

African Witchcraft and Pentecostalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses upon African witchcraft and the impact of Christianity on this. After discussing the notion of mystical mentality, it examines the role of Pentecostalism with its emphasis on evil spirits and deliverance on the perpetuation of witchcraft convictions in Africa using Ghana as an illustrative example. There are clear parallels between the spiritual cosmology in African traditional religion and the Pentecostal demonic world. It moves on to examine the inequality, capitalism and the Prosperity Gospel in the process of maintaining witchcraft beliefs. Overall, evidence supports the assertion that Pentecostalism in Africa maintains or even intensifies the phenomenon of witchcraft.

Keywords: African, demonic, pentecostalism, witchcraft.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on African witchcraft and the impact of Christianity on this. Witchcraft beliefs are widespread across the world, occurring in multiple continents and dozens of countries (Gershman, 2022; Harries, 2010, p. 140; Kirwen, 2005; Manala, 2004, p. 1503; Mbiti, 1991). Lumwe (2017) points out that while the majority of the population in the sub-Saharan region are Christians and Muslims, beliefs and practices relating to witchcraft persist. People of varying educational backgrounds religious affiliations, and in both rural and urban contexts, continue to hold beliefs in the power of witchcraft. Kroesbergen-Kamps (2020) notes the intensification of witchcraft beliefs in Africa in recent decades. Witchcraft thrives in modern-day environments. This author notes the intimate relationship between modernity and witchcraft (see also Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999; Geschiere, 1997). Modernity denotes diverse aspects: urbanization, individualization, a neoliberal market economy, and politics in the postcolonial nation-state. Social changes associated with modernity are held to result in increasing preoccupation with witchcraft.

2. AFRICAN WITCHCRAFT

African traditional religion is characterised by highly complex animistic beliefs, a belief in one creator God, divinities, spirits, ancestor worship, medicine and magic and is largely based upon oral tradition. Which includes stories and myths. Religion permeates every aspect of African people's everyday existence (Idowu, 1973, p. 139). Life is considered to be impacted by powers or people greater than human beings and the African cosmos can be considered as spiritual in nature. African scholar Okorocho (1992, p. 173) refers to the cosmos as 'peopled by myriads of intractable and capricious spirits locked in an internecine battle at the center of which is humankind.' Witches are held to be affiliated with evil spirits and under their control to cause death and devastation to others.

Uchendu et al. (2023) point out how, in Africa, definitions of witchcraft vary across countries and even between communities within one country. The term refers to a number of diverse beliefs and practices. And finally, Geschiere (2023) reminds us that to see "witchcraft" as a "traditional," stable phenomenon is now untenable. 'Witchcraft' is a dynamic phenomenon. Witchcraft convictions should not be seen as "traditional" – there have been obvious changes over time. It is associated with constant innovation and novel interpretations in contemporary contexts. Its changing nature makes it difficult to define.



As will be discussed below, Christianity, while not abolishing African witchcraft, has significantly affected its meanings. More specifically, Pentecostalism has redefined the cultural, philosophical, and ideological foundations that underlie witchcraft practices and beliefs (Uchendu *et al.*, 2023). From the nineteenth century African societies were influenced by western missionary activity and despite their hope that Christianity and modern education would eradicate magical convictions, this has not occurred unlike the situation in Europe whereby the Enlightenment resulted in changes in European thinking including a decline of belief in magic (Thomas, 1971). Contemporary beliefs view witchcraft's power as deriving from evil spirits possessing the witch and endowing individuals with the potential to harm. The possibility of possession by evil spirits has been propagated in Africa by predominantly fundamentalist western missionaries, especially those of Pentecostal backgrounds.

Anderson (2005, p. 64) refers to the massive growth of Pentecostalism in Africa as the 'African Reformation of the twentieth century' and is the largest Christian body in Nigeria. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Spirit and Power, a 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals (Pew Research, 2006, p. 86) describes the Nigerian Pentecostal movement as being the largest one in Africa. About thirty percent of Nigerian people self-identify as Charismatic or Pentecostal Christians.

