

Representing Witches in contemporary Ghana: challenges and reflections on making the 'Witches of Gambaga'

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Ghanaian women film makers are making serious inroads to the local cultural landscape. An important and popular space has been prised open in the feature film industry by Shirley Frimpong-Manso and Leila Djansi. Shirley specialises in writing and directing high-end, glossy, Hollywood-style, women-centred feature films full of sex and sexuality which are hugely successful in Ghana. Leila – through her production company – Turning Point Pictures – also writes and directs movies. To my eyes, her films veer towards a more 'artsy', francophone aesthetic, yet nonetheless tackle pressing social issues. Her latest film *Sinking Sands*, for example, is concerned with exposing and challenging domestic violence within marriage.

My contribution, as a documentary film-maker, is somewhat different, most recently having completed *The Witches of Gambaga*. (see Ekine, this issue (p. 154) When I started researching residents at the witches camp at Gambaga in 2004 as part of a pan-African *Mapping Sexualities Programme* devised and coordinated by the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town in collaboration with the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, I did not anticipate that six years later we would still be trying to finish the film based on that research.¹ Nor did I anticipate that I would find myself identifying so strongly with the refrain I heard so often among the women living at the witches' camp, when I'd ask them to tell me their life stories.

'Where do I begin?' Ma Hawa – the spokeswoman of Mamprusi-speaking women at the camp - asked me. 'I don't know how to begin,' said Asana. 'When I grew up nothing eventful happened to me, until I was brought to this place,' said another woman, highlighting a central theme of almost all the 19 narratives that I collected and analysed. All the women I spent time

with at the camp, framed their disparate life stories as a series of events that climaxed in the drama that precipitated their arrival in Gambaga. Whether a woman had chosen Gambaga as a place of refuge and safety, or had been deposited and exiled there by her family, the events that brought her to the witches' camp and forced her to remain there were an important, defining feature in her life.

So, how do I begin to describe how a motley group of around 100 poor, middle-aged and elderly Mamprusi, Dagomba and Kokomba speaking women; women condemned to live as witches in a camp in the small provincial town of Gambaga 'bewitched' me to such an extent that I, and other women who care about women's rights, were determined to have their voices heard, and make a film that would support efforts to change the fate of the women of Gambaga, and thousands of others being subjected to similar appalling treatment?²

There were many hurdles that, Amina Mama, my co-producer and I had to overcome as we negotiated a new and complicated course through various institutional and interpersonal relationships, to eventually complete *The Witches of Gambaga*, so long after the initial idea was formulated and the field research completed. Even just within Gambaga this required sensitive and intimate relationships with the condemned women whose interests we wished to consider first, relationships with Gladys Lariba and Simon Ngota, community workers from the local Presbyterian Church already working with the women in the camp, local chiefs of varying dispositions, and with the women's movement organizations that we sought collaboration with in order to ensure that the film would indeed offer them a powerful tool with which to mobilize against the persecution of accused women. Beyond Gambaga, there were relationships with state and church authorities that had to be negotiated. Indeed, the first local screenings of the film, while very well received, also provoked the ire of certain political figures, one of whom threatened us with a legal suit on the basis of mere hearsay, before even viewing the film. This particular reaction placed us in ethical dilemmas, and our response had to be worked out carefully, in dialogue with our women's movement collaborators. In that instance, we made the choice to respect their wishes and sensitivities, rather than divert attention from the community of women we were primarily concerned with, in accordance with a feminist ethic which differed from professional cinematic and journalistic impulses

to resist editing on the basis of threats. In the end we agreed that costly legal battles that we could not afford financially would have introduced a counterproductive sensation that might have “boosted sales” as we were told, but for the wrong reasons.

