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Tarots, Stars, and Spells: Witchcraft as Coping and Resistance in Times of Crisis

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Abstract: This paper explores the resurgence of witchcraft and magical practices, such as tarot, astrology, and ritual spells, in moments of conflict and crisis. From the witch hunts and colonial encounters of the past to the digital witchcraft communities that flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic, these practices emerge as cultural responses to uncertainty, instability, and the perceived failures of dominant institutions. Drawing on Malinowski's functionalist view of magic in uncertain contexts, Durkheim's insights on ritual and anomie, and Foucault's notion of subjugated knowledge, the study situates witchcraft as both a coping mechanism and a form of resistance. Contemporary feminist and decolonial perspectives further illuminate how marginalized groups have reappropriated witchcraft as a source of empowerment, identity, and critique of patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist structures. By examining historical precedents alongside contemporary digital practices, the paper argues that witchcraft is not merely escapist but an adaptive cultural strategy that restores meaning, fosters community, and challenges dominant epistemologies. Ultimately, *the paper* contends that in

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times of war, plague, and global disruption, witchcraft serves as both survival and subversion, revealing the persistence of alternative ways of knowing and imagining futures.

Keywords: alternative epistemologies, decolonial theory, magic, witchcraft

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INTRODUCTION

Crises—wars, civil unrest, pandemics, economic collapses, and the cascading effects of climate emergencies—do not simply disrupt material life. They also unsettle the cultural "common sense" through which societies interpret reality. In these moments of rupture, practices long dismissed as superstition or marginal spirituality, such as tarot, astrology, witchcraft, and ritual healing, have a recurring habit of resurfacing with renewed visibility. This resurgence is not an aberration on the fringes of modernity. Rather, it signals a widespread search for meaning, agency, and community precisely when dominant institutions and narratives appear fragile or inadequate. Understanding why magic and witchcraft return in times of crisis requires close attention to how cultures generate and negotiate meaning under pressure, how emotions congeal into historically specific moods, and how archived knowledges, like those contained in grimoires or transmitted through ritual, circulate across generations.

Two complementary theoretical lenses help frame this inquiry. First, Raymond Williams's notion of "structures of feeling" captures how emergent, pre-articulated sensibilities (e.g., collective moods, textures of experience) coalesce during periods of social transformation before they harden into formal ideology.[1] Crises often crystallize such structures of feeling: anxiety tinged with hope and disorientation paired with a hunger for orientation. Practices like tarot and astrology meet this affective demand by offering narrative frameworks and ritualized forms of attention that render contingency legible. They "make sense" of the moment not by predicting events with empirical certainty but by organizing feelings, such as fear, grief, and anticipation, into symbolic patterns that individuals and communities can inhabit.

Second, Clifford Geertz's anthropology of symbols invites us to treat magical practices not as failed science but as "systems of meaning" or

[1] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131.

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public, culturally shared texts that people use to interpret reality and enact it.[2] In Geertz's classic formulation, religious symbols provide "models of" reality (maps) and "models for" reality (scripts for action). Tarot spreads, natal charts, and spells function similarly: they are interpretive maps that make chaos legible and also pragmatic guides that shape comportment, decision-making, and ethical imagination. In crisis, the demand for such "thick" symbols intensifies. What matters is less the metaphysical truth-status of divination and more its semiotic labor: it orders emotions, aligns attention, and re-enchants a world experienced as precarious.

A historical vantage point underscores that these resurgences are not new. As Owen Davies demonstrates in his history of grimoires, manuals of magic have persisted, adapted, and recirculated across centuries despite shifts in religious authority, scientific prestige, and media technology.[3] From handwritten books of secrets to mass-printed pamphlets and, more recently, to PDFs and social media posts, magical knowledge has proved remarkably portable. Its portability matters in crises: accessible texts, templates, and rituals enable people to mobilize practices rapidly, alone or in networks, when conventional forms of guidance falter. Davies's *longue durée* perspective helps us avoid presentist explanations that treat, say, a pandemic-fueled astrology boom as a novelty rather than as the latest iteration of an older pattern whereby esoteric repertoires offer usable frameworks for disoriented times.

This paper builds on these theoretical foundations to examine why and how witchcraft and magic resurge during crises. It proceeds from three interlocking claims. First, crises are affective events: they alter the structure of feeling in a society, producing atmospheres of uncertainty that invite symbolic, ritual, and narrative responses.[4] Second, magical practices operate as meaning systems that supply interpretive maps and embodied

[2] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 91.

