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FEARING THE FAMILIAR: WITCHCRAFT, GOD, AND THE POLITICS OF SUPERNATURAL POWER

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paradoxical dynamic wherein communities that profess strong belief in divine justice often exhibit greater fear of witchcraft than of God's punishment. This study explores how fear operates differently across spiritual agents by drawing on various primary and secondary sources, including historical witch trial archives, contemporary African ethnographies, legal analyses, and literary narratives. While divine punishment is frequently abstract, delayed, and bound by moral doctrine, witchcraft is perceived as immediate, intimate, and unregulated by institutional or theological constraints. Through interdisciplinary and intercultural analysis, the paper theorizes that the fear of witchcraft arises not from irrationality but from culturally coherent logics rooted in relational proximity, epistemic immediacy, and institutional invisibility. This study advances several key arguments: first, that witchcraft's perceived embeddedness within everyday social networks makes it a uniquely fearsome threat; second, that modern legal and religious institutions often fail to address spiritual harm in culturally resonant ways, thereby reinforcing informal and usually violent responses; and third, that witchcraft accusations serve as gendered and political tools of social regulation. The paper contributes to broader debates in anthropology, religious studies, postcolonial theory, and gender studies by offering a new conceptual framework for understanding spiritual fear and its role in shaping moral, legal, and communal life. It also outlines future research pathways that address the evolving dynamics of spiritual belief in digital, mental health, and hybrid justice contexts.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Fear, Divine Justice, Spiritual Epistemology, Gender and Power, Intercultural Belief Systems

INTRODUCTION

Across a range of societies that maintain belief in both divine power and mystical harm, there exists a striking and persistent paradox: communities often express greater fear of witchcraft than of divine vengeance. Despite widespread religious adherence and the veneration of deities or divine figures believed to be capable of immense punishment, the threat posed by a suspected witch or sorcerer frequently incites the strongest communal reactions, from social ostracization

to violent retribution. This dynamic raises essential questions about how fear is constructed, directed, and socially mediated within spiritual systems, particularly when the supernatural threat is perceived to originate from within the social fabric itself. The fear of witchcraft is not merely the product of ignorance or irrational belief, as has often been implied in secular or Western rationalist discourses. Instead, it emerges from a historically situated and socially constructed understanding of power, proximity, and harm. In both African and early modern European societies, witchcraft has operated as a framework for explaining misfortune, resolving social tensions, and articulating anxieties that formal legal or religious structures fail to address. Witchcraft is feared not because it exists outside the moral order, but because it resides within it. Its supposed agents are not distant cosmic forces, but family members, neighbors, and co-workers. This closeness lends witchcraft a unique potency. This familiarity, this potential for betrayal by those embedded in everyday life, renders witchcraft a more immediate and emotionally resonant threat than a god's distant, abstracted vengeance.

The African context presents rich material for examining this phenomenon. In the empirical study by Otundo (2024), witchcraft in countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana shapes interpersonal relations, political behavior, and social organization. Witchcraft beliefs occupy where formal governance ends, regulating behavior in ways the state or religious institutions cannot. For instance, the persistent resort to witch-hunting and spiritual consultation in local disputes reflects a belief that spiritual actors are not only real but dangerously active. Communities do not merely believe in witchcraft; they live in fear of it, act on that fear, and sometimes resort to extreme measures, including lynching and exile, to manage it. A similar logic underpins the fictional yet culturally grounded portrayal in *La Malédiction du Lamantin*, as analyzed by Ehigie and Braimoh (2024). In this Malian narrative, the villagers are more concerned with appeasing the river deity Maa than cooperating with state police investigations. The tension between traditional belief and modern justice reflects a larger epistemological clash, in which divine order is respected. However, mystical punishment elicits a more profound fear when it threatens one’s household or community. The story shows how spiritual explanations are prioritized over empirical reasoning, not because people reject science, but because their lived experience confirms the efficacy of spiritual causality in tangible, immediate ways.

Early modern Europe also reveals comparable structures of fear. In Weishar’s (2023) exploration of witchcraft during the European witch hunts, the association of witchcraft with the domestic sphere, especially with women’s healing knowledge and bodily expertise,

contributed to a climate of suspicion and fear. Women who had long been caretakers, midwives, and herbalists were suddenly viewed as potentially dangerous, not because they had abandoned their social roles, but because those roles now signified unruly and uncontrollable power. This fear was compounded by legal changes that gave women full responsibility for their actions in court for the first time. As women became more visible within legal systems, so did their supposed spiritual culpability. Historical documentation from Scottish witch trials provides vivid, granular insight into how fear of witchcraft was socially produced. Trial records of individuals such as Isabel Young reveal long-standing feuds, property disputes, and communal envy coalescing into accusations of witchcraft. These cases, as preserved in archival witchcraft documents, show how the accused were rarely strangers to their accusers. Instead, they were embedded in dense networks of emotional and material exchange. Witchcraft here becomes a vocabulary for discussing broken relationships, economic hardship, and interpersonal betrayal. The fear of witchcraft was, in this context, the fear of unresolved social tensions erupting into supernatural violence.

