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Esoteropolitics, violence and armed conflict in Colombia—Narratives, actors and strategies

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Esoteric practices have played a significant yet often overlooked role in shaping the dynamics of Colombia's armed conflict. This article introduces the concept of *esoteropolitics* to analyze the interplay between war, power, and supernatural rituals—including witchcraft, religion, spiritualism, and the occult. Using an intentional sampling strategy, 150 sources—comprising scientific articles, literary works, and journalistic records—were collected and systematically coded. The analysis focused on both macro and micro scenarios, tracing how objective and subjective narratives intersect in the conflict. Findings show that esoteropolitical elements were not only present but acted as influential agents throughout the conflict. Despite being systematically marginalized by political elites and illegal armed actors, esoteric narratives shaped war strategies, tactical decisions, and the formation of legitimacy and territorial control. This research expands the literature on the political functions of esotericism by demonstrating its embeddedness in armed conflict and its capacity to structure power relations. It urges a reconsideration of these often-invisible forces in understanding the logics of violence and governance in Colombia.

KEYWORDS

esoteropolitics, Colombia, conflict, occultism, legitimacy

1 Introduction

Studies on violence, conflict and security in Colombia have focused their attention on the causal explanations of the confrontations. In this regard, the greatest concerns have been based on the legitimacy of the state, the role of armed groups, social tensions and counterinsurgency security policies. However, the Colombian conflict has ceased to be a simple parenthesis in republican history to become one of the forms that best explains the sociopolitical logics of the country.

This analysis aims to find new explanations for the war in Colombia, particularly those with paranormal elements. From canonical perspectives in studies on conflict and violence, the vision in which the esoteric and the occult play a determining role in both the conduct of the war and its explanations does not appear to stand out. In 2016, the Justice and Peace Tribunal recognized that esoteric practices are weapons of war in Colombia. This undoubtedly marks a turning point in the understanding of the repertoires of violence and polemological analysis. Thus, the question guiding this article is: How have esoteric

practices and the occult influenced the conduct and development of the armed conflict in Colombia?

To answer this question, we affirm in this study that the complexities of the Colombian conflict encompass dimensions that go beyond traditional analyses of security, violence and counterinsurgency. Therefore, our explanations and processes also depart from the most orthodox approaches of armed confrontation and simple strategic approximations between friend and foe. Occultism and the esoteric have been elements that have defined the identity of the conflict, cutting across political, legal and military aspects. From this perspective, we argue that the analysis of the Colombian armed conflict requires a deeper understanding of how the esoteric and occult are intertwined with the power structures and daily practices of the armed actors. These practices have not only shaped the way in which the war was perceived and faced, but also legitimized actions and strategic decisions that often escaped the conventional logic of the conflict. Thus, the esoteric should not be considered marginal, but rather a central dimension in the configuration of the conflict and in the construction of authority and territorial control.

Based on the above, this article is divided as follows. First, the categories of the occult and the esoteric related to power and politics are addressed, introducing the reflections through a brief tracing of concrete examples. Second, the esoteric in the Colombian conflict is specifically analyzed, with an analysis of journalistic records that documented certain testimonies on paranormal issues, witchcraft and Santería at different times during the conflict and in specific territories of Colombia. Finally, the conclusions are proposed as clues for future research on this matter.

1.1 The occult, the esoteric, power and politics

Interest in the occult has been a constant in the history of humanity as a way to explain the connections with nature that remain invisible or as a formula to explore access to attributes or abilities that escape the world of the rational (Horowitz, 2023). Thus, qualities that were not directly observable and could not be explained in terms of the verifiable were attributed to the “occult”, not only because they were beyond the reach of the senses, but because they were a kind of “black box” beyond the reach of scientific verification: “a limit of God to human curiosity” (Hanegraaff, 2014).

However, in the transition to modernity following the Renaissance, acceptance of the occult decreased among the most educated layers of society, remaining present in only the most rural contexts (Galbreath, 1971). Despite this, from the eighteenth century onwards, with the help of movements like Romanticism, Neoplatonism, the appearance of the Theosophical school, the rise of astrology, the expansion of Asian and Indian esotericism and the growing enthusiasm for secret societies, there was a modern revival of the occult that continues to this day (Chaves, 2008; Galbreath, 1971). The study of the occult could actually be considered the establishment before the dominance of rationalism, being part of what Gary Lachman calls “rejected knowledge” (Lachman, 2008).

Thus, occultism acquires a subversive nature within the framework of modernity and, paradoxically, it is modernity itself that makes it fascinating.

Politics, as the natural setting for human coexistence based on the struggle for the administration of power, has not been alien to the search for support from the divine, the supernatural, the occult. Webb (1976), in his work *Occult Establishment*, asserts that the history of politics and its ideas have in some way been associated with the belief in the supernatural and the occult since the very beginning of civilization. It is impossible to deny the recurring inclination of the great empires and their leaders, in the framework of their decision-making, to investigate the world of omens, dreams and astrology (Lachman, 2008). Hence the association of movements like the Templars, the Rosicrucians, the Gnostic Cathars, the Masons and other societies linked to occult beliefs and practices have been connected to important historical turning points like the evolution of the nation-state, the French Revolution and the process of construction of the United States (US) and other nations of the new world, among other historical milestones (Howard, 1989).

