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## WHAT IS QUEENMOTHER?

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Understanding and Reconstituting an Eroding Institution for Women with Traditional Power



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Queen Mother is an honorific and royal title for two very distinct roles with varying degrees of authority and influence. In the Western world, when none hears of “Queen Mother” it is firstly assumed one is speaking of the Mother of a ruling monarch. As the royal family in Britain is widely watched, the term almost exclusively references the mother of Queen Elizabeth II. Such Queen mothers are still recognized today across the remaining monarchies in pockets across the world. In addition to this more commonly known title of royal standing, Africa, there is another Queen Mother, and her stories are seldom captured by the few who choose to document and share the influences and impacts of these ruling women. The African Queen mother is a dual-sex political system<sup>1</sup>.

Within the traditional West African governance structure, historian Tarikhu Farrar notes, “Every office in the Akan political hierarchy (in all its variants) has female and male counterpart...All issues pertaining primarily or exclusively to women...where addressed within the female hierarchy.” (Ferrar, p. 588)

Unlike the European worldview of their Queen Mother institution, the enstooled African Queen mother has access and ability to command her warriors. The enstooled Queen Mother has final say in the selection of the next King. The Queen Mother had jurisdiction over women, but was not limited to domestic matters. While the King’s Council reviewed matters of long-distance trade, warfare, and diplomacy, the Queenmother was usually the sole female voice. But the voice was potent and had to be headed by all, particularly the King as Queenmother’s voice represented many. The challenge as this paper will illustrate, is the erosion of Queenmother or

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<sup>1</sup> This term dual-sex political system was coined by Kamene Okonjo

if stools remain vacant, the absence that singular, yet powerful voice silences the jurisdiction of women and children she represents, effectively rendering them as mute.

Far more literature and scholarly research as been documented by the English or French on the role and ranks of Chieftaincy. And little has been documented about women in leadership roles. The role of Chief in its authentic institutional precept, is a decentralized role. Chiefs have grades according to their level of power and proximity to the Paramount Chief or King. There are Elders who may serve as Sub-Chiefs, Chiefs of village, Chiefs who preside over several villages, the Chiefs who preside over a region and ultimately the King. It is important to note that lower grade Chiefs still have a great deal of autonomy when it comes to local judicial, tribal, or wealth and resource distribution and taxes.

The role is Chief is often for life and is determined through lineage, individual capacity and increasingly economic contribution and political influence. Later in this paper the alarming trend of the growing importance of financial competition to assume the role of Chieftaincy will be addressed. The other foundational competent of a Chieftaincy is the sacral component. Even with European monarchies, particularly of the Golden Age, monarchs were seen as divinely chosen and close intermediaries to God. This belief of divine selections led to the religious crusades, the acquisition and conversion of “heathens” and missionary work as an underpinning and justification of colonization. In Africa, chieftaincy, traditional priesthood and healers were also viewed as divinely chosen and elevated. Although lineage was another major competent, similar to other monarchies, the stool or throne of the African chief stood for something even more. The role of ancestors serving at the core of traditional African life, meant

that lineage, wisdom, stewardship and secrets were passed on to the rightful individual to lead through spiritual selection.

Often spiritual or sacred signs would determine who would lead. The European royal establish was patriarchal and this often went to the first-born son. Within Africa, however, polygamy particularly within royal enclaves and children as symbol of wealth and prestige, meant that the next Chief or ruler typically had a plethora of eligible successors from which to choose.

Therefore, the divine inspiration and selection (through the consultation of Elders, Secret Societies, King Makers, the Ancestors and ultimately QueenMother, would determine the next in line. Now that we have established the leadership role of Chief, it serves as a reference to the role of his (or her as there have been and are female Kings, some of whom were Queenmothers) counterpart as Queen Mother.

### **The Erosion of Queen Mother...**

Contrary to many public debates, the concept of ruling women in Africa is not new, nor foreign to the true history and foundation of Africa and the acceptance of dual power between African men and women.

