Ghana: A peculiar tale of religious eclecticism

Submitted by: Derek Nnuro
STATEMENT OF AWARD PURPOSE
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In parts of Africa, colonialism did more than change the tongues of the people; it forced a new order upon them. Modern day Ghana offers the perfect opportunity for an exploration of the manners in which West Africans have negotiated the coexistence of their traditions, their beliefs, and those of the Western world. As a writer of Ghanaian decent, I am fascinated by the manners in which my people have negotiated unions between their traditions and those of the West. My fascination transformed into academic inquisition when I went to Ghana in 2007 for my grandmother's funeral.

During Akan funerals, the body is open to viewing early Saturday morning. On the Saturday of my grandmother’s funeral, my mother, her sisters and others lamented over my grandmother’s body. They asked my grandmother why she had left them behind, what they would do without her, and what the future held. Most importantly, they bestowed upon her a great responsibility - the responsibility of seeing to it that their wishes were granted. And as the demands of tradition were being met, the family’s favorite pastor sat in silence, waiting on Christianity’s turn. After enough time had been devoted to the Akan way, he rose and directed the events of that day and the next on a Christian path. That morning, the consecutive performance of Akan traditions and Christian traditions did not appear odd to me. My interest grew when I was told without a satisfying explanation that to entrust the dead with the responsibility of granting one’s wishes was a staple of Akan funerals. In my search for answers, a peculiar duality revealed itself to me.

According to J.B. Danquah’s Akan Doctrine of God, the Akan tradition necessitates the “cleansing and refining of the inner nature in man through myriad lives… the return of a soul to earth is not like a condemned criminal to be hanged, but more like a little child ready to learn more and to do better.” But the majority of Christian denominations reject reincarnation. Christians refer to Hebrews 9:27, “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,” to debunk the idea of a return of the dead to this world. At my grandmother’s funeral, I witnessed the accommodation of two opposing views. It is in acknowledgement of the return of the dead, and upon that return a mission to do “better,” that Akans bestow their wishes upon the dead. At the same time, a figure that represents opposition to reincarnation plays a major role in Akan funerals because demands of a new order have to be met. This is the peculiar duality in which they live—where beliefs that are in apparent opposition to each other are allowed to coexist.

A narrative about this peculiar duality is waiting to be told. If the Akan Doctrine stipulates that through reincarnation can man truly “...do better”, what are the implications of the peculiar duality of embracing and rejecting reincarnation? If the story went something like this - At her mother’s funeral, ___ clad in black, asked for a son. Surely, she lamented over the loss of her mother. But she lamented over the lack of a child as well. Ten years, she had been married. Ten years, she had been barren… Her reasons: a son would bring her husband home, a son would wipe her shame, and a son would allow her to converse with the other women about the sudden growth of their once lads. She didn’t know that this son would do all that and more. He would come to do better than what she had asked for… is the chance to do better lost if Akans continue to simultaneously reject and embrace reincarnation? I propose to explore this abstract question steeped in realism and surrealism through fiction.

This endeavor will initially involve research into the historical identity of the Akan tribe—with a focus on religion. I have built relationships with the history and sociology departments of the University of Ghana, Legon. Interviews with African history professors and access to their libraries will allow me to get recorded and nuanced answers to my historical questions. Specifically, the research will provide me with a social, political and economic picture of pre-colonial Ghana, which was predominantly Akan. I will place much focus on the origins of traditional Akan religion, its teachings on reincarnation and the reasons why Akans bestow their wishes on the dead. I am particularly interested in events surrounding the Akan tribe's
STATEMENT OF AWARD PURPOSE

Ghana: A peculiar tale of religious eclecticism

period of religious transition and how that may have shaped the practices of modern day. All proposed methods will also be used to acquire information on colonial Ghana’s religious identity.

As a novelist, I want much of this endeavor to provide me with information that meets the requirements of literary elements such as plot and characterization. Living among the Akans will be of immense literary benefit. The Ashanti region, where a large number of the Akan people are located, provides a rich environment for a novelist like me to work. The focus of this research demonstrates the dynamic themes of cultural conflict and ambivalence that Akans provide a novel. But a novel is more than theme; elements such as setting and characterization are important components. Living in the Ashanti region will acquaint me with the flora and fauna of the area and I will come to understand the people’s relationship with the environment – all important factors of setting. I will also get to know the people, listen to their stories and get involved in their day to day working lives. Being fluent in Twi and Fante, two common languages spoken among the Akan people, I have already overcome one major obstacle in accomplishing my goals. To gain knowledge on the current state of traditional Akan religious practices I will attend events like the Afahye with the people in order to observe Akan rituals. Through observation and conversations with attendants, I hope to gain knowledge of maybe how this celebration has changed – by juxtaposing my historical knowledge with what I see I hope to answer questions on dualities and transition from the past. I will also attend church with the people in order to observe practices and converse with them about their faith. Not forgetting the driving force behind this endeavor, attending Akan funerals will provide more accounts of the peculiar duality of Christian and Akan practices. Being aware of the emotional nature of funerals, the trust I build, through the already described assimilation processes, will be the deciding factor in my ability to attend these funerals. Most importantly, I will also converse with people about their views on reincarnation, making sure to get a cross generational and cross religious perspective on the topic.

I am making no effort to reach scientific findings on the topic of the implications of this peculiar duality. I will leave that to sociologists and anthropologists. But there are many ways to tell this story; one way is through fiction, accurate fiction. As I suggested earlier, this story can be told through a woman’s yearning for a son. Living among the Akans will provide me with more ways through which to tell this story. Having family in Ghana provides me with a network of people who will connect me with reliable sources of information in the Ashanti region. The professors I have contacted at the University of Ghana, Legon will do the same as well. My goal is to collect a wealth of information on the complicated Akan people – the kind of information that provides narratives beyond the focus of this endeavor. My goal is to begin the novel during my time in Ghana. I hope and want this project to inform and better my surrealist style of writing and nurture a successful career as a West African novelist.
A CAREER IN SERVICE JOURNALISM

