



ISSN 2336-3274 (Print) ISSN 2570-7558 (Online)

<https://edu.uhk.cz/africa>

## The Sanctuaries for Witch-hunt Victims in Northern Ghana

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### Recommended citation:

Riedel, F. (2018). The Sanctuaries for Witch-hunt Victims in Northern Ghana. *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 6(1), 29–60. <https://doi.org/10.26806/modafr.v6i1.220>



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## SANCTUARIES FOR WITCH-HUNT VICTIMS IN NORTHERN GHANA

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**Abstract:** Witch-hunts in Ghana's Northern Region mainly occur among neighbours and members of the extended family. Factors triggering accusations are disease, death and accidents. With many exceptions, the accused are mainly postmenopausal women. Accusers include children, women and men alike. Witch-hunts only occasionally target specific behaviour or deviancy: they are registered as accidental and "unjust" by almost all victims. Most accusations disrupted productive relationships and reaped no benefit for the accusers. The victims are often tortured in order to produce confessions. The accusers rely on dreams for singling out the accused, while the latter are then forced to chicken- and potion-ordeals at various shrines to determine their guilt or innocence. Exorcisms include potions and shaving. Today, about 800 victims of witchcraft-accusations live in nine sanctuaries for witchhunt-victims to dodge further accusations and lynching. While diverse in character, eight of the nine sanctuaries adhere to an earth-shrine-complex typical for Northern Ghana and beyond. Social work with the victims and educational campaigns by NGOs are well-tried and promising, but governmental malpractice and media attention have thus far reaped mixed results.

**Keywords:** *Witch-hunts, Ghana, Earth-Shrines, Konkomba, Sanctuaries for Witch-hunt Victims*



*Map. Locations of the sanctuaries for witch-hunt victims and of the shrine Tongnaab in Tenzug.<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

Sanctuaries for victims of witch-hunts exist in the DRC, Ghana, Malawi, South-Africa, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Burkina Faso (Riedel 2012). The evident absence of comparative studies is the result of a shortage of local studies. Drawing from more than 160 semi-structured interviews with witch-hunt victims collected in 2009, 2011, 2015 and 2016, I shall introduce the nine sanctuaries in Northern Ghana and discuss factors for accusations, violence and exile. In advance, I will provide a preliminary summary of the typical process of witchcraft-accusations and of the status of the activities of NGOs.

1 Modified Map, original source: Central Intelligence Agency. Ghana Physiography. Via [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/cia-maps-publications/map-downloads/Ghana\\_Physiography.jpg/image.jpg](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/cia-maps-publications/map-downloads/Ghana_Physiography.jpg/image.jpg) [30.6.2015]. The name of the location Tindang in this text is replaced with Gnani.

Depending on ethnic specifics, notions about witchcraft in Northern Ghana include witchcraft-substance as well as inherited witchcraft and ritual sorcery. Concepts of sorcery and poisoning are associated by ideas about what Tait named *transvection*: astral cannibalism of body souls or witchcraft (Tait 1954: 66).<sup>2</sup> In general, witches are deemed capable of nocturnal astral flight, preying on body souls to cannibalise them in the bush, thus causing sickness and death. Especially in the centralised Dagomba-areas, ideas about witchcraft seem to merge with the more lurid Akan witchcraft-concepts, while in the remote eastern Konkomba-areas ideas about witchcraft seem to be much less specific. In many cases, persons were only accused of “making somebody ill” out of irrational metaphysical malevolence. While the notion of “Juju” (ritual harmful magic) is well-established, concepts of infectious and unconscious external witchcraft-spirits of the Akan and other West-African societies tend to be absent or of lesser importance in the North. Those accused of witchcraft deny any knowledge of witchcraft-legends and often insist that they themselves lost children without accusing anyone.

Accusations mostly occur at the village level, at hamlets, farms, but also in smaller towns and at marketplaces. The triggers for accusations are chiefly “inexplicable” sickness or death. Accusations are highly erratic and occur in clusters. The more cases I collected, the more I was forced to question patterns and employ a more dynamic, individualistic model of idiosyncratic accusations with only one shared feature: witchcraft-beliefs. Even though men are accused and sometimes killed as well, at least 95% of the refugees in the sanctuaries are women. They escaped mob-violence either on their own or were brought by family members, or they arrived accompanied by their accusers.

At the most renowned of the various shrines, earth-priests perform a specific ordeal: a fowl is slaughtered and thrown away. The animal flops and thrashes around. Finally coming to rest on their belly or their back, they announce guilt or innocence of the accused. The accuser and the accused are both expected to bring a chicken to “prove” their version, but often the accusers refuse to come to the shrine. For the priests, the chicken-ordeal channels the verdict of a spiritual entity

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2 “[...] the sorcerer, instead of going himself to overlay his victim, sends his shadow to eat the victim’s shadow. As the shadow in life is the ghost after death, a man whose shadow is gone dies of a lingering disease.” (cf. Tait 1956a: 337).

resting at the earth-shrines, vaguely referred to as “the gods of the place.” The chicken-ordeal serves as a sacrifice as well, as the blood of chicken is also used to appease gods and restore peace. As an alternative or in addition, at Tengzug, Gnani and Kukuo a potion-ordeal is administered to the accused, which most likely derived from poison ordeals.<sup>3</sup> The accused is forced to drink the potion and told that the gods will kill her, if she has lied. Though suspicions of manipulation were common, the chicken-ordeal rests on luck alone, while the potion-ordeal tends to reward the audacious, who insist on their innocence and survive the ordeal.

After an ordeal, the accused is expected to “wash her stomach” and therefore neutralise her witchcraft through a different potion containing chicken-blood, earth, water and other ingredients.

At other local shrines, individual methods are applied by creative shrine-entrepreneurs. Some move around and use trance or public rituals to cleanse entire villages from several “witches.” Sometimes, a broom-ordeal is used to find an accused person in a certain hamlet, where the broom is carried around until it knocks on a door (Igwe 2016: 133). In one of my interviews, an accused woman reported that she had been tortured at a local shrine and had witnessed the death of another accused woman. In some other cases, the shrines protected accused persons and scolded the accusers. This diversity often leads to expensive shrine-shopping in search for an appropriate outcome. Irrespective of the verdict at the shrines, the accused prefer exile in a sanctuary over a return. As many interviewees said: “They will accuse me again and anyone can attack and kill me in the bush.”

