Rounding up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante
Author(s): Jean Allman
Published by: Cambridge University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/183183
Accessed: 16/08/2013 16:09

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
ROUNDING UP SPINSTERS: GENDER CHAOS AND UNMARRIED WOMEN IN COLONIAL ASANTE*

BY JEAN ALLMAN
University of Minnesota

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

* As part of a broader study of gender and social change in Asante, research for this paper was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright-Hays Research Program, the Social Science Research Council, the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana and the University of Missouri Research Council. I wish to gratefully acknowledge this support and the generous assistance of the staffs of the National Archives of Ghana, Manhyia Record Office and the Centre for African Studies at Cambridge. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1993 meeting of the African Studies Association in Boston. I wish to thank Susan Porter Benson, Robin Law, Takyiwaa Manuh, Tom McCaskie, Richard Rathbone, David Roediger and the members of the Comparative Women’s History Workshop at the University of Minnesota for their comments and suggestions for revision.


This content downloaded from 128.252.67.66 on Fri, 16 Aug 2013 16:09:43 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions
the arrest of all women who were over the age of 15 and not married. 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 ahemfe [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'.

The pattern, it seems, was similar in each town. A gong-gong was generally beaten to announce the arrest of unmarried women (asigyafo). 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.

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

2 To date, I have found written evidence of arrests occurring in the Asante towns of Adansi, Asokore, Bekwai, Edweso, Effiduasi and Mansu Nkwanta.

3 J. Allman, interview with Eponuhemaa Afua Fom, Effiduasi, 30 June 1993. (Hereafter interviews are cited by name, town and date only.) Most of the interviews referenced below were conducted by the author with the very able assistance of N. O. Agyeman-Duah. Ivor Agyeman-Duah and Selina Opoku-Agyeman assisted with some of the 1993 interviews. At present, all transcripts of interviews are in the author’s possession. They will be deposited in the Melville J. Herskovits Library, Northwestern University, after completion of the broader project.

4 Christaller defines asigyani (pl. asigyafo), as ‘an unmarried person, i.e. a man or woman who has not been married at all, or a man who has sent away his wife, or a woman who has forsaken her husband, in general one who is not in the state of regular marriage’. See J. G. Christaller, Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Basel, 1933), 456.

5 See NAGK/ARA 1907: Assistant Chief Commissioner, Ashanti to Chief Commissioner, Ashanti, dd. Kumasi, 19 July 1932; District Commissioner, Bekwai to Assistant Chief Commissioner, Ashanti, dd. Bekwai, 23 July 1932; Bekwaihene to District Officer, Bekwai, dd. Bekwai, 23 July 1932; Mansu Nkwanta to District Commissioner, Bekwai, dd. Mansu Nkwanta, 26 July 1932; Chief Commissioner to Assistant Chief Commissioner, dd. 18 July 1932. The fees involved in these arrests, though not exorbitant, were not inconsequential. As Rathbone indicates for the 1920s, a blacksmith earned roughly 35 per day, while a day-labourer earned about 15 6d. One yam could cost as much as 1s and six plantains about 1d. Rathbone, Murder, 19, n. 50 and N. A. Cox-George, Studies in Finance and Development: The Gold Coast (Ghana) Experience, 1914–1950 (London, 1973), 79. For discussions of the variety of marriage rites in Asante during the colonial period, see R. S. Rattray, Ashanti Law and Constitution (Oxford, 1929), 22–31 and Religion and Art in Ashanti (Oxford, 1927), 76–86. See, also, M. Fortes, ‘Kinship and marriage among the Ashanti’, in A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde (eds.), African Systems of Kinship and Marriage (London, 1950), 278–83.
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 spinster’ or the ‘frailties’ of Asante’s ‘maidens’ have escaped historical inquiry.10

6 Meyer Fortes Papers, ‘Marriage prestations’, [no date], Centre for African Studies, Cambridge University. Unfortunately, Fortes gave no indication of the sources upon which his description is based. This makes it particularly difficult, for example, to ascertain how much the fees involved in ‘captured spinster’ marriages differed from those paid in other circumstances. Rattray wrote in the 1920s that the *tiri aseda* (money and wine payments) marking the marriage of commoners was usually 10s, with an additional 6d for rum or wine. Fortes, presumably with reference to the 1940s, remarked that *tiri nsa* (as *aseda* was increasingly termed) ‘was said to have been as much as £3 at one time, but in most of the descriptions spirits and a few shillings are referred to’. Fortes, ‘Marriage prestations’, and Rattray, *Religion*, 81.

7 D. D. Vellenga, ‘Who is a wife?’ in Christine Oppong (ed.), *Female and Male in West Africa* (London, 1983), 150. Vellenga’s reference was a sub-file in the ‘Ghanaian archives’ entitled, ‘Forced marriage of African girls, prevention of, 12 June 1939’ and a letter to the editor, *Gold Coast Independent*, 13 Jan. 1930. Unfortunately, Vellenga did not name the archive in which the sub-file was located and I have not come across it in the national archive collections in Accra or in Kumasi.


9 Ibid.

10 Professor Kofi Glover, University of South Florida, recently informed me of a 1950s incident in Nyageo, Volta Region, which bears striking similarities to the cases cited here. Unfortunately, I have no further information on this episode.
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.

