Akwantemfi—‘In Mid-Journey’: An Asante Shrine Today and Its Clients

T.C. McCaskie
Department of History, School of Oriental and African Studies, London WC1H 0XG
tm2@soas.ac.uk; tmccaskie@aol.com

Abstract
This paper examines the activities today of the Medoma shrine in Kumasi, capital of the historic Asante kingdom in the Republic of Ghana. It seeks to contextualise this shrine in relation to historic and current Asante indigenous belief. It also looks at it in relation to the rise of charismatic or Pentecostalist Christian churches, and to the ever growing presence of the African American diaspora in Asante. It supplies a profile of the life and beliefs of Nana Abass (Kwaku Abebrese), founder and ‘priest’ (okomfo) of the Medoma shrine. It explores his commitment to societal development and some of the initiatives and projects that have arisen from this involvement. It discusses the motives of the shrine’s Asante, other Ghanaian and African American clients. Finally, it advances an interpretation of the nature of Asante indigenous belief in the past and in the present age of globalisation and charismatic Christianity.

Keywords
Asante, Ghana, shrines, indigenous belief, Pentecostalism, African Americans

Introduction
Kumasi, historic capital of the Asante kingdom and Ghana’s second city, is different today from the place I first worked in forty years ago. The population has exploded. Villages full of Asante and other immigrants have been incorporated into unplanned urban sprawl. Runaway building and pollution have consigned West Africa’s famed ‘garden city’ to history and to memory.¹

In the 1960s Kumasi was home to long-established Christian denominations. Most Christians were Methodist, Roman Catholic or Anglican and sometimes shifted from one to another during a lifetime. Christian observance then was embedded in the easy sociability of modified tradition, a round of weekly Sunday services punctuated by church meetings, festivals, christenings, confirmations, weddings and funerals. Today, however, even the most casual
observer can sense the ways in which Christianity has become more salient in Kumasi life. It is too and undeniably a different Christianity.

This booming city is now full of Pentecostalist churches both large and small. Many of these are branches of national or international organisations and in terms of fervent allegiance they have overtaken the older established churches. Recently Kumasi has also seen a huge growth in what Asante call ‘one man churches’, localised Christian congregations founded and led by a charismatic pastor (osofo) who wields personal authority over an impassioned following drawn from his own kin and neighbourhood. Such churches fit the historic Asante pattern of ambitious ‘youngmen’ (nkwankwaa) making a name for themselves by assembling a retinue, but this is a new development too in the passions surrounding beliefs and prohibitions among pastors and members. This transformation has produced a much more vibrant, engaged, fluid, contentious and even unforgiving Christianity. There can be no doubt that sectarian Pentecostalist belief of both external and local origin is now a central component of lived experience and identity for very many in Kumasi.2

Ghanaian Pentecostalism generally is the subject of accumulating, insightful research. In that work an underlying theme is the continuing attraction felt by many Christian Pentecostalists towards the tenets, idioms and solutions offered to them by indigenous religious practices.3 Fieldwork in Kumasi shows that a flourishing of Asante religious practices is taking place.4 Like its Christian Pentecostalist equivalents, this is a major force in many people’s lives today. It is damned by the Pentecostalist churches as an atavistic or Satanic temptation to apostasy or, worse, a condemnation given urgency by the fact that it is common knowledge that Christians habitually consult indigenous shrines (ayowa), and especially the newer and more successfully publicised ones. This parallel universe of indigenous shrines founded, adapted and committed to addressing present conditions in Kumasi is all but neglected by scholarship, and certainly so by comparison with the plethora of work on Pentecostalism.

This present paper looks at one of indigenous Asante belief’s most vivid, best known and influential expressions in contemporary Kumasi, the renowned Medoma shrine on the Mamponten road in the city’s northern suburbs. This was founded in the 1980s. It has become famous over the past fifteen years or so by attracting constituencies both old and new. In what follows I provide an ethno-historical eyewitness account of this shrine, an analysis of the beliefs and goals of its charismatic founder Nana Abass, and a profile of who goes to Medoma to consult it and with what issues and expectations. As will be seen, the Medoma shrine is identifiable with historic Asante practices, but it also reflects socio-economic and cultural changes wrought by burgeoning urban-
ism and globalism in Kumasi itself, as elsewhere in Ghana and throughout West Africa.

The Shrine Complex

I first visited the Medoma shrine complex in 2001.⁵ I expected to find a small, dusty or even dilapidated site of a kind I had seen many times before, as at Gyakye, south-east of Kumasi, or a partially restored historic complex that was more a museum than anything else, as at Bogyiwaase, below the Mampon scarp north of Kumasi. I had not been in Medoma since the early 1980s, when it was a small, sleepy peri-urban village. I passed through without really noticing it on my way to the Kumasi Gyaasewa stool house in the neighbouring settlement of Atimatim. Back then this whole area was the countryside, full of trees and with small houses, farms and sawmills dotted about it.

In 2001, however, it took over an hour of driving to battle through the half-dozen miles of snarled traffic all along the Mamponten road to reach the Medoma exit on the left. The land all the way north was now built over and the trees were gone. The exit sign for Medoma was eclipsed by a handwritten notice pointing the way up an unmade dirt road to the shrine complex. The car bumped its way past an unremarkable four-sided compound house built in a historic, if now outmoded, Asante style. I learned later that this modest dwelling was where Nana Abass had first settled to begin his work.

A few hundred yards further along what was now a deeply rutted track, and up a hill to the right, I entered a large and imposing complex of new, recently painted and well maintained buildings. A high gated wall led on into a large outer courtyard. Off to the left of this was a modern three-storey building. This was the shrine’s ‘clinic’, an airy building with over one hundred and thirty rooms for those who stayed for some time to consult with Nana Abass. A gateway with an arch inscribed ‘Peace and Love’ led on through the rear wall of the outer courtyard to a smaller, much more intimate inner courtyard.

