"My Arse for Akou". A Wartime Ritual of Women on the Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast.
Monsieur Adam Jones

Résumé
A. Jones — Un rituel de guerre féminin sur la Côte de l'Or au XIXe siècle.
Cet article traite d'un rituel qui était pratiqué en temps de guerre par les femmes de la région correspondant au sud du Ghana et à l'est de la Côte-d'Ivoire actuels. Ce rituel revêt de nombreux aspects tels que la dance, les discours de louange et d'exécration, les prières, différentes sortes de symbolisme, des conduites obscènes (nudité), l'inversion des rôles et les injures lancées aux hommes lâches. La plupart de ces traits peuvent être actuellement observés au sein d'un rituel dénommé mmbomme en langue twi, mais la fonction et le sens de ces phénomènes ont probablement changé par rapport à la situation qui prévalait autrefois. Cet article tente de montrer combien il est difficile d'interpréter ce qui est écrit de ce rituel dans les documents du XIXe siècle.

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If women are mentioned at all in studies of precolonial African warfare, it is usually with reference to nineteenth-century Dahomey, where several thousand female soldiers fought in many military campaigns (Law 1993). Elsewhere there are a few recorded instances of women taking part in battles, for example among the Mbundu in the seventeenth century, among the Igbo in the eighteenth century and in nineteenth-century Ethiopia (Cavazzi 1687: Bk II, par. 72; Curtin 1967: 66, 77; Silassie 1979-80: 75-76, 82). In much of Africa, however, war formed part of the “exosphere” from which women were automatically excluded.

Yet even if the waging of war is more often than not a man’s affair, its impact is usually felt by society as a whole. It seems to me that those who have written about the history of African women have frequently neglected the ways in which their peacetime and wartime roles might differ. Most of the classic ethnographic descriptions we have of social organisation in Africa were written during peacetime and take this situation more or less for granted; but historical records suggest that peace was the exception rather than the norm in the nineteenth century and probably before. As Dozon (1985: 189) has argued, war represented not
so much a breakdown of the precolonial sociopolitical system, but rather a "regulatory practice tied to the movement of social production": moreover, it was through war that the "differential relation" between men and women was most clearly demonstrated, since it provided a clear-cut means of regulating among men the control of women (ibid.: 173, 195). As in other parts of the world, war played a crucial role in "drawing the lines" between male and female (cf. MacDonald 1987).

In this paper I propose to discuss how warfare affected relations between men and women on the Gold Coast (the southern part of modern Ghana west of the Volta and a small adjacent area of Côte d'Ivoire). I shall be concerned with several ethnic groups, each with its own forms of kinship and political organisation, notably with Akan-speakers (Fante, Asante, etc.) and with the Ga who live further east. As far as the topic of this paper is concerned, however, ethnic differences do not seem to be of crucial importance.

Women and warfare

Although the history of the Gold Coast offers nothing comparable to the Amazons of Dahomey, women were certainly sometimes involved in military affairs. The best documented example is that of the small Fante polities, whose military organisation (asafot) was divided into a number of "companies": membership was inherited patrilineally, so that the companies formed a structural contrast to the matrilineally organised descent group, abusua. Women, like men, belonged to their father's company, and the "strength" of the women in a company was something to boast about, if only because it implied that the men were even stronger.

Several Fante communities also had a separate women's contingent, adzewa, whose main task was to dance and sing on certain occasions, including some funerals, and to keep up the men's morale in wartime. The head of the adzewa, known as the adzewafuhene, must have been of some sociopolitical importance: Dutch documents mention presents given in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the "women of the quarters" or the "Great Quarterwomen", terms which apparently referred to the adzewafuhene. Presumably the "queen" (mammye) of a Ga town played a similar role, together with her female

3. The flag of one Fante company showing two armed women conveys the message: "If our women are prepared to kill the bush cow, then what will our men do?" (Ross 1979: 18).
officers: according to a nineteenth-century source, she had to "lead the women in any public business or in war" (Zimmermann 1858, II: 191-192).

Rivalry between the different "quarters" of a town often led to demonstrations of collective female militancy. In 1764 fighting broke out in Moura as a result of the aspersions cast by women of one quarter on those of another.6 Nearly a century later, after a quarrel between the people of English Accra and Dutch Accra had been settled, the women of the two places kept hostility alive by exchanging insults;7 and in the twentieth century riots between Fante asafo companies have originated in a similar manner (Christensen 1954: 124). Such outbreaks, although triggered off by particular events, could only have occurred against a background of well organised solidarity.

