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Effectiveness of traditional institutions as an informal security mechanism in preventing ritual killings in Rural Cross River State, Nigeria.

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Keywords

Abstract

Traditional institutions, ritual killings, informal security mechanisms, community surveillance, crime prevention, Cross River State, Nigeria.

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Ritual killings have become a growing security concern in many rural communities in Nigeria, particularly in Cross River State, where the quest for quick wealth, spiritual protection and supernatural influence has contributed to the persistence of this violent crime. Despite the presence of formal security agencies, the limited reach and effectiveness of law enforcement in rural areas have created a need for alternative approaches to crime prevention. This study examined the effectiveness of traditional institutions as informal security mechanisms in preventing ritual killings in rural communities of Cross River State, Nigeria. The study adopted a qualitative research design and relied on secondary sources of data obtained from scholarly journals, textbooks, conference papers, government publications, newspaper reports, policy documents, and

	relevant internet materials. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Findings revealed that traditional institutions play significant roles in preventing ritual killings through various mechanisms such as community surveillance, vigilante groups, age-grade associations, traditional secret societies, oath-taking, ritual cleansing, public denunciation, social stigma, ostracism, and banishment of offenders. These mechanisms contribute to community vigilance, social control, and the enforcement of moral values that discourage ritual-related crimes. However, their effectiveness is constrained by challenges such as limited legal authority, inadequate funding, corruption among local security actors, weakening traditional values, political interference, and the increasingly secretive nature of ritual killings. The study concludes that traditional institutions remain valuable partners in crime prevention and recommends stronger collaboration between traditional authorities and formal security agencies to enhance community safety and reduce ritual-related violence in rural Nigeria.
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Introduction

Traditional institutions have long served as the backbone of social order in many rural communities, particularly in Africa, where formal state security structures are often limited in reach and capacity. These institutions comprising traditional rulers, elders' councils, age-grade systems and community vigilante arrangement whose authority is deeply rooted in cultural legitimacy, shared values and collective responsibility, making them highly influential in shaping community behavior and maintaining peace, enforcing norms and resolving disputes (Oyejide & Adeleke, 2026). In recent years, concerns over ritual killings in rural areas have heightened the need to reassess the role of these indigenous systems in crime prevention. Ritual killings, often driven by superstition, greed, and spiritual manipulation, pose serious threats to human security and social stability. While formal law enforcement agencies continue to respond to such crimes, their limited presence in remote communities creates gaps in surveillance and rapid intervention (Olowo, 2025). Boge (2020) holds that ritual killings is a deliberate and heinous act of taking human lives with the intention of appeasing deities and seeking spiritual and magical benefits.

Obineke (2018) observes that perpetrators of ritual killings often operate under the belief that sacrificing human lives can secure supernatural rewards such as wealth, transformation, healing, immortality, or even spiritual cleansing. In many communities, there is also a widespread belief in the effectiveness of ritual preparations and magical substances made from unusual ingredients, which are thought to attract money, fame, and power. Similarly, Ojiezele (2023) notes that in Nigeria and other African societies, the growing desire for quick and unearned wealth, without corresponding effort, has significantly contributed to the rising incidence of ritual killings linked to money-making practices. Falae (2018), asserts ritual killing in Nigeria, is strongly associated with wealth and has informed the exponential rise in money rituals, that involve the use of human body parts to attract wealth, protection and supernatural favour. Among these practices,

the use of human body parts is often considered by perpetrators to be the most powerful, reliable and effective, which makes it the most sought-after form of ritual preparation. This belief has continued to fuel the demand for such practices despite their criminal and violent nature. Ojiezele (2023) argues that the perception that human parts can generate sudden wealth, influence and social elevation without legitimate effort, has contributed significantly to the persistence of ritual killings in society.

