

WOMEN CHIEFS AND POWER IN THE VOLTA REGION OF GHANA

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This paper considers the roles of women as significant actors in public life, the life of communities, and particularly the roles of women who have the status and title of 'chief', however that is interpreted in the local context. I am particularly concerned to show the significances of these roles over time in one part of Ghana, the Avatime traditional area.¹ However, I do not intend to enter the debates on the origins and evolution of chiefship in Ghana and women's roles therein (nor would I claim to be competent to do so). My aim is to look briefly at the structure of chiefship in very general terms in the Volta Region, and, more specifically, in Avatime, where I have been working intermittently since 1973. The 'traditional' roles of women chiefs/ Queen Mothers (the terminology itself could be a focus for debate) are discussed, but I want to do more than just to give a static, single frame and historic (antiquated?) picture. Whatever the roles and significances of women chiefs in the past, the intention here is to show how the contemporary influence of women office holders in particular is linked to their active involvement in the affairs of community. My major point *vis-à-vis* current politics and development in Ghana is that it is not enough just to hold a title: in order to be influential women have to be active in currently relevant organisations concerned with politics or development. Women without formal titles may now have more influence or sway in local affairs than official office holders, even though they may be constrained to work through the channels of office holding. But it is worth considering in addition the possibility that the scope of women's influences, given this shift in its base, may well be able to increase. It remains to be seen whether the same may be true for male office holders at the immediate local levels, but this is a point to which we return at the end of the paper. Before we focus on

¹ A traditional area is a group of villages each of which probably has an elected chief but which acknowledge their relationship to one another and their joint allegiance to an overarching or paramount (male) chief.

Avatime, however, let us look for comparative purposes at the traditional scope of women's 'empowerment'² both as women and as chiefs in Asante, perhaps the most studied people in southern Ghana, using material drawn from the literature.

The Powers of Women in Asante³

Asante provides both a good baseline and comparison when looking at women's roles and empowerment. Asante society has a matrilineal focus, that is, entitlement to inherit wealth and key positions passes through women. In spite of this pivotal genealogical role for women, however, women were historically only the conduits as sisters and mothers of brothers and sons through which entitlement to office holding and property passed. Men held the offices and managed the property, whether land or other forms of wealth. Some (see in particular Sanday 1981), writing in what we can label for convenience here evolutionary and equality modes, interpret the matrilineal tag as somehow indicating a better, with the implication of 'more equal', status for women. This means better than that of their sisters at similar levels of evolutionary advancement, however we might measure that, who have the misfortune to be born in patrilineal societies. Grossly summarising these ideas, they imply that matriliney is good for women and patriliney either much less so or just plain bad. The claim is that women in matrilineal societies such as the Iroquois or Asante are less subordinate and oppressed than women in patrilineal societies.

I have criticised the theoretical basis of Sanday's assumptions elsewhere (Brydon 1982). The tide of feminist theorising has moved away from examinations, assertions or measurements of gender equality or particular kinds of evolutionism since the early 1980s. But no less an ethnographer than R.S. Rattray also asserted the prominent position of women in Asante, or particularly women as Queen Mothers (Rattray 1923: 78 ff). He was perhaps one of the earliest ethnographers to note the "importance of women" in "many parts of Africa" and his discussion of the significance of women is part of his discussion of matrilineal descent, which he conflates with "mother right" (Rattray 1923: 78, 79), not surprisingly given the time at which he was writing. I cannot here enter into a detailed

² I use this term in the knowledge that it has a current and specific use in the gender and development literature, but also because of its ordinary significances.

³ I cannot hope in a short piece like this, and in which I am using Asante as a comparison with Avatime, even to begin to do justice to this area of work. I have to beg the indulgence of Asante scholars for making free with their published work and for incorporating ideas growing from informal discussions.

examination of the 'significance of women in Asante', (nor would I claim to be competent to embark on such an elephantine undertaking at present). Suffice it to say that, even though Rattray remarks on the importance of women in Asante society, his stress on their importance is in their genealogical roles. It may be said, borrowing from the ideas subsequently set out by Ortner and Whitehead (1981), that in his view women have position, status, whatever in Asante society because of their genealogical positions as mothers, maternal aunts or classificatory sisters. They do not, automatically, have status in their own right as persons. As if to underline the parameters of women's importance in Asante society Rattray's remarks about women and their 'importance' are confined to the single chapter on matrilineal descent in his 1923 book. Elsewhere women are mentioned only as consorts or mothers or the participants or officiants in life-crisis rituals: they are not the policy makers, diplomats or generals of Asante society.

