

Date: 8 July 2008

Interview with: Elders of the Akonodi Shrine

Interview by: David Owusu-Ansah, James Madison University

Location of Interview: At the Akonodi Shrine House at Lartey (Akuapem)

Purpose of Interview: To hold conversations about the nature of the Shrine and its place in contributing to religious tolerance in Ghana.

Comments:

I visited Lartey on Monday 7 July to hold pre-interview conversation at the Akonodi Shrine and to make sure that I will be afforded the opportunity to meet with the Shrine Elders. Based on conversations that day, I was directed to return the next day, Tuesday 8 July 2008, for the appointment as Tuesdays and Fridays were the only appropriate days of the week for the gathering of all the elders of the shrine. The conversation below is the record of the visit on 8 July.

I arrived at the Akonodi Shrine at 9:00 in the morning and following a little waiting for the elders to gather the pre-interview formalities took place. I was not allowed to record any of this information. But, this involved a private conversation with one of the elders who instructed me of protocol issues--how much it costs to come greet the shrine (one bottle of Schnapps Gin; 200,000 Cedis or 20.00 New Ghana Cedis which is about \$20.00). To be granted an interview, allowed to record that interview, and to take pictures, I was required to present a second bottle of Schnapps Gin and pay an extra 50.00 New Ghana Cedis (about \$50.00). Once the required amounts and drinks had been provided, I was formally introduced to the gathered elders of the shrine and a libation was poured. I was not allowed to record the libation either. The interview formally started and recorded from this point on.

Interview Format:

- a) The format of interview was similar to a visit to a traditional chief's palace. The Shrine was often referred to as Nana, the standard reference of an Akan elder. The senior elder was referred to as Nana as well. Clarity is provided in the interview to ensure that Akonodi is identified appropriately when the term Nana is referenced.
- b) There is a linguist or spokesperson for the gathered elders. My questions will be directed at the linguist who restates them to the Senior Elder primarily and the rest of the gathered elders generally. There was usually a general conversation among the elders before the linguist was told a specific response.
- c) Lartey is the language of the people and though the people understand and speak also the Akan (Akuapem language), much of the responses to my questions were in the local Lartey dialect. The linguist however responded to me in the general Akan language.

Linguist: Dr. [Owusu-Ansah], we have completed everything [the initial pre-interview procedures] to allow us to start the questioning.

Q: One basic question I want to ask is who or what is Akonodi?

A: Akonodi is a spirit which came just like Jesus Christ was spirit. We know that Jesus Christ was born by Mary but Akonodi was not given birth to physically because it is a spirit.

Q: How long has Akonodi been here and why Lartey and not any other place?

A: For as long as we have been here, we know that it was our great grandfathers that Akonodi came to reside with so we do not know exactly when it arrived but we do not know any specific year that it arrived. What we know is that there are Akonodi laws that must be obliged.

Q: Let me continue from your answer. What are the rules and regulations that guide the worship of Akonodi?

A: The laws are very basic: it says that do not commit murder, do not steal, or do not take another person's wife just like the Ten Commandments. These laws regulate the worship and if you break the laws, [Akonodi Bosom] will punish you.

Q: So does this mean that the laws of the shrine are not the commandments of the Church but rather these are original laws of the Bosom?

A: The laws were there before the Christians came and therefore these are not [imitations of the] Christian commandments. So if you break these laws by killing somebody for example, Nana [Akonodi] will punish you. And Nana will not give you the free ride to steal from another person.

Q: So, if somebody who lives at Lartey broke any of the laws and let's say that the person lives in the lower end of the town of Lartey and not close to the Northern end [where the shrine is located], how then can the Shrine gain control of this person for punishment?

A: Akonodi is a spirit and therefore has the ability to see those who person these evil acts. You may think that nobody saw you commit them, but Nana [Akonodi] sees it and will bring you to account for those acts.

Q: But what if the person who committed these acts is just an ordinary resident who has not committed himself or herself to Akonodi or even a Christian. Will the spirit of the shrine bring this person to account for the acts?

A: As long as you reside on the land that Akonodi controls, you come under its jurisdiction and even if you run overseas after breaking its rule, you can be affected negatively by the spirit and punished.

