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QAnon and other conspiracy ideologies' impact on Sub-Saharan Africa in the age of Global Capitalism

Dirk Kohnert ¹

Cartoon: 'Bananas'



Source: [Zapiro](#), [Daily Maverick](#), 9 January 2021 ²

Abstract: With the attack on the Capitol by the 'Proud Boys', Donald Trump's 'deep state' allegations reached the peak of U.S. conspiracy ideologies. Conspiracy was at the core of Trump's policies, including his repeated claims that President Barack Obama was born in Africa. It reflects Trump's deep dislike of African states. After all, a third of the Republican electorate agreed with the far-right QAnon paranoia and other bizarre conspiracy theories. From the outside, the United States was taking on the shape of a banana republic. When US media identified a South African journalist as the mastermind behind QAnon's global rollout in 2019, many Republicans equated Africa with Pandora's box. However, it is no coincidence that the black continent is associated with occult powers. In the social sciences, the modernity of witchcraft beliefs in Africa has been debated hotly for decades. Modern techniques and utensils have become central to the occult's continued importance to Africans. The crisis of the modern nation-state is closely intertwined with the global spread of neoliberal capitalism and the 'invisible hand' that shapes its political and material conditions and forms of society. Beliefs in witchcraft and zombies reflect the alienation of labour, capitalist exploitation, and class formation in African societies. The poor of Africa and the people of the Global South in general, do not lack modernity but have been denied the promise of modernization. Today, even cybercriminals working in the Ivory Coast, impersonating Europeans on social media profiles and seducing partners into falling in love with them, feel compelled to seek the advice of witch doctors to outwit their prey. Given the worldwide importance of social media, this suggests that the virtual space of the global economy as a hotbed of magic and witchcraft is under-researched. As in the U.S. election campaign and its entanglement with fake news, examination of the cosmology of the occult in Africa and elsewhere reveals the threat of destructive forces inherent in social relations. African religions could provide a framework for valuable self-determined solutions to current problems in contemporary life, including the issue of witchcraft violence. In addition, this could open up an inspiring new dimension of philosophical thinking and emancipative action to the outside world, for example, regarding conflict resolution and reconciliation.

Keywords: [Global economy](#), [conspiracy theory](#), [deep state](#), [Trump government](#), [occult](#), [modernization](#), [Neoliberalism](#), [commodification](#), [international trade](#), [migration](#), [governance](#), [sustainable development](#), [post-colonialism](#), [Sub-Saharan Africa](#), [African culture](#), [South Africa](#), [Nigeria](#), [Kenya](#), [Ivory Coast](#), [African Studies](#)

JEL-Code: E26, F15, F16, F22, F54, F66, I31, J15, J46, J61, N37, O17, P17, Z13

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² Jonathan Shapiro, © (all rights reserved). His pen name is *Zapiro*, he is a South African cartoonist, whose work appears in numerous South African publications and has been exhibited internationally on many occasions ([Zapiro](#), Wikipedia). - Tags: Capitol, KKK, NRA, Proud Boys, QAnon, Trump.

1. Introduction

On 11 January 2018, President [Donald Trump](#) allegedly labelled African countries in a semi-public meeting in the [Oval Office](#) as '[shitholes](#)', questioning why so many of their citizens had ever been permitted to enter America. Instead, he suggested the US should bring in more immigrants from developed countries like Norway. Across Africa, this caused diplomatic fury. The UN and the African Union (AU) qualified the remarks as 'clearly racist' (Wintour & Burke & Livsey, 2018). Three years later, on 6 January 2021, right-wing extremist [Proud Boys](#) played a central role in the mob's [attack on the Capitol](#) to violently stop the transfer of presidential power after the 2020 election (Associated Press, 2022). This assault, as well as the upsurge of radical [conspiracy-theoretical](#) machinations like the [QAnon](#) ideology, made the USA resemble exactly those African '[banana republics](#)' insulted by Trump as '[shithole](#)' countries before.

The following analysis presents working hypotheses on the close interrelation between the current wave of conspiracy rumours in the U.S. and its possible origins in the growth of [global capitalism](#) and current [African occult belief](#) systems intimately entangled by its colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal structures (Geschiera, 1997). The background, origins, and actual forms of the growing menace of conspiracy theories will then be scrutinized based on available evidence.

There are strong indicators that the U.S., as a major promoter of the spread of [global capitalism](#), has thereby unwittingly been instrumental in strengthening and transforming [modern witchcraft belief in Africa](#). [QAnon](#) and other '[deep state](#)' ideologies in the U.S. today might have their origin in modern African witchcraft beliefs (Davis, 2020). They show significant analogies to black magic and traditional African religions. Possibly, the disdain of Africa and Africans by [right-wing Americans](#), as shown especially under the [Trump administration](#), essentially stems from the [repression](#) of their own [inferiority complexes](#). Yet, the alleged inferiority of the [African poor](#), and people of the [Global South](#) in general, emanates not from a self-inflicted lack of [modernity](#). On the contrary, Africans have been denied the promise of [modernization](#) due to the aftermath of the [African slave trade](#), the ruthless exploitation of Africa's resources over centuries, and persisting [post-colonialism](#) (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; 2012a). [African magic](#) and cosmologies of the occult have been established too in the new digital world in the Southern hemisphere. Although these virtual cosmologies showed ambivalent, sometimes even doubtful outcomes, they could nevertheless serve as a guide to explore the challenges of digital technology, including its entanglements with the minds, bodies, and societies concerned. Thus they could help to create a genuine Southern theory of [virtual sociality](#) (Newell, 2021; 2021a). Not least, they reveal the threat of destructive forces inherent in social relations by providing significant indicators of the sources of conflict and fear in local communities.

The worldwide growth of [social media](#) facilitates the spread of [fake news](#) and [conspiracy ideologies](#) in U.S. politics and elsewhere, thereby creating a '[second world](#)' in the virtual South. [Traditional African religions](#), including the occult, could guide the exploration of a new virtual world in Africa and beyond. Thus, African religion and culture may open up inspiring new dimensions of [philosophical](#) thinking and emancipative action to the outside world, for example, regarding [conflict resolution](#) and [reconciliation](#) (Kohnert, 2007).

