

Article

Gendering Ocean Management for Sustainable Ocean Care in Ghana

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Abstract: UNESCO presently offers a universal regime and policy environment for the identification and management of natural and cultural heritages. However, heritage does not merely signify cultural diversity; it can also facilitate greater equity and equality. The research problem addressed in this article is that in Ghana, the national government perceives and treats the small-scale fishing (SSF) sector as a masculine space and endeavour, ignoring the gendered aspects of this environment, of SSF practice and ocean care. In the article, it is hypothesized that if the SSF sector is treated as a socially differentiated space, and if the concern of ocean care is prioritized as a key imperative in Ghanaian ocean management, it is likely that a more inclusive and sustainable ocean management process and SSF sector will emerge in Ghana. Mindful of the socially differentiated nature of the SSF sector in Ghana, the goal of the research presented in this article is to use mixed qualitative research methods (participant-observation and semi-structured interviews) to investigate gendered knowledge forms and gendered practices in ocean care in the central region of Ghana. A key finding of the research is that gendered ritual practices, including canoe building and use in Ghana, are critical to long-term, sustainable, and inclusive ocean management in the country. Recognition of the gendered dimensions of ocean management in Ghana may also result in more inclusive ocean governance policies and nature management policies in Ghana in general. The conclusion of the article is that ocean governance in Ghana should consider and mainstream a gendered perspective of the SSF sector, to advance transformative, sustainable, and inclusive ocean care. The article draws on theories of intersectionality, African indigenous feminist thought, and critical heritage studies to analyse the data gathered, to support the discussion, and to propose the way forward for the national government.

Keywords: cultural heritage; Ghana; ocean governance; gender and small-scale fishers



Citation: Oduro, G.Y.; Boswell, R.; Wilson, D.; Ansah, J.W. Gendering Ocean Management for Sustainable Ocean Care in Ghana. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 8722. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16198722>

Academic Editor: Asterios Bakolas

Received: 11 August 2024

Revised: 17 September 2024

Accepted: 21 September 2024

Published: 9 October 2024



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1. Introduction

In 2014, the Director General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova stated, ‘While there has been progress across the world, inequality persists with regard to who participates in, contributes to and benefits from culture’ [1]. Bokova added, ‘I believe we must do far more to harness culture for the empowerment of women—for this UNESCO’s standard-setting instruments provide a unique springboard’. The motivation of this article is to offer insight into the potential of a more gender-inclusive policy and practice of ocean care in Ghana to secure long-term ocean sustainability, for it is now well demonstrated that gender inclusivity in ocean care in Mexico, Philippines, Gambia, and Kenya advances overall gender equality in a society [2], more participatory ocean planning and management, gender-responsive legislation, and greater equality in the ratio of women to men in community organizations [3]. This article adds the case study of Ghana to seminal, global discussions on the role of women as activists for ocean care [4]. It also draws attention to how the role of women in fisheries management is often downplayed [5], that women are crucial to fisheries and local

economic sustainability [6], that women are more amenable to behavioural changes that lead to conservation of the natural environment [7], and that ‘inclusive approaches result in greater engagement by ocean users and decision-makers as well as greater uptake of information and community consensus’ [8–11]. The goals of the article are therefore (1) to elucidate in the need for holistic ocean care, (2) to reveal the importance of understanding gendered roles in safeguarding heritage and ocean management, and (3) to clarify what the Ghanaian government can do to achieve greater gender inclusivity in ocean care. Presently, and as Ojwala [12] notes, there is insufficient gender-disaggregated data on women in the African ocean economy; women are poorly represented as researchers and policymakers in the African ocean economy and there is a need for greater interdisciplinary collaboration and data dissemination. This article seeks to provide qualitative data on the potential inclusion of women in the African ocean economy to enrich existing quantitative [2] and review studies [12]. It also draws attention to the fact that the government of Ghana still relies on authorized and externally informed cultural and natural heritage discourses to frame and implement national heritage policies and practices. Furthermore, in attending to the issue of gendered ocean care, the discussion presented in this article seeks to facilitate greater epistemological equality as well as locally meaningful forms of heritage and heritage management. The approach will also respond to patriarchal ideologies in Ghanaian society, because, presently, Ghana remains a society where colonial and patriarchal discourses of heritage persist despite key gender reforms.

The situation is leading to insufficient inclusion of gender in ocean care; thus, the first hypothesis is that if the national government shifts its perspective to include the gendered dimensions of ocean care, a more inclusive, heritage responsive, and gender sensitive ocean management policy and practice will arise. The second hypothesis is that the shift to a differentiated and gender sensitive perspective of ocean care will also respond to UNESCO’s globalized heritage discourse, which presently does not consider the gendered dimensions of heritage.

In Ghana, cultural heritage, specifically coastal cultural heritage, is gendered and dynamic. Heritage is not static. Associated social relations reveal a dynamism in the SSF sector that can support locally meaningful and sustainable ocean care. Therefore, it is proposed in this article that the Ghana fisheries authorities and its heritage authorities adopt a feminist lens when considering the SSF sector. To achieve a gendered perspective, the article advocates for an ecofeminist and new materialism perspective. The first attends to the issue of women’s inclusive care for nature while the latter attends to the issue of continued inequalities and marginalisation of women in emerging economies. Finally, the article calls for greater national and global visibility of the contributions of Ghanaian coastal heritage to ocean management, including more attention to the ways in which African women are advancing an environmentally constitutive heritage practice.

A second concern is that Africa’s coastal waters are now increasingly compromised by illegal fishing, marine pollution, and the impacts of climate change on the ocean. Many of these scourges could be alleviated if more attention were given to local cultural forms and how these practices and beliefs contribute to the conservation of the environment. While multinational organisations such as UNESCO have taken the lead in surfacing the importance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) to the conservation of cultural and biodiversity, UNESCO needs to do more to consider and include local epistemologies and philosophies of cultural heritage, which suggest unique and relevant forms of local environmental management. Our findings reveal a dynamic gendered field in Ghanaian ocean management. There are overlapping gendered domains of ocean care and the findings advance possibilities for the assertion of the gendered approach for ocean management to achieve the realisation of UN SDG 5, which seeks to advance gender equality worldwide.

