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Examining the Concept of Participation in Traditional Societies: A Case of the Akan Traditional Society of Ghana

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EXAMINING THE CONCEPT OF PARTICIPATION IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES: A CASE OF THE AKAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY OF GHANA

A Master’s Project

By

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ABSTRACT

There is the general impression that traditional societies, especially those in the developing world, lack participatory mechanisms for their citizens to effectively participate in decisions affecting their lives. This study therefore is an attempt to examine the concept of participation in relation to decision-making and execution of community self-help projects in the Akan traditional society in Ghana. The objective is not to confirm or disagree with this general notion, but to reveal the processes and levels of involvement of the Akans in decisions affecting their lives.

For better understanding of the decision-making processes in the Akan society, one needs to examine the various cultural events depicting the life-cycle of the Akans. The study therefore used the Rites of Passage of the Akan - Birth/Naming, Initiation, Marriage and Death/Funeral - as case studies. In addition to these cultural events, some self-help projects executed by the Akans in some communities were also examined. Since the Akan society is undergoing significant transformation especially due to modernization and western influence, some activities and participation processes of few external community development agencies working in the Akanland were also examined for comparison.

The study reviewed some literature on Culture and Participation and focused on Hofstede’s (2002) four main dimensions of culture for the theoretical framework.

The study concluded that the Akan society is collectivist, has large power distance, has high uncertainty avoidance and is masculine. The values of these dimensions significantly affect one’s involvement in decision-making. Therefore there are various levels of participation in decision-making in the Akan Society mainly based
on age, sex, group membership and position in the family or the community. Again the study reaffirmed that the Akan culture has rich indigenous knowledge based on their cultural values that development partners working in the Akanland could utilize for successful execution of programs.
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CHAPTER ONE

1.0. Introduction

1.1. Background - Ghana.

1.1.1 Geography

Ghana is a Sub-Saharan African country on the western side of the continent. The country was formed from the merger of the British colony of the Gold Coast and Togoland trust territory. In 1957 Ghana became the first country in colonial Africa to gain its independence. The country shares borders on the western side with the Ivory Coast, the Republic of Togo to the east and Burkina Fasso to the north. The south of the country enters the Gulf of Guinea, which forms part of the Atlantic Ocean. The country occupies an area of 239,460 square kilometers with a coastline of 539 kilometers. It has a warm tropical climate, with two main seasons - wet and dry.

1.1.2 Population and Ethnicity

Ghana currently has a population of approximately 20,000,000. The 2000 Ghana Population Census recorded 18,800,000, with a growth rate of 1.7%. The country is made up of 98% Black Africans with several ethnic groups. The major tribes are the Akans 44%, Dagomba 16%, Ewe 13% and Gas 8%. The remaining 19% is made up of several minor ethnic groupings. Even though there are differences in cultural practices among these tribes, the differences are not too significant. Some of their practices are similar if not the same, for example, funerals (how the dead are treated), festivals and chieftaincy activities. The differences may be in the form of the regalia and artifacts used in organizing these events, but the underlying beliefs, norms and value are almost the same.
All the tribes have distinct roles and positions for men, women and children in the traditional Ghanaian society. This delineation of roles and functions, as well as wealth and age, also influences decision-making, both in the family and in the communities. This will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, since it falls within the focus of this research. It must also be noted that all these different tribes or ethnic groups, since the beginning of their existence, have undertaken community improvement activities or self-help projects on their own, before and even after the advent of external development assistance into the Ghanaian society. Usually the decisions on initiation and implementation of such programs are based on cultural beliefs and practices. However, some of the cultural practices have been significantly influenced by external factors, since the latter part of the twentieth century.

The tribes’ contact with outsiders, through migration, education and modernization, has had significant impact on people’s behavior. Twumasi (1995, p. 48), writing on the effect formal education has had on the Ghanaian society, asserts that, “the introduction of formal institutions for education has in itself helped to ‘alienate’ the youth from traditional society, thus furthering a process already set in motion by economic factors”. The result of this is that the youth may not necessarily conform to traditional practices and beliefs because of their alienation due to their exposure to modern education. Typical Ghanaian traditions and cultures are therefore more evident in rural communities than in the cities and towns.

For the purpose of this study, I will use the Akan culture as a point of reference, since the Akans form 44% of the Ghanaian society, with their culture, including the language, becoming the most dominant one in the Ghanaian society. Moreover, according
to Adu Boahen (1995), an eminent historian of Ghana, the other tribes like the Dagomba, the Mamprusi and the Gonga also live like the Akan, with centralized states, even though they are not Akans.

Within the Akan communities, the town chief or village head serves as the leader of the community, but he consults with a council which is made up of the heads of the respective lineages who are resident in the village or the community. As argued by Apter (1972), this type of political structure reveals logic and a degree of centralization that is capable of providing a stable government with the consent of the governed. The Akan social structure and cultural practices, in relation to participation in decision making and implementation of community programs will be explained in greater detail in chapter three.

1.1.3 Economy

Ghana is endowed with numerous natural resources including gold, industrial diamonds, bauxite, manganese, rubber, fish and hydropower. Its natural forests also provide a lot of tropical hardwood timber. Cocoa and coffee also thrive very well in the middle and western portions of the country. Despite these rich resources Ghana remains one of the poorest countries in the developing world with GNP per capita of US$390. This poor state of the country’s economy has been attributed to rampant corruption and mismanagement in the government’s circles and unnecessary military interventions in politics leading to erosion of investors’ confidence in the country. The country’s external debt by 2001 estimates stood at $6 billion. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth
rate is 3%. The country qualified for HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Country) in 2000, due to its high external debt and the total collapse of the economy.

Ghana’s economic difficulties started in the late 1970s under one of the four military dictators the country has had since its independence in 1957. The conditions became more serious in the 1980s which paved the way for the World Bank and the IMF to intervene, thereby introducing Structural Adjustments Policies (SAP) which the government embraced. The SAP also opened the way for private sector participation in the economy, especially in the provision of services and goods. This policy also encouraged the proliferation of local and international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and arrival of other bilateral and international development agencies.

These agencies and organizations came along with the “emerging” concepts and notions of development at that time, notably among them were, Participation, Bottom-up approach, Empowerment, Capacity building, Sustainability, etc. Even though words like “participation” and “participatory”, according to Sachs (1992), appeared for the first time in the development jargon during the late 1950s, they could still be described as emerging or re-emerging concepts in the Ghanaian society in the early 1980s, due to the sudden popularity they assumed from that period. These concepts and many others have become the popular parlance of development interventions at both the national and community levels.

Most of these NGOs are intervening in the agriculture, education, health, environmental and micro-credit sectors. The bilateral agencies like the USAID, CIDA, DfID, JICA, etc. provide funding for some of these NGOs. They are also major source of funding for the Ghanaian government in its development programs. Even though the
interest and strategies of these development partners may vary, they all however, subscribe to these popular concepts of development in one way or the other. Participatory methodologies and techniques in their various forms, at various levels, are being used to conduct training programs or implement and evaluate projects/programs or carry out research especially at the community levels. The government has also adopted various types of participation in governing and/or addressing issues of national concern.

Besides these international NGOs, there are many Community-based organizations (CBOs) which are also embarking on projects to improve their communities. Some of these CBOs receive external funding while others rely solely on community resources. However, it is important to note that Ghanaian villages/communities, on their own, have been undertaking self-help projects before the advent of NGOs and CBOs, and continue to do so. Some of these self-help projects will be discussed as case studies in chapter three.

1.2.0 Project Background

Participation has become a popular concept in human development in recent times. The latter part of the 20th century has witnessed unprecedented writings and discussion on participation in human/community development. Most of the writing, training programs, practices and theories have been geared towards making the developing world, especially Africa, “participatory” in their developmental and political activities. For example Nie (1969) wrote that a nation’s level of economic development correlates with its level of political development. Moreover, Lerner (1958), a prominent spokesman of the development ideology, emphatically stated that, “traditional society is non-participant” (p. 50), while modern society is participatory. According to him
traditional society deploys people by kinship into communities isolated from each other and from the center, whereas modern society functions by ‘consensus’: individuals making personal decisions on public issues must concur often enough with other individuals they do not know to make possible a stable governance.

It must be argued that Participation, either in decision-making or self-help programs, is not new in Africa, especially in the Ghanaian culture. What is new or perhaps critical is the level, value, principles and the form participation takes in the “modern” sense as compared to the traditional form of participation in Ghana.

This project, therefore, is an attempt to examine the concept of participation in a Ghanaian traditional society, through some of its cultural practices, and compare it with the “popular” form of participation as embodied in the programs of NGOs and other development agencies. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the various levels of participation that exist in Akan society, manifesting themselves in their culture and other community/village-initiated development programs. These levels are also compared with the type(s) of participation some national and international NGOs have been promoting in the Akan communities in particular, and in Ghana in general. The purpose for this comparison is not to uphold one system as better than the other, but to identify the differences and similarities.

1.3.0 Objectives of the Project

My interest in this study for my Master’s project has been generated by a number of courses I have taken at the Center for International Education. Prominent among them are Cultural Perspective on Education Management, Participatory Action Research and
Education for Community Development. These courses made me reflect on my twelve years of development work with different NGOs in trying to implement community development projects in rural Ghana. The main objectives of the study therefore are:

- To examine what participation means in the Akan culture, in the context of decision-making and the execution of self-help projects.
- To use some Akan cultural practices as case studies to explore the rationale, values, and levels of participation in the Akan society.
- To compare and contrast the concept of participation in Akan culture with that of the NGOs operating in the Akanland.
- To examine the influence of the modern concepts of participation on Akan cultural values.

1.4.0 Theories, Methodology and Presentation

Hofstede’s four dimensions of culture have been used to examine the Ghanaian society as a whole, and the Akan culture in particular, in terms of decision making and participation. Various theories and concepts of participation and decision making from the western and developing world are also used or applied to examine the topic. Contemporary literature and research on Ghanaian cultural practices have been cited to explain some cultural practices of the Akans.

