

The Deceptive Nature of Magic and Witchcraft: A Cultural Practice and Its Menace on Zimbabwean Society



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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the deceptive nature of magic and witchcraft as cultural practices in Zimbabwe and highlights its negative impact on society. Based on social conflict theory, the research explores how the belief in witchcraft fosters fear, suspicion, and social division, perpetuating conflict within families and communities. Witchcraft, often considered a form of cultural heritage, is scrutinised not only for its historical significance but also for the ways in which it undermines social cohesion and development. The study employed a qualitative methodological approach, using a combination of ethnographic accounts and a literature review to gather insights from local communities, traditional leaders, and scholars. By analysing narratives from individuals who have been affected by witchcraft accusations or practices, the research revealed the deep-seated anxieties and tensions that witchcraft engenders. This paper argues that although cultural traditions should be valued, harmful practices such as witchcraft must be discouraged to foster social harmony and progress in Zimbabwe. The discussion calls for a collective effort to address this menace and to reimagine cultural practices in a way that promotes unity, peace, and development. This study contributes to scholarship by offering a critical cultural analysis that challenges the romanticisation of witchcraft as heritage, presenting a framework for evaluating cultural practices through their social consequences. It adds to the discourse on cultural reform and social justice, particularly in postcolonial African societies seeking pathways to development grounded in ethical and inclusive traditions.

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INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft is defined as the use of magic powers, especially evil ones.¹ One of the unique characteristics of witchcraft is that one can strike from a distance. Therefore, witchcraft presents itself as a technological initiative of its class or as a science not comparable to modern technology. However, magic, in general, is also a means of finding solutions to health complications. Thus, the way a society responds to disease reveals its deepest cultural, social and moral values.² In addition, an attempt is made to sensitise the readership (including local communities and herbalists) about the conservation

¹ Adam Ashforth, "Witchcraft, Justice, and Human Rights in Africa: Cases from Malawi," *African Studies Review* 58,no.1(2015):5–38.

² Allan M. Brandt and Paul Rozin, *Morality and Health* (London: Routledge, 2013), 148.

of the natural and ecological environment, as well as the preservation of some wildlife species, such as snakes, hyenas and owls, which are traditionally and culturally associated with evil and witchcraft. In addition, *varoyi* are herbalists who use plants, barks, leaves and the roots of trees as critical parts of their concoctions.³ The continuous destruction of the natural habitat, when herbalists uproot trees, will expose the natural environment to gradual extermination. The study has also gathered that sometimes, *huroyi* comprises sacrifices of live animals such as goats, cattle, chickens, and humans. Sacrifice involving human blood is also a critical part of the practice of witchcraft, black magic and sorcery. In addition to examining *huroyi* as a unique technology among Africans, this research also attempts to elucidate the negative impact of *huroyi* on humans and domesticated animals. Hence, Matsobane J. Manala states, “So dangerous for human life and survival are witches that people who find themselves in the grip of bewitchment have to seek help, not only from humans but also from divine and spiritual powers.”⁴

Numerous narratives (and literature) on witchcraft existed in ancient Israel.⁵ Although existing documents from the ancient past do not make sufficient reference to the act of magic practised as witchcraft by ancient Israelite societies, the phenomenon was a common religio-cultural practice. It is argued that the use of the term “witchcraft” referring to sorcery, in general, is gender-blind; an informal discussion with a colleague revealed that a “wizard” (male sorcerer) is more terrifying than a “witch” (female sorcerer).⁶ Meanwhile, the statement that a “Muroyi appears as a shadowy human form, always stark naked having left her clothes behind in the hut to cover her metamorphosed body, her eyes bright and shining like burning lumps of coal” reinforces this study’s argument that it is usually females who are regarded as “people of darkness.”⁷ Hence, the term “witches” is constantly used.

However, the Shona noun *huroyi* expresses the practice more precisely, and the term will be employed throughout the discourse. Third, the proposed project presupposes that *huroyi* in Zimbabwe is a technology of an advanced level. So far, previous contributions on *huroyi* have not explored the unique practice of technology of the highest order in Africa. Most, if not all, previous studies on witchcraft have tended to discuss the phenomenon in general terms by portraying it in a bad light. The present study presents *huroyi* as a unique practice that can be regulated for the benefit of those practising it and to members of society at large if used constructively. Some societies, especially Western ones, have tended to view narratives of *huroyi* as fictitious and mythical. This study, therefore, argues that *huroyi* is a reality and that there are instances individuals struck by the spell of *huroyi*.

