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TRAINING THE PRIESTESS AT THE AKONNEDI SHRINE*

by Kofi Asare Opoku**

Entry into the ranks of the priesthood at our traditional shrines is preceded by a period of training, lasting three years or more, under the tutelage of a senior priest or priestess. During the novitiate, the trainee makes a complete break with normal life and prepares rigidly to assume the role of a priest or priestess.

At the Akonnedi Shrine, only women are trained to assume the office of priestess. The candidate is "called" by Akonnedi or any of her associate deities - Adade Kofi, Asuo Gyebi, and Asi Ketewa - for it is firmly believed that no one on her own accord volunteers to become a priestess, the initiative rests with the deities. The "call" is manifested through possession by a deity who at once identifies himself or herself; or the candidate may be overtaken by a strange illness which would necessitate her being taken to the Akonnedi Shrine for treatment. At the shrine the particular deity reveals himself or herself and indicates his or her intentions.

It is believed that refusal to obey the "call" could result in either madness or death for the recalcitrant candidate. On the other hand, the parents and relatives of the possessed person could plead with the deity through the Okomfohene or Chief Priestess for her release, and it is entirely up to the deity to decide what to do. If the deity accepts their plea, the girl is released and the parents and relatives are shown how

* The material for this article is based on personal observations at the shrine, and on interviews with Mr. S.W. Mensa-Dapaa, General Secretary of the Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers' Association, as well as on his unpublished manuscript on the Akonnedi Shrine.

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to effect the release. The deity can also turn down the plea, in which case the girl's relatives would have to comply for fear of the obvious consequences.

If there is no obstacle in the way, or, after all obstacles have been removed, the novice is received into the shrine to begin her formal training. She is first given a ritual bath for seven days by a senior priestess, and this consists of bathing with a herbal decoction. Her nails are then clipped, and her hair cut and fixed in such a way that it grows from then on in long strands. This is done on the first of the seven days. The hair remains uncut till the end of her training period; she is also forbidden to shave the hair under her armpits and also her pubic hair.

The trainee is then taught what taboos to observe, and what foods to avoid in order to remain ritually clean. The rules are as follows:

- a) She should not go out of the precincts of the shrine without the permission of the Okomfohene; she can only go out when on errands for the Okomfohene.
- b) She should strictly abstain from sexual relations during the entire training period.
- c) She is strictly forbidden to eat sweet things, such as ripe plantain, sugar and honey.
- d) She is forbidden to drink alcohol. While under training she may be given a drink by having it poured on her wrist, on ordinary occasions; or she can also have a drink by having it poured on her back, when she is under possession.

- e) She is forbidden to eat kenkey on Tuesdays and Fridays, which are Akonnedi's days; she is also instructed never to bring dough to the shrine.
- f) She should not under any circumstances eat pork.
- g) She is forbidden to eat kola nuts.
- h) She should voluntarily absent herself from the shrine for seven days each month during her menstrual period.
- i) She should not go back to her home till the end of her training; she is also not allowed to talk with her relatives except by the permission of the Okomfohene. She is also not allowed to shake hands with them except by permission of the Okomfohene.
- j) She should be obedient to her elders.

The first prohibition is part of the general expectation that the neophyte should be obedient, and always remain within sight of the Okomfohene, who keeps a watchful eye on all trainees. Constantly remaining within the precincts of the shrine, except when on errands, means that the conduct of the neophyte can always be scrutinised; and this seems to help keep her in line and prevent any temptation to deviate from the accepted code of behaviour.

The second prohibition is a basic one imposed on all priests and priestesses under training. It is believed that during the period of training, the novice is "married"¹ to the deity to whose service she has dedicated her life, and hence sexual intercourse is strictly forbidden. So important is this prohibition that a married

1. Her "marriage" to the deity is not restricted to the training period; it is for the rest of her life.

neophyte could be granted a divorce from her spouse in order that she could concentrate on her chosen career. Infringement of this prohibition involves the neophyte in a purification exercise and a lot of sacrifices to the offended deity. In such circumstances the trainee may be asked to start her training all over again, or she may be banned from the shrine with all the opprobrium that goes with it.

