

# INTRODUCTION

## Witchcraft Violence in Comparative Perspective



On August 23, 2004, a High Court of Justice in Ghana imposed the death penalty on a 39-year-old carpenter for bludgeoning his wife to death (Amanor 1999a; Sah 2004). The sentence followed a protracted court trial and a guilty verdict for a brutal murder that had occurred five years previously. The assailant claimed he killed his wife after she had transmogrified into a lioness during the dead of night, and was about to devour him. In a sworn deposition given to law enforcement authorities, and later affirmed by the defendant during the criminal trial, the assailant testified that at the time of the murder, he and his thirty-two-year-old wife had been married for six years and together had a five-year-old daughter. He indicated that some days prior to the murder their daughter fell ill and that he had transported her to a local member of the clergy for spiritual healing. The court learned that while at the cleric's house the assailant confided in the pastor that he had been experiencing petrifying nightmares in which he saw his wife transformed into a hermaphrodite, attempting to kill and cannibalize him. The priest reportedly offered him a powdery concoction with instructions to sprinkle the substance in his bedroom for three consecutive days. The husband was advised that he would see "wonders" shortly thereafter. He told police that following his administration of the substance, his nightmares became more graphic and intense. On the night of the murder, he observed his wife morph into several vicious creatures that threatened to kill him. When the police arrived at the crime scene, the assailant told them that he slaughtered a lioness that was charging at him. Only later did he realize that the "lioness" threatening to kill him was indeed his wife.

In another case of egregious violence fueled by suspicion of witchcraft, in January 2001 a 25-year-old unemployed man in the village of Tongor in the Kpandu District of the Volta Region of Ghana used a machete to slash the backside of the head, and to sever the hands of his 75-year-old paralyzed and bedridden paternal aunt (Ephson 2001). He told the police that he suspected the elderly woman of being a witch whose maleficent witchcraft had been responsible for his frequent job losses, protracted unemployment, and his general lack of social and economic advancement in life. In a post hoc crime interview with police, the defendant reported that he had been informed by various witch doctors in his community that the victim was the cause of his economic wretchedness. His well-calculated violent action was designed to extirpate the witch and thereby extricate himself from her spiritual influence. Despite the man's heinous actions, the incident was not reported to the police until a month had elapsed because the victim and her family regarded the assault as a private family matter. The assailant was later sentenced to prison for six years with hard labor.

In October 2009 law enforcement authorities in the capital city of Accra charged a 44-year-old woman with cruelty for force-feeding her seven-year-old nephew a mixture of human excreta and urine (Tenyah 2009). Police investigations revealed that the force feeding was part of a long-standing and systematic pattern of torture to which the child-victim had been subjected while residing with his aunt. Indeed, the torture was aimed at coercing the boy into confessing that he was a malignant wizard responsible for untreatable ailments that were afflicting his grandmother, who was also the mother of the assailant. In addition to the force-feedings, the assailant had applied a heated pressing iron to the face, hands, legs, and chest of the victim to compel him to confess to malignant witchcraft. The witchcraft allegation against the boy was originally initiated by the assailant's pastor who intimated that the boy was a wizard whose witchcraft activities were solely responsible for his grandmother's physical ailments.

In August 2005 a woman in her mid-nineties was nearly lynched in Kumasi, Ghana's second-largest city, on suspicion that she was a witch (Nunoo 2005). The incident unfolded when four young men found the frail, haggardly, and distraught woman sitting atop a boulder located in front of a neighboring house at 1:00 in the morning. The youths surmised that the woman was a witch returning home from a nocturnal witches' Sabbath whose journey was derailed by their witch-sighting. After subjecting her to four grueling hours of physical beatings and psychological torment, the youths frog-marched the woman to the local police station where law enforcement personnel detained her for another three hours while attempting to disperse a fractious crowd that had congregated in front of

the police station, clamoring to mete out “instant justice” to the woman. Amidst the commotion, relatives of the elderly woman arrived at the station to appeal for calm and to obtain her release to their care. They informed the police that the woman was psychiatrically impaired and a member of the local royal family and that she occasionally left home at odd hours.

In September 2007 a vortex of suspicions, accusations, and harassment in a small village community led to the suicide of an elderly woman (“Grandma, 85, Commits Suicide” 2007). According to case records, on September 30, 2007, law enforcement personnel were summoned to the lavatory of a small apartment in the town of Nkwatia to recover the corpse of the elderly woman. She had committed suicide early that morning by hanging herself with a stringed sponge tied to her neck from the rafters in the ceiling of her grandson’s apartment lavatory. According to the facts of the case, the woman, who lived in Accra, returned to her hometown of Nkwatia to attend the funerary ceremonies of a relative. Following the conclusion of the funeral obsequies, the elderly woman extended an invitation to a grandson with whom she was regularly domiciled in Accra, to come and visit her at Nkwatia. The grandson honored the invitation, traveling with his wife and children to Nkwatia where the family spent a week together. While returning to Accra, the commercial vehicle on which they were traveling was involved in a fatal crash that killed all the occupants in the vehicle. The motor vehicle accident and the deaths triggered a flurry of accusations in which family relations, neighbors, and community members came to perceive the octogenarian woman as a witch who had used her witchcraft to engineer the accident that claimed the lives of her grandson and his family. The intense physical and psychological mistreatment in the form of physical ostracism, gossip, innuendos, and other subtle and overt threats and antagonisms that ensued led the eighty-five-year-old woman to take the drastic measure of terminating her life when she found herself unable to cope with a whirlpool of accusations of witchcraft against her.

