

Belief in Sasa: Its Implications for Flora and Fauna Conservation in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The rate of depletion of plants and animal species in Ghana has assumed an alarming dimension, and the government is finding it difficult to control the process. Several factors account for this. A major one is the neglect of the traditional ecological knowledge prevalent in the culture of Ghana. *Sasa* is the Akan word for the spirit believed to be found in some plants and animals. This paper examines the role of *sasa* in flora and fauna conservation in Ghana. Traditional Ghanaians have a strong belief that some plants and animals have special spirits, which when cut (as in the case with plants) or killed (animals) can bring serious harm to the person. Thus, such plants and animals are not eliminated. This paper argues that *sasa* as an Akan indigenous conservation tool can complement the modern means of nature conservation in Ghana.

KEYWORDS

Akan, *sasa*, flora, fauna, nature conservation, traditional ecological knowledge



Introduction

Many scholarly publications on traditional Ghanaian ecological knowledge exist (Ntiama-Baidu 1995, Abayie Boaten 1998, Appiah-Opoku and Hyma 1999, Nsiah 2009). But the link of indigenous religions (African Traditional Religion) to this traditional ecological knowledge is usually not referred to or only touched on tangentially.¹ This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the link between indigenous religions and indigenous ecological knowledge with particular reference to *sasa* (the special spirit that the Akans believe certain plants and animals possess). The emphasis is on *sasa* because it is one of the types of traditional ecological knowledge that seem to be not as well known in Ghana due to infrequent references to it in ecological academic discourse. Although the study is about Ghana, the traditional Akan society is used as a case study, informed by the fact that the Akan is by far the largest ethnic group in Ghana. They mainly occupy the middle and the southern part of Ghana and are found in six out of the ten administrative regions in Ghana (see fig. 1).



