



Ghana's traditional women chiefs: Role and challenges of 'the Wuriche' within the Gonja social organization

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Abstract

In Ghana, there is a lack of participation and involvement of women in major decision-making processes in government, which has implications for good governance and sustainable development. Current debates on gender power relations emphasize the limited space for women in formal government structures without examining the position of women within the traditional political system. The Gonja chieftaincy is one of the most resilient traditional institutions in Northern Ghana. Known as a Wuriche, a Gonja female traditional leader, performs certain functions under a certain authority prescribed by the Gonja political system. However, her authority as a traditional leader is confronted by the male chauvinistic tendencies associated with the Gonja society which makes it difficult for males to take instructions or accept decisions from women. Using descriptive and content analysis, the paper evaluates the authority and influence of the Wuriche and the challenges they face within the broader Gonja society. Her authority extends from the executive through legislation and adjudication to mobilization. The paper concludes that, despite Gonja society's preference for male authority, the Wuriche is accorded some authority that she exercises in relation to the male chief. Nonetheless, there are numerous challenges to the exercise of her authority in society that requires consideration.

Keywords: Gonja; Female Authority; Traditional Governance; Role; Wuriche; Social Organization

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1. Introduction

In Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, traditional rulers are ideally positioned to respond to culturally relevant issues in the rural and peri-urban areas. In several research studies, the focus has always been on male traditional leaders. But findings from our ongoing research on women traditional leaders in Ghana show that the Wuriche (Gonja female chiefs) play key roles in addressing pertinent issues in their respective communities, including the adherence to recent Corona Pandemic of 2019/2020 protocols. The responsibility of the traditional political governance system of chieftaincy is to maintain the link between people and the government, law and order, and to promote development and ensure the sustainability of development (Busia, 1968; Nukunya 2003; Mohammed et al., 2022). The traditional leader, thus, becomes the focal point around which all development activities are expected to be performed at the local level. In other words, getting local people to participate in development activities requires the active involvement of traditional leaders since they are the pivot around which all activities rotate in the rural areas. But according to Ahwoi (2010), there are always power relations between men and women in governance at the local level, which has always been a major issue of discussion in Ghana.

Besides the cultural issues of power relations between men and women, it is also evident in the Ghanaian system that the existence of the chieftaincy institution has served as one of the best means of getting the people involved in non-routine activities aimed at improving their welfare. This is attributable to the respect accorded the traditional leaders by the citizens and how they are also believed to have the welfare of their citizens at heart. It is obligatory for the chiefs to ensure the welfare of their areas of rule, as is enshrined in the oaths they swear when they assume the throne. It is therefore imperative that discussions on the power relations between men and women (on the broader spectrum) consider an examination of those power relations within the traditional political system. This is important because looking at the position of women leaders in the traditional system gives us information that can be used to shape larger national discussions and policy frameworks that aim to achieve a balance of power between men and women in terms of representation and participation (Dawda, 2020).

2. Theory and conceptualization

The concept of gender-mainstreaming describes the issues of imbalance in the creation of positions of authority to the detriment of women. According to the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (2002), Gender mainstreaming is:

the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy to ensure that the concerns and experiences of women, as well as of men, are made an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic, and societal spheres so that inequality is not perpetuated. (p.1).

In essence, gender mainstreaming in this study is the recognition of the relevance of women and men working together to improve their lives and the conditions of their communities. If so, what is the authority and role of the Wuriche, (a female chief of the Gonja kingdom), in terms of gender relations with that of the

male chief? How can we improve our efforts to elevate the wuriche as a cultural institution in modern society? Women in positions of authority in Gonja society are allowed to provide leadership within the political space, which contrasts with the global picture of women in positions of authority being denied room (Dawda, 2020). The female chief is appointed by the male chief who is usually a daughter or sister to the male Chief responsible for making the appointment. After her appointment, the female chief occupies that position till death. The question remains: how does the wuriche exert authority in a social and political framework dominated by males, with rules that have historically favored men? How do we give equal relevance and recognition and opportunities to women chiefs in the Gonja societal organization?

According to Tong (1998), Feminism studies women's experiences of gender inferiority, the causes of women's oppression, how gender inequality is perpetuated, and how gender inequality might be addressed. Feminism claims that women's oppression stems from their lack of equal access to legal, social, political, and economic institutions (Tong, 1998). Remedies want women to have the same legal rights as men and be able to participate in the public spheres of education, politics, and work. The claim of women's oppression originates in sexuality, and as Lorber (2005) argues, women's bodies are controlled through violence, objectification, and social institutions such as medicine and religion. Sexism, according to feminists, is the oldest and most pervasive kind of oppression (Jones and Budig, 2008). They say that the elimination of patriarchy and forced heterosexuality is the best way to end gender oppression. This can be done by giving women more control over their bodies, such as changing sexuality, childbirth, and motherhood.

Furthermore, feminism seeks to counter the male-bias psychoanalytic theory, which provides explanations for women's experiences with their emotions, bodies, and sexuality. It explains that environmental and childhood experiences shape women's psyches and create differences between men and women. However, Feminist theories have been challenged by women of color for neglecting coexisting types of oppression. (Parrillo, 2008). This perspective, according to Dawda (2020), comprises black, Chicana, multicultural, and third-world feminisms. Their analysis of gender oppression is combined with analyses of systems of inequality based on race, class, and sexuality. The research shows how "privilege and disadvantage" are intertwined in a matrix of oppression to produce unique forms of oppression (Parrillo, 2008). They argue for solutions that prioritize the survival of the human species as a whole, rather than just women (Ahwoi, 2010). By stressing Western imperialism, postcolonial feminism expands on intersectionality (Lorber, 2005). Women's exploitation as employees and sexual beings is thought to be a byproduct of industrialization and economic restructuring, which includes sexism. The study focuses on women's roles as mothers in their communities and how they may use their positions to advocate for girls' education, adequate healthcare, and environmental protection. (Jones and Budig, 2008).

