

Magic, Religion, and Electoral Politics in Uganda

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Abstract: As a typical case of the intertwining of "modernity" and "tradition" in post-colonial African countries, Uganda's "spiritual politics" provides a key entry point for analyzing the construction of legitimacy of power in post-colonial societies. Its cyclical elections clearly reveal that modern democratic procedures, cloaked in "popular sovereignty," transform the suppressed indigenous belief system of the colonial period into an implicit logic of power operation through political mobilization, elite competition, and media discourse. The inherent contradictions and ineffective enforcement of the colonial legacy, the Law of Magic, further highlight the limitations of modern rule of law in the face of deeply rooted spiritual worldviews. Uganda's "spiritual politics" is a co-production of "indigenous cosmology" and "modern state-building." These two clashed during the colonial period and evolved into a unique "dual power system" after independence. In the postcolonial era, the identity paradox and behavioral paths of Ugandan political elites between their public "modern" identity and private "traditional" practices reflect the long-term and complex nature of "modernity" on the African continent. Examining this phenomenon can provide important theoretical insights for understanding the diverse forms of state-building, democratic consolidation, and even political legitimacy in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: Spiritual Power, Uganda, Witchcraft Laws, Witchcraft Politics, Identity.

1. Introduction

In the study of African history, "magic" and "religion" are often viewed as traditional or irrational. However, in the political practices of many African countries, they are frequently seen as effective forces for constructing power, vying for legitimacy, and mobilizing the masses. Uganda's independence in 1962, while marking a shift in its political status, did not sever the deep entanglement between its spiritual beliefs and political life. Instead, it ushered in a new historical phase in which old belief systems were reshaped and utilized within the framework of the modern nation-state, while legal legacies such as the colonial-era Magic Law persisted, providing an institutional context for later political manipulation.

In this context, electoral politics becomes a key arena for observing the continued operation of this "spiritual power." The cyclical elections provide a stage for the struggle for political authority on both material and non-material levels. On this stage, the actions of political elites—from secretly consulting traditional healers for protection to openly using religious platforms to gain support—reveal how modern political competition is inextricably intertwined with anxieties about spiritual security, jealousy, and supernatural intervention. Political elites have used accusations of witchcraft as a political weapon, and public interpretations of candidates' "spiritual abilities" have become central to political discourse, shaping not only voters' perceptions but also influencing the legitimacy of the democratic process itself. Therefore, the construction and struggle for political leadership in Uganda exposes a fundamental challenge faced by post-colonial states: how can modern democracy operate within a public sphere where power is perceived to originate from both the vote and from the invisible world of gods, ancestors, and divine will, and in turn be shaped by it? What specific role do witchcraft and religion play in Uganda's political elections? How does the general public understand and participate in this "spiritual politics"? How do political elites utilize these traditional belief systems to construct or

maintain their political legitimacy? These are questions that Uganda and many other African countries need to consider.

2. Witchcraft, Religion, and the Post-Colonial State of Uganda

In the pre-colonial era, witchcraft was consistently viewed as an integral part of the social structures of most traditional African societies. At the cultural level, witchcraft practices and threats served as "moral vehicles" for regulating behavior and encouraging adherence to rules. On a political level, witchcraft was used to consolidate the political power of chiefs and rulers. The customary laws prevalent in traditional tribes constructed a complex management mechanism based on fundamental principles, enabling rulers to restore social balance after witchcraft-induced social unrest. In traditional African societies, sanctions included both reparations and different punishments depending on the severity of the witchcraft. The main method of controlling witchcraft was through divination and oracles, with experts from the ruling class responsible for determining whether witchcraft had occurred. Depending on the severity of the witchcraft, punishments ranged from exclusion and reparations to enslavement and even execution. "Purification" rituals were also practiced for individuals or entire communities to eliminate evil forces from society.

When Britain controlled its African colonies, it neither understood nor trusted the existing social control systems. The British considered Africans "inferior and barbaric" and therefore sought to introduce their own methods to maintain law and order, handle crime, and resolve disputes, while simultaneously assuming a moral responsibility to "civilize the natives." Lord Lugard believed that the British bore both a mission to gain benefits and a moral responsibility to "civilize," thereby legitimizing their colonial rule. He defined the main objectives of the British empire in Africa as ending the slave trade, inter-warfare, human sacrifice, and "witchcraft and divine judgment." [1] British colonists used law as the primary tool for "civilizing" the ruled. They only

retained traditional customary laws if they did not violate what the British considered "natural justice, fairness, goodwill, or moral principles." [2] On the issue of witchcraft, the British were skeptical, believing that witchcraft "did not exist," and that what should be banned were the "barbaric and harmful" witch hunts and the activities of "witch doctors."

Uganda has a long history of religious belief. In 1844, an Arab merchant visited the palace of Kabaka Suuna II and took the opportunity to introduce Islam. During the reign of Kabaka Mutesa I, Mutesa began learning Arabic and ordered the construction of mosques throughout Buganda, but neither of them converted to Islam. By 1877, Anglican missionaries arrived in Uganda to begin their missionary work. Two years later, Roman Catholic missionaries also began their missionary activities. During this period, different religions in Uganda coexisted in a state of instability. Until 1884, when Mutesa I died, his successor, Kabaka Mwanga, fearing a threat to his authority from foreign religions, began to use force to suppress them.

