The Hidden History of Gender in Ghanaian Print Culture

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Abstract

Mainly because conventional history and its discourses were constructed around the figures of illustrious men, and “important” male-centered events, in many colonial histories and histories of nationalism, women are either completely absent as historical actors, appear only in relation to male actors, or occasionally as deviants, or archetypes of good or evil.

Western formulated dichotomies such as private/public, nature/culture, reason/emotion have also contributed to the historical neglect of African women by suggesting that women were unlikely to have been in the public spheres of politics, employment and scholarship in early historical periods. So have parallel assumptions about women’s subordination, oppression and inferiority in African societies.

This paper de-constructs Ghanaian press history from the perspective of gender by charting the contributions women made to newspapers in the Gold Coast during the colonial period. It argues that despite women’s absence in secondary texts on the history of Ghanaian newspapers there was considerable female presence in both the operations and discourses of the very vibrant nationalistic press throughout much of the colonial period. Textual and anecdotal evidence show that from as far back as the last quarter of the nineteenth century through to the twentieth century women were engaged with the press as readers, as occasional contributors, as paid and unpaid columnists, journalists and editors.
Introduction

For years researchers of the Ghanaian press succumbed to “received wisdom” that the female writing subject did not exist in early newspaper culture. Except for K.A.B. Jones-Quartey’s (1974) passing reference to Mabel Dove-Danquah (considered the first female journalist in Ghana) in his first volume on Gold Coast journalism and a profile he wrote on her for the centenary brochure of the Ghana Association of Writers (1975), the history of women’s participation in colonial print culture in Ghana has had no lineage. The dearth of historical information on women has perpetuated a fairly common notion that women did not engage with newspapers during the colonial period.

The assumption that women were absent from newspapers is predicated on the fact that press culture is highly ritualistic and was male-dominated. Researchers of women’s press histories have also reasoned that because newspapers are a form of public speaking and women were discouraged from public speaking, few women engaged in journalism in the early days of the western press (Zoonen, 1991, 1994; Henry, 1993; Hermes, 1993; Tuchman, 1996; Perkins, 1996).

In Africa where traditionally women had strong informational roles the introduction of newspapers themselves, not biases against women’s public speaking, was largely responsible for the silencing of women (Steeves, 1993). This new colonial mode of communication required literacy and money, requisites that disadvantaged women and advantaged men, who were likely to be the more educated and affluent of the genders in colonies such as Ghana. Not only did the educated male elite who published and edited newspapers become the natural communicators, who spoke on behalf of the majority uneducated population, but the highly politicized, opinionated, and querulous institutional culture of the early African press made newspapers an inhospitable site for female activity.

Early Female Engagement with the early Ghanaian Press

Still, textual evidence from newspapers indicates that despite these drawbacks women were represented as readers, as illustrative figures, as writers, and as correspondents in the early Ghanaian press. As early as in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, for example, the Gold Coast Times implicates women as readers by posting female-directed advertisement on its pages (See Gold Coast Times 1874-1884). The newspaper carried notices advertising a Mrs. Jane A. Brown, a milliner, who could make dresses for ladies, and one advertising a ladies college in Finchley, U.K. Other papers reflected similar gendered advertisements such as lotions, make-up and gentle laxatives, many of which were illustrated by images of European women.

More persuasive evidence that women constituted a target readership, however, lies in the Gold Coast Times’ promise to start a column for ladies. Even though it failed to produce the column with any degree of consistency, the fact that the Gold Coast Times felt a need to include a women’s column is in itself suggestive of female readership. The only “Ladies Column” extant, which was carried in the July 21, 1880 issue, lacks authorial attribution and there is nothing specific to the text that leads to
the conclusion it was written by a Ghanaian woman, however that dim possibility cannot be dismissed without further authentication.

Before 1930, especially, women primarily engaged with the press through correspondence between newspapers and their implied female readership. It is impossible to ascertain whether indeed this readership was real or representational, particularly as most letters carried no authorial attribution, or at best only partial gendered attribution. Even though authorship may be open to conjecture, gender-marked letters to the editor can, however, be read as a form of female activism and the range of dialogue encouraged in them as representational of the positioning of women’s voices in this male-oriented sphere (Shevelow, 1989). Such letters provided women with opportunities to speak for themselves and to share feminine experiences invested with the authority of their gender (Shevelow, 1989). Admittedly, there are social implications implicit in the act of letter writing as only elite women could appear in print and we cannot surmise that they spoke to the condition of the majority of Ghanaian women. Still, female-authored letters in early Ghanaian newspapers are worth interrogating because they grapple with serious fundamental questions regarding women in a transforming society, and indicate that male-dominated cultural institutions such as the press had the capacity to accommodate heterogeneous views.

