

# *The First Time I Called Myself a ‘Witch’ Was the Most Magical Moment of My Life: Unmasking the Influence of Christianity in the Persecution of Witches Through Cultural Hegemony*

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## Abstract

Whereas Christianity and biblical narratives continue to constructively form human, theological, spiritual, and social existence, it cannot be downplayed that these two central components sometimes lead to destructive perceptions, actions, and behaviours. This is because Christianity and the Bible have continually influenced the comprehension of humanity and spirituality for centuries. With particular reference to witchcraft, particularly in the South African context, this article aims to unmask and scrutinise the influence of Christianity in the persecution of witches. To do this, this article elicits three biblical pieces of textual evidence from the Bible as one of the historical Christian narratives. To unmask and address the phenomenon of interest, cultural hegemony as a theoretical framework is applied to these three biblical pieces of textual evidence. As a result of this endeavour, this article makes three notable findings. First, as Christianity could be appreciated for constructively shaping social perceptions, actions, and behaviours, it should be implicated in certain immoralities. Second, some of the historical injustices, such as witch-hunts and the killing of witches, have, in large part, been propagated by Christian and biblical ideologies. Third (last), Christianity, as a dominant culture of its time, ought to be unmasked within the contemporary contexts for the very reason that it continues to (re)shape contemporary societies, and it is undoubtedly patent that it may continue to (re)shape future generational societies. This article’s recommendations and closing remarks underscore the necessity to examine Christianity alongside its biblical voices recurrently.

**Keywords:** biblical narratives; Christianity; cultural hegemony; persecution; witches

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## Contextual Background and Introduction

“The first time I called myself a ‘Witch’ was the most magical moment of my life.”  
(Margot Adler).

“Just because you do not believe it, does not mean that it is not true.” (Katherine Howe).

Since 2004, it has been purported by Niehaus (2012) that over 20,000 people may have been murdered on the grounds of witchcraft implications in South Africa, particularly in rural areas among women and young girls. Many of these people are reported to be from the Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces of South Africa. Undoubtedly, this number mirrors a severe and pervasive challenge that has significant implications for human rights, community welfare, social cohesion, and consciousness. This is based on the reality that accusations of witchcraft leading to violence and assassinations signify apparent transgressions of fundamental human rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and security, among many more (Owusu, 2023, 341). Specifically, the right to life, security, and liberty from prejudice are fundamental principles that should be safeguarded for all individuals, regardless of their cultural or religious belief systems. Against this backdrop, the concentration of these incidents in South Africa raises questions about the specific factors contributing to the vulnerability of this country, with special reference to rural areas, the elderly, women, and young girls.

For this reason, Mabunda and Ross (2023) suggest that witchcraft-related violence has a profound impact on communities, contributing to agitation, mistrust, and social divisions. This means that communities experiencing such violence could face long-lasting consequences, including fractured relationships, economic instability, and diminished overall security. For these reasons, I contend that the effectiveness of legal and judicial systems in addressing witchcraft-related violence needs to be reassessed. This is because there may be gaps in legislation or enforcement that permit perpetrators to act with impunity. On the grounds of this reality, strengthening legal frameworks and ensuring the swift prosecution of individuals involved in witchcraft accusations and violence could serve as a deterrent and promote accountability. In the process, concerted efforts, as argued for towards the end of this scholarly discourse, should be made to enhance victims’ access to justice, including legal aid and support services.

Considering these observations, understanding the root causes, whether social, economic, or ethnological, is essential for developing effective intervention strategies. In fact, witchcraft allegations have long permeated South Africa’s socio-cultural fabric, giving rise to an intricate narrative that interweaves indigenous belief systems with the influence of Christianity. This interweaving of cultural constituents has shaped how witchcraft is perceived, understood, and acted upon within South African communities. One would recall that South Africa has an affluent tapestry of indigenous belief systems that predate the arrival of Europeans and the introduction of Christianity (Manala 2013). Thus, these belief systems involve a profound connection to the spiritual kingdom, with

notions of ancestral spirits, mystical powers, and the coexistence of the physical and supernatural ecospheres. Despite this fact, the arrival of Christianity in South Africa introduced new perspectives on witchcraft. This suggests that the coexistence of indigenous belief systems and Christianity has led to a syncretic approach to spirituality in South Africa. This syncretism has formed attitudes towards witchcraft, as belief systems in ancestral spirits and mystical powers intersect with Christian dogmas on sin, evil, and supernatural intervention. Consequently, witchcraft allegations are framed within both indigenous and Christian frameworks, leading to complex interpretations and responses within communities. In detailing this assertion, Diko (2023, 602) underscores that:

The introduction of Christianity brought new beliefs, moral frameworks, and interpretations of supernatural phenomena, influencing the way witchcraft was perceived and dealt with in South African communities. Christian doctrines continually framed indigenous beliefs and practices, including those related to witchcraft, as manifestations of devilry or pacts with the devil. Witchcraft, from a Christian perspective, was seen as a form of malevolent magic aligned with evil forces.

