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Original Research

VIRGIN MYTHS: ORIGINS AND IMPACT ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT
Humankind has been preoccupied with virginity for thousands of years. The notion of virginity is highly valued in many cultures since it is usually associated with sacredness and purity. However, society's obsession with virginity has resulted in the emergence of several virgin or virginity-related superstitions many of which trigger severe violence against young females presumed to be virgins. Surprisingly, the concept and historical developments of virginity-related superstitions, and the extent to which such beliefs impact violence against young females in African communities, have not been sufficiently explored. Drawing on a wide range of relevant literature and media reports, the present study explores the concept and origins of two virginity-related superstitions—virgin cleansing myth and virgin ritual myth, highlighting their cultural and historical meaning. It also offers a cursory overview of the extent to which these beliefs and practices impact violence, particularly sexual assault, against young females in sub-Saharan Africa. It shows that even though virgin-related superstitions contribute to child sexual abuse and the spread of venereal diseases in Africa, the exact extent to which they impact such crimes and violence is unknown due to the unavailability of national data sets and the paucity of empirical studies on the two phenomena.

Keywords: Virgin Cleansing Myth, Virgin Ritual Myth, Superstition, Virginity, Child Sexual Abuse

INTRODUCTION
Superstition is an age-old phenomenon found in all cultures (Griffiths, Shehabi, Murphy & Le Pelley, 2019; Irwin, 1993). Interestingly, many of the superstitious beliefs and practices prevalent in sub-Saharan African societies relate to virgins or virginity. Indeed, virginity, as Addison (2010, p. 71) notes, "is a concept fogged and obscured by superstition, folklore, [and] false science." Society has been preoccupied with virginity since time immemorial (d'Avignon, 2016; Valenti, 2009) and this fixation is even more profound in contemporary African societies. The notion of virginity is highly valued in many cultures since it is usually associated with divinity/divineness, sacredness, and purity (see d'Avignon, 2016; Mehrolhassani, Yazdi-Feyzabadi, Mirzaei, Zolala, Haghdoost & Oroomiei, 2020; Owusu, 2023; Valenti, 2009). Unfortunately, however, the African's obsession with virginity has resulted in the emergence

of several virgin-related superstitions some of which, unfortunately, trigger severe violence against children, particularly young females presumed to be virgins.

Surprisingly, the concept and historical developments of virgin-related superstitions and the extent to which such beliefs and practices impact crimes against children, particularly girls, have not been sufficiently examined in the academic literature. This study bridges the knowledge gap. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including relevant extant literature, reports by various organisations, and media publications, the present study explores the concept and origins of two understudied virginity-related superstitions—virgin cleansing myth and virgin ritual myth, and the extent to which they inspire violence against young females. It must be clarified that any female virgin, whether young or old, could be a victim of violence resulting from virgin myths. However, several studies have shown that children tend to be the primary targets/victims due to the perception that they are largely sexually inactive and therefore more likely to be virgins than adults (Aruna, 2018; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Oluyemo, 2020; Owusu, 2022). This justifies the decision to focus on children, specifically girls, in this study. It is worth clarifying at the outset that the two virgin-related superstitions discussed in this study are commonly referred to as "virgin myths;" therefore, the phrases "virgin/virginity-related superstitions" and "virgin myths" are used synonymously and interchangeably in this study.

The second and third sections of this article offer a brief exposition of the concept of superstition and virginity respectively; this facilitates a better appreciation of the discussion. The fourth and fifth sections explore the concept and origins of each of the two virgin-related superstitions under discussion—virgin cleansing myth and virgin ritual myth. Section six offers a cursory overview of the extent to which these two superstitious beliefs instigate violence against children, particularly girls, in sub-Saharan African societies. Section seven discusses some of the key findings of the paper, followed by a conclusion. Evidently, gaining in-depth knowledge and understanding of the historical developments of the two virgin myths, the misconceptions surrounding virginity in Africa, and the extent to which virgin myths impact child mistreatments in the region, will facilitate the development of appropriate and effective preventive strategies to curtail superstition-driven violence against children.

THE CONCEPT OF SUPERSTITION

Foster and Kokko (2009, p. 31) define superstition simply as "a false conception of causation." Indeed, for many academics, the term "superstition" is synonymous with irrationality, primitiveness, or absurdity (Hood, 2009; Lesser, 1931; Planer, 1980; Skinner, 1948). Abbott and Sherratt (2011, p. 92) refer to superstitious conducts "as actions or inactions that are given, in order to affect the probability that a beneficial outcome occurs when, in fact, there is no causal relationship between the action and the outcome." They add that it is a situation where "there are no rational grounds to believe in a relationship between action and outcome." This definition is consistent with that of Planer (1980, p. 3) who states that superstition "is a belief in influences and events that are incapable of being justified on rational grounds." The main thrust of all the definitions cited above is that superstition is a generally held but irrational belief in paranormal influences—it creates a linkage between an action and an outcome, even though there is no causal link whatsoever in reality. This is what Griffiths et al. (2019) and

Matute, Yarritu and Vadillo (2011) term illusions of causality, as people perceive a causal relationship where none exists.