The columns of some of the earliest newspapers produce several letters ostensibly authored by women that illustrate the degree to which early female readers of newspapers were actively involved in press narratives as both consumers and participants. Typically, these letters were in response to male writers whose opinions had affronted Ghanaian womanhood in some form or fashion. An exemplar instance of this can be found in the following acerbic retort from an anonymous reader of the “Ladies Column, the first women’s column published in a Ghanaian newspaper:

The ladies of Cape Coast are much obliged to Cancoanid¹ for his zeal in the vindication of our causes. It is true that we Ladies of Africa in general are not only sadly misrepresented but are made the foot-ball of every white seal that comes to our Coast...The gentleman or we should rather say biped (for we cannot call him by any other name and whom we believe is a Just Ass of P’s) we say the biped, who said he could not ‘perceive why we should seek to be clothed in European habiliments or desire to be mentally trained in the education of Europe, is only fit to be Just Ass of P’s to the Boobies in Fernando Po...We would like to ask that Donkey Clown what habiliments did his ancestors who worshipped the mistletoe and wood and stone wear?...We have been sadly abused by people of such description, and because we have said nothing they continue to abuse us with impunity...It is true had we the advantages of European ladies we should not be a whit behind and although we have not white or angelic faces we are capable of as high a degree of culture as any white lady...such clownish gentlemen would that we were still in our ignorance that they may take advantage of us... (Western Echo, January 3, 1886).

¹ Cancoanid is the conductor of the “Ladies Column” which published this letter. It has not been possible to determine the article that provoked the response above.
This anonymous gender-marked letter leaves authorship open to the possibility that there were women in the Ghana in the late 1800s who were educated, socially aware, and prepared to challenge patriarchy and racism in print. By simply exercising their right to rejoinders female newspaper readers such as “one of them” wittingly or unwittingly are able to insert themselves into gendered discourses and provide counterpoints to male views. Throughout the colonial period such correspondence made it possible for women to provide alternative views to male-dominated discourses on controversial issues. A letter by “Afua of Abokobi,” (Times of West Africa, May 14, 1934) for example, takes on a male reader for disparaging women who were in polygamous marriages by terming them “second hand women.” Her rebuttal challenges the gender stereotypes and double standards of elite men and successfully articulates another perspective on the marriage debate.

Another example of the female alternate voice comes from a letter by “Yaa Amponsa” of Kumasi appealing to Governor Shenton Thomas, through a letter to his daughter Bridget, to withdraw the water and sedition bills because passing them would bring hardship to “hundreds of thousands of girls” in Ghana and Ashanti. (Times of West Africa, March 8, 1934). Here, instead of addressing the Governor directly she positions herself as female supplicant in the traditional practice of appealing for intercession through an intermediary. Though carried in a “benign” gendered space, this interesting instance of female political satire, underscores the ways in which women’s press activism presented themselves.

In a letter in which she describes herself as family head of the Amoah family and sister to Senior Divisional Chief Amoah II, a reader of the Gold Coast Independent, Elizabeth Johnston asserts her authority within traditional Cape Coast society by justifying her right to appoint a representative to her brother (Gold Coast Independent December 13, 1930, Gold Coast Times, December, 16, 1930). The full background to the letter is unclear but since the one that was carried by the Gold Coast Times was qualified by an editor’s note disagreeing with her method of appointing her brother’s replacement as chief, we can infer that Johnston’s letter was an attempt to set the record straight regarding actions for which she was being criticized. A few weeks later she is provoked to write a rejoinder taking exception to the editor’s note at the bottom of her previous letter. This takes the form of a lengthy lecture on the Fante native constitution, kinship system and traditional customs (Gold Coast Independent, January 10, 1931). The tone of the letter locates Johnston in the traditional role ascribed to women as custodians of culture, except that where her expertise in this area would have been normally displayed orally, the medium determined orality be substituted with textuality.