The relationship between power, politics and occultism has been little studied. Much of this omission in academic research work relates to an obsession of Weberian origin that assumes an exclusively secular source of power, leaving aside other elements of cultural order (Niehaus et al., 2001). Specifically, in the case of the study of the relationship between power and practices like witchcraft in Africa, Siegel et al. (1991) raise the need to recognize that human societies respond to various centers and epicenters of power, so the later must be assumed as part of the creative faculty of human activity. Thus, from this line of interpretation, Niehaus et al. (2001) invite us to approach the study of power from a broader dimension, especially with attention to phenomena which, like witchcraft and other related practices, can also be understood as a symbolic formulation of power derived from “extra-human agencies”. Therefore, authors like Stephen (1987) describe witches and sorcerers as characters with great capacity for social influence who use rituals to mediate with “cosmic power” for constructive purposes of protection and healing or for destructive purposes with the intention of causing harm, including to the extent of wounding and killing.

The exercise of power is a ritual, and it obeys rational forms of construction (Melzer, 2015; Senholt et al., 2012). Mysticism in politics has been present from the most primitive perspective of the exercise of governing (Rosenbaum and Sederberg, 1971). In this sense, the relationship between the cosmogonic and human decisions, including the religious, the occult and the esoteric (Ranson, 2013), evokes complex perspectives through which those who govern weave spiritual relationships for decision-making. The idea of state-building, including the political devices of control and social administration, have been directly linked to religious complexes. Monarchical systems projected, for the sake of the cohesion of their subjects, esoteric and spiritual narratives in which the figure of the king depended on divine will.

There has been a dual social construction around the supernatural. On one hand, everything related to the occult or the esoteric has been considered negative while, on the other, religious issues have been commonly accepted despite also being linked to

supernatural dimensions (Voss and Faivre, 1995). Following this logic, Voss and Faivre (1995) show that the field of esotericism is not limited to secret knowledge or an arcane discipline, but also includes the paths that lead to a spiritual «center» and to the «center» of being itself. This is a way of understanding that canonical religions can also be esoteric.

Some authors, such as Melzer (2015), have been concerned with exploring the existing logics and communicating vessels between the occult, the esoteric and the rational in terms of the conduct of power. Others have suggested that the esoteric escapes the rational, but several claim that there is much that is rational in the esoteric, even warning that the rational is more evident in the spiritual than in the factual (Ranson, 2013; Rush, 1959). This is because rational choice and the balance between benefits and losses include the invocation of exogenous forces to pursue them, requiring a greater effort of some kind than that needed in the simple plane of empirical evidence. Therefore, there is a rich academic approach to explaining the motivations of some political leaders and power systems through the esoteric and the supernatural.

For Senholt et al. (2012), there is a causal relationship between the cultural and belief system of radical right-wing political communities and chaos magic, ritualism, tantric yoga and esoterism in general. This relationship is based on the fact that, for Senholt, the radical political right has significant elements by emitting esoteric influences that shape the perception of society. Some reference points are found in the *völkisch* movement in Germany, with deep roots in the Romanesque nationalism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Johann Gottfried von Herder (Senholt et al., 2012). From this arose a widespread notion of unique and exclusive ancestry, where racism was the center of gravity for the supremacy of said people as a founding myth. Therefore, from the early years of the twentieth century, the Ariosophy doctrine took on a special meaning in the way of conceiving the relationship of German society with others considered inferior.

Another significant example relates to the myths surrounding the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte (Frost, 2018). According to some biographical reports, the decision and undertaking to become Emperor of France related to a paranormal experience in Egypt, where he spent the night next to the Pharaoh's sarcophagus in the Great Pyramid of Giza in 1798, imitating Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar (Taine, 1891). There, he had a revelation that motivated him to want to conquer Europe. The rationality of war and the sophisticated manner of building military strategies and tactics were inspired by esoteric experiences (Taine, 1891). It can be inferred that the geopolitical redesigns of Europe at that time had roots in Napoleon's cosmogony and esotericism.

As previously mentioned, the ethnographic work of Niehaus et al. (2001), explored the witch-hunt system in South Africa in the 1980s. The authors demonstrate that witchcraft is not simply residue of ancestral culture, but part of a complex web of beliefs in the social drama and that it influences the political and economic processes of society (Niehaus et al., 2001). In this sense, witchcraft was politicized during apartheid.

Thus, the authors find how the African National Congress and many other political groups used witchcraft belief systems to promote their own political agenda (Niehaus et al., 2001). This was

the case in Madagascar where, a few decades ago, the capture of a sorcerer who was part of an insurgent group and the destruction of his talisman increased the popularity of the president because this meant peace would be restored in the area, not so much because of the security forces' raid and the presence of the state, but rather because of the removal of the criminal witch from the equation (Klaas, 2023).