This was enclosed on all four sides by a single-storey building with open verandahs facing onto the courtyard and a row of rooms behind them. The verandah on the left-hand side of the gateway was elevated and its floor was tiled to form a recognisable dampan, a sitting area of the kind historically used by chiefs and other ‘big men’ for talking business and issuing instructions.⁶ In the corner nearest the outer courtyard was a carved chair (asipim) resting on an elephant’s skin (banwoma). This was where Nana Abass sat in public to exchange formal greetings with visitors. He also sat there to preside over shrine observances, and vacated this seat to lead the ritual dancing that took place in the inner courtyard.
Behind Nana Abass’s chair a room ran the length of the inner courtyard. On its walls were four display cases of photographs. Three showed him dancing while possessed (akom) or with clients. The fourth was devoted to an enlarged photograph of Nana Abass meeting with the present Asantehene Osei Tutu II. Half way along this room a small door was set into the rear wall. This was Nana Abass’s own private entry to the shrine itself. Everyone else was escorted to the far end of the verandah at the left rear corner of the inner courtyard.

Here the way was blocked by a shallow trough of water flanked by two rows of sun-bleached Fanta Orange bottles filled with a viscous brown liquid. All visitors had to pass through the water to purify themselves. Consonant with historic Asante custom, this applied most particularly to menstruating women, whose presence was polluting (akyiwadee) to the shrine. The bottles when new contained the eponymous soft drink. These were refilled periodically with a sugar solution mixed at the shrine.

This drink was for the mmoatia (‘dwarves’; ‘little people’), originally supernatural denizens of the deep forest who guarded the shrine and chose individuals to initiate into the needs and uses of the entities who elected to abide there. All mmoatia are addicted to sugar, and those at Medoma were said to suck up an endless supply from the bottled liquids. The bottles were capped so that only the ‘dwarves’ might drink to refresh and reward themselves for watching over the shrine.

Beyond the water trough were access ways to right and left. To the right was a room without windows. Piled on its floor were shrine offerings and gifts of food, washing powder, soap, bags of cement, tools, electrical goods and even money. On the back wall were pegs with Nana Abass’s ritual garments hanging from them. When a spirit ‘mounted’ (akom) him, he sniffed at it to make sure which one it was before putting on the garb appropriate to it. Each spirit had its own special dress. Some, like ofegye (‘the dirty millionaire’), were very particular about clothes.

To the left was the public entry to the shrine where shoes were removed. Outside, the shrine itself was on a huge pile of large rock slabs. A natural phenomenon, this gave panoramic views of the city to the south. The main shrine building was high up on the rocks with others sited below it. All of them were small round or hexagonal structures with iron roofs, wooden doors and curtained windows. At the main shrine house yams and corn hung before the door, left there by people seeking a blessing on their crops. Before another shrine house hung the discarded clothes of a reformed witch who had been cured of her malice towards kin and neighbours.

The main shrine house was clean inside. A sofa sat to the left. Facing it were piled up bottles of imported Dutch schnapps, Asante’s preferred ritual alcohol.
since the early eighteenth century. The shrine room itself, as was customary and is documented in ethno-historical records, was divided in two down the middle by a wooden partition. In the middle of this was a small glass window. Clients coming for a consultation sat before the partition while Nana Abass went behind it. Discussion took place through the window.

On the private side of the partition hung a photograph of Nana Abass’s mother and two framed certificates attesting to his credentials. Two objects mediated contact between client and consultant. Suspended before the partition window was a square glass lantern-like object that looked North African in design. This was the shrine’s memory device (biribi a w’asua no yie a wobe-tumi akae), known as ‘the computer’ because it was said to store and retrieve images and information about everyone who stood before it. Behind it, hung from the window frame, was a small bag containing ‘medicine’ to encourage talk and so aid with diagnosis and prescription.

**Nana Abass**

The Medoma shrine complex is impressive. It is testimony to the visionary drive of one man. This is Nana Abass, its sole founder and ‘priest’ (okomfo). I have checked his own oral account of his life history with that of others and against an authorised version he dictated. The latter was printed as *A Profile of Nana Abass* in 2000 and it is given to selected shrine visitors. To those who know about the trajectory of a calling to serve the Asante abosom (‘gods’), the life of Nana Abass is conventional in outline. Such a life is a narrative of struggle to come to terms with and accept a vocation first revealed, and often frighteningly, in childhood. The underlying theme is that of a tortuous journey into the priesthood, and then of a relentless striving to follow that chosen path in the service of the abosom.

This is why Nana Abass, and others like him, say their lives are always akwantemfi—‘in mid-journey’. This term derives from akwan, which means a ‘road’ in the literal sense but also embraces the idea of life as a ‘way’, a ‘path’ or a ‘journey’. This is the most fundamental of Asante historical ontologies, shared by all, but the most difficult and hardest of ‘journeys’ is followed by the okomfo in his (or her) traffic with entities or spirits that embody dangerous supernatural powers. When understood as the ‘path’ through life of the okomfo, akwantemfi connotes ideas of loneliness, isolation, testing, trial and an endless struggle not to fall by the wayside. Such a person has been chosen to hazard the self in a metaphysical wager with the supernatural. Once embraced, any deviance from or failure to live up to this challenge is said to drive the errant okomfo into going off the ‘path’ into a wilderness of abandonment, insanity and even death.
People are led to this calling by a variety of supernatural guides. In the case of Nana Abass these were *mmoatia*. They summoned him into the service of the category of *abosom* that inhere in rocks and stones (*abo*). Indeed, the very term *abosom*—*abo* (stones) + *som* (to serve)—may derive from the seniority accorded stones over the powers of the sky and trees that compose the other two main sources of the Asante pantheon.\(^{11}\) It should be noted too that all the supernatural entities that call people into the service of ‘gods’ have discrete characteristics. Thus, the fondness of *mmoatia* for sugar has already been discussed. They also like strong scents. In themselves they have trickster qualities, the caprice of children and are notoriously talkative, teasing and tormenting.\(^{12}\)

Nana Abass was born as Kwaku Abebrese in Akrofoso Akyempem in Agona, north-east of Kumasi, on 27 September 1962. He was the second of three children born to his mother Adwoaa Bruku. All three were conceived as the result of interventions by shrine powers consulted by their mother. His father was Opanin Kwabena Abebrese and both parents were subsistence farmers. When Kwaku Abebrese was an infant his mother took him to her farm. He disappeared. A search by neighbours found nothing until one suggested the boy had been taken by *mmoatia*. There was no sugar to hand so river water was left for them. The wind rose and a voice called from the forest. The baby was found under a large shade tree. He was smeared with the white clay (*hyire*) used in celebrations, and raffia bands of ‘power’ (*tumi*) were bound around his wrists and ankles.

