

# Witchcraft and Sorcery among Office Bearers: The Case of Private Universities in Uganda

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## ABSTRACT

Having realized that witchcraft and sorcery are a reality in Uganda yet many academicians are reluctant to write and publicly talk about it, the researchers developed interest. The current study was carried out in five private universities located in Central Uganda. Given the nature of the study, social desirability bias was anticipated, thus, indirect oral interviews were used. This method involves collecting information by speaking with individuals who possess indirect knowledge of a subject or topic. This method depends on individuals who have heard about the issue, witnessed related events, or acquired secondhand knowledge through stories, rumors, or shared accounts. Taking a qualitative approach, only 28 people were interviewed to provide qualitative responses to the questions related to the prevalence of witchcraft in universities among office bearers, as well as its causes. The majority of the respondents reported that despite the fact that all office bearers are highly educated, witchcraft prevails to a large extent. Witchcraft is however more pronounced than sorcery. They reported that many Ugandans are religiously syncretistic; believing in imported religions as well as in the indigenous African religion though they don't want to disclose it. The reasons cited for the prevalence of witchcraft among office bearers were job insecurity, fighting for promotion, fighting the perceived enemies/saboteurs, as well as family background or peer influence. The study concludes that although witchcraft is taken as a secret issue which many people usually avoid talking of publicly, it is highly practiced in universities. The belief is that although God is extremely powerful, he usually takes long to answer prayers. Because of this, many people resort to witchcraft which is believed to work quickly, propelled by spirits of various types such as the jinns, mayembe, mizimu, lubaale, biteega, bikumpuli, etcetera. The witchdoctors who are believed to be experts in causing these spirits to work are usually consulted by clients. In the private universities, job insecurity, the fight for positions and promotions, family backgrounds of the office bearers as well as the desire to harm the perceived enemies on the job, have caused witchcraft and sorcery to prevail. The study recommends that the Parliament of Uganda amends the law on witchcraft so as to make it easy for the perpetrators of witchcraft and sorcery to be punished by law. Otherwise as the law stands now, proving crimes of witchcraft is hard and hence the witch and sorcerers many times go un-punished. Secondly, employees in private universities need to be assured of their jobs; let university founders ensure that the employees are secure, without always being threatened with statements like, "You will be sacked". Mindset change is also necessary so that people can properly use the intelligence God gave them by for example working hard and strictly following organizational policies. This can do a lot in causing people to be safe on their jobs, be loved and promoted, instead of relying on witchcraft. Therefore, this paper does not praise the power of witchcraft and does not encourage it; it only highlights the extent of its existence in universities. Whether it really works as believed or not, should be another study to be carried out preferably with large samples.

**Keywords:** Witchcraft; Sorcery; Office bearers; Private universities

## INTRODUCTION

In this study, witchcraft means the use of mysterious forces or powers with good intentions, such as seeking promotion, being secure on the job, being loved etc, although there is a possibility to get the opposite of what one had hoped. Sorcery on the other hand is done with evil intentions only, such as causing sickness, accidents, job loss etc to the victims. Witchcraft and sorcery in Uganda have deep roots in the country's diverse cultures, traditions, and belief systems. Unlike the Western concept of black magic or malevolent forces, witchcraft in Uganda, as in many African societies, is seen as a multifaceted element of the spiritual realm, where supernatural powers can be wielded for both beneficial and harmful purposes. For centuries, witchcraft has

been intertwined with the traditional religious practices of various ethnic groups in Uganda. It is closely linked to a spiritual worldview that includes belief in unseen forces and ancestral spirits. Ethnic communities such as the Baganda, Bakiga, Basoga, and Banyankole traditionally held that there is a balance between good and evil forces, with witchcraft serving as a tool to influence or manipulate these powers (Kirwana-Ssozi, 2000).

In pre-colonial Uganda, witchcraft was seen as a form of power controlled by specific individuals, known as witches or sorcerers. These practitioners were believed to have the ability to harness spiritual energy, affecting the lives of others, either for personal gain, to protect the community, or to inflict harm. Witchcraft was regarded as both a divine and dangerous gift; some witches had the power to heal or protect their people, while others could curse, cause illness, or even bring death. Witchcraft was often closely associated with other spiritual practices, such as healing and divination. Traditional healers and diviners, referred to as “Nganzi” in Luganda and other local languages, played a crucial role in Ugandan societies. They diagnosed illnesses, predicted future events, and offered protection from evil spirits or curses. While these healers were respected members of society, they were also believed to be capable of using their knowledge for harmful purposes, such as casting curses or manipulating others.

During Uganda's colonial era under British rule (1894–1962), the perception of witchcraft underwent a shift as the colonial authorities introduced Western-style Christianity, education, and legal systems. Witchcraft was regarded by colonial officials as superstitious and backward, leading to the growing vilification of traditional beliefs.

With the spread of Christianity, particularly through missionary efforts, witchcraft became increasingly associated with evil and demonic forces. Christian missionaries and colonial authorities promoted the idea that belief in witchcraft conflicted with Christian teachings, portraying such practices as primitive or sinful. As a result, witchcraft was criminalized during this period, with laws prohibiting its practice. However, Christianity provided a framework for understanding good and evil in spiritual terms, which allowed certain traditional beliefs, including witchcraft, to be reinterpreted within a Christian worldview. The British colonial government often viewed witchcraft as a threat to the social order, using it as a justification for exerting control over local populations. This led to a mix of suppression and selective recognition of witchcraft, particularly when practices were seen as disruptive or dangerous to colonial authority. After Uganda gained independence in 1962, belief in witchcraft persisted, especially in rural areas. The development of institutions such as schools, hospitals, and churches led to a division between traditional and modern forms of knowledge. While urban areas embraced Western ideas and practices, witchcraft remained a significant part of rural Ugandan life. Many people continued to seek the help of traditional healers for physical and spiritual issues, and belief in witchcraft remained both a source of comfort and fear. Periods of political instability, such as the regimes of Idi Amin (1971–1979) and Milton Obote (1966–1971; 1980–1985), further fueled witchcraft beliefs. During Amin's regime, paranoia and fear of political opponents led to accusations of witchcraft being used as a form of political warfare. Witchcraft was sometimes perceived as a tool for political manipulation or as the cause behind the mysterious deaths of political figures (Abbo, Okello, Ekblad, Waako, & Musisi, 2008).

