

17 AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF "WITCH CAMPS" AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTHERN GHANA

Saibu Mutaru¹

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, there are abundant cases of human rights violations across the African continent. Many such violations and abuses thrive on, and are clearly visible in, political, ethnic and religious conflicts. Notwithstanding the fact that witchcraft accusations are rampant on the continent, rights violations and abuses in relation to witchcraft accusations have escaped the attention of many. In many places around Africa, and more generally the world, people who were accused of witchcraft in the past were often executed. In Ghana, for instance, such executions usually took place in the Mamprugu kingdom before the nineteenth century.² With time, the execution of accused people has been discouraged and has now become less popular than before. Nonetheless, it still exists in many rural areas, as well as in urban centres, in some cases. However, more humane forms of punishment, such as banishment, loss or seizure of assets and other forms of physical abuse are more common than execution nowadays. In southern Ghana, there are established Christian prayer camps where people accused of witchcraft could be sent for prayers and exorcism after which they are brought back to live with their families.³ In the north of Ghana, by contrast, women accused of witchcraft are banished from their communities by family members, village chiefs and opinion leaders. Banished women (mostly divorced or widowed), who are left with no other option for shelter and protection, flee to the witch camps, where they are taken through a process of exorcism by the shrine or priest and thereafter admitted to the camp.

Keeping the accused witches in witch camps has been interpreted differently by different stakeholders. Most frequently, journalists, development NGOs and other organisations dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights perceive the camps as "prisons". They often argue that such camps are sites that create conducive environment for all kinds of exploitation and maltreatment, thereby resulting in unjustifiable suffering by the inhabitants. With this view, there is the

1 PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

2 Foucault M. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

3 Badoe Y. 2005. "What Makes a Woman a Witch?", *Feminist Africa* 5:37-51; Drucker-Brown S. 1993. "Mamprusi Witchcraft, Subversion and Changing Gender Relations", *Journal of International African Institute* 63(4):531-549.

tendency to liken these camps to Agamben's⁴ "state of exception" where the accused witches are almost reduced to the status of "homo sacer".⁵ On the one hand, some organisations literally refer to these camps as prisons, because of the perceived loss of freedom and regimentation of daily life. On the other hand, the custodians of the camps, village opinion leaders, ordinary community members and, very interestingly, some of the accused witches themselves largely view such camps as sanctuaries, where full protection is assured, and the residents live, eat and work freely devoid of any disturbances or restrictions, and without any exploitation.

In describing these camps as prisons, one immediately recalls the scholarly analysis of the concept of "total institution" by the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman.⁶ Juxtaposing theory with empirical evidence from fieldwork in northern Ghana, it may be quite problematic to classify witch camps as penal institutions. Findings from my research indicate that such camps provide shelter and security to the banished witches. My conversations with the accused witches indicate that they live a normal social life like other ordinary members in society. By attributing "normal social life" to the accused witches in the camps, I seek to indicate that the camp inhabitants are not governed by any specially created social and cultural norms, rules and values other than those governing the social life of members of the native community members. They socialise with natives of the host community, visit their families and are also visited by relatives.

This chapter is the outcome of research I conducted on the Ghanaian witch camps between August 2016 and March 2017.⁷ While research preliminarily focused mainly on the economy of these witch camps, part of the investigation concerned participants' experiences and perceptions of the prison-sanctuary notion of these camps. The chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section of the chapter focuses on the "state of affairs" of witchcraft accusations and human rights in Africa, generally, and Ghana in particular. In the second section, readers are

-
- 4 Adinkrah M. 2015. *Witchcraft, Witches and Violence in Ghana*. New York: Berghahn Books. Agamben uses the expression "state of exception" to denote human existential condition, or the "state of being" that is brought into existence when the sovereign suspends the law.
 - 5 Agamben G. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. In ancient Roman law, "homo sacer" was an obscure human figure, who was condemned on account of his wrong-doing (misdeeds). He could be killed by anybody in society without any charge of homicide, yet it was forbidden to sacrifice him.
 - 6 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
 - 7 The study was conducted using qualitative interviews and observations. I engaged extensively with district level government officials, representatives of NGOs working with the camps, religious leaders, village opinion leaders, ordinary community members, and more importantly the accused witches living in the camps. Informal conversations with community members at unarranged locations also formed part of the pool of data I collected during fieldwork. Interviews were conducted in all the six witch camps in the North of Ghana. Using purposive sampling, I selected eight participants from each camp, including their leaders. Beyond interviews, I observed the daily activities carried out in the camps, interactions among the inhabitants and their relationship with people outside the camp, as well as the physical features of the camp environment.

introduced to the phenomenon of "witch camps" in Northern Ghana. The third section is a discussion of the witch camps in respect of the existing prison-sanctuary binary notion. The expression "prison-sanctuary" binary is used here to indicate the dualist nature of public perception regarding the existence of the camps.

Drawing on Goffman's⁸ scholarly analysis of total institutions, I compare the theoretical characteristics of prisons to empirical features of witch camps which were identified during fieldwork. I argue in this chapter that "witch camps" are technically not prisons. They are largely viewed by the host communities as sanctuaries – places that provide protection and where the safety of the accused witches are guaranteed. Before proceeding to the main discussion, one caveat is necessary. Goffman's concept of "total institution" encompasses various kinds of establishments, including prisons. In this chapter, however, the scope of the term total institution is restricted to the notion of prison. In other words, I use the terms "total institution" and "prison" interchangeably. It is my conviction that a juxtaposition of empirical ethnographic data from the camps alongside the theoretical analysis of total or penal institutions should provide an understanding of, and a clear insight into, the real motives of the camps.

