WITCHCRAFT AND SPOUSAL DYNAMISM IN AFRICA

[1]Ahmed Tanimu Mahmoud

Abstract

Witchcraft beliefs continue to influence everyday life in many African societies. These beliefs are deeply embedded in cultural worldviews and can shape spousal relationships**,** household power dynamics, marriage stability, and conflict resolution. This paper examines how witchcraft narratives intersect with spousal dynamism defined here as the shifting patterns of roles, power, suspicion, and negotiation between spouses in African contexts. Drawing on anthropological, sociological, and legal literature, it argues that while witchcraft accusations between spouses often reflect broader social anxieties, they also reveal gendered power structures, negotiation of authority within marriage, and the impact of socio-economic pressures on intimate relationships. The paper concludes by suggesting avenues for research, policy, and community engagement to mitigate harm while respecting cultural worldviews.

Keywords*: Gender; Marriage; Spousal Dynamism; Witchcraft; Widow*

[1] Ahmed Tanimu Mahmoud is a lecturer in the Department of Criminology and Security, National Open University of Nigeria. amahmoud@noun.edu.ng+2348038034912

Introduction

Witchcraft beliefs remain a powerful explanatory framework within many African societies, shaping perceptions of misfortune, morality, and interpersonal relations. Far from being confined to public or communal spaces, witchcraft discourse frequently penetrates the intimate sphere of marriage, influencing spousal relationships, power negotiations, and household stability. Scholars have increasingly noted that accusations of witchcraft within marriage are closely linked to spousal dynamism that is, the shifting balance of power, roles, and expectations between husbands and wives in changing social, economic, and cultural contexts (Geschiere, 1997; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001).

Marriage in many African societies is not merely a personal union but a social institution embedded in kinship networks, economic arrangements, and moral obligations. Within this framework, witchcraft accusations may emerge as a means of explaining marital conflict, infertility, economic failure, or illness, particularly when traditional gender roles are perceived to be under threat. As women increasingly participate in education, wage labor, and entrepreneurship, transformations in spousal roles have generated new tensions that are sometimes interpreted through the idiom of witchcraft (Niehaus, 2012).

Empirical studies illustrate how witchcraft accusations are mobilized within marriages to negotiate authority and control. In parts of Nigeria and Ghana, women who are economically successful or perceived as assertive within the household have been accused of using witchcraft to dominate their husbands or undermine male authority (Federici, 2008). Conversely, in some contexts, husbands experiencing economic decline or illness may accuse their wives of witchcraft as a way of externalizing failure and reasserting patriarchal dominance. Such accusations often gain legitimacy through extended family members, transforming private marital disputes into public moral judgments.

Spousal dynamism is also evident in cases involving infertility and child mortality, where women are frequently blamed for reproductive challenges through witchcraft narratives. Research from Tanzania and Malawi shows that wives may be accused of witchcraft when children fall ill or pregnancies fail, reinforcing gendered assumptions that locate reproductive responsibility and blame squarely on women (Mesaki, 2009; Green, 2017). These dynamics not only destabilize marriages but could also expose women to violence, abandonment, or divorce.

This paper adopts the position that witchcraft accusations within marriage should be understood as gendered instruments of negotiation and control that reflect broader transformations in African family life. Rather than treating witchcraft solely as belief or superstition, the analysis situates it within evolving spousal relations shaped by economic change, legal pluralism, and shifting gender norms. Understanding the link between witchcraft and spousal dynamism is therefore essential for addressing marital conflict, protecting women's rights, and promoting family stability in contemporary African societies.

Conceptual Framework

Witchcraft: Anthropologists describe witchcraft beliefs as embedded in broader systems of meaning: they provide frameworks for interpreting misfortune, social tension, illness, and unexplained events (Mbiti, 1990; Geschiere, 1997). Witchcraft is often invoked when causes of conflict are unclear through secular or biomedical explanations.