Conditions in all sanctuaries were dire during my first visit in 2009, but improved significantly after a few NGOs stepped up their work. The most active was the former *Gambaga-Outcast Home Project (Go-Home Project)*. Since 1994, Simon Ngota and Gladis Lariba organised negotiated repatriations of about 400 witch-hunt victims. If victims

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3 The *Odom* poison-ordeal is discussed by Allman and Parker (Allman and Parker 2005: 126). They mention potions used by the *Aberewa*-movement (Allman and Parker 2005: 12; cp. Parker 2004: 402). Poison-ordeals and other harmful ordeals were outlawed in 1901 (Parker 2004: 307). Cardinall recalls a high demand for poisonous strophantus-plants from the Tongo-hills (Cardinall 2012 (1920): 90). Lévy-Bruhl suggested that ordeals mark the development of political organisation (Lévy-Bruhl 1966 (1927): 232).

wanted to return and negotiations ensured their safety, they were supported with fees for a final potion-exorcism and a small-income business, then transported home, and finally revisited several times. The conditions for those who wanted to remain were gradually improved with farmland, water, food, clothes and huts. The project ran out of funding, and the Mamprusi-Kusase-war turned the Kusase Simon Ngota into a refugee himself. In 2010, he founded the *Witch-hunt Victims Empowerment Project* (WHVEP) and continued his work in Gushiegu, covering the sanctuaries at Gushiegu, Nabule, Gbintiri, Kpatinga and on a limited scale Gnani and Duabone. After a transitional period, the modified *Presby Go-Home project* under Samson Laar resumed his work in Gambaga. In Kukuo, the NGO *Songtaaba* has adopted the concept of repatriations. The *Anti-Witchcraft Allegation Campaign Coalition* (AWACC) and *ActionAid Ghana* both claim the role of an umbrella-organisation while their real amount of input outside of the regional capital Tamale is questionable. Fierce competition for scarce funding and media-attention is palpable on the ground and often compromises neutral positions while producing wild exaggerations of resettlement numbers that had become the currency for successful work for all NGOs.

While the state remained largely inactive until 2014, the governmental Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), founded in 1993, offered at least legal assistance to witch-hunt victims (Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice 2018). Ghana falls into a range of African states that refuse to allow witchcraft-cases to courts and criminalised accusations, harmful ordeals and other harmful traditional practices (cf. Igwe 2016: 120). The question of the existence of witchcraft pitches state institutions against traditional forms of legislation. In recent years, more and more of the accused resort to legal institutions and sue their accusers. Families have become more active in organising repatriations on their own.

### ***Methodology and Sources***

In 2009, Simon Ngota guided me to sanctuaries in Gambaga, Kukuo, Gnani (often misspelt as Nagani, Ngani or called *Tindang*, which simply means “earth-shrine”), Kpatinga, Nabule, the two sanctuaries at Gushiegu and the small shrine at Banyasi which was closed in 2014.

I recorded more than 40 interviews within six weeks, focusing on Gambaga. I revisited the sanctuaries for five weeks in 2011 to conduct more than 120 interviews, mainly in Gushiegu. In 2013, I sent my assistant David Osei to Duabone to gather 11 interviews with the mostly male refugees at a shrine, which was mentioned only in one source in 2001 (Dovlo 2007: 73). In 2015 and 2016, I visited Duabone myself. In 2011, Ngota discovered another sanctuary in Gbintiri, which I visited in 2015 and 2016. My research and visits between 2008 and 2012 were funded by the University of Siegen, while all my research from 2012 on has been financed by my family.

In total, I conducted more than 160 semi-structured, open-ended and trauma-informed interviews with victims of witch-hunts. All interviewees were past the age of 30, most older than 50 and all but one lacked formal education, were illiterate and unable to communicate in English, the official language in Ghana. Only nine of them were men.

I compared my own findings with other sources: Leo Igwe, starting visits in 2012 for conducting his PhD research on the agency of victims among the Dagomba, mainly in Gnani; Stephen Schrezenmeyer, a student, who joined the WHVEP in 2015, visited all sanctuaries and provided several internal reports since that time; several students and journalists, who sent brief updates after being introduced to the field.

Earlier sources of special importance are the documentary films *Witches in Exile* (2004) by Allison Berg; *What I used to know – the Road to Ghana’s ‘Witches’ Camps* (2010) by Zoe Young; and *The Witches of Gambaga* (2010) by Yaba Badoe. Badoe also published an insightful report, *The Witches of Gambaga – What it means to be a Witch in the Northern Region of Ghana*. (Badoe 2005) The documentary *Joana und die Mächte der Finsternis* (2011) by Andrea Morgenthaler included a short scene in Gushiegu. As the sanctuary in Gambaga was often visited by photographers and students, many smaller productions of differing quality can be found online: in-and-out disaster-journalism spreading misinformation, but also more qualified approaches.

Two remarkable books have appeared after my first field-research: *Die Hexe von Gushiegu* (Haase-Hindenberg 2009) and *Spellbound – Inside West Africa’s Witch Camps* (Palmer 2010). Few academic texts have dealt with the subject so far. Susan Drucker-Brown’s essays

on Mamprusi-witchcraft (Drucker-Brown 1993; 2006) elaborate on the camp in Gambaga. Almuth Schauber focused on Gnani in an evaluation of a short-lived project of the German government-agency DED (Schauber 2007). Earlier sources of utmost importance were Esther Goody (Goody 1970); A.W. Cardinall (Cardinall 1918); David Tait (Tait 1954, 1963) and Ernst Haaf (Haaf 1967). More recent studies on witchcraft-beliefs in the Northern Region of Ghana are Jean Allman/John Parker (Allman and Parker 2007); John B. Kirby (Kirby 2004, 2009, 2012); Bernhard Bierlich (Bierlich 2007) and Leo Igwe (Igwe 2016). Three Ghanaian theses (Nabla 1997; Nangpaak 2007; Suglo 2006) were published as grey literature but provided valuable information. Including these sources, and newspaper articles, I had access to more than 230 different cases of witch-hunt victims in Northern Ghana.

