

APPEARANCE AND REALITY: THE AMBIGUOUS POSITION OF WOMEN IN KWAHU,  
GHANA

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Even if a woman possesses a talking drum, she  
keeps it in a room belonging to a man. (Twi proverb)

Proverbs are the pre-eminent way of expressing and reinforcing traditional values among the Kwahu of Ghana. Proverbs are like magical formulas. If someone is able to use an appropriate one at the right moment, he reaps applause from the audience. A proverb may influence the outcome of a court case.

The proverbs referring to the position and role of women are numerous. One has been taken as a motto for this paper: "Even if a woman possesses a talking drum, she keeps it in a room belonging to a man". Akrofi (n.d.:4) explains that the possession of a talking drum is the privilege of a chief, so according to him the proverb means: however great a woman, she is dependent on a man.<sup>1</sup> Another proverb with a similar tenor is: "The beautiful woman owes her beauty to her husband". Because a woman is ultimately dependent on a man she should show deference and respect in her behaviour towards men, particularly towards her husband. One proverb goes: "It is improper if a woman sits down while her husband is standing", and another one says: "A woman should sleep behind her husband", meaning a woman is subordinate to him. Finally, a large number of proverbs have it that women are useless, talkative, greedy and vain creatures, for example: "All women are alike", "Women like to be where there is money" and "If a tall woman carries palm nuts the hornbill (a bird) eats them". The meaning of the last proverb is probably that a talkative woman divulges domestic secrets (Akrofi n.d.:5).

In this paper I endeavour to show that these proverbs represent make-believe values, male ideals which prescribe rules of deferential behaviour for women and validate these rules by pointing to allegedly inferior female qualities. In reality, however, women often correspond more to the picture of manliness than the men themselves. It seems, therefore, that official rules and the recitation of traditional values shroud reality rather than disclose it.

## 1. The research<sup>2</sup>

The data presented in this paper was collected during two six-month periods of fieldwork in a small town (4000 inhabitants) in the Kwahu area of Ghana. During this time I lived in the house of the head of a matrilineage. The first period (1971) I spent studying marriage and family life in that lineage. My most important techniques consisted of participant observation and recording life histories of lineage members. The second period (1973) was characterized by a more structured approach. Forty-two adult members of the same lineage were interviewed about marriage and birth control. In addition, 100 males and 179 females in that town, were given the same interview.

Another part of the research took place at schools where I collected the opinion of pupils about a wide range of topics. The method involved tests consisting of uncompleted sentences (cf. Molnos 1968) and the writing of essays. Occasionally we shall refer to this school survey as well.

## 2. The Kwahu of Ghana

About half of Ghana's 8 million population are matrilineal Akan who speak mutually intelligible dialects of a language called Twi. Some of the Akan subgroups are better known than others due to the work of ethnographers. The best known group is the Asante (Ashanti) who have been studied by Rattray, Fortes, Busia and various others. Other groups described by anthropologists include the Akyem (or Akim; by Field) and the Fante (by Christensen). One Akan group lives across

the Ivory Coast border: the Agni among whom Köbben carried out field-work in the 1950s. The Kwahu are most closely related to the Asante.

The Kwahu area is situated about 100 miles north of the capital of Accra. The largest Kwahu town is Nkawkaw on the Accra-Kumasi road. The Kwahu number about 190,000, but it is estimated that 30 % of them live outside the Kwahu area (10 % in the capital). The reason is that Kwahu are astute traders who set up stores in all towns of Ghana. They seem to monopolize a great deal of the trade in Accra. Most Kwahu in the Kwahu area, however, are farmers and it is with this group of rural Kwahu that we are concerned in this paper.

### 3. Appearance of female subordination

For a superficial observer the position of women in rural Kwahu is characterized by subordination. This first impression is based upon the recitation of traditional values through proverbs and direct statements concerning rules of comportment as well as upon actual behaviour. Male informants, particularly older men, emphasize that a woman must show deference and respect to her husband. A large number of activities are further considered as unmanly and must be performed by women or children. For example, it is improper for a man to eat together with his wife, to perform domestic chores such as carrying water, pounding fufu<sup>3</sup>, washing laundry, and sweeping the compound. Nor should a man carry any loads on his head. The traditional rules are not followed by everybody, but a large group of men do put them into practice, as is shown in the four tables below. The tables show the (reported) practice of husbands concerning two activities: taking meals and carrying loads. Two things strike the eye. First that male segregation, which is taken here as a form of superordination, does not sufficiently decrease among the young as to produce a statistically significant relationship. (In one case, segregation is even more pronounced among the young; see Table 4.) Thus female subordination is also common among the younger generation. The second point worth mentioning is that according to female respondents, male segregation is considerably higher than male respondents report. This may be an indication that women resent the overbearing attitude of their male

partners.

