‘Mɔn’ (to marry/to cook): negotiating becoming a wife and woman in the kitchens of a northern Ghanaian Konkomba community

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In this article, I consider the kitchen as domestic space that is at once gendered and gendering in its construction and use by women as they negotiate their social position across the life course. Deeply rooted patriarchal values structure Konkomba society in northern Ghana, and a woman’s role is to be a wife, to prepare food in support of her husband’s family and community. Although the normative definition of woman’s role in society stems from a clear-cut division of labor between women and men, a woman must negotiate her social position and ability to fulfill these labor obligations; she becomes a woman and wife by working to gain access to and control over resources and labor. I explore the shifting dynamics of women’s work and social position across the life course, emphasizing the transition from young woman to woman-as-wife-as-cook in her husband’s community. These negotiations take place in the kitchen – a fiercely feminine space in which a woman becomes a wife when she earns the right to place hearth stones and prepare a ceremonial ‘first meal’ for her husband and his community.

Keywords: domestic space; kitchens; life course; marriage; gender

Introduction

Day to day, a young Konkomba girl’s life is largely wrapped up in developing skills to assist her mother and other women in their daily work – she fetches water, pounds dry vegetables and prepares soup, stirs porridge, and pounds yams. She goes to farm, participating in seasonal tasks. She watches over younger siblings and provides assistance to elderly relatives. Before she even reaches her teenage years, a girl will participate in most of the activities making up women’s work in her community. It is within her village that she learns the practices of cooking, farming, cleaning, gathering, and gleaning, the practices of labor exchange, trade, and reciprocity. But she is not a cook. Her daily work contributes to the fulfillment of her mother’s responsibilities of supporting her family. To become a cook, a girl must first become a wife – she must marry and successfully establish herself in her husband’s community, thereby taking on her own responsibilities of supporting a family. This article considers girls becoming wives within this patriarchal society by focusing on the kitchens – spaces where girls and women learn, help, and ‘cook’ as they navigate their relationships with each other and the society in which they live.

Domestic spaces have long been of interest in the social sciences, providing insights on cultural traditions and social relations. Research in West Africa has considered how particular social relations impact the form of domestic dwellings (Lyons 1996), as well as how these spaces reinforce and create social relations, including gender relations (Moore 1986; Smith and David 1995; Lyons 1998; Robson 2006), kinship (Drucker-Brown 2001; Gabrilopoulos, Mather, and Apentiik 2002), ethnicity (Lyons 1998), and class (Saarikangas 2006). Entering into these dwellings and understanding the

spaces within has not always been a priority. Feminists within the social sciences, however, shifted the focus to these margins – where attention to everyday life, particularly that of women, opened the doors into domestic spaces and the seemingly mundane experiences of women (Rose 1993; Domosh 1998; Johnson 2006a). Cross-culturally, domestic spaces, particularly kitchens, tend to be identified as feminine spaces – reinforcing women's place in society and in the home (Llewellyn 2004; Jerram 2006; Johnson 2006a; Supski 2006). Kitchens are described as spaces that carry feminized designations as private and informal: private spaces where devalued labor – cooking, cleaning, caregiving – is done by girls and women. Some feminists have pointed out how the kitchen can operate as a site of female oppression within patriarchal society, a space where women are confined, cut-off from the public sphere (Floyd 2004; Bennett 2006).

But an interest in the spaces of everyday life, in tandem with a feminist perspective attuned to power inequalities, allows us to see the kitchen as a more complex space. Within kitchens, women and men reproduce their cultural traditions and negotiate contemporary forces, including those of globalization, urbanization, development, and industrialization (Johnson 2006b; see also Llewellyn 2004; Pascali 2006; Schroeder 2006). They transcend the private sphere – in and through their kitchens, women reproduce cultural traditions (Christie 2004, 2006; Supski 2006), subvert patriarchal structures (Bennett 2006; Robson 2006), transform their communities through grass roots development projects (Schroeder 2006), and negotiate economic support for themselves and their families (Lyons 1998). The kitchen, therefore, is an important space where the struggles of everyday life take shape, simultaneously reproducing and challenging social relations. It is a site where opposing forces – including the oppression of patriarchal structures and women's authority and power – meet to reproduce and transform societies. Indeed, feminist work has often focused on women's agency through the resistance to oppression (Abu-Lughod 1990; Nagar 2000). However, the reproduction of an oppressive structure such as patriarchy does not negate women's agency, nor the opportunity for their authority (Mahmood 2001), much as the existence of a structure does not guarantee that every individual will have the ability, drive, or opportunity to navigate it successfully. The relationship that exists between women's spaces and women's work can therefore provide the starting point to explore power negotiations between women in women-dominated spaces.

From there, we can begin to critically consider what it means to perform a normative gender role – here, the role of 'woman' and 'wife' – a role that is not only learned but also earned by engaging with other women and achieving the necessary skills, resources, and authority. Identity and social position is negotiated via intersecting lines of social difference (Valentine 2007). Feminist geographers, and more recently critical geographies of age, have discussed changing identities over the life course, with changes influenced by personal and cohort experiences of family and community over time (Monk and Katz 1993; Pain, Mowl, and Talbot 2000; Hopkins and Pain 2007). For these Konkomba women, their identities as women and wives are shaped as a result of aging and marital unions, as well as the everyday labor obligations that are expected of girls and women as they move through these stages. The ways in which cooking obligations and abilities create changing access to resources and the power to successfully negotiate space and labor toward meeting these obligations to family and community provide a rich ethnographic example of the materialization of these changing identities.

