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**WITCHRAFT: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT OR A
NATURAL PHENOMENON**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was not to determine the reality of witchcraft but to find out whether it is a social construct (a product of social interaction and inter-relationships) or a natural phenomenon. An appropriate methodology was used. Some of the techniques included focus group discussions, interviews, questionnaire and personal observation. The evidence gathered pointed to the fact that the phenomenon of witchcraft is a social rather than a natural phenomenon.

Key words: *Witchcraft, social construct, natural phenomenon*

Introduction

The problem that captures the attention of this paper is that existing literature on witchcraft does not provide adequate information as to whether witchcraft is socially or naturally determined and the mode of acquiring witchcraft. Various authors have contributed to literature on witchcraft depending on their areas of interest. Whilst some of the literature is concerned with the historical background of which camps, other literature concentrates on the concept of witchcraft as a whole.

Waibel (2001), gives a world view on witchcraft in six societies.

In North America, it is mentioned that Salem was famous in American history for executing women who were suspects of witchcraft and could not prove their innocence. However, of late there is a new movement of women who are reclaiming their names as witches. These women emphasize the power of witchcraft and belief as a gift and spiritual power. It is an important part of the modern feminist movement in Northern America. They organize witches conferences and want to educate and share their ideas of spirituality.

Germany as well as other European countries also saw witchcraft as a negative power about a hundred years ago. The accused were mainly women and most of them were lynched. Some were found guilty of witchcraft by court and were publicly burnt. This is however history. Attitudes towards witchcraft and these historical events have changed. Even though most Germans would say that witchcraft does not exist, they equally admit that some supernatural powers exist because of some phenomenon, which cannot be explained specifically. Nevertheless, these powers are not associated with negative spirits.

In Sierra Leone, Gambia and Nigeria, belief in witchcraft is very strong. Identified witches are most women who cannot give birth. However, witchcraft is not limited to elderly women. In general witchcraft in these societies are associated with negative powers.

Benin depicts quite a different situation. Witchcraft is associated with the voodoo society, which are women dominated. Women suspected to have these powers include barren women, women with one child, spinsters, and young girls with special qualities amongst others. Belief in witchcraft and the fear to become one is so strong that most clans donate a family member to the voodoo society for protection. Usually it is the girls who are sacrificed right after birth.

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the modes of acquisition of witchcraft?
2. Is witchcraft a social construct or a natural phenomenon?

Perception of Witchcraft in different Societies

The work of Waibel (2001), provides a varying perception of witchcraft in different societies. The common feature that cuts across countries is that witchcraft in all these societies is a female club. Except that the industrialized countries have moved from lynching and burning of witches to more organized societies. This work provides an informative variation of witchcraft. Mention is made of all the witch camps in Northern Ghana. It also illustrates the idea that various forms of violence against accused witches is historical and has occurred in many societies. This is thus very beneficial to this work. Notwithstanding Waibel's broad discussion on the subject matter, his work lacks specificity. He also does not discuss witchcraft as socially or natural defined. The gender question as regards witchcraft is not adequately discussed.

This work would establish witchcraft as either a social or natural phenomenon or even both, as stated in the hypothesis. The gender aspect is also backed in this study. In his book "Ghana is Retrospect" Sarpong (1992), defines a witch as a living being who possesses or is rather supposed to possess witchcraft substance. This substance could take the form of pot, a gourd, shell or any container in which objects are said to be, concocted. He explains witchcraft to be a psychic emanation, which is believed to cause injury to health and property. It is supposed to look and glow like fire and be able to fly. Sarpong (1992), argues that a witch by nature is evil and that there cannot be a good witch. He stresses that a witch may or may not be conscious of the fact that he or she possesses witchcraft. Even a baby could be a witch before it is born.

Although Sarpong' work discusses what witchcraft entails and operates he limits his work to the Akan community. He also fails to discuss the gender aspect of witchcraft. Sarpong does not mention whether the psychic power called witchcraft is socially or naturally acquired.