Postmodern feminists focus on plurality and difference rather than overarching causes or solutions to gender inequity (Parrillo, 2008). They question gender's inevitabilities and fixed traits, such as heteronormativity (the belief that heterosexuality is "natural") and the broad category of "woman." They contend that gender inequality is perpetuated via performativity, or the repetition of gendered identity and display. As a remedy for gender inequity, they advise combining gendered characteristics and challenging "typical" patterns of gender and sexuality (Tong, 1998). In summary, patriarchy is seen by feminist theory as a fundamental contributor to women's oppression and gender disparity in the appropriation of power and authority in society (Dawda, 2020). As a result, feminism asks for a restructuring of social relations through redistribution of roles, changes in access to opportunities, and changes in political power (Parrillo, 2008).

Therefore, activities to promote women's participation as a way of balancing power relations between men and women at the national and international levels must, first of all, consider efforts aimed at overcoming the obstacles female traditional leaders face that make them more involved and appreciated at the local levels and processes of governance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study location

The study was conducted in the savanna region of Ghana. The Savanna region is located in the north-western part of Ghana. Bordered by the Ivory Coast to the east, the Bono and Ahafo regions to the south, the Northern and Northeast regions to the west, and the Upper West region to the north (See Figure 1).

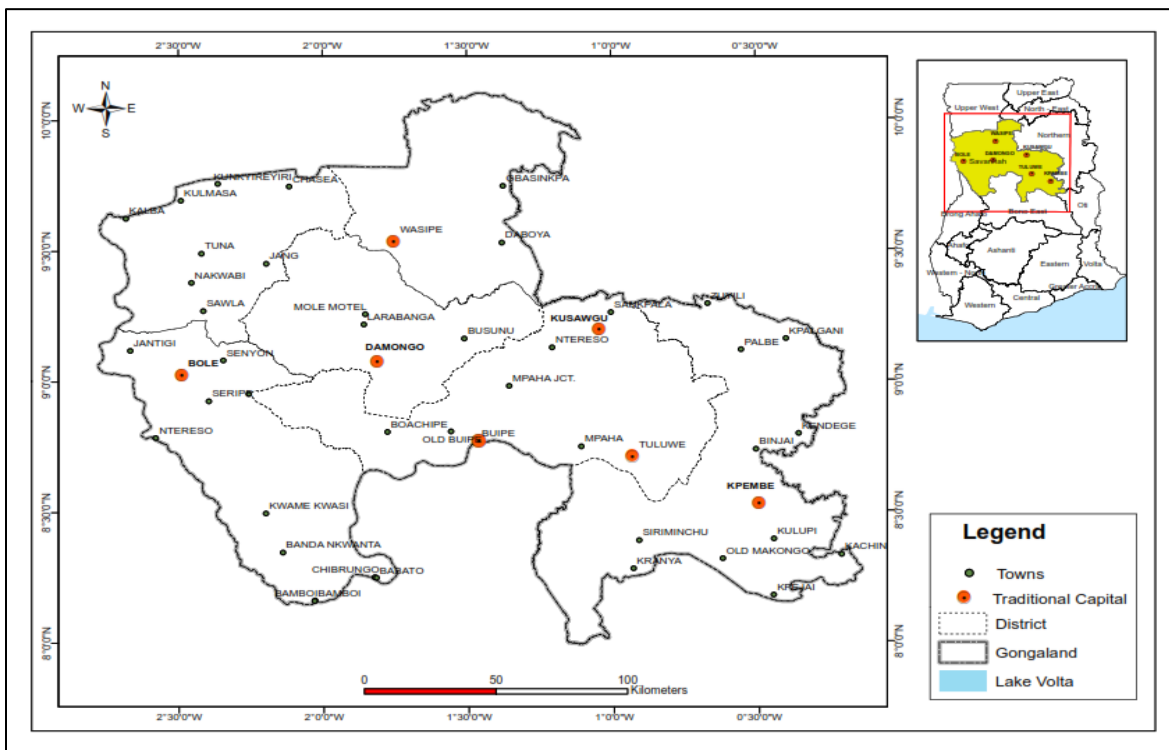


Figure 1. Traditional map of Gonja

The study was conducted in the four Gonja communities of Damongo, Bole, Kpembe, and Daboya in the Savanna Region of Northern Ghana. Gonja communities in general span sparsely across the Savanna region of Ghana. The four communities are the most populous and also the traditional divisional capitals of the Gonja civilization. The Savanna Region is the area that is occupied by the Gonja people in Ghana, and any study about Gonja traditions should be centered in this area.

3.2. Research design

Considering the processes of investigating the social phenomenon being investigated, the study adopted a qualitative research method. This design offered the expected descriptive reports of individuals' views and attitudes towards events and issues of female chieftaincy in the Gonja traditional area. A qualitative study is a way of finding out how individuals or groups ascribe meaning to social phenomena (Harrison and Callan, 2013). A research design is chosen based on the nature of the research problem(s) or issue(s) being studied, the personal experiences of the researcher, and the people who will be reading the study. The study also afforded a more useful approach to probe for information through in-depth interviews and discussions with respect to respondents' perceptions, body language, beliefs, values, attitudes, and opinions about the roles and challenges of the institution of the Wuriche. The Gonjas are among a few of the traditional societies in Northern Ghana that are centrally organized in terms of traditional governance. By far, it is one of the most stable in Northern Ghana because of its resilience to serious conflicts with respect to the succession of the traditional kingship – the Yegbunwura – the overlord of the Gonja kingdom. Among the Gonja people, Chieftaincy plays a key role in the governance of their society.

