

What makes a woman a witch?

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“Suicide bombers”; “Girl accused of using witchcraft”; “African kids sacrificed in UK Churches”: such headlines might seem to be unlikely fodder for news in British papers. But at a time when London, the city in which I live, has experienced the trauma of a terrorist attack, and three Angolan refugees here have been convicted of child cruelty for torturing and threatening to kill a child in their care whom they believed was a witch, it’s not surprising that British politicians are talking about “our” way of life being under threat. Barbarism, it seems, is snapping at our heels. The heart of darkness is encroaching on the capital city. At a time when the social consequences of globalisation are being felt by migrant and indigenous communities throughout the world, it seems pertinent to try and understand what it must be like to be made a scapegoat for social ills: in other words, what it means to be a “witch”.

This article is taken from a much longer report, which I wrote for the Mapping Sexualities Project¹ over a five-month period in Ghana (between October 2004 and April 2005). The report was based on research I conducted in Gambaga in the Northern Region of Ghana, from early November to the beginning of December 2004. Here I summarise some of the findings from my larger report, highlighting the narrative of Asara Azindow, one of nineteen people I interviewed and whose story I recorded in the “witches’ camp” in Gambaga.

Academic ethnographers and historiographers interested in an appraisal of relevant works pertinent to the region, as well as a detailed analysis and review of witchcraft discourse in Africa, are referred to the longer report, which, as part of a preliminary feminist cultural studies project, is very possibly the first in the field of sexuality carried out by a team of African researchers. Consequently, the research and analysis is framed within the context of contemporary feminist anthropology. In this field, the work of Lila Abu-Lughod is of particular interest to me. In her introduction to her innovative ethnography on the lives of Bedouin women, in which she weaves stories told by women together with major themes in their lives, Abu-Lughod advocates writing against “culture” as



a means of challenging the generalisations and objectification of subjects endemic to mainstream anthropology (1993: 13). By interrogating her own position as a Muslim woman of American and Palestinian heritage, writing for a predominantly academic Western audience, Abu-Lughod crafts an ethnographic narrative that challenges standard anthropological generalisations about social structure and culture; feminist interpretations of gender relations in non-Western societies; and widely-held understandings of Muslim Arab society. She does this by concentrating on individuals and the particularities of their lives, so that “we may be better able to perceive similarities in all our lives” (1993: 27). Focusing on individuals, she claims, “encourages familiarity rather than distance and helps break down ‘otherness’, for it not only corresponds to the way we ordinarily think about those close to us in our everyday world but also actively facilitates identification with and sympathy towards others” (1993: 30).

Given the limited space available to me in this forum, my priority is to adopt a transdisciplinary approach that examines “culture” alongside economics at the same time as foregrounding the subjectivities of women living as “witches” in Gambaga. In this instance, I focus on Asara Azindow and what her narrative reveals about what it means to be a witch in the Northern Region of Ghana. An extremely successful businesswoman, Asara was accused of witchcraft in 1997 and forced to leave her family and property. To this day, she lives in Gambaga, exiled from her home.

It was in my capacity as a journalist based in London, and holding dual British-Ghanaian nationality, that I first stumbled upon the “witches’ camp” in Gambaga over ten years ago, when I was working as a stringer with the BBC World Service. I’ve managed to keep in touch with the camp through the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, which has been working since the 1960s to ameliorate the conditions of the women living there. More recently, the church has been trying to rehabilitate witches into their home communities. Consequently, the number of inmates at the camp has declined over the past ten years from around 160 to 74, and some of the inmates of the camp I had met on previous visits had returned to their home villages or died.

How the “witches’ camp” came about

The small, provincial town of Gambaga is about 150 kilometres north of Tamale, the capital of the Northern Region of Ghana. Compared to the southern part of the country, the northern sector has been underdeveloped by consecutive governments, and exploited primarily as a source of cheap labour for

the south. The area is rural, with over eighty per cent of the population depending on agriculture for their livelihood (Songore, 1996: 53). There is little industrialisation and a low level of urbanisation, a reality reflected in the seasonal, agricultural work of many women living in and around Gambaga.