In a similar view, Akerele (2022) explains that money rituals in traditional belief systems may take different forms, including human sacrifice, the use of animal parts, or plant-based concoctions intended to attract wealth and success. However, Usman (2017), as cited in Salihu et al. (2019), warns that thousands of innocent Nigerians, both male and female across different age groups, have lost their lives as a result of ritual killings linked to these beliefs. This demonstrates the severe human cost behind such practices and the disturbing extent to which superstition and material desperation intersect. In Cross River State, Nigeria, ritual killings remain a serious security concern, often linked to the “get-rich-quick” mentality, cultism and belief in supernatural wealth acquisition. These crimes typically involve the murder of victims whose body parts are harvested for ritual purposes, frequently associated with the “Yahoo Plus” phenomenon, where internet fraud is combined with ritual practices. Victims are often young women, frequently targeted through deceptive relationships or social manipulation, though children and relatives are not exempt. In many cases, bodies are discovered mutilated, decapitated, missing and specific organs believed to hold spiritual value. Traditional institutions, on the other hand, represent long-established structures of governance found in many African societies and according to Enyi (2014), these institutions historically play key roles in maintaining security, formulating community laws, and adequately can check and curb ritual killings (Ohirole and Ojo, 2015; Neupert-Wentz and Müller-Crepon, 2024).

Similarly, Boateng and Afranie (2020) emphasize that these institutions evolved to provide leadership and coordination for settled communities, commanding deep respect and loyalty among members. Within this context, traditional institutions in rural setting through Paramount Rulers, Clan Heads and Village Heads, can via community surveillance and enforcement of local laws can mitigate, prevent these killings and promoting social stability. Against this backdrop, this study examines the effectiveness of traditional institutions as informal security mechanisms in preventing ritual killings in rural communities. It seeks to explore how these institutions operate, the extent of their influence on community behaviour, the challenges they face, and their overall contribution to reducing ritual-related violence. By doing so, the study aims to provide insights into how indigenous governance systems can complement formal security structures in addressing one of the most troubling forms of violent crime in contemporary society.

Statement of Problem

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed a disturbing rise in ritual-motivated killings. Even more alarming is the growing involvement of adolescents and young adults in these crimes, a trend that has heightened fear, anxiety, and insecurity across many rural communities (Ayandiji, 2022; Victor & Funso, 2024). This development reflects a deepening security challenge that threatens not only the safety of individuals but also the moral values, social cohesion, and cultural stability of society. Although, formal security agencies such as the police and other law enforcement bodies

exist across the country, ritual killings continue to persist, particularly in rural areas where security presence is often inadequate, poorly resourced, and slow to respond to emerging threats. The limited reach of formal security institutions in many rural communities creates significant gaps in surveillance, intelligence gathering, and rapid intervention. Consequently, residents remain vulnerable to violent crimes that formal mechanisms alone have been unable to effectively prevent or control.

Ritual killings are especially troubling because they are frequently associated with beliefs in money rituals, occult practices and the pursuit of supernatural wealth and protection. These crimes are often driven by economic hardship, social pressure and the desire for quick success without legitimate effort. Perpetrators may believe that the use of human body parts for ritual sacrifices can bring wealth, fame, influence and spiritual protection. Victims are sometimes deceived, abducted and murdered by people they know, including friends, acquaintances, and, in some cases, family members. The secretive nature of these crimes, coupled with fear of spiritual repercussions and community stigma, often discourages families and witnesses from reporting incidents. As a result, many cases remain unresolved, allowing perpetrators to continue their activities with minimal resistance. In rural communities of Cross River State, traditional institutions have long served as important mechanisms for maintaining social order and security. These institutions include Paramount Rulers, Clan Heads, Village Heads, Councils of Elders and community-based vigilante groups. They are deeply rooted in local culture and command considerable respect and authority among community members. Traditionally, they have been responsible for resolving disputes, enforcing customary laws, preserving communal values, and ensuring peace and stability within their communities. Because of their close relationship with the people and their intimate knowledge of local dynamics, they are often well positioned to identify early signs of deviant behaviour and intervene before conflicts escalate into serious crimes.

