

2015

The Impact of Matriarchal Traditions on the Advancement of Ashanti Women in Ghana

Karen McGee

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.usfca.edu/listening_to_the_voices



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGee, Karen (2015). The Impact of Matriarchal Traditions on the Advancement of Ashanti Women in Ghana. In Betty Taylor (Eds.), *Listening to the Voices: Multi-ethnic Women in Education* (p. 1-10). San Francisco, CA: University of San Francisco.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Listening to the Voices: Multi-ethnic Women in Education* by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

The Impact of Matriarchal Traditions on the Advancement of Ashanti Women in Ghana

Karen McGee

What is the impact of a matriarchal tradition and the tradition of an African queenmotherhood on the ability of African women to advance in political, educational, and economic spheres in their countries? The Ashanti tribe of the Man people is the largest tribe in Ghana; it is a matrilineal society. A description of the precolonial matriarchal tradition among the Ashanti people of Ghana, an analysis of how the matriarchal concept has evolved in more contemporary governments and political situations in Ghana, and an analysis of the status of women in modern Ghana may provide some insight into the impact of the queenmotherhood concept.

How do scholars define matriarchy? A matriarchy can be a social system in which the mother is head of the family, or it can be defined as a family, community, or society based on this system or governed by women. Data used to document the existence of a matriarchy are of three types: first, societies in which women make a major contribution to subsistence; second, societies in which descent is traced through women; and third, ancient myths of women rulers.

In 2000, Ghana celebrated the 100th anniversary of the battle of the Ashanti people against British occupation. The battle was led by Asantewaa, the Queen Mother of Ejisu. In March 1900, Asantewaa inspired Ashanti chiefs to take up arms against the British, who had arrested Prempeh I, the *Asantehene* (king), in 1896 and deported him to the Seychelles Islands off the northern tip of Madagascar. Prempeh I was in exile for four years with 30 of his most important paramount chiefs and elders, as well as his family. The Ashanti chiefs in Ghana were afraid to wage war against the British; however, Asantewaa gave an impassioned speech and subsequently led an army of about 4,000 men to fight against exploitation by the British.

Listening to the Voices

How can a proud and brave people like the Asante sit back and watch, while the white man took away their King and chiefs, and humiliated them with a demand for the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool only means money to the white man, they have searched and dug everywhere for it, I shall not pay one predwan ([pound] 8 25) to the governor. If you, the chiefs of Asante, are going to behave like cowards and not fight, you should exchange your loin clothes for my undergarments. (Agyeman-Duah & Boateng, 2000, p. 40)

Asantewaa understood the ramifications of British occupation, although she could neither read nor write. She is seen by Ghanaians today as a queen mother who exercised her political and social clout to help defend her kingdom. The role she played in influencing the Ashanti men to battle the British appears to be a function of her matriarchal status.

In 1995, First Lady Rawlings, wife of Ghana's President Rawlings, was honored at Lincoln University, alma mater of Ghana's first president, Nkrumah. First Lady Rawlings was honored for her work in the 31 December Women's Movement, an organization she created to advance women's economic causes in Ghana. The 31 December Women's Movement was said to have a membership of 2 million Ghanaian women. The purpose of the organization was to mobilize Ghanaian women in the areas of literacy, business and agricultural development, children's health, and family planning. Famous men had been honored by Lincoln University; however, the recognition of Mrs. Rawlings' contribution to the women of Ghana was a historic event in that it was the first time in the history of Lincoln University that both a husband and wife were honored with honorary degrees. It was also significant that Lincoln University honored a woman whose tribal background included a matriarchal clan system. Mrs. Rawlings' family came from the Ashanti region of Ghana; she was entitled by heredity to be a "queen mother," a title held by women as part of the matriarchal tradition.

In 1990, Ocloo, a native of the northern Volta region of Ghana, was the first woman to be awarded the Africa Prize for Leadership, presented by the Sustainable End to Hunger Project (Fultz, 1990 p. 16). The Africa Leadership Prize was one of many awards received by Ocloo for her lifetime of work toward the empowerment of women in business. Ocloo founded Nkulenu Industries, a successful company in Ghana. She was the first chairwoman of Woman's World Banking; she pioneered the concept of micro-lending—the financing of small women's businesses by means of very small loans. “Why are we talking about women as victims or as passive beneficiaries of social services. Poor women are the world's farmers, traders, informal sector industrialists. Women need access to financial services—not charity, not subsidies” (Ardayfio-Schandorf & Okwafo-Akoto, 1990, p. 7).

