

Black Magic and Politics in Africa: Power, Perceptions, and Practices in Comparative Analyses

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Abstract

Review Article

Belief in evil and hidden supernatural forces, generally referred to as witchcraft, is widespread in many parts of the African continent. In addition to affecting individual health, perceived security, and social relations, witchcraft allegations may be used as covert political instruments, resulting in governance challenges such as lack of trust, transparency, administrative delegation, and political accountability. This study explores the intersection of black magic and politics in Africa, examining how spiritual beliefs and practices influence political power, governance, and social control. It investigates the ways in which politicians and communities engage with notions of black magic to assert authority, manage dissent, and navigate crises. Using a few cases from Kenya and Malawi, as well as invoking interdisciplinary approaches from anthropology, history, and political science, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how African cosmologies shape the political landscape.

Keywords: Black magic, Politics in Africa, Witchcraft, Governance, Social control.

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INTRODUCTION

Defining witchcraft and related phenomena, such as magic, presents a significant challenge, partly due to the differing perspectives of those studying these phenomena. Mbiti (1990) argues that Western scholars, administrators, and missionaries have long distorted and misrepresented the experiences of local African communities, especially regarding the "mystical power" expressed through practices like magic, divination, and witchcraft. From a Western viewpoint, anything that seems unscientific is often broadly categorized as witchcraft. However, the diverse and fluid nature of witchcraft practices, as described by Murrey (2017), makes it nearly impossible to define or quantify precisely, as these phenomena are "plural, fluid, multiform, and ambiguous" (Ranger, 2007).

The motivations for engaging in witchcraft or accusing others of being witches are often driven by personal emotions such as greed, jealousy, hatred, and revenge (Ashforth, 2005; Redding, 2019). These accusations are also linked to underlying socio-economic inequalities within society. Interestingly, individuals from both affluent and impoverished backgrounds may be accused of witchcraft, with the poor often being targeted by those who assume that envy or resentment

drives their behavior (Cohan, 2011; Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 1998). Accusations against family members may arise from a perceived breach of trust, where kin are believed to use witchcraft to advance their personal interests at the expense of others (Geschiere, 2003, 2013; Kohnert, 1996). Witchcraft, therefore, is seen as the darker, more destructive aspect of kinship, rooted in social conflicts, particularly around resources and power struggles. This fear of witchcraft often leads individuals to conceal their successes or seek protection from healers (Lwanda, 2005; van Breugel, 2001). According to Ashforth (2005), witchcraft is viewed as the illegitimate use of occult forces, whereas healing is considered its legitimate purpose.

Since the 1990s, academic interest in African witchcraft beliefs has largely revolved around their relationship with modernity. As witchcraft beliefs persisted alongside democratic processes and efforts at economic development, scholars began to examine how contemporary understandings of witchcraft adapt to new circumstances (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2020; Redding, 2019). This perspective posits that witchcraft is not merely a vestige of traditional thought but a creative response to modern challenges. In this sense, witchcraft may be seen as a product of complex political, social, and

economic factors in modern postcolonial life, and some argue it is inherently "modern," reflecting the tensions and uncertainties of African societies (Ranger, 2007). Recent years have seen witchcraft gain visibility in public discourse, no longer regarded as taboo, but often featured in legal, political, and personal discussions (Geschiere, 1998; Roxburgh, 2019). In Malawi, for example, witchcraft remains a regular topic in media outlets such as newspapers, radio and television programs, and social media discussions.

In Kenya and Malawi, the intersection of politics and witchcraft becomes particularly pronounced during election years. Similar to pollsters who profit from the electoral process, traditional healers (*waganga*) also find political seasons lucrative. The 2013 General Election was no exception. President Uhuru Kenyatta, representing the ruling Jubilee Party, sought re-election, leveraging the historical advantage often enjoyed by incumbent heads of state. While presidential candidates engaged renowned political strategists, communication experts, and crisis managers of international stature, aspirants for lower political offices, such as county assembly seats, were reportedly turning to alternative means to secure electoral success. Accounts emerged of politicians setting aside their religious convictions and seeking the services of witch doctors, both within Kenya and beyond its borders. Allegations of politicians engaging in witchcraft to enhance their electoral prospects further fueled public discourse on the role of supernatural beliefs in Kenyan politics.

Africa and Black Power: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Black magic, often perceived as a clandestine and controversial practice, has long been intertwined with African political systems. Politicians are frequently accused of employing supernatural means to secure power, intimidate opponents, or maintain control. Despite its pervasive influence, the relationship between black magic and politics remains underexplored, with much of the existing discourse framed within stereotypes and Eurocentric narratives. This study seeks to address this gap by providing a nuanced analysis of the sociopolitical functions of black magic in African contexts.

