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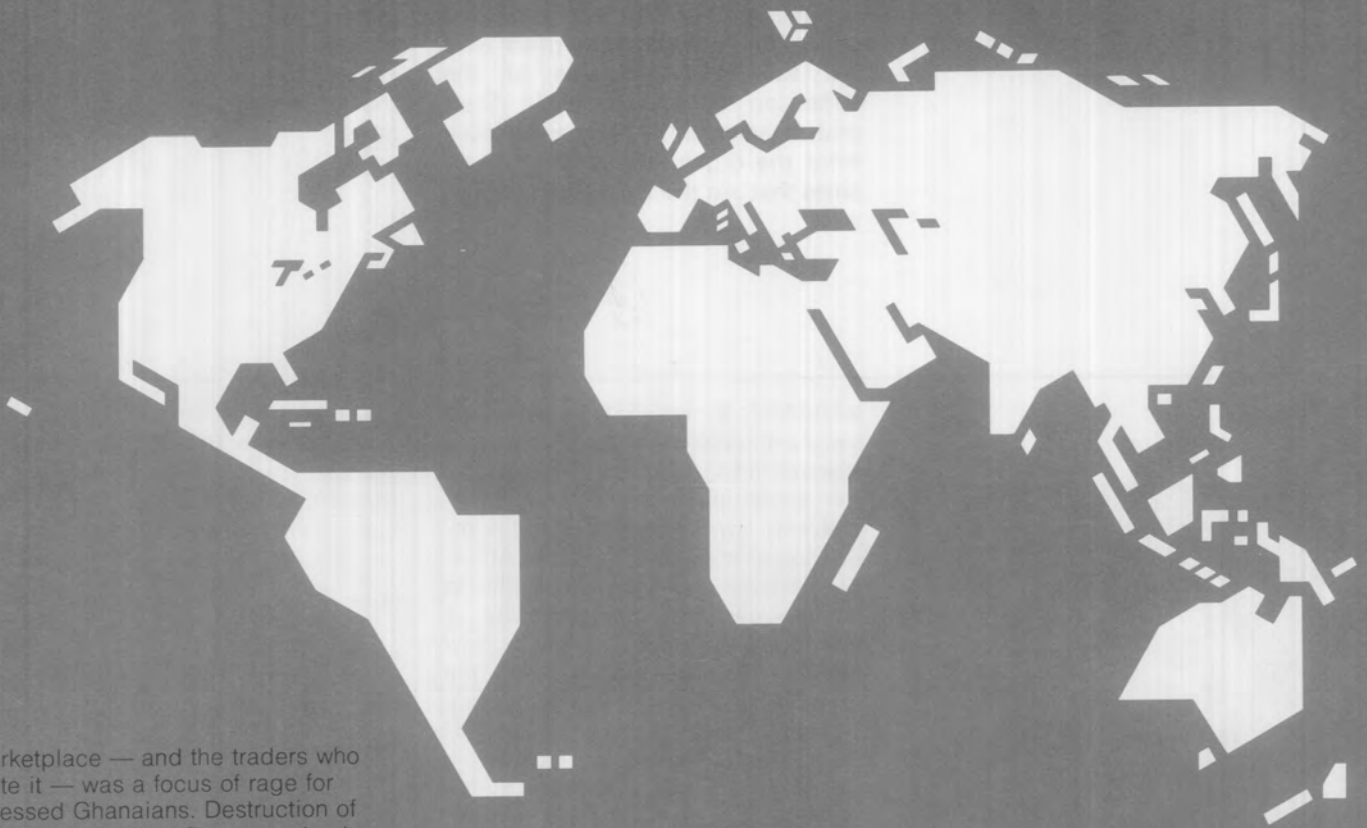
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Reports

WOMEN AND THE 1979 GHANA REVOLUTION

by Barbara Harrell-Bond



The marketplace — and the traders who dominate it — was a focus of rage for hard-pressed Ghanaians. Destruction of Makola Market Number One may also be seen as part of a long process directed toward limiting the economic field in which women can effectively compete with men.

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In a recent article on the roles of African women in literature, Professor Kenneth Little comments that "the general characterization is not consonant at all with stereotypes of African wives as spiritless downtrodden creatures" (*West Africa*, September 17, 1979). The validity of such stereotypes is equally challenged by events in Ghana after the June 4 *coup d'état*, led by Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings on behalf of an Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), which climaxed in the destruction of Accra's Makola Market No. 1 on August 18, 1979. The evidence suggests that Ghanaian women are regarded (and regard themselves) as equal with men, their economic power being clearly demonstrated through their control of trade and food supplies.

