



Veritatis Gaudium:

Multidisciplinary Journal of Postgraduate Studies

College of Postgraduate Studies,

Veritas University, Abuja, Nigeria

ISSN: 3043 - 5285

Volume 1, Number 2, June, 2026

DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.17243.12321

**WITCHCRAFT IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES: EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY
OF BELIEF, MORALITY, AND SOCIAL ORDER**

Egwu, Emmanuel Onuchejo & Adidi, Dokpesi Timothy, PhD

Department of Philosophy, Veritas University, Abuja

adidit@veritas.edu.ng

ORCID identifier: 0000-0002-1374-627X

&

Uzomah, Michael Maduawuchi, PhD

Department of Philosophy, St. Albert Institute, Kaduna State

drmmuzomah@gmail.com,

ORCID identifier: 0000-0002-6514-8183

Abstract

This paper is a critical, phenomenological cum hermeneutical discourse on the apparent malevolent concept, “witchcraft”. Witchcraft remains a significant feature of African belief systems, shaping moral values, social relations and communal life across many societies. Despite extensive anthropological and sociological studies, its philosophical significance has received less attention. This study examines witchcraft beyond its common portrayal as superstition and explores its role in African moral thought and social organization. It is motivated by the continuing altercation between traditional witchcraft beliefs, contemporary human rights concerns and modern systems of governance in Africa. The study investigates the relationship between witchcraft, morality and social order within the framework of African philosophy. It adopts the hermeneutic and phenomenological methods. Hermeneutics is used to interpret the cultural meanings and symbolic significance attached to witchcraft, while phenomenology examines the lived experiences of individuals and communities that sustain such beliefs. The study demonstrates that witchcraft functions not only as a metaphysical belief but also as a moral and social institution. It serves as a framework for explaining misfortune, regulating behaviour, reinforcing communal values and promoting collective responsibility. The central thesis of the paper is that witchcraft occupies an important place in African moral philosophy because it operates as a culturally based mechanism for ethical regulation and social cohesion. Consequently, the study concludes that witchcraft should be understood through its moral, communal and epistemological dimensions rather than dismissed as an irrational belief. It recommends culturally sensitive legal, educational and religious interventions that protect vulnerable persons while respecting the cultural realities and moral values of African societies.

Keywords: Witchcraft, African philosophy, morality, social order, belief systems, ethics.

Introduction

This treatise is an expository, phenomenological, hermeneutical and reflective discourse of the phenomenon of witchcraft in Africa, in the critical tradition of philosophy. It is germane to state ab initio that few issues have attracted as much attention, controversy and scholarly interest in Africa as witchcraft. Across the continent, beliefs in witchcraft continue to influence ideas about morality, justice, responsibility and human relationships. Despite the growth of formal western education, scientific knowledge, urbanization and globalization, witchcraft remains an important framework through which many people interpret illness, death, poverty, social conflict and other forms of misfortune. Its persistence in both rural and urban communities suggests that it is not simply a remnant of the past but a living aspect of African social and intellectual life. The enduring presence of witchcraft raises important philosophical questions. Why do beliefs in supernatural causation remain influential in societies increasingly shaped by science and technology? Why do accusations of witchcraft continue to affect social relations, moral judgments and communal responses to suffering? More importantly, what does the persistence of these beliefs reveal about African conceptions of morality, justice, personhood, responsibility and social order? These questions indicate that witchcraft is more than a religious, cultural, or anthropological phenomenon. It is also a philosophical issue that invites critical reflection on human existence, moral responsibility and the foundations of communal life.

Most studies on witchcraft have emerged from anthropology, sociology and religious studies. Scholars such as Evans-Pritchard (1937), Turner (1967), Douglas (1970), Horton (1970) and Geschiere (1997) have shown that witchcraft beliefs possess their own internal logic and perform important social functions. Their works reveal how witchcraft serves as a means of explaining misfortune, regulating behaviour, resolving social tensions and preserving communal stability. It should be observed that while these contributions remain valuable, they largely focus on the descriptive and functional dimensions of witchcraft. Less attention has been given to its philosophical implications for morality, social regulation, ethical responsibility and systems of knowledge.

