

THE PERFORMATIVITY OF AKAN LIBATIONS: A COMMENT

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The act of libation contains a rich mixture of religious, social and cultural ingredients. It is a prayer to the ancestors and gods for their blessing; it is a social ritual binding together the members of the audience by emphasizing their common roots; it is a performance of oratorical skills; it is a demonstration of cultural and historical knowledge; it is a political statement with cleverly constructed hidden messages. Pouring libation is an attractive and artistic way of uniting the living and the dead, those at home and those abroad, the past and the future.

Joseph K. Adjaye (2001) has successfully captured the intricacies of libation in Akan society by presenting it as a form of “poetic meta-communication” in which the skills of the libator and the participation of the audience play a key role. His essay is convincing, and the quoted libation text by Nana Kissi-Ampadu in London beautifully illustrates his argument.

Doing research among elderly people in a rural community in Kwahu I have been particularly struck by the performative potential of the libation. I would like to suggest that libation prayers should first of all be understood as communication with the living. In the same way that Akan funerals are conducted to honor the living more than the dead (cf. Van der Geest 2000), libation is primarily performed to convey a message to those who are alive and witness the occasion. The living are addressed via the roundabout way of ancestors, gods of rivers and mountains and the Almighty *Onyankop n*. The libation ceremony is a speech in disguise, an “indirect speech” one could say. The attendants are praised and flattered—or tactfully criticized—with words that are seemingly directed to ancestors and supernatural beings. But most of all, the libator is praising and flattering him or herself by exhibiting his oratorical skills, cultural competence and historical knowledge.

The indirect speech of the libation can hardly be contradicted as it takes place on religious grounds, and the audience has little choice other than to confirm the lines with the stereotypical responses of *we*, *ampa* and *sio*. In other words, the libator has an open field to display his talents.

During my own—earlier—research I indeed experienced the libation ceremony to be a convenient and safe opportunity to impress others. I was studying the history of one *abusua* in the town of Kwahu-Tafo and had managed

to trace the names and fragments of life histories of the *abusua*'s ancestors as far back as four generations. When drinking palm wine with members of the *abusua* it was not difficult to reap their praise by including the names of some of their ancestors in playfully enacted libations.

For the elderly, the libation ritual is one of the few remaining occasions to excel and attract the attention and admiration of the younger generation. As I have argued elsewhere (Van der Geest 1998), the elders of Akan society find themselves in a world where their skills and wisdom have stopped earning them the respect and esteem they hope for. The younger generation is no longer in need of the advice of the old to become successful in life. I wrote: "The history of the family, the boundary of the farm, the use of medicinal herbs, the traditional agricultural techniques, the knowledge of gods and prayers, the ability to solve riddles, the name of ancestors, it has all become quite useless to them" (ibid.: 487). I should, however, nuance my statement about the shrinking grounds of the *panyin*. There are occasions where the names of ancestors and the ability to pray do matter, also to the young. The practice of pouring libation has survived the inroads of modern life including globalization and Christianization. Indeed, the prayer quoted by Adjaye shows its resilience in the face of globalization: the Thames River is added to the list of Ghanaian rivers whose gods are called upon.

In pouring and praying libation the Akan elders have retained an opportunity for marking their importance and displaying their skills to the younger generation. In that sense, the libation is a performance *par excellence*. By praising their forbears the elders praise themselves, by mentioning the names of gods and ancestors they try to save their own name from oblivion, by paying respect to the *Nananom* they hope to earn the dear respect of their younger relatives.

References

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