WITCH CAMP REPORT

THUDEG & Anti-Witchcraft Allegation Campaign Coalition 2011

Women still accused of witchcraft, lynched in Ghana

This is not a Grimm's Fairytale, but it is grim and unfortunately true: Many people are shocked to learn it is against the law to murder a witch, says a human rights activist in Ghana, West Africa.

"Education is one way to stop this kind of gender violence." Ken Addae is coordinator of the Anti-Witchcraft Allegation Campaign Coalition in Ghana's three northern regions which networks with women's groups and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) to advocate for the rights of women accused of witchcraft, and promote rural children's education. I spoke with him in a series of interviews in early 2011.

"A neighbour can simply dream someone is a witch, and without evidence or legal trial, the woman can be lynched, or banished from her village forever -- and 99% of accusations are against women," says Addae. We are being driven north from the city of Tamale over deeply rutted roads on our way to one of the region's Witch Camps. As I interview Addae in the backseat of the rented 4x4, the car bounces so drastically, my writing is nearly illegible. Ghana's road network is poor, and the Northern Region's saffron-coloured roads are sadistic with potholes.

Schools are also sorely lacking in the North. The widespread lack of education may partly account for why women suffer from such bizarre accusations, domestic violence, poverty and scanty human rights. Education is poor despite the fact that Ghana, is rich with natural resources. The

Asana Tongo was accused of turning people into bees by her husband's family and had to flee from her village of Kukigbeni in Northern Ghana. She is banished to a Witch Camp for the rest of her life. Story page 6.

country has some of the world's largest stores of oil, timber, electricity, bauxite, gold, diamonds and manganese, as well as fertile land producing agricultural products and cash crops like cocoa and palm oil. Large deposits of iron ore have just been discovered in the Shieni area. All these riches exist, yet Northern Ghana in particular remains very underdeveloped and women pay a miserable price.

The North -- where Ghanaians are predominantly Moslems and African traditional worshipers who practice polygamy -- has the most Witch Camps. There are seven camps around the regional capital of Tamale: Kpatinga, Kukuo, Gnani, Gambaga, Gushiegu, Bonyase and Naboli. The camps have existed since the 19th century and population estimates vary wildly between 2000 and 6000 women and children.

Addae says awareness campaigns are changing local attitudes. “Ten years ago women would not dare discuss witchcraft allegations publicly. Now, they go on the radio to educate people. We need bylaws at a local level to prohibit witchcraft accusations.”

Addae founded his own non-governmental organization, The Human Help & Development Group in 1997 in Tamale, led by social workers and community development practitioners. Women certainly need the help. “We find that some police are corrupt and afraid to investigate and prosecute perpetrators,” he said. Poverty, illiteracy, outmoded customary practices and negative traditional practices leave women vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft and many other forms of gender violence: rape; cruel widowhood rites; domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and denial of inheritance and marriage rights for them and their children.

Women can be accused of making their polygamous husbands impotent or causing their co-wives or mistresses to become barren. Women may also be accused of witchcraft if a child contracts measles or if a neighbour falls ill with yellow fever or malaria.

One of the larger witch camps started on the outskirts of the town of Gambaga in northern Ghana's Mamprusi East District a century ago, but over the years the city has grown so the camp is now enclosed in

Gender violence: Damaged doll found behind mud huts in Gambaga Witch Camp eloquently speaks to cultural violence that denies women their voices and basic human rights.

Ken Addae of The Human Help and Development Group in Tamale: local by-laws are needed to prohibit witchcraft accusations.

Educational posters carry the message that witchcraft accusation is a crime under Ghana's Domestic Violence Act passed in 2007.

the town centre. Townspeople live with no ill effects in proximity to the witches. This is attributed not to the harmlessness of these old, poor women but to the powerful magic wielded by the Chief of Gambaga who is also the sorcerer or fetish priest of the Gambaga Witches Camp.

The Chief sorcerer controls the surrounding lands and is believed to be capable of determining whether a woman is a witch and neutralizing her evil powers. Addae tells me that following a fowl-slaughtering ritual, the Chief rarely finds a woman innocent.

"To be fair, these women would have been killed in their communities without his protection. After an accusation, they flee for their lives. Their village perpetrators, mostly teenagers and children, will lynch and murder them. The Chief provides a safe place for the accused women to live and offers some sort of absolution, ruling that if they do have a witchcraft spirit, they can't use it. Therefore, townspeople feel safe."

