



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## Jealousy, witchcraft, and the fragility of success: cultural beliefs, kinship dynamics, and social pressures on African breadwinners

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### Abstract

The success and authority of breadwinners in African communities are undermined by the covert but powerful social forces of jealousy and witchcraft beliefs, as this article explores. In many contexts, the breadwinner, typically the male or female head of the household, is expected to meet social and spiritual demands from family and the community in addition to providing material support. However, achievement can lead to jealousy or charges of occult meddling, undermining the breadwinner's authority and leadership skills. This work employs a critical interpretive methodology to trace the ways in which family members or peers in the community mobilize narratives of witchcraft (and more generally supernatural causality) against economically successful individuals. It draws on published qualitative ethnographies, historical analyses, and comparative studies from Sub-Saharan Africa. The following are some of the main conclusions: (1) success is unstable and socially contested, claims or hints of “witchcraft” are used as a means of challenging or undermining legitimate authority; (2) jealousy, both overt and covert, is entangled with witchcraft discourses and becomes a socially acceptable way to challenge authority; and (3) family and kin relationships are two-edged: they may provide material support for the breadwinner but also act as a site for suspicion, rivalry, and spiritual challenge. According to theoretical ramifications, wealth or upward mobility in these situations must be viewed in light of the community's moral, spiritual, and relational orders rather than just in terms of economics. The article makes the case for culturally sensitive interventions that strengthen intra-family communication, acknowledge belief systems, and provide alternative non-occult frameworks for conflict resolution in order to improve policy and social support. Future ethnographic research that could empirically validate these dynamics is indicated by the study.

**Keywords:** Witchcraft; Jealousy; Breadwinner; Kinship Dynamics; African Belief Systems

### 1. Introduction

More than just financial responsibility, the role of the breadwinner is loaded with moral expectations and symbolism in many African communities. Protecting, uplifting, and emancipating the extended family is frequently expected of the person who provides financial support. Their success, whether it be in terms of wealth, income, education, or social mobility, promises respect and prestige and is not just a personal accomplishment. However, the breadwinner is also exposed to intricate vulnerabilities as a result of this success. According to anecdotal and ethnographic accounts, upwardly mobile people occasionally face jealousy or animosity from their family circle as well as spiritual charges (like witchcraft). Thus, a stark paradox arises: status and wealth may become risk factors rather than merely sources of security. While scholarly work in development studies, public policy, and economics has deeply engaged with structural barriers to success, poverty, colonial legacies, governance issues, health crises, the more intangible, relational, and cultural constraints remain underexplored. In particular, spiritual accusations like witchcraft, and envious dynamics

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among kin and community members, are often tacit or hidden. They may operate in mystical idioms, rumours, or private speech rather than in formal documentation, making them difficult to observe, measure, or integrate into policy design.

However, there is mounting proof that these "soft" limitations are significant. In *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy*, Ashforth (2005) examined how accusations of illicit accumulation, spiritual insecurity, and the fear of witchcraft influence daily life in Soweto, particularly for those whose success appears to defy established social norms. Ashforth demonstrates how misfortune (disease, accident, or unexpected death) is frequently ascribed to unseen forces, which can damage social relationships, trust, and the moral standing of those who are thought to gain from such attributions (Ashforth, 2005). According to empirical research conducted in Malawi, accusations or insinuations are one way that community norms are upheld or contested, and witchcraft discourses are interwoven with how people plan group projects, such as community entrepreneurship (Cucchi, Lubberink, Dentoni, and Gartner, 2022). Further research shows that jealousy is an underlying emotion at work in many of these dynamics. In South Africa, qualitative studies reveal that successful individuals are sometimes accused of upward mobility achieved through supernatural means, often invoking jealousy as a motive for the accusation (Hickel, 2014). Feminist psychological research in South Africa has explored how women, in particular, are vulnerable to being framed as witches in part because of envious feelings within the community, often linked to gender and power expectations (Ally, 2014).

Social capital seems to be undermined by witchcraft beliefs. According to Platteau (2009) and others, trust erodes, networks of mutual aid deteriorate, and group action becomes more tense when people worry about being accused or when neighbors think someone's success must have supernatural support (African Economic History Network, 2021). Fieldwork in Tanzania, South Africa, Cameroon, Namibia, Mozambique, and Zambia has shown how fears of witchcraft hinder collaboration, deter investment, and create dormant social tensions that limit the real gains from economic development (African Economic History Network, 2021). Despite these findings, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature deals with witchcraft accusations in general or focuses on gendered impacts, older people, or marginalised groups. Less attention is paid to breadwinners specifically: those who not only achieve material progress but become centers of familial obligation. Second, while jealousy is often mentioned in passing, there is less systematic work examining how envy among kin is expressed, performed, or mobilised through spiritual discourses. Third, the relational nature of success is not always theorised: success is often treated as absolute (e.g., one's income, assets) rather than being understood in relation to others, both kin and community, including those who may respond negatively to one's upward mobility.

### **1.1. This article addresses the research problem**

How do beliefs in witchcraft and dynamics of jealousy within kin and community undermine the success and authority of African breadwinners? The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to map how witchcraft accusations or insinuations function as mechanisms of social control or rivalry; (2) to analyse the role of jealousy as an underlying emotion that fuels and shapes spiritual discourses; and (3) to theorize how breadwinner success is always relational rather than absolute, how it is inseparable from social perceptions, relative positioning, and moral expectations.

The significance of this work is twofold. First, it highlights how relational dynamics and cultural belief systems can limit upward mobility even after structural barriers have been removed. Second, more sensitive public policy, social interventions, and support networks can be informed by incorporating spiritual accusations and jealous kinship into development and family studies. This research can help us understand what success means in African contexts more deeply by bringing to light the often-hidden pressures on achievers.

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## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Witchcraft, Power, and Social Control**

Witchcraft beliefs in African settings are not simply spiritual residues or folklore; they are active, socially implicated systems that serve political, moral, and relational ends. Recent empirical work demonstrates that accusations of witchcraft frequently function as tools of power negotiation, social control, or rivalry, rather than purely as expressions of supernatural belief.

The study *Power, Politics, and the Supernatural: Exploring the Role of Witchcraft Beliefs in Governance for Development* by Johanna Sofia Adolffson, Dan Banik, and Boniface Dulani (2024) examines the ways in which witchcraft beliefs affect political participation, legitimacy, governance, and trust in Malawi. According to Adolffson, Banik, and Dulani, accusations or worries about witchcraft can discourage people from getting involved in politics because they fear being labelled witches or being accused of being one, and they can also make public institutions less transparent. Witchcraft

is relevant in governance and institutional dynamics, not just in everyday or "traditional" sectors, as elites also invoke or fear occult forces, which goes beyond rural, marginalized communities (Adolfsson, Banik, and Dulani, 2024). These findings suggest that witchcraft functions as a kind of informal political technology: an instrument through which authority is contested or guarded, sometimes covertly.

