

## Wives and Traders

Women's Careers in Ghanaian Canoe Fisheries<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** Canoe fishing is extremely important in Ghana, both as a source of protein and income on the family level, and as a national source of revenue. Women play a crucial role as intermediaries in the processing, distribution and exchange of fish. They have also played an important role in the introduction of new technology into the artisanal sector as creditors, financing canoes, nets and outboard motors. And an increasing number of women are owners of means of production and managers of fishing companies. This article focuses on women's careers and how they become *fish mammies* in Moree, a Fante fishing town in the Central Region. A particular attempt is made to explain how women use their roles as mothers, wives and daughters in their strategies in the fishing economy. It is argued that there is a clear correlation between their economic success and their domestic position.

### Introduction

It is well known that women are indispensable in fishing societies, not only through their domestic roles but also in fish related activities (Nadel-Klein and Davis 1988; Cole 1991; Nieuwenhuys 1989; Chapman 1987). Women in the artisanal fisheries of Ghana are a case in point. The sustainability and potentials of this system of fishing build on the complementarity of the genders in the sharing of work tasks. Men fish and women exchange, process and distribute the fish. As intermediaries, women have achieved what seems to be unusually strong economic positions. The focus of the present article is on women's careers in the canoe fisheries, and it emphasises the significance of socio-economic networks for the careers of both the small-scale *fish wives* and the large-scale *fish mammies*. These two broad categories cover a wide range of women in the fisheries. The majority of women in the fisheries are fish wives. The term originates from the traditional division of labour where each fisherman handed the catch over to his wife or, if he was not married, to his mother or sister (Vercrujse 1984:31). Thus a fish wife is not necessarily a wife; she is a fish processor and trader on a relatively small scale. Some fish wives, especially those who are too poor or too young to have 'started their own,' in other words to have established an independent career, operate on a very small scale, and are helpers and carriers for those who operate on a larger scale. Fish mammies are those who have had successful careers as fish wives to the extent that they own canoes

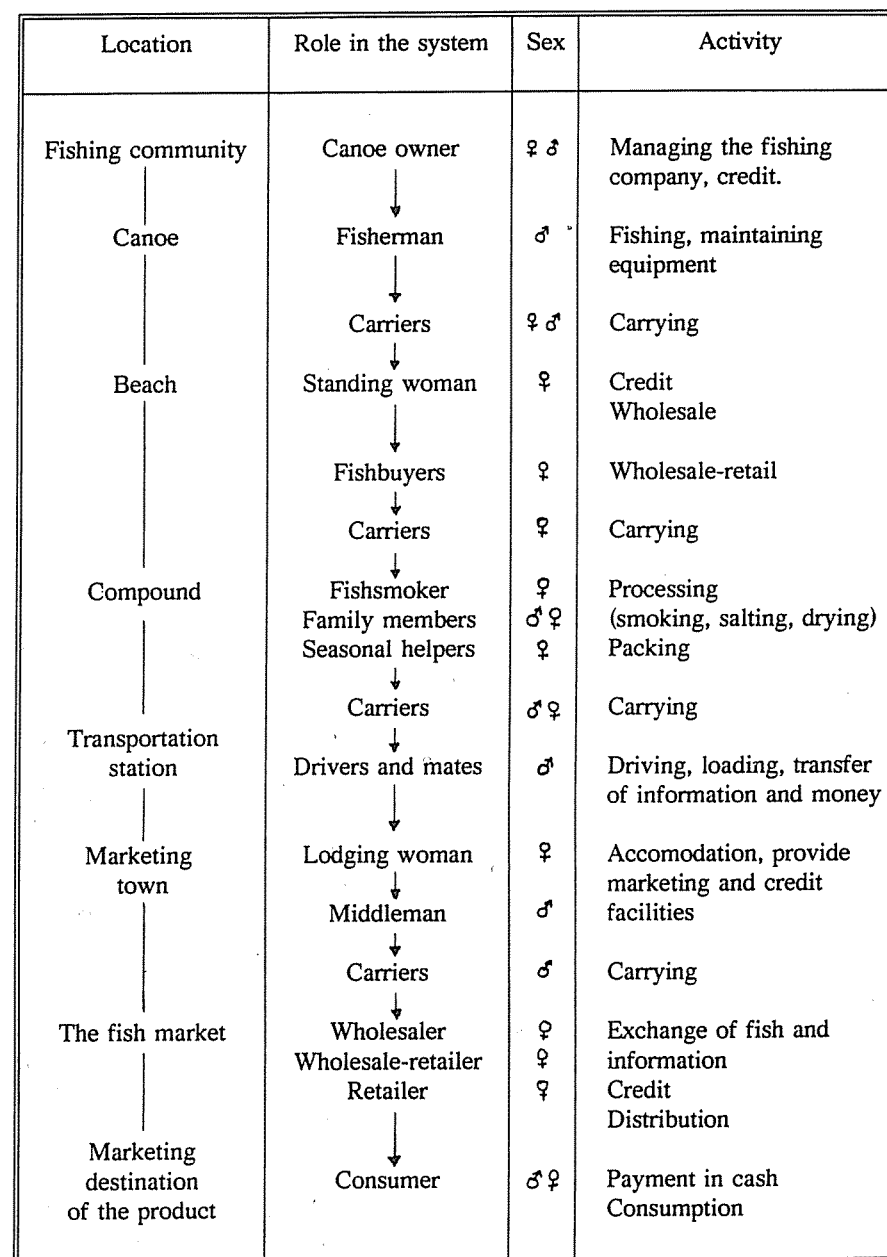


Figure 1. Activities and roles in a chain of production, processing and distribution of fish.

and houses; they often employ other women to do the fish smoking and trade for them, and are rich by local standards. Fish mammies have many roles, such as wholesaler, large-scale processor and market trader, canoe owner, creditor and manager of fishing companies.<sup>2</sup>

In the process from production to consumption of fish, women are, as Figure 1 illustrates, indispensable as *intermediaries*. The more intermediary links a fish mammy deals with and controls, the more roles she is able to combine, and the more power she has, both in economic and social terms. These women have made careers in their gender defined roles to the extent that they constitute an elite in their communities.

Women in the canoe fisheries are not only autonomous economic agents, but also wives and community members. In contrast to many other parts of the world, where women often have to choose between a career and a family, or they have a hard struggle combining the two, a combination of productive and reproductive roles in fishing communities in the West African context is apparently possible. It is even expected. Among the matrilineal Fante, two central aspects of being a woman stand out: to give birth to children and to be economically independent. In the context of a fishing village, the most obvious economic option and socially accepted way to achieve these goals is to be a fish processor and trader. A woman is expected to be a mother in order to secure the continuity of the lineage, and to be economically independent in order to support the children and sometimes even her husband, and to contribute economically to the extended family. To be able to contribute to this socio-economic network of kinship and marriage, is a necessity for survival as well as a precondition for social status and potential for success in the fishing economy.

Social relations in the fisheries are still decisive for how fishermen and fishmongers organize activities, which also is the case when they fish or trade far away from their home towns, either on seasonal or long term migration (Jorion 1988; Nukunya 1989; Hagan 1983; Odotei 1991; Haakonsen and Diaw 1991). The fish mammies, with whom the fishermen deal in daily life, are often their mothers, wives, aunts, grandmothers or daughters. Technological development has transformed the fisheries, but they are still to a large extent organized through matrilineal and conjugal relations. Although recruitment of men as crews has become more contractual (Ninsin 1991), and women's ability to purchase fish more dependent on capital, it still has a lot to do with kinship and marriage. In other words, without a socio-economic network in the system of fishing, fishermen and fishmongers have small chances of success.

