

WITCHCRAFT, GOSSIP AND DEATH: A SOCIAL DRAMA

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Witchcraft among the Kwahu of Ghana is by no means a public affair. Most accusations are expressed in a secretive way and take the form of gossip. In this article an attempt is made to reach a deeper understanding of witchcraft by viewing it in the light of gossip theory. A detailed account of a single case, supplemented by more general information, suggests that rumours of witchcraft: (1) are exchanged between members of one group, (2) centre around people with whom a close social relationship exists and (3) who have more power than those who spread the rumours, (4) are utilised to further personal interests, and (5) tend to be opposed to modernisation. Special attention is paid to the position of women by investigating why women are accused of witchcraft much more frequently than men.

I believe that the comparative analysis of such nightmares is not merely an antiquarian exercise but one of the keys to the understanding of society.

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I

An enormous amount of literature has been written by anthropologists on witchcraft since Evans-Pritchard's classical study of witchcraft among the Azande. Mary Douglas distinguishes two directions among them. Some of the writers, such as Evans-Pritchard himself, saw witchcraft accusations as a means to explain the inexplicable. These studies should be classified as sociology of knowledge. Others, such as Marwick (1965), Mitchell (1956) and Turner (1954) looked at witchcraft from a political point of view. They 'interpreted the accusation of witchcraft primarily as an instrument for breaking off relations' (Douglas 1970: xxi).

In most studies, with the exception of Evans-Pritchard's pioneer study, witchcraft accusations take on a rather formal character. They are presented as unequivocal public statements, often prompted by a diviner or oracle, which set in motion a clearly defined set of social forces.

During a six months' research project carried out amongst the Kwahu, an Akan sub-group in Ghana, I found that witchcraft accusations in that society were far from formal public affairs. Most accusations were expressed covertly, some could hardly be called accusations and I toyed with the idea of substituting the terms 'suspicion' and 'suspector' for the widely used terms 'accusation' and 'accuser'.

Witchcraft accusations were further characterised by many conflicting versions and it would have been incorrect to select one as the 'official version'. All of them should be studied in their own context and given due attention. Beidelman expressed the same idea when he asked, 'How many have compared different interpretations of the same case by the various protagonists, such as the accused, the

accuser, the reputed victim, the various relatives and neighbours concerned?' (Beidelman 1970: 354).

Among the Kwahu gossip is the outstanding feature of witchcraft accusations and suspicions. A study of witchcraft should therefore take into account some of the characteristics of gossip. Gluckman wrote an exploratory paper on 'Gossip and scandal' (Gluckman 1963) in which he describes the social function of gossip. He quotes Elisabeth Colson, who states that among the Makah Indians gossip and slander reassure norms and values which cannot be expressed in any other way (Colson 1953: 228). One of the most important observations made by Gluckman is that gossip follows the structure of the group in two respects, namely whom the gossip is about and between whom the gossip is transmitted. Concerning the former he says, 'The important things about gossip and scandal are that generally they are enjoyed by people about others with whom they are in close social relationship' (1963: 313), and about the latter, 'The right to gossip about certain people is only extended to a person when he or she is accepted as a member of a group or set. It is a hallmark of membership. There is no easier way of putting a stranger in his place than by beginning to gossip: this shows him conclusively that he does not belong' (1963: 313). . . . 'The more exclusive a group is, the more will its members indulge in gossip and scandal about one another. And the more persistently will they repeat the same gossip again and again without getting bored' (Gluckman 1963: 315).

The relation between gossip and social norms has been further spelled out by Epstein in two articles on social networks in an urban situation (Epstein 1969*a*; 1969*b*). Epstein points out that societal norms and values are implicit in most gossip conversation. One additional remark by Epstein will prove to be particularly relevant to the topic of this article. 'To be talked of in one's absence, in however derogatory terms, is to be conceded a measure of social importance in the gossip set; not to be talked about is the mark of social insignificance, of exclusion from the set' (Epstein 1969*a*: 113).

Gluckman's functionalist view of gossip has been criticised by Paine (1967) and others. Paine stresses that gossip should not merely be seen as an involuntary phenomenon which keeps society going. Gossip is a purposive attempt by individuals to forward their own interests. A discussion of the various positions in the anthropological ideas on gossip and a bibliography can be found in Handelman (1973).

This short review brings out five main characteristics of gossip:

1. It reinforces norms.
2. It is transmitted between members of one group.
3. It centres around people with whom a close social relationship exists.
4. To be the butt of gossip is an indication of social importance.
5. Gossip is utilised to forward personal interests.

In this article I attempt to show how Kwahu witchcraft beliefs and gossip are intertwined. By doing so we hope to throw some new light on the theory of witchcraft. We will do this by the way of social drama. An event of misfortune in a rural community is presented and some people's reactions to this event are analysed.

