



# **Modernizing Indigenous Priesthood and Revitalizing Old Shrines: Current Developments on Ghana's Religious Landscape**

A dissertation

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by

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## **Abstract**

This study is about the upsurge in the activities of the agents of more than one indigenous religious tradition (IRT) in contemporary Ghana. We concern ourselves with two case studies. These are the neo- and the old indigenous religious agents represented by two major shrines. The two shrines, headed by a priest and priestess, both claim to be rooted in indigenous Akan religious traditions (Nananom som), yet they show contrasts in discourse and other features.

The study links the rise in the activities of these indigenous religious agents to the contemporary ethos of intense religious competition in Ghana. The quest to attract clientele for their religious goods and services in the Ghanaian religious field has changed how the individual religious groups operate. To remain visible and viable these groups deploy delegitimizing strategies to undermine other competing religious traditions. The contest is largely an inter-religious contest between Christians and non-Christian “others,” especially, Ghana’s indigenous religious traditions, though there are also intra-religious contests between the indigenous religious traditions themselves. The mainstay of religious life in Ghana before the arrival of foreign religions was the indigenous religions. Yet, Christianity, currently largely represented by a Pentecostal-Charismatic strand, dominates Ghana’s religious terrain. Historically Christianity has launched a vicious attack on agents of the indigenous traditions, demonizing them and forcing them to operate under cover. The rise in the activities of indigenous religious agents this study focuses attention on therefore represents their staging of a public comeback, the most important sign of which is the increase in the activities and newly constructed discourses of a group of neo-indigenous religious priests or agents and revitalized old priests and priestess.

Gathered through the use of ethnographic methods, the data from the study shows the resilient nature of IRTs in Ghana in spite of and contrary to scholarly claims. It argues that the delegitimizing campaign of Charismatic Pentecostalism and demonization by colonial Christianity has paradoxically contributed to the growing appeal of agents of the indigenous religions in Ghana. The data also establishes a link between the rise in indigenous religious specialists in Ghana and the growing demand for spiritual power in Ghana, as many seek to enlist ritual experts to address hardships linked to socio-economic dislocations and other sources of modern malcontent. The study identifies economic motives behind the activities of the agents of the indigenous traditions in addition to their religio-cultural functions and extensively explores the strategies these agents are using to establish their presence locally and in some cases globally.

### **Dedication**

To my son Jayden-Rafael Kofi Dwomor Asubonteng and husband Kofi Ababio Dwomor Asubonteng

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In writing this thesis, a number of people have guided, inspired as well as supported me all the way, though I cannot individually capture everyone who has been of help, I would like to show gratitude to certain people. I am indebted to Prof. (em.) Ulrich Berner, my supervisor, who first accepted to work with me in 2009 before I even secured admission into BIGSAS. Secondly, I extend my profound gratitude to Prof. Afe Adogame for informing me about the University of Bayreuth and actually introducing me to Prof. Berner. Thanks for your mentorship. Dr. Magnus Ecthler has, since my arrival to Bayreuth, been my mentor. He helped in shaping the work from beginning to end and I am most grateful for his invaluable assistance.

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I wish to thank Nana Kwaku Bonsam, Komfo Oforiwaa and her husband Paa Sarbah, members and clients of both shrines and the entire community that volunteered information.

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## **Glossary**

*Agoro*- “gorɔ” literally means to drum or to play. On the IRTs terrene it means a gathering of priests and priestesses to play publically.

*Akom*- “kom” means being possessed or dancing. In this sense it signifies the gathering of priest and priestesses at the indigenous religious state levels for the purposes of exhibiting potent spiritual power.

*Sunsum*-spirit.

*Sunsum sore*- are African forms of Christianity – controlled by Africans. In academic circles they are known as Afrian Initiated Churches. The name is derived from the ecstatic spiritual performances accompanied with clapping, drumming, divining, prophesying, and dancing

*Nananom*-ancestors, deities, elders.

*Ɔkomfopayin*- Eldest indigenous religious priests or priestesses

*Ɔkomfoɔ*, *Komfoɔ* or *Komfo*- refers to an indigenous priest or priestess. The three are used interchangeably.

*Bosomfo*- serves as the linguist or mouthpiece of a priest or priestess- a mediator between the priest/priestess and a client.

*Zongo*-refers to settlements in urban centres in Ghana inhabited mostly by Muslims or people from the northern part of Ghana

*Sankofa*- is an ideology that promoted a kind of save the heritage campaign, reviving indigenous religions and encouraging the populace to go back to old time religion.

## **Abbreviations**

IRTs Indigenous Religious Tradition

IRs indigenous religions

PCC Pentecostal Charismatic Churches

K.B Kwaku Bonsam

GSS Ghana Statistical Services

GPTHA Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers Association

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This study concerns the upsurge in the activities of agents and adherents of indigenous religious traditions (IRTs here after) in contemporary Ghana. There has been a dramatic rise in the number of indigenous religious priests or agents which has been increasing visible all over Ghana. Because it not possible to cover all these agents in a single study, the focus of this study is limited to two cases of indigenous religious agents whose contrasting discourses and *modi operandi* reflect the debates shaping the developments in Ghana' indigenous religious landscape. Furthermore, these two cases of indigenous religious agents were chosen because they operate in the context of Ghana's pluralistic, volatile and extremely competitive religious ethos. We need to know something about this backdrop as they are affected profoundly by it.

### **1.2 Background of the study**

Ghana's religious field is a highly diversified one, characterized by a multiplicity of religious forms and their agents, such as Western missionary churches, Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, new indigenous religious institutions, independent ritual specialists, the Spiritual churches [*Sunsum sore*], Islamic groups, the Bahai Faith, Neo-Hindu and Buddhist traditions, and local offshoots of Judaic traditions such as the African Hebrew Israelite and Zetahill missions. The resulting religious pluralism compels the diverse traditions to compete for relevant capital and social visibility on the Ghanaian religious scenario. The goal is dominance over others in the sphere

of Ghanaian religious life. The intense religious competition in Ghana is increasingly changing how the individual religious groups operate. Some of the religious institutions and agents are operating like business organizations-- appropriating marketing strategies in a quest to attract clientele for the religious goods and services they offer. Some are doing so by employing delegitimizing strategies to undermine other competing religious traditions.<sup>1</sup> In what Asamoah-Gyadu frames as the “the battle of the gods” for spiritual supremacy,<sup>2</sup> the contest is observably an inter-religious contest between Christians and non-Christian “others,” especially, the IRTs. But there are also intra-religious contests, that is, contestations among the various indigenous religious traditions in Ghana as well.

Before Ghana’s encounter with religions of outside provenance, the mainstay of religious life in Ghana was the indigenous religions. While the influences of the Indigenous Religious Traditions are still strong in Ghana, they do not by any means contemporaneously constitute the dominant religious culture in the nation. A strand of Christianity known as Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (PCC)<sup>3</sup> has more dominant influence in Ghana. According to the 2010 Ghana government statistical population and housing census, the total population of Ghanaians is 24,658,823. Christianity takes a chunk of 71.2% of this population. Muslims are 17.6%, Traditionalists, who I refer to as indigenous religious practitioners in this work, are 5.2%, and people with no religion are 5.3%. Further classification pegs Pentecostal-Charismatics as the

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Kafui Wuaku, *Hindu Gods in West Africa: Ghanaian Devotees of Shiva and Krishna* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Clashes of Spiritualities in Ghana,” in *Fundamentalism and the Media*, ed. Stewart Hoover and Nadia Kaneva (New York, Bloomsbury Academic 2009), 162.

<sup>3</sup> Birgit Meyer, “Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 448. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/25064861>. 29/07/2014.

highest among the Christian denominations with 44.6% of the total Christian population.<sup>4</sup> This indicates Christianity's dominance and the strong position of the Pentecostals, as well as the marginality of other religious groups, particularly IRTs.

The Pentecostal-Charismatic dominance on the religious landscape thrives, among other things, on their general negative attitude towards IRTs and their agents. This Pentecostal attitude finds expression in their direct attacks on the IRTs through their teachings and activities. Their main narrative on modernity, for example, characterizes indigenous religions as outmoded, irrelevant, evil and backward. They share, and indeed bolster, popular views about “local gods and spirits that recast them as Christian demons operating under the auspices of Satan.”<sup>5</sup> This attitude has generated popular fears of and hostility against indigenous shrines, priests and clients/devotees to the point where many IRTs agents have been forced to operate undercover. Aside from the indigenous religions, Pentecostal-charismatic discourse typically demonizes other religions in Ghana as well, priding Pentecostalism with conquering these “religions of darkness.” Owing to their popularity and widespread influence, Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches have enjoyed the most attention from scholars who have investigated, analyzed and documented almost every facet of their discourses and practices.

In a situation that contrasts sharply with the current scholarly focus on contemporary Christianity in Ghana, happenings on the indigenous religious landscape still remain relatively unexplored and undocumented. This is in spite of the fact that the indigenous religious landscape

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<sup>4</sup>Ghana Statistical Service, 2010 Population and Housing Census, final results. Pdf. May 2012, 40 <http://statsghana.gov.gh/>. Wednesday 23rd July, 2014, Accessed 10/8/2013.

<sup>5</sup> Birgit Meyer, “Powerful Pictures: Popular Christian Aesthetics in Southern Ghana,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76: 1 (2008): 95-96. Accessed January 3, 2013. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40006026>.

of Ghana has experienced dramatic changes, especially since the 1970s. The academic neglect of this area of study gives the impression that indigenous traditions are no longer relevant in the religious life of Ghanaians. The sense one gets is that the indigenous religions are on their last legs given the weight of global forces, particularly the spread of Pentecostalism, on them. Yet, Ghana has not been, as asserted by Spickard and Adogame, a “merely passive recipient of global pressures, but also a site of religious creativity inspired by these forces. A great deal of this creativity is taking shape in the indigenous religious landscape and the by-products have also had a considerable effect on the outside world”<sup>6</sup>. This study seeks to shed light on some of those religious events and processes that have otherwise been ignored in the contemporary research.

### **1.3 Thesis of the Project**

The chapters of this study evolve around three related arguments. First, I argue that IRTs have not dwindled in belief and practice as portrayed in the polemical attacks of Pentecostal-Charismatic discourse and by the paucity of scholarly research on them. Rather, there is an upsurge in indigenous religious belief and practices occurring at different levels and in different parts of Ghana and their influences are extending into Ghanaian Diasporas in the West. I produce data to support the view that IRTs are re-asserting themselves in the Ghanaian religious public space, championed by a new brand of indigenous religious agents. Armed with requisite knowledge of the history of their encounter with other foreign religions as well as the current competition that exists on Ghana’s religious landscape, these agents of the IRTs are making use of strategies that

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<sup>6</sup> James V. Spickard and Afe Adogame, “Introduction: African, The New African Diaspora, and Religious Transnationalism in a Global World” in *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*, eds. Afe Adogame and James V. Spickard (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 2.

seek to counter and even undermine the dominant Pentecostal and Charismatic religious discourse. Agents of Ghana's IRTs are constructing new discourses, borrowing religious capital, deploying modernizing formats and internationalizing their activities to prove their importance on the world stage. The study views all of these as counter-hegemonic strategies that agents of IRTs in Ghana are deploying to re-assert their public visibility and place on the religious landscape. In a way, these agents are deconstructing the negative definitional tag placed on them and reconstructing a more positive outlook on IRTs through their activities.

Secondly, I argue that this upsurge in the activities of the IRTs is linked to the fierce competition among the various religious groups and their agents in Ghana. As members of the dominant tradition on Ghana's religious landscape, the Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians downplay the importance of IRTs and their agents as well as other minority religions by demonizing them so that they can maintain their hegemony. The paradox is that while Pentecostals as a group envision themselves as occupying an opposite camp, they have contributed largely to the success of the agents of the ITRs through their discourse on spiritual power, which present ITRs as a rival source of portent spiritual power, leading to its appeal to some worshippers in Ghana.

The study also argues that underlying the activities and discourse of Ghana's new agents of indigenous religion is a newly emerging narrative on modernity in Ghana's religious landscape. This narrative posits the possibility of an authentic African modernity. Through the neo- and revitalized old indigenous religious agent's activities and pronouncements they claim that progress in a modern world does come about only through the appropriation of western modernity and its signs. Building on the indigenous religio-cultural resources and shaping them to modern situations also leads to progress. They claim that a "modern" Africa must not part with indigenous culture as

Pentecostals posit; rather, it must embrace the indigenous, as this is what will guide it in the increasing encounter with the rest of the globe, which is globalization.<sup>7</sup>

Again, the study argues that the fact that “there are millions of people who adhere, or continue to adhere”<sup>8</sup> to Ghana’s autochthonous traditions in modern times means that these traditions are meeting the traditional as well as modern needs of the subscribers and may be providing more satisfactory results than the Christian traditions they have adopted. The data from the study shows that both permanent/casual clients of these new traditions belong to other religions. But they nevertheless secretly enlist the services of IRTs and their agents, and aptly so, because these traditions are utility based in that they serve the practical and spiritual needs of anyone who enlists their help. In this context clients/adherents can claim double allegiance or deny affiliation altogether. Particularly, those clients who have not been initiated into these shrines as members are not accountable to them so long as they pay for the services rendered.

Lastly, the study contends that behind the competitive public performances of neo- and revitalized old IRT agents, as well as those of other religious traditions on the religious landscape of Ghana, are a number of motivations-- the quest of the actors to show off their credentials, to establish their status as efficacious ritual agents, to fulfill indigenous religious and cultural obligations and to demonstrate control of spiritual power in order to attract attention of potential clients and gain economically.

I use the activities and discourses of two groups of indigenous religious leaders and their shrines in the Ashanti region of Ghana to demonstrate these arguments. I find these two cases to

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<sup>7</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 20, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Gerrie ter Haar, “World Religions and Community Religions: Where does Africa fit in?” in Conference Proceedings of the Center of African Studies, University of Copenhagen, September 21, (Copenhagen: 1999,) 2.

be suitable because, although they share practices and a common discourse in some respects, they contrast each other with regard to gender, understanding of modernity and orthodoxy in indigenous Ghanaian religious practice, emphases, and the status and public images of the priests and priestesses involved. Put together, these two groups demonstrate features that complement each other, enabling us to understand a broader range of issues related to the rise of indigenous religious activities in modern Ghana. The first case features the activities and discourse of the protagonist of a neo-indigenous religious movement. This man is called Nana Kwaku Bonsam. He is a neo-indigenous priest with extensive global connections because of his emphasis on spreading the influence of indigenous Ghanaian religions to the rest of the world. The second case focuses attention on a revamped indigenous religious shrine led by a woman called Komfo Oforiwaa. I purposefully selected her not only because her discourse is in contradistinction with Bonsam's, but also because she and her clientele, the majority of whom are women, enable us to explore the gender dimension of the upsurge in indigenous religious activities in Ghana.

Weighing them on a scale of status, on the one hand the neo-indigenous priests, whom Bonsam represents, are nationally renowned and, in some respects, are also becoming more active on the international scene. On the other hand, the revitalized indigenous shrines represented by Oforiwaa are known only by those who patronize them in their local areas of operation. Also, the indigenous religious priests and priestesses belong to a national association called the Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers Association<sup>9</sup> (GPTHA here after) which has established the criteria for accepting individuals as legitimate indigenous priests or priestesses in Ghana. For

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<sup>9</sup>GPTHA is an umbrella institution that operates in the interest of these priests, vouching for them when they face a crisis in the course of their careers as priests. The institution is recognized by the Ghana government (Ministry of Health) as a purveyor of alternative health and healing services.



instance, the person must be called to the vocation, the call must be verified and the person must undergo training by an elderly priest/priestess (*Ɔkɔmfopayin*). The neo-indigenous priests do not belong to this association and do not lend themselves to the rather rigorous process of becoming a ritual agent, as established by the association. It is not important that anyone attests to their call to priesthood. They simply self-declare themselves as priests/priestesses. The two categories of indigenous ritual agents also differ in their discourse on modernity; whereas the neo-indigenous priests advocate for a totality of change in procedures to suit modern tastes, such as using modernizing formats to expand their influence, the agents revitalizing the old shrines insist on a strict adherence to tradition. For example, they insist that ritual agents must not self-promote their activities, must operate secretly and must confine their activities to their localities. Interestingly, both of the representatives, that is, Kɔmfo Oforiwaa and Nana Kwaku Bonsam, locate their roots in the *Nananom Som* [the worship traditions of their ancestors or the religious heritage] of Asante.

Bonsam's case is an instance of an increasingly popular and emerging trend; the growth of free-lance indigenous religious agents, who I refer to as neo-indigenous priests, priestesses' or agents. I refer to them as freelance because they do not belong to any conventional organization, such as the much written about *Afrikania* movement or Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers Association, which is the body that registers indigenous religious priests in Ghana. They operate independently, serving a loose network of clientele. Neo-indigenous religious agents are not only forceful in their efforts to spread their influence and increase their visibility, but operate in public with a boldness and impudence that would seem to invite the chagrin of Christian worshippers who dominate the religious field of Ghana. These agents' willingness to use modern media forms, internet and transnational connections and tourism to advertise their activities, services and products is unprecedented in the history of Ghana's indigenous religions. Implied in their narrative

and practices is a counter discourse that claims that, contrary to the teachings of other religions, especially, the Pentecostal-Charismatics, IRTs are sources of good and very potent spiritual power. They openly claim that Pentecostal worshippers surreptitiously consult them for spiritual help; they chide some Pentecostal pastors for being hypocritical, and claim that these pastors tap into indigenous spiritual power sources secretly while denouncing activities of IRT agents publicly. Often deploying the rhetoric of pan-Africanism in religious circles, and seeking to appeal to the sensitivities of sympathizers of this movement, these agents openly declare their goal to “evangelize” and or convert people of African descent in the diaspora as well as non-Africans to IRTs. In doing so they, foster a sense of “reverse mission,” to borrow the characterization deployed by scholars such as Adogame<sup>10</sup> to speak to the growing practice of African churches extending branches of their churches to Europe and North America. But this reverse mission differs from the Indigenous African Christian practice scholars such as Adogame write about. It involves agents of IRTs such as Bonsam carrying their beliefs and practices to locations in Europe and North America, a trend that reverses the historic flow of Christianity from the West to African through the agency of Western missionaries.

A good deal of the discussion in the study focuses on the story of Nana Kwaku Bonsam’s [referred to as K.B or Bonsam] rise to public prominence and fame in Ghana. Originally a priest from the Ashanti region of Ghana, Bonsam has become something of a celebrity on the local religious scene in Ghana. The national fame he has garnered parallels the fame of Ghana’s Pentecostal icons. More importantly, he was not mentored or trained by an established priest as is the tradition in Ghana. Like his allies, he emerged on the scene dramatically, started operating as

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<sup>10</sup> Spickard and Adogame. “Introduction,” 14.

a priest, and is referred to as such by his followers. Building on his popularity, he has established shrines in major cities in the nation. Signposts describing such priests, their powers, their services and fees are ubiquitous in Southern Ghana. Like other priests in this case, Bonsam has established shrines in far flung locations beyond Ghana's geographical boundaries. A distinct feature of Bonsam and these agents is how they try to authenticate their traditions by locating their praxis in the old time *Nananom som* religion [or the indigenous heritage] in spite of their novel introductions. More intriguing than anything else is the ability of Bonsam and his allies to operate against the backdrop of an ostensibly overwhelming Pentecostal vitality and presence. It is this feature that makes the activities of these neo-priests and priestesses an intriguing and a promising line of academic inquiry.

I locate the second group of priests and priestesses in the conventional indigenous religious category. However, I describe them as revitalizing old indigenous religious forms. These traditional forms are revitalized in the sense that while priests and priestesses emphasize adherence to tradition, they are also selectively re-shaping aspects of indigenous religious practices so that they can still be relevant to worshippers in modern Ghana. The renewal taking shape in these older shrines can be described as a reshaping of the 'container not the content,' in that it is the outlook or structure of the religion that is being revised and not the core "concept, practice, and symbols, that are being re-worked."<sup>11</sup> The priest/priestess of these shrines are trained in the "old fashioned" or traditional way by older priests/priestesses, known locally as "masters" or mentors. These elderly mentor figures verify the neophytes claim to "having been called" before accepting to lead

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<sup>11</sup> Rosalind I.J. Hackett, "Revitalization in African Traditional Religion," in *African Traditional Religions: In Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Paragon House 1991), 136.

them into priesthood by way of apprenticeship. Also this category of priests and priestesses belong to an institutionalized body known as GPTHA.

The agents leading the revitalization of IRTs base their moves on the claim that Ghana's indigenous religions must shape themselves to emerging needs of Ghanaians without necessarily adopting formats and practices from outside, especially the West. For this reason, unlike the earlier category of priests and priestesses, this group does not encourage any form of proselytizing or the use of any form of modern media to extend the influence of their activities. They also do not encourage the creation of new shrines. They argue that deities often have their powers located in specific chosen spaces and if the deities' power would be effective, the shrine must be located only at that point or place the deities choose. They also do not favor extending their services to overseas locations, although they welcome foreigners seeking their services. However, they share in the discourses of the free-lance priests on the "superior potency" of indigenous religious powers and also claim that some agents from other religious traditions, especially the Pentecostal-Charismatics, tap into their power sources to enhance their magico-religious capabilities, all the while openly condemning these same sources.<sup>12</sup> An important consideration for including these revitalized shrines in this study is the recent rise in demand for them by both local as well as diaspora clientele. For example, famous shrines such as the *Akonnedi* shrine,<sup>13</sup> the Abidjan *Mami wata* shrine, the *Kwaku Furi* shrine, the *Antoa nyamaa* shrine, the *Pemsan* shrine, and a host of others in different parts of Ghana have presently seen a heavy increase in their patronage by Africans, Americans and Africans in the diaspora.

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<sup>12</sup> They agree with the neo-priests on some issues. Later on, when we deliberate the issue of power relations in the religious field of Ghana, we will note that both neo- and old priests perform in the *agorɔ* and *akɔm afahye*, demonstrating affirmation in the face of skepticism. We hope to throw more light on this later on.

<sup>13</sup> The Akonnedi shrine is located at Larteh in the Eastern Region of Ghana and is popular for training of African American Priest and priestesses such as Nana Yao Opare Dinizulu and others. (See <http://onipa-abusia.org/>).

I also present in this study an account of Kɔmfoɔ Oforiwaa of *Pemsan* shrine, a priestess who is one of the indigenous ritual agents leading the revitalization trend. What makes her a good case and a suitable comparison to the neo-indigenous priests such as Bonsam are the following. First she is a woman and a younger agent but famous for the potency of her remedies; she is therefore well known in the Obuasi-Dadwen of Ashanti region, her domain of influence. Secondly, she seems to be the preference of many females seeking the services of indigenous ritual agents, presumably because she is a woman. This provides us with the opportunity to explore the gender dimensions of the rise of these indigenous agents and their activities in Ghana. The third reason for choosing this priestess as a focus is her discourse on what are authentically indigenous religions, which differs considerably from the narrative and philosophy of the movement the neo-indigenous priests are leading.

In all, the study uses both the rise of Kwaku Bonsam, his shrines, which are proliferating all over Ghana as well as abroad, his activities and his followers, and the developments taking shape in the revitalized and rejuvenated old *Pemsan* shrine headed by Kɔmfoɔ Oforiwaa, to discuss the rise in indigenous religious activities in a highly modernized and thoroughly globalized and pentecostalized Ghana. It deliberates on how IRT forms are competitively attempting to renegotiate their space by casting indigenous religions as an alternative spiritual power base on the Ghanaian religious landscape, using strategies that counter those of the other players.

#### **1.4 Objective of the Study**

The objective for embarking on this study is to investigate and analyze the contemporary transformations on Ghana's IR landscape, paying attention to the activities of the neo-indigenous

and revitalized old priests/priestesses, their worshippers, helpers, clientele base, the movements they are forming and leading, their discourses, their ritual practices, and the strategies they are adopting to expand their influence. I congruently assess the overall implications of this development for an understanding of how the indigenous religious fields of contemporary Ghana are shaping themselves to the globalizing and modernizing processes the continent is currently experiencing.

The following questions guided the inquiry:

1. How did the indigenous religious agents/experts (neo and old) assume the roles they play in contemporary Ghana, or, in other words, what strategies do these agents adopt in popularizing their presence and activities?
2. What are the central points of appeal or attractiveness for IR products such as those produced by Kwaku Bonsam and Komfo Oforiwaa, and who are the clients/consumers of the products?
3. In what ways do these actors substantiate their claim of superiority of spiritual power from indigenous sources over other religions, how do they claim authenticity for their practices and how do they define this authenticity?
4. What is their discourse like and are they trying to institutionalize or internationalize their activities as a movement; to what extent are the agents successful in their activities and how is this development related to the general shifts in a thoroughly globalizing Ghana?

The study also explores the niches that these neo-indigenous religious groups and revitalized forms are occupying in Ghana's religious economy and investigates how these developments are shaping the overall understandings of indigenous religion among Ghanaians.

## 1.5 Defining Indigenous

The African continent is extremely complex--historically, culturally, religiously, socially and linguistically. It is a home of many indigenous religions that despite their diversity, share common affinities in their core ideas, rituals and worldviews.<sup>14</sup>

The above statement from Spickard and Adogame is affirmed by Asamoah-Gyadu, who contends that “African traditional religions display differences across cultures. Yet they display enough ‘family resemblances’ or shared features that justify them together under a single nomenclature.”<sup>15</sup>

The term “indigenous” which is often used in place of “other religions” [such as African Traditional Religions] as a way of distinguishing between ‘world religions’ and other autochthonous traditions<sup>16</sup> is a highly contested category in academic circles. I however prefer to use indigenous religious traditions rather than African traditional religions in this study so that I will reflect briefly on the ideas of scholars such as Cox and Harvey, leading contemporary proponents in this contestation. My goal is to make very clear the sense in which the term indigenous is used in this study. Harvey postulates that:

What the label ‘indigenous religions’ valuably points to, is more than a tradition merely existing in a particular place. It is a celebration of the experience of continuity of people and places. The label respects the almost ubiquitous centrality of elders and ancestors as holders and sharers of tradition it respects the almost ubiquitous veneration of particular lands.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Spickard and Af Adogame, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>15</sup> J. Asamoah-Gyadu, “Media Representation of African Traditional Religions” in *Proceedings of The Media Project’s Conference Journalism, Ethics and Religion*, Accra: 2011, 8.

<sup>16</sup> ter Haar, “World Religions and Community Religions: Where does Africa fit in?”, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Graham Harvey, “Indigenous Religions: A Companion” ed. Graham Harvey (Cassell: London, 2000), 12.

Harvey's location of indigenous religions in place and people as well as his stress on the centrality of elders, ancestors and even land is a good starting point for the project, for it includes the continuity of people who have relocated from their original 'place' due to migration but who still look back to their homeland or 'elders and ancestors' in this case. This definition, for instance, includes Africans in the diaspora and indigenous extensions in the Caribbean as well. Harvey's usage and definition paves a way for Cox, who notes that:

Indigenous religions refer to its being bound to a location; participants in the religion are native to a place, or ... belong to it. The single and overriding belief shared amongst indigenous religions stems from kinship-based world-view in which attention is directed towards ancestor's spirits as the central figures in religious life and practice.<sup>18</sup>

Cox argues further that the two key features "kinship and ancestors" make the term 'indigenous' more preferable, in that it stresses origin and location and how owners (indigenes) can subscribe to it. These are kinship based, localized religious traditions. Cox's emphasis on kinship and ancestors as what makes indigenous a better option falls a bit short in that subscribers or clients of the two indigenous priests and or shrines of the phenomena under study expand beyond blood ties. However, the definition also partly fits the neo-indigenous priest, Bonsam, who, despite his innovations, which entail the nationalizing and internationalizing of indigenous religions, still locates his roots in Akan *Nananom som*. In a nutshell, indigenous religions have become a sort of utility or need-based tradition for diverse categories of people. People visit shrines or worship particular deities and perform sacrifices to the gods, not because they have ties or blood relations with the worshippers or people who maintain the shrines but because they need help or want to remain in tune with their indigenous beliefs. Cox's use of "location" reminds us of "place" which

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<sup>18</sup> James L. Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* (Ashgate: Burlington, 2007), 69.



is often stressed in most religions. In Akan indigenous religious traditions, the location of a shrine is crucial, because the shrine is the “seat” of the magico-religious power of the ritual agent who presides over the shrine; the location is as important to worshippers as Mecca and Jerusalem are to Muslims and Christians, respectively. Clients of indigenous shrines who live abroad or in other cities must visit the shrines in person or by proxy to express fidelity to the deities and to gain from their powers. Location (of a shrine) in this sense does not necessarily mean a place where adherents are physically present. Adherents from far flung places can be linked to a shrine through association and/or belief.

From these two definitions we identify titbits of concepts that resonate with, and can help us speak to, the phenomena under study. My understanding of ‘indigenous’ in the study is located at the intersection of Harvey’s and Cox’s definitions. In this way it somewhat departs from the debates on the use of the word ‘indigenous’ as a category that captures the religious beliefs and practices of the people of Ghana before the historical encounter with foreign religions. Much as we can talk of several IRTs in Ghana because they are particular to Ghana’s various ethnic groups, we can also point to the similarities these traditions share. Building on emic perspectives drawn from my field research among Akan people I use the word “*Nananom som*” to refer to the indigenous religions. *Nananom* means ancestors and *som* means worship. Combined, the two terms literally mean the ancestral Akan religious heritage in whatever shape or form its expressions exist today.

A theme that emerged from the research is that religious practices of a locality are not linked with ancestral traditions or gods rooted within these places only. Ancestors and gods from far flung locations are co-opted or easily grafted onto the ritual culture of shrines located geographically in Akan towns and villages. Thus a shrine or a priest/priestess can be said to be a

representative of '*Tano*,' a river god of Ashanti, to use an example, yet *Tano* would not be the only ancestor or deity worshiped in the shrine. There would be deities from all over Ghana and beyond (*Atia nframa*, *tigare* and *Atongo* from the North, *Gbgogbo* from Cote d'Ivoire, and *Agyake bula* from western Ghana) in a shrine located within a specific geographical space. In my survey of shrines, I came across countless examples of such cases; situations where priests and priestesses worship deities which are not local or related to their geographical spheres of influence. I therefore propose that contemporary IRs in Ghana are somewhat pan-Ghanaian. They are religious practices of the people of Ghana that predate the coming of foreign religions. They are not necessarily linked to specific localities or kinship networks. Some trace their roots to local ancestors, maintaining elements of the particular location where they originated in Ghana, while at the same time embracing and absorbing new elements from far-flung places.

## **1.6 Review of Relevant Literature**

In this section I review the literature on the subjects relevant to this research on two levels. Part one will explore literature on the developments within Ghanaian Indigenous Religious Traditions (IRTs) from colonial times to the present. Part two will cover the growing literature on Pentecostal-Charismatic growth in Africa and its extensions in the African diaspora. This discussion will shed light on the dramatic backdrop against which the rise in indigenous religious activities in Ghana is occurring.

### 1.6.1 Developments within the Neo-Indigenous Religious Traditions

The literature on contemporary developments on the indigenous religious landscapes of African communities, especially Ghana, the focus of this study, is still very scanty. I am not aware of any extensive research on the two cases of this study. With regards to the neo-indigenous priest, Kwaku Bonsam, articles in Ghanaian local newspapers focus attention on his powers, his daring nature shown through his confronting and challenging PCC pastors--or mega stars-- in public and in the media, his exploits in overseas countries such as the Netherlands and USA, and his bold comments on government and social issues.<sup>19</sup> Also, on the international scene one contributor to the New York Times, Jed Lipinski, wrote an article on Bonsam's debut in the USA.<sup>20</sup>

The same cannot be said for Komfo Oforiwaa. I found nothing in writing on her although oral narratives about her miraculous exploits circulate widely in Ashanti towns and villages. The most comprehensive account of the experience under study, the rise in Ghana's IRTs is represented by the research on Ghana's *Afrikania* movement. Relevant insight can also be gleaned from some research on resistance/revival strategies of indigenous religions,<sup>21</sup> otherwise known as the anti-

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<sup>19</sup> Halifax Ansah-Addo, "I give Pastors Kofi –Kofi: Kwaku Bonsam" *Daily Guide*, May 7, 2008, 1&2; Halifax Ansah-Addo, "Mad Rush for Juju" *Daily Guide*, May 13 2008, 1&3; Sam Mark Essien, "Kwaku Bonsam Hits NDC" *Daily Guide*, May 15, 2008, 1&3; Morgan Owusu, "Kwaku Bonsam Floors Pastor" *Daily Guide*, May 16, 2008, 1&3; Halifax Ansah-Addo, "Kwaku Bonsam Storms Manhyia" *Daily Guide*, May 19, 2008, 1&2; Fred J.A. Ibrahim Jnr, "Pastor Mad at Kwaku Bonsam" *Daily Guide*, May 21, 2008, 1&6; A.R Gomda, "I Won't Fight God" *Daily Guide*, May 24, 2008, 1&2; Sam Mark Essien, "Bonsam Juju over Missing Cocaine" *Daily Guide*, January 16, 2012, 12; Halifax Ansah-Addo, "Kwaku Bonsam Grows Church" *Daily Guide*, June 4, 2008, 10; Morgan Owusu, "I'll Turn Pastor to Snake" *Daily Guide*, June 7, 2008, 1&2; Halifax Ansah-Addo, "Kwaku Bonsam Again" *Daily Guide*, June 18, 2008, 2; Issah Alhassan, "New Look: Kwaku Bonsam in Town" *The Chronicle*, August 14, 2013, 1&3; Issah Alhassan, "Kwaku Bonsam Dares TB Joshua to Predict Outcome of Election Petition," *The Chronicle*, August 19, 2013, 1&3; Issah Alhassan, "Kwaku Bonsam Accepts Christ" *The Chronicle*, August 26, 2013, 1&3.

<sup>20</sup> Jed Lipinski, "A Visit from the Devil: Feared Traditional Priest from Ghana Spends a Year in the Bronx." *The New York Times*, accessed July 25 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/nyregion/feared-traditional-priest-from-ghana-spends-a-year-in-the-bronx.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Elom Dovlo, "The Church in Africa and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of New Religious Movements and Charismatic Churches," *Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 27.53 (1998): 69, 53.

witchcraft shrines during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> These anti-witchcraft shrines featured widely in Ghana in those times and attracted considerable scholarly attention. Researchers identified and pointed to the widespread nature of these anti-witchcraft movements as a new development. For instance, Parker mentions movements such as *Aberewa* (literally meaning old woman), which originated in 1906, and others that followed, such as *hwemeso* (1920-1923) also literally meaning “watch over me,” presumably a reference to its role in the provision of supernatural cover for its clientele.<sup>23</sup> “The most dominant shrines at the time were those such as *Kunde*, *Senyakupo*, *Nana Tongo* and *Tigare*.”<sup>24</sup> *Tigare* is said to have spread across West Africa in the 1950s.<sup>25</sup> Another researcher, Goody, also focused on three shrines: *domankama* (The Creator), *aberewa* (The Old Woman), and *hwe me so* (Watch over Me), but located their origins in pre-colonial time, that is, from the 1870s to late 1920s.<sup>26</sup>

The consensus of these researchers was that this development was a sign of the rapid social change taking shape in the West African region as a result of colonialism and the activities of the missionaries. Local populations explained the dislocations that emerged from the encounter with the west through colonial agents in terms of witchcraft, thus leading to a rise in shrines specializing in the provision of antidotes against witchcraft attacks and securing the wellbeing of communities in many other ways. The researchers identified as a common initiation process the drinking of herbal medical preparations believed to infuse a member of the shrines with magico-religious power that shelters him/her from forms of spiritual attack. Hence many of these shrines were called

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<sup>22</sup> Dovlo, “The Church in Africa and Religious Pluralism,” 53.

<sup>23</sup> John Parker, “Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft and Trans-Regional Ritual Innovation in Early Ghana: Sakrabundi and Aberewa, 1889-1910,” in *Journal of Africa History* 45.3 (2004): 393.

<sup>24</sup> Parker, “Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft and Trans-Regional Ritual Innovation in Early Ghana,” 393.

<sup>25</sup> Elom Dovlo, “The Church in Africa and Religious Pluralism,” *Exchange* 27. 1 (1998): 54.

<sup>26</sup> Goody, 1981, I.

medicine-drinking shrines. Dovlo contends that these shrines also "served a juridical role of settling interpersonal disputes and provided enforced codes of moral conducts."<sup>27</sup> Goody noted how anti-witchcraft shrines such as *adomankama* solely relieved the evil destructive powers of witches without killing them, while McCaskie affirms "that the Asante inhabit a cognitive universe saturated with apprehensions respecting witchcraft."<sup>28</sup> Dovlo asserts that "most of these movements emerged as a result of encounter of African religion and culture with Christianity and western civilization."<sup>29</sup> Parker alleged that the anti-witchcraft shrines were a twentieth century response against colonialism and swift social change that accompanied it.<sup>30</sup> McCaskie demonstrated how socio-political or cultural change breeds new ways of solving problems, which manifested in innovations on the indigenous religious landscape.<sup>31</sup> Goody's take on the issue is different. For him, the anti-witchcraft shrines were a continuation of older forms of shrines. But McCaskie contends also that those shrines were forms of social control mechanisms.<sup>32</sup>

Again, Goody stresses the economic gains of such anti-witchcraft cults as opposed to Parker's position of shrines springing up in "response to anomie and social stress."<sup>33</sup> Researchers also note how the colonial government viewed the *hwe me so* shrine as simply a cynical device for making money and as political in orientation and consequently banned it, at least publicly.<sup>34</sup> There is evidence, however, that this shrine lingered on until independence when the first president of

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<sup>27</sup> Dovlo, "The Church in Africa and Religious Pluralism," 54.

<sup>28</sup> T. C. McCaskie, "Anti-Witchcraft in Ashanti: An Essay in the Social History of an African People," *History in Africa* 8(1981), 126. [url:http://www.jstor.org/stable](http://www.jstor.org/stable). Accessed 09/06/2013.

<sup>29</sup> Dovlo, "The Church in Africa and Religious Pluralism," 53.

<sup>30</sup> Parker, "Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft and Trans-Regional Ritual Innovation in Early Ghana, 394.

<sup>31</sup> McCaskie, "Anti-Witchcraft in Ashanti," 126.

<sup>32</sup> McCaskie, "Anti-Witchcraft in Ashanti," 126.

<sup>33</sup> Jack Goody, "Anomie in Ashanti?" *Journal of the International African Institute*, 27,4. (1957): 3.

<sup>34</sup> McCaskie, Anti-Witchcraft in Ashanti, (1981)144, Parker, Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft and Trans-regional, 407.

Ghana tried uniting the country with religion, falling on indigenous religious metaphors for the purpose.

If Parker's assertion of the earlier indigenous religious movement emerging as a reaction to colonial rule is anything to go by, then with independence and self-rule, practitioners of these religions should have naturally operated and practiced their religion freely. Nevertheless, it would seem that IRTs continually faced criticism both as a legacy of colonialism and due to Christianity's demonization of these traditions, relegating them to the background while Christianity took the front stage. Even though individual Ghanaians such as "Afrikadzata Deku, Seth Dartey Kumordzi and Segbawu expressed nationalistic religious views through the print and electronic media,"<sup>35</sup> the momentous contemporary IR developments that has quickened Ghana's religious landscape is that which is being sponsored by the likes of freelance neo-indigenous priests such as Bonsam and allies.

De Witte, Meyer and Dovlo have covered aspects of the Afrikania development. Meyer identifies how Rawlings's Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) revolutionary government venerated Afrikania as a cultural representation of local cults and eased their access to national media to the detriment of the other religious traditions which were outlawed from accessing the media. Arguing that the state enlisted these traditions in a bid to provide an ideological backing for the political revolutions at that time, Meyer shows how Afrikania's narrative infused the nation with a strong sense of the necessity for Ghanaians to regain their African heritage.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Dovlo, "The Church in Africa and Religious Pluralism, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Birgit Meyer, "Religious revelation, Secrecy and the Limits of Visual Representation," in *Anthropological Theory* 2006 6: 431-453, 437.

De Witte's account focuses on current developments in Afrikania, especially its adoption of media as a crucial tool in the competition for exposure after the 1992 media liberation that accompanied Ghana's return to democratic rule. She also hints at the movement's attempt to reform and modernize traditional religion to make it relevant and attractive as an alternative to Christianity.<sup>37</sup> She notes how in structure and practice Jsofo Okomfo Damuah, a disrobed Catholic priest and founder of Afrikania, patterned the movement in accordance with Christianity and incorporated many Christian elements, starting with his title, Jsofo (a title for Christian priests) before adding Komfo, a title for traditional priests/priestesses. Other innovations include the use of candles, sprinkling of water, dipping fingers in water and making a sign before entering the worship center among others. I suggest that this ethos of *Afrikania*, mixing indigenous religions with Christianity, departs from the developments that this study covers. What *Afrikania* sought to do was to gather and institutionalize IRTs, priests and priestesses under one holistic umbrella with one leader. However, the founder of *Afrikania* faced problems in pushing this agenda forward. First, Damuah was perceived by IR priests and priestesses as an outsider, and secondly, powerful priests and priestesses were not ready to succumb to one authority. Hence the failure of Damuah and later leaders to institutionalize IRTs in Ghana. All the same, developments in this era could have been the catalyst that engendered the new indigenous religious priest we see in the public sphere today. Taking clues from opinions expressed by both Parker and Goody about the socio-political forces that possibly triggered the earlier indigenous religious movements, we gain insights into the contemporary indigenous religious outburst onto the public, and nearly 30 years after *Afrikania* was founded. Following these leads, this study pays respectful attention to how contemporary social changes, induced by both internal and global forces, are eliciting changes on

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<sup>37</sup> Marlene De Witte, "The Spectacular and the Spirits: Charismatics and Neo-traditionalists on Ghanaian Television," *Journal of Object Art and Belief* 1.3 (2005): 314-334, 326.

the indigenous religious landscape of Ghana. I offer analytical accounts of two indigenous religious strands, shifts in societal thinking about indigenous religions, the new developments within Ghanaian Christian religious circles and the ways in which they are evoking responses from the indigenous religious landscape.

In the beginning of this discussion, I intimated that research done on contemporary developments taking place in the indigenous religious realm of the contemporary religiosities of African communities, especially on Ghana, for the most part is cursory. It would seem that researchers who write on modern Ghana are not specifically interested in the indigenous religious cultures of the communities they research but, rather, on the way the people (communities) rally their indigenous resources in general to deal with issues imposed on them by globalization. Happenings in the religious sphere are often mentioned, but only in passing. For example, essays featured in the Comaroffs' *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* make only cursory mention of the new forms of religious belief and practice that the destructive impact of contemporary globalization is producing in modern African communities.<sup>38</sup> Themes covered in this work range from the influence of expanding markets, modern mass media forms, commoditization, crusading creeds and bureaucracies on contemporary African communities and how the IRTs are responding to them.<sup>39</sup>

The essays in *Modernity and its Malcontents* are here examined in two parts. Part one deals with “(Re) visions of Power, Ritual (Trans) formation while the second part looks at Moral Economics, Modern Politics, and Mystical Struggles.”<sup>40</sup> The Comaroffs share the view that

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<sup>38</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), vii.

<sup>39</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, eds. *Modernity and its Malcontents*, xi-xxxi.

<sup>40</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and its Malcontents*, xi-xxxi.



external (global) forces have interacted in diverse ways with local conditions and contingencies, giving rise to a vista of socio-cultural creations, structural arrangements and re-arrangements, and material situations in postmodern African communities. These dislocations, they have argued, further engendered a heightened pre-occupation with indigenous religious symbolic forms, which in turn function as the cultural lenses through which the affected African communities interpret modern developments, and the ritual mechanisms within which they engage practically with new situations.<sup>41</sup> The essays of Auslander, Bastian, and Scholl, for example, clearly demonstrate how the dislocations linked to the colonial project and the impact of contemporary globalizing forces have occasioned the efflorescence of witchcraft beliefs, magic and sorcery, contrary to popular expectations or speculations. Witchcraft belief, they argue, deploys a variety of meaningful images which enable local communities to engage “the jealousies,” “the expectations,” and “the frustrations” that have accompanied consumer capitalism, colonial control, and the “rupture of the indigenous balance of power and wealth.”<sup>42</sup>

The literature also stresses the role of belief and ritual in postmodern Africa, especially in the efforts of people to garner power so that they can assert some measure of control over their rapidly changing, chaotic and unprecedented worlds. Masquelier’s essay on the Bori cult in Niger, for example, shows how local communities draw on indigenous religious belief and ritual praxis to regain their independence from global hegemonies.<sup>43</sup> To be specific, Masquelier suggests that the traditional religious symbolic forms of the Bori constitute the basis of a “counter hegemonic” religious discourse and praxis that functions as crucial powerbase for them in their efforts to retain a sense of their indigenous identity. Similarly, Matory, noting the symbolic value of contemporary

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<sup>41</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity and its Malcontents*, xxix.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Auslander, Misty L. Bastian, and Pamela G. Schmoll in “*Modernity and its Malcontents* 167, 129, 193.

<sup>43</sup> Adeline Masquelier, “Narratives of Power, Images of Wealth: The Ritual Economy of Bori in the Market,” in “*Modernity and its Malcontents*, 3.

initiation rites of Shango possession priests in the Oyo-Yoruba religion of Nigeria, writes “These rites of spirit possession mobilize the norms of a defunct empire in the service of a rival modern order, which, unlike the modern hegemony, valorizes feminine authority.”<sup>44</sup> For Comaroff and Comaroff, images of evil embody “all the contradictions of the experience of modernity itself.”<sup>45</sup> Meyer clarifies this idea by suggesting that “exactly those occult forces that Western media often take as evidence for Africa’s Otherness are found to evolve from or speak to situations of contact between Africa and the West.”<sup>46</sup> The growth of IRTs in Ghana which this study is about is, among other things, a byproduct of modernity’s malcontents. It is linked with the encounter between modernizing forces and local conditions in Ghana. While these forces impact traditional religious beliefs and practices directly as we have discussed above, it is their impact on Indigenous Christian beliefs and practices that seem to be more marked in Ghana. Furthermore, it is the expansion of Christian influence in Ghana that has triggered reactions from the indigenous religious actors and institutions in Ghana. This is why we need to know something about the growth of Pentecostal-Charismaticism in Ghana and its extensions in the Diaspora in order to understand our subject of inquiry properly.

### **1.6.2 Pentecostal-Charismatic growth in Africa and its extensions in the African Diaspora**

Among the diverse religious groups in Ghana’s Christianity, the strand called Pentecostal-Charismatic has enjoyed the most attention from scholars. Researchers have touched on almost every facet of Ghana’s Pentecostalism. The themes in the burgeoning literature have covered the

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<sup>44</sup> Lorand Matory, “Government by Seduction: History and the Tropes of “Mounting” in Oyo-Yoruba Religion,” in *Modernity and its Malcontent*, ed Comaroff Jean and Comaroff John (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 64.

<sup>45</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity and its Malcontents*, xxix.

<sup>46</sup> Meyer 2008, 85.

origins of the experience, the factors responsible for its expansion and domination of public space, its extensive appropriation of modern media forms and modern organizational strategies. Scholars such as Asamoah-Gyadu, Ukah, Gifford, Pobee, Adogame, Meyer, and De Witte have explored different aspects of this African religious experience. Ukah, Meyer, Hackett, Asamoah-Gyadu and De Witte attribute the success of these groups to the use of the media.<sup>47</sup> Adogame's view is that not much has changed; Pentecostals simply recast indigenous discourse and practice within a modern institutional context. Asamoah-Gyadu in his very recent publication argues that the “growth of Christianity, especially Pentecostal/Charismatic varieties, has clearly put traditional religion under siege.”<sup>48</sup> Paul Gifford focuses on the growth of a strand of Christianity called Charismatic churches; he gives elaborate data on the major groups led by Nicolas Duncan Williams, Mensah Otabil, Joseph Eastwood Anaba, and Charles Agyin Asare.<sup>49</sup> Omenyo speculates that Pentecostalism in Ghana is growing so much that the missionary churches have to adopt Pentecostal styles in order to keep their members.<sup>50</sup> Another theme that emerges from the scanty literature is how African Christianity is being extended to the newly emerging Diasporas of Europe

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<sup>47</sup> Rosalind I. J. Hackett, “Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of Media Technologies in Nigeria and Ghana,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 28, Fasc. 3 (1998), 258. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1581571> .Accessed: 05/08/2014 05:38; Birgit Meyer, “Praise the Lord”: Popular Cinema and Pentecostal Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere,” *American Ethnologist* 31. 1 (2004): 94. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3805306> .Accessed: 05/08/2014; Asonzeh F.-K. Ukah, “Advertising God: Nigerian Christian Video-Films and the Power of Consumer Culture,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 33, Fasc. 2 (2003): 204. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1581655> .Accessed: 05/08/2014; Asamoah-Gyadu, “Media Representation of African Traditional Religions,” 4; De Witte, “The Spectacular and the Spirits,” 316.

<sup>48</sup>J.Asamoah-Gyadu, “African Traditional Religion, Pentecostalism and the Clash of Spiritualities in Ghana,” in *Fundamentalism and the Media*, eds. Stewart M. Hoover and Kaneva Nadia (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 161-163.

J. Asamoah-Gyadu, “Media Representation of African Traditional Religions,” 8.

<sup>49</sup>Paul Gifford, “Ghana's Charismatic Churches,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24. 3(1994): 244-251. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1581301>. Accessed: 05-08-2014.

<sup>50</sup> Cephass Narh Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Churches in Ghana* (The Netherlands: Boekencentrum, 2006), 297.

and North America.<sup>51</sup> Adogame and Spickard alert us to the “reverse flow”<sup>52</sup> or “reverse mission,” trends where Africans formally referred to as “heathens” are going back to re-Christianize the American and European continents.<sup>53</sup> For Olupona “reverse missionaries” includes not only African-established churches but also has a significant impact on the evolving civic participation of African religious communities.<sup>54</sup>

On the whole, most of the views of scholars affirm the dominance of Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, on Ghanaian religious space. One major theme in these works, which is of much relevance to this study, is how agents of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian forms delegitimize African religious traditions and their agents by casting the indigenous religious landscape as an abode of the devil and predicting their disappearance.

Though scholars have written about the resilient nature of indigenous religions in the face of modern Christian dominance, a comprehensive account of the ways in which the indigenous religious landscape is shaping itself to the Christian dominance is yet to be produced by researchers. Parish’s description of how indigenous religious agents and apparatus are enlisted in local efforts to participate in the global economy is one of the few research works that speaks, albeit partially, to this question. She describes how pressure on the Ghanaian youth to succeed in local business ventures in a growing capitalist economy has led to the use of magico-religious power in business ventures, enhancing the relevance of indigenous shrines in Akan-speaking areas of Ghana.<sup>55</sup> De Witte also describes the proliferation of shrines in Ghana, which specialize in

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<sup>51</sup> Adogame (2013, 2010, 2009), Tetteh (2007), Olupona (2007).

<sup>52</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 271.

<sup>53</sup> Spickard and Adogame, 14.

<sup>54</sup> Jacob K. Olupona and Regina Gemignani, “African Immigrants Religions in America,” (New York Press: New York, 2007), 8.

<sup>55</sup> Jane Parish, “From the Body to the Wallet: Conceptualizing Akan Witchcraft at Home and Abroad,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2003): 488.

equipping travelers with spiritual power so that officials of the embassies of the foreign countries they wish to travel to will grant those visas easily.<sup>56</sup> Wuaku notes how a growing appeal of Hinduism in Ghana seems to auger well for the expansion of the indigenous religious field.<sup>57</sup> Wuaku's work provides bits of information on the new developments on the indigenous religious landscape of Ghana. The study disputes the notion that the indigenous religions of Ghana have been supplanted by Christian dominance. It offers data to support the view that this field is recently and dramatically transforming itself into a modern religious sphere; it has become even more relevant to Ghanaians than before, and its agents are deploying their creative religiosities in the production of narratives that counter the hegemonic discourse of the Pentecostal Charismatics. In this connection this study fills a crucial lacuna in both the literature and the research on the activities of current neo-IR agents on the local scene as well as their exploits in their international destinations.

### **1.7 The Geographical Locations: Akomadan-Afrancho and Obuasi- Dadwen**

The settings of the research are primarily two Ghanaian towns: Akomadan-Afrancho and Obuasi Dadwen, both in the Ashanti region of Ghana. I settled on these two cities after an initial research survey, which took me to five of the 10 regions in Ghana. My choice was influenced by this region being the highest in population among the ten regions with 4,780,380 (19.4%) of the total demography of Ghana. Also, the Ashanti region is popularly noted for preservation of her indigenous traditions. Geographically, the two towns are located in different districts in the Ashanti

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<sup>56</sup> Marleen De Witte, "Religious Media, Mobile Spirits, Publicity and Secrecy." In *African Pentecostalism. Travelling Spirits Migrants Markets, and Mobilities*, eds. Huweimeier and Krause. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 84.

<sup>57</sup> Albert Kafui Wuaku, *Hindu Gods in West Africa: Ghanaian Devotees of Shiva and Krishna*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1.

region. Kwaku Bonsam represents the neo-indigenous priests who are emerging and he is located in Akomadan-Afrancho, a semi urban town in the Offinso North District of the Ashanti region. The revitalized old indigenous religions are represented in this study by the tradition of priestess Komfo Oforiwaa who resides at Obuasi-Dadwen, a suburb, of Obuasi, an urban centre. My objective in this section is to describe these locations to enable readers understand the background of the events analyzed in the study. I describe Akomandan-Afrancho first, before Obuasi-Dadwen.



Akomadan-Afrancho is located in the Offinso North District Assembly of the Ashanti regional divisions. The town is one of three urban settlements in a district with a population of 56,881<sup>59</sup> people. Akomadan and Afrancho are considered to be twin cities, but they are separately located. As a matter of fact, the locals of Akomadan-Afrancho refer to their town as the gateway to the Ashanti capital from the northern part of the country. Akomadan-Afrancho is predominantly Akan and, like other Akan societies, it has a matrilineal inheritance system. It is the economic hub of the district. About “80% of the inhabitants work in the agricultural sector”<sup>60</sup> while the rest work in the service or commerce sectors.

Obuasi-Dadwen is located in the southern part of the Ashanti region and about 50 kilometers from the regional capital, Kumasi. It is a rural settlement located off the Kumasi highway. The inhabitants are predominantly Akan people, though ethnic groups from all over Ghana have migrated to the place due to the gold industry. Obuasi is the economic hub of Adansiman,<sup>61</sup> and due to the proximity of Dadwen to Obuasi, most of the folks work there. The mainstay of its economy is gold mining done either by multi-national companies who have the legal backing of the government of Ghana, or individual or freelance miners operating illegally in the context of a process dubbed as “galamsey” by the local community.<sup>62</sup> Next we look at the religious life of the two towns. Since the two towns share religious cultures we compare and contrast their features, in order to avoid repetition.

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<sup>59</sup> Ghana Statistical Services (GSS) May 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Obuasi Municipal Assembly brochure.

<sup>61</sup> It is a commercial town. No wonder the commercial and services sectors are rated high and leading in terms of employment with 55% of the population. 35% are employed in the mining sector and 10% in Agriculture (Obuasi Municipal Assembly brochure).

<sup>62</sup> Galamsey is the local nick name for illegal mining.



### 1.7.1 Religious Life

The main religious community in Akomadan-Afrancho is Christianity. At the same time the Christian population is fairly high in Obuasi<sup>63</sup> with the Pentecostal-Charismatics being the highest; whereas in Akomadan-Afrancho, the mainline churches--Catholic, Methodist, and a high percentage of Adventists--lead in terms of their numbers. There is also a significant Muslim population which resides in the portion of the town called *Zongo*.<sup>64</sup> Many of these are migrants from northern Ghana who have settled in Akomadan-Afrancho to work. Furthermore, the proximity of Akomadan-Afrancho to the northern part of Ghana, which is predominantly Muslim makes it a suitable destination for these migrants. Obuasi also has a significant population of Muslims who dominate the galamsey mining sector. In terms of population, the IRTs practitioners are statistically next in line after Christianity and Islam. Their small numbers notwithstanding, agents of IRTs have a very strong influence on worshippers.

### 1.7.2 Political Life

Politically, as elsewhere in Ghana, there exist two forms of political organization in the research setting: modern and traditional. Akomadan-Afrancho falls within the Offinso North District Assembly. The capital of the district is Akomadan. Officially the district assembly implements all governmental policies and stands in for the central government in the area as is the case with the Obuasi Municipal Assembly. There is also the traditional council, which is represented in the

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<sup>63</sup> I refer to Obuasi and not Obuasi-Dadwen because there are no churches or mosques in the town, all are located in the mother town Obuasi.

<sup>64</sup> *Zongo* is a Hausa word meaning settlement. The urban centres in Ghana inhabited mostly by Muslims or people from the northern part of Ghana are referred to as *zongo*.

various districts. In Ashanti region the traditional area or council is governed by the *Asantehene*, the king. He coordinates activities in the traditional area with the help of paramount chiefs (*Omanhene*), who head the various traditional divisions. The Obuasi traditional council is supervised by the paramount chief of Adansi area. He is called the *Adansihene*. In the same vein, Offinso, an outlying region, is under the traditional jurisdiction of the *Offinsohene*. Both the *Adansihene* and *Offinsohene* represent the *Asantehene* in dealings with the various sub-chiefs on all traditional governance issues.

### 1.7.3 Social Life

The social life of the people of Akomadan-Afranchi is not too different from other Akan communities. Mundane and inevitable events such as births, marriages, and funerals are all year round activities, often bringing home sons and daughters of the region, who live in and around other parts of Ghana. Also, there are annual festivals in both districts that attract considerable attention of people from all walks of life. The “*emua nni ko*”<sup>65</sup> is a festival celebrated by the *Offinso* traditional area in December. The festival is a thanksgiving rite as well as an agricultural ritual. It provides a ritual context for thanking the deities of the region for giving the people the lands (*Offinso* land) which sustain their agricultural life as a group. In the Obuasi (*Adansi*) traditional area, the *Afahye* festival is celebrated under the auspices of the *Adansihene*. This is a yearly ritual which takes place in the last week of November or first week of December. The chiefs and people of Adansiman celebrate this festival as separate units in their own villages, congregating at the

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<sup>65</sup> Literally, this means “animals eat and go.” This festival was carved by the *Offinsohene* in the era of warfare: while his contemporaries were fighting other communities to amass slaves, he was gathering land. And his reason was that, when you plant on the land and animals eat some or destroy some, some of the produce would be left and the land will always be there to be tilled.

traditional capital, Fomena, to climax it. The essence of the festival is to thank the gods for their providence during the year and to ask for their protection in the years ahead. In contemporary times, the gathering also serves as platforms for soliciting for funds for developmental projects in the traditional area. The traditional council also celebrates all religious activities mandated to be celebrated by the Asantehene.

I have already discussed the two cases offered in this study as demonstrations of the recent upsurge of activities on Ghana's indigenous religious landscape. One case stems from a small town or a village but is gradually spreading its influence nationally and globally. The other case is in an urban setting and is rooted locally. Though I distinguish between the religious, political and social spheres of the lives of the people in these towns, what I wish to point out is that these spheres are traditionally intertwined and inseparable. We will notice that the effort we put into separating them does not yield much profit. We encounter how the influence of religion is pervasive. This attests to the continual importance of "traditional religion:" the pre-colonial system of governance still holds sway, the king's position and roles are linked with religious beliefs and practices and most Christians and Muslims continue to participate in indigenous life-cycle and annual communal rituals, which are performed in the context of indigenous religion.

