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# Fufuo, Dreadlocks, Chickens and Kaya: Practical Manifestations of Traditional Ashanti Religion

Jerusha Rhodes

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**FUFUO, DREADLOCKS, CHICKENS AND KAYA:**

**Practical Manifestations of Traditional Ashanti**

**Religion**

**Jerusha "Nana Ama Asantowaa" Rhodes**

**C.S.A.-Ghana: Arts & Culture**

**Spring 1996**

**Bishop Peter Akwasi Sarpong, Catholic Bishop of**

**Kumasi**

## ABSTRACT

This paper is the product of three weeks of research on the practical, daily manifestations of traditional Ashanti religion. It briefly examines two major historical trends in the study of traditional religion: traveler's accounts/sensationalism and theoretical theology, which focuses on the cosmology and epistemology of traditional religion. It proposes that there is a vast and extremely important area which both of these trends overlook. This is the temporally and spatially contextualized practice of traditional religion. This lack in the field of religious study serves as the basis for justification of my study which focuses on the actual daily life of the okomfo' in Ghana in 1996, and how this life is different from the life of an average person. It explains the type of methodology used and this methodology's appropriateness to the study of the daily practice of traditional religion. It then presents a series of short stories, which plainly illustrate how everyday events are intertwined with the religion, and how Nana Asantowaa rationalizes her world. In conclusion, the paper challenges the clear distinction between the "sacred" and the "secular" and proposes a future study which would delve deeper into this aspect of practical traditional religion.

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## INTRODUCTION

Such scholars might uncharitably be compared to flies crawling on the outside of a goldfish bowl, making accurate and complete observations, measuring their scales meticulously, and indeed contributing much to the knowledge of the subject, but never asking themselves and never finding out how it feels to be a goldfish.(Idowu, 1973, p.5)

Traditional African religions, those religions, which pre-dated Christian and Islamic influence and which now intermix and co-exist with Christianity and Islam, have been a subject of interest for many centuries. Whether it be what Idowu(1973) calls "casual observations...by the outsiders" which lent "spice" to stories of distant lands or the insider's perspective on his or her own religion, a major component of religion has been overlooked and ignored. The "casual" observers relayed the bizarre practices of traditional priests, but the rest of the traditional priest's life was ignored in the interest of sensationalism. Also the accounts, due to lack of depth in their observations were not concerned with the ideas or rationales which stimulated those actions. This lack of insight is obviously connected to the general belief that Africa was a "dark continent" without capacity for rational thought, never mind actual religious institutions. I would consider these researchers and their findings to be the equivalent of postcards today. The phenomenon may be documented in great detail, but the insignificant blurb on the reverse side comes no, where near to a truthful explanation of that phenomenon.

The insider's perspective on religion has also not presented the whole picture. Many of them, along with the majority of

modern scholars, have concentrated on the cosmological or theoretical facets of religion. With traditional African religion, this has led to a discussion of the religion based on epistemological categories, such as the high god, the lesser spirits, the ancestors and the priests. These agents have then been contextualized in social structures such as birth, puberty, marriage and death.(Sarpong, 1974) The benefit of this sort of research is that it does not allow people to mistakenly believe that traditional African religion has no rationale. Rather it shows how that rationale is embedded in the rites of passage of every society. The rites of passage are "events" which attract mass attention and group participation, and therefore it seems obvious that they would be rationalized under the institution of religion.

What the traveler's account and the theoretical account both lack is a concentration on the micro-scale of daily religious life: how the traditional priest lives from day to day in the present time. What I mean by this is how does the priest LIVE? This answer to this question encompasses the spectacles that enticed the traveler writers, the theory which modern theologians and philosophers have extrapolated upon and the rite of passage which are common to all humans and are easily influenced by religion. In addition this question asks how the priest sleeps, dresses, walks, eats and gets to town. This question also asks how the priest is different when he is performing his specialized role of prophet and healer from when



he is "just living." I would argue that the time when the priest is "just living" is not separate from his specialized role, and that all activities in the priest's life are influenced in some capacity by the fact that he is a priest. This is not to say that all moments in the priest's life are spectacular or "sacred", but rather that the division between that which is "sacred" and "secular" is not a distinct reality. The priest does not clock out, like a factory worker, at the end of the day. Therefore being a priest is a way of life, which needs to be documented in all of its ordinary and extraordinary moments.

