

“Asante Queenmothers; A Study In Identity And Continuity”(1)

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Abstract: Queenmothers are characteristic of many African political systems though their authority and responsibilities differ considerably from one society to the next. In spite of their ubiquity throughout Africa, female leaders who occupy recognized positions in the political system have seldom been the subject of study. To provide a representative view of the dynamic and changing office of queenmother today I will present a descriptive overview of queenmothers' authority and responsibilities, and then I will present a profile of four queenmothers, each of whom differs from the other in rank and in style. At the conclusion, I show that despite queenmothers are considered the mothers of the culture and thus the keepers of identity and of indigenous kin-based hierarchical society, the Asante state incorporated kinship as the basis for political rule establishing a dialogue between these two sources of power.

Keywords: Queenmothers – Asante – Identity - State

Queenmothers are characteristic of many African political systems though their authority and responsibilities differ considerably from one society to the next. Annie M.D. LeBeuf's survey article on women in the political organization of African societies, discusses twenty societies in which female leaders hold or held positions parallel to those of male leaders. She states that "in most of the monarchical systems there are either one or two women of the highest rank who participate in the exercise of power and who occupy a position on a par with that of the king or complementary to it" (97) (see also Stoeltje, "Queen Mothers in African Societies"). In spite of their ubiquity throughout Africa female leaders who occupy recognized positions in the political system have seldom been the subject of study.(2)

While many societies in Africa have lost the position of female leaders in the process of modernization, the position of the Asante queenmother (and those of the other Akan groups as well) in Ghana remains strong even today; it is no coincidence that Asante culture is also very strong. Queenmothers, in fact, contribute significantly to Akan identity, especially in the case of Asante society. Although the queenmother's position, like that of the culture as a whole, was influenced by colonization and modernization, it nevertheless has remained vital and is adapting to the modern world.

Today the position of queenmother is quietly being expanded. Some towns are bestowing the title of "honorary queenmother" or "progress queenmother" on modern female leaders who are active in other venues. Equally significant is the trend for patrilineal societies to create queenmothers for the first time in their history. Other efforts, too, suggest an expansion of the role. Most recently a proposal was put forward in the Consultative Assembly, held this spring to plan for a new government, that queenmothers should be included in the National House of Chiefs, a modern institution from which they have been excluded. (At least one queenmother

was a participant in the Consultative Assembly.) There is no comparable assembly for queenmothers.

Although the proposal was defeated, the results were reported as headlines in the major daily newspaper. The question has been under discussion informally for several years, and the fact that it was seriously discussed by this official body represents an increase in status. Nevertheless, its defeat also points to the boundaries which currently exist as limits on that status in modern politics.(3)

Apart from the complexities of modern politics, however, the increased attention to the office of queenmother points to its significance in maintaining cultural identity, especially at this moment in time when political discussions include the subject of cultural identity.(4) It is in terms of this foundational concept, then, that this paper explores the dimensions of the Asante queenmother position.

To provide a representative view of the dynamic and changing office of queenmother today I will present a descriptive overview of queenmothers' authority and responsibilities, and then I will present a profile of four queenmothers, each of whom differs from the other in rank and in style.

THE QUEENMOTHER IN THE POLITICAL AND KINSHIP SYSTEM

Each political unit in this matrilineal society has not only a chief but a queenmother also. One does not exist without the other. The stool in Asante symbolizes power and authority just as the throne does in European monarchies, and Asante queenmothers have their own stools. The significance of this fact is that queenmothers hold office on the basis of their own qualifications, a defining feature that distinguishes Asante queenmothers from others in Africa who hold office or derive power as the consequence of their relationship to a chief.