2. Religious and populist dimensions of conspiracy theories

Throughout history, the outbreak of major pandemics has been associated with the proliferation of conspiracy theories and the blame of the ‘other’. Thus, in [medieval Europe](#), the ravages of [plague](#), [cholera](#), [typhus](#), and other pandemic diseases were often linked to the conspiratorial activities of [Jews](#), [Muslims](#), [heretics](#), and [pagans](#). For example, during the ancient Roman plague, most prominently the [Antonine Plague](#) (165–180 AD), that devastated every aspect of life, or the viral haemorrhagic fever that spread through the Roman Empire between 249 and 262, the Christian church blamed Jews and pagans for the pestilence and underlined that only those who converted could potentially be saved in the kingdom come. Once the ideology of [nationalism](#) developed, most conspiracy theories about pandemics embraced nation-centric understandings of social reality. Thus, [social class](#), [gender](#), [religion](#), and [the nation](#) became all potential categories of imagined communities (Malešević, 2022). One of the first conspiracy theories in America was the [Salem Witch Hunt](#), from February 1692 to May 1693, when hundreds of people in [colonial Massachusetts](#) were accused of witchcraft. It was the most notorious incidence of mass hysteria in colonial America. Although QAnon has different roots it shares crucial elements with the movement that resulted in the [Salem witch trials](#), namely, [isolationism](#), [religious extremism](#), and [false accusations](#) (Morris, 2020).

More recently, in 19th century [France](#) for example, socialist utopian anticipatory fictions like the [Icarians](#) created a political climate in troubling times comparable to the current QAnon fantasies. Thereby, conspiracy theories served as anti-fictions by exploiting ambiguities of the past to weave a nightmarish version of the menacing ‘real reality’ (Sipe, 2022). Followers exported the [Icarian utopia](#) in 1848 to the U.S., where they established several egalitarian communes in [Texas](#), [Illinois](#), [Iowa](#), [Missouri](#), and [California](#) (Blick & Grant, 1974).

Cartoon 2: ‘The sleep of reason produces monsters’³



Source: [Francisco Goya](#) (1797)

³ Drawing on witchcraft belief and rational thinking as imagined by the Spanish painter [Francisco Goya](#) (1797): “[The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters](#)” [Spanish: *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*]. Etching by the Spanish painter and illustrator Francisco Goya. 1797. It is the 43rd of 80 etchings making up the suite of satires *Los Caprichos*. Source: [Wikimedia commons](#) - © (all rights reserved).

Later on, the worldwide spread of neo-liberal capitalism, driven by the [fetishization](#) of consumption and the [invisible hand](#) that regulated its unjust distribution, contributed also to the revitalization of occult belief and the modernity of witchcraft in Africa and elsewhere (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002; Fernbach, 2002; Schroeder, 2008).

There are also numerous recent examples of transnational and transhistorical continuities between religious doctrines and conspiracy theories all over the world, including in Africa. In South Africa, for example, the notorious '[muti](#)' killings, based on the alleged use of body parts to produce strong forms of magic, constituted also politically motivated allegations of [ritual murder](#) ([muti](#)) aimed at fighting the political opponent (Kohnert, 1997). However, witchcraft charges were not just a means to pursue a political purpose. The inner, existential dimension of coping with fear and self-discovery of individuals and political groups, like [ANC](#) activists in the [homelands](#) of [Lebowa](#) in the early 1990s, demonstrated that witch accusations as such were, politically at least, as important as their conscious exploitation for political purposes (Niehaus, 1993).

Cartoon 3: *didn't we meet at Harvard* ⁴



Source : Serguei Goizauskas, 1987

The modernity of witchcraft accusations in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has been proved by several case studies (Geschiera, 1997; Kohnert, 1996; Niehaus, 1993). In the history of several West African countries, for example, [mass hysterias](#) of [genital shrinkage](#) (*Koro*, medicine) were rampant from the 1970s to 1980s and again in 1996-1997, first in [Nigeria](#) and [Cameroon](#), then spreading to [Ghana](#), [Ivory Coast](#) and [Senegal](#) (Dzokoto & Adams, 2005; Graft-Aikins & Dzokoto & Yevak, 2015). These genital theft theories, circulating periodically as by-products of African modernity, shared many characteristics with current U.S. conspiracy theories (Adams & Dzokoto, 2007; Piraino & Pasi & Asprem, 2022). The quoted examples also show the politically ambivalent nature of participatory cultures and challenge assumptions on critical thinking and social media solutions to 'post-truth' dilemmas (Marwick & Partin (2022). Thus, the [alt-right](#) conspiracy faction, [QAnon](#), used the [Pizzagate](#) conspiracy for its all-embracing campaign to attract support for Trump and tried to establish it as a popular narrative within the contemporary Republican political [Zeitgeist](#) (Bleakley, 2021).

⁴ "didn't we meet at Harvard?" cartoon on the modernity of witchcraft belief in contemporary Africa. Credit: '[Serguei](#)', French cartoonist, Serguei Goizauskas, *Le Monde*, 11 December 1987. © (all rights reserved)

3. The rise of anti-science in times of the Corona crisis

The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) brought an upsurge of conspiracy beliefs amid a growing feeling of dependency and uncertainty. The crises made people feel that others could be a real or potential threat to them and thus reinforced the call for a strong leader, [authoritarianism](#) and [ethnocentrism](#). The increasing real-world volatility made many people paranoid and endorsed [conspiracy ideologies](#), e.g. about confinement, mask-wearing and vaccination (Merlan, 2019). Apparently, belief in conspiracy increased greatly when social rules were ignored, particularly in cultures where rule-following was valued (Suthaharan & Reed & Leptourgos et al.2021).

In general, extremism manifests in different forms depending on location, situation, and the capabilities of those in power. With global capitalism firmly entrenched, it had become a global ongoing problem that, however, changed forms in recent years, focussing on [conspiracy ideologies](#), [fake news](#) and [Antiscience](#), i.e. a categorically rejection of science and scientific methods. At first glance, globalization is meant to promote human rights. Yet, because of the capitalistic nature of globalization, it does not necessarily protect all classes, marginalized ethnic and gender groups, or the environment (Vissing, 2022).

Cartoon 4: ‘QAnon meeting’: Deep State & Corona ⁵



Source: [Dave-Whamond](#), [The Mercury News](#), 2020

A prominent role played the '[Deep State](#)' ideology that referred to mighty actors within the political [power elite](#) that controlled key positions of public administration. Although it resembled common traditional [American conspiracy theories](#), it originated in [Turkey](#) in the 1990s ([derin devlet](#)). This was a fertile ground for the spread of far-right [QAnon](#) conspiracy theories in the U.S., notably during the [2020 presidential election](#) campaign of the [Republicans](#) (Suthaharan & Reed & Leptourgos et al.2021). They infected communities from the [U.S. Congress](#) to [Facebook](#) groups and other [social media](#) (Bodner & Welch & Brodie, 2020).

