



Social life of Ashanti Tribe: An Overview

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Abstract: *The vibrant and unique culture of Ashanti tribe of Ghana (Western Africa) is quite interesting and attracts the attention of the researchers. Their matrilineal society, social norms, customs and traditions, marriage system are some significant aspects to be studied in depth. Hence the purpose of the present study is to throw light on features of social life of Ashanti tribe and to bring out each aspect of this society. The study is based on qualitative method of research. Informal interviews were taken by personal visit to Ghana.*

Key Words: *Ashanti, Tribe, Ghana, Social, Marriage, Custom, Tradition.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

Ashanti is the largest and last ethnic group of Akan civilization. They settled down in the rainforests of central Ghana of Western Africa. During 17th -18th century, the Ashanti empire emerged as a powerful ruling kingdom. The empire was founded in 1670. Kumasi was established as a capital by Asantehene Osei Kofi Tutu I. The whole empire flourished around with Lake Volta and Gulf of Guinea. Prosperity came to the empire because of rich gold mines. Their undaunted fighting spirit and fearless attitude declared themselves undisputed masters of western Africa. Earlier they came under the control of Denkyias, a powerful tribal clan. To whom they used to supply red clay. Since clay was called Asan, therefore they were given the name of Asante. It can also be pronounced as Ashanti. Other tribes of Akan society were the Akyems, Bonos, Kwahus, Assins, Fantes, Sefwis, Denkyias, Akwamus and Akwapims. Ashanti continuously fought against European colonial powers. Between 1823 to 1829 four wars were fought against British which are known as Anglo -Asante war. In 1901, the empire was defeated by the British and was made British Protectorate in 1902. The capital of Ashanti Kumasi came under British control in 1680. In 1935 British granted the empire self- rule sovereignty as kingdom of Asante. After that Asante revived their power again.

2. Literature Review:

Osei Kwadwo (2002), in his book, A Handbook on Asante culture, has thrown light on the culture of Ashanti tribes. The book has presented a detailed picture of socio- religious and cultural life of Ashanti tribe. In his book, an outline of Ashante History (2009), he has given a detailed information of foundation of Ashanti empire, its expansion and contribution of Asante Chiefs and Queen mothers. Fortes M.,Steel and R.W.,Ady P.have done survey based anthropological study (Ashanti Survey An Experiment in Social Research) on Ashanti culture and Society. Roy Indrani (2014), in her article "Wailing Wall of Elmina" has thrown light on plights of slaves and history of Trans- Atlantic Slave trade in Ghana.

3. A Glance at Social Life of Ashanti :

The Ashanti society was based on hierarchical system. The King and Aristocracy class were at the top of social hierarchical ladder. Common people were below Aristocracy. Slavery was lowest class in social hierarchy. At present, slavery does not exist in Ghana. It was banned during British period. Social distinction in classes is negligible.

Position of women in Ashanti society was quite good. Since Ashanti society was matrilineal, importance was given to mother and women of society. Women occupied important position in society. They were given authority, freedom, decision making power, political, social and religious powers as well. In olden days, along with the chief of the clan, queen mother played an important role. In all major decisions of society, queen mother's opinion was essential. The

queen mother held the second position in the state. She was next to the chief or king. Queen mother had so much power that she had the right to nominate a male for stool (Symbol of Chieftaincy). If her first nominee was rejected by the kingmakers, she had the right to nominate the second candidate for the stool. If second candidate was rejected, she could nominate the third candidate also. She was the principal advisor of the chief. When an elder got offended by the chief, He had the right to complain against the chief to queen mother. She was regarded as the head of all women of the clan. During colonial rule, queen mothers lost their importance because Europeans made contacts only with the male members. In Post- colonial period, traditional authority of queen mother is accepted. In 1988, the Ashanti Queen mother Association was formed. Around 44 women leaders from Ashanti region joined as members in this association. They look after women related issues. In 2010 the National house of chief in Ghana announced inclusion of 20 queen mothers. In 2014, the Ghanaian Chieftaincy minister, Henry Seidu Danna allowed queen mother's participation in house of chiefs. Today also queen mothers are selected from royal families of each town and village. They are spiritual heads of the community. They have the power to appoint the chiefs. Nana Konadu Yiadom III is the present queen mother of Asante kingdom. She is the 14th queen mother of the kingdom. In present days also Ashanti women are highly respected in family. They have political and social powers. They have full freedom to take all decisions, they have the right to education and property.