Apart from secondary data (information) which were readily available from various sources, key informants have also been contacted who have provided significant information on cultural activities. The information focuses very much on the “Whys”, “Hows” of the cultural activities, specifically examining the levels of participation but
not merely the catalogue of activities. The information for this project has been mainly collected from key informants who are Akans, through personal interviews and discussions conducted by hired Akan university students. The information was tape-recorded and later transcribed into English with the help of a university professor who is also an Akan. The author also conducted telephone interviews with two prominent Akan leaders living in the United States. The major cultural activities used as cases studies are birth/naming ceremonies, initiation, marriage and funeral events. Information regarding decision-making on some typical village/community-initiated projects has also been provided based on the author’s personal experience working with some NGOs within the Akan society.

It must be emphasized that the author, who is also an Akan, has lived and worked in the Akan society over a period of twenty years and is well versed in the Akan culture. This helped him assess the credibility of the information provided by the informants. The author acknowledges that, being an Akan who worked with Western NGOs in the Akan society which were trying to promote western ideas of participation, would obviously carry some biases. He however, tried as much as possible to minimize the effects of any personal biases in this project.

The information collected has been presented in interpretive/narrative and analytical patterns. The report is organized into four main chapters in the following format:

- Introduction
- Literature Review.
- The Akan Society and Case Studies
- Analysis and Conclusion
CHAPTER TWO

2.0. Literature Review

2.1.0 Culture

Culture presupposes collectivity. An individual cannot form a culture no matter how long he/she stays in one particular place, because culture is expressed in groups of people living together. Culture has been defined in many ways by anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists. During the twentieth century, the famous definition of culture formulated by Taylor (1871) was very influential, because it covered a wide range of cultural elements. According to Taylor, “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society” (p. 15). Today, Taylor’s definition is not popular among social scientists because they believe it is not a very useful guide for research. It is too broad and lacks sufficient boundaries. Kluckhohn (1951) quoted a consensus of anthropological definitions of culture as consisting,

“in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values” (P. 86).

The above definition brings to fore the importance of human group or groups living together and making distinctive achievements. These achievements, as expressed in customs, symbols, artifacts and the way they conduct themselves, become the accumulated knowledge of the group. It is essential to recognize that, knowledge is the backbone of culture because societies evolve their own ways of doing things based on the knowledge and experiences they have acquired over the years. Acknowledging the importance of indigenous knowledge, Castilo (1983) has stated that any development
effort, whether by design or by default, touches on these established patterns of doing things and must not be ignored. It is therefore incorrect, from a scientific point of view to consider all traditional knowledge *a priori* as inoperative, as some development practitioners have tried to portray. For example, Rothman (1995) asserts that, in the third world international projects, the community is often seen as tradition-bound, ruled by a small group of autocratic elite, and composed of an educationally deprived population who lack skills in problem solving or understanding of democratic methods. With this backdrop, some of these outsider development practitioners try to change the existing culture of their host communities by introducing the concepts they believe in. The irony is that, their very unilateral action of infusing the so-called democratic (participatory) principles into a culture they do not very well understand, defeats the very principles of democracy they are upholding. This notwithstanding, there is however, an evidence that some kinds of indigenous knowledge, which impede progress, are replaced by new ones as has happened all along in human history. However, the point I want to emphasize here is that culture is like an iceberg. What we see is just the tip which usually is made up of the artifacts; beneath these are the cherished unseen values, norms and assumptions.

In the 1982 UNESCO Conference on Culture and Development held in Mexico, culture was defined as the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. The definition included not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs. This definition is important by virtue of its globality, however, critics of the definition say that it is grounded in the Western world-
view with subjective intention. Perhaps these critics assume that fundamental human rights is a Western concept and is not present in all human societies.

The *American Heritage English Dictionary* also defines culture as the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. The significance of this definition is the fact that culture is socially transmitted from one generation to the other. This suggests that it is learned and since it is learned, it is also taught. However, the effective way of teaching culture is not through any formal institution. Culture is transmitted through the process of socialization, where the elements of culture are passed from one generation to the next. According to Habana-Hafner et al (1998), “new generations learn the cultural ‘agreements’ from generations preceding them; once these agreements are internalized, external reinforcements are no longer necessary” (p. 11). Through socialization, individuals develop a culturally-defined world-view and sense of identity.

Much as I agree that culture is learned through socialization, I however, postulate that the learning or training in Akan culture follows informal ‘structured’ stages comparable to the modern ways of training or learning. This assertion will become clearer as we discuss some customs or activities of the Akan culture in subsequent chapters. Habana-Hafner’s assertion that, “external reinforcements are no longer necessary” (p. 11), once the culture is internalized may not be appropriate at this present period of excessive external influences impinging upon traditional values and customs. The individual, especially the one being socialized, as in the case of a child or the youth, and in some cases an adult, needs to be constantly “reminded” by reward or sanction, as it were, to keep him or her on track. The Akan culture has various forms of rewards and
sanctions. A reward could be in the form of appointment as a leader of peers for a particular activity, and sanction could also be a ban placed on you from enjoying certain privileges. The culture itself serves to regulate the lives of the people.

Cultures are systems; they must be viewed as wholes, not as discrete and isolated parts. Banks (1988) therefore stated among other things that, any change in one aspect of a culture affects all of its components. It is therefore important that any outsider, who wants to introduce ‘new’ concepts or ways of doing things in any society in general and that of the Akan in particular, should endeavor to understand how the host culture operates. It may not be surprising to discover that what s(he) intends introducing already exists after all, only in a different form.

2.2.0 Participation

If any word is ubiquitous at all in International Development, then it is participation. Participation, as a concept and a popular paradigm in the development field, is laden with ideology and assumptions. For example the assumption that all human societies are the same and participation is feasible in every society has some serious flaws. Therefore the concept has been applied, and in some cases misapplied, to justify a lot of development interventions all over the world. Despite its manipulative vulnerability in the hands of pseudo-community developers, participation continues to play a central role in economic, social and political developments of both traditional and modern societies.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes participation as the action or fact of partaking, having or forming a part of. This simply means the involvement of people in
some activities. Analyzing this definition, Rahnema (1992) revealed several dichotomies inherent in the Oxford’s definition. According to him, participation could be either transitive or intransitive; either moral, amoral or immoral; either forced or free; either manipulative or spontaneous.

Rahnema again explains that transitive forms of participation are oriented towards a specific goal or target. By contrast, in its intransitive forms, the subject engages in the partaking process without any predefined purposes. People, according to him, could be asked or dragged into partaking in operations of no interest to them, in the very name of participation. In this case the concept has assumed a manipulative and immoral function. The opposite is therefore true for free or spontaneous participation.

Deshler and Sock (1989) have proposed a different framework for categorizing the types of participation on the basis of the degree of control exerted by participants. According to them, the degree of control exerted by the participants determines whether the involvement is pseudo-participation or genuine participation. They explained that pseudo-participation domesticates and could be manipulative, just a therapeutic or mere information giving. However, genuine participation leads to cooperation and empowerment which usually emanates from partnership, citizen control or delegated power”. (p. 205). Again they see consultation and what they term placation as pseudo-participatory because they lead to paternalism or overdependence.

It will be interesting to analyze the Akan culture with this categorization, especially at the family and the societal levels. For example, in the typical Akan society, the family or the parents choose the bride for their son in marriage. There is little or no involvement of the son in arriving at this decision and in most cases the boy does not
have to object to the parent's decision. Should we label this as paternalistic, manipulative, or informative as outsiders or consensus according to the culture? I will attempt doing this at chapter four of this document.

Theorizing on political participation, Benn (1978) contended that when people participate in collective decision-making, they develop certain morally desirable properties, as is the case of the Akan society, there is a sense of responsibility both for themselves and for others. However whether Benn's assertion is true or not, it would still have to be shown that disposition to participate was either a causally or a logically necessary condition for being a morally responsible person. More light will be thrown on this as we discuss Hofstede's (1997) four dimension of culture in relation to the Akan society in the next section.

In international development circles, participation is hailed as one of the very few panaceas to remedy the ever-increasing number of unsuccessful projects/programs especially in the developing world. This has resulted in unintentional rephrasing of old concepts to have a participatory tone, for example, popular participation, participatory action research, participatory monitoring and evaluation, community participation and participatory training. Even though the concept has been misapplied in a few cases, there is still ample evidence that when people are truly involved in their own effort to improve their conditions, the results are marvelous. The success of many development projects especially in the developing world have been attributed to a high level of participation by the beneficiaries.

Notwithstanding the acclaimed high level of successes of participatory projects/programs, there still remain some ethical and pertinent questions which need to
be answered. For example, whose successes are we talking about? Who set the criteria for measuring the successes? What justification do we have to alter some people’s culture to achieve our success? Are we sure there wasn’t any form of participation before we introduced our ideas? How do we assess the long-term effects of our action on their culture? And perhaps the most important of all, Could we have worked through the existing culture? These are some of the hard questions this project wishes to examine.

2.3.0 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions and the Akan Culture

One author who has lucidly explained the theory of cultural dimensions is Hofstede (1997). From cross-cultural studies in multinational corporations like the IBM, he has constructed four main dimensions which characterize the differences between countries’ cultures. These dimensions are labeled Collectivist/Individualism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity. The survey results were collected from subsidiaries of these multinational corporations from 40 countries. Even though the only African country covered by this study is South Africa, the dimensions are relevant for understanding the national and ethnic cultures in Ghana. This study therefore will employ Hofstede’s cross-cultural dimensions in examining participation as it exists in the Akan culture of Ghana.

