

DIVINE AUTHORITY AND OCCULT THREATS: RELIGION, WITCHCRAFT, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SUPERNATURAL CONTROL

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Abstract

This paper examines the paradox where communities professing a strong belief in divine justice exhibit greater fear of witchcraft than of God's punishment. It explores how fear operates across spiritual agents, drawing on historical witch trial archives, contemporary African ethnographies, legal analyses, and literary narratives. While divine punishment is often abstract and bound by moral doctrine, witchcraft is perceived as immediate and unregulated. Through interdisciplinary study, the paper theorizes that fear of witchcraft arises from culturally coherent logic rooted in relational proximity and epistemic immediacy. Key arguments include: witchcraft's embeddedness within social networks makes it a uniquely fearsome threat; modern institutions often fail to address spiritual harm in resonant ways, reinforcing informal and violent responses; and witchcraft accusations serve as gendered and political tools of social regulation. The research work contributes to debates in anthropology, religious studies, postcolonial theory, and gender studies by offering a framework for understanding spiritual fear and its impact on moral, legal, and communal life. It also outlines future research pathways addressing the dynamics of spiritual belief in digital, mental health, and hybrid justice context.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Fear, Divine Justice, Spiritual Epistemology, Gender and Power, and Belief System.

Introduction

In societies believing in divine power and mystical harm, a paradox arises: communities fear witchcraft more than divine vengeance. Despite honoring punitive deities, witchcraft accusations trigger stronger communal responses, such as ostracization and violence. This dynamic prompts questions about fear's formation within spiritual systems, especially when supernatural threats seem to arise from the community. The fear of witchcraft is socially constructed rather than stemming from ignorance, as secular narratives suggest. In African and early modern European contexts, witchcraft explains misfortunes and addresses unresolved social tensions. It is feared

not due to moral separation but because it operates within moral frameworks. Its familiar agents make witchcraft a more immediate threat than distant divine retribution. The African context reveals witchcraft's significant influence. Otundo (2024) notes that witchcraft in Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana affects interpersonal relationships and governance, regulating actions outside state or religious oversight. Communities resort to witch-hunts and spiritual consultations, confirming beliefs in active spiritual forces. Extreme reactions like lynching occur due to the fear of witchcraft. This pattern resonates with *La Malédiction du Lamantin*, discussed by Ehigie and Braimoh (2024), where villagers favor appeasing the river deity Maa over involving police. The clash of traditional beliefs and modern justice underscores respect for divine order, with mystical punishments creating deeper fears. In the end, spiritual explanations outweigh empirical reasoning, not from rejecting science but because lived experiences validate spiritual causality.

Early modern Europe fostered fear. Weishar's (2023) study links witchcraft to the domestic sphere, especially women's healing knowledge, fueling suspicion. Women, as caregivers and herbalists, were deemed dangerous due to their perceived power. Legal changes intensified this fear, resulting in more allegations against women. Records from Scottish witch trials show that fears of witchcraft were socially constructed, often stemming from personal conflicts, property disputes, and community resentment from familiar accusers. Witchcraft highlighted issues like broken relationships, economic hardship, and betrayal, reflecting deeper anxieties about unresolved social tensions leading to violence. This context necessitates viewing witchcraft as a spiritual logic that commands belief through its relational nature. Divine punishment ties to scripture, while witchcraft's threat is immediate and unpredictable. People may seek divine justice, but witches can cause quick harm. Thus, fear of witchcraft reveals metaphysical and political concerns, illustrating how communities interpret agency, proximity, and danger. This paper examines why witchcraft evokes more fear than divine punishment, despite both being crucial to spiritual life. By comparing African and European contexts, literary texts, and cultural evidence, it argues that fear in spiritual contexts is social, influenced by visibility, action, and harm. Understanding why witchcraft is a primary fear point sheds light on the political and moral economies shaping supernatural imagination.

Objectives of the Study

- To investigate the social and spiritual logic behind the heightened fear of witchcraft relative to divine punishment.
- To examine how witchcraft functions as a form of local power, often perceived as more immediate and dangerous than divine forces.
- To analyze the political and legal implications of how witchcraft is treated versus religious belief in judicial and communal contexts.

