

The Public Debate on Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana

Heidi Graves

History Senior Honors Thesis

University of California, Santa Barbara

Advisor: Professor Stephan Miescher

2013



## CONTENTS

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements .....	3
Key Terms.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Chapter 1: The Akan and Witchcraft.....	15
Chapter 2: Colonial Intervention .....	24
Chapter 3: The Public Debate on Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana .....	31
Conclusion .....	51
Bibliography .....	55



## ABSTRACT

The debate surrounding witchcraft has been continuous since colonial times. However, the majority of scholarship on the subject of witchcraft in Ghana is written from the outside perspective and African contributions are largely absent. Through an analysis of local newspapers, this thesis sheds new light on the public debate on witchcraft that occurred not only within the Gold Coast, but also extended internationally. In the 1930s, these discussions crossed racial lines as literate Africans and outsiders with experience in Africa engaged directly with one another. Further, these sources illuminate that Africans were active participants in the debate on witchcraft. This thesis argues that Hans Debrunner's book, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, developed as a product of these discussions and perpetuated missionary discourse that witchcraft would evaporate with the transition to modernity.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am forever indebted to the various people who assisted me on my journey to completing this thesis. I am deeply grateful to Professor Miescher for reading through endless drafts, suggesting relevant scholarship in the field, and most of all for pushing me to make deeper connections within my research.

I am eternally thankful to my other advisor, Professor John Lee, who was an incredible listener that had an unbelievable ability to ask stimulating questions that forced me to delve deeper into my research. Professor Lee designed a dynamic class that became not only a place for my twelve undergraduate colleagues and me to intellectually challenge one another other, but it also became a support system throughout the research process.

This project required the help of multiple individuals and institutions to acquire archival documents. I received generous assistance from the staff at the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies at Northwestern University. I am also grateful to Martha Smalley for helping me to access invaluable International Missionary archival materials from the Yale Divinity Library. Finally, I am indebted to the Interlibrary Loan staff at the University of California at Santa Barbara Davidson Library for their endless help in obtaining research materials from across the world.

This project could not have been completed without the financial support of the Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities Grant provided by the College of Letters and Sciences at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Thank you to my family for their unwavering support and encouraging me to pursue my passions in life.



## KEY TERMS

*abusua*: blood clan, based on matrilineal descent, economic foundation of Akan society

*bayi*: witchcraft substance

*kra*: life-soul, exists separately from the human body, based on matrilineal descent

*ntoro*: spirit clan, based on patrilineal descent

*obosom* (pl. *abosom*): Tutelary spirit or lesser god

*okomfo* (pl. *akomfoo*): shrine priest, acts as spirit mediums between *abosom* and shrine adherents

*Onyame*: supreme creator God of the Akan

*suman* (pl. *asuman*): amulets, charms, used for personal purposes, power remain temporarily

*sunsum*: personality soul, based on patrilineal descent, linked to character and personality



## Introduction

Currently, over a thousand accused witches are living in witch camps in the rural lands of Northern Ghana. The vast majority of accused witches are elderly women who have been forced to flee their homes in fear of persecution or even death. Within these witch camps, women are exposed to terrible sanitary conditions and are coerced to serve the local chief economically in return for his protection. In 2011, Ghana's Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MOWAC) made a pledge to disband these camps and to help reintegrate the suspected witches into their former communities.<sup>1</sup> Yet, little progress has been obtained.

For the first time, accused witches are voicing their opinions on the discussion surrounding the future of these witch camps. A number of accused witches living in the camps stood firmly against the plan introduced by MOWAC, explaining that they felt more secure in the camps and feared that they would be "targeted for attacks in their communities in the event of any calamity after reintegration."<sup>2</sup> Yet, news of these witch camps has drawn international attention that has denounced the existence of the camps based on their connection to women's and human rights violations.

In July of 2011, I began my journey of studying in Ghana at the University of Ghana, Legon for one year. Prior to my arrival, I was completely oblivious to the fact that witchcraft beliefs continued to exist anywhere in the world. Within my first few days, newspaper articles caught my attention discussing the prevalence of witchcraft accusations, violent treatment of blamed witches, and the future of witch camps located in the North. My interest developed

---

<sup>1</sup> Nurudeen Salifu, "Ministry urged to fulfil pledge to alleged witches," *Daily Graphic*, March 15, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Yakubu Abdul-Majeed, "Shocking! 'Witches' say 'no' to ministry's offer," *The Ghanaian Times*, November 30, 2011.



considerably after watching the documentary *The Witches of Gambaga*, directed by Yaba Badoe, which follows the lives of accused witches living in the Gambaga witch camp in Ghana's Northern Region. By focusing on individual experiences with witchcraft, Badoe created an emotionally arousing film that gives insight into the daily lives of women banished from their former communities. Most importantly, this documentary sheds light on the ingrained nature of witchcraft in present times and begins to question how the issues surrounding witchcraft should be solved.

During my stay in Ghana, I did not visit any witch camps or anti-witchcraft shrines, but it became clear through my interactions with Ghanaians that the belief in witchcraft remains entrenched. As my roommate and I sat in the darkness of our guesthouse located in the small town of Tafi Atome in the Eastern Region, three children peered through the window beckoning us to come outside. They tried to coerce us out of our room by reassuring us with the statement "we are not witches, we are children." The mere fact that the children chose to reference witches reflects that witchcraft is a topic that retains importance in contemporary Ghana.

As I delved deeper into my studies of witchcraft and became more accustomed to my surroundings, I thought that it would be appropriate to ask my local friends about their understandings of this belief. Yet with the mere mention of the word "witchcraft," my friends shuddered and often offered no response. On one occasion my friend snapped at me "shhh! You should not speak of these things!" It was apparent that something deeper lay behind the silence which only sparked my curiosity even more. As a result, I chose to focus my senior honors thesis on the history of witchcraft with the hopes of creating a deeper knowledge of the complex belief system surrounding the supernatural which has often perplexed outsiders.



In order to gain a better understanding of the current debate surrounding witchcraft practices in Ghana, it is imperative to look at the role the government has played in regulating beliefs and practices about the supernatural in the past. Further, it is important to trace the debate surrounding witchcraft not only within colonial Ghana, but also in regards to international interest and involvement.

### *The Study of Witchcraft*

Two key debates exist regarding witchcraft in Ghana that have spanned from the colonial period to current times. The first debate addresses the prevalence of witchcraft activities and whether there has been an increase due to colonialism and outside influences. The second debate revolves around the connection between witchcraft and modernity.

Beginning in the colonial period, scholars claimed that anti-witchcraft activities were increasing due to the social disruptions caused by colonialism and capitalism. Scholars believed that rapid social change resulted in an increase of anxiety and tension that led to the rise of anti-witchcraft activities. Hans W. Debrunner, a Swiss theologian who studied witchcraft in Ghana on behalf of the Presbyterian Church, believed that the fear of witchcraft increased due to the influence of outsiders. In *Witchcraft in Ghana*, he wrote that “economic and social changes have so shattered tribal institutions and moral codes, that the result of white contact is in many cases an actual increase in the dread of witchcraft.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the assumption of many European observers that the extension of Christianity and formal education would eliminate the belief in witchcraft, the number of shrines continued to grow in order to provide supernatural protection.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hans Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana* (Accra: Presbyterian Book Depot LTD, 1961), 65.



A number of scholars used biomedicine as a means to explain the prevalence of witchcraft. Margaret J. Field, a British colonial anthropologist and trained psychiatrist who conducted research on behalf of the Gold Coast government in the 1930s, analyzed the connection between psychology and witchcraft in her study *Search for Security*. Field documented the prevalence of new shrines created to provide protection to Africans imbued with a sense of insecurity. She claimed that this insecurity derived from changes occurring in traditional society produced from interactions with outside forces. For example, Field specifically connected the growth in the cocoa industry with the rise in anti-witchcraft shrines across the colony. The cocoa industry was driven by individual efforts, which differed from traditional roles that stressed kinship loyalty and shared responsibilities. This industry produced envy, competition over inheritance, and fear of crop failure, resulting in the overall sense of insecurity which required the supernatural protection of shrines. According to Field's observations, a number of the adherents of these shrines were visibly mentally ill. Through case studies conducted at Ashanti shrines, such as *Mframa*, Field argued that mental illness, particularly depression, kept witchcraft beliefs alive. She stressed the necessity of clinical psychiatry to the understanding of witchcraft.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, scholars have challenged the previous interpretation that anti-witchcraft actions increased due to social disruptions. Natasha Gray questioned the argument that witchcraft activities increased following colonial interference. She suggested that this theory could not be proved because scholars had no way of measuring the frequency of witchcraft activities prior to colonialism. In order to justify her claim, Gray documented the incidence of colonial witchcraft trials between 1913 and 1937 in the Akyem Abuakwa Native Tribunals, local African courts in

---

<sup>4</sup> Margaret J. Field, *Search for Security* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1960), 38.



the Eastern Region of present-day Ghana. It is important to note that not all witchcraft accusations entered the court, because many disputes were handled within the family. Taking this into account, Gray discovered that the number of cases did not increase over this 25 year span, refuting older theories that anti-witchcraft activities were on the rise as a result of social distress caused by outside forces.<sup>5</sup>

The second debate surrounds the relationship between witchcraft and modernity. Previous scholars viewed witchcraft as a local, traditional, and primitive practice that posed a challenge to the spread of Christianity, as well as to colonial rule. Such findings also reflect the idea that witchcraft could not withstand the forces of development and modernity that would result from contact with the outside world. Historians Jean Allman and John Parker explained that “to many westerners, it seems self-evident that the belief in witchcraft or sorcery is something ‘traditional’ that will automatically disappear with modernization.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars suggested that the characteristics of modernity, such as formal education, biomedicine and science, and the spread of Christianity would indefinitely shatter the belief in witchcraft.

