

WEAK LAW ENFORCEMENT, CORRUPTION, AND RITUAL KILLINGS IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA: A STUDY OF OKEITE

Mark, Kingsley Chinonso PhD¹, Chinwe Mariaceline Eze (PhD)²

^{1,2}Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examined the interplay between weak enforcement of laws, corruption, and the rise of ritual killings, specifically the Okeite practice, in South East Nigeria. It explores how systemic failures of law enforcement and pervasive corruption have fostered an environment conducive for ritualistic crimes, particularly Okeite, a money ritual practice. Through the lens of qualitative research design and the combination of Strain and Broken Windows Theories, the study identifies key factors contributing to the persistence of these issues. The findings reveal that weak law enforcement, coupled with corruption, has enabled the growth of Okeite, undermining societal trust and security. The paper proposes practical recommendations, including strengthening judicial independence, enhancing community policing, and implementing public awareness campaigns to curb corruption and ritual killings.

Keywords: Law, Weak Laws, Law Enforcement, Corruption, Ritual Killings, Okeite

Introduction

South East Nigeria, comprising states like Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi, faces significant challenges of ritual killings most often linked to Okeite ritual. Okeite, a ritual involving human sacrifice for wealth, has gained notoriety amid socio-economic pressures and governance failures (Sahara Reporters, 2022). These ritual practices, are often driven by the quest for wealth and power (Okeke, 2023). For instance, in July 2025, the Anambra state police, Ogbunike Area command arrested Somtochukwu Nwafor a 24-year-old, an accomplice of master Chiemerie Obika Elobisi a native of Ogbunike who lured a pregnant nurse under the guise of seeking medical attention, only to kill her, mutilate her body and sell her parts to native doctors (Ikenga, 2025). On the 29th July 2025, Operatives of the State Criminal Investigation Department (SCID) in the early hours burst a shrine of Nwafor Chibunna Ofornwatadile from Itima Amawa Village, Ogbunike and recovered decomposing bodies and human body parts, concealed in cellophane (nylon) bags.

The incident of Chukwudozie Nwangwu also called (Akwa Okuko Tiwara Aki), Ekene Igbo Ekweze, known as (Eke Hit), Onyebuch Okocha (Onye eze Jesus) in Anambra state. The incidents of Uche Kingsley (Agumba), High Chief Levi Onyema Obu (E dey play E dey show) in Enugu state. In Abia state, a man popularly called Ede killed his own father and remove his eyes for money ritual. In July 2014, two men were arrested by NSCDC in the Ariaria junction area of Aba, they were caught carrying a sack containing the lifeless body of a little girl, whose body had hospital intravenous gadgets attached to her neck and hand, suggesting a ritual killing. In February 2025 the traditional ruler of Oriendu community in Imo state, reported that over 30 bodies were dumped naked with missing body parts into the Imo River by ritualists.

The intersection of these acts with human sacrifice has raised serious concerns among scholars and academia's on the efficacy of laws; and their enforcement in Nigeria and South East in particular. Hence, recent studies highlight the rise in ritual-related abductions and killings not only a function of weak enforcement of laws but also fueled by corruption and the mode of operation and the enforcement of laws. (Nwankwo & Eze, 2024).

The weak enforcement of laws orchestrated by the inability of the law enforcement officers like the Nigerian Police to effectively investigate and resolve issues of ritual killings which most often are perpetuated by the youths has fueled public distrust in law enforcement, and exacerbated insecurity. According to Alemika and Chukwuma (2000), the Nigerian Police Force has long struggled with issues of corruption, inadequate training, and limited forensic capacity, which hinder effective criminal investigations.

The failure to bring perpetrators to justice not only emboldens criminals but also fosters a culture of impunity, undermining democratic governance and the rule of law (Osah & Omenma, 2019). On the above note that many development scholars and public affairs commentators have concluded that weak law enforcement in Nigeria is rooted in corruption. In an opinion poll conducted by The Guardian Newspaper in 2007, 70% of the Nigerian respondents picked corruption as one of the worst problems hindering the nation's advancement. In spite of the exposure on the media and public outrage over scandal perpetrated by individuals in the guise of different names, ranging from human ritual killings and kidnappings few perpetrators were investigated, charged and sentenced for their offences (Ojo, Simeon, Odetunde & Mustapha, 2023).