THE "STATE OF AFFAIRS" OF WITCHCRAFT AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA AND THE PARTICULAR CASE OF GHANA

Although witchcraft appears to be almost a universal phenomenon, beliefs relating to it are not the same in all cultures. Even ethnic groups sharing similar cultural traits and practices may vary in their belief system about witchcraft. For instance, British anthropologist SF Nadel⁹ identifies two societies – the Nupe and the Gwari – in northern Nigeria that are neighbours and share many things. Both groups "speak closely related languages and have an identical kinship system, based on patrilineal succession, patrilocal residence and localised extended families."¹⁰ Yet the two groups, to a certain degree, profess different belief systems about witchcraft. For example, among the Nupe, witches are believed to be always women. Typically, men are not accused of witchcraft and are always seen to be performing benevolent roles in respect of spiritual powers possessed.¹¹ On the contrary, there is no "sex polarity" in the belief system of the Gwari, thus both "witches and their victims are indiscriminately male and female".¹² Because different, and sometimes similar, cultures have different belief systems about witchcraft, it has not always been easy to answer the question of 'what constitutes witchcraft? For this chapter, I use anthropologist Adam Ashforth's conception of witchcraft, which is explained as

8 Goffman E. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Anchor Books.

9 Goffman, *Asylums*.

10 Nadel SF. 1952. "Witchcraft in Four African Societies: An essay in comparison", *American Anthropologist* 54(1):18.

11 Nadel, "Witchcraft in Four African Societies: An essay in comparison".

12 Nadel, "Witchcraft in Four African Societies: An essay in comparison", 20.

“harmful activities carried out by persons presumed to have access to supernatural powers”.¹³ Admittedly, this conceptualisation is also problematic, as it fails to account for the activities of “white witches”, who are also part of the witchcraft crew in anthropological literature. Although anthropologists often tend to highlight the difference between witchcraft and sorcery – as exemplified by Evans-Pritchard’s ethnographic work among the Azande – this distinction is not emphasised in all cultures.

History has taught us that witchcraft has been a global – not just an African – affair. If witchcraft is a case of primitiveness and backwardness, then America and Europe have been backward and primitive before. In *A Storm of Witchcraft*, American historian and archaeologist Emerson Baker reminds us of the “pivotal moments” and the harrowing experience of accused witches in American and European history.¹⁴ The multiplicity of witchcraft-related actions that are taking place in contemporary Africa also took place in Europe. People were accused and subjected to various kinds and degrees of ordeal to extract confessions before being killed eventually. For instance, while about 800 people were executed for various witchcraft-related offences between 1710 and 1750 in Hungary, “a series of witch-hunts in the German electorate of Cologne that started in 1626 and continued for a decade resulted in approximately two thousand people being executed”.¹⁵

In comparison with the contemporary Western world, Africa may be regarded as the epicentre of witchcraft and other supernatural belief systems. High illiteracy rates and low levels of scientific knowledge and invention have partly been used to explain the high presence of these mystical beliefs in the continent. Daily misfortunes invariably attract a wide array of interpretations. For instance, the death of the “unlucky” boy who accidentally got drowned in a river during a fishing expedition is attributed to the work of his stepmother, who has been unable to bring forth children after several decades of marriage. British anthropologist EE Evans-Pritchard maintains that although such misfortunes have perfect scientific explanations, which are understandable to both the Western and the African mind, such explanations appear inadequate and not fully satisfying to the African villager who must unravel all mysteries surrounding a misfortune.¹⁶ In Africa, witchcraft attributions are not only made in circumstances of misfortunes, they are also invoked to explain circumstances we may refer to as “exceptional fortunes”. For example, it is not uncommon to rely on witchcraft to explain why a female passenger escaped unhurt – and for that matter the only survivor – in a gory accident which claimed the lives of all passengers on board a vehicle.

13 Ashforth A. 1998. “Reflections on Spiritual Insecurity in a Modern African City (Soweto)”, *African Studies Review* 41(3):39-67.

14 Baker EW. 2015. *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

15 Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*.

16 Evans-Pritchard EE. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

17. An anthropological study of "witch camps" and human rights

The high prevalence of witchcraft accusations in Africa and the intolerable degree of violence committed against the accused is one of the reasons for the negative stereotyping of the continent in the world geopolitical system. Over the years, horrific and worrying cases of witchcraft-related persecutions have been reported, particularly in East and Southern Africa. Referring to statistics contained in a report compiled by HelpAge International on Tanzania, for example, a legal analyst and attorney Jill Schnoebelen writes that about 17,220 women were subjected to persecution for their alleged involvement in witchcraft and 10% of them were killed between the period 1998 and 2001.¹⁷ In citing examples of human rights abuses in Africa with respect to witchcraft accusations, a legal practitioner Maakor Quarmyne presents a sad encounter of an accused Kenyan elderly woman called Sato Magdalena Ndele, which occurred in 1995. Sato recalls her experience as follows:

It happened in the night. I heard people opening the door without knocking ... They shone a light on my face. I thought – what is happening? What can I do? That was when I felt the first cut into my body. I looked down and saw my hand was cut right off. Then they cut into the right one and it was hanging. Then I felt a blow against my head and I lost consciousness.¹⁸

Clearly, this ordeal and many more of such horrible persecutions constitute gross violations of women's fundamental human rights and therefore deserve condemnation and draconian sanctions by state authorities. Sadly, such palpable violations are usually not reported to state law enforcement agencies.