Ocloo was a prominent advocate of the role of women in economic development. She did not come from a tribe that subscribed to the notion of queenmotherhood. Accounts of Ocloo's early life indicated that she was born in Peki-Dzake to parents who were poor farmers; however, Ocloo was able to obtain scholarships that allowed her first to graduate from high school, and to later attend college in the UK where she studied food technology, food preservation, nutrition, and agriculture.

Diop (1989), in a text entitled *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Matriarchy and of Patriarchy in Classical Antiquity*, disputed Western definitions of matriarchy. According to Diop, Bachofen used Greek literature to infer that matriarchal systems first had to do not with marriage, but with “barbarism” and “sexual promiscuity,” and that marriage and matriarchy evolved, and were based on the supremacy of women (Diop, 1989, p. xi). Diop also disputed Morgan's analysis of the concept of matriarchy. Morgan suggested there were stages in the evolution of marriage and family in which matrilineality and matriarchy were practiced by “barbarian peoples”—they had primitive “promiscuous intercourse”—whereas monogamy and patriarchy were practiced by “civilized” people—Romans and Greeks (Diop, 1989, p. xi). Diop stated that the theories of

Listening to the Voices

both Bachofen and Morgan were racist, and reflected their European notions of family structure. Diop explained the concept of matriarchy in the context of social organizations, women's organizations, and kinship associations, but did not describe matriarchy as a society ruled by women.

Diop (1989) hypothesized that the evolution of the concept of matriarchy had to do with how ecology influenced a given social system. The author spoke of two world geographical zones: north and south and theorized that matriarchy originated in the agricultural south (Africa). In the agricultural south, women were in charge of the house and were the keepers of the food. Women were involved in agriculture whereas men were hunters, and the power of the woman was based on her economic contribution to the social system. In this system the mother was considered to be sacred and had unlimited authority. The power of motherhood was symbolized in African religions, and it was also symbolized in African spiritual or magical powers. Diop substantiated this hypotheses on the concept of matriarchy by describing numerous African Queens and their achievements. In contrast, Diop theorized that the concept of patriarchy originated in the north (Indo-European culture) because of the nomadic nature of communities. In this system, women were denied a public role and were given no power, "a husband or father had the right of life and death over a woman" (Diop, 1989, p. xii). Diop also theorized that patrilineality became part of African culture with the introduction of Islam in the 10th century.

In the book entitled *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*, Amadiume explored the concept of matriarchy in Africa. The author did not fully agree with Diop's emphasis on Egyptian queens as evidence of the existence of matriarchies. Instead the theory presented was that the unit of mother and children formed the basis of a matriarchal system that existed in conjunction with a patriarchal system. Amadiume described matriarchal systems as the power women had through women's societies, control over food production and

the marketplace, and through goddess worship, which deified their maternal role (Cousins, 1998, p. 2).

In an investigation of female political authority in precolonial West Africa, Farrar (1997) asserted that ancient African political systems were dominated by queen mothers, women who had considerable political powers. This author asserted that the position of queen mother was not necessarily derived from a genuine matriarchy, and that other scholars tended to confuse the concept of matriarchy with the concept of matrilineality: tracing descent through the maternal line. Further, the status and power of women could be better explained if one differentiated between the great majority of women—common people who lacked power to any significant degree—and royal women who did have political, economic, and social status. An example of royal women who had political, economic, and social status was the queenmother roles among the Akan people in Ghana. The Akan Queenmother, *ohemmaa*, had true political power, and at some times in history had even become the king. The *ohemmaa* held her title because she was a senior female in the royal family. She was chosen by her male and female senior lineage mates. One of her responsibilities was to nominate the *Assantehene*, King of the Confederacy (Farrar, 1997).

Farrar (1997) further explained the concept of queenmotherhood by describing a dual-sex political system. Every office in the political hierarchy of the Akan people had female and male counterparts.

