

3 Leadership, Statecraft, and the Challenges of Ritual Killings in Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Among the lingering criminal behaviours that constitute obstacles to human freedom and define the state's supremacy to guarantee secured and sustainable human existence is the phenomenon of ritual killing, also known as human sacrifice. This cannibalistic practice constitutes a component of culture in some societies with a considerable degree of antiquity. According to Boge (2021), the practice is simply an act of murdering (human) lives to appease the deities or to accrue some spiritual and magical benefits. Often driven by belief systems in spiritual or supernatural powers, ritual killing represents a unique and deeply disturbing form of violence with significant socio-psychological impacts on individuals and communities. The killings, typically performed in hopes of achieving power, wealth, or protection through supernatural means, can be found in different cultural and religious contexts, particularly in parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Boge, 2021; Ellis, 1999). Records show that human sacrifice to local deities was particularly common among Central American civilisations such as the Aztecs, Toltecs, and Maya as early as between 1200 and 400 B.C. The 2020 archaeological and physical anthropological excavations of several temples and pyramids uncovered as many as 603 human skulls in the area. The era was dominated by the belief that humans were significantly indebted to the deceased (The Nation, 28/02/2022). This points to the fact that ritual killing has a long history that spans many places and eras and has its roots in diverse cultural, religious, and social contexts (Boge, 2021).

Pulling further the tread of history, the practice of ritual killings has also been traced back to a variety of other cultural contexts, such as Neolithic European sacrificial rites, medieval and early modern European accusations of ritual murder against Jews, and ancient Chinese and Roman human sacrifices, all of which are frequently connected to religious, social, or political goals. The practice, as first observed in the Mesolithic, evolved into a sacrificial rite in the Early and Middle Neolithic across Central and Southern (Europe Ludes et al, 2024). These customs have changed and been interpreted in a variety of ways, frequently mirroring the prevailing values and ideologies of the period. Evidence points to the use of ritualised homicides, like ligature strangulation, as a component of agricultural sacrificial ceremonies throughout Central and Southern Europe. As Ludes et al. (2024) record,

archaeological discoveries from locations such as Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux in France demonstrate that this technique spread from the Mesolithic era and grew more common during the Middle Neolithic. As shown in Loponen's (2019) account, the ritual murder charge, a recurrent anti-Semitic charge, has been a significant issue in Britain since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with a focus on the use of the victim's blood in rituals. While these acts are often condemned by modern legal and human rights frameworks, their persistence in some regions continues to have profound consequences on both the individuals involved and the broader social fabric. To die for the deities was perceived to be highly honourable; as a result, human victims were often semi-deified. Certain anthropologists contend that cannibalism, defined as the consumption of human flesh, was an effort to rectify the imbalance caused by shifting ecological conditions and the resultant decrease in available animal protein. Other notorious areas for human sacrifices and cannibalism included New Zealand (among the Maori ethnic group), Papua New Guinea, and West/Central Africa. In addition, cannibalism persists in Rotenburg (Germany), India, Liberia, Nigeria, Florida (USA), and Fiji. Although most regions in the US have legislation against cannibalism, this practice persists, albeit to a limited extent. The situation in Nigeria is alarming and unacceptable as it jeopardises the core principles of humanity.

Ritual killing at the individual level, as hypothesised by Xygalatas (2019), can lead to severe psychological trauma for both victims and culprits. Victims, whether directly targeted or threatened, often experience great anxiety, fear, and mistrust toward others, especially within the community. This can be worse in cases where the killings are part of widespread practices, creating a pervasive sense of insecurity and fear (Meyer, 1999). Survivors and the families of victims may experience grief complicated by the nature of the loss, with feelings of helplessness and guilt about their inability to prevent the death. Moreover, witnesses or those indirectly affected by such killings may suffer from long-term psychological disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and paranoia (Douglas, 2002). For perpetrators, the socio-psychological impacts are equally complex. In many cases, those who carry out ritual killing are either coerced or manipulated by community leaders, religious figures, or societal pressures. While some may believe they are fulfilling a sacred or culturally necessary duty, others may struggle with internal moral conflicts and guilt, leading to emotional and psychological strain. The dissent between their actions and societal norms, especially if they are eventually held accountable by the law, can result in cognitive dissonance, anxiety, or even personality disorders (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993).

Ritual killing equally has wide-ranging social impacts on communities as it fosters an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, especially when such asocial and insensitive acts are linked to reticent groups or influential community members. The breakdown of trust within a community can result in social fragmentation, where individuals

distance themselves from one another out of fear of being accused of or associated with ritual practices. This can hinder social cohesion and community development, as people become less passionate about cooperating or being involved in communal initiatives (Durkheim, 1912). The socio-psychological impacts of ritual killing extend to the stigmatisation of communities where the acts occur. Communities known for ritual killing may be ignored or stereotyped by outsiders, leading to social seclusion and further marginalisation. This can have a ripple effect as it would negatively impact economic opportunities, education, and healthcare in the affected areas (Meyer, 1999). The cycle of poverty, ignorance, and fear or myth that often surrounds communities involved in ritual killing reinforces the very beliefs that sustain these practices, creating a vicious cycle of violence and underdevelopment. Children are particularly vulnerable to the socio-psychological effects of ritual killing. In many cases, the underage are either the direct victims or witnesses to these events, and their early exposure to such violence could have long-lasting developmental impacts. As Douglas (2002) concludes, exposure to violence in childhood, particularly ritualistic violence, can impair cognitive development, increase aggression, and perpetuate cycles of violence into adulthood. The socio-psychological impacts of ritual killing are wide-ranging, affecting individuals, families, and communities. These infractions leave deep psychological blemishes on both victims and perpetrators and foster social environments characterised by fear, mistrust, and division.

Ritual killings, as previously noted, typically involve the use of human body parts for spiritual, economic or political benefit. The phenomenon has endured in several societies of the world. While such behaviours are sometimes regarded as vestiges of superstition, their persistence in elite political contexts needs a closer theoretical and empirical investigation. This study utilises three primary theoretical frameworks: Weberian authority theory, structural-functionalism, and state-capture theory, in conjunction with perspectives from cultural criminology and African political economy, to contextualise ritual violence within governance and legitimacy issues. Max Weber's (1978) typology of authority—specifically traditional and charismatic authority—illuminates the endurance of ritual practices in contemporary governance. Thus, numerous political and religious leaders in Nigeria derive legitimacy from spiritual narratives, employing traditional beliefs to reinforce power in areas where the state's rational-legal authority is weak. Durkheim's (1995) structural-functionalism emphasises that rituals, including violent ones, perform social roles. Ritual killings in Nigeria's context may be seen as instruments of social cohesiveness among the political elite and criminal networks, providing both symbolic and material guarantees of power and allegiance. The theory of state capture (Van de Walle, 2001; Reno, 1998) examines ways in which political elites exploit state institutions for personal benefit. This chapter contribution situates the problem of ritual killing within the broader discourse on leadership and statecraft in Nigeria, claiming that ritual killings are not only cultural glitches but indications of systemic governance failure and elite manipulation.

