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The Lynching of Witches in Northern Ghana: A Public Theological Critique of Mob Justice

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Abstract

Witchcraft accusations and maltreatment have become a menace in the northern part of Ghana. Most of the people who were accused of being witches are women, children, and the poor in the society. In these parts of the country, some camps have been set up as a haven for these accused persons, so as not to incur the wrath of their family and society. Despite the existence of these camps, in 2020, a ninety-year-old woman by the name of Akua Denteh was lynched to death for being accused of witchcraft. This was against the backdrop of a traditional priestess accusing her of being a witch. In a video that circulated online on various social media platforms, one could identify a young woman and an elderly woman molesting and beating the ninety-year-old woman in the glare of the public. This act is usually referred to as mob justice in Ghana. This is an act whereby a mob, most often numbering several dozens or hundreds, takes the law into their own hands to cause harm and kill a person who has done or is accused of doing a wrong act. In this act, the issue of the victims' status is most often secondary, since the mob acts as a prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner. Thus, employing a feminist public theological perspective, this study interrogates the traditional institution of witch camps and the accusation of women being witches in northern Ghana. This study would use the lynching of a ninety-year-old woman as a case study. This study notes that the church is comfortable with the notion of witches' camps, which they argue is a haven for these accused women, rather than fighting against the evils of these cultural practices. This paper argues that the church must engage the public as

a prophetic voice of action to bring to an end this gender-based injustice, which does not promote life.

Introduction

This paper seeks to investigate the indigenous institution of witchcraft and its accusation in the northern part of Ghana. This paper argues that the church in the northern part of Ghana has a prophetic responsibility to speak against any form of oppression and injustice against women who are accused of being witches in the northern part of Ghana. The northern part of Ghana consists of four regions, namely, North East, Savannah, Upper West, and Upper East. The accusation, beating and killing of witches in these parts of Ghana and the entire country has become a menace to the government; thus, in 2023, the parliament of the Republic of Ghana passed the Criminal Offences (Amendment) (No.2) Bill, 2023, to prohibit people who identify themselves as witch doctors or finders from 'declaring, accusing, naming or labelling another person as a witch; and for related matters' (Criminal Offences (Amendment) (No.2) Bill, 2023:2). This act is awaiting the assent of the president for it to become a law. The Member of Parliament who spearheaded the bill, Hon. Francis Xavier Sosu, has claimed that the delay in assenting to the bill by the presidency is deliberate due to the politicisation of the issues (Dzodzegbe 2023). The presidency on the other hand has refuted these claims, arguing that they recently received the bill and had to take into consideration some constitutional issues before assenting to the bill (Okine 2023).

The Criminal Offences (Amendment) (No.2) Bill, 2023, presents one with the task of attempting to understand the keyword under contention, which is the concept of witchcraft. The term *witchcraft* comes with some challenges because the term is an English word that is used to depict an African belief and practice (Igwe 2016). The word or term in various African languages will have a different meaning which can be negative or positive. For instance, among the Akans of Ghana, of which I am a part, the Akan word for witchcraft is *bayie*. The literal translation of the word means 'come well' or 'you have come well'. One may ask, if this is the literal meaning ascribed to the word, why are people who practise it seen as evil? In attempting to find an answer to this question, one will then have to resort to various linguistic meanings of the term, especially from the English language, which is one of the most popular

languages on the continent. It has been argued that the term among Europeans stood for the belief and practice of

> harmful, black, or maleficent magic, the performance of harmful deeds utilizing some sort of extraordinary, mysterious, occult, preternatural or supernatural means. (Levack 1987:4)

The meaning ascribed to the word by Europeans was further spread on the African continent by missionaries, scholars, and colonial officers, who came to the African continent and used this notion to frame religious and occult phenomena. Thus, the term was used to describe beliefs and practices related to African spiritual power, charm, occult, magic, and voodoo. This expression conflates the concept of witchcraft with 'indigenous' religious practices that are not related to witchcraft, such as manhood initiation ceremonies and marriage. Thus, the accusations of witchcraft, in such a context, present synonymous allegations with those of voodoo or traditional religious practice. This is because there is no distinction made between witchcraft as a key religious belief and witchcraft as a definer of the African indigenous religion (Igwe 2016).

