

FILM REVIEW

Rungano Nyoni (writer/director). *I Am Not A Witch*. 2018. 98 min. English, Cewa, Bemba, and Tonga, with English subtitles. France, Germany, United Kingdom and Zambia. Curzon Artificial Eye. \$16.95.

Rungano Nyoni's insightful, provocative film opens in the Zambian countryside, as a tour bus lumbers down a rural road dirt road, ferrying a gaggle of African and European tourists to a government-sponsored "witch camp." As if observing animals in a zoo, the tourists cast indifferent glances at two dozen elderly women, clad in identical shabby blue pinafores, sitting docilely behind a flimsy metal fence, their faces painted with white markings, their bodies tethered to enormous spools of ribbon. The ribbons, the tour guide explains, "are used to prevent the witches from flying." The witches, he elaborates, "usually fly to go and kill." The guide reassures his group, the witches "are harmless now...they're just here to show people, tourists." As the tourists start wandering back to the bus, the women gyrate and trill, capping their performance. This opening scene, veering like much of the film between the deeply poignant and the deliberately absurdist, invites the question of how the women came to be designated as witches and incarcerated in the camp.

The implicit answer comes in the person of a mostly silent little girl, whose story structures *I am Not a Witch*. The girl, later named "Shula," that is "the uprooted," by her companions in the camp, is accused of witchcraft by a local woman who, walking from the village well with a bucket of water balanced on her head, encountered Shula in the road and collapsed before her; she claims the child has bewitched her. She explains to the blasé magistrate recording her formal witchcraft accusation: "From the time that this child came into the village, lots of strange things have been happening...we don't know where she came from. She has no friends. She has no relatives... This is what I'm saying, madam. She's a witch...we're scared because of this witch." Rather than sending Shula to an orphanage or invoking Zambia's Witchcraft Act, which forbids both witchcraft acts and accusations, the magistrate summons Mr. Banda, the entrepreneurial operator of the camp, who is delighted to learn that there's "a new witch in town" and who offers Shula the stark choice of admitting her witchcraft and joining the camp, ribbon attached, or denying her witchcraft and becoming an (untethered) goat. Shula chooses the marginal humanness of being a ribbon-rooted, camp-bound witch over losing her humanity completely.

With these early scenes, Nyoni establishes the essence and epistemology of witchcraft. While “witchcraft” is never explained directly, the film suggests that witchcraft is both supernatural malevolence *and* the explanation for such magical harm. Witches fly to kill people, and if “lots of strange things” happen then it is (obviously) because witchcraft is at work. While Shula’s is the only path the film follows from village to camp, we learn who witches are: a category of persons who are dangerously powerful and deeply vulnerable, women who have no friends, no relations, no *one*, and thus no social standing or protection. They are at once malevolent actors who inspire fear and hapless victims who invite incarceration.

One of the film’s greatest strengths is the way that it illuminates the core tension between the extraordinary and the ordinary surrounding witchcraft. Witchcraft is understood to be the deployment of extraordinary, supernatural power, but this power is deployed in the everyday and engaged with ordinary concerns. The “witches” are reputed to do extraordinary things, which is why they are given over to the camp, and by extension to Banda’s control. Yet, their quotidian realities are much more banal, although by no means benign. From time to time Banda does employ his “civil witches” in supernatural pursuits such as divining and rain-making—he has particular ambitions for Shula in those arenas—but the majority of the witches’ work is as a beribboned chain-gang, whom he leases out to till fields. The women, longtime denizens of the camp, have embraced their circumstances, happy to reach an old age, and spend their time eating, drinking, and gossiping together within the relatively safe confines of the camp. Shula, however, chafes against her chains made of ribbons.

I am Not a Witch is ultimately a film about power: the power to define who you are and to determine what that identity means, as well as the price that such power can exact. The film cleverly engages topics central to Africanist scholarship: supernatural situations, gender dynamics, generational conflict, state corruption, cultural commodification, and urban-rural relations. Indeed, it was inspired by Nyoni’s visit to the real-life Gambaga witch camps of northern Ghana. Yet, *I am not a Witch* is frustrating at times as its plot and imagery require significant, sustained unpacking. The film puts the interpretive onus largely on the audience. One wonders, though, how audiences unfamiliar with the film’s context, but steeped in popular tropes about African primitivity and pathology might read the film’s boldly satirical bent? As caricature or as more evidence of African Otherness?

Katherine Luongo
 Northeastern University
 Boston, Massachusetts
 k.luongo@northeastern.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2019.64