More recent work argued that witchcraft is not merely an age-old traditional practice, but rather a fundamental practice of dealing with misfortune. These beliefs have withstood the influence of colonialism, adapted and become intertwined with the processes of modernization. Allman and Parker approached the shrine *Tongnaab*, an oracle shrine devoted to the god *Tong* located in the Tong Hills of northern Ghana, with the common notion that it was an ancient shrine that Ghanaians solely worshipped locally. However, their study invalidated the original

---

<sup>5</sup> Natasha Gray, “The Legal History of Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana: Akyem Abuakwa, 1913-1943” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2000), vi.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005), 2.



views because they discovered that *Tongnaab* attracted people from throughout West Africa and even from across the world. Further, they described how *Tongnaab* withstood the attack of British colonialism and instead developed alongside modern processes, such as the monetary economy, athletics, and within the political realm. Thus, instead of weakening as a result of contact with the outside world, witchcraft has retained an important role in modern Ghana.

One of the striking aspects about the history of witchcraft is that outsiders' produced the majority of published accounts. These foreigners traveled to Ghana predominantly from Europe as missionaries, anthropologists, colonial officials, and scholars, bringing with them their own beliefs and attitudes that influenced the way they viewed witchcraft and anti-witchcraft activities. Thus, it is necessary to question these sources and determine whether the local beliefs are misrepresented in their documentation. Many authors attempted to give a glimpse into the local understanding of witchcraft by including court records, interviews, and firsthand experiences with witchcraft practices. Despite these efforts, secondary source material often analyzes the debate on witchcraft from the outsider perspective instead of focusing on the tension surrounding witchcraft through the eyes of local people. Overall, these texts reflect the attempt of foreigners to understand a complex belief system that often seemed illogical to them.

The one-sided nature of the history of witchcraft sparked my interest in learning more about the public debate surrounding witchcraft from the local African perspective.

Unfortunately, one of my greatest limitations is that I am myself an outsider as a white, American woman. However, I hope to shed light on the public debate surrounding witchcraft in the Gold Coast during the 1930s, the time period when the colonial government passed contradictory laws in regard to witchcraft. The Gold Coast refers to the British colony in West Africa, composed of Accra and the Eastern, Central, and Western Provinces, which would later



combine with Ashanti, the Northern Territories, and Togoland, to become the independent nation of Ghana in 1957. This thesis will analyze these laws and assess how the colonial government's policies changed over this period of time in order to contextualize the discussion of witchcraft in Ghana. Through an analysis of newspaper articles written in African owned newspapers for the reading public of the Gold Coast, I will unveil the local debate in regards to witchcraft that crossed racial lines and engaged both Africans and Europeans living in the Gold Coast. Further, this paper will show that the witchcraft debate did not occur in isolation but became an international concern. Finally, this thesis demonstrates that Hans Debrunner published his influential book, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, in response to the International Missionary Council's concern of witchcraft in Africa.

### *African Newspapers*

In order to provide an in-depth analysis of the debate surrounding witchcraft from the local perspective, this study focuses on African owned newspapers. As with many aspects of history, a limited number of tangible primary sources exist for the study of witchcraft in the Gold Coast. However, African owned newspapers provide valuable insight into the unfolding of events, as well as into the topics of importance during a particular time period from a local viewpoint.

Between the 1880s and the 1930s, the expanding colonial education system increased the number of literate African men and women. A Christianized, highly educated African elite owned various Gold Coast newspapers and provided African readers with the space to use their literacy to write on issues surrounding colonialism, culture, or any other current issues. Thus, the



topics published in these newspapers can be indicators of subjects of importance and relevance to Gold Coast readers during a specific moment of time.<sup>7</sup>

Local newspapers served as a vehicle for Africans to express their contempt with the colonial order. Anthropologist Jennifer Hasty has argued that “news media in Africa emerged as expressive local forces of indigenous resistance against the globalizing forces of colonial repression and exploitation.”<sup>8</sup> In 1903, the editor of the *Gold Coast Leader* declared that the African press is “the *only* medium through which the governed can express their protests against drastic and illegal laws, the ruthless expenditure of public funds, the inhuman treatment of natives and the denial of justice.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, these newspapers developed as a means for African expression of discontent to the oppressive aspects of colonialism.

A number of scholars refute the claim that newspapers were primarily used for voicing resistance against the colonial government. Stephanie Newell has pointed out that newspapers did not purely contain oppositional rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> Instead, African owned newspapers contained diverse opinions which sometimes fell in line with the colonial government’s policies. This view is supported by the fact that the readership in the Gold Coast included not only literate Africans, but also foreigners living in the colony. As a result, some of the contributions to newspapers came from an outside perspective that reflected the colonial viewpoint.

Although African newspapers became important spaces for local people to express their opinions on politics, the economy, and current affairs, writers had to be cautious of their positions at times. In rare cases, writers could be subject to six months of jail time for negligent

<sup>7</sup> Stephanie Newell, “Articulating Empire: Newspapers in Colonial West Africa,” *New Formations* 73 (2001), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Hasty, *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Gold Coast Leader*. June 27, 1903, 4, quoted in Stephanie Newell, “Articulating Empire: Newspapers in Colonial West Africa” *New Formations* 73 (2001), 30, emphasis in original.

<sup>10</sup> Newell, “Articulating Empire,” 30.



libel and up to two years for intentional libel. Newspaper editors were especially at risk to claims that they used the printing press to provoke anti-colonial sentiment amongst the local Africans. Despite the threat of the printing of seditious materials the government tolerated African newspapers for its value as a “tool for the surveillance” of African elites.<sup>11</sup> Newspaper articles gave the colonial government insight into the minds of educated Africans, as well as foreigners in the Gold Coast, and their reaction to government policies.

African owned newspapers were printed in English which is significant because it connected the Gold Coast readership to other English language texts throughout Africa and transnationally. Specifically, Gold Coast readers had the ability to read articles from other colonized peoples and to identify and learn from their struggles against colonial oppression. For example, when witchcraft became a topic of interest in Gold Coast newspapers in the 1930s, many articles were reprinted from South African and Kenyan newspapers about witchcraft violence and the colonial government’s actions against witchcraft activities. Thus, the use of English in local newspapers became an important link for connecting Gold Coast readers with relevant discussions from across the English-speaking world.

Newspapers are a valuable source to analyze because they provide a rare window into the discussions that occurred not only amongst Africans, but also between Africans and outsiders living in the Gold Coast. In addition, Newell explained that these daily newspapers gave insight into the “social relationships between different groups of literate Africans and the colonial authorities.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, these sources also provide information on the relationships between Europeans living and working in the Gold Coast and the colonial government. Most importantly,

---

<sup>11</sup> Newell, “Articulating Empire,” 30.

<sup>12</sup> Newell, “Articulating Empire,” 27.



newspapers serve as a reminder that Africans were not passive adherents to colonialism but rather actively involved as a part of the dialogue that influenced colonial policies in the Gold Coast.



## Chapter 1: The Akan and Witchcraft

This section focuses on the witchcraft beliefs of Akan society as described through the lens of colonial anthropologists. The Akan are the predominant ethnic group of present day Ghana, concentrated primarily in the south. Akan society formed a tight bond centered on the dualistic nature of an individual's existence within the *abusua* and *ntoro*.

Both Akan men and women belonged to a blood clan, or *abusua*, through matrilineal descent. Large households formed based on membership to a blood clan which included members of the extended family. The blood clan stood as the economic foundation of Akan society, as both inheritance and succession took place within this matrilineal system. As a result, inheritance of a father's property did not pass to his son, but rather to his nephew. Further, the *abusua* stressed the importance of communal responsibility. Members of the *abusua* supported one another throughout life and in times of struggle, individuals could always turn to their blood clan.<sup>13</sup> For example, students sought financial assistance from their blood clan to help pay for school fees. This is a significant aspect of Akan life which was disrupted by outside forces, such as capitalism, which encouraged individual success.

In the past, the Akan also belonged to a *ntoro*, or spirit clan. According to Akan beliefs, individuals belonged to a *ntoro* based on patrilineal descent. Thus, an individual belonged to his or her father's *ntoro* group but were not a member of his *abusua*. The *ntoro* was ruled by a tutelary spirit and contained many taboos that members adhered to derived from the patrilineal side. Thus, a woman had to follow her husband's *ntoro* taboos, as well as her father's taboos. Debrunner suggested that the *ntoro* represented discipline and spiritual tradition because men

---

<sup>13</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 7.



maintained authority through their dependents' adherence to their *ntoro* taboos. Most scholars have suggested that the *ntoro* disappeared under the impact of colonialism. For example, Stephan Miescher explained in *Making Men in Ghana* that the *ntoro* was no longer of significance by the mid-twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Debrunner cited that the breakup of the *ntoro* has "destroyed the social balance between the sexes and contributed to an increase in witchcraft belief."<sup>15</sup>

A brief discussion of Akan religion is necessary to understand not only witchcraft beliefs, but also the anti-witchcraft shrines that existed in Ghana. According to Akan religion, there exists one supreme creator god, *Onyame*. The lesser gods, known as the tutelary spirits or *abosom*, are often referred to as the children of *Onyame*. The Akan believed that the *abosom* inhabited rivers, trees, mountains, and other aspects of nature.<sup>16</sup> These spirits promoted the well-being of the state, town, and family by warding off enemies protecting crops and domestic animals, and preventing any other conflicts.<sup>17</sup> Besides acting as protectors, the *abosom* also took on disciplinary roles in relation to humans for disloyalty. Due to the central role of the *abosom* in daily life, the Akan regularly provided sacrifices in order to appease these gods.

The ancestors of the Akan also held a central role in traditional religion. The ancestors were formerly humans who died an acceptable death and continued to involve themselves in the lives of their descendents. Surviving relatives poured libations and performed sacrifices to their ancestors who in return looked after their descendents.

<sup>14</sup> Stephan Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Akosua Adoma Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004), 102.

<sup>17</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 5.



