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# Constructions of Masculinity Among the Akan People of Ghana

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## Abstract

This paper contests Butler's theory of gender performativity established on the premise that gender is made real through the constant enactment of certain behaviours that are learnt. Butler posits that, gender can be defined as something people do rather than a biological quality they possess. The theory ultimately supports the principle of gender neutrality often argued by gay and lesbian activists and queer theorists. Using evidence from Akan constructions of masculinity, the paper supports the conventional view that gender is primarily biological and that people perform their social roles based on their biological make up. A major highlight of the paper is the events leading to the election of Barima Kwame Kyeretwie as Asantehene Prempeh II in 1931 and the resolution of destoolment charges brought against him by some Asante youth in 1935. The paper concludes that in gender categorization, social construction is not abstract but is premised on biology which should be the primary determinant of a person's gender.

## Keywords

Gender Performativity, Gender Neutrality, Akan Masculinity

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## 1. Introduction

On Monday 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2011, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that the Ugandan government of Yoweri Museveni had issued a defiant response to a weekend statement issued by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron. According to the BBC, Cameron, reacting to reports of inhuman treatment of gays in Uganda and Africa in general had stated that 'those receiving UK aid should adhere to proper human rights'. Specifically, 'those receiving UK aid should respect gay rights'. Cameron, therefore, announced to Africa and the world that UK aid to African countries would be linked to the treatment of homosexuals and the open show of zero tolerance for homophobia by governments in those countries. The position of David Cameron derived from a long and sometimes bloody fight for gay and lesbian rights in Britain and other

countries across the western world. Two days after the Ugandan reaction, the Ghanaian President, John Evans Atta Mills mirrored African sentiments by stating on 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2011 that: No one can deny Prime Minister Cameron's rights to make policies take initiatives or make statements that reflect his societal norms and ideals but he doesn't have the right to direct other sovereign nations as to what they should do especially where their societal norms and ideals are different from those which exist in the Prime Minister's society.

In the ensuing brouhaha, the African union and some other African governments openly but weakly protested this imposition of western culture on Africa. The protests were not based on the fact that Africans lived in blissful ignorance of the existence on the continent of homosexual populations; the protests derived from the recognition of the fact that this was another imposition of western knowledge and values on

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Africa with complete disregard for indigenous African knowledge derived from African experiences.

Those who protested were not stuck in the Middle Ages; on the contrary, they were on the defence because African interactions with the western world have put the African identity which is represented in its indigenous knowledge systems under siege and therefore caused it to be in danger of extinction or loss. The African protesters to the imposition of homosexuality as a fact of African life only reminded the west that the differences we find with other people was a fact of humanity, so sacred that it had to be protected in the words of Malcolm X by any means necessary. The contention was that unbridled universalisms have put the world on the verge of a one-size-fits-all agenda which is inconsistent with the diversity embodied in the natural order of things. Cameron's statement and the arguments it engineered which had long been a part of the gender discourse in the west suddenly became a part of the gender discourse in Africa.

Historically, scholarship on gender studies which began with documenting women's contributions has expanded tremendously. The interrogation of new methodologies and research frontiers in this field gave an added impetus to the feminist movement in the twentieth century. From an early focus on the study of western women, research shifted in the 1970's to the study of women and gender in Africa. Towards the end of the 1980's, a new breed of western gender activists and marginalization theorists directed attention to identity politics in western gender studies. In examining gender identities and relations, this new breed of scholars increasingly focused attention on gender categorization. The issues they raised and concomitant attempts to answer them, led to the rise of scholars like Judith Butler, who in 1989, impacted the world of gender studies with the provocative book: *Gender Troubles* (Butler, 1989).

Butler interrogates stereotypic definitions of male and female based on physical or biological evidence. Being homosexual, Butler furnishes the reading public with an insider's perplexity in matters of gender categorization using the traditional definition of male and female. Butler opposes dominant perceptions of femininity and masculinity based on physical characteristics by arguing that in certain cultures and circumstances, men for example can be feminized or emasculated based on their inability to perform certain roles. With the opposite being true of women, it is impossible to judge who is a man or a woman from appearance. In effect, gender is not a fact thrust upon a person at birth neither is gender about qualities people possess. Rather, gender is something people do and hence acquired through repeated performance of social roles.

