



**Reinventing African Chieftaincy  
in the Age of AIDS, Gender,  
Governance, and Development**

Edited by Donald I. Ray, Tim Quinlan,  
Keshav Sharma, and Tacita A.O. Clarke

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# 8 The Predicament of the Akan “Queenmother” (*Ohemmaa*)

Christiane Owusu-Sarpong

## I. INTRODUCTION

A word is not a thing... A word is alive, it moves from mouth to mouth, from one context to another, from one generation to another. – Tzvetan Todorov (1981, 236)<sup>1</sup>

A word’s history reflects the changes a society has undergone. In the Akan<sup>2</sup> world, the word *ohemmaa* most certainly took roots at the beginning of chieftaincy amongst the Akan people. Many centuries have gone by since, and the institution of traditional leadership in what is Ghana today has suffered tremendous changes. In order to track down the origin of the predicament of the Akan *ohemmaa* or “queenmother,” and in an attempt to prove that her predicament has been caused by a constant denial or misrepresentation of the power and authority that may well have been

originally invested in her, I will first turn my attention to “texts of olden days” – namely to two Akan queenmother tales – before taking a closer look at colonial archives referring to “chiefs and queenmothers.” This glimpse into the past will hopefully shed a new light on the contemporary state of affairs: while chiefs have managed to secure a place for themselves in the Ghanaian society of today, queenmothers are sometimes still struggling to regain their lost strength.

The fieldwork I conducted in conjunction with successive groups of students in Asante and Brong-Ahafo (Ghana) between 1992 and 2000<sup>3</sup> harvested a considerable number of Akan texts. Two of these archived stories will be reproduced in their English translation and then analyzed; they both have, as the central figure of their plot a female character, an Akan *ohemmaa*.<sup>4</sup>

While editing the texts of the collections, I was involved in two international research projects, namely *WWA* (an inquest into the secular voicelessness of African women) and *TAARN* (a comparative study of traditional rule in contemporary African states)<sup>5</sup>; these seemingly different academic pursuits soon started to crystallize in my mind and one topic in particular appeared to be central to the multidisciplinary work I was involved in – that of “the Predicament of the Akan Queenmother.”

Once again, Robert S. Rattray’s<sup>6</sup> writings proved to be a major source of inspiration. In the Preface to his bilingual collection of *Akan-Ashanti Folk-tales* ([1930] 1959), Rattray quotes an Asante informant who offers the view that, during the oral performance of a folktale,

... subjects ordinarily regarded as sacred, e.g. the Sky God, the lesser gods, fetishes, spirit ancestors, the rich, chiefs, sexual matters, appear to be treated as profane, and sometimes even tend to become the subject of ridicule ([1930]1959, x).

The view expressed is that the public performance of an Akan folktale often became an exceptionally dramatic event, during which controversial matters of religious, social, or political import were raised; during those very special moments, when some amount of verbal licentiousness was permitted, normally “untouchable” people such as the political leaders were proverbially criticized and elements of social tension were purged (Rattray [1930] 1959, xii).

Interestingly, Rattray had devoted some earlier pages, in his *Ashanti* ([1923] 1969), to those he then referred to as the “old Ashanti mothers,”<sup>7</sup> or, more precisely, to the “position of the senior female in the ruling clan, i.e. the *Ohema* or so-called Queen Mother, and the part she took ... in local government and in the selection and enstoolment of a chief” ([1923] 1969, 81). To date, this passage remains the earliest *locus classicus* on the subject.<sup>8</sup>

In those pages, which even today remain popular in Ghana and elsewhere, Rattray insisted on the importance of the institution of female leadership in pre-colonial Asante as well as on the fundamental need for its survival; yet, at the time of his writings, and probably partly because of the complete “gender chaos” that had by then started setting in, in Asante (Allman 1996, 49), this once strong Akan socio-political system of “Dual Leadership with Gender Parallelism” (Stoeltje 1997) was to be more and more denied, suppressed, and endangered by the Asante male rulers themselves, with the active support of the British policy of Indirect Rule. And, amidst the contemporary turmoil of a post-colonial African state, within which traditional leaders and central government are constitutionally working out various forms of “divided sovereignty and legitimacy” (Ray 1998), the *nhemmaa* managed miraculously to survive, to increasingly regain and to continuously struggle for a proper recognition by their male “counterparts.”

When I started editing Akan folktales with queenmothers as their central heroines, it dawned on me that the storytellers of today are still pursuing the poetic task of subversion, described by Rattray’s informant a century ago; each such story is, at the time and in the place of its performance, making a point that could probably help us grasp the puzzling historical “predicament of the Akan Queenmother” as the embodiment of the eternally suppressed voices of women in power in Africa and in the world at large.

In order to develop this argument, which, basically, will be a development on a persistently negative “social discourse” on the Akan *ohemmaa*, first I shall give the English translation of the two selected tales, then conduct a semiotic textual study of those two texts, and follow this by an analysis of the complexity of female power in the Akan state and the constant academic and political verbal denial of female power in the colonial and post-colonial contexts.

## II. TWO QUEENMOTHER TALES

In Akan culture, *Ananse Kokroko* (the Great Spider) first served as a metaphor of the Supreme Being (Rattray [1916] 1952, 52) and later became “a symbol of tales, that is, of linguistic art and skill and intellectual play, which are the sign of the divine spirit in man” (Kropp-Dakubu 1990, 49). But, more often than not in Akan folktales (*anansesem*, lit. stories of Ananse), Ananse the Spider plays the role of a Trickster, of a “monster of evil and perfidy; summarizing all human shortcomings.... Spider is precisely what we are not supposed to be” (Colardelle-Diarrasouba 1975, 185).<sup>10</sup>

In both tales reproduced below, Ananse the Trickster and a Queenmother will be clashing on the subject of “morality.” In both stories, the Trickster will be tricked. Yet to determine the moral value of the main characters’ actions, and to decide upon who actually tricked whom, must have been much more of a dilemma for the audience of the second tale. This textual confrontation will, in any case, serve as a lively opening of this chapter’s debate on the predicament of the Akan *Ohemmaa* or Queenmother.

### *Tale 1: Kwaku Ananse and the Queenmother Crocodile*

(Kwabena Obeng, 14 January 1996, Bekyem)

Kwaku Ananse once lived with his children. One day he decided that he would find a way to lure all animals and kill them.

“Kwaku, what plan do you have which will enable you to kill all animals?” his children wanted to know.

“You are not smart,” Ananse laughed at them. “Do you want to bet with me, Kwaku Ananse, that I will achieve this feat?”

True to his word, Kwaku Ananse, determined to accomplish this task, wove cane rods into an *apentennwa* – a big cane basket which used to be called *akotwe*. Kwaku also took some rope, in addition to the *akotwe*, and set out for the farm.

On his way, he met Kwabena Agyanka, the *duyker*.

“Kwaku my father, why are you sweating under such a heavy load,” the duyker asked Ananse.

“Your children, Tikononkono, Nyaakronhwea and Ntikuma say that you are heavier than I,” Ananse replied. “But I insist that I am heavier than you are.”

Kwaku put down the load he was carrying. He asked the duyker to lie down in the basket so that he, Ananse, would carry him, supposedly to find out whether he was the heavier of the two. But because Agyanka, the duyker, did not know exactly what to do, Ananse decided to demonstrate it to him. He lay in the contraption and arranged his hands and feet to show the duyker exactly how he would have him do when he got into it.

“You will tie me up before you carry me,” Kwaku explained to the duyker, knowing very well that when it was his turn, he would want the duyker tied up securely before he killed him. “Then you will untie me so that I also can carry you to see which of us is heavier.”

Kwabena Agyanka tied Kwaku up, just as he had been told to do, and carried him.

“Ah, Kwaku, you are not heavy at all,” said the duyker.

Then he put Kwaku down. Ananse tricked the duyker into the basket and tied up his hands and his feet. He carried the duyker and turned round to return home. On the way, the duyker asked him: “Father Kwaku, why don’t you put me down, just as I did?”

“What do you want me to eat if I put you down?” Kwaku asked the duyker.

It was a very sad situation! True to his word, Kwaku Ananse took the animal home and called his children to him.

“Now you know what wisdom I have!” he told them. “You can see for yourself that I have brought one animal home.”

Kwaku Ananse had killed the duyker and used it in cooking his soup.

Three days after this incident, when there was no more meat, Ananse carried the basket again and set off to find another animal. He met Adowa, the antelope, on the way. He tricked Adowa into the basket, tied him up, and turned to go home.

“Father Kwaku, are you really going to use this trickery to kill me?” Adowa asked him on the way. “Why don’t you put me down so that I can also do what you demonstrated?”

“Look here,” was Kwaku’s callous reply, “I am going to kill you; then I will use your offal for cocoyam casserole. As for the meat itself, hmmm... I cannot tell you what I am going to do with it!”

The antelope cried all the way to Ananse’s house. Once they got there, Ananse, with his children, killed him. All this while, Amoakua the squirrel, in his hide-out on the outskirts of the village, had been watching all that Kwaku had been doing. He had seen everything.

Soon there was no more meat. Ananse had killed almost all the animals in the forest. So what happened was that he had to go out again to see whether he could find an animal to kill. He picked up his *akotwe* again and set off for the outskirts of the village with the knowledge that that was Amoakua’s favourite eating place. While Amoakua was eating, he saw Ananse coming toward him with his *akotwe* on his head. Immediately, Amoakua came out to meet him. Kwaku Ananse called out to Amoakua, flattering him with appellations:

*Hail Amoakua, the pure one!*

*Hail Amoakua, the pure one!*

*Hail Amoakua, the pure one!*

“Why are you, as old as you are, sweating under such a heavy load?” Amoakua asked Ananse. “Where are you going?”

“It’s your children,” Ananse replied. “They insist that you are heavier than I; I say, however, that I am heavier than you!”

