



Women in Review: The Role of Women on the History of Ghana, 1874-1992

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INTRODUCTION

In a world where conservative history has been built around the figures of illustrious men and patriarchal events, thus making women either completely absent as historical actors or mostly appeared concerning their male compatriots.¹ Conversely, the crucial positions of women in ensuring the socio-political and economic continuity of societies cannot be looked upon.

In the wake of the arrival of the Europeans and the subsequent British Imperialism, Ghana women's participation and roles were significantly impacted.² There has been a plethora of research and scholarly works on mainly the socio-political history of Ghana but not extensively on the roles women played in the colonial and postcolonial era of Ghana. An in-depth review of relevant studies reveals a research gap in women's roles in both the colonial and postcolonial periods in Ghana.

By examining historiographical trends, this paper seeks to offer an overview of the colonial and postcolonial transformation in the roles of Ghanaian women. Further, the paper then will examine the different social and political roles women played in Ghana's history.

WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL GHANA

In African societies, the development of the community and the family largely depended on the balance that existed in both sexes. The role of women encompassed the African belief in the perceived duality of nature. As such, both men and women performed roles considered relevant to the growth of the family and community. Hafkin and Hanson described this phenomenon as:

*"the positions of women were given unmatched significance as they were regarded as being closer to the Supreme Being (the creator) as juxtapose men. Women's ability to give birth asserted their creative prowess. Hence, in the African community, the authority of women was unwavering in all facets of life."*³

In the same way, women's role in the community has been generally considered very common. Thus, working on the socio-political history of the forest kingdoms in pre-colonial Ghana, women's authority in ensuring social, religious, and political continuity was unmatched as most of these women occupied significant positions in these states.⁴

Women have assumed essential positions in African societies long before the coming of the European explorers. Africa's socio-political and economic landscape has been steered by both sexes, with women assuming even more significant roles. The book "African Market Women, Market Queens and Queen Merchants" discovered how women economically dominated the buying and selling of various commodities. The major drivers of the pre-colonial economy were women. In open market centers throughout Ghana, women served as market retailers, street vendors, wholesalers, and travelers who collected goods from farms, factories, and ports, ensuring economic continuity and development.⁵

On researching the Shai-Osudoku ethnic group in pre-colonial Ghana, it was established that women played a role significant in their craft industry. They found that women were the financiers and creators of pottery goods. Through the pottery institution, Shai women became influential leaders.⁶ To add, the significant position women in Kumasi played, especially during trans-Saharan commerce. Women contributed immensely to the smooth administration of the trade. For instance, women in Kumasi became reliable intermediaries for traders from North Africa.⁷

Politically, women assumed the complementary role as juxtaposed their male counterparts. In both non-centralized and centralized systems

¹ Gadzekpo, Audrey Sitsofe. "Women's Engagement with Gold Coast Print Culture from 1857 to 1957." Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 2001.

² St Clair, William. "Imperialism and traditional African culture." Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994.

³ Hafkin, Nancy, and Edna G. Bay. *Women in Africa: Studies in social and economic change*. Stanford University Press, 1976.

⁴ Achebe, Nwando, and Claire Robertson, eds. *Holding the world together: African women in changing perspective*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2019.

⁵ Clark, Gracia. "African market women, market queens, and merchant queens." *In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. 2018.

⁶ Browne, Angela W. "Appropriate Technology and the Dynamics of Village Industry: A Case Study of Pottery in Ghana." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 6, no. 3 (1981): 313-23.

⁷ Milne, Claudia, and Charlotte Boaitey. *Asante Market Women*. Royal Anthropological Institute, 1982.

of governance saw the dominant roles of women. Lynda Day, in her book "Long Live the Queen! The Yaa Asantewaa Centenary and the Politics of History," exposed the powerful authorities of women in the Asante land.⁸ The Asante of the Akan ethnic group in pre-colonial Ghana came to be regarded as a dominant force to reckon with. At the height of the Asante dominance, the queen mother (Asantehemmaa) was considered the epitome of womanhood and authority. The roles performed by the Asantehemmaa included the resolution of conflict, mainly cases involving women or issues of commerce, ritual duties, the nomination of a new king, and her officiating at initiation ceremonies.