Methodological problems included the scarcity of good translators in multi-ethnic-settings, poor infrastructure, gender-related biases, trauma and the need for intervention: As interviewees lost worktime and needed to survive, I paid about one to three Euros per interview. In addition, many interviewees suffered from visible diseases, were registered at the National Health Insurance (NHIS) and sent to a nearby hospital at my own expense. Most victims left the interviews in an elated mood, as they were relieved and happy to tell their story and share their anger and frustration.<sup>4</sup>

### ***The History of Witch-hunts and the Earth-shrines in Ghana***

Records of witch-hunts in Ghana date back at least to the 18th century (Oldendorp 1777, by Debrunner 1979 (1959: 103, 62). People accused of witchcraft were burnt, decapitated, drowned and killed in various other ways (Debrunner 1978 (1959): 102ff.; Allman and Parker 2005: 125ff. Rattray 1927; Kramer 1987: 49ff). The *Domankama*-movement, which aimed at curing witches instead of killing them, thrived for 20 years before the colonisation of the Ashanti-Kingdom (Parker 2004: 396; 400). Colonial legislation then outlawed accusations in 1906 (Olsen 2002: 522). According to Tait, change has led to a sharp decrease in killing people accused of witchcraft: "In these days a sorcerer is no longer killed" (Tait 1954: 73). Ostracising

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4 For further information on methodology see Riedel 2016: 129–142.



has replaced killing and women are therefore more vulnerable. Dagombas interviewed by Tait were afraid of a return to the time when “people were killing each other” (Tait 1963: 144). In the same spirit, locals see the sanctuaries for witch-hunt victims not as a feature of backwardness but of progress, not as a traditional, but as a “modern” and most humane way of treating people accused of witchcraft. As far as historical sources for Northern Ghana concerns, much speaks for the prevalence of traditional violent witch-hunts on the one hand and a very old traditional set of institutions entrusted to deal with witchcraft on the other. The “cultural-change” hypothesis (Debrunner 1978 (1959): 75, 78ff.; Schönhuth 1992: 12) as well as the “modernity of witchcraft” paradigm are therefore refuted by Allman and Parker (Allman and Parker 2004: 115).<sup>5</sup>

Rattray points at syncretism, diffusion and migration of cultural sets (Rattray 1931:43f) while Parker confirms exchanges within Ghana and speaks of a *Voltaic culture* sharing essential elements (Parker 2006: 363).<sup>6</sup> Werthmann sees a shared transregional consensus about spiritual issues of land and mediation through earth-priests, who are also in charge of dealing with witchcraft (Werthmann 2009: 134; Zwernemann 1968: 33ff). In Burkina Faso, Werthmann found the earth-priest system intact (Werthmann 2009: 131ff). Zwernemann collected evidence for earth-shrines throughout West-africa (Zwernemann 1968: 33ff).

According to Rattray, earth-priests in Ghana were *priestly-kings* (Rattray 1931:44). The invasion of the Dagomba between 1200 and 1400 AD annihilated earth-priests of the Konkomba in their western dominions and usurped their power (Rattray 1931: 49; Bierlich 2007: 3). Some priests lost their political power but remained custodians of the land (Rattray 1931: 49ff). Mainly in their eastern dominion Dagomba chiefs lived and do live side by side with Konkomba earth-priests (Kirby 2009: 65). Tait describes this division as follows:

A chief may succeed to an office held by his father’s father; a *tendana* may succeed to an office held by his mother’s father. A *tendana* only controls land when he is also a village chief; otherwise his office is

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5 Cf. Allman and Parker 2005: 142; 226. Cf. Gray 2005: 140ff. Multhaupt even sees anti-witchcraft movements absent in societies of rapid and intensive change (Multhaupt 1990: 35).

6 For similarities with Ashanti-customs, see Allman and Parker (2005: 116ff.)

a ritual one and his task is to purify the Earth, not to control the use of land (Tait 1952: 382).

Likewise, the Mamprusi divide political power of the kings (*naam*) and ritual power of the earth-priests (*dendaan-dima*) (Drucker-Brown 2006: 240). The neighbouring Kusase also have earth-priests (*tendan*) resembling the Konkomba system (Haaf 1967: 30f).

Earth-priests are regarded as descendants of the first settlers among various ethnic groups including the Dagara and Sisale in Nordwestern Ghana (Lentz 2013: 85).<sup>7</sup> Cardinall delineates the prevalence and function of *tindaanas* as justices of the peace and keepers of collective rituals among Konkomba, Moshi, Dagomba, Builsa and Kassena (Cardinall 2012: 16).<sup>8</sup> They transport and transfer ritual power with stones installed at the center of their shrines (Lentz 2013:85ff; Allman and Parker 2005: 48ff; Igwe 2016). Today, the earth-priesthood can be regarded as a dynamic, diversified and transregional institution (Bierlich 2007: 3; Nabla 1997: 33; Schönhuth 1992: 2, 4).

The most influential earth-shrine is the *Tongnaab*-shrine at Tengzug, where several cult-movements concerned with witchcraft originated, among them the *Atinga*-movement (Allman and Parker 2005: 5, 125ff).<sup>9</sup> The South admired the supposed spiritual powers of the North and readily adopted or invited priests, thus spreading the cult (Parker 2006: 354, 358).<sup>10</sup> During my visit in 2009, the priests played down the role of witchcraft-accusations for the shrine.<sup>11</sup> They mainly offer divination in a crevice, featuring a voice called out through clapping.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, several victims of witchcraft-accusations reported they were brought to Tengzug and had to drink a potion they remembered as repugnant. They suspected poison and often

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7 Lentz 2013: 85. Earth-priests are called *tengangsob* (Dagare) and *totina* (Sisale). Cf. Allman and Parker 2005: 44; Zimoñ 2003: 425; Werthmann 2009: 76.

8 “And it is worship of the earth-gods that is common throughout the country. It is said that there is no place without a *tindana* [...]” Cf. Werthmann 2009: 83.

9 Bugiya, near Gambaga, hosts another renowned witch-finding shrine (Drucker-Brown 2006: 240).

10 Cf. Allman and Parker 2005: 31. Transfers of rumours about occult wealth from Akan cities to the north are also happening (cf. Allman and Parker 2005: 93).

11 Cf. Allman and Parker 2005: 16.

12 Fortes/Mayer state that the priests would despise mediumistic practices (Fortes/Mayer 1966: 11). Nonetheless, visitors from Northern Ghana named the voices in the cave “voice of the gods.”

confessed in fear. Laxatives, emetics and other drugs are administered at some shrines (cf. Igwe 2016: 168). Other earth-shrines at Gambaga, Gbintiri, Banyasi and Kpatinga referred to ritual obligations towards *Tongnaab*, which Parker characterises as an “expansive ritual network” (Parker 2006: 353; Parker/Allman 2005: 11ff).<sup>13</sup> *Tongnaab* therefore was and is important for the sanctuaries, but while it might be tempting to indulge in diffusionism, the shrines seem to rely more on the individual character of the priest than on an organisational superstructure. A lot of different other shrines are shattered across rural Ghana and many deal with witchcraft-accusations as well. Among collective witch-finding rituals, “carrying the body” was of special importance. The body of the deceased was carried by several persons until, as if out of its own will, it knocked at the door of the person to be accused of witchcraft (Tait 1954: 70). Though outlawed, modifications of it might still be prevalent. But the first and most important authority for witchcraft-accusations today is the dream of the individual accuser, which reveals the true identity of a witch.

