

Philosophical Discourse by the Asante of Ghana: Mythological Symbolic Analysis

by

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Abstract

African indigenous people have marvellous mythological stories with philosophical symbolic connotations which they make known to their youth during their stages of growth. This is mostly done during the evenings when all chores for the day have ended. Most of the teachings are in the form of stories which are told by the elders who congregate with the youth by the fireside in the evening. Such mythological stories are impregnated with philosophical issues – beliefs, values, morals, ethics, good and evil, heaven and hell and ancestral worship. The psychological connotations are centred on obedience, devotion, love for strangers and hard work without any external motivation. Inclined on making children to identify with the Creator and live responsible, appreciative and respectable lives during adulthood children are made to understand life and living related to customs and tradition. Most of these mythological methodologies for the upbringing of children have not been documented for posterity. This article introduces and discusses a few of these mythological niceties and teachings among the Asante ethnic group of Ghana to open up a neglected field of enquiry for further research by interested researchers.

Key concepts: mythological symbols, Asante ethnic group, indigenous people, philosophical, symbolic, Creator mythological methodologies, ancestral worship.

Introduction

To all those who are not informed about the indigenous African customs, culture and traditional practices very often refer to them as signs of backwardness, primitivity, barbaric and outmoded because they consider such practices from a restricted view of their life world (Quan-Baffour, 2008). Every ethnic group worldwide has their own mythological stories. These mythological stories are the basis for their very existence and make them unique –what they are, where they are now and what they have been before and where they are going (Boaduo, 2010).

Among the Asante ethnic group of Ghana myths are advanced forms of stories that carry spiritual instructions which includes symbols that stand supreme in all their deliberations – from birth to adulthood and death; as well as during major cultural celebrations like giving a new born baby a name, during female initiation to adulthood and during marriage (Larunga, 1992; Ngangar & Prime, 1997). There are many symbols that are depicted in traditional kente and adinkra clothes that tell the initiated in Asante mythology and symbolism, philosophical and psychological narratives of life's practices among the Asante ' (Wiredu, 2005). Generally, Asante civilization is grounded in myths and there are four distinctive functions that are always interchanged when teaching the youth.

The four functions assigned to myths are mystical, cosmological, sociological and pedagogical (Campbell, 1988; Courlander, 1996; Gatti, 1994). Mystically, myths help individuals to realize the mystery of the universe in relation to creation and the Creator. Cosmologically, myth is the aspects of life that cannot be explained, for instance death is a cosmological mystery which the Asante take as mysterious and only the Creator knows why it happens. Sociologically, the Asante take myths to support and validate the rules of society so that certain principles values and moral principles are specifically related to ethnic sociological inclinations. Pedagogically, which is one of the major functions of myth among the Asante, helps to teach the youth how to live their lives from the time they are born to the day of death. In sum, among Asante myths are the highest form of ideals and beliefs of cultural practices. Specifically, myths are holier and revered and are meant for the youth to begin to be initiated into the cultural and traditional beliefs of the Asante cultural heritage (Quan-Baffour, 2008).

Ethnic Mark: Origin and Significance

Among the Asante everyday spirituality is engrained in the cultural and customary traditional practices. Culturally the Asante do not bear ethnic marks of any sort on any part of the body. The cultural understanding of the Asante about marks on the body is that, if any member of the community bears a mark on the cheek, forehead or nay part of the body, it is frowned upon. Hence, the Asante believe that a person should keep every part of the body intact in order to be able to give account when called by the Creator on their return after completing their earthly mission. Any mark of any sort, on the body, according to the Asante is a mutation and one would be held accountable (oral tradition from my grandfather Nana Akwasi Poku).

Despite what has been indicated, which must not be taken to be a contradiction, the Asante have marks on their body anyway. The first one is what is generally termed as birth mark. Every Asante has such mark since the mark is naturally placed on the body before birth and for that reason everyone is born with it. This apart, the Asante have marks at specific points on their body. The commonest one is either on the cheeks, the joints, and the centre of the forehead or at the corners of the lips. These marks have special significance. They are either medical or related to special events and occasions.

