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A NOTE ON AKAN COLOUR SYMBOLISM

by G.P. Hagan*

On ritual occasions Akans use three main colours. These colours are Fufu (white), Tuntum (black, or dark), Kɔbene, Kɔkɔ, or Memene (red). Except in a few cases involving the use of green (bun), all colours used in ritual ceremonies appear to fall under these three broad terms; so that the terms Fufu, Tuntum, Kɔbene (and their cognate terms) tend to apprehend wider ranges or spectra of colour than would normally fall under them in a naturalistic classification of colours. White, yellow, milk and any shade off-white are Fufu; red, purple, pink, orange, and violet are Kɔbene; black, blue, indigo, and the darker shades of brown are Tuntum. One immediate implication of this is that the colour terms Fufu, Kɔbene and Tuntum cannot be interpreted as "white" "red" and "black", but I shall here use white, black and red, and they should be understood to refer to the various arrays of colour which the terms Fufu, Tuntum and Kɔbene designate.

Symbolically, Fufu, Kɔbene, and Tuntum have certain broad connotations, but the most significant meaning which attaches to each one of these colours can only be discovered in the context of the specific rituals. The aim of this note is to indicate the standard well-known meanings of these colours and then to show the meanings they acquire in two ritual contexts.

General Meaning of Fufu, Tuntum, Kɔbene

Among Akans, Fufu is the ritually auspicious colour and it has immediate association with victory and spiritual purity. It is associated with the sacred, and it is considered the colour of gods and kings; the symbol of the purity and sacredness of their persons and estate. Fufu also expresses joy and hope and well-being. That aspect of the human person which bears a man's destiny and directs his fortunes (KRA) is associated with Fufu, and the expression Kra-biri (the dark Kra) refers to the state of a person who has lost hope and lost his ritual bearings.

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Tuntum stands for darkness and loss, and for death, but it does not necessarily connote defilement or profanation. The Stool of kings or elders who die in battle or of old age while in office are consecrated and held sacred to their memory, and they are black. If a woman entered a stool house during her menses, she had to "buy her head" by sacrificing sheep and paying fines. White stools, the unconsecrated stools of the Ashanti, are by contrast profane. Kofi Antubam suggested that black symbolizes spirituality and age. "All objects which are dedicated to the spirits of the dead are purposely treated to appear black" (Kofi Antubam 1963, p.79); objects of war booty, except gold and silver, are blackened. But in spite of its association with spirituality and age Tuntum is never used for the celebration of victory; it usually expresses sorrow and it is associated with ill-luck.

Kobena is full of ambiguities. Akans generally point to blood as the paradigm of this colour cluster and much of the ambiguity in the symbolic meaning of the colour derives from the mixed associations of blood. Blood stands for life and vitality, and the word bogya (blood) means the fire (gya) of creation (bo). Akans believe that blood is the means by which a Kra might be given human form. But as blood stands for life, so does any blood which does not give life, or is spilled wastefully, stand for death. Akans consider menstrual blood to be dangerous. It is believed that when menstrual blood comes into contact with a sacred object it desacralizes or blunts the sacred object (okum ano) in terms of the purposes the sacred object serves. In such contexts then, red might stand for impurity and danger. When a man puts on a red cloth and smears himself with red ocre, it means he is in a defiant mood (ogyina kodom ano). Among the Ashantis, as Rattray observed, and it is generally true for most Akans, "sorrow and anger (and danger) (mine) would seem to be related", "m'ani abere (my eyes are red) being the idiom common for both expressions". Of course "m'ani abere" refers to the blood-shot eye.

CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE

There are wide differences in the manner in which colours are used. But broadly speaking colours might denote three distinct facts. First, colours might differentiate the categories of individuals involved in ritual ceremonies and make it possible

to define their roles in the drama of ritual enactment. Second, they might point to different "stations" in a ritual sequence and make it possible to apprehend movement and direction in ceremonial performances. Thirdly, in both of these two kinds of usage colours might also define the affection appropriate to social categories and the stations of a ceremony and so indicate the emotional quality of ritual action. We see these in various accounts of Akan rituals. I here examine two.

The first striking thing about an Ashanti funeral is the clear colour distinctions in the clothing of mourners. As Rattray observed it, "The blood relations smear lines of red clay (ntwuma) or odame on the forehead (known as kotobirigya), and on the upper part of the arms (called asafie)... Mourning bands (abotiri) are fastened round the head, into which red peppers are sometimes placed; the russet-brown mourning cloths are put on; these are sometimes marked with Adinkra stamped designs" (1929, p.150). The mourners who are not blood relations (and these would include non-matrilineal relations, affines and personal friends) put on black. Thus at this level black and red refer to opposite categories and relationships. But all "the outward and visible signs of mourning, the red ochre and the funeral clothes affected by the ordinary mourners, are taboo to a priest" (1929, p.175). So that a matrikin of the dead in the priesthood "must wear white and sprinkle himself with white clay, as if as far as he is concerned, death and mourning and sorrow do not exist. The corpse of a dead priest is draped in white and sprinkled with white clay, symbolizing the antithesis of ordinary funerary customs, which possibly mark out the wearers as being in a state of sorrow or defilement" (1929, p.175).

In respect of the corpse in terms of whose connections these categories are distinguished, Rattray remarks that "Sometimes the head of the corpse is shaved and marked with alternate, red, white, and black stripes, made with esono (red dye), white clay, and bidie (charcoal). This, I am informed, is done so that the dead person may be readily recognized if he or she walks as a saman (ghost), (Rattray 1929, p.152).