It is unlikely, however, that Gold Coast women took an active part in any fighting outside their own villages. Quite apart from anything else, male fears of contact with menstruation would probably have made it difficult for young women to go to war.8 Oral traditions in the Akan-speaking interior of the Gold Coast celebrate several queen mothers who participated in wars fought between 1820 and 1900; all were old women, presumably beyond menopause (Aidoo 1977: 5). One contemporary account of the "Asante War" in the early 1820s states that the Queen of Akyem was "in the hottest part of the action",9 and there are a few references to women of high status accompanying Asante armies.10 But otherwise nothing suggests that women saw active service in this region. Those who went to the front at all did so not as soldiers or in order to make it hard for the men to retreat (as in Ethiopia [Silassie 1979-80: 75-76]), but as a sort of commissariat, carrying food for their husbands or male kin.11

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Rijksarchief [henceforth ARA] (The Hague); Entry for 30 March 1844 (Elmina), NBKG 365; VAN DER EB 1931: 305.
6. "Letter from Aukema, 5 Nov. 1764". Moura correspondence, NBKG 125, ARA.
8. For a summary of some of the early sociological/anthropological literature on attitudes to menstruation in southern Ghana, see OPPONG 1973. More recently, however, the notion of "menstruation-as-pollution" has been shown to be an oversimplification even in the case of the Akan, who seem to be more conscious of "female pollution" than many other African groups—perhaps a structural aspect of their matrilineal organisation. See BUCKLEY & GOTTLIEB 1988: esp. 37.
9. RICKETTS 1831: 128. According to this source she led her army into battle, carrying a gold enamelled cutlass—presumably not intended for use as a weapon—and wearing a necklace of bullets.
10. MONRAD 1824: 121; Royal Gold Coast Gazette (Cape Coast), Vol. I, No. 34, 9 Aug. 1823, p. 123.
Should the war result in victory, women generally took part in the celebrations. In the seventeenth century women as well as men on the central Gold Coast trod on the skulls of enemy warriors that were brought back, and on the anniversary of a victory the successful general and his wives might stage a mock battle in celebration.12

**Mmobomme**

From what has been described so far, it might seem that the wartime role of women was limited mainly to that of supplying and congratulating their menfolk. On an ideological level, however, their position vis-à-vis men changed significantly. This change was expressed through a ceremony (or set of rituals) known in Twi as *mmobomme* or *mmomo(m)me*, aspects of which are mentioned in at least twenty sources written by European observers between 1784 and 1903, covering the whole region between the lower Bandama River (in what is now Côte d’Ivoire) and the Volta. Although many of the details varied over time and space, certain frequently recurrent features can be picked out.13 These include “dance”, praise and execration, “prayer”, symbolism, “obscene” behaviour (including nakedness), inversion of gender roles, and the abuse of male “cowards”. I shall deal with these in turn, although they were closely linked.

**Dance**

After the men’s departure, women painted their skin white with kaolin powder and (according to some sources) put on white clothes—white being, among many other things, the colour of victory and of liminality.14 In doing so they were no doubt consciously marking a contrast to them from the men) see “Voyages de Jean Godot”, 1704, p. 269. Ms. français 13380-13381, Bibliothèque nationale (Paris).

12. BRUN 1624: 84; MÜLLER 1673: 140; VILLAULI DE BELLEFOND 1669: 315-318. Following the British conquest of Asante in 1874, a troop of richly dressed Cape Coast women went to congratulate the British commander, Sir Garnet Wolseley: “Each in turn, gracefully bowing with arms outstretched, went down upon her knees, and brushed his feet with her forehead” (BOYLE 1874: 375).

13. There is a Twi synonym, *asaverė*, also used in Ga (“asaverē”, CHRISTIEN 1881: 456; ZIMMERMANN 1858: II: 20). GIBERT (1993: 8) refers to a similar ritual in Akwapim as *aworabe*, a term not found in the dictionaries. The Anyi equivalent is *mmummu* (ESCHMANN 1985: 211). In describing the Baule, DUMOULIN (1913: 266) uses the term *agyə* (cf. “adyaa” in LUIG 1990: 273) rather than *mmobomme*, but most of his account corresponds closely to what was described further east. I shall treat it as if it referred to *mmobomme*.

other occasions, notably funerals, at which women daubed themselves with red earth. Dressed in this manner, women would parade through their village or town at least once a day, shouting, gesticulating, beating drums (a musical instrument normally reserved for men) or brass pans and performing dances reserved for such occasions, similar to the men’s war-dances: “They walk in a circle, singing and keeping time, moving their bodies in a peculiar manner and from time to time acting as if they intended to attack the nearby enemy”.