These varied yet intersecting contexts underscore the need for a framework that understands witchcraft not as superstition opposed to religion or science, but as a competing spiritual logic that commands belief precisely because it is intimate, immanent, and relational. While divine punishment is often mediated through scripture, prophecy, or religious authority, the threat of witchcraft is seen as unpredictable and direct. One may pray for divine justice and await its slow unfolding, but the witch is already at work, already inflicting harm. Thus, the fear of witchcraft reflects a metaphysical and political concern. It reveals how communities interpret agency, proximity, and the immediacy of danger. This paper seeks to explore why witchcraft is more feared than divine punishment, despite both occupying central roles in spiritual and communal life. Through a comparative analysis of African and European case studies, literary and legal texts, and cultural-historical evidence, the paper argues that fear in spiritual contexts is not merely theological but profoundly social. It is shaped by who can be seen, who can act, and who can harm. In examining how witchcraft becomes the preferred target of fear, the paper uncovers the political and moral economies that determine the contours of the supernatural imagination.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To investigate the social and spiritual logic behind 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.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding the fear of witchcraft concerning divine justice spans anthropological, literary, historical, and legal studies. The fear dynamic, wherein communities prioritize concern over witchcraft rather than divine vengeance, has been approached from various perspectives, including gender studies, epistemology, social conflict theory, and intercultural pragmatics. This literature review draws upon African and European contexts to examine how supernatural power is constructed, feared, and legitimized within communal and institutional frameworks. In African contexts, the work of Ashforth (2022) is pivotal in understanding how witchcraft is embedded in social order. He argues that in many African communities, witchcraft serves as both a diagnostic tool and a form of political commentary. It explains misfortune when formal systems of governance and medicine fail to offer satisfying answers. Rather than viewing witchcraft as irrational, Ashforth positions it as a rational system within its own epistemic and cultural context. This approach complements Bandama's (2023) human rights-oriented analysis, which explores how witchcraft accusations, particularly against women and children, function as mechanisms of control, often grounded in unresolved personal disputes or economic competition.

Ekpenyong and Asuquo (2016) provide a grim illustration of this logic in their examination of child witchcraft accusations in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria. Their study documents numerous cases of abuse, abandonment, and violence against children labeled as witches, often based on little more than a pastor's declaration or a community member's suspicion. This suggests that belief in witchcraft is not abstract but operational, mobilized in moments of tension or crisis. Similarly, Adinkrah (2015) examines witch camps in northern Ghana, which serve as social responses to accusations rather than state protection mechanisms. Women sent to these camps are typically elderly, widowed, or socially isolated, and their alleged supernatural crimes often involve envy over limited resources such as land or food. These camps, while providing physical safety, institutionalize the stigma and reinforce the perception that witches are an active, ongoing threat.

Bryceson, Jønsson, and Sherrington (2010) extend this argument in their study of Tanzania, where albino killings linked to witchcraft beliefs persist. They argue that socio-economic desperation exacerbates belief in mystical power, particularly when rituals are commodified through the black market of albino body parts. The immediacy and brutality of such violence suggest that the fear of mystical harm is not only more potent than that of divine wrath, but also actionable in ways that religion is not. In Kenya, Githiora (2017) investigates how witchcraft accusations frequently emerge in land disputes among the Kisii community. In these cases, the figure of the witch becomes a scapegoat through which community grievances—over inheritance, jealousy, or marital discord- are expressed and sometimes violently resolved. This further supports the argument that witchcraft accusations do not operate on a theological axis but on a relational one.

Ranger (2007) contributes a historical dimension by examining how colonial systems in Zimbabwe co-opted and suppressed indigenous beliefs while still relying on them to explain violence they could not control. The inconsistency with which colonial administrations prosecuted or ignored witchcraft reflected a broader discomfort with spiritual power that could not be categorized within European legal structures. Regarding primary literary material, Konaté's *La Malédiction du Lamantin* offers a dramatized yet ethnographically sensitive portrayal of how a rural Malian village navigates death and crisis through traditional and modern paradigms. Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) interpret the tension between the local belief in the river deity Maa and the state's investigative methods as a clash of spiritual and communal epistemologies, with the latter being rational and institutional. However, the fear expressed toward Maa is rooted not in theological distance but in the belief that the deity's anger manifests through physical and social misfortune. The villagers' actions, including sacrifices and consultations with spiritual leaders, illustrate that supernatural retribution is feared when it is believed to have immediate, tangible consequences.

Blanes (2021) explores similar themes in his analysis of modernity and witchcraft in Africa. He argues that contemporary African societies navigate a "double consciousness," where rationalism and mysticism coexist without contradiction. He notes that even individuals working within modern bureaucracies may consult traditional healers or spiritualists privately, indicating that belief in witchcraft retains its legitimacy regardless of formal secular roles. In the European context, Bever (2002) argues that witchcraft in early modern communities was a vehicle for expressing and controlling female aggression. He emphasizes that the perception of women as simultaneously fragile and dangerous allowed accusations to function as moral and

social regulation within tightly knit communities. This echoes the work of Anderson and Gordon (1978), who found that approximately two-thirds of all accused witches in England between 1300 and 1500 were women. Their study suggests that social fears about disorder and female autonomy were refracted through the image of the witch.

Barstow (1988) offers a historiographical perspective, arguing that the rise of witch trials coincided with religious upheaval and changes in women's legal status. Women were newly recognized as legal persons responsible for their actions, and this newfound visibility made them vulnerable targets for accusations. The convergence of spiritual anxiety and gender restructuring gave rise to a uniquely gendered form of moral panic. Forsyth (2016) takes a legalistic approach, noting that regulating witchcraft beliefs and practices often lags behind their social influence. She highlights the legal invisibility of witchcraft in formal court systems and argues for a more culturally sensitive jurisprudence that acknowledges spiritual belief as social fact, if not legal evidence.

Sneddon (2012) offers a more micro-historical perspective by examining Irish witch trials. He emphasizes that witchcraft beliefs often stemmed from local disputes, particularly those related to property and inheritance. These localized tensions frequently spilled into accusations of supernatural harm when unresolved through formal mechanisms. Juárez-Almendros (2017) focuses on portraying aging female bodies in early modern literature, tying it to the persecution of midwives and healers. She argues that physical decline and female knowledge became a potent symbol of deviance. In the witch, society punished the individual and the body of knowledge she represented. The archival research presented in *Witchcraft and Family* (2002) reinforces these themes through close readings of trial records. The case of Isabel Young, for example, reveals a multi-decade accumulation of grievances among neighbors and family members that ultimately culminated in her execution. The charges against her were not spontaneous but evolved, reflecting how witchcraft accusations often emerged from accumulated social tensions rather than singular events. Lastly, Bertelsen (2021) explores the emotional and relational dynamics of sorcery in Mozambique, suggesting that accusations often arise not from belief in evil per se, but from the need to explain personal and familial suffering. Sorcery becomes a symbolic vocabulary for managing pain, loss, and unresolvable tension within intimate settings.

