

## INTRODUCTORY ARTICLE

# ‘What kind of witchcraft is this?’ Development, magic and spiritual ontologies

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### ABSTRACT

This collection represents a significant intervention in the space cohabited by witchcraft, spirit worlds, and development – a realm frequently marginalised by development practice. Through a diverse set of scholarly and methodological orientations, the contributions draw on contrasting case studies (spanning the local, national, and borderlands) to explore the current and possible future co-productions of development through various forms of spirituality. They do so with attention to the paradoxes, nuances, and complexities of these intersections. This introduction explores some of the cross-cutting themes arising from these complexities, including: scale; limitations of Euro-dominant conceptualisations of development; Othering of polytheistic, multi-theistic, and non-theistic spiritual ontologies; entanglements of spirituality, politics, and power; and co-productions of new forms of development. We argue that thinking through these various cross-cutting themes provides a multitude of possibilities for decolonising the development project.

### What kind of witchcraft is this?

‘What kind of witchcraft is this?’ or ‘c’est quel genre de sorcellerie ça?!’ is a common phrase in much of French-speaking West and Central Africa. It is said when something appears to be wonderful, improbable, magical, or dangerous and captures the ubiquity of magical forces in everyday life. This term encapsulates the often ignored and unseen but almost paradoxically ubiquitous presence(s) of magic, spirituality, and/or the uncanny in everyday social encounters, including in the social and political projects and encounters of so-called ‘development’. In this collection of 14 papers by 21 authors, some of the variegated spiritual and magical lives of development emerge as central to considerations of ecology, climate change, health, violence, and conflict resolution across diverse geographical contexts, from Africa, the Americas, and Asia.

This collection builds on previous examinations of the intersections of witchcraft, spirituality, and contemporary political-economic-social structures and projects like development. Indeed, these connections have been the subject of much anthropological work, particularly in African and Oceanian contexts<sup>1</sup>. Previous research in anthropology has made important strides in (a) dismissing Eurocentric frames that held witchcraft and magic to be obsolete phenomena that would ‘go extinct’ through processes of modernisation and in (b) recognising the ‘modernity’ of witchcraft, particularly in the realms of political and economic violence.

Witchcraft has been understood as notably ambiguous, fluid, and mobile.<sup>2</sup> We do not attempt to presume a universal categorisation of any terms here. Following postcolonial critiques of the dynamics of knowledge and power, James D. Sidaway et al.<sup>3</sup> deconstruct the tendency to push forward universalist assumptions that, through ascriptions of geographical classifications and comparisons of ‘world religions’ for example, reiterate Eurocentric orderings of the world. Rather than agreeing on (or impose) a universally applicable or appropriate terminology, scholars in this collection often employ the terms most widely used by the people in the places where they work, while also deconstructing the Eurocentric partialities in terms like ‘witchcraft’ and ‘sorcery’.

Indeed, witchcraft is ‘notoriously hybrid and mobile... constantly traveling and being borrowed, mixed, and innovated’.<sup>4</sup> Witchcraft has been described as an ontology that frames and informs being in the world: perceptions of time, place, embodiment, and in/visibility. Witchcraft has also been taken to be an overarching knowledge through which people interpret power, misfortune, wealth, and phenomenological reality.<sup>5</sup> With distinctions and

variations in practice and language, witchcraft has sometimes been understood historically and ethnographically as partially reflective of, or arising out of, violent experiences and provides ways to understand and interpret varying encounters with violence, death, misfortune, and illness.<sup>6</sup> While serving as a lens for framing misfortune and violence, witchcraft and sorcery have also been sources of violence and communal conflict, particularly at the local level.<sup>7</sup>

Magic might be taken to mean those encounters, moments, thoughts, beings, and materials that cannot be fully explained or unpacked but that, by definition of being 'magical', are necessarily partially obscured. This obscurity is similarly reflected in witchcraft, which is practiced out-of-sight and cannot be fully understood or traced by non-witches.<sup>8</sup> A noted distinction between magic and witchcraft is that magic is less bound by an aura of apparent negativity; foresight, *déjà vu*, or visions, in this way, might be interpreted as magical. The suppression and persecution of those accused as witches has simultaneously reinforced inequalities and domination, particularly at the local level.<sup>9</sup> With such broad deployment in everyday life, conversation, and interpretation, aspects of and encounters with witchcraft and magic (broadly defined) continue to hold particular relevance for understanding(s) of various forms of development.

Despite continued attention to the relevance and 'modernity' of spiritual worldviews, magic, and witchcraft in anthropology, their roles in, and encounters with, twenty-first century development have largely evaded mainstream development scholarship and practice.