These cases show that, far from being isolated or anecdotal events, the relationship between esotericism and politics has managed to insert itself into political regimes and social structures, to the point of contributing to the definition of the popularity and respect of political leaders and/or illegal armed actors, if they manage to demonstrate mastery and control of supernatural events that are part of the symbolic capital and the axiological structure of a community. The resources and strategies for gaining authority, reputation and leadership are the subject of study in this article, and are detailed in the following section.

2 Methodology

This study employs a genealogical approach (Villalobos, 2023) to trace the transformation of esoteric practices in Colombia's armed conflict, documenting their evolution from cultural stigmatization in the nineteenth century (Ramírez, 2015) to full strategic militarization by the twentieth century (Castro Caycedo, 2021). Through systematic analysis of historical records, visual cultures, and testimonial evidence (Chilito, 2021; El Colombiano, 2024), we identify three critical dimensions of this phenomenon. First, the research uncovers how esotericism became weaponized across all armed factions—from guerrilla herbal baths to paramilitary patiquines—establishing parallel spiritual economies that actively sustained cycles of violence (Wilches et al., 2024). Second, the findings demonstrate the political instrumentalization of these practices, revealing how elite adoption of occult rituals (Cabrera, 2014) coexisted with the Catholic Church's peacebuilding efforts (Garzón and Agudelo, 2019), creating a complex dynamic where esotericism simultaneously challenged and reinforced institutional power structures. Third, the study analyzes legitimacy disputes through visual collage, which exposes how conflict actors strategically performed syncretic beliefs (including Santería and other hybrid traditions) to manipulate emotional politics (Nussbaum, 2013), thereby obscuring esotericism's tactical function in prolonging the conflict. Together, these findings demonstrate that occult practices in Colombia's war operated not as marginal superstitions but as sophisticated mechanisms of power, violence, and social control.

To identify and systematize narratives in the relationships between esotericism and politics, a qualitative approach was used, based on the five categories included in the content analysis proposal of Abela (2002) (Table 1).

3 Results

The systematization of the corpus shows that the relationships between esotericism, politics and armed conflict are recognized

TABLE 1 Content analysis categories.

Determine the object or topic of analysis	The work corpus is composed of an intentional sampling of historical documents, academic articles and testimonies that address the relationship between esotericism and politics in the context of the armed conflict in Colombia. The selection of this corpus is justified by the need to understand how esoteric beliefs have influenced political decisions and the dynamics of the conflict (Bastidas Meneses et al., 2021). In total, 150 documents were collected, which account for different historical moments in which esoteric practices were connected to the narratives of political elites and illegal armed groups.
Determine the coding rules	The coding rules are considered by recording nine codes that are readapted, according to the proposal of Mendieta Vicuña and Esparcia Pérez (2018): Source D1: Scientific document D2: Literary document D3: Journalistic document Actors A1: Esoteric actor A2. Political actor A3: Illegal armed actor Relationship between Esotericism and Politics R1: Alliance R2: Enmity R3: Indifference
Determine the category system	The Abela model is followed, from the macroscopic and microscopic levels, to identify narrative patterns in which levels of influence between esotericism and politics intersect and, in the end, impact social, cultural and economic decisions (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008).
Check the reliability of the coding-categorization system	Coding is carried out considering the criterion of authority sources proposed by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) in which they establish that narratives acquire authority, reputation and leadership at the moment they circulate under the legitimacy of scientific and journalistic institutions. The debate on the statuses of truth and manipulation strategies is, of course, important, but they are not part of the object of study of this article.
Inferences	Inferences are made from the proposal of a research program focused on esotericism as a line of work in Latin America (Chaves et al., 2024), and by establishing points of dialogue and debate with the prolific line of work that links esoteropolitics, from a historical-representational analysis that accounts for syncretic relationships (Galicía Martínez, 2024), unpredictable relationships (Engler and Gardiner, 2023), and those susceptible to being precisely identified and located in time and space (Boland, 2024).

and mythologized (Chilito, 2021), a result of the regimes of visibility (Jiménez-Martínez and Edwards, 2023) that originated with the trajectories of the armed conflict and the signing of the 2016 peace agreement (Garzón and Agudelo, 2019), but they are not exclusive to this historical moment (Rubinstein, 2023), having genealogies that run parallel to republican history. Returning to Galicía and Chaves (2023), we witness an esoterosphere marked by complex powers that, in a reticular way, frames zones of distance and proximity according to the ordering of conjunctural and structural interests (Villalobos, 2023).

Thus, for example, it is possible to identify how, since the disputes between federalists and centralists in nineteenth century Colombia, the stereotyping of merchants, liberals and artisans as atheist, strange and dangerous agents for the consolidation of the Catholic religion became popular; this formula would be successfully applied later to characterize the guerrillas as agents contrary to the triad of values represented by tradition, family and property, or to validate the role of the Catholic Church in peacebuilding processes (Ramírez, 2015).