Although the governing elites at all levels bemoaned these developments, the efforts to arrest the ugly situation through various policies and programmes were largely ineffective and often overshadowed by the officials' pursuit of personal interests. For instance, there have been agencies established to fight corruption and laws that condemn bribery, fraud, embezzlement, kickbacks, extortion, forgery, misappropriation of funds, nepotism and other forms of corruption, yet the political will to implement these laws has been lacking (Ojo, Simeon, Odetunde & Mustapha, 2023).

In the face of these myriads of problems relating and regarding the state laws, their operations and enforcement the Anambra State government took steps to curb ritual-related crimes. In January 2025, the Agunchemba Law was enacted, targeting ritualistic practices such as Okeite and Ezenwanyi syndromes (Anambra State Government, 2025). The law aims to address these issues by enforcing strict regulations and increasing public awareness about the dangers of ritual killings.

Additionally, the Anambra State Homeland Security Law of 2025 was introduced to combat criminal activities linked to ritualism and fraudulent spiritual practices (Anambra State Government, 2025). These measures reflect the state's commitment to tackling both the cultural and criminal aspects of ritual activities which most often are associated to Okeite rituals. Despite these efforts, ritual killings persist.

It is on the above premise this study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on secondary data from academic journals, government reports, and reputable news sources. The historical method of data analysis was used to interrogate weak enforcement of laws and corruption have exacerbated ritual killings in south-east Nigeria. Addressing the issue demands a multidimensional strategy, including legal reforms, cultural reorientation, and economic empowerment. Scholars argue that combating ritual-related kidnappings must involve engaging traditional leaders, who hold significant influence over their communities (Obi & Nwachukwu, 2024). Community-based initiatives, such as grassroots education campaigns and economic support programs, can help dismantle the structures that enable ritual killings.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

Laws:

Laws are formal rules established by a governing authority to regulate behaviour and maintain order (Black, 1990). In Nigeria, laws include the Constitution, Criminal Code, and anti-corruption statutes.

Law Enforcement:

This refers to the application of legal rules by authorities, such as police and judiciary, to ensure compliance and punish violations (Tyler, 2006). Effective enforcement requires resources, training, and integrity.

Corruption:

Corruption entails much more than taking bribes and gratification, committing fraud and stealing funds and assets by public officers entrusted to their care. It means the deliberate violations for gainful ends of standards of conduct legally, professionally or even ethically established in private and public affairs. These gains may be either in kind or cash or even psychological or political (Ojo, Simeon, Odetunde & Mustapha, 2023). They are made from the violation of the integrity of an entity and involves the subversion of its quality and capacity

Ritual Killings:

These are homicides performed for spiritual or supernatural purposes, often involving human sacrifice to gain wealth or power (Igwe, 2004). In South East Nigeria, ritual killings are linked to cultural and economic factors.

Okeite:

Okeite is a specific form of ritual killing in South East Nigeria, where individuals are murdered, and their body parts used for rituals to attract wealth (Sahara Reporters, 2022). It is often associated with youth desperation and organized crime.

Review of Related Literature

Laws and their Enforcement in Nigeria

Nigeria has a robust legal framework, including the 1999 Constitution, the Criminal Code, and the Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act, which criminalize corruption and violent crimes (GAN Integrity, 2017). However, enforcement is weak due to underfunding and corruption within law enforcement agencies (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The Nigeria Police Force, responsible for crime investigation, is perceived as highly corrupt, with officers often extorting citizens rather than enforcing laws (Amnesty International, 2015).

The police is regarded as the gatekeeper of the criminal justice process and the biggest and most visible subsystem of the criminal justice system entrusted with the constitutional duty to protect the citizens. In Nigeria, however, the police suffer from negative public image, and have come under intense criticisms over the way they carry out their law enforcement duties (Obasanjo; Olufemi, & Sadiq, 2021).

