

Criminals' Recourse to Indegeneous Spirituality and Crisis of Crime Control in Anambra State: A Study in Interpretive Analysis

Chidimma Evelyn OJUKWU and Makodi BIEREENU-NNABUGWU

Department of Political Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka NIGERIA

[0169] Abstract

In the wake of Nigeria's deepening security crisis, with rising cases of armed robbery, kidnappings, ritual killings, armed attacks on communities, and particularly, the growing use of mystical powers by criminals in their operations, Anambra State has become a stark example of the failure of security in recent times. Thus, this study explores the nexus between criminals' recourse to spirituality and crime control in Anambra State between 2015 and 2023. Through the theoretical lens of Travis Hirschi's Social Control Theory, the study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design rooted in phenomenology. It centred on the lived experiences of six purposefully selected police officers from the Anambra State Police Command, and Zone 13 headquarters. Data collection involved unstructured face-to-face interviews, audio recordings, and field notes, enabling a rich exploration of officers' perceptions. Analytical procedures followed descriptive phenomenology, using Quirkos software to code data and extract significant themes. Findings reveal a complex interplay between indigenous spirituality and formal policing: spiritual practices simultaneously function as tools of community cohesion and as mechanisms for violence and extrajudicial justice. Police officers perceive spiritual phenomena both as tactical instruments used by criminals and as informal coping mechanisms amidst institutional inefficiencies. These dynamics expose epistemic tensions between rational-legal policing and culturally embedded beliefs, revealing a critical disjuncture that hampers effective crime control. The study concluded that the rigid exclusion of spirituality from legal discourse obscures key aspects of crime dynamics in Anambra State. It recommended culturally informed police training, the establishment of an interdisciplinary consultative unit on supernatural claims, and the initiation of national policy dialogues to reconcile indigenous epistemologies with formal legal frameworks.

Keywords: Anambra state, criminals, crime control, indigenous/traditional spirituality, politics,

Introduction

The internal security environment in Nigeria has increasingly deteriorated, with states like Anambra grappling with a diverse range of criminal acts that undermine the stability and safety of society and people. Studies have extensively acknowledged the deep-seated nature of Nigeria's security crisis, where rising incidents of armed robbery, kidnapping, ritual killings, drug and human trafficking, and terror attacks have evolved into a Hobbesian state of widespread anarchy (Okeke, 2022; Olusegun & Adefolaju, 2013; Bassey & Ogbonna, 2019). The sheer pervasiveness of such crimes has been attributed to a complex interplay of factors, including unemployment, rural and urban poverty, low industrial output, deteriorating infrastructure, rising debts, and widespread corruption (Ali, 2013; Salawu, 2010; Ewetan, 2013). Against this backdrop, Nigeria's internal security crisis has intensified, prompting government efforts such as the Anti-Terrorism Act and increased allocations for security (Ewetan, 2013; Agwanwo &

Olumati, 2019). Yet despite these measures, rising levels of crime remain a pressing challenge across Nigeria.

Traditionally, the Nigeria Police have been positioned as the state's primary crime-fighting agency, charged with the prevention, detection, and apprehension of offenders (Alpert & Dunham, 2004). However, the force has faced significant limitations due to corruption, institutional decay, a dearth of modern equipment, and declining ethical standards (Moghalu, 2018). Criticisms abound about the police's waning ability to secure lives and property in the face of sophisticated crimes, especially as perpetrators evolve beyond conventional tactics. Recently, studies have pointed to the increasing resort to spiritual and mystical methods by criminals, employing juju, charms, amulets, rituals, and invincibility spells, as a critical and understudied trend complicating the effectiveness of Nigeria's crime control efforts (Harnischfeger, 2006; Nwolise, 2012, 2025). These practices have granted perpetrators a sense of invulnerability and an edge over formal policing methods.