---


13 I am not alone in associating ‘chaos’ with ‘cocoa’. G. Mikell has used ‘chaos’ to describe the broader economic, political and social turmoil associated with the spread of cocoa production throughout Ghana in her book, *Cocoa and Chaos in Ghana* (New York, 1989). That Mikell and I came to use the term independently may underscore its appropriateness for highlighting the general disorder of this era. (It may also simply reflect a shared fondness for alliteration.) Certainly, my use of ‘chaos’ here is more circumscribed that Mikell’s, for it is meant to capture the specific disorder in gender relations that occurred in Asante as a result of the expanding cash economy. Finally, it is worth noting here the fascinating body of literature on ‘chaos’ and history which seeks to apply the mathematical theory of chaos (‘the science of physical systems governed by
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 Kumasihene 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

nonlinear dynamical laws’) to historical narrative. See, for example G. Reisch, ‘Chaos, history, and narrative’, History and Theory, xxx (1991), 1–2, D. N. McCloskey, ‘History, differential equations, and the problem of narration’, History and Theory, xxx (1991), 21–36; ‘Forum: chaos theory and history revisited’, History and Theory, xxxiv (1995), 30–89. This paper makes no pretence of contributing to the development of this theoretical model, though the literature has convinced me of the appropriateness of using ‘chaos’ to describe this particular moment in Asante’s gendered past.

14 NAGK/ARA 1907: Chief Commissioner, Ashanti to Assistant Chief Commissioner, Ashanti, dd. Kumasi, 18 July 1932.

15 NAGK/ARA 1907: District Commissioner, Bekwai to Assistant Chief Commissioner, Ashanti, dd. Bekwai, 23 July 1932.

16 The Mansu Nkwantahene reported that ‘the object of beaten gong-gong is to prevent venereal diseases and etc. prevalent within the Division’. NAGK/ARA 1907: Mansu Nkwantahene to District Commissioner, Bekwai, dd. Mansu Nkwanta, 26 July 1932.

17 While the chiefs spoke of a new tendency for women not to marry, it is virtually impossible to ascertain, via quantitative data, whether it was actually the case that women were not marrying at rates far greater than before. Unfortunately, sources simply are not available to judge whether the chiefs’ fears were well grounded or simply articulated a general concern over women’s ‘uncontrollability’ during this period.
away in marriage to a suitor by her parents and relatives as is the case now.\textsuperscript{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’.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 1920 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.\textsuperscript{21}

In the end, the Asokore Native Tribunal ruled against Afuah Buo, fining her £5 9s od – £3 4s od 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 marriage that upheld the husband’s exclusive sexual rights in his wife, while minimizing or discounting com-

22. Vellenga, ‘Who is a wife?’, 145. M. Lovett has discussed the fluidity of marriage arrangements in the urban townships of the Copperbelt during the same period, noting how these arrangements ‘posed an especially powerful threat to the authority of the elders and to the maintenance of rural social relations. They also increased women’s autonomy’. See, M. Lovett, ‘Gender relations, class formation and the colonial state’, in J. Parpart and K. Staudt (eds.), *Women and the State in Africa* (Boulder, 1989), 31. For a fascinating discussion of the dynamics of marriage in Asante today, see Gracia Clark, *Onions Are My Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women* (Chicago, 1994), ch. 9, but esp. 344–8.

23. T. C. McCaskie set the parameters of the discussion for the nineteenth century—his ‘State and society, marriage and adultery: same considerations towards a social history of pre-colonial Asante’, *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxii (1981), 477–94. Recently, Clark’s *Onions* and T. E. Kyei’s *Marriage and Divorce Among the Asante: A Study Undertaken in the Course of the ‘Ashanti Social Survey (1945)*’ (Cambridge, 1992) have made important contributions to our understanding of marriage in colonial and in present-day Asante. Finally, many of the specific questions raised by this paper promise to be addressed in V. Tashjian, ‘It’s mine and it’s ours are not the same thing: a history of marriage in rural Asante, 1900–1957’ (Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern University, 1995).
pletely the husband’s reciprocal obligations toward that wife. This ‘petrified’ vision of marriage as an ‘all-or-none tie’ left women with little or no defence in countless numbers of cases heard in Asante’s Native Tribunals during the colonial period. More specifically, in the testimony and judgements of many adultery cases, we see the husband’s obligation to maintain his wife eroding in almost measurable ways. Many women justified their refusal to reveal the name of a lover or, as an alternative, to pay that lover’s adultery fee (ayefare) to their husbands by insisting on the mutuality of conjugal obligations, by maintaining that a husband’s exclusive sexual rights in his wife were contingent upon his provision of subsistence support. Almost without exception in the period under consideration, such arguments were rejected by the court.24

In recalling the capture of those remaining unmarried, Asante women certainly do not speak with one voice.25 Their recollections reveal a host of sentiments and reasonings – some echoing the perspective of Afuah Buo, others that of Asante’s chiefs. Still others speak from a singular and personal perspective that defies simple categorization. Yet these very contradictions and inconsistencies, these multiple truths, help us to appreciate the complexities of the colonial experience. They bring the personal to bear on the structural relationship between economic and social change and, for the purposes of this particular inquiry, are fundamental to the process of disentangling charges of prostitution and concerns about ‘spinsterhood’ and morality from women’s assertions of autonomy in a rapidly changing colonial economy. Interestingly, none with whom I have spoken over recent years points to the economic depression or to men’s inability to afford marriage payments as a reason for women’s non-marriage. Akosua Atta certainly saw the root of the problem as men not proposing marriage to women, but she could point to no economic reasons for this. ‘I don’t know why’, she recently pondered, ‘things were not expensive then as they are now’.26 Others, like


25 Over the past three years, I have been collecting life histories and reminiscences from older Asante women as part of a broader project on gender and social change in the colonial period. These efforts have focused on the Ashanti Newtown district of Kumasi, on sub-urban Tafo and on the rural towns of Effiduasi and Asokore. While none of the women with whom I spoke in Kumasi and Tafo recalled the capture of unmarried women, many in Effiduasi and Asokore could remember the episode in some detail. Of those, nearly all were willing to talk about it generally or as something that happened to certain other women. In some cases, however, it was fairly obvious that the reminiscences were those of someone who had been captured, even though the story was told in the third person. Because of the stigma attached to being from ‘among those caught’, however, I did not ask women directly whether they had been arrested or not. Only Eponuahemaa Afua Fom volunteered that information and she did so nearly a year after our first discussions.