Over and above this assertion, missionaries and early Christian leaders intermittently sought to eradicate or replace indigenous spiritual practices, considering them incompatible with Christian dogmas (Oosthuizen 1997; Resane 2023). This led to the stigmatisation, castigation, and demonisation of indigenous practices, including those associated with witchcraft.<sup>1</sup> Missionaries, in their pursuits to convert local populations, sometimes associated indigenous belief systems that were long in natural operation with demonic practices. Christian doctrines, particularly the perception of witchcraft as a pact with the devil, contributed to the derogation and character assassination of these indigenous practices, influencing how witchcraft allegations were framed and comprehended in the broader social context of Africa. Over time, a syncretic blending of indigenous belief systems, such as ancestral reverence, ceremonial practices, and Christian dogmas, occurred in many South African communities (Ukpong 1984). This syncretism led to a unique homogenisation of spiritual practices, rituals, and explications of supernatural phenomena. On the grounds of this occurrence, practices like ancestor veneration and the utilisation of spiritual mediums may coexist with Christian rituals and belief systems in some communities within the South African context. For example, in some communities where most of the population adheres to Christianity but also maintains strong connections to traditional African spirituality, families could gather regularly to honour their ancestors through rituals and ceremonies, believing that their ancestors play a central role in guiding and protecting them. In addition to this reality, the association of witchcraft with demonic influences contributed to the witch hunts and persecution of individuals accused of practising

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1 The efforts to replace indigenous spiritual practices with Christianity mirror a broader pattern of cultural hegemony, where dominant religious or cultural systems impose their beliefs and norms on silenced groups. Ultimately, this leads to the marginalisation and erasure of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), undermining cultural multiplicity and autonomy.

witchcraft. This was particularly prevalent during historical periods such as the European witch trials and had echoes in various regions influenced by Christian belief systems, including parts of South Africa. It is for these reasons that Mndende (1998, 118) reports that the introduction of Christianity influenced legal systems, and laws against witchcraft were sometimes enacted with the support of Christian authorities. With this view in mind, allegations of witchcraft could lead to legal consequences, further subjugating individuals within the Christian framework. Beyond this, I contend that Christianity, with its moral codes and emphasis on obedience or deference to religious authorities, provides a framework for social control. This means that accusations of witchcraft could be used as a tool to enforce social hierarchy and conformity within Christian communities.

By the same token, the history of witchcraft in South Africa is marked by a tapestry of ethnological, religious, and historical threads that configure the perceptions and responses to those accused of practising the occult. Keeping this in mind, it stands to reason to suggest that witchcraft-related issues in South Africa are a source of concern due to their impact on individuals and communities, with particular reference to rural areas, the elderly, women, and young girls. Similarly, it is prudent to observe that the term “witchcraft”, which is dealt with later, is complex, encompassing a range of cultural, spiritual, and religious practices. While this is the case, what is important to accept is that allegations of witchcraft have, in South Africa, led to violence and murders. Individuals alleged to practice witchcraft continually face enormous harm, including being ostracised, physically assaulted, or murdered. In parallel to this claim, witch hunts are fuelled by a combination of cultural belief systems, agitation, and socio-economic tensions within South African communities (Mangaliso 2001). As a matter of fact, those accused of being witches recurrently face social deformity and intolerance. As a result of this challenge, they are secluded from their communities, lose their livelihoods, or are denied access to essential services (Mndende 1998). In view of this concern, healing the wounds inflicted by witchcraft-related violence requires community-wide efforts to promote reunion, understanding, and dialogue. This suggests that reintegrating accused individuals back into their communities, restoring their livelihoods, and addressing the root causes of violence and prejudice are essential steps towards advancing social cohesion and healing.

Over and above this, the stigma associated with witchcraft could adversely impact entire families and communities, advancing a cycle of agitation and suspicion. Having said that, Meel (2022) underlines that some individuals exploit the fear of witchcraft for personal gain. For example, certain witch doctors or traditional healers may potentially take advantage of vulnerable people, promising protection from witchcraft in exchange for money or other resources. However, it is important to understand that this remains a bone of contention. In any event, this exploitation could lead to financial victimisation, further subjugating already vulnerable individuals and communities in South Africa.

Similarly, witchcraft accusations could result in legal consequences, with those accused facing imprisonment or other legal actions (Browne 1935; Forsyth 2016). In addition to this, legal responses could be inconsistent, and there may be challenges in effectively addressing these challenges within the legal framework. To the same degree, women, young girls, and elderly individuals are often disproportionately affected by accusations of witchcraft. They are targeted due to existing gender and age-related prejudices, and the consequences are particularly severe for these vulnerable groups (Ashforth 2005; Meel 2022). The reasons for this, among others, are entrenched gender disparities and stereotypes within many societies that contribute to the vulnerability of women and young girls to witchcraft accusations. Women are frequently perceived as subordinate to men and are assigned traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers. As a result of these traditional gender roles, when misfortune or illness occurs within the community, women and young girls could be scapegoated as witches, particularly if they deviate from expected gender ethical codes or challenge existing power dynamics.

Similarly, witchcraft accusations intersect with traditional belief systems and practices. For example, misunderstandings of natural phenomena, illness, or affliction could be ascribed to witchcraft, leading to the scapegoating of individuals. Therefore, it stands to reason to contend that the humiliation associated with witchcraft not only adversely affects individuals but also breeds suspicion and discord within families and communities. In other words, when indictments of witchcraft arise, it fractures relationships, creates rifts between neighbours, and sows seeds of distrust among community members. This inter-generational and community discord intensifies social tensions and undermines cohesion, obstructing efforts towards unity and collective security. This is the reason I underlined earlier that efforts to address witchcraft-related violence must consider the broader impact on social harmony and work towards fostering unity, inclusivity, and understanding within affected communities.