The opposition of earth (fertility) and witchcraft (death) is widespread.<sup>14</sup> Some accused women took earth into their mouths to prove their innocence (cf. Haase-Hindenberg 2009: 192). Earth is also the main ingredient of potion exorcisms in Kukuo, Gnani and Gambaga. The priests of Gambaga, Gnani and Kpatinga as well as the former earth-priestess in Banyasi all refer to themselves as earth-priests. Shrines in Kukuo, Nabule and Gbintiri follow similar patterns.

Of particular interest are the earth-shrines of the Konkomba, which seem to have inspired those of adjacent ethnic groups. This acephalous and variegated society calls the earth-shrines *tendana-untindaan* or *litingbaln* (Talton 2010: 16. Cf. Zimoń 2003: 423; Zimoń 2003: 423). Priests are appointed through rituals involving contingency more than determination of the aspirant (Zimoń 2003: 427). Every clan has a shrine, where spiritual powers of the earth are watching over the clan (Zimoń 2003: 423). In states of emergencies, priests are consulted and determine rituals to settle spiritual crises (Tait 1952a: 168). Doubt and ambivalence seem widespread:

13 In Burkina Faso, Werthmann noticed smaller shrines depending on a larger shrine in Guéguéré (Werthmann 2009: 77).

14 Brain discusses an antagonism of sky-forces associated with witchcraft and earth-forces in Cameroon (Brain 1970: 178, cf. Kirby 2009: 54).

While Konkomba affect to despise their diviners they often consult them; diviners regard themselves as men with a mission (Tait 1952a: 167).

Priests are expected to sustain the moral order, prevent violence and enforce ritual taboos (Zimoń 2003: 423). Zimoń specifies three main objectives of prayers: rain, fertility and protection from witchcraft (Zimoń 2003: 436). Shrines are expected to make “people with four eyes” (witches) visible to everyone (Zimoń 2003: 441). Sacrifices are conducted for rain and lightning to strike witches (Tait 1954: 58; Werthmann 2009: 95). The earth-priest of Gnani displayed his curved rainmaking-stick on my visit in 2016.

Key for understanding the sanctuaries is the taboo of murder and violence at earth-shrines (Zimoń 2003: 423; Werthmann 2009: 133). The auratic spiritual powers of the place and the high-god *Uwumbor* prohibit any bloodshed among clan-members. To murder an outsider calls for a vendetta, but not for sanctions through the own clan (Zimoń 2003: 423). Witches are thought of as enemies from within; they are considered traitors. But in an exogamous society, women often are not clan-members. They belong to both realms: outsiders and insiders. To kill a person accused of witchcraft does therefore not necessarily lead to a vendetta (Tait 1954: 70), while in several cases accusations nonetheless provoked vendettas or counter-accusations between families. In most cases, the accused are sacrificed by their own family to avoid feuds and conflicts with neighbours.

In short, the perpetrators of the worst crimes are still protected by the earth-shrines while the same spiritual powers also prevent them from continuing their bloodshed. Both, shrines and witches cannot operate beyond a certain distance, including an ethnic distance. This is the reason why they are in proximity of each other: within their aura, shrines protect “witches” from bloodshed as well as communities from witchcraft, adultery, incest, which are all considered as similar and punishable by beating, killing and ostracism (Zimoń 2003: 423; cf. Werthmann 2009: 133, 212). Incest is especially tabooed between siblings of the same mother and it might be of interest that, according to Tait (Tait 1956a: 335, 338.) and my own interviews, also accusations of witchcraft between them are extremely rare (but not absent).

## ***History of the Sanctuaries***

Besides a scarcity of knowledge about the institution of earth-shrines in North-Eastern Ghana, even fewer sources exist about the History of the sanctuaries. Archaeological research would be a good method to shed light on the issue. It might be able to unearth bones at a hill near Gambaga, where according to oral history people accused of witchcraft were killed (Drucker-Brown 2006: 234; cf. Dovlo 2004: 73). A similar hill was reported in Kukuo: “witches” were not buried but exposed to scavengers.

Esther Goody reported from the neighbouring Gonja:

Once the witch’s guilt was established, the chief had three possible courses of action. The first resulted in her death. [...] she was either beheaded or stabbed with a wooden stake [...]. The dead body was then dragged into the bush with a rope around the feet and left for the vultures (Goody 1970: 213).

Killing involved placing a glowing pot on the head of the accused person, drowning her, or, as several informants still remembered, smoking the person to death in her hut with smoke from red pepper, a spice used as a universal weapon against “witches” throughout West-Africa. Haaf refers to the killing of witches among the Kusase and mentions a poison ordeal: the accused uses a poisoned arrow on oneself and walks three times around the grave. Survival proved one’s innocence (Haaf 1967: 133). On witch-killings among the Konkomba, Tait concludes:

Before the arrival of the Germans in Togoland all deaths were investigated on the day of death [...] and the sorcerer was killed on the spot (Tait 1954: 73).

Up to three “sorcerers” were killed after one death. Marks from torture, execution or systematic abuse would likely be detectable on skeletons and could contribute to date back places of execution as well as sanctuaries.

Historical sources also confirm the punishment of witches through slavery under a chief, which might be a precursor of the sanctuaries.

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A final possibility was for the chief himself to take charge of the witch. On being convicted of witchcraft a woman and her children automatically became witch-slaves, *bagbenye*. The father could collect money and redeem his children, though the chief might decide that one daughter should stay with the mother to help her. But the woman herself could not be redeemed; she became the wife of the chief (Goody 1970: 214).

Inhabitants of sanctuaries still sometimes refer to themselves as *Bagbenye* and some are assisted by their grand-daughters in the sanctuaries.

As far as ethnohistory is concerned, we only have limited sources to draw conclusions from. In 1918 Arthur W. Cardinall, a colonial official cum anthropologist reported about the shrine at Gnani:

Witchcraft is very much feared. There are at Gnani and near Wapuli special villages where the fetish of the place has the power to prevent “child- or man-eating” people – invariably women, in these instances – from continuing to do so. The Gnani village is very large and is divided into three sections, Konkomba, Dagomba and Nanumba. The women seem quite happy and are looked after by their men-folk, who visit them and make farms for them and keep their huts in repair. The fetish is a stone under a big tree. Trees seem generally to have evil spirits, and many baobabs are cut down to drive them away (Cardinall 1918: 61).<sup>15</sup>

In another source from 1969 Cardinall writes:

In Dagomba, Mamprussi and Nanumba and to some extent in Gonja, separate villages are set apart for the use of witches. In Gonja confessed or “convicted” witches become the slaves of the sub-divisional chief (Cardinall, cited in Parker 2006: 353).

