

Ghana

Response to Information Request Number:	GHA00001.ZAR
Date:	October 18, 1999
Subject:	Ghana: Information on the "queen mother" tradition among the Kwahu people of Ghana
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Ghana / Customs and traditions / Traditional practices affecting women

Query:

- 1) Who are the Kwahu of Ghana?
- 2) What is the function of the "queen mother" tradition among the Kwahu people of Ghana?
- 3) What would happen if a woman were to refuse the queen mother position?

Response:

1) WHO ARE THE KWAHU OF GHANA?

The Kwahu are a main constituent kingdom of the Akan ethnic group. The Akan reside in clusters in southern and central Ghana, and the Kwahu reside in the eastern central part of the country. The common language of the Akan kingdoms is Akan, which has many dialects (Stoeltje 1997, p. 41-42; Encyclopedia of World Cultures 1995, p. 11; Associate Professor of Folklore 6 Oct. 1999).

According to an associate professor at the Folklore Institute of Indiana University, the Kwahu are mountain-dwellers who are considered to be "wealthy,.. very successful traders...who reside at the top of a mountain, a location which is somewhat removed from the other Akan groups" (Associate Professor of Folklore 5 Sept. 1999, 6, 10 Oct. 1999).

2) WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THE "QUEEN MOTHER" TRADITION AMONG THE KWAHU PEOPLE OF GHANA?

Social organization in all Akan kingdoms is based on matrilineal descent. Within kingdoms, the basic group is the clan, of which there are eight in total, with members of each clan often occupying every town and village (Encyclopedia of World Cultures 1995, p. 11-12; Associate Professor of Folklore 6 Oct. 1999). Each town or village has a royal family (the family that first settled there), and from this royal family the chief and the queen mother are selected by the elders of the royal family, the chief, or the queen mother (Associate Professor of Folklore 6 Oct. 1999). Occasionally the chief and queen mother are related to each other as mother and son, but more often they are uncle and niece, aunt and nephew, cousins, etc. A carved wooden stool is the symbol of authority, and the chief and queen mother are "enstooled," as European monarchs are enthroned (Stoeltje 1997, p. 51; Associate Professor of Folklore 6 Oct. 1999).

Queen mothers are the "most important" officials involved in selection of the chief and are sometimes called the "supreme king makers" (Encyclopedia of World Cultures 1995, p. 12; Inter Press 11 Nov. 1991). The queen mother is knowledgeable of the clan genealogy, and she may have her own court and be assisted by other clan officials (Encyclopedia of World

Cultures 1995, p. 11-12; Inter Press 11 Nov. 1991). "One of [the queen mother's] major roles, and some would argue that it is definitively her major role, is to advise the chief on all matters" (Stoeltje 1997, p. 52).

There are instances in which "outsiders," including American researchers, activists, and Winnie Mandela, have been enstooled as queen mothers (South Wales Evening Post 5 June 1998; New York Times 5 Oct. 1997; Ethnic NewsWatch 16 July 1997; Ethnic NewsWatch 21 May 1997; Ethnic NewsWatch 27 April 1996; Ethnic NewsWatch 21 May 1994; AP 24 Nov. 1994). Non-citizens of a community must first be adopted into the royal family and elders of the locality deliberate and propose the possibility of the individual's enstoolment to the people (Ethnic NewsWatch 21 May 1994).

There are queen mothers of varying ranks. The queen mother on the local town or village level has a lesser status than the "paramount queen mothers," who have lesser status than the one head queen mother in the kingdom (Stoeltje 1997, p. 52). Each town and village is different--for instance, generally it is not allowed that the queen mother and chief in a locality be mother and son, but in some areas, such as Juaben, near Kumasi, this is still allowed. These differences, however, "do not alter the overall system" (Associate Professor of Folklore 5 Sept. 1999).

Various religious beliefs and activities co-exist and are practiced side by side among the Akan (Encyclopedia of World Cultures 1995, p. 11-12). Christianity has been a strong influence in Ghana since the 19th Century (Associate Professor of Folklore 6 Oct. 1999). Islam also has a long history among the Akan, and Akan royalty used Muslim scribes for court duties (Encyclopedia of World Cultures 1995, p. 11-12). Yet there are many in Ghana who still practice indigenous religion. Although many Ghanaians are comfortable practicing Christianity and ancient custom together, there are those whose devotion to one precludes any adherence to the other (Associate Professor of Folklore 5 Sept. 1999, 6 Oct. 1999).