Hofstede argues that people carry ‘mental programs’ which are developed in the family in early childhood and reinforced in schools and organizations, and that these mental programs contain a component of national culture. This statement is true in the context of socialization of the Akans. The family is the most important primary unit of
the Akan social structure. Unlike the nuclear family of the west, a typical Akan family extends beyond a man, a wife (or wives) and children to other members from the same lineage tracing their roots to one ancestor. This is called an ‘extended family’ from the western perspective. Therefore, the training or bringing up of a child through the socialization process is first the responsibility of this extended family and secondly the entire village as a whole. The family which is an economically productive, socially and demographically reproductive units reinforces natal group solidarity and even operates as a microcosm of the larger society. Its structure, usually with a family head, is the direct replica of the Akan political structure of a community or village with the chief as the head of the community. The harmony, consensus and collective responsibility of each member of the structure are clearly seen in Hofstede’s Collectivist dimension.

2.3.2 Collectivist Culture

More Collectivist cultures, as opposed to Individualistic, according to Hofstede, call for greater emotional dependence of members on their organizations (in this case members of the family and community); in a society in equilibrium, the organizations should in return assume a broad responsibility for their members. We can therefore conclude that the Akan culture is collectivist. These collectivist characteristics permeate every aspect of their lives from decision-making, participation in family or communal events, to rituals and festivities. Moemeka (1997) also underlines some important characteristics of collectivist cultures, such as the supremacy of the community, the limited value of the individual and the sanctity of authority. These can be summarized as the preference for the common good over that of individual; the contribution of the
individual towards the common goals; and the respect and honor accorded to people
chosen as leaders by the entire group respectively. All these are also common traits of the
Akan culture. The last one – honor and respect accorded to leaders- falls within the
domain of our next dimension, which is Power Distance.

2.3.3 Large Power Distance Culture

The Akan political structure, as discussed earlier, is a direct representation of the
family structure. The chief is the leader of the community, just as the family head is the
leader of the family. Some social scientists have contended that the Akan chieftaincy
position is ascribed but not achieved. Whether this is true or not is debatable, and it is
beyond the scope of this thesis. The undeniable fact is that, even though a chief is always
selected from the same family whenever the position becomes vacant, the qualification
goes beyond just a mere member of the family. One’s commitment to the community and
comportment in public life are some of the crucial considerations in choosing a chief. By
Hofstede’s standard, the Akan society may have a moderately large Power Distance
index.

Power Distance refers to the relationship or inequality that exists between the
superior and the subordinate. It is the measure of the interpersonal power or influence
between a boss and subordinate, as perceived by the less powerful of the two. Large
power distance therefore is the existence of a clear-cut, highly structured hierarchy
between the powerful and the less powerful. In a typical Akan family, children, women,
men and family heads all have their clearly defined or identified positions and roles.
Children are not usually ‘involved’ in decision-making within the family. They are
subject to the decisions their parents take, since by the norms of the culture, the parents represent them. Women are represented by their husbands in a general community decision-making. Family heads represent the family in public decisions. The relationships, however, are not the same as those found between a boss and a subordinate in a formal organization in a high power distance society.

An Akan wife may not necessarily speak in a general village meeting. She can however, present her views to the husband, who will carry it out. Whereas the wife can inquire privately (not openly) from her husband why a decision was taken and child also usually from the mother, this may not happen between the boss and the subordinate in an organization or between a teacher and a student. The youth are also represented by their elected or nominated leader in the village. The Akans call this leader mmrantehen, literally the chief of the gentlemen, even though women also form part of the youth. It must be emphasized that external influences are fast eroding these relationships especially in the urban centers. Whichever way one analyses these dimensions in the Akan culture, we cannot say participation or involvement in decision-making is absent. Collectivism implies togetherness; whatever comes out of the chosen leader(s), if the group agrees, binds them all, as in the case of a high power distance culture. In fact, I will call this ‘participation in silence’. The chief cannot take any important decision without discussing it with his elders and seeking their approval, who are also heads of families. In fact the elders (men in the case of a king and women in the case of a queen) have the ultimate power to depose their chief or queen if he or she is perceived as autocratic. Just as parliamentarians represent their electorates in western democracy, so do the elders represent their families, who in turn constitute the entire village.
If Rothman (1995) therefore says traditional communities lack problem solving skills, do not understand democratic principles, and are ruled by a small group of autocratic elite, then it stands to reason that he does not understand the workings of Akan traditional culture, but is trying to judge it from his own culture, which makes him ethnocentric. Saraswati (1997) has contended that, the knowledge we formulate about the ‘other’ is filtered or refracted through the knowledge we have built for ourselves, i.e. we are interpreters of cultures and can observe ‘others’ only through our own cultural and experiential biases. According Saraswati the possible way cultural information models can be built is when cultures are experienced comprehensively; the internalization of the holistic social and cultural experience is crucial since it allows one to move beyond conceptual worlds of people, to a totality that comprises thoughts, feelings and emotions. According to him this is the only way that allows for a fuller understanding of both cognitive and embodied knowledge. Understanding cultures is not about information categories; it is a learning process that can only come via experiencing. This is especially true for the Akan culture.

2.3.4 Strong Uncertainty Avoidance Culture

Ghanaians have two popular adages which go, “the devil you know is better than the angel you don’t know” and “one does not point his finger at his family house”. While it is difficult to trace the origin of the former, the latter is typically associated with the Akans. These sayings, however, vividly explain Hofstede’s third cultural dimension – Uncertainty Avoidance - which is high in the context of the Akan culture. Akans in particular and Ghanaians in general are considered hospitable and friendly towards
strangers. However this hospitality does not go beyond welcoming you into one’s home and sharing of meals. Actual family and community issues are not usually discussed with strangers. A stranger, usually seen as an outsider, will have to win the confidence and respect of the group before vital information will be shared.

Different societies have adapted to uncertainty in different ways and Hofstede explains this to mean that ways of coping with uncertainty belong to the cultural heritage of societies and they are transferred and reinforced through basic institutions like family, the school, and the state. They are reflected in collectively held values of the members of a particular society. He goes further to state that their roots are non-rational, and they may lead to collective behavior in one society which may seem aberrant and incomprehensible to members of other societies. Because of the high level of uncertainty avoidance in the Akan culture, outsiders especially those from western culture, may find it difficult to understand why the people are reluctant to embrace innovations from outside. One element which astounds the strangers is the seemingly absence of ‘freedom of expression’ as it exists in the West. The answer is simple. The Akans want to avoid the unknown and deviant behavior is also not tolerated; it is therefore culturally unacceptable to express an opinion which will contradict groups’ decisions or societal values. This leads to collective behavior which guides everybody’s participation in maintaining the society. In fact there is a typical gesture and/or posture (difficult to explain in English) which a speaker in Akanland has to engage in constantly as s (he) speaks, either in conversation or public lecture. This gesture (usually repeating words, like “sebe”, in the course of the speech) is an assurance to your audience that you may unknowingly say something wrong and you should be pardoned for that. This is similar to a westerner
saying, “excuse my language”, before s(he) utters an unpleasant word or sentences. If one does not assume this posture and says something intolerable or vulgar, it is a big offence.

The strong uncertainty avoidance in the Akan culture can also be easily misinterpreted by outsiders as ‘a resistance to change’. The truth is that new ideas have to be proven by consensus because the people are usually suspicious about them.

2.3.5 Masculine Culture

There is well defined sex role distribution in the Akan culture. Women, children as well as men have distinctive roles they play in the family and in the community as a whole. Much as men have greater power and responsibility, which is a characteristic of a masculine society, the culture as a whole is also nurturing. The culture considers women and children as fragile and weaker, they are therefore protected. ‘Hard jobs’, clearing and tilling the land, are the preserve of men, and ‘lighter’ ones like planting and harvesting are done by women and children. It is the man’s responsibility to provide for the sustenance of the family and therefore not out of place when he takes decisions on behalf of the entire immediate family. Akan culture by Hofstede’s classification is masculine. Masculinity according to him, is shown in both males and females’ assertiveness with strong gender roles, whereas in femininity both men and women are nurturing with blurred gender roles. Culture according to him is also either tender (feminine) or tough (masculine). It is obvious that in the Akan culture, the biological differences of the sexes have implications for their roles in social activities which make it more masculine than nurturing.
From the above discussions of the four dimensions, it can be easily assumed that the Akan culture exhibits all-inclusiveness and collective behavior, therefore participation of everybody in family and community business is assumed to be high by the Akans themselves, but may not be visible to an outsider. Next section will discuss some case studies from the Akan culture which will give clearer understanding of the concept of participation in that society.
CHAPTER THREE

3.0 The Akan Society and Case studies

3.1.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the social and political structures of the Akan society in relation to participation in decision-making processes as they are manifested in the culture and community initiated programs. This is presented in the form of case studies based on the information gathered from various informants in the Akan society. These case studies are also strengthened with information from published sources. The analysis of these cases based on the objectives of this study will, however, be presented in chapter four.

The totality of the Akan culture can be constructed around the events of the life cycle of its members; i.e. from birth to death. These can be referred to as the Rites of Passage of the Akan. Consequently, the following events will be the case studies from the Akan culture: Birth/Naming ceremony; Initiation; Marriage; and Funeral (Death).

Other case studies of Self-help projects by some Akan communities and those implemented by some national and international Non-Governmental Organizations will also be presented as well to complete our discussion on participation in decision-making and execution of development programs. It is however important to present, first and foremost, the social and political structures of the Akans since within which all the cultural events and programs take place.
3.2.0 The Akan Socio-Political Structure

Every Akan person is believed to be made up of three parts, namely *Mogya* (the Blood), *Sunsum* (the Spirit), and *Okra* (the Soul). The blood is contributed by the mother as a substance of the family (*abusua*). The *mogya* therefore *is* synonymous with the lineage (*abusua*) and it provides the child with its lineage. The Akans trace their lineage from the mother’s descent, and therefore practice matrilineal inheritance, because it is believed that the *mogya* makes the child a human being. Therefore the child belongs to the mother’s family, not the father’s. Every Akan by birth is a member of his mother’s lineage and a member of the chiefdom in which this lineage is located. Marriage or migration does not affect the membership of this matrilineage as people still find their real home in their original chiefdom. Wherever they are, they still retain their rights of membership in their natal homes. Dispersal therefore does not in any way deprive members of their lineage rights and statuses.

