

Blood of the Mother, Spirit of the Father

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“Very long ago one man and one woman came down from the sky and one man and one woman came up from the earth.

From the Sky God (Onyame), also came a python (*onini*), and it made its home in the river now called Bosommuru.

At first these men and women did not bear children, they had no desire, and conception and birth were not known at the time.

One day the python asked them if they had no offspring, and on being told that they had not, he said he would cause the woman to conceive. He bade the couples stand face to face, then he plunged into the river, and rising up sprayed water upon their bellies with the words *kus kus*, and then ordered them to return home and lie together.

The women conceived and brought forth the first children in the world, who took Bosommuru as their *ntoro*, each male passing on this *ntoro* to his children” [Rattray 1923: 48-49].

The Ashanti live in the region of Africa that was known as the Gold Coast during British colonization, and what is now southern Ghana. It should be noted that most of the information that has been attained in the following investigation of Ashanti kinship practices were originally gathered during the 1920's and 1930's, and thus should not be assumed as a reflection of the current Ashanti's practices – it is a still-frame of what their culture was at that particular time. The Ashanti culture is inseparable from their religious and spiritual beliefs; it influences politics, marriage practices, rituals, land transfers, menstrual taboos, birth and death. The importance of the above quoted creation myth shall be unraveled as their kinship and spiritual practices are related. Extracting the Ashanti's' kinship practices from the older terminology of Capt. R. S. Rattray has been a great mystery that finally became obvious after sketching out many diagrams, considering their inheritance practices, and finally locating the match in Linda Stone's book [Kinship and Gender](#). Throughout the older ethnographies and journal articles the Ashanti are described as being matrilineal; however, this seems to be too basic and does not account for many of their inheritance practices. It shall be shown through this analysis, that the Ashanti of the early twentieth century were part of a double descent system; the rarest of kinship practices in which one set of rights, duties, and inheritance is received through “ego's” father and another set through “ego's” mother.

As we can see in the creation story above, the Ashanti came into being through the gods, and with the help of a python they were able to continue life. It is significant that in the beginning two sets of people were put on the earth, one coming from the male Sky God (Onyame), and the other set of people from the female counterpart, the earth herself. This balance indicates a respect for feminine energy, not only do both exist, but both create. As one of Rattray's informants said, “We in Ashanti dare not worship the Sky God alone, or the Earth Goddess alone, or any one spirit. We have to protect ourselves against, and use when we can, the spirits of all things in the Sky and upon the Earth” (1923: 150). Placing two couples upon the land also diminishes the need for siblings to copulate and reproduce since there are offspring from another couple. Life can not continue without descendents, thus shall begin with the beliefs and practices surrounding birth.

When a child is conceived, the blood (*abusua*) is given by the mother, and the spirit (*ntoro*) is given by the father. In the story of creation it is interesting how the earth is female and is of a physical nature (blood), whereas the sky is male and functions in the spirit world of the unseen. The Ashanti reason that a father could not give his blood to a child through his penis, instead he provides the child's *ntoro*; the spiritual bonds between the child and their patriclan. It is interesting to note that semen is sometimes referred to as *ntoro*; it has the potential to provide this necessary aspect of a human being (Rattray, 1923:46).

Anthropologists have some discrepancies about the distinction between the *ntoro*, *sunsum*, and *kra*. K. A. Busia has deduced that the *sunsum* is a specific instance of the *ntoro*, but the two terms are sometimes interchangeable. The *ntoro* refers to the larger group connection, to their specific *ntoro* kinship. The *sunsum*, inherited through the father is what gives the child their distinctive personality and characteristics, not their physical body but what is spiritually within. During the union of a man and woman, the conception is blessed by the Supreme Being by giving the child their *kra*, which is a small piece of the creator that is described as their life force. The *kra* does not belong to the father's or mother's kinship groups, but is distinctly the child's. Upon death of an individual their *sunsum* "perishes with the man", whereas their *kra* returns to the Supreme Being. (Busia, 1954:197)

Rattray says that the *kra* is the life and breathe, while the *sunsum / ntoro* is the spirit, and that *sunsum* and *ntoro* are interchangeable terms, but does not allude to the specificity distinction. He does not mention the specifics of what happens to the *kra* when someone dies, but states that the "*ntoro* does not accompany the ghost (*saman*) to the *samando*, spirit world" (1923:53). Their *ntoro* stays in the world to look after those who share their *ntoro*. A mother's *ntoro* would not look after her own children, since they are of their fathers' *ntoro*, she would invest in her brothers' children after death (since her sisters' children's' *ntoro*, will be of their own father).

