

BOOK REVIEW

Matthew Gmalifo Mabefam. *Witch Camps and Witchcraft Discourse in Africa: Critiquing Development Practice*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023. 191 pp. Preface. Acknowledgment. List of Abbreviations. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$95. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781666918496.

The history of witchcraft beliefs and accusations is not confined to Africa; it can also be traced back through the histories of Europe and the early American colonies. Our understanding of witches, as well as the beliefs and accusations surrounding witchcraft, continues to evolve in response to the context in which they arise. Consequently, the discourse surrounding witchcraft beliefs and accusations remains a complex and contested issue. It reveals the intricate dilemma of cause and effect, and at times, it may even seem like an oxymoron. Indeed, in the realm of witchcraft discourse, “nothing just happened.” There is invariably a quest for explanations regarding the sources of both good and bad fortune. Typically, it is a person, rather than an object, who is held accountable for either outcome. Thus, scapegoating becomes an unfortunate inevitability, particularly affecting the vulnerable—especially elderly women and children—who often bear the brunt of such accusations.

The author of *Witch Camps and Witchcraft Discourse in Africa: Critiquing Development Practice* has contributed significantly to the existing literature on this topic. The book is structured into four chapters, each presenting a distinct facet of its central argument: “The issue of witchcraft beliefs and practices, particularly the existence of communities of refuge and the banishment of individuals—predominantly poor and elderly women—merits a more nuanced academic examination of how development is conceptualized and approached in specific contexts” (5). It is crucial for development initiatives led by both governmental and nongovernmental organizations to carefully consider the social norms and practices within the communities they aim to assist. Failing to do so may lead to unintended consequences, where attempts to “solve” a problem result in dire and disruptive outcomes.

The first chapter outlines specific characteristics that help identify a witch, particularly in the context of modernity. Some perceive witchcraft beliefs as contrary to the ideals of modernity or Western development. Within the discourse on witchcraft, diviners are seen as possessing unique insights and the ability to identify witches through rituals and sacrifices. The community plays an active role from the outset, engaging in gossip and envy while validating the diviner’s revelations regarding the status of the accused.


Chapter Two discusses the fate of the accused individuals and how their social status and capital are almost irreparably changed. The label of “witch” leads to

their banishment from the community they once called home, forcing them into a new environment with shared memories and destinies. This uprooting involves a complex power dynamic. Being labeled a witch results in a permanent loss of inheritance and innocence, as well as the disintegration of their social unit, whether it be their immediate family or a large extended family.

The disruption caused by accusations and subsequent banishment is examined in Chapter Three, which highlights the tipping of social and economic scales due to the destruction of relationships. This chapter reveals the consequences of either community- and government-initiated developments or interventions by outside organizations. The author notes that the impact of witchcraft beliefs and accusations affects the community in multiple ways, describing it as “a double-edged sword ... used ... as a destructive tool and a strategy for wealth creation” (83). This reinforces the complexity surrounding witchcraft activities and development.

In Chapter Four, the author warns against oversimplified solutions to the issues associated with witchcraft practices. Intervention actors must recognize that good intentions do not eliminate unintended consequences. Any intervention introduced, whether in response to community outcries or as part of social development efforts, must consider the disruption caused by witchcraft accusations and the exile to witch camps. Closing these camps in response to perceived human rights violations can further alienate already dislocated individuals and communities. The local community views this matter differently; they see the camps as a dual protection system: safeguarding the accused from potential violence by angry accusers while also protecting the community from the misfortunes attributed to witchcraft, regardless of their true source.

Mabefam's book is an essential contribution to the conversation surrounding beliefs and accusations of witchcraft, particularly in the context of decolonizing development work within communities affected by economic or social disruptions. The author aptly advocates for development efforts that recognize and help restore the agency of these communities. While development agencies often have noble intentions, they must strive to minimize any unintended consequences that may impact community members. Those interested in the dynamics of witchcraft beliefs and the resulting judgments and ostracism faced by “witches” will find Mabefam's work particularly insightful. Although some characteristics of witches are discussed in the book, readers who are less familiar with the topic may benefit from more explicit definitions/descriptions due to the inherent ambiguities surrounding the discourse. Nevertheless, the glossary included in the book serves as a valuable resource for readers.

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