However, it is highly contentious to refer to superstition as "irrational" since what is irrational to one individual may be rational to another and vice versa (Lesser, 1931; Spence, 2017). The question has also been raised as to whether by such descriptions, every irrational belief, practice, or behaviour can be categorised as superstitious (Spence, 2017). In their bid to resolve this problem, several academics have identified "fear" as the main distinction between superstitious beliefs and simple irrational beliefs (see Phillips, 1993; Planer, 1980; Tilley, 2000). Drawing on this view and other propositions, Spence (2017, p. 3) defines superstition as "a belief providing the relief of anxiety [or fear] through an irrational perception of the causal relationship between action and outcome."

Beck and Forstmeier (2007, p. 36) however offer a very broad definition of the term superstition "a wrong idea about external reality." Even though they admit that their definition is too broad, they claim that "[t]his rather broad definition is widely accepted in the psychological literature because it applies irrespective of whether superstitious beliefs are self-created by an individual …, transmitted culturally …, or even genetically inherited." Evidently, all the proposed definitions of superstition have their own limitations; however, presenting a detailed analysis of the concept and meaning of the phenomenon is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, Beck and Forstmeier's (2007) definition reinforces the view that the concept of superstition encompasses a wide range of beliefs, practices, and behaviours some of which, unfortunately, have deleterious consequences.

It has been argued by several academics that the term "superstition" is value laden, and those who use it, hypocritically imply that they have exceptional knowledge and authority to opine on the cosmic truths of others' beliefs, or that they have superior evidence for their own scientific or religious convictions (Bush, 1932; de Blécourt, 2011). Notwithstanding this interesting argument, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the question as to what beliefs and practices constitute superstitious conducts and what do not, is very subjective, as "[w]hat is religion to you is superstition to me" and vice versa (Bush, 1932, p. 237). Indeed, what one may classify as superstitious beliefs are never superstitious for those upholding them. They are rather superstitious for outsiders or observers—people who do not believe in them and do not accept them (de Blécourt, 2011; Scheibe and Sarbin, 1965; Umoh, 2011). If this argument is accepted, then as an outsider or a person who does not believe in or subscribe to virgin myths, the present author is not falling foul of any academic fallacy for categorising virgin myths as superstitions—irrational beliefs in paranormal influences and a false conception of causation.

THE MEANING/CONCEPT OF VIRGINITY

Virginity as a sexual construct can evidently be applied to both females and males. However, the pertinent extant literature suggests that the concept of virginity is generally associated with only females in virtually all societies (Ababio & Yendork, 2017; Mehrolhassani et al., 2020; Moussaoui, Abdulcadir & Yaron, 2022). This article focuses on only female virginity as almost all virgin-related superstitions in Africa are viewed and appreciated from the perspective of a female subject (Ababio & Yendork, 2017; d'Avignon, 2016; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Owusu, 2023). Studies conducted in different geographical settings show that people hold different

concepts of virginity (see Ababio & Yendork, 2017; Addison, 2010; Mehrolhassani et al., 2020; Olson & García-Moreno, 2017). Thus, the term "virginity" or "virgin" may be understood from various viewpoints—biological, historical, religious, psychosexual, behavioural, and cultural (Addison, 2010; Chen, 2010; MacLachlan & Fletcher, 2007; Moussaoui et al., 2022; Olson & García-Moreno, 2017). This, obviously, makes it a surprisingly difficult concept to define. According to Moussaoui et al. (2022, p. 382), virginity "has no medical or scientific definition", and that "[i]t is a social, cultural and religious construct, which refers to the absence of former engagement in sexual intercourse." For the purposes of this article, virginity is defined strictly as abstention from sexual intercourse. A virgin is thus a person, particularly a female, who has never had sexual or penile-vaginal intercourse before (Addison, 2010; Komlenac, Herzig, Pittl, Perkhofer, Tucek & Hochleitner, 2022; Zayed, Elbendary & Moawad, 2022).

In many African societies, female virginity ideals have historically been linked to cultural notions of virtue or morality, respect, dignity, and honour (Ababio & Yendork, 2017; Bhana, 2016). Female virginity and purity have also been important in determining the extent or the value of the bride price to be paid by a potential groom in some communities; thus, a higher bride-price is likely to be paid by a potential groom and his family if the bride is, or is deemed to be, a virgin (Hunter, 2010; Moussaoui et al., 2022; Rudwick & Posel, 2014; Wickstrom, 2010). To encourage young girls towards chastity, many African societies honour virginity. There are therefore several rites and ceremonies that are performed in various communities to honour adolescents who abstain from sexual intercourse until they get married.