The curious thing about these events is that they would begin to be relativized when the corpus records indicate that, in a hidden way in the 1940s (Cabrera, 2014), and more brazenly toward the 1970s, the political elites began to use esoteric practices to fight their enemies (Castro Caycedo, 2021) and to free themselves from the harsh realities that occurred during the regionalization of the conflict. This relativization of esoteric discourse as contrary to religious beliefs was accompanied by the phenomena of contract killing and drug trafficking and began to reveal religious syncretisms (Wilches et al., 2024) which erase any

boundary between the faith professed by religious legalism and that promulgated by criminal and illegal organizations (El Colombiano, 2024).

These differentiated yet parallel relationships among religion, esotericism, witchcraft, conflict, and politics reach a critical inflection point in visual cultures that unveil belief systems and positions increasingly subjected to new struggles for legitimacy. In this context, no actor openly claims ownership of an esoteric narrative; consequently, researchers of such narratives often resort to topical strategies designed to stir curiosity and fascination among audiences. These strategies serve to intensify the testimonies of those who claim protection and even immortality through ritual practices.

What does enter the realm of performance is the legal-illegal actor with syncretisms that can be established from an esotericism seen as dangerous or mysterious (such as Santería, witchcraft and spells), or from the practices of indigenous traditions that are agreed upon as sacred or ancestral. In both cases, the same intention appears to prevail, that is, to adjust the politics of emotions (Nussbaum, 2013), considering the primary emotion of the dispute for protection and that whoever wins in said confrontation will erect the esoteric-religious-spiritual status as a practice susceptible to being emulated. Thus, praying for bullets for the hitman, taking a herbal bath for the guerrilla or paramilitary, or connecting with the earth for the political leader are all examples of the search for help that will never be lacking in the face of the rationalities of war, economics and political debate.

This study analyzes esoteric beliefs not as isolated incidents but as *politically operationalized* phenomena. The data reveal that claims of immortality (e.g., bulletproofing rituals) systematically

TABLE 2 Narrative coding strategy.

Objective	Macroscopic		Subjective
	I. Objective Situation: Structural demographic and economic indicators	II. Subjective Situation: Opinion and value judgements Media	
	III. Objective Opinion: Individual opinions on the social reality	IV. Subjective Opinion: Individual opinions on their reality	
	Microscopic		

Source: Abela (2002).

reinforced guerrilla and paramilitary resilience, becoming embedded in their *political imaginaries* of invincibility (Chilito, 2021; Ramírez, 2015). Such practices transcended individual acts, shaping collective identities and conflict prolongation through *emotionally charged narratives* (Nussbaum, 2013). By tracing their genealogies—from nineteenth century stigmatization to modern syncretic warfare (Wilches et al., 2024)—we demonstrate how esotericism served as a *strategic tool* for legitimacy, merging criminal, political, and spiritual authority (El Colombiano, 2024). The effects are structural, not anecdotal.

The presentation of these findings is supported by the proposal of coding and systematizing the data, in which some of the relationships being woven are evident and which, despite not being absolute, do offer routes for the analysis and understanding of what Max Weber would propose as types of domination—in this case governed by traditional domination—but with the capacity to blend into charismatic and legal forms of domination (Table 2).

3.1 Objective situation

D1 (scientific document) sources predominate at this level, with these sources being those that aim to justify the places and conditions in which esoteric politics has predominated. At first glance, it would seem that the tendency is to show that these practices occur in contexts of extreme poverty, inequality, absence of the state and precarious democracies. However, historical documents have recently indicated that, although they may try to go unnoticed, esoteric practices have reached urban areas and generated a certain stratification in relation to the people who hold the power to carry them out. In other words, while in marginal areas the person who protects the actors with political influence is branded as a charlatan, witch or trickster, in elite areas they are conceived as teachers and spiritual guides. This trend continues when A2 (political actor) and A3 (illegal armed actor) actors establish the denomination ranges of the A1 (esoteric actor) actors and place them according to the levels of credibility and skepticism they hold in the social space where they establish their dominance. This situation shows a paradoxical relationship of visibility/concealment, since A2 and A3 are on different sides and have different interests but, unlike A1, they enjoy recognition in the public space while A1 ends up camouflaged in the sociologies of everyday life (AS) and of popular narrative (AP).

Regarding codes, the R3 (indifference) code prevails in this scenario, reinforcing the positioning of the actors when they appear to have any relationship with practices that overlap with the Catholic-Christian or indigenous-ancestral tradition. As an explanation for this phenomenon, it could be said, in Bourdieu’s terms, that there are relationships of complicity where A1, A2, and A3 are careful not to expose rules that define territorialized social representations, and that the community would have no great interest in making themselves visible, either because they do not want to expose themselves or, in a more simplistic-reductionist way, because they do not see a cost-benefit relationship in being revealed as believers in esotericism as a way of surviving the uses and abuses of armed conflict.