My career in service journalism — journalism that does not simply deliver reports of possibly fleeting relevance, but tells a story for the benefit of the community — began at Phillips Academy Andover. When I arrived at Andover there loomed the specter of political fury. For the first time, I came across high school students who were passionate about political topics but furious at the fact that their opinions were not being heard. With this in mind and inspired by *The Nation*, one of my colleagues and I formulated the idea for Point/Counterpoint. Point/Counterpoint would be a political journal that fosters debate between students of opposing political views on topics of religion, sexuality, war, etc. With the financial backing of an Abbot Grant of $3,000, what we’d dreamed up in our pitch became a reality in the fall of 2004. Point/Counterpoint’s inaugural issue focused on that year’s presidential election. As co-editor-in-chief of a new publication, I was nervous about the public’s response. But Point/Counterpoint’s inaugural issue sold out to eager political enthusiasts. Andover students and their parents embraced Point/Counterpoint; they sustained its financial stability and allowed five issues of the journal to be published during the 2004-2005 school year. Point/Counterpoint continues to serve the Andover community with its third editorial board which recently invited me to be a contributing editor on an ambitious venture — an issue that focused on the role that race and gender played in the presidential primaries. Beyond providing high school students a venue to voice their political opinions, Point/Counterpoint, by being open to conservative and liberal viewpoints, does not deem any viewpoint more appropriate. Instead, it gives its high school readers the opportunity to look at both sides of the political spectrum and form their own opinions.

When I arrived at the Johns Hopkins University I searched for a meaningful opportunity that would allow me to continue in my preferred field of service journalism. My involvement with The National Student Partnerships (NSP) in Baltimore put an end to my search. NSP is a national non-profit organization that serves the indigent population of 12 cities. Each office is a free drop in resource center staffed by college students (volunteers) that aids those less fortunate with housing searches, employment searches, benefits searches, and all necessities that ensure a person’s self-sufficiency. In the fall of 2006, I was brought on as communications associate in the NSP Baltimore office (founded summer 2003). As communications associate I was put in charge of much of the office’s media relations and advertising. That year, NSP Baltimore was venturing on a major endeavor to staff the office with more college students from the area. Because of the office’s proximity to Homewood campus, Hopkins students were of particular interest. Though the office was already equipped with a fair amount of volunteers from Homewood campus, they were not enough to ensure NSP’s effectiveness. One major initiative I developed was to write articles on behalf of the organization to improve its visibility in Baltimore and surrounding areas. Through these articles, NSP would not only advertise itself to the Baltimore community as a whole, but Homewood students especially. As a small nonprofit organization NSP Baltimore was unable to afford major media events that would promote the organization’s cause on a grand scale. Grassroots efforts like the articles I wrote for the JHU Newsletter is an example of the ways in which the organization promotes itself. In fact, the company’s visibility is essential to its strength since only through it can NSP acquire the volunteers it needs to staff its offices, the clients who visit its offices, and the funding necessary for its growth. The first article I wrote for the Newsletter served as an introduction of NSP Baltimore to the Homewood campus. The article highlighted the organization’s mission, its impact on the Baltimore community, and the relevant role more Hopkins students could play at NSP Baltimore. A short article that appeared in the Baltimore Sun touched on the impact college students were having on the community through their work at NSP Baltimore. At the end of my one year tenure as communications associate at NSP Baltimore, the number of volunteers — especially Hopkins students — had more than doubled in size.

My time at NSP Baltimore did not end with my one year tenure as communications associate. My first year there I was mainly tasked with the office’s media relations and advertising but I also worked with
clients every time I was in the office. Like the other Hopkins students who were there as volunteers assisting clients in need with their resource searches, I built a close and important bond with many clients. After my first year, I stayed with NSP as a volunteer. Beyond the important role I played in promoting the NSP name, the other students' and my presence there proved to be helpful in changing some perceptions of Hopkins students in the community. Several clients, most of them homeless, indicated to me that they were very appreciative of the assistance the other students and I provided. But more than being appreciative, many clients expressed that Hopkins students had always appeared to them as somewhat unconcerned with the troubles of the community. The perception of Hopkins students as just a bunch of aloof rich kids was pervasive; the work that we were doing was significantly altering that Hopkins image.

In the Spring of 2007, my work at NSP Baltimore and my work in the Writing Seminars Department was awarded with the Louis Azrael Fellowship in Communications. The $5000 merit scholarship is provided to a student by the Writing Seminars Department in recognition of excellence in communications. That fall, the award helped me secure an internship with the Baltimore Sun.

At the Baltimore Sun I continued on my service journalism path. I interned with the health section of the paper; specifically, I interviewed physicians for the Ask the Expert column that appears in the paper's Thursday health section. My interviews focused on health topics of particular interest and concern to the Baltimore community — as determined by recent scientific research and letters from readers. The interviews I conducted with physicians and transcribed in the paper served as important informational tools for the community's health benefit.

My time at NSP (though ongoing but not as avid this semester) and my time at the Baltimore Sun (Fall 2007), allowed me to utilize my writing skills in ways that benefited the Baltimore community. I am certain that having a Hopkins student attached to these endeavors boosted the University's image. Because at NSP, my work not only benefited the indigent population of Baltimore but it helped transform the image of the Hopkins student, and the University's as well, from aloof to caring. At the Sun, columns on health concerns such as age-related macular degeneration drew readers' attention to a common but not always discussed medical problem — as told by Derek Nnuro, Hopkins Undergrad. I have traveled beyond the confines of 3400 N. Charles St. In doing so, I have imparted my writing skills in ways that have helped organizations like NSP better meet their mission. I am proud to say that Johns Hopkins remains the most represented university at NSP Baltimore and volunteers continue to make an important difference every day. I cannot take all the credit for NSP's successes, but my work contributed immensely.
EDUCATION

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD
Bachelor of Arts in Public Health Studies (Natural Sciences), Minor: Writing Seminars
Phillips Academy: Andover, MA

RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL EXPERIENCE

E-newsletter Data Mining Project Assistant, GAVI’s PneumoADIP,
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD
- Use STATA to prepare report on activity of recipients of campaign emails that detail PneumoADIP’s efforts to promote access to lifesaving pneumococcal vaccines for children in developing nations.