In understanding the reason behind the accusations and punishments meted out to people who claimed to be witches, one should first understand the different types of witchcraft. There are three main categories of witchcraft, namely remediable, irremediable, and anticipatory. Remediable witchcraft is a type of witchcraft where the healing, cure, or repair of the victim who was harmed is possible. Thus, by the use of the tool of accusation, the accused is compelled to remedy the misfortune. Irremediable witchcraft is a form of witchcraft whereby there is no option for cure or repair; thus accusation is utilised as a tool to identify and sanction the causal agent. Finally, anticipatory witchcraft is a type of witchcraft that is expected to happen in the future. Thus, this form of witchcraft could be a potentially remediable or irremediable misfortune. In this process, the accusation is made to thwart the evil plan, scheme, or intent of the witch (Igwe 2016).

In the context of Ghana, Brempong (1996:42) postulates that, in most Ghanaian societies, belief in witchcraft is one of the elements that is prevalent. The belief he noted is not limited to only the rural areas, as also the urban

areas hold on to this belief despite their level of education. Those who are usually accused of witchcraft are the disadvantaged in society, that is the women, children, the poor, and deprived people (Kohnert 1996). According to Brempong, witchcraft goes beyond a cultural thread; 'it is the warp reinforcing the spiritual fabric of Ghanaian societies' (1996:42). Despite Westernisation in Ghana, to Christians and Muslims, this belief is not an alien religious experience. This is because, as argued by van Wyk (2004), the belief in witchcraft is deeply rooted in the religious phenomenon, such that the development of a culture of human rights and the improvement of the judicial process cannot solve this problem alone. Van Wyk further noted that Christian theology has a role to play in solving this problem. He suggested that a theology that liberates people from fear and murder should be constructed. This, he argues, can help people deal differently with this phenomenon of witchcraft.

The way persons who are accused of witchcraft are treated has been an issue of both local and global interest. This has prompted scholars to point out the dreadful way that accused persons are dealt with by their accusers (Igwe 2016). In a report for the United Nations, Cimpric stated that children who were accused of witchcraft were subjected to psychological and physical violence by their relatives, friends, church pastors, and traditional healers (2010:5). The report also noted that their parents could kill them. Similarly, Schauber (2007:116) argued that accusations of witchcraft 'lead to the banishment, torturing, lynching and even killing of the accused persons'. Magesa (1997:188-189) in like manner argued that 'Lamba of Zambia spear the witch to death' while the 'Akamba of Kenya executes proven witches by arrows' and in other places they 'kill witches by beating or strangling them to death, or by burning them alive'.

Similarly, in Ghana, though this has also been the case, most witches rather than being killed are sent to places known as witches' camps where they find shelter from their angry relatives who would have preferred killing them (Riedel 2020). Despite the existence of these camps, in 2020 an old woman by the name of Akua Denteh, aged ninety, was lynched to death for being accused of witchcraft. A traditional priestess accused this old woman of being a witch. A young woman and an elderly woman were seen in a video directly molesting and beating her, with a crowd standing by and watching. In Ghana, this act is

sometimes referred to as mob justice. This is an act whereby a mob, most often numbering several dozens or hundreds, take the law into their own hands to cause harm and kill a person for real or alleged wrongdoing. In this act, the issue of the victim's status is often secondary, since the mob acts as prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner. This act is being practised all over the world (Ng'walali and Kitinya 2006). Thus, the ninety-year-old woman who was accused of witchcraft fell victim to this mob justice and in the process lost her life. This rekindled the earlier agitation against people perceived as witches and how they were treated. In such a context in which human life is not respected in cases of witches, what should the response of the church be in that community or jurisdiction? Thus, this paper argues that the church should be the voice of the voiceless and less privileged in society who are silenced by the evils of society. This paper will utilise feminist public theology as its main framing in stating its arguments.

Though this paper seeks to address the issue of witchcraft from the perspective of gender, one should not forget that the church has played an important role in the conceptualisation of this problem. The early church, through Exodus 22:17 and Deuteronomy 18:10, proclaimed the death penalty for such transgressions and saw it as their duty to uproot witchcraft (van Wyk 2004). Maimela (1985:63) states that witchcraft is categorised among Harry Sawyer's four types of sin that call for salvation. Asamoah-Gyadu (2015:23) on the other hand, commenting on the Lord's Prayer, noted that, when the African Christian recites the Lord's Prayer, the portion that reads 'Deliver us from evil' includes the activities of witchcraft. He further noted that the reason why the African Independent Churches made an impact in Africa was because of its pastoral response to the issue of witchcraft, which is embedded in the African cosmic worldview but that Western mission churches ignored. Thus, in most Pentecostal and Neo-Prophetic churches, most of their time is dedicated to fighting against witches and demons, which they most often call spiritual warfare. As one who also comes from the Pentecostal tradition, in Ghana, most misfortunes are associated with witches whom the churches perceive as the conduit for such activities. In most Neo-Prophetic churches, we find most of these prophets accusing the parents of their congregants as witches or wizards. However, it is rare for one to see the accusation of men; most of these people accused of witchcraft are women or girls, which points to the issue of