“Hey, Kwaku, all this is unnecessary,” Amoakua told him when he had put the basket down in preparation for his usual demonstration.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Ananse replied. “I am going to show you how it is done. You will carry me first; after you have put me down, I will carry you.”

Amoakua pretended to sit in the basket first.

“Hey, Amoakua, this is not how it is done,” Ananse protested. “Put your hands and your feet in the basket!”

“You know, Kwaku, that I walk with both hands and feet,” Amoakua answered. “You know that when God created me he did not make me straight. Therefore come and lie in the basket and show me how I can do it right.”

Amoakua had planned that as soon as Ananse sat in the basket, he would tie Ananse up. So when Ananse lay in it, Amoakua quickly tied him up tightly. He also decided to carry Kwaku home and kill him; then Ananse would know what hunger was really like! He set off for home. When Kwaku Ananse realised what was happening to him, he started lamenting out loud.

“Amoakua, why don’t you let me down so that I can also do what I showed you?”

“Look here,” Amoakua retorted, “you have tricked all the animals and lured them to their death. I alone am left. I am also taking you home to cut your head off so that you will know what hunger is really like.”

Kwaku Ananse cried and cried and cried. On their way, they came to a pond. While they were crossing it, Ananse suddenly had a great idea. He stared into the water, and then lifted up his voice in song:

*Queenmother Crocodile lying in the depths of the pond,  
Queenmother Crocodile lying in the depths of the pond,  
No animal was able to tie Ananse up ... to tie Ananse up,  
Amoako the pure one has tied Ananse up ... has tied Ananse up,  
Odennee, okudennee, odennee,<sup>11</sup> he has tied Ananse up,  
Odennee, okudennee, odennee, he has tied Ananse up,  
Odennee, okudennee, odennee, oo !*

Immediately, the bottom of the pond shook! Kwaku Ananse lifted up his voice in song again:

*Queenmother Crocodile lying in the depths of the pond,  
Queenmother Crocodile lying in the depths of the pond,  
No animal was able to tie Ananse up ... to tie Ananse up,  
Amoako the pure one has tied Ananse up ... has tied Ananse up,  
Odennee, okudennee, odennee, he has tied Ananse up,  
Odennee, okudennee, odennee, he has tied Ananse up,  
Odennee, okudennee, odennee, oo !*

As if on cue, Crocodile rose out of the water and lay down on the edge of the pond.

“Hey Amoakua, why, what is wrong?” Crocodile asked. “You know that Kwaku Ananse is our leader; why have you tied him up?”

“Nana,<sup>12</sup> Kwaku Ananse has tricked the elephant and all the other animals in the forest and lured them to their deaths,” Amoakua explained. “Now I am the only one left in the bush. By the grace of the Creator, I have succeeded in luring him and tying him up. I was just about to take him home and cut off his head so that he too will feel hunger in the pit of his stomach!”

“Well, you know that I am the queenmother of all the animals,” Crocodile replied. “Since Kwaku has asked me to intercede on his behalf, I ought to be able to help him.”

“Nana, Kwaku Ananse is a very troublesome person,” cautioned Amoakua. “Let me take him away!”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Crocodile assured Amoakua. “Let us give him another chance and see what he will do after this.”

Kwaku Ananse was untied. You should have seen the once-brave man, scared, sweating, and feeling quite miserable! For the help she had given him, Kwaku decided to swear an oath to the queenmother Crocodile.

“Nana, I would like to advise you not to trust Kwaku Ananse,” said Amoakua to Crocodile. “If you are not careful, he will trick you and kill you as he did to all the other animals!”

“Nana, don’t listen to what Amoakua is saying,” Ananse cut in. “I am going now, but I promise that I will return to show my appreciation.”

Kwaku was allowed to leave. In disgrace, he carried his *akotwe* home.

“I have seen Crocodile the Queenmother,” Ananse informed his wife when he got home. “You should see her tail; it would be very good in palm-nut soup!”

“Hey Kwaku,” his wife exclaimed. “Why are there so many welts on your skin?” He did not tell her the truth about what had happened to him. On the day he promised to return to the Queenmother Crocodile, Kwaku Ananse asked his wife to make some white mashed yam with twelve cooked eggs. He was going to call Crocodile and use the food to lure her to her death.

His wife did as he had asked. When she had finished, Ananse set out on his way to lure Crocodile out of the pond, and together with his wife, eat her flesh. He carried the food to the pond, and when he arrived, he started to sing his song:

*Queenmother Crocodile lying in the depths of the pond,  
Queenmother Crocodile lying in the depths of the pond,  
No animal was able to tie Ananse up ... to tie Ananse up,  
Amoako the pure one has tied Ananse up ... has tied Ananse up,  
Odennee, okudennee, odennee, he has tied Ananse up,  
Odennee, okudennee, odennee, he has tied Ananse up,  
Odennee, okudennee, odennee, oo !*

Immediately, the bottom of the pond shook! The crocodile rose out of it.

“Nana, here is the promise I made to you,” said Kwaku Ananse, giving the food to Crocodile. When Crocodile started to eat the food, she first took an egg. Kwaku Ananse waited impatiently for an opportunity to kill her, his knife well-sharpened. He had hidden the knife and was trying to persuade Crocodile to eat more eggs.

“Kwaku, be patient,” Crocodile said to him. “This is your gift to me; whether I eat it myself or give it to my children is really none of your business!”

Kwaku Ananse was very impatient. He desperately wanted Crocodile to pick up another egg, so that he would have the opportunity, in her unguarded state, to cut her up. Meanwhile, Crocodile had caught on to what Kwaku had up his sleeve. They were still arguing over the egg when Kwaku Ananse took out his knife to cut Crocodile. But Crocodile was quicker; she lifted up her tail, brought it down sharply right into Kwaku Ananse, and cut off his head which got itself reattached to his rear!

This is the reason why the spider’s head is attached to his rear, and his rear attached to his head!

## *Tale 2: How divorce came into the world*

(Eno Sikyaena, 9 January 1998, Kwaso)

Today, I am going to show you how divorce came into the world. This is the story.

There was once a woman whose name was Domaa Akua; and she was very beautiful. She was a queenmother. This queenmother caught a very contagious skin disease. This disease was known as *buropete*. Anyone who

had this disease was not allowed to live at home. Rather, a small hut was built some distance from the village, and the afflicted person was quarantined in that tiny settlement.

When the queenmother, Domaa Akua, caught this disease, she was covered with sores from her head to her toes.

“We have to take precautions,” the people said, “otherwise it will spread in this village.” They found a good place about six miles away from the village. They weeded it and built a hut there. (A long time ago, our forefathers called a hut *sese*). They packed all her belongings including her pots and pans and sent them, along with her, to her new place. They lit a fire for her and provided her with all that she would need to dress her sores. Every day, on waking up, this woman would light a fire, boil water, and clean her sores. The elders of the town would also visit her every day to see how she was faring. This continued for some time.

One day Kwaku Ananse set out to look for wild yam. Then he saw flames pushing up smoke in the middle of the forest.

“Ah! Who is this bold person who has chosen to settle in the middle of this thick forest?” he wondered. Kwaku walked on, little by little, into the forest. Suddenly, before him stood a woman who was very beautiful to look at.

“Ei? Why, my good woman?” Kwaku asked her. “What is wrong with you?”

“Anyone who is afflicted by this disease, my good man, is not allowed to live in our village. A place is found for that person to live away from the village. That is why I have come here.”

“A beautiful woman, such as you are?” Kwaku asked. “Tell me, if I take care of you until you are healed, would you marry me?”

“Oh! my lord, I would marry you,” she replied. “As a woman living alone in the middle of the forest, do you think that if God were gracious enough to bring healing to me through you I would refuse your proposal of marriage? Tell me, whose proposal would I accept?”

“I can see that you are agreeable. I have to leave but I would want you to try and look for a gourd. If you do not get it, do not worry. I will look for one and bring it along with me on my return. On second thought, since you cannot return home, who else can bring it to you but I?”

Kwaku Ananse abandoned his search for wild yams and set out to look for the gourd. He walked and walked, looking for the gourd and

some cotton wool. He found it, tore off a piece of cotton wool, and returned to the woman with all these items.

“Whenever you finish rubbing the medicine all over your body, put the used cotton wool in this gourd,” he told the woman.

Every day Kwaku would come and dress the sores and cover them with the medicated cotton wool. In the evening, he would take them off and place them in the gourd.

The gourd was soon full of pieces of used cotton wool, and the woman was completely healed. She was once again her old self, Domaa Akua, the queenmother. Kwaku and the woman continued their relationship; as her husband, he often came to see her.

“Papa, make me a farm,” the woman asked of Kwaku one day.

“I will indeed make you a farm,” Ananse replied. “Why not?” And Kwaku made her a farm.

All the crops on the farm grew well. On market days, the woman would take some foodstuffs from the farm and sell them. She would use some of the money she made from the sales to buy salt and other needs. Then she would return home. This was her usual practice.

She was recognized at the market by a woman called Ankoma, who immediately ran to the chief’s palace.

“Nana!” Ankoma called out.

“Yes,” the chief responded.

“Ei! I have seen Nana Domaa Akua, and she looks more beautiful than ever!”

“Oh, it can’t be true. Since we sent her away about a year ago, we have not been to see her. She must be dead by now, and you come to me talking about these heavy matters!”

“I swear by the sacredness of your foot, Nana, that I saw her!”

“When she comes to the market again, come and call us. When you have positively identified her as the woman, come and call us so that we too can see her and confirm that it is indeed her.”

Ankoma became very vigilant at the market place from then on, looking out for Domaa Akua.

Soon it was market day again, and Domaa Akua was at the market, with her wares arranged ready for sale.

Sales began and the market teemed with people busy with buying and selling. The woman, Ankoma, walked about, on the look-out for Domaa

Akua. Then she saw her sitting by her wares. She broke into a run and returned to the village.

