

FRIENDLY FREETHINKER

Which craft is being practiced in Africa?

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

A brave and committed African named Leo Igwe is the founder of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. He's also active in two other organizations devoted to reason and defense of the most vulnerable citizens, primarily women. The "Critical Thinking Social Empowerment Foundation" focuses on encouraging rationality, while the other group specifically addresses something we might find quite strange in our "more enlightened" pluralistic culture: "Advocacy for Alleged Witches." I wonder if we're so much more enlightened.

A writer in England describes the context Leo Igwe faces: "Nigeria is a deeply religious country. In the north there is a strict Muslim presence, while the south is dominated by an extremely fundamentalist form of Christianity mixed with older superstitious beliefs about witches, demons and possession" (Maggie Hall, *Humanistically Speaking*, UK, December 2024). How would

we face that tension created by competing religious dogmas?

The description of their mission on the advocacy website may seem strange to our ears: "Using compassion, reason, and science to save lives of those affected by superstition." It may be hard to imagine this kind of situation, where basic qualities of human concern become essential tools in the defense of innocent lives. In our cultural context, we might reframe the problem more specifically as "saving minds"—assisting people to practice greater awareness of manipulation by those who invent more means (and mean ways) to judge people as evil or demonic. Witchcraft is condemned as satanic. Where does this belief come from? Missionaries have perpetuated this black and white, good and evil, God and satan, worldview for centuries. Once people come under the influence of superstitious beliefs, they lose the ability to practice another kind of "craft," a more creative, constructive and common sense skill.

Which "craft" is practiced in Africa that we could replicate here? The craft of education. The art of confronting beliefs that hurt others, that destroy lives. This craft takes courage and a deep commitment to face ugly truths about harmful religious beliefs. The advocacy organization has a simple motto: "Using reason, saving lives." How can we relate to this in our own lives, our communities, our nation? Could this motto apply here, as well as Africa? How many are endangered by superstition here as they are in Nigeria? We can confront dogma-based attempts that seek to restrict healthcare, transform education, create a climate of fear, and demonize opposing views. The crusade to craft laws by imposing biblical or theological teachings needs to be countered by crafting more democratic, pluralistic, constitutional defenses.

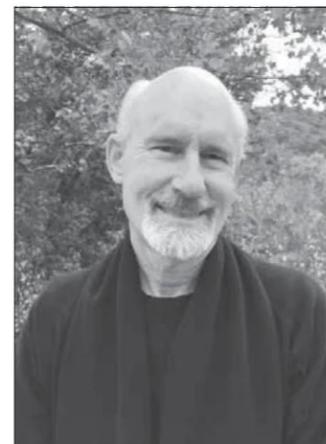
We may not see the extreme level of irrational brutality against supposed "evil forces" where we live, yet maybe we ought to consider how lives

are harmed by misinformation, conspiracies, false accusations and twisting of the truth. When religion is used to justify the dehumanization, the demonization, of others, it becomes a monster itself. This is where we can take heart in the model presented by these brilliant Nigerian minds. As Maggie Hall states: "The Critical Thinking programme aims to introduce critical thinking skills into Nigerian schools with the aim of teaching children to question, challenge and interrogate. Leo described the many difficulties encountered when trying to gain access to schools and establish the programme."

What about "Advocacy for Alleged Evil People" in our land? Who challenges those who condemn others in the name of their Divine Judge? Who advocates for people who choose more inclusive, less superstitious religions? Who defends the rights of those who choose not to believe in any god? Who stands up against the whole notion there are "evil" people?

I recommend watching Igwe's 2016 TED Talk (https://www.ted.com/speakers/leo_igwe), where he proudly proclaims the effects of his humanistic outlook: "In some cases, religion drives many Africans to extraordinary length: to attack other human beings ... superstition is widespread, with so many people believing in witchcraft, something that has no basis in reason or in science. Yet alleged witches, usually women, children and elderly persons are still routinely attacked, banished and killed. And I've made it part of my life's mission to end witchcraft accusation and witch persecution in Africa."

In a BBC article on Dr. Igwe (October 25, 2024), we read: "[In Nigeria] it is an offence to accuse, or threaten to accuse, any person of being a witch or having the power of witchcraft. It carries a maximum two-year prison sentence. However, prosecutions and convictions are rare." This is why the organizations led by people like Leo Igwe, are active not only in Nigeria but



in Ghana, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Kenya.

In response to an email I sent to Dr. Igwe, calling him "a courageous warrior of compassion," he replied: "Quite encouraging. I wish I could do more and more." Don't we all.

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