Conceptual Clarifications

Leadership

Leadership is a diverse and dynamic concept that has been widely explored across numerous disciplines, including management, psychology, political science, and sociology. In its broadest sense, leadership is the act of influencing people to comprehend and concur on what must be done and how, as well as the process of supporting both individual and group efforts to achieve common goals (Yukl, 2013). It is fundamentally relational, based on interactions between leaders and followers, and frequently influenced by organisational structures, culture, and circumstance. Individual characteristics and behaviours have been the main emphasis of traditional leadership theories. Early 20th-century trait theories emphasised natural attributes including charisma, intelligence, and self-assurance (Northouse, 2021). However, detractors contend that trait-based approaches ignore the situational and relational aspects of leadership and are unduly simplistic. Behavioural theories emerged in the middle of the 20th century (Stogdill, 1974) to pinpoint particular leadership behaviours that enhance effectiveness, such as task-oriented versus people-oriented leadership styles. By suggesting that effective leadership relies on how well a leader's style aligns with situational factors, contingency, and situational theories advanced the field. Fiedler's Contingency Model, for instance, suggests that a leader's efficacy depends on both their style and level of situational control (Fiedler, 1967). Likewise, the Situational Leadership Theory of Hersey and Blanchard highlights followers' maturity as a factor in determining proper leadership conduct (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2012).

Since their introduction in the late 20th century, transformational and transactional leadership theories have taken centre stage in academic circles. The goal of transformational leadership is to inspire and motivate followers to put the collective or a higher purpose ahead of self-interests (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and personalised attention are traits of transformational leaders. On the other hand, the foundation of transactional leadership, as Burns (1978) enunciated, is interactions between leaders and followers, such as performance rewards or sanctions for noncompliance. Although both approaches are crucial, as submitted by Judge & Piccolo (2004), transformational leadership is frequently linked to greater levels of structural engagement and follower satisfaction.

Moral integrity, humility, and a dedication to the welfare of followers are key components of ethical, servant, and authentic leadership models that have gained popularity in recent years (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Greenleaf, 1977). These methods address criticisms of previous models that disregarded leaders' moral and societal obligations. For example, by putting the leader in service to followers, encouraging community, and promoting both professional and personal growth, servant leadership subverts conventional power hierarchies (Greenleaf, 1977). The

significance of culture, gender, and diversity in influencing leadership practices and perceptions is becoming more widely recognised in modern leadership research. Theories of global leadership emphasise how cultural settings affect the effectiveness and expectations of leadership (House et al., 2004). Contrariwise, feminist and critical leadership theories expose how power, patriarchy, and inequality shape conventional notions of leadership, challenging prevailing paradigms (Sinclair, 2007). The concept of leadership is dynamic and multifaceted, defying simplistic definitions. Personal characteristics, interpersonal dynamics, environmental influences, and ethical issues all interact dynamically. Scholarly research on leadership must continue to be flexible, inclusive, and multidisciplinary as businesses and society struggle with change, complexity, and diversity.

Statecraft

Various scholars have defined the word “statecraft” using different perspectives that reflect their respective epistemological orientations. According to Lasswell (1950), statecraft is "the shaping and sharing of power" in the framework of government and policy-making, with a focus on the calculated use of resources and influence to accomplish political goals. To Rosenau (1997), statecraft is "the art of managing state affairs," with a focus on both domestic governance and international relations as key areas where state actors use a variety of instruments to uphold law and order and accomplish their goals. Levi (1988) highlighted the significance of institutional development by defining statecraft as the ability of rulers to create institutions and regulations that guarantee legitimacy, resource extraction, and compliance. Luttwak (2001), in his conceptualisation of the concept, defined statecraft as "the rational use of power to serve national objectives," especially through economic policies, military planning, and diplomacy. Berridge (2010) viewed Statecraft as "the skilful administration of a state's foreign relations," especially through alliance-building, diplomacy, and negotiation to prevent war and further a state's objectives.

According to Buzan (1991), the etymological roots of statecraft go back to the state's intentional construction or shaping, indicating its fundamentally strategic and intentional character. Essentially, statecraft refers to the state's ability to operate efficiently, exercise power, and command legitimacy. This includes the creation and upkeep of organisations that administer justice, enforce the law, provide security, collect taxes, and distribute public goods. Niccolò Machiavelli (1513/1998) and other classical scholars highlighted the importance of prudence, calculation, and manipulation in statecraft, especially during periods of political instability.

Realist academics like Morgenthau (1948) contend that the pursuit of national interest, which is largely defined in terms of power, is what motivates statecraft. According to this theory, nations can negotiate anarchic international relations by using diplomacy, military strategy, and foreign policy as essential tools of statecraft. Neorealist perspectives highlight the structural limitations that force states to give

survival and power balance priority (Waltz, 1979). However, by emphasising the significance of institutions, norms, and identity, liberal and constructivist viewpoints expand our knowledge of statecraft. From a liberal perspective, statecraft encompasses cooperation, rule-based governance, and economic interdependence in addition to power projection (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Conversely, constructivists contend that the values, beliefs, and past experiences of state actors socially build and affect the meaning and practice of statecraft (Wendt, 1992).

The concept of "governance capacity" is increasingly being used to evaluate the efficacy of statecraft, especially in fragile or postcolonial states where state institutions may lack coherence or legitimacy (Fukuyama, 2004). In these situations, statecraft may necessitate the reconciliation of formal bureaucratic authority with informal networks of power, such as traditional institutions or clientelist systems (Bayart, 1993). At the domestic level, statecraft involves managing internal governance challenges, such as economic policy, political legitimacy, civil-military relations, security, order sustenance and social cohesion.

In simple terms, statecraft can be understood as the art, science, and practice of running a state and coordinating the strategic management of its institutions, resources, and policies to maintain political stability, economic growth, and national security. It is a theoretical and practical concept that includes the instruments and methods used by political institutions and leaders to exert power both at home and abroad. A reconsideration of statecraft in the twenty-first century has resulted from the globalisation of state functions. These days, states are actively preoccupied with international issues like pandemics, migration, terrorism, and climate change. These problems necessitate a flexible, multifaceted, and frequently cross-border cooperative style of statecraft (Held & McGrew, 2002). Thus, networked governance and hybrid policy tools are joining the classic Westphalian model of sovereign statecraft more and more. The strategic use of power, governance, and diplomacy to uphold and strengthen state authority is all part of the complex idea of statecraft. Statecraft continues to be essential to the functioning and survival of the contemporary state, whether through cooperation or coercion. In the contemporary context, intra-national challenges occur to contravene extant cultural, religious, and legal systems, as observed in violent crimes, including ritual killing, hostage taking, kidnapping for ransom, etc., which constitute threats to sustainable social existence. These social crises have emerged to form part of the yardsticks for gauging the capacity and efficacy of statecraft as lives of the human species have become endangered.