The onslaught of religious crusades through Islamicization and Christian Missionaries largely reduced the active participatory role, voice and power of African women. As gatekeepers of the royal palace (autonomous governance), as priestesses (religious leaders), Queen Mother (women's leadership representation) and as leaders of the economies (control of micro all of these roles were a threat to the recipe for colonial domination. To speak of African women's empowerment is not a favor nor a Western concept. It is a restoration of an inherently African

paradigm of balance. These African women warriors were often royalty, but for the many who were not, were bequeathed titles and distinctions for their bravery. Some of these women warriors are celebrated national heroes in Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Niger. But why do we not know of them as we do the Joan of Ark?

In addition to the intentional economic marginalization of the African women, the modern disenfranchisement also silenced them with respect to critical decision-making factors and omission of contribution and suffering of colonial domination. Queenmothers as representatives of the women who oversaw operations of the royal palace and its governance, religious practices and healing as well as the local market economy. These primary institutional pillars were intentionally targeted and dismantled to be overtaken for the patriarchal colonial agenda to succeed. The colonial suppression of Black women by European or Eurocentric colonizers was and is an active and targeted assault against the African woman. What has been the spur of targeted and sustained economic suppression of the African women?

Prior to African colonization, African women had roles in the development of Kingdom's and even King selection (Afolayan, 2011). Under the colonial regime, women played a less active role in the newer, distorted political structures within their communities. Nonetheless, the women knew how to make their collective voice heard as necessary.

The collective voice and sometimes outrage expressed by women from the colonial era to present day served and constitutes to serve as a vocal objection to gender distortion and grievances. But women were not only interested in their personal livelihoods, women often protested or pending change which was a catalyst for many women tactical opponents of the

new colonial structures. As a leading voice in African Women's Gender discourse, Oyèrónke Oyewùmi aptly notes that African traditions were replaced with the foreign influence and pressures of an emerging customary law. Oyewùmi contends that, "The making of customary law also illustrates how traditions were reinvented...in the process of [constituting] customary law, women were excluded."

The post-colonial African woman became marginalized with the onset of colonization. Language played a key role in the distortion of gender parity in colonial and postcolonial society. Women once were revered for semi-mystical powers of the African spiritual mythology with powers matching or rivaling those of the few Gods that were ascribed a sex. The origin stories of African societies spoke of the aptitude and disposition and preferences of a spirit and not that of a man or woman. But the colonial documentation and thus, translation put a male characteristic and label to the powerful Gods. This erasure of a God as genderless or even, female strips the African imagination and references of the authentic cosmos that allowed gender-neutral, male and even female deities to be powerful.

Language was also used in the development of customary law shifting traditional governance and oral traditions to those laws "of the crown" or the colonial dominating society. The civic structure was thus born adhering to new colonial rules and laws. The paradigm shift did not originate with the laws per se, the advent of foreign religious principles and doctrines precipitated the societal shift that soon followed. The new customary laws, often omitted women's participation and representation. The fading of the woman continued as the historical accounts and documentation further excluded the African woman.

To provide an example, historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, analyzed that only 4 pages out of 649 in Ajayi and Crowder's, *History of West Africa*, mention "women" (Zeleza, 2011). As the African tradition of history and memory was largely oral, the documentation of history was largely driven by the colonial masters. History was put on paper cementing distortions and further silencing or making those who were omitted virtually invisible. While the story of African women and their contributions were omitted, other scholars have found that male chroniclers intentionally minimized African women's achievements as was the case with Queen Amina and the brave Dahomean warriors (Zeleza, 2011; Edgerton, 2010).

The economic targeting of women had drastic implications on their livelihoods and children. Traditionally, in many African societies, African women were expected to provide and sustain for themselves and children within their household. This custom was upheld whether or not the husband was in a polygamous relationship. Upon marriage, brides used some of their dowry or wedding funds or gifts to establish sustenance farming and small market trading. The implication of economic responsibility in terms of gender roles was thus high. Therefore, attacking the economic vitality of a woman could leave her children and herself vulnerable.

