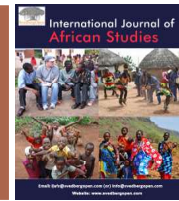




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## QAnon and Other Conspiracy Ideologies' Impact on Sub-Saharan Africa in the Age of Global Capitalism

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### Abstract

With the attack on the Capitol by the 'Proud Boys', Donald Trump's 'deep state' allegations reached the peak of US 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 labor, 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 US 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, Modernization, Neoliberalism, International trade, Migration, Post-colonialism, Sub-Saharan Africa, African culture*

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### 1. Introduction

On January 11, 2018, President Donald Trump allegedly labeled 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

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**Cartoon 1: 'Bananas'**

Source: Zapiro, *Daily Maverick*, January 9, 2021<sup>1</sup>

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 *et al.*, 2018). Three years later, on January 6, 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 rumors in the US 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 (Geschiere, 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 US, 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 US 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 and 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.

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Shapiro, South African cartoonist, South Africa.

The worldwide growth of social media facilitates the spread of fake news and conspiracy ideologies in US 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 (Maleševič, 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 US, where they established several egalitarian communes in Texas, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and California (Blick and Grant, 1974).

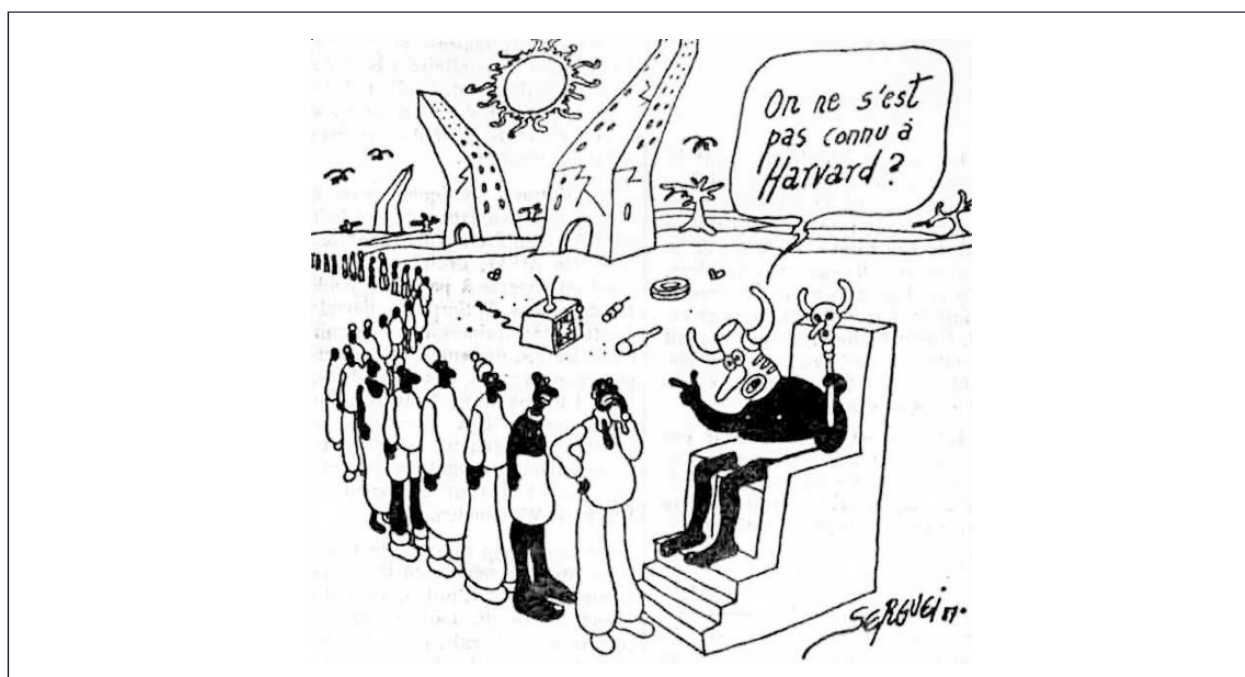


**Cartoon 2: ‘The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters’<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> 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 43<sup>rd</sup> 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 and 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<sup>3</sup>**

Source: "'Serguei', French cartoonist, Serguei Goizauskas, *Le Monde*, 11 December 1987. © (all rights reserved)".