[3] Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2.

[4] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128–35.

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routines through which people can metabolize uncertainty, not in opposition to rationality, but alongside it.[5] Third, the persistence and periodic flourishing of these practices reflect historical continuities in the circulation of magical knowledge,[6] as well as discontinuities introduced by media change (from print to platform) and shifting political economies (from feudal and colonial orders to late capitalism).

The argument unfolds across four substantive movements. The following section situates the present within a historical frame, tracing the relationship between witchcraft, war, and colonial suppression. It examines how persecutions intensified amidst plague and conflict in early modern Europe, and how colonial regimes demonized indigenous spiritual authorities, such as the *babaylan* in the Philippines, as part of broader projects of domination. Bringing Bronisław Malinowski's functionalist view of magic in uncertain contexts, Max Weber's account of disenchantment/re-enchantment, and Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial cultural violence into dialogue clarifies how magic functions both as a coping practice and as cultural resistance under duress.

The third part turns to the present, analyzing the contemporary resurgence of witchcraft in the pandemic and digital age. Here, Émile Durkheim's account of ritual's role in restoring social solidarity during moments of anomie, Arjun Appadurai's concept of mediascapes and cultural flows, and Judith Butler's insights on performativity illuminate the forms of empowerment and identity-work that online witchcraft and astrology communities enable. The section also attends to the gendered and queer politics of this resurgence, drawing on Kristen J. Sollee's account of sex-positive feminist reclamations of the witch.

Part 4 synthesizes these strands to argue that witchcraft today is best understood as an alternative epistemology and politics of knowledge. Drawing on Michel Foucault (subjugated knowledges), Silvia Federici (witch hunts, capitalism, and the disciplining of women's bodies), and

[5] Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 89.
[6] Davies, *Grimoires*, 2.

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Homi Bhabha (hybridity), the section offers a comparative frame: European feminist reclamations and decolonial renewals of suppressed indigenous practices (including the *babaylan*). This comparative approach avoids flattening differences while clarifying shared logics of survival and critique.

Finally, the paper concludes by returning to the stakes of crisis. With Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope* as a guide, the paper reads magical practices as responses to precarity and as horizons of possibility or utopian anticipations that keep other ways of organizing care, knowledge, and community. The conclusion also draws on Federici's later reflections and Alex Owen's historical work on modern occultism to emphasize continuity and transformation: magic persists by changing form, and in doing so, it preserves capacities for imagination that crises threaten to extinguish.

Two clarifications are in order. First, treating witchcraft and magic as meaning systems does not entail collapsing their specificity into generic "coping." The paper instead tracks how different practices (e.g., tarot, astrology, ritual healing) organize attention and relation in distinctive ways, and how they are embedded in material histories of gender, labor, race, and coloniality. Second, the analysis neither romanticizes nor pathologizes magical resurgence. Rather than judging truth-claims, it asks what these practices do semiotically, socially, and politically when people mobilize them amidst breakdowns of certainty.

In sum, the thesis advanced here is straightforward: Witchcraft and magic resurge in times of crisis because they crystallize emergent structures of feeling and provide culturally intelligible systems of meaning that restore agency, produce community, and articulate critique when dominant institutions and epistemologies are in question. By integrating historical cases, colonial and decolonial frames, and contemporary digital practices, the paper demonstrates that the "return" of magic is neither accidental nor merely compensatory. It is a recurring cultural strategy, sometimes conservative, often insurgent, through which people recompose life under pressure.

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HISTORICAL ROOTS: WITCHCRAFT, WAR, AND COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS

The historical roots of witchcraft reveal a dynamic entanglement of magic, politics, and power, where struggles over survival and authority were projected onto spiritual figures and practices. Far from being an archaic remnant of superstition, witchcraft emerges in history as a socially embedded practice shaped by crises of plague, war, and colonial domination. In Europe, witch trials often flared during moments of social upheaval, providing a scapegoat for widespread suffering. In colonized territories, indigenous healers and spiritual leaders were frequently rebranded as witches, their authority demonized to facilitate cultural suppression. A closer examination of these histories shows that witchcraft has long functioned as both a target of repression and a subtle form of resistance, embodying what Frantz Fanon called the "seething pot" of colonized consciousness.[7]

The European witch hunts, roughly from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, are often narrated as mass outbreaks of irrational superstition. Yet anthropological perspectives complicate this story by situating witchcraft in its social context. Bronislaw Malinowski, in his seminal work *Magic, Science and Religion*, argued that magical practices are not simply vestiges of ignorance but strategies that provide "a practical assurance of success in circumstances of emotional stress."[8] Within agrarian societies facing repeated outbreaks of plague, famine, and the devastations of war, witchcraft accusations served as a mechanism of channeling uncertainty and fear. The hysteria around witches often peaked during times of crisis, suggesting that witch trials were less about supernatural belief in isolation than about coping with collective trauma.