We see another use of colours in the ritual which terminates Kunaye, the ritual which among Akans a person performs to mourn the death of a spouse. According to Kofi Antubam, "After a year's period of wearing black cloth, a married person who has lost his or her

partner closes the Kunaye rites at the end of the year, and in the morning of the first day of the second year she or he throws off the black and puts on Kobene (red cloth) for the ceremony, weeping in memory of the dead. Towards noon on that day, he sheds the red too and puts on white cloth tinted with green" (1963, p.85).

In Rattray's description of funeral costumes, it is clear that the different colours worn by mourners serve as labels to differentiate groups in terms of their relationships to the dead. Red marks out the matrilineal relatives of the dead, black, non-matrilineal relatives and the principal group in this class of relations is the affines of the dead. For the priestly class however, none of these labels is used. Those in priestly office can only use white. A short comment on this is necessary.

The use of colour in denoting the specific classes and therefore the role of individuals in funerary ritual here employs two distinct levels of classificatory categories. In the one case a distinction is made between those who belong to the abusua of the dead and those who are outside it. Red for the former and black for the latter. But at another level, a contrast is implicit between those in the aforementioned statuses together and those in the sacred office of priesthood. This distinction rests at a deeper level of classification, on the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. And this level of analysis is supervenient to the former, hence the fact that a priest, be he a maternal relative or not must use white, the colour of purity and sacredness.

Rattray makes this antithesis clearer in his observation that while the head of any ordinary dead may be "marked with alternate, red, white, and black stripes", the corpse of a dead priest "is draped in white and sprinkled with white clay", as if even in death, the priest is undefiled by death. This also shows the dominance of the sacred/profane categories over all other modes of classification.

I have personally been curious to find out what the combination of red, white and black stands for. Here one observes that another use of this tricolour is in the decoration of the funeral vessel "abusua kuruwa" (the clan or lineage pot vessel). The "abusua kuruwa" is usually of burnt clay pot and it "has a lid or cover which has been fashioned to represent the dead; it has frequently also red and white and black stripes. All the blood

relations of the deceased now shave their heads; this hair is placed in the pot", (Rattray 1929, 169, 165) which the women in the maternal line of the dead carry to and leave at the place of the pots (esenso) in the cemetery where their relation was buried. I should like to suggest that the symbolism here is the same as the symbolism of the alternate red, white and black painted on the head of the dead; and that the idea that the colours should make it possible for the dead to be identified in the nether world rests on the fact that every individual, or his status, can be identified in terms of three things: his relations with his maternal relatives (red), his connections with non-maternal relatives (black) and finally, his relationship with the spiritual world (white). If the dead must be identified in the afterworld it is in terms of his social status that he must be identified which is meaningful in the light of Akan belief that the place the spirit of the dead occupies in the next world depends on the social status he attains before death.

Coming as it is at the end of the funeral observances of a bereaved spouse, the ritual of which Antubam gives a description serves to move the bereaved spouse from the profane to the sacred. And it is the stations in the process of transition which the distinct colours specify: black, the symbol of death, red a sign that she is in transition from the profane to the sacred; and, white, a sign that she is purified, and sacred, and the tinge of green is a clear indication of the assumption of new life.

In the contexts above, the emotions which the colours used express are explicit enough. Those who put on red and smear themselves with red ochre to indicate they are the blood relatives of the deceased are in an extreme traumatic state, and every effort is made to dramatize this fact. Those who put on black because they are not related to the dead by blood only share in the sorrow of the kinsmen of the dead; their grief does not approximate to that of the kinsmen of the dead. The third category of people is the category of priests, who, whether as blood relatives or other, express, as is due to their office, their complete disassociation from death, suffering and sorrow. In the midst of grief, the office of a priest stands for the spiritual joy of which the living are assured.

In looking at the ritual which terminates Kunaye as a ritual of transition one would see beyond these two levels - first transition from an old disrupted status to a new one in the society

and second a transition from the sacred to profane — a third, the transition from sorrow to joy. The black colour which the widow wears to show she has lost a loved one gives way to red, which might here express extreme sorrow caused by the memory of the death or the sorrow and danger felt in the crisis of transition. When she sheds the red and puts on white, she puts away sorrow. She also moves from the state of danger inherent in transition and arrives in a state of joy.

One interesting point here is that the emotional states which are prescribed for individuals or groups particular ritual roles and stations in a ceremony as indicated by the colour in use might not correspond to the actual emotional state of the person performing the ritual. And what strikes me as an important aspect of this conflict between actual emotions and prescribed affection is that the latter might be used as a means of controlling the former to bring about the emotional adjustment one has to make in situations of crises. This is what might be at the bottom of the traditional practice that when a sudden death occurs, death through accident, childbirth or other (Atɔfowu), relatives do not put on black or red. They must, like the dead himself, be in white. On such occasions Akans who are given to much emotional wailing at funerals are forbidden to weep. By this device the sudden surge of emotion is dammed and the excessive sorrowing which might stimulate the desire to revenge and lead some people to behave in ways which might be anti-social are allowed to peter out. Also, when a very old person dies, white is the colour tradition prescribed for use. In this instance, people are not only required to control their emotions, but are also asked to rejoice. It is a common belief that when the aged die they bring the blessings of many children to the lineage. In this hope sorrow is banished.

For an analysis of colour use among Akans this note can only be an initial probe. It is hoped that the scheme of analysis used here will be found to give meaning to the use of colour in other Akan rituals. The study of colour combinations in the field of ritual might reveal aspects of dramatic presentation and aesthetic appreciation which may be peculiar to African cultures.

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