In this article I illustrate how girls and women become wives and cooks, establishing their own kitchens. It is then that they start to perform the role of 'women' in the community. Although a definition of 'woman' and 'wife' exists – with well-defined expectations of labor and social obligations – these roles are performed from a diversity of social positions that differ not only between individuals but also as a result of intersecting axes of difference. The monolithic definition

of ‘wife’ and ‘woman’ is a social ideal that guides behaviors, but within it also exists navigable space for women to negotiate their abilities and their relationships, creating new forms of womanhood and wifehood in the process (Butler 1990). While most women are successful in becoming wives, I will demonstrate how falling short of the norm can result in some women failing to position themselves favorably within their homes and communities.

I start by providing a brief introduction to the research and its setting. I then present historical background on marriage practices among the Konkomba, and how these traditions play out in one Konkomba community today. This provides historical and contemporary context for the social positioning of women, highlighting the patriarchal structure of Konkomba society, and women’s subservient position therein. The remainder of the article explores the work of girls and women in the kitchen, as they move through different stages of their lives, experiencing changing relationships with other women as they work to establish their position in their husband’s communities as wives.

The research context and methods

This study is focused on Binalobdo, a small rural village in the East Gonja District in Ghana’s Northern Region, located near the town of Salaga, the district administrative capital (Figure 1). At the time of writing, the village is located among a cluster of ethnically Konkomba communities, although as recently as the 1990s many of the villages were multiethnic. Livelihoods in the village are primarily based in agriculture, with every compound managing several small-scale farms, each producing a variety of crops. Traditionally, people lived in extended family compounds, consisting of brothers with their wives and children, although increasingly young men are choosing to establish smaller family units.

The bulk of the research on which this article is based was conducted over 10 weeks in 2006 (Hanrahan 2007), but I also draw on interviews undertaken in 2011 – 2012 in the same village. Data collection consisted of compound surveys, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and mapping compound courtyards. In 2006, I worked with the assistance of two interpreters who are members of the community – a young woman and a young man, both in their early twenties and not yet married. The 2011 – 2012 data were collected with the help of the same male interpreter, still unmarried. The young woman had since married and therefore unavailable to work. This young woman and man were extremely important not only for helping with language translation but also in enabling me to navigate the community and put the interview content into a cultural context in a very short period of time (Twyman, Morrison, and Sporton 1999; Borchgrevink 2003). We are all of similar age and unmarried at the time of the interviews. It is important to note that unmarried youth experience a freedom to move between houses and socialize with both girls and boys that will end when they are married – and I was afforded the same freedom as a result. In citing individuals1 from interviews, I indicate their sex, marital status, and their relative age. Exact ages are not known by many of the participants; instead, I use culturally relevant categories: usapɔɔnbo (‘young girl’ or ‘young woman child’), usapɔɔn (‘young woman’), upii (‘woman’), ‘upii pɔɔk’ (‘mature woman’), and upininkpel (‘elderly woman’).

Prior to marriage, a women’s position is defined by her age and physical maturity and whether she has borne a child. A girl who is still living in her father’s village helps her mother with household and farming tasks. She is considered to be *usapɔɔnbo* until she is ready to have boyfriends and bear children, whereupon she becomes *usapɔɔn*. A woman is considered to be *upii* once she is married. A young married woman who is formally acknowledged to be *upii* might also be called *usapɔɔn* if she

is very young, and has only a few very young children. Such women are considered to be immature, and not sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced to properly perform the role of wife. These young women may even refer to themselves as *usapɔɔnbo* to highlight their own immaturity. A mature woman, or *upiiɔɔpk*, will no longer bear children, and is undeniably a 'woman'. She is considered to be elderly, *upininkpel,* when she can no longer work efficiently and may be in need of the regular assistance of others. It is important to note that the word *upii* ('woman) is also used to refer to a wife or girl promised for marriage, although she has yet to formally become a wife and fully serve that role in society. This intertwining of woman and wife reinforces the importance of marriage for women and the role they will play in society.

Figure 1. Map of Ghana showing East Gonja District within the Northern Region. (Map courtesy of D. Gilbreath, University of Kentucky Cartography Lab).

Marriage among the Konkomba and the movement of women

Prior to the 1970s, the Konkomba were organized in loosely affiliated lineages and clans, without a centralized authority. Lineages are said to have been fiercely independent, and while marriages were a way of creating relationships between lineages, they were also a significant source of tensions. Marriage arrangements were made outside of the paternal lineage, but between affiliated lineages

belonging to the same clan or group of clans (Froelich 1954; Tait 1961). Marriages were traditionally arranged through the betrothal of infant girls, but today marriages are more often arranged when girls and women are of marriageable age. Furthermore, choice in marriage is becoming more acceptable. These reforms are the result of the efforts of the Konkomba Youth Association and various Christian churches that have, since the 1970s, worked to reform Konkomba cultural practices (Talton 2010). Marriages are arranged between men as exchanges; although labor, goods, and money are given to a girl's family to secure and finalize a union, relations between lineages are predicated upon the exchange of women. A man who gives a kinswoman in marriage expects to receive a wife in return, but the wife is not necessarily given immediately, and she may go not to him but to another man in his lineage. Exchange arrangements are complex and can take years to become complete, including fulfillment that transcends generations.