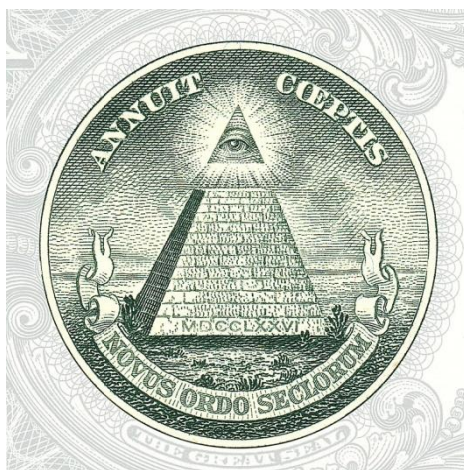
Occurrences of conspiracy theorizing related to real-world uncertainty are common in human history. Apart from the [Black Death](#), quoted above, the [AIDS/HIV](#) epidemic was an outstanding example, showing how bewildered people imagined nearly every possible farfetched machination, even that the human immunodeficiency virus was begotten through the [polio vaccination programme in Africa](#) (Suthaharan & Reed & Leptourgos et al.2021).

⁵ Source: QAnon meeting. © [Dave-Whamond](#), Canada, PoliticalCartoons.com. - Dylan Bouscher: “[Cartoons: Coronavirus and colleges](#)”, [The Mercury News](#), 1 September 2020. © (all rights reserved)

Concerning the actual [COVID-19 pandemic](#), the growing [anti-vaccine movement](#) turned into a general [anti-science movement](#). Inadequate risk communication during uncertain times accelerated the rise of conspiratorial ideas, although there are regional variations. In [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) (SSA), for example, early campaigning had little positive effects (Chan & Rizio & Skali & Torgler, 2021).

In the U.S., the anti-science movement supposedly originated in [Southern California](#) before expanding into [Texas](#) and [Oklahoma](#), and from there to the whole of the [United States](#), [Western Europe](#) and elsewhere (Hotez, 2021). It significantly affected the ability to vaccinate large percentages of the population because of vaccine refusal all over the world, including [in Africa](#). In the U.S., the [Trump Administration](#) even pulled out of the [World Health Organization](#) and the [COVAX](#) facility.

Graph 1: *The Eye of Providence*⁶



Source: Barkun, 2003

Also, the restricted distribution of effective vaccination against [COVID-19](#) favoured the development of a two-tiered system where the [Global North](#) had access to [mRNA vaccines](#), but the [global South](#), notably [Sub-Saharan Africa](#), had not. The [Russian government](#) exploited the situation by spreading [fake news](#) and a program of ‘[weaponized health communication](#)’ (e.g. [Twitter Bots](#) and [Russian Trolls](#)) meant to multiply anti-vaccine messages (Hotez, 2021; Kohnert, 2022b).

⁶ “The [Eye of Providence](#), or the all-seeing eye of God, seen here on the US\$1 bill, has been taken by some to be evidence of a conspiracy involving the [founding fathers of the United States](#) and the [Illuminati](#). ” ([Conspiracy theory](#), Wikipedia)

4. Impact of African beliefs on conspiracy theories in the U.S.

4.1 Direct impact by U.S.-dominated political bots in Africa

Although supporters of right-wing conspiracies like [QAnon](#) had in general mainly derogative views on Africans, its supporters were not above seeking new platforms and followers in [Africa](#) to smear presidential candidate [Joe Biden](#) ahead of the [U.S. election](#) with abstruse accusations of an international [paedophile](#) plot (Obaji, 2020). For ‘[Trumpists](#)’ it had become a daily routine to underline loud and clear that America, once praised as ‘[This Land is Your Land](#)’ according to one of the United States’ most famous folk songs, doesn’t any longer want ‘strangers’. Africans have to go back to Africa! (Yang, 2018).

Such xenophobic attitudes are by no means limited to Americans. Africans like to fall for it, too. In 2018, [Trumpers](#) even received explicit appreciation for their frankness from [Uganda](#)’s autocrat [Yoweri Museveni](#). [Damien Glez](#), an internationally renowned [Franco-Burkinabe](#) press cartoonist, suggested already, why shouldn’t then the conspiratorial movements that made up Trump’s messy ideology feed on African roots? (Glez, 2022). He was right indeed: after all, Africans can reflect on a rich history of despotism and occult beliefs.

Cartoon 5: Africans tend to fall for conspiracy suspicions⁷



Source: Glez, 2022; [Jeune Afrique](#), 25 February 2022

In the 2022 U.S. elections, coordinated networks focussed especially on small-scale [influencers](#) with fewer than 10,000 followers for political campaigns, [political action committees](#) (PACs), and special interest groups. They were particularly interested in those with more intimate followings, regarded as more trustworthy by their followers, and therefore better positioned to change their behaviour. Moreover, this type of propaganda from influencers was better able to evade systems built to detect [political bots](#) and to defy regulators concerned with digital [free speech](#) (Goodwin & Joseff & Woolley, 2020).

Shortly after [Twitter forbade QAnon](#) on its site, the latter’s supporters began to target African media, for example in [Nigeria](#), the by far most populous African country. They sent e-mails to well-known newsrooms and individual journalists, accusing U.S. Democrats as anti-Black [paedophiles](#) who exploit Black people, including children in [West Africa](#), the cradle of [vodun](#),

⁷ ‘Researchers assert that Africans see conspiracies everywhere ... that is a conspiracy ...’ - Cartoon on [QAnon](#) and Africans - Source: Glez, Damien (2022): ‘QAnon : le mouvement complotiste pro-Trump est-il né en Afrique ?’, [Jeune Afrique](#), 25 February 2022. © Damien Glez (all rights reserved).

and abuse African Americans using law-enforcement agents. Africans were called to share these messages with their contacts and [social media](#) groups. The sender of these e-mails, 'William Gyado' or 'Bill Gyado', was identified later on as sending the emails by secured mail hosts, including [Yandex Mail](#), headquartered in [Moscow](#). However, also [troll farms](#) in [Nigeria](#) and [Ghana](#), based in the respective capitals, [Abuja](#) and [Accra](#), and produced such [fake news](#) and sent them to Americans via [WhatsApp](#) (Obaji, 2021).

