

DOES RELIGION MOTIVATE GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN INDIGENOUS AFRICA? AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INDIGENOUS RELIGION OF THE ASANTE AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE.

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Abstract: The paper studies the Asante, an ethnic group in Ghana, to understand their notions on religion, gender and violence with the view of answering the question: Does religion motivate gender-based violence in indigenous Africa? It investigates the existence of gendered violence and how it is related to religion. Religion is understood here as a practice and at the same time a worldview - an ideological framework used to interpret, understand and respond to occurrences in the world. Gender, however, is seen as a sociological factor. A careful examination of interviews of ritual specialists, community leaders and sixteen focus group discussions reveals that among the Asante there is 'ritual violence', which is gendered but religion and gender based violence should not always be interpreted from the perspective of power relations of inequality and exploitation of women as feminists theorists often see it. Rather, among the Asante religion pays attention to the protection of women from violence. The ambiguity is that while in one instance religion protects women because of its understanding of femininity, in certain instances it exploits violently femininity for varying purposes. In the same way masculinity is not spared in this exploitation. Thus, sometimes, it is the idea of what constitutes male and female that largely underpins gender-based violence among the Asante but not because of gender inequalities and exploitation.

Key Words: Gender violence; Ritual violence; Worldview; Femininity; Masculinity

Introduction

Many studies have been conducted on gender-based violence (GBV) in West Africa. In the past, much attention was given to violence against women in post-war situations and what has come to be known as harmful cultural practices in which female genital mutilation and widowhood rites occupied much attention. In all these studies, religion was assumed to be one of the culprits of violence. This assumption is right in one way or the other. Sociologists often assume that

gender differences in religiousness are underpinned by differential socialisation. The implication is that if socialisation affects religiousness and religion affects attitudes and behaviour of the individual, religion cannot escape from partly (if not fully) being blamed for gender-based violence. Moreover, gender norms prescribe how males and females must behave. Consequently, if religion determines norms, again it cannot escape from a situation where there is power relation of inequality that manifests itself in violence against women. That is, how males and females are socialised correlates with the religiousness of the sexes. Though Miller and Stark have debunked this co-relational hypothesis by arguing that it has no empirical basis,¹ we need to continue to interrogate these theoretical assumptions.

One way of approaching this interrogation is through intersectional studies. The understanding is that gendered violence does not exist alone, but rather other social systems of differentiation are interwoven with gender and they reinforce one another. Intersectional studies on gender also imply that gender violence must be looked through the lenses of other disciplines to shed more light on the connexion between gender and violence.

It is with this understanding that I use the indigenous religion of the Asante of Ghana to answer the question: 'Does religion motivate gender-based violence in Africa?'

Gender based violence

Classically, violence is seen as the intentional use of force to harm or to kill as can be seen in WHO definition: "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation."² Though this understanding of violence sees the result of violence to encompass economic, psychological and physical, it misses the social context within which violence takes place. It, like others, situates violence at the individual level. Even Stanko's definition of violence as 'any form of behaviour by an

¹ Alan S. Miller and Stark Rodney, "Gender and Religiousness: Can Socialization Explanations be Saved?" *American Journal of Sociology* 107 no. 6 (2002):1399-1423.

² Etienne G. Krug *et al.*, eds. "World Report on Violence and Health." Accessed January 13, 2019: https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/.

individual that intentionally threatens to or does cause physical, sexual or psychological harm to others or themselves'³ suffers the same fate of focusing on the individual. The reason is that violence can be structural, and the injury could be against a person's rights.

That violence can be structural is recognised by Galtung. In his 1969 study, he broadens violence as both physical and non-physical, occurring at both the level of the individual and structural.⁴ He sees violence as the difference of what is potential and what becomes as the actual. Thus, in a situation when the potential is not achieved, there is violence. "Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations."⁵ He says structural violence is pervasive, widespread and difficult to change. It is institutionalised.⁶ Galtung advances the understanding of violence by adding cultural violence to his typology. Thus, to him violence occurs at three levels - personal, structural and cultural. On cultural violence he says, it "preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural, or into not seeing them (particularly -not exploitation) at all."⁷ In effect, cultural violence legitimises the other types of violence.

Violence occurs within a certain cultural context; a context which serves as shared knowledge to explicate and legitimate it (violence). The paper tries to identify this cultural context which serves as a code to understand gendered violence. Moreover, the cultural context incorporates a given society's understanding of gender. Gender, according to Wood and Eagly "refers to the meanings that individuals and societies ascribe to males and females."⁸ And as Sapiro explains, gender "is a sorting mechanism used by law, policy, institutional processes, and social custom to differentiate among people and place

³ Elisabeth Stanko, "The Day to Count: Reflections on a Methodology to Raise Awareness about the Impact of Domestic Violence in the UK," *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 1, no. 2 (2001): 215-226

⁴ Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-191.

⁵ Galtung, "Violence, Peace," 168.

⁶ Galtung, "Violence, Peace," 173.