Socio-economic studies of fisheries often focus on the economic activities of the *fishermen*, with an emphasis on the special features of fishing societies, including the physical hardships and high financial risks involved (Acheson 1981; Vercrujssse 1984; Robben 1987; Jorion 1988; Pálsson 1989). In cases where women have strong positions in fishing societies, it is often explained by the long absence

of the men, when the work load, responsibility and influence in the community are left to the women to a greater extent than what is 'normal.' In Norway, for example, women were crucial for the viability of the fishing communities as farmers, for raising children and as 'ground crew,' essential for the fishing activities of the men (Gerrard 1987). Cole (1991) found that women in maritime households in Vila Cha in Northern Portugal played a much more active role in production than in the nearby farming households. Can the special features of making a living of fishing explain the importance of women in their productive and reproductive roles in Norway, Portugal or Ghana? A number of empirical examples seem to contradict this, such as the apparently inferior position of fisher women in Kerala in spite of their important role in the fishing economy (Nieuwenhuys 1989), or in Camurim in Brazil, where wives of fishermen are more or less excluded from fish related activities, and their power is confined to activities in the domestic sphere, in accordance with men's macho ideals (Robben 1989). It is thus evident that we must see gender relations in a fishing community within the context of the socio-cultural features of that community and its region.

### Gender and Fisheries in the West African Context

With the introduction of outboard motors and modern nets (such as *ali* and *poli*), Ghanaian canoe fisheries have experienced a tremendous expansion over the last thirty years. Ghana is today the leading fishing nation in West Africa (Haakonsen and Diaw 1991). 70% of the total fish catches are landed by the artisanal sector, which consists of more than 8,000 canoes in addition to the estimated 2,000 'Ghana canoes' on seasonal or long term migration to other West African countries. In 1970 the motorisation of canoes was estimated to be 20-25% (Vercrujssse 1984), and in 1989 more than 57% of the total canoe fleet had outboard motors (Koranteng 1990). The canoe fish landings rose from 27,500 tons in 1961, to 262,400 tons in 1987 (Hernæs 1991), and the increase in fish production employed a growing number of fishermen. The *Ghana Canoe Frame Survey* of 1989 (Koranteng 1990) estimates the number of fishermen to be 91,400 and suggests that an additional 1.5 million people are 'dependants' of these. Hence, the increased production also provided new opportunities for those who process, distribute and sell the fish: the women.

In this process, the fish mammies became the main financiers of the new technology (Christensen 1977; Vercrujssse 1983; Odotei 1991). With the increased production, some wealthy women were able to combine profitable investments with crucial social contacts, and emerged as a group of large-scale intermediaries. They were able to accumulate considerable wealth and converted their gains into powerful positions. Some have characterized them as capitalist exploiters (Vercrujssse 1984; Ninsin 1991). However, we question the relevance of using such concepts in this context. For example, in the ongoing discussion of the relationship between

fishermen and intermediaries (i.e. Acheson 1981; Platteau 1989; Ninsin 1991; Tvedten and Hersoug 1992), gender relations must be central. Given the fact that the persons who inhabit the positions of intermediaries in Moree are women, the implications of the concepts we use change. The close integration of economic and social relations must inevitably have consequences for our understanding of the role of these intermediaries. As Vellenga (1986) points out, the specific cultural characteristics of West Africa, such as the coexistence of polygyny, lineages, and class divisions may create dividing points in a society different from those familiar in the West (ibid.:63). Female entrepreneurs are not less exploitative because they are women, but gender is of relevance in explaining why women emerged and remain in these powerful positions.

When new technology has been introduced to traditional systems of production, it has often had negative effects for women (Boserup 1970; Rogers 1980; Whitehead 1985). From the above presentation of women in the Ghanaian canoe fisheries, a different picture from what we often meet in representations of African women, emerges. Instead of being 'victims,' the fish mammies of Ghana appear as entrepreneurs; individuals who assume risks and make important decisions concerning the operation of an enterprise, in order to achieve some economic or social goal (Lewis 1977:132). The importance of women for the development of fisheries, in Ghana as well as elsewhere in West Africa, also contradicts the commonly held view that women are conservative and that men are the initiators of economic change. Moreover, a study of fishing societies with emphasis on the gender dimension can give new perspectives on stereotyped views like the men:sea/ women:land and the men:public/women:private dichotomies (Nadel-Klein and Davis 1988).

Little information exists on the historical development of the strong positions of fish mammies (Odotei 1991), how they are maintained, and how women use social relations as parts of their economic strategies in the fishing economy. It has been pointed out that in many West African societies, political structures are gender sensitive and dual-sex in nature (Moran 1990:166). Both men and women are able to achieve social status via exclusively male and female channels (Okonjo 1976). In Ghana, the market system in particular provides an opportunity – often the *only* opportunity – for women; a hierarchy that is not dominated by men, where entrepreneurial activity and age grants prestige. This dual-sex type of status system, upheld by the cultural construction of the genders as two separate, noncomplementary kinds of human beings (Moran 1990), could be a key to an understanding of how women have achieved their economic role in fisheries.

In Ghana, the position of women as market traders or intermediaries is deeply rooted in the traditional production system and cultural values (Lawson 1971; Lewis 1977; Ardayfio-Schandorf and Kwafo-Akoto 1990). Nypan (1960) quotes a description by de Marees dating back to 1602:

The inhabitants of the sea-side come also to the market with their wares, which they buy from the Netherlanders in the ships, as linnen cloth, knives, ground corals, look-glasses, pinnes, arme

rings, and fish, which their husbands have gotten in the sea, whereof the women buy much, and carrie them to other towns within the land, to get some profit of them, so that the fish which is taken in the sea, is carried at least an hundred or two hundred miles up into the land, for a great present, although many a times it stinks like carrion, and hath a thousand maggots creeping in it. Those women are verie nimble about their businesse, and so earnest therein, that they goe at least five or sixe miles every day to the places where they have to doe, and are laden like asses; for at their backes they carrie their children, and on their heads they have a heavey burthen of fruit, or millia, and so go laden to the market, and there she buyeth fish, to carrie home with her, so that oftentimes, they come as heavily laden from the market as they went thither (in Nypan 1960:2).

Marketing of agricultural surplus was regarded as a wife's duty, as described by Field in 1940 in her works on the Ga, and this, of course, also includes fish:

It is a woman's duty to trade any fish or food her husband produces over and above the amount required to feed the husband, wife, and children. For instance, when a husband has a catch of fish, he will say to his wife – or to each of his wives – 'This is five shillings worth of fish. Take it and give me...five shillings in three day's time...' A man cannot demand of his wife that she works on his farm...But it is her bounden duty, as a wife, to do all the marketing and exchanging of farm goods for her husband (Field 1940:62-63).

