

Spellbound: the stigma of witchcraft in Ghana

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Tachira Muntaru's daughter crouches on the hard mud floor, her body covered only by shadow. Dawn light slants through the doorway of the hut as midwives pad in and out. Outside, an orange haze creeps across the spear-grass thatches. The stillness is broken by a mewling cry.

Tachira's sixth grandchild has arrived. The women here greet the birth as a blessing and begin their high-pitched ululations, but Tachira knows the child is cursed. Using a gourd of water, the midwife washes his tiny limbs, but the mark can never be erased. This boy, his umbilical cord still uncut, has been born into one of Ghana's most famous witch camps.

Gambaga camp is "home" to 104 women and 36 children. Tachira's daughter, Sala, was visiting when she went into labour. Given the stigma surrounding the place, you might think people would be reluctant to come. But Tachira, 70, says her daughters are tainted whether or not they enter the camp, simply by being related to her.

"Their names have been spoilt already and the world will see them as witches regardless," she says. "All it takes is suspicion. It's possible that the stigma can't ever be removed."

Here in the Northern Region of Ghana, there are six camps like this.

Part sanctuary, part prison, they contain more than 1000 women who have been accused of sorcery, and 160 children. There are no barbed wire fences; the perimeters of these women's world are invisible, just like the powers they are said to possess.

For Tachira's new grandson, there is some hope. By gender alone he is protected. Although anyone can be accused of witchcraft here, for men, sorcery may be considered a force for good. Women, it is agreed, can only use it for evil. The camps' inhabitants are all female.

It is not easy when your mother is accused. People are brought up to believe in spirits but this is not her. Although Tachira says she has never possessed powers, she still accepts her "guilt". "Because they said I was a witch I had to accept I was, that I had powers I didn't know about," she says, as the tiny pale baby screws up his eyes and yawns.

Legend has it that in the 18th century an imam witnessed a woman about to be lynched for witchcraft, and brought her to Gambaga. From that time it has been said the gods of the land would protect those accused and strike them down if they attempted to use their powers. Agreeing to this is part of the women's "initiation". Before they enter the camp the tindana, or spiritual custodian, slaughters a cockerel. If it falls on its side or forwards, it indicates the woman is a witch. Only if it lands on its back is the woman vindicated.

The purification ritual varies between camps but it generally involves drinking or being smeared with a mixture of soil, herbs and the blood of the dead cockerel.

Tachira's ordeal began four years ago, after her husband died. His younger brother asked her to be his wife but she refused. The next day she was called to the chief's palace and accused of being a witch.

"The chief's younger brother said his daughter was sick, that she'd seen me in her dreams, that I am a witch," she says. "My husband's brother and others beat me with sticks then left, saying they'd return. I had to run. I hadn't even time to say goodbye to my children. My body was such a mess I had to go straight to hospital."

A witchcraft test was conducted, with the inevitable conclusion. "My fowl fell on its side," she says. "That means I must remain in the camp. It is better to accept and stay here than go home and be killed."

Today, Tachira is the camp's leader or mangerizia. Her youngest daughter, Fatima, lives here along with her own five children, who attend the local school. Though they try to blend in to the community they have been taunted and had rocks thrown at them.

A recent United Nations report suggests that despite the expansion of Islam and Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a resurgence in superstitious practices. There has also been a marked increase in accusations against women and children as a result of pastors, often from Pentecostal churches, profiteering from witchcraft accusations. During the past year, while Ghana has been lauded around the world as a beacon of development because of its shift to middle-income status, at least three women have been burned alive for supposed witchcraft.

Last November, 72-year-old Ama Hemmah was tortured, drenched in kerosene and then set on fire in Tema, the country's main port. Her alleged chief accuser was a pastor. Police have pledged to pursue the case but no court date has been set and the accused remain free.

"Our mother was never a witch," says Ama's son, Stephen Kwame Ofose Yeboah. Nor, he insists, had she ever suffered from any mental disorder, "apart from signs of old age, such as forgetfulness".

The case triggered a public outcry. Although human rights organisations and politicians deplored the violence, almost nobody, including the government, questioned the existence of witchcraft. In the past, politicians have used fear of sorcery in their election campaigns.

The Ama Hemmah case stood out in Ghana because it occurred in the urban south, which is considered more developed than the north.

According to the UN, three-quarters of adults in northern Ghana are illiterate compared to 43% nationally. Just 50% of children attend school compared to 70% in the south.