3.3. Population, sampling and data collection techniques

In line with the objectives of the study, five categories of respondents comprised the target population for this study. According to Sarantokos (2004), the target population for a study comprises individuals and groups from whom adequate and reliable information can be collected about the phenomenon under investigation. The targeted respondents who were identified included male chiefs (Ewura), female chiefs (Buwuriche, or a Wuriche); members of the council of elders, key informants; and subjects in the communities that were covered by the study. The study relied heavily on primary sources, which included interviews, focus group discussions, and archival searches. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted in four Gonja communities of Damongo, Bole, Kpembe, and Daboya in the Savanna region of Northern Ghana. The participants during the interview were male chiefs (Ewura), female chiefs (Buwuriche or a Wuriche) and the secretary to the Gonja Traditional Council, who were contacted as key informants.

In selecting a sample for data collection, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select respondents for the conduct of the study. In using these techniques, four communities were purposively selected: Bole, Damongo, Daboya, and Kpembi, all of which are located in the Savanna region of northern Ghana. From these communities, samples were then drawn using the purposive and snowball techniques to select chiefs (male and female) and other key informants for purposes of data collection. In all, the respondents were comprised of seven male chiefs, seven female chiefs, 17 key informants, nine kingmakers at the Yagbun palace, and seven councils of elders at the Mankumawuriche palace. The total number was comprised of 47 people, with 22 females and 25 males across the four communities whose responses constituted the report of the study.

The study relied extensively on ethnographic methods to extract information from the respondents. For data collection, four major techniques were used. These methods include; in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, observation, and focus group discussions. In addition, information from an archival search from the Tamale Archives was quite useful. The Tamale Archives is a collection of colonial and post-colonial administrative reports including minutes and records of meetings of traditional councils and reports of

activities from traditional authorities to government and from the government to traditional authorities. In-depth interviews were conducted with the chiefs, female chiefs, and secretaries to the traditional council, while focus group discussions were conducted with the members of the council of elders. Information from these methods was analyzed and results were generated to form the basis for triangulation. This was important to allow for data from the various sources to be compared, validated, and analyzed for a comprehensive understanding of the authority and role of the Wuriche in the Gonja traditional political architecture. It was thought that using a mix of these methods was important because using only one method would not be enough to get the information needed for the study.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Role of the Wuriche as a female leader in Gonja

The position of the female chief in the Gonja Kingdom is a traditional requirement and a woman who qualifies and agrees to occupy such a position helps in the maintenance of the culture and traditions of the Gonja people. Explicating this traditional requirement, Mankumawuriche Memuna added that:

"It is the duty of the senior wuriche to take the newly appointed one (s) through the laid down customs of the office of the Wuriche upon assumption of office. This ensures that the traditions and customs guiding the position of the Wuriche and the chieftaincy institution in general, are passed on from one generation to the other". Interview with Mankumawuriche Memuna March, 2020. (Mankuma Wuriche is the Female Chief of the Mankuma Traditional Area and she is the Paramount Female Chief in the Gonja Society).

From the interviews, we found that the wuriche plays a significant leadership role in the traditional governance system of the Gonja Kingdom or society. Unlike in other jurisdictions such as the Dagaaba of North Western Ghana where there are only male chiefs, the Gonja society benefits from the knowledge and contributions of both male and female leaders. Contrary to the general notion over the years that women do not play leadership roles in traditional governance within the Gonja society, the wuriches complement the efforts of male chiefs. These roles have been put into two groups: traditional roles that have been around for a long time and new roles that have come about as a result of colonization and modernization.

4.2. Traditional roles of the wuriche

Firstly, within the general Ghanaian society, as in the Gonja society, Alhaji Losina Afuli (linguist to the Yagbunwura) states that a Wuriche plays the role of a mother figure first and foremost. He further states that:

"As a mother, she "bears" and teaches children to be loyal and loving to their families and community. In many cases, she puts herself second to her husband, children, families, and community". Interview with Alhaji Losina Afuli (March, 2020).

From this quote, it is clear that the Wuriche should be a woman who has given birth to children and understands the challenges of raising a family. With the understanding that, before she can provide that motherly care and protection for the people of the community, she should have had that experience of caring for her immediate family first.

Secondly, women contribute immensely to the economic well-being of society. In fact, women contribute over 60% of the labor involving the planting, harvesting, and head portage in agriculture in this part of the country (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). This makes their contribution to the maintenance of the household crucial since the major economic activity of the people of the area is crop cultivation. The motherly role and the economic contribution, which are particularly true of the Gonja woman, are of immense importance for the proper appreciation or examination of their role within traditional political governance.

To the Mankumawuriche, the wuriche plays the role of socializing and educating the younger ones about the culture and traditions of the Gonja, and, further alluded to, "this is one of the reasons why the institution of the Wuriche was conceived in the first place". This role is carried out by the female chiefs even in areas where the authority system rest on men. In this respect, the Wuriche plays the role of cultural preserver and custodian of tradition. As observed by Stoeltje (2003), the political system is inextricably linked to the kinship system, as female chiefs, together with their male counterparts, in this case, are seen as part of the cultural identity of the people. Through the periodic meetings of courts, the frequent attendance of funerals, and other regularly occurring rituals, the Wuriche continues to perpetuate and preserve the identity and culture of the Gonja people. The chieftaincy institution serves as a strong symbol of identity and a sense of belonging among the Gonja people, and, by extension, serves as an imposition over the different ethnic groups within the region. Therefore, efforts are always made to jealously protect this aspect of the Gonja culture for posterity, hence the relevance for both male and female chiefs.