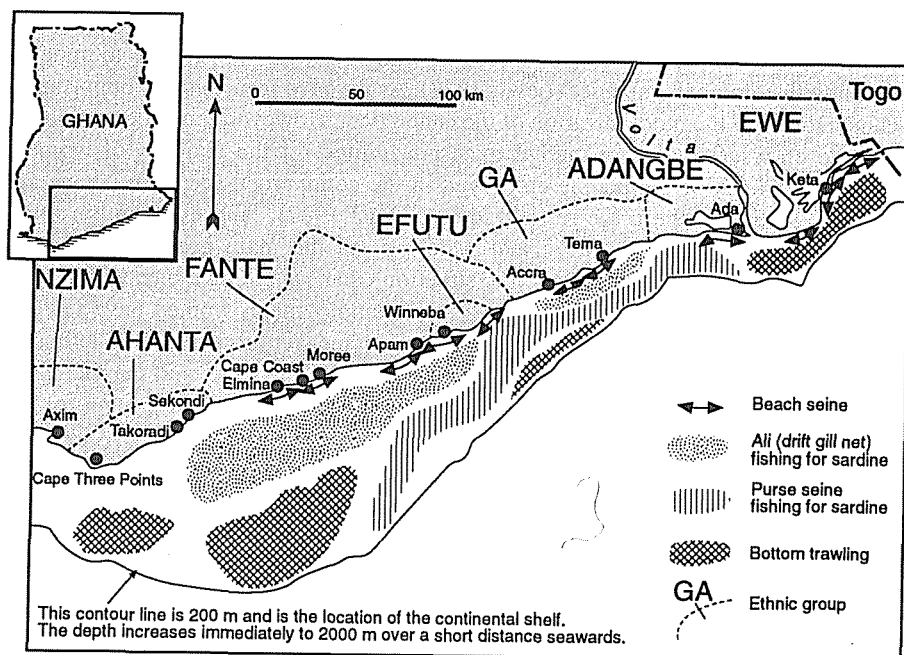
But to trade was not solely a duty. Women saw it as an opportunity to earn money and achieve status in the market system and in their communities. As structural conditions changed, women also changed their strategies in entrepreneurial activities. For example, Fante women took advantage of the opportunities to trade on credit with colonial companies (Lewis 1977). As we have seen, another opportunity came later with the modernization of the canoe fleet. However, the opportunities to operate on a large scale in market trade are limited for the majority of women. Although 84.6% of the people employed in the commercial sector in Ghana are women, 98.5% of these are retail traders (Ewusi 1987), 'and even within retail trading, petty trading, hawking and peddling are the main pre-occupations of women' (ibid.:14). With the economic situation Ghana is facing today, with urbanization, population pressure and increasing unemployment, women have few income-generating alternatives besides trading with meager turnovers. But, although people are broke they can at least afford some fish in the soup, and the increased fish production was therefore welcomed as an important source of protein for the growing Ghanaian population.

An examination of the historical, economic and cultural processes that have created the present situation of the fish mammies in Ghana, is beyond the scope of this article. It will examine how women in a particular fishing community, i.e. Moree, deal with daily life. The major topics to be addressed are, firstly, how women develop strategies for making a living in a fishing community and, secondly, how some women achieve dominant positions in the fishing economy, in other words become fish mammies. In the closely intertwined economic and domestic spheres of the fishing community women combine productive and reproductive roles in

their strategies, and it will be argued in the following that this combination of roles is a prerequisite for a successful career in both fields of life.

### Fishing and Trade in Moree

Moree is a Fante fishing town 8 km east of Cape Coast in the Central Region of Ghana, and has approximately 15,000 inhabitants. However, the resident population varies with the fishing season as a large proportion of the fishermen and women migrate westward to the villages near Sekondi, Axim, Half-Assini, etc., during the off-season from October to April. During this period the town is very idle until activities pick up with the herring and sardinella fisheries from July to September. Moree is a fishing town with few alternative income generating activities. Only a few families rent a plot of land to supply the household economy. People engaged in non-fishing occupations are mainly providing services for the fisher folk, and farm produce is brought in from the nearby villages to the market in Moree, especially from the nearby Ewe/Ada migrant settlement Twuwiiim.<sup>3</sup>



Map 1. Ethnic groups fishing along the coast of Ghana, and fishing techniques and fishing grounds on the Continental Shelf.

Large canoes with outboard motors fish with drift gill nets and purse seines. According to the chief fisherman in Moree there are 400 small canoes (down to 15-20 feet) with a crew of 8-10 men and 100 big canoes (40-50 feet) with a crew of 20-25 men. Owning a canoe is a sign of wealth which is limited to a small proportion of the population, and some canoe owners have more than one canoe. Moree has a total of 400 canoe owners. Approximately 100 of these are women, with the proportion of female canoe ownership increasing. These women are either sole owners of the canoe(s) and equipment, or co-owners with their husbands. An example of the latter is a woman who, with credit from her canoe owning husband, buys a canoe, and with her own capital buys the outboard motor and nets. In such a case, the husband may be the manager of the wife's fishing company and receive 50% of the catch until the loan is paid back. But there are also wives who lend their husbands money for the purchase of a canoe, which in turn is an advantage to her own fish supply.

When the fish is landed on one of the six landing beaches surrounding Moree, known to be the most rocky beaches in Ghana, the catch is divided amongst the crew and the canoe owner. The most common share system is to divide the catch according to the number of crew members, plus one share for the canoe, one for the net and two shares for the petrol expenses. Thus, if a canoe has 10 crew members, the number of shares would be 14. The canoe owner would get four shares and each crew member one. But with the enormous increase in petrol prices, which were exceptionally high in 1991 as a result of the Gulf War, the common procedure is now often to deduct the cost of petrol first, and then share what remains of the catch between the canoe, the net and the crew. With such a share system, the canoe owner earns substantially more than the crew members, but he/she must also bear the costs of repair, losses of nets, etc. Each crew member gets his bucket, which before the fishing trip contained food, filled with *chop fish* (fish for cooking). He gives the chop fish to his wife, or sells it if he is not married. The fishermen's income in cash is settled and paid in the canoe owner's house, every Tuesday, which is the non-fishing day.

In addition to the canoes that land fish in Moree, the women purchase fish at the nearby fish market in Elmina, and sometimes they hire trucks to buy cartons of frozen fish from the coldstores in the harbour of Tema. Another source of fish supply is the factory trawlers. Most industrial trawlers in Ghana are owned by foreign companies, but regardless of nationality, the Moreeans call them *the Koreans*. Five fish mammals in Moree, all of them canoe owners, have special agreements with the commercial trawling companies to buy fish of inferior quality, known as *dumping fish*. They also supply the crew of the trawler with fresh food, such as coco-nuts, tomatoes and *kenkey* (the typical Fante staple food made of maize). Only the five women's canoes are allowed to deal with the trawlers. Their canoes are known as *Seicos* and are registered by number, and sometimes the crew of the *Seicos* even spend a few days aboard the trawler. Little information exist on how and why



these 'contracts' developed, but the few women who obtained them are clearly in a privileged position, and so are their dependents, their daughters, sons, in-laws, canoe crew and fish carriers, who welcome this opportunity for employment during the lean season.

