

**THEY HAVE USED A BROOM TO SWEEP MY WOMB:
THE CONCEPT OF WITCHCRAFT IN GHANA**

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Introduction

Witchcraft is an element of the beliefs which are prevalent in Ghanaian societies. In this paper some of the general characteristics of witches and their activities against human beings will be investigated. The belief in witchcraft is prevalent not only among the rural folks in Ghana, but also in the cities among the western educated; it cuts across all social categories. In their conclusion to *African Christianity*, George Bond, Walton Johnson and Sheila S. Walker acknowledge that traditional beliefs including witchcraft are part of the religious experience of the people in the African Cities. They write:

Movement located in more remote areas tend to focus on the traditional concerns of healing and witchcraft eradication, whereas those located closer to urban areas tend to have a broader spectrum of concerns. The issues of healing and witchcraft are, however, often present in the urban movements and, in many instances, such as in the church of the Messiah, may be reinterpreted in terms of the concerns of modern urban life.¹

Witchcraft is more than a cultural thread; it is the warp reinforcing the spiritual fabric of Ghanaian societies. Even today, despite the impact of Westernization, for adherents of Christianity and Islam the belief in witchcraft is not an alien religious experience. Many people join Western religions looking for new "deities" as benefactors and protectors against the traditional witchcraft system.²

The concept of witchcraft seems to be a widespread phenomenon; it is found in societies around the world³. Several European scholars have written about the subject. Geoffrey Parrinder's *Witchcraft: European and African*, Hughes Pennethorne's *Witchcraft* and Margaret Murray's *Witch Cult in Western Europe* are few examples.⁴ Murray divides witchcraft into two categories, operative witchcraft and ritual witchcraft. To her, operative witchcraft encompasses all charms and spells, both good and bad, and is practised in all societies around the world. Her definition of ritual witchcraft is confined to the practices begun in the late medieval times by so-called witches.⁵ This description of ritual witchcraft coincides with the following modern dictionary definition of what a witch is:

A person who practices sorcery; a sorcerer or sorceress; one having supernatural powers in the natural world, especially to work evil, and usually by association with evil Spirits or the Devil: formerly applied to both men and women, but now generally restricted to women⁶. (p. 1179)

The term witchcraft, sorcery and magic are generally lumped together in anthropological literature⁷. However, since this terminology is derived from Western academic literature it may not automatically be legitimately used to label similar systems of beliefs and practices in African societies.

As John Rush observed:

A great deal of inference has been attached to the terms witchcraft, sorcery, and magic and, with respect to witchcraft and magic, they may refer to specific 'religious' systems. It might be more productive to consider the systems in each culture as unique, using their terminology. By using the words witchcraft and sorcery or magic one builds into the analysis an artificial similarity which maybe less than accurate⁸.

Scholars have demonstrated that witchcraft belief is nearly a universal phenomenon in African Societies. Evans-Pritchard was one of the first scholars to realize the sociological importance of beliefs concerning witchcraft in African religion. His work on the Azande fostered interest in and more research on the subject. Scholars such as John Middleton, E.H. Winter and James L. Brain in East Africa. The Rev. H. Debrunner, M.J. Field and Wolf Bleek in West Africa and others have attempted to explicate both the psycho-religious and the sociological aspects of witchcraft in African Societies.⁹ Although their works are based on outsiders' perspectives, they demonstrate a strong academic interest in witchcraft.

Akan Witchcraft Beliefs

In order to avoid generalization, this paper will focus mainly on the witchcraft belief among the Akan of Ghana since most of the information available are centred on this particular group and the Twi language. However, since most Ghanaian societies have shared religious values, a great deal of the information provided can be utilized in cross-cultural perspective. Witchcraft among the Akan is a mystic power which can be utilized by its possessors (witches and wizards) to harm other persons in the matrilineal side of the family. This malevolent spirit, when inherent in human beings, makes them spiritually cannibalistic; they kill and destroy their own blood kin group as their abode and their activities are often localized within the same group. Witches are believed to cause strictures, preventing members of their own kin group from

producing children. In addition, the witches hinder man's prosperity and can alter man's destiny. Witches are mostly females but there are also male witches (wizards).