Having discussed the introduction, we next move to the materials and methods section. This is followed by a discussion on globalised heritage discourse and its impacts on gender and the findings and discussions of our research drawing on both primary and secondary data. The data section begins by offering an historical overview of maritime coastal culture

in Ghana. We propose that gendered relations with the sea are multifaceted, requiring engagement with new materialisms in feminism [13], critical heritage studies [14], and ecofeminism [15]. Bringing these theoretical strands together, we argue that the gendering of ocean management should be substantively inclusive. Our key research questions are: How and why have African women been excluded from or marginalized in African ocean management? And how and why does canoe culture in Ghana illustrate the rich relations that women have with the sea? In our discussion we offer three potential institutions that can advance the recommendations offered by the study, how the evidence obtained can be presented to the decision-makers in these organizations and to scholars pursuing more inclusive ocean development, and what are the implications of a new governing mentality for a more inclusive ocean development.

2. Materials and Methods

As social scientists and heritage researchers, we are interested in the gendered and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of fishers and canoe builders and associated implications for ocean governance, we examined the meanings, constructions, experiences, and interpretations of the cultural practices we encountered in the above-noted coastal settings of Ghana [16–18]. We combined the qualitative research methods of individual interviews and observations and supplemented these with photography and video recording to assist in both the collection and analysis of data for the study [19–23]. Thus, using Nvivo version 12, we triangulated qualitative, visual, and creative methods of data collection for the study. It is now considered that arts-based participatory methods in combination with standard qualitative research methods can provide new perspectives on lived realities [21]. This approach can reveal otherwise hidden power hierarchies and social inequalities but must be carefully utilized to manage the potential problem of incommensurable findings. For example, an interview recording can suggest that an interviewee is supportive of a particular view of cultural heritage and its' conservation, whereas the video recording can present embodied responses that suggest otherwise. Our study involved three (3) research sites—Biriwa, Elmina, and Cape Coast—all in the central region of Ghana (See Figure 1).

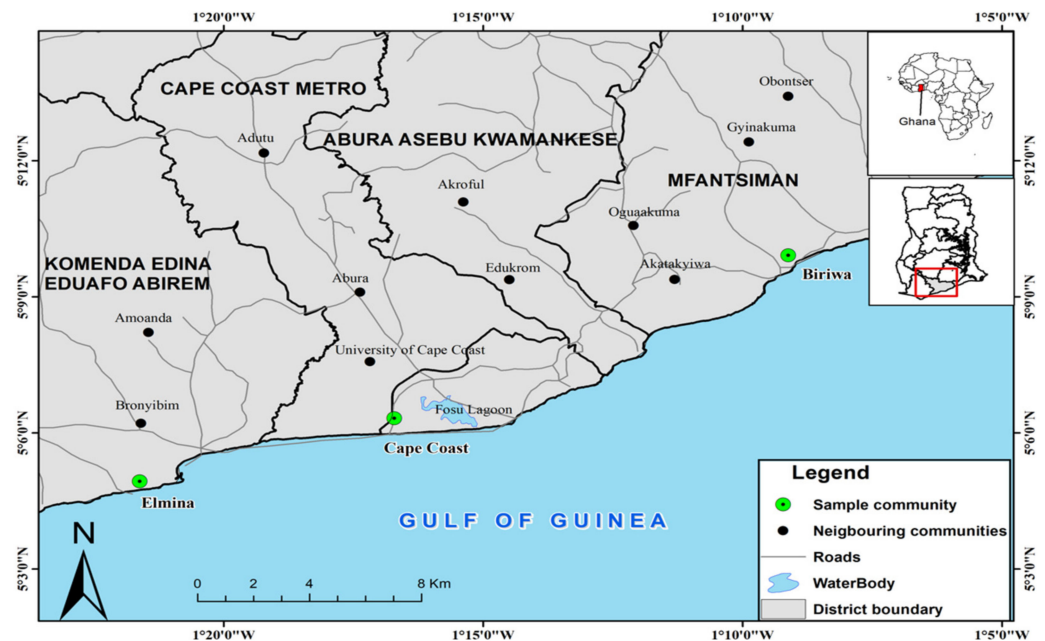


Figure 1. Map of the three study sites marked in green. Source: Yaa Oduro, 2023.

Following the stated goals in the introduction to this article, the aim and objectives of the study are to: (1) examine canoe culture in Ghana's fisheries and the role of gender in this system, as well as contributions to ocean care within it, (2) offer qualitative exam-

ples of gendered ocean management and care in selected coastal communities in Ghana (3) consider these gendered dimensions as coastal intangible cultural heritage, and (4) identify actions that can be taken by the Ghanaian government to improve gender inclusion in ocean management. A limitation of the study concerned identifying women who are involved in the SSF sector, as this sector remains a male dominated space. We overcame this via purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. For example, we approached key fisher cooperatives and identified prominent women there via this route, and subsequently leveraged these connections to network with less visible women participants. We also took advantage of the annual traditional festivals of the chiefs (in the respective study sites), to gather additional observational data and photographs. A total of twenty (20) participants from the three study sites of Biriwa, Cape Coast, and Elmina were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods and interviewed. The participants included male carvers, carpenters, painters, and artisans in the canoe building industry, as well as female canoe owners and users, traditional priestesses, *supis*, *asafo hen*, fishers, and fish processors. Five men were selected from each of the two male dominated canoe-building sites of Biriwa and Cape Coast, while 10 (5 men and 5 women) were selected from Elmina, which is a non-canoe-building site. Thus, our study involved a total of fifteen (15) men and five women because of the dominance of men in the canoe building industry and the subject of our study.

Informed by the study objectives noted above, we found the research design and approach appropriate for the research [24]. Murtagh [24] used the critical quasi-ethnographic approach in her study of formative assessments in UK schools and opines that whereas a full ethnographic approach requires the researcher to stay with the participants for a longer period in the field using participant observation as a key method, the same cannot be said of a quasi-ethnographic approach since it is more flexible and allows varied and multiple engagements with local communities. In our case, two of the researchers were in and out of the field from April 2021 to July 2021 and back in the field from July–August 2022 for additional data.