The family consulted the Asaaman shrine near Agona about this strange happening. Kwaku Abebrese was smeared with white clay and a divinatory egg was broken over his head. From this it was predicted that the child would be famous and have people kneeling before him begging for help. To Adwoaa Bruku’s consternation the shrine already knew about her son’s abduction. She was told to tell Kwaku Abebrese about what had happened when she thought him old enough to understand.

In due course the boy went to school in Akrofoso Akyempem. He was solitary and introverted. To his alarm he could see ‘little people’ no one else could see. In Middle School he went one day to weed his mother’s sister’s farm at Dompoase. His aunt was astonished at the amount of work he completed and asked who had helped him, but the boy was on his own. Kwaku Abebrese then saw *mmoatia* with braided hair who demanded to be his playmates. They visited him seven times thereafter. He resisted their overtures but they laughed and teased him and said they would return.

Kwaku Abebrese was afraid and confessed all to his mother. She told him about his disappearance as a baby and the Asaaman shrine’s prediction.
The pair now visited the great historic shrine dedicated to the Tano river at Gyamaase near Mampon. Via the medium of a sacrificed white cockerel, Tano chose to ‘marry’ (w’aware no) the boy in confirmation of the fact that he would certainly serve the abosom in the future. Kwaku Abebrese was confused and frighted. He left school and went to live with his father in Schwi, west of Asante, to escape the mmoatia. But the area was wooded and he feared another abduction.

He fled to Kumasi where, in the late 1970s, he found work as a petrol-pump attendant at the Shell station near Komfo Anokye roundabout. There he began to make money hand over fist. He bought three taxis, driving one himself at night after his work. This was ‘magic money’ (sika ntafowayi), self-creating and making an addicted slave of its possessor. One day Kwaku Abebrese was driving between Bantama and Kagyatia with no one in his taxi when all four doors of the vehicle began to open and slam shut repeatedly. To any Asante this sort of thing means that a messenger from the abosom is coming. Sure enough, a huge man carrying a sword and dressed in a black batakari overshirt appeared in front of the car and as suddenly vanished. It also means that this ‘herald’ (esen) will be the first of other such visitors.

One day Kwaku Abebrese again saw mmoatia in the gardens of Kumasi’s Cultural Centre. They called to him in friendship but he rebuffed them in fear. Then, one day he found a large sum of money in his taxi. Friends advised him to keep it but he had no need of cash. He returned it to the woman who had left it there. This was alhajjia Hawa, a Kumasi Muslim businesswoman and regular passenger. For some reason he told her about the mmoatia who had bothered him all his life. She told him to become a Muslim and these visitsations would cease. He did so, and a Malam who resided near him in the Zongo instructed him in the Islamic faith and renamed him Ibrahim Abass.

He became an observant Muslim and the mmoatia disappeared. Then in 1983 he was driving from Kumasi to Obuase when smoke began to pour out of his engine. He got out of the taxi and immediately saw the mmoatia. He consulted a Malam who told him he was the victim of a spell (asuman kabere) and would be forced to become an okomfo. In panic he went to Kulungungu in northern Ghana to have the spell lifted, but the shrine house he visited caught fire while he was in it. He was told the mmoatia on the roof were responsible and that he should return to Kumasi and accept his fate.

Back in Kumasi he experienced possession (akom) for the first time and lost track of his movements for three days. Then, at a gathering at Tabiri in Mampon, he tore off his clothing and danced while possessed. Ashamed and weeping, he fled to Tafo in Kumasi. The mmoatia were now ever present, climbing onto his roof at night to make a din that ruled out sleep. He sold his cars and
reduced himself to penury in an attempt to break the spell. This had no effect. The ‘little people’ now ruled his life.

This was a crisis point, recalled as such by Nana Abass and consonant with historical accounts of the path of inner struggle in becoming an okomfo. At last he gave in to his allotted destiny or fate (nkrabea). In time-honoured fashion he allowed the mmoatia to bear him off to the deep forest to be initiated and trained. They made ritual cuts on his body to teach him to endure and instructed him in the use of herbal medicines. The mmoatia then led him on an exhausting journey through Asante before finally telling him to settle at Medoma and build a shrine (ayowa) and a dwelling (the original house described above). He was also told to keep the name Abass but to replace the Muslim Ibrahim with the Asante honorific Nana.

Two things made Nana Abass famous. First, the mmoatia carried him to the top of the tallest tree in Medoma. He was up there for two days and crowds gathered below. In the end an okomfo in the crowd ordered that a gun be discharged three times. This was done, and after the third shot Nana Abass suddenly appeared on the ground. He was wearing doso, the raffia skirt of the okomfo, and danced while possessed. Second, it was now revealed to Nana Abass that obosom adiabu (‘the god who is master of the stones’) inhabited the Medoma slab rock formation. He was told to serve it and this would make Medoma itself grow and flourish.

The biggest obstacle was the lack of a supply of drinking water, an absence that had always inhibited the growth of the place. Nana Abass was instructed where to look for water and he found it. This gave him local celebrity. If Kumasi informants know of him, it is generally as ‘the priest who can find water’ in an area with polluted streams and inadequate pipe-borne provision. This has been something of a mixed blessing, as will be seen presently, for it has made Nana Abass captive to his public reputation for success in finding water.

Medoma was reordered on the instructions of obosom adiabu. The main shrine house was built high on the rocks. As is generally the case where an obosom is served by an activist okomfo, other entities were attracted to the place to form a community. These included asunkwa, a generic servant of the ‘gods’; baakoayo, ‘only child’, a specialist in reproduction and child-bearing; wadiepu, ‘the seer’, an oracle of future happenings; and ofegye, ‘the dirty millionaire’, a guide to wealth and prosperity. Nana Abass also made mention of visitations by hue me so, tigare and künde, powers that appear in the colonial records in the 1920s-50s. This community was talkative and amicable, but occasionally quarrelsome as well. Its members possessed Nana Abass at different and unpredictable times. Note has already been made of the clothes required to be worn to serve each of them. All have shrines scattered about the rock formation.
Nana Abass, acting on orders from *adiabu*, developed Medoma. The Hwen-tia Abena stream was discovered underground and then used for ritual practices. A spiritually obstructive tree was chopped down in a complex rite in which bats were expelled as being inimical to the settlement’s future success. In the main shrine house a liquid containing leaves, bark and roots identified by the *mmootia* was mixed up. It was said that bathing in this would bring prosperity to any individual who truly believed in the old ‘gods’. As we saw, a most impressive shrine complex was built. Let us turn now to the ideas being propounded by Nana Abass, and then to the shrine’s operations and its clients.