Access, permission and funding are all production considerations without which a film can't be made. Once we had developed relationships with subjects living in conditions that would be deemed 'backward' - in this case women condemned to live as witches in Gambaga - we had to negotiate preconceptions as to what is considered an 'appropriate' representation of their lives and fates, in the context of a modern nation state that was a signatory to the international conventions on women's rights. Later on, our many attempts to find funding were often thwarted by the presumptions of Western broadcasters and funding agencies with regard to how African women - in this instance 'witches' were best depicted. The solution, as it turned out, didn't lie with Western broadcasters or funders. In the end the completion and dissemination of *The Witches of Gambaga* was only possible because we were able to draw on the support of African women activists, and friends and allies who cared enough about the violence and dispossession meted out to women accused of witchcraft in Ghana to want to change it.

I first heard about the witches' camp in Gambaga in January 1995 from a civil servant at the Ministry of Social Welfare in Tamale, the capital of the Northern region of Ghana. At the time I was working as a stringer in Ghana with the BBC World Service, making documentaries and filing stories for *Network Africa*. My remit was to find human interest features outside Accra, so in March that same year, I made my first trip to Gambaga. I intended to work quickly and finish the job in time to catch the last bus back to Tamale, the regional capital, at 4.30 that afternoon. But before I could talk to a single one of the 160 women who were then living at the witches' camp, I had to get permission from their custodian, the Chief of Gambaga, the *Gambarrana*.

To my astonishment, he firmly refused. He claimed that, even if he'd wanted to, he wasn't in a position to grant me an audience with the 'witches' in his care. Only a week before, he told me, he'd denied access to a CNN crew. He couldn't give me permission because such a decision - he claimed - was political in nature and the only person capable of taking it was the District Commissioner of East Mamprusi. And since the Commissioner was out of town for the day, I would have to wait.

In 1995 there were no mobile phones in Ghana. In fact, telecommunications in the north was negligible, making it impossible to contact Mr Kussi, the DC, to find out when he'd be back. His office couldn't give me any information and neither could his wife. So I waited anxiously with my interpreter in a local chop-bar³, not far from the Gambarrana's residence. The town of Gambaga has the bedraggled, unkempt appearance of a dusty, provincial settlement that has survived in spite of everything. The name Gambaga derives from the original poverty of the town. In Mamepe, the language of the Mamprusi majority, *gamb* means "to eat" and *mbye* means "to survive": a reminder of the harsh beginnings of the community, when its inhabitants were forced to eat millet flour without soup.

Compared to the southern part of Ghana the north has been sadly neglected by consecutive governments, while being exploited as a source of cheap labour. In the 1990's, the impact of IMF structural adjustment programmes on the region was particularly severe, such that 70% of the population, mostly small-scale farmers, were living in extreme poverty. Infant and maternal mortality rates have remained high, and health and nutrition are among the worst in Ghana.

While I bided my time at the chop bar, a middle-aged woman in yellow cloth was hustled, protesting, from the Gambarrana's residence. I looked enquiringly at my escort. "She says she's not a witch," he explained "She says she's innocent."

Still pleading, the woman in yellow was led away.

It was then that the first seed of doubt about what I was doing began to niggle. I don't believe in witchcraft, I told myself. Even if people here do, I don't. The seed mushroomed, a few hours later, when I watched the last bus to Tamale leave town. Mr Kussi returned home later that afternoon. As soon as I explained my mission in Gambaga, he gave me permission to proceed and willingly agreed to an interview. A well-built, affable man in early middle age, he acknowledged centuries of superstition with a shrug. Tradition is the voice of the people, he smiled. And since the people believed in witchcraft and found it expedient to expel witches to Gambaga, there was not much anyone could do about it. The people have spoken! In the few minutes it took to confirm the *"laissez faire"* approach of successive Ghanaian governments, dusk had fallen. Eager to assist me in any way he could, the D.C. drove me to the residence of the local Presbyterian Minister – Reverend Awindago. The Reverend worked with the 'witches' on a daily basis and knew them well.

He agreed to act as my interpreter, allowing my escort from the Ministry to go home. Then, the Reverend took me to the Gambarrana, and after he had added his consent to the Commissioner's for good measure, the chief instructed his son, Abukari, to accompany me to the witches' camp.

