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Jan G. Platvoet

## RATTRAY'S REQUEST SPIRIT POSSESSION AMONG THE BONO OF WEST AFRICA

In this contribution I deal with 'spirit possession' as it was found in among the Bono of West Africa. My contribution about the important and fascinating subject has four parts. In the first, I explain, by way of introduction, what 'spirit possession' is, in what religions it is found, how it may be studied, and what theories have been developed to better understand, and explain, certain aspects of it. The second part serves to create the settings, geographical, historical, social and religious, for the main purpose of this chapter: an analysis of a spirit possession session which 'Captain' Rattray, government anthropologist in the Gold Coast in the 1920s, witnessed at Tanoboase, a Bono village at the edge of the forests of West Africa. In the concluding part, I discuss how far theories on 'spirit possession' help us to understand it better.

### *ySpirit possession*

'Spirit possession' is the standard label among anthropologists and scholars of religions for rituals in which one, or a few, or even several, of the participants in a public ritual behave in ways believers interpret as signifying that 'spirits' have taken 'possession' of them. In that condition, they are for them the 'mediums' of unseen beings. In ancient Greece, such a person was termed a *prophetès*, 'mouthpiece'. The message that was received through the mouth of a 'possessed' person was called an *oraculum*—from *orare*, 'to speak'—in Latin. Believers experienced these rituals as the manifestation of spirits among them and as 'face-to-face' contact with them.

The term 'spirit possession' is in one respect a happy term. It readily calls to mind the main feature of this ritual in nearly all religions: the belief that 'spirits' take possession of humans on certain occasions and/or in certain [81] ritual settings. 'Spirit possession' is, therefore, what anthropologists call an *emic* term. It expresses a meaning which believers themselves attach to what they believe happens during a spirit possession ritual. 'Spirit possession' is, therefore, a religious, or theological, term. People who believe in spirit possession regard certain invisible realms, beings, qualities, actions and/or qualities as 'real' and assume that they are, or may be, active

in the empirical world of humans. They conceive of them as belonging to either the meta-empirical world of ‘the spirits’, or to the empirical one of humans, in ways which we cannot empirically observe and cannot investigate with scientific tools. In that respect, their faith is basically similar to that of Christian believers who trust in the grace of God, the intercession of a saint or in the operation of sacraments.

The study of religions is, however, a scholarly enterprise. It is limited to what science can investigate. It can study only the empirical part of spirit possession rituals, i.e. those elements that are part of the history of the cultures of humankind in a verifiable, or testable, way. Scholars (of religions) have no means of investigating the meta-empirical part—if any—of ‘spirit possession’ (or any other religious ritual or belief). They cannot verify, nor falsify, whether spirits actually ‘take possession’ of their ‘mediums’, and ‘heal’, or perform other ‘work’. Not being able, on grounds of the methodology of scientific research, to either prove or disprove the claims of the believers about spirits and their activities, scholars of religions can neither support them as true, nor reject them as false. They can only take an agnostic position in respect of the truth or falsehood of the beliefs of faithful. They must, therefore, confine themselves to investigating what is empirical about these beliefs and rituals, i.e. to those elements and aspects of them that belong squarely to our own world and are part of its empirical cultural and historical realities. They need, therefore, to supplement, ‘spirit possession’ with another term, or set of terms, which clearly express what can be investigated in them.

Now, the most empirical element of spirit possession is spirit possession behaviour. Spirit possession rituals are always performed in public, for the ‘spirit’, or possessed medium, needs an audience which it/he/she can address. The rituals can, therefore, be witnessed, recorded, and their meanings for the believers can be discussed with them. In these public rituals, spirit possession beliefs are acted out. Although they are notions in the heads of the believers and as such invisible, they are mental constructs about the ‘unseen’, and as such an important part of the cultures of the believers, and so of humankind. They are, moreover, not only expressed in behaviour, but also function as the religious institution by which spirit possession behaviour, of the mediums as well as of the other participants in a ritual, is governed, moulded and constrained. Their spirit possession [82] beliefs determine what behaviour is proper for each of the participants. They teach them to behave in ‘deferent’ ways—fitting the various roles participants have to play in a spirit possession ritual—and to avoid ‘deviant’ acts. Spirit possession beliefs can, therefore, also be studied as a religious institution. In addition, scholars can investigate how that institution, its rituals as well as beliefs were moulded by the cultures of the societies of believers in spirit possession. In like manner, they can also study the many functions, religious and especially non-religious, which the institution of spirit possession fulfils in the societies of the believers.