In April 2012 a seventeen-year-old girl with an exceptional record of academic performance was forced to abandon her home because of an accusation of witchcraft (“Girl Dumped in Witch Camp” 2012). Under threats of torture and death, the female high-school student fled her home and sought refuge at the Gambaga Witches’ Camp in northern Ghana, a sanctuary for accused witches facing persecution and violent attacks from their accusers. Unable to explain the outstanding academic achievements of a female, community members presumptively attributed her academic performance to witchcraft, accusing her of having used her witchcraft power to steal the intelligence of her classmates. The predicament of the student

came to the attention of the Ghana's Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MOWAC), which retrieved the girl from the witches' sanctuary and transferred her to a school outside her original community.

In 1997 a cerebrospinal meningitis epidemic in northern Ghana that caused 542 deaths led to a spate of public lynchings of suspected witches. During that time, residents in the afflicted communities imputed the disease and its spread to malevolent witchcraft and launched a ferocious campaign to ferret out the witches responsible (Nkrumah-Boateng 1997; "Round Table Conference on the Treatment of Suspected Witches in Northern Ghana" 1998; Safo 1997). In the ensuing weeks, hundreds of women suspected of witchcraft were physically assaulted, occasionally with lethal outcomes. For instance, in March 1997 an angry mob publicly lynched three elderly women in the village of Yoggu, accusing them of spreading the disease through witchcraft. A few weeks later, in the village of Kumbungu, masked vigilantes bludgeoned and stoned to death two women, aged fifty-five and sixty years, on suspicion that the pair had used witchcraft to cause the death of a young man in the town (Hushie and Alhassan 1998).

On November 25, 2010, a 72-year-old woman traveled roughly one hundred miles by bus from her village to visit her adult son in Tema, near Accra (Ocloo 2010a, 2010b). Unbeknownst to the elderly woman, her son had recently relocated to another suburb of Tema. Unable to locate her son's new residence, she found herself stranded, wandering through the neighborhood, and begging strangers for water, food, and money to facilitate her return to her village. Then she strayed into the compound of a thirty-seven-year-old unemployed woman. It was here that she was murdered in cold blood by an evangelical pastor, his sister, and four other accomplices. According to police reports, the pastor had come to visit his sister and was the first to come upon the disoriented elderly woman sitting in his sister's bedroom inside the multi-family dwelling house. The sister had been away from home, having taken her children to school. After raising an alarm that attracted other residents of the neighborhood, the pastor proclaimed the older woman a notorious malefic witch in the community whose flight to a witches' Sabbath had been derailed. The grandmother was detained by the six assailants, and then subjected to four hours of torture during which she was coerced into confessing to malevolent witchcraft activities. After being tormented, she was doused with a mixture of kerosene and gasoline and brutally set ablaze. She was rescued from the blazing fire by a passerby student-nurse and rushed to the nearest local hospital but perished less than twenty-four hours later. A family spokesperson of the victim disputed the imputation of witchcraft, asserting that the victim was an upright citizen who suffered mild and incipient symptoms of dementia

resulting from old age. In court, the assailants denied the murder charges preferred against them, claiming that the anointing oil they had smeared on the victim's body during an exorcism ritual had spontaneously erupted into flames amidst intense prayers and repeated chants of "Holy Ghost Fire!"