The lineage plays an important role among the Konkomba, and is an important component of a person's identity. Lineage is not just family but a wide network of relations who share a common ancestry, dialect, taboos, and blood; relationships are tied to land and resources (Hanrahan 2008). Villages are built around these lineages – brothers (defined widely as members of the patrilineage) build their family compounds and farm the land where their brothers live. Villages are home to a lineage, and occasionally, several lineages will live together while maintaining distinctly separate identities. Binalobdo is home to two closely related patrilineages; each lineage occupies a distinct area of the village, bearing its own place name.

Marriages are virilocal – women are required to move to their husbands' homes when they marry. Many compounds house extended families, with sons living with their families inside their father's compound. For a new wife, this means moving into a compound that is likely to house senior women – her husband's mother, her husband's brothers' wives, and, if the marriage is polygynous, her husband's other wives. Many women move to far away villages, but even for women moving within the same village, this relocation at marriage is more than just a matter of changing residence. Moving to a marital home is a transition from daughter to wife, and adjusting to this new position requires learning the rules and customs of the new household and community and building new relationships. Relationships with senior women are integral in these adjustments. Bigeŋme explains what happened when she went as a young wife to live with her husband's kin at marriage:

> The time I came and married here, I was not sensible enough. I was still misbehaving, so [my husband's unmarried senior sister] decided to come and stay with my husband so things would go on right for us ... When I came, I didn't know how to relate to the people of [the village] properly. My place is the same, but when you travel to a place, you are a visitor. You can't assume you know how it works. (Bigeŋme, *upii* (married woman); Interview, 2012)

When women marry and relocate, they retain links to their lineages; they maintain their dialects and taboos (Hanrahan 2008). But women marry into a community, not simply into a family or house. As Ntesi, an elderly man, explained, a woman is 'our wife' (Ntesi, *ujaninkpel* (married elderly man); Interview, 2012). It is the expectation that with marriage, everything a woman does is in support of her husband's lineage. Her labor, the crops she grows, and even the children she bears belong to her husband's lineage, not her own. To successfully become a legitimate community member, a woman must become a wife and cook; she must work, learn, and assert her abilities to establish herself.

It is extremely difficult to break a traditional Konkomba marriage, and divorce is uncommon in this community. Under the exchange system women fill the voids left by the women they are replacing,

and if a woman leaves a marriage her husband's kin can also reclaim the woman they gave in exchange or, more likely, demand a suitable replacement. Once a marriage has been established, a woman is the responsibility of her husband's community. While it is important to maintain ties with her own lineage and a woman may return to her natal community (where a woman was born and to which she holds patrilineal ties) for funerals, or to provide care, her everyday obligations are to her husband's place. For example, when I asked one woman why her mother, who is ailing, does not live with her, I learned that her husband's community would think that she, the wife, was not prioritizing her husband and his family, and it would reflect badly on her natal community because it would suggest that they were not capable of caring for her mother themselves (Afia, *upii* (married woman); Interview, 2012). This focus on her husband's lineage helps a woman to secure her place. When a woman's husband dies, she is not permitted to leave her husband's community; her husband's lineage is expected to care for her, either by finding her another husband within the lineage or caring for her in her old age. In addition to the inter-lineage complications that arise from a dissolved marriage, women are fearful of leaving because doing so breaks a taboo and threatens to bring about dire supernatural consequences that could have devastating, even fatal, effects. Furthermore, should a woman leave a marriage, she also leaves behind her children, who belong to the father. Establishing a legitimate position in her husband's community is a matter of security and well-being for a woman, whose position in her father's house and community alters once she is married.

Nyaa Gmatumi, an elderly woman in the community, explained that when her husband died, another member of his lineage 'collected her' (took her as his wife). She remained married to this second husband for a few years until she decided to return to her first husband's village and live as an old woman with his sons. Her husband's family sees it as their responsibility to care for her because she was a wife to their father and a mother in the community. When deciding to leave her second husband, she did not have the choice to go elsewhere, not even the village in which she was born (Nyaa Gmatumi, upininkpel (widowed elderly woman); Interview, 2012). A married or widowed woman has a very specific relationship with her natal community – while she is always a member of that community, her status as a married woman alters her right to material support from that community. Women report resistance when they have returned to their natal homes; some experience hardship in developing relationships of support from other women who could help her with labor, while others have difficulty ensuring adequate food resources from male family members. A woman is expected to 'die in her son's house' (Nyaa Hannah, upininkpel (widowed elderly woman); Interview, 2012). Therefore, if a woman fails to establish herself in her husband's community as their wife, she puts herself in a vulnerable position for her later life. Nyaa Abena, who spent her years as a young wife devoted to traveling for business and trade instead of working in her husband's community, has suffered in later life as she is no longer able to work for herself. She has very weak ties in her husband's village and has difficulty garnering material and social support. She frequently moves back to her father's village, but is eventually pressured to leave because it is no longer their responsibility to provide for her (Nyaa Abena, upininkpel (widowed elderly woman); Interview, 2012 and Nyaa Abena's brother's son; Interview, 2012). Women go into their marriages knowing that successful wives work hard and negotiate carefully to create a legitimate place for themselves in their husbands' communities and that failing to do so can have long-term consequences; they are even counseled on this subject by elderly women when they first enter their husband's community. These negotiations play out in the kitchen, itself built through the process of becoming a wife.