gender discrimination in this act (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015). Drucker-Brown (1993:531), commenting on such forms of accusations in Mamprusi noted that,

> Mamprusi women are accused of witchcraft not only because their aggressive feelings are denied legitimacy but also because they have no public role in the politico-jural domain.

She further asserted that these witchcraft accusations were reactions by men to their loss of control in the local economy and the change in gender power. She postulated that such attributions of evil magic constituted a response to the increasing autonomy of women in the sexual division of labour, in an attempt by men to assert control over them. Drucker-Brown (1993:531) further opined:

> Mamprusi has always regarded women as potentially subversive [...] the fear of witchcraft has grown as men's dependence on women has increased and the increasing autonomy of women threatens both men's control of women and the control by senior women of their juniors. Fear of witchcraft can thus be seen as a measure of the importance of that normally hidden female hierarchy, on which the relations between men and women are precariously based.

This assertion thus points out gender and power issues when it comes to the accusation of witchcraft. This further affirms highly dense patriarchal communities in northern Ghana. This paper will rely on primary and secondary data in this research. The data for this study was gathered from interviews, books, journal articles, and the internet.

Feminist Public Theology

In responding to the problem, a feminist public theology would be an appropriate tool in dealing with this issue. According to Edgar, Babie, and Wilson (2012:vii), 'Christian theology, properly understood, is always *public* theology'. Moltmann (1999:5) presents a detailed explanation of public theology by stating that,

> As the theology of God's kingdom, theology has to be public theology. Its public character is constitutive of theology, for the kingdom of God's sake. Public theology needs institutional liberty over against the church and a place in the open house of scholars and the sciences. Today this liberty has to be defended against both atheists and fundamentalists.

Tracy (1981:3) on the other hand posits that 'all theology is public discourse'. Breitenberg (2010:5) defines public theology to be

> theologically informed descriptive and normative public discourse about public issues, institutions, and interactions, addressed to the church or other religious body as well as the larger public or publics, and argued in ways that can be evaluated and judged by publicly available warrants and criteria.

Stackhouse (2004:275) suggests that public theology presents a dialogue between theology and other fields of thought and carries an indispensable resource for forming, ethically ordering, and morally guiding the institutions of religion and civil society as well as the vocations of the persons in these various spheres of life. Tai (2012:3) noted that public theology is a discourse that has three main divisions: firstly, it is theologically informed, secondly, it is about the public, and thirdly it uses public reason. He further noted that justice as understood in the scriptures as an overarching concept and principle provides justification and guidance for public theology.

Stackhouse (1997:165) further noted that public theology presents insight into

> the way things are and ought to be, one decisive for public discourse and necessary to the guidance of individual souls, societies, and, indeed, the community of nations.

For Chung (2016:1), public theology

> is a theological-philosophical endeavour to provide a broader frame of reference to facilitate the responsibility of the church and theological ethics for social, political, economic, and cultural issues. It investigates public issues, developing conceptual

> clarity and providing social-ethical guidance of religious conviction and response to them.

Peters (2018:155) contends that

> public theology is conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the academy, and meshed within the wider culture for the benefit of the wider culture.

One may inquire about the meaning and scope of the public at this point. Thomas (1992:458) cites the definition of Jürgen Habermas concerning the public as

> A realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed [...] A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.