The price for each *head pan* of fish is settled for all traders on the beach in the morning, but this *beach price* may fall if the fish landings are large throughout the day. The prices also vary with season. The price for a pan of herring (40-50 kg) may vary between 500 and 4,000 *cedis* (\$ 1.4 – \$ 11 in 1991). In accordance with the day's beach price and the number of head pans, the wholesale price for the complete catch is settled between the canoe owner and the *standing woman*. She is a fish mammy and the intermediary link between the canoe and the fish wives. She is usually either the wife of the canoe owner or a canoe owner herself. She may have



Photo 1. A fish mammy controls the crew as they launch her canoe.

regular fish buyers, fish wives who operate on a relatively large scale, and they may in turn resell the fish to small-scale fish wives. If fish is scarce, the standing women have primary access to buy fish to smoke, and they can also choose the fish with the best quality. The standing women sell fish on credit, and are thus in a good bargaining position towards their fish buyers. Since the credit schemes of the governmental and the commercial banks have proved very unsuitable for the fishermen's needs, customs and the nature of their fishing activities, they often turn to the person who is in charge of exchange of fish for credit, for instance, when a canoe owner needs to replace a motor or net. Thus a standing woman is often also the creditor of the canoe company she is attached to. Women in such positions establish credit dependency relationships with fishermen and companies. The fishermen are seldom able to clear the whole debt, and creditors thus have a good bargaining position when the fish price is to be settled. Fish mummies who are both standing women and canoe owners, have strong and influential positions in the exchange of fish. The profit exceeding the canoe's wholesale price, is the profit of the standing woman. Thus a female canoe owner who also controls the wholesale of her canoe's catch, is in a favourable position compared to a male canoe owner, who has no direct control of that link in the market chain. She practically controls both ends, as an intermediary between production and exchange.

Most of the fish in Moree is smoked; some is salted and/or dried. The women process the fish on traditional circular mud ovens in their compound. The fish is

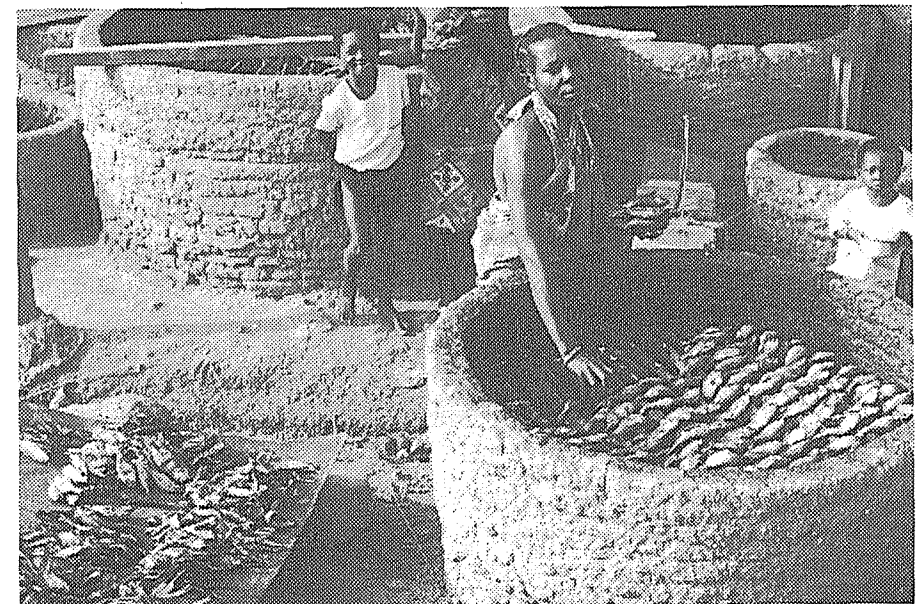
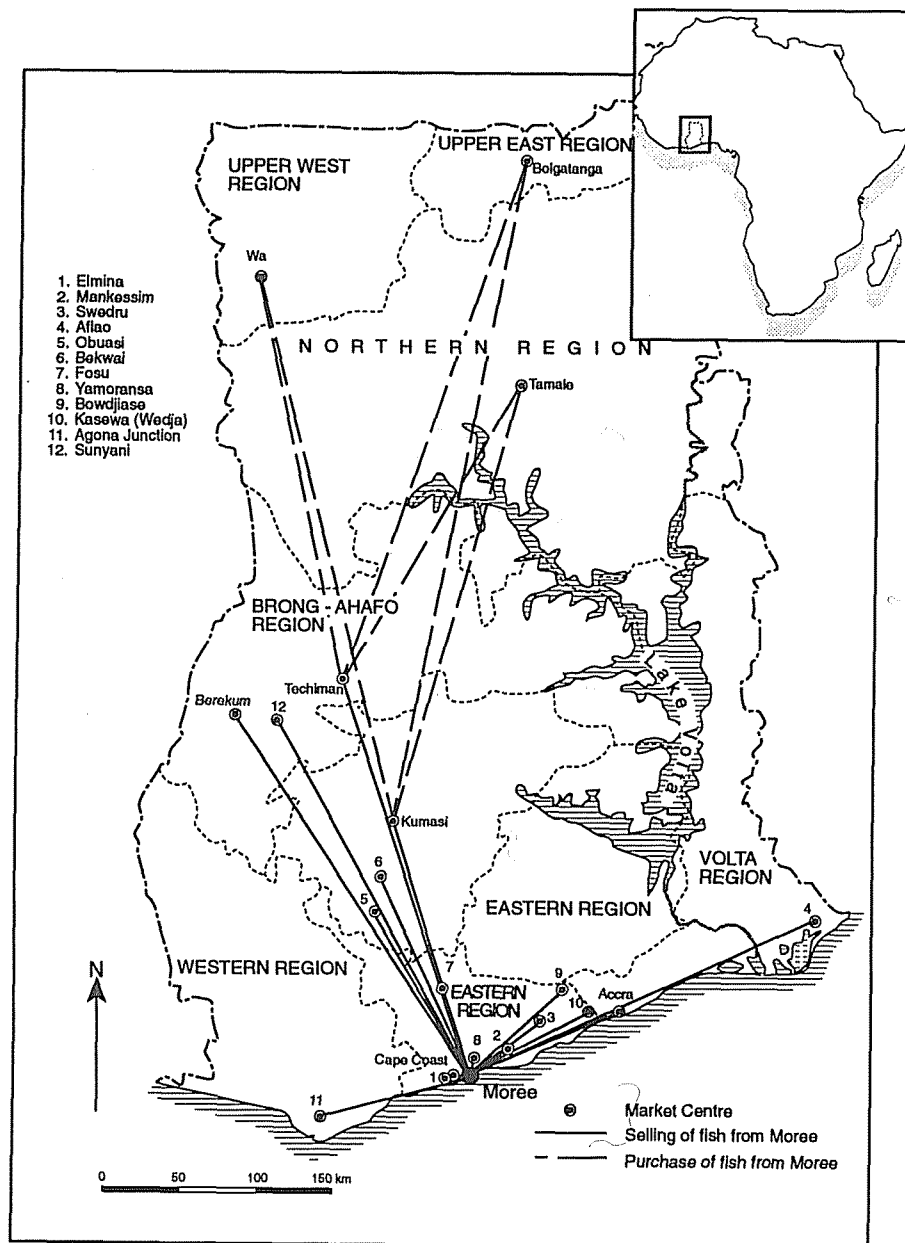


Photo 2. 'Red fish' is turned on the oven and smoked on the other side.



Map 2. The marketing region of fish from Moree.

washed and placed in up to six layers, with broom between them. The fish is smoked for 2-4 hours, which leaves the fish soft and tasty, and it can be kept for two or three days before it is spoilt. Preferably, the fish has to be sold the following day. The fish can also be smoke dried, whereby it is smoked for about seven hours. Then it can be kept for up to six months, if it is properly stored and regularly resmoked.

Markets are women's domain, and a market has its own rules, social organization and political leaders. Every commodity branch has its Queen Mother. She is elected by the other market women of her branch, on the basis of her position acquired through her abilities in trade, and her political talent. Her main function is to be a mediator when there are conflicts between the traders. The traders themselves claim that Queen Mothers have no economic advantages, nor much power over other women, but that: 'We need her when there is a problem.'