⁷ Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990), 295

⁸ Wendy Wood and Alice H. Eagly, "Gender," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, eds. S.T. Fiske, D.T. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 630.

them in different positions”⁹ Ridgeway adds that gender occurs as “a primary cultural frame for organizing social relations.”¹⁰ Gender is, therefore, a relational issue defining the relationship that must exist between the sexes. West and Zimmerman are, therefore, right when they assert that gender is not given but rather a social product. It is something one does, rather than what is.¹¹ Gender is generally seen as “an institutionalized system of practices for constituting people as two different categories (men and women), and organizing relations of inequality based on this difference.”¹² Thus in this study, gender based violence is understood to mean any violence which stems out of a given society's production and re-production of who men and women are and what is expected of men and women in terms of roles. In theorising gender from this perspective, we posit that violence against women (VAG) is not the same as gender based violence (GBA).

Gender Based Violence in Ghana

Not enough literature is found specifically on gender-based violence among the Asante. Ghana Statistical Service gives 17% of Ghanaian women between the ages of 15-49 as having experienced partner violence of one sort or the other. It further reveals that a whopping 38.7% of women who had ever married and were between the ages of 15-49 had experienced partner violence.¹³ Females also perpetuate violence of various forms against their male counterparts. The existence of gender-based violence of various kinds has received attention from feminists' sociologist such as Abane,¹⁴ Adomako Ampofo on sex

⁹ V. Sapiro, “Theorizing in Gender in Political Psychology Research,” in *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, eds. D.O. Sears, L. Huddy and R. Jervis (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 605.

¹⁰ Cecilia L. Ridgeway, “Framed Before we Know it: How Gender Shapes Social Relations,” *Gender & Society* 23 (2009), 147.

¹¹ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender & Society* 1, (1987): 125-51.

¹² Shelley J. Correll, Sarah Thebaud, and Stephen Benard, “An Introduction to the Social Psychology of Gender,” in *Social Psychology of Gender*, ed. Shelley J. Correll (Burlington, UK: Emerald, 2007), 1.

¹³ Ghana Statistical Service, “Ghana Health Service and ICF Macro,” *Ghana Demographic and Health Survey 2008*; DHS Final Reports No. FR221 (Accra: Ghana Statistical Service and Ghana Health Service, and Calverton, MD: ICF Macro, 2009).

¹⁴ H. Abane “Towards Research into Wife Battering in Ghana: Some Methodological Issues,” in *Men, Women and Violence*, ed. Felicia Oyekanmi (Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA, 2000).

trade,¹⁵ and women education.¹⁶ Coker-Appiah and Cusack did a national study on violence against women and children in Ghana.¹⁷ Theoretical issues have also received attention in the literature.

Religion, Gender and violence intersectional discourse

Feminist researchers in Ghana have published many works on violence against women and gender in relation to its implication for health, education, politics and economy. Emphasis on religion as a major category in intersectional study has received scanty attention. But some intersectional studies have been done on menstruation and school attendance.¹⁸ Recent studies on gender have focused on how to conceptualise and theorise on the relationship between social groups and systems that shape each other.¹⁹

The concentration has been on gender and other differences such as race, class, ethnicity and religion. This presupposes a theoretical assumption of homogeneity in gender. 'Gender' as a category for intersectional study presupposes a theoretical assumption of a homogenous understanding of gender. However, within the category of gender there are other nuances. The identification of the complexity in theorising gender would help to understand the interplay among religion, gender and violence. Following the study of Russo and Vaz²⁰ that calls for the taking into cognizance the interplay between gender and other factors of social and biological differentiation, the paper posits that variety of humankind's religion view gender differently. There are other sub-classifications within gender that narrow the debate on

¹⁵ A. Adomako Ampofo, "The Sex Trade, Globalisation and Issues of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Research Review* 17, no. 2 (2001): 27-43.

¹⁶ A. Adomako Ampofo, "Does Women's Education Matter? A Case Study of Reproductive Decision Making from Urban Ghana," *Ghana Studies* 5 (2002): 123-157.

¹⁷ Dorcas Coker-Appiah and Kathy Cusack, eds. *Breaking the Silence & Challenging the Myths of Violence Against Women and Children in Ghana: Report of a National Study on Violence* (Accra: Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre, 1999).

¹⁸ Mami Sommer and Mokoah Ackatiah-Armah, "The Gendered Nature of Schooling in Ghana: Hurdles o Girls Menstrual Management in Ghana," *Jenda* 20 (2012). Accessed, May 2, 2019. [url:https://www.africaknowledgeproject.org/index.php/jenda/article/view/1578/1697](https://www.africaknowledgeproject.org/index.php/jenda/article/view/1578/1697).

¹⁹ See, for example, J.R. Mann and B. K. Takyi, "Autonomy, Dependence or Culture: Examining the Impact of Resources and Socio-Cultural Processes on Attitudes Towards Intimate Partner Violence in Ghana, Africa," *J Fam* 24 (2009): 323-335. Accessed, November 20, 2018.doi.org/10.1007/s10896-009-9232-9 and Dodzi Tsikata, "Gender, Institutional Cultures and the Career Trajectories of Faculty of the University of Ghana," *Feminist Africa* 8 (2007): 26-41.

²⁰ Nancy Fillepe Russo and Kim Vaz, "Addressing Diversity in the Decade of Behavior: Focus on Women of Color," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 25 (2001): 280-294.

intersectionality so far as gender-based violence is concerned. Sub-categorising gender within the gender and violence conversation helps us to situate the relationship that religion has with gender-based violence. There is, therefore, the need to identify the nuances in the conceptualisation of gender and factor the sub-classifications into the discourse on intersectionality so far as gender-based violence is concerned.