Habermas has presented us with what the public thus consists of and what it does not consist of. Brazilian theologian Júlio Zabatiero now presents us with a detailed definition of public theology that brings to bear the prophetic role of the church in the execution of its role in the public sphere. He puts it this way:

> My provocative thesis is that theology cannot, in contemporary society, have the luxury of the privatized isolation of individual religiosity, or the ineffective security of denominational confessionality. Theology has to be public to be theology. Theology, when in fact it is theology and not merely doctrine, has a public dimension that cannot be denied or hidden; it cannot be restricted to sanctuaries, nor the new 'holy of holies' of the temples and their priesthoods. The privileged place of theology today is the public square; the place of the struggle for justice; the place of struggle for the humanity of human beings; the place of struggle for the ecological citizenship of all beings living on planet earth; the place of struggle for the freedom to be, as a counterpoint to the pseudo-freedom to have and to consume more and more. (Zabatiero 2002:56)

Kim (2011:3) presents three main tasks of the church in contemporary times. He suggests that, since the church finds itself in the context of postmodern and pluralist societies, for reasons of justice, the church should be in opposition against any monopoly on power, be it political, economic, social, or religious, and apply its weight to the creation of a public sphere with open access and public debate. Next, he posits that the church should be actively engaged in the public sphere; thus the church must develop a public theology to enable it to play this role in the wider society. Finally, the task of public theology should be the result of engaging in a hermeneutical circle of theory and practice that involves the Christian community as a whole (theologians, church leaders, and ordinary congregations) interacting with other religious communities and wider society. The task proposed by Kim, along with Day (Kim and Day 2017:10), identifies seven marks for public theology. They are as follows: public theology should be incarnational (address concrete rather than abstract matters), fluid (escape the limitation imposed on it by churches and academic institutions and mesh with specific publics), interdisciplinary, dialogical, non-authoritarian (conceive authority as a social construction, mediated through social processes), global, and engaged in praxis rather than mere reflection. While public theology has the above arguments, Isherwood and McEwan (1993:15) argue that feminist theology argues for placing religion and religious doctrines in a discourse 'about change and transformation', the 're-think' or 'metanoia of which the Gospels speak'. They further noted that the word *feminism* in feminist theology denotes a broad context of social analysis reflecting on societal inequalities and flawed structures, rather than asking for equal access for women in an unequal society or replacing male power with female. The core beliefs of feminism are mutuality, relationality, and wholeness; this feminism tries to counter patriarchy, which is seen as a dualistic system inevitably resulting in hierarchy and the oppression that all too often accompanies stratified systems. Similarly, Grey (2007:105) observed that feminist theology is 'a family of contextual theologies', which focuses on the struggle for women and the transformation of society. She further noted that this form of theology is liberative in nature and aims at reconstructing theology and religion in the service of a transforming process, within the specificity of the many contexts in which women live. Ruether (1983:18-19) sums up the definition of feminist theology in this manner:

> The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore appraised as not redemptive. [And it] must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or a community of redemption. This negative principle also implies the positive principle: what promotes the full humanity of women is holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the message of redemptive community.

From the above definitions of both public theology and feminist theology, a feminist public theology can be described as a form of theology that aims at an equal society for both men and women, devoid of any form of oppression or inhumane treatment based on one's gender, through inclusion of diverse religious and cultural communities in the public space. Thus, feminist public theology in responding to witchcraft accusations, which are gendered, would frown upon these acts, which perpetuate injustice against women. In perpetuating gender injustice, witches' camps have been set up as a haven for accused witches. There have been mixed reactions from both the public and religious divides on these establishments. The next section will attempt to briefly look at the notion of a witches' camp.

The Idea of the Witches Camp

Mutaru (2018:256) posits that, though

> witchcraft belief and practices are omnipresent and mundane in African society, the phenomenon of witches camps is rare in the continent.

He further noted that people who were accused of being witches were executed in the past. Drucker-Brown (1993:548), in her study of the Mamprugu kingdom in Ghana, similarly noted that, due to civilisation, public executions of witches have been replaced with punishment that is more humane. Thus, Mutaru (2018:257) noted that the banishment of witches from

their villages by their community leaders has become the order of the day apart from them being beaten, tortured, and insulted. He further noted that, in the northern part of Ghana, for those accused of witchcraft to save their lives, they should relocate to any of the six witch camps located there.

He further argued that, though these places are seen as providing sanctuary and safety for those accused of witchcraft, others perceive these places as 'prisons' where the accused's rights are curtailed and they are being exploited. Irrespective of this assumption, others also perceive these places as playing both roles (Mutaru 2018:259). Crampton (2013:99) concurs with this argument by stating

> to which the accused may flee for protection where they are also effectively imprisoned if their family or community refuses to let them return.

