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The Queen Mothers of Ghana: Maternal Activists of the Twenty-First Century

The instating of the queen mothers of Ghana—an ancient tradition in the region, much documented by researchers and highly valued for its equitable political influence—was discontinued during colonial times. It was revived recently, and as a traditional and contemporized practice, it embodies the “politics of care” (Stein) exhibited by maternal groups in challenging situations through its proactive interactions with several Ghanaian communities. This article examines the effective deployment of this tradition in a particular region of Ghana where these women leaders are working selflessly and systematically to care for vulnerable people at every level. The transformational leadership style of the queen mothers shows great concern for people and relationships and, thus, has a more interactive, nurturing, and democratic style (Hassan and Silong 363). The queen mothers challenge the male-oriented leadership style that has become prevalent in postcolonial Africa while contesting the essentialization of motherhood based solely on patriarchal interpretations of and assumptions about the female role in families (O’Reilly 14). As the case of the Manya Krobo Queen Mothers Association (MKQMA)—which has 370 queen mothers as members (Steegstra 110)—shows, when women get together and care for a community, they can achieve great things: caring for children, providing nutrition, education, social connections, and safety nets, and enhancing visibility for the causes vital to communities, to name just a few. Hence, this article attempts to catalog and evaluate the radical maternal frame of the initiatives taken by the queen mothers in Ghana and their growing local and regional influence.

Introduction

This article argues that the local and regional impact of the queen mothers of Ghana—who have been actively engaged at the grassroots level in supporting and empowering women to alleviate the impact of neglect and apathy from

men and government agencies and to seek greater political representation—has become central in fighting for not only the survival of women and children in the region but also gender equity. The local influence of the queen mothers exceeds even that of much publicized agencies, such as those of the UN, by virtue of their strong engagement and commitment. This is evident in the modernization of this practice through the installation of new queen mothers in various localities due to their outstanding abilities and public standing in various regions of Ghana and neighbouring countries. For instance, in the Akan region (Ghana) of Manya Krobo, the queen mothers have taken over the significant task of caring for orphans and abandoned children. In essence, with support from various illustrious women leaders, this traditional institution has seen a revival that will change the condition of women and their role in politics and childcare in West Africa forever.

Problematizing Motherhood

In her book *Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality and Activism*, Rachel Stein posits “a “politics of care”—in which mothers and others strive for cultural survival by working to assure the viability of future generations” (16). Women, especially mothers, then, work not only to fulfill a biological imperative but also a significant sociocultural role. When this role is taken up by a collective of women, it becomes simultaneously maternal and political. The reinstating of the queen mothers in Ghana—a tradition that was discontinued during colonial times and only revived in the past decade—embodies that principle through the actions of the mothers.

The revitalization of the age-old institution of the queen mothers from the Akan region of Ghana has positively affected communities in West Africa. The queen mothers, now numbering over ten thousand (Mistiaen), have taken charge of development issues in communities at the grassroots level (Mensah, Antwi, and Suleman 206-07). They are involved in numerous social work activities, such as opposing child marriage, HIV/AIDS prevention, fighting against female genital mutilation (FGM), supporting the care of orphans and abandoned women, fighting poverty and land fragmentation, extending credit to market women, and striving for equitable political representation in the House of Chiefs, among other civic issues. The active involvement of women in “planning and development of communities has been recognized as a key contribution to sustainable development of communities” which is affirmed by the United Nations’ Agenda 21 (2012) (Hassan and Silong 363).

The work of the contemporary queen mothers is a testament to the fact that caring and mothering are communal public acts. Whereas biological mothers offer physical and emotional care to their children, the queen mothers provide access to resources and support that the state has consistently failed to provide

since several African nations achieved independence in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, the reconfiguration of traditional female authority in the institution of queen mothers has been an empowering force, as it establishes the notion of caring as a civic activity that moves beyond domestic boundaries by extending care to all disempowered and neglected people in need.

Although the queen mothers' gender provides them with the title of "mother," the scope and extent of their work challenge the narrow definition of motherhood as instinctive and limited to the home and disputes the patriarchal correlation between womanhood and motherhood (O'Reilly 14). The fact that their work and outreach lead them out into their communities, regions, and to the larger political arena of the national House of Chiefs—not to mention the new practice of installing queen mothers from different professions (e.g., journalists, doctors, and nurses) beyond the traditional royal lineage—highlights the strength and scope of their abilities as change makers in several spheres as well as leaders and advocates who happen to be women.

