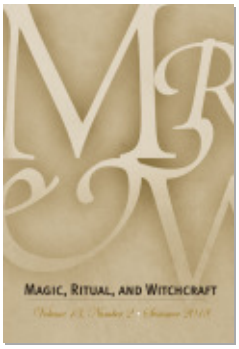
Witchcraft as a Social Diagnosis: Traditional Ghanaian Beliefs and Global Health by Roxane Richter, Thomas Flowers, and Elias Bongmba (review)



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The MMCM drew to a close soon after. In her conclusions, Garner challenges the reader not to think of the meetings (and especially their ending) in terms of successes or failures, but instead to think through the ways that the meetings opened up space to come to more considered ways of relating. *To Come to a Better Understanding* is a helpful contribution to Indigenous studies as a text that helps readers to engage in a methodology and alternative historical context when thinking about activism, ritual, spirituality, and sociocultural practices.

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ROXANE RICHTER, THOMAS FLOWERS, and ELIAS BONGMBA. *Witchcraft as a Social Diagnosis: Traditional Ghanaian Beliefs and Global Health*. London: Lexington Books, 2017. Pp. xx + 148.

In northern Ghana there are about seven "witch camps" or "witch villages," where women who have been accused of witchcraft and expelled from their communities find asylum. Reports estimate that the total number of women in such places is around one thousand. Some of these women have children with them, but their estimated numbers vary enormously. Most of the women are between forty and seventy years of age. About one percent of the residents in the camps are men, either accused witches themselves or relatives/partners of the women. The camps fall under the authority of local chiefs and/or traditional priests who guarantee the safety of the inhabitants and provide medicine to clear them of witchcraft. When they arrive at the camps, the women are often tested for the presence of witchcraft.

The local people living in the towns where the camps are situated do not tend to worry about the presence of these "witches" and live with them in relative harmony. The women earn a living through petty trading, doing odd jobs at the market, and working on the farms of the local population. In theory, after some time the women can return to their communities if they wish, once the air has cleared, but most refuse to return, out of fear of violence or worse. They prefer to remain in exile. Several attempts by political authorities and humanitarian organizations to bring the women back to their homes have failed in the past.

These are some general features of the witch camps, though there are many details that differ locally. The literature on these camps suggests that they are not a recent phenomenon, but that sanctuaries for expelled witches

existed already in the precolonial period. The expulsion and persecution of suspected witches seems, however, to have increased in the past few decades. It is further believed that Ghana is the only country in the world where such witch camps exist.

This brief description will probably "fascinate" historians who study witchcraft beliefs and practices in Europe between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, including the readers of this journal. Ghana's witch camps, with their public management of occult evil magic, might appear as a phenomenon from their own distant past, occurring in present day Africa. The camps present themselves as locations where anthropologists and historians could meet and work together, as was the case in the 1970s and 1980s.

In Ghana, however, the camps are first of all the subject of heated debate between politicians, human rights activists, and humanitarian organizations such as NGOs and churches. Understandably, these debates are fuelled by journalists' reports, Internet blogs, and students attracted by this dramatic phenomenon who choose the camps as a topic for their theses. By now, the literature on the camps, popular as well as academic, is overwhelming. The book under review, *Witchcraft as a Social Diagnosis* by Roxane Richter and co-authors, is part of this growing interest in the plight of women in these witch camps. Two of the authors (Richter and Flowers) are medical doctors and prominent members of World Mission Possible, a nonprofit organization that "offers vision and medical care to the underserved in rural communities and indigent in sixteen nations." The third author, Bongmba, is a Christian theologian.

The title of the book is somewhat misleading; it suggests that the authors use the phenomenon of witchcraft as a lens or perspective for exploring social conditions in local communities. But the book is rather an engaging plea for relieving the plight of marginalized and stigmatized women with an emphasis on social and medical suffering. The authors' field location is the witch camp near Gbani, a market town in the vicinity of Yendi, the traditional capital of the Dagomba people in northern Ghana.

In Chapter 1, the authors sketch a historical overview of the context of religious multiplicity in which witchcraft and the camps occurred. The second chapter describes the Gbani camp and its residents. In Chapter 3, they contrast biomedical concepts of albinism and endemic diseases (such as TB, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and mental illness) with local witchcraft explanations of these conditions. The biomedical perspective is continued in Chapter 4, which relates the clinical interventions and medical support that the authors offered to the camp's inhabitants. In the fifth chapter, the authors discuss the "pathologies of prejudice" that led to the expulsion of the accused women

from their communities. Key concepts in this reflection are "structural violence," gender and feminism, and elder abuse. The final chapter looks at the future and offers ten recommendations for putting an end to this form of extreme gender inequity.

The merit of this account is its engaged support of Ghana's outcasts and its attempt to view the problem in its historical and cultural context. One of its major conclusions is that the witch village (a term they prefer over "camp" to emphasize its long-term character) is only a symptom; the real *problem* is witchcraft (its beliefs and its practices). To remove the shame of the camps, the belief in witchcraft needs to be demystified. Their plea for an end to the inhumane treatment of so-called witches is trenchantly summarized in this quote from Abdul-Karim Mohammed Awaf:

> One may not be far from the truth to suggest that most cultural practices are unfavorable to women in northern Ghana as they continue to go through outmoded widowhood rites and do not have any right to inherit properties of their parents including land ownership. It is also disheartening to know that in the northern part of Ghana, women who are domineering and assertive are easily branded witches most especially when they are successful in their businesses. Civil society groups must step up efforts to demystify the myth surrounding the age old concept of witchcraft which seems not to have any empirical basis.[1]

Unfortunately, a proper anthropological analysis of what belief in witchcraft is and does and how accusations and maltreatment erupt in concrete social and familial contexts is missing in this publication. The little ethnographic evidence presented in this book consists of brief excerpts of nineteen one-to-one interviews with residents in the camp. Most excerpts provide only one or two sentences with the women's point of view regarding the origin of the accusation, before they move on to thank the doctors for their help and support. I do not want to belittle the achievements of the authors—on the contrary—but it should be clear that their contribution to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of witchcraft beliefs in northern Ghana is limited.