One remark. It is generally accepted that gossip and similar types of information transmission play a more prominent role in a rural setting than in an urban one. In the village it is one of the few forms of social entertainment. Radin made that observation as early as 1927 when he—in the language of his time—wrote ‘Primitive people are indeed among the most persistent and inveterate of gossips’ (quoted by Gluckman 1963: 307). The ‘bush telegraph’, as many people have come to realise, is indeed surprisingly well developed.

There are indications that this high degree of development is also reflected in the language. In Twi, for example, there are terms for different kinds of verbal communication which do not exist in English and can only be described with much pain. This aspect of gossip, however, lies outside the scope of this article.

II

The research on which this article is based focused mainly on one single matrilineage in the Kwahu area of Ghana. The reason why such a narrow basis was chosen was that I wanted to collect more accurate information on certain phenomena such as divorce, inheritance and witchcraft accusations. Particularly with respect to witchcraft accusations, this proved a very successful experiment, because many accusations and suspicions were detected which would have remained hidden in a large scale survey. The accusations uncovered underlying tensions in the kin relationships, and *vice versa*, the kin relationships threw some interesting light on the accusations.

To an outsider the frequency and intensity of witchcraft accusations in the lineage is staggering. A complete survey of the entire lineage would most likely reveal that nearly every member is somehow involved in witchcraft, as an accuser, a victim, or as a witch. Because it was not possible to interview each member on the issue, we have no definite figures on how frequent witchcraft accusations really are. Furthermore, it should be taken into account that members who declined to talk about witchcraft are in fact the strongest believers and probably most involved. It was this very fact that prevented them from freely talking about it. For them the issue was too embarrassing and too shameful. This was frequently confirmed by information from other members. It is, therefore, difficult to indicate the frequency of witchcraft accusations in the lineage under study. In total I collected seventy-one accusations in a population of about 115. Many of these are duplicates or different versions of the same root accusation. To get a more accurate picture of the degree of witchcraft involvement in the lineage I isolated in one section of the lineage two generations which have been most intensively interviewed. They comprise thirty people, ten dead and twenty alive. From these twenty only three have not been interviewed about witchcraft. If we omit these three we can state that out of twenty-seven members of the two generations only two (one dead, one alive) were not in any way involved in a witchcraft case. This would give a ‘witchcraft involvement rate’ of 92 per cent. It is particularly significant that such a high proportion of the dead (nine out of ten) were mentioned in witchcraft accusations. Some were mentioned as victim, some as witch and some as both. It shows that witchcraft plays an important role in ‘explaining death’, which will be spelled out further in the course of this article.

The most shocking aspect of witchcraft accusations is, however, not their high frequency, but the fact that they tend to occur between very close relatives. This is no news, for the same has been recorded by many anthropologists in other parts of Africa (e.g. Marwick 1965) and elsewhere, but the absolute absurdity of it only dawns on one, when one knows all the people personally.

The two following tables show kin relationships between accuser and witch and between witch and victim respectively in the seventy-one recorded witchcraft accusations.

TABLE 1. Reciprocal kin relationships between accuser and witch in a Kwahu lineage (Bleek, 1975: 346; percentages in brackets)

| | |
|-----------------------------|----------|
| ego — mother | 3 (4) |
| ego — sibling | 5 (7) |
| ego — MZC | 12 (17) |
| ego — MB | 4 (6) |
| ego — MZ | 6 (8) |
| ego — grandparent* | 9 (13) |
| ego — more distant relative | 28 (39) |
| ego — affine | 4 (6) |
| total | 71 (100) |

* Anyone called 'Nana' by ego, in the same section. *Nana* is any relative of the second ascending generation.

TABLE 2. Reciprocal kin relationships between witch and victim in a Kwahu lineage (Bleek 1975, 348; percentages in brackets)

| | |
|-----------------------------|----------|
| ego — mother | 11 (20) |
| ego — sibling | 12 (22) |
| ego — MZC | 7 (13) |
| ego — MB | 2 (4) |
| ego — MZ | 3 (6) |
| ego — grandparent | 7 (13) |
| ego — more distant relative | 7 (13) |
| ego — affine | 4 (7) |
| ego — ego | 1 (2) |
| total | 54 (100) |
| no victim mentioned | 17 |
| final total | 71* |

* Except for two cases, ego = victim.

The two tables bear out the fact that close kin relationships are indeed very easily contaminated with witchcraft accusations. This applies particularly to the witch-victim relationship. Mothers and siblings are the first to be suspected of witchcraft when someone, whether young or grown up, falls sick or dies. If, further, we take into account that one's mother's sister is felt to be one's mother and is addressed accordingly, and one's mother's sister's child is likewise considered one's brother

or sister, we come to the conclusion that, according to table 1, twenty-six out of seventy-one accusations (37 per cent.) occur between ego and 'mother' and ego and 'brother or sister'. By the same token, table 2 indicates that thirty-two out of fifty-four accusations (59 per cent.) accuse 'mothers' and 'brothers or sisters' of bewitching their 'child' or their 'brother or sister' respectively (one case is reversed).