The main market for the fish traders from Moree is Mankessim for the small scale traders, and during periods of small catches, for the large-scale traders as well. But Kumasi is the most important market during the main season or when there is a bumper catch. The fish traders from Twuwim have Techiman as an additional marketing centre. The smoked fish is transported with big trucks to the inland markets, while the traders themselves go by public transport via Accra on a better road. In the bumper season, groups of traders often hire a bus (a *mama lorry* or *Benz*) and go together directly from Moree to Kumasi. Map 2 indicates the marketing region for Moree and Twuwim, and shows that the smoked fish ends up as far away as 600 km, in northern Ghana, and sometimes even further north, to Burkina Faso. Some few coastal women trade fish in the northernmost market centers, but the majority seldom go further than to Kumasi, Techiman and Berekum. It is wholesalers from the north (mostly female) who transport the fish from the big inland marketing centres to their home regions.

During the main fishing season, many of the fish mammies stay in Moree to manage their business while a daughter or younger sister, called a *representative*, is sent to Kumasi to take care of the fish trade there. The representatives travel back and forth between Moree and the market in Kumasi, or they stay in the receiving end for 2-3 months during the whole season until September. Most women stay with a *lodging woman* in the marketing town. In addition to accommodation, she provides facilities in the market and credit. Such lodging women often have a *middleman* in their service, men from Northern Ghana who organize carriers and arrange the wholesale trade. At the fish market in Kumasi, small scale traders sell fish to bypassers, but those with long experience and those who trade on a larger scale, have regular customers to whom they sell on credit, and thus long lasting trading relationships develop. Such personal contacts are of vital importance, since the whole system of trade is based on credit and trust. For instance, the traders have developed a *sending system*: Each woman has a *symbol*; a painted figure on her fish boxes, or a piece of cloth on fish baskets. The fish trader's co-operation partners in the marketing town (the representative, the lodging woman and the middleman)

must know her symbol. The truck driver also knows each trader's symbol, and he is often trusted to bring large amounts of cash from one trader to the other.

With the close integration of production and marketing, a highly specialized and vertically integrated artisanal fishery sector has developed in which 5% of the Ghanaian work force is employed (Koranteng 1990). It is a system that hitherto has proved more efficient and flexible than attempts of introducing industrial trawlers, refrigeration facilities and centralized distribution systems (Hernæs 1991). The described processing- and distribution system is necessary for the functioning of the system of fishing, or system of employment (Jentoft and Wadel 1984), as a whole. The dynamics of this system do not only involve the work tasks in all the stages the fish goes through, but also the social relations between the persons who perform them. This is of great importance when we analyze women's careers in a fishing community.

### Women as Traders and Women as Wives

Fish supply is the clue to a fish trader's success. She must have access to fish from a canoe, as well as the money to buy it. Previously, women usually had access to fish through a husband's or brother's share of the canoe's catch, and small-scale fish traders are still referred to as fish wives. Today marriage has to some degree lost its significance as a direct source of fish for a woman's trading activities, and as a way for the husband to get cash for his catch. A fish wife as an intermediary link between the fisherman and the market, is no longer a necessity. Nowadays, the women related to crew members through family or marriage, only get the chop fish. The fish the wife of a fisherman smokes and sells is bought from a standing woman. Thus a woman's ability to purchase fish rests on the amount of capital she has, but very few small-scale fish wives have a capital base, and can therefore only pay for the fish after she has sold it on the market. So in practice her access to the fish supply rests on the ability she has to obtain credit through social contacts. Access to the vital inputs, fish and credit, are mainly obtained through kinship and marriage. Thus a woman's opportunities are limited if she has no favourable relations in the fishing economy, through a husband or matrilineage.

The Fante have a matrilineal kinship system. Each person is a member of a matrilineage, the *abusua*, with a male lineage head. The *abusua* relate to a common ancestress, to whom members trace matrilineal descent (reaching back about four generations (Bleek 1987:139)). The *abusua* is divided into many matrilineal residential entities, *fie*, with a male or female head. The size and composition of the households vary with season and with its development cycle. There are many exceptions and variations, but generally the Fante practice a matri-local pattern of residence. Women and men continue to live with their matrikin after marriage. Husband and wife also have a separate private economy. The wife works in her own

*fie*, but she brings the evening meal, which it is her duty to cook, to the *fie* of the husband where she also sleeps. In polygynous marriages the wives alternate on a monthly basis in this arrangement. The husband has the obligation to give his wife (wives) a monthly or weekly sum of money for cooking, the chop money. He is also expected to pay the school fees of the children. Children mostly reside with the mother, but adolescent boys often spend a period with their father, and fostering is also very common. Thus in Moree the most common way of living is a combination of a conjugal household and a matrilineal residential group; a flexible network of persons, with arrangements for production, reproduction and consumption. This socio-economic network is for most people their only social security system, and the extent of its resources is significant for both women's and men's potential to manage economically.

Since most couples, whether in a full customary marriage or a 'lover marriage' (see Abu 1983), do not have a common residence and the children belong to the mother's lineage, breaking up a marriage is – at least practically – not very dramatic. And divorce rates are high. Hagan (1983) describes the pattern of divorce in an Effutu fishing town, where 'husband and wife have distinct, but complementary responsibilities for their own needs and the needs of the children. This system seems to create crises for the husband-wife relationship' (ibid.:192). Hagan sees clear variations in the divorce rates, with one peak in April, when the fishermen return to their families after months of seasonal migration; periods where extramarital relations are frequent. The other peak is in September after the fishing season, when the income and debts of the fishermen and fish wives is to be settled. The most important cause of divorce is not infidelity, but the problem of money and economic duties that are not fulfilled in the conjugal relation. To fulfil the duties and rights of marriage is not easy, and the problems are almost always related to fish, or as the saying goes: 'No fish means no money, and that means trouble in marriage.' A marriage, therefore, must have a significance other than a reproductive one. To be married to a fisherman opens up possibilities in the fishing economy. According to the women in Moree, husbands are the most frequent source of credit in their own fish business. However, the women also lend money to their husbands, and they stress that it is a loan that must be repayed. This mutual credit relationship makes marriage important for the ability of both men and women to make a living out of fishing. Women are regarded as the 'bank of the household'; she should make wise dispositions with the income from the fishing season, often with credit from the husband or his canoe company, in order to carry the family through the lean season. A fisherman put it this way: 'If a man gives money to the wife, she is supposed to make more money out of it.' This implies that he gives her credit to buy, process and sell fish. A wife also lends the husband money when he is broke during the lean season, so that he can cover the expenses for consumer goods, food and school fees for the children. At the end of the fishing season, the wife should pay back the loan from the income of the season's fish trade, and the husband is expected to have

earned enough during the fishing season to pay his debt to the wife. If he is a proper husband, he also gives her cloth for a dress. Thus, to some extent the significance of exchange of fish in marriage has been replaced by contributions in cash. But still the income of both spouses comes from canoe fisheries; modernized, but organized through social relations of production, and the relationships between the persons in this employment system are important for how they organize their activities, and for their potentials for success.