Early Ghanaian newspapers provided another avenue for women’s thoughts to come before the reading public through the publication of the full or partial text of public lectures given by prominent women at literary clubs or other social organizations. Exemplar instances of writings of this kind are a lecture on “domestic training” delivered by Charlotte Quarshie-Idun to the Young People’s Literary Club (Gold Coast Independent, April 29, 1933), one by Mercy Quartey-Papafo on “the place of the woman in the home or in the social life of the town” (Gold Coast Times, October 13, 1934), Ethel Dove’s lecture on the “Education of Girls” (Gold Coast Independent, April 23 & 30 1927), and a talk by Charity Zormelo to the Nationalists Literary Society on “Education for a New Day” (Gold Coast Independent, May 4, 1935). The
titles and substance of these lectures are instructive of the topics considered in elite women’s purview, and underscore assumptions that their gender transformed them into experts on girls’ education, domesticity and preparation for their assigned roles in society.

Yet another illustration of the female writing subject is represented by published poetry. In the first quarter of the twentieth century the Gold Coast Leader (see 1925-1928), for example, published several poems by Gladys May Casely-Hayford. The poems appeared in the newspaper during the editorship of J.E. Casely-Hayford who was Gladys’ father; her mother was Adelaide Casely Hayford. Most of Gladys' poetry was romantic and personal, although she did write a few that were somewhat political, for example one “dedicated to the late Dr. Aggrey” (Gold Coast Leader, Oct. 21, 1928). The Leader also provided Gladys with the opportunity to review works and to write feature articles. So for example, she reported on the proceedings of the 2nd Achimota conference (Gold Coast Leader, July 14, 1928), an important conference which the paper editorialized on in a subsequent issue of the paper and reviewed Creole poetry of West Africa (Gold Coast Leader, August, 20, 1927) and G.A. Gollock’s “Sons of Africa” (Gold Coast Leader, September, 19, 1928).

Gladys’ poems were not the only female-authored poems carried in Gold Coast newspapers. There appeared to have been poems by a Georgina Ione Hansen-Hammond, who was cited by one of the Gold Coast Leader’s more regular columns, “Mixed Pickles by Ebo,” as having contributed poems to the Leader, and who was held up, along with Gladys Casely Hayford, as illustrative of the fact that Gold Coast women had crossed the literary barrier:

In former times the pen, like the sword, was considered as consigned by nature to the hands of men, the ladies contended themselves with private virtues and domestic excellence. A female writer, like a female warrior was considered a kind of eccentric being that deviated, however illustriously from her due sphere of motion and was therefore rather to be gazed at with wonder than countenanced. The revolution of years has now produced an army of women writers who with the spirit of their predecessors have set masculine ability at defiance and asserted their claim. They are proving day by day that their intellect is not inferior to that of man” (Gold Coast Leader, October 8, 1927).

Gendered Spaces

The most effective outlet for women’s voices in the predominantly male space of the early periodical was the gendered space. Generally, media histories have shown that gendered spaces such as women’s columns in newspapers, magazines, journals, radio and television programs, are the likely sites for locating much of early female journalistic activity. The works of several researchers have richly informed our understanding of the functionality of the gendered space in print culture (White, 1970, Ferguson, 1983, Shevelow, 1989, Tuchman, 1989, Ballaster et. al., 1991, Brake, 1994, Beetham, 1996, Aronson, 1997). While current debate criticizes them for “ghettoizing” rather than mainstreaming women’s issues, gendered spaces were, and
in many ways are, still motivated by the desire to address a perceived gap in the communication needs of their target audience.²

There is scant evidence of the existence of women’s periodicals in colonial Ghana, although a 91-year-old informant, Marion Odamten, claims she and a group of friends started a magazine somewhere in the 1940s that lasted into the 1950s titled African Woman. Indeed a 1951 Daily Graphic article partly confirms this by noting that Odamten was the “editress of “Ghana Women”(Daily Graphic, September 14, 1951).³ Odamten claimed to have edited the magazine for the Women’s Progress Union, a society of which she was a founding member and admits that the magazine circulated only in the capital city of Accra, and had an estimated print run of no more than 100 copies.⁴ No copy of the magazine appears to have survived although her assertions suggest women’s periodical contributions may have extended beyond newspapers.