Table 1. Kwahu men: age and manner of taking meals  
(percentages only; N = 86)

	eating with wife	eating separately	total
-29 years	20	16	36
30-39 years	12	15	27
40+ years	13	24	37
total	45	55	100

df = 2       $\chi^2 = 2.68$       p = .26

missing observations (not married) = 14

Table 2. Kwahu men: age and habit of assisting wife to carry  
head loads  
(percentages only; N = 82)

	helping wife	not helping wife	total
-29 years	32	5	37
30-39 years	17	7	24
40+ years	28	11	39
total	77	23	100

df = 2       $\chi^2 = 2.60$       p = .27

missing observations (not married; not farming) = 18

Table 3. Kwahu women: age and manner of taking meals by husband  
(percentages only; N = 164)

	eating with wife	eating separately	total
-29 years	22	38	60
30-39 years	7	24	31
40+ years	2	7	9
total	31	69	100

df = 2       $\chi^2 = 3.35$       p = .19  
missing observations (not married) = 15

Table 4. Kwahu women: age and habit of husband to assist wife  
carrying head loads  
(percentages only; N = 150)

	helping wife	not helping wife	total
-29 years	31	28	59
30-39 years	21	10	31
40+ years	5	5	10
total	57	43	100

df = 2       $\chi^2 = 3.80$       p = .15  
missing observations (not married; not farming) = 29

There is, however, abundant evidence that male domination is less strong than is suggested by the above-cited rules. In the first place, these rules prove to hold strongly only when husband and wife are seen by others or at least run the risk of being seen. That risk is continuously present in a town where life takes place in the open and hardly anything occurs without others seeing it. In such a situation, a large proportion of men will refuse to eat with their

wives, because, as they say, such a thing would be improper for a man to do.

During a few months in the year, most farmers go to their 'village' (akuraa) as they call it. An akuraa is an isolated farming settlement where people live under rather primitive conditions. Usually there is only a small hut made of grass or mud and everything which makes life in the town enjoyable is missing. If a man and his wife go and stay in such a place they will not even think of continuing the segregated type of life they were living in the town. There is nobody around to observe and criticize them. The man eats with his wife, carries heavy loads on his head and helps his wife with numerous domestic duties. After all, their stay in the akuraa serves an economic purpose and it would be absurd for the man to insist on social formalities and by doing so unnecessarily prolong this harsh and unpleasant stay in the settlement.

Kwahu couples who move to Accra and rent a room in one of the crowded houses in the Accra suburbs are in a similar situation. Their life becomes more individualistic if they have no relatives or acquaintances around and a greater part of their life takes place indoors. They too may start behaving differently. A man may give up his façade of male authority and start sharing tasks with his wife. But when they return to their hometown, the Accra couple as well as the couple from the farming settlement take up again the old habits of conjugal segregation.

The feelings about upholding rules of male superordination are well expressed by a school pupil who writes about a man eating with his wife:

Although it is good it is not good because when you and your wife are eating and your friend comes in and sees you he will laugh at you.

In general, however, school pupils, particularly girls, have a rather positive opinion about a man who eats with his wife, helps her and treats her in a more egalitarian way. Most of them tend to consider this as a sign of love and affection, but even among them the idea that a woman ought to be subordinate to her husband is widely prevalent. The following essay on "The qualities of a good wife" was

written by a 15 years old girl.

A good wife has to be gentle and obedient to her husband and do whatever she is told to do. A good wife has to show a kind of politeness to her husband. The wife must wake up early and keep the house in order and give the husband water to bathe and have breakfast ready as early as possible for the husband.

She has to sweep the rooms and arrange everything as the husband likes it to be. She has to wash the man's clothes any time she sees that they are dirty without him telling her to do so and when asking him something she must begin with please and never use abusive words.