However, despite their historical significance, the effectiveness of traditional institutions in preventing ritual killings remains uncertain and has not been adequately explored. While these institutions possess moral authority and cultural influence, ritual killings present unique challenges due to their secrecy, spiritual justification, and increasing sophistication. In many cases, perpetrators are members of the community themselves, making detection and prevention more difficult. Furthermore, the influence of modernization, changing social values, and the growing disengagement of young people from traditional authority structures have weakened the level of control that these institutions once exercised over community behaviour. Traditional institutions also face several structural challenges, including limited legal backing, inadequate institutional capacity, and a lack of formal enforcement powers. Their interventions often rely on persuasion, moral authority, and community sanctions rather than coercive legal mechanisms. Additionally, issues such as inconsistency in decision-making, potential bias, and external political interference may undermine their effectiveness in addressing sensitive criminal matters such as ritual killings. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine the effectiveness of traditional institutions as informal security mechanisms in preventing ritual killings in rural communities of Cross River State. Specifically, it investigates the roles these institutions play in maintaining security, promoting social order, and responding to ritual-related threats within their communities.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective was to examine effectiveness of traditional institutions as an informal security mechanism in preventing ritual killings in Rural Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically the study seeks to:

- I. Examine the mechanisms used by traditional institutions in preventing ritual killings
- ii. Assess the extent to which traditional institutions mechanism impact on ritual killings prevention

the effectiveness of the mechanism used by traditional institutions in preventing ritual killings

- iii. Identifies the challenges faced by traditional institutions in preventing ritual killings

Literatures

Traditional institutions and roles in preventing ritual killings

Traditional institutions have existed for centuries and remain important structures for governance, social control and community development, particularly in rural societies. These institutions represent long-established systems of authority and administration that have endured over time and have historically provided mechanisms for maintaining law, order and social stability (Ohiole & Ojo, 2015). Before the emergence of modern state institutions, traditional institutions served as the primary means through which communities regulated behaviour, resolved conflicts and ensured collective security. According to Yadava and Gautam (1980), traditional institutions encompass a wide range of community-based structures, including traditional rulers, kinship groups, farmers' associations, age-grade organizations, women's groups and religious institutions such as churches, mosques, and traditional worship centers. These institutions are often interconnected, with many performing multiple social, cultural, economic, and security-related functions within the community. Neupert-Wentz and Müller-Crepon (2024) further observed that traditional institutions frequently overlap in their responsibilities, enabling them to respond to diverse community needs.

Traditional institutions can be broadly classified into several categories. The political category includes kings, chiefs, clan heads, village heads and councils of elders who provide leadership and governance. The social category comprises family and kinship networks, age-grade associations, and community-based clubs that promote social cohesion and collective responsibility. Economic institutions include trade guilds and occupational associations that regulate economic activities. Religious and spiritual institutions encompass both traditional and modern faith-based organizations that influence moral behaviour and social values. Cultural institutions preserve indigenous customs through music, dance, festivals, and other artistic expressions, while educational institutions facilitate knowledge transfer through apprenticeship systems, mentorship, oral traditions, and cultural education. Judicial institutions, such as traditional courts, councils of elders, and mediation bodies, provide mechanisms for conflict resolution and justice administration (Neupert-Wentz & Müller-Crepon, 2024).

In Cross River State, traditional institutions include Paramount Rulers, Clan Heads, Village Heads, Age-Grade Associations, Secret Societies, and community vigilante groups. These institutions play significant roles in maintaining peace, promoting social order, and safeguarding

community values. Traditional rulers serve as custodians of indigenous customs and cultural heritage. They mobilize community members for development projects, encourage participation in government programmes, and mediate disputes relating to land ownership, chieftaincy matters, family conflicts and other communal issues. Through their extensive knowledge of local dynamics and social networks, they often possess valuable intelligence that can assist in identifying security threats before they escalate. The prevention of ritual killings requires strong community surveillance and collective action, roles that traditional institutions are uniquely positioned to perform. Through their authority and influence, traditional rulers can discourage harmful cultural beliefs, promote moral values, and mobilize communities against practices associated with ritual violence. They can also facilitate the reporting of suspicious activities and collaborate with formal security agencies to improve crime detection and prevention.