On a macro level, this study consists of a multitude objective. First, the study offers an alternative interpretation of *huroyi* from the perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) to enrich scholarship and prove to the reader that *huroyi* in Africa (and in Zimbabwe) is a technology of the highest order. Second, the study seeks to instil pride in Africans that Africa is endowed with rich values, belief systems, and practices that compare competitively with global technology. Such technology needs to be tapped into and developed so that it begins to benefit the broader society and can be exported to Western (and European) markets. Such an initiative has the potential to enhance local expertise while simultaneously earning the country foreign currency. Third, in addition to its usefulness as a resource for academic purposes, this study also demonstrates a transformative potential when society is informed about the negative aspects of *huroyi* and the injurious consequences associated with the practice, with special reference to human and animal sacrifices.⁸ When the cause of a specific category of *huroyi* is identified, the therapeutic character of African traditional medicine

³ Dale Wallace, “Rethinking Religion, Magic and Witchcraft in South Africa: From Colonial Coherence to Postcolonial Conundrum,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 28, no. 1 (2015): 23–51.

⁴ Matsobane J. Manala, “Witchcraft and Its Impact on Black African Christians: A Lacuna in the Ministry of the Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 60, no. 4 (November 2, 2004), 1502. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v60i4.635>.

⁵ JoAnn Scurlock, “The Techniques of the Sacrifice of Animals in Ancient Israel and Ancient Mesopotamia: New Insights through Comparison, Part 1,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS)* 44, no. 1 (2006): 241–264.

⁶ This debate will be developed in a future study.

⁷ Hugh A. Stayt, *The BaVenda* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 274. The argument against presenting women as “people of darkness” will be explored in detail in a future study.

⁸ Schadrack Mvunabandi, “The Communicative Power of Blood Sacrifices: A Predominantly South African Perspective with Special Reference to the Epistle to the Romans” (University of Pretoria, 2008), 374.

will likely be used to successfully treat health complications with the potential of reversing harmful spells of *huroyi*. Fourth, in an attempt to analyse witchcraft from the perspective of those who believe in it, the present research examines various types of *huroyi*, including the following: *zvidhoma*, poisoning and lightning.⁹ Another example can also be drawn from Ghanaian society, in which spell-casting is believed to have the potential to cause one to become sick.¹⁰ It is also envisaged that barrenness, infertility, attacks by dangerous animals, snakebites, persistent headaches and repeated miscarriages are consequences of witchcraft.¹¹ It has also been established that a witch can cast a spell by mentioning the victim's name.¹² Finally, this study examines Zimbabwe's laws and the possibility of recognising *huroyi* as ICH.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a narrative inquiry research method. Narrative inquiry is an umbrella term that captures the personal and human dimensions of experience over time and takes into account the relationship between individual experience and cultural context.¹³ Narrative inquiry is a means by which the researcher systematically gathers, analyses and represents people's stories, which challenges traditional and modernist views of truth, reality, knowledge and personhood.¹⁴ In narrative inquiry, secondary data is used, an approach that is traditionally known as "desk research."¹⁵ Secondary sources such as book chapters, journal articles, and internet sources will be critical in developing the proposed argument.

Huroyi as Unique Technology in Zimbabwe

In Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular, power is sought in various ways, but the most common one is *huroyi*.¹⁶ *Huroyi* is quite different from magic, as explained in the various instances above. Victor Nakah concurs: "The belief in witchcraft is very real and strong among contemporary Shona." Some societies outside Africa tend to trivialise *huroyi*. The fact that other societies cannot understand the particularities and practices involving *huroyi* does not make the practice mythical or insignificant. The technology of *huroyi* lies in the fact that no one can touch or feel it; one will experience the consequence. Although developed nations with advanced technology can strike a target some miles away using a missile, *huroyi* can equally hit and devastate a target simply by an act of magic. Thus, Victor J. Pitsoe and Mpho M. Dichaba could not have said it better by stating that: "Arguably, all human beings have certain life stages in common, but no one generation approaches them in the same way."¹⁷ Thus, Ngara and Porath's preference for *huroyi* as *shavi rokuroya* (Shona: skill of witchcraft) depicts an acknowledgement that *huroyi* is a unique knowledge system in Zimbabwe.¹⁸ However, popular reports that need to be substantiated by a further study involving actual practitioners say that *varoyi* can fly at night in their excursions¹⁹ to a distant place to attend a function

⁹ Yaseen Ally, "'Burn the Witch': The Impact of the Fear of Witchcraft on Social Cohesion in South Africa," *Psychology in Society* 49 (2015): 25–45, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-8708/2015/n49a3>; Dexter Tagwireyi and D E Ball, "'Muti' Poisoning in Zimbabwe," *Tropical Doctor* 32, no. 1 (2002): 41–42.