Ritual Killing

Ritual killing is the deliberate killing of a person as a part of a symbolic or ceremonial act, frequently motivated by cultural, religious, or spiritual beliefs. Usually, this practice entails using the victim's bodily parts to perform traditional rites, achieve

personal advantage, or appease supernatural forces (Ellis, 1999; Asuni, 1969). Even though not exclusive to any one society or historical epoch, ritual killing is most frequently linked to traditional belief systems in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, where cosmological worldviews frequently incorporate spiritual causality into daily life. The word "ritual" highlights the performative and symbolic aspects of the act, setting it apart from ordinary homicide. Ritual killings are entrenched in larger cultural narratives and are supported by metaphysical justifications, in contrast to criminal murders committed out of retaliation or greed. For example, among some traditional African communities, it is thought that human existence contains tremendous spiritual energy (chi or ase) that can be harnessed to assure success in politics, business, or agriculture (Igwe, 2004). Ritual killing is said to "sacralise" murder in these situations, making it a necessary but morally abstruse practice.

Ancestral appeasement, witchcraft, or spirit possession are common motivations for ritual killing. Because they are believed to have special spiritual qualities, victims may be selected based on their social vulnerability, such as children, people with albinism, or people who are considered outsiders (Federici, 2008; Harnischfeger, 2000). For example, the killing of people with albinism has been connected to the belief that certain body parts bring wealth and good fortune in nations such as Tanzania and Malawi (Adeyemi, 2023; Sipemba, 2022; Cruz-Inigo, Ladizinski, & Sethi, 2011). Ritual killing also has connections to political processes and power structures. To maintain power, defend self against alleged spiritual threats, or show their allegiance to secret societies, political elites, or traditional leaders have been known to carry out ritual killings (Ellis & Haar, 2004). Cultic organisations or secret fraternities, like the Ogboni in Nigeria or the Leopard Men in Central Africa, occasionally carry out these murders. They use symbolic codes and ceremonial secrecy to prevent detection (Evans-Pritchard, 1976).

Ritual killings have continued and even evolved to fit modern environments, even while institutionalised ritual traditions have declined in many parts of the world. In urban environments, reports of ritualistic murders linked to "money rituals" have emerged as part of broader anxieties surrounding capitalism and spiritual decay (Smith, 2001). Media sensationalism and public discourse often promote moral panic about these instances, confounding efforts to discern myth from genuine cases. Ritual killing constitutes legal worries for human rights and law enforcement. Because the crime is covert and frequently cloaked in communal cooperation and spiritual justification, it is challenging to investigate and prosecute. Furthermore, in situations where traditional authority is still strong and the state apparatus is weak, cultural relativism can occasionally obstruct legal remedies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999). Ritual killing is a complex social phenomenon that defies easy description. Deeply held cosmological beliefs serve as its foundation, while social institutions and global-local dynamics all influence it. An interdisciplinary approach that takes

into account political theory, criminology, religious studies, and anthropology is necessary to comprehend it.

African Society and the Phenomenon of Ritual Killing

African ways of life, whether in their traditional or modernised form, are shrouded in the magico-religious and spiritual system of belief that largely influences people's daily engagements. This accounts for why ritual killing as a practice is ingrained in cultural, magico-spiritual traditions driven by motivations encapsulated in eco-political advantages or fear of supernatural forces (Ellis, 2007). Ritual killing occurs sporadically across various African countries, including Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa, and is intertwined with local beliefs, which make it difficult for the legal systems to adequately engage with the practice. Smith (2001) recorded a horrid tradition of annually stabbing a young female by the community for ritual purposes. This act was expected to propel the goddess of the sea for a favourable rainy season. Lending credence to this, Parker (2021; Boadu, 2019) also report how slaves were being used in certain parts of sub-Saharan Africa for human sacrifice in annual rituals, such as those practised by the denizens of Dahomey.

In Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania, albinos, hunchbacks, and other unique human species are the targets of ritual killings (bbc.com 2015). Numerous African nations have reported attacks on Albinos, with Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Mozambique, and Burundi reporting the highest rates (Pereira 2019). According to the report, these attacks occurred in response to the growing ritualistic search for albino body parts. The culprits, otherwise referred to as “body hunters”, are mostly males of low socioeconomic status (Owusu, 2024). One strong factor encouraging ritual killing in the Southern African region, according to Ashforth (2005), is the belief in “muti,” a term used to describe traditional medicine derived from plant or animal products, including human body parts. Muti murders are particularly prevalent in countries like South Africa and Swaziland, where some believe that the use of body parts in rituals can increase the efficacy of traditional medicine or provide supernatural benefits, such as good fortune or protection (Ashforth, 2005).

As Baker et al. (2010) observed, ritual killing in sundry most, targets vulnerable people in society (children, women, albinos and hunchbacks) whose body parts are thought to possess unique powers. In other words, vulnerable members of society, such as women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, including family members of ritualists, are targeted and killed (Sahara Reporters, 3/7/2012). Research also confirmed that the traditional targets of ritual kidnapping are "children, lunatics and the physically challenged" (Osumah and Aghedo, 2011; 279). The practice of ritual killing is triggered by tradition and socio-economic disadvantages like poverty and inequality. For instance, a lot of African groups celebrate traditional festivals where they sacrifice non-indigenous people to please the gods. In many regions of

Ethiopia, teenagers can only be circumcised into adulthood or manhood after they have successfully fulfilled a traditional requirement that requires them to kill an opponent to show courage (ezega.com 2009). As a show of courage, the victim's vital organs-such as their ears, noses, and toes-were cut off and displayed. Also, the Omotic-speaking Karo and Hamar tribes in southern Ethiopia hold that children with deformities, such as twins, unwed or out of wedlock children, children with chipped teeth, and children who cropped their upper jaw tooth before their lower jaw tooth, are wicked and impure (Ngugi 2017). Known as "mingi," these kids are doomed to ritual sacrifices or other extremely cruel treatment, like being left in the middle of nowhere or drowning in a river. Socio-economic difficulties such as unemployment, poverty, psychiatric disorder, and substance addiction could also influence people's decision to engage in ritual killings. In 1978, for instance, Richard Trenton Chase was reported to have murdered a woman and drank her blood in the United States (encyclopedia.com 2020). In most African countries where poverty is widespread, individuals seeking wealth or political power may resort to ritual killing, believing that supernatural forces can offer a shortcut to success. This practice, according to Igwe (2004), has been documented in politically unstable regions where desperation leads people to rely on traditional or occult practices for material gain. In this context, ritual killing can be seen as both a symptom of and a response to economic marginalisation and weak governance structures, which fail to provide legitimate pathways to social mobility.

