No Peace in the House:

Witchcraft Accusations as an "Old Woman's Problem" in Ghana

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Abstract

In Ghana, older women may be marginalized, abused, and even killed as witches. Media accounts imply this is common practice, mainly through stories of "witches camps" to which the accused may flee. Anthropological literature on aging and on witchcraft, however, suggests that this focus exaggerates and misinterprets the problem. This article presents a literature review and exploratory data on elder advocacy and rights intervention on behalf of accused witches in Ghana to help answer the question of how witchcraft accusations become an older woman's problem in the context of aging and elder advocacy work. The ineffectiveness of rights based and formal intervention through sponsored education programs and development projects is contrasted with the benefit of informal conflict resolution by family and staff of advocacy organizations. Data are based on ethnographic research in Ghana on a rights based program addressing witchcraft accusations by a national elder advocacy organization and on rights based intervention in three witches camps.

Keywords: older women, witchcraft, Ghana, advocacy, human rights, development

INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft beliefs are a part of every day life in Ghana and a part of aging in Ghana as well. This is typically not a problem for older adults, in a country where the connotation of the English word "old" is more positive; a colloquial term for translating, "I am old" means "I have grown" (van der Geest 2005). In addition, older adults who are known to have the wisdom that comes with knowing witchcraft are more often feared and respected rather than feared and abused (Awedoba, personal communication 2005, Van der Geest, 2002). On the other hand, older women marginalized within family systems are vulnerable to attack and even abuse. The national and international media have reported on horrific cases in which older women were murdered as suspected witches (e.g. Smith 2010). Follow up reports then focused on "witches' camps," to which the accused may flee for protection where they are also effectively imprisoned if family and/or community refuse to let them return. There are no national statistics on the scope of this problem, and reports counting numbers of "inmates" apparently trapped at shrines and in camps vary from hundreds to thousands. The national government's Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) publishes a census of inmates and accompanying children in four of the camps but these reports offer contradictory numbers (e.g. CHRAJ 2009; Quason 2009). A general estimate of 1,000 inmates seems to be the most stable number for the six camps typically used for statistics (e.g. Whitaker 2012). The UNHCR, the United States State Department and the U.K. border control address witchcraft accusations as a human rights problem. Their reports are used in assessment of asylum cases from those either accused of witchcraft or accused of inflicting witchcraft (Schnoebelen 2009; UK Border Agency 2013; U.S. Department of State 2012). Since the 1990s, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have implemented projects to address witchcraft

violations broadly and to "free" or assist camp inmates. The long-term impact, based on research and assessments by reporters and advocacy workers, is unclear at best, and those with sustained involvement have softened from a focus on rights violations to a more culturally sensitive approach of family conflict resolution.

The purpose of this paper is to provide anthropological analysis of witchcraft as an older woman's problem that has not been well solved using rights-based intervention. Data presented are from a larger ethnographic study of elder advocacy work by a nationally based Ghanaian NGO between 2003-2005. I call this organization Ghanaian Aging Resources (GAR). Specific data on witchcraft accusations and elder advocacy are from GAR's rights program and field research on intervention work in three of the camps in the villages of Gambaga, Kukuo, and Ngnani, which are located in the Northern Region. Updates on rights based intervention are provided through results of an internet search yielding about 100 documents in the form of governmental reports, NGO sources, and news stories published between 1996 and 2013. Findings build from work by Sjaak van der Geest (Bleek 1975; Van der Geest 2002b) on how witchcraft is part of aging in Ghana, and add data on elder advocacy intervention. Rights based intervention work attempting systemic change has not been effective but is becoming a common part of public discourse and life in at least one witches' camp. As such, I argue it is an evolving form of cultural practice linking global audiences to local contexts that cannot simply replace local moralities and social response. What has been more effective advocacy is to work from within cultural norms through informal conflict mediation among family and community systems.

BACKGROUND

The Anthropology of Aging in Ghana

Study of aging in Ghana began with the work of Nana Araba Apt in the 1970s (Apt 1996, 1993, 1971; see also van der Geest 1997). Subsequent work has continued to examine what it means to grow older in Ghana in the context of extended family, culture, and socioeconomic contexts (Aboderin 2006; Brown 1992; Stucki 1995; van der Geest 1997; 2006). A common proverb both in the literature and in conversations about aging with people in Ghana identifies the importance of interdependent relationships: "Just as the elder helped you as you cut your first teeth, so must you help them as they lose theirs." In other words, aging is not characterized as an individual as much as a social experience very much dependent upon reciprocal relationships and demonstrated respect (van der Geest

2002a). The rights of young and old are not stressed as much as the responsibilities accorded to social roles within extended family systems. Older adults who have "done well" over the life course financially and socially have supported younger generations, and then can expect to be supported in return as they reach old age. Even as they may become weaker physically, they are valued for their wisdom accumulated through life experience. As one elder explains, he is happiest when the younger generations seek his advice (van der Geest 1998).