Mary Oduro and Rosina Boama, both of Effiduasi, saw the problem as a straightforward one of numbers. Women were not marrying because ‘the women outnumbered the men’. It was feared, Boama explained, ‘that they [the women] would contract some venereal disease’.27 From the perspectives of Oduro, Boama, Atta and a few others, non-marriage was not a choice that women made, it was something that happened through no fault of their own. Through men’s refusal to propose or simply because of the demography of the times, some women were left unmarried.

Most reminiscences of the period, however, are far more willing to underscore women’s agency in this process of non-marriage, to see the decision not to marry as a choice, though there is little agreement on how to characterize that agency. Even Rosina Boama, who was sure that the main reason women did not marry was that there were not enough men, allowed that some women might have chosen not to marry. ‘I can’t say’, she recently recalled. ‘They were just roaming about. Whether they were not having [husbands] or were not getting [husbands], I can’t say’.28 Other women were not so torn in their reasonings and echoed quite clearly the sentiments expressed by chiefs in the early 1930s as they pointed to women’s uncontrollability. ‘During that time’, recalled Beatrice Nyarko, who was nearly forty years old during the capture of unmarried women at Effiduasi, ‘young girls were misbehaving’. Jean Asare, who was a child at the time, remembered that ‘women were just roaming about, attending dances, sleeping everywhere. Some even went as far as Kumasi to sleep with boyfriends, so…it was a disgrace to the town and to the people here in the town’.29 As Yaa Dufie explained, it was ‘because of the fear of contracting the disease [babaso, or venereal disease]. That’s why they locked them up’.30 Indeed, several of the women to whom I spoke did not hesitate to call those who had been captured ‘prostitutes’. When asked if she were sure these women were prostitutes (attufo) and not concubines of one sort or another (mpenafo), Beatrice Nyarko responded,

28 Rosina Boama, Effiduasi, 24 Aug. 1992. Again, we are hampered by the dearth of demographic information for this period. Certainly, no such imbalance appears in the 1948 Census, and the Census for 1921 and for 1931, although admittedly unreliable, in fact suggest that the male population in Asante was growing faster than the female population during this period as a result of immigration from the Northern Territories. See Gold Coast, Census of Population, 1948 (Accra, 1948). For an excellent overview of population trends and census data in Ghana from the mid-nineteenth century to the post-independence era, see E. V. T. Engman, Population of Ghana, 1850–1960 (Accra, 1986), esp. 92 and 100–5 for data on sex ratios. It is far more likely that Boama’s assertion of men outnumbering women reflected the fact that young men were delaying marriage longer than they had before. That is, women outnumbered men in terms of availability, if not in statistical terms. Why this may have been the case is open to speculation. Although far more local research is required before any conclusions can be drawn, it is not improbable that, during the late 1920s and early 1930s, young men were finding it far more difficult than their fathers or uncles to enter successfully the colonial cash economy. The Bekwaihene’s assertion that men could not afford the marriage payments certainly substantiates such an hypothesis, as does Afua Fom’s recollection that ‘in those days, the women were able to get money faster than the men’. Eponuahemaa Afua Fom, Effiduasi, 30 June 1993.
It was proper prostitution. If they see you as a waiting man, they will come to you and say the price, but it wasn’t a bargaining thing. If she sees you, you can give her money and she will come to you. The next time, she may see another man, too, who can give her money, [and] she can go to him.31

Many women, however, had more difficulty leaping to the assumption that those who had not married were prostitutes. As Akosua So reflected in a recent interview:

A: … some girls don’t want to marry. It’s a personal thing. Some don’t like it. Some don’t want to lead good lives.

Q: Were they prostitutes or concubines or …?

A: They can’t openly declare themselves as prostitutes, but the ones who weren’t married, people assumed they were prostitutes.32

Perhaps some were; probably most were not. Eponuahemaa Afua Fom reported that both unmarried women and prostitutes were arrested. When I asked why some women had chosen not to marry, she replied, ‘Each person had their own reason. Some were lazy. They didn’t like to go to farm and to cook for the husband, so they wouldn’t marry… The men wanted to marry, but the women didn’t want to marry and it’s even worse now’.33 In a subsequent conversation, Afua Fom would inform me that she was among the sixty spinsters caught in Effiduasi in the early 1930s.34

According to Afua Fom and her sister, Adwoa Addae, both of whom are now in their mid-eighties, women were unmarried and they were choosing sigyawadi (being unmarried or the state of non-marriage) for reasons that had far more to do with the economics of conjugal obligations than with laxity in morals. Adwoa Addae has always lived with her sister in the family house (abusua fe). She had four husbands, but never any children, and helped her sister raise her eight children. The first time we spoke, Adwoa Addae explained the events behind the capture of unmarried women in this way:

Men were not buying! That is why the women were saying that they would not marry. The men were not taking care of them… The men were not serving us well. You would serve him, go to the farm with him, cook for him and yet he would not give you anything… The man and woman may farm together, but the woman would do the greater part of it… [The men] prefer to sit and do nothing.35

Although Adwoa was not captured, she recalled those days as ones in which women asserted a great deal of autonomy and independence – much of it linked to the establishment of cocoa farms or to engagement in foodstuffs trade. Adwoa, herself, divorced at least one of her husbands because he refused to cultivate a cocoa farm for her:

34 It is difficult to retrieve the numbers involved in these arrests. Most of the women whose reminiscences I have recorded talked of ‘many’ or ‘not many’. The written sources provide no statistics. Afua Fom recalled that there were ‘maybe sixty’… But there may be more than that because they were going to the farms. The sixty is what I saw. But we were more than sixty because they went far’. I am accepting Fom’s figure, for the time being, because she is the only woman I have encountered who has identified herself as among those captured. Eponuahemaa Afua Fom, Effiduasi, 30 June 1993.
I got married to my husband because I had wanted some benefits from [him]... so that maybe, in the future, I would not suffer... If the cocoa is there, the proceeds – I will enjoy them. But my husband was not prepared to think that far, so I decided to divorce [him]...36

Adwoa Addae did not consider her actions or attitudes to be personal and non-representative and her reminiscences, though lengthy, warrant extensive quotation. ‘In those days’, she recalled,

women were hard working, so we could live without men. The only thing we did not get were children, so we were forced to go in for these men. Apart from that, we were independent. We could work without the assistance of men. I don’t know, but that might have accounted for what the chiefs did... Those days are better than these days. In those days women could work hard and get a lot of things they wanted. But today it is not like that. Even if you try to assert some form of independence, you will see that it doesn’t work as it used to work. In those days, even though women wanted to be independent, they still got married to men, but it was because they wanted to... In those days, if you had a wife and you did not look after her well, she would just go. If you looked after her well, she would stay.'37

If Adwoa Addae remembered her years as a young woman as years of autonomy, she also remembered them as ones of broader disorder. It was as though the gendered world of Asante was turned upside down, if only for a few fleeting moments. Not only were unmarried women arrested, she recalled, but women who were married were instructed by the chief to ‘buy cloths for our husbands, which we did, and even in some cases sandals and other things... We really did not understand why the chief was saying that, but we had to do it’.38 R. S. Rattray, in his extensive discussion of marriage in Asante, wrote that one of the main liabilities that a husband incurred upon marriage was responsibility for his wife’s maintenance.39 Providing cloth was considered an important aspect of maintenance, and dowries in the pre-colonial and early colonial periods, he reported, often included provision of large pieces of cloth.40 The order by the Effidusaihene that men need no longer provide cloths for their wives and that those wives should provide cloths for their husbands – an order recalled in detail by Afua Fom, as well – undercut one of the fundamental obligations of marriage, that a husband must maintain his wife.41 Afua Fom remembered the order only as a ‘temporary measure that the King took... It was not customary so it did not last long’. She viewed the order more as a ritual – something the king had been advised by a diviner to do in order to ward off some imminent danger. When asked if she thought it was related to the capture of unmarried women, she replied, ‘We could not ask because, customarily, when the chief says something you cannot ask a question’.42

36 Ibid. 30 June 1993. Adwoa subsequently established her own farm on land given to her by her grandfather and reported, ‘right now I am enjoying from the fruits of that cocoa farm’. 37 Ibid. 38 Ibid. 39 Rattray, Ashanti Law, 25–6. 40 Rattray, Religion, 81–2. 41 Certainly, this incident must be understood in the light of broader contest within Asante over the meaning of marriage and the reciprocity of conjugal obligations. See n. 24 above. 42 Eponuahemaa Afua Fom, Effiduasi, 30 June 1993. I have found no written evidence of this order.
Although Afua Fom did not offer a direct correlation between the capture and the order concerning cloth, her recollections point to a series of attempts to assert control over women. Not only were there the arrests of ‘spinsters’ and the recasting, however temporary, of marital obligations, there was an attempt, according to Fom, to register girls upon passage of their first menses:

The King was also using another means [to determine who was unmarried, but eligible for marriage]. When the woman was old enough, when she started passing the menses, you will go to a registrar who will register that this woman is old enough to marry... [Women registered] at the court... so that they’ll have a rough idea which people are not marrying but are eligible to marry. There are puberty rites, too. Because of the puberty rites... people got to know which girls were eligible for marriage... By this they got to know who was married and who was not.43

I have not yet come across any written documentation that provides details on the registration of girls at puberty in Effiduasi. Nonetheless, it does not appear to be outside of the realm of possibility in a world in which, for the moment, anyway, confusion reigned.

How can one make sense of these charges and counter-charges – of prostitution, venereal disease, immorality and ‘bad girls’, of captured ‘spinsters’, wives clothing husbands and chiefs registering girls at menarche? In short, how does one sort through the chaos that seemed to engulf the gendered world of colonial Asante in the late 1920s and early 1930s? Certainly, it is not a question of figuring out who was telling the ‘truth’ and who was ‘lying’, or of simply ascertaining the precise number of prostitutes in a town like Effiduasi in 1929 (whose population was estimated as 3,778 in 1931)44 in order to evaluate the veracity of the chiefs’ charges. Even if it were possible to retrieve those figures, they would tell us nothing about how prostitution was defined in 1930 or the ways in which its meaning was contested. It is my contention that the reminiscences of women like Afua Fom and her sister, Adwoa Addae, point us in the right direction. Their repeated references to women’s autonomy and independence during this period – whether through complaints that men were ‘lazy’ or through matter-of-fact statements like ‘in those days, the women were able to get money faster than the men’45 – highlight the importance of economic and social context in framing the critical questions. In this case, we should not be asking whether or not the streets of Asante towns like Effiduasi were overrun with prostitutes. Rather, we must ask: why were women perceived as being prostitutes, as being out of control in this period, and why was that ‘uncontrollability’ consistently articulated in terms of a moral crisis?46