## **1.8 Methodology**

This study demanded approaches from varied disciplines, including religious studies, history, sociology and cultural anthropology. I therefore employed an eclectic methodological approach, drawing from the diverse disciplinary backgrounds: ethnographic, phenomenological, historical, comparative and analytical methods. Historical approaches enable us to reconstruct the history of

the encounter between IRTs and foreign religions and globalizing forces in order to identify the trajectories and noting what is similar or different about the experience under study in relation to earlier developments. I also had to engage a phenomenological approach as I had to try to understand the agents and clientele on the IRT landscapes from their own viewpoints because I consider myself to be an outsider, in the sense that I am not a practitioner, a subscriber or an Ashanti. At the same time I could refer to myself as an “insider” on the note that I am a Ghanaian scholar researching in Ghana. My overall outsider status called for inserting myself emphatically into their world to uncover what they do. I garnered much trust from the communities involved through this approach and this trust facilitated the gathering of information on the communities and adherents. Using phenomenology benefits a researcher. By “playing as a member” information is often volunteered without a second thought. Pretending to be a member, however, is a moral issue, as it could be viewed as deceitful. Yet sometimes the only way one could get accurate information is to pretend to be like one of them.

The ethnographic method was particularly vital, in that the research called for detailed descriptions and explanations of the diversity of signs that marked the experiences I was investigating. These included the indigenous agents (priests/priestesses), their shrines, clients, helpers, subscribers/adherents, non-worshippers, fans, consumers and natives of the locations of the study. Gold has quoted Weber as arguing that “one could best understand society for what it is-not for what one thinks it might, should, or must be-by studying it from the points of view of its members.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, as an ethnographer the only way to do this was by living among them, observing, probing, participating, asking questions and recording. Comparative analysis was

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<sup>66</sup>Raymond L. Gold, “The Ethnographic Method in Sociology,” in *Ethnography* Vol.1, ed, Alan Bryman (London: Sage, 2001), 290.

definitely an essential tool in prompting the difference and similarities of the two case studies serving as samples to represent happenings on the indigenous religious landscape of Ghana. Finally, the analytical tool is a critical device that aids a researcher in making sense of the raw data accessed, which is going behind what one has collected on the field. This tool cannot be ignored.

## 1.9 The Field

The table below sums up the entire timetable of the research.

No	Nature of Field Trip	Dates of visit	Area visited	No of days
	Pilot study	17/12/11- 17/01/12	Atimpoku in V/R Koforidua in E/R Kutunasi A/R Moree in C/R Azuleluanu in W/R Akotsi in C/R Akomadan- Afrancho A/R Obuasi in A/R	4 4 3 4 4 4 3 4 4
	First field trip	17/12/11- 17/4/12	Akomadan Afrancho	90

	Field trip in (USA)	14/11/12- 21/11/12	the Bronx, New York	7
	Second field trip	17/12/12- 17/4/13	Obuasi-Dadwen	120
	Follow-up visit	28/04/2014- 10/05/14	Akomadan- Afrancho and Obuasi-Dadwen	12

The research was carried out in a period of eight months. I used the first month as a pilot study in mapping the research sites and also in connecting to my gate keepers and gaining access to the leaders of the shrines. During this phase, I also established contact with people informally in the community before getting into the natural setting of the phenomena for the research and data collection. I scheduled appointments with several priests/priestesses during this period, conducting short forms of interviews. After a careful nationwide mapping up of priests/priestesses/ and shrines belonging to IRTs and its current new extensions, I settled on two major agents/shrines to be used as case studies using random sampling technique. This was based on Gold's assumption that "human communities are regarded as not significantly different from other natural orders of phenomena."<sup>67</sup> Sampling technique was used in two ways. First, I used it in selecting the cases for this study and secondly in interviewing actors in the sites. Because it is virtually impossible to interview all the priests in Ghana, or even talk to all the priests and priestesses in Ashanti region alone, I sampled in the first case, using "sociological sampling."<sup>68</sup> I then selected the two cases

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<sup>67</sup> Gold, "The Ethnographic Method," 291.

<sup>68</sup> Gold, "The Ethnographic Method," 291.

that best exemplify the happenings on the religious field of Ghana, those being the neo-indigenous priest and revitalized old priests/shrines. The selection was based first, on what the project sought to uncover, but most importantly on the willingness of respondents to grant access to their experiences and to be interviewed. To investigate these two research sites, I used semi-structured interviews, observations, examination of documents,<sup>69</sup> and other information related to the topic under investigation.

In the towns of both shrines, I rented a room which I seldom used, as I stayed most of the time in the shrines. Sometimes I spent weeks in the shrines, using the excuse that I could not find accommodation in the village. My rationale for doing so was to capture activities of the shrine that were not often open to public observation. Many of these activities took place in the night. In the field I inserted myself into the setting and went about the data collection by talking and interacting with the community to capture the "inside" experiences. This involved spending time with the priests, workers/helpers, subscribers/adherents, non-worshippers, fans, and consumers in their homes and their places of work, but also accompanying them to their ritual activities such as worship, healing, initiations, and ritual cleansing sessions, especially the public rituals, but also the private ones. I also ventured beyond the shrines under study to explore related religious experiences in the vicinity of the shrines. I visited churches (both Pentecostal-Charismatic and mainline) to ascertain what Christians thought of these IRTs. I also frequented mosques, the shrines of *Mallams*, youth associations, women's meetings, and meetings in the chief's palace which were public, in order to gain access to narratives floating about regarding the shrines and their agents. My favorite activity was visiting the local pubs. The local pubs are a meeting place

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<sup>69</sup> Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 3rd edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 371.

of diverse categories from the public, both “cool people” and violent *galamsey* youth in the case of Obuasi, but interesting places to get important uncensored information.

I conducted one-on-one interviews as well as group interviews, and discussions were conducted with respondents using semi-structured and unstructured questions. Semi-structured and unstructured forms of interview offer the informants the liberty to express their views freely and even add valuable information not included in the original questions, an advantage that structured interviews miss.

My aim in conducting interviews was to probe into the reason behind the IRTs agents’ recent riposte on the Ghanaian religious scene, their biographies, particularly their discourses, strategies they are using to negotiate their entry and for clients and members, reasons for openly belonging to these shrines, the history of other religions they belong to or had belonged to before joining the IRTs, and why the shrine has become more important for them in contemporary times. Most of the interviews were conducted in the local Twi language. These were translated and transcribed into English. The primary data for analysis were generated from the transcribed/translated interviews, pictures, hand-outs, as well as the description of the two settings for the research.

Consent is a major hurdle a researcher must clear before interchanges can take place in the field. To observe, participate, record,<sup>70</sup> photograph or even hang around the premises of the setting, approval must first be given. Permitting access is almost as important as giving consent by the leader of the shrine (priest/priestess), but oftentimes consent granted by the leader alone is not enough. In my case, consent was granted by the leaders of the shrines under study. But I had to

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<sup>70</sup> Julian M. Murchison, *Ethnography Essentials: Designing, Conducting, and Presenting Your Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 61.



wait for these ritual agents to consult the *suman* or deities to officially pave the way. Often this called for drinks and other offerings: I had to buy drinks for the Kwaku Bonsam Shrine, and a fowl for the Komfoɔ Oforiwaa shrine, in order for the gods to grant permission for a stranger to research them. Luckily, on all occasions I was told the gods accepted my gifts, granting my requests. Yet there was another form of consent I needed. This was individual consent from the various actors. Often, they were asked to consent by the priests, but as a solution, I had to tactically warm up into their world so as not to look like intruding into their privacy.

I interviewed both priest/priestess and clients in any place deemed convenient for them, but especially in the shrine on ritual/worship days, referred to as *som da* or even during interludes in the course of such activities. In this setting I was able to categorize visitors to the shrine into three: members, permanent clients, and clients. The categorization was only possible through covert means, what is often debated to be unethical, but what Bryman justifies on the grounds that “...all scientific endeavors are interest-led. The problem with this association of ethics with certain studies (and methods) is that it implies that ethical concerns only or even primarily reside in some methods but not in others.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, he is suggesting that sometimes a researcher must do what must be done to get the information in certain studies to be able to categorize certain items and straighten data.<sup>72</sup>

With time it was easier to talk to the respondents as they developed trust and could express themselves freely to me in their homes, workplaces and sometimes on their way to the market or

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<sup>71</sup> Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 114.

<sup>72</sup> During the research stay, I saw different people accessing the shrine. Whereas some said they were members, others visited the shrine on a regular basis and since they claimed not to be members but visited the place only when the need arose, I classified them as permanent clients. I observed a third group of people, those whom I saw in a flash only once (casual clients). These were the people least likely to talk to me, yet I needed to be able to classify them as well. I therefore used a covert technique in interviewing them.

the farm, as most members in Bonsam's shrine, for example, were farmers. The conversations were informal and unstructured, though follow-up questions were directed with prompts. While most interviews lasted between one to two hours, depending on the place of interview, few interviews, such as the ones conducted in the farms of interviewees, were very long. The second and third groups of respondents, categorized as permanent and casual clients, were not easy to deal with.<sup>73</sup> This was more often the case with the casual clients. I had to deploy creativity in talking to them. Here my approach can be described as covert, as I would offer them rides from Akomadan-Afrancho or Obuasi to the capital Kumasi, which is about one hour and thirty minutes from Akomadan-Afrancho, and engage them in conversation. While most clients were unwilling to talk to me around the shrine, believing that I am a researcher or journalist who might make their stories public and destroy their social or religious status, they spoke freely about their encounters and experiences in the car, probably because they were convinced at that point I would not expose them, or possibly because the setting did not suggest they patronized the shrine.

When we would arrive at Kumasi I would make a point of "dropping" them off in their homes, which enabled me to follow up later with another interview, often a longer one. In a number of interviews in which I followed up, I sought clarification from them on gossips or "heresay" I have heard in the town by the town folks. Mostly, the interviews focused on the personal/biographical religious history of all the actors in this study. Apart from interviewing the actors in the research, I conducted expert interviews with scholars in this area of study to informally tap their expertise. To this end I met three professors from the University of Ghana and

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<sup>73</sup> Recording conversations made some casual and permanent clients uncomfortable. These two categories of persons were subscribers from other religious denominations who were "hiding"--against the will of their religious group--when patronizing the shrines. Fearing that they could be exposed on radio/ TV or even internet as attending a shrine, a place abhorred by their religion, they declined to grant interviews.

the University of Science and Technology. Our conversations helped to shape my research and notes in beneficial ways.

Observation and participation were tools I used as well in the field. The two approaches, though often fused together, are different tools. None can observe without necessarily participating to some extent. However, Murchison suggests that for an ethnographer to learn about the complicated dynamics of society and culture he/she must be involved with the people in both ways,<sup>74</sup> because insider's information cannot be accessed by distantly observing. Rather it is only through participation that one gets closer, and develops rapport, and trust for effective information disclosure. Living in the towns where these shrines are located made it a bit easier to participate and observe as I virtually hung around the shrine daily, or, as indicated earlier, even slept in the shrine in order to observe activities that took place in the night. However, I was very careful not to sway from the aims of the research in my attempt to participate/observe.

First, I had to change my way of dressing by putting on cloth instead of trousers and shirt, as the shrines had rules about women not wearing trousers but dressing traditionally. This means wearing the cloth wrapped around the waist, or even a flowing gown that concealed a great portion of a woman's body. This mode of dressing enabled me to easily blend in with participants during worship. Sometimes I took on roles many worshippers performed, such as arranging chairs, sweeping of the dusty shrine, singing and clapping with the musicians, pouring libations (praying) among other activities, which I had to learn quickly, all the while keeping in mind my purpose for being there. I also observed the priests, members and clients in the shrine as well as how they behaved in their homes, whenever I would visit there with them.

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<sup>74</sup> Murchison, *Ethnography Essentials*, 84.

In a typical interview I would converse with respondents on private matters whenever there was an opportunity to do so. This was a deliberate effort on my part to earn their trust and create rapport. Adherents and or agents of IRTs, as I have already pointed out, are suspicious of the people like myself, who come to the shrines not to subscribe but to research. Standing aloof is interpreted by the community as eavesdropping, and to get over this I participated in their activities both in the shrine and when I visited them in their homes. During home visits I pounded fufu,<sup>75</sup> peeled cassava, helped to dry washed clothes on lines or the grass when I visited homes and this created an air that facilitated the free-flow of the information I was seeking.

I made a conscious effort to observe the body language of actors as they spoke during worship and on ordinary days. In the shrine, for example, I observed the members and clients alike bowed to greet the priest. They also spoke to him looking down (not directly in his eyes). When I inquired from one elder and a client why they did that, he explained that the priest was “awesomely filled with spiritual powers” and a mere human cannot look into his eyes as humans are not on the same level as the spirit whose powers “fill” the priest. He also explained that the gesture ---of bowing and not looking the priest in the eye--- was a symbolic expression of respect for a priest. Later investigations in the community revealed how, bowing before, and not looking into the eyes of elders and chiefs and other symbols of the community, means respect in keeping with Akan decorum.

Using participant observation is a valuable way of getting in-depth information as well as establishing lasting rapport with respondents. I sometimes joined in group conversions of clients at the shrines as well as individuals on topical issues. This way I was able to capture personal

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<sup>75</sup> Boiled cassava and plantain, pounded and mixed into dough. It is often served with soup.

views and experiences. I found out that such interactions were crucial in making respondents drop their guard, as they help clear away earlier suspicions of you as one coming to spy and eavesdrop on them. Interacting sends a positive signal that you care, you are just like them and you reason with them. I listened mostly attentively and spoke when the need arose or when I needed them to clarify a relevant issue. When they shared their life problems, I offered a listening ear and a few suggestions or consolations. I found that this gesture builds trust in the field. For example, it was my expressed interest in Kwaku Bonsam's school that led him and his members to open up to me. I visited his school frequently after the initial introduction and even taught some lessons, because I am a trained elementary school teacher in Ghana. This gesture of interest and kindness dispelled suspicions of me as a spy, leading the community to accept me as one who was kind and willing to help. Encouraged by my gestures, the headmaster of the school and the teacher's volunteered information on the priest and members of the shrine for whom I lacked interviews. This enabled me to fill in crucial gaps.

Normally, I would record observations in my field note and scribble answers and explanations given to questions I ask as well. William G. Zikmund, Barry J. Babin, Jon C. Carr and Mitch Griffin were actually right when they hinted that the field is comparable to a map and it is left to the researcher to negotiate the way around in order to know where to head.<sup>76</sup> That is, each researcher must study the terrain of the setting and the actors in the setting to see how to negotiate the contours of the field to acquire data. Reading scholarly work prepares one ahead of the task but most of the work depended on how researchers negotiate their way in the field.

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<sup>76</sup> William G. Zikmund, Barry J. Babin, Jon C. Carr, and Mitch Griffin, *Business Research Methods* (Australia: Macmillan Publishing sSolutions 2010), 62.

The method I used paid off as I was able to make some friends who became my regular informants. The rapport I have with them allows me to call and ask for clarification even after fieldwork ended and I was back in Germany.

Primary data was accrued basically from the 40 interviews I conducted. See the table below.

DATA	Kwaku Bonsam	Komfo Oforiwaa	Total
Members	4	3	7
Permanent/casual clients	7	7	14
Town folks	3	3	6
Group discussions	2	2	4
Expert on IRTs			3
USA and Amsterdam clients	5	1	6

Also, sources in the form of published and unpublished materials in religious studies and other disciplines on the phenomenon were consulted. Sources consisting of published studies on related developments in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa were also consulted. I used sources such as texts, articles, journals, local newspapers, online newspapers, internet news, blogs and Facebook amateur videos and film, recorded TV news and interviews, pamphlets and handouts from shrines and magazines.

### **1.10 Challenges and limitations**

Departing from Germany for the field in Ghana, I was excited and hopeful of a smooth take off and process of my fieldwork. I thought I had an advantage in my being Ghanaian and my doing research work in an Akan community, of which my ethnic group, Nzema, is a part. We share traditions, especially in terms of the language spoken. Armed with the confidence afforded me by these advantages, I plunged into the fieldwork expecting everything to proceed smoothly. Soon, however, obstacles began to emerge, one after the other. But as time went by it sunk in that these were causalities of field research just like any project, and they called on me to demonstrate flexibility as a field researcher in devising “ways and means” tactics to strategize a way forward in the field. In this section, I offer accounts of some of the complications and challenges I encountered in the field that were drawbacks and how I was able to overcome them. These setbacks include the problem of access, suspicions of respondents, coercion by practitioners to be a member of their shrine, challenges to swear oaths, restraint from certain activities by virtue of my gender, the difficulties linked with using electronic gadgets, the fear of curses, and the insistence of priests on inspecting what I write daily among others.

The most difficult problem that befalls a researcher is the problem of access. As an outsider researching IRTs, I experienced the difficult task of getting access. Outsider here means non-practitioner or non-adherent of IRTs. I employed the services of gatekeepers who knew the terrain very well. Some worked and some did not. With their assistance, however, I started the research work mapping out the research sites. Mapping the research sites was done in Ashanti, Eastern, Central, Western and Greater Accra Regions of Ghana. Twelve priests/priestesses and shrines were

consulted.<sup>77</sup> Through the mapping up, I selected six out of the willing agents and slashed it down to two cases, each representing the argument of this thesis while using the other four as backups should either of the two decide to opt out at any point in time. This selection did not come easily as some shrines posed problems, which would be highlighted later on. However Zikmund, Babin, Carr and Griffin hinted that the research process is comparable to a map, which has no one right way, but the path chosen depends on available choices and resources.<sup>78</sup> This was the case for my time-bound research which had to change to suit available resources. After my mapping up, I selected two cases: a neo-priest and revitalized old shrine. The revitalized old shrine was manned by a priest who had formally served as a Pentecostal-charismatic pastor. These two cases were initially selected based on an offer of access and other factors. However, on my second field trip to begin the case study of the pastor turned indigenous priest, Nana Ogya Nframa, he seemed to shut the research door on my face and would not allow me near his shrine. Numerous mediating attempts to allow me access failed and after a month of pursuing him, due to time restraints I abandoned the site in search for a replacement. Luckily, I had a backup plan with four reserved priests and priestesses who had already granted access, so I selected one to replace the pastor turned priest. It was a challenging and chaotic situation that could have turned disastrous without the backup plan. Fieldwork comes with the baggage of deep frustration, disappointment and confusion, sometimes even bitter tears,<sup>79</sup> all of which somehow come together at the end as goods

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<sup>77</sup> Aba Yaba of Moree shrine central region, Soetor Amegashie Kporho of Aboso near Koforidua and Efo Agbenyo of Abidjan Mame wata Atimpoku-Adome Bridge in the Eastern Region, Osofo Kofi Garden in Azuleluanu-Esiamana and Nana Nyamekeh in Takoradi in the Western Region, Nana Obuanipa shrine in Kuntense, Nana Kwaku Bonsam in Akomadan-Afrankor, Nana Sabentoo in Apitikoko near Obuasi in Ashanti Region, Nana Ogya-nframa, Kwabenakwa-Obuasi and Komfo Oforiwaa in Dadwen-Obuasi in the Ashanti region, Komfo Robert in Afofeso near Accra, and Nana Kofi Agorsor in the Greater Accra Region.

<sup>78</sup> Zikmund, Babin, Carr, and Griffin, *Business Research Methods*, 62.

<sup>79</sup> Jan Blommaert and Dong Jie, *Ethnographic Fieldwork: Beginner's Guide*, Multilingual Matters, (Bristol, 2010), 24.



in disguise. I say so because the disappointment of the earlier selected shrine opened my eyes to make a useful adjustment that led me to reconsider my choice in terms of gender. To this end, I selected a priestess whose shrine is modeled after the old forms of shrine; young and with different discourse from the neo-priest, she nevertheless claims the indigenous religious faith of her forefathers and foremothers.

After the final selection of the two cases and access was granted, it was time to insert myself into the setting itself, as granting access in an indigenous religious setting does not necessarily guarantee access to information at all, as I soon experienced. I envisaged that this was not going to be an easy task considering the terrain of the indigenous religious landscape where priests and adherents alike were weary—and therefore wary-- of people misrepresenting them in public. Their rigidity and overprotectiveness were based on their suspicions of outsiders' perception about them so that even when access has been granted, the researcher is still a suspect and monitored by actors. The circumstance called for tactical strategies so I did not rush them into trusting me. Rather I explored other avenues of interest to them and concentrated on life of both priests and members outside of the shrine and that helped in winning their trust. It took time but they did warm up later. The interactions I had with the actors outside of the setting threw more light on their coldness to outsiders and suspicious attitude towards people to whom they even grant access. Their suspicion focused on issues such as the negative tag placed on IRTs, inter- and intra-competitions that exist in the religious landscape and lastly, possible misrepresentation by investigative journalism.

In Ghana, IRT have historically been castigated as deleterious by Christian missionaries and have recently often been accused by the dominant Christian Pentecostal-Charismatics as the stronghold of the devil, backward and timeworn. On one of my visits to the shrines, a question

posed by Nana Obuanipa hints at the priests' perception of strangers who are not clients. He asked me: "What have you come to research?" This is a loaded question which I would later understand as the underlying factor that explains the hostile attitude of indigenous priests to outsiders--fear and suspicion. They are suspicious of persons who have not come to solicit their help but to research, because agents of IRTs are unable to detect straightaway who their adversaries are and who might be harmless researchers. Adversary here means people who have come to seek their downfall. They would not know whether one was a Christian or Muslim pretending to be a researcher in order to get information for their outfit to buttress the standing argument that IRTs are evil and are up to no good. Also, we researchers can also be perceived as spies from other shrines who have come to copy so as to reproduce in their own shrines, or to sift for information that can prove an indigenous agent as fake or a bad nut among the IRTs agents. Similarly, fierce inter- and intra- competition among the various religious traditions over potent spiritual power, a contested essence on the religious landscape of Ghana, has created an arena where various religions try to outwit the "other," either within or outside of a tradition. People who are not known are therefore suspected to be allies of their rivals.

Another problem in the field in relation to access can be attributed to recent investigative journalism in Ghana. The face of journalism has changed from its former on-the-scene reportage to a more fact-finding type, resulting in the uncovering of corrupt undertakings of people in the public sphere. The sight of a recorder, a note-book or even enquiry for information consequently causes panic. Priests and priestesses have become so defensive. They will not allow a negative reportage of their activities to tarnish the image they are trying hard to redeem from the already disparaging ink painted on them by the dominant religious group.

Mobile communication has become one of the easiest ways of communicating in Ghana. As much as the technique has eased communication for researchers and clients or members to fix appointment times, unlike the traditional way, it also became a source of deceit and excuse, as informants due to this easy access conveniently skipped interviews when called, impeding the progress of the interviews until I reverted to the old way of going to them without prior notice, which turned out to be more successful in the end.

Again, my gender posed a problem and sometimes impeded the progress of the work. By virtue of being a woman and biologically having a menstrual cycle, I was warned not to come to the shrine during that period of my cycle. Meanwhile, important activities in the shrines were carried on during that period of time. I therefore had to employ the services of an assistant to stand in for me. Yet the frustration of not being able to witness it firsthand was a big setback. Connected to my natural state as a woman, was the issue of man-woman relationship. Priests normally ignored protocols and made passes at me because they felt I was a woman and could be wooed. In Akan tradition, women wield much power but when it comes to relationships, men are at the helm of affairs. In Akan culture, men have had a right to pursue their own agenda toward women. I saw that behavior as disrespectful and patronizing, an attitude that distracts research attention and breeds tension when not tactfully tackled. Probing into why a priest would want to woo a woman who has come to do research leads to different interpretations, all bordering on the earlier noted “suspicions” of such a priest. Most of these priests are illiterates and perceive everyone holding a recorder or seeking information as a journalist. Wooing a journalist in order to get an ally in the media to get positive projection, I suggest, could be the driving force behind such act.

Lastly there was the problem of restriction of information. Recording, taping and photographing were especially restricted. I was prompted by priests or helpers to stop recording

several times in the middle of an activity with an explanation that a deity did not want to be recorded. Though they explained that they had to stop me because of their respect for the deities, it could also be that the intention behind their action was to mystify the setting of the shrine to demonstrate that the deities do really control both the spiritual and physical worlds in their area of operation. The restrictions were often extended to observations of some activities performed during the night. Even though I managed to observe some activities, aided by shrine attendants, the ban on recording was a drawback. Again, there was the issue of accessing firsthand information of what ensues between a client and priests; whereas communication between a consulting priest and a client was allowed in some shrines, others saw it as intrusion of privacy. However frustrating and stagnating the restrictions and other stated options were, the process facilitated an effort of building on earlier experiences to re-strategize at every stage of the research.

### **1.11 Conclusion**

The research brings together two main developments on the Ghanaian indigenous religious scene. As a way of demonstrating the current upsurge of activities on this portion of Ghana's local religious landscape--one neo-indigenous religions priest/shrine and one revitalized old priestess/shrine. I use these cases to demonstrate the argument that developments on the indigenous religious landscape of Ghana parallel the robust ethos that characterizes the Christian religious landscape, yet because of the neglect of scholarly focus on these developments there is a strong sense that the influence of indigenous religions is waning in Ghana.

The chapters of the study will debate this impression by demonstrating how socio-economic and political dislocations in Ghana and globalizing influences over the last three or four decades are pushing individuals to enlist the help of agents of Ghana's indigenous religions in their

efforts to meet traditional and modern spiritual and material needs. The study also shows how agents from the indigenous religious landscape are taking advantage of Pentecostal discourse and ritual, modern formats of religious organization, Western technology, and a heightened sense of the need to internationalize religious influence, compete among the various religious traditions as well as themselves to challenge the hegemony of modern Christian forms in Ghana. I cast this stance of the indigenous religious agents as a counter-hegemonic one and I deliberate in the chapters of the study, the contexts in which these indigenous agents play out these counter-hegemonic strategies.

The thesis is divided into three major parts. The first part (three chapters) constitutes the backdrop. Here, I discuss introduction and background to the study, discuss the relevant literature that sheds light on the subject—in historical as well as substantive terms—on the developments of the contemporary indigenous religious scene in Ghana. I also offer a discussion of the methodologies deployed in the study to gather data and theoretical frames and concepts the study engages in making an intellectual sense of these developments. I close the first part with an ethno-history of the subject to state its contemporary stand. The second part of the study offers biographical as well as analytical accounts of the two case studies, of Ghana's new indigenous religious priests and of the revitalized old shrines/priest around which the upsurge of indigenous religious activities is evolving. The life histories of these individual ritual agents, their communities, discourses and strategies, and their followers' narratives and experiences with them are discussed in these chapters. The final part of the study deals with performance as an empowering strategy of the indigenous religious traditions. The discussion will shed light on how such empowerment constitutes a crucial foundation on which these traditions stand as they challenge the Christian religious hegemony in Ghana and the possible economic benefit behind

the performances of the various religious traditions. I also discuss the internationalization of indigenous religions in order to demonstrate the new paths the neo-indigenous priests are paving to pitch their tents on the global religious market. The discussion shows how this global outreach campaign is intended to demonstrate both the ability of indigenous religions to travel and also their global relevance. These factors constitute a crucial foundation for the claims of Ghana's neo-indigenous priests to the modernity or "moderness" of their traditions. Lastly, the study concludes with a discussion of the main strands of the arguments that run through the study, its contribution to the scholarly debates on religion in modern Africa, and suggestions for profitable lines of inquiry in the future.

It is not by coincidence that Bryman suggest that "theoretical issues drive the formulation of research questions, which in turn drives the collection and analysis of data. Findings then feed back into the relevant theory, theory is supposed to be the outcome of an investigation rather than something that precedes it."<sup>80</sup> With this in mind, I proceed to the chapter that follows to discuss theoretical issues that speak to themes underlying the data.

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<sup>80</sup> Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 70.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1 Introduction

In researching the new indigenous religious priests/priestesses in Ghana, I had indicated certain theories in my proposal as suitable for engaging my interpretation of the data. Later, I opted for the "discovery of theory through data approach, which is also referred to a grounded theory."<sup>81</sup> I did not want to impose a theory on the data I would gather; rather I wanted "a way of arriving at a theory suited to its supposed uses,"<sup>82</sup> that is, a theory that might emerge from the field data. Following the grounded theory approach, in this project, I expected data from the field to inform the theoretical perspectives of the study. I therefore entered the field with an open mind. In the setting of the research, I interviewed various actors: priests/priestesses, members, clients and community. I also observed and participated in their activities.

The sense I get from the field data is that there is a rise in the activities of indigenous ritual specialists, who are boldly showcasing themselves in public spaces. This is so in spite of and because of the vicious onslaught of Pentecostals-Charismatics, the dominant Christian religious group speaking against indigenous religions and their agents in Ghana's religious field. In my data analysis, my attention has been drawn significantly to themes such as: religious economics, power relations, performance, charisma, syncretism and revitalization. In the light of these themes, six

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<sup>81</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 2012), 1.

<sup>82</sup> Glaser and Strauss, *the Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 3.

core theoretical concepts will engage our reflections in this study. We will also allude to other related concepts in the course of the discussions of these six. These six concepts are the theory of the field, the perspective that deploys the metaphor of the market place in analyzing activities of religions in a pluralistic ethos, performance as a metaphor of religious theatre, the concept of charisma as a force that shapes religious trajectories, syncretism, which refers to the mixing, borrowing and appropriation of religious symbols and lastly theory of revitalization prompts us on why religious movements spring from existing traditions by invigorating some portions of their beliefs while leaving others.

## **2.2 Conceptualizing the Themes**

In this chapter, I seek to use the aforementioned core themes while alluding to minor ones to develop a coherent whole framework that will enable us to make intellectual sense of the contemporary happenings in Ghana's indigenous religious field. The first theme we discuss is the religious market perspective.

### **2.2.1 The Religious Market Place Perspective**

Ghana's ethos of numerous religious traditions operating in the religious field is increasingly changing the *modus operandi* of the individual religious traditions and their agents. Most religious groups behave more like business organizations--appropriating marketing strategies in a quest to attract clientele or "consumers" to the goods and services they offer, while at the same time making sure their organizations are visible and viable. Peter Berger, in an effort to explain the relationship between religious groups in a thoroughly secularizing and quickly changing religiously pluralistic



American society in the 1960s, suggested the religious economy theory. He posited that in a culture or society where the state and its agents have restricted power to sanction religious adherence, new religions and worshipping cultures would emerge constantly, each presenting its most attractive image in a bid to win the loyalties of worshippers.

Berger argued that the development described above engenders a free market situation in which religious groups and their agents compete for adherents and public patronage.<sup>83</sup> Berger's theory sparked further scholarly inquiries, with Iannaccone adding a new twist by stating that "if individual denominations function as religious firms, then they collectively constitute a religious market."<sup>84</sup> Muller describes the "distinguishing characteristics of religious organizations motivating a view of religious organizations as competitors...*considering* the sustainability of competitive advantages among religious organizations."<sup>85</sup> Stark and Finke in their earlier submissions viewed the religious economy as a commercial venture.<sup>86</sup> They have recently, however, revised their earlier position, describing a religious economy as a subsystem within religious activity, consisting "of all the religious activity going on in a society: a 'market' of current and potential adherents, a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract or maintain adherents and the religious culture offered by the organization(s)."<sup>87</sup> By this definition Stark and Finke imply that religious organizations are run just like firms where producers (religious organizations) exhibit

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<sup>83</sup> Peter Berger, "A Market Model for the Analysis of Ecumenicity," *Social Research* 30. 2 (1963): 79.

<sup>84</sup> Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Introduction to the Economics of Religion," *Journal of Economic Literature* 36. 3 (1998): 1485. Accessed 06/06/2011 URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable>.

<sup>85</sup> Kent Muller, "Competitive strategies of religious organization," *Strategic Management Journal* 23.5 (2002); 436. Accessed 30/05/2011. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable>.

<sup>86</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "Religious Economies and Sacred Canopies: Religious Mobilization in American Cities," *American Sociological Review* 53. 1 (1988): 42. Accessed: 13/08/2012 .URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2095731>.

<sup>87</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human side of Religion*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 193.

their products for sale and religious followers are like consumers on a market shopping for religious commodities: they bargain and pay a price for what religious groups offer.<sup>88</sup> In the same vein the strategies of religious leaders, or suppliers of various forms of religious capital, is analogous to that of producers and entrepreneurs whose actions are calculated responses to the constrictions and opportunities offered them in the religious market place.<sup>89</sup> The relative freedom of choice exercised by religious consumers urges religious agents to create different religio-cultural commodities and services, especially in countries with more “numerous competing churches than [in] countries dominated by a single established church.”<sup>90</sup> These producers will supply attractive commodities and services to their clients, advertise and market their products, fight with other competitors to maintain a portion of the market and keep a constant flow of demand for their supplies.<sup>91</sup>

This theory, like others, has been opposed by scholars for likening the behavior of religions in a pluralistic society to a commodity market situation, pointing out especially its shortage of selectivity.<sup>92</sup> The religious market model, in my view, however is still germane for the analysis of the strategies the indigenous religious agents are using to carve a niche in Ghana’s modern religious economy. It enables us to capture the creative ways in which agents of Ghana’s IRTs achieve visibility, access potential followers, supply religious commodities and also try to create and maintain demand for their goods in a somewhat unregulated Ghanaian religious economy,

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<sup>88</sup>Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Voodoo Economics? Reviewing the Rational Choice Approach to Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34.1 (1995): 77. Accessed: 12/08/2012. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/>

<sup>89</sup> Iannaccone “Voodoo Economics?” 77.

<sup>90</sup>Iannaccone, “Introduction to the Economics of Religion,” 1486.

<sup>91</sup>Iannaccone “Voodoo Economics,” 77.

<sup>92</sup> Roy Willis and Steve Bruce, “The Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Religion: A Critical Analysis of Counter Proposals,” *Sociological Analysis* 45 (1984); Steve Bruce, “Religion and Rational Choice: A Critique of Economic Explanations of Religious Behaviour,” *Sociology of Religion* 52. 2 (1993); Roland Robertson, “The Econonimization of Religion? Reflections on the Promise and Limitation of the Economic Approach,” *Social Compass* 39. 1 (1994): 51.

dominated by fiercely competitive Christian traditions. Unlike the years of military governments in the 70s and 80s when religious activities were constricted, today citizens in Ghana's democracy are constitutionally guaranteed the freedom of religion. There is a high level of religious pluralism because of the new situation, occasioned by diversified and divided loyalties or affiliations, engendering a free religious market in Ghana. In such a free-- or even volatile-- religious market situation as we find in contemporary Ghana, there is the tendency for power struggle among the various parties involved. This leads us to the next theme, that is, power relations in Ghana's religious field.

### **2.2.2 Power Relations on Ghana's Religious Field**

Power is a contested phenomenon in Ghana's religious domain. In dealing with the theme of power relations, Bourdieu's theory of religious practice is well suited "to interpreting the relationship between religion, class and power, especially in societies that are characterized by stark class divisions"<sup>93</sup> of social and religious institutions. Bourdieu discusses the relationships between hegemonic religious agents and institutions and their competitors who are often in the minority in a given field. Since the subject under discussion is religion, field as used here refers to the religious field.

A field, for Bourdieu, is a "space of action" often constructed around explicit categories of frames.<sup>94</sup> These structures could be political, social, cultural or religious. Fields can also be autonomous or inter-related.<sup>95</sup> Bourdieu argues that fields are arenas of competition for the

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<sup>93</sup> Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London: Equinox, 2007), 45.

<sup>94</sup> Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 44.

<sup>95</sup> Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 45.

production, acquisition, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge “connections” or status, and the competitive positions held by actors enhance their struggle to accumulate, monopolize and dominate different kinds of capital.<sup>96</sup>

In Rey’s understanding of Bourdieu, the notion of capital applies to assets other than money and property. Specifically referencing religion, the context of this study, he categorizes two forms of capital: religious symbolic systems (myths and ideologies) on the one hand, and religious competences (mastery of specific practices and bodies of knowledge) on the other.<sup>97</sup> Religious capital includes religious communities, discourse, salvation and other allied resources that enable religious groups to function and also access public space.<sup>98</sup> Competition for capital is a crucial feature of religious fields. Religious individuals, institutions and their agents maneuver and struggle for desirable resources in a field. Critically, Bourdieu’s impact is his idea that fields are also structured spaces of dominant and subordinate positions based on types and amounts of capital. In that structure, there is a struggle between those in subordinate positions against those in super-ordinate positions. He posits that entry into a field requires a tacit acceptance of the rules of the game, meaning that specific forms of struggle are legitimated whereas others are excluded. The points he makes is accented by Berner who posits that the concept of the field is:

Basically a spatial metaphor, maybe taken primarily as being related to the concept of game. This concept, when also used as a metaphor, implies reference to the “rules of the game” that determine the relations between the positions and the movements in the respective social field.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Rey, Bourdieu on Religion, 42-46.

<sup>97</sup> Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 42/46.

<sup>98</sup> Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 22.

<sup>99</sup> Berner, Ulrich. *The Bishop and the Politician: Inter-Field Dynamics in 19th century Natal, South Africa*. [forthcoming]

Bourdieu identifies what is often at stake in the struggle between religious hegemonies and heresiarchs in a religious field as the power to inculcate in followers a particular form of habitus. A habitus is a lasting, generalized and transposable disposition to act in conformity with a (quasi) systematic view of the world and human existence.<sup>100</sup> Internalized and naturalized as a mode of thought and behavior, the habitus precedes conscious thought, ordering one's choices and structuring one's activities. Bourdieu argues that religion is an important producer of habitus, as religious discourse, praxis and even community informs the way in which people process their experiences and shape themselves to happenings around them.<sup>101</sup> The tendency of Christian traditions to demonize “others,” especially followers, agents and institutions of the IRTs in Ghana, which this study highlights considerably, resonates directly with Bourdieu’s emphasis on how “institutional religions seek to monopolize the religious field by imposing on the laity an ‘orthodox’ worldview and by denouncing as ‘heretical’ any alternative worldviews that competitors seek to propagate among the same laity.”<sup>102</sup> In the following chapters of this study we will read about how dramatic the rise of Ghana’s IRTs is linked directly with the ways in which they manipulate this power-play with Christian traditions to their advantage.

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<sup>100</sup> Pierre, Bourdieu. “Structures, Habitus, Practice.” In Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, (Stanford, CA: University Press, 1990):52-65.

<sup>101</sup> Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 25.

<sup>102</sup> Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 56.

### 2.2.3 The Performance Theory

Performance as a theoretical tool is useful in analyzing activities of the neo-indigenous priests as well as the revitalized old shrines in Ghana. Schechner defines performance as “an activity done by an individual or group in the presence of and for another individual or group.”<sup>103</sup> Schieffelin first points out the two ways in which social science has used the notion of performance:

the first refers to particular symbolic or aesthetic activities, such as ritual or theatrical and folk artistic activities, which are enacted as intentional expressive productions in established local genres...The second is the symbolic interactionist school. The focus... is on performativity itself.<sup>104</sup>

Performance in the former sense refers to activities that are consciously produced and are meant to bring abstract ideas to reality by involving the spectators experientially, whereas the latter focuses on structures through which humans bring out their daily life. Either way, Schieffelin suggests that the anthropological usages of “performance” and “performativity” are Western constructions of routine activities brought on stage.<sup>105</sup> For him, “human intentionality, culture and social reality are fundamentally articulated in the world through performative activity ... such as voice, gesture, facial expression, bodily posture and action”<sup>106</sup> and these activities may look the same, there are cultural variations that make performance in a theatre comparable to performance in a religious setting. Performance in the theatre or “acting means make-believe, illusion, lying”... and performance in a religious tradition is concerned with “moral integrity and empowerment in

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, (1988), 22.

<sup>104</sup> Edward L. Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,” in *Ritual, Performance, Media*, ed. Felicia Hughes-Freeland, (London: Routledge, 1988), 195.

<sup>105</sup> Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,” 195.

<sup>106</sup> Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,” 195.

relation to an invisible sacred reality”<sup>107</sup> Stepping down to some performative aspects of human activities, Schieffelin discusses Humphrey and Laidlaw’s attempt to differentiate between “ritualization” and “performance.” Ritualization, they noted refers to events that are consciously carried out, whereas performance essentially entails cognitive intentions, both of which Schieffelin finds uncomfortable in that each magnifies the inner core of a performer without considering the effects on others.

Schieffelin posits that “performance” or “performative” actions may not essentially require intentions. However, if the differentiation of Humphrey and Laidlaw is anything to go by, where then can spirit possession of indigenous religious priests be placed? They are not always conscious of what they perform or act, nor do they intend ahead of the possession what they wish to enact. They do not “have themselves” at the spur of the moment; they lose consciousness in that condition in order for the spirits to take over, and until the spirit leaves them, they are not aware of happenings around them. The idea here is that there is much left to be desired if we insert performance theory into an African religious setting as a conceptual frame. It raises the issue of “make believe” and an actual act, abstract and in reality. Perhaps, Harding’s distinction between the two types of “performing: not-acting and acting”<sup>108</sup> would best describe the African condition. Performance then, I suggest, is a relative concept that when clearly defined could be applied to different situations, whether the theatre or religious setting.

The art of performing is always a two way episode. Someone acts and someone observes; there is always a performer and an audience/participant. I agree with Schieffelin when he argued

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<sup>107</sup> Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,” 200.

<sup>108</sup> Frances Harding, “Presenting and Re-presenting: From Not-Acting to Acting in African Performance,” in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (London: Routledge, 2003), 22.

that “we act both for ourselves and in the eyes of the beholders.”<sup>109</sup> There is an intention behind every performance depending on the place of the performance. This differentiates between some religious performances, which are often not planned, and performances in theatre or orchestra, which are staged. In all cases, Schieffelin postulates, performances are meant to unearth or “reveal something” for the “participant” to consume or receive, as well as experience. Performance, whether in the theatre, stadia, church or public arena, evokes some sort of feeling in the audience. It could make people cry, laugh, or react as if it’s real. Also, the outcome of the performance is not only for the audience but the actor as well. The action of the performer is meant to be consumed by an audience but performers are at risk because they stand to gain from the performance, be it satisfaction, entertainment or monetarily. The burden of countering a sense of uncertainty on the part of the audience therefore rests on the performer. Schieffelin reminds us that performance is “inherently a contingent process...inherently interactive, and fundamentally risky.”<sup>110</sup> It is risky on the part of the performer who succeeds or fails by meeting audience expectations or causing disappointment. Though we acknowledge the fact that something can go wrong during performances, the ultimate aim of an actor/performer is to succeed in accomplishing the intended purpose of the performance.

Performance is a theme which is unvoiced but has to do with negotiations as well authenticity of “spiritual power” which is an “essence” contested in Ghana by various religious traditions. Power is social capital that makes the powerful prevail over the less powerful and control them. Power is related to economics. A phenomenon vested with the tone of intra-power relations, but more specifically economics, is evidenced in an ancient practice of performance in

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<sup>109</sup> Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,” 197.

<sup>110</sup> Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,” 198.



indigenous religious traditions, where various indigenous religious priests and priestesses in a particular area, district or zone gather to perform, in what I got to know as *Agoro* or *Akom*, literally meaning “play.” In this setting of *Agoro/Akom*, priests and priestesses showcase the power base of their various deities through miraculous feats. This conceptual tool would speak to the performative aspect of the careers of indigenous religious priests and priestesses in this study. Performance is the pillar around which almost all activities of indigenous religions revolve. The study explores the types of performances these agents engage in, what their motivations are, who their targeted audiences are, and how the audiences receive the performance. We also, and importantly, explore how Ghana’s IRTs exploit the failed performances of agents of Pentecostalism and Charismatic churches in order to enhance their own visibility and also make their claims to spiritual superiority.

#### **2.2.4 Charisma**

To demonstrate the authority Bonsam uses as he leads in the move to re-assert the place of indigenous religions in the public domain in Ghana, I make profitable use of the concept of charisma. Weber, who made the concept popular, noted three basic types of authority. The first type he calls “rational-legal authority,”<sup>111</sup> the second being “traditional authority,” and the third he calls “charismatic authority.” What interests us in the three types of listed authorities is the charismatic authority. Weber defines a leader charisma as:

A kind of claim to authority which is specifically in conflict with the bases of legitimacy of an established, fully institutionalized order. The charismatic leader is always in some sense a revolutionary, setting himself

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<sup>111</sup> Weber Max, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Tr. by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. Ed. with an introduction by Talcott Parsons, (Free Press Glencoe: London, 1947), 65.

in conscious opposition to some established aspects of the society in which he works.<sup>112</sup>

Weber's submissions on charismatic authority patterns up with some of the neo-priests in this study, for example, Nana Kwaku Bonsam, who unlike the revitalized old priests and priestesses. The authority patterns of these latter can be categorized either as "rational-legal authority" or "traditional authority," that is, they are either legally selected/appointed or their office is treated "as having always existed and ... binding."<sup>113</sup> Bonsam and other neo priests seemed to emerge from obscurity to claim for themselves priestly status.

Charisma, then, is a distinct power or talent of an individual making him capable of exciting and persuading a large following. In religions it could be attributed to the display of mystical talent by a religious leader. According to Weber a:

certain quality of an individual's personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities have to 'be proved by being recognized as genuine by his followers.'<sup>114</sup>

Weber continues that "the authority of the leader does not express the 'will' of the followers, but rather their duty of obligation."<sup>115</sup> Adogame also sheds light on how the basis of Nigeria's Celestial Church of Christ founder Oschoffa's personal charisma, which was affirmed by him and admired by followers even in his death, rested upon "its sense of being rooted in sacred authority."<sup>116</sup> This speaks, among other things, to Weber's assertion. To this end a person is said to have charismatic ability when that person claims to possess "specific gifts of body and mind"

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<sup>112</sup> Weber Max, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 64.

<sup>113</sup> Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 57-60.

<sup>114</sup> Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 65.

<sup>115</sup> Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 65.

<sup>116</sup> Afeosemine U. Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ: The Politics of Cultural Identity in a West African Prophetic-Charismatic Movement* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 51.

and demonstrates this gift to his followers by miracles, signs and proofs.<sup>117</sup> Reiterating Weber's position, Dow asserts that the obedience of the followers is contingent upon the belief or faith that the leader has powers.<sup>118</sup> It follows, then, that leaders who fail to continuously validate the divine connection may lose their followers. The major protagonist of the neo-indigenous religions movement in Ghana, Bonsam, builds his leadership on his charisma. His claim to be a messenger of the gods, upon which he bases the authenticity of his office, is accepted by his followers and is a crucial force explaining his ability to effect "radical social change"<sup>119</sup> on the indigenous religious landscape of Ghana, which is extensively explored in the study. Even the socio-political and economic context in which he is operating contributes very much to his charismatic credentials. Mostly, social change which is radical in orientation "causes social distress and dissatisfaction among a segment of the population or a group of people cut off from mainstream of society,"<sup>120</sup> bringing about "social crisis," a congenial context for the emergence of a charismatic leader.<sup>121</sup> In this connection Barnes was right when he identified "charismatic leadership as specifically salvationist or messianic in nature."<sup>122</sup> He continues that there are two ways charismatic leaders gather a following: "their unique personal style and the content of their teachings."<sup>123</sup> Either way their followers often hail them as divinely sent to disentangle people from their predicaments. As the study will show, Bonsam benefits largely from his showmanship and his claim to the ability to tap into indigenous spiritual sources in solving Ghana's problems at a time when the chasm between the few "haves" and the majority "have nots" keeps widening. For the latter group,

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<sup>117</sup> Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1962), 299.

<sup>118</sup> Thomas E. Dow Jr., "An Analysis of Weber's Work on Charisma," *The British Journal of Sociology* 29.1 (1978): 84. Accessed: 14/08/2013. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable>.

<sup>119</sup> Douglas F. Barnes, "Charisma and Religious Leadership: An Historical Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17. 1 (1978): 2. Accessed: 14/08/2013. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable>.

<sup>120</sup> Barnes, "Charisma and Religious Leadership", 4.

<sup>121</sup> Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, 299.

<sup>122</sup> Barnes, "Charisma and Religious Leadership," 5.

<sup>123</sup> Barnes, "Charisma and Religious Leadership," 4.

Bonsam is the answer to their crisis and he makes a point of demonstrating this through the spiritual services and material benefits he provides to his followers.

Weber suggests that in order to accomplish their goals, charismatic leaders must break away from institutional structures,<sup>124</sup> making charisma a very revolutionary force.<sup>125</sup> The “values that the leaders introduce and their practices are often new and deviate from what society would consider very normal.”<sup>126</sup> They are able to introduce those values because they see themselves as being put there by the spirits or a mystical being. Based on that belief, they behave authoritatively in departing from what is considered to be the normative in society. The study shows that Bonsam’s dramatic rise to public prominence without going through the apprenticeship of a senior priest, his public display of magico-religious power, often through the conjuring up of items and distributing them to audiences, and his open challenges to pastors for public power contests, as well as other practices, follow a pattern that runs counter to what is normal priestly practice among Akan people. In addition to these actions, his authoritative stance as he operates in these contexts enhances Bonsam’s charisma. I suggest that spirit possession precisely exemplifies the theory of charisma. Lewis described spirit possession as “hypotheses which, for those who believe in them, afford a philosophy of final causes and a theory of social tensions and power relations.”<sup>127</sup> This is

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<sup>124</sup> Barnes, “Charisma and Religious Leadership,” 5.

<sup>125</sup> Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, 300.

<sup>126</sup> Genevieve Nrenzah, *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Ghanaian Pentecostalism: The Mame Wata Healing Churches of Half Assini* (Saarbrücken: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), 11.

<sup>127</sup> Ioan M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism*. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), 205.

a situation that supposedly exists among the various religious traditions in Ghana where spiritual power is a contested commodity among religious leaders.

Next we note the dynamics of mixing, borrowing or appropriating elements of various religions in order to be able to compete with the “other.” This is usually called syncretism.

### **2.2.5 Syncretism**

Over the past several decades there has been a dramatic increase in religious traditions operating in the religious field of Ghana, following the initial local religions’ encounter with Christianity and Islam. This ethos has engendered within the operating traditions, practices of mixing, adapting, adopting, borrowing and appropriating elements from each other consciously or unconsciously. The concept of syncretism captures this process.

The concept of “syncretism” has been used extensively, especially in history of religions,<sup>128</sup> to describe the combination of different traditions. It is also true that it has been heavily criticized due to its problematic negative tag, forcing later scholars to form new concepts such as hybridization and creolization<sup>129</sup> to describe the phenomenon. However, it retains its original meaning of mixing no matter how the new concept is argued. Burger posits that “syncretism is the reconciliation of two or more cultural systems or elements, with modification of both.”<sup>130</sup> Ulrich

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<sup>128</sup> Ulrich Berner, “The Notion of Syncretism in Historical and/or Empirical Research,” *Historical Reflections* 27. 3 (2001):499-509; Robert Baired, Syncretism and the History of Religions. ,” in *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, ed. Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (London: Equinox, 2004), 48-58.

<sup>129</sup> Ulf Hannerz, *The World in Creolization*. Africa 57,4 (1987),546-59; Peter Beyer, “Purity as Hybridization: Religio-Cultural Syncretisms in the Context of Globalization,” in *Unpacking the New. Critical Perspectives on Cultural Syncretism in Africa and Beyond*. eds Afe Adogame, Magnus Echter and Ulf Vierke ( Berlin:LIT Verlag, 2008): 27-46.

<sup>130</sup>Henry G. Burger, “Syncretism: An Acculturative Accelerator,” *Human Organization* 25. 2 (1966): 103.

Berner notes theoretical and “moral” problems emanating from the negative normative Christian theologian’s usage, and points out how offended someone would feel to know his or her religion is termed “syncretic.” He also points that the “lack of uniformity in ordinary usage hints at the difficulties facing effort to suggest a binding terminology for research into syncretism.”<sup>131</sup> In response, he points to the way forward in solving the difficulties in the term syncretism without its historical baggage.<sup>132</sup> With all the baggage that accompanies the concept of syncretism, Berner suggests a model that will regard every religion and its interpretation in the light of systems. A “religious system” will be understood as an association of elementary thoughts (and the related representation and acts), providing humans with an irreducible explanation of the world, and giving them behavioral norms which are likewise absolute and untraceable.”<sup>133</sup> The terms “systems” and “elements” as suggested would be useful in this research considering their advantages. Berner proposes that:

Syncretism (in the systems level) “designates those processes where the boundary, and thus the competitive relationship between the systems, is eliminated...and Syncretism on the level of elements designates those associations of different elements where the boundary between the elements is terminated so that the adherents of the system concerned perceive them as a unity; the superposition of an element by means of other interpretation; the emergence of a element in analogy or as an equivalent to a competing element.”<sup>134</sup>

The appropriating of elements from indigenous traditions by Christian churches, the adopting and adapting of formats from Christian religions by Indigenous traditions which this study explores extensively leads directly to the concept of syncretism. The field featured in the study is one in

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<sup>131</sup> Ulrich Berner, “The Concept of Syncretism,” in *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, eds. Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (London: Equinox, 2004), 297.

<sup>132</sup> Berner, “The Notion of Syncretism,” 499-500.

<sup>133</sup> Berner, “The Concept of Syncretism,” 297.

<sup>134</sup> Berner, “The Concept of Syncretism,” 305.

which religious agents are using elements picked from each other in their bid to compete and gain an advantage over these others.

### **2.2.6 Revitalization Theory**

In an attempt to remain viable most religious organizations find innovative ways of revitalizing their traditions. This often creates different strands within particular traditions. Often, the issue of legitimization and keeping to the core of the traditions crops up, instigating religious agents to find novel ways of doing things. Wallace's concept of revitalization offers a framework for analyzing such religious developments. He defines revitalization as a "deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society or religious tradition to construct a more satisfying culture"<sup>135</sup> Wallace posits that far from being unusual phenomena, revitalization movements are "recurrent features in human history. He notes that "probably few men have lived who have not been involved in an instance of the revitalization process."<sup>136</sup> He argues that societies' leaders intentionally engage in forms of revitalization when existing structures fail to meet their basic needs. Out of such organized efforts a more satisfying culture is created. Wallace also identifies two conditions under which revitalization can and often does occur.<sup>137</sup>

First, times of stress for individual members of society can trigger revitalizations. Social dislocations precipitate such stressful situations that call on members or leaders to make

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<sup>135</sup> Anthony Francis Clarke Wallace, "Revitalization Movements." *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 2 (1956): 279, 24/7/2015,

DOI: 10.1525/aa.1956.58.2.02a00040

<sup>136</sup> Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist*, 267.

<sup>137</sup> Wallace, "Revitalization Movements" *American Anthropologist*, 279.

adjustments in the context of revitalizations. Second, revitalization movements occur when there is widespread disappointment or disillusionment with existing cultural beliefs and when traditional rites do not seem to be working, other integrative cultural Gestalts are sought.<sup>138</sup> Revitalization then is a process of cultural change. The persons involved in the process of revitalization must see their culture or some major areas of it as a system and they must feel that this system is unsatisfactory. They must innovate a new cultural system and specify new relationships.<sup>139</sup>

Whiles Wallace's concept enhances understandings of socio-cultural changes in general, it can help us to understand reforms in religious institutions too, as these are sub-cultures. In the context of this study the creative innovations shaping the indigenous religious traditions in Ghana currently, lead directly to the notion of revitalization. The concept can be applied in two related ways. First, the changes on the indigenous religious landscape that the study analyses are linked with the growing engagement with religion in Ghana as people seek magico-religious remedies for dislocations imposed on Ghana by local and global forces. Revitalized indigenous religious beliefs and practices offer worshippers going through suffering and chaos new and more satisfying worlds. Secondly, the concept speaks to the ongoing creative religiosity on the indigenous religious landscape. I argue that the severe undermining of indigenous religions especially by Pentecostals has precipitated revitalizations on the indigenous religious field. As the indigenous traditional religions struggle to find their legs in a 'supposedly' dominant Christian landscape, their agents add, subtract and re-organize aspects of their practice to remain viable.

Throughout the study we have demonstrated how the selected concepts and theories speak to the themes that have emerged from the data. The chapter that follows offers an ethno-historical

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<sup>138</sup> Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist*, 269.

<sup>139</sup> Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist*, 270-271.



account of indigenous religions in Ghana. This entails a discussion of the historical encounter between IRTs and the two major foreign religions in Ghana, showing that what is currently happening in the indigenous religious circles is only a single stage in the historical trajectory of Ghana's IRTs.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ETHNO-HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF GHANA'S INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter re-introduces us to the subject of this study by offering an ethno-historical account of the encounter of Ghana's indigenous religions with forms of foreign religions, especially Christianity and Islam. The point of the discussion is to demonstrate what seems like a consistency in the ways indigenous religious traditions behave when they encounter new religious and socio-political situations in Ghana, whether locally or globally induced.

Ghana can be described as a zoo<sup>140</sup> of religions from all over the world. In this chapter, I focus attention on Islam and Christianity, two traditions whose impact on Ghana's indigenous religious as well as social life has been significant. I touch briefly on Ghana's encounter with Islam but dwell more on Christianity. This is in view of the fact that the influence of Christianity on Ghanaian culture has been more pervasive than that of Islam. Christianity has impacted every facet of Ghana's institutions--social, religious, cultural, and political-- whereas Islam's impact is felt mainly in the Northern portion of Ghana, parts of the Ashanti region, and in the self-contained Muslim enclaves of urban Ghana called the *Zongo*.

This chapter does not intend to offer a comprehensive history of Christianity in Ghana. Rather it traces the history of the struggle of indigenous religions with Christianity, from the pre-colonial times through the colonial era to the present, highlighting the resilient nature of the

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<sup>140</sup> Zoo as used in this context is a metaphor that explains the multiplicity or collection of diverse religious traditions on the Ghana religious landscape.

indigenous religions and their struggle for viability and visibility through these phases. The chapter sheds light on how the agents of Christianity (missionaries and sometimes colonial agents) --and also agents of Islam-- perceived and engaged indigenous religions and their agents and how the IRTs agents responded during the different phases of the advance of these religions.

The discussion offered in the chapter is based on the scanty literature on the trajectory of the encounter between indigenous religions and foreign religions in Ghana. We also examine the backgrounds of the authors when the need be. We deem scrutiny necessary because, as Danfulani has noted, the critical scrutiny of phases of “African traditional religion is not a new theme. It has been discussed in the past in the works of scholars such as p’Bitek, Westerlund, Ikenga-Metuh, Onunwa and Platvoet among others.”<sup>141</sup> According to Danfunlani, Platvoet categorized the authors of earlier scholarly works on religions in Africa, including Ghana, as “amateur anthropologists, professional anthropologists, Christian theologians and historians,”<sup>142</sup> suggesting that many of these writers could have therefore been biased by virtue of their backgrounds and the audiences they were writing for.

Going on, Platvoet had asserted that there were two phases in the literature on Africa. The first phase he calls the “African as object” and the second the “African as subject.” The Africans-as-object era was the time when Africans were primarily studied by non-native Africans or “outsiders,” and the Africans-as-subject period began when study was by “insiders,” or African scholars.<sup>143</sup> To follow Platvoet’s logic, we should probe further into the backgrounds of “insiders,” too. We should not lose sight of the fact of which Amoah has reminded us, that, as she

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<sup>141</sup> Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani, “Africa Religions in African Scholarship: A Critique.” In *African Traditions in the Study of Religions in Africa: Emerging Trends, Indigenous Spirituality and the Interface with other World Religion*. eds. Afe Adogame, Ezra Chitando and Bolaji Bateye (England: Ashgate, 2012), 17.

<sup>142</sup> Danfulani, “Africa Religions in African Scholarship, 17.

<sup>143</sup> Jan G Platvoet, “From Object to Subject: A history of the Study of Religion in African,” in *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects*, Proceedings of Regional Conference of the IAHR, Harare, Zimbabwe, 1992 (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1996), 118.

found during her many years as an African Traditional Religion lecturer at the University of Ghana, the “earlier African insiders work were influenced by their backgrounds which for example was theology in the case of Mbiti, Bolaji and Idowu.”<sup>144</sup> Danfulani has also noted several of those African scholars with different backgrounds and whose works were influenced by their backgrounds.<sup>145</sup> P’Bitek is one scholar who called attention to African scholars or insiders patterning African religions after Western views in his controversial book. He argued that African religions as known in the literature are, in fact, western notions in disguise, actually Hellenized.<sup>146</sup> With this background information on most of the scholars this chapter first discusses religious practices of the people of Ghana in the pre-encounter period, which is pre- Christian/ Islamic Ghana. I follow it with a discussion of Islam's encounter with IRTs before proceeding to the phases of the Christian presence in Ghana beginning from the fifteenth century when the Portuguese inaugurated Christianity in Ghana. A central theme of the discussion is that the current upsurge of indigenous religious traditions and their agents in Ghana is not a new experience in Ghana's religious history. It represents a new phase in a long history of IRTs’ resilience in the face of an overwhelming Christian presence. This resilience takes the form of IRTs’ ability to re-invent themselves, often by appropriating elements from other religious traditions or from the same modern culture on which Christian forms thrive.