**Beliefs, Ideas, Publicity, Projects**

Nana Abass’s credo is explicit. All cultures possess an idea of ‘god’. Man is religious because of fears, above all of losing one’s life. More generally, and in a dichotomy of culture against the wild that is so thoroughly documented in Asante’s past, ‘there is a continual innate fighting against the forces of nature’. Illness, sterility, poverty and a host of circling threats are confronted, sometimes vanquished, by soliciting the help of supernatural forces. Such forces inhere in nature itself, but may be domesticated to the solace and support of human society by attending to their needs and messages. An initiated *okomfo* is the medium between the sources of succour and the people seeking it. In truth, ‘man created God in his own image’, in that all cultures possess their own constructions and images of the numinous and otherworldly.

None of the foregoing would have been unfamiliar to Asante folk in the past. The fly in the ointment is the impress of recent and present conditions, and in response Nana Abass has elaborated a belief system for modern times. ‘Traditional religion’ (*abosom som*) was the glue of Asante society. It fostered positive qualities like unity, empathy, sociability, diligence and the like. Today, however, ‘foreign religions and modernity have relegated it to the background, trying all out to completely obliterate it.’ It has been labelled as Satanic, and particularly by Christian Pentecostalists. Apart from its intolerance, Christianity is itself problematic. It is an alien import from another quite different cultural matrix. More precisely, its integrity and practice in contemporary Ghana, most especially in the Pentecostalist churches, is highly questionable.

The critique of Christian Pentecostalism advanced by Nana Abass is a pointed version of complaints common throughout Ghana. These are voiced by educated secularists as well as ordinary people. The Medoma shrine view is that Pentecostalist pastors enrich themselves at the expense of their congregations. Their doctrines are commercialised. They also suppress resourcefulness,
and encourage passivity in the face of social ills by looking to miracles and not actions for redress. The forgiveness of sin contributes to the same end. The overall consequence is a moral nullity reinforced by educational precepts that are little more than ‘indoctrination and brainwashing’.23

In this view Christianity in general, and especially Pentecostalism, are sectarian and divisive for they are competing for money and status as well as souls. Nana Abass instead emphasises that his beliefs work towards the well-being and socio-economic development of communities. This is because abosom som is organic to local society and expressive of its deepest historical wants and needs. Nana Abass has spoken out about these matters in the media. In 2004 he vigorously defended Asante traditional religion in the press, dismissing the claim made by many Pentecostalists that it was ‘devilish’. The precepts of the Medoma shrine, he stated, were historically based in Asante society and dedicated to communal peace and development.24

I asked about ‘prosperity’ (aiiyedi), a promise trumpeted in charismatic churches that preached a Prosperity Gospel. Indeed some Asante I met at Medoma told me they had come seeking advice on achieving ‘prosperity’. In a poor country like Ghana, I said, it is surely the case that people mean money when they talk about ‘prosperity’. This was true, I was told, but far from being the whole story. When Pentecostalist pastors talked about ‘prosperity’, they stressed accumulation as a sign of standing in grace. This was not the historic Asante view.

I was reminded that the concept of aiyedi went beyond money to point to what was to be done with it. It meant ‘security’ and ‘welfare’ in the sense of an expenditure for others rather than only on oneself. This was the perception at the Medoma shrine, and when people came asking for ‘prosperity’ they were questioned as to what they would do with money and counselled in community values. This may look like hair splitting, but in fact it addresses potent Asante fears about the fragmentation of social cohesion in their society, and especially in a place like Kumasi today. Ahujo bone, ‘Ahodwo is bad’, was shorthand for condemnation of the mansion homes put up by rich Christian pastors in the south Kumasi suburb of that name.

At times Nana Abass seemed as much a social activist as an okomfo of a recognisably historic type. Thinking about this, however, I saw that such people had commonly led others in the pursuit of a common good. After all, development and prosperity are old ideas in Asante. What has changed is the politics of both. Nana Abass is a partisan of the Golden Stool, seeing in the Asantehene and his chiefs an ancient dispensation that presided over an integrated society. He is immensely respectful of this, but he can see that the
power to get things done now ultimately rests with the politicians in Accra. In many cases these politicians are not Asante, but his complaint in this regard is not the common one of a strident cultural nationalism.

Rather, it is the due recognition that those who know local communities no longer arbitrate their affairs. The result is stasis. In a viewpoint that would not sound strange in the mouths of development experts, Nana Abass believes that national politicians are ineffective when not corrupt. This is why he leads from the front, employing his reputation as an okomfo to mobilise people in shifting for themselves. Here, old ideas of Asante communal self-help are joined with initiatives that address modern needs. These projects are funded by monetary gifts to the shrine and to Nana Abass, and he spends resources freely to improve amenities and services of all kinds.

It has been noted that Nana Abass built his reputation by locating drinking water for the people of Medoma. He went on to do the same thing at his natal village in Agona. He was 'led' to water sources by adiabu speaking through the mmoatia. Potable water is a problem in Asante, and nowhere more so than at Kumawu in Sekyere on the edge of the Afram plains to the east of Kumasi. In 1995 Kumawu's Onwam river treatment plant broke down and was not repaired, leaving the town critically short of water. In 2002 Nana Abass offered his services to Kumawuhene Barima Asumadu Sakyi. The estimated cost of finding and pumping water to Kumawu people was about £8,000.

Nana Abass offered to finance the search and project work himself, with the Kumawu Traditional Council reimbursing him on successful completion. His initiative, so he declared, was inspired by a wish to have the powers of 'traditional religion' enlisted in the service of community development. I do not doubt the sincerity of this motive. However, it should be noted that much publicity accrued from the offer, and increased prestige would naturally follow on the project’s success. This was a high-risk strategy, because Nana Abass stood to lose his investment if he failed to locate water, and also because his personal reputation was being hazarded in Asante’s competitively fickle religious market place. Other religious figures have come to grief over development projects in Ghana.