It should, however, be noted that this aspect of witchcraft accusations—the tendency to occur between close relatives—is less clearly brought out in the social drama presented in this paper.

Strangely enough, witchcraft accusations do not necessarily originate from conflicts, as this article may suggest. Their occurrence is more mysterious and obscure. Actual conflicts may pass without any allusion to witchcraft and—outwardly—peaceful relationships may prove to be riddled with witchcraft suspicions.

Furthermore, witchcraft accusations in the lineage were found to be mainly launched by the young against the old, probably because of the overbearing attitude of the old towards the young. And finally, migration proved to produce a sharp decline in witchcraft involvement. Witchcraft accusations thrive best where people stay closely together, sharing both occupational and domestic affairs. Several proverbs underline this, such as, 'Fear the one who is close to you' and 'Only the insect in your own cloth will bite you'.

After these preliminary remarks on witchcraft in general, let us now look at the events of the social drama which gave rise to so many conflicting accusations and suspicions.

III

The actors in this social drama are Kwahu. The Kwahu are a sub-group of the matrilineal Akan in Ghana and they are closely related to the better known Asante (Ashanti). As in most matrilineal societies, Kwahu marriage is characterised by conflicting interests in the wife, between the husband on the one side and the wife's relatives on the other side. These tensions not infrequently find an outlet in open quarrels during which the wife has to choose one or other side.

The events we want to study here took place in 1969 in a rural town on the Kwahu Plateau in Ghana, but their root cause stretched back to 1967. In that year a certain Amo (see figure 1) who is the head of the royal matrilineage in town got into conflict with one Osei (see figure) over a piece of land. The conflict developed into an exchange of abuses and threats and a few light blows. This Osei was in fact the brother-in-law of Amo as his—Osei's—wife, Oforiwa, was Amo's classificatory sister (MMMMZDDDD). Besides, Oforiwa owed respect to Amo as her lineage head.

In spite of this kin relationship, Oforiwa took the side of her husband against her 'brother' and lineage head. The quarrel became a police and, finally, a court case and all the time Oforiwa kept to her husband's side. Their daughter Mercy, also a member of Amo's lineage, even gave evidence against Amo at the police station. Communication between them and Amo stopped altogether. Most other members of the lineage tried to keep out of the way and pretended not to know about the affair. Some members, however, used the opportunity to rebel secretly against Amo who was disliked by many members of the lineage, particularly those of

Oforiwa's section (see figure). Accusations that Amo was misusing family capital for his own ends and was not really interested in the welfare of the members of the lineage were commonly heard.

Two years later Oforiwa fell suddenly sick and died two days later in the hospital. When Amo was informed about her death he renounced her as his 'sister' and refused to bury her. This resulted in a couple of long and tense sessions of the family court and Oforiwa was finally buried by Amo after pacification had been made by Osei on behalf of his wife.

My concern in this short essay is: how did people respond to Oforiwa's death, or more precisely: how did people explain her sudden death? Accusations of witchcraft or other forms of evil power are ill-defined. Many conflicting theories may exist as to why this dreadful event took place. Rumours start to spread, coming from different sources and following different channels till they meet at some point, where people can make up their mind as to which version is the most plausible and acceptable. Perhaps they do not select any particular one but lump them altogether and hand the 'news' over to the next person. In addition the story will be slowly distorted and exaggerated resulting in a very complex pattern of rumours, suspicions, accusations and slander.

My intention is to locate some of the rumours surrounding Oforiwa's death which were picked up by me. I shall first have a look at who voiced the rumour and how this person is related to Amo and Oforiwa. Figure 1 will be helpful in understanding the sometimes complex set of relationships.

1. MARY: *Place in the social network*

The royal clan of the town is divided into two lineages which both claim to be the rightful heir of the stool. There is considerable tension between the two lineages whenever stool affairs are discussed, but on other occasions they appear as one lineage. Sometimes they claim a common ancestress, sometimes a different one. Both have a different head. Amo is the head of the one lineage and Mary, who is about twenty-five years old, is a member of the other lineage. Mary has personal feelings against Amo whom she believes to be a wicked and very stingy person. She will never set her foot in Amo's house.

The accusation

'Amo has killed his "sister" Oforiwa. He is a wicked man. About ten years ago one of Amo's nephews had a quarrel with him and insulted him. A short while later the body of the nephew was found hanging on a tree in the cemetery. People said that the man had been killed before and that the dead body had been brought to the place to suggest suicide. The tyres of a car could be seen on the ground. Everybody knows that it was Amo who killed him. He is rich and can do whatever he wants. So, he called two men and gave them money to get rid of his nephew. The whole town knows this, but nobody dares to say it because they are afraid of Amo. And now the same thing has happened again.