These sources provide a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for analyzing the asymmetrical fear of witchcraft and divine punishment. They highlight that fear is not evenly

distributed across spiritual categories but is shaped by proximity, agency, and the capacity for direct action. Whether in historical Europe or contemporary Africa, the witch figure remains a potent embodiment of socially concentrated power, feared not because it is theologically superior, but because it is believed to be immanently dangerous.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite the breadth of scholarship on witchcraft, spirituality, and religious belief in both African and European contexts, a significant conceptual and analytical gap remains in how the differentiated emotional responses to supernatural power are understood, particularly the contrast between fear of witchcraft and fear of divine punishment. Much of the existing literature tends to examine witchcraft as a standalone sociocultural phenomenon or as a legal, moral, or political issue. Few works interrogate the comparative fear hierarchy within cosmological systems where divine and mystical forces coexist and hold power. Current anthropological and sociological research, such as that by Ashforth (2022), Otundo (2024), and Ekpenyong and Asuquo (2016), rightly emphasizes the social functionality of witchcraft in explaining misfortune, regulating behavior, or expressing political resistance. However, these studies treat belief in witchcraft and divine forces as separate analytical categories, rarely exploring the dialectical or competitive relationship between the two. For example, Otundo (2024) highlights the persistence of witchcraft-related violence in communities that are also highly religious, but does not critically explore why fear of mystical harm overshadows faith in divine justice within these same communities.

In the historical studies, particularly those on European witch trials (Weishar, 2023; Bever, 2002; Anderson and Gordon, 1978), the focus is on gender, legal evolution, and symbolic power. While these analyses are valuable for understanding the social construction of the witch, they often overlook the comparative dimension that considers why witches were feared more intensely than religious figures or divine intervention. The literature treats divine belief as a backdrop or normative moral frame rather than an actively comparative spiritual force. Furthermore, while feminist scholars such as Federici (2004) and Juárez-Almendros (2017) have revealed the gendered underpinnings of witchcraft accusations, their work also stops short of comparing the affective intensity of societal fear across spiritual agents. That is, while we understand who gets feared and punished (usually women), we have limited insight into why this fear is disproportionately directed at witches rather than, for instance, God's wrath or clerical authority, primarily when both exist in the same spiritual economy.

In studies rooted in African literature and cultural analysis, such as that by Ehigie and Braimoh (2024), there is meaningful exploration of how traditional spiritual systems conflict with empirical or Western investigation systems. Their analysis of *La Malédiction du Lamantin* reveals tensions between indigenous belief and modern legal epistemology. However, their focus is primarily on the linguistic and communicative practices that mediate this conflict, rather than on the emotional or spiritual weight that each cosmological system commands. In other words, the psychology of fear, as differentiated between spiritual agents (witches versus deities), is underexplored. Moreover, while interdisciplinary scholars like Jindra (2011) and Blanes (2021) have acknowledged the coexistence of Christian and traditional spiritual worldviews in modern African societies, they have not adequately addressed how these dual frameworks interact affectively, specifically, how individuals emotionally prioritize one type of spiritual threat over another in moments of crisis.

Another lacuna lies in legal anthropology. Studies by Forsyth (2016) and Ranger (2007) have considered the exclusion of witchcraft from formal legal reasoning and colonial suppression of spiritual knowledge, respectively. However, they do not adequately address how legal systems, by denying mystical causality, inadvertently reinforce the public's reliance on informal and spiritual forms of justice, thereby compounding the fear of witchcraft as something legally untouchable and therefore more dangerous. The pragmatic and symbolic power of witchcraft accusations, as articulated by Thomas and Wareing (1999), is also often treated as an issue of linguistic or performative violence, without full exploration of why such speech acts carry more weight, urgency, or terror than prophetic or divine pronouncements, especially in communities that believe fervently in both.

To summarize, the literature richly documents the roles and functions of witchcraft across cultures and epochs, but tends to do so in isolation from its spiritual competitors. The specific question of why witchcraft is feared more than God, even among populations who publicly affirm religious orthodoxy, remains largely under-theorized. This paper addresses that gap by examining fear as a spiritually comparative and relational construct that is not just about belief but immediacy, intimacy, and agency. It seeks to reconceptualize witchcraft not only as a system of explanation or scapegoating but as a politics of supernatural fear, shaped by who is perceived to act, when, and from how close a distance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding why communities fear witchcraft more than divine punishment necessitates a multidisciplinary theoretical approach that considers not only sociological and anthropological perspectives but also spiritual epistemologies, gender theory, and the politics of power and surveillance. The framework for this analysis is constructed around five key theoretical domains: relational proximity and embedded agency, the spiritualization of social conflict, postcolonial knowledge systems, gender and embodiment, and the pragmatics of belief systems in intercultural contexts. These approaches collectively allow for a nuanced reading of the spiritual-political landscape in which witchcraft operates as both symbol and social mechanism.