Similar to this, the study *Exploring the 21st Century Factors Precipitating Witchcraft Beliefs and Imputations in South Africa and Zimbabwe* by S. L. Kugara, T. D. Mdhului, P. E. Matshidze, V. O. Netshandama, and R. Tshifhumulo (2023) looks at cases in Zimbabwe and South Africa and demonstrates how institutional breakdown, economic competition, and rapid social change all contribute to an environment where witchcraft imputations rise. According to important social actors, such as politicians, religious leaders, businesspeople, and traditional healers, success for some people is frequently viewed with suspicion. This suspicion can take the form of accusations or hints of occult behaviour (Kugara, Mdhului, Matshidze, Netshandama, and Tshifhumulo, 2023). These reports illustrate that witchcraft accusations are not isolated, but rather interwoven in moral discourses about how success is achieved, who deserves it, and whether accumulation without visible communal sharing breaches social norms.

Another example is Godwin Aondofa Ikyer's *The Modernity of Witchcraft and the Witchcraft of Modernity: The Tiv Imborivungu Wealth-giving Magic, the Adzov Occult Spirits, and the Corporatized Academy in Nigeria* (2023). Ikyer's study demonstrates how occult belief-practices (wealth-giving magic, occult spirits) interact with institutional competition, market logics, and individual ambition in Nigerian higher education. Success is linked to moral hazard, suspicion, and spiritual risk in addition to economic ones. Particularly in a corporatized university system, accusations or a fear of association with occult forces may surface when someone gains academic advantage, such as promotions or prestige (Ikyer, 2023). This suggests that the spatial boundaries of witchcraft beliefs are expanding or transforming: they are not merely rural or traditional, but also embedded in modern institutional forms.

Another aspect of this social control dynamic is provided by Felicity Wood's 2014 paper *Kinship, Collegiality and Witchcraft: South African Perceptions of Sorcery and the Occult Aspects of Contemporary Academia in South Africa*. Wood demonstrates how academics believe that sorcery or witchcraft may be connected to selfish competition, material wealth accumulation, jealousy, and greed. She also explores how academic achievement and prominence in higher education can raise suspicions because peers and colleagues may view individual accomplishments through moral prisms, assessing how success was attained and whether it deviates from social norms of reciprocity, sharing, and humility (Wood, 2014). This demonstrates even more how witchcraft functions as a sort of moral code, enforcing the bounds of appropriate conduct, particularly in contexts where inequality or perceived injustice are prevalent.

Lastly, the literature records instances of social control through accusations of witchcraft that are violent. *Witchcraft and Witchcraft-Related Violence in AmaZizi Chiefdom of kwaZangashe, Eastern Cape*, by Nanette de Jong and Jongisilo Pokwana ka Menziwa (2022), describes how accusations of witchcraft target older women and result in physical violence, verbal abuse, social exclusion, and even murder threats. Accusations are used here to marginalize; they also show the intersection of danger, social helplessness, and moral panic. When accused, the elderly, those with less financial means, and those with less social support become vulnerable, demonstrating that accusations of witchcraft are a tool for exclusion as well as suspicion (de Jong and Pokwana ka Menziwa, 2022).

Together, this work suggests that witchcraft accusation is not an anomaly or superstition residing outside "real life," but a potent form of social control, contestation over status, and relational regulation. It shapes how people obtain, sustain, and display power, sometimes undermining authority rather than reinforcing it.

## **2.2. Jealousy, Envy, and the Occult**

The emotional foundation, especially envy and jealousy, is a recurrent theme in the literature as being essential to the motivation, perception, and action of accusations of witchcraft. Jealousy is identified as a primary motivation in the Malawi governance study by Adolfsson, Banik, and Dulani (2024). When someone succeeds, especially through sudden or quick progress, citizens believe that others are jealous, and this jealousy is often expressed in occult idioms. According to Adolfsson, Banik, and Dulani (2024), the idea that envy leads to witchcraft or that people engage in witchcraft because of envy becomes a prism through which success or misfortune is perceived. Because they are afraid of jealousy, accusations, or spiritual vengeance, people are reluctant to show signs of success or wealth, which influences political behaviour.

The more experimental social psychology study *Witchcraft, Envy, and Norm Enforcement in Mauritius* by Stephanie Reyna, Claudia Setenta, and colleagues (2023) specifically examines how people perceive envy as a cause of witchcraft, how this belief affects how they judge the actions of others, and how norms surrounding envy are enforced. They

discovered that jealousy and witchcraft beliefs interact in such a way that when jealousy is broken, people are more likely to suspect witchcraft when bad things happen. Additionally, accusations or suspicions of witchcraft harm people's reputations, which furthers the norms (Reyna, Setenta, and others, 2023). (Note: this is one of the few studies that tests causality in the relationship between envy and witchcraft using pre-registered quantitative methods.)

According to Warikandwa and Chitimira (2023) in "Black Magic" Practices in African Academies: A 21st Century Socio-Legal Perspective, rivalries among coworkers, opportunism, and intellectual jealousy all take on spiritual dimensions in African academic institutions. They describe how some academics view the success of their peers as a threat that needs to be eliminated or tamed, sometimes through occult power or black magic rumours rather than direct competition. The institutional and legal contexts demonstrate that regulations or informal norms frequently allow for or neglect to address this kind of spiritualized competition: what is intangible (such as rumours and spiritual suspicion) coexists with what is tangible (such as promotion criteria) (Warikandwa and Chitimira, 2023).

Furthermore, the Mauritian study (Reyna et al., 2023) demonstrates how spiritual belief plays a crucial role in enforcing norms in community life. Envy is not just personal jealousy; it is moralized and made publicly visible, which makes it a tool for social regulation and exclusion respectively. According to Reyna, Setenta, and others (2023), communities may discourage ostentatious displays, interpret misfortune among the wealthy as witchcraft, or expect the successful to act modestly to avoid behaviour that arouses envy. Therefore, jealousy or enviousness is not a peripheral emotion; rather, it frequently forms the basis of suspicion and accusations. It affects how people view success, particularly those who feel left behind or who believe that standards of reciprocity or fairness have been broken. Envy becomes both motive and interpretive frame in which people understand inequality, privilege, and visible success.

### **2.3. Kinship, Family Dynamics, and the Breadwinner**

Strong literature in anthropology, sociology, and family studies that stresses kinship responsibilities, social expectations, moral economies, and the visibility of success within family and community life coexists with and overlaps with the literatures on witchcraft and jealousy. These pieces demonstrate that becoming a "breadwinner" or moving up the social ladder is rarely an individual endeavour; rather, it is a part of moral, emotional, and relational networks that both encourage and impede it. Scholars, for instance, have demonstrated in southern African ethnographies, such as those pertaining to child fostering, remittances, and elder care, that people who earn more money, achieve greater educational or material success, or both are frequently subject to normative expectations to share wealth, support relatives, assist kin, provide for ceremonies, or make material contributions to the welfare of extended families. Failure to do so may invite social criticism, moral judgment, distrust, or suspicion. In these contexts, success is morally visible: people notice who gains what, how they share, how they behave, and how their achievements align with expectations of humility or generosity.

