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Dancing Golden Stools: Indigenous Religion as a Strategy for Identity Construction in Ghana

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Abstract

In this article the author concentrates on the use of Indigenous Religion among the Akuapem in Ghana for the construction of their group identity. She discusses the way in which the Akuapem make use of the celebration of an annual indigenous religious festival (*Odwira*) to strengthen their cultural identity by self-identification, differentiation and the perception of other cultural groups. Her specific focus is on the common Ashanti-Akuapem history, the foundation of the Akan Golden Stools, *akom* dancing and the *Odwira* festival procession and Durbars. She concludes that Indigenous Religion should not be left out in the study of the construction of group identities in the social sciences.

Keywords: Africa, Akan, festivals, identity, Indigenous Religions.

1. Introduction

In this historical-empirical study,[1] I will focus on the use of Indigenous Religion among the Akuapem in Eastern Ghana in the construction of their cultural identity within the umbrella category of "Akan" in past and present times. For the construction of the "legendary" and "analytical" history[2] of the Akuapem people I studied historical archives in Ghana.[3] The empirical part of this study consists of conducting fieldwork among the Akuapem people and the Ashanti people in 2005, analysing (self-made) video images of the annual indigenous religious festivals of these Akan groups and collecting in-depth interviews from the Ashanti and the Akuapem people.

Since 1819 "Akan" has been the widespread covering term for a number of cultural groups in Ghana, Togo and the Eastern part of the Ivory Coast who share the same language *(Twi)*[4] and many cultural characteristics, such as naming ceremonies, puberty, marriage and funeral rites and royal artefacts. The Akan also belong to the same eight matrilineal clans[5] and patrilineal sub-groups[6] (Busia, 1954: 199). From a cultural–linguistic perspective "Akan" is therefore a useful term. Historically, however, the term is problematic, since it does not refer to any connection in the past between the cultural groups that are labelled as Akan. Instead, the term has its roots in the construction of two imaginary states, known as "Acanes grande" and "Acanes pequenos" that were identified in 1602 by Portuguese map makers (Cortesão and Teixeira da Mota, 1962: 67–69) and imaginary people who in 1875 were defined by the Danish missionary and creator of a Twi dictionary J. G. Christaller as the "Ɔkànni" (Christaller, 1933). The term "Akan" is thus an artificial

1. I would like to thank Dr J. Platvoet and Professor P. Nugent for reading drafts of this article and Dr C. K. Coffie and R. Okine for giving me permission to use my video camera.

2. Legendary history is the interpretation of people of oral cultures of their history. This type of history allows the use of religious (imaginary) explanations of historical events. It can be distinguished from narrative history, by the fact that narratives are accounts of what happened which are based on "true" stories. Analytical history is a generalization from the particular in order to arrive at useful notions about past phenomena. It can provide rich concepts, which are strongly suggestive of how an historical event might be explained (Lemon, 2003).

3. Archival research was conducted in Kumasi in the National Cultural Centre.

4. The language Twi - also referred to as Akan - is a tonal language from South Central Niger-Congo.

5. The matrilineal clans of the Ashanti are: Ekoana, Asona, Bretuo, Agona, Aboradze, Atwea and Aduana.

6. The patrilineal sub-groups are: Bosompra, Bosommuru, Bosomtwe, Nkatia, Afram and Abankwade.

construction created by outsiders and has no indigenous historical roots. Not surprisingly, the cultural groups that belong to the Akan (the Ashanti, Akuapem, the Akyem, the Akwamu, the Assin, the Denkyira, the Twiforo, the Wasa and recently also the Fante) have not primarily identified themselves with this term and find it important to specify to which of the Akan groups they belong.

Since 1500 and most likely earlier, the Akan cultural groups of the lower guinea coast (the coastal area which currently comprises of the Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo) were organized by lineages, clans, city-states and kingdoms, without fixed boundaries (Ogot, 1999: 210-11). After the Conference of Berlin in 1884–85, the artificial umbrella categories such as Akan that were created to divide and rule over Africa, became common use. The fact that the cultural groups of the lower guinea coast never formed a political unity, however, lies at the heart of their resistance against this classification since their construction at the end of the nineteenth century.

In this study I will aim to provide an in-depth insight into the relationship between "Indigenous Religions" (IRs) and the history of the creation by the Akuapem people of a more specific cultural identity within the umbrella category of Akan. To understand this relationship I will first explain what Indigenous Religions are. In Cox's (2007: 69) definition of this term, its primary characteristic refers to its being bound to a location; participants in the region are native to a place, or they belong to it. The single and overriding belief shared amongst Indigenous Religions derives from a kinship-based worldview in which attention is directed towards ancestor spirits as the central figures in religious life and practice. As such, IRs are restricted cosmologically because their spirit world is organized around a system of lineage. Ancestors are known by name; they belong to a place just as their descendants do, and they are related to living communities as spirit conveyors of ancestral traditions.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, I will focus on the common history of the Akuapem and the Ashanti, who have culturally influenced the Akuapem. The Akuapem *Odwira* celebration, which is their most important indigenous religious festival, was introduced to the Akuapem people after their encounter with the Ashanti people. Then, I will demonstrate how the Akuapem people deepen their cultural identity by the help of their Indigenous Religion during their celebration of *Odwira*. The *Odwira* festival is on the ninth and last month of the Akan *adaduanan (40 days)* ritual calendar. Its purpose is to celebrate the beginning of the new harvest and the New Akan calendar year. I will thereby focus on two festival events: (a) the lulling of a Golden Stool (*Sika Dwa Kofi*) and (b) *Akom* dancing performed by indigenous priests and priestesses. Finally, I will use the case of the

Akuapem *Odwira* festival as a means to describe the relationship between Indigenous Religions and identity construction in more theoretical terms.

