

## The Ancestors and Nation-Building: *Aluta Continua*

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### Introduction

When I received the invitation to bare my mind on the sub theme *Tradition, Innovation and Change* as a contribution to this seminar on **The Contemporary Relevance of Tradition** I felt highly honoured. I hope my humble thoughts will find their way in the formidable array of eminent intellectuals and chiefs herein listed. I must also seek your forgiveness. I tend to be more Akan-traditions-and-culture centred because of my origin, background and knowledge. Although I do not want to fall into the pits of unanimity, nonetheless I strongly believe that the underlying principles of my Akan thoughts are shared by other cultures in this socio-linguistic area.

In my deliberations over the topic I am reminded of a phrase usually used to describe the chief's office – 'traditional ruler'. I have often wondered about the meaning of this phrase and have tried hard in various ways to translate it into Ahanta or Fanti. Generally, this kind of inquiry within this socio-linguistic area has also been fruitless. In addition those who occupy such offices are often referred to as 'the custodians/repositories of traditions and culture'. Again, while ruminating about the implications and connotations of such a description I have been acutely aware of what I term as 'chief-bashing' by some Christian evangelical dogmatists and sections of the media. The calls generated are either to do away with the so-called 'custodians' of traditions or change them into something that has yet to be defined. The word 'tradition' appears to be retrogressive, backward and obstructive. It is seen either as a historical burden or the millstone around the neck of progress or development. Such thoughts informed the choice of my topic - *The Ancestors and Nation-Building: Aluta Continua*.

### Contemporary Scene

The militant workers of the Gold Coast Railways had a slogan – 'We are working to build Ghana!' Together with the urban youth during Ghana's struggle for independence they emanated self-confidence and a passionate hope in building a strong and viable nation, creating a better future and controlling their destiny after getting rid of the evil of colonialism. Hope is the word to emphasize here. Hope in a better world to come. The strength of Hope is at times expressed in beliefs e.g. the belief in entering a heaven or, for me, the ancestral world governs actions here on earth. Presently, the youth of this country, especially the segment in tertiary institutions, display their confidence and hope in this ship of state by wanting to jump ship. The walk across the perilous sands of the Sahara and the various attempts to endure the rigours of stowing away together with the humiliating long queues at the visa sections of Western consulates reveal an absence of hope in this country. Any country in which the youth desire to abandon ship has lost the future. Who are we building this nation for? Our self-confidence and self-esteem are so low that our religion is not merely a loan from the Arabs and the West but we are also dependant on an imported theology, and worship a white spiritual image of authority which we also implore with fervent prayers to take us out of our economic distress as well as provide us with jobs.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we also perceive the geographical area built on a history of feudalism, inequality, slavery, colonialism, injustice and the exploitation of man as heaven on earth. How can we then give full respect to our black selves?

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<sup>1</sup> John Henrik Clarke **Africans at the Crossroads: Notes for an African World Revolution** African World press Inc. New Jersey 1991 p.398

## **Reflections from Traditional History**

Traditions embody history and history is the most important tool in shaping the consciousness of a people. We have been quite oblivious to the one-dimensional view of history which makes us negate the well-functioning civilizations destroyed by European conquerors and rather extol these conquerors and the unworkable systems they put in place to aid them in controlling or manipulating us.<sup>2</sup> If a people lose control of their history they lose control of their future. Without history there is no vision. In spite of the fact that Ghana's written history is still struggling to liberate itself from the European paradigm and colonized information, very little attention is paid to history as a subject in the school curriculum. If one examines evidence on the ground from a traditional perspective it becomes fairly obvious that our history reveals co-operation, co-existence, and co-mingling of the various peoples who inhabit the territory of Ghana and beyond and the devastation of slavery and colonialism also become vividly clear. Such a perspective is completely different from Euro-centric paradigms which, for example, seek a negative 'tribal' prism to evaluate the past – a gross distortion that has crept into contemporary Ghanaian political analysis.

If one takes the Ewe and Akan groups in Ghana, for instance, the politics of today gives the impression that the two groups have been at loggerheads throughout history. However, the evidence within their history reveals a very strong and healthy relationship with each other. The Anlo, for example, have an oral tradition which claims a brotherhood with the Akwamu. Within the geographical spread, names and institutions borrowed to enrich cultural pigeon-holes reveal a high degree of co-operation and understanding. There has been assimilation of peoples and an appreciation of issues in the historical landscape among other things. Despite changes and innovations, the internal evidence from Akan institutions point to the fact that traditional governance embodied social justice, the right to work, representation and participation of all shades of opinion in deliberations and a consensual mode of decision-making. Symbols speak through time and the mother-hen (*akoko bataan*) principle of the linguist staff, for instance, has not changed – the mother hen will make sure the offspring are fed before she eats, and the fact that anyone in the leadership position should be prepared to give up his or her life for the survival of his people. This symbol of the principle of leadership (i.e. the real leader must always place the needs of his people above his own) is an enduring one regardless of the changes, inversion or corruption of the chieftaincy institution.

