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# Witchcraft Beliefs and the Erosion of Social Capital: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa and Beyond\*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between witchcraft beliefs, a deep-rooted cultural phenomenon, and various elements of social capital. Using novel survey data from nineteen countries in Sub-Saharan Africa we establish a robust negative association between the prevalence of witchcraft beliefs and multiple measures of trust which holds after accounting for country fixed effects and potential confounding factors at the individual, regional, and ethnic-group levels. This finding extends to other metrics of social capital, namely charitable giving and participation in religious group activities. Such coexistence of witchcraft beliefs and antisocial attitudes stands in stark contrast to a well-explored alternative cultural equilibrium characterized by religious prosociality. Evidence from societies beyond Africa shows that in preindustrial communities where witchcraft is believed to be an important cause of illness, mistrust and other antisocial traits are inculcated since childhood. Furthermore, second-generation immigrants in Europe originating from countries with widespread witchcraft beliefs are generally less trusting.

*Keywords:* Culture, Persistence, Social capital, Superstition, Trust, Witchcraft

*JEL Classification Numbers:* O10, Z10, Z12, Z13

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