Queen mothers effectively fill a crucial gap in the existing infrastructure and help to negate the effects of patriarchy that are manifest in the Ghanaian context. They aim to help populations that have been subject to erasure and abandonment by the state. Their work resists neglect and apathy—it is a willed political act that resists the reductive effects of male-centred politics and industry. Their work's parallel to motherhood is clear, as the queen mothers devote their energies to their "children" at great personal cost—time, energy, and money—which they expend selflessly and unconditionally. Whereas the government has directed its finances and energies towards developing industry, the development at the grassroots level is largely ignored, and community leaders like the queen mothers are left to do the significant task of caring for the marginalized populace in small villages and towns.

Origins and History

The queen mothers are a part of the indigenous political system of the Akan region, where every town or paramount region has a chief (or ohene) and a queen mother (ohemma) (Obeng and Stoeltje 25). The women in these traditionally inherited positions are called the Paramount queen mothers. The name queen mother is a derivation of the Twi term "ohemma" (Steegstra 105). Queen mothers were traditionally installed along with chiefs and exercised authority in matters related to the selection of new chiefs by "validating a king's royal ancestry" and in ensuring "harmony and consensus" in a formal culture (Gilbert 2). The queen mother is viewed as the spiritual head of the community, and since it is a matrilineal system, she is the repository of genealogical knowledge and knows who is qualified to be the next chief or "to occupy the stool" (Obeng and Stoeltje 26). The "stool" is an actual physical

object that symbolizes the chief's authority and person. Although the queen mothers may have lost some power and actual authority due to the impact of colonialism (Mistiaen; "The Queens of Ghana"), their traditional authority is almost sacrosanct. Yet much of this authority and privilege rests on tradition and the consent of the males in the community (Obeng and Stoeltje 26). In cases of political and financial importance chiefs often try to "overstep their political and legal boundaries" and challenge the queen mothers' authority (Obeng and Stoeltje 26).

Queen Mothers: Appearance

In visual terms, queen mothers are outstanding and are recognized by their stately appearance and slow, dignified gait, which they are trained to maintain in public to establish their presence and command respect. They wear traditional kente cloth wrapped in a traditional manner (Gilbert 6); two pieces of cloth are wrapped around the woman's body, leaving her shoulders bare, and a third cloth is draped over her shoulder (Steegstra 114). The Akan royal queen mothers wear gold ornaments, while other queen mothers wear their traditional gear; for instance, the Krobo queen mothers wear traditional glass beads (Steegstra 114).

All queen mothers must follow strict rules for social conduct; for instance, they cannot eat or drink in public and must cover their hair while in public (Steegstra 113). They swear an oath of allegiance to the paramount queen mothers and chiefs upon installation. While the queen mothers do not yet have access to the House of Chiefs, which limits their political reach and their financial authority (Gilbert 6; Mistiaen; Obeng and Stoeltje 26), they traditionally take the lead in social rituals and in settling local, domestic disputes expeditiously and economically (Obeng and Stoeltje 26). Their authority in court matters is unquestionable; no one can challenge their opinions or decisions in public. In effect, the institution of queen mothers continues to function within the more contemporary political and judicial system and fulfils the needs of local and individual constituents, especially those subject to marginalization and neglect, including women and children.

Selection

The selection of queen mothers is also a matter of great significance, as was evident upon the death of Asantehemma Nana Afia Kobe Serwaa Ampem II ("Queen Mother of Ghana") in 2016, when the deliberations for the selection of her successor (Timah) took several days. A candidate's lineage, knowledge of tradition, reputation, ability to perform the right ritual duties, seniority to other qualified women, and ability to exercise political authority judiciously

are all taken into consideration during the selection process. The higher her status, especially if she will be the paramount queen mother for a region, the more scrutiny she will undergo. In comparison, lower-ranking queen mothers go through the process of election in a simpler fashion—they are identified for the entire community in public when elders smear white clay on their arm (Steegstra 113). Queen mothers willingly and consciously undertake their role as a civic obligation and duty, with a full understanding of the physical and emotional commitment entailed in advocating for those in need of protection, empowerment, and care without any expectation of financial compensation—a tradition that had been ingrained in the political system of Ghana for effective administration at the local, rural, and communal level (Steegstra 113-14). The institution has, in essence, challenged gender-based definitions of mothering for centuries of its existence as the queen mothers have been a recognized and crucial, functional part of Ghana's political system.