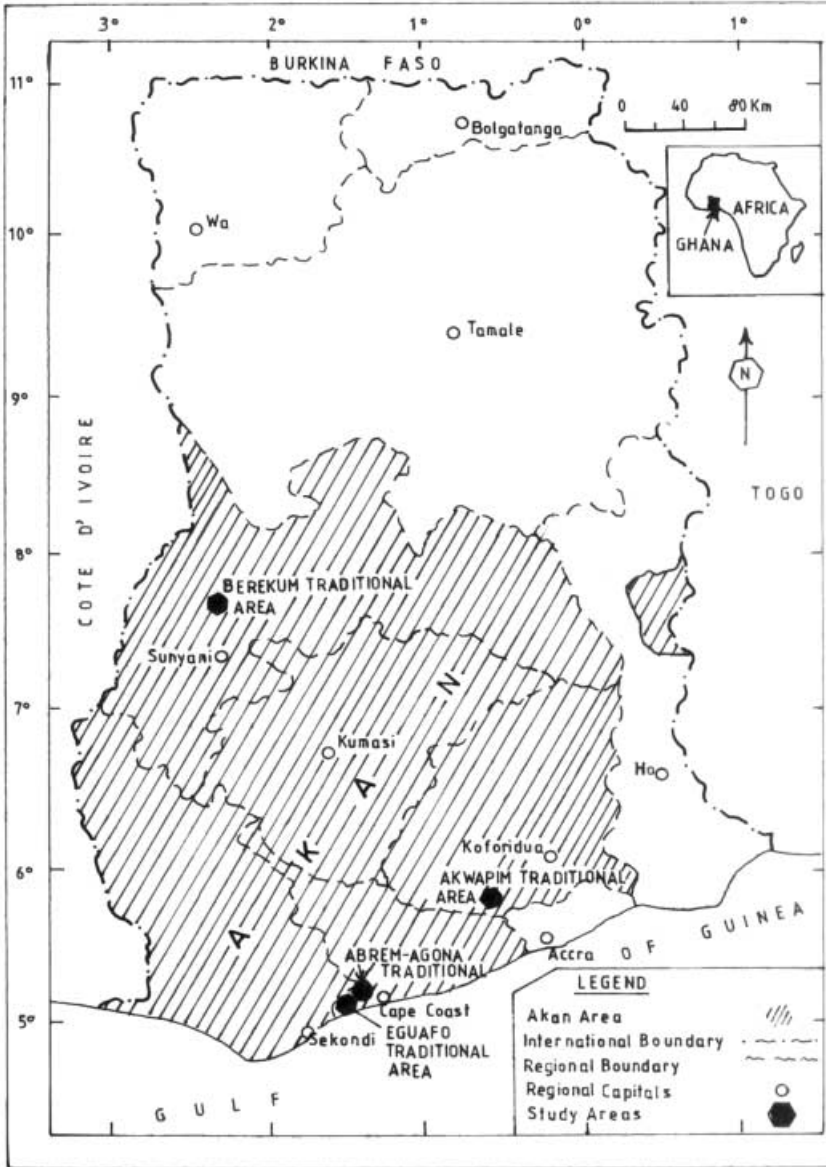


Figure 1 ■ Map of Ghana showing Akan Distribution and the Study Areas.

Source: Author's own Drawing.

Traditional Akans, like other Africans, are very religious (Parrinder 1974, McLeod 1981, Mbiti 1969, McCaskie 1995). The indigenous religion of the Akans is what is collectively known as the African Tra-



ditional Religion. I am, however, aware of the agelong debate over whether African spirituality should be known in the singular or plural form—that is, *African Traditional Religion* (ATR) or *African Traditional Religions* (ATRs) (Mbiti 1969: 1-2, Idowu 1973: 103, Metuh 1987: 19, Ejizu, n.d). But this debate is outside the purview of this paper. The main element of Akan religion is the belief in the Supreme Being and the ancestors, the lesser gods, and the impersonal forces that manifest themselves in the workings of magic, witchcraft, sorcery, charms and amulets (Rattray 1923, Parrinder 1961, Mbiti 1969, Idowu 1973). These spiritual entities are hierarchically arranged with God always presiding over this hierarchy, for he is believed to be the creator of the universe and everything in it. This indeed makes the universe a religious entity. This also makes the worldview of the Akan a religious one. By worldview, I mean what Emefie Metuh defines as “the complex of a people’s belief about the origin, structure and organization of the universe, and the laws governing the interaction of beings in it” (Metuh 1985: 37). This worldview, in fact, determines the Akan conduct in all spheres of their lives (Opoku 1978). It is within this theoretical framework that Akan environmental ideas or ethics are interpreted.

Methodology

The study is an ethnographic study conducted between 2005 and 2010 among the people of Berekum, Akwapim, and Eguafu-Abrem traditional areas of Brong Ahafo, Eastern, and Central regions of Ghana respectively. Its aim was to investigate the role of indigenous religious belief in nature conservation with particular reference to the belief in *Sasa*. Although the study focuses on the Akan people, evidence from other traditional societies in Ghana are also used to support the analysis. The primary data was mainly collected through semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to select the following principal interviewees for the study: local chiefs and elders, traditional priests and priestesses, attendants of sacred groves, hunters, saw millers, wood carvers, farmers, and traditional healers (herbalists). The selection was also informed by the fact these categories of people constitute the major players involved in environmental issues in the various traditional societies of Ghana. In view of the qualitative nature (Jonassen 2001) of the study, 35 people were formally selected and interviewed.² Many other informal interactions

with other people of the study areas took place during the study to cross-check some of the responses.

Sasa Defined

The Akan, like other traditional Ghanaians, view some trees and animals as sacred because such plants and animals are believed to have *tumi* (spiritual power) of some sort. The Akan word for this kind of *tumi* is *sasa* (Rattray 1923, 1959, Warren 1986). My informants intimated that some categories of trees and animals are believed to possess more spiritual power than others. This differentiation in *sasa* suggests that the *tumi* suffused in these animals and plants is not of equal standing. It is organized into two categories: *sasa a eye hare* (*sasa* which is not heavy) and *sasa a eye duru* (*sasa* which is heavy) (McCaskie 1995). My interviewees noted that those trees and animals believed to have light *sasa* are supposed to be harmless to humans but those with heavy *sasa* are believed to be dangerous, for they can be vindictive. As a consequence, the people are very cautious in their attitudes towards such plants and animals. Examples of plants with heavy *sasa* include: *Odum* (*Chlorophora excelsa*), *Esa* (*Celtis mildbraedii*), *Abeko* (*Tieghemella heckelii*), *Tweneboa* (*Entant drophragma*), *Onyina* (*Ceiba pentandra*), *Homakyem* (*Dalbergia saxatalis*), *Odi* (*Okuobaka aubrevillei*), etc. The animals include: *Tromo* (*Tragelaphus euryceros isaacii*), *Oyuo* (*Cephalophus niger*), *Kuntun* or *Pataku* (*Canis adustus*), *Okoo* (*Syncerus caffer*).