Vital Conceptual Clarification

This section will clarify some key terms that have a nexus with the research.

Witchcraft: The practice or belief in using supernatural powers or magical rituals to influence people, events, or the natural world. It often involves the invocation of spirits, the manipulation of hidden forces, or the use of charms, spells, and potions. Witchcraft is typically perceived as operating outside sanctioned religious systems and has historically been associated with both healing and harm, protection and persecution.

Divine Justice: This refers to justice as administered or ordained by a deity or higher spiritual power (in this case study, God Almighty). It is grounded in the belief that moral order in the universe is maintained by a divine being who rewards righteousness and punishes wrongdoing according to divine will or law.

Literature Review

The literature on witchcraft and divine justice encompasses anthropological, literary, historical, and legal studies. Communities often prioritize concern over witchcraft instead of divine vengeance. This review examines how supernatural power is constructed and legitimized within communal and institutional frameworks in African and European contexts. Ashforth (2022) is crucial in understanding witchcraft in the African social order, where it acts as both a diagnostic tool and political commentary, explaining misfortune when governance and medicine fail.

Ashforth argues that witchcraft is rational within its own context. This complements Bandama's (2023) analysis of witchcraft accusations against women and children, which serve as control mechanisms rooted in personal disputes or economic competition.

Ekpenyong and Asuquo (2016) examine child witchcraft accusations in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, highlighting abuse, abandonment, and violence against children labeled as witches based on pastors' declarations or community suspicion. This shows that belief in witchcraft becomes active during crises. Similarly, Adinkrah (2015) analyzes witch camps in northern Ghana as social responses to accusations rather than state protections. Residents are usually elderly, widowed, or isolated, with alleged supernatural crimes arising from envy over resources. While these camps provide safety, they institutionalize stigma and reinforce threats associated with witchcraft. Bryceson, Jønsson, and Sherrington (2010) focus on Tanzania, where albino killings tied to witchcraft persist, arguing that socio-economic desperation increases belief in mystical power, particularly as rituals become commodified via the black market for albino body parts. This violence suggests that fear of mystical harm outweighs concerns over divine wrath. In Kenya, Githiora (2017) reveals that witchcraft accusations in land disputes among the Kisii community serve as scapegoats for inheritance grievances, jealousy, or marital discord. Ranger (2007) notes that colonial systems in Zimbabwe suppressed indigenous beliefs while repurposing them to explain violence, revealing discomfort with spiritual power beyond European legal frameworks. Konaté's *La Malédiction du Lamantin* shows a Malian village navigating crisis through traditional and modern lenses. Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) highlight the conflict between local belief in the river deity Maa and state investigations, representing clashes between spiritual and rational epistemologies. Fear of Maa stems not from theology but the belief that anger leads to misfortune, evident in villagers' sacrifices and consultations with spiritual leaders due to perceived immediate consequences.

Blanes (2021) analyzes modernity and witchcraft in Africa, arguing that contemporary societies experience a "double consciousness," where rationalism and mysticism coexist. He observes that even those in modern bureaucracies may privately consult traditional healers, showing that belief in witchcraft remains legitimate despite secular roles. In Europe, Bever (2002) contends that witchcraft in early modern communities served to express and control female aggression. He

highlights that women were seen as both fragile and dangerous, allowing accusations to regulate moral and social behavior in close-knit communities. This aligns with Anderson and Gordon (1978), who found that about two-thirds of accused witches in England from 1300 to 1500 were women, indicating fears of disorder and female autonomy reflected in the witch stereotype.

Barstow (1988) argues that witch trials increased with religious upheaval and changes in women's legal status, rendering them vulnerable to accusations. This spiritual anxiety and gender restructuring created a moral panic. Forsyth (2016) notes that the regulation of witchcraft lags behind its social influence, highlighting its legal invisibility. She advocates for a jurisprudence that acknowledges spiritual belief as a social fact, if not legal evidence. Sneddon (2012) examines Irish witch trials, noting that beliefs in witchcraft often arise from local disputes over property and inheritance, leading to supernatural harm accusations. Juárez-Almendros (2017) connects aging female bodies in early modern literature to the persecution of midwives and healers, arguing that physical decline and female knowledge represent deviance, with society punishing both. The archival research in *Witchcraft and Family* (2002) supports these themes through trial record analysis. Isabel Young's case shows a buildup of grievances among neighbors and family members that ultimately culminated in her execution, reflecting the social tensions behind witchcraft accusations. Lastly, Bertelsen (2021) explores Mozambique's dynamics of sorcery, suggesting accusations often stem from a need to explain personal suffering rather than belief in evil, serving as a symbolic way to manage pain and unresolved tensions within close relationships.