The colonial era shook up the African values and concept of governance familial and ancestral land. Land ownership was within a family or clan unit. And oversight of land was the jurisdiction of the Chieftaincy. Very seldom were women the land owners even prior to the distortions of African traditions. At the onset of colonization, the shift of merchant activity went from Trans African trade toward the commercialization of cash crops to benefit the colonial economies. The access, sale, clearing and repurposing of the land became essential. The capital demand was high for more land sales and use for the profitable coffee and cocoa produced during the

colonial times of West Africa. The formalization and commercialization of these crops generated new wealth even within the rural farming communities. But the wealth was largely earned by the male harvesters, further marginalizing the women (1997, Oyewùmi). The males gained more influence as they were now the ones with access to capital through earnings.

While the colonial and modern era provided a wealth boom in the now gendered farming activities, no equivalent wealth building opportunities for rural women opened up (1997, Oyewùmi).

### **Today, Queen**

Today women recognize the need for economic empowerment and the telling, retelling or modification of her story. Queen Mothers in villages and kingdoms today address a number of community issues and use the platform to raise attention to the traditional council as well as the state political institutions as well. A well-respected Queen Mother can garner media attention and raise issues to politically elected or appointed Mayors, Governors, Directors, Deputies and even Ministers.

In line with the Queenmother's primary role to give voice to women, children and community at large topics and initiatives cover a broad range. Whether it is addressing the girl-child marriage or the rise of unwed teenage pregnancy, the Queenmother seeks to find and equilibrium between moving beyond antiquated traditional stronghold traditions to the other continuum of the dissolution of values and traditional institutions. Queenmother may lead the crusade against local hunger, peaceful voting, preventable or detectable diseases, and transport safety.

Like all leaders, some are notable and make history, some Queenmothers lead actual crusades such as Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana who was the last stand against the British military takeover and cementing of its colonization. Some Queenmothers today are addressing global issues such as fighting against human trafficking and environmental preservation.

For African women to ask for parity and to push for empowerment is a not a Western “disease”. It is the rightful place of an African woman across the continent and the ages. The tenacity to find for fairness, protect children, uphold family honor and to birth new lands remained within the African women even if she was forcibly taken away. The memories of these women are in the accounts of griots, but the recording, interpreting and sometimes dismantling of these actual stories are controlled by the pen of the male colonialists.

While it is easy to criticize the colonialists for their distortion, erasure or omission, it serves as a starting point for this faded memory to have the honor and dignity of reembrace and a proper place in herstory. The ownership of Africans distortion is also It is important to note that the institution of Queenmother never complete eroded nor disappeared. Certain communities and Chiefs upheld the women in this role. The memories and achievements of the Queenmothers, many of whom were also women warriors (in combat and on the social front-lines) have left small clues for the shattered pieces to be picked up and put back together. Queenmother often ruled under the sage approach of community affection.

Many historians have viewed African women’s apparent silence as proof of powerlessness, irrelevance or inaptitude. Those external observations and perceptions are often ill informed as the power and influence of the enstooled woman is articulated in private and often during the

focused, quiet stillness of night. Queenmother did not, and does, not often speak in public as her word is edict and carries much weight and her thoughts, votes (and at times, final say) are done privately at night after the other stakeholders have already weighed in. Kenneth E.

Boulding, an English political economist, discussed the idea of an economy ruled by love as a motivator or using fear as a motivator in his classic book, "The Economy of Love and Fear".

The Queenmother often used her elements of persuasion and guidance in terms of individual and community well-being. The community support and participation are motivated by the "Economy of Love or the affection exhibited to each other in a community as a form of *ubuntu*.