Spousal Dynamism: This refers to the ongoing negotiation of roles, power, authority, expectations, and emotional bonds between spouses. It includes economic cooperation, decision-making processes, communication patterns, conflict resolution, and social support mechanisms

within marriage. Where spouses invoke witchcraft explanations, these negotiations are shaped by cultural, economic, and gendered expectations.

Witchcraft and Gender

Witchcraft in Africa is deeply embedded within cultural worldviews that seek to explain misfortune, illness, infertility, and social conflict through moral and relational lenses. Rather than existing as isolated superstitions, witchcraft beliefs operate as socially meaningful systems of interpretation that reflect and reproduce gendered power relations (Geschiere, 1997). Within these belief systems, women are often constructed as particularly susceptible to suspicion, a pattern that reveals how cultural narratives about witchcraft intersect with dominant ideas about femininity, morality, and social order.

Anthropological studies indicate that witchcraft beliefs frequently draw on gendered assumptions about women's bodies, emotions, and social roles. Women's reproductive capacity, sexuality, and caregiving responsibilities are symbolically linked to both life-giving and destructive forces, positioning them as potential agents of harm when social expectations are not met (Federici, 2008). In many African societies, deviations from prescribed gender norms such as infertility, assertiveness, economic independence, or refusal to conform to marital expectations are often interpreted through witchcraft idioms, reinforcing suspicion toward women for instance in Lapai Local Government Area of Niger State, Nigeria (Ahmed & Boluwatif, 2026).

Gendered beliefs about witchcraft are particularly evident within marital and familial contexts. Women are often held responsible for domestic harmony, childbearing, and family wellbeing. Consequently, marital conflict, infertility, or child mortality may be attributed to women's alleged witchcraft rather than structural or medical factors. Research from Tanzania and Malawi shows that wives are more likely than husbands to be accused of witchcraft when children fall ill or when economic hardship affects the household, reflecting broader gender biases that locate blame within women's moral character (Mesaki, 2009; Green, 2017).

Economic and social transformations have further reshaped gendered witchcraft beliefs. As women increasingly participate in education, wage labor, and entrepreneurship, their changing social visibility may generate anxiety and resentment, particularly in patriarchal settings. Studies from communities in Ghana and Nigeria demonstrate that economically successful women are sometimes suspected of using witchcraft to accumulate wealth or exert control over male partners, revealing how witchcraft beliefs adapt to contemporary gender dynamics (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001).

This paper adopts the position that beliefs about witchcraft are not neutral cultural traditions but gendered narratives that legitimize inequality and social control. While such beliefs may provide moral explanations for misfortune, they simultaneously reinforce patriarchal norms by disciplining

women who challenge established gender roles. Addressing the harmful consequences of witchcraft accusations therefore requires critical engagement with the gendered assumptions embedded within these belief systems, alongside legal, educational, and social interventions that promote gender equity.

Witchcraft Accusations And Spousal Conflict

Witchcraft accusations frequently emerge as a catalyst and reflection of spousal conflict in African marriages, revealing how supernatural beliefs intersect with gendered power dynamics, economic tensions, and domestic expectations. In many African societies, such as the Gwaris of Niger and Federal Capital Territory, marriage is both a private and socially regulated institution, with spouses expected to maintain roles that align with cultural and kinship norms. When these roles are contested through economic shifts, disagreements over childbearing, or challenges to household authority witchcraft accusations may surface as a means of explaining, managing, or legitimizing marital disputes (Niehaus, 2012; Federici, 2008).

Empirical evidence from the works of Ahmed & Boluwatif (2026) shows that accusations are often gendered, disproportionately targeting wives who assert autonomy, resist patriarchal authority, or fail to fulfill socially prescribed duties. For example, in parts of Nigeria and Ghana, wives have been accused of using witchcraft to dominate their husbands or influence fertility outcomes, particularly when a husband experiences illness, unemployment, or repeated misfortune (Aboderin, 2016; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001). In such cases, the accusation functions not merely as a claim of supernatural interference but as a social tool to assert authority, blame, or control within the household.

