

Review: *The Witches of Gambaga*

Sokari Ekine

The Witches of Gambaga is a disturbing documentary about a community of women condemned and exiled as witches to the village of Gambaga in northern Ghana. The film was produced by Nigerian feminist academic Amina Mama and Ghanaian filmmaker/writer, Yaba Badoe, who also directs and narrates the film. During repeated visits over a period of 5 years, Ms Badoe interviewed the women, traditional rulers and community activists in the region.

The village of Gambaga has traditionally been a sanctuary for women accused of witchcraft where they are protected by the village Chief. Many of the women are elderly and arrive after having been driven into exile by their families. Guilt is established by the arbitrary way a chicken dies following an accusation by anyone, even a young child. The bird's throat is cut and if it dies with its wings down, then the woman is a witch. In trying to understand what it means to be a witch, the film's producer and narrator, Yaba Badoe, asks the question which goes to the heart of the film, "*[what] If witchcraft traditions are so deeply entrenched, that to be born a woman is to be born under a shadow of suspicion?*" This is contrasted with men, who can also be witches but for them, the practice is used in a positive way such as to protect his house or family.

The belief that some women and men have supernatural powers has existed throughout history and across the world as a way of maintaining social control and upholding patriarchal structures. But invariably it is women who have been singled out for persecution at different points in history, usually when communities are facing a crisis or series of events which are inexplicable or unpredictable. To understand the naming of women as witches, requires close scrutiny of the factors behind, on the one hand, the rise and powers of Pentecostal churches and Muslim marabouts in Ghana and other parts of

the continent, and on the other, the use of traditional and spiritual practices for explanations around the failure of nation states to address poverty and lack of socio-economic responsibility by governments. The power of male authority, patriarchal traditions and the low status of women are central to this. It is pertinent to point out that although accusations of witchcraft can cut across class and age, it is those women who, despite being poor and uneducated, are seen as strong and independent, who are most at risk.

The 'witches' of Gambaga are protected by the paramount Chief, the Gambarrana, and there is no doubt he benefits from their presence. They pay to stay and must pay to leave, so it is in his interest to accept either a "confession" as proof of guilt or the manner of the chicken's death to ensure the practice continues. But as the film points out, good and evil is never simple and change is always possible. Community engagement by local community activists has been central to questioning the practice as well as trying to reintegrate accused women back into their villages. Even though this can be a slow process, it is preferable to a confrontational strategy led by outside people, especially westerners, descending on communities. Once the work has been consolidated at a very local level then it can be taken up by activists at a national level and moves towards intervention by the government and community leaders. *The Witches of Gambaga* shows that there is another way of addressing traditional and religious practices which hurt women and children. Women activists are beginning to speak out against the practice and the film itself has contributed to raising awareness at a national level. Changes in attitudes by local leaders can also contribute to ending the practices of accusing women of witchcraft.

The success of the film is due to Badoe's persistent visits and her personal engagement with both the women and the Gambarrana who allows her to film the "secret" ceremony which decides the guilt of the women. Her interviews are intimate and heart-breaking, showing both the vulnerability of the women as well as their agency and strength. One young mother of two is ambivalent about her exile but at the same time focused on ensuring her children are educated by raising money to send them to school. The film, thankfully, lacks the "pitying" and patronising tone often found in documentaries made by non-Africans, as the women and the audience are treated with the utmost respect. The strong feminist intervention places the women at the center and focuses only on the issue it wishes to confront

and expose, leaving all of those involved, including the audience proud and empowered.

Women and children accused of witchcraft in other parts of the world do not have a safe space in which to carry on their lives. Often they are forced to undergo degrading public acts of admission and submission or face being expelled from family and left to survive the best they can on the streets as sex workers and beggars. As awful as it may appear compared to a life on the streets with no protection, the women sentenced to a life of exile in Gambaga, separated from their families for years or even a lifetime, have still been able to create a new life and community amongst themselves. One is left feeling there is a sense of purpose if only to work towards the day they can return home.

The Witches of Gambaga has been shown and well received by audiences in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Brazil, South Africa, Kenya and across Europe and the United States. The film was the Winner, 2010 Black International Film Festival Best Documentary Award and won 2nd prize in the Documentary competition at Africa's largest film festival - FESPACO - in Burkina Faso.