This coincided with the Berlin Conference, which saw Europe embark on a scramble for control of Africa. In 1888, Scottish businessman William McKinnon founded the British East African Imperial Company (IBEAC) in Britain. [3] That same year, the company received a Royal Charter from Queen Victoria, granting it the legal authority to formally implement British colonial plans in Uganda and other parts of East Africa. During this period, followers of the three major foreign religious groups—Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Anglican Church—responded to Mwanga's repression with military mobilization, ultimately overthrowing his regime in September 1888 and forcing him into exile. The fall of Mwanga's regime marked the end of the indigenous faith's dominance in Buganda. Subsequently, Mwanga reached an agreement with domestic Christian denominations and, with the help of their military forces, successfully restored his rule. On December 26, 1890, Mwanga formally signed a treaty with Frederick Lugard, then representative of the British East African Empire Company in Uganda, ceding sovereignty over Uganda, including tax collection, judicial administration, and trade rights, to the British East African Empire Company. The British Church also emerged victorious in its subsequent struggle against the Roman Catholic Church, ultimately establishing a hierarchical system in Uganda with the Anglican Church at the top, followed by Roman Catholicism and Islam, with the indigenous faith at the bottom.

The British East African Empire Company's colonization of Uganda did not last long. On April 1, 1893, the company transferred all its rights in Uganda to the British government. On June 18, 1894, the British Foreign Office issued a proclamation establishing a protectorate in Uganda. Religion was a significant factor in early Ugandan politics; Christianity (especially the Church of England) consistently received direct or indirect favor and support from both the colonial and post-colonial powers. As mentioned earlier, a new religious hierarchy was established during British Uganda, with indigenous beliefs at the bottom, almost entirely unrecognized and only tolerated with great difficulty. After Uganda became a complete British colony, Ugandans began to realize that their indigenous spiritual beliefs could serve as a powerful tool for mobilizing the people against British colonial rule, and they began to organize and consciously resist British rule. For example, the Nyabingi Movement arose in the 1900s in the Gech region of southwestern Uganda, bordering Rwanda and eastern Congo. The Abagirwa

movement was a religious and political movement led by the Prophet Muhumuza, a pioneer of anti-colonialism in Africa. Muhumuza mobilized his followers (Abagirwa) to resist German, Belgian, and British colonial powers by claiming spiritual abilities such as "curing diseases and restoring infertility." In its early stages, the spirituality of the movement was a religious attribute, focusing on providing services such as "healing" and "protection" to the vulnerable. However, with the oppressive policies implemented by British colonial powers in the Kichi region from 1907 to 1910, the movement's core objective shifted to anti-colonialism, and spirituality became a political tool, manifested in the following ways: First, the claim of divine power and military protection: Muhumuza claimed that the colonizers' bullets would turn to water and used symbols such as drums, caves, and stones to strengthen the spiritual foundation of political resistance. Second, spiritual rituals and mobilization strategies: Muhumuza used incantations, curses, possession phenomena, and mystical dances to convince followers of the power of a goddess, thereby enabling them to ambush colonial officials and sabotage colonial facilities. Third, spiritual punishment and the maintenance of order: followers inflicted "divine punishment" or arranged the deaths of traitors, using the fear of spiritual threats to maintain the purity and loyalty of the movement. [4]

A similar example is the Yakan movement initiated by the Lugbara people of Uganda in 1890. The movement claimed to drink "Yakan water," made with a local psychedelic daffodil called Kamiojo, advocating for spiritual awakening and social reform through the use of psychedelic plants. The British viewed the Yakan movement as a force resisting forced labor and dispatched machine-gunned troops to suppress this "rebellion." In general, the spiritually driven witchcraft movements within the colonies instilled fear in colonial powers, forcing Britain to enact the Witchcraft Act of 1912 to suppress them, indirectly demonstrating that spirituality had become a significant threat to colonial rule and was fully integrated into the anti-colonial political struggle. [5]

The 1912 Penal Code (Witchcraft) Ordinance is considered one of the earliest and most influential anti-witchcraft legislations. The act explicitly aimed to "interpret all forms of traditional African religious experiences as witchcraft" and ban them. Modeled after the British Act of 1735, the act focused on "pseudo-witchcraft" because the British believed witchcraft did not exist. The Witchcraft Act became a tool for suppressing anti-colonial activities, particularly the 1917 crackdown on the Nyabingi Movement. As political tensions eased in the 1920s, the law remained unchanged until the 1950s. Kigaanira, claiming possession by the spirit of Kibuuka, launched a brief religious revolution on Mount Mutundweh, challenging the authority of the British colonial government. Ultimately, Kigaanira was arrested, and the Witchcraft Act of 1957 was enacted, building upon the 1912 Witchcraft Act. [6] The revised law increased penalties, including life imprisonment for witchcraft threats, introduced deportation orders, and allowed the use of defamatory evidence against defendants. The act was initially designed to consolidate colonial rule and suppress traditional beliefs and political dissent. While the core purpose of the Witchcraft Act was to suppress violence, its effects were counterproductive, creating conditions for new and more brutal forms of extrajudicial violence. While the pre-colonial system was harsh, it was controlled by a recognized authority, providing