Drucker-Brown mentions similar “witches’ settlements [...] in the Kpasinkpe province [...] and also in the neighbouring Dagomba Kingdom” (Drucker-Brown 1993: 535). The existence of other

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15 Kirby mentions an earlier document from 1917 in Yendi about the sanctuary with the signature “AWL” (Kirby 2009: 64). Most likely the signature reads AWC for A.W. Cardinall.

sanctuaries than those introduced below could not be confirmed thus far.

The sanctuary of **Gambaga** was already documented in the late 19th century. According to oral history, an imam rescued a woman named Adissa from Simba from her death-sentence by either the *Nayiri* Nahaya Musa, *paramount chief* of Nalerigu, or the Na Briga, chief of Nalerigu. As the imam rescued the woman, others came and the site became a sanctuary for witch-hunt victims. Later on, the *Nayiri* transferred the women into the custody of *Gambarana* Bawumya, the chief of Gambaga (Badoe 2005: 9; Dovlo 2004: 73).

The town spreads along the Nalerigu-Road leading to Nakpanduri, an important trade-route in former times. Islam dominates, but churches of Presbyterians, Catholics and the *Assembly of God* are very active. The majority belongs to the ethnic group of the Mamprusi, who were fighting violent chieftaincy disputes with the Kusase in 2009 and 2011.<sup>16</sup>

The ghetto for witch-hunt victims starts beneath the chief's palace; its 31 small huts with their 128 "rooms" (Nangpaak 2007: 43) are surrounded by a low adobe-wall, which offer some privacy and keep goats out but do not prevent people from passing. Leaking grass-roofs often cause sickness and stress. The total number declined from 400 individuals in the late 1980s to 81 in 2009.<sup>17</sup> Numbers bounced back to 120 in 2016 due to a lack of resources of the *Go-Home-Project* and then increased according to Samson Laar. The decrease in numbers from the 1990s on was mainly the result of resettlement campaigns of the *Go-Home-Project*. The mixed ethnic composition is dominated by Mamprusi, while another 40% of the inhabitants are Bimoba and Konkomba and the rest belongs to various minor groups (Nabla 1997: 49; Nangpaak 2007: 63). According to Drucker-Brown, several male sooth-sayers were living among the women in 1960 (Drucker-Brown 2006: 238), but in 2009 only one man accused of witchcraft was living inside the ghetto and refused to be interviewed.

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16 For a short prehistory of the conflict in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, see Haaf 1967: 14ff.

17 In 2006, Nangpaak counted for Gambaga 83, Kpatinga 57, Tindang 120 (including 12 men), Kukuio 324 (Nangpaak 2007: 35, 88). For numbers, see Drucker-Brown 2006: 238.

In 2016 a new compound for the refugees was almost finished. The huge structure resembled a boarding school and aimed at providing a secular site run by the “Lordina Foundation” of the former first Lady Lordina Mahama. The new camp is located two kilometres out of town, in the middle of bushland. Elderly women who could visit the market and buy and sell products, would then be cut off from social contacts, alms, options to trade, food. The inhabitants of the sanctuary were hostile to the idea of moving outside of town during my visits of 2015 and 2016. The chief claimed his neutral position and promised they could stay in their old structures if they wanted. The conflict is yet to be solved. It shows that governmental and semi-governmental actions often fail the actual needs of witch-hunt victims, even when they decide to act after decades of apathy. Gambaga is at the forefront of media attention and the women are aware of their expected roles, but also frustrated of detrimental action or inaction. Women accused of witchcraft often arrive on a weekly basis and sometimes in clusters.

**Gnani** is located east of Yendi. Beneath the village, the *Tindang* (earth-shrine sanctuary) consists of adobe huts along a slope, containing about 500 people, of which 185 were accused of witchcraft.<sup>18</sup> The other inhabitants are their relatives or descendants. The nearby river Oti provides water and fish, but the water condition, a scarcity of arable land and the remote location render the situation in Gnani as the worst of all camps. I noticed signs of starvation on some elderly women during my first visit, and all knew at least seasonal malnutrition.

The earth-priest claimed that his ancestors had detected the sacred nature of the place. According to Kirby, the female refugees are symbolically married with the shrine and have to observe some taboos, such as a nightly curfew (Kirby 2009: 53). The priest performed the chicken ordeal and each year a potion-exorcism was administered to all women (Cp. Nangpaak 2007: 47). After his death, he was replaced by a younger priest in 2016. In 2015 the situation had improved, a borehole provided water, an NGO had donated chicken-stables that were empty due to epizootic diseases and competition for fodder – a widespread phenomenon in Northern Ghana.

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18 Schauber reports 1,500 individuals (Schauber 2007: 121; cf. Waibel 2001: 17), which likely includes inhabitants of the nearby village of Gnani but exaggerates the number at the sanctuary.



**Kukuo** is the largest sanctuary; the entire village consists of descendants and relatives of the accused. The sanctuary sports a large mosque, a pharmacy, a school and electricity generator. Water is a problem in almost all Northern villages as boreholes erode quickly, but in Kukuo a new one was being build. The inhabitants are mainly Nanumba with a few Konkomba and Kotokoli present as well. Among the Nanumba refugees, accusations of daughters of the accused seemed common and witchcraft was considered hereditary. Greying of hair was reported as the main risk-factor.

Berg managed to film the chicken-ordeal and had it explained by the priest (Ingwe 2014). While potions were reported about deadly ordeals in former times, they now serve as exorcisms (Ingwe 2014). Unlike in Gnani, Gambaga or Duabone, only women are present in Kukuo: “The men don’t come, because we don’t give them the concoction” (Ingwe 2014). Of considerable value is Bergs interview with the priest:

Priest: I, Damba, tell them, women are wicked and they are not good.

Berg: Have women always been wicked?

P: Yes! Since the times of your mothers. Because it is you women who are no good. Because you cook for us and you fetch water for us.

B: Cook what?

P: Food. And you fetch water for us to drink.

B: So if you do that it means you are no good?

P: Yes, tell them! (Ingwe 2014).

It was not deviancy, but conformism which triggered his resentment. In 2015 he was anxious to cooperate with NGOs. The acting political chief is considered stronger than the ageing priest.