The Mankumawuriche further alludes that, in the period before formal (colonial) governance was introduced, the role of the Wuriche was very central to the day-to-day administration of the Gonja state. The wuriche used to have the authority to mobilize revenue on behalf of the Yagbunwura. Her position also allowed her, as the head of the community, to resolve disputes and report them to her superior; as well as refer to unresolved disputes. Furthermore, the Wuriche was in charge of the mobilization of the entire community that she headed in times of war and communal labour; as their role included the cheering of soldiers and the succor of the wounded. Some of these roles, however, have been taken over by the male chiefs. This is because the colonial and post-colonial governments asked for and appointed male chiefs to communities that were previously only run by the Wuriche. This was done because the men wanted to control resources directly from these communities.

Expatriating on the modification of the duties of the Wuriche, Alhaji Losina Afuli, said, present day Wuriche's duty call is restricted to the mobilization of her colleague women for communal work. The Wuriche is no longer permitted to accept royalties on behalf of the Yagbunwura, a role that has been relegated solely to the male chiefs. In terms of development projects, which often require community support, chiefs offer assistance with the mobilization of communal labor. However, the Wuriche must mobilize only the women of the affected community/communities to play their part as expected by the particular project, such as fetching water from water sources to the project site amidst dancing and singing to cheer the males as they work. In all this mobilization and organization, the Mantewuriche affirms that the Wuriche is responsible for the feeding of the workers during communal labor.

4.2.1. Celebration of festivals

Also established during the study was that, the Wuriche, like the male chief, participates actively in the celebration of the annual Damba festival-a major celebration of royalty and chieftaincy of the Gonja people. During the celebration, the Buwuriche are usually responsible for the preparation of food during festivals, the installation of new chiefs, and the ceremonial food (kusutu-dwe) for the dead. It is the duty of the Buwuriche to supervise the preparation of these meals on such occasions. In an eye-witness account of the 2019 Damba festival, the Buwuriche were seen preparing ceremonial food (kusutu-dwe) for the dead, including other meals that are prepared for the occasion. They perform the same function on the occasion of the installation of a new chief. The celebration of the festival is incomplete without the preparation of the special traditional food for the dead. To the extent that it is only the wuriche who is allowed by tradition to prepare this meal. Therefore, the role of the wuriche, and women for that matter, in this process of mobilizing food and cooking is an important aspect of the celebration of the Damba festival. From the point of view of the former secretary to the Gonja Traditional Council, Mr. Kachitowura Siburu, the celebration of the Damba festival is an important element of the customs and practices of the traditional political system of chieftaincy among the Gonja people. He alludes to the fact that the role the Wuriche plays during the Damba festival places her role as an important one within the traditional Gonja society.

The wuriche also performs a consultative role in the Gonja political system in the enstoolment of the new chief of the Gonja traditional kingdom. The Kachitowura revealed that before the installation of a new chief, the Wuriche is always consulted. The consultation is usually in respect of women whose sons are candidates for chieftainship; to confide in the wuriche if certain reasons could disqualify their sons from being appointed as chiefs. An example of such consultations is to ward off a candidate who is an illegitimate son of his father, which is not yet public knowledge. This is so important to the tradition in terms of cultural fairness because in his words:

The woman is the only one who knows the real father of her son and can, therefore, advise the kingmakers as to the suitability of the person that is being installed in terms of his true identity".
Interview with Mr. Kachitowura Siburu (December, 2019).

In his assertion, they always have to be sure that the right person from the appropriate lineage is installed, and such authentication can only come from the mother of the person who is being appointed.

4.2.2. Enskinment

When the Yagbunwura-elect takes his seat on the "Kawul putti" (the skin), he is addressed by the Kagbapewura, the senior Dogte, the senior Mbangapu (Senyonwura), the Mankumawuriche, the Mbonwura, and finally the drummers by custom. From the Mankumawuriche's accounts, during the installation of a new chief, the Wuriche, addresses the new chief, saying;

"It is my expectation, and the expectation of all women, that when you are given food, you will not forget us. I assure you of the support and assistance of all women and children under your jurisdiction as long as you reign". Interview with Mankumawuriche", (January, 2020).

This is by custom a message to the new traditional ruler that while women in the area will stand by him in times of trouble, they nonetheless should not be forgotten in times of joy. The address by the Wuriche is a significant aspect of the installation process as it indicates a pledge on behalf of the women and their children to support the chief in all his endeavors. Without this citation, any chief that is installed is considered not legitimate over the people but a chief for only the Gonja chiefs because he is deemed not to have been properly installed. Apart from being consulted on the suitability of the candidate, the role of the Wuriche is not directly linked to the nomination and appointment of a person for the position of chief. Her advice on the suitability of the candidate is nonetheless taken into serious consideration in the appointment of the candidate. This is to ensure that the new chief is properly appointed and that the appointment process is transparent enough to ensure the acceptability of the people.

4.2.3. On public announcements and the Wuriche

As recounted by the Bolewura, the Yagbunwura would not make a public statement without consulting the Mankumawuriche. It is, however not binding on the Yagbunwura to act according to the dictates of the Mankumawuriche but he more often than not heeds her advice. For example, during one of their meetings at the Yagbun palace, it was observed that before the Yagbunwura will make his final statement, he beckoned the Mankumawuriche to come closer to him. In the process, he consults her before he makes a statement to the hearing of all present in the meeting. This principle applies to the relationship between the other chiefs and the Buwurche within their respective jurisdictions.