In modern-day Uganda, witchcraft continues to influence society, despite modernization, urbanization, and the influence of religion. The practice of witchcraft remains contentious, especially when accusations lead to social unrest, violence, or even murder. One notorious aspect of witchcraft in Uganda is the practice of "sacrificial killings" or "ritual murders," where individuals—often children—are killed for their body parts, which are believed to bring wealth, power, or protection. The belief that witches can use human body parts for power has led to tragic incidents, including the killing of children or elderly people accused of witchcraft. In some regions of Uganda, accusations of witchcraft result in mob justice. People accused of being witches may be beaten, ostracized, or even killed by angry mobs. These individuals, often elderly women, may be blamed for misfortunes like illness, death, or crop failure. Witch hunts and trials sometimes occur in local communities, where those accused are judged without formal legal processes or representation. Witchcraft remains illegal under Ugandan law, though the judicial system struggles to address witchcraft-related crimes due to the cultural significance of the practice and the challenges in proving such accusations. The Witchcraft Act of 1957, inherited from the colonial era, criminalizes witchcraft, but enforcement is inconsistent. Many people still turn to traditional healers or spiritual leaders for assistance with health problems, personal issues, or financial struggles (Byaruhanga-Akiiki, 1995).

It is widely believed that witches use objects, words, and gestures to inflict supernatural harm, or that they possess an inherent power to do so. Hutton suggests that both types of practitioners often coexist in the same culture, with the two sometimes overlapping; someone with innate power may use material objects to channel that power. While most cultures regard witchcraft as a deliberate act, some Indigenous groups in Africa and Melanesia believe witches carry a substance or evil spirit within their bodies that compels them to harm others. In some accounts, these substances are said to act independently, even when the witch is sleeping or unaware. For example, the Dobu people believe that women cast harmful magic while asleep, while men do so while awake. Additionally, in cultures where supernatural powers are attributed to substances within the body, these substances can be viewed as good, bad, or morally neutral. Hutton distinguishes between those who unintentionally cast the evil eye and those who do so intentionally, defining only the latter as witches (Kayindu, 2017).

Despite the influence of Christianity and Islam, both of which condemn witchcraft as evil, the belief in witchcraft persists. Many Ugandans practice both Christianity and traditional beliefs simultaneously, and some religious leaders offer services like exorcisms or "witchcraft deliverance." Additionally, new religious movements, such as Pentecostal churches, have also confronted witchcraft, with some congregations focusing on freeing individuals from witchcraft and demonic forces. Therefore, witchcraft in Uganda has a long history, shaped by indigenous beliefs, colonial influence, and contemporary issues. It continues to be an important aspect of Uganda's cultural and spiritual landscape, especially in rural areas, and plays a role in both individual lives and social dynamics. While modern legal systems and religious institutions challenge and discourage witchcraft, its influence remains, resulting in complex interactions between traditional beliefs, modern governance, and societal norms.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the fact that witchcraft is illegal as well as immoral in Uganda, based on media reports as well as the researchers' casual observations, this practice seems to be high not only among the illiterates but also among the elites. The belief is that certain supernatural powers which are manipulated by the experts known as the witch or witchdoctors, can cause positive or negative changes in one's life. The witch can mix certain herbs, certain body parts of animals and birds and sometimes add in blood, to cause this concoction to bring blessings or curses and problems to the victims. Because of this, at times children are abducted to be sacrificed. The Uganda Police for example recorded 22 sacrifices in 2019 and the figures jumped to 45 in 2020 and 65 in 2021. Most victims of such "ritual sacrifices" are children, apparently because they are easier to abduct and are seen as "pure" and so of "higher ritual value. Their eyes are poked out, nose, tongues and more often genitals are cut off for ritual practices. Superstitions lead people to seek help from witch doctors, who in turn offer weird prescriptions, including human sacrifices to turn around their luck (Uganda Police Force's Annual Crime Report for 2021).

As for the elites especially those with offices at places of work, it is alleged that some of them use spiritual powers mainly got from witchdoctors to safeguard their jobs. Others use such powers to cause harm to their job opponents, thus causing them on and off sickness, accidents, mysterious deaths, being hated by their bosses, etcetera. Whereas these beliefs cannot be scientifically proved, we need not ignore the fact that Ugandans believe in both Science and religion. It is in religion where such beliefs are rooted. Uganda national leaders always take oaths while holding holy books (Bible or Quran) and it is these holy books which teach that witchcraft exists (Kayindu, 2017). Upon this background, the researchers investigated witchcraft and sorcery among office bearers in private universities in Central Uganda with regard to its level of existence and causes.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Witchcraft is widespread across Europe, Africa, South Asia, Polynesia, Melanesia, and North America. Additionally, some Indigenous cultures in Africa and North America believe that witches harm people by inserting cursed objects, like small bones or ashes, into their victim's body. In certain cultures, witches are also believed to use human body parts for magical purposes, and they are often thought to murder children for these parts. In Europe, cases of women killing their children, often due to postpartum psychosis, were sometimes interpreted as succumbing to diabolical temptation. Witches are believed to operate in secret, sometimes alone,