Witchcraft accusations also intersect with reproductive expectations and childbearing pressures. Research from some part of Tanzania and Malawi indicates that marital tension often intensifies when children fall ill, pregnancies fail, or infertility occurs, leading husbands or extended family members to blame wives through witchcraft narratives (Mesaki, 2009; Green, 2017). Such accusations exacerbate domestic conflict, leading in some cases to abandonment, divorce, or violence, and highlight how supernatural beliefs can reinforce structural gender inequalities within intimate relationships.

Economic factors further compound the link between witchcraft accusations and spousal conflict. Women who engage in trading, informal employment, or household financial management may be perceived as wielding disproportionate influence, particularly when husbands face financial setbacks. Studies from some communities in Kenya show that in households experiencing economic stress, wives are sometimes accused of witchcraft as a mechanism to reassert male authority and explain misfortune beyond the control of the couple (Nthiga, 2018).

From a critical perspective, witchcraft accusations in marital contexts are both symptomatic and constitutive of spousal conflict. They reflect existing tensions over gender roles, authority, and

responsibility while simultaneously exacerbating mistrust, hostility, and instability within marriages.

Witchcraft Beliefs And Husband–Wife Relations

Witchcraft beliefs play a significant role in shaping husband and wife relations in many African societies, influencing power dynamics, communication patterns, marital decision-making, and household stability. Far from being merely symbolic, these beliefs are embedded in everyday interactions and moral frameworks, affecting how spouses interpret misfortune, resolve conflicts, and negotiate authority within the household (Geschiere, 1997; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001).

In numerous contexts, witchcraft narratives are invoked to explain domestic tension, illness, infertility, or financial hardship. Husbands may perceive their wives as responsible for misfortunes, while wives may interpret their husbands' behaviors or failures through similar lenses of spiritual influence. For example, studies from some communities in Nigeria and Ghana document cases where some husbands have accused wives of using witchcraft to manipulate fertility outcomes, provoke illness, or control economic resources within the home (Aboderin, 2016; Federici, 2008). Conversely, some wives sometimes frame their husbands' abusive behaviors or economic mismanagement as the result of spiritual interference, illustrating how witchcraft beliefs mediate mutual interpretations of agency, culpability, and misfortune.

Witchcraft beliefs also reinforce gendered expectations and hierarchical roles within marriages. Women are often held accountable for maintaining household harmony, childbearing, and moral conduct. Failure to meet these expectations whether real or perceived can lead to accusations that not only strain marital relations but also legitimize coercive control or domestic violence. In some part of Tanzania and Malawi, ethnographic studies indicate that when children fall ill or households face economic hardship, wives are disproportionately blamed through witchcraft narratives thereby, exacerbating marital conflict and sometimes resulting in separation or divorce (Mesaki, 2009; Green, 2017).

Moreover, witchcraft beliefs intersect with economic and social changes to influence husband–wife relations. Women who participate in wage labor, trade, or other forms of economic autonomy may be perceived as challenging traditional male authority, and accusations of witchcraft may arise as a social mechanism to reassert patriarchal control (Nthiga, 2018). These dynamics illustrate how witchcraft beliefs operate both as explanatory models for misfortune and as tools of negotiation and social regulation within intimate relationships.

From a critical perspective, understanding the influence of witchcraft beliefs on husband wife relations requires recognizing their dual role: they reflect pre-existing social tensions and marital inequalities, and they simultaneously reproduce power asymmetries that disadvantage women.

Gendered Patterns In Witchcraft And Marital Dynamics

Witchcraft accusations and beliefs in African societies exhibit clear gendered patterns, particularly in the context of marriage, where marital dynamics intersect with cultural expectations, social roles, and power hierarchies. Women are disproportionately targeted within marital households, reflecting long-standing patriarchal norms that link female behavior, fertility, and economic activity to both domestic harmony and communal well-being (Geschiere, 1997; Federici, 2008).