a fearsome yet accepted social mechanism for addressing spiritual insecurity. Colonial states destroyed this official mechanism by banning witch doctors and traditional trials.[7] However, the state did not offer viable alternatives to address the deep-seated fears and social anxieties that fueled witchcraft beliefs. This created a judicial vacuum. With the disappearance of the formal system, communities were left to act independently, leading to the rise of disorganized, anonymous, and often more violent "lynching." By removing the "judge," the law inadvertently unleashed a more chaotic form of violence, such as the extreme and violent "witch cleansing" movements that emerged in rural Uganda in the 1980s.[8]

In the 1960s, the wave of democratization in Africa was unstoppable. Uganda officially declared itself an independent nation on October 9, 1963. Its first prime minister, Milton Obote, inherited a political landscape defined by profound religious and ethnic divisions. The legacy of the colonial era extends beyond administrative boundaries and economic crops; it also includes an institutionalized landscape of religious competition. Pre-independence political mobilization unfolded along religious lines: the newly formed Democratic Party (DP) was widely seen as "Diini ya Papa" (the Pope's religion), with its core supporters being Catholics; while the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), led by Obote, was considered "the Protestant alliance of Canterbury," primarily representing the interests of the Anglican Church (Protestantism). Against this backdrop, building a unified, secular nation-state while simultaneously appeasing and integrating these powerful religious authorities with deep-rooted popular support became the primary challenge facing Obote's government.

At the time of independence, Uganda operated under a quasi-federal system, with the four kingdoms of Buganda, Ankole, Bunyoro, and Toro retaining autonomy, with Buganda holding the highest status. To secure a majority in parliament and form a government, Obote's Ugandan People's Congress party formed a seemingly improbable political alliance with the Kabaka Yekka (KY), a royalist party in the Kingdom of Buganda. Buganda is the most powerful kingdom in Uganda, and its king, Kabaka, holds a semi-divine status among the people, symbolizing the traditional spiritual world. However, the kingdom itself is deeply infiltrated by Christianity, with a complex power network formed between Catholicism and Protestantism. Obote's government's initial rise to power through this political alliance with Buganda was seen as merely a stopgap measure. This alliance itself was a high-stakes political balancing act, attempting to bind a modern party advocating centralized power to a kingdom seeking to maintain traditional monarchy and federal status. Therefore, the legitimacy of Obote's government was, from the outset, built on a fragile compromise with a powerful, semi-independent religious-traditional authority. This compromise was evident in the allocation of cabinet positions, the arrangement of state ceremonies, and the handling of sensitive issues such as church lands and property. Every decision required navigating between the expectations of different religious and ethnic groups.

To establish a strong central government, Obote clearly recognized the need to weaken the influence of the two "parallel power centers," the kingdom and the church. One of his key measures was the nationalization of church-run schools. Obote, an Anglican, had a strained relationship with Catholic Archbishop Joseph Kiwanuka. In 1963, Obote

established a committee to promote the "de-religiousization" of schools. [9]The government took over religious schools established by missionaries, eliminated religious restrictions on enrollment, and standardized the curriculum (such as adding African history). This move aimed to break down regional inequalities caused by Catholic/Anglican dominance in education. However, this measure was met with strong opposition from the Catholic Church. Relations between Obote and the Catholic Church only eased somewhat after Archbishop Kiwanuka's death in 1966 and his successor, Emmanuel Nsubuga.[10] The Obote government also pursued a centralized policy aimed at weakening the power of the kingdoms, including Buganda, in order to establish a strong central government. This ran counter to the political demands of the KY party. The conflict escalated in the 1964 "Lost Territories" referendum, in which Obote supported the Kingdom of Bunyoro's return of territories occupied by Buganda. The referendum result exacerbated the conflict, which Buganda viewed as a betrayal, leading to a break between Buganda and the central government. Ultimately, this political crisis erupted violently in 1966. [11]Obote accused the King of Buganda of inciting a rebellion, sent troops to seize the palace, abolished the federal constitution, and expelled Mutesa II. A new constitution was subsequently promulgated (1967), abolishing all kingdoms.

The abolition of traditional leaders' political power and the implementation of centralized authority. The significance of this event far exceeded a simple political power struggle. For the people of Buganda, the storming of the palace and the expulsion of the king were blasphemous acts against their sacred authority and a heavy blow to their cultural and spiritual identity. Although Obote achieved military and political victory and temporarily unified the country, he also sowed the seeds of a profound legitimacy crisis at the heart of Ugandan politics. Obote's government's strategy of "compromise first, then repression" destroyed Uganda's fragile political balance, making the establishment of state authority no longer a process of seeking consensus and reconciliation, but a naked act of military conquest. The political elites knew that in this notoriously religious country, any political project attempting to completely bypass or suppress spiritual authority was destined to be fragile. The tense interactions of this period foreshadowed Idi Amin's more extreme rule in the 1970s, which combined religion and violence.