The father provides the soul (Okra) of their children through their semen in the course of a baby’s conception. The soul is responsible for the character, temperament, genius or quality of the person. However, Twumasi (1975) contends that as the child is being socialized to become an Akan, he acquires the *okra* which is his character. This may also resemble the ego and superego concepts of Sigmund Freud (1913). The *okra* is educable and has a moral system of reward and punishment. Failure to adhere or conform to the usages and practices of the lineage carries negative sanctions. On the concept of social sanction, Radcliffe Brown (1934) points out that:

*The sanctions existing in a community constitute motives in the individual for the regulation of his conduct in conformity with usage. They are effective, first, through the desire of the individual to obtain the approbation and to avoid the disapprobation of his fellows, to win such rewards or to avoid such punishments*
as the community offers or threatens and second, through the fact that the individual learns to react to particular modes of way as to his fellows, and therefore measures his own behavior both in anticipation and in retrospect by standards which conform more or less closely to those prevalent in the community to which he belongs (p. 531).

The Akans have a well-structured social and political stratification system. Schwimmer (2002) describes this as stratification systems based upon the maintenance of hereditary status tied to their political order that represents a form anthropologists call a ranked society, a characteristic of Hofstede’s power distance and masculinity dimensions. According to him, “the principle positions consist chiefly of titles arranged in a graded hierarchy from the king who rules over the entire state, to divisional chiefs heading subordinate regions, to town chiefs at the bottom of the administrative ladder” (p. 6). Within each community the chief or village head serves the people as the leader of that community. He however consults with a council which is made up of the heads of the respective lineages who are resident in the village or the community, holding specialized political and social responsibilities. Most of these offices are reserved for men with the exception of the queen mother’s position.

Apart from the queen mother and the king’s/chief’s positions that require broad approval from the population, there are no uniform succession rules for the positions of lineage heads. In spite of the hereditary nature of political office, installation of chiefs needs popular support from the society. After the death of an incumbent, his stool could be filled only by a member of the appropriate lineage but several candidates had to compete for office and campaign among the "kingmakers" on the local council and among the public at large. Furthermore, an unpopular chief could be destooled (deposed). These features of the Akan ranking system are typical of this form of stratification in that
statuses are restricted but are quite numerous and arranged in a complex hierarchy based in part upon locality.

The economic functions of the lineage focus on agriculture and land ownership. The land is invested in the ancestors, but the abusua panin (family head) acts as a trustee for the group. Land can therefore not be sold or otherwise permanently alienated. Actual distribution of farm plots for agricultural use is assigned to minor lineage segments, which are responsible for mundane and day-to-day concerns. Individual tenure and farm management is left to household heads, which are usually men and often work the soil with the assistance of wives and children.

3.3.0 Case Studies (1) – Akan Cultural Events

3.3.1 Birth/Naming Ceremony

Childbirth is a very important event in marriage in the Akan society. A marriage without the issue of a child is always threatened with divorce. Usually the female is blamed by her in-laws as being the one incapable of reproducing. The man also suffers reproach from his peers in the village, because a child is the proof of one’s manhood. Therefore, the birth of a child is a source of joy and pride to the couples and the entire extended family. This joy and happiness becomes complete when the child survives the first seven days, after which a naming ceremony is organized by the family.

Within the first one week of child’s birth, the Akans believe that it (the child) is not yet a human being and can die. Since the death obviously will rob the family of the joy, they wait until after the first seven days. The naming ceremony is immediately organized on the eight day at which the baby is given a proper name, signifying that the
child has been welcomed into the family because it has declared his/her intention to stay. Within the first seven days the child is called by its day-name which becomes the first name of the Akans throughout life. For example all males born on Sundays are called ‘Kwasi’ and females are called ‘Akosua’. Therefore a Sunday-born male child named after his father Sarpong will be called Kwasi Sarpong. However with the influence of education and Christianity, these names have become middle names. For example a person who was called Kwasi Sarpong may become Samuel Kwasi Sarpong.

The naming ceremony, according to Nkansah-Kyeremateng (1996), stresses truthfulness as an Akan attribute. Three drops of alcohol and water each are put on the tongue of the baby admonishing him/her to be truthful by distinguishing between alcohol and water. Never in his/her life should s(he) call alcohol water and vice versa. In the western parlance he/she should call a spade a spade. The proper name is usually given by the father of the baby. He can choose to name the baby after his father or mother depending on his/her sex or even after himself. The mother of the baby, according to custom, does not have the right to give or suggest the proper name to the baby. The husband can discuss this issue privately with his wife, even asking for her consent before the eighth day, but it should not appear in public that the woman has a prior knowledge of the name, because men are supposed to be more secretive than women. Akans usually associate gossiping with women, therefore it is believed that the woman may leak the information to her friends before the day of the ceremony. Any man who is not able to keep a secret is considered a woman.

The birth of a child to a couple is also a birth of a child to the extended family and the community at large. Consequently the upbringing or training of the child is the
responsibility of the entire community. A child misbehaving in public can be punished or 
reprimanded by any member of the community without prior approval from the parents. 
The punishment is always endorsed by the parents if they get to know of it. A child (boy 
or girl) who has not attained adulthood should never sit in the meetings of adults. If the 
parents are chatting the child should not contribute to the conversation if he/she is not 
invited. It is believed that this training makes the child become respectful and disciplined 
and always appreciative that adults are more knowledgeable and experienced in life. 
However with the advent of formal education, parents have become aware of the new 
knowledge their children posses and therefore invite them to contribute to discussions 
when the need arises. Notwithstanding, children are expected to play and have 
conversation more with their peers than with adults, unless they have special problem 
which needs an adult's attention. Before the child attains adulthood, he or she is under the 
decision taken by the parents, because they care for him/her and provide his/her needs. 

A child who is well-trained is respectful and listens to the advice of his/her 
parents and that of the entire members of the community. Such a child will have the 
honor of being initiated into adulthood when she attains the puberty age.

3.3.2 Initiation

The most popular initiation rite in Ghana which has attracted a lot of 
attention within and outside the country is the ‘Dipo’ initiation for the Krobo girls. This 
paper however does not cover the Krobos even though all of them speak the Akan 
language besides their own. However, the Akans also have initiation ceremony for their 
girls even though the practice is in decline these days mainly due to western ideas and the
cost involved. While boys do not have any rites delineating the transition from childhood to adulthood, the Akan girls have the puberty rite. In a typical Akan society it is a prohibition for a girl who has not been initiated to womanhood to become pregnant. If she does become pregnant without the puberty rite, she is banished with the husband to live in a hut in the bush until the baby is born and proper customary rites performed. It is believed that this practice instills chastity among Akan girls.

The mark of a girl to be ushered into womanhood is her first menstruation. As soon as a girl sees this sign for the first time, her mother announces it to the old women in the village or the community. In the evening the mother publicly washes the girl and cuts her hair. Within the period of the menstruation, the girl is considered as unclean and is restricted to a secluded place. The father may pour libation as a prayer for fecundity, guidance, and protection of the new adult member of the family. According to Ephirim-Donkor (1997), this marks the advent of sex education. Her mother and older women from this time on begin with the pedagogical tasks of womanhood, instructing the young woman about the taboos and prohibitions of menstruation, marriage, dietary laws, and societal responsibilities and expectations. In the past little or no attention has been paid to her movements and activities as a child, but her activities now will be circumscribed to prevent her from engaging in dishonorable conduct. Her actions from that time have ethical repercussions and she must therefore be careful in public.

After the menstruation is over, the old women prepare the girl by shaving her armpits and pubes, dress her in gold jewels and other ornaments and she is seated by the main street of the community to receive homage. After this is over, usually it lasts for
three days, she goes round the homes thanking the people. From that day the girl is ready for marriage if she is not attending school.

3.3.3 Marriage

This account was given by two persons who are an Abusuapanin (family head) of a family and a Local Pastor, aged 75 and 68 years respectively.

The Akan custom demands that it is only the man who can propose marriage to a woman but not vice versa. Usually the father of a young man takes the responsibility of finding a wife for his son. It is not wrong, however, for the son to also fall in love with a lady, but he must first of all inform his father of his discovery. When it happens this way and the son informs the father, the latter does not have to agree immediately with his son’s choice. The father has to conduct further investigations into the girl’s background including her family’s record in the community. It is the duty of the father to know and be convinced that his son is marrying into a good family. Because as Nkansa-Kyeremateng (1997) puts it, “marriage among Akans is considered more as a group union than a bond of two individuals since it unites two families” (p. 73). Therefore investigation to ensure sound social and health background is of paramount importance. It is believed that, for example, if some of the girl’s family members are prostitutes, there is the likelihood that the would-be-bride can also become adulterous. If there are mad people in the partner’s family some of the children who come out of the marriage will also become mad. After the father has done all these investigations into the girl’s background and he is convinced beyond every reasonable doubt that the girl is from a
respectable family, he then will agree to his son’s choice by informing the girl’s father of his son’s proposal.

