

A NOTE ON RESEARCH IN PROGRESS: "WOMEN IN SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC CHANGE"

By

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In November of 1975, I began social anthropological research work on the economic activities and life situations of rural Akan women in Ghana. The research project is one of five similar area projects included in a wider comparative project at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm, Sweden. The projects have a shared methodological framework, which aims ultimately at generating hypotheses on the nature and bases of women's participation in social and economic life in five countries in Africa, Europe, and Latin America. The area project in Ghana has been granted affiliation with the Institute of African Studies, Legon, and has received the aid and cooperation of several researchers from that and other departments at the University of Ghana.

The relative lack of social scientific research material on the roles and activities of women in Ghana, as in other West African societies, has begun to be corrected to a certain extent in recent years. However, attention has primarily been directed to only very few categories of West African women. One of these categories is the most visible one of women as traders. Another category that has only recently received the attention of researchers is comprised of salaried urban women and women belonging to the educated elite in West African societies. Yet another category of women which is at least as economically important as trading women, and certainly more numerically significant than the elite, educated category of

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women, has nonetheless received far less attention than it deserves or is required by the current urgent socio-economic state of affairs characteristic of most countries, the economies of which are based on non-industrialized agricultural production. This category is made up of rural women, almost all of whom are actively engaged in agriculture or in other primary economic activities such as fishing and gathering.

The present project is an attempt to contribute to the construction of a sound basis for much-needed further research by extensively mapping out the constructs of social and economic realities for a small number of women in Ghana. It is to be noted that this research is not for the purpose of validating or refuting any pre-formulated hypothesis or theory concerning women's roles in Ghana's social and economic systems, but aims at the generation of grounded hypotheses from field data, by identifying empirical areas of behaviour and attitude in terms of which the life situations of the women studied are patterned.

This progress report is merely an attempt to systematize and document my research activities and to order some of the thoughts and ideas I have about the research at this stage in my work. As such, and because research is still in progress, any, indeed all, of the ideas expressed here must be considered as inconclusive, probably subject to modification, and in any event incomplete.

In addition to perusal of literature and other archival documents relevant to different aspects of the research topic, active field research has been started in a rural town of about 4,000 inhabitants near Dormaa-Ahenkro in western Brong-Ahafo. The population is almost entirely Dormaa-Akan, descendants of a group of emigrants from Akwamu, who left the Eastern Region about three-and-a-half centuries ago, and those they incorporated on the way to Dormaa

District. The first two months in the field were spent in conducting a census survey in one of the four military-cum-descent determined "quarters" of the town (and incidentally the one in which I am resident when in the town) to obtain basic factual information about occupational structure for men and women, the range of economic activities for all inhabitants above the age of 5 years, the extent of formal education, fertility, residence patterns, marital obligations, marital careers, polygyny, property and its acquisition (of immoveable, and moveable but durable items), land use, physical mobility patterns, kinship networks, kinship obligations, female-female relationships, male-female relationships, and use of household and more public space by men and women. This quarter contains 34 structures, 42 compounds and about 600 inhabitants. Number of "households" is more difficult to determine as I shall return to below.

Remaining field time has been and continues to be spent in completing and correcting details of information elicited from the initial census survey, collecting individual life-phase histories, and the collection of ethnographic data on the town, Doma District, and the district, regional, and national economic, political and social systems, as well as the international economic structure in so far as it affects the movements, ideas, and possibilities of the town's inhabitants, for example in the organization of cocoa production and marketing, the agricultural production of foodstuffs, and the realisation of personal ambitions.

In spite of the above-mentioned reservations and the fact that compilation and analysis of quantitative data from the initial census survey is as yet incomplete, it is yet possible to state here some of the indications I have thus far perceived in my data which may be of interest to others. With regard to occupational structures for