4.2.4. Welfare issues

Of equal importance to the aforementioned is the Wuriche's responsibility for the welfare of women and domestic issues in her community. Having to deal with a wide range of societal issues and relations, her responsibility in this regard is heaviest; and borders on conflict resolution and settlement involving most of the time, women. These issues entail quarrels between two or more women or a divorce case between a man and a woman. The Wuriche also handles issues involving different kinds of domestic problems, not only those between men and women but also those having to do with extended family members or tenants in a house. Under such circumstances, the Wuriche presides over the cases like a Circuit judge and pronounces judgments; as well as guidance and direction; sometimes through persuasion for the settlement of the issues. Here, the knowledge and wisdom of the Wuriche are brought to bear as those are key attributes required in the settlement and resolution of social issues within the community.

4.3. The changing roles of the Wuriche

The processes of colonial and subsequent post-colonial administrations, coupled with their interaction with other political systems, have affected the Gonja traditional institution and its authority. The wuriche has over the years taken on other roles that were not hitherto performed by her. The wuriche now plays collaborative roles with governmental and non-governmental organizations, by engaging with entities like the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection, the District Assemblies, Action Aid Ghana, Pronet North, and Community Development Alliance (CDA), to bring development to their people. As with many leadership positions, the Wuriche, in the effective performance of her duties, needs to collaborate with other traditional and formal

government leaders to be an effective chief. And for Wuriche to get the cooperation and support of others to prove her authority, she needs to talk with them and work with them.

In terms of collaboration and dialogue, the Wuriches are grouped under one umbrella called "the Buwuriches Association of Gonjaland," loosely referred to as the Gonjaland Queen Mothers Association. The Mankumawuriche is the leader of the association and chairs meetings of the association. The Kiapewuriche avers that, in times of need, under the auspices of the association, they support each other through contributions by members to support other members during bereavement and marriage ceremonies of members. Through this association, she reveals, the association sponsored two girls to the Tamale Nurses Training College on a full scholarship for further studies.

This and other similar processes have assisted women to develop a sense of unity and togetherness for the common purpose of championing the interests of members and their society at large. The Buruwuriche recounted the support she received from the association during the funeral rites of her late mother and suggests that it is very important to the people because of the honor that comes along with it. In narrating what happened, it could be seen on her face that she and the family were so happy and felt they could not have been treated any better. Through their interaction with traditional women leaders from other systems, the female chiefs of Gonja have become part of the larger body of traditional women leaders in Ghana known as the Queen Mothers Association of Ghana (QMAG). The Buwuriche of Gonja is part of the Northern Regional Queen Mothers Association of Ghana. Through these associations, the female chiefs receive training on sensitization on issues of gender mainstreaming and empowerment. In 2016, the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection, which is part of QMAG, taught them about how important it is for girls to go to school and how early child marriages hurt children.

4.3.1. Collaboration with men

The wuriche collaborates with the male chief as their roles complement each other in the governance processes of the community and the fact that her authority is exercised in relationship with the male chief. The collaboration includes the mobilizing of the people for durbars and other occasions and support in making sure that all functions organized under the auspices of the skin are successful. The chiefs, together with the Buwuriche, hold meetings to discuss the organization of festivals, funerals, and the installation of chiefs. For example, it was observed during the 2018 Damba festival that the male chiefs met with the female chiefs to discuss what would be required for the organization of the festivities, including feeding and logistics. Here, they pull together resources and ideas to ensure the success of the festivities. With the partnership of the male chiefs, the wuriches are able to help implement and monitor projects being executed for the benefit of their respective communities by government and non-governmental agencies. As alluded to by the Singbingwuriche...

"We have to work together with the chiefs so that facilities that are being implemented for the benefit of our people are carried out in the best way. Even after such facilities are provided, we need to work together to ensure that such facilities are maintained to function for the longest period possible". Statement from an interview with the Singbingwuriche (November, 2019).

Emphasizing on the above, it is only when the female chiefs and the male chiefs collaborate that they can get the needed development for their community. After the development projects have been provided, they need to be maintained for maximum benefit through the collaboration of the two wings of the traditional system. Both have also collaborated in lobbying for projects in their various communities. From the narration of the Mantewuriche, women and men have worked together with the Buipewura for a borehole to be drilled in the community through the District Chief Executive (DCE), who represents the government at the local level. And to reiterate further, she said that:

"Take a step outside the compound and look down the road. You will see people fetching water from a borehole. It came about as a result of the combined efforts of myself and the Buipewura whereby we had to visit the DCE to complain about the water situation in Buipe and he gave attention to our plea and delivered". Mantewuriche interview (February 2020).

Under these circumstances, the presence of the two traditional leaders would have more weight in the eyes of the DCE than in their presence. This kind of relationship reinforces their authority and yields better results for the development role that they play in the community. And as alluded to earlier by the Mantewuriche, their engagement with government and non-governmental agencies and officials expands their horizons of collaboration. She recounted one such collaboration, in which they were awarded three boreholes to be drilled at Jentilpe, Busunu, and Kabampe by an NGO, Pronet North.