Women in the Dagbon areas of northern Ghana were also accorded nobility and good social status. For instance, the paramount chief (Yagbonwura) of Dagbon delegated his authority to women to perform rituals and initiation rites during annual festivals.⁹ Further, most communities in Ghana during the 17th century significantly relied on the spiritual authority of women. Thus, some women became priestesses, soothsayers, and vessels for African gods. These women became more responsible for revealing dates and times of sacred ceremonies, rites of passages, and rituals.¹⁰

Women became an essential source of spiritual recuperation in Ghana from the early years of the 18th century until the 19th century. For instance, in the 'Kplemi Cult' of the Ga-Adangbe people, women importantly perform the unique role of singing traditional chants during processions to the gods.¹¹ It is crucial to ascertain that up until the introduction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in West Africa, women were the most valuable commodities in the indigenous slave trade, as a recent work documented it.¹² Women were socially regarded as essential in housekeeping and were also highly priced for their sexuality.

Due to the productive and reproductive abilities of women and girls, slave masters and traditional lineages captured or bought women slaves to increase their price tags and prestige, respectively. Women were regarded as "women labor was necessary labor – a labor from which surplus could be derived ...".¹³ However, it must be stipulated that women slaves were treated humanely with dignity in the indigenous slave trade as juxtaposed with the Atlantic Slave Trade.

WOMEN IN COLONIAL GHANA

The arrival of Europeans and the subsequent British Imperialism in West Africa played an influential role in ending the previously envied positions of women in Ghana. The roles of women in the social and political terrains in the Ghanaian community were drastically altered.¹⁴

There was the emergence of the European social phenomenon of 'domesticity,' which increased women's role in the home as sole child bearers and home keepers instead of occupying socio-political roles in the African societies as these roles were reserved for men. Hence, the role of women was reduced during the colonial regime. The balance of gender relations that hitherto were respected during the pre-colonial era collapsed as more men were given many distinct public roles.¹⁵

The colonialists' views on women were that the policy of domesticity and Victorian values should categorize women as merely housekeepers, mothers, and wives. Various associations that were established during the colonial era to ensure the good socio-political roles and education of women suffered colonial stigmatizations – their social status was challenged.¹⁶ Perbi posited that during the colonial era, women were barely given technical education as they were regarded solely for domestic purposes. He added that the educational system gave priorities to men as juxtaposed to that of women.¹⁷ Women in the colonial period were conceived exclusively made for domestic roles (home management). Further, those women who defied the social norms to attain higher positions, especially in colonial administrations, were short-lived as most married and started giving birth.¹⁸

More so, women's role in the agricultural sector of colonial Ghana was affected as successive governors formulated policies aimed at favoring men rather than women. For instance, men in the Gold Coast's cocoa-producing areas were supported with a plethora of agricultural incentives and labor.¹⁹ Colonialism impacted women's position in the food production sectors as the colonial economy emphasized the commercialization of lands and the cultivation of cash crops. Women in Gold Coast were considered subsistent farmers, not capable of large agricultural plantations.²⁰

⁸ Day, Lynda R. "Long live the queen! The Yaa Asantewaa centenary and the politics of history." *Ghana Studies* 3, no. 1 (2000): 153-166.

⁹Vieta, Kojo T. *The Flagbearers of Ghana*. Vol. 1. (Ena Publications, 2000)

¹⁰Akyeampong, Emmanuel, and Pashington Obeng. "Spirituality, gender, and power in Asante history." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28, no. 3 (1995): 481-508.