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[7] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 52.

[8] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1948), 14.

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Max Weber's sociological framework deepens this analysis by connecting witch hunts to broader questions of authority. For Weber, religious worldviews structured how societies managed misfortune and meaning, and the rationalization of religion gradually displaced magical forms of explanation.[9] In this light, the prosecution of witches can be read as a step in consolidating both ecclesiastical and state power, a process in which the elimination of competing magical specialists cleared the ground for more centralized forms of authority. Witch trials, then, were not only local dramas but also part of a structural transformation in European societies: the disciplining of belief and the monopolization of legitimate forms of spiritual authority.

This European dynamic resonates with the colonial encounters in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, where indigenous healers were similarly rebranded as witches or sorcerers under the colonial gaze. In the Philippines, the figure of the *babaylan*—a woman (or sometimes a man) serving as healer, ritual specialist, and mediator with the spirit world—was systematically targeted by Spanish missionaries and colonial officials. As Carolyn Brewer documents in *Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines*, the *babaylan* was perceived as a dangerous rival to both church and state authority, embodying "a challenge to the patriarchal, hierarchical structures the Spanish sought to impose."[10] Demonization was not merely rhetorical; it was accompanied by campaigns of violence, coercion, and forced conversion, designed to erode the symbolic and practical power of these women.

The demonization of the *babaylan* exemplifies what Fanon described as the colonial assault on the spiritual life of the colonized. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argued that colonization seeks to "distort, disfigure, and destroy" indigenous institutions and cultural practices,[11]

[9] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. by Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 270.

[10] Carolyn Brewer, *Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521–1685* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 22.

[11] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 210.

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severing people from their sources of collective strength. The labeling of *babaylans* as witches or servants of the devil was part of this broader strategy, turning indigenous cosmologies into sites of suspicion and fear. Yet, paradoxically, this very demonization underscores the potency of such figures: they were threatening precisely because they provided an alternative locus of authority, rooted in community memory and land-based knowledge.

Grace Nono, in *Song of the Babaylan*, highlights how, despite centuries of suppression, the songs, chants, and healing practices of *babaylans* endured, often transmitted quietly across generations.[12] For Nono, the persistence of these practices demonstrates the resilience of indigenous epistemologies, which refuse to be entirely erased even under conditions of extreme repression. "The *babaylan* tradition," she writes, "is not only about healing the body but also about restoring balance in the community, linking people to each other, to their ancestors, and to the natural world."[13] What colonial authorities sought to eradicate, communities preserved as a vital counter-memory or a practice of cultural survival that transformed witchcraft into resistance.

Taken together, the European witch hunts and the colonial suppression of figures like the *babaylan* reveal a common logic: witchcraft is stigmatized when it threatens established authority, whether ecclesiastical, political, or colonial. Both Malinowski and Weber help illuminate this dynamic. Malinowski shows how magic emerges in times of crisis to provide meaning and agency, while Weber frames the suppression of magic as part of the rationalization and monopolization of authority. Fanon extends the critique to the colonial situation, insisting that such suppression is never only about religion but about control over the very consciousness of the colonized.

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[12] Grace Nono, *Song of the Babaylan: Living Voices, Medicines, Spiritualities of Philippine Ritualist-Oralist-Healers* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2013), 45.

[13] *Ibid.*, 47.

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These historical cases also force us to rethink the binary between superstition and rationality. The persecution of witches in Europe coincided with the rise of modern science and the centralization of the nation-state, suggesting that the very institutions that pride themselves on rationality were built in part through the violent exclusion of magical others. Similarly, the suppression of *babaylans* was not the triumph of reason over superstition but the imposition of a new cultural order, one that privileged patriarchal and colonial authority over communal forms of knowledge. As Brewer notes, "to understand the colonial assault on the *babaylan* is to see how gender, power, and spirituality intersect in the making of the colonial order."[14]

The memory of these persecutions lingers, shaping how witchcraft continues to be imagined and contested in the present. The historical witch trials of Europe still haunt popular culture, while in the Philippines and other formerly colonized societies, the figure of the witch or healer continues to oscillate between demonization and romanticization. In both contexts, what is at stake is not only the status of magic but the broader politics of knowledge, who gets to define reality, and whose practices are marginalized as irrational or dangerous.