Informed by the works of theorists such as Miles and Huberman [25] and Reinharz and Davidman [26], we strictly observed the rules of voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality in the conduct of the interviews and some of the observations and photographs. The data collection also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, and we observed all the COVID protocols. Other events, such as the festivals and associated rituals, were public and could be observed, photographed, and video-recorded openly; as such we did exactly that to complement the data we collected earlier. There were tourists and other observers who recorded these events as well.

Bearing in mind the need to be flexible and to obtain richer findings, we conducted in-depth interviews. These yielded insights into the canoe-building processes, canoe-related rituals, and the gendered dimensions of canoe culture, as well as comments on the implications of canoe culture for ocean governance in Ghana. In total, twenty face-to-face interviews with different ‘actors’ associated with canoe building were conducted, as mentioned earlier. To complement the interviews, we recorded the festivals using video, capturing the ritual practices related to gendered ICH during the *Oguaa Fetu Afehye* of the people of Cape Coast and the *Edina Bakatue* (means opening of the lagoon into the ocean) festival of the people of Elmina. We also documented the events using photography. These audio–visual data were collected to provide additional sources of information for our analysis of gendered contribution to ocean care. The professionalisation of the social science research process in Ghana (as noted above), as well as the bona fide qualification and research experience of the primary researchers (Yaa Oduro and Ansah) who are Ghanaian, as well as the qualification and research experience of the secondary data researchers (Boswell and Wilson), seasoned social scientists, endorses the validity and representativeness of the interviews and secondary data research undertaken for the study. Following Gissi et al. [7], it is our view that the participation of women researchers in identifying and assessing the participation of women and indigenous peoples in ocean economies is critical. The process

contributes to the validity of the data, as interviews are conducted in the local languages and the researchers serve as cultural brokers, navigating between the collection, analysis, and presentation of data for scholarly scrutiny and engaging with local communities to obtain an emic or insider perspective of ocean care.

Data Analysis

Miles and Huberman [25] perceive data analysis as a continuous process that starts in the field. Hence, our analysis commenced with field notes and general reflections on the entire research process right in the field. We (Yaa Oduro and Ansah) translated and transcribed the interviews from Fante (local language) to English. We employed manual analysis method guided by the analysis framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana [27]. Manual analysis uses circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or colouring rich or significant participant quotes or passages that strikes the researcher, what Harding (2013) describes as those “codable moments” worthy of attention. The data was read repeatedly with codes generated between and across themes, categories, and patterns. Also, the visual data were informed by participatory research analysis procedure where we drew on ideas of emergence, collaboration, and dialogue from an iterative process and sense-making [28]. We supported the narratives with the visual data, which helped us to corroborate but also challenge what we obtained from the narratives. We further ensured the trustworthiness of the study by triangulating the methods and information gathered from the participants [16,29–31]. We next present the findings of the study under key themes which are: masculinity in canoe building and deployment, the place of gendered rituals in canoe culture, and women’s role in canoe culture and ocean governance.

3. Secondary Results

The following section offers the secondary results of the study. These results are key since they provide insight into the historical and current factors shaping ocean management and in particular canoe culture in Ghana. The secondary data also guide the theoretical framework for the study, indicating the importance of critical heritage studies to a more nuanced and politically conscious understanding of cultural heritage conceptualization and its management in Ghana. In particular, the findings lead us (Boswell and Wilson) to consider that cultural heritage management in a contested terrain and that its objective management may have adverse consequences for the recognition and mainstreaming of intangible cultural heritage in national ocean management.

Drawing on both secondary and primary data findings, we (all the authors) find that, in Ghana, canoes are perceived as conscious and spirit imbued vessels that traverse an equally spiritual and agential sea, powered by a God that has potential to affect one’s fortunes. Canoe building and use are also gendered processes, revealing the multidimensional nature of SSF cultural and economic life. The following paragraphs share these findings.

3.1. The Historical Findings

The long and intertwined history of fishing and canoe culture in coastal Ghana is characterised by a gendered division in maritime-focused labour, in which men have predominantly occupied labour at sea while women have controlled the value chain on land. This division of labour points to distinctive types of gendered management over marine activities vital to coastal livelihoods. Yet (and as asserted by Wilson), it is important not to see this gendered management as an overt binary between terrestrial and aquatic spaces; these are interlinked spaces in which men and women have historically exerted their influence and power. The canoe is central to these waterscapes and to this gendered management, not just by providing the vehicle through which people navigated waterscapes, but also as the vessel that facilitates the bringing of the ocean’s bounty to land. Beached canoes became marketplaces where goods were sold, and prices negotiated [32]. Even more than this, canoes were—and continue to be—a “social map” articulating cultural understandings, spiritual beliefs, aesthetic values, and personal and collective

identities' [32]. Canoes could be male or female, determined by how they move across the water, while food and libation offerings were made to canoes to seek their protection, charms were placed inside hulls to protect against danger, and hulls decorated with iconography and motifs articulating culture, spiritual, and political identities [5,6]. An examination of the entangled histories of gendered ocean management and canoe culture points to how fishers and fish traders have played a leading role in driving adaptations and changes within the canoe-based fishing industry [33].

Constructed from cottonwood and sometimes wawa trees (*Triplochiton scleroxylon*), the canoes employed on the Ghanaian coast are solid dugouts fashioned from a single piece of wood. These are streamlined purposefully for the rough conditions of the Ghanaian coast where navigating the dangerous and difficult surf requires solid watercraft with shallow draughts that can ride waves, cross shallows, and be easily beached; the latter being crucial in a region characterised by surf ports rather than natural harbours. This meant that canoes and those who piloted them quickly monopolised ship-to-shore transportation following the expansion of Atlantic markets from the fifteenth century onwards [32,34–36]. Over time, the use of canoes for different activities led to the adaptation and development of canoes of varying sizes depending on the intended service, with designs also changing as knowledge was shared between Africans and between Africans and European merchants [32]. It was only in the twentieth century that the use of canoe in ship-to-shore transportation began to decline, when the British colonial government (1874–1957) undertook a series of harbour development programmes and, especially, the development of an artificial harbour at Takoradi in 1928 and Tema harbour in 1962 following independence [37–39].