The idea of proper Akan education meant instilling The Ancient Path or treading the Path of the Ancients – *ntsi tsi*<sup>3</sup>. To bring up a child properly is to follow the footsteps of the Ancients – the path the Ancestors paved for the individual and community. This inculcates Loyalty, Honesty, Responsibility, Obligation, Duty, Patriotism, Justice, Self-knowledge, Self-sacrifice, Frugality, Purity, Modesty, Tolerance, Honour, a sense of shame, a deep sense of and commitment to Family/Community and among other things a strong belief in an after life that triumphs the fear of Death. If one may borrow the Cartesian analogy, there is an inherent and fervent belief in 'I am because we are; we are therefore I am'. These precepts are firmly embedded and encoded in every aspect of the Akan culture which appreciates the inter-relationship and inter-dependence of all beings in all facets of existence. The Akan way of life gives a positive meaning to the real family and community. Character is everything. One of the early Ghanaian intellectuals reflected:

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p.346

<sup>3</sup> *tsi tsi* means: ancient (in Fanti)

*Our forebears, with all their limitations and disadvantages, had occasion to originate ideas and to continue in their own order. They sowed incorruptible thought-seeds, and we are reaping a rich harvest today, though for the most part we are scarcely conscious of the debt we owe them. Western education or civilization undiluted, unsifted, has more or less enervated our minds and made them passive and catholic.*<sup>4</sup>

### **Intellectual History**

Presently, Ghana's intellectual activity is generally cut off from the social realities of the country. It is yet to be deconstructed from its colonized framework. Its heart is in the West - the institutions, doctrines, vocabulary, research methods and scholarship are all still rooted in Western perspectives and knowledge systems which by their own subjective historical development impart racism and are un-African. This of course is far from early Ghanaian scholarship which exhibited a strong disaffection with the basis upon which their social realities were constructed by European scholars and their deterministic reasoning. In 1913 the acting Principal of Mfantipim School, Rev. S. J. Gibson, commenting on the Aborigines Rights Protection Society, which was founded by men who had earlier formed the *Mfantisi Amanbuhu Fekuw*, said:

*It is a grand thing when a people recognize that it has a heritage of ancestral rights; when it feels that the past is not a nameless, shameful shadow, and realizes that its forefathers have in the long, long years evolved a system of customs and usages which are trustworthy, practicable and expedient in the economy and polity of the present. ... (And)... seeks to preserve the old, not because of its antiquity but because of its intrinsic value.*<sup>5</sup>

John Mensah Sarbah, Casely Hayford and the Rev. S. R. B. Attoh Ahuma wrote books and published articles in learned journals promoting and defending their culture and its worldview. Casely Hayford for example founded the Gold Coast National Research Association in Sekondi with branches in Cape Coast and Accra with the objective of eliminating 'the white man's standpoint from the black man's outlook'.<sup>6</sup> These intellectuals were determined not only to observe native customs only, but also to try to reconstruct on paper the native state system 'as it was before the disintegrating foreign element intruded, or insinuated itself into it.' They lamented over the fact that the Gold Coast educated African was becoming 'the flotsam and jetsam of exotic civilizations'<sup>7</sup> i.e. a people with a deep sense of psychological alienation 'based on self-rejection, self-hatred and a futile and tragic attempt on' their part 'to regain their humanity through apish imitation of white people.'<sup>8</sup>

These intellectuals who were firmly anchored in and respected their traditions displayed a vigorous and creative intellect. Creativity lies within and one can only feel and appreciate their power and creativity as they touched upon their heritage and traditions. Sarbah and his colleagues constantly pointed to the Japanese example and in 1889 drafted a petition to the Secretary of State requesting the institution of a municipality based on indigenous institutions. They complained: 'Today we are being ruled as if we had no indigenous institutions, no language, no national characteristics, no homes.'<sup>9</sup> Casely Hayford stated further that because of contacts with the West 'the former municipal arrangements' of the coastal towns had been

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<sup>4</sup> Attoh Ahuma, **The Gold Coast Nation and National Consciousness** Liverpool, 1911, p.6

<sup>5</sup> Casely Hayford, **The West African Land Question** London 1913, p.158

<sup>6</sup> **Gold Coast Leader** 2 December 1915

<sup>7</sup> Attoh Ahuma, *op. cit*

<sup>8</sup> Ama Mazama, **The Afrocentric Paradigm** Africa World Press, Inc p.13

<sup>9</sup> CO/96/202 – Nana Kobina Nketsia IV papers

disorganized, nonetheless ‘there cannot be the slightest doubt that, in the hands of an intelligent civilized central government, the different embryo municipal corporations of the country may be developed and adapted to local peculiarities of the people without coming into conflict with any of their cherished ideas.’<sup>10</sup> The crest of the institution founded by these intellectuals, Mfantshipim School, reveals the perception toward the future. The crest consisted of a stool and state swords symbolizing indigenous culture and traditions, a book and a set of tools, also symbolizing Western learning and technology. Of course such paths were not trodden.

