

# GENDER AND TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY IN THE ARTISANAL MARINE FISHING INDUSTRY IN GHANA

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Studies on the fishing industry<sup>1</sup> lay emphasis on the economic aspect of the industry with constant reference to the technical and entrepreneurial skills of Ghanaian men and women who have developed the industry, not only in their own country but have spread their skills to other West African countries.<sup>2</sup> These skills developed within an organisational structure, which provided necessary conditions for the growth of the industry. It is the purpose of this paper to focus on the traditional organisational structure with special emphasis on the role of gender in traditional authority.

## **Historical Background**

The fishing industry in Ghana caught the attention of early writers from the 15th century onwards.<sup>3</sup> They were struck by the richness of the coastal waters and the technical and entrepreneurial skills of the fisherfolk who exploited them. Fishing as an economic activity was wrapped in a socio-cultural package which sustained its development. The sea itself was worshipped as a god with all the trappings such worship entailed. Fishing was not merely an economic activity but of religious and political concern and fisherfolk were portrayed as a distinctive occupational group.

Two characteristics of special significance for this paper are the sexual division of labour and traditional authority mentioned or described by these early writers. On the sexual division of labour, Rask (1754) wrote:

The inhabitants of the coastal towns also come to market with fish, which their husbands have caught in the sea. These women and peasants' wives very often buy fish and carry it to towns in other countries, in order to make some profit: thus the fish caught in the sea is carried well over 100 or 200 miles into the interior, where it is considered of great value...<sup>5</sup>

Rask's statement portrayed male/female functional specialisation, role complementarity, and authority in the domestic sphere.

With regard to traditional authority, De Marees (1602) made the following observation:

The kings have their *tollmen* who live on the beaches where the ships anchor and trade with the lands people. In order that proper justice is done, the kings install alongside the tollmen one or their sons of close friends (relations). This tollman receives the toll on the fish caught in his quarter or in front of his harbour. He has a measure with which he measures the fish. Those fish which fall below this measure (no matter what kind of fish) are not taxed; but for those which exceed this measure he takes every fifth fish or as much as he thinks it right to take as his toll; and the fish is at once delivered to the King of the quarter by his slaves, who come and fetch the fish every morning.

The jurisdiction of the *tollmen* was not confined to revenue collection, but extended to breaches of public order such as theft and adultery. Another central figure in the authority structure was the priest called "*Fetissero*" or "*vicar servant of their god of fetisso*". Scarcity of fish was regarded as a problem of a religious nature which had to be solved by the propitiation of the gods.

Religion was barely distinguishable from other matters concerning the sea. Such was the situation that even laws on technical matters, such as the banning of fishing with nets on some parts of the coast at certain times of the year, was seen as instructions from the gods, who would "cause much harm" if their instructions were disobeyed (Müller, 1673).

Meanwhile the ruler of the whole community, the king delegated authority to subordinate functionaries in charge of fishing who performed their functions with the assistance of other appointees. The use of discretion of these functionaries and the ultra-fiscal aspect of their jurisdiction were very effective.

The religious dimension of the industry vested authority in yet another group of specialists, priests and priestesses. With the exception of the

religious sphere, women were not mentioned in the public authority structure, in contrast to their indispensable individual role in marketing and financial management of the incomes of their husbands and children.

A study of present day traditional authority in the artisanal sector reveals some of these historical traits.

## The Study

It was observed that practically all fishing communities along the coast have a public authority structure headed by a chief fisherman *Apofohene* (Fante), *Woleiatse* (Ga-Adangme), *Dotorwofia* (Anlo) assisted by a Council. The absence of woman on this body specifically tied to fishing raised issues on its representativeness, since the industry is characterized by the active and indispensable participation of both men and women with complementary gender specific roles. Do these all-male councils deal exclusively with male concerns? If so, then how and by whom are female concerns resolved? Are there other complementary or alternative sources of authority?

In the study, the results of which are presented here, qualitative research methods were mainly employed. Thirteen coastal communities namely Half Assini, Axim, Dixcove, Kommenda, Elmina, Cape Coast, Moree, Anomabo, Accra, Ada, Anloga, Keta, Woe, and eight inland marketing centers, Agona-Nkwanta, Mankessim, Ho, Kumasi, Takyiman, Tamale, Bolgatanga, and Bawku were selected for the study. In-depth interviews were held with the chief fishermen (*Apofohene/Woleiatse/Dotorwofia*) and their council members in the coastal communities. The women leaders (*Konkohene/Konkohemaa, Enamhema*) in all the selected communities were also interviewed to obtain adequate information on their operations. Some of the fish processors and fish traders, *Konkofo/Batafo* (Akan), *Looyei* (Ga-Adangme) were interviewed alone while others were involved in focus group discussions. The men and women included were aged between 18 - 50 years. The interviews were taped and transcribed. Useful information was also collected from oral traditions and through participant observation.

