



# POLICY BRIEF

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## **Rising Cases of Ritual Killings in Nigeria: Imperatives for Legislative Intervention**

**By:**

Ishaka Dele, Ph.D, Patrick N. Udefuna, Yerima Hassan & Dr. Martins U. S. Udom.

Department for Democracy & Governance.

### **Executive Summary**

There is no denying the fact that ritual killings in Nigeria pose a grave threat to the safety and security of citizens, instilling fear and anxiety within the populace. While precise data is limited due to under-reporting, it is estimated that over 168 in 2022 and 100 ritual-related deaths occurred in Nigeria in 2024 alone, a grim statistic that underscores the urgency of addressing this issue. Since 1999, the number of documented ritual killings has steadily increased, highlighting the need for comprehensive and decisive action. Ritual killings, characterized by the deliberate taking of human life for non-natural purposes such as the utilization of body parts in traditional medicine or for sacrificial offerings, have a long history in Nigeria. While precise data is limited, evidence suggests their continued occurrence, often targeting vulnerable groups such as children, women, and albinos. Several factors contribute to the perpetuation of ritual killings. Poverty and economic inequality can drive individuals towards desperate measures, including criminal activities. The erosion of traditional values and the persistent belief in the efficacy of ritual killings, particularly in certain regions, further fuel this heinous practice. The inadequacy of law enforcement, including underfunding, under-staffing, and corruption within the criminal justice system, hinders effective investigation and prosecution. Combating ritual killings requires a multi-pronged approach. This includes strengthening legislation with harsher penalties, enhancing law enforcement capacity through increased funding, training, and resources, and improving prosecution rates by providing greater support to prosecutors and witnesses. The policy recommends:

- The National Assembly should prioritize the enactment of specific legislation that explicitly criminalizes ritual killings, addressing the unique aspects of these crimes, such as the use of human body parts for ritual purposes. This legislation should include provisions for harsher penalties for perpetrators and enhanced legal protections for victims,
- The government should actively engage with traditional healers, religious leaders, and community elders to address the underlying beliefs and practices that may contribute to ritual killings,
- The government should establish and strengthen comprehensive support services for victims of ritual killings and their families and
- The government should actively support and promote community-based initiatives to raise awareness about the dangers of ritual killings, encourage the reporting of suspicious activities, and foster a stronger sense of community cohesion and social responsibility.

### **Introduction**

Nigeria, akin to numerous other nations classified as developing, is currently confronted with a myriad of intricate societal dilemmas, one of the most disturbing being the worrisome increase in the occurrence of

ritual killings, which have become a pressing concern. These atrocious acts, which are defined by the intentional and premeditated taking of human life for purposes that are not derived from natural circumstances, such as the use of human body parts in traditional medicinal practices or for sacrificial rituals,



possess a deeply entrenched historical significance within the fabric of Nigerian society. Although obtaining precise statistical data regarding the frequency of ritual killings is fraught with difficulties, primarily due to the substantial under-reporting of such grievous offenses, the existing evidence, which includes various media reports alongside numerous anecdotal narratives, robustly indicates that these acts continue to be alarmingly prevalent within the populace. The individuals who fall victim to these horrific atrocities are often drawn from particularly vulnerable demographic segments, encompassing children, women, and those with albinism, who are unjustly viewed as possessing an enhanced capacity for ritualistic exploitation<sup>1</sup>.

The ongoing perpetuation of ritual killings within Nigeria can be attributed to a complex interplay of multifaceted factors that converge to create an environment conducive to such egregious behavior. One of the predominant elements contributing to this phenomenon is the pervasive nature of poverty and economic disparity, which significantly influences the choices of desperate individuals who may find themselves enticed into engaging in criminal acts, including ritual killings, as a perceived pathway to achieving financial stability or material wealth. In addition to these economic pressures, the gradual erosion of traditional social norms and values has played a critical role in fostering a societal climate where acts of violence may be erroneously regarded as acceptable or even

legitimate means for attaining desired personal or communal outcomes.

A 2022 report by Nigeria Watch and West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP's) National Early Warning System (NEWS) documented over 168 deaths resulting from ritual-related incidents across 20 states<sup>2</sup>. While the exact number of ritual killings remains difficult to ascertain, these figures underscore the seriousness of the issue. Furthermore, the report highlights the vulnerability of certain groups, with children and individuals with albinism disproportionately affected.

