“I’m Divorcing Because I Drank Lake Ontario”: Marital Breakdown in Ghanaian Immigrant Families in Toronto

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Abstract: Much of the recent research on immigrant women in Canada has been focused on women from Asia perhaps due to the relatively large number of immigrants who have arrived in Canada in the past two decades from that part of the world. But it is also a fact that a significant minority of immigrants, including women, have come from the African Diaspora and made Canada their home. These African women have influenced and have in turn been influenced by Canadian culture. Yet there is relative dearth of information about them as women and as immigrants. The relative dearth of information about African immigrant women skews our understanding of the Black experience in Canada. This article fills a gap in the literature by examining the dynamics of gender roles and expectations in Ghanaian immigrant families.

For the past twenty years, a significant number of immigrants of African descent have made Canada their home. Whether they entered Canada from the Caribbean, South America, or Africa, these immigrants have influenced, and in turn been influenced, by Canadian culture. African women have featured prominently in this immigration process and yet there is relative dearth of information about them as women and as immigrants. While scholars including Elabor-Idemudia (1996, 2000, 2005a, 2005b) and Donkor (2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) have highlighted the experiences of some groups of African women in Canada, there is still a glaring imbalance in research on African immigrant women as opposed to research on immigrant women from other world regions, especially Asia. Although one can argue that more immigrants enter Canada from Asia than they do from Africa (see Statistics Canada, 2006), the fact remains that the relative dearth of research on African immigrant women skews our understanding of the experiences of these women and by extension Black people as a whole in Canada. This article fills a gap in the literature by examining how Ghanaian immigrant women redefined gender roles in their families and how such redefinition created conflicts and the threat of divorce.

The article starts with a short story to situate the centrality of gender in the lives of Ghanaian immigrant women.
A funny but powerful myth used to circulate in the Ghanaian immigrant community in Toronto.¹ It said that the spirit of Lake Ontario was a divorced woman who was on the prowl to avenge herself on married couples. She was lonely and jealous of married women, the story went; therefore any woman who drank her waters was susceptible to divorce in order for her to have company.² On the surface this story appeared as a silly joke; however, when situated within the context of a myth as a “useful fiction” (Cords and Gerster, 1991: 2) the story assumes significance and does not appear funny or silly anymore. The incidence of divorce in the Ghanaian immigrant community in Toronto was high in the late 1990s when I did research with women and heard the story.³ Many were confounded with the rise in divorce in the community and turned to traditional Ghanaian forms of explaining hard to understand phenomena. They explained the divorce problem within the realm of the supernatural, attributing the cause or causes to factors that lay beyond themselves. In doing so they absolved themselves, at some level, of responsibility in the event of marital breakdown.

But if we take the story for what it is - a myth - it becomes clear that there was an underlying cause or causes of marital breakdown that the women did not wish to address directly in public discourse. The Lake Ontario-as-a-divorced-woman story was a euphemism that described the women’s internalization of Canadian gender conventions that were different from the gender ideology and practices that the women brought with them from Ghana. Unlike Canada where years of feminist activism and government action have created a fairly decent degree of egalitarianism between the sexes in most spheres of life, feminist activism has not taken firm root in Ghana and women generally accept gender asymmetry as natural. Ghanaian women, especially illiterate and rural dwellers, are steeped in tradition and do not usually question their subordination to men. Thus when the women said that they had drunk Lake Ontario it could be interpreted to mean that they had imbibed Canadian gender norms. The Lake Ontario story was thus used as a smokescreen to hide deep-seated gender issues in Ghanaian immigrant families. But it was one thing for the women to appeal to a myth in public discourse and quite a different thing for them to act on the realities of their lives in the privacy of their homes. This seeming contradiction presents a unique perspective for understanding the various ways in which Ghanaian women articulated a new sense of gender roles in a Canadian context. The article reveals how Ghanaian immigrants negotiate gender as a way of reinterpreting new cultural realities and developing new identities as Canadians.