Given the extreme shortages that prevailed at the time, it is not surprising that traders were under severe attack by the public and the military, and fairly extreme punishments were meted out in an attempt to eliminate hoarding and profiteering. That the vast majority of these traders were women meant that *women* were a major target for revolutionary "action." Attacks on those who control the marketplace frequently accompany a revolution and as such are not unusual. This *Report* argues, however, that the attack on traders during the "revolution" in Ghana had more significance *because* the traders were women. Men seized upon the crisis as an opportunity to further

their aim of eliminating women as economic competitors.

During the period of transition to civilian rule that began in January 1979 and before the June coup,¹ there were many calls in the press for Ghanaian women to participate actively in the political process and to support the government's efforts to improve the quality of life. Among the many political parties that emerged then was the Mother of Ghana Solidarity Party. While the party was primarily intended to provide an avenue for women to exert political leadership, its aims extended to specific social and economic reforms.

After General Acheampong's overthrow in July 1978, the Akuffo government made numerous official inquiries into corrupt practices or "kalabule" — a term coined by Ghanaian author Joyce Addo to describe a range of illegal activities. These commissions put most of the blame for Ghana's economic maladies on officialdom, particularly the military — in other words, on institutions controlled by men. After the AFRC assumed power and began its "clean-up" operation, however, not only were traders obviously singled out for revolutionary "action," but even the term "kalabule" came to be invested with new meaning. A writer in *The Standard* invented an etymology for the word which included gender distinctions. It is significant to note that, according to this view, women are more powerful and more wicked than are men:

Calabully (feminine Kalabule) is a well known figure; an identifiable personality in the Ghanaian society. ... Calabully is described as a person who has inordinate propensity to grab and cheat, and does in fact grab and cheat his fellow man and country through deceit and trickery. KALABULE is more prolific [sic.] dynamic, volatile, and more dangerously devastating than CALABULLY, the male counterpart. ... the English words CALAMITY and BULY [sic.] are the origin of CALABULLY. ... Its female counterpart KALABULE derived from two Ewe words KALE and BULU. KALE means "overbearing strength and bravery" such as shown by David in tearing lions into pieces and overpowering and killing Goliath. BULU means "one who can be made a fool, or who can make fools of others through cheating, grabbing deceit and tricks." ... Calabully has brought a great misfortune, deep distress and disaster to Ghanaians as individuals and to the country as a State. (July 29, 1979)

One of the first "Kalabule" incidents we heard about soon after arriving in Ghana in late June 1979 concerned a woman in Kumasi who had allegedly purchased a piece of cloth at the control price and sold it almost immediately for a much higher price. The soldier who arrested her was reported to have asked her where she came from. The woman, it was said, named her home village. The baby that was tied to her back was removed and she

was killed with a bullet on the spot. While the punishment in this case was more extreme than most, it was not an isolated example of women being "disciplined" for hoarding and profiteering in the marketplace. The following accounts in the Ghanaian press illustrate the severity with which women's economic "crimes" were treated.

One woman "contractor," a Madam Margaret Domson, was given 24 strokes of the cane after a dawn raid by the military had uncovered "large quantities" of hoarded essential commodities. These included two cartons of corned beef, two cartons of Omo detergent, toilet soap, whiskey, and building materials (*Ghanaian Times*, June 25, 1979). A later issue of the paper carried a photograph of the woman standing with the soldiers in front of her "hoarded" items just before she was caned. The same report described the case of Madam Ofori who was found guilty and similarly punished for hoarding buckets, bed sheets, towels, and saucepans, together with 68 cartons of schnapps. In both cases the quantity of hoarded items (with the possible exception of the schnapps) appears to be no more than the minimum stock required for a market stall. Four other women were arrested in the same swoop and it was noted that "Sources close to the military hinted that a shooting range was being prepared... for the execution of persons who might be found guilty of offences against the revolution by the People's Court." The report continued by describing how 200 women "queue contractors" (people who stand in line to buy items for resale rather than for their own personal use) were made to lie flat on their backs facing the sun for 15 minutes and were then given one stroke each before being released (*Ghanaian Times*, July 19, 1979). In Ho it was reported that 15 persons, including 4 women, were given a total of 324 lashes of the cane in public, and 3 other women were sentenced to sweep the streets of the town for one week, while a fourth woman had to do a day's

sweeping and was bound over for 6 months to keep the peace (*Ghanaian Times*, August 3, 1979).

