

# Are the Occurrences of Witchcraft and Superstition in Swahili Literature a Part of African Philosophy?

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the issues of witchcraft and superstition within African philosophy by referencing works of Swahili literature. Its specific aim is to examine how different societies perceive the role of witchcraft and superstition, focusing on the foundations of indigenous culture. Primary data were collected from the library through careful reading. A purposive sampling technique was used to select three genres of written literature: epic poetry, novels, and drama. These texts were deemed suitable for fulfilling the article's objective due to their distinctiveness. Some other texts were referenced occasionally to support and validate the primary data. The findings reveal that witchcraft and superstition are integral to social and spiritual arrangements rather than core aspects of philosophy itself. Witchcraft is not considered an African philosophy but is embedded in the culture and worldview. Likewise, African philosophy treats witchcraft as a part of life rather than its foundation. This article advocates that issues related to witchcraft and superstition should be studied as part of occult sciences, which ought to be made accessible to the broader public for the benefit of all.

**Key Words:** Witchcraft, Superstition, Swahili Literature, African Philosophy, Sociological Theory.

## INTRODUCTION

This article explores issues of witchcraft and superstition as part of African philosophy, with reference to works in Swahili literature. To understand whether witchcraft and superstition form part of African philosophy or not, it is first necessary to understand the concept of African philosophy and the notion of witchcraft. African philosophy is a deep reflection on life, existence, society, humanity, and the universe (Copleston, 1976). It also focuses on matters of justice, belief, ethics, the relationship between the individual and society, and the meaning of being human. Broadly speaking, African philosophy is a way of thinking that employs reason, logic, and communal experience. Witchcraft involves the use of unseen or spiritual forces to influence life outcomes, people, or the environment, whether for good or ill (Hull, 2019 & Brown, 2004). Unlike healing, witchcraft is believed to involve secretive powers intended to bring about misfortunes such as curses, illness, and death. Witchcraft relies on belief systems, symbolism, cultural rituals, and traditional healing. In contrast, it is more commonly associated with therapeutic practices.

The relationship between witchcraft and African philosophy lies in the fact that witchcraft is not founded on philosophical reasoning, but rather on social and cultural beliefs (Deme, 2009). Moreover, witchcraft cannot be scientifically verified or discussed through open rationality; it is practised secretly and is rooted in belief. Witchcraft may be examined as a component of African thought, not as a philosophy in itself, but as a cultural interpretation of life shaped by community perspectives. Within African philosophy, there are debates on the role of witchcraft in society, including the ethics of using mystical powers, the relationship between humans, spirits, and the spiritual realm. There are also discussions about justice and the moral implications of accusing someone of being a witch. Witchcraft forms part of the social and spiritual order, but it is not exactly a philosophy (Adeofe, 2004). It is not African philosophy, but it is a component of cultural traditions and worldviews. Therefore, African philosophy engages with witchcraft as a feature of life experience, though it does not serve as the foundation of the philosophy itself.

Witchcraft has long been part of the lived reality in many African communities, spanning thousands of years, and its history can be briefly outlined across the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. For instance, before the arrival of colonial powers in Africa, witchcraft was an integral component of traditional life, deeply rooted in indigenous beliefs, superstitions, and diverse cultural practices (Abraham, 1994). It was viewed as a means of interpreting the inexplicable, such as illness, sudden death, or natural calamities. Witches were believed to possess supernatural powers. Witchcraft was also seen as a means of communicating with ancestral spirits, the souls of forebears, or traditional deities, either to protect the community or to punish enemies.

During the colonial era, European settlers brought with them their religions, primarily Christianity, along with strong views that condemned witchcraft. They regarded it as demonic and actively sought to suppress it. Strict laws were enacted against its practice. This led to significant transformations; some people concealed their beliefs and practices, while others openly rejected them. In certain regions, however, witchcraft was used as a spiritual, or psychological weapon against colonial forces, through charms, blessings, and magical protection (Asante, 1993). After independence, belief in witchcraft persists in many African communities, where it is still thought to influence development, health, and individual success. Cases of killings linked to accusations of witchcraft remain common in many African societies. Although some people have abandoned such beliefs, others, particularly in rural areas, continue to find meaning and relevance in them.

