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THE CHANGING ROLE OF QUEENMOTHERS IN THE AKAN POLITY

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INTRODUCTION

In the Akan cosmogony women were said to be the founders of the various clans: for example, the Tena/Bretuo clan was said to have been mothered by a woman by name *Asiama Guahyia* at Ayaasi in Adanse, Rattray (1925). The Asona Clan which originated at Sodua in Adanse descended from a woman who was said to have emerged from the skies just like the mother of the Tena, Agyeman-Dua (1963); Daaku (1972); Boahen (1966).

Since the Akan lineage is maintained through the matrilineal line these women leaders came to be recognized as Queenmothers, or heads of the clans.

They were repositories of knowledge and wisdom, therefore complicated issues were referred to them for counselling. Thus the concept of: *Yenkobisa Abrewa* that is, "Let us seek counselling from the old lady" evolved and still persists up to today.¹ The word *Abrewa* did not just mean an old lady, in this context it meant the **Good Old Lady**. She was referred to as "good" because she was always able to give very good counselling leading to amicable settlement of issues for which men counsellors alone often messed-up, sometimes leading to unrest and wars in the olden days.

Who then was this important feminine socio-political figure? And how did she function in the cultural milieu in the past?

THE TRADITIONAL ROLE OF THE QUEENMOTHERS

It is not very clear how and when kingship/chiefship and for that matter queenship emerged in the Akan society. However, with the formation of the first Akan forest State, that is Adanse² and with Awurade Basa as the last known chief, (Daaku 1968; Adu-Boahen 1966), his female counterpart's (who was his mother) position, as the caretaker of the female population, was established. Again the history of the Tena Clan which migrated from Adanse and founded the Mampong-Asante State, clearly stated the leadership role of the mothers of the migrant leaders: Barfuo Antiedu and Boahen Anantuo, (Agyeman-Dua 1964). The Oyoko tradition of Kumasi clearly stated that while Opemsoo Osei Tutu was the chief of the united states of Asante (1694 - 1728), his mother Manu Kutusii was known as the *Asantehenmaa*. The history of Akwamu state indicates that their famous Chief, Agyen Kokobo, ruled with his mother as the Queenmother; (Adje 1981). Therefore, as every state/community/settlement had a chief so did they have their Queenmothers.

"Homes are made by the wisdom of women." (Proverbs 14:1). So these female leaders built and established homes. (Rattray 1923 and Busua 1968) claimed that traditionally females were more important than men in matrilineal societies. Asonomaso-Kwagyanso tradition vividly recounts the role played by the female leaders: Nana Ago Mansa and her daughter Akua Fosuaa in the establishment of that community. The Queenmother of Asonomaso, Nana Yaa Frempomaa, was instrumental in the founding of

Safo; a settlement which now has a population of over four thousand (4,000) inhabitants.

The Queenmother, therefore was the female ruler whose role complemented that of the male ruler or the Chief. (Arhin 1983). Indeed, she was directly in-charge of the female affairs of the community. The Akan word for the term Queenmother was *Ohenmaa*. This word was the shortened form of the mother of a Chief; *Ohene* (chief) *maame* (mother). Since the Akan tradition is emphatic about the motherhood of the female leader to the chief (and therefore the Stool), this explanation appears plausible, (Boaten 1991). (Others had explained the word simply as the female ruler).

SELECTION OF THE QUEEN MOTHER

Traditionally the selection of the *Ohenmaa* or the Queenmother or the Stoolmother³ was the prerogative of the incumbent chief. When the female stool became vacant it was the sole responsibility of the chief to select an elderly female member of the royal lineage to occupy the stool. In some cases the selection was obvious. In the case of the Akua Fosuaa Stool of Asonomaso-Safo the succession of the female stool went from mother to daughter, for example:

AGO MANSAH
AKUA FOSUAA
YAA FREMPOMAA
NANA AMPONSAA I
NANA AMPONSAA II

In each case, however, the incumbent chief did the selection. In modern context when the selection may not follow such a neat pattern as indicated above, the incumbent chief would be obliged to select a candidate from the direct lineage of the founding mother(s) of the community. Since the chief was the sole **Queenmaker**, the selection and enstoolment of *Ahenmaa* in Akan areas were not characterized by the acrimony which often accompanied that of chiefs where many people, the so-called Kingmakers, were involved.

