



Introducing the African Queen Mothers of Ghana

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Introducing the African Queen Mothers of Ghana: Women’s Leadership for Today

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We thank you for the opportunity to present one of the oldest, longest and most remarkable government forms ever created by society, the *Nana Ohemaa*, or African queen mother. First, we have to sweep out all those old learned thoughts about queens and kings, and luxuries, and make room to see their new/old set of principles and ethics for society and families. Perhaps, knowing how the Queen Mother women leaders of working people in Africa traditionally governed their communities can inspire solutions to our well-being today.

This *Sankofa* act, the youth call “Afrofuturism:” envisioning the future of Black/African people. This cannot be done in isolation. Since 40 million people were enslaved and scattered across the Americas as slaves, our dignity and leadership in a global world

continues to be tied to Africa. When the least of us is free, so shall all of us be free. Through our study and experiences in Africa, we saw that the Queen Mothers are the rightful leadership today for our quest to end the miseducation and exploitation of the masses of black people.

Background

It is difficult if one began with educational establishments to learn much about African culture and indigenous knowledge because the faculty tended to have assimilated into Eurocentric culture, including the academic enterprise of narrowly defined research within disciplines. In 2010, we were completing a month of study abroad with Morehouse Pan-African Global Experience (MPAGE). It had been an eye-opening experience with African university faculty.

Lectures by the Muslim *malam* and the traditional healers proceeded smoothly. However, a law professor guest speaker, in Kumasi, assured us, when asked, that queen mothers basically no longer existed, and those who did, had no power. This set

the stage for our decision to seek out Queen Mothers and discover the reality or non-reality of “matriarchal” traditions in Africa.

Many of us have heard of Queen Nefertiti and Nefertari, Queen Nzingha, and Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa, but was there more to these queens and queenmothers than just isolated historical personalities? Cheikh Anta Diop, of Senegal, perhaps the most renowned African social scholar, concluded in his book, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, that matriarchy was a common cultural foundation across Africa. Further, he suggested that matriarchy was a distinctive African cultural commonality amid all the differences, upon which to base Pan-African unification.

We asked ourselves, are queen mothers an historic component of matriarchy? And are there still queen mothers in traditional African society in Ghana? Cheikh Umar “Hajj” Mohammed, a music producer and filmmaker, offered to help. For years he had been documenting indigenous culture. Together, we interviewed Queenmothers. Now, some eight years later, we present this report.

What is a Queenmother?

Today in Ghana among the majority people who speak Akan languages, the countryside is divided into Traditional Areas, or kingdoms small and large, each with a queenmother and a chief. Together they form the chieftaincy. An African queen mother can be quickly revealed as a queen of mothers, or a mother's senior representative. How nice is that? Specifically, *Nana* translates to "elder" and *ohemaa* is "female leader" (and *ohene* means "male leader,") in the Akan language. A queenmother is the highest ranking member of a royal family who traditionally govern a realm or society, through inherited right. Many such realms still exist in Ghana and in other global south countries.

In Africa, all the way back to the start of human society, there evolved a government structure with one particularly distinguishing feature: women shared power and authority with men. Commonly,

there were governments which had a queen mother and a king, always, ruling together, related but not married to each other. And of the two, the woman is by right, the senior partner. There are also examples of women who reign as queen when a prince is not available to fill it, but what distinguishes a queen mother is that there is a political institution in its own right, complementary with the male king institution. A society has both at any given time, governing together. They govern through consensus of councils of elders. Generally the queenmother's council includes women and, as well, men, while usually the king's council includes only men, or plus the queenmother.

Today, it is less common to see a political or governing body that does not include women, but what is key to understand is that this women's inclusion is not something new in societies. Rather it is a return to the prevailing principles of government originated in Africa.

Queenmother institutions enshrine women's authority and power to protect their interests. Okay, you may say, and how is this different from men

having political institutional power to govern in their interests? In Africa, as in general, reproduction of a new generation of people is “women’s work” as mothers. It has always been done by a few men as fathers, but the key is the continuation of humanity is dependent on enough women carrying out childbirth and childrearing, which is shared with men, especially after the highly vulnerable first two to four years. Queenmothers evolved throughout human history, before today, when although women did space their childbearing, they most likely would give birth to the next child in a 2 4 year period, hence, they were intimately engaged with reproduction.