For example, the Ghanaian troll factory 'Caliwax Media', owned by the Accra-based so-called media consultant Atam Boateng, but hosted and secured in [Russia](#), preferred to recruit young students for broadcasting mass messages intended to propagate a positive image of Donald Trump and fuel racism in the U.S. It allegedly paid US\$ 40 for each item sent. According to the American news website [The Daily Beast](#), the messages went to randomly selected contacts (Schmid, 2020). Supposedly, there was hardly any African student who did not receive such messages on [WhatsApp](#), the most popular [social media app](#) used by Africans besides [Facebook](#). Therefore, it could not be ruled out that the addressed people might just start attributing Nigeria's problems to the U.S. Democrats (Obaji, 2020).

[Accra](#) is notorious for its many [cybercriminals](#) engaged in different forms of internet crimes such as gold market, romance, online shopping, collaboration with security agencies, and criminal networking opportunities to co-opt their partners (Mensah, 2018). Also in [Nigeria](#), cybercrime had become one of the main opportunities for embezzling money and business espionage. Criminal groups, even whole cybercrime factories, were to be found in many Southern Nigerian cities like [Lagos](#), [Benin](#) and [Owerri](#). Nigeria ranked 16th highest country in cyberattacks vulnerabilities in Africa in 2016 (Omodunbi, B. A. et al., 2016). The Nigeria Cyber Security Outlook published in 2021 by [Deloitte](#) revealed that phishing schemes are likely to become bigger and increasingly daring, creative and sophisticated. They threaten even government and public institutions worldwide causing data leaks and sensitive information breaches (Igwe, 2021).

4.2 Indirect impact via African occult beliefs shaped by global capitalism

[Conspiracy](#) suspicions are nothing new in [Sub-Saharan Africa \(SSA\)](#). However, on the continuum of narratives about the evil '[stranger](#)' not all African occult belief systems are necessarily to be equalled with an active agency of people doing harm or 'black magic' with the intention of conspiracy. Although most of the suspicions of evil '[strangers](#)' try to explain adverse happenings or inequalities in power, like the sex thieves mentioned above, only [Satanists](#), and [Illuminati](#) are conspiracy theories in a strict sense, as narratives which imply the existence of a group that is plotting harm (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2022). However, both are largely irrelevant in SSA, first, because they are based on Christian religions and second because they are mainly of European and American origin.

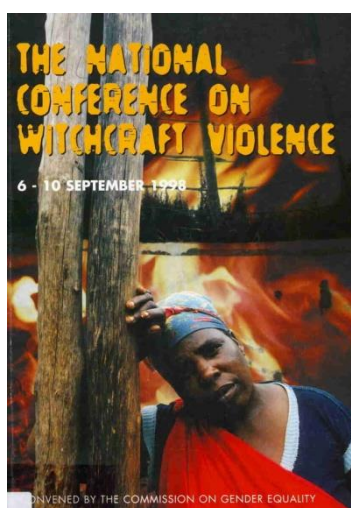
Nevertheless, the U.S., as the major driver of [global capitalism](#), shares a considerable responsibility in spreading occult belief systems in contemporary [SSA](#). Modern social structures, techniques and commodities, usually of Western origin, have become central in rumours of the [occult](#), especially in African politics and entrepreneurship (Geschiere, 1997).

The belief in [occult forces](#) is still deeply rooted in many African societies, regardless of education, religion, and social class of the people concerned. According to many Africans, its incidence is ever-increasing due to social stress and strain caused (among others) by the [process of modernization](#). Most often [black magic](#) and [witchcraft](#) accusations work to the

disadvantage of the poor and deprived. Magic and witchcraft beliefs have increasingly been exploited for political purposes. They lend themselves to support any kind of political system, whether [despotic](#) or [democratic](#). [Strategic groups](#), notably the [power elite](#), are prone to use it systematically in their struggle for command and control. Thereby, they are likely to add further social stress to an already endangered precarious balance of power, which makes witchcraft accusations flourish (Kohnert, 1996).

Many of the African poor long for what they understand by modern Western goods and services and try to adapt it to their requirements. Thus they contribute unwittingly to creating '[multiple modernities](#)', including its destructive effects on the distribution of real inequalities. However, they, and the people in the [Global South](#) in general, do not lack modernity. Instead, they were deprived of the promises of modernization by the inherent propensity of capital to create [social](#) and [economic inequality](#) (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012a).

Graph 2: Witchcraft violence in Africa,
often resulting from exploiting political agendas ⁸



Source: [Commission for Gender Equality](#),
Johannesburg, South Africa, 1998

Yet, in as far as many nation-states of the [Global north](#) – including the U.S. - experience serious problems hitherto rather associated with Least developed countries ([LDCs](#)), like excessive indebtedness, privatization of state-owned enterprises, deregulation, corruption, nepotism etc., they seem to approach more and more the [Global south](#). All this impacts on the many facets of social organization, including [democratization](#), [nationalism](#), [xenophobia](#), [law and order](#), [governance](#) and [employment laws](#), and, last, but not least, on [religion](#) and [occult](#) beliefs and conspiracy theories (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012).

⁸ The 'National conference on witchcraft violence' dealing with so-called 'muti' witch murders in South Africa after the end of the Apartheid regime in the early 1990s. (front page of the final conference report, 1998). © (all rights reserved)