Mɔn (to marry/to cook)

In Konkomba communities, women are said to be cooks; men are farmers. Women are responsible for supplying non-starchy vegetables and other ingredients for soups or stews, as well as for turning all the raw ingredients into food, while men are responsible for farming the starchy staple foods. This generally concurs with the way women and men talked about their roles, but falls far short as an accurate description of both women's and men's practices – in the extent of daily work responsibilities, as well as how these tasks can change over the life course. Men's practices are beyond the scope of this article; as for women, they are much more than cooks. They are also farmers[2] and gardeners, caregivers, mothers, daughters, market and businesswomen, midwives, and many other things. Despite the diversity of activities taken on by women, this gendered division of labor is an important structure that describes the primary responsibilities of married adult women and men. Unmarried adults experience a degree of flexibility with respect to this division of labor as they work toward meeting their material needs without the support of the complementary labor of a spouse. With regard to the work of unmarried youth and adults, it is important to note that the gendered division guides learning early in life, imposes responsibilities, and provides a prescribed scope of opportunities for individuals in their adult lives. Married adult women and men fulfill their labor obligations by gaining access to resources, space, and labor of others – those who have not yet become 'women' and 'men' or wives and husbands assist women and men in fulfilling these roles, and are not regarded as having or fulfilling these obligations themselves. Age, marital status, and household composition are therefore important social relations that position individuals such that they are beholden to particular social expectations of labor and responsibilities to others. They are also positioned into relationships with others where power is negotiated via those same labor and responsibility expectations.

For the Konkomba, the concepts of marriage and cooking are inseparable, and in fact verbs 'to marry' and 'to cook' are the same word (mɔn) in Likpakpaln, the Konkomba language. When asked to describe the role of a wife, both men and women defined the role of a wife as that of cook; bearing children was the next most commonly cited expectation of a wife. When asked to explain how she became a wife, Ngebi stated that her husband asked her to marry him and to cook for him (Ngebi, upii (married woman); Interview, 2006). In another interview, Npul Matulbi, an elderly woman, who had left two marriages after only brief stays because she was not able to bear children, confirmed that she was married to a man with whom she had lived and had sexual relations by stating simply that 'I was cooking for him' (Npul Matulbi, upininkpel (unmarried elderly woman); Interview, 2012). Giftee, a young woman, not yet married at the time of the interview, also emphasized the intertwining of cooking and marriage when she explained that unmarried usapɔɔnbo and usapɔɔn are not cooks because without a husband they 'have no one to cook for' (Giftee, usapɔɔn (unmarried young woman); Interview, 2006).

While a division of labor exists, structuring the responsibilities and opportunities of women and men in building their livelihoods, their success in doing so is not guaranteed simply because they are a woman or a man. Women will experience differential access to the spaces, resources, and labor necessary to fulfill their role as cook. In part, this access changes as they age, but access is also negotiated and in no way guaranteed for mature women. Actually, becoming a cook is a considerable accomplishment, signaling that one has acquired the power to negotiate and to command resources and the labor of others. The process by which girls and women learn to negotiate and start to control kitchen spaces is the process by which they fully become cooks and wives and embed themselves into the community in which they will spend the rest of their lives. '*Mɔn*' (to marry) is '*mɔn*' (to cook), and '*mɔn*' (to cook) is to live with a husband and have gone through a period of apprenticeship in his house, to earn, and place a kitchen within his compound. This use of space and period of apprenticeship is discussed in the remainder of this section.

‘*Kisaamondi*’: the cooking place

When a woman enters her husband’s community, the kitchen is where she must work not only to fulfill her labor responsibilities but to establish herself as a legitimate member of the community as their wife. The kitchen is defined here as a female space used for food processing activities, referred to as *kisaamondi* (‘cooking place’). By focusing on the creation and use of the *kisaamondi* by women at various stages in their life course, it becomes clear that the everyday acts of cooking serve to position women within society. In Binalobdo, dwellings are constructed by joining rectilinear and circular rooms around an open-air courtyard. In her husband’s home, a woman has two spaces – the kitchen and associated storage rooms or areas and her sleeping room – where young children will also sleep and where she stores most of her possessions, including cooking and serving items, and foodstuffs. There is not necessarily a specific room built for food processing activities; kitchens may be built within an enclosed or partially enclosed room, or in the open courtyard.

Kitchens are arranged in a variety of ways. They may be spatially fixed, contingently constructed, or mobile. Permanent kitchens are defined by fixed hearths located either in a kitchen room (Figure 2) or in the open courtyard (Figure 3). Contingent kitchens are created to meet particular circumstances. For example, a woman may build a large hearth outside the compound to facilitate the preparation of a large amount of food during funerals or to brew beer for sale. Women sometimes also create mobile kitchens, by bringing loose stones into a sleeping room to build a temporary hearth for warmth on cold nights and mornings, or so that they can take shelter from the rain to do their cooking.