African philosophy provides an important framework for addressing this gap. African thought generally views reality as an interconnected whole in which the physical, spiritual, moral and social dimensions of life are inseparable. Scholars such as Mbiti (1990), Gyekye (1997), Wiredu (1996), Idowu (1973), Bujo (2001) and Asouzu (2004) assert the relational nature of existence and the importance of communal responsibility. Within this worldview, human actions are rarely seen as isolated events. Rather, they are understood within broader networks of moral accountability and social obligation that have cyclical significance for the world of the unborn, the world of the living and the world of the living dead. Witchcraft emerges within this context as a significant category through which communities explain misfortune, identify perceived sources of harm and reinforce accepted standards of conduct. In other words, malevolent occupancies are habitually attributed to witchcraft. The logical implication of this is that witchcraft is commonly construed as a malevolent phenomenon.

This study is motivated by the need to move beyond simplistic portrayals of witchcraft as mere superstition. Such interpretations often overlook the ethical, social and epistemological roles that witchcraft plays in African societies. They also fail to explain why beliefs in witchcraft continue to influence personal decisions, communal relationships, governance structures and legal processes across many parts of Africa. Hence, understanding witchcraft requires philosophical engagement with the values, assumptions and lived experiences that sustain these beliefs.

The central problem addressed in this study is the altercation between traditional witchcraft beliefs and contemporary commitments to human rights, democratic governance, scientific rationality and social justice. While witchcraft often functions as a mechanism of moral regulation and communal accountability, accusations of witchcraft have also led to discrimination, violence, social exclusion and the violation of fundamental rights, especially among women, children and the elderly. This dual character raises an important philosophical question: how can societies preserve valuable cultural traditions while safeguarding human dignity, justice and individual freedom? To address this concern, the study examines the relationship between witchcraft, morality and social order within African philosophical thought. Using hermeneutic and phenomenological methods, it explores both the cultural meanings attached to witchcraft and the lived experiences of those who sustain such beliefs. The study argues that witchcraft is not merely a supernatural belief but a moral and social institution that shapes behaviour, reinforces communal values and contributes to social order. At the same time, it contends that witchcraft-related practices must be subjected to ethical scrutiny where they threaten justice and human dignity. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates in African philosophy concerning culture and ethics, tradition and modernity and the relationship between communal values and individual rights.

Statement of the Problem

Although witchcraft remains a significant feature of African social life, scholarly discussions have largely been dominated by anthropological, sociological, religious and historical perspectives. Studies by Evans-Pritchard (1937), Douglas (1970), Horton (1970) and Geschiere (1997) have demonstrated that witchcraft beliefs possess an internal logic and perform important social functions within their respective cultural contexts. While these contributions have enhanced understanding of the origins, functions and social consequences of witchcraft, they have paid comparatively less attention to its philosophical implications. As a result, important questions concerning the ethical, epistemological and normative foundations of witchcraft remain insufficiently explored. Limited attention has been given to how witchcraft beliefs shape moral reasoning, influence notions of responsibility and justice, regulate social conduct and contribute to the preservation of social order. Similarly, there is a need to examine how key African philosophical ideas such as communalism, personhood, relational existence, moral accountability and collective responsibility help explain the continuing relevance of witchcraft in contemporary African societies.