For European observers such behaviour must have been confusing and somewhat alarming, and their reports do not often give a clear picture of what happened or what the purpose was. Most observers were struck by the amount of noise; this, they wrote (probably correctly), was intended to “frighten hostile spirits” or “influence the fetish”.

Praise and execration

In its narrowest sense the word mmobomme refers to the songs sung on such occasions. Some of these were exhortations addressed to the soldiers, such as the song reported to have been sung by Gā women in 1826:

“Sons of heroes, get hold of your guns!
The King’s white men say, When you get to fight, you will fight!
(When the war breaks out, you will be able to fight!)
Sons of heroes, get hold of your guns!”

pp. 61-62; Ramseyer & Kühne 1875: 33, 115, 172; Boyle 1874: 47; Casely Hayford 1903: 92; Delafosse 1913: 266; Gros 1884: 199; Monatsblatt der Norddeutschen Missionsgesellschaft (Bremen) [henceforth Monatsblatt]. Vol. XVI, No 182 (Feb. 1866), p. 799. Akan mediums (akonfó) are covered in white kaolin and wear white calico when performing or possessed.

15 Monatsblatt, Vol. XVI, No. 182 (Feb. 1866), p. 799. Cf. “Observations…”, Royal Gold Coast Gazette, 25 Feb. 1823 (see supra fn 14); Douchez 1839: 98; “Züge aus Westafrika”, Der Evangelische Heidenbote (Basel), 1859, Nr 2, p. 13; Dieterle 1900: 48; “Station Christiansborg. Todesfälle, Krankheits- und Kriegsnoten”, 3, April 1866, Jahresbericht der Evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft (Basel) [henceforth Jahresbericht]. Vol. LI (1866), pp. 41-42; Ramseyer & Kühne 1875: 50; Ellis 1887: 226; Delafosse 1913: 266-267. Among the Gā such songs and dances were known as asayere, among the Ewe as bebede or aye-fufu (Zimmermann 1858, II: 20); Nketia 1962: 12-13. 16. The word “dance” is perhaps misleading: the Anyi, for instance, do not speak of “dancing” mmobomme but of “extirpating” it (Perrot 1982: 31 fn 6), and Nketia (1962: 24) states that the songs are “combined with processional movement”.


17 Reindorf 1895: 211. He gave the Gā text as follows: “Mmanini-mma, múnsó tuo mu! King burufo se, múnyà kó a, mobekô. Mmanini-mma, múnsó tuo mu!”
Other songs extolled the leading men of the village and poured scorn on the enemy in a manner reminiscent of European soldiers' songs such as "Colonel Bogey". A few "samples" extracted from songs of this second type were recorded in the Baule country by Maurice Delafosse, probably in 1894 or 1895. Unfortunately they have survived only in the form of an expurgated French translation:

"Okou est un ennemi, qu'on lui coupe la tête.
Okou est l'excrément de mon derrière.
Okou se fait aimer charnellement par les chiens.
Okou est complètement impuissant.
Les femmes d'Okou ne veulent pas se laisser approcher par lui.
Les parties génitales d'Okou sont pourries et ont l'odie des excréments.
Quant à Kouadio, il est un homme. Toutes les femmes d'Okou partagent la couche de Kouadio.
Kouadio peut renouveler dix fois de suite ses exploits amoureux sans être fatigué.
Aoussou aussi est un homme. Kouadio et Aoussou sont forts et leurs hommes sont forts.
Ils couperont la tête et les parties génitales d'Okou."

According to Delafosse, the women concluded the ceremony by making violent thrusts of the buttocks in the direction of the enemy country, singing: "My arse (mon derrière) for Okou" (or whoever the enemy happened to be). Although this gesture is not mentioned explicitly in other sources, it seems legitimate to regard it as embodying the key significance of mmobomme: women made use of their bodies—the one thing over which they had unlimited control—to demonstrate their power as women, in this case by "defecating" upon the enemy.

Prayer

Prayer, according to many sources, was another essential element: in their songs and speech women invoked the protection of (or sought to propi-

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18. For a discussion of mmobomme as a "verbal art form" in Asante, see AKYEA 1967. ZIMMERMANN'S Gà dictionary (1858, II: 252) includes osé, "a war cry or song of women". But CHRISTALLER (1881: 417) translates the Twi word o-sé as "war-song, war-cry," without reference to gender.