According to the associate professor at the Folklore Institute at Indiana University:

"The rites of passage which functioned to recognize a girl's transition to adulthood have ceased to be practiced as a result of the influences of modernization (Christianity and education, for example). These rites honored a young woman through feasting and through serving her; she was taken to the queenmother [sic] for public recognition of her new status... Although the rites are no longer performed, many individuals continue to inform the queenmother of the onset of puberty" (10 Oct. 1999).

The queen mothers' authority has always rested (and continues to rest) in the perception, by themselves and others, that they possess knowledge and wisdom in important areas such as tradition, legal and political matters, and genealogy. Queen mothers are still viewed as keepers of tradition and "king-makers," and in their continuing role of safeguarding women's welfare, they have taken up "modern" civic issues such as child care, education for women, drug addiction, and teenage pregnancy (Inter Press 11 Nov. 1991; Associate Professor of Folklore 10 Oct. 1999).

3) WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF A WOMAN WERE TO REFUSE THE QUEEN MOTHER POSITION?

American and Ghanaian scholars of chieftaincy issues who were consulted on the question of possible harm to individuals who refuse the position of queen mother were not aware of any instances of such harm (Assistant Professor of Linguistics 13 Sept. 1999; Associate Professor of Folklore 5 Sept. 1999; Associate Professor 5 Aug. 1999; Associate Professor of Linguistics and African Languages 12 April 1999).

According to the associate professor at the Folklore Institute:

"For a wide number of reasons, some individuals may be reluctant to accept the position of

queen mother (or chief). Therefore, sometimes negotiations can become protracted over time. Reasons for this reluctance may include the exercise of personal choice in matters of career or marriage, and/or personal feelings about religion as well. Many Ghanaians practice Christianity and Custom [sic] simultaneously, but others choose one or the other, so feelings about religion could be among the reasons an individual chooses not to accept the position of queen mother. It is important to note that religion, the kinship system, the political system (known as chieftaincy), gender roles, the legal system, the ritual system, are all integrated; the term 'custom' refers to the entire socio/political/cultural indigenous system which functioned prior to colonization and continues today though it has been much affected by modernization" (10 Oct. 1999).

An assistant professor at Indiana University stated that "there are several people wanting to be chiefs and queenmothers [sic] so refusing to be a chief or queenmother is a welcome news [sic] to [those who make the chief/queenmother selection]. This helps to reduce the often crowded contestants" (Assistant Professor of Linguistics 13 Sept. 1999).

According to the associate professor at the Folklore Institute:

"A particular family may try to persuade a woman to sit on the stool, and they may be disappointed if she doesn't... However, it is very unlikely that such an individual would be ostracized to the point of complete isolation from the community or destitution for refusing to become queen mother. In most instances in which a person is reluctant to serve, it is because she has developed another career and family life that would be disrupted by assuming the role of queen mother. They almost always have removed themselves...from the town or village already and have become part of another community though most Ghanaians maintain strong links to their hometown" (6, 10 Oct. 1999).

In the known rare cases where violence has flared up in queen mother and chieftaincy issues it has been when someone wants to be enstooled as chief and someone else thinks that person should not be chief (Associate Professor of Folklore 5 Sept. 1999). The associate professor at the Folklore Institute said that "feelings can run high when it comes to questions of succession to the position of chief, in particular, and occasionally violence erupts in the midst of a chieftaincy dispute, but it is very rare" (5 Sept. 1999, 6, 10 Oct. 1999). "Even when hostilities develop, they do so around factions because these issues usually involve lineages, or families, and though one individual may be the focus of the dispute, people do not isolate the individual. The rare instances in which a person can be isolated do not occur in conjunction with disputes over chieftaincy" (Associate Professor of Folklore 10 Oct. 1999).

The associate professor at the Folklore Institute also stated:

"Today many chiefs are very well educated people with university degrees, some of which have been earned in Ghana and some in Britain and in the U.S. Often they are lawyers, engineers, accountants and businessmen. Fewer queen mothers are as well educated, but there is a widespread effort to persuade educated women to take the position of queen mother and bring education and development into the village or region. Due to the effects of modernization and education for over a century, many precolonial laws, rituals, and practices have been changed or have long since disappeared" (10 Oct. 1999).

More specific information on the queen mother tradition among the Kwahu people of Ghana was not found among the sources consulted by the RIC.

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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Attachments:

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