5. Impact of QAnon on internal divisions in African countries

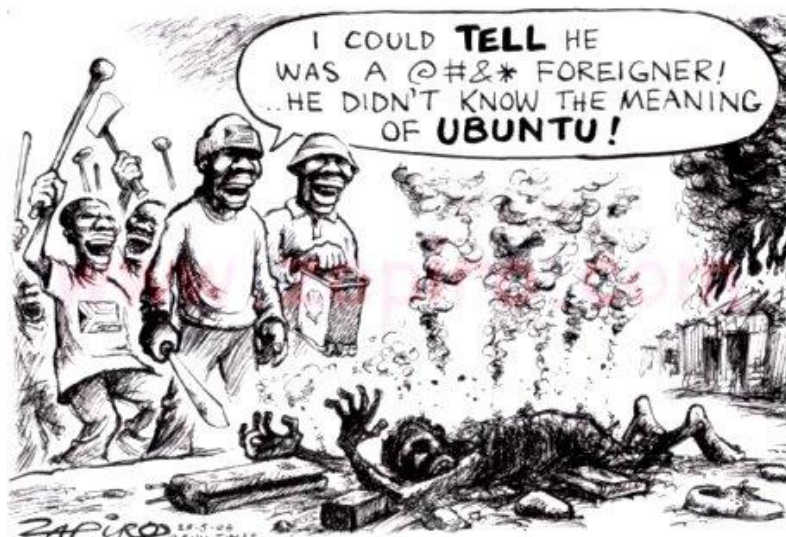
[QAnon](#) followers also had an extensive discussion on [international affairs](#), mostly focused on [China](#), [Russia](#), and [Israel](#). Their hatred of ‘[Jews](#)’, [black](#) and [coloured people](#) broke all boundaries. In some extremist tweeds, they even attacked Trump himself because he did not stop the alleged ‘[genocide of white farmers in South Africa](#)’, apparently referring to the [end of Apartheid](#) (Miller, 2021).

Moreover, American conspiracy theories, even apart from their direct and indirect effects on African belief systems, fuelled internal divisions in African societies that were particularly vulnerable to them. The repercussions will be discussed in the following, taking the example of [South Africa](#), [Nigeria](#), [Kenya](#) and the [Ivory Coast](#).

5.1 South Africa

In the [Rainbow Nation](#), the [QAnon](#) ideology was exploited by [South African](#) extremists to fuel pre-existing tensions in the local society in two different ways. Firstly, radicals within the white [10 % minority](#) upper class propagated fears of a black uprising backed by a [global black conspiracy](#). A ‘[white genocide](#)’ was said to be attempted, and consequently, blacks were attacked in ‘defence’. Secondly, long-standing [xenophobic](#) tendencies within the black community were reinforced by campaigns against [irregular immigrants](#), especially from [Zimbabwe](#), [Nigeria](#), [Mozambique](#), and [DR Congo](#), and other deviant social groups (Griffin & Lakaje, 2022).

Cartoon 6: *Xenophobia and the meaning of [Ubuntu](#).*⁹



Source: [Zapiro](#), 25 May 2008

⁹ Cartoon on nationalism and growing xenophobia in South Africa. - Credit: [Zapiro](#), 25 May 2008 „Xenophobia and the meaning of [Ubuntu](#). Description & Background. - This powerful Zapiro cartoon shows a group of South Africans beating up a foreigner because he didn't understand the word [Ubuntu](#). The cartoon was drawn during a period of violence against political, economical and other refugees living in South Africa. Attacks broke out in a poor neighbourhood of [Johannesburg](#) on May 11 and spread across the country, targeting immigrants including Zimbabweans and Mozambicans, whom locals blamed for taking their jobs.“ Website: <http://www.zapiro.com/cartoon/122820-080525st> - accessed: 8 October 2010. © (all rights reserved)

Already before, in the early 1990s, [South Africa](#) had been associated with the [Satanic panic](#) ideology, triggered by the creation of the [Occult Related Crimes Unit](#) in the South African Police Service ([SAPS](#)) in 1992, related to the so-called ‘[muti murders](#)’. The unit was portrayed as the ‘world's only ‘ritual murder’ task force’. The Satanic panic movement was promoted by powerful conservative Christian forces within the white community in the last years of apartheid (Teppo, 2009), but it lives up to this day intermittently for a given occasion. The SAPS repeatedly denied that the country was in the grip of a [human trafficking](#) scourge. Yet, it appears that pre-existing fears were exploited by these reports to fuel societal dissent (Davis, 2020).

At the beginning of the [COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa](#), there was an increase in [Twitter](#), [Telegram](#) and [Facebook](#) accounts in the country referring to [QAnon](#) or ‘[QArmy](#)’ issues, accompanied by the establishment of local QAnon supporter groups protesting against the supposed upsurge in [farm murders](#) and the alleged ‘[white genocide](#)’ (Davis, 2020). However, in actual fact, black and poor people were disproportionately victims of violent crime in South Africa (Silber & Geffen, 2016).

5.2 Nigeria

Cartoon 7: *Nigerian politicians would join the devil to win elections* ¹⁰



Source: Mike Asukwo, 2019

The [2023 Nigerian presidential election](#) will be held on 25 February 2023 to elect the president and vice president of [Nigeria](#). Incumbent [APC](#) President [Muhammadu Buhari](#) cannot seek re-election for a third term because the presidency is limited to two consecutive terms by law. At the end of September 2022, the official campaign period began with the signing of a peace accord in Abuja by nearly all candidates along with the parties' national chairmen. However, the elections will be hotly contested and it is assumed by many voters that almost every contender would be willing to join even the ‘devil’ if that would help to win. Elections in Nigeria are highly controversial because the country is plagued by long-

¹⁰ Nigerian cartoonist Etim Bassey Asukwo, pen name [Mike Asukwo](#). He is an internationally renowned artist and Chief Editorial Artist with *Business Day* from Lagos. © (all rights reserved) – Source of cartoon: Jimoh, Ganiyu A. (2019): [Masked in Metaphors: Counter-Narratives in the Works of Nigerian Cartoonist Mike Asukwo](#). *African Arts*, vol. 52(2), pp. 32-39

standing problems of regionalism, ethnicity and religious divide. Moreover, cultural diversity, political instability, corruption and nepotism reduced economic growth, despite its wealth in natural resources, notably oil from the Niger delta (Ahmad & Uddin & Shah, 2022). It is against this background that QAnon and other conspiracy ideologies could gain credibility in the population as shown by the following succinct analysis.

In early 2020 [QAnon](#) promoters began to focus also on [media](#) in [Nigeria](#), with nearly [280 million people](#), by far Africa's most populous nation and the world's biggest Black society. They sent e-mails portraying U.S. Democrats as anti-Black to multiple newsrooms and individual journalists, including journalists of [Cool FM](#), [Wazobia FM](#) and [Nigeria Info FM](#), the countries' three biggest private radio stations. The emails also slandered presidential candidate Joe Biden, alleging he disrespected blacks and was protected by paedophiles (Obaji, 2020). The smear campaigns also showed that QAnon supporters were desperately looking to draw Africans into their movement. They tried to convince Nigerians to join their campaign by referring to a report by the [African Child Policy Forum](#), published in November 2019, which found that Africa was experiencing an increase in child sexual exploitation, including 'tourism marriages' between young girls and male tourists in [North Africa](#) and the online recruitment of young girls in [West Africa](#) 'into pornographic films and bestiality'. Many Nigerians were worried that the defamation campaign could impact negatively on the country's reputation because people might start attributing Nigeria's problems to the [U.S. Democrats](#) (Obaji, 2020).