Even as African canoemen found new opportunities in maritime conveyance, fishing continued to form the main employment for the majority of coastal-based mariners throughout the pre-colonial and colonial periods [37,40,41]. It was not until the early twentieth century that the sea fishing industry experienced significant transformation following the introduction of large European-influenced herring drift nets (Ali) and beach-seine nets (*yevudor*)—and later purse-seine nets (*watsa*)—within coastal waters. These were larger and more expensive nets, which required significant capital investment not only to purchase them but also to hire the appropriate canoes required to deploy them as well as larger crews to be able to work them [40,42,43]. A. P. Brown identified three different types of canoe utilised in the Labadi district in Greater Accra: *fa lele*, a craft about 19-feet long used for inshore fishing with bottom-dragging nets; *Tjani lele*, a craft about 24-feet long used for beach seining; and *Ali lele*, a craft between 23- and 25-feet long used for deep-sea fishing using the large herring drift nets [44]. A major change in the twentieth century concerned motorisation, in which outboard motors began to be adopted on canoes from 1959 onwards; these proved so popular that by 1969 more than 75 per cent of dugout canoes utilised an outboard motor [39,40,45]. These technological changes of both canoes and fishing gears stimulated greater capitalisation and commercialisation of the canoe fishing industry, in which women played a leading role.

While men piloted canoes and fished at sea, it was women who controlled the production and marketing of fish, meaning it was women who dominated the process through which the sea's bounty was commoditized for consumption on land in coastal Ghana. For centuries, women have controlled the processing of fish, whether through drying, smoking, or frying for centuries. It is through this process that fish is then transformed into a saleable commodity that has formed a continuous staple in local and regional markets. By controlling the economic process through which fish were commoditized, and through wide-stretching commercial networks, women were in control of the finances of the fishing industry [40,43,46,47].

Through this control, fish traders have not only been at the forefront of investment and innovation in the canoe fisheries in the past but were crucial in protesting and resisting developments—whether legislation, wasteful fishing practices, or price disputes—that would impact on the economic value of canoe fisheries [43,47,48]. Crucially, throughout the twentieth century, as sea fishing transformed into a much more heavily capitalized and

labour-intensive industry, a class of wealthier wholesalers emerged as female entrepreneurs encouraged the adoption and development of new technologies that provided greater yields and led to lower prices paid per fish caught. It was these wholesalers who played a central role in providing capital for new canoes, gears, and motors, extending their power and influence beyond the processing and marketing of catch as not just investors and financiers of new technologies but also as owners of gears and canoes too [39,40,42,47]. As Overå argues, this was often occurring in spite of colonial and later governmental and international intrusions, which either concentrated on attempts at “modernization” and industrialization or which intervened in fisheries management in unstructured, underfinanced, and unsustainable ways [39].

In sum, there is a long history of gendered ocean management in coastal Ghana. Despite differing levels of access to aquatic and terrestrial spaces, both women and men have exercised and continue to exercise influence over marine affairs both directly and indirectly. This influence is centred around canoe culture, as it is the canoe that connects these spaces, collaborates on these activities, and carries the ocean’s bounty to land. Through their connections to canoes and the activities therein, both women and men exert their influence over these two connected realms, weaving social, spiritual, natural, and economic connections that cannot be easily disentangled. Despite the changing uses and designs of canoes as heritage symbols with its associated gender dynamics, canoes continue to be spiritual objects, imbued with spiritual and cultural meanings, and linked to gendered management of the oceans. This is a culture that has developed over centuries, but which is constantly adapting, innovating, and transforming in reaction to changing economic, ecological, and political circumstances. It is a culture that is rich in knowledge and history, which has held and continues to hold, or has the potential to hold, significant power and influence over ocean governance. That these gendered histories of maritime existence are not more fully exposed in historical literature is revealing and comprehensible; African histories are, for the most part, still narrated by scholars in the global north and from perspectives that are not inclusive of a diversity of voices.

3.2. The Present Setting

Ghana is a West African country bordered to the north by Burkina Faso, to the west by the Ivory Coast and to the east by Togo. At the South is Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean [49]. The country has 16 administrative regions with four on the coast. One of these four coastal regions is the central region, with Cape Coast as the regional capital. The three study sites of Biriwa, Cape Coast, and Elmina were drawn from the central region. Biriwa is a corruption of the Fante word *biriw wura* (charcoal seller). It is the smallest of the three study sites, with Elmina being the second largest and Cape Coast being the biggest. Elmina is the municipal capital of the Komenda–Edina–Eguafo–Abirem Municipality, while Cape Coast is the regional capital of the central region of Ghana. Characteristic of the Ghanaian general population, these sites boast men, women, and children, most especially, young people. Biriwa, for example, has a population of 36,409 [50], while Elmina has a population of 33,576 made up of 51% females and 49% males. Cape Coast is the largest site with a population 189,925 people, also with 51% women and 49% men [51]. All three study sites are fishing ports, with the men mainly involved in fishing while the women actively handle the processing and trading of the catch. Thus, the value chain of the fisheries reflects a gendered division of labour, unequal power relations, and limited access to and control over resources. Within this context, women’s work has been systematically discounted and devalued [52]. Some of the inhabitants of these towns have however diversified their livelihood options with trading, farming and office or formal work [51,53]. Cape Coast is the colonial capital of Ghana and the current capital of the central region, as such it boasts of a vibrant formal sector with a number of schools, especially secondary and boarding schools and governmental offices [51,54]. All three study sites have huge youth population with resultant high rates of teenage pregnancies and school drop-out rates especially among the females. A study by the Ghana Health Service and the UNFPA [55] reported that

75,000 teenagers between age 15 to 19 years got pregnant nationally, with 14,000 of them coming from the central region. Elmina for example, had a total of 497 teenage pregnancies between January and September 2017. Several causes have been attributed to this development, including dysfunctional homes, poor parenting, irresponsible fatherhood as a result of the prevailing matrilineal culture in the area, and poverty, among others [56,57].