The camp at **Kpatinga** seems to fall into the category of older sanctuaries. I could not trace any founding myth, but the shrine at an adjacent grove seems to be very old and appropriated by the Dagomba. There were no memories of first arrivals. Kpatinga had at most 100 inhabitants until the Dagomba-Konkomba-War in 1994–95, when

the uprising Konkomba invaded and demolished the neighbouring town of Kpatinga inhabited by the Dagomba. The population of the sanctuary was mixed from both ethnic groups and each feared reprisal attacks. For a good reason: the Konkomba suffered from pogroms in Tamale and government forces sided with the Dagomba, portraying Konkomba as backward and evil aggressors while the Konkomba themselves resorted to an all-out war including spiritual warfare, sporadic massacres, and women and children as helpers (Bogner 1996: 165, 166, 172). In the sanctuary, the sight of the burning town caused a mass-flight: Dagomba-women walked out west towards Tamale into the Dagomba mainlands, while Konkomba-women tried to bypass roadblocks around the northern Dagomba-stronghold Gushiegu and reach safe Konkomba areas. According to survivors, many died from thirst and snakebites during the exodus and mainly Konkomba were killed or robbed at roadblock massacres. Returnees and new arrivals quickly resettled the place as before. In 2015, 29 Dagomba- and 18 Konkomba-women were living in the colourful, but eroding huts built by *World Vision* and Franciscan nuns (Nangpaak 2007: 55). The sanctuary owns a borehole and seems to have profited from the activity of NGOs. The priest Sampa is open towards outsiders and he and the women joke with each other. He performs the chicken ordeal, exorcisms include potions and shaving. The shrine is shared by Konkomba and Dagoma and falls into a category of competitive and cooperative ritual shrine-unions (Lentz 1998: 638; Werthmann 2009: 134).

While the sanctuaries at Gambaga, Kukuio, Gnani were most likely established before 1900, and the history of Kpatinga remains shrouded, the other sanctuaries were definitely founded later.

**Gushiegu** offers two locations that are used by refugees mostly of Konkomba origin: a small hamlet built by an NGO in the 1990s for approximately 50 women near police barracks outside of the town; and the town itself, where another 50 women are living in different compounds of which some have been adopted by Dagomba families.

Allman and Parker mention “truckloads of elderly women travelling to a healing center in the Gushiegu district” during the 1950s (Allman and Parker 2005: 223). Tait observed accused people pilgrimaging to Gushiegu and Karaga for a potion-exorcism. The elated returnees

reported 50 other visitors at the shrine (Tait 1963: 137). Idrissu quotes eyewitnesses and police-reports about a “Nana-shrine” at Gushiegu. Witch-finders were roaming around and met ambivalent reactions of chief. The chief of Lamashiegu called mostly elderly women to prove their innocence at the shrine on 6 August 1955, but at the same time insisted together with the Gukpenaa, a paramount chief of the Dagomba, to abstain from any violence (Idrissu 2013:120ff). No memory or any reference could be traced in interviews. According to informants, the camp in Gushiegu was founded during the 1970s and two of the eldest inhabitants remembered being the first at that time. Haase-Hindenberg recalls the chief of Gushiegu as a former police-officer who protected accused women against the will of his citizens (Haase-Hindenberg 2009: 19). According to Palmer, a violated woman requested a safe place from the chief, and he allocated her an empty hut at the outskirts of town (Palmer 2010: 184). No woman at the camps reported of any ritual or obligations in Gushiegu (cf. Palmer 2010: 184). Only during the war of 1994–95 did the chief and other citizens protect Konkomba-women from harassment in the Dagomba stronghold besieged by Konkomba-troops. The tensions ceased and in daily life the women are not feared, as witchcraft could only affect the ethnic ingroup (cf. Palmer 2010: 186).

The *WHVEP* has its office near the camps and visits almost daily, precariously funded by the two German NGOs “Hilfe für Hexenjagdflüchtlinge” (Hilfe für Hexenjagdflüchtlinge 2018) and the “Klaus-Jensen-Stiftung” (Klaus-Jensen-Stiftung) as well as the Danish NGO *Seniorer uden Graensker* (SUG).<sup>19</sup> As charismatic churches in other camps, the Catholic church is actively and aggressively missionising among the refugees in Gushiegu and provided a borehole and toilets. In 2013, Simon Ngota counted 115 women with 16 children.

The history of Kpatinga is connected to the founding myth of **Nabule**, a Konkomba town. Seven survivors were found in the bush by the chief of Nabule, who then safeguarded them to his town – a typical glorification of the role of the chief to ensure further benevolence. Interviews with survivors referred rather to relatives living nearby. Nonetheless, as the sanctuary was established near a regional market, the ghetto quickly grew to more than 70 inhabitants from nearby

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19 The present author negotiated the support of the three NGOs and acts as founder and chairman of “Hilfe für Hexenjagdflüchtlinge”.

villages. Disease and malnutrition had reduced the number to 50, when I arrived for the first time in 2009, and stayed around that amount. In the beginning, the importance of the shrine was played down during my presence. Simon Ngota then furthered interviews with accused, who claimed that the priest expects the son of the woman to take her home, shave her hair, and then return with her. In cases of emergency, the shaving could take place at the shrine. Witchcraft, as in other shrines, was perceived as located in the hairs. Zimoñ reports that earth-priests are shaved before being installed (Zimoñ 2003: 428) and children and widows are shaved as a sign of mourning (Haase-Hindenberg 2009: 198).

The women at Nabule were impoverished but self-conscious and free. A cunning elderly woman had considerable authority, as she ran a tavern and even bought her daughter a motorbike and a sewing-shop nearby. She is not the acting leader, though. Some women started new relationships with men in Nabule, a common phenomenon in the camps that should not be mixed up with “survival sex,” but often involves authentic companionship. Marriages of elderly people are not unusual in polygamous societies. Local politicians were supportive of the refugees and critical of witch-hunting. The arable land is poor and limited and poverty therefore is grim.

About ten kilometres away, the Konkomba town **Gbintiri** hosts the most recently founded sanctuary. The interim chief told me that accused women were sent to him by the chief of Gambaga from 1997 on. The accused Konkomba-women were all sent to *Tongnaab* to determine their guilt and to perform the exorcism. A local shrine was later imported and reinforced by *Tongnaab* priests each year. This founding myth seemed quite plausible to me but was later on questioned by Ngota and other informants while not offering another version. 42 women were present at my two visits and, as usual, those interviewed had very different stories without a clear-cut pattern. The chief and the pastor seem to cooperate well. Access to potable water was a problem in the entire town in 2015 and 2016.

The camp at **Duabone** is located in the area of the Bono, an Akan group. The shrine is Akan in nature and was founded by Nana Akwasi Kopore about 100 years ago near two sacred trees. The first exile, Abiba, said she was brought there around 1995, and all nine men

and two women I interviewed in 2015 were Konkomba from Salaga, Sabobe and Yamoase. The dwindling population of the original village seemed happy for new inhabitants and readily provided resources to integrate the mostly male refugees and their families. There were no new arrivals during the past years. One source speaks of 49 refugees in 2000 (McGlobal.com 2013, cf. Dovlo 2007: 73). The ritual includes a chicken-ordeal, potion and shaving and is possibly imported. Like most women, the accused men were accused after sickness or death of relatives or neighbours. All were farmers and three named their own hard work and resulting prosperity as triggers for envy. One specified a dispute with brothers over his election as an elder as the true cause for the accusation.

