

# They Bleed But They Don't Die: Towards a Theoretical Canon On Ga-Adangbe Gender Studies

by

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## Abstract

Contemporary African women are often cast as existing below the glass ceiling. African women who are perceived as having overcome this glass threshold are therefore seen and celebrated as exceptional. Against this background, this essay offers conceptual tools with which to examine the lives of historical and contemporary women in Ga traditional society of Ghana, living beyond the glass ceiling. Drawing a distinction between the role of women in the modern nation-state and traditional societies, this study asserts that unlike the situation in modern governance, structures and practices of Ga traditional societies have enabled Ga women to live beyond the glass ceiling. Acknowledging the non-static and dynamic evolution of Ga traditional society, this paper explores how Ga women exercise public and private power in Ga society.

**Keywords:** Dual-gendered divinity, Biological power, Abrewa Tia, Abadai, Ga-Adangbe, Ayaabi Yoomo, Ghanaian gender and women's studies, Ga Women

## Introduction

This work is mainly a conceptual essay that offers historical and contemporary portraits of women, and the general leadership roles they occupy in traditional religious practice in Ghana. The essay is particularly focused on the Ga-Adangbe ethnic group even as it draws examples from other ethnic societies in Ghana, and West Africa, including the Larteh-Guan of Ghana. The perspective underpinning the conceptual tools explicated in this article is that in the traditional sphere of Ga-Adangbe life, women have always had roles beyond the glass ceiling. Even as traditional societies are not static and continue to function within modern states, their distinct cultural underpinnings should be distinguished from the modern nation-state in Africa. Thus, while traditional societies form a part and influence contemporary nation-states, their ethos, values and worldview may significantly differ from the contemporary milieu of the modern African countries in which they are located. In other words, unlike the dual or equal-gendered representation in some traditional African societies, the functioning of the contemporary nation-state in Africa leaves much to be desired. Despite the successes of women like President Sirleaf-Johnson of Liberia, in most modern African states and their accompanying political and religious organizations, leadership roles of women have been either non-existent, attenuated, or have been grudgingly reformed to include women.

The conceptual tools used in this essay to interrogate women's spiritual leadership in Ga-Adangbe society are derived from Ga-Adangbe cultural referents, which include Atta-Naa Nyonmo, or Dual-gendered Supreme Being, Ayabi Yoomo (Let's go ask the old lady), Abadai, that is the nurturing and servant-leadership qualities of women, women's distinctive biological power, as well as the idea of Abrewa Tia (Senior female of the clan) among the Larteh-Guan speaking people of Ghana. Below, I explicate the conceptual tools cited above in a series of field research narratives, which also elaborate on the various public and private religious leadership roles I saw women occupy in Ga-Adangbe society.

The Ga and their mutually intelligible cousins, the Adangbe, live in a series of Nshona ke Koo majii (coastal and inland towns) on the eastern coasts of Ghana's portion of the Atlantic. While my paper is specifically aimed at adding to the canon of the rather scarce theoretical scholarship that exists on Ga-Adangbe women, it also contributes to scholarship on Ghanaian, and African Women as well as Gender Studies about women's leadership roles in African societies.

Seminal scholarship on gender theory includes Cheikh Anta Diop's theoretical consideration of matriarchy and matrilineage in Africa (Diop 1989). It is important to note that the studies of women in Africa date at least to the fifth decade of the twentieth century (Kaberry 1952). These studies were initially aimed at correcting the pseudo-scientific and Eurocentric literature of the preceding era (Hammond and Jablow 1970; Moore 1994).

Although there have been some major contributions to the burgeoning body of work on women in Africa, the theoretical work on women in Ghana remains scant. I focus on the Ga in particular because in the last two decades or more there has been a shift in the systematic studies on the historical and modern role of women in African societies towards ethnic or geographic specific women's studies.

## **Theoretical Background**

Contemporary works that continue to re-examine the Eurocentric literature of the earlier period as well as the earlier corrective scholarship, have also produced useful conceptual models on women in African communities (Oyewumi 2005; Terborg-Penn, Harley, and Rushing 1987). Of particular prominence are the groundbreaking works of Kamneje Okonjo (1976) and Ifi Amadiume (1997). In the Ghanaian sphere, studies among the Ewe and the Fon further east of the Ga coast, in the works of Edna Bay (1997, 19-40; 1998) and Sandra Greene (1996, 1999, 2000, 29-48) have also become important to a hitherto unexamined dimension of gender and women's roles in Ewe and Fon societies. Bay's studies include a careful explanation of the spiritual, social, and political space Kpojito-the King's mother, and women warriors occupied in Dahomey society. Green's writing is also centered on the importance of gender and ethnicity in understanding the role of the Ewe as participants in the Atlantic world.