This practice of maintaining separate, parallel political hierarchies for the female and male sections of the population is a fundamental and presumably ancient feature of Akan political organization. In the day to day affairs of government in pre-colonial Akan society, women did not normally come under the authority of men. All issues pertaining primarily or exclusively to women (and there were many—political, economic and cultural) and all conflicts between women were addressed within the context of this female hierarchy. Furthermore, issues involving both females and males—issues

Listening to the Voices

like adultery, rape, marital conflict, and so forth—were also handled by female stool-holders. (Farrar, 1997, p. 6)

What is the current status of Ghanaian women in social, economic, and political arenas? In 1999, Fallon interviewed 24 residents of Larteh, Ghana, to determine the effect of gender and education on the perceptions of social status and power. Fallon found that for girls, more informed educational information involving reproduction issues resulted in an increase in the use of contraceptives, a decline in fertility (childbearing was more often postponed), and a decline in infant- and child-mortality rates. There did continue to be a discrepancy however, in the numbers of women enrolled in secondary education, compared to the numbers of men. This was explained in terms of the sociocultural view that women were best suited to be mothers, and men were financial supporters. Women who were interviewed indicated that because of a kinship-lineage emphasis, they felt pressured to have children to continue their lineage. The women felt that their social status was linked to their ability to bear children. The overall result of Fallon's study was that exposure to education did lead to increased social status and power for both men and women.

In the year 2000, Ghanaian women became more involved in the political life of their country. The women began to organize discussion groups focusing on social and gender issues in their homes. It appeared that the roles of Ghanaian women began to change, although the women did not believe they could make a positive impact upon society due to their lack of social status.

What are some of the recent experiences of Ghanaian women regarding the pursuit of higher education and attainment of professional careers? In the year 2001, Otieno interviewed seven female African students who were attempting to pursue higher education in their home countries and in the United States. Of the seven women interviewed, only one was from Ghana; however, it appeared that all seven women had similar experiences in higher education, and their recommendations for change were also similar. Each woman interviewed had progressed in higher education because she possessed

a spirit of independence, motivation and resiliency. “I learned to be patient—that has been my weapon for fighting obstacles. When one door is shut in my face, I have learned to wait patiently behind it, until I get another opening to the same place” (Otieno, 2001, p. 13).

There was unanimous agreement among the women in the Otieno (2001) study that education in most African countries does not promote upward mobility for women. The women noted that African education severely limited choices by emphasizing home economics as the best career for African women. All of the women interviewed were the products of elite family backgrounds; some came from families with several generations of education in their past.

How, then, does a matriarchal tradition and the tradition of an African queenmothership, impact of the ability of African women to advance in political, educational, and economic spheres in their countries? First Lady Rawlings, Ocloo, and Queen Mother Asantewaa are three women whose experiences may offer some answers. First, Lady Rawlings is an educated woman who is a member of the Ashanti matriarchy and who is entitled by heredity to be called a queen mother. Her elite status, her wealth relative to the Ghanaian population, her education, her position in the Ashanti matriarchy, and her position as first lady when her husband was in office all appeared to provide her with the social, political, and economic means to increase her power and influence. In her case, Rawlings’ female power structure, although it was said to exist for the advancement of ordinary women, in fact did not have that as a priority. Rawlings “exploit[ed] the commitment of the international movement towards gender equality in the interests of a small female elite [and thus] end[ed] up reinforcing patriarchal social systems” (Ibrahim, 2004, p. 4). Rawlings used her power and influence to further her husband’s and her own political aspirations. Several of her opponents even accused her of maneuvering to take over the Ghanaian presidency after her husband was no longer in office (Ibrahim, 2004).

Ocloo was apparently not a member of the Ashanti tribe. Accounts of her life suggest that although her parents were poor, they were very

Listening to the Voices

supportive of her educational advancement. She was intelligent and was able to advance her education through scholarships. Even as a young girl, she was aware of the value of economic empowerment in her life as well as in the lives of other women. Ocloo seemed to be a visionary who was able to advance her human causes despite the social and cultural obstacles she encountered. Although the concept of matriarchal tradition did not appear to have an impact on her life accomplishments, it is possible that she took inspiration from her knowledge of past and present queen mothers, women who demonstrated leadership and determination by their actions for their country. Asantewaa was likely to have been a positive example for Ocloo.

