

# AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON THE PERCEIVED SPIRITUAL CAUSES OF PSYCHOSIS IN CENTRAL UGANDA.

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## **Abstract**

### **Background**

The WHO defines health as the complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not simply the absence of disease. Unfortunately, many are increasingly suffering from mental illness especially following the recent COVID-19 pandemic characterized by psychosis among other symptoms. According to the DSM-5, psychosis is characterized by the following: “delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, catatonia or abnormal motor behaviour, and negative symptoms” which greatly disrupt human life and relationships.

Although there are conventional ways of managing psychosis, people still seek spiritual modalities due to the perceived spiritual causes. This study, therefore, sought to identify and document the perceived spiritual causes of psychosis in Central Uganda from July to December 2022.

### **Methodology**

An ethnographic study design was employed for this explorative qualitative study. The sample size was 15 which was obtained through saturation. Sampling was carried out using the snowball method and the respondents were traditional healers, Christians, and Muslims who practiced spiritual management of psychosis as well as their clients (patients and caregivers). In-depth Interviews and Key informant interviews as well as observations were used for data collection. Data were analysed thematically.

### **Results**

The spiritual cause of Psychosis in the study area was found to be demons (evil spirits). These were either ancestral in nature or a result of witchcraft. Witchcraft was either sent or self-inflicted.

### **Conclusion**

There is a spiritual world that can influence and inflict disease in the physical body including mental illness (psychosis).

### **Recommendation**

Research needs to be done to establish whether the disease progress and manifestations are similar in one who has psychosis as a result of spiritual causes compared to one whose psychotic symptoms are a result of purely physical causes.

*Keywords:* Mental illness, Psychosis Spirituality, Witchcraft, Ancestral spirits, Submitted: 2023-02-17 Accepted: 2023-02-20

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## 1. Background

Psychosis has been found to affect the quality of life of patients in all spheres be it cognitively, physically, emotionally, socially, and economically (Mwesiga et al., 2022; Vancampfort et al., 2019). Sufferers tend to have difficulty carrying out activities of daily living, have disrupted families, have poor relationships, become isolated and wander about homeless (Chidarikire et al., 2020).

According to the DSM-5, psychosis is characterized by the following:

*“delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, catatonia or abnormal motor behaviour, and negative symptoms”* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Various religious healers have different beliefs about mental illness. According to Pentecostal Christians, all manner of sickness including mental illness a result of demonic activity and demonic presence. A specific mental disorder is said to be a reflection of a particular spirit that possesses the patient (Dein, 2020). The following are some of the spirits possessing demons that cause mental illness according to Hammond and Hammond (1973/2010): spirits of strife, rebellion, control, bitterness, paranoia, and nervousness. It is also believed that previous experiences like attempted abortion by parents, occult practices, curses, and childhood trauma among others can open up portals or ports for demonic entry into an individual resulting in spirit possession (Dein, 2020).

In Islam, there are various spiritual beings responsible for various illnesses namely: angels (farista), demons (marrid), spirits (jinn), satanic beings (shaytaan), and evil spirits (bhut) (Dein & Illaiee, 2013). Mental illness or madness among Muslims is said to be caused by either spirit (jinn) (Dein & Illaiee, 2013), witchcraft, or the evil eye that is related to envy (Dein, 2020).

In Puerto Rico, mental disorders are attributed to disincarnated spirits (obsession) or a previous

traumatic life (Moreira-Almeida & Koss-Chioino, 2009a; Moreira-Almeida & Neto, 2005). Among South Africans, it is believed that spirits, magic, and sorcery cause many illnesses including mental illness; which can only be diagnosed and treated by traditional healers (Audet et al., 2017). According to a Zimbabwean study, schizophrenic Shona speakers believe that either witchcraft or spirits cause symptoms of mental illness (Chidarikire et al., 2020). In Ghana, Christians and neo-prophetic pastors believe that psychosis is caused by the supernatural, namely: evil or unclean spirits (Kpobi & Swartz, 2018; Kpobi & Swartz, 2019). Akol et al. (2018) also found that traditional healers among Kenyans believed that the aetiology of mental illness is supernatural. In Uganda, mental illness is said to be caused by witchcraft, unhappy ancestral spirits, a poor relationship with the dead, spirit possession, or failure to observe cultural traditions (Bailey, 2014; Akol et al., 2018). In the Busoga region, psychosis is believed to be caused by clan/cultural issues, a failed relationship with God, or witchcraft (Abbo et al., 2008).