It is important to note that not only animals and plants have *sasa* but also human beings. But the *sasa* in human beings is believed to be potent only when the individual is dead, especially when the person dies in a violent way or unbefitting burial rites are performed for the person.³ This issue of human *sasa* is, however, outside the purview of this paper.

Objects Believed to Possess Sasa

It has been noted that the Akan considers many plants, shrubs and climbers and various kinds of animals to possess *sasa* and are cautious in their relation with these entities. The reason is that they firmly believe that such spirit power inherent in these animals and plants could be very lethal. The following examples of plants and animals



are used to illustrate how this belief operates in the lives of the people in the study areas.

Plants Believed to Possess Sasa

The *Odi* (*Okuobaka aubrevillei*) plant is one of the most respected and feared plants among the Akan and, in fact, throughout Ghana, due to the strong *sasa* it is believed to possess. The *Odi* is considered to be the “king” of all plants in the traditional Akan societies due to the unique beliefs associated with it. The people of the Akwapim traditional area,⁴ for instance, have the *Odi* as their totem. Many of the hunters I interacted with in the study areas said that the *Odi* plant has no fallen leaves under it. They also said that only very few animals can pass under it and that any animal not spiritually powerful would die instantly if it did so. Consequently, one would find a lot of dead animal bones under the *Odi* plant. It was only *Okusie* (giant rat) and *Apesee* (*Artheerus africanus*) that could pass under the *Odi* without any problems. This means that the Akan believe these animals have strong spiritual powers or are spiritually powerful in the animal kingdom. Paradoxically, these two animals are also those that are usually most hunted in the Akan society. Unfortunately, my informants could not explain why this is so. It may perhaps be due to the palatable nature of the meat of these two animals.

Another plant that the people of the study areas believe has *sasa*, and thus commands awesome reverence, is *Homakyem* (*Spiropetalum heterophyllum*). The color of the sap in this plant is like blood. All the traditional African priests and traditional medicine practitioners I interacted with said that this plant can speak like a human being during the night. My informants believe strongly that *Homakyem* has a very high medicinal value but it is only those who are spiritually fortified that can cut part of this plant for medication. Even here they have to do the cutting either early in the morning or late in the evening, because it is believed that if one’s shadow falls on it while cutting it, one would spiritually be cutting oneself. Therefore, it is cut when there is no sunshine to cast a shadow on it. Those who cut part of the *Homakyem* for whatever reason have to appease it first before the cutting is done (cf. McLeod 1981, Falconer 1992). Usually eggs are put under the plant and a drink (usually alcohol) is used to pour libation to ask for permission from the plant before the cutting is done.

Odum (*Chlorophora excelsa*) is another *sasa* plant according to my source. In fact, the *Odum* is regarded as a god among the Akan because of the spiritual power that it is believed it possesses (Abbiw 1990, Falconer 1992). There is a belief that the *Odum* can change into a human being at night and visit the *Ohene* (chief) of a village and inform him of the nefarious activities of criminals in his community. I was informed that the chief is supposed to hear a lot about what goes on in his community; this is one of the sources through which it is believed he gets his information. This is one of the reasons why the *Odum* is usually found at the outskirts of Akan settlements.⁵ Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro (2010) state that an Ashanti craftsman will offer an egg to the *Odum* tree saying, "I am about to cut you down and carve you; do not let me suffer harm."⁶

Another plant believed to possess *sasa* is *Tweneboa* (*Entan drophragma*). It is mostly found in the forest areas in Ghana. Its wood is usually used in making the *fontonfrom* drum, an important Akan traditional drum (Warren 1986: 60, Rattray 1959: 5, 271). This kind of drum usually puts people into a state of frenzy (in a possessive mood), particularly when it is beaten during sacred days and on annual traditional festival days. The local tradition has explained that it is the spirit that resides in this plant that makes people go into the state of frenzy. Because of the *sasa* associated with the *Tweneboa* tree, it is only the spiritually powerful wood carvers who are able to use it to make the *fontonfrom* drum.