A careful assessment of the Butler theory confirms the huge

role performance plays in gender categorisation. Among the Akan of Ghana, nature and humanity were divided into two: male (*banyin, barima*) and female (*basia, obaa*). For example, a man (*banyin, barima*) was expected to show certain characteristics, an important one being bravery. A lack of bravery or any other masculine characteristic could earn a man the dishonourable categorisation of being genderless or gender neutral (*obaa barima or Kodwo basia*) and instructively possessing more female genes than male; such a man could also be referred to as feminine (*obaa*). In spite of the Akan confirmation of the theory of performativity in the performance of gender roles, it is important to note that the only reason a man stood in danger of being emasculated was because he was first and foremost considered to be among the league of men based on his biological possession of phallic attributes at birth. A woman on the other hand could be said to have male attributes (ex. bravery) as a compliment. This was the case of Ejisuhemaa Nana Yaa Asantewa who is known to have organised and led the Asante attack on the British in 1901 (Owusu, 2009: 21-24). At other times when a woman is said to have manly qualities due to her behaviour or physique, it is an insult because her femininity is being questioned.

The theory of gender performativity as expressed in Butler's 1989 edition of *Gender Troubles*, dangerously gave substance (as is so often the case with western inspired academic disciplines) to generalisations and universalisms by launching a clarion call to gender practitioners the world over to discard the conventional definition of male and female and accept a western concept of gender neutrality until such time as repeated role play could define and differentiate between men and women. This one - size- fits- all or better still, western- size -fits- all approach to intellectual theorising is a danger the liberal Arts exists to change.

The Arts are supposed to inculcate in us the consciousness of our consciousness – the awareness of our being. Being is an existential statement. Therefore, one must consistently be conscious of the structures and contents which inculcate in any individual or society the awareness of their state of being. Being is invariably a statement of self. To be African is to know the self as African. It is a statement of self-knowledge. It is a cultural statement and a cultural affirmation. Self and world are fused in a web of reciprocal relations. A society's worldview is the sum total of its memory (history) and its interpretation of its environment. How we react to the world of nature and the worlds of culture other than our own depends on the assumptions which make sense to us in terms of our worldview which necessarily consists of what we know.

In this paper, two out of the three variants of the Akan language that have been reduced to writing – Fante and

Asante Twi will be used. The paper defends indigenous African knowledge by interrogating ideas of masculinity through the use of information from the language and history of the Akan people of Ghana. It is the view of this paper that language which forms an integral part of cultural transmission is an important window into the appreciation of any group of people and what truths they hold to be true. Language is the sum total of a peoples knowledge because it embodies their attempt to rationalise through speech what they know to be true and therefore worth keeping. Employing the multi-disciplinary approach, the thrust of the discussion is the Akan categorisation of nature, humanity and roles which presupposes gender differentiation – male and female. The paper underscores the importance of gender in Akan leadership which is climaxed through the assumption of a stool. Particular attention is paid to constructions of masculinity through the interrogation of *mmarimaseɛm* (expressions of masculinity) as evidenced in Akan cultural philosophy emanating from the language and the history of its people. A case study of the experiences of one Akan leader, Asantehene Osei Agyemang Prempeh II (1931-1970) is used to disprove the universality of the performativity theory and support the position of the paper that in gender categorisation, it is impossible to divorce the biological which is natural and therefore fixed, from the social which is performed and therefore changeable. The paper concludes that in gender categorisation, biology is primary and performance secondary.

## 2. Methodology

Conducted through an intense search of linguistic and historical sources, this paper relied heavily on oral interviews of Fante speaking Akan men and archival information from the Public Records and Administration Department, Kumasi, Ashanti Region of Ghana. We consulted books and scholarly articles written on gender as well as websites of relevant organisations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation. The researchers also made good use of linguistic evidence and data drawn from Akan music, folklore and proverbs in analysing and assessing the cultural and historical data gathered.

