

## **The *Okule* Cult Education and Practice in Ghana**

Samuel Ntewusu,  
Richard Awubomu,  
Diana Amoni Ntewusu,  
Grace Adasi  
*University of Ghana, Ghana*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

*Using oral interviews, archival sources, observation, and published materials, we discuss the recruitment and training processes of the Okule Cult, an all-female cult. We analyze information obtained from the Nawuris of Northern Ghana to give insights into the relevance of Okule education practices to communities in Ghana. Knowledge about how members of the Okule cult educate new inductees and younger members advances our understanding of the continued importance of African Traditional Education. It would aid efforts to decolonize education on the African continent. The findings of our study can help educational authorities provide a balanced and holistic educational experience to learners.*

**Keywords:** Balai, Chankpana, Education, Environment, Guan, Kiliji, Nawuri, Okule.

---

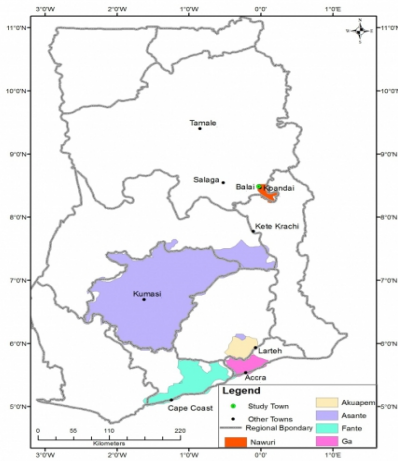
## INTRODUCTION

Ross (2004), in her paper on indigenous art and knowledge systems, points out the tensions between pre-colonial and post-colonial forms of education in Ghana. She indicates that the so-called post-colonial forms of education emphasize reading, mathematics, and other subjects, contributing to an excessive focus on completion and examination results. Unlike the 'modern' forms of education, the indigenous system of education developed as a system of teaching and learning that served the needs of a non-literate people. Communities designed it to impart their accumulated wisdom, knowledge, values, beliefs, and attitudes to the younger generation. Boutte, Johnson, and Muki (2019) point out that intergenerational, local, indigenous knowledge still resides in cultural memories. Through time, African knowledge systems whiles transformed have not been abandoned and are readily apparent- particularly in rural communities in Africa. Such knowledge systems have adapted to the times and continue to help societies solve pressing social issues and challenges.

In this paper, we carry the discussion further by using the *Okule* cult as a case study. Our analysis demonstrates that despite the importance attached to western forms of education in Ghana, the *Okule* education system, as an indigenous educational system, is equally relevant and has contributed to the enhancement of society, especially among Guans of Northern Ghana. We conclude by highlighting some of the cult's challenges.

## THE STUDY AREA AND METHODS

We conducted the study in several communities in the Northern and Volta Regions of Ghana, West Africa. The notable towns and villages that served as the research site include Kpandai, Balai, Nkanchina, Katiejeli, Kete Krachi, Keri, Shiare, Lesenai, and Nkwanta. Ethnic profiles of these communities composed mainly of Guans, particularly Nawuri, Achode, Krachi, Ntrubo, Chala, and Adele. It is essential to indicate, however, that our work in the Nawuri area, particularly in Balai Village, was more extensive than other towns. A substantial portion of the analysis in this paper reflects insights and perspectives from Balai. The reason for settling on Balai is that they have maintained much of their traditions compared to other communities.



Study area: Map adapted from Emmanuel Akyeampong and Samuel A. Ntewusu “Rum, Gin and Maize: Deities and Ritual Change in the Gold Coast during the Atlantic Era (16<sup>th</sup> century to 1850)” *Afriques*, vol. 5, 2014, p. 2.