With some notable exceptions<sup>10</sup>, witchcraft, magic, and non-dominant, multi-deistic, Indigenous spiritual ontologies have received less attention from other disciplines across the social sciences, while the development establishment has persistently ignored, marginalised, or exoticised/romanticised them.<sup>11</sup> These absences are all the more intriguing given that contemporary development and post-development discourse has so vehemently and explicitly advocated for local or grassroots community participation, including assertions of the value of local knowledges and practices for addressing a plethora of development 'challenges' (local governance, climate resilience, health and healing, and to name a few)<sup>12</sup>.

It is perhaps the paradoxical, ambiguous, and categorically evasive aspects of witchcraft, magic, and the occult that have limited their inclusion in development programming. The historical work of the enlightenment, colonialism, and, later, development itself has and continues to banish spirituality to the periphery<sup>13</sup>. This collection disputes this marginality while at the same time remaining attentive to some of the particular challenges of attending to magic, witchcraft and the occult in development interventions of an academic nature.

The diverse fields of scholarship, spatial locales, and 'realms' of development addressed here are testaments to the emerging and energising work which foregrounds the pivotal place of spirituality, witchcraft, and the occult not only in development, but also as a sustained critique of development, including how it is thought about and what it 'does' and might 'do' in the future.

First, and unlike most previous collections on witchcraft, the occult and spiritual worldviews<sup>14</sup>, these papers are the products of studies across a wide range of fields, including: geography; development and post-development studies; anthropology; health research; theology and museology; and environmental studies and climate scholarship. As such, these papers are conceptually and methodologically diverse, from mixed methods research by social scientists, to ethnographic work most associated with anthropology and human geography, to critical studies of artistic and academic practices. Just as development scholarship should be open to the significance of spirituality and witchcraft, they should also be critical and 'legitimate' subjects of study across the disciplines. Diverse methodological approaches might contribute to this opening up of the subject matter.

Second, this collection is unusual in its breadth of coverage in terms of regional, national, and local settings, which include: Cameroon, Chad, Liberia, Uganda, South Sudan, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, South Africa, Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico, Canada, the USA, Timor-Leste, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Within these contexts, the authors address a considerable diversity of social landscapes, from Indigenous peoples, grassroots actors, and local groups in rural, urban, and peri-urban settings to groups of social scientists, including anthropologists employed by corporations, transnational development agencies, and museum curators. This coverage

highlights the important but under-recognised roles the spiritual plays in all aspects of development, across a multitude of contexts. Critical scholarship in the last two and a half decades has recognised that preconceived notions of development fail to properly account for the diversity of human ontologies. Increased consideration of spirituality in development, then, demands that we continue challenging how and where notions of development are propagated.

#### Encountering spirituality, witchcraft, and development: the structure of this collection

This collection is structured in three parts, based on the core topics addressed in each article; these parts should be conceived of as cross-cutting and addressing linked themes rather than isolated categories. However, each part represents a significant node of concern for scholarship on spirituality, witchcraft, and development, and therefore each speaks to a body of scholarly work in its own right.

Articles in the first section, Violence, Capitalism, and Colonialism, explore spirituality and witchcraft through physical and symbolic manifestations of violence, as well as how security and care are constructed through diverse ontological framings. The articles present holistic and nuanced examinations of the violent and emancipatory potentials within confrontations between Indigenous, non-dominant ontologies, and development endeavours. The authors in this section draw from a range of contexts in which these confrontations take place, from academic discourses (Murrey)<sup>15</sup> and Western museums (Mosurinjohn)<sup>16</sup>, to rural communities in Uganda and South Sudan (Storer et al.)<sup>17</sup>, urban and rural sites in Timor-Leste (Winch)<sup>18</sup>, and the role of child rape in Liberian politics (Thornhill)<sup>19</sup>. All are concerned with the entanglements between the colonial ‘ruins’<sup>20</sup> manifest across the Global North and South, the contemporary workings of capitalism, and the multitude of ‘spiritual landscapes’ in which they unfold<sup>21</sup>. Thornhill, for example, explores how acts of sexual violence against children in Liberia are closely associated with accumulative powers of witchcraft, accusations of which are levelled against powerful men of government, which should be of concern, she argues, for those governing development interventions. Storer et al. examine contexts where violence against perpetrators of sorcery has been replaced by collective voting, co-opting notions of democracy, and accountability in new, local mobilisations of power. In the aftermath of colonialism and recent decades of violence and the struggle for independence in Timor-Leste, Winch explains the complex interplays between belief, spirituality, and understandings of security. In doing so, Winch explores the pivotal role of ‘spiritual landscapes’ for community reliance to violence and insecurity. Mosurinjohn, in contrast, discusses the evolution of the museum from a ‘civilising institution’ of colonialism to a contemporary critic of capitalism and development. She argues that the decolonising practices of exhibitions such as Brendan Fernandes’s ‘Lost Bodies’ challenge previous colonial violence(s) against those whose worldviews are regarded as ‘enchanted’. Murrey similarly explores the difficulties of engaging with decolonising practices through academic and development discourses, particularly when current dominant modes of knowledge production risk reifying colonial tropes and past violence. The articles in this section therefore explore the modern constellations of power between magic, witchcraft, colonialism, and capitalism.