19. DELAFOSSÉ 1913: 266-267. Note that there is no suggestion of "men vs. women" as in the songs of Dahomeyan Amazons cited by LAW (1993). The published extracts from Delafosse's letters suggest that he confused the names of the chiefs involved, see L. DELAFOSSÉ 1976: 113, 120, 169. For a similar case of women uttering curses in the direction of the enemy, see BÖHNER 1890: 260, which refers to La (near Accra). PERROT (1982: 31 fr 10) mentions mmobomme songs of Anyi women cursing the porcupine, which symbolises the enemy.

20. Such gestures are by no means confined to Africa. German history, for instance, includes several cases of women who are said to have saved their town from destruction by showing their posterior to the enemy. For further examples from various parts of the world, see DUERR 1992.
tiate) "the gods", "the God of War" or "the fetish". In Akropong prayers were addressed to the spirit dwelling in the large tree (*Ficus vogelianana*) in front of the king's court, known as Mpéni, whose shade was symbolically associated with peace and "coolness":

"You are our father Kofe! You are great! You are the Old One! You sent our men to war; bring them back. We fall down before You and place the matter in Your hands: You are our hope".22

Symbolism

The symbolic significance of this ritual is alluded to in many accounts, each very different from the others. When the men of Accra went to war against the Anlo Ewe in 1784.

"[their women] sat down in the canoes which lay upon the beach and acted as if they were paddling them, throwing some [sc other women] into the sea; they also took bricklayers' trowels and laid bricks. All of this was allegorical: the paddling on the sand meant that our men [i.e. those of Accra] were to cross the River Volta, engage the Augnaer [=Anlo] in combat and drown them. The bricklaying, on the other hand, signified the building of Fort Königstein [at Ada, near the mouth of the Volta]" (Isert 1788: 227).

In 1838 a French visitor to Elmina wrote:

"Imagine hundreds of bacchantes, each holding the end of a string 3 ells long, both ends of which are knotted, and along which there are at intervals some grains of gold or pieces of glass, like the chaplets of pilgrims or Calabrian bandits. They pretend to exert all their energy to break the string, calling out: 'My husband / my brother / my cousin / my beloved is still alive'" (Douchez 1839: 97-98).

Other authors, referring mainly to the Akwapim region (further east), describe different forms of symbolism. Women might spend the day pouring water on the ground, with the aim of thereby quenching the enemy’s fire in battle or (put in more philosophical terms) in order to

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21. *Monatsblatt*, Vol. XVI, No 182 (Feb. 1866), p. 799; "Observations...", *Royal Gold Coast Gazette*, 25 Feb. 1823 (see ref. *supra* in 14); *Dietler 1900*: 49; *Ramseyer & Kühne 1875*: 33, 172; *Ellis 1887*: 226; *Caseley Hayford 1903*: 92. *Christaller* (1933: 319) actually defines *mmom(m)omé* as "to pray for prosperity" (neither *mmobomme* nor *mmomomome* is included in the first edition of 1881). It is noteworthy that none of the sources mention "priests" or "priestesses" in this context; this is probably because anyone can pray and not all "fetishes" are good for war.

“cool the matter”. Women might place pots of water in the streets of the village, to ensure (by analogy) that their own men would not suffer thirst during the campaign. A creeper tied firmly around a bundle of grass from top to bottom served as a representation of the fate which awaited the enemy. Women carried fufu pestles to the crossroads outside the town, in order to remove misfortune. They might also stage a mock battle; in 1784, for instance, the women of Accra fought one another with wooden sabres while their men were at war; in Akropong a century later the women, having tied cords and other objects around their feet, fought one another with whips shaped like guns. In some villages women painted large fruits black and threw them, as if to hit the enemy with cannon balls; they might also stab pawpaws (representing the heads of the enemy) with knives.

Obscenity

Several sources indicate the importance in mmobomme ritual of gestures which would normally have been considered disgusting (Dieterle 1900: 48; Ramseyer & Kühne 1875: 52); and three authors (all referring to Cape Coast or Elmina) state that women went naked, at least at the time when a battle was anticipated. When asked by European men why they had done this, women at Cape Coast replied: “What does it matter? We were all women at Cape Coast. The men have gone to war” (Gordon 1874: 18). (It was somewhat naïve to expect that women would—or could—“deconstruct” their own symbolism for the benefit of curious outsiders). Interestingly, according to Ellis (1887: 226), on such occasions some of the leading women might wear two hens’ eggs fastened above the pudenda.