They represent the authority of the state in a modern society, and have the role to demand conformity to societal laws and expectations. That is, the police have the capacity to enforce the law, even if that requires the use of coercive force. Bittner (cited in Wroblewski & Hess, 2006) submits that “the role of the police is to address all sorts of human problems when and insofar as their solutions do or may possibly require the use of force at the point of their occurrence” Furthermore, based on the principles of policing espoused by Robert Peel in (1829, police are the public and the public are the police. Therefore, the authority of the police comes from the people via their laws and institutions. Wroblewski and Hess (2006) note that the goals and priorities of a police agency are based on the need or the desire of the community. They further submit that priorities are often more influenced by the desires of the people (the policed) than by any consideration; because, according to Wroblewski and Hess, the success of policing depends heavily on public support, and as such, the citizens' wishes must be listened to and considered. However, police institutions, particularly the Nigeria Police Force, have come under intense criticisms over the years for their ineffectiveness, inefficiency, incivility and antidemocratic conducts.

In Nigeria, in particular, a number of factors have been observed to be responsible for this. The challenges and problems facing law enforcement (police, in particular) in Nigeria include, but not limited to corruption, inadequate funding, and abuse of authority. Others include lack of accountability, insufficient education and training, inadequate equipment, poor condition of service, lack of motivation, poor leadership; nepotism, general neglect of the police by state political leadership, colonial legacy, among others (Amusan & Saka 2018; Dambazau 2011; Kasumu 2017; Onyeozili 2005; Osayande 2008). In the view of Amusan & Saka (2018), all of these factors mentioned above constrain the police and reduce their capability to stem the tide of crimes in Africa, Nigeria and south east in particular. These factors have made the people to perceive the police as an ineffective institution that has failed to discharge the responsibilities for which it had been created to the fullest (Amusan & Saka 2018). Dambazau (2011) notes that lack of professionalism engendered by poor recruitment policy, coupled with endemic issue of corruption within the system have remained some of the challenges of effective law enforcement in Nigeria. Similarly, Osayande (2008) submits that Nigeria police suffer from external and internal factors that

impede their functions and cause them not to perform optimally. Osayande (2008) notes that the age-long major external factors inhibiting effective policing include but not limited to incessant military intervention in government, poor funding and mismanagement of available funds, under budgeting, as well as creation of parallel security organisations. Internal factors impeding the performance of the Nigeria Police Force, according to Osayande (2008), include inappropriate deployment of police personnel for protective security, non-observance of the rule of law and fundamental rights by the police. Others include factors inherent in the Nigeria Police such as organized corruption, in fighting among senior officers for promotion and posting, unlawful exercise of authority and non-compliance with some laid down regulations, procedures, manuals and traditions at all levels of police operations. Other factors include unacceptable and decayed state of discipline, inadequate basic and continuous training of police personnel, among others (Osayande 2008).

Weak Enforcement, Corruption, and Ritual Killings in South East Nigeria

Weak enforcement and corruption create a cycle of impunity that enables ritual killings. Economic desperation, coupled with ineffective policing, drives youths to engage in Okeite, believing it offers quick wealth (Obadare, 2022).

