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An Enquiry into the Historical Relevance of the Stool House (*Nkonwa Fie*) at the Bogyawe Palace in Akwamufie, Ghana

Andrew Richard Owusu Addo

Lecturer, Department of Jewellery Design,
AsanSka College of Design and Technology, Ghana

Abstract:

Generally, the stool house (*Nkonwa fie*) is the name given to a sacred room where deities and stools belonging to chiefs that have passed on are blackened and stored. It is a sacred place and notable from other houses or rooms where consultations and rites are performed to ask for a good thing and not bad things. In the Akan society, the stool house plays a significant part so far as the traditional leadership and political institutions are concerned. The stool house has several cultural and symbolic undertones that require a study and an understanding by modern society. Hence the study was conducted at the stool house used by the Akwamumanhene revealed philosophical, cultural, and an outstanding value attached to the stool house. This was attained by using qualitative research design and research instruments such as purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Interview and observation were the two main data collection tools used.

However, the long hours of inquiry with key respondents in the naturalistic fieldwork which was peculiar of phenomenological study such as this aided the researcher in gaining in-depth information and understanding of what the stool house represents and its significance in the tradition and customs of the people of Akwamuman.

Keywords: Regalia, stool, deities, *Nkonwa fie*

1. Introduction

Instead of a throne, Akan chiefs traditionally sit on a stool and when they die, their stools are painted black and stored in a sacred room called *Nkonwa fie* (stool house). Unlike the *Bamun* of Cameroon, they do not believe that stools house the spirit of the dead but rather these royal objects obtain potency from their owners and die when their owners die. Kyerematen (1964), describe how the stool of a dead chief is preserved by ceremonially blackening it, first by smoking and then by smearing it with a mixture of soot and egg yolk. According to him, not all chiefs have the privilege of having their stool blackened after their death since it was done for only exemplary rulers (Kyerematen, 1964). While Sarpong (1971) believes that before the Europeans introduced Chairs in Ghana, almost every Akan had a variety of these seats in the house. This did not usurp the position and importance of the stool in the scheme of things in the house (Sarpong, 1971). Fosu (1994) on the other hand describes a stool to be the single most important piece of furniture in the royal household and palace, adding that the stool was unique as well as symbolic and acts as the spiritual link between the ancestors and the citizens (Fosu, 1994). A stool house is a sacred place and distinguished from other houses or rooms among the various houses and room available for use by the chief and the custodians of the tradition and customs of the people. There is also the focus and attention on the objects and artifacts as well as the actions and rituals that take place in the house.

There is a general knowledge that the stool house is visited on every *Adae* celebration and particularly in the Ga traditional area where installation of a chief is conducted. Even though there is a general knowledge that stools are kept there, there is also some level of 'fear' and reverence associated with every stool house or stool room. This is due to the various myths and taboos associated with the stool house. Among the Ewes, they have the *Togbui Zikpui* which means 'ancestor stool' (*Togbui* – ancestor and *Zikpui* – stool/chair). Annually offerings and libation are made to the stools in the house usually during the celebration of yam festivals apart from other necessary time when the stool house is visited for individual consultations.

During the *Adae* commemoration, which means a period of resting in *Twɔ*, it is commonly considered is a day of rest, and one of the important ancestral customary celebration of the Akans. The *Adae* runs a six-week cycle with two distinctive days of celebration, being either on a Sunday (*Akwasidae*) or a Wednesday (*Awukudae*). This is repeated nine times in a year with the ninth and last one on the Akan calendar referred to as *Adae Kese* (big *Adae*).

Traditionally the days preceding the *Adae* festivals are for preparations towards the celebration which include the general clearing of the surroundings of the stool house and the palace. The preparation also includes feeding of the stools and cleaning of the stools. The preparation days are the Saturday before an *Akwasidae* or the Tuesday before the *Awukudae* which is called *Dapaa* (meaning good day). The *Dapaa* is a solemn day observed to usher in the *Adae*. According to Nana Aboagye Gyabaa III who is the Gyaasehene of Abiriw in Akwapim, family issues such as litigations are solved.