Background
Between 1998 and 1999 I interviewed Ghanaian immigrant women in Toronto for my doctoral dissertation. Although my focus was on their education, a recurrent theme in the research was gender dynamics in the family and its
impact on the women’s public sphere participation. The majority of the women I spoke with stressed that family life constrained their ability to access the educational opportunities Canadian society offered immigrants. It has been a little over a decade since I conducted that research; however I have followed five of the women by engaging them in conversations regarding their changing roles in their families. They in turn have invited me to family arbitrations involving marital crises in theirs and other families, thus giving me greater insight into their redefinition of self as an essential component in their adaptation to life in Canada.

The choice of the five women instead of the entire pool of women I interviewed ten years ago was based on their educational backgrounds and entry status as immigrants. They were among the least educated before they arrived in Canada. As well, all five came directly from Ghana as sponsored spouses, as opposed to others in the study who had lived in various European countries before settling in Canada. The women’s characteristics suggested that they would have internalized gender norms in Ghana more so than their more urbanized and relatively more educated counterparts, and would have accepted their position as women with all that it implied in a Ghanaian context (see Oppong, 1970, 1974, Greenstreet, 1985, Clark, 2010). My interviews with the women in 1999 and subsequent conversations revealed that they, more than the others, underwent the most radical shift in their reinterpretation of gender as they settled in Canada.

I realized that talking to the women alone would have presented a one-sided narrative that would not reveal the full range of experiences in their families. As such I talked to four men, also selected from the pool of men in the original research, about their understandings of gender roles to validate the women’s assertions of gender tensions at home. What emerged through these conversations illuminated conclusions I drew ten years ago. One of the conclusions that I drew in the original research was that the women faced many challenges in their families and had to devise means of confronting those challenges. Motivation, confidence, and understanding of Canadian society were important factors in the women’s attitudes toward family responsibilities (Donkor, 2000:208). Ghanaian immigrant women and men understood that the act of immigration necessitated adjustments and sometimes outright changes in perceptions, aspirations, desires and expectations, and that at the heart of these changes was gender. Simply put, they understood that their ability to successfully adapt to life in Canada depended, to a large measure, on their ability to make gender role adjustments. But making such adjustments created tensions that sometimes led to divorce or the threat of divorce. In this article I utilize material from the original research and subsequent conversations, to focus on two aspects – housework and family budget – as issues that produced the most tension in the immigrants’ families. Before I analyze the two categories and their impact on marital stability, it is important to examine how scholarship on immigrant adaptation has integrated
gender as a category of analyses, for immigrants’ ability to successfully deal with gender in their families greatly affects their ability to integrate into the host society (Boyd, 1986; Ornstein, 2006; Martins and Reid, 2007; Corbett, 1957, Richmond, 1967).

**Gender and Immigrant Adaptation**

There is no denying the fact that gender plays a vital role in the adaptation of immigrant women. Interestingly, analyses of adaptation are complex and the impact of gender is sometimes buried in larger patterns of analyses (see, for example, Ornstein, 2006). Different analysts emphasise different factors. Some emphasise factors such as job security and mobility, cross-cultural relationships, and utilisation of social services while others focus on personal characteristics such as education and language facility (Corbett, 1957, Richmond, 1967, Rockett, 1982, Burnaby et al., 1985, Boyd, 1986). More recent scholarship takes a different approach and seeks immigrants’ perspectives on what they perceive to be the factors that promote or hinder their successful adaptation (InterQuest Consulting, 2006).

David Corbett (1957) set the tone for a theory of immigrant adaptation that combined institutional factors and individual characteristics that scholars subsequently built upon. Anthony Richmond (1967) utilized Corbett’s framework and defined adaptation as immigrants’ engagement in the leitmotifs of the host society to their advantage (1967: 61-68). Applied broadly, immigrants would be expected, for example, to have host society friends, read host society newspapers, attend host society churches, eat non-ethnic foods, and dress like members of the host society. While such interaction would act to immigrants’ advantage in the sense of helping them to better understand their new home, the premise of Richmond’s formulation was narrow. It focused on the cultural symbols of the host society while paying less attention to the cultural identities and characteristics that immigrants brought with them. It assumed that immigrant women and men had similar characteristics and therefore would respond to conditions in host countries in similar ways. In short, analysis following the model of Richmond’s “de-gendered” immigrants. Cross-cultural relationships, for instance, will largely depend on the extent to which the men in the women’s lives would allow the women to forge such relationships. If immigrant women come from cultures that do not allow women to take the initiative in social interactions, it is evident that such a cultural limitation will influence immigrant women’s ability to establish cross-cultural links. Research has shown that one of the biggest impediments to immigrant women’s adaptation in Canada is social isolation (Martins and Reid, 2007).