In Twi the term for the female ruler is Ohemaa in the singular, ahemaa in the plural. The parallel male term is Ohene (sing.) and ahene, (pl.), king or chief. The source of the translation of ohemaa as "Queen Mother" is generally attributed to Rattray, the British anthropologist and government agent in Kumasi in the 1920's and 1930's, but the term queen-mother is used in the English publication of Ramseyer and Kuhne in 1875. The translation raises problems which are widely recognized; nevertheless, the term queenmother is widely used to refer to female political leaders who occupy a stool in parallel to a chief. However, Twi makes distinctions of status in terminology. The term Ohemaa refers only to the female rulers at the upper levels of the hierarchy: the queenmother of all of Asante, the Asantehemaa, and the paramount queenmothers. (A paramount stool has authority over all of the towns in its paramountcy and divisions.) The term for the female rulers of lesser status is oba panin, those of towns and villages. (The parallel male term is odikro). The English term queenmother is generally used without reference to rank, though the terms small queenmother and big queenmother are sometimes used. The leaders of the market women also use the term ohemaa or queenmother in spite of the fact that the royal queenmothers object.

The queenmother's position is central to the Asante political system which is referred to as Chieftancy, but a broader term in common use is Custom or Traditional Rule (see Kwame Arhin, *Traditional Rule in Ghana*). Essential to an understanding of Asante political organization is the fact that Chieftancy is built upon the matrilineal kinship system and cannot be separated from that system in spite of the fact that the Asante established a centralized state prior to colonization.(5)

Although a queenmother and chief represent a duality, they do not assume office together. When a stool becomes vacant (either because of death or destoolment), a new queenmother or chief is selected for office from among those who qualify as members of the royal family. A queenmother plays a major role in selecting a new chief and vice versa, but in both cases the person must qualify as a member of the royal lineage. The queenmother and the chief are biological mother and son in very few places. More often they are close relatives such as sister and brother, cousins or uncle and niece or aunt and nephew. They are never married to each other, but each one has a spouse (or in the case of chief, spouses) if they wish. These parallel lines of authority, female and male, are interlaced in a complex system which insures that the actions of the chief and those of the queenmother will always affect each other. They are expected to act together as leaders in the best interest of their people. Asante queenmothers may be described, then, as the legitimate, publicly recognized female leaders in this society that reckons descent through the female line.

The Asante, like other Akan groups, practice matrilineal systems of succession and inheritance, tracing descent from a common ancestress through lineages (based on a known ancestress in historical time) and clans (based on an unknown or nameless ancestress in earlier time). The connection between one generation and the next is established through blood, [mogya] or [bogya] as it is passed through the female, from mother to child. Thus, identity in a lineage and a clan, and inheritance, as well as royal status, are determined by the mother.(6) The position of mother takes on value beyond its biological function and becomes an important symbol because of its power to define persons, to situate a person within the larger system, and also because of the knowledge associated with that power.

The Ohemaa is considered to be the mother of the clan in her town and therefore the "mother" of the chief. As the mother of the clan she embodies knowledge and wisdom, and through her leadership she is expected to impart that wisdom to the chief and her people.

This knowledge and wisdom derived from the concept of mother is what legitimates her authority and defines the functions of the queenmother. These functions and the source of their legitimacy are described as follows by a paramount chief whose queenmother is his biological mother and his close advisor.

"In terms of who is the first citizen...it is a matter of the hen or the egg which is coming first. The queenmother who should give birth, she is the first, because from her the others get the relative status, and she is the special advisor because of that very question: you have the Moral Power and Authority over our very children--unless they come of age where they can disagree with you, but that they do at their own peril, because they have the benefit of greater wisdom, greater experience and for that matter greater exposure" (Fieldwork interviews, 1989 - 1990)

He describes her moral power in terms of its application to the chief. She is:

- 1) the Advisor [to the chief] on matters of tradition and religion, insuring that taboos are not breached,
- 2) the Advisor [to the chief] on secular affairs of state,
- 3) the Nominator of the chief, and
- 4) the Procreator.

Another paramount chief confirmed that a chief must take the advice of the queenmother once she is on the stool. He explained with a proverb: "The King sucks the breast of the Queenmother".

In an analogy to the nurturing power of a mother's breast milk this means that the chief must follow the advice the queenmother gives him, analogous to a mother feeding her child.

Another proverb states that it is the queenmother who builds the nation: "Ohemaa na kyekyere Oman".

Most familiar and frequently used is the proverb that says in response to a problem: YEEkObisa Aberewatia - "we will go and consult the old lady," (the queenmother), the implication being that she can be consulted to solve a problem because of her wisdom. This statement is widely uttered when people wish to retreat from a setting such as a courtroom so that they can consult with each other.