Compounding the severity of this issue is the inadequacy of existing law enforcement mechanisms, which further intensifies the challenges associated with addressing ritual killings. The Nigerian Police Force, which is currently beleaguered by severe underfunding and a chronic shortage of personnel, encounters considerable obstacles that impede its ability to effectively investigate and prosecute cases of ritual killings. Furthermore, the pervasive issue of corruption within the criminal justice system has the potential to foster a culture of impunity among perpetrators, thereby significantly obstructing the collective efforts aimed at curtailing this abhorrent crime<sup>3</sup>.

## Issues

- a) **Perpetuation of Traditional Beliefs:** The belief in the efficacy of ritual killings for acquiring wealth, power, or good fortune persists in certain segments of Nigerian society, fueling the demand for

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<sup>1</sup> Nigerian Tribune (2020, January 14). Ritual Killings: A Monster We Must Tackle. <https://wanep.org/wanep/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/RITUAL-KILLINGS-IN-NIGERIA.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Nigeria Watch (2022). Ritual Killings in Nigeria: A Growing Concern. <https://www.nigeriawatch.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Vanguard (2019, July 29). The Menace of Ritual Killings in Nigeria. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/05/the-scourge-of-ritual-killings-in-nigeria/>



human sacrifices<sup>4</sup>. These beliefs, often intertwined with traditional religious practices, can desensitize individuals to the sanctity of human life.

- b) **Erosion of Traditional Values:** The rapid pace of modernization and urbanization in Nigeria has led to a decline in traditional social values and a weakening of community structures. This erosion of social cohesion can create a climate of moral ambiguity and contribute to the acceptance of violence as a means of achieving personal or societal goals<sup>5</sup>.
- c) **Influence of Occult Practices:** The influence of occult groups and secret societies, which may promote the use of human body parts for rituals, further contributes to the prevalence of ritual killings. These groups often operate clandestinely, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to effectively investigate and prosecute their activities<sup>6</sup>.
- d) **Poverty and Inequality:** Poverty and economic inequality can create a climate of desperation, driving individuals towards desperate measures, including criminal activities such as ritual killings. The allure of quick wealth and social mobility through ritualistic practices can be particularly tempting for individuals living in poverty<sup>7</sup>.
- e) **Corruption and Impunity:** Corruption within the criminal justice system, including police bribery and judicial

misconduct, can create a climate of impunity for those who engage in ritual killings. Perpetrators may be able to evade justice due to bribery, intimidation of witnesses, and other forms of corruption<sup>8</sup>.

- f) **Lack of Forensic Expertise:** The lack of adequate forensic expertise within law enforcement agencies can hamper the investigation and prosecution of ritual killings. Proper forensic analysis of evidence, such as DNA testing and post-mortem examinations, is crucial for establishing the cause of death and identifying potential suspects.
- g) **Stigma and Under-reporting:** The stigma associated with being a victim or witness of a ritual killing can discourage individuals from reporting such crimes. This under-reporting makes it difficult to accurately assess the true extent of the problem and hampers law enforcement efforts<sup>9</sup>.
- h) **Lack of Public Awareness:** Inadequate public awareness about the dangers of ritual killings and the legal consequences of engaging in such activities contributes to their continued occurrence.

### Legal Matters

Ritual killings in Nigeria are a complex issue with multifaceted legal considerations. While there is no specific federal law directly addressing ritual killings, several existing legal frameworks can be applied to prosecute

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<sup>4</sup> Iwu, C. K. (2010). Ritual Killings in Nigeria: A Sociological Perspective. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 24(1), 1-10.

<sup>5</sup> Oladipo, O. (2015). The Erosion of Traditional Values and the Rise of Crime in Nigeria. *Journal of Social Issues in Nigeria*, 1(1), 1-15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Adegboyega, A. A. (2018). Ritual Killings in Nigeria: A Sociological Perspective. *Journal of Sociology and Anthropology Research*, 4(1), 1-10.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch (2015). *Nigeria: Police Brutality and Impunity*. Human Rights Watch.