Onyina (*Ceiba pentandra*) is a plant with the unique characteristic that its vicinity is unusually quiet. Among traditional Akan and traditional Ghanaians in general, places of unusual quietness forebode the presence of spirits, both benevolent and malevolent. In view of this, the *Onyina* is viewed as an abode for spirit beings. The *Onyina* plant is usually associated with *Mmoatia* (fairies) as are the *Homakyem* and the *Odi* in the study areas (cf. Sarfo-Mensah et al. 2010). Therefore, among the traditional Berekum, Eguafó and Abrem people, when it becomes necessary for an *Onyina* to be felled, libation precedes it, and at times, eggs are also offered. This belief has possibly ensured the protection of this species of plant.

Animals Believed to Possess *Sasa*

The *Tromo* (*Tragelaphus euryceros isaacii*, the bongo antelope) is perhaps the most feared animal by Akan hunters (McCaskie 1995: 220).



McCaskie's finding was confirmed by all the hunters interviewed during the study. The *tromo's sasa* is believed to be the most powerful in comparison to the *sasa* of other animals in the animal kingdom. It is believed that when the *tromo* is killed, its *sasa* will haunt the hunter until its *sasa* is exorcised through a special ritual bath. All the hunters I interviewed were unanimous that when one is haunted by the *sasa* of a *tromo*, one suffers from hallucinations and will shout the *tromo's* name. The affected hunter can even mistake a human being for an animal and shoot at him/her or can make false confessions.

The Akans generally say "Yenni sasa aduro a yennkum *tromo*." In English translation this means: "If you do not have *sasa* medicine you do not kill the bongo" (Agyemang 1994: 144). Therefore, most Akan hunters try to avoid it during their hunting expeditions. The fear that the Akans have for *tromo* has been expressed in another saying that "*se wobeku tromo na w`adware sasaduru dee gyae no ma onfa nemm-rantesem nante kwae ase*." This is literally translated as "if you kill the bongo its spirit will haunt you until you exorcise it; you better leave it to roam about in the forest." Therefore, this fear associated with the bongo is potentially helping to preserve the species.

Another animal that the Akan hunter will hesitate to kill is *Oyuo* (*Cephalophus niger*, the bush goat). It is among the animals that the Akan loosely classify as having witchcraft power. It is even believed that this animal can announce the impending death of a member of the community in a special way. For this reason, the hunters in Bere-kum and Abrem that I interviewed described the *Oyuo* as *aboa bone*, which literally means "a bad animal." This suggests that the *Oyuo* possesses spiritual power. Because of this, the hunters said they try to avoid it during their hunting expeditions in order to prevent any misfortune that could result from killing it. It was, however, added that those hunters who are spiritually powerful may kill the *Oyuo*.

The Akan also avoid *Kuntunu* or *Pataku* (*Canis adustus*, the side-striped jackal). This is because of the dangerous *sasa* it is believed to possess. It is said that its mere presence can bring about confusion in the community. My informants hinted that a sorcerer could cause a serious fight to break out in a community for no justifiable reason just by shaking the tail of a dead *Kuntunu*. For this reason, hunters are hesitant to hunt it.

Other animals among the Akan, when killed, require that their souls be propitiated or else they will pursue the hunter as a ghost (Par-rinder 1974: 53). It is not possible to discuss all of these animals in the scope of this paper. In view of the above observations, however,

one may argue that the belief in *sasa* has the potential to contribute to the local protection, conservation, and the sustainable use of nature.

Relevance of Plants and Animals with *Sasa* to Flora and Fauna Conservation

The Akans believe that many of the plants with *sasa* have the ability to ward off evil spirits. As a consequence, the founding ancestors of the various towns and villages would intentionally plant such trees in their communities to serve as *genius loci* for a community or a village (Parrinder 1974: 52, Rattray 1923). Trees such as the *Nyamedua* (God's tree) or *Sinduro* (*Alstonia gongenis*), *Sume* (*Costus afer*), the fig tree, etc. fall under this category.⁷

Furthermore, my informants stated that it is common to find in many Akan villages large trees such *Odum* (*Chlorophora excelsa*), mahogany (*Khaya ivorenses*), etc. standing at the outskirts. Such trees may have shrines under them for special rituals. This means that people are restricted from entering such places and implies that they therefore become sanctuaries for the trees, shrubs, and animals within the vicinity of the shrines. In the words of Sarpong (1974), plants with *sasa* create "residential areas" of spirits and gods, and thus, must not be felled without the appropriate rituals being performed. Among the Akans, when it becomes necessary for parts of such trees to be used, only sections are taken (Falconer 1992). This belief has contributed to the protection and sustainable use of these trees (Dorm-Adzorbu et al. 1991, Anane 2003, Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro 2010).

