Continuity and Change: Women's Work in the Kente Economy of Bonwire, Ghana

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Abstract

Asante weaving traditions have survived relatively unchanged for more than 300 years. Yet the productive role that women once played as cotton growers and spinners has been eroded while a traditional ban on women entering the loom has proved difficult to overturn conclusively. Kente has been studied as an art form but rarely as an economic activity in which women's productive role is clearly defined. This paper aims to fill that gap. The paper seeks to understand why more women do not weave and to test some claims made by male weavers about the low participation of women. The paper draws on a 10% survey of households in Bonwire, the original weaving village in Asante, where to this day kente is produced for the Asantehene, the King of Asante. The survey pinpointed precisely who does what in the kente industry. The research found that more women are weaving than ever before yet continue to face pressure to stop, despite suspension of the traditional gender taboo on weaving. These findings are important in a context where women are increasingly asserting their right to their own employment preferences.

Keywords: weaving, tradition, women, taboo, change

Introduction

This paper looks at the gender dimensions of work in the kente industry of Bonwire, a royal weaving town in Asante. Bonwire is located 18 kilometres from Kumasi, Ghana's second city and the capital of Asante, which is a highly structured matrilineal society with a deeply studied pre-colonial polity (Bowdich,

1819; Rattray, 1927; Boahen, 1975; Wilks, 1975; McCaskie, 2022). There, boldly patterned kente cloth is woven in strips on narrow looms and sewn together to form a cloth. Each pattern used in a strip of kente is deeply symbolic and may be used to communicate pointed messages. In the past, kente cloth was produced under royal patronage and could only be worn by royals. Today, it is widely used in Ghana for all manner of joyful and ceremonial occasions from weddings to university graduations and has been adopted in the African diaspora as an expression of black pride. Kente weaving is a highly-skilled, powerfully communicative, and aesthetically rewarding undertaking, which many consider worthy of consideration as a UNESCO masterpiece.

Asante weaving traditions are more associated with continuity than change; for example, the design of the loom has barely changed in 300 years (see photographs in Bowdich, 1819; Rattray 1927). Yet recent changes in the supply of the key input – the yarns – have impacted significantly on who does what in the industry. Whereas Bonwire is usually noted for the work done by men, this paper focuses more on what the women do.

Boserup (1970: 92) said that men despised occupations dominated by women. However, Boserup also made the point that women, like many men, preferred small profits from trading to larger profits from more arduous forms of agricultural work. Alongside the question of who weaves kente, this paper looks at who trades it once it is produced.

This paper draws on a survey of households in Bonwire, conducted in late 2014.[1] The objective of the survey, conducted at every tenth house in Bonwire, was to test observations I had made about the social organisation of kente during an earlier research trip in January 2005 and to test some of the claims made by male weavers about who weaves kente and why. During my first field trip in 2005, I had met no female weaver but was told of one active female weaver, who had travelled to Kumasi. I was also told of two other women from a royal weaving household who knew how to weave. While it might be expected that a traditional taboo would be most closely observed in a royal household steeped in tradition, this seemed to suggest that women in such households had more leverage to engage productively in the sector of choice.

1 I am grateful to Louis Boakye-Yiadom for his critical comments on my survey questionnaire.

One of the claims made then was that to accept women as weavers would interfere with cooking arrangements in the home (Amanor-Wilks, 2006: 309). Returning to Bonwire nine years later, the systematic household survey approach enabled me to probe these issues. Although eight years have passed since the household survey was conducted, my work on this signature, pre-industrial and contemporary indigenous industry is grounded in economic history and its findings speak to a sector more associated with continuity than change, though some evidence of change does emerge in the picture. This paper explores the tension between continuity and change in the relationship between gender and reproductive work, as well as the productive work associated with women in the kente industry.

Balancing Productive and Reproductive Roles

The tension between the competing labour demands of cooking and childcare in relation to economic production is a significant theme in the literature on gender. As shown by Britwum, citing Manuh (2003) and Tsikata (1989), this tension exists in both matrilineal and patrilineal societies:

> Contrary to accounts that celebrate female autonomy under matriliny, these communities are male dominated, confirming the observations that matrilineal societies are not synonymous with matriarchies and do not grant female power over male (Britwum, 2009: 72).

In the case of Asante market women, Gracia Clark (1994) analyses the kinds of negotiations that successful market women must master before reallocating their time from domestic duties, primarily cooking and childcare, to productive work. Market women do not receive much financial help from husbands and must therefore use their ingenuity to establish viable trade enterprises. But as part of a matrilineage that protects women from various risks, a woman must also take care not to neglect her kinship responsibilities. As Clark (1994: 331) points out:

> The matrilineage provides a real safety net for most urban Asante women, against the risks of divorce, illness, or bankruptcy. This safety net can also help a trading enterprise survive, but helping to maintain it for other kin requires commitments of time and income that inhibit capital formation.