To further strengthen this kind of collaboration, the government, through the Ministries of Gender and Social Protection (MGSP) and the Ministry of Chieftancy and Traditional Affairs, organizes leadership workshops and assists in discussions on the need for the girl child to be formally educated. One such collaboration occurred in June 2015, in which the MGSP organized a training workshop for the Gonjaland Queen Mothers Association on the need for women's participation in local governance in Ghana. During the training, it was identified that one of the reasons women do not participate in the district level elections is a lack of resources at their disposal. Following that, the Ministry got some funding and sponsored female candidates in the district level elections that year. As a result, the number of females who were elected into the various assemblies in the Gonja area increased from 15 to 23, which was a remarkable improvement over the previous elections. These roles played by the wuriche certainly could not be carried out without some challenges. In her attempt to influence the lives of the people she represents, the wuriche is confronted with several difficult situations which impede her performance as a traditional leader. These challenges serve as barriers to her authority and influence in society, as they are reflected in the discussions that follow.

5. Barriers to Wuriche's authority and influence

Since the adoption of democratic governance in Ghana after independence, women have been trying to join the ranks of both elected and appointed officials in positions at both national and local levels. Under the current Fourth Republican dispensation from 1992, the proportion of women holding elective positions in the national parliament has doubled from about 5.5% in 1993 to about 11% in 2017. At the District Assembly level, women hold about 14% of the chief executive positions, while at the state level, women hold nearly 18% of the appointed offices as of the beginning of 2018 (Institute of Local Government Studies, 2018). Notwithstanding the apparent improvements in the percentage of women occupying public office positions, men continue to

dominate even though women constitute 51% of the population of Ghana. The low number of women in formal government positions is a reflection of the challenges women have to go through to get elected or appointed into public office. The reasons for the low participation are mostly based on the male chauvinistic tendencies of Ghanaian society. This phenomenon is not different from what occurs in the Gonja traditional governance cycles.

5.1. Socio-cultural challenges of the Wuriche

Therefore, the society in which the wuriche finds herself makes it challenging for her to carry out her duties as a chief. The Wuriche is confronted with several challenges within the Gonja social organization. These barriers tend to undermine her position or impede her performance. The wuriche has to deal with these challenges in her line of duty to remain relevant to society. Even though the Gonja traditional political system provides chiefship positions for women, the dominant socio-cultural attributes favor men and are determined by them. This creates a patriarchal order which tends to impact in different ways the powers of female traditional leaders in Gonjaland. Society acknowledges that men are superior to women, which affects the self-confidence of women. This stigma not only restricts their access to resources and information but also places them at a disadvantage in comparison to men. This societal challenge affects their involvement and participation in traditional governance since they are more often than not left out in the decision-making processes that affect them, especially in formal government circles. This plight of the wuriche in the Gonja society is reflected in the larger women's society. To expatiate on this phenomenon, Kiapewuriche Abiba recounted a confrontation she once witnessed between a wuriche and a male participant at a meeting: the wuriche's contributions and utterances, according to her, were most often taken as offensive and disregarded for the authority of the men present in the meeting. In such meetings, women are normally labeled as witches and should be quiet when men speak about issues. In her words, during one of the meetings before the celebration of the Damba festival (2018), the Kpembewura angrily asked her to sit down when she raised her hand to ask a question. He said I was talking too much in the meeting and it is only witches who take over meetings when men are present. This tag of witchcraft on wuriches weakens their importance and restricts them from speaking in such high-powered meetings where important decisions are taken. Alhaji Losina Afuli confirmed this position when he further explained the phenomenon during that interview:

"Loose talkers cannot keep secrets and therefore must be avoided in times of taking serious decisions." Interview with Alhaji Losina Afuli, Chief Linguist to the Yagbunwura (February, 2020).

To him, women easily leak information, and that explains why they are often left out in the decision-making processes of very serious and important matters. He gave the example of the Damongowuriche, who disclosed the outcome of a meeting about the decision of the traditional leaders on the choice of a DCE for Damongo to the New Patriotic Party Chairman of Damongo. He said before they could invite the party executives to the palace the following day, the Chairman already knew their choice and immediately stated that he had already been informed by the Damongowuriche about their choice. The chiefs present were surprised at the action of the Damongowuriche because it was decided that the decision should not be disclosed to the executives until they met them. The Damongowuriche apologized and promised not to do so again. But this would have been different, he concluded, if the person involved was a male chief. When asked if the person who leaked the

information was a male chief, Alhaji Losina said that it would have been normal for male chiefs to interact with party executives on those lines. In reality, the reasons given for why there aren't any female chiefs based on that reason alone are still sexist and can be traced back to the way the system is set up.

This position of patriarchy was also particularly adopted and perpetuated by the British colonial administration through the indirect rule system, where the male chiefs were used to enforce colonial administrators' demands (Odame, 2014). A close examination of the dynamics of power as observed by Aidoo (1981) illustrates how traditional leaders in precolonial Ghana exercised considerably more authority than during the colonial period and after. Caused by the sharp differences that exist between male and female chiefs in Gonja, the consequences of different impacts under colonialism and post-colonial rule, and the growing pressures of economic survival in modern society, the burdens the Wuriche bears threaten to subvert her authority and undermine her performance. Ignored and bypassed by patriarchy over the years, despite the fact that she continues to be important to the maintenance of society, the Wuriche has survived and is still clear about her position in society.

5.2. Polygyny and bride-price payment

Polygyny and bride-price are two other cultural influences that combine to affect the status and role of female traditional leaders in the Gonja traditional system. From the customs and traditions, which stem basically from patriarchy, these two factors tend to put the woman under the care of the man as property. In this circumstance, women cannot take decisions on their own when they are being kept as property by their husbands. The system does not, therefore, allow an arrangement in which the woman (wife) is elevated to a status higher than the man (husband), who is recognized as her "owner". These practices degrade the woman's dignity and turn her into a convenient tool for the man. The Mantewuriche asserts that, as a chief, the wuriche still needs to accept being under the influence of her husband because the bride-price that is paid by the husband keeps the woman subservient to the man. Under these circumstances, everything that the wuriche does should align with what will be acceptable to the men. In failure to do so, the man simply divorces the woman or ignores her and concentrates on his other wife or wives, since polygyny is a common practice among the Gonjas. And because the wuriche will not also want to lose her marital status, she continues to respect the dictates of her husband and live under the influence of these cultural practices of polygyny and bride-price.