As will become clear from the materials to be presented below, spirit possession rituals may be described in a preliminary way as those public rituals in which at least one participant enters into a ‘trance’, or ‘altered state of consciousness’ (ASC). That special state of mind and body is usually marked by four features. Firstly, the person

who has entered into it, is dissociated to a greater or smaller degree, i.e. he or she is to a certain degree out of (normal) touch with his or her social environment. Secondly, that person often exhibits a certain loss of muscle and motor control. Particularly in certain kinds of spirit possession, or in the early phase in a spirit possession career, he or she may be in a state of considerable bodily agitation. That state is termed *hyperkinesis*. Thirdly, in that state, he or she is acting out a character and role that are markedly different from those of his or her normal self. Lastly, the person often does not remember what he or she has said or done during the period of ritual dissociation. That loss of memory is termed *amnesia*.

The trance behaviour displayed is interpreted by the other believers present as the manifestation of a spirit with the self, or character, that the 'possessed' person is acting out. He or she is the 'medium' of that spirit for the believers by the very fact of his or her acting out the 'personality' of a spirit in a state of dissociation from that person's normal self. The believers infer from that behaviour that a particular spirit is present among them, and communicating with them. The 'medium' displays numerous marked changes in his or her face, voice, body language, attire, and actions during the period of the trance. By means of these clues in the behaviour of the possessed person, the believers identify which 'spirit' 'is present' among them in the body, and through the mind, of the 'medium'. These clues are traditional in a society, and the believers readily recognise and interpret them. The possessed person, therefore, displays 'coded behaviour'. However wild and uncontrolled the behaviour of the 'possessed' may seem to Western observers, mediums always display the behaviour that is prescribed by their role in the possession ritual. Not only the believers, but also observers can verify that the 'possessed' person displays a personality other than his or her own. They can also establish that the faithful interpret [83] it as the behaviour of the possessing 'spirit' from the way the believers behave towards the 'medium' during his or her 'possession'. That behaviour is clearly different from the one they direct towards him or her outside the ritual, when that person is not in the state of being 'possessed' and displays his or her own 'normal' self.

Four elements have now been identified which can all be empirically investigated. They are, firstly, the spirit possession rituals because of their public character. Secondly, the the trance behaviour of the 'medium' which is hyperkinetic in character. Thirdly, the coded behaviour displayed by the 'possessed' person, causing the other participants to infer that such and such a spirit is now among them. And fourthly, the beliefs of a society that particular spirits take possession of some of its members. Or in one line: spirit possession is the public religious ritual in which the trance of a 'medium' is taken to signify that a meta-empirical being is present among the believers.

The task of scholars of religions investigating the empirical elements of spirit possession may now be summarised as follows. It consists in the accurate description of, firstly, the public ritual actions which believers perform on account of their beliefs, and secondly, of the meanings which spirit possession beliefs have for the believers who entertain them—without pronouncing on their truth or falsity. Thirdly, in showing how spirit possession beliefs function as an institution that assigns specific

roles to specific believers and governs, moulds and constrains the role behaviour of each of them. Fourthly, in studying how a 'spirit possession' event affects the state of mind, and the behaviour of the 'possessed' person(s) during the ritual. Fifthly, in researching how the culture of the participants (which includes their religion) has shaped these beliefs and rituals. And sixthly, in investigating how they affect the relationships between the members of these societies.

*Where may it be found?*

Spirit possession, defined in this way, is found in virtually all religions of humankind from earliest times till now, from the religions of the bands of food gatherers since Neolithic times to the most modern religions of today. Its forms, and to a lesser degree its belief contents, show an amazing diversity. Important varieties of spirit possession are indicated by special labels. Some of them are shamanism (arctic, Siberian and other), prophetic movements (e.g. in ancient Israel and several in other times and places), mantic oracles and dansomaniac cults in Mediterranean religions (ancient, medieval and modern), and *zar* and *bori* cults in Africa. Others are the many exorcist rituals (e.g. Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim) by which 'evil [84] gods', 'demons', 'devils' and *jinn* are expelled; spiritism and spiritualism; certain forms of ritual healing; glossolalia in Pentecostal and charismatic varieties of Christianity;<sup>1</sup> and channeling in New Age religions.<sup>2</sup> No less varied are its functions: apart from religious and cosmological functions they have psycho-hygienic, therapeutic, socio-structural, political, economical, and several other functions.<sup>3</sup>

The place spirit possession has in religions varies greatly. In most small-scale societies and their preliterate, or indigenous, religions, 'spirit possession' has, or has had, a central position. It has been, and is, practised frequently in them, and is regarded as a normal and approved way of communication with 'the spirits'. It provides mediums at times with the option of an interesting career, income and influence. Spirit possession holds this central place in these religions, because these religions habitually practise ongoing communication with the 'world of the spirits'. They do so, because their believers are in constant need of revelations, of the pragmatic kind that will assist them, they hope, in improving the quality of their lives and warding off the disease, disaster, dissent, death and other evils that threaten their lives. Therefore, they regularly practise spirit possession, and other rituals, such as divination. They have, so to speak, an 'open channel' with the 'supernatural'.