The Chief sorcerer will allow the accused witches stay on his Gambaga land and in return they work on his farms by planting, weeding and harvesting. During harvesting, the women are given food. Once the Chief accepts women into the camp, he assigns each woman a living spot in case her children are willing to come and build her a hut.

Addae says the Northern Region has the most accused witches because of outmoded cultural practices and negative traditional belief systems. Communities with polygamous marriages are more prone to witchcraft accusations and lynchings. "Muslims have a tradition of widowhood rites where a young widow cannot stay in her dead husband's house if she intends remarry." In other areas, when a man dies, it is customary that his widow becomes part of the property to be inherited.

"With the high illiteracy rate, some Northern village residents are ignorant about laws and human

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rights, so people do things any-old-how. Some traditional rulers don't know there are human rights laws. They console themselves by taking bribes and rule in favour of the bribe-paying person, even if he is incorrect. This encourages people to do wrong things."

He goes on to describe his recent visit to the town of Damongo, near Mole National Park, about 170 kilometers west of Tamale where in an unusual case, a man was accused of being a wizard.

A village woman dreamt she vomited bullets after a man shot her. She told her dream to her husband.

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Women shown above arrived in the Witch Camp a week before this photo was taken and sell firewood by the roadside to earn food money.

Witch Camp Report

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Can you help these women?

Development projects are needed in Tamale and across Northern Ghana. Poverty is slow-motion violence against women. Can you offer some help?

Contact Ken Addae from The Human Help & Development Group, and Anti-Witchcraft Allegation Campaign Coalition:

PO Box 273 (Education Ridge)
Tamale, Northern Region
Ghana, West Africa

Magic beliefs universal

Russian witch's house recognized by legs

Below: Anti-Witchcraft Allegation poster in Ghana

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Later at her workplace, a frog appeared out of nowhere, jumped against her and fell to the floor. The couple went to the community leader who advised them to visit a fetish priest.

At a shrine, the fetish priest slaughtered fowls in a ritual to see if the man was a wizard.

Fowls are strangled or have their necks partially slit. Then the priest tosses the bird into the air and how it lands determines guilt. If the beak points to the sky, the accused is innocent. If the fowl falls on its face, the accused is indeed a witch.

In this case, when the man was said to be a wizard, he agreed he did the shooting in spirit form because he wanted his wife to have the other woman's job in a school feeding program. At the hearing, the community chief's ruling was very different than if the accused had been a woman. The chief dismissed the case by saying, "We are all the same people; we do not expose each other."

Addae commented, "Some leaders are ignorant about the laws and make any decision they like. If men are accused of being wizards, they aren't at risk of being killed, so they rarely leave the community. However 99% of witchcraft accusations are against women."

In another case, Accra's *Daily Graphic* newspaper on February 14, 2011 carried a page 35 report of two male farmers being arrested for forcibly draining blood from a man at Oda-Nkwanta in the Eastern Region believed to be for ritual purposes. Police are said to be conducting further investigations.

Men's witchcraft is thought to be positive, and women's powers are negative, Addae explains. Men deny widows' inheritance in part due to a convenient belief that having money gives an evil spirit to women. This is a mysterious conclusion when contrasted with current United Nations studies revealing that when men receive development money they spend it on themselves, buying alcohol, weapons, prostitutes and marrying more wives. When women get money, they spend it on their families, buying food and educating their children. *

"I wish I were a man and could protect myself I have no rights as a woman"

...Tachera Mutaru

Before entering the witch camps north of Tamale in Ghana's Northern Region, (as a foreign visitor) I must seek permission from Chief Gambaga Rana who is Chief sorcerer of the Gambaga Witches Camp. Translator Lariba Mahama from the Gambaga Outcasts Home Project will facilitate the meeting.

The 4x4 driver takes Lariba Mahama, local Anti-Witchcraft Allegation activist Ken Addae and I down a bumpy village path where we alight in a courtyard busy with goats and chickens rooting through piles of vegetable garbage. Kids play with plastic bags eddying in the hot breeze. A red, cracked mud brick wall bulges beside me.

"The path is too narrow for the car. We'll walk the rest of the way," Mahama says.

"I've never met with a Chief sorcerer before. What do I do?" As I hoist my knapsack , I realize that using a laptop for the interviews will be too clumsy.