3.2 Subjective situation

This level allows for the explosion of mass media narratives (D3, journalistic document) that find in these stories a lucrative business of arousing curiosity and morbidity in public opinion. Without the intervention of scientific studies or research methodologies from social phenomenology, there are many stories in which members of illegal groups (almost always anonymous) tell stories of spells and characters who, with metaphysical rites, contributed to them staying alive in the heat of war. The veracity of the stories is not part of the debate, being instead colorful stories that try to give another type of attention to the dynamics of the armed conflict. It is curious that the ideological extremism or hate speech that is usually present when the news arouses political interests or discussions about concessions to illegal armed groups do not prevail in user comments on these stories. In this case, they receive a certain degree of benevolence and satire in the face of the event narrated.

This trend is connected to the media’s treatment of actors who participate in esoteropolitics, where value judgements predominate and where stories that hide the gains in access to power are mediatized and hyperbolically superimpose stories of violence and immortality to mythologize A1, A2, or A3 characters or to scare audiences with the limits of these practices for those who dare to challenge them. This is the case of Carlos Castaño, leader of paramilitary groups in the 1990s, the story of whose downfall went viral when he assumed his daughter’s *Cri du chat* (cat meow) syndrome as divine punishment for his acts.

In this direction, the relationship that prevails is R1 (alliance), where any differentiation or ethical parameter between who uses A1 is lost, or any distinction in establishing whether it is a question of bucolic stories (almost always stereotyped as places where witchcraft acts germinate, like a medieval forest) or urban ones (where the idea of not disregarding any extraterrestrial help will become naturalized, in the midst of an always haphazard world). The spectrum is so broad and flexible that, in Colombian politics, leaders emerged who openly declared themselves related to witchcraft stories, such as ex-presidential candidate “Regina 11” and indulgences were given to practices like Freemasonry and witchcraft that have since been timidly confessed by government leaders, guerrillas and paramilitaries.

3.3 Objective opinion

This dimension is occupied by D2 (literary document), where literature and fictionalized media in series, documentaries and films offer, despite their narrative licenses, historical documentation that places the trajectories of the armed conflict in the complex situation of being a social event that normalized violence, to give way to the spiral of motivations in which each actor tried to establish their own place from the public and private spheres.

D2 puts us at the pinnacle, but also the crisis, of these relations (R2, enmity), where the differences and claims of A1 to gain a space that will be denied or granted—as long as it does not directly challenge the political machinery—are revealed. When these differences are denounced, A1 becomes the subject of a journalistic source and media story, with the purpose of avenging the anonymity and exclusion from power to which they have been subjected. However, although esoteropolitics can be criticized for breaking the idealisms of liberal democracy, it can never lead to a judicial process to accuse an illegal armed actor of saying a prayer to kill an enemy, performing rituals to successfully transport a shipment of cocaine, or going to a witch doctor to order presidential and regional elections.

From José Eustasio Rivera's *La Vorágine* (The Vortex) which reveals the dangers of underestimating the peripheries and their rituals, through to Germán Castro Caycedo's *La Bruja* (The Witch) or *Mi Alma se la Dejo al Diablo* (I Leave My Soul to the Devil) where the national narrative (of “anything goes”) is incorporated and the end justifies the means—to confront the de facto powers—up to the proliferation of narco-series, where records of syncretic religious acts are part of the plot, providing ingredients of mystery, controversy and validation with historical records.

3.4 Subjective opinion

This is the section with the lowest number of records because, as previously stated, the regimes of visibility play with the legitimizing narrative of esoteropolitics as a symbolic weapon of the armed conflict and a moralizing force that conditions the story of whoever decides to assume authorship of the facts. The hidden nature of politics is then reaffirmed, which is narrated as a continuum of pacifying pacts between elites (The National Front),¹ and of the armed conflict almost always resolved in favor of leaders of illegal organization under the model of formalistic agreements with privileges of political representation.

Doubts remain about the capacity of the peace agreement to place these stories in what could be called the construction of collective memory. The risk is very high because the society that is the victim of the conflict (AN) would run the risk of seeing its story trivialized or caught in the sensationalism of D2 codifications. This scenario is valid, but it runs the risk of taking away the scope of action of literature because, in Bolter's (2019) perspective, it does

not have the multimedia, simplistic and effective resources that characterize entertainment cultures inclined to promote short-term memories and that invoke spirituality, astrological predictions and esotericism (Kapcar, 2024).

In short, the rigidity of the statutes of scientific seriousness and intellectual rigor, together with the socialization of the public sphere and electoral democracy, make it impossible for A1 to move from a secondary role to a protagonist of documents (D) and records (R), and with it the armed conflict and the understanding of the naturalization of violence will continue to be located in speculative journalistic narratives or academic research.

The core of this criticism is aimed at relativizing the determinism of the legality–illegality–civic culture trinomial, since esoteropolitics as a social actor does not compete with these concepts, rather it seeks to adapt and offer a more efficient interpretation to a social group that is not so naïve as to not know that in order to survive one must adapt, that disobedience produces crises and that life in a collective is articulated to the frameworks of interest.