In the absence of women’s magazines it was the women’s column that gendered Ghanaian journalism. Women’s columns in early newspapers were instrumental in forming a female reading audience organized around the textual representation of women as readers, writing subjects and textual figures situated within a reformist discourse designed to instruct and entertain them. They engaged directly with readers on specific topics as well as engaged in their lives by offering to show them how to improve themselves. While they provided a discursive space for women, they also delineated the process of simultaneous liberation and restriction that marked women’s engagement with the press. At a time when women had few outlets for self-expression the women’s column provided them with an enabling space, and to co-opt Beetham (1996), acted as a “kind of nursery,” which allowed for all kinds of literary activity – poems, short stories, didactic articles, fashion sketches, essays and sounding-off forums. At the same time however, it was a dis-enabling space, limiting the location of women’s writings and circumscribing what could or could not be discussed. An editor’s note soliciting contributors for a women’s column, is illustrative of attempts at regulating the contents of gendered spaces in early Ghanaian newspapers:

The Editor will welcome articles for the Women’s Corner on the world of fashion, on female society and the social world in general; on dancing, music and concert; on children and children’s education, on indoor games and other sports such as tennis, on the home and the kitchen, and in general on all subjects, even literature, books, religion, marketing, dress-making, etc. in which the cultured lady of fashion is interested. Articles on the female view of

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² The recent phenomenon of male-targeted media such as magazines is noted and included in the definition of gendered space.
³ There is an obvious discrepancy in the title of the publication, which poses a problem. This was pointed out to Odamten but she insists that it was African Woman and not Ghana Women (letter from Helen Odamten, daughter of Marion Odamten, July 12, 2001). Unfortunately no copy of the magazine has been located as yet.
⁴ Interview with Marion Odamten, Accra, January 31, 2001. Odamten’s children said she had shown them copies of the magazine but did not know what had happened to the copy that had been kept by Odamten. She said she started the magazine because she wanted something to do beyond being a housewife and thought it would help in her charity work. She wrote some of the articles and named among her contributors Mrs. Simango and Aaron Ofori-Atta.
politics for this Corner must be moderately toned in harmony with the polite
taste of women (Times of West Africa, March 12, 1934).

Still women’s columns produced journalistic writings that bear witness to women’s
interventions in the public sphere. At one point or another in their publishing history,
more than a third of the pre-independence newspaper titles provided space
specifically addressing women. They include the Western Echo, the Times of West
Africa, the Gold Coast Independent (second series), the Gold Coast Times (second
series), the African Morning Post, the Gold Coast Spectator, the Gold Coast
Observer, the Ashanti Pioneer, the Accra Evening News, the Daily Graphic and the
Sunday Mirror. A few others, notably the Gold Coast Times (first series) and the
Gold Coast Leader, promised women’s columns but failed to deliver.

Were gendered spaces motivated by a real need for women’s own space or were they
just conventional? Perhaps as Kathleen Hewitt (1933) hints at in her foreword to a
collection on the “Women’s Corner” by Marjorie Mensah Ghanaian newspapers
established women’s columns so they will not be considered “behind the times.” A
more gracious reasoning, however, may have been that nationalist editors recognized
very early on the need to include women in their reformist agenda and sought to do
that through this dedicated didactic space whose primary mission was to educate and
modernize the “new” Ghanaian woman. It is reasonable to also assume that in their
bid to create new communities of readers, editors may have calculated that they could
extend their subscription base by attracting a small but growing pool of loyal female
readers. No matter, whether born of a fashion trend, or of recognition of her social
and/ or economic potential, or motivated by the desire to educate women, the
women’s column was a strong signifier of the presence of women in print culture. It
was the most public arena opened up by elite men in which elite women could
dialogue on “women’s issues and concerns” and helped to sustain a continuous and
intimate communication between early newspapers and their female readership, a
relationship which sometimes extended beyond the text.

**Beyond the Gendered Space**

The gendered space may have been the breeding and nurturing ground for female
journalistic activity, but journalism was not always gendered. It was possible for
women to transcend the journalism of women’s columns as well as to rise in the
hierarchy of the press. Not surprisingly, the Daily Graphic, the paper that encouraged
the most female activity, provided opportunities for acknowledged writers such as
Mabel Dove-Danquah, Akua Asaabea Ayisi, Edith Wuver and Regina Addae to write
on non-gendered subjects that appeared in the more general pages of the newspaper.
After Independence Wuver made history by becoming the first female war
correspondent in Ghana, having been sent by the paper to cover the 1962 Congo War.
Regina Addae, who was initially employed as editorial secretary became the paper’s
first female parliamentary reporter and a current affairs columnist in the middle
1950s.5

Two women, Efua Scheck and Dove-Danquah, rose to become editors of newspapers
in 1950, an achievement that was not replicated until 1980/1981 when Elizabeth

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Ohene was made editor of the *Daily Graphic*. Scheck was the assistant editor of a provincial newspaper called the *Takoradi Times* and assumed editorship in 1950 when her brother, Saki Scheck, who was the editor, was thrown in jail for 12 months for publishing seditious material.

