

## Witchcraft Accusation Rages in Northern Ghana

Written by Leo Igwe

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The atmosphere may appear calm and serene, and the people friendly and hospitable. Life in the regional capital, Tamale may not be much of the hustle and bustle one finds at the state capital, Accra. There is low traffic and the streets are hardly overcrowded except when a new chief is being installed, a political campaign is going on or a top politician is visiting the area. Still all is not well in the northern region of Ghana because beneath this veneer of calmness and tranquility lurks a vicious, virulent and violent trend. Witchcraft accusation.

Northern Ghana is a region charged with allegations of witchery, spiritual possession and attack. Witchcraft is at the root of a silent battle, an ongoing war that has torn apart families and communities, internally displaced many people, turning them into refugees in their own land. In the past three weeks there have been three cases of accusation within the regional capital, Tamale, alone. Most cases of accusation take place in the rural parts of the region with no accessible roads, power or telephone service. In these remote communities, traditional beliefs and institutions are very strong. Cases of accusation are not reported in the news. They are rarely taken to the police stations, that is, where such stations exist. Except on the highways or border posts, there are virtually no police presence in the rural communities. Most cases of witchcraft accusation are resolved locally and traditionally. By that I mean the matter is taken to the local chief and elders who often refer the issue to a local shrine for confirmation. In some cases they are pressured to banish the accused without a confirmation by a local priest. Sometimes accused persons are forced to flee on their own. Accused persons who are banished are relocated to other communities. In most cases they are taken to one of the seven 'safe spaces', otherwise known as witch camps, in the region.

This article is based on three cases of accusation currently under study in the area. In the first case, a middle aged woman, Mateda, was accused of being responsible for the death of a 20 year old seamstress. The seamstress sewed some wedding clothes for Mateda's daughter. But shortly after Mateda paid the seamstress, she took ill and died. The parents of the seamstress accused Mateda of being behind the death of their daughter. They reported the matter to the chief and asked him to banish the woman immediately from the community. The chief declined and instead suggested that the matter be taken to a local shrine for confirmation. But the family of the deceased and a local mob refused and insisted that Mateda be banished right away. In protest they marched to the palace of the paramount chief of Tamale and reported the matter. He sent them back to the village chief, who insisted that the case be taken to a shrine.

The angry youths started throwing stones at the palace of the village chief and threatened to burn down the building. They broke a window of the palace and a 'sacred' pot used in keeping some water for the ancestors to drink when they come visiting at night. The chief called for the police, but before the police convoy arrived, the mob had dispersed. The Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit and the Criminal Investigation Department are currently questioning the suspects. The second case deals with an elderly man who had been sick for several months

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and a woman in the neighbourhood was suspected of being responsible. I was told that if the man died, the 'youths' in the area might attack this woman or get her banished from the community. I am trying to nip this accusation in the bud.

I visited the sick person. He was lying on a small bed. I was told he had lost sensation in the lower part of the body and could not defecate. He lacked an appetite and takes only a bit of the local porridge. The man was holding muslim beads in his hands and murmuring some prayer verses when I entered the room. I was told he used to see the woman in his dream. And in the northern region, this constitutes 'hard' evidence for witchcraft. Anyone seen in a dream by a sick person is believed to be the person who caused the sickness or who gave the person the sickness as they say. The family members are using local herbs to treat the man. Meanwhile, they could not tell me what the man was suffering from, or what exactly they were actually treating. The family members said they took him to two hospitals in the city where he spent two weeks and 4 days respectively. I have made contact with hospital authorities and we are trying to ascertain whether the man was actually treated at these places and what the diagnosis was so that we can provide him with urgent medical assistance. I hope to use this means to deflate the rumour of witch cause or accusation and hopefully persuade the family members to understand that lack of proper medical treatment, not the woman in the neighbourhood, that is responsible for the man's illness. But I must say this is a tough and tricky task.

While I was at the police station gathering information on Mateda case, a police officer drew my attention to the case of another woman, Sheta. She was accused of being responsible for the death of a young man, Badul. Badul's family said they took him to a local hospital but couldn't confirm if he was treated or what he was suffering from. They strongly believe that this woman, Sheta was behind the sickness and death. They said, before he died, Badul was seeing her in his dreams. And also that one of their family members, a woman, whom they claimed was occasionally possessed by the spirit, once revealed while under the influence of the spirit, that Sheta was responsible for the sickness. But a source in the family of the accused woman told me the woman whom they claim was often possessed by the spirit was actually a mentally unstable person, that she has a psychiatric problem but the family has refused to send her for treatment because they believe her case was spiritual. This woman often makes some witchcraft related pronouncements which the family takes seriously. And on this occasion while the brother was sick, she pronounced that Sheta was responsible for the illness. And one morning, the Badul's father stormed the house of Sheta with a machete, in search of her apparently to kill her but Sheta was not in the house.

The matter was reported to a the village chief who asked them to go to a local shrine for confirmation. But before the day they fixed to go to the shrine, Badul died. The family of the deceased said they would no longer go to the shrine. Meanwhile the accused woman has been relocated to another community. And one of the sons reported the matter to the police. The

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police have invited the accusers for questioning. I met briefly with some of the accusers in their family compound shortly after the police invitations were delivered to them.

I noticed a mixture of grief, fear and anger mainly because they had been invited by the police. In fact they thought I was a police officer. It took some time to reassure them that my mission had nothing to do with the police. They all maintained strongly that Sheta spiritually killed their son and brother. And to add to their pain, one of the sons went and reported this to the police. As a form of advice, I told them to try and separate the pain of the loss of their son and brother from their claim of who killed him and by what means. That the police would want them to provide evidence that Sheta killed Badul. At that point tempers started running very high and we were forced to adjourn our meeting. I went back to the police station to learn how the process of investigation was going.

Cases of witchcraft accusation are handled by The Domestic Violence and Victims's Support Unit of the Ghana Police Force. I was told that several cases are reported every year. According to the Inspector in charge of the Unit, the cases are seasonal. They get more cases during the time of the year when there is high rate of infection and diseases. The people who are often accused are women who lack social support, widows, childless women, poor elderly women who are living alone etc. He blamed that the rampant case of accusation on outmoded traditional beliefs which, he said, the people have refused to abandon. He said that the police were working with the chiefs and human rights groups to educate and reorient the minds of the people.

Any effort or initiative to tackle this problem must include getting the people in Northern Ghana to begin to doubt or disbelieve that people can kill others using spiritual means; That a person allegedly seen in a dream by a sick person is the cause of the sickness; That local priests and soothsayers have the power to confirm through rituals or divination that somebody is a witch or wizard.

Generally in the region, witchcraft evokes fear and blind faith. We need to change that and ensure that witchcraft evokes curiosity and critical thinking. We need to get the local population to begin to ask questions, to seek evidence and challenge witchcraft claims and accusations.

Definitely, this is not going to be an easy task. It will require a lot of effort, sacrifice and commitment. But as they say, whatever is difficult is important. The time has come for us to take

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up that difficult but crucial task and help bring an end to the rage of witchcraft accusation in the Northern Region of Ghana.

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