I suggest that this resilience resides largely in the ability of Ghana’s indigenous religions to easily adapt to new situations in all the phases of their encounter with foreign traditions, especially Christianity. A fluidity which enables them to shift and shape to emerging situations, an uncanny ability to appropriate elements from alien forces and strategically enlist them as their

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<sup>144</sup> Elizabeth Amoah, Department of Religious studies, University of Ghana.

<sup>145</sup> Danfulani, “Africa Religions in African Scholarship,” 18.

<sup>146</sup> Okot p’Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (East African Literature Bureau, 1970),

own resources, and the creative ingenuity of their agents are among the factors that enable Ghana's indigenous religions stand up to forces that threaten them internally as well as invade them from outside Ghana.

Since it was transported to Ghana, Christianity and its agents have commonly viewed indigenous religious practices as backward and evil, whose savage practitioners must be rescued. Meyer accounts on how "this Christian popular culture has quite successfully colonized public space, mostly in the south of Ghana where Christianity reigns supreme."<sup>147</sup> In the face of a contemporary expression of this narrative championed by Pentecostal traditions, IRTs are rallying their age old resources to fight back and they seem to be achieving significant success in this bid. The indigenous religious agents are positing a new narrative on spirituality which is not modeled after Europeans or the West, but looking inward into indigenous religious practice for accelerated development. In other words, a breed of new indigenous religious agents (priests) has emerged on the Ghanaian religious scene, rebranding indigenous religions in ways that deconstruct the negative assumptions purported by Christianity in particular, and presenting themselves in more attractive ways.

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<sup>147</sup> Birgit Meyer, "Powerful Pictures: Popular Christian Aesthetics in Southern Ghana," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76 . 1 (2008),:84. Accessed: 19/09/2013. URL: <http://www.jaar.oxfordjournals.org>.

### 3.2 Ghana's Indigenous Religions: Pre-foreign Religions Encounter

Ghana is made up of several indigenous or ethnic groups.<sup>148</sup> Each unit practices a religion that is peculiar to it, although in very general terms one can still identify similar patterns underlying the beliefs and practices of these groups, what is otherwise termed as “family resemblance.”<sup>149</sup> sharing similar religious practices and cultural praxis with other groups. In this study, I limit myself to one of many IRTs known as the Akan indigenous religion. I selected Akan indigenous religion for two reasons. First, the research sites for this project are in the Ashanti region, which is inhabited by Ashanti Akans. Secondly, the Akans are the largest of the ethnic groups in Ghana. They constitute 49.1% of the entire population and inhabit about two thirds of Ghana's land space.<sup>150</sup> In what follows, I discuss mostly the literature on the Akan indigenous religion, featuring its hierarchy of spiritual beings, its characteristic fluidity and flexibility, its tolerance of incoming elements, the importance attached to spiritual power, the place of ritual specialists, and its instrumental use by followers as a guarantor of material well-being.

#### 3.2.1 The Akans of Ghana

The Akan social, religious and political functions are intimately knitted together<sup>151</sup> just as all other indigenous religious traditions in Africa, the Akan have a belief system which is particularly complicated in structure and hierarchy. The Akan indigenous cosmology features a hierarchy of

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<sup>148</sup> The plural implies that Ghanaians are not all the same; they speak different languages and have varied cultural practices and religions. We can therefore refer to indigenous religious traditions to depict the various indigenous religions in Ghana.

<sup>149</sup> Gyadu, “Media Representation of African Traditional Religions,” 1. Prof. Asamoah Gyadu is a Very Rev Minister and a Contemporary Pentecostalism lecturer at the Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Accra.

<sup>150</sup> Nykansa K. Kyeremanteng, *The Akans of Ghana: Their Customs, History and Institution* (Accra Optimum Design and Publishing Services, 2010), 26; Roger Gocking, *The History of Ghana* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>151</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 29. Prof. John D. K. Ekem is Rev. Minister. He teaches biblical studies at the Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Accra.

spirit beings. At the top of the hierarchy of spirit beings in Akan cosmology is the Supreme Being<sup>152</sup> or God and He is known by various Akan groups as *Onyame/Onyankopon-Ashanti*, *Akyem*, *Akuapim and Brong*, *Nyame* or *Nyankonpon-Fanti*, *Nyamele-Nzema*, and *Nyamia-Sehwi* and *Brosa*. The idea of God is illustrated or stored in "proverbs, sayings, names, myths, and legends,"<sup>153</sup> but the Supreme God is assumed to be distant and not involved in the routine activities of humans, although the name *Nyame* is often on the lips of people.<sup>154</sup> This assertion is especially upheld by Parrinder, who maintains that God is viewed only as a glorified chief or ancestor<sup>155</sup> but before "foreign cultures rudely interrupted us and made things fall apart"<sup>156</sup> the Supreme Being God had been worshipped through the gods known as *abosom*<sup>157</sup> by the Ashanti tribe of the Akan group.

The gods are next in hierarchy after the Supreme Being. Other Akans, like the Nzema, call the gods *Bozonle*, and *Bosom* among the Fanti. These groups describe the gods as God's children who represent him, hence they are the mouthpieces of God Almighty. It is believed that God has left the care and affairs of the world to the *abosom* to manage. He must be consulted only on very important matters. The *abosom* or deities/gods are intermediaries between humans and God and

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<sup>152</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 32; E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1973), 140-141.

<sup>153</sup> There is an Akan proverb "no one shows the child God" meaning God is self-revealing and a child need not be told. There is also a saying that "it is God who pounds fufu for the one-armed man" meaning God helps in the affairs of the disabled or metaphorically God helps the helpless. Names such as Nyamekye literally meaning God gives or Nohale Nyamele means true God. Such sayings exemplify the in-depth knowledge about God in pre-Christian Ghana.

<sup>154</sup> Noel Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1966), 76; Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 140; Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 35.

<sup>155</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 31. Geoffrey Parrinder started his career as a Methodist missionary and then a teacher in Nigeria and King's College London, where he held an endowed chair. He was a Christian theologian but he is perceived as one of the founders of Religious Studies. He was instrumental in the creation of African Traditional religion at the university. For more on Parrinder see: Martin Forward, *A Bag of Needments: Geoffrey Parrinder and the Study of Religion* (Peter Lang, 1998).

<sup>156</sup> Gibreel M. Kamera. "Regaining African Aesthetics and Essence through Our African Traditional Religion," *Journal of Black Studies* 30.4 (2000): 502.

<sup>157</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 36.

may dwell in a river, a tree, a rock or in an altar-shrine. Since they are spirits and as such cannot operate on their own from their abodes--- rivers, rocks, groves, forests, trees and mountains--they need human vessels, their agents, in order to be able to carry out their tasks on earth and among humans on behalf of God. They are therefore represented and served by the *akɔmfɔɔ* (priests or priestesses). . . "158 The *abosom* have power to influence humans for good or bad and are therefore revered. There is also the belief in the living dead or ancestors (*Nsamanfo*) or what Ekem calls the ancestral spirits. In the Akan worldview, it is believed that the "dead, the living and the unborn are ontologically bound to each other,"159 so dying is not the end of a human being. Life is cyclical, humans die and reincarnate to continue the cycle of life. Based on the life one led while on earth they become an ancestor after death.

Next in the hierarchy is the belief in the world of other spiritual forces known as *ahonhom* by the Akan. These spirits are believed to be made up of benevolent and maleficent forces which can affect the life of humans for good or for bad. Below the *ahonhom* in the hierarchy are humans, who by their very nature are vulnerable and at the mercy of all the spirits (good or bad). The position of humans makes them question the existences of being.<sup>160</sup> For that reason they must cling to some sort of protection in order to enjoy the two cardinal pillars of living, health and wealth, which are achievable when one is at peace—remaining in the good books of the world of the spirits. Hence, the pervasive sense is that every action or deed must be directed to pleasing God and the gods. This represents the predominant Akan outlook on life in general. Enjoying wealth and health in the here and now is the basis of Akan religion.

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<sup>158</sup> Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 77.

<sup>159</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 36.

<sup>160</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religious Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1970), 19. Mbiti is a Kenyan-born Christian religious philosopher and writer and an ordained Anglican priest.



Before the advent of Christianity among the Akan people, the indigenous religions and their agents dominated the religious field. As Gyekye notes of the dominant Akan group, the Ashanti', they knew about God and expressed this understanding through different and diverse mediums before the arrival of the foreigners and an introduction of their monotheistic "God."<sup>161</sup> Likewise, the visibility of the religious life of the people of Ghana before the introduction of Christianity was captured by Junod and noted by Debrunner in the following words: "...wherever I went, I found my Master has been there before me..."<sup>162</sup> Religion was and still is so pervasive in Ghana that it permeates all facets of individuals' existences and extends even to non-living things like rivers, forest, and land.

In indigenous Akan religious traditions, there is no separation between social activities, religion, politics, tradition and culture; all of them are inter-connected to religion.<sup>163</sup> Opoku and Debrunner make these points forcefully when they note that in Ghanaian indigenous religions in general: the religion of the indigenous people of Ghana permeates all aspects of their lives. Religion was therefore not separable from other aspects of life and "religious life is not an individual but a communal affair."<sup>164</sup> Among Akan people one is born and socialized into religion. In such an indigenous setting religion is not separate from other aspect of living. Everything is intertwined. But indigenous Akan religions also demonstrate features which foreshadow their ability to withstand the pressures from newly emerging forces, whether local or external. Fluid

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<sup>161</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra, Sankofa 2003), 4.

<sup>162</sup> Hans W. Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra: Waterville Pub. House), 1967), 2.

<sup>163</sup> Debrunner, *History of Christianity in Ghana*, 2; Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, (Accra: FEP int. Ltd, 1978), 11.

<sup>164</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *Africa Cultural Values: An Introduction*, 4.

and flexible in nature, their beliefs and practices are always dynamic, changing, adopting and adapting to newly emerging situations.

Unlike Christianity, Islam and some other religious faith that are strict and dominated by rules, Akan indigenous religions demonstrate an uncanny openness and tolerance to incoming innovative elements or forms of spirituality. They can borrow practices from other forms of religion and can accumulate as many gods as can be utilized. Akan gods are not jealous gods; they are sometimes challenged to perform or protect the people or adherents and if they do not, they are refused worship or thrown out, to give way to more powerful and result-oriented gods or symbols of spiritual power, local or foreign.<sup>165</sup>

Akan people place more emphasis on ritual than belief. Ritual furnishes worshippers the context for deploying spiritual power in beneficial ways. This underscores the great importance attached to ritual specialists (priest and priestesses), who are the main protagonists in shaping the trajectory of this portion of Ghana's religious field. The more the ritual specialist or mouthpieces of the gods are able to disseminate protection, health, and wealth demonstrated and exhibited through potent powerful displays, the more the people venerate the gods. The opposite of this can lead to abandonment. Following Horton, I suggest also that these traditions are the sources of local conceptualizations that enable people to make sense of and deal practically with socio- cultural changes, including the malcontents that often accompany them. In effect, the agents of Akan IRs are becoming even more relevant in a rapidly globalizing and modernizing Akan society. In the next section, I discuss how these elements inherent in Akan traditional religions played out in the context of their encounter with outside religious traditions, Christianity in particular.

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<sup>165</sup> Sumankwahene, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 3, 2012.

### **3.3 Introduction of Foreign Religions to Ghana and its Subsequent Encounter with Indigenous Religions**

In the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries the indigenous people of Ghana entered the era of interaction with foreigners. The encounter took place both along the coast of Ghana and the hinterland. These foreigners brought with them their respective religions. The émigrés along the coast were the Portuguese Christians and the other European missionaries who followed, and in the hinterland or forest regions were the Mande or Madingo<sup>166</sup> Muslim traders, also called the Wangara Muslims,<sup>167</sup> who also unconsciously fermented the region with Islam.

For us to be able to understand the dynamics of the encounter between Islam, Christianity and the Indigenous religions, we need to decipher the underlying motive of these two émigré groups. My sense in this discussion is that two main elements underlie these encounters---the first is competition and the second is economics. Though these two reasons are not necessarily all, I have suggested these two motives underlying the activities of foreign religions, especially Christianity, against the background of the Roman Catholics expansion due to the challenges they faced after the European reformation. This event did not only pose a threat to the Catholic Church as the main authority at the time but it crippled the church financially. Going out to preach to the heathen nations, one can infer, was a strategy for the church to gather following, expand the church

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<sup>166</sup> Ivor Wilks. "The Northern Factor in Ashanti History: Begho and the Mande," *The Journal of African History* 2. 1 (1961): 25-34. Accessed 07/03/2011.

<sup>167</sup> Cephas N. Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism, Pentecost outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Churches of Ghana*. (The Netherlands: Boekencentrum Publishing Houses, 2006), 31.

and compete for members. One could also say that there was also an economic motive behind the scheme. In terms of numbers, by being first to touch areas where the Protestants have not considered reaching was a possibility of also maximizing control and money as much as possible. (By this allusion, I mean amassing humans through evangelism as well as economic capital through trade). After reaching Ghana, they would later realize that the indigenous religious traditions are interwoven with the entirety of the people's lives and they were not going to give in that easily; therefore, there was a religious struggling and competition of incoming traditions with the local religion. Another issue that did not help the foreigners was the ushering in of new techniques of order such as the socio-economic and political developments. I argue that indigenous religions survived the competition because their elements enabled them to speak to the newly emerging socio-economic and political needs that occasioned the presence of these traditions. Next we discuss Islam.

What I intend to do in this part is to say something about the brief encounter between Islam and the Akan indigenous religions. This discussion, even though brief, is still relevant, as it demonstrates a pattern common in such encounters. My account of the Christian presence among Akan people and the conversations between Akan religions and Christianity will be more detailed, as Christianity is the foreign religion with the most pervasive influence among Ghanaians, and certainly among the Akan people.

### **3.3.1 Islam in Akan-land-Ghana**

Islam emerged in the Northern part of Ghana and the Akan lands sometime between the fifteenth century and the mid seventeenth century,<sup>168</sup> a period in which war was the mainstay of Akan life. For the specific Muslims who might have come into contact with the Akan, Wilks mentions Duncun-Johnstone's submission that:

It was the Mandingo influence that first brought Ashanti in touch with the Moslem world to the North..... *In the same vein* Goody has stressed the role of Mande-speaking peoples, and especially the Dyula traders, in the spread of Islam southwards... to the present day Ashanti<sup>169</sup>. The motive of those Muslims was mainly commerce--trading in goods--beds, cloths, brassware..... In return for gold and highly valued red forest cola...<sup>170</sup>

Clarke's argument that trade in gold and cola nuts was a factor in the Islamization process is in agreement with what Wilks has earlier stressed.<sup>171</sup> This means that Muslims were not too much into proclaiming their faith; they were not in a rush to convert the local people at the time but were focused on trade, a situation that radically departed from the Christian encounter with the peoples of the coastal regions of Ghana. Originally the Muslims were not even willing to mix with Akan people. According to Wilks "they had a market place where all business took place by a time-honoured method of a dumb barter,"<sup>172</sup> the underlining factor being suspicion. In the context of this mutual suspicion the Muslim merchants viewed the Southerners as pagans, while the Southerners also perceived them as "sort of wild and bloody blacks."<sup>173</sup> Wilks points out how the inhabitants who lived in the towns invaded by the Muslim merchants developed a "local tradition" in which they divided their townships, "the one part predominantly pagan and autochthonous, the

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<sup>168</sup> Ivor Wilks, "The Northern Factor in Ashanti: Begho and the Mande," *The Journal of African History* 2. 1 (1961): 28. Accessed 07/03/2011.

<sup>169</sup> Wilks, "The Northern Factor in Ashanti," 25.

<sup>170</sup> Wilks, "The Northern Factor in Ashanti," 30.

<sup>171</sup> Peter Clarke, *West Africa and Islam: a Study of Religious Development from the 8th to the 20th Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), 4.

<sup>172</sup> Wilks, "The Northern Factor in Ashanti," 30.

<sup>173</sup> Wilks, "The Northern Factor in Ashanti," 30.

other Muslim and alien....".<sup>174</sup> It is evident that at the onset of the Muslim presence, the merchants were interested in only trade. Later, Islam became a palace religion as Ashanti kings enlisted the help of Muslim clerics as healers, preparers of war charms and medicines, and spiritual protectors of kings against their adversaries. This assertion is affirmed by highlights of Dumbo who stresses that "the incorporation of Islamic elements in the culture of the states, then integration of the foreign Muslims into the socio- political system of the north. Islamic influence was eventually consolidated with the Islamisation of members of the royal estate into Islam."<sup>175</sup> With the passage of time, due to the constant interaction through trade and living in the same town, some of the local people adopted the Islamic religion. Islam garnered a reputation as the repository of superior power and a religion of traders. And perhaps people naturally adopted Islam because of its similarity with indigenous religions.

Two elements of Islam that hold appeal for Akan worshippers need to be noted here. One is Islam's reputation for having potent spiritual power, a coveted element in Akan indigenous religions. For this point, Owusu-Ansah and Hiskett have noted that the potent spiritual competences of Muslim clerics attracted the people<sup>176</sup> and somewhat influenced their acceptance.

In Akan indigenous religions potent spiritual power is emphasized. It is the raw material used to provide wealth and health. Rituals provide contexts for tapping into spiritual power sources to meet these needs. A religion reputed to have superior spiritual power will naturally elicit attention from worshippers in indigenous Akan religions. So many Akans enlisted the help of Mallams in a variety of endeavours. Muslim ritual specialists prepared amulets believed to possess

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<sup>174</sup>Wilks, "The Northern Factor in Ashanti, "26.

<sup>175</sup> Yunus Dumbo, *Islamic Revivalism in Contemporary Ghana* (Stockholm: Södertörn University (2013), 5.

<sup>176</sup>David Owusu-Ansah, *Islamic Talismanic Tradition in Nineteenth Century Asante*.(New York: Edwin Mellen Press.1991), 10; Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* ( London: Longman. 1984), 2.

supernatural power and to protect as well as harm people. These amulets are made with small leather pouches that contain verses from the Quran."<sup>177</sup> Many Akan people, including chiefs, use these forms of "*aduro*" (potent medicine). The smock called *Batakari* produced in the northern part of Ghana, and the one called "*Batakarikese*," won by the Asantehene on his coronation, are decorated with these power-charged amulets. It is said that in the days of wars, no *Asantehene* went to war without consulting a Muslim *Mallam*. Powerful potent spiritual force is what these Akan chiefs needed and Islam readily provided it. *Mallams* offer spiritual help as well as providing a healing regimen for the people-- some Akan kings even used Islamic agents as healers in their courts, as well as medicine men who protected them and their kingdoms. Because Muslim traders relied on the power of Islam for success and protection, the trend was that many Ashanti who converted to Islam were traders.

Secondly, the content or practice of Islam itself resonates with indigenous religious traditions. The resemblances it shares with Akan religion made it easier to adapt. Also, Islam is a layman's religion, to borrow Parrinder's words; it did not uproot people purposely for conversion. Islam's greater tolerance of elements from Akan indigenous religions made Akan people look on it kindly. For instance "its permission of polygamy suited the African background"<sup>178</sup> of the Akan; hence, local people who wanted to convert to Islam did so without having to give up so much of their belief systems and traditions. That is, they could still keep their polygamous marriages, unlike in the case of Christianity where they would have to divorce all the wives but one. Consequently, "men drifted into this religion, often with no instruction or initiation, and got called Muslims when there is a *Mallam* in the village."<sup>179</sup> We can suggest that Akan beliefs system resonated somewhat

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<sup>177</sup>Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 32.

<sup>178</sup> E.G Parrinder, "Islam and West Africa Indigenous Religion," *Numen* 6 (1959):136.

<sup>179</sup> Parrinder, "Islam and West Africa," 137.

with Islam but also we note through this encounter that Islam did not undermine Akan indigenous religion as did Christianity and hence their smooth entry. Despite IRT practitioners comfortably with Islam I must also point out that Islam maintained its strict monotheistic status.

In the context of their encounter with Islam, indigenous religions demonstrated their ability to be flexible enough to bend and accommodate aspects of the incoming religion. Though Islam does not have a ubiquitous presence among Akan people, we see remnants of the usage, interaction and adaption of Muslim beliefs and practices featuring in Akan traditions. Presently, *sika*, the Twi word for money is a corruption of the Hindi word **सिक्का** (*sikka*) or *عملات معدنية* which means coins. It is an import of the Muslim traders. An additional point I wish to stress is the Muslim literacy culture- Owusu-Ansah has pointed that the literacy backdrop of the Muslim clerics aided them as intermediaries in the chief's court.<sup>180</sup> It also prepared many Akan people for employment as clerks and administrators of the Ashanti kingdom. Notwithstanding the interesting way Islam blended with indigenous religions, conflicts arose from the meeting of the two cultures. For example, Omenyo writes about the "fifth *Asantehene* Osei Kwame who was destooled by the queen mother Konadu Yaadam and his critics for his involvement with Muslims."<sup>181</sup> It follows from the discussion that Islam's ethos resonated with the needs of the people they encountered, being a practical- or need-based religion that answers the spiritual needs [Sufism] of the Akan and in practice not offending their socio-cultural practices of polygamy. The cited instances above speak to the argument I have made about the adaptive nature of Akan indigenous religion.

To conclude this discussion of Islam, I wish to stress that the inauguration of Islam among the Akan people was not occasioned by the missionary zeal that spread Islam into other parts of

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<sup>180</sup> David Owusu-Ansah, *Islamic Talismanic Tradition in Nineteenth Century Asante*, 10.

<sup>181</sup> Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 32.



West Africa; the nineteenth century *Jihads* did not touch Akan lands. The bearers of the religion, especially the Fulani raiders and the Mande traders, could not impose their religion on the Akan. In a way because of the absence of missionizing zeal as a mode of its spreading in Akan lands, the IRTs and their agents did not perceive Islam to be much of a threat to them. Moreover, Islam's ethos resonated with their own, it being pragmatic like indigenous religions. I discuss Christian's encounter in what follows.

### **3.3.2 Christian Encounters with Indigenous Religions**

I now turn my attention to the Christian presence in Akan lands. There are two phases in the history of Christianity in Ghana. The first phase is the era of the Portuguese traders turned missionaries, around the second half of the fifteenth century, and the second is represented by the era of the nineteenth and twentieth century missionary activities."<sup>182</sup> These two phases of the Christian presence, one can assert, introduced inter-religious competition among the Akan, as the Akan religion struggled to survive in the presence of the newly introduced Christianity. Right from the onset of Christianity in Akan lands, the agents sponsored an anti-indigenous religions discourse. The Portuguese, the earliest agents of Christianity to arrive in Akan lands, disregarded the locals as having no religion even before they arrived.

Christians' preconceived negative view of the traders and missionaries of the people in this part of the world (Africa) were that of a bizarre group of humans with primitive customs. This is evidenced in their narratives and in the very rationale for embarking on their expedition. I note here that this attitude of the disrespectful Portuguese assessment of their hosts was exhibited on

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<sup>182</sup> Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 14.

their first day in the land of the "heathen." Diego d'Azambuja the head of the expedition, landed at Elmina on January 20th 1482.<sup>183</sup> He wrote:

The mass was heard by our men with many tears of devotion, and thanks to God for allowing them to praise and glorify Him in the midst of those idolaters, asking Him that as He was pleased that they were the first to erect an altar at so great a sacrifice, He would give them wisdom and grace to draw those idolatrous people to the faith, so that the Church which they would found there might endure until the end of the world.<sup>184</sup>

Words such as idolaters and heathens not only betrayed their preconceived notions, but foreshadowed what was to follow. The Portuguese, without any doubt, found something wrong with the African people that needed to be corrected. Following their arrival D'Azambuja arranged a meeting with the chief of Edina (also known as Elmina) in the Gold Coast and made a long speech outlining their missionizing agenda: to Christianize them, offer them protection and the friendship of the king of Portugal if the chief and his people would convert to the Christian religion. He also made a plea to build a castle on the coastline of Elmina. Diego's speech did not amuse the chief, Kwamina Ansah, whom the Portuguese called Cammaranca. He reacted both the idea of practicing a foreign religion and the occupation of his land by the owners of that religion. He politely rejected the idea of a new God and a possible occupation of their land by building a castle and registered his protest by an answer dense enough to scare away the guests from Portugal. He is noted to have responded to D'Azambuja in the following words: "friends who meet occasionally remained better friends than if they were neighbors."<sup>185</sup>

The response from the chief set the stage for a clash of these two faiths, cultures and powers. The Portuguese were indifferent to the chief's desires; they stayed anyway and used a

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<sup>183</sup>Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana*, 17.

<sup>184</sup>Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana*, 17.

<sup>185</sup>Debrunner, *History of Christianity in Ghana*, 18.

strategy Elizabeth Amoah<sup>186</sup> describes as the “package deal”<sup>187</sup> to entice the natives to convert to Christianity. This proselytizing model took the form of an exchange which was to benefit both the Portuguese and the natives of Elmina and other Akan people. The Portuguese promised to protect them from their enemies when they converted. They extended friendship, cementing it with the offering of gifts, especially to the chiefs and elders. The package deal strategy paid off as Akan chiefs and subjects alike submitted to mass baptisms in Efutu and Komenda.<sup>188</sup> One of the most significant points to note in relation to these events is the socio-political milieu of the times. On top of that the nature of indigenous religions aided the Christian missionaries in their cause. First politically, the era was marked by warfare among the various indigenous inhabitants of the Gold Coast. This necessitated the forming of alliances with more powerful groups, such as the Portuguese, on whom Akan chiefs could depend for military support during wars. Chiefs taking part in baptisms was then a calculated political move designed to secure for themselves guns or whatever they could obtain from the “Whiteman” to fight their enemies. In other words, chiefs, with their households and town folks, got baptized not because they wanted to be Christians, but because they knew the “Whiteman” has guns that could protect them from their enemies.<sup>189</sup> The church was perceived not only as a religion but the guarantee of an ally in times of war. Also, other treats such as foreign alcohol and other goodies were gained from the missionaries, so the notion of the church as a social organization or social club where worshippers could meet all people at one place on Sundays enticed Akans to be baptized. Here we see not only the accommodating

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<sup>186</sup> Prof. Elizabeth Amoah is a professor at the Religious studies department of University of Ghana, Legon and an authority in African Indigenous religions and West African church history.

<sup>187</sup> The ‘Package deal’ was a mutually exclusive agreement between the earlier Portuguese missionaries and explorers and the local Gold Coasters. It was an exchange between the two-the Portuguese promised them friendship, gifts and to protect the coasters from their inland enemies in exchange for the locals being converted and baptized by the missionaries.

<sup>188</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 64.

<sup>189</sup> S.K Odamtten, *The Missionary Factor in Ghana’s Development up to the 1880s*. (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1978), 163-164.

nature of the indigenous religions at play in its very early encounter with Christianity, but also the pragmatism that underlay the decisions of its agents and followers.

Secondly, accepting other gods or God into their own collection of gods is a practice in keeping with the openness of indigenous religious believers. As the gods are not jealous, a believer can visit as many shrines or places of worship, and worship as many gods as he or she pleases. Accommodating the Christian god, saints and religious symbols did not mean totally throwing away their beliefs and accepting completely another religion. Rather it meant adding a new religion to their faith. This is seen even in the attitude of the so called baptized Christians who “succumbed to the temptation and joined the rest in pouring libations and other ritual performances.”<sup>190</sup> Pragmatism features greatly in African indigenous religious belief systems; for example, if a group adds a new god to their gods, that accepted god must speak to practical evidential needs. Failure to do so will result in that god or religion being abandoned.

Unfortunately, and far from what the Akan converts anticipated, the version of Christianity the Portuguese inaugurated was not a practical religion. It could not answer both material and magico-religious needs of the people. In a way, one can argue that the belief system of Aka's at the time, which also informed what they expected of a new religion, explains the failure of the earliest agents of Christianity to root their religion on Akan lands. Despite the numerous mass baptisms, no vestiges of mass conversions were visible in places the Portuguese had earlier worked when latter missionaries visited. A related factor is that, the first encounter of Christianity with indigenous religions failed to yield results because the missionaries did not take into consideration their host's culture, religion and social set up, which is often so fluid and adaptive that resistance

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<sup>190</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 64.

is ignored. They were convinced that the locals' acceptance of baptism meant abandoning their native worship forms and acceptance of Christianity, when in actual fact there was more to just outwardly professing a faith. Without touching the socio-cultural foundation or worldview of the people it would be impossible to effect transformation. Even more, in the case of the indigenous natives of the Akan lands both then and now the new religion must both be meaningful and must answer their practical needs. Failure to do so results in natives ignoring the proffered faith. Christianity in its earliest manifestations faced this challenge.

Not only did Akan indigenous religions demonstrate their ability to stand up to invading religious forces in this early encounter, they also demonstrated an uncanny ability to seize the crucial signs of the invader's religion and transform them into Akan symbols of supernatural empowerment. The people of Elmina invested local meanings into some symbols of the Christianity that the Portuguese introduced. For example Obeng writes about the *Santa Mariafo* and *Santonafo* worshippers of Mary and St Anthony of Padua respectively--Catholic saints' shrines adapted by indigenous religions after the Portuguese left. The *Santa Mariafo* exalted the Virgin Mary and performed rites on Friday with the statue of Mary. *Santonafo*, followers of *Nana Ntona* [Saint Anthony] performed the annual festival led by indigenous religious priests and attended by chiefs and the people of the town.<sup>191</sup> For the natives of Elmina at that time, Christianity did not serve a pragmatic purpose, so, they seized its symbols and invested these with local meanings, rendering them pragmatically useful.

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<sup>191</sup> Obeng Pashington, *Asante Catholicism : Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana* ( Leiden: Brill, 1995), 125.

### 3.3.3 The Second Phase of the Attempt to Christianize Indigenous People

The second phase of Christian mission activity begins with the advent of various European missionaries, through the era of British colonization, the independence of the Gold Coast and the contemporary developments in the Ghanaian post-colony. The discussion that follows highlights the dynamics of this relationship between Christianity and indigenous religions in the context of African Initiated Churches (AICs), the Pentecostal and Charismatic development and neo-African religious movements such as Afrikania.

The second phase in the attempt by European missionaries to Christianize Ghana was marked by the arrival of groups such as the Moravian United Brethren Mission, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), Basel Mission, Bremen Mission, the Netherland Reformed Mission, Wesleyan and Methodist Missions and the United Free Church of Scotland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>192</sup> The various missionaries settled in different parts of Ghana and used different missionary approaches and strategies to Christianize their host communities. One such approach referred to as “Tabula rasa,”<sup>193</sup> or clean slate, was first used by Thompson of The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and later by other missionaries; others used segregation [Salem system], boarding school system [separate schools for both boys and girls-not mixing them], “agricultural development, training centres for apprentices and the establishment of hospitals to cater for health needs of the people;”<sup>194</sup> all in an attempt to Christianize a heathen

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<sup>192</sup> Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 43.

<sup>193</sup> The clean slate method was especially used in the schools. They later built on this clean slate method by separating Christians from their families to live in what was known as Salem or Christian villages.

<sup>194</sup> A.A Boahen, *Government and Politics in the Akuapem State 1730-1850*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 120.

people. In effect, the approaches used provide us with insights that betray the ethnocentrism of the missionary bodies.

These missionaries, like their earlier counterparts, arrived with preconceived notions of Africans and their culture, notions that would not allow any room for them to consider and pay attention to the worldview of the indigenes. Smith hints that the European missionaries came from Western Europe conscious at the time of its developing technology and of its cultural achievements in contrast with which West Africa would seem “backward” and in dire need not only of the grace of the Gospel but also of the blessings of Christian civilization.<sup>195</sup> The indigenous worldview, emphasizing spiritual and nonphysical beliefs, would not make any sense to the missionaries at all, because they came from a background of empiricism, reason, and science. As a matter of fact, the social and religious practices of Akan people, especially human sacrifice, confirmed their preconceived notions. Conversely, such negative attitudes towards the indigenous religions by missionaries invited resistance from agents of the IRTs who also saw themselves as the custodians of their Akan cultures. Wherever the missionaries settled throughout the Akan region, they met with stiff resistance. The missionary strategy of downplaying the religious beliefs of their host Akan communities in order to showcase theirs as pure and good had repercussions, as custodians of indigenous religion--chiefs, priests and ordinary Akan people--did not sit down unconcerned. The following words sum up Smith's summation of the missionaries' perception about the indigenous religious systems and traditions:

The little culture, which today licks the coastal areas, had not penetrated to the uplands. England's power had not yet held the various tribes in check. The tribal chiefs still ruled with the old despotism over their subjects, oppressing them as slaves without right. This oppression was increased by the fetish-priest....and sorcerer, who, by the use of poison and magic

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<sup>195</sup>Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 87; Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 45.

incantations exploited the people and made them slaves of fear. The severe laws and senseless decrees of the so-called sacred fetish priest retarded the progress and welfare of the natives. Slavery, polygamy, drunkenness, bloody quarrels, brutality and cruelty revealed the pagan life of the people.....<sup>196</sup>

The missionaries leveled criticisms against the indigenous institutions. Widmann reports that:

...veranlassen die Costümmen, welche oft eine vermögliche Famile in die bitterte Armuth stürzen; sie fressen die dem Fetisch gebrauchten Speisen...  
[...they promote the customs that often plunge a wealthy family into the most abject poverty; they consume foods brought to the fetish...]<sup>197</sup>

These words also betray the frustration of the missionaries at the defiance of the indigenous religious agents (priests and chiefs). There are clearer cases demonstrating the practical ways in which the indigenous religious agents registered their protest and resisted Christianity in ways which obstructed the efforts of the missionaries and prompted them to take more stringent actions. For example, the frustrated Basel missionaries among the Akuapim who are Akans went as far as asking the agents of the British Empire to delegitimize what they called heathenism “which they viewed as a hindrance to the progress of their evangelizing efforts. They identified three levels of heathenism as fetish worship, polygamy and the power of chiefs.”<sup>198</sup>

The attitude of the missionaries would spark tensions between them and the Akan people. The indigenous priests, who wielded much power in traditional societies and were therefore feared, featured prominently in these clashes. They were the protagonists in local anti-missionary campaigns, calling on locals not to succumb to foreign worship. Their activities infuriated some missionaries and were a key factor in the animosity missionaries harbored towards Akan priests and chiefs. Vestiges of this animosity exists in the derogatory ways in which agents of indigenous religions are cast in the discourses of modern-day Ghanaian Christianity. In missionary reports

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<sup>196</sup> Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 88.

<sup>197</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 80.

<sup>198</sup> Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 89.



written in the 1850s, indigenous religious priests were regarded as the agents of the devil and the main obstacle to the spread of the gospel. Smith narrates an incident in Akropong where J.A Mader (1851-77), a very zealous missionary, openly flogged a fetish priest for opposing the preaching of the gospel. In Asaafa and Kwaaman, both in the central region, a sacred grove was destroyed to pave way for the building of a chapel.<sup>199</sup> Mader was also noted for sending his seminary students to fetch black soil for his garden from the sacred grove to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the powers of the grove. He is said to have predicted to a local chief that he would go straight to hell because of his immoral life.<sup>200</sup> In Akwapim when the King wanted to marry some female catechumen, he received a letter from Inspector Josenhans that “the conscience of Christians is violated when they accepted polygamy...They have been instructed not to yield to the king or anybody else on this issue...If his Majesty, acting according to the pagan practices, forces any such marriage, he is guilty of injustice before God and Man.”<sup>201</sup> He was further threatened to be punished by the queen if he defies their orders.

The attitude of the missionaries provoked both priests and chiefs who were official custodian/bearers of indigenous religions. In 1850, in Aburi an incident provided a context for an outburst of Akan feelings of anger. The missionaries felled a sacred tree to make way for the building of the mission house, a way of demonstrating the passing away of the old religious order, which was seen as the worship of idols. This incident infuriated the local people. As such they demonstrated open defiance at Aburi, led by priests “demanding that the Christians should sacrifice goats and fowls in order to avert a small pox epidemic”<sup>202</sup> which they believe was as a result of the missionary’s defiance of the Akan deities. Again, there was an instance where Mader,

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<sup>199</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 95; Odamtten, *The Missionary Factor in Ghana’s Development*, 163.

<sup>200</sup> Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 91.

<sup>201</sup> Odamtten, *The Missionary Factor in Ghana’s Development*, 159-160.

<sup>202</sup> Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 91.

a missionary, mentions the controversy between Christians and non-Christians in his report about the death and burial of a converted woman in Mamfe-Akwapim. Her Christian husband was forced to perform rituals for offending the gods by converting to Christianity to enable his wife deliver his child but she eventually died. A later confrontation at the burial ensued when the indigenous people threatened to bury the woman in the night because the next day, which was Sunday, was a ritual day, but Mader insisted they bury her in broad day light at 10.00am, contrary to custom, because Christians are children of light.<sup>203</sup>

The missionaries' attitude to indigenous religions was persistent almost all over Akan land. Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti, was referred to as the "stronghold of the devil" by Maclean, the then British governor in a letter to Freeman.<sup>204</sup> The missionary branded "Asante *odwira* and *odae, apae* (traditional praise and prayers), drumming, dancing, puberty rites...and other religio-cultural actions as 'pagan' and 'superstitious.'" <sup>205</sup> In some instances, funeral rites were banned because they were viewed as "hindrances to civilization." Also, a ban was placed on betrothal or marrying adolescent girls, particularly girls undergoing baptismal teachings by the missionaries.

The indigenous religious functionaries often reacted to such orders as representing a negative attitude of the European missionary toward their Akan culture. In one instance, the chief of Akropong, who was also a priest, protested the orders of the ban on marriage and in a show of open defiance, went ahead to marry an adolescent girl to the chagrin of the missionaries. In Aburi when the indigenous priest instructed the inhabitants of the town to destroy their red goats to avert the outbreak of small pox and the Christians refused the orders "a fierce crowd of young men

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<sup>203</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 82.

<sup>204</sup> Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 88.

<sup>205</sup> Pashington, *Asante Catholicism*, 121

looted all red goats and fowls from the mission station”<sup>206</sup> to register their protest. In Ashanti, the king, Mensah Bonsu, responded by inaugurating his own campaign, educating the missionaries on reasons why the indigenous religion was of crucial relevance. He is noted to have told Picot in 1876, in response to the missionary’s negotiations to work in Kumasi, that:

The bible is not a book for us. God at the beginning gave the Bible to the white people, another book to the Cramo, and the fetish to us... We know God ourselves... As to the commandments of God, we know and keep them all. But we will never embrace your religion....The God of the white man and the Fantis is different from the God of the Ashantis, and we cannot do without our fetish”<sup>207</sup>

In this way the King identified Christianity and IRTs as equal and parallel systems, each suited to a specific cultural sphere and serving similar purposes. This can also be interpreted as a tacit rejection of the new religion. A number of reasons explain the Akan resistance to Christianity during this phase, and the missionary’s defiance of that resistance. First, to become a Christian meant abandoning the Akan ethnic and family structure. Secondly, allowing Christianity would reduce the utility and usurp the political powers of priests and chiefs. King Mensa Bonsu of the Ashanti rejected the missionaries on the grounds that their religion had weakened the powers of the Fanti kingdom and made both “low and high people equal.”<sup>208</sup>

To elaborate further, when, for example, the missionaries started segregating new local converts of Christianity from the non-Christians, so that the Christians are not “contaminated,” the Akan chiefs and elders initially obliged the practice. They felt that allowing a portion of their subjects to stay in a separate place in the suburb of the towns (salems) was not really alien to their customs. Strangers in towns and villagers were confined to self-contained sections of the village

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<sup>206</sup> Odamtten, *The Missionary Factor in Ghana’s Development*, 162.

<sup>207</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 96.

<sup>208</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 96.

or towns, so the chiefs allowed the salems. But the salems would later serve as breeding grounds for the natives to separate themselves from the culture and traditions of the people. Practically, those who lived in the salems [Christian village, *bronikrom* among others] had nothing to do with their family members. They did not participate in religio-social activities of the towns, prompting chiefs such as the Akropong chief, for example, to accuse the missionaries of trying to separate brothers and setting them against each other by creating towns within a town. Boahen's casting of the situation is instructive: "African societies had become divided into rival factions first, converts and non-converts..."<sup>209</sup>

The Christian attempts to totally undermine indigenous religions were successful only to an extent. In indigenous Akan cultures, the natives' religion and social cultural traditions are intertwined and inseparable. Even though salems were created to separate Christians from non-Christians, Smith hints at how in the missionaries' zeal to establish separate Christian communities, they failed to realize that the claim of kin could not easily be put aside."<sup>210</sup>

The social system of matrilineal inheritance made children of Christian parents close to their maternal uncles whether he was a Christian or not. Also ceremonies such as funerals and marriages provided contexts for the interaction of kinsmen or *abusua*. In the process of these interactions, Christians and non-Christian alike, participated in the same ritual forms. This prompted a missionary to write in 1895 of the Akropong Christians that "the old ceremonies and customs which take place for important heathens and in which Christians take part live on strongly and once again characterize on congregation as a heathen-Christian....[sic]."<sup>211</sup> He continues his lamentation about Christians visiting "*abosom* priests," that is indigenous religious priests, and the

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<sup>209</sup> Adu A.Boahen, *African Perspective on Colonialism*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1987), 50.

<sup>210</sup> Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 104.

<sup>211</sup> Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 104.

failure of Christians to deny belief in the power of these priests. He thus implied that, even with the creation of the salems and a promise of a heaven in the hereafter, the church could not answer the unquenchable thirst for spirituality in the Akan people. The usual ritualistic and performative spiritually-charged ways of dealing with mundane issues was lacking in the church, accentuating the need for indigenous religions, which then became, for the Christians, a force to reckon with.

The hostilities and denigration by missionaries towards the indigenous faith was largely based on their frustration at their inability to expedite the mission of rescuing a heathen people. The custodians of indigenous religions resisted what they saw as usurpation of their authority and sometimes even “broke into a chapel to force Christians to take part in a festival. In spite of their new-found faith, the Christians were still regarded as members of the family and community.”<sup>212</sup> So Obeng could not be far from wrong in saying that the "gospel must submit to the African imagery, language and styles of understanding and articulations"<sup>213</sup> for it to be meaningful to them, for the simple reason that the ordinary person “in the street and in the bush expected four things from religion: social fellowship, emotional experiences, healing and security against real or imagined evil forces.”<sup>214</sup> However, it is often debated by scholars whether the success of the second phase of missionary activities was in part a result of the help missionaries received from colonial powers. Next I discuss colonialism in Ghana.

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<sup>212</sup> Odamtten, *The Missionary Factor in Ghana's Development*, 162.

<sup>213</sup> Obeng, *Ashanti Catholicism*, 1996, p4.

<sup>214</sup> Debrunner, *A History of Christianity*, 320.

### 3.3.4 The Colonial Impact on the People

The British colonial rule over the Gold Coast, which followed their formal annexation of Ashanti in 1902,<sup>215</sup> was also an experiment in acculturation, and Christianity functioned as a major ideological tool in this process. It was a major mechanism through which inhabitants of the Gold Coast were culturally co-opted into the empire. For this reason, missionaries received help from agents of the empire. One element that helped the missionaries' survival was this backing. The political occupation by the British made the indigenes of the Gold Coast powerless. Their political, social, cultural and religious rights, which were all intertwined and vested in the chiefs and other indigenous functionaries, were usurped, hitting them at the core. Chiefs sometimes led in ritual performance by virtue of their divine position linked with the stools or skins of office, and usurping their political powers by the imposition of an imperial hegemony constricted the performance of their religious duties.

Colonialism also undermined the authority of Akan women, who controlled the domain of indigenous religious healing and rites of passage. Elsewhere, I have described how Christianity introduced "an androcentric religion that recognized and celebrated males and men within its ranks, replacing the feminine principle in Nzema religion, for instance. Nzema women were removed from the socio-religious locations where they exercised power in the pre-colonial religious order."<sup>216</sup> The structural changes introduced by colonial agents further eroded this female control over aspects of Akan religion. For example, the introduction of modern health care

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<sup>215</sup> Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 108.

<sup>216</sup> Genevieve Nrenzah, *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Ghanaian Pentecostalism*, 50.

facilities contributed greatly to a decline in the reliance on women as healers and midwives whose dispensation of health entailed indigenous religious rituals.

Western education, introduced by the missionaries and supported by colonial agents, further undermined the influence of the indigenous religions. As the need for qualified natives in the colonial administration increased, the importance of western education also increased. However, education alienated Akans from their indigenous religions. The missionary schools tailored their curriculum towards Christianizing the natives, and encouraged them to look on their indigenous customs as heathen practices. To be educated was to be a Christian and adopting Christianity meant denial of everything indigenous--including a person's name, way of life, religion, and total way of thinking and behaving. As it turned out later, it was the native Western educated elite who would inherit the task of denouncing indigenous religious practices their fellow kinsmen engaged in, an example being David Asante and colleagues from Akuropon who shared the views of the missionary Mader.<sup>217</sup>

Notwithstanding these setbacks linked with colonial rule, indigenous Akan religions found fertile ground on which they continued to thrive. The rapid socio-cultural changes colonial rule introduced to Ghana proved somewhat to be Christianity's undoing, for these changes introduced disruptions into the lives of the indigenes, which they interpreted in terms of witchcraft, as manifestations of sorcery, demonic possession and the activities of agents of supernatural harm. These issues called for the use of indigenous religious resources and many people, even Christians and the educated, saw the need to enlist the services of indigenous religious agents for healing, divination, sacrificing of animals and other remedies for their suffering.

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<sup>217</sup> Boahen, *Government and Politics in the Akuapem State 1730-1850*, 122.

During the late nineteenth century, according to McCaskie, and the first half of the twentieth century, according to Parker, a number of anti-witchcraft shrines emerged in the Akan region. These shrines included: "*aberewa*" (meaning old woman), *hwemeso* (meaning watch over me), and *kunde*, *Senyakupo*, *Nana Tongo* and *Tigare*.<sup>218</sup> They mushroomed all over Akan land to deal with the troublesome issues of the time. Reinforcing the need for these shrines is the fact that missionary Christians offered no alternative to belief in the efficacy of agents of supernatural harm in the indigenous religious world. For this reason the natives did not find the agents of Christianity capable of dealing with their traditional, much less their modern magico- religious needs.

Education had an eye opening effect on Akan indigenes, and also impacted indigenous religions in a positive way. They saw that most of their beliefs and traditions denounced by the missionaries as evil and only fit for abandonment were actually represented in the Bible, especially the Old Testament: polygamy, divination, libation, drumming and dancing, among many other practices.<sup>219</sup> The literacy culture introduced by the missionaries and the inherent ability of indigenous religions to adapt and be dynamic resulted in the formation of independent churches. These churches provided a context or space within Christianity for indigenous religion to flourish. While these churches represented the rooting of Christianity in Africa on the one hand, on the other hand they signaled the triumph of indigenous religions and their agents. They demonstrated the ability of indigenous religions to tolerate, adapt and make Christianity their own. My position here is that the Africanization of Christianity, which begun during the era of colonialism, did not so much reflect the success of missionaries in planting Christianity on African soil, as it did the

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<sup>218</sup> Parker, *Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft*, 2004, 393; McCaskie "Anti-Witchcraft Cults in Ashanti," i.

<sup>219</sup> Genesis 4:9; 16.1-4 on polygamy; Numbers 15:7 on Libation; 1 Samuel 28 on divination; and Psalm 150:6 on drumming and dancing.



seizure of the Christian religion from its owners—a position on which many scholars agree.<sup>220</sup> These churches were testaments to the ability of agents of African indigenous religions to stand their ground.

### **3.3.5 Indigenous Religion in the Post-Independence Ghana**

Faced with a fragile young country divided by different ethnic factions, regionalism, political rivalry, and religion, Kwame Nkrumah needed a single integrative symbol. He looked to indigenous religions for an answer. For Nkrumah, indigenous religion was the one element the various indigenous groups had in common and it must be promoted if the nation was to come together. Nkrumah challenged the cultural relevance of Christianity in Ghana and Africa and nurtured a national consciousness that identified Christianity with colonial rule because it was the religion of the colonizers.<sup>221</sup> Kwame Nkrumah had a skeptical view about Christianity since for him, as well as the populace who supported him, "the same ship that brought the bible brought the gun and alcohols."<sup>222</sup>

The constitution of post-colonial Ghana declared Ghana as a secular state, meaning Ghana would not be ruled with religious laws, but religion and state would be separate the two being different entities. Yet to the contrary, from the night of 6th March 1957, religion featured prominently in Ghanaian politics, especially under Kwame Nkrumah, who used civil religion to

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<sup>220</sup> Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 295; Christian R. Gaba, "Man's Salvation: Its Nature and Meaning in Africa Traditional Religion," in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward Fashole-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrain Hastings and Godwin Tasie (London: Rex Collings, 1978), 400; Ogbu U. Kalu, Introduction," in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed Ogbu U. Kalu, (NJ: Africa World Press 2007); Clifton R. Clarke, "Ogbu Kalu and Africa's Christianity: A Tribute," *Pneuma* 32.1 (2010): 120, accessed December 30, 2014. DOI: [10.1163/027209610X12628362887712](https://doi.org/10.1163/027209610X12628362887712).

<sup>221</sup> Dovlo, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 633.

<sup>222</sup> Boahen, *African Perspective on Colonialism*, 58.

amalgamate Ghana, which was then made up of small ethnic states. Dovlo has noted civil religion as the "use of religious images and symbols in public and political life aimed to invoke patriotic piety and unite people of different nations into one 'nation'."<sup>223</sup> After Ghana's independence, what all these kingdoms had in common was the indigenous religion which had been condemned by the missionaries and colonizers as backward. By using indigenous religions and privileging their importance over the colonizer's religion Nkrumah aroused loyal attitudes toward the nation. Kwame Nkrumah, as the first president of Ghana, appealed to indigenous religious sentiments by incorporating indigenous rituals, such as pouring of libations, the indigenous prayer, at every state gathering and function. His initiatives have been a legacy in Ghanaian public life ever since.

Secondly, under the rubric of *sankofa* ideology, Kwame Nkrumah inaugurated and promoted a kind of save-the-heritage campaign, reviving indigenous religions and encouraging the populace to go back to old-time-religion, *sankofa* in Akan. He supported and promoted everything indigenous so much so that he adopted the *Kpando bobobo*, an indigenous drumming and dancing troupe from the Volta region of Ghana that graced his special occasions. He always wore *Fugu* or *Kente*, all locally made fabric, for state functions. *Fugu* was the official attire on the day he and other leaders declared independence for Ghana on the podium in Accra, now Independence Square. Nkrumah's sponsorship of African studies at the University of Ghana also speaks to the state sponsorship and support of indigenous culture, including indigenous religions and its agents, in the earlier stages of the Ghanaian post colony. As a leader, he is believed to have enlisted the help of indigenous ritual specialists and also depended on the gods for his own security and supposedly

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<sup>223</sup>Dovlo, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 634.

that of the state. For example, he was believed to have imported a god from Guinea called *Kankan Nyame*, which he planted in the castle and flagstaff house respectively.

The socio-political and economic climate in Ghana between the late 60s and early 80s gave birth to an ethos that directed attention to indigenous religions nationally among the Akans. In the late 1960s, the opponents of Nkrumah wanted his downfall as he steered the country into a one party state; this eventually led to his overthrow in 1966 through military takeover. Around the same time Ghana experienced a sharp decline in socio-economic conditions. Basic goods were scarce, prices of items rose sharply, there was galloping inflation, and many people suffered unemployment. This situation prompted Ghana's two political revolutions.

The first was a bloody *coup d'état* in 1979 led by Flight Lieutenant Jerry-John Rawlings. This *coup d'état* was so brutal that it plunged the nation into a state of anxiety, fear and uncertainty. The second revolution, which occurred in 1982 was relatively peaceful. These situations generated a sense of insecurity all over. Given this insecurity, people depended on indigenous religions and agents for powers to restore a sense of security. Also during this period many Ghanaians escaped to oil-rich Nigeria, seeking greener pastures. These included many doctors and health sector workers who left Ghana to work in Nigeria, where salaries were better. As a result, this same era also witnessed the indigenous religious agents transforming into major health providers. The shrines and herbalist centers became the hospitals, since access to modern Western health centres was practically impossible, especially in the villages. But in the same era African-initiated Christianity, or the AICs, also flourished, as many Ghanaians consulted them for health and wealth to deal with their situations.

### 3.3.6 The African Initiated Churches (AICs)

The emergence of the AICs can be dated back to the nineteenth century.<sup>224</sup> Omenyo posits that Christianity was unable to communicate effectively with indigenous religions. Christianity created a "theological deficit" by demeaning the Akan religious worldview and reducing Akan beliefs to illusions and imagination. In doing so, it totally failed to meet the needs of the Akan, understood as based in wealth and health, i.e. the physical and spiritual wellbeing of an individual, achievable through the various rituals, rites and performances deemed evil by Christianity. The development of African Initiated Churches or African Independent Churches (AICs), otherwise called "*sumsum sore*" (spiritual churches) was the inevitable result of the endeavors of indigenous religious actors. Nevertheless, the AICs were more than a religion that was analogous to the indigenous religious worldview. They were also political in orientation and often perceived as a "protest against and challenge to the Eurocentric disposition of the mainline churches in Africa."<sup>225</sup> These agents perceived missionary-established Christianity to be alienating. The dull services and lack of "heat" in the spiritual life of the missionary churches and the missionary neglect of the belief systems of Africans in their churches were important factors that accounted for what can be described as a religious revolution.

Equally important was the translation of the Bible into local languages, for it enabled indigenous worshippers to invest their own meanings into the interpretations of Christian scripture. Biblical references to consultations of seers (as in the case of Saul), the pouring of libation, the anointing oil, naming ceremonies, human sacrifice, drumming and dancing, prompted indigenous

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<sup>224</sup> Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 4.

<sup>225</sup> Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 4.

worshippers to identify likeness between Christianity and indigenous beliefs and practices. Encouraged by these similarities, local worshippers questioned the basis of the hostile missionary attitudes towards the indigenous religions, which they were convinced could co-exist with Christianity as they have elements in common. The agitation about mixing their indigenous traditions, which they felt was already present in the bible, with that of the missionaries was not welcomed by the missionaries, breeding breakaways and consequently the widespread formation of AICs in Ghana. Indigenous religious actors such as William Wade Harris, John Swatson and Sampson Oppong created schisms during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>226</sup> Recently, scholars have acknowledged that the work of these prophets helped in establishing African forms of Christianity, controlled by Africans and known in Ghana as *sumsum sore*. The name is derived from the ecstatic spiritual performances accompanied with clapping, drumming, divination, prophesying, and dancing. These new traditions were testaments to the resilience of indigenous African religions and their agents. They provided alternative spaces for Akan worshippers who wanted to be Christians and Akan at the same time. In the contexts of the rituals performed in these spaces, AICs tried to satisfy the worshippers' deep religious and spiritual quest for an authentic Akan spirituality. The ethos of the AICs answered some, if not all, their spiritual needs. The AICs certainly set the pace and blazed a path for other forms of African Christianity even in contemporary times,<sup>227</sup> for out of the African Initiated Churches came the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches mushrooming all over Ghana today.

More importantly, we must note that the AIC traditions provided contexts also for women to reassert the indigenous ritual power and leadership they lost due to colonial policies. Many of

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<sup>226</sup>Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 67.

<sup>227</sup>Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 74.

the leaders in the AICs, such as Grace Tani, leader of the Twelve Apostles, were women.<sup>228</sup> They dispensed forms of indigenous healing to their followers.

Despite the efforts of the AICs to bridge the gap between indigenous religions and Christianity by contextualizing or acculturating its message and forms of worship to make them appealing to the natives, the historical negation of indigenous religions reappeared, as the AICs were branded as non-Christian by missionary-established churches. Yet what seems as a paradox is that even within mission churches, indigenous religions found ways to offer forms of resistance. Dovlo notes how a cursory look at the missionary churches discovers unconscious ‘Africanizations.’ The African clothes worn on Sundays to church, the indigenized liturgies, and the singing bands mostly in vernacular, especially those that sing *Ebibi Nwom* (literally meaning indigenous black songs) and various indigenous musical instruments used in these churches are all visible examples to substantiate this view. By incorporating Akan culture in the churches by the AICs, the inherent characteristics of the Akan indigenous religions were retained.

### **3.4 The Ghanaian Pentecostal/Charismatics and Indigenous Religious Traditions**

In contemporary Ghana, Pentecostals dominate the religious scene<sup>229</sup> and despite the resemblance of indigenous religions to Pentecostalism in ethos and practice, Pentecostals campaign vehemently against indigenous religions, perceiving indigenous religious functionaries as evil and demonic, and the landscape itself as a repository of the demonic powers. They constantly abuse indigenous religions verbally in their churches and on TV when preaching.

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<sup>228</sup> Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 73.

<sup>229</sup> Census2010\_Summary\_report\_of\_final\_results.pdf, 6

The Pentecostals have constructed a discourse in which indigenous rituals, belief systems and practices are perceived to be backward and offer the gateway to hell. Not only do they condemn the practicing of enlisting the help of indigenous religious agents, they also view cultural practices informed by indigenous religious beliefs, such as traditional baby outdoorings and naming ceremonies, traditional marriage rites and funerals as avenues through which demonic forces resident in the indigenous religious landscape gain access to and influence the lives of Christians. Christians must disengage themselves from these practices.<sup>230</sup> Meyer has also pointed out how missionary Christianity translated the devil in the realm of indigenous repositories.<sup>231</sup> Pentecostal worshippers and agents also profile themselves as being book- centered, modern, globalized and progressive, in contradistinction to agents of the indigenous religions, who they describe as stuck in the past, “primitive” and retrogressive. They argue that to be a Pentecostal means to be modern and to gain access to all the benefits Western modernity offers. They even lump together mainstream/mainline missionary churches [Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran, and Presbyterian], opposing them, characterizing them as dull and non-spirit-filled. Catholics, in particular, are singled out and tagged with the label of idol worshippers for their veneration of Mary and other saints, and due to their highly ritualistic culture.

There is a sense in which we can argue that this vicious Pentecostal campaign has backfired, in that by casting indigenous religious agents as powerful adversaries they reinforced the sense that IRTs were still powerful, making them appeal to people seeking potent powers in dealing with problems created by globalization-- problems such as poverty or chronic lack of money, the pressure to be successful by participating in the global economy or international travel,

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<sup>230</sup> Rev. Dr. Peace Donkor, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, December 28, 2011.

<sup>231</sup> Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*. (Trenton: NJ. African World Press, 1999), xvii.

lack of confidence due to the feeling that one cannot measure up to those who are doing well, and diseases. In other words, paradoxically the indigenous religions have somehow been popularized by the constant negative narratives of the Pentecostals. It would seem that name- calling of the various religious denominations, which has long been a feature of Ghana's religious ethos, has recently escalated because of the activities of Pentecostals and has increased tension among them, especially between Pentecostals and indigenous religions. The tension between Christianity and indigenous traditions due to power struggle or competition is rooted in the history of their encounter.

Contributing to this tension is the boldness with which indigenous agents present themselves. Far from the earlier encounter in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century and the last two or three decades, when they operated in secrecy, indigenous religious functionaries have become more visible in the present times. They advertise their services on sign posts in both the rural and urban areas, in newspapers as well as through the use of modern media devices, such as TV and internet. During their annual festivals, their agents seize the opportunity to reassert their claims to authority by imposing curfews and bans on noise-making in specific communities. Often these sanctions are trivialized by a strong argument proffered by Christians who are of the opinion that, in a modern era with modern government, citizens have rights to enjoy freedom of religion. The Pentecostals also argue that as Christians they believe that their God, the true God, created the world and everything in it, so they have to praise Him with drumming and dancing as and when they wish and should not be limited by "heathens" speaking the language of the missionaries.<sup>232</sup> These differences in outlook have resulted in bloody clashes between the agents of these two religions.

