

“Lawmakers meet during a session of Parliament in Accra” by World Bank Photo Collection’s photostream.
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Note on this Case Study:

No religion is inherently violent or peaceful. However, religions are powerful forces. They can inspire horrific violence. They can also inspire nearly unfathomable acts of love and peacebuilding. The Ghanaians described here span a wide range of values regarding the intersection of their religion and violence. Some are the perpetrators of violence, some are working to end violence and promote peace, many more are bystanders, who may build up cultural violence, cultural peace, or even both. As always, when thinking about religion and conflict, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

Coalition Building and Activism to End Witchcraft Accusations and “Alleged Witch” Camps

On July 27, 2023, the Parliament of Ghana passed a bill that would make it a crime to accuse someone of witchcraft.¹ The law would dismantle shrine refuges or “witch camps” in northern Ghana where primarily poor, widowed, older women suffer in exile after being charged with supernatural crimes against family or community members. Activism against witchcraft accusations and the camps took on urgency after the horrific murder in July 2020 of a 90-year-old Muslim woman, Akua Denteh, by village members in Kafaba after they accused her of witchcraft.²

In Ghana, traditional beliefs and practices revolve around the intimate connection to and interaction between the invisible, spiritual world of the ancestors and local deities, and the material world of the living. European colonists and missionaries used the term “witchcraft” to describe the indigenous African religious beliefs and rituals they encountered. Colonialism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions have all influenced Ghanaian notions about witchcraft. Without contradiction, many Ghanaians draw upon complicated identities that can accommodate a mix of modern and traditional worldviews. For example, combinations of modern medicine and drugs, religious practices, and traditional remedies and rituals are strategies for health and material well-being.³ It is with special

consideration to this complex nature of Ghanaian understandings of witchcraft that activists and the government work to address cultural beliefs and practices that respect

¹ Christian Akorlie and Maxwell Akalaare Adombila, “Witchcraft accusations in Ghana could be banned by new law,” ed. Sofia Christensen, Reuters, July 28, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/witchcraft-accusations-ghana-could-be-banned-by-new-law-2023-07-28/>.

² Leo Igwe, “Elderly Woman Beaten And Lynched For Witchcraft In Ghana by Leo Igwe,” Sahara Reporters, July 24, 2020, <https://saharareporters.com/2020/07/24/elderly-woman-beaten-and-lynched-witchcraft-ghana-leo-igwe>.

³ villanovauniversity, “Yoruba Traditions and African American Women Narratives,” YouTube, March 28, 2012, video, 24:00-33:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltPZbtdmV7g>.

local worldviews and different ways of knowing without undermining fundamental universal human rights.⁴

Belief in witchcraft and witchfinders is widespread across religious affiliation, education level, ethnicity, social class, age, and regional location.⁵ Many Ghanaians fear witchcraft and view sorcery as a supernatural crime that poses genuine danger from which intelligent people must protect themselves; others dismiss it as superstition and view “witch camps” as abominable places of human rights abuse that must be banned.⁶ Witchfinders and shrine priests wield power in their communities, and people trust their authority. Witchcraft accusations disproportionately affect poor, widowed or single, illiterate, older women between 50 and 70 years old.⁷ Underlying tensions among family and community members and responses to poverty and shifting social roles may contribute to accusations.⁸ Accused witches suffer many abuses, including torture, beatings, sexual assault, and emotional cruelty. Often, they are banished from their homes and loved ones. Sometimes, their accusers—many of whom can be close relatives—kill them.

The murder of Akua Denteh in Kafaba energized several religious and civic organizations to push for government action. The Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, an association of 200 member denominations, called for a national conversation about the care and protection of accused witches and the closure of witch camps.⁹ The Sanneh Institute (TSI), a research institute at the University of Ghana led by Presbyterian minister and interfaith leader John Azumah, organized initiatives for religious leaders, teachers, and media outlets. It lobbied for legislation to criminalize witchcraft accusations, witch-hunting practices, and witch camps.¹⁰ Songtaba, a women’s human rights advocacy NGO, produced a study on the gendered dimension and power dynamics of witchcraft accusations.¹¹ The government’s Commission on Human Rights and Access to Justice (CHRAJ) issued a report on gender-based violence against elderly women accused of witchcraft. It recommended the need for state agencies to work with chiefs to establish protocols for reporting accusations, to make additional efforts to increase police visibility, to establish police report centers in communities where witch accusations frequently occur, and to encourage state educational and health agencies to invest in health services and education of accused children.¹² Finally, a coalition of local religious and advocacy groups, organized by The

⁴ Saibu Mutaru and Naa Adjeley Suta Alakija Sekyi, “Murder at Kafaba: Debating Witchcraft and ‘Witch Camps’ in Ghana,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 32, no. 1 (2023): 44–45, doi: 10.53228/njas.v32i1.781.