Traditional healers and witches are still sought for various purposes such as bringing good fortune, removing misfortune, or safeguarding businesses. On another note, witchcraft remains a prominent theme in literature, the arts, and cultural expression. It is frequently portrayed in African books, folktales, proverbs, and films (Bujo, 1999). In some of these works, witchcraft represents an individual's power in response to specific societal, or environmental challenges. African literature often engages with witchcraft as part of African identity. Regarding witchcraft and modern science, some African scholars are reinterpreting witchcraft as a unique epistemological framework, one that explains psychological, spiritual, or even ancient scientific dimensions of life.

Despite modern developments, witchcraft continues to pose social challenges, particularly due to ongoing instances of violence against elders, persons with albinism, or others suspected of witchcraft. In Africa, witchcraft is not merely an archaic relic, but remains a living part of the continent's history, culture, and daily existence (Geofrey, 1969). Even though it is opposed by both religious teachings and legal systems, it continues to shape social perceptions, political dynamics, and economic behaviours. There is, therefore, a pressing need to critically explore its historical trajectory in order to better understand its role and significance in contemporary African societies.

### **Philosophical Perspectives of the Western and Eastern Worlds on Witchcraft and Superstition**

Western philosophy is an intellectual tradition that employs deep inquiry to understand life and the universe. It has significantly contributed to the development of science, politics, justice, and modern human philosophy. Western philosophy is a reflection on reality, life, politics, and human existence, originating and evolving particularly from ancient Greece in the sixth century to modern Europe and the United States. It is renowned for using logic, reasoning, and scientific methods to seek truth and the meaning of life (Airoboman, 2002). Early philosophers such as Thales, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras attempted to understand the world through rational argument. Major developments occurred through debates on the nature of things and ethics (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle), faith and logic (Augustine, Thomas Aquinas), human freedom and scientific inquiry (Descartes, Kant, Hume, and Locke), logic, language, and the power of human knowledge (Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre), as well as challenges to foundational truths and the idea that truth is subjective (Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard).

The history of witchcraft in Europe has been greatly influenced by politics, religion, and social change. Before the advent of Christianity, ancient Europe was full of superstitious beliefs (Baur, 1994). Witches were perceived as people possessing secret knowledge of nature, healing, and spirits. In Celtic, Norse, and ancient Roman traditions, there were laws against the misuse of magic. Deities such as Hecate and Hermes were associated with witchcraft. With the spread of Christianity from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Church began condemning witchcraft as a sin. Witches were linked to the devil, and witchcraft started to be viewed as a demonic means of deceiving humanity. In these early medieval centuries, witches were not widely hunted, but were instead urged

through preaching to abandon superstition. During the High Middle Ages, between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Catholic Church grew stronger, and teachings began to stress that witches were working with the devil. Belief spread that witches could cause droughts, disease, and death. A wave of fear and suspicion against witches began to emerge and gradually intensified.

