

**NORTHERN GHANA WOMEN IN NATIONAL POLITICS:
Biographies of Lydia Akanbodiipo and Catherine Tedam ⁶⁶**

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ABSTRACT

Although in recent time, a few works are appearing on the publishing scene on women's experiences in politics, education, workplace, economy and education, these focus largely of the broad experiences of women. Such works hardly cater to the differentiated locations and spaces of Ghanaian women beyond the situational and occupational divides. These works have hardly given voice to individualized stories or moved beyond the aggregated and universalizing themes that continue to diminish particular experiences. In particular, works on the life-stories of Ghanaian women have been rare. Where they have been told, like in the case of Dopylyne and Ardayfio-Schandorf, they have hardly included those of northern Ghanaian women. This bibliographical essay is an attempt, a starting point, to address the gaps in the life-stories of northern Ghanaian women. It looks at the lives of two past politicians, Madam Lydia Akanbodiipo and Madam Catherin Tedam, who rose from humble beginnings in the Upper East Region, then the Upper East Region, to become key actors in national politics. These seemingly forgotten women, who both started as teachers, rose to become the only women parliamentarians during their time, the Second Republic. Although in parliament in the same era, they sat on opposing sides of the legislature, one in the ruling party with the other in opposition. The sharing of their stories has been possible through interviews, conversations and the limited documentation on them. Although material has been scarce, it is intended that the re/presentation here will create space for deeper and broader sharing on their and other life-stories.

INTRODUCTION

A few works have focused on women's political participation in Ghana. Many such publications have focused on criticism about the exclusions women face in Ghanaian politics and/or ways of enhancing their participation in politics and public life (Odotei, 2006; Allah- Mensah, 2005; Ofei-Aboagye, 2006, 2005; Apusigah, 2004). Another and parallel form of research that is emerging on women's political participation in Ghana is biographical. Such biographical sources have focused on Ghanaian women's histories and/or social participation in general. The works of Florence

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Dolphyne, Jane A. Adu and Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf are typical examples. While such works are contributing in very significant and unusual ways in articulating and creating awareness on Ghanaian women's histories and experiences, they hardly provide the details of their lives. While this biographical work is not claiming to provide such detail, it offers a difference in terms of the persons involved.

Many of the existing works have highlighted the life stories of women of southern Ghana with a few on very renowned northern Ghanaian women such as Madam Hawa Yakubu, Hajia Salamatu Taimako and Mrs Susanna Alhassan. In this short time that such works have emerged, there has been a general sense that northern women have been largely oppressed or victims of one cultural practice or another. A few others have however provided avenues for inserting and promoting their agencies. Undoubtedly, in many northern Ghanaian narratives, oral or written, one finds the extraordinary roles that women have occupied in both public and private life. Some of them are on record for performing deeds that have not been surpassed by men and their counterparts from southern Ghana. Yet, the stories on their gendered oppressions that have often been blamed on retrogressive cultural practices, fail to appreciate and acknowledge the many ways and instances that northern women have risen above cultural norms and taken up roles that have eluded even the patriarchs. Such women have acted as agents, reactionaries and survivors rather than mere victims. While oppression, victimization and subjugation remain real issues in daily life, there are also several instances of transcendence.

In this paper, which focuses on northern women's experiences in politics, the stories and experiences of two daughters of northern Ghana, whose political activism and participation are hardly acknowledged, are shared. Madam Lydia Akanbodiipo, who has since passed away and Madam Catherine Tadam, who is alive, have occupied the political limelight in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the nation was still struggling to understand, shape and carve out a worthy political system. Their legacies live on as we celebrate Ghana at Fifty, this year and especially as the nation prepares for the next General Elections in 2008. Their legacies should serve as inspiration for up and coming women who have interests in politics and are endowed with leadership qualities.

This paper, which is biographical, re-presents the analysis of data from very scanty and dispersed primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included phone conversations with Madam Tadam and an interview with Charles Akanbodiipo, a relative on Madam Lydia Akanbodiipo. These women were the only women parliamentarians in the Second Republic of Ghana from 1969 to 1972, under the Busia Administration. Both women were professionally trained teachers who made grand entry into politics and reached the highest level of the legislature as parliamentarians. Both women were from the Upper East Region and northern Ghana. They are proud daughters of northern Ghana and the Upper East, areas where female education to date remains very low. Enrolment rates remain far below the national average of up

to 30% less. The gaps are wider at the upper levels. In a report presented in 2006, the Girls Education Unit of the Ghana Education Service reported that 12 out of the 15 districts struggle to meet their gender parity commitments were located in northern Ghana (GEU/MOESS, 2006).

That Madam Akanbodiipo and Madam Tedam were able to make it to the very top testify to their personal determination and sterling qualities. These women were able to overcome the challenges of culture and education, and were even able to break traditions by getting into politics at that very early post independence era. The accomplishments as northern women were however not new. They had followed in the footsteps and equally sterling accomplishments and examples of Mrs. Susanna Alhassan and Mrs. Cecilia Ayanore Bukari, who were the first women to join the Nkrumah parliament, one of who became a minister of state.