Relational Proximity and Embedded Agency

One of the most potent explanations for the heightened fear of witchcraft lies in its intimate, embedded character. Unlike divine punishment, which is often abstract, delayed, and universalized, witchcraft is typically perceived as local, immediate, and personal. Douglas (1966), in her foundational work *Purity and Danger*, argued that fear often arises when boundaries are transgressed in culturally sensitive spaces. Witchcraft, positioned within the familial or communal circle, transgresses the boundary between trust and betrayal, thus becoming particularly potent in evoking fear. This relational framing is echoed in the analysis of Isabel Young's trial from the *Witchcraft and Family* archive. The case demonstrated how accusations often emerged from decades of close contact, accumulated grievances, and interpersonal tension. The community's proximity to the accused intensified their suspicion and emotional response. Such fears are directed not at distant, otherworldly agents, but at familiar individuals whose actions seem to elude social norms while exploiting them. Scott (2009) elaborates on this concept by describing how "hidden transcripts" within communities surface through ritualized or symbolic accusations. Witchcraft becomes a medium through which suppressed social animosities are aired, often without confrontation. It provides an idiom for discussing unspeakable fears, frustrations, or jealousy. This theoretical position allows us to see that fear is not directed at witchcraft as a cosmological category but at its potential embodiment in someone socially proximate.

Spiritualization of Social Conflict

Another robust explanatory framework is the spiritualization of social and economic conflict, particularly under conditions of limited institutional recourse. Geschiere (1997) argued that in

many African societies, witchcraft serves not simply as a belief system but as a framework for interpreting structural tension. Where judicial systems are inaccessible or distrusted, accusations of witchcraft allow communities to attribute misfortune to social actors rather than impersonal systems. This theoretical framework is evident in the findings of the *Witchcraft and African Development* report, where witchcraft is not treated as mere superstition but as a "vernacular mode of political critique" (p. 42). The report documents several instances where community members frame political exclusion, inequality, or poverty in spiritual terms, transforming economic suffering into personal betrayal. In this context, fear is not irrational but deeply rational within the community's interpretive economy. Scholars like Whitehead and Wright (2004) have further explored how spiritual beliefs mediate everyday violence. In their edited volume *In Darkness and Secrecy*, they theorize that invoking supernatural harm often provides a legitimate, culturally sanctioned explanation for suffering when other explanations are absent or culturally inadequate. This positions witchcraft not as an irrational residue of traditional culture, but as an active site where power, morality, and justice intersect.

Postcolonial Knowledge Systems and Epistemic Authority

To understand the durability and influence of witchcraft belief, it is necessary to consider how colonial and postcolonial knowledge regimes have devalued indigenous epistemologies. The imposition of Western scientific rationality as the singular valid framework for truth marginalized spiritual and mystical ways of knowing. However, as the empirical evidence from the *Role of Witchcraft and Sorcery in Africa* study shows, these indigenous systems continue to shape decision-making, health practices, and conflict resolution across many African societies. Mudimbe (1988), in *The Invention of Africa*, underscores how colonial epistemologies not only excluded African knowledge systems but actively worked to delegitimize them through education, law, and religion. However, this delegitimization did not erase traditional frameworks of understanding; instead, it created a bifurcated system in which communities operate under rational-legal and spiritual-logical paradigms. This epistemic dualism explains why a community may fear God and simultaneously fear witchcraft, yet respond more urgently to the latter when it is perceived as more immediately consequential.

In the context of Konaté's *La Malédiction du Lamantin*, Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) draw on intercultural communication theory to show how the coexistence of these paradigms causes epistemological friction. The villagers trust Maa, the river deity, not out of theological dogma but of observed cause-and-effect relationships. When death strikes, it is interpreted through

spiritual violation rather than natural coincidence. Having been angered by human failure, the river exacts its revenge in death and illness, necessitating spiritual atonement. Here, witchcraft is not feared as evil but as powerful, real, and immanent.

Gender, Embodiment, and Fear

The gendered dynamics of witchcraft accusations are well theorized within feminist anthropology and historical studies. The intersection of fear and gender is central to understanding why certain bodies are marked as dangerous or spiritually deviant. Federici (2004), in *Caliban and the Witch*, argues that the persecution of witches in early modern Europe was not just a religious or legal issue but a political project aimed at controlling female bodies and knowledge. Midwives, herbalists, and elder women were often the targets because they occupied a space of knowledge and authority outside patriarchal institutions. This theoretical perspective is corroborated by Juárez-Almendros (2017), who demonstrates how early modern European discourses about the aging female body associated it with decay, poison, and malevolence. The portrayal of such bodies as naturally inclined to witchcraft served to validate their exclusion and punishment. Bever (2002) also argues that witchcraft allowed communities to manage female aggression, whether real or imagined, by projecting it onto symbolic actions such as cursing, poisoning, or sexual transgression.

The archival records from *Witchcraft and Family* support these theories by illustrating how accusations were disproportionately directed at women who defied gender norms, whether through independence, assertiveness, or deviant sexuality. The fear of witchcraft thus becomes a fear of uncontrollable femininity, of bodies and behaviors that resist domestication. This fear is both social and symbolic, policing gender boundaries through spiritual allegory. In African contexts, Adinkrah's (2015) and Bandama's (2023) findings further support the idea that gender intersects with spiritual suspicion. Witch camps in Ghana, populated almost exclusively by women, are testaments to the persistent gender bias in witchcraft accusations. The aging widow, the childless woman, or the outspoken matriarch becomes the repository of communal anxieties, blamed for deaths, illness, and misfortune.

Pragmatics of Belief and Intercultural Epistemology

Finally, the framework of intercultural pragmatics is essential to understanding how belief systems operate not in isolation but in dialogue with other modes of knowing. Thomas and Wareing (1999) emphasize that language is expressive and performative. In the context of witchcraft, speech acts such as accusation, curse, or blessing are not symbolic but materially

practical within the belief system. The utterance itself becomes a mode of action. Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) apply this framework to their analysis of Konaté's novel, demonstrating how linguistic strategies such as silence, euphemism, and metaphor are employed to manage the tension between modern justice and traditional belief. The fear of witchcraft is constructed not only through narrative but through pragmatic strategies of interpretation, where meaning is co-created by speaker and hearer within a shared epistemic field.