As non-members of the cult, the elders perform elaborate rites and rituals each time we visit before answering our question. These rituals involved water, a calabash full of herbs harvested from the bush, a local alcoholic beer called *pito*, and other metal objects. The leaders mix the materials and use the mixture to offer traditional prayers in the form of libation before giving us the calabash and water to wash our head, face, and feet (Ntewusu & Ntewusu, 2020). Rather than a detailed questionnaire prepared on a piece of paper, we chose to ask questions based on our previous observations of activities in the cult. With this unstructured format, the research had a natural flow that yielded very detailed results. We were aware that *Okule*, as a group, holds onto many cultural and traditional practices; therefore, carrying a piece of paper with questions could interfere with the process and protocols regarding information delivery. It would have created a barrier between authors and the research community.

Although the *Okule* cult has a long history, at the moment we were unable to locate any document on them in Ghana’s national archives. However, there were files regarding some traditional religious practices and practitioners including the history of deities that provided insights into traditional religion in Ghana. For example, there was detailed information on shrines, such as *Kankpe*, *Brukum*, and *Dente*. Those files gave us insights into the religious landscape in the study area. The Roman Catholic Church had an organization called Tamale Institute for Cross-Cultural Studies (TICCS), which had some records on the cult. A Roman Catholic priest, in the 1980s,

commissioned about five parishioners to research into the phenomenon of the *Okule* cult in the area. The research report, which was about five pages, had more to do with the origin and membership of the cult. The information from TICCS was useful in understanding the history and geographical spread of the *Okule* cult.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE *OKULE* CULT**

*Okule* is a corruption of *Okuoku*, which is a form of greeting among members of the *Okule* cult (TICCS, *Okule* papers, 1980). Historically, the cult is said to have originated from Atakpame in Togo. It spread from there to Anyagna and other parts of Togo and Ghana. But recent research reveals that the *Okule* cult has its roots from Nigeria. Among devotees in Ghana, they call their deity *Chankpana*, a corruption of *Shankpana*, the name of a deity among the Yoruba of Nigeria. There are linguistic similarities between the cult language and Yoruba. Kropp-Dakubu refers to the *Okule* language as one that has been ‘Yoruboid’ (Kropp-Dakubu, 2013).

Our field observations and insights gained from various discussions lead us to the conclusion that several factors, marriage, migration, and trade, can explain the presence of the cult in Ghana. Trade and migration of the Yoruba could have played a vital role in the spread of the *Okule* Cult. Regarding trade, there had been an extended network of trade systems that connected many communities and trade centers in West Africa. For example, the trans-Saharan trade was a major mode through which trade articles, such as gold, cowries, hides, salt, kola nuts, and ironware, circulated within the sub-region. The circulation of trade articles also came along with migration and the foundation of communities. In Ghana, such trades led to the establishment of migrant residential communities called *zongos* (Ntewusu, 2012).

The composition of *zongos* in Ghana in the pre-colonial period had ethnicities such as Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Zambrama, Mande, just to mention but few. In the Nawuri area, for example, there was such a thriving community in Balai called *Sabon Gyida*, which in Hausa means ‘New House’ or ‘New Settlement.’ Residents of these communities were mostly Yoruba and Hausa traders from Nigeria. The community was abandoned in 1969 following the Aliens Compliance Order, which was then introduced by then Prime Minister Kofi Abrefa Busia, which saw the repatriation of a number of people from the Sahel and Nigeria to their countries of origin (Pel, 1971). The Yoruba, both at the time that they were in Balai and after departure, did not have so much ritual or linguistic connection to influence the cult. In the same manner, the *Okule* language does not appear to be based on known language matrix of the area like Nawuri, Konkomba, or Gonja, that is, no other

languages were found in the women's linguistic repertoire (Brindle et al., 2015).

Even though *Okule* members dispute the influence of Yoruba on their language, they admit that the most important legacy that *Sabon Gyda* had in Balai and many other areas in the Nawuri area is its influence on their 'pass out' ritual; they use materials that can be traced to the Sabon Gyda culture.<sup>1</sup> These material, include cowries, maria Theresa coins, British pence, and Yoruba beads. These objects were generally called *ewo* in Kiliji or *afule* in Nawuri, which means money. The argument is that even though the Yoruba community may not have been directly involved in the recruitment and training process, they provided the material essential to the cult's functioning. As Birgit Meyer and Houtman points out, there can be no religion without material objects (Meyer and Houtman, 2012).