The modernity of witchcraft accusations in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has been proved by several case studies (Geschiere, 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 and Adams, 2005; Graft-Aikins *et al.*, 2015). These genital theft theories, circulating periodically as by-products of African modernity, shared many characteristics with current US conspiracy theories (Adams and Dzokoto, 2007; Piraino *et al.*, 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 and 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).

### 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

<sup>3</sup> “Didn't we meet at Harvard?” cartoon on the modernity of witchcraft belief in contemporary Africa. Credit: ‘Serguei’, French cartoonist, Serguei Goizauskas, *Le Monde*, December 11, 1987. © (all rights reserved)

conspiracy increased greatly when social rules were ignored, particularly in cultures where rule-following was valued (Suthaharan *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, focusing 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<sup>4</sup>**

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 US, notably during the 2020 presidential election campaign of the Republicans (Suthaharan *et al.*, 2021). They infected communities from the U.S. Congress to Facebook groups and other social media (Bodner *et al.*, 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 program in Africa (Suthaharan *et al.*, 2021).

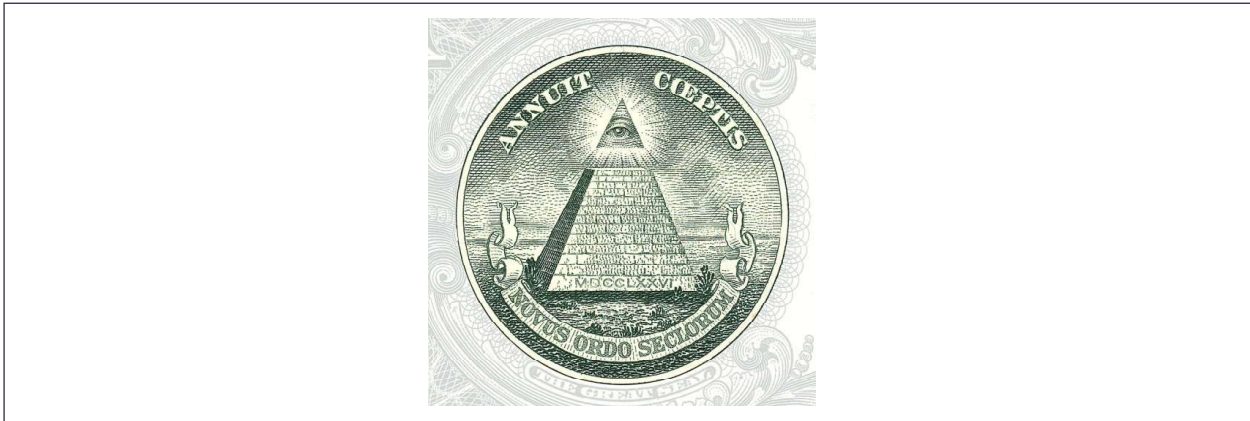
Concerning the actual Covid-19 pandemic, the growing anti-vaccine movement turned into a general anti-science movement. Inadequate risk communication during uncertain times accelerated the rise of conspiratorial ideas, although there are regional variations. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), for example,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

In the US, 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,

<sup>4</sup> Source: QAnon meeting. © Dave-Whamond, Canada, PoliticalCartoons.com. - Dylan Bouscher: Cartoons: Coronavirus and Colleges, *The Mercury News*, September 1, 2020. © (all rights reserved)

including in Africa. In the US, the Trump Administration even pulled out of the World Health Organization and the COVAX facility.

Also, the restricted distribution of effective vaccination against Covid-19 favored 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).



**Graph 1: The Eye of Providence<sup>5</sup>**

Source: Barkun (2003)

#### 4. Impact of African Beliefs on Conspiracy Theories in the US

##### 4.1. Direct Impact by US-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 US 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



**Cartoon 5: Africans Tend to Fall for Conspiracy Suspicions<sup>6</sup>**

Source: Glez (2022), *Jeune Afrique*, February 25, 2022

<sup>5</sup> “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)

<sup>6</sup> 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*, February 25, 2022. © Damien Glez (all rights reserved).