According to the Ghana Living Standards Survey, which was first launched in 1987 to monitor the impact of structural adjustment economic programmes on vulnerable groups across the country, the three regions in the northern part of the country have consistently been the hardest hit in terms of poverty. For each of these regions, the percentage of poor people between the early part of the last decade and its end increased dramatically. This is certainly the case for the Northern Region, where nearly 70% of the population is defined as poor. Infant and maternal mortality rates are high and the health and nutritional conditions of its people are among the worst in Ghana (Republic of Ghana, 2000). Although health service provision has improved markedly across the country, overall, the three regions in the northern sector (Upper West, Upper East, and Northern Region) have the lowest doctor per population ratios, and the lowest rate of access to health services.


During the early period of British colonisation of the north in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Gambaga was the capital of the Northern Region, and the centre of Islam for the country.² The brand of Islam usually practised in northern Ghana is a variant of Sunni Islam, from Senegal, which was brought to Ghana by Hausa migrants, via the Fulani conquest of the Hausa in northern Nigeria. According to the present Imam of Gambaga, Alhaji Mesuhna Yahaya, once Muslims were permitted to practise their religion in the royal palace of the Nayiri – the paramount chief of the Mamprusi – it spread throughout the region, co-existing with traditional African animist beliefs.

It is claimed by Alhaji Mesuhna Yahaya and other local oral historians who spoke to me, that prior to the enstoolment of the first Imam of Gambaga, Imam Baba, by the Nayiri Na Bariga in the second half of the nineteenth century, women condemned as witches in northern Ghana were executed. After intervening to save the life of Adissa of Simba, a woman about to be executed for witchcraft, the mosque in Gambaga under the patronage of the Imam became a refuge for alleged witches.³ The mosque was both a place of safety and a location to which women accused of witchcraft could be banished by their families. As the number of accused women grew, their relatives built a collection of compounds made up of thatched mud huts for them, on what was then the outskirts of town. This is where the witches' camp is situated today, a few yards from the chief of Gambaga's palace.



Women accused of or condemned for witchcraft lived under the protective custody of Imam Baba, until his successor quarrelled with the future Nayiri over who should become the next Nayiri of Nalerigu. Furious with the Imam, the Nayiri removed the witches from his care, placing them in the custody of Gambarrana Bawumya, the chief of Gambaga at the time. Since then, women condemned of witchcraft in the region have been given sanctuary by the Gambarrana – the title given to the chief of Gambaga – who places them under the protection of the gods of Gambaga to prevent them from practising witchcraft.

Conducting the fieldwork



The witches' camp in Gambaga is one of four refuges and places of exile for people expelled by their families and communities in the Northern Region of Ghana. While Kuku camp in Bimbila and Nyani in Yendi accommodate both men and women, Kpatinga in Gushiegu and the camp in Gambaga are inhabited exclusively by women. Research carried out in 1998 by the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice in Ghana revealed that out of over a thousand people in refuges for witches in the Northern Region, only thirteen were men. This illustrates clearly the gendered dynamic in witchcraft accusations in northern Ghana, a dynamic that appears to be rooted in a visceral terror of women's procreative power and sexuality. The study of witchcraft is therefore inevitably a study of gender and sexuality, as witches are almost always women in all senses: biologically, socially and culturally.

I arrived in Gambaga early in November with Mr Nachinaba, a veteran research assistant at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Legon. Mr Nachinaba was to be my interpreter for my first week, and was to help me find female interpreters to work with during my period of research in Gambaga.

The Gambarrana, Yahaya Wuni, approved my choice of interpreters: Gladys Lariba,⁴ a member of the Presbyterian Church's team working at the witches' camp, and Aisha Muhammad,⁵ a member of a migrant Hausa family to the region. That same day, with the help of Madam Lariba, I compiled a rough list of about twenty women whose life-stories I thought it would be interesting to record. The age, ethnicity and religion of these women were taken into consideration, so that although the majority of women on the list were of Mamprusi ethnicity, reflecting their numbers in the camp, Fulani, Hausa, Kokomba and Bimoba women were also included; as were a mixture of Christians and Muslims. In spite of their disparate ethnic self-identification, all the women spoke Mampeme, the language of the dominant Mamprusi group. Most of the

residents at the camp were post-menopausal and elderly; nevertheless, some younger inmates were selected to get a sense of what younger women made of life in the camp.