The period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries became known as the era of witch hunts in Europe. The publication of the book *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches) in 1487 fuelled widespread persecution and suppression of alleged witches. Thousands of individuals, particularly women, were accused of witchcraft and either executed, or burned at the stake (Tehenan, 2003). Countries such as England, France, and Germany led in the number of witchcraft prosecutions. During this time, witches were believed to have made pacts with the devil, participated in nocturnal witch gatherings, and possessed powers to alter the weather or destroy crops. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, scientific and rational perspectives began to supersede superstitious beliefs. Philosophers and scientists criticised the execution of witches as acts of ignorance and superstition (Hountondji, 1983). Many laws against witchcraft were repealed or fell into disuse. For instance, England abolished its witchcraft laws in 1736.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, modern historiography began to explore witchcraft as a component of historical, political, and social control. Some activists, including Wiccans, revived witchcraft as a religion, or spiritual way of life (Barrow & Woods, 1989). A modern religion based on ancient witchcraft was established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Gerald Gardner. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, witchcraft in Europe is more commonly understood as a form of cultural heritage, spirituality, and even entertainment. Many countries now respect religious freedom for contemporary witchcraft groups such as Neo-Pagans. Books, films, and popular culture have helped rekindle interest in witchcraft, including titles such as *The Witcher*. The history of witchcraft in Europe is rich with fear, religion, belief, and societal power. However, perceptions have shifted, and today, witchcraft is increasingly viewed through spiritual, cultural, and historical lenses.

In terms of Eastern philosophy across societies in Central, South, East Asia, and the Middle East, the concept of witchcraft was deeply rooted in tradition, religion, and spiritual worldviews. In this context, witchcraft was not always regarded as an evil act; it was often associated with wisdom, healing, or spiritual powers that could be either positive or negative, depending on their use. For instance, within Chinese religious philosophy, Taoism teaches that witches are believed to have the ability to communicate with spirits or alter spiritual states using everyday tools, talismans, or specific rituals. Taoism also emphasises the balance between the two opposing cosmic forces (Yin and Yang). Witchcraft is seen as a means of harnessing natural energies for a particular purpose (Jones, 1969). On the other hand, Confucianism criticised the flourishing of witchcraft, placing more emphasis on morality, family, and social discipline rather than invisible powers.

Within Indian religious philosophy, Hinduism acknowledges the existence of mystical forces that can be accessed through spiritual practices. Witchcraft was employed for various purposes, such as protection from evil spirits, healing diseases, acquiring wealth, or attracting love. It is viewed as a spiritual path filled with mystery and elemental powers, capable of being good or bad depending on the practitioner's intentions. According to Buddhism, the use of witchcraft is not directly encouraged, although some scriptures permit its use for protection, or healing. In the context of Arab and Islamic religious philosophy, Islam regards witchcraft as a sin, often described as the work of devils (Erdsier, 2003). Nonetheless, in Islamic history, astrologers did exist and were distinct from witches, as they were grounded in legal and scientific knowledge. Furthermore, certain Sufi traditions at times involved the use of secret utterances, which some scholars interpreted as forms of witchcraft.

Persian religious philosophy, Zoroastrianism, preached the struggle between light and darkness. Witches were priests who utilised knowledge of astronomy, healing, and spiritual counsel. Dark magic was condemned and seen as the work of evil. Regarding Japanese religious philosophy, Shinto holds that the world is filled with spirits, and some individuals can communicate with or harness them. Witches or shamans were often women who acted as spiritual intermediaries. Witchcraft was understood through deities, spirits, or ancestral beings who could either assist or harm. In Japanese tradition, witches could be benevolent or malevolent depending on the spirits they were associated with. Therefore, Eastern views of witchcraft did not always interpret it as inherently evil, but rather as a part of spiritual practice, healing, and communication with natural forces (Howell, 2003).

Therefore, this article has explored the topics of witchcraft and superstition within the context of African philosophy, drawing on works of Swahili literature.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article explores the issues of witchcraft and superstition as part of African philosophy, with reference to works of Swahili literature. The primary data presented in this article were obtained through library-based research methods. Primary data are those which have not previously been collected by anyone else at the time of collection. They are original and gathered specifically for the research being undertaken at that moment (Furlong, 2009). A purposive sampling technique was used to select three genres of written literature: epic poetry, novels, and drama. The same technique was applied in selecting the following books: Rukiza, Mugasha, Kivuli Kinaishi, Janga Sugu la Wazawa, and Mirathi ya Hatari. These texts were deemed suitable for achieving the aims of the article due to their distinctiveness. In addition to these core texts, other literary works were occasionally used to clarify or support the primary data. These supplementary texts helped to provide explanation, verification, or elaboration of the main findings. The following section explains the theoretical framework used in the discussion of the data presented.

