

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

NTORØ AND NTON

The two sociological terms, Ntorø and Nton in Akan, have been summarily treated as though they were one and the same thing. It has been suggested that "synonymous terms for Ntorø are Nton, Sunsum, or bosom"¹; but a further study of Ntorø has revealed that Ntorø is not synonymous with Nton. The writer of the statement quoted above must have been led into that error by a previous writer whose definition of Ntorø was not explicit enough. In that definition, an example under one of the various meanings was given as follows: "Me nton or me ntorø ni"², and the meaning vaguely given was "we are of the same ancient family, worshipping the same fetish." This writer's difficulty can be appreciated as his informants must have confused him by stating that "in Akuapem, Ntorø is both patrilineal and matrilineal."³

The Twi Spelling Book also equates Ntorø with Nton.⁴ There has been a long standing confusion between the two terms, which in turn has resulted in real difficulties, even among some Akans, regarding the meaning and character of the terms.

What then are Ntorø and Nton? We shall begin with Ntorø. Ntorø is the general term applied to the spirit, in most cases totemic, of each of a number of patrilineages of the Akans. The spirit is passed on from father to son or daughter. The Ntorø which is passed on to a daughter

¹ Rattray: Religion and Art in Ashanti: Page 318, footnote.

² Christaller: Dictionary of the Asante and Fante language: Page 529.

³ Christaller: Dictionary of the Asante and Fante language: Page 529.

⁴ Twi Spelling Book: Twi Nsem Nkorenkor Kyerewbea: Pages 136, 138.

is not transmittable from her to her issues: at death, the daughter's Ntoro goes back to the spirit source which in all cases but one⁵ is with a river-god. Sons distribute part of their Ntoro to their children. The Ntoro therefore is spirit - a part and parcel of every child. It should not be confused with the "Okra," the soul. One child may have a combination of several spirits: the spirit of the father, the spirit of the person after whom he is named, the spirit of a great grand-parent of the mother's lineage, and sometimes the spirit of a god related to the child.⁶ These are sometimes referred to in Twi as "mmoaa" or vital parts, as in "ne ho mmoaa adwane": his spirits have fled out of him, that is, he is extremely terrified. The component spirits of a person may manifest themselves in what may be described as personality, unusual achievement in a special subject in which a dead relation shined, the gift of second sight, a close resemblance of an ancestor, etc.⁷ Note the expressions: "ewo sunsum": he is great-spirited; "ne sunsum ye duru": he is full of personality; "ne sunsum ye den": he is a man of strong will; "sunsummire": the dark-spirited one; "n'anim ye hare": he is without personality; "n'anim ye duru": he is imperious; "n'anim ye nyam": he is glorious etc. These are not spoken of the soul. The "sunsum" or "mmoaa" may be said to be the guard of the soul. When a person's spirit has been chased away or has disappeared - "ne sunsum adwane" or "ne ho mmoaa ko!" - then the soul, according to the Akans, becomes susceptible to capture or expulsion. (cf. "Yeakyere ne kra": his soul has been

⁵ Bosomkrete: a shrine-god in Aburi, Akuapem.

⁶ Rattray: Religion and Art in Ashanti: general notes on Sunsum) Page 154

⁷ Rattray: Ashanti: Page 46.

arrested; "Honhom nni me mu bio": No vital breath is in him any more). This perhaps justifies the use of "Honhom" in the Twi Bible to mean the God-spirit part of Himself, and that in men called the soul.⁸ The "Okra" therefore is virtually the "Honhom" personified.

Of the derivation of the word Ntoro only a little can be said. The original meaning is lost, and it is only the method of plausible deductions which is here employed. An informant, born about 1880⁹, told me that Ntoro is an ancient term, and that it is a cognate of "to", to die. This may be true. There are two established Twi words spelt "ntoro". One is the variant of "atoro" or "etoro": a lie, as found in "eretwa ntoro / atoro/etoro"; he is telling a lie. The other one is "ntoro": spirit, with which we are concerned here. That this word is traceable to "to": to die, cannot be gainsaid. In Asante Twi, one could say:

"Ebi reko na ebi reba", and

"Ebi reto na ebi reba."

It is more rhetoric to say

"Ebi rekoro na ebi reba", and

"Ebi retoro na ebi reba."

So the form "toro" as a cognate of the verb root "to" is possible. It may be noted that there exist the Twi

8

- i. Genesis 2 verse 7
- ii. Rattray: Religion and Art in Ashanti: Chapter xxix.