The medical marks are as a result of treatment of some ailments. Among the Asante certain diseases and illnesses such as convulsion, headache and joint pains are treated with ashes prepared from medicinal herbs, barks of trees, roots, seeds and flowers. The marks are made with sharp object in a form of small incisions at these spots and the prepared ash smeared or rubbed in the opening. Such treatment brings instant relief and the ailment is brought under control and consequently healing results (oral tradition from my grandfather Nana Akwasi Poku).

The occasional one has various connotations and may include real mark on the body as well as in names. One of it is that any time the same Asante woman loses a baby consecutively, especially through stillbirth and through normal infant mortality, the belief is that it is the same child who delights in playing tricks with the mother by going and coming. The Asante believe that such mischievous activity should be prevented. To prevent the mischievous baby from constantly molesting the mother in this way, the midwife who is always an experienced Asante woman in delivering the child immediately imposes on the new born baby funny names she can think of as soon as the baby is born. Names such as Donko [slave], Sumina [dumping ground], and Asaaseasa [space for grave is finished], Bosuo [dew] and Binka (let some remain) or Yinka [this one should remain] are examples of children whose mothers have had several still births. The belief is that these names are symbolic and once imposed on the newly born child, it may feel shy to die (oral tradition from my grandfather Nana Akwasi Poku).

Another means of making sure that the same child desists from its deliberate wickedness of coming and going is to make large marks on one or both cheeks or around the corners of the mouth. Making such marks on the body of the child is tantamount to declaring the baby a slave or outcast. It is believed that if marks are made on the newly born baby whose mother has experienced consecutive still births the baby will feel ashamed to die. Such names are also symbolical and show that the child has been identified and cannot disappear again (oral tradition from my grandfather Nana Akwasi Poku).

The Asante usually do not let stillbirth issues lie unattended. They consult with the chief traditional priests and medicine men (usually referred to as “Odunsifo” to find solution to the continuous stillbirths or child mortality within the community of among specified family members. The traditional priests and medicine men and women are consulted to find solution to such calamity. When children are born after such events and they are marked as indicated above, they are also given names that are specific to the issues surround their birth.

For instance the word “bagyina” [one specifically catered to survive] is given to a child whose mother struggled to conceive and was helped by the tradition priest or medicine man. With such funny name and the marks on the baby, there is no way to escape again. Some of the traditional priests and medicine men and women even make sure the hair of the child is never combed so that it grows naturally braided. This is called “mpesempese”. Among the Asante, anybody who walks about with “mpesempese” on the head is easily identified as ntoba [the child who has been bought from the ancestors]. The Asante believe in reincarnation and ascribe special attention to children who are born and seen to be the reincarnate of elders who have been in their midst before (oral tradition from my grandfather Nana Akwasi Poku).

Spirituality Among the Asante

Among the Asante, everything that God has created is significant. Both young and old have dignity. Everybody is accountable for his or her actions. All people must behave themselves to avoid penalty of any sort. Spirituality, according to Asante mythology, begins during pregnancy and never ends. As a result the Asante treat one another and strangers with respect, love, concern and dignity. Hospitality is ingrained in the blood cells of every Asante person. Spirituality is lived in the daily lives of every Asante. It is expressed in concrete action. It manifests in the desire to refrain from offending the ancestors and to attempt positively to remember them and make them part of their daily lives (oral tradition from my grandfather Nana Akwasi Poku).

I recall many times that my grandfather, Nana Akwasi Poku, mentioned the ancestors in almost everything he did. The mentioning of the ancestors refers to the effortless daily interactions among the Asante and their relatives, dead or alive. Libation is the major symbolic medium of contact with the dead. Libation is poured to the departed souls at the beginning and end of every occasion in the community. The belief is that at the beginning of an event the departed souls are required to be invited to come and join the living souls for that event. At the end of the same event libation is pour to thank the departed souls who were able to attend the event and also remind those who could not attend due to commitments to remember to attend when they are called upon next time. This symbolic exercise is ingrained in the lives of all the Asante (Gyekye, 1987). Statements like “Nananom adaworoma” which literally translates to “Due to the benevolence of the ancestors” is always altered during celebration (oral tradition from my grandfather Nana Akwasi Poku).