Asante and Gender

The Asante is an ethnic group, which is part of a larger Akan ethnic group found mostly in Ghana, but also in Côte d'Ivoire. In Ghana, the Asante are found mostly in the Ashanti Region, but some are in Bono Ahafo, Eastern and Volta Regions of Ghana. According to the 2010 Population and House Census, the population of people in Ashanti Region is 4,780,380, with males constituting 2,316, 053 females 2,464,328.²¹ Historically males and females have played complimentary roles in all aspects of life. In the area of religion, there are male and female deities and in the same way there are male and female priestesses. Asante spiritual universe is gendered as often feminine and masculine roles are ascribed to spirit entities. This gendering of the spiritual universe affects the practice of indigenous medicine.²² The idea of complementarity does not mean that both men and women over the years were put on the same status. It seems that women fared better in pre-colonial Asante²³ than during colonialism and post colonial Asante. Though colonial rule opened avenues to education and economic empowerment to females, men seem to have enjoyed more resources especially political and economic than females.²⁴

Though the major occupation among the Asante is farming with women forming around 65% in the rural areas, in the urban areas a

²¹ Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), *2010 Housing and Population Census, Final Report* (GSS, Ghana: Accra 2012).

²² Yaw Sarkodie Agyemang, "Femininity and the Practice of Medicine: The Asante Experience," in *Women, Gender and Sexualities in Africa*, eds. Toyin Falola and Nana Akua Amponsah, 335-345 (Durham: NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2012).

²³ Meyer Fortes, "Time and Social Structure: An Asante Case Study," *Social Structure Studies*, ed. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 83.

²⁴ Prospere Backiny-Yetna and Kevin McGee, *Gender Differentials and Agricultural Productivity in Niger*, Policy Research Working Paper, No. WPS 7199 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2015); and Ellen Bortei-Doku, *Profile of Women in Ghana* (Ghana, Accra: CIDA, 1990).

sizeable percentage of women engage in trading. They contribute substantially in educating their children and family upkeep (Clark 2008).

Worldview: The shared Knowledge for Understanding Gender in Ashanti

There is the need to understand indigenous Asante worldview because it is the gate through which we can know the relationship between religion and gendered violence, if any at all. As already noted by Ridgewood gender is negotiated within the parameters of a shared knowledge. Galtung also notes that this shared knowledge is used as the legitimator of gender-based violence. We see the worldview of the Asante as the prism of understanding the production and re-production of gender. By worldview we mean the intersubjective or trans-individual²⁵ aspect of the ideological framework and beliefs underpinning the way a community interprets and interacts with the world. This kind of ideological framework goes beyond the individual because it is for both the individual and the larger society. Thus, worldview is a cultural product or a social construction. Vidal likens worldview to “ideology”, “symbolic order”, “cultural code”.²⁶ It is a 'cultural code' though not completely dichotomised from the objective world of science and the subjective lived world of the individual. The paper posits that this 'cultural code' of the Asante is germane to the understanding of the relationship between religion and gender-based violence. As Cobern notes this when he says “fundamental beliefs about the world exert a powerful influence on how sense is made of events in the world.”²⁷ We therefore seek to unravel relevant aspects of Asante worldview that would help to answer the question: Does religion determine gender based violence in indigenous Africa?

The Asante believes that a man has a spiritual component called *ntoro* and the woman has *mogya*. When *ntoro* and *mogya* unite, conception of a living being / human being takes place. The *mogya* determines a person's citizenship and inheritance. This understanding of conception establishes the child in the matrilineage. Although contemporary

²⁵ Clement Vidal, “Metaphilosophical Criteria for Worldview Comparison,” *Metaphilosophy* 43 no. 3 (2012): 306–347. Accessed June 8, 2010. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9973.2012.01749.x.

²⁶ Vidal, “Metaphilosophical Criteria,” 10

²⁷ William W. Cobern, “World View, Metaphysics, and Epistemology,” *Scientific Literacy and Cultural Studies Project*. 7, (1993). Assessed, 20 November, 2008. url: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/science_slcsp/7.

society has caused some changes, in indigenous Asante, the maternal uncle has more control over the child than the biological father.

On the other hand, the child belongs to another exogamous group because of the *ntoro* of the father. It protects the child until he/she gets to puberty.²⁸ The *ntoro* is so important in the life of children in marriage that Rattray remarks "it is the husband's *ntoro* that is instrumental in making and building up any offspring that may result from the union."²⁹ Rattray again adds that the *ntoro* protects the child in the womb and continues to adolescence. Consequently, a wife is supposed to observe all the taboos associated with the husband's *ntoro*. And it is transferable from the father to the children.³⁰

There is another spiritual component called *sunsum*. Though both males and females have this spiritual component, that of the man is believed to be more powerful than that of the woman. Consequently, the man is supposed to protect the wife and the children by exhibiting boldness, aggression and risk taking. A man who fails in doing these is deemed not to be a 'man' (*barima*) but a 'woman' (*obaa*). Moreover, a man is expected to use his *sunsum* to spiritually ward off any malevolent spiritual attack on his family. There is hierarchy in Asante spiritual universe with the man having stronger and more powerful spirit than that of a woman.