Moreover, the challenge becomes more complex when viewed alongside contemporary commitments to human rights, constitutional democracy and the rule of law. While witchcraft beliefs may foster communal accountability and social cohesion, accusations of witchcraft have also been linked to discrimination, stigmatization, violence and the marginalization of vulnerable persons, particularly women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. This situation raises important philosophical questions about the relationship between cultural traditions, social order, justice and human dignity. Consequently, this study addresses the problem of understanding witchcraft not merely as a supernatural belief but as a moral, social and philosophical phenomenon. It seeks to examine its role in African moral thought, its contribution to the regulation of social behaviour and its implications for contemporary debates on justice, human rights and social order. In doing so, the study aims to fill an important gap in existing scholarship and advance a more philosophically significant understanding of witchcraft in African societies.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to conduct a phenomenological and hermeneutical analysis to examine the relationship between witchcraft, morality and social order in African societies. The study investigates how witchcraft functions within African moral thought and explores its significance as a mechanism of social regulation and communal accountability. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the historical, cultural and philosophical foundations of witchcraft beliefs in African societies;
2. Analyze the role of witchcraft in shaping moral values, communal responsibility and social control;
3. Evaluate the ethical and epistemological dimensions of witchcraft within the framework of African philosophy;
4. Investigate the relationship between witchcraft beliefs and the maintenance of social order in African communities; and
5. Appraise the implications of witchcraft beliefs for contemporary debates on human rights, justice and governance in Africa.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical approach based on the complementary methods of hermeneutics and phenomenology. These methods were selected because the phenomenon under investigation extends beyond empirical observation and requires a critical analysis of meanings, lived experiences and cultural interpretations foregrounded within African societies. The hermeneutic method is employed as an interpretive periscope for understanding the cultural and philosophical meanings associated with witchcraft in African thought. Hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of texts, symbols, traditions and human experiences within their historical and cultural contexts (Uzomah, 2024). Since beliefs about witchcraft are deeply rooted in indigenous worldviews, oral traditions, proverbs, rituals and communal practices, this method provides an appropriate tool for uncovering their underlying assumptions and normative significance. Through hermeneutic analysis, the study examines how African communities construct meanings around witchcraft and how such meanings shape notions of morality, responsibility, justice and social order. Phenomenology complements this approach by focusing on lived experience and human consciousness. Rather than treating witchcraft merely as an abstract metaphysical concept, phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals and communities experience, perceive and respond to it in everyday life. It allows the study to appreciate the realities of those who hold, negotiate, or are affected by witchcraft beliefs without prematurely dismissing such experiences through external explanatory frameworks. This approach is particularly useful because the social influence of witchcraft often derives from the meanings people attach to it and the ways these meanings inform their actions and relationships.

Consequently, the combination of hermeneutics and phenomenology is justified by the nature of the research problem. While hermeneutics provides interpretive depth by cascading witchcraft within African philosophical and cultural contexts, phenomenology offers insight into its experiential dimension. These methods collectively facilitate a balanced and integrated understanding of witchcraft as both a system of meaning and a lived social reality. This methodological orientation enables a critical examination of the relationship between witchcraft, morality and social order, while remaining sensitive to the complexities of African thought and experience.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Communalism and African Moral Philosophy

This study is anchored in the theory of communalism as articulated within African moral philosophy. Communalism asserts the interconnectedness of persons and the view that individual existence acquires meaning within the context of community. Unlike moral traditions that prioritize individual autonomy, African ethics generally conceives the individual as inseparable from a network of social relationships, obligations and responsibilities. A foundational expression of this outlook is found in Mbiti's (1990) assertion that "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am". This perspective underscores the belief that personhood is realized through participation in

communal life. Philosophers such as Gyekye (1997), Wiredu (1996), Bujo (2001), Asouzu (2004) and Metz (2012) jointly maintain that African morality is fundamentally relational. Moral conduct is evaluated according to its contribution to social harmony, mutual care and collective well-being. Within this framework, virtues such as solidarity, reciprocity, compassion, responsibility, honesty and respect for others are regarded as essential for sustaining communal life. Actions that threaten these values are viewed as morally objectionable because they undermine social cohesion and collective flourishing.

The relevance of communalism to the present study lies in its capacity to explain the moral significance attached to witchcraft in many African societies. Witchcraft is commonly perceived as a violation of communal ethics because it is associated with harmful intentions, antisocial conduct and the misuse of power. Hence, witchcraft is widely construed as a malevolent reality. Consequently, accusations of witchcraft often reflect broader concerns about moral responsibility, trust and social stability. In this sense, witchcraft functions not merely as a supernatural belief but as a moral category through which communities identify and condemn behaviour considered detrimental to collective welfare. However, communalism also raises important ethical questions. While it promotes social harmony and accountability, it may, under certain circumstances, justify exclusion or injustice against individuals accused of wrongdoing. This issue demonstrates the need to balance communal values with respect for human dignity, fairness and individual rights. Hence, the theory of communalism provides an appropriate framework for examining the relationship between witchcraft, morality and social order in African thought.