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International (2018). *Nigeria: The Shadow of Impunity: Human Rights Abuses in Nigeria*. Amnesty International.



perpetrators. Here's a breakdown of the key legal aspects:

- a) **Murder and Homicide Laws:** The Nigerian Criminal Code Act, Cap N30 LFN 2004 is the most relevant legal framework for prosecuting ritual killings falls under the general criminal codes of Nigeria. Both federal and state criminal codes typically have provisions against murder and homicide. These laws carry severe penalties, including life imprisonment or the death penalty, depending on the specific circumstances of the crime<sup>10</sup>.
- b) **Laws Against Cannibalism and Mutilation:** Some Nigerian states have enacted specific laws that criminalize cannibalism and the mutilation of human bodies. These States include; The Lagos State Criminal Law (2011), The Penal Code applicable in Kano State includes provisions against cannibalism and related practices, Oyo State has laws that address ritual killings and cannibalism, particularly under its criminal code, which includes severe penalties for murder and related offenses. Abia State has also enacted laws that specifically target ritual killings, which may involve cannibalism. The state's legal framework allows for harsh penalties against those found guilty of such heinous acts and In Benue State, the Penal Code includes provisions that criminalize cannibalism and mutilation of bodies, reflecting the state's stance against ritualistic practices that involve human remains. These laws can be particularly relevant in cases

where ritual killings involve the consumption or mutilation of body parts<sup>11</sup>.

- c) **Child Rights Act:** Section 24 of the Child Rights Act (2003) protects children from violence, exploitation, and harmful traditional practices. This act can be used to prosecute perpetrators who target children for ritual killings<sup>12</sup>.

### Cross Country Comparison

While ritual killings manifest differently across cultures, examining international best practices and legal frameworks can offer valuable insights for Nigeria.

**South Africa:** South Africa has grappled with the issue of "muti murders," where human body parts are used for traditional medicine or to acquire wealth and power. The South African government has taken significant steps to address this issue: The Criminal Law Amendment Act (Act 105 of 1997) specifically addresses the crime of murder for the purpose of extracting organs or body parts. This legislation provides for harsher penalties for such crimes.

Recognizing the role traditional healers can play in preventing muti murders, the South African government has engaged with traditional healer associations to raise awareness about the illegality and ethical implications of using human body parts in their practices.

**United Kingdom:** While not directly facing the same scale of ritual killings as Nigeria or South Africa, the UK has robust legislation against human trafficking and exploitation,

<sup>10</sup> <https://lawsofnigeria.placng.org/laws/C38.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR <https://web.archive.archive.unhcr.org/20230531093755/https://www.refworld.org/docid/50c84a6d2.html>

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch

<https://features.hrw.org/features/african-union/files/Nigeria%20-%20Child%20Rights%20Act%20No.%2026%20of%202003.pdf>



which can have relevance in addressing the underlying factors that contribute to ritual killings. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 criminalizes human trafficking for various purposes, including exploitation, forced labor, and organ harvesting. This legislation emphasizes victim protection and support services.

### **Conclusion**

To combat ritual killings, a comprehensive legislative framework is needed that addresses the root causes of the crime and improves the effectiveness of law enforcement.

### **Recommendations**

The following legislative measures are recommended:

1. The National Assembly should prioritize the enactment of specific legislation that explicitly criminalizes ritual killings, addressing the unique aspects of these crimes, such as the use of human body parts for ritualistic purposes. This legislation should include provisions for harsher penalties for perpetrators and enhanced legal protections for victims.
2. The government should actively engage with traditional healers, religious leaders, and community elders to address the underlying beliefs and practices that may contribute to ritual killings.
3. The government should establish and strengthen comprehensive support services for victims of ritual killings and their families.
4. The government should actively support and promote community-based initiatives to raise awareness about the dangers of ritual killings, encourage the reporting of suspicious activities, and

foster a stronger sense of community cohesion and social responsibility.

### **Contact**

National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies  
National Assembly,  
Plot 307, Cadastral Zone, Umaru Musa Yar'adua Expressway, Airport Road, Abuja, Nigeria

**E-mail:** [info@nils.gov.ng](mailto:info@nils.gov.ng)

**Website:** <http://nils.gov.ng>

#### **NILDS Liaison Office**

Suite 214 Senate Wing  
National Assembly Complex  
**Mobile:** +234 8066945075

#### **NILDS Liaison Office**

Suite 214 Senate Wing  
National Assembly Complex  
**Mobile:** +234 807 364 4822