One important human spirit, which Africa has had to reckon with very painfully and disastrously, according to Idowu (1973), is the spirit of witches. To Africans of every category, witchcraft is an urgent reality. African concepts about witchcraft consist in the belief that, spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands, wreaking havoc on other persons in body, mind, or estate; that witches have guild or operate singly, and that spirits sent out of the human body in this way can act either invisibly or through lower creatures, an animal or a bird. It is generally believed that the guilds of witches have their regular meetings and ceremonies in forests or in open places in the middle of the night. The meeting is the meeting of souls and spirits of the witches. The spirits leave the bodies of witches in the form of a particular kind of bird. Their main purpose is to wreak havoc on other human beings. The operation is that of spirits upon spirits. It is the ethereal bodies of victims that are attacked, extracted and devoured. This is what is meant, when it is said that witches have sucked the entire blood of the victim. Thus, in the case of witches or their victims, spirits meet spirits, spirits operate upon spirits, whilst actual human bodies lie asleep in their homes.

Idowu's work discusses witchcraft beliefs in Africa. He also looks at how witchcraft operates and the form it takes. His work also provides information on how witchcraft activities, acquisition, and how it operates. He discusses only the negative aspects of witchcraft. This work therefore does not give a clue whatsoever as to whether witchcraft is a social or natural phenomenon.

Writing on witchcraft in his book "Tradition and change in Ghana", Nukunya (1992), defines witches as people, both male and female, who are believed to possess inherent supernatural powers, which they use knowingly or otherwise to harm others in order to benefit themselves. Witchcraft may be inherited or acquired. Features associated with witchcraft include the aged (old ladies), persons with red eyes, excessive wealth, abject poverty and senility. Nukunya further explains that, witchcraft does not strike at random. For witchcraft accusation from someone, the supposed victim must have some relationship with the accused. This relationship could be one of kinship, neighbours, friends and fellow students. This, the writer says makes witchcraft accusation a function of social relation, which is likely to cause or result from jealousy, hatred, envy and fear. This argument links witchcraft to social conditions, which probably presents witchcraft as a social rather than natural phenomenon. Nukunya's definition of witchcraft to some extent agrees with that of Sarpong (1992). But the writer further discusses witchcraft as both a natural and a social phenomenon. Nukunya just like Sarpong (1992), does not discuss the gender dimension of witchcraft.

Assimeng (1989), describes the attitude of people towards witchcraft in the sub-region as an indication of primitiveness. Though every Ghanaian believes in witchcraft, the topic is discussed in secrecy and mentioned obliquely. The uncertainties and insecurities of rapidly changing social and cultural conditions according to Assimeng (1989), appears to be directly related to increased fears of the activity of wizards and indeed to the demand for extra-empirical help in attaining new goals, new securities and new stability. He also discusses reasons why people visit witch doctors. Some reasons include protection, prosperity, and pursuit of deliverance among others.

Witchery according to Assimeng (1989), has become a common phenomenon in Ghanaian society by which those who possess it, use it to destroy progressive citizens needed by the state in resuscitating the shattered economy. He suggests to the authorities concerned to consider seriously the establishment of an association to be formed from medical doctors and traditional healers association. These categories of people according to Assimeng should have wider power to deal with cases of witchery.

Assimeng (1989), concentrates on the purported negative activities of witches in the Ghanaian societies and put across suggestions.

This work, though significantly relevant to the study, does not contain information that gives an indication as to whether witchcraft is a natural phenomenon or a social construct. This leaves the question as to whether witchcraft is a natural phenomenon or a social construct yet answered.

Delivering and opening at a round table conference on the treatment of persons suspected or accused of witchcraft on the 17th December 1988, Short (CHRAJ) looks at situations and problems in the witch camps of the Northern Region. He discussed findings of investigations conducted by CHRAJ. This was as a result of a newspaper report on maltreatment meted out to women in the witch camps. The investigations revealed that relatives brought most of the accused with some severely beaten to the point of death. The report also indicates that some of the inmates confessed using their powers to harm others. No evidence of sexual exploitation and for that matter maltreatment was found.

CHRAJ also observes gender bias in witchcraft accusation throughout the country, and condemns the method employed in determining a witch. Short and his commission gave an insight into real situations of the camps and also problems faced by the accused. However, no reasons have been adduced to explain the gender biases of witchcraft. Also, the report does not make mention of witchcraft as a social or natural construct. The report however gives a clue as regards the physical and social features of people generally accused of witchcraft.