Multiple lesser powers exist beneath *Onyame*, the *abosom*, and the ancestors which play an influential role in Akan religion. Included in this category are material objects called *suman*, or charms and fetishes, talismans, amulets, medicines, and witchcraft substances.<sup>18</sup> Many foreigners misinterpreted *suman* as the central element of Akan religion due to their visibility, but *suman* actually maintained more of a marginal role. *Suman* are commonly tangible objects that are used for personal purposes and only maintain their powers temporarily. *Suman* can be bought or sold and the priests of shrines often distribute *suman*, like pots, rings, or medicine for purposes of protection. Thus, *suman* became an important object to ward off evil, such as witchcraft.<sup>19</sup> Yet, these objects are also known for their powers of aggression and revenge.

The Akan have a unique concept of the soul that vastly differs from European understandings. However, their complex perception of the soul is key to understanding the Akan's belief in the supernatural. The *kra* is often translated as the "soul" and is viewed as existing separately from the human body. The *kra* is linked to the blood of the maternal ancestors and is believed to be given to a person from *Onyame*. Debrunner called the *kra* the "life-soul" and described it as "the life in the blood of man."<sup>20</sup> The *kra* is unalterable and continues to exist even after death.<sup>21</sup>

The *sunsum*, on the other hand, is deemed the personality soul. It is derived from the spirit of the male ancestors. The *sunsum* is described as the spiritual element of a human connected to personality and character. The *sunsum* is linked to "health, wealth, worldly power, success in any venture, in fact everything that makes life at all worth living."<sup>22</sup> Whereas the *kra*

<sup>18</sup> Natasha Gray, "The Legal History of Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana," 5.

<sup>19</sup> T.C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 111.

<sup>20</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> T.C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante*, 168.

<sup>22</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 14-15.



could not be changed, the *sunsum* could be altered with training. For example, a “light” *sunsum* could be trained to be “heavy” which is considered a key method for protection against witchcraft. Further, the *sunsum* could leave the body during sleep and was susceptible to possession by a witchcraft substance.<sup>23</sup>

According to Akan belief, an individual needs to retain a balance between his or her *kra* and *sunsum* in order to remain healthy. Particularly, a strong relationship with these two elements is essential to effective protection from witchcraft. Within oracle shrines, various treatments and medicines are administered to strengthen this balance.

### *Witchcraft Practices*

Witchcraft remains an ingrained belief throughout Africa and many parts of the world. The term “witchcraft” is used to classify the complex belief systems of people across the globe despite their immense variations. Amongst the Akan, witchcraft is a supernatural power that possesses an individual and is used primarily for evil and disruptive purposes.<sup>24</sup> Further, witchcraft can be used for positive purposes, such as for the accumulation of wealth, to promote fertility, or to increase intellect. Yet, witchcraft drew the attention of the colonial government in the Gold Coast primarily for its malevolent power and resulting fear amongst Africans.

The Akan concept of witchcraft is used as a way of dealing with any misfortune that arises in society. Commonly, witches are blamed for physical issues, such as illness, injuries, sterility, or death. Further, witchcraft is viewed as the root cause to material loss, crop failure, or even the loss of intelligence. According to Field, Africans maintain that “no-one can die- except

<sup>23</sup> T.C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante*, 168.

<sup>24</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 1.



in old age- unless he be killed by some supernatural being.”<sup>25</sup> Whereas most Americans believe in fate, death by natural causes, and that sickness originates from physiological or psychological causes, the Akan attribute any misfortune to supernatural forces.

An individual becomes a witch through possession by a witch spirit, or what is known as *bayi*. This spirit can infect a person consciously or unconsciously. For example, a witch spirit can be purchased willingly, or an individual can obtain a witch spirit unknowably by receiving a gift, randomly picking up an object on the street, or swallowing food that has a witch spirit. Further, witch spirits can be inherited from the matrilineal side of one's family.

There are a number of accepted characteristics regarding witchcraft amongst the Akan which reflect the complex nature of this belief system. For example, a witch's *sunsum* leaves the body and flies through the darkness of night, emitting a bright light. All of the witches congregate at the tallest tree near a town. Witches are believed to work in groups, called witch companies, and each witch solidifies its position in these groups by sacrificing the *kra* of members of their own blood-clan, or *abusua*, to feast on. Eating the *kra*, or life-soul, of a victim is symbolic of eating human flesh. As Gray notes, the witch eats “the soul of the flesh” of his victims, the spiritual double of the body.<sup>26</sup> In most cases the victim would not die but instead experience pain, illness, material loss, or some other misfortune correlated to the damage of the *kra*.<sup>27</sup> In some cases, however, the victim may be killed by the witch spirit. These are the characteristics of witchcraft belief most commonly documented by colonial anthropologists who worked in the Gold Coast in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

---

<sup>25</sup> Margaret J. Field- “Memorandum on ‘The Fetish Kundi,’” January 12, 1940, Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD).

<sup>26</sup> Natasha Gray, “The Legal History of Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana,” 5.

<sup>27</sup> Natasha Gray, “The Legal History of Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana,” 5.



### *The Gendered Nature of Witchcraft Accusations*

Accusing somebody of being a witch has a strong gendered dimension. In the Gold Coast, witchcraft accusations frequently fell upon women. Specifically, elderly women stood as the main target of suspicion of witchcraft amongst the Akan. Prior to colonization, elderly women held distinguished positions within Akan society. They could serve as an influential female elder, market woman, priest, or even a chief. However, as Debrunner explained, the status of women declined due to colonial influence, such as the spread of education and capitalism. Elderly women were primarily accused of witchcraft because society considered them useless since they were infertile and unable to sexually please men.<sup>28</sup>

Gold Coast communities also aimed witchcraft accusations at women who did not fit the gender norms of society. Bold women who spoke their minds were viewed as a threat and thus became targets of witchcraft accusation. Intellectual women and economically successful women were also commonly suspected of witchcraft. Thus, women who challenged gender ideals and entered male domains had an increased chance of being accused of witchcraft.

Previous scholars discussed how women were viewed as weaker, and thus more susceptible to receiving the witch spirit. According to Debrunner, men had an aggressive energy that resulted in the tendency to accuse others, while women had an inner psychic conflict that resulted in them accusing themselves of witchcraft.<sup>29</sup>

Recently, scholars have attempted to explain why women continue to be the primary targets of witchcraft accusation. Laura A. Truxler explained in her thesis that “the legitimacy of female land inheritance, in addition to government pressure to seek out western medical care

<sup>28</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 73.



instead of low-cost traditional herbalists, are threatening power structures and sparking witchcraft violence.”<sup>30</sup> It is of importance to note that although women are mainly accused of witchcraft, their voices are almost entirely omitted from the historical record on witchcraft. Thus, further research is required on the topic to unveil a more complete image of the reasons for the gendered nature of witchcraft accusation.

### *Anti-Witchcraft Practices*

The tutelary spirits, known as the *abosom* amongst the Akan, were in charge of keeping society in order. The Akan believed that the *abosom* revealed themselves through possession of an individual that would act as the *okomfo*, or priest, of an oracle shrine. The *akomfo* (priests) acted as spirit mediums, since the *abosom* spoke through them and communicated with their followers. The *abosom* gave promises, made demands, issued threats, showed anger and pleasure, listened to prayers, accepted or rejected sacrifices, and instituted rites in which the worshippers joined. Further, the *abosom* had the ability to expose and kill witches, as well as humans who planned evil acts.<sup>31</sup>

Natasha Gray classified medicine oracles as the most powerful *suman*, charms or fetishes, since they offered protection for a wide variety of misfortunes. The shrines were setup to deal with various disruptions within society, ranging from crop failures and disease to anti-social practices, such as witchcraft.<sup>32</sup> The popularity of an *obosom* relied on its success in aiding its followers. If the *obosom*'s promises repeatedly failed, members of a community sought a new

---

<sup>30</sup> Laura A. Truxler, “From Wise Woman to Mutilated Hag: Witchcraft Violence in Ghana,” (Master’s Thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 2006), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Natasha Gray, “The Legal History of Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana,” 51.

<sup>32</sup> Natasha Gray, “The Legal History of Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana,” 51.



shrine's protections. Thus, a competitive market existed as new oracle shrines overtook the role of formerly prominent oracle shrines.

Respected oracle shrines originated in Northern Ghana and over time transferred south to the other regions of Ghana. Chiefs brought in a new shrine to strengthen their rule and promote unity amongst their communities. In other cases, private individuals became initiates of a cult and spread the oracle to new towns. Medicine oracle cults often differed even within the same cult because of the gradual spread and transformation of individual cults across Ghana. Further, oracle cults were molded to meet the specific needs of each town. However, there was a basic setup that many of the cults held in common, according to Gray. Individuals arrived at a shrine seeking initiation in order to receive protection. Before being initiated, a ritual was performed to discover if the person was worthy of acceptance by the spirit. One of the most popular of these practices was the fowl sacrifice. Under this practice, "the priest would stab the fowl and if it died on its breast the supplicant was accepted. If the fowl died on its back, it was a sign that the oracle did not accept the supplicant."<sup>33</sup> If denied by the spirit, the participant confessed his or her sins and once again participated in a fowl sacrifice before acceptance into the cult.

During initiation, members drank, ate, and bathed in the cult's distinct medicine. These medicines possessed both the powers of protection and punishment. After drinking the medicine, initiates would be protected from "a host of misfortunes, including the attacks of witches."<sup>34</sup> However, if the initiates transgressed the cult's policies, such as by practicing witchcraft, the medicine disciplined the individual by causing physical and mental illness, infertility, or death. The only cure for these ailments was confession along with the payment of a fine.

<sup>33</sup> Natasha Gray, "The Legal History of Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana," 59.

<sup>34</sup> Natasha Gray, "The Legal History of Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana," 59.



There are many variations of anti-witchcraft shrines within Ghana. However, they all share a universal function of protecting against a wide variety of misfortunes. The protection against witchcraft became one of the most recognized elements of these shrines by colonial anthropologists. Further anti-witchcraft activities drew the attention of the colonial government which led to contradictory legislation.

This chapter has provided background information on the Akan family structure, religion, and concept of the soul in order to create a better understanding about the entrenched nature of witchcraft in colonial Ghana. Further, this chapter has explored the gendered nature of witchcraft accusation, as well as the origins and characteristics of anti-witchcraft activities. The complex nature of this belief system often perplexed Europeans in the Gold Coast which was reflected in colonial legislation. The following chapter looks at the colonial interaction during the interwar period and highlights governmental confusion over the supernatural beliefs of Africans.



