Old Age: A Painful Transition in Ghana

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Abstract

It is argued that old age is a sign of wisdom, and that the older one becomes the more knowledge one acquires. This makes old people, and older women in particular a "learning institution" for the younger generation. No wonder that in some societies, it is a privilege to get older. Ideally, old age is expected to be revered and celebrated. Unfortunately, this is not always the case for many old people, and especially old women. On the contrary, many older people are exposed to different kinds of indignity including witchcraft accusations. Much of the extant literature on aging focus one form of transition; the transition from a "youthful" to an "elderly" age in ordinary social life. This article takes a different analytical approach to aging transition. Based on fieldwork conducted in northern Ghana, we use the eclectic approach to discuss three forms of transition of elderly people: (a) transition from home to the "witch camp" (b) ritual incorporation and living through life as a morally compromised strangers (c) becoming ill, dying and assuming the status of the "forgotten dead." This paper goes beyond exposing the "mystery of old age" to document the painful experiences of elderly women who have been accused of witchcraft and have passed through these transitional stages. Drawing on ethnographic observations, life-history interviews with accused witches and (in)formal conversations with other locals, this work raises perplexing questions regarding why old age is a painful

and regretful transition, especially for old women in relation to witchcraft accusations.

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Introduction

The essential roles played by the elderly in the Ghanaian society are institutionalised and unambiguous. These multifaceted roles are numerous to outline in this brief introduction. Culturally, the elderly ensure that the extended network of family is maintained and strengthened. This is demonstrated in their essential role in, for instance, child fostering practices. Among the Baatombu of northern Benin, for example, aside serving as foster parents, the elderly, as grandparents, take on additional responsibilities, including financial obligations (Alber, 2004). For Baatombu grandparents, Alber (2004: 28-29) notes: "not only do they feed, clothe and raise their grandchildren, but also find them a husband or wife and pay for their wedding". Hence, "fostering means that the grandparents take on the position of parents…." Fostering roles played by grandparents are reinforced by the essential informal social safety network role of the extended family in crisis situations.

The political roles of the elderly extend beyond being good mediators in conflict situations and advisors in certain chiefdoms, to practically demonstrating their traditional leadership acumen as chiefs, priestesses of certain shrines and as Queen mothers (MacGaffey, 2013; see also Odotei, 2006 in Sossou & Yogtiba, 2015). Among the Dagbamba of northern Ghana for instance, the essential political role played by the elderly is demonstrated by the reservation of certain chieftaincy titles for the daughters of the Ya-Na (paramount chief of the Dagbamba). Known as *Nabipuginsi*, these royal women occupy the Gundogu and Kpatuya

chiefdoms (Mahama, 2004). Ibrahim Mahama (2004) identifies other important *nam* (chieftaincy) communities reserved for women who are descendants of the Ya-Na to include, among others, Yiwogu, Warigbani, Fuyaa, Kugulogu and Shilung,. These communities, according to Mahama, are occupied by elderly women because of preference accorded older persons in Dagbon. Hence, as part of the requirements to rule these communities as chiefs or priestesses, occupants need to pass their menopause. This unique position accorded elderly women is not for window dressing purposes. What is clear is that these women chiefs have, over the years, demonstrated good leadership, especially in conflict management, mediation, and resolution. Mahama (2004, p. 21) surmises thus "Dagomba women chiefs are not merely titleholders but chiefs of substance". They are of chiefs of substance because "They have towns and subjects under their control." Added to these, "They have courts and administrative set ups" as well, and "They sit in State to receive their Elders and subjects. In short they are rulers." Reference to Dagbon is important because of the location of majority of the alleged witches' camps in the Dagbon traditional area. However, despite these traditional political roles, many people are ignorant about the political position of elderly women in Dagbon, and the role played by elderly women within the political sphere across Africa in general. However, admittedly, it is quite clear that beside these important political roles, and admission by society to this effect, a large section of women, and elderly women for that matter, remain politically underrepresented.

Economically, elderly women keep local rural economies running, especially serving as subsistent farmers, and crop and vegetable farmers. The economic roles also extend to serving as marketers and distributors of goods and services albeit on a small-scale. These "uncompensated activities" (Sossou & Yogtiba, 2015) are however problematic because even though important, many of

these types of work are often not captured in official statistics. Therefore, the elderly is the most economically excluded and materially deprived. Also, since the elderly are found in informal local/rural economies, they lack pension benefit to enable them to live dignified lives. This is compounded by the fact that "in most countries there is an emphasis on paid employment as the basis for pensions and welfare systems; for example, contributions systems are organised through employers" (Vincent, 2003, p. 23). In this sense, and "given the characteristics of the workforce in the modern sectors of the global economy, women, old people and those living in rural areas are the ones most systematically excluded" (Vincent, 2003, p. 23). Despite these challenges, their essential roles in local economies cannot be underestimated, and hence should be acknowledged.

It is in the light of the multifaceted roles played by the elderly that they are expected to be revered and adored by society. They may be seen as pots of wisdom. Based on this, Musah (2020) asserts that "possessed with wisdom, garnered through years of experience, old people are most often classified as the wisest in society, even though wisdom does reside in the old". This is akin to what Aubel refers to as the elderly being a "learning institution" (Aubel, 2005 in Quarmyne, 2011). Hence, the younger generation is expected to draw lessons and experiences from the elderly via storytelling sessions, babysitting songs, and funeral dirges. These experiences and lessons are partially gained from many years of work and toil, in the informal sector.