But there is still a popular image of Asante women (and others in matrilineal societies) as being both strong and powerful. That such an image exists is easily seen in the scapegoating by recent military governments in Ghana as well as sections of the Ghanaian press of women, Asante among them, who are said to be so rich and powerful as to be able to subvert governments and wreak national economic ruin (see also Robertson 1983).⁴ However, the recent work of Gracia Clark on female onion traders in Kumase market (Clark 1994) meticulously teases out the realities of women's authority and economic power in contemporary Kumase and a paper by Takyiwaa Manuh (1988) demonstrates the ethnographic problems with asserting the 'power' of Asante women in the formal and traditional setting of the *Asantehemaa's* (Queen Mother's) court in Kumase. Pepe Roberts' work (1987) has also shown the relative lack of options open to women in their work and lives in rural and small town Akan areas. What emerges from the work of these scholars are themes of restricted competences. Women have authority and power only in closely circumscribed areas: within the household and family, within some areas of local markets and with respect to certain aspects of family and lineage life.

But there are also accounts of famously strong and powerful Asante women, acting in the public sphere, some of whom held office, while some did not. Yaa Asantewaa, the *Asantehemaa* at the end of the nineteenth century, has a secure place both in written history and in folk ideology as a patriot and powerful leader

⁴ The idea that women can be rich and powerful in their own right is resented. These are not aspects of women's roles and women who aspire to either are often felt to be anomalous in various ways, either as criminals or, in other cases in the literature, witches or prostitutes (Nadel 1952; Brydon 1987). These ideas also owe much, of course, to Mary Douglas (1966).

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against the British invaders. Wilks (1988, 1993) has brought to light the person of Akyaawa Yikwan, not only in her typical 'womanly' roles and statuses as daughter of an *Asantehene*, mother of an eminent statesman and ancestress of other *Asantehenes*, but also her roles as diplomat and negotiator in the Asante disputes with the British, particularly the treaty of 1831 negotiated in the wake of the disastrous battle of Katamanso. But Manuh's work confirms that the instances of women wielding these kinds of power in the wider society are rare. More usually women's recognised competences have a restricted and 'domestic' orientation (Manuh 1988).

A key limitation on Asante women's public personae was the 'taboos', for want of a more parsimonious expression, against menstruation and menstrual blood.⁵ The possibility of pollution by even indirect contact with menstrual blood debarred Asante women from accompanying their men on military campaigns (the blood had the power to destroy the efficacy of charms, amulets and other magic) and from working in closer relationship to men as chiefs.⁶ As Wilks (1988) and Obeng (1988) stress, only post-menopausal women could be active in the public sphere of the state. Wilks writes with respect to Akyaawa Yikwan's prominence and self-assertion in the 1820s, when she must already have passed the menopause:

[P]ost-menstrual women in Asante often assume overtly aggressive and provocative attitudes towards males, as if in compensation for the earlier years of enforced domesticity. (Wilks 1988: 123).

According to most general sources on Asante, women, and especially Queen Mothers, are the repositories of genealogical knowledge and history which gives them their supposedly powerful roles in the election of chiefs, including the *Asantehene*. But, although formally they have a key role in election and government, in practice their influence is mitigated by culture and historical circumstances, their own personalities, and the manipulability and efficacy of their networks.⁷ Just because a woman is *ohemaa* of a town it does not follow that she

⁵ There is a wide ranging literature focusing on the polluting power of menstrual blood in Africa and elsewhere (for example, Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Brydon 1990). I do not have the space to discuss these issues here.

⁶ The relationships among different kinds of blood in Asante have yet to be systematically explored and analysed (personal communication: T.C. McCaskie).

⁷ I am indebted to T.C. McCaskie for discussions about the roles and positions of Ashanti Queen Mothers.

is politically powerful or even prominent. Even Akyawa Yikwan, according to Wilks (1988), who had an extremely forceful personality, was able to draw upon a wide network of kin and supporters and her relationship with the Asantehene in her efforts to broker the treaty with the British and, further, lived at a time which presented her with the opportunity to exercise these talents to the full, did not become prominent until her later years, after her children were grown.⁸

When and Where Do Women Act?

While Akyawa Yikwan and Yaa Asantewaa are noteworthy in Asante because of their particular actions in the public sphere (and only after they had passed the menopause), more generally women act in the public sphere as a group, the collectivity of (usually adult) women in the society. In the literature, too, women's public identity is often held to be more widely as a collectivity. As individuals they are what British social anthropologists of the 1950s regarded as 'jural minors' in that they have no public roles as individuals in their own right. But even acting as a group, women's recognised sphere of jural competence tends to be confined to specific 'women's issues': some areas of the market organisation and trading, some household managerial decisions, and family and lineage matters, particularly those pertaining to life crisis rituals. This is perhaps most obviously illustrated by the forms of collective action which are the prerogative of women in some West African societies, and which are collectively orchestrated and directed against men and the male (public) spheres when men are deemed to have violated women's own areas of concern (for example, Ardener 1975; Ifeka-Moller 1975; Van Allen 1976). But even where there are women office holders, as in Asante and in the areas east of the River Volta which form the main focus of this paper, their powers are circumscribed by those of men whether as kin, chiefs or priests.