Philosophy and Witchcraft in Africa

Witchcraft occupies a distinctive place in African thought because it raises fundamental questions about causality, responsibility, morality and human existence. Beyond its religious and cultural dimensions, it represents an important philosophical concern that invites reflection on how individuals and communities understand misfortune, justice and the nature of social life. A central philosophical issue associated with witchcraft is causality. In many African societies, misfortunes such as illness, death, infertility or economic failure are often interpreted as having causes that extend beyond the immediately observable. Consequently, questions are not limited to what happened but also why it happened to a particular person at a particular time. Witchcraft provides one framework through which such experiences are interpreted. Rather than serving merely as a supernatural explanation, it reflects a broader attempt to make sense of suffering, uncertainty and human vulnerability.

The persistence of witchcraft beliefs also raises important epistemological questions. Critics often dismiss such beliefs because they do not conform to modern scientific standards of verification. However, African philosophical traditions recognize multiple sources of knowledge, including communal experience, oral traditions, ancestral wisdom and lived reality. From this perspective, beliefs concerning witchcraft emerge from culturally rooted systems of meaning that seek to explain aspects of existence not easily addressed through empirical methods alone. The philosophical challenge is therefore not simply to accept or reject such beliefs but to examine the assumptions and forms of reasoning that sustain them.

Equally, witchcraft is significant within African moral thought. It is commonly associated with harmful intentions, selfishness, envy, greed and the abuse of power. As a result, accusations of witchcraft often function as moral judgments about character and conduct rather than merely as claims about supernatural activity. The concept serves as a symbolic expression of behaviours regarded as incompatible with communal well-being and ethical responsibility. This moral dimension evinces the close relationship between witchcraft and social accountability. Communities frequently invoke witchcraft discourse when attempting to explain actions perceived as harmful to

collective welfare. In this regard, witchcraft functions as a moral language through which societies articulate expectations concerning responsibility, trust and acceptable conduct. Nevertheless, the philosophical significance of witchcraft extends beyond its social functions. Its continued influence raises important ethical questions regarding evidence, justice and human dignity. While witchcraft beliefs may reinforce communal values, accusations can also result in fear, exclusion, discrimination and violence. Individuals accused of witchcraft are often denied opportunities to defend themselves according to standards of fairness recognized in modern legal systems. They are often subjected to jungle justice (burnt alive, beaten to death, or banished).

These concerns require a balanced philosophical approach. Witchcraft should neither be dismissed as mere superstition nor accepted without critical examination. Its significance lies in what it reveals about African understandings of morality, responsibility, causality and communal life. A philosophical engagement with witchcraft, therefore, involves appreciating its cultural and moral relevance while subjecting its social consequences to ethical scrutiny. Such an approach enables a deeper understanding of both the enduring appeal of witchcraft beliefs and the challenges they pose within contemporary African societies.

Conceptual Framework: African Cosmology, Witchcraft and the Regulation of Social Life

An adequate understanding of witchcraft in Africa requires an appreciation of the cosmological assumptions that shape African conceptions of reality. African societies have traditionally viewed the universe as a unified and interconnected whole in which the physical, spiritual, moral and social dimensions of existence are inseparable. Human beings do not exist in isolation but within a vast network of relationships involving fellow humans, ancestors, divinities, spiritual forces and the natural world. This holistic worldview provides the intellectual and moral context within which beliefs about witchcraft emerge and acquire significance. Unlike the dualistic worldview that often characterizes modern Western thought, traditional African cosmology generally rejects a strict separation between the sacred and the secular, the visible and the invisible, or the material and the spiritual. Reality is perceived as a continuum in which spiritual forces actively participate in human affairs.

According to Mbiti (1990) African peoples understand existence as fundamentally relational, with events in the physical world frequently connected to realities beyond immediate sensory perception. Consequently, occurrences such as illness, infertility, crop failure, sudden death, persistent poverty or unexpected success are rarely interpreted as random or morally neutral events. Instead, they are often viewed as manifestations of deeper spiritual and social processes.

