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Power, and Queen Mothers in Ghana: Links to the Political Economy

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong
POWER, AND QUEEN MOTHERS IN GHANA:
LINKS TO THE POLITICAL ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the leadership roles that Ghanaian queenmothers play in negotiating the intersection in an increasingly complex social-cultural environment that is strategically linked to the national political economy. The ways in which modern and traditional markers of status are being merged in contemporary Ghanaian communities show how individuals who achieve prestige use material and human resources gained to manipulate their gender-specific roles. Currently, queenmothers are effectively using their associated positions in the highly revered chieftaincy institution, their understanding of modern government, and the power of the women's vote to help their communities access scarce resources. By whatever means of succession, "queenmothers" actively participate in social, political, economic, religious, and artistic manifestations of Ghanaian contemporary life. This process shows an understanding of, and interfacing of, modern contexts and traditional status with women meeting the challenges of contemporary life and the demands of tradition in a society in transition. Data to support findings are taken from 1995-6 in-depth interviews conducted in Ghana to generate queenmother profiles. Additional insight is gained from examining the published efforts of the current government administration to include queenmothers in their economic and political agenda.
Introduction:

Colonialism, neo-colonialism, and subsequent increased interaction with the Western world brought significant changes in the ways and to the people who have access to power in many African societies. Colonialization eroded roles of most traditionally based positions by making common that which had been valued in extraordinary ways (Mazrui, 1989). Western driven development initiatives have also, in many respects, marginalized women's labor and social position (Haakon and Bay, 1976; Ofori-Atta, 1978; Etienne and Leacock, 1980; Dumor, 1983; Momsen, 1991). However, throughout this process, African women have responded in innovative ways to sustain their communal influence and exercise authority over women-centered arenas through institutionalized arrangements within both patrilineal and matrilineal societies (Mikell, 1986). In addition, Ghanaian women, in particular, are beginning to understand and respond pro-actively to the political, economic, and social power implicit in the modernizing of their 'traditional' roles.

This paper examines the emerging roles that Ghanaian "queenmothers" now play in negotiating their social reality in an increasingly complex social-cultural environment that is strategically linked to the national political economy. In Ghana, the matrilineal Ashanti and other Akan speaking groups such as Fante, Agona, Brong, Akyem, Akuapem, Kwahu, Denkyira, Assin, Ahanta and Nzema, who account for approximately forty-five percent of the national population, have a well established institutionalized role for designated women, known as "queenmother." This status is either ascribed (lineage based) or achieved (honorable).
whatever means of succession, "queenmothers" actively participate in social, political, economic, religious, and artistic manifestations of Ghanaian contemporary life. In each sphere of activity there is a distinction between secular and sacred power.

Ghana is currently undergoing rapid social change driven by the demands of an emerging global economy (Lofchie, 1992). In addition, indigenous institutions and incumbent power positions are being routinely challenged by the demands of centralized government development policy. This appropriation of local and national cultural/traditional roles and ritual performances for government purposes is transforming Ghanaian society. The incorporation of the Sankofa' motif by the current government is a striking example of this modernizing of traditional icons.

Ghanaian women, in particular, are increasingly challenged by the dual demands of contemporary life and tradition in a society which is in transition. For now, there is no template of propriety for these women who are increasingly educated, articulate and financially secure. For women who have succeeded to or been appointed to the position of "queenmother," sustaining their place in the indigenous power/authority structures requires a new understanding and ability to negotiate and/or manipulate their participation in events central to their society.

The professionalism and multiplicity of roles now available to educated and articulate women is increasingly determined by the needs of their communities to access certain state resources. By examining the way in which modern and traditional markers of status are being merged in contemporary Ghanaian communities we begin to understand how women who have achieved culturally institutionalized prestige use material and human resources gained to manipulate their gender-specific roles.
Part 1. Royals, Chiefs, and Queenmothers

For Westerners and to a lesser extent, Africans, the overuse and oversimplified notion of chieftancy causes considerable confusion. The word “chief” used indiscriminately, conceals and misrepresents real differences between the kinds of power and/or authority exercised by the various traditional office holders. It also conceals the various degrees of power corresponding to the various levels at which power is exercised (Arhin, 1985: 1).

In the Akan’s highly structured hierarchical social structure there is less room for manipulation as members are vested in maintaining the status quo. All the political heads have their female counterparts. The female counterpart of the Ohene (chief) and Omanhene (paramount chief) was known as Ohemaa. The female counterpart of the Odikro (village head) is known as Obaapanyin. The Ohemma or Ohaapanyin is a female relative of the male office holders, and could be any of the following to him: A mother, or mother’s sister, a sister, or a mother’s sister’s daughter; a sister’s daughter or a mother’s daughter’s daughter. The Ohemma or Obaapanyin is mandated to oversee the women’s affairs, and is a member of the council of her political unit. The traditional Akan state consisted of a hierarchy of three councils of power holders and authority holders corresponding to the units of the political organization.