In addition to wisdom through accumulated life experience, older adults are also associated with knowledge of potentially destructive knowledge glossed as "witchcraft" in English. They may be feared for having this power and thus treated with respect. They may use this power to curse another and bring misfortune. This attribution can also be a form of social sanction by accusers for not sufficiently sharing resources when another seems to have acted selfishly or succeeded unfairly. As in other African contexts, these accusations can be analyzed as interpersonal conflicts of jealousy and also as intergenerational power struggles when youth accuse elders of preventing success within families and communities (Auslander 1993; Bleek 1975). In Zambia in the 1980s, for example, youth led by a self-appointed witch finder conducted village "cleansings" in which older adults and especially older women were prime targets. The cleansing temporarily subverted local power dynamics but elders eventually regained power (Auslander 1993). Although both women and men may use witchcraft, the association between women and witchcraft is particularly negative in Ghana and other African contexts (Drucker-Brown 1993; Hoch-Smith 1978). Accused women include those who are unusually successful or unsuccessful. Scholars interpret this as meaning women are sanctioned for any deviance from social expectations, which includes following a cultural norm of subordination to men (Amoah 1987; Drucker-Brown 1993). As in the media accounts of violence, those most vulnerable in witchcraft accusations are late middle aged, post-menopausal women and older women. These accusations are not necessarily serious. As Van der Geest found in a study of witchcraft accusations within an extended family system in the 1970s, accusations among family members not only target the elderly, and rarely become more serious than gossip (van der Geest, personal communication, 2005). In follow up research focused on aging in the mid to late 1990s, a respondent explained the dynamics of witchcraft accusations within family systems, and his regrets as a young man:

If an old woman is in the house and the young in the house don't prosper, they will regard her as a witch.

But if the young in the house are successful, they won't regard the old woman as a witch. If old women use witchcraft for the success of their children, it is referred to as good witchcraft, bayi pa. People seldom mention it even when the term is mentioned. It is said as a joke, but the young in the house constantly insult those with bayi bone (bad witchcraft) and on some occasions they even threaten to attack them… Most of the accusations are not true. The young do it because they are desperate. When they face difficulties they tend to accuse the old wrongly. When I was young and struggling in life I used to insult my mother whenever I got drunk and I constantly accused her of witchcraft… it is like when you have lost an item; you think of everyone as a thief. (Kwame Opoku quoted in Atuobi et. al, 26)

As expressed in this quote, the associations between age, gender, and witchcraft may be positive or negative. Implications are found in relation to individual and family functioning rather than on age and gender in isolation.

The Anthropology of Witchcraft in Ghana

Witchcraft has long been of interest to anthropologists of Africa, and Ghana has hosted some of the disciplines most famous scholars, such as Jack Goody (1967, 1962) and Meyer Fortes (1945, 1940). This is in part because witchcraft is part of spiritual beliefs and practices that permeate much of daily life in Ghana within a multicultural region of many ethnic groups and multiple languages. Quoting from an anthropologist, Anthony Appiah explains spiritual beliefs persist from, "being born into a culture with ready-made patterns of belief which had the weight of tradition on them," and that this tradition includes witchcraft (Appiah 1991, 117). Witchcraft is hard to explain and beliefs vary but it is generally believed in Ghana and across West Africa to be a term to explain how misfortune and loss are caused by one who has inflicted evil as illness, accident or death (Simmons 1980). One may acquire witchcraft intentionally as a "medicine" or may unconsciously receive it from another witch (Drucker-Brown 1993, 533). In other words, not all witches are aware they have this power or how they acquire it. At the same time, there are positive constructions of witchcraft as a power to bring good fortune to oneself, which is mainly criticized if that good fortune is at the expense of others. A common proverb is used to explain that only people close in kinship ties and geographical proximity can cause harm, which is that it is "the insect in your cloth that bites you. "

Very generally, one who is accused or fear they have the witchcraft may consult a shrine. A shrine priest holds power to divine who is a witch and to 'dewitch' through medicine and ritual. Typically the shrine priest is an older male who has the same witchcraft powers but uses them for different purposes (Drucker-Brown 1993, 534). In Gambaga, the village best known internationally having a "witches' camp," there is no shrine but the chief has the power to render witches harmless. He performs the divination and offers the necessary ceremony to "dewitch" if the person is guilty. He does not require the accused to remain in the camp after they pay for the dewitching but in practice lack of "peace in the house" in the home village may mean that the accused cannot return with or without a finding of guilty. Lack of peace refers to unresolved strife within a "house" that is typically several houses clustered within an extended family compound. As argued by Geshiere, witchcraft accusations are part of the "dark side of kinship" (Ciekawy and Geshciere 1998, 4), given that accusations are only among close family members. The camps then become a place of refuge if peace cannot be restored. As described by Karen Palmer, a journalist who studied the camps over several months in the mid 2000s writes, "accused women took their demolished reputations and hid themselves at the witch camps, since they knew no other remedy for the anger and violence that came with the accusation" (Palmer 2010, 216).

Witchcraft beliefs have been studied both as an explanatory theory and as a means of social organization (Stewart and Strathern 2003). In particular, the "witchcraft idiom" (Van der Geest 2002b, 450) is a way to answer existential questions about misfortune and loss. As explained by E. E. Evans Pritchard, it helps explain not necessarily the material aspects of why something happened, such as the underlying illness that caused death, but rather why a particular loved one had to be the victim at that particular time (Evans-Pritchard in Appiah 1991, 117-119). As a means of social organization, Victor Turner famously described the "social drama" (Turner 1972) that may erupt due to underlying tensions of kinship and competition that are then blamed on an outsider. Witchcraft accusations are a way to surface interpersonal conflicts, air grievances, and then restore social relations to a more harmonious whole (Stewart and Strathern 2003, 4). In this process, a moral order is challenged and then affirmed. This structural-functionalist view came under criticism within anthropology as the Durkheimian assumption of social harmony as a norm was replaced by greater attention to how conflicts may not simply serve to stabilize social systems. Moreover the seemingly isolated ethnic groups studied as self contained groups in the typical village study were in fact part of modernity and larger colonial projects of governance and political economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003). Social tension underlying witchcraft accusations can be linked to unequal incorporation of villages and regions into capitalist market systems (e.g.