Regardless of permanency, the hearth is the heart of the kitchen. It is created by positioning the *nfako* (three or five large stones capable of supporting one or two cooking pots over fire). The *nfako* are not simply acquired materials used for cooking. Despite being made from easily accessible materials – stone conglomerates that litter the landscape – the right to own and place a hearth must be earned. By working under and for the senior woman, proving herself able and worthy of being a wife for her husband, the senior woman gives the junior woman the right to have her own kitchen. A young wife is granted the right to a hearth and her kitchen by the senior woman with whom she has apprenticed. Once it has been earned, a hearth is the indisputable property of a wife, and a material reminder of her status in the community. It will not be used by other married women, only by girls and young women assisting her in her labors. The hearth represents her power to control access to the labor of young girls and women, access to resources from her husband, and her own success at production. It is from her *kisaamondi* that she feeds her husband, his children, and asserts her position as a lifelong member of this community.

Figure 2. A permanent kitchen with the hearth located inside a kitchen room.

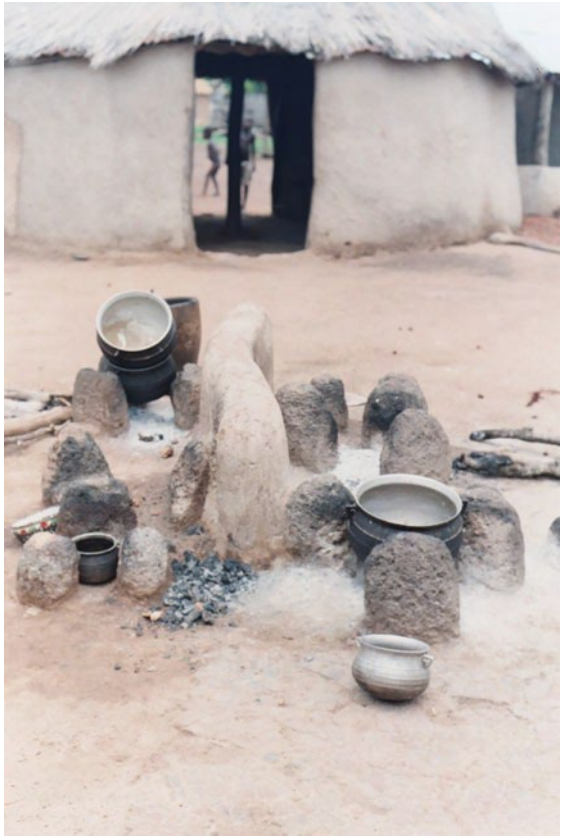

Figure 3. A cluster of hearths forming the kitchen spaces of multiple generations of women in the compound, including the senior woman and her daughters-in-law. These are permanent kitchens located in the open courtyard.

A wife's hearth defines her kitchen; it physically anchors a kitchen in space and delineates the area around it as belonging to that woman and wife. This space then contains her cooking materials, mobile and impermanent features organized around her hearth that are involved with food preparation. The presence of the hearth and kitchen physically incorporates a woman into the family compound giving her a space of control through which she commands access to resources from her husband, negotiates the labor of other women and children, all toward fulfilling the expectations of the family and community to provide support in the form of the preparation of meals. If a woman is

the sole woman in a compound, her kitchen is likely to lie in uncontested space. However, when more than one woman lives in a compound, the organization of the kitchen is continually negotiated, reflecting the relationships of the women. In most compounds, hearths are organized in a common area in the center of the courtyard (Figure 3) where women – co-wives, wives of co-habiting brothers, and women of different generations – work side by side to prepare meals, continuing to learn from and provide support for each other. In houses with more tense relationships, this convivial kitchen cluster may be replaced by an arrangement of dispersed hearths and kitchen spaces. One compound that bears the scars of these tensions – the rough, uneven patch in the courtyard floor left behind by the dismantled centralized hearths – has hearths located in separate corners of the courtyard. The less frequently used indoor kitchens were also segregated with one wife taking the usual kitchen room and the other utilizing the unconventional space of the circular anteroom. Such reorganizations provided each woman with distinctly separate spaces in which to work. The women were able to dismantle the hearth cluster only after their husbands' mother no longer did any of the cooking work and therefore no longer had the authority to dictate the location of these spaces as the senior woman.

Women also need other items for food processing such as mortars and pestles, cooking pots and utensils, grinding bowls, serving dishes, firewood, and charcoal. These are stored in the kitchen room, kept in a woman's sleeping room or scattered along the perimeter of the courtyard. Even when there is a delineated space for a kitchen, activities are not confined to the immediate space, but spill outward from the hearth and beyond its confines as women and children contribute to the food processing as required labor or in the course of visiting. The organization of the kitchen therefore serves women's needs in completing their daily work.

Becoming a wife, becoming a cook

People pass freely through the kitchen space throughout the day but not everyone may use and control the kitchen area and its equipment. Establishing the right to a kitchen and acquiring access to the tools and resources necessary to cook is a process that involves years of training and negotiation in a woman's natal and marital homes. A daughter begins to help her mother in the kitchen at around the age of six or seven years – watching her mother and assisting with small tasks under her mother's direction. This usapɔɔnbo is able to complete tasks such as pounding dried ingredients such as hot peppers, okra, groundnuts (peanuts), and various seeds, and she can also set fires and boil water. Within a few years, she also cleans fish, sifts grain flours, peels and pounds yams, and stirs porridge. A young daughter develops the skills to prepare simple meals. By the age of 12 or 13, many young girls are preparing full meals for their families, and women rely upon them.