**Banyasi** is located near Yapali at the white Volta-Bridge south of Tamale. One source mentioned the camp in 2004:

[Banyasi, FR] is getting closed (only 3 inmates) because the spiritual leader has now converted and become a Muslim and moved away from the camp (Mohammed 2004: 6).

In 2009 I found the elderly female earth-priest living together with seven elderly women. Once 30 refugees inhabited the large shrine-compound, then it was orphaned and reopened again. The priest also uses chicken ordeals and mentioned an upcoming ceremony with priests from *Tongnaab* and the *Gambarana*. In 2014, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWAC) together with *ActionAid Ghana* selected Banyasi for a closure campaign, accompanied by a conference in Accra and a huge ceremony. About 50 women were summoned from Kukuo and Gnani to act as successfully resettled population of Banyasi for the media and a brochure was boasting a successful program in place. In Kukuo and Gnani, none of the women was remembered as actively resettled during my visit in 2015 and several claimed they had expenses due to the ceremony. After the closure, Simon Ngota showed me two of the women from Banyasi who had been relocated to Gnani. Their return was not negotiated with the relatives and the latter refused to integrate them. This negative experience was shared among the sanctuaries and caused distress in Gambaga:

When we heard of Banyasi, we could not sleep for a week. I was not happy when I attended the conference in Accra (female leader in Gambaga, 2015).

All sanctuaries except Banyasi were run by a male priest or chief and all had a female leader called *magazia*. The *magazias* have considerable authority over the women, they negotiate between the accused, chiefs, relatives and NGOs. They often suffered from extreme trauma and are maybe therefore capable of relating to new arrivals, offering solace but also calls to order. In Gambaga, the *magazia* is appointed by the chief, while in Nabule the women elected their leader on their own. Female chiefs are not unknown even to the extremely patriarchal and islamised group of the Dagomba.

### **Factors for Accusations, Violence and Exile**

The search for factors in functionalist explanations often went at the expense of understanding the ideological and philosophical problems at stake. Witchcraft beliefs cannot be explained away simply through ever-present crises or psychological mechanisms. They rely on a specific set of philosophical presumptions: souls, vision, evidence, empirism. Within the same culture and under the same conditions, more people decide not to accuse people of witchcraft in cases of sickness or death than people who do. For understanding the factors of witch-hunts in Northern Ghana, we have to bear in mind their limited explanatory value.

The ultimate trigger for an accusation is death or the fantasy of pending death due to sickness. Neither unemployment nor natural disasters or harvest loss were prevalent in the accusations. Contrary to the “modernity of witchcraft” theorem, triggers remain in the traditional mindset and rural areas are affected the most. All Ghanaians were both eager to point at the need for educational campaigns and sceptical of the limited potential to eradicate witchcraft beliefs. All informants working with witch-hunt victims were hopeful to end witch hunts within the next fifty years, not the next five.

As Igwe has proved, institutions associated with “modernity” (police, courts, NGOs, hospitals, pharmacies) are a major factor in quashing or minimising the harm of an accusation (Igwe 2016: 153, 186). In

my thesis, I have argued that “modernity” is a misfit category to define both African and Western history, serving to create a twifold idealisation of both Western and African conditions (Riedel 2016). Whereas for Evans-Pritchard the African subject was “as rational as we,” the “modernity of witchcraft” school argues they would be “as modern” as we.<sup>20</sup> Against Evans-Pritchard I would say: the African subject believing in witchcraft is as irrational as the Western subject believing in witchcraft – the accused on both sides saw, felt and denounced this irrationality. The general mindset of the average Western subject is not rational – beliefs in souls, white supremacy, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories or secondary superstition are by no means less irrational than the local, sporadic, but violent witch-hunts in African societies. The “modernity of witchcraft” school only adds to Evans-Pritchard’s roseated rationalisation, as it reduces witch-hunts to the effects of a modern, neo-liberal “social malaise.” But witch-hunts are “the crisis” for those accused of witchcraft. The “modernity of witchcraft” school idealises the conditions in African countries as equivalent to Western “modernity” – while Africans are painfully aware of the poor quality of educational standards and still insist on an opposition of education and witchcraft-beliefs. If the term “modern” is understood as “current,” it has lost its analytical value. The problem of modernity and temporality is better understood with the model of the “dialectics of enlightenment” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1969), which allows for a non-teleological, qualitative understanding of history and industrial progress in the relative absence of positive social progress.

Another school and popular misinterpretation of witch-hunts suggests that mainly social misfits and deviant persons would be accused of witchcraft. This rationalisation mistakes witchcraft accusations as reactions to real “sin,” while African belief systems more often refer to witchcraft as metaphysical “wickedness.” Witchcraft is unexpected, it comes from inside: the good mother, the conformist, the benevolent friend might be the most dangerous witches (cf. Geschiere 2013). While few witchcraft-accusations were propelled against female creditors by insolvent debtors in Northern Ghana, many more targeted women who had helped, had donated, who were benefactors to their accusers, who were the pillars of family networks. Women are normally not accused because they cannot take care for themselves, but because

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20 For the entire discussion of sources, see Riedel 2016: 99–108.

they take care of others. Deviancy sometimes is a welcome excuse, but by no means essential to witchcraft accusations in Northern Ghana.

The main factor for exile is the absence of the monopoly of violence in the rural areas. This is especially the case among the acephalous and rather democratic Konkomba with only weak chiefs (*uwombor*), who cannot oppose the anger of youth organizations and mobs. Witchcraft accusations there can turn into feuds between families of two brothers, but more often families arrive in a conflict about an accusation from their midst and the husband's brother may oppose the accusation of his son or daughter against his brother's wife. The same happens with co-wife accusations. "Rival" accusations were common, but rivals also defended each other or helped with taking care of the children. Few husbands accused their first wives when they opposed polygamy with a second wife or could not bear children – nonetheless, husbands also defended their wives in similar circumstances. Accusations can be instrumental, but this is not their core. What lies at the heart of most accusations is the authentic belief of being bewitched by a person, who then feels randomly singled out without any reason.