### Research Theory

The analysis, interpretation, and discussion of data in this study were presented using the Sociological theory. Historically, the theory of sociological criticism was founded by Hippolyte Taine and began to emerge in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, flourishing in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe (Okpewho, 2006). One of its fundamental principles is the view that the natural environment of a society determines how literature should be shaped. It is also used to examine how literature relates to a society's context (Njogu & Chimerah, 1999). Art is not created in a vacuum; rather, it is the product of an artist working within a specific environment and time, accountable to the society that surrounds them. An artist cannot escape the influence of their community, as their literature is a direct outcome of that society. Literature is a mirror of the community and cannot be separated from the reality and truths of life within that society.

Literature is a field capable of reflecting the science and culture of a community; it is an integral part of real life. Literature concerns people, offering a complete portrayal of life by examining it deeply and from a broad perspective (Selden, 2005). The ontological elements in the selected novels were examined as specific products of the communities from which they arose, taking into account their culture, history, philosophy, economy, and politics. These elements were also considered as unique connectors within social relationships. The researcher focused on the interaction between social forces and artistic expression. The analysis acknowledged that literature is governed by existing societal structures, reflecting the interrelations among members of society in their daily conduct. Both artistic and social forces relate to the ontological elements present in the selected novels.

This theory recognises the role and significance of the social context in literary criticism by considering the representation of particular worldly conditions (Ntarangwi, 2004). The ontological elements within the selected novels were interpreted within the context of the artist's society and its history. The researcher examined the relationship between the community and the nature of its activities, its historical background, development, philosophies, and perspectives. This approach enabled the researcher to explore the relevant elements in depth in order to determine their themes in line with the community's culture, history, and philosophy.

The selected books were examined by portraying the setting, characters, and various social issues that were accepted within the society of their time. The chosen elements were analysed by the direct relationship between social activities, the environment, and literature. They were also explored as an integral part of the community's culture, taking into account its traditions and surroundings. The relationship between society and the elements of witchcraft and superstition forms the basis through which societal issues are represented as they appear in the selected genres of written literature. In this study, the researcher examined the elements of witchcraft and superstition as part of African philosophy, focusing on how they are presented and accepted in the societies concerned. The selected literary genres were explored as a true product of African societies, considering the broader context of how issues of witchcraft and superstition are experienced within those communities.

## Reflection of Witchcraft and Superstition in Swahili Literature is Part of the Traditional Life System and Social Culture

This article has shown that the issues of witchcraft and superstition in Swahili literature are not part of African philosophy, but are embedded in the traditional life system and diverse social cultures. Therefore, the depiction of witchcraft and superstition in selected works of Swahili literature reflects the way African societies view their world, environment, and experiences, rooted in their indigenous cultural foundations. The next section displays how witchcraft and superstition are portrayed in these selected works.

### Witchcraft and Superstition

Superstition refers to the belief in witchcraft, while witchcraft is the actual practice itself. The African believes that both superstition and witchcraft exist and that they have varying outcomes depending on how they are used. The belief in the existence of witchcraft is closely tied to the existence of divine and ancestral spiritual forces. Witchcraft utilises magical powers and sorcery to achieve specific objectives (Masolo, 1994). This leads the African to believe that every misfortune occurring within the community has its origin in human intervention—that is, witchcraft. Witchcraft may be controlled by a witch or a more powerful healer. As a living force, witchcraft, when used to cause harm, is considered destructive, but when used to heal, it becomes a form of medicine. According to African ontology, the witch reduces life, while the healer extends it. The existence and persistence of the concept of witchcraft have led African thought to be dominated by a preoccupation with death and life.