Some of the well-known *rites de passage* in sub-Saharan Africa are: *Umkhosi woMhlang(a)* among the Zulu of South Africa (Ivanovic, 2008); *umhlanga* among the people of Swaziland (van Rooyen & Hartell, 2010); *bragro* and *dipo* among the Akan and Krobo of Ghana, respectively (Adjaye, 1999; Sarpong, 1977); *chisungu* among the Bemba of Zambia (Richards, 1956); *mothei* and *!Xoo* of the Tswapong and Zutshwa of Botswana, respectively (Nhlekisana, 2017; Werbner, 2009); and the *Iria* ceremony among various groups in the Niger Delta of Nigeria (Arnett, 2006; Williams, 2016). Even though these rites are celebrated differently, the general rationale for the ceremonies is the same—to usher maidens or young virgin females into the world of adulthood or prepare them for womanhood. It also offers the relevant communities the opportunity to appreciate and celebrate the purity of maidens. However, some academics and commentators have argued that such extreme obsession with virginity evidenced by these traditional practices some of which involve virginity testing[1], only strengthen myths that assign magical powers to virginity, causing people to severely abuse young females believed to be virgins (Gorar, 2021; Hossain, 2010; Owusu, 2023). Indeed, being a young female virgin in certain superstition-ridden communities in Africa, comes with its own dangers as shall be demonstrated in this discussion.

VIRGIN CLEANSING MYTH: CONCEPT AND ORIGINS

Virgin cleansing myth is the belief that sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, and HIV/AIDS, "can be cured as a result of having sex with a virgin" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002, p. 87). Thus, it is the belief that views sexual intercourse with a virgin as a therapeutic response to STDs (Charlier, Bou Abdallah, Brun, Hoang-Oppermann, Deo,

Mostefai-Dulac, Mamzer & Hervé, 2018; Lekalakala, 2013; Smart, 1999; van Dyk, 2008). According to this belief, a man can "cleanse" his blood of, for instance, HIV/AIDS through intercourse with a young female virgin without the girl herself getting infected in the process (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). Among some cultures, this virgin cleansing therapy is also thought to provide a type of vaccination against the threat of future sexually transmitted infections (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). Studies have established that this belief is widespread in some African countries, particularly those in southern Africa and, in recent times, Kenya (see Kilonzo & Mugwagwa, 2009; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Oluga, Kiragu, Mohamed & Walli, 2010; Omolo, 2015). A survey conducted at the Daimler Chrysler plant in East London, South Africa, found that 18% of 498 respondents (workforce) believed in the virgin cleansing myth (see The New Humanitarian, 2002). Another study by health educators in Gauteng province revealed that 32% of respondents believed in this myth (see Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). A nationwide survey involving over 9000 young people conducted by Andersson also found that an estimated 13% of participants believed that virgin cleansing could prevent AIDS (see Leclerc-Madlala, 2002).

However, Bowley and Pitcher (2002, p. 1352) maintain that the "idea that sex with a virgin will cure men of sexually transmitted infection is not new, nor exclusively African". This view is supported by Zevenbergen (2012) who stresses that this myth or superstition "has roamed the planet for centuries, if not millennia." By the 19th century, the belief had become prevalent in Europe and North America (Davidson, 2001; Hand, 1980; Wagner, 2019). In the United Kingdom, for instance, this myth became so widespread that brothels would advertise having both young and disabled virgins available for paying customers (Smith, 1979; van Dyk, 2008; Wagner, 2019). Smith (1979) asserts that in the 1800s it was the belief among some British men that intercourse with a child virgin would cure syphilis; hence, around the 1820s in Liverpool, quack doctors kept special brothels to provide this cure.

It is reported that rapes or sexual defilements motivated by the virgin cure/cleansing myth were so rampant in Britain that many child rapists used the myth as a legitimate defence in court (Davidson, 2001; Wagner, 2019). British lawyers and judges therefore found it difficult when dealing with cases involving child sexual assault. For instance, in an extraordinary court case reported in 1884, a man with syphilis who had raped a 14-year-old girl argued that he had not intended to harm the victim, but only to cure himself (Smith, 1979). Then in January 1913, one Robert James C, a 37-year-old coal miner, was indicted in the High Court on a charge of raping his nine-year-old niece and of the aggravated offence of infecting her with gonorrhoea and other venereal diseases (see Davidson, 2001). In preparation for the trial at Glasgow High Court, expert witnesses were questioned about "whether there exists a common superstition … that intercourse with a virgin is a cure for venereal disease" (Davidson, 2001, p. 62). The inquiry and precognitions (statements of prosecution witnesses) elicited a revealing consensus among expert witnesses. The evidence of Dr James Devon, HM Prison Surgeon, was even more startling:

> [T]here is a curiously persistent and widespread belief that a man who suffers from venereal disease can get rid of it by having connection with a virgin. I have been surprised at discovering the existence of this belief in people generally well informed as well as among the comparatively

> illiterate.... I have tried to find evidence for the theory that it is a belief traceable to certain districts but I have discovered it among people of different places and of different occupations – so different that now I should scarcely be surprised to come across it anywhere (cited in Davidson, 2001, p. 63).