¹⁰ Peter White, "The Concept of Diseases and Health Care in African Traditional Religion in Ghana," *HTS: Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 1–7, 2.

¹¹ Elijah Obinna, "'Life Is Superior to Wealth?': Indigenous Healers in an African Community, Amasiri, Nigeria," in *African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* (Routledge, 2016), 137–38.

¹² Itani P. Mandende, "A Study of Tshivenda Personal Names" (University of South Africa, 2009), 9.

¹³ Jean D. Clandinin and Michael F. Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

¹⁴ Kim Etherington, *Narrative Approaches to Working with Adult Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2000).

¹⁵ Melissa P Johnston, "Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of Which the Time Has Come," *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries* 3, no. 3 (2014): 619–26.

¹⁶ Robert Munthali, "Traumatic Ritual Murders in Venda: A Challenge to Pastoral Care" (University of Pretoria, 2005).

¹⁷ Victor J Pitsoe and Mpho M Dichaba, "Reimagining UNISA's Open Distance Learning through the Lens of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 23 (2014): 1356.

¹⁸ Constantine Ngara and Marion Porath, "Shona Culture of Zimbabwe's Views of Giftedness," *High Ability Studies* 15, no. 2 (2004): 202.

¹⁹ Gordon L Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe* (Zimbabwe National Traditional Healer's Association, 1982).

or feast and return the same night, “while their bodies remained at home in bed.”²⁰ It is said that *varoyi* use broomsticks to fly.²¹ Others claim that *varoyi* also use a rusero (winnowing basket) as a “flying machine.”²² Meanwhile, *varoyi* form extra-village and transcultural hostile bands who meet at night on distant mountaintops to practise their parodies of shamanistic freedom, cannibalism, and incest.²³

In recent years, Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) and African religio-cultural practices (medicine, healing, divination, belief in the potency of *huroyi*, etc) have been regarded as superficial.²⁴ Even in the postcolonial Zimbabwean context, such a scenario presents itself. The colonial system also perceived the African cultural heritage negatively. For example, the Witchcraft Suppression Act (Ch.73) of 1899 made it clear that although people may genuinely believe in *huroyi*, it regarded the whole practice of *huroyi* as a pretence and a sham, something which, in actual fact, has no real existence at all.²⁵ Moreover, the Act undermines *huroyi* by referring to it as “so-called witchcraft.”²⁶ Hence, what was traditional became superstition.²⁷

However, indigenous and culturally entrenched Africans believe that one can be afflicted by the potency of *huroyi* in the absence of personal contact, in which both *muroyi* and the victim are thousands of kilometres apart. Culturally rooted Africans believe that *muroyi* can traverse (unnoticed) the air space for thousands of kilometres in a single night and back. For us, it is also a mystery. However, *vaShona vanoziwa chaizvo kuti kune vanhu vanoshandisa mishonga vanogona kuita zvinhu zvisingaonekwe nemaziso uye zvikuru sei nokuti zvinoitwa husiku* (Shona; literally translated: “the Shona people understand very well that there are people who use magic to do things that cannot be seen, more so because such things are done in the dark.”) The fact that accusations and counter-accusations based on *huroyi* appear to be on the rise supports the severity of the phenomenon.

On another level, human blood is said to be more treasured by *varoyi* for its magical efficacy.²⁸ Although a large portion of the concoctions used by *varoyi* derives mainly from ecological sources (trees, roots, legumes, etc), a mixture of these is said to be more effective when a portion of human blood is included. *Varoyi* are believed to be more interested in the blood of their prey than in the flesh.²⁹ Sometimes *varoyi* enjoy both eating the flesh and sucking the blood of their victims.³⁰ *Varoyi* are thirsty for blood because of their ascribed power to nourish and make them more potent.³¹ The *muroyi*'s magical powers can cause various forms of harm, such as a curse, stillbirth, delayed birth, death while or after giving birth, barrenness, and persistent illness, among others. For instance, young women are considered to be particularly susceptible to *huroyi* during their first pregnancy and childbirth.³² A protection ritual to stop this is performed in which young mothers are usually required to return to their parents' homestead for birth during their first pregnancy because Shona people believe that the ancestors, through the parents, are capable of proffering some protection against *huroyi*.³³ This ritual of returning a pregnant woman to her parents at birth is common among the Shona people and is known as *masungiro*.³⁴ A similar ritual was also performed during the Old and New Testaments. Among the Shona people, even after the baby is born, a breastfeeding mother is instructed not to mix with strangers. When forced to breastfeed in the company of multitudes, she has to move to a solitary

²⁰ John F. Middleton and Edward H. Winter, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 3.