## 3. Findings and Discussions

### 3.1. The Akan Concept of Gender and Masculinity

In an interview with the researchers, the Omanhene of Essikado, Nana Kobina Nketsia V, stressed the fact that the Akan are theocentric and therefore construct their cultural philosophy on cosmic balance. He further stated that, in Akan

religious and philosophical thinking, the Akan live in two interacting worlds: the world of nature, which is imposed and the world of culture, which is man-made. The pursuit of cosmic and societal balance gave birth to the assignment of complementary roles. Among Fante speakers, the world of nature and of man can be divided into two gender categories ‘nyin’ (male) and ‘bere’ (female). In fante ‘bere’ may mean ripe, or time. So, ‘*akokɔnyin*’ is ‘*akokɔ* (fowl)’ + *nyin* (cockerel) - male and ‘*akokɔbere*’ is *akokɔ* (fowl) + *bere* (hen) – female. In the same way, some plants are categorised as male and female. An example is pawpaw. A pawpaw tree with fruits is female and the one without fruits is male. The male pawpaw tree is normally used for medicinal purposes.

The days of the week are also gendered because they are controlled by particular deities who possess qualities distinctively masculine or feminine; that is, the various deities with responsibility to control particular days have gender characteristics - males and females. The male days include, Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The female days are Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. The female days are accorded with production and so the Twi speakers of Akan call the earth ‘Asaase Yaa’ (Earth Thursday). The Akan normally contract marriages on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday because they are female days. It is believed that the marriage would be fruitful and produce a lot of children if contracted on a female day. In Akan thinking, marriages that are contracted on male days do not last and could also cause barrenness. The importance attached to choice of day is also evident in the respect paid to the dead. Corpses are normally buried on female days so that they could ‘germinate’ again because of the Akan belief in reincarnation.

Another philosophy of the Akan concerning the dead is with the issue of inheritance. Apart from the Akuapem people, Akan inheritance is matrilineal. Children have blood relations with people from their mother side and so they can succeed their mother’s brother, known as ‘*Wɔfa*’ from ‘*wɔ*’ (have), and ‘*fa*’ (take). This means that nephews and nieces have the right to take or possess their uncle’s properties.

An interview with J. B. Crayner, who is a Fante legend and the author of many historical books in Fante including *Akweesi egu nananom pɔw* published in 1967 and *Bɔrbɔr Kunkumfi*, which was published in 1969, affirmed that a father may have a lot of children, but none of them has the right to succeed him because they do not have blood – ‘*mogya/bɔgya*’ lineage, rather they believe that ‘*egya*’ (father) releases the semen, that is, ‘*gya*’ (see off) the semen or the unborn child to spend ‘*nna*’ (days) with the ‘*na*’ (mother). So, to Akans, ‘*na*’ or mother also refers to days - that is, days a child spends with the woman in the womb. Since the father releases the semen, his spirit protects the child. So the deity of the father – ‘*Egya bosom or ntorɔ/nton*’ also becomes the

deity of the child. The taboos of the father apply to the child. If the father's deity is the river god *Bosom Pra*, it means the child is also guided or protected by that river god, and since *Bosom Pra* is known to be Wednesday born, those who serve him do not eat purple yam - '*ewuruku*' on Wednesdays - '*Wukuda*'. The emphasis placed on the protective qualities of a father's spirit is exemplified when calamity strikes an Akan; he/she normally shouts '*egyeyi!*' which is '*egya*' (father) + '*ei!*' (shout associated with fear).

Gender categorisation also reflected in art forms. Music forms an important part of day to day activities among the Akan. They therefore produced musical instruments in order to enhance their cultural life. The philosophy of harmony or balance was also transferred into this important cultural and social practice. For example, the '*Atumpan*' (Talking drum), was the most important drum in the life of an Asante state (Kwadwo, 2002). Appropriate usage required a pair- male (low tone) and female (high tone). According to Kwadwo, these drums, ('*ntumpan*' - plural) served three purposes (2002: 106-110).

- a) In the absence of radios and telephones, these drums were used to send important messages about invasions and wars as well as fire outbreaks. Also, in case someone went missing, the drums were used by the search party to send messages to the lost one especially when it was suspected that the person probably lost their way in the forest.
- b) *Ntumpan* drums formed part of a King's orchestra - *fontomfrom*.
- c) They were used to sound the appellations of a king/chief as well as individuals.