At the national and global levels, legal mechanisms have been put in place to protect the constitutional rights and civil liberties of women and children who are usually the target of witchcraft accusations. Over the years, the United Nations has made concerted efforts at ensuring the protection of women and children's rights through the establishment of some legal structures such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).¹⁹ Unfortunately, unlike other African countries (such as South Africa, Zimbabwe and Cameroon) where legal structures have been put

17 Schnoebelen J. 2009. "Witchcraft Allegations, Refugee Protection and Human Rights: A review of the evidence". UNHCR, Working paper 169, 1-43.

18 Quarmyne M. 2011. "Witchcraft: A human rights conflict between customary/traditional laws and the legal protection of women in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa", *Willian & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 17(2):481.

19 Convention on the Rights of the Child, G.A. res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), entered into force Sept. 2, 1990.; United Nations Secretariat. 2008. Ways and means of expediting the work of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: note / by the Secretariat, 19 September, CEDAW/C/2008/III/4; Lundy L. 2007. "'Voice' Is Not Enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child", *British Educational Research Journal* 33(6):927-942.

in place to explicitly address issues bordering on witchcraft,²⁰ Ghana has been without an explicit legal framework that addresses the problem of witchcraft since its independence in 1957. This perhaps explains why deliberations on witchcraft have been largely absent at government corridors and has received less attention from the Ghanaian state as compared to other issues of developmental concern such as corruption and unemployment. It should, however, be noted that although there are no specific laws that explicitly address the problem of witchcraft in Ghana, the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana articulates sincere commitment on the part of government towards the protection of women's rights, including the prohibition of any cultural practices which undermine the dignity and violate the fundamental rights of women.

With a current population of over twenty-four million people,²¹ Ghana has been touted as one of the most peaceful and stable democracies in Africa.²² In 2007, Ghana left the league of Highly-Indebted Poor Countries to become a Middle-Income Country,²³ thus widening up opportunities for socio-economic development. In the past decades, many educated elites believed that with acceleration in globalisation and modernity, beliefs and practices of witchcraft would go into extinction.²⁴ A British professor of comparative religion, Geoffrey Parrinder, quoted by the Ghanaian theologian Opoku Onyinah,²⁵ argues that "an enlightened religion, education, medicine and better racial and social conditions will help dispel witchcraft beliefs" in Africa.²⁶ So far, this theory is yet to hold true in the African continent, as witchcraft is continuously manifested in different forms in modern institutions.²⁷

-
- 20 Geschiere P. 2008. "Witchcraft and the State: Cameroon and South Africa: Ambiguities of 'Reality' and 'Superstition'", *Past & Present* 199:313-335; Niehaus I. 2001. *Witchcraft, Power and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld*. London: Pluto Press.
 - 21 Geschiere, "Witchcraft and the State"; Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics*.
 - 22 Ghana Statistical Service. 2012. "2010 Population and Housing Census: Summary Report of Final Results". Accra: Government Statistical Service. Online at: http://statsghana.gov.gh/docfiles/2010phc/Census2010_Summary_report_of_final_results.pdf
 - 23 Institute for Economics & Peace. 2017. "Global Peace Index: Measuring Peace in a Complex World". Online at: <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/06/GPI-2017-Report-1.pdf>. While the World Bank and the IMF use the expression, "Highly-Indebted Poor Country", to indicate the level of poverty and debt overhang associated with a country, and on the basis of which it provides special assistance, they use the term "Middle-Income" to indicate a country's level of economic progress based on its per capita income ranking.
 - 24 Onyinah O. 2002. "Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft in Modern Africa: Ghana as a Case History", *AJPS* 5(1):107-134.
 - 25 Onyinah, "Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft in Modern Africa."
 - 26 Parrinder G. 1958. *Witchcraft, a Critical Study of the Belief in Witchcraft from the Records of Witch Hunting in Europe Yesterday and Africa Today*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 202-203.
 - 27 Comaroff J and Comaroff JL. 1999. "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony", *American Ethnologist* 26(2):279-303;

17. An anthropological study of "witch camps" and human rights

Ghana has been recognised as one of the countries in Africa where the presence of witchcraft beliefs is high.²⁸ In Ghana, as in most African countries, women are the group of people most vulnerable to being exposed to witchcraft accusations for several reasons. Ghanaian sociologist and criminologist Mensah Adinkrah observes that Ghana is very diverse in terms of ethnic composition. In this regard, a woman's political and social status and recognition depends on the ethnic group to which she belongs.²⁹ He argues that people in northern Ghana who are mostly Mole-Dagbani, have patriarchal structures that tend to undermine the social status and power of women as against the matrilineal Akan-speaking ethnic groups in southern Ghana who are more powerful than their counterparts from the north. Customarily, Ghanaian women are expected to show a great deal of respect towards their husbands, remaining highly submissive and very obedient.³⁰ This cultural requirement contributes to their vulnerability and powerlessness. Like many societies in Africa, Ghanaian men and women are assigned roles based on gender. Culturally, women are supposed to get married, produce and take care of children and limit themselves to domestic chores. Men, on the other hand, are supposed to have the financial power to provide for the needs of the family. In situations where there is a transgression of these gender norms, women usually bear the brunt in the form of witchcraft accusations.³¹