“You did not believe me when I told you that I had seen Domaa Akua,” she told the chief. “She is back again. Come, you have to see her for yourselves.”

“Go with her and confirm what she has told us,” the chief instructed his linguist.<sup>13</sup>

When they got to the market place, Domaa Akua was there indeed, seated by her wares.

“Nana, you are welcome,” the village people said to Domaa Akua, without further ceremony.

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Nana says we should bring you to the palace.”

“Who is going to take care of my wares while you take me to the palace?”

“We will take care of them for you. You go on and listen to what Nana has to say,” the market people assured her.

Domaa Akua left her wares in the care of the market women and set off for the palace.

“We will not allow you to go back to your hamlet,” she was told when greetings had been exchanged at the palace. “We would be lying to you if we were to promise you that we would allow you to return to your hamlet. Your stool<sup>14</sup> is still vacant. Come and occupy it.”

“Ever since you sent me away, I have been assisted by a very generous person who has taken very good care of me. What will happen to me if you do not allow me to return home?”

“We cannot let you go,” they insisted. “We would be deceiving you if we were to promise to let you go.”

No matter what she said, they would not let her go. And since she herself was pleased with the prospect of going back to occupy her stool, she did not put up any further resistance.<sup>15</sup> She would do well to stay. And she did.

Meanwhile, Kwaku waited and waited for his wife’s return. Day after day, he waited. Soon, almost a whole month had passed.

“No,” said Ananse, “I do not understand this. Obirekuo, the cuckoo bird, is my friend. I will go and tell him what has happened. This is a situation I cannot handle by myself. After all I have done for this woman,

how can she deceive me by telling me that she's paying a short visit to her town when, in fact, she is running away?"

So Kwaku Ananse called his friend Obirekuo.

"Obirekuo, judge for yourself what this woman has done. After all that I have suffered for her, she tells me that she will return soon from her visit. See what has happened. I will say nothing for now. However, I want you to understand this, Obirekuo, that I will return her skin disease to her.

"How are you going to do this?" Obirekuo wanted to know.

"Do you really think that she intends to return, after all the time she has been away?" asked Ananse. "I am going to return her disease to her. Obirekuo, come, I want you to accompany me."

"I will go with you," replied Obirekuo. "But tell me, how are you going to return the disease to her? How can that be?"

"We are going to organize ourselves into a performing group to perform at a funeral that I hear will take place in that town. The queenmother is bound to be in attendance by virtue of her very status. There I will get the opportunity to give her back the disease."

The two friends discussed the plan thoroughly.

"From now until it is time for us to go," said Obirekuo after deep thought, "we have to perfect our performance."

"I agree with you," replied Ananse.

They made some drums. Then Ananse called his wife, Aso Yaa, and his children, Ntikuma and Afaseenkyerebua. Obirekuo also called his wives and children together. Then they lifted up their voices in song:

*When first I saw her she was a nonentity ... she looked pitiful.*

*She was a nonentity when I saw her.*

*I told you so, Akua Gyaamaa!*

*I told you so, mm, Akua Gyaamaa!*

*I told you so, mm!*

*The song of the bird Obirekuo sounds like the song of the bird*

*Dankaa.*

*Let her come closer,*

*Then throw it at her!*

*Let her come closer,*

*Then throw it at her!*

*Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!*

“We are now ready to go,” declared Ananse. “I am ready for whatever happens at the funeral.”

Soon it was time to go. Ananse and his friend prepared themselves for the trip to the funeral. Domaa Akua had no idea that Ananse could ever turn up at the palace. The thought never crossed her mind that a person of his inferior standing would attend this funeral! How could he?

The funeral celebration was in progress and the performers had swung into full action.

“Obirekuo, listen carefully to what I am about to tell you,” Ananse told his friend. “While I am singing you have to wait until she gets very close to us before you throw it at her. When you throw it this way, you will see that the disease has returned to her. If she is far away, do not throw it at her; otherwise too many people will be infected. So let her come close to us. Therefore listen carefully as I sing; that way you can throw right on cue, just as we planned it.”

They lifted up their voices in song again:

*When first I saw her she was a nonentity ... she looked pitiful!  
She was a nonentity when I saw her.  
I told you so, ei! ei!  
Akua Gyaamaa ei!  
I told you so, ei! ei!  
Akua Gyaamaa ei!  
I told you so ei! ei!  
The song of the bird Obirekuo sounds like the song of the bird  
Dankaa.  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!*

“Nana, there is a group of performers here whose performance far surpasses the ones you brought here,” the people said. “You have thrown good money away by hiring the others! You have wasted good money! The good performers are down there. You should see them with your own eyes! We do not have words to adequately describe their performance. You should have placed them here by your side. In fact, if you do not go down there to commend them by dancing to their music, they will depart with ill-feelings. Their performance is extraordinary!”

As soon as the performers saw the chiefs coming towards them, the performers lifted up song:

*When I first saw her she looked pitiful!  
She was a nonentity, she looked pitiful  
I told you so!  
Akua Gyaamaa, ei!  
I told you so!  
Akua Gyaamaa ei!  
I told you so!  
The song of the Obirekuo bird sounds like the song of the Dankaa  
bird.  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!*

The chief began to dance. His *Kontihene* (his regent) and the *Asafohene* (the leader of his army) also danced.

“Nana, Queenmother,” the people said, “it is amazing that these men know your name, which very few people use. Even we do not use your name very often. See how they say your name, Akua Gyaamaa, with all its appellations. We would like to suggest that when you escort the chief and his entourage back to their seats, as God is our witness, you too should return and dance to their music. The performance of the men is outstanding!”

The queenmother got ready to dance, holding her cloth and turning it this way and that. She let her cloth fall gracefully from her hands, and she began to dance to the music of the performers:

*When I first saw her she looked pitiful  
When I first saw her she was a nonentity.  
When I first saw her she looked pitiful,  
When I first saw her she was a nonentity.  
I told you so!  
Akua Gyaamaa,  
I told you so!  
Akua Gyaamaa  
I told you so!  
The song of the bird Obirekuo sounds like the song of the bird Dankaa.  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!*

As the queenmother danced, turning this way and that, Obirekuo turned to Kwaku Ananse.

“Kwaku, as for me, I am ready to fly off. I am a little worried about how you can get away. As for me, as soon as I have thrown it, I will take off.”

“Be firm in your resolve,” Ananse told his friend. “Let her come closer. When she gets closer, we can then determine better our get-away plan.”

Then they sang their song again:

*I told you so!  
Akua Gyaamaa ei!  
I told you so!  
Akua Gyaamaa ei!  
I told you so!  
When I first saw her, she looked pitiful,  
When I first saw her, she was a nonentity.*

*When I first saw her, she looked pitiful,  
When I first saw her, she was a nonentity.  
The song of the bird Obirekuo sounds like the song of the bird  
Dankaa.  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!  
Let her come closer,  
Then throw it at her!*

Obirekuo lifted up the gourd of used cotton wool and threw it at her –  
*too!*<sup>16</sup>

“Kwaku Ananse says ‘Take back your disease,’” said Obirekuo, as he threw the gourd at her.

The woman collapsed, and Obirekuo took off. But Kwaku Ananse was grabbed by the throat...

“You this man! What you have done here today in public has put your life in great danger,” the townspeople told Kwaku. “Your brother has fled; but you will not get out of this alive!”

Ananse was firmly grabbed, handcuffed, and sent to the chief’s palace.

“We are going to cut your head off; and your blood will be poured to cleanse our stools because of the crime that you have committed. Never, in this town, have we seen such sacrilege! Who are you that you should infect a prestigious personality such as the queenmother with this disease, during such a public, well-attended event?”

“*Nananom,*”<sup>17</sup> Kwaku Ananse addressed the chiefs, when he had been dragged before them at the palace, “I know that you are going to kill me. However, I beg you in God’s name, to allow me to try and explain to you why the woman should be blamed for what has happened today. When I complete my explanation and you still want to kill me, you can do so.”

Some of the people began to plead for him thus: “Nana, it will be impossible for him to flee. Therefore allow him to explain his relationship to this woman which seems to be at the root of the crime that has been committed in public today. That way, everyone will hear what he has to say. It will be a fair deal. And then if you have to kill him, you can do so.”

“*Okyeame!*” Ananse called out to the chief’s linguist. “Ask Nana whether he has ever seen me in this town.”

“No,” Nana answered.

“Ask the queenmother if she knows me,” Ananse requested.

“Yes, I know you,” the queenmother answered.

“Ask her how she knows me,” instructed Kwaku.

“When I had the contagious skin disease, the chiefs sent me into the forest because they said that if I stayed in town, I would infect other people with it. They built me a small hut and asked me to live in it. This is the man who healed me of my disease and made me well. After that, I came to the market every day to sell my wares. When once, I came to the market, and you sent for me, try as I did, you refused to allow me to go back to my home. As God lives, I cannot say in all honesty that I do not know this man. This is why all this has happened. This is what I have to say.”

“Well, well!” said the elders, now fully appreciative of the matter before them.

“Nana, are you satisfied with the explanation the woman has given to you?” Ananse asked the chiefs.

“Yes, we are,” the chief replied.

“Take her then,” Ananse told them. “I am returning her to you just as you took her to the hut in the forest once. She belongs to you, take her.”

I have shown you how divorce came into the world.

### III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

Every culture possesses this capacity to generate texts, which it uses to produce the types and quantities it feels it needs, both functionally and aesthetically...