Community vigilante groups and hunters' associations also contribute significantly to local security. According to Ocheja and Aina (2020), these groups complement the efforts of formal security agencies by providing grassroots security services and intelligence gathering. Yusuf (2024) notes that one of their primary functions is the conduct of stop-and-search operations at strategic locations within communities. Such operations help to monitor movement, identify suspicious individuals, and prevent criminal activities. Community vigilantes often establish checkpoints and barricades to control access routes and enhance surveillance, thereby serving as an important crime prevention strategy (Ajegbomogun, 2023). In addition, they conduct regular patrols to protect lives and property and respond swiftly to emerging security threats (Feyikemim, Okunola, & Oriowo, 2024). Age-grade organizations also play an important role in maintaining social order. Traditionally, they function as disciplinary bodies responsible for enforcing community norms, organizing communal labour and promoting responsible behaviour among youths (Talbot, 1999). Through peer monitoring and collective accountability, age-grade associations can help discourage deviant behaviours and support efforts aimed at preventing crimes such as ritual killings.

Traditional institutions mechanism and ritual killings prevention

Every traditional community has its method of guaranteeing rational control of human and material resources and maintenance of peace and order. Traditional institutions in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, employ a range of mechanisms to prevent and combat ritual killings, focusing on social control, spiritual deterrents and community mobilization. These methods are designed to uphold moral order and enforce communal justice against crimes seen as threats to social cohesion. As further accentuated by Enamhe, et.al, (2025), their efforts are particularly important in addressing ritual killings, which are often shrouded in secrecy and influenced by deeply rooted beliefs in supernatural wealth acquisition and occult practices. In Nigeria, specifically cross river state, traditional institutions employ several mechanisms to prevent ritual killings and other forms of violent crime. One of the most prominent approaches is the use of vigilante groups and community watch structures. Community-based security groups, such as youth associations and vigilante organizations, serve as the eyes and ears of the community. They conduct regular patrols, monitor suspicious activities, gather intelligence and secure isolated areas where criminal activities are likely to occur. Their close familiarity with local residents and terrain enables them to quickly

identify unusual movements and potential threats, thereby reducing opportunities for ritual-related crimes.

Traditional leaders also rely heavily on community surveillance systems. Village heads, clan leaders, elders, age-grade associations, and youth councils work together to monitor the activities of both residents and newcomers. Individuals whose behaviour raises suspicion are closely observed, and information about their activities is often shared within the community. This collective vigilance serves as an early warning system that helps prevent crimes such as abduction, murder, and ritual violence. For instance, traditional secret societies, such as the *Mgbe/Ekpe society*, *Biyan*, *Mfam*, and *Ekume Anakai*, has been employed traditionally to social control and prevent crime. These institutions command significant respect and authority and often function as informal law enforcement bodies. Through their influence, they regulate behaviour, investigate misconduct, and impose sanctions on individuals found guilty of violating community norms. Their public condemnation of ritual killings and cult-related activities reinforces communal opposition to such practices. In other hand, Maringa & Mulaudzi (2025), state that spiritual mechanisms also play an important role in preventing ritual killings. In many traditional settings, serious crimes such as murder are believed to bring spiritual pollution upon the community. To address this, ritual cleansing ceremonies are performed to restore harmony and remove perceived defilement. Among the Bekwarra people of Cross River State-nigeria, practices such as *Atabouchi* (land cleansing) and *Uchon* (oath-taking) are used to discourage criminal behaviour and uncover hidden offenders and believing that supernatural forces will punish anyone who violates an oath, serves as a powerful deterrent against participation in ritual killings and other crimes (Malatjie, et.al, 2023).

Another important mechanism is public denunciation and social stigma. Traditional rulers and community leaders openly condemn ritual killings during community gatherings and cultural events. By challenging the belief that human sacrifice can bring wealth or success, they help reshape public attitudes and reinforce moral values that respect the sanctity of human life. Individuals associated with ritual activities often face severe social disapproval, which discourages others from engaging in similar behaviour. Traditional communities also employ ostracism and banishment as forms of punishment for serious offences. Individuals found guilty of ritual-related crimes may be expelled from the community either temporarily or permanently. Among the Bekwarra people, the practice known as *Ichibibi* (wizard banishment) is regarded as one of the most severe sanctions, carrying consequences comparable to social death. Such measures serve both punitive and deterrent functions. Furthermore, some communities utilize restorative justice systems to ensure accountability. Among the Yakurr people, for example, matriclan justice requires offenders and their families to make restitution to victims' families, emphasizing the value of human life and communal responsibility. Traditional councils also monitor the activities of herbalists, spiritualists, and other practitioners whose services may be exploited for ritual purposes. Through continuous oversight and regulation, they seek to prevent the misuse of traditional practices for criminal ends.