The number of witches camps currently in Ghana are all located in the northern part. There are six in number, with three camps located in the Gushegu district, in Gushegu, Nabuli, and Kpatinga. The famous Gambaga witch camp on the other hand is in the East Mamprusi district, whereas Gnani and Kukuo camps are found in the Yendi and Nanumba South districts respectively. Some of these camps are over a hundred years old. The total population of the inhabitants of all these six camps is around a little below one thousand. Admission to these camps is done daily, weekly, or monthly while the reintegration of these accused witches into their families and societies follows similar patterns. Reintegration is only done when the conditions are safe for them (Mutaru 2018:259).

Human rights reports, media, and non-governmental institution (NGO) reports seek to portray the conditions in these camps as denigrating the dignity of their occupants. These institutions, seeking to attract public attention, often portray a gloomy picture of life in the camp and liken it to 'prisons' where accused persons are 'incarcerated' and made to live in conditions that are not in congruence with human dignity (Mutaru 2018:259). An NGO called ActionAid (2012) mentioned that,

> The witch camps are effectively women's prisons where inmates have been given no trial, have no right of appeal but have received a life sentence.

On the contrary, the indigenes as well as the accused women have a contrary view. Both the community and the accused do not see these camps as prisons or places of exploitation and human rights abuse. To the people, these camps are there to provide shelter and protection to any accused witch who flees her village for fear of being killed or harmed.

Mutaru further noted that the accused witches who inhabit the camps are not restricted in terms of their movement. He argued that these persons could visit the homes of ordinary community members to work and converse with them. This, he argued, is done daily by the host community, which could buy from and even sell to them. Inhabitants also have access to hospitals, funerals, festivals, and activities organised within and beyond the host communities. Likewise, community members have access to the camp. There is no supervision whatsoever on their movement and the custodians of the camp have a friendly relationship with them (Mutaru 2018:264). The custodians are forbidden by the earth shrine to show any form of antagonistic attitude towards the accused persons and a violation of such law would see sanctions from the ancestral world (Mutaru 2018:264-265). Mutaru (2018:265), from a different point of view, states that it would be dishonest on his side to deny the fact that there is suffering in the camp, specifically in livelihood. Though some of the accused saw these camps as safe havens, others also pointed out the challenges they face when basic subsistence becomes a challenge, thus leading them to suffer. One of the inhabitants of the camp puts it this way:

> I see the camp as both a place of protection and suffering. It is a place of protection because stranded, banished women like me have sought asylum in this place and we are protected from any harm from our village kinsmen. It is also a place of suffering because we endure economic hardships. We arrived here with nothing. So, it has not been easy to cope with livelihood. Life is hard here. (Mutaru 2018:265)

It must be noted that when one is cast out of his or her community, psychologically, it comes with some form of rejection and restriction since these persons are banished from their communities. Even though they are received well by the host communities amidst challenges, their rights are also curtailed since their freedom of movement is trampled upon. This is because they cannot move freely to the particular communities from which they were banished. But the perspective from which Mutaru is arguing uses the terminology of rights to place how one feels in one's place of origin on the same level as how one feels in a foreign land. What he fails to note is that some of the women who are accused are people who have toiled their entire lives and have made properties which help them have a decent living condition in their communities. Banishing them means they have to start life all over again; though they have all the freedom they might need in these communities, the strength to make it in life again might not be there because of age issues. Though Mutaru is refuting the argument that sees these places as 'prisons' according to human rights and NGOs, he must also recognise the psychological problem that this banishment comes with. One can have all the freedom one requires in a foreign land, but the warmth and psychological implication that are felt by one being on one's land and among one's people cannot be compared to that which one enjoys in a foreign land. Having presented briefly the idea of witches' camps in northern Ghana, I will attempt in the next section to delve into the issues of witchcraft.

Witchcraft in the Northern Part of Ghana

This section will utilise the method of purposive sampling to sample the concept of witchcraft from the northern part of Ghana, since the northern part of Ghana consists of different tribes and ethnic groups who have different concepts of witchcraft; thus, this paper cannot capture every aspect of it. Igwe (2016:17) asserted that the Dagbani term for witchcraft is *Sotali*, which denotes destruction using *tim*, which is 'medicine'. He further noted that usage of the terms *Sonya* (a female 'witch') and *Bukpaha* (a wizard/male witch) are negative and destructive terms. He argued that the terms *witchcraft* and *sorcery* have been used in explaining this magical phenomenon that exists among the Dagombas (Dagomba is the tribe whereas Dagbani is the language). Evans-Pritchard (1976:18-19) discusses witchcraft and sorcery among the Dagombas, whereby he argues that there is no distinction between them. Igwe

noted that among the Dagombas, it is the witch who decides what he or she uses the witchcraft for, be it for material or immaterial ends. Thus, in this context, Igwe noted that accusation is the tool that is used to compel the witch to reveal the means used to perpetrate the occult harm. David Tait (1963:136) observed a sorcery hunt among the Dagombas. He noted that this hunt was executed in Savelugu. Igwe (2016:54) cites Tait as follows,