²¹ Ulrich P. Mayer, *Witches: An Inaugural Lecture* (Grahamstown: Rhodes University, 1954), 8.

²² For a research on the technology of using a broomstick and a winnowing basket as “flying machines,” Lee, S. Kugara, “Witchcraft Belief and Criminal Responsibility: A Case Study of Selected Areas in South Africa and Zimbabwe” (University of Venda, 2017), 161.

²³ Evan M. Zuesse, “Divination and Deity in African Religions,” *History of Religions* 15, no. 2 (1975): 168.

²⁴ Tarisai Chimuka, “Ethics among the Shona,” *Zambezia* xxxvii, no. 1 (2001): 24.

²⁵ Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe*, 130.

²⁶ Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe*, 130.

²⁷ Webber Ndoro, Albert Mumma, and George Abungu, *Cultural Heritage and the Law: Protecting Immovable Heritage in English-Speaking Countries of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Rome: ICCROM, 2008), vi.

²⁸ Francis Machingura and Godfrey Museka, “‘Blood as the Seat of Life’: The Blood Paradox among Afro-Christians,” *Perichoresis* 14, no. 1 (June 1, 2016): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1515/perc-2016-0003>.

²⁹ Machingura and Museka, “‘Blood as the Seat of Life’: The Blood Paradox among Afro-Christians,” 54.

³⁰ Machingura and Museka, “‘Blood as the Seat of Life’: The Blood Paradox among Afro-Christians,” 55.

³¹ Machingura and Museka, “‘Blood as the Seat of Life’: The Blood Paradox among Afro-Christians,” 55.

³² Thomas N. Huffman, “Ritual Space in the Zimbabwe Culture,” *Ethnoarchaeology* 6, no. 1 (2014): 27.

³³ Huffman, “Ritual Space in the Zimbabwe Culture,” 28.

³⁴ Huffman, “Ritual Space in the Zimbabwe Culture,” 28.

place to do so. This action is believed to be a precautionary measure to protect the newborn baby from *varoyi* or people who use muti (African magic), which can make the baby sick.

Missing or disappeared clothes (usually undergarments) can also be used to bewitch the owner of the clothes. If the owner of the clothes is a woman, she may suffer continuous hemorrhage through menstruation, divorce, or barrenness. A man may suffer various other misfortunes/curses, including loss of job, being disliked, or some mental disorder. The other common type of *huroyi* is that of sexual intimacy (known as *mubobobo*)³⁵ with someone unaware; the partner may feel that the spouse is in bed when, in actual fact, it is just a *duri* (mortar)³⁶ placed inside the blankets. There are also communities in Zimbabwe who believe that disability is caused by *huroyi*.³⁷ However, this theory cannot be substantiated with certainty and has been criticised in various scientific studies.

In certain instances, a curse is also related to *huroyi*. Although it is common knowledge among Africans in Zimbabwe that beating up parents or breaking a taboo can invite a curse, *varoyi* is also known to pronounce curses on certain individuals.³⁸ It is evident that when one curses a person they do not like. If a parent can curse their child like a *muroyi*, the parent acts like a *muroyi*. However, if the cursed person is not guilty, the pronounced curse will not affect them.³⁹ A Shona proverb says: *nhunzi haimhari pasina ronda* (literally translated as a house fly does not land where there is no wound), meaning that a curse is linked to a state of guilt. Usually, *huroyi* is more effective on a person of the same totem as the *muroyi* or when one's totem is known to the *muroyi*. It is believed among Africans that a *muroyi* has to pronounce *huroyi* on someone using concoctions while using the "technology" of mentioning that person's name and totem. *Huroyi* is believed to be enhanced by the power of spoken words. Thus, Mark Mercer maintains, "The worst is the curse uttered at the deathbed; for once the pronouncer of the curse has died, it is practically impossible to revoke it."⁴⁰ In addition, witch doctors play a central role in *huroyi*.⁴¹ Witch doctors⁴² are experts in witchcraft and are cognizant of muti that can cause either imminent or gradual death.⁴³ Witch doctors are offered incentives to provide fateful services.