We personally observed many cases of women being brought from the market at gunpoint to military camps for interrogation and punishment. At the naval base women were laid across stacks of old car tires for caning. At Burma Camp, three women came to complain to the AFRC about having been arbitrarily beaten by soldiers, their swollen heads and faces bearing mute testimony to the severity of their punishments. Throughout July and August, reports of such "disciplinings" of women traders continued.

But even the Ghana Women's League for Social Advancement did not question the *justification* for punishing the women when it suggested that those guilty of crimes against the revolution should be sent to farms to help in the harvest rather than being administered the "unpleasant forms of punishment currently being meted out" (*Ghanaian Times*, August 18, 1979).

Even when Elizabeth Ohene, the newly appointed acting editor of the *Daily Graphic*, joined the outcry, it was against the *type* of punishment being inflicted; she did not question the women's guilt.

... the enterprising nature of the Ghanaian woman has often been mentioned with praise.... It must be this enterprising spirit which led to our women assuming such powers in the economic life of this country. It is not strange therefore that when the economic problems of the country soared, the women came to be identified as part of the problem. They were the ones who, predominant in the retail trade, came to be regarded by the public as the group responsible for the high prices. The economic realities of the day forced many of them into new fields and we saw the emergence of female contractors and straightforward crooks... women sought avenues fair and foul to look after homes. Many of them of

course simply got carried away by greed and avarice and plundered Ghana shamelessly.... The "Graphic" would be the last to advocate a preferential treatment for female criminals. It is obvious however that the types of punishment being meted out to women and publicly too, must outrage every decent norm. If they must be flogged, need they be stripped naked?... It is bad enough that some very few soldiers... indulge in such acts, but the crying shame for the whole country is that crowds look on and cheer. (July 27, 1979)

The dominant position of women in the market economy of West Africa is well known. In 1976, for example, it was reported that in the largest of Accra's 11 markets, Makola Market No. 1, there were 12,000 women traders, and even when the count included the second largest market, Makola No. 2, there were only 8 male traders (*Africa Women*, No. 5, 1976). The editorial notes that "Besides women traders in the markets, there were hundreds of other Ghanaian women who are also engaged in keeping shops, stores, and kiosks." Observing that the women of Makola Market "are indeed a force to reckon with as there is a strong bond of unity among them, which makes them rally round to protect their interests," *Africa Women* in 1976 already regarded women as responsible for creating artificial shortages of essential commodities and for other trading malpractices: "Market women in particular and traders in general have over the past three years been a thorn in the flesh of both the government and the public as a result of hoarding, profiteering, conditional sale, refusal to sell, and smuggling."

One of the AFRC's first actions was to attempt to enforce price controls

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Press
comments

25

THE MIRROR Hoarders on parade CAUGHT IN THE NET

'When the
bubble bursts'

ST JERRY AND THE KALABULE
...DEMOLISHED
IN WAR ON
HOARDERS

Mother Ghana
Party formed
Don't
Harrass
Ladies

let 'market queens'
off our neck—Farmer

'We'll Kill Hoarding'

Ga Mantse mee
market women
TRUTH
trade malpractices

GRAPHIC VIEW
Chivalry —
Alive Or
Dead?

Complaints
Tables for
markets Food items

MAKOLA NO. 1 IS NO MORE

Thursday, June 14, 1979

Hoarded
rice
uncovered

Don't sell
the night—RC
'Revolution will
give all a fresh
start'

ACC given ultimatum
on 'Makola' car park

GRAPHIC VIEW
DON'T SOIL
YOUR IMAGE

Saturday, August 4, 1979

GHANAIAN
TIMES

FOOD 'Anti-Kalabule' war

Hoarded goods seized

ARMY-STUDENT TEAM IMPOUNDS FISH SELLERS

Revival of
national spirit

Goods seized

Daily
Graphic

GET AFRICAN ASSURANCE

Wednesday, July 4, 1979

Develop
Makola
No. 1
Into
Car
Park

Real power rests with
the people—Rawlings

Soldiers
demolish
building

CALABULLY
THE CEILING OF POLITICAL AND CULTURAL
DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA

None will be
molested—Asante

Stop Sales At Dawn—
Market Women Told

through policing the market with soldiers. That there were almost no foodstuffs available in the market was blamed on the women who, in press reports, were accused both of diverting goods and of discouraging producers from selling.