The missionary religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, however, have relegated spirit possession to a marginal place. They are in the habit of attempting to banish it from their congregations altogether, for three reasons. The first is that spirit possession, as a process of ongoing revelation of the pragmatic kind, does not sit well with their exclusivist soteriological claims. They base these on a Scripture that is held to contain the complete, unique, once-for-ever revelation, to which nothing may be

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<sup>1</sup> See Goodman 1972; Samarin 1972; Malony, Newton & Lovekin 1985.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. MacLaine 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Much of this is surveyed in Lewis 1989.

added and from which nothing may be subtracted. That ‘revelation’ is, moreover, directed at ‘eternal salvation’, and not at well-being in this life. The second reason is that they regard spirit possession as the ‘superstition’ of ignorant folk believers. They attempt to banish it by presenting possession in the theological terms of an absolute moral, and even cosmological, dualism. They represent spirit possession as believers being ‘captured’ against their will by ‘evil’ spirits, gods, demons and devils that seek the eternal perdition of the believers, and therefore, as an unmitigated ‘evil’, that can be overcome only by conquering them and driving them out. Having been demonised, ‘spirit possession’, therefore, took the form of ‘exorcisms’ in these religions: the ‘evil spirit’, ‘devil’, or *jinn*, etc., had not only to be ‘thrown out’ from the possessed person, but also banned from the community of believers (from the Greek: *exorcizoo*, ‘to ban beyond the borders’). The [85] third reason is that they see ‘possession by the devil’ as radically different from, and squarely opposed to, the rituals of dissociation of which they approve. They are, in Buddhism, the disciplining of the mind in meditation through which ‘enlightenment’ is sought. In Islam, they are the ecstatic experiences of (personal and/or collective) unification with ‘God’ in Sufi *dzikr* rituals and the dances of the dervishes. And in Christianity, they are the ‘speaking in tongues’ (glossolalia), and other ecstatic experiences, in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in mainly first century and twentieth century Christianity.

Finally, this demonising of spirit possession by Christianity has made the general public and scholars with little knowledge of ‘indigenous’ societies and religions in modern Western societies regard spirit possession as weird, occult, strange, ‘primitive’ and repulsive. Westerners habitually see spirit possession as a symptom of mental instability and even insanity, and are inclined to account for it in terms of psychopathology. Especially Western psychiatrists and psychologists have a long tradition of regarding it as the nervous disorder of hysteria, because mainly women were found to ‘suffer’ from it in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. More recently, they regarded it as some other form of psychic lability, or as a folk ritual means to forestall, or cure, mental illness.

#### *How may it be studied?*

An example of the latter is the psychiatric theory of Walker that spirit possession rituals provide mediums with an opportunity for ‘regression in the service of the ego’. During the time of the rituals, mediums relinquish, she says, control over their minds to a subsystem of their minds which hallucinates and recalls ‘repressed material’, i.e. the representations about the possessing ‘spirit’ and the clues how to act its role. By thus using ‘the [fictive] gods’ as objects of transference for past traumas, mediums would gain improved control over themselves, and restore their mental health or maintain its balance.<sup>4</sup>

Other theories have been developed in the past few decades in order to account for spirit possession, or for certain aspects of it. Anthropologists, as social scientists, have

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<sup>4</sup> Walker 1972: 33-39, 154.

mainly studied 'spirit possession' as the ritual interaction between the 'medium' and the other participants by means of which not only religious, but also important social, economical, political and other processes are transacted. An important example of this is the theory of the British social anthropologist I.M. Lewis. He distinguishes between 'central' and 'peripheral' forms of spirit possession. The former serve to legitimate [86] and maintain the existing public (political and moral) order of a society, i.e. to keep the powerful in power, and to increase the wealth of the rich. The latter are found in far greater numbers. They flourish also in the major missionary religions of Buddhism,<sup>5</sup> Christianity,<sup>6</sup> and Islam.<sup>7</sup> They serve as the rather ineffective means by which some of those situated in the periphery of a society in terms of prestige, privileges and pay, i.e. the poor and women, try to shift the uneven balance of power and possessions a little bit in their favour. As such, they are cults of protest and the religions of the deprived.<sup>8</sup> Lewis argues that in a way that is true even of central possession cults: they are found in societies in which instability prevails because of acute external pressures, e.g. from the ecology.<sup>9</sup>