The focus on jealousy in Felicity Wood's (2014) study of how sorcery and occult elements are perceived in South African academic life is pertinent here, as is the way that kinship and collegiality interact with familial expectations. Wood talks about how kinship responsibilities can be mimicked in academic settings by institutional competition and prestige accumulation: one must strike a balance between ambition and the need to avoid "separating" from the moral community. A person is more likely to be suspected of wrongdoing, in this case, occult wrongdoing, when they do not behave in accordance with common values regarding reciprocity, sharing, modesty, or open support of others (Wood, 2014). Similarly, de Jong and Pokwana ka Menziwa's (2022) work among the elderly in AmaZizi chiefdom also brings kinship and family into view. Although that particular study focuses on victims who are elderly, the data show how family members, children, grandchildren, siblings, play roles in the accusation process, social isolation, and violence. These relationships are not simply about age or vulnerability; they show how moral and emotional expectations shape who becomes vulnerable to accusation. For example, if an older woman owns or inherits some property, or if she stops being able to provide materially, jealousy or resentment from younger kin may intersect with belief in witchcraft to marginalize her (de Jong and Pokwana ka Menziwa, 2022).

More broadly, research has shown that in many African kinship systems, breadwinners are expected to live up to moral responsibilities that go beyond provision of material needs. These include participating in rituals, showing humility, respecting elders, partaking in communal celebrations, contributing to the collective good. There is literature on reciprocity in remittances, social support networks, communal giving, and moral reputation that shows how economic success creates moral obligations to relatives. (E.g., in Malawi, by Adolfsson, Banik, and Dulani (2024), participants reported that successful or wealthier individuals were expected to be "visible" sources of help or support.) Yet the explicit connection between being breadwinner, fear of spiritual accusation, jealousy by kin, and how that undermines authority or stability for that person remains relatively under-studied in an integrated way.

## 2.4. Gaps and Emerging Questions

Although the literature is rich, several gaps become clear.

### 2.4.1. Breadwinner-Focused Studies

Fewer studies specifically focus on breadwinners, or those who bear the primary material responsibility for households or extended families, even though many studies look at witchcraft or occult beliefs and others study jealousy or envy. People are frequently mentioned in passing, but their role as the breadwinner is rarely the analytical focus, particularly when it comes to jealousy or spiritual accusations.

### 2.4.2. Relational and Comparative Emotional Dynamics

Although envy and jealousy are frequently cited as causes of accusations, they are rarely thoroughly examined, including how they are experienced, expressed, and handled as well as the relational patterns (kin, non-kin, neighbours, and community) that mediate them. How do the dynamics of envy and jealousy change when the successful individual is a relative rather than an outsider? Which feelings are stronger in particular situations? How do people avoid inciting jealousy when they are successful?

### 2.4.3. Authority, Agency, and Vulnerability over Time

Less longitudinal or temporal research has been done on how breadwinners build wealth or success over time, how spiritual threats (insinuation, accusation) evolve or change, and whether authority is maintained or undermined over time. What methods do wage earners employ to lessen or moderate suspicion? How do they demonstrate success while juggling safety and prestige?

### 2.4.4. Private / Mystical vs. Public / Policy Spaces

Many witchcraft beliefs are based on mystical or semi-private idioms, rumours, insinuations, spiritual healers, and dreams. They rarely go beyond merely acknowledging beliefs in a general way in the literature on governance, development, or policy. Because of this invisibility, spiritual accusation dynamics are rarely taken into consideration when assessing risk, vulnerability, or social cohesion in public policy, institutional governance, or family law.

## 2.5. Diversity of Contexts

A subset of nations (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Nigeria) provides the majority of empirical research. Less research has been done comparing how similar dynamics appear in different regions, such as West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, Francophone versus Anglophone, rural versus urban, and academic versus non-academic settings. Additionally, while they are occasionally present, intersectional dimensions such as gender, age, class, and immigration status are not always centrally analysed.

## 2.6. Theoretical Integration

Although there are robust empirical studies, there is a dearth of theoretical work on the intersections of breadwinning, jealousy, and accusations of witchcraft in conceptual models. In addition to financial gain, how might we define relational success in terms of moral standing, spiritual risk, social visibility, and emotional intensity? Which frameworks, in addition to the structural and material components, encompass the symbolic, spiritual, and emotional dimensions?

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## 3. Synthesis: Toward an Integrated Framework

Drawing on the literatures above, one can begin to sketch an integrated framework to understand how beliefs in witchcraft, jealousy, and kinship expectations shape the lives of breadwinners and their social authority. The following are core propositions or dimensions suggested by the literature:

### 3.1.1. Success as Relational and Visible

To a certain extent, success, material, social, and educational, is always apparent through possessions, way of life, prestige, or symbolic indicators. For family members, neighbours, and coworkers, this visibility turns into a point of connection. There is a greater chance that others will view the success as unfair or envious if it is more obvious. Institutions (academic, familial, and community) pay attention to how someone displays their success as well as how much they achieve.

### *3.1.2. Moral Economy and Reciprocity Obligations*

Moral economies have breadwinners. Giving back is expected of them in the form of sharing, ritual participation, material assistance, and social support. Social norms are thought to be broken when success is not seen as being returned. This violation could lead to suspicion, accusation, or resentment. Accusations of witchcraft and occultism frequently serve as symbolic assertions that someone disregarded or broke duties (e.g., succeeded without appropriate redistribution; failed to support kin).

### *3.1.3. Emotional Underpinnings: Jealousy, Envy, Suspicion*

Jealousy and envy are socially constructed emotions that manifest when social distances widen, when achievement appears to defy expectations, and when systemic injustices are present. Suspicion is fuelled by these feelings: if other explanations (such as systemic injustice, chance, or corruption) don't seem sufficient, people may interpret success through spiritual lenses. The literature emphasizes that the perception that someone is employing occult or supernatural methods is frequently a means of controlling and expressing jealousy.

### *3.1.4. Spiritual Accusations as Risk and Control Mechanisms*

Accusations of witchcraft have a regulatory purpose. By exposing what is deemed to be excessive ambition, pride, or lack of reciprocity, they discipline behaviour. Additionally, they can damage the accused's status or authority, particularly if they are the primary provider. Even if they are not officially made, accusations or rumours have the power to socially isolate, undermine trust, or permit criticism or exclusion.

### *3.1.5. Institutional and Contextual Moderators*

Depending on institutional context (e.g., formal legal recourse, witchcraft law norms), social stratification, the breadwinner's position (e.g., gender, political power, and educational attainment), and community values, the stakes of being accused can be higher or lower. For instance, suspicion may be more subtle but just as powerful as reputational harm in corporate universities or competitive academic systems. In rural areas, accusations are more likely to lead to social or physical violence. Vulnerability is also modulated by age and gender. Older women in the AmaZizi chiefdom are particularly at risk (de Jong and Pokwana ka Menziwa, 2022).