Bearing this contextual background in mind, this article aims to systemically investigate and uncover the multifaceted influence of Christianity in the persecution of individuals accused of witchcraft in South Africa, applying cultural hegemony as a theoretical framework to certain selected biblical narratives. The reason for relying on biblical narratives is induced by the Bible being the central religious text of Christianity, serving as the foundational scripture for Christian belief systems and practices (Shingange, 2023). It comprises the Old Testament (OT), shared with Judaism, and the New Testament (NT), which narrates the life, dogmas, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, forming the foundation for Christian theology and faith (Oliver 2021). Nevertheless, by scrutinising the interplay between Christian doctrines and indigenous belief systems, the aim herein is to elucidate how cultural hegemony contributes to the stigmatisation and violence against alleged witches. Through an intricate exploration of historical contexts, societal dynamic subtleties, and the normalisation of certain belief systems, this article endeavours to illuminate the intricate relationship between Christianity and the persecution of witches, ultimately advancing a profound understanding of the socio-ethnological forces at play in this complex narrative. It is further essential to observe

that although witchcraft is a concerning phenomenon of interest, in large part, it affects certain groups of people. This is detailed in the next section.

### Who is Most Affected by Witchcraft-Related Killings in South Africa?

Several scholars have investigated the killings of suspected witches in South Africa. These witchcraft accusations and assassinations have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable and marginalised individuals, particularly women and elderly people. While it is crucial to recognise that the victims come from various backgrounds, certain groups are more susceptible to being targeted. For instance, Mavhungu (2000) reports that women are frequently the primary targets of witchcraft accusations and subsequent violence in South Africa. Among other concerns, Petrus (2011) indicates that accusations stem from resentment, disputes, or societal prejudices against women who may be regarded as challenging traditional gender ethos or economically independent. Adding to these reports, Leistner (2014) proclaims that older members of different communities, especially elderly women, are at an increased risk of being accused of witchcraft. This is because elderly individuals, particularly women, are perceived as more vulnerable due to age-related physical and cognitive changes. In some societies, this perceived vulnerability could be associated with a heightened susceptibility to supernatural influence or the belief that older individuals possess occult knowledge or powers. Ultimately, this vulnerability results from a lack of economic productivity, physical frailty, or cultural perceptions associating wisdom with supernatural abilities. Beyond this, this vulnerability underscores the intersection of age, gender, and cultural expectations, contributing to the social challenges faced by older individuals, particularly women, within certain communities.

In the same vein, Taylor, Bradbury-Jones, and Lund (2019) make a notable statement that individuals who are socially marginalised, such as those from minority ethnic groups or individuals with disabilities, continue to face a higher risk of being accused of witchcraft. These accusations could be rooted in illiberality, prejudice, or ignorance. Similarly, socially marginalised groups continually face power imbalances and discrimination within their communities or societies. On the grounds of this, indictments of witchcraft can be used as a tool to ostracise these groups further, fortify existing power structures, or maintain social control over resources and opportunities. Given this assertion, such accusations advance detrimental stereotypes and buttress prejudiced belief systems. This means that associating specific individuals, especially from sidelined groups, with witchcraft sustains adversarial perceptions that obstruct social cohesion and inclusion. One should bear in mind that ethnic minorities and people with disabilities are already vulnerable to communal imbalances (Ndlovu 2016, 33).

For this reason, accusations of witchcraft exacerbate their vulnerability, making it severely challenging for them to access essential services, employment, and fair treatment. Over and above this, Taylor et al. (2019) suggest that individuals with limited access to education and information are more susceptible to witchcraft accusations.

According to Ingstad (1990), a lack of information and understanding of natural phenomena could contribute to attributing afflictions to supernatural causes. In such circumstances, afflictions or unexplained occurrences are attributed to supernatural causes, perpetuating a cycle of panic, superstition, and the censuring of individuals based on ethnological beliefs rather than empirical understanding. This susceptibility underlines the significance of education and information dissemination in dispelling mythologies and advancing a more informed and rational perspective within communities in South Africa and, possibly, elsewhere in the global village.

Over and above these claims, Golooba-Mutebi (2005) promulgates that witchcraft accusations are more prevalent in rural areas where traditional belief systems and practices are profoundly entrenched. In other words, limited access to education and healthcare in these areas perpetuates superstitious belief systems. This is on account that these belief systems continually involve concepts of witchcraft, spirits, and mystical powers that are passed down through generations, contributing to a cultural framework that can be more accepting of witchcraft accusations (Golooba-Mutebi 2005, 939). This denotes that rural areas could encounter challenges in providing accessible and quality education. Bearing this in mind, limited educational opportunities suggest that people may not have the tools to evaluate or contest superstitious belief systems critically. Given this fact, a lack of education can contribute to the perpetuation of traditional belief systems, including those related to witchcraft. By the same token, minimal access to healthcare in rural areas could potentially lead to a reliance on traditional healing practices (Meel 2009). When illness or affliction occurs, it could be attributed to supernatural causes, fortifying the belief in witchcraft. Beyond this view, economic challenges in rural areas can contribute to a heightened sense of vulnerability and competition for resources, as previously outlined. In times of hardship, accusations of witchcraft can potentially emerge as a way to justify or cope with challenges. In fact, Motsoeneng (2022) and Diko (2023) make it clear that rural communities in South Africa have a close-knit social structure where everyone knows each other. This is important to observe as this environment leads to heightened social tensions and conflicts, and accusations of witchcraft emerge as a way to address or deflect blame for community challenges. Noting the deliberations on people who are most affected by witchcraft-related killings in South Africa, it is prudent to accept that these killings do not come out of nowhere. Instead, there is a history behind them. This is explained in the next section.

