

Women's Discourse on Social Change in Nzema (Ghanaian) Maiden Songs

K.E. Agovi

Introduction

This paper deals with one aspect of Nzema *Ayabomo* songs. It examines women's discourse on the theme of social change in the songs. In particular, it attempts to analyze the different ways in which Nzema women appropriate a profound awareness of changes in their environment as a form of empowerment to undermine *fixed* perceptions of women and their seeming marginality in the social process.

Of all the cultural productions undertaken in the Nzema area by women, *Ayabomo* is perhaps the most significant. It is the only event that unites a broad spectrum of women of all ages. Its recreational appeal is widespread. Although there are differences in the range of songs from one place to another, common tunes, melodies, rhythmic structures, stock ideas, and themes can be found in the repertoire of all the performing centers.¹ In a real sense, therefore, *Ayabomo* provides an outlet for assessing defined attitudes, perceptions, and reactions as being representative of Nzema women on significant social issues.

Historical Trends in *Ayabomo*

A careful study of the language and themes of the *Ayabomo* reveals that it is a pre-colonial cultural event. A large number of the songs contain archaic Nzema words; in addition, the ideas and world-view in some of the songs seem to reflect epochs of an earlier, pre-colonial Nzema society when hierarchical social structures and values were preeminent. There are songs

¹ For details, see Agovi 1989.

that reflect a “transitional period” immediately following the imposition of colonial rule, and there are still others that deal with stresses and tensions of more recent times. Hence, generally speaking, there appear to be three broad phases of development in the *Ayabomo*.

In the first phase, the *Ayabomo* seem to have emerged as a response to the need for women to bond together as a distinct social unit in order to share their marital problems publicly. Probably as a result of the high incidence of intra-group conflicts, the need was also felt to set up defined standards of moral comportment. Accordingly, there was a marked groping, in some of the earlier songs, towards female self-censorship in which insult, ridicule, and satire became the tools for shaping group morality so that women generally would fit the mold of male expectations.

After the establishment of colonial rule in the early nineteenth century in Southern Ghana, including the Nzema area, the period witnessed a “loosening of tongues” in the *Ayabomo*. Women began to use the *Ayabomo* to assert certain rights in marriage and to mildly “protest” when these expectations were not met or frustrated. Incipient attempts at *deliberate* insult of men on gender lines began to emerge in the songs. Such “loosening of tongues” in this sense also coincided with a certain drive towards openness in Nzema society, particularly towards the early twentieth century. By the end of the 1950s when travel, money, education, trade, and commerce had become intensified in the colonial situation, a new female morality began to evolve in the *Ayabomo*. This new morality was aggressive, defiant, urgent, possessing also a sense of mission. The significance of this third phase in the *Ayabomo*, particularly its success in reordering social perspectives, interpersonal relationships, and in particular male-female power relations in Nzema society, will constitute the subject matter of this paper.

Research Area

The material for this paper was collected from eight villages and towns between Axim and Half-Assini in the western region of Ghana. The area is located between two major cities, Sekondi-Takoradi in Ghana and Abidjan in Côte d’Ivoire, each less than one hundred kilometers away. While the main occupations of the people here are fishing and farming, there is also intense traffic in economic ventures. A large proportion of the

female population in the research area is engaged in trade, commerce, and marketing. The volume of such economic activities has rapidly increased with the completion of the Trans-Africa highway about a decade ago. The highway effectively links the area with a number of other urban and commercial centers in both Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. It has also led to the creation of "seasonal workers," mainly for the fishing and mining industries in both countries. These economic migrants, who are predominantly Nzema males, have helped to reduce the population density in the area. Added to this is the effect of educational institutions that turn out educated youths who are also forced to migrate to the cities as job-seekers.

This pattern is consistent with national demographic trends. Since 1948, urbanization in Ghana has been especially rapid, with the result that today nearly 31% of Ghanaians live in a city or town. According to a recent survey, between 1960 and 1970, more than half of urban growth was caused by migration from rural areas. At the same time, the fastest growing towns in Ghana as a whole tended to be market and transport centers or suburbs of large cities (cf. Nabila 1988:1-8, Dickson 1984). These trends have significantly created imbalances in the age-sex composition of the urban and rural areas "due mainly to the selective nature of migration undertaken by males in the working age groups in search of employment in urban areas" (Batse 1990:61; cf. also de Graft-Johnson 1974). As a significant consequence, the predominantly rural outlook of the communities in the research area seems to be radically affected by this constant interaction with urban trade and commerce. As we shall see, echoes of this phenomenon will form the major considerations in this paper.

In the Arena of Performance

Normally, *Ayabomo* performances are not arranged beforehand.² They take place spontaneously but at designated public arenas. These are often located in the center of a village or town and are always open to the general public. Each performance takes place in the evening and is usually initiated by a few participants who are randomly joined by others as they become attracted to the performance-in-progress.