In Richmond’s defence, he made his analysis when Canada had not adopted multiculturalism as an official policy. Canada, by all indications, was a white country with a white culture into which immigrants were expected to assimilate (Hawkins, 1991). Therefore, his theory of
immigrant adaptation that was built on assimilation was consistent with the social and cultural expectations of mainstream Canadian society with respect to immigrants. The official policy of multiculturalism that Canada adopted in 1971 shifted emphasis from assimilation of immigrants to cultural plurality and changed, at a theoretical level, definitions of adaptation such as Richmond’s that expected immigrants to learn to live like “Canadians.” The policy appeared to raise ethno-cultural groups to the same level as dominant, white Canadian culture. The difficulty for immigrants was that while a policy of multiculturalism encouraged the maintenance of ethno-cultural identity, immigrants had to consider some of their cultural practices within the legal implications of “Canadian” law and traditions.

It has long been a tradition in Canada that when immigrant practices and traditions do not accord with Canadian law, those practices and traditions are deemed illegal. Female genital mutilation and firing of musketry at the death of a chief, for example, are practices that occur among some ethnic groups in Ghana but would not be permitted in Canada. Sometimes immigrant practices and traditions do not break the legal codes as such but they raise questions of acceptable behaviour within the context of international human rights laws and/or national security concerns. Examples from other immigrant receiving countries will help to illustrate.

Multiculturalism assumes, on a theoretical level, that cultural entities within a social mosaic have relative value to their adherents and should be recognized as such (Taylor, 1994). As official policy, multiculturalism recognizes pluralism as a basis of Canadian identity. The difficulty for immigrants in a multicultural society such as Canada is that they have to operate within existing institutions and structures that have long defined Canadian culture and identity as white. Thus, when
questions arise as to what immigrants can or cannot do then the relative worth of ethno-cultural difference within the mosaic is brought into question (Gutman, 1994). The point to note is that when “Canadian” laws and traditions trump immigrant practices and traditions, then multiculturalism becomes a façade for a subtle process of immigrant assimilation, ergo “de-culturalization.” For, ultimately, immigrants would have to behave like Canadians (understood as white Canadians) for them to feel properly adjusted. In order not to break the laws of the host society, immigrants will practice cultural traditions that contravene host society’s legal codes or acceptable conduct underground. Ultimately, women end up being the ones to suffer from the “underground immigrant culture.” For example, female circumcision is practiced in some African cultures, including some ethnic enclaves in Ghana, whose citizens are now legal residents of Canada. Since it is against the law in Canada to circumcise girls, parents who wish to perform this surgery as a cultural imperative may travel outside the country to do so, have the procedure done underground, or forgo it altogether. The latter option ends up alienating girls from some aspects of their cultures.

When we move from cultural adaptation to economic adaptation, we again encounter problems in analyses as far as immigrant women are concerned. Two important factors that scholars generally agree are essential for immigrants’ economic adaptation are education and language proficiency (Richmond and Warren, 1980, Burnaby et al., 1985, Kposowa, 2002). In his study of the impact of education on immigrants’ short-term mobility, Ian Rockett (1982) concluded that there is a direct correlation between immigrants’ educational achievement and their short-term economic performance. According to Rockett, educated immigrants have a greater chance of transferring their skills in the global labour market. Although his study focused on immigrant men in the United States, it does have wide application because it underscores the importance of education in the economic adjustment of immigrants. But as my own research with Ghanaian women in Toronto revealed, the use of education as a measure of adaptation does not take women’s educational achievement prior to immigration into consideration.