and other times with other witches. According to Hutton, witches are thought to gather at night, when humans are inactive and vulnerable in their sleep. During these gatherings, witches are often believed to break social norms by engaging in acts such as cannibalism, incest, and nudity. In some regions, it is believed that witches can shapeshift into animals, or that their spirit leaves their body and takes animal form, a practice linked to shamanism. A widespread belief is that witches have an animal helper, which is considered to be an evil spirit or demon in animal form. As researchers have studied other traditions, they have broadened the concept of familiars to include spirit-animals that are part of the witch's soul. Necromancy, the practice of summoning spirits of the dead for divination or prophecy, is also associated with witchcraft, though it can sometimes involve raising the dead for other purposes (Byaruhanga-Akiiki, 1995).

In societies that believe in witchcraft, various methods are believed to thwart or counteract it. One common approach is protective or counter-magic, with cunning folk being experts in these practices. This includes using charms, talismans, amulets, anti-witch marks, witch bottles, and burying objects like horse skulls inside buildings. Another way to cure bewitchment is to persuade or force the alleged witch to lift their spell. In many cases, people attempt to stop witchcraft by physically punishing the alleged witch—through banishment, wounding, torture, or even killing. However, in most societies, a formal legal remedy is preferred over private action, leading to the prosecution and, if found guilty, the execution of the accused witches.

According to Ssekamwa (1967), African witchcraft is closely linked to spirits. In Buganda society, these spirits are classified into three types. The first group is called *Lubaale*, which consists of powerful spirits that serve as intermediaries between God and humans. This concept can be better understood by comparing it to Christian saints, some of whom are believed to have more influence and power, such as Mother Mary, St. Peter, and St. Theresa (the Little Flower of Jesus). Examples of *Lubaale* include Mukasa, Kawumpuli, Dungu, Kibuuka, Kiwanuka, Wamala, Musisi, Muwanga, Namalere, and Wannema. The second category of spirits is *Mayembe*. Traditionally, *Mayembe* were associated with acquiring wealth and good fortune, and they were referred to as *Nambaga*. These spirits were believed to bring prosperity, good luck, and numerous children to their possessors. However, in modern times, *Mayembe* has been split into two groups. The second division, known as *Kifaalu*, is linked to a more sinister type of power. The possessor of *Kifaalu* can send these spirits to harm others. The *Kifaalu* spirits were introduced by people from Bukoba in Tanzania, Bwamba in Toro, and possibly parts of Kenya. They became more widely recognized after World War II. The third group of spirits is *Mizimu*, which are the spirits of ordinary deceased individuals. These spirits may manifest through people, similar to *Lubaale* and *Mayembe* spirits, but it is only the *Lubaale* and *Mayembe* that are called *Nambaga* that require human mediums. The *Mayembe* known as *Kifaalu* are typically purchased and stored in a home for the benefit of their owner. The owner typically uses these spirits to harm individuals they despise or wish to hurt, often driven by sadistic impulses.

Witchcraft has for long been used in Africa in many fields including politics. During the Maji Maji rebellion in 1905 in Tanzania involved witchcraft. In Uganda, the remnants of the UNLA and other dissidents formed the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces under Alice Auma, a spirit medium possessed by the Lakwena, or Messenger. Alice was a prophet, a warrior priestess initially bent on fomenting national unity through 'purification', who marched to within 80 miles of Kampala before being finally defeated and fleeing into Kenya. It is her cousin Joseph Kony, on whom the Lakwena—the Spirit—then fell.

A common belief exists that individuals can acquire satanic power from the evil entities residing in an underwater kingdom. In Uganda, many hold the view that these underwater agents appease evil spirits by offering human sacrifices, and in return, the devil grants them wealth, elevating these agents above others in the community. While the phrasing may vary, it is generally believed that power is gained by interacting with "underwater" agents who live among the community. These agents are thought to exchange people's bodies or souls for money or other forms of worldly success. Once this exchange occurs, the sacrificed individual is believed to be taken to an underwater kingdom, where they lose all connections to their previous life and the human community. Witches are often believed to cast curses, which are spells or magical words and gestures intended to cause harm through supernatural means. Curses may involve inscribing symbols or sigils on objects to imbue them with magical powers, binding or burning a wax or clay figure (poppet) to affect someone, or using herbs, animal parts, and other substances to create potions or poisons. Witchcraft has been blamed for various misfortunes, with illness or death, especially among adults, children, or animals, being the most



common harm attributed to witches in Europe. Ailments like impotence in men, infertility in women, and a lack of milk in cows were particularly linked to witchcraft. Diseases that were not well understood were more likely to be blamed on witches (Abbo, Okello, Ekblad, Waako, & Musisi, 2008).

In cultures around the world, it is commonly believed that witches use something from their target's body, such as hair, nail clippings, clothing, or bodily waste, to work their magic. These beliefs are widespread across Europe, Africa, South Asia, Polynesia, Melanesia, and North America. Additionally, some Indigenous cultures in Africa and North America believe that witches harm people by inserting cursed objects, like small bones or ashes, into their victim's body. In certain cultures, witches are also believed to use human body parts for magical purposes, and they are often thought to murder

In Uganda, section 2 and 3 of the Witchcraft Act provide as follows: "For the purposes of this Act, "witchcraft" does not encompass genuine spirit worship or the legitimate manufacture, supply, or sale of traditional medicines. This suggests that spirit worship or the production, distribution, or sale of traditional medicines is considered witchcraft unless it is genuine. Further, it is stated that (1) Any person who threatens another, either directly or indirectly, with death through witchcraft or any other supernatural means shall be committing an offense and, upon conviction, may face imprisonment for life. (2) Any person who threatens, directly or indirectly, to inflict disease or physical harm on another, or to cause harm to livestock or property of any kind through witchcraft or other supernatural means shall be committing an offense and, upon conviction, may be sentenced to imprisonment for a term not exceeding ten years.