Family history, as well as traditions, are thought and learned as there is also the preparation of whatever is needed for the *Adea*. On this day, The chief has to eat a meal made of yam or plantain without salt, due to the general belief that spirits do not eat salt.

2. Methodology

The qualitative research design has been used for the entire research in gathering data and analysis. This method was realized to be appropriate for the study due to its probing nature and the ability to systematically describe phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Looking for an in-depth description of the cultural and social significance of the stool house as part of regalia would require looking for views from the very people who engage in the practices. This can best be carried out using the qualitative approach and not in a statistical form as in quantitative research.

The researcher intentionally focused data collection by using instruments such as observations and semi-structured interviews using prepared interview guides the curator of the stool house. The gathered data were analysed qualitatively.

3. Findings and Discussions

To the ordinary citizen in Akwamu, and other Akan societies, the stools become one of the visible and permanent reminders of a past ruler in the stool house. The people of Akwamu consider the stool house as part of their Akwamuhene's regalia their *Akwamuhene's* regalia, this is because they attach a sense of piety to the stool house in addition to the rituals and customary activities that are performed there. The Akwamu kingdom has several stools. The most prominent stools are the male stools (ancestral or blackened stools) that have been used by ancestors of the state. The Akwamuhene is expected to sit in state with other qualified persons by tradition and custom every *Akwasidae* a celebration which takes place every forty days in the Akan calendar as part of the routine ritual after the Akwamuhene has visited the stools and performed all required rites. As tradition also demands his *Aprade* which is a drum is a set of drums played only for the king. The *Aprade* is also used to communicate to the king and when it is being played the players are covered so that no one sees the way it is played even though some of the restrictions have been modified. However, the drum players will be in session with the *asafo* troupe singing war songs and appellations.

The Akwamu black stool represents the soul of the state and is a symbol of unity and permanence. The Akwamu black stool is revered as a sacred object not to be sat on by anyone. The sacred stool is believed to be kept in the stool house (*nkonwa fie*) at the *Bogyawe* palace where the *Akwamuhene* resides. One is only able to gain access to the *nkonwa fie* and maybe into the sacred room after some rituals have been performed. It is also forbidden to take pictures either video or still pictures as well as an audio recording of happenings in the room. This is due to the sacred nature of the room and its occupants, besides, the fact that it is forbidden for ordinary people to visit such sacred items at the stool house. All over the world and in Ghana for that matter, are sacred items and sites due to the African way of traditional worship. *Sacred sites generally are important to the cultural fabric and heritage of the Northern Territory. ... They anchor cultural values and spiritual and kin-based relationships in the land. Aboriginal people know that sacred sites can be dangerous places and can play an important part in their health and well-being.* In the stool house can be found several identifiable stools with varied sizes and shapes. Included in this collection of stools in the stool house are the two most important stools of Akwamuman, which are the Golden bells stool and the Black stool. In the stool house, the stools are placed on animal skins, beds or wooden platforms, never directly on the ground, as a show of respect since it is believed that the stools are the embodiment of our ancestor and spirits for that matter, such that when they are placed on the bare floor, it is deemed as putting authority down. According to Kofi Addo (the mediator and custodian of the Abiriw stool house, the stools are offered mashed yams or plantain and the blood of the sacrificial ram periodically. This accretion was confirmed by Nana Samenhyia also the person in charge of activities in the stool house at the *Bogyawe* palace in Akwamufie. Nana Samenhyia went further to state that fat and some unspecified parts of the sacrificial ram is also offered to the stool and deities in the stool house. However, he did not disclose the particular parts saying 'that is not for public consumption' Apart from the black stool which is the soul of the state and others which were used by former chiefs, there are found some deities in the stool house such as *Odum gyakata* who is the deity attached to Mahoney a bulletproof cloth. The literal meaning of *Odum gyakata* is 'Ogyeabour' is a reflector of stones/bullets with no damaging effect and *Sanaa* who is the money giver.