'After the quarrel between Amo and Osei Oforiwa told Amo, "Don't do to us what you did to that other man". Amo replied, "If you die, you will not enter my house", after which Oforiwa said, "and if you die, I will not enter your house either". Now Amo's prophecy has come true, because Oforiwa's body was not brought to Amo's house, as everyone had expected, but to her step-mother's. Everybody knows that Amo killed Oforiwa, but no one will speak.'

Comment

Mary's story reached me through someone else, from whom she elicited a promise 'to tell nobody else'. She seemed very afraid of Amo and, although I had several interviews with her later on, I never brought up this matter again.

The story seems commonly known in Mary's lineage and she has heard most of it from her mother. Her rumour was probably the explanation which was most widely spread throughout the town, although not necessarily the one most believed. I heard several people, some of them outsiders, giving their opinion about it in secret. Some believed it was true, others rejected it. Explanation for its wide spread probably lies in the case of ten years ago which horrified people to such an extent that it became known throughout the area. At that time Amo was the focus of much rumour and was even taken to the police station but later on released. People whisper that he bribed the police with an enormous sum of money. It should further be noted that Amo, as head of the royal clan, is a public figure in the town, so that many people have some kind of relationship with him.

Mary seems to accuse Amo of outright murder and not of witchcraft or any other kind of mystical action.

2. BRIDGET: *Place in the social network*

Bridget is about seventeen years old. She is not related to Amo in terms of kinship. Her mother used to be the mistress of a tenant in Amo's house. Sometimes, when her mother went to spend the night with this man, Bridget came along and slept in the same room on the floor, although she was then around fifteen years old. One night, a year ago, her mother 'clashed' with another woman in the man's room. That woman was a 'niece' (MZDD) of Amo. The two women started to fight and Amo came to his niece's help. Since that time her mother has been at loggerheads with Amo as well as with the tenant and she has not returned to Amo's house ever since. Her mother, Bridget says, is afraid of Amo, because she knows that he is a witch.

The accusation

Bridget believes that Amo is a witch and has something to do with Oforiwa's sudden death. 'Amo is a witch. In the night he becomes very active and the lower part of his body changes into that of a fish. My mother, one night, went outside to urinate and saw him. She ran away for fear. Because she was in his power, she could not see whether he had changed into a fish or not.'

Comment

Bridget's accusations are indirect and originate from her mother who enjoys slandering the one she hates. Bridget is a typical example of someone who wants to impress others with some really 'interesting stuff'. It should however be recalled that this is a characteristic of gossip in general.

The tenant mentioned above confirmed that Amo used to be a witch. He added that he had sometimes seen him at night sitting naked or walking through the town. He was, however, convinced that Amo had stopped practising witchcraft about six years ago, when a prophet took the power away from him. He does not believe, therefore, that Amo killed Oforiwa.

Bridget's, or rather, her mother's story seems to be confined to a small group of 'insiders'. The conclusion of the story, that Amo killed Oforiwa by witchcraft, is not accepted by everyone.

3. KOFI ANIM: *Place in the social network*

Anim, who is twenty-six, is Amo's classificatory nephew (MMMMZDDDDS), but his relationship to Oforiwa is much closer (MZDS). Besides, Anim is Amo's step-son. This unique combination of two conflicting roles, uncle and father, came about through the fact that Anim's real father was a slave who was given in marriage to one of Amo's classificatory sisters. When he died the family decided to take back his property and gave it to one of the elders. When this man died he was succeeded by Amo. So Amo is legally Anim's father.

Anim's complaint is that Amo takes no interest in him and the other children of his mother, neither in his capacity as father nor in that of lineage head. He says, 'Amo does not help us at all. When my brother got in trouble with a girl and incurred a debt of 600 cedis, Amo did not pay a pesewa. My mother paid the whole amount herself. She had the money ready because she wanted to build a house. That's no longer possible now.' Anim, his mother and her other children bear a grudge against Amo, and are rarely seen in his house.

The accusation

'Even though Amo is the head of an Apostolic church, he is a witch. He uses the church as a cloak to cover his evil practices. I also believe that Oforiwa's death has something to do with her quarrel with Amo. I am sure that he knows more about her death. This is my own opinion but I have also heard it from other people in the family. I have not heard it outside the family.'

Comment

Anim himself adds that he heard the story only from lineage members. This is not surprising. It is not likely that an outsider will tell a lineage member that his lineage head is a witch. This kind of gossip will rather remain within certain circles and not cross the borderline between members and non-members. Furthermore, in spite of ill feeling towards their lineage head, members will think twice before informing others that their head is a witch. 'Domestic affairs are not like dirty linen which is washed and dried in an open place', says a proverb.

Anim used the opportunity to side with Oforiwa who was much closer to him in kinship terms and to defame Amo against whom he bears a grudge.