All the more so as [Nigeria](#) has long been considered an African stronghold of [ritual killings](#). They were said to show the mounting despair of Nigerians because of mounting inequality and the run for personal wealth and security amid the creeping collapse of law and order. In 2017, the criminal ritual gang of [herbalists](#), the *Badoo Boys*, spread terror across [Lagos State](#), the country's commercial capital, by crushing the skulls of its victims. Allegedly, at least one suspect confessed that desperate politicians paid as much as US\$ 1,000 for a handkerchief soaked with the blood of the murdered person for ritual purposes (Obadare, 2022). In February 2022, [Nigeria's House of Representatives](#) urged the [federal government of Nigeria](#) to declare a state of emergency on the rising incidence of ritual killings in the country (Obadare, 2022). Between 5 January and 28 December 2021, the statistics of ritual-related deaths generated from Nigeria Watch and [WANEP's](#) National Early Warning System (NEWS) showed a total of over 168 ritual murders in 80 incidents across 20 States in Nigeria (WANEP, 2022). The [Nigerian police force](#) confirmed that there were at least three murders a week in Nigeria as a result of [human sacrifices](#) (Campbell & Roberts & Sarkaria, 2020). Allegedly, members of the [Nigerian political elite](#) regularly visit shrines to swear oaths, ask for a deity's blessing, or seek 'spiritual defence' against their political adversaries. In 2004, police discovered dozens of corpses at a [shrine in Okija](#) in the [Ihiala](#) Local Government Area of the southeastern [state of Anambra](#), where many of the state's senior politicians had also sworn oaths (Obadare, 2022). The [Okija-shrine](#) was only the tip of the iceberg. Many Western-educated Nigerians considered the continued existence and strength of the country's traditional and informal social control systems as a repulsive contradiction to the country's quest to become a 'modern' state with [good governance](#). However, the terms '[shrine](#)' or '[secret cult](#)' carries quasi-automatically a diabolical meaning of [paganism](#) for those who advocated good governance and the [rule of law](#). Yet, there is strong evidence that Okija and similar secret cults remained very popular among Nigerians, irrespective of their [religion](#), [social status](#) and [level of education](#), honoured and feared at the same time (Kohnert, 2007).

This aroused international attention when on 21 September 2001 the mutilated corpse of a young boy called '[Adam](#)', apparently a victim of [ritual murder](#), was found on the banks of the

[River Thames](#) in London. [Scotland Yard](#) which investigated the crime showed a stunning exhibition of what scientific method can now achieve in tracing back the origin of the body to [Yorubaland, South Western Nigeria](#). Nevertheless, police and media interpretations of African occultism revealed persistent ignorance, scepticism, and naivety. They reproduced all the massive deeply-rooted European prejudices on African culture and religion, cherished for generations on the [Dark continent](#) and [African Otherness](#) (Sanders, 2003). Twenty years later, in 2021, BBC journalists tried to disclose the secret of the still unsolved case. They found that the boy and his mother were refugees who had lived in [Hamburg](#), Germany until late 2001 before moving to [London](#) where they had overhanded the boy to a notorious Nigerian [human trafficker](#) (Crawfordn& Smith (2021). An anthropologic analysis of the case revealed all possible fallacies of [homogenisation](#), [presumed identity](#) and the impact of [globalisation](#) usually related to the unsettling story of [African Otherness](#) (Sanders, 2003; Ranger, 2007).

5.3 Kenya

Cartoon 8: *a Kenyan view of the 'Deep State'* ¹¹



Source: [Gado](#), [The Standard](#) (Kenya), 30 March 2022

Also in [Kenya's](#) recent [election history](#) hotly contested, sometimes violent elections had to be deplored in which candidates and their allies exploited already existing ethnic cleavages to incite voters. The growing use of social media encouraged the development of a thriving disinformation industry which threatened the democratic culture of the country (Madung, 2022). This applied also to the [2022 Kenyan presidential election](#). The election campaign was marked by imputations of the prevalence of a Kenyan '[deep state](#)', as headlined by the discredited [QAnon](#) movement, thereby propagating the notion of a mighty shadowy conspiracy of a power elite, that, although not elected officially, nonetheless, deformed the wishes of the voters during and after elections to fulfil their own sinister desires. Thus, supporters of presidential candidate [Raila Odinga](#) claimed that there was a conspiracy at the highest levels of government to deny the former prime minister, who had lost the 1997, 2007, 2013 and 2017 presidential elections, his victory (Egbejule, 2022). Already in the presidential

¹¹ 'A resolution of unity ...', a [Gado-Cartoon](#) concerning [Raila Odinga](#), a Kenyan politician and businessman, who was from 2008 to 2013 a non-executive Prime Minister in the [Mwai Kibaki's government](#), published in the Kenyan '[Standard](#)' on 30 March 2022. © (all rights reserved)

elections of [2013](#) and [2017](#) disinformation and hate speech had a repulsive impact. For example, the campaigns of incumbent [Uhuru Kenyatta](#) used [Cambridge Analytica](#) to create messaging to promote information laundering and ‘divisive propaganda’ that inflamed ethnic tensions. The technical infrastructure was provided by US and Chinese tech platforms and software like [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [TikTok](#), where the principal discussions about the election unfolded. Also involved were *Harris Media*, a notorious Texas-based right-wing media company that had also assisted [Donald Trump](#) during his 2016 campaign. In 2021, for example, Kenyan judges and activists experienced several waves of attacks on Twitter as [Kenyatta](#) and his opponent [Raila Odinga](#) sought to get their [Building Bridges Initiative](#) (BBI), an illegal pact of the power elite, to pass the courts (Madung, 2022). The same crooked power elite tried to neutralise the public outcry after the revelation that [Kenyatta](#) and his wife [Ngina Kenyatta](#) had been implicated in Africa's uncensored [Pandora Papers](#) in late 2021 (Alba, 2021). Besides, there were two more general problems. Firstly, there existed a US tech platforms’ context bias in Africa. Because the former, mostly based in [California](#), knew next to nothing about the salient history and informal politics of [African democracy](#) (Kohnert, 2000; Kohnert, 2022a). Secondly, the platform moderation and policies guiding AI regulation were not impartial because they had a long-established history of (post) colonial interference, both culturally and politically, in digital spaces. Whereas social media platforms in the [U.S.](#) and [EU](#) had to stop [QAnon fake news](#) due to growing public pressure or to meet [GDPR](#) regulations in the EU, there were no such efficient [checks and balances](#) in [Kenya](#) (Madung, 2022).