Overall, nineteen women took part in the research. Throughout, I was correctly perceived as an outsider of Akan ethnicity with an “American” accent, acquired through prolonged immersion in European culture.

As protocol demanded, the first life-story I recorded was that of Ma Hawa, the Magazia (spokeswoman) of the Mamprusi women and the overall spokeswoman of the witches. She has been a resident of the camp for over twenty years, and is gradually going blind. As with all the women whose stories I recorded, I began by getting a sense of Ma Hawa’s provenance and family background before inviting her to tell me her life-story. With either Madam Lariba’s or Aisha’s help, I would make a rough estimate of the woman’s age, ascertain her ethnicity and religion, where she was born, the type of work her parents had done, the position of her mother in the hierarchy of her father’s wives, and how many uterine siblings she had. Then I would ask for the name of the village she married into, the number of co-wives she’d had, the number of children she’d given birth to, who had brought her to Gambaga, and how long she had resided at the camp. After I had ascertained these basic facts, I would proceed to record the woman’s life-story.

It was immediately evident that the notion of narrating their life-story was an unusual one for many of the women. Almost all of them asked for further clarification from the interpreter. After a couple of minutes, during which I’d ask the interpreter to let me know what had been said, I would intervene, concerned that the interpreter was beginning to shape the woman’s narrative on her behalf. Stressing that I wanted to hear about the woman’s life in her own words, I would encourage the subject to tell me whatever she thought was important in her life in any order that she wanted.

“Where do I begin?” Ma Hawa asked. “I don’t know how to begin,” said Asana, another subject. “When I grew up nothing eventful happened to me until I was brought to this place,” said a third woman, Tipoa Saibu, highlighting a central theme of almost all the narratives. All the women framed their disparate life stories as a series of events that climaxed in the drama that precipitated their arrival in Gambaga. Whether the subject had chosen Gambaga as a place of refuge and safety, or had been deposited and exiled there by her family, the events that brought her to the witches’ camp and forced her to remain there were an important, defining feature of her life.



All the women's stories were redolent with emotion, and expressed, in varying degrees, a profound sense of loss and separation, anger and rejection, combined with a yearning for ongoing familial contact. Only one of the women interviewed, Awabu Tarana, had no contact with her family whatsoever. This was very unusual.

Culturally, I was very much an outsider, and oblivious to the nuances and niceties of social interaction between Mampole-speaking women in the camp. In fact, at the outset, I was told by Madam Lariba that pursuing a theme of witchcraft discourse about a subject's entrapment of the soul of her victim would be too difficult to discuss. This turned out not to be the case. Nevertheless, through observing a subject's body movements and facial expressions, the sound, tone and texture of her voice, participating in her silences, and witnessing and responding to her tears as they fell, I became an active participant in the conversational triangles as the recordings proceeded.

This was thanks to embracing a methodology advocated by Hollway and Jefferson (2000). Their narrative methodology enabled me to focus on women's voices at the same time as going beyond the surface of their stories to illuminate their emotions and make sense of what they were telling me. It encouraged me to engage creatively with the women's life-stories in analysing the manifold meanings they placed upon their experiences. Using the stories as both text and data opened up a wealth of multi-layered information. Moreover, as a storyteller myself, this methodology played to my best attributes as a researcher and writer, for I'm also an avid listener to other people's stories. I believe that my ability to listen intently and sympathetically, drawing out themes that emerged from the women's stories, was crucial to giving primacy to the voices of women who, though silenced by their communities, were now finally being heard.

Due to the emphasis the women placed on events that had led them to Gambaga, and before developing themes raised in a subject's life-story, I would often clarify the relationships involved in the accusations of witchcraft, in order to get a sense of the social context and motivations concerned.

It was evident from the interviews 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. There, with their brothers and their brothers' many wives in control, they soon became targets of ill will. Also vulnerable were 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. These were the women banished to Gambaga.