Articles in the second section, Health and Healing, are broadly concerned with the role of spiritual worldviews and witchcraft in physical and mental health as well as healing at different scales. Spiritually attuned approaches to complex mental and physical health cases may offer ‘paths to healing’, which transcend modern health discourses. Palmer et al.<sup>22</sup>, in their writing on healing pathways in Timor-Leste, explore how ritualised healing practices are expressed as being collective and sociopolitical, rather than individual. It is these community-based or collective forms of healing which Jeater and Mashinge<sup>23</sup> and McGiffin<sup>24</sup> discuss in their respective papers. In Zimbabwe, Ngozi spirit hauntings have been linked to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet Jeater and Mashinge resist these functionalist explanations that rationalise spiritual life, instead highlighting how the spiritual resolution of Ngozi cases is a form of communal conflict resolution simultaneously concerning mental health and morality. Forms of oral poetry also offer opportunities for community healing, as McGiffin explains in the case of the imbongi in South Africa. McGiffin questions the marginal

role of oral poetry and literature in development, as her findings suggest the significant role of spiritual and cultural practices in community health and well-being. The third section, Climate Change and Environment, engages with the various roles that spirituality plays in local, national, and global relations between people and the environment.

Although spirituality has been recognised as an important component of how people deal with environmental changes<sup>25</sup>, the lack of official engagement with the breadth and depth of spirituality, witchcraft, magic, and the occult amongst the policy and academic community is the common concern of this section. How communities conceptualise and practically confront environmental change through spiritual means is the subject of papers by Leck<sup>26</sup>, Rubis<sup>27</sup>, and Harris<sup>28</sup>. For Leck, some worldviews in South Africa reflect tensions between fatalism and security in the face of environmental change, while for Rubis (in Borneo) and Harris (in Bolivia), rituals and connected practices appear to be community-based adaptive responses to environmental stress. Rubis and Harris both highlight that ontologies, which are inclusive of spiritual relationships with the environment are also personal and political. Smith and Andindilile<sup>29</sup> also discuss the local political implications of entanglements between spirituality, witchcraft, and environmental protection. The papers by Castellanos Domínguez and Johnson<sup>30</sup> and Fois<sup>31</sup> consider how either intentionally created spiritual communities or those that are immigrants to certain regions, create spaces for worship that have important implications for local environmental sustainability.

Each section hinges around a critical exploration of the role of witchcraft and spiritual worldviews in relation to these development themes, focusing on the implications for contemporary development challenges both locally and internationally. These contributions, taken together, argue that witchcraft and spiritual worldviews are critical vectors through which individuals and societies understand, create knowledge around and tackle these development concerns. Collectively, they assert that spiritual ontologies shape knowledges of development and, in turn, are shaped by contemporary postcolonial development agendas.

The cross-cutting themes of this collection

In the remainder of this introduction, we discuss some of the cross-cutting themes that emerge from the three parts of this collection, which engage with debates relevant to, but also transcending, those of development. These are: scale; limitations of Euro-dominant conceptualisations of development; Othering of multi-deistic and non-deistic spiritual ontologies; entanglements of spirituality, politics, and power; and co-productions of new forms of development.

Scale

Consideration of the temporal and spatial scales at which spiritual worldviews intersect with development is a key contribution of this collection. The ‘appropriate’ scale of development interventions has long been a preoccupation of critical development studies, not least that pertaining to the ‘local’ turn in development, whether through participatory development<sup>32</sup> or Indigenous Knowledges<sup>33</sup>. Studies of witchcraft and spirituality have also attested to the scale at which such phenomena become entangled with processes of the development state and international capital, particularly work from the South African context<sup>34</sup>. Together, the contributions in this collection broaden the scalar horizons – upwards and downwards, outwards and inwards – of development and spirituality.

Broadly, the articles herein demonstrate that development and its associated discourses, articulated at different scales, are disrupted, disputed, and oftentimes co-opted by or through spiritual ontologies. In some cases, these may reveal critiques of the modern state. In Liberia, for example, Thornhill finds that the widespread belief that those with state or commercial power are involved in ritualised sexual violence may represent a nation-wide critique of the state’s legitimacy<sup>35</sup>. Fois explores how intentional spiritual communities and spiritual activism(s) may emerge out of opposition to capitalist relations and racial/class divisions promulgated by nation states. For marginalised peoples, reasserting and reinvigorating spiritual rituals can be part of an ongoing counter-narrative of development, as Rubis describes amongst Bidayuh communities of Borneo. Rubis argues that Bidayuh communities appear to reinforce an Indigenous identity against the state apparatus. For Jeater and Mashinge,

Ngozi spirit disputes in Zimbabwe indicate that development (in this context) is more appropriately understood as the relations between people and kin, rather than material things and economic well-being (which remains the focus of dominant developmental models). Storer et al. explore how some notions of development, such as transparency and democracy, are co-opted into local conflict resolution mechanisms in instances of alleged poisoning. Together, these papers therefore attest to the multi-scalar temporalities, spatialities, and contestations of the spirituality-development intersection.