The public location of the *Ayabomo* is significant in many ways. It

² They are performed as prearranged events only at the funeral of a maiden.

allows for an open-air dialogue both among the female participants and with the community at large. Hence, audience in this event is bi-focal: the women participants constitute their own primary audience, speaking to each other, sharing knowledge of their real-life experiences, and affirming their common plight in society. Simultaneously, they also engage in a dialogue with the community, represented by those who are present or are within hearing distance. They reach out to this audience in a dialogue whose agenda gradually unfolds from one song to the other. This also includes debates, arguments, and points of view that are intended to inform, persuade, or highlight central issues of female concern (cf. Agovi 1989:15-20).

Indeed, the arena in the *Ayabomo* is considered a place for homely truths. Participants are enjoined to be honest, truthful, and open about their real-life experiences and about social realities. According to one informant, “if you see that your marriage is not going well, you put it in the song. Your friends add to it; your loved ones also add some more. Then it continues.”³ Another observed as follows: “You see, I struggle with you, I work on the farm with you, grow rice with you. Then you leave me, take another woman, and spend the money on her! Why won’t I ridicule you in the *Ayabomo*?”⁴ At Tikobo, I was told that women find it difficult to criticize their husbands face to face because “they beat us when we do so; but through the *Ayabomo*, we feel free to tell them our piece of mind.”⁵ Within the performance itself, there are built-in verbal features that tend to suggest the truthfulness of what is said. Spontaneous shouts of acclamation such as “so-ε-ε” or “yiε-ε-ε” are used to greet not only the imaginative use of language, but more significantly those ideas and viewpoints that are known to be true. These are usually uttered by close friends who are also participants and who happen to know or be familiar with the situations depicted. Embodied in the *Ayabomo* are verbal mechanisms of verification that allow the audience and other participants to assess the factuality of

³ Interview with Madame Mieza Aku, a 70-year-old resident of Bokazo at an *Ayabomo* performance on 23 April 1991.

⁴ Participant who readily offered this view at the interview with Madame Mieza Aku (see note 3).

⁵ Interview with Madame Nyameke Ekputi at Nkroful on 23 April 1991.

utterances and viewpoints as reflecting real-life experiences.

When the women appropriate the public arena for the *Ayabomo*, they also establish a metaphysical relationship with the performance space in order to enact a profound sense of female bonding. An aspect of this bonding is the projection of a collective voice that is entirely their own. Here, voice and space seem to merge together to achieve a certain autonomy. Throughout *Ayabomo* performances, we are made to confront this sense of spatial autonomy as a self-defining entity, a place of empowerment where the women are free to sing, mime, dance, and clap as a group. In this metaphysical space, the women are supremely themselves, expressing wit, sarcasm, and laughter in a common intellectual and creative enterprise.

As the women perform, they group themselves into a *closed* circle. This also emphasizes their sense of bonding. The circular formation, particularly in relation to the space that is appropriated, tends to demarcate performers from the audience; it separates speaker from listener, actor from “acted upon,” insider from outsider. It sets the women apart, simultaneously heightening their sense of “togetherness” and “separateness.” One can also mention the uniform rhythms of hand-claps as part of this common purpose. Other significant features include verbal shouts of encouragement that stress a continuing sense of bonding throughout the performance. These shouts are spontaneous and short. They can be uttered by any participant who instantly feels the need to reinforce the group’s esprit de corps. Seemingly meaningless expressions such as “yε-ε-εε,” “hε-ε-εε,” or “εε-ε-εε” are often used to raise or indicate the intensity of the bonding in the performance. Sometimes, the same effect is achieved through direct verbal exhortations such as “ko yeε” (unity!), “bezɔnu” (let’s hold together!), “besa nu” (your hands together), and “bε bo nu-εε” (knock your hands together!). These are further reinforced by special songs that are calculated to evoke bonding. These songs may be introduced at the beginning of a performance or in the course of it. The following song is a good example:⁶

i

Maidens, maidens in a group
We are only singing Ayabomo songs

⁶ Recorded at Ehoaka on 24 April 1991.

We are not in a group war!

ii

Maidens, Maidens, youthful maidens
I bid you all a fine evening!

iii

Mothers of the household
I have come to lure
Away your husband!

iv

If you don't leave him alone
I will hit you with something!

v

An erect object: there's nothing to it
Only a piece of half-cut bread!⁷

vi

Yes, we are singing Ayabomo songs
No fight is allowed.

vii

We are only playing
There is no fight in it.

viii

Maidens, maidens, yes
We are only singing Ayabomo songs!