FUNCTIONS OF THE STOOLMOTHER

As the traditional mother of the chief perhaps her first function was her role as the principal advisor of her son. She was the only personality among the courtiers who could openly advise the chief or even rebuke him., She had the responsibility to counsel the chief in the **do's** and **dont's** of chiefship.⁴

B. She had to make sure that the royal lineage remained intact. This aspect of her work was extremely important, since a particular royal lineage remained so long as female progeny existed in the lineage.⁵ This was because with the extinction of the female progeny a royal lineage ceased to exist. For this reason deities were often consulted before young spinsters (in the lineage) hands' were given in marriage. It was her responsibility to make sure that the females married from good homes to ensure good quality progeny into the royal lineage.

C. It was her duty to control and advise the female population. She controlled the female population by announcing and supervising the nubility rites for teenage girls in her community. Should a girl fail to allow these rites to take place before she became pregnant

then it was the onerous duty of the Stoolmother to make sure that the culprit went through the *Kyiribra* rites,⁶ (Sarpong 1972).

D. The most significant role of the *Ohenmaa* probably was the part she played in instoolment of a chief. It was her singular prerogative to select or nominate a candidate to be made a chief. As the head of the matrilineal group she knew those who had the pure royal blood.⁷ The Stoolmother was however enjoined by tradition to perform this function in conjunction with the *Abusuapanin*, the head of the royal lineage. (See Arhin, *op. cit.*). Unfortunately, her role ended with the nomination and the acceptance of the candidate by the Stoolelders. (These were wrongly referred to as Kingmakers). Should the Stoolelders find fault with the stoolmother's nominee she was obliged to select another candidate. The Akan tradition gave her three chances, after which the stoolelders should nominate their own candidate, of course, from the same royal lineage. In the olden days, the stoolmothers were so respected that their nominees invariably became chiefs; unless the candidates were known to be social misfits, such as drunkards, thieves etc.

E. The Stoolmother was obliged to attend all durbars where she sat at the left hand side of the chief. Even though tradition did not give her the right to openly take part in the deliberations of the court, she could speak (on-point-of-order) and her contribution should be final; a typical example was the famous *Yaa Asantewaa War*, the last Britanico-Asante War of 1900. Again at court a "wise" condemned criminal could appeal to the Stoolmother for a reparation; should the Stoolmother speak on behalf of the criminal, the chief was duty bound to accept the plea of his mother.

F. In time of war she held the home front and organized the womenfolk to pray and keep vigil and if possible defend the community while the men were away campaigning (Boaten 1991). The women sang dirges, (Nketia 1955) *Twe Mmomome* for the safe arrival of the menfolks.

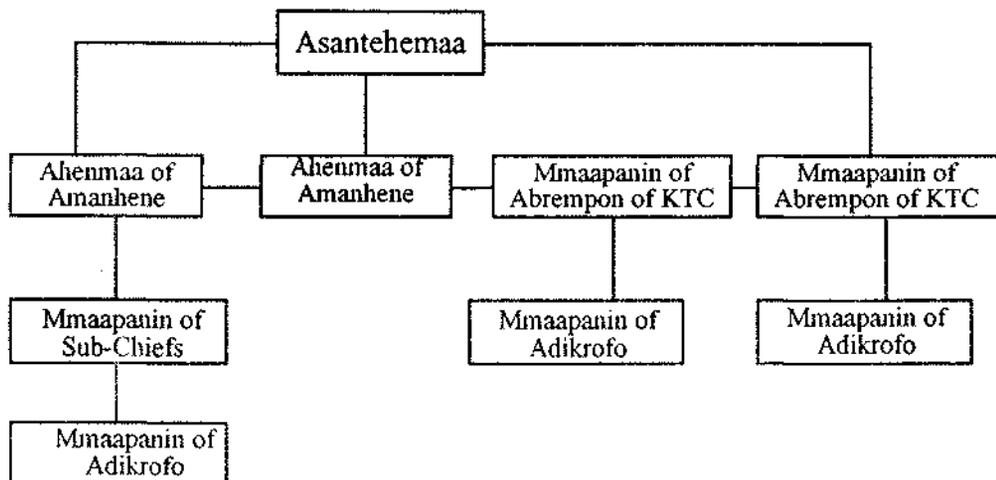
G. Like the chief she had her blackstools.

From the discussion so far it could be seen how important women were in general and the Stoolmothers in particular in the Akan polity. Perhaps a profile on the position of *Asantehenmaa*, the Stoolmother of the Golden Stool, may help to clarify the position of the Stoolmothers.

ASANTEHENMAA

Discussing the concept of *Ohenmaa*, a closer look may be taken at the institution of *Asantehenmaa*. Among the Akan, she was the one who had the largest following of *Ahenmaa* and *Mmaanpaninfoo*; that is to say, all the *Ahenmaa* under the jurisdiction of the Golden Stool of Asante were under her.