## Chapter 2: Colonial Intervention

Prior to 1850, the British government's control extended only as far as the coast. There the British built forts to facilitate trade, provide defense, and to use as living quarters. Originally, the British took a stance that they would not intervene with local customs as long as they were not deemed as violent, disruptive, or as a threat to the subjects of the Crown. However, with the establishment of the Gold Coast Colony and Protectorate in 1874, the British began intervening more directly in the affairs of the local people. In order to protect the public from what they considered superstition, the British passed a series of contradictory laws that increased anxiety about witchcraft. Despite the active legal role the British took against witchcraft, the continued unwavering fear of witchcraft showed that belief in the supernatural remained free from colonial law.<sup>35</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, the British colonial government extended British rule into surrounding towns near the coast and expanded north, challenging the chiefs and the local customs. The colonial government sought to abolish threatening customs in order to protect local subjects from the fear of witchcraft, to promote the spread of Christianity, and to "civilize" the local people. Prior to colonial rule, individuals declared guilty of witchcraft were "executed, exiled, sold into slavery, or cleansed at a shrine depending on the judgment of their community."<sup>36</sup> In 1874, the British prohibited witch-finding methods such as corpse-carrying, "a form of divination in which men would carry a shrouded body, and, if witchcraft or magic

<sup>35</sup> For an overview, see Roger Gocking, *History of Ghana* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), ch. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Natasha Gray, "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law: Evolving Anti-Witchcraft Practices in Ghana, 1927-1932" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 2 (2001): 340.



caused the death, the spirit of the deceased would subtly guide the carriers to the responsible party.”<sup>37</sup>

In 1908, the British colonial government declared the first ban on the anti-witchcraft cult known as *Aberewa* or “old woman” on the grounds that “its observance tended towards the commission of crime.”<sup>38</sup> *Aberewa* resembled other witch-finding movements of the time in that it contained a strict moral code, an oracle to identify misconduct, and a medicine to protect against a variety of misfortunes.<sup>39</sup> The British colonial government accused the priests of *Aberewa* of extortion and of mishandling corpses. The government remained skeptical of the priests’ accumulation of riches, which they personally acquired from initiation fees, fines from misconduct, as well as the seizure of personal property of adherents killed by the spirit of *Aberewa*. Colonial officials called *Aberewa* priests frauds for taking advantage of the local people’s fear of the supernatural to obtain wealth. However, political reasons stood at the forefront of why the colonial government outlawed this cult since it feared the strong following that it possessed within the local population. Over the next twenty years, the British colonial government banned multiple cults and monitored any cult that resembled the structure of *Aberewa*. Yet, government officials came to realize that these laws did not function as they had planned.

Instead of decreasing the fear of witchcraft, legislation banning witch-finding movements caused anxiety amongst local people. Initiates of the criminalized cults believed that “banned gods retained their power to punish them severely if they did not atone for violations of

---

<sup>37</sup> Natasha Gray, “Independent Spirits: The Politics of Policing Anti-Witchcraft Movements in Colonial Ghana, 1908-1927” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35, no. 2 (2005): 145.

<sup>38</sup> Gray, “Independent Spirits,” 145.

<sup>39</sup> Gray, “Independent Spirits,” 143.



movement rules.”<sup>40</sup> The people of southern Ghana were stuck in a precarious position. If they continued to worship their gods, they would be breaking the laws of the colony which could result in fines or imprisonment. On the other hand, if initiates followed the laws and abstained from satisfying the needs of their gods, they risked punishment for breaching their movement’s rules. As Gray has argued, the colonial government’s efforts to curb fear of the supernatural ironically increased the necessity for supernatural protection since Africans could not appease their gods.<sup>41</sup>

The colonial government established eradication campaigns that focused on upholding the £25 fine for continual participation in anti-witchcraft movements, as well as confiscated any ritual items of the banned movements. Colonial officials and missionaries expected that “seeing ritual objects burned would convince the public that they had no power.”<sup>42</sup> Despite such government efforts, the belief in anti-witchcraft spirits remained active. In order to appease the state as well as their gods, many individuals chose to worship secretly. Since the government did not have sufficient police forces or the support of local chiefs, the anti-witchcraft movements continued to exist despite the legislation banning their existence. According to Gray, the British became hesitant to prohibit these movements because they feared the risk of appearing powerless, when local Africans ignored their authority.<sup>43</sup>

In 1927, the colonial government passed the Native Administration Ordinance (NAO) which made the practice of witchcraft illegal, punishable by a £50 fine. The Ordinance forbade “the practice of witchcraft, or the possession of any poisonous, noxious, or offensive thing with

<sup>40</sup> Gray, “Independent Spirits,” 139.

<sup>41</sup> Gray, “Independent Spirits,” 139.

<sup>42</sup> Gray, “Independent Spirits,” 146.

<sup>43</sup> Gray, “Independent Spirits,” 152.



intent to use such thing to endanger or destroy human life, or to hurt, aggrieve, or annoy any person.”<sup>44</sup> Further, this Ordinance placed the power to judge witchcraft cases in the hands of the Gold Coast Native Tribunals, African courts formalized by the British colonial government to extend customary law. Native Tribunals often sought advice from oracles because witchcraft dealt with the supernatural and as a result, little physical evidence existed that could be used to decide a case. As the Provincial Council of Chiefs from the Central Province explained, “it is impossible for the ordinary person to find out Witchcraft, except by certain Native Doctors, who, by extraordinary medical skill and experience have the means of discovering it.”<sup>45</sup> Further, the extension of witchcraft into the criminal code of the Native Tribunals gave them the authority to compel suspects of witchcraft, including Christians, to be tested at oracles.<sup>46</sup> Thus, anti-witchcraft shrines became an informal component of the judicial system established by the colonial government.

Since the British established the Native Tribunals and gave them the power to judge on witchcraft cases, the misconduct of the courts ultimately became the government’s liability. Given that the Tribunals were forcing Christians to be tested for witchcraft at oracles, the “British government was indirectly forcing Christians to violate their religious beliefs.”<sup>47</sup> Protestant missions protested that the Native Tribunals compelled their followers to participate in oracle practices which could result in abusive treatment. They had to deal with “head shavings, beatings, and ‘hooting’ or the angry denunciations of the crowd.”<sup>48</sup> The Roman Catholic mission

---

<sup>44</sup> Gray, “Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law,” 349.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Gray, “Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law,” 349.

<sup>46</sup> Gray, “Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law,” 349.

<sup>47</sup> Gray, “Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law,” 349.

<sup>48</sup> Gray, “Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law,” 351.



rejected the referrals of Tribunals to allow their members to be tested at oracles.<sup>49</sup> As a result, Christians pressured the colonial government to change their policies through complaints and seeking refuge in colonial courts.

The press became extremely involved in this dispute and pressured the government to take action. During this period, two individuals accused of witchcraft in connection with the *Tongo* shrine, decided to commit suicide instead of facing punishment. Daniel Holdbrooke, an 89 year old man, was accused by Kobina Owusu, a priest of the *Tongo* shrine, for paralyzing his eldest daughter using witchcraft. Holdbrooke denounced Owusu's claim but when his family invited the priest back to their home, Owusu hung himself.<sup>50</sup> The press highlighted the controversial nature of these cases, as well as other stories of terrible mistreatment at the shrines. For example, an elderly woman was forced to keep her face towards the ground for ten hours as a test for witchcraft at a *Tongo* shrine.<sup>51</sup> Since the government did not want to be considered responsible for any of this abuse, it decided to take action.

In December 1930, the Executive Council of the Gold Coast passed legislation which reversed the 1927 law that outlawed the practice of witchcraft. The Native Customs (Witch and Wizard Finding) Order-in-Council No.28 of 1930 stated that "the practice of witch or wizard finding and any ceremony connected therewith is prohibited and any person taking part or instigating any person to take part in any such ceremony shall be liable to a fine not exceeding twenty-five pounds."<sup>52</sup> Thus, individuals who claimed to be witches could no longer be

---

<sup>49</sup> Gray, "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law," 351.

<sup>50</sup> Gray, "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law," 354.

<sup>51</sup> Gray, "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law," 355.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Gray, "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law," 357.



disciplined. However, the priests and other witch-finders could now be prosecuted. Furthermore, Native Tribunals no longer held the authority to judge witchcraft cases.

Following the passage of the Native Customs Order, the debate surrounding witchcraft became even more heated. Individuals contested that this new legislation veiled the witch and increased tension amongst the local people, because they had been stripped of their customary methods of diminishing witchcraft. Witches could now act freely without legal repercussions. Further, many priests and members of witch-finding movements were unaware that the government had declared their actions illegal. Gray describes how the priest of the *Tongo* shrine, Kobina Assifu, requested the presence of Provincial Commissioner Applegate and District Commissioner J. C. Warrington at a witch-finding ceremony, unaware that this activity had been banned. After attending the ceremony, Warrington sent Assifu a copy of the new legislation.<sup>53</sup>

Soon after receiving the copy of the Witch and Wizard Finding Order, Assifu hired J. B. Danquah, a prominent Ghanaian lawyer educated in England, to push the government to reform the new law. First, Danquah declared that the Order should be interpreted loosely. Since Native Tribunals no longer possessed the authority to force accused witches to attend oracles, Danquah argued that individuals who willingly visited an oracle to free themselves from the witchcraft spirit, should not be restrained from exercising their religious beliefs through this law. Otherwise, Order 28 left individuals in fear for their lives and with no right:

To consult a legitimate native doctor versed in the practices of witchcraft to analyze the cause of the person's troubles by a process of psycho-analysis, and to find remedies for

---

<sup>53</sup> Gray, "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law," 358, emphasis in original



the BELIEF, whether groundless, hallucinatory or not, which that person entertains in regard to his own health and well-being.<sup>54</sup>

Danquah made it clear that whether or not witchcraft existed, the belief and resulting fear of witchcraft was a reality. The only way to lessen the anxiety was through oracles. Further, Danquah employed a discourse that equated the work of oracle priests with Western biomedicine, making his argument compelling to outside observers. Danquah's sharp approach struck home, and the colonial government reformed the Native Customs Order in 1932 to include voluntary witchcraft confession and cleansing. According to Gray, the change in this law "made a decisive contribution to the eventual transformation of witch-cleansing from a coercive, quasi-judicial process driven by accusation into a voluntary, therapeutic practice centered on confession" in Ghana.<sup>55</sup>

Originally, the Gold Coast government claimed that local customs would be respected unless they interfered with natural justice.<sup>56</sup> However, the colonial government took an active role in prohibiting activities associated with the supernatural. This interference reached a height between 1927 and 1932 when the colonial government passed a series of contradictory laws which sought to decrease the fear and violence associated with witchcraft. Despite the severity of the punishments under this legislation, the belief in witchcraft withstood the power of the law. During this time period witchcraft became a topic of increasing importance as reflected in the discussions occurring both within Gold Coast newspapers, as well as internationally.