As usual, the "makola" mummies and their accomplices have gone to the villages with the alarming story that with the soldiers checking prices, it is unsafe for anybody to send foodstuffs to the markets for direct sales. By such clever methods, the greedy, get-rich-quick traders could soon monopolize the foodstuffs trade instead of leaving it in the hands of the farmers themselves. (Ghanaian Times, June 25, 1979)

This notion that there could be a food distribution system which did not require the market women (or anyone else) as intermediaries, is echoed in a *Ghanaian Times* interview with a local farmer. He asserted that "Farmers in the rural areas are prepared to contribute their quota towards the general exercise in bringing down prices but so long as the market queens continue to deny us the right to sell direct to consumers there is very little that can be done to bring down prices of foodstuffs" (June 26, 1979).

The revolution thus provided an opportunity for attacking women's traditional dominance in the marketplace. Justification for the attacks was based on a simplistic view of a market system: there was no food in the market because women had so intimidated the producers they would not sell. The solution was equally simplistic: producers should sell directly to the consumer so as to eliminate the middlemen, the women traders.

At the same time, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council was keenly aware of the importance of women traders in the distribution network. On June 25 Rawlings addressed a crowd of over 10,000 market women

Women, predominant in the retail trade, came to be regarded by the public as the group responsible for the high prices.

in Accra. Speaking to them in English, Ga, Twi, and Ewe, he said, "It is workers and you who have to dictate the destiny of the country... the entire workers and soldiers cannot do without the services of the food sellers." He stressed that they must therefore "not do anything that would make the workers go hungry," that the power to make revolution succeed was in their hands. Members of the AFRC addressed women traders at similar meetings all over the country, appealing to their loyalty on the one hand and delivering a stern message with the other: price controls must be observed or offenders would be publicly flogged.²

Since hoarding was very arbitrarily defined, the presence of the military in the market and the continual arrests and punishments caused food supplies to diminish even further. The AFRC was finally convinced that it would have to withdraw the soldiers from the market to entice the women to cooperate in selling food. But since the stark reality was that there was almost no food in the country (the harvest had barely begun), the women found themselves caught in an insoluble situation.

There were few opportunities for women to explain to the angry public the complexities of the

market with which they were all too familiar. On one occasion, however, Madam Allotey, speaking on behalf of the Makola Women's Association, attempted to remind everyone that women were not the only culprits. She appealed to the government to take steps against the managers of commercial houses—all of whom were men—whom she accused of being the sources of *kalabule*. She also called on the AFRC to educate the farmers, the producers of perishable foodstuffs, on the aims of the revolution so that the market women would get foodstuffs at reasonable prices to sell. She also cited the high cost of transport from the farms as another factor in the unreasonable price of food, and, indeed, the AFRC did attempt to take steps to reduce these costs.

Still, the attack on women as the chief cause of food shortages and high prices continued. Their seeming ability to elude the regulations inflamed the public. When it was found that women were selling food during unconventional hours, Lieutenant Edward Awuah visited food marketing centers and announced that henceforth 6 A.M. would be the hour for beginning sales. He said it had come to the notice of the authorities that because the food



sellers wanted to sell their wares at cut-throat prices, they did so at dawn and left for their homes as quickly as possible (*Daily Graphic*, July 13, 1979). But after-dark trading continued and the AFRC organized meetings to warn women that it was aware of their activities and that anyone caught would be treated as "an enemy of the State" (*Ghanaian Times*, July 27, 1979).

Addressing another public meeting, an AFRC spokesman maintained that women were partly to blame for the economic chaos which had precipitated the revolution and "advised them to desist from using their 'lustrous feminine positions to influence men in high positions'" (*Daily Graphic*, August 7, 1979). In Kumasi, the AFRC urged students to "be bold to advise the trader to sell her wares at stipulated prices, adding that where their advice failed they [the students] should organize themselves and sell the goods to the public" (*Ghanaian Times*, August 7, 1979).

Throughout the period of AFRC rule it was generally recognized that Rawlings was a moderating influence on more radical elements within the military. A delicate balance had to be maintained between satisfying the revolutionary fervor expressed in the "clean-up" exercise and preserving existing

social institutions, the latter requiring that the AFRC control the widespread intimidation of the public by the military. That this balance became seriously disturbed in mid-August, with at least one faction of the military becoming restive and demanding more direct revolutionary "action," is illustrated by the spectacular and violent destruction of Makola Market No. 1 in Accra. Once again the traders (women) were the scapegoats.

Makola Market had already been identified as the "nerve center" of all malpractices.

It later came to light that Makola Number One was the center which dictates prices of foodstuffs in Accra.