By now it was night. There was no electricity in Gambaga and I could scarcely see in front of me. The only light available was a kerosene lantern that Abukari held aloft. He led me behind the royal compound down a well travelled, meandering track that seemed to run through the middle of town. Any sense of direction I possessed dissipated as shapes merged into shadows, and sounds reverberated beneath an undertow of sighs. I was vaguely aware that I was passing clay and cement structures: some roofed in zinc, others thatched with grass. Behind us trailed a gaggle of giggling children. When we arrived at what seemed to be the entrance of a large compound, Abukari shooed the children away. Inside, fifteen or so women were already waiting for me. After I'd introduced myself, Abukari informed me that I was to interview three of the one hundred and sixty residents at the camp: the three oldest in their compounds, they'd lived at the camp for many years and would speak on behalf of everyone present. Fumbling to find the record button of my cassette player – for despite a few lamps blinking in the night, I could barely see – I started recording.

One after the other, I interviewed Zabia, Duah and Tia; three women of indeterminate age in threadbare clothes. I have the dimmest recollection of what they looked like. What I recall is that flickers of lamplight lengthened the shadows on their faces, distorting the mounds of their cheeks, their lips. Eyes glinted in the half-light as I asked my questions. Faces inched closer to mine. What had brought them to Gambaga? How did they survive? Their stories confused me. Zabia, a mother of three and a grandmother, spoke in a voice raw with remorse. Her older brother had accused her of witchcraft when his son died: "When I arrived here," she said, "I was full of regret for having bewitched the boy. I prayed that once the Gambarrana had accepted me and I was living here with him, my thoughts would never go back to bewitching somebody's child again."

But Duah, whose life had been scarred by physical and verbal abuse until her brother brought her to the safety of the camp, appeared to relish her disreputable past. "I accepted I was a witch," she confessed. "I wasn't tried by ordeal or anything because I knew I was a witch. So when I was brought here

I told the Gambarrana, “I chopped all those people they’re talking about. I killed all the young men and women in my neighbourhood.” Sensing bravado close to insanity in Duah, I pressed her to disclose her method for killing so many people. She simply repeated her assertion: she was a mass murderer of the highest order; a queen among witches! Titters rippled through the gathering as Duah proclaimed her infamy for the world to hear.

Only one of the three women I spoke to, Tia, refuted allegations that had been made against her. Tia believed that she’d been wrongly accused of witchcraft. The instant she voiced her innocence, Abukari shouted her down. Mistakes aren’t made in Gambaga, he insisted. The ritual never lies. The old woman backed down immediately. However, that single note of dissension struck a chord in me. Up till then I’d been asking questions with a consciousness grounded in the ostensibly ‘rational’ landscape of BBC journalism. I knew that elements of a feature were falling into place and that the long journey from Accra had been worthwhile. I was holding any reservations I felt in check, while I probed the parameters of the women’s lives. And yet, as I asked my questions and recorded their replies, I was beginning to sense something else happening. It was as if, against my will, I was being dragged into a compelling, collective narrative. In the face of combined acquiescence, Tia alone had spoken out. What ritual? I enquired. What are you talking about? Abukari intervened again. “Women are by nature witches,” he explained patiently, “while men are more likely to be thieves.” He went on to disclose that thanks to powers vested in him by his ancestors, the Gambarrana is able to determine if a woman is a witch. So when a woman accused of witchcraft is brought to him, she’s subjected to a trial by ordeal. The Gambarrana kills a chicken. If it dies face down, the woman is a witch. But if it dies, its wings facing the sky, then the woman is exonerated, her innocence accepted. Apparently, Tia’s trial by ordeal had gone against her. She’d been a resident of the witches’ camp, she told me, for over twenty-five years. The women didn’t know their ages and when they tried to quantify the number of years they’d stayed at Gambaga – twenty-five, thirty, thirty five Zabia had said – the figures they quoted were not necessarily accurate, though it was clear that each of them had spent decades at the camp.

Calm, diminutive and astute, Tia had recently been joined by a daughter who was seated beside her. Witchcraft can be passed on, supposedly, from a mother to her daughter. Men aren’t exempt from witchcraft, I learned.