Within this cosmological framework, witchcraft functions as a theory of causation. While natural causes are not necessarily denied, they are often considered incomplete explanations of significant events. The crucial question is not merely what happened but why it happened to a particular individual at a particular moment. Evans-Pritchard's (1937) classic study among the Azande demonstrated this distinction. The collapse of a granary may be explained by termites, yet the deeper question remains why the collapse occurred precisely when certain individuals happened to be sitting beneath it. Witchcraft explains this dimension of causality by connecting physical events to human intentions, spiritual influences and moral relationships. This understanding reveals an important philosophical insight. Witchcraft is not primarily concerned with scientific explanation but with existential meaning. It seeks to address questions that empirical investigation alone may not satisfy. Why do innocent people suffer? Why does misfortune strike one family while sparing another? Why do some individuals experience repeated setbacks despite apparent effort and virtue? Such questions arise in every human society. African cosmology responds by locating human experience within a broader moral and spiritual order.

The relationship between cosmology and morality is particularly significant. In African thought, morality is not simply a matter of personal preference or individual choice. It is rooted in the very structure of reality. Human beings are expected to live in ways that promote harmony within the interconnected web of existence. Actions that disrupt relationships among persons, communities, ancestors and spiritual forces are regarded as threats to both moral and cosmic order. Consequently, morality acquires a communal and metaphysical significance that extends beyond individual conduct. Witchcraft occupies a critical place within this moral universe because it represents the deliberate misuse of power for destructive purposes. Across many African societies, the witch is portrayed as an individual who exploits spiritual abilities for selfish ends, often at the expense of communal welfare. Such conduct violates fundamental African ethical principles, including solidarity, reciprocity, compassion and mutual responsibility (Kanu, 2015). The witch, therefore, becomes a symbol of moral disorder, embodying attitudes and behaviours that threaten social cohesion.

In this respect, witchcraft serves as a moral category through which communities identify and condemn antisocial conduct. The language of witchcraft frequently reflects concerns about jealousy, greed, envy, selfish ambition, betrayal and the abuse of power. These concerns are fundamentally ethical rather than merely supernatural. They reveal communal anxieties about behaviours capable of undermining trust and cooperation (Kanu, 2015). Witchcraft beliefs thus function as moral narratives through which societies articulate and defend their most cherished values.

The regulatory function of witchcraft becomes evident when one examines its role in maintaining social order. Before the emergence of modern legal institutions, many African societies relied upon a combination of customs, religious beliefs, kinship structures and communal sanctions to regulate behaviour. Witchcraft beliefs formed part of this broader system of social control. The fear of supernatural consequences often discouraged individuals from engaging in conduct considered harmful to others. In this way, witchcraft operated as an informal but effective mechanism for reinforcing communal norms. Anthropologists and social theorists have long observed this regulatory dimension. Douglas (1970) argues that accusations of witchcraft frequently emerge during periods of social tension, serving as mechanisms through which communities identify perceived threats to collective stability. In like manner, Turner (1967) notes that beliefs concerning mystical powers often play important roles in conflict management and social integration. From this perspective, witchcraft accusations are not arbitrary events but social responses to perceived disruptions in communal relationships.

However, reducing witchcraft solely to a mechanism of social control would be inadequate. Such an interpretation overlooks the existential seriousness with which many Africans approach the phenomenon. For those who believe in the reality of witchcraft, accusations are not merely symbolic expressions of social anxiety; they concern genuine threats to life, health, prosperity and human flourishing. A proper philosophical analysis must therefore recognize both the symbolic and experiential dimensions of witchcraft.

The social significance of witchcraft is also closely related to African conceptions of power. In many traditional societies, power is understood as morally ambivalent. It can be used for healing, protection and communal development, or it can be employed for domination, destruction and exploitation. The ethical evaluation of power depends largely upon its purpose and consequences. Witchcraft is condemned because it represents the misuse of power against the interests of the community. In this regard, it functions as a moral critique of selfishness and the irresponsible exercise of influence. This insight becomes particularly relevant in contemporary Africa. Although the forms of social organization have changed significantly, concerns about hidden power remain pervasive. Political corruption, economic inequality, exploitation and social injustice are often

interpreted through conceptual frameworks that bear striking similarities to traditional understandings of witchcraft. Geschiere (1997) argues that modernity has not eliminated witchcraft beliefs; rather, it has transformed their expression. Witchcraft continues to provide a language through which people discuss power, insecurity, inequality and vulnerability in rapidly changing social environments.