The lack of study or documentation in this style has led to a perpetuation of the idea that traditional African religion is a "traditional" structure which is out of context in modern times. Researchers seem to have shied away from contextualizing traditional religion in modern times and places because such a contextualization calls into question the validity of religion. It does so because it questions the notion of religion as a static and rigid structure, which needs to be preserved. (Idowu, 1973, p. 12) The truth is that no religion is static; it is dynamic and changing. Even if the basic truths stay the same, the physical manifestations of those truths change with technology and time. A result of such decontextualized accounts of religion is the misconception that traditional religion was something practiced in the "darkness" of pre-Christian and pre-Islamic influence. In reality traditional religion co-exists with these institutions, and this co-existence is vital to understanding traditional religion today. Tied to this recontextualization of traditional religion is the fact that people involved in traditional religion are not disconnected from the rest of society; they are mothers, teachers and tro-tro drivers. The demand for a modern context does not mean that the history of traditional religion should be neglected,

but only that the humanity and reality of those who practice it today should not be forgotten either.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Despite the above critique, it is beneficial to briefly discuss some of the major works that have been written on traditional African religion. This will help illustrate my thesis and also acknowledge their contribution to the cumulative field of religious study.

I will start with Captain R. S. Rattray. Rattray wrote numerous books on Ashanti culture. *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (1927) deals with the material manifestation of religious concepts in a systematic and detail manner. From Kente cloth t proverbs to prayers and libations, he substantiates his claims and illustrates his subject matter clearly. This work provides the foundation of information on traditional Ashanti religion, and it is the main source which today's scholars critique and build upon.

My only problem with Rattray's work is that it is highly decontextualized. The book is about art and art is concerned with objects, therefore even the parts concerned with people such as the okomfo) are objectified. These "objects" are described in incredible detail, yet they seem to be of a distant past. Also Rattray's work was written in 1927, so even if he had contextualized the religion and art within the historical and temporal realm, it would not be completely applicable today. Ghana has seen the colonial period at its apex and independence since Rattray wrote this book' and these political changes have been accompanied by ideological shifts which inevitably effect religion. Furthermore I also not mention the vast amount of technological changes which have

taken place since the 1920's These have changed life and interaction between people in general and in the realm of religion specifically.

Another book which is important to recognize as an example of the theoretical trend in scholarship on religion is J.B. Danquah's The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics (1968). In this work he concentrates on the manifestations of Nyame: Onyame, Onyankopon and Odomankoma (p. 30-77). Danquah's treatment of religion is highly systematized and analytical. I have yet to hear people differentiate between the nominal titles of Nyame in such a way. This is not to say that Danquah's conclusions are wrong, but to only juxtapose his ideas to the commonplace ideas and expressions of actual people. Using Danquah's book as an example, it is easy to see that another problem the theoretical approach to religion presents is that when ideas and concepts are completely removed from the actual context it is feasible to mold them into close replicas of other concepts. Danquah does this by Christianizing the manifestations of Nyame so that they appear similar to the Christian Trinity. In reality this may be true, but he supports it only in theory and without discussion of daily religious practices.

Theory also becomes the focus of E. Bolaji Idowu's African Traditional Religion: A Definition(1973). His book is for the most part a critique of the theories and techniques people have historically been using to study religion. He insightfully recognizes the necessity of trying to place oneself inside the religion and of using what he calls "imaginative sympathy, appreciative understanding, and ...experiential participation."(p. 19) Ironically enough, the majority of his work, with the exception of small fragments of the introduction and conclusion, does not do this. He instead shows how the study of religion, writing on religion and attitudes toward African religion have developed and

changed. This is incredibly valuable, but for the purpose of this paper it need only be stated that he does not write about the actual practice of traditional religion; He concentrates on ideas about the practice instead.

The above critique of three major works on traditional African religion is nowhere near exhaustive. It is meant only to be representative of the observation that the majority of research done on traditional African religion does not contextualize the practice in time and space nor the existence of the practitioners as a whole.

Finally, as a disclaimer, I have to say that the study of religion, as Idowu's book illustrates, is a cumulative process, and that it is only from the privileged point of reference that all previous scholars have created for me that I critique their findings and methods. Also, I by no means intend to say that the work of Rattray and the theoretical style of others should be discredited. It is vital to religion and to the study of religion. It is only that I have chosen to focus on a different facet in order to contribute to the field of religious study

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

Language is always an issue in the study of religion. It is very easy to translate words from one language another and lose the meaning in the process. Bishop Sarpong (personal communication, April 1996) rightfully points out that language and concepts are inextricably linked. In order to avoid this dilemma to a certain degree, I will use the Twi names for religious objects and people. I recognize that this method still necessitates a definition in English, but the definition that I will offer is not meant to be exhaustive of the term. I would hope that by using the Twi names it prevents the reader from

automatically assuming that the Ashanti concepts are equivalent to western/Christian concepts.

The following definitions are an amalgamation of many different resources, unless specifically stated, including writings, priest's terminology and my own views.