Two articles herein, by Storer et al., and Rubis, explicitly traverse national borders to consider how local cooperation can be spiritually enacted across boundaries and in multilocal settings. Winch describes how spiritual practices play out across and within particular scalar landscapes, or 'spiritual landscapes'<sup>36</sup>, of security. Unlike most modern political territories, spiritual landscapes are far from static. As Castellanos Domínguez and Johnson illustrate in their analysis of Nahua migrants in Mexico, spiritual territories are created and/or recreated through the renewal of spiritual practices across time and place. Mosurinjohn and Murrey examine the ways in which objects and ideas of development carry across contexts. They interrogate institutions in the Global North (including academia, the museum, and the corporation) in which development is entrenched within racialised and gendered violence (symbolic and physical) while witchcraft and magic are simultaneously defined out of context.

Several articles describe social landscapes where distinctions are often unclear between the local and global, between 'modern' and 'traditional' ontologies, and/or between relations and ways of being. Thornhill describes associations between women's clothing and gender identities, which often reflect sexual and patriarchal violence that spans global, national, and local contexts. Dylan Harris and Hayley Leck similarly address spatially and temporally expansive concepts by investigating how climate change is perceived through 'local' cosmologies. Harris suggests that one Kallawaya understanding of climate change is as an 'embedded' phenomenon, 'felt in a person's bones' and in a 'spiritual dissonance'; this reframes the typical characterisation of climate change as an 'external threat'.

#### Limitations of Euro-dominant conceptualisations

The second theme in this collection is that Euro-dominant categories and conceptions of various aspects of life (relations, well-being, and nature) have been insufficient in accounting for and engaging with the wide-ranging variety – the 'pluriversality'<sup>37</sup> rather than universality – of human ontologies and epistemologies. As a result, development practice and knowledge founded on/through Euro-dominant epistemologies have been inaccurate, partial, anachronistic, and/or symbolically and materially violent when applied to most of the world's people and places.<sup>38</sup> Following this line of thinking, several authors in this collection argue for a continued attentiveness to the multidimensionality of being. Attending to issues of violence, security, safety, and well-being requires a consideration of the multiple layers and ways through which our senses of safety, care, and cohesion are fashioned and reinforced. Storer et al. consider communal responses to accusations of poisoning in the Uganda/South Sudan borderlands, where systems of collective voting have arisen to address such accusations. Storer et al. argue that these forms of reconciliation encourage 'a re-evaluation of [scholarly and judicial] notions of evidence, accountability, responsibility and democracy' (13).

Winch similarly asserts a need to take agency and security more seriously in Timor-Leste, where complex spiritual and emotional landscapes – including 'unresolved grievances and trauma' (2) – inform senses of personal safety and security. These spiritual landscapes, she argues, are 'domain[s] of relational space' (2) constituted of complex layerings of relationships and sources of power. The beings, power, forces, and energies within spiritual landscapes are navigated and sometimes mobilised in particular ways 'as... kind[s] of resource[s] in acts of protection and risk mitigation of the body and space' (3). Mainstream approaches to development, security, and conflict resolution often fail to seriously consider these important features of well-being, care for self and community, security, and justice.

Drawing on research from Timor-Leste, Palmer et al. address post-trauma resolution through a lens of mental and medical health. They argue that, often in the absence of a 'coherent narrative of disease', customary health and healing practices offer pathways to healing, which fluctuate between 'presence' and 'absence'. Where these illnesses appear to

resist technical and managerial attempts to overcome them, such customary conceptualisations may offer more collective ways of 'doing health'. These communal understandings of health and well-being have transnational connections. In Zimbabwe, the framing of PTSD, including Ngozi spirit hauntings, can re-conceptualise healing as a family and community matter, rather than as an individual pursuit. However, as Jeater and Mashinge explain, functionalist attempts to explain away Ngozi hauntings as PTSD miss the much more nuanced, supernatural experiences, which encompass spiritual well-being and human relationships, again resisting the instrumentalisation to which development is prone. McGiffin argues that current development understandings of literacy based on United Nations Human Development Index indicators overlook the diverse forms of literature and literacy in contexts such as South Africa. Traditional oral poetry holds a profound spiritual significance that also offers possibilities for social healing. That oral poetry and human well-being can be so interrelated is inadequately recognised by current development notions of literacy and health. Continuing the problematisation of dominant development framings, Fois argues that, despite increasing attention to cultural and religious associations, there remains little concern for 'alternative spiritual communities' and the role of spirituality in shaping development. Based on an ethnographic study of the shamanic community of Terra Mirim (in Brazil) and drawing on the notion of 'spiritual activism', Fois argues that the study of spiritual practices, epistemologies, and ontologies can reveal facets of developmental practices that are currently ignored. Relatedly, in their respective papers, Harris and Leck underline how climate information can be misinterpreted or overlooked due to dominant epistemological and ontological assumptions. They emphasise the importance of accounting for plural worldviews in approaches to climate change and how alternative views can open new spaces of understanding and action.