From a perspective and at the risk of being accused of pessimism there is little doubt that our economy, our society, our politics and nationhood seem to have no larger direction and no purpose – there appears to be an absence of the commitment, the dedication and the hope that the Workers of the Gold Coast Railways embodied. This is the social reality. Contemporary Ghana is in a mess. Tradition is on the sidelines. And at the vanguard of the desertion of tradition, of this confusion, of this self-enslavement, loss of dignity and imperialism and in pushing us further into the hour of night is a fragment of the population which is often referred to as the educated African whose intellectual traditions lie in Europe.

### **The Educated?**

If one pays attention to discourses in our media and ‘the educated’ behaviour in the public domain one could easily agree with Edward Blyden that ‘the African strives to be those things most unlike himself and most alien to the culture that produced him. He feeds grist into other people’s mill and sees nothing of his creative self as a result.’<sup>11</sup> Another scholar has observed that the educated Ghanaian has ‘lost his ability to be creative and stopped using his imagination as a tool of survival. The European man became, in his mind, the image of achievement, and the European woman the image of beauty.’<sup>12</sup>

Personally, whenever I am listening to any media programme and I hear the statement “even in Europe/America” I simply switch off. In my opinion the media is at present the powerful vanguard of our mis-education. Education is not used to fight or lead the struggle for what is ours, neither is it used to protect what is ours. Rather it is the vehicle for our destruction mainly because what we conceive as education is in fact mis-education.

Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Rev. Attoh Ahuma, an early nationalist, lambasted his educated colleagues for turning themselves into apes.<sup>13</sup> He was aware that we could not turn back the influence of Europe by imitating Europe. However, in 1929 Rev. Edwin W. Smith made an observation that ‘it was undoubtedly an English (Euro-centric) Kingdom of God that the Cape Coast (Ghanaian) Prophets looked forward to.’<sup>14</sup> This shows that Attoh Ahuma’s exhortation had not been heeded. Today, about a century thereafter these ‘apes’ have produced offspring who have not only matured but are in full bloom. Uncensored, unquestioned wholesale western educational thought, ethos, models and forms have been the invisible poison attacking Ghanaian society, propelling and strengthening the mental incarceration. None of the Ghanaian universities takes indigenous knowledge seriously. The general curricula and syllabi are not based on the day-to-day experiences of the indigenous communities. It is as if there were no forms of knowledge and inculcation of any form of

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<sup>10</sup> Casely Hayford, **Gold Coast Native Institutions**, p.110-111

<sup>11</sup> cited in Clarke *op. cit.* p.323-324

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> . Attoh Ahuma *op. cit*

<sup>14</sup> .E. W. Smith, **Aggrey of Africa**, London, 1929, p.43

knowledge till Europe established schools to teach us about Europe. The institutions do not even appear to attempt to investigate knowledge and fields of study and how they still manifest themselves in indigenous societies.<sup>15</sup> It has been pointed out that ‘the Africanisation of African universities consistently left the debate on models and the content of curricula and structures intact. Indigenous knowledge systems were always posited in reductionist terms.’<sup>16</sup>

It appears as if a large crop of defeatist intellectual opinion live in their own invisible prison created by bricks made from material such as David Hume’s warped and uninformed opinion that:

*There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturer among them, no arts, no sciences ... such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries or ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.*<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting for example to listen to such intellectuals in their expansive mood when discussing a man like Voltaire who wrote that:

*If (the African’s) understanding is not of a different nature from ours it is at least greatly inferior. They are not capable of any great application or association of ideas, and seemed formed neither for the advantages nor the abuses of philosophy.*<sup>18</sup>

From Voltaire’s perspective Africans display their inanity even through the attempt to study his work.