She must see to bathing the children and giving them clean dresses to wear because perhaps the man wants to introduce his children to someone and it will be a disgrace to see the children dirty. The woman too must be neat and put on clean clothes and wash her hair and tie it nicely. I think if a wife does all these things it will bring peace and they will have a fine marriage.

It is not certain whether this girl is giving her own view or quoting the rule. Whatever the case may be, the essay vividly illustrates the extent to which the old rules are still being reinforced. But, as I have said, these rules serve to uphold an appearance, not a reality. The first doubt about the genuineness of the observance of these rules arose when we discovered how much observance depended on observation (by third parties). The belief in male superiority among the Kwahu is, however, utterly shattered when we examine the true position of men and women in everyday life.

#### 4. Economic position

No woman in rural Kwahu is entirely dependent on her husband in economic terms. Every woman has her private sources of income from which she pays her own costs and, not infrequently, a great deal of those of her children. Some women run their household without any assistance from a husband. All Kwahu women keep their accounts separate from their husbands'. Most women who are divorced or who never married the father of their child often receive very little financial help from their ex-husband or ex-lover (cf. Jones Quartey 1974). Women perform a wide variety of jobs to earn money, for example, farming, trading (in a store, in the market, or by hawking),

sewing, running a 'chop-bar' (chop = food), or prostitution. It is well known that the markets of most Ghanaian towns are ruled by female traders.<sup>4</sup> McCall, who carried out fieldwork among market women in an Asante town, found that 80 % of the women interviewed by him received less than 5 shillings (20p) per day from their husbands (McCall 1961: 295-298). This is not a recent phenomenon because Fortes reports that 30 years ago in another Asante town one in four women who were currently married "was in fact carrying on her life and bringing up her children with little or no regular support from her husband at that date" (Fortes 1970:206). In the Kwahu town where the research was conducted a similar situation obtains. The following case is an example.

#### Case 1

Kofi Dwamena, 39 years old, is a labourer on a state farm with a meagre income of 18 cedis (£ 7.20) per month (minimum wages have gone up since). His wife was a widow with four children before Dwamena married her. Since then she has borne three more children.

Dwamena gives his wife 6 cedis (£ 2.40) every month, which is clearly insufficient to support a family of two adults and seven children. The family lives mainly on the money brought in by the wife's farming and trading but it is difficult to assess the exact amount of the woman's contribution.

Dwamena's position in his (nuclear) family is weak and one day when he makes an offensive remark about his wife's prolific fertility she decides to divorce him.

The position of many Kwahu husbands reminds of the situation in former British Guiana as described by Smith (1956). The insignificant role of many fathers in their own (nuclear) family is linked up with a financial factor. The inability or unwillingness of Kwahu men to contribute substantially to the upkeep of their wives and children drives women to go their own way. Smith speaks in that case of 'matrifocal' families.

Economic self-sufficiency of women is not the only factor leading to their social independence, as will be shown in the next sections, but it is probably the most crucial one. At the same time, however, the achievement of their economic position brings about a condition which makes them look socially repressed because their economic independence must be underwritten by hard labour from morning till



evening.

#### 5. Position in the family

The bond between mother and child is more intimate than the bond between father and child. There are a number of factors which explain this. In the first place, there is a biological explanation which applies to all cultures. Another explanation lies in the field of finances and has been discussed above: it is often the mother who keeps the family going. A third explanation is to be found in Kwahu culture itself. The Kwahu, like all other Akan, are matrilineal, so the children belong to the mother's family alone. A man sees the continuation of his family not in his own children but in his sister's children. Strictly speaking, he is a stranger in his own (nuclear) family. This picture is inevitably a simplification but it does not distort reality.

An additional factor enhancing the position of a mother among her children is the relative unimportance of the conjugal bond in comparison with the bond of kinship (cf. Bleek 1975b). Kwahu people experience marriage as something temporary but membership of a lineage (abusua) can never be severed. Divorce is frequent and when a conflict arises a person ought to ally with his/her lineage, if need be, against the conjugal partner. A firm dose of suspicion lies beneath every marital relationship. The partner is and remains a stranger with his/her own private interests, so it is no wonder that married people always keep separate accounts. Some people try to avoid or postpone a marriage as long as possible by not legalizing their love relationship. When a marriage is dissolved or a relationship broken off, the children usually stay with the mother. Men who look like unburdened bachelors sometimes have three marriages behind them and have begotten more than three children. Their 'freedom' is at the same time the hallmark of their unimportance; no responsibility implies no power.