## Witchcraft Accusations in South Africa: A Historical Background

Witchcraft, acutely ingrained in indigenous belief systems, has been an integral component of South African societies for centuries. Accusations of witchcraft have manifested in various forms, encompassing suspicions of malevolent powers and attributing misfortune and calamities to alleged practitioners of the occult. These accusations, historically tied to traditional belief systems, gained new dimensions with the advent of Christianity on the African continent (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015; Walker

1979). Indigenous South African societies and cultures have long-held ideologies concerning supernatural energies, including the existence of individuals with mystical powers, ancestral spirits, nature spirits, and deities, *oothikoloshe*<sup>2</sup> in the isiXhosa language, rainmakers, and many more. These beliefs were continually interwoven with the spiritual fabric of communities, configuring cultural practices and perspectives. In the same vein, witchcraft accusations were traditionally embedded in the context of communal life, with the accused often perceived as a threat to the community's security. In essence, witchcraft is an integral feature of indigenous belief systems in South Africa, entangled with notions of supernatural energies and beings such as ancestral spirits and nature deities. However, accusations of witchcraft, profoundly implanted in communal life, arise in response to perceived threats to community security, reflecting the complex interaction between spiritual belief systems and cultural practices. As outlined previously, the assimilation of Christian dogmas alongside indigenous beliefs has factored the framing and comprehension of witchcraft indictments, introducing new dimensions to the historical and cultural context surrounding witchcraft in South African societies.

Using a scenario, in traditional African societies, rainmakers were not inherently considered threats; instead, they were honoured figures with a unique ability to influence weather patterns, particularly to bring rain during drought (Spire 1905). The concept of rainmakers is acutely established in cultural and spiritual practices, and these individuals were regarded as essential for the community's security, especially in agricultural societies where rainfall is crucial for crops. However, the perception of rainmakers as threats or associating their practices with witchcraft could plausibly emerge under certain circumstances or in specific cultural contexts. For example, in times of drought or other environmental challenges, people could seek explanations for the lack of rain. If a rainmaker's efforts to bring rain were unsuccessful, they could be implicated for exacerbating the situation, leading to a perception of their activities as ineffective or even harmful (Spire 1905). Adding to this view, Whitelaw (2017) underlines that different communities within South Africa may have varying beliefs and mores related to weather control. In areas where multiple belief systems coexist, conflicts could arise if one group perceives the practices of another, such as rainmaking rituals, as conflicting with their own spiritual or religious traditions. In accordance with this and with particular reference to *oothikoloshe*, they are continually perceived as supernatural beings or malevolent spirits that can pose a threat (Walker 1979). *Oothikoloshe* are commonly associated with mischief, trickery, and even agony, and their presence is linked to witchcraft beliefs and practices. This could include spreading illness, creating obstacles, or causing accidents. Their mischievous nature contributes to its perceived threat within many communities in South Africa. This means that *oothikoloshe* may be regarded as a familiar or accomplice of witches, carrying out their

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2 One must note that the singular form is *uthikoloshe*, while the plural form is *oothikoloshe*. In most instances, it is believed that *uthikoloshe* cannot exist in isolation. Thus, it is commonly suggested that they are often a group, hence *oothikoloshe* in the isiXhosa language.



bidding or assisting them in causing harm to others. This makes it clear that in addition to varying belief systems about weather control among communities in South Africa, as Whitelaw (2017) noted, the perception of *oothikoloshe* as malevolent spirits adds complexity to inter-community subtleties. Associated with disruption, deception, and harm, *oothikoloshe* are linked to witchcraft belief systems and practices, further amplifying their perceived threat within many communities. This perception leads to *oothikoloshe* being regarded as collaborators or familiars of witches, facilitating the spread of illness, the creation of hindrances, or the occurrence of accidents as part of their purported mischievous activities.