Smith and Andindilile argue that the current dominant systems of environmental governance are often contradictory to, or exist in isolation from traditional worldviews relating to the natural environment, and are underpinned by scientific and managerial rationalism. Drawing on research in Tanzania, the authors contest development and conservationist rationalities by showing how the 'spiritual, social, political, and ecological assemblage around chiefs, forests, snakes, village governments, and the Christian church raises important questions for the assemblage of development, conservation, and rationality' (14). Furthermore, in their article on the experiences of Nahau migrants to Sonora, Mexico, Castellanos Dominguez, and Johnson question the predominant 'belief that "development", as a discourse of "economic progress", is somehow separated from, if not opposed to, cultural beliefs and practices rooted in religion or spirituality' (2).

#### Othring of spiritual ontologies and practices

The third theme from this collection is that notions of 'underdevelopment' have been accompanied by and often constructed through racial hierarchies that castigate people and places as inferior through an Othring of spiritual ontologies and practices. Although this has been evaluated in postcolonial studies<sup>39</sup>, this collection makes an important contribution for development studies in particular, which has been less attentive to the symbolic dimensions of its own discourse and ordering of the world and often too quick to embrace 'traditional' knowledge in ways that remain superficial or problematic without this critical context (or, even more damaging, when these apparent embraces are more appropriative than understanding)<sup>40</sup>. Part of the potential strength of this collection, then, is the drawing together of critical work that is too often being conducted in disciplinary niches.

Mosurinjohn's article evaluates a museum space that endeavours to combat the symbolic violence of museological erasures and de-contextualisations of 'African art' within early European museum exhibits, where objects otherwise belonging in the ceremony, or objects imbued with important spiritual forces and power, would be held up in 'empty space' (1). The institution of the museum played a central role in manufacturing diverse spiritual ontologies as 'religions' and then ordering them according to a modernising developmental hierarchy. Mosurinjohn's article innovatively draws together considerations of museum history (particularly the 'exhibitionary complex'), Euro-centrism, magic, and development to ask: 'what development work did spiritually significant "African objects" do in their original contexts?'

(14). Asking this question is part of unpacking the ‘harms’ of development thought on and in spiritual landscapes.

In her article, Murrey sketches the historical trajectories of some of these harms in order to argue that present-day academics who engage with spiritual ontologies (like sorcery, magic, and witchcraft) as topics in academic conferences following the standard 15-min presentation style in the Global North risk reinforcing racialised and gendered Othering, even inadvertently. She argues that there is an implicit framework that situates scholars in this context – including herself, as she argues through reflections on her own ethnographic work along the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline – in such a way that even arguments against the racialisation of spiritual ontologies might result in forms of spiritual Othering and forms of epistemic violence. Storer et al., on the other hand, contend that researchers must ‘cease hiding in the safety of normative ideas’ (14). Both assertions seem to contain truths. Indeed, Storer et al.’s use of the term ‘safety’ is significant: there are numerous tangible dangers in doing scholarship on witchcraft, sorcery, magic, and violence.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, Murrey argues that although scarcities of scholarship are most often celebrated in academia as a basis for potential innovative knowledges and as an important part of establishing the ‘value’ of a study, they can also be characterised by epistemic violence when the subjects being (presumably) ‘exposed’ for ‘increased attention’ are marginalised peoples, places, and ontologies. These claims to ‘newness’, when situated within their larger, racialised historical geopolitical context, echo earlier colonial tropes of ‘discovery’, and reinforce Eurocentric and ethnocentric frames.

The Othering of spiritual practices and ontologies has also occurred in relation to health and healing. As several of papers herein attest, the medicalisation and professionalisation of health care, accompanied by the adoption of health as a ‘measure’ of development, have continued the colonial trajectories of Othering ‘customary’ healing practices. The ongoing marginalisation of communal and traditional health and healing practices in South Africa (McGiffin) continues to reinforce deep-seated racial and cultural hierarchies between black and white and/or elite and marginal (typically Indigenous) communities. In Timor-Leste (Palmer, Barnes, and Kauma) and Zimbabwe (Jeater and Mashinge), the ongoing peripheral status of community healing practices – derided as ‘non-modern’ – equally pushes them to the margins. While these processes of marginalisation may take place in specific national and local contexts, they are underpinned by developmentalist and modernist rationales of contemporary medicalised health processes and measures that are global in their operation.

