enforcement of local bylaws and education on legal protections for children were some protective factors that contributed to the decline of ritual abuse. The study highlights gaps in the framing of child witchcraft accusations and calls for social work involvement to address ritual abuse of children.

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Introduction

In recent years, the abuse of children accused of witchcraft (termed ritual abuse) has intensified across Africa (Adinkrah, 2011, 2015, 2019; Van, 2020), posing a severe threat to the well-being and rights of

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vulnerable children (Adinkrah, 2011; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Ayelotan, 2023; Van, 2020). Studies have documented various forms of ritual abuse, including physical torture, emotional, and psychological abuse (Adinkrah, 2011). Evidence suggests that thousands of children are subjected to these forms of ritual abuses annually in Africa, which are driven by a complex mix of poverty, superstition, and socio-cultural beliefs (Bartholomew, 2015; Cimpric, 2010; Peacey et al., 2024). For example, witchcraft accusations and related ritual abuses accounted for a significant portion of cases in rural courts in Central Africa (Cimpric, 2010). According to a 2012 report by ActionAid Ghana, there were approximately 800 women and 500 children residing in eight witch camps in northern Ghana as a result of being accused of witchcraft (Action Aid, 2012).

Ritual abuse in Africa is motivated by the intersection of beliefs and practices supported by community structures (Nel, 2020), such as 1) deep-rooted socio-cultural beliefs that associate certain forms of child behaviors to witchcraft possessions, 2) traditional community structures that validate claims of child witchcraft possessions, and 3) beliefs and structures that punish children accused of witchcraft possessions (Cimpric, 2010). Although the origin of the phenomenon of ritual abuse in Africa dates back several centuries, it is believed that growing educational awareness on child development by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the development of child welfare frameworks to safeguard children may have contributed to weakening ritual abuse practices in Africa. However, there is limited empirical evidence, particularly from young people, on the contemporary societal factors that contribute to the perpetration or prevention of ritual abuse incidents. Consequently, this study will explore the contemporary societal factors that contribute to the prevention of ritual abuse and those that enforce perpetration in Ghana. The study seeks to answer these key questions:

- (1) What contemporary factors contribute to the increase in child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse in Ghana?
- (2) What contemporary societal factors contribute to the prevention of child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse practices in Ghana?

Understanding the contemporary factors that contribute to the prevention of ritual abuse, as well as those factors that perpetuate it, is crucial for informing contemporary interventions and strategies aimed at breaking the cycle of perpetration and eliminate the practice of ritual abuse. By identifying the social, cultural, and legal frameworks that have led to reductions in ritual abuse, stakeholders can replicate or strengthen successful approaches and address ongoing challenges more effectively (Adinkrah, 2011; Agyapong, 2020; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Ayelotan, 2023; Van, 2020). Thus, this study

not only contributes to the academic discourse but also seeks to provide evidence that will influence contemporary policy and advocacy efforts to protect vulnerable children from ritual abuse.

Ritual abuse in Africa: historical analysis

The phenomenon of ritual abuse in Africa, particularly related to witchcraft accusations, has deep historical roots (Cohan, 2011; Okonkwo, 2022; Olsen, 2002; Onyinah, 2002). While precise origins are difficult to pinpoint, early European accounts and colonial records indicate that accusations of witchcraft and associated abuses were present in Africa before the 19th century (Okonkwo, 2022; Olsen, 2002). For instance, Okonkwo (2022) revealed that accusations of witchcraft were used to justify severe physical punishments and social exclusion in the early 19th century in both Nigeria and Ghana.

In Ghana, the history of witchcraft accusations dates back to pre-colonial times when traditional beliefs in supernatural forces were deeply embedded in society (Olsen, 2002) and shaped by social norms and community practices (Adinkrah, 2011; Olsen, 2002). Colonial administrators during this period recorded instances of ritual abuse, which were often institutionalized by local beliefs, religious organizations, and community practices (Olsen, 2002). However, increased missionary works by the Colonial rulers, between the 1940s and 1950s, led to the documentation of ritual abuse practices in official reports and scholarly works (Luongo, 2011; Olsen, 2002; Waller, 2003), which influenced efforts to address ritual abuse in the 1960s and 1970s in post-colonial African states (Luongo, 2011). The 1990s saw a resurgence of attention to witchcraft accusations, partly due to the rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, which often reinforced and amplified traditional beliefs in witchcraft (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Onyinah, 2002). Evidence from the 20th century onwards indicates that ritual abuse is often substantiated through coerced confessions or community consensus (Adinkrah, 2011; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Owusu, 2020, 2024).