Parker 2006). Contributing factors to accusations against a family member then may require understanding what Paul Farmer refers to as the "structural violence" of poverty and social inequality (Farmer 2003). Anthropologists study witchcraft beliefs and accusations as stabilizing and destabilizing forces within colonial and postcolonial contexts of conflict and socioeconomic change. As Todd Sanders explains, "African notions of witchcraft are neither archaic nor static but are highly flexible and attuned to the conundrums of our contemporary world" (Sanders 2003, 338). Witchcraft is thus a way in which people interpret and construct modernities as well as seek to resolve tensions and misfortune within modern contexts (Sanders 2003, 339-340; Simmons 1980, 447). This is important to consider in asking why the camps are located in northern Ghana, which is a region historically deprived of development investment and yet used to support a southern based economy through colonial and postcolonial government policies (Drucker-Brown 1993).

Witchcraft accusations against older adults have not been a sole focus in these studies. In Ghana as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, accusations tend to be among kin but are not exclusively imposed on older adults. For example, Susan Drucker-Brown studied the Mamprusi in Gambaga (Drucker-Brown 1993). The famous Gambaga witches' camp was formed during precolonial (and pre-written recorded) times. Her fieldwork was in the 1960s with a follow up in 1991. She writes that most of the women inmates had been banished there in late middle age, were widowed, and that most were now older adults. The local term for the camp is pwaanyankura-foango, which translates literally as, "old ladies section" (Drucker-Brown 1993, 535). She noted that most but not all of the women were old. In the 1960s, few of the inmates were Mamprusi, and people in the village were not afraid of the witches who came from the surrounding region. In 1991, however, she found that most of the women were now Mamprusi and people told her that, "witchcraft had become more frequent and more serious" (Drucker-Brown 1993, 539). This parallels research in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa in which anthropologists find that witchcraft concerns rise with rather than recede with benefits and stresses of modernity (Ciekawy and Geshiere 1998, 3). Her analysis of the situation in 1991 and changes since the 1960s focused not on age but on gender. She argued that the basis of the accusations was in gender relations and attempts to restore a patriarchal order in the face of socioeconomic changes that had allowed women to make more gains and for men to lose resources. Some of the accused living in the camps had been unusually successful, and some were vulnerable within family power dynamics and thus easy to attack.

Traveling to Gambaga and interviewing nineteen women in 2006, Yaba Badoe reached a similar conclusion (Badoe 2011). The intersection of gender, age, marital status, and children led her to note that,

> …those most vulnerable to witchcraft accusations were widowed women in late-middle age, who were forced to move back to their fathers' houses after the death of their husbands; successful businesswomen who headed their own households; women without children to provide them with leverage within the extended family; and women without an adult male brother from the same mother to protect their interests in the extended family (Badoe 2011, 42).

Jon Kirby links gender and age with political economy in a 2004 essay in which he describes how NGO work to empower youth and women had been fueling witchcraft accusations by men left out of development projects (Kirby 2004, 1). In these analyses, tensions fueling social drama come from the vulnerability of women without male allies in extended family systems within the stress of inadequate and uneven development interventions.

Rights Discourse on Witchcraft as a Social Problem in Ghana

In contrast to a small number of academic studies on aging, gender, and witchcraft accusations, there are hundreds of articles printed and reproduced through national and international media on the plight of women, mostly older women, attacked, banished, and murdered as witches. Stories collected for this article were published between 1996 and 2013 but Drucker-Brown suggests media interest was already strong in 1991 (Drucker-Brown 1993, 537). The majority of these articles were written within a rights discourse that also informs much of the advocacy work on this issue around the country. The Gambaga camp serves as the icon for representing witchcraft beliefs as a social problem and rights violation against women, particularly older women (for a dramatic example, see SOSYWEN, n.d.). As icon, the construction of the camp is one reminiscent of colonial era village studies in the 19th century. That is, the camp supposedly exists within an isolated village that seems lost in time. Here, traditional beliefs control people's lives. Few outsiders have traveled so far to discover surprising insights of how modernization has not yet reached this place. Ignorance is the source of elder women's marginalization and abuse. The camps are a national disgrace within Ghana and a global human rights violation. Demands are made to disband the camps and return the women to families. Poverty is named as the root of the problem—poverty of education, of resources, and of the ability to rise above

supernatural thinking. Development is then the answer, in the form of education and development assistance. Modernity is not the problem but rather the solution. As such, rights discourse potentially serves the self-interest of government agencies and NGO organizations soliciting development funds. They become the self-appointed sources of "awareness creation" through conferences and the production of educational posters and brochures. They argue that public education will change beliefs in part by enlightening communities of scientific explanations for illness and death. At the same time, the characterization of the discourse for this review has been simplified for the sake of brevity. It is not monolithic and is subject to change through engagement with publics in and outside of the camps as well as intervention projects. The point is that media representations of witchcraft as an older woman's problem omits the more complex power dynamics and socioeconomic contexts in which accusations arise, and isolates the problem as self-evident rather than as subject to interpretation and negotiation. My research indicates far greater ambiguity and complexity in linking age, witchcraft and abuse as a problem demanding formal intervention by the government and NGOs. Research design, methods, and results are next presented.