These functions concerning her wisdom and advice lie at the center of a queenmother's authority and consequently are the source of much controversy and litigation today. Briefly, the function of Nominator means that she nominates the candidate for chief on the basis of her knowledge of the family history and the character of those who are qualified. Her knowledge of family history and genealogy ensures that only true descendants of the ancestress will be considered and not anyone who has been incorporated into the family from outside. She consults with the elders of the royal family group and then nominates a qualified individual; the sub-chiefs from the other clans in the community then consider the choice and may reject it, on grounds that are ambiguous and thus often controversial. She has three chances to produce a candidate acceptable to the political community; if she does not succeed, then the representatives of the community select a candidate who, according to most sources, must meet with the queenmother's approval.

In her role as advisor she is expected to visit the chief every day and pass along to him information she has obtained from her associates, especially the women. She is expected to keep him apprised of the customs he should follow to assure that he does not compromise the stool by violating any taboos, and on the basis of her experience she advises him on secular and political affairs. She sits on his left side when he holds court and may offer him advice from that position at any time that she feels he needs it. She may have other specific duties in regard to the chief as well such as the responsibility to visit the wives of the chief and keep peace among them and their children.

These definitions of a queenmother as the mother of the clan and the mother of the chief, the Possessor of knowledge and wisdom and Advisor to the Chief, as well as a political ruler, place her in a position of multiple meanings; consequently she becomes a multivocalic symbol, coordinating the separate domains of meaning in the culture and also establishing a high degree of flexibility in the role.

A QUEENMOTHER'S POWER

A Queenmother must perform important rituals and be present for many ceremonies, especially funerals, in order to fulfill the responsibility of her stool which is equally as explicit and elaborate as the chief's in its ritual responsibilities.

While there are many ritual and ceremonial events, traditional religion requires most prominently the observance of Akwesadae and Awukudae. On these days, the queenmother and the chief must honor their ancestors through acknowledgement of and sacrifice to the stools of their ancestors. Occurring on Sunday and Wednesday respectively every six weeks, these rituals require the chief and queenmother to pour libation to and feed their stools of the deceased queenmothers and chiefs who preceded them on the stool. These rest permanently in the stool room, a special room designated for the purpose in the palace. A sheep is slaughtered as a sacrifice to the stool, and special foods are cooked and offered to the stools and eaten by the queenmother and chief. In this act the queenmother not only shows respect but also establishes a line of communication with her ancestors.

A queenmother has numerous responsibilities in regard to the women of her jurisdiction. These take a range of forms. She can call the women of the village together at any time, but especially to engage in common labor such as cleaning the village in order to cleanse it of evil. Especially important, all young women must be brought to the queenmother to be registered when they first begin to menstruate. She examines the young girls and records their names. This practice has taken the place of initiation rites or, as Peter Sarpong called them, nubility rites (*Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*). Not restricted to the traditional residents only, often the educated middle class follows this practice as well.

Among the most important of her responsibilities in her community is the queenmother's authority to settle disputes involving women. Disputes between females and males, disputes between two women, or any form of domestic dispute occurring in her jurisdiction qualifies for the queenmother's court or her juridical attention. Women and men alike can bring cases to the queenmother, as well as to the chief's court which receives cases involving issues of a public or property nature. The queenmother listens to the presentation of the problem and determines a solution to the dispute, often one involving a fine and a change in behavior. A paramount queenmother or the Asantehemaa has one or more okyeame (spokespersons) and elders who assist her in dealing with disputes. Attending to the many disputes brought before her constitutes one of her major responsibilities as she has final authority in these matters, and as they consume a great amount of her time and attention. Generally, a person pays a fee for the services of the court and the resolution of the dispute.

The Asantehemaa has her own palace in close proximity to the Asantehene's palace. She lives there with many servants and holds her court there. A paramount queenmother generally has a special house or compound built for her in which she lives and receives visitors and hears cases. A small queenmother generally lives in her family house and hears cases there. Her movement is not restricted though she must be ever mindful that she is the queenmother, and generally she must be accompanied by family or servants when she is moving about so that she can be treated with the proper respect. Every queenmother is served by numerous family members and servants, though no other queenmother has such a large number as the Asantehemaa.