2. The *Asanteman Adae Kese* and the Akuapem *Odwira* Festivals: A Common History

In this section, I will focus on the analytical and the legendary common history of the Ashanti and the Akuapem Akan cultural groups. According to analytical Akan history, the Ashanti and the Akuapem people lived in peaceful coexistence and shared a history of mutual harmonious relationships in the period between the foundation of the Ashanti Kingdom in 1701 and the year 1742. The earliest inhabitants of the area that is now known as "Akuapem" were the Guan, who migrated southwards from modern Burkina Faso, along the Volta River toward the Atlantic coast in 1000 CE. The Guan, who were the earliest of Ghana's cultural groups, organized themselves in small independent states until the fourteenth century when their living area was absorbed by various Akan groups, who influenced them politically and culturally. Consequently, the Guan became divided and whereas some of them – such as the Anum-Boso – show a greater influence from Ewe language and culture, others such as the Larteh–Kyerempong and the Efutu adopted Akan cultural practices. In 1733 the Akan Akwamu founded and ruled over the current Akuapem state until their power was taken over by the Akan Akyem Abuakwa people and later the Akuapem people.

From 1742 onwards, however, the peaceful coexistence between the Ashanti and the Akuapem came to an end after the Ashanti attacked the Akuapem and attempted to conquer their living area in order to get direct access to the trade with the European nations at the coast near Accra to avoid having to deal with Akan middlemen. The Akuapem remained, however, a semi-autonomous Akan state. They had their own traditional authorities (chiefs and queen mothers) who officially fell under the authority of the Asantehene but maintained the influence over their own vassal states. In the period 1742–1816 this meant that in practice the cultural influence of the Ashanti on the lives of the Akuapem was insignificant, even though a short-lived Ashanti-Akuapem war of 1811 was won by the Ashanti. After several Ashanti traders were killed in 1816 by the Akuapem in order to prevent a direct Ashanti-European trade link, the Ashanti increased their political control over the Akuapem state and its traditional rulers. In 1826 a second war broke out between the Ashanti people and the Akuapem people. The defeat of the Ashanti people at Akatamansu in the same year resulted in the separation of the coastal states from the Ashanti kingdom (Kwadwo, 2000: 32). The war marked the end of a long period of hostilities

(1807–26) and the resumption of peaceful trade on the Gold Coast (Kwamena-Poh, 1973: 95).

According to Akan legendary history, the common Ashanti–Akuapem account also goes back to 1701. The powerful Akuapem chief-priest Anokye is believed to have played an important role in the foundation of the Ashanti kingdom in this year. The god "Otutu" of the shrine Awukugua to whom Anokye belonged had advertised itself by enabling the sister of the chief of Kwaman (*Kwamanhene*) – which was the most important Ashanti town – to give birth and so bring a successor for his stool. In 1698, the Ashanti defeated the very powerful neighbouring state of Denkyira and created a union between various cultural groups in order to prevent the Denkyira people fighting any other wars against the Ashanti people and the inhabitants of its surrounding states. Shortly after the creation of this union, the *Kwamanhene* received the position of primus inter pares of all paramount chiefs within the union. According to the legend, it is for this reason that Osei Tutu I, the Kwamanhene who came to earth as the result of the spiritual mediation of priest Anokye, became the first King of the Ashanti people. To thank the priest of the Otutu shrine for his life, Osei Tutu I brought priest Anokye from the Akuapem hills to the Ashanti people and together Anokye and Osei Tutu I founded the Ashanti kingdom (Kwamena-Poh, 1973: 19, 73). The harmonious relationship between the Ashanti and the Akuapem came to an end in 1742 after the Ashanti first came to help the Akuapem to defeat the Akyem–Abuakwa but then annexed the Akuapem state to incorporate it in the Ashanti Kingdom.

Since the creation of Christaller's Twi dictionary, the Akuapem people and the Ashanti people are both academically categorized as Akan cultural groups, because they share a long history of culturally related indigenous religious practices, such as the *adae* rituals and the *Odwira* (purification) festivals. Since the fourteenth century the Akuapem people used to celebrate the *adae* or ritual calendar (*adaduanan*) days to venerate the inhabitants of the spiritual world, such as the natural deities (*abosom*), the ancestors (*Nananom nsamanfoɔ*) and the High God (*Onyame*). The history of the celebration of the annual Akuapem *Odwira* festival goes back to 1826 after the Akuapem people had defeated the Ashanti people. On a state level, the *Odwira* festival has been celebrated annually by the Ashanti since 1701 to show their allegiance to their traditional authorities (the chiefs and queen mothers) and renew their loyalty to them and to cleanse the nation from the evil influence of spiritual beings by the invocation of spirits (KNCC 1:1/30/1/18, KNCC 1:1/7/31). *Odwira* also helped the Ashanti to enforce their self-identity as a cultural group by enhancing the unity between their traditional authorities and their subjects. The Akuapem, however, began to celebrate *Odwira* to enforce their cultural identity by distinguishing themselves from their previous occupier, the Ashanti people. The Akuapem

Odwira festival was instituted by the Akuapemhene Addo Dankwa I and first celebrated in October 1826. Addo Dankwa I used the *Odwira* festival as a symbol of victory over the Ashanti people and its allies and the capture of the central symbols of their military power (Kwamena-Poh, 1973: 90, 94).