4. KOFI ASANTE: *Place in the social network*

Asante is Oforiwa's first born from a previous marriage. He is about twenty-four and has spent most of his life with his maternal uncle (MB), about 150 miles away from his mother and the lineage. This geographical distance prevented him from becoming involved in the conflict between his mother and the lineage head. He pretends that he did not even know about it. Now that his mother was dead, there was no reason for him to choose her side and accuse Amo. After all, Asante's relationship with Osei, who was not his father, was rather loose. Moreover, Amo's help and goodwill as head of the lineage would be very much needed in connection with the settling of the inheritance. So Asante's story about his mother's death is strikingly ambiguous.

The accusation

Asante and his uncle arrived the day after Oforiwa had been buried. A member of the family had been sent to them with the news and they had come along with him immediately. Asante, who is a taxidriver, told Amo and the elders on his arrival that he hit a cow with his taxi on the very day that his mother died. The cow died but the taxi was not spoiled. So, he concluded, witches must have changed his mother into a cow for her son to kill her.

Comment

Asante's story spread throughout the town and gave rise to many speculations. Asante stressed the work of the witches. It would be ridiculous, argued my research assistant, to assume that Oforiwa turned herself into a cow. It is clear that evil powers did this so that she might be killed by her own son. Asante, however, put himself in a dangerous position by his story. It is not uncommon in Kwahu belief for a son to kill his mother in order to get her money. Although we have no evidence, it is likely that a number of people in the town leaned to that interpretation. Asante's story is a typical example of an accusation which may ramify into many different versions.

Why did Asante bring his story after all? Part of the explanation must probably be sought in the dramatic effect it had. Coming from afar to attend such an event calls for something spectacular which can attract the attention of the lineage elders and suits the already emotion-laden occasion. So Asante brought his story about the cow. His uncle's message to the elders could be compared to it. He said, 'when X arrived to inform me about the death of my sister, I was weeding behind my house and I had just cut myself with the cutlass. But as soon as I heard the news, the wound stopped bleeding.' This is another theatrical way of expressing how he was struck by the news and how much he had loved his sister. It was found that most people had an extraordinary talent for 'acting' whenever the occasion called for it.

5. KWAKU ANTWI: *Place in the social network*

Antwi is around forty. His kin relationship to Amo and Oforiwa is similar to Anim's, but in contrast with Anim, he has a much better understanding with Amo. Antwi is one of the

few in Oforiwa's section of the lineage who frequent Amo's house and pay due respect to the lineage head. and we suspect that he is casting a sheep's eye at the position of the lineage head. We were not able to trace his feelings towards Oforiwa before her death, but during the funeral he expressed a deep love for her. This, however, is not surprising. Everybody attending a funeral will try to demonstrate that no one is more grieved by this death than he or she. It is probably in this light that we must see his exclamation.

The accusation

During Oforiwa's funeral, just before the coffin was going to be closed and emotions had reached their zenith, Antwi pushed himself to the front. He looked haggard and bewildered. His state was partly caused by excessive drinking and partly by genuine grievance, a familiar sight to anyone who has ever attended an Akan funeral. He stood over the coffin and spoke loudly to the deceased with a tone of anger in his voice, 'You fell ill only a short while ago and now you say you are dead. Why is it that a human being should die? It was only your stomach that pained you a short while ago and now you say you are dead. When you go, let us all see who killed you. Let us see him (her) tomorrow so that everybody will know him (her). The point is, that when a human being dies, that is the end, but how should such a person die without a reason? Without anyone knowing about it?'

Comment

Antwi's statement was not so much an accusation as an expression of desperation. He may not have had anyone in mind, but expressed a general philosophy of life and death: death is the end, but why? Why should someone die without a reason?

Others, however, may have taken it as a covert accusation of someone in the crowd, someone who knew that it was meant for him (her). This kind of insinuation is called in Twi 'Akutia'. A proverb says, 'Akutia knows its master', meaning, 'the person for whom it is meant will understand'.

Here again we have an example of a theatrical performance, resulting in an obscure and equivocal statement which may trigger off several suspicions and insinuations.

6. NINA: *Place in the social network*

Nina, eighteen years old, is the daughter of one of Amo's wives, but she is not Amo's daughter. The woman divorced Nina's father before she married Amo. Nina stays with her mother in Amo's house. Her position in the house is somewhat ambivalent. She knows much about Amo's lineage, since all the cases are settled in the house for her to hear, but is at the same time an outsider as she does not belong to Amo's lineage, nor to his conjugal family. Although Amo has no legal authority over her, she fears him. At times she keeps her distance from him, and at times she sides with him.

The accusation

When we asked Nina about the cause of Oforiwa's death she answered that members of the family (*abusuafo*) may have cursed her. She added that there are so many old women in the family that anyone could be suspected.

Comment

Nina speaks in general about old women in the lineage but there is one old lady in particular who is by many believed to be a witch. She is Amo's mother and it is not unlikely that Nina thought of her, but did not want to reveal her name for fear of the old lady. It is generally held that this old woman is behind many things in the lineage and manipulates her son. When Osei two years ago was asked about the cause of the quarrel he replied, according to Nina, 'is it not the son of that old woman, Amo with his ugly head?'