An incident halfway through my research further shaped the perspective of my fieldwork by bringing home to me the power of gossip in a small community like Gambaga, as well as the all-pervasive fear of witchcraft, which means that allegations can be made of any woman, irrespective of class and education. This was a brief conversation I had with Mr Nachinaba on a short visit to the Institute of African Studies. He informed me that during a drinking session with a family friend on his last night in Gambaga, he'd been told that Aisha, one of my translators, had been accused of witchcraft three times and had been sent to the Gambarrana for trial by ordeal.⁶ Apparently, Aisha's mother and aunt had also been accused of witchcraft in the past. The aunt's case had been so bad that she had been forced to leave Gambaga and settle in a neighbouring village. Indeed, it was generally believed that the women in Aisha's family were predisposed to witchcraft.

Madam Lariba had already told me about three occasions when she had been suspected of witchcraft, so when I next saw her, I asked if she knew anything about Aisha. It transpired that it was common knowledge in Gambaga that Aisha was suspected of being a witch. Indeed, when Madam Lariba took me to a local *pito* bar so that I could find out what "ordinary" people knew about witchcraft beliefs, a woman I questioned facetiously replied that if I wanted to find out what witches did, I should ask Aisha, as it was well known that she was one of *them!* Of course, when I ventured to ask Aisha if anyone in her family had ever been accused of witchcraft, she replied in the negative.

The case of Asara Azindow

Asara Azindow, a successful businesswoman, was accused of witchcraft along with two other flourishing women entrepreneurs during an outbreak of meningitis in the Northern Region (an almost annual event) in 1997. All three women headed their own households in the market town of Gushiegu, about fifty kilometres north of Tamale. Known locally as "NGOs" because, like non-governmental organisations, they are not subject to government (read "masculine") control, these women were the focus of considerable envy in the town.

During the 1997 epidemic, they were forced to leave the community, seeking refuge in witches' camps in the Northern Region. Asara ended up at Gambaga, where she has resided for eight years, apart from a nine-month period during which she returned home to live with a brother.



Asara was the only fat woman I met and interviewed at the camp. While everyone else there is sinuously lean, their bodies reflecting arduous lives of agricultural labour a breath away from hunger, Asara's voluptuous body tells a different story. She was so affluent before she arrived at Gambaga that she has maintained much of her body weight. However, she is lame, and walks slowly with a limp. Her disability makes physical exertion difficult, and she has learnt to use her business acumen (as well as her sexuality, I suspect) to survive.

Asara is a Dagomba-speaking, Muslim woman in her mid-fifties. She was born in the large village of Gushiegu and married a farmer in Nawohugo, becoming the first of his four wives. They have seven children. Asara left her husband to take care of her mother in Gushiegu when she became ill. She stayed with her mother for ten years. When the old woman died, Asara took over the house, expanding it and building up her businesses. Her husband used to visit her and his children in Gushiegu once in a while, but to all intents and purposes, at the time of Asara's harrowing expulsion from the community, the couple were living separate lives. She told her story as follows:

My grandmother used to run a chop bar. She used to cook rice and sell it. It's thanks to my grandmother that I learnt how to run a successful chop bar in Gushiegu. I then started trading in mangoes. When mangoes were in season, I'd travel out to villages to buy them and return to my village and sell them. After the mango season was over, I'd start selling firewood. I'd hire a tractor, travel out to villages, buy the firewood and then come back to Gushiegu and sell it. I made a lot of money that way and I helped many people.

If you happened to be in need and you came to me for help, I'd help you. Even though I went out of my way to be of use to people, I was never respected. People in the village hated me. They gossiped and said all sorts of things about me, which got me into trouble.

There was a bad outbreak of cerebral spinal meningitis in my village, Gushiegu. It came to Sakogo as well. People in my community thought that I was the cause of the sickness because I lived independently, away from my husband. I was doing fine. Local people called me an "NGO" because I was living independently. There were three women in my neighbourhood of the village that they called "NGOs". People thought that we were responsible for the sickness.

They harassed us and beat us up, and we ran to the chief's house for protection. The police kept us safe for a while, but the next day we had to go home again.



Relatives of the two other women came for them and took them away to other villages. I had nowhere to go because Gushiegu is my village. My husband is in Nawohugo. I can't go back there because I left him a long time ago. I had nowhere to go, so my junior brother decided to bring me to Gambaga.