Especially in the islamised regions, gender discrimination is palpable and has high explanatory value for witch-hunts. Drucker-Brown argues that since 1960 women prospered and therefore challenged male authority and roles (Drucker-Brown 2006: 250; cf. Bierlich 2007: 18). Nonetheless, many other ethnic groups experienced the same change but did not resort to witch-hunting.<sup>21</sup> And while women are attacked, men are also accused. However, exogamy puts only women in a defenceless situation, in which they are vulnerable to accusations by the ingroup that regards her as a stranger. In case of an accusation, their first resort is their father's home, but as they are confronted with suspicion, after some time they tend to leave again to one of the sanctuaries. Nonetheless, the misogynic structure does not explain witchcraft-beliefs nor accusations. It can only explain why accusations can harm women more than men. Equally problematic is the observation of Badoe that men would control female sexuality and mind through accusations (Badoe 2005). As women are subdued anyway and physical punishment is allowed in cases of open disobedience, the question is, why would men resort to witchcraft

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21 Palmer visited the cluster of Baralong together with Simon Ngota, as dozens of women were sent to Gambaga from this village alone (Palmer 2010: 69).



accusations if they could have other means? As accusations are slightly less often uttered by men than by women and children, and only rarely by husbands, the “control” thesis is not plausible even if women as widows gain power over younger men – which was not the case in the Konkomba-areas and not hinted at from my Dagomba-interviewees.

As many outsiders expect self-accusations to play a major role I would like to clarify that only two women I interviewed identified as witches and those two were deemed mentally ill by the other women. Two other women were accused after they had accused another person. Unlike in other African societies, there is no benefit of being a witch in Northern Ghana. Those who confessed, did so under threats and torture. Torture included driving a needle into the entire length of a finger, smashing ankles and bones with stones, whipping and beating with sticks, cutlassing, burning and threats of amputations. Interviewees showed scars and wounds, sobbing or in rage about the injustice they would have never brought upon others.

Surprisingly, even social conflict is not an explanation. The worst conflict was the Dagomba-Konkomba war. Witch-hunt victims were hiding in the chief’s palace in Gushiegu during the siege in fear of assaults and pogroms. They suffered during the war, but only due to their ethnic affiliation. Like the magic powers of chiefs, war-magic like bullet-catching water-bowls were not interpreted as witchcraft but as legitimate magic. If not during the war, one would expect social conflicts after the war, especially in multi-ethnic villages with returnees, war-widows or war-orphans. But all interviewees categorically refused any connection of witch-hunts with the war, some ridiculed the question as if two entirely different conflicts would have been brought together by an uninformed outsider: the interethnic (war) and the intraethnic (witchcraft).

Health crises offer the strongest correlations, as disease and death are the chief triggers. Seasonal meningitis epidemics triggered cycles of accusations and are mentioned by elderly informants. Nonetheless, the relation remains filled with contradictions, as some of the worst diseases were pushed back or eradicated in the past fifty years: smallpox, syphilis, sleeping-sickness (Haaf 1967: 154, 157, 177).

Tait concludes on all factors:

But such factors spread, disseminate, or intensify the outbreak; the conditions precedent alone make it possible (Tait 1963: 145).

As in Europe, neither cultural change, crises nor gender can explain witchcraft-beliefs away. There is no shortcut through statistics, no correlation better than witch-hunts and witchcraft-beliefs. The dynamics of identifying “the witch” and accusing is bound to indigenous cosmologies and epistemologies of disease, conflict and nature.

A critique of ideology tapping into the unconscious (pathic projections and idiosyncrasy), the cultural (ideas, customs, mythology) and the social (exogamy, misogyny, monopoly of violence) at the same time could provide solutions, but the European shift from witchcraft-beliefs lasted hundreds of years with a complex interplay of factors yet to be unraveled. Much points to the influence of Cartesian philosophy and the abolition of torture. The crude positivism of European witch-trials also present in the ordeal experiments in Northern Ghana was in Europe replaced by a more complex empirism assisted by humanistic ideals of truth, law and bodies. While all these changes took time in Europe and are summarised by Ghanaians as the general need for “education”, Ghanaian NGOs found a shortcut: The WHVEP brings groups of witch-hunt victims to market-places, where they perform educative dramas and then tell people publicly not to accuse each other of witchcraft. This moral admonition is a common and worthwhile practice of enlightenment on any subject (HIV, hygiene, peace). And as witchcraft-beliefs produce their own evidence through forced confessions and visions, the first step is to stop torture and violent witch-hunts through the monopolising of violence. Workshops with police and chiefs are therefore a tested practice to raise awareness even in acephalous settings where chiefs are politically weak but can still influence the public opinion.

The shrine system under the watch of NGOs once was a step into the right direction, but it cannot leviatate the poverty of exilants and it still participates in the stigmatisation and expensive rituals. Media exploit their position and portray them as slave-keepers or witch-hunters. As a result, a decade-old discussion about the closure of the camps has unsettled traumatised victims of violence, who experience the sanctuaries as a safe haven and who also know about the incapability

of outsiders to provide them with viable alternative means. In the case of the closure of the Banyasi sanctuary, repatriation has become a threat rather than a promise. Many do not want to go back, some have lost relatives, children and friends, some have acquired property and a small business at the sanctuaries. The active choices of witch-hunt victims to return to homesteads where they have once suffered traumatisation and stigmatisation demand resilience on behalf of the victims and diplomatic competence on behalf of the negotiators among the NGOs. Repatriations are a risky and expensive task and can only happen step by step, while governments tend to have limited expedience and lack the stamina of NGOs specialised in the social work with witch-hunt victims. Last but not least, academic research tends to exploit women and does not contribute to the improvement of the modes of livelihood in the sanctuaries.

## Conclusion

A few NGOs struggle to assist witch-hunt victims in Northern Ghana with three very promising strategies: negotiated repatriations, educational campaigns and humanitarian assistance in the sanctuaries. NGOs cooperate with chiefs and earth-priests and avoid open confrontations on matters of spiritual beliefs. Media attention, on the other hand, has yielded mixed results. Public pressure and outrage pressured the government from utter inaction into malpractice while targeting the institution of the earth-shrines. On the local level, many separate initiatives by middle-range officials among police and district governments, as well as the governmental assistance for the aged and impoverished people, have contributed to raising the standards of living in the sanctuaries for witch-hunt victims. Research was erratic and often avoided involvement with the humanitarian issues at stake. Embedded research in cooperation with NGOs avoids exploitation and retraumatisation through “fact-hunting.”

I argued that most patterns are secondary in nature and that witch-hunts in Northern Ghana are more complicated, more local, more specific than most confronted with the subject would suspect. The levels of specialisation and dynamics required for hypercomplex subjects such as witch-hunts in multi-ethnic settings cannot be met in current competitive academia with their limited means and terms. NGOs, on the other hand, have a hard time raising funds for elderly

people in Africa accused of deeds that trigger ambivalent and often negative emotions in most people. Witch-hunts are expected to wane with time or just stop by themselves, as if they ever did.

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