Table 5 shows in how many cases men and women do not have one or some of their children staying with them because their marriage or sexual relationship has broken down. The difference between maternal

and paternal residence shows itself most sharply in the average numbers: 4 times as many children live away from their father as from their mother.

Table 5. Number of parents who have children staying away from them  
(percentages in brackets)

	father	mother
number of own children		
staying away from parent: 0	51 (56)	119 (69)
1	15 (17)	53 (31)
2	13 (14)	-
3	3 (3)	1 (1)
4+	9 (10)	-
total	91 (100)	173 (100)
mean number of children		
not staying with one parent	1.2	0.3

The following case provides an example of a father who lives away from his own children and has very little to do with them.

Case 2

Kwasi Ntiri, 28 years old, is an untrained teacher. He is presently unmarried and claims that he has three children while a fourth child was born dead. None of the children is staying with him and we may be quite sure that he does not support any of them either.

When Ntiri finished school at the age of about 18 his girlfriend became pregnant and gave birth to a child. Ntiri says it was his child but the girl put the responsibility on somebody else and never presented the child to him. Some time after the child was born, the girl returned to him and she conceived a second time. Ntiri married her but quarrels and other difficulties brought about a divorce after a short time. The girl left him and took her two children along.

During the time of this marriage Ntiri once had sex with a schoolgirl from another town. He did not know the girl but she happened to visit the house where he had rented a room and apparently they liked one another. They had sex in Ntiri's room. She returned to her home town and never met him again. After some time she wrote him a letter with the news that she was pregnant and that he was responsible for it. Ntiri tried to deny his responsibility but without success. He was made to pay

a heavy fine, common for impregnating a schoolgirl, and the girl's parents asked him to marry their daughter. He refused, and at the moment he has lost sight of the girl and the child.

Kwahu marriage has still another characteristic that plays social power into women's hands, namely duolocality, which means separate residence of husband and wife. Duolocality occurs in about 40 % of all marriages in the Kwahu town under study, and this figure seems to apply generally to Akan areas (Gil et al. 1964), although higher incidence has been reported from other Akan places (Fortes 1949: 77-78 and Vercrijse 1972:8). Duolocal residence is practised because kinship is regarded as being more important than marriage. If a woman marries a man from her home town she continues to live in her own family house. There she feels more at home than in her husband's family house, where she is surrounded by - potentially hostile - in-laws. Only a few men are able to offer their new wife a new place to live. Separate conjugal residence in a small town does not prevent a woman from performing what are regarded as basic conjugal duties. She cooks the food in her own house and takes it to her husband, or, more likely, lets one of the children take it there. At night she goes to sleep with her husband in his house.

Duolocal residence enlarges female independence because a man has little opportunity to observe his wife's actions. But most of all it emphasizes her central role in the nuclear family because the children in a duolocal marriage usually stay with the mother. Only boys above six years of age may take up residence with their father. So a number of men become outsiders to their own nuclear family even during their marriage.

## 6. Divorce

The divorce rate in Kwahu is high. It is estimated that 2/3 to 3/4 of all people who have ever been married have been divorced at least once (Bleek 1975a:192). The independence of married women vis-à-vis their husbands shows itself in the fact that women initiate divorce as frequently as men. Their reason for divorce is often neglect of marital duties by the man, which must be understood in financial

terms. Other reasons may be: no love, a quarrel, or maltreatment. An example of a divorce brought about by a quarrel and the husband's failure to support his family adequately has been presented in Case 1 above. Sometimes a woman is persuaded by her lineage to initiate a divorce. Particularly if a woman cannot get pregnant, her lineage will press her to "try another man". Here, again, it is clear that the influence of the lineage continues during marriage. The bond with her lineage strengthens a woman's independence from her husband. She does not stand alone. When a man misbehaves towards his wife, he will get in trouble with her relatives, females as well as males.

### 7. Role in public life

Women have always played a role in traditional government. A woman with the title of Ohemaa (usually translated as 'queen-mother') is a member of the chief's council and assists the chief in his administrative functions. Her voice is particularly influential during the election of a new chief. In 1900 one famous Ohemaa, called Yaa Asantewa, led the Asante in their last war against the British. She is now revered as a heroine and schools and streets have been named after her.