Leadership and Statecraft in Nigeria's Historical and Contemporary Context

Throughout Nigeria's history, leadership has embodied a complex interplay between traditional authority and state governance, reflecting enduring tensions and adaptations in statecraft. During the precolonial and colonial eras, rulers such as kings, obas, and emirs exercised considerable influence within their communities, wielding both political and spiritual power. However, post-independence Nigeria witnessed a gradual erosion of these traditional institutions as centralised state structures expanded, often sidelining customary mechanisms of governance. Contemporary statecraft reveals a nuanced reconfiguration where traditional leaders, despite diminished formal authority, continue to function as crucial intermediaries in managing local conflicts and security challenges. This hybridity underscores how leadership in Nigeria cannot be accurately understood without accounting for the persistent role of these customary figures who, while unable to wholly replace the state, complement its efforts in governance and conflict mitigation (Ehrhardt et al., 2023). Thus, Nigeria's evolving identity, as Fadirepo (2023) observed, illustrates how leadership and statecraft are negotiated within popular discourse, shaping public perceptions and engagement with national unity.

Legal Constraints to Ritual Killing in Nigeria

The philosophy behind the legislation against Criminal offences borders on the presumption that it tends to suppress order in a society if left unsanctioned, whereas

criminologists have concluded that societies breed their criminals. This is to re-emphasise that crimes evolve in proportion to society's evolution. As spelt out in Nigeria's Criminal Code (1990), any person who commits murder will be sentenced to death (Nigeria 1990, Sec. 319(1)). Likewise, any act subjecting a person to a "trial by ordeal" that results in death is also punishable with a death sentence (*ibid.*, Sec. 208). Also, any person found in possession of a human head or skull within six months of its removal from a body or skeleton can be sentenced to five years in prison (Nigeria 1990, Sec. 329a (1)). In addition to the above, the Criminal Code also specifies that:

Any person who-

- a. by his statements or actions represents himself to be a witch or to have the power of witchcraft; or
- b. accuses or threatens to accuse any person of being a witch or of having the power of witchcraft; or
- c. makes or sells or uses, or assists or takes part in making or selling or using, or has in his possession or represents himself to be in possession of any juju, drug or charm which is intended to be used or reported to possess the power to prevent or delay any person from doing an act which such person has a legal right to do, or to compel any person to do an act which such person has a legal right to refrain from doing, or which is alleged or reported to possess the power of causing any natural phenomenon or any disease or epidemic; or
- d. directs or controls or presides at or is present at or takes part in the worship or invocation of any juju which is prohibited by an order of the State Commissioner; or
- e. is in possession of or has control over any human remains which are used or are intended to be used in connection with the worship or invocation of any juju; or
- f. makes or uses or assists in making or using, or has in his possession anything whatsoever the making, use or possession of which has been prohibited by an order as being or believed to be associated with human sacrifice or other unlawful practice;

is guilty of a misdemeanour, and is liable to imprisonment for two years. (Nigeria 1990, Sec. 210). According to sources, the Criminal Code Act is applicable in the southern parts of Nigeria, while the Penal Codes apply in the 19 northern states (Bello, 2013; Vanguard, 28 July 2011; Leadership, 5 Aug. 2011). According to Etudaiye (2007/2008), the Penal Code criminalises the act of representing oneself as a witch, accusing another person of witchcraft, possessing any juju, drug or charm for use in witchcraft rituals, and invoking "unlawful" juju (Etudaiye 2007 and 2008, 4, note 14). The Penal Code also criminalises trial by ordeal, cannibalism, and unlawful possession of a human head (Etudaiye 2007 and 2008, 5-6). Sections 306 - 325 of Nigeria's Criminal Code deal with killings or attempts to kill another person in

any form or under any guise, while section 329 deals with the possession, transfer and sale of any human parts and the prosecution of such offences. With regards to prosecution of offences, Section 36(12) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that:

Subject to as otherwise provided by this Constitution, a person shall not be convicted of a criminal offence unless that offence is defined and the penalty therefore is prescribed in a written law; and in this subsection, a written law refers to an Act of the National Assembly, or a Law of a State, any subsidiary legislation or instrument under the provisions of a law” (FGN, 1999)

Thus, the so-called “newly defined crimes” are offshoots of the existing ones; as such, crafting of new legislation or a refinement of extant laws is required to capture emerging sociolegal realities. To arrest or curtail the pace of ritual killings and other emerging or evolving crimes in Nigeria, the criminal justice system must constantly be re-engineered to keep up with the exigency of time, especially since ritual murder has currently become rampant due to the frightening rate of its manifestation in various parts of the country.

Shrines Associated with Ritual Killing in Nigeria

Ritual killing in Nigeria represents a complex and deeply rooted phenomenon that intertwines cultural beliefs, socio-economic factors, and criminal practices. Ritualistic practices are not new and have historical antecedents in pre-colonial religious traditions, where sacrifices were sometimes seen as a means to appease deities or ancestors (Ojo, 2010). Ritual killing, a grim and persistent phenomenon in Nigeria, is reported with alarming frequency, particularly with the belief in human sacrifice as a means to achieve wealth, power, and spiritual protection. Many individuals involved in these acts subscribe to the notion that the use of human body parts can confer supernatural powers or success in personal and political endeavours (Igwe, 2021). Consequently, ritual killings have been closely linked to organised crime, religious syncretism, and political ambition, particularly during election seasons or other critical junctures in the political space. This subsection focuses on instances of ritual killing in Nigeria, highlighting key cases and the possible socio-cultural underpinnings of these acts. A few instances of notorious ritual killing or ritual venues are briefly examined hereunder.

The Otokoto Ritual Killing

A high-profile case was that of the Otokoto Ritual Killing of 1996 in Owerri, Imo State (Iwuoha, 2024; Smith, 2001), in which an 11-year-old boy named Ikechukwu Okoronkwo was reportedly murdered. The incident exposed a network of wealthy businessmen and political figures involved in ritual killing. After the boy's decapitated body was discovered, investigations revealed that his head had been

used for a ritual by members of the Otokoto Hotel syndicate. This case led to widespread protests and riots, with locals expressing outrage at the apparent impunity of the elite involved in the gruesome killings (Eweka, 2018). The Otokoto killings demonstrated the deep entanglement of ritual practices with power structures in Nigerian society, further complicating efforts to tackle the crime.