Tia told me that while she'd been living in the camp, three men have been convicted of witchcraft. But none was detained for longer than three years. Within three years, they'd been able to buy their freedom, giving the Gambarrana the sheep and money necessary to leave. "Men are also witches," Tia claimed. "But they have the upper hand. They have homes to go to. But a woman has no home in our system."

Would you like more men to stay at the camp? I asked.

Tia snorted in derision. "Let the men stay by themselves," she retorted. "They should leave us alone."

The women laughed, bringing the interviews to an end. After I'd thanked everyone present, I was led down a path into a building I couldn't make out. A door was pushed ajar, I was taken inside. The kerosene lamp revealed the outline of a low, narrow bed. Thanks to Mr Kussi, this was to be my room for the night. Unable to see beyond the fading shimmer of the lantern to make out the length and breadth of the room, the state of its walls and floor, I lay down exhausted with my shoes still on.

Sleep eluded me. My mind, immersed in the day's events, refused to rest. I remembered the woman in yellow, her protests of innocence. I recalled Tia's flash of rebellion and then, a moment later, the ritual that decides a woman's future. It seemed unbelievable that in the final decade of the twentieth century the death throes of a fowl could determine innocence or guilt and lead to years of incarceration. And that this was happening in my country of origin, not far from where I was born, was horrifying.

During the course of that long, sleepless night, witches became more than objects of my curiosity. The narrative I'd sensed encroaching on me, crept into my consciousness. I was able to hold it at bay while the lantern shone. Its light dimmed gradually, and when the glow of the wick was snuffed out by night, a question sprang to mind. What if I was accused of witchcraft and a trial by ordeal performed? What if the trial went against me? In a town with no telephones, how would I get word to my family in Accra? What would I do? I couldn't get the thought out of my mind. But for an accident of birth, I too could be a witch. I could be one of them.

As soon as day broke, I fled Gambaga for Tamale and the long journey back to Accra, where I spoke to anyone who would listen - relatives, academics, friends old and young - about the impoverished, elderly women I'd encountered at Gambaga. I spoke of the camp, a place of sanctuary, a site

of punishment, and of what I'd learnt about the ritual that could destroy a woman's reputation with the tremor of a wing.

Nine years after that first visit, I returned to Gambaga, to record and analyse the life stories of women forced to live as 'witches', as a first step to making a film about them. I was invited to take part in *The Mapping Sexualities Programme* by an old friend of mine, Amina Mama, who was then Director of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, and one of the people I had regaled with the tale of my initial experience, back in 1995. The research she invited me to pursue was part of a seminal cultural studies project, very possibly the first to be carried out in the field of sexuality by an all-African team of feminist researchers.

To my surprise, the Gambarrana, Yahaya Wuni, recalled me on my return to Gambaga, and this time, since I was working with the support of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, he didn't have a problem allowing me to talk to the women in his custody. In daylight, with all but the oldest residents out working on farms, the camp seemed mundane: an expanse of dishevelled mud huts inhabited by a few crones. I had visited the camp once in the intervening years and managed to keep in touch with what was happening thanks to the late Comfort Mensah, a development worker with the Presbyterian Church in Accra. The Reverend Awindago was no longer at Gambaga. Rumour had it that his wife believed that the 'witches' at the camp had put a spell on him that had made him turn to alcohol. The church, eventually, transferred him elsewhere.

In the end, the major issue delaying the completion of the film was money. Who has it, how much they will commit to a film, and why they give it to us. The research for the *Mapping Sexualities Programme* was funded by a Ford Foundation grant to the AGI. The Commonwealth Broadcasting Association's DFID-funded World View Media Programme - which gives grants to filmmakers working on stories about the developing world in the hope that terrestrial broadcasters in the United Kingdom will eventually commission them - contributed £10,000 to pay for the cameraman I considered best for the job - Darren Hercher - to fly to Accra from London. The money covered Darren's salary, film stock and equipment; and paid for fourteen days on location in Gambaga with transport, interpreters and fixers. The money also paid for a week's worth of editing to make the trailer, which we hoped would get the documentary commissioned by a UK broadcaster.