Depending on the context and the perspective in which aging is considered, it is not farfetched to contend that aging or old age projects an ambivalent mix of happiness and depression, optimism and hopelessness, regret and contentment, confidence, and self-indictment. This article explores the social implications of aging among women in northern Ghana. It discusses the

regretful experiences of women as they encounter aging, and especially at it relates to witchcraft. In doing this, we aim to go beyond the usual scholarly discussion of old age in ordinary social life. We document and analyse the practical encounters of old women as they transition through three distinct stages of "witchcraft indictment": transition from home to the "witch camp," ritual incorporation and diachronic living realities in the "camps," and transition to the stage of the "forgotten dead."

What is the problem?

Isn't it a compelling paradox that despite the essential roles played by the elderly, especially elderly women, they are wantonly deprived of necessities of life, and are sometimes shun by society? In one breadth society adores the appropriate roles of the elderly. In another breadth, society is silent about the numerous indignities confronting the elderly in the Ghanaian society. These indignities are wide ranging and multifaceted. This article is about the experiences of elderly women as they pass through three different transitional stages in life. Witchcraft accusations (which is often linked to the first transition - that is, transition from home to the alleged witches' camps) results in the natural emergence of the other two transitions. These are ritual incorporation and diachronic living realities in the "camps," and transition to the stage of the "forgotten dead." Majority of these so-called "witches' camps," which have disproportionate representation of women, and older women, have been in existence for many centuries, but have, in recent years, received widespread condemnations. Accused elderly women often face different forms of sanctions including banishment. Once accused, the elderly is ostracised by their communities and abandoned or stigmatised by their family members (sometimes including their biological children).

The disproportionate representation of elderly women in the camps, compared to men, highlights what is described as the feminisation of witchcraft (Musah, 2020; see also Crampton, 2013). Feminisation as a concept, is used to describe the female angle or face in many socio-economic and political discourses. It was originally used to describe a large segment of women living in poverty. This concept is extended to explain the gender dimensions of witchcraft beliefs and practices. Hence, feminisation of witchcraft simply indicate that witchcraft accusation (or victimisation) has a 'female face'" (Musah, 2020, p. 163). This feminisation is practically manifested in the Ghana's "witches' camps," as women inhabit them. During the time of our fieldwork in 2015, 2016 and 2017, all but one "camp", were inhabited by elderly women. This is unsurprising because belief in and the practice of witchcraft across the globe is or remains an "older woman's problem" (Crampton, 2013, p. 199). What should be noted is that accusations against older women are systematic and "institutionalised." What is clear is that, often, once eyebrows are raised regarding witchcraft, old women become uncomfortable as they are the obvious targets for accusations and victimisations.

Witchcraft beliefs, accusations and persecutions are widespread in West Africa. In Ghana, stories of witchcraft accusations and grotesque maiming of elderly accused witches are often reported in newspapers. These stories show the extent to which old age could lead to distrust and hatred. In 2010, a 72-year-old woman, on suspicion of being a witch, was killed in the industrial city of Tema in Ghana (Adinkrah, 2015). Also, in 2017, the people of Trindongo in the Upper East region murdered a 67-year-old woman in cold-blood on suspicion of witchcraft. The woman in question was stoned to death (Danyo et al., 2018). In July 2020, a video that showed the murder of the 90-year-old Mariama Akua Denteh went viral. In the video, two young women, surrounded

by onlookers, were seen maiming the elderly woman. Unable to bear the torture, Akua Denteh passed on.

The above cases highlight several important things. First is the gender aspect. Although men are sometimes accused, majority of those accused and persecuted are women. Secondly and relatedly, it is not merely about the issue of women, but elderly women. This directs our anthropological gaze to the dynamics of aging and elderly people in northern Ghana. The article raises three critical transitional issues of aging by the elderly, in relation to witchcraft allegations. These are transition from home to the "witch camp," ritual incorporation and living through life as a morally compromised being and becoming ill, dying and assuming the status of the "forgotten dead."

Method

This paper is partly based on data derived from our doctoral field projects conducted between 2015 and 2017. The fieldwork was done in local settlements in northern Ghana variously described as "witches colonies," "witches' settlements," "outcast homes," or "witches' camps." Although the projects did not focus exclusively on the elderly, the life worlds of the elderly constituted a central part of these works because "witchcraft beliefs are a part of everyday life in Ghana and a part of aging in Ghana as well (Crampton, 2013, p. 199).

In view of the culturally sensitive nature of the research, appropriate research methodology which responds to changing local dynamics was used. This was necessary because "witchcraft beliefs and practices are complex processes with interlocking explanations and assumptions" (Musah, 2020, p. 136). Hence, to be able to understand various local or micro-level processes which relate to witchcraft beliefs and practices

concerning the elderly (as well as to contextualise them), the insertion of "self" into the world of the research participants (ethnography) was indispensable. This methodological approach created an atmosphere that enabled us to dig deeper into participants' lifeworld, especially their feelings, aspirations, and understandings of the various transitions.

As part of the ethnographic engagement, more than fifty (50) accused witches were interviewed while life-history interviews were conducted for the *magazianima* (women leaders) in all the six well-known "witches' camps". In addition to these, we also conducted interviews with local *asanza niriba* (opinion leaders) as well as Church and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) officials who had working relationships with the elderly accused women in these settlements. All these were supplemented by both participant and non-participant observations as well as informal or casual conversations and interactions.

Given its slippery and culturally sensitive nature, the subject of witchcraft could best be explored ethnographically through the deployment of the native language. The appropriate use of native language (and the etiquette associated with its usage), could determine the level of openness of research participants. Hence, our competence in speaking the Dagbani language, which was spoken by many of our research participants, was helpful in the data collection, and indeed the entire fieldwork process. Our demonstrated competence in Dagbani also ensured that we obeyed basic etiquette of the Dagbamba. Among the Dagbanmba, respect accorded to people of higher status is valued. This is demonstrated by lowering one's body and going down on one knee (women go down on two) (Salifu, 2010). Interestingly, Salifu's observation reaffirms the kind of veneration accorded the elderly in Dagbon society.