According to the women whenever the middlemen brought in the foodstuffs, they would consult certain women at Makola Number One, known as "market queens" on how much to sell the produce. Until the "queens" had been consulted, they claimed, the foodstuffs would not be distributed among the sellers. (Ghanaian Times, July 27, 1979)

It was thus no surprise when an AFRC release broadcast on radio and television on the evening of August 17 noted that certain persons were still known to be hoarding goods at Makola markets.

The public was informed that, with effect at 8 A.M. the next morning, Saturday, traders would no longer be allowed to sell nonperishable goods at Makola markets (the implication being that food would still be for sale). Women were advised to collect their wares by 6 A.M. on Saturday: failure to comply would result in "severe" punishment. The warnings were published in the newspapers on Saturday and repeated throughout the day on the radio.

But the soldiers had already taken up their positions around the market on Friday evening and tanks and bulldozers arrived early on Saturday morning. By Saturday evening Makola Market No. 1 had been demolished. That the situation could easily have become even more violent is suggested by the remarks of one driver to a journalist who was standing by:

This military driver said that there was really going to be action now, and that after the Makola operation they were going to begin moving from house to house in Accra in order to deal with all the hoarders and profiteers. He said they had a special map of Accra and that "we know where to move to." (West Africa, August 27, 1979)

The event clearly served two functions: it released the mounting tensions within the ranks of the military who were dissatisfied with the degree of revolutionary zeal being manifested by the AFRC; and it destroyed an important symbol of economic exploitation, an action which the public clearly welcomed.

In a chat with newsmen during an inspection tour of the market, ... Flt. Lt. Rawlings said the Council had been forced to take the decision because traders had turned deaf ears to appeals requesting them to bring their goods for sale at control prices. Flt. Lt. Rawlings who rode a police motor bicycle to the market was cheered by a teeming crowd

Women were regarded as responsible for creating artificial shortages of essential commodities and for other trading malpractices.



which had gathered to witness the historical event. (*Daily Graphic*, August 20, 1979)

The demolition of Makola Market was intended to be a lesson to all persons engaged in economic malpractices in the country, according to remarks of other military personnel as reported in the same editorial. One AFRC member expressed the hope that market women all over Ghana would take a cue from what had happened at Makola and refrain from their "nefarious activities." The soldier who had led the operation said it was the AFRC's aim to stamp out, once and for all, hoarding and selling above control prices because unscrupulous traders were hiding their wares, waiting for the establishment of a civilian regime so that they could once more embark upon "kalabule." "Let them be warned," he said, "that they will be sorry if they revert to their evil practices." It was disclosed later that the AFRC intended to replace the market with a modern car park, and some even suggested that the women who had been trading in Makola No. 1 should not be given new stalls in other markets.

Evidence for the argument that men seized upon the political crisis as an opportunity to eliminate women as economic competitors may be found in the distinction Flt. Lt. Rawlings made between those selling perishable or nonperishable items. Rawlings said at the time that traders would be "screened" and genuine ones allocated stalls elsewhere to sell *perishable commodities*. (Recall also that the first announcements concerning Makola Market had been directed against those selling *nonperishable commodities*.) In the course of the razing of the market, Captain Boakye Djan was reported to have expressed great shock at finding a bale of Ghana flag for sale at Makola and to have remarked, "If the Ghana flag is being sold at the market then

That there were almost no foodstuffs available was blamed on women, who were accused of diverting goods, and of discouraging producers from selling.

the country can be sold out by these traders [i.e., the women]" (*Daily Graphic*, August 20, 1979).

Selling locally grown perishable foodstuffs has been a traditional prerogative of Ghanaian women and for the moment at least, men do not appear to be prepared to challenge it. But nowhere in West Africa are women's economic activities limited to trading in food: their businesses include the sale of manufactured goods, both locally produced and imported, and it is here they compete directly with men in an economic activity where the greatest profits are to be realized. Seen in this context, destruction of the Makola Market is consistent with a number of regulations imposed in recent years which have had the effect of excluding women from trade in manufactured goods. These include limiting the sale of certain items to license-holders and granting monopolies over the sale of other merchandise to state-owned companies. Men control both the state-owned enterprises and license-granting authority. The market women's response has been ingenious circumvention of the regulations and continued participation in the lucrative trade in nonperishable commodities.

Supernatural explanations were even trotted out to explain the

power of the women traders. It was said that when the bulldozers ground their way through the rubble of the market, soldiers unearthed underground chambers containing live snakes, charms, fetishes, and other symbols of women's ability to control supernatural forces. In an editorial entitled "The Snake Affair" the *Ghanaian Times* related:

The hundreds of people who left their homes and converged at the Makola Square to witness the much talked about demolition of the famous "power house of the economy," had one aim in mind: to confirm or deny rumours that items like air-letter cards had been hoarded there. The stalls were broken into by the soldiers and the rumours were confirmed. But one thing the spectators did not prepare themselves to face were "objects" of the "other world."