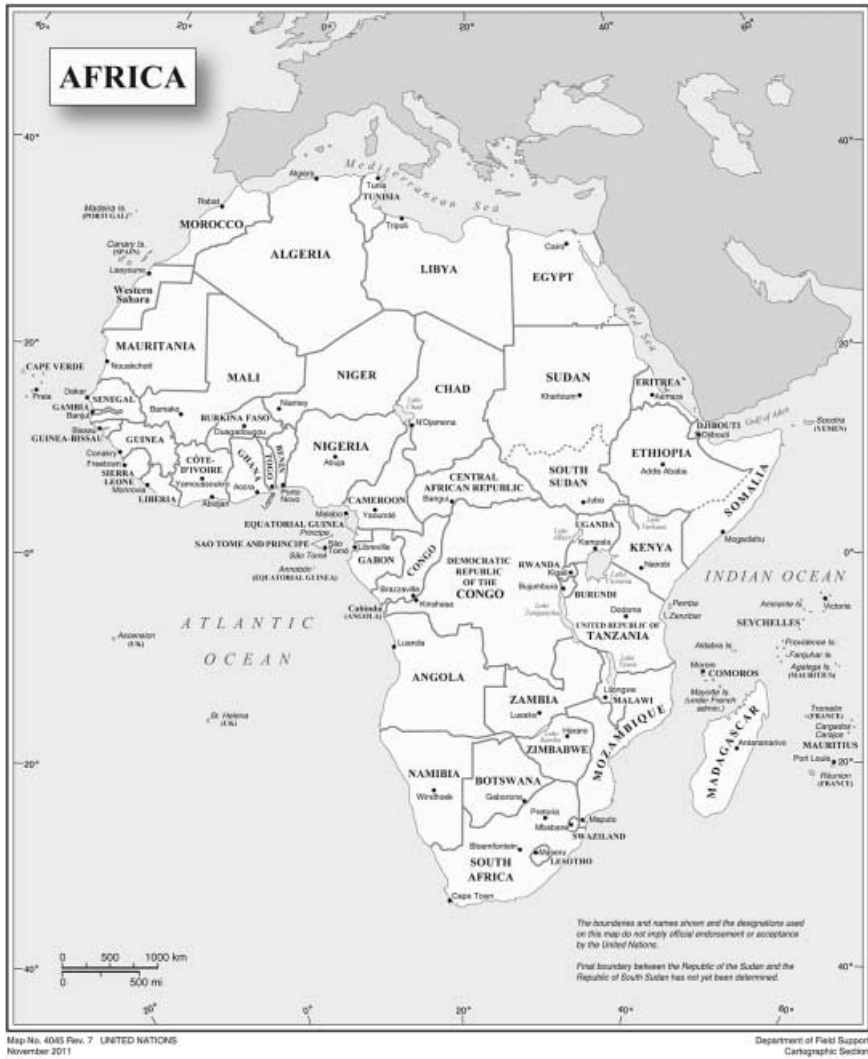
The above-profiled cases of a spousal murder, maiming, physical and psychological intimidation, as well as vigilantism are not isolated incidents of gratuitous violence. They represent a pattern of aggressive action directed against supposed witches in Ghanaian society. Yet a review of media stories emanating from several societies across the globe in recent years shows that Ghanaian society is not atypical in terms of the violent victimization of putative witches. The physical and psychological brutalization, banishment, and even slaying of alleged witches are not limited to Ghana. Contemporary examples of witch persecutions are found in virtually all corners of Africa (see map 0.1.), from Abidjan to Yaounde, and from Angola to Zaire, illustrating that witch persecution is rampant on the continent (Ashforth 2005; Behringer 2004; Ter Haar 2007; Niehaus 1993).

## **Witch Persecutions in Africa: A Brief Survey**

In recent years, the infliction of violence against suspected or accused witches has emerged as a major form of human rights abuse in Africa. Many local and international media agencies, human rights organizations, and even local law enforcement agencies have reported scores of people being threatened, intimidated, tortured, or murdered on suspicion of witchcraft. It is not known whether the recent proliferation of media reports on the subject reflects a growing incidence of the phenomenon or is merely due to increased interest and expanded coverage in the media. What is certain is that, at present, there is scarcely a society in Sub-Saharan Africa without a record of violent victimization of putative witches. Some of the most severe cases of contemporary witch persecutions documented on the continent have occurred in Republic of Benin, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gambia, Malawi, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

### **Republic of Benin**

Extant reports indicate that belief in witchcraft is also prevalent in the Republic of Benin in West Africa (Behringer 2004; Integrated Regional Information Networks [IRIN] 2005) and is often the basis for severe mistreatment of suspected witches. In the mid 1970s the official government



Map 0.1. Map of Africa

was implicated in campaigns of witchcraft persecution contributing to the widespread maltreatment and torture of dozens of elderly women alleged to be witches (see Behringer 2004, 11–12). A July 2005 report issued by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) suggested that traditional beliefs about childbirth and witchcraft in Benin contribute to the murder of scores of infants in the society annually (IRIN 2005). Among some ethnic groups in the country, there are

strong beliefs that infants born in breech positions are witches, and must be killed instantly or abandoned to the elements. Infants whose births are characterized as in any way unusual are killed or left to die in the bush. The report noted,

Unless a baby is born head first and face upwards, many communities in northern Benin believe the child is a witch or sorcerer. And tradition demands that the infant must be killed, sometimes by dashing its brains out against a tree trunk.

In the eyes of the Baatonou, Boko and Peul people, a child whose birth and early development deviates in any way from the accepted norm is cursed and must be destroyed.

If the parents are compassionate, the baby is simply abandoned to die in the bush or be found and rescued by a charitable soul. . . .

[I]f the parents of an ill-born baby obey the demands of tradition, the infant is handed over to a “fixer.” He ties a rope around the child’s feet, walks several times round a tree and then dashes its head against the trunk.

Alternatively, the fixer may drown the child or poison it to exorcise the evil which it is deemed to have brought into the world.

It doesn’t take much for a child to be sentenced to death in this way. It is enough for the infant to be born feet, shoulders or bottom first or head first but facing towards the ground.

If the mother dies in childbirth, if the child fails to grow its first tooth before the age of eight months, or if its first tooth appears in the upper jaw, it is equally condemned.

