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# THE SHRINE OF TUTU ABO, AKWAMU WAR GOD

by C. Gould\*

The most important Akwamu shrine, which houses dieties of mainly protective powers, is situated in the village of Anyensu, about four miles off the main highway at Apeguso, on the Adome-Ho road. The villagers of Anyensu, by hereditary right and unshakable obligation, are the keepers of the shrine of the War God, Tutu Abo. Anyensu, close by a remarkably fertile plain between forested hills, is nevertheless perched on an eroded outcropping of ferrous stone, pocked and rilled from the heavy tropical rains. Loose stones and small boulders, some of flint stone, lie about the village, making walking somewhat hazardous. The village site, it would seem, was chosen for just these attributes, as the name of the main god of the shrine gives some indication. Tutu Abo: *Tutu*—"to pluck, take, pull, cast out," and *Abo*—"stone, rock, flint stone." (Christaller's Dictionary), would indicate that Tutu is a rock god, one who draws out or casts rocks, or, as one informant translated, 'Stone-Thrower.' Some years ago, when the new main highway was built, the then neighbouring village of Apeguso moved as an entity to a new site astride the new surfaced road and the junction of the laterite road leading to old Apeguso and Anyensu. The Anyensu villagers did not have that choice. They are bound by the presence of the shrine and the peculiar sacredness of the rocky spot which surrounds it.

The responsibility which binds the Anyensu people to the Tutu shrine is not a simple god-and-servant obligation, but reflects a close traditional relationship with the paramount chieftaincy. Although the age of the tribal gods cannot be guessed at, the Anyensu people say, wherever the Akwamus have gone, they have served the gods in such a shrine<sup>1</sup>, whose protective forces are strongly bound to the paramount chief, and whose blessing he seeks in time of ill health, war, or misfortune. In recognition of the service they render him, the Omanhene of Akwamu state extends to them the inalienable right to enter his presence and speak to him without Akyeame or any other intercessor; and their allegiance is owed directly to him, rather than through a sub-chief.

On the day we visited the Anyensu shrine, the annual 'Odedidi Afahye,' or 'eating new yam' festival was being held for the gods of the shrine—with the customary sacrifice of sheep and feeding of new yam to the spirits. It is always difficult to gauge the approximate starting time of traditional ceremonies, and when we arrived the

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1. There seem to be other opinions on this. See Ivor Wilks, "The Rise of the Akwamu Empire, 1650-1710", THSG, Vol. III, No. 2, p.108. "Otutu is a god of war. Otutu has been a Guan god from time immemorial and the Akwamus had their Otutu shrine consecrated for them by the Guans". See also "The Guans, A Preliminary Note" by Otutu Bagyire IV, Abiriwhene, in Ghana Notes and Queries No. 7, January 1965. "It (Otutu) is attached to certain Guan stools. Its shrine consists of a large pot containing sacred relics. In the past the shrine featured in trials by ordeal". It would appear from these comments that Otutu was adopted as an Akwamu deity when they conquered the Guan peoples of the Akwapim ridge in the last half of the 17th century, but that the physical appearance of the 'seat' of the god and his shrine have changed since the Akwamus crossed the Volta. It is also possible that the god Tutu did arrive with the Akwamu-Abrade people and was adopted and assimilated by the indigenous peoples. An example of the spread of Tutu worship through Akwamu influence can be seen in the Ga settlement around Christiansborg, where a Tutu shrine exists to this day.

washing, sacrifice and feeding had already taken place. The elders had been expecting us, however, and there was a large group of villagers about.

The shrine (or shrines, for we were to see a familial complex of gods) is housed in a sizeable traditional compound, consisting of an outer court, with two 'swish' huts on either side, and an inner court, with small 'sumandan' rooms arranged at the sides of the entrance wall and opening on the inner court. Across the court was the main shrine itself.

Entering the crowded outer court, we noted that it had been formed by running bamboo fencing between the two outer huts. The left and right wall of the courtyard were formed by the swish and thatch huts of the priests and shrine attendants. On the day of the ceremonies, a fresh roof of green palm branches had been constructed over a portion of the outer court, so that those who attended the ceremonies could be seated out of the sun. The fourth side of the outer compound was formed by the outer walls of the swish huts which opened on the inner court, and the entrance to the inner court was formed by a space of about nine feet between the two buildings. It was here that shrine musicians, as well as supplicants waiting their turn, were seated. A continuous roof covered the two huts and the entrance chamber. Passing through the entrance one faced directly into the main 'fetish' hut, or *obosomdan* (god's house). In the courtyard, set up on a base of rocks, were several clay pots. These contained herbal brews prepared by the priest, Okomfo Osofu Poku.

We were guided into the fetish hut, where the elders awaited us. Customary greetings were exchanged, and a small bottle of gin was presented to the guests. . . symbolic of the water always offered the newly arrived traveller.