However, before Darren could come into Ghana with his equipment, I needed a filming permit from the government of Ghana to allow us to film at the witches' camp. The Gambarrana - Yahaya Wuni - had already given permission. This made no difference to the government of Ghana. Indeed, the civil servant dealing with my request went so far as to admonish me for even thinking of filming the camp. 'Why don't you film a dam?' he said to me. 'Why not show pictures of a dam or a bridge or brand new schools? Why do you people always have show us looking backward? If it's not *trokosi*⁴ in the Volta Region, it's those witches up north!'

He had a point. For that civil servant, any attempt to depict unsavoury practises such as the incarceration of women for witchcraft on film would shame and embarrass the international image of Ghana and could therefore not be countenanced. The issue in question wasn't the broken lives of women forced to become witches, but the 'national interest' that would show Ghana as a modern nation state with all the accoutrements of modernity - understood by government functionaries as dams, bridges and schools. We would not have been able to get permission to document women at the camp if it hadn't been for the intercession of the former Director of the Institute of African Studies, Professor Takyiwaa Manuh, who was then serving on the same committee as a Director at the Ministry of Information. Takyiwaa had collaborated with the AGI on the original research project. We were thus granted permission on condition that the film would be used for educational purposes only in Ghana, and not shown anywhere else in the world.

All in all, nineteen women told me their stories. Azara Azindow lost her house and restaurant in 1997, when she was accused of starting a meningitis epidemic and was thrown out of her village. Awabu Tarana was tortured for days to extract a confession from her. Bintook Duut was on the run for three months, chased by her accusers before she found refuge at Gambaga. Asana was tortured by her brother, who threatened to pluck out her eyes if she didn't confess to witchcraft. Despite the extraordinarily powerful testimonies I collected, half-way through my research I still couldn't decide how to make a film that required immersion in a completely different way of looking at the world. How do you introduce an international audience to a world view that appears superstitious, without making the subjects of the film seem backward? Amina, who had initiated a number of AGI feminist research projects by this time, was insistent that the film speak most effectively to the

local socio-political context, so that it could be used by feminists working on women's rights, as well as by feminists across other African contexts – including her own country Nigeria – and other West, Central and Southern African contexts, where witchcraft accusations have been on the rise. We had to navigate that difficult terrain between our own anticipation of what local audiences could engage and work with, and what international funders and distributors might seek.

When it came to constructing a meaningful narrative, the life stories I was mulling over were complex and challenging, suggesting intense rivalries within polygamous families: rivalries between wives, between brothers and sisters, and between women within an extended family, whose daughters sometimes ended up married to the same man. I didn't know how I could frame discussions about witchcraft, until I heard Amina Wumbala's story and determined that for her sake, and all the other women who'd spoken to me, somehow or other, we *had* to make the film.

Amina was unwell the morning I interviewed her, and had returned to her hut early, after gleaning millet under the intense November sun. Shivering, she spoke to me urgently, without the usual pauses and hesitations, without any prompting on my part, as if she felt compelled to speak out. This is an edited version of what she told me:

"After my husband died, I decided to return to my father's house. My brothers accepted me, giving me a room. One day it was threatening to rain. We all ran to fetch containers to collect rain water. The next morning all the containers were full except for mine, so I asked: "Where's my water?"

My brother replied that I should ask his wife. So I asked: "Where's my water?"

We started arguing. My brother came out and said that I shouldn't insult his wife, for if I insult her, I'm insulting him as well. He said I should get out of the house. The house belongs to all of us. It's our father's house and he doesn't have the right to throw me out.

My brother struck me. That very night he died. His children claimed that I'd killed him with witchcraft, so they came after me with people from the largest houses in the village. They beat me until they thought they'd killed me....Luckily my senior son arrived and drove everyone away. But the next day the villagers carried me across the river and

dumped me on the other side, calling me a witch. I lay there for a full day and night before I felt strong enough to get up and walk to Gambaga.