Hyɛbrɛ and Nkrabea (Destiny)

Among the Asante hyɛbrɛ and nkrabea are two important concepts that are used in the explanation of the behaviour of children born in to families. The English alternative is destiny. However, destiny does not explain the Asante dual connotative meanings. Thus, the Asante have dual concepts for destiny which are hyɛbrɛ and nkrabea. The Asante also believe that destiny is dual, and that hyɛbrɛ aspect of destiny is self-imposed while nkrabea is divinely imposed by the Creator (Sarpong, 1974).

My grandfather was not literate but the distinction I got from him, nevertheless, made me to believe and understand the double Asante concepts of destiny he gave as *hyɛbrɛ* and *nkrabea* to be extremely relevant in the daily living of Asante. Both concepts are mythologically significant. The significance about the distinction is that when, as a child, I do something wrong, it is not attributed to *nkrabea* which will make God, the Creator responsible, but instead to *hyɛbrɛ* which places the onus of my action squarely on my shoulders. In other words, wrong doings are not attributed to *nkrabea* since only God the Creator is responsible and assigns everybody's *nkrabea*. The Asante have firm beliefs that God the Creator knows why He created human beings and for that matter has a specific duty for everybody to perform. Unfortunately, once born human being acquires different habits, which, in most cases sway him or her from *nkrabea*.

Hyɛbrɛ, on the other hand is taken to mean the acquired habits of man, which has nothing to do with *nkrabea*. Any time one is confronted by series of problems these are blamed on *hyɛbrɛ* and God the Creator is not made responsible of what is happening. The dual meanings of destiny guide every young and adult Asante person (Sarpong, 1974).

Hospitality Among the Asante

My grandfather was extremely hospitable. I clearly recall at one time his benevolence nearly caused him his marriage. The wife wondered where all the food that had been accumulated for the lean season had gone to. My grandfather's conviction was that "keep doing good, the ancestors want it that way. According to him food that is not shared with others will finish anyway. You will be satisfied to a point where you cannot eat any more. If you had not shared your food with others, how can you, in fairness, share your problems or even joy with them?" He used to emphasise that to live a humane and happy life you need conversation; you need to be related to others. In trouble times, he used to say, "you do not know who will come to your aid in times of need". As a result, the Asante usually express such philosophy in proverbs such as "wo nko wo did a wo nko wone". [Literally meaning if you eat alone you do not expect anybody to accompany you when nature calls especially during the night] (Quan-Baffour, 2008).

Indigenous Asante Songs and Dance as Mythological Symbolism

Quan-Baffour (2008) has elaborately discussed about the transformation and acculturation in Ghanaian songs. His contention is that Ghanaians, (Asante being the largest cultural group) cherish, love, practise and preserve their culture and tradition through songs, names and manner of dress despite their exposure to western culture (Wiredu, 2005). Authentic indigenous Asante culture and tradition are still very much alive and cherished, valued, practised and treasured despite western cultural infiltration (Williams, 1974). Music is integral part of the life of the Asante. Songs are used to express love, hatred and sorrow in terms of occurrence of death in the community (Ampene, 2005). Songs are powerful link to the worldview of the Asante and are highly customised for specific occasions and contexts; for example songs depicting joy and happiness at celebrations cannot be sung at funerals when people are mourning and vice versa (Arts Council of Ghana, 2000; Kamba, 2000)).

Furthermore, through songs Asante musicians can sing to praise, abuse, complain, thank, speak in parables, ask for favour from God of people, rejoice and express satisfaction or disappointment in life as a whole (Quan-Baffour, 2008). Men and women have their own kind of songs for various occasions. Nnwonkorɔ is usually sung by women with varied type of songs that they sing. For instance during funeral dirges are sung and celebrations have their accorded songs too (Ampene, 2005).

There are several traditional singing groups who may specialise in the composition and singing of Nnwonkorɔ. Every song is always accompanied by special dancing always associated with special body movements. The way the feet and arms are coordinated in the movement during dancing requires intricate attention to be able to decipher and understand the meaning. There are also songs of resistance which are taught to and sang by the youth and are encouraged to sing them in the course of protests either against individuals or communities or unfair judgement from the elders in the course of disputes.