But even after training some sexual taboos are still observed. The priest or priestess is expected to abstain from sexual intercourse on days on which rituals are to be performed for the deity. It is believed that sexual relations before the performance of such important rituals render the officiant ritually impure, and this further renders whatever rituals are to be performed null and void, and of no consequence.

The rule against the eating of sweet things pertains to the one discussed above. It is commonly believed that sweet things have a tendency to arouse sexual desire, the very impulse the neophyte is expected to keep in check during the novitiate. Thus this rule is an aid to the observance of the previous one concerning sexual relations.

The ban on the drinking of alcoholic beverages appears to be a commonsense rule, for since there is so much drink at the shrine and the performance of many of the rituals involves the use of drinks, a priestess who has a weakness for alcohol would be ruining her own life and chosen profession. Besides, a priestess is expected to maintain a high degree of sobriety while she gazes into water and interprets what she sees and hears; but a priestess cannot execute this very important function under the influence of alcohol. Thus while under training, the priestess is forbidden to drink, so that she may not acquire a habit which will certainly be detrimental to her in the future.

The rule against eating kenkey on Tuesdays and Fridays arises from the fact that the days in question

are Akonnedi's sacred days on which she visits the shrine by spirit possession to be called upon in case of need and also to receive suppliants and clients "in person". Since kenkey and dough are taboo to the deity, the priestess-in-training is expected to respect the taboo and to uphold it.

The ban on the eating of pork is a common rule in many of the religions of the world. The pig is believed to be an unclean animal whose meat defiles whoever eats it, and hence the priestess-in-training is forbidden to eat pork.

The taboo concerning women in their menstrual period stems from the belief that menstrual blood is impure, and hence women in their period are banned from places, shrines, and other places of ritual significance until the period is over. This is one of the deadliest of taboos and its infringement involves severe penalties.

The prohibitions regarding her relations with her relatives are symbolic. They are meant to symbolize a break with her previous life and entry into a new one; and, to emphasize this point, her dealings with her relatives are symbolically severed until the end of her training period.

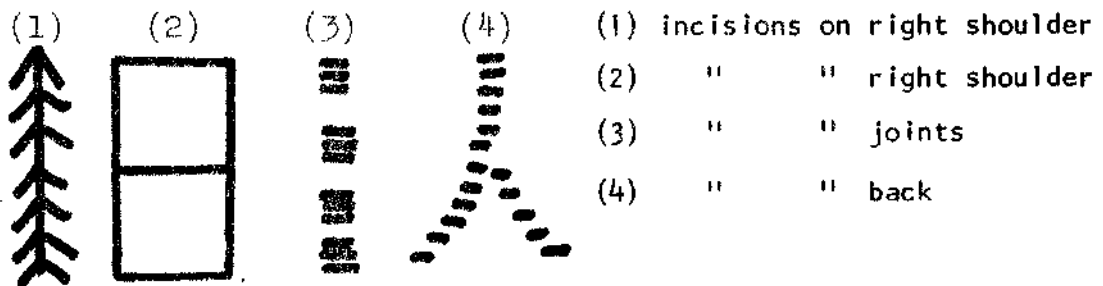
Lastly, a priestess is always a servant, both of the deity to whose service she has dedicated herself, as well as to the elders at the shrine and the general public she serves. Obedience therefore becomes a cardinal virtue to the priesthood, for a haughty priestess certainly does disservice to the deity she serves. If a priestess-in-training abides by these rules she can finish her training in the minimum time of three years; otherwise her training period is protracted.

The training begins with learning to do household chores around the shrine, going on errands for the Okomfohene and learning to live and cooperate with other priestesses-in-training, for, quarrelling is strictly forbidden among them. She learns how to dance and to

sing, not only the songs of the particular deity she is preparing herself to serve, but also songs of the other deities associated with the Akonnedi Shrine.