9. Opanin Ahunuyea of Wawase, Kwabere 3, Ashanti: interviewed in 1953.

words "korebae": that which does not change its form 'when going or when coming', and "korebeaniagye ": he who is happy wherever he finds himself. These also are cognates of "ke": to go. I am sensible to one or two points against this deduction, but those points are not indissmissible.

Again, the pattern of "ntoro" can be found in words like (i) Ntumi: the name of a man from Akuapem, meaning "the one against whom you cannot prevail", and (ii) Mpusu: the name of a fetish and of a man in Ofinsu, meaning "the unshakable." The investigation of the origin of "Ntoro" continues. But from the foregoing points, it can be argued that it is not peculiar that a term like "ntoro" should be formed by the sages of old to mean "that which does not die": the imperishable, which in fact is the connotation of the term "ntoro": the spirit which lasts as long as sons exist.

The term "Nton" seems to have meant an "arch" though it does not by itself mean so today. We find the term in the names of some plants which have arched blades; examples are: the Nton¹⁰ plant with which the ntonkete(mat) is made; and the Twiton plant.¹¹ Nton is also in the Twi word Aninton which means "the arch of the eye." There is again the Nyankoton, "the-sky-arch" or rainbow. The generic term Nton therefore appears to denote the "arch" which has stretched over the centuries and reached to the present: an "arch" which not only connects the past with the present, but it also embraces all in it as members of one family. That is why Nton is exogamous, and though the members forming it may come from different and distant places, they come under the same "family arch": wɔbɔ nton korɔ.

¹⁰The Nton plant: Pandanus sp.: See Irvine: Plants of the Gold Coast: P.320

¹¹The Twiton plant: Sansevieria sp: See Irvine: Plants of the Gold Coast: P.375.

Syntactically, another line can be drawn between the two terms Nton and Ntoro. When one wants to know to which extended family you belong, one would ask: "wobe nton ben?" The emphasis is on the verb "bo" which enquires whether or not you "join" or "belong to" the "abusua", the extended family. On the other hand, the verb used in agreement with Ntoro is "dware", to bathe. Hence the enquirer would say, "Wodware ntoro ben?" "In which spirit (river) do you bathe?". The Akans, particularly the Ashantis, believe that when a person is at the point of dying, his or her Ntoro flies off and plunges itself into its agnate river.¹² Often it does so with a shout: "Hu+u-u-u!" and then a splash! and disappears. If the river-god does not order it to go back at once but welcomes it, then the soul left alone in the body also leaves it. This point of the Ntoro spirit reporting back to the river-god is the idea reflected in the expression "kewuakra." Ke-wu-a-kra is a sentence-word referring particularly to the Ntoro of Bosomtwe. The full meaning of it is, "you to whom people send their Ntoro to say goodbye before they die!"¹³ The classic expressions to which I have tried to call attention are "bo nton" and "dware ntoro."

To sum up, the generic term Nton which is connected with the Akan matrilineage embraces such clan groups as Oyoko, Aduana, Agona, Asona, Ekoena, Bretuo, Asennes and Asakyiri. There are two points to be noted about them: the first is that each of the Nton may have subdivisions, as in the case of Aduana which has Aduana, Atwea and Aberade under the one major group known as ADUANA. The second point is that the Nton groups may

12 & 13

See a similar account in Rattray: Ashanti: Page 55
(Same page - footnote - gives reference to Bossman.)

have different nomenclature at different areas; for example, Gyoko and Bretuo in Ashanti are the Anona and Twidan respectively in Fante.¹⁴

The Ntoro divisions traced patrilineally include Bosompra (River Pra), Bosomtwe (Lake Bosomtwe), Bosommuru (a river in Bodweseanwo in Adanse), Bosomnkatia (the Sea), Bosomdwerebe, Bosomakom, Bosomafi, Bosomayensu (River Ayensu), Bosomkonsi, Bosomsika, Bosomafram (River Afram), and Bosomkrete (a shrine at Aburi). These also divide up into several sub-divisions; in some areas, it is a sub-division which has persisted; for example, of Bosomnkatia it is the Adomakodee subdivision which is better known in Ashanti. Among the very well-known subdivisions of the Ntoro are the Aboade and the Adufude of the Busummuru major group.¹⁵ NTORO is certainly different from NTON.

A.C. Denteh.

14

- i. Rattray: Ashanti: Pages 47 ff
- ii. Mensah: Asantesem ne Mmehusem Bi (1966): Page 36.

15

- i. Busia: The position of the chief in the modern political system of Ashanti: pp.1-2; 127
- ii. Christaller: Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages pp.600-601 (Appendix D).