There are supernatural or spiritual attributes to mental illness/psychosis as cited above namely: spirits, witchcraft, evil spirits, unhappy ancestral spirits, a failed relationship with God, and so on. However, is there a difference in each of these aspects? How do they cause psychosis? Is the pathophysiology similar in each instance? This study sought to find these details on perceived spiritual causation in the study area.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study Design

An ethnographic study design was employed for this explorative qualitative study. This allowed the researcher to understand and document the perceived spiritual causes of mental illness.

### 2.2. Study Area

The area of study was the central region of Uganda with a population of approximately over 11,500,000 people. The region is comprised of various districts including Kampala (Capital City),

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Wakiso, Mukono, and so on (Brinkhoff, 2020). The central region is spiritually diverse due to the diversity in the population. People use various spiritual healers including Pentecostal Healers, Roman Catholic Healers, Anglican Healers, Islamic Healers as well as, African Traditional Healers to help them with the management of psychosis in central Uganda. The study was carried out from July to December 2022.

### **2.3. Inclusion Criteria**

All spiritual leaders carrying out the management of Psychosis and their patients who consented to participate in the study were included in the study.

Psychotic patients had to be able to listen and comprehend the informed consent and discussion.

### **2.4. Exclusion Criteria**

Non-consenting individuals and participants who are unable to speak or communicate for whatever reason were excluded from the study. It was very important for the interviewer to completely understand the respondent's perspective.

### **2.5. Sampling**

Study participants were stratified or grouped based on religion/faith namely: Christians, Muslims, and African Traditionalists and their respective patients.

The participants were selected using the snowballing method where the researcher identified one spiritual healer or patient or caregiver receiving spiritual healing. Then that religious leader/healer or patient referred the interviewer to another respondent who also does the same and so on until saturation was reached.

The sample characteristics comprised of the following: spiritual healers who are actively practicing the management of psychosis (irrespective of religion) within the study area; psychotic patients and their caregivers who are receiving spiritual healing at the time of the study. The participants had to be able to listen, comprehend and speak.

### **2.6. Study Variables**

The study variables were: perceived spiritual causes of psychosis, reasons for seeking spiritual management of psychosis; and spiritual modalities of management of psychosis.

### **2.7. Data Sources**

The study participants comprised: spiritual leaders from the various religions in the study area who carry out spiritual management of psychosis, their respective patients, and attendants who take the patients for treatment and tend to them till they recover. The religions were largely grouped into the following categories: Christians, Muslims, African Traditional Religion, and others if they are available.

### **2.8. Bias**

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the following was done:

- An independent individual was assigned to check the audio in comparison with the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the transcription;
- the transcripts were returned to the respondents for comments and corrections to ensure credibility and confirmability;
- the data collection process comprised triangulation (by respondent, setting, and by data type); and
- a clear description of the study settings allowed for the transferability of the data in similar settings.

### **2.9. Sample size**

Sample size depended on Saturation, which was reached after 8 Key Informants, and 7 In-depth interviews.

### 3. Data analysis

Collected data were organised into categories and stored in files. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and also stored in files based on categories. The researcher also had a field diary where key interesting aspects were written at the end of the day from the field notes, interview session recordings, and observations (memoing).