As mentioned earlier, Obote's "compromise first, then repression" strategy sowed the seeds of a major disaster for Uganda's fragile political balance. In the final years of Obote's first government, the Protestant elite's dominance in the political structure became increasingly consolidated, marginalizing Catholics and Muslims. Idi Amin Dada, then Commander-in-Chief of the Ugandan Army and a Kakwa Nubian, was angered by Obote's favoritism towards the Acholi and Lango peoples, fueling discontent within the army. Amin's own Muslim identity and his power struggles with Obote exacerbated the conflict. This led him to decide to stage a coup and seize power. On January 25, 1971, while Obote was attending the Commonwealth Conference in Singapore, Amin led his loyalist forces in a raid on key facilities, seizing control of the capital, Kampala.[12] He then broadcast an 18-point statement accusing Obote of corruption and dictatorship, declaring himself president. Obote ultimately went into exile in Tanzania.

This coup was not only a dramatic turning point in

Uganda's political trajectory but also a profound reorganization of religious power. When Amin, a Muslim, overthrew Obote, the coup was "cheered by both Catholics and Muslims." To them, it seemed to herald a new era that could break the old religious power structure and bring about a more equitable distribution of political power. Amin skillfully exploited this expectation, portraying himself as the savior of the oppressed, thus gaining a crucial social support base from the outset of his power grab. After coming to power, Amin used religion to consolidate his power. He was initially a Christian (Anglican), but gradually converted to Islam in the early 1970s, appearing in public as "Al Hadji" (a former pilgrim). This identity shift was not a simple change of private faith, but a deliberate act. [13]Amin viewed Muslims as a "historically marginalized" group, and to win their support, he gave them special treatment. In 1972, Amin established the Supreme Muslim Council of Uganda (UMSC) and provided it with state funding. By strengthening his control over Muslims through official institutions, Amin united the Muslim forces within the country. Following international condemnation of the expulsion of Asians, Amin proactively engaged with Arab Muslim countries to gain political and economic support. Through these means, Amin portrayed himself as a supporter of the Islamic world, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of his rule and mitigating the adverse effects of domestic and international circumstances on his regime. In the mid-1970s, Amin's relationship with Gaddafi's Libya was particularly close: reportedly, he met with Gaddafi during his first visit to Libya in 1972, and the two countries quickly established friendly relations. In December 1972, the Gaddafi government donated 21 million Ugandan shillings to the Supreme Council of Muslims of Uganda, becoming a significant source of funding for Muslim projects such as the construction of mosques in Uganda. Furthermore, Amin also mentioned donations and aid from countries such as Saudi Arabia. In 1976, he publicly stated that several governments (Libya, Saudi Arabia, Ivory Coast, Qatar, Iraq, the UAE, etc.) had donated cement and funds for the construction of the Kampana National Mosque. Through these maneuvers, Amin attempted to cloak his rule in a veneer of "sacredness," binding his personal dictatorial power to the rise of the entire Muslim community, thereby constructing a new legitimacy for his rule based on religious identity.[14]

However, the "immense oppression" of non-Muslim groups, especially Christian church leaders who dared to dissent, meant that violence and fear became the core means of maintaining his rule. In 1977, Janan Luwum, then Archbishop of Uganda, publicly accused Amin of abusing his power, demanding an end to extrajudicial killings, corruption, and ethnic persecution. He was subsequently arrested by the government on the pretext of an assassination plot. Amin was "extremely hostile to Christianity" and at one point attempted to convert Uganda into a Muslim state. Against this backdrop, many Christian clergy and believers were persecuted as threats to the regime. Witnesses recalled that village pastors and other Christians were "considered a threat to the regime," and many who upheld their faith were arrested, tortured, and even killed. Amin's security forces also used kidnapping, torture, and shootings to eliminate "potential disloyalists" and genuine opponents. Many journalists, judges, businessmen, officials, and even artists and religious leaders were secretly arrested and executed during this period. This series of violent actions against religious and dissident figures further consolidated Amin's dictatorial rule and created an

atmosphere of extreme terror both domestically and internationally.

To maintain his dictatorial rule, Amin often displayed himself in elaborate military uniforms and numerous self-appointed or awarded medals, portraying himself as a "sacred" and inviolable leader. In 1977, when Britain severed diplomatic relations with Uganda, Amin declared that he had defeated Britain and added CBE (Conqueror of the British Empire) to his title, expanding it to "President for Life, Field Marshal, Hajj Member, Doctor, Idi Amin Dada, recipient of the Victoria Cross, Distinguished Service Medal, Military Cross, Master of the Beasts of the Land and the Fishes of the Sea, Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa and throughout Uganda." [15]Amin also modeled himself after the British Victoria Cross, awarding himself the "Victory Cross," a medal he had never personally earned. He frequently held grand military parades and celebrations in public to display his authority and prosperity, broadcasting images of him mingling with the people through state broadcasts, state banquets, and national day ceremonies. [16]Dr. Richard Vaux noted that he (Amin) "embraced the media, understood its power... and knew how the media amplified his arrogance and political will." Through these various ceremonies, titles, and media exposure, Amin reinforced his mystique and ruling authority as a "divine leader." Furthermore, Amin was said to be quite supernatural, carrying various amulets and charms, and consulting shamans at night for divination and exorcisms, all intended to consolidate his rule. Foreign diplomats jokingly remarked that if Amin's guards found someone wearing an amulet, they would suspect that person of using witchcraft to assassinate the head of state. While these claims are difficult to verify, they reflect the intertwined personality cult and mysticism within Amin's regime. Amin cultivated an image of an "omniscient and omnipotent" ruler within Uganda, his mystical aura often reinforced by rumors of witchcraft. [17]His government employed numerous "diviners" and "traditional medical advisors," and some government officials even used witchcraft to threaten dissidents. The public's perception of his reliance on mystical powers served as a symbolic reinforcement of fear and a sense of mystical authority, making his iron-fisted rule even more awe-inspiring. During Amin's dictatorship from 1971 to 1979, religious freedom in Uganda was severely violated.