Still in Ghana, considerable literature has also been produced on the Akan speaking ethnic groups in Ghana, particularly the Asante. Various studies exist on the leadership role of the Asanteheema (Asante-queen mother) and other queen mothers within Asante Society (Ogunleye 1987; Abayie Boateng I 1992). Some of the older work includes the earlier writings of Christine Oppong (1974) and Agnes Aidoo (1977). The former was a conceptual study of matrilineal kin network among migratory Akan elite. The latter work is a study of the various roles of Asante Queen mothers in the nineteenth century. Contemporary studies on women and gender in Asante include the work of Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng (1995) who write about women's spiritual power in Asante. Professor Takyiwah-Manu who helped co-edit *Africa after Gender* (2007) in which she asks whether African women have theory, and in turn has tried to explain everyday acts of women's activism in Ghana. In her own individual work, she has written on the Asante Queen mother's court and legal pluralism in Asante (Takyiwah-Manu 1988). Jean Allman's (1996, 2000a, 2000b) work on colonial Asante is also an important contribution to the study of Asante women as part of Asante history and historiography. All of these authors including Stephen Meischer's (2005) work on masculinity among the Akuapem, are contributing to the production of a theoretical canon on Akan people. But in the general Akan case as well as the Ewe, and various ethnic societies in Northern Ghana, there still exists a similar case of limited theoretical work as it is in the Ga-Adangbe case.

In contrast, following the debates that ensued in the aftermath of the publication of Amadiume and Okonjo's pioneering materials, a large volume of theoretical literature has been produced on specific ethnic societies in Nigeria. For example, on the Igbo of Nigeria, Amadiume (1997, 112) disagreed with aspects of Okonjo's explication of a dual-sex political system while herself providing other insights into Igbo political systems. Amadiume for example opined that Okonjo's single sex gender theory was flawed since men could also be gendered female among the Igbo. Nwando Achebe (2005, 36, 166-173; 2011), improving on the earlier scholarship (Amadiume 1997, 112), has also offered theoretical insights on the various roles women played in Igbo land as farmers, warriors, and traders. Nnaemeka Ibioma (1997, 1998, 2005) has also been prolific in offering critical analysis of various aspects of Igbo and African women's social practices. The result of these contributions is the existence of a substantial canon of theoretical tools for understanding gender ideas and distinctions among various Igbo societies.

In the Yoruba context, canonical theoretical literature has been created following various prolific writings by M. Ogundipe-Leslie (1985), Nkiru Nzegwu (2001), Bolanle Awe (1992) and Oyerenke Oyewumi (1997) and others whose work has engendered serious theoretical and analytical debates among women and gender scholars of the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Some of the critiques and debates about the existence or non-existence of gender as conceived in the West among the Yoruba people have come from the likes of Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003a, 2003b) and J. Lorand Matory (1994, 2008, 2004).

Nzegwu (2001) in an ingenious attempt to transcend an individualistic notion of gender uses a docu-drama approach to enrich the debate on dual-sex systems for both the Yoruba and the Igbo. Her contention is that when equality is conceived in social terms and "comparable worth" it reveals the democratic principles inherent in Igbo dual-sex relations, and political systems. These scholarly deliberations by Nzegwu and her peers have provided scholars of the Yoruba and Igbo with an array of theoretical tools to analyze, critique, choose and apply to their studies on gender, or women.

## **Scholarship on the Ga**

My intention is not to paint a grim picture of Ghanaian gender and women's studies or to say that there have been no theoretical essays, manuscripts or articles on Ghana or the Ga. There may as yet be more theoretical scholarship coming out of the Ghana hub of the *Pathways of Women's Empowerment* activist group. There are also scholars like Nana Wilson-Tago who addressed theoretical themes in her analysis of Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo's fictional work, as does Vincent Odamtten in his books on Ama Ata Aidoo (1994) and Amma Darko (2007).

