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The Impossibility of Purity in the Face of Human Rights Dangers

Witches and Wards as People Out of Place

Alexandra Crampton

In my research on elder advocacy in Ghana and the United States, I noticed similar discursive and intervention strategies used to address very different social realities. One is the witches camps in Northern Ghana, to which mainly older women are banished once accused and convicted of causing harm to others through witchcraft. The other is adult guardianship in the US, a legal system in which an adult is adjudicated as incompetent, disabled or incapacitated in meeting basic needs and is therefore awarded a guardian as a ward of the court. Witches camps are part of a larger belief in the power of the supernatural to influence everyday life. For example, some purchase or cultivate witchcraft for personal benefit in a business venture, while others are accused of causing great harm such as destruction of another's success, illness, and death. Adult guardianship is also part of a belief system but adult guardianship is more widely known in the US as a rational response to the problem of irrational adults who may be at risk of causing harm to self or others due to such problems as developmental disability, traumatic brain injury or mental illness. Both practices have attracted the attention of elder advocates alarmed by the number of older adults, particularly older women, who are sent (or flee) to the camps in Ghana and who become subject to full guardianship in the US. Under full guardianship, a ward loses the rights and responsibilities of adulthood, such as choices in voting, where to live, and whom to marry.

What seems to bring these disparate practices together as a human rights issue are extreme cases of abuse and abandonment. In Ghana, some witches are feared for their powers and others go to a shrine or chief associated with the camps for cleansing so that they are able to return to families or start a new life by moving to another part of the country. However, women left in the camps longer term have been completely ostracized and have no other options as a safe place to live. Similarly, media expose stories of adult guardianship have centered on cases in which guardians fleeced or literally abandoned wards who then have no recourse to fight back. Advocates focus particularly on cases of physical abuse, which provide graphic support for moral outrage. Activists have also characterized witches camps and the guardianship system as pushing people out of their homes and communities to a life of isolated if not solitary confinement. As one US gerontologist commented, "Outside of capital punishment, guardianship is the most radical legal remedy we have" (Elias Cohen in Topolonicki, 1989). Using this discourse, the solution to abolish both the camps and the practice of full guardianship so that victims may return home. As such, it fits a frame developed by Mary Douglas to compare religious systems in which she found that the social construction of purity came out of recognition of taboo. Identifying rights violation helps construct a vision of social justice driven by a moral imperative to restore witches and wards to family, community and society. In the purity of condemnation, rights activism demands abolishing local practices through replacement of moral frame, turning the roles of perpetrator and victim around in Ghana and of inverting the benevolent role of guardian as protector into one of abuse and neglect. The lines of purity and danger are thus redrawn.

At this point, anthropologists can anticipate what happens next. In neither case has the human rights frame replaced local moral imagination. In Ghana, efforts to expose and solve the camps as a social problem date back to the 1990s. Since then, the camps periodically attract attention through media events or media reporting of particularly horrific cases. The most recent was two years ago, when 72-year old Ama Hemmah was brutally murdered by several people. The predictable results were news stories and a hasty attempt by the Ghanaian government to answer for bad press in the form of conferences and declarations to close the camps. In Ghana, this reaction is enforced by fear that evidence of supernatural beliefs exposes failure to modernize and therefore maintain a respected place in the global community. In

the US, a report by the Associated Press in 1987 did lead to widespread legal reform that tightened criteria for incapacity, called for greater use of temporary or limited guardianship, and created more bureaucratic oversight to evaluate and monitor guardians. For example, old age was removed from most state statutes as a basis for guardianship and replaced with more specific language about functional limitation. Similar to Ghanaian calls to solve problems through modern education, the move was to make the process more scientific through application of medical and other professional expertise.

I am not arguing against effort to help older adults accused of witchcraft or subject to adult guardianship proceedings. I do argue, however, that rights campaigns have drawn a simplistic binary of rights violation and ideal states of justice that has had the power to mobilize sentiment and action without necessarily improving the outcomes for the intended beneficiaries. One irony of rights work in both cases is the rather minimal role of witches and wards in these efforts. They have been interviewed, photographed, and featured in stories but rarely taken an active role in their supposed rights struggle. As such, they serve as spectacle and inspiration for the good work of others. As people out of place, witches and wards spark the imagination of those who wish to promote the sacred ideal of social justice through rights work directed at the moral transgressions of the profane. This helps create and strengthen identities and careers of human rights activists, elder advocates, NGO workers and policy makers. What this has not changed, however, is that the camps are still there and most adult guardianship petitions still result in award of full guardianship.

While short term efforts and moral outrage have not brought systemic change in beliefs or common practice, change is possible. The easiest rhetorical space has been to identify common ground between moral systems. This means attacking abuse of the local system, such as false accusations of witchcraft, excessive and inhuman treatment of the accused, and the imposition of full guardianship on older adults who may be eccentric or in great need of services but are sufficiently rational to retain rights to autonomy. These areas of agreement then have led to legal reform, education campaigns, and conferences. What has been more challenging is effort to prevent more accusations and guardianship petitions, while helping to restore the place of alleged witches and wards. This work is more time consuming, uncertain and messy. Purity and danger are not so easily defined because this requires engaging with the accusers, petitioners, diviners, judges and bystanders previously demonized as the problem rather than solution. Moral dilemmas rather than certainties soon emerge, such as how to work with women who believe they are witches or people with dementia who may wander off for days and therefore do seem unsafe without 24 hour supervision. Then there is the challenge of time and resources needed for substantive change. For example, the underlying problem of witchcraft accusations in Ghana is often attributed to poverty, lack of education and family conflict. Who pays for and how is poverty to be alleviated? How can education be offered beyond a poster, a new story, or an impassioned speech? In the case of family conflict, one Ghanaian NGO's strategy required investing years in visiting with families in order to negotiate return. In the US, substantive change to the adult guardianship system also requires more than changes in official policy and procedure. If Americans are to accept older adults (and others) who seem disordered, irrational and erratic, there will need to be more education and more resources for family and community support. Limited and temporary guardianship potentially may require more oversight, such as how to calibrate intervention as an older adult with a degenerative disease becomes increasingly dependent and incapacitated.

The rights discourse of purity and danger in the form of social justice versus rights violation has played an important role in gaining attention from the media and sympathy from the public. Moral outrage inspires donations for the relief of witches and legal protection for wards. The reduction of issues into rights violations and categories of persons who are harmed helps create an imagined community of rights work across otherwise disconnected social realities. The localization of rights work in these cases necessitates relinquishing of purity in condemnation for the messy compromise of engagement. The result can be a kind of moral syncretism in which fears that lead to witchcraft accusations and incapacity

assessment are accepted without accepting the camps or full guardianship as the best or sole solution. Rights are then not something to demand as much as to negotiate within limitations and opportunities of local realities.

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