3. Dancing Golden Stools

In this section, I will describe how the Akuapem in present day Ghana make use of their Indigenous Religion during their *Odwira* festival to enforce their cultural identity within the umbrella category of Akan. I will focus on the strategic use of the common Ashanti-Akuapem history of the Akuapem people in interpreting their indigenous religious symbols for this purpose. An example is, for instance, the Akuapem's use of colonial historical sources on what happened to the central symbols of Ashanti military power during the last Ashanti -Akuapem war of 1826. There are at least two versions of this history on which I will now elaborate.

First, according to a report of the British Lieutenant–colonel Purdon the central symbols of military Ashanti power that were captured by the Akuapem in the last Ashanti-Akuapem war in 1826 included the skull of the British governor Sir Charles MacCharty, whose head had been cut off by the Ashanti under the army leadership of Osei Tutu Kwamina after they had defeated the British on the 21st of January in 1824 (Kwamena-Poh, 1973: 94 n. 3). Additionally, Purdon included the Golden Stool (*Sika Dwa Kofi*) among the Ashanti war trophies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The *Sika Dwa Kofi*: the golden stool of the Ashanti.

The Golden Stool is the most important indigenous religious symbol of the Ashanti, because it represents spiritual authority. The Ashanti believe that the one

who is brought in connection to this stool by his "enstoolment"(enthronement) receives the spiritual power to mediate between the inhabitants of the spiritual and the material world. The *Sika Dwa Kofi* is also believed to contain the *sunsum* or communal soul of the Ashanti people and is a symbol of union of the Ashanti nation (McCaskie, 1995: 168; Wilks, 1999: 43). The myth of the Golden Stool goes that if the *Sika Dwa Kofi* were to fall into the wrong hands, this would herald the fall of the Ashanti Kingdom (Rattray, 1923: 289-90). It is very likely, however, that Purdon's report with regards to the capture by the Akuapem of the British governor's Sir Charles MacCharty's skull and the Ashanti *Sika Dwa Kofi* in the war of 1826 is inaccurate measured by the standards of writing an analytical history. Various Ashanti historical archives reveal that the Ashanti chiefs the "Kontanasehene Nana Antwi Panin" and the "Dwabenhene Nana Kwasi Boaten" managed to recapture the Golden Stool after it was conquered by the Akuapemhene Addo Dankwa (Kwamena-Poh, 1973: 49 n. 5; KNCC 2: 2/2/11). In 1826, according to the renowned historian Wilks (1989: 118, 359) Asantehene Osei Yaw Akoto (1823–33) did indeed take the Golden Stool on his march against the revolting vassal states in the south–east, but it was not lost in the Akantamansu war. It is therefore unlikely that the Golden Stool belonged to the war trophies of the Akuapem and likely that there is an inaccuracy in Purdon's report, all the more so because Purdon also mistakenly took the skull of the deceased Ashanti war leader Tutu Kwamina, "which Okutu (Asantehene Osei Yaw Okoto) had brought with him as a powerful talisman after having been warned by the Tano Fetish not to undertake the campaign" [against the British] for the one of the British governor MacCharty (Kwamena-Poh, 1973: 94 n.3). Purdon's report can at best be explained as a written version of the Akuapem legendary history of the Ashanti-Akuapem war of 1826. It is currently used by the Akuapem to enforce their cultural identity.

Since the nineteenth century, the Akuapem have used their legendary history of the capture of their war trophies from the Ashanti as a reason to start the celebration of *Odwira*, the festival of their former rulers. Before the Ashanti–Akuapem war of 1826, the Akuapem royals did have stools, which were introduced in the Akuapem state in 1733 after the migration of the Akan Akwamu to the Akuapem region. They did not, however, have a Golden Stool, because unlike the Ashanti the Akuapem did not have a pyramidal organizational structure of which the *Sika Dwa Kofi* is the symbol of the highest spiritual and political authority. The Ashanti are ruled by a primus inter pares paramount chief or king who has a higher religious-political status than all other kings or chiefs within the same group.[7] The Akuapem were,

7. A primus inter parus chief or king has the same rights but more tasks, which is why he has a higher religious-political status.

though, ruled by various paramount chiefs or kings who have been equal in function and who therefore all occupied the same type of stools, which were made of ebony wood. The Akuapem Golden Stool is thus an "invention of tradition"[8] (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992) among this cultural Akan group.

During their Akuapem *Odwira* festival of 2005, I observed that the stool-bearers of Akuapemhene Addo Dankwa III carried the "Akuapem Golden Stool" that they believe to have captured from the Ashanti on their heads (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The *Sika Dwa Kofi*: the golden stool of the Akuapem.

They shake it with their hands from left to right and back and front as if they were lulling a baby and were using the name that the Ashanti gave it, which is Kofi, meaning "born on a Friday." I discovered that unlike the Ashanti Golden Stool (*Sika Dwa Kofi*) which is "a mass of solid gold" (Kyerematen, 1969: 4),[9] the "Akuapem Golden Stool" is made of ebony wood, like any other of their chiefs' stools. The Akuapem Golden Stool resembles one of the royal stools of the Asantehene, which

8. The colonial power would often invent a "tradition" which they could use to legitimize their own position. Often these inventions were based on some form of tradition, but were grossly exaggerated, distorted, or biased toward a particular interpretation (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992).