In countries like Canada where foreign education and credentials are usually not recognized, immigrants who wish to secure better job opportunities have to retrain. During the period of retraining, they may be unemployed or under-employed. Indeed, Richmond (1967) and Martins and Reid (2007) note that many immigrants suffer a loss of status on arrival in Canada because they are forced to take jobs of a lower status than those they held prior to migration. What this analysis points to is that structural and systemic conditions mediate the value of education in the immigrant adaptation process. Nevertheless, in the Canadian context, the value of education as a determinant of adaptation is significant because immigration policy depends heavily on skill and experience. Skill and experience are outcomes of education which in most
Third World countries is not offered to women to the same degree as men.

Thus an immigration policy that appears to be gender-neutral in theory limits women’s chances of entry in practice. Women who do not have the requisite qualifications to enter Canada on their own may decide to enter in the family class category as sponsored wives, sisters or daughters (Donkor, 2005, VanderPlaat, 2007:5). Once sponsored, women are defined as dependents regardless of age. As dependents, they face both public and private limitations. They may not be eligible for certain social services and programs; in the privacy of their homes their dependent status creates conditions for their sponsors to treat them inequitably. Indeed, there is a large body of literature in Canada that addresses the practical and systemic challenges women face when they enter the country as dependents (Boyd 1986, Ng 1988, Brand 1991, Bakan and Stasiulis 2003, Agnew 2009). Winnie Ng (1988), for example, offers a powerful perspective that adequately captures a common viewpoint of scholars who analyze immigrant women’s challenges as they struggle to sink roots in Canada:

In this great land of opportunities, many immigrant women are walking in chains. These are chains of dependency, chains of being treated as a hand rather than as a person with a brain, and chains of having doors closed right in your face in the name of Canadian experience. It is a sense of vulnerability and helplessness, of being stripped of one’s own historical, cultural and social roots once you set foot on Canadian soil. It is also a sense of humiliation for having to rely upon a relative, a friend, a child or at times even a stranger to “speak” and “think” for you. Being illiterate for a non-English speaking immigrant woman is like “doing time” in a prison without walls. Ng (1988: 41)

Studies such as Ng’s that put immigrant women at the centre of immigration analysis shift the lens so that we are able to appreciate the impact of gender on the process of adaptation. But while her work offers important perspectives on the challenges immigrant women face, it focuses mostly on emphasizing the challenges at the expense of women’s efforts to confront those challenges. Such emphasis sometimes draws attention away from women’s agency and presents their situations as immutable, frozen in time. Yet, as the story of the Ghanaian women will show, immigrant women engage in attitudinal shifts in gender roles and expectations. Successful adjustment for immigrant women occurs when they simultaneously confront the gender ideologies they brought with them from their home countries as a necessary step toward confronting the restrictions they may face in the host society. Moreover, it is by releasing themselves from such restrictions that immigrant women can
begin to participate in the social, cultural and economic activities of their adopted country to the fullest. The story of the Ghanaian immigrant women shows how they used divorce as the language to claim a degree of gender parity.

Confronting Gender in the Ghanaian Immigrant Family

Like men in any patriarchal society, Ghanaian men were traditionally not expected to perform domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and washing. These were women’s responsibilities; men were expected to be the financial backbone of their families. They were expected to provide ‘chop money,’ \(^4\) pay children’s school fees, pay hospital bills, provide clothing and shelter for their families; etc. Perhaps as a result of such arrangements, economic activities were theoretically sex typed. In practice, traditional gender arrangements were fluid, especially in regards to women engaging in income generating activities and contributing to the family budget (Clark, 2010). If they were farmers, women could have their separate cash crop farms in addition to cultivating food crops for family consumption while at the same time helping husbands to manage their farms and taking full responsibility of domestic chores. If not, they engaged in some trading activity and generated income independent of their husbands’ economic activities. Women’s financial contribution to the family budget was crucial but in most places it was not demanded, expected, or required. Women contributed to the family budget according to need or “as the morally right thing to do.”

It was from such a background that the women whose stories are presented below entered Canada and joined a well established Ghanaian immigrant community in Toronto. Like many immigrants who seize opportunities offered in other societies to improve themselves, the women pursued education in Canada. The education they received complicated their understanding of gender roles. They got to interact with Canadian mainstream society more than they would had they not gone to school, and that interaction opened their eyes to the different ways in which gender could operate. One of the things that the women emphasized in our conversations was the fact that women had rights in Canada. However they interpreted such rights, they were emboldened to speak their minds in situations where they would not have if they were in Ghana. The problem for them was whether to continue to maintain old notions of a gendered social world or make adjustments in the ways they conducted themselves at home.