Having said that, the introduction of Christianity in South Africa introduced new dimensions to witchcraft accusations. Missionaries, while seeking to convert local populations, associated indigenous belief systems with demonic practices, as previously underscored. The Christian notion of witchcraft as a pact with the devil or as heresy contributed to the demonisation of these traditional beliefs and practices. This intersection of indigenous and Christian perspectives erratically intensified the social stigma associated with witchcraft. It is for this reason that Diko (2020) underlines that the clash between indigenous South African belief systems and Christianity created a cultural and spiritual tension. This is based on the premise that missionaries pursued to replace or obliterate traditional beliefs, considering them incompatible with Christian doctrine. This clash, now and then, intensified the negative conception of indigenous South African practices. In addition to this, missionaries in South Africa imposed foreign moral standards on indigenous practices, including those related to witchcraft (Diko 2020). In other words, practices that did not align with Christian moral value systems were defined as morally corrupt or sinful, contributing to negative conceptions. On the grounds of this, I argue that the association of witchcraft with demonic influences promoted by missionaries led to witch hunts and the persecution of individuals accused of practising witchcraft. The fear of demonic influence fuelled community suspicion and hostility. As communities embraced Christianity, there was a gradual transformation of ethnological practices. This denotes that traditional rituals associated with healing, divination, or spiritual protection were replaced by Christian rituals, diminishing the role of indigenous practices. Considering this fact, the suppression of indigenous belief systems and practices by missionaries led to the manipulation, distortion, and erasure of local knowledge systems as well as spiritual practices. This manipulation, distortion, and erasure affected how communities understood and dealt with natural phenomena and catastrophes. Nonetheless, it is perceptive for this scholarly discourse to clarify the concept of “witchcraft”, given that it contains ambiguities in different global contexts, including South Africa. This is presented in the next section.

## Concept Clarification

The term “witchcraft” is complex and could be fathomed and interpreted in various ways across different regions and cultural contexts. It entails a range of practices, belief systems, and perceptions that involve supernatural or magical powers. In Western

history, especially during the early modern period, witchcraft was associated with the practice of malevolent magic and was believed to involve a pact with the devil (Hewitt 1902). Witches were thought to engage in harmful spells, curses, and other supernatural activities. The witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries, such as the Salem witch trials in the United States (US), are infamous examples of how accusations of witchcraft led to mass hysteria and persecution. With particular reference to the Salem witch, the term—Salem witch—refers to individuals accused of witchcraft during the infamous Salem witch trials in colonial Massachusetts in 1692 (Hewitt 1902; Roxburgh 2018). The Salem witch trials were a series of hearings and prosecutions that resulted in the execution of 20 people—14 women and six men—accused of practising witchcraft. These trials began when a group of young girls in the town of Salem Village claimed to be afflicted by mysterious illnesses and implicated several women in the community for bewitching them. According to Hewitt (1902), the accusations instantly spread, leading to widespread hysteria. Biased and flawed judicial practices characterised the legal proceedings that followed. The implicated individuals were subjected to spectral evidence, which involved the testimony of accusers claiming to see the spirits or spectres of the alleged witches harming them. In addition to this, nineteen individuals were executed by hanging, and one man was pressed to death with heavy stones for refusing to enter a plea (Reed 2015). The executions took place in 1692, and several others faced imprisonment. The Salem witch trials are believed to have been coerced by a combination of religious, social, economic, and political factors. As a result of this complexity, a climate of fear, religious zealotry, and conflicts within the community contributed to the outbreak of accusations. In the years following the trials, the colonial government recognised the injustices and issued apologies to the families of the accused (Padro 2021). The Salem witch trials have since been widely examined as a cautionary tale about the dangers of mass hysteria, unjust legal proceedings, and the consequences of false accusations.

In contrast to this, in many African and indigenous cultures, witchcraft is profoundly entrenched in traditional belief systems. It involves individuals believed to possess supernatural powers used for both benevolent and malevolent purposes (Mbhiza 2021). Witchcraft accusations in these contexts relate to the belief that an individual has used their powers to cause anguish, illness, or misfortune. Because of this view, the accused may be perceived as a threat to the community and face social ostracism or even violence (Padro 2021). On the one hand, witchcraft or sorcery is understood in the context of supernatural practices. In certain Middle Eastern and Asian cultures, there are distinctions between white magic, regarded as beneficial or protective, and black magic, regarded as harmful or malevolent (Diko 2020). Having said that, allegations of witchcraft in these regions potentially have consequential legal results, and some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Gambia, Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, and many others, have legal frameworks specifically addressing witchcraft and sorcery (Boaz 2023; Hund 2004). The contemporary Neopagan and Wiccan contexts are also important to indicate herein. This is on account that in contemporary Western societies, particularly among Neopagan and Wiccan communities, witchcraft is associated with modern pagan and

magical practices (Hund 2004). In these contexts, a “witch” practices nature-based spirituality, magic, and rituals (Hund 2004, 69). While this is the case, in Latin American and Caribbean cultures, witchcraft is interweaved with syncretic religious practices that blend indigenous, African, and European influences (Whitelaw 2017). Practices such as Santería or Vodou involve elements of magic, ritual, and the invocation of spirits (Spire 1905). As previously outlined, this article applies cultural hegemony to unmask the influence of Christianity in the persecution of witches. Cultural hegemony is explained in the next section.