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<sup>232</sup> Rijk van Dijk, "Contesting Violence: The Ban on Drumming and the Musical Politics of Pentecostalism in Ghana," Leiden University - Ghana Studies Series Vol. 4, (2001): 34.



Examples of such confrontations include those that ensued in the capital Accra in 2001<sup>233</sup> and also in 1993<sup>234</sup> in Half Assini.

What is significantly noticeable here is that, whereas Christianity has been consistent in tagging indigenous religions as evil or heathen, indigenous religious agents without fail defended their religious practices and resisted imposition or excessive dominance of Christianity. This allusion is based on the track record of indigenous religions' resistance to incoming religions but also on the current happening on the religious landscape of Ghana.

In 1982, while indigenous religious functionaries and agents and followers of Christianity were still struggling over the issue of who wielded more power and influence on the religious landscape, there was a development that stunned the Ghanaian Christian world. But this same development was the first sign of the extent to which Western modernity was triggering shifts in the minds of indigenous religious agents. A Catholic priest by the name of Rev. Father Vincent Damuah left the Catholic Church to align himself with indigenous religions. He formed a movement, called *Afrikania*/Reformed Traditional Religion or *Sankofa*. *Sankofa* literally meaning going back to take, referring to a call to all and sundry to return to indigenous religions. He challenged the core of Christianity, emphasizing its irrelevance for the advancement of the African. His goal was to rally all indigenous religious agents and followers together under one umbrella and institutionalize them, presumably in response to the threat the Pentecostals posed.

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<sup>233</sup>The Ga traditional council mobilized the youth to vandalize the Christ Apostolic Church International in Accra because their church members and their pastor, Reverend Augustine Annor-Yeboah, flouted the ban on noise-making imposed by the indigenous religious priest.

<sup>234</sup> In 1993, the church of Pentecost in Half Assini was burnt down by the chief and religious functionaries of the town for their refusal to abide by the ban on drumming and dancing.

De Witte notes how Damuah and his group were motivated by the quest to reconstruct and promote “African Traditional Religion as a modern pan-African religion...”<sup>235</sup> They promoted a discourse that runs counter to the Pentecostal hegemonic narrative that indigenous religions are “secretive fetish cults.”<sup>236</sup> They described the indigenous religions as “modern and morally good” religions comparable with any world religion. Damuah’s revolutionary gesture piqued the interest of Jerry John Rawlings (the military leader of Ghana) who had inaugurated a political revolution at the time and was suspicious of the anti-Ghanaian culture rhetoric of Pentecostal churches. He posited the view that Christianity was an alien religion, which participated in the colonization of the African’s consciousness.<sup>237</sup> He called on Ghanaians to do away with everything colonial in order to create a sense of national identity and pride. This meant doing away with Christianity and going back to old time religion- *sankofa*. Damuah then sought to unite all indigenous religious priests and priestesses in Ghana under one institution to reassert the centrality of their authority and the viability of African religious beliefs and praxis.<sup>238</sup> In doing so, Damuah patterned the group after the Christian format to make it more attractive to the populace. Perceiving Damuah’s movement as a religious movement with a strong political vision on African identity and national development, Rawlings adopted it as the religious arm of his revolution.<sup>239</sup> Damuah’s rise was a landmark development in the history of the resistance of indigenous religious traditions to Christian religious forms. For the first time after the death of Nkrumah, the indigenous religions and their agents garnered much needed political support in their efforts to reassert their authority and viability. The modern organizational framework he also adopted for his movement indicated

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<sup>235</sup> De Witte, “The Spectacular and the Spirits,” 326.

<sup>236</sup> De Witte, “The Spectacular and the Spirit,” 323.

<sup>237</sup> Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, 277.

<sup>238</sup> Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

<sup>239</sup> De Witte, “The Spectacular and the Spirits,” 326.

the possibility of an indigenous African religious model that would be able to address indigenous needs of modernized Ghanaians.

Damuah's initiative in revitalizing African religions ushered in an era of indigenous religious and cultural inventions and revivals that Ghana had never experienced before that time, arousing the interest of many Ghanaians, who then initiated cultural projects.<sup>240</sup> Agents of indigenous religions became more emboldened in their efforts to claim public visibility. Damuah's *Afrikania* introduced a structure, format, membership, and *modus operandi* that are in keeping with modern times into the indigenous Ghanaian religious landscape. *Afrikania*'s rise also demonstrates my view that indigenous religions constantly shape themselves to meet emerging needs of their followers.

In a more modern and post-Damuah development, a new form of charismatic Pentecostal Christianity has emerged in Ghana which though formatted as Pentecostal has lots of indigenous religious features. It is the most current testament to the resilient nature of indigenous religions in the face of the onslaught launched by modern Christian forms in Ghana. These churches demonstrate how IRTs' beliefs and practices manifest in the very spaces Pentecostals claim they have absolute control over. The leaders of these new churches are called prophets or *Odifo*<sup>241</sup> which means an intermediary between humans and God. These churches make extensive use of the modalities of indigenous religions such as prophesying, visioning, divining, deliverance-*[mmusuyie]*, purifying with water, praying over food items, whipping the demonic forces out of follower's experiences using oils believed to be spiritually charged---all the while referring to themselves and their organizations as pure charismatic Christian forms. These churches seem

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<sup>240</sup> See Wuaku Kafui, *Hindu Gods in West Africa*, 66-67.

<sup>241</sup> *Odifo* means prophet but more of a seer in the indigenous religious sense.

more like indigenous shrines in terms of their ritual, hospitals in terms of their organizational formats and are businesslike in orientation.

These new churches emphasize spiritual power and their leaders demonstrate such powers publicly through healing and deliverance on TV and radio. Prophets such as Prophet Ebenezer Adarkwa Opambour Yiadom of the Ebenezer Miracle Worship Center in Kumasi owns a radio station called Mercury, a Kumasi-based radio station which broadcasts his programs live. He also preaches and performs miracles on Metro TV Saturdays at 10:30-11 am. Prophet Obinim of International Gods Way preaches from 10 to 10:30 am on Saturdays at metro TV, Prophet Nicholas Osei aka Kum Chacha, head pastor of Heaven Gate Ministries, preaches at Adom FM based in Accra and on TV Africa. Indigenous ritual agents contest the claims of these prophets' churches to superior spiritual power—the indigenous religious priests claim they supply those powers to the prophets, who surreptitiously consult them in their shrines.

Kwaku Bonsam, one such indigenous priest who alludes to this claim, walked into one of these new churches in Kato, a suburb of Brekum in the Brong Ahofo region of Ghana, on a Sunday morning to demand the return of a god that the founding pastor had borrowed from him.<sup>242</sup> In front of TV cameras he revealed how the god was the source of the magico-religious powers that aided the pastor to fill the pews in his church, dazzle worshippers with miracles which enticed new members, heal, arrest witches, cast out demons, and guarantee financial security for members. Takes place against the background of such pastors supposedly consulting indigenous religious priest for powers and yet publicly demonizing them, amidst capitalism and globalization, plus what seems to be a modern day pan-African movement which together constitute the contemporary Ghanaian religious situation.

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<sup>242</sup>[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iI\\_IFCutgLo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iI_IFCutgLo) accessed 6/5/2013.

### 3.5 Contemporary Indigenous Religious Landscape in Ghana

Kwaku Bonsam is one of the most recent generations of Ghanaian indigenous priests championing the cause of the indigenous religions in the nation. One distinctive characteristic of these new priests is that they use a model different from their predecessor, Damuah. Whereas Damuah tried to model *Afikania* after Christianity in terms of its organizational format, these neo- indigenous priests seek to look inward to the indigenous religions themselves. Drawing on the inherent flexibility and fluidity of these traditions to re-create themselves so that they can appeal to indigenous and modern sensibilities and speak to the needs of worshippers [modern and indigenous]; they are putting forward a discourse on modernity. This narrative posits that indigenous African religious institutions can retain their indigenous structures and still be relevant in a modern Ghana. To modernize African religions, they argue, it is necessary for these traditions to respond to the Christian onslaught. This modernization however, should not necessarily entail the adoption of Western religious models. Modernity should not be wholesale Westernization, but simply improving upon indigenous structures so that they speak to the needs of a rapidly modernizing and globalizing Ghana. They adopt modernizing formats and have moved a step further than the earlier indigenous shrines located in the rural areas of Ghana by providing social services to their communities and individuals at large. All their efforts are directed at projecting themselves not as evil, as purported by their detractors, the Christians, but as a formidable force to reckon with. They argue that Christians would not secretly access their powers to popularize and populate their miracle churches if their powers were evil. The new indigenous religious outburst is revolutionary and widespread, even unstoppable, as it cuts across every nook and cranny of

Ghana, with each neo-indigenous religious priest making a mark for himself or herself wherever they find themselves--village, city or town.

These priests even demonstrate their intentions of globalizing their inventions, as the study will show later. Some of them, such as Kwaku Bonsam, have extended their services to overseas locations such as the Netherlands and the USA. Through the monitoring of radio, TV and the internet, other priests receive strings of requests through modern media of communication, especially phone calls every day from their clients all over the globe. While it can be suggested that these priests have somewhat been provoked by the viciousness of the Pentecostal-Charismatic attack on indigenous religious traditions to redouble their efforts at seizing the religious landscape of Ghana for themselves, it is also true that the overwhelming effects of the dislocations associated with globalization on Ghanaians have led even some devout Christians to secretly solicit their help as noted in the record books of Bonsam and Komfo Oforiwaa,<sup>243</sup> expanding their clientele base in the process. In other words, the neo-indigenous groups and agents are benefitting from the new changes that are occurring in modern Ghana. Equally of important in their rise is the growth in new Ghanaian Diasporas all over the globe and the strong desire among members of the older African Diasporas, such as African-Americans, Jamaicans, Haitians, and Cubans, to rediscover their indigenous spiritual roots in West Africa.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> The researcher pressed for evidence from both Bonsam and Komfo of their claims that Christians and other religious adherents patronized their services. I noted that in their record books, used in recording the daily visits of their clients, clients stated their religious affiliation.

<sup>244</sup> Afe Adogame, "Practitioners of Indigenous Religions of Africa and the Diaspora," in *Religions in Focus: New Approaches to Tradition and Contemporary Practices*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Equinox, 2009); Afe Adogame, "From House Cells to Warehouse Churches: Christian Church Outreach Mission International in Translocal Contexts," in *Traveling Spirits: Migrants, Markets and Mobilities*, eds. G. Huwelmeir and Kristine Krause, (New York: Routledge, 2010); Henry John Drewal, "Introduction: Charting the Voyage," in *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* ed. Henry John Drewal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 16-18; Jacob K Olupona and Terry Rey, "Introduction," in *Orisha Devotion as World Religion*, ed. Jacob K Olupona and Terry Rey (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 5.

### 3.6 Conclusion

I have attempted to introduce the ethno-historical account of the encounter of Ghana's indigenous religions with other forms of foreign religions, especially Christianity. I discussed pre-foreign religious encounter in Ghana, narrowing my scope to Akan indigenous religion and pointing out an inherent characteristic of indigenous religions--an element that has made it resilient to stand the test of time. I followed up with the Islamic encounter and argued that Islam's greater tolerance of elements from Akan indigenous religions, as well as its practices being in some instances similar with the indigenous worldview, made it easier for them to convert without giving up their belief system. I concluded that Islam did not undermine Akan indigenous religion as did Christianity, which in part accounts for the success of Islam in parts of Ghana.

I then touched on the two main phases of Christianity's intercourse with the natives of Ghana. I argued that the first stage championed by the Portuguese was a fiasco because they failed to recognize that the worldview of their host was too strong to be erased easily with baptism. I pointed out that accepting other gods or religious symbols is a tolerant characteristic of indigenous religion. The second phase of Christianity was loaded with events of the nineteenth century European missionaries, British colonization and the contemporary development in post-colonial Ghana. I suggested that the success of missionaries depended on first the help they received from the colonial government and second the advent of African Christianity in the form of AICs. I argued strongly that the resilient and accommodating nature of indigenous religions made this

possible-in that the indigenous religious agents started the struggle for independence against external imposition (Christianity and colonialism), and when it was finally attained the first President used indigenous religions and symbols to tie the soul of the country together.

I continued by describing the dynamics of the African -initiated churches, the Pentecostal and charismatic development and African religious movements such as *Afrikania* Mission. I concluded by referring to the contemporary ne- indigenous religious upsurge within the larger Ghanaian religious landscape. I accentuated that throughout these various phases, the indigenous religious characteristics of adaptability, dynamism, and innovative responses have contributed to the continued persistence and prevalence of indigenous religions in Ghana. IRTs are never dying but resurfacing and reshaping themselves in guises appropriate to their social function, which is to promote total health and wellbeing.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **GHANA'S NEW INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS PRIESTS: THE STORY OF KWAKU BONSAM**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I focus on Kwaku Bonsam, the neo-indigenous priest. The key theme around which the discussion evolves is that, contrary to the common assumption that the expansion of Pentecostal-Charismatics in Ghana is accompanied by the demise of indigenous religious beliefs and practices, IRTs are resurgent with a new brand of neo-indigenous priests such as Bonsam. The chapter links these developments to the parlous state of Ghana's socio-economic situation and argues that the insecurities that have accompanied modern Ghanaian life have led to an upsurge in the demand for the services of these neo-indigenous religious agents. Nowadays in Ghana these neo-indigenous priests/specialists match Pentecostal-Charismatic pastors in the provision of magico-religious services to worshippers and clients. Magico-religious power is a contested essence in the religious field of Ghana, and people who feel the need to succeed in their endeavors access it from the "highest bidder." Building on the rise in the demand for this commodity, agents of IRT claim that their powers yield faster and sharper results than those of their competitors.

This discussion is the context in which I report some of the findings from my research on some of these neo-priests/agents of indigenous religions. Specifically, I shed light on Nana Kwaku Bonsam, arguably the most important protagonist in this new Ghanaian religious development. I discuss his emergence and rise to public prominence; the content of the neo-indigenous religious community he is gathering: members, clientele, religious culture and life, and their organizational structure; Bonsam's activities, strategies, discourse and claim to authenticity of spiritual power

over others through rituals and miracles. I finally end by discussing Bonsam's definition of success.

#### **4.2 The Old Model of Priesthood in Akan Religions**

The Akan indigenous cosmology features a hierarchy of spirit beings with the Supreme God, *Onyame* being the head, the *abosom* or deities being intermediaries between men and God, hence the mouthpieces of God almighty. The Akans believe that God has left the care and management of daily affairs of the world to the *abosom*. He must be consulted only on very important matters. The deities are spirits and as such cannot operate on their own from their abodes, namely rivers, rocks, groves, forest, trees and mountains. As spirits they need human vessels, their agents, in order to carry out their tasks on earth and among humans on behalf of God. In Akan religion, the priests and priestesses are the representatives of deities and God.

The Akan worldview about deities or spirit inhabiting rivers, forest, groves and rocks demonstrates Edward Tylor's "animism," or theory of souls. This states that "belief in spiritual beings or souls is the root of all faith."<sup>245</sup> The hypothesis of this theory, Parrinder stresses, has been criticized as being too "academic and not fitting those peoples who believe in gods...*Parrinder thinks* believers should rather be called Polytheist since they believe in many of such gods other than Animists"<sup>246</sup> with which I acquiesce. For me, the similarity of Tylor's theory to the Akan belief system lies solely in the fact that Akans believe these rivers, rocks, forests, the earth, and sea are inhabited by spirit beings and as such revere them, without necessarily believing in them as having some sort of power. Tylor's theory of animism was challenged by his contemporary scholars, but recently cognitive theorists have resurrected it, affirming its

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<sup>245</sup> Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 20-21.

<sup>246</sup> Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 20-21.

importance. In his recent publication, *Faces in the Clouds*, Guthrie elaborates this theory. For instance, he views anthropomorphism in the opposite- “that gods consist of attributing humanity to the world... *stressing that* religion consists of seeing the world as humanlike.”<sup>247</sup> In three accounts which he develops from ethnographic, analytic and cognitive science respectively, he emphasizes that:

We find plausible, in varying degrees, a continuum of humanlike beings, from gods, spirits, and demons to gremlins, abominable snowmen, HAL the computer and Chiquita Banana. We find messages...in wide range of phenomena such as weather, earthquakes, plaques, traffic accident and the flights of birds.<sup>248</sup>

For Guthrie, the propensity for attributing human physiognomies to nonhuman spheres is rooted in what we see and how we interpret it. This means that there is something behind the non-human objects we see, which implicitly refers to a force. The idea of some force behind non-human objects that, for instance, causes humans to sometimes get angry when one falls or hit a foot against a stone and even describe rivers as peaceful or a raging storm as vengeance is analogous with Parrinder’s animism; they imply that “the sprits are the main ancestors and forces of nature: the powers behind the storm, rain, rivers, seas, lakes, wells, hills, and rocks are not just water or rock but embodies spiritual powers that manifest themselves in diverse spaces.”<sup>249</sup> That said, as mediators of God living in rocks, and rivers, the deities need humans to be able to relay their messages or implement their earthly responsibilities, and they chose the person they so wish. Writing about Akan priests and priestesses, Ekem enhances our understandings in the following words:

Individuals do not become *ɔkɔmfo* by their own choice; the initiative rests entirely with the deities. Priesthood in Akan traditional religion is,

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<sup>247</sup>Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>248</sup> Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, 4.

<sup>249</sup> Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 23.

therefore, a solemn vocation centering on the choice of the *abosom* themselves regarding who should become their priests and priestesses. For this reason a person cannot independently work his or her way into the priesthood and expect to be accorded the recognition and honour due to priests and priestesses.<sup>250</sup>

The human beings the deities come to occupy then become the mouthpiece of the deities and, for that matter, they become sacred humans. However, their statuses and claims to priesthood must be validated as genuine according to the precepts of the communities. Normally, the *ɔkɔmfopayin*, an elderly priest/priestess who is familiar enough with the traits of the different deities determines which one has called a person to priesthood service.<sup>251</sup> The next stage involves training and being tutored in the do's and don'ts of the said deity, and the knowledge and skills expected of a priest in Akan culture. The training duration is often between one to four years, depending on the ability of the trainee to learn fast.<sup>252</sup> After the training, he/she graduates and is initiated as an *ɔkɔmfoɔ* or *Kɔmfoɔ* priest amidst a *durbar* where priest/priestesses from all over are invited to grace the occasion and also to bless the new entrants. Afterwards, he/she is then helped to settle in by his/her tutor or "master," the *ɔkɔmfopayin*. The place (shrine) where the graduate would settle and practice as a religious leader is also chosen by the deities/gods themselves and communicated through various cultural signs. At this point an apprentice or trainee is acknowledged as a priest/priestess. The community accords him or her respect and the sacredness that goes with the profession. Though this is the laid-down traditional procedure for priests and priestesses who claim roots in indigenous Akan religion, Bonsam pioneered an entirely new model of priesthood in modern Akan society. In the discussion that follows we focus on this intriguing Akan religious actor and the new model of priesthood he has inaugurated.

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<sup>250</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 48.

<sup>251</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 48.

<sup>252</sup> Kɔmfoɔ Kyei, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 3, 2012.

#### 4.3 A New Model of Indigenous Akan Priesthood: The Man, Kwaku Bonsam, and the Story of His Emergence and Rise

Nana Kwaku Bonsam was born as Stephen Osei Mensah. Two meanings are associated with his religious name Nana Kwaku Bonsam. Generally, the term *Nana* is a title of reverence that prefixes the name of a god, a chief, a priest, an elder or an important personality in Akan society. The prefix *Nana* is therefore used in reference to the deities whose agents' priests serve. Bonsam is addressed as *Nana* because he is a priest who serves a deity. In Akan culture Kwaku is a name given to a male born on Wednesday. In Akan religion it is said that a person's soul, *ɔkra*, was created on the day he was born. Thus Bonsam's soul or *ɔkra* was born on a Wednesday according to Akan thinking. Some controversy however, surrounds Bonsam's use of this name. This is because his explanations of its usage reveals inconsistencies. In one account he links it to the day of the week on which he was born, Wednesday. In another narrative, however, he claimed that he performed wonders in the court of the Techiman paramount chief and earned the nickname Kwaku Bonsam, from the chief, on account of his spectacular display of supernatural abilities.<sup>253</sup> It is still not clear which of these explanations back his use of the name Kwaku Bonsam. Likewise, for his name "Bonsam," which is the Akan Christian term for Satan. The name created a stir when he emerged on the national religious scene in 2008 with the proclamation that he would champion a return to the practice of the indigenous religions in Ghana, having been given the mandate by some deities to engage the powers of the gods in the redemption of Ghana and the world at large from socio-political, economic and religious problems. He is quoted to have said:

Ghana is plagued with both spiritual and physical problems because we have left the worship of our forefathers. For Ghana to develop like China and Japan we need to go back to our indigenous worship; this is because

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<sup>253</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 30, 2012.

these two countries are developed without the help of the West because they dwell on the religion of their fathers... Kofi oo Kofi promised that he will help to heal the world. So my aim is to spread IR to the world.<sup>254</sup>

This statement was in response to an inquiry by the host of a program about why he came on radio as an agent of IRs in a time when indigenous religion was no longer in vogue and had lost its relevance. To bolster his proclamation, Bonsam argued in Twi, his mother tongue, that the religion he was sponsoring was not anything new he was introducing. He said “it is not foreign, it is indigenous, the religion of my forefathers, old time religion *Nananom Som*.”<sup>255</sup> The public suspicion that this proclamation evoked from Christian audiences set the tone for the clashes between Kwaku Bonsam and agents of Christianity in the years to come. It could also be said that the boldness with which he adopted a name linked with Satan and openly declared his agenda of returning Ghana, a nation with a strong presence of both Christianity and Islam, to the worship of Ghanaian gods bolstered his charisma. Convinced that he must really have the backing of some powerful gods to be able to make such a claim; other individual agents from the indigenous religious landscape felt encouraged to publicize their credentials and activities from this time on.

Bonsam’s formal education was patchy because his parents did not have money to pay his school fees, leading to frequent interruptions until he eventually dropped out of school frustrated. Apart from poverty contributing to his dropping out of school, another factor that made going to school an ordeal for the young Bonsam was his totally disfigured face, caused by a childhood accident that resulted in 70% of his body being badly burnt. Explaining his difficulties with school, Aunt May, his mother, shed more light on this childhood event:

It happened when he was only four years old. He was filling a kerosene stove with gas oil from his father’s motor bike, and then all we heard was “boom!” fire. It covered all his body, he cried out *agyeiia! Agyeiia*; before

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<sup>254</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 31, 2012.

<sup>255</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 29, 2012.

we put the fire off, he was burned. Two years he was at the hospital. The accident, however, traumatized his childhood. His friends shun his company not wanting to associate with someone who was disfigured. Other people made fun of him.”<sup>256</sup>

Auntie May concluded by describing how their chronic lack of money and impoverishment added to these problems, coercing Bonsam to drop out of school. Bonsam’s version of the story of his burns however, has strands that make it differ considerably from his mother’s account. He linked his disfigurement to an occupational hazard at his job site. He told me of how he got his burns when the gas filling station he worked at caught fire. Most often stories about religious leaders become part of the mythic repository, which are told in a way to bolster the legitimacy of the leader. Sometimes the figures themselves re-interpret earlier happenings in their lives in the light of their vocations as religious leaders. Bonsam slants the story of the accident to suit his adult working life, by stating how he did not perish from the burns because the gods had a mission for him. This would make the story of his rise as a priest more dramatic and easily believable.

When I met Bonsam for the first time, he was only able to communicate in Twi and broken English. While his fluency in English has been enhanced by his frequent visits and sometimes quite prolonged stays in New York (e.g. from August 2012-August 2013) one can easily notice how he struggles with English words and makes numerous grammatical errors in his effort to speak English correctly as is expected of an emerging global spiritual icon. Bonsam tells of how dropping out of school made him assume many responsibilities at an early age. These included assisting his mother Auntie May with farm work from the age of twelve until he was twenty when he migrated to Kumasi to learn a trade in gas cylinder repair. Later he was employed by an LP gas filling station in Pakrono, a suburb of Kumasi. His responsibilities included repairing damaged cylinders, helping clients to fill them, and supplying the filled cylinders to clients in their homes in the catchment

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<sup>256</sup> Auntie May, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 31, 2012.

area of Pakrono. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, it was in the course of fulfilling his roles that he claimed to have had an encounter with a stranger, who would later give him the spiritual powers that turned him into a priest.

#### **4.3.1 Bonsam's Call to Priesthood**

In mid-2006, a kind gesture he extended to a stranger set off a series of events that eventually culminated in Bonsam's acquisition of the supernatural power that would turn him into a full blown indigenous priest. Considering the normative path to priesthood in Akan societies, Bonsam's call is something of an anomaly. In his account of Akan priesthood, Ekem sheds light on the culturally accepted signs that a person has been called to the vocation. These include being afflicted with bizarre illnesses, sudden spirit possessions, having dreams or visions and experiencing repeated failures in one's endeavours. He also noted how priesthood can be acquired through inheritance or abduction by *mbotia* (dwarfs)—that is, mystical beings that carry them into the deep forest to train them.<sup>257</sup>

Kwaku Bonsam's call to this vocation did not follow any of these modalities. First, he does not descend from any priestly family and did not inherit the office. Secondly, although a possession marked Bonsam's call, it was not followed by verification and prolonged training by a senior priest as is required by indigenous Akan religious decorum. In the varying strands of the narratives of his beginning circulating about, there is a link made between his priesthood and a generosity he extended to someone, many years ago. While conversing with him in his shrine one afternoon he stated his own version of the story of his rise, and in this story he makes the link clearer:

A man from the northern part of Ghana; (whom I saved from dying by taking him to a hospital and paying his bills) invited me to the north. When I went there his father gave me an effigy as a present. He said he was

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<sup>257</sup> Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 48.



thanking me with it. Believing it was a simple work of art, I placed the effigy on a wardrobe in my bedroom. Some days later, I heard strange sounds coming from the top of the wardrobe. Fearing the effigy must have been possessed by a demon, I sent it to some pastors who prayed over it and burned it. But when I came home I found the effigy where it was before I took it away. I became upset and threw the effigy in a septic tank to finally get rid of it. But you know what happened to this tank, it exploded and the effigy mysteriously made its way back into my room. I became frustrated and headed for the north to return it to the owner. Upon reaching the north, I learnt the man was an indigenous priest and that he had died. They told me also that according to tradition since he gave the effigy to me before his death, I had no choice but to keep it. I was then told the effigy will tell me what to do when the time comes. Disappointedly, I went back to Kumasi with the effigy.<sup>258</sup>

Kwaku Bonsam also described the event that occasioned the transfer of the magico-religious power in the effigy to him:

One day, as I was walking on the street, I chanced upon a group of priests and priestesses dancing. As I passed by them, I suddenly became possessed and started dancing. In that state of trance I lost myself completely but as I was told later, I performed magical feats like conjuring up money, clothes and food. But that did not end it. That day and the days following changed my life, as deities from different sections of Ghana relocated to my room on their own. I did not know how it happened. Then these gods started training me in the art of the priestly job. They revealed herbs for healing diseases and granted me the “eye” for seeing and talking to spirits. I got the third eye and also somehow changed my ways of relating to people, it just happened. I became more humbled and graceful. This drastic change in behaviour amidst the spiritual episodes, healing and prophecies made people in my vicinity start addressing me as either Nana or *Komfo*. I however kept doing my job as a cylinder repairer and LP gas supplier in Pankrono, a suburb of Kumasi. There was a *Gawo*<sup>259</sup> man who had his Petrol filling station on the road to my house. I know these people from Burkina Faso also have “eyes” so he was able to know what was happening to me spiritually. He called me one day on my way to work and advised that I go to my hometown because the deities like quiet places. So I went to my hometown, Akomadan-Afrancho.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>258</sup>Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 15, 2012.

<sup>259</sup> *Gawo* is a nickname given to Muslims from Burkina Faso who mostly engage in the petroleum business.

<sup>260</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 17, 2012.

Kwaku Bonsam described the reaction of his fellow townsfolk following his inauguration as a priest, stressing how he was not given a hero's welcome. In another interview, before starting into the story of this momentous event that changed what she considered to be a normal course in her son's future life, Auntie May, Bonsam's mother reminisced about her son's youth, indicating how she did not like the idea that her son had become an indigenous priest.

I was very upset when I came back from the farm to meet him here in the house with the boys in the area gathered around him in his room and saying that he has spiritual powers to help them. I was stunned. In the beginning I could not bring myself even close to tolerating the whole idea. You see, I am an Adventist... I am a Christian. So I asked myself "why should my son be a priest?" But whenever I would advise him against this new direction he would say "mother it's not my fault, I can't stop it, I am not even aware of what I do." And in fact he did many wonderful things. He would turn paper into money; heal people with mysterious illnesses, etc. And everyone was talking about it. But I have never hated him. Because of his explanation that, "I cannot do anything, anytime I throw it away, they come back." I saw that there was nothing I could do about it. I had to accept it like that. I gave him my support, believing that maybe that is what God wants him to be. I cannot fight God. So from time to time I go to visit him.<sup>261</sup>

Talking to different people, especially Bonsam's followers and family, I learned more about Auntie May's initial reluctance and later acceptance of her son's vocation. Maafia, a middle-aged woman and a member of the Kofi oo Kofi Patoso shrine in Akomadan-Afrancho, told me of Auntie May's own encounter with the deities who visited Bonsam, linking her eventual change of mind to this encounter. Maafia said the incident occurred when Auntie May went to her farm one day. Just as she had gathered her foodstuffs and was ready to leave the farm, her basket and the foodstuff vanished in front of her eyes. Maafia attributed this incident to the deities, and said they were trying to teach Auntie May a lesson because of her disbelief. Auntie May herself would

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<sup>261</sup> Auntie May, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 5, 2012.

confirm this account during a subsequent interview in which I mentioned it. She added more details:

I searched and searched the farm that day but would not find my basket full of farm produce, so I decided to come home since it was getting late, but about fifteen minutes to my house, I saw my basket with the food items by the roadside. I looked around to see if someone was playing tricks on me but found no one, so I picked up my basket and headed home. When I got home I told the people in my house what happened. It wasn't until the next day that my sister came to inform me that my son was possessed and that the incident was a sign that his deities were not happy with my response. They wanted me to behave, otherwise they will deal with me in ways that will surpass the previous day's farm experience. That was when it dawned on me that the deities may have taken my basket from the farm. So from that time onwards I kept my peace and watched him.<sup>262</sup>

From the several narratives and their re-telling about Bonsam's beginning that float about in the village it was clear that Bonsam had a difficult start. He suffered rejection from his mother, friends, and the townfolks. The only person who embraced his new status and stood by him during the initial stages of his call in his hometown was Auntie Efua, a 67 year old maternal auntie.

On account of her support, she has earned the title *Komfo Maame*, meaning mother of the priest. MC, a member of Bonsam's shrine, said this title was given to her by Kofi oo Kofi, the chief deity of Bonsam. Komfo Maame's earlier names are now considered to be defunct, as everyone in the town now knows her by her new name. As I was conversing with Komfo Maame one Saturday morning, she recounted how she was initially Bonsam's *bosomfo* or spokesperson:

Anytime he became possessed, I could communicate with the gods on his behalf as he was unaware of himself or what he says in that state. Also, since none of the family was ready to worship deities, I readily took up that task to support him.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Auntie May, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 1, 2012.

<sup>263</sup> Komfo Maame, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 20, 2012.

Komfo Maame also provided insight into the earlier history of Bonsam's career as a priest:

As time went on family and town folk loosened up. People who had heard about his earlier feats in Kumasi consulted him for different issues--healing, visa problems, and marital issues in the family house until he secured a bigger plot of land and moved to the present location in the corner of his hometown, Akomadan Afrancho. The transitional period in the family house was a trying one but that is how he started building his community.<sup>264</sup>

*Komfo Maame* explained how setting up a place/shrine after the initial difficulties did not guarantee Bonsam's entry into the religious field. "It was the promise of the gods to make Bonsam great and a rare commodity" she said, and went on to describe how she knew all about what the deities wanted him to be. As the initial *bosomfo*, mouthpiece of the gods, when no one yet recognized Bonsam's deity, Kofi oo Kofi, \_\_\_\_ revealed his greatness to me when the deity possessed him:<sup>265</sup> The deity said:

Your son is going to be great. He is going to buy lots of cars. There is going to be a time he would be so scarce that you will find it hard to see him or to talk to him. He will go all over the world to do wonders and draw people to *abosom som*. At the time I did not know whether to believe this prophecy or not because priests and priestesses are often not known anywhere apart from their village. Also, I have not heard of rich priests so why was ours going to be different? But somehow I was convinced that the gods could do it, otherwise they would not say it at all. So I waited."<sup>266</sup>

I interpret this statement as an attempt of *Komfo Maame* to legitimize Bonsam's call as a priest and to authenticate his claim to be the agent of the gods and their emissary in their project to send a message to people all over the world about the importance of indigenous Akan spirituality.

Bonsam's debut as a public religious figure was marked by his appearance on the airwaves of an FM station in Kumasi. *Komfo Maame* said she interpreted this event as a sign that her son

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<sup>264</sup> Komfo Maame, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 20, 2012.

<sup>265</sup> Komfo Maame, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 20, 2012.

<sup>266</sup> Komfo Maame, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 6, 2012.

was really destined for greatness. In an interview with Bonsam he had explained that his “going to radio was an instruction from the gods.” Shrouding his call and his other life- changing decisions in mystery is one way in which Bonsam establishes the legitimacy of his call and his status as priest. In this way he imputes sacredness to himself. The radio launch of his mission, the subsequent advertisement of his credentials, his utterances about the hypocrisy of Christians, and finally his reclaiming of spiritual power, (he alleged a pastor had borrowed from him to enable him appeal to more members), propelled Bonsam to the national spotlight.

The sense that he had the backing of the gods seems to have given Bonsam confidence and emboldened him to go public with IRT, a religion that is still shrouded in secrecy in Ghana. His statement below exudes this boldness:

I, Nana Kwaku Bonsam, came up with the idea of advertising my religious product and I was not afraid at all, I came out boldly. I have my own saying that “*mensuro Asantehene na makosuro nkruasifuohene*” meaning “I don’t fear *Asantehene* so why will I fear a village chief.” So when I was coming I made up my mind that if even I will have to die for the faith of my ancestors to come alive, I am prepared to die because I knew Kofi oo Kofi would never fail me.<sup>267</sup>

Building on his use of the airwaves of Solid FM [now called K-FM], a radio station in Kumasi in the Ashanti region, to inaugurate his mission, Bonsam adopted radio as his main mode of public outreach. He describes his array of religious commodities, the location of his shrine and days of availability on radio. In the beginning, his radio campaign/advertisements were limited to the catchment area of Kumasi and its environs. In the course of time, Bonsam’s frequent controversial statements about the hypocrisy of Pentecostal-Charismatic pastors, who surreptitiously consulted with him for magico-religious power, infuriated the Ghanaian Christian community and evoked a variety of responses, contributing to the spread of his influence nationally. For instance, when he

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<sup>267</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 29, 2012.

commented in Kumasi on the hypocrisy of followers and agents of Christianity, the angry reaction was quick and widespread nationally, even though he made the comment in Kumasi. This happened in the course of an interview with Shaibu Yakubu a radio personality.

Bonsam openly declared that “the *Kristofoo* boast of casting the indigenous religious spirits out of the land because they are evil. But I tell you, these powers are still there and are very potent. Even Christian pastors secretly come to me for some of these powers. That is why I have a problem with those proud pastors who speak ill about my deities.”<sup>268</sup> These words sent ripples of anger through the Ghanaian Christian world. People openly insulted Bonsam on radio, TV, in churches, and at lorry stations. Some weeks after these bold public statements Bonsam substantiated his claim that Christian pastors used his powers to enable them to perform miracles when, followed by a crew with a video camera, he walked into a church on a Sunday morning to reclaim his powers [in a form of an effigy of a god] from a pastor called Kwadwo near Bechem in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. “I did and it is lying in the shrine over there” Bonsam said to me when our interview veered into the direction of this incident, his face exuding pride in that accomplishment. Such rampant symbolic expressions of defiance in the face of an overwhelming Christian presence in Ghana have become a hallmark of Bonsam’s behavior. But they also contribute to his charisma. Although he claims that the gods who sent him on his mission gave him the mandate to spread the influence of Ghana’s indigenous religions to far flung places on the globe, during a conversation I had with him, Bonsam revealed another side to the factors that motivated the globalizing agenda, which has extended his activities to other African countries, Europe, and the USA.

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<sup>268</sup> Shaibu Yakubu, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 19, 2013.

I had asked him whether he saw any god/goddess worship in America and the European countries he travelled to and how he thought he could root African indigenous religions in these alien spaces. Bonsam stared at me in the face, looked up as if he was going over the reminiscences of his visits to these faraway lands and shot a question back at me: “I will ask you a question first, since you study over there in Europe. Have you thought about why white people throw schnapps at a new ship they have built before moving it?” He continued with a lengthy discourse providing a justification for his visits abroad.

Have you asked yourself why they do that? It is a ritual and they do that to pacify the sea god for permission to sail and for successful voyages. They can call this act by any name but what I know is that they are pacifying the deities in the sea. By acknowledging that the deities are there and pacifying them, they are worshipping them. Africans and others have like-beliefs in the existence of deities inhabiting different natural objects but we only worship ours differently. I will give you another example. When you go abroad, you will see that, the white-man has created statues in all places; those statues are gods. He bows down to the statue before embarking on an invention or a daily activity. So we all share these beliefs and practices. But when they came here to Ghana to tell us that ours was not good, we accepted their assertion foolishly. Nowadays we say, ours is not good, so we are following the bible. We have thrown away ours and are following a foreign religion when we are not privy to the details of the religion. That is why the deities have chosen me to tell everyone in the world that anyone who decides not to follow old time religion, the religion of our great-grandfathers *Nananom som*, that person is lost. This is because *Nananom som* is the best <sup>269</sup>

Bonsam reveals an underlying political agenda, that is, reversing the disparaging of indigenous religious traditions, a trend established through the colonial control of the Gold Coast. But to justify this, he constructs the idea that the IRTs of Africans have universal features that can fit perfectly into all cultures and societies. Even though he might cast it differently, his argument is that “the white-man” or Westerners, too, practice a form of indigenous African religion. Bonsam’s point is also that this is a truth that needs to be revealed to the Western world and this

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<sup>269</sup> Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 29, 2012.

revelation would involve the introduction of African religions to the Western world. Bonsam also reveals his ability to incisively critique existing paradigms, in spite of his checkered educational history. He clearly has a theological foundation for his own version of the reverse mission. It is attributes such as these—the ability to think deeply about issues, think in global terms, and participate in debates raging in scholarly circles---that make Bonsam and his claims appealing to people in Ghana, including scholars, who may not necessarily agree with his agenda.

#### **4.3.2 Bonsam's New Indigenous Religious Community**

In his attempt to modernize IRT Bonsam tries to build it around a community. This sense of community is, however, a loose one, because he insists his religion is simply the Akan religion of his ancestors, which is an all-inclusive religion that can be patronized by anybody from any faith. It would seem right to suggest that Bonsam and cohorts are re-launching the past by borrowing/appropriating local and globally circulating religious symbols from the diverse and often competing beliefs and practices of the various religious groups on the Ghanaian religious landscape. Their gestures can also be interpreted as a reverse discourse in the indigenous construction of religion which de-emphasizes institutionalization. Bonsam shows that a modern religion must show tendencies towards institutionalization if it is to survive. Bonsam's community is a clientele-based one. Based on my observation and interviews there are three categories of members. These are members of his shrine, permanent clients, and casual clients.

The members of the shrine belong to the shrine and affiliate with the shrine just as Christians affiliate with a particular church. Some of them live in the shrine and perform important roles that contribute to its smooth day to day running. The second category of membership, which I call permanent clients, is adherents who come to Bonsam consistently at any point they are in need of his services. Many of them, however, still maintain their affiliation(s) with other religious



bodies, or even establish new affiliations. The third category consists of individuals or families who come to the shrine once, or maybe once in a while to consult with Bonsam. These are people seeking services, who receive their services and do not reappear unless and until some form of misfortune comes their way again.

The members of the community I observed in the field, apart from Bonsam's own family, were clients who first came to seek help. Many kept coming for consultation on one issue after the other, becoming permanent clients, and joining as full members when they became fully convinced of the potency of Bonsam's powers. Permanent membership must be attained through a ritual ceremony, which binds the devotee to the shrine. The priest and his elders have established rigorous regimens that individuals must go through to become permanent members. Probably the rigor is intended to scare away intruders or would-be spies and ensure genuine belonging and devotion. Kojo Poku, the *Bosomfo*, told me on one occasion what it would take for a person to become a member:

We will slaughter a fowl to the deities. Only when the deities accept the fowl would we also accept incoming devotees. Once accepted, all members have obligation to be loyal to the deities and lead holy lives by avoiding all sorts of immoral behavior as well as to observe the religious activities in the shrine. Failure to do so can amount to a member experiencing a misfortune or sickness as a warning from the gods but if the member continues on the wrong path the gods will finally end his life.<sup>270</sup>

In addition to keeping the religious rules of the shrine, members are obliged to respect themselves and authority as well as keep the shrine clean.

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<sup>270</sup> I observed one of such warning on the 22 of January 2012 at the Akwasidae festival in Afrancho. When Kwaku Bonsam got possessed, he reprimanded a male member called *Norman* that he has seen his immoral behavior of sexual offence and warned that if he does not change a very strange thing will happen to him.

### 4.3.3 The Shrine Community

Each shrine is made up of adherents and ritual persons who function in different roles in the administration of the shrine. A devotee, *Mamepayin*, who is an elderly member of the community and the cook for the priests, told me of the different chores assigned to members and how orderliness is expected in a group.

All members are referred to as *Asomfoɔ* which literally means two things: worshippers and servants. A subcategory of the *Asomfoɔ* is the *Akyeamefoɔ*<sup>271</sup> (*plural*) and *ɔkyeame* (*singular*). The *Akyeramadefoɔ* is made up of *Agorofoɔ*--drummers/clappers-- and *nwomtofoɔ*--singers. I noted how the names assigned to these categories among other things spell out their duties as well, except the *Akyeamefoɔ*, who are special assistants to the priests/priestesses. As Mamepayin described the categories in the shrine, I noted that there was a form of hierarchy. This initial assumption was confirmed by the *bosomfo* and Bonsam when I asked about the structure of the group.

In the hierarchy of members in the shrine, Bonsam is the head. He is the high priest who presides over all the major religious activities in the shrine. However, he delegates powers to his subordinate priests or the *bosomfo*, who are next to him in the hierarchy. Following the *bosomfo* are the *akyeame* (elders/linguist), the *asodofoɔ* (caterers), *asomafoɔ* (messengers/servants), *agorofoɔ* (drummers and singers) and *members* (clients, permanent clients). I noted that priests/priestesses in all Bonsam's shrines are family, that is-his blood brothers and sisters. Other members are individuals who have earned their positions in the group as a result of their faithfulness. While seeking to construct a modern form of indigenous religion in Ghana, Bonsam

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<sup>271</sup> *Akyeamefoɔ* are servants of various deities. Before one becomes an *ɔkyeame*, one must have been a member and faithful to the shrine for a long time. The deities appoint the *ɔkyeame*; however the sacrifice offered to that deity must be accepted first before the person commences. The person then becomes the servant of that deity and must learn the things the deity likes so that when the priest gets possessed by that deity they can make the deity comfortable by supplying the things he likes.

still seems to build on structures of similar movements that were influential in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as *aberewa*. Parker described a similar structure when he noted the retinue of the high priest of *aberewa* as consisting of "a body-guard of slaves, a company of drum-beaters, a number of speakers... *akyeame* [sic], a band of singers and dancing men (Ogurufo), *coupled with* exotic assemblage of a variety of generically 'northern' accoutrements."<sup>272</sup> Bonsam's organization is nonetheless innovative in that it differs somewhat from earlier ones: neither Parker nor Goody mentions that the earlier anti-witchcraft shrines all over Ashanti and other parts of Ghana were under one central priest as is the case for Kwaku Bonsam—who is the head of his community worldwide.

He is the spiritual head/overseer of a number of shrines headed by priests who are his family members. In terms of their functions however, we could say Kwaku Bonsam's new indigenous religious shrines represent a comeback of the earlier traditions described by Parker and Goody. These scholars show how these earlier shrines emerged to combat *bayie* or witchcraft, which is seen by the Akans and other ethnic groups of Ghana as an evil force capable of destroying a person's "health and wealth." In the 21st century Ghana in which Bonsam operates, witchcraft is no longer perceived as an evil spiritual force that is operational only at night, but has been given a modern slant as a force inherent in some humans and active even during the day. A victim can be affected by this force at the work place, in the market, at home and in the classroom, among other places, in ways that thwart his or her progress.<sup>273</sup> The ubiquity of the existence of evil spiritual forces is a feature of modern life in Ghana and is the context in which Bonsam's ability to offer spiritual antidotes in times of crisis is considered by many to be very crucial.

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<sup>272</sup> Parker, *Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft*, 411.

<sup>273</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 20, 2012.

One novelty of Kwaku Bonsam's community and his shrines is the performance of matrimonial rites. Not only is this practice not discussed by scholars such as Parker, McCaskie or Goody in their accounts of the earlier shrines in Ghana, it is also not a common practice of many of the contemporary shrines in Ghana. This practice seems to form part of Bonsam's modernizing agenda as it represents a borrowing of the Christian practice of performing weddings in the church. In the marriage ceremonies of Bonsam's tradition the marrying couple kneels down facing each other and holding an egg. After the incantation and libations designed to consecrate the union and the invocation of blessings such as children and prosperity, the priest gives them two rings to exchange. Afterwards the eggs are crashed on the altar of the shrine.<sup>274</sup> The shrine ceremony does not require a visible legal contract between the two contracting parties as man and wife, but it is believed that the deities are the witnesses to the ceremony and so neither of the two can end the relationship in any way except in the shrine. Akua, a devotee who alleged that her husband had been seeing other women, shared her frustrations with me. She told me how she wished she could divorce her husband because of his infidelity but could not because she married in the shrine. When I inquired why she could not divorce him, she gave an explanation that revealed one way in which the shrine's rituals affected marriages.

Ei no, how can I. Those of us who have been married in this shrine cannot leave our husbands or the shrine altogether unless we perform a sacrifice of a huge cow, and offer drinks and two sheep to the gods. Even then things don't end there. You may still not be free to go. The deities must accept to release you. If they say no, then you will keep staying here in the marriage. Being a member and having your husband as a member in addition to having no money to pay for all these makes it almost impossible to leave your marriage.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Kojo Poku explained that the crashing of the eggs means that the union cannot be broken, as a crushed egg cannot become a whole egg so is the marriage irreversible, except under serious conditions and even then, the gods must agree to end it.

<sup>275</sup> Akua, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 4, 2012.

How to interpret this policy? As a new group which relies on constant members to keep its good standing strong moral codes may seem necessary to keep members. As members abide by the rules, they will stay married and procreate which will increase the number of members. The moral codes could be deity-originated or a part of Bonsam's survival strategies. He had to find a way of sustaining his following and the creative imposition of such stringent rules can be one of such ways. Sometimes groups will also want to adhere to social values to make themselves appealing to society. At another level, the divorce rate has reached its highest rate in Ghana presently. In 2011, the statistics from the Greater Accra area, the capital, according to Mr. Ernest Mawuli Adzekey, Head Office of Legal Aid Ghana, reveal that at least 40% of marriages registered annually in the region break up within a period of 14 months.<sup>276</sup> The divorce rate is certainly higher, for indigenous marriages dissolved out of court are not captured in national statistics. Given this social problem, imposing rules on members that make it difficult for them to divorce their partners, would likely be viewed as emanating from someone concerned about the survival of marriages. This would reflect positively on his tradition.

#### **4.4 The Community's Religious Culture and Life: Bonsam's Shrines and the Holy**

Kwaku Bonsam's Kofi oo Kofi religious movement has emerged from the old forms of Akan IRTs. He alludes to this link when he refers to the community's tradition as the worship of his ancestors *Nananom som*. In that he seeks to associate himself and his tradition with what he describes as "the old authentically unadulterated and uncontaminated Akan<sup>277</sup> religious practice," it would seem safe for us to even describe it as an invented tradition. A strong piece of evidence to support such an assertion is how Bonsam makes an effort to religiously follow the Ashanti religious

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<sup>276</sup> <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=217831>, accessed 10/01/2013.

<sup>277</sup> The Ashanti are the dominant group within the Akan ethnic group and Kwaku Bonsam is an Ashanti Akan.

calendar. The Ashanti Akans are traditionally led by the king, who bears the title *Asantehene*, who sits on a stool that is considered to be the soul of the Ashanti Kingdom. He is therefore the spiritual head of the Ashanti kingdom and has a crucial role in the designing of the Ashanti ritual calendar. All the religious activities of Ashantis are clustered around this strict calendar. Observation is supposedly obligatory for all the folks living on the land.

The Ashanti have a forty day monthly calendar, culminating in nine months in a year. While in the field I followed the calendar rigorously as I was interested in the religious activities and when they were practiced. In the calendar month there are four auspicious days known as *da bone*, literally meaning bad/evil day-these are the *Akwasidae*, *Fɔdwoɔ*, *Awukudae*, and *Fofie*. *Da bone* is not necessarily bad as the name suggests. These are rather sacred days as they have been set aside for the worship of the deities of the Ashanti. Kojo Poku, Bonsam's assistant, explained that the days are devoted to attending to and feeding the deities. On these days human activities must come to a halt, lest a deity be angered. For example, on Thursdays farmers do not go to farm because it is a *da bone* set for the forest deities. Other Akans who live along the coast also observe Tuesdays as *da bone* for deities in rivers and seas and for this reason fishing activities are halted on Tuesdays. *Da bone* days must be adhered to by all and anyone who contravenes these rules do so at his or her own risk. I gathered from believers of indigenous religions and inhabitants of the town where I did fieldwork that anyone who went against the rules linked with the sacred days would see strange things and sometimes be lost in the forest for days until a rescue team including the priests appeases the gods in order to get him back. People whose livelihoods depend on the sea also experience such risks of having their boats capsized and sometimes drowning for disobeying the *da bone* rules.

The most important sacred day is *Akwasidae*. This is marked by displays of power, pomp and pageantry. The first *Akwasidae*- sacred day is celebrated at the beginning of the year and the last at the end of the year. These two *Akwasidae* are considered to be special and particularly high profile, in that they engage the Ashanti elite, while all other *Akwasidae* are considered to be ordinary and celebrated quietly. *Fɔdwoɔ* and *Fofie* are religious rituals done specifically for cleansing and intercession. Apart from these important days of religious worship s in the life of the Ashanti Akans there are others which are followed by individual priest/priestesses as recommended by their deities.

Bonsam and his members observe these religious practices of the Ashanti Akan people. But at Bonsam's shrines there are specific days for religious gathering and worship, and these are determined by the deities. These days are Friday, Saturdays and Sundays. Interestingly, these days are also days meant for serious consultation in Bonsam's headquarters-Akomadan-Afrancho. Some clients and visitors who are unable to come on Friday, Saturday, or Sundays come during the week and can also be helped with whatever problems they bring. Many of these visits are pre-arranged through the use of phone calls. Ritual specialists from other religions in Ghana, such as Islamic clerics (*mallams*) and Pentecostal pastors who secretly seek help from the shrine visit on Mondays because they are engaged with their own religious rituals over the weekends.<sup>278</sup> At all the shrines of Bonsam in Ghana worship is only held on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. But at the other shrines consultations are held on other days of the week, not on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. If a devotee or client wishes to get nearer to the core of the tradition, they are advised to go to the headquarters in Akomadan-Afrancho to express their desires.

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<sup>278</sup> Kojo Poku, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 22, 2012.

Our emphasis on Akomadan-Afrancho, the seat of Bonsam's power, leads us to the importance of "sacred space." In the discussion to follow we will focus on his sacred space—the shrine and the activities that are carried on there. Two elements associated with Bonsam need to be mentioned and discussed if we are to understand the culture of his shrines. The first is his inclusive orientation towards other religious traditions, which can be seen in how he allows people from other religious faiths to patronize him without necessarily committing themselves fully unless the client decides to become a member. The second is Bonsam's eclectic approach of borrowing from other religious traditions by appropriating their elements. Bonsam's tradition observably builds on the propensity of indigenous religions to be flexible, fluid and open. His tradition is a collage of different religious signs, patterns, strategies, norms and beliefs.

Kwaku Bonsam, whose ancestry is Ashanti and who claims to be strictly operating according to the old time religion of his ancestors (*Nananom som*) should be expected to subscribe to only Akan Ashanti deities; however, this is not the case, as his pantheon contains deities from all over Ghana and beyond. One of these deities called *Legba* seems to have been borrowed from the Fon of Dahomey and locations in the Eweland of southern Ghana. We can trace the roots of other deities to the ethnic groups of the northern part of Ghana. These include *Nana Atongo*, *Atia Nframa* and *Tigare*. *Tigare* and *Atongo* are deities that featured prominently in the twentieth century *aberewa* and *sakrabundi* indigenous religious movements, implying that they are being re-invented in Bonsam's tradition.

Apart from the adoption of deities of alien IRT provenance, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism are also appropriated and co-opted as part of Bonsam's neo-indigenous religious tradition. For instance, most ethnic communities in Ghana have their traditional dresses and religious regalia for specific occasions. Due to the dominant Islamic presence in the Northern part



of Ghana, indigenous ethnic groups from the North have adopted Arabian dressing styles and combine these with their local cultural dressing styles and patterns. Their traditional dress is the *fugu* or the smock.

Even though he is Ashanti, Bonsam prefers these dresses to the local Ashanti priestly skirt known as the *dowso* during his ritual dances. Also the *buta*, a container or kettle used by Muslims for ablutions before prayers, is used in the shrine for purification purposes. Anytime Bonsam comes back from town, he is met at the entrance with a *buta* filled with water. This water is used to wash his feet in a rite of purification. It is believed that this process cleanses him of the spiritual dirt he might have accumulated during his rounds outside the sacred confines of the shrine.

Bonsam also borrows from Christianity. Christian insignia such as the crucifix feature prominently in his ritual culture. In the shrine the cross is located in two places. The first one can be found on the left side of the major altar at the shrine where sacrifices are made. There is a pot on the altar and that pot sits on a round stand. On the stand is the sign of the crucifix decorated with White Sea shells. On that same altar is a wall connecting the shrine to another shrine. On top of this wall is another crucifix made of metal; I observed that on every ritual day, three to five leather pouches are hanged on the crucifix. MC, a member of the shrine and a ritual assistant, explained to me that the leather pouches are deities and are charged spiritually. Bonsam also linked the cross to purity in his explanation. He said it signifies the presence of God and his son, who are the epitome of ritual purity. The cross also symbolizes God's presence. Whatever anyone comes here to do, God is watching, Jesus is watching and the deities would act,"<sup>279</sup> Bonsam elaborated. The borrowings and appropriations form part of the ethos of Bonsam's shrines.

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<sup>279</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 20, 2012.



New Bibles supposedly brought by pastors to Bonsam's shrine. Picture by author.



The altar of sacrifice at Akomadan-Afrancho shrine. Picture by author.

#### 4.4.1 Bonsam's Shrines

The shrine is central to this religion which is full of rituals and sacrifices to the deities.<sup>280</sup> Bonsam has managed to dot major cities and towns of Ghana with his shrines to enable easy accessibility

<sup>280</sup> The community worship and sacrifice to deities of various characters. By the description of Kojo Poku, I was able to group their deities into two categories. Harsh/wicked/vengeful and calm/kind deities. The wicked/vengeful deities are known as *suman Abrafo* or executioner deities. When they possess the priest the helpers paint the face and body of the priest with charcoal. All other material used for such deities are also mostly black. Examples of such deities as Atutuatu, Afanfri, and Afanfra come like a man--very strong he comes out in the night because he does not like light. "If we have to give Afanfri a cow, it must be black, everything he demands is black and when we kill it, no one eats any of the meat." Kojo Poku stressed that there is one also called Atutuatu, who is wild looking and he is a witchcraft deity. Legba is a god who speaks English. He comes from abroad. Tigare smokes cigarettes. The calm/kind deities use

to adherents and clients. The headquarters of his shrines<sup>281</sup> is in his hometown Akomadan-Afrancho but he has established shrines in Sunyani-Tamasoa, Takoradi, Obuasi, Cape Coast, and in small towns such as Sehwi Asawenso, Bibiani, Fosu, Elubo, Sefwi Debeso, and Kasoa. Some of them are also in international locations such as Amsterdam, Paris, London, the Bronx-New York and Conakry in Guinea.<sup>282</sup> Some of the international shrines were verified through representatives of those shrines while I visited. Ritual times and place in the shrines varies. The time could either be in the early hours of the day or late at night. Likewise the place of ritual could be the altar of the shrine itself, an incinerator, a cemetery, and tri-road junction or wherever the deity prescribes.

Chidester identifies two properties of a sacred space. These are the substantial and the situational. He relates the substantial aspect to Otto's sense of the "holy," Van der Leeuw's notion of "power," and Eliade's idea of the "real," all of which characterize insiders' experience of the sacred. Chidester argues that the "situational aspect of sacred spaces connotes its connection to human/social activities and is subject to human interpretation."<sup>283</sup> Chidester's formulation furnishes us with a useful frame for describing the holy grounds of Bonsam's tradition. His notion of a substantial portion of sacred spaces leads us directly to the holy grounds of Akomadan-Afrancho where Bonsam's headquarters is located. In one of my conversations with him Bonsam explained at length how he chose this sacred locus:

I first started the shrine in the family house but the deities said they wanted a bigger place. Even though I had no money, Kofi oo Kofi said he would

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white materials, so, for example, when the priest is possessed by Kofi o kofi, a the chief deity, his helpers use white clay or powder to paint his face and environment- Cha-cha, Atia Nframa, and Tano, a river deity, are other examples of white deities.

<sup>281</sup> Among the 13 locations of shrines in Ghana, I visited 5 plus the USA branch and worked mostly in three of the locations namely Akomadan-Afrancho, Kumasi-Afrancho and Accra-Sapeiman.

<sup>282</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 3, 2012.

<sup>283</sup> David Chidester, "The Poetics and Politics of Sacred Space: Towards a Critical Phenomenology of Religion," in *From the Sacred to the Divine. A New Phenomenological Approach*, ed. Anna Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht:Kluwer Academic Publishers,) 211.

show me where to build the shrine. One day I was possessed and I run to the chosen place. It was Kofi oo Kofi who possessed me and he said the place where I would run to was where he wanted me to build the shrine. The land was 45 acres. My aunty and some family members accompanied me later to negotiate its purchase with the owner of the property. But the owner, an elderly woman, rather gave it to me for free. Then I told my deities to show me *nsekyereni*-- a sign or miracle to prove that the land is indeed blessed. That was when Kofi oo Kofi possessed me and conjured up a little tree, which I planted on the land, a few days later when we came to the property the little conjured plant had grown into a big tree. That is why I call it the miracle tree. This is the tree under which we are sitting now [he pointed to it]. Examine the tree very well. You will see that it is not ordinary; it is made up of two different trees. A palm tree is inside of the other tree but they are two distinctive trees. The palm tree is in the middle of the other plant. I built the altar and shrine around the tree so that I can offer sacrifices to the deities. This tree is the seat of my powers. This shrine is the most important shrine among all the others. It is the headquarters of the deities.<sup>284</sup>

From Bonsam's narrative we deduce that the choice of the current site of the headquarters in Akomadan-Afrancho was not determined by its location in Bonsam's hometown but its status as the locus of a hierophany, explained by Eliade as the "break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation."<sup>285</sup> The deities chose the place and planted a tree, a sign that validated Bonsam's call at the same time. This status explains why serious supplications are always directed to the headquarters and probably why most clients prefer Akomadan –Afrancho, the headquarters, to the other shrines.

