

Kick Dust at their Heels and See if they Cough: Witches in Ghana

Review by D. S. Farrer

Witchcraft, Witches, and Violence in Ghana

by Mensah Adinkrah

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Mensah Adinkrah starts with a complaint that scholarly attention to witchcraft in Ghana has focused almost exclusively on witchcraft-related violence and witch's camps in northern Ghana. He claims: "This ignores the major problem, and the very different forms of witchcraft violence that occur in the southern part of Ghana," adding that, "[m]ost of this book focuses on the witchcraft ideology of the Akan, but considers witchcraft beliefs and related violence throughout Ghana" (x). The author follows his assertion with ten chapters, few of which return specifically to the problem of how northern and southern witchcraft violence differ. Instead, witchcraft here is treated as a monolithic bloc, with the emphasis on Akan "traditional beliefs," and the occasional nod towards the Islamic north and other tribal divisions. Aside from the initial authorial promise not followed through, the rationale for research oft-provided in this text—that major problems have been ignored, omitted, or never previously studied—begs the question of when, why, how, and for whom research is conducted. The author asserts the noble cause of "helping to eradicate witchcraft violence in Ghana and elsewhere" (xi), but to my mind this may be read as a conflation of ideas, where calls to eradicate witchcraft violence are actually calls to eradicate witchcraft *per se*. For the most part the book is written in an omniscient journalistic style, appearing lucid, and matter of fact, albeit in a nudge, nudge, wink, wink narrative collusion with the reader. The book's raw focus to articulate a social problem comes at the expense of a more thorough treatment of the extant theoretical literature (E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Jeanne Favret-Saada, and Paul Stoller to name a few). Despite announcing surveys of the anthropological literature in the "Introduction: Witchcraft Violence in Comparative Perspective" the author seems unaware of the meaning of Evans-Pritchard's famous distinction between sorcerer and witch, to blithely collapse

African experience (yes, all of it) into the medieval European witch craze. Numb to anthropological theory, the book also fails to outline the methods employed in a fashion that would satisfy the criminologist or sociologist. The research claims authority on the basis of anthropology, ethnography, sociology, and criminology, yet the rigorous demands of these discourses to engage current theoretical arguments or to provide methodological details are unmet, leaving the reader tantalizing glimpses as to exactly how, where, and when, the research was conducted. Merely citing another academic review is a cop-out and not the same as conducting a review of the massive literature and making an original contribution to the field. Nevertheless, in the study of witchcraft an indigenous perspective is welcomed, including, “The author’s own seven years of experience in an all-boys boarding secondary school in Ghana” (110).

Chapter 1, “Ghana: The Research Setting” provides a summary overview of history, politics, population, literacy, education, economy, communications, health, common diseases and substance abuse, mental illness, and the comparatively low status of women, children, the elderly, and the disabled in Ghana. Sections on the north-south developmental divide and contemporary Ghanaian ethos reveal a modern obsession with material advantage as a reflection of spiritual potency, or lack thereof. Sub-sections on “traditional religion” and “religion” blur the two subjects to provide a sense of overwhelming Christian spiritual dominance as a means to convey benefit or avoid misfortune via the intercession of spirit ancestors. By this point I sensed that a focus on the contradictory and violent role of Christian clergy and pastors in witchcraft violence is a missed opportunity, and could, perhaps should have been the central theme of this book. After listing atrocities the narrative switches to banality. The author states: “Contemporary anthropological literature and numerous media reports indicate that belief in witchcraft phenomena exists in many societies, although these beliefs remain more entrenched in some places than in others” (14). What are “many”? What has belief got to do with practice? The classic theme in the anthropological witchcraft literature for generations, the issue of misplaced cognition, faulty logic, is evident here on every other page, but the author makes no attempt to address this fundamental debate. The book is not a contribution to anthropological inquiry, but mostly a tour of depredation. Outdated statistics compete with bizarre sentence formation. Citing a source in a section on mental illness and pointing out the lack of facilities and provision for treatment, the author says, for example, “Concurrently, several people with psychiatric and neurological disorders such as schizophrenia, manic depression, neurosis, epilepsy, and other severe and common mental disorders do not receive any medical care” (29).