Transition to "witches' camp" and derision of old age

What accounts for witchcraft accusations against elderly women? Who are the main architects behind these accusations? How is the transition from ordinary homes of accused persons to the "camps" done? Attempts are made to answer these questions in this section. We begin by arguing that the causes of witchcraft accusations are many and varied. However, because of limited space, we concentrate on the role of the youth within the transition from home to the "camps."

Unsuccessful youth

In Ghana, the causes of witchcraft accusations against the elderly are broad and multifaceted. Like in many other jurisdictions, the youth are at the centre of accusations. During fieldwork, many of our research participants (accused elderly women) noted that they were accused by young people, especially young men. The youth were also said to be at the centre of witchcraft-related violence and destruction of properties.

The many long interviews held with our interlocutors during fieldwork revealed that witchcraft suspicions and accusations are inextricably linked with old age. Having attained an advanced age and looking weak and frail, the elderly was unable to "fight" back when they were physically assaulted. During our interviews in Kukuo, we met Memuna, an elderly accused woman. She could not mention her age, but her physical outlook gave us a clue about her age; she was in her eighties. Interestingly, even though Memuna did not know our ages, she claimed that she had been living in Kukuo before our birth. Given that we were both in our late-30s, Memuna's claim meant that she had probably been living in this settlement for more than forty years. Several decades ago, Memuna was accused by a young

man in her original village. Her accuser was a school drop-out but was doing well in trade. The young man accused her of being responsible for his drop-out and the frequent illnesses he suffered. He also accused her of stifling his trade and blocking his general prosperity. The accusation shocked Memuna. Her own children, three males and two females, were also not progressing economically. "Am I responsible for their predicament as well?" She asked rhetorically. Interestingly, neither her late husband nor any of her children supported or protected her. She received several threats of harm from her accuser. The community members supported the young man and chastised Memuna for allegedly bewitching him.

One early morning, as Memuna was preparing to move out to fend for herself, two angry and incensed young men accosted her. Before she could say a word, one of them knocked her on the chin. They threatened to kill her if she did not leave the community immediately. Memuna panicked as other locals started gathering and forming a crowd around her. She was deemed morally compromised and had lost community support. Fearing that she could be subjected to more harm, she moved out of the house, and made her way to one of the alleged witches' camps (Kukuo). During a long interview with Memuna, she described Kukuo as her "permanent home" and the host community members as her "family." She recalled with pain how both her late husband and biological children looked unperturbed as she fled her natal home to finally settle in Kukuo. But Memuna did not blame her children much because of their apparent powerlessness. "The Devil finds work for idle hands," Memuna noted. She mentioned that her attack by the youth only signified a transfer of youth irresponsible behaviours. They failed to extend care and support to her as custom demanded. Aboderin (2004) reduces this kind of behaviour to two key words: "unwillingness" and "incapacity". That is, the unwillingness and incapacity of the youth to support

the elderly as customs and moral ethos demand. Hence, the "increasing *unwillingness* of the young to provide for the old" and the "growing *incapacity* on the part of the young" to extend care and support to the elderly (Aboderin, 2004, p. 129). For Aboderin, care and support for the old by the youth are discretionary.

In 2016, during one of our encounters with accused witches, we met Adiha (not her real name). She lived a lonely and unhappy life back in her original community. She was considered insignificant within the household because her people viewed her as an economic burden. Adiha felt that she was not accorded the kind of respect she deserved as mother and grandmother to several children. The lack of respect brought about low self-esteem. Adiha was therefore not surprised when her own family members accused her of bewitching her granddaughter. The accusers ignored the fact that Adiha personally contributed to nurturing her grandchildren. She was accused regardless of her role in "building family bridges." Adiha's story is symptomatic of the sheer disregard for old age by the youth.

From the stories we documented, it was clear that the elderly was blamed for the failures of the youth to make progress in life. From the perspective of the youth, the elderly "witches" were denying them the benefits offered by modernity. This kind of discourse is like Fisiy and Geschiere's (2001) work which focuses on witchcraft being adopted as an active resistance against modernisation and development. It also resonates with Comaroff and Comaroff's (1999) piece on witchcraft being used to provide answers as well as interpretations to unequal rewards and aspirations during uncertainties and moral disquiet associated with modernisation and development. One can also extend this to Englund's (2001) work which views witchcraft as a tool being deployed to confront modern and development-related problems in both urban and rural areas.

During fieldwork, we noted that anytime questions were raised regarding the youth, many participants wore visibly irritated faces. Some women poignantly noted that instead of depending on the youth at this critical and vulnerable stage of their lives, they felt betrayed by them. During an interview session in Gnani, Mungani (not a real name), an elderly male accused witch, indicated that in *Dagbon kurili* (ancient Dagbon), living with elderly persons constituted a sign of respect and favour. He remarked with pain,

> *This world has changed. Nothing is certain these days. The youth have been influenced by many modern things. There is total disregard for elderly people in our communities. May be the youth think that they have made it in life, or they have become more civilised than those who gave birth to them. They don't attach any respect to the elderly. They insult and point fingers in their faces without fearing anything. This didn't happen in ancient Dagbon. Those days it was considered a favour and privilege to live with an elderly person, and family members did everything to protect their elderly people. Our values have increasingly eroded. We don't value the elderly anymore. It is sad*.