Spirit possession usually takes the form of dramatic, expressive rituals with a great deal of role acting by the possessed and, in response, the congregation. They may, therefore, also be interpreted as discourses in which the identities, statuses, duties and aspirations of certain persons, or groups of persons, in a society are expressed, maintained, developed or reconstructed, especially those of the selves of the persons 'possessed'. Spirit possession discourses use the rich symbolic means which spirit possession idiom offers for these purposes. Spirit possession then functions as a means for the 'possessed' and other participants to imagine themselves, to act out their problems, to comment, in often provocative ways, on issues they would not, or could not comment on in their ordinary selves, and to voice demands they would not, or could not, make themselves. In brief, they serve for the possessed and the congregation as a means to achieve some pre-theoretic awareness of their particular situation (usually a stressful subordinate one) in their societies, 'reflect' on it by means of the drama, symbol and story of spirit possession, and thereby reformulate it metaphorically. Janice Boddy has presented such a discourse analysis of a *zar* possession cult group of women in a village in Northern Sudan.<sup>10</sup>

As spirit possession rituals are often performed for curing diseases, or for providing protection against the 'spiritual' agents that are believed to cause diseases and other misfortunes, the therapeutic function of spirit possession rituals may also be given special attention.<sup>11</sup>

The most distinctive part of spirit possession is, however, the trance into which the medium enters in order to serve as the vehicle and mouthpiece of some (postulated) intelligent being from a 'realm' other than our empirical one. The psychological and

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. Kapferer 1991.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Goodman 1981; Goodman 1988: 52-63, 79-122.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. references in Lewis 1986, and Lewis 1989 to *jinn*, *zar*, and *bori* cults.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis 1989: 59-116; also Lewis 1986: 23-50; on Lewis, cf. Morris 1987: 231-3).

<sup>9</sup> Lewis 1989, 29-30.

<sup>10</sup> Boddy 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. e.g. ter Haar 1992.

cultural mechanisms by which that altered state of consciousness may be achieved, and the [87] marks of that state itself, demand neuro-biological and psychological analysis and interpretation. The studies of this crucial aspect of spirit possession are, however, as yet very few. The neurobiology and psychology of ASCs (altered states of consciousness) and trance has been dealt with by Ludwig and Lex.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, spirit possessions rituals may be analysed as processes of (presumed) communication between humans and unseen beings, for the faithful believe that the unseen beings get in touch with them by taking possession of one, or several, of them. As with empirical communication between humans—and also between them and their pets and other domestic animals, and between all animals that live in groups structured by social relationships—the postulated communication between believers and possessing spirits cannot take place in a social void. It presupposes a postulated network of pre-existing relationships, or ‘community’, between those believers and the presumed ‘unseen’ beings that are believed to take possession, or to be able to take possession, of some of them. That network serves as the ‘field’, or ‘arena’, within which the actual processes of communication take place, and as the institution by which they are governed and constrained. This may be studied in what I call the ‘network’ or ‘field analysis’ of the process of communication in a spirit possession ritual, as I will show below. Network analysis must be complemented by the analysis of the actual process of the (postulated) communication in what I call ‘process analysis’. It analyses not only the flow of the process, the content of the communication, the symbolic means used to convey the messages, but also several other elements, such as those relating to the time when, and the place where the ritual took place, who took the initiative to it, etc.

To these two analyses must be added the ‘context analysis’, in which the various contexts of a spirit possession ritual (geographical, historical, cultural, political, economical, but also religious—the one of the rest of religion of that society—etc.), are examined. Their purpose is to investigate how that ritual is shaped by them, and how it presently functions in them. To these three, finally, an analysis of the trance of the ‘possessed’ must be added. It examines the means by which the trance was induced; how deep was it; whether there was hyperkinesis and/or amnesia; how the relationship between the possessing spirit and the possessed person began; with what status did it endow the possessed in his, or her, community; what profits or suffering did it bring to the medium; what ends did it serve; etc. As is clear from the above, spirit possession is a very complex phenomenon that needs to be studied from many angles by quite a number of different disciplines.

### [88] *The setting*

The following discussion relates to the Bono of the forested coastal region of West Africa. In 1980 the Bono, or Brong, were an Akan society of some 520,000, with Takyiman (also Techiman) as its capital, in the Brong-Ahafo region of the modern

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ludwig 1967; Ludwig 1968; Ludwig 1972; Lex 1976; Lex 1978; Lex 1979).

state of Ghana. They are one of the 15 different ethnic groups of Southern Ghana that speak a dialect of the large Akan language. The largest are the Asante (often written as Ashanti) in the interior, who speak Twi, and the Fante on the coast, who speak Fante. These Akan societies were not only a linguistic, but also a cultural unity because they all had an identical matrilineal social structure, political organisation, and religion.<sup>13</sup> I present data concerning a ritual that took place in 1921, therefore I use the past tense.