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF WITCH CAMPS

Although witchcraft beliefs and practices are omnipresent and mundane in African society, the phenomenon of witch camps is rare in the continent. In the past, a person who was accused of witchcraft was often executed. British anthropologist Susan Drucker-Brown observes that this was particularly the case in the Mamprugu kingdom of Ghana before the nineteenth century.³² With the passage of time and the exposure of the African "primitive" way of life to world civilisation, public execution of accused witches has now been replaced with a more humane system of punishment. Apart from insults, beatings and torture, it has become a widespread practice in Africa for people accused of witchcraft to be banished from their own villages by community leaders. In the wake of accusations and ensuing threats of violence, it is possible for an accused witch to save her life by relocating to one of the six witch camps in northern Ghana. While such camps may be seen to be providing sanctuary and safety for the accused, they are equally perceived as "prisons" where residents are deprived of their liberties and are also subjected to

Geschiere P. 1997. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Virginia: The University Press of Virginia.

28 Comaroff and Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction"; Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*.

29 Adinkrah M. 2015. *Witchcraft, Witches and Violence in Ghana*. New York: Berghahn Books.

30 Drucker-Brown, "Mamprusi Witchcraft, Subversion and Changing Gender Relations".

31 Drucker-Brown, "Mamprusi Witchcraft, Subversion and Changing Gender Relations".

32 Badoe, "What Makes a Woman a Witch?"

exploitation. Yet others see the camps as serving both purposes; of “prison” and of “sanctuary”. Anthropologist Alexandra Crampton shares the later view when he writes that the witch camps are places “to which the accused may flee for protection where they are also effectively imprisoned if their family or community refuses to let them return”.³³

Currently, the witch camps are six, all located in the northern region of Ghana. Three of the camps (Gushegu, Nabuli and Kpatinga) are located the Gushegu district. The Gambaga witch camp is in the East Mamprusi district while Gnani and Kukuo camps are found in Yendi and Nanumba South districts respectively. Most of these camps have been in existence for several decades. During my field interviews in the camps, it was revealed that some of the camps are over hundred years old. Data gathered from the fieldwork indicates that the total population of residents in all the six camps is approximately a little below one thousand people. It must be acknowledged that the provision of accurate population figures for the camps is difficult because of the fluid and flexible nature of admission into the camps and subsequent reintegration into society. For each of the camps, admissions may be done on daily, weekly or even monthly basis. Similarly, there is no any stipulated time for reintegration, therefore accused witches may be returned to their families or communities as and when conditions are safe for such return or reintegration.

Apart from the Kukuo witch camp that has expanded or developed into a village status, the rest of the camps are suburbs of the respective villages that accommodate them. The camps are made up of small mud huts or compounds with thatch roofs characteristic of the housing architecture in northern Ghana. A typical living compound in the camp is occupied by a minimum of one and as many as four accused witches. In *Spell Bound: Inside West Africa's Witch Camps*, journalist and writer Karen Palmer, presents a graphic description of the nature of living compounds being occupied by the accused witches in the Gambaga witch camp:

There was almost nothing to denote that the tight circle of huts where they live was different from the rest of the village, except that the mud homes were more compact than the rest populated only by women and surrounded by mud walls built low enough that neighbours could easily spy in.³⁴

Except for the Gushegu witch camp, all the remaining camps are operated and supervised by *tindaamba* (earth priests). While village chiefs are political and ceremonial heads, the *tindaamba* are spiritual leaders, who are principally preoccupied with keeping the land-gods in “good shape” by offering the needed pacificatory rituals whenever the gods are deemed angry. Although the camps provide physical protection for the accused witches, they have, from time immemorial, been recognised as spiritual shrines in the villages where they are located. Except for Gambaga, where the village chief – the Gambarana – is also the custodian or priest of the camp, each

33 Crampton A. 2013. “No Peace in the House: Witchcraft accusations as an ‘old woman’s problem’ in Ghana”, *Anthropology & Aging Quarterly* 34(2):99.

34 Palmer K. 2010. *Spellbound: Inside West Africa's Witch Camps*. New York: Free Press, 29.

17. An anthropological study of "witch camps" and human rights

of the other four camps has a custodian who is technically different from the village chief. Each witch camp has a leader who is the "queen of the witches".³⁵ In local parlance, the queen is addressed as *magazia* (or *gazia*). My informants in all the camps told me that it is the responsibility of the camp custodian to appoint the *magazia*. Overall, the *magazia* serves as the principal coordinator or "liaison officer" between the custodian and the other residents of the camp.