Methods

Research Design and Study Sites

The data used in this paper were collected as part of a larger cross national study of elder advocacy projects piloted by a nongovernmental organization in the U.S. and one in Ghana. I called them American Aging Resources (AAR) and Ghana Aging Resources (GAR). In both projects, the dominant research methods were participant observation, ongoing informal interviews with key informants, semi-structured interviews with program participants, and document examination of materials used as part of the program. In both sites, I was able to literally participate initially as a mediator and mediator trainer due to a request by GAR that I offer skills rather than merely conduct my own research. This entry to research, then, was like that of anthropologists who work as consultants in the organizations they study (see Strathern and Stewart 2004). Mediation training and project development was followed by data collection for research purposes as my role changed from participant to observer. In both sites, this data collection followed the methods of legal anthropology to '"follow the ideas" (Starr and Goodale 2002, 64-5) underlying intervention rather than to focus on individual case analysis. These ideas included old age as a social problem, witchcraft accusations as an elder

rights problem, and rights work as a solution. In Ghana, I chose additional sites in which to observe mediations as conducted by Ghanaians who were trained by Americans but not by me. One was a legal aid board that hears cases diverted from court. I also extended my focus to a legal rights program because the mediation project was ideally going to become part of this program. The project was funded from 2004-2006 with a focus on three types of rights violations against older adults; property disputes, disinheritance of older adults, and witchcraft accusations against older adults. The legal rights program generally solicited "legal challenge" cases that could be used to uphold existing laws or challenge those that discriminated against older adults. There were also two urban and two rural sites targeted for community meetings and educational "awareness creation" about rights. I studied the rights program through examining awareness creation documents, such as posters, and traveling to each of the targeted community sites. I lived in village K for three weeks and village M for a month. Data were collected with IRB approval.

Although witchcraft accusations had already been identified as a problem by GAR, it was located by many in conversation and in the press as a problem experienced by others—for example, those in other parts of the country or with less formal education. In addition, the legal challenge program yielded no cases during the study period. The one case in the program between 2004-2006 was a property dispute.

In order to expand data collection on witchcraft and older adults, three witch camps were added as field sites. GAR has never worked in these camps so that my GAR affiliation as a mediation consultant was less relevant than my affiliation with the Institute for African Studies at the University of Ghana as a researcher. I was, however, immediately recognized and assigned a role as curious outsider with questions similar to those of travelers, journalists, NGO professionals, and rights activists. This brought a second problem, which Ann-Elise Riles refers to as the 'inside-out' problem in her study of a women's network (Riles 2004). The problem is when one studies a practice that is already familiar, that comes already analyzed. In her study, the problem was that she was already familiar with networks because this was part of a familiar cultural norm. Her task, then, was how to make the familiar strange by looking at spaces between the more obvious variables for data collection. In this study, the camps have been so often visited that they are new to outsiders but the outsiders are all too familiar to insiders. I therefore focused on understanding the sources of this familiarity and insider perception of outsider visits, particularly in trying to

intervene through NGO work. Data from visiting the camps and interviewing government officials and NGO staff who have been engaged in intervention work was updated by internet searches of reports and intervention work since 2005. Searches were conducted using terms Gambaga, witch, witches, witchcraft, and Ghana in Proquest, LexisNexus databases as well as Google. This document review included ten government reports, a UNHCR analysis (Schnoebelen 2009), an NGO research report (Houde n.d), a research report by a journalist (Badoe 2011), and over seventy-five news articles dated between 1996 and 2013. Karen Palmer's journalistic account of the camps published in 2010 helped verify and add data about the camps and intervention work solutions from the 1990s through 2006.

Limitations

The main research limitation was time for fieldwork. Because witchcraft accusations were not the focus of the larger study, there were only three weeks of data collection in the region hosting the camps. Within two trips to the Northern Region, seven days were spent in direct data collection in the camps within three weeks that included interviews with government officials, pastors, and NGO staff based in the cities of Tamale, Yendi, and Bimbilla. And, while English is the official language of Ghana, there were several local languages used in these field sites that were not mastered. Mediations at the legal aid board were generally in English but sometimes in one, two or three additional languages. Interviews at the camps required a translator.

The more specific focus on witchcraft accusations was difficult to study. This was in part due to stigma attached to admitting one's spiritual beliefs are real when talking to academics (or as academics). In Ghana, many people of all levels of education believe in the supernatural and in witchcraft but hide this from outsiders who might disdain these beliefs as exotic and false. Formal interviews and survey research can lead to unreliable results, as is described in the results section. I therefore relied upon the serendipity of ethnographic research, in which chance encounters and informal, ongoing conversation provides better data. These data were recorded as field notes and then used in subsequent conversations in effort to best achieve "interpretive validity" (Fetterman 1998) of the data.