Significant Predecessors

Although queen mothers play a significant role in the political affairs of their region, in the absence of a male chief, their actions and work become even more crucial. Far from being mothers in the traditional sense, queen mothers are political leaders and organizers. As has been noted by various NGOs and researchers, in the Accra region the Ashanti had queen mothers who have managed their communities on their own; led their tribes into battle—such as the leader Nanny of the Maroons who fought against the British in the 1700s—and managed diplomatic negotiations with the British, such as Akyaawaa Oyiakwan in the 1800s and repatriated exile Ama Sewa and her female descendants, who ruled over the Asante people from 1838 onwards (“The Queens of Ghana”).

As noted above, in the early years of colonization, queen mothers had always undertaken significantly active roles in Akan society. The most famous example is of the Asante Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa, who led the Ashanti people (Ashantehene) in the last major war against the British in the early twentieth century through her inspirational words and her active involvement in the actual battles (Otto 117-22; “Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa”)—an event that challenges the idea that mothers (or women) do not perform political or combative roles. Their leadership roles give them the title of “mother,” but their gender does not prevent them from performing the actions of fierce warriors and advocates for their people. As Susan Otto notes in her study of Yaa Asantewaa, she performed her role as a Queen and leader along with her role as a mother and wife with equal seriousness and dedication, and her example provides Asante women with a model for claiming agency as social activists (122). Interestingly, she also believed that home management

should be shared equally between husband and wife (Otto 122). Susan Otto cites the example of Yaa Asantewaa as “the African Indigenous episteme ... that can emerge from anti-oppressive and anti-racist pedagogy” (123), which gives another powerful rationale for reviving the tradition of queen mothers.

Reviving the Tradition

Reviving this practice is essential in repowering the disadvantaged components of the population, but it is also a way for current generations of West Africans to reconnect with their cultural practices and concepts and to recognize the fact that the contemporary, postcolonial method of operation in their nations has caused problems of a different nature for women in the region. As Otto cites in her work (and this has been noted by numerous researchers and organizations) the Western model of feminism does not operate in the favour of local women in West Africa (124). According to research done in local communities in Kenya, “many of the problems of overwork now felt by female agriculturalists rests in the gradual erosion of traditional ways. Rather than improving women’s lives, the ...Western agenda has created a situation wherein men do less work” (Otto 124). The contradictions inherent in the clash between traditional and neocolonial influences is causing many of the economic issues evident in many African nations (Otto 125). Hence, the role of queen mothers as repositories of traditional wisdom and customs is crucial in returning power and balance to the people, especially women and children, at a very fundamental level. As soon as the governments realize the gap between the needs of their populace and the practices they have adopted from Western cultures by force or by necessity and recognize the value of the work the queen mothers are doing to fill the lacunae in the government-directed policies for sustainable development, the nations can perhaps alleviate the economic and social problems that have become endemic to the West Africa region.

The queen mothers’ positions have been revived and revitalized because of the various larger issues that affect Ghanaian citizens: population displacement due to the building of dams, the industrialization of agrarian communities, urban migration, and unemployment. In addition, gendered oppression manifests itself in such issues as early/child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), lower education attainment opportunities, female poverty, and increased rates of HIV/AIDS—all of which needs to be addressed at the grassroots level. In fact, many Ghanaian districts report a high incidence of adults and children with HIV/AIDS (Addo-Fening; Lund and Agyei-Mensah 93-95). The role of queen mothers—and, thus, the need for their activism and labour—is evolving today due to the above-mentioned issues. Ghana’s many queen mothers are now involved in various political and development-related

activities and activism, such as managing associations that run schools as well as monitoring local trade and running medical facilities. They actively advocate against child labour and child trafficking, mobilize discussions on harmful traditional practices, such as early marriage and FGM, and aid women and children in the form of employment, loans, food, and basic care (Lund and Agyei-Mensah; “The Queens of Ghana”). Furthermore, queen mothers are becoming adept at using technology in their advocacy to meet the demands of an evolving world (Drah).