The increasing contemporary word usage of “queen” and that of “queenmother” is perhaps even more complex and culturally sensitive. The term ohemma has been commonly and some say, inappropriately, translated into English as queen-mother, following the practice of Rattray (1923), the British ethnographer, who wanted to show the same respect for Ashanti women as that held for the Queen Mother of Great Britain (Clark, 1994:252). Ghanaians
speaking and writing in English generally follow this form, using the title of queenmother for a wide range of female community leaders.

Traditional authority in Ghana is bound to the institution of chieftaincy (Arhin, 1985; Sarpong, 1986; Afari-Gyan, 1995). Among Ashanti royals there have always been female ahemma, or female chiefs (Clark, 1994:92). The Ashanti lineage and chiefship system contains numerous respected positions for women, but fewer than for men. In addition, there are important non-royal positions such as okyeame, or spokesmen, and treasury officials and minor bureaucratic officials, including market supervisors, ranked as non-hereditary chiefships that are always filled by men (Wilks, 1975). Gender boundaries in hereditary offices are less absolute than in the appointive bureaucratic offices. There are reports that some towns may allow women to occupy the male office of ohene, while another woman occupies the ohemma office (Mends, 1996). Additionally, Mazrui, (1989) concludes that, “dual-sex authority systems ensured that African women were included among the ranks of monarchs, councilors, title holders, and religious dignitaries.” In contemporary Ghana, documented evidence of the continuing influence of chieftaincy affairs in state affairs is contained in the deliberations of the 1992 Constituent Assembly that deemed it necessary to protect the sanctity of “traditional” chieftaincy and defend and define it within the Constitution. The rigorous debate that ensued over who is a chief underscores the continuing influence of persons holding these positions. In an interesting verbal exchange among members of the Constituent Assembly it was agreed that the institution of chieftaincy "as established by customary usage" be upheld in the Constitution. The largely male Assembly held that traditionally there is a "hierarchical system of chiefs" and that the queenmother is completely outside that system. To support this ‘exclusion’ of queenmothers the
representative model used was the position and role of the queenmothers in the Akan system. According to the sources quoted for the Assembly, the ohemaa (queenmother) is the "staff adviser" to the chief. It is she who advises the chief. In times of war, it is the queenmother who stays back at home and sings songs asking God's blessings. In times of peace, it is the queenmother who prepares the ancestral food. The queenmother is represented at the chief's council in her full right. However, the queenmother should never ever be deemed to be equal in status to the paramount chief (Afari-Gyan, 1995:95-6).

Finally, it was recommended that, "parliament in the Fourth Republic should chart the course of positive neutrality in so far as the nomination, election or selection, installation or the position of a person as a chief is concerned. This is the function of the kingmakers and not Parliament." (Afari-Gyan, 1995: 93-94) When sitting queenmothers used their lobby to fight this attempt to exclude them, their efforts were rewarded by their being included and protected, albeit reluctantly, within the Constitutional structure.

Part II. Power and Authority

The cohesion of any group of people depends on their thinking of themselves as a unit. In Ghana, chiefs and queenmothers are human symbols of societal unity, well-being, and fertility. Additionally, modern and traditional markers of status are being consistency merged in contemporary Ghanaian communities. Men and women who have achieved the prestige markers of modernity now use material and human resources gained to attain tradition-based honors. It is not uncommon to see a Ghanaian sporting a three-piece suit and bowler hat while positioning himself to hold numerous chieftaincy titles. The sustaining role that women play in the family
and more importantly in a lineage-based society is being used as the focal point for cultural projection that is looking back to the values of the idealized and real past in order to deal with social dynamics of the present.

Queenmothers are currently using their negotiated links to the highly revered chieftaincy institution, their understanding of modern government bureaucracy, and the power of the women's vote in electoral politics to help their local communities access scarce resources. This process shows an understanding of and interlinking between modern context, traditional status, and the political economy.

In Ashanti-land and other Akan-speaking regions, the matrilineage continues to play a major role in the transmission of land and other property and in the allocation of financial and labor assistance. Loyalty to matrilineal kin remains a fundamental moral principle with emotional commitment. Ideally, each lineage should be headed by a pair of male and female elders, analogous to the paired male and female chiefly offices of ohene and ohemma, selected by consensus from the whole lineage (Clark, 1994: 94-100). The Ashanti pattern of lineage leadership, in particular, reserves offices for women but integrates them into a joint hierarchy that reinforces complementarity rather than providing full sexual parallelism (Poewe, 1981). Gender imbalances of power occur most frequently at higher political levels; one woman participates at each level with a male chief and a whole council of men. A forum for council meetings requires that all male elders are present while the participation and/or consultation of women elders is informal and optional except for issues specifically concerning women (Clark, 1994: 94-95).