Children accused of witchcraft are frequently treated with a range of punitive measures, including beatings, abandonment, and, in extreme cases, ritual killings (Adinkrah, 2011, 2015). However, the 21st century has seen the enactment of legal frameworks to address the growing accusation of witchcraft and ritual abuse in several sub-Saharan African countries. For instance, ritual abuse is considered illegal in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Gabon, although the enforcement of laws that prohibit ritual abuse is inconsistent and often ineffective (Cimpric, 2010). Ghana's Criminal Offences Amendment Bill, 2022, prohibit the practice of witchcraft, including declaring, accusing, or labeling someone as a witch. Enforcement of these legal prohibitions could be challenging in Ghana and many African communities due to

societal practices that normalize and enforce ritual abuses. This is because the normalization of practices generates binding social obligations among people, which often override their commitment to legal laws (Gould, 2018). Hence, it is safe to argue that despite the positive developments in the fight against ritual abuse in the 21st century, the practice could still prevail because of societal practices that normalize it.

Social work practice in Ghana: a missing piece in child witchcraft accusations

The colonial rule introduced Western social work in Ghana to address social problems and create social change (Avendal, 2011). Social workers in Ghana work in government, private, and NGOs, with the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection being the government body responsible for promoting social welfare of individuals, groups and communities. Social work practice in Ghana is informed by a number of local policies and legislation such as the Children's Act 1998, Act 560, Domestic Violence Act 2007, Act 732 and the Child and Family Welfare Policy 2015. Central government organizations where social workers operate include the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development (DSWCD), Domestic Violence and Victims' Support Unit (DOVVSU) and the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ). The DSWCD, for instance, has district-level social workers working in all 16 regions of the country to promote and protect the wellbeing of vulnerable individual in communities.

Following colonial rule and particularly in the 21st century, there has been an increasing trend in families seeking recourse from social workers when dealing with violence, abuse, child neglect and forms of vices that negatively impact the physical, social, mental, and emotional wellbeing of people. However, informal and traditional actors like kinship, religious leaders, and chiefs continue to play a key role in the wellbeing of individuals in areas where social work intervention are inadequate or non-existent (Avendal, 2011; Manful & Cudjoe, 2018). In fact, in many cases, the cultural notion in Ghanaian communities to protect family ties would mean that families grappling with domestic violence or child maltreatment will first attempt to resolve the situation within the family before resorting to formal intervention from social workers. Hence, traditional actors and professional social workers co-exist in a social world with similar ambitions to promote the wellbeing of vulnerable groups (Avendal, 2011).

Child witchcraft accusations is a highly cultural, spiritual, and religious phenomenon, and it is considered one of the areas where social workers are rarely involved. Traditional actors and religious leaders have been the primary point of contact in these cases. Pastors, who are regarded as spiritual authorities, often validate claims of child witches through their pastoral activities (Ayelotan, 2023). As a result, religious or spiritual leaders are positioned as

individuals with the spiritual capacity to identify, validate, and address issues of child witchcraft. Similarly, traditional beliefs in ancestral spirits (Cimpric, 2010; Olsen, 2002) promotes the role of traditional healers in bringing “deliverance” to supposed witchcrafts. Also, the role of influential community figures, such as chiefs, elders, and other traditional leaders, has been pivotal in sustaining ritual abuse (Adinkrah, 2011). Often regarded as custodians of cultural heritage, community leaders in Ghana participated in and sanctioned ritual abuses as a means of protecting their communities from perceived supernatural threats (Adinkrah, 2015; Adinkrah & Adhikari, 2014). Their endorsements lends legitimacy to these actions, and normalizes them, thereby making it difficult to challenge or change such norms (*cf.* Weber, 1978).

However, the actions of many traditional actors and religious leaders continue to perpetuate the abuse and marginalizes victims accused of child witchcraft and their families. While child witchcraft accusations represent a severe form of child maltreatment, this has been an area often neglected in social work practice in Ghana, due to its heavy cultural underpinning and framing as a spiritual issue. There is an urgent need to rethink social workers’ role in ritual abuse, toward ensuring the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children accused of being witches.

