ABSTRACT:

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, colonial governments across Africa, including South Africa, promulgated laws which aimed to prohibit the accusation of witchcraft, methods for the detection of witches and witch trials. However, while administrators saw merely superstition in witchcraft beliefs, "repugnant to the standards of civilisation", many Africans saw an integral element of the social and spiritual order. The policing of witchcraft beliefs became a thorn in the side of colonial rule. This article brings to light some of the deeper historical complexities in policing witchcraft by looking at the application of witchcraft law in the early twentieth century - a neglected period in witchcraft scholarship. Firstly, it examines some prominent discursive constructions of the concepts of "witchcraft" and the "witch doctor" during the early twentieth century, two terms which feature centrally in colonial witchcraft legislation. It argues that these terms were shrouded in a great deal of misconception and, at times, fear. Secondly, it examines instances in which the Transvaal Witchcraft Ordinance No. 26 of 1904 was applied at the Supreme Court level, demonstrating that it was employed in a wide variety of instances which often shared only a tenuous link to poorly defined notions of "the supernatural". Nevertheless, diviners seem to have been especially prejudiced in the implementation of the law. Finally, archival correspondence derived from Native Affairs Department files dealing with witchcraft are examined to reveal that the job of policing witchcraft was rather more uncertain and *ad hoc* at the grassroots level than official "civilising" rhetoric may have suggested. While in principle there was no compromising with beliefs in witchcraft, in practice, such beliefs had to be carefully managed by local officials, who were given (often uncomfortably) wide powers of discretion in deciding when and how to employ the force of the law.