An Akan Queen Speaks
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Indigenous Aftican Extended Clan Culture Holds Wisdom for the World

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Family in the Ghanaian context is not what today is called "nuclear," consisting of husband, wife and children. It is not even the extended variety, with wife and children, grandparents, uncles and cousins. The family goes deeper than these. The Akan family is an unbroken clan that includes not only the living, but the dead and the unborn.

This paper is written from the point of view of an Akuapem, part of a larger group called the Akan who make up 65% of the people of Ghana. The Akan belief is that God is our creator. Man is made up of soul (okra), spirit (sunsum), blood (mogya) and family (abusua). Every Akan belongs to a clan and is bound to that clan by blood relation. This family setup is the basis of the entire social organization of the Akans.

The Akan society is organized around the family or, more appropriately, the clan, which is based on the lineage system. Akan society is composed of three systems: matrilineal, patrilineal and double descent, the latter meaning descendance from both the mother's and the father's sides.

The society is structured around eight clans. The family, abusua, is that unbroken clan which includes the living, the dead and the unborn. The lineage system provides the fundamental codes of life for the Akan, the skeleton of the social structure, the framework that shapes the body politics and guards inheritance, marriage and land tenure. It is also perceived as key in matters relating to troubles, including debt, arrest by police, help in school fees, or finding jobs.1

The Mature Wise Woman

Women play an important role in lineage matters in that throughout history and even today, mature, respected women of the community are consulted in every important aspect of life. They have a primary say in choosing traditional rulers. Ohene (chief) and Ohemmaa (female ruler) are highly respected, help to settle land disputes and are consulted about marriage problems.

The mature women are responsible for the funeral rites, which is a significant position in the society. They are morticians, remain with the bereaved family, comforting and counseling. Friends and members of the community make a family contribution (abusua tow) of food and money to help pay for funeral expenses. Funeral ceremonies with these contributions take place in the USA and elsewhere outside Ghana, enabling bodies of Ghanaians to be flown back to Ghana.

The Power of Indigenous Religion

The indigenous religion still has tremendous influence on many Ghanaians, whether Christians or Muslim. Most of them outwardly profess foreign religions, but at heart they are

attached to the indigenous religion. Indigenous festivals are widely publicized in the media and even patronized by the whole family and community. All rites connected with the rites of passage (birth, puberty, marriage and death) are in various degrees faithfully carried out by almost all the community. Naming ceremonies precede Christian baptism. Indigenous Akan names, sometimes including names of elders and ancestors, are attached to Christian and Muslim names. Puberty rites are performed by many in addition to Christian confirmation or the Muslim Agipa rites. Traditional customary marriage rites--invocation of the blessings of God and ancestors, and payment of brideprice--are always performed before weddings, Christian or Muslim. Some Christians may profess monogamy. But in practice they are polygamists, which is an important part of the Ghanaian traditional life.2 Traditional funeral ceremonies are performed side by side with Christian memorial services.

The indigenous religion revolves around everything and is the basis of moral behavior. Religion sets the pattern or code of behavior for the family, and the community as a whole, as such influencing moral and social behavior. In the life and thought of the Akan, the character of a person is of supreme importance. God is acknowledged as the Final Guardian of law and order and moral code. The Akan proverb, "Onyame mpe bone" (God is against evil), explains that morality flows from God, who demands appropriate response from his children. "Animguase mfata Okame hal" (Akan is not to be disgraced by bad character).

The concept of good character includes:

1. Hospitality to people, especially strangers. Selfishness is

strongly prohibited.

2. Sharing whatever we have with our less fortunate people. Generosity is very much stressed in general. The African usually looks after his brother's or sister's children and people from the extended family. (The African household may consist of father, mother, children, nieces, nephews, grandmother and some members of the extended family or strangers.)

3. Protection of women and vulnerable groups, widows, orphans and the disabled. Honor and respect due to the elderly are a norm in the society.

4. Truthfulness, condemnation of injustice and wickedness.

5. Chastity before and during marriage.

The Akan believe that the norms and ethics are instituted by God, whose nature is virtue.