Northern Region police tell me that two other "unnamed" women have been burnt on suspicion of witchcraft in the past year. These cases received scant media attention. "Two women were burnt and killed who didn't make it to the camp," says the area's police commander Jose Sanze. "Arrests were made. There has not been a related conviction in this area since at least 2008. Most women won't even come to the police."

Although keen to eradicate the violence, he believes in witchcraft.

"If it did not exist why would the word 'witch' exist?" he asks. "Some of the women even admit that they have these powers."

A 1999 survey of 1000 (mostly university-educated) Ghanaians found that more than 90% believed in witchcraft. "Witches can transform themselves into anything," says 34-year-old Tanko Fatuwa, a student from Gambaga town who is doing a business degree in Accra. "I've seen their lights hunting people."

Attempts by witch camp residents to raise money by selling food failed because customers were afraid to eat it. Before the charity ActionAid began advocacy work here, local people were afraid to shake the women's hands as they thought witchcraft could be transmitted through contact.

Asana Mabian is covered with white scars. A few weeks ago, men from the village – including her brother-in-law – poured molten plastic on to her upper body. She was five months pregnant at the time.

"They said they didn't want to touch me directly in case I passed it on," she says quietly, looking at the ground. "They put a torch in the fire, removed my blouse and dripped the molten plastic on me. My children were weeping and begging them to stop. They said I had to confess.

"My husband did nothing. His young brother was sick and claimed I was hunting him in dreams. Everyone believed [I was a witch]." Her husband brought her to Gambaga on the back of a motorbike. The baby is due in two months.

At 30, Asana is one of the younger women to be accused of witchcraft. Family legacy seems to have played a part. "Many years ago my grandmother was brought here to Gambaga," she says, as her two-year-old son David and 10-year-old daughter Acosua cling to her legs.

"So many communities attribute everything to witchcraft," says Lamna Adam, the leading ActionAid partner working on advocacy and women's rights here. "People believe it will pass on down the family, so children suffer too."

Belief in witchcraft appears, at least in part, to be rooted in the inability to control one's destiny. Accidents, disease and crop failure are routine but for the villagers, each misfortune requires an explanation.

"Almost everyone believes in witchcraft," says Lamna Adam. She does too, though she says: "Equally I know that an outbreak of cholera is caused by lack of sanitation. In the villages, suffering from a disease or going through the menopause can lead to accusations."

Illiteracy is mainly to blame, she says, adding: "In our society, women are not even allowed to speak if men are talking. The patriarchal system and belief in male superiority is a major part of the problem. A man can go through the cleansing ritual and return to his home. Women don't own homes to go to."

To be "released" from the camp, a woman must provide a sheep and a chicken for "purification". A sheep alone costs 70 Ghana cedis (about £30), and camp residents make only enough money to eat twice a day. Cracking groundnuts, one of their main sources of income, brings in about two Ghana cedis (about 90p) a week.

Even if they could save enough, they require a male relative to collect them from the camp and house them. Just 2% of the landholdings in Northern Region are female-owned.

Few of these women know their exact age. They can't read and they don't hold birth certificates. Poakurugu Bukari – thought to be at least 95 – has been waiting 30 years for her relatives to come for her. Her three sons are dead and her daughters can't help because "it's forbidden to take me to their marital home".

"Women have no rights," says Poakurugu, as she carefully unfurls the off-white woven cloth she plans to be buried in. "Usually your family would organise your burial cloth but I know I'm alone. The chief will bury me if I die before they come. I've been waiting a long time."

Ants creep beneath the tiny wooden stool where Poakurugu sits. It is her only piece of furniture – the sole means of keeping her off the floor of the compound that acts as lounge, kitchen and dining area. An adjacent open-air mud-built cubicle is used as a shower and a urinal.

There are no toilets. The effluent from the urinal in each compound flows through the camp; the paths run along conjoined grey arteries of open sewage.

"Lots of people make false accusations, often from envy," says Poakurugu. "People in Ghana believe we are witches but what can they know? I had three boys who died. Do you think that if I had such powers I would have let those children die?"

She has seen the number of women at the Gambaga witch camp double from 50 to 100. She says there has been a marked change in the women's awareness as a result of ActionAid's advocacy work. "We used to work for people for free but now we know we have rights so we make sure they pay us."

This camp was once in the countryside outside Gambaga but the town has grown up around it. Telegraph poles and electricity cables skirt the skyline above the camp, but the technology has not penetrated these mud and dung houses. If the women want to visit the local market they have to inform Tachira for their own safety. The chief and tindana of Gambaga, Gambarana Wuni Yahaya, has been accused of exploiting the residents financially, but some of those who work there say he provides much of their food.