The Akomadan –Afrancho holy place is a vast compound with structures/buildings for sleeping and several shrines. Contrary to Benjamin Ray's depiction of "African shrines as purely natural in form, such as forests groves, large rocks, or trees where the gods and spirit dwell"<sup>286</sup> or

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<sup>284</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 22, 2012.

<sup>285</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1987), 21.

<sup>286</sup> Benjamin Ray, "African Shrines as Channels of Communication," in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 26.

the older shrines made of raffia sticks or clay, Bonsam's shrines are built of cement blocks, painted, and tiled. Altars for sacrifices are also tiled. Even though there are several shrines on this compound housing the deities and their ritual paraphernalia, the townsfolk refer to the entire complex as “the shrine.” The compound is situated on the town’s outskirts next to the forest. There are two buildings on the compound. These buildings look like school blocks. There are about twenty-two rooms which accommodate the priest and other religious functionaries of the shrine. These rooms are also the sleeping places for clients who are booked to stay overnight, or even for months. The compound is neither walled nor gated. It is demarcated from other houses in the vicinity by white clay on the ground. On reaching the compound one must remove his/her shoes before crossing the demarcation. The portion within the demarcation is considered to be sacred and footwear can ritually pollute it. There are five different shrines in the holy land.

One cannot just pass by the shrine without turning to look because of the spectacular palm tree growing inside another tree. This is unlike any other tree in the vicinity. Under the tree is a tiled altar. On the altar is a black pot seated on a stand which has been decorated with the sign of the cross and sea shells. One spectacular shrine that evokes every visitor’s attention is the shrine called the dwarf’s kingdom. This is built in the form of a circle and allegedly harbours over 480 dwarfs.<sup>287</sup> The dwarf shrine is the last structure on the compound. Behind it is the beginning of the forest.

Another important shrine is dubbed “the consultation room.” This is where the priest and *bosomfo* sit to mediate on supplications on behalf of clients. There is also a big waiting room/reception where clients sit to await their turns for consultations with the priest. The store

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<sup>287</sup> Bosomfo Opoku, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 13, 2012.

room for keeping the drums and other religious regalia is next after the consultation room and then the court.

The compound is designed like an Akan chief's palace. In the middle is an elevated platform with a big stool placed at the center. Bonsam sits on this stool on important occasions. The stool is flanked on the left and right sides by two smaller stools. In an Akan palace a chief sits in the middle of the square court and, the queen mother on his right hand on one of the small stools. This arrangement is replicated on Bonsam's compound because as a representative of the gods, his status is akin to that of an Akan chief who is an agent of the gods. Chairs are neatly arranged on the left and right sides of the compounds for the elders of the shrine. One of the rooms has been turned into a drinking spot called *Nananom* spot. According to my respondents this is where they often go to relax. I noticed however that it was the site of a brisk business. This is where clients buy drinks when they are requested to present them for the purpose of pouring libation to the gods. Aside from the fact that buying dinks from the shrine is convenient in terms of easy accessibility, it also ensures that the drink presented to gods meets the correct specifications as the purchase is supervised by ritual specialists. The deities become angry when offered the wrong drink.



The entrance to shrine/court in the main house. The court modelled after an Akan chief's court.



The main school block houses.

Pictures by author.



Shrine and house for clients on admission.

#### **4.4.2 Activities in Bonsam's Shrine**

Bonsam's modernizing agenda is reflected in the way he organizes his operations generally, but particularly, in how he conducts activities in his shrines. The structures of the shrine as described earlier are modern and not like typical indigenous religious shrines. Even the geographical distribution of his shrines in small and big towns reflects a modern pattern. Another intriguing element is that Bonsam's shrines are not just shrines in a very typical sense of a home for deities where people come to consult with their priest, they are also places he disseminate his ideologies and discourse. They are akin to schools. Moreover Bonsam runs his chain of shrines like businesses. Each shrine has a secretary, who receives calls, keeps records of payment of services rendered and books appointments for clients.

Upon arrival, clients are received at the reception called "waiting room" where they pay to book their seats and wait for their turns to be "called." When a client is called to see the priest, he/she pays a consultation fee. This enables the client to see the priest for diagnoses. Clients who seek help for physical health problems feel like they are visiting a modern hospital, where a patient waits patiently till he/she is called by the doctor. In this case the priest, Kwaku Bonsam, functions

as the physician. He makes diagnoses and prescribes antidotes for the problems. Bonsam does not, however, see these innovations as Western practices. He insists that they are only modern in that they are ways of shaping indigenous religious practices to suit modern times and needs. “No culture has a monopoly over “modernity” he insists. We can all be modern when we upgrade our ways, he would argue, explaining that “in a changing world we must reshape our traditions to suit emerging needs and tastes.”<sup>288</sup> This idea of an indigenous religious modernity seems to colour Bonsam’s major claims, strategies and activities.

The key activity of the shrine is healing of body and soul. I have stated this earlier in this work that wealth and health are the two cardinal pillars that explain well-being in the Ghanaian imaginative mind. As Bonsam himself noted:

not all sicknesses or problems are spiritual, [but]most of the time one is sick physically because he/she has been harmed spiritually....This world is not as we see it, there is more to it, if the world is as plain as what we see, we will leave our doors open when we go to bed at night.<sup>289</sup>

In his bid to serve this need, Bonsam offers solutions to a chain of problems such as illness, chronic lack of money, joblessness, a problem facing a relative living abroad, chronic failure in the search for a husband or wife, recurrent spontaneous abortions, death of an important member of the family, a family or work-place conflict, or a personal identity crisis, spiritual gunshot, power to perform miracles in church and witchcraft. On a daily basis he welcomes clients or visitors to his shrine. Through my interactions and observation, I noted most of the regular visitors are permanent clients visiting him and his agents as a follow up on earlier visits, or because they are in need of advice on a pressing issue. Others, however are occasional visitors who approach Bonsam and his agents with all kinds of problems.

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<sup>288</sup>Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 8, 2012.

<sup>289</sup>Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 10, 2012.



He maintains his clientele are made up of the ordinary persons as well as elite and rich persons in Ghana and abroad. In the consultation room, I observed that Bonsam and his *bosomfo* would listen attentively to the problems of clients, sometimes even extending empathy for the suffering they are going through, and then he would offer them the remedies by tapping into the powers of the gods. The remedies most of the time either involve rituals or sacrifices to the deities, herbal medicines which are administered to the afflicted or both. Clients I met at these shrines attest to the efficacy of these remedies and emphasize how this quality endeared Bonsam's tradition to them. One of the permanent clients, a lady called Aba Sarah, highlighted her experience when I asked whether the issues she brought to the shrine had been resolved. Smiling, she said:

Ah sister, have you not seen me here before? This is the fourth time in two months I have come across you here, so if I don't get my problems solved I would not have come here over and over again. The first time I came here last year, I needed a husband badly and he did some rituals for me and I got a husband..... Last month someone stole my grandmother's gold in her house. Unfortunately, I had just visited my grandmother, so naturally they accused me of stealing.... I therefore came to Nana to help me arrest the thief. He asked me to leave after I paid the money and did the ritual of reciting my problems on the *pinyawn* (see picture 2). [*Pinyawn is a stick which I saw clients tie thread of different colours in a circular manner while reciting their needs.*] I did this and left believing that it would work...Weeks later my elder brother came with a taxi begging me to join and that they had found the gold. It was a tenant who stole it and that she said she was being whipped by dwarfs and was shouting all over the house...I brought them here and was admitted and told to untie her from the *pinyawn* which I did. Look sister I will not waste my time here if his powers are not sharp.<sup>290</sup>

Other clients told me of experiences that confirmed their belief in the efficacy of Bonsam's power and their total trust in the priest and his agents. Observably, the many shrines or branches he has in Ghana and elsewhere suggest the growing popularity and patronage of Bonsam.

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<sup>290</sup> Aba Sarah, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April, 2012.

#### 4.4.3 Strategies, Discourse and Claim of Authenticity of Spiritual Power over Others

Kwaku Bonsam emerged onto the Ghana religious scene as a self-proclaimed messenger of his deity Kofi oo Kofi. Aware that this claim alone could not garner appeal and followers, he embarked on a self-promotion campaign, taking advantage of the popularity of modern media forms. He uses radio, television, internet and print media to advertise his activities, services, philosophy, products and his new narrative on the value of the indigenous religions in modern times. He advertises on radio stations such as Fox FM, K-FM, Metro FM, Ash FM and Nhyira FM all in Kumasi and their sister station Adom FM in Tema but now also in the Greater Accra region. TV stations such as TV3, TV Africa and GTV have granted him interviews on live shows. He has been invited about eight times as guest on the cable networks, such as Multimedia- Adom TV channel. This is a program hosted by Kofi Adomah Nwawani on Tuesdays at 8 pm which features indigenous priests, *Mallams*, herbalists, pastors and politicians.<sup>291</sup> Bonsam takes advantage of these appearances to push forward his argument that IRs are sources of good and very potent spiritual power forms.

Bonsam is a religious showman whose showmanship is boundless. His public appearances at ceremonies are spectacular. Often he would arrive late after everyone is seated riding a white or brown horse, a rare practice in modern Ghana. A throng of supporters follow him with some shouting appellations and others, such as his *akyeame*, constantly dusting him with white powdery substances, symbols of potent spiritual power in Ghana. He partakes in *agorɔ* and or *akɔm* indigenous festivals contests, where Akan indigenous ritual specialists are given the opportunity to display the potency of their spiritual power base. Events that showcase the competition between indigenous religious priests and priestesses are given great publicity. He does not hesitate to take on Pentecostal pastors who challenge him publicly for spiritual power contests and he uses these

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<sup>291</sup> Kofi Adoma Nwawani, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 27, 2013.

events to counter the narratives of the Pentecostals in Ghana. For example, when Prophet Pastor Ebenezer Yiadom, founder of Ebenezer Miracle Church in Kumasi invited Bonsam to a contest to determine whose power sources was more potent- Bonsam readily accepted the challenge.<sup>292</sup> These encounters are detailed in chapter Six.

Sometimes he foretold future events that would occur within Pentecostal circles and uses the opportunity to brag about his ability to extend his spiritual eyes beyond the indigenous religious world and to be able to participate spiritually in the Christian spiritual universe. For example, Bonsam predicted the release of a pastor, Prophet Nana Kofi Yirenkyi, nicknamed Jesus One Touch, from prison for defiling his 10 year old daughter. When these predictions came true, it evoked a challenge from Kum Chacha, a Pentecostal-Charismatic pastor and a friend of Jesus One Touch to a miracle performing contest. The pastor's goal was to "floor Bonsam once and for all."<sup>293</sup>

In most of these challenges people would troupe to the competition grounds to witness the contests but the pastors do not show up, setting the stage for Bonsam to declare himself as the victor. This mode of self-promotion and public visibility are discussed into details in chapter six. The interesting point we note, however, is that, as an indigenous apologist, who believes he has been chosen by the deities to expand the territorial landscape of indigenous religions, Bonsam fully exploits the publicity he garners after such exposure. The attention-grabbing argument he puts forth on such occasions is that if pastors are unable to confront him, it is because they tap indigenous power sources surreptitiously and are aware of its potency. He would also argue that because pastors were using power from indigenous religious sources it was no longer shameful for clients and adherents alike to come to the indigenous shrine. He would then extend open invitations

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<sup>292</sup> Morgan Owusu, "Kwaku Bonsam Floors Pastor," *Daily Guide*, May 16 2008, 1/3; Peace FM News, May 27 2011.

<sup>293</sup> <http://edition.myjoyonline.com/pages/news/201204/84364.php>.

to all, irrespective of religious affiliations, to visit his shrines, should they need help spiritually or materially.

Kwaku Bonsam also achieves public visibility through the vigils and all night services he organizes in Accra and other places to perform miracles and to lecture on the indigenous religious faith. He performs magical feats such as changing items into dollar notes, resuscitating dead animals, and levitating. In one of such displays of his control over powers, he carried a basket full of water on his head. In spite of the holes in the basket it held the water. On another occasion he conjured up plants through the use of traditional chants on one of those indigenous religious performative platforms. These plants appeared magically in an empty bowl he had on his head.



Bonsam, displaying on his head a plant he conjured during a public performance. Picture by author.

Bonsam also garners popularity by making controversial pronouncements, some of which could have political implications. He has been an ardent critic of the government policy of refusing traditional religious priests to be featured in national events, describing this gesture as hypocritical and very self-defeating for an African nation. Recently he announced his intention to contest for a seat in parliament for the Offinso North constituency in the upcoming 2016 election year with a yet-to-be-registered political party dubbed the Traditional People's Party (TPP). He declared his intentions of addressing the hard economic situation in Ghana, by exposing greedy political government officials who enrich themselves through corrupt means. In the chronicle newspaper caption- *Kwaku Bonsam for Parliament*. He referred to himself as "the people's man" and announced his plans to introduce a charm called *Apia*, an itchy substance, into the house of parliament to check and punish corrupt politicians.<sup>294</sup> In this way he would help to curb the canker in the house, which has allegedly contributed to Ghana's economic woes.

Lastly, Bonsam uses a different approach in operating as an indigenous religious priest. He concerns himself with philanthropic activities. For example, he has a basic school from kindergarten to Junior Secondary School in his hometown, Akomadan-Afrancho. Students attend the school for free. He also cares for a number of orphans and prostitutes (I counted sixteen of them in his Sapeiman shine but Bonsam insisted he has more of such destitute scattered in Kumasi, Obuasi and Akomadan-Afrancho). He houses them and teaches them different handyman trades. He had said that, "I am not only a priest but someone called to help humanity' ...I have to give back to society what the deities have given me."<sup>295</sup> This again is a strategy he uses to make himself equal to or superior to his competitors, that is, the Christians and fellow indigenous priests and priestesses. An indigenous priest engaging in social work is emulating a typical Ghanaian Christian

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<sup>294</sup> Michael Boateng, *The Chronicle*, Friday November 1, 2013, 3.

<sup>295</sup> Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 2, 2012.

practice. But Bonsam also adopts this strategy to create a brand that would make him appeal to many, even Christian worshippers. Consequently, considering all his activities, Kwaku Bonsam is a challenge to the structures of the majority Christian groups and other competitors on the religious landscape of Ghana.



Bonsam's school and some students. Picture by author.

#### **4.5 Tapping the Powers of the Gods: Bonsam's Rituals and Miracles**

In the beginning of Bonsam's call and the launch of his priesthood, he had consistently maintained that he was called by the deities, and that his actions and deeds were and must be attributed to the will of the deities. He taps into their powers through dreams, falling into trances or getting possessed. He claims he has been given the "third eye" which allows him to "see things" in the spiritual realm. He says he can communicate with spirits in his sleep, while walking or even when sitting. In performing miracles in public places, healing in his shrines, or prescribing ritual remedies, Bonsam taps into the powers of the several deities he serves. But as a priest, he must also give something to the deities to keep them active. This is the rationale behind rituals of sacrifices--feeding deities with food, especially blood. Blood, the medium of the animal's life-



force, makes the deities more powerful. It furnishes the gods with the spiritual power they in turn transmit to the priest. Bonsam explained that the effigies in the shrine are the representations of the deities. The deities are spirits and can only manifest through humans but they are represented in the shrine through the effigies. The effigies are made from different materials. Some are fashioned from pieces of wood or logs and others look like steel vessels. A few of the effigies are built with animal skin, while others are in the form of talisman with a rope or string tied to them.



Bonsam and his assistant standing by the effigies (deities) they fed with blood.

*Bosomfo* Kojo Poku explained that the effigies I observed were lifeless without blood. They become “sharp” or animated with spiritual power when blood is poured on them. The significance of blood in Bonsam’s new indigenous religion is therefore not too different from its significance in the Yoruba religion where *Ashe*, which is believed to be a life-force that runs through both living and inanimate objects, is transmitted through blood among other vessels.<sup>296</sup> In essence, what it

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<sup>296</sup> *Ashe* is the power through which things materialize or come into being according to Yoruba belief and that power in the world could be tapped by sacrificing blood. When an animal is sacrificed, the power in the form of blood in living thing sacrificed is transmitted back to the person who performed the sacrifice.

means is that the deities also need some material or substances for survival; they need food to survive just as humans do, but their food is blood. The more one feeds the deities the more powerful or healthier they become. As they become powerful, they transmit more power to the priests and the priestesses. The analogy here is that just as human beings can die as a result of hunger so can the deities. When they are not fed with blood, they become weary and powerless. Bonsam explained how some priests/priestesses have been rendered powerless because they refused to feed the deities. He also added that acts such as adultery and other sins can make the deities depart from priests or priestesses, withdraw their power from them or even kill them.

#### **4.5.1 Individual Ritual/Sacrifice**

As the name indicates, such sacrifices are performed by individuals for the purposes of protection, renewal of contract with deity, atonement, warding off evil, averting curses, and attacking one's enemies. At one time Bonsam told me how he offers animal sacrifices to the deities on special days for the purposes of replenishing his own powers. These sacrifices were in addition to the religious calendar-prescribed rituals and other kinds he performs several times in the year. He added, explaining, "I have to offer these sacrifices to assure the gods that I am still with them and they in turn renew their vows of helping me in all my activities."<sup>297</sup>

In the same vein, people who come to the shrine come with different issues. After consulting with the deities they can learn what they will need to solve the problem. This could be an animal or some other object. The most common items, however, are fowls and schnapps. After observing several consultations, I noted that the first thing a typical client does (that is, upon getting out of the consulting room) is to inquire from the helpers in the shrine where he/she could find a

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<sup>297</sup>Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 20, 2012.



fowl and schnapps to buy.<sup>298</sup> These two items are needed for the deities to solve most of the problems clients bring to the shrine--health, wealth, job, protection, and vengeance. If the deities prescribe animal sacrifice, they will demand that a specific animal be slaughtered for a particular god. Blood sacrifices are, however, not constant items in the shrines' ritual culture. Specific problems call for them. When a remedy calls for the sacrifice of an animal, the priest, who will be possessed during the ritual, will demonstrate traits associated with the sacrificed animal. For example, in the context of a dog ritual sacrifice, the deity for which this sacrifice has been performed will possess the priest, making him to behave like a dog. Also the choice of a sacrificial animal can be determined by its suitability for meeting the specific needs of the client on account of its natural attributes. Thus a dove, when used in a sacrifice, can aid in solving problems whose sources are far-flung or whose solution is required in a far flung place. This is because of the notion that a dove can fly beyond the specific geographical borders of a locale to effect what the clients wants in a distance land. We discuss the importance of ritual and sacrifice as an integral part of Bonsam's community, next.

#### **4.5.2 Communal Ritual/Sacrifice**

The communal rituals or sacrifices are enacted for the good of all the community. I have already mentioned that those religious days are called *da bone*. The rituals and sacrifices performed on those religious days are communal and observed in the whole of the Ashanti region on the same

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<sup>298</sup> Fowl and schnapps are used in determining whether the deities would agree to solve the person's problem or not. The fowl is first slaughtered and left to display, when it turns its head and chest up the sky it means the deities have accepted but if it turns its head down it means the deities are not ready to work on the client's problem. At this point, the schnapps is used in pouring libation to plead on behalf of the clients for the deities to act. Afterwards, another fowl is slaughtered and once it is accepted other rituals continue. The follow-up ritual could be another animal [sheep, cattle, dog, dove, cat etc.] sacrifice or other.

day. Apart from these planned religious days, the political and spiritual head of the *Asanteman*, the *Asantehene*, can, in consultation with his council perform communal sacrifices for the good of the *Asanteman* and Ghana as a whole. Recently, I had the opportunity of observing a communal sacrifice at the *Manhyia* palace in Kumasi.

On this day the king of Ashanti, *Asantehene* Otumfoɔ Osei Tutu II who ascended the *Sikadwa* (golden stool) on the 26 April 1999, celebrated his 15th anniversary. A ban was placed on drumming, funeral rites, and noisemaking from the 28th March to 28th May. The *sumankwahene* explained that the ban was not just a mere exhibition of authority of *Asantehene* over the Ashanti Kingdom but made room for people to reflect on life, remember ancestors, pray for the protection and goodwill of the people in the kingdom and Ghana as a country and for natives who live abroad. One element here that deserves special mention is the *Kuntukunideɛ*, a day which is linked with the *Akwaisidae*. It fell on 30 March 2014. *Kuntukunideɛ*, as the name implies, means black or dark day. The dress code for that occasion was black or red, symbols of the dead, as the day was to commemorate the past heroes of the kingdom and offer communal prayer for the progress of *Asanteman* and Ghana. An animal was slaughtered and the blood was sprinkled on the grounds where the activities took place, the *Manhyia* palace, and the seat of *Asanteman*. It is believed that the religious performances, or re-enactments of past ancestral practices, will invite the ancestor's home. As noted by Eliade, rituals re-enact a cosmic myth which transforms the community by bringing them back into a sacred moment of origin.<sup>299</sup> In a similar vein, the people re-enacted the ritual, singing war songs, dramatizing the *abrafoɔ* dance with their faces painted in black just as they went to war in days of old, the *abrafoɔ* waging war against their enemies. The *sumanbrafoɔ*, executioner deities in the spiritual world, are merciless in dealing with spiritual

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<sup>299</sup> Eliade, *Myths and Rituals*, 93.

enemies, just as the physical *abrafoɔ* cut off heads of physical enemies without any pity for them. For the indigenous religious agents to dispense of their best to the community they must tap into the powers of these deities.

According to my observations throughout the course of my research in the various shrines, tapping into the powers of the deities rest on the priests or priestesses building a shrine to house the deities after a “call” to the priestly vocation. In the shrine are effigies that are receptacles of the powers of the gods they represent. According to Komfo Kyei, *Komfopayin* an indigenous high priest at Aboabo in the Adansi district, and the president of the Ashanti regional GPTH, those receptacles or effigies are lifeless. In other words, the effigies are empty until the deities come to inhabit them. Kyei explained,

“When you want a deity to come and listen to issues, you must invite the deity by pouring libation on the effigy. The deity almost comes immediately to inhabit the effigy and listens to you. Until a deity comes to dwell in an effigy, it is empty and can be lifted but as soon as the deities inhabit it, the effigy becomes very heavy.”<sup>300</sup>

I propose then that these effigies in the shrines could be likened to mobile phones. They are media for communication as there is always a ‘call’ on one side by the priest and a receiver on the other side by the deities. However, communication can only ensue when the other party decides to pick up the call. Following this analogy, we can say that the priest or priestesses summons the deities by placing a call to them through the pouring of libation on the effigies. The deities then respond to the call by coming to inhabit the effigy, taking embodied forms. In this location they are able to listen to the priest’s reason for calling them.

Secondly, for the priest to remain powerful and continually access the services of the deities he represents, he must offer sacrifices of blood to them. This would also apply to clients or subscribers who seek favors from the deities. These are the two major activities Bonsam performs

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<sup>300</sup> Komfo Kyei, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 17, 2012.

both at the individual and communal levels to tap the powers of the deities in order to be empowered as he addresses adherents and clients alike. His spectacular display of the powers he taps into is the basis of his charisma.

#### **4.5.3 Charisma and the Man Bonsam**

Charisma is the source of respect accorded Bonsam by followers in spite of the fact that he skipped all the normative cultural steps towards priesthood among Akan people. This process is linked with African Christianity as well. The founder of the Celestial Church of Christ was for instance a carpenter who was called to priesthood. But by virtue of his charisma he has attracted a huge following in Nigeria.<sup>301</sup>

Weber has identified three basic types of authority, one being charismatic leadership. He notes how this is “a kind of claim to authority which is specifically in conflict with the bases of legitimacy of an established, fully institutionalized order. The charismatic leader is always in some sense a revolutionary, setting himself in conscious opposition to some established aspects of the society in which he works.”<sup>302</sup> The rise of Bonsam connects directly to Weber’s ideas about charismatic authority. Unlike the cases of “rational-legal authority” and “traditional authority” where a leader is either legally selected or the “system of order is treated as having always existed and been binding,”<sup>303</sup> Bonsam emerged from relative obscurity by virtue of his charisma. Bonsam’s authority defies these two other forms in that he never went through a structured theological institution to become a leader as is the case with most religious organizations, nor did

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<sup>301</sup> Afe Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ: The Politics of Cultural Identity in a West African Prophetic-Charismatic Movement* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1999), 24.

<sup>302</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trs. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. ed. with an introduction by Talcott Parsons (Glencoe, Ill, Free Press, 1947), 64.

<sup>303</sup> Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 57-60.

he use the traditional channel where a leader emerges naturally through the matrilineal or patrilineal line to ascend to the throne of authority as in the Musama Disco Christo Church, or even indigenous religious priests of the Akans of Ghana, for example. As a demonstration of his power Bonsam exhibits control over physical and spiritual matters whether he is in Ghana or abroad. During festivals he performs magical feats such as making objects levitate, resuscitating a dead fly, planting a seed to grow instantly, carrying water in a basket or conjuring up monies in different currencies and denominations. He demonstrates power through his healing processes in the shrine where the sanity of the mentally ill person is restored by his administration of herbs, the barren give birth, and the jobless find work.

He builds on his charisma to gain public prominence. Following Weber's notion of charisma, Bonsam's "charismatic quality has to be 'proved' by being recognized as genuine by his followers."<sup>304</sup> Not only do his miracles and the sharpness of his remedies as a healer achieve this, but the story of the supernatural means by which he became a priest and had powers bestowed on him to save Ghana and the world at large, which he tells audiences over and over again, magnify him and validate his charismatic personality. The views of some followers attest to their convictions about his status as a man of the gods. Nana Kra, a woman in her early 40s and an *okyeeame* of Bonsam, bolsters his legitimacy as one chosen by the deities by referring to Bonsam's earlier encounter with the man who gave him the effigy that would become a foundation of his powers. She also refers to the deity Kofi *oo Kofi* who had spoken through Bonsam to his family in the early days of his call. The deity had said "Bonsam will be known all over the world and would be so famous that family members will have great difficulty in gaining access to him." For Kra,

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<sup>304</sup> Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 65.

Bonsam's shrines, which are all over Ghana, his popularity in Ghanaian media, his international travels and their associated fame are fulfillments of the prophecy.

Bonsam himself re- counts the childhood accident that left his body charred to the extent that many people in his hometown did not expect him to survive and makes much of this incident to bolster his charismatic credentials. For him, surviving that serious accident was an affirmation that the deities have chosen him to carry out a mission on their behalf. He goes beyond the episode that occasioned the bestowing of magico-religious power on him due to of his act of kindness to link his childhood accident and survival to his present status. Consequently, stories circulating among his followers, town folks and even around Ghana about his magical feats seem to suggest a public legitimization of his claim as a chosen vessel to redeem Ghana and the world. As to how successful he has been as a priest through his activities, we turn to the discussion that follows.

#### **4.5.4 Definition of Success by Bonsam**

Bonsam himself primarily measures success in relation to his decision to come out boldly on radio in 2008. He asserts that through that effort “neo- and old indigenous priests alike have become bolder”<sup>305</sup> in their operations. Analyzing Bonsam's argument, we can agree that the increase in the number of radio advertisement of names and locations of indigenous priests and priestesses and radio programs hosting mostly indigenous priests and priestesses as panelists to discuss both mundane and spiritual issues such as Nhyira FM in Kumasi and its *Wiasemo ye sum* program held from 10:00pm to 12:00 pm daily as well as TV stations<sup>306</sup> support his claim. Also, the numerous signboards and posters displaying priests and priestesses and the boldness they

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<sup>305</sup> Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 2, 2012.

<sup>306</sup> Multimedia cable network: Adom TV, Ammamre TV, etc.

display in the course of their operations in their locations affirm Bonsam's claims. We note, that Bonsam prides himself with having made it possible for the public demonstration of the activities of indigenous religious priests and priestesses. He perceives himself as an innovator and a leader who must lead others in this all- important project, a view he conveys through this adage "*sa aboa bi pɛsɛ ɔyɛ kɛsɛ a osua prako*" literally meaning "*if any animal wants to learn to be big, it learns from the pig.*" Bonsam's reference here is to his success. For him, his has become the model all indigenous religious agents are copying, especially with regards to his use of modernizing formats to advertise his religious products. For Bonsam, success must be measured by the extent to which his vision for the future of the indigenous religions is materializing.

Secondly, the success of Bonsam can be measured in terms of the spread of his movement's influence. The growth in the number of his shrines is a sign of this spread, as I indicated earlier. Like Bonsam, most priests or priestesses who advertise their products on TV or radio have two or three branches in different locations of the country. The fortunes of the indigenous religions can be linked with the liberal attitudes of Ghanaian worshippers in the present times. Worshippers in Ghana feel free to belong to, access, and use religious resources from many different sources. In response, religious agents and their activities have become highly visible in public. This can be contrasted with the late 19th and the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when, as noted by Parker, colonial governments imposed bans on indigenous religious activities and many agents of indigenous religions faced challenges posed by the strong presence of Christianity. Many agents had to operate under cover or resurface in new forms. In the light of this comparison it can be said that indigenous religions are indeed going through something of a renaissance in this era. They have become a part of the Ghanaian modern world and the use of their resources is banal. For example, nowadays to convince others that they are speaking the truth or to force the truth out of

people, politicians in Ghana would swear by or call for the other party to swear by an indigenous deity called *Antoa nyama*, a feared river goddess in the Ashanti region. It is believed that wherever one is cursed with the name of the goddess on earth, the goddess will respond. *Antoa nyama* is indeed dreaded among a section of Ghanaians, especially those from and around the Ashanti region. A case in point is when one of the ex-presidents of Ghana, Jerry John Rawlings, having been accused by a section of Ghanaians of murdering three high court judges, suggested to the National Reconciliation Committee (the body commissioned by parliament to investigate and settle such cases when he was subpoenaed) that he should be taken before the *Antoa Nyamaa* shrine in Kumasi to determine his guilt or innocence.<sup>307</sup> Mallam Issah, another politician, was found guilty on the 20th of July, 2001 after he was charged with stealing money marked for the payment of bonuses to members of the senior national soccer team, the Black Stars, in a World Cup qualifying match in Sudan.<sup>308</sup> Recently he commented on an Obuasi-based radio that he was “wrongfully accused and imprisoned” because he had committed no offence and that he had indicated his readiness to prove his innocence if J.A Kufuor, the president at the time, would accompany him to the river deity *Antoa nyamaa* to have a spiritual trial of the case.”<sup>309</sup>

The president of the Ghana Football Association, Kwesi Nyantakyi, offered another example of the public use of indigenous religious spirituality in Ghana when he unveiled publicly on a TV3 channel program, “Hot Issues” on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 2014 edition that he spent about Ghc10,000 on spiritualists who performed sacrifices for the national football team to be successful during the world cup soccer tournament in Brazil. He even went further, stressing that these spiritualists came from diverse religions in Ghana. What we infer from his public submission in relation to

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<sup>307</sup> <http://www.modernghana.com/news/117127/1/rawlings-was-right-suggesting-nana-antoa-nyamaa-sh.html>. Accessed 31.07.14.

<sup>308</sup> <http://elections.peacefmonline.com/pages/politics/201401/185809.php?storyid=100&> . Accessed 7.31.14.

<sup>309</sup> <http://elections.peacefmonline.com/pages/politics/201401/185809.php?storyid=100&> Accessed 7.31.14.



using indigenous religious resources is his mention of “spiritualists” and “sacrifice.” It is clear he was referring to “*juju*”, an indigenous religious source. The practice of individuals in public office using indigenous religious resources openly is an affirmation of the trust Ghanaians currently have in the judgment of the human agents of indigenous deities. Such widespread use, Bonsam would argue, is a sign of his success.

Bonsam views all these developments as a fulfillment of promises his deities made to him about aiding him to popularize indigenous religions. His deities have proven their loyalty and demonstrated the continuing viability of their powers through their empowering him to spread his influence in most important cities in Ghana, Africa, Europe and USA. He prides himself especially with rooting his own version of Ghanaian indigenous religions in far-flung places of the world, making it acquire the status of a world religion.

#### 4.6 Conclusion

I have demonstrated that the neo- IRTs agents/priests<sup>310</sup> are individual priests/priestesses/spiritualists who do not belong to any organization like the GPTHA, but rather make use of modern media to advertise their exploits. I have also stated that though these neo-indigenous priests “do religion” in ways that are different from the old forms, they still claim to be part of the old *Nananom Som*. Focusing specifically on Kwaku Bonsam as a neo- indigenous priest and a protagonist, I have discussed his call to priesthood, his activities and the strategies he employs to negotiate his way through the competitive religious landscape of Ghana.

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<sup>310</sup> Apart from Bonsam, other neo indigenous priests whose activities are congruent to Bonsam’s pattern are: Nana Nyamekeh, Father Moses, Nana Saabentoa, Nana Ogyaframa, Mallam Kagyeibi, Nana Obuanipa, SafoAbass, Nana Azagli, Nana Dzakpata, Komfo Yaa Asuo, Togbui Kedinakpo, Mallam Kagyeibi, Sofo Abass, Komfo Yaa Bea, Nana Durga, Nana Obiaba Nye, Nana Brenyam, Mallam Zack etc

The neo-indigenous priest Bonsam, in his own right, has contributed to the immense proliferation of the current IR hype on the religious landscape of Ghana. We have pointed out that he achieved this through his creation of a plethora of shrines, his appropriation of modern media and his embarking on an internationalization agenda. Also, the rituals and sacrifices of blood that Bonsam and clients perform to tap the powers of the deities in order to maintain a good relationship with them is central finding in this research--the deities do not give power for free, there is a give and take dynamic in how they relate with their human agents. Bonsam's call and consequent popularity is linked to his charisma. Finally, we touched on how the neo-indigenous priest, Kwaku Bonsam, measures his success.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PRIESTS AND PRIESTESSES OF REVITALIZED OLD SHRINES IN GHANA: KOMFO<sup>311</sup> OFORIWAA IN REVIEW

#### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I focus attention on the old indigenous shrines that are being revitalized or rejuvenated by their priests/priestesses with the purpose of making them relevant to the emerging needs of both modern and traditional clientele. These men and women view their shrines and themselves as representing an unadulterated tradition and make a point of differentiating their practices from the likes of Kwaku Bonsam and other neo- religious priests whom they often label as imposters, or fake priests. They pride themselves with having gone through the conventional processes of Akan priesthood and because of that process understand themselves genuine. They argue that they are the true custodians of the indigenous religious heritage, and on that account they have created an organization--a body of priests/priestesses known as Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers Association (GPTHA) --<sup>312</sup> which is recognized by the contemporary state. During important national events these priests can be invited to lead indigenous religious rituals such as the offering of libations to the national gods.

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<sup>311</sup> Komfo, Okomfo and Komfo are titles of an indigenous religious priest or priestess. These three are used interchangeably and all mean the same. Sometimes IR priests are also addressed as *Nana* which means an ancestor, also a title used for chiefs and queen mothers, as it is believed that they are representing the ancestors. Komfo and Nana are used interchangeably but observably, the revitalized priests and priestesses use the title Komfo nowadays while the neo-priests use Nana.

<sup>312</sup> GPTHA is the body that can vouch for their members in times of misfortunes. Also, they are certified by the Ghana Ministry of Health. This certificate enables them to use herbs to heal in their shrines apart from spiritual matters which have nothing to do with physical health. By that they are also licensed by the District Assemblies through the forestry department to be allowed to visit the forest for medicinal plants, herbs, tree bark, roots, etc.

These priests and priestesses argue that maintaining indigenous religious orthodoxy must be of paramount concern to modern practitioners. Modifying the core practices of indigenous religions dilutes its “essence.” Akan indigenous religious expressions and practices have survived changing historical and cultural circumstances and must continue to preserve their content. Priestly authenticity lies in making efforts to keep the tradition as it has always been.

At the core of the discourse of these priests/priestesses, is the notion that spiritualities emanate from specific sources and that location is crucial in maintaining spiritual potency. Spiritual power must only be channeled towards the provision of needs that enhance the lives of individuals involved. Transporting spiritual power from its geographical source to another place or using it for the purpose of exhibiting power in the media, or transporting it to an international destination for the purposes of expanding one’s influences are actions that can diminish the potency of the powers of the deities. In advancing this discourse, these priests and priestesses are pitting themselves against the neo-indigenous priests whom they cast as “others” and tag as deviants, magicians and salesmen outside the sacred priestly vocation they claim to practice. Another difference is that whereas priestesses in the revitalized old shrines practice freely in their locations, there seem to be no women exercising leadership in the neo-indigenous religious arena. In other words, neo-indigenous priestesses are almost nonexistent.

Despite these distinct disagreements or differences, the two groups of indigenous ritual specialists share some traits. They agree that individuals must be free to practice indigenous religions in modern Ghana, just as citizens practice other faiths. Also, they benefit from the growing demands for spiritual power in Ghana and build on each other’s strengths. For example, the old shrines that are rejuvenating their practices owe the boldness with which they are making themselves visible in public places to the neo-indigenous priests who dare to challenge opponents

of indigenous religions openly. This has encouraged older traditional priests to revitalize some old shrines.

## **5.2 Komfo Oforiwaa, the Priestess: A Biographical history**

I use the priestess Komfo Oforiwaa to represent the priests or priestesses who are at the center of the rejuvenation of old indigenous religious shrines. In spite of her young age she represents the “old” tradition of priesthood and champions a discourse on modernity that seems to depart dramatically from the neo-priests’ narrative. The objective of the discussion is to show how the different ideological positions of these ritual agents informs their practice and strategies. One other reason why she aroused my interest is her predominantly female following, which provides an opportunity for us to explore the gender dimension of the rise in indigenous religious activities in modern Ghana. The discussion focuses on Komfo Oforiwaa’s priesthood, its origins, her biography, her activities, the discourse she is attempting to push forward and how all of these are informed by the different ideological baggage these priests or priestesses operate with.

Komfo Oforiwaa was born on the 23 July 1987 in Obuasi, a mining town in the Ashanti region of Ghana to Madam Afia Boameng, also known as Obaa Lizzy from Fomena Kusa her mother and Opanyin Kwame Prah of Obuasi her father. Oforiwaa is the fourth child of her mother and father. She has lived in Obuasi with her mother and her other four siblings after her parents divorced in 1993. Oforiwaa is married to a Fanti man called Paa Sabbah and has a son called Adjei Sabbah. At the time of her first encounter with the deities she currently serves, Komfo Oforiwaa was thirteen years old and was in form two at the Obuasi L/A Junior Secondary School (JSS). Describing her call one Saturday morning when I visited her in her shrine,<sup>313</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa said her friends and teachers complained that anytime she made a mistake in class and was spanked she would become possessed and would throw a tantrum in class until she was sent home. Since it was a possession she was usually unaware of what she did. This went on for a long time till the head-teacher finally called her mother to the school and advised her to find help for her. In her version of the story Obaa Lizzy, Komfo Oforiwaa’s, mother expounded on these highpoints:

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<sup>313</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 23, 2013.

First, I thought it was the deity in the river by her school worrying her, so I changed her school. I sent her to a religious school-Deeper Life Junior Secondary School (the school is part of Deeper Life Church, which was exported from neighbouring Nigeria), but her plight became worse. She always became possessed immediately she set foot on the school compound. Teachers and pupils alike would pray for her but the deity would not leave. Neither would she communicate with us. At this point I was afraid of the obvious, which is the fact that my daughter might become a priestess. I said “No way. I am a Christian and I am not going to allow that to happen”. The first thing I did was to send her to prayer camp here in Obuasi, but pastors were unable to deliver her. I then took her to Atweaa Mountains in Mampong Ashanti, a very big prayer camp set on a mountain for Christians to pray. We stayed there for one month and fasted 14 days. 14 days ooh [emphasis] without food. We prayed and prayed and while we were there she was not possessed so when we left I knew my daughter was delivered. When we came back to Obuasi, she was possessed after three days and it lasted about six hours. She would still not talk. Luckily our neighbor chanced on her and advised that I forget about church and send her somewhere to find out exactly what’s going on with her. The next day we were on our way to Takyimantia, a suburb of Bechem in the Brong Ahafo region. My daughter’s husband also lived in our area and was always in our house to encourage her to go school and not to be shy of the students and teachers due to her plight. On that day when he came I told him of my journey to find out what was causing all the problems in my daughter’s life. He said: “Maa but what about if she gets possessed on the way? I will go with you and help in case”. That was how come Paa got involved with my family. When we got to the location of the priest, he asked of our mission and when I opened my mouth to talk, my daughter became possessed again. Apparently it was a deity talking through her. She said: “I am upset about what you have been doing sending her to places to cast me out. If she goes to church and lead a good life, I don’t have any problem but if they try to exorcise me from her that is when I will kill her. I have chosen her to work for me.” I was disappointed and later inquired from the priest if we could perform some rituals to free her from the deity. The priest said it was possible but he must consult his deities to make a bargain for us. He did but the deity insisted she would not leave her. At this point the elderly priest advised that I accept her condition and aid her training rather. We stayed for one more month and left to Obuasi.<sup>314</sup>

Picking up the narrative from where her mother had left off, Komfo Oforiwaa described how her possessions were intermittent when they came back to Obuasi.

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<sup>314</sup> Obaa Lizzy, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 18, 2013.

I was stable and fine but once in a while I would be possessed and inform the people around me the foods that were taboo to me or the places I should not be allowed to visit. One day a spiritual force seized me and directed me to the forest. I would later get to know that I was in the forest for six weeks. My absence from the public was noticed by the villagers.<sup>315</sup>

Oforiwaa's narrative graphically depicted her encounters with spirits in the forest:

I found myself in the thick forest where I have never been before. And yet I was not afraid. I was surrounded; I felt someone directing me to follow so I kept following. Sometimes when I was hungry I would come across banana and eat it. At night I slept and the next day I continued. I never knew the number of days I spent in the forest. From there as I kept following the spirit, I ended up in a town by a river bank. In the town I kept walking until a voice told me to go to a house which was built like a shrine. Upon entering I saw drawings of Mame Wata and materials from the sea and river as well as things you can find in a typical indigenous shrine. I stood at the entrance not knowing whether to go left or right. Suddenly a woman in her mid-fifties appeared and urged me to come over. She gave me a chair to sit on, gave me water to drink and asked why I was there but I could not talk because my mouth was so heavy. She offered me a place to sleep since I could still not talk. The next day, I came back to my senses and asked the woman where I was. She said I was in Ivory Coast in a town called Franbo. I said but I am from Obuasi in Ghana, how did I come to another country. How am I going to go back? As I was still talking to the woman, she became possessed and started talking to me in the company of the people in the shrine. They called it garden. She said "You have come to the right place. I am the goddess *Gbogbo*<sup>316</sup> and I am the one who brought you here to learn how I am worshipped so that when you go back you can do what I want, the priestess will teach you for some time before you go back." I was stunned and terrified. "What am I doing here?" I asked myself. So as the goddess willed, I stayed there and trained for five weeks and she said I could go but I must come later after my family sees me since they would be worried by now. So I went back to Obuasi this time in a public transport. When I got to Obuasi and narrated my experience my grandmother who had come from the village to console my mother because I went missing, revealed our family history.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 18, 2013.

<sup>316</sup> Gbogbo is a river which separates Ghana and Ivory Coast on the border of Jewi Wharf (Ghana).

<sup>317</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 3, 2013.

Oforiwaa then started into the narrative her grandmother told her. She said her grandmother revealed how she (Oforiwaa) was from a priestly family which lived in the very distant past. Her great-grandmother was a priestess but when she died no one inherited her, until later her grandfather called Ofori (who she happened to be named after) took up the task to become an indigenous priest. Later he moved from Fomena Kusa, their hometown, to settle in Fosu Asiakyenmunu in the central region and converted to Christianity but continued his indigenous priesthood undercover. As a Christian, Ofori joined the Twelve Apostles church--known locally as *Nankaba asore*, a kind of religiosity that combined indigenous religions with Christianity. These types of churches are commonly identified as *sumsum sore* or spiritual churches due to the way they become possessed by a “supposed” spirit. Scholars such as Omenyo and others have categorized these types of church which combines Christianity and IRTs and are founded by Africans as African Independent Churches (AICs).<sup>318</sup> As *Sumsum sore* practice was very popular in the central region at that time, Agya Ofori saw it as the most suitable context within which to conceal his indigenous priesthood and became an *Ɔsofo* or pastor of the *Asiakyenmunu* branch of the church.

The strands of *sunsum sore* or the Twelve Apostles church (*Nankaba*) are churches that normally worship water deities. Each branch adopts a water deity as the patron deity. Naturally, Ɔsofo Ofori adopted the deity *Ggbogbo* from Ivory Coast as the deity of his church. This was the source of his spiritual powers as an *Ɔsofo* or pastor. The deity helped him to become powerful. He was noted for the sharpness of his remedies and his fame spread beyond his area. But he contravened the deity’s regulation on purity as he committed adultery repeatedly. Not even warnings from the deity would change him. Eventually the deity punished him by inflicting him

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<sup>318</sup> Omenyo, *Pentecost outside Pentecostalism*, 73.



with stroke. He died eventually from the stroke. But the deity did not leave after Agya Ofori's death. It was still alive and active in their family, looking for a "vessel" or an agent to occupy, like all the other deities in their family. Because Kɔmfo Oforiwaa was named after her grandfather Ofori, the deity was drawn to her and started possessing her. Oforiwaa told me of how the details of this narrative were revealed to her in Ivory Coast, explaining how stunned she was when her maternal grandmother confirmed them when she came back to Ghana.

Oforiwaa described the change in her when she came from Ivory Coast, the signs of her new status. She said she started dressing like a priestess, always wearing white dresses and locking her natural hair in dreads. She saw visions, fell into trance and would often dream about weeds, herbs, leaves and the bark of trees used for healing diseases. She would be calm as long as she poured libation and led a holy life. Though she was not yet a full priestess people consulted with her for various problems and her remedies were very efficacious. One day she became possessed and the deity spoke, directing her to go through training and to learn the rules of the vocation before she settled as a priestess. The ritual that settled one in the priestly vocation is known as *atinase*, or the initiation into priesthood after a call. Her mother and husband went to inquire in her hometown where she could possibly go for the priestly training and were directed to Kɔmfo Kyeyi, a chief priest who had practiced as a priest for a long time and is reputed for his spiritual power in the whole of the Ashanti region. He is also the Ashanti regional president of the GPTH. <sup>319</sup> He lives on the mountain in the forest area of Adansi Aboabo. When Oforiwaa's relatives consulted with him, Kɔmfo Kyeyi asked them to bring Oforiwaa to the shrine for verification of her call before

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<sup>319</sup> This body of indigenous priests was formed in 1960 according to the national president, Togbui Massa Alowonu Adenyo, to protect the purity of the religion and frustrate fake agents.

he could proceed with further instructions. Oforiwaa relived the experience of her verification of call in the following narrative:

When I first encountered his shrine, he poured libation to the deities to get me possessed to find out if they really called me. I became possessed and according to my mother and husband, different deities spoke through me: *Nana Gbgogbo*, *Pemsan* and *Asuo Abena*. After consulting with deities and engaging the deities who have possessed me, Kɔmfo Kyei verified and confirmed that they were genuine deities and so I could commence training as soon as I was ready. In the shrine under the tutelage of the senior priest, I and other apprentices were trained on how to invoke the deities, their likes and dislikes, taboos of the vocation, how to use herbs for healing purposes and protection, how to give information to clients, human relations and so on. I remained under the tutelage of Kɔmfo Kyei for one year, after which I was officially initiated as a priestess. I went back to my mother's house after the initiations and started practicing as a fulltime priestess. I will say because I was very effective I got lots of gifts and money. The deities I serve showed me a land in the outskirts of Obuasi in Dadwen and next to a river where they would help me to settle. My mother and some elderly people looked for the owner who willingly sold the land to us. While I was in my mother's house in Obuasi estate I started building a block house on the land which was going to serve as a shrine and my place of abode. The shrine was commissioned by the help of my master Kɔmfo Kyei and other colleagues amidst the agorɔ festival from the 12-15<sup>th</sup> August 2011. After that I moved in here.<sup>320</sup>

It is instructive from Oforiwaa's biographical history that, though the deity *Gbgogbo* possessed her at the age of thirteen, she was never called Kɔmfoɔ, a sacred title for an indigenous religious priestess, although she offered spiritual help to people who consulted her. She became a priestess with the title only after she was initiated according to the precepts of the community she lived in. Oforiwaa's priestly call falls within the category Ekem has described as "genuine." First, she was possessed by a deity, given a duty call, which is normally referred to locally as *akɔm a fa no*, a further test was made to verify the authenticity of the *akɔm* by consulting an *Ɔkɔmfopayin* (elderly indigenous priest), and through the test the deity revealed herself as *Gbgogbo*, a deity from Ivory

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<sup>320</sup> Kɔmfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 3, 2013.

Coast, and offered her reasons for choosing her. Finally she went through training and was initiated as a priestess. This pattern represents a departure from the modality of the neo-indigenous priests such as Kwaku Bonsam, whose status is often founded on their charismatic attributes. Rather it falls under what Weber refers to as “traditional authority.” Weber postulates that this form of authority is a “system of order which is treated as having always existed and been binding.”<sup>321</sup> Consequently, Komfo Oforiwaa as a priestess had to go through this laid down and binding system and, as a matter of association, join GPTHA to be recognized as an indigenous priestess. The “important consequences and symptoms of the existence of traditional authority is that there can be no such thing as new ‘legislations.’”<sup>322</sup> This issue is the topic of contestations between the old indigenous religious agents and the neo-indigenous religious priests. For the former, the innovations of the neo-indigenous priests are unacceptable as they are not in tune with tradition.

### **5.2.1 Oforiwaa and her Revitalized Indigenous Religious Shrine: An Emerging Discourse**

The priests of the revitalized old shrines are the old-fashioned indigenous religious agents. As identified earlier on in this work, these priests or priestesses are normally known only in their areas of operation. Nonetheless, due to the fact that they have come together as the GPTHA, they have a powerful voice in the shaping of the trajectory of the indigenous heritage. As a group they have been able to construct a discourse that runs counter to the emerging neo-indigenous priests’ positions on indigenous religious issues. Wuaku, who also writes about Ghana’s religious landscape, has identified the place of discourse in the shaping of developments on this field. He shares with Foucault the notion that a discourse could be an “individual or collective creation related to an author and located in a specific context. It is neither true nor false but simply

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<sup>321</sup> Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 60.

<sup>322</sup> Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 60.

everything said about something. A discourse is not necessarily based on facts, but simply an opinion.”<sup>323</sup> The field data points to the fact that the main bone of contention between neo-indigenous religious priests and those who represent the old tradition is how to define the indigenous religious traditions in the modern era.

The agents of the Akan indigenous religious tradition who are at the helm of its revitalization argue that being modern in this changing world does not mean compromising the core values of the religion and/or orthodoxy. Simply modifying, for example, aspects of the religion which are no longer suitable for the modern times can make the religion modern. These aspects can include the structure of the shrine itself, the religious functionaries’ appearances, the processing of herbal medicine, human relations in the shrine, the nature of shrine procedures and so forth. However, they continue to argue that, in order to maintain the core of the religion and remain faithful to the deities, indigenous religions should be local. This means that the abode of the deities, the shrine, should be at the destination the deities chose to reside when they called the priest or priestess to service. This is because deities choose a particular location for a reason. For this group of ritual agents modernity does not mean completely reconfiguring the tradition using the models of other players on the religious field. It only means introducing subtle changes that can ensure continuity of the practices while keeping the core intact.

The significance of sacred space as an integral part of IRTs in the discourse of the revitalized old priests is discussed elsewhere in this work. The priests of the revitalized old shrines argue that place and efficacy of the deities are compromised with movement and exposures to the public as the neo-indigenous religious priests are doing in the media. Echoing the stance of these

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<sup>323</sup> Wuaku, *Hindu Gods in West Africa*, 8.

revitalized old priests, Kɔmfo Oforiwaa argues, for example, that it is erroneous to open branches of shrines in places other than the location the deities chose to situate their power or to advertise the exploits of the deities or priests in the media. She stresses the fact that advertising in the media, especially on the internet, amounts to accepting that one's deities are not powerful enough to attract clients. Such actions are typical of charlatans who use the vocation of the priesthood as guises because --wɔn ben yɛ. "If a priest or priestess has been truly called by the deities, and the deities had a purpose for calling that priestess, they would ensure his or her fame and that priest would not need to go about blowing his or her own horn about his exploits,"<sup>324</sup> she argued. Paa, Oforiwaa's husband and the *bosomfo* of the Pemsan shrine, summed this conviction up with an Akan maxim that: *ahwiene pa nkasa*, meaning *good beads do not rattle or* another way of saying it is "empty barrels make the most noise." The sense these priests seek to convey is that the neo-priests are pressured by their own feeling of inferiority to publicize their skills and abilities as priests. This position is one of the bases of their discourse on the spurious nature of the claims of the neo-priests to authenticity.

A related issue that Oforiwaa and her cohorts raise in relation to the authenticity of a priest has to do with ritual practices, especially sacrifices. For example, these traditional priests argue that the neo-priests lack knowledge of the right procedure involved in practicing rituals because they are not priests—that is, their calls were not verified, they were not trained as priests by anyone; rather they emerged spontaneously as one would normally expect of magicians in Ghana. The GPTH, to which Kɔmfo Oforiwaa, Kɔmfo Kyei and other traditional priests belong, has tried to distinguish itself from the neo-priests by distancing itself from some of their public declarations or proclamations. Referring to an incident involving Kwaku Bonsam, Kɔmfo

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<sup>324</sup> Kɔmfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 6, 2013.

Oforiwaa offered me an example of how the neo-priests often expose themselves to public ridicule through their claims:

I was so ashamed of myself and felt sorry for Kwaku Bonsam for disgracing himself on TV3 the other day, when he was asked how we indigenous priests can help the dried up Akosombo Dam<sup>325</sup> fill up with water so that Ghanaians can have constant electricity supply. He said the dam is a god and the god is angry that is why the dam has dried up, so for it to fill up, ritual sacrifice of dogs and cats must be performed to appease the gods. Only then will they release the rains. ...I was dumbfounded when I heard this because no genuine indigenous priest will sacrifice a dog or cat for a river deity. River deities have taboos and dogs are abominations, every trained priest or priestess knows this but because he is not a priest, Bonsam does not know this simple thing and was sitting on TV showing his ignorance and disgracing himself.”<sup>326</sup>

Komfo Oforiwaa's position was that Bonsam had wrongfully informed people about what needed to be sacrificed in such a situation. All the same, to make sense of the discourse of the traditional priests or priestesses which stress the traditional authority based on the precepts of their ancestors, I will suggest that it is a delegitimizing strategy the priests and priestesses of the revitalized old shrines are employing to press home their non-negotiable traditional system. They cast the neo-indigenous priests' ways of doing things as new and originating from a tradition other than theirs so that they can sideline the neo-priests. There is a sociological explanation for this discourse in that it stems from the natural human instinct to impose authority, power and control over others to delegitimize them while stressing one's own legitimacy. Also, the nature of traditional authority, as pointed out by Weber, does not compromise with “new legislations,” which is what the neo-indigenous agents are all about and hence their problem with the priests and priestesses of the revitalized shrines.

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<sup>325</sup> The Akosombo Dam was built to supply hydroelectric power to supply electricity for Ghana and neighboring countries. It is one of the major projects initiated by the first president of Ghana (Dr. Kwame Nkrumah) and as such revered as a national asset.

<sup>326</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 14, 2013.

Ray has defined African shrines as passages that humans use in communicating with the spiritual world. He asserts that shrines could be in their “natural form such as forest grooves, large rocks, trees and lagoons, rivers, and mountains” or there can be man-made shrines, such as a building <sup>327</sup> or structures made of raffia sticks or clay. For Komfo Oforiwaa, one way of modernizing shrines is to:

Change the shrine’s physical outlook. This is very important as it makes the shrine more attractive to non-believers or clients, so to speak. Such cosmetic changes, I insist, are needed in these modern times because it is imperative for the signs of the indigenous religions to have a better outlook than what prevailed during my “great-grandfather’s era.”<sup>328</sup>

It is the cosmetic changes in the shrine which lead us as scholars to characterize the phenomenon as revitalization, not the changes in the nature of ritual practices. For instance, the first impression one gets upon approaching the vicinity of one of these indigenous shrines is that of awe. Before my field work, whenever I would think of a shrine I would envision an old rickety thatched hut, almost collapsing and with blood smeared all over the walls and floor of the shrine, manned by a priest whose outward appearance evokes fear. They were characterized by masquerade painted faces, discolored teeth from years of chewing cola-nuts and not brushing their teeth, and dressed in old filthy-looking traditional garments reeking with the smell of fresh animal blood.

As a person who grew up in Nzema,<sup>329</sup> an Akan society, I had nerve-racking reminiscences of shrines as places with animal heads hung on the wall, blood spills, full and empty schnapps

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<sup>327</sup> Ray, “African Shrines as Channels of Communication,” 26.

<sup>328</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 18, 2013.

<sup>329</sup> The Nzema are a part of the Akan ethnic group that occupies the south western part of Ghana on a border with Ivory Coast. See Nrenzah, *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Ghanaian Pentecostalism*, 30.

bottles, altars that are normally on the floor etc. Below is an example of a typical old-fashioned shrine.



Nana Sabentoa of Apitikoko-Obuasi shrine in his old fashioned shrine. Picture by author.

The shrines I observed during my research were far from what I had envisioned. For example, what I observed upon entering the half-gated compound of *Pemsan* shrine which belongs to Komfo Oforiwaa, as well as at other revitalized shrines, are quite different and probably the exact opposite of the old types I was familiar with. There is a modern styled cement house-- which serves as the residence of the priestess-- adjoining the shrine rooms for admitted clients, a waiting area, a consultation room and an altar. The floors of all these spaces are tiled. Most significantly the altar is built in the form of a platform, unlike the ground altars I saw as a child (as above). Oforiwaa always made a point of stressing the need for such changes: “change in the outlook is in keeping with the times but the content of the religion should always be in line with what *Nananom* have practiced.”





2. Inner shrine has raised tiled altar. 3. Outer shrine and waiting area. (Pictures by author).

For her, those indigenous religious priests and priestesses who have not cared about making such modern innovations have themselves to blame for the disrespect they suffer at the hands of other religions in Ghana.

I don't see why a priestess or priest should look dirty or fearful to be considered a genuine priest or priestess. Neither should an altar in a shrine used in worshipping the deities and spirits be ugly or placed on the floor with contempt as if it is an eating place for animals. If human beings like to look beautiful how about the deities who are even more superior? They also like good things. That is why, apart from them choosing beautiful people, they also choose kindhearted, down to earth, 'humans' to be their mouthpieces. As such we being their eye on earth should showcase their beauty. Any priestess or priest who is dirty is naturally dirty because the deities did not tell him or her to be dirty and smelly. Indigenous religious agents complain about being looked down upon by people of other faiths but they forget that as humans our appearances and demeanor makes others perceive us as backward or progressive. As a priestess I must look presentable. Looking fearful and ugly is a thing of the past. My residence and the shrine for the deities must also be pleasant, a place revered and respected. Keeping the shrine and yourself neat evokes blessings from the deities. When I was called to priesthood, I started with two deities-*Ggbogbo* and *Pemsan*. But now I have about fifteen or more active deities because I keep myself holy and neat but also offer sacrifices as the deities prescribe...<sup>330</sup>

<sup>330</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 10, 2013.