Ashanti customs and traditions are very rich. They give importance to some etiquettes. Greeting people is a very important etiquette of Ashanti. A person who does not greet a passer-by is considered as an uncultured person. The elder people feel disrespected if they do not get greetings from anyone. The Ashanti people consider the use of right hand very auspicious. Hence eating, greeting, shaking hand, all are done with right hand. Even marriages break if greetings are not maintained in family. People greet in morning (*Maakye*) Afternoon (*Maaha*), evening(*Maadwo*) and night (*Dayie*). When any delegate or guest wants to greet Chief of the clan or queen mother, he or she has to take prior permission and has to follow some rules. He or she has to remove sandal while greeting the Chief and Queen mother. Handshaking is done right to left anti clockwise. Greetings in funeral ceremony (Figure 3.) is also very essential.

Puberty rite ceremony (Figure 1.) was celebrated among Ashanti tribe. It was done to declare adulthood of a woman in front of the community. The ceremony was called *Bragoro*. It was a rule in their society not to indulge any sexual relations before declaration of puberty. If any girl becomes pregnant before this declaration, she was punished by the chief of the clan. This system was practiced to prevent premature pregnancy in society. In earlier days, Ashanti celebrated puberty stage of girls in a ceremonial form. When an Ashanti girl experienced mensuration for the first time, she had to observe some strict rules. It was the rule to present that girl to the queen mother for inspection and declaration of puberty. The queen mother would inspect her breast and also inspect her whether she had undergone menses or not. After inspection, queen mother used to declare her adulthood. After declaration by queen mother, parents of that girl would announce puberty rite ceremony. The girl had to spend six days in seclusion. Several restrictions were put on menstruated girl during this time, for example not entering to stool houses, not fetching water, she should not cook during that period etc. All neighbours were invited in Puberty rite ceremony. Food items like palm oil, eggs, fowls, meat, fish and yams were brought for the ceremony. On the first day of ceremony girl was bathed and to be seated on a white stool. The stool was kept on a blanket. One egg was kept inside the stool. The girl had to seat three times on that stool. Any elderly women would say aloud in Twi language that the girl has attained womanhood and that's why they were showing her to people. Adwera leaves were put into water in a brass pot to sprinkle holy water on the girl. The girl was clothed with four-yard cloth covering her body from leg to armpit level. Her breasts and shoulders were exposed to public. She was given mashed yam and egg to eat. Many present and gifts are given to her. In modern days, Ashanti women take objection to expose their bare upper part to public. Strict rules of puberty rite are not followed now. According to one survey 9100 adolescents got pregnant in Ashanti region in first half of 2017. Hence the association of queen mothers in Ashanti Region has expressed concern over increasing rate of promiscuous lifestyle of teenagers. The association is thinking over to reintroduce puberty rite rules to prevent teenagers' pregnancy.

Marriage is an important social institution of Ashanti. It is one of the important pillars of the Ashanti culture. Ashanti people consider marriage as the sacred union of male and female. But following marriage rituals is not very significant for them. They marry in mutual understanding. There are some rules and regulations in marriages which they have to follow. Marriage in same clan is prohibited. Children of two brothers or two sisters are not allowed to marry. However, children of a man and children of his sister can marry. A man cannot marry two sisters. If a man divorces his wife, his relative should not marry that woman. If a woman divorces her husband, her relative should not marry the man. There are six types of marriages practiced among Ashanti. In Bethrol marriage (*Asiwa*), the marriage is fixed before birth of a girl child. It was done only on assumption. It was done in olden days and is not followed in present age. In Widowhood marriage, after death of husband a woman is allowed to marry the relative of her husband so that she should not face

any hardship and can bring up the children easily. In ordinary marriage, couple decide to marry in mutual understanding. After their decision, parent's permission is taken and marriage date is fixed. In an unofficial or concubinage marriage, girl and boy live together without any marriage. Another type of marriage is replacement marriage which was earlier done by village chief. After conquering any place, he would marry any woman of conquered area. If woman died for any reason, another woman from same family was married to that man. In debt substitution marriage, If anyone cannot repay the loan, he offers his daughter to money lender. Among Ashanti tradition of bride price is practiced. The groom has to pay bride price to the bride. Without paying bride price, a boy cannot marry a girl. In old days, Ashanti tribe encouraged multiple marriages and giving birth to many children. The couple who produced ten children were awarded. The award was called Badudwan. They encouraged increase in population because war, epidemics and famine were threat to population and for adding more earning member in family. Now a days they have adopted family planning steps.

Entertainment brings in them lots of energy and enthusiasm. Music and dance form an integral part of their life. Almost in every occasion, they dance and sing to entertain themselves. They sing individually or in a group. In Ashanti empire, singing was performed to do praises of their kings and chiefs. During wars, "Aho" songs were sung to give encouragement to the warriors to fight bravely in the wars. They sing even to abuse their opponents. During moonlight nights girls sing and play. At the weddings, they sing, play drums and dance. They used to sing at the time of happiness and also at the time of sorrow. That's why even at the funeral ceremony, they play drums, sing and dance. The churches too have their singing bands and choirs. They organise various types of orchestras such as Adowa Orchestra, Kete Orchestra, Mpintin Orchestra, Sikyi Orchestra, Penpen siwa Orchestra Ntumpun Orchestra etc. Various types of drums and instruments are used to entertain people. Drums play an important role in all entertainment programmes of Ashanti.