Amina Wumbala's account - like those of several other women - reveals that a "witch" is often an assertive, argumentative, determined woman; a woman capable of antagonising those around her and challenging male authority. She doesn't "know her place" and thus either doesn't know or refuses to recognize when she should back down, to accord with local norms. And when her righteous anger is followed by to a calamitous event, the ultimate sanctions of communal violence followed by expulsion from her home, family and community silence her dissenting voice, and remove her from the community, thus re-inscribing the normative, patriarchal order.

Once the initial filming of 'The Witches of Gambaga' had been completed and a promotional trailer made, the next hurdle we had to negotiate was to get the documentary commissioned by a broadcaster in Britain. It turned out that no one was interested. It could have been a matter of packaging (discussed in the feature by Jihan El Tahri p. 71) I tried all my usual connections, but no one was enthusiastic, even though there was growing interest in the outrageous predicament of African children in Britain being accused of witchcraft. I know this to be the case because in July 2005, while our own project was stalled, I was invited to present a radio documentary for the BBC World Service's *African Perspective* on Child abuse and witchcraft allegations in African Churches in Britain. Three years later, in November 2008, Channel 4's *Dispatches* programme broadcast a shocking documentary, *Saving Africa's Witch Children*. This Dispatches special followed the work of an Englishman, Gary Foxcroft, who has devoted his life to helping children in some of the poorest parts of Nigeria, where evangelical religious fervour combines with a belief in witchcraft to blame children for catastrophes. Mr Foxcroft's charity, Stepping Stones Nigeria, raises funds to help Sam Itauma who, five years ago, rescued four children accused of witchcraft. He now struggles to care for over 150 accused children in a makeshift shelter and school called CRARN (Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network).

Saving Africa's Witch Children caused a sensation in Nigeria and Britain, provoking exactly the sort of reaction that the civil servant that I'd met at the Ministry of Information in Accra most feared: shame and embarrassment. More positively, the documentary pushed the Governor of Akwa Ibom State to adopt Nigeria's Child Rights Act, a drama that played out in front of TV cameras.

Though I haven't yet seen the film, I heartily congratulate its makers for drawing attention to the problems of child witches in Nigeria and for the plaudits they've received for their work. I'm pleased for them, even though I'm sure that one of the reasons that the documentary was given the go-ahead by a British broadcaster was because of its close resonance with the old colonial notion of the missionary saving infantilised Africans. I'm inclined to suspect that integral to the narrative of 'saving' the child witches from 'superstitious natives' was the advocacy of a *white man*. This is only supposition on my part, but I imagine that it must be reassuring to a British audience to have the comforting stereotype of the white missionary reinforced; especially when he's saving African child victims from the misguided delusions of superstitious natives. Perhaps only cruelty to animals could be more heart-rending to the average British viewer. We were forced to realise that a film about the misshapen and wizened old women that I got to know in Gambaga could not possibly compete successfully with traumatised children – inevitably more appealing to Western eyes, and thus in the television ratings wars raging in Britain. It was at this point that I too came to identify more strongly with my co-producer's initial concern – that in fact we – both African women concerned with advancing respect for women's rights in our societies – wanted to tell a different story, one grounded in our identifiable personal-historical connections to rural communities in which witchcraft is prevalent. We wanted to make a film that would speak most loudly and clearly to African audiences.

The celebrated Egyptian filmmaker Jihan El Tahri, describes how she came to be a documentary film maker. She writes:

"Our stories, our images and our history have been mainly documented by the west. Often we see ourselves through western eyes and proceed to integrate that image as our own. Indeed it is part of what we have become... it is our responsibility today – now that we have the know-how – to forge our own image of ourselves and transmit it as we see fit." (see El Tahri, this volume, p. 72)

She goes on to say: "The real challenge I have faced in the past two decades has been to get a broadcaster to support and commission the story I want to tell, rather than the story they want me to tell. Our stories are often regarded as "not interesting" for a western audience. Commissioning Editors seek "universal" stories to maintain their audience ratings and there is little appetite

for African stories that do not confirm the already existing stereotypes... This is a reality that we –African Documentary filmmakers – have to live with! Hopefully one day our own National Broadcasters will commission our films but that is not the case for the moment.” (p. 74)

Too true! Jihan tells a fascinating story about how she spent years of frustration writing documentary proposals before she understood the difference between an idea that a commissioning editor in the West – where most of the money is – would find interesting and therefore be of ‘universal’ interest. In the current context the meaning of “universal” is all about ratings. These require films that are most palatable to western audiences. The secret, Jihan suggests, is *packaging*.