7. KOFI AMO: *The accusation*

Amo's position in the general network of relationships has been spelled out sufficiently. It was extremely difficult to approach Amo directly on the matter of Oforiwa's death. On one occasion, however, he let himself go. We were conversing about a case of spirit possession which took place during the funeral and we asked his opinion about it. First he seemed to

doubt that the person had been really possessed, but then he changed his mind and remarked, 'It might be true that the girl was possessed by the spirit of the deceased, because the deceased was a witch. The spirit of no decent person will ever possess anyone when he (she) dies.'

Comment

On the surface Amo's remark does not refer to the cause of Oforiwa's death. It should however be noted that a witch does not only kill others, but may well be killed herself by some 'medicine' because of her witchcraft. In the lineage under study 33 per cent. of the witchcraft accusations referred to such cases (Bleek 1975: 373) where the witch was killed or affected by some serious disease. To make a statement shortly after someone's death that she was a witch is tantamount to saying that she was killed because of her witchcraft or, as people say, that she was 'caught by medicine'. Amo's remark therefore is clearly such an accusation. His accusation is the only one in its kind; no one else made such a remark.

Amo must have been aware of the rumours against him. The whole situation pointed to him as the suspect. When two people are at loggerheads and one dies suddenly, the other one's involvement is naturally suspected. Amo's counter-accusation was an attempt to shrug off these suspicions. As a matter of fact, his remark did not sound very convincing. It was rather an empty accusation and almost simply abusive.

8. *Another rumour about Oforiwa's death*

It is remarkable that hardly anyone in the town thought of giving a more 'scientific' explanation of Oforiwa's death. There is however one 'scientific' explanation which is frequently heard at cases of sudden death of women in the town, but which has lost much of its scientific character and has become a new type of 'myth'. The explanation is that the woman has died after having induced an abortion. Induced abortion, which most often is performed by quack doctors or by the pregnant women themselves (cf. Bleek n.d.), is frequently practised. Abortion is a favourite topic for gossipmongers in the town. It satisfies the need for sensation which is an inherent part of gossip. In Oforiwa's case attempted abortion was considered briefly by some people (no one of the lineage) but this view was quickly rejected. Oforiwa's last born were twins and women are eager to give birth again after having had twins to get a *Tawia*, as they call it.

IV

The eight recorded rumours around the death of Oforiwa show that 'explaining the inexplicable' plays an important role in all the accusations. People are not so much interested in the physical cause of her death but in what Evans-Pritchard has called 'the socially relevant cause'. This is, however, not the only factor; people do not only want a socially relevant explanation, they also want a *dramatic* explanation, an exciting one. A dry medical report does not satisfy them unless it carries some sensational content like attempted abortion. Particularly during funerals people want to be shocked and to shock others by saying and doing the most extravagant things. This link between witchcraft accusations and excitement is also made by Beattie in his paper on sorcery among the Bunyoro when he writes that the excitement of the seances is a welcome change from the drab of everyday life (Beattie 1963: 50-1), and by Kluckhohn (1944) about Navaho witchcraft.

It has further become clear that witchcraft is not the only explanation available. In the above social drama explanations included murder, witchcraft, cursing, killing by 'medicine', and attempted abortion. It is not always easy to draw a clear demarcation line between witchcraft and non-witchcraft. Witchcraft is only one of the many possible obscure and mystical attacks by evil and people do not necessarily distinguish between them. It is therefore dangerous to force witchcraft into a dogmatic strait-jacket and impose upon it an artificial rigidity that is not held by the people themselves.

The eight rumours demonstrate that factional tensions, conflicts, feelings of hatred and dislike, and so forth, shape to a great extent the content and direction of the accusations. The opportunity is seized upon to tarnish the reputation of the enemy or to take revenge on some suffered injustice. The enemy may be among the living, but he/she may also be one of the deceased.

The most enigmatic aspect of witchcraft accusations is, however, that they occur between close relatives, that 'the enemy is within' (Winter 1963), or that the 'enemy' is not an enemy. Marwick was one of the first to explain this puzzling quality by pointing at a latent function of witchcraft: witchcraft accusations, according to him, are launched against people who cannot be attacked in the court or through other agencies that regulate tensions. Such people are close relatives. Marwick's hypothesis implies that accusations always occur between people who are enemies or arise as a consequence of conflicts. In Kwahu, however, many conflicts between close relatives are never ventilated through witchcraft accusations and many witchcraft accusations cannot be traced back to any form of conflict or tension (see Bleek 1975: 353). Affection for a person may even go along with accusations of witchcraft and animosity with absence of such accusations (Bleek 1975: 354). This whimsical character of witchcraft accusations may be explained better with the help of the ideas about gossip.