Entanglements of spirituality, politics, and power relations

A fourth cross-cutting theme is the entanglement between the spiritual and political, which has been the subject of much debate in Indigenous scholarship and anthropology. While there has been considerable attention to the manifestations of witchcraft in local and national politics<sup>42</sup>, more recently attention has turned to the nature of the politics between and within different ontologies. Following concern that Indigenous ontologies have been de-politicised<sup>43</sup>, recent research has reframed the ontological turn in social sciences towards concern for their political manifestations<sup>44</sup>, particularly the politics of the pluriverse. In his paper on Kallawaya cosmologies in Bolivia and climate change, Harris argues, following Blaser<sup>45</sup>, that any given ontology is ‘always-already political’ (8), countering the often a political definition of development-related challenges (including climate change, health, and education). Some of the articles herein describe overtly political manifestations of the occult. For example, Thornhill argues that widespread witchcraft accusations against government workers in regard to child rape (and its associated accumulative rather than socially levelling<sup>46</sup> nature) may represent a suspicion of the Liberian state’s legitimacy. McGiffin describes how spontaneous oral poetry may be useful politically, particularly for calling local leaders to account. In Zimbabwe, Jeater and Mashinge examine the family and community politics of grievance resolution often at the heart of Ngozi spirit hauntings, where claims are made strategically to reconcile perceived disturbances in community relations. Similarly, Palmer et al. find that ritualised healing practices in Timor-Leste are ‘deeply political’, offering ways of ‘doing health’, which are more communal than individual, necessitating a negotiation of familial and community relations in order to seek support.

Smith and Andindilile explore the entanglement of sacred sites and political forces. They describe how the powers of a chief are not only political, but are also imbued with the 'more-than-human material forces of snakes and rainfall, with the habitat of forest necessary to sustain snakes, as well as the intangible spiritual forces, which establish links between chief, ancestors, snakes, forests, and social/material transgression' (10). Relatedly, Rubis explores how the revival of Gawea Nyobang (skull blessing ritual) by Bidayuh communities in Borneo symbolises the reclaiming of Indigenous power through existing ritual specialists and emphasises the role of the Chief Priests, Village Heads, and other elders within the community structure. Linked to the notion of place, Castellanos Domínguez and Johnson argue that, when culture is understood as bound to a specific place, being a 'displaced migrant' may lead to the conception of cultural irrelevance and consequent marginalisation from economic benefits associated with representing Mexico's cultural diversity (predominantly connected to Indigenous groups). Drawing from Foucault's notion of 'political spirituality', Fois shows how the Terra Mirim community in Brazil challenges Western modernity's political rationality: their 'spiritual call for action' stems from 'an inner realisation of the interconnectedness of human and non-human beings and the expressed desire that others can perceive this interconnectedness' (12).

#### Co-productions of new forms of 'development'

The fifth overarching theme in these contributions is an attention to the future of spiritual worldviews and the occult in development projects, developing spaces and for development practice. These writings present a step forward in development studies: several articles deliberately speak to the future of spirituality and development, considering how spirituality might co-produce new forms of development and development knowledges. For some communities, the spirit worlds (such as the *Ngozi* spirits in Zimbabwe) address people's hopes and fears about future community transformation and raise possibilities for taking control of the future (Jeater and Mashinge). In South Africa, *imbongi* oral poetry, as spontaneous, reactive, and visionary compositions, is capable of 'making things happen', promoting local agency, creativity, and autonomy. It is in this context that McGiffin questions future development priorities and suggests that all forms of literature (including oral poetry) be included in notions of human well-being. This would deem oral poetry as a form of development practice 'in itself'. Further, Mosurinjohn concludes that the contemporary museum may operate increasingly to critique development, moving away from its previous role as a 'civilising institution' within the colonial project.

Rubis, Fois, and Castellanos Domínguez and Johnson each discuss how 'new' or 'revitalised' forms of spirituality and ritual emerge in response to societal flux, which may lead to new and adaptive patterns of belief, values and spiritual agency. Drawing on assemblage theories, Smith and Andindilile raise questions about the possible (re)directions created through a re-territorialisation of spiritual worldviews. They emphasise the importance of such questions both in seeking to disrupt development and conservationist rationalities as well as in revealing possibilities for alternative re-territorialisations. Many forms of ritual are about hope for the future, about societal renewal and growth – these ambitions are not dissimilar to the broad goals of 'global development'. However, in contrast, ritual practices described in these papers are typically locally rooted, imagined, and realised; they address spiritual and personal well-being as much as material and economic 'progress'.