4 Discussion: esoteropolitics in the Colombian conflict

The results of this study demonstrate the influence of esotericism on war strategies and the configuration of legitimacy within the armed conflict in Colombia. These findings not only corroborate the coexistence of esotericism with the conflict, but also underline its role as a significant actor despite being frequently rendered invisible by political and armed elites, and instrumentalized by the mass media. In this section, we examine how these practices have shaped the dynamics of the conflict, contrasting the results with various documentary sources. This discussion allows a deeper understanding of the complexities of the Colombian conflict, integrating cultural and symbolic dimensions that have traditionally been marginalized in conventional analyses.

The complexities of the Colombian conflict encompass dimensions that go beyond the classic analyses of security, violence and counterinsurgency. Its explanations and processes also deviate from the most orthodox exercises of armed confrontation and mere strategic approaches. Along these lines, occultism and the esoteric have also been elements that have given identity to the conflict, from the political, legal and armed perspectives. In this context, it is essential to explore how these esoteric practices have influenced decision-making and the construction of legitimacy by the armed actors. Not only have they served as tools of power and control, but they have also permeated the collective imagination, affecting the way in which communities perceive violence and authority. By integrating the esoteric into the analysis of the conflict, an additional dimension is revealed that challenges traditional interpretations and offers new perspectives on the internal dynamics and the durability of the armed conflict in Colombia.

There are several documented approaches that support this hypothesis. Based on a study by Ampudia (2019), one can explain how in 1993 in Carepa, north of Urabá in the department of Antioquia, an armed battle occurred between the Francisco de

¹ The National Front was a political pact between the Colombian Liberal and Conservative parties which aimed to remove General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla from power who, after a coup d'état in 1953, intended to perpetuate himself in power. This agreement was in force between 1958 and 1974.

Paula Vélez Battalion and the now demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). During the battle, the soldiers remember the guerrilla nicknamed *El Percherón* (the shire horse) who, at the beginning of the confrontation, removed his shoes, took up his M-60 rifle and shouted “Don’t worry, my lieutenant, *El Percherón is here*” (Ampudia, 2019). According to Ampudia, his companions reported that his uniform was full of bullet impacts but that none hit his body, suggesting that by taking off his boots he activated some kind of supernatural armor. Thus, based on the legend of *Los Rezados* (the prayed for), these combatants were immune to bullets and machetes. Only a witch doctor could, with plants, potions, prayers and objects, protect the body so that death could not affect them. Soldiers of the military forces, police, guerrillas and paramilitaries were the protagonists of this episode of the Colombian conflict, which went from being a legend to an assumed reality (Ampudia, 2019).

This case is not isolated. Similar beliefs in supernatural invulnerability have been documented among paramilitary groups, such as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), where fighters carried *patiquines* (protective amulets) and underwent initiatory rituals to ensure divine favor in combat (Ampudia, 2019). These practices not only bolstered individual morale but also reinforced group cohesion, as shared esoteric beliefs created a sense of invincibility among fighters. Beyond Colombia, occult practices have played a documented role in other conflicts: The Liberian Civil War (1989–2003): Commanders of factions such as Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) employed “magical” protections, including bulletproofing rituals and the use of *juju* (West African spiritual charms). Fighters believed that these rituals made them immune to bullets, influencing their willingness to engage in high-risk assaults (Ellis, 2007). The Mozambican Civil War (1977–1992): Renamo guerrillas were reported to use *curandeiros* (traditional healers) to perform rituals that would “turn enemy bullets into water,” a belief that enhanced their battlefield confidence (Nordstrom, 1997). These examples demonstrate that esotericism is not merely a peripheral superstition but a strategic tool that shapes tactical decisions, troop mobilization, and psychological warfare.

Empirical evidence suggests that state actors and paramilitary leaders have systematically incorporated spiritual consultations, ritual practices, and astrological guidance into their strategic calculus, reflecting a broader intersection between esotericism and governance in conflict scenarios. At the governmental level, esoteric practices have occasionally influenced diplomatic and political decisions. A documented case is that of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who integrated *Santería*—an Afro-Caribbean syncretic religion—into his political strategy. According to Marsh (2016), Chávez sought counsel from *santeros* (spiritual practitioners) during moments of national crisis, attributing both personal and political resilience to ritual protections. This phenomenon underscores how esoteric belief systems can shape leadership behavior, particularly in contexts where political legitimacy is intertwined with spiritual authority.

Thus, esoteric practices enable the perpetuation of conflicts by failing to resolve them, instead imbuing warfare with mysticism and prolonging violence through its legitimization as a means to destroy the enemy. These practices challenge peacebuilding efforts across three key dimensions: (1) reinforcing the intangibility

of violence through supernatural narratives, (2) entrenching ideological divisions via ritualized group identities, and (3) institutionalizing strategic irrationality by prioritizing divination over rational conflict termination.