23. Heidenbote, 1859, Nr 2, p. 13 (see fn 15); Heidenbote, 1870, Nr 11, pp. 122-124. For the importance of coolness (dwo) in Akan thought (and its association with the kind of shady tree mentioned above), see McCleod 1981: 29, 39-40.
25. Isert 1788: 227; Heidenbote, 1870, Nr 11, pp. 122-124 (see fn 16). When Anyi women perform mmobomme today, they throw pieces of wood towards one end of the road, as if trying to hit the enemy (Perrot 1982: 31 fn 9).
26. Heidenbote, 1859, Nr 2, p. 13 (see fn 15); Dieterle 1900: 48-49; Ellis 1887: 226. Of these sources, the first two refer to Akwapim (Aburi and Akropong). Unfortunately Ellis did not state which of the “Tshi” peoples he was referring to.
Inversion

As this last detail might suggest, war made it possible (or necessary?) to invert or reverse some of the etiquette which normally governed gender roles. This was the one occasion on which a woman might be seen wearing men's clothing or carrying an implement associated with men, although to do so was not essential. In some cases they carried knives, old flint-locks, imitation weapons carved out of wood, or simply long sticks, which in this setting were regarded as guns. Other implements used included paddles, fly-switches, machettes and (in the case of non-Christian wives of Christians) books.

Gender inversion among the Baule and their Anyi neighbours was even more explicit. Women adopted the name of their husband or of a male relative and addressed one another with salutations normally reserved for men. Seated on the ground, they would tell tales of their alleged exploits in battle, each one giving lewd details of the (masculine) pleasure she would have in sleeping with the women she had captured. In addition, led by the chief's senior wife, the women poured libations of water, drank water in the way men would drink palm wine or spirits, and then thanked the chief's wife with the words "Father X, thank you".

Elsewhere women temporarily filled the political offices occupied in peacetime by their husbands, unless the latter were among the very old men who had remained at home (Ramseyer & Kühne 1875: 33, 52). Similarly, as missionaries noticed to their surprise, even a few “heathen” wives of Christians attended church in their husbands’ stead as long as the war lasted.

Furthermore, a woman could act more aggressively than was usually considered proper (i.e. without danger of being regarded as an ohaa banyin, or “female man”). The objects of attack were not only the enemy but also any man fit to bear arms who had remained at home.
including sometimes Christian catechists and even white men. During their dancing the women would encircle such a man, shower him with ridicule and abuse, and then perhaps beat him with sticks, stones, whisks cut from palm fronds or whips made of cotton threads. Women in Asante sang special songs (called kosa-ankomee, "coward") which could drive war-shirkers to suicide. Alternatively, according to two sources (both referring to the central Gold Coast in the early nineteenth century), they might castrate him (Robertson 1819: 154; Douchez 1839: 22).

Thus a large number of different elements are mentioned in connection with mmobomme ritual. It would probably be wrong, however, to assume that all of these constituted an essential part. Some are mentioned in only two or three sources. In my opinion their absence in other accounts is significant, and they may therefore be considered “optional” according to the situation. These include the use of noise to “frighten the hostile spirits”, the praising of one’s own side and cursing of the enemy, the use of “disgusting” gestures and nakedness, and the adoption of male roles in public life. But other elements feature in the majority of sources: the importance of the colour white, the performance of a dance or parade, the role of prayer, the need for symbolic actions (albeit of widely differing kinds), the use of male clothing or implements, and the adoption of aggressive behaviour towards those men not actively engaged in warfare. These we are probably justified to consider “core” elements of mmobomme ritual.

The earliest reference I have discovered to such ritual dates from the seventeenth century. A German surgeon who lived at Fort Nassau (Mouri) on the central Gold Coast from 1617 to 1620 wrote:

“While the men are at war, their wives at home make green wreaths, dance with them and call on their god Fytysi [i.e. ‘ fetish’] for help, until they see a sign one way or the other, such as heads which one of the men of high rank may send home to delight the women” (Brun 1624: 83-84).

Here we already have three elements mentioned in nineteenth-century accounts of mmobomme—dancing, prayer (for protection or victory) and symbolism (in this case “green wreaths”).