Dove-Danquah was the *Accra Evening News*’ very visible combative editor for a short period from early 1951 to the middle of that year. Like Scheck she was politically active, both journalistically and otherwise. In June 1954 as CPP’s candidate for the Ga Rural Electoral District, she won 3331 out of 3974 votes beating out two male opponents to become the first African woman elected by popular vote to a national legislative body. More importantly, Dove-Danquah was the indisputable doyenne of Gold Coast journalism having first entered the field by working as a columnist for the *Times of West Africa* (1931-1935). Her four-decade-long career as a journalist had her corresponding for several other newspapers under various pseudonyms. She also engaged in other literary activities such as writing short stories, some of which were published in newspapers (*Times of West Africa* and *Daily Graphic*, for example) and can now be found in international literary collections.

**Anonymity**

A mistress of disguise, Dove-Danquah’s journalistic versatility was exposed through a small announcement carried in the *African Morning Post*, accompanied by her picture, which notified readers that:

> Mrs. J.B. Danquah (nee Dove) whose photograph is reproduced above, will in future write articles in her own name, Mabel Danquah. She has been known under such pen names as Marjorie Mensah ‘*Times of West Africa*; Ebun Alakija – ‘*Nigerian Daily Times*’ and Dama Dumas – in our own *African Morning Post*’ (*African Morning Post*, January 3, 1938).

Anonymity in the early Ghanaian press appeared to have been fairly entrenched, partly because the social and political conditions prevailing in colonial Ghana required protective anonymity in order to diffuse responsibility, deflect liability from individual authors of text, and to present a unified front to readers. Anonymity shielded in particular contributors who were in government employ and who feared victimization for articulating contentious views in nationalist newspapers that were adversarial to colonial policy and authority.

There may have also been gendered reasons for female anonymity, although it was not always clear. The identities of most of the authors of early women’s columns and pages were concealed behind such feminine pseudonyms as “Elena,” “Joyce,” “Marjorie Mensah,” “Gloria,” “Nana Egyiriba,” etc.

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6 It is not quite clear exactly when she took the over the editorship of the paper. It appears it was at least before April 1951 because her name was appearing on the paper as editor about then. The June 29, 1951 edition of the paper however, lists S.O. Sandy as editor, indicating that her editorship ended around that time. She appeared to have left Ghana shortly after for Freetown Sierra Leone where according to an article carried in the *Evening News* of November 27, 1951 she stayed for three months and led a women’s demonstration march against the high cost of living. Jones-Quartey, (1975b) also notes that in 1951 she paid a visit to her father’s birthplace, Freetown where together with Constance Cummings-John, the second African woman central legislator, they organized 20,000 Sierra Leonean women to stage a march-demonstration against the rising costs of living.
Since the early Ghanaian press appeared to have actively solicited articles from women, and eagerly represented the female writing subject, the primarily reason for female anonymity was unlikely to be that women feared they would not have been published on account of their gender.

Rather, a likely reason educated elite women, conditioned to be demure, may have preferred to write in anonymity was that they were afraid of “risking fame” by appearing in print. By using anonymity they were able to shy away from the “bubble notoriety” that authorial attribution would have conferred upon them. Another reason female writers preferred to operate anonymously was because of the confrontational nature of print culture. Newspapers required not only literary ability, but also a tough skin that could withstand the scrutiny of critics. Anonymity allowed contributors to maintain their privacy, and perhaps personal dignity in the face of newspaper attacks, and prevented their alienation from people they might offend in their writings.

But anonymity, no doubt, is a contributory factor to women’s historical invisibility in print culture, obscuring identity and presenting difficulties for researchers interested in discovering women’s varied voices in the press.

No column illustrates the vexed questions raised by authorship like the “Women’s Corner” in the Times of West Africa and the multivocality of its pseudonymous author Marjorie Mensah. The unraveling of the Marjorie Mensah mystery deserves close attention because it elucidates the manner in which anonymity was deployed in the Gold Coast press and underscores some of the implications raised by anonymously authored female texts in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Right from the inception of this column on March 12, 1931, it fueled intense intra and inter-newspaper debate over authorship, with readers contesting the gender of Marjorie Mensah and the paper reveling in the controversy. Bold headlines over reader’s letters on the identity issue were augmented by well-considered comments from Marjorie Mensah herself or her fellow columnist, pseudonymed “Zadig,” who wrote the “Diary of a Young Man About Town” column.