Before we move on to look specifically at Avatime and the Volta Region let us summarise the discussion so far. Even in a matrilineal society such as Asante, in which, some have argued, women are relatively powerful, women's empowerment both currently and in the past is seen to be circumscribed and constrained. Women are only adjudged to have jural and political competence in defined areas of life, mostly relating to domestic matters (Manuh 1988). Women's participation in political, economic and social life writ more broadly is severely

⁸ What I am arguing against here, in effect, are attempts to pinpoint and to quantify some nebulous idea of 'women's status' as definable without reference to specific actresses and their circumstances, for example Sanday (1981) and also those broadly influenced by the work of G.P. Murdock.

limited, by ritual constraints in their earlier and fecund years and by strongly held notions of 'women's place' more generally throughout their lives. 'Rich' women or 'powerful' women are anathematised anomalous categories. Perhaps the idea of women as rich or powerful can only be comfortably held if women are first and foremost public servants, as we saw in the cases of Yaa Asantewaa and Akyaawa Yikwan. Let us see how these ideas translate or transpose themselves to Avatime today.

Chiefship (Male and Female) in the Volta Region and Avatime

First we need to have some grasp on the histories and political and social structures of the peoples of the central part of the Volta Region, the area with which I am concerned.⁹ Again, this is not the place to set out on a detailed history of the area: much basic ethnographic and archival work remains to be done. Very generally, the area is sometimes known as Ewe-Dome, the population of which consists of fairly small groups of Ewe-speakers clustered in villages, each group of villages under the authority of a paramount chief who is usually chosen from the same village. The late pre-colonial and early colonial history of the area can be summarised in terms of the competing colonial powers (Britain and Germany) vying for influence in the area by supporting particular groups of people.¹⁰ In addition to the Ewe-speakers, however, the more northerly parts and some areas bordering the Volta Lake contain a patchwork of differing ethnic and linguistic groups. These included the Guan speakers by the Lake and groups such as Logba, Santrokofi, Lolobi and Likpe in the mountains and the north. Avatime, which is the main focus of this paper, is a group of seven villages in the hills, about 20 miles north of Ho and today under the authority of Osie Adja Tekpor VI as paramount.

The institution, ideology and practices of chiefship in this part of the Volta Region

⁹ Thus I shall not be concerned with Anlo to the south nor with the largely Twi-speaking areas in the more northerly parts of the Volta Region.

¹⁰ Thus, for example, since Britain laid claim to a large part of the Ewe-Dome area, the British supported the claims of the Peki chiefs to be the overall rulers of the area since such a configuration offered them a large area of territory. Rattray was only the last in a series of British envoys who toured the area (in about 1915) collecting stool histories which emphasised at some point various villages' subordinate relationships with Peki. The Germans, on the other hand, stressed the independence of the small groups in the area and denied Peki's claim to influence thus allowing several groups to claim the protection of the German flag.

also have contested histories. Western scholars (Welman 1924; Ward 1949) as well as Ghanaians such as Amenumey (1964) suggest that, apart from Anlo, Ewe 'chiefship' is imitative and adopted from Asante form and practice. Thus Welman (1924) suggests that it was only after Peki adopted Asante-style chiefship and military practices in the early nineteenth century and other groups followed suit that the groups of the Volta Region were able to offer any concerted resistance to the Asante-Akwamu (and sometimes -Anlo) alliance. Ward (1949) supports Welman and cites the relative infrequency of destoolments in the Volta Region as evidence that chiefship does not hold a core place in local world views.

Avatime's claimed traditional history, however, is markedly different from that of the Ewe.¹¹ While the Ewe claim to have moved into the area in stages from the east, Avatime claim to have originated in the west, in Ahanta. They describe a slow movement east along the coast of Ghana and then northwards, east of the River Volta. Long term settlements in Ningo and Matse appear in nearly all accounts. Avatime is nominally patrilineal and rights in land and immovable property are inherited through the male line. An Avatime village population (*BmanBme petee*) consists of a number of 'clans', in Avatime *akpBla* (sing. *lekpBle*), a word which in other contexts means 'knot' or 'lump'. These are groups of people who claim putative descent from a common patrilineal ancestor, but cannot trace all the steps in that descent. Within each clan is a series of *ikune* (sing. *oku*), or lineages, the members of which do claim to be able to trace agnatic descent from a commonly acknowledged male ancestor.

The male chiefship hierarchy is extensive. The group as a whole is under the paramountcy of Adja Tekpor VI and each of the villages and clans has its village or clan chief. Associated with each chief, at whatever level, are other offices such as linguists (Ewe: *tsiamewo*, Akan: *akyeame*) and chiefs of the young men (Ewe: *sohefiawo*). Other titles borrowed from the Akan and Ga languages are also used, for example *odikro* (sub-chief: Akan) and *mankrado* (town 'owner': Ga). Large proportions of Avatime clan and village office holding terminologies seem, therefore, to be borrowed.