> the chief invited the sorcery finders, mostly women to the village and they organized a ritual to identify witches. In the process, the sorcery finders separated the accused persons from the non-accused persons and danced and started pointing out the witches by falling in front of them after falling into a trance. The accused persons were made to drink the medicine that kills the sorcerer's medicine and then were allowed to continue their normal lives in the community.

From the above quote, one can observe how gender injustice is systematically entrenched by using women to enforce these systems. Critically analysing the quote, we see a chief who is a man but refuses to accuse women of being witches. Society thus brings a woman to accuse a fellow woman as a witch, which in a clever way vindicates the chief who is a man of any wrongdoing. The women who accuse the other women of being witches do so because society has constructed these notions and ideas in them; thus the accusations have their foundation in socio-cultural issues. It could be observed that the case under study also demonstrates such a trajectory. It is a female priestess who accuses the ninety-year-old of being a witch and it is a woman who stones her to death. In these two cases, one could observe that, apart from women being victims of gender injustice, they also are used as tools for its perpetuation.

It would be unfair on my side to argue that witchcraft does not exist in the African context, but then whether witchcraft is for good or evil has gender issues attached to it. The purpose of these gendered accusations of witchcraft is to perpetuate patriarchy in the northern part of Ghana, which is a male-dominated society. Goody (1970:207) observed how among the Gonjas there is a distinction between male and female witches. Among the Gonjas, male witches are perceived as protectors, while female witches are perceived as those who cause evil with their witchcraft. This form of distinction or

categorisation of witches seeks to cement the argument that these accusations are directed at perpetuating patriarchy and enforcing male dominance in these societies. However, what would inform these accusations? As argued earlier in the introductory part of this paper, Drucker-Brown (1993) posits that this is because men in these societies have lost control over the local economy. Not only that but there have also been some changes made in gender power. She also noted as argued above that there has been a sexual division of labour in an attempt by men to control women. Thus, when these women are accused of being witches, their hand-toiled properties are transferred to the men, thus granting men a monopoly over the local economy and granting them power in these societies. These women, as stated above, are sent to witches' camps where they have to start life all over again.

Similarly, Badoe (2005:42) noted based on her study of accused persons at the witches' camp in Gambaga that women who resisted coming under the control of men were mostly the target of witchcraft accusations and banishment. She further noted that women who were financially sound or barren and lacked the support of their families were often branded as witches. Badoe (2005:43) supports this assertion with a case study of a woman named Asara Azindow, who was a successful businessperson and accused of witchcraft alongside two other flourishing women entrepreneurs during the outbreak of meningitis in northern Ghana which occurred in 1977. She noted that all these women headed their households in the market town of Gushiegu. These women were forced to leave their communities and seek refuge in the witches' camps for fear of their lives. These accusations thus bring to bear the relations between gender and power. It seems there is a contrast between the reasons for accusation of witchcraft in southern and northern Ghana, though victims are women in both. In southern Ghana, old women who live in poverty are mostly accused of witchcraft, whereas in northern Ghana successful women are those who are usually accused of being witches. Badoe again posits that women who opposed and transgressed the gender regimes in the patrilineal, polygynous, patrilocal societies were those often accused of witchcraft. This is because women in these communities are seen as objects who are to submit to male authority. Also, the potency of women's sexuality is often controlled and contained by men, be it their fathers, husbands, uncles, etc. Any breakdown in this gender regime between men and women or disruption of the hierarchy between co-wives can also lead to witchcraft accusations and the expulsion of

the transgressive women from their societies, thus upholding the patriarchal order (Badoe 2005:49-50). With this relationality between gender, power, dominance, and patriarchy, what then could be the response of the church to these issues?