Communications Associate/Volunteer, National Student Partnerships (NSP), Baltimore, MD
- Promote the visibility of NSP through planning of fundraisers
- Researched and wrote articles that appeared in Baltimore Sun and Johns Hopkins Newsletter
- Involved in organizations day to day strategic planning on how to ensure that community’s indigent population is better served through NSP initiatives

Intern, The INFO Project, Center for Communication Programs
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD
- Assisted with implementation of initiatives that support health care decision-making in developing countries
- Monitored INFO’s virtual community of practice that allowed professionals from around the world to discuss best practices in healthcare delivery
- Prepared correspondence with benchmark institutions during INFO’s preparation of multi-million dollar grant proposal.

Health Section Intern, Baltimore Sun, Baltimore, MD
- Researched and reported on health topics of current interest
- Interviewed notable physicians and experts and reported interviews in the paper’s “Ask The Expert” section

Program Support, Phones 4 Charity (LA, Tucson, Chicago Red Cross), Canoga Park, CA
- Researched corporations’ history of community involvement and cell phone dispersion practices
- Conducted meetings with corporate representatives to introduce Red Cross’s cell phone recycling fundraising effort

Corporate Research Intern, Scholastic Inc, New York, NY
- Worked with Scholastic’s Corporate Research Department as Children’s Defense Fund Fellow
- Gave presentation that educated Scholastic executives and staff on current technology trends in schools and consumer markets

ACTIVITIES

Contributing Writer, Johns Hopkins Newsletter, Baltimore, MD
Sept. 2005—
- Write articles for Features section on topics ranging from politics to campus happenings.

OTHER (Awards, honors, etc)
Azrael Fellow: Awarded a $5000 scholarship for 2007-2008 school year for excellence in communications.
Johns Hopkins University Arts Grant: Awarded $2000 spring 2007 to start yet to be launched campus arts journal.
Hodson Success Scholarship: Awarded $5000 each academic year of college by Johns Hopkins University.
Portfolio

I have attached 3 short stories. A year ago, I wrote this series of short stories focused on Ghanaian women. These stories are not intended to be quasi-ethnographies and I hope are not interpreted as that. These are works of fiction, inspired by my contact with Ghanaian women and conversations I have had with them. These stories are most indicative of my style of writing. I hope that after reading them you become better acquainted with me as a writer.

Derek Nauro
Sun, Sweat, and Marriage

Look at the wall bordering that compound. Its bricks improperly layered, each in search of more room to fit within. Can you hear their voices; they are hurried journeymen fidgeting within a packed space on the ship’s floors.

That wall surrounds five cocooned homes belonging to Mr. Nimo. His three wives live in the first three from a visitor’s left. The next two, his extended family. When he was alive, he split his time between his wives’ quarters. Though they performed his funeral rites a month ago, the citizens of Kwankyere village roam about clad in black, still mourning the death of their beloved benefactor. Nobody had purchased a house or farm without Mr. Nimo’s financial assistance.

When he was alive, he made certain that, upon his death, no member of his family would not lay claim to any of his belongings. A few days before he died, he called into his infantile room - where a pail sat next to his bed ready to collect drops of urine from his hanging sheets - his three wives and some members of his extended family.

His words played like an omen. “You can enjoy the pleasures of my wealth. But know that I have named none of you heir to my belongings. If any of you attempt to take my place after I’m gone, I will come back for what’s mine.” They all laughed - not at anything in particular, they were encouraged by a surge of discomfort.

That night, Efe, his first wife, cursed anyone who would entertain the thought of controlling her husband’s empire. She was in fact cursing the other wives. She trusted that if anyone were to act against her husband’s wishes, it would be them. In order to make sure the deed to his three cocoa farms was in her name, Akua would seek assistance from the voodoo man. As for Mary, if sleeping with everyman in their husband’s extended family meant she would secure a position as heir, then that is exactly what she would do. After all, that was how Mary had earned a spot in her husband’s harem. Though nobody knew much about her past - not even her husband - the stories she told of Abidjan caused the villagers to correctly conclude that Mary-Jane had been a prostitute. When asked about the origins of her name, her answer was simple... one of her clients (she’d concocted a tale of how she was a singer for hire) had given her the name after she’d performed one of his favorite songs for him. According to the client, Mary-Jane was the perfect name for her because when she was around, he returned to the numbness of his marijuana years.

When he was alive, Mr. Nimo never confirmed that his third wife had been a prostitute. He’d fallen in love with her after sex of the highest quality. At fifty six, he wanted to enjoy the company of a woman thirty-six years his junior without the confirmation that she bedded most men she encountered. Before he could cultivate any interest in investigating her background, he rushed in making her his. He knew that his relatives would oppose their marriage and would not support him in performing the traditional rites. They wed in a courthouse the morning after their encounter. The appeal of worldly possessions made that day the happiest in Mary’s life. When he returned home, he surprised Efe and Akua with gold linens and a new woman who needed training on how to service her husband’s nonsexual demands.

At this moment, on Mr. Nimo’s compound, a man grooms Efe’s first child for marriage. Kofi, a resident fool, serves as the village’s sex conductor. For in the eyes of the other men, his manhood suffers from frills.

“He’s seen the fruits of every young virgin in this village. Still, desire has not led him to claim one for himself. What else can we believe... he is a homosexual. And if before marriage, my daughter requires awareness on what delights men, who better to teach her than him...” echoes the
palm winied men.

The children have formed a three tiered pyramid. Efe's three sons, the base of the structure. Her other daughter, arms linked with Akua's second child...midsection. On top, Akua's oldest child peaks through featherlike layers of patched lace. The propped window permits a tickling breeze.

"Do you see anything?"
"Not much...wait..."

A harmony of rhythmic movements pesters the girl's view of the event. Her lids bat like drumbeats. The curtains swing in wavelike motion, further confusing an understanding of the back and forth massage Kofi applies to his elastic foreaskin.

Tomorrow by this time, Efe's girl will be someone's wife. His name is Kwei, her name is Aba. Aba meet Kwei, it is your wedding day...this is what they will say.

Next door, the three wives prepare tomorrow's assorted feast. It appears that Akua has put her jealousy aside; maybe it's not necessary that her daughter is the first of the children to get married. The aroma of reduced groundnut paste laced with paprika burns draining nostrils. It will soon form into the perfect complement to the hollow taste of cassava dumplings. Mary Jane falters in such situations. They've asked her to grate the cassava.