Ritual abuse: validation process, and changes

Research suggests that African children with certain characteristics and developmental deformities are often subjected to spiritual assessment by religious, community and traditional leaders to determine whether they are “witches.” Children with congenital deformities, such as albinism (Cimpric, 2010) and those with chronic illnesses, such as epilepsy or tuberculosis, psychological disorders like autism or Down syndrome, or even those who stutter, are frequently accused due to their perceived “otherness” (Cimpric, 2010; Groce & McGeown, 2013). The assessment and validation of witchcraft accusations often involves traditional healers, diviners, and even pastors or prophets, who perform rituals to “diagnose” the presence of witchcraft spirits (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Cimpric, 2010). A common method of assessment involves administering potions made from poisonous plants, which are forcefully applied to the eyes or ears of the child (Cimpric, 2010; Groce & McGeown, 2013). Vomiting or defecating through this process is interpreted as evidence of the presence of witchcraft or as proof of the efficacy of the treatment (Groce & McGeown, 2013).

Although religious organizations are still predominant in Africa, authorities of community leaders have waned in contemporary Ghana due to increased urbanization (Nukunya, 2016). As a result, the roles these traditional leaders play in ritual abuse may have weakened. Also, some researchers suggest that intensive community education and awareness of human right abuse by NGOs

(Davies, 2024), and the development of child welfare legislation (Boateng & Sottie, 2021) may have contributed to the decline in beliefs of child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse. Further, investigative journalism has increased public awareness of ritual abuse cases, which increases pressure on governments to take decisive actions against ritual abuse (Adinkrah, 2015; Owusu, 2020). Danielson (2013) reports that works by investigative journalists have resulted in the arrest of perpetrators and accomplices. These positive developments suggest that some societal factors contribute to the prevention of ritual abuse incidents in Ghana. This study adopts a balanced approach by investigating contemporary societal factors that contribute to the increased perpetration and prevention of child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse incidents in Ghana.

Methods

Research design and approach

This study was guided by a qualitative collaborative inquiry using a vignette-based narrative approach. Collaborative inquiry is a qualitative design that fosters the co-creation of knowledge, by engaging participants actively in the research process (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Following this approach, the first five participants who were recruited to participate in the study were engaged to co-design the interview guide. The participants provided insight and suggestions on age-appropriate questions as well as strategies to strengthen engagement with the young people. Both the researchers and the participants agreed to develop vignettes as the basis for the interview discussion. The vignettes were meant to provide initial case scenarios that will stimulate the discussion. Participants and the researchers collectively developed stories on two child witchcraft incidents, based on their lived experiences (see Table 1). Vignettes were designed based on real-life cases involving child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse, prompting participants to reflect on how key societal factors

Table 1. Vignettes on child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse.

Vignette 1	<i>"Afisa, a 10-year-old girl from the Volta Region, was accused of witchcraft after several children in her community fell ill. Her own family turned against her, believing she had caused the illnesses through supernatural means. Afisa was beaten and starved until a local pastor intervened and provided her with shelter and protection.</i>
Vignette 2	<i>At ten years old, Kwame was known for his intelligence and his knack for understanding the plants and animals around him. He often helped his grandmother, who was a traditional healer, gather herbs and prepare remedies. Though many appreciated his abilities, others viewed them with suspicion. In one particular year, the village experienced a series of unfortunate events: a severe drought, an outbreak of illness among the livestock, and mysterious ailments affecting some villagers. Fear and anxiety spread, and the elders convened to find the source of their misfortune. During the meeting, an influential villager named Nana Kojo spoke up. "I have seen Kwame wandering in the forest, speaking to himself and collecting strange herbs. His grandmother's practices are known, but perhaps the boy's powers are darker." The head elder, a stern man named Baffour, addressed him. "Kwame, you have been accused of witchcraft. Kwame was subsequently ostracized from the community?"</i>

contributed to the persistence or reduction of these accusations. The vignette approach is effective in researching sensitive topics without requiring participants to disclose personal experiences directly (Wilks, 2004). The vignette-based narrative approach was applied through in-depth qualitative interviews.