If we view witchcraft accusations as a form of gossip, the fact that they occur between members of one group and sometimes between close relatives, becomes intelligible. We have seen that gossip thrives best under the same conditions. It vividly illustrates the ambiguity of human relationships. They are characterised by attraction and repulsion simultaneously. It also explains why accusations of witchcraft are not expressed to outsiders. The mere fact that they are outsiders excludes them from the witchcraft-set, as it excludes them from the gossip-set. A third characteristic of witchcraft accusations in Kwahu is that they rarely come into the open. Most of them remain secretly uttered suspicions. The fact that they seldom develop into public accusations becomes understandable in the light of what Gluckman (1963: 313) says about gossip: 'You must scandalise about an opponent behind his back' and not to his face, because 'insults of this kind, if open, make impossible the pretence of group amity'. If gossip (*in casu* witchcraft accusations) is spread in such a manner people 'who are actually at loggerheads can outwardly maintain the show of harmony and friendship' (cited by Paine 1967: 279).

The question why gossip takes the form of witchcraft accusations has not yet been answered but the social drama presented in this article gives an important clue. Witchcraft rumours tend to arise after events of misfortune. Such events, as we have said, call for a 'socially relevant cause'. The occasion enables the members of the community to fabricate rumours which explain the misfortune and which at the same time satisfy their desire to gossip. In a rural society where little happens that is worth gossiping about, witchcraft provides a large arsenal of topics, which lend themselves to gossip and which cannot be refuted by facts.

One aspect of gossip seems particularly relevant to the understanding witchcraft accusations. We have phrased this aspect thus: To be the butt of gossip is an indication of social importance. The rumours around Oforiwa's death support this proposition; in four of them a person of social importance is the butt of gossip.

Three people accused Amo, the lineage head, of being responsible for Oforiwa's death and one person accused Amo's mother. In only one case the accusation was directed at someone with a lower social position, namely Amo accusing Oforiwa. It has been commented, however, that this accusation was more of a mere abuse than of the type of story which is used for gossip. In the three remaining rumours nobody was mentioned by name.

The view that witchcraft accusations, like other forms of gossip, are directed against persons with more social power collides with observations made by Middleton and Winter in east Africa. They state that the practice of 'wizardry seems to be inevitably considered as the weapon of the weak, the down trodden, the poor and the envious . . .' (1963: 13). In Kwahu, and most likely in the entire Akan society, it is the accusation rather than the practice of witchcraft which is 'the weapon of the weak and down trodden'. Among the Akan the older generation tends to take an overbearing attitude towards the young and the young have little leeway to vent their frustrations apart from accusing them of witchcraft or other evil practices which cannot be checked.

A quantitative analysis of all witchcraft accusations in Amo's lineage gives support to the view that the accusations tend to come from the young and are directed at the elders, and that the elders are believed to suppress the young by the power of witchcraft (see table 3). Witchcraft gossip seems to provide some compensation for those who have no other means of hitting their opponents.

TABLE 3. Relationship of accuser to witch according to age and generation (Bleek 1975: 357; percentages in brackets).

| | <i>Age</i> | <i>Generation</i> |
|---------|------------|-------------------|
| Younger | 56 (79) | 35 (49) |
| Equal* | 5 (7) | 28 (39) |
| Older | 10 (14) | 8 (11) |
| Total | 71 (100) | 71 (100) |

* Equal age = less than 5 years difference.

Table 4 corroborates that the old are believed to bewitch the younger rather than the young the old, as Middleton and Winter state for east Africa.

TABLE 4. Relationship of victim to witch according to age and generation (Bleek, 1975: 357; percentages in brackets).

| | <i>Age</i> | <i>Generation</i> |
|---------|------------|-------------------|
| Younger | 8 (15) | 5 (9) |
| Equal* | 7 (13) | 24 (45) |
| Older | 34 (64) | 24 (45) |
| Unknown | 4 (8) | — |
| Total | 53 (100) | 53 (100)† |

* Equal age = less than 5 years difference.

† In 17 accusations no victim was mentioned and in one witch and victim were the same person.

A similar observation was made by Wyllie in a paper on witchcraft among the Effutu, a Guan-speaking group surrounded by Akan. Wyllie reports that witchcraft confessions 'tend to flow down the status hierarchy': in fifty cases (82 per cent.) witchcraft had allegedly been applied to someone of a younger generation, in eight cases (12 per cent.) to someone of the same generation, and in four cases (6 per cent.) to someone of an older generation (Wyllie 1973: 79).

Considering the hierarchical character of witchcraft accusations one may ask why it is that remarkably more women than men are accused of witchcraft. Out of seventy-one accusations that were recorded in Amo's lineage only five were directed at men and sixty-six at women (Bleek 1975: 367). The same was observed by Field (1960) who collected many case histories of Akan women accused of witchcraft but only six cases of Akan men, and by Wyllie (1973) who recorded thirty-seven witchcraft confessions of which thirty-five were female confessions. Wyllie attempts to explain the preponderance of female witches among the Effutu in terms of social inequality. He comes to the conclusion that women who feel suppressed or neglected confess witchcraft in order to receive special attention and rehabilitation. Wyllie writes that witchcraft confessions among the Effutu are 'a relatively mild form of protest and an appeal for recognition and respect by people in subordinate social positions' (Wyllie 1973: 78).