\*NYAME- God

\*ABOSOM- spirits

\*ATANO/NSUOM/ASUO- river spirits (McLeod, 1981)

\*BOSOMFO- priest/priestess of a bosom

\*OKOMFO'- priest/ priestess

\*AKOM- McLeod (1981) defines as the dance, which leads to possession, but it is the whole complex surrounding the capacity of a priest/priestess to become possessed and prophesize.

\*ADURO- physical or spiritual herbal medicine

\*MMOATIA- forest dwarfs attributed with extensive knowledge of herbal medicine

\*NNABONE- McLeod(1981) defines this as "bad days", Akwasidae is one.

\*BAYIFO- witch

## METHODOLOGY

My primary objective for the ISP period was to live with and study the daily, practical life of an Ashanti okomfoØ. I wanted to observe and participate in their life in order to better understand how the okomfoØ fits into Ghanaian society in 1996 with all the technology and Western influence.

In addition to living within this environment, I wanted to concentrate on how agency, power to cause events to occur, causality are attributed and to whom. I wanted to examine on reciprocity and the epistemological reality of the agents, both natural and supernatural, involved in traditional Ashanti religion. I, proverbially, bit off more than I could chew in three weeks. So my focus became the practical activities of the okomfoØ, and how and where those activities differed from the activities of others.

I planned to find one main okomfo, preferably a woman, to work with and to cross check the information I gathered with other okomfo. I met Okomfo, Boakye in Benim, a village located near Mampong in the Ashanti region, and did formal and informal interviews with him. This provided me with some initial information, but not a central informant. I also used a contact Christine Mullen Kreamer, at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., who put me in touch with Mr. Monney at the Museum Workshop for the Cape Coast Castle. He subsequently had me introduced to the priest and priestess who tend the Nana Fosu and Nana Tabire shrines. These formal introductions opened the

door for me to do comparative research between Cape Coast and the Ashanti region, but due to lack of time this did not materialize.

As fate would have it, I met the woman, Nana Efia Asantowaa, that I would spend my ISP period studying almost by accident. I was introduced to her in Mampong by Yemi. She came the following day to talk to me in Benim, and by the end of that day I was positive that I had found the woman with whom I wanted to study. With the ISP drawing closer, I went to Tano Odumasi to visit her and ask if it would be possible for me to come and live with her. She agreed, and the only plan was that I would come and that she would welcome me. This vagueness as to the specifics of my stay with her must be emphasized because it characterizes the entirety of my time in Tano Odumasi. I decided from the onset of my project that it was important to me that she be the one in control. I would add that it was probably inevitable that Nana (as I will refer to her from this point on) was going to be in control. Therefore in the interest of studying how her life really is, I decided to be as small of a stimulus as possible. I recognize that my presence was a stimulus and that I did alter her daily routine to a certain degree, but I intentionally tried to limit this influence. The method I used to do this was to state my scholastic intentions up front. She knew how long I would be there and what I needed to achieve in that period of time. I had faith that she would take my intentions to heart. En addition to trusting her, I had ever-lasting patience. As the words on the external wall of her shrine declare, ABOTARE YE,

Patience is Good! This is the slogan which characterized my every moment in Tano Odumasi.

The way I collected my data was through participant and non-participant observation and formal and informal interviews. I spent practically every hour of my ISP with Nana, so a lot of my information came from just listening to and interacting with her. I would go to town with her, meet her family, meet other okomfo, and do anything else even when it seemed totally unrelated to religion. In addition we held three formal interviews during, which I asked her prepared questions on earlier observation.

The formal interviews, as well as the majority of the informal ones, were conducted through an interpreter. Yaw Gyamfi acted as my okyeame for the whole ISP and interpreted for all three of the formal interviews. He would come to Nana's house on a daily basis to sometimes sit and do no interpreting ad1 day and other times to be my okyeame to the nsuom. In addition to Yaw, Nana's eldest son, Seth, who spoke English and served as an okyeame to the shrine would interpret for me. He would tell me stories about Nana out of his own desire, and he would also interpret directly for Nana. Finally, Nana speaks limited English, and three weeks of hearing practically nothing but Twi allowed me develop a small ability to communicate. So miraculously it was possible for me to understand some of what Nana was saying to me in Twi in the last few days of my stay.

I would observe the people come to consult Nana and her spirits, but unfortunately the level of secrecy was so high that



I was not allowed to actually sit in on consultations. What I benefited from was that the secrecy that exists around Nana's shrine is not a sneak-to-the-okomfo)-under-the-mask-of-darkness type of secrecy. It was instead a sort of secrecy, which was preserved through a blurring of the distinction between social visits and "business" visits. This allowed me to interact with her "friends/clients" in some capacity, and therefore to make basic assumptions about the type of people who came to her. I supplemented my observations in this arena with direct questions to Nana about the people who came for assistance.