## DISCUSSION

### Recruitment

Before becoming a member, an individual goes through recruitment and training. Recruitment is open to all females. There are about two key means through which people join the cult. The first is through voluntary or free will; the next has to do with possession. If any female wants to be a member voluntarily, she will first place her hands on the head and start shouting the words *jei, jei, jei*, while running to the residence of the cult leader - that is the *Olami*. On arrival the *Olami* will send for other senior members of the cult, libation is poured to *Chankpana* to accept the newcomer. This kind of recruitment is common in households where mothers, aunts, and sisters are already part of the cult. The recruit would have had enough time to study and observe actions of the cult members in their household and reflect on the issue over time before deciding to join. With recruitment through possession, the spirit of the *Chankpana* deity enters or takes over the individual who runs to the *Olami*'s house. The individual will also utter the words *jei, jei, jei*, but it would be involuntary. What marks the difference between voluntary and involuntary has to do with place and behavior. With involuntary, the individual could be possessed from anywhere. It could be in the market or on the farm or any other place. In the case of the voluntary, the individual would usually be in the house and start shouting. Behavior wise, with the voluntary, it becomes easier for the recruit to calm down after libation. Whereas

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Pass out or passing out' is a term used in Ghana for any graduation ceremony held for apprentices who have gone through a period of training.

involuntary, the recruit is usually restless and could run around the community and throw herself on the ground with the least available chance. The *Olami* will have to continuously recite incantations to calm down the restlessness and keep the person in place.

There are two minor sources of recruitment that we also need to be aware of. If a person got possessed during pregnancy, once the baby is born and she is a female, the baby automatically becomes a member of the cult. But to be fully accepted, she needs to learn the language as well. Also, after the passing away of one of the cult leaders, the cult chooses a member of her family to take over her leadership position.

Recruitment usually begins in June at the start of the rainy season. Training starts in July and ends around September or October. The reason for this period is that from July, the 'lean' season, usually characterized by insufficient food, would have been over. From July till December, most of the crops would have been ready for harvesting, especially the staple food yam. The availability of food makes the training more accessible. If not, the *Olami*, as well as members, will have to find ways and means to feed them. Also, there is a yearly visit by *Chankpana* around September or October, which is celebrated as a festival. Such visits allow the new devotees to experience and participate in activities during the festivities. Finally, as part of their training, the newcomers are supposed to understand the ecological profile of their respective areas. During this period, the vegetation is green thereby allowing them to know more about flora and fauna in those areas.

### **Training**

The formal acceptance process begins after recruiting a number of young women, which usually ranges from a minimum of four to a maximum of two hundred. The initial process starts when the leaders take away all the cloths that the recruits wore to the *Olami*'s house. The fabrics are considered unclean henceforth. The recruits now wear only cowries around their waist, ankles, wrists, and necks. Those who could afford smaller bells could buy and tie them on their ankles. The bells signal their presence as they walk around the community. They do not cover their top and have breasts exposed. They, however, wear a tiny 'G-String-like' cloth called *Lolo*, which is just enough to cover their private parts. The *Olami* officially perform rites to begin the training. She gives the group a collective name- *Aleri*, which means newcomers or novices. They abandon their ancestral or day names and are also supposed to distinguish themselves in the way they walk. For example, they are not supposed to walk too fast and are not supposed to raise their heads when walking. They always have to look down when walking. They are not

supposed to look back, left, or right, and their palms have to face forward as they walk. They are not supposed to respond to any call from any member of the society except members of the cult and are equally not to participate in any social activities in the community. If they want to greet the elderly in the community, they do so while kneeling. Such respectable gesticulations usually attract some monetary compensation from the elders.

Even though they are regarded as newcomers and collectively referred to as *Aleri*, the first to arrive for training is given the name *Onimgbo*, and the last person is also called *Nkianyi*. These two names have interesting implications for training and discipline in the cult.

