

Feb 26th, 2006

Nana Boakye Ansah Debrah

Asokore-Mampong Hene (Asantehene Nifahene)

Prof: we are here today February 26th, 2006 at Dichemso, the residence of Nana Boakye Ansah Debrah, Asokore Mampong Hene who is also Kumasi Nifahene. We also have Nana Akyiakrom Hene. We are here to listen to anything you can share on religion and history of Asante.

Nana: Okay. I believe that Asantes have a concept of God, they believe in God. And we also have our deities through which we appeal to God. Around the time of Okomfo Anokye we fought with Dormaa Kusi. During the war, Dormaa Kusi was captured but Okomfo Anokye ordered that he should not be killed, rather transform him. So he became a *Kra dwareni* (soul cleanser - priest). Okomfo Anokye ordered a shrine to be built at Asokore Mampong and called it Osei Tutu Nyame Kesee. Rattray calls it the sky god. So when that house was built, Dormaa Kusi was moved to Asokore Mampong and whenever Asantehene "entered Odwira" (cleansing and atonement period), that was his last point of call. We would come there finally to be baptized and cleansed of all evil and defilement. How they knew that they were cleansed, I can't tell you but they have been doing it for centuries. The last time anyone was here to cleanse himself was in 1985. It was Otumfuo Opoku Ware II who came to be baptized at the Osei Tutu Nyame Kesee temple. I plan to restore it and make it a historic site and open it to the public. When the house was completed, Okomfo Anokye planted a sword near the temple; it is still grounded to date. After I have told you that I need to tell you about my belief in God. I believe, as the bible says, if God created man, then He created him in his own image. So I see God as a person. As we say in Akan: *onipa yi ye me nyame, me nhyia no 'a anka me nnim dee me ye* ("That man is my God, I don't know what I would have done if I had not met him").

In the same manner, we also say: *onipa yi 'a owo eho no ye me bonsam* ("That man over there is my devil"). They are both human beings, but it depends on the role they have played in your life. If it is good, then that is your God, and if it is bad, then that is your devil, very simple.

The way I see it, anyone who does good in this world is God and anyone who does evil and bad things is the devil. So since my enstoolment, I have vowed that whatever I do has to be good and well-meaning. No that I am perfect and would never do anything bad, what I mean is to make a conscious effort not to hurt anyone. I want to do things that would make everyone live comfortably. That is my mission. So everything I do goes on smoothly because I have good conscience. I have also heard some churches say that God works through humans. I agree in part because I haven't heard him anywhere. But if the same bible says that we are created in his image, then he must be a person like us. And if he is a person like us then he must be living somewhere, well maybe living everywhere.

Prof: You seem to have a position. It appears to be related to Christianity, and it also seems to be related to traditional religion, so what would you call yours?

Nana: Well, I call that serving God. As I said earlier, anyone who does good deeds is living in God's image. Let's use Asantehene as an example, in the six years that he has been around, he has done so much to elevate hardships in many areas and has made all of us proud. So when we

get up in the morning with the main objective of going to Manhyia to serve Otumfuo, that is our god.

Prof: Well, I have heard that In Asante all manner of service is through the chief or the king. It is said, “*Wo nni nyame, Osei na owo nyame*” (you don’t have a god; Osei is the one who has a god). When you look at every religion what baffles mankind is death – the enigma of death, the fear of death. So Nana can you tell me about the Asante concept of death. And would you please add your own personal philosophical perspective as to how you see death.

Nana: I have heard before somewhere that Jesus Christ is coming back and they describe the coming as sudden etc. I think they are talking about death, not Jesus Christ. All death has a surprise element. It’s quite recently that we even hear about planned deaths because of ‘mercy killing’ and euthanasia. Those are the only deaths that you see coming, other than that all deaths are surprising and scary. It also motivates you to strive to do better. I believe that is why people go to church and we think that there is someone who can help avoid some deaths that is why we go to church. Let’s assume that it is the Kramo (Muslim Mallam), the Christian priest and the traditional priest who currently stand between us and death.