HIERARCHICAL COMMAND IN THE STOOLMOTHERSHIP IN ASANTE



Traditionally, the *Asantehemaa* was the embodiment of motherhood for not only the occupant of the Golden Stool, but occupants of all other stools in Asante. Her relationship with *Asantehene* was one of a good mother to a dear son. For example, it was the duty of the *Asantehemaa* to cut the hair of *Asantehene*, (Abayie Boateng 1991). Apart from mothering the *Asantehene*, she ceremonially followed the *Asantehene* at all durbars. She had a court which settled cases involving women, as well as matters concerning disputes in lineages, (Manuh 1988). It was her prerogative to select a candidate from the royal lineage to occupy the Golden Stool. Even in contemporary times we cannot imagine how the *Asantehemaa* could insist on her nomination or choice at the face of: (1) Kumase Abrempo (Chiefs of Kumasi) and (2) *Asanteman* (Paramount Chiefs of Asante). Her position as *Asantehemaa* enjoined her to respect the tenets of our traditions of which she was the mother custodian.

HER RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHIEF

From the typical example of the *Asantehemaa* and her son the *Asantehene*, the Stoolmothers related to their chiefs as real mothers and sons. If this relationship broke down beyond reconciliation the chief could destool the stoolmother. Traditionally the Stoolmother could not cause the destoolment of the chief. However, she could form an under-ground trouble to cause the destoolment of a chief. To avoid all these unhealthy developments, the relationship should be extremely cordial; with the *Abusuapanin* always ensuring this cohesion.

This was the state of the position of the Stoolmothers in the Akan areas. However, with time some significant changes in their role have been recognized. We would see how these changes came about and how some of the negative effects of the changes could be ameliorated.

THE MODERN STOOLMOTHER

Today a great deal of external influences have affected the role of the Ohenmaa in the Akan polity. In discussing these changing roles we have to take cognisance of Western education, the world-wide women's liberation and the whole concept of gender issues. These influences are affecting the positions of the stoolmothers irrespective of their so-called assigned traditional roles or position. For example, these mothers claim that their position in the traditional set-up has been marginalized by their male counterparts because often the chiefs do not consult them on several issues as demanded by custom. Furthermore, they claim that when the chiefs "eat" they forget the Stoolmothers.

I. WESTERN EDUCATION AND THE EDUCATED STOOLMOTHER

As the traditional administration becomes more and more complicated which often demanded "scientific" solution, many educated women are being enstooled in the *Akan* areas. Now it appears quite remote to enstool an illiterate as a Stoolmother. The communities always demand someone who could read and write. With this new phenomenon, the education standard of the Stoolmothers range from Middle School Leaving Certificate through General Certificate of Education to the University level. These educated traditional female administrators have brought in new dimensions in the role of the *Ahenmaa*.

Most of the educated Stoolmothers see themselves as next-in-command to their male counterparts. They argue that if the first stools in any community were: (1) the male and (2) the female stools, then they do not see how this should not mean that in actuality the common structure should not take notice of the Stoolmother as the second-in-command to the chiefs. Indeed, they do not see how sub-stools, created by their own sons should supercede their own. They assign this to the usual male domination. Logically, this perception is right, however it is at variance with male dominated tradition.

Busia, (*ibid.*) indicated that traditional histories from Mampon, Dwaben and Wankyi as well as other Divisions claimed that women were the early rulers. However, their roles as rulers were hampered when they were in their menstrual periods. On menstruation and women's leadership role Assimeng (1990) wrote:

In Africa generally various myths; taboos, customs and traditions had historically assigned women to a ritually (and therefore socio-politically) inferior status. One principal cause of this discrimination has been menstruation, seen as both spirit-change and polluting at the same time.

Some scholars interested in gender issues do not see how menstruation should debar women from assuming the roles of men. However, a large number of Stoolmothers accept the fact that menstruation actually hampers their traditional functions. This argument of whether menstruation should be a limiting factor in the leadership role of women appears to be the direct result of the influence of Western Education.

B. In spite of their physical disabilities, (Busia 1951; Rattray 1923) the educated Stoolmothers are demanding recognition and greater say in the affairs of their traditional areas. They no longer accept the peripheral position which had characterized their status

for a long time. This is manifested at places where the Stoolmothers are more educated than their chiefs (and their elders). The clamour for recognition led to a call for the acceptance of Stoolmothers into Regional and National Houses of Chiefs. This call had been so strong that the Constitution for the Fourth Republic of Ghana has said that there was no need for special seats to be created for the Stoolmothers in those Traditional Councils; (Constitutional Committee of Experts, 1991; Consultative Assembly, 1992; Constitution, 1992).

C. The Stoolmothers are using their unique role as the “defender of the rights of kin-ship” to press home their recognition. The rights of kin-ship simply means that the question of any candidate’s legitimacy to a stool must be confirmed by the Stoolmother, (Busia *ibid.*, p. 20). Educated Stoolmothers see this role as a unique opportunity to make their presence felt in their traditional areas whenever their male stools become vacant. These days they insist on their selected candidates. They, in fact, become stronger when the *Abusuampanin* favour their choices. The Stoolmothers have realized that the so called King-makers or Stoolelders get corrupted during the enstoolment of chiefs; so that especially in Asante wealth has become a major criterion for the selection and the enstoolment of chiefs.⁸ This unfortunate situation is being challenged by the Stoolmothers who insist on their nominations, when if closely analyzed are devoid of any monetary reward for the old ladies concerned.

These developments are regarded by the men as usurpation of their legitimate rights by the Stoolmothers. They claim the stoolmothers are now making chiefs, a function which should be performed by them.

The present writer sees this as a new phenomenon which is likely to persist if the women leaders are not given wider powers than they have hitherto enjoyed. The idea that they are demanding a greater say in the affairs of their traditional areas may have to be accepted by the male.

Some scholars of gender studies have argued that since in Ghana women form over 51 per cent of the population their traditional leaders may be accorded wider political powers by the men. We however think that in this particular instance the women leaders have their assigned duties for which they should not be disturbed.

INFLUENCE OF WESTERN EDUCATION

While the educated Stoolmothers are using the knowledge acquired in the formal education to influence their localities positively, it appears there are some negative influences which may eventually change the main tenet of our culture. The acceptance of the Christian culture fashioned in the Western civilization appears to be the first inhibiting factor. A few examples will suffice to explain the above claim: (1) The neglect of the nubility rites had been the direct result of the influence of Christianity. On this issue Sarpong (1991) wrote; “Can we wonder that the values associated with the nubility rites are fast becoming a myth with the disappearance of and the disrespect on the part of the youth for these rites in Kumasi? The irony of the situation is the part that Christianity has played in killing interest in and respect for the rites. Yet Christianity is preaching the very values that the nubility rites dramatized and inculcated into the youth with such vigour and effectiveness. The situation we find ourselves in is like doing all you can to promote an occupation while at the same time prohibiting the use of the tools purposely manufactured for that particular occupation.” (Also see Rattray 1929). The educated *Akan* regard these rites as unchristian, an attitude which has been counter productive.

2) Pouring of libation which is central to the Akan tradition is highly objectionable to Christianity and Western culture generally. Some educated Stoolmothers are known not to perform this singular rite, with the pretext that it is against their religious belief. Do we have to allow this attitude to obliterate the central theme, the ancestorship of our culture? Should this new attitude succeed where will our traditional heritage be? These and other such searching questions may be addressed by the Stoolmothers' Associations in our bid to safeguard our culture from foreign domination, we concede that a culture should be a dynamic phenomenon, however in its growth the central theme should not be lost else the culture dies, (Boaten *ibid.*). We would like to point out that the educated Stoolmothers should be careful not to supervise the demise of our rich cultural heritage based on the veneration of our ancestors who are, more or less, our traditional saints.

QUEENMOTHERS' ASSOCIATIONS OR AHENMAA KUO

(In this paper these associations shall read: **Stoolmothers' Associations**), the formation of these associations appears to be a reaction to the apparent neglect or the peripheral position the Stoolmothers find themselves. It is a platform on which the female leaders hope to press home their rights. These association are spearheaded by the well educated among the Stoolmothers.

The first known association was formed in 1983 at Cape Coast in Central Region known as the Queenmothers' Council. It was formed by the Stoolmothers from that Region who resided in the Cape Coast Municipality. The Council was opened to the non-resident Stoolmothers from the Central Region.⁹

The aim of this association was to think about the welfare of the Stoolmothers and how best to enhance the institution of chieftaincy.

The same Stoolmother in 1988 organized the Stoolmothers in Abora, Asebu, Kwamankese District to form Stoolmothers' Association. Presently, there have been spate of inaugurations of Stoolmothers' Associations all over the country. The best known are the Stoolmothers of Kwabre District, Ashanti Region, Greater Accra Region, Volta Region and Central Region.

The main aims and objectives of these associations may be summarized as follows:

- 1) To ensure the welfare of Stoolmothers and the institution of Stoolmothership.
- 2) To ensure the maintenance of good traditions and to eliminate those that are inimical to the good of the society. In this regard the Stoolmothers in Asante are seriously considering the re-introduction of the *bragro* ceremony, (nubility rites) while at the same time they are opposing the practice of female circumcision by some Northern tribesmen who reside in Region.
- 3) To work out good working relationship with the chiefs under whom they serve.
- 4) To advise the female population on issues such as family planning, home management etc.

We think that the formation of these associations is at the right direction, what is needed now is the education which the Stoolmothers will have to go through, in order to be effective. While on this platform, the Stoolmothers will know their privileges, through

the same way they will learn to appreciate their responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

The new educated Stoolmothers may revolutionize the institution of Stoolmotherhood by making sure that the female population which is directly under them accept the dangers of teenage pregnancies and dropping out of school before the end of the basic education. It should be their responsibility to educate the population on the need of spacing of births, especially on health grounds which affect their kind, the mothers.

On the point of recognition of Stoolmothers we want to suggest the following:

- a) Stoolmothers themselves should allow the creation of female stools for all known male stools, for example *Krontihene - Krontihenmaa; Adontenhene - Adontenhenmaa; Nifahene - Nifahenmaa* etc. These should meet under the leadership of the Stoolmother and deliberate on issues that affect the community especially the womenfolk. Furthermore, on this platform they could effectively influence the male court on relevant issues.
- b) These women councils could be formed at the traditional level where the women would discuss issues affecting their traditional areas. It seems to us that if this suggestion is adopted, the female leaders will exert more significant influence on their male counterparts. We envisage a situation where the men will have to refer decisions on issues such as litigations on instoolment of chiefs to these female councils.¹⁰ We hope that by this way their voices may be heard more loudly than when they join the male dominated Traditional Councils.

Finally, the male rulers should encourage and give every assistance to their female counterparts in this direction. If this is not done, then the men should expect a more stiff opposition from the women in the near future.

FOOTNOTE

1) Today the concept of Yenkobisa Abrewa is highly abused. The men counsellors when going to consult the "Old Lady" only meet in-camera and reach their decision by consensus. In actuality they physically do not consult the "Old Lady". Now it is an imaginary concept. Maybe because most of the Queenmothers are young and inexperienced. Since it is a desirable concept, it should be practiced by the traditional administrators.

2) The name *Adanse* appeared on the Dutch map of 1629 as a territory rich in gold. Archaeological evidence on *Adanse* area indicated that it had been inhabited by people well over one million years, Anquandah (1980).

3) This is the first time any scholar has used this term: "Stoolmother" in place of Queenmother. I consider this term appropriate since the English word Queenmother has a different connotation; while the Queenmother in Western/Eastern Monarchies are not rulers and are invariably mothers to the Queen or King, in our context she is a ruler and a mother (traditionally) to the Chief. Here she rules with the chief especially taking care of the female population under her.

- 4) **In her role as the chief's top counsellor, the Stoolmother did it as a true mother, but not in a way to jeopardize the position of her "son".**
- 5) **It is equally significant to make sure that good quality males existed in royal homes. Many a home had lost their hold on stools because at one point or the other they could not offer acceptable candidates for their stools.**
- 6) **In the olden days failure to allow the *Ohenmaa* to announce one's nubility period led to the traditional rites known as *This* ceremony put a pregnant woman through some humiliating rites with her husband (of course); after which the two of them were banished from the locality until after the birth of the baby.**
- 7) **In the olden days if a woman married a man from a non-Akan tribe, especially the Northern tribes, their children could not be regarded as people with pure royal blood.**
- 8) **These developments are as unfortunate as they are untraditional. It is unfortunate because some non-royals or persons with doubtful royal parentage have bought their way to occupy stools as against rightful owners. This is untraditional and therefore soiling the name of the institution of chieftaincy.**
- 9) **The brain behind the formation of the council was Nana Ekua Sasa I, the Stoolmother of Abora Nsafona. This stool is the *Obaatan* (Mother) to the Abora State. Nana Sasa I was trained at Achimota College as a teacher and holds a Diploma in Nursery Education from the Haggai Institute in Singapore. She retired from Ghana Education Service as an Assistant Director of Education. She was a member of the Consultative Assembly which drafted the 4th Republican Constitution and currently a Member of Parliament for Abora.**
- 10) **It is hoped that in this way the concept of *Yenkobisa Aberewa* will become more relevant; we envisage that through these associations the female leaders will learn more about their roles as against the extension of the world-wide women's liberation idea which is now agitating the minds of the educated Stoolmothers.**

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