Results

Lessons from GAR

I first learned of witchcraft in relation to the potential mediation program. It was in the context of helping me prepare for a mediation training as requested by GAR in 2003 by offering an example of a potential mediation case. The example was a past case in which an adult son had accused his mother of being a witch and kept her "in a structure." GAR staff were unable to convince him to change his mind or take better care of her but they were able to negotiate to provide her with food and clothing on their own. The focus of staff attention was similar to that of professionals who intervene in elder abuse cases in the United States, in which the problem is a neglectful or abusive caregiver who is therefore both the problem and the ideal source of solution.

When I returned in 2004, GAR had secured funding for the rights program previously described from an overseas NGO for a grant period from 2004-2006. There were no witchcraft cases in this program during the study period. The observable parts of witchcraft in the legal rights program were educational materials produced for "awareness creation." For example, one had an old man as a wizard covered by a red circle and slash. The text read, "Old age is not the start of witchcrafting." When attending a community meeting in village M where the posters were distributed, the reception was muted. This reaction is probably related to how members of the village had already told the NGO that they did not need assistance. I was told that they had their own internal system of settling disputes and did not need the intervention of a rights program. At the same time, when asked directly about accusations, a key informant first described how a nephew had accused an aunt within her family and then how she had been accused on occasion. However, she was the head of the extended family, and expressed this more as an annoyance than a serious problem.

Witchcraft accusations also did not seem to be a common preoccupation for older adults requesting GAR services and was not an obvious part of agency activities at the main office or in the communities where they worked. I did collect one more example of witchcraft accusation, which was narrated as follows:

A GAR woman was accused of being a witch- she had donated land on which a church was built and a visiting pastor told the congregation she was a witch and it has ruined her- she has lost friends, people won't buy firewood from her, etc. and the church is trying to say it's

not their fault, it was a visiting pastor but (volunteer) said that the people there must have had some agenda against the woman and used an outsider to come in and condemn her so that people would believe it and believe it coming from a pastor and so GAR has asked to bring the visiting pastor back so he can say it is not true.

In addition, of the dozens of settlement cases observed at the legal aid organization, there was one case involving an older woman and witchcraft. The head of the family explained that the woman who had owned the property was accused of being a witch by a younger family member, and that is why she left that one out of the inheritance of property and room. This statement brought a shocked reaction from the room, and the young family member's lawyer protested that this accusation was not relevant to the case, but one of the legal aid lawyers replied that it was relevant if it was related to the inheritance issue.

These brief examples suggest that witchcraft accusations happen within a context of conflict and contest. They can be quite serious, involving elder abuse and financial loss. They may also remain at the level of family rivalries and gossip. As narrated to me, each case implies a false accusation unfairly used against an older woman. While the formal program did not yield a legal case to submit in court, GAR staff used informal methods of negotiation and conflict resolution to help in cases brought to their attention. Funders of the rights program rejected requests to include this type of mediation into the rights program, which was focused on identifying cases for court rather than conflict resolution.

The lack of information substantiating severity of a problem of course may simply indicate need for more data collection. In order to learn more, I traveled to the one area of Ghana in which one was guaranteed to find problems of witches, age, and gender. This turned out to be a well-worn path in a region of the country historically neglected by development efforts by the colonial and postcolonial government. The extra attention given more recently to Gambaga was welcomed, criticized, and resented. Successful advocacy for the inmates came through more informal and long term efforts to resolve family tensions and negotiate return.

Lessons from Camps

My first trip began with Gambaga. "We get people like you all the time," was the general response I received upon arrival. This was evident from the numerous signs posted to advertise the good work of USAID and NGO projects. Gambaga was hardly an isolated village trapped in time but was rather the ongoing recipient of outsider beneficiaries and travelers.

I located an NGO guesthouse. The staff first criticized me for bringing a young man as a translator and then introduced me to a replacement. Hawa, a woman who is Mamprusi and has lived in Gambaga, became translator, guide and friend during this trip and my return to the village about one month later.

The first step was to meet David, who ran an NGO sponsored by the Presbyterian church called the Go-Home Project. Although David no longer works there, and the NGO project ended in 2009, the church's ministry had been the only longstanding intervention presence in the camp. This ministry to the accused witches began in the 1960s, and the Go-Home Project was established in 1994. Camp census numbers recorded between 1994 and 2009 ranged from 52 to 128 women (Houde n.d, 29). The project provided charity, such as funds for school fees, and income generating projects but the work stressed to me in 2005 was about family conflict resolution. David acted as a social worker to investigate cases, meet with families, and negotiate return. Investigation included whether the person was married, if any children were grown or not, if family came to visit whether the relationship seemed cordial, and if there was family back home who would care for her. As David explained, he visited the families to find out if people back home were not happy and/or likely to kill her. David also assessed whether they were "wild" or angry. Sometimes he was successful, and reported the project had helped 300 women. He provided a positive image of sending the person back and having a big gathering with the chief in the village. However, when Yaba Badoe filmed two of these returns in 2006, she highlighted how the women seemed to be unwelcome (Badoe 2010). She also noted that all but one of the nineteen women she interviewed had some ongoing contact with family (Badoe 2010, 42).