Data were analysed by use of thematic analysis using the NVivo software. Thematic analysis is where the information/data was sorted and grouped into key themes. This was done by the use of both inductive and deductive (hybrid) means. Pattern coding of ideas that are common across and within data sources was used to generate the themes. The findings from the themes were presented based on research questions with quotations from the respondents. The findings were then explained using theory and literature.

### 4. Findings

All the Key informants reported that the spiritual cause of psychosis was evil spirits or demons. The caregivers and patients also believed that the condition they were dealing with was a result of witchcraft. The cause of the psychosis can be differentiated based on the signs and symptoms being manifested as well as the words being voiced by the patient.

#### 4.1. Limitations

One of the most challenging limitations was the unwillingness of some of the healers to participate in the study. It took a lot of time and resources trying to find those who were willing to consent and share their views. In some of the venues, we were told to come back. Psychosis can be caused by ancestral spirits (otherwise known as “spiritual madness,” where one is being sought by his/her clan spirits so he/she can be a host and worship the spirits). According to Respondent 09, this type of psychosis manifests as follows:

*“The patient wears a bark cloth, gets a container/tin/bottle, puts stones inside, and starts to shake the container while singing. That is said to*

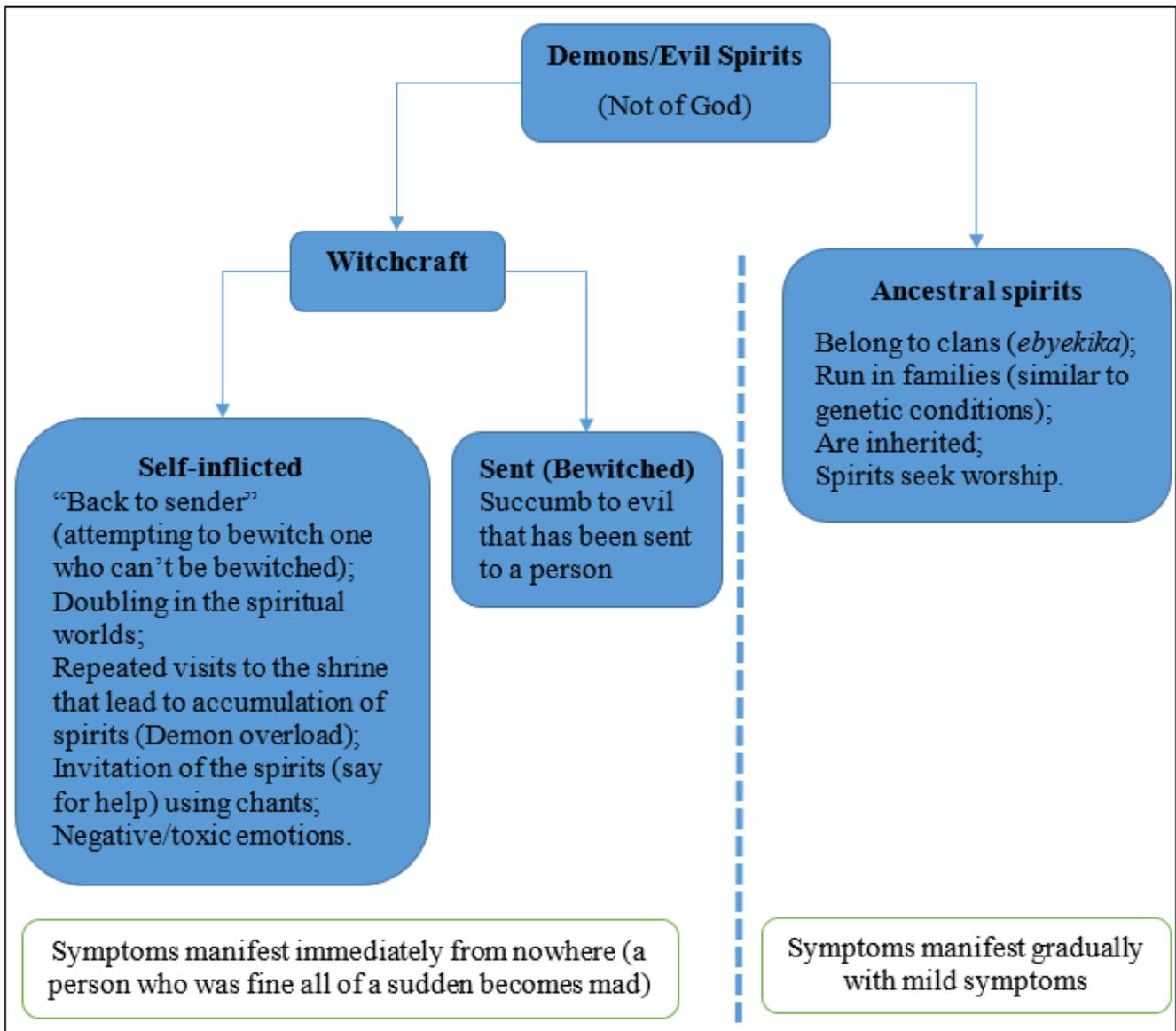
*be a signal calling on more of the ancestral spirits to come.”*