If a woman is born into a poor family, or does not have a husband who is able to support her with chop money and seasonal credit, she has 'nobody to turn to,' which is a category of fish wives often referred to in Moree. Women and men who lack an economically viable family network and a contact network in the fisheries, are the poor people of Moree. A base in a wealthy family, active in the fishing economy, is significant for the socialisation into fish related occupations, as well as for a person's contact network and for obtaining credit and access to fish supplies. For example, a wealthy mother may give her daughter a sum of money to 'start her own' career. But the matrilineage is not an unlimited source of credit, as expressed by a young fish wife: 'If you ask your mother, you get. But you don't get the next time.'

Both men and women face the dilemma of his or her inability to fulfil both obligations towards matrilineage, spouse and children (Oppong 1981; Bleek 1987; Hagan 1983; Vellenga 1986; Abu 1983). To be part of a security network, contributions are expected in return. Residence pattern, polygamy, seasonal periods of separation of the spouses and failure to fulfil the expected obligations are destabilising elements in the conjugal relation. People seem to be more attached to their *fie*, and there are no indications that the significance of the matrilineal, extended family is losing ground as a result of the modernization of the fisheries. When asked in what to invest a large sum of money, the majority of women in Moree answer that they would 'invest in the fish business.' Their aim is to expand from their present level, however small, and increase their profit potential. For those who are so prosperous that they can imagine any such possibility, the major goal is to build a house. This is the aim of the majority, but achieved by few. The building is often done very gradually, and many families live in incomplete houses. These incomplete houses can literally be seen as physical manifestations of people's life projects. Through their fishery-based careers, women hope to be able to establish a *fie*; a house for their children and maternal relatives, which in turn is means to an end: Economic security in old age and a social position in the community. The two spheres are closely interrelated, and success in one realm tends to generate success in the other.

### From Fish Wife to Fish Mammy

The three following cases are examples of women who all make a living in the fisheries, but with different starting-points, on different levels and with different degrees of success. The two first cases exemplify different categories of fish wives, and the third case is the success story of a fish mammy.

The case of fish carrier Adjoa illustrates how the majority of women through marriage and their own entrepreneurial activities, try to establish independent careers as fish wives. Adjoa (19) is still very young and very poor. She lives in her mother's brother's house together with the mother, the sister and her seven children. Adjoa has a nine months old daughter. The father of the child is a crew member on a canoe. With credit from the husband's canoe company and another canoe from Cape Coast, Adjoa has bought 10 head pans. They cost 4-5,000 *cedis* each, and a credit burden of 50,000 *cedis* (\$ 137 in 1991) is considerable for a small-scale fishmonger like her. However, the fact that the husband is the creditor, makes the repayment of the loan more flexible, and Adjoa is willing to take the risk. The investment in *head pans* is a conscious strategy to get an advantage over the other fish carriers. Competition is hard, she says: 'There are plenty, plenty carriers. The one who gets the fish first, gets it.' For each pan Adjoa carries, she gets 3 or 4 fishes.

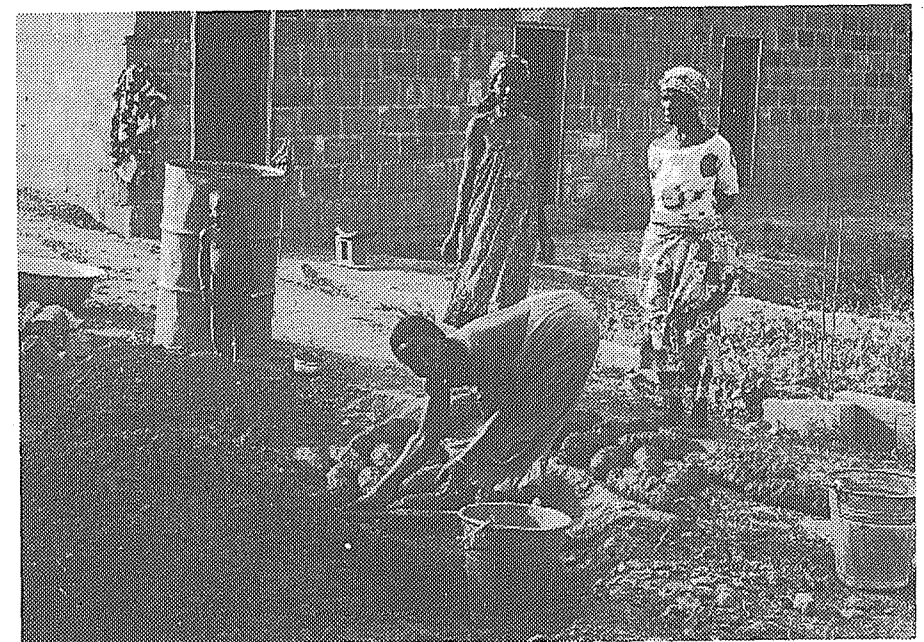


Photo 3. A fish wife builds a new smoking oven of mud. Her mother and aunt stand by.



This is so little that she seldom bothers to smoke the fish, but sells it fresh or use it in the daily cooking. But when the supply of fish is abundant, she can buy some extra fish, and smoke it on her mother's oven. She sends it with the sending system to Kumasi, where her husband's brother's wife, who lives there, receives it. Thus, marriage does not only give her access to credit, but also to a market contact in Kumasi.

The expansion of Adjoa's career as a fish wife is going to be a slow process, and she can not afford more loans to purchase larger quantities of fish. Besides, her mother's limited smoking oven capacity is a problem. But with time and with hard work, and if the coming fishing seasons bring fish, she can, over the years, maybe expand from her status as a standing woman's carrier to that of a regular fish buyer, whereby the profit potential would increase, and her dependence on credit from the husband would decrease. Adjoa's goal is to help the mother to build a house. Through marriage, then, Adjoa extends her socio-economic network which can enable her to make a career as a fish wife, which again is a strategy to achieve status in the matrilineage. Whether she has the chances to become a fish mammy is doubtful. Her capital input is not big enough to enable her to make the necessary investments.

Aba is one of the *fish wives* who have 'nobody to turn to.' She says she is 30 years old, but looks like 40. She lives in her mother's brother's house, and Aba does not know when the mother, who is on long term migration with her father to Nigeria, will return. Since both the uncle and the two other women in the house are old, Aba is more or less the only breadwinner. She has three sons, 13, 10 and 7 years old. Aba's husband works as a crew member on various canoes, but he does not earn enough to fulfil his obligations towards the wife and children. A mutually beneficial co-operation in the fisheries is therefore not possible. Thus Aba struggles really hard to make ends meet during the lean season. She explains her situation:

The men don't look after their women now and they don't give them money. Before they would give them 1000 now and 1000 then, but not now. The petrol takes it all. And the fish we get from our husbands is so little that we cannot make any profit on that either. When I go to Mankessim these days I am only left with 50 cedis.

The husband has no money to lend her, and there is nobody else she feels she can turn to. A standing woman would not give credit to a woman she knows will not be able to pay her debt. Aba and her family live on the margin and can only wait for the fishing season to start. Then the husband can go fishing again, and Aba hopefully gets credit for fish to smoke. During the three or four months before the season of activity and income, Aba has no security network to lean on, neither through the *fie*, the temporarily unemployed husband, nor from more prosperous colleagues. The lack of resources in the socio-economic network perpetuates 'failure,' and such families often enter a circle of poverty.

The two foregoing cases show the dependence of small scale fish wives on their husbands in their careers. The following case of Afi, on the other hand, shows a woman who has managed to become economically independent from both husband and matrilineage. She has achieved the dream of most women in Moree, and has established a socio-economic network in which she has a dominant position.