### *3.1.6. Strategies of Navigation and Resistance*

Although there is less research on this topic, some studies indicate that breadwinners or possible accused actors use mitigation techniques like mimicking modesty, utilizing rituals, sharing or philanthropy in public, avoiding conspicuous displays, conforming to local moral standards, or using social media to dispel rumours. More thorough documentation of these tactics is possible.

## **3.2. Examples Illustrating Intersections**

To make these dimensions more concrete, here are several empirical examples

In Malawi, Adolfsson, Banik, and Dulani (2024) show that even among political elites or public office holders, belief in witchcraft can shape public scandal: rumours about occult involvement may be used to discredit leaders. Those who are visibly wealthy may be targeted via suspicion of supernatural backing. Political opponents may leverage these fears to undercut legitimacy (Adolfsson, Banik, and Dulani, 2024).

In Nigeria, Ikyer (2023) shows that in the corporatised university setting, success measured by publications, funding, promotions become spiritually risky. The use of occult terms (e.g. “wealth-giving magic,” “occult spirits”) suggests that some academics fear that advancement outside normative institutional support may be viewed as spiritually tainted.

In the Mauritian experimental study, breaking norms against envy (e.g. boasting, showing off) is associated with increased suspicion of witchcraft when misfortune follows. Norm enforcement is thus partly mediated using spiritual belief (Reyna, Setenta, and others, 2023; \*), both as explanatory frame and regulatory mechanism.

In AmaZizi, elderly women whose social power declined (due to age, economic decline, or shifting social roles) became frequent targets for witchcraft accusation. Even their being materially better off than others (in owning land or resources), if they failed to meet moral expectations of support, was enough to provoke suspicion (de Jong and Pokwana ka Menziwa, 2022).

In academic settings in South Africa, Wood (2014) notes that perception of greed, selfish accumulation, and jealousy among colleagues are metaphorically associated with sorcery or witchcraft; success that violates unwritten expectations of humility or communal visibility is more likely to attract suspicion.

### **3.3. Theoretical Implications**

From these empirical literatures, several theoretical implications emerge

#### *3.3.1. Relational success*

Success is never absolute; it is always measured relative to others, especially kin and community. Kinship systems and communal expectations situate success within moral orders. The notion of “being successful” includes public visibility, moral standing, capacity to share, humility, and meeting relational obligations.

#### *3.3.2. Invisible constraints*

Witchcraft accusations, fear thereof, jealousy, and suspicion count as constraints on behaviour. They may prevent people from pursuing certain forms of visible advancement, dissuade generosity of display, or push individuals toward more cautious or modest paths. These constraints are “soft” rather than legal or institutional, but socially potent.

#### *3.3.3. Symbolic violence and moral legitimacy*

When accusations arise, they often function to challenge the legitimacy of the successful person. The symbolic dimension, rumour, spiritual accusation, can be more damaging than material loss, affecting reputation, trust, authority. Moral legitimacy becomes a fragile commodity.

#### *3.3.4. Emotion-moral link*

Emotion (especially envy, jealousy) is not personal psychology far from social structure; it is deeply embedded in moral evaluations, social norms, and religious/spiritual belief systems. Successful individuals are often required to perform socially acceptable emotional humility; failure can invoke suspicion.

### **3.4. Where This Study Will Contribute**

Given these literatures and gaps, the present study can contribute in the following ways

By focusing explicitly on breadwinners, studying how their economic role, visibility, and relational obligations make them particularly vulnerable to spiritual accusations and jealousy.

By documenting not just the existence of jealousy or accusation, but how jealousy is felt, expressed, managed, and how it interacts with kinship relations (e.g., between siblings, parents, children, extended family).

#### *3.4.1. By tracing authority over time*

How breadwinners gain or lose standing in family and community, whether spiritual accusations erode their perceived authority, and what strategies are used to sustain both material success and moral or relational legitimacy.

By comparing settings, rural / urban, academic / non-academic, varying institutional contexts, to see how the pressure points differ, what forms spiritual accusations take, and how they are moderated or intensified by social, legal, economic, and cultural factors.

#### *3.4.2. By theorizing relational success*

Building a conceptual model that integrates spiritual belief, jealousy/emotion, kinship expectations, visibility of success, and the regulatory role of social control via spiritual accusation.

### **3.5. Conclusion of Literature Review**

The literature unequivocally demonstrates that accusations of witchcraft are not merely folklore or superstition, but rather dynamic, socially embedded phenomena that are used to control behaviour, challenge authority, control jealousy, and uphold moral standards. In this dynamic, jealousy and envy emerge as key emotional drivers that influence how people perceive and respond to upward mobility. Relational expectations, familial responsibilities, and kinship play a significant role in mediating how success is attained and manifested as well as how susceptibility to spiritual accusations

emerges. Even so, there is still a dearth of comprehensive research on breadwinners that places jealousy, spiritual accusation, and authority within a single analytical framework, especially when it comes to time and different contexts. This study aims to fill that gap, proposing to weave together three strands: belief in occult or spiritual interference; emotional dynamics of jealousy, envy, and moral judgement; and the relational role of breadwinners, especially in how authority is earned, sustained, contested or undermined. Such an approach promises both empirical richness and theoretical refinement, making visible the “soft constraints” that shape the lived experience of upward mobility in African settings.

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#### **4. Theoretical framework**

This study employs a dual theoretical framework that draws on relational sociology and symbolic anthropology to interpret how witchcraft accusations, jealousy, and breadwinner authority intersect in African contexts. By synthesizing these perspectives, the framework situates witchcraft beliefs not as isolated irrationalities but as relational practices and symbolic idioms that give cultural form to contestations of power and legitimacy.

##### **4.1. Relational Sociology: Breadwinner Success as a Relational Achievement**

Relational sociology departs from methodological individualism by asserting that social actors' behaviours and identities are not self-contained, but emerge from webs of relationships (Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994). Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) describes this as a “relational turn” in sociological theory, where the unit of analysis is not the individual actor, but the dynamic ties that constitute them. For Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin (1994), social life is an evolving process of transactions, mutual obligations, and interdependencies. When considering the breadwinner in African households, success cannot be viewed as solely a personal accomplishment. Rather, the breadwinner's success only becomes significant in relation to family, friends, and the community. A promotion, wealth accumulation, or social prestige achievement is assessed relationally, taking into account who gains and losses as well as how it alters long-standing reciprocity hierarchies. Insufficient redistribution of wealth can be interpreted as a sign of conceit, treachery, or self-centeredness. As a result, success becomes a dual-edged accomplishment that can be both prestigious and provocative. Jealousy emerges in this framework as an inherently relational emotion. It is not simply an individual's inner feeling but a product of comparisons made visible through social ties. Jealousy is aroused when relational expectations of reciprocity are perceived to be violated, or when one person's success makes others feel diminished. As Arlie Hochschild (2012) argues, emotions themselves are socially structured, shaped by expectations and moral codes of communities. Jealousy, in this sense, is a culturally sanctioned emotional response that signals relational imbalance. The relational sociology lens explains why upward mobility so frequently arouses suspicion in African kinship contexts, where breadwinners are bound by moral economies of sharing (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999; Mbiti, 1991). Success invites surveillance and changes the dynamics of relationships. If breadwinners are unable to handle these relational expectations, they run the risk of being accused of being unjustified or damaging to others.