Children provide a woman's greatest ties to the matrilineage, influencing lineage

relations and the balance of power, while trading also increases a woman's leverage in lineage affairs. But childcare is easier to delegate—preferably to older siblings rather than to maids, who can harm children with their carelessness—than cooking (Clark, 1994: 361). For, of all the responsibilities that compete with her ambition as a trader, the delegation of cooking responsibilities is the most delicate for a woman to negotiate since cooking is primarily for her husband and influences the gender power balance within the marriage. Yet without children, a woman will have fewer opportunities to delegate domestic work and increase her economic sphere of influence. As Clark (1994: 332) puts it: "Unpaid domestic labour from children and kin paradoxically gives more women their best opening to withdraw from unpaid domestic labour for kin and husbands themselves."

Standard definitions of child labour do not include this gender problematique, namely that when domestic duties are disproportionately allotted to girl-children, women face the dilemma that they can only free up their own time for productive enterprise and thereby meet their obligations to feed children and put them through school when they delegate some of their domestic duties to their children. Since African society generally expects girl-children to do more unpaid domestic work than boy-children, this inevitably creates a cycle in which women perpetually must free themselves from domestic servitude to achieve their productive and economic goals.

Chalfin (2004: 52-5) in her work on the social organisation of shea butter extraction and shea nut trade in Ghana's Upper East region found an intergenerational division of labour and expertise in which "[t]he youngest women—daughters, daughters-in-law, and junior wives—are the source of labour, middle-aged women, the source of capital, and older women, the source of expert knowledge."

The emergence of this female commodity as a highly prized global value chain commodity has opened up avenues for women to accumulate capital, as Chalfin (2004: 25) notes thus:

> Rather than domains of female obligation, with respect to shea butter production, rural households emerge as sites where women control and concentrate labour, allowing them to endow resources with value and to accumulate wealth.

Shea butter producers often learn their trade as young girls from their mothers and other female kin. As she assumes the more tedious and physically demanding tasks of head-loading, mixing, and beating shea nuts and butter, a young woman acquires, before marriage, the skills she will need to sustain her own business and access the labour of other girls. Through this process of initiation, teenage girls learn to balance their time between assisting their mothers to process and trade the nuts while pursuing their own butter business. Chalfin draws on Clark and Manuh's 1991 study of the impact of neoliberal reforms in reducing the working capital of female entrepreneurs in the south of Ghana. Increasingly, to avoid being squeezed out of the market, rural women must diversify their economic pursuits.

Balancing productive and reproductive roles that enable them to be both successful businesswomen and family providers is also a theme of Ragnhild Overå's comparative 1998 study of gendered roles in three distinct coastline fishery communities in Ghana, Moree in the Central Region, Kpone in the Greater Accra Region and Dzelukope in the Volta Region. Of the three areas, the first is matrilineal while the other two are patrilineal. As observed in the literature, fishing is men's work while women partake in fish smoking, distribution, and trade (Odotei, 2000; Odotei, 2003; Britwum 2009). However, women have been able to push into the male domain to establish enterprises beyond the female market domain. Overå (1998: 340-1) found that only in matrilineal Moree could women act beyond their socially constructed female role as fish traders to own their own canoes and emerge as fisheries entrepreneurs. But even here, a woman's power did not extend beyond her roles as defined by the matrilineage, her own canoe company, or the market hierarchy, and beyond those three areas, female canoe owners had to find male mediators to connect them to resources.

This point is developed further by Odotei (2000: 6) and Britwum (2009), who argue that because women are unable to go to sea, they constantly face the threat of having their fishing enterprises wrested from them by the male captains they hire to manage their fishing equipment and expeditions. As the latter's study of three matrilineal coastal fishing communities in Ghana's Central Region notes further, "It is fishing that gives men control over fresh fish, which in turn gives them power over women" (Britwum, 2009: 81).

In all three societies studied by Overå, marriage gives women access to fish through the right to buy it from their husbands, but kinship ties provide access to labour, particularly female labour. Overå (1998: 339) found that women in matrilineal Moree had more opportunities to establish their own fisheries enterprises because the matrilineal system encouraged male relatives, not only female relatives, to take an interest in enhancing their mothers' and sisters' redistributive potential. In the two patrilineal communities, by contrast, men had little interest in "investing their time, labour, knowledge and loyalty in fishing enterprises run by women" thus women ploughed their surpluses back into the female domain of the fish trade or built their own houses. Men, on the other hand, focused their energy "within the male domain of fishing and accumulation and redistribution to lineage members in the male line" (1998: 340-1).

Whereas Fante women in Moree could build on local matrilineal networks in their home towns to break new ground — Overå attributes the high incidence of motorised canoes to women's extension of credit and their innovative integration of production and distribution processes, as well as their visibility in large-scale and long-distance trade — the Ewe and Ga-Adangbe women in Dzelukope and Kpone, respectively, had to create networks outside their patrilineages and home towns to become redistributors or managers of beach seine (dragnet) companies in the case of the former or motorised canoe companies in the case of the latter, drawing on gender models on a higher geographical level, in regional female market hierarchies or through "masculine" models constructed at Tema Fishing Harbour (Overå 1998: 341-2).

Taken together, these studies of Ghanaian women entrepreneurs suggest powerful reasons for the kinds of prohibitions facing women weavers, described by Rattray in 1927. They also go some way to explain why close to a century after Rattray's work was published, women weavers are still relatively hard to find. These reasons will be examined further below. The next two sections explore the impact on women of the decline in cotton production and the current roles played by women in the kente economy.