Relationships within African societies demand great caution in speech and action. Failure to observe this may be condemned, as it goes against customs and traditions. It may also bring about consequences for the individual and others. Customs and taboos are not considered to be human-invented magic, but if one does not follow the prescribed order, they may suffer harm caused by the forces of the natural environment (Bujo, 1999). Every person is expected to follow the rules, customs, traditions, and taboos of their community. For instance, it is taboo for a woman to eat food set aside for religious purposes, for a father-in-law to associate intimately with his daughter-in-law, for a son to sit higher than his father-in-law, for a pregnant woman to greet loudly, or for those left behind during war to engage in sexual relations. Such taboos aim to build, safeguard, and promote moral values, which are rooted in the customs and traditions of society.

Witchcraft exists to fulfil human desires and ambitions through the use of extraordinary powers for personal gain. Some scholars make a distinction between witchcraft and superstition. For example, Parrinder (1962) explains that witchcraft harms people and brings about specific outcomes. Witches operate within a supernatural realm and practise rituals that are used to torment others. Witchcraft is associated with the presence of divine and ancestral forces. It employs magical powers and sorcery to realise particular intentions. According to this belief, for the African, every misfortune that befalls a person is believed to have been caused by a witch. Witchcraft can only be countered by more powerful healing practices. Healing and medicine are integral aspects of witchcraft. Witchcraft is a living force; when it harms, it is witchcraft, and when it heals, it becomes medicine. People employ this living force to gain status, achieve victory, and succeed in their undertakings. Divination and astrology are seen as ways of exploring the vital force within human beings. The African believes that the witch reduces life, and the healer increases it.

Regarding the philosophy of belief in witchcraft, the African heavily relies on mystical powers. In European societies, many turn to the Christian faith in times of trouble, whereas in African societies, people often revert to their indigenous belief systems. This philosophy of belief in witchcraft is strongly portrayed in the novel *Mirathi ya Hatari*, particularly through the scene where Gusto inherits witchcraft from his father. Elder Kazembe tells Gusto, “My son, I am leaving you with a great responsibility. It is a powerful inheritance if used wisely, but it is also a dangerous legacy if not handled carefully. I leave you all the potions in my mystical collection of sorcery” (p. 15).

There is also the presence of a witchcraft oath, which is revealed when Gusto is sworn in as a sign of loyalty upon entering the world of witchcraft. Everyone must take an oath in order to become a witch. Gusto is seen swearing by uttering the words, “Oh spirits and ancestors” (p. 21). Additionally, numerous deaths are occurring

under suspicious and mystical circumstances. For example, Kapedzile was killed by Gusto; Malipula murdered his daughter Dina; Gusto's mother (Nyamidze) and sister Nandi were killed by Malipula as an act of revenge. Malipula himself was eventually killed by Gusto in collaboration with elder Mavengi. Due to the prevalence of witchcraft and superstition, some individuals resort to using protective amulets as a form of defence. The philosophy of belief in witchcraft leads to conflict, calamity, and the hindrance of development.

The issue of fear surrounding life and death dominates the lives of many Africans due to the presence of beliefs in witchcraft and superstition. It is believed that when one falls ill, recovery is impossible because death is approaching (Geofrey, 1969). This notion is also depicted in the novel *Mirathi ya Hatari*, when elder Kazembe tells his son that his health is failing and death is near: "My days are numbered; I don't think I'll live much longer" (p. 15). Furthermore, Gusto's mother feared for his life, which is why she warned him to reject the inheritance given to him by his father, as it could cost him his life. She said, "I do not want to lose another one of you before I die" (p. 38). The philosophy surrounding life and death compels members of the community to exercise caution to avoid untimely death.