I am confident that Casely Hayford’s head must be bowed in shame because these institutions are a far cry from the character or type of institution of higher learning he and his colleagues envisaged. It is not surprising that our education has produced women who now perm their hair and bleach their skins as if it were normal and are unaware of the heritage of the lack of self-esteem that produced these cosmetics of self-depreciation. The so-called educated become estranged from the very community which pays for their education and whom this education is supposed to uplift. Most educated people become lost forever to their communities. They totally disregard traditional philosophy, pay insignificant attention to their community and progress toward selfishness masked under the term individualism. To borrow from Frantz Fanon:

*Having judged, condemned, abandoned his cultural forms, his language, his food habits, his sexual behaviour, his way of sitting down, of resting, of laughing, of enjoying himself the (mentally enslaved) flings himself upon the imposed culture with the desperation of a drowning man.*<sup>19</sup>

Another writer Amadou Hampate Ba also stated that ‘qui que tu sois devenu, tu ne sais pas ce que tu es’ (i.e. whoever you have become, you do not know who you are).<sup>20</sup> Are we nation-

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine A. Odora Hoppers ed., **Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems: Toward a Philosophy of Articulation** New Africa Books South Africa 2002

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p.x

<sup>17</sup> . Marimba Ani **Yurugu: An African-centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behaviour** Africa World Press, Inc. 1994 p.298

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> . cited in Ama Mazama op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> . cited in Françoise Vergès *Psychoanalysis, the Enigma of human Behaviour and the Contribution of Indigenous Knowledges*, in Catherine Hoppers op. cit. p.173

building? How can a nation be built with apes - with a people who do not have confidence in themselves; with a people who have been programmed to accept their dependency?

Obviously, the educated Ghanaian just as other educated Africans has led this country to adopt and assimilate 'wholesale whatever the West has to offer. The end result is not just a cultural betrayal but a serious case of self-dehumanization and outright self-subversion both in terms of dignity and self-esteem. Indeed there is no race on earth that abhors its own culture and is so easily prepared to abdicate it and flirt with experimental ideas which promise no more than vanity, to a large extent, like the African race.' It is thus not difficult for example to understand the infatuation by some sections of the educated class for the ideas of the racists Karl Marx and Immanuel Kant.<sup>21</sup> A blind eye is turned to their 'wise thoughts' which denigrate the African and Africa's historical experience. Infact I personally believe that our ancestors must be wailing. If their descendants were truly educated they would have found a way out of the socio-economic confusion.

### **The Economy**

Almost fifty years after independence Ghanaian economists seem to lack creative indigenous solutions to our problems. Economically we may be nothing else but slaves. 'To be a slave is not the fact of being poor. A lot of people are poor and they are not slaves. To be a slave is not to be able to determine your own destiny.'<sup>22</sup> Ghana is rich but who manages our riches? There is a proxy control over our resources by Western economic and financial institutions. We owe them and they also give us the modus for financial or economic liberation. Meanwhile it is fairly obvious that the West derives its strength from our weakness. After experiencing slavery and colonialism and being very much aware of neo-colonialism the comical tragedy is that we still delude ourselves into believing in the palliatives or the adjustments or the Western so-called solutions. Our head pads may be adjusted in order for us to carry a heavier debt burden. And yet all that one hears from some economic 'gurus' (i.e. if indeed they are gurus) in our tertiary institutions appear to point to the path that pushed us into enslavement and has kept us in bondage. Over a century ago Blyden stated the obvious that 'nothing comes out except what has been put in and that, then, is our great sorrow'.<sup>23</sup> Sadly one can only muse over the nature of economic theories being studied in our institutions and being used to indoctrinate the unimaginative African. What have we learnt that provokes rebellion over the Euro-centric economic philosophies? As one commentator has written: 'the most dangerous of all dependencies is to depend on' the system responsible for your weakness and derives its strength from that weakness 'to free you and share power with you, because powerful people never train powerless people to take their power away from them.'<sup>24</sup> Plain common sense! Ignorantly, our society drifts on, the beggar (donor) syndrome continues and the socio-economic confusion deepens.

### **Society**

We have started building orphanages and old peoples' homes. The basis of any society is the definition of family. There is only one definition dominant in our classrooms and among the

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<sup>21</sup> Kant for example displayed his wisdom in a remark that: 'this fellow was black from head to foot, a clear proof that he was quite stupid' see Tsenay Serequeberhan, *African Philosophy: The Point in Question*, in Tsenay Serequeberhan, ed., **African Philosophy: The Essential Readings** Paragon House, new York, 1991

<sup>22</sup> Clarke op cit. p.332

<sup>23</sup> cited in Clarke ibid p.408

<sup>24</sup> ibid. p. 364

educated elite today – a couple and their children. The real basis of our social structure, the *ebusua*, as family is fast sinking into depths of oblivion under the weight of the educated elite, cultural imperialism, colonized information and a new form of enculturation.