The girl’s father will also start his investigation together with his wife and their grown up children, if there is the need. Assuming that their investigations prove positive, then the two families will soon become ‘one’ by the bond of marriage. The father of the young man then pays a visit to the girl’s mother in her house to disclose the news to her. Even though the woman has been informed by her husband about the proposal, the former will pretend that she does not have any prior knowledge of it. This is because the girl’s father should not be portrayed as someone who cannot keep a secret. Women protect the integrity of their husbands by pretending that they do not know what has transpired between their husbands and other people. During this meeting a day will be fixed, usually in the evening, for the representatives of the two families to meet to perform the customary rites for the marriage. It is in this subsequent meeting that the girl will be asked in the presence of all gathered, including the would-be husband, of her opinion about the impeding marriage. Once again the girl’s mother has already informed her daughter about the proposal before the meeting and sought her consent already. If the parents agree to the marriage it becomes obvious that the girl has to accept. Therefore it is not common for the young lady to say no in the presence of the two families.

After the girl has consented to the marriage, the meeting closes but the marriage is not yet contracted. It is from this time that the future couples will get the chance to meet each other, but not for any sexual activity. It is through such meetings that the young man inquires from the lady what her family is demanding as the bride rite or dowry. The girl then brings the list of items to be bought for the marriage to the man and the latter
also presents it to his father. As one of the informants noted, “Enough time is needed to enable the man’s father to purchase all the items listed by the lady”. After the items are ready a day is fixed for the celebration. On the day of the celebration, the man’s family will present the items, and the uncle (mother’s brother) of the young man, stands behind the bridegroom to receive the bride. The uncle of the bride also stands behind the lady and gives her out. After some prayers are offered, pieces of advice are given by both sides of the family to the couple. For example the young man is warned never to beat up his wife and the wife also has to respect her husband. A few drinks and food are served, if available but they are not obligatory, and everyone enjoys. It is believed that marriages performed in this way are difficult to break because it is the responsibility of all those present to help resolve whatever conflict that may crop up between the couples in the course of their marriage. Any major problem that confronts each of the partners in the course of the marriage, be it sickness, heavy debt, or legal matters, becomes the concern and responsibility of the entire two families bonded by the marriage.

After the celebration the groom can take his wife away to live with his parents till the two of them are ready to move out as mature adults. They move out to begin another extension of their larger families by bearing children, contributing their quota to the welfare of the families and the community as whole. By so doing they will have a better place in the society so that when they die, they will receive an appropriate funeral and will join their ancestors who also distinguished themselves in a similar manner.

3.3.4 Funeral

One the most frequent and important cultural events in the Akan society is the
funeral ceremony. All community members, young and old, participate in this major event. As Nkansa-Kyeremateng (1996) rightly puts it, “funerals are regarded as social events which stress the unity in a lineage and the town. They help to reaffirm cultural values” (p. 84). Therefore the attendance at funerals is normally expected from everyone in the village, except children. Failure to attend funerals without socially acceptable reasons carries serious consequences, including alienation and stigmatization, which also affect the funeral patronage including the burial of the culprit during his/her death. There have been instances where communities have refused burial of their townsmen and women who stayed in other towns and villages but never attended funerals in their hometowns. The Akans therefore esteem the funeral as a very important event in their society. Mbiti (1992) has observed that, “the manner of funeral rituals expresses feeling of sorrow and loss as well as emphasize the belief that death was not the end of the person’s existence. The spirit of the deceased will continue to influence the lives of his living relatives with blessings or curses depending on how he was treated by the living” (p. 119).

Nana Badu (nana is usually a title for a chief or any grandparent) of Adiembra Community and Nana Ofori, a one time chief of an Akan village (now living in the United States), who were interviewed as an informants on funerals for this study, have thrown more light on the funeral. The following will therefore be most of their accounts on Akan funeral. According to them,

“If a person dies, we don’t announce it immediately, we wait until the sun has set down when everyone has taken his/her dinner. If it is mistakenly announced before dinner, then people cannot eat but go to bed on empty stomach. Even before the name of deceased is mentioned publicly, the Abusuapanin (i.e. the head of the family), must be informed first. The Abusuapanin is usually the oldest male member of the extended family. He has to confirm the death by inspecting the body. In the case the Abusuapanin
is physically inactive, his roles are played by the next oldest male of the family. The body is then cleaned and massaged with some herbs called *Akyeampon* to preserve it for the night."

In a situation where the person dies in a hospital, the body will be kept in a mortuary for a number of days decided by the Abusuapanin and his elders. This enables them to make all the necessary arrangements for the burial and the funeral. Twumasi Ankrah (2002) reiterates that in the contemporary Akan society, it is a norm for dead bodies to be kept in the mortuary for weeks or months until relatives are adequately organized to give a fitting burial ceremony to the departed soul. Such preparations normally take the form of an expensive coffin, shroud, food and refreshment for invited guests, provision of music usually by a hired band, publicity on radio and television. This is especially so if the deceased had a good-standing relationship with his circle of associates prior to his death. In that case, sympathizers from the deceased’s religious, professional, political and other forms of affiliations will mobilize financial donations, transportation, etc. just to attend the burial or funeral of their departed colleague regardless of the distance.

After the entire community is presumed to have taken their dinner, the death will be announced and then the identity of the deceased disclosed. This ushers in the uncontrollable wailing and crying over the dead especially by the women. To an outsider this may appear to be a confusing state of affairs, since almost all the women in the community are wailing loudly at the same time. Nketia (1990) asserted that the celebration of a funeral in Akan social life demands often not the solemnity of a quiet atmosphere but rather the turbulence of a festival shorn of its glaring gaiety.

All these are just preliminaries or pre-funeral activities. The actual planning of the funeral proceeds the following day as early as 4.30 a.m. Basically there are very
important stages which form the process of every normal funeral in Akan society. They are the planning and resource mobilization, durbar/ceremony and assessment stages. Participants at each level differ depending on factors including family membership, age, sex, and community membership. It must be pointed out here that the mention of family means the extended family members.

At the planning and resource mobilization level, the family head chairs the meeting. Other members of this meeting include the oldest female in the family and other adults. Usually children below the ages of 20 are not included in such meetings. At this stage the meeting deliberates on the arrangements for the funeral including the burial of the corpse. The date for the actual celebration (durbar) is fixed during this meeting. The members deliberate on the budget for all the expenses – coffin, feeding, entertainment, seating facilities, etc - and agree on a specific amount. In times of disagreement, the decision of the Abusuapanin becomes final and everybody is expected to oblige.

Normally, money voted for these activities is called a loan. Even if there is a wealthy family member who can foot all the bill, custom still demands that the money should be spent as a loan secured from outside the family. The Abusuapanin takes charge of whatever amount (loan) is secured for the funeral. Some of the reasons given by the informants for calling this amount a loan are: (i) this avoids dictatorship by the creditor (if a family member) in order not to manipulate the funeral activities to his/her own advantage, (ii) a loan puts the entire family in responsibility to ensure that resources are used judiciously, because if there happens to be a debt after the funeral, the entire family members will contribute to offset that debt.
At this meeting roles and responsibilities are assigned to members. For example the male youth are in charge of erecting canopies, arranging seats and chairs, procuring music and singing groups to entertain people at the funeral grounds on the day of the grand ceremony. The women, usually those below their fifties, take charge of the preparation of meals for the guests who will attend the funeral. Money for all these is taken from the loan the family has secured. Whatever expenses each person incurs should be noted for reconciliation during the assessment stage.

The ceremony or durbar day (D-day), which is usually a Saturday, is the climax of the entire funeral activity. Usually the corpse is either buried before this date or is laid in state in the night (vigil) prior to the D-day and buried early in the morning before the actual durbar/ceremony begins. The festivities on this day are so important and grand in style that the events of the day overshadow all other events performed before or after this date. As a result people have associated funeral with only this day even though other activities start the day the person dies and even continue after the D-day. During this day, the Abusuapanin and his family sit in state at the funeral ground dressed in black and red mourning costumes. The seats at funeral ground are arranged in horse-shoe fashion. The Abusuapanin and his family members sit at the arch, the community members and visitors sit at both the right and the left flanks also dressed in beautiful red and black mourning costumes.

As soon as the Abusuapanin and his members sit down for the funeral to begin, usually around mid-day, each person who enters the funeral grounds must greet by shaking hands with everybody on the front row of all the people seated. The handshaking must always start from the right flank of the gathering and end at the left. As the new
arrivals are in a queue shaking hands with those seated in the front row, the announcer of the events (MC) will be announcing to the crowd the identities of the new arrivals. The identity is usually the name of the family or town or organization the new arrivals are coming from. All this is to show solidarity with the bereaved family and also for them to notice the presence of those greeting (shaking hands). This greeting continues throughout the event as new people keep on attending the event. This activity is interspersed with music, traditional drumming and dancing and most importantly individual and group donations to the bereaved family. The donation is first paid at the table in front of the Abusuapanin, the name of the donor is written and a receipt if available is given. Occasionally the donors’ names will be announced by the MC and the amount donated. This also continues sporadically till the day’s events are over. After the announcement of each or group donation, the adult females of the bereaved family will file out in a procession and express their appreciation to the donors where they (donors) are sitting. They must shake hands with each other as they say, “we thank you for your donation”.

Usually the visitors are taken to a special room outside the funeral grounds and served with food and drinks before they come back to give their donations. Normally, as the custom demands, a donor must give far more than the cost of the food and drinks he/she has been served with. This particular practice is being outlawed by some of the communities because of the huge amount involved in providing the meals and drinks. Attendance at funerals is normally expected from everyone in the village and expenditure on funerals is a substantial part of the household budget. This perhaps needs to be explored by other researchers to determine the effects of such funeral budget on distribution of wealth in communities.
Writing under the title ‘A Successful Akan Funeral’ posted on the internet, a Peace Corp Volunteer (no name provided) to an Akan community in Ghana, expressed that one sometimes gets the impression that people care more about their dead than about the living. The elaborate funeral celebrations during which no trouble or expenses are spared contrast sharply with the daily struggle for the primary necessities of life. People spend amazing amount of time and money on funerals. They are great public events, where families compete for prestige and respect by showing off wealth and by publicly conforming to norms of solidarity and respect for the dead. Weeks or even months and millions of Cedis (Ghana currency) are spent in organizing an event, which impresses everybody. A funeral, more than a wedding or any other ceremony, should be grand and successful.