Witchcraft and superstition are among the misfortunes that afflict many African societies (Ilomo, 2013). This issue is given prominence in the novel *Janga Sugu la Wazawa*. For example, after experiencing a series of the deaths of his children, elder Ninalwo left with his surviving sons to wander across the land in search of the cause behind their misfortune. This journey symbolises the extent to which beliefs in witchcraft and superstition dominate many African societies. The author writes: "They disappeared deep into Sukuma and encountered healers with every kind of charm and protection to safeguard human life" (Ruhumbika, p. 42).

### **Traditional Healing and Herbal Medicine**

People often fear witchcraft more than they fear the acts of God or the disturbances caused by spirits. An individual is believed to be vulnerable to witchcraft from the moment of birth. Every aspect of life is exposed to such dangers. Everyone is expected to defend and protect themselves against witchcraft. There are as many remedies for countering witchcraft as there are for casting it. The role of the traditional healer is to diagnose illness and identify its causes. Some illnesses are believed to have spiritual origins. A healer must recognise harmful influences within a patient's environment that may cause problems. They are also expected to use their ability to draw upon hidden powers to protect people from witches, spirits, and demons seeking to infiltrate and dominate the individual. It is believed that both healers and witches acquire their knowledge and skills from God (Oyekwe, 1975). One of their responsibilities is to prevent the theft of crops and livestock and to resolve conflicts. Healers are also closely associated with traditional rituals that involve praying to deities.

There are various types of traditional healers (Nkwera, 2002). The first category involves herbalists, intercessors, doctors, and nurses. Intercessors are individuals endowed by God with the power to heal through prayer, fasting, and self-denial. This group does not engage in rituals involving deities, nor do they indulge in self-glorification or deceive their clients. They focus purely on the essence of healing. The second category involves practitioners who work with spirits and ancestral powers. This includes diviners and witches and is heavily linked with rituals dedicated to ancestral worship and summoning spirits. Their aim and practices revolve around glorifying spirits and manipulating the minds of clients to control them, mislead their beliefs, and extract wealth. Witches are not formally recognised as healers, although they possess knowledge. Their practices are conducted secretly at night, though they are believed to cause harm even during the day, for example, through a malevolent gaze. The evil of witches is clearly reflected in language. There are protective charms worn around the neck or hung in homes to ward off witches.

Traditional healers have also taken advantage of society's fear of witchcraft and superstition as an opportunity for financial gain. To confirm this, the author notes that the business of superstition became a source of wealth for a few individuals who ran it, along with their benefactors (Ruhumbika, p. 187). The trade in superstition and witchcraft has caused division and disrupted various social structures, particularly in Africa. This is the very "*Janga Sugu la Wazawa*" (Persistent Tragedy of the Natives) that has instilled fear in certain members of the community. There is a negative perception that views traditional healers as sources of conflict and societal problems. This arises from the deception practised by some, including diviners. The fraudulent acts committed by such healers are the basis of claims that certain events, especially deaths founded on superstitious and

witchcraft-related beliefs, are caused by traditional healers (Mair, 1969). These matters must be examined with a critical eye as they incite discord within society. However, it is unwise to assume that every illness, death, or problem in a community is the result of witchcraft or superstition.

In the novel *Kivuli Kinaishi*, this theme is employed to reveal to the audience the cunning of the ruling elite in ensuring they remain in power, regardless of the wider interests of the public. For instance, the character Bi. ... says: "Ahh, do you still expect me to remain silent... my efforts to bind them with sacrifices and great spells..." (p. 110). These statements illustrate the efforts made by leaders to deceive the public so they can maintain control indefinitely. According to African Ontological theory, God enables human beings to discover traditional medicines that can bring healing into their lives. Traditional remedies can be harmful if misused, but when applied correctly, they can offer effective solutions (Mbogo, 2008). Traditional medicine can solve problems that modern medicine may struggle to address. For example, after Kitaru received treatment from doctors without showing signs of recovery, he turned to traditional medicine. His father's approval for his wife to summon a traditional healer demonstrates the father's belief in herbal remedies. Therefore, the coexistence of traditional and modern medicine should be built on a foundation of complementarity in addressing human and environmental health issues within society.