<sup>54</sup> Allman and Parker, *Tongnaab*, 174.

<sup>55</sup> Gray, "Independent Spirits," 153.

<sup>56</sup> Gray, "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law," 363.



### Chapter 3: The Public Debate on Witchcraft in colonial Ghana

In 1932, the Christian Council of the Gold Coast issued “The Report on Common Beliefs with Regard to Witchcraft,” as well as a challenge to witchcraft, sparking a debate amongst literate Gold Coast readers that dominated the pages of the daily newspaper, *The Times of West Africa*. These articles illuminated the unique readership that existed then in the Gold Coast as both educated Africans and non-Africans submitted their views to local newspapers. The opinions of Gold Coast readers were far from homogenous, as writers examined the validity of the Report and branched into discussions on the nature of witchcraft. The debate surrounding witchcraft in the Gold Coast did not occur in isolation. Rather, the topic received attention internationally, as Christians came together across the world to discuss how to eliminate Africans’ fear of witchcraft.

The Report on Witchcraft published by the Christian Council of the Gold Coast derived from the research of a sub-committee that was composed of members of the English Church Mission, the Methodist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Presbyterian Church.<sup>57</sup> Africans constituted the majority of the Christian Council, reflecting the growing Africanization of Protestant churches. A number of Africans had previously been trained for leadership roles in mission churches. By the 1930s, missionaries had accelerated the program to establish self-supporting Churches which left Africans in charge of many decisions. Yet, foreign missionaries retained their executive authority because they felt that the continuing power of traditional religion and customs required their direction. The sustained presence of European missionaries created tensions, as African and foreign interests conflicted and local leaders sought the ultimate independence of their churches. The Presbyterian Church of the Gold

---

<sup>57</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 175.



Coast provides the perfect lens to analyze this transition period. After 1918, all of the major decisions within this Church were made by the Synod, the supreme court of the Church which was composed of a majority of Africans. Missionaries continued to manage the Central Fund, all of the church revenues, and the educational administration. Only in the late 1950s, did Africans take over the executive positions in these key areas.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the churches that composed the Christian Council were in a state of transition when they began their inquiry into witchcraft in 1932.

The Christian Council published its views 14 months after the passage of the Native Customs Order which had made witch and wizard finding illegal. The Report recognized and upheld the government's recent rulings on witchcraft, stating that the legislation followed "the example of civilised people" and saved innocent individuals from injustice.<sup>59</sup> Yet, as shown above, this law did not decrease the anxiety about witchcraft amongst the people of the Gold Coast. In fact, many Christians continued to participate in anti-witchcraft activities due to their fear of the supernatural. As a result, the Christian Council disseminated its Report to enlighten the minds of the community on the "dark and difficult question" of witchcraft and to advise and reassure Christians.<sup>60</sup>

The first part of the Report does not address whether witchcraft existed or not, but rather recorded the recognized beliefs regarding witchcraft. The Christian Council declared that Africans acknowledged two types of witchcraft: for obtaining wealth and for destroying life. Characteristics of witchcraft included: witchcraft could be inherited at birth or acquired later in life; female witches were more common than male; witches were organized in "non-material

<sup>58</sup> Noel Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1966), 159.

<sup>59</sup> "Witchcraft In The Crucible: The Christian Council Report." *The Times of West Africa*, January 28, 1932.

<sup>60</sup> "Witchcraft In The Crucible."



groups”]; and that witchcraft was practiced solely amongst members of a family.<sup>61</sup> These characteristics mirror the accepted beliefs recorded by colonial anthropologists.

In its Report, the Christian Council argued that the belief in witchcraft rarely depended on the personal experiences of the individual. Rather, Africans believed in witchcraft because other people accepted its existence and passed on accounts of witchcraft occurrences. The Council claimed that “stories of what witches do or have done are accepted by those who do believe without proper foundation.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, the Council deemed that the fear in witchcraft was unrealistic because it was not built on firsthand experiences.

The Christian Council also addressed the highly debated topic of how accused witches should be treated in the Gold Coast. The Christian Council claimed that “if they are witches they should be considered the children of God and they deserve not only condemnation but pity and compassion.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, a dualistic view of witchcraft existed amongst the Christian Council. Although witchcraft opposed Christian belief, the Council maintained that witches deserved sympathy. In order to decrease Christian’s fear in witchcraft, the Report advocated that individuals should place their trust in Christ.

The challenge to witches became the most controversial aspects of the Report. The Christian Council declared that it would pay £10 to any individual who could perform one of the following tasks in front of a committee selected by the Council:

- 1) To “eat” a pawpaw [papaya] or some other fruit selected by the Committee, at a distance of five yards without any sort of physical contact with it. (By “eating” is to

---

<sup>61</sup> “Witchcraft In The Crucible.”

<sup>62</sup> “Witchcraft In The Crucible.”

<sup>63</sup> “Witchcraft In The Crucible.”



be understood the causing of the inside of the fruit to disappear as if it had been eaten).

- 2) To extract from a sealed box without breaking the seal an article deposited in it by the Committee.
- 3) To transform himself into any beast or bird or creeping thing.<sup>64</sup>

Essentially, the Christian Council sought visual evidence that witchcraft existed. By designing a test under their own terms that was required to be completed in the presence of a trusted committee, the Christian Council prevented any probability of deceit.

The *Times of West Africa* article that outlined the stance of the Christian Council referred to witchcraft as an “abstruse science,” recognizing not only the confusion over the subject, but also foreshadowing the heated debate that was provoked amongst literate Africans following the issuance of the challenge to witches.<sup>65</sup> Over the course of the next six months, literate Africans as well as foreigners living in the Gold Coast analyzed this challenge, questioned the relationship between witchcraft and Christianity, witchcraft and science, and attempted to determine what the proper course of action should be to lessen the fear in witchcraft.

### *The Gold Coast Debate: Seeing is Believing*

Local newspapers provide a window into the witchcraft debate that occurred amongst the reading public living in the Gold Coast in reaction to the Christian Council’s Report. A series of articles show that discussions regarding witchcraft crossed racial lines, as Africans and Europeans living in the Gold Coast directly engaged with one another through newspapers. The discourse used by these writers reflects the attempt by both Africans and Europeans to grapple

<sup>64</sup> “Witchcraft: A Challenge.” *The Times of West Africa*, January 29, 1932.

<sup>65</sup> “Witchcraft In The Crucible.”



with the complex belief system. Specifically, the authors attempted to draw connections between witchcraft and Western science, creating a tangible explanation for foreigners, as well as in some ways legitimating the belief in witchcraft.

Only days after the printing of the Report, *The Times of West Africa* published the first of many reactions. On February 2, 1932 “Zadig” published in his daily column “Diary of a Man About Town” an analysis of the Report. According to historian Jinny Prais, “Zadig” was actually a penname for the prominent lawyer and future Gold Coast nationalist, J.B. Danquah.<sup>66</sup> This connection seems credible because prior to 1932, Danquah had been actively involved in the legal defense of local practices against government intervention. Specifically, Danquah defended both the *Bruku* and *Nkona* shrines in 1927 against government repression.<sup>67</sup> Further, Danquah actively denounced the 1930 Native Customs Order that made witch-finding illegal, because Africans were left without a way to release their intense fear of witchcraft. As a result, Danquah became the main proponent of the reform that occurred in 1932 which allowed for voluntary confession and treatment of witches. It is important to note the beliefs and actions of Danquah in regards to witchcraft in order to understand the argument of “Zadig.”

Initially, “Zadig” played both sides of the fence, discussing the interpretations of the intentions of the challenge from the supporters’ and the opponents’ point of view before defending his own oppositional stance to the challenge. Those in support believed that the test would prove to the people of the Gold Coast whether witchcraft actually existed or not. However, the other side of the argument was that the challenge should never have come from the Christian Council, because its leadership did not believe in witchcraft. Thus, the Christian

---

<sup>66</sup> Jinny Kathleen Prais. “Imperial Travelers: The Formation of West African Urban Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in London and Accra, 1925-1935.” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), 209, n. 448.

<sup>67</sup> Allman and Parker, *Tongnaab*, 173.



Council should not be interested in trying to disprove belief in the supernatural, when its leadership did not officially believe it existed.

According to "Zadig," the challenge represented the Christian Council's fundamental misunderstanding of the practice of witchcraft. He argued that the principal mistake of the Council was that the design of the test suited magicians and not witches. Witchcraft, he explained, was a non-material practice that took place in the spiritual realm. For example, "when one hears that a witch has taken the arm of a child one is never called upon to see the arm physically broken off. The believers believe that it is done 'spiritually.'"<sup>68</sup> Thus, witchcraft was not practiced in the tangible form, which the Christian Council's challenge designed to test. Further, "Zadig" points out that witches would never come forward to participate in the challenge because they belonged to a secret society. Only its members held the knowledge of the policies and regulations of their society. Thus, witches would not want to participate in a public display of their powers, making the Council's challenge pointless. "Zadig" highlighted the complicated nature of witchcraft that was apparent in the Christian Council's Report.