*Rattray's request for a god*

Robert Sutherland Rattray (1881-1938), who spoke fluently Asante-Twi, was Government Anthropologist in the Crown Colony of the Gold Coast from 1921 to 1930.<sup>14</sup> He came to Bono-Takyiman in early May 1922, partly because he had been told often that much of the culture, religion and institutions of the Asante had originated there, but mainly because he had been told it was 'the home of the gods—and the factory, so to speak, of their shrines'.<sup>15</sup> New gods were usually 'born' in an Akan town by a long process of incorporation into human society, which began, it was thought, by a new god seizing its future medium in a violent and mute possession, consisted mainly in a 'training' of that god and its 'medium' for a number of years until the god was believed to have been taught how to 'work' properly among and for men, and ended by 'the god' being 'installed' ritually in its own shrine (*yawa*, brass pan), being given a residence, and being 'fitted out' with its means of divination and its 'medicines'. But gods might also be imported from elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> After Bono's incorporation into Asante in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the fame of Tano—the river and god who was regarded as the 'first born' (*piesie*) son of creator god Nyame, and as the most senior god of the Akan pantheon—spread far and wide. Many Asante towns had sent delegations to the village Tanoboase ('Under Tano's Rock'), the 'spiritual capital' of Bono-Takyiman, to request that the priests of Tano produce an *atano*, 'son of Tano', for them and allow them to install him, i.e. his *yawa*, 'shrine', in their town. Shrines of *atano* gods had thus spread throughout the Akan region.

[89] Rattray wished to witness the production of a new *atano* god. In addition, he meant to obtain an authentic *yawa* for himself. He had just been informed that he would be in charge of the sections on the Gold Coast in the forthcoming World Exhibition at Wembley in London in 1924. His pet project was to obtain permission from priests of an *atano* god that he be allowed to take a shrine of a 'son of Tano' with him to Europe in order to put it on show there in an imitation Akan *bosombuw* ('temple'), as an authentic example of Akan culture and religion. Rattray had been encouraged to conceive this bold plan because the priest of the most important *omanbosom* ('state-god') of Bono-Takyiman, Taa Mensa Keseè, (Tano's 'third son',

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<sup>13</sup> See Platvoet 1982.

<sup>14</sup> On Rattray, cf. Platvoet 1982: 57-68; von Laue 1975; von Laue 1976. There is also an unpublished biography of Rattray by Machin.

<sup>15</sup> Rattray 1923: 146, 172.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Platvoet 1973: 32-35.



*miensa*, ‘the great’, *keseè*), had been inclined to permit that a shrine of a son of this god be made for Rattray.<sup>17</sup> But he was hesitant to allow him to take it to Europe. So Rattray decided to take his project to highest level and to put it before the priest of Tano himself, Kofi Duro, the *ohene* (‘leader’) of Tanoboase.

He arrived at Tanoboase in the afternoon of Thursday, 4 May, 1922. He put his request before the priest that very evening. His plea was strongly supported by his two Asante friends who accompanied him on this trip, and by the priest of Taa Keseè. Kofi Duro and his elders answered that this request was too extraordinary for them to grant or refuse. Only Tano himself could permit it. They informed Rattray also that the next day was a *Fofie*, ‘Court Friday’, the day in the 42-day Akan ‘month’<sup>18</sup> on which Tano was to be welcomed back in his temple after an ‘absence’ of six days for his monthly ‘retreat for prayers’. They would put the request before him first thing next morning.

That night a violent rainstorm broke over Tanoboase. A tree just outside the room in which Rattray slept was struck, the lightning splitting it from top to bottom, without, however, charring it.<sup>19</sup>

#### *The possession rite*

In the early morning of 5 May 1922, Rattray, his two companions and the priest of Taa Mensa Keseè were met by Kofi Duro, who was clad in a white cloth, and some six Tanoboase men in the courtyard of the temple of Tano. They entered the ‘room of the gods’ (*bosomdan*) barefoot. Most bared also the upper part of their body. The oblong room contained the shrines of Tano and eight of his ‘sons’, and five *apunnua*, ‘black stools’. The wide and flat one of Tano stood on top of a raised, cloth-covered altar in the far corner in the right-hand part of the room.<sup>20</sup> Just below it were the smaller and slightly higher ones of Ateakosea and Taa Kwasi Kramo (the [90] ‘Muslim’). In the ‘court’ of Tano at Tanoboase, Ateakosea was believed to serve as Tano’s *okeyame* (‘speaker’), and Taa Kwasi Kramo as *kyidomhene*, ‘commander of the rear of the army’. In Tano’s absence, he ‘ruled’ the ‘court’. The shrines of Tano’s other six ‘sons’ stood, each on his own *akonnua*, ‘stool’, on the floor of the temple along the long rear wall to left of the altar, opposite the entrance to the room. Along the short wall at the rear in the left-hand part of the room stood the blackened stools of four predecessors in office of Kofi Duro, and that of a deceased *obaapanyin*, female elder.