Writing in the semiotic sense, which includes all signifying sets of social signs, points to the notion of *texture*, social fabric, web of experienced and accepted constraints, claims of possible imaginative pulsions in a given culture. – Simon Battestini (2000, 361)<sup>18</sup>

Amongst the Akan, public speech remains, to date, circumscribed; strict limitations have been placed on all forms of protest against the decision-makers and the norms they regulate, at all levels of the still-existing “traditional” socio-political structure. This control is being exercised inside the large “family houses” by the family elders (*mpanimfo*); at the political level, whether at the chief’s palace (where major decisions concerning matters of the traditional state are taken), at the chief’s courts (where land and chieftaincy disputes are settled), or at the village square (during funerals or annual festivals), where “communication functionaries,” such as the *akyeam* (chief’s counsellors and speech intermediaries), the *akyerema* (royal drummers), or the *abofɔ* (heralds), have the prerogative of safeguarding their leaders’ public image as well as social peace and harmony.

Nevertheless, social tensions are regularly released during cathartic “anti-structure” rituals such as the Brong *Apoo* festival<sup>19</sup> or the Nzema-Ahanta annual *Kundum* festival. In an organized manner, performers of songs such as the *avudwene* have been participating, over the years, in the continuous production of “a poetry of profound political significance” (Finnegan 1970, 82), so much so that Kofi Agovi considered the *avudwene* singers as true “democratic agents” (1995, 48); their texts, like those of the *Apoo* singing groups, seem to constitute an ongoing discourse on leadership, on sovereignty and power, on freedom of expression, and on accountability.

Akan women’s access to public rhetoric tends to be more restricted than that of men; they were totally forbidden from appearing at public proceedings at the palace during their monthly period of “uncleanness.” This, however, never prevented them from being creative in the expression of their grievances or praises. During funerals, for instance, it has been women’s prerogative to sing dirges (Nketia [1955] 1969) or *nnwonkoro* songs of praise (Anyidoho 1994); the Nzema *ayabomo* maiden songs (Agovi 1989) or the Asante *mmomomme* songs and pantomime dances (Arhin 2000) in support of their men at war constitute well-documented examples of Akan women’s oral poetry. During daily interactions, “textile rhetoric” still serves as a remarkable form of non-verbal expression, which, alongside proverb-creation (*ebebuo*), Akan women resort to in order to project an argument, for instance, in the realm of domestic rivalry/inside a polygamous marriage; proverbial textile prints such as *Ahwene pa nkasa* (“Precious beads are silent”) can be worn by a teasing “senior wife”

who might well feel like proclaiming loud and clear, to the hearing of her co-wives, that “A man is not a pillow upon which to rest one’s head” (Yankah 1995, 83).

The apparently anodyne act of storytelling represents a more subtle and complex instrument at the disposal of any adult member of the Akan community, any time he or she wishes to make a point, in the same fragile, elaborate, and ever-changing manner a spider waves its web; this may well be one reason why the Akan describe tale-telling as *anansesem to* (lit. “to spin a spider’s-web”). Interestingly, the word “text,” as recalled by Battestini, etymologically means “a set of woven ideas”; by analogy, the production of a “text” is, in Textual Semiotics, “made from a limited inventory of selected signs and symbols, proper to one culture, serving as scaffolding during its construction,” which necessarily “aims at testifying or contesting texture”; in this new perspective, a “text” becomes, “against the usual senses of ‘structure’ or ‘appearance’ or ‘disposition of the constituent parts’ of a fabric, an autonomous dynamic entity” (2000, 413). In other words, a tale-text poetically voiced by a gifted member of a community must be perceived as a statement on ever-changing matters of communal relevance.

In this respect, Kwabena Obeng’s and Eno Sikayena’s literary suggestions on gender relations in Asante and, more particularly, on “the Predicament of the Akan Queenmother,” appear as totally opposed. Both storytellers live in regions of Ghana (Brong-Ahafo and Asante) where chieftaincy took roots and continues to flourish; in both stories, Ananse the Trickster and a queenmother are central figures of the plot; yet this is where the similarity ends. A brief overview of each tale will highlight the fact that Kwabena Obeng, the male storyteller, is actually carrying out a literary denial of the institution of female leadership and tackles gender relations just to add a touch of comic relief to his story, while Eno Sikayena, the female storyteller, produces a very committed “monument” of Akan “verbal art,”<sup>20</sup> a feminist apologia on Asante history.

### *Kwaku Ananse and the Queenmother Crocodile*

Kwabena Obeng’s version of this tale is, in many ways, a typical West African “Trickster story” inside which Kwaku Ananse (the male anti-hero) symbolizes the selfish, greedy, and callous member of his community, as

well as the boastful husband and father who ends up being ridiculed and trapped at his own game. The “Trickster” (whose relationship with the human world or animal kingdom remains somehow unclear) will be tricked twice, first by Amoakua, the clever squirrel, who lives on the borderline (*nkwantia*) between the village and the bush (*fukwan*) and has observed the cruel manner in which Ananse-the-Spider was trapping and killing all the animals of the Kingdom (*mmodoma*), one after the other; this is the turning point of the story, for Ananse, in danger of losing his life, then appeals to Crocodile, who, according to the custom of *dzwantoo*,<sup>21</sup> pleads for his release, despite the squirrel’s violent protest:

“Hey Amoakua, why? What is wrong?” Crocodile asked.  
“You know that Kwaku Ananse is our leader; why have you tied him up? ... You know that I am the queenmother of all the animals. Since Kwaku has asked me to intercede on his behalf, I ought to be able to help him.... Let us give him another chance and see what he will do after this.”

The plot moves on with Kwaku playing a trick on the queenmother herself and getting his final punishment: a disgraceful disfigurement of body which would bar him from becoming a chief.

Kwaku Ananse represents a male figure (*barima*) living with his family in a home in the village (*fié*); prototypically, the portrayal of family relations in the story is a mockery of Ananse’s irresponsible acts of bravado and a condemnation of the reprehensible aspects of his character; but it does not, in any pungent manner, question a *status quo* according to which, as the Akan proverbs go:

*Obaa ton ntorowa, na onton atuduro.*

(A woman sells eggplants, and not gunpowder) (Appiah and Appiah 2000, N°96).

*Obaa twa bomma a, etweri barima dan mu.*

(Even if a woman makes a drum, she keeps it in a man’s room)  
(Christaller 1879, N°22).

*Odenkyembemmaa* (Queenmother Crocodile), on the other hand, does not live in any form of royal village set-up as a queenmother “normally” does; although the role of intercessor and of righter of wrongs “she” plays recalls the “motherly” role of an Akan queenmother, “she” acts much more like a water goddess responding to a fervent supplication (Ananse’s songs) than like a royal female ruler, settling a case in her court of justice. One can therefore justifiably conclude that the story-teller, by relegating her to the distant underwater world (*ebunu mu / nsuo asee*), pushes her socio-political existence as a female traditional ruler back into a mythical past.

### *How Divorce Came into the World*

Similar to all folktales around the world, Eno Sikayena’s story is neither dated nor precisely located; yet it is, from the very outset, reminiscent of a “historical” past with which the historians of the Akan have not yet entirely come to terms. Several of its descriptive elements set the mind back to a period of time (from 1500 onwards) when the Akan’s ancestors (*atetefoo*) had already accomplished their slow transition from foraging to sedentarization, from hunting and gathering to farming and gold mining in the dense moist forest areas (Wilks 1993; 2003; 2005).

The early times of Akan village life and chieftaincy would then be the ancient “historical” background during which Domaa Akua, the queenmother, had been quarantined in a *sese* hut, and lived in total isolation because she had contracted a contagious skin disease, referred to as *buropete*.

From a purely structural perspective, Eno Sikayena’s story belongs to the category of “cyclic” tales:<sup>22</sup> it starts and ends with the same clause and this grammatical repetition is indicative of a perfect closure of the cycle – the final situation being apparently “identical” to the initial one.

The main dramatis persona is being introduced, right from the beginning, as *both* a “beautiful woman” (*obaa fefeefe*) and a “queenmother” (*ohemmaa*). The plot will continuously shift from one aspect of her being (womanhood) to the other (royalty associated with sacredness) and the line between the two will keep on narrowing, until the very end, when she – as a human being (*onipa*) – will forever be reduced to the level of social “nothingness” (*adee*, lit. “a thing”), a woman without a husband, a “divorcee.”

Domaa Akua's misery began when she contracted a contagious skin disease (*buropete*), which not only disfigured her but resulted in her being abandoned in the forest, in a place of quarantine (*sese* hut), to die; she was not only endangering the health of the other village dwellers, but also the spiritual survival of her community; she could no more "sit on her ancestral stool" in her "unclean" state. Kwaku Ananse, the ludicrous and very dubious character of Akan tales, comes into play at that very moment, when Domaa Akua's position is at its weakest; they become, for a short time, an eccentric couple, "married" in the broadest cultural sense of the term<sup>23</sup>; but Domaa Akua, probably considering that she has sufficiently paid her so-called "husband and lord" (*wura*) back for having helped to cure her, decides to desert her "home" in the forest and to recover her position as a queenmother. Ananse's frustrations as an abandoned lover lead him to fight for what, in his mind, had become his *bona fide* property – doubtful as this may appear. He refuses to accept that the social disparities between them would, under normal circumstances, never have allowed him to engage in any form of sexual or marital relationship with her. And so the story ends with the queenmother (*ohemmaa*) being paid back for her ingratitude as a woman (*obaa*): Ananse "divorces" (*ogyae aware*) his wife (*ne yere*) and gives her back to the chief and elders of her village, in the same pitiful state (*mmobo mmobo, nkete nkete ...*) in which he had found her in the forest.

The story remains open-ended; the elders' decision concerning their queenmother's illness remains untold. Ananse's trial has introduced a new notion of guilt and it looks like the old order has been profoundly disturbed. A new gender relationship has begun.