In regard to most matters Asante queenmothers are endowed with considerable autonomy. This extends to their personal lives as well. They may be married or not at the time they become a queenmother. Though it is not stated officially, it is generally expected that a queenmother will have children, and she may continue to have children after she becomes queenmother. Clearly chastity is not a factor as it is in some societies, and in fact, divorce and remarriage is not uncommon for queenmothers. Unlike every other woman, when a queenmother is married, she is

not bound to her husband exclusively. She must at all times remain discrete, of course, and conduct herself with dignity and authority.

In considering this particular feature, Sherry Ortner's comments on the function of gender and sexuality in hierarchical societies are helpful. She observes that in hierarchical systems the highest level principles of social organization do not divide women and men of the same social categories but rather unite them based on their common status and interests. The "logic of hierarchical systems" tends toward gender equality. In this case the chief and the queenmother derive their status from their royal lineage first, and then from their positions as occupants of their stools. In such hierarchical systems, within any given level, "men's and women's statuses are more similar to one another's than to persons of either sex at other levels." ("Gender and Sexuality in Hierarchical Societies" 397). This autonomy which is unique to queenmothers may be explained by the status of their office. As the female and male are more alike than different in status, and as she is quite different from other women in status, she enjoys the same privileges as the male ruler in most matters. Coupled with the issue of status, however, is the significance of the role of mother, as discussed above. She is considered the mother of the clan in a matrilineal system that places a high value on children. Thus, her position as symbolic mother of the clan and of the chief, and her position as procreator are enhanced by her autonomy with regard to matters of sexuality, procreation and marriage.

HIERARCHY AND VARIATION IN STYLE

Queenmothers are aware of the significance of their position as women leaders today and are sensitive to opportunities that will improve conditions for the women of the community. Within this large body of women leaders style varies considerably, reflecting differences in age, education, economics, travel and other variables. The hierarchy of the Asante political organization also creates distinct variations among the queenmothers, depending on the size and status of the town and the stool. This range of style and variation is demonstrated in the four examples which follow.

The Asantehemaa has the most power of any queenmother as the queen of Asante and the queenmother of the Asantehene, the ruling king of the Asante federation. Her style is unambiguously traditional, her palace and entourage larger than others, and her court is the only full queenmother's court. Paramount queenmothers occupy the second level of status and size in the hierarchy, and they are responsible for the queenmothers in the villages throughout the paramouncy. The Offinsohemaa, a paramount queenmother, represents change within the tradition, as she brings the perspective of education and modernity to her stool. At the third level of the hierarchy are large and important towns. The Juasohemaa, an oba panin, represents this level in the hierarchy. Through her office we witness the difficulties of dispute and the external conditions which influence internal chieftancy affairs. At the next level down in the hierarchy is the small town, and the queenmother of this political unit is also an oba panin. The Boankrahemaa also demonstrates the ability of queenmothers to introduce modernization and expansion into their communities.

The Asantehemaa

The most powerful queenmother in Asante must know the customs and traditions of her people thoroughly. Indeed, it is said that the present Asantehemaa was selected from among other qualified candidates because she was so well versed in Custom.

Her palace and that of the Asantehene are located in Kumasi and the site is called Manhyia. In close proximity are the Asante Archives (under the supervision of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana), the Secretariat, and the National House of Chiefs and the Regional House of Chiefs.

Manhyia is the site for important ceremonies and rituals; but it is also an important stop for international visitors to Ghana, and commoners routinely have business there as well. Consequently a constant stream of visitors flows in and out of the various locations at Manhyia: foreign dignitaries, queenmothers and chiefs, businessmen and commoners. The Asantehene, Osei Tutu II, was enstooled 1999 in Kumasi. He had been called from London where he was a practicing business executive. Since he first assumed the position he has exercised his authority to blend the ideal in tradition with the best in modernity to create a new image of the head of the Asante. Among his most important duties are the judiciary. His court functions two days a week, bringing men, and occasionally women, to resolve their conflicts over such matters as land disputes and chieftancy issues. Large crowds attend the court, as many as a thousand people or more, and school children are brought in to see the court as well.