The last but not the least event is the assessment which takes place usually on Sunday after the previous day’s event. During this period usually in the evening, the family head opens the donation box and the money is counted. All the expenses by the members are also received and verified. The total expenditure is subtracted from the proceeds. If the product is positive then the family has made a profit. If it is negative, it means they have incurred a loss. A loss means each family member, excluding children below the age of 20 years and not married, will be given an amount to pay to defray the loss. In case the family makes profit, they will decide what to do with it. Usually it is either kept by the eldest woman to be used to donate to other funerals outside their family, or is spent on renovating a family building (if any). This meeting also takes stock of all the funeral activities to assess where they performed poorly and learn from the mistakes. The family head wraps up the meeting by blessing and thanking everybody and
admonishes members to return whatever they might have borrowed or hired for the events. After this members who came from outside the village or community are free to depart any day. If there is a conflict between some members in the family it must be settled during this period before everybody departs.

One could expect that a traditional ritual, centered around the extended family and around beliefs about death and ancestorship to reduce in importance under the influence of modernity, including individualization, urbanization, market economy, and Christianity. The opposite scenario however is taking place in the Akan society. Funerals are, more than any other ceremony, gaining scale and importance. Technological innovations like mortuaries, mass media, and electronic apparatus have enlarged possibilities and have given the funeral new dimensions. Even though the Akan society is undergoing changes due to modernity, the funeral celebration is symbolically restoring the village/community unity.

Besides these rich and colorful cultural events which bind the Akans together to ensure their survival and integration, there are other physical developmental activities which the people also undertake to improve their existence. These self-help programs which entail decision-making at various levels span across health, education and economic activities. The following section will discuss a few of these projects.

3.4.0 Case Studies (2) – Self-help projects

3.4.1 Construction of a Well in Asantaaso

The people of Asantaaso (not the real name), an Akan community with a population of about 800, constructed a well in 1993 to provide potable water all year
round for its population. Asantaaso became one of the ideal communities for this study because of its remoteness and unadulterated Akan culture. Moreover, this small community has been able to provide potable water for its people by their own initiative. A village committee member and a woman’s leader were the source for the information on the construction of the well.

In 1989/89, the Techiman District Assembly of Ghana provided a limited number of Wells and Ventilated Public Latrines for some communities with assistance from the UNICEF. Asantaaso, though a community in this district which for a long time had been experiencing inadequate water supply especially in the dry season, did not benefit from this project. According to the informants the community was told by the District Assembly that the project was a pilot (pronounced ‘parrot’ by the informants) one, and therefore could not cover the entire district. Not happy with this information the community decided to initiate their own water project, as stressed by one of the informants in the local language, “yen nhunu u aborofo na yedidi na ye da”. Literally, “we were eating and sleeping alright before the White man came”. Most Ghanaians, especially the illiterates, refer to most of external assistance as coming from the White man; even the work (jobs) of Civil Servants is referred to as Whiteman’s job (Oburoni adwuma).

According to the informants, the chief and the committee chairman at that time who was also an Abusuapanin met all the men in the village to discuss the need to construct a well. The only woman who attended the meeting was the women’s leader since the village did not have a queen mother at that time. The meeting was chaired by the chief Nana Kwakye (not the real name) with two elders supporting him. Nana and his
elders informed the meeting that there was the need for the village to have a well to provide potable water especially in the dry season. The chief therefore requested that all the people present should feel free to comment on the proposal. All those who spoke supported the idea but the next issue was how they could achieve the objective. As clarified by the Village Committee Chairman, “we decided to invite an expert well-digger from the District Capital to discuss the cost and technical issues with us. Before we closed that meeting we all agreed that all the men in the village would be levied to meet the cost – purchasing of digging tools, payment for technical supervision and cost of cement for concrete works- for the project”. It was also agreed by all of them that men who would do the digging would not pay the levy. The women’s leader also promised that the women would provide food for the diggers during the digging.

After the village secured the services of a ‘technical officer’, the well was constructed within five months. Each man paid a little over Forty Cedis (about $5) and those who helped with the digging did not pay the amount. Every man living in that community, except the disabled and very old men, participated in one way or the other in the construction of the well. The well was covered with a very strong cement slab and a platform was built around it. The women in the village clean the site weekly by washing the cement platform, sweeping and weeding around the well. They do this in turn as assigned to them by the women’s leader. The well was built very close to the small stream which served as the source of water for the community in the rainy season. The decision to build the well near the stream was taken by the men and the technical officer. After the construction the chief and his elders requested that the stream water should be used for other domestic purposes apart from drinking. The well water should serve as
drinking water throughout the year. The well which is now 10 years old is still providing water for the community even though it is obvious that the community needs an additional well or two to support the growing population. Apart from this well, Asantaaso community has also teamed up with a nearby community to put up three classrooms for a Primary School located between these two villages (equal distance from each village). The construction of this school, according to the informants, was carried out in a similar manner.

3.4.2. Anansu Self-help projects.

The people of Anansu in the Ashanti Region of Ghana have undertaken a number of projects including the construction of latrines, primary school and electrification of their community. Even though the execution of these three projects – Primary School, 2 improved pit latrines and electrification – was carried out at different periods spanning 20 years, the mode of acquisition was the same, mainly through self-help or community initiated as narrated by our informants. With the provision of electricity, it is the Ghana Government’s policy that any community which is able to procure the electrical poles and wires needed will be assisted to erect them and connected to the national grid. The Anansu community took advantage of this policy and got their community connected in 1998.

The informants here were made up of a female retired Primary School Teacher, the Chief and a 36 year-old male farmer. All of them are natives of Anansu and have stayed in the community for over 30 years.

According to the informants it is difficult to single out an individual as the source of the decisions on each of the projects. However they all agreed that the chief with the
assistance of his elders (the elders are the heads of families in the community) including the queen mother convened all the meetings on the projects. Usually these people met and discussed the issue and each member reported to his family before general meetings were called for further deliberations including the modalities for the execution of the projects. Even though such meetings are open to everybody except children, very few married women attended. The reason is that most of them are represented by their husbands, because they are the heads of the households.

In all the three projects, adult males and females were levied to contribute to the cost of the projects. The females paid half the amount apportioned to the men. For example if every female paid a total of about $200, each man would also pay about $400. However the married men were responsible for payment of the amount for themselves and their wives. “Even if the wife is richer than the man and is paying the entire amount she will still give it to her husband to pay up to the collectors”, this was made clear by the retired teacher. It must be made clear that each of the levies was spread over a period of about one year and could be paid in installments. Since most of the community members were rich Cocoa farmers it was not difficult to raise the money. The projects were labor intensive therefore the community embarked on what they termed “Kommuna Laba” (Communal Labor). The community has been divided into four sections and each of them has elected a ‘headman’ (foreman) who is in charge of mobilizing his section or zone for manual jobs on every project the community undertakes. The sections work in shifts, normally on Tuesdays and Saturdays. For example if section ‘A’ works this week, section ‘B’ will work the following week till it reaches ‘A’ again. The reason for this division and shift was explained in this phrase: “Too many hands lead to conflicts and slugging”.
The informants admitted that conflicts or quarrels among some members of the community occurred during the executions of these projects. However, these conflicts were minor and usually centered on the specifications or technical issues of the project but not on the need or importance of such projects. The collective interest and motivation about the projects always override such conflicts and as such they do not escalate into any major divisive occurrences. The chief and his elders are also symbols of unity for the community and therefore settle all issues impartially and amicably. To defy their judgment is sacrilegious. This reverence of authority according to the informants “has preserved the unity and sustenance of our village.”

3.4.3 Petepom School Improvement Initiatives.

Petepom is an Akan community in the Wassa West District of Ghana. This village with a population of about 2,000 inhabitants is considered one of the progressive communities in the district due to their interest in improving education in their community. Having realized the pain their children were going through by walking a distance of about 3 kilometers to a nearby town to attend school, the people of Petepom established a lower Primary School by building three classrooms in the late 1980s. Before the first pupils completed the lower primary, the community was able to secure European Union Micro Project Assistance to put up a three classroom building for the upper primary. Not satisfied with their achievement, the community continued to establish a Junior Secondary School of 3 classrooms in the 1990s on their own.

As a means of motivating the teachers in these schools, who were posted there by the District Education Office to stay in the village, the people decided to provide free
accommodation for the head teachers and subsidized the rent for the rest of the teachers. The community has cultivated a five acre oil palm plantation as a source of income for the schools to purchase the necessary text books, teaching and learning materials and sports equipment.

Unlike some other Akan parents who did not see the need to enroll their girls in schools, Petepom, in their bid to improve female education, made it mandatory for very parent to send his/her girl to school in the community. The community again instituted their own ‘bylaw’ making it an offence to impregnate a school girl or giving out a school girl for marriage. Any man or boy who impregnates a school girl is fined a C1, 000,000 (about $120) and asked to leave the community if he is staying in Petepom. As at the time of collecting this information from Petepom, the ‘law’ has operated for almost six years but its practicality has never been tested since no teenage pregnancy has been recorded. Petepom was connected to the national electricity grid recently and the community is now enjoying electric power.

What makes Petepom interesting for this study is the collective decision the people took to execute all the above-mentioned programs. Nana Ameyaw, the chief of the community, described the people as

"belonging to one big family with one respectable leader (chief) whom they have chosen to lead. Since they have chosen me it also means that they must respect my opinions and judgment, therefore whoever disobeys me and my elders is disobeying the entire community. You cannot disobey the entire community and continue to live in our mist therefore we all try to live in peace and work towards the improvement of our community."