The song attempts to establish an “in-group morality” for the performance by highlighting the need for the group to maintain restraint, tolerance, and goodwill. To this effect, the structure of the text insists on only one line of argument: the *Ayabomo* is a group activity; it involves conflict, tension, and ridicule. But it is important for every participant to realize that it is only a game, a play, not a “group war,” so “no fight is allowed.” For, after all, the bone of contention—“an erect object” that resembles a “piece of half-cut bread”—has nothing to it. This kind of evocation has a sobering effect on personal animosities in the arena while serving to elevate the primacy of

⁷ A euphemistic reference to a circumcised penis.

group consciousness.

Thus through such modes of verbal and non-verbal expressions, the women establish “bonding” as an essential factor of the performance. They prime themselves, psychologically, to confront dangers of social, domestic, and interpersonal conflicts by means of a heightened sense of solidarity in the performance arena. From that point onwards, they become empowered to deal with a variety of issues, including especially their collective response to the phenomenon of social change.

Social Change in the *Ayabomo*

A major concern of the *Ayabomo* is the confrontation and negotiation of the changes being experienced in Nzema society. Several issues emerge under this theme—as is true of other themes of the *Ayabomo*—but in this regard, the women dramatize a distinctive relationship to social change. They see it as an avenue for asserting a liberated selfhood; it affords them the opportunity to bring forth an *inner* essence that is then brought to bear on social realities. Above all, they employ the theme of social change to assert a distinctive female voice and identity that is firmly on the side of change and progress. The manipulation of social change and the establishment of a definite relationship to it unfold in the *Ayabomo* as a process of definition.

Broadly speaking, however, there appear to be three related concepts of social change in the *Ayabomo*, each with its own internal discourse. There is first the concept of social change as an “outside force,” an alien, external imposition on the women’s consciousness. Second, in some of the songs, it emerges as an *alterer* of consciousness in which an alternative point of view on social realities is presented. Finally, closely related to the latter, social change becomes synonymous with a state of being where the values of change are internalized, giving rise to a deeply personal identification with forces of change on the part of the women.

Social Change as an Outside Force

In the songs that deal with this theme, social change is evoked as a *living* reality in the environment. It is both intrusive and pervasive,

affecting all aspects of life. The women take pains to underline its tangibility, manifestations, effects, and, of special significance, their own attitude towards it. This is what is dramatized in the following song collected from Akoto.⁸

i

Soloist: Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ
 Chorus: Yε-Sεε-ε
 Soloist: Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ
 Chorus: Yε-Sεε-ε
 Soloist: Me yeye mahile wɔ kε
 Chorus: Yε-Sεε-ε
 Soloist: Me suzu mahile wɔ kε
 Chorus: Yε-Sεε-ε
 Soloist: Ele kenlema a enredo yemenle Kofi o daa
 Chorus: Ayi O ma menga mengile wɔ o daa
 Ele kenlema a enredo yemenle Kofi o daa

My friend, let me tell you

Yes sir!

My friend, let me tell you

Yes sir!

I want to take it out for you (to see)

Yes sir!

I want to suggest to you

Yes sir!

That if you are handsome, you're nowhere

Near Mr. Kofi at all . . .

Yes, let me tell you my friend,

If you're handsome you will never be

Anywhere near Mr. Kofi at all.

ii

Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ

Yε-Sεε-ε

Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ

Yε-Sεε-ε

Menga mengile wɔ

Yε-Sεε-ε

Ele kpale a enredo yemenle Jimmy o daa

⁸ Recorded at Akoto near Anyinasi on 23 April 1991 at about 7 pm.

My friend, let me tell you
Yes sir!
My friend, let me tell you
Yes sir!
Allow me to tell you
Yes sir!
If you are good, you will never be
Anywhere near Mr. Jimmy at all.

iii

Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ
 Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ
 Me yeye mahile wɔ kɛ
 Ele kɛnlɛma a enredo yɛmenle A.E. o daa.

Let me tell you, my friend
Let me tell you, my friend
I want to spell it out to you
If you are handsome, you are nowhere
Near Mr. A.E. at all.

iv

Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ
 Me yeye mahile wɔ kɛ
 Me yeye mahile wɔ kɛ
 Ele kɛnlɛma a enredo teacher Kwakye o daa.

Let me tell you, my friend
Let me tell you, my friend
I want to spell it out to you
If you are handsome, you are nowhere
Near teacher Kwakye at all.

v

Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ
 Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ
 Ateaba danger menga mengile wɔ
 Ele kpale a enredo Sister Kobla o daa.

Let me tell you, my friend
Let me tell you, my friend
My sweetheart danger, let me tell you
If you're good, you will never
Come near Sister Kobla at all.

vi

Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ
 Me yeye mahile wɔ kɛ
 Mɛbiza mahile wɔ kɛ
 Ele kɛnlɛma a enrɛdo yɛmenle Agovi o daa.