The whole process of marriage and the eternal relationships it is supposed to build among communities and groups is fast vanishing. An anthropologist uses a term like ‘bride price’, for instance, and we unthinkingly accept it forgetting that the bottom line and implications of such an absurd term not only borders on chattel slavery but dehumanizes our mothers and sisters and among other things denigrates our cultures as well. Anthropological distortions have been used to contort social explanations.<sup>25</sup> The gravitas of death is changing to one of ridiculous entertainment. Infact in the contemporary scene we appear to be overturning all the inherited indices of our society. With communitarianism in its doldrums, ill-gotten wealth, selfishness, intolerance and indiscipline now appear to be an accepted part of our social fabric. I believe that my ancestors must be sorely distressed as we appear to be heading toward a country of Despair – no matter the spin.

### **Politics**

With the absence of imaginative, inspiring and culturally creative constitutions, Ghana appears to be wallowing in a Marsh of Folly because of ‘conceptual incarceration’.<sup>26</sup> From the media it appears as if Ghanaians are obsessed with politics. If one recalls songs such as ‘Dr. Danquah *sakabo*’ and the *Kru-lizing* of the first President of Ghana together with the filthy songs sung after his overthrow then one can deduce that the politics of insults has really been a part of our nation-building. Of course, this is probably due to the fact that a majority of the population does not understand the issues and so it is easier to have personality bashing and view the world of insults as politics. There is a money inducing and ethnic-centred so-called ‘democracy’ in place, which is often referred to as fledgling (whatever that means) together with its attendant structures which are highly touted by the Euro-centric Ghanaian educated elite and social commentators. The idea of competition is being deeply entrenched or ingrained in all these structures. Platforms are created for bulimic political actors to self-proclaim the beauty of their characters, their honesty and their undying love for communities which they only become aware of during electioneering period.

Politically, the society is being divided into either ‘For’ or ‘Against’ the ruling government. If you are labeled as belonging to the ‘Against’ division of society state doors are shut firmly against you and your citizenship faces a reduction. So-called politicians irresponsibly sharpen and oil their ethnic machetes and fan ‘tribalism’ for their own ends and bring into focus the National Question. We have a Parliament which perceives national crisis such as the Dagbon issue (one of the most horrible and disgraceful blots in our historical conscience) in strictly partisan terms. Elected honourable members become colour blinded by their parties and not by Ghanaian colours. To all ends politics is a lucrative business. With the various constitutions which have been produced by Euro-centric Ghanaians this quagmire is understandable and would have been hilarious if it not for the fact that it affects human existence. It is sad but it becomes easy to appreciate the observation that:

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<sup>25</sup> Marimba Ani’s perspective is that: ‘to study anthropology is to be struck by the pervasive anti-Africanism of the discipline. And if one then approaches the discipline critically, it emerges as a tradition of Eurocentrism, functioning to satisfy the needs of European ethos.’ Marimba Ani **Yurugu** op cit. p.3

<sup>26</sup> The present Ghanaian constitution appears as a mish mash of French, American and English constitutions. None of our institutions of governance or constitution since self-government have had any kind of African originality about them. It will be interesting to study the Fijian constitution for example in comparison.

*When we look at (the) African Independence Explosion, we must take into consideration that not one African nation came to power using conventional African structure of government. Every one used an imitation of parliamentary procedure taken from Europe. It's like wearing a coat that wasn't designed for your body and will never fit.'*<sup>27</sup>

As a nation we are paying the political price of our mental conquest.

## **The Nationhood**

Colonialism by its very nature is antithetical to the welfare of indigenous groups. Military regimes have distinctly revealed this fundamental characteristic. They have clearly exhibited the fact that because of its structures and mode of operation Ghana is indeed a colonial state. It rests on violence – ‘physical violence, including torturing, violating, massacring’ and more importantly, ‘psychological violence’.<sup>28</sup> The so-called structures of government such as the army, police, judiciary, the law etc. were designed not only to be oppressive, parasitic, expropriative and exploitative but were also to safeguard the government’s (not the people’s) interest. Whether ‘revolutionary’ or ‘unrevolutionary’ these military regimes have clearly displayed the buccaneer nature of the state and power. Colonialism was an act of piracy and the inherited colonial apparatus has been to keep the occupant of the Christianborg Castle (the seat of Government in Ghana) in power as an agent for the mother country. And there are times the nation has represented nothing but a labour camp for the expropriation of its wealth. It is not a wonder that in the Fanti heritage *aban* (which has come to mean the non-indigenous form of government) is perceived as anti-people, unliberating and oppressive. Every Fanti saying which has to do with *aban* is one of alienation e.g. *Aban wo twiu n’ase won’soa* i.e. ‘*aban* is dragged on the ground and not carried’ (this should be taken in the context of the culture of a people who carry their chiefs); *aban nkaba* i.e. the bracelets of *aban* (hand cuffs). Among other depressive and oppressive sayings it is also associated with a prison – *aban mu*. In the Akan tradition a prison is an institution of human filth from which one needs to be ritually cleansed when one emerges from incarceration. Perhaps it is not ironic that Ghana is ruled from a slave castle. The castles and forts that dot the coastline were sometimes named after Christian saints but their innards reveal the mind-sets of those who created them.