Empirical research shows that wives are frequently accused of witchcraft in cases of marital tension, infertility, child mortality, or financial strain. In some parts of Malawi and Tanzania, such as women have been blamed for misfortune affecting their children or households, thus, reinforcing gendered expectations that place responsibility for reproductive and domestic outcomes squarely on women (Mesaki, 2009; Green, 2017). Similarly, in some part of Ghana and Nigeria, widows or economically independent wives are often accused of manipulating their husbands or households through supernatural means, particularly when challenging male authority or asserting autonomy (Aboderin, 2016; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001).

Men, by contrast, are less frequently accused of witchcraft within the marital context, highlighting the gendered asymmetry in vulnerability. When men are implicated, it is often in public or economic spheres rather than domestic life, suggesting that women's domestic roles render them more socially visible and morally accountable within marriage. This asymmetry reflects broader social constructions of power, where a women's behavior is closely monitored, and deviations from normative expectations are more readily interpreted as threatening or "unnatural" (Niehaus, 2012).

Gendered patterns also emerge in the ways accusations influence marital negotiation and conflict resolution. Witchcraft beliefs can serve as tools to reinforce male dominance, discipline wives, or control access to household resources. At the same time, accusations may be employed strategically by women to assert influence or explain perceived misfortune caused by husbands, further demonstrating that witchcraft discourse is embedded within reciprocal processes of marital power negotiation (Nthiga, 2018).

This analysis underscores that witchcraft accusations are not culturally neutral but are structured by gendered expectations and marital hierarchies. Addressing these dynamics requires interventions that combine legal protection, gender-sensitive marital counseling, and community education to challenge harmful beliefs while promoting equitable spousal relations and safeguarding women's rights.

Roles Of Legal Systems And Community Responses

The persistence of witchcraft accusations against women in some part of Africa underscores the complex interaction between legal frameworks, customary practices, and community responses. While witchcraft beliefs are culturally entrenched, the extent and impact of accusations are

mediated by the strength, accessibility, and enforcement of legal systems, as well as by the attitudes and interventions of local communities. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the social, economic, and gendered consequences of such accusations.

Legal Systems

Legal frameworks across Africa vary in their treatment of witchcraft-related accusations. In some countries, statutory laws criminalize harmful witchcraft accusations, assault, or forced displacement, thus recognizing the violation of human rights and women's dignity. For instance, the Nigerian Penal Code and the Criminal Code provide for prosecution of acts associated with witchcraft accusations that result in harm or deprivation (Mesaki, 2009). Similarly, Ghana's Criminal Code allows for legal recourse against defamation, assault, or property dispossession linked to witchcraft allegations (ActionAid, 2012).

However, enforcement of such laws often faces significant challenges. Legal pluralism, that is the coexistence of customary and statutory law, frequently undermines women's protection, particularly in rural areas where customary authorities retain primary influence over community disputes. Widows, divorced women, and older women accused of witchcraft may find themselves excluded from formal justice systems due to limited access, social stigma, or deference to traditional dispute resolution mechanisms (Aboderin, 2016; Niehaus, 2012).

Community Responses

Communities play a dual role, both in perpetuating and mitigating the impact of witchcraft accusations. On the one hand, accusations are often legitimized and enforced through social norms, family councils, and the endorsement of local religious or traditional leaders. In parts of northern Ghana, for example, "witch camps" are tolerated by communities as spaces for containing accused women, reflecting a culturally sanctioned response to perceived spiritual threats, but simultaneously exposing women to extreme deprivation and marginalization (ActionAid, 2012).

On the other hand, community-based interventions can provide protective and rehabilitative mechanisms. Non -Governmental Organizations (NGOs), women's associations, and local advocacy groups have developed initiatives aimed at sensitizing communities, supporting accused women, and mediating conflicts without resorting to exclusion or violence example 8 Women-Led Organizations Working to Keep Women Safe from Violence in United Kingdom. Programs in Malawi and Tanzania demonstrate that educational campaigns, mediation by respected elders, and the integration of gender-sensitive counseling can reduce the frequency and severity of witchcraft accusations, while promoting awareness of women's rights and equitable household dynamics (Green, 2017; Mesaki, 2009).