Biriwa also has a canoe-building site from where we interviewed some participants in addition to observation and photography. Elmina, locally known as Edina, is a historical fishing town where fishing dates back to the 1400s. Elmina's 2015 strategic report reveals that about 75% of the estimated population derive their livelihood directly from fishing and related activities. Elmina has the third largest fish landing site in Ghana after Tema and Sekondi harbours. The majority of the fishing activities in Elmina are artisanal while that of Sekondi and Tema are semi-industrial and industrial fisheries [58–62]. Although Elmina's fishery is artisanal, it nonetheless generates roughly 15 percent of the nation's fish output. As a result, Elmina makes a major contribution to the local economy and way of life as well as the GDP of the country's fisheries. The Elmina fish landing dock is built along the bank of the Benya lagoon, and thus provides an ideal landing site for most of the canoes and small semi-industrial boats engaged in traditional fisheries, such as fish processing and trading and other ocean related activities such as salt processing. Elmina celebrates the annual Bakatue festival which revolves around fishing. Bakatue is celebrated in the first week of July annually, with varied gendered activities and rituals [60,61,63,64].

Ola, a suburb of Cape Coast with artisanal fishing and canoe building activities was the site for five interviews with canoe builders. We also conducted observation, picture-taking, and video recording at another suburb of Cape Coast known as Bakano, which is home to the Fosu lagoon and the site for the annual regatta and canoe racing competition among the Asafo (traditional warriors) fishing companies of Cape Coast and forms part of their annual *Fetu Afahye* (traditional festival). This festival is held in the last week of August to the first week of September every year.

3.3. The Theoretical Findings

A key finding of the study in the secondary data review, is that cultural heritage, as conceptualised and deployed by UNESCO, is subject to discursive forces and deployment. Heritage is (as Boswell asserts) not merely an intergenerational gift, nor does it merely signify culture for aesthetic consumption. Perceived as both tangible (i.e., palpable, observable artifacts, monuments, and sites) and intangible (i.e., immaterial forms such as song, poetry, ritual practice, or belief), UNESCO has long presented heritage as an observable, delineable, and universally valuable set of cultural practices and associated artifacts. Thus, the globally circulated concept of heritage continues to be challenged. The research in this article shows that canoe culture in Ghana is part of a rich spiritual and feminist valuation of the material/immaterial world. To apprehend this complexity and understand the positioning of this heritage in Ghana, the study draws on the concept of ecofeminism, new materialisms in feminism and critical heritage studies. Ecofeminism as discussed by Plumwood [65] offers a feminist critique of reason, a critical analysis of '...the master form of rationality' which until very recently has been hegemonically patriarchal and 'systematically unable to acknowledge dependency on nature, the sphere of those it has defined as 'inferior' others'. As per Plumwood, this 'master rationality has developed 'blind spots' which may threaten our survival' [65] and our future depends increasingly on our ability to create a truly democratic and ecological culture beyond anthropocentric dualism. Ecofeminism offers a potential lens and critical response to the dominant view of history and of the place of women as cognitively subordinate and invisible in Africa's history. Taking a cue from Braidotti [13], we add that Ghana's canoe culture can also be perceived through the lens of new materialisms in feminist studies, arguing that the social positioning of women in canoe culture is a patriarchally influenced process. Women are publicly associated with homemaking and having children, and thus, in the patriarchal, modernist society of Ghana, the perception of women as meaningful contributors to canoe

culture does not fit the dominant rubric. However, their very positioning as marginal beings also provides unique opportunity for shared gendered spiritual domains of the culture. These domains are not available to men. Third, taking critical heritage studies into consideration, canoe culture is locally generative, but this aspect of the culture does not feature in Ghana's official heritage discourse [33]. Canoe culture draws on symbolism, beliefs, and practices which do not easily fit into the modernist-realist view of Ghanaian heritage. By this we mean that there is a dominant view of heritage as existing in the present, visible, and palpable 'reality'. The immaterial and transmaterial aspects of canoe culture and women's role in it are not considered. This results in poor understanding of canoe culture, low consideration of women's role in heritage, low consideration of the holism of ocean care, and poor global understanding of the multidimensional nature of Ghanaian society.

The secondary findings of the study also draw attention to the power of a globalized discourse on heritage. Since the implementation of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 1972, scholars worldwide [66–69] have discussed the UNESCO approach to heritage. Most note that the UN agency advances an authorised heritage discourse that needs to make more conceptual space for indigenous management of heritage [70–73]. As Peterson, Gavua, and Rassool argue [74], much attention is also given to the museumification of cultural heritage and not enough attention is given to living heritage. The latter can, as Goody [75] argues, stymie the dynamism of heritage and the inherent value of commonplace, everyday gendered heritage practices [76]. In one study, we emphasize the living heritage of Canoe Culture in Ghana and discuss its diverse elements to support global accounts of living heritage and contribute to a global, decolonial knowledge archive [77–81]. It is argued in the study that more can be done to recognise African intangible cultural heritage and what it can do for sustainable coastal livelihoods and ocean conservation. To date, for example, there are approximately 584 elements inscribed on UNESCO's List of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage (List of Intangible Heritage), but of this number, only 88 elements on the List are from Africa.

The secondary data findings also show that there is some recognition and inclusion of African indigenous heritages. However, while 50 state parties (out of 54) have ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [82], there is insufficient local capacity to conserve heritage [83,84]. Thus, many more new generation scholars must be trained in the field of heritage identification and management. Of utmost importance is attention to gendered heritage in Africa [85]. Diaspora and African feminists, for example, explain how women are negatively affected by their circumscription in heteronormative (and patriarchal) worlds [86], their disregard *tout court* [87], and their violent sublimation in what Gqola [88] calls a globalised 'fear factory'. These authors, and others such as Wane [15] call for the inclusion of African indigenous feminism in analyses of African societies so that local parameters of identity and the uniquely embodied and spiritual dimensions of being a woman [13] are recognised. Lastly, gender exclusion is even more pernicious in colonised states [89] especially so in those societies where religious ideology coincides with patriarchy [90] In such contexts, dominant (and often conservative) religious ideology can marginalise women and their knowledges and experiences further. These factors, as well as factors noted next, contribute to an intersectional experience of gender oppression in Ghana, which ultimately affect critical sectors such as ocean management.