According to the chief, most of the initial ideas or proposals for the projects came from individuals within the community. Whoever had a very good idea had to first of all discuss it with the chief and his elders before a community meeting was called to discuss
further the details. Everybody in the meeting, usually more men than women, was free to express his/her mind. The most important thing was that the person should know is the ethics of talking in the presence of chief, his elders and other people. Even though disagreements could occur in such meetings, it was not common to close the meeting without a consensus. If at the end of the day everybody agreed to the execution of the project a committee was then selected to work out the modalities for the implementation. Some of the issues the committee considered were the labor, cost and technical assistance if necessary. Nana Ameyaw explained that his people were always motivated to work harder if they heard that some communities had been able to implement similar projects. This became a sort of competition amongst towns and villages within that locality, and it is still the case.

3.5.0 Participatory approaches of some NGOs working in Akan communities.

Over 800 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are registered in Ghana, according to the Department of Social Welfare. This number is made up of both National and International NGOs, but excludes Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) which are also becoming major partners in development in the country. Both the NGOs and the CBOs compete keenly for funding from the very few donors operating in the country. Because of their financial dependence on the donors, they must as of necessity show evidence of sustainability and community participation in their programs. These two concepts – sustainability and community participation – have become popular in the field of international development in the latter part of the twentieth century.
My twelve years association with both national and international development organizations in the 1990s exposed me to quite a number of participatory approaches being adopted by the NGOs and CBOs operating in Ghana. Whereas some of these NGOs create new structures in the communities to facilitate their participatory approaches, others work with existing structures. For example, CARE International with which I worked as a Program Coordinator and Project Manager, created Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Teams, besides existing Parent Teachers' Associations (PTAs) in all the communities in which it implemented its Education project.

CARE was implementing two projects in the Western Region of Ghana which is part of the Akan society. In the Girls' and Basic Education project, the beneficiary communities nominated five community members based on criteria set by CARE, who were trained in PRA skills to facilitate and promote participation in the project in the communities. In effect these teams were to use the training skills to mobilize the community to achieve the objectives of the project. The other was an HIV/AIDS Prevention project. This project also trained peer educators from selected communities to facilitate the activities of the project. The peer educators selection was voluntary, however, CARE designed criteria for accepting the volunteers. The criteria did not take into account important cultural factors, like one's family background, marital status, status and involvement in communal activities and events like funerals. They were purely based on the ability to communicate effectively in the local language and ability to fill out simple forms for data input. It was therefore no wonder that some of the peer educators had to withdraw their services due to lack of community recognition. The Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana (PPAG) which was also operating in this same
area used the Peer Educator method in promoting Reproductive Health programs in the communities. Their approach and pattern was similar to that of CARE’s.

Other NGOs like World Vision International, Plan International and PRONET which worked through existing PTAs in implementing their education projects in communities also fell into the trap of dictating to these PTAs, in the course of training them, how meetings should be organized and facilitated. These NGOs were mainly concerned with promoting western type of democracy in decision-making during community meetings. They believe that every community member should be allowed or be free to express his/her opinion during meetings and discussions. Even the seating arrangements during meetings should be patterned in such a way that they do not create any class difference. In essence everybody should be at par with each other, be it a chief, a child, a woman, a man, active or inactive community member. This arrangement, according to these organizations, promotes effective participation. There were instances where chiefs were even advised never to talk too much during such meetings so that they would not influence the ideas and expressions of the subjects. Such a suggestion usually backfired because the people would always look up to their leaders to express their opinions.

One major area where some of these NGOs worked through the existing social or cultural structures was in facilitating cash and labor contributions by communities in projects. Some projects like water and school infrastructure (building) programs demanded, as a means of sustainability and commitment, communities’ contribution in cash or labor or both. In such situations the NGOs allowed the communities to work through their own means or system of raising monies or organizing labor without any
interference. In other words the NGOs did not dictate who should be involved or not. What they needed was the lump sum (total contribution) or organized labor from the communities as fulfillment of their (communities') part of the agreement. In most cases the communities feel comfortable when they are allowed to work through their own systems.

This presentation is not aimed at condemning the approaches of these NGOs working in the Akanland in particular and Ghana in general. They have, in fact, played a very useful role in facilitating rural development and these contributions cannot be overlooked. It is however the objective of this paper to project the possibility of making use of some of the existing participatory models in the Akan society for more effective community development. It is also evident that some of these cultural practices may hinder genuine development and ways must be found to make them more useful and supportive to community improvement. The subsequent chapter will therefore examine these cultural dimensions in the light of exploring better understanding of participation in the Akan society and finding ways to show the relevance of making culture more supportive to development.
CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 Analysis and Conclusion

4.1.0 Participation in Decision-Making and Communal Activities.

People’s participation, either in decision-making or project implementation, has been a major source of concern for implementers of development projects especially in developing countries. The concern has been expressed at least at two levels namely, the policy level where decisions affecting people at the grassroots are taken at the top dubbed ‘top-down-approach’ and a similar situation at the local level where decisions affecting an entire community/village are supposedly taken by a few privileged people living in the community. This chapter analyzes the latter, but in the context of Akan culture in relation to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions.

Hofstede (1997) has asserted that, “parents, teachers, managers, and rulers are all children of their cultures; in a way they are followers of their followers, and their behavior can only be understood if one also understands the mental software of their children, students, subordinates, and subjects” (p. 40). This statement fits the Akans in that whatever behavior is exhibited by them as a group is at least partly the expression of the actions, believes and values handed down to them by their predecessors. In other words they model themselves after the examples set by their elders both dead and alive. Therefore one way of thinking about the Akan as a local ethnic community or group is in terms of their collective identities which underpin them and the degree to which such identities are either fluid or rigid and defended.

Being a large Power Distance society, the Akans place much value on age, status, sex and experience when it comes to participation in decision-making. Children are
expected to be obedient to their parents and respect for parents and other elders is seen as a basic virtue which lasts through adulthood. Grandparents are treated with formal deference even after their children have taken control of their own lives.

There is a pattern of dependence on seniors for opinions which pervades all human contacts, and the mental software which people carry contains a strong need for such dependence. The case studies presented in chapter three clearly confirm some of these social arrangements. For example the decision on the naming of a child is usually taken by the man by virtue of being a head of the family, usually older than the wife and perceived as being more experienced; and he is the provider for the family that also boosts his status. In the same vein a father searches for a wife for his son and the would-be husband or wife has to accept the proposals of their parents. This practice has an underlying virtue which is experience based on age. Fathers and mothers are perceived to know better when it comes to marriage.

The Akan believe that marriage is a lifelong union and also a bond between two families and for that matter its contraction should not be left in the hands of neophytes. Full-blooded Akans cherish this tradition so much so that even some of those residing in western countries like the US and in Europe still rely upon their parents back home to arrange marriages.

The manifestation of large power distance in the Akan culture should not be seen as an attempt to stifle an individual’s participation in decision-making. For example, Lozare (1994) argued that participation “may not sit well with those who favor the status quo and thus they may be expected to resist such efforts of reallocation of more power to the people” (p. 242). Much as this statement may be true in some oppressive social
environments, the basic problem is with the attempt or effort to reallocate the existing power. Who should be the judge or referee to determine that there is unequal power structure in the Akan society and that it needs to be reallocated? Even though there is evidence of stratification, which obviously can be a recipe for oppression of vulnerable group(s) by the most powerful, unless the Akan people themselves become aware of this and resolve as a group to do the reallocation, any outside interference is bound to conflict with the existing cultural values.

The Akans value opinions coming from children, subordinates as well as women, but like that of men and the elders, they must be conveyed in cognizance of cherished values of the group. Freedom of expression whereby one feels that he/she is equal to everybody else and can express his/her opinions anyhow and in anyway is unacceptable in the culture. The strict cultural and social etiquette must be observed to ensure continuous discipline in the society. Wisdom and experience, in Akan interpretation, are the products of old age. That is why children and the young gather around their grandparents at sunset to listen to stories full of wisdom and admonitions. Fathers being the head of households command respect, to maintain law and order. A child who misbehaves in public brings ridicule and embarrassment to the parents and their family in general. It is not uncommon for people to ask, “Which family does this child come from?” when a child is misbehaving.

The Akan society has endured due to respect for age and authority. The society itself has mechanisms or arrangements for the voices of persons to be heard on issues. For example children find more comfort in discussing issues with their mothers who in turn discuss them with the husbands. Family members convey their opinions on critical
issues through their ‘Abusuapanin’ to the council of elders in the community; this is perhaps synonymous with the western type of representative government. Examining the Akan culture through Hofstede’s lenses of large power distance, one will perfectly agree with his following assertions: “Inequalities among people are both expected and desired; Less powerful people should be dependent on the more powerful; Parents teach children obedience; and Children treat parents with respect” (1997, p. 37).

The interest of the Akan as a group prevails over the interest of the individuals. Hofstede calls this type of society Collectivist. Every Akan is born into both the ‘family’, and the community. The family consists of a number of people living closely together; not just the parents and other children, but, for example, grandparents, uncles, aunts, servants, or other housemates. Children growing up tend to think of themselves as part of a ‘we’ group which is the major source of one’s identity, and the only security protection one has against the hardship of life. The Akan therefore cherish the interests of the group and do whatever it takes to promote its aspirations. The maintenance of harmony with one’s social environment becomes a key virtue which extends to other spheres beyond the family to the entire community. It is therefore not surprising for the Akan to regard events like death and funeral as communal ones. Refusal to participate in an event like this carries serious sanctions both from the immediate family and the community at large. The result of these social sanctions is what Hofstede calls ‘shame’. The group member who has infringed upon the rules of society feels ashamed, based upon a sense of collective obligation. Shame according to him is social in nature. In this ‘shame culture’ direct confrontation of another person is considered as sacrilegious, rude and undesirable. Saying ‘no’ to the ‘Abusuapanin’ presiding over events like funeral is seldom entertained
because he is seen as a symbol of unity. Disagreeing with his suggestions is seen as confrontational, not only to him but to the entire group. The culture does not encourage ‘personal opinions’ because they are divisive. The community or group is supreme and there is sanctity of the authority. Hofstede confirms this by stating that, a person who repeatedly voices opinions deviating from what is collectively felt is considered to have a bad character.