The use of spirituality by criminals is well-documented across Nigeria, including cases of ritual murder, abductions, armed robbery, and cult-related violence (Melvin & Ayotunde, 2011; Oludayo, 2013). The media has been inundated with instances such as the brutal murder of 22-year-old Oluwabamise Ayankole in Lagos and the arrest of suspected ritualists in Kwara State, highlighting the growing role of spiritual elements in facilitating and concealing serious crimes. The long-standing infamy of figures like Lawrence Anini, whose use of spiritual charms allegedly rendered him invincible and shielded him from arrest for years, further illustrates the deep-seated role spirituality has assumed within Nigeria's criminal underworld (Igiebor, Ilori & Edekpai, cited in Agwanwo & Olumati, 2019). Also, extralegal actors such as the Bakassi Boys who embraced spirituality as a tool for countering crime where state institutions failed, shows the systemic erosion of trust in Nigeria's formal policing architecture (Williams, 2007).

Although spirituality's role in Nigeria's crime dynamics has increasingly gained scholarly attention, it remains a largely underexplored area of study in Anambra State. Critically, the interplay between spirituality and crime control exposes significant institutional deficits and highlights the urgent need for nuanced inquiry. The challenge posed by spiritual elements complicates traditional policing methods, making routine enforcement and investigation increasingly ineffective. Against this background, this study aims to investigate how the recourse to spirituality by criminals has shaped the nature and control of crime in Anambra State between 2015 and 2023.

Literature Review

The concept of spirituality has been examined extensively across disciplines, yielding varied interpretations that reflect scholars' diverse interests and philosophical orientations. Gupta and Singh (2016) trace its etymology to the Latin "spiritus," signifying breath or life force. Thus, Zohar and Marshal cited in Agwanwo and Olumati (2019) define spirituality as referring to meaning, values, and the fundamental purpose of a thing. Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders cited in Chatterjee (2007) describe it as a way of being and experiencing rooted in a transcendental dimension, wherein one finds belonging, purpose, and an expansive sense of connectedness. Similarly, Aurobindo (cited in Goswami, 2014) relates spirituality to knowing and living one's highest self and aligning with the "all-embracing unity" that imbues existence with profound meaning.

Additional perspectives have evolved to emphasize spirituality as an internal, personal endeavor. Afful and Williams cited in Robinson (2019) adopt an inward-origin approach, viewing spirituality as rooted within the person. Wiggins-Frame cited in Leaman (2009) identifies spirituality as involving one's sense of belonging, mission, and purpose, regardless of formal religious affiliation. Likewise, Bent-Goodley and Smith (2017) link spirituality with shaping identity and guiding life direction, while Geppert, Bogenschutz, and Miller (2007) emphasize its role in fostering profound connections between the self, others, nature, and the sacred. Such ideas collectively highlight spirituality's influence across diverse

domains of life, including its intersection with social behavior. Spirituality has long been implicated in the perpetuation of crime across Nigeria, wherein traditional belief systems are harnessed for malign ends. Igbo (2001), Abioje (2013), and Aborisade (2020) have extensively traced the roots of ritual killings and charm usage, indicating continuity between precolonial spiritual practices and contemporary crime. Harnischfeger (2006) observes that the advent of modern weapons combined with spiritual practices has shaped a unique blend of violent crime in Nigeria. The rise of ritual killings, abductions, and human trafficking from the 1980s reflects a deeply embedded belief that spiritual forces can grant invincibility and success, as evidenced by findings from Ibrahim and Balogun (2016) and Oluwole and Adekoya (2018), wherein 70–85% of respondents acknowledged the role of spiritual charms in crime.

Studies by Omonijo (2019), Nwolise (2015), and Salihu (2019) further corroborate the alarming trend of spiritual practices being used to facilitate ritual killings, kidnappings, and sexual exploitation of the dead, mentally ill, or physically disabled. This belief in invincibility has evolved into a ritualistic subculture that terrorizes communities and complicates policing efforts. The proliferation of banditry and communal clashes fueled by juju practices (Olusegun, 2013; Ijagbemi, 2018; Okoli, 2020) underscores the role spirituality plays in Nigeria's contemporary security crisis. The psychological and social dimensions of these practices intensify their appeal and complicate the role of formal policing institutions.