These sources provide a foundation for analyzing the asymmetrical fear of witchcraft and divine punishment, showing that fear varies by proximity, agency, and direct action. In both historical Europe and contemporary Africa, the witch symbolizes concentrated power, feared not for theological superiority but for perceived dangerousness. Despite extensive scholarship on witchcraft and spirituality, there is a gap in understanding emotional responses to supernatural power, particularly the contrast between fear of witchcraft and divine punishment. Existing literature often views witchcraft as a standalone sociocultural issue, overlooking the comparative fear hierarchy of sacred forces. Recent research, such as Ashforth (2022), Otundo (2024), and Ekpenyong and Asuquo (2016), highlights witchcraft's role in explaining misfortune and

regulating behavior but rarely examines its relationship with divine forces. For example, Otundo (2024) discusses witchcraft-related violence but does not analyze why the fear of mystical harm often surpasses faith in divine justice. While literature documents witchcraft's roles across cultures, it typically isolates these from spiritual competitors. The question of why witchcraft is feared more than God remains largely unexplored. This paper addresses that gap by examining fear as a relational construct, viewing witchcraft as scapegoating and politics of supernatural fear influenced by proximity and agency.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding communities' fear of witchcraft over divine punishment requires a multidisciplinary approach, integrating sociology, anthropology, spirituality, gender theory, and power dynamics. This framework involves five key domains: relational proximity, social conflict spiritualization, postcolonial knowledge, gender embodiment, and belief systems, clarifying witchcraft's role as a symbol and mechanism of fear. Unlike abstract divine punishment, witchcraft feels immediate due to its local and personal nature. Douglas (1966) notes that fear arises from crossed boundaries. Witchcraft breaches trust, provoking fear, as shown in Isabel Young's trial in the Witchcraft and Family archive, where accusations stem from close contact and interpersonal tension. Closeness to the accused breeds suspicion, targeting those who challenge social norms. As Scott (2009) observes, "hidden transcripts" emerge through ritualized accusations, allowing communities to express repressed animosities indirectly, centering fear on individuals embodying witchcraft.

A strong explanatory framework spiritualizes social and economic conflict amid limited institutional recourse. Geschiere (1997) argues that witchcraft interprets structural tensions in many African societies. When judicial systems are inaccessible or mistrusted, witchcraft accusations help attribute misfortune to social actors instead of impersonal systems. This is evident in the Witchcraft and African Development report, where witchcraft serves as a "vernacular mode of political critique" (p. 42). The report reveals how members frame political exclusion, inequality, or poverty in spiritual terms, turning economic suffering into personal betrayal. Thus, fear is rational within the community's interpretation. Scholars like Whitehead and Wright (2004) examine how spiritual beliefs influence violence. In *Darkness and Secrecy*,

they theorize that invoking supernatural harm explains suffering when others are absent. This positions witchcraft as a dynamic site where power, morality, and justice intersect.

Understanding witchcraft beliefs requires examining how colonial regimes devalued indigenous knowledge, marginalizing spiritual understanding. The Role of Witchcraft and Sorcery in Africa study reveals that indigenous systems influence decision-making and conflict resolution. Mudimbe (1988), in *The Invention of Africa*, notes that colonial epistemologies neglected African knowledge, fostering reliance on rational-legal and spiritual-logical paradigms. This dualism explains why communities fear both God and witchcraft while viewing witchcraft as urgent. In Konaté's *La Malédiction du Lamantin*, Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) illustrate the friction between these paradigms. Villagers trust Maa, the river deity, based on cause-and-effect, viewing death as necessitating atonement. Thus, witchcraft is seen as powerful and real, not evil.

