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Ageing and forgetfulness in Sub-Sahara Africa – witchcraft accusation deprives older people with dementia of participation

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Objective: Being engaged in occupations is an essential part of daily life and participation for everyone. People with dementia (PwD) are at risk for occupational deprivation. This is especially the case in Sub-Sahara Africa (SSA), where a lack of awareness often results in stigmatization of PwD, and, alarmingly, confound their challenges by accusing PwD of witchcraft. Therefore, this study aims to explore dementia awareness challenges in SSA.

Methods: In a cross-sectional survey, data were collected by using a questionnaire adapted to current knowledge of dementia, witchcraft and old people behaviour, in Namibia and Ghana (n=1.642).

Results: The results revealed a lack of dementia awareness in SSA. Only 23 % of the respondents have ever heard about the disease. Referring to this, higher educated respondents showed greater dementia awareness ($p < .001$). Disturbingly, respondents identified symptoms of dementia like speaking nonsense, memory-loss and aggressiveness as behaviour associated with witchcraft. 45 % (n=736) still believe in witchcraft as a spiritual power, 58 % (n=929) are afraid of potential harm by witchcraft. As a result, they support the exclusion of PwD or “witches”.

Conclusion: Due to missing knowledge of mental disorders in SSA people are still stigmatized and accused of witchcraft. Consequently, these people are excluded from participation. There is thus a great need for PwD to be integrated into society and to meet their needs in order to optimise participation. This requires a dementia-friendly environment and education on dementia and similar conditions. Awareness rising policies and strategies how to include PwD are absolutely mandatory.