Mungani fled to Tindang (the name of the local "witch camp" in Gnani) 14 years earlier when his senior brother's son, Ganeem, accused him of witchcraft. Ganeem had just completed his teacher training programme in one of the teacher training colleges in Tamale and was preparing to commence his teaching career. The young man's dream was, however, cut short when he fell seriously ill. The illness, which family members believed had no biomedical cure, lasted for about a month. When there were no signs of recovery, Ganeem accused Mungani of being envious of his success. Ganeem died few days after the accusation. Before he died, Ganeem succeeded in convincing his father

that Mungani was responsible for his affliction. After his death, Ganeem's siblings mobilised the support of the local youth to chase Mungani out of the village. Mungani was 61 at the time he fled the village. He was well received by the Tindana at Gnani who assured him of his safety.

Throughout our conversation, Mungani lamented about the moral decadence that has taken hold of modern society and its consequences on the relationship between the youth and elderly people in society. For him, law enforcement agencies are partly to be blamed for the derision of old age by the youth especially in relation to witchcraft accusation and victimization. "If they beat or kill an elderly person because of witchcraft and the police are able to deal with them ruthlessly, they will learn a lesson and will dare not repeat it," Mungani noted.

In many of the confrontations involving the elderly and the youth, the later considered their actions as acceptable and appropriate behaviours because the accused were believed to have violated laid down traditional or customary expectations which centred on good behaviour and conduct. Hence, the youth considered their actions to be legitimate. It showed "collective disapproval and indeed resentment of suspects' seeming 'immoral' scourge" (Musah, 2020, p. 202). Baba Iddrisu Musah (2020, p. 202) argues that in the case of physical violence, the actions by the youth are "seen to be plausible to communal members who see the actions and activities of suspects as threats to communal life…,". In the specific case of physical overt violence (and its justification), it fits into Sally Engel Merry's (2006) classification of gender violence as "appropriate violence" or "acceptable violence". Appropriate violence in the sense that it is considered "appropriate discipline for certain kinds of behaviour" (p. 25). Often, the assumption is that violence perpetrated is considered to fit the "crime" committed, and hence to suppress the "crime": witchcraft-

related deaths, diseases, and illnesses (Musah, 2020). As Gibbs (2012) argues, "the core purpose is to protect the community from the perceived threat of witchcraft". What is to be noted is that these assumptions may appear unscientific. But what is "science"? And does it even matter to the youth? Absolutely not. No rational or logical reasoning and/or explanation will convince incensed communal youth to shift their positions or change their minds when they feel that the social order has been compromised and disrupted by immoral "witches." For Adam Ashforth (2015, p. 7), witchcraft raises "a very different issue of justice, one that goes beyond the simple problem of false accusation and involves harm done by witches to their victims". From this perspective, Ashforth (2015) noted, "Perpetrators of witchcraft…are dangerous and powerful figures, not members of vulnerable groups, however frail seeming they may be. Witches are said to cause illness, death, suffering, and misfortunes of all kinds. Proceeding on the conviction of local justice, witches are "perpetrators of criminal violence, albeit of a particular kind. For people who live in the world of witches, their primary concern has to do with security. Hence the dangers posed by witches are present and real (Ashforth, 2015).

During fieldwork, it was observed that the way local accusations of witchcraft were often managed did not help matters. Youth violence against elderly persons accused of witchcraft was reinforced by delayed actions on the part of traditional authorities. Accusations were often accompanied by heightened expectations of quick resolution, especially by traditional authorities. Delayed response to accusations raised eyebrows and affected prevailing trust between the youth and community elders. As Musah (2020, p. 201) notes, "By staying arm's length from the activities of suspects, traditional authorities, and chiefs for that matter, are believed to build walls of silence behind suspects' alleged activities or machinations, and of witchcraft

practices in general, and this might imply indirect and tacit approval of suspects' actions". Musah's work further highlights that traditional authorities' delay in handling witchcraft-related accusations and persecution denotes "indirect, sympathetic and sometimes compassionate acceptance, accommodation and indeed approval of the alleged activities, machinations, and intentions of suspected witches" (Musah, 2020).

Traditional justice mechanisms and processes

Once an elderly person was accused of witchcraft, there were various mechanisms of seeking redress. The commonest mechanism (and the one used frequently) was seeking redress from traditional authorities (*kpamba/kpambalba*) or local chiefs (*nanima*, sing. naa). Headed by *nanima*, it was the responsibility of traditional authorities to find an amicable solution to the witchcraft crisis. This was part of the politico-judicial functions of *nanima.* As Hangmann (2007) once noted, "resolving conflicts represents a 'chiefing' activity of special importance". Emphatically, "traditional leaders have often asserted their authority informally in carrying out state functions in local political settings, such as dispensing justice, collecting rent, and policing" (Kyed & Buur, 2007, p. 2). This was like the role of chiefs in precolonial times. In precolonial times, chiefs "ruled as the political heads, their palaces were the courts where disputes were settled and justice was administered" (Assimeng, 1999). The central role of chiefs in the management of witchcraft accusations is essential because accusations are often accompanied by communal tensions and divisions. Hence their involvement is primarily intended to prevent scale-up of communal tensions, (Musah, 2020). Among the Dagbamba, a visit to the chief's palace was often preceded by attempts by the *dogrikpema* (head of a family) to find an amicable solution to the witchcraft-related crisis. This was intended to prevent family rapture.

Among the Dagbamba, resolution of witchcraft-related crisis was built around the council of elders in a community (made up of the *Naa* and his *kpambalba*). This was an admission to the significant role played by the elderly in dispute resolution in Dagbon. "This explains the reason why the council of elders constitutes an important pillar, and thus is commonly consulted on matters which come to traditional authorities" (Musah, 2020, p. 232). Writing on the Dagbamba, Mahama (2004, p. 83) notes that they spend the longest time with the *Naa*, and that they ensure that there is continuous flow of information and humour.