"Keep some kola money folded in your pocket."

I follow Mahama along a polished mud platform flanked by round thatched huts. To my Canadian eyes, these pointy domes rising out of the courtyard floor seem surreal. I can't see anyone, but hear pots clanking, roosters, and women's voices nearby. We walk through an opening in a low wall and enter a shiny courtyard.

"Take off our shoes now," Mahama whispers, and she bows at a the entrance to a large hut. "Naaa."

A male voice murmurs within. She ducks to enter the low, wood-framed doorway. I follow and we squat before three figures in the shadows.

I have been instructed to answer 'Naaa" whenever anyone addresses me. My eyes slowly adjust to the dark. The person I take to be the Chief sorcerer, in a navy and white striped robe and matching cap, has his back to the wall with his thin legs outstretched. Two older men in mud-coloured caps and cloth wraps sit cross-legged. My knees throb at squatting.

Poverty leads to witchcraft accusations. It is cheaper for a man's family to banish a widow, barren woman or another man's unwanted children than to feed them.

The Chief sorcerer gives a sign and thankfully I am allowed to sit cross-legged. Frantically I scan my memory for etiquette tips on meeting with sorcerers. I am careful not to look him in the eye, remembering somewhere this can be taken as a challenge. Then I notice Mahama herself making eye contact so I straighten my shoulders and do the same. His eyes are dark and shiny even in the hut

shadows. I remember not to point the soles of my feet at the sorcerer, or his minions, recalling this might be an insult.

And of course, one asks permission before taking videos. I gesture towards my iPhone.

He hoists his open palm in refusal at being photographed. "You may write my name but no pictures."

After waiting while I print his name in my book, Gambaga Rara Wuni Yahaya, Chief of Gambaga, he smacks his thin thigh and begins an impassioned speech.

After her husband died, Tachera Mutaru was left with six children. Her dead husband's brother wanted marital sex. She refused. Under her area's customary (tribal) practice, living in her brother-in-law's home meant she would lose her marriage inheritance rights -- there was no legal deed to the ancestral property. When Mutaru refused his proposal, he called her a witch. She fled before she was beaten by her community.

"First, I want you to know all the women come to me. I do not go to the villages and bring them here. I do not force any woman to stay. I provide protection. If they need anything, they come to me."

Mahama interjects that the Chief sorcerer is angry with British newspapers that recently reported he uses women as a slave labor force, renting them out to plant, weed and harvest. "The issue is not black and white," she tells me. "The women live on his property and working the crops is how they pay rent."

However, if the family comes to retrieve their mother, to actually take her back home, the Chief sorcerer charges the family for her upkeep. "Rates depend on how much the family can afford."

The Chief sorcerer begins speaking again, slapping emphatic points against his thigh.

"I ask each accused woman, 'Is it true you are a witch or are they (village residents) lying? If you are accused for no reason, go to the police."

Mahama interjects, "If the women agree they are witches, they never involve police. If they are taken back to their village, the community can kill them."

While the majority of the accused witches say they are innocent, some admit to practicing *ju ju* to hurt or protect others.

Watching me writing in the spiral notebook, the Chief sorcerer compares witchcraft to armed robbery. "Witchcraft is like a robber, but in spiritual form. You can't just do away either of them."

He goes on several minutes. We listen as his torrents of words pile up. I know I shouldn't, but I hold up my notebook to interrupt.

"Please give me time to understand your exact words."

In the shadows, I think I see him glower.

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Can you offer help to these women?

Development projects are needed in Tamale and across Northern Ghana. Poverty is slow-motion violence against women. They need ways to support themselves.

Contact Ken Addae from the Anti-Witchcraft Allegation Campaign Coalition at: The Human Help & Development Group (THUDEG)
PO Box 273 (Education Ridge)
Tamale, Northern Region
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Tachera Mutaru is just one of many marginalized women accused of being witches in Ghana who have very limited opportunity to earn income. The Anti-Witchcraft Allegation Coalition is seeking funding for micro-enterprise projects that will help these women support themselves.

Local residents in Northern Ghana are often frightened to buy soap and other products made by women in the Witch Camps. The banished women need additional ways to generate money.

Bugari Kpin was banished from her village 30 years ago for not giving birth to a son.

"Naaa," I reply when the Chief sorcerer flicks his eyes at me.

He frowns. "I am very angry with journalists who write stories that I force these women to do farm work without pay."