Perhaps one of the factors which has helped the Akans to preserve most of their customs in the face of external influences and threats is the fact that they are highly conservative. This conservatism is clearly described by Hofstede as high Uncertainty Avoidance. The Akan are usually skeptical about new and untested ideas. They are hospitable to strangers on their land but very cautious in divulging any information to them. Parents do not want their children to marry into other tribes. Whenever they want to prevent inter-tribal marriage, they will usually use the geographical distance between the two tribes as one of the excuses. The underlying factor is that they do not want a situation where the behavior and beliefs of the outsider will run contrary to the cherished values and norms of their group. As has already been explained in chapter two, outsiders, especially development practitioners, have interpreted this attitude as resistance to change and have described the Akan as laggards or late adopters of innovations. This description is however unfortunate because their (Akans) attitude is usually carefully guided by their past experiences with strangers and events. They accept familiar risks but ‘fear’ ambiguous and unfamiliar situations and risks. This same high level of uncertainty avoidance puts a limit on what people can say and cannot say. Before one opens his/her mouth in important discussion he/she must weigh the consequences of the utterance
whether it will hurt the group and/or the elders. It is better to keep quiet if one is uncertain of the meaning that will be attached to his/her opinion.

There is a clear demarcation of roles for men and women in the Akan society as has been confirmed by Hofstede that every country is likely to show cultural differences according to gender. Males in virtually all societies dominate in politics, in the community, and at the work place: so the sub-cultures of politics, community affairs and work are relatively masculine and the Akans are no exception. Hofstede describes masculine occupations as those filled by men, and the feminine occupations are the ones usually filled by women.

The Akan believe that women are ‘soft and fragile’ and therefore must not be engaged in jobs which are reserved for men because of their energy sapping and strenuous in nature. This does not necessarily mean that outsiders will always agree with this assertion. Because what the Akans consider as women’s light jobs may not be light at all in different cultures. Nonetheless, all physical construction jobs and military duties are the preserve of men who are usually regarded as robust. In derogatory terms a woman who behaves like a man is called ‘obaa-barima’, literally ‘woman-man’, and a man taking women’s role or behavior is also called same ‘obaa-barima’ (woman-man). However in the former, the obaa is a noun whereas in the latter the obaa is an adjective. This remarks put a check on how far a woman should go in living her life. Surprisingly enough, women who have ‘deviated’ and braved the consequence and participated in war or battles successfully are considered as heroines. For example the legendary female warrior Yaa Asantewaa of the Akans, who led the Ashantis (a section of the Akan tribe) to fight the British in 1900 to prevent her territory from being colonized, is very
important in both Ghanaian and Akan history. Generally women’s views are respected if presented appropriately, however they are considered as soft and more of trouble avoidance. Another common saying restricting women’s role is the phrase, ‘obaa ton nyandua na onton atuduro’ – woman sells vegetables but not gun powder. This phrase is self explanatory; women cannot engage in armed business. Men are also restricted in similar way, usually not to be seen as too soft and flexible.

These cultural arrangements of the Akans have been heavily criticized by outsiders especially NGOs purporting to promote participation at the community level. They hold the notion that, for a community project to succeed, everybody including children and women should be involved in the decision-making and implementation of that project. Their actions, whether overt or covert seek to promote free, democratic and open discussions to ensure full participation and also community ownership. Whether this attitude has helped to achieve the desired results is a subject of debate. However one thing is clear. If the culture of the people is completely ignored, the project is bound to fail. There may be some signs of pseudo participation from the people at the initial stages, just to avoid confrontation and also preserve the culture of respect for visitors, but the long-term success and cooperation cannot be guaranteed.

The four cultural dimensions discussed by Hofstede are relevant in understanding who participates in community initiated programs/projects in Akanland. In terms of ownership, the Akan understanding of a community project may not be different from that of an outsider or an external community development practitioner. The basic understanding which is common to both the Akan and the outsider is that the project belongs to all the people in the community. What is completely different is participation
at the various levels from the initial decision-making to the execution and maintenance of
the project. Initial decisions on establishing a community project usually comes from a
few individuals who are in most cases part of the top hierarchy of the ruling body of the
Akan community. In case the idea originates from an individual at the lower level of the
hierarchy, it has to pass through the Abusuapanin then to the council of elders. Once the
idea is agreed on by the elders it is likely that the project will be executed. The idea now
becomes the entire community’s idea because of their collectivist nature.

If the project involves technical skills and expertise, a few people are appointed to
handle this. Contributions in terms of monies and materials for the project are based on
gender and age as well as the division of labor involving the execution. Men contribute
more in terms of cash and labor than women, old men/women, as well as children are
exempted from the contributions. Whether the community will embark on the project or
not depends on their absolute conviction that the project will not fail. They do not want to
take unnecessary risks. One way of ensuring this is to find out if other neighboring
communities or groups have successfully embarked on an identical or similar project
successfully. Once the project is completed it belongs to the entire community even if
some members contributed more than others.

4.2.0 Conclusion

The Akan society is rapidly undergoing social and cultural transformation
especially in the urban centers. New ideas and innovations continue to infiltrate the very
fabric of the Ghanaian society as a whole and the Akan communities in particular. The
country’s ratification of UN Human Rights and Child Conventions as well as global
policies like Education For All (EFA) continue to have impact on the Ghanaian society in
general and the Akan culture in particular. The ushering in of the western type of
parliamentary democracy, decentralization, community and women’s empowerment are
all key factors in the promotion of participation in all spheres of life.

In the Akan rural communities, both International and National NGOs are some
of the organizations championing grass-roots participation. For example almost all the
education and health projects in these areas stress the need for all the community
members to be part of the decision-making process. The success or otherwise of most of
these development agencies has mostly depended on their individual strategies in
effecting their desired change.

In situations where an organization recognizes the existence of indigenous
knowledge, tries to understand and respect the host’s culture, and designs interventions in
recognition of these cultural relationships, the results have been successful. On the other
hand those who ignore these cultural values, but try to implement their foreign ideas of
participation continue to face severe resistance. Whereas the Akans cherish a member’s
opinion or decision as a group decision, the agency may be emphasizing individual
opinions and contributions to reach consensus. Whereas the Akan recognize and value
power differences (hierarchical and vertical power relationship) in arriving at decision
and taking action, the agency may be insisting on horizontal power relationships and
decision making. Again the agency may be promoting gender fairness or equity in
opportunities and decision making, the Akans see different opportunities and roles for
both sexes. Even though these differences are evident and do not promote fairness and
equity, they should not be seen as insurmountable obstacles to any positive innovations.
What matters most is the approach that the change agent adopts to carry out its program. Akans, like any other society will like to work with those who respect and value their culture and will be willing to make compromises for mutual benefit. The most important thing to consider however is that, compelling people to follow new method of participation without woven it through the existing culture may lead to false hope or impression of successful participatory development. Mobilization of people for any initiative has to be backed by confidence in what the people know and have learned to do. This is why focusing on the culture and on the preservation of people’s knowledge is central in any successful interventions.

Whereas some scholars and organizations see culture as very important in socio-economic development, others like Harrison and Hungtington (2000), writing from an economic perspective, see culture as a major obstacle to economic development. To them the idea of ‘progress’ is suspect for those who are committed to cultural relativism, for whom each culture defines its own goals and ethics, which cannot be evaluated against the goals and ethics of another culture. They oppose some anthropologists’ view of progress as an idea the West is trying to impose on other cultures. They explained that millions of African parents and children are prepared for change, are becoming increasingly cosmopolitan or at least aware of alternatives, and creatively do change their family life and child care practices, yet many resist change at the same time. Harrison and Hungtington should not see this as contradiction or be surprised with this behavior of the African. The main reason for this so-called resistance to change is deeply engrained in Hofstede’s dimensions of culture. Understanding the dimensions of culture is very useful for socio-economic development.
Development efforts should be anchored on faith in the people's capacity to discern what is best to be done as they seek their liberation, and how to participate actively in the task of transforming their society. The people are intelligent and have centuries of experience. It will be prudent to listen to them and draw out their strength. Every society, every community has, through the years, evolved its own ways of getting things done. Any development effort, whether by design or by default, touches on these established patterns of doing things. In more collectivist societies, people tend to behave in such a way that their actions are conditioned by norms, expectations, and interests of the social groups of which they are part.

Stressing the importance of culture, Fischer and Vogt (1973) argue that life is regarded as essentially disorderly and chaotic. It is culture that imposes order on life, and for the human species, it is necessary for life to continue. They however admitted that it is clear enough that not all individuals are made healthy and happy by their cultures; not all societies are insured growth or survival by their cultures, but that successful societies do not indefinitely preserve their cultures intact but must change them. It is therefore not surprising that the Akan culture is also changing in some aspects and embracing new ideas and ways of doing things from other societies. For example women are being giving more roles and power in decision making, girls’ education is seriously pursued and individual opinions are being tolerated. The culture is also purging itself from harmful and negative practices. It must however be understood that the changes cannot happen overnight and will be more sustainable if most of the changes come from within. For now and perhaps generations to come, we will continue to see some of the signs of large power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and masculinity in the
traditional Akan society because of the values inherent in these characteristics, for true
development is the increasing attainment of one’s own cultural values. Misra and Honjo
have summed it all up that,

“First development is a process, not a state. Secondly, that process ultimately
refers to values, and third, that the values referred to are those of the people involved, not
the values of the Western world.” (p. 8).
Bibliography


THE AKAN MATRILINEAL LINEAGE

Red markings indicate members of the matrilineal extended family.