Several articles explore the rapidly changing contexts in which contemporary development knowledges is created and recreated across diverse scales. In doing so, the volume further disrupts conceptions about where 'valid' knowledge resides and how development is framed. Since at least the 1980s, there has been an inclination in development studies and development practice to consider (or claim to consider) non-dominant, non-Cartesian ways of being; this was demonstrated through the rise of the discourse of 'local' or 'bottom-up' development<sup>47</sup>. Considerations of spiritual ontologies entered relatively late into this conversation, but certainly by the 2000s even dominant aid institutions like the World Bank were considering the influence of 'local' and 'traditional' dynamics, practices, and belief systems on development projects and programs<sup>48</sup>.



This focus has been critiqued for over-stating – indeed, sometimes romanticising – the potentials of ‘local’ approaches.<sup>49</sup> Scholars and practitioners of development risk fetishising ‘the Indigenous’, ‘the traditional’, and ‘the customary’ by too firmly re-casting a Western/non-Western binary or by too eagerly discussing ‘the traditional’ as symbolising unproblematic egalitarian ways of being and/or spiritual landscapes.<sup>50</sup> Part of the richness of this collection is the ethnographic attention to complexity, nuance, and paradox that colour the dynamics between spiritual landscapes, well-being, nature, and development. Indeed, some of the papers here sound a note of caution about the potential for a straightforward ‘co-production’ of future development. Amongst these cautions, Leck, as well as Smith and Andindilile, highlights that, in relation to understandings of climate change and environmental conservation, statements about incorporating different ‘ways of seeing’ the world (including, we assume, scientific rationales), do not translate into a ‘common agenda for understanding or action’ (13).

### Conclusions

Magic, witchcraft, and the spiritual world resist straightforward analysis and representation, yet these articles attest to the conduits through which they continue to inform and frame pluriversal ways of ‘being in the world’. Far from being marginal to development, spiritual landscapes and ontologies are critical to ways in which individuals and communities engage with and perceive of development, while they are equally constitutive of sustained critiques of development. This collection challenges how and where notions and practices of development are enacted and produced. Indeed, the central argument in this introductory piece has been that thinking through these various lenses provides a multitude of possibilities for decolonising the development project.

As Murrey and Thornhill concede in their contributions herein, academic articles are necessary but limiting modes of exchange. This is perhaps most starkly evident when attempting to write and speak about the ethereal world of the spiritual and occult, which is often perceived of as defying presumptions that reason, logic, and transparency are necessary and calculable social phenomena. These assumptions are based on Enlightenment modes of knowledge making that hold the visible world to be the ‘true’ world; these assumptions about knowledge remain hallmarks of both academic and development worlds. Writing as a form of representation does modest justice to the complex layers of ritual, meaning, and, indeed, material and immaterial ‘stuff’ that is witchcraft, the occult, and spirit worlds. Part of acknowledging this complexity and our limitations as scholars is reflected through the authors’ near unanimous emphasis on the importance of hesitancy and the need to avoid over-stating or making broad claims about the interplay between spiritual landscapes, nature, development, and/or violence. Spiritual ontologies may produce counter-narratives of development but, we argue, they should not be romanticised as idealised modalities of resistance. Past violence may be mediated through witchcraft, magic, or communal and spiritual healing, yet violence continues to be perpetrated through occult means. Drawing wider attention to spiritual ontologies contests their marginal status, while also risking colonial tendencies of exotification and ‘discovery’. These apparent paradoxes have some congruence with the paradoxical, oblique nature of witchcraft, magic, and spirituality. Storer et al. assert: ‘The enquiry presented here may have raised more questions than it has provided answers’ (14), and, indeed, the same can be said of the collection. More contextualised, historicised, humble, and sometimes risky ethnographic work remains to be done.

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Thomas Aneurin Smith is a human geographer in the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University. He has been conducting research in Tanzania since 2008 on topics relating to participation in environmental management and conservation, including: the role of spiritual beliefs, witchcraft, magical animals, and local knowledge in environmental protection; local understandings of carbon sequestration; and environmental education and the role of young people as environmental actors. His current research also explores urban housing and job creation in Nairobi, the role of technology in mediating families’ environmental interactions in the UK, and ethnomethodological study of outdoor roaming and navigation. Recent papers include: Smith, T. A. (2017) Witchcraft, spiritual worldviews,

and environmental management: rationality and assemblage. *Environment and Planning A*; Holmes, G., Smith, T. A. and Ward, C. (2017) *Fantastic beasts and why to conserve them: animals, magic, and biodiversity conservation*. Oryx: The International Journal of Conservation; and Twyman, C., Smith, T. A. and Arnall, A. (2015) *What is carbon? Conceptualising carbon and capabilities in the context of community sequestration projects in the Global South*. Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change. Amber Murrey, currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at The American University in Cairo, is a feminist decolonial geographer and anti-racist scholar. For the last decade, her research has elaborated the connections between resource extraction, race and international development, and the knowledge-development-extraction nexus in Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia. She has published a dozen chapters, articles, and reviews, some of which have featured in the pages of *Political Geography*, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, *Third World Quarterly*, *The Journal of Black Studies*, *Capital & Class* and more. Amber has a PhD in Geography & Environment from the University of Oxford and an MA in Pan-African Studies from Syracuse University.