43 Ibid.
46 Obviously, terms like ‘prostitute’ must be handled quite carefully. When colonial and chiefly concerns over growing numbers of ‘prostitutes’ – so pervasive in the written documentation – are not situated in a precise social/historical juncture or are not weighed against the testimony of women and/or subordinate men, there is a very real danger of misinterpreting women’s agency for women’s victimization. For example, ➔ B. Grier, ‘Pawns, porters and petty traders: women in the transition to cash crop agriculture in colonial Ghana’, Signs, xvii (1992), 322. D. Jeater’s recent study, Marriage, Perversion...
These questions are certainly not unique to Asante. In recent years they have been posed quite dramatically in the growing body of comparative literature on gender and colonialism. As Nancy Hunt recently reflected: ‘where women most often appear in the colonial record is where moral panic surfaced, settled and festered. Prostitution, polygamy, adultery, concubinage and infertility are the loci of such angst throughout the historical record’. 47 Hunt and a number of other historians concerned with gender issues, particularly in areas with sizeable white settler populations, have devoted much energy to exploring why this has been the case. Most have come to conclusions similar to Megan Vaughan who has argued that

‘the problem of women’ was shorthand for a number of related problems including changes in property rights, in rights in labour and relations between generations… The real issue, of course, was that with far-reaching changes taking place in economic relations, so enormous strains were placed on both gender and generational relations … these complex changes were described in terms of degeneration, of uncontrolled sexuality and of disease. 48

Asante, I would argue, provides no exception here, except that in Asante’s equation there were no white settlers and cocoa was absolutely key. 49 The spread of cocoa farming in Asante, and throughout the forest belt of southern Ghana generally, has been well documented by numerous scholars over the past decades. 50 Several among them, most recently G. Austin, B. Grier and G. Mikell, have been particularly concerned with gender relations and the exploitation of unpaid labour in the initial years of cocoa’s expansion. 51 Their writings provide material for constructing, at least


48 M. Vaughan, Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness (Stanford, 1991, 144. Jeater’s recent work on Southern Rhodesia provides one of the more thorough explorations of ‘the problem with women’. See Jeater, Marriage, esp. 119–40.


51 Each of these authors draws from a very different research base. While Mikell’s book concerns the impact of cocoa on Ghana generally, it draws very heavily from fieldwork in the Sunyani District in the early 1970s. Grier’s recent analysis of gender, cocoa and colonialism in Ghana is based on existing secondary literature and on several published government reports from throughout the colony. While it provides a new reading of some of this literature, its conclusions largely echo Mikell’s. Austin’s work, by contrast, is located in Asante specifically, with much of the fieldwork drawing on the experiences of cocoa farmers in the Amanesie (Bekwai) District of Asante. In the discussion which
provisionally, a gendered periodization of the development of the cocoa economy in Asante – a chronology that can provide a context for understanding not just the capture of unmarried women, but the general chaos, the crisis in morality and sexuality, that appeared to engulf Asante in the years between the two World Wars. Few would dispute Austin’s contention that the labour necessary for the rapid spread of cocoa came ‘very largely from established, non-capitalist sources’. Initially, these sources included the ‘farmowners themselves, their families, their slaves and pawns, cooperative groups of neighbours and, in the case of chiefs, corveé labour provided by their subjects’. However, with the abolition of slavery and the prohibition of pawning in Asante in 1908, wives’ labour increasingly became, for most men, absolutely essential for the establishment of a farm. Few had the means to pay for hired labour. Of course, when connecting the abolition of pawning to an increase in the exploitation of wives’ labour, a distinction needs to be drawn between male and female pawns, for while male pawnage decreased dramatically after 1908, wives-as-pawns were quite common well into the 1940s. Austin’s work in fact suggests that many of the wives whose labour was being exploited in the establishment of cocoa farms were undoubtedly pawn-wives. ‘The pawning of women was relatively safe from prosecution by the colonial authorities’, he argues, ‘as long as the loan could be presented as a marriage payment, that is as tiri sika’. Wives’ provision of labour in the creation of cocoa farms flowed logically from pre-cocoa productive obligations between spouses. Wives commonly grew food crops on land cleared by their husbands – crops which both fed the family and provided a surplus which wives were entitled to sell. Indeed, in the first three to four years of a cocoa farm’s existence, the only returns from cocoa farms were the food crops – particularly crops like plantain or cocoyam – which were planted to shade the young trees during their first years. After that point, however, foods crops (that is, the wife’s only material and guaranteed return on her labour investment in the farm) diminished. Any labour invested by a wife after a cocoa farm became mature was directly compensated ‘only in the continued obligation of her husband’, as Roberts writes, ‘to provide part of her subsistence from his own earnings’. Obviously, for wives, the investment of labour in a husband’s cocoa farm did

follows, I draw most heavily from Austin’s contributions to our understanding because of their grounding in the specific dynamics of cocoa farming in Asante and because of the careful attention paid to organization of labour and to the subtle changes in that organization over time.

Implicit in Roberts’ discussion of cocoa in Sefwi Wiawso is such a ‘gendered chronology’, though it differs in important respects from the chronology proposed here for Asante. See Roberts, ‘State’, 53–5.


Austin’s earlier work is concerned with tying the abolition of slavery and pawngage to the initial use of hired labour on Asante cocoa farms, but not with changes in the gender division of labour. His recent discussions demonstrate quite convincingly that pawnage was not simply abolished, but declined in uneven, ambiguous and very gendered ways that profoundly impacted upon conjugal relationships. See his ‘Cocoa-farming’, 264–5 and ‘Human pawning’, 137–43.

not provide for future economic autonomy or security. For this reason, as C. Okali observed, ‘wives working on new and young farms were always aware that they were not working on joint economic enterprises. They expected eventually to establish their own separate economic concerns’. The historical evidence suggests that this is precisely what many did after the initial establishment of cocoa in an area. As Austin has recently suggested, women’s ownership of cocoa farms in Asante during the first two decades of this century was exceedingly rare. After that point, it became far more common and was directly correlated to the length of time cocoa had been cultivated in a given area. ‘The longer that cocoa-growing had been established in a given district’, he writes, ‘the higher the proportion of women among the growing number of cocoa farmowners and among the increasing number of owners of bearing trees’. In explaining when women moved into cocoa farming, Austin highlights the gendered division of labour in Asante farming, the varying labour requirements of a cocoa farm as it matures, the ‘propensity for most cocoa farmers to make more than one cocoa “farm”’ and the increasingly favorable odds that, over time, some women, through inheritance, gift or direct purchase, would end up as cocoa farmers in their own right. Mikell, on the other hand, attributes the ‘revolutionary high cocoa prices in the 1920s’ as stimulating women’s movement into cocoa farm ownership. Yet the price of cocoa peaked quite dramatically in 1920 and then continued a slow decline throughout that decade. This trend suggests that a gendered chronology of cocoa in Asante cannot be derived from an examination of prices alone, but must be grounded in a very specific analysis of land, labour and cash in a given region.