Participants and procedure

Twenty young people, aged 18–23, were recruited from the Ayigya, Tafo, and Aboabo communities in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The focus on young people, born in the past two-three decades, was appropriate in generating evidence on contemporary beliefs on child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse. Also, we purposively selected these four communities due to their cosmopolitan and diverse nature, which offers unique insight into the cultural nuances of child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse. The research team first sought permission and guidance from the community leaders, who helped facilitate entry into each community. The community leaders initially introduced the research team to three households in each community to initiate recruitment. Following this introduction, the team proceeded to identify additional households closer to the three households using the next-door neighbor sampling approach (Emery et., 2015). This sampling process ensured that the study participants were clustered within defined neighborhood areas, thereby enabling the researchers to generate insight into collective community practices that promote or prevent child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse. Fifty-six households were visited but only 24 had at least one young person within the eligible age range of 18 to 23. Some households had more than one eligible young person. A total of 30 young people were approached for the study, but only 20 were deemed eligible. To be eligible, the participants were expected to: (1) have lived in the community for at least 12 months, and (2) have indicated awareness of child witchcraft accusations or ritual abuse.

Written informed consent was obtained from each young person to confirm their voluntary decision to participate in the study. The consent form highlighted participants' rights to withdraw from the study and the potential benefits and risks associated with the study. Participants who agreed to participate were encouraged to choose interview times and locations that were convenient and comfortable for them. The research obtained ethics approval from the Kwame Nkrumah University Science and Technology.

Data collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with the 20 young people using narrative vignettes drawn from two real-life cases of ritual abuse in Ghana. The vignettes enabled the participants to reflect on ritual abuse incidents, whereas the semi-structured interview questions elicited detailed narratives

on factors contributing to either the increase or decrease of child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse. For example, key questions in the interview guide included: “Can you tell us what you know about the factors that have contributed to community practices of ritual abuse and child witchcraft accusations?,” “Can you describe any changes in how the community respond to witchcraft accusations involving children?” and “What factors do you believe has contributed to the changes/shift in community response?” All interviews were conducted in Twi (the widely spoken language among the participants) between June and September 2024 and spanned an average of 90 minutes. Each participant was given 30 cedis (~US \$2) as a thank you souvenir.

Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded, translated, and transcribed into English. The reflexive thematic analysis process by Braun and Clarke (2022) was followed to generate themes from the interview data. The initial step involved two researchers reading the transcriptions multiple times to become familiar with the data and content. A line-by-line reading of the transcripts was done independently by two researchers to generate initial codes. Examples of initial codes generated included: “Mallams validating suspicions” and “religious teachings reinforcing accusations.” These initial codes were reviewed during the project meetings by all researchers to resolve coding discrepancies. The initial codes were then grouped under the broader themes based on similarities within the content of the codes. The themes were further refined during project meetings to ensure they collectively addressed the research questions. The entire analysis process was completed in NVivo 12 software.

Findings

Demographic summary of participants

Table 2 provides detailed demographic characteristics of the study participants. The average age of participants was 20 years. The majority of the participants have completed junior high school education and are currently enrolled in senior high school, with one participant enrolled in a National Vocational and Technical Institute (NVTI). All participants had lived in their respective communities for at least 10 years.

Key themes

Five key themes generated from the interviews have been presented below under the two primary research questions; What contemporary factors

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Items	Classification	Frequency (n)
Gender	Male	16
	Female	4
Age	17–18 years	5
	19–21 years	12
	22–23 years	3
Education	Junior High	6
	Senior High	13
	Tertiary	1
Relationship	Single	19
	Married	1
Number of Years Lived in Community	10–14 years	13
	15–19 years	5
	20 years and above	2
Ethnicity	Gonja	8
	Fante	3
	Gurusi	2
	Ashanti	7

contribute to the increase in child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse in Ghana? and What contemporary factors contribute to the prevention of child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse practices in Ghana?

Factors sustaining child witchcraft accusations

Influence of Mallams. A common theme that emerged from the interviews was the influence of Mallams [Islamic leaders] shaping and legitimizing witchcraft accusations. Most participants argued that teachings by the religious leaders [Mallams] shaped perceptions of witchcraft, enforced ritual abuse practices and created an environment where accusations were more likely. One participant explained,

... some religious teachings have contributed to that. Some people are being taught that whatever bad thing that happens to them is as a result of a witch; hence, when they go through difficulties, they look around them and try to find someone to accuse them. This behaviour is increasing the rate at which people accuse others. (Y1, 19 years)

Mallams [teachers in Islam] are seen as trusted figures who have the spiritual capacity to identify child witches. As a result, their judgments are widely respected within communities. A participant confirmed this:

Our elders and some Mallams have spiritual gifts of seeing such things [those who are witches in the community]. They are the ones who identify those children (Y8, 19 years)