Another account on these discrepancies provided by Melville J. Herskovits, agrees with Rattray on the basic terminology of the three terms, but then diverges from both Rattray and Busia on the grounds of what is inherited. What Herskovits says is the opposite of other sources, and thus will not be focused on too strongly, except to illustrate how confusing these terms are to anthropologists and how everyone perceives and records information differently. To Herskovits it is the *kra* that is inherited patrilineally, and that the *ntoro* pertains to the matrilineal descent-group. This does not make sense, as will be shown; the functions of the *ntoro* group and the *abusua* group are distinct. When asking one of his informants which is greater, the *sunsum* or the *kra*, the person replied "Is the guard greater than the king he guards?" (1937:289-290). This statement is pertinent in this discussion regardless of how these aspects are inherited, and makes perfect sense in relation to each of the anthropologists views. It seems almost a striking relation to certain Western concepts in psychology of the ego and the subconscious. The subconscious and collective conscious are in a way protected by an outward persona. Collective consciousness is like the *ntoro* groups, held together by a particular underlying spirit. But those outward attributes of being alive are no more or less important than the aspect of the individual that continues after death. Regardless of which terms are used, each of the anthropologists indicates one of the terms to be an outward expression and the other an internal spirit.

The duties and characteristics of each *ntoro* group, makes these patrilineal kin groups corporate. Stone states that a corporate group "is a group of persons who

share rights (usually rights to some property or resource), privileges, and liabilities" (2006: 14). Even though corporate groups are often thought of as people who share inheritance rights to land and other resources, it also includes other "privileges and liabilities." Even though children belong to their mother's clan through blood, a father is responsible for the moral actions of his children because he has given them his own *ntoro*, and thus reflects him as a father and an individual. If a child is ill, a priest may say that it is "because his father's *sunsum* is aggrieved" (Busia, 1954:197).

Eight days after a child's birth, the paternal grandfather participates in a ceremony where he spits into the child's mouth, securing the child's *ntoro*. The child is then named after the grandfather. Babies are not thought of as fully of this world until the eighth day, should the child die before then it is thought to have been a ghost. The body is whipped after death, while the parents dress in festive attire and have a joyous feast to shame the ghost for endangering the mother's life. Even though land is inherited through the mother's brother, fathers and their patriclan have a powerful spiritual bond and are the ones who will watch over their children when they have passed (Rattray 1923).

Most often there are seven *ntoro* groups cited, but occasionally eight or nine are mentioned. This seems to be because sometimes groups are listed as subgroups, while other times the same group is recorded as the major group. The seven most commonly listed groups between sources are: Bosommuru, Bosumpra, Bosumtwe, Bosommaran, Abankwadie, Agyinadie, and Akankadie. All *ntoro* groups are exogamous, and with each of these groups are specific taboos, dislikes, and rituals. Each *ntoro* group has a day of the week for *ntoro* observance; on this day one participates in *ntoro* washing (what seems to be a spiritually ritualized bath). The literal translation when asking someone what *ntoro* they belong to is "What *ntoro* do you wash?" (Busia 1954:198, Rattray 1923:46, Melville 1937:291).

Washing the *ntoro* every week is not necessary for the ordinary person; they wash when their god (*obosom*) says that they need to. For the king and those of his *ntoro* it is a weekly ritual. Each group also has special affections for certain animals and totems, often stemming from the story of their *ntoro* groups birth. These animals are taboo to eat, and certain rituals must be done if one is found dead. There are also certain animals that are not eaten, not due to reverence, but because of an inherited dislike – being stated that it will make them ill. The creation story related already, describes the beginning of the Bosommuru *ntoro*. Because of the help that the python provided, they do not eat or kill pythons, and if they should find one dead they "sprinkle white clay upon it and bury it" (Rattray 1923:49). Bosommuru also will not eat the monkey, dog, or palm wine; this is not because of a spiritual bond however, it is because those in this *ntoro* become sick from them. For Bosommuru they wash their *ntoro* on Tuesday (Rattray 1923).

Since each group has different taboos that they adhere to, and different days for washing, this creates strong bonds between those that bathe and eat together. Having a close relationship with those other than your own *ntoro* could cause some awkward tension when they happen to eat an animal you revere. Marriage residence is not entirely clear; there is some mention of it being matrilocal, or that at one time this had been the practice. Marriage is also double exogamous. If it is matrilocal, the husband will live in an area where his wife's family has different taboos than his own; however, it is his wife who will adopt her husband's taboos on top of her own observances. She only has to adhere to them during her menstrual years or while

living with him as his wife. This is thought to be because, should she conceive, the child will be of the father's *ntoro*, and eating food forbidden to the child could cause death. Adultery is a more severe offense for a woman than a man; should the man be of a *ntoro* group other than her husband's the result for the baby is death, because of the different qualities of *ntoros*. Thus even though a child may already be conceived, it appears that the affect of semen within the woman's body would act as poison. If the man is of the same *ntoro* as her husband the offense is less severe. But if the man's *ntoro* is of her *ntoro* group, both of them could be expelled or killed (Rattray 1923:50).