The trainee priestess is then introduced to the art of divination, and a divining pot, "korow", is procured for her with which she begins to learn this particularly important skill. Medicines are rubbed into her eyes and ears so that she can see and hear her deity when she looks into the divining pot. She practises at her divining pot regularly during the entire course of her training, sitting on a stool in front of the divining pot and ringing a hand bell while she gazes into the pot. The sound of the bell is believed to summon the deity to appear in the pot and to transmit messages to the priestess-in-training. The ability to hear and correctly interpret what is heard and seen determines the success or failure of a priest or priestess. It is only by looking into the divining pot that a priestess-to-be learns to diagnose diseases and to prescribe cures, all of which are imparted to her by the deity. She also learns to identify other spirits other than her own deity who appear in the divining pot and to interpret their messages correctly.

If the trainee acquits herself well and gives evidence of her fitness and aptitude for the job, she is tattooed on her right shoulder, back and joints at the end of her first year. The tattooing ceremony marks the beginning of an important phase in her training, for she is from now on confirmed and stabilized. The tattooing is intended to "toughen" the trainee, it helps her to develop stability and resistance to dizziness when she dances; and it also renders her immune to poisoning by



Tattoos on body of Priestess

her enemies.¹

The priestess-in-training continues her studies for two more years, learning to perfect the skills she has begun to acquire. If she is serious-minded she will observe all the rules in order to get herself in readiness for the final examinations at the end of the training period. The most important examination is looking into the divining pot and correctly interpreting what one sees and hears. Before the trainee appears for the final examination before the Okomfohene and her elders and senior priestesses, a senior priestess may be asked to ascertain how good the trainee is at the divining pot, and if she receives a favourable recommendation she is then allowed to present herself before the grand panel. If she is successful and acquits herself creditably before the panel in her final examination a date is fixed for the graduating ceremonies, called "Akomyi", and her relatives are informed accordingly in order that they may make adequate preparations for the occasion. The preparations include the payment of a fee of N55 (which may be waived if the family is poor, in which case the new priestess may be asked to remain at the shrine to work for some time after her training), two sheep, and two bottles of schnapps. The family also ought to procure a large steel trunk and several items of new clothing, buckets, beads, soaps, lavenders and other cosmetics, as well as large amounts of foodstuffs for the occasion.

The Passing Out Ceremonies:

Normally more than one priestess passes out each time. The passing out ceremonies are held on a Friday, but the exercises begin a day earlier, on Thursday. On this day the priestess - to-be is given her final examination which consists of an endurance test, the purpose

1. Personal communication from Okyeame Kwadwo Donkor, Akonnedi Shrine, Larteh.

of which seems to be to test the retentive memory as well as the physical endurance of the priestess-to-be. The Okomfohene usually sends the priestess to a market-place quite a distance away from Larteh, and she is expected to walk the whole distance on foot and also to remember what she is expected to buy from the market.

An extract from my field notes of this year's "akomyi" (15-16 January 1970) may serve as an illustration of this day's activities:

"The Okomfohene sent the eight priestesses-to-be in three groups to Dodowa, Accra and Nsawam. Three went to Accra, three to Dodowa and two to Nsawam. They were sent to go shopping in the towns mentioned above and were each given N₵3 (Three New Cedis) with specific instructions as to what to buy on the market.

"The priestesses-to-be left Larteh early in the morning, each carrying a white enamel basin on her head. They were given strict instructions not to talk on their journey, they were only allowed to communicate with people by sign language. Furthermore, they were expected to do their journey on foot. The only concession made in the case of the priestesses sent to Accra and Nsawam was that they could continue their journey by lorry from Dodowa and Mampong respectively, but that on the return journey they were to walk back from Dodowa and Mampong to Larteh, a distance of about eleven miles each way.

"On their return, they were summoned to appear in groups before the Chief Priestess to render an account of their day's mission. They knelt before the Chief Priestess as their wares were examined, and the change counted. Each priestess was allowed to keep any money that was left. This money was not supposed to be spent, but was to be kept on them to start their work in their respective shrines at the end of their training.