Wyllie remarks that in the past too much emphasis has been laid on *accusations* and too little on *confessions*. His paper is, therefore, an analysis of 'introspective witchcraft'. I want to make two comments to his paper. First, Wyllie's paper allows for a comparison between Effutu and Kwahu witchcraft. If Wyllie's observation is correct and Effutu women spontaneously accuse themselves of witchcraft when they feel socially deprived, then the Effutu situation is clearly different from the Kwahu one. In Kwahu most people who are suspected of witchcraft never come to a public confession. Suspicions, as we have seen, are expressed surreptitiously, behind people's backs. In a few cases the rumours are so persistent that they become open accusations and it is only in such a situation that the alleged witch may make a public confession. When his/her name has been so utterly spoiled some sort of catharsis is required, i.e. a public confession. It should be noted, however, that such a confession is not reached spontaneously but that the 'witch' is virtually forced to take this step in order to escape the tarnish of witchcraft and not to become an outcast.

This leads us to a second point. If the accusation is first and the confession comes second or in other words, if the confession is triggered off by repeated accusations, it means that the need for an explanation is shifted from the confession to the accusation. A person confesses because his/her name has been tarnished by accusations, but why was he/she accused? Because of his/her low social position, as Wyllie proposes for the Effutu? Our foregoing argument has suggested the opposite: it is rather people of social importance who are the butt of witchcraft suspicions.

In this light it would seem likely that the preponderance of women among the persons accused of witchcraft is a result of the social power that women hold. This conclusion sounds provocative. It is a popular belief that women in Akan society rather take a subordinate position but this belief is only a superficial impression. Social scientists who have studied Akan society more deeply have frequently emphasised the social, economic and political independence of women (e.g.

Rattray 1923: 81-5; McCall 1961: 295-8). Female subordination and male domination are often merely outward appearances. In reality the roles are more or less reversed. Outward male domination is often a cloak to cover the lack of real power and female subservience is often pretended and could be described as 'sop-behaviour' in a term of Foster (1972).

In view of this it becomes intelligible that more women than men are accused or suspected of witchcraft. Women are felt to be in command of the essential goods of life. Those who want to resist them have no other weapon than to resort to witchcraft accusations. More than twenty years ago this same hypothesis was launched by Nadel in his well-known essay about witchcraft in four Nigerian societies. Nadel (1952) pointed out that among the Nupe there is a strong antagonism between men and women. Women are economically independent, they are always on the move for their trading business and may refuse to have children by inducing abortion or using contraceptives. The men feel that they cannot control their wives and therefore start accusing them of witchcraft. This explanation, however, does not entirely apply to the Kwahu situation because the accuser-witch relationships do not exactly reveal polarity between men and women: out of sixty-six accusations against women, thirty-five are from the mouths of men and thirty-one from women, which means that both men and women equally accuse women. It probably implies that the power of women is resented by men as well as by women of a younger generation. It should be noted, finally, that the well-nigh female monopoly of witchcraft is not reflected in the social drama presented in this article.

Another characteristic of gossip which has been mentioned is that gossip is a form of information management to further personal interests (Paine 1967). Interests should not be understood in strictly economic terms but rather should include any sort of social prestige. In six of the eight rumours around Oforiwa's death the informants clearly attempted to impress others by their exciting story. The story did not always directly serve the interests of the informant but one may assume that such thrilling news adds to the esteem of the one who brings it and strengthens his membership of the group. The rumours which were spread by Asante and Antwi are typical examples. They did not accuse anyone in particular, at least not openly, but they tried to enhance their position in the family by relating their story before the elders in a theatrical manner. Others like Mary and Bridget who did mention names told their story more secretly. Bridget attempted to improve her relationship with us by telling us something sensational. Anim furthered his personal interests by scandalising the one who had wronged him.

A last aspect of gossip which has not been investigated in relation to witchcraft accusations is reinforcement of norms. This quality of gossip seems to be least evident in witchcraft accusations. The accusations taunt innocent close relatives with hideous actions and it is difficult to view them as a positive phenomenon in the life of a community. The only positive 'function' of witchcraft accusations with respect to traditional norms is that perhaps they stand for 'justice'. Accusers tend to take the part of the weak (Oforiwa) against the powerful (Amo). There are indications that witchcraft accusations oppose social change and support the traditional values. People who try to escape from the traditional setting and achieve in making a career are likely to incur the disfavour (envy) of relatives and run the risk

of being accused of witchcraft. The revival of witchcraft beliefs with the coming of western colonialism is a case in point.

NOTE

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