"People have said filthy things that are lies," he says, as flies circle the cowhide upon which he sits. "We take the worst cases [of people targeted for alleged witchcraft] to the police. The women need a safe place. It will take a long time to change beliefs in the villages and for people to be educated."

Yet although he condemns the violence and considers himself a protector of these women, he also helps perpetuate the superstitions which lead to their persecution. He says witches can travel thousands of miles "in a blink of an eye". "If a person is a witch most people won't know," he says. "It is something inside, invisible. I can tell the difference between a cat and a human that has turned itself into a cat."

"There was a boy in Walewale [a nearby town] who said he had joined a coven. They would dance, blow their trumpets and beat their drums but only those who were witches could hear and see. Some people may have the power to heal. Some can see the future. The difference with a witch's power is that it is used to do harm."

Gambarana also acts as adjudicator. Last year, he says, a 12-year-old girl was referred to him claiming to be a witch. She said her grandmother had changed into a crocodile and she into a hawk so they could "meet at the river to hunt". He worked with the family and social welfare agencies so the girl could be "purified" and returned home.

It's unusual for a child to be referred to him; most of the accused are old women, many of whom have lost their husbands. "Widows are considered bad luck," explains Lariba Mahama, who works with camp residents under the Presbyterian Church's Go Home project.

"When my own husband died I had to spend five days naked to prove I was not a witch. When I walked around, other women used leaves to cover my buttocks but my private parts were not even hidden. Older women are also considered far less useful to the family."

Lariba is vulnerable too because of her work. "I can't give anyone a compliment or play with children because if someone gets sick they will say I've passed it to them," she says.

While ActionAid and partners are working to eradicate violence against women and help change attitudes, they don't try to persuade people that witchcraft doesn't exist. "We work on reintegration," says Lariba. "We prepare the community to receive the person and accept them without violence. It takes a long time. For some women there is no chance of going home, while others go home but have to come straight back."

At Gambaga camp, the women talk a lot about home. They know they are refugees here, with little hope of return.

Some 55 miles south of Gambaga lies Kpatinga, one of the smaller witch camps. Sana Alhassan, 90, has been here for a year and five months. She is counting the days. Her husband died two years ago. Shortly after, "a cow went wild" and trampled her cousin. At his funeral her relatives accused her of killing him with magic. Her son lives in the adjacent town, just a 15-minute walk from the camp, but she can't live with his family because she is tainted. "My son said he had to get me out of there and into the camp until the tension settled," she says.

Her son, Baba Yili Abdullai Iddrisu, is a sub-chief in Kpatinga town. He has five wives and 31 children. He is a man with authority and status, yet he has little power over superstitious beliefs.

"It's not easy when your mother is accused," he tells me. "Kpatinga camp is a safe place. I'm not happy that my mother is there. I'm trying to build her somewhere to stay with us. People are brought up to believe in spirits and I believe in elements of it but I know this is not in her. Once my mother has gone through the ritual to cleanse her and spent time at the camp nobody can attribute bad things to her."

The real problem, he says, is illiteracy. If children went to school, witchcraft accusations would cease. What he does not say is that according to local beliefs, if he had taken his mother straight home after the witchcraft allegations surfaced, he would have been the next to be accused.

The local chief of Kpatinga died recently and has not yet been replaced. Some women here say that in his absence, Musah Adam, tindana of the camp, has started intimidating them and demanding money. He denies this and says he protects and helps the women. In other camps there have been claims of sexual exploitation. "Because we are living by ourselves we have no security," says Sana.

"We have nobody to protect us. If someone is looking after you they shouldn't demand money."

Few officials or government ministers ever visit these camps. Without homes, land or financial security, women are entirely dependent on men. Traditionally their husbands are

supposed to protect them but once cast out from their families, they rely solely on their tindana.

“What concerns me is that often the individuals and institutions we expect to come out and take action tend to just say yes, something should be done and then they do nothing about it,” says Lamna.

Baba Yili shows me the house he is building for his mother near his own compound. It is a solid rectangular structure with a corrugated iron roof. Some time soon, Sana Alhassan may be able to come home.

ActionAid works with 25 million people in more than 40 countries. In Northern Ghana they have worked on advocacy to educate communities on women’s rights. They have also helped women accused of witchcraft to access healthcare, land and education for their children.

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