An important aspect of Akan philosophical thought expressed through its art form is the stool. Basically, a wooden seat, a stool comprises three parts: a base, a middle section and the top. According to Sarpong, perhaps, 'the one stool which surpasses all the others in importance, reverence, mysteriousness -if only in regard to its origin- and fame is the golden stool [*Sikadwa Kofi*]'- the state stool of Asante (Sarpong, 1971: 34). The stool (*adwa/akonnwa*, -Twi; *egua/akongua*- Fante) is considered an important part of the domestic, political and religious life. An important attribute of the Akan stool is its description as male or female; thus, '*mmarimadwa*' and '*mmaadwa*'. Just as many people in the world, the Akan believe death does not end a person's membership of a society; rather death affords the living a communicative link to the ancestors and the world of *nsamanfo* (ancestral spirits). The uniqueness of the Akan's link to his ancestor however lies in the medium of the stool which can denote the highest offices in the land- that of the chief and queen. When any member of Akan society is elected as leader, male or female, the process of legitimising

that person is said to be his/her enstoolment because the individual chooses a stool that earlier belonged to an ancestor. After enstoolment, a chief/queen is said to sit on a stool or occupy that stool. When a leader is forced to abdicate for any reason, he/she is said to have been destooled or removed from the stool.

The Akan refer to their ancestors as *nananom* (grandparents); but the word *nananom* is also used as the title of chiefs and queens. This means that a chief/queen is elevated to the position of an ancestor immediately he/she is enstooled because the spirit of the ancestor who first sat on that seat will come and inhabit the newly enstooled person. Males sit on male stools and females sit on female stools. If it happens that a female is to sit on a male stool, she bears the name of a male and she dresses like a male. This is common among the coastal Fante. Males, however, never occupy female stools since it is disgraceful for a man to be considered a woman. A respectable man was expected to express '*mmarimase*' at all times. The stigma attached to the description of a man as a woman forced the Akan to clarify in no uncertain terms the attributes and roles of each sex.

### 3.2. *Sikadwa Kofi, Masculinity and the Enstoolment of Prempeh II*

The story of *Sikadwa Kofi* is mundane but the significance of the story is the unwavering belief of Asanteman (the Asante people or nation) that the stool is a symbol of their nationhood and contains the *sunsum* or the soul of their union. This stool which is believed to have been dropped from the heavens by God is like all other wooden stool. The only difference is that it is encased in gold plates and is also decorated by several gold ornaments. The most significant aspect of the origins of this stool in so far as this paper is concerned is however the name of the stool - *Sikadwa Kofi* which is *Sikadwa* (golden stool) + *Kofi* (name given to a male born on Friday). Friday translated '*efie da*' (home day), or '*efua da*' (protection day) implies a day of safety for the Akan. It is therefore significant that the symbolic stool of the Asante was born on that day. Another important significance of the name is that it is masculine and therefore a man's stool. No woman can therefore be Asantehene neither can a man who is not considered as a full and proper man. The importance of the stool's sex is exemplified in the circumstances surrounding the enstoolment of Asantehene Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II.

Owusu (2009) records that, on May 12 1931, Asantehene Nana Prempeh I joined his ancestors. *Sikadwa Kofi* was therefore rendered vacant and there was intense competition for the position of Asantehene among the eligible royals. The Asantehemaa (female leader of the Asante/ queen), in this case, Nana Adwoa Serwaa, was by custom allowed to elect



three persons to present to the *Gyaase* (caretakers of the palace selected from the royal family) for their approval. Customarily, although the *Gyaase* were informed of the top nominees, the selected candidates were presented one after the other. This meant that it was not necessary to present a second candidate if the first was approved of. On the other hand, knowledge of the competing candidate helped the *Gyaase* to make an informed choice. After consideration by the *Gyaase* the candidate of the royal family was presented for approval to the *Kumase Nsafohene* (high ranking Kumase chiefs). The election of 1931 was special because the Asantehemaa's son was also eligible to be selected for the vacant position. She narrowed the choice down to two - her son, Barima (man, male) Bonsu and her nephew, Barima Kwame Kyeretwie. Rumour has it that Nana Adwoa Serwaa wanting to appear impartial presented Kwame Kyeretwie to the *Gyaase* first. On her motives, it is believed that her decision was based on assurances from some members of the *Gyaase* that Kwame Kyeretwie would be rejected leaving the position clear for her son, Barima Bonsu (Owusu, 2009: 44-47).