Afi is a successful fish mammy. She is approximately 50 years old, has given birth to 11 children of whom 9 grew up. She divorced her first husband and is now married for the second time. She owns a house and two canoes, she is standing woman, fish processor and trader, landlady and head of her *fie*. Afi and her two younger sisters have built their big houses next to each other, overlooking Moree from a hill side which has been given the name *Three Sisters*. Afi tells the story of how this all came about:

I have been doing fish trade in Moree for more than thirty years. This is the story of how we got the name *Three Sisters*. I was the first born. The house of the second born sister is in the middle, and then comes the third sister. I started by going to Aboadze [Sekondi-Takoradi] and buy fish there as I was young [approximately seventeen years old]. That fish was already smoked, and I sold it in Moree. We bought it in Aboadze for £ 1 for 100 fish, and sold it in Moree for maybe £ 1.5. Then I started buying with a truck from the coldstores in Tema for five cedis per carton. I would smoke it and sell it for six cedis. This was in the time of Kwame Nkruma [in the early sixties, when Afi was in her mid-twenties]. Then Nkruma got away, and the fish got more expensive. At that time I started teaching my younger sister [the second born] how to do the buying and smoking, and I included her in my business. And then I took the third sister too. This was at the time when the trawlers started coming [in the seventies]. All of us smoked fish, and one of us at the time went to Kumasi to sell the fish. We shared the profit amongst ourselves and shared it with our mother. Now the second born sister has got her own three canoes, I myself have two. We have built our houses next to each other. My youngest sister has now also started her own.

Afi belongs to the generation and group of fish traders who contributed to and took advantage of the introduction of new technology in the canoe fisheries. She had a base in a relatively wealthy family, and could thus take the opportunities when they were there. In other words, she had sources of starting capital. The role of her ex-husband in building her career is not clear. She is certainly independent of her present husband, who is a rich canoe owner with four wives, of which she is number two. He has been important as an advisor in her purchase of canoes and management of canoe companies, but her main co-operators are her sisters, who also have benefitted from the expansion of Afi's enterprises. Their role is not insignificant for her success. Thus the success of the *Three Sisters* is interlinked through a complex network of extended family and marriage relations which gave them access to resources and the right contacts, and at the right time. For example, Afi is one of the few in Moree who have a Seico-contract with the trawlers, and she has obtained it through the husband of her sister, who is a Tema-based trawler company's contact person in Moree.

The oldest son (31) of Afi is the captain of one of her canoes, and his two wives are Afi's regular fish buyers. Her oldest daughter (25) has gotten training as a seamstress, but goes as her representative and sells her fish in Kumasi during the main fishing season. The second oldest daughter (20) has 'started her own,' and her husband is her *motor-man* (the man in the canoe crew responsible for the outboard motor). A teenager daughter (12) is a helper and is being trained to become a skilled processor and trader as well, and one of the younger sons (16) is an apprentice as a crew member on one of her canoes. The recruitment of relatives in the fishing activities is significant for Afi's control over her employees. For example, since she does not go fishing herself, a son as canoe captain gives her more control over the operations of the crew.

Afi is an entrepreneur and administrator; she employs and manages a large number of people who depend on her for their livelihood. She keeps the accounts in her head, and she seems to be everywhere – collecting money and giving orders. Without doubt Afi has authority both as a *fish mammy* and as *Mami*, as her family and canoe crew call her, and she combines the roles of canoe owner, *standing woman*, wife, sister and mother, both when she is at home in the house and when she is on the beach managing the business.

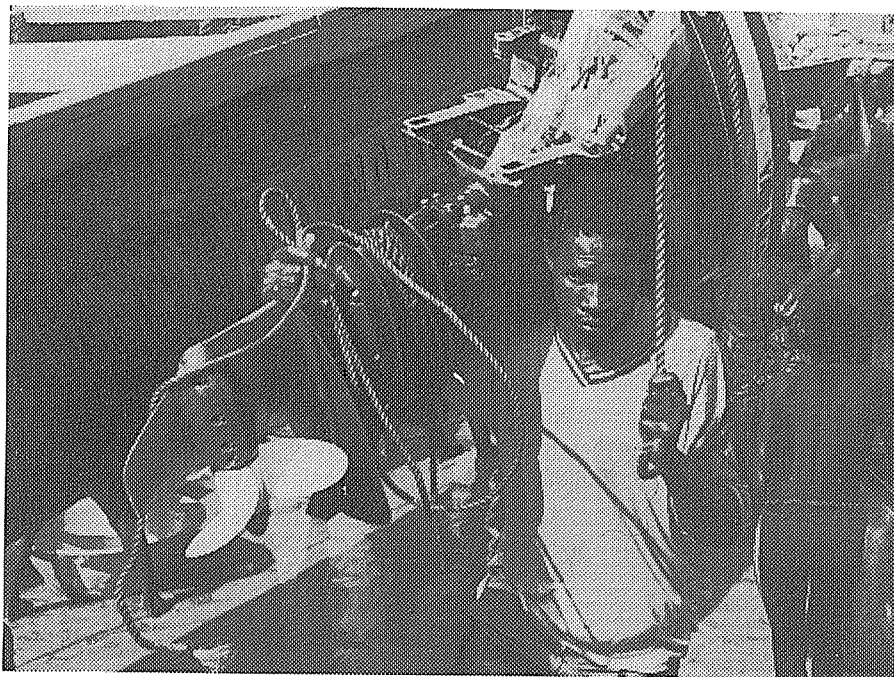


Photo 4. Afi's son-in-law and 'motor man,' carries her outboard motor ashore for maintenance.

In a society where the extended matrilineal family is so important, economic success, and hence the ability to share, can be converted into social status by letting the success 'trickle down' to other persons. Afi is a mature woman who has had success in both her domestic and economic career, and can expect to get something in return for her contributions to the children, husband and lineage when she reaches old age. She enjoys the fruits of her life and runs her business with help from many hands. Afi is a highly respected person. By making other people dependent on her support, she has created something in life, and will be remembered as a 'matron' to whom many feel grateful. In this way she can convert economic independence based on fish, into a social network that gives her economic security and social status in Moree, as well as political influence and prestige as a woman in the dual-sex hierarchy. The socio-economic network that gave her these opportunities is also the 'investment object' of her success.

### What Makes a Successful Fish Mammy?

Who are the women who have 'made it,' who have become wholesalers, intermediaries, creditors and owners of means of production; the women who enjoy relative wealth and prestige in Moree? And who are the ones who have not? We must seek explanations in the specifics of the socio-economic organization of the, in this case Fante, culture that are decisive for women's access to fish and credit, which are essential elements in their economic activities.

My suggestion is that two main strategies may be used in order to get access to fish supply and credit, which are the two deciding factors for the scale and profit potential of a woman's career in the fisheries. Firstly, there are those who use the domestic strategy. They come from wealthy families that can finance the start of their careers, or they get access to the vital inputs by marrying a canoe owner, for example. Secondly, there are those who through their entrepreneurial activities take the risk of obtaining credit from sources outside the lineage/marriage network, such as from standing women, canoe companies, or even from banks or money lenders: this is the economic or entrepreneurial strategy. This strategy requires risk taking, skill, luck and the ability to build a business network. Thus the strategy is of course a limited possibility for those 'who have nobody to turn to.' Since they lack an 'ascribed path' to success through a security network, they lack the possibility to take the risks it takes to be an entrepreneur. The women who were able to combine both the economic and domestic strategies when the opportunities for investment in new technology were there, are those who today inhabit the positions of fish mummies, with the wealth and prestige involved.