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## Notes

1. Ashforth, "Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy"; Comaroff and Comaroff, "Modernity and Its Malcontents"; Geschiere, "The Modernity of Witchcraft"; Geschiere, "Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust"; Kohnert, "Magic and Witchcraft"; Niehaus, "From Witch-Hunts to Thief-Hunts."
2. Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*; Fisiy and Geschiere, "Witchcraft, Development and Paranoia."
3. Sidaway et al., "Planetary Postcolonialism."
4. Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust*, xxvi.
5. Ashforth, "Of secrecy and the Commonplace"; Murrey, "Invisible Power"; Nyamnjoh, "Expectations of Modernity."
6. Abrahams, *Witchcraft in Contemporary Tanzania*; Schram, "Witches' Wealth"; Smith, "Buying a Better Witch Doctor."
7. Mesaki, "Witchcraft and the Law"; Moore and Sanders, *Magical Interpretations, Magical Realities*; Smith, "Witchcraft, Spiritual Worldviews and Environmental Management."
8. Smith, "Witchcraft, Spiritual Worldviews and Environmental Management."
9. Adinkrah, "Child Witch Hunts"; Englund, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics"; Geschiere, "Globalisation and the Power of Indeterminate Meaning."
10. See Murrey, "Invisible Power, Invisible Disposition"; Smith, "Witchcraft, Spiritual Worldviews and Environmental Management," and indeed the articles in this collection.
11. See Murrey's contribution in this collection for an example of the World Bank's engagements with witchcraft, which display precisely these tendencies to both romanticise and marginalise.
12. Briggs, "Indigenous Knowledges."
13. De La Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes."
14. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity and Its Malcontents*; Moore and Sanders, *Magical Interpretations, Magical Realities*.
15. Murrey, "Decolonising the Imagined Geographies of Witchcraft."
16. Mosurinjohn, "The Dance between Artefact, Commodity and Fetish."
17. Storer et al., "Poisoning at the Periphery".
18. Winch, "'La iha fiar, la iha seguransa'."
19. Thornhill, "Power, Predation, and Postwar State Formation."
20. Stoler, "Imperial Debris."
21. Bovensiepen, "Spiritual Landscapes."
22. Palmer et al., "Opening the Paths to Healing."
23. Jeater and Mashinge, "Can't Pay, Won't Pay."
24. McGiffin, "Oral Poetry and Development Ideology in South Africa's Eastern Cape."
25. Smith, "Witchcraft, Spiritual Worldviews and Environmental Management."
26. Leck, "The Role of Culture in Climate Adaptation."
27. Rubis, "Ritual Revitalization as Adaptation to Environmental Stress."
28. Harris, "Mountain-Bodies, Experiential Wisdom."
29. Smith and Andindilile, "Assemblages of Forest Conservation in Tanzania."

30. Castellanos Domínguez and Johnson, "From Nahua Migrants to Residents in Sonora, Mexico."
31. Fois, "Shamanic Spiritual Activism."
32. Cooke and Kothari, *Participation*.
33. Smith, "Local Knowledge."
34. Comaroff and Comaroff, "Occult Economies"; Niehaus, "From Witch-Hunts to Thief-Hunts."
35. See Murrey, "Invisible Power, Visible Dispossession" for a similar analysis of politics in Cameroon.
36. Allerton, "Introduction: Spiritual Landscapes of Southeast Asia"; Bovensiepen, "Spiritual Landscapes of Life and Death."
37. Mignolo, *On Pluriversality*.
38. Escobar, *Encountering Development*.
39. King, "Orientalism and Religion."
40. Briggs, "Indigenous Knowledge."
41. A few of these dangers are emphasised by Sylvia Federici in "Witch-Hunting, Globalization, and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today."
42. Comaroff and Comaroff, "Occult Economies"; Kohnert, "Magic and Witchcraft"; Smith, "Buying a Better Witchdoctor"; Luongo, "Polling Places."
43. Dudley et al., "Protected Areas, Faiths, and Sacred Natural Sites"; Howitt and Suchet-Person, "Ontological Pluralism."
44. De la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics"; Sundberg, "Decolonising Posthuman Geographies."
45. Blaser, "Ontology and Indigeneity."
46. Geshiere, "The Modernity of Witchcraft."
47. Blaser, "Ontology and Indigeneity"; Howitt and Suchet-Person, "Ontological Pluralism."
48. World Bank, "Knowledge for Development"; Smith, "Local Knowledge."
49. See Briggs and Sharp, "Indigenous Development." See also Murrey's article in this Collection, in which she argues this romanticisation has also been a form of racialised Othering that echoes the earlier colonial discourse of the 'noble savage'.
50. See Murrey, "Invisible Violence, Visible Dispossession."

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