The Vulnerable Groups

These groups include the aged, widows, orphans, disabled and those with bodily defects: albinism, hunch, extra fingers and dwarfs.

Care of the vulnerable goups comes under the African concept of good character and moral code, the sharing spirit and the principle that we are our brother's keeper. As I have mentioned, the aged and widows are part of the family and are looked after by their children and the family. The orphans are cared for by their aunts, uncles or members of the extended family. People with bodily defects are treated with special care.

Akans believe that all God made was good, and the disabled are born with special reason and talents; dwarfs are usually cared for by chiefs. They believe that if the disabled are

treated well, they bring good luck to the family; if mistreated, they bring misfortune.

Akans believe that to be human is to belong to the family and the whole community, and that to do so is to participate in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. It is not only an individual right, but an obligation. The ceremonies and rites bind and strengthen the ties of the individual members as a group and lineage. They form religious values which govern the family and society.

Rites of Passage

Akan life is wrapped in religion. The whole culture, the beliefs, activities and life cycle revolve around religion. Man's life is a cycle of birth, puberty, marriage, death and hereafter. No one can stay in one state forever, but must move on to the next. Special rites are performed to make the transition smooth, harmonious and peaceful. The rites of passage are governed by the abusua, the family system. Dr. Danquah, the Ghanaian philosopher, stated that what the Akan take to be good is the family.3 An Akan proverb says, "Nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame roma, obi nye asase ba" (All men are children of God, no one is a child of the earth).

The beginning of the rites of passage is the birth of a child, which is celebrated with a fitting ceremony. One week after birth, there is a naming ceremony because the birth of a child is a public affair. Every Akan child, even if born out of wedlock or an orphan, is given the same out-dooring ceremony: equality of humanity is an important aspect of life from the beginning. The extended family system becomes a child's

important social world. It is the family that brings up the child, who learns good manners and behavior from society. The naming ceremony is a very important event for the baby, as well as for the community. Every child has a "soul" name: the day on which he or she was born, plus the name of a grandparent, family member or ancestor. The Akan names are very precious and have significant meaning.

The next significant stage in a child's life is puberty or young adulthood. Rites are performed to initiate the child into society and make him or her into a fully developed person. The initiation rites acknowledge the child's biological as well as social maturation. Society wants to instill in the child the ideals of manhood or womanhood. Nowadays, puberty rites are performed mostly in the rural areas. The effect of education and urbanization has made the youth shy; as a result one rarely sees the rites amongst the youth in urban areas. It has become a private family affair, and parents give the girl presents and valuable things from the family.

Marriage is the next stage. It is necessary here to explain the two marriage laws in Ghana: marriage ordinance and customary law. Colonialism provided the marriage ordinance and succession rights of educated Christians. The wife assumes the husband's name and title of Mrs. This type of marriage is terminated by divorce or death. The marriage ordinance accounts for less than six percent of marriages in Ghana.

Under customary law, marriage is regarded as the union between two families, and not even divorce or death can

terminate the relationship. The criteria for a valid customary marriage are: the agreement for the parties to live together, the consent of the families and the payment of the brideprice. The bride retains her family name.

Most marriages are customary marriages blessed in church. Under customary law, the husband is the head of the household. He has the right to name the children, and the names are from his family.

Among the matrilineal, the wife is not considered as a member of the husband's family, and in the event she becomes a widow she may go back to her own family with her children. This is one of the reasons why women in Ghana are independent and always engaged in trading, farming and business.

Divorce under customary law is frowned upon, and severe efforts are attempted by families and elders before divorce takes place. Marriage is a way of widening the family; it is also contracted with the understanding of a permanent union, which is why the entire family and community participate in the unique ceremony.

Death and hereafter is the last rite performed by the whole family. Funerals are great social occasions in the Ghanaian society. They usually involve the whole community. The appropriate rite helps to strengthen the deep bond between the living and the dead. There is a general belief that unless the appropriate ceremonies and funeral rites are performed,

the dead will not be able to join the ancestors. These ceremonies are performed with very great satisfaction.

