



REPORT ON ALLEGED WITCHES' CAMPS IN GHANA – JUNE 2021

Following the public lynching of Madam Akua Denteh in July 2020, The Sanneh Institute, ActionAid Ghana, Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) and Amnesty International formed a Coalition Against Witchcraft Accusations in Ghana (COAWAG) to campaign against the labelling of persons, mainly elderly women as witches.

In the month of May 2021, The Sanneh Institute conducted research in alleged witch camps in northern Ghana. The camps are communities of mainly female victims accused of bewitching family members and banished by their families and communities. Camps are mostly found around traditional shrines believed to have powers of detecting and exorcising the spirit of witchcraft. Research assistants gathered data from the camps and the Executive Director visited all the camps and interacted with the accused persons and the traditional priests running the camps.

While witchcraft belief is widespread across Africa and other parts of the world, only Ghana has established “witch camps”. Two of the camps were successfully closed in 2014 and 2019 through the collaborative efforts of ActionAid Ghana, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ). Currently, there are five (5) remaining camps, all of which are in the former Northern Region, (which is now made up of the re-demarcated Northern and North-East Regions).

CAMPS

Gnani Camp, near Yendi:	196 = 38 males and 158 females
Kukuo Camp, near Bimbilla:	139 = 2 males and 137 females
Gushegu Camp:	99 = All females
Gambaga Camp:	78 = 1 male and 77 females
Kpatinga Camp, near Gushegu:	27 = All females
Total:	539 = 41 males 498 females

The above make up the directly accused persons living in the camps at the time of data gathering (May 2021). The figures are not absolute, as victims move out and new ones move into the camps regularly. Many more victims in Gnani and Kukuo who are not directly accused still cannot return home for various reasons. Gnani and Kukuo are more like “witch villages” than “witch camps”. In Kukuo, the victims live in the midst of the rest of the community; the dividing line at Gnani is barely noticeable to outsiders. A number of descendants of accused persons in Kukuo and Gnani have not been directly accused themselves. Some older women are taken to Kukuo by their children or moved to the place by themselves out of fear of been accused; some sought refuge there from past conflicts; the majority of dependents (mainly young girls) follow accused grandmothers and mothers to offer care. Kukuo is made up of nearly all Dagomba victims.

Gnani is where most of the male victims are found. The accused at Gnani are overwhelmingly from the Konkomba ethnic group. Accused men are able to move into the Gnani community with their families while the women are not able to move into a camp with their families. Nearly all the victims are accused by family members; most of the accusers are male family members. Some are accused by their own children; others, by local chiefs and religious figures, including pastors. The accusations mainly follow the death of someone in the family: children, grandchildren, husband, etc. The moment an accusation is leveled against someone, they are on their own, as people are afraid to come to their defense, including biological adult children and spouses. These accusations happen mostly within polygamous marriages.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Most victims in the 5 camps are from the Konkomba ethnic group (53%), followed by Dagomba (41%), Mamprusi (2%), Bimoba (2%), and others (2%). Gnani is majority Konkomba, Kukuio nearly all Dagomba, Gushegu nearly all Konkomba, Kpatinga is majority Dagomba, and Gambaga is majority Konkomba. Other tribes in the camps are in the single digits. The age of the accused ranges from the mid 50s to late 70s. A few victims' families visit them occasionally. However, the majority never see their families: no one visits out of fear of being accused and ostracized themselves. Some family members, including children, completely cut ties with the accused. But when a victim dies, the family will show up to convey the body home for burial and funeral rites.

OTHER FACTS

In all the camps, except Gushegu, traditional priests (known as *tendanas*) perform rituals to confirm who is a witch and to exorcise the spirit of witchcraft. They also act as overseers of the camps. The presence of shrines and priests is clear evidence that belief in witches is deeply rooted in traditional religions. Some priests openly admitted that most of the accusations are fabrications out of malice, jealousy, and hatred by family members. The priests compare themselves to doctors who “diagnose” and “treat” witchcraft. It is families and communities who refuse to accept accused persons back even after they have been declared “whole” by the priests. In other words, communities believe in priests' power to diagnose someone as a witch but not in their power to declare someone free of the spirit of witchcraft.

Camps have no walls or gates. But there are gatekeepers! One cannot just walk into the camps and meet with the victims on their own. The priests act as gatekeepers; in two camps, one or two churches/NGOs play similar roles. These gatekeepers have to be present at every meeting, making it nearly impossible for the victims to speak candidly about conditions in the camps. Both the traditional priests and some members of the wider community exploit the victims for personal gain. All these gatekeepers are benefiting from the camps' existence and are opposed to closing them down.

All the traditional priests we met claim that victims are free to return home whenever their families want them back. But there are caveats. In one camp, we were told that victims who return home will not survive more than two years because the shrine does not like it when victims leave the camp. In all the camps except Gushegu, the victims cannot leave unless the final rites are performed by the traditional priest, and these come with costs. In four camps with the shrines, even though the victims can leave at any time, they will not do so without permission from the priest through performance of rituals. The main wall keeping victims in these camps is psychological.

