

GHANA WITCH CAMPS:

Women shelters and modern day witchcraft accusations

Violence against women has taken many different shapes alongside history. It has been present in the shape of feminicides, rapes, female genital mutilation; and has been perpetrated from the private to the public sphere, from families to strangers, and even from the different governments and states if we consider systematic violence.

Mass paranoia spread around Europe and colonial America from the 15th to the 18th century, reaching its greatest peak around the 16th century. Even if the beliefs vary among cultures, those accusations were mostly as a consequence of unexpected hardship of bad luck, such as generalized bad crops, livestock death, or widespread diseases. As those situations were attributed to devilish forces, combating his minions on earth was seen as a way to fight them.

According to the American history educator Anne Llewellyn Barstow, the estimated number of

executions is around 100,000; but this is only proximate data, as others have concluded that there could have been around 200,000 – 500,000 or even more than a million deaths. However, and even in the bloom of the 21st century, witch hunts are far from being a sad story from the past. In some countries of the world, especially Africa, but also within Southeast Asia and Latin-American, many women who are accused of witchcraft are tortured, mutilated and even burnt at the stake – or hanged, as even if most stories talk about witches burnt to death, most of them in Spain, England, and its American colonies were assassinated by hanging. This is what actually happened in the famous Salem Witch Trials, where twenty people were executed as witches, sentenced to death by hanging.

In many African countries, witch hunts were triggered in the past during an epidemic outbreak that would lead to a health crisis. In the concrete case of Ghana, for example, during a meningitis outbreak. This very same country has received

international attention for their so-called “witch camps” that consist of refugee camps for mainly women who have been expelled from their communities, most of them old women, single mothers, unmarried or widowed, and fear to be assassinated. In addition to having to face physical abandonment and abuse, when women are accused of witchcraft and stigmatized, they also suffer financial violence and boycott, which is a massive problem as most of the accused are elder women, who have no personal income and are dependent on their families or who depend on retailing for their sustenance. Furthermore, witchcraft accusations impact greatly the mental health of the women, creating them emotional trauma and distress.

Even if the belief in witchcraft is not unique to Ghana, witch camps are. Those shelters are located

within scattered settlements in northern Ghana – within Bonyasi, Gambaga, Gnani, Kpatinga, Kuku, and Nabuli –, and women there live under miserable conditions: they often lack running water, and neither have any type of social services or education for the children that accompany the accused. Still, at least they have an opportunity to live, as some of them never reach those shelters and are murdered after the witchcraft accusations. Even women who have families with male relatives will choose to flee to those shelters, as the lives of their relatives may be at risk if they decide not to. In 2004, the Gambaga camp, which was established in the 18th century and was the one where most women accused lived, had about 8,000 inhabitants, 80% being women around the ages of 45 and 90 years old, some of them who had been there for 30 years. In 2018, still, around 1,000 women lived in witch camps, after being ostracized by their families and communities.



The camps, even if a safe haven for women, are still managed under the same harmful beliefs that made women flee their homes in the first place. The chiefs of them claim they “ask the local gods to neutralize their powers and render them harmless”. Women, who are never able to get over their trauma, end up having to assume their guiltiness, under the premise that “if we are here, then we must be witches”. Still, some of them hold hopes of being allowed back home, and that is why they try to subject themselves to different tests to prove they are not witches. However, due to the stigma, most of them do not stand a chance of going back to their families and communities.

According to the Italian Rwandan photographer and filmmaker Marilena Umuhoza Delli, women in the shelters “suffer from physical and mental illnesses, such as Alzheimer’s, senility, misshapen limbs, and blindness. They are completely exploited and stripped of their dignity. They are turned into monsters.”

Many different non-profit groups and NGOs have taken a stand against these phenomena, and even policymakers have tried to put an end to it. According to Ajoa Kwarteng Kluitse, the country director of the human rights organization ActionAid in 2012, declared that women who were accused were those whose actions do not fall within the communities’ conception of “normal” behavior: “[...] So if you are a woman who is extremely bright, very astute at business, is able to amass wealth, a woman who is challenging and not docile, any of these can lead to allegations of witchcraft”.

Northern Ghana, the place where most witch persecutions are taking place, has already made some efforts to close every single witch camp. However, it wasn’t until 2010, when an alleged witch was burned to death, that more official action was taken against it. In 2012, efforts were made to close six of the shelters that served as witch camps, while re-integrating those women who had been separated from their families and greatly marginalized, into their communities. However, they ran into huge cultural pressure and stigma. In 2014, again, the Minister for Gender and Social Protection of the Ghanaian government developed a plan to shut down those camps and reintegrate the women into their communities, starting with the Bonyasi camp. However, human rights organizations feared women wouldn’t be accepted back by their communities, while most women themselves feared going back.

Nowadays, those shelters still exist – four out of the six mentioned are still running – even the efforts made, and many women who would end up in those camps never saw any actions taken against their abusers. At the same time, the number of witch hunts continues to rise, some of it attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. Actually, on Thursday 23rd of July of last year 2020, Madam Akua Denteh, a 90-years-old woman, was beaten to death in broad daylight at Kafaba – near Salaga – a very well-known slave market during the 18th/19th centuries. She had been accused of witchcraft, together with 17 other women, by the self-proclaimed witch hunter Hajia Filipina. Filipina was brought to the village to find out who was responsible for the lack of rainfall. As a consequence, he accused 18 women, 17 of them

who “confessed” being witches – after, of course, numerous tortures, abuses, and the hope of surviving. However, Madam Akua Denteh refused to confess something which wasn’t true, and for that reason, she got beaten to death.

The problem is: Denteh’s assassination is not an isolated case. As country journalists claim, the only difference in her death was the international attention it brought. However, witch hunting in Ghana is still a systematic problem in most communities – not only in small villages – and needs to be properly addressed. According to Ghanaian journalist, Elizabeth Akua Ohene, no woman, especially those who are elderly or poor, is safe from witchcraft accusations, as it is something very embedded within the country’s culture and ideology.

In conclusion, Ghana’s witch camps are completely dehumanizing, not only for the reasons that oblige women to exile and seek asylum in them, but for the conditions they must face and the traumatic treatment they still have to bear. However, what will happen to the women and what kind of safety will they have if those camps close but the government does not take greater steps in the judicial field, while at the same time granting a

comprehensive education against the stigma and the cultural attitudes? Without taking positive actions against the abusers, and pushing for a social and cultural change of mindset, the witch camps act indeed as shelters and are the only thing keeping women alive. According to Angela Dwamena, Aboagye – a gender rights activist: “you need a very strong combination of research, advocacy, community action, and state action working together and over a long period of time to dismantle these notions within the community.”

The 10th of August has been declared the World Day against Witch Hunts, and we have the individual responsibility to push towards international recognition of those crimes, as well as to advocate against them and support the projects and non-profit initiatives working together with the communities to end with those massive violations of women’s rights. Again, and following Carol Hanisch and bell hooks idea of “the personal is political”, it is important to advocate for greater rights for women internationally, as those violations are built upon sexism, misogyny, and the global patriarchal structures in place all around the world.

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