A factor which stood out clearly in the study, was the peculiar blend of conservatism, traditionalism and dynamism and the local variations in the exercise and effectiveness of authority. Authority relations were found to be multifaceted. Some of the basic concepts are separateness of the sexes, interdependence, diffusion, and integration. For example, kinship and domestic spheres of authority relations are interwoven with work units which link up to public traditional fishing authority within the overall traditional authority structure in the community. A look at these other forms of authority relations will shed more light on traditional authority in fishing.

## **Forms of Authority**

### **1. Traditional Authority in Towns and Villages**

Traditional political authority in the selected towns consists of a chief: *Ohene/Omanhene* (Akan), *Mantse* (Ga-Adangme), *Fia* (Ewe) who rules with the assistance of a council and sub-chiefs. Based on past military formations, territorial and religious functions, most of these positions are hereditary with lineages acting as the basic social unit, which determine the eligibility to office. A common feature of the chief's council is that it is all male, the only exception being among the matrilineal Fante, where the queen mother or the occasional female sub-chief may speak on behalf of women. Women usually remain in the background and are consulted when necessary. As traditional authority loses its power and functions to modern local and national governments, the demarcation between the specific roles and responsibilities of the traditional functionaries are becoming blurred. In spite of this, the fishing industry has managed to retain its distinctive, occupational, traditional authority structure.

### **2. Kinship and Domestic Authority**

Kinship units are the basic and the most potent sources of authority in the community. Kinship is indissoluble, ordained by the gods and gives access to property, status and power. It is vested with economic, political and spiritual authority for the ordering of the community. Descent in kin groups

is either matrilineal, as in the case of the Fante, or patrilineal as in the case of the Ga-Adangme and Anlo, but in all cases the important role of affinal ties and the 'submerged' lines of descent are given due recognition. Every lineage in the kin group is governed by a head (*Abusuapenyin*- Fante, *Shia Nukpa* - Ga-Adangme, *Ametsitsia* or *Samefia*- Anlo) with the assistance of council. Both the head and the council members are male but the *Abusuapenyin* has a female counterpart (*Obaa Penyin* - Fante, *Shia Yoo Nukpa* - Ga-Adangme) who is consulted by a council on important issues. However, women meet when the need arises to discuss issues which demand their participation. They are also invited to the lineage council meetings for discussions on specific issues. Within the group or lineage are smaller units based on genealogy and residence.

Three generations within the kin groups appear to be the most effective units for the exercise of authority over members within the group. Three types of residential units were observed:

1. unisexual units comprising patrilaterally related males headed by a male.
2. unisexual units comprising matrilaterally related females headed by a female.
3. bisexual units comprising lineage members and spouses headed by a male or a female. (The sex of the head of the unit depends on the builder of the house.)

The first two pertain to Fante and Ga-Adangme traditional residential patterns while the third pattern is found among the traditional Anlo.

The sexual separation of residential units implies that both men and women have a chance of heading residential units under the ultimate authority of the lineage head *Abusuapenyin*. In this way, the residential pattern symbolizes sexual separation, female autonomy, and male superordination.

Cutting across or parallel to the kinship and residential authority is the conjugal family. Among the Fante and Ga-Adangme, residence is duolocal, while the Anlo are virilocal. However exceptions to the general pattern were observed in all the three ethnic groups. In the case of duolocality, the authority of the husband as head of the conjugal family harmonises with

the authority structure of the residential unit. In duolocality, a cleavage is created in the conjugal unit, which weakens the authority of the husband. The wife lives with her kinsmen and all her children except for the adolescent males. She only goes to sleep in her husband's house at night. In the case of polygyny, her visits are even less frequent. A wife's relationship with her children, especially adult daughters and their children, is therefore closer, giving her more scope for the exercise of her maternal authority. For example, a wife staying with her married daughter shares authority with her daughter's husband.

The authority relations within the conjugal family and kin groups are made more complex by the sexual division of labour, parental obligations in the occupational sphere and interdependence of male and female, husband and wife in the fishing industry. Traditionally, conjugal units and kinship ties are reorganized to operate as work units.