In his essay, "Kinship and Marriage among the Asante," Meyer Fortes did underline the tensions inherent in a kinship system such as the Asante where, even though the matrilineal rule of descent remained a dominant principle, both patrilineal and matrilineal affiliations were important (a great number of bonds and claims did arise out of marriage and of fatherhood).<sup>24</sup> He noted the high rate of divorce among the Asante, at the time he was writing (Fortes [1950] 1965), and linked the factor to the strength of the matrilineal ties; he suggested that women could envisage divorce with some amount of serenity since, in Asante,

Divorce usually makes little change in the domestic circumstances of a woman or in her economic situation, nor does it affect her jural status or that of her children. Though it may involve personal distress, it carries no moral stigma and no social penalties. ([1950] 1965, 283)

Fortes was pointing at the “sandy and slippery path” gender relations were bound to move on, inside a system supporting male supremacy, yet in which a husband had the greatest difficulty in keeping his wife or wives under control.

More recent studies have shed new light over the gradual changes in the gender construction among the Akan from the pre-colonial period, through colonial times, up to the present post-colonial age.

Victoria Tashjian, for instance, shows how, because property, in matrilineal Asante, was never joint and spouses did not inherit each other’s property, “conjugal labour” (that is the right for the husband to demand his wife’s participation on his land) gradually became a litigious matter, in particular at the turn of the twentieth century with the rapid expansion of “cash cropping” such as cocoa farming (Tashjian 1996, 207).

Jean Allman addresses the topic of another Akan customary practice – that of *ayerefare* or “adultery compensation,” and tries to establish how this practice had always been, at least in Asante, “about power and subordination: chiefs on commoners, Kumasi over Asante’s periphery, and husbands over wives” (Allman 1996, 56). She describes how this custom slowly but surely drifted away and faded, during the colonial period, under the policy of British Indirect Rule.

Eno Sikayena’s story is gradually taking on many new layers of meaning. Domaa Akua’s illness, the contagious disease that was threatening the community as a whole, can be read as a metaphor of the “social decay” and chaos which, from a male point of view, hit the Akan society from early colonial days onwards – namely the growing rebellion of women.

Domaa Akua’s abandonment takes us into the realm of royalty, for she had not just been quarantined as anyone with her sickness would have been, she had as a matter of fact been left to die. Not only was she being punished as a rebellious woman (the “story inside the story”: her liaison with Kwaku Ananse and its tragic end) but the chief and the elders were

actually trying to “get rid of her” entirely, while the down-trodden of the village community (the “people”) were pulling her back on her stool.

At this level, she symbolically represents an institution: that of the Akan female ruler (*ohemmaa*), the embodiment of female power and authority which, from the period of the British Indirect Rule up to this day, has been continuously suppressed and denied.

#### IV. THE COMPLEXITY OF FEMALE POWER IN THE AKAN STATE AND ITS CONSTANT ACADEMIC AND POLITICAL DENIAL

*In this Chapter unless the context otherwise requires, “chief” means a person, who, hailing from the appropriate family and lineage, has been validly nominated, elected or selected and enstooled, enskinned or installed as a chief or queenmother, in accordance with the relevant customary law and usage. – Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, 1992, chap. xxii, “Chieftaincy.”<sup>25</sup>*

From the early times on, when the Akan had become sedentary in the tropical forest regions at the centre of present-day Ghana to practise agriculture, the founders of the settlements had started organizing their social and political life in a very structured and hierarchical manner.

The Asante became the dominant group during the eighteenth century, when Osei Tutu established the original Asante nation and state, with the help of *Okomfoo* (traditional healer, priest-ideologist) Anokye, ruling it from Kumase; Osei Tutu was the first *Kumasehene* and *Asante-hene* (king of the Asante state). Thereafter, his successor, Opoku Ware I, extended the state through wars of conquest and succeeded in establishing a vast Asante empire or confederacy that covered most of present-day Ghana, from the northern states of Gonja, Mamprusi, and Dagomba to the southern Ga-Adangbe, Fante, and Ewe lands.

In this pre-colonial set-up, the Akan world was divided into structural units, which, at all levels, were governed by traditional leaders (*ahene*, ‘heads’): each *nmanso* (hunting lodge), each *akuraa* (village), each *kuro* (larger settlement, town), each *oman* (state/traditional area) was governed by

an elder (*opanin*): the *odikro* was literally the “owner of a town” and the *omanhene*, the “head of a state” or “traditional area”; a “chief” necessarily originated from the family of the founders of the settlement (the so-called “royals” or *adebye*) and his ancestry could be traced back, through the matrilineal line (*abusua*), to the “royal” female ancestress.

In his classical textbook, *Traditional Rule in Ghana – Past and Present*, Kwame Arhin explains, that, in the Akan traditional set-up,

All the political heads had their female counterparts. The female counterpart of the *Ohene* and *Omanhene* was known as *Ohemaa*. The female counterpart of the *Odikro* was known as *Obaapanyin*. The *Ohemma* or *Obaapanyin* was a female relative of the male office-holder, and could be any of the following to him: a mother, or mother’s sister, a sister, or a mother’s sister’s daughter; a sister’s daughter or a mother’s daughter’s daughter. The *Ohemma* or *Obaapanyin* was supposed to look after women’s affairs, and was a member of the council of her political unit. (Arhin 1985, 17)

Arhin thus posits the view that the translation of *ohemmaa* to “queen-mother” is not accurate.

Arhin’s brief presentation of the chiefs’ “female counterparts” also underlines the fact that, if one may, like Stoeltje, talk of “dual leadership with gender parallelism” in Asante, “the terms *duality* and *parallelism* [certainly] do not imply equality or sameness, but *complementarity*” (Stoeltje 1997, 44) in this cultural context; be that as it may, the terminology used by Arhin to evaluate the level of power of the Akan *ohemmaa* is fraught with some subjectivity which renders most ambiguous our understanding of the female ruler’s status.

Strikingly, in his 2000 article “The role of Yaa Asantewaa in the 1900 Asante War of Resistance,” Arhin does consider historically well-documented examples of “powerful” Asante women who have left eloquent memorials on the sands of time; he concedes that “the Asante could in appropriate circumstances accept female leadership.”

Arhin first remembers Akyaa(wa), the daughter of Okoawia Osei Kwadwo (*Asantehene* 1764–77) who, in 1831, and according to Ivor Wilks, had “blazed a trail” (*oyi kwan*), when she was appointed by the

then *Asantehene Nana Osei Yaw Akoto* (1823–43) as the Head of a diplomatic mission that negotiated the McLean Treaty of 20 April, and a Treaty with the Danes at Christiansborg Castle, on 19 August.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, we read in Wilks’s own chapter this rather revealing final parenthesis:

With the conclusion of the treaties of 1831, Akyaa’s public career was virtually ended. It was an extraordinary invasion of a sphere that was, in Asante, all but totally male dominated. Yet the fundamental role of the Asante woman was to see to the reproduction, not only in a biological but also in a social and economic sense, of her lineage. Akyaa’s descendants commemorate her for this rather than for her brief intrusion in public affairs. (1993, 353)

Arhin further takes his reader back to Sir Francis Fuller’s pages in *A Vanished Dynasty – Ashanti* (1921, 188–89) on “The last (Asante) rising” in which mention is made of how “*Ya Asantiwa*, the Queen-Mother of Ejisu, was asked to head the movement” of rebellion after the incident which took place on 28 March 1900; that day, Sir Frederik Hodgson, the governor of the Gold Coast, on visit to Kumasi, had made a stunning speech, asking for *Sika Dwa Kofi* – the Golden Stool (the most sacred of all Asante symbols of power and authority). Arhin adds that, according to his own informants, when “the [above reported] meeting broke up silently,” this woman of courage, who was “present at the meeting in the absence of her grandson, Afranie, the *Ejisubene* in exile with Nana Prempeh, taunted the Asante rulers, enquiring how they could sit there and listen to all that ‘nonsense,’ and had they been turned into women?” (Arhin 2000, 53). She thereafter became the first woman ever to be appointed *Osahe* (war-leader), commander of the Asante fighting force that went to fight the last battle against the British troops, now celebrated as the “Yaa Asantewaa War.” Rather cautiously, Arhin adds:

Whether or not they were stirred into action by Yaa Asantewaa’s taunts or not ... the leaders of the resistance held a meeting in the evening of the ‘palaver’ in the house of the Gyasawahene, Opoku Mensah, where a resolution was adopted....

... Jealousy among the men may have led them to choose a woman, who had already shown a keenness to defy the British and, perhaps, unusual leadership qualities. (Arhin 2000, 53–54)

Ensnared by the exigencies of his own logic, Arhin ends the article by strongly stating, this time, that “for the Asante [of the pre-colonial period], gender was irrelevant to leadership” (Arhin 2000, 66).

In effect, and despite the occasional reminiscences of “exceptionally powerful women,” the enforcement of a proper gender balance of power in the Akan state is presented as a debatable historical reality in most scholarly accounts; this is the more so since, throughout the colonial period and the post-colonial period, the position of “chiefs,” and particularly that of “queenmothers,” has been undergoing major shifts.

Stoeltje rightly argues that “Queen mothers have been given rather scant attention by scholars and politicians while chiefs and kings have received quite generous notice” (1997, 44). This may be so, as a result of the constant attempt (both in politics, and in male-dominated academia) to suppress the truth about the actual pre-colonial power and authority of the then Akan female rulers (“chiefs”) and to counter their influence by ignoring them in all manner of ways.

Ever since the advent of British Indirect Rule, colonial administrators and conniving male rulers started sensing the subversive pressure queenmothers could potentially exercise and the constant threat to an already difficult and complex prevailing situation they represented. Increasingly, moves were made by commoners – mainly by groups of “young men” or *nkɔwankɔwaa*<sup>27</sup> for the destoolment of government-sponsored or traditionally legitimate but unpopular chiefs; these rebellions were often led through the queenmothers. According to Allman and Tashjian (2000):

One of the most serious of these rebellions against British-recognized chiefs occurred in Agogo in 1917 and witnessed the *ohemaa* (queenmother), Adjua Jiwah, and a group of *nkankɔwaa* “malcontents” calling for the ouster of the recently enstooled Kwabena Tandoh. The “malcontents” argued that Tandoh was not nominated by the queenmother, was not of the stool family, and had incurred serious debt. They also

charged him with “having neglected a cocoa farm made for him by the people,” having “discarded 10 stool-wives after collecting head-money on them,” and a host of other misdeeds.