Witchcraft beliefs are still highly salient in sub-Saharan Africa. It is those groups most exposed to the Atlantic slave trade who are more likely to maintain witchcraft convictions. There is evidence that such beliefs have significant social impacts: They can impede the accumulation of wealth, restrict economic mobility, destroy social relations and incite violence. Those accused of witchcraft often experience forced confessions, face torture, forced exile and death and are treated with the greatest cruelty. It is often vulnerable groups like elderly women, the disabled or children who are targeted. Witches, spirits and demons which comprise the world of invisible spirits have a profound effect on current African politics, economics, ritual and religion (Geschiere, 1997; Rio *et al.*, 2017). Gaining power at times of economic and political uncertainty is often attributed to witchcraft and in Africa witchcraft is often equated with power and is implicated in wealth, high status and with political power generally (Geschiere, 2017).

Witchcraft and sorcery may have different anthropological connotations in different societies, but all refer to harm to individuals or their possessions by humans or spiritual entities and are ways of understanding misfortune from a human-centric perspective. The term witchcraft refers to a phenomenon associated with "supernatural activities that are believed to bring about negative or evil consequences for individuals and families." (Akroong, 2007, p. 53). This author discusses how, in Ghana, witches are held to negatively impact one's birth destiny given by God resulting in social disorientation, confusion in a person's life, the performance of acute immoral acts and (Akroong, 2007). Furthermore, in his view, witchcraft can "enhance one's ability to perform extraordinary feats."

Witchcraft convictions are still widespread in Africa despite advances in education and the acquisition of western scientific knowledge in many African countries (Behringer, 2004, p. 14; Donkor, 2011, p. 38; Drucker-Brown, 1993, p. 539; Kohnert, 1996, p. 1347; Ter Haar, 2007, p. 10; Van Dyk, 2001). While Parrinder (1958, p. 202) argues, "an enlightened religion, education, medicine and better social and racial conditions will help to dispel witchcraft beliefs", this is not so. Rivals commonly accuse each other of witchcraft as a way of destroying them or accounting for their success. Furthermore, these beliefs may have re-emerged in Africa since the 1970's following disillusionment and various pandemics. But why does it persist? Does Christianity abolish this long held belief system or on the other hand does it exacerbate it?

3. MYSTICAL MENTALITY

An important reason for the persistence of witchcraft convictions in Africa relates to the 'Mystical mentality' in Africa. In traditional religion according to which there is a mystical order, invisible, hidden, spiritual power in the universe Beliefs in a spiritual realm is widely held in African life. There is a hierarchy of beings in African traditional religion from God to spirits, the living dead, humans, animals, plants and inanimate beings. All possess mystical power in diminishing degrees.

Mbiti (1991, p. 81) underscores the fact that consciousness of the spirit world "affects their [Africans] outlook and experiences in life for better and for worse." He goes on to assert: "belief in the function and dangers of bad magic, sorcery and witchcraft is deeply rooted in African life, and in spite of modern education and religions like Christianity and Islam it is very difficult to eradicate this belief" (Mbiti, 1991, p. 165). This author refers to African beliefs in 'mystical order' governing the universe. This resides in the spirit world and is connected to God's power and is available to any person who has the knowledge to tap into it. However, as Lumwe (2017) notes, few people might possess this knowledge. The powers may be good or evil and deployed for healing or harmful purposes.

Mystical causality-the influence of supernatural forces on the physical realm –underpins African witchcraft beliefs and their persistence. Every effect has an associated spiritual cause. Sacred and

secular are inseparable. Misfortune is purported to be caused by malicious spirits, neglected ancestors, enemies colluding with ancestors or witches. [Akrong \(2007, p. 60\)](#) notes how those who encounter adversity ask, “Who is doing these things to me?” rather than “What is causing these things?”. In summary the supernatural worldview is deeply ingrained in the African psyche.