At the Asantehemaa's palace everyday life and tradition are more apparent than at the Asantehene's. Only Twi is spoken, as is the case in the Asantehene's court. The Asantehemaa, like the Asantehene, has her own elders, sub-chiefs, akyeame, and servants. These latter are primarily women who live at the palace. While she too receives many visitors, primarily local ones, her authority is felt most effectively through her court. Individuals, primarily women because a queen mother is responsible for the welfare of women, bring their cases of curse, insult, oaths, marital disagreements and other forms of personal disputes to the Asantehemaa's court where they are heard and arbitrated and penalties determined.

The court operates one day a week, but throughout the week individuals who are bringing cases at the court may come to the palace to place themselves on the docket and make arrangements for their case to be heard. The court is constituted of the Asantehemaa's akyeame and elders, a group of approximately 20 - 25 people, the majority of whom are male but five or six are female. Akyeame are spokespersons for chiefs and queenmothers, the persons to whom any individual directs herself when speaking to a chief or queenmother. One never speaks directly to them, and they speak back through their akyeame. These rules for speaking hold in all formal circumstances, but in some selected circumstances such as a foreign visitor in an informal setting, a chief or queenmother may choose to speak directly to a person. The Asantehemaa has between five and ten akyeame present on any given day in court.

One woman does participate in the court in an important role. She is the Dwanatofohemaa, or the "pleading queenmother." Her duty is to accept the pleas for a lesser fine from the guilty parties and to plead with the akyeame to lower the fine, which they almost always do. This position is inherited through her family.

The woman who preceded her was her grandmother. She is educated, lived in London for ten years, and now runs several small businesses of her own. She is a close advisor to the queenmother, is very effective, and has considerable prestige in the palace.

The male elders claim that both women and men believe that men are better able to reason, and therefore it is better for women as well as men that the elders who listen to and judge the cases are men.

One of the Asantehemaa's most notable accomplishments was the hosting of a durbar of queenmothers at her palace at Manhyia in April of 1988. Hundreds of queenmothers attended.

At the opening of the event the Asantehemaa formally greeted and was greeted by the queenmothers. She then spoke to the gathering, exhorting them to avoid causing disputes over chieftancy matters and to uphold the standards of their position. (Her speech was written for her by the Asantehene's office.) Following her speech a representative from the Asantehene's office gave a detailed speech outlining the authority of a queenmother. There was then an opportunity for response, and a number of queenmothers came to the microphone and stated explicitly that the cause of chieftancy disputes are chiefs and not queenmothers.

The Offinsohemaa

The paramount queenmother of Offinso, the Offinsohemaa, whose stool name is Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, represents a considerable contrast. When she was called to serve as the Ohemaa of her town in the mid-1980's she was a public school teacher, a middle class wife and mother of four in her thirties, living in Accra. Nana Nyarko was selected among those who qualified specifically because she is educated and progressive. Offinso is located north of Kumasi in the midst of a substantial cocoa region, so the stool has financial resources and is eager to raise the standard of living throughout the paramountcy.

The queenmother enjoys a good relationship with the chief who is her uncle and who is quite senior to her. As custom requires, she visits him each day when they are both in residence. Her closest advisors are family members: an uncle, a brother, and a sister who worked in the United States as an agent for an airline until she returned to Ghana to assist the queenmother.

The Offinsohemaa has been successful in exercising strong leadership in her paramountcy, especially as regards women's affairs. Soon after she was enstooled she consulted with various senior people, including professors and church leaders, asking them to assist her in forming policies for the eighties concerning women. A most interesting example she has instituted is an ancient practice called Dabone. This custom requires that one day of the week is set aside during which people do not go to farm in respect for Asase Yaa, the Mother Earth. It is believed that if you do go to farm you will encounter a frightening creature because they roam the earth at this time. Due to the influence of Christianity this practice was stopped early in the Nineteenth Century. One explanation for the reintroduction of the practice is to demonstrate that the queenmother is on good terms with the spirits so that she can achieve success in her program for the development of women.