¹¹Steggstra, Marijke. "Krobo Queen Mothers: Gender, Power, and Contemporary Female Traditional Authority in Ghana." *Africa Today* 55, no. 3 (2009), 105–23

¹²Saidi, Christine. "Women's Authority and Society in Early East-Central Africa". Vol. 44. (University Rochester Press, 2010).

¹³Saidi, "Women's Authority and Society in Early East-Central Africa,"

¹⁴Sheldon, Kathleen. *Historical dictionary of women in Sub-Saharan Africa*. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

¹⁵Mama, Amina. "Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa During the 1990s." *Working Paper Series 5/96*. Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA, (1996), 28.

¹⁶Akurang-Parry, Kwabena O. "Aspects of elite women's activism in the Gold Coast, 1874-1890." *The International Journal of African historical studies* 37, no. 3 (2004): 463-482.

¹⁷Perbi, Akosua. "Asante Women's Struggles 'I Will Not Eat Stone': A Women's History of Colonial Asante. In Jean Allman and Victoria Tashjian. Oxford: James Currey; Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2000. *The Journal of African History* 43, no. 2 (2002): 313-376.

¹⁸Tsikata, Dzodzi, and Akosua Darkwah. "Change and Continuity in Women's Everyday Lives in Ghana: Exploring some Indicators of the Material Dimensions of Empowerment and Citizenship." (2009).

¹⁹Allman, Jean. "Rounding up spinsters: gender chaos and unmarried women in colonial Asante." *The Journal of African History* 37, no. 2 (1996): 195-214.

²⁰Agbosu, Lennox, Mariama Awumbila, Christine Dowuona-Hammond, and Dzodzi Tsikata. "Customary and statutory land tenure and land policy in Ghana." (2007).

Further, an interview conducted among the Krobo women during the colonial era found that queen mothers in the Krobo areas could collaborate with the European farmers in establishing more extensive palm plantations.²¹ Consequently, these Krobo women were able to gain wealth and prestige through their economic expeditions and began to influence decisions regarding poor social construct toward local women and their basic social welfare.²²

Even though several studies attested to the marginalization of women in colonial politics, a newsletter report ascertained the socio-political feat of women in colonial.²³ Since the traditional position of women in Ghana was reduced during the colonial era, the role of women was metamorphosed into completely new positions as some of these women established movements seeking the welfare and political participation of women in colonial governance.

For instance, there was the Ladies Mutual Club in Sekondi and Young Ladies' Christian Association. These groups demanded women's political empowerment. With the establishment of the Native Ladies of Cape Coast (NLCC), as section of Ghanaian women such as Kate Swanzy and Eliz Waldron as organizers of the groups were able to mobilize and solicit resources to extend helping hands to the plight of businesswomen.²⁴

Added, the NLCC paved the way for women in colonial Ghana to be involved in colonial Ghana's social orientations. The aftermath of the Second World War saw Ghanaian women recognizing their social influence and acting as a gender pressure group to demand constitutional changes, improved social status, and political recognition.²⁵ Mabel Dove-Danquah and Evelyn Mansa Amarteifio were women who incessantly organized social gatherings and political awareness programs to demand gender equality in public services.²⁶

Most importantly, women prominently contributed to the nationalist struggle for independence in Ghana.²⁷ Prior to the infamous political riots leading to the arrest of the "so-called Big Six" members, market women, especially in the capital of Ghana, demanded better economic conditions as inflation was on the ascendency. There was a report on how petty traders in Kumasi boycotted the conditional sales policies by the British government in Ghana – as the paper put it: "Adweso market women on a reject spree."²⁸

Again, an excerpt from a Ghanaian newspaper stated the contributions of women in the aftermath of the 1948 riots. It was reported that a group of women regarded as political activists and media practitioners was able to organize a nationwide anti-colonial campaign aimed at sensitizing the Ghanaian populace on the ill-treatment meted on Kwame Nkrumah and other members of the Big Six. Thus, the paper recorded women's names such as Leticia Quaye, Hannah Cudjoe, Akua Asabea Ayisi, Ama Nkrumah, among others who demanded the release and appropriation funds for arrested Ghanaian politicians.²⁹