So we think that because women’s lives, from their lives as youths, were concerned with children, home, food, water, education, and health, hence their interests were disproportionately connected to success in these areas of social life. When women are given social power, they will protect these areas – the family well-being, preparation of the next generation, and the social security net. Whether one understands this as “interests,” nature, or second

nature, the connection overall between women and concern with reproduction can be seen everywhere. Women in legislatures, when present in sufficient numbers, propose legislation and vote more for enhanced healthcare, education, aid to remediate disabilities, rehabilitation policies for incarceration, against war and for social-security. This has been documented by research about women everywhere around the world.

How much power does a queenmother have? Dual gender nobility political systems originate in, and are found widely throughout Africa at some point in time, with many existing continuously to today. The societies where they are found have been called matriarchies. This term may be objectionable to some of us for various reasons, however, if we go back to the Latin root, we can find some useful understanding. We are continuing with the specific understanding that matri- refers to “women,” and -archy references “-arche,” or “first,” in the way that in the word “archetype,” -arche means first, hence “first-type.” It could be interpreted to mean women-first societies. This has so many interesting

ramifications, but we will only mention one. Archeologists and biological anthropologists sometimes discuss the origin of life and they concede that an original *xx* chromosome pair was first, and at some point it morphed or mutated (whichever you prefer) and a *y*-chromosome was born, and this pattern spread because it offered advantages over the old arrangement, thus a female *and male* complements *xy*-chromosome evolved. Maybe this is modern mythmaking, but the point to be made is women first: the idea being that the male sex was a valuable later specialization and together the pair was advantaged.

In sociological terms, “gender” is a culture of rules about what men do and what women can do that disadvantages women and allows men to dominate most aspects of life. It was rare in early African societies. There was a “division of labor” between men and women, as described above, but it was not based on the enforcement of a power hierarchy by one side over the other, as is the case with “patriarchy,” male dominant social order. The male, free from or lacking (again whichever you

prefer) the majority of the reproductive role carried by the woman was free to specialize in other valuable areas, including physical exertion, distance travel, defense, hunting, and music, philosophy and governance, and often when a division of labor by sex evolved, males came to predominate in their functions.. Regarding this last area, in matriarchal societies governance was shared and women played pivotal and dominant roles.

As explained by African sociologist, Cheikh Anta Diop, patriarchy evolved in the northern hemisphere among the societies least in contact with their southern African cultural origins. While in the northern clime where patriarchy came about, a nomadic and herding lifestyle with constant danger of marauding gangs or tribes seizing one’s caches, or “property, vital to surviving the winter or dry spells, made childbearing women something of a burden, giving roles that men came to specialize in, dominance throughout. European and north Asian women agree that women were always oppressed by men in their social cultures. This is not the case for the global south, and Africa in particular.

In the conditions of harsh cold and/or desert climate, the roles of men took precedence in the struggle for survival. In the global south, horticulture and gathering were the predominant economies and women were no less able to make a homestead thrive than men. Even at an early age, children could and did contribute significantly to the community well-being.

In the 1960s, Congressman from Boston and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, presented the thesis of matriarchy as a pathology (disease or integral disorder) in African American families. He called African American families “matriarchal” because he said that women and men shared and sometimes traded-off “leadership” in the household, bringing in the “bacon,” and decision-making all things we celebrate today and that women and conscious men have fought to make available in all families! So whether celebrated or decried, at the society level or at the family level, African (i.e., black) culture is understood to be characterized by matriarchy. The characteristic of societies where there is a queenmother is that land is collectively

owned by a community and its royal families under the sovereignty of the queenmother, in particular. She is guardian of the land and sees to the distribution of land use among all families and youths as they come of age. Therefore, there were no homeless or destitute unless a natural event affecting all, or a foreign invasion, occurred. In these matriarchal cultures, the land use and “trust” vested in the woman, and passed on from mother to daughter.

Sons remain important members of their birth families, however. In fact, often a man’s greatest role is was as the uncle to his sister’s children. The uncle is involved in major decisions related to nephews and nieces, and upon his death, the moveable property he acquired is inherited by the nephews and possibly, the nieces. Families in matriarchy are matrilineal. All social standing is inherited through who your mother was, rather than who your father was. The role of the father was more of a mentor and friend to his sons, and daughters. In the case of the queen mother, they are selected each

generation from members of the royal families (many societies have more than one). The initial nominating selection is made by the council. The new queenmother may be the daughter or granddaughter of the past queenmother through the rule of matrilineal descent that girls inherit their mother's rights.