From a philosophical standpoint, this persistence demonstrates that witchcraft addresses enduring human concerns. Beneath its supernatural dimensions lie profound questions about morality, justice, responsibility, suffering and the misuse of power. These concerns remain ubiquitously relevant regardless of historical period or cultural context. The continuing significance of witchcraft, therefore, reveals less about the persistence of irrationality than about humanity's ongoing search for meaning, accountability and social order. Nevertheless, the regulatory role of witchcraft remains ethically ambiguous. While witchcraft beliefs may strengthen communal solidarity and reinforce moral norms, they may also create opportunities for prejudice, manipulation, exclusion and violence. Individuals accused of witchcraft are frequently denied the protections ordinarily associated with fairness, due process and human dignity. Consequently, the same institution that promotes social order may also generate social injustice.

It is germane to state that the above altercation lies at the heart of the philosophical problem examined in this study. Witchcraft simultaneously functions as a source of moral regulation and a potential instrument of oppression. Understanding this dual character requires a careful balance between cultural interpretation and ethical critique. African philosophy provides the conceptual resources for undertaking this task because it seeks not only to understand social practices but also to evaluate them in light of broader ideals of justice, communal flourishing and human dignity. Therefore, African cosmology reveals that witchcraft is far more than a supernatural belief. It is an institution deeply established in African understandings of reality, morality, power and social life. Through its connection to communal values and moral expectations, witchcraft contributes to the regulation of conduct and the maintenance of social order. At the same time, its capacity to produce fear, exclusion and injustice necessitates critical philosophical scrutiny. Any adequate account of witchcraft must therefore recognize both its integrative functions and its ethical limitations.

Findings and Discussion

1. Witchcraft as an Explanatory Framework for Misfortune

The first and perhaps most fundamental finding of this phenomenological cum hermenutical treatise is that witchcraft functions as an important explanatory mechanism within African societies. Many communities interpret illness, death, infertility, economic failure and other forms of misfortune not merely as natural occurrences but as events with underlying spiritual causes. This finding supports Mbiti's (1990) argument that African cosmology perceives reality as an interconnected system in which visible and invisible forces interact continuously. Moreover, Evans-Pritchard (1937) observed among the Azande that witchcraft provides explanations for why misfortune affects particular individuals at specific moments. This is philosophically significant because this finding suggests that witchcraft addresses existential questions concerning causality, suffering and uncertainty. It offers meaning where empirical explanations appear insufficient.

2. Witchcraft as a Moral Category

The study further found that witchcraft serves as a moral category through which communities evaluate human conduct. Witchcraft is commonly associated with envy, greed, selfishness, malice and the abuse of power. Consequently, accusations of witchcraft often function as moral judgments rather than merely supernatural claims. This finding tallies with Gyekye's (1997) view that African morality is cascaded on communal well-being and social responsibility. It also supports Bujo's

(2001) argument that African ethics emphasizes relationships that sustain life and community. Therefore, witchcraft represents behaviour perceived as contrary to communal values and moral expectations.

3. Witchcraft as an Instrument of Social Regulation

Another significant finding is that witchcraft contributes to the maintenance of social order. In many traditional African societies, beliefs about witchcraft have historically served as informal mechanisms of social control. The fear of social condemnation or spiritual consequences often encourages conformity to accepted norms and discourages antisocial behaviour. This finding is consistent with Douglas's (1970) position that beliefs concerning pollution, danger and social deviance often function to preserve social order. Likewise, Turner (1967) argues that ritual and symbolic systems play important roles in maintaining social cohesion. Witchcraft, therefore, operates as part of a broader framework of indigenous governance and moral regulation.