Across many societies globally, misfortunes such as illness, infertility, accidents, and death are often attributed to the influence of unseen supernatural forces, commonly labeled as "witchcraft." A broad range of diseases, including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, dementia, schizophrenia, Ebola, and COVID-19, are frequently believed to be the result of witchcraft. While beliefs in witchcraft are widespread and considered a significant aspect of social reality in many parts of Africa (Lwanda, 2005; Mbiti, 1990; Smith, 2019), scholars have argued that witchcraft should be understood as a local response to issues such as inequality, economic

difficulties, social unrest, alienation, and oppression (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Geschiere, 1997; West, 2005). Although some scholars view witchcraft as a form of covert violence distinct from other forms of physical and psychological harm, it is not perceived as any less harmful by those who believe in its power (Ashforth, 2005).

In much of the scholarly literature, discussions of witchcraft are seen as coexisting with modern frameworks of state-society relationships and capitalism (Englund, 1996; Ferguson, 2006; Mabefam, 2022). For instance, Ashforth (2002) notes that the "witchcraft paradigm" provides explanations for suffering and distress, answering essential questions like "Why me? Why now? Who is to blame?" Besides affecting individual health and social relations, the belief in supernatural forces plays a pivotal role in determining the level of trust citizens place in their leaders (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 1998). Such beliefs and practices may have significant implications for the perceived legitimacy of the state. The aim of this study is to examine how the belief in witchcraft, particularly among political elites, impacts governance, especially their approach to transparency and accountability in everyday practices.

This study focuses on Kenya and Malawi, where many people, including elites, believe in the influence of hidden supernatural forces, particularly the malevolent interactions of "ufiti," often misinterpreted as witchcraft (Lwanda, 2005). Colonial authorities and European missionaries created the broad category of witchcraft, defining it as any supernatural phenomena not in line with Christian practices (Redding, 2019). They also condemned African healing and divination practices, linking them to witchcraft, although many healers did not attribute misfortune or illness to witchcraft (Redding, 2019). While some argue that witchcraft is a derogatory term, it continues to be widely used by the public (Geschiere, 2013; Nichols-Belo, 2018).

In Malawi, anxiety and fear of misfortune permeate daily life, reflecting what is often referred to as "spiritual insecurity." This sense of insecurity arises when people perceive that their suffering is caused by witches, spirits, or individuals with evil powers (Ashforth, 2010). Witchcraft is generally understood as being used to secretly cause harm, destruction, or death to humans, livestock, crops, and property (Malawi Law Commission, 2021). Historically, colonial powers and international scholars linked witchcraft in Africa to superstitions resulting from low education levels and rural lifestyles (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2020; Leistner, 2014).

The prevailing view was that such beliefs would diminish as modernity progressed (Chabal, 2009;

Englund, 1996). However, despite efforts to "civilize" through colonial policies and the post-colonial push for economic and political development, accusations and violence related to witchcraft have intensified in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2020; Smith, 2019). Scholars have linked this escalation to increasing socio-economic inequalities resulting from intensified foreign capitalist engagement, which has deepened power disparities and increased corruption (Ferguson, 2006; Murrey, 2015).

Although the practice of witchcraft was outlawed under the Witchcraft Act during colonial rule, and witchcraft remains illegal to this day in Malawi, reports of witchcraft-related persecutions continue to surface in the media. Those accused of being witches often face social exclusion and violence, with some even being murdered (Ashforth, 2014, 2015; Chilimampung & Thindwa, 2012; Englund, 2007). According to the Malawi Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation, 75 individuals accused of practicing witchcraft have been killed since 2019, and violence against suspected witches is considered one of the most severe human rights violations in the country (Mweninguwe, 2022). A recent Afrobarometer survey revealed that 74% of Malawians believe witchcraft plays an integral role in daily life, and a majority of the population supports criminalizing the practice (Afrobarometer, 2022). Interestingly, the survey found that educated individuals were more likely to believe in witchcraft than those with less formal education, and there was little difference in belief between rural and urban populations. This highlights the persistence of witchcraft beliefs, even in more educated segments of society.