Life is very rudimentary in the camps. The major economic activity in all the camps is peasant or subsistence farming. The women provide farm labour for natives in the host community in exchange for foodstuffs and sometimes money. They help villagers to plant their crops during the start of the farming season and are also called upon to provide labour when it is time for harvesting. The custodian of the camp and his family also rely on the labour of the women in exchange for the protection that is accorded them. But he also gives them foodstuffs during harvesting, in exchange for their labour services during the farming season. For some of the women, their families, particularly their biological children and grandchildren, have not abandoned them. Occasionally, they visit their mothers in the camps to provide foodstuffs. To enhance their livelihood, the women also engage in other economic activities such as harvesting of firewood from the bush, picking of left-over foodstuffs (e.g. corn, legumes) from the market as well as petty trading, such as sale of soap, waist-beads, shea butter, kola nuts and other goods.

A major challenge in all of the witch camps has to do with old age and its accompanying frequent sicknesses. This presents an inevitable worry to the residents, as it threatens their ability to engage in any serious economic activity, hence constituting a threat to their very essence of livelihood. In response to this challenge, some of the children and grandchildren of the accused witches are brought to live with them, in order to provide companionship and other forms of support. The livelihood support packages received from family members and other external donors constitute an important coping strategy for the camp inhabitants. The major external livelihood support for residents of these camps often comes from churches and development NGOs.

An important economic or livelihood system that prevails in all the witch camps is what may be referred to as an "economy of sharing" or "collaborative economy".³⁶ Typically, the women live on the sheer benevolence of and mutual dependence on one another. This is particularly the case in moments of difficulty and need. Here, the women practise the anthropological sense of reciprocity. They share their foodstuffs and ingredients brought to them by their children with friends or next-door neighbours. This is done on purely altruistic terms, and there is no immediate obligation to return the favour. On another day, when the giver runs out of corn

35 Palmer, *Spellbound: Inside West Africa's Witch Camps*, 29.

36 Dredge D and Szilvia G (eds). 2017. *Collaborative Economy*. New York: Springer; Hamari J, Sjöklint M and Ukkonen A. 2015. "The Sharing Economy: Why People Participate in Collaborative Consumption", *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 14(4):90-103.

flour in the process of preparing a meal, the receiver feels obligated and willing to provide similar support to maintain and probably strengthen the existing symbiotic relationship. It is important to note that although the women are under the custodianship and protection of the earth priests, neither the priests nor any village opinion leaders control or regulate the economic activities of these women. Here I describe the earth priests as custodians because they “own” the camps and offer full protection – both physical and spiritual – to the camp inhabitants. Like other native villagers, the women are free to engage in any economic activity of their choice, provided they are physically strong and have the requisite wherewithal. Once in the camp, their right to life, worship, work and movement is fully protected and guaranteed.

WITCH CAMPS AS “PRISONS”?

Reports of human rights organisations, the media and non-governmental institutions often seek to portray conditions in the witch camps as very denigrating to the dignity of those who occupy them. Individuals and NGOs wishing to attract public attention to the camps often designate them as unpleasant and life-threatening sites, where all aspects of life are regimented by the custodians. These NGOs and human rights organisations who paint a gloomy picture about life in the camp often tend to liken these camps to “prisons”, where accused witches are “incarcerated” and made to live in conditions repugnant to human dignity. According to ActionAid, “The witch camps are effectively women’s prisons where inmates have been given no trial, have no right of appeal but have received a life sentence.”³⁷ Interestingly, the accused women living in the camps and the local community people perceive the camps differently. Contrary to reports of human rights organisations and NGOs, the local people do not perceive these camps as prisons. They do not believe that the camps are places of exploitation and human rights abuses.

Conceiving witch camps as prisons effectively seeks to place them under a category of what Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman and French philosopher Michel Foucault³⁸ refer to as “total institutions” or “complete and austere institutions”, respectively. A pertinent question one might ask is whether these witch camps can technically be classified as prisons. Any attempt to deal with this question might require us to revisit the conceptual characteristics of total institutions.

In the 1950s, Erving Goffman studied the social world of patients or “inmates” at the St. Elizabeth Hospital in Washington, D.C. He was later to designate such cut-off or physically confined worlds as “total institutions”.³⁹ A “total institution”, according to Goffman, “may be defined as a place of residence and work where

37 Dredge and Szilvia, *Collaborative Economy*; Hamari, Sjoikint and Ukkonen, “The Sharing Economy: Why People Participate in Collaborative Consumption”, *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 14(4):90-103.

38 Goffman, *Asylums*; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

39 Goffman, *Asylums*.

17. An anthropological study of "witch camps" and human rights

a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life."⁴⁰ In the light of this definition, Goffman identifies five main categories or variations of total institutions. According to him, certain institutions accommodate persons who are seen to be "both incapable and harmless".⁴¹ Goffman mentions homes that accommodate orphans and the blind as typical examples of such institutions. The second category of total institutions are made up of places that accommodate people who are deemed "to be both incapable of looking after themselves and a threat to the community".⁴² although such threat may be unconscious and unintended. Psychiatric hospitals are classified under this category. The third category of total institutions are those that provide asylum to people considered potentially dangerous to society. The danger or threat posed by such persons is considered an intentional one. Goffman identifies concentration and prisoners of war camps as belonging to this category of establishment. The fourth and fifth categories are those institutions that are, respectively, established "to pursue work-like task and justify themselves only on these instrumental grounds: army barracks ... boarding schools"⁴³ and those "establishments designed as retreats from the world even while often serving also as training stations for the religious; examples are abbeys, monasteries".⁴⁴ Total institutions are defined by certain essential characteristics. These features largely help to classify groupings or establishments as total institutions or otherwise, bearing in mind a preliminary caution by Goffman that such categorisation is not exhaustive.

