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The Sorcery of Life Sucking-Forces: Paramilitarism and the Politics of Terror in Colombia

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Abstract

This paper contends that paramilitarism in Colombia operates as a form of social sorcery. Through this lens, paramilitary violence functions like a magic formula—one that spreads chaos, rupture, and death through the misconfiguration of social, symbolic, and material orders. Sorcery, in this context, becomes a powerful metaphor for the terrorising behaviours of paramilitaries and the broader paramilitary project, a social phenomenon that exerts power by unsettling the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. This study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand modernity and modern warfare through the lens of magic and sorcery (e.g. Taussig, Comaroff, Mbembe). As metaphors, these practices reflect people's responses to the disruptions produced by globalisation, neoliberalism, and capitalism. This dissertation argues that approaching paramilitarism as a sorcerous phenomenon offers crucial insights into the enduring effects of a culture of terror in Colombia. It also raises critical questions about how such cultures persist in post-demobilisation contexts, and how elite actors continue to symbolically and materially "extract life forces" from marginalised populations. Ultimately, the paper invites reflection on how conceptualising terror as a form of sorcery might inform alternative frameworks for transitional justice, memory, and resistance.

Keywords: Warfare; Post-conflict; Inequality; Political Cosmology; Transitional Justice