The Okija Ritual Shrine

In 2004, dozens of corpses were discovered at a shrine popularly called Okija in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State, southeastern Nigeria. The police found human skulls alongside the remains of dozens of corpses; some dismembered, some in coffins, while others were lying by the side of the path leading to the shrine. Precisely, eighty-three (83) corpses, including 63 that were without a head, and twenty skulls were discovered. Opinion from some quarters suggested that the corpses almost certainly were of people who had died elsewhere and were removed to the shrine only subsequently. Newspaper reports suggested that these were evidence of what Nigerians call ritual murders. Ellis, in his account of the Okija complex, reported that:

The bodies found at the site might not be the remains of people who had died in the groves where the main shrine was located, but the corpses had been brought from elsewhere. In some contexts, the shrine functioned in a fiduciary capacity, guaranteeing a solemn agreement between the two parties. This appeared to be its main role in dealings between politicians. In other cases, people who were party to a dispute, often business people or people involved in land conflicts, came to the shrine in search of justice and were made to swear oaths in support of their complaints. If a plaintiff came to the shrine alone, the priests might summon other parties to the case to appear in much the same way as a regular court of law might do, working largely through networks of traditional rulers. If one of the litigants subsequently died, he would be regarded as having been punished by the shrine deity, and his family would be obliged to bring the corpse to the shrine. ... relatives of a person killed in this way brought the corpse to the shrine to placate the anger of the deities, fearing that, if they did not do this, the angry deity would start to kill the next of kin of the deceased in revenge. However, many people suggested that the deaths attributed to the shrine may also have been caused by human agency, in the form of rituals designed to kill a victim by mystical means or through the use of poisons” (Ellis, 2022)

To demonstrate the connectivity of the Nigerian elite to shrines' patronage, books of record found at Okija in 2004 showed that the place was being visited by people of high social status. Analysis of over 5,000 names listed on its register to have visited

indicates that the patrons included high-profile people in society like doctors, lawyers, engineers, politicians and company directors who were mostly from the southeast region of the country (Ellis, 2008). This revelation that key political figures had attended the Okija shrine and sworn oaths there drew attention to an informal politics in which traditional shrines credited with powers of life and death may play to influencing political choices and decisions at various levels in Nigeria.

The Soka Ritual Shrine

One of the documented notorious cases of ritual killing occurred in 2014 in Soka, Ibadan, which is considered to be the most shocking national discovery of a ritual shrine. This "forest of horror" was discovered to include mutilated human remains, skulls, and bones, as well as emaciated survivors who had been held captive. According to investigations, the victims had been abducted and taken to the bush, where they were ritually slaughtered and mutilated (Akinwale, 2015). This case demonstrated the systematic and covert character of ritual killings, as well as the involvement of powerful individuals who were presumed to have provided funding and protection to promote these activities.

Ritual killing remains a seriously persistent problem in Nigeria, with instances occurring across the country. High-profile cases, such as the referent Otokoto killings, the Okija scenario and the Soka forest incident, have drawn attention to the organised nature of these killings and the involvement of powerful actors. Ellis' account of the Okija incident of 2004 particularly shows that most of the ritual killings and shrines are being shielded, supported and funded by influential members of Nigerian society. Also, the way the Soka incident of 2014 in Ibadan was eventually swept under the carpet is an indication of complicity by the Nigerian elite against the less privileged.

Recent Trends in Ritual Killing

Public discussions and condemnation of the trend of ritual killing in Nigeria have increased, especially with regard to the justification for the crime. In addition to the cannibalism of some tribes and occult groups, ritual killings have been a cornerstone of various cultures' belief systems for ages. According to research on ritually motivated killings, the practice is believed to appease traditional deities or serve as a retainer sacrifice, in which a monarch's servants are killed so they can continue to serve their master in the afterlife, among other reasons.

Reports of missing body parts in murders and disappearances have surged in recent years, frequently pointing to ritualistic motivations. As captured in a report by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2012), ritual killings are performed to obtain human body parts for use in rituals (Daily Trust 21 June 2010; Osumah and Aghedo June 2011, 279; Sahara Reporters 3 July 2012), potions (Daily Trust 21 June 2010; This Day 26 September. 2010), and charms (The Punch 10 Aug. 2012; Sahara

Reporters, 3 July 2012). Ritualists, known as head-hunters, go in search of human parts at the request of herbalists, who require them for sacrifices or for the preparation of various magical potions" (This Day, 26 September 2010). This confirms that human body parts are brought to herbalists who use them to perform the rituals (Daily Trust, 21/6/2010). Such rituals are reportedly motivated by the belief that they can bring power and wealth to an individual (Leadership 30 Apr. 2012; The Punch 10 Aug. 2012; Daily Trust 21 June 2010). Sources also indicate that charms are believed to make a person invincible (The Punch 10 Aug. 2012) and protect them from business failure, illness, accidents, and "spiritual attacks" (Daily Trust 21 June 2010). Remarkably, many Nigerians have been made to believe in the effectiveness of such rituals (The Punch, 10 Aug. 2012). Many experts attributed the prevalence of ritual murder to the "continuing belief among many Nigerians, ... even educated ones, in the supernatural" (Daily Trust, 21 June 2010). The belief in the power of ritual murder "is particularly very strong among the local population [of southern Nigeria], including people of different faiths and educational backgrounds," and not only among "traditional fetish illiterates" (Sahara Reporters, 3 July 2012). As a result of these barbaric and anti-human practices, Many Nigerians are now deeply engulfed in villainy. Even some members of the socio-political elite are also involved as they pursue more power, protection, and wealth. In other words, both members of the lower and upper classes are accomplices in these barbaric/stone-age activities.

Between 2018 and 2020, over 200 cases of ritual killings were reported across Nigeria, predominantly involving vulnerable people, including women, children, and the elderly. From January 5 to December 28, 2021, the statistics of ritual-related deaths generated from Nigeria Watch and WANEP's National Early Warning System (NEWS) showed a total of over 168 deaths in 80 incidents across 20 States in Nigeria. Out of the total recorded deaths (168) during the period under review, 29 were females and 30 were children. In most cases, the identity of the gender remains unknown due to severe mutilation of the victims' bodies. As Oluwafemi (2021) notes, the South-West emerged as a hotspot, with notable cases in Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo states. Ritual killing incidents, according to Oluwafemi (2021), included arrests of perpetrators with human body parts and the discovery of ritual dens. In 2019, Gracious David-West, a ritual murderer, was apprehended in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Reports indicate that this offender admitted to murdering a minimum of 15 women for ritualistic purposes within hotel premises. In April of the previous year, a serial killer murdered one of his neighbours in Kwara State. The ritualist excised specific body parts from the victim and applied acid to the remains to facilitate rapid decomposition. Other cases include the 2020 murders in Akinyele, Oyo State, where young women were targeted. Similarly, a 19-year-old suspect confessed to working under the guidance of an herbalist for ritual purposes. The horrific kidnapping and murder of Michael Obasuyi in Agbado-Ekiti, in Ekiti State, serves as an example of the startlingly high number of similar occurrences (Oluwafemi, 2021).