It is not humans alone who have *sunsum*. Political units like the family, towns and the entire Asante have *sunsum*.³¹ Each family has a pot (*abusua kuruwa* - the family pot) which serves as the receptacle of its *sunsum*.³² That of towns is harboured in the oldest stool with the golden stool of the Asante, *Sikadwa Kofi*, having the highest *sunsum*. The head of family and chiefs who are the custodians of these symbols of the *sunsum* become the embodiment of the spirit of their respective group. One key taboo of these symbols of the spirit of the group is they coming into contact with menstrual blood or a menstruating woman.³³

²⁸ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International, 1978), 98.

²⁹ R. S. Rattray, *Religion & Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 50.

³⁰ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

³¹ Opoku, *West African*, 97.

³² Rattray, *Religion & Art*, 164.

³³ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 96.

Another aspect of Asante worldview germane to the subject under discussion is witchcraft belief. Witchcraft may have several meanings, but it is seen as a way of expressing social, political, and economic problems of society.³⁴ There are many people who accept the objective reality of its existence. Witchcraft is broadly seen as a power some people possess, which they use to cause harm to individuals and society. Though both men and women can possess the craft, women are chiefly accused. Individuals and society attribute un-explained death, poverty, various diseases and virtually all inexplicable bad occurrences to them witchcraft.

The last aspect of the worldview is the idea that human life and parts of the human body have inherent power "even after death."³⁵ This can be gleaned from the practice of medicine, magic and sacrifice.

The above is the shared knowledge or the 'cultural code' which serves as the blueprint for any discussion on gender in Asante. One notices that this shared knowledge is highly religious.

Method

In this study of unravelling the religion-gender nexus from one indigenous Ghanaian society, the study generated data from sixteen (16) focus group discussions. Ten 10 ritual specialists consisting of medicine men, priests and priestess, traditional rulers and market queens were interviewed. FGD was used because people are free to discuss socially accepted norms³⁶ and since gender beliefs and practices are socially owned, there is not much inhibition in talking about them with others. In the case of the interview, the research needed special information on sacrifice which is not common knowledge. Through snow-balling, these information-rich people were selected for interview.

It must be noted that conversation was built on already known information on gender and violence in the study area and generally in the

³⁴ S. Redding, "Witchcraft in Africa: Political Power and Spiritual Insecurity from the Precolonial Era to the Present," *Oxford Encyclopedia of African History* (Accessed June 3, 2019); <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/doi10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.441>, and Hans Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 2nd ed. (Accra: Presbyterian Book Depot, 1961).

³⁵ Jean La Fontaine, "Ritual Murder?" *OAS Press, Interventions Series* 3 (2011), 8; November 10, 2018. <http://openanthcoop.net/press/http://openanthcoop.net/press/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/La-Fontaine-Ritual-Murder5.pdf>.

³⁶ Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter, *Focus Group Practice* (New York: Sage, 2004) and Michael Bloor, et al., *Focus Groups in Social Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001).

literature on gender-based violence. Among them are: partner violence (though contested as not being gendered),³⁷ sexual violence by non-relatives and relatives, harmful traditional practices (e.g. female genital mutilation, marriage at early age, harmful widowhood rites, accusation of and rituals associated with witchcraft); depriving women access to economic resources; honour violence or violence in the name of honour.³⁸

Discussions and the interviews were guided by the following questions:

- 1) How do women and men experience violence?
- 2) What are the ways that gender inequality and power influence violence against men and women?
- 3) What is the place of religion and gender in all these?
- 4) Does Asante indigenous religion discriminate on the basis of gender inequalities?
- 5) Does this discrimination, if any, lead to violence against women and men?

FGD was done on the basis of sex and age. Since the study was to gain insight into the intersection of religion, gender and violence, it was not representational. Each group consisted of 8-10 members. There were eight (8) groups of males and eight (8) groups of females. All of the discussants were above the age of 40; the reason being that I wanted people very conversant with the indigenous culture of the Asante. The snowballing method was used to form the group but there was one consisting of women meeting headed by a queen that I accidentally met. Besides that, most of the group members were friends. In all 78 women and 72 men participated.

Six (3 for males and 3 for females) of the FGDs were done in Kumasi, the administrative and traditional head of the Asante. The reason was

³⁷ Kristin L. Anderson, "Why Do We Fail to Ask 'Why' about Gender and Intimate Partner Violence?" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 75 (2013): 314; and Kathleen J. Ferraro, 2013. "Gender Matters in Intimate Partner Violence," in *Perceptions of Female Offenders: How Stereotypes and Social Norms Affect Criminal Justice Responses*, ed. Brenda L. Russell. (New York: Springer, 2013).

³⁸ UNCHR. *Evaluation of UNHCR's Implementation of Three of its Protection Strategies: The Global Education Strategy, the Updated SGBV Strategy, and the Child Protection Framework* (UNCHR, 2017). Accessed, 20 January 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/research/evalreports/5a183d9c7/>.

to have an insight of cosmopolitan Asantes on the issue. The remaining 10 were distributed between peri-urban (2 males and 2 females) Kumasi and rural Asante (3 males and 3 females). The main reason for the geographical spread was to have the insight of a cross section of the Asante.