Section (3) states that Any person who practices witchcraft or claims to be a witch, whether on one or more occasions, shall be guilty of an offense and, upon conviction, may face imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years. However, Section 3 (3) of the Witchcraft Act does not define what specific actions constitute witchcraft. As a result, it lacks sufficient clarity for legal discussions

As people are practicing witchcraft, they go to witchdoctors who charge a lot of money from them. These witchdoctors at times practice ritual murder to convince their clients that they will be very safe on their jobs after offering such "heavy" sacrifices (of children, goats, cows, bulls and sheep. It is however not clear why pigs are not sacrificed yet they are so fatty. In Sub-Saharan Africa, ritual killings and human sacrifice remain ongoing practices despite being illegal, as outlined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other human rights frameworks. Countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Swaziland, Liberia, Tanzania, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Mali still witness such activities. These practices involve the harmful act of removing body parts, blood, or tissue from living children, often leading to their deaths. These children are frequently abducted for such rituals. According to the African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN), nearly 3,000 children are reported missing every year, though the actual number may be even higher. A UNICEF report highlighted 13 cases of child sacrifice in 2014 and 2015, with six of the 2015 incidents linked to elections. The risk of child sacrifice increases around election times, as some prominent Ugandans have been persuaded to partake in the practice, believing that sacrificing a child will help them secure a political seat.

Uganda is a home to several faiths some of which have strange beliefs and practices. Religious cults are in existence and some officials in government as well as in other public offices belong to these cults. Without the knowledge of the believers, these cults usually use witchcraft in their activities and at times give it to their followers to take to offices.

Studies on witchcraft in Africa have explored a range of causes, including cultural, social, political, and economic factors. A number of research efforts have been carried out across the continent, especially in areas where witchcraft beliefs are strongly rooted in traditional cultures. Some examples of these studies include: In 2006, Damas conducted a study in Tanzania titled "*Witchcraft, Sorcery and Medicine: A Study of Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Tanzania.*" The research explored how witchcraft is often used as a coping mechanism in societies facing social and economic difficulties. Damas discovered that economic challenges, unemployment, and poverty were significant drivers of witchcraft accusations in Tanzanian communities. People often resorted to witchcraft to address personal or family issues, with those accused believed to possess magical powers capable of either causing harm or healing. The study also highlighted how societal tensions, such as jealousy and competition for resources, contributed to witchcraft beliefs. Also, Mwaura's 2012

research, *“Witchcraft and the Power of Women in Rural Kenya,”* examined witchcraft perceptions and practices in rural Kenya. The study focused on women who were frequently accused of witchcraft and explored the social consequences of such accusations. Mwaura found that gender inequality and the marginalization of women were major factors behind witchcraft beliefs. Women, especially those seen as powerful or independent, were more likely to be accused. The study also indicated that witchcraft accusations were sometimes employed as a means of social control, limiting women's autonomy and challenging their roles within families or communities (as cited in Kayindu, 2017).

Pool's 2004 study, *“The Role of Witchcraft in Economic and Social Change in Ghana,”* examined how economic changes, particularly modernization and urbanization, were contributing to a rise in witchcraft accusations in rural Ghana. Pool argued that the perception of witchcraft was closely tied to the perceived failure of traditional social structures to provide stability in a rapidly changing society. He suggested that as people lost confidence in these traditional systems, they began to attribute their misfortunes to supernatural causes, leading to the scapegoating of individuals suspected of practicing witchcraft. Relatedly, Behrends (2010) conducted a study titled *“Witchcraft in Northern Nigeria: Social and Cultural Contexts.”* This research focused on the connection between witchcraft accusations and social and political factors in northern Nigeria. Behrends found that witchcraft beliefs were often intertwined with local power struggles and social dynamics. Wealthy or politically influential individuals were sometimes accused of witchcraft by rivals who viewed them as threats. Accusations were frequently used as a means to discredit political opponents and diminish their social status. Behrends also highlighted the role of urbanization and the breakdown of traditional authority as factors contributing to the increase in witchcraft accusations.

In his 2005 study *“Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa,”* Adam Ashforth explored the role of witchcraft in post-apartheid South Africa. He found that witchcraft accusations were particularly common in rural areas, where they were often linked to poverty, unemployment, and social alienation. Ashforth argued that witchcraft beliefs were a response to the collapse of traditional social structures and the challenges people faced in a changing political and economic environment. He framed witchcraft as a social phenomenon that served as a form of commentary, expressing dissatisfaction with modernity, government institutions, and societal changes.

A common theme across many studies is that economic hardships, such as poverty, unemployment, and competition for resources, are significant drivers of witchcraft accusations. Witchcraft is often employed as a tool for social control, with accusations used to diminish the status or power of individuals, particularly women and marginalized groups. In these studies, the belief in spiritual forces—whether divine, ancestral, or supernatural—is central to understanding witchcraft. It is frequently viewed as a way to explain misfortune, illness, or societal issues. Research from Kenya and other African nations often highlights the gender dynamics in witchcraft accusations, where women, especially those who are perceived as powerful, independent, or defiant of traditional norms, are disproportionately targeted. In conclusion, the studies conducted in various African countries reveal that witchcraft beliefs are influenced by a mix of economic, social, political, and cultural factors. Often, witchcraft accusations serve to explain societal misfortunes or difficulties, and the practice is tied to power struggles and the pursuit of control. To understand the root causes of witchcraft, it is essential to consider the broader societal context, including poverty, gender inequality, and the erosion of traditional social structures. Whereas these studies are relevant, none of them is on university office bearers in Uganda, hence the current study.