*My friend, let me tell you
 I want to spell it out to you
 I want to divine it to you
 If you are handsome, you're
 Nowhere near Mr. Agovi at all.*

vii

Ayi ma menga mengile wɔ
 Meka mahile wɔ kɛ
 Ele kɛnlɛma a enrɛdo yɛmenle Daniel o daa.

*Let me tell you, my friend
 I am telling it to you
 If you're handsome, you will
 Never come near Mr. Daniel at all.*

Certain features stand out in the discourse. First, there is a narrative framework in which soloist and chorus move towards a consensus on a given point of view. At the end of each soloist's "testimony" (as fully exemplified in stanza i), the chorus agreeably reiterates, in total agreement, the essential point of view of the soloist. Embodied in the chorus's response is the recurrent feature of "yɛ-sɛɛ-ɛ," a direct re-creation of the English addressive "yes sir." Also related to this is the admixture of honorific addressives in both Nzema and English that are used to precede names: "yɛmenle" (Nzema equivalent of "Mr.," normally used for educated persons), "teacher," "sister," and sometimes "brother." Moreover, in addition to local day names in the text, such as Kofi, Kwame, and Kwasi—names that carry traditional religious assumptions—there are also references to modified Christian names: "Jimmy," "Daniel," and, in a similar version of the song collected from Elena, "Stephen" and "Angelina." Similarly, there are anglicized addressives such as "A.E.,"

“T.K.,” and “Baker.”⁹

Gradually, as the song unfolds, the women graphically evoke the *distortions* in the social environment that can be traced to identifiable forces of social change: there are language distortions, distortions in identities, and distortions in cultural formulations. These are seen as the direct result of an alien language, religion, and educational system in contact with the Nzema cultural environment. While the magnitude of the distortion seems total and overwhelming, the women regard it as a blessing. Completely unlike attitudes toward similar depictions in contemporary African written literature, the women in this *Ayabomo* song seem to display an uncritical acceptance and admiration for such distortion. There is an insistence on “telling” what has been seen as an *observed* fact, hence the different levels of disclosure: “tell you,” “take it out for you,” “suggest it to you,” “spell it out for you,” “divine it for you.” At the end of it all there is the awareness that out of the raging distortions in the environment emerges the women’s ideal man, their new kind of man who is both “handsome” and “goodness.” The notions of goodness and handsomeness are conceived as concepts closely related to modern classroom education and Christian training. They therefore carry the implication of a male who is educated, cultured, neat, morally sound, and well-mannered. Such a male is not only a “new” and “ideal” person, but also the creature of the eruptive processes of acculturation.

The impression of social change as a disruptive and beneficent force in the society is also true of this song:¹⁰

i

I will buy you underwear
 I will buy you spectacles
 I will buy you a car
 If only no rival will beat me
 I will do all these things for you
 So send me something in return
 When someone comes my way.

⁹ These names feature in a similar version of the song recorded at Elena on 25 April 1991.

¹⁰ Recorded at the Ehoaka performance, 24 April 1991.

Chorus:

Oh! my dear seaman boy¹¹
I love you so much
That I will do all these things for you
So send me something
When someone comes my way.

ii

I will buy you clothes
And wash them for you everytime
If I wash your clothes for you
And I am not beaten by a rival
I will do everything else for you
So send me something
When someone comes my way.

iii

I will buy you shoes
Buy you slippers
If I buy you all these things
And my rival does not beat me
I will do everything for you
So send me something
If someone comes my way.

iv

I will buy you a watch
Buy a car for you
If I buy them all for you
And no rival beats me
I will do everything for you
So send me something
If someone is coming my way.

v

I will buy you books
I will buy you pens
If I buy them for you
And someone's daughter
Does not beat me

¹¹ A term of endearment that also suggests an awareness of seafaring activities.

I will do so many other things for you
 So send me something in return
 If someone comes my way.

vi

I will buy you a bicycle
 I will buy you an airplane
 If I buy all these things for you
 And someone's daughter—Blackie—
 Does not beat me
 I will do everything for you
 So send me something
 When someone is coming my way.

vii

I will buy you a tape recorder
 Adorn your feet with golden sandals
 When you see a new woman, you sack me!
 Oh! my beloved seaman boy
 How dearly I love you
 I will do anything for you
 So send me something in return
 If someone comes my way.

Although eloquent expressions of love, tenderness, and affection stand side by side with cynicism and fears, there is a clear affirmation of faith in the enhancing power of *imported* material objects circulating in the society. The careful catalogue of the items from “spectacles,” “watches,” “shoes,” “books,” and “pens” to “cars,” “airplanes,” “bicycles,” and “tape-recorder” reveals an attitude that regards them as prestigious (cf. Hardiman 1974). They have become representative symbols of “good living” in the modern context; these symbols carry overtones of nobility, decency, and taste associated with education, wealth, and cultivation. The women are aware that this new materialism has a capability, a power, that facilitates, induces, and cements human bonds. It is the means of consolidating interpersonal relationships in the modern context. By means of this itemization, we are suddenly made to confront a new reality in the society—an awful truth, if you like—that there is now a palpable materialism hovering out there in the larger society that it is absolutely necessary to the ordering of human ties.