5.4 Ivory Coast

Cartoon 9: A Gbich! ¹²

Ivorian view on the grim bond between internet and witchcraft



Source: [Gbich](#), Newell, 2021a

The ‘Second Wind of Change’, initiated by the [disintegration of the Soviet empire](#) in the late 1980s and the subsequent [democratization](#) process in [West Africa](#) was accompanied by the ‘return of the religious’ (Mayrargue 2002). Especially new Christian denominations, the

¹² Cartoon : ‘A Gbich! - illustration of the morbid connection between the internet and witchcraft’ - Source: [Gbich](#), Ivorian satirical newspaper, Cambridge University Press; © (all rights reserved). Newell, 2021a. – ‘This somewhat bizarre name is the transcription of an [onomatopoeia](#). According to the authors of the journal, this is the sound you hear when someone receives a violent punch. This idea is also translated by the newspaper's slogan: The newspaper of humour and comics that hits hard!.’ ([Gbich](#), fr.wikipédia).

[Pentecostals](#) and the [Celestial Church of Christ](#) gathered huge crowds of followers by proactively integrating [traditional African religions](#) and modern anti-witchcraft cults. They claimed to reveal the occult sources of those in power and successively to purify politics (Kohnert, 2011). Thus, a new striving market of divine revelations developed. It embraced spiritual as well as material goods. This market was ruled by the law of supply of grace and social demand, as well as by fierce competition between actors, often a one-man business, in control of spiritual practices. As keen businessmen, the Pentecostal pastors orientated their revelations mostly towards the richest and most charitable social and economic classes (Guiblehon, 2020). An outstanding West African example was the Nigerian [televangelist](#), and [prosperity gospel](#) preacher Joshua Iginla, the leader of a [megachurch](#) known as ‘City of Wonders’ in Abuja with an 80,000-seat auditorium (Okogba, 2019; [Joshua Iginla](#), en. Wikipedia). In [Ivory Coast](#), a similar pastor and self-declared prophet, [Séverin Kacou](#), is said to be an important figure in the African evangelical milieu. The Pentecostal churches may also be considered as unwitting enablers and facilitators of [conspiracy theories](#) in [SSA](#).

In [Ivory Coast](#), as in most [West African](#) states, both in [Anglophone](#) and [Francophone Africa](#), the belief in [witchcraft](#) and other occult forces was present everywhere and at any time, even in the virtual world of the [internet](#). In [Abidjan](#), the Ivorian commercial capital, an outstanding species of online [scammers](#) developed, the so-called [brouteurs](#), operating social media networks, similar to the infamous Nigerian [advance fee scams](#), also called ‘Nigerian prince’ or ‘[419 scam](#)’. They try to lure Europeans into social media profiles and seduce them into falling in love with them (Newell, 2021). According to the anthropologist [Sasha Newell](#) of the [Free University of Brussels](#), these scammers even solicited traditional ‘[witch doctors](#)’ to enhance their business. He, therefore, suggested to rethinking the [global economic virtual world](#) as a form of a magical process of signification or [semiosis](#) that could drain human vitality from human being similar to blood-sucking [vampires](#) and witchcraft itself (Newell, 2021). The parallels are striking indeed. After all, the use of [social media](#) and the [smartphone](#) has become indispensable even for Africans (Kohnert, 2022e).

The great expansion of [social media](#) networks also served as a response to the limited access of ordinary people to [public media](#). The most virulent reactions were recorded concerning health alerts and related public policies. The majority of the Ivorian population refused to sacrifice their perceived traditional cultural identity on the altar of modern requirements of health emergency that they did not perceive as such. This had been observed already during the [Ebola epidemic](#) which struck for the first time in [West Africa](#) from 2013 to 2015. It entailed among others the banning of hunting, marketing and consumption of ‘[bushmeat](#)’, a prohibition perceived to be as a plot orchestrated by the former [colonial powers](#) against cherished [traditional custom](#) (Zran, 2019).

6. Conclusion

Just as factual and symbolic goods and services circulate in globalized Africa, received and imaginary ideas spread too. [QAnon](#) and other [conspiracy ideologies](#) that mushroomed in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) found a ready market because of the modernity of [witchcraft and magic in Africa](#) that facilitated the dissemination and the crisis of confidence that accentuated the fracture between rulers and ruled (Coulibaly et al, 2020). As a consequence, African [cyber activism](#), which was often based on foreign responsibility and Western conspiracy theories, developed as a kind of [counterculture](#) (Irigo, et al, 2020). Despite the heterogeneity of [fake news](#) and [conspiracy theories](#), their interpretations were generally stimulated by common imaginations, particularly oriented towards the politics of the [power elite](#) (Drabo, 2022). However, African [social media](#) and [smartphone](#) cultures, just like modern African witchcraft, were especially relevant for close kin and trusted friends. This could be a starting point for future research. African occult belief might be read not as a relic of the past but, on the contrary, as a chance to learn about the invisible infrastructure of [sociality](#) in a [globalized world](#) (Newell, 2021).

Yet, the problem of ensuring information, psychological, and [cybersecurity](#) remained common to all African countries. Attempts at the [Pan-African](#) level to take into account the interests of the vast majority of African people failed (Pantserev, 2022). Under the conditions of [Global capitalism](#), these conspiracy ideologies were not just a political myth, nor a simple collective delirium about Western power and domination (Atenga & Samnick, 2020). First, because [QAnon](#) was proactively and maliciously implanted by interested [right-wing U.S. American](#) circles, and second because it was part of a particular reading of African actors on the long history of the [transatlantic slave trade](#) and [colonialism](#) and current events.

The conspiracy of the [digital age](#) in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) was more about identity than politics. It allowed for a better understanding of African imaginaries of the self, the other and global relations that shaped them (Atenga & Samnick, 2020). Yet, Africans were not just passive victims of Western ideologies. They developed their own agency to adapt it to their requirements, as shown by the case studies of [South Africa](#), [Kenya](#), [Nigeria](#) and [Ivory Coast](#).