Q: When Akonodi arrests the one has broken its laws and that person happened to be a Christian and there only saw his or her illness and did not equate it to the adverse effects of the shrine, at what point does one become aware that this is Akonodi's act of vengeance?

A: So if you are a Christian and you did not take this to be the act of Akonodi, then the illness will continue till the time that you will figure it out that it is something out of the ordinary and therefore to seek the help of the shrine. For example, if one person dies in the family and another one more dies unexplained, then you will begin to seek answer. Since we live in the Abibibrim [land of the blacks] when people die unexplained and it is continuing, we drop our Christianity temporarily and seek answers in a traditional way. In fact, before our fathers became Christians, they were reliant on a tradition of belief in the Abosom as part of our culture so we never left it even when we become Christians.

Q: I know that we have talked about this issue in the various question and answers, but sum it up for me again: What are the defining characteristics of Akonodi?

A: Nana is there for everyone and not only those who belong to the Akonodi shrine. He is there also for the nation and for example if someone is sick even when you do not belong here but come here for help, Nana [Akonodi] will help to treat you of your sickness. If you are not progressing with your work and you come here Nana will help you and if you are having difficulty having children and you come here you will be helped to have children. When you come here, Nana will consult with you and you will be directed on what to do to alleviate the problems and give you also medicine.

Q: That means that you don't have to belong to the Akonodi shrine to visit for consultations?

A: Yes, you can come from every part of the world to consult. The shrine is for everybody [who needs help].

Q: What is your understanding of the concept of a person placing himself at the protection of an Obosom?

A: Nana says that God the Supreme Being created everything just like the farmer planted his or her plantain. But when the wind comes and forces the plantain tree to bend and with fruit on it, what do you do? You cut a stick to support it till it is ready to harvest. So the protection the Obosom provides is a support system.

Q: If someone is sick and there is the suspicion that something spiritual had gone wrong or that the person who is sick or suffering has offended an Obosom other than Akonodi. The sick person purposefully avoided going to the Bosom that had been offended but came to Akonodi for help. How would you deal with such a situation?

A: [The question led to a long conversation among the elders but the Okyeame asked for clarification. I indicated that I had a reason for the question the way it was asked. I was thus asked to restate the question which I did as below.

Q. Let's say that I have placed myself at the protection of an Obosom other than Akonodi and I broke a rule of that shrine. I may even had been a Christian and so did not want to return to that shrine whose rules I have broken but I came to Akonodi instead at a distance away from where I may be seen. What will Akonodi do to help me cure my condition?

A: [Another long general discussion ensued but the linguist stepped in and addressed the question.] Let's say that sometime ago you wanted children and you went to a specific shrine for help. Now you have the children or the work for which you sought help has prospered but in the process you became a Christian and did not return to the shrine that had helped you to offer thanks or meet a promise you made. When you come to Nana [Akonodi] and the matters is "looked into spiritually" you will be told that "once a time ago you made this promise to a shrine but you have not met the obligations, so go there [to that shrine to perform your obligations] and after that if you still need help, then come back here.

Q: This identification of the rights of shrines indicates that the Abosom respect each other and work together. So if someone had gone to Dente for help, this person could have been told by Dente Okomfo to return to Akonodi to perform an unmet promise. Is this the case?

A: Oh yes. Long before Christianity came we the Abosom were here and we worked together.

Q: Long ago [in the 1970s] when I lived here at Lartey, I used to see those young girls who used to wear only one piece white cloths. Who were they and can you speak a little about them and were they all Akonodi people?

A: Oh, yes the Akomfo? Those people you saw in the 1970s were akomfo in training who had been possessed by various shrines. Some were from Asante, others from Eweland or other places, some had shaved head and others were Rastas. When these persons were possessed by other sprints and in some cases the possession manifests itself in various ways. The person was brought here and Nana [Akonodi] will tell the person which spirit had possessed her and the girls were trained here at Akonodi and sent back to the Obosom that originally possessed her. If the possession had been of a friendly source but not of any of the major Abosom or a shrine belonging to the family of the possessed, then Akonodi priest will give you a station somewhere to go operate.