One of the earliest letters questioning Marjorie’s gender came from Asuana Quartey whose main force of argument centered on the technical competence of women writers:

I have been following closely the many interesting letters under the pen of Miss Marjorie Mensah since your paper made its first appearance in the journalistic arena. The nature of the letters, the diction, the firm grip of the writer, tend to arouse my suspicions, and probably those of many readers; and confirm me in the conviction as to the identity of the writer being a man. I mean no offence to ‘your lady’ correspondent, but it is very unusual that West African Ladies (even those with a superior European education) could be induced to take an intelligent interest in the affairs of the country in the same breath as your lady correspondent is doing. This is a new feature in West Africa journalism, for which please accept my heartiest congratulations (West Africa Times, April 21, 1931).
Another letter from a C.A. des Bordes, who also disputes the likelihood that women were adequately placed to be journalists, echoes Quartey’s position:

“...I beg to say in my few infantile stock of vocabulary, that Miss Marjorie Mensah is a man – To say she is a man, may sound differently or bring about a variety of understanding to some of your readers, but to me I say she is a man in that, the work which she has voluntarily undertaken to do, and must do as long as this paper endures for the reason that a special column is provided for her, could very seldom be accomplished by even a man except he is solely attached to the duties of the Press. Miss Marjorie Mensah’s daily writing since the first publication of this valuable paper, except on two occasions when she was relieved by her woman friends, has always been a sensational problem to me in particular and very likely to many others – her sweet style of diction as a woman is to me above the par… Miss Marjorie Mensah’s portrait must, if possible be printed at the side of her name in the Ladies Corner, which was for her sake provided. While it will gain for her more honor and admiration, it will give more fire to many of our women who are ambitious.

Undoubtedly, Miss Marjorie Mensah had most of her training in Europe; but I dare say her complete control of English may not wholly emanate from her European training… (West Africa Times, April 24, 1931).

Other readers such as Esther Stonewall Payne (West African Times, May 11, 1931) counter the male skepticism about Marjorie Mensah’s journalistic ability by arguing that her style of diction demonstrates her mental prowess and highlights the fact that “some of the ladies out here have wit enough to express their minds as equally as the men if not better.” The writer chastises the male detractors, reasoning that,

Rival newspapers soon joined the fray over Marjorie Mensah’s identity, carrying views from readers such as C.S. Adjei, for whom the Marjorie Mensah identity crisis produced a constant stream of letters. In one of his letters Adjei accuses another letter writer, Kofi Tawia, of trying to deceive “the white world into regarding our women as generally capable of contributing articles, such as those that emanate from the veiled personality of Marjorie Mensah” (Gold Coast Independent, August 8, 1931). A charge to which Kofi Tawia provides this spirited and insightful defense:

Far from contending that Marjorie Mensah is not the Nom de Plume of a male correspondent of the West Africa Times, I have simply sought to bring home to you and your type of patriots two important facts – that the articles of ‘Marjorie Mensah’ can possibly be the product of a female correspondent and that contrary to the general belief that our women are still swimming in illiteracy, we have today, a number of ladies, though small, who can suggest social reforms in the press and hold their own against many a man in a lot of things…(Gold Coast Independent, September 12, 1931).

The columnist herself was quick to address what she termed the “literary scraps” about her identity, accusing her detractors of courting “bubble notoriety which they had sought with so much ostentation – the small consequence of seeing themselves in Print.”