Initial conversation was concerned about issues of identifying the role of men and women in the Asante society and the type of violence men and women experience as wives/husbands, and as women/men. Further conversation centred on the relationship between violence and indigenous religious worldview and practices.

In analysing data of both the FGD and the interview, themes which emerged out of the transcripts and already determined themes were identified. Sub-themes which emerged were also identified. After exhausting themes, relationships were established and reasons which account for differences and relationships were sought for.

Discussions and Findings

In all the FGDs, both males and females accepted the traditional role of the male as the protector of the family in terms of security, shelter and the upkeep of the children. The idea of the man having a stronger protective spirit than the female and physiologically stronger than the female was assigned for the provision of security. Females as wives work in the farm (in the villages) and are engaged in various forms of trading activities to support their husbands for the upkeep of children. Sometimes, they also feed their brothers. Infact, the domestic support of females is enormous. But the domestic roles of males and females have no religious underpinnings.

However, in the area of spiritual security there is a direct religious connection of *sunsum* of the male being stronger than that of a female. It came out that some women stay in marriage when their kids are below adolescence no matter the condition they experience in marriage for the sake of their children's safety. There was a consensus among females that sometimes when children do not see their father frequently, they could get sick. Though not as pronounced as it was in the past, even in present Asante, some women experience violent behaviour in the form of wife beating and irresponsible males for the sake of children's spiritual security.

It must be noted that most males did not accept suffering of physical assault from their wives, sisters and concubines, there was a general agreement that it did exist. Verbal insults, especially the insult of being called stupid (*kwasia*) came out clearly. Other domestic violence males complained of was refusal of wives to provide meals and name calling to humiliate them. In two instances the abuse was economic. The males planted cocoa trees on the wives' family land. Upon dissolution of the marriage the wives' families denied them access to the land. Though males were not prepared to admit, FGB from the women revealed that sometimes they deny their husbands sex for various reasons. The key reason which came out was husbands' failure to fulfil their financial obligations in the house. Men could openly talk about verbal, economic and emotional abuses from females but discussions on physical and sexual violence was mute. This is understandable in view of the worldview of the Asante, and in Africa in general. A major finding of Namadi³⁹ in a study in Nigeria is that because of the patriarchal nature of African societies males who suffer domestic violence are reluctant to admit it, let alone report the abuse. Among the Asante, masculinity includes aggressiveness, physical strength, boldness which emanate from having a stronger *sunsum* than a female. Males continue to portray manliness even in a situation when they suffer physical violence from females.

Males are forced to do gender to meet societal expectations. Some of the male participants shared their experiences on 'being a man'. Being a man means providing basic needs of the family including food, clothing and shelter. In instances when they could not do, some felt so ashamed that even going home becomes a problem. "I find it shameful to go home, let alone eat food prepared by my wife when I fail to provide money for the family up-keep." This was the response of a male participant in a discussion on if they were able to always provide the basic needs of their families and how they felt if continuously they failed to do so. "I stay in the same house with my father and mother-in-laws. Sometimes if I fail to provide 'chop money' (money for family upkeep) the way my mother-in-law looks at me, I wish the earth would open to swallow me up," responded another. Another participant

³⁹ Mohammed Mustapha Namadi, "Nature and Prevalence of Domestic Violence against Men in Dala Local Government Area of Kano State, Nigeria," *Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2017): 10-20.

remarked, "[T]here are instance I leave home at dawn and sneak back to the house late in the night to sleep to avoid being seen". After sighing, one remarked, "Being a man is not easy." Some of them would go to every extent to fulfil their financial obligation to avoid being derided at home. Some borrow and ran into debts. Some of the men participants asserted that they are derided, insulted and humiliated even if through no fault of theirs they fail to perform their pecuniary responsibilities at home.

Sometimes the attitude of wives and the wives' relation cause so much psychological violence. Even, in some cases, if no one derides them, they feel ashamed for failing in their responsibilities. Clark observes this and comments that marital hostilities are focused on "economic relations" ⁴⁰ and further indicates that "[P]raises and insults about gender conformity and deviance often feature economic performance." ⁴¹ Economic failings on the part of men make them vulnerable and the vulnerability is exploited by women to abuse men. Societal expectations from men with stronger *sunsum* than women include economic leadership in the home. Striving to meet this expectation makes some men to do gender. Doing gender puts pressure on men. It makes some of them to feel un-worthy in society; they feel they are "nothing" and "no-body". There is self-negation making them to cause psychological violence to themselves.

Besides domestic life of males and females two practices already identified in the literature, widowhood rites and witchcraft accusation came out clearly as two types of gender motivated violence which has religious basis. In the case of widowhood rites, it has been generally reported in the literature of the abuse that widows go through. Female discussants noted that the physical abuse is non-existent in many cases. In one group the women agreed that they would go through the rites not because the spirits of their husband would haunt them but rather because they fear that witches in their own maternal family would capitalise on their refusal to subject themselves to the widowhood rites and harm them and their children. The idea of going through

⁴⁰ Gracia Clark, "Money, Sex and Cooking: Manipulation of the Paid/Unpaid Boundary by Asante Market Women. In The Social Economy of Consumption," in *Monographs in Economic Anthropology* 6, *Society for Economic Anthropology*, eds. B. Orlove and H. Rutz, eds. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 323-348.