One of her innovations is the institution of a regular meeting with the village queenmothers of her paramountcy. She calls them to Offinso each month to her palace, and often she arranges for a lawyer or doctor or other professional person to come in and explain issues and problems of modern life. At these meetings the village queenmothers can also discuss with her whatever problems they are having in their villages. At the durbar of queenmothers called by the Asantehemaa several years ago the Offinsohemaa was one of the queenmothers who came to the microphone and spoke to the group. At that time she expressed the opinion that queenmothers would benefit from attending organized meetings on a regular basis which could be called by the Asantehemaa as a follow-up to the durbar. Observing that the chiefs go to the National House of Chiefs where they learn a great deal and participate in national political processes, she noted that the women leaders are left behind. Thus, meetings for queenmothers would be helpful.

In the paramountcy of Offinso, then, the queenmother is using her authority to improve conditions for women. She is well educated herself and makes every effort to share knowledge with the women in her town and paramountcy. She also supports efforts that organize women

into communal activities that will benefit them. All of this is consistent with her goal which she articulated when she assumed the stool: to work for the advancement of women.

THE JUASOHEMAA

The next level in the Asante chieftancy system is that of town, and for this level we will consider the queenmother, or correctly speaking, the oba panin of Juaso. Although not a paramountcy, Juaso is a significant town located southeast of Kumasi in Ashanti Akim. The royal family is of the Oyoko clan, the same as that of their overlord, the Juabenhene, and the same as the Asantehemaa and Asantehene, so there are close ties to higher levels in the system. One of their previous chiefs was a powerful and wealthy man who had many children, many of whom are now in prestigious positions in Juaso, Ghana, and outside as well. During the early colonial period the British established themselves in Juaso, and it was, therefore, one of the earliest towns to have schools. Today Juaso families still place a high value on education, and several members of the royal family are professors, both in Ghana and abroad. The town is also the home of the District Assembly for this area and thus for the District Secretary and his offices. (The District Assembly is the local unit of government, established by the present Ghanaian administration to initiate local level rule.) However, the Juaso stool does not have a source of income, and thus the resources available for the queenmother and the chief are scant.

The Juasohemaa, Nana Abena Frimpoma, worked very closely with her elders to fulfill her ritual and religious duties with good spirit. In fact, she grew up in the household of her uncle who was the abusuapanin, the head of the royal family in Juaso, and was carefully groomed for the position of queenmother. Unfortunately she "joined the heavenly choir" on February 6, 2012. The Juasohemaa was especially articulate about the duties and responsibilities of a queenmother, having been groomed for the position from an early age. She explained that among the most important is the responsibility for providing hospitality for guests, including food, so that a visitor feels welcome in the town. As a queenmother must attend many ceremonial events where music and dance are important means of communication, especially for demonstrating respect, it is also advantageous for a queenmother to be a good dancer. The Juasohemaa was exceptional in providing food and hospitality for visitors, and friends as well, and also enjoyed a reputation as a fine dancer.

For some time she was forced to deal with a difficult situation in her town, but unfortunately, one that is not uncommon. This situation is most often referred to as a "chieftancy dispute." However, chieftancy disputes can refer to a wide range of difficulties having to do with the affairs of the stools. In Juaso the queenmother is well versed in custom and works closely with the elders and sub-chiefs of the town and with the Juabenhene and Juabenhemaa, the paramount chief and queenmother who are the overlord of Juaso. However, the chief relies upon sources outside the town, including the government, and within the town relies upon the support of "the young men" and tends to ignore the demands of custom. He nurtures a discourse that would modernize chieftancy, and, in effect, abolish the royal family and queenmothers but retain chiefs.

Destoolment charges (twenty-two of them) were filed against the chief in July 1990 by the seven sub-chiefs of the town (some of whom live in the town and others live in the larger cities). The charges include accusations of financial mismanagement of funds intended for community development and numerous charges of violations of custom and disrespect for the stool. After years of court dates, the chief was destooled and a new chief enstooled. Nevertheless, the former chief continues to feed the flames of rancor in the town.

Queenmothers cannot destool a chief because they are in the same family, and that is not allowed by the system. However, queenmothers are often central to the process of any chieftancy dispute because of their knowledge and wisdom, their moral authority, and because they act as advisor to the chief. He is expected to follow their advice; when he ignores it, a conflict emerges because the two authorities are in opposition to each other.