The Decline of Women's Productive Role

Up until the late twentieth century, women had important productive roles transforming raw cotton for the weaving industry. According to Rattray (1927: 221): "The earlier fabric woven on the looms in Ashanti was undoubtedly made of cotton threads, obtained from cotton grown and spun in the country." He gives a vivid description of the role of Asante women in growing and spinning cotton for the kente industry:

> While weaving in Ashanti is an art entirely confined to the male sex, cotton may be picked and spun into thread by the women—especially old women—who have reached the menopause. The women's share in the work begins with the planting of the seed, and ends with the spinning of the cotton into thread, the intermediate states of picking the cotton (*tete asa*) and removing the seeds (*yiyi asa*) also being carried out by them. Great deftness and skill are displayed in spinning. It is quite fascinating to watch some old dame at the work (Rattray,1927: 221).

As spinners historically of cotton growing wild in the Asante forests and supplemented by savannah sources of cotton, women could claim to have an occupation every bit as important as weaving. Without the spinning of cotton into yarns, weavers might have continued to depend on raffia as their primary input and kente would not have climbed the heights of artistry and design for which it is known today.

As cotton growers and spinners, Asante women could claim an element of prestige that is often lacking in subsistence agricultural production. Cotton is a cash crop, and this makes it almost as prestigious as cocoa in West Africa and tobacco in Southern African countries such as Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

The decline of the cotton industry in Ghana and the reliance on imported rayon yarns has removed from production an important plank of women's work. This has eroded the long-term sustainability of the kente industry in an era of unfettered market liberalisation. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding attempts to revive the cotton industry in the north of Ghana most particularly, it is unlikely that cotton could again become the favoured input for the kente industry. For, while silk threads are admired above all else for their smooth, soft and shiny

appearance, today's synthetic rayons mimic silk more closely than cotton can.[1]

With the major role that women once played in kente production missing today, other productive roles for women include winding bobbins for weavers and stitching woven kente strips together. However, women now engage in the kente industry to the largest extent through the trade of woven kente cloth, as will be shown below.

Women's Work in the Bonwire Economy

Women in Bonwire are engaged in a relatively broad range of economic occupations while supporting the kente-focused economy of the town. However, female weavers are far less visible than male weavers and this makes their contribution to the kente economy much more difficult to capture. Occupational data on 61 female respondents and 33 male respondents show a stark contrast in the principal occupation of household respondents. All 33 males were household respondents, whereas the 61 females comprised both household and individual female respondents, reflecting the desire to capture more data on women.

As Table 1 shows, whereas three-quarters of male household respondents were principally engaged as weavers, among a larger number of female respondents, only one apprentice weaver was visible. Nevertheless, the largest category of female respondents, 23.0%, said their main occupation was in the kente industry. The category comprised 13 kente traders, of whom two were also food vendors, and one apprentice weaver who was also a student. Across the broader sample population of 807 people recorded in the household inventory, men are engaged in a wider variety of occupational activities than is evident in Table 1. At the same time, the proportion of women engaged principally in the kente sector increases to 30%.

Among the sample shown in Table 1, twelve farmers accounted for the second largest category of females, representing 19.7% of respondents. The only other significant category of economically occupied respondents was the category of food vendors. These comprised eight in total representing 13.1% of the 61 respondents, though two are also counted as kente traders. The remaining list

1 I am grateful to Gracia Clark for pointing this out to me.

of economically active female respondents is varied, including two fishmongers, two hairdressers, a teacher, a banker, a nurse, a seamstress, a drinks vendor and a sandals vendor. Some of the women employed in the above categories also work as bobbin winders for the kente industry.

About a fifth of respondents could be classified as economically dependent. However, it would be wrong to assume that none of these was contributing to the Bonwire economy. For example, 14-year-old Belinda is a student, but she is also an apprentice weaver. And I encountered 85-year-old Adutwumaa, a strip stitcher, walking to her cocoa farm though she had previously stated that she was retired.

Table 1: Principal Occupation of Respondents by Gender

Men's occupations			**Women's occupations**		
Occupation	Frequency	%	Occupation	Frequency	%
Weaver	24	72.73	Apprentice weaver	1	1.64
Trader/storekeeper	3	9.09	Kente trader	11	18.03
Weaver/trader	1	3.03	Food & kente vendor	2	3.28
Driver	1	3.03	Seamstress	1	1.64
			Farmer	12	19.67
			Food vendor	6	9.84
			Drinks vendor	1	1.64
			Sandals vendor	1	1.64
			Fishmonger	2	3.28
			Hairdresser	2	3.28
			Student	3	4.92
			Nurse	1	1.64
			Teacher	1	1.64
			Banker	1	1.64
			Okomfo's assistant	1	1.64
			Housewife	1	1.64
			Retired	8	13.12
Not economically active	4	12.12	Not economically active	6	9.84
Total	**33**	**100**	**Total**	**61**	**100**