Witchcraft mentality and development is the theme of a lecture delivered by Boi-Nai (1997) at Tamale Institute for Cross cultural Studies (TICCS) at a seminar in May 1997. Boi-Nai defines a witch as someone who uses his or her psychic power to harm others. He describes witchcraft as mentality and attitudes that prevent people from participating in their own personal development and the development of their communities. Attitudes such as fatalism, ignorance, suspicion, jealousy, aggression, blaming others for one's problems, witch hunting, consulting fetish with the aim of harming others and wishing the downfall of others do not aid development. Witchcraft belief is acquired as one grows up in a traditional family, where bad things that happen are attributed to witchcraft activities. This submission supports the view that witchcraft is socially constructed. Boi-Nai discusses witchcraft as a reality and as a misplaced explanation to situations. He dismisses witchcraft as that which builds tension and quarrels among families. Boi-Nai as well makes suggestions to deal with witchcraft mentality. These include education, showing love to the people involved, intervention by CHRAJ and other institutions.

Boi-Nai's work provides information that forms the basis of witchcraft. These are attitudes and mentality acquired. He therefore sees witchcraft as a social construct. In his article titled "Gender apartheid, crime or custom" published in the weekend mirror, Azumah (2001), presents the general problems faced by women with particular emphasis of rape, the "trokosi" system and the confinement of suspected witches in camps. According to Azumah women have basically been regarded as the bearers of tradition from one generation to another. The transformation of their role in society is therefore seen as an erosion of the foundation of traditional cultures. He expresses his disappointment in some of the learned people of the country who should know that culture is dynamic, support and even finance these practices.

Although Azumah's script is not specifically on witchcraft, but on general cultural practices faced by women in Ghana, his work stand to benefit this study. This is because the article is centered on women and culture. Women are central to development and should not be sabotaged by cultural practices.

Writing on witchcraft in the Mirror, Safo (2001), looks at what happens to witches in Ghana. She is concerned about treatment meted out to accused witches. She cites instances where parents look unconcerned simply because some spiritualist has declared their child or a member of the family a witch. Phenomenon such as poor harvest, strange disease, and deportation of people not meeting emigration requirement documents are all attributed to witchcraft activities. She also dismisses methods such as dreams, visions and divinations used to determine witchcraft as unscientific. Witchcraft according to Safo (2001), is a spiritual issue and should be addressed spiritually to prevent children and other innocent people from being maltreated.

The article provides the means employed in determining a witch and some incidence that calls for witchcraft accusation. Although the article is not targeted at any witch camp it gives a broad view on witchcraft issues and allegations in Ghana as a whole.

Reporting in *Womanews* (Chicago Tribune), a foreign newspaper, Agyekwena (1996) looks at the issue of witchcraft amongst Ghanaian women. According to her, belief in witchcraft is so strong and violence against suspected practitioners so common that villages have been established in Northern Ghana as refuges for women accused as witches, places where the women are supposedly exorcised and rendered harmless to society. The reporter writes on interviews conducted with the Gambarana Yahaya.

Wuni who dismisses the argument that, accusation of witchcraft is a ploy by men to suppress women. He says “no one can convince me that witchcraft does not exist” ...the fact that women accused of being witches are now using the law courts to defend themselves does not necessarily mean that they are innocent”.... “Witchcraft is a spiritual problem and answers must be sought in the spiritual realm. You only need to hear these women confess their crimes when you will realize how serious the issue is”.

Agyekwena gives a general view on witchcraft situations in Northern Ghana, including interviews conducted to determine the reality of witchcraft. She however does not mention what witchcraft entails and how it is operated and acquired. The work therefore does not give a clue as to whether witchcraft is a social or natural construct. The objectives of this study include tackling issues ignored in Agyekwena’s work.

