

Yoruba country. It has not, for example, examined the position of the Iyalode among at least two important Yoruba subgroups, the Ekiti and the Owo, whose nearness and historical association with the Benin kingdom had modified their political systems and might have affected the position of the Iyalode within them. It has, rather, concentrated on those areas where there is a strong tradition as regards the institution of the Iyalode. Within these societies, it is clear that the institution represents an attempt to give women a chance to participate directly in the political process. It is an example of female power based on recognized authority. But the effectiveness of the Iyalode within the political system depended on her personality and the degree of power in the hands of the male ruler. Where power was concentrated in the hands of the ruler, she suffered as much loss in influence as did the male chiefs. Other variables affecting her position were her own personality and the historical tradition in the particular political system. But whatever the level of her achievement within the political process, she did not, on the whole, see herself as being in competition for power and influence with the Oba and his male chiefs, but rather as being in a complementary position. Hence she was often referred to as Otun Oba ('the ruler's right hand'). This pacificatory, complementary role is certainly the ideal that the present holders of the Iyalode title and their male colleagues like to stress. But this is a far cry from those instances where, by virtue of her wealth, ritual position, or her leadership of the female hierarchical order, the Iyalode was able to challenge male dominance. The cases of Iyalode Tinubu and Iyalode Efunsetan, and the potential power of the Arise and the Lobun, provide good examples of the contribution of the Iyalode to the political system. It is, however, important to point out that there are indications that such participation could only be tolerated within limits and did not often go unchallenged. The fate that befell Iyalode Efunsetan shows only too well that if at any time an Iyalode tried to lead opposition against the male chiefs, she was likely to be put down in a most brutal manner.

Finally, it should be noted that the participation of the Iyalode in the political process does not exhaust the forms of female political activity within the Yoruba country. It is only evidence of their direct participation. Female participation in government could and did take other less obvious forms. The evidence available at present, however, indicates that women did have political as well as economic interests, though their political power has often varied and has not always taken the same form. For a full appreciation of female contribution to the decision-making processes in traditional society, we need further investigation. The rapid changes that the Yoruba country has witnessed within the last 100 years make such an exercise an urgent one. There is no doubt that British colonialism has had an adverse effect on the role of women in the Yoruba society and that current development processes might sweep overboard whatever vestiges of her contribution remain.

Notes

- ¹ For convenience I have used the title Iyalode for any woman designated as the political leader and charged with the responsibility for articulating the views of Yoruba women in government within any Yoruba society. In practice, such women have their own titles; for instance, in Ilesa she is called Arise, in Ondo she is known as the Lobun, and in Erin-Ijesa her title is Esemure.
- ² This occurrence is not peculiar to the Iyalode among the Yoruba: see Onwuejeogwu (1969).
- ³ Many intelligence reports were written in the 1930s when the British

colonial government was contemplating changes in the local government administration.

- ⁴ There are many local histories of Yoruba towns written by the Yoruba themselves. Biobaku (1973) gives a fairly comprehensive list.
- ⁵ The nineteenth century is a fairly well-documented period in Yoruba history, and there is considerable information on the contribution of women in that period.
- ⁶ Information was obtained by interviews with Oluwo Folasade Labosinde, head of the Ogboni cult in Ibadan, who was about ninety years of age.
- ⁷ I am grateful to Professor Oyin Ogunba for introducing me to the present Iyalode of Owu-Ijebu, who granted me a long interview.
- ⁸ The following information comes from two interviews, with the present Arise of Ilesa, about sixty-five years old, and the Lisa Lobun, about ninety years old but very articulate and energetic. The Lisa Lobun is acting for the Lobun, since a new Lobun cannot take office while the old king whom the present one installed is still living.
- ⁹ The Nupe were horsemen and had an advantage over the Ijesa, who were mostly infantrymen and fell easy prey to Nupe spears and lances. Arise found a way of unmounting the Nupe horsemen and forcing them to engage in hand-to-hand combat.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Ondo titles:

<i>Male Line</i>	<i>Female Line</i>
Osemowe (ruler)	Lobun
Lisa	Lisa Lobun
Jomo	Jomo Lobun
Sasere	Sasere Lobun
Adaja	Adaja Lobun
Odunwe	Sama Lobun

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Rounding Up Spinsters

*Gender Chaos & Unmarried Women
in Colonial Asante****Reference***Journal of African History*, 1996, 37(2): 195–214

In March of 1933, the District Officer's 'Quarterly Report' for the Mampong District in Asante contained a rather strange entry for the town of Effiduasi. 'Becoming alarmed at the amount of venereal disease spread in the town by unattached spinsters', the officer wrote,

the *Ohene* [chief] published an edict commanding that all unmarried maidens should forthwith provide themselves with husbands. This shook the Wesleyan Mission somewhat but only one complaint was received. In fact, the husband hunt seems to have been rather enjoyed by the girls than otherwise. The *Ohene*, however, was warned against the futility of publishing unenforceable orders and against advertising the frailties of his maidens.¹

Although the District Officer cast this so-called 'husband hunt' as a minor, isolated incident in the town of Effiduasi, there is enough written evidence and ample oral testimony to suggest that it was anything but minor and it was certainly not isolated. Between 1929 and 1933, in a number of villages and towns throughout this region of the former Gold Coast, chiefs were ordering the arrest of all women who were over the age of 15 and not married.² As one of those who was arrested recently recalled:

We were arrested and just dumped into a room – all of the women of Effiduasi who were not married... The *ahemfie* [palace] police [did the arresting]. The women were flirting around and so they became an embarrassment to the King. So, he decided that they should get married ... they announced it that on such a day all women should be able to show a husband ... When we were sent there, we were put into a room ... When you mentioned a man's name, it meant that was the man you wanted to marry, so they would release you ... You would go home with the man and the man would see your relatives and say, 'I am getting married to this woman.'³

The pattern, it seems, was similar in each town. A gong-gong was generally beaten to announce the arrest of unmarried women (*asigyafɔ*).⁴ A woman was detained, usually at the chief's court, until she spoke the name of a man whom she would agree to marry. The man was then summoned to the court where he would affirm his desire to marry the woman and then pay a 'release fee' of 5s. If the man refused to marry the woman, he was fined. In some cases, the fine was 5s, in others it was as high as £5. After the woman's release, the man was expected to pay a marriage fee of 7s and one bottle of gin to the woman's family.⁵

To my knowledge, no one has explored this elusive episode in Asante's social past. No references to anything that even remotely

resembles the rounding up of unmarried woman can be found in our sources for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For the colonial period, the primary written sources on the subject are scanty, at best, limited to a small collection of colonial correspondence, a Quarterly Report entry and a few customary court cases. Meyer Fortes made brief mention in his field notes from the 1945–6 'Ashanti Social Survey' to the fact that

periodically the political authority stepped in and decreed that all unmarried women must be married; in some cases they were placed in a cell and told to name their choice; theoretically the men could refuse, but in practice it appears to have been difficult for them to refuse. In order to facilitate marriage in this situation, marriage by registration was introduced, so that only a small fee (usually 5/-) [was paid]; the *tiri nsa* was also paid, often such small amounts as 6d of palm wine being cited.⁶

In the more recent, published literature, there are only two brief references to the detention of unmarried women in Ghana's colonial period – and those in sources not pertaining specifically to Asante. D. D. Vellenga, in her 1983 piece, 'Who is a wife?' made general reference to chiefs' concerns about the number of women not properly married. 'Some even went to the extreme measure', she wrote, 'of locking up such women until their lovers would pay a fee to release them, thus legitimising the relationship'.⁷ P. A. Roberts discovered more detailed information on the arrest of unmarried women in Sefwi Wiawso – an area to the south-west of Asante which was incorporated into the empire in the early eighteenth century as a tributary state.⁸ She found evidence of a 1929 'Free Women's Marriage Proclamation' which ordered that 'such women ... be arrested, locked up in the outer courtyards of the *omanhene*'s palace in Wiawso and held there until they were claimed by a husband or by any other man who would take charge of them. The male claimant was required to pay a fine of 5/- to release the woman'.⁹ For the most part, however, 'husband hunts', the 'capture of spinsters' or the 'frailties' of Asante's 'maidens' have escaped historical inquiry.¹⁰