The first characteristic of a total institution is the central domiciliation of all aspects of life. In ordinary life, an individual chooses where to work, eat and play. All things being equal, there is no any restriction on the individual regarding all these aspects of social life, and there is no single authority that strictly controls when and how these aspects of life should be carried out. On the contrary, in a total institution an individual has no luxury to determine where and with whom to work and play. As Goffman observes, "all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority."⁴⁵

Secondly, all inmates are treated in the same manner and are, robotically, expected to engage in similar or same work together. All daily activities are carried out in the presence and company of many other colleagues. This feature contradicts the letter and spirit of ordinary societal life, whereby an individual may choose to postpone the performance of an activity to a time best suited for him without an imposition of sanction(s) from any authority. Outside a total institution, a person has the liberty to choose the type of work he wants to do and with whom to do it.

40 Goffman, *Asylums*.

41 Goffman, *Asylums*, 4.

42 Goffman, *Asylums*, 4.

43 Goffman, *Asylums*, 5.

44 Goffman, *Asylums*, 5.

45 Goffman, *Asylums*, 6.

Thirdly, Goffman emphasises that, in total institutions, all stages “of the day’s activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials”.⁴⁶ Unlike an individual in ordinary social life who, all things being equal, has the right and luxury to vary the sequence and spacing of his daily activities, an inmate residing in a total institution does not design his or her daily work itinerary. Inmates are only required to abide by a certain work plan – a set of activities to be performed for a day. All activities are carefully and tightly organised to be carried out at specific times. A crucial point to emphasise here is the fact that the tight work schedule put in place by authorities is to be strictly followed without any question or deviation in order not to attract any penalty. In the process of carrying out the activities, inmates are kept under strict surveillance by a superior authority Goffman calls “staff”.⁴⁷ He argues that these two groups, staff and inmates, are not only locked up in a supervisory relationship, but also act and behave in ways that clearly manifest an antagonistic or hostile relationship.

All in all, another vital characteristic of total institution is that activities are collated and documented as one “single rational plan”.⁴⁸ This single plan is aimed at meeting or fulfilling the aspirations and objectives of the institution. We need to be careful in our attempt to label a place as total institution because, as Goffman rightly points out, some individual features may be present in ordinary social settings, but they may not be sufficient to categorise such places as total institutions. For example, a large household made up of several family members may live in a fenced or closed home, but that may not be sufficient to designate members as “inmates” living in a total institution, because “these persons are not collectively regimented and do not march through the day’s activities in the immediate company of a batch of similar others”.⁴⁹

Because inmates of total institutions move and work in bloc, they are usually left to the supervision of the staff who often create a status barrier between the inmates and themselves. A key characteristic of prisons is that the inmates are cut-off geographically and socially from the outside world. Movement outside the confined, enclosed structure is highly censored and there may be less or even no opportunity for social contact and communication between the world of the inmate and that of the outside world. In many of these institutions, visitors may not be allowed into the enclosed yard to have direct contact with the inmates, while any attempt by the inmate to mingle with the outside world is also consciously and severely curtailed. Interestingly, the staff not only limit the contact of the inmates with the outside social world, but also consciously seek to create a superior-inferior

46 Goffman, *Asylums*, 6.

47 Goffman, *Asylums*, 6. Goffman uses the term “staff” to denote supervisors or people who guard inmates in a total institution.

48 Goffman, *Asylums*, 6.

49 Goffman, *Asylums*, 6.

17. An anthropological study of "witch camps" and human rights

binary distance. Consequently, "social mobility between the two strata is grossly restricted; social distance is typically great and often formally prescribed."⁵⁰

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault outlines certain attributes that are characteristic of inmates' social life in austere institutions.⁵¹ One self-evident truth about prison is the fact that it takes away or deprives its inmates of certain fundamental rights and liberties, such as freedom of movement, choice, association, and work. For Foucault, "the prison must be an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus: it must assume responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind."⁵² The focus of the prison is to instill in its inmates complete and uninterrupted discipline – what Foucault refers to as "unceasing discipline".⁵³ Besides, the prison or total institution is supposed to exert a total and absolute power over its inmates to bring about an unfailing compliance with instructions or directives. The effect of this absolute or totalizing power of the prison is that it leads to the attainment of "despotic discipline".⁵⁴

American sociologist and criminologist Gresham Sykes, carried out an ethnographic study of the New Jersey State Prison, a maximum-security facility, in the United States. In his work, he provided a detailed ethnographic account of the dynamics of prison life, as opposed to ordinary social life in a free society. Consequently, in *The Society of Captives*, he identified some "pains of imprisonment" that characterise inmates' lives in prisons.⁵⁵ He suggested that in view of the regimentation and totalising nature of prison life, the inmate is deprived of several rights and privileges that are considered highly necessary for meaningful existence in everyday social life. Such deprivations include those relating to liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security.⁵⁶

Having gained some insights into the conceptual intricacies of prison as a total institution, it may be necessary at this stage to compare the life of accused witches in the witch camps and that of the inmates in total or penal institutions. My engagement with district-level officials, village opinion leaders, custodians and, more importantly, the inhabitants of the camps during fieldwork revealed one obvious fact: the witch camps are there to provide shelter and protection to any accused witch who flees her community for fear of being harmed or killed. All the camps, except Gushegu, are associated with earth shrines. The women owe their very existence in the camps to the shrines. Some people accused of witchcraft report

50 Goffman, *Asylums*, 7-8.

51 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

52 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 235.