In the latter work edited by Odamtten (2007, 128-130, 150), Naana Benyiwa Horne, explored Amma Darko's appropriation of Naa Yoomo a name for grandmothers among Ga-Adangbe people. Horne explained Naa Yoomo's role as sage, muse, and crone, and I explored some of these issues in my section on Ayaabi Yoomo (Let's go ask the old lady). Nonetheless, theoretical writings that are specifically aimed at exploring gender, gender relations, or role of women among the Ga are rare.

Previous scholarship that has had some consideration of Ga Women's roles may be seen in the earlier works of Margaret Field (1940, 1961). Field's work was aimed at explaining the religious and political culture of the Ga, but also includes various roles occupied by early twentieth century Ga women. Following Field, is Marion Kilson's (1971, 1974) various works on the Ga, which disagreed with some of Field's initial positions on Ga kinship. One of Kilson's writings is focused on Ga kinship and the other on Ga religious songs (Kilson 1971, 7; 1974). The latter in particular, shows the spiritual role occupied by women in Ga society, as Kilson's many respondents on Ga Kple (religious) songs were priestesses of various Ga deities to whom these songs were sung.

Arguably, the first systematic study specifically dedicated to the study of Ga women, and with some theoretical thrust is Claire C. Robertson's (1984) *Sharing the Same Bowl: A Socio-Economic History of Women and Class in Accra*. Robertson's venerable study of Ga women in central Accra explains how Ga women increased their autonomy and economic status within the Ga socio-political hierarchy between the pre-colonial era and the post-independence era. Robertson explains that Ga women in pre-colonial Ga society were involved in "corporate kin mode of production" that functioned in a social web of male dominance, and that the colonial period allowed Ga women to assert more autonomy within this Ga patriarchal system. Finally, the capitalist mode of production in the post-independence era saw women lose their access to production and thereby lose the autonomy they gained during the colonial period leading to class formation along gendered lines (Robertson 1984, 1-247).

Robertson's study revealed a lot of facts and truths about Ga society, however her view of Ga society as having an ideology of male superiority is debatable, as societal emphasis on the patrilineage does not presume matrilineal inferiority. A critical examination of the religious ideas of the Ga as I do in this essay, as well as an analysis of the symbolic representation of power in gendered terms would help reflect the checks and balances that exist in Ga society and perhaps also lead to a less extreme view of male superiority among the Ga people. As Kilson pointed out in her research on Ga kinship, Ga social relations were steeped in a cognatic ideology rather than a male superiority ideology. This cognatic theory also operated "at the level of social transaction" or everyday Ga life (Kilson 1971, 7). More recently, Irene Odotei's (2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003) writing on the artisanal marine industry has thrown light on the role of Ga and Adangbe women's migrant stories, their agency and entrepreneurial pursuits in the Fishing Industries of Ghana, the Republic of Benin, and the Ivory Coast.

As previously explained, the Ga-Adangbe people occupy a series of coastal and inland towns on the eastern shores of Ghana's share of the Atlantic Ocean. Stretching from the south the Ga-Adangbe coastal towns are bordered in the west by the Guan speaking Awutu, and in the east by the Ewe people. The inland states are bordered in the north by the Guan and Akan speaking Larteh, Akuapem and Akyem. I will be writing mainly about the coastal Ga societies with whom I have much more lived intimacy, and research knowledge. I begin with how the roles of Ga women in religious leadership of Ga society are derived directly from Ga notions of the divine or the spiritual.

## **Dual Gendered Ga Divinity**

In her contribution to Bella Vivante's (1987, 196) *Women's Roles in Ancient Civilization: A Reference Guide*, Tolagbe Ogunyele commented on the Ga conception of a father-mother God, or Atta Naa Nyonmo as an androgynous deity. An understanding of this spiritual notion is critical to understanding the significant leadership roles, social and spiritual power designated to, assigned, or acquired by women in Ga society. Among the Ga, God is conceptualized as a dual-gendered divinity, hence the name Atta-Naa (Elderly Father-Mother) Nyonmo (Supreme Being) (For extended discussion on God in Ga-Adangbe thought see Adjei 1996; Bediako 1996).