But it does seem likely that some form of indigenous chiefship existed in Avatime (as is claimed throughout Avatime), as both village chiefs and the paramount himself have titles which are uniquely Avatime. The paramount's title, '*Osie*', is a

¹¹ When I worked in Avatime initially (1973-74), I collected accounts of Avatime history from all seven villages and the factions within them, both from groups of chiefs and elders and also from traditional priests and anyone else who was regarded by local people as knowledgeable about history. What is given here is only a gloss of these accounts for reasons of space. See further Brydon (1976).

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kinship term implying a distant male relative in an earlier generation, linked either patri- or matri-laterally. The term for village chief is *okusie*, which is a combination of *oku osie*. Over time these two systems have merged and adapted to each other, and been subjected to the external influences of colonial rule and the (Presbyterian) Church, to produce the chiefship system apparent today in Avatime. Avatime chiefly titles, while aping the Akan system in similar ways to Ewe chiefly titles, have at their core particular Avatime terms and significances which seem to have no parallel in Ewe areas.

Just as with the men, so with women in Avatime there seems to have been a kind of cafeteria borrowing of women's titles and offices from Asante. Today, therefore, in Avatime there is a 'woman chief' in each village as well as each clan. I hesitate to use the term 'Queen Mother' as, although this is the term sometimes used by local people when they speak in English, the Avatime term translates literally as 'woman chief' (*odze okusie*). While women village and clan chiefs may have had well defined roles and made frequent appearances as such in the past, today women village and clan chiefs have few, if any, roles and responsibilities and I have never seen them act as such.¹² Women's most regularly prominent roles today in Avatime are as the body of *Keda'midzeba*, adult Avatime women.¹³ In order to understand the roles and responsibilities of Avatime women, both as chiefs and as women, we first have to know something about the statuses of and opportunities for women in Avatime culture.

In spite of a long and thorough association of Avatime with colonial rulers and Christianity, fundamental ideas relating to the nature and progression of a woman's life still hold sway. An Avatime woman, once she has passed the menarche cannot be buried as an Avatime woman unless she has a series of ceremonies performed for her confirming her status as such. If a woman who has not yet had the ceremonies performed for her dies unexpectedly then a version of the ceremonies is performed (by women) on her corpse before she can be buried as an Avatime woman. In the past, until say, the 1940s, these ceremonies or nubility rites, known in the Avatime language as *kpe ablabe*, included marriage ceremonies and preparation for life as an adult (married) woman and lasted for about two months. Since about the 1950s, marriage has become separated out

¹² This is not to say that women as clan chiefs do not have formal responsibilities. The point is that they do not appear to act as such on a regular basis.

¹³ The term is an elided version of *Keda banoma badzeba*. The noun class prefixes *ba* are elided. The first two words thus run together make *Keda'noma*, the indigenous term for Avatime people. This is then combined with *'dzeba*, the term for women, to make *Keda'midzeba*, where most of the second word is either elided or corrupted.

from the ritual cycle on most occasions, and the rituals themselves have been drastically curtailed.¹⁴ Having had these ceremonies performed for her an Avatime woman achieves the status '*keda'midze*', 'adult Avatime woman.' '*Keda'midzeba*' (plural) form a community in each Avatime village and also throughout Avatime as a whole. Becoming *keda'midze* even today, gives an Avatime woman a particular status in the community: she may own a hearth and cook on a regular basis for a man, she may speak in public meetings (and be listened to), and may also play a significant part in organising family and community affairs. In short she is recognised as an adult woman. Women as senior members of their patrilineages, irrespective of any links with female chiefs, and acting as senior father's sisters, have specific roles to play in lineage affairs, both economic and social (including life crisis rituals). The body of Avatime women, as *Keda'midzeba* are the constituency of the Avatime women village chiefs (as well as of the male chiefs) rather than women owing allegiance to a female chief on a clan or kinship basis.¹⁵ Thus Avatime women chiefs are not just pale imitations of Akan *ahemaa* or *abaa-panin*.

Let us see what roles there are for women chiefs today. The clan *odze okusie* has a special status as *primus inter pares* among the *ked'amidzeba* in each clan. Thus Avatime clan *Keda'midzeba* recognise the position, if not the authority of the woman clan chiefs. They are adjudged to have particular competence in judging women's affairs (including marriages and conduct within them) in the Avatime villages. But beyond the level of clan and also possibly village women chiefs it seems, taking into account both oral and written historical material, that there was a significant 'woman chief' in Avatime, an (all) Avatime woman chief, who again, today at any rate, has the title *odze okusie*. She is always chosen from a particular lineage in Amedzofe, one of the Avatime villages. Thus, just as the male chiefship hierarchy consists of an over-arching Avatime chief, who is supported by village and clan chiefs, so for the women there is an all-Avatime

¹⁴ This is obviously a highly condensed description of what has happened. In the 1970s and into the early 1980s what remained of these rites, known as *kusakoko* (cloth putting on, the same name as the Ewe, *avotata*) were tolerated and even encouraged by the EP Church in the villages. Women who were having the rites performed for them were expected to go to church, dressed in white, on the Sunday after their celebrations and to be blessed by the pastor. With the advent of strong evangelical influences in Ghana, however, I am unsure as to the fate of the status of these rites. The pastor's ultimate threat in the villages, if his flock persist in what he sees as pagan practices, is to refuse to bury them as Christians.