In Table 2, we see the precise engagement with the kente industry of each of the 61 female respondents. More than 77% of women had had some involvement with the kente industry. In contrast to Table 1 showing the principal occupation only, here we find two weavers, two apprentice weavers and one former weaver. Kente traders account for 34.4% of women, the largest category. They comprise

eight kente traders, another eight trekker-traders and five trader-bobbin winders, making a total of 21 active women kente traders. Bobbin winders comprise another large category of kente workers. Altogether 21.3% (13) of the 61 respondents were bobbin winders. However, five of them were primarily kente traders and are already counted in the 34.4%. One of the 13 bobbin winders also worked as a kente strip stitcher. She was one of just two kente strip stitchers counted in households, and the only active one. Among the 61 female respondents, there was no kente accessories producer. The results for women weavers improve when data are analysed on the total sample population of 807 people counted in households.

Table 2: Involvement in the Kente Industry of 61 Female Respondents

Kente involvement	Number of women	% of female respondents
No involvement	14	22.95
Weaver	2	3.28
Apprentice weaver	2	3.28
Bobbin winder	7	11.48
Kente strip stitcher	1	1.64
Kente trader	8	13.11
Trekker & kente trader	8	13.11
Kente trader & bobbin winder	5	8.2
Bobbin winder & strip stitcher	1	1.64
Former weaver	1	1.64
Former kente trader	5	8.2
Former bobbin winder	4	6.56
Former strip stitcher	1	1.64
Former strip stitcher/bobbin winder/kente trader	2	3.28
Total	61	100

Women weavers

The true extent of weaving knowledge among women only becomes apparent when data on the occupational activities of all 807 people in the sample population are unpacked. In 24.6% of sample households (14 sample sites), there were females who had some knowledge of weaving. The breakdown of these women and girls is shown in Table 3. As the table shows, there was a total of 29 females with weaving knowledge, representing 7.4% of females in the sample population. Of the 29, six were active weavers, seven were apprentices and 16 were inactive weavers. Inactive weavers included two who had learnt how to weave but did not appear to have used their skills for economic gain. One of these was Ama, aged 18, who household respondent Yaw (#5) said had learnt to weave but was "not a weaver." Though Ama is not counted among the five weavers in her household, she is listed here as an inactive weaver.

Table 3: Number of Women Weavers (Total Sample)

Weavers	Apprentice	Inactive weavers	Total weaving knowledge
6	7	16	29

Extrapolating from these figures would give a total of 290 women in Bonwire who have acquired weaving skills. Of these, 70 are apprentices and 60 are active weavers, though some active weavers are still in school and weaving under the guidance of male family members, and do not therefore earn an income from weaving. However, the bulk of women with weaving knowledge, 160 women and girls, are inactive weavers.

Women kente traders

Kente trading is the chief of the kente-related activities in Bonwire that is seen as "women's work", as highlighted further below. Bonwire household residents appear comfortable with a gender division of labour that encourages males to weave kente and females to market it. Yet the division that is so pronounced in

terms of the production of kente is far less pronounced in the marketing of the cloth. Indeed, many male weavers market their own kente cloths and some weavers abandon their looms for lucrative kente entrepreneurship, commissioning other weavers to produce cloths for sale in their stores. Bonwire is a popular destination for kente buyers and tourists. But Bonwire's kente sellers do not wait for the market to come to them. Thus, trekking kente is a routine activity in many Bonwire households.

Christiana, aged 46, is one such trekker. Once a month she travels to Accra, staying at Achimota with one of her customers. She takes 30-40 pieces of kente with her and stays a week, selling all the cloth before she returns to Bonwire. Although some customers give ready cash, Christiana says there is a great deal of trust required in kente trading as some customers insist on taking the kente on credit. When she travels to Accra the next month Christiana collects the outstanding payments. Kente is a relatively expensive good, and while some customers pay after a period of one month, others pay by instalments over two or three months. During her week on trek, Christiana visits many offices in Accra searching for customers. Like other kente trekkers, Christiana plans her visits to coincide with the end of the month, when government workers would have received their salaries.

For some women, such as Hegar, trekking supplements the income from other occupations. In her case, she is a food vendor. She spends one week in each month trekking to sell kente and the remainder of the month selling banku and kenkey. Though Hegar is more visible in Bonwire as a food seller, the occupation from which she earns more income is kente trading. "Trekking is every month while banku is every day, but there is more profit in trekking than in selling banku," she explains. Hegar's husband is a weaver who also treks. At the time of interviewing Hegar, her husband had travelled to Sunyani in the then Brong Ahafo Region to sell kente. It is common for trekkers to market kente cloths woven by any weaver in the household as well as by friends and relatives who have cloth ready for sale.