This particular case involves a full range of influences active in contemporary Ghana, and thus it outlines the sources of power and authority and how they interact in everyday practice. This case demonstrates especially the central role of queenmothers in chieftancy matters, in spite of the fact that most studies have overlooked the office of queenmother in the matter of disputes and their settlement.

THE BOANKRAHEMAA

Boankra is small town near Kumasi, so the term for the female leader there is oba panin. Nana Abena Afriyie occupies the stool in Boankra and is leading the town effectively as the only ruler since the chief has been destooled. The queenmother and elders are moving cautiously and slowly in the selection of a chief as they want to be certain that the new chief will be a good one.

Nana Afriyie became oba panin at the age of twenty-five years when the previous oba panin, her own mother, died. She states that the eldest daughter of a queenmother should succeed her mother upon her death. That principal is especially relevant when she has been groomed for the purpose for most of her life by her mother as Nana Afriyie was. Consistent with that practice, the royal family in Boankra made the decision to place her on the throne when it became vacant. She explained, however, that the family is not the only qualification to be considered in the selection of a queenmother or a chief. The candidate for the stool must be a person of good character. An individual who qualified by birth but who was disrespectful or high tempered would never be placed on a stool.

Nana Afriyie has exhibited an exceptional ability to unify and build the town in spite of the fact that it has just completed a destoolment process which absorbs time and resources. She works closely with the head of the local school in a project to build a new building. She is active in the queenmothers' association in her district and in the District Assembly, the local arm of the official government, cooperating with the Assembly leadership on all matters so that together they can bring improvements. She has also had the foresight to appoint a person to fill the office of progress chief. A modern office created by the Asantehene in recent years, a progress chief is an outsider or an individual who is outside of chieftancy affairs, who is appointed by a queenmother or chief to provide advice and assistance to the local leadership. Nana Afriyie appointed as progress chief a British man from Accra who attended the wedding of one of his employees in Boankra. He became a strong advocate of the town and proposed as his project that he would match the funds raised by the townspeople for the school with funds of his own. He follows through with frequent visits to the town during which he participates in ceremonial and other events.

The Boankrahema represents the office of queenmother at the level of the small town. Her leadership, however, exhibits a vision that expands beyond the boundaries of the town itself. She supports education and every possible effort to increase the resources of the town, and works to link the town with larger units of organization. Fulfilling the purpose of the stool, she acts in the best interest of the community.

CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the issues raised in the beginning of the paper, let me repeat that queenmothers have not captured the attention of scholars nor politicians, and yet they have continued to occupy their stools, effectively leading their communities and adapting to the conditions of a rapidly changing world. Most recently, however, they have been seriously considered in several new venues. Certainly this notice can be attributed in part to the rising consciousness of women's importance in society, a global phenomenon.

Yet, queenmothers are associated with custom and tradition, not modern movements. As demonstrated, they embody kinship, family, and custom - in a word Identity. As the mother of the clan and the female leader of the political unit, as the keeper of knowledge and wisdom, queenmothers are the authorities on culture. They are the mothers of the culture and thus the keeper of Identity.

As Ghana faces yet another major transition in domestic political affairs and simultaneously into the global economy, it is consciously concerned with how to keep its cultural identity, its indigenous culture. The institution of chieftancy rates high as indigenous culture not only because of its ancient history but especially because it merges kinship and community, the past and the present, the personal and the political. In anthropology, history and political science these domains have been defined separately, and an implicitly evolutionary model has been presumed in which kinship societies evolve into ones of the state. West African societies, Asante in particular, have been characterized as such since an Asante state was established at the beginning of the 18th. century, before colonization by the British.