Anthropologists typically differentiate witchcraft from sorcery. The former are held to possess an inherent power to harm people whereas the latter deploy materials and paraphernalia to harm ([Stewart & Strathern, 2003](#)). Witchcraft provides a worldview which accounts for personal or communal misfortune in terms of interpersonal causes and may be a potent strategy to regulate interpersonal tensions including anger, guilt, jealousy and frustration. Furthermore, it may function to facilitate conformity to social norms. Nothing just happens by chance ([Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015, p. 145](#)). It is a ‘serious philosophical attempt to deal with the problem of evil’ ([Kunhiyop, 2008, p. 377](#)). At times of sickness the Swahili people living on the Kenyan coast state, “*kuna mkono wa mtu hapa*” (there is someone’s hand behind this) ([Mitchell, 1977, p. 68](#); see also [Behringer, 2004, p. 14](#); [Healey & Sybertz, 1996, p. 291](#); [Kirwen, 2005, p. 220](#); [Manala, 2004, p. 1498](#); [Mbiti, 1991, pp. 117, 165–166](#); [Opoku, 2002, pp. 78–79](#)). There is much overlap between witchcraft and related practices such as sorcery, magic, esotericism and diabolism.

4. WITCHCRAFT AND THE DEVIL

Christianity is a key element of African modernity. [Manala \(2013\)](#) underscores the fact that Christian missionizing in sub-Saharan Africa was an enormous success. [Katongole \(2001\)](#) describes Christianity’s growth in Africa as massive. Furthermore, missionary activity contributed towards the development of western education and improved health provision. Christian missionaries replaced the traditional African faith systems with their local conceptions of the Divine and worship-the imposed their own doctrinal teachings without understanding the worldviews of those they attempted to convert and encouraging them to discard them.

Colonial religion taught, and still teaches, that witchcraft is still a problem of demonic expression and manifestation. It acknowledges the reality of a God, of demons and evil spirits including witches. In many instances Christianity reinforces convictions of witches and other supernatural entities ([Igwe, 2023](#)). This author argues that what has been designated by scholars as African modernity is not modern enough-it is a superficial form of modernity. While the church often forbade witchcraft practices, it did not directly address the underlying world view which was in direct opposition to the Bible and failed to provide people with a biblical functional substitute ([Lumwe, 2017](#)). Mbefo summarises this:

The missionaries of the older churches failed to address the type of questions the African situation raised for them: witchcraft, demon possession, haunting by evil spirits, the cult of ancestors; the use of protective charms, talisman; sorcery and the traditional dancing form of worship at the shrines. The tendency among the missionaries was to dismiss these questions as due to ignorance arising from a pre-scientific mentality. ([Ukpong, 2007, p. 107](#))

[Rio et al. \(2017\)](#) discuss spiritual politics in Africa and Melanesia focusing upon the relationships between Pentecostalism and witchcraft. In these regions Charismatic Christianity has resulted in a revival and transformation of witchcraft. Here Pentecostalism denotes Christian beliefs and practices which emphasise connectivity to the Holy Spirit and often emphasises healings, prophecy, prayer, visions and deliverance from oppression or possession by evil spirits (see [Brown, 2014](#)). Believers may receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. [Newell \(2007\)](#) notes how Pentecostal churches ability to combat witchcraft in society may account for the growing popularity of this movement. Furthermore, as [Kananoja and Hokkanen \(2024\)](#) argue, Pentecostalism’s focus on ‘miracles’ fosters a magical worldview. Furthermore, in Pentecostalism witchcraft and sorcery are powerful concepts and much attention is paid to these. Pentecostalism emphasises the fact that the practice of witchcraft is a real phenomenon and witches exist. One significant question pertaining to witchcraft in African Pentecostal churches is why do people condemn ‘traditional’ practices and ideas while at the same time, they obviously strongly adhere to ‘traditional’ beliefs pertaining to witchcraft and evil spirits themselves (cf. [Meyer, 1992, p. 103](#); [Newell, 2007, p. 464](#))?

The Church has reopened the space of the occult. Christianity shares a belief in the idea that misfortune is brought about by the malevolent intention of others –demons, the devil and Satan. It is human-centric. Humans are always under attack by evil entities. Pentecostalism sees witchcraft as the localisation of evil. According to Pentecostal beliefs every misfortune is the work of Satan or his servants in the form of witches. This misfortune can be remedied by prayer, sacrifice, renunciation,

deliverance and redemption and Pentecostals claim to be able to take control of invisible powers. Several studies demonstrate how deliverance has been employed to confront witchcraft powers (Kgatle, 2020). Prophetic diagnosis and deliverance can be understood in terms of a long tradition of divinatory consultation, a characteristic feature of African traditional religion.