Bobbin winders and strip stitchers

A household respondent who combines kente trekking with bobbin winding is Ama Akomaa, aged 42. Since Ama's mother, Afia, 60, has retired as a bobbin

winder, Ama winds bobbins for her father, Kwame, aged 80, an active weaver and cocoa farmer who is the head of household. In terms of the actual production of kente, bobbin winding is the activity giving females the greatest visibility, albeit part-time. Bobbin winding does not require a great outlay of time and can easily be combined with schooling and other occupational activities. It requires less skill and concentration than warp-laying and is popular with women of all ages. On the other hand, kente strip stitchers appeared far less visible. The only active female strip stitcher counted among household respondents was Lydia, aged 52, who is also a bobbin winder. Lydia says that she learnt these skills in school during the 1970s. According to her: "During Acheampong's[2] time there was a JHS (Junior High School) in Bonwire that used to train students in weaving, stitching, warping, bobbin winding, etc." Lydia's stepmother, Adutwumaa, aged 85, also used to stitch kente strips, wind bobbins, and trade in kente. Although she retired from this work four years ago, she still farms cocoa and cassava. Lydia and Adutwumaa were the only strip stitchers encountered in our survey.

With their once crucial role in cotton production and spinning upended by the decline in cotton production in Ghana and a shift to imported rayons, women's role in the kente industry has been diminished, as the results discussed here show. Though they are still active as bobbin winders and trader-trekkers, two factors make these roles less secure than in the past. The first is that yarns are now sold pre-wound onto cones instead of in loose hanks and this has, to some extent, eroded the work of bobbin winders. The second is that market conditions arising from the liberalisation of the Ghanaian cedi, which performed particularly badly in 2014 (the year I conducted my household survey), and the reliance on imported yarns, for which ever more cedis are required in exchange, makes kente an ever more luxurious good relative to average salaries, and this means that women traders must work increasingly hard to find markets for the kente cloth woven by their husbands, brothers, fathers, and friends. With only 6,6% of women respondents actively engaged as weavers or as weaving apprentices, the next section explores the reasons why more women do not work in the industry as weavers.

2 General Ignatius Kutu Acheampong was head of state between 1972 and 1978.

Why More Women do not Weave

> If I marry a woman and I teach her [to weave], who is going to cook for us? Then she'll know the value of the money. Then she'll go to work, and she won't stop to cook for a man to eat. At the same time, it's painful at the waist. If you sit [at the loom] for a long time, it pains the women a lot.

The statement above by master weaver Afranie Okese, quoted in my earlier research (Amanor-Wilks, 2006: 309), contains three key ideas. The first is that teaching women to weave deprives men of their cooks. The second is that women should not know the value of money because they would no longer be prepared to cook for men. The third is that weaving is painful for women. The first two ideas address domestic reasons why women should not weave, the second with economic ramifications, and the third idea focuses on an occupational health reason. Unfortunately, during my first field trip in 2005, when I interviewed Afranie, I was unable to find any woman weaver in Bonwire to comment on these findings. Nor did I spend sufficient time in the field then to generate other data on women, since I was conducting primarily archive-based research. Addressing that gap, this paper analyses the reasons more women in Bonwire do not weave, discovered through my 2014 survey and interviews.

Answers to the question "What prevents women from weaving?" were put to male and female household respondents and to female questionnaire respondents. Responses were obtained from 44 household respondents and 51 female respondents, some overlapping. A comparison of the responses is shown in Table 4. Where responses are missing it is either because some women weavers were present in those households, or because there were no women at all living in the household. As the table shows, I found five main categories of reasons why women and girls did not weave. For both sets of respondents, a traditional loom taboo was by far the most important reason given. Other reasons cited are grouped as (i) lack of interest; (ii) lack of time due largely to domestic duties; (iii) the laboriousness of weaving; and (iv) education, as interpreted below.

This question elicited more unprompted comments than any other in the questionnaire and in only one case did a household respondent, a woman, say she did not know what prevented women or girls in her household from weaving. Some respondents cited more than one reason; hence the total number

of responses adds up to more than the number of respondents. Among them, two household respondents and one female respondent said the reason was both the traditional taboo and "tedious, hard work", and two household respondents cited both education and the traditional taboo. Before looking more closely at the traditional loom taboo, the following sections discuss briefly the other reasons cited as preventing women from weaving.

Table 4: Reasons Women do not Weave

	HH Respondents (44 of 57)			Women (51 of 61)		
Reason	**Frequency**	**%**	**Valid %**	**Frequency**	**%**	**Valid %**
Tradition or traditional taboo	21	36.84	43.75	24	39.34	46.15
Lack of interest	6	10.53	12.50	11	18.03	21.15
Education	9	15.79	18.75	6	9.84	11.54
Lack of time and domestic duties	5	8.77	10.42	4	6.56	7.69
Tedious, hard work	5	8.77	10.42	4	6.56	7.69
Weren't taught	1	1.75	2.08	2	3.28	3.85
Don't know	1	1.75	2.08	1	1.64	1.92
Total number of responses	48	84.21	100	52	85.25	100

Lack of interest and competing demands on time

Lack of interest was the second most important reason cited by female respondents. By contrast, household respondents (female and male) perceived it to be the third most important reason why more women did not weave. As can be seen in Table 4, 21.1% of responses by women[3] and 12,5% of responses by men and women cited lack of interest as the reason women did not weave.

Among these Alhaji stated: "It's not every woman who's interested in weaving. Those who are interested engage."