We should, however, not blame them for this. Studies that examine witchcraft accusations in the context of everyday family life and village politics, based on the anthropological approach of participant observation over a

1. Abdul-Karim Mohammed Awaf, "Witches Camps in Northern Ghana-Reality or an Illusion?" *Modern Ghana*, March 26, 2015, http://www.modernghana.com/news/607311/witches-camps-in-northern-ghana-reality-or-an-illusion.html.

lengthy period of time, are rare, also in northern Ghana. It is easier to interview women in a witch camp during a visit than to spend a long time in a community waiting for events to happen among people one has become acquainted with. During my own research in one extended family in southern Ghana, witchcraft accusations and fears mainly expressed secretly in gossip and came to my attention through confidential conversations I had with younger and middle-aged people. The elders seemed upset and angry when I cautiously broached the topic and refused to speak about it.[2] Susan Drucker-Brown, who worked among Mamprusi people north of Gbani, remarked that witchcraft was not a topic to be mentioned casually: "to mention witchcraft was to admit an interest" in it.[3] The little we know about witchcraft in its "natural context" of everyday life is mostly based on information from key informants and on big dramatic cases that led to expulsion, about which one-sided *stories* are collected. I italicize the word "stories" because "narrativization" tends to be a form for reworking events into a coherent legitimization of the victim's present position and a way of finding sympathy and support from listeners.

From accounts by anthropologists who have conducted research in communities in the region, it appears that witchcraft is most of all seen as a problem of men losing control over their world of male superiority.[4] In Drucker-Brown's words:

> [E]conomic necessity decrees that they [women] must farm, travel and trade in order to provide for their families. This increasing autonomy is paralleled by frustration among men, who see their own activities threatened as those of their wives expand. Belief in the increased frequency and virulence of witchcraft, as well as new ways of dealing with witches, reflects not so much a change in the nature of female power as a loss of control by Mamprusi men over their own economic and political environment. The need of men for women's economic support, and the increasing autonomy of women which that implies, conflict with the traditional definition of women as ideally controlled by men.[5]

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2. Wolf Bleek, *Marriage, Inheritance and Witchcraft: A Case Study of a Rural Ghanaian Family* (Leiden: Africa Study-Centre, 1975).

3. Susan Drucker-Brown, "Mamprusi Witchcraft, Subversion and Changing Gender Relations," *Africa* 63, no. 4 (1993): 533.

4. See Drucker-Brown, "Mamprusi Witchcraft," 531–49; Bernhard M. Bierlich, *The Problem of Money: African Agency and Western Medicine in Northern Ghana* (New York: Berg Hahn Books, 2007); Jon P. Kirby, "Ghana Witches: Scratch Where it Itches," in *Mission and Culture: The Luis J. Lutzbetak Lectures*, ed. Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2012), 189–223.

5. Drucker-Brown, "Mamprusi Witchcraft," 547.

The picture of helpless victims in the camps may need some retouching. A thorough anthropological ethnographic interpretation of the ostracism that some women in northern Ghana undergo is long overdue. Such new insights are urgently needed to come to grips with the "symptom" of witch camps in an effective and more culturally sensitive way.

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NANCY MANDEVILLE CACIOLA. *Afterlives: The Return of the Dead in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. Pp. xviii + 363.

As the one fact of life about which there is certainty, death has always played a major role in cultural and religious traditions around the world; this is perhaps especially true of the Christian Middle Ages. Christianity is a religion fundamentally based on death: Christ was born as a human being in order to cleanse humanity of sin through his death, and thus also free humanity of mortality (itself arising from sin) by providing the possibility of the soul's resurrection in heaven. There remained, however, the possibility of a life after death: in hell, and as the medieval centuries wore on, in other forms and places. In an age of low life expectancy, regular outbreaks of epidemics, and even at the best of times, high levels of infant, child, and maternal mortality, death was a constant presence in everyday life, and so too were the dead.

In a manner similar to Thomas Laqueur in his recent magnum opus, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (2015), Nancy Mandeville Caciola begins her book with the proposition that "the dead are quite intimately revelatory of the living," since "the social constructs that are built upon the fact of mortality are the chief instruments of culture" (6). Unlike most of the now vast body of scholarship (chiefly in French and German) that has examined memorial cultures, burial and other rites, testamentary practices, and hortatory and artistic artifacts like the *ars moriendi* and *Dance of Death* traditions, Caciola is concerned principally with the dead themselves as they were conceived of as presences in the society of the living, and as they were imagined to inhabit a community of the dead. While this perspective has, it is true, received less attention than it might have, her statement that the importance of the dead has received insufficient weight in medievalist scholarship is a bit odd (5): English-language scholarship has not been much enthused with the subject, it is true, but certainly the scholarly traditions in France and Germany in particular—and it is clear from her footnotes