So how did we package and repackage *The Witches of Gambaga*? In May 2008, we approached Chicken and Egg Pictures, a San Francisco, USA-based grant-giving organisation that supports women film makers working to address social justice and human rights issues. Amina heard about Chicken and Egg through its founder. They too turned down our application for funding. It was only thanks to a fortuitous meeting with one of the directors of Chicken and Egg at a documentary film festival in Oxford, that I discovered the reason why.

I learned that the women that I’d got to know so intimately appeared too ‘exotic’ for them. The phrase used was “too Nat Geo,” by which they implied that we had objectified them in the anthropological way of the well known USA publication *National Geographic*. This was a particularly scathing indictment for us, as it was exactly what we had sought so carefully not to do. Indeed, the objectification of African women was the very problem that had informed and motivated the entire African sexualities project in the first place! Apparently – and for whatever reason – our carefully nuanced and intimate approach to filming the women at Gambaga just hadn’t worked for the US women at Chicken and Egg.

‘Why not put *yourself* in the film? the woman I ran into suggested. The idea being that once the viewer understood that witchcraft accusations also affect ‘nice’ middle-class families such as my own in Accra, and not just poverty-stricken families up in the north, an international audience – could begin to grapple with issues raised by the so-called ‘witches’ of Gambaga.

I took the advice and relayed it to my co-producer Amina Mama, who enthusiastically embraced this suggestion– arguing that since I am after all a Ghanaian woman, this could work, especially if we also included footage of

key women activists already well known for their work, to make it clear that the disciplining of women in this manner was not just a feature of remote rural communities. By this time I was willing to do more or less anything to achieve our aim, and we both wanted to finish the film. Moreover, I felt powerfully obligated to the community at Gambaga, all those women who had shared their most intimate personal stories with me and allowed me to write about, record and film their lives, because they wanted the world to know.

At this point the then-Director of the Institute of African Studies, Professor Takyiwaa Manuh, who was also serving as the regional co-ordinator for an Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University's project, was able to give us a grant of £5,000 to do six days of follow-up filming at the witches' camp. In December 2008, we shot more footage with them, and at the same time included me in the frame as the presenter of the documentary. We also situated the witches' stories in the broader context of the women's movement in Ghana, and its on-going campaigns to expose and stop all forms of violence against women.

As the title of this paper suggests, these are preliminary reflections on some of the obstacles we had to overcome in order to complete *The Witches of Gambaga* in July 2010. These obstacles have a bearing on the complicated politics of representation in and beyond contemporary Ghana. Images still mostly reproduced and given currency by Western based broadcasters, who operate according to their priorities and agendas, not those of African feminists experimenting with the media they have dominated for so long. These issues are part of a much larger debate about who funds whom and for what reasons? However, if I were forced to draw conclusions from our experience with regard to this particular documentary, it would be that on every step of the journey towards completion, we've had to make alliances – political and personal – with individuals and organizations: the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and their workers, Simon Ngota and Gladys Lariba who work tirelessly to rehabilitate 'witches' incarcerated at the witches camp; my co-producer, Amina Mama, who invited me to take part in the Mapping Sexualities Programme because she was interested in exploring how a well-researched film project could be a more effective tool for activists than even the best of research reports, with the added advantage that it could reach further to include non-literate audiences, and positively affect the lives of the women who participated in the field. She