The compelling nature of the new materialism also affects women's

aspirations in marriage:¹²

i

I will build my aluminum-roofed house
So that my loved one will sleep in it
when he comes

Chorus:

Ayabomo O yanosia

ii

I will build my house of cement blocks
So that my loved one will sleep in it
when he comes

iii

Let us go there
Child of another woman
Let us go there

iv

Let us go there
My friend, let us go there

v

Let us reach there
My friend, let us reach there

vi

I will build my aluminum-roofed house
So that my boy will get a place to sleep
when he comes back

vii

Let us meet there
My beloved, let us meet there

viii

Let us stay here
My friend, let us stay here

¹² Tikobo *Ayabomo* performance, 23 April 1991.

ix

Let us go too
 Child of another woman
 Let us go there, too.

x

Let us go there
 Kofi, let us go there.

The connection between a modern house of cement blocks and aluminum roofs and exhortations to travel may not be readily apparent. In Ghana generally, there is a persistent saying, usually proverbial, that the bird that refuses to fly dies of hunger. In other words, the able-bodied person who refuses to go away or travel to seek his or her fortune away from home is never believed to prosper. To the women in the *Ayabomo*, it is by encouraging their men to go and work in the city that material prosperity can be guaranteed. The need to get their men to travel has become imperative, a necessary condition to the realization of their *new* aspirations in life. Without saying it in so many words, the women make it clear that they cannot continue to live in old-fashioned mud or wooden houses in the village. A marriage has to *move* with the times; it has to prove its success by the acquisition of the most important symbol of “modernity” and “material prosperity”—a cement house with aluminum roofing sheets.¹³

There is the impression that these women are so passionately committed to this ideal of social progress that nothing can be allowed to stand in the way. This comes out in the wide range of collocations of motion used: “let us go there,” “let us reach there,” “let us meet there,” “let us go too,” as if, compelled by a certain urgency to travel, the women are ready to hustle their loved ones into the next available means of transport. The desire for a modern house has become synonymous with the achievement of the women’s quest for the good life that change now symbolizes. This vision of “modernity” is still dominant in Nzema society, as indeed it is throughout Ghanaian society. It has been largely responsible for the persistent trend of rural migration to the urban areas over the past three decades. It has also been responsible for the radical transformations in physical structures and services in Nzema rural communities. In effect, this

¹³ See Hardiman 1974 for collaborative evidence from other areas in Ghana.

is one area in which Nzema women have been able to bring their rural communities to the side of change and progress by compelling their menfolk to take account of women's collective aspirations in this regard.

Social Change as a State of Mind

In this depiction, there is rarely a mention of social change as an "external force" whose features are discernible in concrete form. It seems to have now become *internalized* as part of a recognizable consciousness whose effects tend to alter perspectives on social realities. The process of constituting social change as an alternative form of social consciousness is the most interesting aspect of the discourse in the songs in this category.

In the selection below, there appears to be a simple-minded rejection of women's roles in the traditional domestic setting:¹⁴

i

A male's bed, I will never lay it again
The *large bed* of young men of Nkroful
I will never lay it anymore.

Chorus:

Yes, a male's bed, I will never lay it again
As for a male's bed, I will never ever lay it again.

ii

Blankets, I will never wash again;
The *near-white* blankets of Nkroful young men
I will never wash them again.

iii

As for their fufu, I will not pound it again
Huge mounds of fufu for Nzema young men
I will not pound it again.

iv

The wild forest, I will not enter there again
The *wild forest farms* of Nzema young men

¹⁴ Nkroful performance, 23 April 1991.

I will never go there again.

v

Marriage, I will not go again
As for marriage in Nkroful
I will never go in again.

vi

Their bed, I will not lay it again
The *withered bed* of Nkroful young men
I will never lay it again

vii

Marriage is no more for me
The *dirty marriage* of Nzema young men
I will never be part of it anymore.

The first line of each stanza embodies a straightforward rejection of some women's role. These principally concern *expected* roles such as preparing the marital bed, washing, cooking, farming, and marriage. However, almost immediately afterwards, each initial statement is also qualified by an image that denotes either "excessiveness" or "sourness." While the women object to *specific* aspects of their traditional roles, there is also the general impression that these particular aspects entail unreasonably heavy burdens, they are labor-intensive activities. Thus the women are in effect saying that they are tired of the "burdens" associated with some of their traditional roles. They are tired of playing the role of "laborers."