⁴¹ Gracia Clark, "Mothering, Work, and Gender in Urban Asante Ideology and Practice," *American Anthropologist* 101, no. 4 (1999): 717-729.

the rites to sever any spiritual bond with a deceased husband is still present to some extent. Among issues discussants raised were lack of privacy, the length of time they had to stay without engaging in active economic activities and unwillingly participating in ritual crying. Women see widowhood rites as a violent act against them, but indigenuous religious beliefs force them to participate in them.

Male discussants accused their wives and sisters who are disrespectful, arrogant, and wealthy as being witches. Some of them accused the elderly in the families as witches and to be blamed for their woes in life. Surprisingly, female discussants agreed with them. Some of them attributed their personal problems such as inability to get good husbands, the academic challenges of their children and strange death in their families to witches in their families. Though there were reported cases of some people inflicting physical harm on family members suspected to be witches, discussants would not engage in such a practice. However, some of the discussants asserted that they would not be benevolent to members of their family suspected to be witches. '*Obi nnye ne busuefo papa*' - 'one does not do good to his/her enemy,' quipped a respondent. Belief in witchcraft is a clear case of discrimination against women which is gendered. It is gendered on the basis that generally an Asante male is supposed to be spiritually stronger than a woman. This manifests itself in the societal expectation of a male being bolder, more resourceful than a female. Above all, the male is expected to lead the women and children in the family. In the situation when females play such roles, the standard accusation is that the females have used witchcraft to 'steal' the males' 'glory' (*animuonyam*). Such women have deviated from the 'norm'. Consequently, a woman who is very resourceful is expected to attribute it to a male. Discussants used Asante proverbs to explain what I will call 'gender mould'.

1. *Obaa to etuo a etwere barima edan me*. If a woman buys a gun, she keeps it in a man's room.

2. *Obaa ton nyaadoa na onton atuduro*. A woman sells garden eggs, but she does not sell gun powder.

Possessing a gun or selling gun powder is masculine but not feminine. A woman who does any of the two has broken the mould and deviated from the norm. It must be admitted that there is remarkable change in the societal expectation of gender roles, but some women would want to avoid witchcraft accusation by keeping to the norm and avoid

breaking the gender mould. In order to evade the accusation of witchcraft women "self-police"⁴² (Stanko, 1969) and this amounts to GBV where violence is seen as the inability of "potential realization".⁴³ However, there is another side to the witchcraft accusation narrative.

It was clear from the FGD that witchcraft belief puts power in the hands of women because those perceived to be witches are feared making them to get *tumi*, power to cause change. Men are wary of women suspected of witchcraft possession. Men are careful not to offend such women. Gendering witchcraft possession gives women leverage in society which puts them in an un-equal power relationship, and which psychologically creates vulnerability in their male counterparts. Redding (2019) has shown that the spiritual insecurity witchcraft belief creates is still retained in post-colonial Africa.⁴⁴ Perception of witchcraft creates psychological violence of vulnerability and fear in males.

There were instances of gender-based violence in Asante but most of them have no religious connexion in the sense of being underpinned by a religious narrative or practice. Those with obvious religious undertones are widowhood rites, witchcraft accusation and females prepared to endure hardships in marriage for the sake of the security of their children.

Gender and ritual violence

Among the Asante violence is perpetrated against both males and females for ritual purpose and this type of violence is gendered in the sense that it is informed by the perception of what constitutes maleness or femaleness. Any historian of Ghana can recall the sacrifice of three important chiefs by the legendary Okomfo Anokye in the formation of the Asante as a nation. Also, in the preparation for the Asante-Gyaman war (1818-19) Dupuis has this to say on the sacrifices offered:

When the king was about to open the campaign against Gaman, he collected his priests, to invoke the royal fetische, and perform the

⁴² Elizabeth A. Stanko, "Safety Talk: Conceptualizing Women's Risk Assessment as a 'Technology of the Soul,'" *Theoretical Criminology* 1 (1997): 479-99.

⁴³ Galtung, "Violence, Peace," 168.

⁴⁴ Redding, "Witchcraft in Africa."

necessary orgies to ensure success. These ministers of superstition sacrificed thirty two male and eighteen female victims, as an expiation offering to the gods⁴⁵

In interviews with ritual specialists, it came out that in the past human sacrifice was practised for the collective interest of warding off evil, retainership, ensuring success in war and economic prosperity. This practice does not pertain to only the Asante. Among the Anlo Ewe, vestal virgins are offered as sacrifice to wipe away sins that demand the sacrifice of a human being.⁴⁶ It also came out that in the past human sacrifice was also practised as foundation of towns. In the recent history of Ghana, individuals (with accusing fingers pointed at politicians) have been accused for engaging in ritual murders with the killing of 30 women before the 2008 Ghana's general election being the most talked about.

Contemporary society due to colonialism and the common law has criminalised these forms of sacrifice. The practice persists and though there is paucity in the literature, a few exist especially from southern and eastern Africa where it is described as 'medicine murder'.⁴⁷ A theoretical and empirical distinction is made between human sacrifice and 'ritual murder'. The former occurs within the context of religion and its telos is collective making it legitimate. The latter is deemed immoral, committed in secrecy for selfish ends and hence illegitimate.⁴⁸ In Ghana both human sacrifice and 'ritual murder' are deemed as murder and punishable by law. The distinction between 'ritual/medicine murder' and human sacrifice is consistent with Asante indigenous thought. When a killing is officially sanctioned for the communal

⁴⁵ Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (London: H. Colburn, 1824), 114.