Feminist anthropology studies witchcraft accusations, examining fear and gender intersections to explain why certain bodies are deemed dangerous. Federici (2004) argues that witch persecution in early modern Europe aimed to control female bodies and knowledge. Midwives, herbalists, and elder women were often targeted for their authority beyond patriarchal structures. Juárez-Almendros (2017) notes that early modern discourses associated ageing female bodies with decay and malevolence, justifying exclusion. Bever (2002) contends that witchcraft enabled communities to manage female aggression by projecting it onto symbolic acts. Archival records reveal that accusations disproportionately targeted women defying gender norms through independence, assertiveness, or deviant sexuality, reflecting anxiety over uncontrollable femininity and behaviors resisting domestication. In Ghana, the witch camps, mainly occupied by women, highlight ongoing gender bias in accusations. The ageing widow, childless woman, or outspoken matriarch embodies communal anxieties, blamed for deaths, illnesses, and misfortunes.

The framework of intercultural pragmatics is crucial for understanding belief systems in dialogues. Thomas and Wareing (1999) emphasize language's expressive nature. In witchcraft, accusations transform speech acts into actions. Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) apply this to Konaté's novel, illustrating how silence and metaphor navigate tensions between modern justice and traditional beliefs. Fear of witchcraft emerges through strategies that co-create meaning. Jindra

(2011) explores fear pragmatics, highlighting the coexistence of Christian beliefs and traditional spirituality in Ghana, where many consult diviners, suggesting fear arises from perceived efficacy. Forsyth's (2016) study uncovers a conflict between belief and authority, as law seeks rational evidence while belief systems rely on community consensus. This results in legal blindness to spiritual harm, even when acknowledged by communities. These perspectives view witchcraft as a dynamic practice whose fear stems not from opposition to God but from its omnipresence, revealing unchecked power beyond rational detection, exposing social realities, epistemic systems, and power hierarchies, indicating that witchcraft is a language of fear, control, and resistance reflecting thriving community conditions.

Discussion

Tensions arising from the fear of Witchcraft

The fear of witchcraft arises from its social and spatial intimacy. Unlike divine punishment, which is often viewed as transcendent, witchcraft is feared for its presence in one's immediate environment. The threat is personal, assigned not to distant deities but to community members, neighbors, family, and acquaintances. Isabel Young's case from Scottish witch trial archives illustrates this; her execution followed years of land disputes and social tension, embodying interpersonal conflict. Witchcraft reflects proximity-based grievances. In Africa, Adinkrah (2015) notes that many accused women in northern Ghana are older, isolated, or economically vulnerable. Their removal to the witch camps highlights the anxiety over their presence. Fear stems not from divine condemnation but from potential retribution by neighbours. In Mozambique, Bertelsen (2021) finds that accusations often arise within families and communities, revealing spiritual threats embedded in their dynamics. Konaté's *La Malédiction du Lamantin* illustrates how villagers fear Maa, the river spirit, whose displeasure from human transgression results in death and ecological harm. Villagers fear this spirit for its perceived closeness to their actions. Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) show that villagers prioritize spiritual appeasement over police cooperation, demonstrating traditional views prioritizing cultural justice and safety over state rationality. Thus, the fear of spiritual power is relational and not purely theological. Thomas and Wareing (1999) argue that spiritual expressions like accusations act as

speech acts with cultural performative weight; curses or accusations are seen as materially consequential, emphasizing the immediacy and intimacy of the threat.

Communities believe in divine justice but often neglect it for practical issues. In contrast, fear of witchcraft is intense, acting swiftly without moral mediation. Divine punishment connects to ethics and timelines, while witchcraft stems from envy, anger, or malice. Otundo (2024) notes that in devout communities in Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana, people prefer traditional healers over relying solely on prayer or church. Witchcraft is seen as a real force responding to social provocation. Ekpenyong and Asuquo (2016) report similar issues in Akwa Ibom, where accused children face violent exorcisms and abandonment, often with religious leaders' silent consent, indicating the mystical is seen as more urgent than abstract theological matters. Githiora's (2017) research in Kisii, Kenya, confirms this trend. In land disputes leading to witchcraft accusations, divine judgment plays a minor role, as suspected witches are confronted or killed, justified by communal safety concerns rather than religious doctrine. This indicates that divine punishment is feared morally, while witchcraft is feared socially. In *La Malédiction du Lamantin*, fear of Maa's anger arises not from eschatology but from experiencing illness and unexplained death after taboo breaches, making the divine presence feel immediate and blurring the line between spiritual agents and their fears. Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) interpret this narrative as a critique of the indigenous belief system's ability to address crises, suggesting fear arises from functional understanding rather than doctrinal loyalty. This sense of immediate accountability contrasts with common perceptions of God. Blanes (2021) describes how many African believers acknowledge God's authority while entrusting daily concerns to traditional spiritual agents. This dual belief isn't contradictory but complementary, reflecting a pragmatic view of which force is likely to intervene and its consequences. Witchcraft is feared not as a rival to God, but because it occupies the emotional and temporal space that divine justice often leaves empty.