Within the policing context, spirituality operates as both a threat and a resource. According to Halstead (2004), spirituality inspires a higher sense of service and ethical commitment among officers. However, the belief in spiritual charms has created profound mistrust and fear within the police force, complicating enforcement efforts. Studies by Adebayo and Oyesoji (2018), Odeyemi (2020), and Aborisade and Adedayo (2020) reveal that many officers consider charms a significant contributor to crime, impacting their perceptions, behaviour, and willingness to apprehend suspects. These perceptions, shaped by the police subculture and media narratives (Akpan, 2019; Okoro & Adibe, 2020), affect operational efficiency and foster a culture of trepidation within Nigeria's law enforcement institutions. Importantly, spirituality can also serve as a source of resilience and ethical grounding for police officers. Carter (2019), Hodge et al. (2010), and Spencer et al. (2013) highlight its role in nurturing officers' emotional intelligence, moral reasoning, and overall mental well-being. When spirituality is embraced in policing, it can foster a sense of belonging, purpose, and a commitment to serve communities, making officers better equipped to navigate Nigeria's challenging security landscape. Conversely, its neglect within policing institutions can deepen cynicism and impede effectiveness, as noted by Hesketh et al. (2014), Moran (2017), and Smith et al. (2015). By recognizing spirituality's dual role, as a catalyst for both criminality and integrity, there is an opportunity for more nuanced policies that incorporate spiritual literacy into police training and crime prevention strategies.

Based on the foregoing, spirituality, conceived as a sense of belonging, purpose, and connectedness rooted in a transcendent or inner dimension, operates in Nigeria's crime landscape both as a catalyst and as a counterforce, making it an ambiguous yet pivotal lens for understanding the dynamics of security and policing. In its darker manifestations, spirituality is mobilised to justify and enable ritual killings, abductions, and other forms of violence, creating a subculture of traditional belief and spiritual charm that complicates policing and erodes trust, while at the same time serving as a source of resilience and ethical grounding that inspires officers and communities to foster belonging, integrity, and a commitment to the common good.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Social Control Theory. The Social Control Theory, pioneered by Travis Hirschi (1969), emerged from long-standing ideas about the role of social bonds in regulating behavior, gaining prominence in the mid-twentieth century when criminologists began focusing more sharply on why people abstain from, or participate in, crimes (Sun, 2023). The theory, which was initially called Social Bond Theory, rests on the core assertion that people have an inherent propensity toward selfishness and

immorality when left to their own devices (Hirschi, 1969). Its central claim is that strong ties to society deter delinquency, because as these connections deepen, the psychological and social costs of committing a crime rise accordingly, making norm-violating behavior less attractive (Schreck et al., 2009). To explain this mechanism, Hirschi proposed four fundamental elements of the social bond: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Attachment captures the emotional connections one has with others, suggesting that emotional investment in prosocial relationships acts as a restraint (Cretacci, 2018). Commitment reflects the individual's stake in pursuing lawful goals, making the threat of loss a pivotal consideration when evaluating the benefits and consequences of crime (Sun, 2023). Involvement emphasizes how the allocation of one's time influences the ability to participate in deviant acts, while belief underscores the role of internalized norms, positing that a person who internalizes the legitimacy of social rules is less prone to break them.

Hirschi (1969) asserted that Social Control Theory applies universally across crimes and populations, aligning its theoretical core with the concept that weakened bonds foster greater susceptibility to offending behavior. The theory highlights that people resist committing crimes when doing so would alienate those significant to them, undermine long-established accomplishments, or contradict deeply held convictions about the sanctity of the social order. Nevertheless, despite its considerable explanatory range, the theory has been criticized for downplaying the structural and systemic influences that can drive crime, and for relying too heavily on the assumption that strong social connections can universally prevent deviance (Fedorek, 2019). In doing so, it may overlook the complexities of social inequality and the way these dynamics affect an individual's ability to form such bonds (Sun, 2023).