men and women, and to range of economic activities, there is a clear indication that the variety of goods - service - or cash income-bringing activity is greater for men than for women, i.e. they have more to choose from, and that the range of such economic activity at any one time is greater but less constant and reliable, with each giving smaller yields for the individual woman than for the individual man. This statement requires further explanation. Whether in response to "what work do you do?" or to more explicit enumerated questions as to how they satisfied 8 needs which seem to be basic to Ghanaian society in general, and to the Akan and the town culture in particular (see below), men were able to reply cocoa farmer, farmer of foodstuffs, poultry farmer, palm-wine tapper, fitter, store-keeper, carpenter, labourer on an agricultural plantation, school teacher, driver, driver's mate, revenue officer, clerks in various district offices, policeman, soldier, weaver, mason, kola buyer, apprentices of various sorts, as well as holder of numerous traditional and religious titled offices, etc., either solely, or more often, in addition to their activities. In response to the general question "what work do you do?", women often replied "menye hwee". Nothing. Although in response to how they satisfied their needs for (1) food, (2) cloth and more expensive items of jewellery, (3) cash, (4) medicine, (5) meeting funeral expenses, (6) tools, (7) school fees for offspring, and (8) "kete-kete" or miscellaneous small but necessary items such as soaps, pomades, talcum powder, razor blades, chewing sticks, sponges, hair-plaiting thread, footwear, costume jewellery, head-kerchiefs, storage boxes for personal belongings, blouses, make-up, lamps or candles, towels, kerosene, etc.¹ they were of course able to give answers which more closely approximated their almost ceaseless activity and labour. Women were able to reply farmer, seamstress, marginal or sometime trader, collector (of firewood, snails, fruits and non-cultivated food items, etc.), palm-wine seller, in addition

to farming and domestic activities, with most women combining most of these activities almost constantly. In addition adult women received material and cash money aid from matrikin, husbands, sometimes female relatives of husbands, and children to a greater extent than adult men. Women still residing in the town were never once able to give a salaried position of whatever kind as one of their occupations, though for a few absent female kin who had migrated to more urban settings, vague reference was made to the effect that they were working in some kind of salaried position. Most female migrants seem to have left "to go with" their husbands, or for young girls (as well as young boys) under some fostering arrangement. A few adolescent girls were away being fostered and serving as maidservants to older female, both kin and non-kin.

Males were on the whole more highly formally educated than women, although tentatively, reservation is made here for traditional education in terms of expertise, training and skills not acquired in organized school form. Boys had a lower school interruption rate than girls. I am as yet unable to say anything about the quality of formal schooling females and males receive. Fertility was in general found to be rather high, being near the national average of 6+ children (live births) per woman ever having given birth. An interesting point is that there is a slight indication that women having children seem to be slightly more likely to have been given a share of land or of a cocoa farm by husbands than women without children, though I am as yet unable to say anything about the significance of number of children or the sex of those children to immoveable property acquisition by means of gifts.

As regards sleeping arrangements, men most often had an entire room to themselves, married men invariably so, sleeping there alone except when visited by their wives. Women whether married or not most often slept together with a number of other women and young children.

Both older men and older women had a number of small children and young people sleeping with them. Young unmarried men sometimes shared rooms with other young unmarried men. "Male" rooms were decidedly less congested than "female" rooms. Residence for presently married persons was mostly duolocal except for the considerable muslim component (whether polygynous or not, and whether Akan or not) of the survey for those staying mostly in the town. Although it seems that for those staying part or much of the time in nearby and associated farming villages, the tendency is for monogamously married husband and wife to co-reside while at village even if they live duolocally in the town. I have as yet little information on residence at village for polygynously married persons. Strong kinship ties, polygyny, lack of places for a potentially neolocal couple to move to in a setting where houses are mostly family-owned and family-disposed structures, lack of funds on the part of the man to pay rent for a new place to live even if there were any, and habit, all make duolocality the most feasible residential marital arrangement. In the few cases in which a man and his wife or wives (the latter was exhibited by muslims only) co-resided in the same compound, fewer still were noted in which man and wife actually occupied the same room on a full-time basis. Interestingly, although muslims when married invariably co-resided in the same compound whether polygynously married or not, few of the married couples who co-resided in the same room were muslim.

Polygyny, either in its more orthodox form or in its just as institutionalized but less formalised variants of "friendships" and "outside wives" can be said to be nearly ubiquitous, with formalized polygynous marriages about half of all present marriages. In addition, the number of socially-recognized and socially valid "outside" marital alliances for which incomplete or no marriage ceremonies were performed, brings the total of actual "formalized" polygynous marriages somewhat higher. Both men and women who were presently or

ever had been married, commonly had histories of several marriages. Men, once married, tend to remain in a married state, with intervals between different wives being short or non-existent (due to polygyny), whereas women commonly exhibited marital careers which contained one or more longer intervals of being unmarried between successive unions. There is an indication that older men and women return to an unmarried state, though this tendency is decidedly less marked for men than for women. In any case, I found no case of an older man having to fend for himself whereas there are several of older women having to do so.