So it is with the king, too. The queenmother nominates someone to be king from among the male children (primarily) of the women in the royal family, and then the council of elders enstools the candidate as king. The new king is the nephew, brother or great nephew of the past king, but not his own son. We might understand that in the case of the king, his mother has the right to have raised a king.

This way of understanding also fits with the evidence. Often in African societies today, whether they continue with matrilineal descent, or have become patrilineal today (inherit from father or both), there are usually cultural traits of matriarchy. For instance, the queenmother or senior women in the lineage have a role in initiation for boys as well

as for girls. Further, queenmothers are particularly responsible for passing on knowledge and accepted practices to a new king.

There is a common practice called "indooring." Once a new queen mother is selected, she is sequestered in a separate hut or room alone except for senior regional queen mothers and other spiritual leaders who spend time with her. For a period of about ten days, she is "re-socialized" to leave-off from everyday secular actions and become mindful of ritualized, significant and community responsible behaviors. They are reborn as it were. A similar process is performed for a new chief or king. This is a very important role for women as mothers in African society.

Further, it is the queen mother who has the right to destool (dethrone) a king or chief for behavior damaging to the community trust. She initiates the process of review and remediation, and if the infractions continue, he is removed. Thus, in traditional African chieftaincies with a queen mother, a woman holds ultimate *power over the selection or removal of male rulers*. This avoids allowing

men with the worst characters to ascend to or remain on the throne.

Queen Mothers' Governing Practices

Queenmothers often take on the task of assisting families, and particularly the working and farming mothers to realize their dreams of their children having an education. Communities support in ways they can, including contributing to the education, health, water and other projects the chieftaincy may be developing.

A queenmother, who is often married, is largely responsible for her own wellbeing since the African chieftaincy has no significant taxing powers, and are barely and rarely funded by government).

Queen mothers play significant roles traditionally in conflict resolution. Disputes are brought before their councils on a regular basis and they seek resolutions that are fair and will prevent exploitation and violence.

Today in Africa, we hear so many complaints about corruption, violence and inequality. Queenmothers as women and mothers, are known to be significantly less likely to be a part of these actions which destroy faith in government. For this reason, most queenmothers are known to carry the respect of their people more so than politicians and the ministers and officials.

On the other hand, there are many good questions to be raised about an institution that is based on bloodlines. Clearly there can be doubt that selection from royal families only is better than a more meritocratic democratic selection from among all. This may be the shortcoming of the chieftaincy. However, today, we must consider that the queenmother and her chieftaincy are the existing root stock of governance across the land. Another alternative institution is the non-profit or non-governmental organizations. These, too, often serve be important community needs, but they lack the overall common law consensus that the chieftaincy holds, the legitimacy. And again, it is not money,

wealth or political power that gives queenmothers legitimacy it really basically must be earned by “right” behavior. It can be argued that right behavior as the expected norm for acceptance in and by society is the quintessential basis of civilization, not the structural access to wealth or power one possesses. In fact, those things are known to cause chaos and “barbaric” behavior. The queenmother role is to be a spiritual warden of her community, and to exemplify “right behavior,” including peaceful conflict resolution, successful adjustment of adolescents into adult occupations, care of the weak, and of land, water and nature.

Queenmothers are also very important as a force in society for awakening women to see themselves differently and become their own agents for change. Hajj was once asked in an interview whether being a Muslim, was he prepared to see women as equals. His response captures why a Pan-African cross-cultural dialogue is important. “The one funny thing when I came back from the States, my people used to see me, and even they called me

“Americano,” because of the change of mindset I have about how we treat our women in the community. Because in Islam, we know that if you are man, you are the controller of the house, but in many houses the women are the ones going to market and go to trade, or do whatever work they’re going to do to feed the family, including the husband. So how can you put the woman behind in the society? She has to be in the forefront.

“So working with the Queen Mothers, I always get some understanding from them. They are the ones making the kings. But after they make the kings, the kings are always trying to come over them. So trying to help them, and then educate them [to] the kind of authority they have, I say, ‘you own the land. It is your son that you put on the throne. So how can your son control you? You have to understand and know you have the power to put him on the throne or to take him off from the throne. So try to get your power back and make sure you put everything in order in your community. Because if you give your son this opportunity to be a king, if he ends up in the big city being a king, you, still, the

queen mother, are in the village, whereby the king is somewhere in Accra. Enjoying himself in the city.