The "Times" was told of manifestations of the devil while the demolition exercise was on. There was, for instance, the tale told of a snake which turned into a mouse with its young ones, and another which vomited money in C50 denominations. (August 20, 1979)

Men's belief in women's control over supernatural powers, together with their experience of women's ability to manipulate them through



"feminine wiles" (a pervasive theme in African literature), not only provided men an explanation of women's dominance in the market place but also a justification for the use of violence against them.

It could justifiably be argued that on many occasions during Ghana's economic "housecleaning," the AFRC failed to "make the punishment fit the crime." Certainly the soldiers policing the markets used an extremely arbitrary definition of hoarding, to cite just one example. For the "Western" observer, however, there is another question raised by the Ghana experience—should women be spared the same extreme punishments that are given men guilty of the same offense? In Ghana, although there were some who protested that women should be treated with greater deference than men, this does not seem to have been a very general sentiment.

At one point, extremely shocked by seeing women treated so roughly by soldiers, we put the question directly: "Don't these soldiers have sisters and mothers? How can these young men be so cruel to women?" Our male audience, however, was interested only in hearing the details of how these "guilty" women had been apprehended and they dismissed our misdirected sympathy

by commenting that it was the women who were the cause of all the suffering in Ghana and it was high time they paid for their misdeeds.

Other women also appear to sanction punishment without concern for gender, judging by the responses to the death-by-firing-squad sentence passed on a Mrs. Odumala in Lagos, Nigeria, after she was found guilty of armed robbery. Although her sentence was later commuted to 14 years' imprisonment, interviews conducted by *Drum* magazine (August 1979) indicate that Nigerian women from all walks of life did not in this case support special treatment for their sex. Two responses are illustrative of the opinions of many who were interviewed. One, a "high executive officer," said,

She deserves no option of fine or imprisonment. She should be executed straightaway. This year being an international year of the child when women in particular are expected to show good examples for our children to emulate... this is a disgrace to the woman's race. She must be shot to serve as a deterrent to other women.

Another woman, described as an African herb seller, put it this way:

Anybody who commits an offence should be ready to damn the consequence. I do not see any reason why Mrs. Odumala should not be executed. After all she had the aim of harming those poor tenants before hiring armed thugs. Let her suffer for her sins. As a woman in particular she should be a good example to others.

Examples of women playing powerful economic and political roles in West Africa are not confined to Ghana or to contemporary times. Colonial history is replete with incidents in which women took initiative to protect their interests. In the 1929 Women's War, for example, thousands of Igbo women in Nigeria organized a protest against the imposition of a tax: in the subsequent confrontations many were killed by the police and soldiers in retaliatory punitive expeditions (organized, it should be noted, by the British administrators rather than Igbo men).³

In recent times, too, action by women has resulted in a dramatic political and economic change. The recent liberalization of Sekou Touré's Guinea, for example, was precipitated, at least in part, by women's demands for economic freedom. On August 27, 1977, after a policeman had attempted to seize the goods of a woman who was illegally selling tomato paste which had been smuggled in from Sierra Leone, a large crowd of women from the Conakry market demonstrated against police interference in their trading activities. The police reacted with force and some of the women were shot and killed. The women marched to the President's house, carrying their dead, and demanded immediate change in the economic restrictions that were part of the "revolution." Their spokesmen reminded President Touré that it was the women and the poor for whom he should be fighting, but that it was they who were in fact struggling and suffering. Touré was

Stallholders are the most powerful group of market women in terms of their influence on prices.



reported to have been "shattered" by this confrontation, for indeed it was the women, together with the youth, who were the principal pillars of the Guinean revolution. After the march he ordered that the dreaded economic police be withdrawn from the market and that the women be granted permission to deal in imported goods (*nonperishable* commodities). Further liberalization of Guinea's political and economic system has proceeded from that event.

In Togo, too, women traders are an essential link in the economy. Called "Mama Benz," the market women are said to be "courted as much by the state as by major importing firms, usually Europeans" (*West Africa*, October 1, 1979). They "serve as the driving force between the importing companies, which have no infrastructure in the country and the traditional retail outlet. If they did not exist, they would have to be invented." Like their counterparts in Ghana, Guinea, and

elsewhere in West Africa, most of the women have no formal education. As the report in *West Africa* attests, this seems to have little effect on their trading skills.