For Ghanaian queenmothers there is a triad of power, privilege, prestige pillared by
culture, custom, church and civilian (locally centered) politics. Each element becomes a part that
directs and is advised. Among the Akan, the strength and viability of queenmothers is profound.
(Arhin, 1985: 13).

Layers of intersection and the recent creation of the “queen-mother status-role” in
communities, such as the Ga of Greater Accra, that formerly had no such position suggests, if not
affirms, the importance of the appropriation of cultural icons in contemporary Ghana and the
manner in which people understand the connections between political mobility, economic
survival and that which is acknowledged as part of the sacred realm.

For most, status recognition with its attendant rights and duties is major in determining
the behavior of people toward each other. Additionally, a network of obligations is evident in the
choosing and manipulations of those designated to fulfill roles previously seen as only crucial to
the traditional/rural sector of the population. Grassroots participation by women is generally
accepted as more intense in a hierarchy of chief, female chief and queenmother. The exchange
and consumption of wealth is not only utilitarian but is a symbolic statement of status or /and a
set of social relations. Compensation is prestige.

A prime example of this phenomenon is the relationship between entrepreneurial women
in Elmina, a coastal fishing town, and queenmothers. In this town where 90% of the adult male
population earns a living by fishing, it is women who own many of the fishing boats and other
women who sell the catch. The result is an economics of social status relationships that binds
women. The relationship between business women and queen-mothers is one of increasing
contention and complexity. To further enhance their collective positions, women vie to be part
of the queenmother's council which presents additional investment opportunities with outsiders.
Queenmothers in this area have become pivotal to strong organization of women and as a consequence they have increased their leverage with 'all' local residents. As economics becomes ever more important in determining social status relationships, queenmothers, like their male counterparts, must ensure the support of the barons of finance. More and more the appointment of women of 'financial' substance to queenmother councils enables them to increase their leverage outside their immediate localities. Investment opportunities are being sought for local development where it is clear that the federal government lacks the resources and/or inclination toward equal regional development.

Queenmothers also exercise considerable influence in matters of chieftaincy in contemporary political affairs and the repertoire of ritual has been greatly enriched by an understanding of the government's need to co-opt certain aspects of culture to earn much needed foreign exchange.

Part III. Place

Queenmothers hold both ascribed (lineage based) and achievement (honorific) status positions. While one cannot make a stranger a queen-mother, the use of multiple mechanisms to influence choice are being put into play. The selection and/or nomination of a candidate for queenmother is now determined by: socioeconomic status; educational attainment; and religious women's organization affiliation which are perceived to complement family orientation, paramountcy succession, and lineage placement. While the criteria for appointment are similar, under no circumstances are the two avenues to accession to be confused. Differences among queenmothers is reflected in the freedoms and maneuverability of the situation on the ground
pertaining to issues of women's affairs and more importantly, among the Akan, the enstoolment of chiefs. The institution of chieftaincy is ethnic-specific and in its local configuration, queenmothers become consultants and key informants. Where this is institutionalized, power is increased proportional to the population configuration.

Among the matrilineal Ashanti, it is the sister or niece who most often plays the important role in 'male' chieftaincy matters as she holds a place of reverence. Queenmothers have their own stools and pour libation to them. Later they sit in state to confer on matters within their scope of power. Among Akan speaking populations, the strength and viability of the queenmothers is crucial in their role as historians and interpreters of the elaborate and extensive hierarchical nature of chieftaincy in Ghana.

Among the other two major language groups, the Ewe and Ga, there is little agreement or consensus about whether “queenmothers” are traditional role bearers or if they are the creation of contemporary Ghanaian power relations which strives for similarity and is designed to ensure equity of resource distribution.

In two in-depth interviews conducted among paramount chiefs there was agreement that “queen-mothership” is not indigenous to the Ga state and thus, has not been totally embraced by all the people. The issue of recognition is difficult, since some chieftaincy courts have, in fact, placed queenmothers on their advisory councils. According to my informants, Ga recognize the importance of mothers but have no institutionalized role for them. It is notable that Ga chieftaincy is thought to have evolved in the same way as the priesthood. Embodiment of holiness and priestly duties are not performed by women. As a sacred position, traditionally, a chief-priest is neither enstooled nor destooled.
Among Ga citizens, the general consensus is that in most things they follow Akan traditions and it is this that allows room for the incorporation of the “queenmother” institution. Even in the performance and celebration of the most exclusive Ga festival, Homowo, there are noticeable influences of the Akans, including words in warrior Asafo songs. There is also in ancient oral history, a story of a Ga queen who, like her Asante counterpart, led her people to war. This story was related to me, on more than a few occasions, to reinforce the place and importance of the institution of queenmothers for the Ga.