Thus, witchcraft in its historical roots cannot be reduced to an episode of mass hysteria or cultural misunderstanding. It must be read as a site where struggles over meaning, power, and survival are condensed. Whether in the war-torn landscapes of early modern Europe or the colonial frontiers of the Philippines, witchcraft has served as both a target of repression and a quiet reservoir of resistance. Its endurance reveals what Fanon called the "irrepressible vitality" of colonized peoples, a vitality that refuses to be extinguished even under centuries of suppression.[15] This recognition sets the stage for examining how witchcraft, far from disappearing, continues to adapt and re-emerge in modernity, whether

[14] Brewer, *Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender Relations*, 31.
[15] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 221.

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through new religious movements, feminist spirituality, or the resurgence of indigenous practices reclaiming their place in contemporary societies.

CONTEMPORARY RESURGENCE IN THE PANDEMIC AND DIGITAL AGE

The global outbreak of COVID-19 precipitated profound disruptions to social life, amplifying uncertainty, fear, and alienation across the world. In times of such crisis, Émile Durkheim's insights into the social functions of ritual and religion provide a crucial interpretive lens. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim observed that "the really religious beliefs are always common to a determined group, which make profession of adhering to them and of practicing the rites connected with them."[16] In other words, religious practices thrive when collective life is unsettled, because rituals serve as mechanisms of cohesion in moments of rupture. The pandemic's unprecedented lockdowns and dislocations, rather than diminishing ritual life, opened new spaces for the revival of witchcraft and esoteric practices, albeit in digitally mediated forms.

Social media platforms became fertile grounds for what Arjun Appadurai theorizes as "mediascapes," flows of images and narratives that shape new imaginaries of identity and belonging.[17] Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter witnessed a striking rise in witchcraft communities, popularly known as "WitchTok" or "digital covens." These spaces facilitated a reconfiguration of ritual and belief, enabling practitioners (many of them women and queer individuals) to sustain communal bonds at a distance. The global crisis heightened the demand for practices of healing, protection, and empowerment, which digital witchcraft provided in accessible and creative ways. Through online spell exchanges, livestreamed rituals, and collective affirmations, communities enacted what Durkheim

[16] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. by Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 44.

[17] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 35.

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would call "collective effervescence" or moments where individual energies fuse into shared emotional currents.[18]

The digital resurgence of witchcraft during the pandemic was not only a matter of coping but also of political articulation. As Kristen J. Sollee has argued in *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive*, "the witch has always been a repository for the fears, desires, and fantasies projected onto women who transgress."[19] In the pandemic, digital witches transformed these projections into sources of empowerment, reclaiming stigmatized identities and reshaping them into performative acts of defiance. The language of witchcraft, long used to demonize women and sexual minorities, was appropriated and reframed to assert agency over bodies, desires, and futures. Judith Butler's concept of performativity helps elucidate how digital witchcraft functions not as a static identity but as a series of repeated acts, such as casting spells, posting sigils, and sharing rituals, that produce new realities of empowerment.[20] Butler reminds us that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame."[21] Witchcraft in the digital age operates similarly: as an embodied and symbolic performance that resists normative constraints and creates alternative modes of being.

Yet these practices were not only symbolic but also pragmatic. WitchTok circulated spells for protection against illness, charms to ward off anxiety, and rituals for economic stability during job losses. For many participants, these acts were not simply metaphorical but profoundly real. As Durkheim noted, "what makes the efficacy of the rite is the belief in its efficacy."[22] Belief, amplified by the immediacy of digital networks, sustained rituals as effective interventions in lives marked by precarity. The

[18] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* 217.

[19] Kristen J. Sollee, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 12.

[20] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.

[21] *Ibid*., 43.

[22] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* 416.

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very act of sharing a ritual online, receiving likes and affirmations, and participating in a viral spell reinforced the sense that collective intention could manifest tangible outcomes. In this way, the internet became both a sacred space and a ritual apparatus.

Appadurai's notion of the "imagination as a social practice" further illuminates how digital witchcraft communities navigated the pandemic.[23] Imagination, he argues, is no longer confined to elite artistic domains but has become "a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility."[24] For young practitioners in particular, WitchTok offered a field of possibility where marginalized identities could negotiate power through ritual creativity. The circulation of spells against patriarchal violence, hexes targeting political leaders, and affirmations for queer love illustrates how digital witchcraft was deeply entangled with contemporary struggles. Here, the resurgence of witchcraft was not nostalgia but an innovative engagement with the global flows of images, ideas, and solidarities.