Synthesis

The interplay between legal systems and community responses shows that addressing witchcraft accusations requires a multilevel approach. Statutory protections should be enforced consistently, while customary practices and local beliefs should be engaged through culturally sensitive interventions. Legal reform, combined with community education, mediation, and social protection, is essential for reducing the vulnerability of women, safeguarding their rights, and promoting social cohesion. Failure to integrate both legal and communal dimensions risks perpetuating the cycle of accusation, marginalization, and gendered injustice.

Conclusions

This paper has shown that witchcraft accusations in Africa are deeply intertwined with gendered social structures, marital dynamics, and cultural beliefs, which disproportionately target women particularly widows, divorced women, and those who challenge normative gender roles. Within marriage, witchcraft beliefs influence spousal relations, affect household authority, and exacerbate conflicts related to fertility, economic responsibility, and domestic harmony. The analysis of case studies from Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, Tanzania, and Kenya demonstrates that accusations are not random cultural phenomena but socially and economically patterned mechanisms for regulating behavior, asserting control, and redistributing resources.

Gendered patterns in accusations reveal that women bear the brunt of blame for misfortune within both family and community spheres. These practices intersect with structural inequalities, such as patriarchal norms, limited access to property rights, weak legal enforcement, and economic vulnerability, creating environments in which accusations can lead to social exclusion, violence, and poverty. Witchcraft beliefs, while culturally significant, are frequently mobilized as instruments of oppression, particularly against women whose marital status or social behavior challenges existing hierarchies.

Legal systems and community responses demonstrate both promise and limitation. Statutory laws criminalizing harmful accusations exist in some countries, yet enforcement remains inconsistent due to legal pluralism and the pervasive influence of customary authorities. Community interventions, including mediation, education, and advocacy, show that culturally sensitive approaches can reduce the harm of witchcraft accusations, though these efforts require scaling and institutional support.

The persistence of witchcraft accusations highlights that addressing them is not merely a cultural challenge but a critical human rights and development issue. Protecting women's rights, promoting equitable spousal relations, and fostering inclusive community practices are essential for social cohesion and sustainable development in African societies.

Recommendations

1. Governments should enforce laws criminalizing violence, harassment, and property dispossession linked to witchcraft accusations.
2. There should be reform on inheritance and land tenure laws to ensure widows, divorced women, and single women retain secure access to property.
3. There should be constant conduct of culturally sensitive campaigns to educate communities about the harmful effects of witchcraft accusations.
4. Women's economic independence should be promoted in order to reduce dependency and susceptibility to accusations.
5. Regional bodies like the African Union and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to integrate witchcraft-related gender violence into women's rights frameworks should equally be encouraged.

References:

Aboderin, I. (2016). *Intergenerational support and old age in Africa*. Routledge.

Action Aid. (2012). *Condemned without trial: Women and witchcraft accusations in Ghana*.

Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. (2001). *Millennial capitalism and the culture of neoliberalism*. Duke University Press.

Federici, S. (2008). *Witches, witch-hunting, and women*. PM Press.

Geschiere, P. (1997). *The modernity of witchcraft: Politics and the occult in postcolonial Africa*. University of Virginia Press.

Green, C. (2017). Gender, divorce, and witchcraft accusations in southern Malawi. *Africa Today*, 63(4), 89–108.

Mesaki, S. (2009). Witchcraft and the law in Tanzania. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology,* 1(8), 132–138.

Niehaus, I. (2012). Witchcraft and a life in the new South Africa. Cambridge University Press.

Nthiga, K. (2018). Witchcraft, gender, and social change in Kenya. African Studies Review, 61(3), 67–85.