Finally, as far as my methods for collecting data are concerned, I would not be lying if I said I ate, drank and slept her lifestyle. I ate fufuo, kenke, banku and anything else given to me, drank the water, and slept in her bed with her. I submerged myself in a way, which was only possible because of the fact that what I wanted to learn was very practical. Nana and I were friends, and we lived and worked together as such. This observation is not intended to mean that my study was not focused or academic; it was focused on being practical. This intimacy is one of the reasons I did not tape record or photograph a lot of things. My focus was not the prayers or objects of the shrine; It was her, and therefore these methods were inappropriate.

This obviously had an impact on how I recorded my information I did not record anything except a few minutes of very poor drumming at the Akwasidae festival. I did take

photographs, but they are not a systematic documentation of the ritual objects. I wanted to contextualize her in her everyday life, and my pictures reflect this. They are photos of her with her family, her cooking and her and I playing. (See Appendix) I believe that these photos are a better representation of my stay in Tano Odumasi, and also of her life. I also opted not to take notes manually during the formal interviews with Nana. I thought this was potentially threatening to our reciprocal relationship as friends. I did not see a benefit in making the situation seem like "studier" and "the studied." So I would retreat afterwards and recount the conversation from memory. I also kept daily journal in which I recorded any information I saw as relevant

It would be a lie if I pretended that my research methods had no faults. If the period of study or focus of study had been different they would not have worked. For example, I would have needed my own space in which to work and think. Another issue is that because I did spend so much time, day and night, just living Nana's life with her, there was technically no point at which my daily work with her began nor ended. There was not a lot of formality in the structure of when and what I would learn. This caused me a lot of frustration, but because I decided to limit the influence of my presence, I refused to ask her to set up a certain number of hours per day during which we would work. At times this decision made me want to manually remove my hair, but I was always reminded ABOTARE YE!

I realize that if I were to continue this study I would need

more specific goals, to interview more people in town and to further examine contemporary research in this area. I would also be less concerned with treading on sensitive ground because I would have more time to resolve any potential conflicts. As it was I was trying to establish a rapport with Nana, adjust to life in Tano Odumasi and learn something substantial about the life of those involved in traditional Ashanti religion all in three weeks.

The main thing I would do differently in the future is record data more accurately. I would record prayers and libation and then have them transcribed and translated. I would also eventually wish to photograph the objects, festivals and rituals of the shrine. Note taking during the interviews would also help with accuracy. The final area in which I would change by research methodology is by learning the language of those I am studying before I begin my research. The time delay that takes place during interpretation inevitably allows for mistakes and misinterpretation. No matter how good your interpreter is, they are always a third party and an extra stimulus. Also the general lack of ability to communicate is one of the most frustrating things I have ever endured. To not have a voice when you are trying to illicit well thought out and specific answers is painful. I am optimistic, but there is nothing harder than trying to show someone that you are genuinely interested and worthy of their time and effort if, on the linguistic-ability-equals-age scale, you are an infant.

## THE STORIES

### Dressmaking

Akwasidae, the forty-second day in the Ashanti calendar, had started the night before when we had drummers come to the house, but due to their incapacity to carry a basic rhythm we had let them leave around 5:00 AM in the morning. Akwasidae is a festival which is important to the okomfo, bosomfo' and chief within the Ashanti region. It is the end of the forty-two day's calendar, but from what Nana told me the importance to her is that it is the one-day upon which all the nsuom would come regardless of where they were. In the past, no one would go to work on Akwasidae; it was a day of rest before Christianity became dominant in Ghana. Many people would come to the okomfo, for spiritual and physical help. The okomfo would dance until the spirits came upon them, at which time they would offer prophetic insights into people's lives and help, akom and aduro, to those who had come in search of it.

This Akwasidae seemed far from that. It was almost 11:00 AM and only one person had come to consult Nana and Kaya, the asuo that possesses Nana. Shortly there after, two women, one holding an infant, walked through the entrance of Nana's house. At first I thought they had come for purely social reasons, but like the majority of Nana's "clients" there was another agenda in addition to socializing. In actuality they had come to consult Kaya. I did not observe their consultation, but later as I sat with them,

Nana held the infant and touched its head. She told me that there was something wrong with the child's head.

As the day progressed, other people came and went, but the two women remained. They sat and talked with Nana and helped her to prepare coco yam for lunch. At one point I was called by Nana to come and join them. I sat with them for a few minutes then Nana told me that I should go and get the piece of batik I had wanted to get made into a dress. She said her friend, the mother of the infant, was going to sew it for me. I expected that the mother would take the fabric with her, but when I returned with the fabric, she had a sewing machine and scissors ready to go. In about an hour, I was again called over by Nana. The woman handed me a finished dress. As I was trying it on, I asked Nana how much I should pay the woman. She said "Dabi", and pointed to herself. I thought she meant that she was going to pay for it. Nana continued to say that the infant was sick so they had come to Kaya for aduro, and that my purple and white dress was the payment Nana and her shrine had accepted in exchange for the aduro.