David complained of how outside groups come from the capital and only stay a short time. He was particularly angry at a national women's legal organization, whom he said only came for one day and used his report. When CNN came a few days later, he refused to give them the report. When I asked about an anti-witchcraft poster David had in his office, he said dismissively, "That's just awareness creation." After we talked and he gave me instructions on how to be sensitive to the chiefs concern about bad press, I had dinner with Hawa. During dinner, she told me of how she was once bewitched by an aunt and then recovered.

The next morning, I followed the next expected step, which was to greet the chief and seek his permission to interview the women. The chief answered my questions curtly, and narrated the common origin story of how he became guardian of the witches. That is, some generations ago, people fled to a local Imam for protection from persecution and in fear of their lives. Because this matter concerned traditional beliefs, the Imam told the Gambaga chief that he should look after them. The current chief, therefore, inherited this responsibility along with the ability to detect and disarm witches of their powers.

Conversation with several women willing to meet me was awkward. My impression was that the women had a short but precise agenda to protect themselves by protecting the chief and the Go Home staff. For example, when asked about growing older, one response was, "It's good to grow old here in the camp because the chief takes care of us." And in response to asking, "Why are you here?" came the response, "Because there is no peace in the house."

The interviews were a repetition of typical responses already published in blogs and news stories. Each woman had been falsely accused through blame for an illness, accident, or death. There was enough ongoing tension in the family that they were advised by a chief or determined on their own that it was better to stay in the camp. In asking Hawa about why published stories are so uniform, she replied that most seemed to get details "from the outside." Outside in this case both refers to people living outside the village as well as people with outside agendas, such as NGOs that are trying to establish themselves through intervention projects.

"You can not believe and you can not not believe"

Hawa continued to help bridge the gap between a staged trip and what the realities might be for people living in Gambaga. On this trip and on the second trip, we talk about witchcraft along with her friends and family. One person explained that witchcraft is used to "progress." Sometimes, people are merely jealous and use witchcraft to prevent progress in others. White men, however, have used witchcraft to create things like TV and cell phones. In other words, witchcraft can be positive and negative. Apparently, younger women are more likely to stay in the camps temporarily and then leave. People have more faith in rehabilitation for younger people. Sometimes younger people simply have more strength and willingness to leave the area completely and move to the capital. Whether those accused of witchcraft actually stay has a lot to do with whether they have any other place where they can go. In addition to the witches, others also come to live

in the camps. Sometimes, children are sent to live with the witch and help them out. This continues a common cultural practice of fostering young children among family members. In a different example, a man followed the woman to the camp and tried to help her return with the help of David. She was not accepted but they married and eventually settled outside the camp. The popular image of total banishment and isolation turns out to be more complex in practice. Young children sent to care for the accused also benefit from funds given by the Go-Home project to pay for school fees. The local hospital no longer charges for visits. The banished are then ironically resented for charity received. As one informant cynically commented, "The NGOs are happy they (the women) are there" because they are so popular as a source of donor funds.

Hawa also told her story of bewitchment a few more times. The story begins with an unexplained and persistent illness. She is having panic attacks. She seeks help from the hospital and was given medication for heartburn. When she returns to the hospital, she refuses the medication because it is the same as before. In one version, she was sent to live with the chief for a year. In most versions, she has a dream in which her aunt drives a stake into her chest, exactly where it hurts. Initially, her father resists accusing the aunt but Hawa is not getting better. In one version, the aunt has already been accused of bewitching another family member. Although the woman protests that she is not a witch, her daughters say things that indicate they know she is guilty. Five chickens are killed, and all of them indicate guilt. The woman then confesses that she has taken Hawa's spirit and turned it into a cockroach. The insect is in a jar in the garbage dump. The jar is found, proving the truth of the confession. The aunt stays for a short time in the camp, is "dewitched," and returns home. Hawa sleeps well for the first time the night after the conviction and does not have major health problems after that. As she says of her experience, "You can not believe and you can not not believe."

I also walk around town and talk to more people in the Presbyterian church. In Tamale, I had met a Presbyterian pastor who had served in Gambaga before the camps "gained so much attention." He made a point to say that the women had been among his best parishioners and he also noted that sometimes they believe they are witches. For example, they talk of cooking people and eating them. Arguments sometimes come up about whose turn it is to kill and gather the meat. In Gambaga, the pastor mentions that he offers exorcisms in the church, but the women remain segregated within the church. Although the women can walk freely about town, many keep their

distance from others in public spaces, such as markets and church services. Another common attitude in town seems to be that while there may be some who are wrongfully accused and are innocent, there are also those who are guilty and would be very dangerous if not kept there.

"Our names have traveled to places we have not been"

I met with government officials and NGO workers in larger towns and cities of Bimbilla, Yendi, and Tamale. However, the information I learned was not substantially different from that found in the rights discourse of intervention work. I also visited two more camps. The protocol for both Ngnani and Kukuo was similar in that I needed the help of a translator and I also needed to first seek permission to talk to the "inmates." Kukuo was described as more of a "clinic" for people to be cured of witchcraft and leave. Unlike Gambaga, it was not a camp that had been created for witches but over time so many additional people had come to live there that it was becoming a town that included witches who were not segregated but part of the settlement. A newspaper article in 2011 recorded an NGO census of 130 women and 171 children (Selby 2011).