Some academics and experts have argued that virgin cleansing myths might have originated from stories of virgin martyrs in early Christendom (Chen, 2010; Wagner, 2019). Blank (2007), for instance, suggests that the idea may have evolved from Christian legends/folklores of virgin martyrs whose purity served as a form of protection in battling demons. However, other academics and commentators have argued that this vile belief originated from and survives amongst ignorant/uneducated and vicious men (Bowley & Pitcher, 2002; Davidson, 2001; Wagner, 2019). They explain that the virgin cure myth developed from the unscientific observation of the venereal disease symptom stages. Thus, when the symptoms, such as blisters, sores, and discharges, eventually disappeared "after several acts of sexual intercourse with different women, the suspicion was that one of the women might have been a virgin. Therefore, to a non-educated person, sex with a virgin was the cure" (Wagner, 2019). This second theory is questionable as the statement of one of the prosecution expert witnesses in the *Robert James* case indicates that the belief is held not only by less educated people but also by the well-informed (see Davidson, 2001, p. 63). It is worth mentioning that both claims/theories do not appear to be based on any diligent scientific studies; therefore, further research will be needed to establish the extent of their credibility.

It is unclear how this superstition found its way in Africa. Some commentators and experts have argued that this superstition became popular in Africa during the colonial and apartheid period (Wagner, 2019). This theory seems to suggest that some African communities might have been exposed or introduced to this harmful superstition by Western European settlers. However, Leclerc-Madlala (2002) holds a quite divergent opinion and demonstrates that this myth is rooted in the traditional African concept of disease and virginity, and therefore predates the colonial era. This view is supported by the CDC National Prevention Information Network (2004) who asserts that in the Kenyan town of Isiolo, the religious practice of men having sex with young virgins to purge themselves of afflictions or curses has existed since time immemorial, claiming that these age-old "purging ceremonies", also practised by the nomadic people in north-eastern Kenya, are today being routinely used as an HIV cure.

Following an ethnographic study of the Zulu, Leclerc-Madlala (2002) made interesting findings about significant cognitive and metaphoric constructions from which the virgin cleansing myth is derived, and the nature of some ethnomedical beliefs that may be informing and sustaining the virgin cleansing practice. The state of being "dirty" or "polluted" is a central concept of disease among certain African cultures such as the Zulu and Xhosa; and this can be understood as an explanatory model for illness (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; see also Douglas, [1966] 2001). In many cultures, including those in Africa, dirt is viewed as the epitome of disorder. As Douglas ([1966] 2001, p. 2) notes, "[d]irt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment."

According to Leclerc-Madlala (2002, p. 89), "[i]deas of bodily 'dirt' and the state of being 'dirty' are used as broad ethnopathological explanatory models for disease that are embodied

and encoded in common processes of illness management among" certain African cultures. To say, for instance, that one has "dirty" kidneys, womb, or brain, is to say that one has an illness in relation to these organs. Therefore, "[a]s part of a therapeutic process to 'cure' the specific illness, one would necessarily take steps to 'cleanse' that organ of the 'dirt'." Various medicines or concoctions are then utilised for therapeutic cleansing that involves purging the body of harmful or hazardous "dirt" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). Managing ailment by taking measures to remove the "dirt" associated with the contaminated organ, can be seen as a first-line defence against illness and an integral part of many traditional approaches to therapy (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002).

HIV/AIDS infection and other STDs are associated with "dirt" contracted or brought upon oneself through sexual intercourse with a "dirty" woman. Such "dirt" or infections are construed as exceptionally potent and stubborn, and therefore a potent enema or remedy is required to expel it from the human system. "The process of managing an illness that is etiologically related to sex with a 'dirty' woman [i.e., a woman with a sexually transmitted infection] could [thus] be expected to follow the logic of ethnopathological processes for cleansing bodily 'dirt'" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002, p. 92). The sexuality of a virgin is perceived to be free of the "dirt" or uncleanliness associated with the sexuality of a non-virgin. For this reason, sex with a virgin, deemed to be a clean human being, may homoeopathically "be thought to have an 'antagonistic' effect on a disease believed to have been caused by having sex with a 'dirty' non-virgin". In brief, the "metaphor is embodied in (and potentially enacted through) the idea that if a dirty … adult woman can give a man AIDS, then a [clean] … girl can take it away" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002, p. 93). Simply put, contact with virgins who are viewed as clean beings is traditionally considered to be a therapeutic process, as it cleanses the "dirt" and makes an infected person pure again.

The basis of the virgin cure superstition has been explained slightly differently by other academics and researchers. They mention that certain communities believe that some STDs, including HIV/AIDS, are the consequence of a curse resulting from a personal offence against the gods (spirits) or from a diabolical witch who wishes harm (Kilonzo & Mugwagwa, 2009; Knudsen & Antwi, 2010; Oluga et al., 2010; Tenkorang, Gyimah, Maticka-Tyndale & Adjei, 2011). The remedy to escape such a curse is for the infected or cursed man to have sex with a virgin girl, as virginity is believed to be associated with magical powers or divineness (Oluga et al., 2010). Thus, virgins are deemed to possess magical powers capable of eliminating impurities caused by a curse. It is, therefore, the magic inextricably linked with virginity that brings about the cure. However, despite these discrepancies, almost all the theories regarding the origins of virgin cleansing myth concur that such beliefs are significantly grounded on the notion that virginity is synonymous with divineness, purity, sacredness, and magical power.