Corruption is although not a new menace to the Nigeria police, it has remained a concern to the public. According to Adler, Mueller & Laufer (2000), a distinction is made between 'meat eaters' and 'grass eaters'. The 'meat eaters' are those officers who solicit bribes or cooperate with ritualists, killers and criminals for personal gain, while the 'grass eaters' accept payoffs for rendering police services or for looking the other way when action is called for (Adler et al, 2000). Muhammed (2009) describes police corruption as alarming. He observes that police corruption manifests itself in roadblocks and jargons like 'wetin you carry', 'park there' 'wey your papers' among other jargons. In the opinion of Dambazau (2011), corruption in the Nigeria police is pervasive and inimical to their constitutional responsibilities towards the public. Stressing the effect of corruption on the performance of the police, Dambazau (2011) contends that police corruption impacts directly on the ability of the police to prevent and control crime, including criminal investigation. Police corruption facilitates the commission of crime, encourages "jungle justice", and creates bad image for the police (Dambazau, 2011). In a similar view, Osayande (2008) observes that corruption has gradually assumed greater dimension in recent times. Some forms of corrupt practices commonly perpetrated by the police as identified by Osayande include aiding the suspect to escape from lawful custody; obtaining money from suspects for closure of case files; escorts of contra-banned and stolen goods. Others include stealing from suspects and accident victims; receiving bribes in order not to effect arrest of crime suspects; receiving bribes from a person in order to arrest an innocent citizen who is not in good terms with the bribe giver; supply of police arms and uniforms to armed robbers for a fee, etc. Other forms of corrupt practices found among officers include divulging information about complainants to criminals for a fee; stealing from crime scene; receiving bribes and failing to enforce the law against motorists who contravene the law, or failing to search vehicles that may be carrying prohibited items; and demanding money from suspects as a condition for granting bail, which is supposed to be free (Osayande 2008). Corruption is found across the ranks and files of the police. An example of high-ranking corruption case was that of the former Inspector General of Police (IGP), Tafa Balogun. Balogun was indicted of corruption as the then sitting IGP,

and was subsequently prosecuted by the anti-corruption agency, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The anti-corruption agency secured his conviction in 2005 after he was found guilty by the court (Adagbada, 2014).

The effect of police corruption on policing is enormous, the corrupt police officer will devote time and energy pursuing grafts and other personal gains at the expense of fulfilling his constitutional responsibilities to the community or society, thereby aggravating insecurity. Police corruption can encourage people to take laws into their own hands, which manifest in self-protection, mob or “jungle justice”, revenge, greater reliance on private security organizations and vigilantes, and building of high fences that replicate that of the prisons, which more or less make the residents, live like prisoners. Corruption jeopardizes administration of justice, affects the image of the police negatively, which makes the public to lose confidence in them (Obasanjo; Olufemi, & Sadiq, 2021).

Empirical Evidence of Weak Law Enforcement and the Growth of Okeite

Okeite has surged in South East Nigeria due to weak legal systems and societal pressures. Reports indicate mutilated bodies found along highways, linked to Okeite rituals (Sahara Reporters, 2022). Corruption allows ritualists to evade justice, as police and judicial officers are often bribed (GAN Integrity, 2017). Cultural beliefs in quick wealth through rituals, combined with unemployment, fuel the growth of Okeite (Mezie-Okoye, 2022).

In the light of the above arguments, empirical studies have examined the link between police inefficiencies and killings in Nigeria. In a study conducted by Osah and Omenma (2019), data from 500 respondents across six states revealed that 78% of citizens believe that political interference is the primary reason why cases of ritual killings remain on the increase. Similarly, Human Rights Watch (2020) analyzed 50 high-profile murder cases over a 10-year period, finding that only 12% of these cases resulted in successful prosecutions, underscoring the weaknesses in Nigeria’s criminal justice system. Alemika (2013) conducted an observational study on police investigative procedures in Lagos and Abuja, revealing that 60% of homicide cases lacked forensic evidence due to the absence of modern crime laboratories. Another study by Agbiboa (2015) used in-depth interviews with police officers and found that 70% admitted that bribery and lack of political will were significant barriers to solving murder cases. Additionally, Ekeh (2021) conducted a survey on public perception of police effectiveness and found that 82% of respondents expressed a lack of confidence in the police’s ability to solve ritual killings and other related crimes. Furthermore, Okereke (2022) analyzed the impact of unresolved killings on community security, using case studies from Northern Nigeria, where the rise of vigilante justice was linked to police failures in investigating murders. The study found that communities experiencing frequent unsolved killings were more likely to resort to extrajudicial means, exacerbating the breakdown of law and order. These empirical findings provide strong evidence of the systemic challenges faced by the Nigerian Police Force a major arbiter of law enforcer and highlight the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to enhance investigative processes and ensure justice for victims of ritual killings. Addressing these issues will not only improve public trust in law enforcement but also strengthen national security and political stability in Nigeria.