Jindra (2011) further elaborates on this pragmatics of fear. He studies the coexistence of Christian belief and traditional spirituality in Ghana. He notes that while many Ghanaians profess faith in a Christian God, their everyday behavior, such as consulting diviners or performing protective rituals, betrays a simultaneous belief in spiritual agents who are more accessible and responsive than the Christian deity. This simultaneous adherence to multiple epistemologies reveals that fear is governed by perceived efficacy rather than doctrine. Forsyth's (2016) analysis of legal responses to witchcraft also explores the tension between belief and institutional authority. She argues that while law demands rational evidence, belief systems operate on community consensus, moral affect, and narrative plausibility. This disjuncture results in legal blindness to spiritual causes of harm, even when such causes are widely accepted in the affected communities.

Synthesis and Application

These theoretical strands collectively support a framework in which witchcraft is understood not as a static belief but as a dynamic, relational, and deeply political practice. Its fear does not arise from theological opposition to God or divine morality, but from its embeddedness in everyday life. Witchcraft is feared because it is seen as capable of immediate action, personal harm, and moral ambiguity. It embodies a form of power unregulated by formal institutions and undetectable by rational instruments. This fear is therefore not a cultural failure or religious deviation but a logical expression of social realities, epistemic systems, and power hierarchies. The theories explored here enable us to read witchcraft not as superstition but as a language of fear, control, and resistance that speaks directly to the conditions of the communities where it thrives.

DISCUSSION

Witchcraft as Proximal Power: The Fear of the Familiar

The fear of witchcraft is profoundly shaped by its social and spatial intimacy. Unlike divine punishment, which is conceptualized as transcendent and often temporally deferred, witchcraft is feared precisely because it is believed to operate within the immediacy of one's physical and relational environment. This spiritual danger is not assigned to distant deities or cosmic forces but attributed to neighbors, family members, and acquaintances. The alleged witch is not a stranger but a part of the community, making the threat deeply personal and emotionally destabilizing. In the case of Isabel Young, documented in the Scottish witch trial archives, her eventual execution followed years of unresolved disputes over land, personal animosities, and social tension. The accusation was not sudden but evolved, culminating from layers of relational breakdowns. This illustrates that the witch was feared not because of metaphysical malevolence but because she embodied long-standing interpersonal conflict. Witchcraft becomes the idiom through which proximity-based grievances are expressed and spiritualized.

This pattern resonates in African contexts as well. The work of Adinkrah (2015) on witch camps in northern Ghana reveals that many accused women are older, isolated, or economically vulnerable. Their removal from the community and relocation to witch camps underscores the social anxiety associated with their continued presence. The fear is not of divine condemnation but of mystical retribution enacted by someone physically and socially near. As Bertelsen (2021) notes, witchcraft accusations in Mozambique often occur among family members and neighbors, highlighting the embeddedness of spiritual threat in relational dynamics. The same principle is vividly dramatized in Konaté's *La Malédiction du Lamantin*, where the villagers' fear is not of an abstract deity, but of Maa, the river spirit, whose displeasure is seen as activated by human transgression and whose revenge unfolds through death and ecological imbalance. The divine figure here is feared because of its perceived nearness and responsiveness to the villagers' actions. Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) show how the villagers seek spiritual appeasement more urgently than cooperation with formal police investigations. The traditional epistemology does not oppose the state's rationality but bypasses it, favoring what is perceived as a more effective, culturally legible source of justice and safety. This fear of spiritual power is thus relational and situated, not simply theological. As Thomas and Wareing (1999) argue in their study of linguistic pragmatics, spiritual expressions such as accusations or blessings function as speech acts that carry performative weight within a specific cultural context. The

utterance of a curse or accusation is treated as materially consequential, not metaphorical, reinforcing the threat's immediacy and intimacy.

The Deferred Justice of God versus the Immediacy of Witchcraft

Communities often believe in divine justice, but rarely rely on it to resolve suffering or injustice urgently. In contrast, the fear of witchcraft is heightened because it is perceived to act swiftly and without moral mediation. Divine punishment is bound to doctrinal ethics and eschatological timelines, whereas witchcraft is seen as untethered from morality, capable of being activated by envy, anger, or mere malice. In the study by Otundo (2024), various cases across Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana demonstrate that even within religiously devout communities, people are more likely to consult traditional healers, spiritualists, or local diviners than to rely solely on prayer or church-based interventions. Witchcraft is treated as a real, autonomous force that responds not to moral alignment but to social provocation or spiritual manipulation. Ekpenyong and Asuquo (2016) observe similar patterns in Akwa Ibom, where children accused of witchcraft are subjected to violent exorcisms and abandonment, often with the tacit approval of religious leaders, suggesting that the mystical is seen as more urgent and more practically dangerous than any abstract theological concern.

Githiora's (2017) research in Kisii, Kenya, further affirms this contrast. In land dispute cases that result in witchcraft accusations, the fear of divine judgment plays almost no role in the communal response. Instead, the suspected witch is confronted, attacked, or killed, and such actions are retrospectively justified through appeals to communal safety rather than religious doctrine. This reaction illustrates that while divine punishment may be feared in the moral imagination, witchcraft is feared in the tangible, social present. In *La Malédiction du Lamantin*, the people's concern over Maa's anger is not rooted in eschatological damnation but in the lived experience of sickness and unexplained death following taboo violations. This makes the story's divine presence more witch-like in its immediacy, underscoring the blurred boundary between spiritual agents and the fears they provoke. Ehigie and Braimoh (2024) interpret this narrative structure as a commentary on the efficacy of indigenous belief systems in addressing real-world crises, suggesting that fear becomes a function of functional knowledge rather than doctrinal allegiance.