9. The original *Sika Dwa Kofi* that was brought from the sky by the priest Anokye was made of wood and a massive amount of gold was only added to the stool much later. However, this does not make the original Ashanti *Sika Dwa Kofi* and the Akuapem Golden Stool look more alike.

is known as the cow stool (*nantwi gwa*) or stool of the Saamanhene, which is an Ashanti paramount chief who is the head of the royal household of the Asantehene. This stool, that could have been taken off the Ashanti by the Akuapem instead of the Ashanti *Sika Dwa Kofi* is, however, far less important than the Ashanti royal stool, which is also a shrine.

This section demonstrates that the Akuapem have been using the report of Colonel Purdon, the common Ashanti–Akuapem legendary history and its indigenous religious symbols to strengthen their own cultural identity by self-identification. The introduction of the celebration of *Odwira* has given the Akuapem recognition for their victory over their former occupiers. Historical events, such as probably the failure of the Akuapem to capture the *Sika Dwa Kofi*, which has been the Ashanti people's most powerful indigenous religious symbol, have been distorted by the Akuapem in order to identity themselves as a cultural group of conquerors.

4. *Akom* Dancing

In this section I will display how the Akuapem people use their Indigenous Religion during *akom* dancing which is part of the celebration of the Akuapem *Odwira* festival to distinguish themselves from their former occupiers, the people of Ashanti. *Akom* bodily movements have indigenous religious, political and aesthetic connotations (Hanna, 1979: 25). *Akom* dances are part of Akan indigenous religious rituals, such as the *adae*, which are certain days of the Akan ritual calendar (*adaduanan*) that are reserved for the performance of rituals, the *Odwira* celebration, and funerals. As an element of *adae, akom* dancing is meant for social healing. It is believed that traditional priestesses who dance can mediate with the deities who are thought to be able to help people and to solve their social problems, such as barrenness or sexual impotence. During festivals such as *Odwira*, traditional priests or priestesses are invited to dance to show to the public the powers with which their deities (*abosom*) are thought to protect "the state," in order that they may be praised for their contribution to "the state" in the past year. Divine protection of the state was believed to be necessary in all pre-colonial Akan states.

Akom dances are usually performed by indigenous priests (*akɔmfoɔ*) who become possessed by natural deities and since the 1920s also by executioner deities (*abosom brafo*) (see Figures 5, 6 and 7). The latter spirits are believed to have entered Ghana to provide spiritual help to cocoa farmers in a time of economic crisis. These spirits played an important function during the Ashanti *Odwira* of 2004 which was named *Asanteman Adae Kese*, whereas they did not play any role in the Akuapem *akom* performance as part of the Akuapem *Odwira* in 2005. The reason given by the Akuapem indigenous priestess (*ɔKɔmfoɔ*) Comfort Appiah for the absence of the *abosom*

brafo among the Akuapem *Odwira* celebrations is as follows: "The Akuapem do not invoke the *abosom brafo,* because these are migrated spirits that are meant to protect people against witchcraft. It is mainly traditional believers, who believe in witchcraft and who have faith in the power of migrated spirits to cure people from the diseases caused by witches.[10] We Akuapem, however, are for the majority traditional Christians. We therefore believe that not the migrated spirits (*abosom brafo*) but God and the *abosom* will protect us against evil forces" (interview Comfort Appiah, 13/11/2005).

It is for this reason that the Akuapem only invoke natural deities (*abosom*) that are local to their living area. They do, for instance, venerate the goddess, which is known as *ntoa* and is associated with the wellbeing of towns and villages in Akuapem. Another difference between the Ashanti and the Akuapem is their association with the Akan High God (*Nyame*). Comfort Appiah said: "The Akuapem do – in much larger numbers than the Ashanti – perceive this Supreme Being as equal to the Christian God" (interview Comfort Appiah, 13/11/2005). This difference can be explained by the large influence of the Presbyterian Church in Akuapem on the representatives of the Akuapem Indigenous Religion: the indigenous religious priests and priestesses and their chiefs and queen mothers. Consequently, the Akuapem *akom* performances of traditional priests and priestesses make less use of Akan indigenous symbols, such as the wearing of a skirt (*odoso*) made of raffia, a talisman made of animal skins (*sebe*) around their neck, whiskies (*bodua*) in their hands, twinkle bells (*adoma*) around their ankles and the covering of their bodies with white clay (*hyire*). The Akuapem representatives do, however, wear traditional beads (*ahwenee*) around their neck, arms and ankles, which are precious articles that stand for wealth and power. During the Akuapem *Odwira akom* dancing I observed, for instance, an indigenous priestess who swung her beads up and down with her hands to show her spiritual powers and allegiance to the present paramount chief of Aburi (the Aburihene) and the Adontenhene "Otubuor Djan Kwasi II."

Like the Ashanti (see Figure 3), the Akuapem priestesses (see Figure 4) danced inside a circle, accompanied by the drummers (*okyerema*), who with their talking drums (*atumpan*) invoked natural deities (*abosom*). The *atumpan* is a medium size single-headed drum. The drummers beat the stick of this drum with hooked sticks, which come into two kinds: the "male" and the "female" which produce two sounds. The function of their drums is to send messages from the living to the spiritual beings. These beings are believed to be familiar with the language of the drums,

10. The Ashanti traditional priests (*akɔmfoɔ*) invite good spirits from outside their local spiritual realm to cure their patients, because they believed that evil spirits are also located outside their spiritual realm.

which are used by the drummers as the medium of communication (Fisher, 1998: 34–35). The priests and priestesses use bodily movements instead as the main medium of communication. Once in trance, it is believed that deities have come upon them and send messages to the people.