### Theoretical Framework: Cultural Hegemony

Cultural hegemony is a concept developed by the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci (Kang 1997; Lears 1985; Rebel 1989). It refers to the dominance or control that a particular group or class exercises over a particular society’s culture, values, belief systems, and ethos (Lears 1985, 570). This dominance is not attained solely through political or economic means but also through the establishment and maintenance of ethnological practices and ideologies that buttress the ruling class’s interests. Similarly, cultural hegemony entails the ruling class’s imposition of a dominant ideology. This ideology mirrors the dominant group’s values, beliefs, and philosophy, continually fortifying their social, economic, and political interests. With this in mind, Antonio Gramsci argued that hegemony is maintained and revitalised through force (coercion) and the consent of the dominant classes (Diko 2023). This suggests that the dominant group achieves this consent by shaping ethnological norms and values widely accepted and internalised by the rest of society. In the process, the dominant ideology or philosophy becomes so entrenched in everyday life that it is perceived as “common sense” or natural. In other words, it crystallises how people think and perceive the world and how they interact with each other. Central to this theoretical framework, this normalisation process helps maintain the status quo. Above and beyond this, cultural hegemony operates through various cultural institutions, such as education, media, religion, and language. These institutions play a central role in disseminating and reinforcing the dominant philosophy. After all, hegemony is a form of social control that goes beyond direct coercion. It influences people’s thoughts and behaviours by shaping their understanding of what is acceptable and expected. This control extends to cultural practices, including rituals, symbols, and narratives.

In the context of the influence of Christianity in the assassination of witches in South Africa, cultural hegemony is applied to critique how Christian belief systems, introduced through colonialism and biblical narratives, became the dominant cultural force. In its application hereunder, this theoretical framework explores how these belief systems influenced the perception of witchcraft, demonising indigenous South African practices and contributing to the justification of violence against those accused of being witches. This suggests that cultural hegemony considers how Christian doctrines were disseminated through religious institutions and how they became fundamental to communal ethical codes. This theoretical framework further scrutinises the power

dynamic forces involved and how the dominant Christian philosophy or theological codes might have been accepted and internalised by various social groups. In essence, cultural hegemony, in this article, provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the influence of Christianity on cultural beliefs and practices related to witchcraft accusations in South Africa. It must be stressed again that to undertake the discussions of this scholarly discourse, certain biblical narratives are utilised because Christianity in South Africa is established in the Bible, as previously underlined. This is presented in the next section.

## Findings and Discussion

Discussing the historical persecution of witches within the context of Christianity comprises examining various narratives from the Bible. In this particular section, I discuss three biblical incidents that I implicate, among other contributing factors, to the persecution of witches in South Africa and possibly elsewhere in the global village.

### **The Witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28:3-25)**

In this biblical narrative, King Saul pursues the help of the witch of Endor to summon the spirit of the deceased prophet Samuel. Keeping this in mind, the use of occultism and communication with the dead is condemned and castigated in the Bible,<sup>3</sup> and this biblical textual evidence is utilised to argue against witchcraft. However, the context and interpretation of this textual evidence are crucial. The Bible does not explicitly label the woman as a witch, and the narrative could be seen as a condemnation of Saul's desperation rather than an endorsement of witchcraft. The narrative involving King Saul's encounter with the witch of Endor is a fascinating case study when scrutinised through the perspective of cultural hegemony. In the context of this biblical narrative, cultural hegemony plays a pivotal role in influencing the interpretation and perception of this biblical narrative. This condemnation of occultism and communicating with the dead mirrors the dominant cultural and religious value systems of the time, buttressing the prevailing ethical codes against practices deemed as occult or supernatural. This story is invoked to denounce witchcraft, aligning with the broader cultural hegemony that views such practices as taboo or heretical. On account of this, I contend that this denunciation is rooted in a cultural or religious belief system that demonises practices like witchcraft. As a result, it is problematic from the standpoint of religious tolerance and multiplicity. In societies that value freedom of belief and expression, castigating a particular belief or practice solely based on cultural hegemony contravenes individual freedoms. In other words, the denunciation of witchcraft based on certain cultural or

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3 This is contained in Deuteronomy 18:10-12, and it reads as follows: "There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord." In addition to this, Leviticus 19:31 continues to suggest that: "Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the Lord your God."

religious beliefs overlooks the principle of cultural relativism, which acknowledges the diversity of beliefs and practices across different cultures. This means that what may be considered witchcraft in one culture could be regarded as a legitimate spiritual practice or cultural tradition in another. Given this assertion, failing to honour cultural differences and imposing one's beliefs as superior undermines cultural diversity and fosters intolerance.

By the same token and taking into account the South African context, this vilification has real-world consequences for individuals practising witchcraft, such as intolerance, persecution, or violence. For this reason, I believe that the aforementioned biblical narrative should be regarded as highly problematic. This is based on the premise that respect for human rights and protection from discrimination should be prioritised. As underscored earlier, the Bible does not categorically label the woman from Endor as a witch. This ambiguity opens the door to alternative explications that challenge the hegemonic narrative. From a different perspective, this biblical narrative could be viewed as a condemnation of Saul's desperation rather than a ratification of witchcraft. It stands to reason, therefore, to argue that recognising the varied ethnological and religious belief systems present within South African society is necessary for promoting acceptance and veneration. However, vilifying practices like witchcraft, which hold significance for many communities, disregard the cultural legacy and spiritual traditions of those who practice it. That is why it is significant to encourage fair dialogues and understanding between different belief systems to help mitigate prejudice and promote a more inclusive society. In essence, I argue that this underlines the tangible consequences of denigrating witchcraft in the South African context, including intolerance and violence against practitioners or those who are indicted of being witches. It underscores the necessity to reconsider traditional interpretations of narratives like the biblical account of the woman from Endor and prioritise deference for diverse cultural and religious beliefs to foster tolerance and inclusivity through dialogue and indulgence.