## METHODOLOGY

This study targeted office bearers. These were the people holding offices, such as the secretaries, heads of department, academic deans, as well as the top administrators of the universities. It was a qualitative study and the respondents were selected from five universities in Central Uganda. This sub region was purposively selected because the majority of the universities in Uganda have branches in Central Uganda. There are also many universities built in Central Uganda and some of them were founded by business partners and individual businessmen (NCHE, 2023), who are likely not to value employees' job security. In addition, the competition for jobs in Central Uganda is too stiff because of the very many graduates, hence a likelihood of the existence of witchcraft among office bearers. Indirect oral interviews were used among 28 respondents. Ten of these

were secretaries of the university managers. The researchers also used casual discussions with sixteen lecturers on the topic of witchcraft in universities without revealing to them that it was a study being carried out. In addition, two medicine men were interviewed. Secondary data was got from newspapers and law reports. Data collection rotated on two elements namely: The prevalence of witchcraft in private universities, as well as its causes. Thematic analysis of data was used.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Prevalence of witchcraft

Out of the 26 people indirectly interviewed on the perceived prevalence of witchcraft among office bearers in private universities of Uganda, the majority of them indicated that it prevails to a large extent as shown in table 1.

Table 1 showing the perceived prevalence of witchcraft among office bearers in private universities of Uganda N=28

| Level             | Number    | Percentage   |
|-------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Very large extent | 03        | 10.7         |
| Large extent      | 13        | 46.43        |
| Small extent      | 07        | 25           |
| Very small extent | <b>05</b> | <b>17.86</b> |

Source: Primary data, 2025.

Based on table 1, the majority of the respondents (46%) reported that witchcraft highly exists among office bearers in private universities. Whereas 25% reported that it exists to a small extent, 10% reported that it exists to a very large extent. However, 18% of the respondents said that it exists to a very small extent. These results therefore acknowledge the existence of witchcraft in private universities among office bearers, no matter the extent of its existence.

The oral informants however noted that witchcraft is more prevalent than sorcery.

Many respondents highlighted that witchcraft is taken as a secret thing; people go to witchdoctors secretly and many times they go to distant geographical areas where they are not known, or go to the witchdoctors at night so as not to be seen. Others use phone calls. They ring the witchdoctors, tell them the problem, send money on phone and then the witchdoctor sends his/her spirits to work on the problem. Indeed, one respondent said, “*Though people do not want to publicly declare being friendly to witchdoctors, many Ugandans including these office bearers go to them because they are believed to play a crucial role in the lives of many Ugandans, Witchdoctors offer a wide range of services, including medical care, protection from witchcraft, spiritual guidance, and economic support. Their influence is not only prominent in rural areas, but also in urban areas among the elites. People turn to witchdoctors for various reasons, influenced by health, social, economic, and spiritual needs, all of which are closely tied to the cultural and religious beliefs of the community. Many employees in universities come from families which believe in witchcraft. As a result of that family influence, even after getting jobs in universities do not expect them to turn away from witchcraft*”

Another respondent, a renowned witchdoctor at Buddo said, “*I have many customers in big offices including universities but I cannot disclose them... With these phones, people just sit in their offices and ring to me, asking for a solution for their perceived threats on the job. After sending them to be the money I have asked from them, I send my spirits like Namuzinda, Lubowa, Lukwata, Lukuula and Mulyabyokya to do the work and after a few days, one’s threats on the job would be no more*”. He however noted that some of the people on jobs have people indirectly fighting them, some of whom are also using witchcraft. He claimed that in such scenarios, the office bearer has to pay much money to the witchdoctors so that the spirits can mysteriously continuously fight for him/her.

One lecturer who claimed to be Born Again said, “*Although as a Born Again I do not practice witchcraft, the fact is that witchcraft practices in Uganda even among the educated sometimes involve physical objects, such*

*as herbs, animal parts, or charms, which are believed to have magical powers. These objects are used to curse someone or cause physical harm. For example, items like hair, nails, or personal belongings from the victim are often used to create magical potions or curses that bring suffering. Additionally, rituals may include the creation of effigies (puppets) representing the enemy, and harming or destroying these effigies is believed to affect the person they represent. Some people turn to witchcraft to manipulate spiritual forces against their perceived enemies. They may consult witchdoctors or traditional healers who can cast spells to turn spirits against individuals. This form of witchcraft may also involve sending evil spirits to torment or control the person, causing them mental distress, confusion, or physical illness. I know these things are done by some people, but they only portray people's ignorance"*

## **2. Causes of the use of witchcraft among office bearers in private universities of Uganda**

The findings on this were analysed under four themes that emerged during interaction with the respondents as follows:

### **2.1: Job insecurity**

Almost all interviewees claimed that job insecurity was the order of the day in private universities to the point that sometimes employees are sacked without even being given sacking letters. For the lecturers, sometimes the responsible Dean of the Faculty just removes one's name from the teaching timetable either on his/her own or after getting instructions from his/her bosses ("Orders from above"). And that marks the end of one's job. They reported that the trend is not far different from the office bearers as at times they find themselves replaced by new persons and the appointing authorities simply tell them that their issues will be looked into.