In the past, it is pertinent to emphasize the fact that the implementation of the community laws underpinned by religio-cultural thought such as those regarding nature came at no financial cost to the community. This is because no one dared to challenge the ancestors. At the very least, each member of the community served as "police personnel." This served as a sort of check on each other.

This situation differs sharply today. This is because the government has to pay security personnel to enforce ecological laws but the people still break these laws with impunity. In Ghana today, forest guards, police, and military and other security agencies are supposed to ensure that people do not encroach upon the national forest reserves, yet timber contractors and chain saw operators, day in and day out, secretly enter these reserves and log the trees. Poachers also hunt



protected animals, at times with the cooperation of the security agents for their own selfish gains.

There is, however, an argument that the fear and awesome reverence that indigenous people give to certain trees and animal has religio-cultural importance rather than ecological. There may be some truth to this assumption. However, the underlying conservation element in these practices cannot be denied. Also, it is important to emphasize the fact that most of the traditional societies in Ghana have a set of animals and plants that are believed to possess *sasa* and, therefore, are treated with fear and reverence like the Akans do, implying that the belief in *sasa* can be a potential tool for flora and fauna conservation in Ghana.

Belief in *Sasa* Today and Its Implications for Flora and Fauna Conservation

In contrast to the past, when traditional religion was the only religion throughout Africa, the present day has Islam and especially Christianity making deep inroads into Ghanaian societies. Christianity in particular sees indigenous ways such as the belief in *sasa* as false beliefs and thus condemns them in no uncertain terms. Other factors such as Western education and culture, science and technology, secularization, the market economy, overpopulation, urbanization, and government policy have tremendously influenced the people in the Akan area and throughout Ghana. This implies that the traditional Akan worldview has been adulterated. Consequently, traditional religion, which underpins most of the Akan's nature conservation ethics, is changing fast.

This is the reason why the traditional way of conserving the environment is not as effective as it used to be. It is only in the rural areas that it seems to be effective. Even here, the undue interventions from governments, particularly the transfer of decision-making from the traditional authorities to the modern state-control institutions and agencies (cf. Migdal 1974), has negatively affected the ability of the traditional chiefs to enforce the indigenous environmental conservation laws in their localities.

This means that the basis for the protection of plants and animals is under attack. Also, the overreliance on western culture, which uses empirical means to address environmental issues, is not helping matters in a highly religious area like Ghana. It is important to add that

the rapid growth of towns in Ghana today is also gradually taking the indigenous people away from their roots. The current population growth rate, which is estimated at 2.3% with its attendant pressure on the land, is making it difficult to keep intact the sacred groves set up in the various Akan villages.

Today, the government of Ghana does not factor in the indigenous ways of nature conservation in national environmental policies. The emphasis is solely on the scientific ways of conserving nature, but in Ghana, history has shown that the scientific method alone has not yielded the desired results. This is partly due to the fact that the required resources have not been adequate. At times, legislation supporting the policies also lack bite. Arhin captures an aspect of this problem:

Ghana's wildlife conservation laws as they pertain in other African countries are inadequate. This is either because legislation has been slow in dealing with evolving wildlife challenges, or because the laws are old, obsolete, and incapable of effectively dealing with wildlife issues (Arhin 2008: 93).

Also, for instance, there is the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) Law 229 to deal with the setting of bush fires in Ghana, but this law is not potent enough to deal with offenders. Consequently, close to 30% of Ghana's forest has been destroyed by bush fires (Ag-yarko, n.d). More often than not, traditional ecological knowledge is viewed in opposition to scientific knowledge (Menziez and Butler, 2006). This has been one source of the problem because when the two are compared, the results:

... oversimplify and emphasize the difference between these two ways of seeing the world. This can make them appear incompatible and therefore somewhat unproductive. Such comparisons can also mask over important points of similarity and commonality such as the fact that the underling [sic] principles of TEK (traditional ecological knowledge) and science rely upon similar principles of observations (Menziez and Butler 2006: 6).