The other cause is when one succumbs to witchcraft that has been sent by someone else; or when one is involved in activities that result in self-infliction of these evil/witchcraft spirits.

#### 4.2. Self-infliction according to the Key Informants involves:

- entering a shrine and carrying out any transactions, as this makes one prone to being accessed by evil spirits. The greater the number of transactions, the greater the number of demons one keeps accumulating which later on results in a demon overload of sorts;
- attempting to bewitch someone who is either immune to witchcraft or carries spirits of a higher rank. Witchcraft that results from what is commonly referred to as “return to sender” manifests as one talking too much, with confessions of what they were attempting to do (trying to bewitch someone else who has higher powers protecting them or can’t be bewitched);
- doubling in different spirit worlds. According to Respondent 02, Christians who also indulge in the occultist or demonic worlds are liable to suffer psychosis;
- Some people out of discontentment seek solutions by calling on ancestors for help. This is an open invitation for the spirits to come and dwell in them and cause them to become psychotic;
- Negative or evil feelings/thoughts also can attract evil spirits as these open doors to the evil world. Some of these feelings are unforgiveness, bitterness, anger, envy, rage, ingratitude, and so on.

According to all the healers, the evil spirits or ancestral spirits are said to enter the person/host and take control over the mind resulting in psychotic symptoms. These spirits come and dwell inside a person since they have no physical bodies



(Source: Primary Data, 2022)

Figure 1: Shows a breakdown of the perceived spiritual causes of psychosis according to this study population in Central Uganda

and they mess up the mind of the host. The spirits are said to give the person some ability to see in the spirit world, while also being able to live in this physical world.

## 5. Discussion:

Demons were said to be the spiritual cause of psychosis in the study area which is partly in

agreement with Dein, (2020) who cited that, all manner of sickness including mental illness is a result of demonic activity and demonic presence (Dein, 2020). Similarly, the Shona speakers of Zimbabwe, the Christians in Ghana, and the traditional healers in Kenya believe that psychosis is caused by the supernatural, namely: evil or unclean spirits (Chidarikire et al., 2020; Kpobi & Swartz, 2018; Kpobi & Swartz, 2019; Akol et al.,

2018). However, not all mental illness according to the respondents was of a spiritual origin. Just like in Akol, et al. (2018)'s study, spiritual healers provided various physical and spiritual explanations for the causes of mental illness, namely: substance abuse and illness or fever being the physical causes; while, witchcraft and unappeased ancestral spirits were cited as the spiritual causes (Akol et al., 2018). While mental illness can be purely physiological, it can also be purely a result of spiritual causes.