Kofi Duro and his followers seated themselves on their low stools (*nkonnua*), or on the floor, in the right-hand part of the room, in front of the shrine of Tano. Rattray and his three followers did likewise in the left-hand part of the room, in front of the five blackened stools. A cloth was spread out between these two groups in front of the six shrines of the ‘sons’ of Tano. One man from the group of Kofi Duro came forward, placed his stool in the centre of the cloth, and, facing the entrance, sat himself on it.

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<sup>17</sup> Rattray 1923: 172.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Bartle 1978.

<sup>19</sup> Rattray 1923: 176.

<sup>20</sup> See Rattray’s photographs and descriptions in Rattray 1923: 172-177, figs. 74-78.

The shrine of Ateakosea was now uncovered. A carrying pad, of twisted cloth, was taken from the altar and handed to Kofi Duro. He spat on it, pressed it to his forehead and breast and passed it under his left knee. Then he handed it to the man who sat on the stool in the centre of the room as a commission to ‘carry the god’, i.e. to serve as the medium of Ateakosea in this session of the consultation of Tano. The man set his heels firmly on the cloth, straightened his back, and put the pad on his head. The shrine of Ateakosea was at once put on his head. The medium sat perfectly motionless, holding a *bodua*, tail switch, as a sign of his commission. An intense and deep silence reigned in the room.

In this silence, an old man with reddish hair and light complexion, who was seated between Kofi Duro and the medium, addressed in a soft voice, as the *okyeame*, ‘speaker’ or ‘mouthpiece’, of Kofi Duro, a prayer, full of praises and historical allusions, to Tano.<sup>21</sup> He ended the prayer with the request:

Today is Court-Friday, and we wish to see your face;  
Therefore, come and listen to what we have to discuss with you.

A minute of deep silence followed. Everyone in the room sat intensely alert. Their breathing could be heard. Then the medium began to twitch all over his body and to slap the side of the shrine on his head with the flat of his right hand. At once, all present, in one voice, greeted the god: *Nana, makye oo*, ‘Grandfather, good morning’.

The priest with the red hair now addressed the priest of Taa Keseè and requested that he, as *okyeame*, spokesman, of Rattray, state the request to be put before Tano. The priest of Taa Keseè rose. Addressing the twitching [91] medium, who now held the *bodua* between his teeth, he related that Rattray had come to visit the great Taa Koraa (‘Preserver’), because he, Rattray, knew that Tano was the greatest of the gods, and also because he hoped that Taa Koraa would permit the priests of Tanoboase to construct the shrine of a ‘son of Tano’ for him. He knew well how they were made,<sup>22</sup> but had never actually witnessed the consecration of a shrine. If his request were permitted, Rattray would leave it to the discretion of the priests of Tano whether or not he could take the shrine with him to Europe.

The medium, quivering more spasmodically now with his heels on the cloth and still slapping the side of the shrine on his head with the flat palm of his right hand, took the *bodua*, switch, from his mouth into his left hand. Then he called out the names of the spokesmen of Kofi Duro and Rattray, and said that he had always come to the aid of the kings of Asante when they were in need of his help. But they never asked that he present them with one of his children. Being Taa Koraa, the Preserver, he was not an *akoraa*, an ‘old man’, who let things get spoiled. If Rattray had come to ask for help, he could, and would, have assisted him. But he could not present him with one of his sons.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Rattray 1923: 178-179 for the Twi text and Rattray’s translation; cf. also Platvoet 1983: 205-206, 214-215, for my analysis of this prayer).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Rattray 1923: 145-150.

The medium then paused for a moment. Then he added that he, Tano, granted permission that Rattray visit him ‘in the [cave] where I live’, and that he sprinkle himself with water from the source of the river Tano. He added that he had no quarrel with his many ‘children and grandchildren’ who went to school and now served God in the Christian way, but asserted that he was himself ‘in truth a child of God’. He finished by saying:

If my grandchildren say that the white European says that he loves me and has drawn near to me, then I will protect him also.<sup>23</sup>

After a brief pause, Rattray rose and said in Asante-Twi that he had understood the words of Taa Koraa. He thanked him for the permission to visit Tano in his cave and at the source of the river. He also complimented him on his liberal attitude to the Christian religion. It was, he said, as liberal as that of the English, who allowed freedom in matters of religion to all men. In school, the children would be taught about God, but that God, he said, was no other than Nyame, the creator whom the Akan had known and worshipped since long before the Europeans came to this country. When Rattray had finished, the priest of Taa Keseè repeated his words in Bono-Twi.

