

February 24th 2006 Manhyia Archives
Nana Asabre Ababio II (Sumankwaa Mmamahene)

Prof: We are at the Manhyia Records Office with Nsumankwaa Mmamahene. But Nana I don't know your name, we should add it to the title.

Nana: My name is Nana Asabre Ababio II

Prof: Nana, thank you. As I mentioned, we are essentially learning about religious interactions. (We can speak Twi and/or English). As I said I want to be able to bring traditional religion into this work so that we don't only have data on Muslims and Christians. Muslims have been in Asante for a very long time now. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a Muslim community here. We go very far back together but it seems that since Christianity came, we have sidelined them and traditional religion, so we don't know the current relationship that they have if any. So, could you talk a bit about the history of religions in Asante and a little bit about their inter-relationship, then direct us to other sources where we can supplement the information you are giving us.

Nana: The little that I know is that Christianity as we know is a way that people in other nations worship God, and they brought it with them into our nation as Christianity, but it is the same God. And if you take Islam, *it came to meet us here*, then we welcomed it in addition to ours. Because it was different. There is some difference between Muslims and us (traditional religion).

The way they carry themselves, worship God even dress. But we always demonstrate that we have always known God. We knew God before the Christians and Muslims came here.

We worshipped God through our deities (rivers, rocks, etc.) but we knew God from the beginning. For example we say that "when you clear a path you would meet the river, meaning when you get there, the river is already there. So when you settle there, you have to always remember that the river was there before you. You name it so that it is never forgotten. And our ancestors usually traveled with their deities, and the deities would usually let us know the name of the river and everything about the land. For example, is it good for cultivation, is it safe from attacks etc. That is why Akans say that our chieftaincy is tied into our relationship with everything else. Meaning, the chief would order all these consultations.

It is the only the chief who can authorize such inquiry. But the initial settlement is usually sought by the Obaa Panin (Female elder). They are the only people who also make laws and sanctions about the rivers and deities. For example, when it is forbidden to go to a particular river and so forth. They make such laws to protect the river against abuse. For example, allowing the river to rest and flow naturally for even a day, protects it from over-utilization. Sometimes, the deity may also see something and advise the chief on how to avoid mishaps. Apart from that, sometimes where both the river and deity are equally recognized, they coordinate to protect the town against invasion and conspiracy. In the olden days, they would clear the town, gather all the refuse and weed, and dump it at the outskirts of the town, symbolically ridding the town of all evil and negative things. Those days they did not take customs and taboos for granted. That was before Christianity and Islam came in. One could easily distinguish between the customary laws of the chief, the river, and those of the deity. Everyone knew when not to go to the farm/forest, everyone knew when not to go to the river, and everyone knew all the forbidden items of the deity. For example, if the deity says that it is forbidden to have sex with a woman in the forest, and you

break that, there are sanctions, then cost of cleansing and atonement. A sheep would have to be slaughtered since you have defiled the whole state, then you are banished from the town. Most deities forbid stealing. For example, it is not stealing to pass one's farm on your way home and pluck a few leaves of *kotomire* [a kind of spinach], but it is stealing if you uproot the whole spinach plant and harvest also the cocoyam at the roots. Incest is also forbidden. It includes extended family members like cousins, nephews, nieces etc. Sexual intercourse with any blood relation is forbidden. Before Christianity and Islam got here we lived in harmony with all the rivers and deities. People listened to the Suman Bosom [spirit and symbol deity] and Asuo bosom [river deity]. Then the abosom brafuo also came in because they felt that the dominant [nature] deities were too lenient. Abosom brafuo [executioner deity] are very unforgiving and they are often invoked to kill or hard offenders. Usually people flocked to abosom brafo for protection because they would expose and sometimes even kill anyone that tries to harm you. They would first expose the offender, summon them for confession, and then demand some pacification and atonement rites to be performed, including shaving all hair. But all the bosom brafo work in support of the dominant deities. And we know this from communications between them through their various priests. Usually, the chief, abusapanin and Okyeame are witnesses. That is also how we develop our concept of saints. From such communications, we learn through the years from generation to generation what who did, and which deity played what role in the town or our personal development. For example, in Akan we say "tano adaworoma" (by the efforts of tano) or "tano, me te neso a masore" (a demonstration of reverence). And we sometimes even recant all the deeds passed down throughout the generations. It is similar to not knowing your great grandfather, but hearing that he built the very house you live in. So, sometimes you will say "Nana adaworoma, enne yewo dabere" meaning because of Nana, we have somewhere to sleep". In Akan that is your angel. If we had a concept of angels before the Christians came, Okomfo Anokye and Tweneboa Kodua would have been called that. We usually refer to them as *Osaman pa* [good ghost]. We usually don't recognize rapists and people who are banished. Sometimes we hear from these Nsaman pa [good ghosts] through oracles. They would instruct us to take schnapps to the family elder to pour them libation. What interests me the most about these libations is that we always start by acknowledging God, Onyankopon Twereduampon Kwame, then Asase Yaa, before all the deities and our Nsaman pa. Then after acknowledging all of them we introduce you and state why we are invoking them. We then say something like,