Because job insecurity is high yet it is not very easy to get another job after losing one, many office bearers use charms purportedly to protect their jobs. This was reiterated by one respondent who said, *"This is Uganda where jobs are very few. When facing job insecurity, individuals may feel they are not meeting societal expectations, which can lead to feelings of shame, frustration, or helplessness. In such cases, witchcraft may be viewed as a means to alleviate these pressures, either by seeking divine intervention or attempting to influence job-related outcomes. As uncertainty about their future grows, people may feel their circumstances are beyond their control. In these situations, witchcraft offers a way for individuals to regain a sense of power, allowing them to influence outcomes that seem controlled by external forces, such as decisions made by employers, HR departments, or economic factors. Others go to Christian Pastors and Muslim Sheiks. Unfortunately, even some of these are using witchcraft though they cannot disclose it to their followers; they claim to be using God's power"*

### **2.2: Fighting for positions and promotion**

One Born Again lecturer said that many people believe in the power of the devil instead of believing in God's power. She said, *"Many people believe that witchcraft can be used to influence the outcome of job interviews. This often involves seeking the help of witchdoctors or spiritual healers, who are thought to have the ability to cast spells, summon spirits, or provide protective charms to improve one's chances of getting hired. Some individuals may use charms or amulets to make a positive impression or stand out from other candidates. The belief is that these spiritual practices can sway the interviewer's perception, leading to a favorable outcome for the candidate. Additionally, individuals may turn to witchcraft to secure a promotion at work. In certain cases, people believe that spells or rituals can attract good fortune, remove obstacles, or weaken their rivals, allowing them to advance in their careers. This might involve using magical items such as herbs, animal parts, or talismans, which are believed to bring success or eliminate negative influences at the workplace. Witchdoctors or healers are sometimes consulted to invoke spirits or use charms to improve an individual's prospects for career progression"*.

Even many other respondents noted that as people are fighting for positions to become heads of department, Deans or big university managers, in addition to using propaganda, at times they seek the help of witchdoctors. One lecturer said, *"In certain cases, individuals may resort to witchcraft to gain favor with influential figures at work, such as their bosses or powerful colleagues. This could involve making sacrifices, performing spells, or requesting blessings from spirits to influence the employer or authority figure to offer a job or promotion."*



*The aim is to create a sense of favor or alignment with these powerful individuals, ensuring that one is viewed as the preferred choice for employment or career advancement”*

### **2.3: Family background or/and peer influence**

It was reported that family background in terms of poverty causes the office bearers to see their offices as saviours for themselves and to their relatives behind them and because of that, one respondent said “ *A person with such background can do whatever he/she believes can protect him/her on the job and the quick answer is usually witchcraft. If you tamper with his/her job, he/she can finish you through a road accident using witchcraft”*

It was also reported that some people are born in families which highly appreciate witchcraft, witchcraft becomes part and parcel of their lives, hence strong use of it even if they are highly educated. On this one female lecturer who said was an Acholi said, “*Many people despite their claims to be Christians or Muslims, highly practice witchcraft since they come from families which do that. Some of them even have family ancestral shrines where they gather as families or a clan on some days to worship their family spirits. In my society we call them Jok. Some of these office bearers do these things since they were nurtured into them by their parents”*

Another respondent who said was a Mukiga said, “*In Western Uganda, the Nyabingi cult is prevalent, with a significant number of people who believe in and worship the spirit of Nyabinghi, a deity that originated in Rwanda around 1800. Nyabinghi was considered a powerful force in daily life. Religious practices were carried out through a medium who communicated with the spirit of Nyabinghi. To appease her spirit, followers would offer gifts to the medium, who would negotiate with the spirit on their behalf. While there are designated mediums who communicate directly with Nyabinghi, ordinary people who are not leaders or official mediums can also become possessed by the spirit. The belief in this religion is particularly strong in southern Uganda and northern Rwanda, regions that were once part of the pre-colonial kingdom of Ndorwa. Even today, some people in positions of authority continue to practice Nyabingi cult rituals to maintain their jobs”*

### **2.4: Fighting the perceived enemies on the Job**

The respondents stated that witchcraft is believed to expedite promotions, helping individuals achieve career advancement more quickly. It is also thought that spiritual powers can safeguard one’s job position, ensuring they do not lose it to others.

Another female respondent said, “*In Uganda, since job insecurity exists, witchcraft is sometimes employed by individuals for self-protection, to gain power, or to take revenge on perceived enemies. The practice is deeply ingrained in cultural and traditional beliefs, where witchcraft is viewed as a potent means to influence or control events and people's lives. It is frequently used to place curses or cast spells, which are believed to bring harm, misfortune, or illness to the target. Curses can cause bad luck, disrupt relationships, or lead to failure in areas like health, wealth, or family. Witchdoctors or practitioners of witchcraft may use special rituals or incantations to invoke negative energies or spirits to afflict their enemies. Sorcery and witchcraft in Uganda are also used as tools of revenge, with individuals accusing others of sorcery in order to protect themselves or harm others. The belief in supernatural powers that can control or manipulate people's lives means witchcraft is sometimes seen as a means of social control, particularly in situations where people feel wronged or powerless. When individuals feel threatened or unable to defend themselves, they often seek the help of witchdoctors or spiritual healers. These practitioners are believed to have the ability to invoke spirits or cast powerful protection spells, which can be used not only for personal defense but also to harm perceived enemies. Seeking revenge is a common reason for consulting witchdoctors, especially when individuals feel that traditional legal or social solutions will not resolve their problems”*.

## **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study found out that witchcraft and sorcery are highly practiced by office bearers in private universities though nobody can disclose that he/she practices it. The oral respondents revealed that though witchcraft cannot be scientifically proved, it exists that is why even the laws of Uganda mention it. In Uganda, the Penal Code Act includes several provisions regarding witchcraft, focusing on offenses and penalties related to its practice.