Ewe have no queenmother tradition but accept that certain Ewe communities do recognize them. Among the Ewe, there appears to be a more embracing concept, including queenmothers and all others who affect group opinion. Lineage leaders, bearers of traditional knowledge, and holders of wealth (new and increasingly important) are all part of this group. Among women the use of "new" status within lineage structures in 'traditional' garb is increasingly evident. Rituals of office are becoming more than social interactive devices while being reinvented to meet new needs.

Part IV. Redefining Women's Roles.

The multiplicity of roles available to educated and articulate women is increasingly determined by the needs of community to access certain resources. In addressing the rapid changes in their lives, Ghanaian women have begun to understand the political and social power of their 'traditional' roles within the contemporary motif of central government. The professionalization of women's traditional roles is increasingly evident in the proliferation of formalized gender based associations. In the last three years, Ghana has seen the secularization
of queenmothers via the inauguration of multiple queenmother associations throughout the country. While a secular phenomenon for the most part, 1996 saw the launching of the Association of Christian Chiefs and Queenmothers.

Multiple symbols of cultural unity and cultural revitalization are receiving government support. Common and effective symbols of Ghanaian unity are chiefs and queenmothers, who symbolize the society's well-being and fertility, and their facilitating roles in traditional events, which join the sacred and secular. The more powerful the emotional charge, so to speak, of the symbol, the greater their loyalty to the group.

The participatory roles of queenmothers in communal rites revisited through annual festivals are an important feature of Ghana's cultural landscape closely related to a set of myths and dogmas, which left unchallenged, explain and validate and keep them alive. These public rites have explicit aims such as fertility, increased food production, and good harvest, while also functioning to express social distance and ethnic uniqueness, uniting potential enemies (new festivals), enforcing cessation of war and overcoming tyrants. In April, 1995, the traditional area of Brong Ahong announced the celebration of, Mboa mbedi nko o, meaning literally, "let the animals come and eat and go." It has been interpreted to be a dig against some people (i.e. some people are animals, they should eat and go).

Another incident sustaining the importance of festivals to their respective communities is the recurring tensions of the celebrated Deer-Hunting festival in spite of admonishments from the appropriate ministries banning its' performance. Calls for reconciliation continue to fall on deaf ears. The Asafo companies, traditionally the warrior groups, have reinvented their roles in contemporary society. Queenmothers are consulted by these 'warriors' to ensure that they keep to
mandates of tradition. Perhaps, more importantly, for Ghana is the social control factor, as festival reunions provide an opportunity to witness those who have acquired the markers of success for the community.

Conclusions

In all societies, political organization is linked to/with ritual and symbolism. In Ghana the ritual aspect of political organization is being supported and enhanced by the civilian government's reliance of religious/traditional leaders to move forward its political agenda.

Historically, without formal recognition by male chiefs, female chiefs could not use their political or ritual authority directly. In contemporary times, it now the National Commission of Culture that has a dominant position in recognizing and ensuring government support for female chiefs and queenmothers.

In another context, E. Brink (1990) refers to “man-made women.” The jury is still out on whether or not the self-images of Ghanaian women and the icons of their ritual positions as queenmothers are being effectively co-opted by government functionaries who know the value of having influential women aligned to political causes. It is at this more popular level that an analysis needs to be situated if we are to provide a more nuanced picture of the queen-mother icon and the ways in which it interacts with the self-understandings of the women it is meant to portray. There emerges from such an examination is the convoluted and sometimes contradictory manner in which a single image can come to be drawn within a discourse that is assessing the evolving role of women in the national political arena.

The interweaving of ritual and secular institutions in contemporary times is important to
any explanation and analysis of Ghanaian queen-mothers. Profiles become increasingly important as they tell a story of how/who is engaged in the process and/or events. Later an explanation begins. The adaptation of traditionally-based institutions can not be adequately represented by statistics, rather there is need for sustained interviews with those benefiting from the system and those who attempt to resist.

Notes:

1. Sanfofa (return and take it) is an adinkra symbol. “Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yennkyi” It is not taboo to return and fetch it when you forget. You can always unto your mistakes.

2. 1992 Constitution. Definition of Chief. Article 277. In this Chapter unless the context otherwise requires, “Chief” means a person, who, hailing from the appropriate family and lineage, has been validly nominated, elected or selected and enstooled, enskinned or installed as a chief or queenmother in accordance with the relevant customary law and usage.
Selected References:


