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## WOMEN IN THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF GHANA

By

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Unhappily, a proper history of Ghana, that is, one showing the position, role and contribution of women to the development of the country, has yet to be written. Standard works by historians and other social scientists of the country show very little appreciation for women who in the past participated in the events which shaped our history.

The present paper is a brief summary of a larger study (now in progress) on the lives and activities of some of Ghana's women in our recent past. An attempt has been made to present a general picture of women in the social, economic, and political spheres of traditional life before British rule and culture were forced upon the peoples of the Gold Coast. Where possible, contrasts have been drawn between the Akan and other women like the Ga, Ewe, Dagomba, Gonja and so on. But most of the illustrations have been taken from the Akan because, in the first place, they form over 40% of Ghana's total population (the largest single ethnic group), and their historical development affected the lives of virtually all other groups. Secondly, the historical data on Akan women is very rich and more easily accessible to the researcher. Finally, important Akan customary laws relating to the political and domestic rights of women have been incorporated into Ghana's modern political and legal system, thus giving a healthy continuity to our development as a people. Some

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of the persisting features from traditional life which are present in modern Ghanaian society have been noted but the contemporary role of women is not under review here.

## I

Foreigners who travel to Africa with preconceptions about the inferior position and 'slavery' of African women are often surprised by the fierce independence of West African women who build their own houses, hold absolute titles to property, run their own businesses and educate their children in Europe. Even where these women are married, there is a marked tendency towards autonomy and self-reliance of the wives. These characteristics of women in West Africa go back to our history and culture.

Unfortunately our records of the past show a great deal of confusion and prejudice about the African woman. A major reason for this can be found in the attitudes of European travellers, colonial administrators and scholars. These men (and a few women) came from a society which was essentially anti-feminist. Women in Western Europe had long been relegated to the 'delicate' sphere of domestic and private life where they were totally dependent on men. Men alone were considered equal to the task of building their nations, economies and empires. European observers to Africa who came from such a milieu were, on the whole, incapable of appreciating the very different manner in which activities were divided between the sexes in other cultures. In the case of colonial administrators, educational, political and economic policies were initiated which actually discriminated against women in Africa and deprived them of many of the responsibilities and rights which they had known in their own culture. The tragedy of the colonial experience for the African woman then is that she has been set backwards and has been made to function in this century as if on sufferance of colonial and post-colonial men, both European and African.

Confusion about the role of African women further arose from the fact that Europeans set up a supposed Western ideal of the status of women and tried to judge Africans by it. An encounter with a hard working African woman who planted her farm, head-loaded the produce home and to market, cooked her meals, cared for her husband and many children, shared her compound with co-wives and kept out of men's social activities in the village, was bound to shock the eighteenth or nineteenth century traveller. Forgetting the drudgery and exclusion of the vast majority of his own women at that time in Europe, the traveller or administrator was quick to castigate the 'bondage' of the African woman. She was so far from the white man's supposed ideal that her position was assumed, necessarily, to be inferior. But it should be pointed out that the western ideal of womanhood that nineteenth century, and even later, observers tried to uphold in Africa was that of a very small minority of Europe's exploiting aristocracy. The 'ladies' of this class were lucky to be supplied with household gadgets and domestic help by their lords who encouraged them to live a 'delicate' and totally dependent life. These were the women who went about pretending to faint or dropping their handkerchiefs so that gallant men could run to their assistance. Poor dears! This image of the 'weaker sex' in Western society was so cleverly exploited by men that it is only in this century that Women Liberation Movements have really begun to expose the dire social, economic and political disadvantages and disabilities implied in it for women. Now, no one who has lived in an African village and observed the activities of women could ever describe them as 'weak'. The African woman does not have that self-image, no matter how submissive she may seem to her husband. She takes for granted the type of independence, self-reliance and self-confidence which the western female liberationist is trying now to establish in her society.

There were some genuine difficulties, however, for serious European observers and researchers who tried to obtain accurate information about women in Africa. Apart from the language barrier, there were many customary practices which prevented the women from establishing contact with such Europeans. Later the colonial situation increased distrust on all sides and made the problem even more difficult. Many African men also deliberately kept their women away from inquiring travellers. In 1817 Thomas Bowdich, an Agent of the Company of Merchants on the Gold Coast, visited Kumasi on a trade mission and found occasion to discuss "the liberty of English females" with the Asante chiefs. He particularly emphasized the right of the English woman not only of "enjoying the sole affection of a husband, but the more enviable privilege of choosing that husband for herself". This interested some of the chiefs' wives who were present. They tried to hear more from the visitors but their husbands immediately declared that they did not like any more of such 'palaver'. They changed the subject to war and ordered the women "to the harem". (Bowdich, 1819:96).

## II

In traditional African societies, certain factors determined the allocation of resources, power, status, rights and duties between men and women. These included descent, succession and inheritance, paternity, affiliation and residence rules as well as economic potential. Among the matrilineal Akan the factors seemed to be weighted in favour of women. The Akan trace descent through the female line. The woman is the genetically significant link between successive generations, since the people believe that only a woman can transmit blood (mogyaa) to a child. The father-child relationship is a spiritual one and a father gives to his child his

ntoro ('spirit') which affects the child's character and personality. In the determination of succession, inheritance, rights and obligations in a community, it is the mogyá that is significant, for that decides membership in a lineage, (abusua) and confers citizenship in a state. In fact mogyá (blood) is in this sense synonymous with abusua.

The abusua is a corporate group and children inherited property through it. The first qualification for a man to the highest political office, that of a chief, was that his mother belonged to the royal lineage of the community. This fundamental importance of women in the social organization was expressed in proverbs like Obaa na owoo barima and Obaa na owoo ohene. (It is a woman who gave birth to a man, It is a woman who gave birth to a chief). The anthropologist R.S. Rattray emphasized the point when he wrote: "A king's son can never be the king, but the poorest woman of the royal blood is the potential mother of a king". After doing extensive research among the Asante in the 1920s, Rattray was convinced that, but for the "natural" physical inferiority of women and the ritual prohibitions surrounding menstruation, the Asante woman would easily "eclipse any male in importance". (Rattray, 1923:81-2).

Certainly in a society where basic legal, economic, and political rights were defined through the feminine principle, women automatically acquired a strong and unique position. They were decisive in the perpetuation of the power, position and rights of the given lineages in the society. If the female sex became extinct in any abusua, no matter how many men there were, the life of that abusua would last only the span of those men's lives. After them the lineage would be completely extinct despite the fact that the men may have left children behind. A grave Asante proverb runs Wo ni wu a, w'abusua asa, (when

your mother dies, your abusua has ended). This is a major reason why child-bearing became such an urgent necessity among the Akan (and other communities). Female offspring were, in the nature of case, particularly desired and to this day the Akan woman in Ghana does not consider her child-bearing over until she has had a girl-even if she is the sixth, eighth or tenth child.

The Akan social organization contrasts sharply with that of many Ghanaian communities which have patrilineal descent like the Konkomba, Kusase or Ewe, or others which have 'bilateral' systems but maintain strong patrilineal dynastic principles like the Gonja, Dagomba, Mamprussi and Wala in northern Ghana. In these communities men held - and still hold - an undoubted dominance in society and women were markedly subservient to them. In the communities where Islam has been established as a religion and a cultural mode, as in Gonja and Dagomba, restrictions on women were even more pronounced. Wives were formally secluded and their activities confined to domestic tasks. Islam in northern Ghana, as elsewhere in West Africa, reinforced the patriarchal practices of patrilineal societies and before the turn of this century the horizons of women under its influence were severely limited.

Among the Ga of south-eastern Ghana, descent is traced patrilineally and inheritance and succession pass mainly through the male line. The basis of social organization was the patrilineage of 'house' called we. A number of these 'houses' confederated and formed a 'town'. The patrilineal element in Ga society was, however, considerably modified by the fact that women held certain important ritual offices, succession to which passed only through the female line. Also women could trade independently and own land and other property which were inherited by their own children, with the daughters having a controlling share. It has been suggested that this hint of matriliney among the Ga might be due to the influence of institutions of the Akan in their neighbourhood, to the north and west. (Manoukian, 1950:73)

Of all social institutions, marriage, and especially polygynous marriage, has been cited as the most enslaving for the African woman. There is no doubt that conjugal intimacy and trust between spouses is considerably lessened, and in some cases absent, in a polygynous household. Besides, jealousy and hostility between co-wives and the children of co-wives often lead to endless discord in the home and community. Also, a young inexperienced wife thrust into a situation of ten established wives might easily be overcome by it. She might end up withdrawing into herself with increasing loneliness and a crippling sense of inadequacy and hopelessness. These were, and still are, serious problems for women who shared their marriage legally with others. But it should be noted that monogamy, the ideal marriage of the Western world, does not guarantee conjugal intimacy or trust between husband and wife. It is significant that senior wives in Africa were given an important role in the selection of junior wives for their husbands. They often had to give their approval before the new marriages were concluded. Among the Akan all existing wives received a formal and public compensation known as mpata. This practice was an attempt to smooth the relations between old and new wives.

European partisans convinced in advance of the superiority of monogamy have often failed to understand the rights and duties of African women in marriage, polygynous or monogamous. First of all the rules and forms of marriage must be understood to be part and parcel of the culture of a people and they reflect their values and mode of life at any given time. Polygyny bears a strong relation to an economic system of a low subsistence type. It also reflects current values about rank, position and wealth in a society. In most African societies plurality of wives was a sign of affluence and power. For most men it remained only an ideal to which they aspired. In the past only chiefs, 'big men' and older men married many wives because they could afford



all the marriage expenses and were deemed capable of taking care of many women. Such men acquired a great labour force in their wives and numerous progeny and at the same time enlarged their circle of social and political relations with their affines. Enlarged relationships, however, meant also increased obligations. The great men had to give feasts, gifts and receptions for their many relations. Their contributions to the funerals of their wives and affines were also enormous.

Asante chiefs had special prerogatives in the matter of wives. Any girl or child a chief 'put his hands on' was a royal wife for life, whether she co-habited with him or not. Bowdich was thus informed that King Osei Bonsu had 3,333 wives although only six resided with him in the palace. (Bowdich, 1819:289-90). Bowdich found it surprising that the "higher orders" of Asante society practised polygyny "to an excess" but most men of the "lower orders" had only one wife, if any. In fact most accounts show that polygyny in Africa was not as common as is generally supposed. In northern Ghana, the anthropologist Meyer Fortes discovered in the 1940s that "the incidence of polygyny among the Tallensi is only about 40 per 100 married men, and two out of three polygynists have only two wives. The modal number of wives is one". Polygyny was closely related to social status. Commoners and ordinary young men rarely obtained more than one wife. Fortes again noted this among the Tallensi. "Plurality of wives", he wrote, "is mainly the privilege of older men, because they have both more resources and a longer marital history than the young men. Three-quarters of the married men under 45 have only one wife each". (Fortes, 1949:124).

Finally it should be pointed out that the problem of polygyny was not one of morality. European administrators and Christian missionaries had such a horror of the system that they placed self-

righteous strictures on the 'easy virtue' and 'licentiousness' of African polygynists. But the Africans did not, and still do not, see themselves in this light. Certainly those who had monogamous marriages did not see themselves as motivated simply by sexual virtue. After his long study of the Asante, Rattray wrote: "I doubt if sexual reasons for a plurality of wives enter very largely into the question at all, the motives for polygamy, where practised in Ashanti, being rather religious and social". (Rattray, 1927:95 n.1). The significant fact for the men and women involved was that all wives in a household were legally married according to the laws and customs of the society.

All wives had rights and duties in the home. In Ghana these differed generally between patrilineal and matrilineal groups. Among the Ewe and Dagonba, for example, where patrilineality was coupled with patrilocal residence, the wife tended to become more a part of her husband's household. His jural rights and control over her were more or less complete. The practice of separate residence, on the other hand, has enhanced the freedom of the Ga wife. Such freedom also characterized Akan marriages. A married woman retained her full legal identity within her matrilineage to which her children also belonged. Residence was more often matrilocal and the woman continued to live with her own kinsmen and cling to her mother. She cooked and carried food for her husband and slept in his house but she returned with all her things in the morning, to her own 'home' to carry on her business and care for her kinsmen. Later on in the marriage she might move to live with her husband.

The Akan wife kept her own name and maintained her legal personality throughout marriage. She held her own property absolutely and kept her separate accounts. If she farmed her lineage lands, the produce and profits were her own and her husband could not touch them. In law she could sue and be sued and she could conduct other legal proceedings in her own right. Furthermore, her husband was responsible for her debts and torts as well as funeral expenses on her death; but she was not liable for his. No matter how wealthy a wife was independently, her husband was obliged to maintain her and her children. (Very often the woman made quiet but substantial contributions to the up-keep of the household). A husband had no ultimate legal control over his wife and her acceptance of a marriage depended, to a large extent, on the kind of treatment she got from the man.

As a father, an Akan man had no rights in genetrical over his children. Such genetrical rights and ultimate jural authority over the married woman belonged to her lineage. The lineage head, abusua panin, was usually a male, (although women are by no means excluded from this position), a brother or maternal uncle. He exercised supreme corporate authority over all members of the abusua and had ultimate legal control over his sisters or nieces and their children. In the past the abusua panin could compel his niece to marry or divorce her husband. He also had the power to pawn his niece or nephew to raise money to pay some corporate abusua debt. It is interesting that the Gonja of northern Ghana with their strong patrilineal tendencies also accorded this right to the Mother's Brother. In the past the Gonja uncle could sell his 'sisters' sons and daughters into slavery, a thing which their father could not do. (Goody, 1966:350).

The economic and legal independence of married women in matrilineal societies has often been given as a reason for the relatively high degree of marital instability. (Southall, 1961:59). Certainly the Asante woman had no fear of divorce. There was no stigma or

disability attached to it. Nor was she dependent on alimony which did not exist. She was always assured of a place to go if she left her husband, and she was accustomed to supporting herself in food and clothing, even in marriage. Such a woman was often heard to declare: Megyae aware a menwe aboo. (If I am divorced, I will not eat stone!).

A verse of a popular song ran:

Ee, fidie hwintin

Fidie hwintin a,

Meko me nkyi

Megyae aware a

Meko Bo-adwo oo

The trap releases

When the trap releases,

I shall go back home

If I am divorced,

I shall go to "Bo-adwo"

(i.e., the place called 'Peace of Mind').

(Nketia, 1963b:53)

'Home' for the Akan woman was where her maternal abusua lived. There she had equal rights to protection and support in the corporate group which she never legally left. The lineage tie was always stronger than the marriage tie and the Akan wife was an 'outsider' to her husband's own abusua and relations. In such a situation marriage per se could never become 'bondage' for the woman. Perhaps it should be added here that divorce caused no disturbance or crisis in the jural, political and property rights of children. These rights inhered in the lineage and the children had access to them through their mother. This is particularly important with regard to children born outside marriage. They were not illegitimate in any legal sense and there was little or no social disadvantage to them. Their mothers' position in their lineages guaranteed them status and equal rights of succession and inheritance with all their other siblings and kinsmen.

But there has always been a contradiction in the known legal and economic, and sometimes even political, independence of many African women and their (calm?) submission to their husband's authority in the home. Wife-dominance is generally absent even where there is the greatest spouse autonomy. In Ghana, society generally (and men particularly) abhorred the aggressive female and put her down as obaa-barima (Twi: 'he-woman'). There are many instances where a wealthy woman owns the 'marital' house and supports the family-husband included - yet the authority figure in the house remains the man. This is more surprising in Akan homes.

Among the Akan, the male principle in society was greatly - even religiously - emphasized. The belief in ntoro ('spirit') which is transmitted from father to son largely compensated for the otherwise very weak legal position of a father and husband. The father's ntoro determined a child's character, personality and spiritual characteristics and made the father responsible for his child's moral behaviour. There were 12 corporate ntoro categories in Akan society, each with its own character-type, sacred 'spirit-washing' day, taboos, surnames, and forms of response to greetings and etiquette. All of these features a man brought from his ntoro to his marriage and transmitted them to his children. A mother and wife was obliged, for the safety, moral and social success of her children, to observe all the religious, social and moral requirements of her husband's ntoro. This is what put women and children under the control of the man in the home.

In the home a woman was supposed to 'talk to' (kasa kyere) and advise (tu fo) her children but it was the father who corrected and punished (tea) them for misconduct. Dr. J.B. Danquah, a foremost Akan lawyer, historian and intellectual, wrote: "The purpose of ntoro is to arm the father of a family with the right to exact obedience from every member of his house, his wife as well as his children ... (To disobey the rules of the father's ntoro) makes you damned, damned

not in the sense that you will go to Hell, but that you will not prosper in this world, and you may fall ill, or you may even die". (Danquah, n.d.:12). This belief in the power of a man's 'spirit' over his children was part of the reason why men had custody of their children when marriages were dissolved.

Similar social and religious factors contributed to the creation of a certain inequity in sexual rights between men and women in Africa. Most Africans consider sexual access to a plurality of women as a male right. In Ghana all forms of customary law recognize polygyny as lawful but all equally forbid a woman to have more than one husband at the same time. (Sarbah, 1897:52). While a marriage lasted, a man had exclusive uxorial rights over his wife's domestic and sexual services. And he was fully supported in these rights by the woman's lineage and lineage head. Female fidelity in marriage was enjoined in Akan and other societies while it was not incumbent on the husband in most communities. Priests, hunters and warriors believed that their wives' unfaithfulness could bring them misfortunes in their enterprises and good conduct was enjoined on the woman. (Nketia, 1963a:78).

The proved adultery of a wife was a universal ground for divorce. The injured husband often claimed compensation (ayefare in Twi) from the seducer. He was also entitled to full refund of his marriage expenses from the wife's family. In early nineteenth century Asante, it was forbidden "to praise the beauty of another man's wife, being intrigue by implication". (Bowdich, 1819:259). In many societies in Ghana a man's adultery was not considered sufficient ground for divorce by the wife. Among the Krobo and Dagomba a woman could not initiate divorce proceedings against her husband, whereas in Ga and Asante societies, divorce could be started by either party. The rights of Asante women in divorce were very explicit. A woman had as many grounds as her husband for terminating an unsatisfactory marriage. These

included the husband's adultery, impotence, neglect of maintenance and sorcery. (Rattray, 1927:97-8; Bowdich, 1819:260).

It would seem that Fante women, culturally akin to the Asante, lost their important right to divorce their husbands in the past. The pioneer legal historian of the Fante, John Mensah Sarbah, insisted in 1897:

Notwithstanding the vague ideas in the coast towns about divorce of native marriage, there is no doubt that, save and except the competency of a native tribunal to decree the dissolution of a marriage, the right to divorce is marital only. The wife cannot declare her marriage void ... nor can her family give her permission to remarry in the absence of the consent of her husband ... For adultery or witchcraft on the part of the wife, a man can divorce his wife and claim from her family the consawment and other expenses. But the wife cannot enforce divorce or discontinue marriage on the ground of her husband's adultery, or on his marrying more wives.

(Sarbah, 1897:52)

Rattray has suggested that this unfortunate predicament of coastal women might be due "to the position and status of women having deteriorated owing to contact with Europeans". (Rattray, 1927:97). I believe there is a need in Africa to engage in studies of social history and to explore the whole phenomenon of "contact with Europeans" with a view to our cultural liberation! It is certain that European notions and practices in marriage, not always consistent, honest, or whole-some, permeated West African societies along the coast more than they influenced inland peoples. European visitors to Asante in the nineteenth century were always struck by the status, dignity of bearing and independence of mind and action of the Asante woman. On the coast, however, Europeans and sensitive Africans complained of the 'bondage' of women and the lack of care by husbands

(European and African). In an editorial on 9 July, 1896, The Gold Coast Chronicle (Accra) drew attention to the problem, noting "among the Fante Tribes especially, the culpable neglect of fathers, placing children in a most unevitable position". (VIII, No.207, 9 July 1896, p.2).

Christianity at first provided an escape for coastal women. In the 1850s many flocked to the chapels, refused to cohabit with their polygynous husbands and succeeded in contracting Christian marriages to elevate their position and gain security. (Cruikshank, 1853:II, 95-101). The Fante woman at last had gained "the undivided addresses of her husband". But Cruikshank, who spent eighteen years on the Gold Coast as trader, magistrate and Lieutenant-Governor, noted that the situation did not always produce peace and harmony and marital bliss. He said the women became aggressive:

The newness of the position of the married wives, so lately raised from degradation, blinded them to the knowledge of their duties, and induced them to exact, as an inalienable and compulsory right, what if they had known human nature better, they might have made the spontaneous result of dutiful affection. This termagant conduct to men, who had hitherto been accustomed to have their own way in their domestic arrangements, was difficult to brook, and led, ... in many instances, to the sin which it was intended to repress. (Cruikshank, 1853: II, 99).

By the end of the nineteenth century the Christian and European-style marriages had become a major social problem of the Gold Coast. The precipitate repudiation of wives demanded by the missionaries left those women in great hardships and often their children suffered along with them. On the other hand, the indissolubility of the Christian (particularly Catholic) marriages created a fairly desperate situation in the 1890s. The Gold Coast Chronicle wrote in 1896:



What was introduced as matrimony degenerated into a hybrid sort of marriage, with the bonds more closely rivetted, the counter-balancing advantages become equivocal, and Divorce placed beyond the reach of 99 out of 100, groaning under this load, and in vain asking the ministers who bound them to unbind, or else help them out of the dilemma but who, whilst sincerely sympathizing with them confess themselves powerless and helpless in the matter! (VIII, No. 207, 9 July 1896, p.2).

### III

Ghana is relatively free of customary and religious barriers to female employment, and the economic development of the country owes a great deal to women. In the past farming was largely the work of women, their children and slaves. This was one area where men genuinely exploited women in the society. The division of labour between the sexes left the heavy tasks of clearing virgin forests, felling of trees and preparation of the soil to men. But the very arduous and continuous work of planting, weeding, harvesting and transporting the farm produce was all done by women. The food of the country - yams, plantains, cassava, corn and vegetables - was grown by women. Dr. James Africanus Horton, an early West African nationalist, wrote in 1868 that the female population of the Gold Coast was "the most laborious". "If a steady and continuous work is required to be done, the female population are the best to be employed". (Horton, 1868:99) Horton was very impatient and critical of the men in the coastal towns who were usually seen "during the day sitting lazily about under the cool shade of a tree". (Horton, 1868:119). In many parts of rural Ghana today where men and women are engaged in farming, certain inequities exist. After a hard, sunny or rainy day's work, the women would be seen trudging home, carrying immense loads of firewood and foodstuffs on their heads, with their babies on their backs while the men would be marching behind, encumbered only by their walking sticks, matchets or guns!

Most women in Ghana were obliged to work on their husband's farms. The produce of these farms and the fruits of the women's labour were subject to the control of the men who decided the distribution and kept the profits. Among the Manya Krobo, a system of 'trial marriage' apparently developed in the past where a wife-elect was taken to live on a man's farm for a year or so to prove her worth as a labourer. The man would not commit himself to a binding marriage until he had tested the woman's abilities as a hard farm worker and a good market-saleswoman (Manoukian, 1950:108). The justification for men's exploitation of their wives' labour was that husbands were responsible for the maintenance and debts of their wives and children. In most cases the women had no time or energy to cultivate their own lands. But where they did, the produce and profits from these separate lands belonged to the women completely. This was true of farms and groundnut fields of Akan and Tallensi women. Ga women apparently were not obliged to work on their husband's farms but they were responsible for marketing the produce for the men. The man stipulated a certain sum for the goods, which the wife had to give him but any excess she made on the sale was hers to keep. In the fishing communities of the Ewe, Ga and Fante, women also controlled the sale of fish caught by men at sea.

In order for men and women to realise any profits from this subsistence economy a large labour force was needed. The work force could come from slaves whose labour was free. But when slave labour was not readily available to the ordinary man, he turned to his women and children. This was the economic reason for polygyny. Even men with slaves married more wives to keep their farms and fishing going, when the slaves were withdrawn for war. Indeed, the burdens of the farm, market and house were so exacting that many wives encouraged their husbands to recruit more wives to share the tasks. This is true

in rural Ghana today as it was in the past. The perceptive Ghanaian female writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, reveals this predicament of the African woman in her play Anowa which is set in Ghana in the 1870s. Anowa, the intelligent, capable, sensitive and independent-minded heroine counsels her husband, Kofi Ake, to take a second wife but indignantly rejects Kofi's suggestion of slave help in their arduous monkey-skin trade. "I shall not feel happy with slaves around," declares Anowa to her husband, in superior moral tones. "Kofi, no man made a slave of his friend and came to much himself. It is wrong. It is evil". But on the question of a second wife she has no trouble. It is her suggestion. "At least she could help us. I could find a good one too". When Kofi Ake protests in alarm, Anowa calmly goes on: "Ah my master, but I don't understand you. You are the only man in this world who has just one wife and swears to keep only her .... Perhaps it is your medicine's taboo?" (Aidoo, 1970:24 and 30).

In the prevailing social and economic conditions of the Gold Coast in the nineteenth century women shared their husbands and kept the population fed. Food production was considered primarily a feminine activity. Men engaged in war, trade, gold mining and hunting. Export agriculture was, for a long time, unrewarding as a source of income. It was less profitable than trading and gold-mining. Besides, greater prestige was attached to commercial enterprise (which ranked with or was second to military success). Through trade men easily acquired European luxury goods which were deemed necessary to bolster their image in society. Later when palm oil and cocoa became established as export commodities, men turned to farming but they never supplanted women. Women played an important role in the production of palm oil, soap and palm kernels. They also helped in the harvesting of cocoa. In this century, however, more male hired labour has been employed in the cocoa industry.