Women did not inherit wealth in property in land and houses and titled offices as often as men, though as regards rooms in houses distribution by sex is more even. When women did acquire immoveable property in land, houses and rooms in houses through inheritance, they did so primarily from other women as mothers, mothers' sisters, and own sisters, and occasionally from fathers. However, for immoveable property that was not self-acquired, women seem usually to have had to rely on the goodwill of husbands or male matrikin, who granted them such property as gifts, or as a token of thanks for long and faithful service and support instead of remuneration or rightful gain through inheritance. Men on the whole possessed more self-acquired property than women in terms of immoveable property, and moveable but durable property, though this statement is qualified, for women's self-acquired property was also generally different as to kind from men's self-acquired property. Cultural values temporarily aside, men's self-acquired property generally had a greater money-exchange value than women's.

There does not seem to be sexual segregation in terms of type of farm worked as has been noted by researchers in some other areas, as women here are engaged in both food farming and cocoa farming.

However, several points are worth noting here. For women, food crops are often cash crops as well. Women as wives and daughters are often the primary, if not the only, source of labour for their husbands and parents, and are often remunerated with food crops which they consume or sell for cash. Also, few men farm only food-stuffs, whereas many women do so. The number of men who own usufruct rights to land is far larger than the number of women who do so, and the size of male holdings in land exceeds that of female holdings, although the proportion of women in farming is greater than the corresponding proportion of men. Women also tend to continue to farm longer than men, indeed it is not uncommon for older women in their seventies to go to farm more frequently than either men (of any age) or younger women, and to remain at farm for longer hours. The return for male agricultural labour seems to be more tangible and greater than for women who often contribute their labour on farms for little and/or delayed remuneration. Women in cocoa farming usually work on land that is not their own, and women are most often dependent upon their husbands or occasionally their male matrikin, for the establishment of their own properties in land for both food and cocoa production. Men inherit land as has been noted above, or they receive a share from fathers before his death, or they purchase or hire usufruct rights to land. Women mostly receive land as gifts from husbands, from mothers or other female matrikin, or they have "gone to beg" for usufruct rights, on the understanding that they can be "sacked" from the land whenever the owner decides he needs it. Both men and women also farm on an abusa sharecropping basis, for married couples sometimes as a unit. Few hire labourers to help them work their land. Of those hiring labourers, women hiring in their own right were by far in the minority.

The amount and kind of kinship and domestic obligations women are subject to, appear to restrict their physical mobility to a greater degree than corresponding obligations do for men. Both men and women seem to have considerable kinship obligations which for married persons reflects on prestation on behalf of one another. For men these obligations tend to be realized in terms of material contributions, for women in terms of time and labour input.

Both female-female and male-female relationships seem to be fraught with tension and speculation, the former primarily because of competition, the latter because of sexuality, either potential or realized. Finally, I find that women spend most of their waking time either on their farms, within or in close proximity to enclosed compounds - either their own or someone ~~elses~~ - or going to or coming from these places, while men appear only sporadically within compounds, and spend most of their waking time either on their farms, at the crossroads, on the verandahs facing the main street, in the main street itself, on the benches of the palm-wine dispensary in the main public square outside the palace, or going to or coming from these places.

I deem it necessary to say an additional word about residential or "staying" arrangements in the town. For purposes of the census survey, information was collected by visiting each compound within a structure, and after asking about the person who was in charge of the house (fie wura) who was sometimes different from the nominal house-owner, and sometimes different again from the person responsible for paying the annual house revenue, I asked - taking room by room - about the people sleeping in the room concerned, and the person (or persons) to whom the room "belonged" - i.e. the person who had the right to decide how the room was to be disposed of in the event of his or her absence; the person who had the right to keep the key and take it with her or him on going out of the compound. Each interview was completed

by asking how those who usually slept in the compound actually used the compound: for sleeping, for cooking, for eating, for bathing, "for everything else", i.e. for storage of personal items, for passing time not spent in any specific work activity. "Use" patterns took all possible permutations, especially for many women who did more things in more different places than most men, which makes it difficult to say anything about the structure of "households" at this point. Most often a woman was considered to be a member of her mother's household or compound, or of the household or compound in which she cooked. But as this was sometimes due to lack of kitchen space in another compound, this does not say very much. Most often, although compound members shared the compound for sleeping purposes only, food-provision and food-consumption networks could be, and often were, different for each member. Quite possibly, "household" either as an empirical or an analytical concept may not be particularly relevant just here. Commonly women (who were the more mobile as regards nightly conjugal visiting), usually slept in one compound, but cooked, ate, and bathed in another, or slept in one compound (maternal) cooked in another, and ate and bathed and "stayed" in yet another compound, or slept and cooked and bathed in one compound but ate and "stayed" in another. Muslim "households" can be said to be more easily defined in that most often, women performed most of their activities in a single compound, and in those cases where they cooked elsewhere because of lack of adequate kitchen space, cooking was the only activity performed outside of the "sleeping" compound. Women most often cooked for and sent food to at least 2 and sometimes more different compounds, to husbands and matrilkin who ate in different compounds, and many men received food from 2 or 3 and sometimes more different hearths - from wives, sisters, mothers, and wives - or sisters-of-friends.