¹⁵ Elsewhere (Brydon 1981) I have written of the different significances of kinship allegiances and 'Avatime' allegiances in Avatime.

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chief, supported by sub-chiefs at various levels. That the office of Avatime woman chief has a long history is attested to by Jakob Spieth, the most prolific of the German mission ethnographers:

It is known that in Avatime there was a real queen for the women [*Frauenkönigin*] in Avatime who was assisted by the women chiefs. In particular family matters the [male] chiefs may pronounce no decision without the agreement of the women's council'. (Spieth 1906: 65*, author's translation)¹⁶

I am uncertain what precisely he means here by 'real queen for the women' (*eine eigentliche Frauenkönigin*), but the term is clearly distinguished from 'women chief' (*Frauenhäuptling*), and the existence of a female or women's council (*Weiberrat*) is also clear. Elsewhere Spieth distinguishes in his discussions of male chiefs in Ewe-Dome between the titles of *König* (of which *Königin* is the feminine form) and *Häuptling*.¹⁷ The fact that Spieth's sources from almost a century ago recognise the existence of an overall Avatime woman chief while there is no mention of such a position from elsewhere in the area, suggest that her position was unique in the sense that it was not found among the Ewe. His use of the past tense, however, also indicates that her influence may have been declining even in the early years of this century.¹⁸

The prominence of women in domestic and public affairs in Avatime has a history evidenced in the form of oral testimonies from the villages and by late 19th and early 20th century mission reports. Several oral testimonies point to the role of

¹⁶ The sense of this translation was checked by Dr Eve Rosenhaft, Department of German, University of Liverpool. Ultimate responsibility for the translation and what appears here rests with the author.

¹⁷ Claims to particular status under German colonial rule sometimes depended on whether the local chief had been designated *König* or *Häuptling* by the colonial authorities.

¹⁸ While women as village and clan chiefs sometimes appear to be surrounded by women office holders with titles which ape the male chiefship system, there are also other, male office holders who serve the women as *ked'amidzeba* and whose functions are not recorded from Ewe or Asante villages. These are the *tenu'a* (sing: *tenu*), whose job is to act as messengers for the women, to communicate among the women of the Avatime villages. The *tenu* is said to be the 'feet of the women', *badzeba iklele*. The existence of this network is a further indication of the relative significance of women in Avatime.

some women who wielded guns in times of war,¹⁹ but taking these as exemplars of women's behaviour seems rather similar to citing the relatively few women in Asante history who had prominent roles in politics, diplomacy and warfare as epitomes of womanliness. Spieth suggests that women in Ewe-Dome areas may have had considerable power when acting as a group (Spieth 1906: 65*, discussing Have and Dzake near Peki, and the men of Kpenoe who bowed before their wives for fear that they would leave them).

Certainly the annual report of the Bremen Mission for 1890 does not suggest that Avatime women were either cowed or submissive. Lamenting the failure to attract anyone, 'least of all' the women to instruction in Christianity, it states:

The women seem to be very traditional. Sometimes they have feasts lasting the day long and at which there is plenty of spirits.... These women for their most recent town feast for the dedication of a drum had bought 120 bottles and 3 demijohns of gin which were drunk in 3 days. They complained they were so drunk that they almost died. The next day they went with the same purpose to Vane. They made a ruling on the part of feasts that each woman who was not among them should pay 4/6. The empty bottles still lie in rows and ranks in the market and proclaim to each stranger what the Amedzofe people have done. (Bremen Mission 1890: 15)

This sounds like quite a feast for the women of a village whose population at the time was estimated at no more than 400. Later in the same report the Missionary²⁰ bemoans the strength of Avatime women relative to their husbands:

Already many a man who wanted to send his child to school has found out, as is the case with so many others, that not he but his wife is lord in the house. (Bremen Mission 1890)

I do not have time to speculate on the origins of Avatime women's chiefship or the changes it may have undergone through outside influences, from those occurring through the adoption of Asante chiefship patterns, through the vagaries of colonial rule to the impact(s) of Christianity. Perhaps this would in any case not

¹⁹ I have seen a photograph of one of these women wielding a gun, published in a 1960s magazine and held in the village of Fume. She was the mother of a friend of mine and is reputed to have fought in the battle with the Tafi in 1929.

²⁰ Probably either Seeger or Osswald. The authorship is sometimes unclear.