"Zadig" argued that the Challenge to witchcraft threatened the growing importance of science. If a witch ate the pawpaw or transformed into a beast, accepted scientific theories would be broken. These scientific laws were fundamental, especially amongst educated Europeans, as a foundation to ideas of modernity. He inquired, "What happens to the great theories and systems upon which science has built up, and upon which the modern world is advancing in the conquest of nature in the air, in the seas, and on land?"<sup>69</sup> The proof of witchcraft held the potential to destroy the scientific theories that colonial powers upheld as one of the key aspects of progress

---

<sup>68</sup> Zadig, "Diary of a Man About Town: The Challenge to Witches," *The Times of West Africa*, February 2, 1932.

<sup>69</sup> Zadig, "Diary of a Man About Town."



and modernization. Zadig's concern for science sparked a debate about the position of witchcraft in regard to science.

Zadig also analyzed the relationship between the challenge and Christianity. He claimed in his article that the challenge to witches actually tested Christians. If the Christian Council believed that witchcraft was connected to the devil, "why should primitive Christians in this country be called upon to witness a diabolical performance of the Great Enemy? Would it help the advancement of Christianity in this fetish beridden country?" He took the stance that if a witch successfully performed the challenge, it would not have the desired outcome of the Church. Instead, it would destroy the progress of Christianity in the Gold Coast.<sup>70</sup> Thus, Zadig retained an oppositional stance to the challenge by the Christian Council of the Gold Coast because it represented their lack of understanding on the subject of witchcraft and threatened the belief in Christianity.

Charles Deakin, an Englishman and the founder of the Engineering School at Achimota College, refuted "Zadig's" statements and upheld the credibility of the Christian Council's challenge. In his opinion, the public witchcraft test would provide Africans in the Gold Coast with the visual evidence for if witchcraft really existed or not. Deakin countered Zadig's article by emphasizing that the challenge should not waver people's belief in science. He declared that "Science is in an impregnable position, for it does not close its eyes to any facts. It treats new facts with suspicion until they are firmly established, and then does not rest until its theories can embrace them."<sup>71</sup> If a witch successfully completed the challenge, these powers would be accepted as new facts to science. He concluded by asserting that "Science has nothing, and the

---

<sup>70</sup> Zadig, "Diary of a Man About Town."

<sup>71</sup> Charles Deakin, "Witchcraft and Science." *The Times of West Africa*, February 5, 1932.



Christian religion little, to fear from the investigation of things in which 95% of Africans already firmly believe, though, as I think, irrationally.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, it is clear that Deakin held the skepticism of the majority of foreigners regarding the belief in witchcraft.

Deakin opposed Zadig’s belief that the challenge posed a threat to Christianity. Instead, if the challenge was successfully completed, “the churches [would] know their enemy better and be better able to combat him. If false, his power over the superstitious will be very much weakened and the Christian very much strengthened.”<sup>73</sup> Deakin refuted the belief that witchcraft could be connected with the devil. He claimed to believe in the devil but that this power of evil could not be exercised in the form of witchcraft. Ultimately, Deakin supported the Christian Council’s challenge and felt that the test would strengthen the power of Christianity in the Gold Coast.

Zadig would not allow Deakin’s statements to be printed uncontested. He refuted Deakin’s statement that science treated facts with suspicion. Instead, he declared that when a belief is proven to be fact it is accepted as scientific knowledge. Zadig claimed that “A scientist never asks that a fact should be ‘firmly established’ - If he does that then the so called ‘fact’ is not really a fact but a theory, a hypothesis or a belief.” Thus, science is not suspicious of facts, but rather theories. As a result, Zadig argues that “Any belief which cannot find a place in the body of facts called science is regarded with suspicion and treated as a false belief or theory.”<sup>74</sup> He further argued that witchcraft fits under this category and as a result, science viewed it doubtfully and regarded it as a fictitious belief.

Following the debate between Zadig and Deakin concerning the relation of witchcraft to science, *The Times of West Africa* printed an article by a science student signed M.J.F. It can be

<sup>72</sup> Deakin, “Witchcraft and Science.”

<sup>73</sup> Deakin, “Witchcraft and Science.”

<sup>74</sup> Zadig, “Witchcraft and Science.” *The Times of West Africa*, February 5, 1932.



deduced from the writing that the initials M.J.F. stood for the colonial anthropologist, Margaret J. Field. During the 1930s, Field carried out research on behalf of the Gold Coast government and became interested in the prevalence of anti-witchcraft shrines. In 1940, Field conducted a study on the *Kundi* shrine, located in Ada, on behalf of the government after accusations of violence, unrest, and extortion. Field defended the practices of *Kundi*, calling the rites “simple and harmless” and declaring that the shrine had a healthy influence on the town of Ada.<sup>75</sup> During her time in the Gold Coast, Field noted the correlation between mental illness and witchcraft activities. Her interest in the subject led her to obtain a medical degree and study clinical psychiatry before continuing her research and publishing the book, *Search for Security*, which documents the connection between psychology and witchcraft.<sup>76</sup> Thus, it is highly plausible that the articles published in 1932 under the initials M.J.F. represent Margaret J. Field’s early observations of witchcraft belief.

M.J.F. declared that science would not discredit witchcraft. Instead, the fields of psychology and psychotherapy have the tools to create an understanding of the processes of witchcraft. Witchcraft, M.J.F. claimed, is a natural affair and that there is “nothing fundamentally incredible about witchcraft—except “supernaturalness.”<sup>77</sup> M.J.F. launched into the debate by describing in lengthy detail how a person could, without touching him, make “the muscles of [his] face and diaphragm, to be convulsed violently and loud, uncontrollable and irrational sounds to issue from [his] throat.” The display of laughter, M.J.F. explained, is no more plausible than what is described as witchcraft. Yet one is categorized as a natural occurrence, while the other is described as supernatural.

---

<sup>75</sup> Margaret J. Field- “Memorandum on ‘The Fetish Kundi,’” January 12, 1940, (PRAAD).

<sup>76</sup> Margaret J. Field, *Search for Security* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1960).

<sup>77</sup> M.J.F., “Science Student’s Sermon of Witchcraft,” *The Times of West Africa*, March 31, 1932.



M.J.F. connected the budding science of psychology with witchcraft. Psychology, she explained, is brushed aside by the other disciplines of science. Yet, the field was conducting research in untouched territory by studying the unusual states of consciousness, and particularly hypnotism. John Elliotson, a medical doctor who experimented with hypnotism, made assertions that hypnotism was a natural phenomenon. M.J.F. felt that hypnotism was no different from bewitchment and thus these discoveries provided a glimpse into the processes of witchcraft. However, M.J.F. took a step back by stating “it is mere speculation that points to the psychologist as the final deliverer of witchcraft from its scorners, its misusers and its imposters.”<sup>78</sup> M.J.F. concluded by questioning if determining the exact nature of witchcraft would have any impact on its entrenched position in Africans lives. In this article, M.J.F. explained that Africans were “discouraged and estranged” by the Christian Council’s denial of the existence of witchcraft. She noted that they have “a right to be a little shocked at such a demonstration of human stupidity by people who are, presumably, here to demonstrate the potential nobility of all mankind.”<sup>79</sup> Although M.J.F. denounced the actions of the Christian Council, she also pointed to common colonial discourse of the colonizers as superior and the embodiment of civilization.

Zadig quickly replied to M.J.F.’s article, stating in a brief statement his disagreement with her beliefs. He was not convinced that “there is any possibility of the word ‘scientific’ being applied to the form in which we Africans take to be the manifestation of the craft of the witch or

<sup>78</sup> M.J.F., “Science Student’s Sermon of Witchcraft.”

<sup>79</sup> M.J.F., “Science Student’s Sermon of Witchcraft.”



wizard.”<sup>80</sup> Zadig's comment reflects that the belief in witchcraft is complicated and cannot merely be explained through a comparison to Western science.

The discussions within *The Times of West Africa* in response to the Christian Council's Report are significant for several reasons. First, these articles illustrate how the debate regarding witchcraft involved both Africans and Europeans living in the Gold Coast. Although African voices are largely omitted from the published scholarship by outsiders, these articles prove that Africans played a prominent role in discussions on witchcraft. Further, these articles reflect that the opinion of foreigners was not homogenous, because whereas Deakin stood in full support of the challenge, M.J.F. defended witchcraft practices and pointed out the senselessness of the Christian Council. Finally, the language employed by these writers reflects the struggle of finding terminology that reflects the complex beliefs regarding the supernatural. The attempt to associate witchcraft with science and Western biomedicine represents the struggle to grasp the complicated characteristics of witchcraft and find a discourse that would make these beliefs understandable to foreigners. This issue occurred not only within the Gold Coast, but extended internationally as the International Missionary Council attempted to understand the complexities of witchcraft in order to develop a plan to combat the ingrained fear of witchcraft amongst Africans.

### *The International Response*

The debate surrounding witchcraft did not occur in isolation. Instead, such discussions on witchcraft had transnational implications. Witchcraft became a topic of interest at the World Meeting of the International Missionary Council at Tambaram, India in 1938, as well as at the

---

<sup>80</sup> Zadig, "Diary of a Man About Town."



Conference on African Marriage Customs, Witchcraft and the Separatist Churches held in New York City in 1939. These conferences reflect the major concern mission societies and churches possessed about witchcraft. Moreover, the fear of witchcraft required definite research and action to combat its influence. In response to the tensions within the Gold Coast and missionary concerns regarding witchcraft, Hans Debrunner's published *Witchcraft in Ghana*. This book encompasses the missionary discourse of the 1930s and 1940s and became one of the most influential additions to the debate on witchcraft in Ghana.