However, some participants expressed concerns over the exploitations by the religious leaders by arguing that some religious figures have turned child witchcraft accusations into profit-making ventures. A narrative by one participant summarizes this:

Some pastors and Mallams have decided to use [witchcraft accusations] as a form of revenue generation. When parents or community members consult them, they have to

pay money. Also, sometimes they give directions for parents to buy sheep or goat for them to perform the assessment. All these are benefits they get, which makes them to just accuse children of witchcraft and earn money from that. (Y1, 19 years)

This narrative highlights the role Mallams specifically plays in enforcing ritual abuse. It also shows that the continued perpetration of ritual abuse could be linked to false accusations by the Mallams which are motivated by the benefits they obtain.

Substantiation of Witchcraft by Traditional Healers. Traditional healers emerged as other key figures who validate and substantiate child witchcraft accusations, particularly when a child's behavior deviates from the community norm. In cases where children display unusual abilities or behaviors, such as recounting events they could not have known, traditional healers are frequently consulted to provide confirmation. One participant explained:

Concoction men (traditional healers) are often consulted to substantiate accusations and provide directives on how accused child witches should be treated. (Y3, 21 years)

Once traditional healers validate an accusation, they often suggest methods of treatment, some of which involve physical abuse. In Aboabo, a participant described the community's response,

Here in Aboabo, if a child is caught as a witch, the 'odunsinii' [traditional healer] will direct that they beat them physically so that the spirit will leave the body. They believe that you intentionally used that spirit to destroy a lot of things in the community, therefore beating you will make you feel the pain and for the spirit to leave you. (Y8, 19 years)

Another participant elaborated on other ritual processes that are performed when a child is confirmed as a witch:

Yes, they also shave your hair and make you bath some concoctions. After that, they assemble you in front of some elders and the concoction man will question you. Based on the questions, some of the children begin to confess what they have done, and the concoction man or mallam will later recite some passages and the spirit will flee. (Y9, 18 years)

Movies and Films. Majority of the participants highlighted contemporary films and movies as key societal factors that influence community perceptions of child witchcraft and ritual abuse. These films often portray witchcraft in ways that reinforce harmful stereotypes, leading viewers to internalize these depictions and apply them to real-life situations.

To me, I think the kind of movies that are aired on our televisions play a major part. For example, in some of the movies like Kyeiwaa parts 1 to 10, the idea being promoted was witchcraft and how people, including children, use witchcraft to destroy their family

members. This made a lot of people become aware of the phenomenon and began to attribute almost everything to the devil or witchcraft. (Y1, 19 years)

Another participant emphasized how these films act as a reference point for community members, particularly young viewers, who begin to see these portrayals as factual representations of witchcraft. He noted,

Ghanaian movies for sometime now have shown a series of witchcraft activities involving children. Due to this, people make inferences from such movies and accuse children when they exhibit behaviours that are portrayed in the movies. (Y3, 21 years)

The narratives suggest that characteristics of child witchcraft that are shown in movies influence people to judge children who behave in similar ways. Other participants corroborated this by sharing personal experiences on some of these characteristics:

When we were in primary school, some of us were afraid of children who had big eyes. We were made to believe that children with big eyes are witches because of one guy called Sunsum who played the role of a witch in movies. (Y1, 19 years)

In the same way, when we watch these witchcraft movies, it gives us ideas about who a child witch is, how they look like and operate. Therefore, if we see a child who is ugly, talks about mysterious things, is very stubborn and likes to go out at night, we think they are witches, because of the movies that we watched. (Y13, 20 years)

In addition to the general effects of strengthening child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse, the research participants discussed how movies contribute to a generalized fear and stigma surrounding witchcraft:

It makes us lose our confidence in doing certain things. Mostly, people fear waking up at midnight to work or pray because they feel that is the time evil forces operate; hence nobody will be willing to conduct business at that time. (Y2, 21 years)

Factors contributing to the decline in child witchcraft accusations

Laws. The study participants argued that laws, including local byelaws, now regulate how accusations of child witchcraft should be handled, often prohibiting public beatings and requiring formal proof. One participant explained:

There is civilization these days. You cannot just get up one day and decide to accuse someone of witchcraft without proof, worst of it all, attempt to beat them. Even if you have proof, you cannot just wake up and decide to beat somebody. There are people in this community who are assigned to deal with matters of spirituality. You cannot take matters into your own hands and act as you like. If you do that, I believe they will let the law take its course. (Y1, 19 years)

This narrative emphasizes the importance of laws that protect children from hasty judgments and mistreatment based solely on assumptions of witchcraft accusations.