As regards census interview mechanics, census interviews were conducted in Twi, by myself for simpler questions, and with the help of two accompanying assistants, 1 male, 1 female, when my own linguistic Twi threshold was exceeded and explanations in answers to questions became intricate and detailed. We were refused entrance to one structure. Data for two others has yet to be completed.

It might perhaps be in order to say a cautious word here about the relative situations of men and women in the town over time from the data already collected. Again, indications perceived are necessarily somewhat speculative at this stage. Nevertheless, I feel that the data collected so far is sound enough to permit careful speculation. Further research including attitudinal and impressional as well as factual responses, complemented by my own observations will hopefully yield more reliable information as to the extent to which these indications obtain.

The northern half of Dormaa District is populated primarily by the descendants of a group of emigrants, the core of which left Akwamufie near Akosombo in the Eastern Region some three or four centuries ago after a succession dispute. Their migratory route took them over Nyanawase near Nsawam, Kentenkreso near Koforidua Kumawu, Asumegya, Suntreso near Kumasi, Bomaa, Duayaw Nkwanta, up to Bondouku in Gyaman, Ivory Coast, back to Chiraa, Abesim and then finally to Dormaa District - first to Wamfie where they met a group of migrant Denkyira, to Ammasu and to Dormaa-Ahenkro (Pamu). At all these major stopping places, new followers were incorporated and old ones were left behind. Departure from most places seems to have been precipitate due to power conflicts and civil wars between constant realigning Akan sub-groups. In addition, the northwestern portion of Dormaa District (now Pamu-Berekum Forest Reserve) was occupied by an independent group of Asensu or Asunsu Akan migrants from Ivory Coast

in the late 17th Century. For most of its migration, the Domaas group seems to have either been under the enforced overlordship of Asante or in the process of rebelling against that overlordship. Relations between the Domaas and Asante seem to have vacillated between mutually respectful if somewhat reluctant and suspicious association, and outright conflict. Protected by their reputation of being fierce Akwamu warriors, and by a strong military organization, the Domaas claim that they were never really beaten by Asante and chose to quit the battlefields with honour, fighting forces and ruling clans as intact as possible whenever they were betrayed or it seemed as if Asante military might temporarily had gained ascendancy. Hence the long migration. Although they of course share much with other Akan sub-groups, notably the Ashanti, the Akuapem and the Brong, the Domaas emphasize the fact that their common history gives them a certain degree of cultural distinctness.

The organization of most towns in Northern Domaas District, as in most other Akan areas, still reflects a military arrangement, with the chief's palace at the crossroads and his wing chiefs and lieutenants immediately beyond and surrounding it (so that they could be quickly summoned in time of need) and with the remainder of the populace at the periphery. In addition, there were guard outposts and hunting camps beyond settlement borders. This military organization reflected an essentially and almost exclusively male political power structure, and sexual segregation of other roles and duties was subsequently nearly complete in other aspects of life as well. Men and women occupied mutually exclusive universes which seem nonetheless to have been essentially complementary to one another instead of one being superordinate to the other. Although most men were probably not actively engaged in war most of the time, it was probably not a very secure time, especially for the male rulers, who especially were

susceptible to being killed. It may well be that it was during these centuries that the matrilineal principle received its greatest solidifying impetus. Mothers and sisters of chiefs might have had a slightly better chance of surviving holocausts, and no matter what horrors they were subjected to in times of war, offspring would invariably be royal, and property would not be alienated. Titled offices were military offices and as such were not the property of women. The only exceptions were of course the Queen Mother and the female lineage elder, reminders that although kings and chiefs were also commanders-in-chief of great armies, they owed their kingship and offices to descent. So political power, already patriarchic, nepotistic and theocratic, because it had also become largely indistinguishable from military power, was also largely unobtainable by women.

As far as economic activity is concerned, it seems women work most of the economic system, certainly locally, and they also made up a considerable portion of those involved in long-distance trade. Markets were manned more than they were womanned - the influx of women who traded in commodities other than foodstuffs or crafts in markets being a consequence of colonialism. And, as men traded in such items as gold and slaves and more costly and prestigious items, no doubt greater profits were realized by men as a group than by women on the economic front was greatly augmented by the bargaining power they also possessed, in terms of kinship, as keys to political power for men and as determinants of social rights and rural status for everyone. The control of women's labour seems to have been largely in the hands of their families prior to marriage, and in the hands of husbands subsequent to marriage, but as their activities were absolutely vital to the functioning of the community and their well-being was to be assured, daughters and wives were provided as independent means of taking care of themselves. Rights

in land were accorded to women on an equal basis with their brothers, and because agriculture and collecting activities were almost exclusively in the hands of women, they also were provided sufficient land to work by their husbands upon marriage.