The demonic spirits vary and they also have personalities, thus the different expressions of the psychotic symptoms. As opposed to Hammond and Hammond (1973/2010) who stated that the spirit-possessing demons causing mental illness are: spirits of strife, rebellion, control, bitterness, paranoia, and nervousness; the respondents here believe that the spirits or demons that cause psychosis are either of the ancestral origin or a result of witchcraft. This is in agreement with other studies that cited witchcraft and unappeased ancestral spirits as the spiritual causes of mental illness (Chidarikire et al., 2020; Akol et al., 2018). Negative emotions like bitterness, etc... do not cause spiritual psychosis. Negative emotions, thoughts, and evil practices only open one up to the entry of demons even for people who would otherwise have been immune to the demonic attacks. This is what is described by Abbo et al., (2008) as a failed relationship with God.

The ancestral spirits derive from the various cultures and clans (*ebyekiika*). Each clan will have its ancestral spirits that are different from those of another clan. Like Bailey (2014), stated these ancestral or clan spirits are either unhappy, or there's a poor relationship between the living and the dead ancestors, or there's a failure to observe cultural traditions of appeasing the ancestral spirits which then leads to mental illness (Bailey, 2014). These spirits/demons seek to be worshipped or appeased and this makes them look for a suitable vessel among the clan members where they can dwell and make their demands known. They start gradually by first appearing to the person of their choice in several dreams at night, one dream after another. The dreams start to

bother the person, if the person does not follow the instructions given in the dreams, they begin to influence their vision, slowly but surely, and the person gradually becomes psychotic. The ancestral spirit manifestation is a very gradual process. The person is said to dress up like a traditional "priest" and carry empty containers which they fill up with stones. They start to shake them, sing, and worship the ancestral spirits. It is said that the spirits which are sent first are of lower ranks sort of "messengers," and they serve the "mother spirit" that seeks to dwell in the person. It can be likened to a chain of command in an army where they keep sending a spirit of a higher rank than the previous one until their demands are met. Till then, the person's psychotic symptoms only keep getting worse due to the torment and oppression caused by these "messenger" spirits. This is similar to what the Dagara tribe (in Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast), termed as "spiritual sickness" where, psychosis is viewed as a spiritual gift (more like a medium) – where one had been chosen and given the ability to communicate with the spirit realm (Marohn & Patrice Somé, 2014). You do not do anything to invite the spirit, the spirit chooses you based on the agreements made by your ancestors. If the spirits are appeased, the psychosis would cease and this individual becomes a bridge of sorts between the spirits and the humans. This special individual would then have the special ability to communicate spiritual messages from the spirit realm to the people in the physical realm (Sousa, 2020). Rebellion against these ancestral spirits would result in continual torment and psychosis.

The demons that result from witchcraft are either sent or invited (self-inflicted). Witchcraft has been defined by the Britannica Encyclopaedia as the use of or exercise or invocation of supernatural powers to control events or people; and the practices involve sorcery or magic (Lewis, et al., 2022). In this region, people seek the help of the supernatural to either cause harm to others or gain something thus the term witchcraft. This practice involves the use of demons (evil spirits) for selfish intentions including revenge. The priests who specialize in this "trade" are commonly known as

witchdoctors or African traditional healers and they carry out their practice in a shrine. They have altars of fire that never die out which they use for the witchcraft – each time the altar is attended to, all the witchcraft that has ever been performed at that altar is renewed/re-enforced. They also use chants, spiritual herbs, blood sacrifices, and evil spirits to bewitch (cause harm, sickness, or death) or to heal one of witchcraft. The evil spirits they use are the “child” spirits of the “mother” spirit that the witch doctor received at his or her “graduation” or “coronation” ceremony. These “mother” spirits vary in spiritual ranking, nature, personality, and power. These are the spirits that are sent/assigned to perform the tasks that the client and witch doctor have agreed on, in this case – mental illness by psychosis. The victim immediately runs mad, irrespective of where they are or what they are doing. Unlike the gradual process in the ancestral kind of psychosis, in this case, the effect is spontaneous.