"After the presentation, the Chief Priestess congratulated the priestesses-to-be, and they were later on led to a room (Asuo Gyebi's room) to be given something to eat.

"Two categories of food were bought - food which could be eaten without cooking - bananas, oranges, bread, biscuits etc. And food which had to be cooked before eating - plantain, cassava, cocoyam as well as vegetables.

"After the inspection some of the food was offered to the deities by being thrown in all directions and then the crowd which had gathered also received their share. The rest was taken away to be cooked the next day.

"Later on there was drumming and dancing at the shrine till the early hours of the morning, and each of the new priestesses was possessed by her deity".

Friday: Akomyi

This is the most important day in the life of a priestess, and it is a day of merriment to mark the realization of dreams of years gone by. The day's activities divide themselves into five clear stages, and again, my field notes taken at this year's "akomyi", may serve as an illustration.

"This day marked the culmination point in the training of the new priestesses, and the shrine was marked by feverish preparations. Eight priestesses "graduated" that day, and the distribution was as follows:

4 were to be priestesses of the deity, Nana Asi (Ketewa);

2 were to serve the deity, Adade Kofi;

2 were to be priestesses of the deity, Asuo Gyebi.

Stage I - (a) Stringing of Beads:

"The major activity of the morning was the stringing of beads for the new priestesses by the senior priestesses who had come to the Akonnedi Shrine to celebrate this particular occasion, and to help with the many chores which had to be performed to ensure the smooth running of the ceremonies. Each new priestess had her beads in two enamel plates. The beads were provided by the new priestesses themselves and were bought on the advice of the Chief Priestess. They were beads for the neck, ankles, waist, wrist and knees.

"The stringing of the beads was not done haphazardly, but according to a particular order and pattern to suit the taste and idiosyncrasies of each deity. This exercise was supervised by the Okomfohene who also took part in the stringing of the beads.

The beads were strung in the following order:

- (a) Adade Kofi's priestesses
- (b) Nana Asi's (Ketewa) priestesses
- (c) Asuo Gyebi's priestesses.

"While the beads were being strung, a male attendant was busy in the inner tabernacle of the Akonnedi Shrine working on the knives, swords, chains and other regalia to be used by the new priestesses. The swords and knives were besmeared with a mixture of white clay and egg yolk, while the others were besmeared with other medicines rubbed against a stone.

(b) For the new priestesses, a major activity of the morning consisted of gathering together their old clothes and anything else they had used while they were under training (this also included cutlasses), and tying them all up in a bundle, to be disposed of ritually afterwards.

These were surrendered to the Chief Priestess who made sure that everything was in order.

"To this bundle was added the beads and raffia bangles, tied to the upper shoulders and legs (in the case of Asuo Gyebi's priestesses) which they wore while under training. The raffia bangles were cut, not with a knife, but with a sharp stone (for Asuo Gyebi abhors knives).

"The disposal of the old things and the cutting of the hair (to be described below) symbolized the passing away of the old life and the old self, and entry into the new, the new life of a full-fledged priestess.

Stage II - At the House of the Elders:

"The Akonnedi Shrine belongs to the Asona Abusua (clan) of Larteh, headed by Osofo (priest) Agyekum II, who is also the Abusuapanyin.¹

"The new priestesses after disposing of their old clothing etc. were then presented to the elders at the male section of the Shrine. There the new priestesses were exhorted to go out and lead lives worthy of Akonnedi and to conduct themselves morally upright. While the address was being given the new priestesses crouched on their knees and elbows in a semi-circle.

"After the address came the pouring of libation which was performed by the Osofo with his left hand (Akonnedi, the deity, is said to be left handed). The Osofo called on the senior deity, Akonnedi, and all the subordinate ones and asked for their blessings on the new priestesses. When he finished the libation the new priestesses crawled one by one to the Osofo who gave them a drink by pouring it on the backs of their neck. The

1. The "Abusuapanyin" is almost independent of the shrine but answerable to Akonnedi for actions taken on her behalf by the "Abusua".

priestesses then retired to the female section.