Beneath these apparently innocuous statements of intentionality, there is a total rejection of the view of women as "domestic laborers" or "objects of labor." Each image employed to satirize a role also harbors an attitude that rejects toil and drudgery as a necessary part of a woman's role-playing in the household. What appears to be a random protest becomes in fact a well-thought-out objection to a rooted perception of womanhood.

This kind of protest is not different from the one dramatized in the song below:¹⁵

i

I said I was going to work as a fisherman
But when I went, I could not catch any fish

¹⁵ Ehoaka performance, 24 April 1991.

Come back, then, and let us eat
Our dry cassava food!

ii

These young men who only steal coconut fruits
If you follow them you will get a disease
If you don't get a disease, you'll never prosper.

iii

These young men of three months standing
If you follow them, you'll get a disease
If you don't get a disease, you'll never progress.

iv

Behold! They are only young men for three months
If you follow them, you'll get a disease
If you don't get a disease, you are pulled down (in life).

v

Young men who don't buy fish
How can you follow them?
If you follow them, you'll get a disease
If you don't follow them, you'll get a disease.

On the face of it, the song is a direct attack on the “young men” of the society. They are lazy workers, thieves, pretenders, misers, and above all, sources of disease and retardation. In short, they are drawbacks of the worst kind. The list of “diseases” and forms of “retrogression” associated with the young men seems endless. However, the primary target of the argument in the song seems to go beyond the young men. As far as the women are concerned, young men are the potential “material” for marriage with them. If the material for marriage has now become woefully inadequate, “diseased,” and a drag on a woman’s soul, then the question arises: what is the point of bothering to marry? By implication, therefore, a fundamental view being advanced here is that marriage of today is not worth the effort. Related to this perspective is yet another view, namely, that if marriage is a potential threat to a woman’s well-being and prosperity in life, then the woman has the right to reject it. No one in his/her right mind would favor embracing a “diseased” way of life. In this way, there is a subtle suggestion that the old idea of marriage as necessary and crucial to womanhood is being challenged in the above song. To the women,

marriage is no longer an absolute necessity, at least given the calibre of the menfolk at their disposal nowadays.

A reordering of the relationship between women and men in the institution of marriage is being advocated. Here again this perspective has, in fact, gained currency in contemporary Nzema society for some time. Women are now increasingly consulted on the choice of partners; they enjoy a greater freedom to contract and dissolve marital relationships. While to some extent these developments are generally regarded by men as being disruptive of marriages in the society, women's choice and consent in marriage have now come to stay in Nzema society. Throughout the songs we have examined in this section, there is no overt mention of social change as an abstract phenomenon; however, we see it in the *mind* at work in the texts. It is a mind that examines, analyzes, and argues in a discourse that has the flavor of depth and metaphor, although it is at the same time deceptively direct and simple. The "language of the mind" employed here suggests that the issues discussed or analyzed have been *thoughtfully* internalized. We begin therefore to realize that the depiction of social change in these songs shifts from the earlier objectification to the psychological arena. This shift denotes a closer identification, at least intellectually, with a process that is increasingly becoming painful for these women. In such a situation, analytical tools of satire, wit, and sarcasm become dominant in the discourse.

Social Change as a State of Being

A matter that weighs heavily on the mind and compels a change in one's perspectives is certainly not too far away from engendering defiance and rebelliousness. It is certainly not far away, when, in particular, it also becomes an issue of conviction and commitment, as we witness in the following songs:

TEXT A (Agovi 1989:32):

i

Even if you beat me
And drag me in the mud
Or turn into a python
In the middle of the road

I will follow him to Awiane.

ii

You can beat me on end
 And drag me in the mud
 Or turn into a cobra
 To block the only path (from the village)
 I will follow him even if he's in Accra!

iii

Even if you beat me throughout (the day)
 And drag me in the mud
 Or turn into a cobra
 To block my path
 I will follow him
 Wherever he is abroad!

iv

If you turn into a python
 To watch the paths
 I will climb over its head
 And disappear (forever).

TEXT B (Agovi 1989:24-25):

i

Whether it irritates you
 Whether it annoys you
 Whether it nauseates you
 Whether it gets on your nerves
 Whether it irritates you
 I will divorce you
 And follow the small boys!

ii

Even if annoys you
 I will divorce you
 So that Amangoa marries me.

iii

If it annoys you or not
 I will divorce you
 For my sweetheart is ever-ready
 To take me along

The language in both texts is direct and confrontational. The messages are clear and unambiguous. There is no attempt to probe, analyze, or discuss. There is a total outpouring of the *whole* being, a being who is full of outrage and determination. In Text A, regardless of the personal torture and potential dangers placed in the woman's way, she is determined to follow her loved one. In Text B, the protagonist is equally determined to break her relationship (with her husband, presumably) in favor of the man she really loves. Both situations depict a rejection of "arranged" marriages and the lack of individual choice in the matter. However, the most outstanding impression is the intensity of the defiance and assertiveness.