## **Cameroon**

Widespread belief in witchcraft and violence against suspected witches have also been widely reported in Cameroon where suspects in witchcraft cases are attacked by individuals or crowds of vigilantes who take the law into their own hands to exact vengeance through beatings and killings of putative witches (Tebug 2004). Discourse about witchcraft in the society depicts witches as cannibals, and as causing death, incurable illnesses, landslides and related environmental hazards, fatal truck accidents, and maternal deaths during childbirth. All manner of misfortune is blamed on the evil machinations of witches (Tangumonkem and Ghogomu 2004). Here, disdain for witches is reportedly pervasive and is responsible for virulent forms of persecution against alleged witches.

## **The Democratic Republic of the Congo**

The situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is particularly disheartening as it often involves child victims. Several media and official

sources indicate that across the country large numbers of children suspected of being witches are regularly subjected to atrocious violence at the hands of family members and other adults (BBC News 1999; Crawford 2005; Davies 2004; Raghavan 2003). These children are invariably blamed for perceived inexplicable misfortunes such as poor crop yield, job loss, economic hardship, and other personal and familial adversities. According to one report, children who “are too fat or too thin, too quiet or too noisy, wet the bed, or are disabled” are all potentially vulnerable to accusations of *kindoki* (witchcraft) (Crawford 2005). Children who are denounced as witches are commonly subjected to painful exorcisms consisting of physical beatings, torture, and starvation (Blair 2005; Crawford 2005; Davies 2004).

According to one report, “They are often forbidden from drinking water and subjected to such things as anal purges, beatings, and having hot oil poured over them” (Blair 2005, 2). Others are forced to “swallow gasoline, bitter herbs or small fish to force them to vomit out evil spirits” (Raghavan 2003, 2). Indeed, the mistreatment of suspected child witches has grown to such magnitude that thousands of children have been forced to flee their own homes for sanctuaries established expressly for the young victims of such abuse. In 1997 the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reported that a whopping 60 percent of the children in its shelters in the Congolese capital of Kinshasa were accused witches (UNICEF 2002). And according to a 1999 BBC news report, more than 14,000 Kinshasa children were living in shelters after being accused of witchcraft by family members (BBC News 1999). Children who lacked the relative good fortune of fleeing their assailants were murdered.

## **Gambia**

Belief in witchcraft is endemic to Gambian society. This belief system follows the same pattern observed in other African societies, where the alleged witch is oftentimes a close family member (e.g., mother, aunt, nephew, or niece), cowife, or a neighbor, and is blamed for a variety of misfortunes, including miscarriages, barrenness, illness, disease, and untimely death. A recent example of a witch hunt in the Gambia occurred in January 2009, following the death of the aunt of the country’s president, Jahya Jamneh. President Jamneh claimed witches were responsible for his aunt’s death, and instructed his personal guards and the country’s intelligence services to ferret out the culprits. In this government-sponsored witch hunt, scores of witch doctors in neighboring Guinea were contracted to lend their services to the cause of identifying and rounding up the alleged



witches. As combined teams of witch doctors, police, and military personnel scoured the hinterlands for witches, scores of individuals were allegedly stripped naked, assaulted, and tortured into confessing to be witches or participating in witchcraft activities.

In the ensuing melee, over a thousand people suspected of being witches were apprehended and imprisoned in secret detention centers for up to five days and forced to drink dangerous hallucinogenic concoctions purported to identify witches. While two people reportedly died from drinking the potion, several others suffered such complications as kidney problems. There were also reports of women being raped and others being robbed of valuables by witch doctors and security forces while the victims were in vulnerable hallucinogenic states after drinking the concoctions. Several people suffered severe physical injuries from the assaults and torture. Hundreds of Gambians fled the country to neighboring Senegal following attacks on their villages by the country's security forces (Rice 2009).

## Malawi

Belief in witchcraft is also prevalent in Malawi (Soko and Kubik 2002). Here, as elsewhere, unexplained illnesses, deaths, and other misfortunes are attributed to the workings of witches who are believed to act out of envy and jealousy of the success of their victims (Soko and Kubik 2002). Violence perpetrated by aggrieved individuals or groups against suspected witches is widespread, resulting in extensive property loss, life-threatening injuries, and death. For example, in April 2001 Malawian police apprehended two village chiefs for authorizing the house burnings of suspected witches in villages under their administrative authority. The chiefs' orders came amidst suspicions that the deaths of a child and a village head were caused by the witchcraft of the alleged witches in question. The arsons led to the destruction of houses and property belonging to over twenty family members of the accused witches ("Arrests over Malawi Witchcraft Violence" 2001).

In another incident, in November 2002 Malawi police filed charges against the parents and two other family members of two youngsters—a three-year-old and a two-month-old—for murdering the children on suspicion that the children were witches. According to media reports, several residents, alarmed by loud screams coming from the family's residence, broke into the house unconvinced by the family's claims that they were "praying for the children to remove bad spirits." It was reported that "the four had sharpened a long rod which they shoved into the anus of the two children to rid them of witchcraft" (Martin 2002).