Ngnani is a much bigger camp and has both men and women. As many as four to ten people arrive each week but many also return within a week. I was told overall numbers are hard to know since some leave "so early… or (stay) forever." The numbers had increased quite a bit in the wake of ethnic conflict between the Dagombas and Konkonbas in 1994. The result was a large number, this time, of Dagombas. An NGO estimate as reported in a 2011 news article was 750 women and 400 children (Selby 2011). As previously mentioned, these census numbers are estimates taken at one point in time. In addition, estimates of age can be difficult given how uncommonly older adults in Ghana know their age by when they were born. Rather than ask for exact ages, my colleague asked for the age of respondents when Ghana became independent from England in 1957 to help with estimation.

There happened to be a divination in progress when we arrived, and we were allowed to observe. The basic activities were those already described in the literature-the focal point is when a bird is pierced and everyone watches as it dies to see which way it falls. If it dies face down, the person is guilty, and if face up, the person is innocent. The first bird indicated guilt, and so the woman protested and the ritual was repeated. Unfortunately, the second one was the same. There followed a sort of pause. Everyone seemed to accept the outcome.

In these conversations with twenty women in Ngnani

and one leader in Kukuo, I'm told that there is more concern about witchcraft that in the past, and more false accusations. I also learn more about family ties, as recorded in my fieldnotes:

The family brings you or you bring yourself. Once you are old, you need protection and seek help from the god at the shrine in Dagbon, when you become old, likely they accuse you, you don't have to wait and go for protection and some stay and beat them. ...Once they are here, they are under the protection of the shrine. You go here and take medicine at the shrine. If your family is strong, you are sent back to the community. Otherwise, find an old lady for you to stay with and you move in. The family collaborates with community members to put up the house (where you live). The family provides material, the people around help to build it. The family might come with a child and prepare food and help. ... There is still a link (to family). Especially if you came here voluntarily, the family will follow up.

Some of the women were there because they had followed when their mothers were accused of witchcraft. Over time, it was easier for them to stay. As in fieldnotes,

Due to the conflict in 1994, she moved to Yendi but her mother was in camp and so she came to assist her mother. She was with her mother when her mother died, and now she is also old. So, she will stay. If she goes back, she may face problems. She has been here for five years and was a child during independence.

When asked about NGO work, replies were that groups and individuals sometimes come. They usually only come once, donate some things, and then leave. There were no NGOs in particular, but in the past they had received a grinding mill, public latrines, help fixing roofs, doors, food, blankets, clothing, mats, and cotton for spinning. Although most were not aware of media stories, one translated response was, "Some time ago, they came and shot pictures and later those on radio heard stories and voices of colleagues and they were happy, realized their names have gone far—even to where they had not gone."

The camps are a complicated site for ethnographic work given the range of interlocutors and familiarity with the iconic representation of witches camps as a rights violation. However, even a brief visit revealed how there is more variation in accusations and aftermath than the simple politicized story of an old woman wrongfully accused of loss or misfortune, who is then permanently banished by ignorant family. There is a disproportionate number of older women living in the camps. Gambaga and Kukuo only have women, and Ngnani and Kptinga

have a very small number of men. This does not mean that only old women are accused but rather older women who are unable to resist accusations are also unlikely to have resources to leave if the family will not take them back. The women may first arrive as daughters or grandchildren expected to support the accused relative, and then have to stay.

"Awareness creation" versus "bringing peace in the house"

The camps are attractive as a human rights problem to tackle and yet sustained engagement is rare. Awareness creation takes place in conferences held far from the camps, and through sporadic public presentations that are unlikely to change deeply ingrained beliefs that seem to explain otherwise unexplainable loss. Political struggle over resources, whether at the micro level of families or the more macro level of communities are unlikely to be resolved through lectures or brochures. Existential questions of why one person succeeds while another fails or falls ill are not really answered by rational or scientific explanations. The "dark side" of kinship is not simply eradicated by passionate speeches against ageism or sexism. These explanations could be reasons why a women's legal aid organization raised funds to "free" the witches in 1998 but most of the women refused to leave. One who did return had her ear cut off and came back to the Gambaga camp with a warning that the other ear would be cut off if she attempted to return again (Ameyibor 1998). Bringing peace to ensure a safer return requires greater engagement, time, and persistence.

The few examples of successful intervention learned through GAR and through the Go-Home project were examples of informal conflict resolution. This requires direct engagement with perpetrators of accusation and abuse that might result in partial rather than total victory. Similar to the dilemma of working with families in which there is elder abuse in the United States, this requires working with those who caused harm and who may feel they are victims rather perpetrators. GAR staff, for example, were not able to convince the son that his mother was not a witch but they were able to provide her with food and clothing.

Accepting spiritual beliefs while trying to address dimensions of abuse is also consistent with culturally sensitive gerontological and social work practice. Another culturally sensitive dimension to this intervention is to use mediation. That is, a common response to interpersonal conflict in Ghana is to seek a third party who can fairly

assess the situation and advise but not impose a solution (Lowy 1973). The mediator role is to convene meetings for communication and reconciliation. GAR staff and David became mediators when asked, and also negotiated to play that role in seeking to bring peace in families and communities. Successfully negotiating return may not be the last step in helping to bring security. When Karen Palmer followed up to visit a woman who had returned after decades as a leader in the Gambaga camp, she found a woman whose health and physical functioning had declined considerably during the year of her return. She commented that perhaps the woman was eating less well than in the camps due to sharing scarce food with children and grandchildren (Palmer 2010, 223-4).