Sollee's feminist reading underscores the sexual-political dimensions of this resurgence. Witchcraft communities online often overlapped with sex-positive and queer-affirming spaces, framing magic as a tool for reclaiming pleasure, desire, and bodily autonomy. "To call oneself a witch today," Sollee writes, "is often to align with radical politics of bodily liberation."[25] The pandemic intensified bodily anxieties around contagion, touch, and mortality, while witchcraft provided a counter-discourse that affirmed the sacredness of intimacy and the legitimacy of pleasure. Rituals for self-love, erotic empowerment, and sexual healing circulated widely, positioning witchcraft as both spiritual practice and political statement.

Moreover, the digitalization of witchcraft highlighted the hybrid nature of modern ritual. Durkheim's framework might suggest that collective effervescence requires physical co-presence, but the pandemic

[23] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31.
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] Sollee, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 88.

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revealed otherwise. Online covens demonstrated that affective intensities could be generated virtually, through synchronized rituals on Zoom or coordinated TikTok challenges. As one practitioner posted on WitchTok: "Even if we're apart, when thousands of us cast at the same time, we're together." This reflects what Appadurai describes as "new forms of global subjectivity," where collective identities are forged through mediated participation rather than face-to-face gatherings.[26]

At the same time, the resurgence of witchcraft during the pandemic cannot be separated from broader neoliberal conditions. The commodification of spirituality, manifested in Etsy spell kits, personalized tarot readings on Instagram, and branded crystals, complicates the emancipatory potential of digital witchcraft. Butler's emphasis on the ambivalence of performativity helps us recognize that these practices can simultaneously subvert and reinforce dominant structures. While the act of self-identifying as a witch challenges patriarchal norms, its commercialization risks reducing empowerment to consumer choice. As Butler cautions, "the iterability of performativity implies the possibility of resignification,"[27] meaning that practices of resistance can always be reabsorbed into the very systems they resist.

The pandemic revealed the enduring relevance of witchcraft as a cultural form that negotiates crisis, identity, and modernity. Its resurgence was not simply a revival of archaic practices but a rearticulation of ritual and belief under conditions of global disruption. What emerged was a digital renaissance of esoteric practices, drawing on ancient symbols while circulating through contemporary flows of media and politics. As Durkheim, Appadurai, Butler, and Sollee suggest, witchcraft's return is less about superstition than social creativity, an imaginative reordering of meaning in precarious times. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified this dynamic, showing how rituals adapt to disruptions, migrate across media, and perform new identities of empowerment. Durkheim's sociology

[26] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 4.
[27] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 122.

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reminds us that ritual fosters solidarity, Appadurai's theory illuminates how digital flows expand that solidarity globally, Butler reveals the performative power of repeated acts, and Sollee underscores the feminist reclamation at the heart of witchcraft's renaissance. These perspectives show that witchcraft, far from being an anachronism, is a vibrant response to the challenges of modern life, where bodies, screens, and spirits converge in the search for resilience and liberation.

SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The discourse of witchcraft not only speaks of fears, punishments, and moral boundaries but also opens a space for alternative forms of power and resistance. As the previous discussion on regulation and surveillance showed, the witch is simultaneously a figure to be contained and an embodiment of unruly agency. This tension becomes even more pronounced when we shift our attention to how witchcraft and related practices have been reinterpreted as sites of empowerment, collective memory, and decolonial reclamation. If witchcraft was historically a label imposed to stigmatize, marginalize, or annihilate, it has also been a category strategically reappropriated by feminists, indigenous leaders, and subaltern groups to articulate forms of knowledge and resistance excluded from dominant epistemologies.

Michel Foucault's notion that "power produces knowledge … power and knowledge directly imply one another" is central to understanding this dynamic.[28] Witchcraft is not simply a premodern superstition but a contested terrain where knowledge of the body, the land, and the spiritual is continually negotiated in relation to structures of domination. To call a woman a witch is not merely to describe her but to regulate her relationship to community, sexuality, and healing. Yet, as Foucault reminds us, the same mechanisms of surveillance that mark subjects as deviant may

[28] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 27.

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inadvertently produce the very conditions for subversive knowledge. Thus, the witch becomes an ambivalent figure: disciplined, but also capable of embodying other possibilities.

Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* offers a landmark analysis of this ambivalence by linking the European witch hunts to the rise of capitalism and the disciplining of women's bodies.[29] Federici argues that "the persecution of witches … was a war against women," designed to suppress communal forms of knowledge, particularly around reproduction, sexuality, and healing, that threatened the emerging capitalist order.[30] Herbalists, midwives, and women healers were cast as dangerous precisely because their practices offered collective alternatives to the privatized, patriarchal family model. Importantly, Federici emphasizes that what was destroyed was not only individual women but also entire ways of relating to the land and to labor. Thus, to reclaim the witch today is not only to recuperate a feminist icon but to remember alternative economic and ecological logics violently suppressed.

This reclamation has inspired contemporary feminist and activist movements across Europe and North America. The "W.I.T.C.H." (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) collectives of the late 1960s, for example, mobilized the witch as a symbol of feminist rebellion, staging protests in the guise of covens to challenge patriarchal and capitalist institutions. More recently, popular media has recast witchcraft as a language of empowerment, where young women, queer people, and marginalized groups identify with the witch to articulate resistance against heteronormative and colonial structures. These movements illustrate what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space"—a site where hybrid and subversive meanings emerge within the cracks of dominant discourse.[31] The witch, as both stigmatized and celebrated, occupies such a liminal space, unsettling

[29] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 163.

[30] *Ibid*., 169.

[31] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 37.

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fixed binaries of good and evil, tradition and modernity, rationality and superstition.

A parallel process of reclamation is visible in postcolonial and indigenous contexts. In the Philippines, the suppression of the *babaylan* was central to both Spanish colonization and later nation-building projects. The *babaylan* embodied spiritual, medicinal, and political authority, yet colonial authorities condemned them as witches or heretics, aligning them with diabolical forces to justify Christianization and patriarchal restructuring. Leny Strobel notes that "the demonization of the *babaylan* was a strategy of colonization that severed Filipinos from their indigenous spirituality."[32] What was lost was not only a religious role but a whole epistemic system rooted in relationality with ancestors, spirits, and the natural world.

Ethnographic accounts highlight how these practices have persisted despite centuries of marginalization. In upland and coastal communities, healers continue to draw on herbal medicine, rituals of spirit communication, and embodied knowledge passed through apprenticeship. These practices coexist uneasily with biomedical and religious institutions, often derided as backward or dangerous but still sought in times of crisis. Anthropologist Fenella Cannell documents how in Bicol, southern Luzon, healing rituals such as *orasyon* and *pagpag* both resist and adapt to Catholic frameworks, blending prayer with older incantations.[33] Far from being remnants of a premodern past, these practices demonstrate how indigenous epistemologies persist as living, adaptive forms of knowledge that respond to ongoing social transformations.

The contemporary revival of the *babaylan* in diasporic and feminist circles illustrates the political potency of this figure. Cultural activist movements in the Philippines and abroad have reclaimed the *babaylan* as

[32] Leny Mendoza Strobel, *Babaylan: Filipinos and the Call of the Indigenous* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 45.
[33] Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 215.

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a symbol of empowerment and decolonial identity, staging rituals, conferences, and artistic performances that foreground indigenous cosmologies. Strobel describes this as a “call of the indigenous,” a project of healing both personal and collective wounds inflicted by colonial history.[34] The act of remembering and embodying the *babaylan* becomes a form of what Foucault might call counter-memory: a practice that resists official histories by reviving subjugated knowledges.

Ethnographic vignettes reinforce how this reclamation works on the ground. For instance, in some Mindanao communities, women healers deploy their spiritual authority in local conflicts, invoking ancestral spirits to mediate disputes and resist extractive development projects. These practices are not merely symbolic but directly political, offering frameworks for land defense, ecological stewardship, and community solidarity. In this sense, witchcraft and shamanic practices act as “weapons of the weak,” subtle but powerful tools for articulating agency in contexts of marginalization.[35]

Bhabha’s framework of hybridity helps explain how these practices occupy ambivalent spaces of cultural negotiation.[36] The revival of the *babaylan*, like the feminist witch, is not a simple return to origins but a rearticulation that emerges in the interstices of colonial and modern discourses. When diasporic Filipinas perform *babaylan* rituals on North American stages, they create hybrid spaces where indigenous cosmologies intersect with global feminist and decolonial struggles. Similarly, when European feminists reclaim the witch, they are not simply recovering medieval practices but inventing new languages of empowerment through selective memory. Both instances illustrate how cultural symbols gain significance in their recontextualization, not their purity.