The underlying sense of the need to make such cosmetic changes to these old shrines is often explained just like the above but I propose that, keeping the shrine clean and maintaining a neat appearance is one of the strategies Oforiwaa and her cohorts have adopted to appeal to the imagination of would-be-clients in Ghana's very competitive and volatile religious landscape. The competition is keen and one needs to be up to the task. Change is inevitable in order to meet this need. The fees these clients pay for their services is a crucial source of revenue for the shrines. One of Oforiwaa's remarks backs this observation "if people come here to see that the shrine is dirty with blood and I smell and look unkempt, they will never come again. However, if this place is neat and homely, they will feel comfortable and unafraid to come."<sup>331</sup> The priestess however insists that, the revitalized old priests and priestesses do not run their shrines as business enterprises as their counterparts, the neo-priests and that they do not charge clients.

However, another tactic I observed they deploy to attract clientele is the ancient public display of power through the *agorɔ* and or *akɔm afahye* performances. We have dealt extensively with this in chapter seven of this study. Oforiwaa does not charge her clientele directly as the neo-priests do. She is subtle in her approach to charging for her services. For instance, a client would be asked to give the deities a gift before the priests communicate with them. Another gift is expected from the client when the priestess solves their problem. Using the guise of gift giving, money is somewhat exchanged for services rendered to clients, but then if one analyzes the revitalized shrines insistence on not charging clients in comparison with the neo-priests open businesslike straight-forward charges, there is the sense at which one can say that, the revitalized priests and priestesses somehow give access of consultation to the poor and rich, money or no money as opposed to the 'pay before service' stance of the neo-indigenous priests.

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<sup>331</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 4, 2013.



Oforiwaa's signboard at the junction of her location

in Obuasi Dadwen (picture by author).

The signpost above lists the services that *Komfo* Oforiwaa offers, and the direction to her shrine. This kind of publicity speaks to an underlying motive, which is either to inform the public of the priest's/priestess' location so as to help them solve their mundane predicaments, or to attract more clients for the purposes of growing the fame of the shrine, gaining even more clients, and enriching the priest/priestess.

### 5.2.2 Her Activities and Community

Oforiwaa conducts all her activities in the *Pensam* shrine. As she advertises on her billboard, her services include family problems, financial crises and spiritual problems, among many others. She explained, however, that the services she offers clients go beyond these three. She heals both physical and spiritual sicknesses as well. As a priestess, her duty is to serve the deities and do their will. She therefore operates within a schema that is dictated by the deities. Oforiwaa begins each day with *Nananom som*, which is worshipping the deities by pouring libation to them. This is obligatory. It is an affirmation of her loyalty to the deities and the shrine. In her absence the *bosomfo* [her assistant] must perform that duty. On top of the daily worship of the deities, there are some prescribed rituals. These are performed each week or bi-weekly for the deities. *Benada*,

or Tuesday, and every other *wukuada*, or Wednesday, are the days reserved for worshipping her deities.

Apart from her commitment to her deities in her shrine, as a priestess in *Asanteman*, Komfo Oforiwaa holds allegiance to the *Asantehene*, who is the spiritual and the traditional political head of *Asanteman*. She is therefore obliged to perform state and local religious rituals, especially sacrifices, in strict compliance with the *Asantehene*'s religious calendar.

Apart from these obligatory religious activities, every day is a working day in Oforiwaa's shrine. The only time activities are halted in the shrine is when there is a heavy downpour, making it difficult for deities to possess or "mount" the priestess. Only a personal or national emergency will compel a ritual specialist to induce a possession after a very heavy downpour. Akan gods are not disturbed on rainy days.<sup>332</sup> Important Akan socio-religious events such as festivals are marked at the shrine. During these events Oforiwaa invites her colleagues from far and near to join her fete. These events are full of rituals and sacrifices. It is manifestly clear that the driving force of IRs are rituals and sacrifice, as both individual practitioners and clients alike partake in those activities either solely or communally.

Sometimes the ritual sacrifices of either priests or clients are shrouded in secrecy, as they are performed without any form of scrutiny. Depending on the ritual type, such rituals are performed in the night at the shrine, cemetery, tri-junction, market, or garbage drop points. These are all auspicious locations in the Akan religious world. These rituals are presided over by the priestess, and witnessed by *bosomfo*, clients and the deity. No ordinary person can witness some of these rituals and that is why they are done during the obscure hours of the night when people

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<sup>332</sup> Paa Sabbah, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 4, 2013.

are sleeping. The secrecy of some of the activities of IRs and their inability to showcase them in the public is due to what De Witte has called problem of the “long history of suppression and attempts at eradication.”<sup>333</sup> Yet what *Komfo* Oforiwaa, for example, had to say about this was that “it is not right for the human eye to see everything, as some rituals can be terrifying or otherwise mysterious. Also, some human beings have evil eyes which can be used in destroying good things and its better they are blocked from that tendency.”<sup>334</sup> The most important thing for the priests and priestesses of the revitalized shrines is that whether they do the ritual sacrifice in secrecy or in the open, it works for the people, and that is enough.

### 5.2.3 The Structure and Leadership of the Shrine

*Komfo* Oforiwaa’s shrine is modeled on the old Akan shrines, as she links the foundation of her practice to *Nananom som*, the old time religion of the Ashanti. This means that she has only one shrine and this is located at the point the deities dictated to her. She is also the only priestess of this shrine. Her shrine is located at Obuasi –Dadwen, off the Obuasi -- Kumasi road. The shrine itself is the last compound in the area and is near a river.<sup>335</sup> The portion nearest to the main road is walled with blocks and has a metal gate. Entering through the gate, one can see a building on the right. The building has two divisions. The last room on the left is the shrine. The shrine has a tiled sacrificial altar. Next to this shrine is another room. This is the consulting room, but it also has a shrine as deities are invoked to inhabit the priestess in order to listen to issues brought before her. In the middle of this room is the waiting area for clients. This area is also tiled. There are two

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<sup>333</sup> De Witte, “Spectacular and the Spirits,” 313.

<sup>334</sup> *Komfo* Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 5, 2013.

<sup>335</sup> The river is a goddess called *Asuo Abena*. According to Oforiwaa, this goddess did not possess her initially but since she lived by the river and fetched water as well as took herbs and leaves from the bank, she performed sacrifice for her anytime she did for her own deities; with time this river goddess started possessing her, so currently *Asuo Abena* is one of her deities.

bedrooms, one for the priestess and the other for her husband. At the back of this main block is a five bedroom house for clients who have to stay overnight night or for lengthy periods. On the left of the main gate is another shrine. This is located at the entry point of the forest. According to the priestess, that shrine serves as a store for all the herbs, and bark of trees, leaves, potions, oils and other material remedies she must administer to clients who come to her seeking help. Flowing under the canopy of the forest and at the opposite side of the main gate to the shrine is the river. The floor of the compound of the shrine is inundated with alluvium from the river and therefore sandy; visitors waiting to consult with the priestess would normally report under a tree by the river before they are called and asked to wait for their turns to consult with the priestess in the consultation room.

While there is a hierarchy at Oforiwaa's shrine there are few offices compared with Kwaku Bonsam's rather complex hierarchy of shrine helpers. Oforiwaa is head of her shrine. She has four assistants. Next to her is the *bosomfo* Paa Sarbah, who is also her husband; the *Okyeame*, Kwasi, who helps the *bosomfo* to control and serve the priestess when she is possessed. The next person in the pecking order is Nana, a lady. Nana and the *bosomfo* prepare the sacrificial/ritual and food for the deities. The last in line is Boampong, a man who cleans the shrine and arranges the seats for the clients. He also calls out the names of clients one after the other from a list he has prepared, so that they can consult with the priestess. Oforiwaa has a team of helpers, composed mostly of family members, who play the drums and sing when there are mini activities in the shrine. But during important events such as the *akɔm* or *agorɔ* festivals she hires professional drummers. The drummers are familiar with the rhythm of each deity and therefore are able to change from one rhythm to the other according to the deity who possesses Oforiwaa at the time. Kwadwo Kwarteng,

the leader of one such drummer-for-hire groups, explained in depth the nature of these groups and how they operate:

We are a group of singers, drummers, clappers and dancers. We are based in Kuntunase in the Ashanti region. There are several such indigenous religious groups, especially in *Asanteman*. Our group comprises both sexes but we have a hierarchy. The leader must be able to identify and understand the deities of *Asanteman* as well as unknown deities during public events, to be able to sing and drum those rhythms they like. I am not just a leader; I am a *bosomfo* of a shrine and so are several of the leaders of such drumming groups in *Asanteman*. We meet frequently to practice these rhythms and songs; every member of the group believes in indigenous religion so we do not encounter any problems with anyone.<sup>336</sup>

The revitalized shrines I observed were not so keen on creating or building a community of followers like the neo-indigenous religious priests. The old-time priests, such as Oforiwaa, are, however, making progress in expanding their clientele base, without instilling in their clients the sense of the need for a community. For instance, Komfo Oforiwaa's clientele base follows the model in Akan indigenous religions where subscribers are free to go to any shrine they so please and wish at any point in time. They are not obliged to be tied to one shrine. Ashanti religion is a utility-based religion in which clients have the freedom to shop around for the most potent remedy for their affliction, or even consult different priests who have specialized in their need.

All the same, I observed two categories of clients in the Pemsan shrine that consulted with the priestess. I classified them as permanent and casual clients. The casual clients were clients I saw only one time and the permanent clients came there several times. In the section that follows I discuss some of the clients and their experiences at the shrine.

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<sup>336</sup> Kwadwo Kwarteng, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 5, 2013.

#### 5.2.4 Clients of Oforiwaa: Why We Patronize the Shrine

In most indigenous shrines in Ghana, diverse human concerns propel clients to consult priests and other kinds of spiritualists. For the Akan, wealth and health can be said to be arguably the basis of good life and people seek to achieve these through consultations of indigenous religious oracles if their mundane efforts fail. On the list of services on her signboard Oforiwaa identified a diverse range of problems that pushed clients to her shrine. Her clientele cuts across the diverse religions as well as ethnic groups in Ghana: the data shows men, women, rich, poor, educated, illiterates, young, old, Christians and their pastors, Muslims, and those with no religious affiliations consult indigenous priests and priestesses. Oforiwaa had told me at one time that though she inquires of clients' religious affiliations before addressing their need, it was only to make clear to them where they both stood. The issue, she explained, was that irrespective of a person's religious loyalties, he or she must accept the terms of the shrine before consultation with the gods begins. "Everybody is welcome to the shrine to seek help as the deities did not specify who I should help, but all humanity. Anyone from anywhere or any religion who believes that his or her problem can be solved here can come. I don't hand-pick clients, I help everyone,"<sup>337</sup> Oforiwaa explained further.

Consultations with the priestess begin with divining into *suman*,<sup>338</sup> the spiritual world of the deities, to access and diagnose problems of the client. Through the diagnosis the priestess is able to identify if a client has a physical or a spiritual problem. This is the only way to determine

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<sup>337</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 15, 2013.

<sup>338</sup> *Suman* means world of deities/spirits. *Su* is (spirit) and *man* means (state/nation). *Sum* also means darkness and since these spirits and deities cannot be seen with the natural eye, it is often imagined the deities are in the world of darkness. The deities or *suman* in Asanteman are headed by a spiritual head known as the *Sumankwahene* (*suman* is world of spirits, *nkwa* is servant, *hene* is chief, all put together means chief servant of the Ashanti kingdom deities. The *sumankwahene* represent the priests and priestesses of Asanteman in the Asantehene court.



which prescription can be provided to the client. It could be as simple as just administering herbs, leaves, bark of trees or sometimes all of these mixed together as concoction and administered in liquid gallons or as other powdery forms to the clients. The remedy could also be a complicated ritual sacrifice, which may entail slaughtering animals such as fowl, sheep, dogs, frogs, cats, and even cows. Indigenous priests and priestess are tasked with solving the physical and spiritual problems of clients. One thing I noted during my observations in the *Pemsan* shrine was the bluntness of the priestess during consultation with clients. She often told clients straight away what the problem was, whether spiritual or physical, identifying the cause and suggesting an antidote for them there and then.

I had been going to the shrine consistently for months, mainly communicating with the priestess and her helpers as well as observing activities and engaging visitors in casual conversations. I saw that some of the clients came to the shrine only one time, others came there a few more times to perform sacrifices and never came again. But there were some individuals who came to the shrine every other week or frequently. My categorization of the clients as either casual or devoted permanent clients was on the basis of these observations and my conversations with the visitors and shrine attendants.

According to my daily records, clients who patronized the shrine were mostly females. The ratio of females to males was 10:3. For instance on 28 March 2013, I counted twenty two clients, out of which eighteen were females; only six were males. This was the case almost all the time I was in the field. This observation leads us directly to the gender dimension of the rise in indigenous religious activities in Ghana. How do we explain the preponderance of women over men as clients in Oforiwaa's shrine? First, the female dominance could be explained by the dominance of women over men in Ghana's population. Ghana's population census clearly

indicates that women demographically more than men. The males are (48.8%) and females (51.2%).<sup>339</sup> It follows that there are more female related issues than male.

The second explanation has to do with the greater appeal of the sex of the priestess to females. Female clients feel more at home with her because she is a woman. Many of my respondents explained how well the priestess is able to relate to the issues they bring to her, making them feel very much at ease. Others talked about the urgency with which she treated their issues and how she would always act swiftly to find solutions to their problems because she understands them as women. In any case, clients attest to the satisfaction with Oforiwaa's handling of their cases. Interviewing subscribers of the *Pemsan* shrine, I identified various themes emerging from their narratives and I discuss these themes in the following section.

### **5.2.5 Themes in Client's Narratives**

An interesting way to start a discussion on clients' motives in adopting indigenous religious spirituality to resolve their problems is to explore the stories of their experiences. One difference between IRTs and other traditions in Ghana is how the former pervades the totality of an individual's personality. The way Akans are socialized into the beliefs and practices of IRTs is so complex that we can agree that Mbiti's famous statement that "Africans are notoriously religious"<sup>340</sup> is no exaggeration. A leading theme of the respondents' stories is a strong belief in the indigenous religious worldview that posits the existence of spirits and their ability to affect human life in ways that can be beneficial or disastrous.

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<sup>339</sup> Ghana Statistical Service, July 3, 2013.

<sup>340</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1.

The account of Kwasi Poku, a policeman, and his wife, Aba Mamsema, a teacher, is a case in point. The couple had been married for five years but had no child. Both of them said the doctors have proven that they were medically fit to reproduce but the woman has still not been able to conceive. As a Christian couple, their first line of action was to visit pastors and prophets for solutions. They had concluded that their predicament was the kind described among Akans as *enye kwa, bibi di akyi* meaning it is not an ordinary happening: there was an underlying spiritual cause. After seeing two pastors and three prophets, and paying substantial fees with no results, they decided to try indigenous remedies. That was when a friend of Aba Mamsema suggested Oforiwaa as a priestess they could visit. The friend said she had consulted the priestess at one time and had good results. Having already determined their situation was spiritual, they came to the *Pemsan* shrine. I met them during one of my research trips. Listening to their interchanges as they awaited their turn in the reception area I came away with the sense of their deep conviction in the spiritual cause of their problems. “If doctors have cleared us medically, then someone who wishes us evil is working against us spiritually and I am hoping this visit will nail the tormentor once and for all,” Aba Mamsema mused, staring her husband in the face. I was not permitted to sit in during their consultation, but from where I sat, I overheard their conversation with the priestess. After describing their predicament to the priestess, she hit the ox tail on her consultation altar three times and said “your problem is not spiritual, you used contraceptive for a long time that is causing the problem. If you accept I would give you herbal concoction to clean your womb for you to be pregnant.” There was a dead silence, betraying the couple’s shock and disappointment at this revelation. “Is that all?” Aba managed to break the silence. The priestesses said “yes, but wait for me to finish with the others so I give you the medicine.” I saw them come out of the room but did not speak to them at that time. Two weeks later they revealed their disappointment at the priestess’

revelation, that the cause of their predicament was natural, when I offered them a ride to the shrine from Kumasi. They explained however, that they had decided to try her remedies because from the stories they had heard about the priestess, her remedies always yielded good results.

The story of a 66 year old retired medical doctor, Dr. Awotwe, who suffered from a mild stroke after he refused to grant his wife of ten years a divorce, offers another example of the kinds of problems that pushed individuals to consult Komfo Oforiwaa. The first time I met him he told me of his battle with his wife over property he had acquired before marrying. His wife repeatedly assaulted him physically on several occasions. He also attributed some mysterious health conditions to spiritual attacks from his wife and explained how he could not wait for the court proceedings to end in a verdict before seeking solutions from the shrine. When I asked him why he did not inform the Catholic Father of Obuasi about the crisis so that he would mediate between him and the wife since both of them were Catholics, he quickly responded with a question. “But why should I, did she consult the Catholic Priest when she went for *juju*<sup>341</sup> to kill me in order to inherit my properties?” Apparently, he turned to the shrine for answers when he became convinced that his stroke was “not ordinary”—it was caused spiritually and the culprit could be none other than his angry wife. His conviction was confirmed when the priestess identified his wife as the one behind his sickness. The priestess also explained that he survived death from the *juju* because of the protective aura his kindness as a doctor had created. The doctor described how the priestess performed rituals for him to avert the effect of the *juju* from his wife. Another ritual was intended to reverse all spiritual attacks directed towards him so that they would rather affect the perpetrator,

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<sup>341</sup> *Juju* or *aduro* are indigenous religious substances, often spiritual but sometimes material meant either to harm or protect.

that is, his wife. In Ghana this kind of ritual is referred to as a “back to the sender” ritual. He expected to have the last laugh in this physical and spiritual war.

These two examples point to the continuing relevance of indigenous religious traditions in spite of the dominance of Pentecostalism and other Christian religious forms and the high educational status of Ghanaians who seek the services of indigenous ritual specialists. The two cases give us reason to question the commonplace assumptions that illiterates subscribe to indigenous religions while elites visit prophets and pastors for spiritual assistance.

Another theme in the narratives is the narrators’ strong belief in the efficacy of indigenous healing systems. Most Ghanaians are selective about what kinds of ailments to send to the hospital and which to send to a shrine or herbalists. Most of the clients I spoke to said they send their physical sickness to Oforiwaa and other shrines for two reasons. First, they believe, for example, that if a person has a broken arm or leg, the herbal treatment administered to the person has a greater potency than the Western forms of medication used to treat them at hospitals. Secondly, most of the clients emphasized the importance of underlying supernatural causations in most ill health situations, even if the physical cause can be identified. Hospitals, they argued, can only help in resolving the physical aspect of the illness but shrines provide holistic healing, they said. These clients had greater confidence in the ability of shrines to restore their health in its totality. I illustrate this sense of confidence exuded by the narratives with one example, though there were several of such stories from the *Pemsan* shrine and the settings of other herbal practitioners.

A month into my field work, Auntie Akuba, a 54 year old woman, was carried to the Pensam shrine. She had tripped and fallen on her way from her farm and dislocated her right leg. Oforiwaa’s diagnosis identified the impact of the fall as the cause of the dislocation, not a spiritual attack. She used herbs and other medicinal substances to wrap the part of her leg that was broken,

and created a cast to hold these remedies onto the leg. She directed Auntie Akuba to report to the shrine every morning to be massaged and treated with herbs. Talking to her on one of her visits, she admitted to me how convinced she was that her accident was caused by jealous family members who envied her big cocoa farm. She recalled the very words of Oforiwaa when she visited the first time with her dislocated leg. Oforiwaa had said “I will treat you till you walk again fully but since you are afraid of someone harming you spiritually; I will give you some amulets to protect you.” Akuba spoke at length about how better she felt both spiritually and physically ever since she came to seek help. “Now I can walk holding just a walking stick, which is far better than the first day I was carried here. I know that in a few weeks more I will go back to my normal self again and visit my farm. Komfo is good; if I had gone to the hospital they would have amputated my leg.”<sup>342</sup> She smiled as she completed her statement. Again this client’s supports the two points I made earlier about the reasons clients preferred the shrine to the hospitals and how these reasons are linked to the strong belief in the efficacy of indigenous religious remedies, notwithstanding the overwhelming influence of modern modes of healing. However, the cost index could be a factor for folks patronizing shrines as they are cheaper compared to bio-medical health facilities.

Listening to the many accounts of clients it becomes clear how ill-fated life events and uncertainty can call for people’s serious reflection on their lives and cause them to interpret these events in terms of spiritual causes, a recourse based in the indigenous worldview. Often this leads them to locations where they can find spiritual resources available to remedy these situations. The story of Peter Donkor which I report in his own words is an illuminating illustration of this theme. He started into this story during my conversation with him at the *Pemsan* Shrine. I had asked him why he came to see the priestess.

I am 32 years and a driver from Kumasi. In the last one or so years, every car I have been given to drive by a car owner would be involved in a serious accident or will just break down. In most of the cases when the vehicle owner takes the car from me and gives it to another driver, the car will not have any more problems. So a friend of mine said I should go to a shrine to inquire about the problem. I came to this place because it is a hide-out when

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<sup>342</sup> Akuba, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 3, 2013.

you consider where I live. Yesterday, the priestess told me after divination that, I am being haunted by the ghost of a woman who is seeking revenge for being hurt by me. She said that until I apologize to her and compensate her mother, I will never know peace. The priestess asked if I have offended any person who later died. That was when I remembered my dead girlfriend. She died through abortion. She has appeared to me in dreams on two occasions very angry, but I never connected that to my job as a driver. The priestess prescribed some rituals for me. I am staying here for one week to conclude all rituals as some would be done in the middle of the night and afterwards I would go to Kumasi and give some compensation to the girl's mother and I hope when all is done, I would regain my normal self and work like any other man.<sup>343</sup>

Another example of uncertainty leading someone to Oforiwaa's shrine is provided by Kesewa Korantemaa, a 38 year old educated and self-employed woman in the upper middle class of the Kumasi social ladder. According to her, she has been married to her husband for ten years with no issue. She described her husband as "the typical Ghanaian man" who feels that only women can be infertile. For this reason he would not submit to any fertility test for males administered at the hospital. Kesewaa said she was left all alone to deal with her own problem. She said she has been visiting doctors at fertility clinics but came to consult Oforiwaa because her husband had started wooing other women and giving her signals that if she did not do something about her problem she would be divorced. According to the Akan and other African societies, the greatest misfortune that one can commit against a community is the inability to produce offspring in marriage. Akans view childlessness as a threat to human existence<sup>344</sup> and in normal cases the family of the man would advise the man to marry an additional wife. As an Akan woman, Kesewa dreaded the obvious, especially when she saw her husband cheating on her with other women. She said she reported her husband's womanizing attitude to elders of their church and his family but he would not heed persuasions and advice to stop. Her only recourse was to "tame" him spiritually because she could not force the husband physically. She came to the priestess Oforiwaa to help her "bind" her husband to only her, that is, for her to be the center of his attention. A ritual was prescribed for her. It was to be done at night, in seclusion, that is, out of human sight. Below are some of the pictures of what went on.

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<sup>343</sup> Peter Donkor, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, 17 August 2012.

<sup>344</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 124.



These three pictures illustrate a ritual done to tame and bind a husband to only his wife. Picture by author.

First, a cat [known in Twi as *ɔkra*] is used as the soul of the man and nailed helplessly to the ground. The second step is carried out when it dies. The names of the woman and her husband are written and wrapped around the cat with some spiritual leaves, pepper, salt and water. The materials are bound together with a rope from the forest. Lastly, the cat is buried in the garbage drop point as shown in the third picture in the middle of the night.<sup>345</sup>

On one of my visits to the *Pemsan* shrine, I sat on a chair under the tree by the river to observe activities. I had just finished greeting the shrine attendants after they had completed the daily routine of pouring libation to the deities. At about 9.00 am a regular client, Esi Yakoba, a 26 year woman and worker at AngloGold Ashanti Mining Company in Obuasi walked into the shrine's premises and walked directly to the priestess and greeted her and her assistant. They were busily preparing their breakfast. Since the daily consultations had not yet commenced, Esi Yakoba looked for a chair and sat under the shady tree with me. My earlier attempts to engage Esi in conversation were not successful as she always seemed to be in a hurry to leave the shrine. On this

<sup>345</sup> The significance of using pepper, salt and water in the ritual is that they are the basic ingredients for the survival of an Akan. What it means is that so long as the man drinks water; eat pepper and salt he would be bound to the woman.



day, she greeted me with a smile, jokingly addressing me as madam. She lamented the priestess's lateness in starting her consultations and said this affected her because she had to go to work from the shrine. This gave me the chance to begin a conversation which led to her describing how matrimonial problems pushed her to become a clientele of the *Pemsan* shrine.

I was born and bred in Obuasi. After my Polytechnic education and subsequent National Service, my next target was to find work. After several applications with no positive sign of getting a job, a friend of mine told me about Komfo Oforiwaa. My first encounter with her was job-related and when by her help I secured a two year contract with my present employee, I was shocked how just a simple libation prayer and a powder she gave me to apply to my face before going for the interview, which I did and secured a job. On the job, I met and fell in love with one of the departmental heads,--I never knew he was married. When I later found out and confronted him, he abruptly terminated his relationship with me and threatened to get me sacked from the job if I do not keep quiet. Feeling cheated, I came to see the priestess for the second time to help this man come back to me for reasons best known to me. Prescriptions were made for me and rituals were performed. Two weeks after my visit and rituals, the man came running and begging me to take him back. Though I was no longer interested in the relationship, I accepted him to teach him a lesson by ditching him when I get a single man. For the past month I have been coming here because I met a single man who lives in America, we had a relationship briefly when he came home to visit in December of 2012 and I got a spell from Komfo so he doesn't leave me. Everything has been going on fine till he proposed to marry me. Some of his family members are protesting against this arrangement, so I have been coming here for the priestess to help me cross that crisis too. She has given me direction what to do and I have done it but I do come here any other day because she specifically instructed me to notify her of any development. She has done a lot of work for me and all went well so I know she can't fail in this one. So far there it's been positive so I am just waiting for my big day.<sup>346</sup>

The leitmotifs that cropped up in each of the numerous narratives of female clientele of the *Pemsan* shrine speak largely to the socio-cultural expectations of the Akan society and how these constrict the lives of the narrators. Good male-female relationships involving intimacy, marriage

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<sup>346</sup> Esi Yakoba, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, 4 February 2013.

and childbearing are attached supreme value in Akan and most African cultures. In the statements below Opoku agrees with Mbiti's stance on the paramount place of marriage in African cultures:

For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All the dimensions of the time meet here and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a law breaker, and he is not only abnormal but "under-human." Failure to get married under normal circumstance means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in return [sic].<sup>347</sup>

Cultural and societal expectations that women must marry or at least be in steady relationships, have successful marriages, and have children exert a good deal of pressure on those women who are single, childless, divorced, or involved in marriages that are not working out. They become desperate and seek help from ritual specialists. This explains the high number of women who patronize shrines in southern Ghana. I use a number of cases to illustrate this theme.

Dakowaa is a 28 year old trader who said she has experienced two evils in her adult life. She lamented how no man had ever proposed to her even though she is noted for her striking beauty. Not even her joining church choirs and participating in numerous church activities nor attributes that enhanced a woman's credentials in Ashanti, had made her attractive to any man. Her being single aside, Dakowaa was confronted with problems linked to her business. She said her business capital was dwindling mysteriously in spite of the fact that she was relatively good at book-keeping. These problems brought her to the shrine. She explained that coming to the shrine

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<sup>347</sup> Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP, 1978), 123-124.

was even a last resort. She had undergone prayer and fasting sessions at various churches and camps at earlier times and these had yielded nothing positive. “Things are delaying, and I am not growing younger, and family and friends are putting pressure on me to find a man and marry him, so I needed the fastest way out” [that is to consult an indigenous religious specialist], she explained to me. She also told me of how she unintentionally saw Kɔmfo Oforiwaa’s signboard by chance on her way to discuss her predicament with a friend. With her attention focused on finding a solution to her problems, she decided to consult with the priestess first before proceeding to Obuasi to visit her friend. Luckily, when she got to the shrine, she was the second person in the queue. The priestess informed her after she had finished narrating her story, that her great grandmother was a witch while alive and when she died, had transferred the witchcraft to her grandmother, with whom she lives, through her property she had inherited. This witchcraft was responsible for her problems. It transfigures her beautiful face into a monstrous spectacle when she encounters men and this makes her repulsive. Prospective husbands see her as an ugly woman and are not attracted to her. She described how the priestess addressed her issues, prescribed some items which she bought and brought them to the shrine. “She asked me to stay overnight so that I could bath in the middle of the night with the medicine she prepared using the items, which I did. She gave me some other preparations and asked me to report here every two weeks to stay overnight and go through rituals. This I did for four months.”<sup>348</sup> She described in an excited tone how her business was picking up since Kɔmfo Oforiwaa started “working for her.” “I totally believe it shall be well,”<sup>349</sup> she concluded with a smile and glow in her eyes, and in a tone that exuded a sense of confidence, hope and belief in the priestess’ deities’ capability of helping her redress her problems.

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<sup>348</sup> Dakowa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 2, 2013.

<sup>349</sup> Dakowa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 2, 2013.

Kathrine Asante, a 26 year secretary, told me of how she hates men and has a problem keeping a job. Several men from four different organizations she had worked for since her graduation from the Polytechnic had proposed to her and when she would say no to them she would be sacked from the organization. She rationalized her response to these series of proposals:

I don't like men, and I only feel attracted to women. So when a man proposes to me, I become so upset and turn them down in a way that made them feel humiliated, perceiving me as arrogant. Since I can't stand these men, especially my bosses, I am either fired or I leave the work.<sup>350</sup>

She then started recounting how her life situation pushed her to come to the shrine of Oforiwaa and how Oforiwaa's remedies resolved her problems:

My mother became worried and pulled me to this shrine. The priestess diagnosed that spiritually I have been turned into a man and that is why I like women. She also said someone in our family did that to get at my mother, that way, I would never give birth to a child and my mother would have no grandchild. Oforiwaa then prescribed a ritual sacrifice meant to appease the gods and she gave me some ointments to smear on myself at night. I also came to the shrine fortnightly to sleep over so that I could have a ritual bath in the night. I feel lighter since I came here and for the first time, people around me have noticed some changes in my attitude. So I can say her medicine works. I got a job a week ago and I am confident that history will not repeat itself because I am now protected against the evil spirit that was implanted in me to destroy me.<sup>351</sup>

When Katherine started speaking her facial expression betrayed how uncertain she was about the efficacy of Oforiwa's remedies in the beginning of the proceedings. But as her story unfolded she started lightening up, though every now and then she would scratch her head or turn and look away as if she never fully had confidence in the potency of Oforiwa's antidote. She however, pointed out how her convictions in the power of the priestess became stronger when people around her said they discerned a change in her behaviour (presumably she linked this

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<sup>350</sup> Katherine Asante, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 6 2013.

<sup>351</sup> Katherine Asante, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 6 2013.

change to Oforiwa's remedies). Certainly it would seem that, a skeptic in the beginning, Katherine was swayed by the response of observers to deepen her conviction in the capabilities of indigenous spiritual sources. One would conclude that effects of indigenous spiritual power can even be felt by sceptics and even non-believers. This may explain why sometimes, some family members who believe in IRs would insist on consulting an indigenous ritual specialist on behalf of and often against the will of their relatives and even perform rites on their behalf for them to get healed or regain their status without the presence or participation of such relatives.

Twenty four year old Alberta is a third year student of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. On the day I met and spoke to her, she had come to the shrine to seek understanding to current happenings in her life.

I have been dreaming of having sex in my dreams and when I wake up, I would be wet and exhausted as if I really had sex physically. When this happens I feel bad the whole day and cannot concentrate in class. Also, though I am very pretty and respectful, I don't seem to be able attract the attention of my mates or other men I know. This is something which baffles me. Anytime a guy comes close to proposing to me, he would stop short and "rush" out as if he had seen a ghost.<sup>352</sup>

The priestess diagnosed her experiences as a sign of her spiritual marriage to a god and explained that unless ritual sacrifices were done to break that link she would never be able to marry, and even if she finally found a man willing to marry her: "There will never be peace in the marriage, it would be full of challenges," Oforiwaa emphasized. Alberta told me of how Oforiwaa gave her several ritual baths which were witnessed by an elderly member of her family. On the first day I interviewed her, I collected Alberta's phone number and followed up our conversation at her hall of residence on campus two months later. My goal was to determine how she evaluated

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<sup>352</sup> Alberta, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 2, 2013.

the effects Oforiwaa's remedies. She told me of how happy she felt since she went through the ritual and how she never had those dreams again, if she had those kinds of dreams, the man in the dream would be unable to have sex with her. If he insisted she would struggle with the man or he would simply turn away. Her relationships with men also improved. She explained, "I think what she gave me is working because I now see that men are admiring me in class and one guy I like so much comes to visit me more often."

Kesewa, a 38 year old woman, echoed Alberta's affirmation of the efficacy of Oforiwaa's powers in dealing with multi-life problems. Kesewa's rituals were meant to "tame" her husband; I watched the proceeding surreptitiously one night when I slept over at the shrine.

The different cases of the diverse clients who came to the shrine seem to suggest a strong affirmation of indigenous religious belief system among the Akan people and probably most Ghanaians. Akans are first indigenous religious believers before being members of their second foreign faiths. The fashionable faiths boost their social status and promise them a better place in the future, and their indigenous religious faith promises them a better life in the here and now. What we seek to unravel most specifically in this section with regards to the argument we raised earlier in the chapter is the predominant female patronage of Oforiwaa's shrine confirmed in the many female stories we highlighted above.

What we infer from the various personal stories of clients in *Pemsan* shrine are the many issues a woman faces principally in the Akan social set up and, for that matter, in Ghana. Mundane problems such as love, relationship, childlessness, and general unsuccessful marriages are problems often blamed on the woman and, whether guilty or not, the Akan woman bears the unwritten social understanding of being responsible for her condition until she "makes things

happen.” I submit, therefore, that the plights of women, especially Akans, puts them in positions of vulnerability with no options in such a society than making efforts to avert their conditions, hence their higher patronage of shrines than their male counterparts. On the other hand, the social expectations or pressure on the Akan woman to be successful exclusively in bearing children and or in marriage emanates from their matrilineal inheritance system where “women are literally the hubs around which nurturing and other aspects of domestic life revolve...as mothers...givers of life, originators of communities and sustainers of the continuity of communities.”<sup>353</sup> The strong affinity of Akan women and the continuity of their lineage and or maternal bloodline accounts for the seriousness with which the women themselves or their families hurriedly rush to the shrine to seek help.

### **5.2.6 How Oforiwaa Measures Success**

Priestess Oforiwaa and her peers thrive on the persistence of IRTs in the face of open Christian onslaught as success. For her, success can be measured in terms of the achievements of the revitalized old indigenous shrines in general, of which her own accomplishments are a part, the fame of her shrines and the satisfaction of her clientele. First, the creation of the GPTHA is a sign of how successful these traditional priests and priestesses are.<sup>354</sup> This organization has been a crucial force in the preservation of *Nananom som* all over Ghana. Its claim to authenticity, to pure and unadulterated forms of the religion has contributed to a strong sense of its connection with the past among practitioners. The practitioners do not advertise their religious products in the public as the neo-priests do. Yet their activities have brought recognition and the restoration of respect and dignity to aspects of indigenous religious practice in Ghana. For instance, the physical healing

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<sup>353</sup> Nrenzah, *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Ghanaian Pentecostalism*, 33.

<sup>354</sup> <http://www.csrpm.org/>. Accessed 17 June 2014.

aspect of indigenous religions which often takes the form of the administration of herbs or herbal potions has become a popular modality for curing some illnesses. It has become a mainstream practice and purveyors operate as alternative medical practitioners in Ghana. Consumers no longer view these healing practices as primitive anymore. Through the efforts of GPTHA and Dr. Oku Ampofo, an allopathic medical practitioner, a proposal was sent to the government of Ghana in 1971 to initiate intensive investigation of the medicinal properties of plants. This initiative was largely inspired by the successes of the revitalized priests and priestesses and their growing fame as healers.

In 1975, The Centre for Scientific Research into Plant Medicine was created. Since December of 2012 the center has been renamed the Centre for Plant Medicine Research (CPMR). CPMR has promoted research into plant medicines and has helped to produce diverse herbal medicines in Ghana. The epitome of the achievements of the CPRM is the creation of a Herbal Medicine Department that trains herbal personnel at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). The Herbal Medicine program in KNUST is the first of its kind to be established in Ghana and even in Africa. It was commenced in 2001 and became a full department in 2005.<sup>355</sup> The GPTHA claims this achievement for itself.

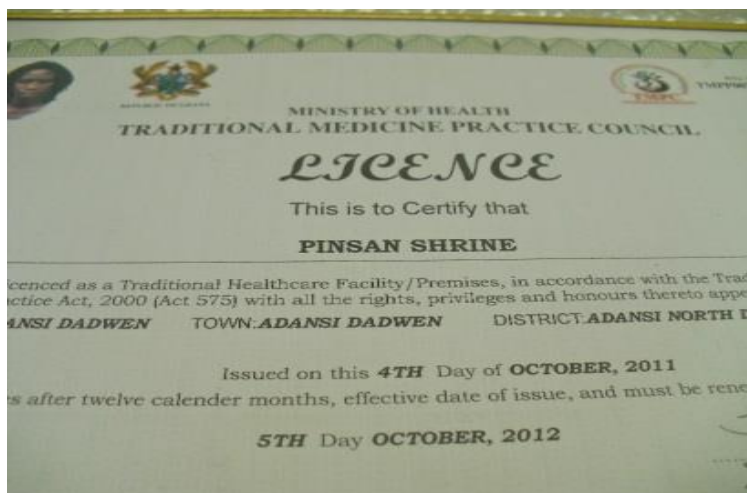
As a group the GPTHA is under the Ministry of Health (MOH) and is supported by MOH under the Traditional Practice Act 2000(Act 575). The group has become an officially recognized purveyor of alternative health services in Ghana. The act came into force in the year 2000 when the government realized that even with the provision of hospitals and health centers, most Ghanaians still preferred traditional medicines to modern medicine. Around the same time the

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<sup>355</sup> <http://archive.knust.edu.gh/pages/sections.php?siteid=pharmacy&mid=607&sid=1822>. Accessed: 20/07/2013.



World Health Organization's fiftieth session regional committee for Africa meeting in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso on the 28 August-2 September 2000 estimated that 80% of rural populations in developing countries depend on traditional medicines for their health. This was confirmed by a contemporary study by the Roll Back Malaria Initiative. The study found that in Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Zambia, herbal medicine is used in the treatment of almost two thirds of children suffering from high fever.<sup>356</sup> These findings prompted the government of Ghana to pay respectful attention to indigenous healing systems. The state regulates persons who could provide such services and because GPTH A was a trusted indigenous religious institution already in operation, the state liaised with its members to bring about this change. Komfo Oforiwa a argues that the quality of the members of GPTH A and the state's rigorous checks and regulations made it a trusted ally in the provision of health services in Ghana.<sup>357</sup>



A license given by Ministry of Health certifying the operation of the shrine hangs in the general area of the shrine. Picture by author.

<sup>356</sup> <http://www.google.de/url>, and <http://www.scielosp.org/scielo.php>, Accessed: 1 /07/ 2014.

<sup>357</sup> Initiation and registration as a member of GPTH A does not make a priest/priestess a member for life. From time to time, executives investigate secretly to make sure a priest/priestess is on track; if a priest is seen to be off track, their GPTH A certificate is revoked and since the MOH license is renewed yearly and renewed only for members of GPTH A, MOH licenses would also not be renewed for members whose GPTH A licenses are revoked.

Oforiwaa links her success as a priestess to the activities and success of the GPTHA. She says that the group's success does not lie in its acceptability by the government but also in its efforts to stamp out swindlers or charlatans who call themselves priests/priestesses. One way the state achieved this was the strict monitoring of activities of the members of GPTHA. The saying that *batakari adɔɔso nti ɔma yɛnnhu kramo papa* meaning because everyone is wearing *batakari* (a northern Ghana traditional dress adopted by the dominant Muslims as their own) we cannot differentiate between a real *kramo* (Muslim) and a charlatan. By insisting that indigenous decorum must prevail when it comes to priesthood, the GPTHA is able to differentiate between those who are called by the deities and as such are genuine priests and priestesses and the "others." This provides the public with an opportunity to make a choice between the healing services offered by the neo-priests and priestesses and those offered by the priests of the revitalized old traditions.

Secondly, Oforiwaa advances the view that the potency or efficacy of her deities in dealing with the many problems brought to the shrine accounts for her success. Oforiwaa links her success as a priestess with the patronage of her shrine. For her, it is of no use to advertise on radio or TV. The quality of services she renders to clients and the good results they get from accessing her shrine makes them spread her name to far flung places. She summed her views up in the following words: "apart from my initial travels when I was called by the deities, I have never travelled anywhere, in fact I have not moved out of the Ashanti region since I was initiated as a priestess, yet people come from all over the country and even abroad to seek my help." She also said that some of her colleagues who are far older than her in age and length of priesthood do not record the large number of clients she sees in a day. She continued to emphasize that the patronage to her shrine is relatively higher because her deities are powerful. She also said the way she related to her clientele is worthy of emulation and endears her to them. What Oforiwaa is implying here is

how the power of one's deities, the honesty of the priest/priestess and the quality of human relations in a shrine are crucial conditions of its success. Oforiwaa also attributes the high patronage of her deities to the structural innovations she has made to the shrine. The environment is inviting. *Pemsan* shrine has a well-decorated waiting place for clients. There are modern amenities that cater to the needs of clients whose conditions demand a stay over. There is no charging of exorbitant fees so both the rich and poor have equal access because "the deities called us to help humanity," explained Oforiwaa. "When clients receive results from their consultation they come back to pay homage to the priestess and deities on their own volition,"<sup>358</sup> she said, smiling.



A client from Chicago, USA. (Picture by priestess).

She concluded that:

Lastly, clients who come here over and over with different problems attest to the fact that what we did the first time worked for them. If the deities are not powerful enough to solve a client's problem and if clients do not know the efficacy of the remedies produced in the shrine they would not even

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<sup>358</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 6, 2013.

patronize in the first place, let alone popularize the priestess by telling others about her.<sup>359</sup>

Any time the subject of clientele came up during the research Oforiwaa was quick to note that those who come to her know her to be authentic and pure in heart.

### 5.3 Conclusion

An Akan proverb has it that *when one views the forest trees from afar it look like one big tree but as one draws nearer to the tree, it becomes clear that the trees are individually separated*. In the same vein an outsider might often think that indigenous religious priests and shrines are all one until one investigates. In this study, we discovered the strands of religiosities on the Ghanaian indigenous religious landscape. These are as we have pointed out, neo- and revitalized traditional groups. We used Komfo Oforiwaa as an archetype to represent the neo- indigenous religions. Using the Priestess Oforiwaa's call to priesthood and initiation as an example of revitalized traditional indigenous religion, we noted the different and often divergent views of the two strands. We then, pointed out where the neo-traditional and revitalized traditional converge.

Hinting as to how agents are revitalizing shrines such as the one owned by Komfo Oforiwaa and other GPTHA members, we discovered that what identifies the old shrines as revitalized is the physical structure of shrines, the ways the priests dress and other subtle cosmetic changes, not the core of the religion itself.

We also touched on Oforiwaa's activities in her shrine as an Akan priestess and highlighted the hierarchy of statuses and offices in her shrine. We sifted themes from clients' narratives and

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<sup>359</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 6, 2013.

argued that the various clients seeking indigenous religious agents' services are informed by the socialization process of Akans and most African communities. Individuals are socialized in communities that believe in the duality and existentiality of spirits and their strong grip on affairs concerning humans. The gender dimension of the indigenous religious landscape was analyzed in the context of the neo- and old priests revitalizing their shrines. Few women partake in the activities of the neo priests, whereas women feature prominently among the agents rejuvenating the old traditions and shrines. We noted how their position as ritual specialists is rooted in the Akan culture which venerates women.

Finally, we touched on the success of priestess Oforiwaa, which she claims is strictly related to her membership in the GPTHA and the powers of her deities as exhibited through the quality of work she performs for her clients. In ending this chapter, we suggested that the discourse these old shrines are championing is an attempt to differentiate themselves from the "others." By casting the neo-indigenous priests as fake magicians, they put themselves at a strategic position on the landscape, which inadvertently betters their lot in contrast to their counterparts. Their goal is to downgrade and label the neo-priests as the fake "others" while casting themselves as the genuine priests and priestesses. In the next chapter we deliberate on how this "otherness" plays in the religious landscape of Ghana through power relations, economics and performance.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ECONOMICS, POWER AND PERFORMANCES OF INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS PRIESTS IN GHANA: A DISCUSSION

#### 6.1 Introduction

Researching indigenous religions can lead to the discovery of taken-for-granted assumptions underlying the activities we observe on a routine basis. Perhaps what made it possible for me to obtain an in-depth insight into the indigenous religious system of the Akan people in the course of this study is the method I chose. Ethnographic study is one method that can lead to interesting and unexpected results. Staying longer at the research sites and observing the goings and comings of the actors--priests, clients, members and communities-- but also participating in and observing the activities while questioning why they did what they did and said, aids the researcher in gaining insight into the psychosomatic content of individual actors as well as their culture. These are often not voiced but rather “gropingly” revealed.<sup>360</sup> From the mundane activities of the actors of the neo- and revitalized indigenous religious traditions, that is, looking at several aspects of the lives of the people and their settings and following them to different locations, as and when they moved, querying what Turner calls “tales, stories, folk-tales, histories, gossips, and informants accounts ...,”<sup>361</sup> I sifted out the different themes. Yet what is of paramount concern to us in this chapter are three different but related themes that underlie their activities--performance, economics, and power. These themes underlie the various religio-social and cultural celebrations that took place in the courtyard of shrines. They can also be gleaned from extra-curricular activities outside the shrines in special temporarily created sacred spaces “used on occasional rather than steady basis

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<sup>360</sup> Victor Turner, “Social Dramas and Stories about Them,” in *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. (New York: *Performing Arts Journal*, 1982), 64.

<sup>361</sup> Turner, “Social Dramas and Stories about Them,” 66.

....”<sup>362</sup> The Ashanti Akans as a group are among the few ethnic groups in Ghana that still hold their religious, social, political and cultural practices in high esteem and try to maintain the tradition as they inherited it from their ancestors.<sup>363</sup> From generation to generation, the events on their social and religious calendars have been enacted and re-enacted by the indigenous religious agents and adherents as handed down by their *nana nom* (ancestors). Their forty day calendar cycle, known as *ada duanan*, is full of ritual days which are purely religious, socio-cultural and/or political. Although there are several of these rituals among the Ashanti-Akan’s, I will limit this discussion to the performative aspect of the activities sponsored by neo-indigenous and revitalized old religious priests/priestesses.

I will also shed some light on performances that take place in the context of competitions between indigenous priests and Pentecostal-Charismatics, who the indigenous priests consider to be their major detractors. The three themes intended to be discussed in this chapter are all related. It is within the context of performance that we see power and economics playing out as important shaping forces. I therefore weave the questions of power and economics into this discussion on performance. I analyze data from observation of performances in the religio-social, cultural, religio-political and/or inter-religious competitive contexts.

## 6.2 Defining Performance in Indigenous Religions

Performance, power, pomp and pageantry are at the core of the rituals of the two case studies of this project--the neo priests and the priests revitalizing the old forms of IRTs in Ghana. While scholars such as Schechner have admitted the stress in defining the concept of performance,<sup>364</sup> he

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<sup>362</sup> Schechner, *Approaches*. In *Performers Theory* 1998, 14.

<sup>363</sup> Louise Muller, “Dancing Golden Stools: Indigenous Religion as a Strategy for Identity Construction in Ghana,” *Fieldwork in Religious* 5.1. (2010): 53.

<sup>364</sup> See Schechner, “Approaches,” 22.

had tired with difficulty to base his convictions on live theatre of ‘audience-performer interactions.’ Though his argument provides crucial lead in this discussion, Schieffelin has criticized the two ways in which social science has used the notion of performance,<sup>365</sup> and said it is a ‘Western construction of routine activities brought on stage.’<sup>366</sup> Pointing out the cultural variations, he defines it by differentiating between performances in the theatre that is make believe or acting and that of a religious tradition, which is based on concerns with “an invisible sacred reality.”<sup>367</sup> Though Schechner’s definition eliminates other activities, his understanding speaks to the Ashanti Akan indigenous religious ritual situations. My view is that performance is a relative concept that could be applied to different situations, be it the theatre or religious setting, when clearly defined. The art of performing is always a two way procedure, one acts and the other observes, and there are always performers and audience/participants, which is why the concept is suitable for describing indigenous religious setting where activities involve actors and observers. Interestingly, as Schieffelin has argued, the ritual activities of the Ashanti are enactments by ritual agents in public spaces or in privacy in the presence of an audience. The audience could be humans or the supernatural or in most cases, both. In other words, when it is a community gathering, other agents, adherents, and onlookers observe or participate as audiences. In other contexts, the supernatural becomes the audience. This is mostly the case when the ritual is a private one, -- an individual indigenous religious functionary or adherent performs while the supernatural watches. Whether a performance involves an individual acting in secrecy or an agent or agents acting publically, there is an audience. As Schieffelin rightly points out when he writes, “We act both for

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<sup>365</sup> “The first refers to particular symbolic or aesthetic activities, such as ritual or theatrical and folk artistic activities, which are enacted as intentional expressive productions in established local genres...The second is the symbolic interactionist school. The focus... is on performativity itself.” (Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,”195.)

<sup>366</sup> Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,” 195.

<sup>367</sup> Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,” 200.



ourselves and in the eyes of the beholders;”<sup>368</sup> audiences must be pleased with the actors during performance.

In the context of indigenous religious traditions, one can define performance as an activity in which physical agents (priests/priestesses and adherents) act before an audience of spiritual beings, either in an all-dramatic act in public space or in a quiet private space. Performance also provides a context for agents of IRTs to showcase the superiority of their spiritual powers relative to the powers of their peers as well as “others” in other religious traditions. In modern Ashanti culture, the performances are either organized officially by groups of indigenous religious functionaries or individual indigenous agents in their shrines. Sometimes media houses sponsor these performances outside of the shrines. In a space often determined by the organizers, two religious agents are made to engage each other in a spiritual power contest. Key performative acts such as the *Agoro* or *Akɔm* (public performances) and private dramatic activities of agents as well as other unorganized religious contests between indigenous priest and Christian pastors are the contexts of the discussion offered in this chapter.

The chapter revolves around the argument that underneath the performances and the showmanship of the priests/priestesses in both the public and private contexts of indigenous religious performances is the quest to demonstrate superior spiritual power and also to garner appeal of potential clientele. Performance in this connection is then about economics and power relations. The ability to conjure up objects during such performances, for example, is linked to the ability to control spiritual forces. And the more able a priest/priestess is in controlling spiritual forces through such displays of dramatic performative skills, the more clients he/she is likely to garner, which eventually translates into more income. To explain further, my point is that through

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<sup>368</sup>Schieffelin, “Problematizing Performance,” 197.

such feats, actors demonstrate their control over potent spiritual powers and over other competitors, negotiating their way into the hearts of the audience. Would-be clients pick and choose who they would want to consult later on and consultation means generating income. What is of concern to us in the act of performance is the intent behind the performance. Is it for entertainment, satisfaction, economics, or power relations? What do the performers and observers derive from the activity? Highlighting the risk and benefits of such indigenous religious performance occasions, especially the gathering of *agorɔ*, *akom* and the media contests, which are more often than not attended by not only adherents or would be clients but also Christians, critics, Muslims and journalists, I describe the performances I observed while in the field. I use a typology of performances to help us understand the themes and to elucidate my argument.

### **6.3 Categories of Performances on the Ghanaian Indigenous Religious Landscape**

I identified three categories of performances in my field data but I will not claim exclusivity of just this typology. There is the type of performance which is individual or personalized, there is the peer group and/or communal type, and there is the modern inter-religious spiritual power contest kind.

#### **6.3.1 The Individual or Personalized Performance**

These performances involve the priest or priestesses performing on their own on specific ritual days or when the deities possess them, often in the privacy of their shrines. During such private performances the audiences are mostly clientele or members of the shrine and the locus of the performance is the consultation rooms of the priest. In some cases only a client observes the ritual specialist's performance, often as part of a healing process. The context of such private performances include votive rituals in honour of deities, spontaneous miracles, ritual dancing,

divinations that result in revelations about secret acts individuals of groups have committed /or are committing or some impending fortune or misfortune.

### 6.3.2 The Peer-group and/or Communal performance

In this category, performances are usually in the context of either religious or socio-religious gatherings. They are organized publicly, that is, at state or community levels. The state as used here implies the Ashanti state (*Asanteman*). At the state level, the Asantehene delegates his powers to the *sumankwahene*<sup>369</sup> (the head and representative of priest/priestesses in the court of the Asantehene) during occasions such as *akɔm* or *agorɔ* to organize such performances. At the community level, the head of priests and priestesses in a particular area, that is, a district or a zone, also organizes such performances. Priests and priestesses are invited to the gathering to *goro* or “play” publically, irrespective of their backgrounds and discourse or narratives. *Agorɔ* and *akɔm afahye* (festival) are examples of state and community performances. The staging of public performances both at the state and community levels is an ancient IR tradition whereby various indigenous religious priests and priestesses would gather to “drum” *goro* and *kɔm* dance for the purpose of exhibiting potent spiritual power. The goal was to determine whose power was most potent among the priests and priestesses.

The terms *agorɔ* and *akɔm* are used interchangeably. There is a slight difference in meaning, however, as I would learn in the field. When such performances are organized at the state level they referred to it as *akɔm* (from the phrase *me ko gorɔ wɔ akɔm afahye* meaning I am going to play at *akɔm* festival). Should the context of the performance be the local community, the reference *agorɔ* is used to describe it. In this connection, the priestess Oforiwaa often told me, *ye*

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<sup>369</sup> Chief priest of Asantehene and representative of priests and priestess in the Asantehene court.

*kɔ agoro* meaning “we are going to play.” What I observed was that at both the state and the community levels, that is, whether *agoro* or *akom*, the format was the same. What differed was the number of participants involved and the context of the festivals. The convergence of actors and spectators of *Akom* at the state level always recorded a higher number of over 200. The community performances attracted between 25-50 participants.

### **6.3.3 The Modern or Inter-religious Power Performance**

This type of performance is a modernized version of the old indigenous religious ritual forms that is, the *agoro* and *akom* festivals. These are new creations aimed at creating a platform for agents of different religions to compete. In this connection we could also refer to this type as inter-religious power performances. Unlike the earlier types, which are organized and moderated by religious functionaries, the media houses organize these modern performances. The venue for the display of power is often set and arranged by the media houses. The radio station decides which city or town to stage a contest between a neo-indigenous religious priest and a Christian pastor. The venue has been decided on, it is announced several times on radio to attract the attention of audience comprised of both critics and supporters. The religious landscape of Ghana as I have reiterated is rife with intense competition among the various religious groups. The dominant religious group is the Christians, especially the Pentecostal-Charismatic strand. The bone of contention historically has been between indigenous religious agents and the Christians. Indigenous religions, which used to be the mainstay of the religious lives of indigenous Ghanaian communities before the arrival of the foreign religions, are perceived by the Christians as having been annihilated by their more powerful and civilized tradition. These indigenous religions are backward and evil and cannot withstand the forces of modernity and a higher civilization, the Christians argue. This type of performance originated from the refusal of the neo-priests to accept

the low status Christians have attributed to them. They argue that, unlike their predecessors, they will not accept defeat and go into hiding; rather, they will openly contest the claims of the Christians through demonstrations that show clearly that they have superior magico-religious power. Some of these priests go as far as arguing that Christian pastors consult them secretly for power to be able to perform miracles, attract followers and keep them.

The resilient stance of indigenous priests often generates strong sentiments in Christian circles and on some occasions some of the pastors have challenged the validity of claims made by indigenous priests and have even invited them to contests in public space to prove to all whose spiritual power was more potent. The contests never take place because the pastors do not show up, thus these are failed performances. But the failure provides the context the neo-indigenous priests need to declare a victory. The refusal of pastors to show up, they argue, is a tacit admission of their weaknesses as purveyors of supernatural power. The neo-indigenous religious priests also use the opportunity to proclaim the superiority of their powers by performing magical feats to reinforce their claims to superiority. This development brings up Schieffelin's argument about failed performances. He asserts that the burden of uncertainty rests on the performer. He reminds us that performance is "inherently a contingent process...inherently interactive, and fundamentally risky."<sup>370</sup> It is risky on the part of the performer who may fail or not succeed in meeting audience expectations. On a platform set for contest performances such as the one between indigenous religious priests and Christian pastors who are competing to control and legitimize claims to power and authenticity, failing to perform becomes a scandal. Such failure goes to affirm or deny the claim of the other. Though we acknowledge the fact that things can go wrong during performances, the ultimate aim of an actor or performer is to succeed in accomplishing the intended purpose of

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<sup>370</sup> Schieffelin, "Problematizing Performance," 198.

the performance. Failure to realize the purpose of the performance consequently translates into the risks a performer must contend with after such event. In what follows I give examples for each category of performance I mentioned above.

#### **6.4 Examples of Indigenous Religious Performances Categories from the Research**

In this segment I offer three elaborate examples of performances to further clarify the typology above. For the first example, that is, individual or personal performances, I use Kwaku Bonsam's dramatic performance at a New Year Sunday worship. This was aimed at thanking the deities of the Kofi oo Kofi shrine. It also marked the return of Bonsam from the Netherlands. The other example is Komfo Oforiwaa's New Year's Day thanksgiving ritual in honor of the deity *Asuo Abena*, whose home is a river by her shrine. This was on a Tuesday, the day set aside for her worship.

As an example of the peer group or communal type, I describe performances at both the state and communal levels. I use Komfo Oforiwaa's performances to illustrate these. Her personality and career epitomize what is typical of the ritual culture of the old shrines. The third description offers two examples of the modernized performances. They feature Kwaku Bonsam and the charismatic-Pentecostal pastors. The reason I have chosen him is that he is the principal protagonist of the neo-indigenous religions and as such, the one pastors single out when seeking to challenge the indigenous priests to a power contest.

#### **6.4.1 The Individual/Personalized Performance: Examples of Nana Kwaku Bonsam and Kɔmfo Oforiwaa in their Respective Shrines**

##### **Example 1**

This example is from one of the case studies, which is Nana Kwaku Bonsam's activity as a neo-priest. The occasion was the New Year worship or ritual celebration. The event, however, doubled as a mark of his return from Amsterdam, the Netherlands. An *agoro* he organized in the afternoon of this day was designed to mark this safe return from Holland. The morning portion of the ritual was a thanksgiving ceremony for the gods of his shrine. All of the events took place at his shrine in Akomadan-Afrancho.

It was a Sunday, one of the days designated by the deities of the shrine for worship and also a day for consultation by clients and members alike. The date was the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2012. This was also the day on which Kwaku Bonsam, the leader of the Shrine had returned from a proselytization tour in Amsterdam and Paris. The day started with the feeding of the gods with cooked food prepared by an elderly woman. This was a woman who no longer menstruated and had become a man by her post-menopausal experience. This condition qualified her ritually to prepare food for the gods and to feed them. A libation prayer was said. The afternoon was marked by a spectacular demonstration of the attributes of the deities of the shrine as they sequentially possessed Kwaku Bonsam. Often, these kinds of events are spontaneous and not planned. But this one was different. The shrine expected that there would be a huge turn out because Bonsam had been away for a long time and as a result shrine workers had erected tents to provide shade for spectators. The arena for the series of possessions that would display the attributes of the deities was a rectangular space with the boundaries marked with white clay. Only the priest and religious functionaries could step into the inner portion of the space. Others must stay behind the line.

The singing, clapping and dancing of members of the shrine marked the start of the ceremony. Some of the dancers were dancing possessed and in trance. Auntie Mansah, priestess in charge of Bonsam's shrine in France, experienced one of the most spectacular possessions among the dancers. Even as the drumming went on, helpers were getting ready with the costumes and regalia of the shrine's different deities so that immediately a deity possessed Bonsam, it would be offered its regalia. Standing under a tree, the assistant priest poured libation to invite the deities to the gathering at the main shrine. Without warning, Bonsam became possessed in the inner shrine. From there he dashed to the square arena and started dancing. As deity after deity would possess him, he would change dresses and dancing styles, each dress and style of dance demonstrating the unique traits of the deity that had made an "entrance" through him. When, for instance, he would dance as if he was dragging a heavy load, the audiences would explain that the deity mounting him was fat.