### Ancestors and Rituals

According to African ontology, ancestral spirits occupy a higher status than the living (Nkemnikia, 1999). Firstly, it is said that the number of ancestors is greater than that of the living. Secondly, ancestors possess superior knowledge and wisdom because they represent the accumulated insight of many generations. Thirdly, ancestors enjoy greater freedom of movement since they are not confined to physical bodies. This status compels the living to show reverence and to honour their wishes. There is also a deep-seated fear of the deceased who have become ancestral spirits. A relationship exists between the ancestors and the living, such that when calamities arise, communities appeal to the ancestors for solutions to their problems (Oruka, 1990). If offended, ancestors may punish the living, but if treated with respect, they are believed to bring peace and prosperity to the community.

In the play *Kivuli Kinaishi*, Mtolewa hears voices and recognises them as those of the ancestors. Mtolewa's recognition and response to these voices clearly illustrate that ancestors or forebears are an integral part of African life. It also demonstrates that the dead retain the ability to act, give commands, and communicate with the living for various purposes. The theory of African ontology, through its core principles, reveals a parallel between African traditional religions and those of the West and East. All religions in the world provide a means through which believers seek to reach God. Just as African believers pray to God through ancestral spirits, so too do Christians pray and offer their requests to God through Jesus Christ. This establishes a strong link between God and human beings. Additionally, Africans believe in the practice of rituals. These are grounded in the African ontological framework, in which Africans conduct various cultural ceremonies. The play *Kivuli Kinaishi* provides a clear example of the use of ritual when Wari and Mtolewa are given nderer flour as they are ushered before Bi. Kirembwe's throne is to undergo a change in social status and gain acceptance into the Giningi community. Bi. Kirembwe addresses Wari:

**Bi. Kirembwe:** First initiate, come forward...The initiate crawls towards Bi. Kirembwe was on her hands and knees until reaching her. (Bi. Kirembwe scoops up some nderer flour.)

Open your mouth. (She pours it in.)

What colour is this? (She shows her a black colour.)

Initiate I: White... (pp. 48–49)

After all the initiates had been fed the nderer flour and deemed to have passed the initiation required for them to join the group of loyal followers of Giningi, they were accepted to serve and belong to the community by the traditional rules established by Bi. Kirembwe's leadership. This illustrates that African communities perform rituals for various purposes depending on the customs of the specific society.

## The Power of Ritual, and the Fulfilment of Destiny

A tambiko (ritual offering) is typically associated with the sacrifice of an animal, whereas a sadaka (offering) may involve food or other items where the taking of life is not necessary. A tambiko is performed depending on the gravity of a broken relationship between God, the ancestors, and spirits (Omeregbe, 1998). Among the Wanyakyusa, it is believed that no offence is left unresolved. It is well understood that theft, witchcraft, and failure to observe community taboos are offences against God and the ancestors. Such transgressions must be rectified through ritual offerings either to God or the ancestral spirits. Events such as prolonged droughts or the outbreak of infectious diseases are perceived as punishments from God. Rituals in these contexts are directed towards God and are often led by a chief or head of the clan.

Although the chief leads the ritual, they may not always know what should be offered by the nature of the transgression. Diviners and interpreters are responsible for determining what should be sacrificed. The reasons for conducting ritual among the Wanyakyusa vary (Peterson, 1992). First, the aim is to repair a rift between God and the people, or between the people and the ancestors, caused by past misdeeds. Second, rituals are performed to seek cooperation between God and the people or between the people and the spirits. Third, ritual can serve as an expression of gratitude to God or the ancestors for blessings received. Both sacrifice and ritual are offered for reconciliation with God, with the former being considered a gift to God in recognition that all success originates from Him.