In 2004 I visited Nana Abass on site in Kumawu. He had found water but after two years the source was still being dug out. The site was on the north-west side of the town. Nana Abass had over one hundred men breaking rocks, digging dirt and carrying both away from a pit that was at least one hundred feet deep. On three of its sides this hole was enclosed by sheer rock walls. On the fourth side there was no wall. There the site opened out into a series of shallow ponds linked by a stream. Nana Abass, in hard hat and carrying a
sledgehammer, was working with his men and urging them on. On the lip of the wall facing the open space below, twenty-foot-high concrete retention walls for a dam were being installed.

It was very hot, the pit was unshaded and everything was being done by hand. Nana Abass said that ‘good water’ had been located and plenty of it. The time-consuming problem was ‘engineering’ the site. He had already spent thousands of pounds of his own money, and his wage bill was running close to £800 a day over a five-day week. He said mmoatia had told him where to dig, as always. He confirmed that he would only be reimbursed by Kumawu ‘when the water came on’, but appeared supremely confident of eventual success.27 The project was worthwhile, he said, because self-help arising from belief in the ‘gods’ was the only truly assured road to development. Politicians were often and sadly prone to wasting money and losing faith.

I was much taken with Nana Abass’s seemingly unswerving belief that his Kumawu project was destined to end in triumph. By this time he was even better known than when I first met him, so I canvassed opinion in Kumasi as to what people thought he was doing and why. Many mentioned publicity for his shrine, but often coupled this with admiration for the strength of his beliefs and praise for his self-help activism. It will not surprise that Pentecostalists condemned him outright, albeit in a manner that proved revealing.

I was told by a charismatic pastor from Family Chapel Inc. in Asokwa, and by other Pentecostalists, that Nana Abass was not looking for water, but instead was digging a pit (amoa) to release and to conjure forth Satan and his powers. That is, this pit was really etu, the lair of a beast and in this particular case the Great Beast. Here Asante beliefs chime with Christian fundamentalism, for Nana Abass’s supporters also told me he was really digging a hole to access additional supernatural powers. In historic terms the Asante conceive of such a pit, dug by an okomfo, as a ‘gateway to power’ (opontumi). Another more cynical explanation, offered around the Manhyia palace, was that Nana Abass was simply determined to show he was a ‘big man’ like a chief. Why else, I was asked, was he ostentatiously pouring away money into a hole in the dirt?28

Expectations, Solutions, Clients, Money

Nana Abass is available for consultation at set times and by appointment. His public reception days are determined by the historic Asante ritual calendar, the recurring forty-two-day adaduanan cycle. He holds audience on the two adaе in the cycle, a Wednesday and a Sunday, when the Asante honoured their ancestors, and on fofie, a Friday sacred to adiabu.29 He also celebrates periodic
‘watch nights’ at the shrine. As many as five hundred people come on Sundays with slightly smaller attendances on the other days.

Many Christians come to him secretly in the night to discuss their problems and seek his help. This is because they are suffering from ‘enticement’, a term used in Kumasi to describe the lure of extravagant promises made by charismatic Christian pastors. I spoke with someone in this category. She attended a ‘one man church’ in Kwadaso to seek solace and guidance for an undiagnosed illness threatening the life of her eleven-year-old daughter. The pastor promised that the mother’s faith would save the child’s life, but when the girl died he blamed Satan’s continuing influence over the woman. In despair she quit her church and came to Medoma to get explanation and relief. She had been ‘helped’, she said, and Nana Abass’s reputation for healing was justified.

Asante and other Ghanaians come to Medoma with ‘countless problems’. Many are richly documented staples of the history of shrines; childbearing, sterility, impotence; various physical diseases; ‘spiritual harassment’ and other metaphysical complaints; drunkenness; tiredness and lassitude; depression; hypertension; and life failures, such as the incapacity to save money despite working hard. Sometimes families and kin bring a relative possessed by ‘bad witchcraft’ (bayi boro). Increasingly, many of these unfortunates are also afflicted by a fearful identification with the Satanic symptoms so fully described and thoroughly excoriated by charismatic pastors.

Other new problems reflect current conditions. Kumasi, as I am aware, is full of drug addicts. The use of marijuana and even cocaine is widespread. Less discussed, but of similar seriousness, is addiction to ‘prescription drugs’, except that in Kumasi these are not prescribed but instead are freely bought in markets or pharmacies. There is no control over type, dose or expiry date, and people who take medications of this sort, commonly very strong painkillers, develop addictions to them. Nana Abass counsels many such people. Since 9/11 Nana Abass has also had a growing number of clients who want help with the endlessly frustrating business of securing residence visas and work permits for Europe or the USA. The spirit abaawa, ambiguous, aggressive and sinuously persuasive, can assist in this but in the end faith is what counts, just as with the Pentecostalist churches.

The Medoma shrine has no formal scale of charges for its services. People ‘donate’ money on their own initiative. Commonly this is not much, but rich Kumasi clients are sometimes very generous. Private consultations take place on Nana Abass’s own verandah and in the big shrine house. Scheduled public receptions are always held in the inner courtyard. Drummers gather in front of Nana Abass’s verandah. They play and are joined by men and women
singing and beating calabashes. A folding chair with a liquor bottle on it is set up on a mat in the courtyard. Clients and visitors throng the sides of the courtyard.

Nana Abass comes down from the chair on his verandah and dances slowly before the drummers. Then he hesitates, runs about, halts and puts his head on one side and then the other as if listening for something. This is the moment of possession (akom). He runs into his wardrobe room and returns dressed in the garb belonging to whatever spirit has possessed him. He then dances in the courtyard followed by a helper who gathers up whatever he discards of his clothing or accoutrements.

The drumming gets louder and the dancing faster. Nana Abass spins round and round, repeatedly drops to the ground and sometimes rests on the folding chair. As in other such performances, the drums seem to define the dance while the dance propels the drums. Occasionally, Nana Abass stops dancing and pours libations from the bottle on the chair onto the earth. At such times he engages in impassioned talk to the spirit that has ‘mounted’ him. Then, suddenly, after about forty-five minutes, it is all over. Nana Abass delivers whatever message he has received to the assembly. People then come forward to give presents of cash and schnapps to the shrine.