3. Post-Independence Spiritual Struggle and Electoral Strategies in Uganda

In 1986, the National Resistance Movement, led by Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, successfully seized power in Uganda after years of jungle warfare, marking a new historical period for this country ravaged by civil war and dictatorship. At the beginning of his rule, Museveni's government faced the daunting tasks of rebuilding the nation, healing social divisions, and consolidating its legitimacy. Against this backdrop, the government's religious policy, particularly its attitude towards emerging Christian forces, became a crucial and far-reaching component of its political strategy.

The "Pentecostal Church" refers to a Protestant denomination that emphasizes baptism by the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, miraculous healing, and spiritual liberation. It originated from the "Azusa Street Awakening" in Los Angeles, USA, in 1906. [18]In the early 20th century,

Pentecostalism spread to Africa along with missionary movements in the United States and Europe. In 1960, Pastor Hugh Reg Leizer, senior pastor and leader of the Uganda Evangelical Fellowship, arrived in Uganda and began preaching. However, in 1971, Amin issued a presidential decree explicitly banning all churches except for the state-recognized Anglican, Catholic, and Orthodox churches. This ban dealt a devastating blow to the then-nascent and developing Pentecostal and other evangelical churches. Their activities were forced underground, and their believers and pastors faced the risk of arrest, persecution, and even worse. After Museveni came to power, he announced that he would no longer ban any religion. This decision directly reversed the policies of the Amin era, providing crucial space for survival for all religious groups. Uganda's new constitution also explicitly guarantees citizens' freedom of religious belief, including the right to freely join and participate in any religious organization, providing the legal foundation for this open policy. Museveni himself maintained a neutral stance on religion, but he publicly condemned those holding separatist ideologies, suggesting that his policies aimed to encourage religious forces that could promote national unity rather than division. Between 1989 and 1990, the Ugandan government passed the NGO statute, requiring all "non-mainstream" churches, including the large number of Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches, to register as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For the Museveni government, which had just emerged from war and was rebuilding, the alliance with the Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches brought multiple strategic benefits: Firstly, as an ally transcending traditional religious divisions, Ugandan politics had long been plagued by factional struggles between Catholics and Protestants (Anglicans), a political ailment inherited from the colonial era. Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches, as a newly emerging, non-denominational force transcending traditional sectarian boundaries, perfectly aligned with the Museveni government's ideology of establishing a broad-based, inclusive regime that transcended old identity politics. These churches became natural allies for Museveni in breaking down the old political order and building a new national identity.

Secondly, as moral partners in social reconstruction, Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches promoted personal rebirth, strict moral discipline, hard work, and "prosperity gospel," which resonated with the Museveni government's post-conflict agenda of restoring social order, combating corruption, and promoting economic development. During the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, the church's moral framework and community networks also became important social resources in combating the pandemic. The government was pleased to have a powerful partner who could help "discipline the people's minds" and provide social services, which significantly reduced the governance burden of the new regime.

Thirdly, it consolidated the legitimacy of the regime and expanded its popular base. By allying with this rapidly growing and vibrant grassroots movement, Museveni's government quickly gained widespread social support, greatly enhancing its legitimacy. Pentecostal believers became a large and loyal "voter pool" for the Museveni regime, providing solid political support at crucial moments. President Museveni himself actively participated in church activities and encouraged religious leaders to participate in nation-building; he was even hailed by some pastors as the

"Chief Puritan" to highlight the moral revival under his leadership.[19]

Unlike the policies during the Obote era, Museveni's religious policies in the early stages of his rule were not simply based on abstract respect for religious freedom, but rather a well-thought-out political strategy. By adopting a tolerant stance of "deregulation," the Museveni government successfully transformed a newly emerging social force, suppressed under the old regime, into a crucial ally in consolidating its power and rebuilding the country. The government gained much-needed social stability, political legitimacy, and a powerful non-sectarian mobilization network; while the church gained living space, social status, political asylum, and unprecedented opportunities for development. In this process, Pentecostal pastors rose from marginalized religious leaders to key figures wielding social capital and political influence. This unique church-state relationship, which took shape in the 1980s and 1990s, profoundly reshaped Uganda's social and political landscape, and its influence continues to this day. It not only explains the prominent position of Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches in contemporary Ugandan public life but also reveals the complex dynamics of how religious and political power mutually shape and evolve during the transition of post-conflict African countries.