An herbalist and two accomplices were arrested in Ogun State in southwestern Nigeria in 2021 for the ritual death of a woman whose body was discovered mutilated. Also in 2021, the Nigerian Army, police, and Department of State Services (DSS) apprehended numerous individuals engaged in the consumption of human flesh in Imo State. Similar incidents of unknown identities were recorded in Cross River State, where 15 beheaded bodies (including males and females) were discovered at Five Miles area on April 13, 2021. In Zamfara State, three persons between the ages of 14 and 20 years old were contracted by a 57-year-old male to source for human parts in exchange for money, which resulted in the killing of a 9-year-old boy with his body parts severed and sold in Gusau LGA on December 12, 2021 (WANEP, 2022). On the 28th of December, 2021, it was reported by the Nigerian Tribune that an alleged internet fraudster (locally known as Yahoo Boy) in Benin City, Edo State, known as Osas, was declared wanted for killing his girlfriend, Elohor Oniorosa, to increase his wealth via money ritual.

Newspaper reports also recorded that in January 2022, Moses Oko was arrested for allegedly killing for ritual purposes, Jennifer Anthony, a 300-level student of the University of Jos, Jos. Also, on 22 January 2022, two male suspects were arrested in Osun State with confessional statements of killing over 70 females in the past, with their body parts harvested for sale. Also on the 12th of February, 2022, Vanguard reported that a couple out of Ogun State -Kehinde Oladimeji and his wife Adejumoke Raji were allegedly caught with human body parts, and the duo admitted that the decomposing body found with them was to be used for a money ritual. As the widespread condemnation of this evil act was going on, the lifeless, mutilated body of another lady was found around the Plateau Radio/TV Corporation in Rayfield, Jos. Same February 2022, an 84-year-old woman was beheaded in Ikun-Akoko for ritual purposes.

In Lagos, the police detained suspects in the 2022 teenage murder case for ritual reasons. More recently, the Ogun State Police Command arrested four teenagers in connection with the killing of twenty-year-old Sofiat Kehinde. The suspects, one of whom used to be romantically involved with Kehinde, had reportedly decapitated her with a machete and proceeded to burn the head, ostensibly to use the ashes and other body parts in a money-making ritual. Shojobi (2025) reported the case of five suspects, including the prime suspect Abdul-Rahman Bello, who was arraigned before the Kwara State High Court, Ilorin, over the alleged murder and dismemberment of Hafsoh Lawal, a final-year student of the Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin. According to the charge sheet, the defendants were accused of conspiring to kill the victim, dismembering her body, draining her blood, and being in possession of her body parts — offences punishable under various sections of the Penal Code CAP P4, Laws of Kwara State 2006. The incident occurred on February 10, 2025, in the Olunlade area of Ilorin. These are nationwide manifestations of brutality that call into question the very essence of our humanity in the 21st century.

The Nasarawa State Police Command also arrested a gospel singer, Timilehin Ajayi, for allegedly killing and dismembering his 24-year-old girlfriend, Salome Enejo, a member of the National Youth Service Corps, for suspected ritual purposes (Punch, 16/2/2025).

Notwithstanding their horrendous nature, these incidents only make up a small portion of the nation's ritual killings, which take place across Nigeria's sociocultural space (Okafor, 2022). There are still reports of ritual killings occurring all over Nigeria, in addition to these reported incidents. Of significant note is the fact that ritual killing is not limited to rural areas but has extended to urban settings, including hotels, where unsuspecting victims are lured for sinister purposes. Joseph (2025), for instance, reported how hotels in Nigeria, which were once known for relaxation, hospitality, and business, are increasingly becoming crime hotspots. Hotels, by their transient nature, nowadays provide a perfect hideout for criminals. The anonymity of guests, lax security measures, and, in some cases, the complicity of hotel staff create an ideal breeding ground for crime. The discovery of over 30 makeshift graves and a shrine within a hotel in Anambra is just one of many miserable examples. The celebrated case of the gruesome murder of Timothy Adegoke, in a hotel in Ile Ife, on 5th November 2021 (Punch, 2023; News Direct, 2021) is another evidence out of several to showcase the conspiracy of hotels in recorded cases of ritual killings.

Part of the challenge in this regard is that the hotel industry in Nigeria is largely unregulated. Though some states have laws mandating hotels to register with the government, compliance with such requirements is low, while enforcement is limited. A confidential memo from the Nigerian police to registered security service providers indicated that ritual killings were particularly prevalent in the states of Lagos, Ogun, Kaduna, Abia, Kwara, Abuja, Rivers, and Kogi (This Day, 26/10/2009). Evidence from the above cases of ritual killing, however, shows that ritual murder is not limited to any specific part of the country and "every region, tribe and state has its share of the incident" (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2012; Leadership 30/4/2012). Several academics have drawn attention to the prevalence and socioeconomic ramifications of ritual killings in Nigeria, making the practice a burning social issue. According to recent reports, there is an increase in murder cases where the body parts of the victims are used in rituals.

Leadership, Cultural Practices and Social Norms in Nigeria

In Nigeria, leadership extends beyond formal political structures to encompass traditional authorities who occupy a unique space in societal governance. These leaders, such as kings, Ezes, Obas, and Emirs, historically served as custodians of customs and community order, a role that today intersects with the state's efforts to manage complex security challenges, including insurgencies and communal conflicts. While conventional security mechanisms often falter, traditional leaders offer a form of localised legitimacy and authority capable of mediating disputes and

maintaining social cohesion. However, their ability to tackle violence is not absolute; rather, they complement the state's efforts, suggesting a nuanced interplay between customary governance and modern statecraft (Ehrhardt et al., 2023).

In many Nigerian communities, the intertwining of leadership roles with cultural and religious practices often shapes the collective identity and societal expectations. Traditional leaders, as custodians of indigenous customs, play a pivotal role in sustaining rituals that reinforce social cohesion and hierarchical structures. Political leaders, meanwhile, frequently engage in these cultural frameworks to legitimise their authority, blending modern statecraft with ancestral traditions. This synthesis underscores the complex dynamics between governance and ritualised practices, including controversial phenomena such as ritual killings, which may be rooted in attempts to harness spiritual power for political gain. By examining these interactions, it becomes evident how leadership extends beyond administrative functions, influencing norms that govern moral behaviour and community loyalty. The media's portrayal of leadership and cultural identity further complicates these narratives, with popular culture forms reflecting and critiquing societal values in Nigeria (Fadirepo, 2023). Moreover, leadership's visual symbolism and propaganda also reinforce certain power structures within cultural practices (Khawaja et al., 2025).