Attuquayefio and Fobil (2005) have expressed a similar sentiment by blaming the ineffectiveness of many of the environmental conservation programs, particularly in Africa, on the lack of appreciation of the link between traditional and scientific conservation approaches. This implies that traditional nature conservation ways and that of science are not as mutually exclusive as some people think. In other words, the two knowledge systems are addressing the same issue from different angles. This also implies that overdependence on one



method alone will not be in Ghana's best interests, but that the combination of the two methodologies is necessary to maximize the benefits of these two systems of nature resource conservation and management.

Research by social scientists and ecologists in Ghana and elsewhere in the world has identified the potential of local or indigenous knowledge in addressing some of the environmental problems of today (Ntiamao-Baidu 1995, 2008, Nsiah 2009, Nwosu 2010, Berkes 1999). But, as stated earlier, Ghana's policy makers have yet to put concrete structures in place to factor local ecological knowledge into Ghana's environmental policy.

Remediating the Challenges

Modern means alone are not adequate for tackling Ghana's environmental problems. This makes a strong case for the need for policy-makers to encourage more research into the indigenous ways of conserving the environment and natural resource management. The research will identify those aspects of the indigenous ways of nature conservation that can be integrated into modern methods for the benefit of the country.

Such research can bring out the philosophies behind the indigenous ways of conserving flora and fauna. Teye's suggestion that an "attempt must be made to explain the science behind these (religious) by-laws, so that they are not seen as fetish...that both the religious significance and the environmental benefits of obeying such by-laws must be emphasized in the contemporary world" (Teye 2010: 37) is imperative.

This is the reason why there is a need to reorient the minds of Ghanaian youth as well as, particularly, the Christian and the Muslim communities, to view the indigenous ways of conserving the environment as an alternative way of conserving God's creation rather than seeing them as a "fetish." The National Commission on Culture (NCC), the Ghanaian accredited body for cultural matters, can play a crucial role in this campaign. Another effective way of doing this is to integrate indigenous Ghanaian nature conservation models into the school curriculum. This will make its integration into the modern means a bit easier since the minds of the youth will have been prepared for the integration.

Conclusion

African Traditional Religions have a key role to play in flora and fauna conservation in Ghana due to the way they have influenced the life of the traditional Akan society and many traditional Ghanaians toward nature conservation in general. Also, as noted, no financial commitment is involved in traditional nature conservation due to the fact that no one is employed to ensure that ecological laws are enforced in traditional Ghanaian society. The major hindrances to the use of local ecological knowledge are foreign religions (Christianity and Islam), western culture, science and technology, secularization, market economy, overpopulation, and urbanization. Although the government of Ghana is aware of the potential of indigenous ecological knowledge, over the years it has yet to go beyond the lip-service that its officials have given to this important national asset (local ecological knowledge). However, in spite of the formidable challenges to the use of the indigenous religion to address some of the environmental problems in Ghana today, the discussions thus far have demonstrated the fact that traditional ecological knowledge, underpinned by local religious thought, is a potential tool for addressing some of the environmental problems of Ghana. It is therefore recommended that urgent steps be taken to integrate it into the scientific means of nature conservation, especially in the area of flora and fauna conservation.



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Notes

1. The Traditional Akan people in this paper should be understood as Akans who still keep to their indigenous spirituality (African Traditional Religion) in spite of the force of impinging religions like Christianity, Islam, etc., that have made significant inroads on the Akanland.



2. The primary data were analyzed through the focus by question approach (Taylor-Powell and Renner 2003, see also Jonassen 2001, Miles and Huberman 1994, Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). More specifically, I put all the data (respondents' answers) from each of the questions together and by this I was able to identify patterns and relationships in the data, this enabled me to draw an overall picture from the study.

3. Information based on personal communication with Agya Amo, 20 March 2010, at his residence during the data collection stage.

4. A traditional area in Ghana is an area under the jurisdiction of a Paramount Chief. A Paramount Chief is a chief who usually has a number of divisional chiefs and sub-chiefs under his/her control.

5. Information based on personal communication with Opanin Kofi Ameyaw, 2 February 2010, at his residence.

6. During my study, the accuracy of this account of the ritual was confirmed by a wood carver.

7. Personal communication with Okomfo (Priest) Tawia of Tankwasi Shrine, 20 March 2010, at his shrine.

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