Interestingly, many of our interlocutors noted that they mistrusted traditional rulers because the likelihood of being found guilty was often high, even though they could genuinely be innocent. According to the informants, arbitration became even more problematic and biased when the accused involved is an "elderly woman." In Nabuli (one of the six famous "witches' camps" in the Gushegu district), during an interview with Sabul, an accused woman believed to be in her late 70s, she commented,

> *Elderly women are most susceptible to witchcraft accusations in our local communities and are most likely to be found guilty when brought before the chief for interrogations. We are powerless and therefore can't argue with the chief, whether we are right or wrong*.

The mistrust between accused elderly women and local mediators, and especially the denial of voice (arising out of power asymmetry) in the court of the *Naa* sometimes compelled human rights activists to question fairness and neutrality of local mediating agents. Concerning the issue of mistrust, one interlocutor (an elderly accused witch) noted:

> *I refused to go to the chief's palace because I know I was not going to be successful. He has never listened to an alleged witch. He*

> *always supports the youth when they send you there. The best place to move to is this place ["witches' camp"] where I am a bit free.*

The assertion above is like Musah's (2020, p. 236) finding in one of the "witches' camps". One of Musah's research participants noted: "The chief was the worse. He stood firmly behind the accusations. When I wanted to speak, he shouted me down and said that he was the owner of the land and therefore decides what is good." This highlights suppression of expression and curtailment of fair hearing. In the end, suspects remain voiceless (Musah, 2020, p. 236). Elderly accused persons often feared that they would be found guilty before an intervention. The idea of traditional rulers and their councils remaining neutral in the resolution process was questionable.

Mistrust, suppression of expression and the likelihood of being ostracised resulted in accused elderly persons moving to nearest alleged witches' camps. Beside these, others moved to the "camps" based on fear of being physically attacked and/or abused. Others were also sent there by their family members to prevent a seeming breakdown of family unity with accusations at the centre.

Ritual incorporation in the "witches' camps"

Our discussions in the preceding section focused on how accused elderly persons transition from their original villages to the "camps" upon witchcraft accusations. In this section, we aim to discuss a different form of elderly transition in life: ritual incorporation into a "new" home ("camp" environment) where the accused persons live and experience another form of life.

During our research, we encountered many cases where elderly accused people arrived in the "witches' camps" as morally compromised strangers. They were seen to be morally compromised in the sense that they had been rejected by members of their own families and communities who viewed them as immoral 'killers' and "racketeers" of social and public order. Regardless of the way they were expelled from their communities, newly arrived elderly accused persons were required to subject themselves to the necessary bewitchment processes to get their witchcraft powers expunged. Ritual cleansing by the *Tindana* (earth priest) was the most important requirement for admission into the "witch camp," and this was non-negotiable. Ritual cleansing was considered very crucial because it provided a platform for the accused person's *sotim* (witchcraft powers) to be expunged. Such an action increased social acceptance of accused elderly persons by the host community because it reinforced the psychological feeling that the accused had become harmless to society.

In December 2016, during one of the field trips to Gnani, the local Tindana accepted our request for an interview. As typical of the weather in northern Ghana, the sun was unusually hot on this day. The Tindana agreed to meet us in an old summer hut erected in the forecourt of his house. Notwithstanding our discomfort about the presence of other locals in the hut who could hear our conversations, the Tindana was not bothered about this. As a local leader, he felt happy being surrounded by his people who frequently referred to him as "chief." In fact, he prided himself around this title. The conversation with the Tindana concerned the procedures for ritually incorporating accused witches into Tindang (the local name of the "witch camp" in Gnani). He started by saying that he does not perform rituals for accused people unless at least one witness of the client is present. He explained that the rituals performed are two

types: testing for witchcraft and cleansing of the "dirty powers" (witchcraft power). The conversation was long and frequently interrupted by family members and other locals who needed to "see" the Tindana. Towards the end of our conversation, three cars arrived. The Tindana paused the conversation and got up to see the visitors. He mentioned that the people were his visitors and that they had come for anti-witchcraft consultation. Later, the Tindana revealed that the visitors were from Tamale. Tamale is the regional capital town of the northern region of Ghana. It is also one of the most cosmopolitan cities in northern Ghana. They had been referred to him by the Choggu-Naa (a chief of one of the suburbs in Tamale) who received complaints about bewitchment.

The Tindana provided benches for the waiting visitors to sit on while he retreated into his inner chamber to prepare for the rituals. When he returned, the place was as quiet as a graveyard. Uncertain about the outcome of rituals yet to be conducted, the accused looked visibly worried. The Tindana then announced the following as the items required for the rituals: a chicken, *dam* (local beer) and an amount of 65 Ghana Cedis. The accused persons might have been briefed earlier about the requirement as each of them came with a chicken and money to cater for other ritual expenses. After all payments had been made, the Tindana led the visitors and other local community members to the shrine. The Tindana pointed to an abandoned, dilapidated house and said, "this is the *kali yili* [literally, customs house]." This structure formed part of the bigger shrine and was described by the Tindana as the territorial space where libation was poured to the ancestors and animals slaughtered for clients who came for ritual consultation.