Witchcraft and Human Rights

Kirby (1997), in his seminar presentation discusses witchcraft accusation, causes and how it affects development in Dagbon. Kirby says “the accepted signs of witchcraft amongst these people is the mysterious lights which shines at night on tall trees, isolated spots, promontories, escarpments or other high places” Kirby (1997), quotes Tait 1963: 146 to describe witchcraft situations in the past. There existed witch-catching shrines such as “Nana” and Tigare” where accused witches were exorcised. The process involved a public accusation, public confession of guilt, gathering of medicinal plants by the accused, drinking water mixed with the plants in a calabash, which indicates the destruction of powers of the witch. The most remarkable thing about the tale is that after being put through the curative rite, the woman simply goes about her normal chores and activities as if nothing had happened. They were not ostracized as is seen today witchcraft accusation Kirby stresses has taken a more traumatic dimension. Situations that bring about the accusation have become aggravated. Controls and sanctions against witchcraft accusation, the police and the legal system have lost their grip on it. Witch catching shrines such as “Nana” and “Tigare” are out of fashion. People want immediate relief to their tension. They are taking the law to their own hands, beating, lynching and banishing accused witches from the communities.

Kirby also gives a profile of the accusers who are made up of mostly young women (wives) with mid to high status in the society. The accused mostly old women of senior status in the compound, women who have had a grudge against their victims, high status women (wives of chiefs, elders, etc.).

Kirby (1997), discusses the form in which the treatment of witches have taken. Also he discusses some characteristics of accusers, accused and victims of witchcraft. This is very important to the work because it gives a clue to test the hypothesis as to whether witchcraft is social phenomenon or otherwise. He limits his work to only the situation in Dagbon. This work looks at the situation of witchcraft in another traditional area, Gambaga in the Northern Region.

Bawah (1998), looks at the appropriate lines at solving the problem of human rights infringement with regards to women put in witch camps. He discusses issues, which lead the women into these camps. He says, “The Gambarana never goes round which hunting and sentencing the guilty ones to the camp. In fact, he and for that matter the camp rather saves the lives of many of the inmates who would have otherwise been tortured to death at their community level. Bawah (1998), identifies some problems faced by these women in the camp as congestion, environmental hygiene and lack of means of sustenance. Also, he mentions some economic activities engaged by these women. These include farming, soap making, cotton spinning, malt making, and

firewood collection among others. He suggests a concerted effort to get the negative and dehumanizing acts out of sight. This can be achieved through public education on the veils and illegalities inherent in the existence of the camp. This he says should include the District Assemblies within sub District Structures, the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), 31st December Women's Movement, FIDA, the Traditional Authorities, NGO's and individual opinion leaders.

Bawah (1998), gives an insight to the problems faced by the accused witches. He also makes vital suggestions, which is beneficial for the recommendation of this work. However, he does not mention witchcraft as either a natural or social construct, which forms the hypothesis of this work.

Adam (2000), in her article in the weekend Mirror discusses the methods used in determining a witch. She also traces the history and situations in the witch camp. Dreams, Divinations and Sacrifices according to Adam (2000), are the methods employed in determining a witch. She describes the women at the camp as weak, pale, hungry looking and wretched. They engage in menial jobs, fetch water and work as farm hands for leftover food and paltry sum of money. Adam also maintains some havoc purported to be caused by witches to include: drought, loss of cattle and sheep, poor yield of crops, malaria, polio and other diseases. She also mentions that about 99 percent of the entire witch camps are female dominated. Adam (2000), asserts that it is poverty that causes disease and frustration, which also lead so-called witches, a strong effort must be made to lesson poverty by establishing income generating activities not just for the accused witches but for the societies from which they originate.

Adam (2000), traces the root causes of accusation to be poverty. Also she examines the activities of witches. These elements are vital to the work because it gives an indication as to whether witchcraft is a social or natural phenomenon.

From the review of available literature on the subject matter, evidence show that, there is a wide spread belief in witchcraft. Discussion of the subject matter is varied and useful for the purpose of this work. However not much has been done on the question as to whether witchcraft is a social construct or a biological reality.

The prime concern of this work is to thoroughly investigate and come out with findings to answer the question whether witchcraft is a social construct or natural phenomenon.

Methods and Discussion

The East Mamprusi District is located in the North Eastern Part of Northern Ghana. To the north it shares boundaries with the republic of Toga. It is bounded to the west by West Mamprusi District and to the south by Gushegu, Karaga and Saboba districts. The District covers an area of 3060km₂ which I about 4.4% of the total land area of Northern Region.