We summoned you all here today because, today your grand child Kwaku Akyeampong is at the height of his career in Ghana, everyone is watching him. He has brought a drink to summon and ask you for help. He is asking for protection from all kinds of evil, tragedies, disgrace, government amaneɛ [trouble], asantehene amaneɛ, nor any form of amaneɛ. Let him succeed in all his endeavors so that he can bring another drink to acknowledge all your help. Any bad person, who wishes that maybe professor Akyeampong should fail and be disgraced despite all efforts and his hard work, then let that be a curse upon that person.

Islam came with the Northerners; I think it was the Mossi group. What I have heard though is that Nana Safo Kantanka was very interested in Islam, *****

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The influences that I see are in the area of alms giving – the use of Massa and kola nuts. I heard that it was during the reign of Nana Osei Kwame that they started to have a presence at Manhyia.

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If you look at the word 'fetish', it is assigned inappropriately. Someone told me that fetish priest means a phony priest. That is very wrong. Okomfo is Okomfo. We have had priests and good priests. But the white man would have everyone thinking that all manner of priesthood in traditional religion is false.

The river Thames is revered, but they don't criticize that. They are all nothing but symbols. There are symbols everywhere you look. Look at Jesus and the cross. Now when you encounter a cross anywhere, you think of Jesus and church. The same way, the rivers, rocks and some trees symbolize different things. We don't know where they came from, but we know that they were created by God and we believe they are here for a reason.

All the deities know that they were created by God and you cannot forsake him. I can show you a shrine that has "God is king" inscribed at the entrance. Do you think they are doing anything bad? They help the sick, they help barren women have children and so forth. They just give you directions and predictions and then if you follow, your problems would be solved. They just prescribe certain rituals and specific things to do to divert bad omen. Some people were born into the shrine families, they never go to church and never wrong anyone, and so if we focus only on the judgment day, then where would those people stand? The Christians also make predictions which they call prophecies, they use olive oil, incense and other things for healing and they are not criticized, we use herbs in place of incense what is wrong with that? When we invoke the deities, we first ask God for help then they usually tell the person that "God willing and with God's help, he would be healed". I think the Muslims do the same; they ask God for help on your behalf. This tells me that we are doing the right thing. We are worshipping God appropriately, just differently.

But there are good priests and there are bad priests. These are just the facilitators between God and us and they can be good or bad. One thing that boggles my mind is some of the mallams; they think that they are so different and better. But they are merely imitating what Mohammed did in his days, performing miracles like Jesus did in his day and Okomfo Anokye too. Why else would they go all the way to Mecca just to throw stones? Why wouldn't they stay at home and pray to God? We all go through some rituals.

Prof: Okay, religious interaction. Let me ask you this question. The deities, has the number decreased over time?

Mmaamahene: the Asante deities, well, some date as far back as the war era of Osei Tutu I when most deity attendants were fleeing into the Asante kingdom with the deities. They all reported first to Okomfo Anokye. They were then interviewed and tested, if they passed then they were given a place to settle, then they in turn helped the war efforts with whatever powers they had. Some were very powerful and made very good predictions. That is why to this day some of the deities ride in palanquins and travel under umbrellas. They were elevated. They are the ones that are still popular to date. I know of towns in Asante kingdom where the deity of the town rides in a palanquin, while the chief of the town walks.