To this the medium answered: *Me da mo ase*, ‘I thank you [all]’. Then he said: *Me kotenase*, ‘I am going to sit down’, a set formula for announcing the end of a consultation. The shrine of Ateakosea was removed from his head. The medium shook the pad from it. Kofi Duro and his *okyeame* closely watched how it fell to the ground. From the side it showed, they [92] concluded, that Tano had indeed ended the consultation. The medium sat dazed for a few moments meanwhile, then passed his hand over his face as if he awoke from sleep. He later told Rattray that he had no recollection of what he had said and done during the trance.

### *In conclusion*

In this conclusion, I distil a few important points for the study of religions, rituals and spirit possession from the particularities of this event by means of (elements from) the network-, process-, context-, and trance-analyses, which I set out in the first part of this article. But I make first a more general point.

It is clear from this spirit possession ritual that the Western analytical dichotomy of the ‘supernatural’, or ‘spiritual’, *versus* the empirical, or ‘material’ is not substantiated by the Akan religion. It cannot be applied, for the two, although conceptually distinct for the Akan also, were at the same time conceived by them as not only continuous realms but also as substantially overlapping, intermingling, and often even as identical. In Akan traditional religion Nyame is the (unseen) creator-god as well as the visible sky, and descends on earth as rain to become rivers and lakes. Tano, likewise, is

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<sup>23</sup> See Rattray 1923, 180-181; Platvoet 1983, 207)

both his 'eldest son', the greatest of the Akan *atano* gods, and *obomuhene*, 'king inside the rock', as well as that rock, the source of the river Tano, and the river Tano.<sup>24</sup>

More important than 'being' a river or a rock, however, is that the usual hierarchy between the 'supernatural' and the 'natural' is inverted. For in Akan religion the gods in nature must be 'tamed' by being immersed in, and restrained by, five additional, man-made forms that make them not only more visible, but also transform them into *fiébosom*, 'house gods', i.e. part of human society, easily addressable and even consumable. These five forms are: his medium-priest (*okomfo*) for meeting with people; his shrine (*yawa*) and shrine room (*bosomdan*) or 'temple' (*bosombuw*) for receiving their prayers and gifts of libation, food, and sacrifices; and also its means of divination (*nsuo Yaa*) and 'medicines' (*nnuru*) for assisting them in their problems in life.<sup>25</sup> Only as part of the networks that constitute society are the gods manageable and trustworthy, to a degree.

### *Network analysis*

That brings me to network analysis. Space does not permit that a full network analysis is made. I will only indicate one striking general feature, [93] to wit that the network governing this ritual is isomorph with the hierarchical institution that is typical for this Akan society and governs other domains of it.

Rattray's consultation of Tano was pervasively structured after the institution central to Akan society: the king and his court. Three 'rulers'—Tano, Kofi Duro, and Rattray—were present in Tano's temple at Tanoboase, each with his own 'court'. As was proper to Akan 'kings', they communicated through their spokesmen (*akyeame*). Ateakosea was believed to have taken possession of the medium and to speak as the *alter ego* of Tano, the 'king within the rock'. The 'priest with the red hair' acted as spokesman on behalf of Kofi Duro, *ohene* of Tanoboase. And the priest of Taa Kesèè did so for Rattray when he put forward Rattray's request. As government anthropologist, he was clearly perceived as a highly placed representative of *aban*, the colonial government.<sup>26</sup> Akan spirit possession of this kind fits in well with the general traits and sociological functions which I.M. Lewis postulated for 'central spirit possession'.<sup>27</sup> More recent Akan types of spirit possession, many of them imported from non-Akan areas, are not, or in a very limited degree, integrated into the Akan traditional political system.<sup>28</sup> They belong to the other major type distinguished by Lewis, 'peripheral spirit possession'.<sup>29</sup>

Significantly, it was Rattray who offended against the rules of this institution by responding himself to Tano's 'decisions'. His response showed him also as the outsider in this ritual: he was permitted to speak himself, for, say the Akan, 'the stranger

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Rattray 1923, 183-6, 191-2; Platvoet 1983, 208-11.

<sup>25</sup> See Warren 1974.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Platvoet 1983: 211-214.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Lewis 1989, 29-30, 114-59.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Platvoet 1973.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Lewis 1989: 27-31, 59-113.

does not break laws' (*ohoho nto mmara*).<sup>30</sup> His position in this event was an anomalous one. On the one hand, the Bono had already nicknamed him *oburoni okomfo*, 'the white [traditional] medium-priest [of an Akan god]', because of his exceptional interest in traditional religion,<sup>31</sup> and he participated in this ritual as a (more or less) sincere supplicant to Tano. On the other hand, he was distinctively present also as an officer of high rank in the colonial government, who did the job they had commissioned him to do and had the full backing of the local DC (District Commissioner). As such, he was even the person with the greatest power present. Conflicting and contradictory hierarchies, traditional as well as colonial, were therefore shaping, constraining and, to some degree, confusing this communication event. It is significant that the priest of the state-god (*omanbosom*) Taa Keseé, and a resident of the political capital Takyiman, acted as Rattray's *okyeame* and had already assented to the request, which Tano refused to grant.