What is striking about Asara's story is how, as a successful, enterprising businesswoman, she became a target for gossip and enmity in her community. Even though she was generous enough to try and help those around her, she believes that she was never respected: indeed, she claims that the community hated her. Listening to her story, I was made aware of the acute vulnerability of women who choose to head their own households in the region; women audacious enough to live independently of men and any protection men might afford them. It is also clear that living apart from a male partner and operating as a free agent is guaranteed to generate tremendous unease in the community concerned. Such is the level of anxiety surrounding women's sexuality that when it operates independently of male control, it becomes synonymous with dangerous, destructive forces.

When asked about her relationship with her husband, Asara spoke about him in the past tense:

I had a husband who used to visit me before I was accused. When I came here, I was still sexually active with my husband. I separated from my husband because my mother was old and needed someone to look after her. My husband agreed. Whenever my husband wanted me, he'd come to my village and spend time with me.

However, his occasional visits to his first wife in Gusheigu were not enough to prevent her being labelled an "NGO". Not only were these transgressive women in control of their lives, but to make matters worse, adding insult to injury as far as the local gender regimes were concerned, they were excellent entrepreneurs: "One of them made local soap, which sold very well. The other woman was producing groundnut oil and people patronised her business." In fact, Asara's description of the multiple business activities she carried out – running a restaurant, selling mangoes and firewood, hiring tractors and managing the seasonal nature of her enterprises – demonstrate that she possessed considerable authority and a good head for business. Moreover, she was wealthy – a dangerous attribute for an autonomous woman in a community where many were struggling to survive.



Asara told me over the course of several conversations that if a woman achieves financial success while living with a man, her success is attributed to the help and advice of the man she's living with – usually her husband or brother. But if she becomes wealthy through her own intelligence, skill and initiative, then her success is ascribed to witchcraft. How else could a woman prosper without a man, if not with help from witchcraft?

In a second interview with Asara, she explained how people used to intimidate her with veiled accusations of witchcraft in order to abuse her generosity:

I used to help people financially. They'd borrow money from me. When I wanted it back, the person I'd lent the money to would threaten me by saying that they'd dreamt of me.

Thus, generosity was repaid with emotional blackmail. This was possible because underlying Asara's apparent confidence and authority was a deep-seated fear of what her community could do to her if she were designated a witch. Some members of the community knew this, and took advantage of the power they possessed to stigmatise a woman on her own, with only her children for protection. Perhaps this was why Asara went out of her way to garner their goodwill. Unfortunately, her exceptional business acumen made her an easy target for gossip and spiteful acts of retribution:

Once I asked people to come and work on my farm.... I prepared food for them, but because of all the gossip and accusations, the young men spoil my bowls by hammering nails through them once they'd eaten. They told my children that they wouldn't work again on the farm of a woman such as me. That's how I know that people were gossiping about me and spoiling my name.

Malicious gossip can fuel mounting resentment. But for public opinion to turn dramatically against a tiny group of successful, independent women, something momentous has to happen to transform habitual resentment into vitriolic hatred. In 1997, a meningitis epidemic broke out in the Northern Region, and it was this that compelled Asara and two other “NGOs” in her neighbourhood to leave Gushiegu.

Asara described in graphic detail how a mob of young men assembled in her neighbourhood, intent on attacking her and her fellow “NGOs”. The elder patriarchs of Gushiegu, custodians and enforcers of the prevailing gender regime, orchestrated the mob, directing them to the houses of the women concerned. It would appear that any successful encroachment by women upon the “public” sphere of the marketplace without the clear sanction of male



authority was a transgression too far. These old men, stoking smouldering resentment that already linked Asara and her successful female colleagues to witchcraft, told the mob that these were the women responsible for the deaths of children: these women were “witches”. Asara was attacked and beaten before she was able to take refuge in the chief of Gushiegu’s palace, where she and the other women stayed overnight under police protection. The following day, one woman was taken to the witches’ camp at Yendi, while Asara and another woman sought refuge in Gambaga.