In this instance, one of the visitors, named Baako (a middle-aged man), was accused of witchcraft by a young woman. Adinpuya

(the accuser) claimed that she had seen Baako in her dreams several times trying to kill her. Having listened to the accuser, the Tindana invited Baako to step forward to undergo witchcraft testing. This was meant to establish the guilt or innocence of the accused. Holding his chicken and looking visibly worried, Baako stepped forward and made his *pori* (a public declaration or oath):

> *My sister here has accused me of trying to bewitch her. She claims that I attack her every night, but I am not a bad man. I am innocent of this accusation. I use my tim [magic] to treat people and save their lives. If it is true that I am using my tim to harm her, may the shrine reject my chicken. If I am innocent, I beseech the shrine to accept my chicken and exonerate me.*

On completion of the *pori*, the Tindana took the chicken from him and started making libation using the *dam* bought by the accused. He recited incantations which involved invoking his *yaan'nima* or *kpiimba* (ancestors) to rise and separate truth from falsehood. Having completed the recitation, he cut off the chicken's head and allowed it to die. The sacrifice was meant for the ancestors who would help to establish guilt or innocence. Locals believed "that the chicken's contorting body could channel the ancestors' answer" (Mutaru, 2019, p. 70). After a while, the slain chicken died on its back (face up). This was interpreted as an acceptance of Baako's chicken by the shrine (or the ancestors).This was good news for Baako. His brother, who accompanied him (also as a witness) and was looking pensive and restless during the testing process began to smile after the verdict. The Tindana later explained that Baako would have been declared guilty of witchcraft if his chicken had died on the stomach (face down).

The above-described ritual was often the first process to be conducted to initiate or incorporate an accused witch into the "witch camp." Baako was one of the few elderly people who escaped "conviction" upon consulting the shrine. Because he was

declared innocent, he could go back home without provocation or attack from the local youth. An unlucky elderly person whose accusation was upheld or confirmed by the shrine needed to go through physical or financial ordeal to be accepted to live in the "witch camp."

Physically, an elderly person whose accusation was upheld by the shrine and who accepted to live in the "camp" to save her life needed to surrender to bewitchment or cleansing rituals by the Tindana. Apart from subjecting her body to a series of thorough rituals, the accused had to bear all the expenses involved in procuring the materials for the rituals. The elderly people would later confess that the requirements involved in the cleansing or incorporation rituals were difficult. While the major requirement (animal sacrifice) was common to all the anti-witchcraft shrines, the specific requirements varied from place to place. The Tindana in Gnani required a sheep and chicken to sacrifice for the ancestors to get the accused cleansed and accepted into the host community. However, at Kpatinga, the Tindana indicated that the shrine required goat, guinea fowl and chicken as sacrifices. At Gnani, an opinion leader revealed why the animal sacrifice was important: "Until this is done, everybody will continue to see the accused as *ninvu*ɣ'*be*ɣ*u* and will fear and avoid her."

At Tindang (Gnani), unlike other settlements, the ritual process was more cumbersome for newly arrived elderly accused persons. Here, they were confined to the *kali yili* (literally, "customary house") where they spent the night alone. The purpose of the seclusion is to "spiritually prepare grounds for ensuing activities" (Musah, 2020, p. 269). The next day, the accused was brought out of the *kali yili* whereupon the Tindana proceeds to perform the remaining cleansing rituals. As part of the ritual process, the Tindana poured some *dam* (local beer) on the ground in libation to the ancestors. The ritual animal (provided by the accused) was

then slaughtered as sacrifice to the ancestors who then spiritually partook of the animal. In Gnani, the Tindana mentioned that the slain animal's blood was collected with the soil and mixed with water to obtain the desired *buɣkom* (literally, shrine water). The "*Buɣkom* was believed to be a mystical and sacred portion sanctioned by the ancestors and therefore more powerful than the accused person's *sotim* [witchcraft power] (Mutaru, 2019, p. 91). To be accepted into the settlement ("witches' camp"), an accused had to drink the *buɣkom*. Locals believed that any accused who drank this had her witchcraft powers destroyed and she was rendered harmless to society. The cleansed woman could not bewitch anyone, and she could be killed by the ancestors any time she attempted bewitchment. The cleansing (incorporation) ritual was completed by having the accused woman's hair shaved. The belief was that the hair brought by the accused from her community was bad. To make the cleansing process complete the unkempt hair had to be removed.

Having completed the ritual purification exercise, the accused was now fully recognised as a member of the Tindana's settlement (so-called "witches' camp"), and members of the host community could now "trust" and live with her:

Everyday life in the "camps"

Entry into the world of the witches (and rarely wizards) was not an easy one. As typical of every traditional palace in Dagbon, one could not enter a community without the knowledge of traditional (spiritual) leadership. This was even quite fundamental for people, and especially accused elderly women who had been ritually incorporated into the alleged witches' camps for safety: spiritual and physical. Because the elderly women were considered as morally compromised and "misfits" in their communities, actions were undertaken to ensure that they were "fit" to live in their new homes (the "camps"). During

an informal conversation with the Tindana of Tindaanzhee at Kpatinga, he commented:

> *You cannot easily enter this settlement ["witch camp"]. Even if you are brought at night, they have to wake me up to come around and welcome you. I am the only person who can grant you permission to stay here, either temporarily or permanently. I have to conduct some spiritual cleansing before you are allowed to live here*.

As the above narrative shows, it did not matter what type of danger was at hand. Neither did it matter what underlying conditions propelled an accused witch/wizard to flee to the 'witch camp' – the incorporation ritual process was the same and had to be followed.