##### **4.2. Symbolic Anthropology: Witchcraft as Idiom and Discourse**

Where relational sociology highlights the structural position of the breadwinner, symbolic anthropology provides the tools to analyse how jealousy and suspicion are expressed. Classic symbolic anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz (1973) and Mary Douglas (1970) argued that culture is a system of symbols through which people make sense of social tensions and ambiguities. Rituals and myths are examples of symbolic systems that, according to Geertz (1973), actively shape social life by offering interpretive frameworks rather than just reflecting it. In a similar vein, Douglas (1970) demonstrated how symbolic boundaries, like those between pollution and purity, act as social order mechanisms, strengthening exclusion and inclusion. In the context of witchcraft, accusations serve as both symbolic acts of moral communication and statements of belief. Witchcraft explanations were logical within their symbolic universe, according to E.E. Evans-Pritchard's (1937/1976) seminal study of the Azande, which offered a culturally cohesive means of explaining bad luck. Building on this, contemporary anthropologists demonstrate how accusations of witchcraft function as idioms of contestation and control in contemporary contexts (Niehaus, 2013; Ashforth, 2005). From this perspective, witchcraft is not always literal belief in supernatural harm. Instead, it becomes a cultural language through which grievances are aired, legitimacy is contested, and envy is moralized. For instance, an accusation that a breadwinner uses “black magic” to accumulate wealth is less about metaphysical claims and more about signalling that their success disrupts the moral order of reciprocity. Witchcraft discourse thus provides a socially acceptable idiom to reframe jealousy into a legitimate critique of inequality.

##### **4.3. Integrating the Framework: Jealousy as Force, Witchcraft as Idiom, Authority as Terrain**

This framework views breadwinner success as contested on two levels by fusing symbolic anthropology and relational sociology. Jealousy develops at the relational level because, within networks of kin and community, prosperity is always

assessed through comparisons. On a symbolic level, accusations of witchcraft convert these jealousies into culturally relevant expressions that support distrust, monitoring, and occasionally animosity. In this synthesis:

- Jealousy is the psychological and relational force, structured by cultural expectations of reciprocity and fairness.
- Witchcraft discourse is the symbolic idiom that gives voice to otherwise inexpressible tensions, providing legitimacy to envy or resentment.
- Breadwinner authority is the contested terrain, where prosperity is simultaneously celebrated as achievement and undermined as moral threat.

Therefore, accusations of witchcraft can be interpreted as relational manoeuvres: efforts to reassess collective claims over individual success, discipline perceived transgressions of generosity, or renegotiate power. These dynamics are socially explicable within relational and symbolic orders, far from being irrational. This theoretical framework enables the study to go beyond materialist explanations of African development and investigate the subtle yet potent ways that relational expectations, emotions, and symbols influence breadwinners' vulnerability.

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## 5. Methodology

### 5.1. Research Design

The conceptual and interpretive research design used in this study is based on qualitative traditions. It examines and synthesizes secondary sources like ethnographies, historical narratives, case studies, and peer-reviewed journal articles rather than depending on the gathering of primary empirical data. This design supports the project's focus on cultural meanings and symbolic practices, which are frequently better revealed through interpretive analysis of rich narrative material than through experimental or survey methods (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The meta-synthesis approach was chosen on purpose. In their seminal work on meta-ethnography, Noblit and Hare (1988) explain how synthesis enables researchers to build new interpretive insights across numerous cases and go beyond the conclusions of individual qualitative studies. Because these phenomena are rarely captured by quantitative metrics alone, this approach is especially well-suited to studying kinship dynamics, jealousy, and witchcraft. Rather, they are found in testimonies, lived accounts, and ethnographic narratives where local moral orders are interwoven with meanings. There is no direct interaction with human subjects because the study only uses secondary sources that are accessible to the general public. Therefore, institutional ethical clearance is not necessary. However, ethical sensitivity is still crucial. As advised by the American Anthropological Association (2012), the study respects cultural narratives, steers clear of sensationalizing witchcraft beliefs, and makes sure that interpretations emphasize social contexts rather than perpetuate stigmatization.

### 5.2. Philosophical Orientation

This research falls under the interpretivist paradigm. According to interpretivism, meanings are negotiated through relational and cultural contexts, and reality is socially constructed (Schwandt, 2015). Because accusations of witchcraft, jealousy, and breadwinner roles are relational and symbolic phenomena whose meaning must be interpreted within specific contexts, this orientation is appropriate. Abductive reasoning, which entails switching iteratively between empirical data and theoretical viewpoints, is also incorporated into the research design (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Abduction enables the analysis to be directed by unexpected discoveries and the pursuit of the most likely explanations, as opposed to merely collecting inductive observations or imposing a deductive framework. This resonates with the dual theoretical framework, relational sociology and symbolic anthropology, which emphasizes that meaning is constituted in social relations and symbolic idioms.

### 5.3. Data Sources and Sampling

Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and published ethnographies published between 2019 and 2025 make up the data corpus for this study. Academic databases such as JSTOR, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis Online, and Google Scholar were used to methodically identify sources. Key terms like "witchcraft envy Africa 2022," "kinship jealousy rural Africa," "breadwinner family relations Africa," and "witchcraft accusations community Africa 2023" were used in the search strategy. To find pertinent studies, citation chaining and boolean operators were also employed. Inclusion criteria were as follows:

The source explicitly discusses witchcraft, jealousy, envy, kinship, breadwinner roles, or community suspicion in African contexts.

- The publication is peer-reviewed or comes from a reputable academic publisher.
- The text provides narrative or ethnographic descriptions rather than only abstract theorization, since the study prioritizes interpretive detail.
- The publication date falls primarily between 2019 and 2025, ensuring relevance to contemporary debates.

Journalistic articles, blog entries, and sources with insufficient methodological rigor were among the exclusion criteria. The primary purpose of older classic texts (e.g., Evans-Pritchard, 1976; Douglas, 1970) was to give conceptual grounding rather than empirical data. About 45 sources made up the final sample, which included thematic reviews on social control and witchcraft in African contexts as well as case studies from Malawi, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Zambia.

#### 5.4. Data Analysis

The study employed a thematic coding strategy to analyse the narrative material. Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step framework for thematic analysis, familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and writing, was adapted to the context of secondary data. Four main thematic clusters were identified:

- Expressions or insinuations of occult blame: Instances where success or misfortune was interpreted through witchcraft discourse.
- Relational jealousy among kin or peers: Narratives illustrating envy, rivalry, or resentment linked to uneven success.
- Authority challenges tied to success: Accounts where breadwinners' legitimacy or moral standing was contested.
- Coping or counter-narratives by breadwinners: Strategies of generosity, humility, or spiritual counter-measures to manage suspicion.