In Ga philosophical thinking, the androgynous Supreme Being, Atta-Naa Nyonmo has a male and female essence that it expresses through a pantheon of masculine and feminine spirits. The critical point here is that without the female half of the divine force, creation is incomplete or non-existent. This dual gendered bifurcation of God by the Ga also reflects their anthropocentrism. The Ga seem to feel a need to not only place men and women at the center of Ga existence, but also ensure a reflection of the gender balance that is needed for continued existence. As it relates to Ga women however, one of the principal feminine spiritual forces is Naa Yoo (divinity of womanhood, procreation/motherhood). In this direction of women as an essential component of human existence, the Ga also believe that while children received "the undying part of their spiritual nature" from God, they also receive their physical and portions of their spiritual essence from each progenitor (Odamtten 1995, 1). Interestingly, the Ga conception of God as exhibiting a dual-gender has survived in the Ga translation of the Christian Bible.

The phenomenological consequence of this spiritual conception is that the Ga-Adangbe use a cognatic kinship system that theoretically allows a Ga fomobi (person of Ga birth) rights of inheritance in the ancestral clans of all four of their grandparents, even though there is first preference for the patrilineal line. This is because the Ga say, even though a Ga person's bloodline comes from his/her patrilineage, that person also carries the blood of all four of his/her grandparents (Kilson 1974, 17). Having established the dual gendered conception of God and its practical application to the everyday lives of the Ga, below I offer stories of my research experience among the Ga and how these encounters depict the leadership roles that women occupy in traditional Ga social, political, and religious practice.

## **Ayabi Yoomo (Let's ask the old lady)**

The intellectual spark for this section of the essay came in December of 2005 while I was collecting and listening to the oral history of a family in the coastal town of La, in Accra, Ghana. Two narrators of an oral story I was recording began disputing a chronology of the history they were recounting during the session. The older of the two narrators pointed out that his version had passed on to his generation from an older female relative, who the younger narrator did not quite know (Owula Koney Hohoe, interview, North Kaneshie, Accra, Ghana, December 24, 2005). The younger narrator acquiesced at the mention of the female authority, an assertion that signaled to me an important structural change in Gold Coast society during the nineteenth century. A popular phrase used by contemporary Ga-Dangbe children best illustrates this change. “Aya bi Yoomo[sing] eh,” which means “Let’s go ask the old lady” is used by playmates to determine the winner of an even game (score-wise) between two competing individuals or groups of people. Its equivalence is the overtime penalty kicks in soccer or the tiebreak in lawn tennis. However, it is the Ga epistemology on which Aya bi Yoomo eh is based, that is relevant for this study. In invoking Aya bi Yoomo, one implores the spirit of Naa Yoomo, mother nature/earth, the procreator of all animate and inanimate things on earth and the fount of all wisdom to decide who the real victor is of what appears to be an even game. Mother Nature in its infinite wisdom would then decide who won.

In the same way, older women (yeemei [PI]) of Ga society are perceived as the fountains of all cultural knowledge. When elderly Ga men have sat in council to deliberate an issue, which has reached deadlock, it is the wisdom of an elderly lady of the house that is sought to break the deadlock, hence the saying *aya bi yoomo*. This privileged position or deference to the knowledge foundations held by yeemei was profoundly changed with the introduction of western education. Prior to the advent of Christianity and Missionary education in the area, women and men held complimentary roles as bearers of knowledge, caregivers, and transmitters of culture for younger generations of their society. This mode of knowledge transmission or education was significantly altered by the appearance of a different system of education in which men/missionaries were the sole transmitters, and boys, the majority recipients. What this led to, is a glass ceiling that women could not easily overcome. However in traditional Ga society, women have retained their roles as mothers, educators of young children, wives, senior and junior siblings, traders, queens, and overseers of age-grades, ritual expertise in rites of passage, regents, priestesses, healers, and warriors. As I will show below in my other research vignettes, in traditional Ga society, women continue to play a central role as repositories of history, taboos, mores and values.

## **Miya miyabi Yeemei, Aawon Okpobi: I am going to ask the old ladies, Aawon Okpobi**

I encountered Aawon Okpobi, a retired female priestess during my field research in the coastal town of Osu in 2008. She recalled that at fifteen years of age, while she was attending primary school, she became familiar with a hunting deity named Okpobi. This deity that had made itself known to her, she later found out, is of her paternal family. Aawon was subsequently after a series of discussions amongst elders in her family apprenticed to a senior priestess at age eighteen. This senior priestess taught her the intricacies of being a priestess- that is a divine personage who would be a conduit for the interaction between deity and humans (Senior Priestess, Aawon Okobi, Osu, Accra, Ghana, field interview, September 2, 2008).