In the matter of the stool house, there are several guidelines and regulations for preparing oneself towards visiting the stool house whether as an active participant or an observer must satisfy with no exception. This is necessary to keep the sacredness of the place as well as the safety of all persons from the wrath of the spirits. Some of the guidelines are:

- Not having any sexual relationship within a minimum of 24 hours before entering the house until after all rituals are performed. In the African traditional setting, women are deemed to be unclean during their menstrual cycle in addition to the belief that sexual intercourse before a battle or an interaction with the gods of the land is an affront to spirituality. Since one cannot determine when the flow of blood will start it will be better to stay completely away from them which is a way of keeping oneself pure, clean and right without any supposed contamination from women based on the traditions of Africa. However, women are allowed to go into the stool house provided they are not in their menstruation period. Similarly, in Abiriw, women are also allowed in the house but not in the inner room even though they can only go as close as to the door of the inner room. Generally, women are not allowed in the inner rooms of the stool house. This is in a way not to appreciate the role women play in our traditional settings.

- In the Akan traditions and cultures, the use of jewellery especially gold ornaments is prestige and to show off one's status in societies even though in contemporary times everybody has one or two ornaments included in their dressing. Hence, you are not supposed to wear any gold-coloured jewellery including rings even in the forecourt of the inner room. The reason is that one cannot compete (show off) with the ancestors and deities in the room
- You'll have to remove your traditional sandals (*ahenemma*) or any kind of footwear before entry the *nkonwa fie*: As a way of showing respect to ancestors, spirits, and deities as well as other artforms which serve as conduits for communication. The stools and other regalia in the stool house are accorded with the same respect as was given to its occupants when they were alive. There is the belief that the dead continue to live in other forms in the Akan society giving strong indication in the continuation of life after death, a situation the Akan call *Owu* (death). In a more exact position, the Akan reflects death or the state of death as just a transition. Similarly, the Ewes believe the spirits live on this earth, nonetheless, quite a different kind of world from that of the living.
- With the sort of respect given to the ancestors when they were alive, the same measure of respect has to be given to the spirits that resided in them, based on the belief that the regalia in the room is the abode of the departed ancestors.
- Anyone entering the *nkonwa fie* must put on a cloth (black and white but with the colour white in dominance). No wearing of smock is permitted in the *nkonwa fie*; the smock is usually associated with battle and power as well as readiness for battle. Wearing any of such may be misunderstood by the spirits as one coming to challenge their power and authority. The white cloth portrays the sanctity of the deities and as such used in performing rituals in the sacred place. The black also represents the remembrance of the departed soul reminders hence the combination of black and white cloth is accepted in the stool house. It must be noted however that the white colour must be dominant. Notwithstanding the strict adherence to the colour of attire to be worn in Akwamufie, what happens in Abiriw is quite different as there is no restriction of the colour of attire to be worn. Any colour is allowed in the stool house. However, apart from the mediator in the stool room none but only those with unique cases are permitted in there. Even in the stool room, the visitor is permitted to go behind the veil to see the stools in the room.
- Wearing any kind of charm or amulet including wrist watches is not allowed in the *nkonwa fie*. Charms in the form of talismans in the African religion are always made for one purpose or the other mainly for protection and fortification. Hence any appearance of such within the vicinity of the stool house or stool room will be seen as a challenge to the gods. Similarly, wearing of smock which is a traditional wardress is likely to be interpreted by the spirits as someone coming to challenge their authority while wearing of a wristwatch and other jewellery also implies regarding oneself as superior to the spirits.
- Females are not supposed to enter the vicinity during their menstrual period. This is to safeguard any calamity that may emanate from the spirit getting angry if any supposed unclean person gets involved in the processes. In some Akan societies, menstruation cannot even be mentioned in public. Traditionally any woman in her menstrual period is deemed unclean and as such, it becomes a taboo for a woman to go near any sacred object or place to avoid contamination and incurring the wrath of the spirits. Menstrual blood is seen as 'dirty' such that women in that situation are seen as contaminated and in danger of transmitting their contamination to others. In Akan communities, this period is referred to in the local language as *oko afikyire* (meaning the woman has gone behind the house). Others say *wabu nensa* (translated as she has broken her hands). Hence during religious functions, menstruating women are not permitted to take part. This taboo must be rigidly upheld and severe penalties are levied if it is infringed. Although women are considered as a spiritual source of danger, they are held as givers of life. They are even forbidden to cook for their husbands at home when menstruating. This is corroborated by Nyantakyiwah (1987) when she elaborated on the belief that menstrual blood makes women unclean and dangerous.