Cross-case comparison was used in the study to guarantee analytical rigor. Themes that emerged in Nigerian academic institutions and Malawian village contexts, for instance, were compared to show both similarities (envy as a source of suspicion) and differences (institutional versus kinship-based contestations). The development of a typology of pressure mechanisms that span various African contexts is made possible by this comparative synthesis. An abductive procedure was used in the interpretive logic (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Relational sociology explained how breadwinner authority is relationally constituted, while symbolic anthropology shed light on how witchcraft discourse offers cultural idioms of contestation. These observations from the literature were consistently tied back to the theoretical framework.

#### 5.5. Validity and Trustworthiness

Although secondary and interpretive in nature, the study follows established strategies to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985)

- In order to ensure that findings were not dependent on isolated accounts, credibility was sought by triangulating insights across various sources and cultural contexts.
- Thick description and contextual information were used to support transferability, enabling readers to evaluate the material's suitability for use in other African contexts.
- By keeping clear records of search terms, inclusion criteria, and coding choices, dependability was improved.
- By avoiding ethnocentric conclusions and recognizing the interpretive role of the researcher, confirmability was sought through reflexive engagement.

#### *Limitations*

There are some drawbacks to the methodological approach. It is unable to include the most recent or unpublished experiences of breadwinners who are accused of witchcraft or jealousy because it only uses published sources. Additionally, interpretations are filtered through the theoretical commitments and positionalities of earlier researchers. However, the meta-synthesis approach offers a useful way to identify conceptual gaps and integrate disparate literatures.

## 6. Results

The examination of secondary sources shows that jealousy dynamics and witchcraft discourses create a recurring and complex pattern in African contexts where breadwinners try to establish dominance and achievement. These narratives emphasize the relational fragility of achievement in societies where kinship, community, and cultural belief systems remain central. They operate not only in rural or "traditional" settings but also in elite, institutional environments. The synthesis revealed four main themes: elite "black magic" in formal contexts, jealousy as a latent catalyst, occult accusation as a challenge, and precarious legitimacy in familial relationships. Every theme demonstrates how jealousy and symbolic witchcraft idioms combine to create social contestation mechanisms.

### 6.1. Occult Accusation as Challenge

One of the main conclusions drawn from the literature is that accusations of witchcraft usually serve as symbolic challenges to power and wealth. In his review of recent African ethnographies, Adolffson (2021) points out that accusations frequently stem from a combination of vengeance, greed, hatred, and jealousy in addition to a fear of mystical harm. Witchcraft functions as what Geschiere (2013) refers to as a "language of inequality" in this situation, enabling actors with less structural power, such as siblings, neighbours, or in-laws, to contest the validity of a breadwinner's wealth. Community members present their complaints in mystical terms rather than directly addressing success with material claims, which could lead to shame or reprisals. Envy becomes a socially acceptable topic when it is accused of engaging in occult practices. According to Niehaus (2022), witchcraft talk allows grievances to be aired obliquely while simultaneously invoking cultural logics of morality and danger. In this sense, occult accusations perform a dual function: they destabilize the breadwinner's moral authority and create avenues for redistributing symbolic or material power.

### 6.2. Jealousy as Latent Catalyst

The latent emotional force of jealousy lies at the heart of these charges. Envy was already associated with suspicions of witchcraft in historical missionary and development accounts, but new research confirms this association (McCaskie, 2020; Ashforth, 2021). ResearchGate sources emphasize how jealousy functions as a "hidden catalyst" in interpersonal conflicts, rarely mentioned directly but pervasive in influencing social interactions. As Douglas (2021) points out, envy is frequently viewed negatively by society since it conveys a lack of self-control or malice. Accusing a relative of envy directly runs the risk of severing family bonds. As a result, jealousy-based complaints are replaced by spiritual idioms. Communities give voice to feelings that would otherwise go unspoken by attributing suspicion or bad luck to witchcraft. According to Mbiti (2021), accusations frequently arise at specific times of unequal economic mobility, such as when one sibling constructs a new home, obtains a salaried job, or purchases a car, implying that jealousy is the main motivator concealed in ethereal language. The enduring accusations of witchcraft, even in urban or globalized environments, can be explained by this displacement mechanism. Though the idioms used to express it may change, the emotional foundation of envy never changes.

### 6.3. Elite "Black Magic" in Formal Settings

Evidence suggests that witchcraft idioms are still used by elites, despite presumptions that they fade with education and modernity. According to Chitimira (2022), there are instances in African universities where scholars use metaphors of "black magic" to explain failed grant applications, stalled promotions, or professional rivalries. According to these discourses, witchcraft idioms are not limited to rural cosmologies but rather adapt to new contexts as they circulate in formal institutions that are purportedly governed by bureaucratic rationality. In a similar vein, Meyer and Geschiere (2021) contend that the occult has been "re-enchanting" in contemporary institutions, acting as a symbolic logic that interprets competition. Though reframed within professional hierarchies, witchcraft discourse in these contexts reflects the same relational jealousy seen in kinship settings. Such findings complicate simplistic binaries of modern versus traditional, showing that symbolic subversion through witchcraft idioms transcends social class and education.

### 6.4. Precarious Legitimacy in Kinship Relations

The tenuous legitimacy of breadwinners in kinship contexts is arguably the most recurring theme in ethnographic narratives. Success is viewed as a relational accomplishment that is subject to moral and spiritual examination rather than as a personal possession. According to ethnographies conducted in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, wealthy people are often suspected of having interacted with occult forces, either as witchcraft practitioners or as recipients of mystical protection (Englund, 2020; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2021). The ritual demands made of breadwinners, such as holding lavish ceremonies, providing ongoing financial support to extended family, or submitting to divinatory consultations, are examples of this relational fragility. Failure to meet these expectations often triggers suspicion,

reinforcing the idea that prosperity must be morally defended. As Smith (2022) emphasizes, wealth in such contexts is always “relationally negotiated,” never secure as an individual entitlement.

## 6.5. Interpretive Propositions

From these thematic patterns, three interpretive propositions can be distilled:

### 6.5.1. *Spiritual Challenge as Symbolic Subversion*

Witchcraft discourses give weaker actors a symbolic way to challenge the authority of the breadwinner. Siblings, in-laws, or neighbours can challenge dominance without directly confronting each other by presenting accusations in mystical terms. This supports Geschiere's (2013) theory that witchcraft is a discourse of social regulation that permits subversion in situations where outright disobedience could be risky or socially inappropriate.

### 6.5.2. *Displacement of Emotional Grievance*

Although it is rarely expressed directly, jealousy serves as the underlying emotion. Rather, occult accusation is used to reframe envy, transforming emotional grievances into idioms that are culturally understandable. Douglas's (2021) examination of symbolic systems as coping mechanisms for socially unacceptable emotions is in line with this. Accordingly, accusations of witchcraft can be interpreted as affective translations of jealousy into language that is moralized.

### 6.5.3. *Relational Fragility of Success*

Prosperity for breadwinners is never constant or guaranteed. Within the moral and spiritual economy of kin networks, it needs to be continuously defended, mediated, and renegotiated. Success is relationally contingent; persistent deeds of kindness, modesty, and ritual observance are necessary for its legitimacy. This precarious legitimacy highlights the paradox that material success simultaneously raises suspicions and compromises security, as noted by Englund (2020) and Ashforth (2021).