While Museveni's laissez-faire policy of allowing religion provided him with significant political leverage in the elections, it also exposed the problem of witchcraft that had existed since the pre-colonial era. In Uganda, the phenomenon of political elites using witchcraft and religious rituals for "spiritual protection" or "spiritual attack" is not an isolated case but rather a recurring institutionalized practice observed throughout election cycles. While most politicians publicly emphasize respect for democracy and state institutions, they frequently seek the help of traditional healers, spiritualists, and herbalists in private to predict election outcomes, protect their bodies, and perform rituals against enemies. These behaviors reveal a widespread anxiety among Ugandan politicians about "spiritual attacks" and "spiritual vulnerability," giving rise to a "spiritual political culture" that combines crisis management with symbolic power.

For example, in the 2011 local elections in northern Uganda, a political opponent paid a healer 1.5 million Ugandan shillings to attempt to assassinate his opponent. This incident was even reported by the local radio network (Uganda Radio Network) and prompted a police investigation. [20] In 2011, the BBC produced a documentary about Ugandan witchcraft and ritual killings, where children, considered pure and innocent, were sacrificed by healers to appease "spirits" and pray for wealth, health, fertility, and other blessings. Hearts, ears, livers, and genitals are considered key materials in sacrificial rituals. In 2014, in Gulu, Acholi region, a wealthy man named Charles Apire (known as "Mr. Red") was accused of witchcraft-related murders because he wore red and his wealth increased. Community members launched a "vote-style" identification process, resulting in him being "voted" as a suspect and subjected to lynching and the burning of his property.[21] In 2023, Ugandan police seized a batch of infant ashes used by a candidate's "personal healer," allegedly for a "power blessing ritual." Behind these dark rituals lies not only a distortion of faith but also a challenge to human rights and the law. In most countries, such practices are tacitly approved or

even protected due to "traditional culture." [22]It has been argued that his national resistance army's success was partly due to its effective use of witchcraft and traditional healers to mobilize the masses and fight enemies. This provides a historical precedent for later politicians to use witchcraft as a legitimate tool in power struggles.

On a more covert level, politicians' reliance on traditional witchcraft for protection is more complex. According to a November 13, 2010 report in Uganda's **Sunday Vision**, an unnamed member of parliament admitted in an interview that he specifically went to a renowned witch doctor in the Toro region before the election for "secluded practice" to "strengthen his spiritual barrier and avoid the magical attacks of his political opponents." The MP also revealed that some "high-ranking" politicians performed animal sacrifices and buried bones in areas where their opponents were active on the eve of elections to "weaken their aura." In 2015, Freda Mubanda, a female candidate for parliament in the Masaka district, paid over 300 million Ugandan shillings (approximately US\$80,000) to a witch doctor before the National Resistance Movement Party primary election, aiming to curse her opponent and predict his victory. The witch doctor promised to "weaken" her opponent's spiritual power through animal sacrifices and burial rituals, guaranteeing Mubanda's victory. However, she lost the primary election, later discovered she had been deceived, and publicly confronted the witch doctor; parliamentary candidate Wilson Watira attempted to shake hands with a political opponent at a funeral, but the opponent refused, citing fear of being cursed through contact. This reflects a pervasive "spiritual warfare" mentality in Ugandan politics: many candidates consult witch doctors before elections, seeking protective amulets to ward off curses from their opponents. Watira himself admitted that this fear stemmed from the possibility that his opponent had used witch doctors to "cast spells" to undermine his campaign prospects, including predicting his opponent's weaknesses. Rituals include prayers at shrines or the use of "pure" animal sacrifices to construct "spiritual barriers." Although these practices appear incompatible with modern political systems, they are widespread in Uganda and do not conflict with voter culture. This practice is based on the premise that political power derives not only from the ballot box but also from the approval of ancestral spirits, deities, or mystical forces.

These phenomena construct a highly ritualistic and hierarchical "political-spiritual complex." In this system, a mutually beneficial relationship exists between politicians and witch doctors/religious leaders. Politicians use witchcraft and religious rituals to gain psychological comfort, political cover, and voter trust, while witch doctors and priests leverage the prestige and financial resources of politicians to enhance their social status and gain more followers. The "spiritual management" of Ugandan politicians is not only reflected in pre-election protective rituals but also in the emphasis on "spiritual cleansing" after the election. Some politicians proactively travel to holy sites for pilgrimage or hold "sin cleansing" ceremonies after their election victories to "eliminate the jealousy and curses caused by the victory." Such behavior indicates that political victory itself is seen as a "spiritual risk event" requiring continuous purification and ritual, rather than a simple vote-counting process. In Uganda, witchcraft and religious rituals not only shape the behavior of politicians but also profoundly influence their legitimacy construction, voter mobilization, and crisis response

mechanisms. In this context, politics is not merely a battle for votes but also a spiritual contest that transcends the visible and invisible worlds.