If one continues to use the Western pattern in the analysis of our nationhood the negatives will be unlimited. Infact to study the contemporary scene might turn one into a teratologist i.e. one who studies malformations or monstrosities. To use Basil Davidson’s words,

*The post-colonial nation-state (has) become a shackle on progress ... the state (has) not (been) liberating and protective of its citizens no matter what the propaganda claimed; on the contrary its gross effect (has been) constricting and exploitative, or else it (has) simply failed to operate in any social sense at all.*<sup>29</sup>

If our traditions are irrelevant to our contemporary existence then we might as well borrow the ancestors of societies we are striving to emulate. The knighted pirates Sir Francis Drake and Hawkins would make good examples. We may also extol Abraham Lincoln who stated that; ‘while they (Black and White) do remain together there must be a position of Superior and Inferior, and I as much as any other man, am in favour of having the Superior position

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<sup>27</sup> Clarke op.cit p.396

<sup>28</sup> . Ama Mazama op cit. p.13

<sup>29</sup> Basil Davidson, **The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State**. London: James Currey. 1992

assigned to the White Race'.<sup>30</sup> If we are not ready to accept such ancestors then we must not forsake our own and we should seek them to help us define our future.

### **The Ancestors**

The word Ancestor is deliberately chosen in order to humanize Tradition. The idea of ancestors in Africa has more often than not been misunderstood. This stems in part from the misunderstanding by Africans learning about themselves from European matrix and studies which in its myopia arrogantly universalizes itself. Absurd! Outside the fact that Africa was exotic to the European mind such studies inspired insecurity and self-contempt. It also ensured a demonization of the African Spirit since at their best they subtly ingrained the Hegelian mind-set i.e. the African indoctrinated himself from a pool of knowledge which not only hated him but denigrated his being. Thus the educated African has been filled with self-hatred. Herein is the paradoxical absurdity of the so-called educated African's world.

Ancestor here applies to the concept of *Nananom* among the Akan. To have a peek into the concept one has to understand the *Nana* who lives in a perduring now and is an embodiment of heaven on earth. However, I must hasten to admit that a large crop of the contemporary '*Nanas*' are quite a distance, if not an inversion, of what the *Nana* concept was designed to inspire. Far from being the custodians or repositories of their traditions many of the contemporary Akan chiefs suffer considerably from the general mis-education of the country and to some extent some chiefs even think of themselves in feudal terms ignorant of the fact that as a people our historical experience never entered the feudal world. Attempts at feudal explanations in our history can be perceived not only as gross misinterpretation of our history and traditions but running counter to the spirit of our Ancestors.

The title *Nana* is sacred. It is similar to the Buddhist idea of the Bodhisattva. It attaches itself to the purity of saints and also refers to a God-like existence. *Nananom* emanate a positive flow of energy from their space to the space of manifest existence in the perduring now. Among other things *Nananom* stands for the very best within the Akan culture that is handed down from generation to generation. It is the latter part which may be referred to as Akan Tradition. Unlike mindless religious dogma, the traditions are ideals that provoke rational thought, philosophies and spirituality. This aspect of the Ancestor concept also gives strength to the present and a direction to and for the future. It is the embodiment of Akan values and heritage. It determines the Akan self-worth, dignity and identity. It is Tradition which makes the Akan - Akan i.e. without the Akan tradition one is not Akan. It is not a matter of birth or geographical description that makes you Akan. It is tradition. The Ewe is Ewe because he embodies the Ewe tradition. The Dagbon is Dagbon because of his tradition. Collectively these traditions make up Ghana. Without them there is no Ghana. If the Akan tradition for example is irrelevant to contemporary Ghana then the Akan is also irrelevant in Ghana. This idea of Ancestorhood goes well beyond the geographical area of Ghana.

Japan after being visited with two atomic bombs sank into its culture and traditions and now proudly raises its head. The Japanese in spite of the computer revolution and their triumphs in technology and science are still Japanese. They did not for example allow their conquerors to take two things from them: their self-confidence in their being Japanese and 'their image of God as *they* conceived Him to be.' In Sri Lanka the Buddhist monks were the traditional pivot around which the country was mobilized. The Chinese in spite of their Revolution still depend on Kung Fu Tzu as the basis of their existence. All the Asian Tigers held on to their traditions.