Pentecostalism is obsessed by attempting to discover how evil is rooted in human relations and how it can be remedied via 'spiritual warfare.' In West African Pentecostalism Satan and demons are often used as synonyms for witchcraft. Among the Ewe of Ghana, Meyer (1999) notes how the image of the Devil, a major theme in Pentecostalism, played a significant role in their appropriation of Christianity. Emphasis upon the Devil, through deliverance services, not only confirmed the existence of local gods and witchcraft but also incorporated them into Christian beliefs as demons. The Ewe gods, spirits and ghosts were classified by missionaries as demonic. The old gods and witches were incorporated in the deliverance ministry.

She uses the term 'translating the Devil' to denote how Pentecostalism re-describes the African spiritual world in terms of the Christian demonic world. Through missionaries 'translating the Devil', the demonic becomes part of the causal nexus of misfortune and the cosmos becomes manageable through deliverance ceremonies. Their engagement with modernity results in a new enchantment rather than disenchantment of their world. Those undergoing deliverance are held to be freed from witchcraft. Opoku Onyinab, a Pentecostal scholar, deploys the term witchdemonology to describe synthesis of western notions of demons and African ideas of spirits and witches. Meyer (1999) argues how Ghanaian Pentecostalism presents a 'modern space' allowing congregations to ritually return to old customs. Meyer asserts that both Pentecostalism and Ewe religion focus upon the role of 'evil' in the causation of misfortune—this facilitates the acquisition of Pentecostal ideas by the Ewe and enhances conversion. Others have argued for a close relationship between witchcraft and demons. Onyinab in Ghana observes that, among interviewees, the terms 'witch' and 'witchcraft' and 'demon' and 'evil spirit' are employed synonymously (Onyinab, 2012, p. 175). Through introducing a personalised devil and associating the gods with demons, the missionaries inadvertently enhanced the belief in these gods and witchcraft. At the same time, they failed to fulfil the needs of newly converted individuals for healing, protection and deliverance.

Geschiere (2017) notes how anthropological studies in Africa indicate a paradoxical relationship between Pentecostalism and witchcraft—they oppose each other, but at the same time they mutually reinforce each other (Meyer, 1999 in Ghana; Marshall, 2009 in Nigeria). Furthermore, each modifies the other. In his view, missionaries may have crusaded against witchcraft, but they have produced an assemblage which inherently entangles religion and witchcraft. Now occult dangers have arisen in this process. Meyer (1999) argues that among the Ewe of Ghana, modernity, rather than resulting in a form of disenchantment, results in a form of re-enchantment.

The identification and accusation of witches characterises many Pentecostal prophetic services in Ghana (Quayesi-Amakye, 2017). The fight against witchcraft is a central theme among Ghanaian Pentecostals. Ghanaian Pentecostals often maintain that the Devil indirectly attacks people by using his agents or servants, who deploy his evil intentions, inclinations purposes in the human world. Clear parallels are drawn by Christians between witchcraft and the Devil. These evil forces can manipulate/abort individuals' identities. These agents include witches, magicians, sorcerers, Muslim mystics, occultists, diviners and necromancers.

As Rio *et al.* (2017) argue, Christianity, through its demonology, not only translates local convictions but also in shape them in terms of local history:

This history is marked by a number of factors and perspectives to do with Christian conversions, modernity, life in the colonies, and relations between masters and servants, but also perspectives on an alternative source of power, on where wealth and prosperity comes from, and on how social life works. (Rio *et al.*, 2017, p. 5).

Ethnographic fieldwork in Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe by Biri and Manyonganise (2022) reveals the persistence of witchcraft convictions among congregants despite attempts by churches to heavily suppress the phenomenon and to discard indigenous belief systems, i.e., to make a completely break away from the past. Among the Shona witchcraft is treated with disdain. Children of accused witches are taunted, and their marriage prospects are limited. Incantations and rituals are made to the ancestors when a family becomes vulnerable to attack. Deliverance sermons are commonplace.