⁴⁶ Christian R. Gaba, "Women and Religious Experience Among the Anlo of West Africa," in *Women in the World's Religions, Past and Present*, ed. Ursula King (New York, N.Y.: Paragon, 1987), 184.

⁴⁷ See works such as J. Schühle, *Medicine Murder of People with Albinism in Tanzania.*, CAS Working Paper No. 2-2013 (Freie Universität Berlin, Center for Area Studies, 2013); J. P. Evans, "Where Can We Get a Beast Without Hair? Medicine Murder in Swaziland from 1970 to 1988," *African Studies* 52, no. 1 (1993): 27–42 and G.I. Jones, *Basutoland Medicine Murder: A Report on the Recent Outbreak of 'Diretlo' Murders in Basutoland* (London: HMSO, 1951).

⁴⁸ La Fontaine, "Ritual Murder?" and Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa, "Nigeria: Prevalence of Ritual Murder and Human Sacrifice and Reaction by Government Authorities" (March 2000-July 2005); Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2005; Accessed, April 2006. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/440ed7372.html>.

well-being, it is a sacrifice. When individuals do it, it is deemed as murder. The paper sees both as ritual violence.

The gender angle comes when we consider victims, parts of victims used or harvested after immolation, the purpose of the sacrifice and the reason behind the selection of victim or his/ or her part.

From the newspapers, it was gathered that when the victims are women the parts harvested are the tongue, breast, nose and either the whole genitalia or only the clitoris. When the victims are men the tongue, heart, and the genitalia are mostly harvested. Statistics on the occurrence, frequency and the sex of victims from Ashanti Region where the research was conducted was not available. A conversation was held with some medicine men, priests and priestesses and some traditional rulers on the issue of ritual violence. It must be stated that these people did not admit that they had ever witnessed such ritual killings. They also made it clear that such acts were done in the past but with the introduction of Christianity and the common law, the practice had stopped.

In rituals for war, the preferred victim was a male and how the victim was treated depended on the recommendation of the oracle. In the preparation for the Gyaman war cited above, though the victims included females, males were in the majority. There were instances that menstruating females were used to neutralise the 'medicine' of the enemy. For the foundation of markets and towns, females were the victims. The females were either virgins or young and pregnant. In one instance, a lactating woman was used. The females were mostly buried alive or immolated before burial. For a chief to get *tumi* over his subjects when sitting in public, a ritual medicine performed with a male young man was buried under the dais chiefs sit on. The young man was either buried alive or immolated before being buried.

One observes from the above discussion with ritual specialists that when the occasion involves power, aggression or boldness, men were the sacrificial victims. In the situation when multiplication of life or wealth is needed a female was often the victim.

A discussion was also held on victims and parts harvested in contemporary ritual sacrifice. My interviewees were quick to point out that these are done by individuals for selfish purpose. Nevertheless, their responses are essential for this discourse. The tongue of either a male

or female is used in preparing potent potions in court cases. The potion is supposed to lock up the tongue of victims or parties so that they are prevented from giving correct narration of events which could lead to prove the guilt of a party. The female genital organ and the breast are used in the preparation of *sika duro*, a money ritual for a client to be rich overnight. Such a female, it was revealed must not be menstruating. There are stories of females who had escaped near ritual sacrifice due to their state of menstruation.

Though the gender aspect of ritual violence is yet to be explored fully in the literature, the observation from the field is consistent with studies in Nigeria⁴⁹ and southern and eastern Africa.⁵⁰ The prime motive is power - financial and political power. The dominance of males in these two quests is a pointer to males as the key perpetrators. Males, rather than females, are more likely to solicit the exertion of the power inherent in the human body and human bodily parts. Moreover, the idea that human body parts have inherent powers is observed in South Africa. Human body parts is said to give '*muti*' where '*muti*' means medicine or power.⁵¹

Interviews with ritual specialists brought out another form of gender related violence - femininity as a source of ritual pollution. Sexual intercourse is not regarded as sinful but having sex even with one's lawful wife makes a man unfit to engage in some ritual acts. Chiefs and ritual attendants are prohibited from sex with their wives at least a day before they go to the stool room. Priests and priestesses do likewise. The ubiquitous menstrual taboo is a case in point. Elderly participants agreed that women are no longer required to leave their homes to stay in an outhouse when menstruating except those staying in sacred places like palaces and shrines of the gods. Nevertheless, the elderly discussants would not go to sacred places in their menstrual state. Young participants do not have this problem. 'I can go anywhere including the palace even in the state of menstruation.' They do not feel any ritual inhibition when menstruating. But even among the youth a few are scared to go to palaces and shrines in that state. 'We have been told that accidental touching of certain objects like the stool and drums can make us barren,' said some of the young participants.

⁴⁹ Immigration and Refugee Board, *Nigeria: Prevalence*.

⁵⁰ Schühle, *Medicine Murder* and Jones, *Basutoland Medicine Murder*.