As stated above, there are various types (or categories) of *huroyi*. Some examples were given earlier in this treatise. The present section examines the following: *zvidhoma* (these have power from a distance), *muchetura* (food poisoning) and *mheni* (lightning that can be manipulated and directed toward the target). For some critics, there is some interrelatedness between *huroyi* and ritual murder.⁴⁴ Admittedly, one would agree with Munthali that the "motive of *varoyi* is to destroy human life, so *varoyi* are ritual murderers who are consulted to kill innocent victims."⁴⁵ Jean Fontaine concurs that *huroyi* tends to influence ritual murder.⁴⁶ It should be understood that this study does not seek to promote *huroyi* and the harm it causes. It aims to demonstrate that *huroyi* is another technology among the Shona people. In other words, *huroyi* among Africans functions in the same way as any digital device, such as a cellular phone, in which one communicates with someone some distance away. Evan M. Zuesse was right to state that: "Possession of a remote tends to move to the extreme of negative

³⁵ Calvin Gwandure, "Mubobobo: Women Have No Sexual Fantasies in Their Sleep," *The Open Anthropology Journal* 2, no.1(2009): 74–81.

³⁶ Edison Mhaka and Cline. Chiome, "An Exploration of the Educational Implications of Experiences of Witchcraft by Teachers and Pupils at Rengwe Primary School in the Hurungwe District, Mashonaland West Province in Zimbabwe," *Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 2C (2015): 489–501.

³⁷ Bazondlile D. Marimbe et al., "Perceived Burden of Care and Reported Coping Strategies and Needs for Family Caregivers of People with Mental Disorders in Zimbabwe," *African Journal of Disability* 5, no. 1 (February 19, 2016), a209. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v5i1.209>.

³⁸ Mark Mercer, "Elijah's Unbearable Curse: A Study of 2 Kings 2:23-25," *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21, no. 2 (2002): 166.

³⁹ Mercer, "Elijah's Unbearable Curse: A Study of 2 Kings 2:23-25," 166.

⁴⁰ Mercer, "Elijah's Unbearable Curse: A Study of 2 Kings 2:23-25," 166.

⁴¹ Maurine M. Mswela, "A Selection of Legal Issues Relating to Persons Living with Albinism" (University of South Africa, 2016), 2.

⁴² Usually, this phrase is used in relation to *n'anga* (a traditional healer). However, a differentiation exists between a witch-doctor and a traditional healer in that while the former focuses primarily on identifying a witch with an aim of exorcism, the latter functions as a herbalist with a healing prowess.

⁴³ Ashforth, "Witchcraft, Justice, and Human Rights in Africa: Cases from Malawi," 201 -212.

⁴⁴ Munthali, "Traumatic Ritual Murders in Venda: A Challenge to Pastoral Care," 42.

⁴⁵ Munthali, "Traumatic Ritual Murders in Venda: A Challenge to Pastoral Care," 42.

⁴⁶ Jean L. Fontaine, *Ritual Murder?* (London: Open Anthropology Cooperative Press, 2011), 14.

liminality; muroyi is independent of local kin and social relationships.”⁴⁷ The difference between a cellular phone and a huroyi is that the latter does not use any physical substance to strike; some muti does the job. It could even be argued that the practice of huroyi depicts some technological advancement that can be further developed. Zuesse further contends that the evil of *varoyi* represents a personal paralysis in the journey into the remote beyond; *varoyi* wander in the darkness in the bush, motivated by an annihilating agony and hatred.⁴⁸

In Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), many people were struck by *mheni* and “most of these were Africans.”⁴⁹ Among the various malevolent acts of huroyi, *mheni* is also mentioned. In Zimbabwe, regions (provinces/districts) are predominantly known for certain types of huroyi. For instance, Chipinge in the Eastern Highlands and Zaka in the southeast of Zimbabwe are popularly known for man-made *mheni*, while Karoi in the northern part is known for *zvidhoma*.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, scientists say that Zimbabwe has the highest number of *mheni* strikes per area in the region because the country has so many radioactive granite sites. Van Olst maintains that radioactivity ionises the air above the rock, making it a likely path for *mheni*.⁵¹ Although scientific research points to other causes of *mheni*, as stated above, the Shona people believe that, to some extent, *mheni* is “manufactured” by *varoyi* to strike the target. Meanwhile, the Shona people also admit that *mheni* can occur due to thunderstorms while still maintaining that death by *mheni* needs a divine/spiritual explanation. The following is an autoethnographic account of the author’s father, who allegedly died from huroyi known as *muchetura*.

Argument against Huroyi as ICH

Many scholars argue that witchcraft operates primarily as a socially disruptive force. According to Geschiere, witchcraft accusations are often linked to envy, social tensions, and conflict, creating an atmosphere of mistrust and fear.⁵² Unlike ICH elements that foster community bonds, witchcraft is “often viewed as divisive, leading to social fragmentation rather than cohesion.”⁵³ In Zimbabwe and other African contexts, accusations of witchcraft frequently lead to social exclusion, violence, or even death for the accused.⁵⁴ Therefore, instead of enhancing communal identity, witchcraft undermines the unity and trust that ICH elements are supposed to nurture. ICH involves the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, practices, and skills that contribute to cultural continuity and social identity.⁵⁵ These practices are usually celebrated and passed down as part of a community's collective identity. However, scholars highlight that witchcraft is often shrouded in secrecy, with practices that are not openly shared or passed down in constructive ways.⁵⁶ Witchcraft “does not facilitate the transmission of skills or knowledge that enrich the community but instead often relies on secrecy and fear.”⁵⁷ This lack of open, positive transmission contrasts sharply with the essential characteristics of ICH.