### **3. Work Units**

In keeping with the historical practice, the sexual division of labour fits into conjugal relationships. Traditionally, the husband hands over his catch to his wife who processes and markets it. A father has the responsibility of teaching the sons to fish and a mother her daughter to handle post-harvest operations. In this way, parents are tutors and managers till the children gain their occupational independence. The occupational authority relations between father and son have been modified by technological developments in the industry.

Father and son may be ordinary fishermen working in different canoes. Under such circumstances, the occupational authority of the father is undermined. However, a father who owns the means of production usually works with his sons, kinsmen, and non-relatives depending on the type and size of the crew. Such a father is able to exercise more authority over his sons. The father, however, shares this authority with the captain or bosun, who is usually in charge of sea operations or when the crew is migrating.

In the female sector of the work unit, interdependence and matrifocality continue to play a major role in authority relations. The reproductive functions and responsibilities of the female, the dispersal of locations of post-harvest operations and the residential patterns are interwoven to enhance the authority of the mother as head of the work unit. Post-harvest operations are located at three sites, that is, the beach for purchase and sale of fresh fish, the home or processing site for processing and sale and the market, either local or distant, for sale and purchase. Shared responsibility is the key to effective management of post-harvest operations. The mother as head of the unit may decide to stay at home to combine supervision, processing and cooking with the responsibility of nursing a sick or newly born child, while one daughter is at the beach purchasing fish and another at the market selling. Seniority, experience, and talent are combined in these authority relations, since important on the spot decisions will have to be taken by the individual on behalf of the whole unit.

The biological, economic and social functions of the female combine with the occupational characteristics of the industry to enhance the authority of the female in the domestic and private sphere. Male and female authorities are complementary with the latter maintaining a comparatively stronger hold, though theoretically it is the male who is vested with superior authority.

Are these authority relations reflected in the public management of the fishing industry?

#### **4. Public Traditional Authority In Fishing**

Three public offices, one male and two female were identified:

The Chief Fisherman *Apofohene* (Fante), *Woleiatse* (Ga-Adangme), *Dotorwafia* (Anlo) and his council, *Besonfo* (Fante) in the coastal communities.

The Chief Fishmonger/Processor *Konkohene* (Fante) and her council *Besonfo* in coastal communities.

The Chief Fish Trader *Konkohene/Konkohemaa*, *Enamhemaa* (Fante) and her council *Besonfo* in the markets.

## **(i) The Chief Fisherman and his Council**

The main function of the chief fisherman is to solve the occupational problems of fisher folk. These include:-

### **Accidents at Sea**

In case of drowning, the chief fisherman bans fishing for some days hoping that the anger of the sea will subside and the body will be washed ashore. A message is sent to neighbouring chief fishermen to send information whenever a strange body is washed ashore. In cases of accidents caused by a collision with other fishermen at sea, or fights at sea, the chief fisherman and his council adjudicate. The keynote is compromise. Other inter and intra crew and company conflicts are also resolved by the council. There may be problems over cheating by the owner of canoe equipment of the crew or vice versa.

### **Conflict Resolution**

Conflicts between fishermen and fishmongers, usually over debts; fishmongers not paying for fish they have purchased from fishermen and fishermen not paying for money they may have borrowed from fishmongers.

### **Sharing of Government Allocations**

Collection, supervision, and sharing of fishing inputs allocated by government. To alleviate some of the problems of scarcity of inputs, the government through various agencies imports the items and distributes them to fishermen at comparatively modest prices. With the introduction of pre-mix fuel, which is less than a third of the normal price of fuel, this function of the chief fisherman has become important. He plays the role of intermediary between migrant fishermen and traditional authority in the town. He collects the customary dues from migrant fishermen and it is his duty to give them protection.



## **Participation in religious rituals connected with the sea.**

The sea is acknowledged as a god containing lesser gods. This function is of extreme importance since the fishermen believe the abundance or scarcity of the fish depends on the sea-god. In cases of scarcity the chief fisherman and his council are expected to consult the god to ascertain what he wants as pacification. Offerings are also made annually. The renowned *Bakatue* festival of Elmina and *Nsho-Bulemo* of the Ga-Adangme are specially dedicated to fishing.

To ensure that problems of fishermen receive prompt attention, the chief fisherman and his council have a special place, usually a shed at the beach where they can sit for consultation. For serious cases, meetings are formally convened and deliberations are held in the house of the chief fisherman as and when necessary.