Madam Lydia Akanbodiipo was the older of the two women although they were contemporaries in politics. She has since passed away, at the prime of her life in 1975. Madam Tedam, the younger of the two lives on. Madam Tedam was the youngest parliamentarian in her days. She maintains her political interests today although she is currently not in parliament and holds no political appointment. Although the two women were contemporaries, separated in age by three years and entered the legislature at the same time, they sat in opposing sides. Madam Akanbodiipo was in the opposing party, the National Alliance Party of Gbedema as MP for Builsa. Madam Tedam was on the side of the ruling Progress Party under Busia after winning a byelection for Paga-Chiana constituency.

Since it has not been possible to get the details of their stories, it is hoped that future works would address that question. The paucity of documentation, lack of eye-witnesses, poor recall and inability to conduct in-depth interviews, with the surviving families and community members, are the main challenges of the study. The stories that were collected were very disjointed and contradictory and as such could not all be used for this paper. It is hoped that with improved funding, work can be re-initiated to straighten-up the data. Also, while it was almost impossible to sit with Madam Tedam in a full in-depth interview due to availability problems, in the case of Madam Akanbodiipo, the interviewee provided very little detail on her life. Only the bits and pieces that could be recalled by her relative were thus used in this representation. The data situation has been worsened by the lack of significant previous documentation on the two women. Hence, this piece is meant to serve as a starting point to more detailed studies on the lives and experiences of the two women and other northern Ghanaian women. Since, Madam Tedam is still alive, it is hoped that this initiative will help ginger her or others interested in biographical studies to document her and/or their life-stories more deeply. The paper is organized into two parts. The first focuses on Madam Akanbodiipo while the second is devoted to the life experiences of Madam Tedam.

MADAM LYDIA AKANBODIIPO ⁶⁷

Family Background

Madam Lydia Akanbodiipo was born 1942 in Sandema Lungs by Mr. Akanbodiibo a farmer, father and Madam Azakpok, mother. Lydia's mother, Madam Azakpok, who was a trader, was said to have been very instrumental in Lydia's educational advancement. Others such as the late Naab Azantilow, the Builsa overlord and monarch, also played a leading role in Lydia's later education.

Educational Background

Madam Lydia, as she was affectionately called, had her basic education in the Sandema Primary School, after which she proceeded to Sandema Middle Boarding School, where she obtained her Middle School Leaving Certificate. Madam Lydia later furthered her education by gaining admission into the then Tamale Women's Teacher Training College, now Tamale Teachers Training College, Tamale, where she trained as a professional teacher completing with a Teacher's Certificate "A" in the Post-Middle category. In Tamale Women's Training College, Madam Lydia was interested and become active in student politics. She was an active member of the Students Representative Council (SRC). After her training, she was posted to Bawku, in the Upper East Region, where she served until she gained admission, again, to advance her professional and academic interests in the then Advanced Teacher Training College, now University College of Education, Winneba, South Campus.

After college, Madam Lydia Akanbodiipo returned to teaching, although her interest in politics remained and leadership qualities continued to shine. This time she was more interested in national politics and community service although she remained in her initial professional practice. Her sterling leadership qualities did not escape anyone around. It was such qualities that attracted the male dominated leadership of the National Alliance of Liberals (NAL) party in the late 1960s. Her mobilizing and influencing skills easily showed up during political fora and activities. Although she was in the teaching profession, it was not long before she left to join active politics in 1969 as a Member of Parliament for Builsa. Madam Lydia entered active politics as a member of the then NAL Party, which was led by Gbedema.

Political Career

Madam Lydia's ability to pull crowds as well as her role in student leadership was one thing that attracted her to the NAL party. She was urged to take part in the parliamentary election, which she did and won as Member of Parliament (MP) for Builsa in 1969. In the National Parliament, Madam Akanbodiipo was appointed to the enviable position as the opposition Chief Whip. She was probably the first woman to have been appointed to that position. She held this position until the democratic dis-

67 Mr. Charles Akanbodiipo gave the biography of the late Madam Lydia Akanbodiipo.

pensation at the time was ousted in a military takeover in 1972 by I. K. Acheampong and his National Redemption Council.

Her role as a "Mother"

During interactions in Sandema about her life story, her role as a mother was always the first to come up. Her humanitarian and supportive nature was highly appreciated and spoken of. She was constantly referred to as a mother who took care of children other than her own. Madam Lydia was said to have taken care of six children. Her motherly role included also the instilling of discipline in all of her children. She supported the education and training of her children at the time that she insisted on bringing them up to be good, educated and fulfilled adults. She ensured that everybody carried out his or her responsibilities and insisted on them behaving responsibly.

Madam Lydia was also said to be very rooted in her tradition, particularly in Builsa music and dance. Her interest in local music and dance was said to have brought smiles to all faces, including many at her home in Sandema. It was said that, "Lydia's house was a home for visitors." All who got to her home found a place of respite where love and goodness were shared.