The main shrine of Tutu Abo is about 12×18 feet, and the building itself has an earthen floor which is perhaps 18" above the level of the compound. A single beam laid at the compound level serves as a retaining wall for the shrine floor, but countless comings and goings have worn the high threshold to a steep slope. One scrambles up and eases carefully down. In the opening, which is stage like in its width and elevation, a red clay altar stands to one side. The altar is about 8 feet square, and from it rise the major gods of the shrine, Tutu Abo, Tutu Abo Poodu and Kwa Dente. Also occupying space on the altar are Asuoyaa, a minor god; several smaller and unnamed servants; Bofookwa, Okyeame to the abosom; and a tray containing a dozen or more round and oval objects surrounding two abosom, 'Ayira' and 'Afrim.' At the front of the shrine, surrounding Bofookwa, who takes the form of a 2-foot missile shaped log, lie many blood-darkened sticks and clubs. These have either a knot, crotch or an extraordinary zig-zag crook or burl at the end. Or they have a curved lozenge shaped head—identical to the 'koto' carried by the Omanhene's personal bodyguard. A few have strange natural wood malformations. One looks like a spiral antelope horn. Another looks like a fat corkscrew.

Soon after we had seated ourselves, an older woman came before the shrine. She took up a koto and did a dance to the accompaniment of drums and gongong—brandishing her club. It had been oppressively, suffocatingly hot when we arrived. Now the rain started to fall heavily, drumming loudly on the corrugated metal roofs. An obosom which had been outside in the courtyard was quickly carried in and set into its own spot in the corner behind us. This was 'Koto Biri Gya.'

I should now like to describe in some detail each of the Abosom in this Akwamu shrine—and the particular function ascribed to each.

'Koto Biri Gya' consists of three parts. The first is a three legged round stand, made of sheet iron, for the obosom itself to rest upon. The obosom is contained in a brass or iron basin, so blackened as to make the actual material indistinguishable. This is filled to the brim with an unidentified substance. Lying across the basin are numerous short stakes, 6-8 inches long and 1-1½ inches in diameter. They are black, obviously from the blood of sacrifice, and also, as the name implies, charred. ('Koto', a club or stick; 'Biri,' black or blackened; 'Gya,' fire.—Christaller) Bits of egg shell on the surface of the obosom show that eggs are from time to time offered to it. A few coins, the size of a Ghana twenty pesewa piece, lie about on the stakes. They, too, are blackened and their coinage indistinguishable. A fresh sheep's heart from the sacrifice of the morning, lies on the obosom. Before Koto Biri Gya, on a low stand, lies a bundle of porcupine quills about 15 inches long; and in the corner, beside the obosom, stands a slender 39 inches iron staff, with the top divided and curving into a ram's horn motif. Midway up its length, a fiber bound bundle is tied about the staff.

This obosom is credited with one important power. Koto Biri Gya helps those who have lost something. Such a person must come to the shrine, pour libation, and offer payment for help in retrieving the lost object. It is believed that Koto Biri Gya will seek out the culprit who has taken the belongings of another. The quills in the bundle before him, which normally serve as a rest for his food, will then serve as arrows to pursue the guilty one. The staff, Koto's walking stick, also aids by serving to draw back the guilty. The 'medicine' bundle around the shaft is to make it strong.

Foremost among the obosom in the shrine is Tutu Abo, one of several which are columnar in shape and fashioned of red clay. Tutu Abo is about 25 inches high and about 8-10 inches thick at the broadest point, and appears to be of an anthropomorphic nature. Painted a flat white at the back and crown, Tutu has a long red ochre 'face,' a suggestion of a nose, and a clear, black, horizontally placed mark upon the left cheek. On this day he had obviously been freshly painted, and wore on his crown small cakes of 'eto' or yam mixed with palm oil, and 'fufu,' or white mashed yam.

Tutu Abo is traditionally the foremost god of war of the Akwamu. He has the power to protect against shot and arrows, and it is his strength, loaned to the magic and medicinal herbs used in the war brews, which gives them the power of protection.

Tutu Abo Poodu stands at the centre of the altar. It is approximately the same height as Tutu Abo and is of a thoroughly engaging abstract curvilinear shape. Poodu in Western imagination, might be described as a pot personified. It has a rather flat, sloping front rising from a broad base and terminating in a small, rounded head with a removable lid. While it displays neither neck nor shoulders, the back is of a rounded form, sloping gently outward to achieve a slight buttocks shape just above the altar from which it is built up. Poodu, also, had been freshly painted a pure flat white. Offerings of palm oil and purifying blood had been given that morning and formed several irregular bright red and yellow vertical stripes down the front of the obosom. On the 'forehead' of the 'pot' were the offerings of white and yellow yam. Tutu Abo Poodu is the pot-god which holds the protective herbal brews with which the King

of Akwamu was bathed before battle. During our visit, when libations were poured, Poodu's lid was lifted, and libation poured inside.