As already noted, an essential aspect of the training process is language education. The recruits are supposed to speak the cult language called *Kiliji*. All activities are done in that language - daily communication, singing, ritual performances, and divination. Since the training period is an essential rite of passage for recruits, all the senior leadership of the cult participates in the various activities. The leaders, include *Orlami*, the overall head; *Onuagyimgyi*, senior cult members or council of elders; *Omaseibo*, the diviner; *Olami Akpakya*, the disciplinarian or commander in the cult - she is highly respected and feared by all members; *Olikukuami*, the lead singer; *Alagbe*, the drummer; and *Ola Gongong*, the gong beater or public announcer. Sometimes old members and recently graduated ones also come around to help with the training. They start off with names of objects, colors, and verbs, such as come, go, eat, take, and so on. Much later, they go into complex issues, such as the construction of sentences, among others. Each week, they test the competence of the recruits as to whether they are having a better grasp of the language or not.

Informants indicate that learning the language sometimes is not too difficult because it is an immersion program. As soon as the training starts, all the people are not supposed to speak their native languages again. They speak *kiliji* or *kitaba*, as they sometimes referred to the language, until they complete their training. Being inundated with words daily facilitates the process of learning and appreciation of words and construction of sentences. At times funny names are introduced to facilitate learning. For instance, they could give funny names, such as *Agyanakuli*, which means elephant, *Tugulu* - the short one or *Gugu* - the tall one, to the recruits.

At the time of training, they are supposed to stay in the house of the *Olami*. Family members could visit and present gifts, mainly foodstuff and money. Such offertories went into a shared pool and used to prepare meals for the entire group and their instructors or mentors. When family visit, they can speak any indigenous language to their relative who is under training, but

she cannot respond in her native language. This usually creates some interesting drama during visits. Family members, especially those who do not understand the new language, often become confused, causing misunderstanding between locals and members of the cult. Recruits, at times, resort to gestures and sign language to facilitate understanding. If a recruit in the process mistakenly speaks any other language, the person needs to recant and go to the *Olami* for confession and ‘cleansing of the mouth.’ This usually involves libation to *Chankpana* to have mercy and forgive the new devotee. Aside from words and sentences, they are also taught how to sing in *kiliji*. Most of the songs usually refer to the environment, the spirit world, and other social issues. Trainers focus on language education and music initially because verbal communication and songs are critical to the functioning of the cult.

Aside from language, other forms of training include home science, especially cooking and how to keep a home, farm work, brewing of local beer, local geography, and the environment. Indeed the last point is very important to their physical and spiritual life. After acquiring the basic vocabulary, they send them to the bush, where they learn local flora and fauna. The bush experience could last for several hours daily or at times two or more consecutive days. This is done almost frequently for over a month. The experience in the bush enables them to know how the spirit world interacts with humans. They also are taught the various uses of animals and plants. This bush experience culminates in a series of taboos, including a ban on killing or harming reptiles, especially the python, which is considered very sacred. According to their oral tradition, since *Chankpana* is not always available, its power has been delegated to the python to protect all *Okule* members.

During training, recruits observe other taboos. For example, they do not receive gifts from male members of the community, apart from their biological father or foster father. They can receive gifts from any woman. As an all-female cult, they consider gifts from men as a form of pollution - *enesi*. They also ban sex during the period of training for the same reason. The only fluids that should go into their body at the time of training are water and beverages, not semen. Members of the society are also not supposed to touch the head of new devotees during the period of training. It is the belief that *Chankpana* inhabits the head during this entire period of training, so touching the head has serious spiritual implications for the trainee. Those who touch the head are given a fine of drinks and a sheep. At a practical level, since much of the things taught must be committed to memory, it is assumed that touching the head could have a distractive effect on the trainees.