There are also good and bad witches. Good witches are believed to be found in prosperous families; families endowed with children, wealth and prestige. As Jahoda noticed:

All Europeans are witches, but they use their witchcraft not in killing people, but for making useful things. There are good and bad witches. The woman whose child appears to get on in life is said to be using her witchcraft well, and it is this sense that the European 'witches' were said to be generally better.¹⁰

We can only understand the concept of witchcraft in Akan culture in terms of its relationship to other socio-religious facts. Witchcraft must be viewed as part of a whole set of family and kin relationships. As Evan-Pritchard noticed in the Azande culture:

Witchcraft is not only a physical trait but is also inherited. It is transmitted by Unilinear descent from parent to child. The sons of a male witch are all witches but his daughters are not; while the daughters of female witch are all witches but her sons are not.¹¹

As among the Azande, witchcraft in Akan society is a matter of family and the kin relationship. It is transmitted by Unilinear descent. The major difference is that the witchcraft is transmitted only through the female line among the *Akan*. Witchcraft activities occur within the same line.

Belief in witchcraft is the most common supernatural belief in Ghanaian societies but it is also the most obscure and mysterious. Not only outsiders, but insiders too find it obscure. Generally, information on witchcraft is only obtainable from the confessions of the witches themselves, from traditional priests and priestesses (who protect man against witches), or from the traditional narratives, news papers, gossip about the cult passed among ordinary men.¹² The main root of most witchcraft belief is intense suspicion and fear, arising from the strained relationships among individuals of the *Abusua*, the matrilineal clan.¹³

There are several Akan sayings which illustrate that the abode for the witches is in the female line of the family; these witches harm their own blood relatives. The saying, *Efi aboses etwa wo a ekpen sekwa* literally meaning "The gravel from the home, when it cuts you, it is sharper than the cutlass". The witches as gravel in the family are more powerful and sharper than the machete when they 'cut' you. The maxim *Se aboa bi nso beka wo a na efi wo are wo nnuma nwa*, literally "if an animal (witch) will bite you it comes from your own clothes" refers to the witches, evil nature and their close proximity in one's own family (clothes).

Nana Kofi Apoo, a traditional priest for the three witch catching deities Ntoa, Amfamfiri and Minntiminina, explained the activities of the witches in the family and the ambiguity in their activities as follows:

None of the abayifeo (witches and wizards) who have been caught by the gods has confessed that he or she has killed people from someone else's family. They kill from their own family (matrilineal kin). They mostly kill from the mother's side but it is difficult to prove that they eat from the mother's side alone. When the deity catches abayifeo sometimes that person confesses that he was travelling to some place to eat or to the garbage dump to eat. The person bypasses his parents. It is difficult to know the truth in this.¹⁴

Several priests interviewed explained that each witch must provide a victim from her own blood clan to the witch cult. The cult obtains victims in this way. Witches who belong to the cult enjoy sacrifices from other families only if the victim has been presented by the victim's blood kin who is a witch.¹⁵

The witches are not only capable of killing people, they also have the power to spoil man's life. Witches can bring diseases and other misfortunes to their victims. They can also bring poverty and conflict, material loss on their victims (Debrunner, 1959:40).

Witches As Impediment to Child Bearing

The most common *Twi* lexemes which designate witchcraft are *bayie* and *bayifeo*.¹⁶ These two important words - *bayie* meaning witchcraft and *bayifeo* meaning a witch - also appear frequently in conversation and modern Christian preaching especially the so-called 'deliverance'. The words *bayie* and *bayifeo* when treated etymologically demonstrate the essential activities of the cult. The lexeme *bayifeo* when etymologised has three morphemes, *ba* meaning 'child', *yi* meaning 'to take' and *feo*, meaning a person of such characteristics. In a sense *bayifeo* therefore means a person with supernatural power to take a child from its mother's womb or cause a stricture in a woman's womb. H. Debrunner informs us about a case of witches restricting children:

Cases are known where the womb or the testicles of both sexes have been removed and thrown into the latrine pit. In the case of women the (witches) generally turn the womb upside down to impede the entry of the sperm.¹⁷

From this basic activity of the witches, the word *bayifo* as a designator of witches probably originated. 'Life! Life to the town, life to the chief, life to the clan, life and fertility to the women! This is the main petition in Akan prayers.'¹⁸

Childless married couples are subject to derision, the man is called by the vulgar 'Wax penis' (Kote krawa). Not so very many years ago the childless man or woman after death had great thorns called pammewuo (lit. 'Link me with death') driven into the soles of the feet. In the case of a chief a pretence only was made of doing so. At the same time the corpse was addressed with these words, 'womwo ba, mma sa bio' (you have not begotten or born a child, do not return again like that).'¹⁹