During fieldwork in 2006 and 2011 – 2012, I lived with a family and my mother, Wulnumor, regarded me as a daughter. I was taught to cook in ways similar to how her daughters were taught. I received private lessons during the mornings of the dry season, when Wulnumor did not have to rush to the farm. These mornings I was instructed to watch how to make soup and stir porridge. I was first charged with small tasks such as pounding ingredients and cleaning fish, and later walked through the process of making soup and closely monitored in my belabored attempts to stir a pot of porridge. I was also sent to fetch water with her daughters and taught to build fires. After a few months, I was also trusted to prepare my own simple meals in the mornings. Although my lessons were on an accelerated track, they mimicked the interactions I observed in the evenings, when her daughter and niece would assist her with meal preparation. In an interview, Wulnumor explained that as her daughters grew up they were given more and more responsibilities. Her older daughters did the

cooking, while the younger daughters did supportive tasks. Once her elder daughters married and left and she had only her youngest, now 15 years old, at home, they brought a niece, now 11 years old, to help out. The two girls prepare the daily meals for themselves and their brothers, but if the meal is also going to be served to her husband or to strangers, she closely supervises the girls to ensure the quality. The girls have yet to master some tasks, and she actively assists them in learning these techniques. The girls both work hard every day in the kitchen, and Wulnumor divides their tasks on a rotational basis to ensure the workload is shared and that tasks are completed even in her absence (Wulnumor, upii pɔɔk (married mature woman); Interview, 2012).

In many houses, girls can prepare the midday or evening meals after the school day has ended, thereby giving their mothers more time to devote to farm work. In 2006, I spoke to Lovely, a 13-year-old girl who explained that she had been doing all the cooking on her days off from school for about the last year in order to give her mother a break. She uses all of her mother's things – hearth, pots, mortar and pestle, and ingredients to prepare these meals, but she never uses the kitchen or cooking equipment that belongs to her father's brother's wife who shares the compound (Lovely, *usapɔɔnbo* (unmarried girl); Interview, 2006). Six years later, Lovely had married and gone to her husband's house; her 10-year- old sister had taken over her work, cooking meals for her siblings on a daily basis and on weekends. Young girls therefore provide an important source of labor support to their mothers; they are not yet cooks, but assist their mothers in fulfilling their labor obligations to feed their husbands and support his house.

A young woman (*usapɔɔn*) who is considered to be ready to marry but has not yet done so, continues to help her mother with the cooking, but she is given much more responsibility. She can perform all necessary tasks in the kitchen without supervision, and she is often also asked to prepare food for others – by men whose wives have yet to return from the farm, by the elderly no longer able to prepare their own meal, and by boys unwilling to wait for their own mothers or sisters to prepare a meal (or to do it themselves, as most boys can prepare a simple meal should they choose to do so). She also contributes important labor toward preparing food for large gatherings, such as funerals. Despite this, a young woman is still not considered to be a cook because she has 'no one to cook for', and therefore has not yet earned the right to have her own hearth, cooking equipment, and access to food resources. She relies upon the hearths, equipment, and ingredients of other women, usually the resources of the women she is assisting. A young woman experiences a freedom – in terms of the spaces she can access and the relationships she can call upon for ingredients and utensils – that a married woman does not, yet this flexibility also means she is restricted in her ability to garner resources from men and provide security for herself.

Although a woman may have had significant cooking experience and be entirely competent at the time of her marriage, once she enters her husband's house, she undergoes a second apprenticeship. The *kisaamondi*, with the hearth as its heart, is the wife's place in the community, and a new wife entering her husband's compound must defer to the senior woman's authority. The process of becoming a wife and cook therefore takes place in the *kisaamondi*. From this place the senior woman exerts her authority – demonstrating her access to men's resources and wielding her power to control this new wife's labor by granting her fettered access to a cooking place until the senior woman decides the new wife has earned herself the right to her own hearth. This apprenticeship is a phase of her life that establishes her in the household and embeds her in the community. Nyaa Ugemme, an elderly widow, explained that she migrated to a distant village to be her husband's third wife. She described her first year in the compound. She acted 'like a daughter' – she watched and assisted with food preparation, thereby submitting to the authority of other women through a process of learning to cook (Nyaa Ugemme, *upininkpel* (widowed elderly woman); Interview, 2006). As a new wife, she

was treated much like she would have been in her mother's home; she worked under the supervision of her mother-in-law and relied on relationships with other wives for access to starchy foods and soup ingredients. She was expected to prepare food for her new husband, yet did not have her own resources to do so. She also served as an important source of labor for these women, providing much needed relief or assistance in completing daily tasks of fetching water, pounding ingredients, and preparing meals. Nyaa Ugemme worked hard to prove herself to these other women who make the final decision to establish a new wife as a 'wife' in the kitchen, the home, and in the community.