Throughout the text there is an intense focus on individuation. Everything—language, thought, and emotion—is summoned to project a heightened sense of the individual. The agonies, dangers, and determination of the protagonists are highly individualized. Their right and freedom of choice are seen in individual terms. The result is that *individuation* is made to achieve a complete identity all of its own, with the result that the defiance, assertiveness, and rebelliousness that we witness in the texts are seen as the *direct* outcome of a severe sense of individualism that has seized the women. There is some impression that this kind of individualism has changed and transformed them. It has made them desperate.

In yet another song, we see how the women luxuriate in this new-found individualism:¹⁶

i

I will never count him,
 You can bring the oracle of *Kwafobomo*¹⁷
 I will never count him
 For he will get into trouble.

ii

"I won't count him" will kill you
 Young women in Akoto

¹⁶ Akoto performance, 23 April 1991.

¹⁷ This is one of the dreaded deities in Nzema. It is customary to invoke this deity at the dissolution of marriages.

“I won’t count him” will kill you:
You will get into trouble.

iii

Truly, I won’t count him
Son of Madame Adwo
I will not count him
For he will get into trouble.

iv

“I won’t count him” is so sweet to your ears,
You women of Nzema,
“I won’t count” is so sweet to you
He will get into trouble.

v

I won’t mention his name
My dearly beloved
I won’t mention his name
If I mention his name
He will get into trouble.

vi

“I won’t count” is so sweet to your ears,
You young women of the world,
“I won’t count” is so sweet in your ears
He will get into trouble.

vii

I won’t mention his name for all the world
Women of Nzema, I won’t mention his name
For he will get into trouble.

viii

I will never count him
Go and bring all the world
I will never count him;
He will get into trouble.

ix

I will swear all the oaths
And die, my beloved,
I will swear all the oaths
And die, for he will get into trouble.

x

I will go with him
 This death of the chest
 I will go with him;
 He will get into trouble.

xi

I will never count him
 You can uproot all the earth
 Of the world, I won't count him
 For he will get into trouble.

xii

I will go with you
 My young boy danger
 I will go with you
 Otherwise, he will get into trouble!

In spite of the contradictory impulse of arguments and counter-arguments among the women in the texts, *one* point of view seems to emerge, namely, the determination *not* to “count” or “mention the name” of the loved one; for “he will get into trouble.” In order to fully appreciate this point of view, it will be necessary to place the insistent refusal in context. In Nzema society, a woman in a recognized marriage is required, on oath, to mention the names of the men she sleeps with outside the marriage. This is also a necessary legal requirement, enforceable by oath sworn on an oracle, deity, or an ancestor at the termination of a marriage. These customary provisions, however, do not apply to men or husbands. For a long time, women in the Nzema society have found this requirement both demeaning and irksome. And from time to time, they have shown a consistent hostility to it that is faithfully recreated in the above song.

The seriousness of the problem and the determination of the women to put an end to it can be seen in the overwhelming posture of defiance in the song. The almost desperate insistence on the right *not* to comply with established expectations is a direct result of the women's new-found freedom in individualism. At the heart of the matter is the issue of gender equality before customary law, morality, and practice.

Before the last two decades, stories of enforced confessions of adultery and oath-taking at the dissolution of marriages were rampant. Through such efforts of the women in the *Ayabomo*, no Nzema man who

prides himself on being cultured or civilized insists anymore on this procedure. It is now normal practice for the families who are party to a marriage contract to meet and dissolve the relationship without either of the two actual partners necessarily being present. In addition, in the past, customary law provided that on the dissolution of a marriage, an aggrieved husband had the right to retrieve not only the dowry, but also goods, properties, benefits, and gifts bestowed on the woman prior to the dissolution. As a consequence of the new morality (signified by the attitude of the women as we have seen the *Ayabomo*), it is now the practice for the husband or the party acting on his behalf to forgo any such right in a public declaration to this effect. It is such a triumph that is permanently recorded and symbolized in the above song. The significance of this triumph can be seen in the fact that versions of the song were recorded in all the performing centers I visited. It was perhaps the only song that was featured in all the centers. At each center, as I found out, the song was performed with gusto, feeling, and commitment, perhaps indicating symptoms of a triumphant conquest and breaking down a bastion of male preserve.

Conclusion

In our examination of the *Ayabomo*, it seems obvious that this genre has been used to promote fundamental changes in the Nzema society. These changes, arising from a new female consciousness concerning social and interpersonal issues, have affected the economic, moral, political, and legal aspects of Nzema society. Interestingly, these changes have coincided with the period of urbanization in Ghana since the late 1940s, increasing in tempo after the last two or three decades. Equally significantly, these changes have also inaugurated an idea of “modernity,” which to the women consists of a *humanized* materialism—the use of wealth to acquire status and social decency—as well as values of a negotiated selfhood.