## **Nigeria**

In Nigeria tragic accounts of witchcraft persecution in which suspected witches are burnt, stoned to death or attacked with machetes are legion (Ademowo, Foxcroft, and Oladipo 2010). To illustrate, in December 1989 in the case of *Ezekiel Adekunle v. The State*, the Supreme Court of Nigeria upheld the murder conviction and death sentence of the appellant, Ezekiel Adekunle, for orchestrating and spearheading the murder of one Felicia Ejide, a seventy-year-old woman whom the appellant accused of being a witch. Witnesses described Adekunle jeering at the victim and calling her a witch before jostling her and causing her to fall while she was being carried home on her daughter's back. When the elderly woman fell, the appellant raised a public alarm about a witch being transported away. He led a converging crowd in pelting the elderly woman to death with large pieces of cement block while chanting, "One kills the witch with stones" (International Center for Nigerian Law 2005).

## **São Tomé and Príncipe**

Witchcraft persecution in Africa is not confined to large, populous societies. Even on the small island of São Tomé and Príncipe, off the coast of Gabon, old women are frequently beaten after they are accused of being a *feiticeira* (witch).

## **South Africa**

In South Africa, witch hunts have claimed the lives of thousands of people (Ashforth 2005). In communities characterized by strong witchcraft beliefs, physical assaults perpetrated against persons suspected of witchcraft are legion. Here, "necklacing"—a vigilante-style killing in which old truck tires that have been doused with gasoline are hung around a culprit's neck and set ablaze—has frequently been used to punish suspected witchery (Ashforth 2005). Survivors of witch attacks and their families are forced to seek refuge in witches' sanctuaries, many of which are characterized by material deprivation and squalid living conditions.

## **Tanzania**

From Tanzania comes reports of thousands of elderly women slain in the name of witchcraft persecution. According to one report, more than 3,072 witch killings occurred in the country between 1970 and 2002 (Duff 2005). Meanwhile, a 2002 report issued by the World Health Organization (WHO)

estimated that five hundred elderly women accused of witchcraft are killed annually in the country. Reacting to the rapacity of the witch hunts and the massive death toll, one analyst described Tanzania's witch persecutions as a "silent holocaust" (Mfumbusa 1999).

## Uganda

Ugandan newspapers are replete with graphic reports of vigilante violence perpetrated by public lynch mobs against persons suspected of practicing witchcraft (e.g., Mambule 2007, 2009; Oloya 2005). These media reports depict numerous instances of witch persecutions, many of which result in the deaths, physical maiming, and forcible displacement of putative witches from their communities. In Uganda, as in other societies profiled, witches are regarded by many as the source of a wide array of personal misfortunes and tragedies that befall individuals and communities. Consequently, witches are widely viewed as a scourge that must be physically exterminated or annihilated to provide a respite in human suffering. These beliefs lead to egregious acts of violence.

A review of Ugandan media reports over the past ten years shows that witchcraft is blamed for myriad maladies and calamities, including strange and inexplicable physical illness, mental illness, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS, and untimely deaths. Forms of witchcraft persecution that follow allegations of witchcraft include destruction or demolition of the accused's home, destruction of crops, forcible eviction from agricultural land, expulsion from village communities, nonlethal physical assaults, and violent homicide. A few cases are provided to illustrate the magnitude of witchcraft persecution in the country.

In September 2005 five families composed of over forty people were evicted from Mabigasa village in Rakai district by residents on suspicion of wizardry. The residents destroyed or appropriated the property that belonged to the suspected witches. The houses and banana plantations of the alleged witches were set ablaze, and their cows and pigs slaughtered and shared by the lynch mob. The violent persecution was triggered by the death of two residents of the village whose demise was attributed to the accused witches (Mambule 2005b).

In the same Rakai district in August 2005, a man and his son had their plantation destroyed, their animals seized, and their house set ablaze because one of the men was suspected of being a wizard. When the accused wizards took refuge at a local police station, a rampaging mob seeking to lynch the father and son attacked the police post, as the police shot and killed a member of the mob who had wrestled a gun from a policeman (Mambule 2005a).

In another incident in September 2005, in Kibenge village in Buwunga, Bukoto East, a fifty-four-year-old woman, Jane Rose Nassuuna, was stoned and hacked to death and her body burnt because she was suspected of being a witch. The daughters of the deceased woman fled for their own lives after attending the local court where their mother was declared a witch and after witnessing the beginnings of the lethal assault on their mother. According to the report, “local officials condemned the woman and let the villagers ‘punish’ her, claiming she had become a menace to the village” (Ssejjoba 2005, 1). Reports indicated that police had arrested several participants in the attack, including a fifty-six-year-old man who took the woman to court, claiming that the deceased had bewitched his wife who recently died in Kitovu Hospital (Ssejjoba 2005).

In yet another case that garnered widespread media attention, over 150 people attacked teachers at Lukomera Church Primary School, accusing them of using witchcraft to afflict the pupils of the school. According to police, the incident occurred after four female students of the school developed psychiatric problems and collapsed on the compound, a condition the parents attributed to witchcraft (“Locals Bitter” 2005).

## **Zimbabwe**

In Zimbabwe, physical assaults upon suspected witches claim scores of lives annually. When a child or person in the prime of life suffers an inexplicable illness or dies, there is suspicion that malevolent witchcraft is responsible. The aggrieved individual, survivors of a deceased witchcraft victim, or members of the community take retaliatory action against the purported witch, often leading to the destruction of property, maiming, or death (Chavunduka 1980).