In December of 1938, 471 participants from 69 countries or colonial territories gathered at Tambaram, India for the World Meeting of the International Missionary Council.<sup>81</sup> The International Missionary Council was established in 1920 as a result of the World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910 which focused on international and interdenominational collaboration. At the time of the Tambaram Conference, the International Missionary Council contained fourteen groups from "sending" countries and twelve councils of churches from colonial territories, such as the Christian Council of the Gold Coast.<sup>82</sup> The Tambaram Conference focused on the development of younger churches, including those in the Gold Coast, as a part of the universal Christian community. Present at the meeting were fifteen African delegates from across the continent. For the first time, attendants of the conference became "conscious not only of Africa but of Africa's place in the Christian community."<sup>83</sup> In special groups meetings, participants pondered the Christian churches' attitude towards polygamy,

---

<sup>81</sup> International Missionary Council, *The World Mission of the Church* (London and New York: The International Missionary Council, 1939), 2.

<sup>82</sup> International Missionary Council, *The World Mission of the Church*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> International Missionary Council, *The World Mission of the Church*, 11.



witchcraft, and separatist churches in Africa. The conference participants felt that it was essential to find a common position in regards to African social customs.<sup>84</sup>

Witchcraft became one of the key topics amongst African delegates. Specifically, discussions about witchcraft focused on how to help rid Africans from the fear of evil forces. According to Christian Goncalves Baëta, an African Reverend from the Gold Coast, witchcraft continued to exist because educated individuals and Christians believed in evil forces. In order to rid Africans of the fear of witchcraft, Baëta declared that a universal education system must be set in place. Mina Soga, a South African delegate, advocated for the extension of scientific education.<sup>85</sup> Almost all delegates agreed that education was fundamental to the elimination of witchcraft belief.

Despite the general agreement of the delegates on the necessity of education, the delegates diverged in their discussion regarding the reality of witchcraft and its position in relation to the Church. One group of delegates declared that witchcraft existed. In order to protect African Christians from their fear of witchcraft, they emphasized the necessity of creating a trust in God. This belief fell in line with the views of the Christian Council of the Gold Coast which advised that fearful Christians should place their faith in God.<sup>86</sup> Other delegates declared that “in a Christian view of the world belief in the reality of witchcraft can have no legitimate place.”<sup>87</sup> According to the latter group, the faith in God was not enough to destroy the belief in evil spirits. Instead, the Christian Church must focus on using the school system to instruct on scientific medical treatment, hygiene, and the principle of cause and effect.<sup>88</sup> Thus, even amongst

---

<sup>84</sup> International Missionary Council, *The World Mission of the Church*, 128.

<sup>85</sup> Frieder Ludwig, “Tambaram: The West African Experience,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31 (2001): 2.

<sup>86</sup> “Witchcraft In The Crucible.”

<sup>87</sup> Ludwig, “Tambaram: The West African Experience,” 2.

<sup>88</sup> Ludwig, “Tambaram: The West African Experience,” 2.



Africans, a large divide existed on the most effective method to overcome the belief in witchcraft.

In order to obtain a better understanding of witchcraft in Africa, delegates concluded that more research into the subject was necessary. An appeal was made on behalf of the churches of the Gold Coast for the Committee of the International Missionary Council to undertake a group of studies "vitally affecting the inner life and integrity of the Christian churches in Africa."<sup>89</sup> The other African delegates stood in support of such a study. This request sparked a series of round-table discussions in New York and London amongst anthropologists, medical experts, missionaries, and other officials with experience in Africa on the topics of marriage, witchcraft, and the separatist churches in Africa.<sup>90</sup>

The 1939 Conference on African Marriage Customs, Witchcraft and the Separatist Churches in New York was held in response to the request of African delegates at the Tambaram Conference. Like in Tambaram, the Conference focused on the topics of polygamy and marriage customs, witchcraft, and the separatist church movement in Africa. In the beginning of the session, Dr. Edwin Smith, a South African who acted as the chairman of the Conference and held missionary experience in Africa, called attention to the fact that the African delegation never put into writing a request for a study of witchcraft at the Tambaram Conference.<sup>91</sup> Instead, the appeal had been made for a study on polygamy. Despite the absence of a request for research to be conducted on witchcraft by African delegates at Tambaram, the participants at the New York Conference felt that the topic required discussion.

---

<sup>89</sup> J. Merle Davis, "A Memorandum on the Proposed Study of African Marriage Customs," May 1946, International Missionary Council Archives 1910-1961, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT.

<sup>90</sup> J. Merle Davis to Whitney H. Shepardson, "Some Observations upon a Proposed African Marriage Customs Project," October 23, 1946, Yale Divinity School.

<sup>91</sup> "Conference on Witchcraft" New York, 1939, 6, Yale Divinity School.



During the Conference, delegates outlined the 1932 Report published by the Christian Council of the Gold Coast on witchcraft. The minutes of their meeting provides greater detail on the Report than was provided in the article within *The Times of West Africa*. First of all, they made it clear that the members of the Christian Council of the Gold Coast who launched the challenge were predominantly Africans. Further, the Report asserted that the Christian Council was more concerned with the beliefs themselves than the truth or falsehood of witchcraft. Finally, the Report recommended that the Christian Council should cooperate with the government to get rid of witchcraft.<sup>92</sup> This shows that Africans in the Gold Coast also played a prominent role in denouncing the belief in witchcraft.

Members of the New York Conference who had attended the Tambaram Conference noted that a particular rift existed between African Christians and foreign missionaries. Missionaries tended to curtail the belief in witchcraft whereas Africans were adamant that witchcraft was an “objective reality.”<sup>93</sup> A Reverend L. A. Brown opposed this statement and claimed that Africans disliked when foreign missionaries admitted that there was some real power associated with witchcraft. Regardless of this debate, it was agreed upon that most foreign anthropologists and missionaries who went to Africa were unwilling to admit that witchcraft does not exist.

One of the central debates during the Conference was in regards to the correct method that should be used to eradicate the fear in witchcraft. Reverend Theodore E. Bubeck, a Baptist with missionary experience in Africa, felt that Christianity held the power to rid Africans of the fear of witchcraft. He claimed that “when there is the most happy Christianity in the Church in

---

<sup>92</sup> “Conference on African Marriage Customs, Witchcraft, and the Separatist Churches,” New York, December 9, 1939, 5, Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies (Herskovits Library), Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

<sup>93</sup> “Conference on African Marriage Customs, Witchcraft, and the Separatist Churches,” 5, Herskovits Library.



his region of Africa, the questions of witchcraft never arise, but where the morals of the Church is low, these questions rise.”<sup>94</sup> He explained that only during times of disaster did Africans revert to witchcraft but if Christianity was present, the forms of witchcraft were not terrible. A Dr. A. L. Piper suggested that the belief in witchcraft could be reduced not only through the spread of Christianity but also with the extension of the theories of science and natural phenomenon. J. Merle Davis, a future proponent of studies on African customs, suggested the substitution of the belief in witchcraft with the love of Christ. Regardless of the mode of action to eliminate witchcraft belief, a general consensus was deemed that they “should not condemn the African too much, since the practice of witchcraft is heard of even in the West.”<sup>95</sup> Despite the fact that the majority of participants of the New York Conference held experience in Africa, their opinions varied greatly on a strategy to combat the influence of witchcraft beliefs.

The fact that no physical evidence existed continued to pose a problem to the foreigner delegates minds. In order to garner a deeper understanding of witchcraft, Dr. Smith, the chairman of the New York Conference, declared that more research was necessary since witchcraft “is one of those things that remains in the mind of the African longest.”<sup>96</sup> The three questions that the proposed study sought to answer were: “How widespread is the belief in witchcraft? How can the fear of witchcraft be eliminated? Should witch finders be the ones to suffer?”<sup>97</sup> Dr. Daniel J. Fleming, a professor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, suggested that the study needed to be conducted by open-minded researchers and focus on a scientific analysis of witchcraft.<sup>98</sup> Further, the studies required the help of African leaders.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>94</sup> “Conference on Witchcraft,” 9, Yale Divinity School.

<sup>95</sup> “Conference on African Marriage Customs, Witchcraft, and the Separatist Churches,” 6, Herskovits Library.

<sup>96</sup> “Conference on African Marriage Customs, Witchcraft, and the Separatist Churches,” 5, Herskovits Library.

<sup>97</sup> “Conference on Witchcraft,” 6, Yale Divinity School.

<sup>98</sup> “Conference on Witchcraft,” 7, Yale Divinity School.



In order to move forward with the proposed study, delegates to the New York Conference sought financial support from relevant groups. As part of an appeal to Dr. Keppel of the Carnegie Corporation, J. Merle Davis outlined the specific plans of their project. He explained that the delegates wanted to establish two studies that would explain marriage customs, witchcraft, and separatist churches. The first center would be created at Achimota College, in the Gold Coast, and the other at either University of Witwatersrand or Fort Hare College, in South Africa. These institutions would take an interdisciplinary approach by setting up a “joint action of college and Church men, and to include the trained anthropological approach, the experience of the missionary leader with the Church and the point of view of the Christian African.”<sup>100</sup> This shows that the delegates viewed Africans as important contributors to the potential studies.

Despite the request of African delegates at Tambaram and the creation of a plan for research by the delegates at the New York Conference, no actual studies were immediately undertaken in regards to the study of witchcraft. Supporters of the studies could not find the financial means necessary to conduct the research because resources were devoted to World War II efforts. The Carnegie Trustees declined a grant for the proposed research, because there was a “general policy that they had accepted of taking up no new Africa studies because of the war in Europe.”<sup>101</sup> Further, commitments had already been made for the study of Latin American churches.<sup>102</sup> Thus, primarily as a result of the outbreak of World War II, the studies pertaining to witchcraft were dropped.

---

<sup>99</sup> “Notes of an Informal Discussion,” White Plains, NY, December 10, 1939, 1, Yale Divinity School.

<sup>100</sup> J. Merle Davis to Betty Gibson, May 6, 1940, Yale Divinity School.

<sup>101</sup> J. Merle Davis to Betty Gibson, Yale Divinity School.

<sup>102</sup> J. Merle Davis, “A Memorandum on the Proposed Study of African Marriage Customs,” 3, Yale Divinity School.