In Ghana, society remains largely patriarchal [91,92] and the predominance of an orthodox and gender conservative Christianization risks marginalising indigenous coastal cultural heritages [19] Coastal cultural heritages evoke spiritual domains beyond Christian orthodoxy. We therefore propose that the national government in Ghana take the lead in Africa (and globally) by (1) interrogating the impact of colonialism and the impacts of dominant (often external) discourses of heritage on local heritage management and (2) identifying, revaluing, and nominating the ICH associated with canoe culture in Cape Coast Ghana for national and global recognition. In so doing, the national government

of Ghana will advance a holistic and equitable ocean management that leverages local and gendered perspectives on heritage to advance sustainable development and ocean care. By revaluing and nominating canoe culture as worthy World Heritage, Ghana will recentre its indigenous knowledge systems, advance decolonial development, and profile the importance of women's contributions to ocean management. The view of heritage and gender in heritage as a discursive and dynamic process encouraged an equally dynamic and multidimensional approach to the research method and methodology of this study.

4. Primary Results

In 1929, A. P. Brown identified three different types of canoe utilised in the Labadi district in the Greater Accra region of Ghana which are *fa lele*, a craft about 19-feet long used for inshore fishing with bottom-dragging nets; *Tjani lele*, a craft about 24-feet long used for beach seining; and *Ali lele*, a craft between 23- and 25-feet long used for deep-sea fishing using the large herring drift nets. These canoes employed motorization in the form of outboard motors from 1959 onwards, which have proved popular through to today. The canoes discovered in the three study sites of Cape Coast, Elmina, and Biriwa also come in different shapes and sizes, with some quite big while others are small. According to the participants, it takes between three weeks to two months to build a canoe, depending on the size, and these canoes can accommodate between five and twenty people. The canoe construction involves different artisans, from carvers to carpenters to painters and symbol writers, accordingly. Unsurprisingly, all the actors in the canoe construction field were men, as reflected in the following narratives:

Without us, there is no way canoes can get onto the sea. . . . Also when the canoes are faulty, we men are the same people who repair them. We are even the people who identify the type of wood to use to ensure that the canoes balance on the ocean. It is lot of hard work ooo. (Wofa Essoun, 48 years, male, Biriwa)

Our (Yaa Oduro and Ansah's) observations on different days and times at the two canoe-building sites at Biriwa and Cape Coast-Ola never captured any woman being involved in the building process. Men are the principal artisans and professionals in the canoe-building process, and they also have male apprentices to assist:

I started this work when I was 15 years. Starting early was good for me because I learnt so many essential things that might escape older apprentices. I graduated from apprenticeship after 6 years and has been on my own since. . . the truth is, this work is very difficult because it demands much manpower and determination and the lazy one can easily give up. I believe that is why women are not in the industry. . . I started as a carpenter and later learnt carving, painting, and designing, so I can do a lot of things on one canoe. (Uncle Ato, 55 years, male, Ola-Cape Coast)

Both Wofa Essoun and Uncle Ato's gendered messages underlie some of the reasons why women may not be found in the canoe building industry, since to them, the industry is energy exerting and requires serious manpower. This sentiment coheres with our earlier reflection on the fact that patriarchies often situate women in heteronormative worlds where they are constructed as a weaker sex, affected by the biology of child rearing and menstruation. Some participants, for example, also attributed the absence of women in the canoe industry to the mobile nature of the business, especially for married women with children. It was assumed that because of marriage obligations in the patriarchal setting and the fact of women bearing the primary responsibility for childcare that women would not be able to participate in the mobility requirements of canoe building:

I think it will be difficult for women, especially married women to be in this industry because we move a lot to construct canoes, we don't stay at one place. . . Just last 5 days I was in the volta region, sometimes I cross the border to Togo, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone, how can a woman leave behind the family for this kind of job? (Kwesi Mensah, Male, carver and designer, 36 years, Ola-Cape Coast)

The fact that the canoe building industry does not accommodate women in Ghana (see Figure 2) does not suggest that carving, painting, and designing cannot be done by women. Rather, the gender discrimination in the quotes reflect powerful contextual realities, beliefs, local knowledge systems, and the gendered division of labour in Ghana and in some industries. A new materialism (i.e., Braidotti) approach to canoe building in Ghana would allow for the recognition of women as equally important and powerful contributors to the ritual and practical aspects of canoe culture. It would also allow for the public recognition of the unique embodied contributions that women make to the culture. They are, as we show next, priestesses, ritual elders, and beings culturally imbued with the power of fecundity and productivity.



Figure 2. Man at work on a canoe, Cape Coast, Ghana. Source: Yaa Oduro, 2023.

Assimeng [49] explains that Ghanaians subscribe to African supernaturality as well as the precepts of Western Christian modernity. In pursuing the former in canoe building, Ghanaian men enact masculine rituals to fell trees (believed to harbour deities) for canoe carving. One interviewee told us:

The trees inhabit deities so we are always led by traditional priests and priestesses who consult the trees and direct us on the kind of rituals to perform to propitiate it before we can fell it for a canoe. (Uncle Akon, male, 48 years, carpenter, canoe building yard, Biriwa)

Another added:

I have designed a canoe for a Methodist, Apostolic, Roman Catholic and even someone with the Twelve Apostles faith member. However, these people believe that the trees used in carving the canoes contain deities or gods, they therefore invite the akomfos (traditional priest or priestess) to summon the deity through a series of incantations. According to them, the deities sometimes direct the canoe owners on how to carve it, the colours to paint it, the designs and/or symbols to inscribe on it and sometimes even the colours they despise. That is why you sometimes come across canoes with symbols such as snakes, crow, tortoise and the like. They depict the emblem of the deity which have implications for fish catch so far as the owners observe the likes and dislikes of the deities and perform all required rituals. . . also remember the sea is a god so all these beliefs and rituals have implications for fishing. (Ato Kwamena, male, designer, 38 years, Biriwa)

On the relationship between rituals and fishing, another canoe carpenter who doubles as a designer observed:

I am a Christian, I attend church. Despite my Christian values. I don't reject any offers even if it comes from traditionalists (abosomfo) since it is my work. I am very professional. On several occasions, some canoe owners ask me to pour libation to appease the gods inherent in the wood before carrying out my work. They also consult the okomfo (traditional priest) to know whether the tree and wood is male or female. The gender of the wood determines the pacification to be carried out. On three occasions, I was told not to have sex with a woman prior to touching the canoe to work on it. (Kojo Papa, male, 55 years, carpenter/designer, Biriwa)

Unlike the canoe-building space, which was heavily male-dominated, the local knowledge systems and ritual space included women. As we show next, women served as priestesses (see Figure 3) and were involved in many rituals and consultations for bumper fish harvests. The latter expresses dualistic gendered beliefs: men are the primary actors in the public domain regarding canoe 'management' and are the ones involved in the cultural and strength requiring activity of canoe building, whereas women are part of the ritual actors and are expected to perform supernatural acts regarding fecundity and productivity such as the securing of bumper harvests and big sales of fish stocks.



Figure 3. Female traditional priestesses (dressed in white) in their regalia and in pensive mood waiting to perform rituals as part of the Fetu festival in Cape Coast Source: Yaa Oduro, 2023.

Regarding women, canoe culture, and ocean governance, women do not fish in Ghana; rather they are tasked with fish processing and sale. However, and as we argue here, women are involved in canoe culture in various ways. Objectively, the men interviewed associated gender segregation in the ocean domain with the persistence of ICH as expressed in myths and beliefs regarding the gendered nature of the sea itself. Others also assigned pragmatic reasons such as the challenge with hygiene practices such as menstruation and its management on the high seas, and even places of convenience for women while at sea. Men interviewed felt that the 'weaknesses of women', their 'fearful nature' and the rigorousness of the sea, as a godlike entity (*Bosompo*), meant that women could not easily handle being at sea.

The men related how they sometimes experience spiritual encounters at sea, especially at night, and that women would not be able to handle these frightful experiences. However, we discovered that although women do not fish, they do own fishing gear like canoes, outboard motors, and other ocean related assets. They also employed men to work for

them [39,59]. Some canoes carry interesting names and inscriptions. They are written in different languages and reflect symbols, animals, faiths, proverbs/sayings, clans, totems, and flags, among others:

The designs and writings are important aspect of canoe fishing that cannot be taken for granted. The paintings and designs give identity to the canoes as Ghanaians even in different waters outside Ghana and during disasters or accidents in helping to track them and for safety reasons. (Mena Anowa, female, canoe owner, 65 years, Elmina)

Women feature in these inscriptions as powerful beings or people to be feared, such as *'ena na onim nea ne mba be di'* (the mother who knows or feeds her children), *obaatanpa* (good mother), *'wo na wua, na wo ebusua asa'* (the mother is the bedrock of the family), *suro mbaa* (fear women) and *'obaa akoko nin'* (an assertive woman) among others. These writings reflect Akan cosmology, specifically Fante worldview, matriliney, and a reality where children trace their ancestry to the mothers' line and belong to the mothers' clan (*ebusua*), although this descent system sometimes contributes to irresponsible fatherhood by some Akan/Fante men who see their children as belonging to the mother's clan, and therefore shirk their responsibility to the maternal uncles or mother's brother(s). The selected canoe inscriptions are gendered and reflect the matrilineal kinship system of the Fantes and the key position of the mother in that cultural domain.

Other gendered roles performed by the women in canoe culture and ocean governance in Ghana related to their roles as traditional and/or fetish priestesses. Traditional or Fetish priests and priestesses are persons who serve as mediators between the spiritual/sacred and profane or ordinary worlds in Ghana and most West African societies [86]. They are both men and women who are selected by divine call by the gods through possession known as *'akom'* (in Akan/Fante). Few of them, however, are selected by the elders of cults or shrines and trained over a period of three years with strict taboos and prohibitions including abstinence from sex, alcohol, and other moral vices to enhance their spiritual powers and growth [93–95]. These Fetish priests and priestesses serve shrines of tribal gods, community gods, family gods, and national deities, and in the case of this paper, these were priestesses serving community gods in Cape Coast and Elmina. The gods are known among the Akans/Fantes as *abosom* (plural) and *obosom* (singular). The *abosoms*, or gods, are seen as God's creation and believed to be in existence since creation. The Fetish priests and priestesses who are their attendants are therefore held in high esteem in the Ghanaian society, though their recognition and respect have been impacted by social change and foreign influences including Western religion, specifically Christianity (See Figure 4). Women and the fetish priestesses were observed offering support through clapping and dancing during the regatta and canoe rowing competitions among the Asafo groups during the Fetu and Bakatue festivals of the people of Cape Coast and Elmina. In fact, these priests and priestesses perform both ceremonial and religious functions with rituals and sacrifices to propitiate the gods.

The gender dynamic is also reflected in that the canoes are also exquisitely painted in a variety of colours informed by the owners' interest, directives of the gods/deities and their support and allegiance towards other countries to the point of hoisting their flags, football teams and political parties. These suggest that although canoe culture is locally embedded, it is also globally oriented, and is thus an artifact of popular as well as masculine intangible culture. One of the interviewees explained, 'I paint and design canoes with football team colours such as Chelsea, Barcelona, Manchester United, Kotoko, Hearts of Oak all based on the owners' support for these clubs.' In this regard and as argued earlier, canoe culture encourages local intangible cultural heritage, and it reaches outward to express a universal cosmopolitanism.

It is also expressive of a dynamic gendered identity and interaction in coastal Ghana, as expressed in this voice:

I paint and design canoes with football team colours such Chelsea, Barcelona, Manchester United, Kotoko, Hearts of Oak all based on the owner's support for these clubs. Some

are also political party colours. (Emma, 26 years, male, canoe painter and designer, Ola-Cape Coast)

Another added:

The other advantage of the canoe painting is that it protects the canoes from the vagaries of the weather and sea and therefore prevent it from spoiling easily. (Ama Mensima, fish processor, 45 years, female, Elmina)



Figure 4. Canoe with Religious Inscription. Source: Yaa Oduro, 2023.