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Primary and secondary data were used. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaire were the main instrument used together data. The semi-structured interviews facilitated in-depth probing. The questionnaire contained both pre-coded and open-ended questions. This combination allowed for gathering of adequate and statistically quantifiable data (Twumasi, 1996).

Out of the four witches camps that is, Gambaga, Kuku, Kpatinga/Gnani and Tindam, Gambaga was randomly selected using the simple Random techniques for the study. This gave each of the four witch camps

equal chances of being selected. The selection of a single witch camp was necessitated by both time and financial constraints.

Systematic sampling was adopted to select compounds to be included in the study. Every third compound starting from the lodging place of the researcher was selected. A total of fifty accused witches were randomly selected for purpose of questionnaire administration.

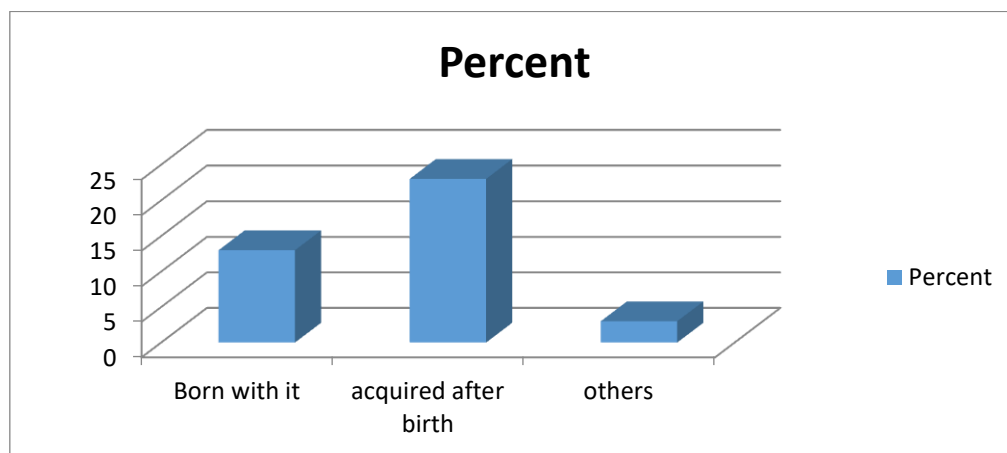
In-depth interview were held with some key members of the community. This solicited information which would normally not be provided. Books, Journals, Newspaper Reports and Research work from government and non-governmental institutions constitute the secondary literature. This gave a broader perspective to the issues and thereby enhancing the understanding of researchers.

Qualitative and quantitative techniques were adopted in the analysis of data. The quantitative techniques comprise of the use of statistical tales, charts and graphs. The qualitative techniques involved descriptive analysis of situations and information.

Research question 1: What are the modes of acquisition of witchcraft?

The Acquisition of Witchcraft

Whilst Nukunya (1992), argues that witchcraft may be inherited or acquired, Sarpong (1992), also stresses that a witch may or may not be conscious of the fact that he or she possesses witchcraft. This study gathered information on various modes of acquisition of that psychic power called witchcraft. These modes are classified into being born with it, acquisition after birth and others (which include inheritance, not knowing when it was passed on).



Source: Field work, 2019

Figure 1: Acquisition of Witchcraft

The witchcraft power as can be observed from figure 1 is acquired through various means. Whilst some respondents claimed to have obtained it unknowingly, others insisted they willingly acquired the power. Majority of the respondents as shown in the diagram acquired the power after birth this implies that the power is acquired through some social procedures rather than biological transfer from parents to children. Those who claimed to have been born with the power explained that they had the power even before they were conscious of themselves and that the spirit was transferred to the foetus. Whilst some community members insisted that pregnant witches can pass on their powers to the unborn during the process of meeting, others assert that the child is socialized with the witchcraft powers after birth. The biological explanation or process of acquiring witchcraft power thus remains debatable. The fact remains that it is the spiritual power that is transferred from parents to the foetus. Biological traits are transferred genetically and not spiritually.