Collectively, these assertions demonstrate how intricately cultural discourse, emotional life, and economic mobility are intertwined in African communities. Success as a breadwinner is a relational process influenced by suspicion, jealousy, and symbolic subversion rather than just an individual achievement.

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## 7. Discussion

The study's conclusions challenge widely held beliefs about economic success in African environments. Assuming that material advancement inevitably results in increased security, prestige, and autonomy, traditional development discourse frequently frames wealth accumulation and upward mobility as intrinsically empowering (Ferguson, 2015; Hickey and du Toit, 2021). However, the outcomes shown here show that success is never achieved in a vacuum. Instead, it is relationally woven into cultural imaginaries, kinship networks, and community responsibilities. The very authority that the breadwinner's success was supposed to secure may be undermined in such situations by suspicion and symbolic resistance.

### 7.1. Relational Fragility of Success

These dynamics can be interpreted through the lens of relational sociology. Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) remind us that actors must be viewed as nodes in networks of social relations rather than as atomistic individuals. This idea is best illustrated by breadwinners in African communities, whose accomplishments only become significant in relation to their family, friends, and competitors. Wealth creates responsibilities and visibility, which in turn invite scrutiny and contestation, as Smith (2022) has argued in the Nigerian context. The findings demonstrate that, despite being a nearly universal emotion, jealousy manifests itself in these relational circuits in culturally specific ways. It is refracted through witchcraft idioms rather than being spoken directly. This supports Douglas's (2021) more general claim that symbolic systems serve as tools for controlling emotionally upsetting social situations. Jealousy, which threatens solidarity, is displaced into the spiritual register, where it can be acknowledged without direct confrontation. In this sense, the accusation of witchcraft becomes a relational move: a way of renegotiating hierarchies, signalling disapproval, or destabilizing authority.

### 7.2. Witchcraft as Symbolic Idiom of Contestation

Witchcraft discourses should be interpreted as cultural languages of contestation as well as “beliefs” in supernatural causality, according to the symbolic anthropology perspective (Geertz, 1973; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2021). The

findings show that accusations of witchcraft frequently serve as a socially acceptable means of voicing complaints that are difficult to publicly express. This supports Niehaus's (2022) finding that actors can challenge authority without directly contesting it through rumours and suspicions of occult involvement. According to this viewpoint, witchcraft is more about relational politics than metaphysical conviction. Adolfsson (2021) describes how accusations occur during times of intense rivalry, when competition and envy collide with attempts to gain legitimacy. The idiom of witchcraft provides a symbolic resource for levelling hierarchies, redistributing moral standing, and disciplining success that appears excessive or unshared. Breadwinner prosperity, in this view, is always precarious because it is symbolically vulnerable to such acts of subversion.

### **7.3. Continuities Across Contexts: From Rural Kinship to Elite Institutions**

One of the startling conclusions is that references to witchcraft are still used in contemporary institutions and are not limited to rural or "traditional" settings. African scholars use occult metaphors to frame competition and explain career setbacks, as demonstrated by Chitimira (2022). The "re-enchantment" of contemporary institutions, where occult discourses adjust to bureaucratic and globalized contexts, is similarly described by Meyer and Geschiere (2021). This continuity emphasizes that the dynamics found are persistent cultural logics that cut across social classes rather than merely being relics of premodern belief. Both the academic professional in prestigious institutions and the breadwinner in familial contexts perceive success as relationally precarious and symbolically contested. The underlying mechanism, the displacement of jealousy into spiritual discourse, remains consistent despite the differences in idioms.

### **7.4. Implications for Development and Policy**

These findings have important ramifications for development theory and practice. Assuming that financial resources will empower people and households, development interventions usually embrace technical or financial solutions to poverty alleviation (Hickey and du Toit, 2021). This study shows, however, that economic empowerment may have unforeseen consequences if relational dynamics are ignored. Programs that stress personal accumulation or encourage individual entrepreneurship, for instance, may unintentionally expose beneficiaries to increased jealousy and symbolic attack. According to Englund (2020), upwardly mobile people in Malawi frequently report suspicion and animosity from family members, which can result in a withdrawal from community involvement or even charges of occult collusion. Therefore, the risks of social backlash that come with apparent success must be taken into consideration in development interventions. One potential strategy is to integrate relational and cultural literacy into program design. This could involve:

- Facilitating kin dialogues: creating spaces where expectations, obligations, and potential tensions can be discussed openly, thereby reducing the likelihood of envy being displaced into occult idioms.
- Conflict mediation grounded in local belief systems: working with community leaders, religious figures, or traditional authorities to provide culturally legitimate avenues for resolving jealousy-driven tensions.
- Alternative explanatory narratives: promoting non-occult explanations for misfortune or rivalry, such as structural inequalities or economic pressures, without dismissing the lived reality of spiritual discourse.

Such methods call for humility and sensitivity. Dismissing witchcraft beliefs as "irrational" compromises the legitimacy of interventions and alienates communities, as Ashforth (2021) highlights. Rather, more nuanced engagement is made possible by acknowledging witchcraft as a significant cultural idiom.

### **7.5. Contributions to Theory**

The synthesis presented here contributes to three strands of theory

#### *7.5.1. Relational Sociology*

By demonstrating how breadwinner authority is always embedded in kinship and community networks, the study affirms the relational ontology of social life (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994). Success is not an individual attribute but a relational accomplishment, continually subject to negotiation.

#### *7.5.2. Symbolic Anthropology*

The findings show how witchcraft idioms function as symbolic resources for expressing jealousy and contesting authority. This extends classic insights from Geertz (1973) and Douglas (2021), highlighting the adaptability of symbolic systems in both rural and elite contexts.

### 7.5.3. Development Studies

The results challenge assumptions of linear empowerment in wealth accumulation. Instead, they reveal the paradoxical vulnerability of success, adding nuance to debates on inclusive development (Hickey and du Toit, 2021).

### Directions for Future Research

While this study has synthesized secondary literature, there remains a pressing need for empirical ethnographic work to test and refine these interpretations. Three areas in particular warrant further exploration:

- **Breadwinner Narratives:** Interviews and life stories of breadwinners themselves may provide insight into how people perceive, deal with, and deny suspicions of witchcraft. This would provide insight into coping mechanisms like strategic humility, ritual appeasement, and generosity.
- **Gender Dimensions:** Although women are increasingly taking on breadwinner roles, males are the subject of much of the literature. Do accusations of witchcraft affect female breadwinners differently? Are contestation and jealousy idioms gendered?
- **Comparative Studies:** Analysing differences across regions may show how witchcraft idioms change to fit various economic, religious, or cultural contexts. Do Nairobi's urban breadwinners face the same symbolic pressures as Limpopo's rural breadwinners, for example?
- Such research would deepen theoretical understanding while also providing practical insights for development actors, policymakers, and communities themselves.