Stage III - Cutting of Hair:

"For this ceremony of cutting the hair, each priestess procured a new pair of scissors, a razor blade, and a new comb, all of which were put in an enamel plate. The priestesses sat on white stools in a straight line, and were called one by one into the temple (Abosonnan)¹ by the Chief Priestess.

"Beginning with the head of the graduating class, each priestess would, when called, take her stool into the temple. There she sat down and the Chief Priestess ceremonially cut about two strands of her hair and put them in a plate. As she cut the strands of hair she had a piece of exhortation to give the new priestess. She said something to this effect:²

"Mintwitwa wo ti se:

1. Fa kobo tuutuu,
2. Fa kobo apoo,
3. Fa kowia ade.
4. Wuhu wo panyin a, bu no.
5. Di wo kunu ni:
6. Di wo na ni.
7. Bre wo ho ase ma wo manfo na wo manfo
nso abu wo".

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1. The Abosonnan is named after Adade Kofi. There is no specific consulting room for Akonnedi.
 2. This text was given to me by Okyeame Kwadwo Donkor of the Akonnedi Shrine, since spectators were not allowed in the temple.

"I am not cutting your hair so that:

1. You may go (into harlotry).
2. You may go and extort,
3. You may go and steal.
4. Respect your elders.
5. Respect your husband.
6. Honour your mother.
7. Humble yourself before your towns-people so that they in turn may respect you.

"Thereafter, four men began to cut the hair of the priestesses, beginning with the long strands and then nicely trimming the undergrowth, giving each priestess a new look. Each one's hair was collected in a bundle for safe keeping and ultimate disposal.

Stage IV - Dressing Up:

"After shedding their old strands of hair and ridding themselves of their old clothing, the new priestesses were then taken into a room where the senior priestesses put beads on them - around the necks, wrists, waists, legs and ankles.

"While this was going on the relatives of the graduating priestesses brought into the open quadrangle steel trunks filled with new items of clothing, buckets and enamel basins containing soap, towels, lavenders, combs, etc. These were brought out for general inspection by the Chief Priestess who meticulously examined each trunk to see its contents, getting rid of inappropriate articles, such as dark or mourning clothes. Every-

thing had to be new and bright in conformity with the gay occasion.

Stage V - (a) Procession to Siase Well:

"The new priestesses, all dressed up in new clothes, were then led to the Siase Well at the foot of the slopes by the older priestesses, to be bathed and dressed up.

"The procession was led by a priestess throwing "hyirew" (white clay). She was followed by relatives of the new priestesses who carried white stools. Immediately behind them were other relatives carrying enamel basins, buckets, containing towels, soap, lavenders, white cloth and other items needed to dress up the new priestesses after they have been ritually bathed and purified in the well. At the end of the procession were the new priestesses. The procession started at the female section of the shrine, went through the male section and then headed down the slope towards the well. Flanking the new priestesses were the senior priestesses who were going to perform the ceremonies. And at the rear of the procession were two young boys beating gong gongs.

"No male spectators were allowed to accompany the priestesses to the well. There they were shaven (under the armpit), washed and dressed up.

(b) Return from Siase Well:

"On the completion of the ceremonies at the well the procession returned to the Shrine. The priestesses, all dressed up in white cloth and besmeared with white clay on their faces, arms, body and legs, were in a state of possession. Each carried the regalia of her deity and sang or danced to portray the characteristics of her possessor.

"The four priestesses of Nana Asi (Ketewa) led the other priestesses and each of them carried two headkerchiefs in her hands (one in each hand). These were followed by Asuo Gyebi's two priestesses, each of whom carried a knife on her shoulder. And after them followed the two priestesses of Adade Kofi who also carried their swords (Akofena) on their shoulders.

"In contrast to the procession leading to the well, this one was marked by singing and dancing and a great deal more of jubilation. The procession paraded through town to the edge of Kubease and then returned to the Shrine through the male section.