Achievement

Apart from her personal investments and extended support to her constituents, Madam Akanbodiipo is probably most remembered among her contemporaries by her gender activist role. She was devoted to improving the conditions of women in the public service. She always stood for women's welfare. Hence, as an MP and opposition Chief Whip, Madam Akanbodiipo was very instrumental in the fight for the institution of three months maternity leaves for women in the public service. She launched a massive campaign and lobbied her colleagues to get the bill passed.

She was also very instrumental in fighting for the Builsa area to be upgraded into a district capital, the upgrading of the then Sandema Clinic into a hospital, as well as the opening up of the Gbedeblisi Valley in southern Builsa into an irrigational area for rice and dry season vegetable cultivation. She, however, did not live to realize these dreams in her days. Her short active political career as a result of the interruption by coup makers truncated her fight for women and the Builsa area as she never got the chance to return to the national parliament again until her passing.

Madam Lydia also sought for the establishment of schools and to improve school enrolment of children in her constituency. She was very concerned about the low levels enrolment, high levels of out-of-school children and the plights of females. Her hard work earned her the position of a role model by many women in her area.

Post Political Career

Madam Lydia did not end her career or political participation after leaving parliament. Her experience in the highest level of decision making had prepared her sufficiently to transition well into a new career. Hence, after leaving parliament she sought new interests and drew from her knowledge and skills to shift her political position. Her multiple skills and talents were readily harnessed and utilized in converting her participation from the legislature to the judiciary. After the coup d' etat of 1972, she took up a new role as a magistrate. She served as a magistrate for Tamale, Damongo and Yendi Magistrate courts. She however passed away after a short illness in 1975.

Awards

During the investigations, it was made obvious that Madam Lydia had been reward many times through her legacies and continued influences in politics. She has also been given a token appreciation as an achiever, a feat that is demonstrative of her sterling qualities. Madam Lydia's role in the adoption of three months maternity leave gained her an award in 2002 for her contribution to development in Ghana.

MADAM CATHERINE TEDAM

Family Background

Madam Catherine Tedam was born into the famous Tedam family of Paga in the Kasena Nankani District of the Upper East Region of Ghana in 1945.

Educational Background

She had her education in the Paga Local Authority (LA) primary school in 1951. She proceeded to Bolgatanga Akantome Middle Boarding from 1957 to 1960, where she earned her Middle School Leaving Certificate. She then took to teaching in St. Mary's Primary school in Navrongo for year. Catherine did not relent in pursuing her educational dreams. She went to Tamale Women's Training College from 1961 to 1965, where she completed and was awarded a Teachers Certificate A, in the Post-Middle category.

Occupational Background

Madam Catherin Tedam trained to become and practiced as a professional teacher. Indeed, she entered the teaching profession before she acquired the necessary qualifications. Her first teaching appointment was to St. Mary's Primary School in Navrongo, upon completion of her middle school education, where she taught for a year, 1960/61. After her four year teacher education, she was posted to teach in her alma matter, Paga Local Authority Primary School. She was later transferred to Akantome Middle School in Bolgatanga.

Before her triumphant victory to parliament, she also taught in Aningazanga experimental school Bolgatanga, briefly, from 1969 to 1970.

Political Career

Madam Tedam pursued her political ambition as she stood for a bi-election on the ticket of Progress Party (PP) that led to her to victory and secure her entry to parliament for as the representative for the Chiana Paga Constituency. She was one of the only two female MPs in parliament, the youngest member in that regime as the well as the only female MP in the governing Party.

In parliament, her innovative capabilities became apparent when she tabled a motion whose results allowed working women to go on three months maternity leave with pay. Her political career however was cut short when the Second Republican Government was ousted in the 13th January 1972 coup d'état of Acheampong. Like Madam Akanbodiipo, Madam Tedam's career was seriously and untimely interrupted by the coup makers.

Achievements

Madam, Catherine Tedam left an enviable track record since she ceased to be a member of parliament for Chiana-Paga. She initiated a number of development projects in housing, agriculture and social welfare. She was able to oversee some of them to completion. Some of these are four irrigation dam projects, connection of pipe borne water projects and rural housing projects in Chiana. Feeder roads projects, agriculture mechanization projects and three clinics were also initiated in the Chiana-Paga area.

CONCLUSION

The re-presentation above only presents an initial effort to document the life-stories of Madam Lydia Akanbodiipo and Madam Catherine Tedam, past MPs of the Second Republic of Ghana. It is the partial narrative of their lives and experiences that can only be characterized as complex, directed and inspirational. The sterling achievements of these two heroines of the Upper East Region present legacies and models for young women and girls in the Region and northern Ghana. Their respective constituencies continue to benefit from their legacies. Their contributions and role in politics for Ghana, contributions to northern politics and women in politics and public life are clear indicators for strength and vision.

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