The Mankumawuriche further avers that the problems of divorce loom large in the general picture of wuriche's status in Gonja traditional society. As in many African societies, divorce, according to Gonja traditional custom, can take effect by extrajudicial arrangements. One of the problems connected with this is that, more often than not, what is considered good grounds for divorce does not hold for husband and wife alike. A man may legitimately divorce his wife for adultery while a woman cannot, because the system of polygyny does allow for a man to have extra-marital relations but not with his wife. This position confirms the findings of Odame (2014), in which a woman may be divorced for laziness, for 'witchcraft and sorcery', and for adultery, whereas a wife cannot accuse her husband of witchcraft or adultery. In many cases, a woman may be divorced for barrenness (without medical proof) on the presumption that she is barren. Because of this belief and practice that a woman can be divorced at any point in time by her husband, it is not supported to offer women sensitive traditional positions due to the fact that a woman is not considered traditionally a permanent member of the community. Therefore, women who take up the position of wuriches are most likely to be

divorced by their husbands, as is evident in the percentage of single-Buwuriches. For instance, out of the eight Buwuriches interviewed, five were divorced, two were widowed, and only one was married.

The high rate of divorce among the Buriches is a result of their status. Firstly, they are not able to carry out their household duties like cooking and fetching water for their husbands. Secondly, they are mostly engaged in meetings and other assignments required by the office. According to the Mankumawuriche, her husband divorced her because he felt she was no longer taking proper care of the home as she was always attending meetings within and outside Damongo. On her return from one of these meetings in Tamale, she came and noticed that her husband had married a new wife following previous complaints that the Mankumawuriche had neglected him. Following the divorce, the Mankumawuriche moved out of her matrimonial home to construct her own home.

Damongo. Thirdly, the wuriche's time is devoted to the performance of her role of resolving conflicts, attending public functions, and working with the male chief, leaving no time to attend to the desires of her husband. This is partly explained by the fact that these women will normally have to leave their places of marriage to take up their new positions, which their husbands would not understand and would simply pronounce divorce to enable them to marry another wife. The Bolewura sums up the above in the following quote:

"We are always careful when we are appointing a woman to the position of a chief. You know, women are not like us, men. They can decide to leave the community at any time and maybe follow a man to a faraway land or even leave the skin. They also misbehave, they like talking and can bring the name of the skin into dispute". Interview with Bolewura (February, 2020).

The Bolewura gave an example of a Kiapewuriche who divorced her husband, got remarried to another man in Accra in 2005, and has since never returned. Despite evidence to the contrary, many male chiefs live outside of their communities and frequently visit their communities to attend to matters of their office. Indeed, the male-biased environment within the traditional system, the Singbingwuriche avers, deters women from participation. She bemoans the predicaments of being a Wuriche; where she works within the styles and modes acceptable to men. In essence, women are treated harshly by men, and many, if not all, of the husbands, have negative attitudes toward female traditional leaders. The men, she believes, do not even want women to be installed as chiefs and therefore should not play any significant role within the system. Such men, therefore, do not cooperate with the female chiefs in their line of duty and even advise others summoned to the wuriche's palace not to honor such invitations. The lack of cooperation from men is therefore a significant barrier to the performance of the wuriche.

5.3. Emerging challenges

From the study, the major obstacle to the authority of the Wuriche in Gonja society is the lack of formal education. Formal education is one of the strongest factors influencing the control of women by men in Gonjaland. Female chiefs are handicapped in the system because of lower educational attainments and the prevalence of social norms that severely restrict their freedom of movement in public space. For instance, all the Buwuriche interviewed had no level of formal education, indicating a high level of illiteracy rate, while over 60% of the male chiefs interviewed had some level of formal education and could read and write.

The findings here confirm the observation by Stoeltje (2003) that "illiteracy is a major hindrance to the performance of female leaders." This element reduces the status of female chiefs in the economic and social space since they are unable to appraise issues put on paper for their benefit or place them in a better position for employment. The lack of formal education, therefore, relegates them to the agricultural sector and petty trading, which are predominantly controlled by men (since women do not own land in this part of the country) and are unable to raise the required amount of money to engage meaningfully in business. Due to this reduced space as a result of illiteracy, the ability and capacity of the Wuriche to participate actively in the traditional political governance process is limited since she fears her involvement and participation open her up for public assessment and criticism, which she is unable to contain. Apart, there are obstacles stemming from the modern Ghanaian state which affect the performance and authority of the Wuriche. The modern Ghanaian state provides fora where male chiefs meet at the national and regional levels, to the detriment of female chiefs. The Buwuriche and, by extension, female traditional leaders do not have a similar meeting avenue even though the definition of a "chief" in the constitution of Ghana (1992:168) includes female chiefs. As outlined in the Ghanaian constitution on "Chieftaincy" (1992: 164-168), female chiefs are therefore placed in a disadvantaged position compared to male chiefs. Chiefs by this arrangement have access to the offices of the state, whereas female chiefs scarcely get these privileges. There are other support mechanisms by the government to uplift the image of chiefs that are not extended to female chiefs. For example, the government occasionally assists in the renovation and construction of chiefs' palaces for them, particularly paramount chiefs in the Gonja and other chiefs throughout the country. Expatiating on such a benefit, the Mankumawuriche cited the construction of the Yagbunwura's palace, the Buipewura's palace, and the Kpembewura's palace, as well as gifts of vehicles to these male chiefs to enhance their movement. The Mankumawuriche had this to add in connection with the aforementioned favors from the government:

"The government continues to give support to the male chiefs and does not look on the side of the Wuriche. Take a look at my house, this is where I also use as my palace as the paramount Wuriche of Yagbun, and compare that with the mansion with a fence wall provided with the support of the government to be used as the palace for the Yagbunwura. Will you have any basis to compare the two?", Interview with Mankumawuriche. (February, 2020).