That there are these particular lacunae in the historiography should not be surprising. Despite the wealth and diversity of sources available for reconstructing Asante's twentieth-century past, the social history of colonial Asante remains largely under-developed. Indeed, despite an historiography for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries unparalleled in sub-Saharan Africa for its richness and detail,¹¹ twentieth-century Asante, as McCaskie lamented in 1986, does 'not yet possess even [a] ... skeletal social history ... [W]e find ourselves enmeshed in dense thickets of trees where no one as yet has defined the topography of the wood'.¹² This paper seeks to contribute to the still neglected task of defining that topography and of teasing out the continuities, innovations and disjunctures to be found between Asante's pre-colonial and colonial past. Certainly, this is a project rendered all the more urgent by the fact that those Asantes for whom the first tumultuous decades of colonial rule were a *lived* experience are now passing into the world of their ancestors. Based upon the personal narratives and reminiscences of women who were either among the 'spinsters' caught or who bore witness to the 'capture', the correspondence of British government officials and the records of customary courts, this paper explores gender and social change in colonial Asante by dissecting and then contextualizing the round-up of unmarried women in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It seeks to understand this unusual episode in direct state intervention into the negotiating of marriage and non-marriage as

part of the general chaos in gender relations that shook Asante in the years between the two World Wars. This chaos, often articulated in the language of moral crisis, in terms that spoke of women's uncontrollability, of prostitution and venereal disease, was, more than anything, about shifting power relationships. It was chaos engendered by cash and cocoa, by trade and transformation.¹³

This was not, however, how the arrests were explained in the early 1930s. British government officers in Asante first expressed concern about the detention of unmarried women in 1932. In July of that year, the Chief Commissioner wrote a brief memo to his assistant requesting that enquiries be made and a report furnished. 'I am informed', he wrote, 'that there is a custom in Ashanti that young girls of 15 years of age upwards are ordered to marry. It is even alleged that any who refuse are placed in prison'.¹⁴ Shortly thereafter, the Assistant Commissioner, having sought information in Bekwai and Mansu Nkwanta, filed his response which included letters from the chiefs of both towns and from the District Officer resident in Bekwai. The officer wrote that the Roman Catholic priest first informed him of the practice and that 'no complaint was made ... by any Ashanti or for that matter any african [sic], one or two africans [sic] rather took it as a joke'. He added that he had heard of similar actions being taken in Adansi, Edweso and even Kumasi a few years earlier, although he understood 'the Kumasi-hene is not in favour of it'.¹⁵

The chiefs confirmed the detentions of unmarried women and then justified their actions by arguing that venereal diseases and prostitution were prevalent in their division.¹⁶ The Bekwaihene and his councillors and elders submitted a three-page letter defending their actions in terms of a desire 'to prevent prostitution which we have notice[d] to bring sterility and incurable venereal diseases'. The solution was, they argued, to 'encourage conjugal marriages among our womenfolk'. If the chiefs were prepared to offer a concrete solution to the 'problem' of unmarried women, they were far more equivocal in explaining why the 'problem' of women not marrying existed in the first place.¹⁷ On the one hand, they argued that 'the tendency ... is attributable to the prevalent financial depression which renders the men incapable to conform with ... the expenses of our native customary laws concerning marriage'. On the other hand, the chiefs betrayed much concern about women's growing uncontrollability, fondly recalling 'the good old days of our ancestors ... [when] no girl or woman dared to resist when given away in marriage to a suitor by her parents and relatives as is the case now'.¹⁸ Yet in their letter to colonial officials, the customary rulers of Bekwai were less intent on explaining the marriage crisis than with exposing its dreadful symptoms - immorality, prostitution and disease. They assured British officials that their intentions were 'clean' and that they would continue the practice of detaining unmarried women 'unless there is any justifiable reason to encourage prostitution and its attendant prevalence of sterility and venereal diseases'.¹⁹ As for the District Officer, he was not fully convinced by the chiefs' arguments. The idea of stopping 'the spread of venereal disease is a good cloak', he wrote, 'behind which to hide a money making proposition'. The Bekwaihene collected a release fee of 5s on every woman caught, the officer noted, and a fine of £5 on every man whose name was called but who refused to pay the fee and marry.²⁰