A critical distinction between witchcraft and ICH is the violation of human rights frequently associated with witchcraft accusations. ICH is intended to promote the respect of human rights and social values. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, ICH should contribute to human dignity, respect, and mutual understanding.⁵⁸ However, witchcraft practices and the resulting accusations often lead to

⁴⁷ Zuesse, “Divination and Deity in African Religions,” 168.

⁴⁸ Zuesse, “Divination and Deity in African Religions,” 173.

⁴⁹ Peter Godwin, *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa* (London: Picador, 1996), 168.

⁵⁰ Tabona Shoko and Agness Chiwara, “Mukondombera: HIV and AIDS and Shona Traditional Religion in Zimbabwe,” *Utambuzi: Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and Its Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (2015): 8.

⁵¹ Vladimir A Rakov and Farhad Rachidi, “Overview of Recent Progress in Lightning Research and Lightning Protection,” *IEEE Transactions on Electromagnetic Compatibility* 51, no. 3 (2009): 428–42.

⁵² Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (University of Virginia Press, 1997).

⁵³ Isak Niehaus, *Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵⁴ Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵⁵ Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa, *Intangible Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁵⁶ Dirk Kohnert, “Witchcraft and Transnational Social Spaces: Witchcraft Violence, Reconciliation and Development in South Africa’s Transition Process,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 2 (June 20, 2003): 217–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X03004257>.

⁵⁷ Niehaus, *Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa*.

⁵⁸ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production,” *Museum International* 56, no. 1–2 (2004): 52–65.

significant human rights violations, including witch-hunts, physical harm, and social ostracism.⁵⁹ This violent aspect of witchcraft, particularly against vulnerable groups such as women and children, “runs counter to the values of respect and dignity that are central to the concept of ICH.”⁶⁰ Therefore, practices linked to witchcraft cannot align with the ethical framework that underpins ICH.

Although witchcraft can be considered a belief system within certain societies, it does not meet the criteria for a cultural asset in the sense of ICH. Douglas, among other scholars, argues that witchcraft is often tied to supernatural beliefs about misfortune, illness, and death, and is rarely celebrated as a positive cultural expression.⁶¹ The belief in witchcraft often leads to fear, accusations, and community fragmentation, rather than a shared cultural identity.⁶² As Kohnert points out, “While beliefs in witchcraft may reflect aspects of worldview, they do not constitute the kind of knowledge or practice that enriches or unifies a community.”⁶³ Hence, witchcraft lacks the positive cultural function that is central to ICH elements.

Meanwhile, some scholars argue that witchcraft should be considered a part of ICH. Several examples will suffice. Evans-Pritchard argues that witchcraft serves as a mechanism of social regulation.⁶⁴ According to Evans-Pritchard’s view, witchcraft provides a moral framework where the unseen forces are invoked to explain certain societal ills, and responses to witchcraft accusations form part of a traditional justice system. Thus, Evans-Pritchard argued that witchcraft was a form of indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage that structured social life and explained misfortune. Jean and John Comaroff also followed up to support Evans-Pritchard’s position regarding witchcraft as a crucial element of African cultural heritage.⁶⁵ Although at the individual level, this study is not influenced by both Evans-Pritchard’s and Jean and John Comaroff’s respective positions, it cannot resist Peter Geschiere’s dimension as well that witchcraft is not only part of African intangible heritage but also plays a critical role in navigating modern political and social life. From an ethnographic point of view, political power in Africa is associated with magic and witchcraft. Geschiere highlights that witchcraft beliefs shape power dynamics, social relationships, and identity in African societies.⁶⁶ Thus, in this sense, as Geschiere puts it, witchcraft is necessary in Africa for the purpose of power. This means that individuals known to be endowed with magical and witchcraft potency are feared and respected. Birgit Meyer also argues that witchcraft beliefs are central to African cosmologies and cultural heritage.⁶⁷ According to her, these beliefs shape social life, political power and identity, and therefore, cannot be easily separated from cultural practices, thus emphasising the symbolic and ritualistic aspects of witchcraft as part of intangible cultural heritage. Both Ashforth and Moore agree with Meyer’s observation of witchcraft as an ongoing practice, an evolving part of African cultural heritage.⁶⁸ Witchcraft and other magical beliefs are believed to be a part of cultural identity and social cohesion that are critical to understanding African notions of the self, community and moral life.