In the arena of the performance, these women, acting together in animated solidarity, compel a reevaluation of womanhood. They inaugurate a new view of womanhood as the primary vessels of change in the society. Women see themselves as the most radical elements in the society anxious to move it to a new sense of “modernity” in which “progress” and “advancement” are the chief ingredients. It also changes their mental outlook as well as their perspectives on social realities

regarding women's roles. Thus their assertiveness is not merely aimed at achieving gender equality (although this is in fact an important aspect of their agenda in the *Ayabomo*), but beyond that at demanding the right to move their society with the times. Obviously, the women have become sensitive to the elemental forces of their historical period—its materialism, individualism, openness, and bold initiatives—and in fact take advantage of them to promote “modernity” in their society. Hence the women reveal themselves as agents of the inevitability of change.

Our analysis also throws into very sharp focus two other issues of theoretical interest. The first is the generally assumed dichotomy between urban and rural communities in African societies, especially given the obvious differences in population density, infrastructure capacity, and the presence or absence of tangible values. While these differences may not be easily dismissed, it is also important, as we witness in the *Ayabomo*, to note that the forces of change tend to establish an umbilical relationship of mobility between the city and the village that reduces urbanity to the probability of a *mental* construct. Urban values, being the bedrock of modernization processes, have so deeply permeated the mental outlook of these rural women that basically there seems to be no difference between their values and those of the city. The changes that these women are able to promote in all spheres of rural life are changes toward modernization. Thus social change in the *Ayabomo* brings us to an awareness of the metaphysical proximity of village and city in contemporary African life.

Related to this issue is the second assumption that in contemporary African society there is always a binary friction between modernity and tradition. This tension has often been explained in terms of a social conflict model. African writing of the immediate post-colonial era has been exclusively seen in these terms.¹⁸ Change is often depicted as an external, alien force working through acculturated agents (who may be members of a given society and culture but trained or educated outside or from within). The individuals or agents are then “set up” against the rest of society with their acquired “enlightenment” as their only tool against established “tradition.” The conflict that ensues normally becomes an end in itself, destructive or beneficial to either the representative individual or to him and the society generally. In the *Ayabomo*, something relatively different

¹⁸ The works of Chinua Achebe have especially been analyzed in this light; see Agovi 1988:123-200.

occurs. While initially there appears to be the same model of social conflict, engendering tension between the genders and between tradition and modernity, this is not in fact the case. We realize that a major segment of the total population becomes committed to change and, in turn, attempts heroically to “lift up” the other segment of society to share in its new vision. Through a process of dialogue, persuasion, and argumentation—a process that reflects the reality of inherent doubts, disagreements, and conflicts among the *Ayabomo* participants themselves—the women attempt to provide an *alternative* social vision to that of their menfolk. While this vision is never compromised, it is held up to the men in a spirit of a frank and open demand. What takes place in the *Ayabomo*, therefore, is not an ultimate process of atrophy and stalemate, but an advocacy of common consent in refashioning an acceptable social vision in which “materialism” and “progress” also imply values of gender equality, participation, and choice. The success and effectiveness of the women in this regard can be measured by the actual changes that have “opened up” or liberalized Nzema society towards a re-envisioned society. Such advances in the situation of Nzema women in the context of social change have been confirmed in studies of women in the larger Ghanaian society.¹⁹

Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon

References

- Agovi 1988 K.E. Agovi. *Novels of Social Change*. Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation.
- Agovi 1989 _____. “Sharing Creativity: Group Performance of Nzema Ayabomo Maiden Songs.” *The Literary Griot*, 1, ii:1-43.
- Batse 1990 Z.K.M. Batse. “The Role of Population in Planning and Development in the Context of the Economic Recovery Programme.” In *Ghanaian Scholars on Quthafi’s Thought: Legon Seminar on Planning, Development and the Third Universal Theory*. Ed. by K.E. Agovi. Legon: Soundstage Production.

¹⁹ See espec. Oppong 1974, 1983.

- de Graft-Johnson 1974 K.T. de Graft-Johnson. "Population Growth and Rural-Urban Migration with Special Reference to Ghana." *International Labor Review*, 109.
- Dickson 1984 K.B. Dickson. *Urban-rural Contrast in Ghana: Its Implications for Development*. Accra: Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- Hardiman 1974 M. Hardiman. "A Preliminary Study of the Role of Women in Some Akan Rural Communities." In Oppong 1974.
- Nabila 1988 John S. Nabila. *Urbanisation in Ghana*. Legon: Population Impact Project.
- Oppong 1974 Christine Oppong, ed. *Legon Family Research Papers, No. 1: Domestic Rights and Duties in Southern Ghana*. Legon: Institute of African Studies.
- Oppong 1983 _____, ed. *Female and Male in West Africa*. London: George Allen and Unwin.