The Social Control Theory provides a compelling lens through which to understand the role of spirituality in shaping the nature and control of crime in Anambra State between 2015 and 2023, as it emphasizes the strength of social bonds and normative belief as deterrents to deviant behaviour (Hirschi, 1969). In this context, spirituality operates as a form of social bond that intensifies attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, creating a framework within which individuals perceive a higher cost of crime, both morally and socially (Cretacci, 2018; Sun, 2023). The recourse to spiritual practices by criminals can be seen as an attempt to reconcile or restore weakened connections with normative institutions, aligning with Hirschi's assertion that people are less likely to offend when invested in a belief system that promotes conformity (Schreck et al., 2009). In this way, spirituality acts as a form of internalized social control, reshaping behavioural boundaries and mitigating the propensity for further deviance, making Social Control Theory a critical and relevant framework for understanding the interplay between spirituality and crime control in Anambra State (Hirschi, 1969).

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretative research design grounded in the qualitative and phenomenological traditions, aligning its methods closely with its focus on the role of spirituality in shaping the nature and control of crime in Anambra State between 2015 and 2023. The phenomenological approach was used to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of participants, in this case, six police officers from the Anambra State Police Command and the Zone 13 headquarters at Ukpou, on the role of spirituality in crime and its control. These participants were purposefully selected due to their direct experience and institutional knowledge, making them vital informants. Data was collected via unstructured, face-to-face interviews, complemented by digital audio recording and field notes, allowing for a rich, nuanced understanding beyond verbal responses. The data was transcribed and imported into the qualitative data analysis software Quirkos, which facilitated coding and thematic clustering. The descriptive phenomenological method guided the analytic process: significant statements were extracted, formulated into units of meaning, and organized into thematic clusters, yielding a comprehensive depiction of spirituality's role in shaping crime and its control. The results of the analysis were presented as a

thematic statement, supplemented by documentary review, providing a robust, context-sensitive understanding of the phenomenon. In this way, the research design, data collection, and analytic strategies aligned closely with the study's focus, allowing for a critical and nuanced examination of spirituality and its implications for crime and policing in Anambra State.

Analysis of Findings

Spirituality, in its diverse expressions within traditional African society, operates as a potent force impacting both social and security dynamics. In Nigeria's Anambra State, the interplay between spirituality and crime emerges as a disturbing dimension of the nation's security crisis. Although Nigeria's criminal justice system, rooted in the legacy of English Common Law, does not acknowledge the role of spiritual forces, such as the use of charms colloquially referred to as *juju*, in the commission of crimes, many police officers interviewed in Anambra State strongly assert that this is an anomaly in a society where spirituality forms an integral part of lived reality. Police officers' accounts reveal experiences wherein suspected criminals utilize juju or mystical powers, as a tactical means commit crime and invade justice. This suggests that the threat posed by organized crime operates not only within the confines of weapons and brute force but also within a spiritual realm that the officers themselves struggle to comprehend.

More alarmingly, the specter of invisibility and invulnerability appears as a common theme across officers' narratives. According to *Officer C*:

We went to effect the arrest of an herbalist who offers juju services to a gang of kidnappers that were caught. On getting to his shrine, we could not find him, but we were hearing his voice all over. He was warning us to leave... I lost consciousness and became totally unaware of events around me (Anonymous, Personal Communication, November 8, 2023).

In the same vein, *Officer B*, describing experiences of police officers with some suspected criminals who were arrested but disappeared from custody without the police knowing how it happened and cannot be explained in court of law.