The conception of "traditional" (pre-colonial) Akan society being made up of a group of individuals who were all, except for the chiefs, basically equal in terms of citizenship and social and political rights in an orgy of communalism is subject to some modification I find. There were rulers, commoners, and slaves, differentiated from one another and among themselves by definitions of economic functions and possession of political power. While this society was by no means a class-based society in Euro-American terms, it was nonetheless very well stratified. And while no condition seems to have been conceived of as permanent, and gifted and hard-working individuals met few barriers to their upward and outward strivings, antecedents were and are nevertheless still meticulously kept tract of. This was and is particularly so in the case of women from whom descent is reckoned. The 17th, 18th and 19th centuries saw the incorporation of many persons of servant and slave status into Doman society, as in other Akan groups. Men served as labourers on the land (remember Akan men did not work the land), sometimes even being granted caretakership of considerable parcels of land, as well as being given the sisters of their masters as wives in return for services rendered and in order to keep landed property from being alienated. Male servants also represented their masters in the market-places. Women served as domestic servants and became wives and mothers of Akan men.

Differentiation between women in terms of ancestry is still tangible, and even visible among older women in the town, with many older female indigenes not having pierced ears while older females

who started their history in the town as servants or slaves have holes in their ears. A common theme in succession and inheritance disputes in the town turns on the alleged illegitimacy of one of the disputants claims because of his reputed slave origins. All this is leading up to a statement of the observation that - ideals of Rousseauian romanticism to the contrary - everybody was not equal in traditional Dormaa Akan society, nor even approximately so as regards exercise of political power and in terms of social rights and popular conception. Economic power on the other hand was more within the reach of most people and there seems to be sound reason for believing that approximate equality in economic terms was indeed realized. Women as a group exhibited great differences among themselves (as did men) both conceptually and in terms of social rights by birth. They were on the whole, however, at least as economically assertive and influential - if indeed not slightly more so, and recognised as such - than men as a group. On the other hand, in terms of authority and exercise of political power, women as a group were decidedly subordinate to men as a group.

And what about now? Well, succinctly put, women in the town seem to be losing ground in terms of power, and on more fronts than previously, as currently their traditional economic assertiveness is greatly curtailed, and the degree of independent economic activity is less. Another main trump card, reliance on matrikin, is made more difficult by hard economic times faced by almost everybody these days. Whereas women used to receive only supplementary or supportive aid from husbands and matrikin, they are now most often very definitely supported and almost completely economically dependent on men and matrikin to a degree quite distressing to themselves. The independent incomes which women previously could expect to keep for themselves, they are now forced to contribute to increasingly deficient food and domestic budgets.

Schematically, I would say that women's general situation, as a consequence of their weakened economic situation, can be represented as relative to men's thusly:

	<u>Traditionally</u>	<u>Now</u>
Economically	same to greater	weaker
Politically:	weaker	still weaker
- authority		
- decisions concerning others than herself		
Socially	approximately same	weaker
Conceptually	same to greater	weaker

In addition, there is also currently considerable emotional distress experienced by both men and women in feelings of expressed dissatisfaction and insecurity. For women, however, this emotional uneasiness seems to different implications than for men, and may have far more dire consequences, as women as a group continue to be forced to base assertiveness on, fulfill social obligations in terms of, and realize economic aspirations by means of confining their actions mostly to an emotional sphere.

APPENDIX I
CENSUS INTERVIEW SCHEDULE I
(Basic Questions)

- 1 - House number
- 2 - Fie Wura (if not builder of structure, how acquired from original fie wura, and relationship to her/him)
 - who pays revenue?
- 3 - Occupants (sleeping):
 - name, parents names, from where?
 - ethnic group if not Akan from here
 - age
 - how she/he uses the compound
 - what they do (get food, cloth, money, medicine, meet funeral expenses, tools, school fees and extras, "kete-kete" things)
 - extent of farming activity, how acquired land, on what terms? what products? For cocoa, what kind, how old? labour?
 - marital alliance career, present civil status
 - children, for those above age 14, where are they? what do they do?
- 4 - How related to Fie Wura?
- 5 - House plan.