Nana Abass’s reputation is rooted in consultation, and performance when possessed. This has always been the stock-in-trade of the okomfo. Nana Abass, however, is also a skilled publicist and media manipulator in a very modern way. Note has been made of the media publicity attending his efforts to bring water to Kumawu. In addition, Nana Abass is Chairman of and a leading figure in the Association of Fetish Priests, a body that is Asante-based but that has members from all over Ghana. It was in his capacity as Chairman of the AFP that Nana Abass led some two hundred of his fellow akomfo to congratulate Asantehene Osei Tutu II on his accession in 1999. The AFP functions as a pressure group to publicise and advance the cause of indigenous belief.31

At a meeting of the AFP in Medoma most akomfo present were women. Discussion centred on the ways Christian pastors were ‘tormenting’ AFP members. Those present asked Nana Abass to petition the Health Ministry to establish a national Traditional Herbal Clinic. Some claimed they had herbal cures for HIV/AIDS. They wondered if there was a Christian involvement in the supposed suicide by gunshot in the 1990s of Nana Drobo, an okomfo who patented herbal cures for HIV/AIDS in Germany and the USA.

Pentecostalism was lambasted for its pretensions to foretell the future. There was talk of how this was done. It was said that unscrupulous pastors led their followers up the Atwea mountain, and there made them fast and woke them
every two hours during the night for prayer. People subjected to such a regime were brainwashed into believing everything their pastors said, including predictions about the future. Throughout this debate Nana Abass continually stressed the value of publicising the virtues of shrines and of gathering influential support for their work.

Nana Abass travels in Asante and throughout Ghana in both his personal and official AFP capacities. In 2002, for example, he attended the funeral of the female okomfo who served the Tano shrine at the crossroads (nkwantanan) in Antoa in Asante. This was a gathering of the servitors of important Asante shrines in Abrem, Agogo, Agona, Asaaman (on lake Bosomtwe), Gyakye, Kodaase and Wiamoase, and it was reported as such in the media. The deceased okomfo Akua Foriwaa was laid out on a bedstead in a room hung about with kente cloth, as in many Asante funerals. The proceedings were distinctly old fashioned by comparison with the gaudily baroque funerals now favoured in Kumasi.

As in precolonial times the assembled akomfo waited to be possessed before one of them was chosen as the 'mount' (ponko) of an entity deemed to be appropriate to the woman’s funeral. Numerous spirits manifested themselves, including dangerous and unsuitable ones such as atatata (‘it is raining down at the back of your clothing’) and kwabena apea, a malign and opportunistic ‘witch-finder’. Eventually one spirit was chosen, but without being named, that was in close harmony with the obo tabiri shrine served by the dead woman. Around the fringes of the funeral discussion took place concerning the status and efficacy of given shrines, and about the politics of relations with Christianity and the state. Dress and imagery too were the subjects of comment. A young man with a ‘moon and stars’ (nsoroma) hairstyle was universally admired, but the Gyakye okomfo drew criticism for his pretension in using an umbrella as if he were a chief.

It was in 1997, in Koforidua in Ghana’s Eastern Region, that Nana Abass made what was arguably the most important contact of his life. His autobiographical profile tells the story as follows.

In April 1997 some black Americans numbering about twenty-seven, with their leader, Doctor Cheryl N. Grills, invited Nana Abass to Oboo Tabri shrine in Koforidua, Eastern Region. In course of the procedure at the shrine they inquired of a shrine in Kumasi, so that they would accompany Nana Abass to Kumasi. Oboo Tabri prophesied that some of the visitors were potential traditional priests which would be manifest when they came to Kumasi. They were sceptical about this. When they came to Kumasi, Medoma to be precise, there was a performance and behold a lot of them became possessed, but that of their leader Dr Grills was more pronounced. They
remained in that state and danced for about two hours. The deity revealed that most of them were potential priests and that some would practise perennially whilst others would be short-lived.33

In Medoma oral accounts it is said that the first contact with Dr Grills was made by Nana Abass’s wife, Obaapanin Afia Tabiri in Larteh, Eastern Region. Whatever the case, this meeting had momentous consequences, for it propelled Nana Abass beyond the confines of Ghana and into the globalised international order.

Cheryl Grills is a Professor of Psychology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. She is a longtime member of the Association of Black Psychologists (ABP), founded in the USA in 1968. This organisation interests itself in the psychology and problems specific to Americans of African descent, and its research has carried it into the fields of Afrocentrism and African history.34 Professor Grills explored traditional religious and healing contexts in Senegal and Nigeria as well as Ghana. Her first visit to the Medoma shrine was memorable.35 A shrine spirit slapped her across the face in full view of all her students. Nana Abass said that this was because she was impatient. He told her she would only gain understanding ‘from inside’, that is by undertaking a course of training. This she determined to do, and she has returned to Medoma many times since.

Professor Grills brought Nana Abass to Los Angeles. There he sanctified a shrine to the Asante abosom in the backyard of her house. Clientele built up by word of mouth. Two-thirds was African American. The rest was of Latino or Caribbean descent, but with whites also attending. It is said the spirits fix particularly on African Americans because they have what the Asante call mogya (blood), a physical and metaphysical substance enabling generational transmission of a diasporic ‘genetic memory’ of life in Africa. This concept of a genetically transmitted sense of historical identity, still manifested to this day in diasporic talk, behaviour, music, cuisine and all the rest, is prominent in Afrocentric thinking. ABP members and many others concerned with African American psychology have a strong interest in it.

Members of the Californian shrine community travel to Medoma for further training. Nana Abass says he has instructed over twenty such African Americans in religious concepts, shrine practices and the use of herbal medicines. This connection has given Nana Abass access to other well organised African American networks in the USA. He travels often to Los Angeles and has been by invitation to New York, Philadelphia and South Carolina. Electronic word of mouth has opened up Europe as well. Nana Abass has visited Amsterdam to talk about Asante beliefs and is planning to travel to Germany.36
The Medoma shrine continues to serve its Ghanaian clients but it is also now at the forefront of an internationalisation of Asante beliefs.