Legal systems, both colonial and postcolonial, have struggled with witchcraft. Formal courts reject supernatural causality as evidence, but communities follow different standards. This gap leads to extrajudicial responses to perceived mystical threats. Forsyth (2016) argues that this disconnection between legal rationality and communal belief creates "zones of silence," where institutions are either absent or ineffective against culturally embedded harm. In these contexts,

people resort to local justice methods, including ritual exorcisms and public accusations, intensifying fear due to the lack of structured resolutions. Ranger (2007) examines how colonial administrations in Zimbabwe alternated between suppressing and co-opting traditional beliefs, undermining trust in colonial legal systems, and deepening reliance on indigenous knowledge. The historical impact persists today, as modern African states struggle to incorporate spiritual concerns into secular legal frameworks. In Ghana, Adinkrah (2015) notes police reluctance to intervene in witchcraft accusations unless they lead to violence; even then, prosecutions are rare. Thus, communities manage these crises, often prioritizing fear over justice, with accused individuals facing banishment or violence rationalized by the need to eliminate immediate threats. Konaté's narrative highlights the police's failure to investigate deaths linked to Maa's curse, showcasing institutional inadequacy. The community seeks local rituals and elder counsel, addressing spiritual harm rather than moral justice. The fear of witchcraft is maintained by the state's inability to validate culturally legitimate dangers. Bertelsen (2021) similarly observes in Mozambique, where security forces often ignore witchcraft-related violence, recognizing their legal tools' inadequacy. This lack of response amplifies fear, resulting in communal efforts to guard against invisible and feared threats.

A critical dimension of fear is its gendering in witchcraft, with the witch figure predominantly female in both African and European histories. This feminization has significant implications for how fear is structured and justified. Women deviating from social norms, by being too independent, knowledgeable, or assertive, are often labeled witches, turning social anxiety into spiritual peril. Federici (2004) argues that this association is systemic. Witch hunts in early modern Europe aimed to control women's reproductive and healing knowledge, enforce submission, and redefine femininity. Thus, fear of witchcraft reflects a fear of feminine power outside patriarchal control.

Bever (2002) and Barstow (1988) reach similar conclusions. They indicate accusations were linked to disputes over property, fertility, and community status, where female autonomy threatens established hierarchies. The witch often serves as a scapegoat for male anxieties about control. In Africa, this dynamic persists; elderly, widowed, or outspoken women are often feared. Adinkrah (2015) and Bandama (2023) highlight cases where women accused of witchcraft faced

public shaming, violence, or forced relocation. Their roles as caregivers or healers are viewed as dangerous when misaligned with communal expectations. These patterns reflect not only belief but also symbolic regulation. Witchcraft punishes deviation, reasserts control, and reinforces moral order. Therefore, the fear of witchcraft is both spiritual and disciplinary, used to contain the unruly, marginalize the resistant, and confirm communal norms through mystical threats.

Contribution to Research

This study contributes significantly to scholarship by examining a rarely explored spiritual asymmetry: the persistent fear of witchcraft in societies that strongly believe in divine justice. While the fear of supernatural harm is well-documented, this paper probes why, in many communities' spiritual thinking, witches are feared more than God. Addressing this question, the paper offers a comparative, interpretive framework for understanding spiritual power, agency, and fear, enhancing our grasp of fear as a culturally contingent construct. Traditionally analyzed through religion or social structures, fear is typically viewed as a byproduct of belief. This study challenges that perspective by demonstrating that fear of witchcraft is structurally distinct from fear of divine power, shaped by theological factors, relational proximity, epistemic immediacy, and institutional invisibility. Through case studies from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Mozambique, and Scotland, alongside narrative analysis of Malian fiction, it shows that fear of witchcraft stems from its connection to local power networks, rather than just abstract theological beliefs.