There exists an ontological relationship between all living beings according to African traditions. Every creature is interconnected with others, as each affects the other in some way. Nothing moves within the universe without being influenced by another vital force (Magesa, 1997). There is an ontological solidarity between a human being and their community. This solidarity allows all beings to continue living and fulfilling their destinies. In the epic Mugasha, the hero collaborates with spirits in his quest for both rulership and a wife. He is supported by his father, who sacrifices his life to enable Mugasha's birth (Mulokozi, p. 222). Traditional birth attendants also offered prayers and searched for a tool with which to cut the hero's umbilical cord.

The fulfilment of Mugasha's birth destiny was the result of collaboration between Nyambubi, the midwives, and the traditional healers. Through healing rituals, the spirits revealed who would father Mugasha's mother and what tool should be used to sever the umbilical cord. In battle, the hero worked alongside the spirits, who manifested in the form of clouds, rain, thunder, and wind. He harnessed winds such as nkomaizi, mushoke, mbuyaga, and mwegundu. According to African ontology, these elements are employed because, beyond the Supreme God, there exist spiritual entities in the unseen world that influence human life (Magesa, 1997). These include both human and non-human spirits whose existence is not tied to anything physical. Though they cannot be seen with the naked eye, their actions are associated with events and states on Earth.

In the Mugasha epic, the hero makes use of invisible spirits manifested in water, clouds, wind, rain, and thunder. Within the Haya community's ontology, such spirits are associated with Mugasha and other ancestral entities linked to him. These spirits assist the hero in fulfilling various responsibilities during his pursuit of destiny. Mugasha's collaboration with the sky spirits in his struggles enabled him to fulfil his destiny of marrying his sister, Lyang'ombe, and restoring his father's rulership in the Sesse region. After achieving his destiny, the people celebrated with traditional dance. This signified the community's support for Mugasha's journey and success.

In the epic Rukiza, too, there is ontological solidarity between the hero, the spirits, and his community. This solidarity is expressed through rituals and the hero's magical powers. The hero used a ritual performed on a slave to invoke the spirits to help his community overcome poverty. As a result of this ritual, the Baganga community prospered, its people thrived, and poverty was alleviated (Mulokozi, p. 322). This ontological unity brought about abundance, with cattle producing milk and ample butter.

Moreover, Rukiza was connected to the spirits through his magical sources, which gave him physical strength, mental fortitude, and supernatural powers used in battle (Mulokozi, 1999). His bond with his people enabled him to receive intelligence regarding the war. The hero's alliance with his community also helped preserve the secret of his magical powers until Ruhinda employed witchcraft and uncovered the truth. Thus, a hero must be



in alignment with a group or community that offers support.

In the epics Rukiza and Mugasha, we observe that there exists an ontological connection between the heroes and the spirits through rituals, healing, and sacrificial offerings, all of which helped them solve personal and communal challenges. The heroes' solidarity with their communities allowed for collaboration in matters such as childbirth, warfare, and overcoming obstacles in their search for destiny. When the ontological relationship between Rukiza and the spirits was broken, the hero failed to fulfil his destiny of attaining rulership.

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined issues of witchcraft and superstition as part of African philosophy by referring to works of Swahili literature. The discussion and presentation of data focused on matters related to witchcraft, superstition, traditional healing, the role of ancestral spirits, rituals, the power of sacrificial offerings, invocations, and the completeness of nature. Through these elements, the concept of witchcraft is understood in relation to deities, spirits, or ancestors who may either assist or harm, depending on the matter at hand. Global perceptions suggest that witchcraft and superstition have not always been viewed as evil, but rather as aspects of spirituality, healing, and communication with natural and supernatural forces. Witchcraft serves various purposes, including protection against evil spirits, curing illnesses, acquiring wealth, and enhancing authority and romantic appeal. It is a spiritual path imbued with symbolism and metaphysical power, and it may be good or bad depending on the practitioner's intent. This article proposes that the subjects of witchcraft and superstition ought to be explored as forms of esoteric science that deserve to be demystified for the broader benefit of the world.

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