There were important reasons why men controlled all profitable trade in Ghana until late in the last century. First of all the articles required for inter-state and international trade were difficult for women to come by. These were gold, slaves, kola nuts, monkey skins and ivory. Such commodities were within the reach only of rich and powerful men. Slaves were the pre-rogatives of chiefs and military captains. As Dr. Dickson has pointed out, the long-distance trade in these goods also required a great deal of organization and a heavy capital outlay. (Dickson, 1969:106). Not only women but the poorer male population could not afford extensive trading. Teams of carriers - slaves - were needed to headload the goods while armed men and state highway police (akwansafoa in Twi) were required to protect the caravans from brigands. It was this reason as well as state policy which made trade in the Asante kingdom, for example, the pre-rogative of the King and his powerful chiefs.

However, male domination of trade began to wane as the traditional commodities became unavailable or unsalable. Slavery was abolished, and the use of slaves as porters was eventually forbidden by the British Administration on the Gold Coast in the 1870s. Then monkey skins and ivory became scarce with the gradual extinction of the animals. As imperialism became established, the goldmining industry fell under the control of European companies who established monopolistic rules about the exploitation of the mineral. Men everywhere were being forced out of jobs as entrepreneurs. Also the conditions of prestige changed. Education (from which women were excluded or held back by policy and custom) and European-type (i.e. clerical) jobs became the factors which conferred distinction in society. But interestingly enough as men left commerce, women - uneducated women and all - took over trading so that today in Ghana, as elsewhere in West Africa, markets are a feminine domain.

Women along the coast began to enter the European trade from about the middle of the nineteenth century. George Henty, the war correspondent for the London Standard visited Accra in December 1873 and was surprised to see everywhere in the market and streets "enterprising women" selling trays-full of beads, Manchester cloths, coloured handkerchiefs, tobacco, English-made pipes, knives, looking glasses, matches and blue. (Henty, 1874:258-60). Often women were also busy selling food, cooked and uncooked, and still others were engaged over large iron pots manufacturing palm oil.

The war of 1873-4 between Asante and Great Britain provided great incentives to women traders in southern Ghana. When the huge British Camp was established at Praso, 70 miles from Cape Coast, Fante and Assin women quickly travelled up to sell dried fish, candles, tobacco, pipes, sheets of note-paper, rice and plantains to the soldiers. (Henty, 1874:329). Though the sale of liquor was forbidden except through the British commissariat, the Cape Coast women who briskly signed up to carry food and ammunition for the Control Department calmly rolled up several bottles of rum and gin in the masses of cloth (atofu) which they carried on their back as bustle or 'improver'. The atofu became a great avenue for smuggling during the war and the search police dared not touch them. Frederick Boyle, correspondent for the Daily Telegraph observed the activities of the dauntless women carriers and wrote: "In the sacred 'improver' a female chapman can carry two or three bottles without any suspicion"! (Boyle, 1874:131).

But there were more settled female traders at the time like the very wealthy and powerful Mrs. Barnes and Mrs. Swanzy of Cape Coast. These formidable women maintained large establishments of slaves, servants and dependent kins-men in the 1870s. This clientele conducted a regular retail trade for the women as well as performing other services. When General Wolseley requested carriers in November

1873 for the Asante expedition, Mrs. James held two rousing meetings at her house and rounded up thousands of women for the British. Mrs. Swanzy alone supplied 80 women of "her people" (i.e., household) to act as carriers. (Boyle, 1874:102-4, 116-7; Henty, 1874:205-7).

Mrs. Swanzy was the former Catherine Dawson, mulatto daughter of a former Governor, Joseph Dawson, and Efiua Ketsi, holder of the Anana stool of Cape Coast. She was believed to be the richest woman on the Coast in the mid-nineteenth century. She owned large tracts of land in the centre of Cape Coast part of which she gave to her Irish husband's firm of F. and A. Swanzy. (She also gave part of her huge household to the husband, Frank, her "intelligent man", and married him off to her bedchamber woman in 1872 - to perpetuate the name)! She was known to have once paid Asante traders by balancing gold dust against a canon ball. (Swanzy, 1956:103).

After Asante had been annexed by the British in 1901, Fante and Ga women initiated Asante and other inland women into the secrets of the European trade. Already some women in Accra and Cape Coast were receiving credit from European firms for tobacco, cloth and other imported goods. The Asante women seemed to have caught on quickly, accustomed, as they were, to taking care of their own property and keeping their own accounts. The tradition of female economic independence and self-reliance has created in Ghana today a class of tough-minded commercial and businesswomen who control vast economic enterprises of considerable complexity. Many of these women are perfectly illiterate! These are the familiar 'cash madams' of Accra, Kumasi, and Lagos in Nigeria. 'Madam Esther', 'Auntie Grace' and 'Maame Seewaa' would be found in these cities dealing in wholesale textiles, hardware and provisions. or else controlling vast retail networks of local goods like fish, palm oil, plantains and farms. They can barely sign their names but their annual turnover is in many thousands of pounds - although the tax official may find it extremely

difficult to assess the volume of their trade or their real worth.

Such women are 'big' in society and they assume chiefly positions in their businesses. In the Ghanaian markets one hears of the 'Yam Queen', 'Cloth Queen', 'Tomato Queen' and so on. They are formidable women who jealously guard their pre-rogatives and rule their branch of the trade with firm hands. They may or may not be married but that is no deterrent to their pursuit of wealth and power. Their husbands often turn out to be fairly dependent males who act as secretaries if need be. But most of the business information is carried in the women's heads and their energy, diligence and knowledge of the world is a matter for surprise. The 1960 Population Census of Ghana showed that of the 2,723,026 economically active population, 1,677,058 were males and 1,045,968 females. Fully 86% of these females were employed in agriculture, fishing and commerce. Seventy five per cent of all females in employment were categorised as employers or self-employed. (1960 Population Census of Ghana; Greenstreet, 1971). The contribution of women to the economy of Ghana then is impressive as well as historical, as the size and nature of their present economic activities show.

Nevertheless, these economic activities remain 'traditional'. Most women now are not equipped educationally and technically to play prominent roles in Ghana's industrialisation process. The colonial system saw to it that women were either excluded from schools or else were given a fifth-rate imitation of the education of the poor in Europe. The 'better classes' of coastal women, mainly mulattos descended from European merchants and officials, received a fair education and grossly pretended at ladyship while the "lower orders" imitated them and strained to do their needle-work and cook a few out of place European dishes. (See Reindorf, 1895:272-3). On their part, African men exploited their traditions to support the colonial system

which kept women 'in their place'. Wives and daughters were required to keep the agricultural economy running and keep their catechist, clerical and labouring men in the mines supplied with food. That was the role of a woman! The economy could not be disrupted; girls could not go to school.