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be a particularly fruitful exercise since the historical evidence is so sketchy. What is pertinent here is that, as in Asante, so even in this patrilineal society women appear to have had considerable significance in particular areas of life. The woman chief had particular status (as *primus inter pares*, as *Frauenkönigin* or whatever), but all Avatime women, once they had been formally recognised as *ked'amidzeba*, adult women, played a part in a network of society-wide affairs, both those affecting women only and those affecting everyone.

Although there is evidence, therefore, that Avatime women and their chiefs wielded considerable public power in the pre- and early colonial period, when it comes to contemporary village affairs the organisation and distribution of authority has changed. Women's obvious and public shows of strength and aggression seem to have been reduced. Since there have been no armed skirmishes in the area since the late 1920s there have been no opportunities for women to arm themselves, but festive occasions for villages and clans when women chiefs are in evidence are few and far between and their roles in the day to day affairs of the village are nugatory. There is still an all-Avatime woman chief but she lives away from the villages and only comes back during holidays and public festivals. Still, however, the corps of women acting as *keda'midzeba* in Avatime villages is much in evidence on all kinds of public occasions such as festivals, town meetings or cases concerning the whole village. The *Keda'midzeba* always have a place, are consulted and given a share of any food or drink present. Women as senior female lineage members are prominent in domestic, life crisis rituals to do with birth, outdoorings, nubility and, to a large extent, death.

Contemporary 'Development' in Avatime

When I first worked in Avatime in 1973 'gender' did not have the high profile it has subsequently gained. Development theories and strategies held and practised by (western) academics and agencies were large scale, 'top-down' and gender blind. While people in the villages wanted prosperity for themselves and their children, the usual ways of trying to achieve this were either by investing in education, with the prospect of a job in the professions or, failing that, in teaching, or through a trade with the subsequent prospects of setting up and consolidating a business. Community development seems to have taken second place to personal advancement. Furthermore, Ghana was beginning to show obvious signs of her decline into the economic morass in which she found herself before the successive economic reform programmes of the '80s. During 1973-74 there was little, if anything, that could be called 'development' in the villages.²¹ If

²¹ I exclude here the National Redemption Council government's attempts to secure

a government official were coming to visit, then the roads might be regraded and the odd culvert repaired, but there were no plans to rehabilitate schools, build latrines, provide boreholes or wells or set up income generating projects such as proliferate today.²² From the point of view of an outside observer over the past 20 years, it seems as if the growing adversity from the mid-'70s, on the one hand, and increased awareness on the part of national and regional bureaucrats and those in authority in the village that development should be seen to have visible effects on the ground, on the other, have prompted efforts at both local and national levels to 'develop' (with the connotation here of 'improve') village infrastructure and villagers' lifestyles. Male village chiefs and elders have played a significant role in this, but until more recently there was little focus for development by or for women.

In the 1970s male chiefs were very much in evidence in the planning of village affairs, such as they were.²³ While the women, sitting *en bloc*, attended early morning village meetings called by the male chiefs and clan elders to plan weeding the roadsides and clearing the gutters, it was primarily male members of the chiefship hierarchy, along with other educated (male) residents, who had prominent positions on decision-making bodies in the villages, such as the Town Development Committees.

But it was not the chiefs, either male or female, or the Town Development Committee who, after the 'bite' of economic decline in the late '70s, promoted the organisation of a co-operative to get a loan to cultivate potatoes and sell them to stores in Accra.²⁴ This was done by a group from Amedzofe mostly, but not

self-sufficiency in food through 'Operation Feed Yourself'.

²² At Easter each year villagers who were working away in Accra or Kumase, for example, came home to discuss happenings in the last year. At the same time contributions were supposed to be made for village projects, and those who came home from the cities brought contributions from the various associations of village migrants in those cities. As far as I can ascertain, these funds tended to be used to fund celebratory occasions (durbahs and so on) and also village litigation in land matters. The Easter contributions were, in effect, the only source of (immediately) local government revenue.

²³ Nugent (in this volume) deals very adequately with the kinds of vacuum which exists and existed in the range of chiefly roles in the Volta Region at any level other than the immediate local level.

²⁴ This lasted for two years until the tractor broke down irreparably and the relative

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exclusively, male. Nor was it primarily the chiefs who were behind the inspiration and organisation of the building of a new clinic/health post, initiated in 1977. This was originally suggested by an outsider whose wife, now dead, had been an Amedzofe woman. The man suggested founding the clinic in memory of his wife and offered a substantial donation towards its building. There were problems with this suggestion, however, as there was already a clinic in the neighbouring village and the Ministry of Health was unwilling to fund and support two establishments so near each other. Eventually, however, with further promises of support from the Bremen Mission (which had maintained some contacts with the area of its former evangelising effort), the Ministry of Health agreed to support a satellite clinic.