The Response of the Religious Community

Before I delve into the response of the religious communities concerning the issues of witchcraft in the northern part of Ghana, let us first look at the religious demography of the northern part of Ghana. According to the US Department of State report (Bureau of Democracy 2009), the majority of the people who reside in the northern part of Ghana are Muslims, while Christians reside in the southern part of Ghana. Thus, most of the people living in the northern part of Ghana are Muslims. As much as this paper would like to investigate how both Muslim and Christian leaderships have responded to this issue, it seems there is little or no work available on the issue of witchcraft in northern Ghana. This is because in northern Ghana there is little dichotomy between the indigenous culture and Islamic culture. Thus, the Islamic response to the issue of witchcraft accusations would be what has been discussed in this paper thus far. Similarly, the Christian response to witchcraft accusations is not so much different from that of the indigenous response. Christians, as in the indigenous paper, seek not to abolish these witch camps. They also perceive these spaces as a haven for those accused of witchcraft. A male Presbyterian minister in Gambaga who had been working in these camps for the past ten years when interviewed by Mutaru (2018:267) stated:

> The camp is a haven for accused women being persecuted. It is the journalists and the media people who portray the camp as a place of suffering. The Gambarana does not force people to come there and he does not force accused people to stay. They come on their own for protection. After which you can go home if you like. Those whose communities are not ready to accept them back are living there. Nobody regulates the economic activities of the women in the camp. They can do what is naturally possible for them to make a living. They can do any work provided it is legally and socially acceptable in society. They are free to go anywhere. They trade in the Gambaga and

> Nalerigu markets. There is no restriction on their freedom except that they must inform the custodian or the church if they are travelling outside Gambaga. This is important because if anyone or any family member comes to ask about her, we should be able to tell her whereabouts. Apart from this, the women are as free as any other person in the village.

This particular quote thus presents an overview of how the church perceives this space. The church, like Mutaru, holds the same view about the camps not being prisons but a place of refuge. The Presbyterian Church in particular has been working with Gambaga witches' camps. Through an interview, Rev. Jacob K. Wandusim, the head pastor of Prince of Peace Congregation of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG), Gambaga, and Mr Charles Adongo, the caretaker of the church, also noted the challenges which these inmates face and assisted them. They both asserted that more than ninety percent of the inhabitants of the camp are members of the church (Bekoe 2016:91). Bekoe (2016:91) noted that they play three main roles in seeing to the wellbeing of the inmates of the camp. These are physical well-being, social well-being, and spiritual well-being. Under physical well-being, the church he argued focuses on the physical growth and development of these old women with the provision of food, shelter, and cloth. The church also helps with health issues and sometimes pays the fees of the grandchildren of these inmates.

Furthermore, the social well-being of the church involves helping the inhabitants of the camp to relate with others outside the camp, since it has been difficult for them to do that. Thus, the church serves as an agent of reconciliation. While spiritual well-being involves teaching them the word of God for their spiritual nourishment, the sermons are deliberately contextualised in order to deal with their specific problems and issues and to bring about both emotional and psychological healing. The church also has the 'GO-HOME' project, which seeks to reintegrate these persons accused of witchcraft into their various communities. The church noted that this has also come with its challenges (Bekoe 2016:92-93).

In addition, the Bishop of Yendi (Catholic Church, which is the largest Christian denomination in the northern part of Ghana), being aware of the closure of the Banysi camp, spoke against it and asked that there should be actions

against the closure of such camps in the future (Riedel 2020). His main argument was similar to that of the PCG ministers and that of Mutaru, who argues that these places are safe havens for these women and that some prefer not to go back home because of the dangers involved. These statements from the churches in the northern part of Ghana shows that their main response, apart from tackling the issues of the 'wellbeing' of the people, is feeling comfortable with the witches' camps. It is quite interesting to note that the main churches that have been actively involved in these cases have been the Presbyterian and Catholic churches. What then should be the role of the church in Ghana in response to this inhumane treatment of women? The lynching of the ninety-year-old Akua Denteh raised various arguments about how the church ought to respond to issues of this nature. With wide condemnation coming from the government and NGOs, some members of the church still reiterated the importance of the witches' camps, which to them could serve as an abode of protection for these women. As observed from the interviews conducted and how the church is responding to the issue of witchcraft accusations, there are some key elements worth noting. First, most of the people who were interviewed were male. Secondly, most of them come from northern Ghana. Thirdly, the initial solution to this problem by the traditional authorities was the establishment of the witch camp. As argued in this paper, the idea of witchcraft accusation perpetuates gender injustice and these accusations entrench patriarchy. This is because these accusations have their backing from the sociocultural environment in which these women find themselves. The men who were thus interviewed seem to be reluctant to address these issues since they are not victims themselves, consciously or unconsciously seeking to guard the system more diplomatically. In light of this, how can the church respond to witchcraft accusations and violence in northern Ghana?