We have seen criminals using juju on several times, but there is no way we can prove that in the court of law. There was a case where a female detainee escaped from her prison cell after her boyfriend visited her. The officers on duty were all charged for negligence and conspiracy with the suspect. Meanwhile, we were told by the suspect's neighbour that her boyfriend was a herbalist and he must have given her something to cause her disappearance from the cell. In fact, one of them confided in us that he must have given her onions to rub under her slippers" (Personal communication, September 2, 2023).

Also, *Officer B* equally recounted another disappearance experience with an arrested Fulani suspect who escaped from police custody: "The handcuff on him was removed neatly without any breakage and he disappeared... that cannot be ordinary, it is supernatural" (Personal communication, September 2, 2023). Additional testimonies deepen the assertion that juju constitutes a viable element within the operational strategies of certain criminals. *Officer D* recounts an episode wherein a gunshot wound refused to heal until "a juju herbalist in Ijebu" administered a remedy. Another episode involved a bullet lodged in an officer that remained undetected by medical scans until a juju priest intervened by "rubbing the spot with a local gin" to extricate the bullet.

The above submissions capture the depth of psychological trauma experienced by state operatives when confronted with forces that, in their worldview, transcend the ordinary. It also captures the deep-seated frustration of enforcement personnel grappling with a reality that the formal legal system disavows, despite its palpable

influence within Nigeria's socio-cultural context. Yet the lack of concrete verification complicates these narratives, suggesting that such accounts might also reflect deep-seated anxieties and vulnerabilities within policing institutions grappling with systemic deficiencies. The belief in spiritual fortification operates as a coping mechanism that allows officers to rationalize the inadequacies posed by underfunding, corruption, and limited training.

The rise of use of spirituality "juju" (mystical powers) among criminals has shaped the strategies they employ to operate, making the police force recognize the limits of traditional enforcement, with some seeking a spiritual solution that will aid their work. This has prompted police officers to adopt their own spiritual practices, primarily rooted in prayer and the tenets of their religious beliefs. According to *Officer A* interviewed:

At times when I become overwhelmed, my outlet is God. I go to church and make sure that I pray. Even during work, when I was walking the streets or before I interview a suspect, I pray for guidance, strength, and protection. Because I knew I was dealing with evil forces" (Personal communication, September 16, 2023).

The widespread belief that some criminals operate with spiritual protection has caused police officers to reinterpret their role beyond the traditional confines of their duties, focusing not only on enforcement but also invoking spirituality as a means of ensuring their own safety and that of the communities they serve. Through these narratives, it becomes evident that spirituality has reshaped the perception and coping strategies of police officers in Anambra. Most officers openly acknowledged relying on spiritual practices, especially prayer and meditation, to find strength and clarity amid the psychological burdens of the job. *Officer B* captured this sentiment succinctly: "In terms of my spirituality as a practicing Christian, my prayer has helped me throughout the last few years. It has helped me look at things from a broader perspective and calms me down" (Personal communication" September 2, 2023)

Others spoke of spirituality as providing a moral compass that influences their decision-making, ensuring that, regardless of the crisis, their service to the public is conducted with integrity. *Officer C* observed that: "there are plenty of opportunities in this profession where you can do things that are unethical, inappropriate, or illegal. So, if you don't have those moral guideposts, that can breed greed" (Anonymous, Personal Communication, November 8, 2023). Through spiritual practices, officers foster resilience, making sense of the unpredictable nature of crime and accepting the role as a "calling" that demands both spiritual and emotional fortitude. Although spiritual practices rooted in orthodox religious beliefs dominate police narratives, the interviews reveal an underlying tension and ambiguity about juju within the police force itself. None of the interviewed officers openly confessed to employing juju in their official duties due to its incompatibility with their religious convictions and verification challenges as evidence in law court. Yet, almost all acknowledged knowing colleagues who had used juju or "supernatural powers" when dealing with hardened criminals. *Officer E* stated:

The use of juju is forbidden by the Nigerian law. Also, juju related evidence is not tenable in the court of law. Therefore, it will be difficult for officers to be giving you information about how he has been using juju either for good or bad (Personal communication, September 16, 2023).