As the study grapples with the theme of huroyi as ICH, in this section, it is also critical to look at issues about the legal frameworks of huroyi in Zimbabwe. Many African countries have legal frameworks to preserve their heritage.⁶⁹ However, it appears Zimbabwe’s legislation does not make

⁵⁹ Ashforth, “Witchcraft, Justice, and Human Rights in Africa: Cases from Malawi.”

⁶⁰ Smith and Akagawa, *Intangible Heritage*.

⁶¹ Mary Douglas, *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (London: Routledge, 1970).

⁶² Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*.

⁶³ Kohnert, “Witchcraft and Transnational Social Spaces: Witchcraft Violence, Reconciliation and Development in South Africa’s Transition Process.”

⁶⁴ Evan E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

⁶⁵ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁶⁶ Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*.

⁶⁷ Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

⁶⁸ Ashforth, “Witchcraft, Justice, and Human Rights in Africa: Cases from Malawi”; Henrietta L. Moore, *The Subject of Anthropology: Gender, Symbolism and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana*.

⁶⁹ Shadreck Chirikure et al., “Unfulfilled Promises? Heritage Management and Community Participation at Some of Africa’s Cultural Heritage Sites,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (January 2010): 30–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250903441739>.

any provision towards either the recognition or the conservation of huroyi as an intangible heritage. Zimbabwe as a country still maintains the legal system which was used during colonial times. During the colonial period, most cases of huroyi were tried in traditional courts.⁷⁰ During that time, once an individual was found guilty of practising huroyi, they were sentenced by the traditional court. The sentence took various forms.⁷¹ In extreme cases, the muroyi was either beaten or killed. Other *varoyi* were ordered to leave the village, and their homes were destroyed.⁷² Chavhunduka further writes that ostracism was the most commonly used form of punishment. In some cases, even the *varoyi* were cured. In such a case, a traditional healer was ordered to neutralise or eliminate the spirit that possessed the muroyi.⁷³

When the Witchcraft Suppression Act (ch.73) of 1899 was gazetted, the traditional courts were no longer permitted to try some instances of huroyi.⁷⁴ Even until recently, such cases were referred to the formal courts. Cases of huroyi now came under the Witchcraft Suppression Act (WSA). However, the Witchcraft Suppression Act was regarded by the traditional court as an unjust piece of legislation because the aim of the Act was not to punish *varoyi* but those who named or accused others as *varoyi*.⁷⁵ Even to date, postcolonial Zimbabwean society still seems to be bound by the legislation on huroyi.

Therefore, for Zimbabwean society to recognise huroyi as an intangible heritage under such circumstances may mean a real struggle or some cultural activism and legal reforms, such as in other sub-Saharan nations. For example, Zambian law is one of the few legislative systems that recognises intangible aspects and heritage associated with indigenous communities.⁷⁶ However, that legislation does not provide witchcraft as an intangible heritage.

Cultural heritage can be classified into two main categories: (1) intangible heritage and (2) tangible heritage. Intangible heritage is spiritual, whereas tangible heritage is material/monumental (e.g., Great Zimbabwe National Monument, Matopo Hills, Chinhoyi Caves, National Heroes acre, etc).⁷⁷ Meanwhile, some scholars have argued that “Most African legislations tend to favour the concept of monumentalism to the neglect of other types of heritage such as cultural landscapes and routes, itineraries, vernacular architecture or underwater heritage, and take very little or no cognisance of associated intangible and spiritual values.”⁷⁸ It is, therefore, critical to take cognisance of the fact that because of its spiritual aspect, it is fitting to categorise huroyi as an intangible heritage. With Ndoro, Mumma and Abungu’s argument in mind, one may note that huroyi needs to be recognised by law as part of ICH. Castigating huroyi as “evil” or prohibiting it through various forms of legislation does not make it disappear. Interestingly, Zimbabweans familiar with the Witchcraft Suppression Act (ch.73) understand that the legislation does not say anything against someone accused of muroyi. Instead, the accuser would face the full wrath of the law for alleging that someone is a witch. Nevertheless, intangible aspects are recognised as relics associated with traditional beliefs such as huroyi, sorcery, exorcism, rituals and other rites.⁷⁹ As Chavhunduka remarked, ideas about huroyi may not be universal; however, it is strongly believed that huroyi exists in Zimbabwe.⁸⁰ For any social or legal reform to be successful, a referendum is needed; an in-depth consultation on huroyi with members of the public can potentially bring to light the mysteries surrounding huroyi. This study is in the position that qualitative research involving individuals who claim to be *varoyi* will shed more light on this phenomenon.