### **(ii) Konkohene/Konkohemaa (in the coastal community)**

In some of the coastal towns the *Konkohene* has influence in the pricing of fish. On the beaches, the prices demanded and obtained by the first crew to land their catch prevail for the day and may last for some days if the catch remains stable. This means that the bargaining and pricing of fish by the first crew is of great concern for the rest of the fisherfolk. For this reason, the *Konkohene* represents the interests of the women in the bargaining process. However, as a woman (*obaatan in Fante*) she is also expected to have natural compassion for the men folk. If the volume of fish caught for the day is reduced or the quality of fish of a particular canoe is much higher, the crew may appeal to the *Konkohene* to see to it that they get a higher price. If there is a glut the women appeal to the *Konkohene* to ask the fishermen for a reduction in price.

Another function of the *Konkohene* is the settlement of disputes between women competing over the purchase of fish. *Konkohene* also settles cases of debts between men and women and between women. She also assists with contributions of cash or kind to ritual performances for the sea gods.

The *Konkohene* and her council do not hold regular meetings. They meet occasionally at the house of the *Konkohene* whenever there is a problem to be solved.

**(iii) Konkohene/Enamhemaa (in the market)**

The *Enamhemaa*'s functions involve the solution of problems related to travelling, transportation of goods, selling, and debt collection.

With regard to travelling, accidents are the main issues of concern. In the event of an accident, it is the *Enamhemaa*'s duty to take care of the injured victim till the relatives arrive. In case of death, she has to transport the body to the victim's hometown. This function is of extreme importance in a culture in which corpses are honoured and a fitting burial signifies proper ushering into the spirit world. When a fish trader dies, it is the *Enamhemaa*'s duty to provide the corpse with a ring, and the family with cash donations (*Nsaa* in Fante). Bereavement of a fish trader also attracts a donation from the group.

Transportation of fish is beset with hazards, some of which demand the intervention of the *hemaa*. The most common form of transportation is trucks and vans. A truck driver loads several consignments of fish from the coast to one or two markets. The fish traders in instances involving short distances accompany their goods, but in most cases only one fish trader travels with the truck of fish. The rest find other means of transportation to the market. In instances such as the Fante-Kumasi-Techiman trade, fish is consigned to agents at the markets, who sell and send back the money. Alternatively, the owners travel to collect the money themselves. The consignments are marked with pieces of cloth (*ahyenso* - i.e. identity tags). At the destinations, porters off-load the fish and deliver to the appropriate stalls leaving watchmen to guard the fish till the owners arrive in the morning to start business. Problems, which fish traders usually face, are: Accidents or breakdown of trucks/vans leading to delay or damage of consignments, delivery of consignments at wrong destinations, and loss of consignments.

In such cases, the *hema* liaises with the Ghana Private Road and Transport Union to seek a solution to the problem. The union also consults the *hema* when it has to deal with lost fish or fish which has to be thrown away because it is rotten.

In the sale of fish, the fish trader may have to inform the *hema* before she starts the business in the market or sometime after she has started, with payment of a fee *amba ntem nasa* (late comer drink). The fish trade survives on supplier credit, for most women simply do not have the requisite capital to commence or operate their business. It was observed at Tekyiman, and Bawku markets that credit extended beyond the borders of Ghana. The trade thrives on goodwill and trust. Sometimes, this trust is abused and buyers abscond with the sellers' money. On a few occasions a trader in such circumstance may travel in search of a debtors but usually she waits till the debtor revisits the market. The debtor is then handed over to the *hema* in the market, who has the responsibility of collecting the money.

The *Konkohema/Enamhema* acts as an intermediary between the fish trader and local traditional authorities. She presents fish to the traditional authorities weekly during festivals or ritual occasions, funerals and when official guests visit the town. A drink is usually added during annual festivals.

## **Eligibility And Qualifications**

### **The Chief Fisherman and his Council**

The basic qualification for the position of chief fisherman is fishing experience and expertise, except in places where it is hereditary. In Cape Coast, Winneba and among the Ga-Adangme the position is hereditary. The eligible lineages are backed by a historical tradition of being either the first to introduce marine fishing to the locality or acknowledged experts in the community sometime in the past. In such cases experience and expertise are identified with the lineage rather than the individual who holds the position.

To qualify for election in places where the status is achieved by merit, a man should be of good standing among fishermen, that is, he should be an owner of a canoe and gear. a man in this class is said to be whole, complete (*Odzi mu* in Fante). Personal attributes such as patience, tolerance, boldness, strength, concern and time (*adagyir*) for other people's welfare and ability to command respect are very essential. In some towns such as Elmina and Kommenda all fishermen are eligible. In others such as Anomabo, Dixcove and Moree eligibility is limited to selected groups in the town.