A perennial source of tension between these women and their spouses concerned domestic chores. All the women admitted that they were solely responsible for the cooking, cleaning, and care of children. This was hardly news because the majority of women in Canada are responsible for house work and childcare. The source of tension hinged on the women’s insistence that their husbands participate in the performance of house chores, a demand that appeared ‘strange’ considering that the women
knew what the cultural norms were in Ghana. But listening to the women, it was not a matter of new-found rights that they wished to enjoy; rather they were considering the practical circumstances they found themselves in. If they were in Ghana they would have relied on a network of extended kin or maidservants (if their economic circumstance were good) to perform domestic chores. Some of them did not even live under the same roof with their husbands in Ghana, which would have allowed them to share responsibility for domestic work. That is, some women lived in their maternal homes apart from their husbands. With such living arrangements, women helped each other with house chores. As a general rule, housework was not a bone of contention between wives and husbands in Ghana (Oheneba-Sakyi, 1999: 121-123). But the women were in a different place, shorn of the support systems they had enjoyed in Ghana. If they did not have older children, the only people they could turn to for help in the performance of housework were their husbands. Importantly, they were in a culture where male performance of house chores did not carry social stigma.

The men saw it differently. The act of immigration did not alter gender arrangements, particularly as it pertained to the performance of housework. The men were especially affronted by their wives insistence that they should cook and clean. One man expressed his displeasure this way:

Some of the women who have gone to school behave as if they have not come from Ghana. When they were in Ghana they did everything without complaining. Now they are in Canada and they want to behave like white women. I will not put up with any of those women! (Nana Kwasi, interviewed at his residence in North York, Dec 18, 1998).

The man explained that he would have helped with housework had his wife treated him with respect. He said:

The fact that she had gone to school did not make our home a schoolroom. I refused to comply because she was not my teacher and I was not her pupil. I finished secondary school before we left Ghana and I did not use that against her. Whatever she learned in school here in Canada, I am not the one to bear the brunt (Nana Kwasi).

Another man was not as blunt in his comment but his view was equally revealing. He said that black women who used their education “as a mask to demand that men perform housework were feminists, white women in black skins.” For him, racial and cultural difference between black (Ghanaian) and white (Canadian) people should determine the behaviour of women in these racial groups. The conflation of race, culture, and gender thus defined femininity and not necessarily masculinity; women could be educated
but their education was not expected to alter their essential femininity.

The same man who believed that education should not influence a woman’s domestic life expected to be treated not just as any man but a particular kind of man— an educated man. He thus reflected the different points at which masculinity and femininity could be fractured along class lines. A nexus of race, culture, and gender defined acceptable female behaviour for Ghanaian women; for the men, class did not affect gender in defining masculinity. These different gradations of behavioural attitudes associated with relative gender positions affected the quality of women’s adaptation. Gender asymmetry at home largely determined what women could do in the public realm. If a husband determined that a wife could not go to school, for example, then she could not go to school, unless she flouted his authority. Those who refused to submit to male authority faced constant threats of divorce. If they had not been in Canada long enough to be on their own, they stayed and hoped that conditions would change. One of the women who initially resigned herself to the situation said:

I do it (housework), I complain. I’m bitter, but he does not care. He usually says, ‘today’s Ghanaian women know too much. You come here and pick Western ways and that’s why you are suffering’ (Lucy, interviewed in Toronto, June 15, 1998).

If women were “bitter” about their husbands’ refusal to do housework, that bitterness hid larger issues. In the same way that the women expected, even demand, that the men did housework, so also did the men expect, in fact demand that the women contribute to the family budget. It was not the expectation or demand that bothered the women; rather, it was the ways that women linked that demand with the performance of house chores. Invoking women’s economic contribution to family upkeep in Ghana, the women implied that if their men wanted to maintain traditional gender arrangements in Canada, then they as women should not be expected to financially contribute to the family budget. They would contribute as a matter of goodwill. On the other hand, if the men demanded that they, as women, share the financial burden, then the old gender arrangement where men did not perform domestic chores had to give way. One woman put it this way:

In Ghana I did not hear my father insist that mother should contribute part of the chop money. Mother did all the housework as her contribution toward the upkeep of the family. She was not obliged to contribute financially. That was father’s responsibility. In Canada the dynamics have changed. Both husband and wife have to work. I have to contribute fifty percent of the family budget, so why must I do one hundred percent of the housework? (Naomi, interviewed in North York, August 1998).