33. Gordon 1874: 18; Ramsayer & Kühne 1875: 50; Heidenbote, 1874, Nr 6, p. 50; Boyde 1874: 47; Ellis 1887: 226; Bohner 1890: 260. A whip was the symbol of office of a Fante anafo officer (Christensen 1954: 110-111).
34. Arhin 1983, presumably based on oral information. Cf. Douchez 1839: 22: “Let us change say these proud Amazons of Del-Mina: ‘Be a woman and give us all those war trappings, which you are unworthy to wear’” (Translation is mine. A. J.).
Problems of interpretation

To offer an interpretation of the complex symbolism embodied in such behaviour lies beyond the scope of this paper. One difficulty is that the function and outward form of mmobomme have changed considerably. Since 1900 no wars have been fought in this region, and inevitably this has transformed the meaning of rituals such as mmobomme.

Nowadays a community occasionally feels itself threatened in its very existence, and then it is the responsibility of women to ward off the danger by means of mmobomme. If, for example, two villages are engaged in litigation, if an epidemic breaks out, if a bad omen for the village as a whole is seen or if the rains are unusually heavy, women in rural areas may perform mmobomme songs and dances, marching from one end of the village to another in ways similar to those described in nineteenth-century accounts. The best documented case is that of the Anyi (Eschlimann 1985: 211-212; Perrot 1982: 31-32). When a woman dies in childbirth, it is believed that all other pregnant women are in danger. They therefore gather at one end of the village, wearing only a loincloth and holding branches of the ginger lily (Costus afer). Other women join them, wearing male clothes and making threatening gestures with objects belonging to their husbands or with large pieces of wood. The women set out to “wage war” against the power which has caused a pregnant woman’s death, shouting imprecations and begging the tutelary deities to protect them. They insult the men of the community, who are obliged to hide and whom they temporarily replace; for it is the “defection and impotence” of the men which have caused all the evils current at this time.

Mmobomme today has different meanings and purposes among different groups, in part perhaps a reflection of the divergent twentieth-century histories of these groups, but also no doubt a result of local differences which already existed. Perhaps the “half naked men and women” who demonstrated in Accra against the Ghanaian government’s claim to have won the 1992 elections were drawing inspiration from mmobomme. In Aowin it can serve to demarcate more clearly the boundary between the village community (“cool”, “white”) and the bush (“hot”, “red”) (Ebin 1982: 141-143). The rarely performed aworabe rite in Akwapim, in which “nude women pound the street with pestles at night” in order to keep away disease or bring rain (Gilbert 1993: 8) seems to be in essence a variation upon the same theme. Among the Fante the

35. NKETIA (1962: 12-13, 16, 115) refers to mmobomme songs as “songs of exhilaration and incitement.” Among the Aowin mmobomme is performed by spirit mediums (today exclusively women), who “sweep the streets of the town and outline its borders in white clay” (Ebin 1982: 141-143).

word *mmobomme* refers only to mourning songs performed after the
death of a chief. Elsewhere it can designate prayers which people
(mainly women) may hold when a relative is taking an examination.

These modern examples indicate that today, as in the past, the rite
draws upon “women’s dangerous creative power” (*ibid.*) in various ways.
Yet given the new meanings which *mmobomme* assumed during the col-
onal and postcolonial period, it would in my view be futile to expect
detailed information on its significance in precolonial times from oral tra-
dition. It is possible that what happens today also occurred in the nine-
teenth century, or at least that the form of the ritual has remained con-
stant while its function has changed; but we simply do not have enough
evidence to demonstrate that this was the case. Of course it would be
useful to know more about the significance attached to *mmobomme*
today; but given that even those scholars who have lived in the region for
many years have not found out very much, I do not consider a fieldwork
project focused upon this question a viable proposition. Nor have I been
able to discover sources for the first half of the twentieth century which
might indicate what sort of processes turned *mmobomme* into what it
now is.\(^{37}\)

In order to understand what it meant in the nineteenth century, there-
fore, we are obliged to rely principally on the written sources cited above.
Surprisingly, these have been largely neglected.\(^{38}\) Virtually the only
scholar who has discussed *mmobomme* with reference to precolonial war-
fare is Arhin (1983: 96):

> “It is unclear whether the dances and songs were expected to have magico-reli-
gious effects on the enemy. But they had the practical effect of shaming potential
war dodgers. [...] The situation can be summarised by saying that the essential
female military role was to give encouragement to the men”.