When I first met Aawon, I was in no doubt about her status among her peers. A priestess in training who had also introduced me to a priest of the Osu river deity Klote introduced me to Aawon. Before we set out to meet Aawon, the young priestess assured me that Aawon knew everything I was seeking for, and after talking to her I would not have to talk to two other Osu priests I had arranged to interview. This priestess apprentice intimated “*ebaa keeh bo nofeno ni otao, ni eba foh onitsumoh noh kuku*” she will tell you everything you need and will make your job easy.

When we arrived in Aawon’s compound, she was being consulted by two young men, and I could visibly see her pointing out various herbs she had prepared for them, at the same time she was giving instructions to children who appeared to be her grandchildren. There was also in waiting, another priestess friend of her’s from the Adangbe town Gbugbla or Prampram. Aawon was therefore popular among her peers, initiates, and other religious devotees suffering from various ailments.

The thrust of my consultation with Aawon involved her explaining to me the various distinctions of different female roles in Osu, especially the difference between a priestess, and a family matriarch. For Aawon, the family matriarch had experiential knowledge of human living while a priestess’s knowledge was spiritual, and acquired not only through material living but by mysterious means. I then asked Aawon what the role of the senior priest (male) was in the socialization of young priestesses because the priestesses and priest tend to live in homes built around the gbatsu, or sacred groves and shrines of deities in Ga. With some force of language Aawon retorted, “*wulomo, wulomo ko beh ni kplekeo woyoo,*” there is no priest that socializes young priestesses into service of the gods. She went on to explain that the socialization of young priestesses could only be, and was the sole responsibility of senior priestesses. She explained that while male priests were the ritual officiates of deities, they were rarely possessed by the deities, for it is the priestesses who when possessed will subsequently inform the priests about the needs of the gods. I concluded in thought that behind every great priest, there is a greater priestess.

In theoretical terms what Aawon means is that the Ga political and religious positions in lineages, exclusive gender organizations, age grades, secret and title societies, as well as oracles, diviners, and other professional groups have gendered divisions with same representation at all levels of civic society. For example, the Mantse/King for males has a corresponding Manye/Queen for women. The Wulomo/Priest also has Woyei (Priestesses). I must caution that on occasion there is the absence of duality. There are no examples of a corresponding male group for dzranoyei/market women, nor is there a female council of elders like there is a male council of elders. There are also instances of ritual gendering, where a social and visibly male Wulomo of a female deity may be gendered female.

Coming back to Aawon's lecture, while Ga traditional priests, the Wulomei are most often the custodians of Ga deities; in public and in private, when the deities decide to communicate with the living, it is the mental and spiritual faculties, as well as vocal cords of the priestesses that they use. The priestesses in turn, inform the priests of the immediate concerns of the deities. Thus in Ga traditional religious communities, traditional priestesses like Aawon possess special public power in Ga society when the gods are public propitiated and they possess women. Priestesses also have private power in the sacred groves of the deity, because it is they who inform the priests of the needs of a deity.

## **Abadai**

In the Ga language, Abadai is defined to mean the experience of the pangs of childbirth, a churning of the stomach, bonds between mother and child, and the heartfelt emotions about human suffering only felt by women who have knowledge of childbirth. It is an expression that Ga women use in reference to women and men, who have not had to be pregnant, successfully carry a pregnancy, and felt the pains of delivery. It is also used in reference to people who are incapable of empathizing with the physical, emotional, or psychological pain that a fellow human being experiences. When a Ga woman exclaims "meneh ebeh Abadai" she means that the person's stomach does not churn over suffering (Mrs. Regina Odamtten, Accra, Ghana, personal telephone communication, April 12, 2011).

While I have known the use of this word as a person of Ga heritage; its conceptual meaning became clearer to me in the run up to the December 2008 Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ghana. I had joined several friends and family in a discourse over who to vote for in the coming elections. As we talked, an older lady who was eavesdropping interjected, "nye beh abadai, hewo nye le noni nye wiewo" meaning we did not have Abadai so we did not fully comprehend what we were discussing. For her, she had seen the inhumane acts meted out to people during Ghana's unstable period of military governments and counter-military coups. She was trying to explain to us that during this period the stomachs of women who had Abadai churned over the loss of life to young men and women; and that memory will determine her choice of candidate in the elections.