It was something of a revolution when the first African woman was admitted to the colonial civil service in the Gold Coast in 1890. This was Miss Elizabeth Ferguson (later Mrs. E. Grant), sister of the famous surveyor and empire builder, George Ekem Ferguson of Anomabo. Miss Ferguson, 'a young native lady' passed two civil service examinations very creditably and the Government could not exclude her from employment. In his effort to persuade the Colonial Office about the woman's employment, Governor Brandford Griffith felt constrained to emphasize that "the admission of young ladies who are natives of the Colony to the Public Service is calculated to have a most useful and moralising effect generally in that service". Lord Knutsford, the Colonial Secretary, agreed with this view and Elizabeth Ferguson was employed as Postmistress and Telegraph Clerk at Anomabo. Yet Miss Ferguson's achievement did not remove the colonial discrimination against women in employment. Teaching in mission schools remained the height of the educated women's aspirations and achievement until very recently. There was some justification, therefore, in what many fathers and uncles used to say: Obaa adesua nso mfasoo ban na swo soo? (What profit is there on a woman's education?).



## IV

In politics women played varied roles depending on the particular social organization and historical circumstances. The traditional emphasis of anthropologists and other scholars on political offices and the position of the chief (who was usually a male) has eclipsed the political role of all but a few African women. A great deal of research needs to be done on the real power of women in the decision-making processes of African polities in the past. In societies like the Ga, Dagomba, Nzima and Aowin where women controlled certain ritual practices and medicines as well as land, stool property, and regalia, the political role of women could be considerable. These women might not be seen debating issues with men in the chief's council meeting but they could influence the decisions from behind the scenes.

The Akan matrilineal social organization gave women a complementary role in politics. In an Akan state there are two stools which serve as the symbols of political authority. One is the (male) chief's stool and the other is the Queen Mother's. The female stool is generally regarded as the senior of the two stools. (Rattray, 1923:81). The Queen Mother (Ohemmaa) is the senior female of the royal lineage who is chosen as a joint ruler with the chief. She may be a real or classificatory mother or sister of the chief whom she regards constitutionally as her son. When there is a vacancy on the chief's stool, the Queen Mother has the first right to nominate a candidate. As the royal genealogist, she has the right to determine the legitimacy of the rights of all claimants to a stool. Her nominee, however, has to be approved and accepted by the sub-chiefs and elders of the people. When a successful candidate is to be enstooled the Queen Mother plays a key role in all the esoteric rites and ceremonies.

The Queen Mother's title means 'female ruler' and she shares the rule of the state with her son. Whenever the chief sits in state she sits beside him on his left. As the 'mother' of the chief, she has the constitutional obligation to advise and guide the chief. She is the only person in the state who can criticise and rebuke the chief to his face and in public. Failure to perform this important constitutional duty can contribute to the destoolment of the Queen Mother herself. This happened to the Queen Mother of the Asante Kingdom, Nana Afua Kobi, in 1883 when two of her sons, King Kofi Kaakari (1867-74) and King Mensa Bonsu (1874-83) were deposed by the people for various misdeeds.

The Queen Mother is a full member of the chief's council and court. Her presence is required whenever important matter of state or judicial cases involving sacred oaths are to be decided. Nineteenth century visitors to the Asante court always commented on the role of the Asantehemmaa and her court. When Bowdich was negotiating a treaty of peace and trade with King Osei Bonsu in 1817, the Queen Mother had to be fully informed of all the proceedings. At a grand meeting of the Asante National Assembly held on 7 September 1817, Bowdich had to relate the objects of his mission to the Queen Mother through her own okyeame (counsellor). The presence of the Queen Mother with some 300 women "in all the magnificence which a profusion of gold and silk could furnish" quite astonished the Englishmen. (Bowdich, 1819:124). Three years later, in 1820, the British Consul, Joseph Dupuis, also remarked on the keen interest that a new Asantehemmaa, presumably Nana Ama Seewaa, took in public affairs. Once she visited the consul at his residence in Kumasi with "a troop of about one hundred and fifty women and young girls" to thank Dupuis and express her views on the successful treaty negotiations between Asante and Great Britain.

Dupuis had this to say of the Asantehermaa's power: (Dupuis, 1824: 114)

This woman's relationship [to the King] naturally established her in an elevated rank, but she was doubly dignified by an employment which, perhaps, may not improperly be termed Governess of the empire, or Queen over the females; all of that sex being immediately responsible to her government, and subject to an arbitrary control under her vice-governesses.

The Asante Queen Mothers have their own 'palace' organization. They hold court independently of the chiefs and are attended by numerous (mainly female) councillors and functionaries. Their jurisdiction covers all the domestic and family cases involving the royal lineage as well as most disputes between women. In certain cases, male litigants can apply to have their cases transferred from the chief's to the Queen Mother's Court where the fees and fines are generally lower. Queen Mothers, like other Asante women, in the past, owned vast estates and whole villages where their slaves and dependents cultivated farms for them. (Bowdich, 1819:45).

Women in Akan society can rule as chiefs if there are no male heirs in the royal lineage. One such female chief in the nineteenth century was Nana Dwaben Ama Seewaa, who ruled the important Dwaben chiefdom from 1841 to about 1850. Dwaben fought a major civil war with the Asantehene in 1831 and lost. Nana Ama Seewaa, and her son chief Kwasi Boaten and their people were forced to emigrate to Akyem in southeasteastern Ghana. Dwabehene Boaten and his brother died in exile and Nana Seewaa led her people back to Asante in 1841 after

successfully concluding negotiations with Asantehene Kwaku Dua I. She completely rebuilt her ruined capital with the help of her 28 year old daughter, Afrakuma Famin, who later succeeded her as chief. The Wesleyan missionary Thomas Birch Freeman who visited Nana Ssawaa in 1842 estimated her age between 60 and 65. (Freeman, 1844:162). But her energy was surprising. She officiated at the religious Adae and Odwira festivals, presided over her court and guided her councillors in government. She also fulfilled her obligations to the Asantehene before whom she took the customary oath of allegiance, "wearing a belt of sepow knives". (Rattray, 1929:173).

