

RESPONSE

“The Person I Hate Most in Life is My Mother”

Opoku Onyinah

The fear of witchcraft is very prevalent in Ghana and in Africa generally.¹ Traditionally, the traditional priests (otherwise known as witch doctors or diviners) deal with the situation. With the advent of Christianity and the introduction of the devil and demons, most Africans have reformulated their own way of dealing with the situation. In this guise, the situation has become more complex. Robert Sutherland Rattray, British anthropologist who researched religion and arts among the Ashanti people of Ghana reveals that in his time, non-adults could not be witches (Rattray 1927, 28). However, Hans Werner Debrunner, a Basel missionary who conducted a study into witchcraft in Ghana shows that the concept was changing in his time (Debrunner 1961, 56-57). Currently, the belief is completely different, as all categories of people, children and adults, male and female, literate and illiterate are accused of witchcraft (Adinkrah 2017, 76-77, 191, 237; Igwe 2016, 20, 47, 69). The accusations that are usually levelled against stepchildren and house aids are very alarming; these are the victims who have almost no one to defend them. Victims of witchcraft accusations sometimes suffer violence, torture, stigmatization, and negligence by their families. It is against this background that the story of a girl I call Akua's story unfolds. I was shocked when Akua told me, “The person I hate most in life is my mother.”

In Ghana, a child may be accused of witchcraft if the child's behaviour is seen to be strange, very destructive or extremely hyper. In some cases, if there is a mysterious death or sudden illness of a close relative which has not been diagnosed, a child may be accused of being responsible through witchcraft. When a child curses another and misfortunes occurs, the child may also be accused of witchcraft. Perhaps, on a positive note, a child may be accused of witchcraft if the child performs very well or excels in many areas at school.

Unfortunately, Akua's torture in life and subsequent accusation of witchcraft as a child of about ten years did not come directly from any of these but from the mother who vented all her frustrations on Akua and

accused her of being responsible for all her failures in life.

When Akua was growing up she realized that her mother's husband was not her father. Both her stepfather and biological mother treated her very badly at home. She was asked to stay with a different family member in a different home. In this home, her auntie sexually abused her and introduced her to lesbianism. She was threatened not to tell anybody about it. Eventually she opted to come back to her mother and pleaded to be enrolled in school, but her mother failed to send her to school even though her mother was a graduate. One day she went to play with the siblings at the riverside. When they returned the stepfather mercilessly beat her up. She thought she would die but managed to run back to the riverside, preferring a peaceful death there to suffering in life. As she sat there, in the form of a trance, she saw someone who revealed herself as the river goddess and gave her food to eat. When she came back to herself, she found peace and thought that at least somebody loved her. When she came back home, she was accused of witchcraft and she was sent to a pastor of an African Initiated Church to exorcize her .

She was happy to be sent to a pastor with the hope that the pastor would assist her and send her to school. The pastor initially spoke tenderly to her and assured her of his assistance. He told her that there was a very powerful spirit following her and wished he could have such a powerful spirit too. The pastor told Akua that he would assist her to go to school if she would agree that she was a witch. Young as Akua was, she agreed. The pastor asked a family member to join them in a prayer meeting in a big gathering. In the prayer meeting, the pastor claimed that the “Spirit” had revealed to him that the girl was a witch. Akua was called to the front to confirm what the pastor had said, and she did so. Her hair was shaved and brought forth to the front of the people in an attempt to exorcize her from witchcraft. The pastor laid hands on Akua and claimed to cast out the spirit of witchcraft in the name of Jesus. This left

¹ This article is in response to the report by Priest, Ngolo and Stabell in this issue (2020).

Akua with a greater stigma than before, and the pastor still did not send her to school.

Akua kept on crying and pleaded to be taken from the pastor's house. None of the family members wanted to receive her back. Her mother did not want to see her at home. Eventually one of them received her back only to send her to a traditional priest who claimed to have the power to set her free. Her stay there worsened her condition, as she claimed to have witnessed the traditional priest administering gimmicks to people such as extortion of money. This created division among family members. During her stay with the traditional priest, she was given different concoctions to drink, and, in addition, to add to bath water in the attempt to set her free. Eventually the traditional priest also attempted to rape her. When she told her story, nobody would believe her, so she ran away to find a place to settle by herself. It was during this period that she found herself in a company of people who claimed to be an occultic group.

According to Akua, all sorts of things happened among the occultic group members. In the attempt to get money, some of them would be asked to eat human excrement, have sex with insane people, have sex with dead bodies, and bring along some parts of the human body to the group meeting for ritual purpose. Her roles included encouraging people who had been given difficult assignments to perform, accompanying some of them in their outings, faking miracles for some so-called "pastors," and inviting prostitutes for some of the men. Having gone through all these things and many more, she was tired and fed up, and wanted deliverance. This was the reason that she went to a pastor who approached me to assist the girl in prayer and counselling.

Akua's situation is very alarming. Her mother who was supposed to love, nurture and support her threw her from the house. The pastor who was supposed to represent God, cherish her, show her God's love, and introduce the Lord to her abused her to claim supernatural power. Accusation of witchcraft drove all the family members away from her because they were afraid of her, since it is believed that witches can kill people and destroy their destiny. Thus, a superstitious belief system can be seriously disastrous to society. The traditional priest wanted to prey on her vulnerability. The strong have always preyed on the vulnerable.

Akua's story shows how some children suffer the accusation of witchcraft from their family members. It also highlights the distorted Christian perspective of witchcraft in contemporary Africa, and the vulnerability of children in some African societies. Akua was born out of wedlock and her mother vented all her frustrations and grievances on the innocent child. Though the mother was a graduate, she failed to educate her own biological child. Her maltreatment

caused Akua to have hallucinations, which were considered witchcraft practices. The collective belief system of witchcraft in Ghana could not allow this girl to receive help from people around her, instead she was pushed to join a group of occult practitioners.

The way the pastor claimed to exorcise Akua portrays the way witchcraft accusation and exorcism has been misconstrued in contemporary African Christianity and elsewhere, which I call "Witchdemonology" (Onyinah 2012). Witchdemonology is the synthesis of the beliefs and practices of the African concept of witchcraft and the Western concept of demonology. In Akua's case, instead of the pastor using the simple word of God to counsel Akua, pray with her and then advise the parents, he decided to portray himself as a powerful spirit-filled person. In witchdemonology, a person may be accused of witchcraft through a prophet's prophetic declaration, which can be, through an alleged word of knowledge or wisdom, similar to the old order where a traditional priest or a diviner may accuse a person. He caused the girl to be shaved just as the traditional priests used to do. Yet, he used the name of Jesus in his claim to exorcise her.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Akua's condition worsened from one place to another. It shows that all the systems failed her. This is an indication that the government of Ghana must demand training from all who claim to be ministers of the gospel and traditional religious practitioners. The government needs to supervise and regulate religious activities.

Furthermore, there is the need for increased advocacy and education on childcare and protection; parents need to play their role well. Churches need to educate their pastors on human suffering, temperament, and how to train children. The government institutions such as the police, the judiciary, the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), and the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection need to do their work effectively and increase penalties for people who abuse children at all levels, including those who do so in the name of religion. For a person to declare that the person she hates most in life is her mother is a sign of the failed system.

This study has shown that there are still atrocities meted out against people who are accused of witchcraft, especially children, in Ghana. Contrary to what early researchers proposed that enlightened religion would reverse the situation, modernity has not changed the belief and occurrence of witchcraft in Ghana. This is a call for the churches and the government to take proper action to help curb the growing menace against people accused of witchcraft.

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