Following this episode I have explored the meaning of the term with a sample of Ga women. Their explanations help explain how women are biologically programmed to function in nurturing roles, and are better at servant leadership positions. As one nineteenth century Ghanaian male scholar, James Kwegir Aggrey proclaimed, “If you educate a man, you educate an individual; if you educate a woman you educate a nation.”

The Ga women I held conference with explained to me the practical meaning of the word Abadai. They explained, for example, that a woman who has carried her pregnancy through, felt the pangs of childbirth, delivered her baby and nurtured it to grow, is seldom angry at a child’s mistake. For example, if a little child in crawling or running around spilt something on the floor, those who have not given birth are more likely to attempt punishing the child as a way of correction, whereas those with nurturing experiences will be hesitant. In explaining how Abadai functions in Ga society, I am suggesting that women are more biologically prepared than men to be nurturer’s and servant leaders in any political process. This is why they are mainly responsible for child socialization in addition to the many roles that they occupy in traditional society (Mrs. Felicia Ankrah, Virginia, U.S.A. personal telephone communication, April 18, 2011; Mrs. Elizabeth Sackey, Accra, Ghana, personal telephone communication, April 19, 2011, Mrs. Charlotte Bruce-Cobbold, Virginia, U.S.A. personal telephone communication, April 21, 2011).

### **Naa Lobi: They Bleed but they don’t die, Women’s Spiritual Power**

In the summer of 2008, I interviewed Naa Baakeh as she was named by her parents, or Naa Yomo as her elders called her as she was growing up. I interviewed Naa Yomo on several occasions. This was because Auntie Naa as I called her made it a point to always call for me whenever she felt there was something important that I had to know. When Auntie Naa called, one had to heed to her request. It was on one of such occasions that Auntie Naa and I got to talking about her growing up in Osu, one of the Ga coastal towns. Auntie Naa grew up at Osu Amantra, where her grandfather Asafoatse Brenya (Paapa) was a farmer and Goldsmith. In civic life Paapa was also Asafoatse (Head Warrior) for the Osu Kinka quarter, and had been a close confidant and protector of the reigning Osu Mantse. However, it was the power wielded by her paternal auntie and the matriarch of the family, Naa Lobi that Auntie Naa loved to talk about. This was because it was Naa Lobi who socialized her into the spiritual knowledge of her patrician.

According to Auntie Naa, it was Naa Lobi who began calling her Naa Yoomo (old lady), when she began to accompany Naa Lobi to the ritual spaces of deities for the Osu paramount stool, the Osu Dade and Akotia. Through this training, Auntie Nana learnt the roles and responsibilities of the spiritual core of the Osu paramount stool’s socio-political structure. When Auntie Naa’s recalled her relationship with Naa Lobi she made a very important point. She elaborated that unless she and Naa Lobi had gone to ritually bathe or “consecrate” the stool of the King and deity of the clan, the reigning King, Nii Nai Dowuona could not venture out of his compound to perform his civic duties.

Because of this, her grandfather, Asafoaste Brenya made sure all her needs were taken care of so that she would go on assisting Naa Lobi in propitiating the gods. Again, here we see the private power that Naa Lobi and her trainee had: Whilst the King and his head warrior displayed public power, that power was predicated on the ritual knowledge that the women of the house possessed and which they exercised esoterically and in private.

A funny, but significant episode of my conversation with Aunty Naa was also about the processes of ritual consecration. Aunty Naa says that when she began going to the ritual spaces of her patriclan, at some point she was told that at any time when a mosquito bit her she should bring it to the attention of Naa Lobi. Aunty Naa remembers crying in her household, and when she was asked why? She exclaimed, Naa Lobi had forbidden her to go to the house of Nii Noi Dowuona, the King. As a still maturing girl, Aunty Naa was unaware that Naa Lobi was speaking in axiomatic terms, that when she reached the stage of puberty her menstrual power renders the ritual work they do ineffective. In analytical terms what this signified to me was that women wielded the wherewithal to render even the power of the gods ineffective. This is because in this perennial cycle in the life of women, they were themselves theoretically like the gods; immortal-they bleed, but don't die.

### **Mi Mini Abrewa Tia ( I am Abrewa Tia)**

Abrewa Tia, I am the old lady of the house, matriarch custodian of this house. These were the words of an old lady dressed in red head wrap, Kaba (blouse), skirt, and wrap. She was the only female present during an August 2007 research visit to the Akonedi Shrine. The shrine itself has known a number of female diviners, its most recent one being Nana Okomfohema Oparebea, High Priestess of the Akonedi Shrine in Larteh, Kubease on the Akwapim Ridge a few miles north of Accra.