3 In all, 13,6% of household respondents (mainly men) and 22% of women cited this

By contrast, 7.69% of responses by females and 10.42% of responses by males and females cited lack of time and/or competing domestic duties as the reason women did not weave.[4] According to Afia, aged 44: "We don't have time. It's too time consuming before the day was done and we don't have that time because of domestic duties. If I combine with that I'll die early." Elsewhere, Abena, aged 39, said that although women in her household lacked interest in weaving, she knew two or three women in other households who did weave. Asked that question directly, several female respondents said they knew women in other households who knew how to weave.

Preference for formal education

A preference for formal education was the second most important factor preventing women and girls from weaving in the eyes of household respondents, though female-only responses ranked it third. Whereas 18.8% of male and female responses combined cited education, 11.5% of all-female responses did. Explanations surrounding the importance of education appeared to suggest that education was viewed as a priority by males in the household rather than by women. For example, in explaining why none of the girls in her household knew how to weave, Ama, aged 42, said: "Their concentration is always on school. Their father wants them to go to school." This perspective was supported by Samuel, aged 31, who said: "Because of education we won't allow them to weave." Samuel went on to explain why he thought young women should not be allowed to weave: "My junior sister was interested to learn but I won't give her a chance while she's in school. In a lady, if she learns she might concentrate on this work and won't find time to study. That's the nature of ladies. Because of traditional custom too, in our town they don't weave."

Samuel's point about traditional custom is explored further below. Quite striking are his views about the "nature of ladies" as being unable to balance interests in favour of something as formative as education and recalling the opinion of Afranie Okese, quoted above, that a woman who is taught to weave will learn the value of money and refuse to cook for her husband. Notwithstanding

4 In all, 7,8% of female respondents and 11,4% of male and female household respondents cited lack of time and/or competing domestic duties as the reason women did not weave.

Samuel's concerns, the junior sister alluded to, Akos aged 18, was listed in the household inventory, compiled with the assistance of various household members, as a schoolgirl weaver who practised weaving during school holidays.

Tedious, hard work

Both women and men preferred trading to work that was excessively hard, Boserup said, as noted above. Although Boserup was referring specifically to farm work, a similar observation may be applied in relation to weaving given the exceptional skill required to become a master weaver, described extensively in the literature. For weaving kente does not simply require coordination between hands, feet, and eyes to manipulate the different parts of the loom. It also requires awareness of the potential of warp and weft patterns, awareness of the checker-board effect created when strips of woven kente are lined up against one other and stitched together into a cloth, and mathematical precision in the ordering on the loom of threads of varying lengths and colours.

Some responses highlighted the difficulty of acquiring such intricate skills, though male respondents tended to link this reason to the gender division of labour. Thus, while from Ama the question elicited the response: "It's tedious to learn and hard work," and from Mavis: "It's hard work", Matthew stated more categorically: "Kente is not for women, kente is for men; the work is tedious for women to do." A little less categorically, Kofi said: "Weaving is tedious, that's why in this household women don't involve themselves with weaving." This view was shared by Kofi Amankwah, 32, who said: "It's so complex, some ladies don't take it up", though interestingly, in his house there was one female, Felicia aged 33, who did know how to weave. As Table 4 shows, "tedious work" or "tedious hard work" was cited in 7.7% of all-female responses and 10.4% of all-male responses as the reason women and girls did not weave.

Health and lack of capital

Surprisingly no respondent cited health or capital constraints as the reasons women did not weave. It seemed surprising that health was not mentioned given the explanation offered during my preliminary 2005 research that women in

Bonwire do not weave because "it is painful at the waist", as alluded to at the top of this section. Indeed, we did find that in almost every household, respondents said that weaving caused a variety of ailments, of which "waist pains" (lower back pain) were the most cited. Nevertheless, beyond the mystical threat of barrenness for women who sat at the loom, health was never cited as a barrier to women's participation in weaving. This does not mean that women do not experience lower back pain when weaving. Though beyond the scope of this paper, worth noting too is the association between food and sex in Asante culture, to which Gracia Clark (1994) alludes in her work. Linked to this, as pointed out to me by Professor Clark during a discussion in Accra, is that "waist pains" might also reflect that the "waist" is a euphemism for a woman's womb and genitals. This is signalled by her waist beads, which, like cooking, reference her sexuality and marriage.[5]

When it comes to the question of capital, although this was not cited as a barrier, my additional interviews with young women weavers surveyed suggest that young women who learn to weave may lack the capital to buy yarns and that this may cloud their identity as weavers.

Gender, Tradition and a Loom Taboo

For both women and men, the most important reason cited for the non-participation of women in weaving is tradition, buttressed by a traditional loom taboo. Close to a full century after Rattray mentioned this taboo, it continues to act as the number one explanator of women's low visibility as weavers. For hundreds of years, the taboo has been upheld by a body of ideas on the power of menstrual blood linked to warnings about the ultimate penalty for women who defy the taboo, namely barrenness. Rattray (1927: 74-5) explained the taboo in terms of the belief that contact with a menstruating woman had the power to dissolve "all supernatural or magico-protective powers possessed by either persons or spirits or objects (i.e., *suman*)," and, of consequence, "all barriers which stand between defenceless man and those evil unseen powers which beset him on every side." Thus, a woman in her menses must not cook food for her husband or any other adult male and faced a raft of other restrictions or taboos. Drawing on

5 Clark, Gracia. Personal communication, Legon, 20 October 2016.

Rattray's work, Eugenia Herbert (1993: 226-7) points out that many cultures use menstruation as a metaphor for the "ambivalent qualities of women," for example sterility and fertility, purification and pollution, life and death. Many cultures link women's menstrual cycles to the waxing and waning of the moon and menstrual taboos express anxiety about the forces of nature, even in relation to human activities such as iron-smelting, Herbert noted.