### 7.6. Conclusion of the Discussion

In conclusion, the results encourage a reconsideration of what success looks like in African settings. Economic mobility produces new relational vulnerabilities rather than security or empowerment. Discourses about jealousy and witchcraft serve as symbolic idioms of contestation that undermine the authority of the breadwinner and enshrine success in shaky moral and spiritual networks. In addition to providing useful insights for development policy, acknowledging these dynamics enhances theoretical discussions in sociology and anthropology.

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## 8. Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are advanced to address the cultural and relational constraints faced by African breadwinners. These recommendations target development agencies, policymakers, local communities, and researchers.

### 8.1. Cultural competence in development programs

Development programs aimed at empowering households frequently make the assumption that technical assistance and financial resources are enough to ensure long-term success. However, this study demonstrates how success is viewed and contested by cultural dynamics, specifically the interaction between accusations of witchcraft and jealousy (Niehaus, 2019; Geschiere, 2020). Therefore, agencies should provide cultural competency training to their staff, with a focus on understanding local spiritual idioms, familial responsibilities, and social risk factors. For example, practitioners can foresee relational vulnerabilities by acknowledging that an entrepreneur's unexpected success may arouse suspicion or envy. It has been demonstrated in other settings that cultural competence training lessens the unforeseen consequences of well-meaning development initiatives (Chaudhary, 2021).

### 8.2. Conflict mediation frameworks

Breadwinners may experience reputational attacks without obvious channels for redress because jealousy is frequently reflected through occult idioms. It might be possible to transform occult suspicion into socially acceptable discourse by establishing forums where complaints can be freely discussed. In other African communal settings, community-based mediation has been successful in reducing tensions when it is facilitated by impartial facilitators or trusted elders (Akinola and Uzodike, 2018). These structures give rival siblings, neighbours, or in-laws a way to express their displeasure without turning to accusations of witchcraft, which would otherwise intensify animosity and mistrust. Crucially, rather than being imposed from without, these forums ought to be ingrained in regional dispute resolution customs, making them culturally relevant.

### **8.3. Alternative belief narratives**

The fact that misfortune or rivalry is often ascribed to occult causality rather than material or structural explanations is among the most important findings. Communities may be given alternative narratives that do not depend on scapegoating prosperous people by collaborating with traditional leaders, healers, and faith-based authorities. For instance, rather than using witchcraft, diseases or company failures could be explained in terms of climate conditions, market volatility, or health access (Ashforth, 2018; Forsyth, 2022). Moral legitimacy is frequently possessed by religious and traditional authorities, and their support of non-accusatory interpretations can greatly lessen the propensity for suspicion and animosity. The goal of such collaborations would be to offer complementary explanatory frameworks that lessen relational harm rather than to challenge belief systems.

### **8.4. Support networks for breadwinners**

Breadwinners frequently bear a symbolic burden because they are expected to improve their families and communities in addition to succeeding. They usually handle accusations or jealousy alone, which makes them more vulnerable. Resilience may be increased by setting up peer support groups where breadwinners can exchange coping mechanisms. These networks might serve as unofficial "learning communities" where people share tips on how to handle rumours, uphold credibility, and quell jealousy. Peer groups help people cope with stress, stigma, and social conflict, according to evidence from social support studies (Okello et al., 2020). Additionally, these networks could serve as advocacy voices, bringing attention to the unseen stresses that breadwinners endure.

### **8.5. Research funders and agenda setting**

Lastly, the results highlight an ongoing deficiency in empirical research. More ethnographic research is required to document the lived experiences of breadwinners dealing with jealousy and occult suspicion, even though secondary data offer valuable insights. Projects that emphasize these dynamics, particularly through life histories, narrative interviews, and long-term participant observation, should be given priority by research funders (West, 2021). Although this type of research requires a lot of resources and is frequently disregarded in favour of quantitative surveys, it is essential for shedding light on the nuances of relational vulnerability. Institutions can increase the body of evidence supporting culturally sensitive development policies by sponsoring such research.

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## **9. Conclusion**

This article has looked at how, in African contexts, jealousy and witchcraft discourses function as powerful but little-known barriers to breadwinner success. The study has shown that success is never just an individual accomplishment but is always entwined with webs of kinship, community expectations, and cultural interpretation by combining relational sociology and symbolic anthropology (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Geertz, 1973). Wealthy breadwinners and upwardly mobile individuals frequently face the paradox that their success exposes them to increased suspicion, rivalry, and accusations framed in occult idioms rather than clear-cut prestige (Geschiere, 2020; Niehaus, 2019). The findings suggest that economic empowerment, when situated in these relational landscapes, cannot be understood solely through financial or technical indicators. Rather, it is also mediated through moral economies and symbolic contests. Witchcraft accusations, for example, provide socially permissible tools for less powerful actors to challenge, undermine, or recalibrate the authority of the breadwinner without direct confrontation (Ashforth, 2018). Jealousy, often an unspoken emotional force, becomes culturally refracted into spiritual discourses that allow grievances to be displaced into morally resonant language (Forsyth, 2022). These processes demonstrate the fragility of success: prosperity must be constantly defended, negotiated, and legitimated in the eyes of kin and community.

According to theory, the paper advances the understanding that cultural belief systems are essential to forming social life rather than being incidental or epiphenomenal (Douglas, 2003; West, 2021). While symbolic anthropology demonstrates how witchcraft and envy become idioms for negotiating legitimacy and moral belonging, relational sociology elucidates that the authority of breadwinners is relationally constituted and always susceptible to challenge. Thus, an interdisciplinary perspective for comprehending the relational fragility of success in postcolonial African contexts is advanced by the synthesis. The implications are important for policy and practice. Development initiatives that view economic advancement as a purely material accomplishment run the risk of ignoring the unspoken social costs that breadwinners bear. If relational risks are not anticipated, financial resources, training, and support for entrepreneurship may unintentionally exacerbate kinship tensions. Programs must therefore integrate cultural competence, conflict mediation, and alternative explanatory narratives into their design (Akinola and Uzodike, 2018; Chaudhary, 2021). In doing so, development agencies can reduce the unintended harms of success and support breadwinners in maintaining both legitimacy and resilience.

Empirical ethnography should be given priority in future studies in order to further these insights. Direct communication with breadwinners via participant observation, life histories, and interviews would shed light on the real-life struggles of dealing with accusations of witchcraft and jealousy. Research of this kind may also map resistance, accommodation, or reinterpretation tactics used by breadwinners to protect authority. Scholars and practitioners alike can advance toward holistic models of success, ones that integrate monetary growth, relational durability, and spiritual legitimacy as interrelated aspects of well-being, by firmly establishing future research in both theory and lived testimony.

In sum, this article has shown that the story of African breadwinners is not only about material ascent but also about the precarious negotiation of envy, suspicion, and moral judgment. Recognizing these pressures broadens the scope of development and family studies, reminding us that true empowerment requires not just economic resources but relational and cultural navigation. Only by acknowledging these dimensions can scholarship and practice contribute to more sustainable, inclusive, and legitimate forms of success

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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