In 1946, the International Missionary Council revived the original appeal of the African delegates at Tambaram for an inquiry into African customs and their effect on Christian churches. The language used to describe the necessity of this research mirrors the continuous debate in written scholarship that focuses on the relationship between witchcraft and modernity. Davis, the main advocate of the project, stated that "The peril to the modernization of Africa lies in the transition period in which the people abandon the old society before they can really enter a reconstructed society."<sup>103</sup> Colonization had rapidly altered traditional African life by influencing politics, economics, industrial development, social organization, religion, and morals. According to Davis, Africans needed to abandon their traditional values before they could accept the new systems, such as Christianity, that had been introduced from the outside world. Further, Africans could only survive this transition period if an effort was made by both Church and the government to modify their practices to encompass the necessary elements of African culture. As a result, the International Missionary Council reasserted the necessity for research into African customs. The discourse used by these missionaries reflects the common belief of foreigners that local African customs, including witchcraft, could not withstand the forces of development.

The resulting project developed by the International Missionary Council diverged from research on witchcraft and supernatural beliefs. Instead, the initiative deemed The African Marriage Customs Project, focused purely on the research of traditional African marriage organization, particularly polygamy, and its influence on the Christian Church in Africa.<sup>104</sup> It was determined that the progress of the Church as well as government in Africa revolved around the African institution of marriage. Thus, the scope of the project centered solely on African

<sup>103</sup> J. Merle Davis to Whitney H. Shepardson, Yale Divinity School.

<sup>104</sup> J. Merle Davis to Whitney H. Shepardson, "Some Observations upon a Proposed African Marriage Customs Project," Yale Divinity School.



marriage systems and as a result the International Missionary Council veered away from the topic of witchcraft.

However, research on the topic of witchcraft did not remain untouched for long. In fact, the monumental book *Witchcraft in Ghana*, published in 1961 by Hans Debrunner, developed in response to the debates occurring in the Gold Coast and internationally during the 1930s and 1940s. Although further research had been halted by the International Missionary Council on the topic of witchcraft in Africa, Debrunner declared that it was his “duty to study it on behalf of the Church.”<sup>105</sup> As a result, Debrunner published one of the earliest monographs that focused specifically on the witchcraft beliefs of the Akan. *Witchcraft in Ghana* mirrors the language used in both the Gold Coast and international debates in regards to witchcraft. Specifically, Debrunner emulates the missionary discourse of J. Merle Davis who believed a chaotic transition period must occur in which Africans struggle to move away from their traditional customs before accepting more modern systems. Debrunner explained that the advent of Christianity would produce instability for a short period of time but ultimately, “the deterioration of paganism, like a hollow husk, must inevitably follow.”<sup>106</sup> Further, Debrunner’s beliefs also fall in line with Margaret J. Field, as he attempts to draw a connection between witchcraft and science. Debrunner does not completely deny the belief in witchcraft but rather explained that it is a pathological feature of Akan culture that requires further research from the psychological angle. Debrunner’s work is of great significance because it provided the foundation for future studies and opinions regarding witchcraft in Ghana.

---

<sup>105</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 2.

<sup>106</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 178.



The inclusion of witchcraft into discussions at both the International Missionary Council at Tambaram, India in 1938 as well as the Conference on African Marriage Customs, Witchcraft and the Separatist Churches held in New York, United States in 1939 reflect that the debate surrounding witchcraft did not occur in isolation in the Gold Coast. Rather, witchcraft was considered a major concern to Christianity, the mission project, and garnered international attention. The tensions surrounding witchcraft in the 1930s and 1940s directly influenced Debrunner's study on witchcraft.



## Conclusion

The debate surrounding witchcraft is not a recent development but rather has been continuous since colonial times. In the 1930s the tensions surrounding witchcraft increased, as governmental laws controversially reversed former legislation that made witchcraft illegal and instead banned witch-finding. Anxiety surrounding witchcraft heightened, as Africans were left without methods to appease their outlawed gods who provided protection against witchcraft. The Christian Council which was composed primarily of Africans, responded to this fear by producing a Report and challenge to witchcraft in order to provide guidance to Christians. Instead of providing the final answers in regards to witchcraft, the Report sparked a lively discussion between Africans, as well as European contributors who lived in the Gold Coast. This debate not only dominated newspapers, but also extended into a global context. This paper argues that Hans Debrunner's book, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, developed as a product of these discussions and perpetuated missionary discourse that witchcraft would evaporate with the transition to modernity. This discourse is not only reflected in the misleading stereotypes about Africa today but also veils foreigners to the dynamic nature of witchcraft and its important role in African modern society.

One of the prominent debates that dominates literature surrounding witchcraft in Ghana is the discussion of the belief regarding witchcraft and modernity. Previous scholars emphasized that witchcraft and other established African practices would disappear under the forces of development and modernization that derived from contact with Europeans. More recently, scholars have suggested that witchcraft is not merely a traditional practice but rather a belief system that has become intertwined with the processes of modernization. All of the scholars



involved in these debates, however, are not Ghanaians. Thus, the debate occurs at a distance and rarely acknowledges the views of Africans.

Through the use of local newspaper articles from *The Times of West Africa*, this research focused on zooming in on the debate surrounding witchcraft within the Gold Coast and examining the local perspective. These articles were written in response to the Christian Council's Report (1932) and illustrated that discussions surrounding witchcraft crossed racial lines, as Africans and Europeans living in the Gold Coast engaged directly with one another. Within these articles, writers' struggled to find a common language that accurately reflected the complexities associated with the supernatural. One significant attribute of these articles was the association developed between witchcraft and science. By connecting witchcraft with science, these authors placed witchcraft in a modern scientific discourse that helped foreigners better understand the complex nature of witchcraft.

The debate surrounding witchcraft did not occur in isolation. Instead, witchcraft became a topic of international attention in the 1930s and the early 1940s. Delegates at both the International Missionary Conference at Tambaram in 1938, as well as at the African Marriage Customs, Witchcraft and the Separatist Churches held in New York City in 1939, regarded witchcraft as a serious threat to the Christian missions in Africa and as a result, strived to develop a plan to eliminate the fear of witchcraft. One of the important aspects of these discussions is that Africans actively participated in the debate on witchcraft. African delegates requested an inquiry by the International Missionary Council into African customs that affected the Christian church in Africa at the Tambaram Conference. This appeal set the stage for the ensuing conference held in New York which focused on developing a strategy to tackle the question of witchcraft. Yet, despite efforts to conduct research on witchcraft in order to curb



Africans fears, the International Missionary Council chose to focus research into studies of marriage customs in Africa and the topic of witchcraft went unanswered.

This thesis demonstrates that the monumental book *Witchcraft in Ghana*, by Hans Debrunner, developed in response to the debates on witchcraft occurring in the Gold Coast and internationally in the 1930s and 1940s. Debrunner claimed upfront in his book that he conducted his research for the Presbyterian Church. His book continued the missionary discourse of earlier times as he asserted the eventual fall of witchcraft beliefs to modernity. Debrunner's work is significant because it provided the foundation for future studies and opinions regarding witchcraft in Ghana.

The missionary discourse employed in *Witchcraft in Ghana* is at the root of many ethnocentric stereotypes that continue to exist about Africa today. Missionary discourse emphasized that witchcraft and other African customs would disappear with the processes of modernity. This concept is central to foreigner's misunderstanding about Africa. Even the use of the term "witchcraft" connotes backwardness, primitiveness, and exoticness. The problem is that these ideas are derived from a discourse that was used to justify white colonization of Africa. Thus, this language is outdated and does not accurately reflect the realities of life in Africa.

Despite the common perception reflected in missionary discourse that witchcraft would disappear under the pressure of modernity, the belief in witchcraft continues to exist in Ghana today. Witchcraft belief not only withstood the impact of development but has become intertwined with modern life. Peter Geschiere displays in *The Modernity of Witchcraft* that "Indigenous concepts have adapted in response to new distributions of power and of goods



brought about by capitalism and state bureaucracy.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, witchcraft is not an ancient belief but rather a dynamic and efficient practice that fits into the modern context. In order to better understand the complexities of witchcraft belief in Ghana, it is important to liberate ourselves from the missionary discourse of the past and to recognize the versatile nature of witchcraft and the important role it maintains in modern Ghana.

<sup>107</sup> Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), ix.



## Bibliography

### ***Primary Sources***

#### Archives

Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL (Herskovits Library)

International Missionary Council Archives, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT (Yale Divinity School)

Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana (PRAAD)

#### Serials

*Daily Graphic*, 2011-2012

*Ghanaian Times*, 2011-2012

*Times of West Africa*, 1930-1932

### ***Secondary Sources***

Allman, Jean, and John Parker. *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.

Debrunner, Hans. *Witchcraft in Ghana*. Accra: Presbyterian Book Depot LTD, 1961.

Field, Margaret J. *Search for Security*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1960.

Geschiere, Peter. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997.

Gocking, Roger. *History of Ghana*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005.

Gray, Natasha. "Independent Spirits: The Politics of Policing Anti-Witchcraft Movements in Colonial Ghana, 1908-1927." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35, fasc. 2 (2005): 139-158.

Gray, Natasha. "The Legal History of Witchcraft in Colonial Ghana: Akyem Abuakwa, 1913-1943." PhD diss., Columbia University, 2000.



- Gray, Natasha. "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law: Evolving Anti-Witchcraft Practices in Ghana, 1927- 1932." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 2 (2001): 339-363.
- Hasty, Jennifer. *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- International Missionary Council. *The World Mission of the Church*. London and New York: The International Missionary Council, 1939.
- Ludwig, Frieder. "Tambaram: The West African Experience." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31 (2001): 49-91.
- McCaskie, T.C. *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Miescher, Stephan. *Making Men in Ghana*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Newell, Stephanie. "Articulating Empire: Newspapers in Colonial West Africa." *New Formations* 73 (2001): 26-42.
- Perbi, Akosua Adoma. *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004.
- Prais, Jinny Kathleen. "Imperial Travelers: The Formation of West African Urban Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in London and Accra, 1925-1935." PhD diss., University of Michigan, n. 448, 2008.
- Smith, Noel. *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1966.
- Truxler, Laura A. "From Wise Woman to Mutilated Hag: Witchcraft Violence in Ghana." Master's Thesis. Florida Atlantic University, 2006.