They've slaughtered ten hens for the celebration that will follow the marriage ceremony. It would have been twelve, but they saved two as part of Attah's payment for agreeing to play the drums at the party. He arrived at dawn. After observing the components of his payment - the hens, a bottle of schnapp, a bag of rice, oil, and a sac of groundnuts - he set up the next best drum in his collection. He saves the best for royal events.

A surprising giddiness has come over Akua this morning. She maintains a stapled smile, a contrast from the embarrassment that often prevents her from showing off her randomly positioned auburn teeth. She's taken over the chores that accompany such events and asked Efe to spend the morning masking her daughter's young face. The combination of rouge and such darkness will cause the girl to appear bloody. But Professor Agyin's white wife, during one of her sessions on femininity, stressed that the women must apply rouge on their faces for special occasions.

With Mary Jane still in bed, Akua, along with her children and Efe's three boys, has arranged the chairs in a tightly spun ring that sits on the stretch of sandy land leading to the homes. At the center, two stools await the bride and groom. Another, a couple inches taller, faces the two. The family elder will officiate the ceremony from there. Behind the bride and groom, the two families will sit. Trickling around the circle will be the invited guests.

The two youngest children have prepared a song for their sister. Akua and the other wives fear the shame that their hoarse voices will bring them. The village's most active gossips do not discriminate between children and adults when it comes to their most cherished activity. Akua has asked the children to practice behind the outhouse. She's informed them that the guests will be arriving soon; if they come upon them practicing, their song will be less of a surprise. They don't know that her intentions are selfish. She doesn't want to hear such scratched sounds as she finalizes the preparations under the unforgiving sun.

_Sweet sister, we will never forget you,
We will miss you,
Come back soon with many nicees,
Nephews are fine too,
But know that you will always be our sister..._
Sweet brother, we welcome you,
We are happy to get to know you,
Come back soon with many nieces,
Nephews are fine too,
But know that you will always be our new brother...

They etched the lyrics within the sand during one of their lifeless afternoons.

The guests have arrived - this is the first time many of them have returned to more glorious attire. The hues in which they have adorned themselves force a rainbow out of the crescent. They anticipate the arrival of the family members who they are sure will soon come out of their shut homes. Nobody worries about the missing groom and his family. They assume that the unique approach the Nimo household takes to tradition will result in a dual entrance of the bride and groom. After all, Mr. Nimo was cremated, an abomination, according to the diction of his culture.

The door of the house at the center of the quintuplet homes swings open. Mary Jane's unbothered figure - she's never had children, allowing her stomach to appear vertically stretched and her breasts, steady as a palace guard - has never being more punctuated in an outfit. Most of the seated men have morphed into peacocks. Their necks, longer and more flexible, anchor inquisitive heads dotted with salty droplets. She's chosen organza for the occasion - a decision that was not taken in consideration of the dry weather. The blue-black material tailored into a long sleeved dress might shimmer under the sun but its stiffness ignores comfort's call. But she has succeeded; the husband of her greatest rival refuses to turn his eyes away from her. It's with much awareness of this that she flounces to her seat with her buttocks curved upright.

Soon after, Akua follows still resembling the mother of the bride. With her smile intact, she calls on Attah to start the drums and performs a floating dance to the beat. Her actions have been painstakingly practiced. Today, she will present herself as an aberration. Looking at herself in the mirror before she arrived, she confirmed her goal for the day: "Less of the jealous stepmother, more of the proud stepmother..." Among the wives, she's most often the subject of gossip. The gradual expansion of her once properly buttoned frame not only kept her husband away from her for six months before his death, but has been the topic of much ill-fated discussion. Some say the turn she's taken to an even more unattractive state - not forgetting the erratic performance that is her teeth - is payback for having her first child with Mr. Nimo out of wedlock. In fact, it is believed that if she'd not gotten pregnant he would have never married her. Gossip or non-gossip, most of the women have focused their eyes on her. Appearing more respectful of the heat, hers is a loose fitting lace robe aired out with stylish holes.

"She's gone mad. She should hide those ugly teeth," one gossip whispers to another
"She thinks we are going to be fooled by this show of happiness," the other responds.
Drumbeats. Paper fans. Aba and her mother will not leave their room until Kwei's arrival.
"Akua, you look lovely" one lies.
"Thank you ... Did you sew your kaba yourself?"
"Yes..." another untruthful remark. The liar will not confirm the role reversal that exists in her household. Her husband sews her garments, prepares her meals, and plait their daughters' hair. She molds cement to patch their cracked walls, climbs palm trees to extract their fruits, and fights off cunning boys after her daughters. Uninformed of their unconventional lifestyle, villagers deem their marriage the happiest of all.

The spreading sweat stain that starts under Mary's left breast clocks the period for which
they've been waiting on the affair. When she first took her seat, the stain was a young boy's testicle - an tiny oval sure to grow. It has now spread past her left side, wrapping around her midsection, soon to return to its starting position.

"Are we ever going to start?"
"Ask again, my sister"
"It's almost like we were just brought here to see who could last longest in the sun."
"Well if that's the case, these seats will soon be occupied by only men."
"True...my hair cannot take much sweat"
"Imagine how badly mine will begin to smell, sweat and shea butter just don't mix well."

Attah halts his gasping drum play. The family elder rises after he notices the murmur of impatience among the guests. He walks over to the Bishop. He is tucked between two nuns who distract him from feeling overly out of place. He started attending these affairs after Professor Agyin's wife announced during one of her sessions that one of the most important roles of a minister was overseeing weddings. The first wedding Bishop Shackles attended set precedence for how he would be involved in tribal doctrine. He offers the opening prayer - never after a proper libation is offered to the gods - and a closing prayer, before the gods receive a final quenching of gratitude.

"Bishop, can you please say a prayer" the elder whispers into his ear.
"But the boy and his family haven't arrived yet" he replies, lips lost in ear.
"I'm sure they will be arriving soon. Everyone seems irritated..."
"Let them be, this day is not about them."
"But they have come with gifts; their presence is paying for some of the expenses. We have to make sure they are pleased."
"If you say so."

Bishop Shackles approaches the center led by his nun carriage.

"Look, we are going to start"
"But where are the boy and his family...or Efe and her daughter if they are not going with tradition?"