Return from the Camps and Follow up Research in 2013

After returning from the camps, I realized that belief in the supernatural was far more common than seemed obvious before I left. The reality of witchcraft was taboo in most professional settings, such as academic seminars and in NGO work. The very real beliefs in witchcraft came out indirectly, such as a comment by a staff member that perhaps they could work in the camps since I had demonstrated an ability to go to the camps and not return a witch. GAR staff often narrowed the legal rights program from witchcraft to witchcraft accusations and then to false accusations leveled against older people as easy targets in the midst of personal or family misfortune. This focus is a point of compromise for those who believe and who cannot not believe. And, respect for the elderly in Ghana can be demonstrated through outrage against false accusations by perpetrators of elder abuse without changing general belief in witchcraft. As one professional explained, "They will not accuse an older woman who is successful but accuse the one who is poor when it may be someone else who is the witch."

In 2005, the internet was a way to research some basic information about the camps through U.S. State Department reports and numerous news stories. In 2013, there is far more material. It has developed into a more uniform discussion of human rights abuses and the need to solve the witches problem through intervention in the camps. What were scattered statistics in government files I reviewed in 2005 are now published online in government reports. The reports appear to offer clear, unambiguous numbers that are in reality very hard to verify and always subject to change. These reports include the age, gender, and number of years spent in the camps for each inmate as well as children living with them. Recent crises in the U.K. over children killed as suspected witches (Morrison 2012)

may be a part of this newer focus on child targets.

Without a follow up visit to the camps, it is hard gauge if intervention work has brought greater change than was apparent in 2005. There is nothing in the news media or rights reports indicating significant change. Palmer's more in depth accounting of intervention efforts does not include sustained successes. However, there is one significant change in status of the village inmates. In 2012, a news agency reported that politicians had visited the camps to solicit votes from the witches (Salifu 2012). This is a remarkable example of how the women are not simply subjects of intervention work but also treated as citizens who vote.

Conclusion

There are two social realities explored in this paper. The first is how witchcraft is part of aging in Ghana. Review of past scholarship and data from this study indicate that while the rights-based interpretation of particularly horrific cases is understandable, these cases are not representative of how witchcraft beliefs more commonly shape older people's lives. Witchcraft is used in explaining successes and harsh losses, and can be regarded positively and negatively. Older adults who have this kind of wisdom may be feared and respected for having an ability to curse. At the same time older women are far more likely to be attacked by witchcraft accusations in verbal abuse, as in the man who would get drunk and call his mother a witch. These accusations are not necessarily taken seriously, and may be forgotten over time.

In their intervention work, Ghanaian rights advocates are keen to highlight problems not of witchcraft beliefs but of false accusation. In fact, what seems like rallying against superstition can be interpreted as a means of upholding cultural values that respect older adults. Rather than focus on witchcraft accusations as an older woman's rights problem, a more useful approach may be to address harmful accusations as a form of elder abuse that disproportionately impacts women. One parallel between witchcraft accusations and elder abuse as studied in the US and globally is that elder abuse is not a typical part of aging for most older adults, and neglect by caregivers is a far more common problem than outright physical attack (Statistic Brain 2013). In other words, attention to the camps is important but may miss more commonly experienced marginalization and neglect. Another is that abusers are most commonly family members, and thus elder abuse is another example of "the dark side of kinship" (Anetzberger 2012, Statistic Brain 2013). A third parallel is in risk factors. That is, one identified risk factor identified in elder abuse is caregiver dependency upon older adults for housing and money (Anetzberger 2012; Phelan 2013, 14-22), which is reminiscent of the man who accused his mother when he was "struggling in life." Another risk factors is marginalized status within family systems. The story of the man who kept his mother in a structure reminds me of a legal case in the U.S. portion of my study. An older woman was dependent on a son who severely neglected her and provided only chips and soda for food. Successful prosecution would have also removed the primary caregiver. If this case were in Ghana, the informal solution of family conflict mediation would be likely.

The second social reality is about elder advocacy as culturally mediated intervention work. Within rights based discourse, the moral boundaries of witchcraft violations appear far more clear than they may to those who genuinely fear witches. Whether one believes or not, the reduction of witchcraft to a problem of violence against women of whatever age misses a larger social context of ambiguity, contingency, and negotiation. More importantly, the solution to simply banish beliefs or force change has been resisted in the camps and does not seem to be taking root in the country as a whole. As in studies offering advice on AIDS and substance abuse intervention, one moral (or scientific) system cannot simply replace another as an explanatory framework or means of resolving social drama (Farmer 1990; Roy et. al. 2011). However, more modest intervention goals seem to have been possible. Although the data presented here relies on anecdotes from NGOs, and journalistic reports, it seems that GAR and the Go-Home Project have achieved some success by working from within cultural systems and negotiating with abusive accusers. Intervention work itself is thus informed by cultural values, such as values of individual rights or social responsibilities, and become subject to change when engaged in local contexts. Further research into intervention as "culture on the make" (Strathern 2002) could more closely trace the mutual impact of dialogue and intervention between rights and elder advocates and the locations where witchcraft accusations escalate to elder abuse. This, in turn, may help identify more sustainable and culturally appropriate solutions in partnership with local communities.

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