⁵ Mensah Adinkrah, *Witchcraft, Witches, and Violence in Ghana*, 1st ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 53, doi: 10.2307/j.ctt9qcswd.

⁶ Mutaru and Sekyi, “Murder at Kafaba,” 34.

⁷ The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), Ghana, “Baseline Study Report on Access to Justice and Gender Based Violence Against Elderly Women Alleged As Witches in Ghana” chraj.gov.gh, 2022, <https://chraj.gov.gh/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Baseline-Study-Report-Access-to-Justice-Project.pdf>.

⁸ CHRAJ, Ghana, “Baseline Study Report.”

⁹ Daniel Silliman and Griffin Paul Jackson, “Ghana Pentecostals Come To The Defense Of Accused Witches,” *Christianity Today*, December 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2020/11/ghana-pentecostals-come-to-defense-of-accused-witches/>.

¹⁰ “Witchcraft Accusations Project,” The Sanneh Institute, accessed October 2, 2023, <https://tsinet.org/witchcraft-accusations-project/>.

¹¹ Songtaba Ghana With Technical Support from Ghana Somubi Dwumadie, “Prevalence of Depression, Quality of Life and Gender Dynamics of Women Accused of Witchcraft in Northern and North East Regions of Ghana,” February 2022, https://www.songtaba.org/wp-content/uploads/Songtaba_Survey_Report.pdf.

¹² CHRAJ, Ghana, “Baseline Study Report.”

Sanneh Institute to educate stakeholders, pressured legislators to generate an anti-witchcraft accusation bill and rallied public support for legislative action.¹³

Responding to calls for action, Minister of Parliament Frances-Xavier Sosu and three other MPs introduced the bill into the legislature. It passed on July 27, 2023. However, in December 2023, Ghanaian President Akufo-Addo refused to sign the bill into law, citing “constitutional issues.”¹⁴ Parliament must now decide how to respond.

¹³ Coalition Against Witchcraft Accusation (CAWA), “Press Release: Conviction Of Akua Denteh’s Killers And The Need To Pass Anti-Witchcraft Accusation Bill Currently Languishing In Parliament,” tsinet.org, The Sanneh Institute, July 20, 2023, <https://tsinet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/PRESS-RELEASE-JULY-2023.pdf>.

¹⁴ Isaac Kaledzi, “Why Ghana’s president refuses to sign laws on witchcraft, death penalty and suicide,” AfricaFeeds, December 5, 2023, <https://africafeeds.com/2023/12/05/why-ghanas-president-refuses-to-sign-laws-on-witchcraft-death-penalty-and-suicide/#:~:text=He%20explained%20that%20the%20way,letter%20he%20sent%20to%20Parliament>.

Additional Resources

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Discussion Questions

- How do the deeply embedded cultural beliefs and narratives around witchcraft in Ghana cause disproportionate harm to women who are marginalized in several ways in their society?
- What assumptions about religion or modern life in Ghana does this case study disrupt?
- Using the film *The Witches of Gambaga* and other sources, explore the intersectional dimensions of witchcraft accusations, considering how factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and religious affiliation intersect to shape individuals' experiences within Ghanaian society.
- Analyze the structural violence inherent in the existence of these camps and the broader societal marginalization experienced by the accused, encompassing various forms of violence (cultural, structural, direct) evident in the case study.
- What kinds of individual or institutional efforts to move toward just peace did you notice?
- How do power dynamics within communities, including patriarchal structures and traditional authorities, contribute to the marginalization and victimization of accused women? To what extent do accusations of witchcraft serve as mechanisms of social control and the exertion of power within Ghanaian communities?
- Reflect on the state's role in preserving cultural traditions and protecting universal human rights. How must the Ghanaian state, with its stated commitment to human rights, play in protecting women accused of witchcraft?