Peacocks once more, the group searches for the invisible parties. The bishop quickly fans their attention his way.

"I know you are all getting pretty tired of waiting. We are going to begin with the necessary rites. The groom and his family will join us soon. Mary...could you please give us a song?"

_Praise be to you, God almighty..._

The group chimes in. Akua, uncomfortable with such blasphemy - a slut heralding a Christian tune - joins Mary in the leadership role. Together, they alert the group whenever the song's chorus looms and conduct the correct lyrics along. Bishop Shackles reaches for the two nuns after the song ends. His action triggers the formation of concentric circles. The Bishop hops, palpitates, swings, loops, and stomps during his prayer. A twinkling bead slides down to his upper lip. He returns to his once haloed demeanor when the saltiness touches his tongue. The prayer ends with his new disposition.

Unable to fan themselves during the prayer, the people immediately reach for handkerchiefs, some rags, after they release each other of tensioned grips. Stillness overcomes the group after they sit. The elder will not offer the libation, not until the groom's family arrives. He winks at Akua; she concocts a quick plan to stall the guests. She walks to the group of children squatted around a game of bottle caps and pulls the family musicians away.
"I have good news; you get to sing two songs today" she tells the children.
"What should we sing Mama?" they ask, grinning.
"Pransa, pransa..."
"We don’t know that one."
"How about Obaa pa?"
"We don’t know that either, only grownups sing that song."
"Well, sing whatever you want... I’m going to introduce you right now."
"Elder and his fellow elders, brothers and sisters, the children have prepared a song to sing to you." She nods to the children; they begin.

My love, love of all loves,
Come back to me,
My heart, heart of all hearts,
Come back to me.
Where did you go,
Why did you go,
Oh please,
My love, my heart,
Come back to me.

Listen to the cry of swatted flies in human silence.

Sunrise reveals the untouched arrangement of refreshments and food. The chairs are still in place, some draped with wrinkled handkerchiefs. After a messenger announced that there will be no wedding, their owners forgot them in their haste to leave. That was when Efe’s daughter went mad. She left for the sea in search of her groom — the boy hidden between pinching cargos en route to the America he heard about from Professor Agyn’s wife. After her daughter left, Efe, with the support of her husband’s extended family, gave Akua and her children twenty four hours to pack and leave her compound. Akua obliged, saddened at the misunderstanding that the joy she’d displayed all day was in awareness of the groom’s impending journey.

Mary Jane never said goodbye to them; they left as she was vomiting in the outhouse. For she will soon have a son and name him after his father. The boy will wrap around his mother, protecting her from Efe’s new found wrath. Years will pass, and when people pass the wall surrounding that compound, they will stop, point, and once again say: “that is Mr. Nimo’s place... go in, he will give you the money you need.”
Man-woman

Part I

Some of Obi’s counterparts, those who once left with missionaries for a Dutch boarding school, returned with glossy lips and a command over the men that most of the other women, the ones that were left behind, feared.

They called their village Kotoka. But when the missionaries arrived, they called it Cape Coast. The people accepted the name as a phonetic translation of their Kotoka, believing that the cracking sounds heard in the latter likened it enough to the former. But they didn’t know that the foreigners had paid little attention to sounds when assigning that place a name. The name sprung out of convenience—the convenience of the fact that Kotoka was surrounded by water, the convenience of the fact that the men, smelling of a sour salt stewed marsh, spent their days fishing and their women spent their days descaling the fish the men caught.

The day she married a man twenty years her senior, the spots of gray in his hair almost matching her white robe, Obi lost all hope of redemption. Her redemption from unfortunate circumstances that caused her to be one of those left behind. She was eight years old when the women and men who wore black and white won her interest. By then, they’d been there for a year. She loved to watch them, paleness intact, parade the dirt roads with a certain somberness that captivated her. They carried with them black Bibles gently propped against their left breasts. The villagers rushed to their sermons. None of them went with pious intent; they’d been advised that the missionaries came to their village to provide financial assistance to anyone who gave his or herself to their Christian cause. The people were mistaken. The financial assistance the foreigners provided came in the form of scholarships that relieved the financial burden that some of the children were to their families. A month before they returned to where they had come from, the missionaries approached the chief and his cabinet with their plan. They would take ten of the most promising girls with them to a school that would provide the children with opportunities that Kotoka couldn’t. When the chief’s linguist announced this exciting development to the villagers, those girls of age wasted no time in considering possible downfalls to such an undertaking. In fact, all but one of these families expressed no hesitation in making certain that the missionaries chose their girl.

Obi’s father had lost all trust in the missionaries when he heard that they had advised some of his patients to deny the herbal remedies he provided them. The devout foreigners deemed the native healer, who they often saw with face markings that appeared bloody, a pagan. They publicized that Christianity frowned upon her father’s work. Though most of the sick ones gave into the missionaries’ treatment of prayer and the other world’s medication, they continued to visit Obi’s father for concoctions of earthly hues. When they were relieved of their illnesses, they attributed it to the work of their beloved healer.

Much to her delight, Obi proved to be one of those promising girls. They ranged in ages nine to eleven; she was ten years old. The missionaries showed a special interest in her—saving such a doomed girl should leave the gates of heaven at least ajar to them.

They visited nine homes before arriving at her father’s doorstep. Nine times, they were greeted with open arms; nine times, they were offered all rights to the girl who captured their interests. These nine choices stemmed from what the missionaries observed to be the
unconditional devotion the families had demonstrated to the church. Certainly they understood that Obi's father would be a challenge, but the arrogance encouraged by their piety led them to that door. Nobody came to the door; the missionaries stood there for a while, left to peek through a window illuminated by a kerosene powered lamp. Obi never saw them or eight of the ten again. Other missionaries came and went; when they finally accepted the people's resilience, missionaries stopped coming to Kotoka. But two of the girls would later return – the girl who took Obi's place and another that she would recognize as the sandy girl the boys used to laugh at.