In relation to weaving, according to Asante tradition, the loom, being a sacred enabler of important work, must never be used to start or complete work on a Friday, the day that Otaa Kraban — the inventor of the classic Oyokoman kente cloth — first set up a loom (Rattray 1927: 234). Named *Odomankoma nsa dua Kofi*, ("Kofi, the Creator's loom"), looms serve as a reminder of their near-sacred nature and evoke one aspect of the loom taboo.[6] Because of the power of menstrual blood alluded to by Rattray, a menstruating woman must never touch a loom, much less climb into one. Hence, weaving is the work of men and a woman who weaves must bear the consequence that she will never give birth. This is indeed a terrible consequence since childbirth gives women an important role in ensuring the continuance of the lineage, not least in matrilineal societies.[7] This powerful combination of mysticism, mythology, and patriarchy has effectively preserved a model of production that kept the most lucrative economic activity in the hands of men, supported in its less prestigious secondary activities by women.

In the survey, 43,8% of responses from male and female respondents of all ages and 46,2% of all-female responses directly cited tradition or the traditional taboo as the reason women did not weave. In addition, the responses from two women (including one household respondent) who said "We weren't taught" may reasonably be added to the category of tradition. A number of respondents cited "tradition" or "the old tradition" without going into detail. Among them, Prophet Labi, aged 37, stated: "We stick to the old tradition." Other male respondents drew attention to the long hours of work to justify traditional taboos or reinforce gender prejudices. Thus, according to Ntiamoah: "In the evening both man and wife are weaving. Neither will be willing to stand up and go and cook for

6 Nsa dua means "loom" and Kofi is the day name for a male born on Friday.
7 As Herbert (1993: 227) puts it: "To die without leaving progeny is the greatest misfortune imaginable… Ancestors…have just as much stake in human procreativity as the living because they die definitively only when a lineage comes to an end."

the other." The male responses linked different types of gender prejudices, such as perceptions about women's menstruation and pregnancy, with concern about who would cook. Thus, according to Akwasi: "At times if you don't know your menses is coming, it can stain the white cloth and you won't know." He added: "If both men and women are weaving, who will cook for the man? Or someone needs an order fast and the woman is pregnant, how can she weave fast?"[8] Although the latter reason may seem to be a practical consideration, nevertheless in formal sector industries, women's employment rights are protected by law precisely because of the perception, real or imagined, that pregnant women cannot work at full capacity. In Bonwire's highly cooperative society, moreover, there seems little reason why a heavily pregnant woman would not be able to enlist help to complete a cloth.

On the question of domestic responsibilities raised by Ntiamoah, Osei made a similar point with less emphasis on the long hours and more on the gender division of labour: "It's not women's work. We stick to the old tradition. If I'm weaving and my wife is also weaving and I summon her to go and do the cooking, she may refuse." Thus, the gender division of responsibilities appeared inseparable from the old tradition. Another male respondent, Amos, aged 43, responded by stating where women's work was considered more appropriate: "Ladies used to put their trade in the market." Some female respondents emphasised the fact that they were never taught how to weave. According to Lydia: "Our brothers were doing the weaving. Our father taught only the men how to do weaving, not the ladies. Our mother sent the girls to farm while our father was teaching the boys weaving." Similarly, Prophet Labi said: "It's not a woman's work," and kente trekker Hegar said: "Kente is a work for men. I know a few women only who have knowledge of weaving." While interviewing a master weaver at sample house 55 in Bonwire Mission, a female family visitor, Regina, contributed to this question by saying: "In this village, we don't allow women to weave."

From the above, it may be seen that arguments about long hours, men's work and women's work had entered into people's consciousness as part of the inviolable rules of culture and tradition. Over time, the desire to protect gender privileges had been infused with the myth of barrenness resulting in a scare tactic

8 Akwasi was contributing to the point made by Ntiamoah.

and a most potent reason why women should not weave. Demonstrating that the traditional taboo was still the most important reason why women did not weave, 85-year-old Abena said: "In the olden days when our ancestors brought this weaving into our town they said if a woman gets into the loom, she'll not give birth." Similarly, Mary, aged 73, said: "In the olden days our ancestors said if you sit on the loom, you won't give birth, so we were scared to sit on the loom. That's what we were taught." However, while the myth of childlessness was echoed by many respondents of different generations, not all respondents were impressed by this scare tactic. Thus, according to 24-year-old Mavis: "People are saying if a woman weaves, she'll not give birth. In Ghana here when they want you not to do something they'll put things behind to scare you." The role of women themselves in enforcing the gender ban was highlighted by Yaw, aged 48. He explained: "There were two ladies weaving in this house. They stopped weaving because the grandmothers told them that the ancestors don't allow women to weave. So, they stopped and went to Accra to practise another trade." According to Yaw, the two women were taught bobbin winding and weaving by their brother and had been weaving for six months before they yielded to the pressure to stop.

Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

This paper has examined the nature of women's work in Bonwire and the extent of female involvement in the kente industry, drawing on the results of a household survey conducted in late 2014. In relation to this paper, two objectives of the survey were to ascertain the extent of women's involvement in the kente industry, including the number of women weavers in Bonwire, and to understand the reasons more women do not weave. In pursuing these research objectives, the paper sought to test the claims made by a weaver in my earlier research that learning to weave would deter women from cooking for their husbands and that women, moreover, don't weave because weaving is "painful at the waist" (Afranie Okese, cited in Amanor-Wilks, 2006).

Quantitative investigation additionally produced evidence on the number of women weavers in Bonwire while qualitative interviews shed light on the low visibility of women working in the kente sector. However, several layers of investigation were required to create a credible dataset and only the household

inventory of each member's occupational profile provided satisfactory quantitative evidence on the number of women weavers. Thus, the extent of weaving knowledge among women became fully apparent when data on the occupational activities of all 807 people in the sample population were analysed, as shown in Table 3.

Whereas the survey found 29 women with weaving knowledge, this paper has focused on the constraints preventing more women from weaving. Qualitative profiles of the 29 women will be published in a separate paper.

The paper sought evidence on the reasons more women do not weave and found the overwhelming reason to be a traditional loom taboo traced to long-held beliefs about the power of menstrual blood. Though this belief system is now subjected to greater challenge by women, in reality, many women themselves uphold the tradition. Other reasons cited for the low numbers of women weavers were a lack of interest, a greater focus on formal education, a lack of time due to domestic duties, and the difficulty and tediousness of weaving.

Surprisingly, there was no evidence to support the notion that waist pains are the reason more women do not weave. Nevertheless, there was evidence to support Afranie Okese's contention that a particular aspect of the gender division of labour, namely women's responsibility for cooking, prevented women from becoming weavers. To the extent that waist pains could be an oblique reference to a woman's womb and genitals, as alluded to above, this could be a reference back to the traditional loom taboo.

Equally surprisingly, lack of capital was never cited as a reason more women did not weave, though it did come up clearly in my conversations with women weavers. This suggests that even if the problem of access to/starting capital is improved for women, greater constraints impede their trajectory as weavers.

Kente weaving is a major source of job satisfaction and prestige in Bonwire. However, Bonwire's male-dominated society, though matrilineal, does not willingly support the development of women weavers. Within this system, women are socialised to espouse the philosophy of a male-dominated society and the most ardent advocates of the exclusion of women from weaving include women themselves.

Boserup's observations still provide insightful perspectives on the desire of men to protect lucrative occupations controlled by them. Whether fear of the power of menstrual blood still holds as much influence as in Rattray's day seems unlikely and the traditional taboo may now appear more part of a competitive strategy than a genuine reason to deny women access to the loom. However, this point can only be concluded after examining the findings of my in-depth interviews with women weavers, which was beyond the scope of the present paper to interrogate.

Nevertheless, between the literature on Asante reviewed here and the slow-changing reality on the ground revealed in my preliminary interviews and more comprehensive household survey, this paper has found evidence of both continuity and change in the work of Bonwire's women. The paper found that women's once critical role as producers and spinners of cotton for the kente industry, described so vividly in the literature, had long been eroded, a somewhat unfortunate example of change. This change comes because of a shift in the sourcing of the main input, the yarns, though the design of the loom itself has barely changed, a major example of continuity in the sector.

Kente remains the most important economic sector in Bonwire for women, not just men, with 30% of women principally occupied in the kente industry and very many more combining activities such as kente trading, bobbin winding and kente strip stitching with other forms of economic activity. This is another important sign of continuity.

But while close to 80% of women are involved in the kente industry, very few are involved as weavers. My survey counted just six active female weavers, and only two of these were established as full-time weavers earning their livelihood from weaving and of these two, one operated outside Bonwire. Of the total 29 women and girls with weaving skills, seven were apprentices and 16 were inactive weavers.

Extrapolating from these figures in a 10% survey would give a total of 290 women and girls in Bonwire who have acquired weaving skills. A very high number of them, 160, are inactive weavers, and this explains the low visibility of women weavers in Bonwire. Of the remaining 130 women and girls, 70 are

apprentices and 60 are active weavers, though some active weavers are still in school and weaving under the guidance of male family members, and do not, therefore, earn an income from weaving. These results are a significant improvement on the situation I met when I first went to the field in 2005, when I could not identify any woman weaver to interview, and they do provide evidence of change over time. In those days women weavers were visible only during the annual kente festival in Bonwire. The improved results may be due in part to an expanded survey. But they are certainly also due to the success of women in breaking down traditional barriers to their participation in weaving. Confirming the validity of these extrapolated results, several female respondents said they knew women outside their household who knew how to weave.

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