### **Tro-tros & Buses**

One morning I was sitting drinking tea and Nana came and sat down next to me. Like usual, we began to talk in our broken Twi and broken English. I noticed that she had about six centimeter long incisions on both of her arms above the elbows, so I asked her about them. She told me that they were medicines that had to

do with the spirits in some way. This was one of the moments I really cursed myself for not being able to speak better Twi. She expanded on her original statement by saying that they were medicines given to okomfo' who were possessed by the spirits. She also showed me other scars on her wrist and face. Then she pointed to a roundish scar on the left side of her chest and said that the medicines, which were placed there caused her to feel pressure in her chest. She described this pressure as not being' able to breathe. This feeling is not always present, but rather it acts as an alarm of sorts, which alerts her to impending harm. She offered two examples of times when she felt this. One time she was about to get on the tro-tro from Tano Odumasi, but she did not. The tro-tro crashed because the axle broke. The other time she was attempting to go to Accra, and the bus she did not get on crashed and burned and the majority of the people died.

### **Child's Play**

Nana has four children. The eldest does not live with Nana, and Nana does not talk about her. All Nana told me is that she cannot remember the last time she saw the girl. The other three, Seth, Linda, and Paa Kwesi, live at the shrine, despite the fact that Nana emphasizes the fact that her "business", working with the spirits, requires a clean and quiet environment. In addition to her own children, there are inevitably at least three extra children hanging around the house. These children do typical children things, but they do not in any way seem to

disturb Nana's "business."

On innumerable occasions I have also seen the children enter the actual shrine. Sometimes they are on an errand for Nana, but at other times it is of their own accord. When I questioned Nana about this, she said that children are innocent and therefore if they have no evil intentions they need not fear or stay away from the shrine and house. She was quick to point out that there are some children who will not enter the compound, never mind the shrine because they are abayifo, witches.

Another explanation she gave for why the children would go into the shrine is that there was a time at which the mmoatia who lived in the shrine would conger toffee, thus tempting the children to come in and play with them.

This is very different from what I observed at Okomfo Boakye's shrine in Benim. The children would stop dead at the path, which lead to his house and shrine. They were obviously scared. Of what I am not sure. All I know is that this fear was non-existent in Nana's shrine where I sat with four young children as they played sporadic rhythms of the drums used in festivals and to summon Kaya.

## **Dreadlocks**

Nana has dreadlocks, as do all priests of the nsuom or atano. These okomfo are not permitted to cut their hair, and they must let it clump together into dreadlocks. It is a mark of identification which proclaims blatantly that the person who

wears dreadlocks is a priest or priestess.

Nana on many occasions would complain to me about wanting to walk down the street inconspicuously. She said she could cut her dreadlocks off but that if she did she would have to hold a large festival, sacrifice a goat and pay money to all the other okomfo) and bosomfo, in attendance. Since this was not an option, she was forced to retain her dreadlocks. Although she did complain about them, I believe that she carried them with an air of pride, like a sort of crown. She in no way tried to hide or de-accentuate them, and only occasionally did she wear a scarf or hat.

One day Nana asked me if there were any "rastas", as she calls people with dreadlocks, in the United States. I responded by saying that there were people with their hair fashioned the same as hers. She was not satisfied with my response, and rephrased her question by asking if there were any okomfo' in the United States. The importance of dreadlocks in Ghanaian society as a symbol and piece of regalia rings clear.

### **Men, Husbands and Marriage**

One thing that is blatantly obvious about Nana's life is that she has no lack of male friends. The majority of the people who come to visit and to ask Nana for assistance are men. These men range from businessmen to x-husbands to men soliciting her hand in marriage to Christian priests. I do not mean to imply that there is anything sexual about these relationships, but



statistically the majority of the people I observed at Nana's house were men.

Nana has been married twice, She divorced the first husband because he did something of which the nsuam did not approve. Nana is sensitive on this topic, and I never had the opportunity to meet him, so I do not know the specifics of this incident. Her first three children, one of which, died, are from this marriage. The second husband, Paa Kwesi's and Linda's father left Nana because, as she says, he was jealous of all the men who me came to her for help. I met this man, and in his presence she referred to him as "crazy." In addition, Nana insisted upon calling me her "kunu", husband. She told me that if any men talked to me, I should tell them that this was so in order to scare them away.

Nana also told me that six months ago she had been ordered by the river spirit to marry a particular man. She would not tell me who this man was, but only that she had refused to follow the dictates of the river spirit. This deviance has lead to her present status. She has offended the nsuom, and this has effected her life because the number of people who come to her for help has declined. In order to atone for this offense she has to offer a sheep and white cloth to the river spirit. She is in the process of trying to sell her VCR in order to get money for this ritual, but so far the highest offer she has had is 250,000 cedis and she is determined to hold out for 300,000 cedis.