It appears that education on the existence of human rights framework has contributed to shaping young people's perception of ritual abuse and the need to prevent ritual abuse. A participant narrated how her education on laws has influenced her:

In the olden days, people could just accuse anybody as a witch and go scot-free. To some extent, they even beat some of them and subject them to torture. However, these days, we are taught in school that nobody can beat you without a reason. It is against my human rights. (Y20, 22 years)

Another participant acknowledged the legal consequences for violence based on accusations, saying,

I do not know the exact laws, but I know that if you beat someone based on witchcraft accusations, you can be arrested by the police. (Y3, 21 years)

However, the influence of legal protections can be inconsistent, as some participants mentioned that cases involving spirituality are often not reported to the police due to cultural sensitivities. One participant argued,

Even though there are laws in this country, people fear to report issues surrounding spirituality to the police. I have heard of instances where the police have refused to pursue a case that has to deal with witchcraft accusation of a child. (Y19, 22 years)

This implies that the role of legal sanctions in preventing child witchcraft accusations could be limited due to cultural narratives that prevent the reporting of witchcraft issues to the police.

Indeed, another participant suggested the need to navigate these complexities by formulating other laws:

It would be helpful if certain laws were enacted with prescribed punishment to deter others from accusing people of witchcraft. (Y1, 19 years)

Education and Legal Protection. The narratives highlight a shift in community attitudes toward child witchcraft accusations, influenced by increased awareness of human rights and education regarding legal protections. This shift reflects a growing recognition of the need to protect children from harmful traditional practices and baseless accusations, challenging the deep-rooted cultural norms that have long perpetuated these beliefs.

Several participants highlighted the role of education in promoting a rights-based approach, which empowers individuals to question and resist accusations grounded solely in superstition.

Our fathers told us that in the olden days, you have no right to question the elderly. However, these days we are taught to question everything. We are taught about our rights, and I know that nobody can accuse me of witchcraft and beat me based on assumptions. I can simply report them to the police. (Y18, 20 years)

This quote illustrates how formal education instills a sense of personal agency and awareness of legal protections, enabling individuals to advocate for themselves and others in the face of witchcraft accusations.

The influence of education has also sparked a growing awareness of the legal implications of ritual abuse, which deters others from abusing children on grounds of witchcraft accusations. One participant shared,

... these days beating children because they were accused of witchcraft is reducing because some people were arrested in the North for lynching an accused witch. I remember it became a very big issue on radio and people were being educated not to be beating people based on accusations. (Y16, 21 years)

Despite this progress, participants also noted challenges in fully implementing these laws due to cultural norms on respect and religious constraints:

I am aware that you can report someone who accuses a child of witchcraft but who am I to report an elderly person in this community? For us as Muslims, we do not challenge what our elders say. Their directives are final (Y20, 22 years)

The reluctance to report cases involving adults underscores the need for culturally sensitive approaches to bridge the gap between traditional norms and modern legal standards.

Overall, the participants encouraged the need to strengthen community education to ensure complete eradication of ritual abuse:

If we can keep teaching people that children are innocent and that accusing them without proof is wrong, then over time, people will stop making these accusations. (Y17, 20 years)

Discussion

This study sought to uncover the key contemporary practices and societal factors that have contributed to the increase or decrease in child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse incidents in Ghana. The findings highlight the role of religious institutions, traditional healers, media representations, laws, and education in shaping community attitudes and practices on child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse. These factors have been discussed to highlight their key practice implications in the context of child protection practices to eliminate ritual abuse cases in Ghana. As previously indicated, the findings have shown that social workers are not necessarily a primary point of contact in witchcraft accusations. However, we have drawn attention to the applications of the study to social work practice, emphasizing the need for professional intervention in this area.