4. Public Discourse and Opinion Control in 21st-Century Uganda

Entering the 21st century, Uganda's media landscape has rapidly evolved amidst digital transformation and political liberalization, becoming a key platform for shaping public perception of "witchcraft politics." Uganda's mainstream newspapers, as well as rural radio programs, construct a narrative framework that intertwines traditional beliefs with modern democracy by reporting on politicians seeking help from witch doctors, witchcraft accusations, and election-related rituals. These reports often portray witchcraft as a "hidden weapon" in electoral competition, reflecting the ongoing tension between spiritual anxieties and power struggles in post-colonial societies. The media not only records events but also reinforces the image of witchcraft as "irrational" or a "moral threat" through selective framing, thereby influencing voters' judgments of candidates' legitimacy. In the lead-up to the 2025 election season, numerous media outlets intensively reported on politicians consulting witch doctors, linking it to electoral uncertainty and highlighting the media's role in amplifying spiritual narratives.

Mainstream media outlets such as **New Vision** and **Daily Monitor** often employ investigative narratives in their reporting, emphasizing the intersection of witchcraft and politics. In a 2025 editorial, *New Vision* likened modern "witch doctors" to "false prophets," criticizing them for extracting money from politicians through rituals such as "sowing seeds" and linking it to election corruption. This framework positions witchcraft politics as a manifestation of "moral decay," visually amplified with dramatic photographs of witchcraft rituals, such as scenes of shaking gourds or animal sacrifices, to enhance the impact. [23]Meanwhile, *Daily Monitor*, in its 2025 Easter coverage, documented clergy warnings about witchcraft and election violence, portraying witchcraft accusations as a catalyst for social division. These reports tend to condemn witchcraft as "anti-modern," calling for a return to Christian ethics, thus reinforcing negative stereotypes of indigenous beliefs inherited from the colonial era. Tabloids like *Red Pepper* amplify the visual elements of "witchcraft politics" in a sensationalist style, often using headlines like "Politicians' Dark Deals" or cartoonish illustrations depicting candidates secretly visiting shrines or performing curse rituals. [24]These reports frame witchcraft as a tool in the "spiritual wars." For example, a 2025 report described Rosie Mukite, a witch doctor in the eastern Mbale region, as providing politicians with "supernatural advantages." The visual language included blurred photos and video screenshots to create an atmosphere of mystery and fear. This sensory representation not only attracts readers but also implies moral criticism, portraying politicians who seek the help of witch doctors as "morally bankrupt," thereby influencing public perception of electoral integrity.

Rural radio programs play a more direct role in rural Uganda. These programs often discuss the intersection of witchcraft and elections in the local language, reinforcing moral anxieties at the community level. Between 2020 and 2021, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC)

revoked the licenses of 23 radio stations, accusing them of "promoting witchcraft," including broadcasting advertisements for witch doctors and programs discussing spiritual protection in elections. [25] Rural radio stations in the Nakasongola region broadcast anecdotes of politicians avoiding handshakes to ward off curses, framing it as "spiritual crisis management." While visually devoid of images, the programs created drama through vivid narration and sound effects. These programs carried a dual moral judgment: on the one hand, condemning witchcraft as "backward superstition," and on the other hand, tacitly approving its practicality in elections, reflecting the media's bridging role in urban-rural divides.

These media re-constructed a complex image of "witchcraft politics" through framing, visuals, and moral dimensions, transforming it from a private belief into the core of public discourse. This construction not only perpetuates the colonial-era stigmatization of indigenous spirituality but also strengthens the spiritual dimension of power struggles in contemporary elections, influencing the legitimacy and stability of Uganda's democratic process.

Witchcraft accusations often manifest in a gendered manner, with female politicians particularly vulnerable to "moral panic." This panic stems from the intertwining of indigenous beliefs and colonial legacies, viewing women's power as a subversion of the traditional gender order, thus stigmatizing them as "spirit manipulators" or "unclean people." Unlike male politicians whose magical practices are often interpreted as "spiritual protection" or strategic wisdom, accusations against women tend to emphasize "moral depravity" or "anti-naturalness," reflecting the clash between the deeply ingrained patriarchal structure and religious norms in Ugandan society. Anthropological research suggests this gender-biased discourse on magical practices can be traced back to the pre-colonial period, when female healers, while playing a healing role in the community, were also more easily accused of being vessels of "evil forces." The colonial-era Magic Law further reinforced this prejudice, criminalizing female spiritual practices and associating them with "barbarism" or "irrationality," leading to moral skepticism often surrounding women's political participation after independence.

A prime example is the public visit to the Eastern Shrine by then-parliamentary speaker Rebecca Kadaga after her 2016 election victory. She performed animal sacrifices and prayer rituals to "inform her ancestors" of her success and seek future protection. While she defended this as a cultural tradition, it quickly drew strong condemnation from the Christian church. Archbishop Stanley Ntagali publicly accused Kadaga of "moral depravity," implying that she gained power through "spirit manipulation," which was amplified in the media into a nationwide moral panic. Kadaga's case exposed the double standards faced by female politicians: when men like President Museveni publicly respect traditional beliefs, they are seen as "culturally inclusive," while women are stigmatized as "unclean," their political legitimacy damaged by allegations of "spiritual contamination." This incident not only caused a temporary drop in Kadaga's approval ratings but also triggered gendered attacks on social media, portraying her as a "witch-like threat."