Within the universe of the Colombian armed conflict, the occult appears to be an actor that is not expressly recognized within social dynamics, but is a protagonist in the ways of conducting hostilities and protection, and in the relationships between adversaries. Between 2002 and 2004, in the midst of clashes between paramilitary groups for control of the Llanos Orientales, the country’s eastern plains, Miguel Arroyave—head of the *Bloque Centauros*—ordered his subordinates to go to the home of a witch in Puerto López in the department of Meta. The mission was to ask for protection to counteract the spiritual shields of the *Los Buitragueños*, a rival group of the *Bloque Centauros* (Quintero, 2021).

In this sense, beliefs in witchcraft and spiritual rituals played a significant role in the perception of invulnerability among combatants. Testimonies from Justice and Peace reveal that the *Los Buitragueños* considered a witch essential for their protection, influencing their belief of being invincible against the *Bloque Centauros*. Miguel Arroyave resorted to similar rituals, believing they would protect them in combat (El Tiempo, 2016). Thus, beliefs in these rituals resulted in reckless behavior, as evidenced by the deaths of 78 combatants who believed they were magically protected. Professor Néstor Pardo explains that, in extreme conflict situations, witchcraft offers a sense of security and control. His research highlights that both guerrillas and soldiers relied on witchcraft to obtain protection. This not only encouraged recklessness but also allowed witches to become active participants in the conflict, influencing the tactics and decisions of the combatants (El Tiempo, 2016; Revista Credencial, 2017).

In the context of the Justice and Peace processes, it was also documented that in the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia and the south of Córdoba, the *Bloque Mineros*, led by Ramiro “Cuco” Vanoy Murillo, murdered and expelled women accused of witchcraft, including homeopathy practitioners. Former combatants reported that it was common to punish the fortune tellers by tying them up under the sun for hours or forcing them to walk long distances for “praying” to people (Quintero, 2021). In the village of El Barcino de Campamento, Antioquia, a woman and her two daughters were publicly threatened with death if they performed witchcraft against local paramilitary leaders. In another case, José Gregorio Mangones, alias “Carlos Tijeras”, confessed to having ordered the murder of “Linda Parapetos” on June 4, 2003 for alleged association with a satanic sect (Revista Credencial, 2017). Additionally, Norbey Ortiz of the *Bloque Tolima* recounted that, in one of his crimes in the south of the department, the victim did not die despite multiple shots, so they finally stabbed her and burned her house (El Tiempo, 2016; Revista Credencial, 2017). The Justice and Peace ruling makes it clear that esoteric practices are recognized as a weapon of war in Colombia (Quintero, 2021).

The forces of the armed conflict, beyond converging in the dynamics and trajectories of violence, also had a common denominator in the occult and esoteric. In other words, situations of violence, conflict and social chaos offer a privileged setting for the performance of witchcraft (Uribe, 2003). In March 1999, the *El Tiempo* newspaper published a report in which it sarcastically

mentioned that while security companies offered bulletproof vests for protected people and high-end armor for airplanes and vehicles, prayers were offered in some zones of the Colombian conflict that were even more effective than the vests (Sánchez, 1999). The report showed how in certain areas of the country, occultism and the mystical character of the actors in conflict played a preponderant role in shaping violent behavior by both state actors, insurgents and criminals.

In her 2009 study, Lozano maps the role of occultism in the Córdoba region. Lozano reveals that the department's former paramilitary combatants integrate a mix of beliefs into their magical-religious mix. These range from the use of objects representing "children on a cross" of the indigenous Zenú people to protect themselves from bullets in combat, to the practice of evangelical exorcisms to counteract the adverse effects of witchcraft (Lozano, 2009). Certain army and guerrilla units did the same in order to find protection and a strategic advantage over their adversaries. Lozano's research suggests that the spiritual involvement of the region's communities, including its paramilitary forces, is older than the armed conflict itself. This shows that, at least in Córdoba, occultism and diverse spiritualities permeate social dynamics, including those of the war. In fact, much of the social tension has been related to the friction of creeds between Santería, evangelicals, Catholics and ancestral notions (Lozano, 2009).

The above defines, to a large extent, the form of violence and conflict in Colombia. Thus, García (2020) argues that the invisible and hidden world plays a fundamental role in shaping the behavior of armed groups and in defining the dynamics of war. In fact, the absence of robust bibliographic bodies on the subject, especially on the armed conflict and the relationship with the esoteric and the occult, is a form of ignorance regarding the conflict. Religious beliefs and the spiritual world contribute to mobilizing and shaping the development of the norms of war. Thus, García (2020) considers that those beliefs can function to maintain the current rules of war and international humanitarian law.