As we know, also before the introduction of the outboard motor, women had central positions as intermediaries in processing and distribution of fish. The Queen Mother of Moree (approximately 75 years old) recalls that she and other women

smoked fish in Sassandra in Ivory Coast, which they sold in Kumasi. They hired a 'wooden truck' to the river Pra, crossed the river by canoe and walked to Adanse and Bekwai, and if they could not sell all the fish there, the women would walk to Kumasi! She also recalls that her mother owned a canoe, and so did the mother's sister who was the former Queen Mother of Moree. The position of a Queen Mother is not inherited, it is obtained by merit. Thus she would not have been elected as a Queen Mother if she had not been very skilful and successful in her profession. But her background in an active and wealthy family is significant for her success. She was socialized into and encouraged in the profession of a fish trader, and she was given starting capital and got access to fish supply through the network of her mother and mother's sister.

Another fish mammy is Auntie B. (45), who inherited her mother's unmotorized canoe in the late sixties. It did not bring her much income, and after a while it was not profitable, since the other canoes were increasingly equipped with motors. But Auntie B. had security in her mother's capital, based on fish trade, which she converted into a successful career as a fish mammy. She built a house and to some degree she educated her six children. In 1988 Auntie B. was able to buy a canoe with an outboard motor, partly with credit from an Agricultural Development Bank women's group, and today she runs a small canoe company with a crew of six men. In 1981 Auntie B. divorced the father of her children because he did not fulfil his economic responsibilities towards them. Neither has he 'looked after them' after the divorce, she says, and since then she has managed without a husband. She is independent from him, and as a fish mammy she is able to secure the future through her children: 'I can never marry again. Maybe somebody comes and wants to marry me, but I do not want that. I use the money I earn on my children, but now they are grown, so maybe it's my turn to get some.' Auntie B. is an example of a woman who benefitted from the motorisation process. But an important point to be made here is that she could not have made it without the initial help of her mother.

The process of modernization through the introduction of outboard motors gave opportunities for a large number of women in fishing communities to make a living, and made the large-scale traders extremely wealthy by local standards. But also for them, social relations were of vital importance in their careers, as we saw in the success-story of Afi. She got access to credit through her mother; she had good helpers and cooperation partners in her sisters; she got a Seico-contract through the husband of her sister, and she employs family labour in her entrepreneurial activities in fish production, processing and trade. On a smaller scale, the carrier Adjoa also uses entrepreneurial skills, risk-taking and social relations in her pursuit of a career. However, conditions for success are not the same in the artisanal sector today as they were at the time when Afi and her sisters founded the base of the success that they now experience. The economic situation in Ghana and the resource situation in the Gulf of Guinea may not allow the same possibilities for viable careers on the basis of entrepreneurship as it did for those who benefitted from the expansion of

the canoe fisheries one generation back. Modernization in other contexts has been described as a transformation to 'a single-sex political system modeled on the West, where men and women find themselves pitted against each other in a unitary system of ranking' (Moran 1990:167). Such a process has been described by Christine Oppong (1981) in her book on Akan women migrating from fishing and farming communities to Accra, in the pursuit of education, elite husbands and urban life style. But instead of becoming house wives, the women in Moree continued to make a living as fish wives, and some made careers as fish mummies in their gender defined roles. The introduction of new technology in the canoe fisheries was articulated through a traditional form of production which was, and still is, clearly divided by gender, and where men and women pursued social status in separate hierarchies. In addition to employment for a large number of men and women, the expansion in fisheries clearly led to accumulation of wealth in the hands of canoe owners and wholesalers. The resulting social stratification took place along gender lines within the dual-sex hierarchies. Through their intermediary roles in the market system, combined with their roles as wives, mothers and daughters, entrepreneurial women in the fisheries in many cases outclassed men, as when they were able to combine the positions of standing woman and canoe owner. Small-scale fish traders still operate within the dual-sex status system. The large-scale fish traders and the increasing number of female canoe owners might, however, have crossed the boundary between male and female spheres and compete in the same system of ranking. Is it possible, then, that a unitary system of ranking is developing in the rural fishing communities, and not only in urban centers; a single-sex hierarchy among the elite, which consists of male and female canoe owners? In that case, the modernization of artisanal fisheries in Ghana has not first and foremost led to a greater dependency of women on men, but of small scale fishermen and fish wives on 'patrons' and 'matrons.'

## Conclusion

By virtue of their economic and domestic position, women are the backbone of the system of fishing: As intermediaries, and as mothers contributing economically to the family and reproducing the lineage and cultural values. Women possess knowledge and skills that are needed for the sustainability of the fishing economy. The viability of the fishing community is not only dependent on the fish related productive activities of the women, but also on their reproduction of human labour and of the daily needs of the family. Thus the continued importance of women as intermediaries is not solely related to economic factors and accumulation of wealth, but also to their domestic position. Economic independence is a prerequisite for a strong position as wife and mother in the community at large. But this goal is not easily achieved without the network of conjugal and matrilineal relations. Hence

women's achievements in their economic and domestic careers are mutually dependent, and the combination of roles in the two spheres is a rewarding strategy for women in their life projects.

The preceding description of the social organisation in Moree has shown that an extended socio-economic network opens up for a career in the fishing economy. Access to fish supply and credit through kinship and marriage is crucial if one is to make a living as a fish wife and achieve an independent position in relation to the husband and the matrilineage. This independence is the basis for further expansion: to become a fish mammy through entrepreneurial activity. Capital enables a woman to operate on a large scale, which implies a significantly higher profit potential. One fish mammy said: 'Fishing is like lotto. If you have a lot of money you can win a lot. Otherwise it is only *kakra, kakra* [small, small].' Some entrepreneurial women who had access to the vital inputs, seized the opportunities that came with the modernization of the canoe fleet; an opportunity they could take with their already well established role as intermediaries in exchange, processing and distribution of fish.

The interrelation between the productive and reproductive roles of *fish mammys*; how they can achieve status *as women*, is a key to an understanding of the cultural constructs of gender in this context. The values of motherhood and women as family providers goes hand in hand with the requirements for success as *fish mammys*. A combination of productive and reproductive roles is required in order to become a part of the socio-economic network, which again is a prerequisite for success in the fisheries.

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#### Notes

1. This article is based on a thesis for the *cand.polit.* degree (see Overå 1992). The material was collected during fieldwork in Moree from November 1990 to May 1991.

2. The term *fish mammy* is here used to indicate the scale of a woman's fish related activities. The term originates from *fish mother*, which in this article is called a *standing woman*. But, for example, it will appear that such a woman often also is a fish wife, in the sense that she sells the catch of her husband's canoe. Thus a fish mammy here is not synonymous with standing woman or fish mother, she is a woman who operates on a large scale in the fishing economy. However, the terms that are used in the literature (cf. Vercrujssse 1984; Ninsin 1990; Overå 1992) on categories of women employed in the fisheries need to be developed further.

3. Twuwiiim (which in Fante means *where they draw the net*) is inhabited by 200 semi-permanent settlers from Ada and the Keta area, who are Ga-Adangbe and Ewe. There are two canoes and beach seines in Twuwiiim. The Ewe and Ada combine fishing with farming, which is common in their home region (Hill 1986). Apart from selling some of their surplus of tomatoes, pepper, cassava, palm nut- and coco-nut oil, and the use of shared public facilities like drinking water, there is not much integration of the migrant settlement and Moree.

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