The study found that religious leaders play a significant role in increasing child witchcraft accusations. Participants identified Mallams as trusted spiritual authorities whose judgments and interpretations

influence communal attitudes and actions on child witchcraft and ritual abuse cases. This finding is consistent with existing studies on the role of religious leaders in mediating supernatural explanations for misfortunes (Adinkrah, 2011, 2015; Cimpric, 2010; Onyinah, 2002). However, compared to studies on the role of Christian religious leaders, such as Pastors (Adinkrah, 2011, 2015; Cimpric, 2010; Onyinah, 2002), this study has revealed the key role Islamic leaders, known as Mallams, play in substantiating child witchcraft accusations and abuses. The reliance on religious leaders, such as Mallams and Pastors, can be attributed to the highly religious nature of the Ghanaian society. As per the 2021 Ghana population and housing census, over 90% of Ghanaians associate themselves with a particular religion, with 71.3% and 19.9% identifying themselves as Christians and Muslims respectively (Ghana Population and Housing Census, 2022).

Also, the continued reliance on spiritual interpretations by religious leaders can be attributed to the lack of appropriate systems and structures for handling issues that bother on spirituality. The absence of appropriate systems for addressing complex societal issues such as unexplained misfortunes and illnesses reinforces the reliance on these religious leaders. In most cases, the absence of scientific explanations for diseases and hardships pushes people to seek spiritual validation. The link between the spiritual interpretations and actions, including physical abuse of children accused of witchcraft, echoes Weber's concept of charismatic authority, which explains how spiritual prowess can legitimize social actions (Lepsius, 2017; Weber, 1978). However, the role of religious leaders in interpreting child witchcraft accusations should be carefully considered as some spiritual leaders exploit their authority due to the financial gain through their spiritual consultative works. We argue that social workers involvement in handling supposed witchcraft accusations could help deal with such exploitation, since social workers will prioritize the interest and welfare of children.

The findings also revealed insight into how traditional healers go about validating accusations of child witchcraft accusations and administering rituals to address suspected child witches/wizards. The findings suggest that the traditional healers often interpret children's unusual behaviors or physical traits as signs and symptoms of witchcraft possession. For example, traits such as stubbornness, isolation, or physical abnormalities are frequently viewed through a spiritual lens as signs of witchcraft possession, rather than being understood as developmental differences or health conditions. Though Cimpric (2010) study in Chad highlighted the role of traditional healers in conforming to child witchcraft accusations, this study has revealed contextual factors, including the characteristics of children that are considered when assessing child witchcraft incidents in Ghana.

The interpretation of children's behaviors and physical deformities as signs of witchcraft highlights the communities' limited understanding of child development and disabilities. Studies have shown that conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), epilepsy and Down syndrome, are frequently misunderstood in African contexts (Mbamba & Ndemole, 2021; Melamu et al., 2024; Mpofu, 2023). Abdullah and colleagues (2022) found that parents in rural communities in Ghana interpreted disabilities among infants to be spiritual issues. These interpretations stem from the traditional belief that any behavior that deviates from "societal norms" is associated with witchcraft or spirituality.

In addition, the findings also highlighted the extreme physical abuse sometimes prescribed by traditional healers, such as beatings or forced rituals, as part of solutions to substantiated incidents of child witchcraft (Adinkrah, 2004, 2011, 2015). The participants argued that imposing physical harm on the child helps drive the witchcraft spirit out of the child. The abuse, therefore, is framed as a spiritual remedy, one that is believed to get rid of the evil forces. The belief in punishment is rooted in the idea that witchcraft cannot be removed through peaceful means, but rather through harsh physical punishment. However, such practice strengthens the cycle of ritual abuse because it gives legitimacy to the idea that violence is a valid method of addressing spiritual wrongs. It also creates a social and cultural context where children who display unusual behaviors or those who are perceived as "different" are subjected to abuse under the guise of spiritual cleansing. The role of traditional healers in perpetuating this cycle of abuse is crucial, as their authority and cultural position make their recommendations appear legitimate, which normalizes the abuse. This process further strengthens ritual abuse, making it difficult to dismantle despite modern interventions and legal protections.

The media emerged as another powerful enforcer of witchcraft narratives, shaping societal perceptions and fueling fears of child witchcraft. Participants identified popular movies like "*Kyeiwaa*" (Ghana Movie House Director, 2019), as a source of information and knowledge that links witchcraft to physical traits and behaviors. Local Ghanaian movies that strengthen narratives on witchcraft, including "*Kyeiwaa*" (Ghana Movie House Director, 2019), "*Efie Bayie*" (Paulgee Tv Director, 2016) and "*Abro ne Bayie*" (Ghana Movie House Director, 2024), have become popular in the past two decades. For example, *Kyeiwaa*, released in 2007, was one of the most viewed and talked-about films in Ghana at the time. It portrayed witches as individuals with distinct, often alarming physical features, and evil behaviors, which resonated with existing cultural beliefs. The display of child witches using strange characters in movies also instilled societal fears, particularly regarding children. Van (2020), argued that the representation of children as witches in movies tends to amplify fears and misconceptions about witchcraft. Our findings have shown that these representations of children often stigmatise

children with physical differences or unconventional behaviors, leading to real-life accusations of being witches. It is therefore crucial to advocate for urgent reforms on how children are represented in local movies.