Many of the Mama Benz are illiterate and can only sign cheques written out for them by the supplying firm. They also have little idea of accounting, market research or annual reports. Their skill is in their natural business instinct. Few lose money.

Indeed, illiteracy can even be regarded as helpful in their successful evasion of modern state regulations. For example, the same report noted that, in Togo, "Apart from low-cost trading licences and a one percent tax on purchases... the Mamas pay no taxes. To do so they would have to keep accounts and make an annual return." Still, these same women are able to raise letters of credit, negotiate loans, and organize supplies with wholesalers. Similarly, Anna Doodoo, President of the Market Women's Association of Ghana, responding to a question about how she managed her business without knowing how to read or write, explained,

I have worked with foreign companies for a long time and this has enabled me to read figures on receipts. I manage to recognize figures so that no one would cheat me. I also speak and understand English. However, I have employed an accounts clerk for my business. He sees to all the financial aspects of the business and once in a while we go through the books together. (Africa Woman, July-August 1976)

In the course of her travels in West Africa in the 1950s, Elspeth Huxley also observed the dominance of women in the marketplace, noting that "Stallholders are the most powerful group of market women in terms of their influence on prices and their control over who is allowed to trade in the market." She also commented on their business

Ghanaian women, far from being spiritless and downtrodden, are regarded and regard themselves as equal with men.



acumen: "Nearly all the mammies are illiterate and carry in their heads intricate multiple sums. The trading firms have no security beyond the woman's reputation; often they do not even know their address. Yet it is the rarest thing in the world for one of them to default."⁴ In less complimentary terms, she describes Yoruba market women in Nigeria: "These women would sell their mother's milk at a profit."⁵

* * * * *

The events that occurred in Ghana between June 4 and September 24, 1979, when the AFRC handed over the reins of government to Hilla Limann and the People's National Party, might be considered less a revolution than an outbreak of civil unrest, which was first contained by the overthrow of the Supreme Military Council and the executions that took place in June and was then channeled by the AFRC's "housecleaning" exercise. Such an analysis is supported by the fact that it was those who controlled the marketplace who were the main targets for the pent-up rage of the average person.

As one person put it: "Ordinary people do not understand banks and multinational corporations. What they know is places like Makola and how hard it is." (West Africa, August 27, 1979)

It was in the market, where one struggled to buy one's daily food, where all the costs of Ghana's institutionalized ills were finally passed on to the defenseless common citizen. That so much of the "housecleaning" was devoted to the marketplace does suggest, however, failure to understand the fundamental institutional changes which would be required to effect real reform.

The importance of the marketplace as the focus of the general suffering of the Ghanaian public may be a sufficient explanation of the rage and violence directed against the women traders who dominated it. If that is so then the severity of the punishments inflicted on traders

who only happened also to be women suggests that, far from being "spiritless and downtrodden," Ghanaian women are regarded as equal with men. But leaving the argument here begs the question of how it is that women hold such a dominant role in the market economy and ignores the emphasis placed on gender during the "housecleaning." As a focus for hostility and aggression, women were, in this case "more equal" than men.

We would argue that the attack on women during the Rawling's revolution may also be understood as part of a long process which has been directed toward narrowing the economic field in which women can effectively compete with men. During the colonial period, women's dominant role in agricultural production was undermined by Europeans who were blinded by a belief in the superiority of men in farming and who lacked the imagination to recognize the traditional economic and political importance of women in African societies. To survive, women found it necessary to find some other sphere of economic activity which would enable them to earn income to meet their responsibilities in areas traditionally assigned to them: their success in the retail trade throughout West Africa is evidence of their skills and adaptability.

The coming of independence to African colonies did not radically alter conditions for women; rather the process of deterioration of their status has continued and may even be accelerating. Writing of the Ga women traders in Accra, Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay concluded that,

As the male dominated modern commercial sector has grown... increased importation of manufactured products has reduced cooperation among women and between spouses. Trade capital has been increasingly difficult to amass, and the result of Western education has been a reduction in the scale of business among traders. The deteriorating economic situation has

*left Accra women fighting to hold onto their economic independence.*⁶

In short, the deteriorating status of African women is bound up with the disruption of African society as a whole, dating back to the imposition, during colonial times, of a social structure based upon stratification by sex and class. As the continuing process of Westernization progressively limits the range of women's activities, the percentage of total economic activity represented by the marketplace declines.⁷

An example from Sierra Leone clearly illustrates the process. Until very recently women controlled the sale of fish caught by local fishermen, who use nets and canoes. Fresh fish was available only from these traders who sold in the market or at the seaside. Women also controlled the sale of smoked fish. Now there are a number of *frozen* fish shops in Freetown which are owned by a Lebanese who has hired Russian trawlers to supply the catch at a price that gives him a competitive advantage. Moreover, the fish in the shops is already cleaned, filleted, and neatly packaged in plastic. Market women cannot compete financially with such an operation nor could they ever hope to acquire the capital to embark on such ventures themselves.