Kwa Dente, the tallest obosom, stands at the rear of the altar, behind and slightly to the right of Tutu Abo Poodu. Kwa Dente is rather more slender than the others, and is of a rough, unfinished clay. It is so modelled that broad, vertical strokes can be seen down the face. Kwa Dente has a pointed crest at the forehead. This is painted white. Blood, palm oil and yam had been placed thereon.

Kwa Dente is not concerned with the protection of the male or the causes of war but rather has powers of protection most important to mothers. It is to Kwa Dente that mothers who have lost several children bring their new babies—to seek health and benevolent protection for the child so that it will not be taken from its mother again. In appropriate ceremonies, the child is 'bound' to the obosom, so that the other spirits dare not take it. The child is brought before the obosom and laid upon a palm broom. A horizontal cut is made upon the left cheek and rubbed with magico-medicinal herbs. Before being returned to the mother the child is given a protective herbal bath.

At the front of the altar, three round objects may be seen. One, a round stone about four inches in diameter, is used by the priest to purify himself before coming to serve the gods. A second whitened round artifact, also nameless, is a 'servant to the gods.' The third, a small round white pot with a domed lid, is named 'Asuoyaa' (water person?) This pot contains water and is 'responsible for keeping things in good order.'

At the extreme left front of the shrine sits a tray of objects, all carefully placed on 'nsummaa' leaves, the fragrance of which is supposed to drive away witches and evil spirits. Included in these objects are a considerable number of round or oval shapes, presumably of clay, which have been painted over with a dark opaque red-purple colour (possibly blood mixed with clay and/or soot)..... Each object has been carefully circled latitudinally and longitudinally with a thin white line—so that a white cross is formed on the dark background. Only two of these shapes are named. A small, tapered vertical column about six inches high is called 'Ayira.' (When this name was spoken, the okomfo rang his bell and the men at the shrine burst forth in a praise song). A round object about four inches in diameter is named 'Afirm'<sup>2</sup> (Again, when the name was spoken, the bell was rung, and the men sang in praise of Afrim). All the other objects on the tray were said to be servants of these two, and had no names. Ayira and Afrim are personal abosom for the protection and purification of the paramount chief. Traditionally, no Odwira festival could be opened unless this tray of objects was taken to the Omanhene and set upon his thighs to purify him.

Next to the tray of Ayira and Afrim, also freshly rubbed with sacrificial blood, rests Tutu Abo's crown—the jaw and horns of a ram.

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2. The columnar shape and the flattened spheroid re-appear over and over again as altar shapes or objects of worship in the traditional religious rites of many peoples. They seem most often to symbolize the male and female life principles. For example, the Degon altars consist of an earthen column about 3 feet high, occupying a central position in a special courtyard. This is the male altar. And several round stones surround it—the female altars. (Dieterlen, G.: *Les Arnes des Dogons*, 1941). In Japanese gardens, the tall stone and the round one, again representing male and female, are considered essential in traditional design.

On the centre front of the altar, in front and to the right of Tutu Abo, as custom dictates, is his Okyeame, Bofookwa. Bofookwa is an 18 inches long log of wood, shaped at one end to resemble a projectile. On either side of Okyeame Bofookwa are heaped numerous okoto, or crooked and knotted sticks. These are used by the servants of the shrine around the priests. In particular, if a person at the shrine becomes possessed by a god, and the okomfo cannot find out which god has come down, the possessed person is struck by the okoto. The god is thus 'freed,' and can come out and make himself known. In response to my query, the priest said that he knew that these sticks were made from a particular kind of wood, but he did not know what it was. He "came and met them."<sup>3 & 4</sup>

Certain objects of regalia and paraphernalia are ranged around the wall of the shrine. Included are two strings of cowries, a sign of wealth or royalty which is often associated with the priesthood. A particular feature of one of these cowries necklaces was a round, perforated stone, about two inches in diameter, which had been whitened with white clay. The priest called it a 'dwarf stone' and explained that it was included with the cowries because it was also used as money.<sup>5</sup> Two ceremonial swords and several horsetail switches (used by the priest when he dances in a state of possession) also are hung on the wall. There is also a cotton netting, called the 'crown' of the carriers of the abosom Ayira and Afrim.