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[34] Strobel, *Babaylan*, 3.

[35] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), xvii.

[36] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 37.

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At the same time, the politics of reclamation is not without tension. Some indigenous communities express ambivalence toward the urban and diasporic performance of the *babaylan*, which can appear detached from lived ritual practice. Likewise, the popular feminist embrace of witchcraft in the West risks commodification, turning a symbol of subversion into a marketable aesthetic. These tensions remind us that reclamation is itself a field of power, shaped by who gets to define and mobilize cultural symbols. Foucault's reminder that power is diffuse, present not only in domination but also in resistance, alerts us to the complexity of these processes.[37]

Ultimately, the social, political, and cultural significance of witchcraft lies in its capacity to illuminate struggles over knowledge and power across contexts. Whether in early modern Europe or postcolonial Southeast Asia, witchcraft discourse has been a battleground where women, healers, and subaltern groups negotiate their place in shifting social orders. The witch hunts were central to capitalist and patriarchal restructuring, as Federici demonstrates. Meanwhile, the suppression of the *babaylan* parallels these dynamics in colonial encounters, shown by Strobel and contemporary ethnographies. As Bhabha theorizes, the reclamation of these figures today occurs in hybrid spaces where old and new, indigenous and global, spiritual and political intermingle. To trace these threads is to recognize witchcraft not as an anachronism but as a living discourse through which marginalized communities articulate resistance, empowerment, and alternative epistemologies.

CONCLUSION

If the preceding discussions have traced witchcraft as a terrain of historical violence, cultural suppression, and contested meaning, then what remains is to consider how it continues to survive, and what it makes possible in the present. Witchcraft, in its many forms, is not simply a remnant of the past but a practice that endures precisely because it carries within it a critique

[37] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 142.

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of dominant power and the hope for alternatives. To understand it this way requires attending not only to what was destroyed or persecuted but also to what survived in fragments, in whispers, in rituals that slip beneath the radar of state and religious orthodoxy. In this sense, witchcraft can be read as both a critique of modernity's rationalizing violence and as a utopian resource for imagining other ways of being.

Ernst Bloch's concept of the *Principle of Hope* is instructive here. For Bloch, hope is not empty optimism but an anticipatory consciousness, a capacity to glimpse what has not yet fully come into being.[38] Witchcraft, when seen in this frame, becomes a practice of survival that contains within it the "not-yet" of alternative futures. The endurance of magical traditions, despite centuries of persecution, signals what Bloch might call a "concrete utopia" or a horizon of possibility rooted in the lived struggles of ordinary people. In rural communities across the Philippines, stories persist of *albularyo* (folk healers) who blend Catholic prayers with herbal cures, or of elders invoking spirits of the land for protection.[39] These practices do not merely preserve tradition. They carve out a space of autonomy against the homogenizing logics of modern medicine and neoliberal economies of care. They allow communities to imagine futures in which health, spirituality, and ecology are intertwined differently than in dominant systems.

Silvia Federici's reflections remind us that witchcraft is not only about the past but also about contemporary struggles. She writes that "the figure of the witch, far from being relegated to the margins of history, continues to haunt the present as an image of rebellious women and subjugated knowledges."[40] The modern fascination with witches, whether through feminist activism, popular media, or community-based revivals, points to the continuing relevance of witchcraft as a language of resistance. Feminist movements in Europe and North America reclaimed the term

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[38] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 1:3–5.

[39] Grace Nono, *Song of the Babaylan,* 87–89.

[40] Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018), 12.

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"witch" in the 1970s, not as an insult but as a badge of power against patriarchal control.[41] Similarly, in the Philippines, the resurgence of interest in the *babaylan* signals a decolonial effort to retrieve what was suppressed under Spanish Catholic hegemony.[42] These revivals are more than symbolic: they gesture toward alternative futures in which gender, spirituality, and community are reconfigured outside colonial hierarchies.

Ethnographic examples illustrate the global persistence of such practices. In northern Ghana, women accused of witchcraft find refuge in "witch camps," where they create support networks and exercise autonomy outside patriarchal households.[43] In the Andes, shamans and *curanderas* (folk healers) use earth spirits as political actors, positioning indigenous cosmologies against extractive economic projects.[44] In the African diaspora, practitioners of *Hoodoo* and *Santería* blend ancestral knowledge with adaptive strategies to navigate racialized and economic marginalization, demonstrating that magical practices operate as survival mechanisms across contexts.[45] In all these cases, witchcraft functions as both a critique of dominant structures and a repository of knowledge that communities use to imagine and enact alternative futures.