After about three or four months of training, the trainees would have completed the rituals required and would have to ‘graduate’/pass out. Usually, a specific date is chosen. In Nawuri, the day is called *Kikpaa*.<sup>2</sup> In Akan, it is called *Akwasiadae*. *Kikpaa* is a forty to forty-two-day circle. From the time of recruitment until graduation, trainees go through about three to four *Akpaa* (pl). The graduation takes place at the end of the forty-two-day circle. It is usually a day of merrymaking. The graduates start their day by bathing in the river or streams with herbs harvested from the bush and adorn their bodies. They wear white cloth that covers the breast till the knees. They also decorate their ankles, necks, wrists, waist, and head with cowries, beads, and coins. The number of objects tied or hanged around an individual’s body conveys their status in the community; people who are respected and admired wear adorn themselves with more objects. Commentaries and phraseologies such as ‘*Ei* this person is very rich, look at the number of cowries and coins adorning their outfit’ are common as the recruits walk majestically in a single file from the river or stream. As they walk, they sing ritual songs while raising their hands in the air and touch their shoulders. They move till they get to a designated area in the town, usually around a *ficus* tree – *kilampo*, where they form a circle and begin dancing. After a while, they kneel, and the *Olami* with a scepter comes around and ‘literally sits’ on each recruit - it is one of the critical stages through which the *olami* pass or transfer the divinity to them. After that rite, sacrifices are made to accept them as members of the cult finally. On the day of graduation, they abandon the name *Aleri* and take new cult names. Members will from hence only call them by the cult names and not the name given to them at birth.

The new members are allowed to show appreciation to family members through dance and by mimicking their family’s occupation, such as farming, hunting, blacksmithing, driving, and teaching. The drummer assigns drum tunes to each member. During public performances, the drummer would use those tunes to pass messages to such individuals. After everything is over, they go back to their homes and revert to their native language, only speaking *kiliji* when they are with members or want to pass on a piece of important information meant for members in public settings. Through the language, they are able to code off some categories of people in the community, particularly male members. But any time *Chankpana* visits them, they speak *kiliji* irrespective of their location. Such visits could last a week or one month. They

---

<sup>2</sup> *Kikpaa* is singular and *Akpaa* is plural.

consider such visits important as that enables them to keep the language and rituals alive.

### **Putting knowledge to practice: the *okule* and society**

Every society has its cultural knowledge system which is drawn upon to serve society or solve societal problems. The *Okule* cult is an avenue where members accumulate techniques and skills that are used for their survival and the smooth functioning of the communities where they live. In this section, we discuss how the *Okule* cult members utilize the knowledge they gain from their training to contribute to the advancement of their communities. Their cult education helps them develop a sense of purpose and moral value, manage their homes, health, environment, and participate in festivals and war.

One key element in *Okule* membership is the issue of unity and togetherness. Synergic existence or communalism is very central to their activities and life. The close relationship that binds them together promotes the ethos that whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group. They are the most united and organized group so far in all the communities. To promote this unity, they are not supposed to quarrel or harbor any ill-feeling against each other. In the same way, they are supposed to come to the aid of any member. There is evidence of group members coming together to discipline men whose behavior is considered unacceptable in society. Examples include abuse of all kinds, including rape and unguarded hunting, especially the killing of endangered animal species, particularly reptiles. Usually, their actions cannot be reported to the police or sent outside of the community.

In the pre-colonial period, they run a kind of traditional lending scheme called *katubakatuba*, where during farming season, those who have high yielding seeds gave out to members to plant. Upon harvesting, a portion is given to the member that gave out the seeds. When local economies got monetized, they still operated their own lending scheme through what is popularly referred to as *susu*. The *susu* system is a traditional savings system, which is thought to have originated in Nigeria and came to Ghana in the early twentieth century. The *susu* system covers a range of activities known as *susu*, including individual savings collectors, rotating savings and credit associations, and savings and credit “clubs” run by an operator (Awunyo-Vitor, 2015). By this system, they have become less dependent on society. Indeed, there are testimonies of members of communities, particularly men going to them to borrow money to meet their pressing needs. At the death of a member, they all come together to perform the funeral of the dead according to the protocols of the cult. Since funerals are a great deal in Ghana, members

are assured that if they die, even if they do not have any siblings, their funeral would be performed. In Ghana, there is the belief in life after death. Therefore, funerals are not just events that mark the end of an individual's life but also the beginning of another life. If one lived a good life and rendered service to society as in the case of the *Okule* cult, one would become an ancestor. Such a position allows her to be able to intervene in the affairs of the living, especially those in her community.