The late '70s and early '80s were perhaps the worst years, in material terms, in which to embark on a community development project like the building of the clinic, and progress was slow. In 1983 the building was still not complete. Subsequently, however, the clinic has opened and been well patronised. The progress of the clinic provides a good illustration of the almost fortuitous progress of development projects. During the course of the '80s and with the increasing influence of US-style Christian fundamentalism in Ghana, another organisation, the African Christian Mission (ACM), has contributed to the running of the clinic.²⁵ Although the Ministry of Health nominally 'runs' the clinic and provides 2 nurses, medicines and equipment for it, their efforts over the past 5 years have been augmented intermittently by the posting of a mission nurse and visits from several teams of mission doctors. The relationship between different sponsoring agencies, the ACM, the Ministry of Health and the Evangelical Protestant Church in this case is not well worked out and there is considerable leeway for problems to develop.

The 1979 Revolution played some part in the area in encouraging local people to try to help themselves. Flt. Lt. Rawlings' early speeches made a great impact on many people in the Volta Region and when 'National Pothole Filling Day' was declared in July 1979 people went out and filled in pot-holes in the roads. The

of a member who was a buyer in one of the Accra stores changed his job. The Amedzofe potatoes were, apparently, more expensive than imports from overseas and the Ivory Coast.

²⁵ One of the ACM's missionaries in Ghana is an Amedzofe man who trained as a pastor in the US. The ACM also funds a Day Care Centre and is building a seminary in Amedzofe. The ACM's links with Ghana appear to be through the American mission organisation responsible for helping to set up and run the Peki seminary from the 1950s.

male chiefs, certainly in Avatime, and also elsewhere in the Volta Region, were instrumental in supporting this although the work was done by both women and men. However, during the economic doldrums of 1980-81 such enthusiasm as was generated during Rawlings' first period in office seems to have waned.

Gender and Development in Avatime: Women Chiefs and Politics

International Women's Year was 1975 and the same year inaugurated the 'Decade for Women'. Ghana set up the National Council on Women and Development as a response to the UN, which lobbied countries to establish national bureaux that could monitor and campaign on women's issues, but it was not only in official organisations that those in authority were beginning to realise that 'women hold up half the sky'. New forms and directions for feminism, both political and theoretical, were being developed in the north, and gradually their influence became apparent in the UN and governmental and non-governmental agencies.²⁶ These new concerns with women and their lives and livelihoods have now thoroughly permeated to the 'grassroots'.

Within Avatime, *Keda'midzeba* are still key actresses in family and moral and ethical affairs in the villages but the significance of the *odze okusie's* role, except on 'traditional' occasions, seems to be nugatory. In spite of there being a 'real' queen from the past in Amedzofe, and in spite of the current strong emphasis on the incorporation of women (in the sense of the inclusion of their interests) in development plans and projects, the woman chief as such has no functions or presence in contemporary development affairs in the villages. Women chiefs are informed and formally consulted about development projects and plans, but at present they have no necessary or significant part in their inception or implementation.

What roles in the sphere of leadership, then, do women have in Avatime today? Just as in the past in the examples of Akyaawa Yikwan or Yaa Asantewaa, women today, although they may in formal cultural terms have a certain, limited set of roles to perform and some may enjoy an aura of respect accruing from holding a

²⁶ The firm location of 'women's issues' as an integral part of any development agenda is still, however, a goal for the future. Since the late '70s there has been a growing debate among feminists from different parts of the world as to the relevance of 'western feminism' outside of the 'west', and criticism by women not in the north of these feminists for what has been termed variously their imperialism or racism. See Manuh and Adomako 1992 for further discussion of these issues in the case of Ghana.

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particular office or status, must draw on other criteria, and perhaps even more so than in the past. Personality, the ability to motivate and manipulate networks, and increasingly some education and political engagement with the world outside Avatime are required for women to be considered active and dynamic leaders in the community. The Avatime/ Amedzofe *Frauenkönigin's* social prominence has declined, but that does not mean that Avatime women can be classed as second class citizens. There has been a shift in scope in the roles for women as community leaders. In the past they had roles within the community. Now they must not only be prominent and popular within the community, but they must also be able to mediate and negotiate with the world outside the villages. Akyaawa Yikwan did this in spite of the constraints placed on her as a woman in early nineteenth century Asante.

Although women in Avatime have always had, and still maintain, a relatively strong voice in community affairs as the group of *Keda'midzeba*,²⁷ through the first 10 years of my acquaintance with Avatime there was no focus for women to act either *qua* women or as prominent members of a wider Avatime community. With the founding of the 31st December Women's Movement (31DWM), however, Avatime women in general, and Amedzofe women in particular, seem to have found a vehicle for their development energies. A branch of the organisation was established in 1986²⁸ and since then Amedzofe women seem to have found a focus for organising both community development and income generating projects such as those which are now widespread and being lobbied for throughout Ghana.²⁹ Thus current efforts at 'development' for women in Amedzofe are the outcome largely of efforts made by the 31DWM in the village and by prominent Amedzofe women, who are well-educated and working in the professions away from the village.