sustained her involvement for the duration, to co-produce the film with me, and was instrumental in putting me in touch not only with *Chicken and Egg* but also the *African Women's Development Fund* based in Accra. They contributed the final tranche of \$20,000 which paid for editing rooms, music copyright and a sound dub. A mutual friend, Zagba Oyorley, introduced me to *Forward*, an African women's NGO based in London, engaged in campaigning for women's reproductive health in northern Ghana. *Forward* contributed £5000 towards the editor's salary. Then there were the women of *Netright*, a coalition of civil society organisations and individuals working to promote gender justice in Ghana, who sponsored our application to *The African Women's Development Fund*. Another friend, Yao Graham, Coordinator of Third World Network, Africa, put me in touch with Kwasi Appenteng-Djan of the *EU's Cultural Initiative Support Programme* who gave us a grant of 6000 Ghana cedis. And there was Sally-Ann Wilson of the *Commonwealth Broadcasting Association* who started the ball rolling. A very dear friend to both of us, Wendy Hollway, donated £1000 so we could create a website for the film. Big Heart Media, a London-based production company, very kindly let us hire one of their editing suites at a reduced rate. Finally – the icing on the cake. When we approached the Ivorian singer and composer Dobet Gnahore to find out how much it would cost to use some of her music in *The Witches of Gambaga* she thought the subject matter was so important that she declined accepting a fee.

In my investigations on witchcraft in Gambaga, only one woman, the erstwhile businesswoman and trader, Asara Azindow, was prepared to discuss what she knew about witchcraft beliefs with me. All the other inmates at the camp and women in the town pleaded ignorance or were eerily reticent about discussing local witchcraft beliefs. It was as if revealing any knowledge on the subject would suggest that a woman was a practitioner, implicating her in the dark art. Men on the other hand were voluble in providing me with humorous anecdotes and vivid descriptions of their encounters with witches and witchcraft. A town elder, Alhaji Issaku, regaled me for a full hour on how, when men are witches they use their art for benign, protective purposes while women, because of their nature, always use it to execute evil deeds. It seemed heartbreaking that men are able to describe and articulate ideas about witchcraft, defining who is and is not a witch, while for the most part women are silenced by it.

At the end of our conversation, during which Alhaji Issaku told me that witches can turn themselves into animals and snakes, they can turn the souls

of their victims into rodents and insects; they have four eyes to enable them to travel by night and have a tendency to go blind, for by the time they're old, they've ruined their eyesight with too much night travel - that's why a witch can never look you straight in the eye. After he'd revealed that a witch will never confess to witchcraft and that witchcraft can never be eradicated from a woman, it can only be suppressed; he described how a cantankerous nature, bearing grudges and manifestations of male pride in a woman are all signs that a woman may be a witch. Not surprisingly, Alhaji Issaku constantly monitors the women in his household for suspicious activity. After he'd told me all these things, he mentioned in passing that if I wanted, and if I brought him a bat and a cat, he would gladly turn me into a witch.

I declined his offer.

Endnotes

1. Excerpts of that report were published in *Feminist Africa 5* under the title *The Witches of Gambaga: What it means to be a witch in the Northern Region of Ghana* (Badoe 2003).
2. The camp at Gambaga used to be one of four refuges in the Northern Region. Research carried out by the Human Rights Commission of Ghana in 1998 showed that out of over a thousand people in these refuges, only thirteen were men. Today there are over three thousand women living in seven camps dotted across the region.
3. Local English for an eating house.
4. *Trokosi* refers to the traditional practice of young girls being indentured as servants in traditional shrines, a practice that has long been challenged by Ghanaian women's organisations.

Yaba Badoe: Filmography

Producer *Nana Chancellor: Damirifa due*, a 55" documentary for the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, celebrating the life and funeral rites of Oyeeman Wereko-Ampem, former Chancellor of the University of Ghana and a traditional chief; Oct 2008

Director/Producer *Kuduo: The Akan Art of Brass casting*, a 35" film for the Institute of African Studies, the University of Ghana. The film investigates the ancient craft of lost wax brass casting among the Akan people of Ghana and celebrates the expression of culture and philosophy in the manufacture of gold weights and chieftaincy regalia. Dec 07