Queen Mothers of Manya Krobo

Ragnhild Lund and Samuel Agyei-Mensah studied the impact of the presence of queen mothers in the Manya Krobo District of Ghana through observation and personal interviews with the queen mothers, local caregivers, and some of the orphaned children. Their study revealed that the involvement of queen mothers in the Manya Krobo District has had a beneficial impact on the lives of orphaned children through the activities of the Queen Mother’s Association (QMA) in Odumase (Lund and Agyei-Mensah 95). Formed in 1998, the QMA consists of “the Paramount Queen Mother, her deputy, the six divisional Queen Mothers, Chief Market Queen Mother, and all other sub-divisional Queen Mothers” (Lund and Agyei-Mensah 97). Besides other culturally sensitive welfare and community-development activities, the QMA runs a school for orphaned children (which the researchers call “orphaned or vulnerable children”), which places orphaned children with relatives or families. The mothers provide for the children’s physical and emotional needs through companionship, cover their financial needs, enroll them in classes during vacation periods, and arrange for recreational activities and vocational training opportunities (Lund and Agyei-Mensah 97, 98, and 104; Steegstra 115-17). Several external and larger agencies collaborate with the QMA, including the Ghana Education Service, the Ghana Health Service, the Ghana AIDS Commission, the Department of Social Welfare, and the District Assembly (Lund and Agyei-Mensah 97-98). Despite all their efforts, there are limitations to the care that queen mothers, in the absence of better funding and support, can provide (Lund and Agyei-Mensah 105; Mensah, Antwi and Suleman 218). As such, the queen mothers advocate for further support from governmental agencies and continued funding to improve the level of services they can provide, which is particularly important, as the care for orphaned children often falls on elderly, single women who are themselves without adequate family or resources (Lund and Agyei-Mensah 104). Although improving access to education, resources, and employment opportunities require support at multiple levels, the queen mothers of Krobo district have worked hard towards alleviating the burdens faced by the women in the

community, who have taken on the task of caring for orphaned (related and unrelated) children. Not only does this example prove that queen mothers have been resilient and self-motivated in supporting the welfare of children in their communities, but it also supports the basic fact that mothering is not necessarily only biological. The members of communities—the queen mothers, the widows, the teachers—all take on the role of mothering children; motherhood, thus, involves the giving of care, and as Otto has pointed out, men were equally involved in the giving of care in traditional indigenous communities both in Africa and the Americas (123). The queen mothers' actions provide a crucial intervention at the ground level, which government offices as well as international or even local agencies do not perform, even when funding and programs are available. The neoliberal state's withdrawal from providing services has let the burden of care fall on women, who are also often mothers (in this case, queen mothers). Mothering is then primarily a willed act directed at ensuring the survival of the next generation and providing empathetic care for those who cannot fend for themselves.

Evolving Roles

The queen mothers' role has evolved into attending to the pressing issues that their communities face, particularly those that disproportionately impact women and children, who are conveniently ignored in practice even as they are touted in government policies and rhetoric. The queen mothers' position in the traditional hierarchy of Akan or Ghanaian society also gives them more validity and acceptance in their communities as trusted advocates and agents. As noted above, several researchers have ascribed the particular success of queen mothers at the grassroots level to their close and continuous involvement with the population they support, as they intuitively and consciously use strategies that include and encourage the participation of the affected population (Mensah, Antwi, and Suleman 209).

Role in Politics

Besides working at the grassroots level in local communities, particularly in the past decade, the queen mothers have been advocating for increased political involvement in the nation's many political forums, including the House of Chiefs, which is primarily a male preserve (Fordjoe and Adogla-Bessa; Steegstra 118-19). They hope to rectify the gender imbalance in Ghanaian government at the national level (parliament) as well as the local one (the House of Chiefs), where men far outnumber women at four to one ("The Queens of Ghana"). Therefore, while their labour is explicitly political, there are political channels that queen mothers continue to be excluded from.

Yet they have been increasingly extending their reach towards addressing issues that disproportionately affect women and girls, as has been reported by numerous news agencies in the region, such as the Ghana News Agency, citifmonline.com, World Pulse, and Reuters.

Research shows that during the mid-to-late twentieth century, the significance of queen mothers in the political process and community planning diminished due to colonial influence (despite the stellar example of the Asante Queen Mother, Yaa Asantewaa, who fought on the battlefield against the British), resulting in the absence of women from the formal political sphere. This deficiency led to the active neglect of women's rights and issues in every community. As a result, the queen mothers have become increasingly vocal in national and local political affairs. This vociferousness is absolutely essential for the survival and health of the basic creators of life—the women and the children. Some part of this activism also derives from the initiative of the former first lady of Ghana, Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, who started the 31 December Women's Movement in 1982 at the behest of several women organizers ("The Queens of Ghana"); this movement, along with other government agencies, actively organizes training workshops and provides technical support to local Queen Mother organizations ("Chiefs").