The 31st December Women's Movement in Amedzofe is extremely popular. The vast majority of women are members and the leader (who is also the Zone leader) is an active and persuasive organiser. Her personality and her prominence form a salutary contrast with those of women in 'traditional' official positions. The 31DWM leader together with two other women prominent in the organisation are

²⁷ This was emphasised in conversation to me by T.C. McCaskie who, on several visits to Avatime, has commented on the prominence of the roles played by women in formal village affairs there as compared with those of Asante women.

²⁸ A group was set up in Vane in 1984.

²⁹ I exclude the Churches as foci for development here. The experience in the Avatime villages is that development through the Church is *for* the Church.

also members of the local Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR)³⁰ and thus have a wider forum in which to state their views and from which to gather information which they relay to their women members. That the women are listened to in these wider fora and have achieved some success in their income generation projects is perhaps a testament to their long-established prominence in the villages as well as their individual skills.

That the focus on 'Women and Development'³¹ in Avatime/ Amedzofe today is largely the result of the efforts of the 31DWM, however, does not imply that the organisation is a panacea, the one means of mobilisation and organisation of women for development in Ghana. Nor is it possible to say that, since the Amedzofe *odze okusie* is not prominent in contemporary women's projects and plans, women's chiefship is everywhere in decline or that women who are in 'traditional' positions are not prominent in contemporary social and secular development projects. Comparative work by Brydon and Legge (1996) in villages in the Volta Region including Amedzofe and in the Ashanti Region suggests that the ways in which 'women's development' (as I call it here for the sake of convenience) is implemented are vastly diverse. In another Volta Region village (Ewe) the Queen Mother³² was at pains to emphasise both her own role in motivating and mobilising the village women and that of the 31st December Movement. In one of the Asante villages, the 31DWM had minimal support ("we just go along to wave handkerchiefs if we are told", was the comment). This latter village, however, had no active focus for community development on the part of either men or women. In yet another village in the Volta Region any role that the movement might have had in mobilising women's development had been entirely fulfilled some 20 or more years before the movement's foundation, not by any activity on the part of the village Queen Mother, but rather by the formation of a village 'Women's Organisation' which was still extremely active in 1991.

³⁰ The CDRs were a national organisation set up in the wake of Rawlings' 2nd coup in 1981. These have now become effectively local development organisations. They were accused of being party organs at the time of Ghana's return to civilian rule in 1992-93.

³¹ Today in the ivory towers of theory 'women and development', also called 'women in development', is being replaced by 'gender and development' (GAD), involving the incorporation of an awareness of gender issues as an interrelated set (concerning inequalities, statuses and so on) into all planning and projects. For a more detailed discussion, see, Moser 1993; Brydon 1993; Kabeer 1994.

³² In the case of Ewe 'Queen Mother' is the accurate translation, not 'woman chief'.

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Thus in some areas and circumstances in contemporary Ghana and in the past female office holding provides or provided a platform for further opportunities for development (now) or for gaining power (in the past). But in others traditional office holding has declined in significance and any attempts at development by and for women are the results of women acting either as individuals or as members of other organisations (NGOs, the churches). Even in an area such as Avatime where it is highly likely that adult women had considerable social power (as *Keda'midzeba*) and that the *Frauenkönigin* wielded considerable influence through an office which owed nothing to borrowing from Asante, the most effective platform for women's development efforts today involves an engagement with the wider regional and national level bureaucratic institutions. While the qualities singled out by other writers, such as personality and the ability to create and manipulate networks, are still important, it seems that today it is entirely fortuitous whether, in the successful exercise of such qualities to promote women's projects and 'enhance the status of women' in communities, they are displayed by a traditional office holder. Being a woman and a traditional office holder are not necessary, let alone sufficient conditions for being a community leader in contemporary Ghanaian society. Indeed, since the restrictions on menstrual blood and fecundity are still pertinent, the value of being an office holder may be problematic because in this case these restrictions are more likely to hamper the full exercise of the holder's potential powers.

I suggested at the beginning of this paper that the shift in the baseline of opportunities for women to attain prominence might be to the advantage of women, such that both the numbers of influential women and the scope of their influence might increase. Thus, while traditionally women's judicial and authoritarian competences were largely in domestic affairs, popular and current emphases in development ideology and practice lay stress not only on teaching women about domestic matters such as general health and nutrition, but also on promoting opportunities for income generation. The current emphasis on the provision of child care also implicitly recognises that in a 'modern' society 'work' might not be compatible with child care, and that, if they are to participate fully in the society which Ghana aspires to become (World Bank 1992), women must be given the opportunity to train and to work outside the subsistence sector. Given the different and new opportunities for contributing to family life, therefore, it is quite possible that the scope of women's influence will increase. Whether men, as office holders, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs or otherwise, can adapt their attitudes and practices in tandem remains to be seen.

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