Then his "show" deity, Kofi oo Kofi, possessed Bonsam. A wave of excitement surged through the crowd. Every one began to talk excitedly. As he would twist and turn his arms making symbolic gestures, he would leap high into the air and summersault. He snatched a bottle of schnapps from a helper, drunk all its content, collected a pack of cigarettes from another helper and smoked almost all the sticks in the pack, all the while dancing. Then in a dramatic fashion, he grabbed one onlooker (a man called Norman) and reprimanded him for engaging in immoral activities. He cautioned Norman to desist from such acts lest he would invite the wrath of the gods and would be punished. When he spotted a group of onlookers with babies standing behind the line, he pointed to one of them, a woman, to come forward with the baby, and beckoned her husband to follow. They both knelt down before the priest in the marked square area. The priest began to dance.



Suddenly, he snatched the baby from the mother, and using his left hand he held the baby by her legs with the head down. Holding a cigarette in the other hand, he walked fast towards the altar of sacrifice, the helpers following him. He immersed the head of the baby in a pot on the altar filled with a concoction. Then he swung the baby around and threw her to his helper, who caught her. The terrified baby cried uncontrollably as she was handed to her mother. Still smoking cigarettes, Bonsam took three majestic strides towards the marked area with his helpers following and dusting him with clay powder. Then he conjured up boiled eggs from the clay powder his helpers had in their hands, and ordered them to be distributed among the children. Other mothers were at this time kneeling to form a queue behind the marked area, holding their children and waiting their turns for Bonsam to immerse their child in the concoction. Bonsam immersed five children in the concoction in the same fashion.

I was told later that the immersion was Bonsam's version of the Christian baptism for children born to members of the shrine. After the immersion, the children became members of the shrine. This ritual clearly is a borrowed Christian ritual and it shows the syncretic nature of Bonsam's community. The *bosomfo* explained further that the act was also meant to fortify and protect the children against the evil eye of wicked people. After the last immersion, Bonsam walked briskly towards the drummers and danced with all his might, jumped up and levitated while still dancing, his helpers dusting him with the white powder. When he landed on the ground after dancing, he headed straight for the members and he shook hands with them murmuring unintelligible phrases, which only his assistant could understand and interpret. As he touched their forehead with his hand to bless them, the audiences swarmed Bonsam. There was a stampede as each person tried to touch Bonsam. He danced passionately again and then asked that he be covered with cloth. After two minutes he got out of the cloth revealing a basket full of handkerchief, pieces

of cloths, T-shirts and pens, he had just conjured up. He threw them in the crowd and people scrambled for the articles.

## **Example 2**

On the first Tuesday of the beginning of the year 2013, Komfo Oforiwaa organized a thanksgiving ritual sacrifice in honor of her deities: *Asuo Abena*, the river goddess who lives in the stream by her shrine, *Gbgogbo*, and *Pemsan Bofo* among others. At about 7:00 am a few family members, permanent clients who were aware of the date, and new clients alike had gathered at the shrine's premises, the river side of the compound, where the deity is believed to dwell. The gathering had been called to witness the offering of a votive sacrifice to the deity for her protection and sustenance of the priestess, her family and the clients who had visited the shrine the previous year. It was also an occasion for making a plea for greater success in the priestess' vocation in the New Year. Singing, accompanied by drumming, clapping and the dancing of the priestess all marked the start of the occasion. This went on for about ten minutes, before the *Bosomfo* Paa signaled for it to stop.

*Bosomfo* Paa held a bottle of schnapps and a glass filled with part of the bottle's content. He lifted the glass and looked up into the sky as if he was showing it to God. Then he began the libation prayer, pouring the liquor on the ground in bits as he mentioned the names of all the deities of the shrines, ending with the deity *Asuo Abena*. He summoned *Asuo Abena* and the other deities to come around to listen to the reason for the gathering. He told them of the purpose for gathering, and poured out the rest of the drink. When this was over he took a white fowl, slit its throat and allowed the blood to pour on the river bank. The assistants quickly cut the legs and the arms of the fowl and removed its heart. These parts would be used to prepare a meal for the goddess. A sheep was then slaughtered. The shrine's assistants poured part of the blood of the sheep on the river

bank, filled a calabash with some blood and headed for the main shrine where they sprinkled it on the effigies of deities on the altar. This was a way of feeding the deities. Just as was done to the fowl, the assistants cut the legs of the sheep and removed the heart which was added to the parts of the fowl and offered to Oforiwaa's mother to prepare a meal for the deities. The ritual soup was ready in an hour and served to the deities with mashed yam and boiled eggs. A portion of the meal was sprinkled on the compound of the shrine's premises so that passing deities and unknown spirits could partake in the meal.

The gathering clapped in appreciation and the drums sounded again to mark the start of another session of dance performance. The crowd sang and clapped as the priestess danced. Soon she was possessed. She ran into the river, and walked as far as the middle before returning to pick up a bucket and then headed back to the river. Muttering some unintelligible sounds, she proceeded to fill the bucket with water, using her cupped palms. With the bucket half way full, she came out of the river and asked for a calabash. She fetched water with the calabash, showed it to the sky and poured it on the ground three times, and drank a bit of it and passed it around for the *bosomfo* of the shrine and other shrine attendants to drink. The last group to drink from the calabash was the drummers and singers. Each person would kneel, take the calabash of water from the priestess, drink, bow, and hand the empty calabash to the priestess who would then fill it and serve it to another person. The priestess repeated this ritual among the permanent clients of the shrine. When it was the turn of the new clients, many of who were there for the first time, the priestess had to explain the rationale for the ritual. She said, "This is blessed water but I don't force anyone to drink it. If you do not have any concerns about drinking it you can go ahead. However, if you feel you don't want to drink, you are free not to." I saw five new clients drink water from the calabash,

one after the other. Their facial expressions, however, betrayed what would seem to be some concern, fear or anxiety.

When the last new client had finished drinking the water the priestess ran to the river bank again, broke a frond from a palm tree, dipped it in the water in the bucket, and sprinkled it on the gathering. She would sprinkle the water on a group gathered at a portion of the compound three times, before moving to others gathered at other portions to repeat the act, until she had covered the entire compound, sprinkling three times on each group. At this time the singing became louder and the tempo of the drum beats was faster. The vigor of Oforiwaa's dancing matched these changes. Then she stopped and demanded the regalia of various deities from the *bosomfo*, who already had them in his hands. She tied a thread on a pole at one end of the shrine, pulled it, and anchored it on a pole at the other end. She gave the ox tail she was dancing with to one of the clients and asked her to hit the thread three times with it. We watched in utter amazement as we saw a small ball of fire erupt at one end of the thread. The ball of flame became larger as it moved towards the other end, burning the thread. The thin black thread became golden brown after it had been burned by this flame. The priestess took the burned thread and ran to left portion of the gathering, where sat a client with a swollen leg, which rendered him incapable of walking. She tied the burned thread around his entire leg and went back to dance. Ten minutes into her dancing she ran back to the man, removed the thread, and asked him to stand. At first the man was reluctant to get up. The priestess urged him on. He took one step forward cautiously. When he did not fall he took the other step. Apparently, confident that he had been healed he continued walking, slowly at first, but quickening his pace later. The compound erupted with the sound of clapping joyful screams and laughter; the faces of the onlookers, many of whom were relatives of the sick man, beamed with smiles. The priestess danced on, ostensibly oblivious to these happenings around her.

She danced for one more hour before the *bosomfo* poured another libation, pleading with the deity to “leave her so she could rest.” After some hesitation, the deity left Oforiwaa. An exhausted Oforiwaa was helped to a seat where she sat for a long time to regain the strength of her physical body, which had had to bear the full weight of the deity that possessed her.

#### **6.4.2 The Peer-group or Communal Example**

The *agoro* or *akom afahye* are performances pre-arranged by the head priest or priestess of a particular community. The location and the time for the activity is communicated to invited priests and priestesses, most of whom are also members of the Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers Association (GPTHA). The priests and priestesses often “play” or (*agorɔ*) or *kɔm*<sup>371</sup> in the afternoons of an *Akwasidae* ritual festival and other festivals.

Also, when an apprentice is being initiated/outdoored as a priest or priestess, *agorɔ* and *akom* are staged. At such gatherings, about 25-50 priests and priestesses at the community and over 200 from all over the state would show up. An open public space is chosen for such occasions. This space becomes sacrosanct as the proceedings take place. Tents are built in a square or rectangular pattern, at the edges of the space invited guests from the community are given a shed, but onlookers or spectators stand at the back of the tent to have a better view and to be able to move freely from one place to another to watch the performances. The various priests, priestesses, and their entourage of drummers, clappers, singers and helpers, occupy the tent. The venue for the display is the inner portion of a rectangle drawn with white clay. No ordinary person can cross the white clay boundaries. Only religious functionaries can. The person presiding over the function pours libation amidst the various drumming, dancing and other performances. The action then

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<sup>371</sup> *Akom* is the profession of priesthood and *kɔm* means to be possessed.

commences. The action itself is not regulated. The priests and priestesses dance in front of the spaces they and their followers have been assigned. One hears different drums as each deity dances according to a distinct tune or rhythm. The place is turned into something of an organized chaos when the action starts, as performances are not ordered. As a priest/priestess gets possessed, he or she starts performing and then a miracle can follow. One can only observe one performance at a time; many move from one place to another to see other performances, while others are moving in different directions to do the same.

#### **6.4.3 *Kɔmfɔ* Oforiwaa at Offinso Namon Festival**

About fifteen priests and priestesses gathered for this festival. There were different rhythms of drumming and different dances. Some priests were performing miracles while others were simply dancing. All of a sudden *Kɔmfɔ* Oforiwaa, the priestess who invited me to the occasion, started dancing. She signaled her helper, *bosomfo* Paa, to bring her stool to the middle, in front of her assigned place. She asked a helper to get her an empty bucket. She collected the bucket and walked around, showing it to the crowd. She then went to the stand where the spectators were and asked for a piece of cloth. Many people run away from her because they were afraid, but an old lady volunteered her cover cloth to her. The priestess took the cover cloth and walked around again, showing it to spectators. She went back to her stand, and covered the empty bucket with the cover cloth. Dancing, she lifted her two hands up as if collecting something from some being in the sky, moved to the empty bucket, and, still dancing, dipped her hands in the covered bucket. With one hand in the covered bucket she lifted the other up mimicking the act of collecting something or communicating with someone. Then she took the other hand from the bucket making sure it was tightly covered with the cloth.

She continued making gestures with her hands as she pointed them towards the sky. She lifted her hands to the north, south, east and west. She opened her palms as if collecting something from the sky, and placed it in the bucket as if she was hiding the item there. She danced a little and put her two hands under the cloth covering the bucket again while her *bosomfo* Paa dusted her with white clay or powder.

She kept dancing, according to the rhythm of the drum, with hands still in the bucket. She lifted one hand up and dipped her hand in the bucket again. This time her helper blew the powder with air from his mouth to the direction of the priestess. When she took her hands out of the covered bucket this time, she had a gold necklace in her hands. Her helper started clapping and the other one sang her appellations: *eye wo a, eye wo a, wo hon ye hun*- “it’s you, it’s you, you have done it, you are so fearsome.” She looked up and showed the necklace to us while dancing from the left portion of the compound towards the right. She signaled one of her assistants, and handed over the necklace to her to be given to the woman who volunteered her cover cloth (as a reward). As the assistant tries to put the necklace on the woman’s neck, Oforiwaa watched and danced, all the while demanding powder from the *bosomfo* Paa and smearing this on her face with her left hand. She paused and looked at the woman with the necklace admiringly, touching it, and then continued the dance. Following the same ritual steps leading to her conjuring up of the necklace, Oforiwaa conjured up a gold bracelet, handing it to the *bosomfo* and asking him to give it to the woman who was given the first necklace. *Bosomfo* placed the bracelet on her wrist. The priestess also conjured up other items that day---a ring, a watch, and money---and donated these to individuals in the audience. Some other priests also performed miracles that day to demonstrate the potency of their powers. One conjured up eggs and boiled them, another toffees, and another handkerchiefs. The higher value of the items Oforiwaa conjured up was a sign of the superiority of her power.

As the sun went down, the *bosomfo* of the various priests and priestesses pleaded with their deities to leave them “as it is getting late so they could go home.” Some of the deities left immediately, others were initially reluctant, but left later. Oforiwaa’s deity left after persistent persuasion by the *bosomfo*. He explained to me that sometimes the deities would want to show off in such places and hence their insistence on continuing to perform. He said they liked it when they would conjure up an item of value and the crowd would cheer them up.

Appealing more to the imagination of spectators through her spectacular display of power, Oforiwaa had garnered what Bourdieu would refer to as religious capital. The other priests and priestesses also drew the attention of individuals who might patronize them. The performances had people asking for their business cards and phone numbers so as to be able to contact them later. And these numbers would translate into economic capital for these ritual specialists when these spectators go to the shrines to consult them, which is the point where the economic factor plays in.

#### **6.4.4 The Modern or Inter-religious Power Performances Example: Kwaku Bonsam and the “Others”**

This category of performance directly reflects the competition in Ghana between indigenous religious agents and Pentecostal pastors. As I indicated earlier, most of these contests are organized and moderated by the media houses. In what follows, I offer a summary of two such contests involving a competition between Kwaku Bonsam, the neo-indigenous religious priest, and two Pentecostal-Charismatic pastors, in two different cities and on two different occasions. I must clarify here that, there have been other such competitions between Christians and indigenous religious agents in Ghana but I selected these because they speak directly to my research questions and I had easy access to data on them.



Kwaku Bonsam had said on his first day on radio in April 2008 that he had “supplied” some pastors with the “powers” they deployed in performing miracles in their churches and in ensuring that crowds of worshippers flocked to their programs, threatening to mention names of those who patronize his services. Reverend Ebenezer Adarkwa Yiadom of Ebenezer Miracle Church at Ahenema Kokoben in Kumasi challenged this claim and suggested a spiritual contest in order to determine whose spiritual power was more potent. Using Mercury FM, a station he owns as his main mode of public outreach, Rev. Adarkwa bragged about having more power than Kwaku Bonsam. “I will show him where the power lies,” he would say on air. Kwaku Bonsam accepted the challenge. A public event promoter, the Chief Executive Officer of Fun Time Promotions, decided the venue of the contest would be the Jubilee Park of Kumasi.<sup>372</sup> People congregated on the grounds to watch what was popularly cast as “the battle” between the two spiritual combatants. Kwaku Bonsam’s entrance was grand. He rode on a brown horse through the principal streets of Kumasi to the Jubilee Park, followed by his fleet of cars. The Reverend Minister however did not show up, though according to the organizers they had notified him of the time and venue.

When the pastor failed to show up, Bonsam used the opportunity to berate his cowardice, interpreting his failure to show up as a sign of his fear of his, Kwaku Bonsam’s, powers. He then used the pastor’s failed performance as an opportunity to “sell” himself and his brand of religiosity. As narrated to the author by Bonsam and other observers who were present that day, he took the stage and in a brief statement said “my mission today was to put this fake pastor called Rev Adarkwa and his colleagues to shame to prove that they are no men of God and also to prove to people that the religion of my ancestors is dignifying.”<sup>373</sup> He then began to perform. His drummers

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<sup>372</sup> Jubilee Parks are open spaces created by the government to celebrate Ghana’s independence jubilee. The space is used in celebrating public activities and they are found in every regional capital in Ghana.

<sup>373</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 9, 2012.

beat their drums, others clapped and singers began singing songs. Suddenly Bonsam became possessed. His assistants marked a square area in the park using the white clay they were carrying in a bowl. Dancing in a trance state, Bonsam signaled his assistants to give him a bowl filled with sand. He danced vigorously, looking into the skies and waving his *bodua* or *horsetail*. He then hit the ground three times with his horse tail, conjuring up a palm-nut seed. He picked it and planted it in the bowl of sand. He signaled his helper to bring him some water in a sachet, which he then poured on the sand while reciting incantations. Suddenly, the seed started to sprout into a seedling.

Bonsam's second miracle was his conjuring up of five live birds. Each time he would hit the ground with his horse tail or *bodua* three times a bird would appear. Next he conjured up money from newspapers. He tore the paper into pieces, covered it with a piece of white cloth, and tapped his horse tail on it three times. When he removed the white cloth we saw that newspaper had turned into monies in different currencies and denominations. He threw the money into the crowd and spectators scrambled for them.

He asked that he be covered by his assistants. After some seconds they took the cover off and all we saw were handkerchiefs, toffees, and pens. He threw these items into the crowd. As the night drew near, *bosomfo* apologized to the deities, asking them to take leave of Bonsam so that he could travel back to Akomadan-Afrancho before nightfall. The deity heeded and left him. They packed up and left while the crowd looked on, apparently too amused to disperse immediately. While two people who witnessed the occasion told me excitedly how Bonsam "had put the fear of God in Ghana's pastors" on that day, two also did not believe Bonsam's claim of defeating Rev. Adarkwa and other pastors who would dare him in future. One had said "Bonsam is a crook and a magician, he is no indigenous priest at all. Why should Adarkwa, a Christian compete with such a

crook?”<sup>374</sup> For Abena Yeboah, Bonsam’s entourage and supporters might have misinformed Adarkwa about the venue of the competition “because there was no way, Adarkwa will throw up a challenge and not show up.”<sup>375</sup> With such comments, we imagined that Bonsam’s show at this point could have been a commercial gimmick. We therefore sought to interview Rev. Adarkwa. After several failed attempts to meet with him, I finally got the chance to speak to him, but when I mentioned the reason for calling, he quickly told me that, “look I am very busy right now and Kwaku Bonsam is not a man I would waste my time on.” But I insisted on knowing exactly what had happened because at that point we only knew what Kwaku Bonsam and the media had reported on the matter. His own side, I insisted, must be heard as well. He then said “OK. Talk to my assistant, he knows all about me and was with me that day. Rev. Samuel Asare, his assistant, with a cracking voice proceeded to tell the tale:

Madam, I don’t know why Ghanaian media give audiences to the devil’s representative on earth. This Bonsam told a lie about giving Ghanaian pastor’s powers, defying the Lord God Almighty and bringing disrepute to God’s ministers and Rev. Adarkwa thought that he needed to be challenged on his utterances. He who accuses must prove. So we set the day and time to show who has powers. Kwaku Bonsam said he was ready and we could meet at Independences Square in Accra. As we were still on our way to Accra, we were called that the show was rather going to be in Kumasi Jubilee Park and that Bonsam had come so they are waiting for us. We therefore decided to return to meet him at the new venue but the journey back was long so by the time we got there, he had declared himself the winner and packed off and gone. Adarkwa, then called him that he has come so he should come back for the contest but Bonsam replied that “My deity Kofi oo Kofi has gone back, I need to ask him if he would want to be engaged with you losers again before I accept any form of meeting.” This reason caused his absence and not because he was afraid of competing with Bonsam.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Kwaku Manu, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 10, 2013.

<sup>375</sup> Abena Yeboah, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 10, 2013.

<sup>376</sup> Rev. Samuel Asare, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, September 10, 2014.

In the above instance Rev. Adarkwa was indeed absent from the place designated for the performance and Bonsam as such declared himself as victor. We proceed to the next example. The next example took place in April 2012, almost four years after the first challenge performance.

On an Adom FM news phone-in program Kwaku Bonsam called to predict the release from prison of a Prophet known as Nana Kofi Yirenkyi aka Jesus Onetouch. Jesus Onetouch was serving a 10 year prison term for incest. True to KB's predication, the pastor was released from prison. When Bonsam was interviewed and praised on air by Adom FM station host Kofi Adomah Nwawani for his sharp prophesy, the leader of the Heaven's Gate Ministries, Prophet Nicholas Osei alias Kumchacha, was enraged. He had a counter claim. He came on air insisting that God had exonerated his friend Yirenkyi, and that Kwaku Bonsam was simply a charlatan with no power. He then challenged Bonsam to a "spiritual contest." Kumchacha boasted about "flooring" [defeating] Kwaku Bonsam and exorcising him of the evil spirit possessing him. Kwaku Bonsam accepted the challenge. He cautioned Kumchacha about daring him. "Six pastors had challenged me and never showed up and I am hoping that this time you will show up and we shall compete so that I can expose you as *fianga* [thin and useless] false prophet" Bonsam said on air.

The date for the contest was 4th April 2012 and the time was 4:00pm. The venue was the forecourt of the Adom FM station in Tema. This was considered to be a neutral ground. The media house sponsored the contest. The host of Adom FM's program, *Dwaso Nsem*, Adakabri Frimpong Manso was to be the moderator of the contest. At 4:00pm it was announced on Adom FM's afternoon program called Ofie Kwanso that Kwaku Bonsam had arrived for the contest. However, the prophet Kumchacha who had thrown the challenge, had failed to show up. His excuse was the rainy weather.

With the crowd already gathered for the “showdown,” the moderators asked Kwaku Bonsam to proceed with his feats in the absence of the pastor. This was telecast live on Adom TV. Bonsam then took the platform to stage his performance. He put a pen in his mouth and chanted for about a minute and puffed out smoke from his mouth. He then leaped high towards the left and then the right, stood still for a while and picked a piece of newspaper, folded it into a cuplike shape, and poured gari (roasted cassava or yucca grains) into it. After about two minutes of chanting the newspaper began to burn. KB then took the microphone and declared himself the victor of the contest. In a speech to the public he explained that the pastors could not compete with him because apart from him being powerful, he and other indigenous religious priests and other ritual specialists were the key suppliers of magico-religious power to pastors. Consequently none of the pastors could stand to compete with them anywhere, Bonsam concluded. In order to get the other side to add to Bonsam’s narration, we proceeded to Prophet Kumchacha to investigate why he called for a context and then failed to show up. In the beginning I tried in vain to get his version while in the field in Ghana because he was not ready to talk about the subject. Later, while I was in Germany, my research assistant was able to convince him to speak to me on the phone. I went straight to the point after exchanging pleasantries. He spoke to me in Twi and gave two reasons why he did not turn up. He said:

“First of all, I am light and Kwaku Bonsam is darkness, his name is evidence of who he is. What has light got to do with darkness? I have nothing in common with him. Secondly, meeting Bonsam meant creating an environment that could initiate religious violence in Ghana. I was surprised that the host of Adom FM, Adakabri Frimpong Manso, who should know better was ready to fuel religious violence. I am a respected pastor who have people looking up to me and I did not want to have a hand in instigating violence, that is why I did not show up. But I still maintain my stand that Kwaku Bonsam has no powers, he is just a charlatan-that is all I can say.”<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Prophet Nicholas Osei alias Kumchacha, interview on phone by Genevieve Nrenzah, 10.15. 2014.

Talking to pastors who have been accused by their competitor, Bonsam, of not showing up because they are powerless against an indigenous spiritual power basis, clarifies the air and enables me avoid the one-sidedness that would have otherwise been the case. This type of performance informs readers about the dynamics of Ghana's interreligious contests, a feature of her ethos of religious pluralism and the performances this ethos engenders.

## **6.5 Contesting Indigenous Religions: A Comparison of Neo-Priest (Kwaku Bonsam) and Revitalized Old Priestess (Komfo Oforiwaa)**

In this section we attempt to compare the two case studies on the basis of the actual performances and also the discourses and the core debates that underlie and define them. We analyze the place of sound (music) and space in these performances because the two go together to make IRs events and ritual performances materialize. Lastly we will also discuss how the interplay of economics and power play out in these different performance contexts.

### **6.5.1 Sound (Music) in Indigenous Religions**

Sound is defined as “vibrations that travel through the air or another medium and can be heard when they reach a person's or animal's ear.”<sup>378</sup> Sound, in the form of singing, drumming and clapping, is one important element marking indigenous religious activities. Sound is used to invoke and sustain the presence and performance of deities. Sound conditions the moods that are appropriate in the priest/priestess in order to communicate with the deities. In a way, one can say sound facilitates spirit possession. The deities cannot possess the priest without their moods being induced by sound. Akan gods are music-loving gods and are attracted to any spot they hear their calling tone, say both Bonsam and Komfo Oforiwaa. To make their presence felt and to express

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<sup>378</sup> <https://www.google.com.gh/#q=meaning+of+sound+> . Accessed 7.20.2014

themselves they must possess or mount a priest. Sound and spirit possession, I therefore conclude are intertwined--they are two sides of the same coin. One cannot function without the other.

Spirit possessions in indigenous religions, as I was informed by the indigenous agents are in two categories: private and public. The first category takes place in the privacy of the shrines. Before the priests or priestess can communicate with the deities he or she must be possessed by the spirits; the deities are invoked to possess priest or priestess,<sup>379</sup> and sound is the medium used in invoking the deities. After libations, the *bosomfo* leaves the consultation shrine in order for the priest/priestess to continue alone the communication with the deities. The priest or priestess rings a small bell until he/she falls into trance, the bell then drops from his/her hands down on the ground. The *bosomfo* who, all this while, hides by the door, listening carefully for the sound of the bell dropping, then moves in. He welcomes the deity by greeting the priest, he then signals the helper outside to call clients for the business of the day to commence.

Secondly, spirit possession takes place in public space in the context of performances such as the *agorɔ* or *akmɔ afahye*. In such instances, the procedure of libation is effected and the drummers, clappers and singers make the sound to invoke the spirit.<sup>380</sup> Noticeably, on the *agorɔ* and *akom* platforms, priests and priestesses dance with exuberance at the sound of the drum beat. The faster the tempo of the drum beat, the easier it is for the mood required for the priest or priestess to begin the performances, and for the deities to descend on the priest/priestess. Music and sound invoke the deities, the *bosomfo* explained; no musicians, not even the priest himself/herself, can force the deities to appear or possess a priest. However, it is impossible to completely connect

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<sup>379</sup> Libations are also often poured on effigies which are receptacles of the deities (I have detailed this in other chapters) to invoke them to inhabit it so as to listen to the supplication of clients.

<sup>380</sup> Neo-priests who are trying to form religious groups, for example, have their musical bands who know the tunes of particular deities and so know how to make sound from the drums and invoke them. The old priests/priestess have professionals who also have the skills to drum and sing to invoke the deities by virtue of serving in various shrines.

spirit possession performances with specific sound and vocal notes. To begin with, different sounds invoke different deities, and secondly the possessed voice changes. The priest or priestess speaks with the tone of the voice of the deities. These are different from his/her normal voice. When the priest is in trance, the only person who is able to understand what the priest utters, and their overall message, is the *bosomfo*. In both cases of spirit possession, the priest did not communicate directly to clients or people. When he talked, it was assumed that the deities were talking through him, that is, the priest becomes the mouthpiece of the deities while the *bosomfo* becomes the official mouthpiece of the priest/deities, who then inform the clients of what is happening. Sound is therefore an element on the indigenous religious landscape which must be noted in contemporary African indigenous religious scholarship. The neo-priest and the priests of the revitalized shrines all share both categories of private and public sound and spirit possessions. Sound or music is something used by both the neo- and traditional priests/priestesses in their daily activities. Without this element, nothing really happens in their shrines. Related to sacred sound is sacred space.

### **6.5.2 Sacred Space**

Sacred space is an important aspect of every religion. In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, for example, Jerusalem and Mecca are viewed as sacred spaces. Religious places or spaces are so sacred to particular religions to the point of even sparking controversies. In the same vein, indigenous religions have sacred spaces, and although the manifestations could be different, the content or essence of the spaces is revered in the same way many other religions relate to their sacred place or space. This research explores several sacred spaces on the indigenous religious landscape. We can, however, group all of them under two headings. These are fixed or private and public or open-air sacred spaces. The fixed sacred spaces are privately owned by individual



religious agents or a group for the purposes of sacred activities. For example, Komfo Oforiwaa's Dadwen shrine was chosen by her deities, and Bonsam's Akomadan- Afrancho cluster of shrines was also chosen by his deities. The shrines are solely owned by the religious agents and by virtue of the fact that those sites are chosen by the deities, they are revered so much so that no mundane perspective can suggest a relocation in the future. Leeuw has suggested that the space "becomes a position by effects of power repeating themselves there, or being repeated by man."<sup>381</sup>

Public or open air spaces are shared venues for activities that range from the religious to the secular, and are often defined in relation to a particular activity that is carried out at a point in time. Such a space as noted by Foucault, then explicitly elicits the "relativity of space" which is the point we want to emphasize. Foucault articulates several possible types of heterotopia or what he describes as spaces that exhibit dual meanings. Heterotopias of ritual are spaces that are isolated and penetrable, but are not easily accessible like public spaces. Applied to our situation, the idea here is that some public spaces in Ghana have multiple meanings and are used for different purposes in both religious and non-religious contexts. The activity of the moment defines the spaces as sacred or profane by either the religious person or the nonreligious. In such cases, the reverence given to the sacred place or space is given priority according to the claims of a particular religion.

Open spaces or parks in Ghana fall into this category. The public performances examples I have offered above as typical of peer group or communal performances and the modern or interreligious performances take place in such spaces. The same space can also be used by Christian worshippers for their open air crusades (proselytizing or recruiting) activities. Also, it

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<sup>381</sup> Van Der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and the Manifestation*, 57. See also Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 20.

could double up as a market space, football pitch and school graduation ceremony's grounds. In such a place, utilized by humans for definite multi-purpose activities, the event that is carried on at the nick in time defines it sacredness or profaneness. I must add that other commonplace sacred spaces in African indigenous religions include tri-junctions, cemeteries, centers of tripod trees, river banks, spots in forests, market places, or what Van der Leeuw calls "artificial sanctuaries."<sup>382</sup> These are open spaces not owned by individuals but shared by people for similar purposes and could therefore fit this type. Sacred spaces in such cases are not fixed spaces, that is, they are defined as sacred in terms of a particular purpose. It is the activities that take place at this space at the moment that makes it sacred.

As observed in the three examples of performances discussed above, the sacred public spaces are applicable to the *agoro or akom* and modern or interreligious performances. The places for the observances of these religious activities were mundane public spaces. Yet before the activity commences, the place is marked with white clay or powder in a square shape, ritually transforming it into a sacred space. No believer or observer is able to cross the marked line until the sacred activity is over. Only priests, priestesses and other sacred entities can operate within the confines of the artificial/temporal sacred space. The temporal sacred space then becomes a "position" even if only for a few hours.

A woman named Araba Donkor explained why ordinary people "are afraid" to cross the marked boundaries of such spaces. She drew on her own experience:

I am a Christian, but sometimes I consult these priests when I am in need of urgent answers and pray for a long time with no result from God. Anytime there is an indigenous religious show out of my area I go to watch. On a number of times I saw some Christians who told me they were praying to bind the demonic powers being exhibited. This activity happened in

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<sup>382</sup> Van Der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and the Manifestation*, 57-59.

Kuntanse on the way to Lake Bosomtwi. The priests were challenging themselves and they have said no one should cross the line marked with white clay. I did not see how the woman of about 45 years old got to the center of the marked lines but what I saw was one of the priest invoking words and dancing with his *bodua* [ox tail]; all of a sudden the woman fell down and stripped herself naked, shouting –‘help me, help me, please help me.... I did not plan to cross. I don’t know what happened’ but the priest kept dancing looking the other way so he does not see her nakedness and instructed his people to carry her out of the line. The priest then said ‘the woman has evil powers and feels she could challenge his powers so he made her striped herself naked. If she had not apologized I would have made her run out of here mad.’ I learnt my lesson out of that experience since, and I think people do believe that they can be disgraced by curiously stepping over the boundaries that has been marked because it would mean challenging the priests/priestess... <sup>383</sup>

On the basis of the narrative one can come away with the observation that the society has been socialized to believe in the temporally defined sacred space of indigenous religious agents.

The point I wish to draw attention to by deliberating on “space” is the similar ways in which the neo and old IR priests and priestesses transform mundane spaces into sacred spaces through ritual action for the purpose of staging their public performances.

### **6.5.3 Rituals**

In the examples I offered of the individual or personalized performances I drew on a ritual activity performed by both Kwaku Bonsam and Komfo Oforiwaa in the presence of their members, permanent and casual clients. In the case of Bonsam, he became possessed and danced to the different rhythms of his deities. Bonsam, who was said to be in trance at this time and did not know what he was doing, engaged in some spontaneous acts that were not only bizarre but could even be described as dangerous. For example, he immersed the heads of his followers’ babies in a pot

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<sup>383</sup>Araba Donkor, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 3, 2013.

of something he had concocted on his altar, an activity his followers claim was the first of its kind in the shrine; in so doing, he risked drowning them.

In the same vein, on the occasion of thanking her deities at the beginning of a new year, Komfo Oforiwaa became possessed and ran to the river by her house inhabited by the goddess known as *asuo abena* to fetch water, first served it to those at the gathering, and later sprinkled it on them. She explained the act was to cleanse and *nhyira* (bless) those gathered. Vansina has postulated that “ the core of most African religions is ritual,” defining it as “sets of actions aimed at improving or safeguarding man's [sic] lot, actions which make sense only if understood in terms of an underlying symbolic system and often presupposing beliefs about the preternatural.”<sup>384</sup> In both cases, I observed the members and/or clients willingly participated in these ritual activities because they believed in the outcome of the activities as ordered, on the spur of the moment by the deities, for their good.

The two priests, both neo- and traditional, would later admit that the activities performed on those occasions at their respective shrines were new. On the basis of this we can describe both performances as innovations in IRs. Yet the concept of baptism and sprinkling of water are not new; both are Christian rituals practiced especially by missionary churches in Ghana. Casting their rituals as *Asubo* and *nhyira* Christian rituals, these ritual agents are appropriating Christian ritual forms and syncretizing them in a bid to garner appeal and the interest of clients and members alike. The intention might be to cajole people to consult with them without guilt feelings.

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<sup>384</sup> Jan Vansina, Review of T. Ranger and I. Kimambo, eds., *The Historical Study of African Religion* (London, 1972), in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* VI. 1 (1973): 178-180.

## 6.6 Interplay of Economics and Power in Indigenous Religious Performance

As stated earlier in this chapter, the pluralistic nature of the religious field in Ghana often engenders tension and competition among the variant and different religious groups on the landscape, each claiming to be the best and “othering” as well as delegitimizing others. But then again, there exists also intra-power struggles on the indigenous religious landscape as well. Christian Pentecostalism-Charismaticism dominates the landscape and seeks to monopolize religious capital, but indigenous religious agents, the main targets of Pentecostal-Charismatic preaching and activity, are fighting back. One of their many ways of competing with the Christians in public places for control over “power” is contesting their claims. But these agents must also contend with intra -competition. The neo-indigenous priests compete with the traditional indigenous priests who are revitalizing their traditions. During the research the impression I got when I queried the revitalized priests about their take on the neo-indigenous priests, was that of doubt, contempt and dismissal. Komfo Oforiwaa had retorted that:

These new priest are fake; they are not priests but just magicians. Anyone who is a priest must go through training and have a master who directs and tutors an apprentice about the trade of priesthood. You cannot just descend anywhere and say you are a priest... yet we “play” with them because at least they believe in the deities and, more importantly, the fight is between us and the others.<sup>385</sup>

The explanation of Oforiwaa, a traditional indigenous priestess revitalizing her tradition, resonates with what Weber notes of traditional authority. For Oforiwaa and her peers, anyone called to priesthood must go through the acceptable institutional procedure; otherwise he or she loses credibility.

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<sup>385</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 31, 2013.

Also, inquiring about the revitalized shrines from the neo-indigenous priests, the answer one neo-priest gave me was: “they are not changing to suit modern times. Their shrines are dirty, smell of fresh blood; they hide in the corners of the bush and dress fearfully. This makes everyone consider indigenous religions as backward, weird, evil and unattractive...if you want people to patronize you, change your way of doing things.”<sup>386</sup> Both strands of IRTs view each other differently, with different discourses, yet often coming together for the purpose of playing to please the gods. Nevertheless they covertly compete among themselves over spiritual power, much as they compete openly with Christians over the same control of potent spiritual power.

Normally, the competition that pits Christians against the indigenous religious agents is invited by Christian pastors, who usually use aggressive controversial statements. The statements made by Reverend Ebenezer Adarkwa Yiadom about having “a spiritual contest to show who has more potent spiritual power” and the one made by Prophet Nicholas Osei alias Kumchacha about having a “spiritual contest... to floor Kwaku Bonsam and exorcise the evil spirit possessing him” are cases in point. Such bold public proclamations demonstrate the nature of the power relations between the various religious institutions and their agents, especially, between Christians and the indigenous religious agents. Pastors demonstrate their sense of total control over the religious landscape through such bold statements. But in taking up the challenge to prove that they, too, possess some sort of powers, which they have even alleged these same pastors are borrowing, the indigenous religious agents also demonstrate how they are forces to contend with.

One thing to be noted about the competition on the religious landscape of Ghana is that whereas the competition between the indigenous agents and the Christians is clearly spelled out,

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<sup>386</sup> Nana Nzema, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 10, 2013.

the intra- competition among the indigenous religious agents is not clear-cut. In the indigenous religious circles the public platform for performance, for example, is called *agorɔ* and the priest when going to such events would say they are going to play with their peers. In essence, playing with their peers showcases who has potent power. Playing makes them weigh the power among themselves but they do not voice the competition out loud or visibly state the motives behind the *agorɔ*. The modern or inter-religious competition, in contrast, is publically declared, both parties well aware of the contest and the rules. In this case, the two parties partaking in the competition brace themselves for the benefit and the risk ahead, with the court of public opinion ready to judge who wins or loses. The participants of the show always have intentions.

Intentions of “stealing the show at the provided platform” and topping the indigenous religious chat of the area so as to recruit more clientele base but it is also a platform to showcase priests and priestesses whose deities are powerful. Komfo Oforiwaa had told me: “Madam, if you want to see how powerful I am than others, come to the *agoro afahye* on Sunday afternoon...but also when we go out to play with others they display to show their powers. Come with us on Sunday afternoon and see what the deities will do.”<sup>387</sup> In a similar vein, Kwaku Bonsam has retorted that:

I am not like some pastors, who can only perform miracles in their church at a particular spot in their church and because of their *fianga* (small) miracle make noise that they have powers after they have come to us for some small powers to deceive innocent people. They know they don't have powers, they can only make noise in their homes, they can chose a venue for the context if they want me, and I am ready to challenge them. I will not retrieve my words [that] pastors come to me for powers.<sup>388</sup>

These two views explain a crucial motive behind the exuberant performance. Whether inter- or intra-, the showmanship is meant to illustrate potent spiritual power. And a control over that power

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<sup>387</sup> Komfo Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 10 2013.

<sup>388</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 4 2012.

means control over others. The prestige that comes with being associated with such power is certainly a strong motivation for the actors involved. Demonstrating power in the context of such public performances bolsters the claim of the actor to legitimacy as a priest/priestess and guarantees a spot in the top tier of the hierarchy of Ashanti priests. Equally important is how such public performances offer traditional religious priests stages to give concrete expressions to their claim that the indigenous religious traditions are still viable in Ghana. In this way indigenous religious priests are able to offer counter discourses to the dominant Pentecostal narrative on the demise of the indigenous religious landscape. We cannot, however, overlook possible economic motivations behind such performances, even if these may not be the overriding forces pushing the performances.

We can argue that, the performance platform is also an economic platform where agents show their “wares” for clients who have gathered to shop for religious goods, so that they can pick and choose which potential agents to go to when they need help (healing, revenge, and protection among others). I suggest that even though, in all three examples, the economic motive is somewhat muted on that stage, we cannot rule out its importance in these competitions. Probably in the past, when priests and priestesses gathered to showcase their deities, they were reluctant to reveal their economic motivations. This situation has changed with the growing commodification of spiritual power in Ghana. Nowadays, the indigenous religious agents make a point of showing through gestures and proclamations, how the “powers” of competitors do not march up to theirs and how, they, rather than their competitors, should be consulted.

I observed during my research that the more dramatic a miracle performance is, the greater the number of clientele who troop to that performer’s shrine in the days following the act. These priests with dramatic, impressive acts attract more clients after such performances. These new



clients consult the priests outside of the public domain and in the secrecy of their shrine and pay for services rendered. For example, both *Komfo* Oforiwaa and Bonsam have asked me how “they performed” several times when I showed up at their shrine a day after a performance. The question is, if they want me to appreciate their powers as a researcher how much more do they need to impress the audience’ at various performances? In such instances, I normally smiled and asked a different question to distract them. I visited *Komfo* Oforiwaa one morning after the previous day’s performance, which I had deliberately not attended. When I got there, I saw lots more people than usual and so I asked what was going on today and she said: “Ah madam, yesterday you did not come to see my show at the *agorɔ* yesterday. Many of priests who advertise on radio and TV came. Have you heard of the man who advertises that he holds power like egg? Togbo Kedinapo.” *I said* “Mmmm, yes.” She said,

“He was flawed yesterday. My deities did too many wonderful miracles that he was left with nothing new to perform. Look, at the many people here today. Almost all of them are new. I am sure they were at the festival ground yesterday and saw how powerful my deities are...”<sup>389</sup>

This statement, for example, explains what I have highlighted, that economics is certainly a motivating factor. Offering a brief history of the practice of priests charging prices for their services, the president of the Ashanti regional branch of the GPTH A attempted to justify the practice:

In the past, priests did not charge clients. People in the community you lived in normally consulted and because the deities called priests to help humanity, we did it for free. Clients therefore out of their own will returned to the shrine with offered thanks, i.e. if their supplication was positively answered by the deities. Now because people come from different places to the shrine to consult, they decide not to come back after receiving help. Also these new priests who are advertising on radio and TV charge and people pay. You know Ghana people, if you don’t charge it means it is not good. So though our members whom we have trained do not charge, yet clients

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<sup>389</sup> *Komfo* Oforiwaa, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 3, 2013.

must give a gift to the deities before they leave-this gift is not paying but it is a covenant between the deity and a client.<sup>390</sup>

The priestess Kɔmfɔ Oforiwaa also hinted tacitly at the economic intentions of even the priests who represented the old tradition. She explained that the old time indigenous priests do not charge for services but collect gifts, often money, as tokens to “contract” the gods to act. She maintained that the neo-priests do charge clients because they had commoditized spiritual power and operated as business people. It would seem plausible to argue that the traditional priests are simply using the tradition of gift-giving to gods to conceal the economic nature of their transactions with clients. Equally interesting to note is how the traditional priests make no mention of money or gifts during their public performances, but insist on “gifts” when clients visit them, impressed by their show during the performance. This betrays an underlying economic motive. In other words, the neo-priests charge directly while the traditional priests hide behind tradition to collect money in the form of gifts. While Iannaccone uses the term “market” as a metaphor to describe how religious institutions and agents position themselves in a pluralistic religious ethos to maximize their gains, we can apply his understanding to the actions of the indigenous religious agents in performances. I could not agree more with Iannaccone that individual denominations function as firms and therefore collectively constitute a religious market for selling religious goods and service. Monetary gains may not be the primary motivations of these agents, but there is no doubt that they also see the platform offered them as a money-making avenue, in addition to its other advantages. They advertise spiritual power and attract seekers who come to buy this crucial religious capital from their shrines.

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<sup>390</sup> Kɔmfɔ Kyei, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 2, 2012.

Surprisingly the failed performances of pastors of Pentecostal churches did not seem to affect the attendance of worshippers. Pentecostal worshippers do not interpret the failure of their pastors to show up for such contests as an admission of their incompetence as ritual specialists. They argue, rather, that their pastors do not show up because they view participation in such contests to be condescending or “stooping low to the level of Satan’s agents.”

## **6.7 Conclusion**

One theme around which this discussion revolves is the idea that performance is a pillar around which indigenous religious activities evolve. It is a force that is shaping the rise in the indigenous religions in contemporary Ghana. Ritual is at the core of the indigenous religions of Ghana and performance provides the context for ritual action. A typology was developed from the data. Three categories of performances-- (individual/personalized, the peer review/ communal, and the modern inter-religious power performances) were identified and used in discussing the argument that performances provide important milieu for demonstrating the potency of spiritual power, attracting potential clientele, and garnering socio-economic power. In other words, performance on Ghana’s indigenous religious landscape, apart from socio-cultural and religious obligations, is an economic exposure, a form of advertisement for the various priests/priestess’ both traditional and neo-indigenous, to showcase their power and sell their religious products. Such disclosures are meant, first, to expose the content or “make up” of the performers to the audience gathered, some of who are potential consumers, adherents, Christians, and critics. This way they are able to pick and choose which priest/priestess they would want to access for whatever problem they have as well as to choose to believe or not in the normative negative narratives perpetrated about indigenous religions by Pentecostal/Charismatics, the dominant religious group in Ghana.

Secondly, the performers exhibit their control over spiritual powers in an arena of competition between the performers and their competitors in the indigenous religions and even outside it. Performance then becomes a measuring tool, a mirror through which adherents/practitioners as well as observers/critics /rivals view the priests/priestess' as victors or losers, a risky task that generates success or failure. The discussion also highlighted the significant role of sound (music) and space in indigenous religious performances in Ghana.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### MODERN AND TRANSNATIONAL: ‘BURGERIZATION’<sup>391</sup> OF NEO-INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS IN GHANA

#### 7.1 Introduction

*The world is now a transnational field, in which religion operates alongside other social institutions and forces. Religion’s “locality” thus crosses borders in a new and complex ways*<sup>392</sup>

The focus of the discussion in this chapter is on the trans-nationalization of indigenous religions. The theme stems from activities of IR priests and priestesses with schemas to cross borders from their locality to other destinations. My main argument is that the competition among the diverse religious groups and their agents over potent spiritual power which is the context in which the dominant Christian group demonizes the minorities, especially the indigenous religions with their modernity discourse, has given birth to a “rebellion” stance of the neo-indigenous r priests in the Ghanaian religious landscape. In a way this rebellious position is sponsoring the reconstruction of the indigenous religion landscape both locally and globally.

The outburst of religious activities championed by the various religious groups in support of their stances has emitted diverse expressions. There are, for example, the “loud” dominant Christian voices, Hindu voices, Muslim voices, and others. All of these voices are steering various debates and, most importantly, making efforts to extend their influences to far flung places beyond Ghana’s borders. We have also noted that these are not the only voices represented in the Ghanaian religious field. The indigenous religious traditions, normally perceived by scholars and casual observers as the underdog, are becoming more visible in public spaces since Damuah’s *Afrikania*

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<sup>391</sup> Burger is a street word which means international. It is used in Ghana to describe people who travel abroad. The word originated from Ghanaian immigrants returning from Hamburg Germany.

<sup>392</sup> Spickard and Adogame, “Introduction: African, The New African Diaspora, and Religious Transnationalism in a Global World in Religion,” 1.

launch in 1982 and has become even more vibrant since the year 2000. Led by a new breed of agents, these traditions are also adding their own voices to the debates and discourses that are shaping the religious landscape. What seems to be even more alarming as well as intriguing is the speed at which indigenous religions are catching up with other religious competitors on the Ghanaian religious field.

The activities of these new priests can be likened to an explosion if we consider how rapidly they are increasing in numbers by the day.<sup>393</sup> More importantly for the discussion presented in this chapter, through the activities of these ambitious agents, these traditions are also spreading their influences to overseas countries, especially in Europe and North America. This rise in the activities of indigenous religious agents and their global outreach<sup>394</sup> are occurring despite and in response to aggressive verbal challenges from Christians, especially Pentecostal-Charismatics. This campaign started with agents and supporters of indigenous religious bases constructing a discourse that runs counter to the narrative of Pentecostal-Charismatic religion, which dominates in Ghana, denouncing indigenous religions as demonic practices<sup>395</sup> that keep practitioners tied to a primitive past, retarding progress in a rapidly modernizing Ghana. Critiquing the Pentecostal narrative and projecting the tradition positively, as one that opens the floodgate of modernity and is therefore better suited to the needs of “people involved in the modernization processes and

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<sup>393</sup> Monitoring their activities through the media, especially radio and TV, one can note almost daily a new powerful priest/priestesses in the city or village advertising their religious products. Radio stations monitored in the Ashanti region, the site of the research are Nhyira FM, K-FM. In addition to the radio stations, Adom TV, a subsidiary of Multimedia cable network and TV Africa were also monitored.

<sup>394</sup> Apart from Bonsam, another well-known indigenous religious priest with an international agenda is Nana Subru, also known as Nana Kudi. He visited the USA and returned on 3.9. 2012. He is located in Abirem, a town in the Ashanti region. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?> Accessed October 2012.

<sup>395</sup> Marleen De Witte, “Insight, Secrecy, Beast, and Beauty: Struggles over the Making of Ghanaian Documentary on African Traditional Religion,” *The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 1.2/1.3(2005): 296.

longing for upward social mobility,”<sup>396</sup> agents of the IRTs argue, following scholars such as Comaroff, that there must be many understandings of modernity in Africa<sup>397</sup> and not just one.

The new indigenous religious agents are postulating a new discourse that indigenous religions are as modern as any competitor religion, more powerful in meeting modern needs, and as such can operate in global spaces. They argue that “indigenous religions should not be cast as something of the past that retards progress. It is a part of a Ghanaian modernity and its resources can be enlisted in efforts of advancements.”<sup>398</sup> I argue that the internationalizing agenda of the IRs priests is a part of these new counter-hegemonic strategies which are meant to stage a comeback not only on the religious scene in Ghana but also to announce their presence to the world.

I suggest also that the activities of indigenous religious agents outside of Ghana is not happening in a vacuum. Some developments at home and abroad are furnishing conducive contexts for these global outreach initiatives. These include the growing interest of the old African diaspora communities in indigenous African religions, which they see as the root of their spiritual heritages. This is leading to the growth in religious tourism, featuring the patronage of indigenous religious rituals and other related activities by people from Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti and African-Americans, as well as their willingness to host ritual specialists from Africa. Also, as African migrants of the new Diasporas face challenges in their new homes in Europe, North America, and Australia, some of them see the need to solicit the services of indigenous religious agents who are noted for providing speedy spiritual responses to problems. Also, cultural awakening or revivalism, coupled with globalization as well as Ghana’s new democracy, is assisting the indigenous religious topography

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<sup>396</sup> Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, 214.

<sup>397</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity and its Malcontents*, xi.

<sup>398</sup> Komfo Kyei, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, April 2, 2013.

in shaping itself to the local and international religious markets. In what follows I examine the history behind the current happenings. Next, I explore some of the earlier activities of individuals that have contributed to the current discussion.

## **7.2 Local and Diaspora Indigenous Religious Activities**

The “1960s/70s saw a cultural awakening, especially cultural awareness in black pride, power and self-awareness”<sup>399</sup> of the black person’s spirituality, or what Konadu has described as the “black cultural thing” in the United States of America.<sup>400</sup> The influence of this movement spread so much that it prompted a revisiting of narratives about the African consciousness in African communities around the globe. In Ghana, it inspired the genesis of the concept or the cultural project that came to be known as *Sankofa*. Unlike the 1950s struggles, which were mainly political in nature, this new concept placed an emphasis on religion. Individuals led the revivalism or the re- structuring of indigenous religions in various African countries as well as in the diaspora. In Ghana, local personalities like Afrikadzata Deku, Seth Dartey Kumordzi and Segbawu constructed nationalistic religious ideas, taking advantage of the growing popularity of the print and electronic media.”<sup>401</sup> Indigenous priests/priestesses also tried institutionalizing themselves. They established a group called the Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers Association (GPTHA) in 1962.<sup>402</sup> Nana Akua Oparabea, the priestess of Akonnedi shrine, was the main pillar behind this move. The organization

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<sup>399</sup> Kwasi Konadu, *Being Akan in Africa and America: The Akan Diaspora in the Americas*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217.

<sup>400</sup> Konadu, *Being Akan*, 2010, 218.

<sup>401</sup> Elom Dovlo, “The Church in Africa and Religious Pluralism,” *Exchange* 27. 1, (1998): 54.

<sup>402</sup> This was the first attempt to institutionalize indigenous religion and though it did not work the way it was planned to function because of power struggles among the priests/priestess, it is still relevant and serves the purposes of differentiating between indigenous agents trained and untrained. It is recognized by the Ghanaian government as an official body. So before the Ghanaian Ministry of Health can give license to IR agents to use herbs to heal one must first be a member.



also received backing from the first president of Ghana, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. The influence of *Sankofa* extended into the early 80s and fertilized the ground for the genesis of *Afrikania*, which could then be described as the most significant new indigenous religious movement.

*Afrikania*'s origins sparked a new revolution that shook the Ghanaian religious field. Founded by a Catholic priest, Vincent Damuah, who was later called *Osofo kɔmfo* Damuah, *Afrikania*'s objective was to revitalize indigenous religions and transform them into a "modern and morally good" religion comparable with any world religion.<sup>403</sup> The founder's dramatic conversion from the Catholic Church created a stir in Ghanaian Christian circles. This was viewed as an anomaly by Ghana's Christians. As Wuaku has noted, when Damuah died in 1992 many Christians welcomed the news celebrating the death as a sign of Jesus's defeat over Satan, who rules the indigenous religious landscape according to contemporary Christian discourse.

In spite of what can be described as his untimely death, Damuah's initiative in revitalizing African religions ushered in an era of indigenous religious, cultural inventions and revivalisms in Ghana. Many Ghanaian religious and political actors were inspired by Damuah to initiate cultural projects afterwards. In his work on Ghana's Hindus, Wuaku identifies some of these cultural awakening programs, such as the Center for the Awareness of African Spirituality, new festivals such as the *Gbidukor Zaa* celebrated in Peki, or invented traditions such as Panafest and Emancipation Day.<sup>404</sup> The Pan African festival or *Panafest* for short, was created in the mid-1980s by the late Efua Sutherland. The idea behind the initiative was to create a national platform where Africans on the continent and in the diaspora can come together to discuss issues bordering on

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<sup>403</sup> De Witte, "Religious Media, Mobile Spirits, Publicity and Secrecy," 89.

<sup>404</sup> Wuaku, *Hindu Gods in West Africa*, 70.

their history while spicing up Africa consciousness among people of African descent. Supported by the then government, this festival has existed since 1992.<sup>405</sup> Another festival, Emancipation Day, was added in 1998 to remember the horrors of the slave trade as well as to venerate people who fought for its abolition. Apart from these new festivals there was also the rekindling of interest in the already existing festivals such as the *Akwasidae*, *Fetu Afahye*, *Kundum*, *Odwira*, *Hogbetsotso* and *Aboakyere*, which are both cultural and religious festivals.<sup>406</sup>

For the diaspora portion of the African world, the cultural awakenings on the African continent, especially in Ghana, held a large appeal. People of African descent from the diaspora in the Caribbean, South America and the USA flooded Ghana every year to access authentic African spirituality, or have a firsthand experience of an indigenous African power house, which many consider to be more potent than those they were exposed to in their home nations.

There was a boom in religio-cultural tourism in Ghana beginning from the 1980s as a result of these developments. The quest of individuals from the African diaspora for recognition as powerful spiritualists whose potency draws on authentic African or “home” sources would seem to be a strong motivating force behind these visits. A classic example of such an individual is an African-American born as Augustus Edwards, who later became Nana Yao Opare Dinizulu.<sup>407</sup> In 1965 Augustus visited Akonnedi shrine in the eastern region of Ghana. During this visit, he became an apprentice and was initiated as a priest by Nana Akua Oparebea, *ɔkomfoohemaa* of Akonnedi, Abena shrine of Larteh-Kubease in 1969.<sup>408</sup> A divination at the shrine, revealing that Dinizulu was a kinsman by the owners of shrine, prompted this initiation. Dinizulu went back to the USA and

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<sup>405</sup> <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=235914> and <http://www.panafestghana.org/op.php?id=5> accessed 24/12/2013

<sup>406</sup> Wuaku, *Hindu Gods in West Africa*, 69-71.

<sup>407</sup> The Akan Diaspora in Americas, (USA oxford university press, 2010), 202.

<sup>408</sup> Konadu, *Akan Diaspora in America*, 2010, 214.

founded a religious institution in New York called *Bosum, Dzemawodzi*, in 1971. He inaugurated other branches in Philadelphia where he trained priests/priestesses, as well as instructing lay people about indigenous Akan spirituality. Beginning in the 1970s, Dinizulu would lead delegations of Americans, mostly people of African descent, to Ghana.<sup>409</sup> Some of these individuals trained and initiated in New York but still wanted to be spiritually fortified in the “homeland.”<sup>410</sup> But there were still many others who simply wanted to visit Ghana to identify with their African roots.

One of the products of Dinizulu was Nana Akua Kyerewaa Opokuwaa, another African-American. She was trained by Dinizulu in Bosum Dzimawodzi NY and was initiated in 1971, visited Ghana and was en-stooled as a queen mother in Elimina. In 1997 she established *Asomdwee Fie*, Shrine of the Abosom and Nsamanfo International (AFSANI) at the District of Columbia, Washington DC in the United States.<sup>411</sup> These are just but a few examples of people of African descent from the diaspora who came to Ghana after their own self-tutored experiences in the spirituality of their ancestors who were slaves.

But it was not only in Ghana that we find such cases. For example, Mama Zogbe, an African-American, also found her roots in Togo, was initiated and established the *Mami Wata* West Africa *Vodoun* shrine in Martinez, Georgia. Also noteworthy is Walter Eugene King, later known as Oba Efuntola Osejeman Adelabu Adefunmi, the king of Oyotunji village. Scholars such as Olupona and Rey have noted how he has contributed greatly to *Orisha* devotion in the United States, drawing largely on his links to Yoruba religions of Nigeria.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> About 30 or more went through training and were successfully initiated at the Akonnedi shrine as noted by Konadu. (Konadu, 219.)

<sup>410</sup> Homeland here means Africa, Ghana.

<sup>411</sup> <http://www.afsani.org/nanakyerewaa/aboutauthor.htm>

<sup>412</sup> Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey, Eds., *Orisha Devotion as World Religion*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 17.

I wish to also point that, there were also parallel developments in other African countries by non-Africans. A classic example is an Austrian-born artist Suzanne Wenger who sought to revive the Yoruba religion. She married Ulli Beier,<sup>413</sup> a German linguist, and the couple moved to Nigeria when Beier accepted a position as phonetician in Ibadan. Wenger's interest in the art and art collection aroused her curiosity in the Yoruba religion. She later trained as a priestess and adopted Oshogbo as her home. She was so engulfed in the Yoruba religion that she "made enormous efforts to protect the sacred grove of Osun, a forest along the banks of the Oshun River just outside Oshogbo, which she turned into a sculpture garden filled with art made by her and others."<sup>414</sup> In 2005, her efforts to protect the grove were rewarded by UNESCO's decision to list it as a world heritage site.<sup>415</sup>

As IRs religions go global, scholars and practitioners have advocated for some to be acknowledged as world religions. Though the concept of "world religion" is itself problematic, Olupona and Rey have advocated that Yoruba religions, just as Christianity, "should now be considered as a world religion"<sup>416</sup> on the basis of movements begun by persons such as Efuntola Osejeman Adelabu Adefunmi the king of Oyotunji activities in the USA and Susanne Wegner in Oshogbo, Nigeria. It would seem that all these efforts paid off, as Stephen R Prothero has recently listed Yoruba religion as a world religion in his book *Die Neun Welt Religionen*<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Beier later became the director of Iwalewa-Haus in Bayreuth.

<sup>414</sup> Keith Richards, "Suzanne Wenger: Austrian-born artist and priestess of the Yoruba religion. *The Guardian*, March 26, 2009, Accessed February 27 2014, January 2009. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/mar/26/obituary-suzanne-wenger>

<sup>415</sup> Andrew Walker, BBC News, Oshogbo, Nigeria, "The White Priestess of 'black magic,'" <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7595841.stm>.

<sup>416</sup> Olupona and Rey, Eds., *Orisha Devotion as World Religion*, 3.

<sup>417</sup> Stephen R. Prothero, *Die neun Weltreligionen*, (München, Diederichs, 2011), 239.