#### [94] *Process analysis*

Here also no full analysis can be made. Process analysis is concerned with a ritual as a communicative event, and with the business transacted in it. In a spirit possession event, the communication is normally of the dialogical type, for it is believed that the spirit is present, can be 'addressed' 'face-to-face', and can respond by virtue of its 'possessing' the medium. Rattray's consultation of the god Tano is an excellent example of this dialogical conversation, be it that Tano, as Akan court etiquette demanded, did not speak himself but spoke through his 'mouthpiece', Ateakosea.

#### *Context analysis*

Here again I have to be very selective. A major subject to be studied in context analyses is what 'secular' (i.e. social, political, economical, etc.) functions spirit possession rituals or events have in the society of the particular time and place in which they are enacted.

The context of the ritual consultation of Tano on behalf of Rattray on Friday 5 May 1922 was that the Bono religious and political establishment with whom Rattray was negotiating before and during this event, was clearly internally divided, and not able, nor willing, to stage war, ritual or real, for the purpose of regaining full internal solidarity and cohesion. Moreover, the British colonial governments in West Africa were actively pursuing the policy of the Dual Mandate, of governing subject peoples through their own traditional rulers—often the puppets that had won the contest for the throne because they had the backing of the colonial authorities. The Bono political establishment at the capital, Bono-Takyiman, represented in this matter by the *okomfo* of Taa Keseè, the state-god, was quite subservient and willing to accommodate nearly

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<sup>30</sup> For Twi proverbs on the position of the 'stranger', *ohoho*, in Akan societies, cf. Akrofi no year.: 82-83).

<sup>31</sup> Rattray 1923, 152.

every wish of Rattray, precisely because he was a high ranking officer in the colonial government.

Context analysis also pays attention to elements in the context (ecological, economical, historical, etc.) of a spirit possession ritual that exert an important influence on its morphology or content. Such contexts may be endogenous and have shaped and constrained the ritual since long, or exogenous and have begun only recently to have an effect on a ritual, or more often, to produce new varieties of it. Of the former, examples have already been mentioned above, such as the court model in the consultation of Tano.

Of the latter, one example may be pointed out, that of the collusion between the colonial government of the Gold Coast and the Christian [95] missions. By 1920, colonial rule was securely established, and a transformation of the economy under way. It offered new opportunities for many people, but on the condition that they had received some formal schooling. That began to be massively offered by Christian missions at that time with the full backing of, but only limited financial assistance from, the colonial government. The several Christian missions were, however, quite eager to foot the bill for the schools (hospitals, and other means of modernisation), for they were eager to use them as means for initiating mass 'conversion' to Christianity by offering literacy and the Christian religion in one package deal. The priests at Tanoboase were aware of these developments, as is clear from Tano's remarks on the shifting religious allegiances.<sup>32</sup>

### *Trance analysis*

I point to only two remarkable elements here. The first has to do with memory. The medium of Ateakosea 'suffered' *amnesia*. Loss of memory of what he had said and done was not merely a neurological event, but also a culturally conditioned, 'normal' trait in Akan possession. It served to strengthen the belief that mediums were 'really' possessed; and it exculpated them, and in this case also the priests of Tanoboase, from the unpleasant elements in the 'messages' they conveyed. Not only did amnesia strengthen belief, it was also a strategy for concealing the power, political and other, which the medium actually had and used.

The second has to do with entering into trance. The consultation of Tano was exceptional in that the medium of Ateakosea did not rely on otherwise common means for entering into public hyperkinetic dissociation, i.e. fierce, monotonous sonic drive of drumming, clapping, singing, rattles strapped onto stamping feet; the photic drive of the flames of dance fires; or even the exertion of the heavy dancing. Rather, it relied on cultural expectation, to wit that it was 'normal' for mediums to enter that altered state of consciousness under these ritual conditions. Instead of sonic and photic

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<sup>32</sup> For a broader discussion of Christian missions in Africa, cf., for Ghana, Platvoet 1979: 566-575; for Sub-Saharan Africa, cf. Platvoet 1996: 61-62; Platvoet 1999. Cf. also Platvoet 1996: 55-57 on the theory of Robin Horton 1971 & 1975 that the big numerical successes of Islam and Christianity in Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century may be accounted for by the micro/macro shift in cosmology brought about by the co-

drive, the silence of intense expectation and the dignified [96] quiet of diplomatic conversation reigned during the consultation of the Preserver and King-inside-the-Rock (Tano Taa Kora *Obomuhene*). In addition, the hyperkinetic state of his body did not prevent him from securely balancing the shrine of Ateakosea upon his head throughout the rite.

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