Now, not everyone will be prone to be attacked by witchcraft that has been sent. Remember, it is the “child” spirits of a specific “mother” spirit that will be sent forth with a word/chant to execute the madness task, not so? When these spirits are sent to a person who dwells spirits or a spirit (Holy Spirit) which/is of a higher rank than the one which has been sent to execute the psychosis, they bow and return to sender. This results in what we have termed “self-inflicted” witchcraft because the sender of the witchcraft immediately becomes mad while they are in the process of bewitching the immune (people who cannot be bewitched). The foundations of a shrine are made with chants and surrounded by spirits, everyone who enters the shrine and is of lower rank is prone to receiving spirits from that shrine. Every time they enter a shrine or transact in witchcraft, they continue to partake of more and more spirits which later on results in an overload of demons likened to legion in the Bible (The NLT Bible, 2001, Luke 8:30) that eventually cause psychotic symptoms. Other people simply call these spirits and invite them for help in various ways like to prosper, they come although their nature and personality eventually start to manifest in the host as psychotic

symptoms. For a Christian who should dwell in the Spirit of the Highest God, allowing evil and negative thoughts, patterns, and emotions opens you up to the entry of these demons thus spiritual psychosis.

How exactly, do the demons cause psychosis? Well, demons are spirits in nature and every human being has a spirit in a physical body, so they (the demons) enter a human being and dwell in the spirit of the man being possessed. The demons then start to manipulate the person’s physiological functions which in this case results in a messed up mental ability and thus psychotic symptoms and also take control of the person – just like in Luke’s account in The Holy Bible when Jesus encountered a man possessed by demons (The NLT Bible, 2001, Luke 8:29) which states, and I quote:

*“.....The spirit had often taken control of the man. Even when he was placed under guard and put in chains and shackles, he simply broke them and rushed out into the wilderness, completely under the demon’s power.”*

The manifestations or symptoms may vary from person to person depending on the personality of the spirit that is causing the psychosis. For example, there are those spirits that prefer to wonder about, they do not like to live in a particular place or structure, others prefer to live in trees, others in a bush, or a hill/mountain, or by the water, or swamp (so you will find the patient staying in those particular places). The dressing too varies, depending on whether the spirit desires to worship a priest (ancestral spirits) – this one will wear bark cloth and carry shakers. Others are very unkempt and have dreadlocked hair, abuse drugs, may be naked, and eat from the garbage. There are spirits whose personality is melancholic, the patients are very tidy, very aggressive, and verbally abusive, while others are very silent. These spirits also give the person the ability to see and hear in the spirit world (because they are spirits), while also allowing the person to retain their ability to see and hear physically. This spiritual ability to see what is in the spirit is what is mistaken for hallucinations, delusions, and sometimes paranoia (whether they are the same as in the psy-

chosis resulting from physical causes is subject to further study).

over and over again until we gave up and found other places to go to.

## 6. Conclusions

The spiritual causes of psychosis were found to be demons (evil spirits). They were either ancestral in nature or a result of witchcraft. The spirits are believed to enter a human body and dwell in his or her spirit thus taking charge of the person's mind. The control of the spirit in the man is what results in psychotic symptoms.

## 7. Recommendations

The spirit world is real and needs to be properly understood especially regarding disease causation and management. Are the symptoms of spiritual psychosis similar to those of psychosis caused purely by physical/physiological means? This could be one area of further exploration.

There is a need for health workers to devise means of determining whether their patients have a spiritual problem or not. While the healers depend on the supernatural to make this diagnosis, how do the health workers know that a client is suffering from mental illness resulting from the supernatural?

## 8. Acknowledgement

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## 9. List of Abbreviations

DSM-V: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fifth Edition)

NHCE: National Council for Higher Education

WHO: World Health Organisation

NLT: New Living Translation

## 10. Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest in this study.

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## Author biography

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Elizabeth Atim was born and raised in Uganda and had training in Nutrition and Nursing. As a professional caregiver, Elizabeth seeks to use integrated management techniques to improve the quality of care for her patients. She also hopes that she can be able to make a difference through her writings.