Kote krawa (impotency) and *bonin* (barrenness) are some of the activities of the witches which are reprimanded by the most societies in Ghana. The Akan say, *Awoɔ yentɔ, awoɔ ne wo yam* meaning 'children are never bought, it is better when the children are from your own womb'. It is better to have your own children stresses the importance of individuals producing their own children. One must say that this is a society which does not welcome conventional adoption. Children without parents are often taken care of by the *Abusua*, but children must always know who the respective parents are. Parentship cannot be forged, it always has to be in its natural form, the coming together of the man (spirit) and the woman (blood) to make children, which is an *Akan* spiritual interpretation of what makes a human being.²⁰

Both popular and traditional singers lament in their songs, '*Me koɔ awadeɛ na marwoba wode prae apra me yam*', literally 'I went to marriage and could not produce a child; they have used a broom to sweep my womb.' The witches have literally swept the woman's eggs from the womb and that is the reason why she is not able to produce children. Women in Ghanaian societies are expected to produce children in order to perpetuate the family and keep the clan in existence. A marriage man therefore is expected to have children with his wife to keep her family in continuous existence. Similarly, he expects other men to produce children with his female kin to maintain his maternal side of the family. Barrenness or impotence are causes of conflict between a married couple in *Akan* society and are good grounds for divorce.²¹

Child bearing is one of the strongest pressures exerted on individuals in the *Akan* society. Belief in the ability of the witches to prevent child bearing is the root of *Akan* fear of witchcraft and witches.

Witches as Destroyers of Man's Destiny

The *Akan* believe that each human being's destiny is pre-ordained. That is, before the spirit enters its mother's womb, it receives its destiny from the Creator. Each spirit, before coming to this world, must take leave of *Nyame*. This leave taking from the Supreme Being the *Akan*

call *Nkrabea*. *Nkra* means 'to ask for leave' and *bea* means 'place'. *Nkrabea* therefore means the place where one takes leave from the Creator. After the individual has asked the Creator for leave he or she requests and is given the *kyebes*,²² the commanded destiny.

The Akan maxim *Obi kra ne Nyankopon na obi ungyina ho*,²³ literally meaning, "when one takes leave of the Supreme Being, no one stands by". This implies that 'leave taking' and the receiving of one's destiny is an understanding between the individual and the Creator. There is also an Akan proverb *Akoko ne kra ene Oberekuo de nso, obiara na ne nkrabea* literally 'The soul of the chicken is different from the soul of the bird *Oberekuo*'²⁴ The axiom means that every one has a unique destiny since he or she chooses what to become during this leave. This explains why people have different destinies. The Rev. H. Debrunner explains the leave taking:

The life-soul may have taken leave of *Nyame* in the following way:

*'I choose poverty and short life' or 'I choose grief, rags and dark cloth' or even 'I hate and taboo all good things and good news, and I choose bad things instead', or even 'I choose to become a witch'. If its leave-taking was so unsatisfactory, the soul is called okrabiri, a black or unfortunate soul. If this is the case, you are well advised to ask through the guardian spirits, that Nyame may allow you to change your unlucky life-soul, i.e. to change your destiny.'*²⁵

According to this traditional belief the individual, before birth, has the choice of what he or she wants to become before coming to this world. There are some individuals who choose an unsatisfactory destiny-poverty, a short life, or to become witches. Other individuals choose a satisfactory destiny - long life, children, and riches. *Nyame* therefore is not responsible for the bad destiny of individuals, because they asked for it. Reversal is however possible. Those who chose an unfortunate destiny can appeal to *Nyame* to change it for the better. On the other hand those who made a satisfactory choice face the power of the witches who can alter their destiny and endow them with misfortune.

Witches can make their victims vagabonds. They cannot settle in one place to have reputable life. The witches are believed to use their power to make people dizzy so that they have no sense of direction. Witches are also believed to be able to make people drunkards, extreme bibulous individuals. Their victims spend most of their lives drinking and doing nothing to benefit their families or their societies. Habitual drinking is believed to be caused by the witches in the families. One can consume a great deal of alcohol because the witches have placed an invisible kerosene-tin in his or her stomach to collect it.

Witches are also believed to interfere with man's destiny from the spiritual point of view. They can be obstacles to their victim's spiritual growth. Lack of such spiritual need makes people worry about their existence in the world.

Spiritual possession is one of the most important characteristics of modern Ghanaian organised Christian spiritual churches.²⁶ Congregation in these churches often practice possession and this spiritual possession is believed to be the power of the Holy Ghost. It is believed that a witch-victim joining a spiritual church might never receive the power of the Holy Ghost. In such cases the priests and the priestesses must perform the so-called 'deliverance' prayers to remove the power of the witches from the victim.