53 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 236.

54 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 236.

55 Sykes GM. 1958. *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

56 Sykes, *The Society of Captives*.

to the camp voluntarily to have their “bellies cleansed of witchcraft”. In times of accusation – where there is denial of witchcraft on the part of the accused – both the accuser and the accused report to the shrine with their chicken, accompanied by their relatives to witness the rituals for a test of innocence, known as *pori pobu* (which literally means “taking an oath”). This test may not be carried out where the accused does not challenge the accusation. Each of the parties takes an oath whereupon the earth priest cuts the throat of the chicken and throws them to die. A party is declared guilty if his or her chicken dies on its chest. Dying on its back signifies innocence or acquittal. Any accused who is found guilty is made to drink the shrine water (*bug'kom*), which symbolises the exorcism of the witchcraft spirit. The spiritual significance of the cleansing is to take away the witchcraft powers of the accused and to give a psychological assurance to society that the spiritual powers of the accused have been deactivated. After the cleansing, it is the responsibility of the accused person and her family to decide whether she is taking residence in the camp or going back home.

Once a person is admitted to the camp, the earth priest makes land available for the relatives to put up a living hut for their kinsman or kinswoman if there is no ready accommodation. A first-time visitor to the camps might be expecting to see the accused witches living in a gated or enclosed community. The camps are neither walled nor gated. The witch camps are open spaces or specific areas in the host community designated for the residence of the accused witches. In some of the villages, especially Gambaga, where these camps are located, the houses of the accused people are merged with those of the natives, such that it becomes difficult to identify the house of an accused from that of an ordinary community member.

Apart from the fact that the women live, work and eat independently in their separate huts, they also decide on the particular economic activity in which they want to engage, as well as the most suitable time for the pursuit of such an activity. The earth priest of the camp or the village chief does not dictate the kind of work they should do for livelihood. Unlike the case inmates in a prison or total institution, residents of the witch camps are not compelled to move and work in blocs, neither are they coerced to execute the same kind of activities. Whilst engaged in economic transactions in the market or work on people's farms, the “witches” are not kept under monitoring and supervision – in other words, surveillance – by any “staff”. Furthermore, there is no tight work schedule or plan designed by the custodians of these camps for execution, except in occasional circumstances when the custodians ask the women to work on their farms. Besides, the women make their independent decisions regarding the spacing or postponement of their own daily or weekly activities. A resident of the camp may decide not to work at all, if she so desires, provided she can cope with the basic subsistence through subventions from other sources including her family.

Secondly, the camp inhabitants are not restricted in terms of their movement. The accused witches visit the homes of ordinary community members to work and converse with them. On daily basis, they mingle with natives of the host community

17. An anthropological study of "witch camps" and human rights

to buy and sell. They are free to attend hospitals, markets, funerals, festivals and other ceremonial events organised in the host communities and beyond. They do all these without any direct observation and supervision of "staff". Just like other community members, the women can travel to other towns or villages to visit friends and family members, and for purposes of exchange transactions. Community members also have unrestricted access to the camps. They visit the camp to greet, buy and sell, and to invite the women to offer their labour services.

The camp inhabitants relate very well with the custodians. In terms of work, there is no any supervisory relationship. The custodian is not bothered about what the women do for a living. The women view the custodian as their "husband" and he, accordingly, treats them as his "wives". He interacts with them on very friendly terms, advises them, responds kindly to their requests in moments of difficulty and offers them full protection. An opinion leader in the Kukuio camp indicated that the earth shrine forbids the custodian to disrespect or show any form of antagonistic attitude towards the accused witches living in his custody. Violation of this requirement is often met with sanctions dispensed from the ancestral world. Therefore, behaviours and attitudes that portray antagonistic relationship between prison "inmates" and "staff" are not discernible in the witch camps.

It would constitute a mark of dishonesty to completely deny the fact that there is suffering in the camps, particularly in relation to livelihood. Although a majority of the accused witches interviewed regard the camps as places of sanctuary that guarantee their safety and therefore expressed their desire to remain there, some of them indicated that the camps are also places of suffering, where basic subsistence is a challenge. For instance, when asked about her experience in the witch camp, Tani (not real name), an accused witch living in the Kpatinga witch camp, responded as follows: "I see the camp as both a place of protection and suffering. It is a place of protection because stranded, banished women like me have sought asylum in this place and we are protected from any harm from our village kinsmen. It is also a place of suffering because we endure economic hardships. We arrived here with nothing. So, it has not been easy to cope with livelihood. Life is hard here."⁵⁷ Banishment comes with pains and some amount of restriction. The women feel deprived of their right to live in their own villages when community leaders expel them. However, once the women take residence in the witch camps, they are literally regarded as members of the host community and this gives them the license to freely mix and interact with other community members. Consequently, the "confined" women are accorded their full rights and privileges in the host communities. Therefore, all of the "pains of imprisonment"⁵⁸ attributed to correctional or custodial institutions, such as deprivation of liberty, autonomy, goods, services, security and intimate relationships are not manifested in the camps. The camp inhabitants reserve the

57 Interview with Madam Tani, an informant, in the Gambaga witch camp by S Mutaru, Gambaga, Ghana, January 2017.

58 Interview with Madam Tani.

right to receive visitors in their rooms, enter into relationships with any member of society and procure any goods and services that are naturally accessible. During interviews, it was revealed that some of the accused witches who arrive as young women sometimes date and marry natives of the host community. Similarly, young girls who live with their grandmothers as caretakers sometimes get married to community members of their choice. My personal observation of social life in all the witch camps revealed that there is no any form of control or regimentation in the way the women live.