In the small 6×9 foot hut at the right of the entrance to the inner compound, further gods are housed. A six-inch squat clay globe, coloured flat black, rests on the floor near the entrance. This is surrounded by smaller, black and white objects. Some are egg-shaped. Some are globes. And some are a peculiar holster shape. The large globe is 'Aberewa Gyanaku,' mother of Tutu Abo. Those surrounding her are her children and servants. Near Aberewa, a whitened pot is seated on its own stool. This is 'Amanfo.' Inside are powerful magic brews for the use of the warrior. When bathed with the waters from this pot, one is rendered secure against gunshot,

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3. These okoto of the Akwamu shrine are identical in appearance to the 'nkotobaa' used by the young men of Wankyi in the annual Apoo festival; and to the nkotobaa also used in the rites of Ntoa at Asueyi — both mentioned by E. Meyerowitz in "The Akan of Ghana", and described as knotty branches cut from sacred trees, the emblem of authority of the ancestors or village lineage heads. They are illustrated therein on page 19. Meyerowitz goes on to say that the sacred wood was identified as 'nampranee' and that M. Field had suggested that this might derive from 'Nyamepranee'. . . F. R. Irvine, in "Woody Plants of Ghana", identifies nampranee (bron) or peteprebi (twi), as *Gardenia Ternifolia*, which has a very hard, fine-grained and insect resistant wood. This variety and the *Gardenia Nitida*, also called peteprebi, are believed to be protective against lightning, and, "in certain parts, the tree is regarded as sacred". It is likely the same wood was employed in the making of the Akwamu nkoto, as it is found in another use there — which would suggest its mystical powers i.e., the tiny crotched sticks which form a border on the sacred 'sumantum', 'manonu', or war cloth of the Omanhene and his senior war leaders. These were said by the elders to be of 'peteprebi' wood. (Actually, only one very old man was able to offer this information). This wood is believed to have the power to turn back bullets. This provides one example of the way in which physical properties of an object or material are associated with magic or spiritual properties ascribed to it.
  4. This is a phrase frequently met in Akwamu when traditions about a treasured object or custom have been lost. It seems to mean, explicitly, "this existed before I was born, and when it came into my care, no history was known or given to me. Thus, you see it as I know it.
  5. This 'dwarf stone' is identical in size and shape to those exhibited in the Ghana Museum. They were found in a hoard in Achimota in recent years. Their original use is still in question. Although this association in the Anyensu shrine may not indicate the use of these stones, still, it is interesting that the Akwamu tradition at least associates these stones with a one-time use as currency. The fact that they are called 'dwarf stones' does imply that they are 'found objects' rather than having any tradition of being manufactured by this people.

and if a knife is raised against one, the blade will shatter.

In this hut, also, there is a built-up earthen shelf at the inner end. This contains an assortment of pots and calabashes which appear not to have been used for some time. Far in the corner rest two small wooden effigies—geometrically fashioned, without arms, legs or feet. The heads are indicated by a sloping 'forehead,' the neck by a slight indentation. Nearby rest the only clay memorial heads I have been privileged to see in Akwamu. Both are in the round, flat-faced Kwahu style—the features defined by bits of clay coil-work. The larger of the two, perhaps 12 inches tall, has simple arms, bent at the elbow and extending forward from the ringed neck torso. This also exhibits a small protruding navel. Both have been painted with white clay.

In the second small hut flanking the entrance was a whitened pot resting on its own stool. It was not possible to learn more about this, for the elders had become tired.

In visiting this old, traditional shrine of the Akwamu still another aspect of the chieftaincy and the integration of the religious into other aspects of life became evident. Akwamu informants had at earlier interviews told me that the Akwamu did not over-emphasize the functions of shrines and priests, but called on them mostly for protection and sooth-saying in wartime. They explained that the great emphasis in Akwamu society is on the chieftaincy. This would appear to be corroborated by the functions of their chief shrine. The gods of this shrine serve the needs of the nation. They help to find lost articles, and they protect children from disease and death. Their main emphasis, however, is to protect the sacred tribal leaders. They are preserved and kept in good condition. They are appealed to because they were the gods and protectors of the ancestors—and the traditional Akwamufo believe in their powers of protection. Wherever the Akwamu have been, the okomfo said, these gods have been with them.

Anyensu is the 'Omanhene's village.' Whenever the chief is ill or troubled, it is said, he must come to his village to find strength and solace. The traditional shrine is yet another support to the sacred powers of the chieftaincy around which the political, religious and social framework of the nation is built—and upon which the people's tense of wellbeing depends.

As vehicles for artistic expression, these traditional gods also deserve respect and consideration. They represent the Akwamu aesthetic of art integrated into life. Here in the traditional shrine, drumming, dance and song serve the gods who serve the people. And the plastic arts embody and personify the protective powers that are most important in traditional life.

It should be noted that Nana Kwafu Akoto II, a christian chief, no longer observes some of the old ceremonies mentioned here. However, he recognizes the traditional importance of this ancient complex of gods within Akwamu society. As an enlightened supporter of the distinctive aspects of his culture, he sees to it that the needs of the shrine and of its attendants are met.