Moreso, the Nigerian Police Force has been repeatedly criticized for its inability to conduct thorough investigations into killings and other violent crimes. Several factors contribute to these

investigative shortcomings, including corruption, lack of forensic capacity, political interference, and inadequate funding. Several factors contribute to the investigative inefficacies of the NPF: Inadequate Funding. The NPF suffers from chronic underfunding, which hampers its operational capabilities. Reports indicate that some police divisions receive as little as N15,000 to N30,000 quarterly, insufficient for essential operations such as fueling patrol vehicles and maintaining equipment (Sahara Reporters, 2024). This financial constraint severely limits the ability to conduct thorough investigations. Corruption within the police force remains a significant barrier to effective law enforcement. Practices such as bribery and extortion are reportedly widespread, undermining public confidence and compromising the integrity of investigations (Adegami, (2016).

Gap in Literature

While existing studies address corruption and weak law enforcement in Nigeria, non-focused specifically on their link to ritual killings like Okeite in South East Nigeria. This study fills this gap by examining Okeite as a distinct phenomenon influenced by systemic failure of law enforcement and corruption contributed to the growth of Okeite in the South East Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the combination of Strain and Broken Windows Theories to explain the relationship between weak law enforcement and the rising cases of ritual killings in South East Nigeria.

Strain Theory, originally proposed by Merton (1938), explains that crime results from the disconnect between societal goals and the available legitimate means to achieve them. Many individuals in South East, Nigeria particularly youths, face economic hardships, unemployment, and limited opportunities, pushing them toward deviant behaviours such as ritual killings (Okafor & Ume, 2024). The belief that Okeite rituals can provide instant wealth serves as a justification for their criminal actions. This aligns with the argument by Eze and Chukwu (2023), who emphasize that when individuals perceive that traditional and supernatural means are their only viable options for economic success, they become more willing to engage in ritual-related crimes.

The Broken Windows Theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) posits that a failure to address minor crimes and procedural inefficiencies emboldens criminal elements, leading to more severe offenses such as ritual killings.

Both theories underscore the need to tackle ritual killings in South East, Nigeria. While Strain Theory highlights the disconnect between societal goals and the available legitimate means to achieve them, Strain Theory points to economic and societal pressures that push individuals into criminal activities. A combination of law enforcement reforms, public awareness campaigns, community driven initiatives, and socio-economic interventions is crucial in addressing the root causes of ritual killings.

Weak Law Enforcement and Corruption Contributes to the Growth of Okeite Ritual

Weak law enforcement and corruption have created an environment where Okeite thrives. The Nigeria Police Force's failure to investigate and prosecute ritual killings allows perpetrators to act with impunity (Amnesty International, 2024). Corruption within the police and judiciary enables

ritualists to bribe their way out of justice, as seen in cases where suspects are released without trial (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

The Nigerian Police Force (NPF), tasked with investigating and preventing crimes, has been consistently criticized for its inefficiencies, corruption, and lack of forensic expertise (Akinyemi, 2017). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2021), Nigeria’s homicide rates remain high, particularly in urban areas, with a significant number of cases left unresolved. The failure to investigate and prosecute killings especially ritual related killings has led to the rise of vigilante justice and self-help security mechanisms, which further undermine state authority and the rule of law (Rotimi, 2005). In addition to Ritual Killings, political assassinations is another major concern, as several high-profile murders, such as those of Chief Akunyili, Hon. Chief Okoye Okechukwu representing Aguata I constituency and Hon. Justice Azuka representing Onitsha I Constituency at the Anambra state House of assembly respectively, leading to public distrust in the judiciary and security agencies (Ojo, 2018); (Sahara Reporters, 2025). Transparency International (2020) notes that corruption in law enforcement, particularly the demand for bribes to commence investigations, has hindered justice delivery and contributed to widespread disenchantment with democratic processes. Human Rights Watch (2019) identifies political interference as a key impediment to objective police investigations, with many high-profile cases suppressed due to involvement of influential figures. The lack of forensic infrastructure further exacerbates investigative shortcomings, as Nigeria has limited functional forensic laboratories, leading to an overreliance on confessional statements rather than scientific evidence (Adebayo, 2020). The failure of the police to conduct timely and effective investigations has fueled class tensions, as different strata of the society perceive selective justice and institutional bias in handling politically motivated killings (Ekeh, 1975)