“So [we] always want them to understand themselves. Yes, they are their mothers so they should still hold the authority to let their voice to be heard and then for the men to know “Hey! We put you on the throne so you have to listen to us.” And then, God’s so good to us, we are getting more progress. And if I remember, maybe back in, maybe, 2013 or 2014, we started this talking with the Queen Mothers. We spoke with them. We understand that all of them, they’re just being the queen in their various places. Then we brought the idea that no. They have to have unity. So we helped them... they came together with the idea of being the Queen Mothers Association of the Central Region, which is the first association of queen mothers in Ghana. First association in Ghana. They started in Mankessim.”

A few vocal Queenmothers had begun to demand their right to sit in the National House of Chiefs as did the male representatives, but one counter argument given was that while all the

regions had chiefs, the Northern, predominantly Muslim ones, did not. This posed a dilemma because those were precisely the areas where women experienced the greatest oppression. They were without queenmother traditions which could help. The queenmothers started talking about how they could get the queenship started in the northern regions. Hajj went on to say, “And God’s so good to us, just recently, we visit there, and we understand we have more than 50 or 60 even paramount Queen Mothers; some of them are even chiefs. It’s very amazing. It’s very, very encouraging.”

We suspect that many politicians don’t want the Queen Mothers to enact the kind of authority they have by right. They don’t want them to use their authority in their community. “But no,” Hajj continued, “they have to. So we are trying to conscientize the queen mothers to let them know that the politicians are under them. Before, the politician (is elected or appointed) he went to the Queen Mother, to the community, [expecting that] the Queen Mother’s going to talk to the people and they’re going to vote for the politician to go to

Parliament. After they go to the parliament, then they forget about the Queenmother. They forgot about the community. No, we don't want that. So we are fighting against that. With a big voice. Telling the world that we all have to come together to fight against that."

Interest among queenmothers has spread quickly beyond Ghana. In May 2019, we invited queenmothers we knew to a first meeting to talk about joining African American efforts with theirs to promote rapid expansion of access to education. Two Queenmothers from the neighboring country of Ivory Coast spoke with their friends in Ghana and came, and within days, Queenmothers from as far as Zambia and Botswana called to ask to be included. We have a role to play in helping to undo the way colonialism and slavery sought to hide the roles of women in leadership, and brought their western culture, trampling upon the pride and dignity of indigenous women leaders left behind on the farm, till they submitted and were silenced. Therefore, not every queenmother is prepared to exert their authority as inherited, but the queenmother

institution has nonetheless endured. In all previous history, it was a phenomenon—a distinction and badge of pride of the Black and Brown people of the global south.

Today may be the time for renaissance of women leadership, and the queenmother is particularly valuable as an exemplar of the principle of dual or joint male-female governance. Finally, women governing, taking responsibility for homes and livelihoods and being guaranteed a certain representation in government and political parties, is being accepted globally. This is only one of the social relations that Africa has evolved in answer to the need for the "art of being human." By taking the *Sankofa* approach of looking back in order to see what to carry forward, Afrofuturists may foretell a trajectory of African transformation on the way.

Learning about the African queenmother institution and queenmothers all around the global southern diaspora of early migrations from the African homeland, one becomes aware of the importance of always giving children and the less able some type of veto power in social decisions

because they are the new and the beloved old, a repository of unequalled experience and the next generation. One becomes aware of the importance to always give children and the less able some type of veto power. Both are vital to the sustainability of society. This implies not only mixing in women but enshrining protected governing roles to be occupied by mothers and other caretakers exclusively, whose approval is needed for social decisions. They can occupy a chamber of a supreme court, a house of congress, have an equal or major quota of seats in parties and organizations, etc.



In the Black community we can all uphold the importance of mothers to new relevant education for the well-being of both boys and girls, and men and women. Don't make caretakers fight for a seat against individuals and other interests. They are the most likely to operate under selfless ethics and thus enshrine those in society. And it is the selflessness that insures the collective. Human *beings* are *social beings*. We must have each other: the collective, socialism, communalism are primary. When the least of us is free, so shall all of us be free.

Faculty members came together in 2008 to form Morehouse Pan-African Global Experience (MPAGE) for study and research abroad, and Pan-African cross-cultural dialogue. Taking our guidance from Nkrumah's writings, we sought to expose students to the three spiritual and ethical heritages co-existent in Africa – the Traditional, the Islamic and the Christian. Informed by world-systems analysis and socialist theory, and with an awareness of the importance of ecologically sustainable development that we saw firsthand the need for in Haiti, in 2009, we began coming to Ghana, and other African countries, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Togo.

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