In Gusii culture, individuals who acquire witchcraft skills from someone other than their parents are generally adults, often married women who have suffered a series of misfortunes, such as the mysterious deaths of several children. These women seek the power of witchcraft either to protect themselves or to take vengeance. Similarly, among the Nandi, witchcraft can only be learned by adults who choose to live with a witch for a period of time. The essential aspect of witchcraft training is the learner's belief in their own power and the sense of pride that comes with it, even if the practice must be kept secret. Both the Gusii and Nandi cultures share the belief that anyone can fall victim to a witch's spell. However, among the Gusii, accusations of witchcraft are more likely to emerge between individuals who are closely related by residence, blood, or marriage. The Gusii believe that when someone suspects they are being bewitched, they are unlikely to accuse a stranger but rather someone within their social circle. This belief is similarly shared by the Kamba. In contrast, the Nandi are less likely to accuse close relatives in either their paternal or maternal lineages (LeVine; Redding).

Witches in many Kenyan societies are regarded as the epitome of evil, blamed for a wide range of misfortunes, including crop failure, infertility, economic hardship, illness, accidents, mental health issues, alcoholism, sexual impotence, and even death. Consequently, suspected witches are often subjected to persecution. Witchcraft accusations frequently arise from mere suspicion, typically following a major misfortune like an unexpected death or a string of inexplicable events in a family or community. These accusations tend to be fueled by rumors and gossip. In some communities, individuals who kill suspected witches are often seen as performing a noble and necessary task, acting on behalf of the community to rid it of evil (Ashforth; van Breugel).

The Perception of Witchcraft in Contemporary African Politics

Witchcraft accusations in African politics are deeply tied to power and hierarchy, influencing both perceptions of leadership and the practice of governance. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (1998) argue that belief in witchcraft plays a key role in shaping the relationship between leaders and their constituencies. In Malawi, for example, witchcraft is not only a deeply ingrained part of everyday life but also a significant factor in political campaigns. During elections, politicians are often accused of using witchcraft to secure votes or eliminate political opponents. As noted by Redding (2019), witchcraft is often seen as a "weapon" that can influence public opinion and manipulate political outcomes. The fear of witchcraft and the desire to control it have led some African leaders to incorporate magical practices into their political strategies, leading to what some scholars call the "witchcraft paradigm" of governance (Ashforth 2002).

In contemporary African politics, witchcraft accusations also serve as a tool for maintaining social order and reinforcing authority. When political leaders invoke witchcraft, they are not only addressing personal power dynamics but also reinforcing their legitimacy in the eyes of their supporters. In many African societies, witchcraft is considered a violation of social norms and values. As such, accusations of witchcraft can be seen as an attempt to challenge or disrupt the established social order (Kohnert 1996). This is particularly evident in countries like Kenya, where accusations of witchcraft can lead to severe social exclusion and even violence. Those accused of witchcraft are often marginalized, further complicating the political dynamics of social interaction (Geschiere 2003). As this practice continues to be a tool of social control, it reinforces the intersection of magic and politics in African communities.

Comparative Analysis: Witchcraft and Political Practices Across Africa

While witchcraft beliefs are widespread in Africa, their practice and the role they play in political

life vary considerably across regions. In South Africa, witchcraft is seen as a central element in understanding the relationship between the state and its citizens. Ashforth (2005) examines the role of witchcraft in the post-apartheid political landscape, arguing that it continues to shape how citizens perceive state power. In contrast to the more overt use of witchcraft in Kenyan politics, the South African approach is characterized by a more subtle manipulation of these beliefs by political elites to influence public opinion and gain favor with voters.

In Kenya, witchcraft practices have historically been linked to the political elite. Politicians in Kenya, particularly during election periods, are known to consult witchdoctors for advice or protection. This has led to an interesting dichotomy: on the one hand, politicians in Kenya embrace witchcraft as a tool for personal success, while on the other hand, the public often condemns the practice as primitive or backward (Lwanda 2005). The role of witchcraft in Kenyan politics, especially during elections, underscores the tension between modernity and tradition. In contrast, Malawi has seen witchcraft become more of a social issue, with witchcraft accusations often leading to violent outcomes. In both countries, witchcraft accusations reflect social and political tensions, but the responses and consequences differ, illustrating the various ways in which witchcraft influences governance and political behavior across the African continent.

CONCLUSION

The practice of witchcraft or black magic in African politics demonstrates the intersection of power, perception, and traditional practices in the shaping of political and social dynamics. While witchcraft may appear to be a relic of the past, it continues to play a significant role in contemporary African governance, influencing both the behavior of political elites and the perceptions of ordinary citizens. The use of witchcraft in political campaigns, as seen in countries like Kenya and Malawi, highlights the complex relationship between traditional beliefs and modern political practices. As the belief in witchcraft persists in many African societies, it remains a potent force in the political sphere, shaping both public opinion and the legitimacy of the state. Understanding the role of witchcraft in African politics provides valuable insight into the ways in which power, authority and social order are negotiated in the African context.

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