Figure 3. Akuapem traditional priestesses wearing traditional cloth *(ntoma)* and pointing to the Highest God – literally 'the boundless one."

Figure 4. An Ashanti traditional priestess wearing a skirt (*odoso)* and pointing to the earth and the sky and then to herself to say "I own everything in every place I have inspected" (Bame, 1991).

The purpose of *akom* dancing by priests and priestesses at the Akuapem *Odwira* festival is to show their ultimate authority in dealing with the spiritual beings. In the case of both the Ashanti and the Akuapem the traditional priests or priestesses show that they are in control of the beings of the spiritual realm by calling upon the four cardinal points as part of their *akom* dancing. They first point to the sky, which is North representing the High God (*Nyame*); then, they point to the South, which is the Earth Goddess (*Asase Yaa*); to the West, to acknowledge the powers of the ancestors (*Nananom nsamanfoɔ*) and to the East, to recognize the forces of the other deities. Finally, they point to the centre, which represents the traditional priests and priestesses. The meaning of the directions in dancing is to show that "except for the High God" (*Gye Nyame*) in the Sky, who is often compared with the wind and the Earth Goddess (*Asase Yaa*), the traditional priests and priestesses have power over the beings of the spiritual world. In the demonstration of their spiritual powers, Ashanti priests and priestesses have also built in a competitive element in their demonstration of the spirits with which they communicate through spiritual possession. Ashanti priests are therefore well-known for their dangerous acts, such as the eating of hot charcoal, the pounding of *fufu* (mashed yam) on a priest's back or the swallowing of a raw egg (see Figures 5, 6 and 7).

Figure 5.

Figure 6.

Figures 5. 6 and 7. The executioner gods *(Abosom brafo)* inside the traditional priests are swallowing an egg like a serpent (Fig. 5 above) chewing raw charcoal (Fig. 6 above) to show the power of the spirit inside and also showing their power by making a lot of noise due to the pounding of *fufu* (Fig. 7).

I observed that in comparison to the Ashanti *akom* performances those of Akuapem indigenous priests and priestesses are more modest. Another difference between the Ashanti and Akuapem *akom* performance is the level of openness of the performance to the wider audience. The dancing of the indigenous priests and priestesses that I observed in Kumasi during the *Asanteman Adae Kese* festival in 2005 had a very open nature, which means that anybody was allowed to attend this ritual and that it was performed in a public space. The Ashanti traditional priestesses that were asked to dance in the royal garden of Manhyia, which is the home and palace of the present King of Ashanti "Asantehene Osei Tutu II," did not start dancing before the cracking of an egg. This Ashanti practice is meant to invoke and ask the *abosom* permission to start dancing and become possessed by their spirits, which normally speak through the body of a traditional priests or priestesses. Once the *abosom* permit the priestesses to dance, they move in clear circles, which symbolize the binding and liberation of evil forces. These movements are meant to prevent spiritual powerful members of the audience, such as medicine men or possible witches or sorcerers, from challenging the performance of the priestesses in order to undo their work. For among the Ashanti, *akom* dances are performed in an open circle. This means that anyone who feels like dancing can enter the ritual dance floor and express him or herself by the use of bodily movements. The openness of the circle symbolizes the Ashanti way of practising democracy, which is expressed by the Ashanti axiom *Wonsa ka bi* – meaning that during a circle meeting of subjects and traditional authorities in a village anyone who would like to express his or her view can come in and contribute to the public discussion. The Ashanti symbol that goes with this axiom has the form of a wheel with big spokes. In *akom* performances the outer ring of the wheel symbolizes the audience and the inner circle symbolizes the position of the deities that possess the traditional priestesses or priests. The spokes represent the channels through which the audience can come in to dance. The Ashanti *akom* dance is ended after the traditional priests or priestesses have danced anticlockwise, to release all spiritual forces and to return to the material realm (interview Nana Agyei, 23/03/06).

The Akuapem *akom Odwira* ritual that I observed in 2005, however, did not have an open nature. The ritual was performed in a private space (a shrine in the backyard of the house of one of the priestesses) and one needed to be invited by its organizers to be able to attend it. This section shows that besides self-identification, cultural identity is also formed by differentiation or the creation of a distinction between one's own cultural group and that of others. It demonstrates that in *akom* ritual festival dancing the Akuapem people make use of their Indigenous Religion to distinguish themselves from the Ashanti people.

5. The *Odwira* Festival Processions and Durbars

In this section I will show that the Indigenous Religion of a cultural group, such as of the Akuapem people, also contributes to the creation of group identities because it shapes the perception of others about these identities. I will illustrate how the perceptions of Ashanti informants on Akuapem indigenous religious events such as the procession and the durbar of the Akuapem *Odwira* festival contribute to the creation of an Akuapem cultural identity.

An Akan proverb says "(it is) people that make a chief's stool great" (*nnipa na ema Ahennwa ye kesee*) (Appiah, Appiah *et al.*, 2000). Because it is believed among the Akan that a King or chief can only be a good leader when he has a lot of followers, a procession is meant to show that he has a lot of support. Among the Ashanti this means that the King is accompanied during the *Asanteman Adae Kese* festival procession by his royal servants (*nhenkwaa*) which among others consist of war shield bearers (*afonansoafo*), executioners (*adumfo* or *abrafo*),[11] royal young men who carry fans (*kokosesefoo*), the court criers and couriers (*nseniefuo*),[12] the bearers of tobacco pipes decorated with gold and silver (*taa-hyefoo*),[13] the Asantehene's personal body-guards (*atumtufoo*)[14] and the special guards for the Asantehene's treasures (*ankobea*) (Andoh, 2004; see Figure 8).