She further averred that her duties involved a lot of movement to and from communities within and outside Gonja, but the system does not provide her with any means by which she can transport herself under these circumstances. In conclusion, she had this to add:

"As the Mankumawuriche, I do not have any means of transport but I am compelled by my position to travel up and down in fulfillment of my duties. But the government has decided to give vehicles to chiefs without considering our plight, despite the fact that these chiefs also have horses in their possession. My walking stick becomes my helper and transporter, and I have to go through all the struggles associated with public transport when I am invited to participate in functions outside my immediate community. This is not fair because the government continues to strengthen the male chiefs against the weaknesses of the female chiefs". Interview with Mankumawuriche, (February, 2020).

These submissions by the Mankumawuriche summarize the imbalanced support relationships of government within the traditional political system in favor of the male chiefs of the Gonjas.

Another factor that militates against women leaders' effective participation in the traditional political governance system of the Gonja is the lack of resources at their disposal. The Wuriche has to overcome the obstacle posed by financial difficulties, as leaders need resources to have control over their subjects. The Mankumawuriche asserts that, for effective mobilization through the proper functioning of the institution of the female chief, the Wuriche requires money to buy food supplies to carry out most of her duties. Most female chiefs don't have jobs because of their position, so they usually rely on what little money they have and what other market women and community members give them.

Finally, there is a lack of resources (as occupier of a 'skin'), in the effective governance of the Gonja traditional political system by the Wuriche. Whereas all "skin" resources are placed traditionally at the control of the male chief, under his kingship, no such is allowed for the Wuriche. Yet the Wuriche must incur expenses in the administration of her 'skin.' She must be present for all public events. Besides, she must always be mindful of the fact that she is appearing as a representative of her people; as such the Wuriche must be dressed in expensive cloth. Most often, events of such nature require one's presence for at least a day, and in most cases, several days, and the Wuriche must travel with an entourage; the number depends on her status. These responsibilities cannot be compromised if she is to exercise the authority of the position she occupies. The lack of education of these women is a major contributory factor to their increasing poverty levels because they cannot be engaged in the formal sector and combine that with their office as female chiefs. As a consequence of these disparities that have been perpetuated over the centuries between the Wuriche and their male counterparts, the role, in terms of authority as chief has been compromised and diminished the relevance of the Wuriche in the Gonja social organization.

6. Conclusion

This study is about the role and contributions of the wuriche within the wider Gonja society, which combines the various spheres of executive, legislative, and judiciary authority in the performance of her traditional and changing roles in modern Ghana. The Wuriche mostly carries out her roles in relation to the male chief within the context of the Gonja social organization. Her authority is linked to the powers of the male chief, and her role and influence are dependent on the support of the male chief. Because her duties reflect her relationship with the male chief and are also mostly considered for the well-being of women, in particular, within her community, the Wuriche functions in parallel roles and responsibilities based on a principle that complements the authority of the male chief but not on the presumption of equivalent power or authority.

The findings of the study have illuminated several factors, including patriarchy and the low levels of education, as factors contributing to the insubordination of the wuriches within the Gonja Kingdom. The impacts of these factors have reduced the wuriche's authority and level of influence, respect and dignity, as well as participation in decision-making processes in the wider Gonja society. Furthermore, the challenges that Gonja (women) political leaders face have common roots with the larger society, namely restrictions that prevent women's emancipation in many parts of the world. Indeed, female leadership in traditional governance, entailing the exercise of executive, legislative or judicial powers within the Gonja social setting, has always been confronted with challenges prior to colonization and in modern Ghana. The challenges are

that patriarchal values and other social vices hold sway elsewhere about women, about their inability to handle 'power and responsibility' is prevalent in the Gonja society and a hindrance to the effective discharge of the wuriche in the Gonja kingdom in Ghana.

This study was not without limitations. The study adopted a case study design that relied heavily on purposive and convenient sampling techniques which were used to select only 47 participants in the data collection process. It is worth noting that this selection process excluded the views of a lot of people who could have contributed to the information-gathering process. Also, the process of interviewing and discussions took longer periods. Research assistants had to translate the interviews and discussions in most of the cases from the local language, Gonja to English for purposes of recording because the researcher could not speak nor understand the local language. Through this process, it is possible that some information would have been lost by way of omissions of some relevant responses or additions of some issues which did not reflect exactly what the respondents sought to put across.

Considering the qualitative approach of the study, the small number of people contacted, the scope of the study and the selection bias, it is imperative to caution that the findings of this study cannot be used to generalize to include other groups without further research. The limitations notwithstanding, the study provides evidence from the top hierarchy of the Gonja political system and a cross section of the people on the authority of female chiefs and how the general political system is structured and organized to provide space within the scheme of things for the various actors to function as a unit to maintain the society.

Future research should focus on the level of cooperation between female chiefs and other state and non-state structures at the community level. This would present a clearer picture of how the contemporary influence of women chiefs is linked to their active involvement in the affairs of the community and current politics and development in Ghana.

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