This sense of immediate accountability contrasts with how God is typically perceived. Blanes (2021) discusses in his ethnographic work that many African believers acknowledge God's ultimate authority while deferring their day-to-day concerns to traditional spiritual agents. This

split belief system is not contradictory but complementary, and it reflects a pragmatic assessment of which force is likely to act, when, and with what consequences. Witchcraft is feared not because it opposes God, but because it fills the temporal and emotional space that divine justice often leaves vacant.

Witchcraft and the Legal Vacuum: Fear in the Absence of Institutional Redress

Legal systems, both colonial and postcolonial, have consistently struggled with how to deal with witchcraft. While most formal courts reject supernatural causality as inadmissible evidence, communities do not operate under the same evidentiary standards. This creates a gap between legally actionable and socially feared, often resulting in extrajudicial responses to perceived mystical threats. Forsyth (2016) argues that this disjuncture between legal rationality and communal belief produces "zones of silence," where formal institutions are either absent or ineffective in addressing culturally embedded forms of harm. In such contexts, people turn to local methods of justice, which often include ritual exorcisms, ostracization, or public accusations. This institutional void intensifies fear because it lacks structured channels for resolution.

Ranger (2007) explores how colonial administrations in Zimbabwe alternated between suppressing traditional beliefs and co-opting them for administrative control. This ambivalence undermined community trust in colonial legal systems and deepened reliance on indigenous epistemologies. The consequences of this historical trajectory are still visible today, as modern African states struggle to integrate spiritual concerns into secular legal frameworks. In Ghana, as Adinkrah (2015) documents, the police are often reluctant to intervene in witchcraft accusations unless they result in physical violence, and even then, prosecutions are rare. This leaves communities to manage these crises, often with outcomes that reflect fear more than justice. The accused are banished, beaten, or even killed, and such actions are rationalized not by theological doctrines but by the imperative to neutralize an immediate threat. In Konaté's narrative, the failure of the police to effectively investigate deaths linked to Maa's curse reflects this broader institutional inadequacy. The community does not turn to the law for justice because the law is seen as incapable of addressing spiritual harm. Instead, they engage in rituals, offer sacrifices, and seek the counsel of elders, all aimed not at moral rectitude but practical survival. The fear of witchcraft here is structurally supported by the inability of state institutions to validate or intervene in culturally legitimate forms of danger. Bertelsen (2021) makes a similar observation in Mozambique, where state security forces often ignore

witchcraft-related violence, implicitly recognizing that their legal tools are insufficient for addressing such deeply embedded beliefs. This lack of institutional response does not diminish fear; it amplifies it. Fear becomes socially mobilized when there is no official recourse, resulting in communal efforts to protect against invisible but believed threats.

Witchcraft, Gender, and Symbolic Power

A final but critical dimension of fear is how witchcraft is gendered. Across both African and European histories, the witch figure is overwhelmingly female. This feminization of mystical threat has significant implications for how fear is structured and justified. Women who deviate from social norms, by being too independent, too knowledgeable, or too assertive, are frequently labeled as witches, transforming social anxiety into spiritual danger. Federici (2004) argues that this association is not incidental but systemic. The witch hunts of early modern Europe were part of a broader effort to control women's reproductive and healing knowledge, to enforce submission, and to redefine the parameters of acceptable femininity. The fear of witchcraft, then, becomes a fear of feminine power operating outside patriarchal oversight.

Bever (2002) and Barstow (1988) reach similar conclusions in their studies. They show how accusations were often tied to disputes over property, fertility, and community standing, all of which are domains where female autonomy threatens established hierarchies. In these cases, the witch is a scapegoat for male anxieties about control and order. In Africa, this dynamic continues. The elderly, widowed, or outspoken woman often becomes the site of communal fear. Adinkrah (2015) and Bandama (2023) document numerous cases in which women accused of witchcraft were subjected to public shaming, violence, or forced relocation. Their social roles, caregivers, healers, or matriarchs, are reinterpreted as sources of danger when they no longer align with communal expectations. These patterns are not only about belief but also about symbolic regulation. Witchcraft punishes deviation, reasserts control, and reimposes moral order. Thus, the fear of witchcraft is not only spiritual but disciplinary. It is used to contain the unruly, marginalize the resistant, and reaffirm communal norms through the logic of mystical threat.

CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH

This study makes a significant and multi-layered contribution to existing scholarship by interrogating a rarely examined spiritual asymmetry: the pervasive and enduring fear of witchcraft in societies that simultaneously profess strong belief in divine justice. While the fear of supernatural harm is well documented in anthropological, historical, and sociological

literature, this paper goes further by asking why, in the spiritual imagination of many communities, witches are more feared than God. In addressing this central question, the paper moves beyond descriptive ethnography or historical case study to offer a comparative, interpretive, and theoretically grounded framework for understanding spiritual power, agency, and fear.

First, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of fear as a culturally and spatially contingent construct. While fear has often been analyzed in the context of religion, law, or gender, it is frequently treated as either a byproduct of belief or a psychological effect of social structures. This study challenges such linear accounts by showing that fear, particularly fear of witchcraft, is structurally different from fear of divine power. It is shaped not only by theological factors but also by relational proximity, epistemic immediacy, and institutional invisibility. Drawing on empirical case studies from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Mozambique, and Scotland and narrative analysis from Malian fiction, the paper demonstrates that fear of witchcraft arises from the belief in its embeddedness in local networks of power and betrayal, rather than from abstract theological judgments.

Secondly, the study significantly advances postcolonial knowledge production and epistemic pluralism discussions. While scholars such as Mudimbe (1988) and Ranger (2007) have critiqued the colonial and postcolonial suppression of African spiritual epistemologies, there remains a tendency in both global academia and local governance to treat these belief systems as either backward or incompatible with modernity. This paper reframes indigenous beliefs, not as superstitions to be overcome, but as rational systems within their own ontological and social frameworks. By situating witchcraft within a matrix of epistemic legitimacy, social justice mechanisms, and relational politics, the paper helps validate these belief systems as meaningful and operative models of understanding causality, responsibility, and harm.