The study advances discussions on postcolonial knowledge and epistemic pluralism. Scholars like Mudimbe (1988) and Ranger (2007) critique the colonial suppression of African spiritual epistemologies, which academia often labels backwards. This paper reframes indigenous beliefs as rational, situating witchcraft within epistemic legitimacy, social justice, and relational politics, validating them as meaningful for understanding causality and harm. It theorizes a hierarchy of fear, distinguishing witchcraft from religion and exploring their social effects. Divine justice is revered but slow, whereas witchcraft is feared for its ambiguity and actionability. This insight benefits moral theology, legal anthropology, and peacebuilding, where spiritual beliefs influence outcomes. The study bridges historical and contemporary data, combining archival witch trial records from Scotland with ethnographies from sub-Saharan Africa and analyses of a modern African novel for a unique transhistorical approach, revealing consistent logic of suspicion,

harm, and betrayal despite varying contexts. By integrating primary sources like Isabel Young's trial documents with reports from Limpopo and Akwa Ibom, the paper shows persistent patterns of spiritual logic across time and geography.

The paper contributes to feminist and gender theory by showing witchcraft as a gendered control mechanism. Drawing on Federici (2004), Juárez-Almendros (2017), and Barstow (1988), alongside African case studies from Adinkrah (2015) and Bandama (2023), it illustrates how the witch figure polices non-conforming women, especially ageing, widowed, independent, or childless. Tracing the intersection of spiritual fears with social anxieties about gender and power, enhances our understanding of fear as a tool for social reproduction and norm enforcement. A key contribution is the identification of institutional invisibility as a source of spiritual panic. Forsyth (2016) and Bertelsen (2021) argue that the legal system's neglect of supernatural claims forces communities to confront mystical threats informally or violently. This paper builds on their argument, showing that this vacuum is both legal and epistemic. Excluding mystical causality from discourse strengthens its impact in informal contexts, transcending reason and regulation. Witchcraft is feared for its effects and its resistance to rational-legal boundaries.

The paper provides a new theoretical vocabulary for scholars at the intersection of religion, law, and community. Concepts like "relational fear," "epistemic immediacy," and "spiritual proximity" examine the emotional and social functions of belief, moving beyond binary distinctions. These terms help researchers articulate belief system complexities that are coherent and effective within their contexts, even if they defy conventional classifications. This research supports decolonizing knowledge production, validating non-Western epistemologies, and rethinking fear's role in spiritual systems. By demonstrating that fear of witchcraft is a culturally rational response, the paper legitimizes spiritual experience as a scholarly area. It opens cross-disciplinary research opportunities, offers public policy and conflict resolution insights, and challenges dominant views on evidence, danger, and belief in diverse societies.

Future Research Directions

This study investigates fear of witchcraft and divine retribution, pinpointing areas for further research. Emotional dynamics connect to power, gender, justice, and knowledge. Future studies

should enhance this paper's comparative and interdisciplinary approach to explore how supernatural fear evolves under varying social and institutional conditions. The key is how individuals manage formal religions and traditional beliefs, particularly in Africa, where Pentecostalism, Catholicism, and Islam coexist with indigenous cosmologies. Scholars like Blanes (2021) and Jindra (2011) have studied this coexistence, but more ethnographic research is needed to grasp believers' emotional and moral choices in real time. For example, what drives individuals to seek divine comfort through prayer instead of consulting diviners or rituals when facing illness or unexpected death? What social scripts guide these transitions, and how is fear regulated across these domains? Moreover, the research could assess how religious leaders confront the belief in witchcraft among congregants, especially in contexts where churches publicly reject traditional practices yet incorporate elements of spiritual warfare, exorcism, and healing. The complexities of this dual adherence remain underexplored, potentially shedding light on belief, fear, and trust in hybrid spiritual economies.