This assessment may be challenged on three counts. Firstly, there
 can be no doubt that the dances and songs were thought to have “magico-
religious effects”. Were this not the case, it is hard to see why in Asante,
at least, the women responsible for *mmobomme* were obliged to lead the
same sort of ascetic life as the men in the war camp—eating no tomatoes,
for instance, and bathing only in cold water (Ramseyer & Kühne 1875:
292-293). Furthermore, the old men who remained in the village insisted
that the women perform *mmobomme*, urging them to redouble their
efforts whenever gunshots were heard. If a battle was lost, this was
attributed to the women’s failure to act at the moment when it took place:

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37. Curiously, *mmobomme* is not mentioned in the works on Asante by RATTRAY
(1923, 1927, 1929).
38. Apart from Amoo (1985: 43-44), which merely summarises two of the sources
mentioned above.
hence the need to avoid lengthy intermissions if the war were being fought too far away for gunshots to be heard.39

Arhin’s comment also pays too little attention to the fact that the women themselves clearly cherished participation in *mmobomme*. As Delafosse (1913: 43) remarked: “This custom constitutes simultaneously an amusement and a duty”. The women, he observed, looked happy at the time and later recalled such occasions with pleasure. No doubt they would have enjoyed other kinds of charivari too, but this one had a special significance. In my view, the roots of this practice lay in the tension that existed, at least latently, between the sexes: *mmobomme* offered women—within a carefully delimited framework—an opportunity to “turn the tables”. As one observer commented in 1839: “It is not surprising that the women are so exacting with regard to men [in wartime]; for they themselves are treated quite harshly, in circumstances where in our country they are coddled” (Douchez 1839: 22).

Above all, to refer to the women as if they were merely cheer-leaders, who gave the men “encouragement”, fails to explain why—at least according to some report—they went naked. The extreme case was that of Baule women, who at such times of crisis performed a dance (*adjantu*) in which their body was covered in white cloth and only the genitalia were exposed—a reversal of the normal state of affairs, when such exposure was considered (by men) almost as dangerous as menstruation. Was this explicit emphasis on sexual symbolism merely a form of “encouragement”, or did it not also serve as an ominous manifestation of female power?40

The significance of this “psychological mobilisation of the female population” (Perrot 1982: 32) becomes clearer if we compare it with forms of female militancy in other parts of West Africa. An obvious example is *anlu*, a “disciplinary technique” employed in the past by Kom women in the Cameroun Grassfields against men who had committed certain offences which were considered obscene. The women would appear “donned in vines, bits of men’s clothing and with painted faces to carry out the full ritual. All wear and carry the garden-egg type of fruit which is supposed to cause ’drying up’ in any person who is hit with it. The women pour into the compound of the offender singing and dancing [...]. Vulgar parts of the body are exhibited as the chant rises in weird depth ...”41

39. Delafosse 1913: 43. Similarly, during the slave revolts in the French Caribbean in 1792, attacks were sometimes preceded by meetings at which women and children “sang and danced frantically” (Gautier 1985: 242).
Similarly in the famous Women’s War of southeastern Nigeria in 1929 Igbo and Ibibio women “used their bodies to ‘insult’ men: and they adorned themselves in ‘the wild’, thereby utilizing the armoury of Nature to convey their belief in the life-giving powers of the land with which they associated their own powers of reproduction” (Ifeka-Moller 1975: 144).

These parallels, which could be taken further, suggest that mmo-bomme was not altogether a unique institution. Certain elements—notably singing, dancing, symbols of masculine social roles, nakedness and/or sexual insult, and the use of greenery or fruits with specific connotations—appear to have been common to other forms of collective female activity at times of crisis.

It is possible to detect further parallels in African and European rituals of status reversal, where “groups or categories of persons who habitually occupy low status positions in the social structure are positively enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors [...]. They are often accompanied by robust verbal and nonverbal behavior, in which inferiors revile and even physically maltreat superiors” (Turner 1969: 167, 185).

Human societies, Turner has argued, refer to two contrasting models of society—one as a structure of jurial, political and economic positions, the other as a communitas of idiosyncratic individuals who are equal in term of shared humanity. Behaviour in accordance with one model tends to drift away from behaviour in terms of the other, for instance when those in authority misuse the incumbents of lower positions. Rituals of status reversal are designed to bring social structure and communitas back into harmony. This may be done at a fixed point in the calendar: some Zulu, for instance, used to have rites which ascribed a dominant role to women for a brief period when crops had begun to grow. Likewise in May (the month when women’s desires were considered to be at their most immoderate), women in rural Franche-Comté “could take revenge on their husbands for beating them by ducking the men or making them ride an ass: women could dance, jump, and banquet freely without permission from their husbands: and women’s courts issued mock decrees”. 42

Alternatively, such rituals can be employed, for instance in southern and eastern Africa, to avert a natural calamity:

“Put briefly, structural superiors, through their dissensions over particularistic or segmental interests, have brought disaster on the local community. It is for structural inferiors—[...] representing communitas [...]—to set things right again. They do this by symbolically usurping for a short while the weapons, dress, accouterments, and behavioral style of structural superiors —i.e., men. But an old form now has a new content. [...] Structural form is divested of selfish attributes and purified by association with the values of communitas” (ibid. : 184).