If I am going to undertake something dangerous that could result in death, I could consult a deity and ask for their protection. They can give you a concoction or potion to drink and you immediately feel invincible. So you will not be afraid to die. In the olden days that is how they lived. There is a town near my town called Pakoso. Before any war, Okomfo Anokye would put some herbs together for bathing and everyone would feel invincible. They still have the pots and pans lying around over there. But most people died including some of those who bathed with the potion. And there were some who survived just because they were psychologically charged. We ask God for a bounty harvest, and then when there is a bounty harvest, we thank him for the abundance of food. The same way, when we return from war, we thank him for the protection. If I lean on God, I do so because death is very close by, that is why I am leaning on him. When you come into the world between one and thirty times and you have a list of things you would like to accomplish, consciously or unconsciously, and you accomplish them it should not matter when death comes. I believe that I have accomplished everything that I set out to accomplish so if death comes today, I would be ready. But my only concern is my children, they are very young and I would like to see how they turn out. I would like to take them along quite a bit to make sure that they are standing on their own feet, and then I’ll be fine.

Prof: I think what you are talking about is fulfillment. Do you mean to say that you have fulfilled your potential? So you are not particularly bothered with death because you have fulfilled your potential.

Nana: Yes, Exactly.

Prof: What is your perspective on life after death? I will tell you a funny story about chief Nuamah later.

Nana: Asantes believe in life after death. I’ve heard that our ancestors who suffered from persistent still-births would mark [scar] the baby and tell the dead baby, “If you come back, you

would stay". Well, I don't believe all that. I believe that when you die, that is it; you will not come back ever again. I see humans as they are, if you get shot, that is it, you are dead and gone. I have never seen anyone return. I may be wrong, it could be happening elsewhere, but I haven't seen it yet.

Prof: what you are saying is very close to the Christian position.

Nana: I read the bible from time to time. A very simple analogy. Look at the story of Adam and Eve. They had Cain and Abel; then Cain killed Abel. Then they multiplied without any explanation. Then before long God instructed Noah to build a ship and pick and choose some people, and then he destroyed the bad people with flood. After that sin took over again so God sent his son, to come and cleanse us from all those sins. Then at some point, this same bible says that Jesus would come again. So I ask myself, what for? To do what? So I don't believe that when we leave we would come back. People also say that the wages of sin is death, if so why do innocent five year olds die? We can substantiate the death of a thirty-five year old along those lines but not a newborn. And then the judgment, well I can understand. The same bible would tell you that the sins of Adam and Eve are upon the newborn that died. Well, if the sins of Adam and Eve have affected us thus, then why wait 'til we die to judge us, why don't we be judged now? I do not believe in life after death and I do not believe in any judgment after death.

Prof: Now I'll tell you the chief Nuamah story. Chief Nuamah and an Anglican priest in Kumasi were very close [early twentieth century]. The priest used to say that chief Nuamah is so intelligent that he would be surprised if he doesn't go to heaven. Chief Nuamah was sick for a while and his priest friend, fearing the worst, tried to baptize him. He objected quickly and explained to his priest friend that his mother and father were not baptized and therefore not in heaven. In fact he didn't know anyone who would be there and he certainly didn't want to go to a place where nobody he wanted to see would be there.

Nana: Okyeame Banahene is chief Nuamah's son. When I was enstooled I didn't know any history and I felt very handicapped, so I used to invite Okyeame Banahene here for discussion. One day he told me that if you plan to tell the truth in this house (Manhyia Palace) stay focused on that, but if you decide to do all inappropriate things like we do, stay there. There is no middle ground so don't flip-flop because when you die and go to heaven they would throw you out because you weren't one of them, and then if you go to hell they would also throw you out because you weren't one of them. The point I'm trying to make is that I agree with Chief Nuamah strongly because my father was very bad. I heard that he would tell my mother that he would be sleeping with a ghost so she should move out of the bedroom, and my mother would move out and he would bring another woman there. I don't think I would see him in heaven if I make any effort to get there.