CONDITIONS IN THE CAMPS

The camps in Kukuo and Gnani consist mainly of mud huts with flimsy thatched roofs. Gushegu, Kpatinga, and Gambaga have some stronger structures thanks to NGOs and the Roman Catholic Church. Food supplies are virtually non-existent. In some of the camps, victims gather grain from the ground in the local markets in order to survive. In other instances, women must walk several miles for water. Virtually no regular services are provided by the government or its agencies, and there are few health or educational facilities. Where these exist, the victims cannot afford them, and social stigma will not allow the victims' dependents to access these services freely.

Abuses at the camps include rape, monetary exploitation, verbal and emotional abuse, diversion of relief aid, and forced labor with little or no pay. For example, victims are used as free/cheap labor on the farms of the traditional priests and other community members. Apart from the abuse the women face, their dependents also endure sexual, emotional, and physical abuse. Early child marriage is common; accused persons and their young minders face a constant threat of rape and theft of their few personal belongings.

Nearly all the victims do not want to be in the camps. However, most refuse to return home out of fear of being reaccused if someone falls sick or dies. Some refuse to return home because of the stigma they will face; others resent their family members and communities for accusing or not standing up for them in the first place. Some are happy to relocate to different communities but do not have the means to do so (including the fees to pay for the final rites at the shrines). In one camp, victims said that it would take joint efforts by the government and the chiefs to reintegrate them back into the communities safely. If the chief of an area declares that accused persons are free to return home after the rituals have been performed, many will feel safe to leave the camps. Some also called for legislation outlawing the practice of witchcraft accusations and witch hunting in Ghana.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. RELIEF:** Conditions in the camps range from terrible to desperate. Churches and NGOs send aid from time to time. But these are not regular, and some camps receive more aid than others. The accommodation in Gushegu is good, thanks to the Roman Catholic Church. But victims have to feed themselves from spilled grains gathered from the ground in local markets. In some of the camps, aid provided for the victims, including boreholes, are taken over by traditional priests and the wider community. Provision of infrastructure in camps like Gambaga and Kpatinga are problematic as these ultimately become the property of the traditional priests and contributes to perpetuating the practice. Relief should neither enable the owners of the camps, nor foster a culture of perpetual dependence among the victims. Some of the victims are in the camps because of the aid from NGOs. Provision of relief should be smart and targeted. For instance, victims who are willing and able to safely return home or settle in different communities of their choice, should be encouraged and supported to do so.
- 2. EDUCATION:** Even though the belief and practice of witchcraft accusations is clearly rooted in traditional African religion, it is widely shared by Muslims and Christians, including imams and pastors. Churches and mosques should explicitly teach against witchcraft belief, which, if properly understood, has no basis in the Bible or Qur'an. The witches and witchcraft condemned in the Bible have nothing to do with the notions of witches and witchcraft as understood and practiced in Africa. For instance, there is not a single verse in the Bible that talks about old ladies flying in the night in search of souls to devour.

The National Commission of Civic Education (NCCE) should partner with credible Civil Society Organizations and NGOs in an educational campaign against witchcraft accusations based on existing laws on harmful cultural practices and violence against women (just as they have done with female genital mutilation). Such educational campaigns should be directed at the most susceptible communities and among the ethnic groups where the accusations are most rampant. They should be conducted in local languages on local FM Stations, in marketplaces, and in other social settings.

3. **LEGISLATION:** The Parliament of the Republic of Ghana should pass a law against witchcraft accusations in Ghana. While the accusations are most common and the consequences more severe in the former Northern Region, women in general and elderly women in particular across the country are regularly accused of witchcraft by family members and religious figures (especially pastors), and ostracized by society. A lot of abuse goes on in prayer camps across southern Ghana similar to, and in some cases worse than those in the alleged witches camps. Passing a law against witchcraft accusations will allow the state to make a powerful public statement to Ghanaians and the international community that Ghana is against witch-hunting. A law will deter accusers, provide a legal framework to law enforcement agencies and victims to prosecute offenders and seek justice, and boost victims' confidence so that they will return to their families. Britain criminalized witch-hunting in 1735. Ghana does not have to wait for another public lynching of a vulnerable victim to act. We are not under the illusion that a law will suddenly bring an end to witchcraft accusations. However, it will serve as one more important instrument in the fight.
4. **REINTEGRATION:** All relief, educational, and legislative efforts should be geared towards reintegrating victims into their communities. Reintegration will empty the camps. Education and legislation will help reduce numbers of victims; over time, they will end new accusations. If local chiefs declare that accused persons who have gone through the rituals should be allowed to return to their families, they will enable victims to return home safely. If such declarations by chiefs are backed by local government officials (DCEs, Assembly women/men, and opinion leaders), a safe environment will be created so that most victims can return home. Thus, the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs and the Regional Houses of Chiefs have a crucial role to play in reintegration. If legislation by parliament and declarations by chiefs are backed by provision of small funds for victims who leave the camps to restart their lives, most victims, except a few elderly and frail ones, will leave the camps. Any remaining vulnerable ones can be absorbed into existing homes and facilities where their special needs can be met.

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