## **Witch Hunts in Non-African Societies**

A review of the anthropological and historical literature amply establishes the persecution of alleged witches as a phenomenon that has touched every region of the globe (Behringer 2004). Indeed, the most widely known cases of witch persecution are those associated with the Middle Ages in Europe and during the early colonial period in America when thousands of people were branded as witches or accused of practicing witchcraft, and were subjected to brutal persecution (Jensen 2007). Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, violent retributive action against alleged witches occurred in England, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Scotland, Sweden, and Switzerland, among others (Beh-

ringer 2004; Jensen 2007; Roper 2004). The accused witches were believed to possess destructive supernatural powers that they used to cause inclement weather, physical injuries, illness, and even death to their victims (Behringer 2004; Jensen 2007; Roper 2004). The resultant public fear about the depredatory actions of witches took frantic proportions while members of the clergy oversaw the purge of thousands of suspected witches. Many accused witches were criminally tried, tortured into confessing to witch misdeeds, and then brutally executed. Persecution of witches in the American colonies occurred in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Virginia. These trials reached a zenith in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts, where nineteen persons were executed as witches and 150 more were incarcerated (Jensen 2007). In Europe, as in America, the witches were typically tortured until they confessed, after which they were burned to death. During these infamous witch trials, accused witches were also forced to name their supposed accomplices, who were tortured in turn until additional witches were named.

It is estimated that between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries as many as half a million people were tortured and executed on the grounds of witchcraft or heresy in Europe. The victims of the European witch persecutions ranged from poor, elderly, unmarried, widowed women to political and social deviants—Jews, Muslims, heretics, and critics of the social, political, and religious order of the time. Examination of the sociodemographic background of witchcraft defendants in Europe reveals that the vast majority of people labeled as witches were women (Oldridge 2002; Roper 2004). According to Oldridge, “the best recent estimates suggest that three-quarters of those executed for witchcraft in Europe were women, though the figures varied considerably from place to place” (Oldridge 2002, 268). These women were generally older, unmarried, and childless, and were thus socially marginalized in their local communities (Roper 2004).

Explanations vary as to the causes of the European and American witch hunts. According to one perspective, the persecution of witches illustrates classic instances of “a search for scapegoats on which fears, hatred, and tension of all kinds could be discharged” (Ginzburg 2002, 122). It was the marginalized—old, infirm, widowed, childless, and other members of the society least likely to fight back—who bore the heaviest brunt of the witch hunts (Midelfort 2002). Gentilcore observes with respect to Italy that “many accused witches were weak and helpless, with no other means of power or influence” (Gentilcore 2002, 104). According to another perspective, violent actions against predominantly female witches must be seen as retribution in patriarchal societies directed toward women who were either unable or unwilling to conform to gender conventions.

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. This literature also shows that violent victimization and persecution of witches commonly occurs in response to allegations of witchcraft. In addition to the cases in parts of Africa profiled above, media reports are replete with documented cases of witchcraft persecutions in India, Nepal, and Papua New Guinea (Ghosh 2013; Ware 2001; “Witch Killings in India” 2000). In Papua New Guinea, as in many other societies where belief in witchcraft persists, witchcraft is invoked to explain misfortune. Witches are believed to be endowed with extraordinary powers that they deploy to cause malefic acts and to bring adversity to their victims. Suspected witches are recurrently accused of afflicting victims with strange, inexplicable, and even fatal illnesses. Here, too, the majority of accused witches are elderly women, often destitute. Efforts by Papuans to rid local communities of reviled, malefic witches in their respective communities have fueled violence against persons accused of practicing witchcraft or harmful magic (Ware 2001). Consider the following case of virulent witch persecution in one Papua New Guinea village:

Sometime in 1997, Jomani and fellow villagers hauled the women from their homes and questioned them about deaths in the village, including that of an 18-year-old youth whose brain the men believed had been replaced with water by a sanguma [sorcerer]. In villages where belief in witchcraft lingers, such interrogations are brutal: hot metal may be applied to genitals, flesh incised with machetes, or the accused strung up by an arm or leg. In the end, the Mondo One women were killed: three with homemade shotguns, the fourth with knives, because the men ran out of bullets. Jomani says the women had all confessed to being sangumas. Asked why they would do that, he replies coolly: “Because we stab them until they do.” And if they hadn’t admitted to sorcery? “We stab them anyway.” Jomani’s village is not unique. Yauwe Riyong, an M.P. from nearby Chuave district, in Simbu province, told Parliament last December that as many as 15 women had been “chopped to pieces” as suspected sangumas. (Ware 2001, 1)

Brutal witch persecutions in India have also been widely reported in contemporary media. A CNN report in 2000 estimated that about 200 women are killed across the country annually on suspicion of witchcraft (“Witch Killings in India” 2000). According to one report, in the Indian state of Bihar, “Women accused of witchcraft are dragged into the forest and hacked, hanged or burned to death. Heads of children have been smashed on rocks. Even nonfatal cases are ghastly. Women suffer smashed teeth, shaved heads or chopped off breasts. Others have been forced to eat excrement or to strip and walk naked through villages” (Misra 2000, 1).