After a chief fisherman has been selected, he goes through rituals and ceremonies varying in elaboration but in consonance with ritual of other traditional offices. Examples are ritual confinement, swearing of oath, jubilation and at the end the use of white powder to signify victory etc.

The chief fisherman is assisted by a council whose members have virtually the same qualities as the chief fisherman. There should always be one or two who can be sent on errands. Selection is open to all but in some towns such as Elmina there is equal representation on the council from all the quarters of the town. The number of Council members varies although among the Fante the terminology *bensofo* "the seven elders" is applied.

### **Konkohene/Hemaa In The Coastal Community**

The qualifications are: experience in fish handling, patience, tolerance, time and concern (*Adagyir*) for others, boldness, compassion and both mental and physical sharpness (*ne ho ye hyiw* "she is hot" (smart). The election is done by the elders (*mpenyinfo*) in the fish trade. There is always a surprise element when the candidate is suddenly lifted up and carried, sprinkled with white powder and cheered. This is usually done at the funeral celebration of the previous *Konkohene*. A date is then fixed for formal presentation to the chief fisherman and to the chief of the town or his oath swearing may or may not be involved during the presentation. The *Konkohene*, like the Chief Fisherman has a council (*besonfo*) which assists her in her work.

## **Konkohene/Enamhemaa - In The Market**

The election of the *Konkohene* for the markets is essentially the same as those in the fishing communities. Qualification such as, age, the first or longest serving fish trader and ethnic identity also prevail. A marked feature of female authority in the markets is the diffusion of authority based on commodity, linguistic or territorial identity, and competition. Emphasis is on leadership of smaller units. For example, in Kumasi there are five leaders of marine fish marketing; two *Eban Hemaa* (herring queenmother) one *hemaa* for frozen fish sellers and one for frozen fish processors and one for Ewe fish sellers. At Techiman, there is one *hemaa* for the Fante residents who travel regularly to the coast to purchase fish - *Kwansofo* (on the road) or *Daadaa Hemaa*, (daily) and three others for the coastal traders who travel to Takyiman on market days. Coastal women as experts and experience fish processors and traders, are seen in leadership positions in markets outside their own hometowns. For example, in Kumasi and Techiman, all the marine fish queenmothers are from the coast. At Ho, the leader of all fish sellers in the market is from Anyako an Anlo town and in Asamankese market she is from *Senya Bereku*.

## **Revenue Administration**

For administrative expenses of the chief fisherman, revenue is raised from the beach. This is supplemented by his private resources. The distinction between private and public revenues are virtually indistinguishable, but in some places clerks or secretaries keep the accounts. Revenue is from both formal and informal sources. From migrant fishermen, the chief fisherman receives a specified amount plus a bottle of schnapps or local gin (*akpeteshie*), (*bele naa nii* Ga-Adangme). In addition, they are taxed a crate/tray of fish. If the catch is more than twenty crates/trays, or for every twenty crates/trays, one tray is collected as tax or, unspecified amounts based on discretion. This differs from beach to beach. For local fishermen, 'voluntary' donations are the mode of taxation. The level of the collected tax is bound to vary from time to time given the voluntary nature of the taxation. The chief fisherman has a basket or wooden tray, which he sends round for collection of fish given according to the discretion of the donor.

The fish, thus collected is shared by the chief fisherman and his council, some for consumption and the rest for sale. On special occasions involving heavy and unexpected expenditure, a levy is placed on every canoe.

### **Konkohene/Hemaa**

For revenue, the *Konkohene* at the beach takes fish from every crate/tray bought by the women. She is supposed to sell the fish to meet any official expenditure. To meet the demands of their office, the female leaders in the market depend on their own resources and contributions from the fish buyers. The usual practice for revenue collection is for the *hemaa* to send messengers round to collect money for specific purposes.

Apart from voluntary donation of fish, the *amba ntem nsa* (late comer drink) which she occasionally receives is also a source of revenue. In addition to these sources of revenue, fines are imposed by both male and female leaders in cash or drinks for infringement of rules and regulations.

### **Chief Fisherman**

#### **Local Variations of Authority**

The role of chief fisherman and his council so far described is what prevails among the Fante, who according to oral traditions are the pioneers in the development of marine fisheries along the Ghanaian coast (Dickson, K.B. 1971). Ethnic and local variations were observed in the expression of traditional authority in other coastal communities. On the Ga-Adangme coast, where oral traditions credit the Fantes with the introduction of marine fishing, the position of chief fisherman is vested in lineages of Fante descent, in recognition of their role as pioneers. The end result is that there are at present men occupying the position of chief fisherman who are not professional fishermen. To minimise the detrimental effects of having a non-fisherman as chief fisherman, there is usually a professional who deputizes for him, backed by a council of mature and knowledgeable men.