What is also important to observe is that Saul, facing dire circumstances and deserted by God, seeks the witch's assistance out of despondency. This interpretation reframes this biblical narrative as a critique of Saul's lack of faith and disobedience to supernatural commands. It underlines the consequences of deviating from the established religious and cultural norms, reinforcing the hegemonic discourse but emphasising the moral dimension rather than solely condemning occult practices. On the grounds of this, I argue that the flexibility of interpretation in this biblical textual evidence highlights the malleability of cultural hegemony. This means that while the dominant narrative may lean towards denouncing witchcraft, the inherent ambiguity allows for alternative readings that contest the established norms. This tension between the dominant cultural narrative and alternative interpretations reflects the dynamic nature of cultural hegemony, acknowledging its influence while recognising the potential for subversion and (re)interpretation. Beyond this, the fact that Samuel's spirit

appears and delivers a message to Saul complicates the interpretation, as it suggests that there was some supernatural reality to the witch's actions.

In contrast to this observation, by unravelling the cultural hegemony embedded in the Christian interpretation of the Witch of Endor, I underline the subtle ways dominant ideologies shape perceptions and contribute to the stigmatisation of alternative spiritual belief systems. This is because the Witch of Endor's textual evidence serves as a foundational voice that contributes to the creation of a hegemonic Christian narrative against practices deemed threatening to religious orthodoxy. Over and above this, I must indicate that the Christian exposition of the Witch of Endor narrative downplays the historical and cultural context in which it originated, neglecting the complexities of indigenous belief systems and spiritual practices in the region at that time. This oversight propagates a narrow understanding of spirituality and advances the subjugation of alternative belief systems, impeding efforts towards genuine religious pluralism and understanding.

### **Exodus 22:18**

This verse attests to the biblical condemnation of witches and reads, "Do not allow a sorceress to live". Interpretations of this verse have been used to justify the persecution and execution of individuals accused of witchcraft (Sprinkle 2004; Szlos 1999). Nonetheless, the historical and cultural context should be considered. The term "sorceress" refers to those who engaged in detrimental magical practices, but the understanding of witchcraft has evolved. Considering this reality, it is crucial to recognise the cultural prejudices and interpretations that have influenced the persecution of supposed witches. The biblical excerpt "Do not allow a sorceress to live" could potentially be understood as a biblical rejection of witches, serving as a foundation for the persecution and execution of individuals accused of witchcraft. This interpretation, however, demands a multifaceted critique within its historical and ethnological context. As one delves into the complexities of this phenomenon, cultural hegemony emerges as a central lens through which to comprehend the dynamic subtleties at play. In dissecting this biblical verse, it is apparent that the term "sorceress" has been a focal point for justifying the poignant treatment of those accused of engaging in destructive magical practices. However, the understanding of witchcraft has undergone significant transformations over time. Given this reality, as Antonio Gramsci proposed, cultural hegemony asserts that the dominant group in society imposes its values, beliefs, and norms upon the subordinate groups. In the context of witch persecution, it becomes clear that the unravelling of biblical pieces of textual evidence was instrumental in consolidating the power of the dominant Christian ideology.

This suggests that Christianity, as the conventional religious force in many societies, wielded significant influence over cultural perceptions. Bearing this in mind, the denunciation of sorcery within the Christian doctrine is a tool for advancing conventional power structures. In parallel to this view, the evolving understanding of witchcraft mirrors the malleability of cultural interpretations, with the label of "witch"

adapting to suit the demands of those in power. It is imperative, therefore, to accept the cultural prejudices interwoven in the persecution of supposed witches. This is because cultural hegemony facilitates the construction of a narrative that positions witchcraft as a threat to the dominant Christian order, thereupon justifying the persecution of individuals labelled as witches. This distortion of cultural narratives not only solidifies the authority of the Christian elite but also perpetuates collective norms that vilify those who deviate from the established religious doctrine. In addition, the denunciation of sorcery within Christian doctrine serves as a mechanism for fortifying conventional power structures by delegitimising alternative forms of spirituality and consolidating the authority of religious institutions. Ultimately, this prolongs a system of social control where those in positions of religious authority maintain dominance over belief systems and practices deemed divergent or threatening to established norms. The evolving understanding of witchcraft echoes the manipulation of cultural narratives to serve the interests of those in power, with the label of “witch” adapting to suit the agendas of dominant groups. This manipulation not only perpetuates cultural prejudices but also validates the oppression of individuals labelled as witches, further entrenching the hegemony of the Christian elite and reinforcing collective norms that relegate dissenting voices. This denotes that by demonising practices deemed outside the scope of established religious doctrines, such as witchcraft, the Christian elite maintain control over belief systems and suppress unconventional forms of spirituality, thereupon perpetuating a system of social disparity and marginalisation.