Also, *Okule* members share the view that going through training makes them very pure and morally upright. According to them, several rules and regulations govern the operations of cult members. These rules keep members from doing evil and causing mischief in society. As we have previously noted, the training offered by the cult was the only mode of education, so they had no competitors when it came to traditional literacy. Members of their society considered them to be an elite group that caught the envy of several people in the community. As a result, many looked up to them as role models. Even today, some members of their communities continues to rely on them for the moral training of children. People turn to them for their children's moral education because they want their children to learn how to respect the elderly and develop clear ethical rules regarding sex.

Furthermore, their home science education help them succeed in their marital life. The *Olami* and several senior members of the cult shared the view that usually in every community until cult members are married off, the rest of the non-*Okule* women had no chances of getting husbands. For them, it is not only about morality; it is also a question of security. The men feel more secured when they are married to cult members. "There is an added spiritual force in the house that can fight against malevolent spirits, and this is what the men look out for," says the *Olami*'s assistant. One of the informant also noted that "We have an antidote to several spiritual attacks. When I or any family member is under attack, I will take any stick and chant words in it and shout *jaaalo* and hit the ground or any object with it, and definitely, there will be an intervention from *Chankpana*."

Closely related to the issue of morality and intervention in crises is the issue of divination and healing. From interactions with members, it became obvious that almost all the members are introduced into spiritual life during training. The *Omaseibo*, as already pointed, is a diviner herself. She is part of the team that accompanies the trainees into the bush. Their time in the bush allows them to interact with other spirit beings, collectively referred to as *Ayayu*. They are taught to decipher activities of these *Ayayu* using different approaches such as the direction and flow of the wind, the sound from particular animals, and birds. With an understanding of the way the sacred

world operates, they are able to intervene in the spiritual affairs of individuals and community members, especially on issues related to sickness, misfortune, and death, which are usually referred to them for solution or interpretation.

On the issue of sickness and healing informants, indicate that at a point in history, chickenpox had plagued many communities in the area and beyond. *Chankpana* emerged and performed a miracle that healed several people that were afflicted. From the narrative, it is evident that healing and seeking remedies for numerous problems is one of the reasons why people choose to join the cult. Indeed, [several practical elements within the training process support our conclusion. As already noted, in the course of the training, members spend some time in the bush. This period allows them to learn more about how to use herbs and other plants to treat various ailments. Indeed on the day of passing out, usually a calabash full of herbs and water is brought to the community for non-*Okule* members to fetch home for their use. It is believed that the herbs provide healing and solution to numerous problems. Almost every time that the spirit visits the community what they usually call '*Chankpana Kibaa*' on the final day of celebration of the presence of *Chankpana* the same calabash full of herbs is carried about town, and people with all manner of problems come to fetch the water for purposes of healing or resolving their problems.

Usually, community members place a premium on medicinal products from *Okule* members since the cult has diviners as part of their operational and healing system. In most communities in Ghana, the belief is that most sicknesses have spiritual or non-physical elements to them. Various scholars have drawn attention to this fact in their works. For example, Twumasi (2005), in his study on medical systems in Ghana, posits that spirituality plays a major role as far as the concept of healing is concerned. He admits that even though traditional medicine practitioners have a stock of remedies for treating illnesses at various levels, the emphasis is also laid on magico-religious aspects to ensure holistic healing; this is due to religious beliefs that are intricately entwined to social life. In a similar vein, Dove (2010), in his work on traditional health care in Ghana draws attention to the practice where, in addition to herbal remedies, pregnant women in some Ghanaian communities are taught some taboos to help protect the pregnancy from evil spirits. Also, Mohr (2009) reports that among the Akan, illness and misfortune are not perceived just as physical problems. They carry spiritual connotations and cannot be resolved without recourse to the supernatural. As such, whether at an individual or community level, illness or misfortune is believed to come about as a result of an imbalance between the spirit world,

especially ancestors and deities, and the physical world. It is in that context that people prefer the treatment from the *Okule* members.