It was reportedly a very close race which engineered a long argument among the kingmakers. Instructively, all eligible royals to the stool went by the title Barima emphasising their male characteristics. In the final analysis, the 1931 election panel chose to limit the requirement to the more masculine candidate. Of the two, Bonsu was a man of few words, well mannered and sociable. Kwame Kyeretwie on the other hand was a man with an intimidating abrasive character and a womaniser. By virtue of the fact that the Asantehemaa had selected Kwame Kyeretwie as the foremost candidate, the kingmakers had to assess his character first. The story goes that when his detractors drew attention to his 'negative' attributes, his supporters reminded the group of the important fact that those traits were indeed manly and therefore appropriate for the occupant of Sikadwa Kofi. An informant, Kyeame (linguist) Banahene simulated the vetting process as follows:

Detractors: Kwame Kyeretwie *ye patapaa* (Kwame Kyeretwie is intimidating and abrasive)

Supporters: *Ohene ye obi a odi akakabensem* (A chief involves himself in complex intimidating issues)

Detractors: Kwame Kyeretwie *pe mmaa* (Kwame Kyeretwie is a womaniser)

Supporters: *Oye barima. Obarima se obaa pe.* (He is a man. A man courts a woman. - This was in view of the fact that sexual prowess was an important attribute among the Akan since a man who suffered from sexual weakness was considered a woman.).

In the final analysis the kingmakers had to concede that Sikadwa Kofi was a male stool and therefore required a man who was firm and fearful. The two qualities were undoubtedly found in the person of Barima Kwame Kyeretwie who was enstooled Nana Osei Agyemang Prempeh II on 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 1931 (Owusu, 2009: 48).

On his enstoolment, Prempeh II assumed the title of Kumasehene and not Asantehene because the British abolished the position of Asantehene with the exile of Kwaku Duah III also known as Prempeh I to Seychelles in 1896. Kwame Kyeretwie as Kumasehene from June 1931 campaigned for the reinstatement of the position of Asantehene. The British agreed to the restoration of that position and he duly became Asantehene on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1935. A few months after his installation, Asantehene Prempeh II was served with destoolment charges (Owusu 2009: 64 – 68).

### 3.3. The Destoolment Saga (1935 – 1938)

Owusu (2009) reports that, on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1935, high ranking chiefs in the Kumase division received letters from the ex-Dadiesoabahene, Kofi Nsiah also known as Kofi Sekyere. In this letter, Kofi Nsiah cited thirteen instances of misconduct for which he believed Asantehene Prempeh II should be destooled. Of the thirteen charges, ten dealt with general issues of impropriety and three alleged that the Asantehene and two others were circumcised and therefore unfit to occupy the chiefly positions they held. The three charges were as follows:

1. That uncircumcision is a real virtue of the Golden Stool and since Nana Osei Agyemang Prempeh II was enstooled, he caused himself to be circumcised; thereby polluting the Golden Stool – the soul of the Ashanti nation – which act is absolutely forbidden by Ashanti custom as prescribed by the Great Okonfu Anokye (*sic*).
2. That the Asantehene Nana Osei Agyemang Prempeh II being the custodian of the Ashanti Native Customary Law and Constitution, has intentionally enstooled Kwadwo Amu as Nkondwasofohene (chief of the bearers of the Golden Stool) who to common knowledge is circumcised, in succession to Baffour Tonto, deceased thereby polluting the Golden Stool of Ashanti against Native Customary Law.
3. That since the notification of Chief Kofi Sekyere on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1935, the Asantehene, Nana Osei Agyemang Prempeh II, has deliberately nominated and enstooled Edward Osei Tutu, alias Owusu Afriyie, as Akyempemhene (head of the Kyidom clan) in the Kumasi Division, who to common knowledge is circumcised, to sit on the stool of Sabinie and Afriyie, which stool is subordinate to the Golden Stool of Ashanti, thereby

polluting both stools – the Golden Stool and the Kyidom Stool – contrary to Ashanti Native Custom.