Factors Promoting Ritual Killing Practices in Nigeria

The persistence of ritual killing in Nigeria can be attributed to several socio-cultural and economic factors. Poverty and desperation play a crucial role, particularly in a society with sharp economic inequality and limited opportunities for upward mobility. Many perpetrators of ritual killing, especially those from impoverished backgrounds, see these acts as a way to escape poverty or gain financial success. As Igwe (2021) observed, the belief that human sacrifice can bring wealth or good fortune is deeply ingrained in some traditional belief systems, and this superstition is often exploited by unscrupulous individuals, such as traditional healers or spiritualists, who claim to possess the ability to channel supernatural forces.

Another complicating factor is the involvement of political actors in ritual killing. Election seasons in Nigeria are often marked by heightened reports of ritual killing, as some politicians and candidates are believed to seek supernatural fortification before entering the political arena. This belief in the power of human sacrifice to guarantee political success or protection from rivals contributes to the demand for ritual killing, making the phenomenon not just a criminal issue but also a political one (Akinrinade & Olarinmoye, 2019). These practices are often shrouded in secrecy and protected by influential individuals, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to intervene.

Likewise, religious syncretism plays a significant role in perpetuating ritual killing. While Nigeria is home to diverse religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and indigenous belief systems, elements of these religious practices have sometimes blended with traditional ritualistic philosophies. This assortment has led to the continuation of sacrificial practices under the guise of spirituality. As scholars have noted, the fraternisation of religious doctrines has created a space where ritual murder is justified in the name of spiritual fortification or advancement (Ogundipe, 2013). Moreover, the involvement of political and criminal networks intensifies the prevalence of ritual killings in Nigeria. The social space is inundated with reported cases of political actors being implicated in ritual killing, with some individuals seeking spiritual fortification before elections or other critical events (Akinrinade & Olarinmoye, 2019). The influence of organised crime syndicates also plays a role in coordinating these killings, making them more than isolated acts of violence, but rather part of a broader system of criminal exploitation. Identifying cultural value depletion as a strong factor for the dastardly act, Ogungbade, the Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice in Ogun State, observed that:

In times past, when people committed crimes, their family members were usually the ones who would alert law enforcement. But what we have today is where the family comes together to shield people who have committed crimes. Unless there is a total reappraisal of our value system, we will continue to have this problem. We need to go back to the family,” (*Independent*, 18/01/2025)

Highlighting the absurdity of ritual killing practices, its implications for human freedom and the importance of government assuming its full leadership role, one of the custodians of traditional institutions in Nigeria underscored the fact that:

The government must liberate the minds of Nigerians from ritual killings - an act that endangers the populace. I especially sympathise with the victims and families of ritual murders. The rampancy of Ritual Killings is worrisome. We cannot claim to have truly become independent until Nigerians are free from the poverty of the mind involving the killing of fellow innocent souls for rituals. The blood in the land is hunting and hurting. The government is making efforts, but the bloodsuckers are frustrating it. The government has to liberate the land by enacting a law that will checkmate ritual Killings (*Vanguard*, 01/10/2024)

Records show that the persistence of ritual killing in Nigeria is being influenced by poverty and the desperation it breeds. Unemployment and economic disparities are widespread, while some individuals resort to ritual practices as a perceived shortcut to wealth and success. The perpetrators often assumed that the use of human body

parts in sacrifices, charms, or talismans could bring prosperity or fortify their standing in society (Igwe, 2021). This belief is often exploited by ritualists, traditional healers and spiritualists who promise "mystic" outcomes, which further strengthen the demand for human body parts. Bazaré, Ladj, & Kadidja (2017) established a strong linkage between ritual killing and cyber criminality. This has particularly manifested in Nigeria in recent years, where the "Yahoo-yahoo" criminal explorations have been upgraded to entail ritualism, commonly branded as "yahoo-plus". Ritual killing generally targets young people who are always motivated by peer pressure, greed, and the effect of social media's portrayal of money and opulent lifestyles. Analysts have highlighted how this threat is fuelled by a weakening moral fabric, bad governance, and parental irresponsibility. The perturbing trend, especially in the Igala axis of Kogi State, is the association of ritual killings with online scammers branded as "Yahoo guys" Reports indicate that this subset of the nation's population looks for mystical powers to advance their unlawful activity. This confirmed Boge's (2021) submission that the most prominent among the reasons why people engage in ritual killings nowadays are for power and affluence.

Leadership and the State's Capacity to Control Crime

To control crime is a critical function of the modern state, requiring effective governance, strategic policies, and robust enforcement mechanisms. Leadership plays an instrumental role in shaping the capacity of the state to manage and reduce crime. Understanding the relationship between leadership and the state's ability to control crime requires a critical consideration of key factors such as the development of institutional frameworks, enforcement strategies, and public trust. As Owusu (2024) observed, ritual killing often occurs in societies where traditional belief systems hold significant sway and state authority is weak. In some rural areas, the influence of traditional leaders and spiritual healers may supersede that of formal state institutions. This constitutes a great challenge for law enforcement, as many perpetrators of ritual killing are protected through community complicity, fear, or respect for cultural traditions (Nyabola, 2008). Lack of trust in the legal system, combined with the covert nature of the killings, makes prosecution and prevention difficult. The practice in Africa represents a complex interplay of traditional beliefs, socio-economic pressures, and elite complicity. To address the practice, therefore, requires a multifaceted approach that includes strengthening legal frameworks, improving socio-economic conditions, and promoting education to challenge harmful cultural practices. Without these efforts, ritual killing may likely persist, fuelled by both traditional belief systems and the inequalities created by contemporary socioeconomic dynamics.

Regime leadership, particularly at the executive level, is pivotal in setting the tone for crime prevention and law enforcement policies. Strong leadership can articulate a vision for public safety, mobilise resources, and ensure that key institutions such as

the police, judiciary, and correctional facilities are adequately supported. According to Rothstein and Teorell (2008), leadership influences the capacity of the state to enforce the rule of law through the creation of well-functioning institutions and accountability mechanisms. Leaders who prioritise crime control often invest in strengthening these institutions, ensuring they are well-resourced and equipped to deal with crime effectively. Also, leadership affects the formulation of crime control strategies. Effective leaders not only develop comprehensive crime prevention programs but also facilitate coordination among law enforcement agencies. This coordination is essential for addressing organised crime, terrorism, and other transnational threats that require inter-agency and cross-border collaboration. Scholars such as Bayley and Shearing (2001) emphasise the importance of leadership in fostering collaboration and innovation in crime control strategies, particularly in urban areas where crime rates tend to be higher. Moreover, leadership also shapes the perception of legitimacy and public trust in law enforcement agencies, which is crucial for effective crime control. When leaders promote transparency, fairness, and accountability within law enforcement, it fosters public confidence and cooperation. Public trust enables law enforcement agencies to engage in community policing strategies that rely on collaboration with citizens to prevent and solve crimes (Tyler, 2004). Contrarywise, weak or corrupt leadership undermines this trust, leading to increased criminality and diminished capacity to control crime (Rotberg, 2004).