Ashanti's have unique dressing sense. Their way of dressing depicts their culture. Ashanti men wear a short inside and cover the whole body with a long cloth in a typical style. They use one type of cloth known as Kyekye cloth. They have discovered one type of tree which has very thick and soft bark which is used to weave kye kye cloth. Kyekye cloths are used by low -income group while the chief queen and wealthy people use Kente cloths. Kente (Figure 2.) cloth is considered the attire of Royalty. Queen mother uses two pieces of Kente cloths. Ordinary women use single cloth. Use of two pieces of cloth or single piece of cloth reflects the financial condition or social status of their husband also. Another type of cloth is Andrika cloth. The Andrika (Figure 4.) cloth is local woven cloth with different stamped symbols. They are stamped with different designs. These designs were local symbols with deep meaning such as Gye Nyamy symbol indicates God is supreme. Earlier Andrika cloths were costly for ordinary people therefore it was used only by wealthy people or members of royal family. However, when people started producing kyekye cloth with Andrika designs, it became cheap and even poor people started to use this. When British colonised Ghana, they introduced European cotton here. European cloth was very cheap hence people started to use it, as a result local handmade textile industries of Ghana faced a great set back and that broke the backbone of local textile industry. At this time the local crafts men shifted to produce plain white cloth calico which they dyed in brown or black to produce mourning cloth (Figure 5.). Even they used Andrika stamps on them. Kente cloth has great demand in International Market. In early part of 20th century silk was also used by Ashanti.

They wear a typical hairstyle which is known as *Densinkran*. It is a hairstyle worn by queen mothers and women of Ashanti people. Hair style is to keep short cut hair at the edges of the head. Hair is dyed with charcoal or black dye. This hairstyle is popular as royal identity. Now a days, women use various artificial hair wigs to cover their short hair.

Twe is their official and first language. This is also their official language. This language is used by common mass. Due to long colonial rules, English has also become popular language and it is in maximum use. Most of the people know English.

The common diet of Ashanti are plantain, cocoyam, yam, cassava, banana, rice and corn etc. The most popular dish is Fufu. Fufu is cooked from plantain, yam, cocoyam or cassava pounded together to produce a solid substance which is used as food. Different varieties of soup are consumed along with Fufu. They include *Abekwan* (palmnut soup), *Nkrakra* (light Soup) *Abunabunu* (Green leaves soup) *Nkatekwan* (Groundnuts Soup) etc. Other staple foods are *Apesie* (Cooked yams) *Akapinkyi* (Toasted and mashed plantain mixed with groundnut paste) etc. Non vegetarian diet consists of Chicken, fish, duck, hen, turkey, egg etc.

Ashanti constructed a variety of shelters. Earlier they used to live in caves. When their occupation was only hunting, they built hut in forest known as *Nnanso*. After knowledge of farming, they started to build huts near farm which are

known as *Sese*. The huts which are in villages are known as *Mpapadan*. In such types of huts, they used wooden plank and palm branches. Now a days, they construct houses by using wooden planks.

Slavery existed in Ashanti kingdom from long back. The captives during war or clan conflicts were declared as slaves. Very often slaves were sacrificed along with their masters. They believed that slaves would serve their masters even after death. During Portuguese colonisation, Portuguese also got involved in slave trade. Slavery was banned in Ghana in 1807 during British Period but fully abolished in 1870.

4. Conclusion:

In concluding remark, it can be said that under the influence of modernity as well as technological advancement many changes have come in Ashanti society. Traditional culture has gradually been replaced with modern culture. Even then, continuity in traditional culture, customs and social norms can be clearly observed in Ashanti society. They feel proud to continue their traditional system as heritage. In marriage ceremony, funeral ceremony, etiquette, clothing, cuisines old traditional style is followed in some modified form. Earlier existence of slavery was like a dark scar on Ashanti culture. During British rule it was fully banned. There is no social distinction existed in present society. Due to colonial rule, many were converted into Christianity hence western influence can also be observed in the society. Rich and vibrant culture of Ashanti is an invaluable heritage for Ghanian. It should be preserved for future generation.

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Images :



Figure 1. Performance of Puberty rite(nativeeyetravel.com)



Figure 2. Wearing *Kente* cloth (Photo credit to crystalkente.com)



Figure 3. Funeral ceremony of Ashanti (Photo credit Urbanana.tumb)



Figure 4. *Andrika* cloth with symbols (www.pinterest)



Figure 5. Black Mourning cloth: A Funeral costume (Photo credit to Dr. Indrani Roy)