Thirdly, the research breaks new ground by explicitly theorizing the spiritual hierarchy of fear. Rather than treating witchcraft and religion as parallel or overlapping systems, this paper analytically separates the emotional intensities they elicit and explores the reasons for their different social effects. The comparative framework reveals that while divine justice may be revered, it is often seen as slow, mediated by ritual and clergy, and bound by moral codes. On the other hand, Witchcraft is feared precisely because it is morally unbound, agentively diffuse, and actionable outside formal structures. This insight is especially valuable for disciplines

concerned with moral theology, legal anthropology, and peacebuilding, where spiritual beliefs often impact real-world outcomes.

Fourth, the study makes a methodological contribution by bridging historical and contemporary data across continents and media. The juxtaposition of archival witch trial records from Scotland with empirical ethnographies from sub-Saharan Africa and the analysis of a modern African novel offers a unique transhistorical and transregional approach. This comparative method reveals that although the sociopolitical contexts may differ, the logics of suspicion, embedded harm, and intimate betrayal are remarkably consistent. By integrating primary sources such as Isabel Young's trial documents with contemporary reports from Limpopo and Akwa Ibom, the paper reveals patterns of spiritual logic that persist across time and geography.

Moreover, the paper contributes to feminist and gender theory by highlighting how witchcraft operates as a gendered mechanism of control and moral regulation. Drawing on the works of Federici (2004), Juárez-Almendros (2017), and Barstow (1988), as well as African case studies from Adinkrah (2015) and Bandama (2023), the paper illustrates how the figure of the witch is often used to police non-conforming women, particularly those who are aging, widowed, independent, or childless. By tracing how spiritual fears intersect with social anxieties about gender, power, and deviation, the study deepens our understanding of how fear becomes a tool of social reproduction and norm enforcement.

Another significant contribution is the articulation of institutional invisibility as a generator of spiritual panic. As Forsyth (2016) and Bertelsen (2021) suggest, the inability or unwillingness of legal systems to engage with supernatural claims creates a vacuum in which communities are left to resolve mystical threats through informal or violent means. This paper extends their argument by showing how this vacuum is not simply legal but epistemic. The exclusion of mystical causality from formal discourse renders it more potent in informal settings because it operates beyond the reach of reason or regulation. Witchcraft is thus feared not only for its effects but for its uncontainability within rational-legal frameworks.

Finally, the paper offers a fresh theoretical vocabulary for scholars and practitioners working at the intersection of religion, law, and community. Concepts such as "relational fear," "epistemic immediacy," and "spiritual proximity" offer tools for dissecting the emotional and social functions of belief in ways that move beyond binary classifications of true versus false or science versus superstition. These terms can help researchers articulate the nuances of belief systems that are logically coherent and pragmatically effective within their contexts, even when

they resist standard academic taxonomies. This research contributes to the ongoing intellectual effort to decolonize knowledge production, validate non-Western epistemologies, and rethink fear's role in spiritual systems. By showing that the fear of witchcraft is not an irrational overreaction but a culturally rational response to perceived proximity, agency, and immediacy, the paper affirms the legitimacy of spiritual experience as a domain of serious scholarly inquiry. It opens new avenues for cross-disciplinary research, offers insights for public policy and conflict resolution, and challenges dominant paradigms about what constitutes evidence, danger, and belief in pluralistic societies.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this study has opened a new line of inquiry into the comparative fear of witchcraft and divine retribution, it also highlights many underexplored areas that warrant further investigation. The spiritual and emotional dynamics discussed herein intersect with broader questions of power, gender, justice, and epistemology. Future research will benefit from building on the comparative, intercultural, and interdisciplinary approach developed in this paper to explore how the politics of supernatural fear evolves under different social, technological, and institutional conditions.

Ethnographic and Comparative Fieldwork on Dual Spiritual Adherence

One critical area for future research is the empirical investigation of how individuals and communities navigate dual adherence to formal religious systems and traditional spiritual beliefs, particularly in African contexts where Pentecostalism, Catholicism, and Islam coexist with indigenous cosmologies. While scholars such as Blanes (2021) and Jindra (2011) have touched on the coexistence of religious and spiritual beliefs, more granular ethnographic work is needed to capture believers' emotional, practical, and moral choices in real time. For example, when someone falls ill or a child dies unexpectedly, under what conditions do individuals seek divine comfort through prayer, and when do they resort to diviners, witchdoctors, or rituals? What social scripts govern these transitions, and how is fear socially reinforced or managed across these domains? Such studies could also examine how religious leaders respond to persistent belief in witchcraft among their congregations, especially in contexts where churches publicly denounce traditional practices yet tacitly accept or even incorporate elements of spiritual warfare, exorcism, and healing. The pragmatics of this dual adherence remain largely undertheorized and could reveal much about the lived realities of belief, fear, and trust in hybrid spiritual economies.

Digital Witchcraft and the Politics of Viral Suspicion

With the rise of mobile technology and social media in Africa, Europe, and Latin America, the digital circulation of witchcraft accusations and fears is emerging as a critical area for study. Videos of exorcisms, public confessions, and community justice practices often go viral, reinforcing fear and belief across broader audiences than previously possible. Future research should explore how digital platforms mediate and amplify spiritual fear, shaping new publics and influencing moral panics. Scholars could examine how accusations are framed and received online versus offline, how virality interacts with local beliefs, and how digital literacy or algorithmic exposure affects belief formation. Are users more likely to believe a witchcraft narrative accompanied by visual evidence? How do memes, hashtags, or spiritual influencers shape emerging narratives of harm and fear? This research could also explore the consequences of online witchcraft accusations, especially where they spill into offline violence or ostracization.