A young wife's apprenticeship in her husband's home ends with the preparation of lisambɔɔn. This is a ceremonial 'first' meal prepared for the husband by a wife on her own hearth, with her own cooking materials. A woman prepares for lisambɔɔn by collecting her cooking stones, but the right to establish her hearth is earned; it is typically the senior woman who will dictate the placement of the new wife's hearth within the compound, thereby signaling the end of the apprenticeship and enabling the young wife to prepare lisambɔɔn. As for cooking materials, a woman's mother is responsible for assembling a collection of cooking pots, serving bowls, utensils, mortar and pestle, and grinding bowls. Additional necessities, such as sleeping mats and cloths, will also be purchased for the wife at this time. Nyaa Ugemme explained that after staying in her husband's compound for about a year, her mother brought her her own cooking things, which were bought with money provided by her husband. At this time, her own hearth was placed in the center of the compound alongside the hearths of the other wives, and she was able to take her place within the rota system, cooking for her husband and his family (Nyaa Ugemme, upininkpel (widowed elderly woman); Interview, 2006). Mothers may also provide their daughters with a stash of dried ingredients for soup making, such as dried okra, peppers, beans, leafy vegetables, and fish. The husband's family will look over the items provided by the mother; because the husband provided the financial backing for these items, it is important for the family to accept what was bought and that the new wife has everything she needs to become a wife in the house.

The *lisambɔɔn* meal will consist of a soup and *busatuum*, a stiff porridge made with guinea corn (*Sorghum* spp.) flour. Everyone living in the compound is served the meal. The wife's mother and father will also partake of a fowl killed by the husband. For the next two days, the wife continues to prepare meals and feed everyone in her husband's compound. On the third day, the wife's mother greets all the men in the compound, giving them each a small gift. The marriage is finalized during this three-day event, as the families come together, marking the occasion when the woman becomes wife through the act of cooking in her own kitchen.

When a woman establishes herself as a wife in a husband's compound, this can change the position of senior women with whom she apprenticed. Kamada is the senior of her husband's three wives. When she entered her husband's house, she helped her husband's mother with the cooking for about two years, before 'establishing [her] own stones'. Once she was established as a wife and cook in her own right, she had also negotiated the right to teach her junior wives as they entered the household, thus earning a senior position among women in her husband's house, although respect and deference would always be expected from her mother-in-law (Kamada, *upii pɔɔk* (married mature woman); Interview, 2006). Being a wife and cook means taking over the responsibility of cooking for the husband, relieving the husband's mother of cooking for her son. A dutiful wife also serves food to her mother-in-law as a daily show of respect. For a senior woman who has established herself, a shift in her position is often at her discretion – if she has the power to delegate her own responsibilities to a young wife or daughter-in-law, it is her right to do so. As a mother, a senior woman gives up her responsibilities toward her son's new wife, but may continue to cook for her own husband and other children. If a woman is considered to be elderly and has difficultly completing tasks, a new wife can

take over and relieve a senior woman of many of her daily tasks, including cooking for the senior women and her husband, in addition to her own family. Widows, with no husband to cook for, may choose to cook for themselves, or remove themselves from the task and eat the food prepared by junior women. Nteliin, Kamada's junior wife, said that although she primarily learned from, and provided assistance to Kamada, her senior wife, her husband's mother also taught her and called upon her for labor (Nteliin, *upii* (married woman); Interview, 2006).

Earning the position of wife within a house takes hard work for women; it requires accepting a subordinate position to other women, laboring for their interests in front of one's own, and it means building personal relationships to help ease the burden of everyday tasks. When successful, a woman is able to rely on other children and young women to help with tasks like fetching water, working on the farm, and preparing ingredients for cooking, thereby helping her to make soup as a proper wife should. There are women, however, who do not succeed at becoming wives and cooks. In 2011, I visited Giftee, the young woman who six years earlier had asserted that as a young unmarried woman, she is not a cook because she has 'no one to cook for'. She is now married and living with her husband in a town distant from both their home villages, where her husband is employed. They live in a Konkomba neighborhood, but Giftee is isolated from that community because her husband refuses to allow her to cook. She does not have other women in the house with whom she can apprentice, nor with whom she can negotiate her position. She is shamed by her inability to fulfill her duties as a wife and this in turn keeps her isolated from other women – she is too ashamed to socialize, and cannot receive labor or resources from them as she has nothing to give in return (Giftee, usapɔɔn/upii (young woman/married woman); Interview, 2011). We also saw above the story of Nyaa Abena, who, as a young wife, had not devoted herself to being cook in her husband's home, and has struggled to find support in later life. Kitchens, together with the relationships between women that are built therein, are important sites not only of power negotiations between women for control over labor and resources needed to support themselves and their families in everyday life, but also sites of power for women negotiating their position in a patriarchal society that undervalues, yet is fundamentally dependent upon, the work done by women in maintaining and reproducing their communities.

Conclusion

The kitchen space is laden with assumptions, predictable in its meaning and use; it is a common assumption that women work daily in the kitchen, subject to mundane routines in order to meet the needs of their social superiors (Floyd 2004). Binalobdo is a rigidly patriarchal society, where women are regarded as inferior and subservient to men. The division of labor does, in a sense, relegate women to the kitchen. The social role expected of women locates much of their work in the family domestic space, particularly the kitchen where the dynamics of kinship and marriage, everyday sustenance, and finding security for the future are played out. Although feminist work widely asserts that patriarchal structures are negative, and women's authority and power is demonstrated as resistance to that structure, it is important to also understand how power relations between women work to reproduce a patriarchal structure. Processes of learning, acts of deference in apprenticeship, building relationships for support in labor, and acquiring resources, all contribute to individual women becoming wives and establishing a legitimate and permanent home for themselves in their husband's community – processes that at once serve to reproduce the patriarchal structures in which they were raised while working to gain authority among women for control over the cooking spaces that are both part of daily work and physical spaces that assert a wife's prominent position in the house and community – not her submissive one.