The chiefs and elders of Asante were extremely enraged when they received the charges and called for an emergency meeting with the Chief Commissioner of the Ashanti Province. Their thoughts on the matter as expressed aptly by the Oyokohene, Kwadwo Agyekum:

From time immemorial, it is the Golden Stool that looks after Asanteman, and anybody who is circumcised is not allowed to sit on it, therefore, if the Asantehene is circumcised he would not have been enstooled at all.

At the meeting, the Adontenhene representing in his own words ‘the Elders of Kumasi’ made an important observation on the circumcision issue:

Kofi Nsiah is not a personal attendant of Nana and cannot see such a thing; therefore his allegation is not true. Ankobia and Gyaase are the people who are personal attendants of Nana and see Nana wash and they can swear that Kofi Nsiah’s allegation is not true.

When he took his turn, Chief Yaw Brema representing the Gyaase confirmed this by stating:

We the Gyaase are the personal attendants of Nana. We look after his food and bathe him, and we definitely say that Kofi Nsiah’s allegations are not true ... Nana would not have been put on the Golden Stool if he has been circumcised.

The Ankobiahene, Osei Kwadjo, reiterated what had been said previously; that as personal servants of Nana, he and his division could confirm that the charges were not true. In fact, they considered the matter so serious that they demanded that the colonial government should banish Kofi Nsiah and ten others from Ashanti. Throughout Asanteman and the Gold Coast, the question on everybody’s lips was what would happen if a sacrosanct stool such as Sikadwa Kofi had been desecrated by the enstoolment of a circumcised man. By the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, the Ankobiahene who had earlier sworn that the Asantehene was uncircumcised had joined the call for the Asantehene to be examined. Faced with this grave matter, the colonial administration decided to have the Asantehene physically examined. A panel of inspectors including a Senior Medical Officer, the District Commissioner and Kofi Nsiah examined the Asantehene’s genitals on 30th October 1935. The Ankobeahene and his doctor did same (Owusu, 2009:78). They all unanimously agreed that the Asantehene was not circumcised. On the basis of this, allegations made against the other chiefs were ignored.

## 4. Conclusion

One of the cardinal aims of the researchers at the time of

information gathering was a clear and direct answer to the question: Who is a man? A focus group discussion was used to elicit response for this question. The respondents whilst distinguishing between a man and manliness were unanimous in their response that: ‘*banyin nye obi a otua dua*’ translated ‘a man is the one with a phallus’. Possession of a phallus and performativity was for these men, masculinity. They were emphatic that the two characterised the Akan man. For example, it is a man who has the responsibility of paying a woman’s dowry. If he is able to impregnate a woman, he is usually referred to as ‘*barima*’ (Twi) or ‘*banyin*’ (Fante) meaning he is a ‘man’. Proverbs such as ‘*barima ne nee no tuo to*’, literally: A man is the one whose gun (phallus) is able to shoot and kill game (impregnate a woman) underscore the responsibilities of a man. In their estimation, a person who possessed physical qualities of a man but failed to adequately perform manly roles was less of a man but still a man. According to the respondents, symbols of good masculine qualities include but are not limited to: preparedness, protection, defense, authority and common goodness.

In the case of Nana Sir Osei Agyemang Prempeh II, his right to hold office in 1931 was tied to his possession of male attributes and satisfactory performance of male roles. By 1935, Nana Prempeh’s continued performance of his royal duties was tied to the state of his phallus. The traditional indigenous institution of chieftaincy continues to be the bedrock of Ghanaian society. This institution which is political and cultural is complete with ‘various duties and activities, rights and obligations’. Extrapolating from Nana Prempeh II’s experience as a leader of one of the powerful Akan states can perhaps aid gender advocates in their advocacy of universalisms.

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