Divergence from Tradition

Traditionally queen mothers (especially paramount queen mothers, who are queen mothers for an entire region) are women of royal lineage with an unimpeachable reputation and vast experience, who fill the need for strong female leadership at the grassroots level in various communities and villages in Ghana. The trend in recent years, however, has been to appoint local queen mothers from among women of high character, education, and experience, who have shown great potential for social engagement and leadership. This practice works well, as all queen mothers must adhere to the rigorous codes of conduct and be exceptional leaders. The Manya Krobo Queen Mothers' Association (MKQMA), for instance, has 370 queen mothers as members. Although these queen mothers cannot appoint chiefs (Steegstra 110, 112), they are responsible for various aspects of public life and hold workshops and seminars to work on issues that disproportionately affect women (Steegstra 112). These new queen mothers have a great deal of public presence and authority; they fulfill their civic responsibilities with equal dignity and seriousness. For instance, Kate Abbam (1934–2016)—a noted regional journalist and activist who advocated for ending the abusive treatment of widows in Ghana—was selected as a queen mother in 1993 and continued her work to "[call] upon women to work for significant change" (Stoeltje 374).

Despite all the positives of this revived practice, the recently installed queen

mothers and their associations face various issues—the most serious being that they do not have any functional governmental authority in policymaking or execution at the state or local level. They also face resistance and manipulation from vested interests, such as local chiefs and elected officials (Timah 1). They also have limited involvement in the state-level planning process and do not receive a monetary allowance—unlike their male counterparts, the appointed chiefs—to finance their work and are therefore forced to fund their community work through personal resources (Steggstra 112; Lund and Agyei-Mensah; Mensah, Antwi, and Dauda 217-18). Their work, through personal enterprise, is another instance of women being required to perform unpaid labour (much like biological mothers' reproductive labour in the patriarchal schema) in the absence of the state's active economic and policy support.

Regional Impact

Although the queen mothers certainly face numerous challenges, their recognized position and visibility have given them the platform to advocate for more concerted action on behalf of their constituents by moving the House of Chiefs to include larger numbers of women among elected officials and to provide more economic and policy support for their work (Abdela; Owusu-Mensah; “Queen Mothers Call on Minister”). That the queen mothers and their work have made a strong impression on the younger population of the region is evident from the numerous blogs, tweets, and articles in local and national media outlets published about their activities. This is an indication that this tradition will continue to evolve and thrive in the future.

Despite all the hardships and hurdles the queen mothers of Ghana have faced, their effectiveness has inspired other regions to adopt this practice. In Uganda, for example, after the Harare Call of Action 2012, key organizations, such as the African Queens and Women Cultural Leaders Network (AQWCLN), have begun collaborating with the African Union, United Nations and other local institutions to improve the lives of women and children in Uganda and elsewhere (“Uganda”; Nkangi). For example, the chair of the AQWCLN, Nanahemaa Adjoa Awindor, called on the extremist group Boko Haram to release the Nigerian schoolgirls they had abducted in May 2014 through an open letter; she labelled the abduction not only a sexual violation but also a violation of their educational rights as girls (Awindor).

The age-old institution of queen mothers and their evolution in contemporary Ghanaian society at various levels suggests an understanding of mothering that goes beyond the limitation of patriarchal definitions of motherhood, which are confined to the single-family unit among blood relations and limited to the household, physically and symbolically. Their work and practices exhibit clearly that mothering (or nurturing) is a collective, communal practice, and a

very public act, which is crucial to maintaining the health of the community, especially its most vulnerable components—the women and children.

Conclusion

It is important to recognize the courage of these women in Africa, who in the absence of financial, procedural, logistical, and political support from the state have stepped up to provide outreach and actual support to individuals in communities, small and large. The intervention and aid provided by the queen mothers of Ghana through their labour of mothering is an expression of a radical and deeply political gesture, as they are social and political activists, who work towards addressing issues of disenfranchisement by empowering the weak and the neglected. In so doing, they oppose the tenets of patriarchal motherhood, which are willfully divisive and limit the power of women in communities.

Traditional patriarchy places limits on involvement, care, and attention to those it posits as the other—those placed outside the circle of people closely related to oneself whether by blood, colour, race, region, or religion—thereby creating hierarchies and positions of privilege. The institution of queen mothers brings parity to the human social experience, as they recognize, include, and embrace all who need help—they take on positions of power in order to include others and help them survive.

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