Challenges of traditional institutions in preventing ritual killing

Many factors have contributed to the gradual loss of relevance of traditional rulers in recent times. Fatile (2010) postulates that these factors are self-inflicted by the traditional institutions

themselves while others are systematically engendered. Among others, the self-inflicted factors is the non-regard for due process in their appointment. Traditionally, the appointment of traditional rulers follows laid down traditional procedure whereby only members of the royal families had the right to be crowned (Fajonyomi 1997). In several parts of the country, many of the current crops of traditional rulers' ancestry cannot be traced to any form of royalty. The high taste in social lifestyles, elegance, expensive cars, tens of children, hangers-on and concubines warrant the need for an extra illegitimate source of income. Thus, traditional rulers began to give their support to any illegitimate dictator who could extend the loot to the palaces. The effect is a total loss of sight of their major roles as custodians of traditional values and brokers of peace, as they have deliberately made themselves prisoners of conscience. Traditional rulers often lack the power of formal prosecution and must hand over suspects to the police, where cases may stall. The influence of traditional institutions has been reduced by modern governance, leading to a decline in the effectiveness of traditional social control mechanisms. In some cases, there are challenges regarding the involvement of some traditional practitioners or the failure of some to adequately police their domains.

There is funding and training gap for local security actors. Who train the traditional vigilante, at what level, which methods and what type of weapon to use at what capacity. The vigilante security service are not well-paid, this made it difficult for the vigilante security service to curb crimes such as internet crimes (Feyikemi, Okunola and Oriowo, 2024). Another problem with the vigilante security service is corruption. According to the Amnesty International (2023), corruption is defined as making use of one official position for personal interest. The meagre remuneration and other factors are responsible for corruption among vigilante security service (Ajegbomogun, 2023). With the low remuneration among vigilante security service, they are likely to engage in corruption. Another obstacle to vigilante security service is poor supervision, the vigilante security servicemen have less supervision (Zumve and Anyo, 2020). The inadequacy in personnel among vigilante security service negatively affected the supervision, without effective supervision, the vigilante members are likely to engage in unethical acts (Yusuf, 2024).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the effectiveness of traditional institutions as an informal security mechanism in preventing ritual killings in rural communities of Cross River State, Nigeria. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it provides an in-depth understanding of social realities, cultural practices, beliefs, and community-based security mechanisms that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. The study relied primarily on secondary sources of data. Information was obtained from scholarly journals, textbooks, conference papers, government publications, newspaper reports, policy documents, and relevant internet sources. These materials provided valuable insights into the nature of ritual killings, the roles of traditional institutions, and the effectiveness of indigenous security mechanisms in rural communities. The use of secondary data enabled the researcher to draw evidence from existing literature and documented experiences relating to traditional governance and crime prevention in Nigeria. A documentary method of data collection was

employed. Relevant documents were carefully selected based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the subject matter. Particular attention was given to publications that discussed traditional rulers, vigilante groups, age-grade associations, community surveillance systems, ritual killings, and informal security structures in Cross River State and other parts of Nigeria. The selection of these materials ensured a comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation. The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This method involved identifying, categorizing, and interpreting recurring themes, concepts, and patterns from the reviewed literature. The themes included the structure and functions of traditional institutions, mechanisms used in preventing ritual killings, effectiveness of traditional security measures, and challenges confronting traditional institutions in crime prevention. The thematic approach allowed for a systematic examination of different viewpoints and facilitated meaningful interpretation of findings.