It is probable that virgin cleansing myth, as some have postulated, existed in some African communities prior to European contact or colonialism. However, it appears from the discussion above that in Europe, virgin cleansing myth and concomitant sexual violence against presumed virgin girls was widespread largely in Britain. Therefore, considering that in Africa and Asia, virgin cleansing myth seems to be prevalent mostly in countries that were colonised by Britain—i.e., South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and India, among others (Brown, 2017; Kilonzo & Mugwagwa, 2009; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Oluga et al., 2010; Omolo, 2015),

it may be premature to entirely disentangle the origins and proliferation of this belief and practice from British colonialism.

VIRGIN RITUAL MYTH: CONCEPT AND ORIGINS

Virgin ritual myth, as the name indicates, forms part of a belief system that holds that wealth-generating rites and similar other juju[2] rituals are more likely to produce the desired effect or result if virgins, sex with virgins, or things related to virgins are used or engaged (Aruna, 2018; Oluyemo, 2020; Owusu, 2022). Simply put, it is the belief and practice which views sex with virgins and objects associated with virgins as an essential part of rituals performed supposedly to generate wealth or prosperity, to protect supplicants and make them live longer, and to guarantee the attainment of power and several other benefits in life (Alabi, 2015; Aruna, 2018; Ogbeche, 2016; Oluyemo, 2020; Owusu, 2022). These are beliefs and practices patronised and perpetuated largely by juju practitioners, including fetish priests, medicine-men, leaders of occult groups, and other spiritualists (Alabi, 2015; Nwolise, 2019; Owusu, 2022).

For instance, in Uganda, Bukuluki, Fellows and Luwangula (2017) and Fellows (2013) report that children who have not pierced their ears, who do not have scars, who have not been circumcised, and those perceived to be virgins (particularly girls) are the most vulnerable victims of ritual child homicide or ritual murder. Such children are deemed to be "whole" or "intact" and "pure" as they have not "shed blood". Thus, people who visit juju practitioners to seek wealth, protection, power, longevity, and the fulfilment of other aspirations, may be instructed to have sexual intercourse with virgins, or provide sexual fluids or body parts of virgins as part of rituals required for the realisation of their supplications or requests (Aruna, 2018; Nwolise, 2019; Oluyemo, 2020; Owusu, 2022).

Like virgin cleansing myth, virgin ritual myth is not a new phenomenon neither is it unique to Africa. Indeed, there have been evidence of the practice of virgin sacrifice and virgin-related rituals in the mythologies, folklores, and religious texts of many cultures or societies including ancient Ghana, Egypt, Greece, and Rome (Conrad & Fisher, 1983; Fisher, 2017; Loring, 1884; Mangieri, 2018; Osborne, 1993; Scodel, 1996). In fact, from the ancient through the medieval to the present era, virgin sacrifices or rituals have been performed for a number of reasons, including, winning wars, appeasing angry deities, obtaining blessings from the gods, and for protection and prosperity (Bilyeu, 1999; Conrad & Fisher, 1983; Fisher, 2017). For instance, in ancient Egypt, beautiful virgins were thrown into the Nile as a sacrifice to appease the god of the "sacred" river and "induce him to bestow a bountiful inundation" (Loring, 1884, p. 140). In medieval Japan, maidens or virgins were buried alive at the base of or near some monuments to protect them against disasters and enemy attacks (Fisher, 2017). Among the Venda of South Africa, virgins were "sacrificed to the crocodiles in the Fundudzi Lake or thrown into the Tshatshingo Whirlpools as offerings to ancestral spirits for the good

of the community" (Labuschagne, 2004, p. 193). It is also believed that among the Ewe of Ghana, virgins were sacrificed to appease angry gods around the 17th century (Bilyeu, 1999).

Unfortunately, the rationale behind the sacrificing of virgins and not non-virgins in such rituals is not clear. However, various pieces of information about virginity in ancient Greece and Rome, and the traditional African concept of virginity or virgins already highlighted above, may provide some valuable clues. Experts maintain that a virgin, to the ancient Greeks and Romans, was a young girl who had not yet reached puberty and had not had sexual relations with a man. Such a maiden was regarded as not yet fully female and thus seen as androgynous (Addison, 2010; Hanson, 2007; MacLachlan & Fletcher, 2007). Describing the concept of virginity from the Greco-Roman perspective, Drijvers (2005, p. 9607) writes that "because of their lack or renunciation of sexual experience, virgins are not completely male or female, and consequently defy, in a sense, gender specificity …. This mediating function of virgins makes them particularly appropriate for contact with the supernatural and implies their sacredness". Virgins are therefore "often entrusted with special religious rituals because they are supposed to be in closer contact with divinity and nature owing to their sexual purity" (Chen, 2010, p. 79). It could be deduced from this information that the perception that virginity is synonymous with sacredness, purity, and innocence, inspired the practice of using virgins for sacrifices and rituals. Thus, rituals or sacrifices were/are believed to be more potent if a virgin or an object linked to a virgin is involved due to their purity and closeness to the divine (Owusu, 2022).