Prof: so you don't know what happened to the others.

Nana: Today we still look to the big ones from the wartime. For example Edwumam Dwemo, which is often referred to as Dwemo piesie, then Sewua Dwemo, Duase Te-Kwabena, Amantwea Bosie, Fumesua

Kobi, Mamfo Bosie, Chiraa te-Kwabena, Kukuro is also at Chiraa. But there are some deities that belong to families so we don't know if they are attended to or not. All these deities are still very active today. Right now, those that have become dormant, well, with the youth going to church, it is difficult to find good priests and attendants so those deities are lying dormant. But those that are active are still reigning supreme and you witness their majesty on festive occasions.

Prof: So all the ones you mentioned are still very active?

Nana: Yes. They are all very active. A deity like Tano has even multiplied. If you hear Te-Kwabena, Te-Kwaku etc, they are all derivatives of the tano deity. The Kobi also has derivatives like Kobi bakoma, and duana kobi etc. Then the river deities; sudanta, offin Abankro, tano, Oda, etc they are all very strong to date with derivatives.

Prof: How about the sea? There is no sea in Asante, but it is very vital to us.

Nana: Yes, we have Epo Abenaa. Because of where it is situated, it is the people around it who perform all the required rituals. For example, we know that the sea is female and was created on a Tuesday, (thus epo abenaa). We leave it up to the people who live near it. But we say that "if a river is big, it is not bigger than the sea". So we acknowledge its might in everything we do and invoke it accordingly when the need arise.

Prof: can you tell us about the nsumankwaa stool. How it originated and what its duties are.

Nana: Nsumankwaa is about and represents all the deities in Asante kingdom. When they were forming Asanteman, Osei Tutu and Okomfo Anokye toured the nation extensively in search of spiritual direction, guidance and protection. There was a deity at Kokofu known as Teatuo Kwagyan; it means when he aims the gun even without bullets or gun powder, it still shot and killed accurately. He is the one who started collaborating with Okomfo Anokye and they were convinced by his powers. Osei Tutu promised him nsumankwaa hene stool, but did not live long enough to put that into place. So when Opoku ware was enstooled he created the Nsumankwaa stool.

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So the stool was conceived during the reign of Osei Tutu, but was confirmed during the reign of Opoku Ware. So far, sixteen people have occupied the nsumankwaa stool. All the nsuman in Asante kingdom come under him. They all call on him first before they can see otumfuo or practice in the kingdom. So technically he is Otumfuo's physician. But when Agonahene is introduced into the picture then things change.

Prof: Agonahene?

Nana: Yes. He is an Omanhene and the occupant of the Okomfo Anokye stool. Osei Tutu created the Agona stool to honor his friend and partner for all his efforts and support.

Ques: Nana, would you please explain the difference between Nsumankwaa hene and Nsumankwaa Mmamahene. Thank you.

Nana: When the nsumankwaa came, it came as a paternal stool. It is a service stool; therefore it is the sons that support their fathers to serve. The Mmammahene serves as a gofer between all the deities that his father coordinates in his service to Asantehene. During special occasions, we lead the deities and their attendants in the procession, but Nsumankwaa here wears *data*, while Mmammahene wears only *danta*.

It is the Mmaamahene who works very closely with the deities. The Mmammahene must study and know their particular characteristics and appearance so that he would be able to identify them whenever necessary without asking them to reveal their identity. For example, some of the priests are possessed by numerous deities, so the Mmammahene ought to know which one is present during a trance. They also require and demand different rituals when they are invoked so Mmammahene must know all of them.

Some demand just a drink, some demand egg, some wouldn't do anything unless a dove is offered, a cat, a sheep, a cow etc. it is different from one deity to the next. There are instances when a particular shrine or priest can be possessed by many deities, they can usually be consulted for specific intervention. Because as in your education system where people study different things but specialize in one, so it is in traditional religion and oracles. In all, the various shrines are becoming more like a one-stop shopping center or a general hospital. Some are known for fertility, some are known for business success and others are known for just fixing physical ailments.

Ques: Are those the ones that are said to have third eyes? The traditional priests who handle different problems and can see things even when they are not in a trance.