In the Penal Code Act of Uganda, Section 132 makes the practice of witchcraft a criminal offense. It states that any person who causes harm, death, or injury to others through witchcraft can be prosecuted. If convicted, they may face penalties, including imprisonment. Witchcraft is considered illegal when it leads to harm or injury to others. Section 133 specifically addresses the act of cursing through witchcraft. It criminalizes threatening another person with death, disease, or harm using witchcraft or any supernatural means. Individuals found guilty of such offenses can be sentenced to imprisonment for up to life. Section 134 makes practicing witchcraft or claiming to be a witch a criminal offense. Anyone who practices witchcraft or presents themselves as a witch, whether occasionally or repeatedly is guilty of an offense. The penalty for conviction may be imprisonment for up to five years. Section 135 criminalizes false accusations of witchcraft. A person who falsely accuses someone of practicing witchcraft can face legal consequences, including imprisonment. These sections form part of Uganda's legal framework aimed at regulating and controlling the practice of witchcraft within society. The government criminalizes witchcraft-related activities that cause harm, death, or unjust accusations, reflecting its focus on maintaining public safety and social harmony.

The study reveals high rate of witchcraft in universities. Some people do it with good intentions, such as protecting their jobs since job insecurity is the order of the day in these private universities. This is not surprising because a job is like a life saviour; it is like a child's parent. Without a parent, the child is likely to suffer a lot and the same is true with an adult losing a job. In scenarios where Faculty Deans or Heads of Department are at times told to prepare lists of those to be sacked, and the sacked people go on cursing those they perceive to have caused them to lose jobs, witchcraft and sorcery become inevitable. The sacked people or those being threatened to lose jobs may not hesitate to send mysterious "fire" to their job tormentors, and the job tormentors cannot just sit to watch the mysterious "fire" consuming them; they do something to prevent that fire. Many times, acts of witchcraft, such as applying protective medicine in their bodies, buying or hiring spirits like jinns, , planting job protective medicine at the place of work, etc are done. As Isiko (2019) claims, at times sorcerers "arrest" the spirit of the victim and tie it in a pot or in an abandoned anti-hill, thus causing him or her to keep dosing almost all the time. The end result of this can be losing control while driving, hence an accident, or being perceived as an irresponsible person on the job and hence be demoted or sacked. This relates to Byaruhanga-Akiiki (1995)'s assertion that Indigenous African religion is growing stronger despite people's claims to be Muslims and Christians. He reiterated that the bones and skins of wild animals like lions, leopards etc (and sometimes the bones of dead people) are usually crushed and administered in people's bodies through cuts using razor blades as a form of protection against sorcery. People easily resort to sorcery because it is hard to be proved in courts of law, unlike fighting others using poison and guns. There is also a belief that although God is extremely powerful, He usually takes long to answer people's prayers probably because He gave us intelligence which we are supposed to use to prevent and solve problems (eg if you don't want to be bewitched, avoid over-conflicting with people). Besides, we tend to remember God during hard times. It is therefore not surprising that He also ignores us. Satan on the other hand, tends to answer people's prayers quickly after the fulfillment of certain conditions, such as offering sacrifices and paying money. The smell from fresh blood pleases him. He solves people's problems quickly so as to divert them from God and lure them into his kingdom. This partly explains why, some people, masquerading as lay Christians and Muslims and at times as Pastors and Sheikhs, use forces/powers derived from the "army men" of Satan.

Whereas these are mere beliefs and cannot be scientifically proved, we must not ignore the fact that human life does not entirely rely on science; beliefs are important as well. The God we highly cherish is rooted in people's beliefs and Science has never proved His existence. That highly cherished God, is, according to Islamic and Christian literature, the creator of Angels some of whom have armies they use to carry out their duties. Satan was at first an Angel of God and when he was chased from heaven, he came on earth with his army comprising of jinns, Amayembe, Ebitambo, Ebiteega, Ebikumpuli, Ebidandi etc. It is that army which some people consult through its mediums like the ancestral priests, priestesses, herbalists, etc. These mediums manipulate the spirits to act accordingly. Therefore, when an elite claims to be ignorant of the existence of mysterious powers of nature, that is an indicator that he or she is also ignorant of the law. Otherwise why did the Republic of Uganda put in place the Witchcraft Act?

The Baganda people of Central Uganda say, "Enjogeziyogezi etuuka nnyinimu ku muze" (somebody who talks openly usually hints on people's vices/immoral acts) and such people usually react angrily or violently,

thinking that one is talking about them as a way of insulting them. Relatedly, witchcraft and sorcery are generally perceived as immoral practices in Uganda and the perpetrators usually feel embarrassed when these things are talked or written about. Kayindu (2017)'s claim need not be ignored that many human beings are pretenders or hypocrites and should therefore not be taken for granted. At times, those who are usually heard condemning witchcraft or those doubting its existence are the ones who bewitch others on jobs.

The power of witchcraft cannot however be guaranteed. The 1905 Maji-Maji rebellion in Tanzania is among the examples. During this rebellion, the Tanzanian fighters were bathed in waters (maji) mixed with herbs supplied by a medicine man Kinjikitilengwale. The belief was that that water (maji) would repel German bullets and hence fail to shoot the Tanzanian fighters. It ended in tears on the part of Tanzanians as the medicine did not work and many Tanzanian rebels were shot dead. Even in marriages, a number of women bewitch their husbands and co-wives but at times the witchcraft does not work. Whereas sometimes these things work, at times they fail. Therefore, over reliance on witchcraft can be misleading.