⁷⁰ Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe*, 129.

⁷¹ Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe*, 130.

⁷² Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe*, 130.

⁷³ Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe*, 130.

⁷⁴ Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe*, 130.

⁷⁵ Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe*, 130.

⁷⁶ Ndoro, Mumma, and Abungu, *Cultural Heritage and the Law: Protecting Immovable Heritage in English-Speaking Countries of Sub-Saharan Africa*, 28.

⁷⁷ A detailed discussion on “tangible heritage” is a topic for a future research.

⁷⁸ Ndoro, Mumma, and Abungu, *Cultural Heritage and the Law: Protecting Immovable Heritage in English-Speaking Countries of Sub-Saharan Africa*, 4.

⁷⁹ Ndoro, Mumma, and Abungu, *Cultural Heritage and the Law: Protecting Immovable Heritage in English-Speaking Countries of Sub-Saharan Africa*, 28.

⁸⁰ Chavunduka, *Witches, Witchcraft and the Law in Zimbabwe*, 129.

Discussion Summary

Among the Shona, *varoyi* can traverse air space undetected for thousands of kilometres and back the same night, and one can be struck by *huroyi* while being some distance away from the *muroyi*. It has been noted that *huroyi* can take various forms. However, the present study concentrated on *zvidhoma*, *muchetura* and *mheni*. The study further argued that *huroyi* is an advanced technology that is non-existent anywhere else. In addition, it was outlined that *huroyi* should be recognised as ICH in Zimbabwe and that a government department must regulate it. This essay makes the following assumptions. *Huroyi*, as advanced technology, is required because of its national benefit, particularly Zimbabwe's security and defense. Any gift/skill can be developed. The position of the paper is that *huroyi* has always been criticised to the point that *muti* (African medicine) practitioners have been unable to state explicitly the particularities that comprise their enterprise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Huroyi can be developed positively. It is paramount to mention that this study yearns for a dispensation when the technology involved in *huroyi* will be exported to the markets of developed nations such as Europe and the United States of America. Nevertheless, before that happens, *huroyi* as part of the ICH in Zimbabwe must be studied critically and individuals who claim to be *varoyi* must be incorporated as an essential component of a qualitative research team. When the technology is developed, the resulting research literature will be archived not necessarily as a material heritage, but more for its economic attraction because those outside the country's borders requiring its unique technology will pay for training and purchasing the ingredients. When that happens, the lives of Zimbabweans will develop, while Zimbabwe's economic transformation will be enhanced simultaneously. To achieve what has been highlighted above, this study proposes two critical approaches to be addressed by the Parliament of Zimbabwe. First, it is fundamental that all medical practitioners (including those practising traditional healing) be registered by a government department such as the Ministry of Health and or the Department of Culture. The Ministry/Department will archive a database of traditional medical practitioners in Zimbabwe according to their expertise or area of strength. Second, qualitative research should be conducted with traditional medicine practitioners (including *varoyi*) to establish the authenticity of claims for either healing through traditional medicine, remote manipulation through *huroyi*, self-made "flight" at night, or the ability to create *mheni*. The reasons for conducting the above are twofold: (1) an attempt to put in place stringent measures so that citizens are not manipulated by claims that have not been verified scientifically, and (2) the need for intuition so that criticism against both traditional medical practice and *huroyi* is made based on inside information gathered from an empirical study.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically explored the deceptive nature of magic and witchcraft as cultural practices that, despite their deep roots in Zimbabwean society, continue to inflict psychological, social, and economic harm. By applying social conflict theory and drawing on ethnographic insights and scholarly literature, the paper has demonstrated how witchcraft belief systems contribute to fear, suspicion, and fragmentation within communities. While acknowledging the value of cultural traditions in shaping identity and social continuity, this research underscores the urgent need to separate cultural pride from practices that breed conflict and hinder development. The findings reveal that witchcraft, often romanticised as an intangible heritage, in fact perpetuates harmful stereotypes, undermines trust, and disrupts communal life. Therefore, it is imperative to initiate open dialogues within communities, led by traditional leaders, educators, and policymakers, to re-evaluate and reform cultural norms. This process should aim to preserve what is life-affirming in tradition while discarding what impedes social cohesion. In conclusion, the paper advocates for a collective reimagining of Zimbabwean cultural values—one that promotes peace, justice, and progress. By discouraging destructive practices like witchcraft and fostering a culture of critical engagement, the Zimbabwean society can move towards a more inclusive and harmonious future.

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