As a symbol of fertility, virginity is perceived among many African cultures as something exceedingly valuable, and worth the sacrifice of one's life. It could therefore be assumed that the primary reason for the use of a virgin's blood, body fluids, and other body parts in juju rituals is to guarantee that the particular fortune or benefit sought is received in abundance just as a fertile woman brings forth children abundantly. One other factor that might have inspired sexual intercourse with, and the use of sexual fluids of, female virgins in wealth-generating rituals and other juju rites in Africa is the unique status accorded such fluids. In her ethnographic study of medical notions among the Zulu, Ngubane (1977) found that female sexual fluids were viewed by the local community as the most unique bodily emission. She attributed the unique status of these fluids to the popular view that they represent a woman's power in the form of reproduction.

VIRGIN MYTHS' IMPACT ON CRIMES AGAINST YOUNG FEMALES

Several academics and researchers have opined that virgin myths significantly contribute to the widespread sexual violence against young females (including babies) and the infection of STDs such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, and HIV/AIDs in some parts of Africa (Groce & Trasi, 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Lekalakala, 2014; Meel, 2003; Singleton, Winskell, Nkambule-Vilakati & Sabben, 2018). As Meel (2003, p. 88) notes:

> The widespread rape and forced sexual abuse of children is a serious social and health issue. One of the motives behind this unsocial and unhealthy epidemic is the strong belief in a myth of achieving a cure for a person's HIV/ AIDS status through sexual intercourse with a virgin. This is also a contributory factor in the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

Owusu (2022) also maintains that the belief that blood and body parts of virgins enhance the efficacy of rituals performed to bring prosperity to the seeker/supplicant, has resulted in the murder of supposed virgins many of whom tend to be young girls.

However, not all academics and researchers agree that virgin myths, particularly virgin cleansing myth, are a significant cause of child sexual abuse and HIV/AIDS infections among young females in sub-Saharan Africa. Jewkes, Martin and Penn-Kekana (2002), for instance, admit that in South Africa, cases have been reported in which this myth was a motivating factor for child rape. Nevertheless, they maintain that most evidence suggests that this motivation is infrequent. Epstein and Jewkes (2009, p. 1419) also insist that:

> [A]lthough the idea of a virgin sex cure is familiar in some African communities, evidence from service providers working with cases of child sexual abuse and from ethnographic and epidemiological studies of child rapists and their victims suggests that it is very rarely a motivating factor in these cases.

In two separate studies that sought to explore the reasons given by convicted sex offenders for child sexual abuse, and to determine if a desire to cure HIV infection motivated their offence in South Africa and Malawi, Lekalakala (2013) and Mtibo, Kennedy & Umar (2011) respectively, found that offenders convicted of sexual crimes against girls in the two countries were generally not motivated by the virgin cleansing myth. Indeed, even though it is commonly agreed that virgin myths may be an important explanation for the apparent rise in sexual and lethal violence against children in some African countries, the exact extent to which such superstitions contribute to sexual violence and other crimes against girls on the continent remains unclear, as no credible statistical data exists. This statistical inadequacy has been compounded by the lack of empirical research by relevant academics on the subject. However, both the traditional and electronic news media have, over the last couple of decades, reported horrendous virgin myths-related violence against young females. Some of the sparse extant literature also contain cases of child sexual abuse triggered by virgin myths.

A cursory overview of the magnitude of virgin myths-related violence

Drawing on the findings of extant empirical studies and other secondary literature, reports from credible international organisations, as well as local and international media reports, this section offers some evidence of virgin myths related crimes and sexual violence against girls in sub-Saharan Africa. It must be mentioned that due to the clandestine nature of virgin myths related crimes, only a fraction of such cases/incidents is uncovered. It is also worth noting that the virgin cleansing superstition is found largely in communities in southern Africa and Kenya; it is virtually unknown in West African countries. The virgin ritual myth, on the other hand, seems to be more popular among communities in West Africa. Thus, it is very difficult to find one African country where both superstitions and practices occur or are widespread. In other words, a deeper dive into the two phenomena (i.e., virgin cleansing myth and virgin ritual myth related violence/crimes) in just one African country may be an extremely difficult task to realise presently. For the reasons mentioned above, the examples of virgin myths related violence/crimes presented in the subsequent section are drawn from different African countries, including, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

Virgin cleansing myth related crimes

In 1998, an AIDS patient in South Africa who believed that having sex with a virgin could cure him of his HIV/AIDS ailment managed to persuade a woman to allow him to defile her four-year-old daughter in exchange for money (Jewkes et al., 2002). In June 2001, a nine-year-old girl was also sexually defiled by her 40-year-old HIV-positive uncle in Umtata, South Africa. The perpetrator had been tested positive for HIV and counselled at Umtata General Hospital the previous month. It is reported that the victim was sleeping in a room with her elder sister when the assailant broke in, tied up both girls, and raped the nine-year-old victim (Meel, 2003).