How women viewed these arrests in the late 1920s and early 1930s is far more difficult to reconstruct than the views of chiefs or colonial officers because so few sources recorded women's voices. But at least one woman's experience of being arrested has been

preserved in a 1929 customary court case from Asokore. In Kwaku Afram v. Afuah Buo the plaintiff sought judicial relief for the defendant to explain her reasons for refusing to marry him after 5s had been paid on her behalf 'during the capture of spinsters in Asokore'. The plaintiff claimed that he saw a 'certain young man from Seneajah connecting with the girl ... [and] upon the strength of that ... found out that the defendant did not like to marry' him. Afuah Buo's defence was brief and direct:

I live at Asokore. I am a farmer. Some years ago, a gong-gong was beaten that spinsters are to be caught. I was among (and previous [to] that I was told by Plaintiff that I must mention his name and he will clear me out). I did and he came and paid 5/- and discharged me ... About two weeks after Plaintiff does not care for me, nor subsist me. I informed one Attah Biom of the treatment and Plaintiff said because he was ill hence he did not do it. What I have to say is that because Plaintiff did not care for me, nor subsist me, hence I connected with someone, to get my daily living. That's all I know.²¹

In the end, the Asokore Native Tribunal ruled against Afuah Buo, fining her £5 9s 0d - £3 4s 0d of which went to the plaintiff as costs and compensation.

Although brief, Afuah Buo's testimony raises a number of important issues concerning the arrests of unmarried women. First and most obviously, that Afuah's case was brought before the court in 1929 and that the 'capture' of spinsters in Asokore had occurred 'some years' prior to that time suggests that the problem of unmarried women was not simply a by-product of the 'financial depression'. It requires that we investigate social and economic changes and their impact on gender and conjugal relationships prior to the depression if we are to understand the meaning and magnitude of the crisis. Secondly, Afuah Buo's testimony points to a serious social contest over the very meaning of marriage in the late 1920s. It suggests that the crisis was not simply about marriage and non-marriage, as the chiefs' arguments suggest, but about what constitutes a marriage and what responsibilities are incumbent upon each partner. For the plaintiff and, indeed, for the court, the payment of the release fee constituted 'marriage' and entitled Afram to exclusive sexual rights in his wife. The marriage was a fact, a state of being, recognized by the court as non-negotiable. It either was or it was not; there could be no mitigating factors. For Afuah Buo, those exclusive sexual rights were contingent upon and tied directly to a man's on-going provision of minimal subsistence or 'chop money'. In her view, marriage was, as Vellenga argued, 'a process ... tenuous and fluid in nature'.²² Buo's definition of the marrying process allowed her to move in and out and between the categories of wife and concubine - a movement easily branded as prostitution by Asante's colonial chiefs.

Although much more research is required into the changing meanings of marriage in Asante,²³ the Asokore court's vision of marriage as 'state of being' rather than 'process' may have been of more recent origin and Buo's fluid interpretation more firmly rooted in Asante's pre-colonial past. Certainly Rattray's view of pre-colonial marriage was one of process, of on-going negotiations between two groups of individuals. Fortes, though he did not historicize marriage customs, wrote that the conjugal relationship in Asante was 'envisaged as a bundle of separable rights and bonds rather than as a unitary all-or-none tie'. My readings of customary court cases involving marriage and divorce in this period lead me to conclude that chiefs and elders were articulating a new definition of