During my visit, Abrewa Tia was the only female present when an entourage of visitors and I arrived at the renowned shrine. Her presence and actions said a lot more about the place of Guan/Akan women in Ghanaian traditional society than one could ever wish for or theorize. As the current High priest of Akonedi spoke, and his visitors, courtiers, and linguists listened, Abrewa Tia gestured in approval, interrupted to correct, and made sure the right information was being conveyed to the listening public. When the meeting was over she walked over and spoke audaciously “mi mini Abrewa Tia” (Senior Female of the Clan.)

The role of the Abrewa Tia in Akan politics and indeed Ghanaian traditional society is an overlooked and less written about part of the discourse on women's spiritual leadership. This is because the institution of the Abrewa Tia began in the period of early complex agricultural period among ethnic societies in Ghana.

When the strong and able travelled to family lands to farm, the old and not so able stayed at home to watch over children who could also not participate in farming (Samuel Ntewusu, Ph.D. candidate University of Ghana and Leiden, Netherlands, debriefing session, and personal communication, August 4, 2007). These children were therefore socialized to the cultural traditions, mores and values of their family, clan, and ethnic groups. Through this socialization process the Abrewa Tia was able to know the temperament of each of the children until they reached adulthood and became eligible for civic positions within the family, town, or city. An Abrewa Tia is therefore held in reverence for not only her knowledge of the cultural institutions of the society, but also for her age, wisdom, and familiarity with the characters of many people within the society.

## **Conclusion**

Abrewa Tia, Naa Yoomo and, Aawon Okpobi do not belong to the distant past. They were women who served as religious leaders, and whom I encountered in Ga and Ghanaian society living beyond the glass ceiling, if indeed one exists for traditional societies. Unless the traditional Ga religious worldview enconced in the idea of an androgynous God is radically altered, women will continue to be a part of the religious leadership of the Ga. These women use the private and public religious power they wield to thrive as leaders of their communities.

What this contemporary portrait of women in Ga society suggests is the need to distinguish between contemporary civic society groups in which women face a glass ceiling and traditional African societies, which may or may not have glass ceilings. In this regard it is critical to note that this essay does not consider traditional African societies as unchanging, stuck in an atavistic past, or impermeable by activities of the modern-nation states in which they reside. Rather, the paper is an attempt to scratch the surface of a reciprocal continuity in change, and change in continuity thesis for women's leadership practice in traditional societies. Several definitions and conceptualizations of "continuity in change, and change in continuity" exist, but in this example I am referring to the dynamic process of cultural change Donald Donham defines as vernacular modernism, i.e., "attempts to reorder local society by the application of strategies that have produced wealth, power, or knowledge elsewhere in the world-develop in this conceptual space. And resistances, rejections, and reactions develop alongside them (Donham 1999, xviii).

Further, the implications of this study for the Ghanaian political landscape is that unfortunately, there has not been a cross-over of dual sex political leadership or representation from traditional society to the modern nation. Since the colonial era, with very few exceptions like Nana Yaa Asantewa of Ejisu, Asante, the male leaders of Ghanaian traditional societies have had a much more public role in the modern political arena. The Kings of Asante, Akyem, Ga and others are currently given much more recognition in public political gatherings, and civic democratic processes, than their female counterparts, such as the Asanteheema, the Ga Manye, and their peers in other traditional societies.

In effect, the modern Ghanaian state and other African countries have a lot more to learn from contemporary traditional institutions, wherein women continue to occupy equal space with men for the better functioning of society. There is also a need to examine how women's roles in these traditional societies have persevered, evolved, and transformed over various historical time periods. The gendered dimensions of tradition and modernity in African societies remain a relatively unexplored arena of study.

In this essay, I hope to have begun a re-examination of women's official roles in traditional societies compared with their status in the so called modern nation-state. Other intellectual ideas needing further study include the possible cross-over of women's leadership practices from the traditional to the 'modern' space and its implications for leadership amongst women. Also, I raise the question, as to whether women's leadership in traditional society itself is becoming transformed by the influx of a so-called modernity. Finally, there is need to identify the spaces that exist for women to exercise leadership outside of traditional society.

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