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.

In the 2022 US elections, coordinated networks focused 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 behavior. 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 *et al.*, 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 US Democrats as anti-Black paedophiles who exploit Black people, including children in West Africa, the cradle of vodun, 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 US. 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 US 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 16<sup>th</sup> highest country in cyberattacks vulnerabilities in Africa in 2016 (Omodunbi *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 equaled 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.

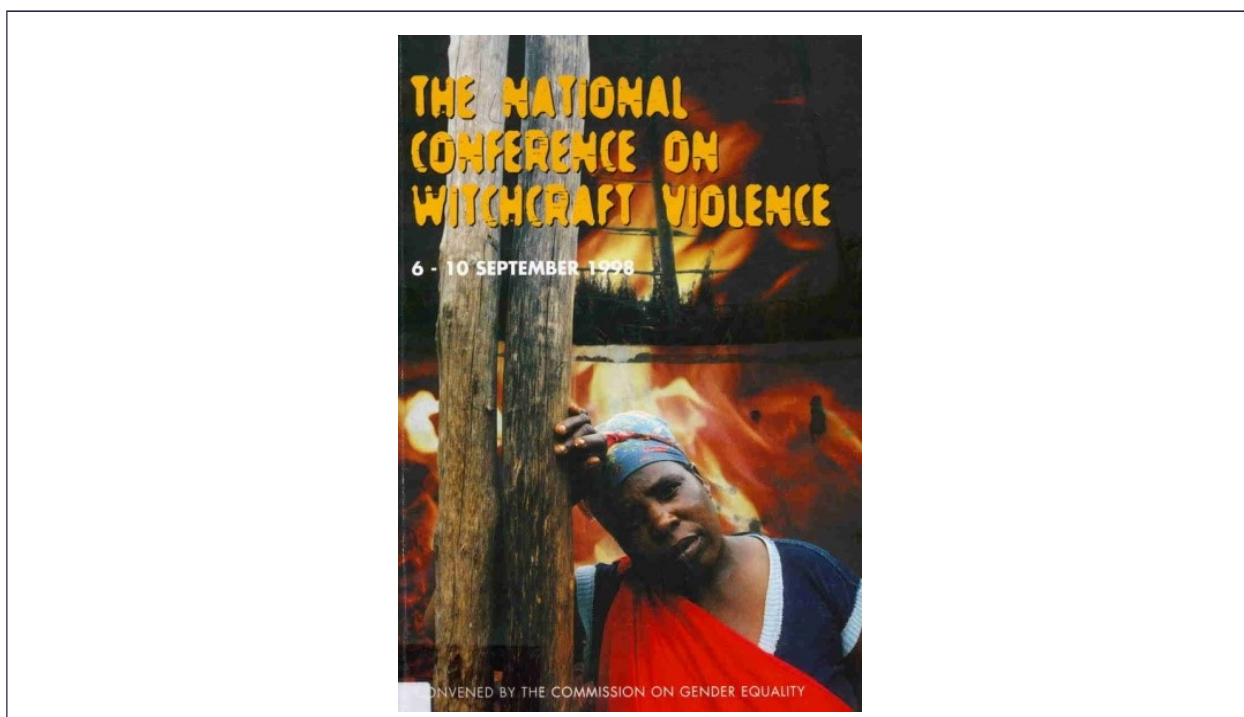
Nevertheless, the US, as the major driver of global capitalism, shares a considerable responsibility in spreading occult belief systems in contemporary SSA. Modern social structures, techniques and commodities, usually of Western origin, have become central in rumors of the occult, especially in African 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 and Comaroff, 2012a).

Yet, in as far as many nation-states of the Global north—including the US—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 and Comaroff, 2012).



**Graph 2: Witchcraft Violence in Africa, Often Resulting from Exploiting Political Agendas<sup>7</sup>**

*Source: Commission for Gender Equality, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1998*

## 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 colored people broke all boundaries. In some extremist tweets, 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 ‘defense’. 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 and Lakaje, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> 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).