On the Anlo coast, the position of chief fisherman is said to be of recent origin. The owners of the means of production are acknowledged leaders since they control comparatively large companies. The overall traditional body in the community handles the affairs of the fishing industry. The position of chief fisherman was instituted out of the need to deal with the supply of fishing inputs provided by the government to conform to what pertains in the other coastal communities.

### **Local Variation of Female Authority**

Local variations of female traditional authority are also evident on the Ga-Adangme and Anlo coasts. Among the Ga-Adangme the positions of *Konkohene* and council are uncommon. So far one has been located to Tema where there is such a leader referred to as *Woleianye* (mother of fishermen), a female equivalent of a *woleiatse* (father of fishermen). For the rest of the coast, some have leaders they refer to as *Onukpa* the ordinary term used to describe an adult or elder. Other parts of the coast including Anlo have no female leaders. In the Accra markets, Agbobbloshie has a female leader who performs the same role as the *enam hema* at Kumasi central market. At Anloga market a woman emerged as a leader who started by organising the women traders for welfare purposes such as bereavement. She was later confirmed in her leadership position by the chief and his council. Female authority on the Fante Coast appears to be comparatively better structured and accepted and more stable than on the Ga-Adangme and Anlo coasts.

The local variation in the authority structure in the fishing industry reveals that the institutions grew out of the need to perform specific functions relevant to the requirements of the industry. For this reason, the role of chief fisherman is more effective and influential in some communities than others. In some communities, such as Elmina, Kommenda, Moree, one chief fisherman is deemed adequate, while in others there are two, three or more, one for each landing beach or quarter, as the case may be. Examples are Anomabo, Dixcove, Axim, and Half Assini. In the female sector, leadership is effective in some communities, while others have no institutionalized leadership positions.

## Responses to Male and Female Authority

In the case of elected functionaries, both men and women have the same concept of the position which they occupy. It is a position of honour, acknowledgment of their special qualities and symbol of status, which they have acquired by dint of hard work. In view of their economic standing they are able to play their role with practically no remuneration at best irregular, inadequate or nominal revenue. In fact their private resources are sometimes used in the exercise of their authority. This means that men and women in leadership positions must be able to carry on their own business while exercising their authority. This reiterates the importance of business success as a criterion in the choice of leaders. In this way, maintenance of the authority structure is not a heavy burden on the fisherfolk. This is significant in the light of the seasonality and insecurity of supply of fish and inadequacy of cash in the fishing business. In the case of the chief fisherman, a crew under a captain, preferably a grown-up son or nephews, keeps the business going while the *Konkohene/Hemaa* relies on grown up daughters and dependants. They are able to have both the resources and time (*adagyir*) to carry on their responsibilities. This type of authority is what Weber (1997) classifies as “amateur or non-professional” type of administrative personnel. To borrow Weber’s terminology, fishermen and women in leadership positions may be classified as “professional amateurs”, a combination of their professional expertise with their non-remunerative status.

Comparatively, men have more power in the exercise of their authority than women. Male authority has longer historical origins than female authority. It appears to be more stable and the role of the chief fisherman more acceptable. The chief fisherman has a defined territory, the sea, and the beach. When migrants come into his territory they are a minority group in a homogeneous situation. His power is even backed by the sea. Its inherent danger and mysteries render the rescue operations supervised by the chief fisherman indispensable and this strengthens his position. On the other hand the *Konkohene* on the beach is surrounded by men in a patriarchal community. Direct male interference in the exercise of female authority is occasionally encountered, though cooperation and peaceful



co-existence is the general pattern. In the markets, the *hema* has to deal with a very mobile and unstable group, who usually come for only a few months of the year during the glut season. The resident fish sellers, who constitute the stable group, may even shift their economic activities to some other commodity or occupation during the lean season. The *hema*'s authority is exercised through influence and persuasion. The keynote is peace and understanding based on respect. While men hold on to their positions women were found to let go when they are faced with opposition. They do not see the point in having to endure insults and grumbling to hold on to such an honorary position.

In the coastal communities, female authority is autonomous and yet subordinate to male authority. Both have their spheres of operation. The chief fisherman sometimes refers cases to the *Konkohene*, when he feels they fall within her area of competence. The *Konkohene* in turn refers problems which she cannot solve to the chief fisherman. Fisher folks see the *Konkohene* as their mother and the chief fisherman as their father. However, they are able occasionally to disregard *Konkohene*'s services, while the need for a chief fisherman is acknowledged by all.