The Akan have four distinct stages for funeral celebrations: preparation of the corpses--done only by mature women--pre-burial mourning, burial and post-burial mourning. The abusua, the family, contribute individually or as a group, and physically support the bereaved.

Akan Household: Responsibilities Clearly Defined

The African household rarely consists of the nuclear family, which is found only among young families who have migrated to urban areas, or foreigners. The average Akan rural household in which a majority of the people live may include eight to twelve members, including members of the extended family and maid servants.

The African household is very complex. The status of relatives, lodgers, children, aged parents, the disabled and the polygamous husband's residents must all be clearly understood. There are many types of households: female-supported households with father as the head, and female heads of households, households headed by divorcees, widows, or single women (osigyani, woman without a man) who are separated or never married. In households headed by a female, her dependents are children both male and female, grandchildren and a sister or cousin.

Women make tremendous contributions towards the household expenses and in many ways are the predominant

providers. Traditionally, due to our inheritance systems, marriage and social setup, women have always been economically independent. They have always worked to support the family. A wife may be the chief contributor to the maintenance of the household. She may give financial support to the husband in private, yet still gives him power to make decisions in public: she prefers for her mother or family not to know that her husband cannot support her. It should also be noted that in Akan society, female subordination is often a facade hiding a large degree of equality among the sexes. It is viewed as a power game through which women buy off a large amount of power in exchange for allowing men public respect and status.

African women as major contributors of moral and economic support should be accepted as a natural concept. Akan women, Ghanaian women from all the ethnic groups, are engaged in either food production or trading. In rural areas, women are the backbone of three major economic activities: agriculture, fishing and commerce.

It is vital to clearly define the input and responsibilities of each member of the household. Traditionally, in rural areas in Ghana, the division of labor was not based on hierarchization of work. Men tilled the land and cut heavy trees. The preparation of the land was a man's responsibility. They built storage barns for storage of crops. Women were not expected to do men's heavy work, though they did many of the farm chores. They have also always had the dual and multiple roles as producers of children, as farmers, housekeepers and traders. The training of children has traditionally been the responsibility of mothers, the family and the whole community.

Children were viewed as an asset to the family, to help both in the home and on the farm: the contribution of children in the household cannot be underestimated.

Mothers have always accepted their roles as duties and responsibilities and have never felt any role conflict, because they took them for granted, accepting them as a natural cultural heritage. But they are aware of their great burdens, and discuss them often. They wish their burdens were lessened by support of their men, husbands, brothers and sons.

In Ghana, age is highly respected. Old people are part of the household and have important status. They are consulted in matters concerning inheritance and choosing traditional rulers. Ye ko bisa aberewa, "Consult the old women." They take active part in politics, politics of the throne ("stool politics") because the old woman is free from childbearing, farming and domestic labor, and has time. They give security and moral support for the members because they have time to listen and give council. There are no old-people's homes in Ghana because the elderly are usually cared for by their children and, in turn, help to care for the children of the household.

Social Roles

On the moral and higher social level of responsibility, the Queen Mother, Ohammaa, is in charge of all the affairs of women in her clan. Ohammaa represents them on all levels: her functions are political, judicial, social and ritual. She protects women's rights. The African conception of human rights is an essential aspect of humanism maintained by

religious doctrine and the principle of accountability to the ancestral spirits. Ohammaa is after the interests of both men and women. She associates in all religious festivals, performs most of the ceremonies, both in Ghana and for Ghanaians abroad; she officiates at birth, marriage and death ceremonies.

Problems Caused by Modern Social Change

Today there is increasing disappointment in the expectations of mothers from their children. Social change has not benefited rural women as much as the other sections of the Ghanaian population, and social services have lagged behind those in urban areas. Education also has a negative effect, in terms of young people's unwillingness to settle down to farming. Education, though more favorable to boys than to girls, is a positive experience, but many parents have sacrificed to educate their children, then find there are no jobs for them. They leave the villages for urban areas to look for jobs and the basic amenities, electricity, better housing and good drinking water. Migration has taken children from the villages to the urban areas, where a new kind of morality is adopted, threatening traditional morality.