Prof: Faith and religion are very important. Some are able to accept God. Religion is very much institutional. One can go to church faithfully for so many years and not have faith. Faith is understanding your own perceptions and convictions based on personal reflections. An indictment of religion is those who practice religion. You have faith in something; faith in a position. I want to label it properly, what should we call it? What would you call yourself? In English could we call you an atheist or a deist? An atheist believes there is no god. The deist

believes there is a God who even created the earth, but not the Christian concept of God who intervenes through miracles. So how should I call you?

Nana: Would it be humanist? I believe in humans. I believe people could make it [life] better or worse. I don't think anyone would come from anywhere to destroy the world; it would be destroyed by a human being. That is why the Americans are so serious about stopping Iran from refining the uranium. They know that they are capable of destroying the world.

A congressman went to Liberia during the Presidential inauguration, the interesting thing that he said was that if you want us to progress, then come and help us. It is not surprising for an Israeli president to ask America for help, the same way we can ask them for help and George Bush can just utter two words and it will be done. He can say something as simple as 'Ghana is developing at a very encouraging pace so let us help them with 1% (one percent) of our GNP. Everyone would rush to Ghana to help with its development. That is where I believe that if someone does that then that is our God.

Akyakromhene: so do you believe there is a god or not?

Nana: I believe god is a person. My uncle raised me, sent me to Canada throughout my education. So I invited him to Canada and really gave him a royal treatment. Then when he died I bore all the cost. He was my God.

Prof: Currently in Asokore-Mampong I believe you have a mixed community of Christians, Muslims and traditionalists; how do you relate to them? How do you bring them together? Are there occasions that you have to exclude any particular group?

Nana: I get along with all of them. As a matter of fact, just three days ago, Assemblies of God, they invited me. But their main purpose was to start a credit union so I explained to them what I know about credit unions and beyond that I contacted somebody to come and help them. Because I know the benefits of such efforts to the community. There are women here with barely ₵500,000.00 capital. It is not enough to support herself and a family. I even plan to buy shares in it, about 51% to be able to control it like a micro-finance scheme. So that is an example of a church doing something to benefit the whole community. Some churches only make noise to disturb and provoke other people. If I would agree, you have to be living on the church site else I will not allow it. Recently, before the Muslim Ramadan, they [Muslims] approached me that they do not have a mosque here so they would pray at home, but in order to summon all the members on time, they would like to mount loud speakers on a roof. I asked them how they would only wake up the Muslims without disturbing the Christians; if they can tell me how they would do that then it would be okay to use the speakers. Because the Christians would be angry. Jehovah Witnesses invited me and I went. I had given them six acres but they felt it was not enough to build a regional headquarters so they wanted to ask for the adjacent park to be added. I asked them to send an application to the committee. They did and the committee put out a notice with all the pros and cons of the site. They listed the benefits of the business that would come to the town and also listed the downside of losing the park where they could relax. They favored the economic benefits and the possibilities and did not object.

Prof: Are there any deities or shrines in this town?

Nana: At the moment, the deities in this town have all diminished. Even the first one I visited after my enstoolment is left in the bush. I am trying to see if I can fence and preserve it. Osei Tutu Nyame Kesse for example, I want to preserve it. I already told you that people who relied on fetishes are not realistic. If today someone says Osei Tutu Nyame Kesse has powers for any war effort, I would run away. I would preserve it to show that something happened before, not because I believe it still has any powers.

Prof: We have chatted quite a bit. Do you have any questions? I have done most of the questioning. Most people believe in the routine of life. They just follow the status quo because it is easy, but you are different. I have enjoyed this discussion very much. Thank you.

Dr Sey: I would like to know more about the spear that Okomfo Anokye planted there.

Nana: Well, I think that what Okomfo Anokye did was, wherever he performed a miracle or did anything significant he placed a sword. It was his practice.

Prof: can we go to Asokore-Mampong and take pictures?

Nana: Yes. There is only a little thing that bothers me. My predecessor never went to school and had no sense of preservation. Somebody broke the handle of the sword and they repaired it using a different handle. But since I came, I have fenced it.

Prof: We have taken pictures of mosques, church buildings etc. We would just like to take pictures of those places to give it a balance.

Nana: What intrigues me is the idea that you can do whatever you like and be baptized to get rid of everything. I find that very fascinating. And this was done in the 1700.

Prof: Thank you Nana.