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<sup>30</sup> Marimba Ani, op cit., pp298-299

Infact it is obvious that tradition is the most powerful force to be used in the restructuring of Ghana and indeed Africa's place in the existing world order. Interestingly, the most decisive moments during the struggle for the emancipation of Ghana depended on the indices of tradition for mobilization. Nii Kwabena Bonne III, the *Osu Alata Manche*, led the successful Boycott of European goods in 1948. Although this was not an action directed at political emancipation, nonetheless it helped to sensitize the average man about the nature of colonial rule. The overtly political strike dubbed Positive Action which was directed toward independence and marked the watershed of the African independence Struggle depended on the mobilizing power of the Chief of British Sekondi (Essikado). Thus, heritage played the most crucial part in the struggle for Ghana's independence.

However, Ghana's 'March into Folly' began with the 1950 disingenuous and un-African Coussey Constitution which made the author of **The Blinkards**, Kobina Sekyi, abandon politics cautioning Kwame Nkrumah and J. B. Danquah about following the path of *Abrofo nsem*.<sup>31</sup> Attoh Ahuma's complaint that 'as a people we have ceased to be a thinking nation'<sup>32</sup> is instructive here. Although tradition has been abandoned nevertheless one has to take a second look at the indices that made the African withstand and battle colonial rule. There is a need to consult the Ancestors if we are to stop sliding down hill. For far too long we have looked at the world from our exploiter's perspective. There is the need for re-education and re-evaluation of our Traditions.

### **Re-Education in Traditions**

Today's selfish or individualist 'education' for example inverts most of the time tested Akan precepts. In fact the so called education is un-Akan. The country has taken *nwoma sua* to mean *ntsi tsii*. It leads to the recollection of a couplet by the people of African descent in America which says:

'Bought you books and sent you to school,  
But you still ain't nothing but an educated fool!'

We must have education and be educated or we perish. Real education (which is *ntsi tsii*) as opposed to mere *nwoma sua* (which is schooling) 'is our means of providing for the inter-generational transmission of values, beliefs, ... customs, rituals and sensibilities along with the knowledge why these things must be sustained'.<sup>33</sup> Through *ntsi tsii* 'we learn how to determine what is in our interests, distinguish our interests from those of others, and recognize when our interests are consistent and inconsistent with those of others.'<sup>34</sup> *Ntsi tsii* 'prepares us to accept the staff of cultural leadership from the generation that preceded ours, build upon our inheritance and make ready the generation that will follow us.'<sup>35</sup> In all gravity and urgency we need to examine our contemporary educational system which has obviously failed to give us a direction to the future. One of the vital agencies through which the Ancients speak to us is Tradition. This translates into the importance of our traditions in contemporary times. Tradition must be the basis of *nwoma sua*. It must be the receptacle that receives

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<sup>31</sup> . Kobina Sekyi held on to the intellectual traditions of Ghana till he passed away in 1956. He constantly advocated for either a governance or a constitution based on African culture.

<sup>32</sup> Attoh Ahuma op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> . Mualimu J. Shujaa, *Eduication and Schooling: You Can Have One Without the Other*, in Ama Mazama op cit. p.246

<sup>34</sup> ibid

<sup>35</sup> ibid. p.247

*nwoma sua* and sifts and churns it. Our future must be built with tradition as its foundation. Without tradition Ghana will flounder in deep developmental waters.

Fortunately, the internal pieces of evidence from the institutions are still present for meditation. Colonization and Westernization have not brought permanent and irreversible change. The acceptance of the opposite is not realism but smacks of a defeatist attitude. Furthermore, the vast majority of Ghanaians have not been grossly touched by the poison of foreign education and so there is still hope. However, I must also once again confess that at present a large number of radio stations are nothing more than mouthpieces for Western indoctrination and are probably unaware of the havoc they are causing among the barely literate and illiterate communities. All the same the problem is really for the educated – they have to go through a difficult process of unlearning their Euro-centric perspectives and relearning to be Africans in thought, outlook and actions. Consistently, they must have a watchful consciousness of the motives underlying non-Africanist interest in the continent. Western ‘knowledge about African people is always political, useful in maintaining neo-colonialism, propagates Western culture, helps generate and perpetuate an inferiority complex (in Africans), fosters individualism among Africans, disrupts organization and unity in the (African) community because there is inherent fear of a united, organized African-centred community, or a combination of all of the above. In short, we are (regarded to be) a people who can only succeed, realize our potential and destiny by being controlled, policed, nursed and guided by Europeans. We are (therefore) incapable of being masters of our own destiny’. Within such awareness a process will begin which will be both their atonement and contentment. Hopefully, the educated will thereon embody a greater commitment to the defense, survival and perpetuation of their traditions as they realize the expansionist aggressiveness and commitment of Europe to the supremacy of its culture and traditions, together with its will of destroying or incapacitating other cultures. The educated ‘who begin with the assumption that they are dealing with the character of “modernity” are doomed from the start for they have already accepted the terms of European ideology.’<sup>36</sup>