Beyond the glossy lips, the newly named women, names that none of the locals could pronounce, impressed Obi with the fairness of their formerly darker skin and the pronounced curvature in their bodies; particularly, their ballooned breasts, a contrast from her loose ones. The little interest her husband showed in her left Obi with more time to marvel, from afar, at what she could have been. She'd left for her husband's household at fourteen – his fourth wife, another will soon follow. For almost twelve years, the union had produced one child, a girl. The other wives had managed at least two sons each. Deemed barren and of little use to her husband, Obi was relegated to duties indoors. When the other wives proudly escorted their fisherman to his canoe, with their younger fishermen not too far behind, Obi stayed behind in a home that the area’s pestering flies wouldn't enter out of fear of its cleanliness.

When they arrived, the two women had lost their grasp of how the natives spoke the language; in turn, they lost the families they left behind. Both parents of both women were still alive, their siblings as well, but neither could conceive a relationship with the people who claimed the women as theirs. So they lived together in one of the empty homes on the chief's compound as they waited on the completion of their own home. They instilled great respect in the men after they purchased the most expensive stretch of land in Kotoka – the one the chief had set aside as his and future monarchs' burial grounds. On that land, the men piled up to erect a large home. For a period, fish rations dwindled in most households because many men ignored the sea for the hefty sum the women paid after each day’s work. They built a two story brick home in a month. By the project's completion, most households had benefited in one way or another, encouraging unexplored questions concerning what the women's experience abroad had been. The question of why they'd returned stood as a matter of little concern. After all, the missionaries promised to return the girls after they had completed their education.

One morning, before the cocks crowed, Obi woke up to fetch water into one of the five barrels that sat behind the house. It would take six bucketfuls to fill up that barrel. She anticipated a quiet but tedious morning; when she arrived at the well far enough to cause her to seek rest, she heard two voices she didn't recognize. The darkness outdoors further obscured their personhood.

“You know they didn't get it taken away before they left.” Those were the first words she heard.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes”

“How come?”

“They were too young when they left. They hadn't reached puberty yet.”

“No wonder the men are afraid of them, it's because they are one of them.”

Obi never fetched water that morning; the four barrels would have to suffice till the next day. On her way home she thought of the first day she met her husband. He'd come to observe her preparation for marriage. She was twelve. Her future husband, her father and his three male relatives stood over her stretched body in a matchbox tent formed from pale sheets and planted branches. Lying on her back, she could see her father look away as the man she would marry

Nnuro, 2
looked on. She shrieked from the pain that grabbed at her entire lower half as two of them held her legs in place, permitting the other to remove that thing within her with more ease — that thing that kept her from womanhood, the one that would cause no man to marry her if it were still in place, the one that likened women to men, the one...

The opportunity that she’d missed when she was younger had a whole new meaning. At first, she wanted to leave with the missionaries because of childish awe, after her circumcision she hoped they would come for her so that she wouldn’t have to marry the old man, but none of these reasons compared to not having to experience what felt like a prolonged tug at her inards. The tug began with the circumcision and continued with her husband’s resentment of her inability to produce a male child, her status as the house maid, and her counterparts’ arrival. She would not allow her daughter to suffer the same misfortunes.

The next morning, Obi visited the two women she’d admired from afar. Much of the village had left for the sea. She approached the large white powdered house that most simply passed overwhelmed by its grandiosity. As she stood at the shut doors, she thought of how she would communicate her needs to them. With a new found determination to disrupt her daughter’s impending fate, the fate that defined her life, she went to beg them to send her daughter to where they had come from. She trusted that the gravity of her situation would break down any language barrier. She knocked.

Indoors, photographs of the two women’s time abroad appeared to have plastered themselves on the walls. The first picture showed ten girls in grey shirts with notched lapels for collars. The bottoms of their knee length skirts lightly touched in the extended line. They stood shoulder to shoulder, the tallest ones at the ends of the stretch of ten stoic faces. Behind them the paler schoolgirls seemed to have fidgeted their ways into the photograph — for they were mashed between school official’s more concerned with the ten girls in front. This was the picture the missionaries sent with donation pamphlets that went out to wealthy benefactors. Obi walked through each photograph; the women grew older and older with each step she took. The last one she saw in the historical row was of the two women in white overalls. The other girls had gone their own ways; these two had kept to each other. In the picture, boots that approached their knees cut out of their lengthy trousers and the white caps they wore hid their womanhood. Abroad, after they had completed their schooling at the boarding school and were left to fend for themselves in a place that wouldn’t allow their kind to seek employment that could translate into a career, they were factory workers. But when funds dwindled, the managers sacked all the women that worked in the factory. Some of the local women went to court. But the women who inhabited the spacious home on the most expensive land in Kotoka collected the money they had saved and headed back.

They were unable to help Obi. She knew there would be no reoccurrence of missionaries; for that reason, she’d hoped the two women would be able to spearhead her new chance for redemption. She found out that the women came to Kotoka with no intention of ever returning to a place they were relieved to have escaped, and certainly no intention of encouraging anyone to seek refuge there.

Part II

The chief’s linguist recently confirmed the monarch’s expected death. At the public gathering, the high-pitched lamentation of both men and women united a parade of unique displays of grief. Some men cried because of the love they had for their chief. Children cried because they saw their fathers throw themselves to the ground, not because of their mothers’ tears, for they
often saw them cry. But none had seen their mothers cry for the reason that the women did. The king’s death required the beheading of a young boy who tiptoed on the brink of manhood and would serve as his servant in the afterlife. There would be a week designated as the mourning period; after that week, the men would go hunting at nightfall. The citizens who were old enough to remember the last monarch’s death, or who were old enough to have been told about the events after his death, knew of the events that would take place. Those who had not yet reached the age of fourteen were unlikely to have been told. Young boys and girls were not told because they did not want to instill fear in them. Young boys were especially not told out of fear of deterring the appropriate boy from what nature had determined as his fate, death in duty to his chief. Most of the women were aware mothers with sons of prime age; they cried at the prospect of losing their boys.

Nobody seemed to notice that Obi’s daughter had always lacked feminine norms, or the fact that her mother started encouraging this deviation from femininity not too long before the announcement of the chief’s death.