There is now a respectable body of work on African American visitors to Ghana. They are drawn to the country for three reasons. First, Elmina, Cape Coast and other slave forts along Ghana's coast are a uniquely concrete and emotive reminder of the diaspora's point of forced rupture from Africa. Second, in Asante and other kingdoms Ghana has living and visible evidence of the historic cultural achievements of African societies. Third, in 1957 Ghana was the first independent African colony, and its then leader Nkrumah retains a considerable reputation among Pan-African nationalists.

It might be said, then, that Nana Abass and the Medoma shrine are among the leading beneficiaries of diasporic interest in African history, identity and belief. There can be no doubt too that this link has been fundamental to the funding of the Medoma shrine complex. Programmes to build and create other amenities at Medoma are sustained in large part by generous donations and gifts of money from African Americans and, as noted, it is their funding as well as their interest that has given Nana Abass a growing international reputation and audience.

There can be no doubt that Nana Abass is comfortable with the global applicability of his beliefs. There can be no doubt too that he has adapted Medoma shrine practices to accommodate diasporic needs and desires. Charges of opportunism are, I think, quite misplaced, for Nana Abass is patently sincere in his belief that African Americans are a legitimate part of his constituency. In his view they are simply historically displaced Africans, and it is a happy coincidence that they are in a position to help advance his ideas and projects.

An example of this kind of ecumenism took place at Medoma in July 2004. Members of ABP, first introduced to Nana Abass by Professor Grills, came to Medoma to carry out a decision agreed by a gathering of Pan-Africanists in Atlanta. This was to place a sculptural bust of the Afrocentric scholar and activist John Hendrik Clarke within the shrine and to have Nana Abass consecrate it as abakosem sunsum (that is, the essence or incarnation of true history). Nana Abass covered adiabu in white clay. He danced before it, awaiting possession and communication. The message when it arrived was that adiabu was present with the celebrants, and was urging upon them a continuation of their unceasing struggle for African and indeed human dignity in the face of all the virulent consequences of the slave trade, colonialism and the neo-liberal world order.
Afterword

It is hard to assess the extent, impact and direction of the surge in indigenous belief in Asante today. Let us return here to the concept of *akwantemfi*, central to much Asante perception and present in an extremely salient way in the life of an *okomfo* like Nana Abass. Asante people were and are comfortable with an idea of culture in which their belief, like much else, surges and fades in recurring temporal cycles but is never truly lost to them. The pulse of this historical continuity, the onward journey of a unity of dead-living-unborn, is central to Asante thinking. This ontology at once derives from and is mirrored in the parallel universe of the *abosom*. Gods, like the cyclical strength or weakness of belief in them, come and go. The history of Asante belief is marked by the coming and going of specific entities, all variations on a theme. The supernatural is co-extensive with itself. Unlike humans, its denizens do not live or die but appear on their own recognisance and, if they wish, can pass into a dormancy that can endure, quite literally, forever.38

This still leaves conjunctural questions of historical causality. Why now is there a palpable reaffirmation of indigenous belief in Kumasi and Asante? This is a question that gains added pertinence when much literature implies *ipso facto* that the rise of Christian Pentecostalist churches is squeezing traditional belief to the margins. And yet, that same literature is full of numerous unexplored instances of backsliding, of people who move backwards and forwards between church and shrine or combine the two. The argument for a prudential pluralism is an historic one. Here is the view of a prominent, very well informed and reflective Asante, the late royal linguist and politician Baffour Osei Akoto.

You see there are not many Asante people who are Christian pure and simple [laughs]. They go to church. But life is full of troubles and sometimes the Fetish Man can help more than the preacher can. Formerly this was understood by all but the new churches [Pentecostalists] are intolerant. So people will listen to Otabil [a nationally famous Pentecostalist preacher] on the radio and then go off to places like the one you are telling me about at Medoma. They hide it. You know, Tom, that Asante people have always been like this. They believe in tolerant gods and lots of them. This Pentecostalism is *abaso* [a thing that has recently emerged] At present it is a fashion but all of these pastors will have to learn to share souls with the Fetish Men [laughs].39

One is tempted to say it was ever thus, as a perusal of nineteenth-century missionary documents from Kumasi makes plain.

Nana Abass and the Medoma shrine exist in a globally complicated and uncertain era that has an influence in Asante both more diffuse and unpredict-
able than anything that has gone before. This is well known and discussed, but it prompts a query. Indigenous or Christian Pentecostalist, just what is religion for in Asante today? Something of an answer can be seen, I think, in West’s work on the Mueda plateau in Mozambique. In a most stimulating essay he argues that the Muedan world is endlessly fashioned and refashioned by those who construct interpretative metaphysical visions of it, and then offer these constructs up for debate and contestation.40

This is an argument for what, in a different context, the pragmatist philosopher Rorty has called ‘edificatory conversation’, the process whereby worlds are endlessly being made, unmade and remade in open-ended discursive exchanges between participants self-contracted to that enterprise.41 I would urge that Nana Abass, like his historical predecessors as Asante akomfo, is a ‘conversationalist’ of this Muedan or Rorty type. He recognises that non-empirical, transcendental questions are a commonplace of all human individuals and societies. He recognises in the same way that ‘God is realized in accordance with one’s culture’, and that ‘in reality, man created God in his own image; not the other way round’. This leads on to an ecumenism that insists that ‘no religion is solely Godly while others are solely Satanic’.42 It also leads to a quest for ‘conversation’, debate and contestation.

This can be observed in Medoma shrine practice. Taking on board the problems and aspirations of African Americans, brought to Nana Abass’s attention by the engine of an integrating globalised world, is an extension through adaptation of Asante belief’s capacity for inclusiveness, for realising ‘God’ in ‘accordance with one’s culture’. It is the cultural embrace offered to diasporic Africans that opens them up to adiabu and to instruction in the rites of the Asante abosom. Even someone like the present writer, a white European, can elect to pass through this door by embracing the culture that lies in the room beyond. After all, it is the abosom themselves who judge who belongs to them and which among these are adepts and which followers. Historically, belief in Asante has always been culturally incorporative, permeable and syncretistic. Some, like African Americans, stand closer to its premises than others, but all can join in by giving themselves up to an ‘edificatory conversation’ with Asante belief.