Still on the issue of healing, the *Okules* define environment degradation as a form of sickness. Each year, they provide, what they term, 'environmental healing' by going into the bush and coming up with new rules and regulations that protect the environment. As already pointed out, in most cases, cult members spend some time in the bush to acquaint themselves with plant and animal life. A yearly return to the forest allows them to take inventory of plants, animals, and insects that are facing extinction. They then devise strategies, such as taboos, to deal with that problem. Indeed one of their songs clearly defines this role:

Song: *Agneniwa ndoye agnenanawanoye agnawakyiluordor  
Ogyeyorwakyikola agna agnawanoye*

Translation: The day you come, and you don't meet us, we are at work. The day you come, and you don't meet us. We are behind the bush in the mountain.

As explained by informants, the word at work in the song refers to the recruitment and initiation process. Behind the mountains is used to denote the activities that take place in the sacred forest for the stipulated period in the bush (Awubomu, 2014). Their yearly activities in the bush, leading to the imposition of new environmental rules, have helped maintain a balance between human activities and flora and fauna. In addition to taboos, they have physically intervened to prevent over-cultivation of lands through the ritual of 'basket placement,' which is a form of ban on farming on areas where the basket is placed till the area becomes fertile again. As indicated above, their action is to ensure that people use the land responsibly. If the ecosystem is thrown out of balance, it can affect the communities they inhabit. The role of the environment in providing the community with medicines to curb sicknesses has already been pointed out. Additionally, most of the reptiles that are *Okule* totems inhabit forests and water bodies, which makes members enforce rules that prevent overexploitation as that will have adverse effects on their totems. In this context, the killing of particular reptiles, such as crocodiles and pythons, is considered desecration by the members, and offenders are immediately sanctioned.

Regulating the interaction between humans and the environment by cult members is borne out of observation that there is a link between agriculture and the environment. Imbalance in the environment can affect time tested agricultural practices, much of which is dependent on rainfall. Since most of the communities rely on rain-fed agriculture, such taboos that regulate the environment to ensure sustained agricultural practices is key.

Within Nawuri communities, one also can appreciate the role of *Okule* members in the celebration of festivals and life cycle events. Nawuris have about two key festivals, namely the yam festival and the guinea corn/sorghum festival. These two festivals are harvest festivals. But aside from these two festivals, some communities also have other festivals that they celebrate. Nawuri festivals are important occasions when members of the community show appreciation to their ancestors as well as deities for protecting them throughout the year and providing them with food. Festivals are also an occasion where people affirm their values and belief systems.

Among the festivals, it is in the guinea corn festival that one feels the presence and energy of *Okule* members. There are several reasons for this, but our explanation will focus on the history of traditional religion and entrepreneurship. Like all religions in the world, the *Okule* cult does not exist in isolation. It operates within a social and religious structure. The Guans are very much attached to their deities. Popular ones include *Akoned* shrine at Larte, *Brukum* at Shiari, *Dente* at Kete Krachi, *Kankpe* at Balai, among others. Incidentally, some of the members of the *Okule* cult are also priestesses called *asiepu chisa* in those shrines. It is this link, in addition to the skills in entrepreneurship, which they develop as a result of their cult education that makes them an integral part of festivities in every area that they are found in Nawuriland.