Several Wesleyan missionaries visited Nana Dwaben Ssawaa, and were impressed with her dignity, kindness and enlightenment. In the mid-nineteenth century she was the only important Asante chief who was willing to consider and accept missions and schools in her state. In August 1844 when Rev. H. Wharton visited her, she gave a large piece of land near her residence for the building of a mission house and chapel. When the missionary left Dwaben, Nana Ssawaa gave him a boy of 8 to be educated on the coast. In 1847 Rev. C. Hillard went to Dwaben and found the old monarch still very keen: "The Queen manifested such kindness and confidence as is truly surprising. She attended personally every time I preached". (Freeman, Wharton and Hillard in The Western Echo (Cape Coast) II, No. 19, 16 June 1836, p.8).

But Freeman observed that Nana Ssawaa could not proceed with the introduction of Christianity in Dwaben against the national policy of Asante as a whole. Christianity was such a momentous innovation that all the Asante states had to adopt a national policy and strategy for it under the leadership of the Asantehene. Its close association to British political imperialism was too patent to the Asante Government.

Remarkable as Nana Dwaben Ama's achievements were as a ruler, they were partly possible because she had reached the menopause in life. Women suffered certain ritual disabilities which often hindered their participation in public activities. The greatest disabling factor was menstruation. The Akan considered a menstruating woman as ceremonially unclean and she was subject to a number of ritual avoidances. A Queen Mother in her period could not take part in any religious rites for the ancestors or go to the chief's court or associate with any of the male functionaries in government. (Menstruation was also part of the reason why women ate separately and kept out of men's social activities in the community). It was especially important that women in their period kept away from military activities and personnel. To ensure against menstrual contamination chiefs and captains going to war were compelled to leave the town soon after they had taken the war oath to the King.

Ritual disqualification rather than physical inferiority prevented Asante women from serving in the state armies. There was also a state policy to guard against Asante women being captured in war by enemies. Only a few senior wives of the King and greater war chiefs accompanied the armies to take care of the sacred "blackened stools", medicines, and treasures taken to war. The rest of the women engaged themselves under the leadership of the Queen Mother, who now assumed the government, in offering prayers for victory and preparing provisions for the soldiers. Observers found Asante women busy in 1873-1874 drying plantains, cassava, corn, nuts and beans for the 'Sagrenti' war. They also ground pepper, baked corn cakes and smoked fish and meat for the men. (Ramseyer and Kuhne, 1875:267; Boyle, 1874:331).

Women along the coast had regular organizations for services in war. Fante military organization was structured into patrilineal asafo companies. Some of these companies had regular female wings called adzewa or adenkum. Some also reserved the important leadership position of Asafo Nkyer baa for women, and female 'captains'

actually fought in war. In 1848 an Ahanta woman described by Cruickshank as "a brave Amazon of Dixcove" marched at the head of her company in the expedition of Governor Winniet to Nzima ('Apollonia'). This expedition deposed the famous King Kwaku Akka of the Nzima who was imprisoned in Cape Coast Castle where he died in early 1852. (Cruickshank, 1853:I, 245; Ellis, 1893:210-11).

Fante adenkum and adzewa bands provided support to the transport and commissariat departments of the asafo companies in war. They also assisted in obtaining supplies and ammunition by placing themselves in pawn or standing surety for their fighting men. (De Graft Johnson, 1932:314). Fante women became the strongest opponents of Asante imperialism in the nineteenth century. Thus the adzewa and adenkum bands gave every support to the British during the Asante invasion of 1873. Under the influence and exhortation of powerful women like Mrs. Barnes and Mrs. Swanzy, the women of Cape Coast and neighbouring towns poured out in their thousands to act as carriers for the Control Department. These Fante women saved General Wolseley's transport organization from complete collapse. For one shilling a day and three pence "subsistence", the women carried rice, salted beef and ammunition in loads of 60 pounds each, all the 70 miles from Cape Coast to Praso - their babies on their backs! Many were the instances when men escaping from Asante fire took shelter behind the lines of these brave women carriers!! British officers and war correspondents had the greatest respect and praise for the 'little women!'. Many then became convinced of the wisdom of the King of Dahomey in employing the female Amazons to fight in his national army. Frederick Boyle of the Daily Telegraph wrote:

Give us women! is the cry of transport officers. That king of Dahomey who organised the Amazon corps was no unnatural tyrant. He appears to have been a man of shrewd observation, superior to prejudice.

On 26 November 1873 Boyle met convoys of 2,000 women carriers marching to the war front led by their headwomen who carried silver-topped sticks of office. He declared:

What order and regularity they keep! I wish the women of Africa would just rise in their thousands and assert that superiority so manifestly possessed.

(Boyle, 1874:142, 173).

Actually the hard working and courageous women did not tolerate male cowardice in time of national crisis. The women had a right to demand the service of every able-bodied man in the national cause. Female assaults on cowardly men in time of war was a pre-rogative and it became institutionalized by the Akan in the military-religious ceremonies of mmobomme. When the men left for war, women under the leadership of the Queen Mother or their company heads painted themselves with white clay (hyire) and paraded through the streets every morning singing songs of exhortation and invoking the protection of the gods (abosom) for the army. On the day of an expected battle they 'played at war'. Armed with sticks, knives and wooden guns they burst through the streets pretending to fight the enemy. Pawpaw fruits served as enemy heads and were fiercely pierced and cut off by the 'warring' women. During these exercises any able-bodied man found in town was dragged out from his hiding place, thrashed in the streets and jeered out of town. Cape Coast in 1873 presented many spectacles of a "man wretch" being pursued by bands of mmobomme women. (Boyle, 1874:47, 50).

Captured enemies and other war prisoners were also subjected to harsh treatment by women. During the Krepi campaign of 1869-71, the Asante captured the Basel missionaries Fritz Ramseyer, his wife and son and the traders Johannes Kuhne and M.J. Bonnat. The

prisoners were marched to Kumase. Several times on their journey they encountered 'troops' of fierce amobonne women who jeered and threatened them with menacing gestures. In Dwaben a "female army" met the captives with "a grand flourish" brandishing their knives in their faces. Ramseyer wrote: "One of them waved her sword full in the face of my wife and swept onward, screaming fearfully". A similar reception awaited the frightened Europeans at Abankuro, near Edweso. (Ramseyer and Kuhne, 1875:34-5, 52-4).