In Kenya, there are sufficient studies and reports that suggest that the virgin cure myth has recently become a widely held belief (Omolo, 2015; Shaw, Barbour, Duncan, Freehling-Burton & Nichols, 2018). A study conducted in the country by Omolo (2015) shows that children have become the main targets of rape by HIV positive perpetrators. In Omolo's study, a social worker in the city of Kisumu divulged that recently there have been several cases of child defilement or rape by men who are HIV positive. This assertion was corroborated by a children's officer in Nairobi who insisted that there was an increase in cases of defilement linked to the virgin cleansing myth. The study reveals that some HIV positive men defile their own biological daughters with the hope of getting cured (Omolo, 2015). In a study that aimed to establish the social factors influencing sexual abuse among children living with disability in Nairobi, Kamau, Rwiza & Ndanu (2017) confirm that the virgin cleansing myth is becoming popular in Kenya. It has also been reported that virgin cleansing myth is not uncommon in the town of Isiolo in the central part of Kenya. In an interview with Reuters, a man living with HIV in Isiola confessed that he was once given a nine-year-old girl by the elders of the community to have sexual intercourse with for a week. This formed part of a rite called "purging ceremony" routinely conducted to help people with STDs to cleanse themselves. The offender claimed that he felt guilty sleeping with the little girl, but out of desperation to get cured he had to do what the elders had advised him to do (CDC National Prevention Information Network, 2004).

Between 2006 and 2009, the BBC and CNN reported several virgin cleansing myth related incidents, including the story of an 18-year-old Zimbabwean girl who was raped by her HIV/AIDS positive uncle when she was just 14 years. The uncle's intention for the crime was to be cured of his disease. Sadly, the poor teenager become pregnant and also got infected with HIV. According to the victim, her uncle wrestled her to the ground and covered her mouth with his hand before forcibly having sexual intercourse with her, threatening to kill her if she ever told anybody. The reports note that the virgin myth phenomenon is perpetuated by some Zimbabwe's traditional healers who advise their HIV-positive clients to have sex with virgins in order to be cured. This practice, according to the reports, has led to the defilement and rape of hundreds of girls, including babies (Cable News Network, 2009; Vickers, 2006).

A recent study conducted by a group of medical experts in the medical anthropology section of the Nanterre Hospital (France) for migrants and refugees, shows that three cases were recorded of virgin cleansing related violence among sub-Saharan African communities in 2017. These comprised "sexual assaults (2 instances of rape and 1 of sexual interference) on sexually immature females (young girls) by patients with sexually transmitted infections (mainly HIV, syphilis) hoping they might thereby be cured." (Charlier et al., 2018, p. 178).

Virgin ritual myth related crimes

In 2010, a 20-year-old man took his 11-year-old sister to the shrine of a traditional priest in Ghana with the intention of having her uterus removed for a potent medicine or ritual that would make him exceedingly rich. Terrified at the thought of not seeing her sister again, he asked the fetish priest to only spiritually remove the virgin girl's uterus. A squabble ensued when the spiritualist insisted that the medicine would work only if the girl's womb was physically removed through a lethal operation. The police were alerted when the altercation escalated into violence. After interrogating the two parties, the police realised that they were dealing with a case of child abduction, sale, and imminent ritual murder (Adinkrah, 2017). In August 2016, a self-proclaimed wealthy Ghanaian ritualist also told a local radio station that he maintains his wealth by sleeping with young virgins and using their blood for rituals. The 46-year-old man claimed that he used a special handkerchief which had been given to him by a juju-man to wipe off the blood that came out of virgin girls after sleeping with them. He claimed that he had been doing that for the past 12 years and had slept with about 30 young virgins for ritual purposes (Bampoe, 2016; Ogbeche, 2016).

Currently, there is a religious practice called ritual servitude (also known as *trokosi* in Ghana) among some ethnic groups in various West African countries (including Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria) where young female virgins between the ages of five and 15 are sent to fetish shrines to become sex slaves as part of rituals meant to avert a communal tragedy supposedly triggered by the transgressions of members of the girls' families (Ameh, 2001, 2011; Bilyeu, 1999; Botchway, 2008; Owusu, 2023). Even though the *trokosi* system has been banned and criminalised in Ghana, the practice has not stopped. In a study published in 2014, Akpabli-Honu (2014) identified approximately 33 fetish shrines in some communities in the south-eastern part of the country; and about 24 of these shrines were still receiving and keeping virgin girls as sexual slaves. According to some commentators, an estimated 3,000 or more *trokosi* girls currently remain enslaved in Ghana (see Asomah, 2015; Msuya, 2017).