However, there is a problem. Nana Abass concedes that some Asante will be drawn to Pentecostal Christianity, even if he is critical of its alien cultural origins. Ultimately, however, he is most perturbed by Pentecostalism’s cen- sorousness and exclusiveness, its claim that it has a monopolistic first, last and only grasp on meaningful truth. How can there be ‘conversation’ with a doctrine that does not offer itself up for debate and contestation? The Pentecostalist God is a most jealous deity. To Nana Abass, there is literally no talking to
his adherents, a situation unlike the recent past when Christians were often committed to looking for the good, or at least the usable, in Asante belief and religious practices.43

Yet Asante people are attracted to Pentecostalism. Why? I could recount the familiar sociological answers concerning post-modernity, community, security, advancement and all the rest. But let me concentrate instead on Nana Abass’s answer. Leaving on one side issues of ‘enticement’ and bad faith in Pentecostalism, the Medoma okomfo ascribes its attractiveness to a doomed if very human quest for certainty, a search that is experienced ever more pressingly in a changing Asante world. To Nana Abass the desire for and will to transcendental certainty is comprehensible, but it is alien to his own way of thinking and contrary to historic Asante perception. Like belief in times past in Asante, the Medoma shrine offers not salvation in eternity but a guide to and a path for the perplexed in the here and now.

The ‘chain of being’ to Nana Abass is akwantemfi, the culturally historicised sense of corporeal life as being part of a journey that began before he was born and will go on after he dies. This is why early Christian missionaries and others reported with some surprise that the Asante had neither a clear idea of nor very much sustained interest in the details of an afterlife distinct from lived existence. Whether or not this ‘rage for salvation’ through Pentecostalism is maintained beyond the current historical moment is a moot point. Imponderable too is the future of the present efflorescence of Asante shrines like the one at Medoma, although that at least is consonant with a discernible pattern of ebbs and flows in belief throughout Asante history.

References


Notes


2. ‘One man churches’ are the subject of Ph.D. research by Karen Lauterbach of Roskilde University, and I am grateful to her for information on this matter.


4. The term ‘neo-traditional revival’ is common currency in Kumasi, used among others by charismatic Christian pastors who preach and warn against it.

5. This paper could not have been written without two people. One is Nana Abass himself, a model of tact and thoughtfulness. The other is the late Dr. Sue Benson of Cambridge University, whose death in 2005 robbed this paper of its intended co-author. I dedicate this paper to her memory and to our trainee anthropologist son Adam. I also thank Birmingham University, the British Academy and the AHRC for their support of my research in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004.

6. For *adampán* and their uses see McCaskie (1995), 15, 278-279.

7. For *akom* see ibid., 113, 290.

8. Compare McCaskie (2000), 82-3 on the *taa kwabena* shrine at Adiebeba in south Kumasi.

9. ‘Just like a Catholic confessional’, as one client observed.

10. The two certificates were issued by the Association of African Traditional Healers, a Ghanaian body remotely descended from the Society of African Medical Herbalists, created by the British in 1931 as a regulatory body aimed at eradicating witch-finding.


12. See Rattray (1930), 53-55 for a folktale showing some of the characteristics of ‘fairies’ (*mmoatia*).

13. Meyer’s work is excellent on ‘Satanic’ wealth among Ghanaian Christians, but the concept in Asante antedates the twentieth century.

14. Nana Abass’s taxi had the number plate GY 9731. Everyone around him knows this, but if the letters and numbers have a significance then no one was prepared to tell me what it was.

15. For *nkrabea* see McCaskie (1995), 107, 292.

16. ‘Dwarfs lift Nana to the top of a tree at Meduma near Kumasi’ is a photograph, with magnified inset, of what is said to be Nana Abass sitting in the crown of a very tall, spindly
tree with no lateral branches for hand holds; it is reproduced in *A Profile of Nana Abass*, taken down by Kwame Owusu Akyaw, and printed by Fickle Productions and Nana Abass, Box T66, Old Tafo-Kumasi (2000), 29.

17. The name *adiabu* is sometimes given as *adiepu* by informants. Although the matter remains unclear it is possible that *adiabuladipe* is an Asante Twi adaptation of the *obosom atipo* widespread among the Twi-speaking Gyaman of the Ivory Coast. It is known that Gyaman has been the historical source of a number of Asante shrines; see McCaskie (2004); Parker (2004).


19. See ibid. (1981). Some of these powers went on to have a regional career in West Africa; see Apter (1993) for *tigare as atinga* among the Yoruba of Nigeria.


23. Ibid., 10.


25. See ibid., ‘Kumawu Traditional Priest Initiates Water Project’ (29 November 2004); ‘Fetish Priest Finances Water System At Kumawu’ (15 March 2005).


27. He was partially successful. In 2006 the dam was still unfinished and pipe-laying had not started. On the other hand the open area I saw being dug out in 2004 had pooled to form a large basin full of water. People had to fetch water from this site, but this was a big improvement on existing arrangements that relied on uncertain deliveries by water lorries from Asotwe. I have no information on the current status of the financial arrangements between Nana Abass and Kumawu.

28. For chiefly extravagance of this sort, ‘a setting at defiance’ (*mpoatwa*), see McCaskie (2000b).

29. For the calendar see McCaskie (1980) and (1995), 151-158.


31. Much to the chagrin, I am told, of the Nsumankwaahene, titular head of the Asantehene’s *akomfo*.


34. For an overview see McCaskie (2007a).

35. Professor Grills talked with Dr. Benson at the request of Nana Abass, and I am using a transcription of that conversation here.

36. He has also visited the UK in a private capacity. In 2003 he attended the launch of a book that I had co-edited at the British Academy in London.

37. See Akyeampong (2000); Benson (2004); Benson and McCaskie (2004); Bruner (1996; 2005); Hasty (2003; 2004); McCaskie (2007); Singleton (1999).

40. See West (2007).
42. A Profile of Nana Abass (2000), 2, 3, 4.
43. See for example Sarpong (1996). Peter Kwasi Sarpong, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kumasi and an Oxford-trained anthropologist, has been a leader in attempts to reconcile and integrate Asante beliefs with Christian precepts.