⁵¹ La Fontaine, "Ritual Murder?" 8.

Though the state of menstruation which made women to feel dirty, unclean and dangerous is waning away in Asante, aspects still linger on.

Participants, both males and females, and corroborated by interviewees revealed some taboos which protect women against violence. Among them are a man stripping a woman naked; a man insulting a woman that she smells; rape, especially in the bush. Breaking any of these taboos has a ritual consequence.

Religion, gender and violence nexus

It is clear from the above discussions that gender is too broad a theory for an intersectional study on religion and GBV. There are many complexities within gender which need a careful analysis. Some of these are menstruation, fertility, age, child-birth, pregnancy, lactation and economic. Three of these nuances are examined below.

Gender-menstruation nexus violence

Menstrual blood is powerful to make a sacred person, a sacred place and any sacred entity desacralised. This property associated with menstruation has implications for gendered violence. Dupuis captured an event which occurred after the return of Asantehene Osei Bonsu from the Asante-Gyaman war (1818-1891). There was a failed palace coup orchestrated by female royals and some of the king's wives. The rebellion was quelled and most of those involved killed. In addition to issues on menstruation already discussed, the fate of the remaining wives of the king brings home the gender-menstruation and violence nexus. I am quoting Dupuis at length.

While these butcheries were transacting, the king prepared to enter the palace, and in the act of crossing the threshold of the outer gate, was met by several of his wives, whose anxiety to embrace their sovereign lord impelled them thus to overstep the boundary of female decorum in Ashantee; for it happened that the king was accompanied by a number of his captains, who accordingly were spot. This is said to have angered the monarch, although his resentment proceeded no farther than words, and he returned the embraces of his wives. But being afterwards told by some of the superintendents that these women were more or less indisposed from a natural female cause [menstruation], he was inflamed to the highest pitch of indignation, and in a paroxysm of anger caused these unhappy beings to

be cut in pieces before his face; giving orders at the time to cast the fragments into the forest, to be devoured by birds and beasts of prey.⁵²

The reason for this massacre was that the body of the king was deemed sacred. The wives who were menstruating defiled his body. In this instance, menstruation has a destructive effect and spelled the doom of the women.

On other hand, menstruation can also be life saving. One way of neutralising the efficacy of harmful medicine (*aduro bone*) is bringing it into contact with menstrual blood or the loincloth that has been used by a menstruating woman. Rattray observes this and says, “an unclean woman is capable of breaking down all barriers which stand between defenceless man and those evil unseen powers which beset him on every side.”⁵³

There is ambivalence in the Asante attitude to menstrual blood. It is loathed and loved, and both can spell danger to a woman. When there is the need to destroy the power of an enemy a menstruating woman is an asset but when in the situation of maintaining the power of a good medicine a menstruating woman is an abomination. Such violence though is gendered because it must be a woman it is not every woman who could become a victim. It is the additional factor of differentiation, menstruation that underpins this gendered violence.

Gender-fertility nexus

Fertility is both a social and biological factor of differentiation, and when it is added to gender, it could spell doom for women in violence with religious undertones. For sacrifices that are supposed to create life either in the form of multiplication of human life or creation of wealth, the human sacrifice is gendered. It is either a male but mostly a female who is capable of producing life or whose ability to produce life is not tempered with in anyway who becomes a victim. The body parts harvested for such rituals are those associated with life - the breast of a woman who can give life or/and her genitals. It is significant to note that women in their menopause cannot be used.

⁵² Dupuis, *Journal*, 116.

⁵³ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 75.

Menopause though biological, creates another social difference among women.

Gender-age nexus

Being a male and youthful qualify one to be a candidate of gender-based violence. In sacrifice to ensure success in war and to sustain the political power of a chief the victim is more often a strong young male. The reason is that manliness, risk-taking and aggression are associated with the gender and age group. Moreover, these are the required qualities that warriors must exhibit in war. It is a kind of imitative magic with the underpinning principle of *'like produces like'*.

Conclusion

Gendered violence is not only against women. The social construct of males and females could lead to violence being perpetrated against either males or females. Both males and females can be perpetrators and victims. Sometimes in indigenous societies as the Asante gender violence is not the results of power relations but a societal problem of conceptualising the sexes. It is not always true that "unequal power relations and discrimination based on gender – is the root of gender-based violence." This also goes to buttress an earlier made point that though GBV is inclusive of VAW, the two are not the same.

Gender understood as a cultural production of differences between men and women and "organizing relations of inequality based on this difference,"⁵⁴ as a category for intersectional studies is appropriate. However, there are other social factors of differentiation which create nuances in gender. Consequently, there is the need to have sub-strands under gender and sub-strands under religion for such a complex relation in religion, gender and violence to be theorised.

The study affirms the call by Russo and Vaz for a "diversity mindfulness"⁵⁵ that enables intersection between religion, gender and violence to be appropriately nuanced because the omnibus theory, gender, hides other factors of differentiation. The study has revealed that incidences which occur across the life-course of the individual such as age, biological and physiological changes, sexual history, fertility

⁵⁴ Correli, *et al.*, "An Introduction to the Social Psychology," 1.

⁵⁵ Russo and Vaz, "Addressing Diversity," 280.

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and infertility coupled with the social production of what these mean
can be at the centre GBV.

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