4. The Tension between Communal Justice and Individual Rights

The study found that while witchcraft beliefs may promote social cohesion, they can also produce serious ethical challenges. Witchcraft accusations are frequently directed at socially vulnerable individuals, including widows, elderly persons, women and children. In such cases, communal efforts to preserve harmony may conflict with principles of justice, fairness and human dignity. This finding validates Wiredu's (1996) caution that communal values should not override individual freedoms. It also is in harmony with Metz's (2012) argument that genuine social harmony requires respect for the dignity and well-being of all persons. The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing communal interests with individual rights.

5. The Continuing Relevance of Witchcraft in Contemporary Africa

The study also found that witchcraft remains relevant despite modernization, urbanization and scientific advancement. Beliefs about witchcraft continue to shape interpretations of political power, economic success, social inequality and personal misfortune across many African societies. This finding confirms Geschiere's (1997) thesis that modernity has not eliminated witchcraft but has instead transformed its expression. Rather than disappearing, witchcraft has adapted to contemporary social realities. Its persistence indicates that it continues to address enduring human concerns regarding power, uncertainty, responsibility and justice.

Synthesis of Findings and Critical Evaluation

The foregoing phenomenological and hermeneutical discourse on witchcraft in Africa evinces that these findings collectively demonstrate that witchcraft is far more than a supernatural belief system. It functions simultaneously as an explanatory framework, a moral discourse and a mechanism of social regulation. Its endurance across time reflects its capacity to address fundamental questions concerning causality, morality and communal existence.

However, the study also reveals important ethical issues. While witchcraft contributes to social cohesion and moral accountability, it may also foster exclusion, discrimination and injustice when accusations are not subjected to critical scrutiny. In this regard, Uzomah (2023) observes that the contemporary African philosopher must be ready for the constructive critique of African culture and ideologies in order to meet the practical needs of our contemporary society. Consequently, the inevitable task of contemporary philosophers and literary analysts is to determine through critical studies which aspects or pieces of African culture are valuable and pragmatic to African needs at the given time to promote. Consequently, the study argues that a balanced philosophical approach is required. Witchcraft should neither be dismissed as irrational superstition nor accepted uncritically as an unquestionable cultural institution. Rather, it should be evaluated in light of African ethical ideals such as communal harmony, reciprocity, compassion, justice and respect for human dignity.

Such an approach allows for the preservation of valuable cultural insights while addressing practices that undermine individual well-being and social justice.

Conclusion

This phenomenological and hermeneutical study examined witchcraft as a moral, social and philosophical phenomenon within African societies. It has been shown that witchcraft occupies a significant place in African thought because it provides a framework for interpreting misfortune, assigning responsibility and regulating social conduct. Beyond its supernatural dimensions, witchcraft reflects deeper concerns about morality, communal welfare, justice and the proper use of power. Its enduring relevance demonstrates the continuing influence of African cosmological and ethical worldviews in shaping social experience. The study further established that witchcraft possesses a dual character. On the one hand, it contributes to social cohesion by reinforcing communal values and promoting accountability. On the other hand, witchcraft accusations can generate exclusion, discrimination and violations of human dignity, particularly against vulnerable members of society. Consequently, a balanced philosophical approach (one that recognizes the cultural significance of witchcraft while critically evaluating its ethical implications) is required. Such an approach offers a pathway for preserving valuable aspects of African moral heritage while advancing justice, human rights and social development in contemporary Africa.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Educational Reform and Critical Awareness: Educational institutions should promote critical thinking and philosophical reflection on indigenous belief systems, including witchcraft. Such education should neither ridicule traditional beliefs nor accept them uncritically. Rather, it should encourage informed engagement with cultural traditions while cultivating respect for evidence, rational inquiry and ethical responsibility. Philosophy, ethics and African studies programmes should play a leading role in facilitating these discussions.

2. Human Rights Protection: Governments, civil society organizations and community leaders should strengthen measures aimed at protecting vulnerable individuals from witchcraft-related discrimination, abuse and violence. Particular attention should be given to women, children, widows, persons living with disabilities and the elderly, who frequently become targets of accusations. Legal frameworks should be enforced to ensure that all citizens enjoy equal protection under the law, regardless of cultural beliefs.