It is highly interesting that while Fante and other coastal women were the strongest opponents of Asante imperialism, women in Asante itself offered the steepest resistance to the British in the nineteenth century. The record of two Asante Queen Mothers and their supporters is particularly outstanding. Asantehemmaa Nana Yaa Akyaa was the mother of Prempe I (1888-96), the last King of independent Asante. She successfully guided her supporters to fight off Prempe's opponents to the Golden Stool in a civil war which lasted from 1884 to 1888. She then became the power behind the Stool of her sixteen year-old son. Many old Asante describe Nana Yaa Akyaa as having the will of a man! She made no secret of her dislike and distrust of the British. Dr. R.A. Freeman, a member of a British mission to Asante and Gyaman in 1888, noted the determined coldness of the Asantehemmaa. At their official reception, King Prempe danced a graceful and dignified customary dance which the visitors found "highly complimentary". But when Nana Yaa Akyaa and her court proceeded to welcome the white men, Freeman noted that "the Queen Mother offered me the tips of her fingers with extreme caution". The Asantehemmaa quite surprised the gallant Dr. Freeman when the officers were paying their compliments:



On this occasion my desire to exhibit a cordial and affable manner again led me into difficulties, for when the Queen Mother presented to me her small, soft, shapely hand I took it in mine and, as I made my bow, bestowed upon it a gentle and affectionate squeeze such as could not have hurt a baby; upon which to my surprise and discomfiture, the old lady closed one eye and pursed up her mouth into the form of an ill-made buttonhole, murmuring at the same time something that I fear could not be construed into a benediction. (Freeman, 1898:103, 105).

The "frostily dignified old lady" maintained her hostility to the British throughout. She counselled Prempe against accepting British protection in 1891. Travelling Commissioner Hull who carried the invitation to Prempe wrote to the Governor about the Queen Mother with "a cruel, inscrutable face" who was "both hated and feared" by her people. This was passed on to the Colonial Office and Nana Yaa Akyaa became the target of British imperialist strategy. She again advised the King to reject the overtures and demands of 1894-5. Her removal from Asante was decided on and in 1896 she, the King, her husband, and a number of important chiefs were arrested and sent to Sierra Leone. After four years there they were shipped to the Seychelles Islands - the haven of intractable royal African opponents of British imperialism. She was baptised 'Elizabeth' into the Anglican Church in 1904 and died in exile on 2 September 1917 at an estimated age of 75.

In 1900 another Queen Mother, Nana Yaa Asantewaa of Edweso, led the kingless armies of Asante to fight Asante's last war against British imperialism. Nana Asantewaa's grandson, Chief Afrane, had been deported with Prempe in 1896, and she became the chief of Edweso. She was never reconciled to British rule. She smarted under the injustice of the deportation and deeply resented imperial taxation

especially the war indemnity the interest on which stood at £16,000 in 1900. When Governor Hodgson made his fatal speech of 28 March 1900 declaring that the Asante chiefs would never return, and demanded the Golden Stool to sit on, the die was cast. A British officer recalling the scene later wrote:

In the procession of filing past the Governor, who was in full dress uniform, Queen Asantuah stopped to examine his medals, to select one to keep after her own great ceremony took place, when the one beat of the drum announced the Governor's head had dropped. Thank God she did not get him. She listened with the greatest attention to the Governor's speech. She was heard to say 'Good, he is calling the Ashantis to arms for me! He could not do it better than he has done it in demanding the Golden Stool? (Hall, 1939:280).

According to Edweso oral traditions, Nana Yaa Asantewaa met the other chiefs that night and declared in the most dramatic language that she was ready to exchange her sex with that of any man who feared to defend the Asante nation. She put her fighting men at the head of the united armies and directed the strategy for rebellion. Nana Asantewaa became the "old terror" to the British. In the well-known 'rising' that followed, the Asante drove the Governor, his wife and escort into the Kumasi fort and held them there for three months. When starvation and death threatened the very core of the Governor's staff he was forced to make a desperate escape breaking through the enemy cordon at night.

The Yaa Asantewaa War continued for another four months. The British received reinforcements from all parts of the British empire in Africa and India and 74 millimetre guns, seven-powders and maxims were directed against the Asante. From August "the august lady" decided on guerrilla warfare led by her personal army. (Biss, 1901:264, 271). Just when Colonel Willcocks' relief force had decided that the rebellion was quelled, he discovered fresh

stockades at Edweso, the Queen Mother's town. Some 3,500 men were organized to resist Willcocks and "about 2,000 of them were picked men of the Queen's bodyguard". They fought adamantly but the town was eventually bombarded. The Queen Mother fled to Ofinso, about 15 miles away, and raised another rebellion there. By the beginning of September some of the Asante chiefs had begun to surrender to the British. Colonel Willcocks gave Nana Yaa Asantewaa four days to appear in person. "However", says Captain Biss, "late on the 18th shortly before the limit of time expired, instead of the Queen, there came an insolent reply that she would fight to the end". (Biss, 1901:286-8). Willcocks determined now to crush the Queen Mother and Asante. The campaign raged on until the third week of November. Over 60 'rebel' leaders had been arrested and Nana Yaa Asantewaa remained the only "wanted" person. She had made a good escape but in the end she was betrayed by one of her own men! She headed the list of 15 chiefs who were sent to the Seychelles in 1901. She too was baptised 'Victoria' in 1904 in the general conversion of recalcitrants. She died on the island on 5 July 1922, two years before King Prempe was repatriated to Asante.

## V

Nana Yaa Akyaa and Nana Yaa Asantewaa were only two very famous women who laid down their lives to secure the freedom of their people from British imperialism. There is no surprise in what they did. Women in Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, have always been regarded as the source of moral strength in their societies. They are the custodians of our best traditions, the archives of our history and culture. The key role they play in life cycle rites for birth, puberty, marriage and death emphasize their importance as guardians of our social and religious values. In Ga religion only women can be mouthpieces of the gods (dzemawodzi) and of

the ancestors. These are the female mediums (woyei) who alone are possessed by the gods and relate their wishes to men. (Manoukian, 1950:96-7). In Akan, the female nnwonkor and adowa musical bands contain some of the best poets and historians in the society. Certain important elements of our national culture such as found in dances, songs, folklore and traditional dress can now only be obtained through these women.

But these are the people who found no place in the colonial system. Their ordinary activities were deplored or misunderstood; their extraordinary achievements were defeated. They were systematically excluded from the new forms of power and prestige in the colonial era. Independence provided an opportunity for national regeneration but the bulk of African women today have no material or psychological basis of authority. Many still maintain their autonomy in the marital home and possess some economic independence because the traditional alternative sources of protection are still there. But for most women the traditional self-confidence is eroded. They doubt their role as partners of men performing complementary duties because of their inadequate education and technical incompetence. There is a great need for feminine initiative in Africa. But there is also a challenge for men. The male leaders of independent Africa have acquired a habit of authority refined from colonial practices. Their tendency is to co-opt a few educated women to boards and councils, and confer positions and titles on them. These are concessions to their sex, but the women of the past did not require sufferance or special treatment.

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