'The basic belief underlying most of the views on menstruation, especially, is that the menstrual blood, besides being unclean, is also considered as dangerous, potent, so that any direct or indirect contact with it is believed to render all powers weak, impotent and interactive. The question is why has it always been accepted that blood from women is impure?'

Generally, women are not allowed into the inner rooms of the *nkonwa fie* at Akwamufie. However, this is not the case in Abiriw in the eastern region where there are remnants of the Akwamu tribe. In Abiriw, women can only get to the entrance of the inner room but can under no circumstance enter the stool room.

- Per the requirements, wearing spectacles of any kind is not allowed in the vicinity because you may have electronic devices installed in them and also magnified to see the details of what is in the room which ordinarily is not for full public viewing. Wearing of spectacles may create reflections of what is not meant for public consumption
- One has to come with a minimum of two bottles of *kasapreko* gin and an envelope with an undisclosed amount of money as an offering to the ancestors and deities to pave the way for their intervention in your difficult times. The drink is used in the ritual of libation offering though various substances may be used for libations, the most common and widely used is an alcoholic drink, such as schnapps. However, the use of Kasapreko Gin is an initiative of the current Akwamumanehene, who believes that a shift from what is practised in other Akan cultures where schnapps is used to Kasapreko and to make it easier for the drink to be used for other purposes other than an offering of libation. Kasapreko is taken in as a normal drink during festive occasions instead of the schnapps.

- All males including the paramount chief have to lower their cloths to the waist level to expose their upper body when entering the inner room where rituals are performed to signify that you are not coming with any weapon, charms around the body and also as a sign of submission. However, women are allowed to cover the upper part of their bodies while their hair is covered as it pertains in other Akan cultures. However, most of these preparations are in a way to also protect the individual since the spirits residing in the stool as well as the deities may get offended and strike at the individual.
- The *nkonwa fie* in *Bogyawe* palace has several rooms, however, access to the inner of the inner room where the various stools and deities are kept was not possible. Nobody is allowed to sit in the first room when rites are being performed as a show of respect for the ancestors. This was not the case in the *nkonwa fie* at Abiriw, where according to Addo Kofi who is in charge of the sacred place and the person whose duty is to perform all rites. Addo Kofi in a personal communication stated that the room where the stools in Abiriw has been partitioned to separate the stools while few seats are provided in the other half to allow petitioners to sit and present their cases. then after he goes to the other half and communicates the spirits. Since seats are not provided in the inner room in Akwamufie, the moderator who is the *Gyasewahene* of Akwamu has to squat or kneel to perform all rites which is also another way of showing respect to the ancestors. In addition to performing rituals and rites, the moderator is also responsible for feeding the stools.
- Visiting the *nkonwa fie* is to be on a fasting basis such that nobody takes in any food before, during the period of the rites (to signify spiritual readiness and pureness). Everybody is permitted to break their fast after all rites have been performed and you are out of the stool house.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The stool house remains the main source of power, comfort and deliverance as much respect is given to it. In essence, there is the belief that once you visit the stool house with your worries and have a consultation with the deities and ancestors, you worry are deemed to have been dealt with.

It, therefore, recommended that this knowledge unearthed needs to be transmitted to the youth to preserve Akwamu heritage as these regalia convey historic facts about the Akwamu kingdom.

5. References

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