### **Relationship with Traditional Local Authority**

Historical developments and local concepts and practices affect the relationship between traditional authority in the fishing sector and the overall traditional political authority in the towns and villages. Both sides have obligations to each other and to the community. In carrying out these obligations, the pendulum swings from one to the other. The chief fisherman and *Konkohene* make voluntary fish donations to the local chief from time to time and annually cash and drinks. In places where fishing is in the hands of migrants, the local authorities are beginning to make more demands. To facilitate control in their towns, local men are edging their way into leadership positions which formerly were left entirely to migrants. Examples are in Axim and Half Assini.

In Kumasi where traditional authority is strong and female authority runs parallel to male authority, the relationship is quite stable. The leaders are

of equal status to the other commodity *hema* in the market and operate under the *Dwabrem Hema* (the market queen mother) a hereditary position with a stool like any other in Asante. The *Dwabrem Hema* is under the *Asantehema*, Queen Mother of the Asante Kingdom and it is to her that she presents the fish, which she receives on behalf of the women. The fish thus received is divided into two, one for the household of the *Asantehema* and the other for the *Asantehene*, as a contribution to the upkeep of the many officials, dependents, hangers on and visitors who live in or visit the palaces.

In other towns where female traditional authority is not as strong as in Asante, local women are now trying to establish themselves as leaders in the markets. In Asamankese, this met with opposition from the Fante fish traders. In Tekyiman, the *Adwenhema* (Mudfish Queenmother), a local woman, is now acknowledged as the overall queenmother of the fish traders. Her *besonfo* include very active, experienced resident Fante fish traders and a male secretary, who support her in the exercise of her authority. In Bawku, a local woman, Madam Juliana was chosen as leader by the local fish traders in reaction to a problem created by migrant fish traders. It was the chief of the town who suggested to the fish traders to chose a leader, when the case with the migrant fish sellers was taken to him for arbitration. The choice was confirmed by the chief and Madam Juliana became acknowledged by the migrant leaders as the overall leader and their intermediary in their dealings with traditional authority in the town.

The relationship between the chief fisherman and traditional religious authority in the towns highlights the complexities of traditional roles and gender relationships. The sea gods are community gods, worshipped by the whole community, under the supervision of two types of occupational specialists fishermen and women, priests and priestesses. Men as priests officiate, but the gods more commonly use mediums, who are usually women. A female medium, when possessed, issues instructions on behalf of the gods to the whole community who are thus compelled to carry out the instructions of the gods with the chief and chief fisherman directly responsible for the compliance. In Elmina, a possessed priestess operates the whole night of the Monday before the Tuesday of the *Bakatue* festival,

giving orders, reprimanding and exposing offenses of men and women of all walks of life. In Cape Coast, the chief fisherman and his council had to visit the shrine of the sea god several times to ask for permission to fish on Sunday. Finally, the god agreed through the priestess to grant their request, on condition that they would offer a cow as sacrifice. Fishermen now fish on Sunday, thanks to the intervention of the priestess! Women are subordinate to men but when the gods take over, men readily obey a woman. In her religious capacity and when possessed, a woman is more or less a god. It must be noted, however, she reverts to her feminine status when not possessed.

### **Modernization**

Traditional authority in fishing exhibits modernizing trends, which tend to weaken or strengthen the authority of the leaders according to the exigencies of the situation. The position of chief fisherman and *Konkohemaa* contend with other centres of influence and power presented by fishing co-operatives, service centres and farmers and fishermen's councils and women's organizations.

In some towns, one finds chief fishermen and local "chairmen" in newly instituted fishing bodies both handling problems of fishermen. The position of secretary is beginning to feature in the traditional fishing bodies since fishermen, mostly illiterate, have to deal with modern administrative machinery at the district, regional and national levels. To help fishermen obtain inputs for fishing, the National Canoe Fishermen Council comprising chief fishermen along the whole coastal areas has been formed. Other national bodies which attempt to solve the problems of fishermen present a modern phenomenon as against the traditional concept of smaller spheres of influence and authority. The prevailing concept of obtaining positions for material gain instead of the traditional concept of honour and status, (*Anuonyam*) is also gaining ground. Tangible gain is taking the place of the hypothetical and potential, which may even lead to the dispensing of private revenue for public good.