At the same time, witchcraft should not be romanticized as a pure site of emancipation. It operates in ambivalent terrains, where fear and hope, violence and protection, often intertwine. In Mindanao, folk healing and sorcery practices, such as those associated with *mangkukulam (witch),* are ethnographically documented as operating in this ambivalent space, with practitioners both sought after for their healing powers and feared for

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[41] Sollee, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 78.

[42] Strobel, *Babaylan*, 45.

[43] Christine Dowuona-Hammond, Raymond A. Atuguba, and Francis Xavier Dery Tuokuu, "Women's Survival in Ghana: What Has Law Got to Do With It?," in *SAGE Open*, 10:2 (2020), 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020941472>.

[44] Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

[45] J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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their potential to harm.[46] Such figures embody what Homi Bhabha calls a "third space"—neither fully oppositional nor fully absorbed by dominant systems, but unsettling the boundaries between them. In their very ambiguity, witches destabilize binaries of modernity: reason versus superstition, good versus evil, past versus present. This destabilization is itself a form of critique, exposing how categories of "rational" or "civilized" are historically bound to projects of domination.

Alex Owen's study of British occultism further illustrates continuity between past and present magical practices.[47] She shows how *fin-de-siècle* occult movements were not merely escapist fantasies but responses to the anxieties of modernity, allowing practitioners to articulate a critique of a world increasingly rationalized and disenchanted. This insight resonates with contemporary revivals. When young feminists in Manila wear crescent moon pendants and gather in circles to perform rituals, or when eco-activists in Latin America invoke indigenous cosmologies against extractive industries, they are not simply rehearsing old traditions. They are re-enchanting the world in ways that challenge neoliberal capitalism and ecological devastation. Thus, witchcraft here functions both as memory and method for reimagining futures that depart from hegemonic logic.

Seen through this lens, witchcraft is survival in at least three senses. First, it is the survival of knowledge—remnants of cosmologies and practices that colonial and patriarchal powers sought to erase. Second, it is survival as a strategy—tactics by which marginalized communities navigate systems of oppression, whether through healing, concealment, or ambivalent accommodation. And third, it is survival as futurity—a refusal to let the present be the only horizon, a stubborn insistence on the possibility of worlds otherwise.

[46] See Grace Nono, *Song of the Babaylan*; Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*, 102–105.

[47] Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 23.

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The challenge, however, is to sustain this hope without flattening witchcraft into a universal metaphor. The *babaylan* revival, for example, may resonate as a decolonial practice for some Filipino communities, but it also risks commodification when reduced to spiritual branding in urban wellness cultures. Similarly, Western feminist reclaiming of the witch may empower, but it can also obscure the violent colonial histories that targeted non-European magical traditions. The critical task is to hold onto witchcraft's utopian charge while refusing to detach it from histories of violence and survival.[48]

Witchcraft endures because it refuses erasure. It survives not as a relic of superstition but as a living archive of resistance, ambiguity, and imagination. From the whispered prayers of *babaylan* in the Philippines to feminist ritual circles across the world, from digital tarot communities navigating pandemic anxieties and corrupt political figures to shamans challenging extractive industries in the Andes, witchcraft persists as both critique and hope. It exposes the violences of patriarchy, colonialism, and neoliberal rationality while sketching worlds otherwise, where knowledge, care, and power circulate differently. As Bloch reminds us, hope is anticipatory, a "not-yet" that insists on possibility; Federici shows that witches haunt the present as embodiments of rebellious knowledge; and Owen traces the continuity of enchantment as a deliberate response to modernity.

To return to the witches is not simply to remember what was destroyed, but to confront what has endured and to witness how these practices open cracks in the dominant order. It is a space where critique and hope converge, where communities reimagine what the world could be. Witchcraft is an antidote to the exclusionary and oppressive beliefs that religions rooted in patriarchy have long preached. It reminds us that knowledge can be hidden, power embodied in unexpected forms, and futures imagined beyond the horizons prescribed by colonialism,

[48] Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 12.

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patriarchy, and rationalist modernity. Even in the face of centuries of erasure, power, knowledge, and hope flow through the margins, and the world can be remade by those bold enough to reclaim it. In its persistence, witchcraft is defiance incarnate: a refusal to be silenced, a demand to be seen, and an invitation to imagine and fight for worlds otherwise.

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