Identification and Source of Witchcraft Accusation

According to Nukunya (1992), features associated with witchcraft include the aged, persons with red eyes, and persons with excessive wealth, abject poverty and physical senility. Although majority of the respondents insisted that witches could easily be identified, the chief and other groups respondent that witchcraft or witches could not be identified easily. It was however observed that some features like physical deformity, widows, barrenness, extreme poverty and wealth played important roles in the identification of witches. It came to light that in communities where there is a resident witch doctor, it is the witch doctor and the victim of witchcraft who identified witches. In communities where there are no witch doctors it is the Gambarana who has the final authority in determining a witch. Even though in some communities there is a resident witch doctor who performs the identification, these rituals cannot pass the test of being a natural phenomenon. These rituals take the form of divination and sacrifices. Regarding the victim of witchcraft doing the identification, the likelihood of a family member being accused is great. This is because with respect to dreams and hallucinations, the chances of a person or person's one frequently interact with and sees often features are high. Family members, most especially the old who are always at home and have nowhere to go stand a higher chance of featuring in victims' dreams and hallucinations. This argument links witchcraft to social conditions, which doubtlessly presents witchcraft as a social rather than a natural phenomenon.

Witchcraft accusation takes different dimensions; whilst children accused mothers, fathers accused wives and so on. Figure 4(d) reveals information on the source of witchcraft accusation.

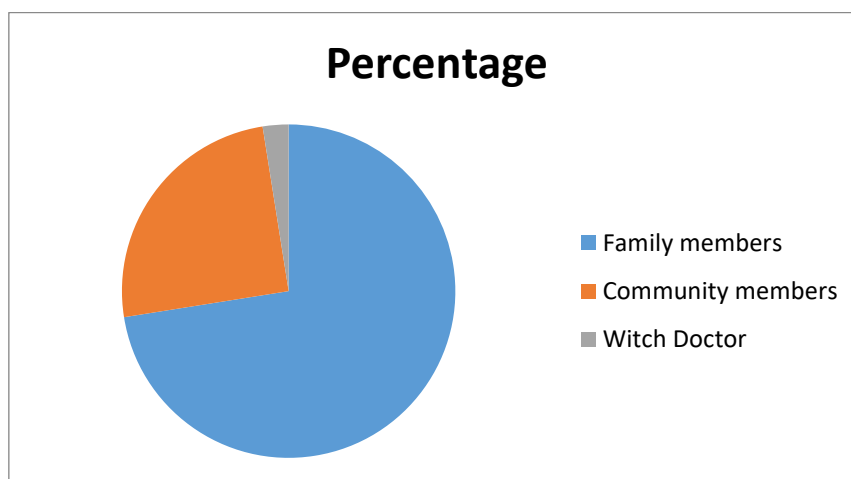


Figure 2: Sources of Witchcraft Accusation by Percentage

From figure 2 above, it can be observed that those who accuse witches are mostly family members. Such people interact often with the accused and are more likely to be seen in their dreams. Also family members easily notice behavioural changes with regard to age, stress, menopausal symptoms and other factors. With the high record of illiteracy in these communities such behavioural and biological changes can be misconstrued, and taken for witchcraft.

The study reveals that, the Bimoba ethnic group sees the need to mobilize resources to perform the necessary rites to send accused witches home. The accused are easily accepted and integrated back into the Bimoba community. The Mamprusi, Dagomba and Konkomba communities do not however exhibit this concern for their relations at the witch camp. Even when the Presbyterian Outcast Home Project performed the necessary rites on behalf of the accused, they are often brought back or they even run back due to threats from community and family members. There are records of some of such returnees who have been lynched in their communities of origin.

Witchcraft accusation, as shown in figure 4d, most often comes or originates from family members. Figure 4d further supports the fact that about 90 percent of respondents were brought to the witch camp by their own family members.

Conclusion

Although a divergent views were gathered with regards to the identification of witches, a section of respondents believed witches could not be easily identified, whilst some other respondents identified some characteristics such as age, physical deformity, widow, barrenness, poverty and wealth as attributes of a witch.

From the study, it came to light that the phenomenon of witchcraft is more of a social construct rather than a natural phenomenon, even though some respondents claimed to have been born with the witchcraft power. This is evident in the discussion of the socio demographic features of the accused, the gender question, identification process and even in the acquisition of witchcraft appears more social in nature.

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