Another woman held a similar view:
Our men want to be treated like men when it comes to housework, but they are women’s equals when it comes to money matters. If the financial aspect of our family life is fifty-fifty, I understand because of the changed circumstances of life in Canada. It is fifty-fifty, and that goes for everything (Edna, interviewed at Scarborough, August 1998).

“Fifty-fifty,” while not common to all Ghanaian women, was a powerful new voice that some adopted. It suggested that the immigrant women were redefining gender roles and expectations as a result of the immigration process. In Ghana they might not have contested their roles due to socio-cultural and economic factors. In Canada, the severance of cultural roots and a new set of economic relations called for an assessment of old practices and how they fit in the new environment. The women could not continue to singularly shoulder domestic roles and be expected to share equally the financial burden of the family. In particular, the women’s education bolstered their claim to a new identity that called for new ways of doing things. Their education had given them economic and social capital that they intended to use. That delineation between their education and womanhood was significant for the ways they saw gender roles.

The women neither refused to do housework nor contribute to the family budget. In fact, they were in a better position to bear a large portion of the family finances. What they did not want to do was to be restricted by gender norms that expected them to bear a lot more of the family burden than they could realistically handle. Yet, we should understand that the women’s attitudes were hardly new. Since the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Canadian women have questioned their relationship to the domestic sphere and its impact on their ability to fully participate in the public realm. Terms such as “double day” or “double jeopardy” came to be used increasingly as women attempted to understand and deal with the burden of working at home and in the public space. Therefore, when the Ghanaian women questioned their roles at home, they were only reflecting a long tradition of feminist activism in Canada or its new traditions in Ghana. But there was something radical about the women’s behaviour. Since the discourse on feminism in Ghana is largely restricted to educated, upper class women, the immigrant women did not acquire their sense of “feminism” from Ghana where their educational background precluded them from being exposed to such discourse. What was radical about their behaviour was the fact that their new environment provided viable opportunities to speak up.

Given their class backgrounds in Ghana and immigration status as sponsored family class, the women were expected to be submissive and thankful to their spouses for bringing them to Canada. Speaking up was not only a
challenge to the men’s egos but it suggested to them that the women did not appreciate the sponsorship. The men failed to consider the ramifications of women’s upward mobility. And when they threatened divorce, the women fired back. They wanted divorce too. The five women whose experiences are presented in this article were divorced from the men who originally sponsored their immigration to Canada. Three had remarried, one was separated from her new husband and one was still single. The three married women indicated that they were still dealing with gender issues but from a perspective that was entirely different from how they behaved when they first arrived in Canada.

The women’s attitude spoke to the fluidity of gender expectations and roles that was caused by the immigration process and a new environment. The women were learning new roles and un-learning other gender roles and expectations; they were internalising new cultural norms and de-internalising formerly learned behaviour. The fact that they were in a different cultural environment changed their perceptions of appropriate female and male behaviour. Immigration had given them a voice. In the eyes of the men in their lives, the women had ceased to beGhanaians and that scared the men.

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**Endnotes**

1 This paper is based on the experiences of Ghanaian immigrant women who arrived in Canada after 1983 to differentiate them from an earlier, professional class of immigrants who arrived in small numbers in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

2 I’m not sure where the myth originated from. The women might have picked the story from their workplaces or simply made it up.

3 Statistics Canada has information on divorce rates but they are aggregated by province and not by race, ethnicity, or even metropolis. Thus it is difficult to compare the divorce rate in the Ghanaian immigrant community with other groups or determine the extent to which the divorce rate in the Ghanaian immigrant community was unique. What was true was that the divorce rate in Canada as a whole rose after the 1985 Divorce Act was passed. The Ghanaian women might have been reacting to a trend that they were part of.


5 Names of interviewees are pseudonyms to protect their identity.