The *ntoro* a child receives has a substantial influence on their life, as does the *abusua* that comes from their mother. The *abusua*, like the *ntoro*, are also exogamous and therefore the Ashanti practice a double exogamous system, both of which are corporate groups. Males are given power and life through their relationship to women. Women have a saying "If my sex die in the clan then that very clan becomes extinct, for be there one, or one thousand male members left, not one can transmit the blood, and the life of the clan becomes measured on this earth by the span of a man's life" (Rattray 1923:79). The clan head is chosen by the adult men and women of the lineage. Those of the clan swear an oath to the head, who appears in the court of the king and swears on behalf of his lineage. About four generations live together in the lineage and are represented as a political unit (Busia, 1954:196). The king, obviously can not pass his kingship to his son, because his son is not of his blood. Even the poorest of women could have the potential to be the mother of a king, should she be of the appropriate blood (Rattray 1923: 79).

Women have autonomy from their husband and financial worth on their own, since their husband does not have power over the land which she has acquired or inherited. Her family may grant her husband land for his personal use; however, it may be revoked should he have any indiscretions or should the marriage end. When a woman dies her land may only be inherited by a man within her clan, if all other females of her blood be deceased as well. What is at conflict in this system, is that wives themselves can be inherited by another male should their husband die. An older brother can inherit his younger brother's wife should he die. In kinship terms, he refers to his younger brother's wife as '*yere kuma* (small or secondary wife). If a king should die, his successor may also inherit the previous king's wife or wives. It is also striking, considering the strengths women do hold in this society that the term to marry is '*yere*, which means "to buy" (Rattray 1923). Unfortunately, there is not any mention of financial transfers at marriage, but if they did practice brideservice or bridewealth, this term would be clearer. The question that unfortunately can not be answered here is; what is happening with the land that belongs to these women if they are being moved around? Apparently it stays within her family, but doesn't this also negate matrilocality, especially if a man can have more than one wife?

Through *abusua*, ancestor worship is also shared. This is associated with the view that the land of the living belongs to the ancestors who have passed. When property is transferred, special blessings and rituals must be performed for the ancestors, to ease them through this change (Rattray 1923:216). At one point in time, the ancestors were made offerings at every meal, but it appears that this was an older practice that is no longer habitually observed (Busia 1954: 201).

In the contexts of marriage, there are many individuals who are restricted, based on the double exogamous practices. However, the Ashanti have a preference for cross-cousin marriage, which enables the reuniting of a specific *abusua* with a specific

ntoro every other generation. It is thought that the *ntoro* ghost is waiting to reincarnate into the same *abusua* and *ntoro* group that they had existed in while alive. Cross-cousins are an acceptable match because they do not share the same *abusua* or *ntoro*. Not only is this a beneficial match for the ancestors, but it is financially prosperous for the clan. Considering that inheritance is matrilineal and the children of a woman inherit property from her brother, a marriage between his child and her child will keep the land strictly in the family, while avoiding a taboo union (Seligman 1925 114-121).

Considering the importance placed upon both the patrilineal and the matrilineal inheritances, and the examination that they are both corporate in nature, it seems strange that the Ashanti should be described as matrilineal. If the Ashanti merely honored the father's contribution in the making of a child as the Navajo do, by saying that a child is "born of" the mother's clan but "born for" the father's clan, than they would understandably be matrilineal (Stone 2006:131). However, the Ashanti are strikingly similar to the Beng, who practice double descent. For the Beng, children inherit their food taboos, personality traits and certain ceremonial functions through their father. Through the mother, children inherit land and political membership. This is in line to what Ashanti children inherit from each of their parents. The biggest difference between the Beng and the Ashanti on this level of investigation is that only the patriclan is strictly exogamous; the matriclan permits a parallel "second cousin" marriage. When charting the Ashanti it becomes obvious that they are double descent, because the mother's father and father's mother are both cut from the kinship chart as being related. The other requirement of being corporate has already been covered. What is really intriguing is that the Beng live in the region of Africa once known as the Ivory Coast (Stone 2006:161-164). The Ashanti are believed to have migrated from the Ivory Coast to the Gold Coast in 1665 (Busia 1954:190); this could possibly account for these rare practices they share.

Perhaps the theory of double descent is incorrect, but on learning of the efforts involved in maintaining the relationships between the living and deceased for both the matriclan and the patriclan and the duties and inheritances of each, it seems unnatural to assume the Ashanti to be strictly matrilineal on the basis of clan property inheritance and ancestor worship. This stringent view is posed by Brenda Z. Seligman: "Although kinship is bilateral, clan descent is inevitably unilateral; it is impossible to belong to the clan of both parents, therefore the question of the line in which descent is reckoned becomes of no consequence" (1925:117).

The Ashanti, is a lineage of blood and spirit, both of which one can not live without.

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Laura Lane is graduating from Fairhaven College at Western Washington University with a BA in Integrated Healing Studies and a minor in Psychology. The research paper, "Blood of the Mother, Spirit of the Father", was an exciting yet challenging paper for her. It was written in Kathleen Saunders "Family and Kinship" course. She had to dare to think for herself and not regurgitate at face value what ethnographers believed about the Ashanti. She argued that they practiced the rarest of descent patterns. She was nervous about being wrong; about straying too far from the experts. But in the end, following her instincts is what stunned her professor, made this her best research paper, and made her excited about what she was writing. This was an important life lesson for her.