From an anthropological perspective, chapter 2, is the best chapter in the book. "Witchcraft Beliefs in Ghana," provides an outline of the scope of witchcraft, socially, in terms of "believers" from all walks of life; indicates the victims of witchcraft violence, primarily the elderly, the disabled, women and children, and the mentally ill; and introduces the perpetrators of violence, anti-witchcraft fetish priests, witch doctors, spiritual healers, clergy, and Christian pastors, illustrating, albeit unacknowledged, one of Evans-Pritchard's key distinctions between sorcery and witchcraft (the latter passed down, inherited, perhaps from an elder family member spitting it into the mouth of the new witch, or passed through contaminated food), as opposed to sorcery, which is learned (and for Evans-Pritchard, the domain of the nobility). As is to be expected the categories smear into one another: witch doctors are witches, and witches are located in guilds like sorcerers. Some details on chicken divination are provided. I can't help but regret that Evans-Pritchard's foundational discourse on African religion, the unabridged version of *Witchcraft, Oracles And Magic Among The Azande*, was not consulted. Nevertheless, this chapter provides a keen insider view, and a useful starting point for contemporary research.

Chapter 3, introduces the core theme of the book, "Socialization into Witchcraft Beliefs." Radio shows, television, newspapers, magazines, children's books, and the Internet are discussed as instruments of socialization. No attempt is made to draw out the key themes in folk tales, thrown in as an aside to the construction of social identity. Continuing the socialization theme chapter 4, "Witchcraft Themes in Popular Ghanaian Music," ventures into ethnomusicology/content analysis, to examine eight songs concerning witchcraft beliefs. Interesting snippets stand out from repetitive analysis. The author reiterates: "The perceived relatively greater social stability and prosperity of the Western world is linked to the beneficent activities of European or American witches, whereas persistent warfare, famine, and poverty in Africa are attributed to the maleficent, harmful, or diabolical witchcraft of African peoples" (137). What needs to be explained given "this era of heightened retraditionalization of the society" (157) is why is everyone so paranoid about bewitchment, specifically from members of their own family? What drives a culture of familial distrust, envy, and resentment? The author begs the question *ad nauseum*, trotting out further redundant "data" for the socialized "belief" in witchcraft, albeit leading up to a more interesting criminological analysis of power, gender, and social control in chapter 9, "Gendered Victimization: Patriarchy, Misogyny, and Gynophobia," where it is opined that although wizards (males) are considered far more powerful in terms of black and white magic than are witches (females), women are greatly overrepresented among those undergoing exorcism rituals in Christian prayer camps and Christian spiritual churches (270), for reasons of patriarchy, misogyny, and women's changing roles under difficult conditions, persecution the author says may be explained via

the “backlash hypothesis” (271).

That music is an agent of socialization, as are proverbs, is considered in chapter 5, “Witchcraft Imagery in Akan Proverbs.” Thirty-four proverbs are provided, adding depth, although the analysis suffers from some repetition. Chapter 6, “Witchcraft Trials in Ghanaian Courts,” describes four trials, two for defamation of character resulting from witchcraft accusations, successfully defended; and two vigilantism cases ending in the murder of accused witches, where some perpetrators received the death penalty, and others life imprisonment. Recorded witch's confessions claimed members of the coven transformed into a lizard, cat, goat, vulture, owl, elephant, parrot, and centipede. "Nonbelievers in witchcraft saw the case as yet another example of inanity" (202). This raises an implicit question of the relation of religion, African or otherwise, to principles of consistency, logic, and insanity. Chapter 7, “Witch Killings” briefly outlines forty gruesome homicides made public in media reports from 1980-2012, showing that older, lower income women are the most liable to be murdered for witchcraft. Chapter 8, “Nonlethal Treatment of Alleged Witches” details thirty-eight disturbing cases where victims suffered life-threatening injuries, physical and verbal abuse, and psychological torment, where refusal to submit to an ordeal is tantamount to an admission of guilt. Ghanaian refuges, we are told, collectively accommodate as many as eight thousand suspected witches, where suspected witches must submit to a dewitching or exorcism regimen (242), spending years if not the rest of their lives in such camps. Finally, the conclusion, “Curbing Witchcraft-Related Violence in Ghana,” suggests further interventions are necessary in the health professions, criminal justice system, and the educational system alongside improvements in mental health palliative care and changes in media and representation of a numerically increasing generation of post-menopausal women facing poverty and hardship in their final years. My favourite takeaway from the book is the notion that although witches appear upright they actually walk upside down, therefore, to detect a witch simply kick sand at their heels and see if they rub their eyes (93). I shall be kicking dust around the heels of my Ghanaian relatives this Christmas, where the book will surely be of interest and make a worthy addition to the shelf.

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