At the time of the fieldwork, old women inhabited all the six well-known "witches' camps" (except Tindang in Gnani). The population in Tindang was a mixture of elderly men and women. We recorded an average age of 58 (in Gambaga), 67 (in Gushegu), 71 (in Kukuo), 66 (in Nabuli), 61 (in Kpatinga), and 68 (in Gnani). Overall, the average age in all the "witches' camps" was 65 years. This age statistics show the kind of vulnerable people who inhabited the "camps." For most elderly women, it was difficult living alone without "helpers." This accounted for the relocation of young boys and girls to the settlements by extended family members who thought it wise to provide "maids" to the banished elderly women. Others already had fostered children, largely girls, staying with them, and hence these girls automatically served as "maids" to the elderly accused. Compared to their original villages, life was not better here, but the elderly women did not want to go back home because there was no peace (Crampton, 2013) at home. They preferred living in penury in the newly found settlements than facing death upon their return home. Their lives, many argued, were much secured

in the "camps" than their natal homes. Many were full of praises for the Tindana for ensuring that their physical security and safety were guaranteed.

In many of these settlements, the accused lived in tiny, dilapidated thatch houses without electricity. Some of the rooms had no doors, while others had leaky roofs, thus leaving the elderly accused women at the mercy of reptiles and rains during the rainy season. Musah (2020, p. 310) gives a graphical description of the thatch structures in the following words:

> *…Spaces which the huts provide are only enough to accommodate mats which many residents sleep on, a small space for personal effects which are few though, a location dedicated for cooking, especially during the wet season, and a portion (dug hole) meant for bathing. Like thatch huts, the doors of the huts are so low that residents are compelled to bend or stoop to enter into them. Besides this, most of the doors of the thatch huts are poorly maintained that they can easily cave in at the least touch.*

In Kukuo, for example, accused witches, with aging complications, had to trek several kilometres to the Oti River to fetch water. Old women who were lucky to have "maids" avoided some difficulties relating to chores as these "maids" provided the necessary help. We found that elderly women who had no "maids" and struggled with household chores were those who had been accused by direct family members (such as biological children). They were left alone to fend for themselves. They had been abandoned and shunned by people they birthed and nurtured. By these, witchcraft accusations and labels create walls, walls that serve as barricades, preventing the elderly from having any meaningful form of engagement with their families and other social networks**.** This is especially true for accused elderly persons without children or grandchildren as "maids." These "maids" serve as symbols of family bond. They indeed

serve as conduits – attracting visitations from family members who would otherwise not have visited the accused (see Musah, 2020) witch/wizard.

One day, while conversing with the Tindana at Gnani, he told a story to demonstrate how families abandoned their elderly accused members after their incorporation. According to the Tindana, one accused elderly woman had been living in the "camp" for over three years. During this period, no family members (including her biological children) paid a visit. Because there was inadequate accommodation, the woman lived with the Tindana and was even fed by him. Her life and survival in the camp were solely dependent on the goodwill of the Tindana. During an interview with this elderly accused woman, she noted that even though she was still supported by the Tindana, the support witnessed a major downturn when she moved to a thatch room which was given to her by the Tindana after another accused witch had relocated. One day, the Tindana informed the woman's family members that she was dead. To the amazement of the Tindana, her family members, far and near, quickly mobilised a vehicle and motorcycles and made their way to the "camp" to claim the body for burial. However, they were shocked when they arrived only to realise that the old woman was not dead, but well and healthy. According to Tindana, he adopted this strategy to measure the reactions of the accused's family.

Although living conditions were difficult for the elderly women in the "camps," the pattern of social life reflected everyday realities in ordinary communities. On a normal day, the elderly women woke up early to start the day's activities. The chores included cleaning the compound, washing bowls, cooking, and fetching water. Although an accused woman could live alone, this was not common. Mostly, they lived in 2s or 3s. There was

no written timetable for daily cleaning of the house. Whoever woke up early could do the cleaning. The women start preparing their breakfast after cleaning and filling their pots with water. Sometimes they simply warmed the leftover food from the previous night.

While the elderly women occupied themselves with off-farm activities (such as petty trading or working for other people in the market) during the dry season, they provided labour to the Tindana and other villagers on their fields during the rainy season. They supplemented the support they received from NGOs, Churches and other philanthropists with token food or cash paid to them after working in their fields. Those who were lucky not to have been abandoned by their families also received additional support in the form of food and cash from home. Since the women lived on the principles of Goran Hyden's (2006) economy of affection, they did daily rounds of greetings. They visited their neighbours to check on their health and to greet them. In Gambaga, the elderly women mentioned that by visiting friends and neighbours to greet, they could get to know who was sick and hence needed attention or support from the rest. Going round to greet others was not compulsory and no sanctions were imposed if this was not done. The accused women explained their daily rounds of greetings in terms of respect for one another. For example, Napaga noted that to greet a neighbour was considered as *songsim* (help*).* She noted that greetings strengthened social ties and helped to forge economic cooperation since one could not borrow from a neighbour if one failed to frequently greet them.

Death and dying: The "forgotten dead"

Death and dying; a state and a process, are intricately connected with emotions. Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Durkheim (Robben, 2018) formulated this idea. For Malinowski, death dredges up some ambivalent feeling and attitude especially in relation to "post-mortem bond between the bereaved and the deceased" (Robben, 2018, p. xvi). Several decades ago, among the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski observed that a contradictory attitude was shown toward the dead: on the one hand to preserve the body, to keep its form intact, or to retain parts of it; on the other hand the desire to be done with it, to put it out of the way, to annihilate it completely … there is a desire to maintain the tie and the parallel tendency to break the bond (Malinowski, 1954, pp. 49–50). This kind of ambivalence was explained by Malinowski because of the combination of a fear of death and the desire for the "reintegration of the group's shaken solidarity" (Malinowski, 1954; cited in Robben, 2018). This ambivalent attitude long observed among the Trobriand Islanders still exists today in many societies including Ghana.

In his ethnography on Ghana, van der Geest (2000) turns the discourse of ambivalence on the ontology of death toward the direction of funerals. He argues that the "living" offers a better perspective to our understanding of funerals rather than the "deceased." Van der Geest (2000) then invites us to "think less of religion and more of politics, particularly, the politics of reputation" when discussing funerals or funerary rituals in Ghana.