42. Davis 1978: 170-171. Similar play with the idea of “women on top” used to take place during the Fasching period in parts of Western Germany.
Although it is doubtful whether war was regarded as resulting from a "social sin", *mmobomme* was evidently closer to this second kind of inversion. The main difference is that the status reversal was not symmetrical: although *mmobomme* women might in some cases adopt men's roles, there were no men to play the part of women. But among the Bete, who live to the west of the Baule, the death of a woman in childbirth is seen as a threat to the community as a whole and is therefore followed by a ritual ceremony in which "naked women drive men out of the village and assume power for a few days, subjecting the men to hunger and isolation". Here we can certainly speak of status reversal, and it may be that the thinking which lay behind *mmobomme* was somewhat similar.

In order to test this interpretation, it is worth examining whether Gold Coast societies also recognised the notion of status reversal in the first sense, i.e. in connection with the calendar. One indication that this was the case has already been pointed out by Turner: at Axim in the late seventeenth century an eight-day festival was held annually, during which people had "the freedom to sing all sorts of bad things about anyone, no matter whom—be it to recall his frauds or knavery, or whatever pleases them" (Bosman 1704: 148). Two centuries later, Rattray (1923: 153) witnessed something similar in northern Asante; its purpose, he was told, was that: "Once a year [...] every man and woman, free man and slave, should have the freedom to speak out just what was in their head. [...] When a man has spoken freely thus, he will feel his *sunsum* ['soul'] cool and quieted ..."

Neither author referred specifically to the structural relationship between men and women in this context, but there can be little doubt that gender was one of the issues. In the coastal town of Elmina in the mid-nineteenth century a "beating custom" took place annually on three consecutive Tuesdays, giving women a brief outlet to express resentment at their position:

"The fair sex has the right on these days to give the men a good thrashing with lianes [...], unless one wishes to redeem oneself with a few bottles of rum. [...] However, in order to render the gentlemen harmless, the women have a gentler or at least less painful custom: during the preceding week they [the men] are permitted to cool their anger by scolding the women to their heart's content".44

Another account referred to the same practice in Elmina a generation earlier:

44. Jekel 1869: 29. The use of lianes might be interpreted as another instance of *communitas* appearing as Mother Nature, as opposed to Father Culture (Turner 1978: 289). (To suggest such an interpretation does not, of course, require accepting the simple formula "male/female = culture/nature" [MacCormack & Strathern 1980]).
...the native believes in a false god (afgod) called Enzan, on whose account the women must be scolded by the men; and thereby, on account of the goddess Ladodo, the women have the right for a week after the opening of the river to beat the men who exercised this injunction upon them" (Van der Eb 1931: 311).

Moreover, at certain annual festivals the norms regulating female sexuality appear to have been temporarily relaxed, so that it was acceptable for a woman to approach a male stranger at a dance and propose sex to him openly.45 This was quite different from mmobomme: the rule in Asante, for instance, was that if a mmobomme woman committed adultery in wartime, she was to be immediately executed (Ramseyer & Kühne 1875: 293).

It would be wrong to explain the role of nineteenth-century mmobomme ritual in terms of a single "function". For one thing, we know so little about many vital aspects of it: were all women involved, for instance, or only a special group?46 And was nakedness regarded as a means of shaming men, or did it have some other significance? Indeed, ought we to speak here of nakedness ("a state of being undressed which causes shame, disrespect, and harmful results in one's social surroundings") or of nudity (a term referring to "liminal situations in which a person passes from one social status to another")?47

Moreover, the little we do know about mmobomme indicates that its meaning was multi-faceted and highly complex. No doubt under certain circumstances mmobomme, like annual husband-beating, might serve to consolidate male dominance in "normal" social life by offering an outlet for the expression of resentment by women with regard to their culturally defined role. But at the same time, although they were supposed to be a deliberate exception to the norm, they may have presented people during a period of social upheaval with an alternative way of viewing the structure of society and of the family (cf. Davis 1978: 178-183).

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46. It seems unlikely, for instance, that slave women would have participated. Several authors (e.g. Gros 1884: 199) suggest that the women involved were those whose husbands, brothers and other relatives had gone to war.
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