11. The *adumfo* and *abrafo* were responsible for carrying out executions and other forms of punishment of those who had committed capital offences against *Asanteman* (the Ashanti Kingdom or state).

12. These are responsible for the maintenance of quiet and order when the Asantehene sits in public. They are also used as couriers of messages.

13. The presence of the *taa-hyefoo* in the procession signifies that it is the wish of the people that their leader should live to an old age since pipes are smoked mostly by the aged.

14. The bodyguards hold specific knifes called *sepo* and a horn or container for gunpowder and bullets. During the *Asanteman Adae Kese* procession of 2004 one of them also wore a skull cap embossed in a golden symbol meaning "let's live in peace" (*obi nkaa bi*). This skull cap was among the regalia that were taken away by the British during one of the Anglo-Ashanti wars (the Sagranti War of 1873–74), but was repatriated in 1985.

Figure 8. The *Asanteman Adae Kese* procession.

It also means that the Ashanti commoners (*mmerante*) use the general sign of admiration, the V-sign, to show their appreciation towards their King. The V-sign is made with one's pointing finger (*akyekeyre kwan*) and one's middle finger (see Figure 9). Finally, the Ashanti show loyalty to their King by carrying him in a palanquin, which is a U-shaped wooden structure that looks like a coffin without a cover and is usually draped in leather or *Kente* cloth and gilded. *Kente* cloth is a type of silk fabric made of interwoven cloth strips that is produced in the Ashanti Region. It comes in different designs and is usually worn by people of high social status, such as chiefs. The *Asantehene* wears *Kente* cloths that are specially designed for him. They are a symbol of the King's royal dignity and therefore nobody is allowed to wear the same designs as the Asantehene (interview Peter King Appiah, 02/03/2006). The Asantehene's palanquin is carried on the shoulders of four strong men and goes up and down to the marching rhythm of the great drums (*fɔntɔnfrɔm*) which are beaten with sticks by the drummers (*ɔkyerema*) who walk behind him. Another purpose of the festival procession is to celebrate the beginning of the new harvest with yams. During the procession the commoners throw away the yam of the previous year and eat the yam of the new harvest after the ancestors, the deities and the Asantehene have eaten from it. The commoners' eating of mashed yam (*etɔ*) symbolizes the homecoming of the ancestors who are usually fed with it. The new yam also symbolizes the King's rebirth or the renewed allegiance of his subjects (Gilbert, 1994: 105–108).

Figure 9. The Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II during the procession to the Durbar ground at the Kumasi Sport Stadium, Sunday, May 9 2004.

Figure 10. Western trumpets and drums are part of today's Akuapem *Odwira* festival procession.

The Akuapem *Odwira* festival procession differs from that of the Ashanti. According to my Ashanti respondents, during the Akuapem procession many of the symbols that are important in the Ashanti Indigenous Religion were absent, such as the use of horns (*ntahera*) and shields (*akyem*) to announce and protect the King. Additionally, walking in front of the Ashanti King there was no traditional priest who wears a silver casket (*dwete-kuduo*) on his head that is believed to contain a

spirit of protection nor were any of the Akuapem paramount chiefs wearing a leather money bag (*nkotokuwa*) that among other symbols stands for the chief's economic power. With regards to the music, Western drums were used in addition to African ones and traditional Akan horns (*ntahera*) were replaced by African-American trumpets (*aten*) that have been imported from the South of the United States to Ghana since the beginning of the twentieth century (Cox, 1996: 130; see Figure 10).

Aten were originally used by African-Americans in the United States during Roman Catholic trance ceremonies (Cox, 1996: 130). Besides African-American influences, the procession also included symbols that referred to the music of Bob Marley. Rita, the wife of this Jamaican singer-songwriter and musician who passed away in 1981, took part in the procession with her Marley fan club for the purpose of remembering her husband and the promotion of his reggae music (self-made video of the Akuapem *Odwira* festival). According to an Ashanti observer the 2005 *Odwira* procession of the Akuapem differed from the one of the *Asanteman Adae Kese* festival in 2004, because "much more than we did, the Akuapem used a lot of modern music during the procession" (interview Miss Joyce Boakye, 10/11/2005). A difference that struck another of the Ashanti observers was that an Akuapem queen mother threw candies to her audience. These candies might be a modern version of the Ashanti custom of distributing yams during their *Odwira* festival procession.

Figure 11. An Akuapem queen mother throwing candies during the Akuapem *Odwira* festival procession.

Another element, finally, that according to one of my Ashanti observers was specific for the Akuapem procession is that the Akuapem traditional authorities (their chiefs and queen mothers) made use of palanquins of which those for the Akuapem queen mothers have the shape of royal seats. Due to the lack of an Akuapem King, palanquins are used by a number of paramount chiefs and queen mothers who are equal in rank. Different from the Ashanti, these palanquins have various shapes and are carried on the heads of their subjects rather than their shoulders (see Figure 11). According to Ashanti observers, both in their choice of music and their choice of palanquins and foods, the Akuapem try to differentiate themselves from the Ashanti by introducing modern elements to their Indigenous Religion.