Logic in Indigenous Thought and Application

In the indigenous traditional life the Asante argue and settle disputes and evaluate arguments both with respect to their validity and soundness (Wiredu, 2005; Davis, 1983). In disputations, especially when disputes are brought before the elders for settlement, the elders usually enunciate fundamental logical principles such as the laws of non-contradiction (viz, nothing is both the case and not the case) and exclude the middle stance (viz. something is either the case or not the case). For example, among the Asante inconsistent talk before any group of elders during hearing would be likely to invite the reminder that “Nokware mu nni abra”, literally “there is no conflict in truth” which, evidently, is an invocation of the principle of non-contradiction (Busia, 1965). And trying to evade an option as well as its contradictory will, earn you the censure “Kosi a enkosi, kɔda a enkɔda” remonstrance, which is a stern way of trying to wake somebody up to the principle of excluded middle. This is, in fact so common that the logical carelessness in question will trigger it almost in any group of the Akans, not just the elders sitting at the hearing (Forde, 1954). In sum, the Asante have formed within their traditions the habit of trying to set out the principles of reasoning among which non-contradiction and excluded middle are of a very basic importance, in the manner of a system (as in logic); nor consequently, have they tended to investigate the assortment of theoretical questions that arise in such an enterprise (as in the philosophy of logic). Logic is ingrained in the Asante philosophy. (<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/4/3.htm>). Assessed 12/02/2010. The Asante are highly logic oriented and this philosophy is included in the upbringing of the youth with the aim that if they are called to adjudicate in the court of the elders in future they would be able to discharge their duties responsibly.

God, Lesser Gods and Spirits Among the Asante

The Asante believe in the existence of a creator who created the Earth and the Skies which they called Nyame (also Onyame, Nyankopon, Twieduampon or Twereduampon). This Nyame, to the Asante, is at the top of the hierarchy of gods. Below this hierarchy are other lesser gods. All these orders of being are believed to be subject to the universal reign of cosmic law. The absence of any notion of creation out of nothing reflects the Asante sense of the ontological homogeneity of that hierarchy of existence (Wiredu, 2005). In songs God is mystified with terms like Obooadee, Katakylie, Kantanka and Odupon (Ampene, 2005). Every Asante youth is aware of this and accords spiritual meaning and respect to these concepts and are not altered playfully. To swear using these concepts indicated the seriousness of the issue under consideration (Dankwah, 1968). The knowledge of God is internalised as the youth grow (Knappert, 1986). The Asante adage “Obi nkyere abofra Nyame” literally meaning, no one needs to show a child that God exists). This testifies the advanced philosophical thought of God by the Asante. It can, therefore be indicated that the knowledge of God is not new to the Asante (Quan-Baffour, 2008). However, there are lesser gods which are considered to work in tandem with the Creator – the Supreme God. In some instances, for instance during death and funeral, the departed soul is handed to ancestors to be escorted safely to his/her destination. These gods, are not worshipped but are considered as medium between the living and the dead. Furthermore, the Asante believe in giving respect to the divine and should not be talked to directly. For this reason, the Asante use these lesser gods as medium of communication between them and the Creator. The uninitiated would consider this as idol worshipping. In essence, the Asante do not worship idols but use them as medium of transmitting message to God. This is enshrined in some of the Asante proverbs “Wo wɔ asem ka kyere Nyame a ka kyere Mframa” literally meaning “If you have message for God tell it to the wind” (Sarpong, 1974).

Conclusion

In this article, I have briefly sketched some of the niceties of the mythological symbolism of the Asante of Ghana. In the discussion, I have espoused about how the Asante take the duty of bringing up the youth very serious by unveiling to them the niceties of the traditional and cultural values that are held in high esteem that will help the youth to grow up to fit into society to be able to make their contribution when their time comes. The key conceptual frameworks that require articulation and understanding to avoid conflicts of interests growing up in the Asante community have been discussed. Destiny, songs and the articulation of logic, especially during the settlement of disputes in the elders’ palace have been sketched. Mythological symbolism is engrained in the traditional upbringing of Asante youth as a survival strategy and the preservation of tradition, custom and culture.

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