5. Discussion

Both the primary and secondary data in this article shows that gendered heritage in Ghana is of enduring value to ocean sustainability. These findings on gendered contributions echo the findings of Gissi et al. [7] and Michalena et al. [8], who assert the importance of women in ocean care, as well as the significance of including women in ocean management processes. The case study offered in this article further enriches these contributions by foregrounding the realm of spirituality in shaping gendered relations with the sea [96] as well as the agential capacities of water. In this regard, the case study encourages analysis of transmaterial relations [97] in the ocean economy and the role that cultural and spiritual objects can play in shaping human-ocean relations (see also [83]). Thus, by adopting a more gender-inclusive approach to ocean care, the Ghanaian government can advance not only the principles and practices of inclusivity [3,12], but also attend to the issue of the spiritual domains of ocean care, and by intervening to include gendered ocean care, diminish epistemicide [98] and abyssal thinking [99] in ocean management. In brief, the government can, by being more gender inclusive, achieve the important decolonial goal of asserting local forms of worlding [100] which can, inter alia increase more interdisciplinary perspectives in ocean governance [12]. state that interdisciplinarity is critical, because it can help to ‘...address inequalities in ocean governance, to address exclusion of women in ocean spaces at both local and national levels, and to reverse declining ocean health that is causing a massive loss of marine biodiversity’. Equally, scholars in African feminist and ecofeminist domains can derive benefit from the presented case study by considering the application of ecofeminist, holistic perspectives to natural resource management (i.e., ocean management). In this regard, ecofeminist approaches to ocean care can benefit ocean managers who will be encouraged to perceive and mainstream more holistic and integrated perspectives of ocean care into ocean strategy and management. Similarly, this study can be used to improve gender inclusion in continental strategies for the ocean economy, since gender is mentioned in the Africa Agenda 2063 but the scope and mechanisms to achieve such inclusion needs to be spelled out via active working groups seeking to mainstream gender in ocean care. At the national level, there is need to refine gender empowerment clauses in the Ghanaian ocean management strategy, the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture Development, Ghana’s Fisheries Commission, and the Ghana National Canoe Fishermen’s

Council. This can be achieved via co-creation and modelling of ocean management scenarios that include and exclude a gender component. It is our view that gender inclusion in ocean care will produce a more holistic, decolonial, equality-boosting ocean management strategy and practice. The input of stakeholders from the institutions identified may foster dialogue on the empowerment of women in advancing an environmentally constitutive heritage practice and promote a more inclusive, heritage-sensitive, and gender-sensitive regime. Amani et al. [3] identifies the inclusion of women in marine and coastal ecosystems management as key to advancing both gender equity and critical ocean sustainability reforms. These findings may also be useful in mainstreaming gendered and culture perspectives in global strategy for ocean management. Regarding UN SDG 14, this study can be used to advance the gender dimension of Targets 14.2 (Protect and Restore Ecosystems) and 14.4 (Sustainable Fishing) as the study shows that women are important contributors to both UN SDG Targets.

The secondary and primary findings of this study also offer a gender-integrated perspective of ocean management and sustainability, urging consideration of global processes of power and inequalities, as well as the importance of a positioned perspective to heritage and ocean management. The study calls attention to the embodied nature of human life with the sea, especially women's embodied experiences of the sea and the fact of women's sexed identities, and how the latter affects their participation in the Ghanaian SSF sector. The fact of gendered spiritual relations with the sea is a unique contribution of this article, since none of the sources consulted indicated the importance of human spiritual relations with the sea.

6. Conclusions

Reflecting on the research findings and the potential use of the findings for sustainability scholarship and ocean managers, we can conclude that Ghanaians not only have a rich intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of potential universal value, but recognition of this heritage, and the inclusion of gender in ocean strategy and management (essentially ocean care), have the potential to dramatically improve equality and long-term ocean sustainability in Ghana. The ritual elements of canoe culture express not only the continued salience of local beliefs in shaping local realities and interactions, but they also articulate women's real and spiritual contribution to ocean care in Ghana and Africa.

By ignoring such cultural practices and the salient role that women have in them, there is a risk that the Ghanaian government will continue to subscribe to hegemonic and potentially exclusionary ideas of heritage. Moreover, there will be a missed opportunity to substantively change African ocean management practice. To achieve the latter, the Ghanaian government should (1) mainstream gender inclusion in its ocean management strategy, (2) prioritize the support of gender inclusion in its funding instruments for ocean care, (3) seek to co-create, with local fishing cooperatives, an SSF sector that is inclusive of women, (4) practice inclusivity in its working groups for ocean care, (5) support the education of women in the ocean economy, and (6) actively contribute to current, global discussions on UN Ocean Decade Actions, especially the work of Working Group 10, which seeks to implement the UN Ocean Decade Actions concerning improving humanity's relationship with the ocean. In brief, inclusion is globally and increasingly considered as key to democratic and progressive ocean management. By mainstreaming gender into ocean care, the Ghanaian government will not only seize opportunities to engage with a gender sensitive, endemic, and environmentally conscious ethos, but, and as Torell, Bilecki, Owusu, Crawford, Beran, and Kent [101] argue, the government will positively contribute to the improvement of its ocean policy environment. Much attention is now being given to gender inclusion in fisheries (as exemplified in the Ghanaian Fisheries Sector's National Gender Policy and Mainstreaming Strategies and the many sources cited), and more and urgent attention is also required regarding the positive role that gender-sensitive and gender-embedded cultural analysis can play in advancing an inclusive and decolonial ocean management.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: G.Y.O. and R.B.; methodology: G.Y.O., J.W.A., and R.B.; validation: G.Y.O. and J.W.A.; formal analysis: R.B. and G.Y.O.; writing—original draft preparation: All authors noted; writing—review and editing: R.B. and G.Y.O.; funding acquisition: G.Y.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) (Grant Ref: NE/S008950/1) and the South African Department Science and Technology (DSI) at DSI-NRF UID 129962. The APC was funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) (Grant Ref: NE/S008950/1) and DSI-NRF UID 129962.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Nelson Mandela University Ethics Clearance number H23-HUM-SA-009.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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