This silence suggests an unwritten code within the police force, wherein spiritual methods of dealing with crime, especially juju, operate clandestinely despite their widespread belief and practice. Most officers interviewed emphasized that the exclusion of juju from the legal framework compromises

their ability to secure convictions and exposes them to unfounded suspicion when spiritual elements interfere with proceedings. *Officer E* stated:

It is only hypocritical of us to claim that juju cannot be recognized under Nigerian laws. The court judges that refuse to acknowledge juju, many of them use juju for different purposes. The lawyers that speak against juju in court and emphasize its non-acceptability, many of them patronize juju. Some of the occurrences facilitated by juju like criminals disappearing, or using traditional bullet-proof, many of them know that these stories are real. Yet, they sanction officers that oversee criminals who disappeared under their care (Personal communication, September 16, 2023).

While some officers expressed skepticism about the practicalities of admitting juju as evidence due to verification challenges, the overwhelming consensus within the force is that ignoring spiritual dimensions leaves Nigeria's legal institutions ill-equipped for the socio-cultural context they operate within, thereby complicating their role in an environment where spirituality and crime are inextricably linked. Ultimately, this paradox highlights the profound influence that spirituality exerts within policing in Anambra State, serving both as a coping mechanism for the pressures of policing and as an ambiguous, contested resource for grappling with the supernatural dimensions of crime.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is an intricate interplay between spirituality and crime in Anambra State, challenging any simplistic separation between spiritual belief and rational enforcement of the law. Spiritual practices, while serving as a communal reservoir of protection and social belonging, often operate as instruments of terror, revenge, and extrajudicial violence. While the formal criminal justice system remains anchored in rational-legal frameworks that dismiss spiritual phenomena such as juju, the lived experiences of police officers reveal a complex terrain where mystical practices are perceived as both tactical tools of criminal actors and psychological coping mechanisms for state operatives. The officers' testimonies not only illustrate the epistemic tensions between institutional law and indigenous belief systems but also expose the existential vulnerabilities within the policing apparatus, where supernatural encounters often fill the void left by material deficiencies, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and legal limitations.

The paradox of rejecting spiritual elements within legal discourse, while informally acknowledging their pervasiveness, highlights a critical disjuncture that complicates law enforcement in a culturally embedded context. Thus, this study makes the following recommendations: (a) The Nigerian Police Force should develop and implement training programmes that incorporate indigenous belief systems, including the role of spirituality in local criminal practices. This would equip officers with a culturally grounded understanding of the environments they operate in, reduce psychological trauma caused by unexplained phenomena, and improve community relations by validating local epistemologies without compromising legal standards. (b) A specialized unit within the criminal justice system, comprising anthropologists, legal scholars, psychologists, and religious/cultural experts, should be established to investigate and document cases involving alleged supernatural phenomena. While such a unit would not substitute for scientific evidence in court, it could serve as a consultative body to guide police response strategies and reduce ambiguity in spiritually-influenced cases. (c) The federal government in collaboration with states should initiate a national policy dialogue involving legal practitioners, traditional leaders, and civil society organizations to critically examine the limitations of the current legal framework in addressing culturally specific realities. This could pave the way for measured legal reforms that, while maintaining evidentiary rigor, allow for the contextual consideration of indigenous spiritual practices in legal and policing processes.

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Biographical Note

Chidimma

Evelyn OJUKWU is a Postgraduate Student in the Department of Political Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka NIGERIA. Her area of specialization is political theory and methodology of political inquiry. Email:

Makodi BIEREENU-NNABUGWU, PhD, is a Professor of political theory and methodology of political inquiry in the Department of Political Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka NIGERIA. Email: mn.biereenunnabugwu@unizik.edu.ng