Here, as in many other places where witchcraft persecution has occurred, the overwhelming majority of the accused fit the archetypical image of the witch as an elderly and widowed woman. Among the misfortunes attributed to witches are strange and inexplicable diseases, fatal illnesses, impotence, miscarriage, and unexplained or sudden fatalities. While fear of witches has driven many people to seek traditional remedies against bewitchment, here vigorous persecution of witches has, in recent years, led to the slaughter of scores of women suspected of practicing witchcraft.

Modern-day witch hunts are not confined to India, Papua New Guinea, and societies in Africa. Indeed, there is evidence that contemporary anti-witchcraft campaigns—ranging from isolated incidents by aggrieved parties to systematic patterns of witch persecutions culminating in the lethal victimization of putative witches—have been reported in countries in Southeast Asia, Central America, South America, North America, and Western Europe. In his survey of witch killings in societies around the globe, Behringer (2004) observed that since 1950 witch killings have been reported in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, and France.

### **Disturbing Features of Contemporary Witch Hunts**

At the most fundamental level, witchcraft persecution involves an accusation of spiritual predation against a putative witch denounced for deploying malevolent spirits to inflict misfortunes and death on others. Violent physical punishment, including death, is then visited on the alleged witch. Contemporary witchcraft persecutions are characterized by a number of distressing features. First, because witchcraft is an occult phenomenon, the alleged acts of spiritual predation that engender witch persecutions are virtually unverifiable by empirical means. The aggrieved parties and other witch labelers (e.g., fetish priests or traditional healers, members of the clergy) have no scientifically demonstrable means for establishing the verity of their claims. In many cases, suspected witches are manipulated, intimidated, or even tortured into confessing to outlandish and imaginary mystical activities. Indeed, studies on witchcraft in many societies have shown that many of the divinatory techniques designed to prove the guilt or innocence of suspected witches, as well as to substantiate claims of bewitchment, are fraught with duplicity, quackery, and charlatanism. Accusations of witchery and the concomitant brutalization and killing of alleged witches typically occur over vehement protestations of innocence by the accused witches. In the frenzied atmosphere of accusations and denials, innocent persons are brutalized, maimed, or even killed.

Another worrisome feature of contemporary witch hunts is the complete absence of due process of law. During the European witch hunts of 1450–1750, witches were executed after lengthy formal trials by ecclesiastical or secular courts (e.g., Roper 2004; Rowlands 2003). In much of the contemporary world where witch persecutions occur, no such trials precede witch killings. The reason is not difficult to fathom. In these societies, witchcraft is not recognized by state laws or criminal codes; witchcraft attributions and accusations are not entertained in state courts. Witch killings are therefore violent extrajudicial acts of vigilantism perpetrated by individuals and groups. Despite their flagrant illegality, witch hunts often generate only minor judicial sentences for the assailants, even in cases of homicide. In many of these societies, the torturing or killing of witches occurs in broad daylight and the perpetrators are well-known in the community. Meanwhile, witnesses to the crime follow a code of silence while law enforcement officers typically lament the absence of witnesses to aid their investigations. In some instances, law enforcement officers themselves pose a hindrance to effective juridical action. Like their compatriots, many police personnel charged with the investigation of witch hunts and the apprehension of criminal suspects hold firm beliefs in the dangers of witchcraft; those law enforcement officials who sympathize with perpetrators of violent witch persecution may even tacitly sabotage official investigations into the crime through insouciance and languidness with the result that their investigations result only in the production of weak evidence that invariably harms the prosecution's case. Similarly, jurors, judges, and other adjudicators in these trials are, themselves, operating under the prominence of witch beliefs. In some instances, community members organize to obtain legal representation for killers of accused witches, reinforcing the community's tacit consent of witch persecution. Where conviction occurs, killers receive only minimal sentences.

Another disquieting feature of witch hunts concerns the double victimization of survivors of such persecution. In some communities, survivors of witch hunts who manage to flee their attackers find themselves consigned to witches' sanctuaries marked by appalling economic and material conditions and social isolation. These individuals are forced to live the remainder of their lives in these sanctuaries, often without the companionship and support of family, friends, and well-wishers who themselves risk charges of witchcraft through their affiliation with the accused witch.

Despite the appalling features of contemporary persecutions, extralegal witch hunts characterized by brutal intimidation, torture, and murder proceed unabated in many communities around the world. Meanwhile, many victims continue to suffer the depredatory actions of their fellow



citizens. These crimes warrant urgent systematic study, redress, and remediation, and is one of the central reasons I wrote this book.

*Witches, Witchcraft, and Violence in Ghana* examines witch persecutions in modern Ghana. It explores how local beliefs about witchcraft fuel violence against suspected witches. It addresses the nature and extent of witch hunts, the causes of witch hunts, and patterns of witch hunts in the society. The book is intended to fulfill two purposes. The first is to contribute to the stock of knowledge about witchcraft beliefs and witchcraft persecution by describing and analyzing modern-day witch hunts that periodically erupt in the contemporary world, using witchcraft-related violence in Ghana as a case study. Second, it is my hope that by highlighting the sufferings that arise from witchcraft accusations and persecutions, individuals and groups will be impelled to channel resources into confronting and eliminating the social, psychological, and physical violence that accompanies witchcraft accusations. This includes establishing policies and programs to assist with the reintegration of individuals ostracized or exiled from their communities as a result of witch persecution. A fundamental premise of this study is that we cannot begin to prevent or control the incidence of witch persecution without understanding its nature and causes.