"When they arrived at the central court, the drummers were already seated and playing. The new possessed priestesses danced in a circle and then filed up to greet the Chief Priestess, (before whom they each knelt), and the spectators.

"Each priestess shook hands in a manner peculiar to her deity. Nana Asi's priestesses used both hands, rather gently; Asuo Gyebi's priestesses also used both hands gently and Adade Kofi's priestesses gave a quick slap in the palm.

"After the priestesses had greeted everybody they began to dance individually amidst the cheering approval of onlookers. Before each one started to dance she would go and kneel before the Chief Priestess.

"Twice the Chief Priestess got up to dance and each time the new priestesses knelt down on their knees with their hands upraised.

"Afterwards, the Chief Priestess poured libation and gave each new priestess a drink by pouring it on the back of their necks.

"Finally, the new priestesses went and knelt before the Chief Priestess who took away from them the regalia of their deities - headkerchiefs, knives, swords - and after this the respective deities departed and the

priestesses collapsed into the arms of two male attendants who helped them to their stools.

"After that they were given water to drink and having come back to their normal selves they were each congratulated by the senior priestesses and elders of the Shrine.

"Once again, the new priestesses got up to thank the Chief Priestess and the crowd of onlookers by shaking hands with them.

"Later on the new priestesses, who had not eaten all day, were led into the temple (abosonnan) and ceremonially given "oto fufu" and "oto kokoo" (white mashed yam and "red" mashed yam)."

This day, "Akomyi", marks the emergence of the priestess into her new life, and all the ceremonies performed at the various stages of the day are meant to emphasize the idea of newness and emergence into a new life. Undergirding the whole range of ceremonies and rituals is the symbolism of death and resurrection; the casting away of old clothes and the putting on of new one and the reunion with relatives emphasize this. The cutting of the hair and the shaving under the armpits, the clipping of the nails as well as the ritual bath in the well also make the same point - the old has passed away, and the new has emerged to take its place. After this day the priestess is reunited with her family, and all the prohibitions relating to her dealings with them cease to be operative. She can now go and visit her relatives (not outside Larteh), shake hands with them and talk with them without permission. The jubilation and felicitations and the warm embraces by members of her family are reminiscent of a welcome accorded to someone who has returned from a long journey.

1. See Parrinder's account of Dahomeyan priests' training in his *West African Religion* 1961, pp. 86-94.

The day also marks the lifting of the ban on sexual relations. For, during the period of training, strict calibacy is imposed on the novices, the reason being that the priestess is the "wife"¹ of the deity. During this period, the priestess-in-training certainly does not appear attractive, for her locks are uncut and her whole manner of dress, in contrast to her dress and looks on the day of graduation are poles apart - she is an entirely different woman. It appears that there is a deliberate attempt to make the neophyte unattractive to mortals during the time she is training to be permanently "married" to the deity, for this is the time when strict chastity is imposed; but after her training she is free to be reunited with her spouse, if she is already married; or she can now get married if she is a spinster.

On the Saturday and Sunday following the ceremonies, the new priestesses go out into town, dressed gorgeously, to show themselves to people and to thank them; and also to receive gifts. Then beginning on the following Monday, the new priestesses are confined for a week at the shrine.

Later on when they have decided where they would like to establish themselves or set up practice, and have obtained a premises befitting the deity, they can leave. Of course when the place is ready for occupation by the deity the Okomfohene sends messengers to inspect the building before the deity is carried to its new abode. When the priestess is going to her new station she is accompanied by drummers and other shrine officials appointed by the Okomfohene. These officials stay with the new priestess and help her to get established before they return to Larteh.

After this the new priestess is on her own but it does not mean the end of her association with the Okomfohene at the Akonnedi Shrine at Larteh. She has to come at least once a year to receive blessings and to consult with the Okomfohene, and also to participate in the New Year Festival of Asuo Gyebi, or in Akonnedi's own Annual Festival.

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1. The priestess however is permanently married to her deity, but after her training she can think about marriage if she is unmarried and formal permission will have to be sought.