The judiciary's perceived lack of independence in prosecuting politically connected criminals further contributes to the cycle of impunity and weakens institutional trust (Olawale, 2021). Moreover, inadequate funding remains a critical challenge, as the 2022 budget report by the Ministry of Police Affairs highlights the severe underfunding of investigative units, resulting in manpower shortages and outdated policing tools. Studies show that community-policing strategies has helped to bridge the trust deficit between law enforcement and the public, improving intelligence gathering and crime prevention (Akinyemi, 2017), (Sahara Reporters, 2025). Strengthening forensic and investigative capacity, ensuring the independence of police investigations, and increasing budgetary allocations for security agencies are essential reforms needed to address these challenges. Without urgent interventions, ritual killings will continue to erode public confidence in governance, exacerbate insecurity, and weaken the democratic process. Addressing the investigative shortcomings of the Nigerian police requires a multi-faceted approach involving legislative reforms, infrastructural investment, and institutional accountability.

Table 1: Factors Contributing to Okeite’s in South East

Factor	Description	Impact on Okeite
Weak Law Enforcement	Inadequate Policing, enforcement and prosecution	Perpetrators evade justice, encoring more killings
Corruption	Bribery and extortion in police	Enables ritualists to operate

	and judiciary	without fear
Economic strain	High unemployment and poverty	Drives youth to seek wealth through ritual killings
Cultural beliefs	Acceptance of quick wealth	Normalizes Okeite as a legitimate path

Source: Researcher, 2025

How Law Enforcement can be Strengthened

Strengthening law enforcement requires addressing systemic issues. First, improving police training and remuneration can reduce corruption (Akanbi, 2017). Second, enhancing judicial independence through transparent appointment processes and anti-corruption measures is critical (GAN Integrity, 2017). Third, leveraging technology, such as digital case management systems, can improve efficiency and transparency (Hoffmann, 2025). Community policing initiatives, involving local vigilante groups, have shown success in some areas but require regulation to prevent abuses (Academia.edu, 2003).

Table 2: Strategies to Strengthen Law Enforcement

Strategy	Description	Expected Outcome
Police training	Professional development programs	Improved competence and reduced corruption
Judicial Independence	Transparent judge appointments	Fair and unbiased rulings
Technology adoption	Digital case tracking systems	Increased transparency and efficiency
Community Policing	Regulated Vigilante collaboration	Enhanced local security and trust

Source: Researcher, (2025)

How Can Strict Enforcement of Laws Curb Corruption and Okeite Killings

Strict enforcement can disrupt the cycle of corruption and ritual killings. By prosecuting corrupt officials and ritualists, authorities can deter future crimes (Transparency International, 2025). Public awareness campaigns, led by religious and community leaders, can challenge cultural acceptance of Okeite (Sahara Reporters, 2022). Strengthening penalties for ritual killings and ensuring swift justice will signal zero tolerance (Obadare, 2022). Collaboration with international agencies, such as UNODC, can provide resources and expertise to combat organized crime (UNODC, 2023).

Conclusion

The nexus of weak law enforcement, corruption, and ritual killings like Okeite in South East Nigeria reflects deep governance and societal challenges. Systemic failures in policing and judicial processes, coupled with economic desperation, have fueled the rise of Okeite. Addressing these issues requires a deep look into institutional reforms, public education, and international collaboration.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations were made:

- Addressing ritual killings requires an approach that integrates legal reforms, public sensitization, economic empowerment programs, and stronger security measures that incorporates the locales to dismantle the networks sustaining these crimes.
- Strengthening Judicial independence, enhancing community policing, and implementing public awareness campaigns to curb corruption and ritual killings.
- Enhance Judicial Independence: Implement transparent judicial appointments and anti-corruption measures to ensure fair trials and deter corrupt practices.

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