All to no avail; the queenmother was deposed by the chief commissioner and accused of having been of “relentless, revengeful and vicious disposition” (2000, 21).

In the colonial discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century in Asante, it is apparent that queenmothers were considered as a dangerous force of opposition to be reckoned with. A legal mechanism was therefore put in place to gradually dispose of the institution of female rule. The Ordinance of 1902, aiming at creating structures that could adjudicate “native custom,” recognized native tribunals, alongside the chief commissioner’s and district commissioners’ courts; but it did not recognize the queenmothers’ courts. In 1905, at Chief Commissioner Fuller’s instigation, the government formally recognized the Kumasi Council of Chiefs, thereby restoring some of their power to the chiefs; but not one of its members was a queenmother. Queenmothers were not listed as “chiefs,” nor were their courts recognized in the 1924 Native Jurisdiction Ordinance. The same position of law was taken when the Ashanti Confederacy Council Ordinance of 1935 formalized Indirect Rule under a “restored Ashanti Confederacy” headed by *Asantehene* Agyeman Prempeh II.

It is therefore not surprising to read the astute adjustments made in a short passage on the role of the queenmother in the selection and election of a chief, as part of a document written down for the use of district commissioners and compiled from the *Minutes of the (restored) Ashanti Confederacy Council Meetings (1935–1949)*:

The Queen Mother’s hereditary position as mother to the founder of the Stool entitles her to be treated with considerable respect as she is on this account accorded privileges to which she has no legal right. She is allowed by custom to say that the Stool belongs to her, and this has no doubt been partly responsible for the prevailing impression that her authority in respect of elections is considerable. This is however merely a *polite fiction* and her legal rights with regard to elections are

limited to the right to be consulted as to the eligibility of a candidate. (Matson 1951, 64)<sup>28</sup>

This official and twisted interpretation by Asante chiefs under British Indirect Rule of the position of the Queenmother vis-à-vis the male “stool” contradicts Rattray’s anthropological findings. Rattray’s trusted informants had indicated to him that “the recognized seniority of the woman’s stool [was] no empty courtesy title” and that

Ashanti traditional lore carries us back to the time when the various clans, that were later to be loosely united under one king, were living in isolated, independent groups, owning no common head, but each looking upon the senior woman of the clan, the Queen Mother, who delegated some of her power to her male kinsman, as its head. ([1923] 1969, 219)

In *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*, Kofi Abrefa Busia re-opens the topic of the “seniority of the female stool” and supports Rattray’s observations about the supplementary creation of “male stools”:

It is common belief that in olden days it was women who were chiefs. The traditional histories of Wenchi, Mampong, Juaben, and other Divisions in Ashanti tell of women who were chiefs. But, according to a well-known tradition, when war broke out and they were sent for, they would say “My menstrual period is on (*m’akyima*)” and they could not perform their duties. So, said [the] informant, we asked them to give us men who would be chiefs in their place. That is why the elders ask the queen-mother to nominate a candidate. (Busia 1951, 20)

In the midst of this furore of claims and counter-claims, most sources nevertheless seem prepared to accept the fact that a queenmother’s political and jural functions were, at least in the past, extremely important. The Akan *ohemmaa* is said to have exercised a lot of influence on all decisions made by the enstooled chief; she was the trusted moral authority of her

community and the democratic guarantor of the male ruler's demeanour; through her, he could be kept under check. Her position was essential, even if it could be challenged, for the selection of a new chief; a complex procedure was in place, with precise rules of succession that ensured that the queenmother acted in all fairness and in consultation with the various electoral bodies and the "people."

Nowadays, succession disputes are plaguing the traditional areas of Ghana; this was apparently not the case in nineteenth-century Asante, when it was still the queenmother "who had most to say in the choice to be made" (Rattray [1923] 1969, 82). Not only was she the "foremost authority on the genealogy of the royal matrilineage and hence the final arbiter on who was qualified by blood to be a male ruler," but also, and in the words of Arhin:

... generally, the social conditions of the Akan political communities in the nineteenth century favoured peaceful selection of stool-holders. The towns were small settlements of small populations, whose people had intimate knowledge of themselves. The peoples of a state were connected by the kinds of bond that could have formed the framework of a moral community.... In the intimate, face-to-face societies of the nineteenth century, it was not difficult to estimate public opinion from the village to the state level. An *Ohemma* was in touch with public opinion through her servants, normally drawn from different parts of the political community. And an *Ohemma* could make direct and informal enquiries outside the royal family before going into consultation with her own kinsfolk (Arhin 1985, 34).

Once a male ruler had been chosen, rightly elected, and enstooled, the queenmother was to remain his constant guide and advisor; it was her prerogative to criticize him when he erred, and if she failed to do so, she was held responsible for the chief's misdemeanour. Busia recalls how "Two queen-mothers of Juaben, Ataa Birafo and Afua Kobi, were destooled for not advising their sons (i.e., the chiefs) well" (1951, 19).

Reportedly, a queenmother was also, in olden days, the moral custodian of the women folk in her polity. She participated in the upbringing

of adolescent girls and played a key role in the puberty rites that licensed their adulthood and marriage. She generally exercised a great influence on women, leading them into all kinds of communal and spiritual activities, like cleaning the village in order to cleanse it from evil, or engaging in pantomime dances and gestures such as *mmomomme*<sup>29</sup> or *bontoa*.<sup>30</sup> She, most importantly, exercised jurisdiction over women in her court and this remains an essential role of hers today.

A queenmother, just like her male counterpart, has her own stool and performs sacred rituals connected to the female stool – which is the incarnation of the royal ancestress, whose worthy deeds she must continue. In Asante law and constitution, the *ohemmaa* of a state has her own *ntam* (a formula for invoking a judicial process) and her own court and *akyeame* (spokespersons) who act as prosecutors and judges. But, while the male rulers deal with *amansem* (matters of the state), the female rulers deal with *efiesem* (domestic matters). Describing the jurisdiction of the *Asantehemmaa* (queenmother of Asante), Takyiwaa Manuh therefore equates her role to that of “the protector and enforcer of women’s rights” in her society, in the following words:

The Asantehemmaa’s court is concerned primarily with matters affecting women, principally matrimonial issues of divorce and maintenance; matters arising in the market; and rights to *nfofoa*, fallow land. Marriage matters include divorce proceedings, cases between rivals, adultery of the wife, unfair treatment of a wife by a husband and other domestic and interpersonal matters. Cases between rivals often take the form of one “putting another in fetish,” to use the highly evocative colonial term; or invoking an oath against the other, the consequences of which could be fatal.

... The Asantehemmaa’s dispute settlement roles are two-fold: these are adjudicatory and mediatory, and the latter role is the usual mode in matrimonial issues. This is known as *dwantoo*, in which the Ohemmaa or her nominee acts as a third party to help the parties arrive at a settlement (Manuh 1988, 57).

The 1992 *Constitution of the Republic of Ghana* does include queenmothers in its definition of a “chief,” yet to be an Akan *obemmaa* today remains a predicament. Although queenmothers have now fully regained their “official” existence in contemporary Ghana and are still installed with traditional pageantry in their regions,<sup>31</sup> they are being kept away from major areas of state over which their male “counterparts” rule and draw their income from; the distribution of land, for instance, remains in the hands of chiefs, and land disputes, which attract heavy fines, are settled by the male leaders and their Council of Elders; queenmothers are not represented in the National or Regional Houses of Chiefs, nor are they allowed to participate significantly in local government; in a recent development, the creation of a National House of Queenmothers has been advocated.<sup>32</sup>

How, may one wonder, can the National and Regional Houses of Chiefs accomplish their new constitutional duty – that of “undertaking an evaluation of traditional customs and usages with a view to eliminating those customs and usages that are outmoded and socially harmful”<sup>33</sup> without the direct involvement of queenmothers whose “traditional” mandate includes women and girls? This question is all the more relevant since most inhumane practices to be addressed by the Houses concern women and the girl-child.<sup>34</sup> In contemporary Ghana, psychological, sexual, economic, and physical forms of violence against women still prevail and are often linked to “traditional” worldviews, which tend to make women seem inferior. Gender equity is far from being realized in schools and universities; as a consequence, most leadership positions, in the modern economic and political domains are still encumbered by men.

## V. CONCLUSION

Annie M.D. Lebeuf’s refreshing paper, “The Role of Women in the Political Organization of African Societies,” was meant to rectify the wrong impression that a certain colonial and post-colonial discourse may have created. Her views are salient and unmistakable:

By a habit of thought deeply rooted in the Western mind, women are relegated to the sphere of domestic tasks and

private life, and men alone are considered equal to the task of shouldering the burden of public affairs. This anti-feminist attitude, which has prevented political equality between the sexes from being established in our country until quite recently ... should not allow us to prejudge the manner in which activities are shared between men and women in other cultures, more particularly ... in those of Africa. And we are entitled to ask ourselves if it is not an attitude of this kind that is at the bottom of many erroneous ideas about the very real authority exercised by women in African political systems; and whether it has not contributed, to a certain extent, to the initiation of policies which deprive women of responsibilities which used to be theirs. (Lebeuf 1963, 93)

Rattray's informants made a similar avowal on the matter of Akan female rule when the anthropologist finally managed to break the "taboo." According to Rattray, his informants would express misgivings in sentences like: "you [that is: the white men] have dealings with and recognize only men; we supposed the European considered women of no account, and we know you do not recognize them as we have always done"([1923] 1969, 84).