Instead of properly responding, "Naaaa, I try to explain, "I am a volunteer with Canadian Crossroads International -- here to learn from Ghanaians about ways to stop gender violence. The stories I write are not to sell ads in newspapers."

He scowls and turns his head away.

This is a good time to hand over the kola-money tucked in my pocket. Mahama hands my offering to him. Kola-money, a symbolic payment named after the mild stimulant, kola nuts, is meant to establish a connection. By the look on Chief sorcerer's face, a tenner is not nearly enough for a relationship.

"I am angry with journalists. I will not give my permission to visit the camps unless you also consult with District Assembly representatives." He frowns into the distance, straight out the bright doorway.

My heart sinks. It is New Year's Eve day, a holiday. Even market stalls are closed. No politicians will be found at the District Assembly Office. Mahama motions me to rise. I hold my tongue between my teeth. We are smiling and nodding. I shuffle backwards out of the hut, careful not to turn my back on the men, bumping my clumsy knapsack against the low doorframe. I hear men's laughter.

Mahama motions me back inside the hut. "Turn around. You can walk out like a normal person." She bows her head, stifling chuckles.

Oh yes, I'm a laughing stock. Still in sock feet, I go back inside, do a 180 degree turn hunched over with my giant knapsack, and depart the Chief meeting for a second time.

We may be laughing, but I am heartsick. The Chief sorcerer has denied me permission to enter the witch camp.

Mahama slips easily into her flip flops and down the polished mud pathway, but I must lean against the compound's thigh-high mud wall to undo my teva sandal straps. The velcro rips louder than cicadas.

I hustle past thatched huts to catch up. She is already beckoning our driver in the 4x4. We lurch farther down the road and pull in at the District Assembly office. A large, predictable padlock hangs from the door. My heart is heavy with failure. "In Ghana, don't try to understand. Just let things unfold," I mumble reminders to myself.

Behind me, I hear a frail voice. A woman in a sarong and tattered t-shirt is greeting Mahama. They embrace. Other women's faces pop up over the wall that joins several thatched huts.

"Paula, meet Asana Tongo. She has been in this camp for three years."

My mouth falls open. I realize we are standing in the witch camp, in the process of being

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greeted by dozens of residents. The Chief sorcerer said no, yet here we are. For a few moments, I feel too overwhelmed to approach the women.

We enter the compound and sit outside, circled by four or five huts that form a tiny courtyard about three metres wide. I am given a small wood stool so I can take notes on my lap. Accused witch Asana Tongo sits on the floor facing me with her knees pulled up in front of her. Mahama translates.

"I am from Kukigbeni village near Nagbow. My husband is paralyzed. One day my father-in-law said I bewitched my son's wife and children by turning them into bees in the hole of a tree. When he said I was a witch, I just picked up my cloak and left."

Tongo claps her palm against her head which is wrapped in a green and white checked headscarf. The scarf ends poke up like two sticks. "I ran away from my village. I did not say goodbye to anyone because I risked a beating from my community.

"I knew Gambaga camp was a safe place. After I arrived, the Chief sorcerer slaughtered fowl and confirmed I am a witch. I decided to stay here. My husband is weak and cannot help me but my children come three times a year to bring me food. They are poor and I appreciate what they do for me."

"What will you do Asana? What are your hopes for the future?" I ask.

"I hope my children will approach the Chief sorcerer to have me purified. We need to supply one sheep and two chickens. He will slaughter the fowl and stir the blood in a calabash. When I am purified, I can go home." Her family is so poor it is unlikely they will ever afford to pay for the freeing ritual. In effect, she is banished for life.

We sit silently a few moments, then I thank Tongo for talking with me. She stands up and another woman in a sarong and cream lace top slides into her spot.

Accused witch Tachera Mutaru is from the Dabari community near Sakogu. "My husband died and left me with six children. In customary practice, my dead husband's brother said he wanted sex with me. I refused because I did not want to lose my marriage inheritance by going to live in my brother-in-law's home. (Since it is ancestral land, there is no legal deed to the property.)