It is tempting to argue that a major aspect of the appeal of Western institutions to the West African man is the edge they give him in his competition with women. On the plus side, however, West African women are surely better described as "a force to be reckoned with" than "spiritless and downtrodden," regarding themselves and seen by others as equal with men.

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NOTES

1. For background on the period, see my "Politics in Ghana, 1978" [BHB-3-'78] *AUFS Reports*, No. 49, 1978; and "Ghana's Troubled Transition to Civilian Government" [BHB-7-'79] *AUFS Reports*, No. 48, 1979.

2. At one meeting called by a traditional ruler, women were again urged to bring their hidden goods out to the market and to sell at reasonable prices. They were admonished to think less about how to amass wealth overnight. "The

mansions and big names you seek are vanities," this ruler warned them.

3. Judith Van Allen, "'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 6, No. 2, 1972.

4. Elspeth Huxley, *Four Guineas—A Journey Through West Africa*, The Reprint Society: London, p. 92, 1954.

5. *Ibid*, p. 181.

6. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, *Women in Africa—Studies in Social and Economic Change*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 1976, p. 17.

7. Sidney W. Mintz, "Men, Women and Trade," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 13, 1971.

AUFS Reports by Barbara Harrell-Bond

- BHB-7-'79 "Ghana's Troubled Transition to Civilian Government"
This Report reviews events from January 1, 1979 up to the days just preceding the AFRC (Armed Forces Revolutionary Council) coup in June, an event which reflected the extraordinary conditions of poverty and frustration Ghanaian citizens have long endured.
- BHB-6-'79 "The Unofficial Urban Courts in Freetown"
Part IV: The Types of Cases
The indigenous legal system as applied in the unofficial courts rests on the premise that man is a social animal and his actions always affect others. The concern for justice goes far beyond punitive considerations; rather, the goal is to restore social harmony.
- BHB-5-'79 "The Unofficial Urban Courts in Freetown"
Part III: Organization, Procedures, and Financial Practices
In Freetown's unofficial courts, presided over by tribal headmen, arbitration and reconciliation take precedence over determination of guilt and responsibility.
- BHB-4-'79 "The Unofficial Urban Courts in Freetown"
Part II: Conditions of Life and the Culture of the Urban Poor
Part II (of the four-part series) describes the character of social relations and other aspects of the indigenous culture of the urban poor. Three Freetown residents report their observations of conditions that produce the need for litigation.
- BHB-3-'79 "The Unofficial Urban Courts in Freetown"
Part I: The Institutionalization of Tribal Headmen
Freetown's unofficial courts, presided over by leaders of the various ethnic communities, administer "customary" law and follow procedures characteristic of the indigenous legal system. Although illegal, they are a practical response to the unmet legal needs of the urban majority.
- BHB-2-'79 "Africa's Dependency and the Remedies"
The 4th International Congress of African Studies
The 4th International Congress of African Studies, convened in Zaire in December 1978, analyzed the multifaceted phenomenon of "dependency." The Congress resolutions reveal Africanists' acute concern with problems of the continent.
- BHB-1-'79 "ECOWAS: The Economic Community of West African States"
The Economic Community of West African States seeks to create a viable, integrated economic unit out of a subregion very rich in natural resources but poor in capital. The 16 member countries differ dramatically in area, climate and topography, culture, history, population, and economic potential.
- BHB-3-'78 "Politics in Ghana, 1978"
In March 1978 Ghana held a referendum on union government and in November it lifted the ban on political party activity. But the attempt to reintroduce civilian rule is plagued by economic problems of long-standing.
- BHB-2-'78 "Freedom of the Press in Nigeria: The Debate"
The debate over press freedom in Nigeria has raised such issues as government financial control, bias in the news, ethics or moral code for the press, national security, and the more difficult question, who is competent to define "public interest."
- BHB-1-'78 "A Window on an Outside World": Tourism as Development in the Gambia
Promotion of tourism as it is occurring in the Gambia raises issues at the core of many "expert" assumptions regarding the objectives and requirements for Third World developments. Papua-New Guinea's effort to pursue "another development" is examined as an alternative orientation.