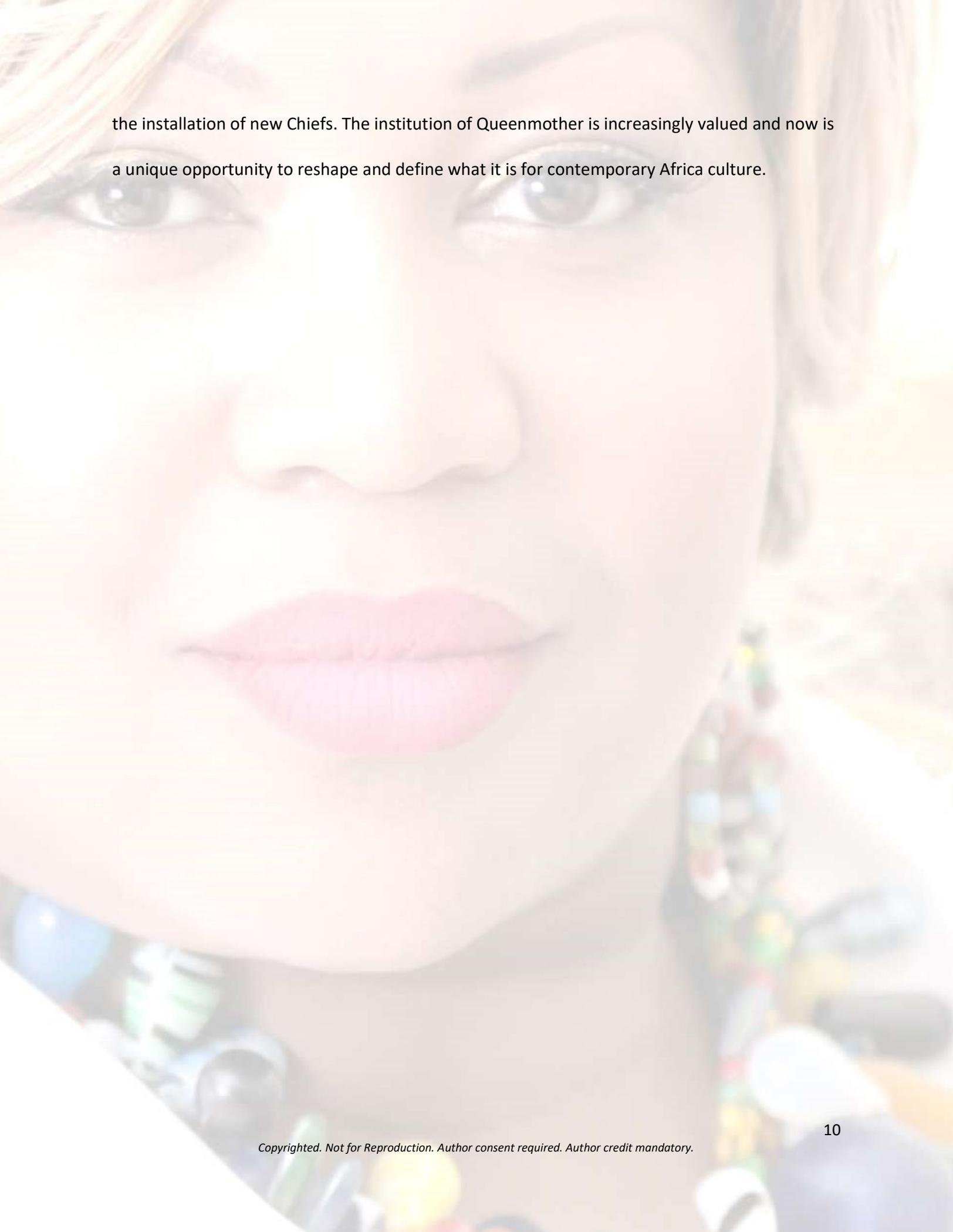
The Queenmother institution has not been one to engage in the "economy of fear" or threat and counterthreat as the international system that diminished their roles extensively operates.

According to Boulding, with respect to the economies of fear, "The conclusion seems unavoidable- that the present international system is the most pathological<sup>2</sup> of all segments of the world social system and that its control, modification, or even abolition is one of the major items on the agenda of the human race (p. 80, Boulding).

Signs of the reinstating and valuing role of Queenmother is visible throughout many African spaces. As are representative of the Economy of Love is welcomed. Many are fatigued with the rule of fear. Furthermore, Queenmother allows for the governance of traditional institution to remain the Queenmother structures. Queenmothers are getting enstooled simultaneously with

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<sup>2</sup> Boulding claims that pathology is the study of ill health and can easily be extended to the ill health of society-that is, conditions which are almost universally recognized as bad. (p.12, Boulding)



the installation of new Chiefs. The institution of Queenmother is increasingly valued and now is a unique opportunity to reshape and define what it is for contemporary Africa culture.

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