Such a chronology for Asante would have women, by the third decade of this century, establishing their own cocoa farms in an effort to gain more long-term economic security than was promised from labouring on a husband’s mature farm. And the independent establishing of a cocoa farm was only one in a series of options that opened to women in areas where the cocoa economy was in place. ‘The growth of male cocoa income’, according to Austin’s recent account, ‘created economic opportunities for women in local markets, both as producers (for example, of food crops and cooked food) and as traders’. Certainly G. Clark’s recent work on Kumasi market women portrays this era as absolutely pivotal, as the period during which women moved in dramatic numbers into trading, especially in previously male-dominated commodities. That many women seized such opportunities in the 1920s may have stood them in good stead, at least vis-à-vis many subordinate males, when the cocoa economy contracted after 1928.

57 Austin, ‘Human pawning’, 141–2. Women’s entry into cocoa farming occurred later and in important ways did not parallel men’s entry. Most significantly, women’s plots were generally smaller than men’s, their size being limited, as Grier recently argued, ‘by the labour [a woman]…could spare, by the willingness of her kin members to help her out, and by her ability to acquire a pawn or hire a laborer’. Grier, ‘Pawns’, 322.
59 Mikell, Cocoa, 102.
60 See Cox-George, Finance, 66–8.
61 Austin notes the special case of pawn-wives who had to share some of their proceeds with their ‘creditor-husbands’ and thus had less incentive to acquire farms in their own right as a means of security and autonomy. See Austin, ‘Human pawning’, 142.
62 Austin, ‘Human pawning’, 142–3; Clark, Onions, esp. 316–18.
While far more research is needed before any conclusions can be drawn, it is not improbable that while farming incomes fell, local trading incomes continued to expand. In other words, women who had moved into food stuffs trading may have been better placed to weather the economic drought of the 1930s than many of the small-scale male cocoa farmers who had entered the cocoa economy in previous decades.

It is in this confusing period of transition in the development of Asante's cocoa economy that we must locate the strange episodes in which unmarried women were rounded up. It was during the period from 1920–35, with cocoa well established in many parts of Asante, that women's role in the cash economy was both changing and diversifying. Many wives were making the move from being the most common form of exploitable labour during the initial introduction of cocoa to exploiting, themselves, the new openings for economic autonomy and security presented by the established, though still expanding, cocoa economy. Their moves are evident not just in the statistics documenting the increasing number of women cocoa farm owners or in descriptions of the growing markets in foodstuffs, but in the crisis in marriage so well documented in customary court cases and in life histories. Indeed, even when that economy began to contract at the end of the 1920s, at least some women were well placed to endure the lean years which lay ahead because they had moved into the local markets as traders. Perhaps that is the resilience which Afua Fom so succinctly captured when she mused that 'in those days, the women were able to get money faster than the men'.

And in those days of disorder, women like Adwoa Addae were quite prepared to divorce a husband who refused to set up a farm for his wife. Others turned to customary courts to challenge matrilineal inheritance, demanding portions of a divorced or deceased husband's cocoa farm in recognition of labour invested. Still others sought to avoid marriage altogether or, at the very least, like Afuah Buo, to insist on its fluidity and the mutuality of conjugal obligations. Indeed, Austin explains the decline in frequency and size of *tiri sika* – a marriage payment by which the husband paid a debt of the woman's family – on the grounds that it was 'less worth paying because the wife felt less obliged in her *abusua* (lineage) to see the marriage through on the terms her elders had accepted on her behalf'. All of these bits and pieces evidenced a crisis in conjugal obligations in Asante, a contest over the meanings and makings of marriage. They were, more than anything, about the struggle for control over women's productive and reproductive labour in Asante – control at the very moment women were

---

64 Countless numbers of such cases can be found in the record books stored at Manhyia Record Office. See, particularly, the records of the Kumasihehe's Native Tribunal, 1926–35, the Asantehene's Divisional Native Court B, 1935–60 and the Kumasi Divisional ('Clan') Courts, 1928–45 (consisting of Kyidom, Kroniti, Gyasi, Ankobia, Oyoko, Benkum, Akwamu and Adonten).
65 Roberts noted a similar pattern in Sefwi Wiawso. See her 'State', 54–5.
66 Austin, 'Human pawning', 143. Grier suggests that the payment of *tiri sika* was a colonial invention. Grier, 'Pawns', 327–8. Austin counters that interpretation in 'Human pawning', 125–6 and 149, n. 44, rightly pointing out that nothing in Fortes' unpublished papers suggests that *tiri sika* was of recent origin. Much of Fortes' information on marriage for the 'Ashanti Social Survey' of the mid 1940s was gathered by T. E. Kyei and Kyei's work certainly confirms Austin's interpretation. See T. E. Kyei, *Marriage*. 
beginning to negotiate their own spaces within the colonial economy.\textsuperscript{67} That this was a struggle articulated in a discourse of ‘bad girls’ and ‘lazy men’ or of prostitution, venereal disease and moral degeneration should come as no surprise. Women’s economic alternatives were easily represented, as Roberts has argued, ‘as the removal of constraints upon their sexuality’.\textsuperscript{68}