Women also have power at a lower level. The (male) head of a lineage is usually assisted by an elderly woman (obaa panyin) who takes part in all discussions about family affairs and whose opinion is much respected. Fortes further discovered that almost half of all children in two Asante towns were living in households headed by a woman (Fortes 1949: 79-80).

The public role of women is perhaps most striking in christian churches and prophetic movements where women frequently address the congregation or play other conspicuous parts. Many prophetic movements have been founded and are now led by women.<sup>5</sup> This religious role of women probably originates from the role of priestesses in traditional religion. The deities choose women as well as men to function in their sanctuaries, and some of the most gifted and respected traditional priests are women. They perform sacrifices at festivals, cure diseases, and solve problems of individuals.

Nor is the role of women negligible in modern politics. It has often been said that Ghana's first political leader, Kwame Nkrumah, owed his rise to power partly to the support of women. Their economic influence added much weight to their support, and Nkrumah's fall in 1966 was preceded by his loss of favour among Ghanaian women.<sup>6</sup>

### 8. Rule and reality

The sharp contrast between rule and reality concerning the position of women asks for explanation. It is not sufficient to dispatch the contradiction by shelving it as an 'ideal-real-gap case'. It is not true that female subordination is regarded by all Kwahu as an ideal and that some cannot live up to this ideal or prefer to deviate from it for some practical reason as, for example, happens with the agricultural taboos, analyzed by Köbben (1971b).

Here the relationship between rule and reality is much more intricate. Female subordination is only considered as an ideal by male Kwahu, yet both males and females continue to speak about it as a norm and to put this norm into practice. But they do so only 'to the letter'. The rule is manipulated by women to pretend subordination and dependence and by doing so to bolster their male partners' self-esteem. At the same time it enables them to carry on their own lives without the interference of their husbands and other men. Conversely, the rule is also used by men to pretend superordination and power and to hide the fact that they have so little say over their wives and children. Female lip service functions as a compensation for the absence of real male authority. As long as women are willing to show their husbands respect and to observe other rules of outward subordination, men resign to their fate of having a relatively care-free but also power-free life.

This subtle game of give-and-take in man-woman relationships is also referred to in a cross-cultural study of marriage payments and the position of women by Van Baal (1970). Van Baal suggests that just because women in some societies are, as it were, sold and treated as objects in the marriage trade, it does not mean that women are simply like chattels without autonomy. On the contrary, it shows that they

have considerable social power because, in Van Baal's view, they are not objects; they only behave as if they were objects. They are really in control of the situation. By behaving as objects, they conceal their actual power, both in economic and in social terms. These interpretations of female status in pre-industrial societies throw an interesting light on the position of women in western societies. It makes one wonder if the courtesy and high status which women here seem to enjoy do not have a similar function, namely to conceal and make up for their lack of social importance and economic power.

To conclude: in the case of Kwahu women the rule of subordination is not supposed to reflect reality but to hide it. Only if the rule succeeds - at least pro forma - in misleading observers and participants about what reality is, only then is reality allowed to remain what it is: the opposite of the rule. One might compare this situation with the role of language in human intercourse. Language enables us to express our thoughts but, as the French bishop-diplomat Talleyrand has once said and demonstrated, language is sometimes more useful to hide our thoughts.

#### Notes

- 1) A similar proverb is quoted by Rattray (1929:337): "When a woman makes a shield, it leans against the wall of the man's room".
- 2) The second part of fieldwork was financed by the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ghana. The writing-up of data was made possible through a grant of the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO).
- 3) Fufu is a staple food in Southern Ghana. It is made from yam, cocoyam, plantain, cassava or a mixture of these, which is boiled and then pounded into a sticky paste. The pounding is heavy and tedious work.
- 4) A more general picture of women's role in the urban economy is presented by Little (1973: 29-48). Little cites Nypan (1960) who reports that 85 % of all stall holders (not of all traders) in Accra market are women (Little 1973:45).

- 5) It is not out of place to mention here the example of such a prophetess in Ivory Coast, described by Köbben (1971c). Marie Laloe founded an anti-witch movement called Deïma and became an object of veneration after her death in 1955.
- 6) The political influence of women in various African countries is vividly described by Little (1973: 61-75) who adds a gallery of portraits of some famous African women to his study (1973: 199-218).

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