The Marjorie Mensah enigma soon transcended literary and social circles, and became a subject of legal contestation. In 1934 Kenneth MacNeil Stewart, a former editor of
the paper, filed a lawsuit in the Divisional Courts against the *Times of West Africa*. The lawsuit was prominently reported on the front pages of the paper starting on May 11, 1934 and continued until judgment was given a few days later. Stewart, regarded as an accomplished journalist and writer of the 1930s, was suing the Guinea Times Publishing Company, proprietors of *Times of West Africa*, for copyright of the name of Marjorie Mensah. His action had been precipitated by the publication of a book containing compilations of articles from the Marjorie Mensah column. Titled “Us Women,” this illustrated book was edited by Kathleen Hewitt of London and was well publicized in the *Times of West Africa* (See for example, November 2, 3 and 28, 1933). In his statement of claim Stewart alleged that with the exception of two articles, he had written all the selections in the book. But the newspaper disputed the claim stating, according to published newspaper reports, that he was not the only contributor under the ‘Corner’ and that the name Marjorie Mensah was not invented by him, but by Mr. Coussey, a Managing Director of the Company in conjunction with Dr. J. B. Danquah. The two men had banded several names around, including the name Regina, before settling on Marjorie Mensah. But perhaps more importantly, the defense claimed when MacNeil Stewart was on staff and after he left the paper, “other people, especially Miss Mabel Dove, wrote articles under the Ladies Corner.” The defense argued that “of 68 chapters in the book ‘Us Women’ only about 8 were written by Mr. Stewart and the rest of the 60 or so were from the pen of Miss Mabel Dove.” According to coverage on court proceedings, original manuscripts backed the newspaper’s claims. Significantly, Danquah is reported to have said that as editor “the first article in the column was handed to MacNeil Stewart to edit, and that it had been written by Miss Ruby Papaio.” Upon cross-examination Danquah elaborated further on the first authorship of the column, explaining that that first manuscript by Miss Papaio on cookery was “built up by Mr. Stewart” (*Times of West Africa*, May 14, 1934).

Five days after the lawsuit was called, Mr. Justice Joseph Mervyn St. John Yates found in favor of the defendants, set aside an interim injunction against the use of the name Marjorie Mensah by *Times of West Africa*, and awarded costs against Stewart. The report on Yates’ judgment is worth quoting as it further illuminates the nature of authorship of the Ladies/Women’s Corner:

His Lordship said that the plaintiff was engaged as editor to produce the paper and no special agreement was made for that employment. There was a Ladies Corner as a feature and he wrote articles under that name in the course of his employment. But ‘Marjorie Mensah’ was not adopted by the plaintiff as his pen name and His Lordship found as a fact that the name was invented by the Managing Director in conjunction with Mr. Coussey for the Company. Articles under the Ladies Corner were not exclusively written by the plaintiff.

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7 A copy of the book can be found in Cambridge University Library. It was published in 1933 by Elkin Mathews & Marrot Ltd., 44 Essex Street, Strand.
8 Unsuccessful attempts were made to crosscheck newspaper reports with court transcripts. No records were located on the case.
9 This fact may explain why in the very first *Diary of a Man About Town* Zadig (a.k.a. J.B. Danquah) had slipped in his introduction of the column and referred to “Regina Mensah,” rather than “Marjorie Mensah.” See *Times of West Africa*, March 19, 1931.
10 Each article was headed as a chapter, accounting for the number of chapters cited in the lawsuit. In actuality therefore what were 68 articles, which made up the collection.
11 *Times of West Africa*, May 12, 1934.
others did so and were paid. The ownership of “Marjorie Mensah” was not therefore in the plaintiff (*Times of West Africa*, May 16, 1934).

This case, as reported by the newspaper, proves at least that the gender of the columnist so hotly contested was mostly, although not entirely female. As the reports suggest Marjorie Mensah was a construct of the newspaper’s bosses; a construct that came with a set of expectations. More importantly, the MacNeil Stewart lawsuit also establishes Mabel Dove Danquah as the dominant and most consistent Marjorie, although not the only Marjorie as secondary historical sources have led us to believe. The interim injunction imposed upon the use of the name Marjorie Mensah in the paper during the period of the lawsuit forced the column to acknowledge other bylines – Koshie, Odarley, and Lizzie Sarbah.12 An editor’s note underneath Lizzie Sarbah’s byline on May 11, 1934 explains that “in view of the pending interest in the writer of the Women’s Corner Miss Mabel Ellen Dove requires us to say she is not the present writer under our Women’s Corner.”

It is probable that even before the lawsuit these women contributed to the paper but were made invisible by “Marjorie Mensah.” On the other hand, it is entirely possible that in order to subvert the injunction these female names were used to camouflage the real author of the text, although this seems unlikely given the fact that the paper ran the risk of court censure.

The clues provided by the Marjorie Mensah lawsuit, specifically the information that Ruby Quartey-Papaio was an occasional contributor, opened up the prospect of investigating her as a possible hidden newspaper contributor also. While I was unable to establish whether Ruby Quartey-Papaio, a distinguished educationist, was concealed behind any other pseudonyms I discovered that her sister, Mercy Quartey-Papaio, later Mercy Ffoulkes-Crabbe, was the ‘voice’ behind “Gloria. As is often the case with conjectural history the possibility that a Quartey-Papaio lurked behind a pseudonym served as the lead to tracing and interrogating more closely members of that family. It had been supposed that the Quartey-Papaio women, having been well educated, were likely and certainly capable of engaging with the press. Public lectures given by both Ruby and Mercy Papaio were occasionally excerpted in newspapers.13 This information served as further motivation to pursue that line of inquiry.