For many years, both the popular and academic treatment of witchcraft in Ghana has focused almost exclusively on accused witches sequestered in witches' sanctuaries in northern Ghana (e.g., ActionAid 2012; Palmer 2010; Sosywen 2012). Clearly, the witches' camps are the most conspicuous expression of witchcraft persecution in Ghana but are undoubtedly not the only one. The witches' camps of northern Ghana constitute only a small part of the Ghanaian witchcraft landscape, however. Indeed, the witches' camps are a northern Ghana phenomenon only; they do not encompass patterns of witchcraft accusations, witch hunts, and the treatment of putative witches in the southern sector of the country where the majority of the Ghanaian population currently lives. A broader and more complete analysis of witchcraft in Ghana should include analysis of witchcraft beliefs and practices as well as the treatment of putative witches among Ghanaian ethnic groups in the southern sector of the country. For example, accused witches in southern Ghana are never transported to witches' camps located in the north. Instead, they are dealt with in their local communities or sent to Christian prayer camps and exorcists. In sum, focusing exclusively on witches' camps in northern Ghana leads to a skewed discussion and interpretation of witchcraft in Ghana. This book offers a comprehensive analysis of witch hunts in the entire country.

## Plan of the Book

This introduction gives the reader insight to contemporary witch hunts in Ghana and throughout the African continent, as well as in India, Papua New Guinea, and other select countries around the world. This comparative, empirical excursus provides some evidence of the scope and nature of contemporary witch hunts.

Chapter 1 provides a general description of Ghanaian society in order to contextualize the phenomenon of witch hunts in Ghana. An understanding of and familiarity with Ghanaian society—including its people, cultures, values, and social and economic development—is necessary to understand the place of witchcraft beliefs and witchcraft-related violence in the society.

Chapter 2 is a comprehensive overview of witchcraft beliefs among Ghanaians, with a strong emphasis on Akan witchcraft beliefs. This chapter illustrates the extent to which witchcraft beliefs are entrenched in Ghanaian society. This is essential in fully understanding the forces that shape witchcraft-related violence.

Chapter 3 is an exploration of how witchcraft beliefs are acquired by Ghanaian citizens through various institutions involved in their socialization, or agencies of socialization. To this end, this chapter explores in detail the role of such major institutions as family, school, and the mass media in purveying witchcraft beliefs in the country.

Some Ghanaian songs focus directly on witchcraft while some give them a prominent place and yet others merely broach the subject. In chapter 4 the lyrical texts of eight songs with witchcraft references or themes are analyzed and used to illustrate this pattern. While such songs are performed to entertain, the songs unwittingly serve as mediums for reinforcing witchcraft ideology in the country.

There is a corpus of proverbs dealing with witchcraft in the Akan language. Analysis of these proverbs reveals a great deal about witchcraft beliefs in Akan society. To some extent, they are also another key influence in transmitting witchcraft beliefs and promoting attitudes in Ghanaian society. In chapter 5 thirty-four such proverbs are cited, translated, and their meanings given, demonstrating how they provide insights into witchcraft beliefs in the society.

In Ghana, imputations of witchcraft occasionally lead to charges of slander and prosecution of the accusers. In addition, witch killings and other forms of nonlethal violence against putative witches are prosecuted in the criminal courts. These witchcraft trials typically generate widespread public interest and extensive media coverage, providing information that further affirms Ghanaian witch lore. Chapter 6 explores four witchcraft-

related trials that occurred in Ghana in recent times as well as their implications for socialization into Ghanaian witchcraft beliefs.

Although they are rare, in Ghana horrific murders are occasionally committed against putative witches. These types of homicides range from incidents involving a single victim and a single offender, to vigilante-style mob killings. In Chapter 7 case histories of thirty-five homicides perpetrated against accused witches are analyzed and used to illustrate how witchcraft beliefs contribute to fatal violence in the society.

In addition to homicide, other forms of violence and cruelties are suffered by some Ghanaians in the name of witchcraft persecution. Chapter 8 focuses on cases of nonlethal abuse meted out to persons accused of witchcraft. These abuses include threats with various weapons, physical assaults, and banishment from communities.

Women and girls are the most vulnerable to witchcraft accusations and associated violent victimization. Chapter 9 explores women's vulnerability to lethal and sublethal violence in witch hunts. The chapter explores the relationship between societal patterns of misogyny and gynophobia as well as female subordination and patriarchal arrangements in contributing to witchcraft accusations and witch hunts as a form of gendered violence.

A primary goal in writing this book was to give exposure to witchcraft related violence and to suggest strategies for curtailing its occurrence. The conclusion is a discussion of programs and policies that can be instituted to control witchcraft-related violence in Ghana with broader applicability to other countries.