## **House Help**

At this point in time only Nana and her three children live at the shrine. They do all the cooking, cleaning and other miscellaneous work that needs to be done. Nana does some weeding of the maize and cassava, which grows directly around the compound, but the majority of it is done by the eldest son and other children from the town.

In a conversation one day about the things Nana could not do because she was a priestess, she told me that she could not go to farm. Therefore her extended family members farm the land around her house. Her explanation for this was that she could not carry anything on her head. She said that if she placed anything upon her head, it would begin to vibrate and her neck would jerk about until it had fallen off. She offered to show me, but I told her not to because she is perpetually complaining of the pains in her neck. I did not want to exacerbate this.

Nana also told me that in the realm of doing house work, she was spoiled to a certain extent. There was a time when she had eight women living with her and doing all of the house work. They were her "slaves." They were witches that were caught by the river spirit, and they were forced to be Nana's "slaves" until they could be changed back into normal people. Next to the shrine door, on two nails, hang the scarf's and beads which these witches wore as they flew at night and victimized members of the community. The shrine claimed these items when the witches were captured.

Today these women are gone, and Nana herself cuts and peels cassava and plantain with which to make fufuo.

### **Paa Kwesi's Birth**

Paa Kwesi is Nana's youngest child. Ever since my first day in Tano Odumasi, I have noticed that she constantly calls him "crazy." He also gets away with doing things that the other two children do not. He does not go to school. He stays at home without attempting to deceive Nana about his intentions he knows he can do so. He says that there is no reason for him to go because Nana never went to school.

One day Nana came to me and told me Paa Kwesi was a liar and that he would lie constantly. Therefore, I shouldn't pay attention to the things he said. She continued by saying that Paa Kwesi had been born on Akwasidae which is considered to be nnabone, a bad day, and this is why he behaved in such a fashion.

On another occasion the topic of Paa Kwesi's birth came up again. I was informed that on the Akwasidae that he was born, Nana was possessed by Kaya up until the point of delivery. She spoke of incredible pain and difficulty in the delivery, and said that Paa Kwesi had been unwieldy ever since. Nana makes no pretense of being in control.

### **Hearing the Beat**

I need not discuss the importance of music and dance in Ghanaian life. Nana's life is no exception. The radio is always

playing, and a large percentage of the time people are dancing. The first thing Nana does in the morning is turn on the radio, and it is one of the last things which is turned off at night. Music serves as a back-drop to almost all activities within her house.

The first time I was introduced to Kaya, UB40 was blaring in the background. When I was called by Seth to come to the shrine I thought about turning it off, and I found it odd that no one else did so. As it turned out it wasn't even an issue, and while I sat greeting the river spirit from Paga, I could hear the lyrics to "Red, Red Wine" bouncing along outside.

About four days later was the Akwasidae festival, so Nana and I hired the drummers from another shrine to come and beat the drums so Nana could dance. The drummers were attached to a shrine in Abraka where the okomfo' had died. They maintained that shrine while they waited for another priest to be chosen by the spirits. The first night, Saturday, the drummers had a rough time getting started. Eventually they created a rhythm and people, including some of the okomfo), started to dance. At what I consider the high-point of their playing, I was sitting next to Nana when she suddenly flipped forward off the bench, did two somersaults and landed on her hands and knees. She then got up and ran into the shrine. She appeared shortly there after wearing a doso, raffia skirt, a white shirt and carrying two knives. This river spirit did not speak, but made hand motions to people in an effort to communicate. The spirit then asked for

fire and started to dance in a circle. This continued for a short period of time, and then the spirit began to walk away from the drummers and seemed to be frustrated. There was an effort made to try to make the drummers play better, but it failed. This spirit entered the shrine and disappeared. Next, Kaya appeared in full Northern garb. It was not long until he began to complain of the lack of skill of the drummers. He made us promise to get better drummers for Sunday, and he left.

The drummers were so poor that not only did humans not want to dance, but neither did the river spirits.

### **Postcards and Houses**

Nana's house rests atop a hill in a fairly secluded area. The house is a C-shaped compound, but only half of it is completed. While I was in Tano Odumasi she was starting to put the frame of the roof on the second half.

The first day I went to Nana's house she showed me all of her pictures. Among them was a postcard of a priestess dancing with a pot on her head; It was Nana. I thought it was wonderful until she told me that the people who took the photo had made it into a postcard without her permission. She received nothing from the sale of it. The people who took the photo were a family from Holland. The father and the daughter, Mellow, had stayed with Nana in 1990, and Mellow had become a sort of okomfo'.