The festival processions of the Akan *Odwira* festivals ended at a Durbar, which is a ceremonial gathering. The social-political goals of the Durbar are to bring together royals and subjects and to confirm and renew their (international) relations (interview Osei Kwadwo, 9/12/2005). To realize this goal the most prominent chief or King among their cultural groups holds a speech. The indigenous religious goal of the Durbar is to cleanse the environment from evil spirits and to create unity among indigenous believers and Christians and (in case of the Ashanti) Moslems (interview S.F. Adjei, 08/03/2006). This aim is realized by the Ashanti by solving as many as possible problems within the core family, the extended family and the Ashanti nation (*Asanteman*). For it is only after harmony in *Asanteman* has returned that the ancestors can be invoked and during the yearly speech can be thanked for their contribution in the past year and that the relationship with them can be renewed for the coming year. According to my Ashanti informants and my own observations and video analysis, the main difference between the Ashanti and Akuapem Durbars of the 2004 *Asanteman Adae Kese* and the 2005 Akuapem *Odwira* festivals were as follows:

In both speeches that were given by Asantehene Osei Tutu II and Akuapemenhene Otubuor Djan Kwasi II at the festival Durbars the ancestors were thanked for their protection of the state in the past year. However, whereas in his speech Otumfuo Osei Tutu specifically mentioned the allegiance of his nation to the Golden Stool (*Kofi Sika Dwa*) and the legacy that the Ashanti inherited to unite their people,[15] the Akuapemhene did not mention the Akuapem Golden Stool at all. This and

15. This refers to the Golden Stool of the symbol of unity of *Asanteman*; the union that was created between various cultural groups in 1698 to protect themselves against the common enemy, the Denkyira.

other Ashanti ceremonies with regards to the Golden Stool[16] show that this royal Stool is only prominent in the indigenous religious experience of the Ashanti. Even though Otumfuo Osei Tutu also mentioned that he would like to increase his links with the African union and emphasized the importance for *Asanteman* to continue and enhance the relationships with well-known people in the international arena, the emphasis of his speech lay on the importance of the Ashanti culture. Asantehene Osei Tutu II said: "We love our culture and our prompt heritage. We have an obligation to renew the past that ties us together and resolve to love our motherland Ghana. That is why we are here today. We believe that no nation can make any meaningful strides if it neglects its culture. We should continue our traditions and moderate them with the demands of the modern era." He also said that he wanted to thank President John Agyekum Kufuor for his recognition of the potential of traditional leaders and culture for the social and economic development of Ghana and the traditional leaders within the domain of the Golden Stool for their support to *Asanteman*.[17] The main focus of the speech of Akuapemhene Otubuor Djan Kwasi II was not on Indigenous Religion and culture but on development issues and local politics. Otubuor Djan Kwasi II shared, for instance, his concern about the many chieftaincy disputes in the Akuapem area and his wish to ban illegal mining, deforestation and child trafficking.

A point that was emphasized by both mentioned speech givers was the need to unite people. Asantehene Osei Tutu II said: "We owe allegiance to the Golden Stool and resent any person or any one who attempts to divide us" and Otubuor Djan Kwasi II expressed his wish to build a new community centre to create more unity among his people. In the case of the Ashanti people, in terms of religion this meant that Asantehene Osei Tutu II not only gave space during the Durbar for indigenous religious rituals, but also organized a religious meeting with prominent Moslem leaders such as Maulvi Abdul Wahab Adam of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission and Sheikh Wahab Adam Usmanu Sharubutu from Accra to show respect for the Moslems within the Ashanti community (see Figure 12).

16. Another Golden Stool ritual that was part of the *Asanteman Adae Kese* festival of 2004 was, for instance, the temporarily removal of the Golden Stool from the stool-room in Bantama, where all stools of deceased Kings are kept, to assure the Ashanti commoners that the Golden Stool has not ceased to exist and so the Ashanti nation would not be in danger of falling.

17. Source: DVD Asanteman Adae Kese and the fifth anniversary celebration of the reign of Otumfuo Osei Tutu II.

Figure 12. Maulvi Abdul Wahab Adam (left), Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II (middle), His Eminence Sheikh Wahab Adam Usmanu Sharubutu, (right).

Additionally, the Ashanti King attended two Catholic Church meetings, the first one on the 28th of May in the St Cyprian Anglican Cathedral in Kumasi, where he was blessed by the Rt Revd Daniel Yinka Sarfo, who was accompanied by other ministers[18] and the Metropolitan Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kumasi Revd Peter Kwasi Sarpong to acknowledge the Christian community in *Asanteman* (see Figure 13). Otumfuo Osei Tutu II regards himself as a "traditional Christian," which means that he is both an indigenous believer and a Protestant (Anglican) Christian (Ama Serwa Nyarko, 10/03/2006).

The second one on Sunday 30th of May at Manhyia Dwaberem, which was a thanksgiving service held by Revd Dr Mensah Otabil, who is the church leader of the "International Central Gospel Church" (ICGC) which is an evangelical charismatic church in Accra.

18. E.g. Revd Dr Frimpong Manso, Asante Presterian Chairperson, Rt Revd Dr Edmund Yeboah, the retired Anglican Bishop of Kumasi and Rt Revd Takyi Ansah from the Methodist Diocese of Kumasi.

Figure 13. The Asantehene receives blessings.