It was clear from Asara’s account that becoming the living embodiment of a community’s nightmares was a terrifying experience, which had damaged her severely. I was to discover just how severely as I got to know her better.

To begin with, Asara described the trauma of taking refuge at the witches’ camp in material terms: “I found it very hard to sleep on the bare floor when I first came here because I wasn’t used to sleeping on the ground. I’d always slept on a bed.”

Although she tried to retrieve her property from her house in Gushiegu, the villagers, not content with having attacked the rightful owner and forced her to flee, denied Asara’s family access: “They beat my children so badly they had to run away. They weren’t able to retrieve my things: my bed and my wardrobe full of bowls and plates and my trunks.” In fact, local people looted the house and its contents, and Asara, once a notable woman of substance, had to hand over the organisation of a daughter’s wedding to a younger sister in Tamale. And then, to amplify the dramatic change in her circumstances, Asara added: “I wasn’t able to attend my daughter’s wedding because I didn’t have enough money for the fare.”

A week or so later, as Asara and I were chatting together, with Madam Lariba interpreting, we heard the sound of a motorbike stopping outside a hut in the vicinity of the camp. “There’s a free woman living in that house,” said Asara with a knowing nod. “Motorbikes are always stopping outside at all times of the day.” She went on to say that it wasn’t a good idea for a woman to be “free” because if a woman was free, anyone could approach her and claim that he loved her – even a leper. Anyone could come in and out of the house. “If you’re a free woman,” she continued, “there’s always a lot of gossip about you. If you’re not married, no one respects you. Everyone should marry.”

“What if you can’t find a man that you want to marry?” I asked.

The answer was telling: “Even if a woman only has one eye, there isn’t a man who would reject her. Even a one-eyed woman can find someone to love



her. So far as a man is concerned, there's no such thing as an ugly woman."

According to Asara, men's sexuality prevents them from discriminating in their choice of sexual partners. Yet, after having lived, more-or-less as a "free" woman herself in Gushiegu, Asara appeared to have capitulated to the traditional attitudes of the prevailing gender regime. Her claim that all women should live with a male protector could indicate her opinion that all *young* women should marry; a statement from which she herself would be exempted because, as a mature woman, she had already married and had children. Another interpretation is that she perhaps did not see herself as a "free" woman, a possibility I find unlikely.

In fact, at one point I wondered if some of the gossip about her at Gushiegu had been fuelled by speculation about her intimacy with male friends, a suggestion she refuted. When I asked Asara if she'd had any boyfriends while in Gambaga, she laughed:

I did have someone after me, but I rejected his advances. I told him that I'm no longer strong enough to have sex.... I could have given myself to a man in exchange for his help. But I'm not healthy enough. I could have gone in for someone though, because I'm still sexually active.

At first, I found Asara's reply contradictory. She said she was no longer strong enough to have sex, but claimed to be still sexually active. It has subsequently been pointed out to me that by stating that she was sexually "active", Asara could have meant that she was still sexually "alive", suggesting as that does, a multiplicity of meanings, including layer upon layer of sensual arousal, ranging from sheer delight in colours and textures to masturbation, mutual stimulation and penetrative sex. Whatever the meaning of Asara's statement, which I didn't ask her to elaborate on at the time, it is highly unusual for a post-menopausal woman in Gambaga to assert that she is sexually "active". Both my interpreters had argued vehemently that after menopause, women no longer feel sexual desire. I had disagreed with them, yet the ferocity of the discussion made me aware that while it is permissible for men to have sexual feelings for as long as they draw breath, women's sexual feelings, especially if they are past the age of childbearing, are heavily circumscribed, if not censored. Nonetheless, because of the harshness of life at the camp, Asara was not averse to the idea of giving herself to a man in exchange for assistance; an attitude doubtlessly common among many of the women.

Rumour was rife at the camp that Asara has enjoyed relationships with two men while at Gambaga. The first had died, but the second, a disabled man,



continues to spend time with her. Indeed, late one afternoon, as Asara was preparing to leave the camp for a brief visit to her family in Gushiegu, I saw her absorbed in conversation in her hut. The man she was talking to was clearly very concerned for her. A current of intensity flowed between the two of them as they sat huddled together. I was not alone in thinking that they were lovers saying goodbye.