Theoretical Framework

Social Control Theory

Social Control Theory was developed by Travis Hirschi in 1969. The theory emerged as a response to explanations of crime that focused primarily on individual motivations and instead sought to explain why most people conform to societal rules. Hirschi argued that criminal behaviour occurs when an individual's bond to society becomes weak or broken. According to the theory, people are naturally capable of engaging in deviant acts, but strong social ties and effective social control mechanisms discourage such behaviour. The theory is built on four major assumptions: viz: **attachment**, which supposes emotional bonds individuals have with family members, community leaders, and significant others. People who value these relationships are less likely to engage in criminal activities because they do not want to disappoint those they respect. Secondly is **commitment**, which relates to the investment individuals make in socially approved goals such as education, employment, and community reputation. Then **involvement**, which suggests that individuals who actively participate in legitimate social activities have less time and opportunity to engage in crime, while **belief**, confers acceptance to societal norms, values, customs and laws. Implying that, individuals who strongly believe in the legitimacy of community rules are more likely to obey them.

Social Control Theory provides an understanding to how traditional institutions contribute to the prevention of ritual killings in rural communities. The theory argues that individuals are less likely to engage in criminal behaviour when they maintain strong bonds with their community and adhere to accepted social norms and values. This stance is particularly relevant in explaining the role of traditional institutions as informal mechanisms of social control.

This perspective aligns with Social Control Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social bonds in preventing criminal behaviour. Traditional institutions foster attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief among community members, thereby strengthening conformity to accepted values. However, the theory has certain limitations. It pays limited attention to economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality that may encourage criminal activities. It also assumes that everyone accepts community values, whereas some individuals may reject these norms. Furthermore, the theory does not adequately explain why some respected individuals

with strong social ties still engage in ritual killings. It equally overlooks broader factors such as corruption, weak law enforcement, and political interference that may contribute to the persistence of such crimes. Nevertheless, the theory remains valuable in explaining the role of traditional institutions in promoting social order and preventing ritual-related violence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The effectiveness of traditional institutions in preventing ritual killings through various mechanisms such as vigilante groups and community watch, surveillance of strangers, traditional secret societies, ritual cleansing, traditional deities and oaths, public denunciation and stigma, ostracism and banishment in Cross River State is however mixed, often high in terms of community mobilization and immediate social control, more direct and respected within the community compared to state-level security measures but limited by modern legal constraints, lack of resources, and the sophisticated, secretive nature of modern, money-driven ritual crimes. Traditional leaders are increasingly encouraged to report suspected "native doctors" or spiritualists to the police, bridging the gap between local intelligence and formal law enforcement. Hence, traditional mechanisms will be most effective in achieving a more holistic result, when integrated with modern law enforcement. Their ability to prevent ritual killings lies in their capacity to foster community cohesion and vigilance, but they require robust support from formal legal systems to be truly effective against the modern, complex, and sometimes transnational nature of ritual crime in the state and Nigeria at large. Note studies from Nigeria. The study recommends as follows;

- **Strengthen Collaboration Between Traditional Institutions and Formal Security Agencies**
Government and security agencies should establish stronger partnerships with traditional rulers, community vigilante groups, and local leaders. Regular information sharing, joint security meetings, and prompt reporting of suspicious activities will improve intelligence gathering and enhance the prevention and detection of ritual killings.
- **Provide Legal Backing, Training, and Resources for Traditional Security Structures**
Traditional institutions and community vigilante groups should be supported through appropriate legal frameworks, security training, communication equipment, and financial assistance. This will improve their capacity to carry out surveillance, crime prevention, and community security functions effectively while operating within the law.
- **Promote Community Awareness and Value Reorientation Programmes**
Continuous public enlightenment campaigns should be organized to educate residents, particularly youths, on the dangers of ritual killings, the sanctity of human life, and the consequences of pursuing wealth through illegal and ritual means. Traditional rulers, religious leaders, schools, and civil society organizations should work together to discourage beliefs that encourage ritual practices.
- **Address Socioeconomic Factors That Encourage Ritual Crimes**
Governments at all levels should create employment opportunities, support skills acquisition programmes, and implement poverty-reduction initiatives in rural communities. Reducing unemployment, poverty, and economic frustration will lessen the attraction of get-rich-quick schemes and contribute to the reduction of ritual killings and related crimes.

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