Although Asantewaa lived in precolonial and colonial times, the fact that Ghanaians celebrated her achievements and her leadership in the year 2000, 100 years after she led 4,000 men into battle, is a testimony to the impact her life has had on the tradition and history of the Ghanaian people. The matriarchal tradition—her position as Queen Mother of Ejisu—gave her power as well as access to male chiefs, so she could influence their decision to fight against British rule. In Asantewaa's case, the fact that she could neither read nor write was not a deterrent to exercising her power and influence. Her power resided in her position as a matriarch.

A matriarchal culture can contribute in significant ways to the advancement of women. The examples of individual women described in this essay suggest that the power ascribed to women because of the matriarchal tradition, and their access to political and economic structures because of queenmotherhood status have both been major factors that have helped women, and Ghanaian society as a whole to advance. Otieno's (2001) research on seven women pursuing higher education suggested that membership in the higher socioeconomic strata (which may for some women go hand in hand with matriarchal membership) was another factor that could be used as a positive means to help women gain greater access in society. Otieno also listed several personality traits that helped women overcome obstacles: a spirit of motivation, independence, and resiliency. The attainment

of higher education for the seven women interviewed by Otieno, as well as for First Lady Rawlings and Ocloo, especially in light of the cultural norm that suggests that education for women should be restricted to domestic activities, is a major factor that can contribute to the improvement of the lives of women in Ghana.

Statistical data collection indicates that in 2003, women accounted for only 9% of the Ghanaian legislature. According to the United Nations Development Programme Report for 2003, (p. 33), 44.8% of Ghanaians fell below the established poverty line of \$1 a day, and 35.5% of women were illiterate, compared to 18.9% of men. The percentage of women using modern methods of family planning only rose from 4.2% in 1988 to 13.3% in 1998. In the year 2000, women's work accounted for 70% of the food security in Ghana and in the rest of Africa. Women in rural areas in Ghana continue to have enormously arduous labor conditions; there continues to be traditional male dominance. Rape, domestic violence, and female genital mutilation continue to be serious problems. An estimated 30% of women in Ghana undergo female genital mutilation. Women can still be banished to penal villages in the northern region of Ghana because of teenage pregnancy or suspected witchcraft. A form of slavery for girls still exists among the Ewe ethnic group in Ghana.

These data show that the answers to the advancement of women in Ghana and in other African countries are complex and are tied to the culture, government, geography, climate, and economic stability of the country. The matriarchal tradition among the Ashanti in Ghana is only one of a many other factors that influence advancement, but it is an important one (Afrol News, 2004; Profiles in the Contemporary African database, 2004).

References

- Afrol News. (2004). Gender profile—Ghana. Retrieved November 15, 2004, from <http://www.afrol.com/categories/women/profiles/ghanawomen.htm>
- Agyeman-Duah, I., & Boateng, O. (2000, December 1). Yaa Asantewaa: A woman of iron. *New African*, 2000(391), 40.
- Ardayfio-Schandorf, E., & Okwafo-Akoto, K. (1990). *Women in Ghana: An annotated bibliography*. Accra, Ghana: World.
- Cousins, H. (1998). Gender, place and culture (Review of the book *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, religion and culture*). *Abingdon*, 5(3), 308–311.
- Diop, C. A. (1989). *The cultural unity of Black Africa*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press.
- Fallon, K. M. (1999). Education and perceptions of social status and power among women in Larteh, Ghana. *Africa Today*, 46(2), 67–92.
- Farrar, T. (1997). The queenmother, matriarchy, and the question of female political authority in precolonial West African monarchy. *Journal of Black Studies*, 47, 579–598.
- Fultz, L. (1990). Esther Ocloo: First woman recipient of the Africa prize for leadership. *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, 7(1), 61–64.
- Ibrahim, J. (2004). The first lady syndrome and the marginalisation of women from power: Opportunities or compromises for gender equality? *Feminist Africa*, 3. Retrieved from <http://www.feministafrica.org>
- Otieno, T. N. (2001). *Higher education: A qualitative inquiry into the educational experiences of seven African women*. Retrieved from Higher Education Clearing House database.
- Profiles in the contemporary African database*. Retrieved November 22, 2004, from <http://people.africadatabase.org/en/profiles/14556.html>
- United Nations Development Programme. (2003). *Human development report 2003*. Retrieved from http://hdr://undp.org/en/media/hdr03_complete