In the so-called "witches' camps," the last painful transition accused elderly women passed through was their struggles with various types of illness due to their advanced age. The eventual consequence of these struggles was death. Some of the accused

elderly witches lamented that after toiling for several years to fend for their children, they were seen to deserve no "good" place to die but a "witch camp." These lamentations were sometimes accompanied with regretful rhetorical questions to the researchers and curses to biological children who initiated the accusations and abandoned them after their admission into the camps.

One hot afternoon, during a long interview with Sanatu (a 75-year-old accused woman) in her compound (in Kpatinga), she was full of bitterness about the way she (thought) had been abandoned by her two biological sons to die with indignity. She remarked,

> *I gave birth to five children, all males. Three died and the remaining two thought that I killed them with my witchcraft. Their father accused me first and they fully supported the accusation. They didn't want to openly attack me, so they instigated other community members to push for my banishment. My son [referring to the interviewer], who will give birth and turn around to kill the child? I feel pain talking about the conduct of my children. They have abandoned the very person who brought them to this world. They want me to die, so that they can come and pick the dead body. If only they will ever appear here. I live them to God. They will face the consequences of their actions on this earth before they die.*

Recollection of painful memories and outpouring of curses on accusers (mostly family members) characterised many of the conversations we had with elderly accused witches. Due to old age (and other factors), many of the accused had health problems. The women suffered from different ailments ranging from frequent headaches and waist pains to severe asthma and potential diabetes. They were also found to be exposed to water-related diseases. Some of the accused did not have health

insurance, while others lacked money to renew their health insurance premiums or cards. However, accused witches in the Gambaga "camp" claimed that the local Presbyterian Church sometimes helped them to renew their insurance premiums. Musah (2020, p. 304) graphically captures the position of health insurance in the camps in the following words:

> *…Although old residents 70 years and above, as per the health insurance law, and largely classified as indigent, are exempted from paying premiums, and thus qualify to enjoy free medical care under the NHIS, officers responsible for undertaking this responsibility hardly and rarely visit the camps. This category of residents also considers trekking to and from registration centres, located at the capitals of MMDAs, exhausting. In many instances too, transport costs to and from these registration centres are considered too expensive and beyond residents' reach. Hence, the goals of the NHIS remain to be seen, in practice, compelling and reinforcing residents' reliance on traditional or herbal medications.*

At Kpatinga, locals confirmed the vulnerability of the accused women when it comes to health issues. At one time, while speaking with a local teacher, he remarked:

> *You can see that these women are poor, they can't do anything for themselves. A small illness turns into a big one because there is no good care. They struggle to feed. None of them can afford decent medical treatment. The Tindana cannot sponsor their treatment. So, some of them die from simple illnesses that should not have killed them.*

During fieldwork in Nabuli, Damu was one of the lovely people we met. She was very old, probably in her mid-70s, but sounded jovial in her conversations. Sadly, Damu fell ill not long after we arrived in the village. When her condition worsened, Damu's

friends in the "camp" contributed some cash and bought some medicine from a licensed chemical store, but Damu refused to take it. Damu's friends hinted that she had no faith in biomedicine. She agreed to consult a herbalist but refused biomedical treatment in a hospital. Damu preferred to die at home, not in a foreign land. She asked her friends to inform her family back home about her condition. The village chief sent a message to Damu's kinsmen to come for her and initiate herbal treatment. The family delayed, and Damu passed on before they arrived. They carried the body home and buried it according to local traditions. Damu had died a painful death but, to an extent, her dream was fulfilled as she was buried in a manner prescribed by herself before her death.

Accused witches whose kinsmen refused or delayed in coming for the bodies were interred in the host communities. The burial and funeral rituals of dead accused witches were often done according to the religious beliefs she professed before her death. Reverend Duru, one of the longest serving officials with the local Presbyterian Church in Gambaga who had intimate working (social) relationship with the accused women explained how death was managed in the "witches' camp":

> *The Presbyterian Church buries those accused witches who die and are Christians, especially if family members are reluctant or delay in coming for the body. After the burial, we will hold a church service for the deceased. If the person is a Muslim, the Muslim community will also handle the burial process in line with Islamic requirements. Usually, after burial, the family members come to take the funeral home to perform. When Magazia Hawa died here, we buried her the Christian way and held prayers for her. But later the family also came and took the funeral home and performed.*

The stain of witchcraft was a very dirty one. Accused persons who became ill and died in the "witch camps" might receive proper burial from kinsmen, but the master status – "witch" – was never removed from the minds of kinsmen and other community members. At best, they could be described as the "forgotten dead" since they were not remembered by the living with any good account. They were not memorialised or immortalised and could never be listed as "ancestors" worthy of veneration. Their progeny carried perpetual shame and damnation of integrity.

Conclusions

In many cultures across Africa, old age is valued and respected. The elderly is believed to have acquired more valuable knowledge and wisdom by the mere fact of living longer than the younger ones. They, therefore, constitute a "learning institution" for the growing youth. Customs therefore demand the youth to respect and revere the older ones. Unfortunately, this is not the case in some African societies including Ghana. In northern Ghana, sheer disregard for elderly people and the constant derision of old age is manifested in the existence of the so-called "witches' camps" which are inhabited by the elderly, especially elderly women. As this article has amply demonstrated, the existence of the camps enacts three phases of painful transition that accused elderly people go through. Even though most elderly people have higher expectations of aging in dignity, social support, veneration, and happiness, for those who unfortunately transit through the three stages identified by this article, old age is considered a painful and a regretful transition.

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