Asara's present conviction that all women should live with a male protector should make the old patriarchs of Gushiegu proud of their handiwork. After years in which she enjoyed considerable autonomy and financial success, they have managed to convince her that a woman living apart from a man must be prepared to bear the full brunt of a community's fury when they project their worst fears onto her. What seems to have happened is that after her horrendous experience in Gushiegu, when for over twenty-four hours she embodied the archetype of her community's nightmares, Asara's confidence disintegrated. Having seen the error of her ways, she is now conforming, albeit verbally, to the ideology of the prevailing gender regime.

Puzzled by the gaping contradiction between the independent life Asara had once led and the orthodox views she now holds, I asked Madam Lariba for details of Asara's life that she might have censored from her narrative.

In spite of having told me that she was waiting for a new chief to be enstooled in Gusheigu before she could negotiate her return home, it transpired that Asara had in fact gone back for nine months in 2001. Determined not to make the "mistake" of living alone again, she decided to stay in her brother's compound on the outskirts of Gushiegu. Asara lived there until an unattended toddler spilled a bowl of boiling water over himself and died. Terrified that she would be accused of witchcraft again, Asara fled to Gambaga, even though this time, no one drove her away from the compound. She has remained in the camp ever since, having internalised the fears of her community. She will remain there, I suspect, for a long time to come.

Conclusions

All the life-stories I obtained and analysed at the witches' camp in Gambaga came from women who, in one way or another, had challenged and transgressed the gender regimes in the patrilineal, patrilocal, polygynous communities from which they hailed in northern Ghana: communities in which women are supposed to be subject to male authority, and where the potency of women's sexuality is generally corralled and contained by men – be it fathers,



brothers, husbands or sons. Any fracture in the gender regime between men and women, or disruption in the hierarchy between co-wives, can lead to accusations of witchcraft and the expulsion of transgressive women from their communities, thereby upholding the patriarchal order.

The life-stories of the two childless women I interviewed, Fatima Mangazi and Asibi Asumah, also suggest that the families of women with “inappropriate sexuality” – in that their fertility has not been realised – are, more often than not, denied leverage that other women acquire within the extended family through children. According to my research, it would seem that the families of some childless women are prepared to manipulate witchcraft beliefs and rituals to relieve themselves of kinship obligations. Hence, although women in the region are supposed to be dependent on a man, when an older woman, such as a widow with no children, is competing with other women in the household for limited resources, she can easily become the target of witchcraft accusations and thus expelled from the family.

At the same time, women who do achieve economic independence, and have the ability to head their own households independently of men, are equally susceptible to accusations of witchcraft. These women, known locally as NGOs, are prey to accusations that eventually strip them of their property, reducing them to lives of penury in camps like Gambaga.

Women who do not fall under the direct “control” of a man, or are economically successful, or childless, or without appropriate familial protection, or in competition for scarce resources, can all too easily become targets for gossip and jealousy. This in turn means that in the event of some kind of community disaster, these women then bear the brunt of local projections and accusations of witchcraft. In other words, it is those who do not conform strictly enough with local patriarchal regimes who are vulnerable to such accusations. These accusations can lead to violence, abuse, familial rejection, segregation and banishment. Perhaps most tragic of all is the extent to which some of these women internalise the fear and loathing of their communities and families.



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Footnotes

- 1 The Mapping Sexualities Project is carried out under the auspices of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon, and the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. It is funded by the Ford Foundation.
- 2 Interview with the Imam of Gambaga, Alhaji Mesuna Yahaya, October 2004.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Gladys Lariba is referred to as Madam Lariba by inmates of the camp – a title I have used in this article. The intimacy I managed to develop with the women I interviewed was largely thanks to Madam Lariba, who knows many of the inmates of the camp well. Her assistance, warmth and generosity of spirit were invaluable.
- 5 Not her real name, which has been changed to protect her identity.
- 6 In a trial by ordeal, the Gambarrana kills fowls brought to him by the woman accused of witchcraft and her alleged victim. If a fowl dies with its wings facing the sky, its owner is believed to be telling the truth, and the alleged witch is either exonerated or condemned of witchcraft.

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