Unlike a penal institution, a witch camp is not to be regarded as an “exhaustive disciplinary apparatus”.⁵⁹ The residents are only there to have their lives protected against possible harm in their home communities. Once admitted, their main concern now becomes how to sustain their subsistence and work to meet other basic demands for minimal survival. Through my interviews, it became clear that the women in the camps are not abandoned completely, neither are they leading lives near death. Some members of their family occasionally visit and bring them foodstuffs and money, while they also make time to go and visit relatives at home. Many of those women sent there, for test of innocence especially, arrive in very healthy condition. One of the women I interviewed in the Gambaga camp told me she has been living there for the past thirty years.

Until my fieldwork in the witch camps, I shared the rights-based assessment that these camps were sites of deprivation of liberties, exploitation and human rights violation. However, I now argue that this constitutes a lopsided (or perhaps invalid) judgment of the camps. Village opinion leaders and, more importantly, the accused witches themselves, refute the prison-like conditions and rights violation and exploitation often attributed to the camps. Both the camp inhabitants and community opinion leaders maintain that the camps are the first point of call for protection when the lives of the accused witches come under threat in their communities during times of accusation. It is in this light that the use of the term “inmates” to describe the residents of these camps may be seen as a misnomer.

Thus, I find it quite appropriate to conclude this chapter with a long quotation taken from the field notes I compiled while conducting interviews in Gambaga. A resident pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Gambaga who has worked directly with the Gambaga witch camp for more than ten years revealed his observations concerning life in the camp:

The camp is a safe haven for accused women being persecuted. It is the journalists and the media people who portray the camp as a place of suffering. The Gambarana does not force people to come there and he does not force accused people to stay. They come on their own for protection. After which you can go home if you like. Those whose communities are not ready to accept them back are living there. Nobody regulates the economic activities of the women in the camp. They can do what is naturally possible for them to make a living. They can do any work provided it is

⁵⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 235.

17. An anthropological study of "witch camps" and human rights

legally and socially acceptable in society. They are free to go anywhere. They trade in Gambaga and Nalerigu markets. There is no restriction on their freedom except that they must inform the custodian or the church if they are travelling outside Gambaga. This is important because if anyone or any family member comes to ask of her, we should be able to tell her whereabouts. Apart from this, the women are as free as any other person in the village.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

That the belief in witchcraft is endemic in Africa is not an issue in contention. However, this belief system predates colonial Africa, when the Americans and their Europeans counterparts subjected people accused of witchcraft to horrific and dehumanising treatment, including death sentences. In the present-day world, Africa has surpassed Europe and America in terms of the intensity in beliefs and practices relating to witchcraft. The problem with witchcraft in postcolonial Africa is not about the belief system, but rather the way people react to accusations. The accused are often subjected to various forms and degrees of ordeal including stoning, burning of property, banishment, and sometimes death. Unfortunately, violations of human rights of the accused persist on the continent, despite the various attempts made in putting in place legal frameworks at national, regional and international levels to deal with such aberrations.

In spite of its enviable economic status as a middle-income country with high literacy rate and a respectable democratic pedigree, Ghana is still recognised as one of the countries in Africa where belief in witchcraft is endemic. As with other countries in Africa, people accused of witchcraft in Ghana are usually maltreated by community members. In northern Ghana, the presence of patriarchal structures reinforces gender-based accusation of witchcraft, with the result that an accused woman is left with no option than to flee to one of the witch camps where her safety is guaranteed. The establishment of these camps is a local containment strategy for witchcraft accusations. This system of containing witchcraft is obviously more benign than the pre-nineteenth century approach where offenders were executed. Nonetheless, rights-based organisations and activists, development NGOs, media personnel and state authorities have viewed these camps with suspicion and disdain. Reports produced on the witch camps by the so-called human rights campaigners often seek to bastardise the camps, portraying them as penal institutions, zones of exploitation, danger, human rights violations and extreme suffering.

In this chapter, I have argued that far from viewing these camps as total or penal institutions, they are places that provide sanctuary, guaranteed safety and security to the accused witches. Contrasting this theoretical frame – the notion of total institution – with empirical qualitative data and observations obtained from the

⁶⁰ Interview with the Pastor of the Presbyterian Church by S Mutaru, Gambaga, Ghana, 12 March 2017.

camps, the evidence does not support the rights-based perspectival designation of the camps as “prisons” or “austere institutions” that superintend over extreme suffering, maltreatment and violation of rights. This chapter provides readers with a comprehensive insight into the nature and functions of witch camps in Ghana. Further, it should serve as an “eye-opener” in terms of recommendations for further anthropological inquiry. As I have indicated, witch camps are rare in the African continent and have therefore been less explored. The findings of this study should generate interest among latter-day anthropologists and motivate them to do further investigation into this relatively grey area of African witchcraft.