In Nigeria, juju beliefs and virgin rituals are common. In a recent publication on ritually motivated rape in the country, Oluyemo (2020, p. 1005) observes that there have been cases of young virgin girls "sexually molested by their teachers, fathers, grandfathers, uncles, siblings, neighbours, and family friends, and some are killed for ritual sacrifices." Drawing on various empirical studies and media publications, she describes several distressing virginity-related rape and murder cases involving victims aged between six months and 17 years. In one instance, the cry of a three-year-old girl who was being sexually defiled in Lagos by a neighbour, attracted the attention of the mother who rushed to the scene, resulting in the arrest of the assailant. In another instance, a 26-year-old man raped his 10-year-old cousin and strangled her for raising an alarm during the act (Oluyemo, 2020). In interviews with local newspapers and radio journalists in 2015 and February 2020, Idah Peterside, former goalkeeper of the Nigerian national football team, the Super Eagles, confessed that his insatiable thirst for money and fame led him into the world of occultism. He further disclosed that one major ritual that he was required to perform occasionally was to have sexual intercourse with young virgins (Okonkwo, 2015; Independent, 2020).

In September 2015, a 46-year-old man, was arrested in Kaduna after raping an 11-year-old girl. Upon interrogation the culprit confessed to the crime, explaining that he was instructed

to commit the offence by a juju-man he had consulted for money-making medicine/ritual. He had been made to believe that sleeping with a virgin girl would activate the juju medicine, and he would begin to have a lot of money (Alabi, 2015; Nwolise, 2019). An Abuja-based pastor was also reportedly arrested for sexually defiling the five-year-old daughter of his landlord. It was established that the pastor, who wanted to get a big congregation and cash in on a new church he was establishing, consulted a spiritualist who prepared a charm for him with further instruction to sleep with a virgin girl in order to activate the juju (Nwolise, 2019).

DISCUSSION

It is worth mentioning that virgin cleansing myth is largely found in southern Africa and some parts of Kenya, and virgin ritual myth is popular among communities in West Africa. It has also been observed that only a fraction (perhaps less than 5%) of such cases/incidents is uncovered. Thus, virgin myths, as noted above, are an important contributory factor in sexual and physical violence against children and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among young females. However, the exact extent to which these superstitions exacerbate perceived increases in these crimes and venereal infections on the African continent, cannot be conclusively determined. This notwithstanding, the evidence significantly discredits the view expressed by some academics that virgin-related superstitions are not a significant cause of sexual violence against children on the continent. These academics base their stance on the argument that "evidence from service providers working with cases of child sexual abuse and from ethnographic and epidemiological studies of child rapists and their victims" is not conclusive (Epstein & Jewkes, 2009, p. 1419). However, this reasoning is misplaced.

This is because studies conducted in several countries including Ghana (Boakye, 2009; Boateng, 2015), Nigeria (Idoko, Nwobodo & Idoko, 2020), and South Africa (Basdeo, 2018) show that rapes and other sexual assaults are chronically under-reported. According to these studies, victims of defilement and rape or their caregivers largely do not report the cases for a myriad of reasons. These include the fear of their lives, the high status or position that the perpetrators may hold in the family or the community, the embarrassment/shame or perceived stigma that comes with raising an alarm and letting people know about the ordeal, as well as psychological and physical residuals of the experience (Basdeo, 2018; Boakye, 2009; Boateng, 2015; Idoko et al., 2020). Consequently, only a fraction of perpetrators of sexual crimes against children are apprehended. Besides, it is very difficult to get perpetrators to be forthcoming about why they committed sexual crimes against children. This makes it almost impossible for relevant service providers to know and appreciate the true magnitude of the phenomenon.

As a matter of fact, the prevalence and persistence of virgin myths and the ensuing violence against young girls may be attributable to different factors in different countries in Africa. It is therefore not possible to identify specific contributory factors that may apply equally to all the African countries where virgin myths and concomitant sexual violence exist and/or are widespread. This notwithstanding, it is apparent that some of the factors that may generally contribute to the persistence of virgin myths-motivated violence in many African countries are: (1) high levels of illiteracy, (2) lack of health education campaigns, (3) poor

parental supervision, (4) unemployment and poverty, (5) preoccupation with juju, (6) failure on the part of the relevant authorities to bring the activities of traditional spiritualists under closer scrutiny, and (7) inefficient and ineffective criminal justice system. However, the question as to how much impact each of the above-listed factors has on virgin myths-related child mistreatment in each African country, remains unknown.

CONCLUSION

There is no question that even though violence against children is widespread in Africa, the extent to which virgin myths contribute to this crime in the region is unclear as credible statistical data do not exist. However, the literature and media reports convincingly demonstrate that the dangers of virgin cleansing myth and virgin ritual myth cannot be ignored in any serious endeavour to promote and enhance the wellbeing of children, particularly girls, in Africa. Evidently, the causes of violence against children in African communities are manifold. They occur largely in the context of a society plagued by high levels of poverty, socio-economic difficulty, fractured families, and extreme inequality between the sexes, among others. However, these factors cannot be divorced from high levels of ignorance and illiteracy which, unquestionably, potentiate dangerous beliefs, practices, and traditions. It must, however, be stressed that even though virginity-related myths trigger some of the most abhorrent crimes against children, particularly girls, it is always important to view and address such beliefs and associated violence within a wider historical, religious, socio-cultural, economic, and gender context. Such an approach facilitates a better appreciation of the problem and the identification of realistic and effective solutions.

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