This survey of contemporary and past sources on the Akan *ohemmaa* has led me to conclude that the responsibility for the distortions in the representation of a queenmother's functions is not to be placed solely on the British colonial authorities. Clearly, and by all accounts, the topic of female rule in Asante has not been discussed in all objectivity.

The gradual obliteration of traces of real female power (if it ever existed) seems to have been done by scholars on Akan chieftaincy, in a manner similar to Kwabena Obeng's literary act of denial. The male storyteller simply relegated the *Odemkyemhemmaa* of his tale to the realm of mythology, thereby erasing all possible analogies one may have wanted to make between her kingdom and the "real" Akan world. Arhin (the learned specialist of *Traditional Rule in Ghana* and its evolution, himself an Akan chief) as well as other scholars mentioned have often tended to relegate the history of female rule to the realm of conjecture, especially when their quoted informants themselves were referring back to some unsubstantiated "traditional lore."

When I started gathering material on the Akan *ohemmaa*, as part of the TAARN Project, I never envisaged the outcome of this investigation; it was the multidisciplinary research I was engaged in that pushed me beyond my initial goal. The fascinating discovery I made of the symbolic meaning of Eno Sikayena's tale in the light of new discoveries in Akan studies (in particular on shifts in gender relations in pre-colonial Asante) encouraged me not to write a mere report on "female leadership among the Akan." My diverse interests urged me to try and understand the puzzling "Predicament of the Akan *Ohemmaa*," which previous researchers on Akan chieftaincy had so blatantly played down.

My new focus was then to show that discrimination against women really started at the dawn of the twentieth century in Asante and that Akan women who had amply proved, throughout official state history, that they could save the nation in times of crisis, stood up to be counted very early in modern times. When economic changes, such as the beginning of cocoa farming, brought about changes in family residence and shifts in relations between spouses to the detriment of married women, Asante women gradually made moves towards financial independence – and "*this* is how divorce started in the world"... it was not men abandoning women in their predicament (the tale's apparent meaning), but rather women leaving their marital home to secure a future for themselves and their children (the hidden meaning of the tale).

In all likelihood, the queenmothers must have led the way, as Domaa Akua did in the story; they certainly supported rebellious women in their marital queries as they were looking down, not only on those husbands who were shamefully giving up their traditional responsibilities towards their wives for financial gain, but also on those male leaders who, similarly, were selling out their political authority for a mere pittance.

*Sikanibere na ede bone nyinaa aba* (Money is at the bottom of all evil), says the Akan proverb: "Money had started its infernal rule" and I am inclined to believe that it was the Akan *ohemmaa solely*, in Asante, who put up a singular combat against all incipient forms of corruption and bribery. And for this she had to pay.

## VI. BROADENING THE PERSPECTIVE

In their introduction to a challenging series of essays dealing with: "*Wicked Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, Dorothy Hodgson and Sheryl McCurdy, the editors, acknowledge that "recent feminist work in African studies has foregrounded issues of gender, power and social change" (2001, 3).

Many researchers have, for instance, underlined the frequent collaboration that took place, in various parts of Africa, between European colonial administrators and African male elders, as they attempted to maintain patriarchal authority over women and young men, through the construction and reinforcement of "customary law" and "traditional authority" (e.g., Chanock. 1982, on the "making" of customary law in Northern Rhodesia). The consultation of colonial archives, for the present paper, confirmed that this was undoubtedly the case in Asante, at the detriment of a previous "order," inside which elite women, such as the "queenmothers," must have played an all-important social and political role.

Works such as Marcia Wright's study on the introduction of maize-growing in Zambia help us understand how environmental and technological changes prompted women and men to renegotiate their marital and household obligations all over the continent. This was also the case in the British Gold Coast, after the abolition of slavery and the prohibition of pawning in 1908 (Allman and Tashjian 2000, 62) when husbands started to rely on their wives' labour, particularly when cocoa farming was introduced and eventually gave rise to the so-called "gender chaos."

The collection of essays gathered by Hodgson and McCurdy tends to prove that, when the "new [colonial] world" began to crumble,

When communities faced particular difficult social or economic circumstances, *wicked women* became the locus of moral panic. Anxious to preserve existing social orders, local and state officials blamed unconventional women for community problems, rather than acknowledge that their own programs and policies created difficulties. Women were construed as the cause rather than the symptom, thereby enabling others

to lay the responsibility for all the scourges of society on their laps. (2001, 14)<sup>35</sup>

Women were, at that point, individually and collectively, challenging dominant authorities: Misty L. Bastian (2001) focuses, for instance, on the women dance groups that confronted powerful Igbo men in colonial Nigeria, while Jean Allman (2001) shows how, amidst the already mentioned turmoil in colonial Asante, “spinsters” (sometimes with the help of men) undermined attempts by chiefs to force them to marry.

Further research also indicates that, as nationalisms emerged in the 1950s, aspiring leaders frequently condemned elite women who “pursued Western ways” and chastised low-class women for their “disrespectful behavior,” urging them all to behave in “African” ways, central to which was, once again, respect for patriarchal authority. Mobutu’s early doctrine of “authenticité” in Zaire is a case in point: he demanded that women, especially the notorious “*femmes libres*” return to their “traditional” roles as obedient wives and good mothers as proof of their “patriotism” and “revolutionary consciousness” (e.g., La Fontaine 1974).

These are some of the new avenues opened by historians and social anthropologists of today. Thanks also to a growing interest in the significance of earlier traces of communal life (artifacts, but also language and oral texts), art historians<sup>36</sup> and archaeologists, together with linguists and specialists of Orature, are trying to reach out further into the past, in order to get to the roots of the puzzling “gender matter” in African societies.

\* \* \* \* \*

In a challenging paper on Nekwaya Loide Shikongo, a prominent woman from “Ovamboland” in northern Namibia and the *oshitewo* (epic poem) she performed in 1953 – where the poetic appraisal of her sons was interwoven with the story of the controversial King Ipumbu yaShilongo, the former ruler of the Uukwambi kingdom who had been deposed by the South African colonial administration in 1932, Heike Becker postulates that “in the case of Ovambo elite women, gender as a social category played a negligible part in the constitution of identity.” This was so [in pre-colonial / pre-Christian times, and especially before the nineteenth century development of militaristic and violent forms of masculinities in

Ovambo societies; “belonging to nobility was far more important for their sense of identity than being a ‘woman’” (2005, 237). This must also have been the case in pre-colonial Akan kingdoms, when they were still run on a purely kinship basis, before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when, according to Emmanuel Acheampong, military expansion “resulted in a stratified [Asante] society rife with tension: a huge class of slaves, commoners subjugated under a military aristocracy, juniors subordinated to elders, and men elevated over women” (Acheampong 1996, 6).

Becker reminds us about the fact that in Ovamboland “of old,” there had been ruling queens, female royals (especially the king’s mother) and other elite women (such as the king’s head-wife) who held extremely powerful and influential positions. She refers us to Märta Salokoski, who argues that the earlier social organization entailed a “duality of male and female power throughout Ovambo societies” (Salokoski 1992, quoted by Becker 2005, 249–50).

Becker finally shows how Christianity and its new discourse on femininity and masculinity, on “legitimate sexuality” through monogamous marriage, and on “housewifisation” continued to shape the “ontological status of gender in post-colonial Namibian discourse on gender and tradition” (Becker 2005, 254). Christianity reinforced the already existing discourse by African male elders and colonial administrators on social, political, and economic power linked to maleness and equated femaleness with domesticity. In this respect, Becker agrees with Ian Fairweather, who argued that many Ovambo nowadays display the notion of *tradition* to express *nostalgia* for a time “when people had proper respect for the church,” instead of a long-vanished pre-Christian time (Fairweather 2003, 287, quoted by Becker 2005, 237).<sup>37</sup>

Domaa Akua’s story, reproduced at the beginning of the present paper, can at this stage be read as a metaphor of a confrontation that probably did not, originally, exist among the “matrilineal” Akan, but was brought about, somewhere in time, through the super-imposition of a “patriarchal Tradition.” Both Loid Shikongo’s epic poem and Eno Sikyena’s folktale illustrate the fact that African women have always used to and continue to practice Orature, beside modern literary genres, in order to exercise various forms of “poetic license,” in particular, to “write” their own “history” of Africa and to change its course.<sup>38</sup>

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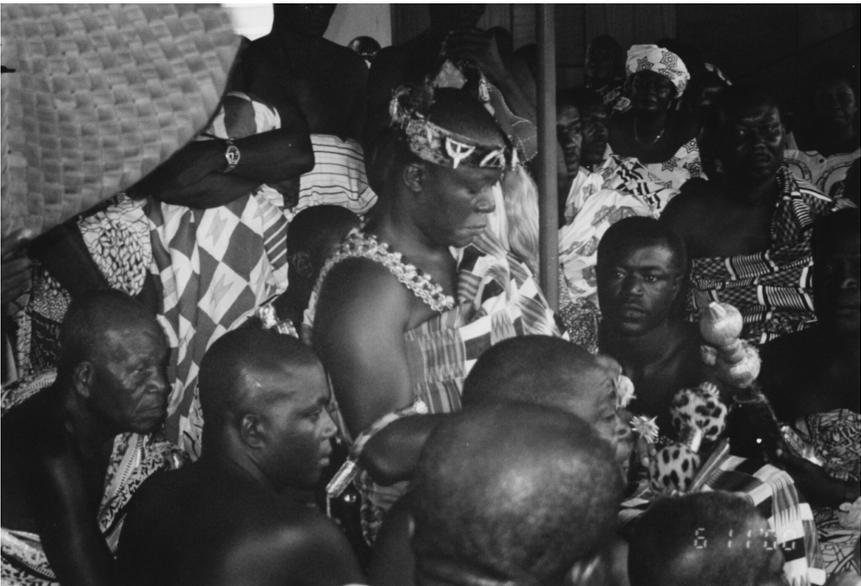


QUEENMOTHER OF WENCHI  
(*Wenchihemmaa*), WHOSE STOOL  
NAME IS *Nanahemmaa Toaa Ampofo  
Tua III*. (PHOTO: PROFESSOR  
CHRISTIANE OWUSU-SARPOG.)