Towards a Ghanaian Feminist Public Theology

In the introductory section of this paper, the paper presented a definition for feminist public theology, which aims at an equal society for both men and women, devoid of any form of oppression or inhumane treatment based on one's gender through inclusive of diverse religious and cultural communities in the public space. Kehler (2001) postulates that most cultural and social norms perceive women as less valuable members of society. These perceptions are

prevalent and are reflected in the attitudes and behaviours that women experience daily. Thus, Amoah (2010) and Oduyoye (2001) call for the abolition of some socio-religio-cultural practices that oppress women in these societies. One of these practices, which ought to be abolished, is the accusation of women as witches. In an attempt to address some of these issues of oppression and suppression within the Ghanaian context, Ghanaian women, like their counterparts among other African women, have begun the articulation of the need for liberation from sexist oppression, which occurs in not only the church but also the social, political, and economic spheres. Thus, most of these scholars take their point of departure as the acceptance of the equal human worth of all in a just society. Thus, according to Phiri (2004:16), African women's theologies involve

> a critical, academic study of the causes of women's oppression: particularly a struggle against societal, cultural and religious patriarchy. They are committed to the eradication of all forms of oppression against women through a critique of the social and religious dimensions in both African culture and Christianity. African women's theologies take women's experiences as their starting point, focusing on the oppressive areas of life caused by injustices such as patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, capitalism, globalisation and sexism.

The above definition by Phiri seeks to suggest that the purpose of African women's theology is the eradication of all forms of oppression against women. This quote further presents a sharp contrast to the church leaders, who do not seek to eradicate all forms of oppression when it comes to women accused of witchcraft and the institution of camps. Phiri's focus is both social and religious; thus, this form of theology cuts across every sphere of life whereby women are oppressed by their gender. As argued earlier, some men prefer to resort to the accommodative approach when it comes to the oppression of women, because often they are the beneficiaries of such systems. Thus, African women theologians take it upon themselves to discuss these issues. Kanyoro (2001:37-38) presents them in this manner:

> Women in Africa are the custodians of cultural practices. For generations, African women have guarded cultural prescriptions

> strictly governed by the fear of breaking taboos. Many aspects which diminish women continue to be practised to various degrees, often making women objects of cultural preservation. Harmful traditional practices are passed on as 'cultural values' and therefore are not to be discussed, challenged or changed. In the guise of culture, harmful practices and traditions are perpetuated. Practices such as female genital mutilation, early betrothals and marriages, and stigmatization of single women and widows, [and also polygamy and domestic violence,] are not liberating to women.

Kanyoro rightly captures the condition in northern Ghana concerning witchcraft accusations. As argued above, the chief in the community invites a woman to confirm that another woman is a witch, thereby making women the custodians of these cultural practices. Most women also prefer not to challenge the patriarchal system, for fear of being accused of witchcraft. Those who have done so have also been accused and lost everything, with some even losing their lives. Oduyoye thus observed that, for many years now, women knew that they were being oppressed by men but thought it wise not to raise their voices in opposition. She notes,

> Over time, African women had to learn to know their oppressors but had held their peace, because 'when your hand is in someone's mouth, you do not hit that person on the head'. (Oduyoye 1995:5)

The trajectory has changed in recent times with a lot of education and consciousness; thus, women across the continent continually raise their voices against such oppression. The lynching of the ninety-year-old further brought this issue to the public domain. This was thus a clarion call to the church and Ghana to be creative in their approach to dealing with these issues. The PCG moderator of the General Assembly, Rt Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante, condemned the act, called for the involvement of the government, non-governmental organisations, and the church to re-evaluate how they are all dealing with witchcraft accusation in northern Ghana, and called for justice for the ninety-year-old woman who was lynched to death.

Conclusion

This paper, employing the feminist public theological approach, has argued that underneath witchcraft accusations in Ghana is the issue of gender injustice and the upholding of patriarchal systems in these societies. This paper noted that it is the perpetuating of these systemic and structural sins that has led to the oppression and humiliation of women in these communities. The paper further noted that though the church and traditional authorities have set up camps to prevent the killing of these accused women, the camps serve as a tool to maintain the system rather than deal with the problem. This thus calls for the church to raise and engage in creative actions and solutions to bring this issue to a closure.

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