Pentecostal churches allow for new modes of expression which allows witchcraft beliefs to persist. For these authors music in the new Pentecostal churches has facilitated the regeneration of indigenous beliefs and confirm the existence of witches. As these authors point out: 'In fact, it is not an overstatement to say that the music is a re-invention of the indigenous beliefs, albeit in new forms

derived from biblical interpretation.’ Songs play a central role in communicating popular beliefs. Similarly, they note how sermons and prayers can be contradictory and can confuse some believers. The authors cite Ezekiel Guti of ZAOGA who is opposed to witchcraft accusations. For him individuals should pray that witches abandon their evil acts. However, this should not be understood as disbelief in witches and witchcraft, and furthermore it brings up significant questions around deliverance.

Some pastors visit powerful but controversial spiritual leaders in Nigeria, some of whom themselves have been accused of deploying indigenous rituals to obtain powers and protection. Finally, the authors note how deliverance sessions have intensified from 2000 to 2022 and how poverty has increased ‘welfare payers’ against witches and evil spirits of retrogression, and is part of the growing prosperity Gospel in Zimbabwe. There is a thin line between witches and the Devil. As they correctly point out the central emphasis on spiritual aspects of poverty detracts from more pragmatic strategies for dealing with it and the role of the political establishment in its causation.

5. INEQUALITY, CAPITALISM AND THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Healing, magic and witchcraft are closely aligned with notions of communal wellbeing, social harmony, political and economic success. [Kananjoja and Hokkanen \(2024\)](#) note how material inequalities alongside the failure of colonial and contemporary African states to provide adequate public healthcare result in a high high demand for contemporary Christian ministers to offer healing and protection from witchcraft.

[Newell \(2007\)](#) argues how Pentecostal churches are themselves forms of witchcraft discourse. In this author’s view Pentecostalism is considered by its followers to transcend material and occult worlds. Paradoxically, it has power to destroy witches but at the same time the beneficent Holy Spirit is held produce individual wealth and health. He notes how witchcraft reflects tensions between individual agency and accumulation on one side and social obligations to kinship and the collectivity on the other side. These tensions have heightened in the historical period referred called ‘modernity’. In a similar vein, [Meyer \(1999\)](#) notes how Pentecostalism expresses the tensions between individual- and community-directed motivations: ‘Pentecostalism provides a bridge between individualistic and family-oriented concerns and allows people to express and reflect upon the tensions between both’ (p. 212).

Extraordinary performance, skill or performance in competitive contexts in most traditional African societies is held require supernatural assistance [Newell \(2007\)](#) argues how witchcraft is a reaction towards modernity’s evils through its accusations towards those who have benefited from the capitalism. It is an idiom which helps people to accept the socioeconomic disparities engendered by the neoliberal ideology-a social adjustment to the capitalist economy. Pentecostalism argues that everyday political struggles are rooted in more consequential spiritual battles. Pentecostalism promises to provide both insight about and a privileged access to, this invisible domain and ways of influencing it. Pentecostal beliefs both are both politically productive and religiously powerful ([Marshall, 2009](#)). Through the prosperity Gospel, Pentecostals are able to accumulate wealth. [Asamoah-Gyadu \(2015\)](#) notes how that the prosperity gospel in Africa-both its emergence and increasing popularity-reinforces not only the belief in witchcraft but also validates the practice of witch-hunting in many parts of Africa. Given that prosperity Gospel preachers teach that God has already met all human needs of health and wealth through Jesus’ suffering and death, believers appeal to bewitchment to explain their adverse experiences in life.

‘Everyday conversations, media exposés, and Nollywood video films are replete with examples of the ways that ordinary citizens interpret the workings of politics in relation to an invisible spiritual sphere, whether in a traditional idiom of witchcraft or through the more recently adopted argot of Pentecostal Christianity’ ([Smith, 2021](#), p. 110).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the impact of Pentecostalism on witchcraft convictions. Evidence suggests that this movement facilitates the maintenance or even intensifies these convictions. There are clear parallels between the spiritual cosmology in African traditional religion and the Pentecostal demonic world and traditional ideas of witchcraft are readily integrated into the Pentecostal worldview. Inequality and the prosperity Gospel feed into this process. These findings have significant implications in relation to accusations of witchcraft and human suffering.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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