3. Community-Based Dialogue: Traditional rulers, religious leaders, educators and policymakers should encourage open dialogue between indigenous communities and modern institutions. Such engagement can help reduce harmful practices while preserving valuable cultural insights. Constructive dialogue is more likely to achieve lasting social change than approaches based solely on condemnation or coercion.

4. Ethical Reinterpretation of Cultural Traditions: African philosophers, theologians and scholars should continue the task of critically reinterpreting traditional beliefs in light of contemporary ethical standards. Cultural traditions are not static; they evolve in response to changing social realities. Therefore, practices associated with witchcraft should be evaluated according to their contribution to justice, human dignity and communal flourishing rather than solely based on historical continuity.

5. Strengthening Legal and Customary Institutions: Efforts should be made to foster cooperation between customary authorities and formal legal systems. Traditional institutions remain influential

in many African societies and can contribute positively to social order when guided by principles of fairness and accountability. Mechanisms should be developed to address witchcraft-related disputes without resorting to violence, stigmatization, or violations of fundamental rights.

6. Promotion of African Ethical Values: The values of ubuntu, communal reciprocity, solidarity, compassion and respect for human dignity should be emphasized as guiding principles for addressing contemporary social challenges. These values represent some of the most enduring contributions of African moral philosophy and provide an ethical framework capable of balancing communal welfare with individual rights.

6. Further Philosophical Research: Finally, additional philosophical research should be undertaken on the relationship between witchcraft, epistemology, morality, law, governance and human rights in Africa. Much existing scholarship remains concentrated in anthropology and sociology. Greater philosophical engagement is needed to deepen understanding of the normative questions raised by witchcraft and its continuing significance in African societies.

References

- Adidi, D. T. & Irabor, B. P. (2019). "Igwebuike as an expression of African communalism: An interrogation of the African past and present." Vol. 2 No. 3 in the *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*.
- Adidi, D.T. & Tella, B.D.J. (2020). "Marriage, Depression, and The African (Nigerian) Woman: A Philosophico-Theological Discourse." Vol. 3 No. 4 in the *International Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*.
- Asouzu, I. I. (2004). *The method and principles of complementary reflection in and beyond African philosophy*. University of Calabar Press.
- Bujo, B. (2001). *Foundations of an African ethic: Beyond the universal claims of Western morality*. Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Douglas, M. (1970). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1937). *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*. Oxford University Press.
- Geschiere, P. (1997). *The modernity of witchcraft: Politics and the occult in postcolonial Africa*. University of Virginia Press.
- Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford University Press.
- Horton, R. (1970). African traditional thought and Western science. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 40(1), 50-71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1157393>
- Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African traditional religion: A definition*. SCM Press.
- Kanu, I. A. (2015a). *African philosophy: An ontologico-existential hermeneutic approach to classical and contemporary issues*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.
- Kanu I. A. (2015b). *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology, and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.
- Menkiti, I. A. (1984). Person and community in African traditional thought. In R. A. Wright (Ed.), *African philosophy: An introduction* (pp. 171–181). University Press of America.
- Metz, T. (2012). African ethics and the idea of a "good life". *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 9(3), 331-350. <https://doi.org/10.1163/174552412X635255>
- Turner, V. (1967). *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Cornell University Press.
- Uzomah M. M. (2024), "A hermeneutical discourse on the Euro-America's global economic conspiracy: A case study of Africa", *International Journal of Technology, Innovation and*

Management (IJTIM), Vol. 4(2), Dec, 2024, pp 19-30, <https://doi.org/10.54489/ijtim.v4i2.383>,
<https://journals.gaftim.com/index.php/ijtim/index>

Uzomah, M. M., Isanbor, P. O. & Uzomah, C. S. (2023). “African tech development: The ideal and summit of contemporary African philosophy and literary studies”. *African Social Sciences and Humanities Journals*, 4(1). 23-36. <https://doi.org/10.57040/asshj.v4i1.351>

Wiredu, K. (1996). *Cultural universals and particulars: An African perspective*. Indiana University Press.