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12 See especially the period between March 12 and May 16, 1934.
13 Mercy Quartey-Papaio’s lecture on “The place of the woman in the home or in the social life of the town” was carried by the *Gold Coast Times* Oct 13, 1934. Also, the paper had on Oct 21, 1939 carried a speech broadcast from the Accra Studio by Miss Ruby Papaio on Women’s part in the war. On July 18, 1951, the Daily Graphic had also carried an article by Mercy K. Ffoulkes-Crabbe (nee Quartey-Papaio) titled “Our Young Women and Higher Studies.” Also “suspicious” was an article in the Ladies Corner on May 18, 1931 from “Cape Coast correspondent” noting Miss Mercy Kwarley Papaio, headmistress of Government School had put a stop to an undesirable practice of schoolgirls, which Marjorie Mensah had drawn attention of her readers to. There was a sense that the article was actually a rejoinder by Mercy Papaio.
Persistence was rewarded by luck when the 67-year-old only child of Mercy Quartey-Papafio stumbled upon information that lay buried in her mother’s “tin trunk.” Dorothy Jane Osuman Ffoulkes-Crabbe, an anesthesiologist had, when first approached, said she had no idea whether or not her mother was a newspaper contributor. The suggestion that she might have been, however, eventually led her to investigate her mother’s belongings, which had remained largely untouched since her death on June 14, 1974 at the age of 80. Among the legacy left behind by Mercy Ffoulkes-Crabbe was an innocuous primary school workbook, containing what appeared to have been attempts at writing an autobiography. The entries were written in the third person, but in Mercy Ffoulkes-Crabbe’s handwriting and they chronicled her illustrious career in education as well as her social activism. More importantly, an entry in the book unveiled she had another more discreet career as a newspaper columnist. Written as a notation in the top margin of a page were the following words: “Mrs. Ffoulkes-Crabbe was for a time a columnist under the penname of Gloria, of the Women’s Corner of the Gold Coast Times, published at Cape Coast.”

This unfinished, unpublished autobiographical material unlocked a major mystery about the identity behind a women’s column, published with great regularity in the Gold Coast Times from 1936-1940, and in which many interesting gender debates occur. Other entries contained in the book are also enormously helpful not only in situating Ffoulkes-Crabbe more firmly as an elite Ghanaian woman, but in informing the discourses of “Gloria,” her newspaper persona.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to demonstrate how women played a significant role in shaping a vibrant and pivotal press in the early press in Ghana. By dismantling the textual and cultural hierarchies of scholarship that have impinged on previous press histories it has been possible to consider the totality of women’s newspaper contributions and to chart a surprisingly long trajectory of women’s journalistic engagement. The textual evidence available from newspapers reveals a shadowy presence of the female writing subject from as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century when women were generally thought to possess little or no literary ability. Evidence has also demonstrated that the female voice became stronger as the twentieth century progressed and peaked in the immediate pre-independence period when women worked variously as editors, as journalists, as columnists and as contributors to newspapers.

The data suggests that the history of women in Gold Coast print culture is not a history of exceptions, even if there were exceptional women, and that the female writing subject was able to insert herself in ways and spaces that allowed her a voice and through that, the opportunity to act as an author of her own social history.

14 Dorothy Ffoulkes Crabbe was first contacted in January, 2001 as part of the informants interviewed for this thesis.
15 Dorothy Ffoulkes Crabbe confirmed that was her mother’s handwriting in an interview on February 3, 2001.
16 She did not expand on this note, unfortunately. At the time she wrote the column (1936-40) however, Mercy Quartey-Papafio was the headmistress of Government Girls School, Cape Coast, now called Phillip Quarcoe, a position she held from 1922 until 1948 when she retired.
Obviously, unearthing the hidden history of women in the early Ghanaian press is an open-ended task, made more difficult by anonymity, which acts as a double-edged sword. Anonymity may have allowed women to stretch the boundaries of the possible, but it has also exacted a great historical price by concealing the identities of many noteworthy women writers and perpetuating their invisibility in the Gold Coast press.
Bibliography