### **Galatians 5:19-21**

In this biblical textual evidence, the Apostle Paul lists “witchcraft” as one of the “works of the flesh” alongside other vices. It stands to reason, therefore, to denote that the condemnation of witchcraft in the New Testament is used to support the persecution of individuals accused of practising magic. With this being said, a multifaceted understanding is necessary, considering the historical context and different translations of the Bible. The term translated as “witchcraft” in the King James version refers to a broader range of magical practices, and interpretations could vary (Davies 2013, 387). It must be stressed herein that the term “witchcraft”, as found in the King James version of the Bible, serves as a linchpin for the persecution narrative. Differently put, the term “witchcraft” in the King James version of the Bible originates from the Hebrew word “kashaph” in the Old Testament and the Greek word “pharmakeia” in the New Testament (Ashforth 2005; Davies 2013). These terms comprise various magical practices, including divination, sorcery, and occult rituals. However, the precise meanings of these terms have been subject to interpretation and translation variations. In the context of the Bible, accusations of witchcraft are associated with activities such as casting spells, communicating with spirits, or performing rituals to influence events supernaturally. These practices are considered forbidden and condemned within the religious framework of the biblical contexts. Given this, cultural hegemony, as a theoretical framework, helps one explicate how dominant cultural groups maintain their power over marginalised groups. In the context of witchcraft persecution, Christianity has historically and continually occupied a dominant position, configuring collective

ethos and influencing legal systems. With this in mind, the castigation of witchcraft in the New Testament serves as a tool through which cultural hegemony is exerted, creating a narrative that advances the dominance of certain religious belief systems, with particular emphasis on Christianity.

However, a more intricate assessment uncovers that the term translated as “witchcraft” is subject to contemporary interpretations. This means the King James version may not capture the full range of magical practices the original term encompasses. Different translations and historical contexts offer alternative perspectives on what was considered objectionable or forbidden. This opens a further platform to the understanding that the persecution was not exclusively based on a clear and universally agreed-upon definition of witchcraft but rather on interpretations configured by cultural and religious prejudices. In the context of cultural hegemony, the persecution of witches could be regarded as a mechanism to subdue alternative belief systems and maintain the dominance of the prevailing religious paradigm—Christianity. Those accused of practising magic often represented a challenge to the established hierarchy, posing a cause for alarm to the cultural hegemony of Christianity. The condemnation of witchcraft in religious texts becomes a powerful tool in justifying the persecution and promoting the societal power structures. It is for this reason that I emphasised previously that unmasking the influence of Christianity in the persecution of witches demands a comprehensive examination of the role played by cultural hegemony. With the discussions that have ensued above, it is clear that the phenomenon of the persecution of witches in the Bible, as well as within the Christian context, is multidimensional. Given this fact, observing some recommendations for future scholarly scrutiny and implementation by directly and/or indirectly involved stakeholders is important. In the same vein, it is important to observe the concluding remarks. All these are presented in the next section.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

The influence of Christianity in the persecution of witches through cultural hegemony is an intricate and historically established phenomenon that necessitates meticulous examination. First and foremost, it is essential to promote historical consciousness and education to illuminate the origins and evolution of these belief systems. This suggests that by encouraging critical exposition of historical narratives and events, individuals could potentially gain a nuanced understanding of how Christianity became homogenised with witch hunts. This could help dispel mythologies and conceptions associated with witchcraft, buttressing a more versed and tolerant society. Second, advancing interfaith dialogue is central to addressing the cultural hegemony propagated by certain explications of Christianity. This denotes that by engaging in open conversations between different religious groups, there is an opportunity to challenge and overcome prejudiced perspectives. In the process, it would be perceptive to encourage religious tolerance and emphasise collective value systems that can plausibly contribute to dismantling boundaries that have historically led to the persecution of



individuals accused of witchcraft. Third (last), empowering subjugated voices, particularly those of women and young girls, is key to deconstructing the cultural hegemony advanced by the witch hunts. This is on account that by amplifying the voices of women who have historically been silenced and promoting gender justice, societies could challenge the male-orientated structures that underlie accusations of witchcraft. This approach recognises historical injustices and actively works towards a more inclusive and evenhanded future where variegated perspectives are valued and honoured.

The persecution of witches, commonly associated with the witch hunts of the late medieval and early modern periods, is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors, including religious, social, economic, and political elements. While it is true that Christianity played a significant role in the persecution of witches, it is essential to acknowledge that the dynamic subtleties are multifaceted, and attributing the entire phenomenon solely to religious influence oversimplifies the challenge. The monotheistic nature of Christianity, combined with certain theological explications, contributes to the perception of witchcraft as a heretical and demonic practice. The Bible, particularly passages like Exodus 22:18 (“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”), justifies the persecution of those accused of witchcraft. The Church’s influence over the legal systems of the time further facilitates the persecution. In consideration of this, Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci describes cultural hegemony, which involves the dominance of a particular cultural group over society. In the context of witch hunts, the church and ruling elites hold significant power. Inevitably, the persecution of witches is then a means for these power structures to maintain control and eliminate perceived threats to their authority. While Christianity plays a crucial role in shaping the worldview that allows for the persecution of witches, it is important to appreciate the interaction of various historical, social, and economic factors. This is because witch hunts are not solely a religious phenomenon but rather a complex interplay of different elements within the broader context of history, society, and theology.

In closing, a witch does not need to fix problems. He or she fixes the energy around problems; then, the problems fix themselves. Unlike this article, which has an ending, challenges concerning witchcraft do not have an ending. As a consequence of this, they require a continued scholarly dialogue.

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