The point of these examples is to show how far-reaching the influence of the local African or Ghanaian indigenous religious revivalisms were, and also to identify earlier developments that have prepared the groundwork for the contemporary global outreach campaign of Ghana's new indigenous priests. In fact, the positive outlook of Africans from the diaspora towards indigenous religions, and the eagerness with which they participated in indigenous religious practices in Ghana, at a time when these traditions were highly disparaged as occult and evil practices in local circles, helped lift the local image of these traditions and boosted the morale of their agents. It also made Ghanaians trust the value of their local "made in Ghana" products more. These include the indigenous religions.

### **7.3 Manifestation of Ghanaian Interest in Indigenous "Religious Stuff"**

As a more positive appreciation of the indigenous heritage manifested in all aspects of Ghanaian life, the patronage of authentically made-in-Ghana goods locally, and exportation to international markets followed. For example, made in Ghana artifacts, but also agricultural produce,<sup>418</sup> were patronized and exported to countries overseas. This patronage led to an expansion in the market for *tie -dye* and *batik* production, creating jobs for local designers/dressmakers and tailors. The government created a national trade platform known as "Trade Fair" for this purpose. Organized every year since its inception and biennially very recently, the Trade Fair is a stage to showcase African product in a month-long trade bazaar. These local fabrics were patronized abroad by African-Americans, especially in Black-dominated cities such as Chicago. For example, in his time as a pastor of the church, Rev Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., Pastor Emeritus of Trinity United Church of Christ (TUCC), encouraged his predominantly African-American congregation to show

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<sup>418</sup> These products included beads, carved art, tie-dye cloths and produce such as pineapple, ginger, yam, and oil.

their pride as Africans by wearing African dress to church.<sup>419</sup> He always wore African dress himself. I therefore propose that the global outreach campaign of Ghana's indigenous priests builds upon the Ghanaian orientation towards exporting local products. The development dubbed by African Christian scholars as "reverse mission" also provided an impetus for Ghana's new priests to begin extending their influences abroad. Adogame describes reverse mission in the following words:

... the concept means that, in time past churches in America and Europe reached out to the world, especially Africa, with the hope of rescuing the heathen and turning them to Christ, but now those "heathens" are coming back to re-Christianize them, often referring to Europe as a "dark or prodigal continent..."<sup>420</sup>

The idea that the West is or has become spiritually arid, and the challenges African trans-migrants face in adjusting to their new homes in Europe and north America, has increased the demand for African Christianity as a spiritual resource and also triggering the influx of African indigenous spiritual forms to Europe and North America.

All the developments discussed above have contributed to producing fertile grounds for the new breed of Ghana's indigenous religious agents [priests/priestesses] to build on earlier efforts to re-stage indigenous religions as an alternative form of religion on the Ghanaian religious field and to endeavor to operate on the global stage. In the discussion that follows, I focus attention on Kwaku Bonsam as a major player and a protagonist in the indigenous religious reconstruction agenda, whose activities exemplify the ambitions of these priests. Viewing his activities as counter-hegemonic in that they undermined dominant Christian assumptions in Ghana, I examine

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<sup>419</sup> [http://www.trinitychicago.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=114](http://www.trinitychicago.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=114), Accessed 27/1/13

<sup>420</sup> Spickard and Adogame, "Introduction: African, The New African Diaspora, and Religious Transnationalism in a Global World in Religion." 14.

how he uses modernizing formats, media culture and the internet in his bid to pursue his international agenda, which is expanding his influence abroad to fulfill the “call of the deity Kofi.”

#### **7.4 Kwaku Bonsam and His Global Outreach**

Since his first public appearance on a Kumasi-based radio with a message from his chief deity, Kofi oo Kofi, to redeem Ghana and the world at large, Bonsam has sponsored an outreach out of his natural jurisdictions, that is, his Akomadan-Afrancho base, to other towns and villages in Ghana and has dared even to travel abroad to propagate his message as well as sell religious products to Africans and other interested consumers.

He is one of the numerous neo-indigenous religious agents and a leading protagonist in that endeavour. Bonsam shows his confidence in his racial identity, and in his utterances and demeanor through his passionate talks about his call and future plans. The idea that he has been chosen by the gods seems to be a crucial driving force behind Bonsam’s moves. Emboldened by this notion, and what he describes as promises of spiritual help from his chief gods, Kofi oo Kofi (whose appellation is powers) and Chacha, Bonsam is confident that he can popularize indigenous religions not only in Ghana, but in other places.

Noticeably, Kwaku Bonsam is the only neo-indigenous religious priest with thirteen shrines operating presently in cities, towns and villages in Ghana. Other neo-priests only have two or three shrines. But some of them seem to have the intention of internationalizing their services abroad; I observed this through the contact information they give in the media. For instance, phone numbers and days of contacts are given differently to local and foreign clients. Nonetheless, Bonsam is the most aggressive of them—he has a track record of pursuing this transnational agenda. Aside from the shrines in Ghana he has shrines in Amsterdam, France, London, Conakry

in Guinea and recently the Bronx-New York, USA.<sup>421</sup> Shrines are symbols that represent “presence” of a spiritual existence; hence his shrines abroad are cryptograms of his presence in those continents he has carefully chosen in his project of internationalizing indigenous religions.

As argued earlier, internationalization or what I refer to as “burgerization” of religious organization has become a status quo. I interpret Kwaku Bonsam’s move in that direction as representing something of a counter approach. Again, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the growth of interest of Africans in the historical as well as more recent Diasporas in indigenous religions, prompting an extension of indigenous traditions beyond their cradle Africa/Ghana. Recent work by Parish has drawn attention to anti-witchcraft Akan shrines in New York, manned by priests who help clients to “eradicate witches” that stand between them and the process of becoming rich and famous celebrities.<sup>422</sup> What she does not tell us is the background of these priests behind the anti-witchcraft shrines in new York, that is, whether they are charlatans exploiting clientele only for economic gains or real priests, who have migrated to New York to help meet such spiritual needs of the growing African and Caribbean populations there <sup>423</sup> or even are African American priests/priestesses trained in Africa, as I described previously. Many of them are setting up shrines in New York. In the next section I focus on Bonsam’s international agenda and how he carries it out.

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<sup>421</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 3, 2013.

<sup>422</sup> Parish, Jane. “Chasing Celebrity: Akan Witchcraft and New York City,” in *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 78. 2 (2013): 281.

<sup>423</sup> Bosomfo Kojo Poku, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 10, 2012



## 7.5 Internationalization of Indigenous Religion

In December 2011, I travelled from Germany to Ghana to do fieldwork. This was the start of my preliminary field work on Ghana's new indigenous priests and my goal was to map the field in order to select sites for my research. I had identified Kwaku Bonsam and his shrine as a potential research site. Upon my arrival in Ghana, I had done the necessary ground work and through the help of the Ashanti Regional Coordinating Director, Mr. Kofi Dwomor Asubonteng, I was linked to the District Coordinating Director of Offinso North District Assembly at Akomadan-Afrancho, known as Tony. He introduced me to an assemblyman who became my gatekeeper and took me to the shrine to meet Kojo Poku, the *bosomfo* or spokesperson for Bonsam's shrine. This was my first visit to the shrine and I had butterflies in my stomach as I approached it. But Kojo Poku's warm personality had a calming and reassuring effect on me. After I had presented him with a bottle of schnapps' and brandy, as Ashanti custom demands of visitors to sacred sites such as shrines, I was disappointed to learn from Kojo Poku that Kwaku Bonsam had travelled to Europe.

The fact that an indigenous priest would travel to Europe piqued my curiosity and prompted me to question Kojo Poku further. "Has he gone for a vacation?" I began, my face puckered with some concern about the short duration of this leg of my field research. "He is there for business," Poku responded, smiling. "Is he a businessman too?" I cut in. "Well," Poku started explaining,

our chief god, Kofi oo Kofi, promised to take Nana K.B to places...Last year Nana came to the aid of a man in Holland, after the necessary rites and the deities solved his puzzle. The man invited him over to Amsterdam. While in Amsterdam, Nana opened a shrine there by the assistance of the deities and appointed the man as the *Bosomfo*. Now, demand for his remedies is so high that he has to go there himself to support the *Bosomfo*. Wait, when he comes he will provide you with greater details, that is, if he and the deities accept you to do this research."<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Bosomfo Kojo Poku, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 10, 2012

The idea to probe into the extension of Bonsam's activities outside Ghana, especially in far flung locations in the west, originated from this conversation with Poku.

My first encounter with Bonsam was on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2012. This was the first *Akwasidae*<sup>425</sup> on the Ashanti religious calendar. That morning, Bonsam showed up in the traditional priestly regalia, dancing in front of his followers and fans to the rhythms of the drummers. The crowd had gathered, first at the entrance of the town to welcome the priest, and had begun a procession that would go through the town and end at his shrine. I followed the procession to his shrine and after libation of thanksgiving we all left for the chief's palace to "feed the gods." Nana Kwaku Bonsam is a kinsman of the town of Akomadan-Afrancho, but also as a priest, it was mandatory for him to participate in the festival.

The afternoon of the festival day is set aside for a demonstration of magico-religious power by priests and priestesses. During the latter part of the afternoon on this day he would be possessed by the gods and remain in a trance for a long time. Requests from clients will be communicated to him by the *bosomfo*, who would also translate his responses to them as they were in the language of the gods and unintelligible to the uninitiated. This was the venue and time for my request to do research to be considered by the gods. Only when they agreed for the research to proceed would the drinks I had presented be accepted.

Bonsam listened with rapt attention as *bosomfo* Kojo Poku told him of the details of my research. The fact that I had travelled from Germany seemed to attract his attention for he jerked his head up and nodded in approval when *Bosomfo* mentioned it as he introduced me. He quickly collected my introduction letter and business card. It was in the course of my initial conversation

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<sup>425</sup> The Akan Ashanti use a forty day monthly religious calendar and *Akwasidae* is celebrated every forty days on the calendar.

with him later that evening in his home that he provided me with a more elaborate rationale for his overseas expansionist endeavours:

My god, Kofi oo Kofi, has never failed me. He promised to take me to places to expand the religions of our forefathers... and he is doing it. I went to Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and Paris, to help alleviate the physical and spiritual problems of people. My next visit will be the USA.<sup>426</sup>

When I inquired what he meant, when he referred to “my people” he shot back, “Everybody, Ghanaians, Jamaicans, Indians and even some of the white people. My aim is to help anyone from anywhere in the world and to tell them the religion of my ancestors is modern and good.”<sup>427</sup>

We can say that, from the outset, Bonsam had already defined his mission in global terms and no effort better represents his agenda to internationalize and modernize indigenous traditions than the extension of his services overseas, especially to countries he visits in Europe and recently to New York, USA, where he lived for close to a year. But Bonsam’s moves can also be interpreted as an attempt to debunk the narrative championed by the dominant Pentecostals that IRs represent the primitive past and that participation in them retards the progress of agents and followers in the modern world, in contradistinction with Pentecostalism which facilitates progress in a modern and globalized world. His frequent travels abroad to sell his brand of IRs internationally create an image of Bonsam as an international spiritual superstar, like many of the Pentecostal-Charismatic pastors who have branches of their churches abroad. Bonsam’s rise, and his activities in this connection, can be said to represent an unprecedented modern Ghanaian development as indigenous priests in Ghana for the most part confine their activities to their countryside bases.

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<sup>426</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 22, 2012.

<sup>427</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, January 22, 2012.

Operating from his shrines in Amsterdam, Paris and New York and other visiting posts, Bonsam reaches out to an extensive clientele base in Europe, especially Amsterdam. Data from New York shows he is quite popular among migrants from Africa and the Caribbean Islands. Some of these individuals are African migrants seeking to make a living in New York's rather harsh socio-economic conditions and seeking forms of magico-religious to help them make socio-economic breakthroughs. Other immigrants seek protection from witchcraft or other forms of supernatural harm, the fear of which is becoming a feature of American culture as the African-American, South American and African immigrant presence becomes stronger. Bonsam's reputation as a great African priest endears him especially to African-Americans and migrants from the Caribbean interested in exploring aspects of the spirituality of their African heritage. However, what seems to be the key to his popularity might have been his daring nature of confronting and challenging Christian pastors for supposedly soliciting his "potent African powers" for assistance. His actions were apparently overstated in the media and the internet and, as small as the world has become now, they exposed him overnight. But reports from the families of Ghanaian migrants back home who might have implored and received his assistance could have also spread his exploits through word of mouth to others abroad.

Bonsam sees his travels abroad as very purposeful. They are part of his efforts to establish a niche for himself as the representative of African indigenous religions, which are now respectable participants in Ghana's modern religious ethos but which have been behind the scenes till recently. Another goal is to push his narrative that like other modern religious institutions in Ghana so that IRs can also provide contexts for the rallying of resources which could be used for the advancement of humanity, black and white, and should be, therefore, patronized as an alternative spirituality to

the others. Bonsam's point is that for a religion to be of some relevance it must be easily accessible to its followers, hence his transnational efforts.

## **7.6 Transnational Agenda**

The use of modernizing formats such as internet culture, media, telephone, billboards, tracts and posters are some of the methods Bonsam deploys to spread the influence of his religion abroad. Normally, using Ghanaian radio stations based in European and American cities, he announces his presence, identifies his location and indicates his phone numbers. He also describes the array of spiritual services he can offer his clientele. Sometimes he used the print media to reach out to the diaspora public. In the USA for instance, Ghana shops/African markets, Mexican shops, and barber shops are flooded with his tracts and handouts and ethnic papers feature stories about him and advertise his services. Word of mouth spreads like wild fire in the African community, especially in contexts where migrants make important social contact with each other—church services, parties, during rites of passage such as births, marriages and funerals. We have identified two mediums (cyber and physical spaces) Bonsam uses in promulgating his mission abroad. In the discussion that follows I describe his use of both cyber and physical spaces in reaching out to his diaspora clientele.

### **7.6.1 Cyberspace Community**

In the new global era, it is possible to interact with persons not physically known but virtually known through the spaces or platforms the internet culture has created. Gado refers to such spaces as shared “at national or even continental levels,” though these shared spaces are not as stable as national, cultural or racial spaces. They appear to be the “receptacles...of globalizing and

localizing dynamics.”<sup>428</sup> Taking advantage of this opportunity, Kwaku Bonsam has created a website--<http://www.kwakubonsam.com/>-- where he has introduced himself and advertised his credentials, services and activities. He has also made known to potential clients his ability to move around the globe by posting his global itinerary on his website. Building on this he has created a cyber-community where he can personally communicate with clients/fans via video/audio located in far-flung places on the globe using his numerous social networks (Facebook, Skype, Tango, Whatsapp, Viber and Twitter). The data discussed here draws largely on his Facebook community, the major site he uses to reach people all over the world. Two of his Facebook<sup>429</sup> accounts are opened to the public with about 2000 friends, family and fans and two secured accounts for clients/fans exist for those who wish to keep in touch with him privately.



The other social medium he uses frequently is Skype. Using the Skype medium, he communicates with clients or friends, often asking them their names and giving them about 10 to 15 minutes to describe the situations that prompted them to call. In the course of such interactions he would carry his computer or smart phone to a room where his shrine is, to create a sense of

<sup>428</sup> Gado, Alzouma, “Identities in a ‘Fragmegrated’ World: Black Cyber-communities and the French Integration System in African and Black Diaspora,” *An International Journal* 1(2008):201-214.

<sup>429</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/nanakwaku.bonsam.5?fref=ts>. Accessed December 1 2012.  
<https://www.facebook.com/nana.bonsam?fref=ts> (1179 followers). Accessed 31/12/2013.

privacy or to secure the full trust of the clients by making the images of his gods, the repositories of his powers, visible to the far away client. The client is also able to see that Bonsam was really consulting with the gods. During my visits to him I would hear him prescribe certain remedies for the clients. These include some actions they must take often.

Sometimes he asked clients to come and see him physically when they call him on phone. At other times he would instruct them to send money to Ghana to his assistant in order that he buy some required paraphernalia to prepare medicine for the clients for when he goes back to Ghana. One gets the sense that ability to bridge the geographical gap between them and Bonsam makes the phone an ideal medium for these clients. With a click of a finger a client is able to call or chat with a priest and gain his services. Sometimes the problem is solved immediately. For others, especially those who are Christians and would not want anybody to know they are consulting with an indigenous priest, the ability of the internet to conceal their transactions from the public and confine it to the private sphere is what makes consulting Bonsam on Skype appealing.

We must note, however, that such innovative modes of reaching people in cyberspace and creating online communities or using other forms of modernizing platforms to showcase the power of indigenous religions does not seem to be welcomed by practitioners in the old school indigenous religions, that is, the priests and priestesses of the revitalized shrines. Some scholars of indigenous African religions have also raised issues about the use of modern technology by the new breed of indigenous priests.



Post on website before departure to the USA and handouts distributed in shops in the Bronx. (Pictures by author).

Many of these issues focus on the question of authenticity. Rosalind Hackett in an American Academy of Religions (AAR) conference held in Chicago Illinois in 2012 raised issues about cyber consultation and the practice of rituals. Her major concern was how a priest can perform a ritual in cyberspace, especially the effectiveness of that space to transmit the magico-religious effects of rituals practiced by a faraway specialist. She argued that African indigenous religions embody tangible rituals as part of their ethos. Sometimes clients must be touched, or made to engage in certain actions at the shrine. This is not possible in cyber space. Similarly, Jacob Olupona questioned the credibility of such virtual priests especially in connection with their training.<sup>430</sup> I share some of these criticisms. In the course of my own observations, I would wonder what would happen should the internet be disconnected in the middle of a divination. Most often, the genuineness of the neo-indigenous priests is questioned when neo-indigenous priests have not undergone any form of training and are not supervised by anyone or any organization. My

<sup>430</sup> Rosalind Hackett is Religious Studies Professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, a specialist in Religions of Africa. Jacob K. Olupona is an expert in African Traditions and currently a professor at Harvard Divinity School and of African and African- American Studies in the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences. I was present for these insightful comments in AAR, Chicago Illinois, and November 18, 2012.



curiosities drove me to inquire from Bonsam how it was possible for him to perform rituals using cyberspace. Bonsam hinted that:

Anytime a ritual must be performed or a sacrifice must be done, I call home for my assistant Nana Moore to do it... after that the information is forwarded to me and I also tell the clients. You know I cannot slaughter an animal on the internet or kill an animal while abroad, as it is against their laws.<sup>431</sup>

To illustrate how his agent performs needed rituals on his behalf from Ghana when he was abroad, Bonsam told me of a recent incident in Ghana involving Richard Kingston (nicknamed Olele), a goal keeper of the Ghana Black Stars, the national soccer team. The goal keeper had praised celebrated Nigerian pastor Prophet T.B Joshua, attributing the team's victory in a World Cup qualifying game against the Egyptians (6-1), to the God-man's spiritual intervention. This development angered Bonsam. His point was that all well-meaning Ghanaians around the world prayed for Ghana to win that match--indigenous priests, pastors, Muslim *Mallams*<sup>432</sup> and many other individuals, and T.B Joshua should not get to take all the credit for the victory.

He told me of how he called his agent in Akomadan-Afrancho, his headquarters, and ordered him to perform a ritual to deities to determine whether Prophet Joshua was behind the victory of the Black Stars. When the goalkeeper was dropped from the team in the return match in Egypt, Bonsam concluded that it was the sign from the gods that Joshua had no hand in the victory of the Black Stars. He argued that the goalkeeper was dropped because he invited curses on himself for deceiving the whole world.<sup>433</sup> Such incidents are often blown in the public by the media and this same story was carried by a media house known as News One.

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<sup>431</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, November 15 2012.

<sup>432</sup> A Mallam in Ghana means a Muslim spiritualist. They often combine spirituality with herbs just like the indigenous religious priests.

<sup>433</sup> Kwaku Bonsam on phone 4<sup>th</sup> November 2013, to G. Nrenzah. News One carried the story on the 6<sup>th</sup> November 2013. <http://www.news1ghana.com/?p=29501>. Accessed 11.6.2013.

### 7.6.2 Physical Space

The other platform Bonsam uses to further his internationalization agenda is his physical travel to those far places where his services are needed. I have already listed countries he has visited for such purposes. In Europe he uses Amsterdam in the Netherlands as a gateway to other European countries such as France, Britain, Italy and Germany. He adopted the style he normally uses in Ghana-- the electronic media, especially radio, to announce his presence. In Amsterdam, for instance, Asomdwe FM<sup>434</sup> and Word of Mouth FM are two Ghanaian radio stations he uses to announce his presence. These stations also announce his programs and the locations of his physical performances. Launching his arrival in a rented town hall program in Amsterdam on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2010 dubbed “Watch night, Wonders by Nana Kwaku Bonsam,”<sup>435</sup> the organizers treated audiences to Ghanaian-style gospel music--some written and sung by Bonsam, others by seasoned Ghanaian gospel artists. The objective of this program was to introduce Bonsam to the diaspora community, the majority of whom are Christian worshippers and would flock to such a program. Featuring Bonsam in a Christian Gospel program is also a strategy designed to identify him with Christianity and “soften” the attitudes towards him of Christians who knew him in Ghana as an indigenous priest. The program casts him as a very tolerant religious agent who has great respect for Christian religious forms and who can be approached by members of the Christian community, too.

Later, the program in which Bonsam would demonstrate the powers of his gods rippled. This was dubbed “the reason for the season” and announced on Asomdwe FM and handouts in African markets/Ghanaian barbing shops. The announcements promised audiences “an all-night

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<sup>434</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgYdQ0QMKAM> (the is an FM owned by a Ghanaian with transmission mostly in Twi, a dominant language in Ghana)

<sup>435</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwH\\_E-LFQrY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwH_E-LFQrY) accessed 10/12/2012.

event filled with wonders.” My account of the happenings on this night are based on narratives from Samuel Kwaku Duah Sakodie, popularly known as Kwaku Duah, the *bosomfo* of Amsterdam, founder and CEO of "Donipa foundation International based in Holland; from an attendee I interviewed, Naana Abena Serwah; and from Nana Kwaku Antwi, a radio presenter and the MC of the occasion. The gathering that day was comprised of diverse African migrants, though Ghanaians dominated. Those present came from diverse religious affiliations as well.

The show started with a call to prayer by pouring libation to the gods, followed by drumming. Then Bonsam became possessed and started dancing. His gods possessed him, one after the other. When the minor gods had all left, his chief god, Kofi oo Kofi, took over his personality and began to perform magical feats as a way of demonstrating his magico-religious power. He conjured Ghanaian fabrics, *ahenema* slippers (traditional Ghanaian slippers), t-shirts and made water in a bowl to boil in the absence of fire. When this water was poured on the hands of audiences they felt no heat or pain and were not burned. Then in a dramatic show of power he conjured up some rings which he distributed to his eager audiences. The rings, he explained, were meant to protect them and ward off evil as well as give them good luck.



Conjured Ghana fabric and ahenemaa in the two pictures. (Pictures by Kwaku Duah).



Conjured rings said to give good luck. (Pictures by Alex, a Ghanaian photographer in Amsterdam).

A similar vigil or all night event was repeated on December 2011 in Amsterdam. One theme that emerged from these descriptions of the events announcing Bonsam's physical presence in the diaspora religious landscape was his borrowing of a popular Ghanaian Christian jargon and praxis, "all night." This Pentecostal-Charismatic term describes the practice of keeping vigil all night praying (often a warfare tactic against the devil) but also playing gospel music. In appropriating this Christian format, Bonsam is not only being savvy but also trying to demystify

IRs, lightening its “strange” and negative image by “Christianizing it” and presenting it as a more palatable way to a multi-racial and multi-religious crowd, the majority of whom have affiliations with Christianity. Intrigued by these performances, many of these individuals have formed the “Kofi oo Kofi” fan club. This is a club for fans and clients, most of whom consult him online.

The second example, showing how Bonsam makes his physical presence known in furthering his transitional agenda is his visit to the USA. His style in the USA is slightly different from Amsterdam, where he already has a Public Relations Officer, Kwaku Duah, who is also the *bosomfo*, and does all the organization before Bonsam’s arrival. Here again we see Bonsam make use of electronic media: his website; tracts; and flyers to announce his presence and publicizing his address<sup>436</sup> and contact number even before his arrival in the States. Unlike his Amsterdam stage show, no special forum is organized for him in the States. Rather he attends radio interviews, during which people phone in requests and questions. He also makes appearances on TV stations, such as Sahara TV,<sup>437</sup> and he attends social,<sup>438</sup> political and religious activities/gatherings. His USA outreach activities depend mostly on his links with well-connected Ghanaians. He has been featured in newspapers like the *New York Times*.<sup>439</sup>

Kwaku Bonsam shifts and shapes his discourse as he gets global exposure, according to the condition in each continent or country he visits. What seems clear is that his international agenda is shifting his ideas. In Amsterdam, his aim was to help the Ghanaian community as well as anyone who needed access to his services. His goal was to bring the content of indigenous African spirituality to the door steps of consumers in Europe and recruit new clients. In the USA

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<sup>436</sup> 1756 Topping Ave, Apt #3A, Bronx, NY 10457.

<sup>437</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USogrjgiAtI>. (Sahara TV; He was interviewed in August 2013).

<sup>438</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXXGI3p-2M>.

<sup>439</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/nyregion/feared-traditional-priest-from-ghana-spends-a-year-in-the-bronx.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/nyregion/feared-traditional-priest-from-ghana-spends-a-year-in-the-bronx.html?_r=0) assessed 5/10/2013.

we see a shift in his agenda. His agenda is more to popularize indigenous religion as commissioned by his chief god, Kofi oo Kofi, through his works. He told me in an earlier visit to him in the Bronx, New York in November 2012,

Now my aim is to let people know what indigenous religion is all about. I am not here for magical performance. My aim is to educate people on the religion in general and also to help them solve their physical and spiritual problems so that they can function well in this world.<sup>440</sup>

In the U.S. he was seen more often in the public partnering with organizers of cultural, social and religious events than as a sole performer on a public platform. When people consult with him in the U.S. it is often in private, in secrecy. His private client consultations and non-noisy public displays can also be attributed to the type of visa he obtained before entering the United States. He was granted a B1 visa and holders of this type of visa are not supposed to work in the States. It could therefore be that he operates more undercover in matters of consultations and religious activities in the U.S. because he fears deportation should the authorities find out about his activities.

Bonsam make a point of sharing with me information about his encounters with important persons in the U.S.A. At one time he told me of how he was invited to “Ghana New York Expo 2012” in Mount Vernon, New York on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 2012, and how this gave him the opportunity to speak to the mayor of the city, Ernest D. Davis, about indigenous religions after the program. Again, showing me a photo, he also described his meeting with the Director of Folklore at the Brooklyn Arts Council, Dr. Kay Turner. It was possible for me to witness one of his public appearances. This was at a social gathering organized by the African migrants in New York on the 14<sup>th</sup> November 2012 to deliberate on the impact of “hurricane Sandy” that had hit New York.

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<sup>440</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, September 11, 2012.

What was of concern to me that night was Kwaku Bonsam's speech at the gathering. I was eager to learn what he would say to the audiences and I was impressed with how he seized the opportunity to educate the gathering on aspects of Ghana's indigenous religions. He started speaking English and mixing it with Twi which was translated by the MC:

I am Kwaku Bonsam and I guess most of you have heard about me or know me. I am not evil as my name implies but it's my appellation as a Wednesday born Akan man. I have come to New York to tell Akwasi Broni that the religion of my ancestors is authentic and not evil but also [to] tell you Ghanaians that you should not be deceived by hypocritical pastors who deceive you that indigenous religious base is evil but come to me for powers.....this hurricane that happened is not something which science can explain; it is spiritual, the gods of New York are upset for being ignored by the city. Sacrifice to them and such a disaster would never happen again to this city. <sup>441</sup>

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<sup>441</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, November 12, 2012.





Pictures of Bonsam's Social Activities in the Bronx, USA. (Pictures by author).

Of course such a speech appealed to Ghanaians and other African ethnicities present, but was meaningless or even sounded bizarre to other ethnicities present there. But Bonsam does not seem perturbed by the presence of people who did not share his understandings of indigenous religion. For him this was rather an opportunity to introduce a new perspective to them. This represents his typical style of operating in the United States—seizing all sorts of platforms, even those that are not religious, to speak about his religion in public. He keeps the practice aspect



confined to the private domain and in the secrecy of his apartment and online community. Next, I examine some of these clients' accounts about their experiences.

### **7.7 Subscribers to Indigenous Religion: Testimonies Abroad and Online**

It is becoming increasingly interesting how people of African descent from diverse backgrounds as well as other races from around the world subscribe to Bonsam's IR through the magic of modern communication tools. People access him for various motives. Here I examine some testimonies of some diaspora/online clientele. I must state, however, that I feature the views of only a few subscribers because this portion of the discussion represents a tangential aspect of the present study. I intend to explore some of the themes here in a subsequent research project on Bonsam's diaspora clientele.

Respondents cited diverse reasons for consulting with Bonsam; some of them were merely fans and sympathizers of IRs and therefore identify with him because he is a famous agent of the tradition who moves to spread its influence globally, and still others have heard about the potency of IRs spiritual power sources and see his presence as an opportunity to experience this power firsthand. There are also clients who find consulting with him online a more convenient way of accessing magico-spiritual power, for all they need to do is to pay the money and have rituals done without them being present. Some clients are vegetarians who cannot stand the sight of animals being killed in a shrine, others fear that their reputation as Christians or Muslims will be tarnished if they are seen visiting a shrine. A private online consultation with Bonsam cannot be easily detected by others. Non-Ghanaians, mostly Africans from other countries, Afro-Caribbean's and Hispanics accustomed to seeking spiritual help from religious ritual experts and Caucasians seeking to experiment with another form of spirituality consult with Bonsam in the USA. There

are some individuals who seem to be unsure about what Bonsam can do for them but still keep in touch in case they might utilize his services later.

Starting with the online clientele, I noted that about 70% (1400) of his 2000 Facebook community clients are Africans, and the majority of these are Ghanaians, judging by their names on Facebook. The other 30% (600) people are from other nationalities. Online clients/fans identify different motivations for consulting with him online rather than in person. One of these individuals, Sam Ahene-Afful, is a regular commenter on Bonsam's posts. He lives and works in Chicago. He has been an online Bonsam adherent since 2011. In one of our conversations he remarked,

I chat with K.B. all the time but consult with Nana on pertinent issues like if things are not going well, if am going for promotion or even before I travel to Ghana. He then prescribes things needed for what I have asked. I often send money through Western Union or mobile money transfer, immediately he receives it he does the ritual for me. Sometimes if I need to carry that "spiritual content" with me he posts it to me here in the USA. I call him and he directs me as to how to use it. I don't need to go there for anybody to see me even when I'm in Ghana...I even have two main Facebook accounts, one connected to him and others for my friends and family. I don't want any interference because for whatever I have asked him to do has worked for me. This arrangement works for me because no one will discriminate against me or point accusing fingers at me for going to the shrine. Also whether I am in Ghana or outside I am always in touch and he knows me. I am ok ...<sup>442</sup>

This client, for example, is sort of secretly indulging in IR online because he does not want family members or friends to accuse him of accessing IR base, because he believes, apart from its convenience, in the efficacy of whatever goes on at the shrine in his absence and is of the impression that being an online client of Bonsam saves him all the negatives he might get from

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<sup>442</sup> Sam Ahene-Afful, chatting messages to author, January 12, 2013.

those who do not believe in IR. Again, by using online links, this type of clients is able to remain in whatever social or religious organization they belong to without necessarily breaking ties.

Henrietta Villafuete, 26, is a student. She lives in Miami, Florida, U.S., and joined Bonsam's club in 2012. She stated that:

I took a course in African religions in the university and decided to check online if I could see real practitioners. Luckily I saw the Facebook account of Nana Kwaku Bonsam and invited him. He accepted me two days later and we started communicating. I wanted to know about the religion and how people participate in it. When the semester ended I still keep in touch, owing to the interest I developed in him as a person. Yes I can say that now I am more of a fan but I will not hesitate to consult with him later on if the need be, as somehow I am convinced about his powers already through our communications.<sup>443</sup>

The above example is one of the five people I spoke to who just saw Bonsam's Facebook profile by chance and joined as fans but are developing interest in him and IRs through the constant communication with him. Their examples show how a casual decision to join this group online as a fan can eventually turn one slowly into an adherent. It commences with the stage of curiosity that leads to contact, then communication. Communication continues to the next stage depending on whether it is fruitful. If communication is positive it would continue. Continual communication develops concentration and the final stage would be to be convinced to join as a member.

Akua is a 40 year old Ghanaian woman living in the Bronx, N.Y and U.S.A. She told me how she heard about Bonsam in a local African shop. Her curiosity about him was piqued by a poster of him and tracts placed both at the entrance of the store and next to the cashier. She described how this interest led to her eventual contact with him:

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<sup>443</sup> Henrietta Villafuete, chatting message on Facebook with author, December 13, 2012.

Hmmmm I have prayed long enough and needed to take an action so I picked one of the tracts when no one was watching. It had the address of K.B. which was only 10 minutes away from my house.”

“But why did you have to hide in picking up the tract?” I interrupted her. “Eii sister, why won’t I, I don’t know what this woman and her son will go telling people in our church so I have to hide,” she insisted.

When I got home I informed my husband about it and he was reluctant but drove me there. He waited in the car for me. My husband had lived with me three years with no job and I had also lost my job a few months back. When I got to Nana’s apartment, he welcomed me and listened to my mission. He bowed as if in a trance and lifted his head and said to me; go and fetch your husband which I did. When he came K.B said because you doubt *Nananom* (gods) I will do something for you. He took my husband to the room, poured libation and recited some incantations, then he smeared an oil-like substance on my husband and gave him some to apply on his face and hands when he goes to look for job. We left without him attending to my own problem because he had other appointment after mine which was used for my husband. My husband did as he was told and on the 4<sup>th</sup> day he got a job. I also went to him and after he did the same thing he did for my husband and gave me same instructions, I did and eventually got a job. No one can tell me IR is evil because something which is evil cannot help people to get jobs but probably will show people how to steal or easy ways of getting rich.

This data provides evidence of Bonsam’s determination of spreading IRTs to the West for Ghanaians in the Diaspora to benefit from it.

Kezia Jones is a full-figured 28 year old African American I met on the third day of my visit to K.B’s. Bronx apartment/shrine. I met her at the entrance of the apartment. Together we climbed up the stairs. Speaking with an American accent, she complained about the steepness of the staircase leading to Bonsam’s apartment. This provided us with something to talk about as we made our way up together. She was excited upon learning that I was an African from Ghana and offered to be my friend from that day. On a day after we had left Bonsam’s apartment we were

chatting when she started into the story that brought her to the spiritualist, a harrowing account of recurring failures in her love life, failures that had left her very hopeless.

Men always used me and then dump me when the time comes for us to be committed. Even now my relationship is on the verge of collapsing. But I would like to marry someday and settle down. I feel I am aging. But as hopeful as I am in this relationship, it also looks bleak. My current boyfriend cheated on me in my house while I was at work and a neighbor called me. When I got home the lady was gone but I could see something “happened” on my bed. When I asked him about it instead of him apologizing for offending me, he rather got upset and left the house. For almost a month he had not bothered calling or passing by, my several calls will not even change his mind, meanwhile I love him very much and have invested much in this relationship I was not ready to let it slip by so I came to K.B to inquire why and what he can do to help me. My neighbors told me that the guy was powerful so I was with all hope he would help me.<sup>444</sup>

Kezia paused for a while as if searching her mind to determine how she would cut a rather long narrative short. She continued:

Ok, coming to the main point. After listening to me on the first day I visited him, K.B sat for about 10 minutes as if in a trance and then he explained that it was not my fault that men dumped me. Rather, it was the result of a generational curse on my family. He warned that if I did not break the cycle the difficulties would continue. He even said I would suffer in child birth and my children too will suffer same. I knew the priest was right [tears in her eyes at this point] because no woman in my family has married. They all have ‘baby daddies’ (that is, men who just impregnate women, acknowledge they are responsible for either the pregnancy or not but do not marry the women). I was therefore convinced at that point that the priest knew what he was about. Anyway, after burning herbs in a pot for me to inhale for 5 minutes, Nana K.B. said “he will come back to you. And if he is yours too, that one I can assure you after everything is done.” Then he took a container, scooped some creamlike substance dark in colour out into a smaller container. He put his finger in it and smeared it on my forehead three times and said to me, “when you go home don’t speak to anybody, go straight into your bedroom and apply this cream on his picture and say whatever you want to it. He will call you if he is yours, but when he calls do

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<sup>444</sup> Kezia Jones, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, November 22, 2012.

not pick. Wait... and he will come to your apartment and beg you. When he comes accept him but do not sleep with him and then come back here.” K.B collected \$30 and said “when you get the first sign, come for the second treatment to block this generational curse from your family so it does not affect your children.”<sup>445</sup>

Kezia described how she went home and followed all of KB’s instructions and how it proved to be effective:

But it took two days for my boyfriend to call, I nearly gave up. But he did call several times and sent text messages apologizing that he did not know why he did what he did and that I should forgive him. I followed the priest’s instructions of not responding. When I closed from work in the evening I went home to see him in front of my door. As soon as he saw me he knelt down to beg me. I opened the door and he came in. When I finally said I have forgiven him, he came to hug and kissed me and said he would sleep over. I said no and he insisted so I said okay. In the night he wanted to get “busy” [have sex] and as much as I wanted to, I had to follow K.B.’s instructions so I explained to him that I could not do it that night because of what I have gone through emotionally and that maybe later. Reluctantly he left me alone. The next day, I came to see K.B and he requested that I buy a sheep, fowls, schnapps, gin and a crate of egg to be used for the ritual. KB explained that because we can’t slaughter animals in the USA and we cannot also get some of the forest roots, herbs and so on, I have to send the money to his assistant Nana Moore in “Afrancho” Ghana for it to be done there. The entire cost came to 300 dollars. So I sent it to the man and brought the receipt to him. He then called the man in my presence and gave the details on the recipe to him. He asked me to go and explained that when the rituals were performed he would follow up with a little one for me here, after which all shall be well. He also said when I was satisfied I could come and give thanks to the gods whether he is in Ghana or New York. Today I came to him because my fiancé proposed to marry me and even gave me a date. I don’t want anything bad to happen so I came to see him”<sup>446</sup>

Another respondent who testified to the efficacy of KBs powers is Juan Lopez, 35 years of age and a native of Mexico. He lives in New York. I met him in Bonsam’s apartment on three

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<sup>445</sup> Kezia Jones, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, November 22, 2012.

<sup>446</sup> Kezia Jones, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, November 22, 2012.

occasions. He was always very early, leaving Bonsam before other visitors would start stringing in. I observed something peculiar about Juan's behavior. Whenever he would leave Bonsam's consulting room, he would head straight for the altar in the corner of the corridor to drink Vodka mixed with tree bark, roots, herbs and spices, from a bottle. In Ghana men drink this concoction, referred to as "bitters" to enhance their sexual potency. I had seen some other men drink the "bitters" concoction during my visits to Bonsam's apartment.

On the day I spoke to Juan for the first time, he had come to consult Bonsam but had to wait for him because he was making some rounds in New York City. As we both sat waiting for Bonsam, I broke the ice by inquiring whether he was Spanish and when he replied that he came from Mexico I told him of how I lived in Miami for three years but could not even manage a smattering of Spanish. We both laughed and traded stories of our lives in different parts of the world-- ---Miami, Ghana, Germany and Mexico. That was when I quizzed him about his habit of drinking bitters. He smiled shyly as if acknowledging the new direction into which I was leading the conversation, and muttered some words about how bitters was helpful to him, before starting into the account of his struggles with impotence which led him to Bonsam:

I am young and handsome so I easily get girls and jobs. In my work environment my boss will like me for a while and for no apparent reason I would be sacked. If I am able to get a girl too, I can't even get erection when we get to the room.<sup>447</sup>

"Ok, but do you get erection when there is no girl?" I asked, my excitement beginning to heighten.

"I do but not really strong." He responded and continued:

This whole thing started since I came to America, I used to be very sexually strong in Mexico. I came to consult with K.B when I heard some Africans discuss him in a barbing shop I went to. I asked for his phone number, he gave me his address and I came to see him.

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<sup>447</sup> Juan Lopez, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, November 20, 2012.

Since I came to see him he has been doing stuff for me one after the other. He gave me good luck, charm and protection so that no evil person can come near me and no boss will sack me unless I break the rules. He has also directed me on how to lead my life and has given me some herbs as medicine to drink to help my erectile issues. The one over there, [pointing to the altar in the corner]. This is very powerful, anytime I come around I drink some. So far everything has gone so well and I am happy to have met him.”<sup>448</sup>

This is a Mexican praising the efficacy of Bonsam’s herbal concoction. From his narration we can deduce that he believes in the spirituality of indigenous religions much as he believes in the priest. Bonsam later told me that, he gets fulfilment when other nationals and race consult him and get results. He feels he is making strides in his internationalization agenda and cannot turn back than do the will of his gods.

During a telephone conversation with Kwaku Duah and Bonsam’s agent [*Bosomfo*] in Amsterdam he told me of how the loss of two of his fingers due to a freak accident in the meat factory he worked in Amsterdam triggered off a series of events that would culminate in his encounter with Bonsam. Kwaku Duah had described some details of his life of struggle in Holland where he has lived and worked for over 15 years, before telling me of this incident. He said:

After I was discharged from the hospital I realized that the insurance promised me was not forthcoming though I was unable to go to work because of my inability. When my lawyer contacted the insurance people, they wanted to cheat me, I did not agree and petitioned through my lawyer for compensation and a disability allowance every month since I can’t work. The uncertainty of the outcome made me plan to go home. Me too, I naturally like IR stuff so I wanted to consult with one to find out the verdict. I had heard about Nana Kwaku Bonsam and his exploits on radio so I decided to try him. I set off to Akomadan-Afrancho to consult him. When I got there, I went through the normal procedure of registering my seating and paying consultation fee. When it got to my turn, I told K.B. my reason for coming. After consulting the gods he told me not to worry and that everything I have asked will be granted, the gods will see to that. Items were prescribed for them to use in performing a ritual to sign a bond with the gods. I bought all the items and made the sacrifice. He later told me to go back to Amsterdam and be ready to

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<sup>448</sup> Juan Lopez, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, November 20, 2012.



celebrate as the gods have said. True to his words I won the case but I promised him before the gods that if I really win the case I will invite him to Amsterdam. That is how he came to Amsterdam.<sup>449</sup>

## 7.8 Conclusion

I have highlighted the earlier efforts by adherent or sympathizers of IRs both in Ghana and from the Diaspora as the catalyst that precipitated the neo indigenous religious priest current activities in Ghana and abroad.

I also touched on Kwaku Bonsam, the leader in this internationalization/globalization of IRs agenda, his activities and the diverse strategies he employs in each international destination he visits in his pursuance in pushing his transnational agenda as commissioned by his chief deity, Kofi oo Kofi. We also mentioned the numerous clients and followers he has been able to gather online and in his international destination. What I however seek to unravel is the testimonies of Bonsam's clients abroad and online of his powers working for them, even though it is often speculated in popular Ghanaian knowledge that the "powers" of an indigenous priest does not cross the Atlantic Ocean. Also, there seems to be concerns about this endeavor as revitalized old priests like *Komfo* Kyei and Oforiwaa also raise apprehensions of the authenticity of such neo-priests who publicize what is supposed to be secret and sacred.

What then happens when during his divination online the internet connection breaks off, especially when he is in trance? Thoughtfully, these are challenges globalization presents but K.B explains that he has not yet experienced internet breakoff so cannot talk about that. However, for rituals Bonsam stressed that some rituals that demand animal sacrifice and other exotic stuff, which

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<sup>449</sup> Samuel Kwaku Duah Sakodie, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, March 2 2012.

are not accessible in a destination he might be at a time are done back home in Ghana by his assistants. “Home” as he puts reminds us of the importance of “sacred space” which points to Akomadan-Afrancho the seat of his spiritual power.

Again, the question one can ask from the discussion so far is that, is this internationalization agenda Bonsam is pursuing the will of the deities as he claims to have been commissioned by them? Or, is it economically motivated? Bonsam and others do cry foul that Christian pastors come to them for powers to enable them recruit more followers, which directly increases the yield from offerings.<sup>450</sup> Or is it a case of power relations as is often observed concerning the religious landscape of Ghana? To answer, we submit that we cannot affirm or deny Bonsam’s claims of prophetic motivations by his deities any more than we can rule out the other possible forces that could be behind such effort. He is clearly running a religious organization, and money could automatically be a factor as discussed in the previous chapter.

Let me say that even though many scholars of religion do not pay attention to Bonsam and his cohorts; his discourse and actions represent a monumental development on the indigenous religious landscape of Ghana and religious transnationalism as a whole. The expression “think globally, act locally” as used by Chin-Yi Tien and Paul C. Talley<sup>451</sup> was timely adopted by Adogame to explain the process of globalization of indigenous religions.<sup>452</sup> Globalization is what is furthering the likes of Kwaku Bonsam and his group in their bid to expand. As to whether he is successful in his international agenda, time will tell. We can only talk of the efforts made so far

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<sup>450</sup> Kwaku Bonsam, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah, February 4, 2012.

<sup>451</sup> Ching-Yi Tien and Paul C. Talley, “Think globally, act locally: ‘Glocalization’ in Taiwanese Higher Education,” *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 3. 15 (2012): 124-129. Accessed 10.06.2014. [http://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_3\\_No\\_15\\_August\\_2012/16.pdf](http://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_15_August_2012/16.pdf).

<sup>452</sup> Afe Adogame, a paper presented in the Guest Lecture series by the Religious Studies Department (University of Bayreuth), African Religion in Diaspora, July 11, 2013.

and the people we know who patronized him, especially people of African descent in the diaspora. As for his “evangelizing” the world and other races as supposedly commissioned by his god, we have to wait to see how this unfolds.

This chapter debunks the one way flow of spirituality from the West to Africa and gives concrete evidence of attempts of neo-indigenous religious activities to internationalize their religion, using a discourse which runs counter to the dominant Christian discourse. Africans themselves are sending their spirituality abroad with the aim of selling, it just like Christianity did to Africans and other races. Though scholars such as Adogame and Olupona have worked on African religious experiences in the new Diasporas, work on African indigenous religious priests pushing their international agendas in the west has not received as much attention as other aspects of the African diaspora religious experience in the emerging scholarship. This chapter is intended as a contribution that fills in that lacuna.

## CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter ties together the strands of the arguments raised throughout the study. The chapters of this study have been woven around the argument that IRTs have not dwindled in significance, as perceived by the dominant Christian group-Pentecostal-Charismatic, national statistics or the over-researched Pentecostal-Charismatic dominance in the literature. On the contrary, these traditions are experiencing an upsurge, of which one sign is their growing public visibility.

The study stressed that the upsurge shows the resilience of IRTs and that such resilience has followed a certain consistent trajectory in the context of the history of IRT encounters with other religious traditions, especially traditions of alien provenance. The data offered in the study has shown that, the rise in the activities of IRTs must be understood in the context of the intense competition on Ghana's religious field. Not only is this competition between IRT agents and the other players on the religious scene of Ghana, but there is also competition among the IRTs themselves, forcing IRTs to have in-house discourses that artificially divide them into strands. The study also identified the economic considerations motivating the motives of Ghana's religious agents and institutions, especially the IRTs. We contended that, the fact that people still patronize IRTs explains their continuing relevance ---there are people with needs that the IRTS can speak to and hence peoples' patronage of the IRTs agents. Our findings reveal that the rise in indigenous religious specialists in Ghana is also a function of the growing demand for spiritual power in Ghana's religious field, as people seek new ways to engage with the challenges Ghana's increasing interaction with the rest of the globe is imposing on them.

The current rise in indigenous religious beliefs and activities can be located in a historical context. The study shows how earlier periods of rapid social cultural change have precipitated

similar upsurges on the indigenous religious landscape. While it seems fashionable to contrast indigeneity with modernity, this finding shows that the relationship between them can be dialectical, as the encroachment of modernity on quasi-indigenous societies such as Ghana gives rise to indigenous inventions or innovations. Thus as Ghana becomes more and more modern, agents of indigenous religiosity become more creative as they are called upon to tap into indigenous resources to respond to emerging traditional and modern questions.

The study also sheds light on how the indigenous religious landscape has not been able to escape the wave of internationalization that has inundated Ghana's religious landscape. As part of their strategy to establish their presence both on the local and global religious markets they employed internationalization or 'burgerization' strategies and are using all available avenues to link up with rest of the world just like their competitors, the Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians, and many other religious groups in Ghana. To facilitate this process of internationalization and transnationalization some actors, such as Kwaku Bonsam, have established new discourses. These narratives debunk the portrait of IRTs as local, primitive, parochial traditions that root followers in the past and that slow the pace of their development as individuals and that of the nation as a whole. The narratives of the neo-priests sell IRTs as modern religious expressions, which have a contemporary relevance that spills beyond local boundaries geographically. Armed with this view, IRT agents such as Kwaku Bonsam are active at home and abroad and have become adept at the use of modern media forms as modes of outreach to both local and global communities.

We have noted that two categories of priests or agents, ---the neo-indigenous religious strand and the revitalized old strands of IRTs ---- are at the fore in the shaping of developments on the contemporary IRT landscape of Ghana. I will not claim that these two categories are the only major forms of indigenous religions acting on the religious landscape of Ghana, as there might still

be others. But the study used the activities of the two major strands represented by Kwaku Bonsam and Komfo Oforiwaa to demonstrate the main argument. These two strands are always contesting each other's claims. Whereas, the neo-indigenous agents tries to foster links with those I call revitalized old shrines or re-invented shrines/priests, the latter do not in any way acknowledge them as legitimate priests or priestesses. Although the traditional school has benefited from the enhanced public receptivity of IRTS in general due to the boldness with which the neo-IRT agents make claims to the potency of IRTs spiritual power, it still has reservations about the neo-indigenous priests. The priests of the revitalized tradition categorize the neo- priests not as "priests," but as magicians. Yet these priests of the revitalized indigenous traditions share the discourse of the neo-indigenous priests that IRTs must participate as equals with Christians and others in the religious field of Ghana, at the same time that they depart from the neo-priests on some issues bothering on orthodoxy, and modes of operation, especially in the media.

One crucial theme emerging from the study is the essential role of notions of magico-religious power in the shaping of the religious landscape of Ghana. "Power" is a contested essence in the Ghanaian religious landscape. As magico -religious power is a raw material in the production of spiritual goods and services in Ghana, making claims to possessing potent forms gives a religious agent or tradition an edge over others. The agents of indigenous religions see themselves as competing with other religious traditions over claims to possess potent spiritual powers. As part of their strategy to win and control the loyalty of worshippers, the indigenous religious agents are rebranding their traditions by casting them as a repository of superior spiritual power more capable of speaking effectively to the spiritual needs of Ghanaians than any other form. In doing so, they are ingenuously seizing for their own use a dominant narrative of Christians, chiefly the Pentecostal-Charismatics, which was devised to delegitimize indigenous religions. The

Pentecostal-Charismatic narrative presents IRTs as sources of potent magico- religious power rivaling the powers of Christian pastors, but posits that IRTs spiritual power emanates from the devil who resides on the landscape of indigenous religious traditions. Agents of IRTs, both the neo- and the traditional, spin this narrative around, arguing that there was nothing demonic about the very real spiritual power in IRTs. They argue strongly that the fact that pastors secretly consult agents of IRTs for this power testifies to its superior qualities. This move by agents of the IRTs sheds light on the creative religiosity of their agents and their uncanny ability to fashion counter-discourses from dominant Pentecostal narratives.

More importantly, their counter discourse on magico-religious power has become a foundation for the boldness with which agents of the IRTs make their claims and appear in public, in contradiction with the recent past when they operated underground. It is also the basis of the growing popularity of these agents, whose help many Ghanaians (including Pentecostal-Charismatics)<sup>453</sup> enlist to meet a myriad of mundane and spiritual needs, including obtaining wealth, health, power, husbands and wives, children, and even obtaining visas.

Closely related to the issue of power, another theme the study highlights is the growing importance of public religious performances in Ghana, particularly on the indigenous religious landscape. Publicity is of crucial value to any religion in Ghana if it is to survive in Ghana's volatile religious market place. In this connection, Ghana's indigenous religious agents view it as a *sine qua non* for their success to perform in public space, compared to about twenty years ago when

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<sup>453</sup> In May 2008 the *Daily Guide* newspaper carried a story on their front page which read "I give pastors 'Kofi oo Kofi' Kwaku Bonsam." *The Chronicle* also captioned it thus: "Give my juju back; Spiritualist raids church to reclaim voodoo from 'prophet'--An indigenous priests in Koforidua storms a church for his powers." Again a video in YouTube shows how Kwaku Bonsam went to Kato, a suburb of Sunyani in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana, one Sunday morning to reclaim his god from a pastor. These episodes exposed the neo-indigenous priests to the public and set in place a contest for power between indigenous religious base and Christianity.

they operated largely undercover. As we have read in the chapters above, through these performances these agents demonstrate their magico-religious potencies, attract potential followers, bolster the confidence of existing clients in them, and demonstrate their presence as viable alternatives to Christian spirituality in Ghana.

A more spectacular development the study draws attention to is the indigenous religions versus Pentecostal spiritual power contests that take place in the context of performances organized mostly by Ghana's media houses. This represents a novel development on the religious landscape of Ghana and other West African countries such as Nigeria. The stakes are higher for religious groups in West Africa presently. It is no longer enough to demonstrate potency through works or miracles, mostly in the form of healing, or to make verbal claims to having it. Religious agents must be prepared to demonstrate the superior qualities of their powers in the context of such competitions. Failure to appear on such competitive platforms renders agents supposedly powerless or fake, so to speak.

In 2010, the Ghanaian government statistical population and housing census put the totality of Ghana's population at 24,658,823. Breaking it down to religious affiliations, it stated that Christianity was the largest religion with 71.2% of the total population; Muslims were 17.6%, traditionalist which I refer to as indigenous religions in this work were 5.2%; and people with no religion were 5.3%. Further classification pegs Pentecostal-Charismatics, a strand of Christianity, as the largest among the Christian denominations with 44.6% out of the 71.2% total Christian population. Clearly, according to these statistics, it is fair to say that the Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians dominate the religious field of Ghana and by virtue of their being dominant, they set the rules of what is acceptable and what is not, who is doing the right thing and who is not. This religious picture leads directly to Bourdieu's notion of the field as a space characterized by "issues



of rationality, struggle, force and power.”<sup>454</sup> Fields, Bourdieu posits, are arenas for maneuvering, struggling and competition for desirable resources within it. There is always a struggle between the dominant religious orthodoxy and the heresiarch, in this case the Christians and the indigenous religions. The numerical strength of the Christians affords them the ability to control the worldview of lay people by imposing on or “inculcating a particular religious habitus.”<sup>455</sup> The dominant coerces the dominated to inculcate their values [habitus] and accept their structures as “legitimate.” Christians impose their dominance through a discourse depicting Christianity as the best thing that happened to Ghanaians. Bourdieu’s emphasis is on how “institutional religions seek to monopolize the religious field by imposing on the laity an ‘orthodox’ worldview and by denouncing as ‘heretical’ any alternative worldviews that competitors seek to propagate among the same laity.” As I have shown, the dominant religions denouncing the minority religion fits the descriptions of the phenomena presented in the study. The data offered here, however, also shows an aspect of such situations that Bourdieu does not look at, which is the dynamics of interreligious syncretization. In Ghana the dominant and major players are appropriating forms of religious capital from the minority religions to aid them in maintaining their hegemony; likewise the minority is copying and adapting dominant religious symbols, styles and strategies in order to compete with the dominant religion. Thus the data suggests that Bourdieu’s theory reduces relationships in religious fields to the dynamics of subjugation and resistance without taking into account the dynamics of exchange between the various religious groups.

For example, the neo-indigenous priests are inventors of a new form of indigenous religion and are making use of religious ideas, symbols, metaphors and strategies, blending them with what

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<sup>454</sup> Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 46.

<sup>455</sup> Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 78.

they have in order to convince potential consumers that they are not evil as portrayed by the Christians and other religious traditions. They are also using counter-hegemonic approaches to attack the Christians, beating them at their own game with modernizing formats. Christians are also borrowing religious capital from indigenous religious bases in a form of alleged “spiritual power” to perform miracles as well as indigenous regalia, such as drums (*fontofrom, dondo*) among others. The act of adding to one’s religious tradition to stay viable and/or visible must be examined as a survival strategy endemic in indigenous religions. In other words, the massive use of religious symbols, appropriated from the other religions, I suggest is embedded in the very basic characteristics of indigenous religious traditions itself and the practitioners as a whole—perhaps more than in other forms of religion. The ability to adapt and embrace religious symbols from other religions and making it their own is a major feature of African indigenous religions. It is a practical utility-based religion with a fluidity that permits practitioners and adherents to choose result-oriented deities and practices. Berners’s suggestion that we should refer to religious syncretism as a “survival” tool certainly works for IRTs, which have the tendency of acquiring circulating symbols and owning them as authentically theirs. It also describes the current situation in the religious field of Ghana. This type of inter-religious “parasitism” is what Berner has termed as “syncretism on the level of elements;” it is fashioned in such a way that:

Designates those association of different elements where the boundary between the elements is terminated so that the adherents of the system concerned perceive them as a unity; the superposition of an element by means of other interpretation; the emergence of an element in analogy or as an equivalent to a competing element.<sup>456</sup>

We also argued that, two of the categories of religious authority listed by Weber explain the two cases under study. The data revealed that while the neo-indigenous priests such as Bonsam

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<sup>456</sup> Berner, “The Concept of Syncretism,” 305.

and others utilize “charismatic authority” as priests, the revitalized-tradition priests/priestesses such as Oforiwaa base their legitimacy on “traditional authority.” Bonsam, became an indigenous priest by making claims to a call which follows a pattern Akans will describe as un-conventional. But this revolutionary departure from the normative pattern in and of itself underlies Bonsam’s charisma. Tensions between the neo-indigenous priests and old ones are often based on this dislocation—or departure from what is deemed to be orthodox. What should, however, be understood in the light of these two traditions is the broader picture the religious market of Ghana offers. The market is open and unregulated; as such anyone can easily jump into it without necessarily going through established procedures.

The data also indicate that the current neo-indigenous priests are trying to invoke public sympathy by involving and concerning themselves with 21st century social issues, especially the development of a person. To do this, they are providing free education and taking care of the poor (widows and orphans). This trend is an approach they embarked while inveighing against the Christians, whom they accuse of greed and being exploitative of the poor church members.

Finally, we conclude that this work has tried to fill a lacuna in an emerging body of literature on contemporary African religiosities by first, shedding light on the various strands of indigenous religious expressions in Ghana’s indigenous religious landscape. Second, the study unravels forces behind the competitive struggle over power on the religious field—the quest of religious actors to garner prestige, demonstrate the viability of their traditions, wield considerable influence and profit economically from the ongoing commoditizing of spiritual power in Ghana. The study sheds light on the apologetic attitude of IRs agents in revamping a sense of the African consciousness in Ghanaians by suggesting something of a *sankofa* (return to or go back and take) of indigenous traditions within the framework of a kind of Cultural Revolution. Third, the study

highlights the importance of religious performance in contemporary Ghana, identifying three types of indigenous performances---the individual or personalized; the peer group and or communal type; and the modern inter-religious spiritual kind. Categorizing indigenous religious performances into three types contributes in distinguishing between performances on the religious landscape in general and how they operate. Fourth, we uncovered the innovations going on in both the circles of the neo- and traditional indigenous priests. For example, in terms of rituals we captured a Christian-appropriated dimension which was termed as *asubo* or baptism. Another innovation is the marriage ceremony which is formatted after a church marriage and officiated by the priest on the altar of the deities. Such a marriage is difficult to divorce and for this reason serves as a form of social control measure, keeping families together. The study contributes to scholarship on another kind of reverse mission taking place on the African continent, involving African ritual agents and lay populations sending their home-bred indigenous religions abroad with the aim of attracting a global following.

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