After the postcard was printed and Nana found out, the family sent Mellow back to Ghana to apologize. Part of the

apology was that the Dutch family would finance the construction of the second part of Nana's house.

### **Kosua ne Fufuo ne Konkonte ne Kraman**

My first morning in Tano Odumasi, Nana prepared breakfast for me. She made me tea and gave me some bread. As I was about to start eating she told me she was going to make me an egg in addition. She went into the shrine, and when she emerged she had an egg in hand. She fried the egg and served it to me on the piece of bread.

Another day when peeling cassava for fufuo, the knife Nana was using was dull and therefore not working well. She called Seth over and said something to him in Twi which I did not understand. Seth then went into the shrine and came back with a knife which Nana used to finish peeling the cassava. Seth promptly replaced the knife in the shrine.

Kaya told me through the assistance of an okyeame that if I ate konkonte and dog that I would be able to speak Twi fluently. Seth, as okyeame, challenged Kaya on this prescription. Kaya reconsidered his advice and went on to say that even he, a river spirit, can make mistakes. The following day Nana asked me about Kaya telling me to eat dog. I said that I knew this is what he had told me to do, and that if there was a guarantee that I would definitely speak Twi, I would do it. Nana said that she would not allow any dogs

around the house because Kaya liked to eat them. Kaya would sometimes demand dog to eat, and when Nana was

told she had eaten dog, she would vomit. Three Uncles I Did Not Greet

For a few consecutive days Nana and I had been trying to go and greet her uncle in town, yet every time we had gone he was not around. I wanted to greet him because on my first visit to Tano Odumasi I had met him at Nana's house and he had, for some unknown reason, given me 2,000 cedis. Little did I know when he gave me this money, but this man was actually the Okontihene of Tano Odumasi. Nana wanted me to go and greet him because he had given me the money, but more so because she wanted me to meet the elders of the village. I had asked when I arrived in Tano Odumasi if I should go and greet the chief, but she said that that would not be possible. She offered her uncle would as a substitute.

It was not possible for me to meet the chief because Nana and him are not on good terms. They will speak to each other, but in the past the chief had Nana summoned before the traditional court for "giving away Ashanti gold" to Mellow's family. One day when Nana was possessed by the river spirit she went into the Tano River, which lies across the road from her house. When she came out she had "gold", and she gave this to the Dutch family. The chief said this was treason, but Nana escaped any charges.

Nana has another uncle in Tano Odumasi that I did not greet on one of our many evening walks, we passed by his house and we

were called by a woman. Nana, who typically stops to talk to everyone, did not go to this woman. Instead she raised her hand in the woman's direction, quickened her walking speed and yelled "Tomorrow." I was struck by Nana's avoidance of this woman. The next morning Nana told me that the woman was her uncle's wife. She said that if I see this woman I can greet her and even talk to her if I like, but I should not talk to her for too long. I should tell her that I have a headache. I was puzzled by this, but Nana clarified herself by saying that the woman was a bayifo a witch.

I could not greet Nana's final uncle because he died before I ever met him. I attended his funeral on my last day in Tano Odumasi. This man was an okomfo' from Nkwanta. Since this was the first funeral I had been to in Ghana, it is impossible for me to compare it to the funeral of a typical person. Nevertheless, this experience was striking because when Nana and I went in the morning to console the family, Nana told me to go into the room where the body had been laid for the wake-keeping the night before. I agreed and asked if she would come with me. She said "no", and sent me in with another woman. When I returned I asked Nana why she did not accompany me, and she simply told me that "Kaya doesn't like it."



## **Rola Nut and Cigarettes**

Before I met Kaya for the first time I was told by Nana to purchase Brandy for him. This I did, and Kaya accepted it on

behalf of the Tano river spirit. Kaya explained, though, that since he was a Muslim he did not drink alcohol, but what he liked was kola nut and cigarettes. I took the hint and promised to bring him gifts. Therefore the day before the Akwasidae festival Nana and I went shopping and bought cigarettes and kola.

Previous to this shopping venture Seth had told me that he did not like the fact that Kaya smoked cigarettes. He did not want Nana's body to bear the brunt of any harm it caused. While we were shopping for Kaya's gifts, Nana echoed the same concern. She told me to buy only a few pieces of kola because she did not want her teeth to turn brown from Kaya chewing it. I followed her wishes.

Ironically when I presented these items to Kaya, he thanked me for everything except the kola. He said that I had done what Nana had told me to do, and that he would thank me when I brought the appropriate amount.

## **Fetching Water**

The main source of water in Tano Odumasi is a piped well, which is located in the center of town along the Mampong Road. In addition to the rain water, Nana's family

uses this water for their cooking, cleaning, and drinking. Nana also has a private well directly outside of her compound, which is used in dire situations.