On the other hand, the findings also revealed how laws and traditional leadership have contributed to the decline in child witchcraft accusations. Participants noted that local byelaws and formal legal frameworks (such as the Criminal Offences (Amendment) Bill 2022) have discouraged community support for physical abuse of children without accurate proof supporting their accusation. Owusu's (2020) review of ritual abuse cases in three renowned newspapers in Ghana highlighted the role of legal protections in reducing ritual abuse. He argued that the existence of laws prohibiting torture and heinous crimes in Ghana has significantly contributed to the historical decline in child witchcraft accusations and abuse. Our findings corroborate these claims but with some caveats regarding enforcement of the law. The current study revealed inconsistencies in the enforcement of laws, particularly in cases involving spirituality. Participants indicated that when witchcraft-related cases are reported to the police the authorities often respond by stating that they do not handle matters of spirituality. Instead, they only take action when there is clear evidence of physical abuse. This creates a significant loophole in legal protections, as many witchcraft accusations are framed within the spiritual realm, making it difficult for the police to act without physical evidence.

Further, formal education and public awareness are perceived to play a crucial role in reducing child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse in Ghana. Participants highlighted how formal education enlightens children about their human rights and empowers them to challenge baseless child witchcraft accusations. As individuals become more aware of their legal protections, they are more likely to resist being silent about unjust accusations. This shift in attitude also fosters a broader societal understanding that child witchcraft accusations are harmful and unjust. The effectiveness of education in changing community perspectives suggests that it could be harnessed to achieve the goal of eliminating child witchcraft accusations.

Implications for child protection social work

The findings of this study have key practice implications for addressing and preventing child witchcraft accusations and ritual abuse in Ghana. First, a tripartite collaboration between social workers, religious institutions, and traditional leaders is required to mitigate practices that undermine children's wellbeing as a result of witchcraft accusations. Compared to religious and traditional leaders, social workers are more likely to be aware of child protection laws and policies around such severe forms of maltreatments. Social workers should be involved in advocacy programmes in communities, churches, and mosques to

educate stakeholders about the need to consider social services in witchcraft accusations and refer cases to social workers. Upon referral, social workers should work together with the relevant traditional and religious leaders using a balanced approach that not only views the phenomenon as a spiritual being but also to assess the implications on the child's health and wellbeing. Training programs aimed at educating Mallams, pastors, and traditional healers on child protection laws and human rights could reduce their involvement in harmful practices. Engaging these leaders as advocates for reform within their communities could also help dismantle entrenched cultural norms that legitimize accusations. Also, the National Media Commission and the Ghana Film Industry should collaborate to enforce content guidelines that prevent the use of harmful stereotypes, particularly those that portray children as witches in movies. In the spirit of collaboration, social workers should be involved in reviewing contents of such films before they are made public. This is to ensure that any misinformation associated with witchcraft accusations is addressed. Additionally, the media should be encouraged to include contents that educate people on the scientific explanations of deformities and illnesses, such as Down syndrome, which are often associated with spirituality.

More so, social workers should be involved in other community-level interventions, such as working with community leaders to strengthen local bylaws and traditional leaders in advocacy efforts. Community leaders could be empowered to mediate disputes involving child witchcraft accusations and provide nonviolent alternatives to address community concerns. Awareness campaigns should focus on educating community members about the consequences of false accusations and the importance of protecting vulnerable children. Finally, the DSWCD needs to strengthen child protection education in Ghana focusing on raising legal awareness of child protection policies and legislation.

Limitations

Some limitations apply to this study. First, the use of vignettes may have the drawback of limiting the participants' responses to only the cases presented. This risk may have been minimized through the follow-up interviews. Also, the study findings are limited to young people within the four urban communities. Further, the participants' lived experiences within the urban communities may have shaped their responses. Research that utilizes a large sample of young people, including young people from rural communities, could help enrich the study findings.

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