Her transformation began after her father first took one of her brothers, the one closest to her age, to the sea. She never thought she’d be left behind. She’d done everything with him. They set tsetse fly traps together. They made makeshift bow and arrows from branches taken off cassava roots. They climbed the tallest trees, for their size, to pick unripe fruits that they used in tossing competitions. But when it came time to go fishing, she was left behind. That was when she decided to mold herself in the image of her brother. Her attire took on more grit. She ripped her dresses in the style of the work clothes the boy wore—the hanging pieces made them multi-layered outfits. She competed with him for the old shorts and trousers the older boys no longer wanted. And when the boys hovered around the fishing net, ready to fix the tears caused by some unruly fish, she’d joined them.

But the girl remained a girl. Obi knew that her daughter’s blood reservoirs would pour out in no time; signaling puberty, five men would then take her into a tent. As far as would marry her daughter, she was certain that the girl’s father would soon offer her to one of his younger mates. One afternoon, alone with such thoughts, she overheard the other wives converse about the chief’s impending death. And the sadness they would feel if they lost theirs sons. And how lucky she might be for not having a son. And how much they would need to keep their sons locked during nightfall...

She called her daughter from her game of kick ball. She sat her on a stool high enough for her to be able to stand and cut the girl’s hair. To have the child’s cooperation, Obi informed the girl that she would look more like her brother upon completion. With each snip of the child’s coarse hair, she cut away what she saw as the remaining outward indication of the girl’s femininity.

So after the mourning period, and until the dark clothed men returned from within the tree-concocted burrows, all the women kept their sons, the ones with freshly spouted public hairs, hidden. As if the fish in Kotoka’s waters knew of the killing climate, they stayed away. When a man returned with more than five whole fish, his wives would dance in joy, for that was an amount they could extract suitable rations from. The hunters included those who had been most privy to the chief’s private struggles. There was his linguist, the royal drummer, his palace elders, and the yet to be enstooled chief. When they found the appropriate boy, it would be the future monarch’s responsibility to shoot. Until he performed this act of loyalty and demonstrated to the deceased that he was ready to continue in his path, he would never be called chief.

It’d been three days and the men had not made their kill. Mothers with young boys had remained vigilante with their jittery sons, jittery because the boys were tired of their lifeless nights indoors. When the sun shone its brightest, the villagers gathered to chat about what might happen

Nnuro, 4
next. One said they'd start hunting earlier in the day. Another said they might move into neighboring villages. One more comment, probably the most sensible one of the day, confirmed that the hunters would continue without change till they found their prey, no matter how long it took.

Obi had used those three days to plot a trap her daughter would certainly fall into. Along with planning, she'd searched for final justification for her actions. The only hope she had in saving her daughter, the help her two counterparts could have offered, had died. There was no other way her daughter would escape the life that Obi had endured over the years.

Before nightfall, she sent the girl out to the sea to fetch the net that she claimed her father and the boys had forgotten to bring home. The girl rushed at the opportunity. She met darkness on her way to the water. She found the net exactly where her mother had directed her - stretched between two palm trees and lit by the moon. She grabbed a portion of the net, dragging it along as she entered the woods on her way home.

The linguist spotted the girl first. He saw a short haired boy pulling his father's fishing net home. Though the darkness beyond the reach of their torches obscured the girl, lightness would not have revealed her true identity any better. She wore shorts and a shirt that were often seen on boys, she tugged at the net with masculine tirelessness, and there was the lack of hair. So the new chief directed his gun and shot at the little boy he was presenting to his deceased predecessor in the afterlife. They wrapped the fallen body in a tan cloth and rushed it to its burial site - a place not too far from where the chief was buried, but far enough to separate master from servant.
On the day they were going to kill her son, Dede woke up unusually early to prepare porridge for the boy and the stocky man whose stench of aged sweat had almost suffocated her the night before. In the place the white man will later call Cape Coast; the young woman was no longer envied by the others.

Dede lived forty or more miles from the coast. But her village had no name, so it became known as part of the place where the men spent their days fishing. There were no fishermen where she lived. The men were farmers whose cocoa plants determined their wealth.

Her once somber beauty—a meticulously round face matched with shy eyes and abashed lips had challenged the men of her village. To them, her face provided the perfect setting to display the year’s great harvest. When they met for palm wine and conversation on Sunday afternoons, each man, after a fifth jug or more, would brag about how he’d transform Dede’s quivering lips into experienced tools. After memorizing their banter, the girl who served the wine would rush off to the wife of the day’s most vulgar participant to recite the latest news. The women who feared Dede most were the ones whose husbands were overdue for a second wife. They prayed for another budding villager as their rival.

When she was fifteen, she married Kwasi Osei. The jocular heavy-set farmer with a keloid plastered on his chin had just inherited two acres of farmland. The marriage between Dede and the village’s most overlooked bachelor (until his inheritance), spurred gossip among the same women who had prayed for her marriage to anybody but their husbands. The villagers grew to believe that the timid girl was in fact, a manipulating opportunist. Though she considered his new status, Dede married Kwasi with his assurance that her marriage would be hers alone and not shared with any other woman.

That morning, as she stirred the ground maize and water mixture on a bed of coals, she watched the cyclic dance of one of her hens as it prepared to lay. Conscious that her son was in the hut to her right, she devoted a stern focus to the hen, shifting her eyes only to check on the porridge.

In the hut that stood side by side with hers and her husband’s, her son lay on the straw mat she had woven for him when he was still young enough for them not to know that he was retarded. With his knees tucked into his chest and his face drooping, he resembled a lifeless bud. As if he knew of the day’s events, the almost three year old’s mouth, agape, gasped for air.

Hoping to be on her way to her husband’s cocoa farm by sunrise, Dede rushed at plating the porridge. It had the consistency of white yogurt. She tiptoed around her husband, making sure not to wake him or the boy as she gathered her farming attire. When she finally escaped, she began the long trek to the farm, humming her usual tune. But this morning was different; her steps stayed in perfect harmony with the lamenting melody.

There were three other farms that Dede passed every morning before arriving at her husband’s, and it was customary that she’d greet the other women working there.

“What is wrong with her? Why did she ignore me when I greeted her?” asked the first wife of Mr. Tumo. Aware of what would be happening that day, she’d altered the apathetic tone of her usual greeting and adopted a more sympathetic “hello.”