The rise of mobile technology and social media in Africa, Europe, and Latin America reveals a significant increase in witchcraft accusations. Viral exorcism videos and community justice amplify fears and beliefs. Future research should explore how digital platforms enhance spiritual fear, shape audiences, and drive moral panics. Scholars could analyze the portrayal of accusations online versus offline, the link between virality and local beliefs, and the role of digital literacy in belief formation. Are users more inclined to believe witchcraft narratives with visual evidence? How do memes and influencers affect harmful narratives? This research could also examine the consequences of online witchcraft accusations that lead to offline violence. Another avenue investigates the link between spiritual fear and mental health, especially in areas with few mental health services. As Ekpenyong and Asuquo (2016) note, many Nigerian children labeled as witches show trauma or mental illness, often interpreted spiritually, resulting in violence. Future studies could explore how communities view emotional distress through spiritual lenses and the related harmful or therapeutic interventions. How does the fear of witch labeling affect mental well-being, especially for vulnerable groups such as elderly women or orphans? What role could culturally sensitive mental health initiatives play in reframing spiritual

fear as treatable distress? This direction would advance decolonial approaches in global mental health while respecting local beliefs.

Forsyth (2016) and Ranger (2007) explored legal blind spots regarding witchcraft, highlighting the need for further research on hybrid justice systems that link spiritual belief and legal rationality. In many African nations, local councils and community courts mediate witchcraft disputes, combining ritual and arbitration, and often gain more trust than formal courts due to colonial legacies undermining state authority. Future studies should examine how informal legal mechanisms interact with supernatural claims while balancing community cohesion and individual rights. Are there restorative justice models addressing spiritual harm without violence or exclusion? Can spiritual testimony be incorporated into legal processes without sacrificing due process and evidentiary standards? Such inquiries could aid policymakers in developing culturally relevant and ethical legal frameworks. More transhistorical and comparative research can deepen our understanding of witchcraft fears over time. While early modern European witch hunts have received much attention, diachronic studies that trace shifts in spiritual fear across eras, including the Enlightenment, colonial period, and digital age, are essential. This would help scholars uncover how technologies, state structures, religious institutions, and knowledge systems affect fears and their implications. Key questions include: How did fears of witches compare to fears of divine punishment in pre-colonial kingdoms? How did missionaries reinterpret local fears? How are contemporary concerns about biotechnological manipulation reflected through mysticism and unnatural power motifs? These queries contribute to a global history of supernatural fear, illustrating how societies establish moral boundaries through fears of unseen forces.

Conclusion

This study however explores a paradox: in societies with a strong belief in divine power, it's often the threat of witchcraft, not God's wrath, that elicits intense fear. Historical European and contemporary African communities have treated witchcraft as a central concern with real consequences. The witch figure, whether a midwife, widow, child, or neighbour, embodies a deeper fear than divine punishments. This paper shows that this fear is driven by social logic, not theological contradiction. Witchcraft is feared because it is seen as personal and immediate. Its

agents are close and its effects are immediate. Unlike divine justice, which is seen as abstract and delayed, witchcraft feels personal, and driven by envy and conflict. Legal and epistemological systems reinforce this fear by excluding indigenous knowledge. When formal institutions neglect spiritual harm, communities resort to their methods, such as accusations and violence. The lack of formal recognition amplifies the threat of witchcraft, making belief necessary where the law fails. Gendered accusations show how spiritual fear acts as a disciplinary tool, often projecting social anxieties about power and conformity, particularly against women. This paper articulates a new vocabulary for understanding spiritual power and fear by examining these dynamics across various contexts and evidence types. Terms like "relational proximity" and "institutional invisibility" equip scholars and policymakers to grasp the enduring influence of spiritual systems in communities. This study advocates rethinking how fear operates within spiritual economies. Witchcraft is a rational system responding to social fragmentation and institutional inadequacy, not a mere remnant of the past. Future scholarship should consider these beliefs to reveal what they indicate about emotional and structural conditions in daily life. If witchcraft inspires more fear than God, it's not due to lost faith but an awareness of power dynamics. Fear serves as a map to the geographies of belief, betrayal, and the search for meaning amid uncertainty.

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