The moral panic behind these accusations further reveals the multiple tensions between gender, power, and religious belief. In Uganda, the clash between the Christian-dominated moral framework and indigenous beliefs has put female

political participants in a difficult position: if they seek spiritual protection, they are accused of "moral depravity"; if they refuse, they are seen as "spiritually vulnerable" and easily attacked.

In the digital age, the spread of witchcraft has become even more widespread through the power of social media. During the Ugandan elections, rumors about politicians' involvement in witchcraft spread rapidly through Facebook, WhatsApp, and other channels. In Kampala, the Ugandan capital, signs advertising "witch doctors" and their ability to boost politicians' campaigns were frequently posted. In late 2020, fake newspaper cover screenshots circulated online, claiming that opposition candidate Bobi Wine had spent a fortune on witchcraft rituals to aid his election campaign. Social media amplified the spread of these rumors, with netizens frequently creating composite images and text, such as fake newspaper screenshots claiming a politician had "spent a fortune learning witchcraft." These fake news posters, with sensational headlines and illustrations, were easily forwarded in Facebook groups and WhatsApp chats. Local social media users or independent media occasionally created short videos claiming a candidate was "possessed" or cursed, and disseminated them through Facebook, YouTube, or other platforms. Voice messages widely circulated on WhatsApp claimed to deliver "insider information" or "pastoral prophecies," making them more believable to listeners. Text-based rumors and stories shared among users spread rapidly using fear and religious sentiment, such as claims that opponents were possessed by evil spirits or had lost legitimacy. [26] These multimodal contents collectively constitute the online rumor ecosystem, constantly reinforcing the link between witchcraft and politics.

Social media has led the Ugandan public to examine political authority through spiritual metaphors. Those in power have also been forced to acknowledge the power of traditional beliefs. President Museveni has publicly acknowledged the influence of traditional witchcraft and rituals: in a speech, he emphasized that "traditional religions are very powerful" and admonished church leaders not to oppose them. This attitude reflects the coexistence of integration and tension between the modern state and traditional spirituality in the perception of legitimacy. [27-28] Michelle MacCarthy argues that this is precisely the "spiritual politics" emerging in modern Africa, which not only measures secular development such as the economy but also reinforces the legitimacy of rule through rituals and religious order. The pervasive witchcraft discourse on social media platforms reflects the public's distrust of political reality and also prompts political authorities to incorporate spiritual elements into public discourse to consolidate their authority.

5. Conclusion

Since its independence in 1962, Uganda's political history has not been a linear trajectory towards a modern secular state, but rather a complex history of the continuous collision, interweaving, and mutual shaping of spiritual beliefs and modern political forms. This study examines the roles of religion and witchcraft in Ugandan electoral politics during the postcolonial period, exploring how "spiritual power," as an informal yet highly resilient political resource, has played a crucial and enduring role in state building, social mobilization, and the shaping of political legitimacy.

This study confirms that colonialism did not eradicate Uganda's indigenous spiritual worldview; rather, it created a

contradictory institutional environment through the Law on Witchcraft. This colonial legacy was fully inherited after Uganda's independence. On the one hand, the Law on Witchcraft officially acknowledged witchcraft as a social reality; on the other hand, its inherent logical dilemmas prevented effective governance, leaving a vast gray area for postcolonial political elites who could manipulate the public's awe and fear of supernatural forces outside of formal legal and political procedures.

In different historical stages after independence, "spiritual power" was utilized by those in power using different strategies. The Obote government attempted to place the authority of the modern nation-state above that of traditional religious authority through nationalized education, but this secularization effort ultimately sank into a legitimacy crisis due to its violent repression of traditional kingdoms. Idi Amin, on the other hand, took a more extreme approach, constructing a dictatorship entirely reliant on religious identity mobilization and supernatural fears by politicizing Islam and spreading terrifying rumors of personal witchcraft. Since 1986, the Museveni government has demonstrated a more sophisticated strategy of "spiritual governance": on the one hand, it formed a mutually beneficial alliance with the rapidly rising Pentecostal Movement, utilizing its vast social network and theological discourse of "peace and stability" to consolidate its power; on the other hand, it tacitly approved and even utilized the unspoken rules of "political witchcraft," keeping electoral competition shrouded in a mysterious, non-institutionalized struggle.

This study points out that "spiritual politics" is not merely a secret game of the elite; it is deeply embedded in Uganda's public discourse and social psychology. Social media has become a key platform for amplifying and shaping the image of "magical politics," simplifying complex political competition into a moral drama of good versus evil, thereby influencing public political perception. In a society where power is widely believed to originate both from visible votes and from the invisible spiritual world, the operational logic of modern democracy inevitably undergoes profound transformation. "Spiritual power" is not only a remnant of pre-modernism but also a tool that is constantly being recreated to adapt to the needs of modern political struggle. It is both a covert weapon used by political elites to protect themselves and attack their opponents and a unique way for the public to interpret political reality, express anxieties, and participate in politics. Therefore, any understanding of the postcolonial political history of Uganda and even the wider African region that ignores this profound spiritual dimension will be one-sided and incomplete.

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