The reasons cited for the high practice of witchcraft among office bearers in private universities included job insecurity, family background, and desire for promotion, as well as fighting the perceived enemies on the job. This relates to a study by **Olupot (2008)** in Uganda which explored the role of traditional medicine in Ugandan communities and found that witchdoctors are heavily relied upon for medical, social, and spiritual problems, particularly in rural areas. Uganda's society is strongly influenced by traditional beliefs. In rural Uganda, witchcraft and traditional healing are part of everyday life. For example, witchdoctors are consulted regularly for protection from spirits and to resolve disputes. This is reflected in the work of **Ssekamwa (1967)**, who noted that many communities in Uganda believe in the power of witchcraft and rely on witchdoctors for help with everything from physical ailments to social problems. There are numerous reports in Ugandan newspapers and media outlets detailing the role of witchdoctors in society. **The New Vision (2016)** reported on cases of people seeking witchdoctors for financial gain, where witchdoctors were accused of performing rituals to "help" individuals acquire wealth

The issue of in-fighting among office bearers as a cause of witchcraft was raised. This relates to many other studies carried out in Africa for example. As cited in Atim, and Osire-Tukei (2023), one early anthropological study by Hilda Kuper (1952) in South Africa examined witchcraft among the Zulu people, focusing on its effects on social relationships and employment. Kuper found that accusations of witchcraft were common in communities facing social or economic strain. Witches were believed to have the ability to cause harm, including destroying people's jobs, businesses, or livelihoods. In these cases, individuals might be socially excluded or lose their jobs as a result of such accusations. The study also addressed the role of witchcraft fear as a mechanism for social control within families and communities. Another study, *Witchcraft, Power, and Politics: Exploring the Relationship between Witchcraft Beliefs and Economic Development in Contemporary Africa* (2007) by Mary L. McDonald, analyzed the role of witchcraft beliefs in shaping economic outcomes in modern African societies, particularly in the workplace. McDonald argued that witchcraft beliefs are often invoked to explain economic misfortune, such as job loss or business failure. Accusations of witchcraft can directly impact a person's career, leading to job insecurity, suspension, or even termination. In some instances, those accused of witchcraft might be marginalized or barred from working, increasing their economic vulnerability. Similarly, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1999) studied the rise of witchcraft accusations in post-apartheid South Africa, focusing on their effects on employment and economic activities. The Comaroffs explored how witchcraft accusations became increasingly associated with wealth and success during the post-apartheid era. Accusations were often directed at individuals perceived as prosperous, particularly in business or professional fields. This highlighted a larger conflict between traditional beliefs and the evolving economic landscape in South Africa. Witchcraft accusations could result in job loss, especially when a person was viewed as too successful or influential in the workplace.

The study findings also relate to Djeremai (2015) who conducted a study in Cameroon, exploring how witchcraft beliefs influenced professional success or failure, particularly in the context of employment. Djeremai found that witchcraft accusations could affect a person's ability to maintain or advance in their career. Those accused of witchcraft often faced workplace discrimination, with employers hesitant to hire or promote them. The study also suggested that witchcraft accusations were more likely when employees showed exceptional success or defied expectations, indicating that witchcraft was used as an explanation for

unexplained professional achievements. Even Karen Flint's study, *Witchcraft, Gender, and the Politics of the Job Market in Urban Zimbabwe* (2011), examined the gendered nature of witchcraft accusations, particularly regarding how women in the workforce were impacted. Flint's research highlighted how women, particularly in urban areas where traditional beliefs clashed with modern economic practices, were disproportionately accused of witchcraft. These accusations were often fueled by professional jealousy or competition in the workplace. Women seen as successful or holding influential positions were especially vulnerable to being accused of using witchcraft to secure their jobs or maintain their success.

As the oral respondents noted that some people cause the mysterious death of others on jobs such as through accidents by using witchcraft, this appears similar to Isiko (2019)'s claims that many Ugandans, such as the Basoga witches can send their harmful medicine through objects that may be living or non-living. For example, a pigeon (engyibwa) is a well-known bird used by sorcerers in Busoga to take poisonous medicine to the homes of perceived enemies. And because of this, pigeons are rarely kept by Basoga. Snakes can also be used. This is the reason why a snake bite cannot be taken as an accident. Bulogo is attributed to be the cause of accidents among the Basoga. This is supposedly the reason why some people involved in the same motor accident may die yet others survive without any scratch. The sorcerers are also said to manipulate traditional medicinal power so that somebody is attacked by a wild animal.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that although witchcraft is taken as a secret issue which many people usually avoid talking of publicly, it is highly practiced in universities. The belief is that although God is extremely powerful, he usually takes long to answer prayers. Because of this, many people resort to witchcraft which is believed to work quickly, propelled by spirits of various types such as the jinns, mayembe, mizimu, lubaale, biteega, bikumpuli, etcetera. The witchdoctors who are believed to be experts in causing these spirits to work are usually consulted by clients. In the private universities, job insecurity, the fight for positions and promotions, family backgrounds of the office bearers as well as the desire to harm the perceived enemies on the job, have caused witchcraft and sorcery to prevail.

## Recommendations

With the emergence of witchcraft in universities, the study recommends that the Parliament of Uganda amends the law on witchcraft so as to make it easy for the perpetrators of witchcraft and sorcery to be punished by law. Otherwise as the law stands now, proving crimes of witchcraft is hard and hence the witch and sorcerers many times go un-punished.

Secondly, employees in private universities need to be assured of their jobs; let university founders ensure that the employees are secure, without always being threatened with statements like, "You will be sacked". When people are assured of job security, they can have a peace of mind and hence reduce the job-related witchcraft.

Thirdly, mind-set change is necessary.

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