“You know why,” answered the second wife. She was one of the few women in the village who felt an honest sadness for Dede. Unlike the first wife, she refused to participate in the hearsay about why Dede had given birth to a boy whose mind would remain blank for the rest of his life. The women happily concurred that Dede had married for wealth and that her son was payment for her selfishness.
For about a month, they had gone without rain. For a year, their farm had consistently produced less than half of the harvest of years past, but the current drought had made the occurrence of a suitable bean a rarity. Hunger had not struck them yet (mainly because of her husband’s wealth), but it was inevitable. When Dede arrived at the farm, the withered cocoa beans had finally fallen off the trees and covered the land in their ashy auburn. She picked one up…a bean tucked within itself with a drooping darkness lined across its upper half. Dede looked at the bean for a moment; she stretched the cloth covering her lower torso onto the ground and then swept the lifeless beans onto it. She wrapped the heavy mass in the cloth and cradled it over to an old tree that stood in the middle of the farm. She left the mass to the fancy of locusts; not the ones the villagers were used to, but the other kind that had arrived not too long ago. They had come once before, but that was when Dede was eight years old.

Before leaving the farm that day, she prepared the land for a fresh sewing of cocoa seeds. The previous day, her husband had angrily axed out the seeds he had sown the week before because they had remained stagnant. Certain that the rains would soon come, Dede dug up new holes with her husband’s curved axe. He would return the next day to sew more seeds.

When she was eight years old, Dede had befriended the blind girl who lived across her father’s compound. Every morning, the girl’s mother sat her in the stretch of sand that led to their hut. She had a silent drool that trickled down her cheek as she dipped her sandy fingers in and out of her mouth. When the girl opened her mouth to talk, her large tongue slurred her speech. Dede never communicated with her, but the games they played—slapping their palms together to a childish lullaby mostly sang by Dede—solidified a friendship that Dede’s mother had opposed.

Dede’s mother had known that the blind girl would not survive the year. The girl’s family had refused to kill her when the village priestess warned them that her disability was a curse. She had been alive five years, and for those years the family suffered. The last great harvest from her father’s farm came in the year she was conceived, and her mother became barren after she arrived. So her father finally dragged her to the river one morning.

As she sprinkled grains of wheat into the chicken coup, Dede saw the girl and her father in the light of sunrise. She dropped the calabash filled with wheat and followed the man, watching his hold on his fluttering daughter.

“Amal!” Dede called out to her friend.

“Dede!” Dede’s mother searched for her daughter. The outhouse had still not been cleaned.

When Dede arrived at the river she knelt behind the tall shrubs that the craftsmen collected for masks during the festival of the gods. Dede did not know what was happening; she felt the need to hide from the people across the river. The village priestess, adorned in her ceremonial black toga and bloody face markings, and the girl’s father wrapped the naked child in a white cloth. The girl attempted to plead with them but tears disrupted her already indecipherable speech. Dede’s fear silenced her. For a while, the people stood almost as if they were rethinking their plan. But when a small wave approached, the priestess, chanting a loud prayer, held the girl by her arms as the father grabbed her legs. Together, they hauled the trembling white curse onto the slow passing wave. As she floated by, wailing, her father watched with a relieved calm. Dede crept out of her hiding place. Unable to stand on her feet, she crawled for a while, waving her head to rid herself of the swarm of locusts. When she finally stood up, she ran home, sometimes falling over from her watery vision.

Dede told her mother about what she had witnessed that morning.
“Anyone who watches a curse die gets cursed themselves” her mother announced.
Later that day her mother led her to the home of the village priestess. Dede and her mother both begged for forgiveness and asked for Dede to be rid of any future curses.
“My daughter, the fact that you have begged for forgiveness is enough. I don’t foresee any mishap caused by a curse in your future.” The village priestess said this with much confidence.

The boy and his father awoke at sunrise, not too long after Dede left for the farm. Still stretched out on his mat, the boy laughed at a scene on his ceiling that only he understood. His father walked into his hut and, with a quick wave of his right hand, signaled the boy to get up. When his father left, the boy continued laughing; this time, at the hen that had recently entered his hut. He emulated the hen’s pitter-patter as they circled his mat to the rhythm of his giggles.

“Kofi!” his father called.

The boy responded not to the same hut to the loudness of the call. His feet were worn and his incongruent eyes appeared even more randomly positioned as he hurried toward his parents’ hut. His father untied the cloth that started at his waist and sat him in a pan filled with cold water and dried herbs. The boy splashed as his father tried to scrub spots of dirt off his body with a ball of recently picked herbs. After the bath, his father dabbed him with a washcloth and then lathered his entire body with the oil extracted from dried palm nuts. He wrapped the boy in a fresh brown cloth and folded a second one, a white fabric, into his goatskin bag. A machete and his other curved axe dangled from his bag as the two walked away from their home into the woods.

They headed to the river. On their way, the child stopped many times. He once reached for a snake crawling by but when he was very close to grabbing it his father pulled him away.

When they arrived at the river, the boy’s father approached the priestess, fragile now with a balding scalp. She’d been waiting.

“Kwasi, there are no waves today... I don’t know what will carry that boy away” she said.
“But we have to still try,” the father answered.
After wrapping the compliant child in the white fabric, they sat him at the edge of the water. She began a chant that made the child laugh.

“Kwasi, I have been praying to the gods... there are just no waves today” she said.
“Then what do I do?” he asked angrily.
“Tie it into your own hands. Destroy this curse yourself.”

In the climate of his anger and impatience, Kwasi reached for his axe. The child sat unaware of what hung in the air. When he turned to look at his father, Kwasi struck at him.

When Dede arrived home, she gently lay the bundle of shriveled cocoa beans into the pan her husband had used to bathe the boy. She shuffled her feet into his room. The hen had lay two eggs on the mat that he’d slept on. Dede rolled the eggs off the mat and fell onto it.
When Kwasi returned, he hurled the bloody axe into the pan with the cocoa beans. He started a bonfire and poured the contents of the pan into the crackling flame. He walked away. Headed for his hut, he peeked into the boy’s. Dede’s arms and legs were stretched out wide on the mat. Kwasi walked in. He loosened the cloth that was covering his lower torso. Lying on top of Dede, his weathered body rocked back and forth. As if she was unaware of what was happening, Dede began a conversation with her husband: “…when I was younger the priestess told me that I will have no curses in my future…” she said. He went on, stopping once to fan a budding locust from her upper lip.