But how could constraints be reasserted? How could a new moral order be constructed out of the crisis? Indirect rule, I would argue, was key to the ordering process and must be understood in light of the gender chaos of the inter-war era.\textsuperscript{69} Indeed, it is important, particularly in view of events like the capture of so-called ‘spinsters’, that historians explore more carefully indirect rule’s specific implications for mediating gender conflict, shaping gendered boundaries and reformulating gender subordination.\textsuperscript{70} While it served the obvious ends of providing administration on the cheap and legitimating colonialism, it also facilitated colonization of the domestic realm – the world of marriage, divorce, adultery, childbirth and death. Asante chiefs, as the arbiters of ‘customary law’, through executive order and through native tribunals, were empowered by indirect rule to manipulate

\textsuperscript{67} Asante women were not unique in this regard. As Lovett has written on the Copperbelt, ‘Women seized new avenues of power and agency, such as the creation of colonial courts, and also actively constructed other opportunities, such as prostitution and fluid urban marital arrangements, in order to accumulate surplus, gain autonomy, and exercise control over their own labor power, fertility and sexuality’. Lovett, ‘Gender relations’, 24.


\textsuperscript{69} I discuss the role of missionaries and medical officers in this ordering process in ‘Making mothers’. Jeater argues that the very concept of ‘moral realm’ is a colonial construct – a process by which ‘Africans as well as whites began to conceptualize issues of gender and sexuality in terms of individual acts…which were dissociated from the broader context of family membership’. \textit{Marriage}, esp. 32–8 and 260–6. Though the number of Europeans in Asante at this time made direct parallels with Southern Rhodesia problematic, Jeater’s definition of ‘moral realm’ as colonizing process translates quite easily to the Asante context.

\textsuperscript{70} Vaughan, \textit{Curing}, esp. 129–40, and J. Parpart, ‘“Where is your mother?”: gender, urban marriage and colonial discourse on the Zambian Copperbelt, 1924–1945’, \textit{Int. J. Afr. Hist. Studies}, \textbf{xxvii} (1994), 241–71, but esp. 244–9, make important contributions to our understanding of the gendered implications of indirect rule. Unfortunately, most scholars addressing this question work in areas with sizeable settler populations, in former colonies where indirect rule institutions bore little resemblance to pre-colonial political organizations. (Roberts’ pioneering work on Sefwi Wiawso is an important exception here. See Roberts, ‘State’, esp. 48–57.) In these settler areas, customary law and native courts appear very much as colonial inventions. The Asante material is far more difficult to sort through because the information we have regarding the pre-colonial period is so extensive and continuities with the pre-colonial past so striking. For the nineteenth century, see the sources cited in n. 12 above. For some tentative reflections on the political economy of indirect rule and continuities with the nineteenth-century Asanteman, see Allman, ‘“Spinsters”’, esp. 183–6, and ‘Adultery’.\textsuperscript{12}
meanings and redefine relationships. A good portion of their energy, particularly after the formal commencement of indirect rule restored the Asante Confederacy Council in 1935, was focused on women’s roles, women’s sexuality and women’s challenges to definitions of marriage and divorce.\textsuperscript{51} But even before the restoration, the British were firmly committed to indirect rule in Asante and chiefs ruled daily on the meaning of marriage – an institution, as Parpart has argued – so important in ‘regulating sexuality, procreation, labour, and property rights’.\textsuperscript{72} The capture of unmarried women in towns like Effiduasi and Asokore, therefore, simply evidenced pre-restoration efforts by Asante’s indirect rule chiefs to intervene directly in the negotiation of marriage and non-marriage and to regulate women’s productive and reproductive power.

And were those efforts successful? Many women remember the capture of ‘spinsters’ as solving momentarily the crisis in marriage. As Beatrice Nyarko recalled, ‘People became afraid. It put fear in them’. Rosina Boama agreed, ‘When the chiefs did that, they started getting married and things became calm’. However, in the long run, many argue, like Adwoa Addae, that ‘it didn’t help us at all’, that its impact was minimal and short-lived. Certainly, the capture did not serve, as Grier writes of indirect rule generally, to ‘guarantee girls and women as unpaid sources of labour on the farms’. Indeed, nothing in Asante politics from 1900 to the present has managed to guarantee that exploitation, only to facilitate it in the face of consistent and unrelenting challenge.\textsuperscript{76}

But this particular form of coercion was unsuccessful in even minimally facilitating the exploitation of women’s unpaid labour and one important reason for its failure was that the capture of unmarried women did not get the backing of the colonial government. In contrast to their support for various changes in the ‘customary’ meanings of marriage, divorce and adultery during the colonial period, the British authorities did not consider the arrest of unmarried women to be legitimate or to have ‘customary’ precedence. This is not to suggest that the British were unconcerned with women’s uncontrollability, but that the ways in which that control could be articulated

\textsuperscript{51} For example, chiefs and elders refused to consider allowing wives to inherit from their husbands, even if a woman had worked for years on her husband’s cocoa farm, for fear that Asante women would simply poison their husbands at the slightest provocation in order to inherit the farm. See Asante Confederacy Council, \textit{Minutes of the Third Session}, 7–23 Mar. 1938. Not until 1948 did the Council rule in favour of allowing a wife and child to inherit one-third of a man’s property if he died intestate. However, the ruling was without legislative effect. For a full listing of Council orders, including those on adultery and wives’ fidelity, see J. N. Matson, \textit{A Digest of the Minutes of the Ashanti Confederacy Council from 1935–1949 Inclusive and a Revised Edition of Warrington’s Notes on Ashanti Custom} (Cape Coast: Prospect Printing, c. 1951), 26–48.