Q: Are all the major shrines able to train akomfo for other shrines or is it only Akonodi that has the ability to train akomfo for others?

A: Once a person has been possessed, any shrine can identify the possessing source and help train the new individual. All the Abosom akomfo can do this.

Q: An Obosomfo can train persons possessed by the spirit of its shrine. An Obosofu can train a person possessed by another shrine. If this is true from our conversation, then can another shrine train a person possessed by the Akonodi shrine who will then come work for this Akonodi shrine?

A: No. Akonodi can train akomfo for other Abosom, but all Akonodi priests must be trained by Akonodi and they must come to this house for their training. As I explained, nobody trains an Akonodi Komfo. There are branches such as Adade Komfo or Asu Ketewa Komfo, even if you are Rasta and we are cutting your hair you must be brought to this house. There had been some African-American people we trained and they came here to get their Rasta cut and technically ordained to go perform priestly functions in America but the shrines they serve are lesser branches. But Nana Pannin [the main Akonodi bosom] nobody serves as its priest but those who are here. It is only here that the main Akonodi shrine is served. So when somebody says that they are Akonodi akomfo and they are located in another town other than Lartey, it only means that those persons have been trained here [and using the surname of the shrine]. Such persons are not possessed by Akonodi only that they are trained here. Even if this priest wants to do something for you, they would have to bring you here.

Q: I heard that you gathered here early this morning to perform certain rites. Is this something I can ask you to talk about?

A: Oh, when we sit here, we pray for the nation and ask that the shrine helps. It is almost a renewal act through prayers.

Q: But why was this done today and not yesterday?

A: The whole thing is that Nana's days of worship are Tuesdays and Friday. If you had met him yesterday when you came here on Monday, he the Osofo [head elder] would not be wearing this

white cloth. He would have been wearing his ordinary garment. But on Tuesdays and Fridays when we gather with the whole of the elders, he wears the white cloth for the ritual day.

Q: So this means that all the elders will meet on these [Tuesdays and Fridays]?

A: Yes.

Q: So these stools here that the elders are sitting on are traditional elders' stool chairs and are not akomfo stools?

A: Yes, these stools are for the elders and they do not sit here. But when it is time for them to be at this house, there are places for them too.

Q: So when you say Nana in this context and his elder sit here. Can you describe Nana in his total context to me? [The point of the question is that the term Nana has been used in two ways. One, as I understand, is in reference to Akonodi. At times however the senior elder who wears the white cloth has also been referred to as Nana, and here Nana and his elders. My question here is with regard to Nana in the context of "Nana and his elders."]

A: Let me remind us that we have a saying that "a senior family member in age is always present when even a young member of the family is selected to head the unit" and it is because of this that the head of the unit does not run the affairs of the family independently, hence we say that Nana rules with his elders. Technically, the young man who has been elevated to the Nana position is said to be "sitting on the lap of his elders to rule."

Q: So in this context, is Nana a traditional ruler or an osofo or an okomfo?

A: Nana is an "Osofo". He is the head of the shrine. He is the gatekeeper of the Akonodi shrine and he is first before the akomfo. He is not the okomfo pinyin. He is like a Pope and his elders are like Bishops and Cardinals, then there are the possessed persons of the shrine.

Q: Is Nana is one of those how can be possessed by the shrine?

A: No. He is the head of the shrine.

Q: If Nana is not possessed but the akomfo, then as head of the shrine what is the relationship in terms of relations of work?

A: We all work hand in hand. For example if there is any problem that must be attended to, Nana [Akonodi, the spirit] will possess the chief okomfo who will in turn reveal the information to Nana [the senior elder] and together we will be directed in the manner to address the issues.

Q: I also understand that after your morning meeting today, it is traditional for all the elders to gather again such as you are doing now--to receive and hear cases. But let me ask about the relationship between Akonodi and Christians [and by extension Muslims as well]?

A: The Christians in this town and ours are one. When they have harvests we are invited and Nana pours libation and prayers for them before they start their function so there is understanding among us. We have the laws of the land and when we say that this week there should be no drumming or work at the farm or even going to farm, the Christians in this town have followed these traditional regulations and therefore there had not been any conflict between us and them. These rules are followed and even when new Christian ministers come to this

town, they come to greet Nana and we pray for them so we do not have any conflict with them and we live together cordially.

