



## PRESS RELEASE

### **PETITION TO SAVE WOMEN FROM A SELF-STYLED "WITCHDOCTOR"**

**Accra, Ghana, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2020** – The Sanneh Institute (TSI) is dedicated to research into issues at the intersection of religion and society. TSI is based in Accra working in close partnership with the University of Ghana and Yale University. I am the Founding Executive Director of TSI and hereby write this petition on an issue that is threatening the peace of the Bawku Traditional Area or Kusaug and the lives of women in particular.

A young man by name Rufai Sumaila and his father have set up a base in Pulmakuom in the Pusiga District, for the purpose of identifying and exorcising "witches". Rufai is an SHS drop out who allegedly had mental issues, and later claimed he met with dwarfs who commissioned him to practice as a witchdoctor. At this base which is near the Ghana-Togo border post at Widana, the self-styled witchdoctors claim to use sachet ("pure") water for identifying "witches" and for healing.

When a sick person goes for healing, they are told their condition is caused by a family member who has bewitched them. When the accused is brought in, sachet water is splashed over them and if they are a "witch", the victim is supposed to confess. In most cases, when the accused resist and insist on their innocence, they are beaten until they "confess"! Attached are photos of one such victims. Their hair is then forcefully shaven ostensibly to rid them of the spirit of witchcraft. Many women have fallen victim to this self-styled witchdoctor. The public humiliation and emotional trauma of victims has led to many broken lives, livelihoods, marriages and families. Many have been ostracized by their families and stigmatized in their communities. Some who go there for "healing" are chained to trees and subjected to beatings. Stories of rape at the base abound.

Rufai and his father enjoy the support of some officials in the Bawku area. They intervene and interfere anytime cases are filed with the police against the pair. Victims are pressured and threatened to drop cases and to remain silent. Some officials have insinuated that they will ensure no judge entertains a lawsuit against the witchdoctors. And claim they can obtain official documents for them to legalize the practice of trial by ordeal. All attempts on the ground to get Rufai and his father to stop the practice have proved futile. Four times, the Paramount Chief of Bawku Traditional Area has instructed Rufai to stop the practice as it is creating conflicts and tensions within and between families and the suffering among women.

It is against this background that in my capacity as Executive Director of The Sanneh Institute, and a native of the area, I request your support for this base to be shut down and the practice of declaring people witches to be proscribed in every part of the

country before another depraved scene of lynching of an innocent victim happens. Apart from the physical beatings, there are many emotionally traumatized, stigmatized and ostracized victims whose pain cannot be captured on camera. It is on behalf of these voiceless victims that I solicit your support to get the relevant authorities to consider and act promptly on this petition.

**Ends -**

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