In the urban setting, also, there is a new trend towards placing great importance on the nuclear family unit. In the villages, change, urbanization and migration tend to leave the women in the position of having to keep the household together and be the keeper of the family farm. Family life is disrupted and mothers are left in the rural areas to shoulder the responsibilities alone. The life of the rural woman has not changed. The situation of the aged has been worsened by modernization and migration, though the children continue to

support them financially.

The problem caused by immigration of children to the city and from the city to overseas not only hurts and disrupts the family unit, but has caused a brain drain, as it has in Africa on the whole. Loneliness is another problem. Children overseas bring their aged parents to join them overseas, but some of these parents die a few months after arrival.

Recommendations

Health care for the elderly is a major problem to be addressed. This would take a great burden away from the children and the family as a whole. Employment and programs for youth are equally necessary, especially for those from the rural areas, where a majority of the people live. This could help to stop the flow of migration of the youth. African traditional religion should also be included in the school curriculum.

There is urgent need for improving the situation in the country, curbing human rights violations, the migration and the brain drain, strengthening religious values and beliefs, living in harmony with our people. All these would strengthen the family unit. In addition, women should be accepted as full partners of the maintenance of the household. Rural women are illiterate, but they are intelligent and should be involved in all the stages of planning and implementation and decisions concerning their welfare. Development and food policies should involve the de facto women's roles rather than the de jure.

Education is needed for the whole family. There should be a holistic approach, men and women striving for mutual cooperation and working together for the common good of the household. Although advocation is for the proper support of women's role in society, it must be stated that the ultimate prime concern is the unity and harmony within the home, between men and women, parents and children and the family.

It is essential for policy-makers and researchers to take account of the religious and cultural aspects of African life. While introducing new and innovative ideas that will definitely benefit African society, efforts should be made to customize programs in order to maintain the status quo of African life. Therefore, appropriate technologies should be introduced that will make a true and lasting contribution to the betterment of the African family. As we have seen in the past, technologies inadequately researched for their appropriateness have only proved to be white elephants. They fall by the wayside due to lack of proper training for those who are in a position to carry out the use of technology or due to the lack of replacement parts for equipment.

Assistance given to women benefits the entire community. Ghanaian women, as we have seen, are mothers, farmers, processors and the economic backbone of the country. They provide excellent examples of the roles that can be played by women when given the proper support and opportunity.

In conclusion I offer a quotation from Opoku's West African Traditional Religion:

"The persistence of traditional religious ideas, though in a modified form, shows that they offer abiding and satisfying spiritual values. Especially in the crucial moments of life--birth, puberty, marriage and death, as well as human welfare and destiny--they provided satisfying answers which science may not be able to provide. African traditional religion also provides our societies with moral values, which undergird the relationships between people in the community and between them and the environment, spiritual and physical. African traditional religion has also been the source of inspiration for which Africa is known, and included in these are art, music, social institutions, political systems and the ancient civilization. We must study West African traditional religion in order to discover its abiding values in a world whose moral and intellectual inadequacies are self-evident, and to apprehend the truth which it represents."4

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Sources of Information

The Ghanaian Traditional Religion, like West African Traditional Religion, has no sacred literature like the Bibleor the Koran. Even though we have no written records, our religious practices, ideas and beliefs are revered and known.

Our sources of information are both non-oral artistic expressions-- architecture, symbols--and oral sources, meaning of God's name, personal theophonic names, liturgy, songs, daily speeches, myths and proverbs. The sources explain our belief in God, His power and attributes, our beliefs about our ancestors, divinities, nature and medicine.

Notes: 1. David Brokenshaw, Akuapem Handbook (Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1972); 2. T.N.O. Quarcoopome, West African Traditional Religion (Ibadan, African University Press, 1987); 3. J.B. Danquah, Akan Doctrine of God (London, Frank Cass & Co., 1968, second edition); 4. Kofi Asare Opoku, West African Traditional Religion (Jurong, Singapore, FEP International Private Ltd., 1978), p. 170.

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