WOMEN IN POST-COLONIAL GHANA

As colonialism was beginning to wane in Africa and especially Ghana, the role of women faced new transformations and challenges. These new transformations and challenges women faced during the postcolonial era were found in all sectors of the new country. In Allah-Mensah's work titled "Women in Politics and Public Life in Ghana," he emphasized women's significant role prior to the first constitutional Ghana government and immediately after Ghana gained self-independence.³⁰ Outspoken and vibrant women such as Hanna Cudjoe, Letitia Quaye, and Sophia Doku were appointed by Kwame Nkrumah as executives to the ruling government. An extract from 1960 parliamentary Hansard of Ghana reported that Kwame Nkrumah appointed ten women to fill specially created seats in parliament out of the 114 seats. Some of such women were Sophia Oboshie Doku and Susanna Al-Hassan.³¹

Within a few years of gaining self-independent, Kwame Nkrumah recognized how vocal and active women were during the fight for anti-colonialism.³² As the Accra Evening News reported, by 1960, Nkrumah had created the National Council of Women, which was to officially empower, encourage, and give women an equal opportunity in the socio-political activities of the government. Accordingly, there was a spring of vocational training centers and open job vacancies in public service for women during Ghana's republic government.³³

Again, women played in ensuring the successful implementation of Nkrumah's foreign policies of African emancipation. With the establishment of the 1960 Ghana Women's Movement, the movement reconvenes an all-women African conference in Accra to create national and continental awareness of women's position against the fight towards anti-colonialism.³⁴ Ghanaian women had the opportunity to travel, especially to the Soviet Republic of Russia, to learn administrative skills and return home to contribute to the development of Ghana.³⁵ Some few Ghanaian women were able to become judges during Nkrumah's regime. One of such women appointed as a female judge was Akua Asabea Ayisi, who was the chief editor of

²¹ Steegstra, "Krobo Queen Mothers: Gender, Power, and Contemporary Female Traditional Authority in Ghana."

²² Nana Many Korkor Gbebi (December 6, 2020)

²³ Prah, Mansah. "Women's studies in Ghana." *Women's studies quarterly* 24, no. 1/2 (1996): 412-422.

²⁴ Akurang-Parry, "Aspects of elite women's activism in the Gold Coast, 1874-1890."

²⁵ Kimble, David. *A political history of Ghana: the rise of Gold Coast nationalism, 1850-1928*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.

²⁶ Bk. Daily Graphic, 1952.

²⁷ Vieta, "The Flagbearers of Ghana"

²⁸ Bk. Ashanti Times, 1946.

²⁹ Bk. Accra Evening News, 1949.

³⁰ Allah-Mensah, Beatrix. "Women in politics and public life in Ghana." (2005).

³¹ Extract of 1960 Parliamentary Hansard as cited in The Nordic Africa Institute report, 2019.

³² Manuh, Takyiwaa. "Women, the State and Society under the PNDC." (1993): 176-195.

³³ Bk. Accra Evening News, 1960. p.3

³⁴ Adamafo, Tawia. *By Nkrumah's Side: The Labour and the Wounds*. Accra: West coast Publishing House, 1982.