Christine Ward Gailey has demonstrated that the dominant trend in studies of the state has been one that focuses on state formation and ignores the kin-based societies conquered by the powerful states, as well as cultural forms of resistance or continuity. She defines kinship societies or kin-based societies as those in which activities are ordered through kin or kin-modeled connections. Property is held communally, with rights to use resources being allocated to every person through his or her affiliation to the group. In such societies, relations that organize production, distribution, consumption, and reproduction are all constituted through sociological kinship. (*Evolutionary Perspectives on Gender Hierarchy* 34)

However, when a state emerges, it must establish its authority and therefore, it must control the reproduction of the kin community. How communities are reproduced becomes an arena of struggle, and control over biological reproduction necessarily becomes an issue as political power is injected into community continuity. ("The State of the State in Anthropology" 83)

This emphasis on the state and its authority led to the widespread assumption that the kin society, or, more specifically, the lineage, was indeed dominated by the state. In writing about the West African states of Dahomey and Asante, J.D.Y. Peel tells us, "The leading anthropological idea, that the advance of the state is linked to the decline of the lineage, has proved to have very little in it" (106). Yet the influence of the model has allowed us to overlook the fact that some states were built, in fact, on the kinship society. As Rattray (*Ashanti*) and Fortes ("Kinship and Marriage Among the Ashanti") documented and stated explicitly, the Asante state incorporated kinship as the basis for political rule, and consequently it was described as a federation in which the various paramountcies retained a great deal of autonomy.

Not only did the Asante incorporate kinship, but their particular kinship system is matrilineal which means that it has female leaders as well as male, and they are the means both biologically and culturally through which the kin community is reproduced.

Thus in any conflict between the kin community and the state, queenmothers occupy a position of power even though it may be circumscribed.

The Asante continue today as a culture based on the merger of the kin community with a political system; they continue to be matrilineal, identifying kin through the mother, holding office on the basis of an ancestress, and inheriting through the mother. If we recognize Asante culture as an indigenous kin community in contrast to the modern nation state which, consistent with nationalism, must unify all of the different ethnic groups and command recognition of its authority, we can understand that a structural and cultural tension or conflict of interest is present between the indigenous kin-based society and the nation state. As the central feature of this kin-based yet hierarchical society, queenmothers symbolize the several domains of the social and political system and ensure that it continues as a vital, living society, not simply as a heritage from the past to be marketed for tourists or utilized as a resource for politics. Moreover, it appears to patrilineal societies who are facing the same questions regarding cultural continuity in a rapidly changing nation that a queenmother would strengthen their position as well. Thus it is understandable that various cultural and political forces are rediscovering queenmothers, approaching them with ambivalence for sure, but nevertheless recognizing them as a major source of cultural continuity and the embodiment of cultural identity, a benefit enjoyed by the Asante for several centuries of cultural continuity.

NOTES

1) The fieldwork for this paper was made possible by a Fulbright Research Fellowship to Ghana in 1989-90. I am especially grateful to the Asantehemaa and the Dwanato0fohemaa, the Juabenhene and the Juabenhemaa, the Offinsohene and Offinsohemaa, the Juasohemaa, and the Boankrahemaa for their cooperation with me throughout my stay.

2) Rattray noted the importance of queenmothers and the British failure to recognize them when he stated in *Ashanti* (1923), "Today the Queen Mothers are unrecognized by us...the Ashanti have simply accepted the fact that our system seemed to take no official cognizance of women as a power in the family and in the State..." (84-85). Ramseyer and Kuhne described receiving gifts and hospitality from queenmothers on several occasions and described the Asantehemaa as "the most influential person at court" (*Four Years in Ashantee* 73). For contemporary scholarship in addition to LeBeuf's article see also Cohen ("Oedipus Rex and Regina: The Queen Mother in Africa"), De Heusch (*Essais sur le Symbolisme de l'Inceste Royal en Afrique*) and Lange ("Das Amt der Koniginmutter im Tschadseegebiet" and "Les Rois de Gao-Sane et Les Almoravides").

3) The context in which the proposal was presented and the body under consideration for the inclusion of queenmothers as members are both modern political forums, and thus a full assessment of queenmother status in modern politics would require analysis of the current political forces.

4) See UHURU magazine 1990, 1991, 1992 for examples of these discussions.

5) Both Fortes (“Kinship and Marriage Among the Ashanti” and “The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups”) and Rattray (*Ashanti* and “The Ashanti Constitution.”) discussed this phenomenon in some depth. See Wilks (*Asante in the Nineteenth Century*) for an extensive study of the Asante state in the Nineteenth Century.

6) Today the national government has introduced laws allowing children to inherit from the father; consequently there are two systems of inheritance, and this often creates problems.

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