The Akuapem, on the other hand, only recognized the indigenous religious believers and Christians in their community by letting a linguist perform indigenous religious prayers and by acknowledging the contributions of the Presbyterian Church to the development of the Akuapem state. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Ashanti Moslems (Ashanti *Nkramo*)[19] played an important role at the Ashanti royal court as record and account keepers, performers of religious services and advisors in matters of trade and foreign affairs of the Asantehene (Schildkrout, 1970: 256). Consequently, the Ashanti *Nkramo* are still remembered for their contribution to *Asanteman.* Among the Akuapem, however, Moslems were and are rare and historically they did not play an important role at the Akuapem royal court. So therefore, unlike among the Ashanti, the Akuapem do not acknowledge the presence or contribution of Moslems to the development of the Akuapem state.

Another significant difference between the Ashanti and the Akuapem is the use of indigenous religious symbols. At least since the nineteenth century and most likely earlier the Ashanti have been making use of the same symbols, such as fans (*kokosesefoɔ*) and shields (*afonansoafoɔ*) made of animal skin (see Figures 8 and 14).

19. In Madinke (the language of the Ashanti *Nkramo* Moslems) Asante *Nkramo* means "one who prays (*krã*) or can read the Koran" (McCaskie, 1995) or "one who tells fortunes" (Christaller, 1933).

Figure 14. 1817 Thomas Bowdich, first day of the Yam festival in Kumasi (Bowdich, 1819).

The Akuapem, on the other hand, have introduced plastic and cotton fans and plastic shields. Instead of asking indigenous priests (*ɔkɔmfoɔ*) (see Figures 5, 6 and 7) to perform, the Akuapem people hire young acrobats to show their skills. According to one of my Ashanti informants, the Akuapem distinguish themselves from the Ashanti by their attempt to be more modern (interview Margaret Arhin, 16/02/2006). According to a female Akuapem informant, however, the Akuapem do not try to be more modern than the Ashanti, but she admitted that the Akuapem have deliberately changed some of the indigenous religious symbols because they want to be different (interview Abena Mensah, 15/11/2006). It seems thus that the Ashanti perception of the Akuapem Indigenous Religion differs from the Akuapem's own opinion of their Indigenous Religion. However, regardless of the accuracy of the Ashanti image-forming of the Akuapem Indigenous Religion in the eyes of the Akuapem, the Ashanti perception seems to play a factor in the creation of an Akuapem Indigenous Religion and identity. It is thus not only by self-identification and differentiation but also through the (deviant) perception of other cultural groups that a cultural identity is formed.

Conclusion

In this article, I focused on the way in which the Akuapem people make use of their Indigenous Religion to distinguish themselves from the Ashanti in order to create their own cultural identity. My study shows that "Indigenous Religion" is an

important factor in the Akuapem's specification of their cultural identity within the umbrella category of "Akan." The way of lulling the "Golden Stool" during the yearly Akuapem *Odwira* festival gives the Akuapem the opportunity to enforce their cultural identity. The remembrance of the historical confrontation with the Ashanti increases the Akuapem people's ability for self-identification. The *akom* dancing of indigenous priests and priestesses during the Akuapem *Odwira* festival is an example of the use of Akuapem Indigenous Religion for the strengthening of their cultural identity by differentiation. The Akuapem people thus make use of their Indigenous Religion to reinforce their cultural identity by both self-identification and differentiation. The *Odwira* procession and Durbar show that the self-perception of the Indigenous Religion and identity of a cultural group can differ from the perception of others. The image-forming of others about a cultural group adds another aspect of such a group's identity.

"Identity" is thus a multi-layered concept and besides indigenous religious factors there are also social, economical and political factors which play a role in its construction. The relationship between those other factors and identity has been the object of various studies within the field of social sciences. The wider aim of this article is to demonstrate that the study of Indigenous Religion is also an important factor in understanding the construction of group identities. Indigenous Religions focus on the inner meaning of identity such as the relationship between the "self" of a group and its relation with beings of the spiritual world. The Golden Stool, for instance, symbolizes the connection of Akan people with the beings of their spiritual realm. The stool is believed to have come down from the sky in 1701 and to consist of divine power that the Ashanti Kings (*Asantehene*) needed to rule their kingdom. *Akom* performances are also an example of Akan expressions of their relationship with their spiritual beings. For a full understanding of the meaning of "identity" its relation to Indigenous Religions should therefore not be left out. For that reason, as an Ashanti axiom says, I would like to encourage scholars of identity not to follow the existing path, but to go where there is no path and begin a new trail.

The study of Indigenous Religion could be an indicator of the expression of the resistance of indigenous people to the use of artificial cultural categorizations that were created during the colonial era, such as Akan, and indigenous plans of breaking away from these classifications. On the one hand, these plans could further weaken the often already feeble African nation-states, but on the other hand, they could be a welcome alternative for the many currently failing African nation-states.

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Miss Joyce Boakye, secretary of the Ashanti Regional House of Chiefs, 10/11/2005.
Comfort Appiah, traditional priestess, 13/11/2005.
Osei Kwadwo, historian, 09/12/2005.
Margaret Arhin, assistant Resource Centre warden 16/02/2006.
Peter King Appiah, public relation officer Kumasi Centre for National Culture, 02/03/2006
S.F. Adjei, director of the Centre for National Culture, 08/03/2006.
Ama Serwah Nyarko, Queen mother of Fomena, 10/03/2006.
Nana Agyei, traditional priest, 23/03/06.
Abena Mensah, communication consultant, 15/11/2006.

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