There is no gainsaying that leadership significantly influences the capacity of the state to control crime through the development of robust institutional frameworks, the formulation of effective crime control strategies, and the promotion of public trust. Strong, accountable leadership that emphasises institutional capacity-building, inter-agency collaboration, and public engagement is essential for ensuring the state's ability to manage crime effectively. However, the sociocultural settings within which modern state institutions operate are characteristically governed by strong beliefs in magico-religious and spiritual traditions, which largely influence the efficacy of their functionality, particularly as it relates to crime management and control.

State Policies, Ritual Practices and Violence

State policies, which serve as a crucial framework within which societal behaviours and cultural practices are either regulated or suppressed (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Marchi et al., 2021), significantly influence ritual killings and associated violence. When leadership adopts stringent enforcement measures without addressing underlying socio-cultural factors, these policies may inadvertently exacerbate tensions, fostering clandestine continuation of ritual practices instead of their elimination. Moreover, the lack of integrated state strategies that combine legal reform with community engagement has often resulted in fragmented responses (Honeycutt et al., 2021; Golub, 2007), undermining trust between citizens and state

authorities. The complexity of these issues necessitates a multidimensional approach that considers historical, cultural, and political contexts to mitigate violence effectively. Recent scholarships emphasise the importance of incorporating local perspectives into policy formulation to ensure the sustainability of peace efforts and the reduction of ritual-related crimes (Khawaja et al., 2025; Ghimire, 2024; Ningrum et al., 2024; Paluck E. & Starck J., 2021). Such comprehensive strategies are in line with broader global peace and security objectives, underscoring the need for cohesive leadership and statecraft to transform societal norms and protect vulnerable populations (Balafoutas et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2023).

Leadership, Statecraft, Ritual Killing

The complex dynamics of leadership, statecraft, and ritual killing in Nigeria are considered within the broader context of evolving security governance and cultural expression. Traditional institutions, though often seen as custodians of indigenous authority and moral order, face significant challenges in effectively addressing modern security threats. Their roles, while crucial, cannot fully substitute for a robust state apparatus, highlighting a complex partnership rather than a simple transfer of responsibility (Ehrhardt et al., 2023).

The inability of state agencies to diligently and sufficiently investigate and subsequently prosecute ritual killings associated with influential individuals in Nigeria demonstrates a compromised state apparatuses that protect offenders and obscures the distinction between state authority and informal power dynamics. Cultural criminology particularly highlights the emotional and symbolic aspects of crime (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2015). Ritual killings, especially those characterised by spectacle and mystery, enhance a larger narrative of elite invulnerability and spiritual strength, which sustain socio-political hierarchies through fear and symbolism. Bayart (1993), in his theoretical postulations on African Political Economy, employed the concept "politics of the belly" to demonstrate how African elites amalgamate spiritual, economic, and political strategies to sustain their dominance. Ritual killings frequently represent this combination, as violence serves as both a metaphysical and tangible instrument of control.

Clifford Orji, apprehended in Lagos for homicide and purportedly providing body parts to elites, never had a transparent trial (Vanguard, 2013). Cultural criminology illustrates how the case transformed into a media spectacle. The political economy of Africa demonstrates elite impunity from legal accountability. A series of homicides in hotels, frequently linked to ritualistic symbols, has heightened concerns regarding organised violence (BBC News, 2019). Cultural criminology identifies the ritualisation of crime in urban environments. Weberian charisma is evident in cult-like figures who have symbolic influence. In 2021, police enforcement discovered a network in Oyo State engaged in ritualistic homicides, with human remains located

at a healer's residence purportedly associated with political clientele (Punch, 2021). The Weberian idea elucidates the spiritual authority possessed by the healer. The thesis of state capture is seen in the protracted and subdued official reaction.

The aforementioned cases demonstrate a pattern in which ritual killings function as instruments of political symbolism, elite dominance, and cultural narrative. Leadership in Nigeria frequently amalgamates spiritual charisma with political power, utilising ritual violence to coerce, safeguard, or further aspirations. The state's hesitance to take decisive action indicates underlying structural problems associated with patrimonialism and the decline of rational-legal legitimacy. Ritual killings in Nigeria should not be regarded as isolated or irrational occurrences. They are ingrained in the nation's political economy, influenced by conventional belief systems, and sustained by a governing framework that frequently neglects the rule of law. This paper illustrates, through the application of sociological, criminological, and political theories, that ritual violence is both a cultural phenomenon and a deliberate strategy for power and survival among Nigeria's elite.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The complex interplay between leadership, statecraft, and ritual killing in Nigeria reveals enduring challenges in governance and social cohesion. While traditional authorities, often regarded as custodians of cultural legitimacy, navigate a difficult path in balancing customary practices with modern state demands, their potential to complement but not replace formal security systems can be acknowledged (Ehrhardt D et al., 2023). Despite efforts by the Nigerian government to address ritual killing, the problem persists due to weak institutional frameworks, corruption, and a lack of adequate policing. Laws criminalising ritual killing exist, but enforcement is often inconsistent, and cases frequently go unpunished. The fear of retaliation from people of influence or organised crime syndicates discourages ritual killing witnesses from coming forward to testify. These further hamper efforts to prosecute those responsible for the anti-human act (Okafor, 2022). Understanding ritual killing within the broader socio-political and cultural framework underscores the persistence of deep-rooted symbolic practices that both resist and adapt to evolving state structures. Thus, addressing the phenomenon requires multifaceted strategies that recognise traditional power dynamics alongside state interventions, fostering inclusive governance capable of mitigating violence while respecting Nigeria's diverse cultural heritage. This holistic approach remains critical for sustainable peace and effective leadership in Nigeria.

Thus, to effectively combat ritual killing in Nigeria, a multi-faceted approach is required. This includes strengthening law enforcement capabilities, ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice, and addressing the socio-economic conditions that drive individuals to engage in ritual killing. Community-based interventions aimed at challenging traditional belief systems and promoting alternatively

legitimate pathways to success are also essential. Besides, religious leaders and traditional authorities must play a role in deconstructing the myths and superstitions that perpetuate the practice of ritual killing. More importantly, addressing the root causes of ritual killing requires not only legal and security measures but also a broader societal shift away from superstition toward more equitable socio-economic opportunities. Analysts and media reports have underscored the importance of rejecting illogical beliefs that human sacrifices can bring wealth, the focus should be on societal shift towards hard work and ethical living.

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