PROFESSOR CHRISTIANE  
OWUSU-SARPONG, GHANA.  
(PHOTO: PROFESSOR CHRIS-  
TIANE OWUSU-SARPONG.)

ASANTE KING OSEI TUTU II  
RECEIVING VISITORS, INCLUD-  
ING HIGH-RANKING POLITICAL  
PARTY LEADERS, AT HIS PALACE  
IN KUMASI, GHANA. (PHOTO:  
DR. DON I. RAY.)



## NOTES

- 1 My translation.
- 2 The Akan people live in most of the coastal and forest areas of Southern and Central Ghana and in the Ivory Coast; in Ghana, they occupy the Ashanti Region and parts of the Eastern, Western, Central, Volta, and Brong-Ahafo regions. According to Florence Dolphyne, the word “Akan” has also, since the 1950s, been used in Ghana to refer to the language whose dialects include Fante, Akwapem, Asante, Bron, Wasa, Agona, Akyem, Kwahu, and Gomua; the Akan people, living along the Ivorian boarder, have dialects of the Bia language in common with their neighbours, such as Ahanta, Sehwi, Aowin, and Nzema (Southern Bia), and, along the Togolese boarder, Chakosi (Northern Bia). See Dolphyne (1988) and Kropp-Dakubu (1988). See also my 2003 chapter in Ray and Ready (2003) for a discussion of aspects of Akan traditional leadership and its relationship to the post-colonial state.
- 3 This fieldwork was conducted while I was at the Department of Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, within the framework of two courses I taught: “Introduction to the Collection and Study of African Oral Literature Texts” (M.A. Program in Comparative Literature) and “Introduction to Creative Writing” (Undergraduate Final Year Course).
- 4 The first tale, “Kwaku Ananse and the Queenmother Crocodile,” by Kwabena Obeng of Bekyem, was recorded on 14 January 1996 by Lot Agyei-Kye, translated from Akan into English by Frederika Dadson and into French by myself: Owusu-Sarpong (1998), 31–37. The second tale, “How divorce came into the world,” by Eno Sikayena of Kwaso, was recorded on 9 January 1998 by Lot Agyei-Kye, translated into English by Frederika Dadson and into French by myself: Owusu-Sarpong (2001), 151–59.
- 5 WWA = *Women Writing Africa*, a project of the Feminist Press at the City University of New York, funded by the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, and directed by Florence Howe. TAARN = *Traditional Authority Applied Research Network*, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, and directed by Donald I. Ray.
- 6 Captain R.S. Rattray (1881–1938) played a significant role in the development of British anthropology. After having learnt a number of African languages, he joined the colonial service in the Gold Coast and was the first ever to be appointed government anthropologist in an African colony; his official appointment was to help government to “understand the natives.” His books on the Asante traditions (laws, customs, and oral literature) remain classics of the great age of anthropology. Despite the suspicion still harboured by some researchers today that he was part

- of the conspiracy “to keep the Black man in his place,” it seems that (and in Noel Machin’s words) Rattray was keen “to let Westerners know that pre-colonial Africans had not been mindless savages, and to let modern Africans know that an intelligent sense of continuity with his past would enrich the future” (Machin 1998, Preface).
- 7 ... who had been referred to by Mary Kingsley (whom Rattray quotes) as: “The old woman you may see crouching behind him [the chief], or whom you may not see at all, but who is with him all the same, and says, ‘Do not listen to the white man, it is bad for you.’”
  - 8 Busia, for instance, writes that “Rattray was the first to point out how important the queenmother’s position was in Ashanti” (1951, 19).
  - 9 Bakhtine’s fundamental theory of “dialogism” to which the concept of “social discourse” is connected is focused on the idea that culture, or even existence itself, is inherently and actively “responsive,” involving individuals acting at a particular point in time and space, in reaction to what has gone on before and in expectation of what is to follow (see, for instance, Bakhtine 1986, and Peytard 1995).
  - 10 My translation.
  - 11 *Odennee, okudennee* ... are onomatopoeic words; they introduce rhythm and life and, at the same time, help to underline a moment of suspense in the plot.
  - 12 *Nana* is used as the title for a male or a female traditional ruler. It also serves as a more general form of address, used by a speaker who intends to show respect for an elderly person, in particular a child for his grandparent.
  - 13 “Linguist” has been commonly used since colonial days to translate the Akan word *okyeame*, referring to the traditional ruler’s counsellor and speech intermediary. See Yankah (1995) for a comprehensive study of the *Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory*.
  - 14 When an Akan traditional ruler appears in public, he sits on a wooden stool, most beautifully carved and ornamented. Special symbolic designs give each chief’s stool (*obene dwa*) its name. Among all royal insignia, the stool of the founder of the state on which he used to sit to deal with the affairs of his people was set aside to be “recognized as the shrine of the spirit of the ‘originator’ and therefore as a symbol of the ‘soul’ of the people.” (Adu 1949, 7). When elected into his office, a new chief or queenmother is “enstooled” (symbolically placed on top of the ‘originator’s’ stool); but, should he be considered an unworthy ruler, a process of “destoolment” then takes place. The word “stool” (*akonwa*) has a twofold meaning: it refers both to the wooden object and to the office of the chief or queenmother who sits on it. The Akan thus also talk of “stool money,” of “stool farm,” of “stool land” (Sarpong 1971, 8).
  - 15 This sentence was recast to tally entirely with the Twi original.
  - 16 Akan storytellers are fond of onomatopoeic expressions such as *tool!*

- At this point of her performance, Eno Sikayena used it to emphasize the swiftness with which the gourd was thrown at Akua Gyama.
- 17 *Nananom*, plural form of *Nana*; see note 13.
  - 18 Emphasis added.
  - 19 See Rattray ([1923] 1969, chap. 15); Turner (1977, 178–81); and Owusu-Sarpong (2000, 113–16).
  - 20 The word “monument” (vs. “document”) is used according to Zumthor’s redefinition of Literature (1983) and “verbal art” is used as in Bauman and Babcock (1984).
  - 21 *Dwantoa* = *dwane* (to flee, to run away); *dwanetoo* / *dwantoo* (a place of refuge). In the past, criminals about to be taken to the chief’s court for trial could escape the death penalty by seeking refuge at the queenmother’s palace; it was also the queenmother’s “motherly” role to plead for forgiveness, whenever someone was taken on by another member of the community for ill-doing.
  - 22 See Paulme’s structural classification of African folktales (1978).
  - 23 In pre-colonial times, according to Rattray ([1929] 1969, 22–32), Akans used to distinguish between various forms of “marriages”: 1. *adehye awadee* (or legal “marriage between a free man and a free woman”); 2. *afona awadee* (or marriage between a “free” man and a “slave”); 3. *awowa awadee* (or marriage with a “pawn”); 4. *ayete* (or sororate); *kuna awadee* (or marriage with a widow, by the heir of the deceased); 5. *mpeña awadee* (lit. “the mating of lovers” without any formal marriage ceremony or *aseda* custom). In the tale, Ananse’s relationship with Aso Yaa comes under the first category and his casual arrangement with Doma Akua under the last; both women are nevertheless called by the same generic name – *yere* or “wife.” Note that polygamy, until recently, was the norm but that, nowadays, although the *aseda* custom is still performed, most weddings – especially amongst town folks, are conducted in a Westernized fashion (town hall and church).
  - 24 See Akan notions such as *ntamoba* and *ntoro*, for instance, which “used to be central to the definition of fathering for previous generations” and which, by the early years of the twentieth century, had nearly disappeared with transformations in childrearing, care, and paternal authority in Allman and Tashjian (2000, 97–105).
  - 25 Emphasis added.
  - 26 See Wilks (1993, 329–69).
  - 27 On *nkwankwaa* or “young men” associations, see McCaskie (1998).
  - 28 Emphasis added.
  - 29 *Mmomomme twe*: pantomime dances and dirges in support of the men at war. “It is unclear,” according to Arhin, “whether the dances and songs were expected to have magico-religious effects on the enemy. But they had the practical effect of shaming potential war-dodgers known as *kosankobi* into joining the war” (2000, 65).
  - 30 *Bontoa*: symbolic seizing of arms by a woman of high status, “as an exam-

ple to the males, in order to arouse their sense of honour and sharpen their martial ardour” (Arhin 2000, 65).

- 31 See newspaper articles such as “Dokua new Okyenhemmaa,” in *The Weekend Statesman*, 28 April–4 May 2000.
- 32 See, for instance, “Chiefs urged to respect Constitution,” in *The Pioneer*, Tuesday, 8 May 2001, or “National House of Queenmothers advocated,” in *The Ghanaian Times*, Monday, 13 January 2003.
- 33 *Constitution of the Republic of Ghana*, 1992, 272, b) & c).
- 34 See Coker-Appiah and Cusack (1999).
- 35 Emphasis added.
- 36 The Musée Dapper, a French museum entirely dedicated to African

Art in Paris, is about to launch an exhibition entitled *FEMMES* (October 2008). In a chapter I am contributing to the catalogue, “Le pouvoir de la femme et les femmes de pouvoir asante (Ghana),” I am taking the matter of “powerful women” a step further than in the present paper, for instance, by looking at artifacts such as the terracotta funerary heads of Akan elite women, produced by women potters of olden days.

- 37 Emphasis added.
- 38 See the series of anthologies published by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York: *Women Writing Africa* (2003), *The Southern Region* (2005), *West Africa and the Sabel* (2007) *The Eastern Region* (2007), and *The Northern Region* (2008).

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