Another source of water is the Tano River, which runs near her property and forms a small lake across the street. Nana only

takes water from this river once a year. This water is used in the shrine as one of many waters, which are placed in a small yellow bowl. This bowl is then used by Kaya to divine and prophesize. The water from the Tano is combined with water from a river near Paga, rivers in the Ivory Coast and the ocean at Accra. Once a year she will travel to all these places and "fetch water." Within the year's time the majority of the water from this bowl will evaporate or be given to people and then Nana will go a collect more.

She gives the water to people who come to her seeking help. If they are willing, they may enter what she calls a "relationship" with the shrine by taking the water. The power that the water gives that person is given in exchange for the performance of certain rites. One such rite is that the recipient of the water must, like Nana, rise early in the morning and before greeting anyone pour libation to the river spirits. In doing so they become a type of priest or priestess, and they are bound to Nana and her shrine. The extent and capacity of this relationship intrigues me, but as of now my knowledge is limited.

## **CONCLUSION**

Regardless of the genre of writing on traditional religion, historically the religions and the people who practice the religion have been de-contextualized. One form this lack of context has taken is precise phenomenological description without appropriate explanation of why the physical phenomenon exist. On the reverse side, traditional religion has also been decontextualized by an abundance of cosmological theory and sparse description of practice. Without context it is impossible to determine how traditional religions fit into a specific time period and place.

In order to completely bring the study of traditional religions back into their actual context, I decided to live with an Ashanti okomfo, Nana Asantowaa, in Tano Odumasi, for three weeks. The methodology I employed allowed me to observe the multifaceted character of her lifestyle. She is not only a priestess; She is a mother, daughter, lover and friend. It would be impossible for her many societal roles to be completely separate. Therefore, the focus of my study became the observation of where and when her role as okomfo became intertwined with the rest of her life. What I ultimately observed is that the line between what is "sacred" and what is "secular" is not

clear cut, and also that the distinction may be different depending on the context. In the story entitled "Child's Play", I tell of how Nana's children would play in the shrine at certain times. This is not to say that the children

were always allowed in the shrine. The point of this story, and the others, is to show that space and objects are not sacred of their own accord. Space and objects are sacred partially because of the context. For example during the Akwasidae festival no children entered the shrine even though there were many children at the house.

It is important for me to justify the choice of format for the second half of this paper, "The Stories." I decided that the most practical and contextualized way to present the data I had collected was to pick a few of the many experiences I had with Nana and recount them as illustrations. This contributed to the choice of the simplistic writing style, which twists between stories and journal entries. I thought it was important for the reader to hear Nana's words. In order to signify this I repetitively used interjections such as "Nana said" and "Nana told me." This is to differentiate between information I was told and information I inferred. These stories concentrate on what I was told and on the context in which I was told that information. Another reason for the style of presentation is that from three weeks of research it was impossible for me to make any substantiated theoretical or analytical conclusions. I had only begun to open up the doors into Nana's

life. Therefore it would be ethically wrong of me to use her life to make vast inferences about the practice of traditional Ashanti religion in modern times.

This brings me to the discussion of a possible future study in this area. There is something very important about the dichotomy of "sacred" and "secular." A comparison of these notions in Christianity, Islam and traditional African religion may yield interesting insights. An investigation of this sort should ask how is space used, what is sacred space, and how does space become sacred? These three questions could also be extended to sacred objects.

As the entirety of this paper has tried to caution, no studies of traditional religion should be at the expense of the contextualized reality. Theory is one thing, but it is not ~ en that real life fits into the perfectly controlled framework of theory. Idowu (1973) explains that religion practiced by living people is alive, and therefore like all living things it has the capacity to metamorphosis; It is anything but static. Idowu even goes as far as to say

It is of the utmost importance for the scholar to realize that religion is living and organic.

Dead or extinct religion is dead and extinct; and the dead should be left to bury their dead. The religion that is worth studying is - religion as practiced by living men.(p.12)

The study of religion should be concerned with the entirety of these living people. "Believers", as Bishop Sarpong (personal communication, April 1996) calls all people who practice a religion, are not only the bodies which fill the pews on Sundays, kneel on prayer mats aligned towards Mecca or consult Kaya in Tano Odumasi. Believers are complex, multi-faceted people, and one of the best ways to understand a religion is to understand

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### Appendix



Above: Nana taking as usual, in front of her shrine

Below: Sign advertising Nana's business





Above: Tano Odumasi

Below: The path to Nana's House & shrine







Above: Nana's House

Below: Nana Family (Seth, Paa Kwesi, Nana, Linda, Akosua)





Above: Illegal Postcard of Nana

Below: Second half of Nana's House-The Apology





Above: Nana dancing in the Doso

Below: Me dancing in the Doso





Above: Nana, in the Doso, by the Tano river