Conclusion

The material presented here is a discussion of the belief about witchcraft and witches in Akan Ghanaian tradition. The *Abusua*, the maternal clan provides the structure of the belief in witchcraft. The most enduring achievement of a man's role are identified with his family. Matrilineal kinship is binding in an absolute sense. The essential relationship between the individual and the natal kin cannot be violated. Potentially opposed to every man's destiny is the collective power of the witches in the family. They can rearrange a man's destiny and bring misfortune upon him. Viewing the family as a forest makes clear the major contribution an individual (tree) must make to perpetuate the existence of the clan (forest). Modern economy based on cash and material assets such as buildings and cars are changing the nature of individual's responsibilities. But the belief in witchcraft still has a major place in Akan, both Christian and traditional religious belief systems. It helps account for why some people in the family are successful and some are not. These concerns and many others are the basis of the belief about witchcraft in Ghana.

NOTES

- 1) **African Christianity**, ed. George Bond, Walton Johnson and Sheila Walker (New York: Academic Press, 1979), p. 165.
- 2) Some people join Christian Churches although they are witches because they find that their bottom is going to leak (when they feel people are going to discover their deeds). See M.J. Field, **Search for Security** (New York: Norton and Company, 1960). My study on the Techiman Pentecostal Churches reveal that people join Christian Churches for other reasons as well.
- 3) Russel Hope Robbins, **The Encyclopaedia of Witchcraft and Demonology** (New York: Crown Publishers, 1959). This book covers the history of witchcraft in several European countries. In the United States of America, William Lightfoot has began a typology of Witchcraft Memorats from Kenturky, in *Indiana Folklore* XI:1 (1976): 47 - 62. Also see Christine Goldberg, **Traditional American Witch Legends: A Catalogue**, *Indiana Folklore* VII: 1 - 2 (1974): 77 - 108.

- 4) Reference to books cited here
- 5) Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (London: Oxford at Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 11 - 12.
- 6) *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1950), p. 1179.
- 7) For the confusion between witchcraft, sorcery and poisoning in the early European Cultures, see Geoffrey Parrinder, *Witchcraft European and African* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 18.
- 8) John Rush, *Witchcraft and Sorcery, An Anthropological Perspective of the Occult* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1974), p. 19.
- 9) More research on witchcraft from both indigenous and outside scholars will throw light on contemporary African Religious Phenomena. Presently we are only relying mostly on outsiders' view points.
- 10) See Gustav Jahoda, *Whiteman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 29.
- 11) E.E. Evan-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 23.
- 12) Confession from the witches are often made after they have been caught by the *Bosommerafoo*, the executioner or the witch-catching deities stated that if a witch does not confess he or she is killed spiritually by the deity. *Nana Okomfoe Adwabi* explains the power of the Boame deity as follows: 'Someone may be *bayifoo*, witch, and when the deity sees it he warns him or her to stop, if he refuses, the god kicks him down. Half of his body dies and later the rest dies as well. The victim cannot even confess his deeds before he dies'. See Warren and Brempong *Histories of the Deities*, 1974, pp. 167 - 168.
- 13) For the matrilineal extended family as abode for the witches, see The Rev. H. Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana* (London: Knight and Truscott, 1959), p. 54.
- 14) Warren and Brempong, *Histories of the Deities*, 1974, p. 183.
- 15) Personal Conversation with Nana Kofi Apee at Asueyi - Techiman, May 31, 1970. Several priest for witch-catching deities I talked to supported this explanation. Also see Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, p. 40.

- 16) With reference to these lexemes see The Rev. Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana* (1959); R.S. Rattray, *Religion And Art in Ashanti*, (1927), and M.J. Field's *Search for Security*, (1960).
- 17) Debrunner, p. 42. The male witch (wizard) is called *bonsam* ('devil') but *bayifoo* is commonly used for both male and female.
- 18) *Ibid.*
- 19) R.S. Rattray, *Religion And Art in Ashanti* (London: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 67.
- 20) *Ibid.*, p. 51, for tradition theory of conception.
- 21) *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 22) *Hyebes* and *nkrabea* are sometimes used synonymously.
- 23) With reference to this maxim see Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs*, p. 26.
- 24) *Obereku* is a bird the size of a pigeon of light brown colour with red eyes and a black beak. This bird sings, *kuku!*, *kuku!* Not only by day but also four times a night. It is considered a spirit and a fortune-teller, a supernatural bird.
- 25) Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, p. 12.
- 26) Spirit possession is also part of the Akan traditional religion. For the nature of spiritual possession, See M.J. Field, *Search for Security* (New York: Norton and Company, 1960), p. 55.