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Résumé: *[L'impact de QAnon et d'autres idéologies du complot sur l'Afrique subsaharienne à l'ère du capitalisme mondial]* – Avec l'attaque du Capitole par les « Proud Boys », les allégations « d'État profond » de Donald Trump ont atteint le paragon des idéologies comploteuses américaines. Le complot était au cœur de la politique de Trump, y compris ses affirmations répétées selon lesquelles le président Barack Obama est né en Afrique. Cela reflète la profonde aversion de Trump pour les États africains. Après tout, un tiers de l'électorat républicain était d'accord avec la paranoïa d'extrême droite QAnon et d'autres théories du complot bizarres. De l'extérieur, les États-Unis prenaient la forme d'une république bananière. Lorsque les médias américains ont identifié un journaliste sud-africain comme le cerveau derrière le déploiement mondial de QAnon en 2019, de nombreux républicains ont assimilé l'Afrique à la boîte de Pandore. Cependant, ce n'est pas un hasard si le continent noir est associé à des puissances occultes. Dans les sciences sociales, la modernité des croyances sur la sorcellerie en Afrique fait l'objet de vifs débats depuis des décennies. Les techniques et ustensiles modernes sont devenus essentiels à l'importance continue de l'occultisme pour les Africains. La crise de l'État-nation moderne est étroitement liée à la propagation mondiale du capitalisme néolibéral et à la « invisible hand » qui façonne ses conditions politiques et matérielles et ses formes de société. Les croyances en la sorcellerie et les zombies reflètent l'aliénation du travail, l'exploitation capitaliste et la formation de classe dans les sociétés africaines. Les pauvres d'Afrique et les peuples du Sud en général ne manquent pas de modernité, mais ils se sont vu refuser la promesse de la modernisation. Aujourd'hui, même les cybercriminels travaillant en Côte d'Ivoire, se faisant passer pour des Européens sur les réseaux sociaux et incitant leurs partenaires à tomber amoureux d'eux, se sentent obligés de demander conseil à des sorciers pour déjouer leur proie. Compte tenu de l'importance mondiale des médias sociaux, cela suggère que l'espace virtuel de l'économie mondiale en tant que foyer de magie et de sorcellerie est sous-exploré. Comme dans la campagne électorale américaine et son enchevêtrement de fausses nouvelles, l'examen de la cosmologie de l'occulte en Afrique et ailleurs révèle la menace des forces destructrices inhérentes aux relations sociales. Les religions africaines pourraient fournir un cadre pour de précieuses solutions autodéterminées aux problèmes actuels de la vie contemporaine, y compris la question de la violence de la sorcellerie. En outre, cela pourrait ouvrir une nouvelle dimension inspirante de la pensée philosophique et de l'action émancipatrice au monde extérieur, par exemple en ce qui concerne la résolution des conflits et la réconciliation.

Zusammenfassung: *[Die Auswirkungen von QAnon und anderen Verschwörungsideologien auf Subsahara-Afrika im Zeitalter des globalen Kapitalismus]* - Mit dem Angriff der ‚Proud Boys‘ auf das Kapitol erreichten die ‚Deep State‘-Anschuldigungen von Donald Trump den Höhepunkt der US-Verschwörungsideologien. Verschwörung war der Kern von Trumps Politik, einschließlich seiner wiederholten Behauptung, Präsident Barack Obama sei in Afrika geboren. Sie spiegelt Trumps tiefe Abneigung gegenüber afrikanischen Staaten wider. Immerhin ein Drittel der Wählerschaft der Republikaner stimmte der rechtsextremen QAnon-Paranoia und anderen bizarren Verschwörungstheorien zu. Von außen betrachtet nahmen die Vereinigten Staaten immer mehr die Form einer Bananenrepublik an. Als US-Medien 2019 einen südafrikanischen Journalisten als Vordenker hinter der weltweiten Verbreitung von QAnon identifizierten, wurde Afrika von vielen Republikanern mit der Büchse der Pandora gleichgesetzt. Es ist jedoch kein Zufall, dass der schwarze Kontinent mit okkulten Kräften in Verbindung gebracht wird. In der Sozialwissenschaft wird die Modernität des Hexenglaubens in Afrika seit Jahrzehnten heiß diskutiert. Moderne Techniken und Gebrauchsgegenstände, gewöhnlich westlichen Ursprungs, sind zentral für die anhaltende Bedeutung des Okkulten für Afrikaner geworden. Die Krise des modernen Nationalstaates ist eng verwoben mit der weltweiten Verbreitung des neoliberalen Kapitalismus und der ‚invisible hand‘, die seine politischen und materiellen Voraussetzungen sowie seine Gesellschaftsformen prägt. Der Glaube an Hexerei und Zombies spiegelte die Entfremdung von Arbeit, kapitalistische Ausbeutung und Klassenbildung in afrikanischen Gesellschaften wider. So mangelt es den Armen Afrikas und den Menschen im globalen Süden im Allgemeinen nicht an Modernität, sondern ihnen wurde das Modernisierungsversprechen vorenthalten. Heute fühlen sich selbst in der Elfenbeinküste arbeitende Internetbetrüger, die sich in Social-Media-Profilen als Europäer ausgeben und Partner dazu verführen, sich in sie zu verlieben, genötigt, nach dem Rat von Hexendoktoren zu suchen, um ihre Beute zu überlisten. Angesichts der weltweiten Bedeutung sozialer Medien legt dies nahe, auch den virtuellen Raum der globalen Wirtschaft als Hort der Magie und Hexerei in den Blick zu nehmen. Wie in den US-Wahlkämpfen und ihrer Verstrickung mit Fake News enthüllt die Untersuchung der Kosmologie des Okkulten in Afrika und anderswo die Bedrohung durch destruktive Kräfte, die den sozialen Beziehungen innewohnen. Afrikanische Religionen könnten einen Rahmen für wertvolle selbstbestimmte Lösungen für aktuelle Probleme des zeitgenössischen Lebens bieten, einschließlich der Frage der Gewalt durch Hexerei. Außerdem könnte dies unter Umständen der Außenwelt eine inspirierende neue Dimension des philosophischen Denkens und emanzipativen Handelns eröffnen, beispielsweise im Bereich der Konfliktlösung und Versöhnung.