The women of Binalobdo gradually demonstrated to me that the kitchen – the domestic space to which they are relegated – is not simply a work space, nor a socially confining space. The kitchen is a rich and complex space, where everyday life is practiced and where social relations are negotiated. The physical organization of the kitchens – indoors or outdoors, clustered hearths of multiple women, or spatially segregated hearths that serve to ease tensions – are the material constructions of women's relationships with each other, as well as the authority they have earned in the process of becoming a cook that enables them to work in the community to which they now belong. They spend much of their lives in other women's kitchens in order to earn and control their own. As girls, they learn and assist in kitchen and farm activities, gaining the knowledge necessary for providing for their mother's family and, eventually, their own. As young women, they can fully participate in these activities, but they continue to rely on married women for the spaces and resources necessary for this work. Married women, in turn, rely on these girls and young women to assist them in their tasks. And while society defines a woman as cook, we have also seen how women can fall short in assuming their role within the kitchen – without gaining authority among women and a sense of belonging to her husband's community, a woman experiences negative social and material implications.

Their role as women-as wives-as-cooks, in service to the needs of men and their community – and the processes by which they work to achieve this role – is understood by women as a role of authority and belonging. In the kitchen it is a woman, in relation with other women, who supports her family and reproduces her community. She builds relationships with others within and outside of her house; she negotiates the ability to call on the labor of others, to secure food from her husband, and to acquire the ingredients she needs. Within the kitchen – space understood to be the purview of wives – a woman works to fulfill the demands of normative labor division and responsibilities to the community while navigating the power structures of women who control space, labor, and resources. 'Mɔn' – to marry and to cook – is to establish herself as a wife, ensuring her right to kitchen space from which she supports herself, her children, and her husband's community, as well as ensuring her own security for the future.

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Notes

1. All participants are identified by a pseudonym. Elderly women's names are preceded by 'Nyaa', meaning grandmother. An exception is mature women with no children living in their natal community, their names are preceded by 'Npul', meaning 'father's sister'.

2. Men's and women's farming are distinct labor responsibilities within the structure of gendered labor division. For the Konkomba, 'farming' is the activity that produces starchy staple foods – work that is done exclusively by men. Women are responsible for providing all soup ingredients for meals, including vegetables. They grow these vegetables on their own farms and on their husband's farms, where vegetables are intercropped with the tuber and grain crops. Women's farm-based labor occupies a significant amount of their time, and resources, but the concepts of 'men's farming' and 'women's farming' are difficult to translate into English. I therefore make reference to women's farming while acknowledging the cultural distinction from 'farming', which is strictly men's work.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

‘Mɔn’ (casarse/cocinar): negociar el volverse esposa y mujer en las cocinas de una comunidad konkomba del norte de Ghana

En este artículo, considero la cocina como espacio doméstico que es al mismo tiempo generizado y generizante en su construcción y uso por las mujeres cuando negocian su posición social a lo largo de la vida. Los valores patriarcales profundamente enraizados estructuran la sociedad konkomba en el norte de Ghana, y el rol de la mujer es el de ser esposa, preparar la comida en apoyo de la familia y la comunidad de su esposo. Aunque la definición normativa del rol de la mujer en la sociedad surge de una división clara del trabajo entre hombres y mujeres, una mujer debe negociar su posición social y su capacidad de cumplir con estas obligaciones laborales; ella se vuelve mujer y esposa trabajando para obtener acceso a los recursos y el trabajo y el control sobre los mismos. Analizo las cambiantes dinámicas del trabajo y las posiciones sociales de las mujeres a lo largo de la vida, enfatizando la transición de la mujer joven a mujer-como-esposa-como cocinera en la comunidad de su esposo. Estas negociaciones toman lugar en la cocina - un espacio intensamente femenino en el que la mujer se vuelve esposa cuando se gana el derecho de colocar piedras para cocinar y preparar una ‘primera comida’ ceremonial para su esposo y su comunidad.

Palabras claves: espacio doméstico; cocinas; transcurso de la vida; casamiento; género

‘Mɔn’（结婚 / 烹饪）：在加纳北部孔孔巴社群中，协商成为妻子与厨房中的女人之过程

我在本文中，将厨房考量作为居家空间，当女性在生命轨迹中协商其社会位置 时，该空间在建构及使用中，被女性给性别化、并同时进行性别形塑。深植的父权价值，构成了加纳北部的孔孔巴社会，而女性的角色即为妻子，并为其丈夫的家庭及社群准备餐食。儘管女性在社会中的角色之规范定义，源自于男女之间明确的性别分工，但一个女性仍需协商其社会位置和能力，以完成这些义务劳动；她藉由尽力取得资源与劳动并加以控制之，成为一位女人及妻子。我将探讨女性在生命轨迹中，其工作与社会位置的转变动态，强调从年轻女性成为妻子及其丈夫社群的厨娘的转变过程。这些协商都在厨房中发生 – 该空间是一个极度的女性空间，当女性于其中取得置放炉石的权力、并为其丈夫和丈夫的社群准备仪式性的‘第一餐’时，便成为了妻子。

关键词：居家空间; 厨房; 生活轨迹; 婚姻; 性别