Law enforcement agencies both formal and informal are providing alternative sources for problem solution. Fisherfolk may now resort to the

police, military, law courts, Cadres for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), militia etc. when applicable to use modern coercive measures to collect debts, settle fights, retrieve properties and solve any other problems that they encounter.

In spite of the modernizing trends, traditional authority in fishing continues to operate using its original structures in some instances to strengthen its position and gain a central position in the development of the towns. In Elmina for example, the chief fisherman and his council are contributing increasing amounts to community development. In Kommenda, through delegations sent to migrant fishermen in other West African towns, the traditional authorities in fishing are able to make substantial contributions to a current electrification project in the town. As proof of their key role, the chairman of the committee in charge of the project is the deputy chief fisherman.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

The absence of women in the council of the Chief Fisherman is not as anomalous as it may appear at first sight. It fits into the general pattern of authority relations in the fishing community. The paradox in this instance lies in the economic power wielded by the women in contrast to their absence from the council. The explanation may lie not only in the traditional practices of the community but also in the occupational division of labour.

Are women really interested in spending valuable time sitting in the council of men discussing issues for which they have no technical knowledge? In answer to the above question, one male participant in a group discussion remarked:

When we go to sea, we don't go with them, and when they go to Kumasi, we don't go with them.

A female canoe owner also stated:

The fact is women do not go to fishing and it is things related to sea and fish production that are discussed, and women discuss preservation and marketing of fish. When you go there,

you see only men and issues discussed are male oriented. Thus a woman will find herself odd among the large number of men. In the same way, there is not a single man among the Fishmonger's Association. Even if a man attends our meeting he cannot understand issues that we discuss because they do not affect him. This is because there are no men fishmongers in our society.

The functions of the council also reveal that the men do not have the requisite knowledge to handle the female sector of the occupation. Added to this is the male tendency in the fishing communities to contemptuously label problems between women as "*Mmaa sem*" (female issues) and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. The response of women to this technical deficiency and male sense of superiority is to organize themselves under their own leadership to solve their own problems a pattern that fits into the division of the sexes, interdependence of male and female, female autonomy and male super-ordination. In the domestic and economic spheres women have carved a niche for themselves and may not therefore find it necessary to seek public participation in a body, which is traditionally, all male. All the women questioned in the study were in total agreement to the council being segregated. One canoe owner said:

Sometimes there are certain things that need to be discussed among men only which do not concern women and I think this justifies the men's association. If you consider the issues we discuss, the circumstances under which they are discussed and above all the settings in which they are discussed you will understand the segregated nature of our associations. For instance we the fishmongers association meet on Tuesdays at the Sempe Chief's house early in the morning and we rush to the market immediately after this. In the week, it is only at this same day and time that fishermen are free to attend to their fishing inputs. Nets are mended, outboard motors are serviced, monetary transactions are effected, and all forms of interactions are made. How then can the men attend our meetings to listen to issue that do not affect them directly?

Authority relations in the domestic sphere and work units provide the props which support the public institutions.

Traditional authority in the artisanal marine fishing industry continues to reflect the essential characteristics and development of the industry within the community at large. On the sea and beaches where men control and direct operations the chief fisherman and his council are all males working hand in hand with the *Konkohene* and her all female council. In the markets where women dominate, the *Konkohene/Hemaa* and her council are all female. Fishermen have no place in the market. Diffusion of authority like the industry itself and the society at large has to cope with modernizing currents. In any case, the importance of the industry and authority of the men in leadership positions is recognized and acknowledged by the society represented by traditional and modern national governments. These are the men and women who know the heartbeat of the industry and who have a stake in its success or failure. They support the structures, which sustain the necessary conditions suitable for the development of the technical and entrepreneurial skills of Ghanaian fishermen. This achievement is enhanced by their immense contribution to the development of fisheries in Ghana and other West African countries.

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## Notes

1. These studies include Johnson, F.R. (1941); Brown, A.P. (1904); Lawson R.M., & Kwei E. (1974); Hill, P. (1963-64); Vercruijse, E. (1983); Afull K. & Osafo-Gyimah, (1979); Haakonsen,(1988) Nukunya (1989, 1990); Overå, 1992; Odotei, (1990/91/92/93).
2. Haakonsen, (1998), Bortei-Doku, (1991) Nukunya,(1989) Odotei, (1990).
3. The writers included, Pereira, P. (1518)); De Marees, (1602); Müller, W.J., (1673); Tilleman, E. (1697); Rask, (1754); Romer, F.L., (1760); Monrad, H.C., (1822).
4. De Marees, 1602; Rask, 1754; Romer, 1760.