\textsuperscript{72} Parpart, ‘“Your mother?”’, 270.


\textsuperscript{74} Rosina Boama, Effiduasi, 24 Aug. 1992.

\textsuperscript{75} Adwoa Addae, Effiduasi, 28 Aug. 1992.

\textsuperscript{76} Grier, ‘Pawns’, 323–8. While few would disagree with her notion that indirect rule ‘reinforced the legal and coercive power of chiefs and male elders over their historic dependents’, most would insist that the ‘whys and hows’ of that broad observation cannot be addressed by simply casting indirect rule as the obvious, invented and uncontested response of a colonial government intent on guaranteeing ‘girls and women as unpaid sources of labor’. One of the first casualties of such an equation is women’s historical agency in the making of the colonial world.
was circumscribed by notions of what was deemed repugnant to ‘justice, equity and good conscience’, or by a ‘repugnancy test’, as K. Mann and R. Roberts have termed it.\(^77\) Thus, in Asante, chiefs’ orders aimed at most other forms of ‘uncontrollability’ – particularly at adulterous wives, prostitutes or those who spread venereal disease – were fully supported by the colonial authorities. In short, orders could be aimed at the aberrant behaviour in which some unmarried women might engage, but not simply at the status of being not-married.

But perhaps far more important than the absence of British support in explaining the long-term failure of the round-ups was the success of many women in subverting the entire process from the outset. Afua Fom, one of those captured, recalls that once women entered the room where they were to be kept, some would immediately mention a man’s name – ‘any man’s name’. This was not necessarily out of fear or desperation, however. She recalls that some women arranged with men in advance of their arrest: ‘When I am arrested I will mention your name, so you will come’. At times, women gave their release fee to a particular man in advance. Once arrested, the woman named that man, he came, paid the fee and she was set free, supposedly to marry this suitor. At other times, Afua Fom reported, women even mentioned their brother’s name. The brother paid the fee for his sister’s release. Once the sister married, the brother would expect to be reimbursed by the husband. ‘He’ll get some money’, she recalled, ‘from whomever wants to get married to you’.\(^78\) Afua Fom’s recollections of how women circumvented the aim of the capture is certainly corroborated by Afuah Buo’s testimony in the 1929 Asokore trial. Buo, it will be recalled, testified that the plaintiff had told her, prior to her arrest, that he would ‘clear [her] out’ if she were arrested.

That many women, with the assistance of male accomplices – friends, lovers or brothers – were able to circumvent chiefs’ efforts to regulate women’s productive and reproductive power underscores women’s ability to shape actively the emerging colonial world. There is certainly no shortage of evidence on this score. Once the cocoa economy was established, many challenged their roles as unpaid productive labour and sought economic security and autonomy in the rapidly expanding cash economy as cocoa farm owners in their own right, or as foodstuff producers and traders. The chaos unleashed by this movement of women into the cash economy, combined with a host of other factors – urbanization, western education, Christianity, and British colonial courts\(^79\) – warranted drastic action by Asante’s chiefs, those empowered to restore order out of chaos. But their actions in this particular case – the wholesale arrests of all unmarried women – appear to have been easily circumvented by the women concerned. Granted, chiefs still collected 5s for every woman captured, thus making the exercise a ‘money-making proposition’, as the District Officer suggested, but they did not


\(^78\) Eponuahemaa Afuah Fom, Effiduasi, 30 June 1993.

\(^79\) For an important discussion of the ways in which women to the south of Asante used the British justice system during this period, \(\Rightarrow\) R. Gocking, ‘British justice and the Native Tribunals of the southern Gold Coast Colony’, *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxxiv (1993), 93–113, but esp. 108–10.
succeed in securing control over women’s productive and reproductive labour, or, in their own words in encouraging ‘conjugal marriages among our womenfolk’. At best, considering the fact that many unmarried women paid their own release fee through a male accomplice, the chiefs had succeeded merely in implementing, and for a very short time, a kind of ‘non-marriage tax’ by making women pay 5s for not marrying. This is not to suggest that women simply walked away from episodes like the ‘spinning round-ups’ as long-term, uncontested victors in the struggle for control over their labour, particularly their labour as wives. Indeed, the spaces women negotiated for themselves in the colonial economy were narrow at best, fleeting at worst and required constant, ever-evolving forms of defence. But it is to argue that women made history in colonial Asante, they were not just victims of it. The story of the capture of unmarried women thus stands as testament not simply to the power of chiefs under indirect rule, but to the success of at least some Asante women in negotiating the terrain of cocoa, cash and colonialism.

SUMMARY

Between 1929 and 1932 in a number of villages and towns throughout rural Asante, chiefs were ordering the arrest of all women who were over the age of fifteen and not married. A woman was detained until she spoke the name of a man whom she would agree to marry and the man in question paid a release fee. If the man refused, he too was imprisoned or fined up to £5. If he agreed, he paid a small marriage fee to the woman’s parents and one bottle of gin. Based on the correspondence of colonial officials, customary court records and the life histories and reminiscences of women who were among the spinsters caught, this article explores gender and social change in colonial Asante by dissecting and contextualizing the round-up of unmarried women. 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 was, more than anything, about shifting power relationships. It was chaos engendered by cash and cocoa, by trade and transformation. From 1921 to 1935, with cocoa well-established in many parts of Asante, women’s roles in the cash economy were changing and diversifying. Many wives were making the move from being the most common form of exploitable labour during the initial introduction of cocoa to themselves exploiting new openings for economic autonomy. That women were beginning to negotiate their own spaces within the colonial economy precipitated a profound crisis in conjugal obligations in Asante – a crisis requiring drastic measures. The rounding up of unmarried women was one of several weapons used by Asante’s chiefs in the struggle to reassert control over women’s productive and reproductive labour.