### **Payback**

Hoping that I may not be sounding too repetitive some of the payback of the Akan Tradition in our contemporary period is that it will infuse us with discipline and commitment and dedication to the national cause. It will give us a self-definition as well as draw out an African concept of nationhood and statehood. This will enable us to know and understand our place in the world. Traditions underpin culture and pseudo-politicians or ‘belly-politicians’ (i.e. politicians who view politics according to the dictates of their stomachs) and neo-colonial agents will only pay lip service to tradition because they fear its potential to arouse a cultural nationalism and the benefit of this is that it will ultimately result in the withering of the lines of greed drawn in Berlin. In part, the pan-African cultural similarities will come to the fore. Furthermore, there will be a promotion of a deeper understanding and tolerance on the continent which will lead to a greater appreciation of the overall unity. In addition, any agenda for development will not be set in the present cultural and philosophical vacuum but will rather be placed on cultural foundations that are revived, refined and revitalized by our Traditions. And these are not mere words!

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>36</sup> Marimba Ani op cit p.22

A Wesleyan reverend minister, S. A. Dzirasah, whose profession and sources of his salary placed him in the class of Ghanaians whose objectives over time have been to destroy Ghanaian traditions and replace them with Judaeo-Roman traditions and Western views made a candid admission in the 1956 Gold Coast Parliament thus:

*I do not think we shall be doing justice to the people of this country if we always believe that what is African is always evil and therefore not worthy of investigation. That is the superiority complex idea which has been imported here. The time has now come for us to try to find out the essence of even the worst things that we have and try to improve upon them. If we cannot do that we cannot lay any true foundations, for after all we as Africans have a heritage.*<sup>37</sup>

In spite of the very subtle psychological confusion in Rev. Dzirasah's statement, his perception of the roots of the country is quite clear. Although I have placed more emphasis on the Akan it is my conviction that the ideas expressed herein apply to most, if not all, of the various groups who inhabit this country.

This country needs a rethinking. It needs to go back into its traditions and anchor itself firmly therein. Without our traditions, Ghana will not have a compass to guide us into the future. The nation is fast deteriorating into 'a mere geographical expression.' Our traditions are as relevant today as they were yesterday. It is tradition which makes us who we are. Our traditions are the essence of our existence. At the 1958 All-African People's Conference in Accra, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana stated:

*There is a searching after Africa's regeneration – politically, socially and economically – within the milieu of a social system suited to the traditions, history, environment and communal pattern of African society. Notwithstanding the inroads made by western influences, this still remains to a large degree unchanged.*<sup>38</sup>

Of course Nkrumah knew this very well because he had passed a subtle test in 1951 when he visited the centre of Ghana's militant nationalism, Essikado, and he stood up for the *Omanhen*. This test set by those at the forefront of Ghana's militant struggle reveals the nationalist mind-set that in spite of the movement into the future the country stood on its traditions and heritage and that the struggle was to keep these and not jettison them. Although we are still reeling under the impact of cultural imperialism the Ancestors are still waiting as we fight an illusory fight with our selves. 'Let us pause' with Pitika Ntuli 'and consider if we are equipped to undertake this task. Let us prepare to remove cobwebs of ideas from our brains and minds. We have traded our African gods and goddesses for plastic white gods; our black spirits for insipid Eurocentric ones. We have sacrificed our ideologies on the unholy altars of Eurocentric convenience. We have lost our souls, which roamed freely in the intricate jungles of thought. Is it not time, within the silent spaces of our beings, to return to the citadels of our past, to rummage for lost answers to the path of progress? ... To invoke African knowledge systems as a basis upon which to build new knowledge systems, for the purposes of contributing to the task of bringing about Africa's rebirth, requires us to embark on a journey of reclamation.'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>. See Gold Coast Legislative Assembly Debates, Official Report, Wednesday, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1956, vol.1, No.7. Nana Kobina Nketsia IV Papers

<sup>38</sup>. see Ghana Today, vol.2, No.22. Published by the Information section of the Ghana Office, 13 Belgrave Sq. London, SW. 1 . Nana Kobina Nketsia IV Papers

<sup>39</sup> P. Pitika Ntuli, **Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the African Renaissance**. Catherine Hoppers op cit. p.55

The struggle continues and in this let us always recollect the cultural truth that: *Aber a Odomankoma boo wiadzi no, na Ananse Kokroko tsena n' egua mu* (i.e. when the Great Benefactor created the world Ananse Kokroko was already seated). Let us listen to *Nananom. Aluta continua!*