**Cartoon 6: Xenophobia and the Meaning of Ubuntu<sup>8</sup>**

Source: Zapiro, May 25, 2008

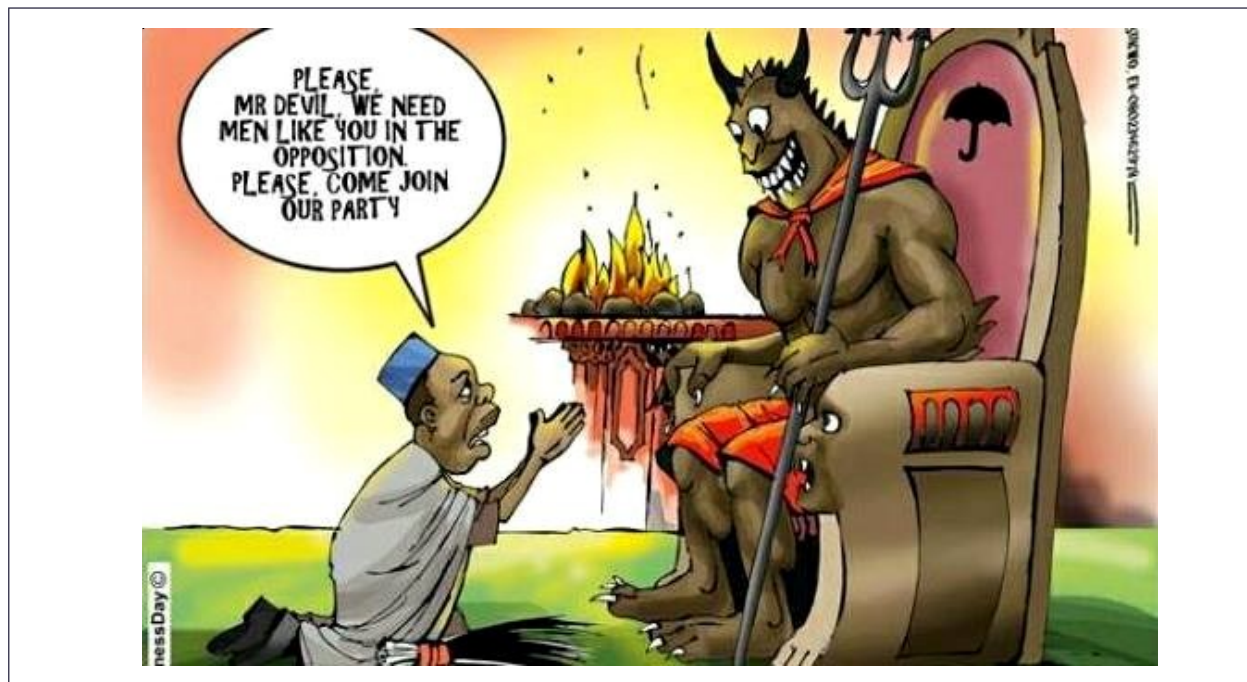
Already before, in the early 1990s, South Africa had been associated with the Satanic panic ideology, triggered by the creation of the Occult Related Crimes Unit in the South African Police Service (SAPS) in 1992, related to the so-called ‘muti murders’. The unit was portrayed as the ‘world’s only ‘ritual 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 and Geffen, 2016).

## 5.2. Nigeria

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election will be held on February 25, 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-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 *et al.*, 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.

<sup>8</sup> Cartoon on nationalism and growing xenophobia in South Africa. - Credit: Zapiro, May 25, 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 neighborhood 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 on October 8, 2010. © (all rights reserved).