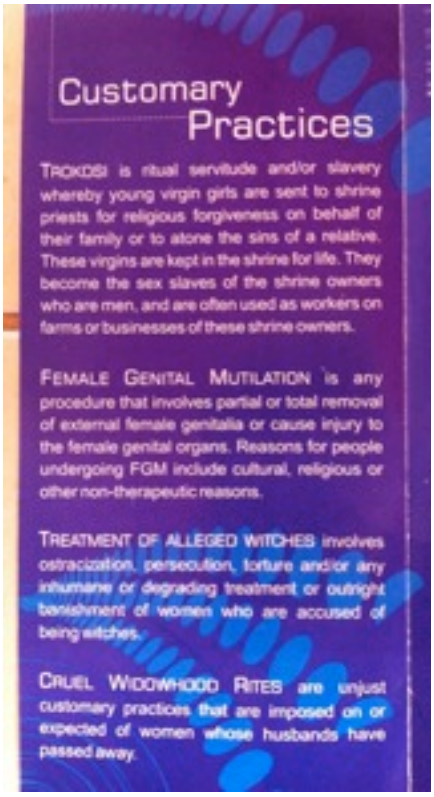
"When I refused my brother-in-law's proposal, he called me a witch. He said my granddaughter got sick after dreaming about me. As soon as I was accused, I fled before village people beat me. I knew the only safe place was Gambaga. I travelled 12 miles to get here."

Mutaru has been in the camp four years. Her family has melted away, just like her mud home. She tells me the house on the ancestral land has collapsed and most of her children have gone south to find work.

"I hope my children will reconstruct the house so I can move back home."

"I imagine you might be angry at all that has happened, Tachera," I say.

Brochure lists types of gender violence perpetuated by traditional practices



Shea trees in Ghana produce nuts used for cooking oil, waterproofing and cosmetics.

Tears fill her eyes. "I wish I were a man and could protect myself. I have no rights as a woman." Droplets run down her dark cheeks. She rubs them away with the heel of her hand. "I feel like weeping when I can't care for all my children and grandchildren. I'd like to educate people to stop making accusations. This would empower women."

It is not just widowed, elderly and barren women that are so marginalized here in Northern Ghana. One 70-year old resident, Bugari Kpin, was banished to the camp more than three decades ago. Her crime was giving birth only to girls -- producing no male child.

"Can you explain why these accusations happen only to women and some children?" I ask.

Kpin, the Witch Camp's elected spokesperson replies, "These bad things happen to women due to evil forces."

Mahama, my volunteer translator sucks her teeth with impatience. She does not like Bugari Kpin's answer. "Her beliefs come from a lack of education," says Mahama who is with the Presbyterian church that runs in the Gambaga Outcasts Project along with Actionaid, an anti-poverty agency.

Christianity and witchcraft: I don't want to get in the middle. "Bugari, is it possible that people might find any excuse -- maybe claim it is tradition just to retain property in the man's family? Could economics be at the root of the accusations against vulnerable women?" After a moment's thought, Kpin agrees that poverty also leads to accusations. It is cheaper to banish a 'useless' woman or another man's unwanted children than to feed and clothe them.

"I was a barren widow. As soon as they accused me of being a witch, I ran away." That was thirty years ago. Kpin adds that she was elected spokesperson at the witch camp because, "I am patient in resolving conflict. I also care for the women's houses when they work in the fields. Nothing goes missing."

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Shea nuts provide income

Kpin is the only person I met who seemed to have come to terms with life among the banished women of the Witch Camp. "I have a peaceful life here," she smiles. "The other women bring me gifts of food and firewood from the fields so they must see my value."

Being valued is perhaps a long overdue experience for the women here. *

Accused witch 'catches fire' near Accra

Gender violence abuses are not confined to rural or Northern areas in Ghana. Ama Hemmah, a 72-year-old woman from the port city of Tema, a town just 25 kilometres from Accra, was allegedly attacked by a group of five people, one of whom is an evangelical pastor, Ghana's *Daily Graphic* newspaper reported. Ama Hemmah was burned to death on suspicion of being a witch November 29, 2010.

It is perhaps encouraging that the case sparked local outrage and newspapers carry regular updates from police and court hearings regarding three women and two men who were arrested, including pastor Samuel Fletcher Sagoe, 55.

Ama Hemmah was allegedly tortured into confessing she was a witch, doused in kerosene and set alight. She suffered horrific burns and died within 24 hours.

According to *Daily Graphic* newspaper reports, the suspects claim her death was an accident and deny committing any crime.

The pastor claimed to be exorcising an evil spirit by rubbing anointing oil on the woman when she accidentally caught fire. *

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