Nana: Some assume that all traditional priests are witches. No, some are just gifted with keen intuition, some have other things (talismans) that assist them, and there are some who only 'see' things when they are possessed and in a trance. That is why people say that, an attendant/traditional priest should be obedient and subservient to the deity and they would develop a certain closeness that allows the priest to see things, even out of trance. The most powerful priests are the ones who just look at a patient and give prognosis even before the deity is invoked and asked. Because it may well be that it is even a taboo day to invoke the deity even in a life and death case, so it is important for the priest to be powerful even out of trance. Every deity has days for consultation and days when they just receive visitors. So if there is an emergency on an odd day, people still expect to get help. But there are some who start out powerful, start neglecting the deity and the deity in turn hibernates. For example, if a male keeps having sex on taboo days, or when priestesses visit the deity room (shrine) during their menstrual period, the deity abandons them and become invariably dormant.

In all cases, it is your cleanliness and respect for the deity that makes you powerful. You have to be very close to the deity. It can even tell you all you have done wrong or why he is going to kill you (while you are in a trance, possessed by him) someone would have to tell you when you come out of the trance. But if you have not been clean or obedient to the deity, no one would tell you.

Prof: It is alleged that Asantehene is the *Okomfo hene* (chief of all priests). So when an Asantehene dies, all such activities like spirit possession are suspended until a new Asantehene is enstooled.

Nana: Well, if someone says that all *Akom* are suspended when there is a break, I disagree. A hospital cannot close because a doctor is dead, right? The work continues. It is just out of courtesy, to

acknowledge the profound loss that something symbolic would probably be done just to illustrate the impact. Some shrines may opt to work sparingly, but they would. On the other hand, even if that is the intended practice, we do not usually feel the consequences for long because a deceased Asantehene is usually replaced within forty days.

Prof: So do they say that Asantehene is Akomfohene because he owns the land?

Nana: precisely. Every stool, every river and every deity in the Asante kingdom. That is why they say “*Osei Tutu Nyame kese*”. It means what he says goes. If everyone says left and he says right, it is right. If all say yes and he says no, it is no. he is the supreme. He is also referred to as ‘the head that dreams’ meaning no one has a right to dream besides him, it also means he is the most sensible person in the universe.

Prof: Thank you Nana. Now last but not the least, the goal of this research is to identify and study the various religious groups collaborating and living side by side. Can you direct us to an area where we can witness such collaboration or co-existence? Or can you tell us about such relationships.

Nana: since time immemorial, Muslims and traditional practitioners have worked hand in hand and collaborated on a lot. Don’t forget that whenever a deity gives you any item for protection, he directs you to a *Kramo* (Muslim) to get it covered in leather. Also, when you go to a *Kramo* for consultation and there are aspects that he feels *Obosomfuo* can help, we would consult with each other and discuss the best treatment for you. I can show you a few of such relationships between a traditional priest and a *kramo*. They attend each other’s festivals; the *kramo* would attend events at the shrine as a *kramo* and the *Obosomfuo* would attend functions at the *kramo* house as an *Obosomfuo*. It doesn’t surprise anyone. And the Imam, I mean asantehene’s Imam; he is the most powerful of them all.

We also have some *konkoma* people at *Nwoase* some are Muslims and some are not. They work with the *Kwaku Firi Bosomfuo*

Prof: So if we want to visit three such places for research, which ones would you recommend? To get a better understanding of the collaborations.

Nana: *kintampo/kwaku Firi, agona/Asaman Gadawu, ahenkuro/* (I will try and remember the name of the deity).

Prof: Can you tell us anything about the *Manhyia Nkramo*?

Nana: Nana Osei Kwame readily comes to mind. He actually brought them in openly and settled them at *Suame*. Their main assignment these days is to come to *Manhyia* every Friday and help Asantehene give alms (*Salaka*).

Prof: On Fridays, when you are doing the almsgiving rituals can I come and watch?

Nana: No, it is very private. They usually use the servants and attendants. But ideally, we should use very young children because they are the most innocent and clean.

Prof: Right now, who is Asantehene *kramo*?

Nana: Literally every Kramo in the Asante Kingdom, but the imam at Suame in particular. Apart from the Friday almsgiving, he also performs others tasks whenever necessary.

Prof: Nana Asabre, thank you very much.