Intersections of Witchcraft, Fear, and Mental Health Discourse

Another promising avenue for future research involves the relationship between spiritual fear and mental health, particularly in regions where psychological services are underdeveloped or culturally stigmatized. As shown by Ekpenyong and Asuquo (2016), many children in Nigeria who are labeled as witches exhibit behaviors that might be interpreted, in biomedical terms, as signs of trauma, developmental disorders, or mental illness. However, these behaviors are often diagnosed in spiritual terms, leading to violent interventions. Future studies could explore how communities interpret emotional or psychological distress through spiritual lenses and what interventions, both harmful and therapeutic, emerge from this interpretation. How does fear of being labeled a witch impact mental well-being, particularly for socially vulnerable populations such as elderly women or orphaned children? What role might culturally sensitive mental health initiatives play in reframing spiritual fear as treatable distress rather than mystical corruption? This direction would contribute to decolonial approaches in global mental health while remaining sensitive to local belief systems.

Legal Anthropology and Hybrid Justice Systems

While Forsyth (2016) and Ranger (2007) have explored legal blind spots regarding witchcraft, there is room for expanded research on hybrid justice systems that attempt to bridge the gap between spiritual belief and legal rationality. In many African countries, local councils, chiefs, or community courts mediate witchcraft disputes through informal mechanisms that blend

ritual with arbitration. These systems are often more trusted than formal courts, particularly where colonial legacies have delegitimized state authority. Future research could map how informal legal mechanisms engage with supernatural claims and balance community cohesion with individual rights. Are there models of restorative justice that take seriously spiritual harm without resorting to violence or exclusion? Can spiritual testimony be integrated into legal processes without compromising principles of due process and evidentiary standards? Such inquiries could help policymakers and community leaders design legal frameworks that are both culturally resonant and ethically defensible.

Transhistorical Studies of Fear and Mysticism

Finally, more transhistorical and comparative research could deepen our understanding of how fear of witchcraft operates across time. While much attention has been paid to the early modern European witch hunts, diachronic studies that trace shifts in spiritual fear across different eras, such as the Enlightenment, colonial period, post-independence era, and digital age, are needed. This would allow scholars to chart how changing technologies, state formations, religious institutions, and epistemologies have influenced who is feared, why, and with what consequences. Such studies might ask: How did fears of witches compare with fears of divine punishment in pre-colonial kingdoms? How did missionaries reinterpret local fears? How are concerns of biotechnological manipulation or artificial intelligence today framed through tropes of mysticism and unnatural power? These questions push beyond regional specificity toward a global history of supernatural fear, offering insights into how societies structure moral boundaries through the fear of unseen forces.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore an often-overlooked paradox: in societies that profess strong belief in divine power, it is not God's wrath but the threat of witchcraft that often elicits the most immediate and intense fear. Across both historical European and contemporary African contexts, communities have treated the presence of witchcraft not as a peripheral superstition but as a central, living concern with material and emotional consequences. The figure of the witch, whether embodied in the midwife, the widow, the child, or the neighbor, has consistently occupied a potent symbolic role, feared more viscerally and urgently than even the most formidable divine punishments. Through a comparative, interdisciplinary approach, this paper has demonstrated that this asymmetry of fear is not a function of theological contradiction, but of social and epistemological logic. Witchcraft is feared because it is believed to be near,

hidden, and personally directed. Its agents are intimate rather than distant; its actions are immediate rather than delayed. Unlike divine justice, which is mediated through religious doctrine, ritual, or institutional authority, the workings of witchcraft are seen as personal and immanent, activated through envy, conflict, and betrayal. This proximity makes witchcraft terrifying in a way that divine punishment, often regarded as abstract, deferred, or bound by moral law, typically is not.

The paper also argued that this fear is structurally reinforced by legal and epistemological systems that exclude or suppress indigenous modes of knowing. When formal institutions fail to engage with spiritual harm in meaningful ways for local communities, those communities resort to their mechanisms, rituals, accusations, banishments, and, in some cases, violence. The absence of formal recognition amplifies the threat of witchcraft by rendering it immune to institutional containment. Where the law and religious orthodoxy falter, belief in witchcraft becomes not only plausible but necessary. Moreover, the gendered nature of witchcraft accusations has emerged as a critical theme, revealing how spiritual fear often functions as a disciplinary tool. The figure of the witch becomes a site of projection for social anxieties about power, independence, aging, and nonconformity. Both historical and contemporary examples show that those most frequently accused of witchcraft are individuals whose social roles challenge dominant norms, especially women. This positions witchcraft not only as a religious or metaphysical concern but as a cultural mechanism of control.

By tracing these dynamics across geographies, historical periods, and genres of evidence, from court archives and ethnographies to literary narratives and empirical reports, this paper has articulated a new conceptual vocabulary for thinking about spiritual power and fear. Terms such as "relational proximity," "epistemic immediacy," and "institutional invisibility" offer tools for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to better understand how and why spiritual systems retain such strong influence in many communities today. Ultimately, this study calls for rethinking how fear is organized and acted upon within spiritual economies. Far from being a remnant of a bygone era, Witchcraft remains a dynamic and deeply rational system within its cultural logic. Its fear is not irrational but contextual, responding to social fragmentation, institutional inadequacy, and the urgent need for interpretive coherence in the face of misfortune and uncertainty.

Future scholarship must continue to take these belief systems seriously, not to validate every claim, but to understand what these fears reveal about everyday life's emotional and structural

conditions. Suppose witchcraft continues to inspire more fear than God. In that case, it is not because people have abandoned divine faith, but because they are acutely aware of where power appears to reside, how it is enacted, and what forms of harm it makes possible. In this way, fear becomes a map, pointing us toward the intimate geographies of belief, betrayal, and the persistent search for meaning in a world governed by both the visible and the invisible.

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