³⁵ Manuh, "Women, the State and Society under the PNDC."

the Accra Evening News prior to Ghana's independence.³⁶

Another significant role played by women in postcolonial Ghana was the appointment of Shirley Du Bois, wife of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois (a renowned Pan-Africanist) was the first director of the Ghana Television Service, established in July 1965 to spread the socialist ideologies of Nkrumah and the newly independent Ghana.³⁷

Notwithstanding, the post-Nkrumah era was characterized by incessant military governments and glimpses of short-lived civilian governments until 1992 when Ghana was ushered into a peaceful and democratic governance era. The brighter prospects of women's role and developments in Ghana as was made in Nkrumah's government were met by stiffer oppositions and backlashes.³⁸

Women's role generally in the public/formal sector was undermined during the military takeovers as Bentsi-Enchill gave an account of how the various military governments treated women punitively and as inferior.³⁹ Other studies concerted the gruesome treatment of women, especially market women in postcolonial Ghana.⁴⁰

The Ghanaian Times newspaper reported that wealthy businesswomen and traders during the 1970s under the era of the Supreme Military Council I & II, during the brief period of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), became victims of military brutalities as they were considered 'profiteers' and 'hoarders' of essential goods.⁴¹ Regardless of the military restrictions meted out on women during the military coups of the postcolonial era, women, especially in the informal sectors of Ghana's economy, played an important role. Women became the backbone of Ghana's small-scale agriculture and businesses.⁴² The postcolonial landscape of Ghana made it very difficult for women to undertake significant roles. Thus women had been derailed of socio-political autonomy due to erratic successive regimes – prior to the inception of democratization in the fourth republic.

Lastly, with the drafting of the 1992 constitution and its accompanying democracy, there was the reinstatement of gender equality where women and men's roles in Ghana's postcolonial landscape were transformed. The role of Ghanaian women during the democratization era became more visible as they were given top-position in public services, equal rights, and more balanced gender equity socially, politically, and economically.⁴³

CONCLUSION

The overview saw the fluctuation of women's roles in Ghana's history. Prior to the influx of Europeans on the coast of West Africa, the role of women in the indigenous societies had been characterized by a series of identities encompassing ethnicity, religion, and social class. The transition of women as crucial participants in pre-colonial Ghana's socio-political and economic landscapes to one with a limited role for women in colonial Ghana and lastly, postcolonial Ghana was witnessing balanced gender roles.

It is no doubt that women effectively participated in the smooth administration of indigenous societies; however, these roles were diminished due to the European patriarchal policies in the colonial. The modern situation in Ghana has witnessed much potential in women that can be harnessed to improve the nation's development. As Fallon (2008) aptly put it:

*"The inclusion of women in the socio-political and economic landscape of Africa will be an important feature to Africa's growth."*⁴⁴

Most importantly, as women become increasingly crucial in the developmental policies of Ghana, scholarships will be highly focused on establishing the position of gender and sexuality in historical studies.

³⁶Botwe-Asamoah, Kwame. *Kwame Nkrumah's Politico-Cultural Thought and Politics: An African-Centered Paradigm for the Second Phase of the African Revolution*. Routledge, 2013

³⁷Botwe-Asamoah, "Kwame Nkrumah's Politico-Cultural Thought and Politics: An African-Centered Paradigm for the Second Phase of the African Revolution"

³⁸ Manuh, "Women, the State and Society under the PNDC."

³⁹Bentsi-Enchill, Nii K. "Losing Illusions at Makola Market." *West Africa* 3242, no. Sept (1979): 1589-92.

⁴⁰Chazan, Naomi. *Anatomy of Ghanaian politics: Managing political recession, 1969-1982*. Routledge, 2019; Dan-Bright, S. Dzorgbo. "Ghana in Search of Development: The Challenge of Governance, Economic Management and Institution Building." Sweden: Reprocentralen HSC, Uppsala. (1998): 85-251.

⁴¹Bk. The Ghanaian Times, 1982

⁴² Manuh, "Women, the State and Society under the PNDC."

⁴³The Women's Manifesto for Ghana. *The Coalition on the Women's Manifesto for Ghana*. (Accra, Ghana: ABANTU for Development, 2004)

⁴⁴Fallon, Kathleen M., and Kathleen M. Fallon. *Democracy and the rise of women's movements in Sub-Saharan Africa*. JHU Press, 2008.