**Cartoon 7: Nigerian Politicians Would Join the Devil to Win Elections<sup>9</sup>**

Source: Mike Asukwo (2019)

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 US 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 US 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 January 5 and December 28, 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 et al., 2020). Allegedly, members of the Nigerian political elite regularly visit shrines to swear oaths, ask for a deity's blessing, or seek 'spiritual defense' 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

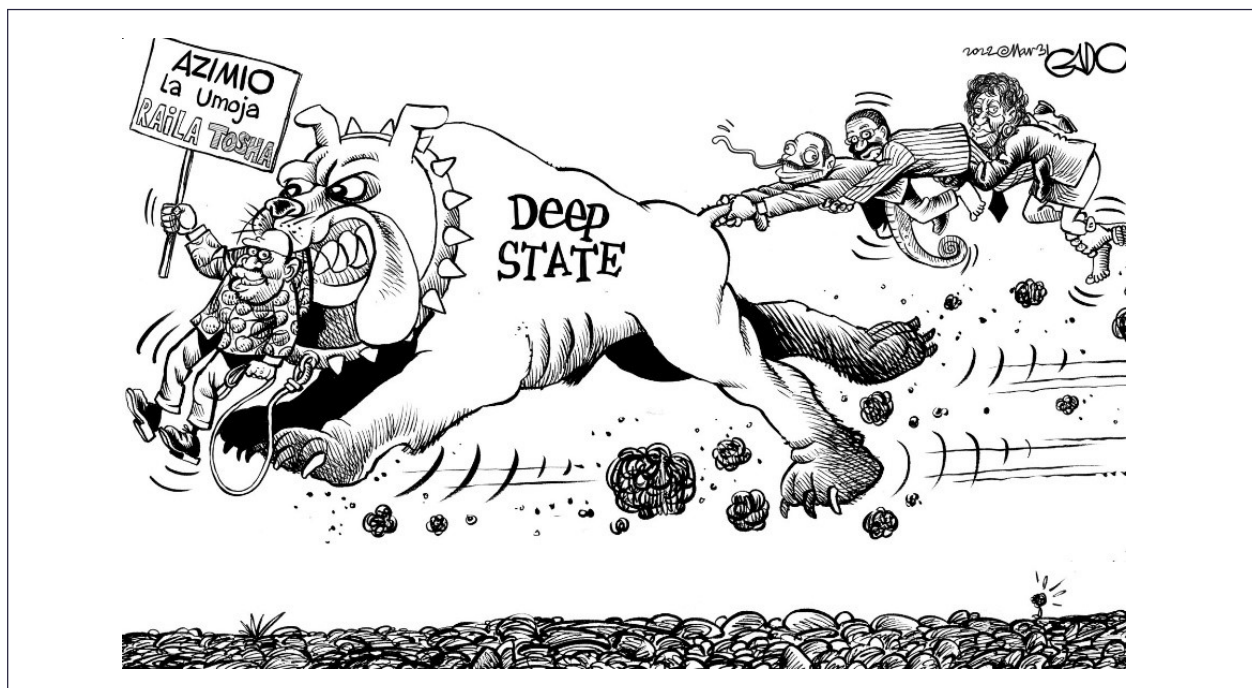
<sup>9</sup> Nigerian cartoonist Etim Bassey Asukwo, pen name Mike Asukwo. He is an internationally renowned artist and Chief Editorial Artist with Business Day from Lagos. © (all rights reserved) - Source of cartoon: Jimoh, Ganiyu A (2019), Masked in Metaphors: Counter-Narratives in the Works of Nigerian Cartoonist Mike Asukwo. *African Arts*, 52(2), 32-39.

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, honored and feared at the same time (Kohnert, 2007).

This aroused international attention when on September 21, 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 (Crawford and Smith, 2021). An anthropologic analysis of the case revealed all possible fallacies of homogenization, presumed identity and the impact of globalization usually related to the unsettling story of African Otherness (Sanders, 2003; Ranger, 2007).

### 5.3. Kenya

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).



**Cartoon 8: A Kenyan View of the 'Deep State'<sup>10</sup>**

Source: Gado, *The Standard* (Kenya), March 30, 2022

<sup>10</sup> '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 March 30, 2022. © (all rights reserved)

Already in the presidential 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 neutralize 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 US 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

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 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.



**Cartoon 9: A Gbich!<sup>11</sup> Ivorian View on the Grim Bond Between Internet and Witchcraft**

Source: Newell (2021a)

<sup>11</sup> 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).

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 (Pantseriev, 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 and Sannick, 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 and Sannick, 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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