Armed groups do not emerge or operate in a social vacuum (García, 2020; Melzer, 2015), rather they emerge from a social and cultural context. Mystical powers are inherent to the worldview of communities, and manifestations of beliefs are more evident in unstable environments. Therefore, the idea that belief systems interfere with and influence the logic of armed conflicts can be very useful for understanding them. The recognition of witchcraft as a weapon of war in Colombia has gone relatively unnoticed by decision-makers and narrators of historical memory. Consequently, it is imperative that studies on the Colombian conflict broaden their analytical framework to include these esoteric and cultural dimensions that have been marginalized. The omission of these practices in official accounts and public policies not only limits the full understanding of the conflict, but also perpetuates a reductionist and binary vision that does not capture the complexity of the dynamics at play. Incorporating the analysis of witchcraft and other mystical practices as factors that shape war strategies and the cohesion of armed groups can provide new keys to understanding both the persistence of the conflict and the difficulties in achieving a lasting peace.

5 Conclusions

The analysis of the Colombian conflict through the lens of esoteric and occult practices offers a novel perspective that diverges from traditional interpretations focused solely on security, violence and counterinsurgency. The inclusion of esoteric elements in the understanding of the conflict reveals a layer of complexity that challenges conventional views and enriches our understanding of the multifaceted nature of the violence experienced in Colombia.

First, the involvement of occult practices in the Colombian conflict demonstrates that the dynamics of the conflict are not based solely on material or strategic considerations, but are also deeply intertwined with symbolic and cultural dimension. The belief in supernatural protection and the use of esoteric rituals by various combatants, including both state forces and insurgent groups, highlights the role of these practices in shaping the behavior and strategies of the parties involved. This integration of esotericism into military and political actions suggests that such practices were not peripheral, but rather recurrent and even central to the operational and psychological dimensions of the conflict.

Academia is still immature in identifying these facts since the imposing role of formalized religion in the Catholic tradition has generated skepticism about its fundamental role in Colombian intellectuality. If we add studies on esotericism to this, the scope narrows and different knowledge disciplines will be attentive to putting the necessary limitations and giving way to religion if it maintains its boundaries in theology, and to esotericism if it is located in studies on mysticism. However, it is necessary to enter into the daily reality of the stories of the relationship esotericism-politics-armed conflict and without breaking into the boundaries and respect for the collective memory of the victims, to identify documentary sources that can reveal the fabric of power and, from there, not aspire to utopias but to critical hermeneutics with careful reading of the context. In the words of Heller (2004):

Abstract morality and religion only fulfil their function properly when their demands are internalized to a greater or lesser extent. Law, on the other hand, is only in exceptional cases internalized by the everyday man, that is, only exceptionally do the commands and prohibitions of law appear to the individual as moral (or, in such a context, religious) commands and prohibitions. When a prohibition does not carry any moral or religious "load", when it is not surrounded by such an aura, it constitutes for the everyday man an external fact and only the fear of punishment prevents him from carrying out the illegal act. (p.182)

This position is supported by Caffrey (2019), who warns of the danger of leaving the reflection of esoteric practices to free will, since these end up being captured by media companies who put the power of reflection in second place behind profit and the configuration of characters and facts that give biased visions of reality and position this practice as a fact that should be applauded or seen as a curiosity in an entertainment culture, when what is really involved is an in-depth debate on the flaws the political

regime and the social system have had in making esoteric practices a legitimate weapon in the search for spaces of legitimization.

Furthermore, the recognition of esoteric practices as a form of warfare, as evidenced by legal findings in the Justice and Peace process, marks a significant shift in the understanding of violence in Colombia. These practices, often dismissed as mere superstitions, have been shown to influence real-world outcomes and decisions, affecting both the morale and tactical approaches of the groups involved. Cases of magical protection and ritual practices illustrate how deeply embedded these beliefs were in the fabric of the conflict, affecting everything from individual behavior to group dynamics.

Exploring these esoteric dimensions also reveals how cultural and spiritual beliefs can influence the political and military landscape. By examining cases where occult practices were used to assert control, maintain power or influence adversaries, it becomes clear that such practices were instrumental in determining the course of the conflict. This aligns with broader scholarly debates about the role of immaterial factors in shaping historical and political events, suggesting that the interplay between cultural beliefs and political power can have profound implications for understanding conflict.

Moreover, this exploratory research points to the need to broaden the analytical frameworks used to study conflicts. Traditional approaches that focus exclusively on political, economic or strategic factors may overlook significant aspects of conflict that are determined by cultural dimensions, including esoteric ones. Incorporating these elements into analyses can provide a more holistic view of conflict and recognize the role of intangible factors in shaping the realities of war.

Finally, the findings argue for a more integrative and holistic approach in historical and political accounts of the Colombian conflict. Recognizing the importance of esoteric practices in the conflict can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the factors that perpetuated violence and hindered peace efforts. This broader perspective could inform more effective strategies for conflict resolution and peacebuilding, recognizing the full complexity of the factors at play.

In short, the integration of esoteric and occult practices into the analysis of the Colombian conflict not only calls into question traditional interpretations, but also provides valuable insights into the underlying dynamics of violence. In this sense, a more global approach is needed to study and address conflicts, one that takes into account the interaction of cultural, spiritual and material factors in shaping the course of these historical events.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

CN: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. HG-S: Formal analysis, Investigation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JW: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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