Q: So what is the purpose of the rules on not to drum or to crack kennele etc.?

A: Before the Christians came here we had our traditions. We celebrated our Adaye or Ohum and we did not beat drums for a week and two respectively. So when the Christians arrived here in historical times and they were told our traditions they followed the rules. They can go to Church but they would not clap or beat drums during those ritual days and as they follow the rules and respect the tradition there had not been any problems and those rules that regulate our relations remain up till today.

Q: You said that the relationship has been good but was it that way in the beginning when the missionaries arrived first?

A: Yes, they followed our rules.

Q: How about Muslims. You have Muslims in this town. Has relations with them been the same as you have expressed about Christians?

A: Yes, the Muslims have followed the rules. They know that this is our land and we say that don't go here on Tuesday and Fridays so they follow the rules. This is our land and they follow our regulations. If one breaks these rules, then it is up to Nananom to uphold the rules. But we work together. Recently the Orthodox people open a church just next here to the roundabout. Nananom went to participate in the function. It was Nana [senior elder of Akonodi] who poured the libation and prayed first. The Muslims were there and the other Christian denominations were all present to join the celebration. So we work together and in fact, their Pope was present for the joint function.

Q: Before we end this conversation, let me ask this question. Let's say that somebody is a Muslim or a Christian and he or she wants to see Akonodi for help. Do these people come in the morning, afternoon, or at night?

A: [Laughter]. Though some are Christian, we are all one people. But since many people from all walks of life come here, those who have need come to us. Maybe because this person is a Christian, he or she may choose to come here in a smaller group or even someone consult of his or her behalf.

Q: Regarding the State/nation you said earlier on that you pray for them. But for the government and say the District Executive Officers, what does Akonodi do for them publicly to ensure national peace and unity or if such persons want to seek help, how do they go about seeking this support from the shrine?

A: As for the prayers we say it for the national peace. But for this District for example, let's say a Minister won the election to represent us. He or she will come to Nana to ask for support and prayers to make the administration successful and to let peace to come during their period of rule. So they come here to ask for help.

Q: But what if trouble occurs and there is physical conflict, we know they go to court to address some of these problems. But are there any other things that government and administrations do that involve the shrines?

A: Some of these cases go to court and remain in court for a long time without resolution. But if the government likes or even the president wants, he can come or he can send message to ask that Akonodi addresses the problem by prayer or otherwise. As you know, court cases can go on for years, but cases redressed at shrines last only a short time and brings peace. But first the government must show respect by recognizing the role of the shrine. In fact government minister Obetsebe Lamptey comes here prior to all of his travels.

Q: Well I will like to thank Nana and bring the conversation to an end, but I see that Nana did not tell me his name. Can I have the names please?

A: He is Nana Osofo Abradu II. And the elders present are Nana Osofo Fiako, Nana Aboagye, Nana Obrewo who is a linguist for Nana Danso who is not here today, Abusua Pannin Kofi Dankwa, Panin Arye Kwabena, Mr. Boateng, and Okyeame Odame Kwasi, Kwadwo Fianko.

Q: I thank you all very much for your time, but can I take picture and what are the meanings of they material cultural pieces [the palm front type of object that hangs behind the seating space of the senior elder]?

A: When you look behind the seating, this has been here from the beginning. These drums that hung here are beaten only once a year during the week after the Odwira festival. The calabashes are for visitors to drink or for ritual bath.

Q: How about the lion and stool symbols on the front wall?

A: All people have their spiritual guides so when we are seated and spiritually these lions protect the stool. Also, as you exit you see on the walls a pot and it is a proverb to advising those who disobey the shrine. We like the telling of truth.

Well I would like to take the opportunity to take the pictures.

The senior elder asked that next time I visit, I should bring him a digital tape recorder like mine so he can just record their information and give them out. I mentioned that the nature of the information is dictated by the kind of questions asked. The conversation ended for the day and we asked for permission to depart.

The End