Another reason for their active engagement in the festival is that it helps them preserve the purity of their god, *Chankpana*. The brewing of the local alcoholic beverage called *pito* is an important economic activity of women in the Nawuri area. It is an industry entirely operated by women. Until the guinea corn festival is celebrated, women are not allowed to brew *pito* with the newly harvested crop. They can do so with the old stock that they have. The reason for not preparing the *pito* with the new crop until the festival is celebrated is that it would lead to contamination of the land and the deities, including *Chankpana*. There is a symbiotic relationship between the festival and the brewery industry. *Okule* members and women in the brewery industry participate actively in the festival because it facilitates the lifting of the ban on the use of new guinea corn, which will enable them to engage in their brewery as it is an important source of employment for the women (Zimon, 1990).

It must be emphasized that without *pito* a number of social, religious, and economic activities would grind to a halt. *Pito* plays an important role in the lives of Nawuris. Almost all members of the Nawuri society drink it. It plays an important leisure role. When farmers return from the farm, they normally retire under trees and drink *pito* (Ntewusu, 2016). *Pito* is most often

used to pour libation at every occasion- marriage, naming ceremonies, funerals and festivals. Indeed clan and family heads must perform sacrifices of animals to clan and family deities, but that must be preceded with libation using *pito*. Certainly, there are other forms of alcoholic beverages, but the over-dependence on *pito* is what is of essence in this discussion. As religious people, several people believe that the *pito* that *Okule* members brew is sanctified. They are not just ordinary women; they have gone through various processes of spirit purification during their training that gives their products, including *pito*, some spiritual sanctity.

Finally, community members in the whole Northern Guan area have indicated the intervention of the *Okule* in a number of wars that they fought in the area. For example, in the latter part of the 1800s, a group of Akan slave raiders came to Kete Krachi and Kpandai to conduct raids. The *Olami* elites and male hunters and warriors met and fought them. In the end, Afreh Sarfo and his band of raiders were defeated. Also, during the ethnic conflicts in the North of Ghana in the 1990s, *Okule* members were involved. Chiefs in the area came to the *Olami* to intervene through libation to *Chankpana* for victory in war. Some members of the cult went to the battlefield with their sticks circling enemy communities and chanting *chankpana* songs and shouting *jaalo jaalo* (As we have already noted, this is a word in *kiliji* that is used in times of danger or trouble.). In war, its use is supposed to break down the power of the enemy. It appears that during training, the educators prepare members for war. As an informant indicates, “in the bush, we talk about war, and we are like warriors; we face anything that we encounter.”

Indeed one of their songs bears testimony to this:

Song: *Gborna yie ankwaasa gborna, Agneniwakyiluordor  
Ormorkyorgna ankwaasa gborna  
Lalignele Oningborgna, ornorkyorgna ankwaasa gborna*

Translation: War? we do not fear war; our presence as warriors urges the community to fight and become free as a happy people.

This song is reinforced by the observations of Michael Jordan, who points out that “Shankpana, plaque god, of the Yoruba, the son of Shango, he is credited with once been a God of war who invaded the country. His symbol is the sesame tree which takes the form of a taboo... a festival is held in September to propiate shankpana with sacrifices of animals and fruits” (Jordan, 2004, p. 283). A male informant indicated that because *Chankpana* is associated with *Ogun*, the women can decide who can go to war or not. Additionally, the Nawuris believe that, as far as issues of spirituality are concerned, women have a natural advantage. Nawuris are of the view that it is a woman who gives birth to all sexual categories; that is why during naming

ceremonies, the name of the male child is mentioned thrice into the ear, and that of the female child is mentioned four times (Ntewusu and Ntewusu).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, among Nawuris, in any fight, if a woman tells a man to fight or not to fight, he must obey. They possess an extra spirit that enables them to see beyond the physical. Being permitted to go to war is a sign of protection or blessing. There is the belief that if an *Okule* woman tells someone not to go to war and, he refuses, he might be killed. This belief gains vitality because the patron deity of *Okule* is *Ogun*. As Jordan hinted at in his quote above, *Ogun* is the god of iron and also a master tradesman. In the Nawuri area, almost all their weapons of human destruction, such as bows and arrows, spears, and guns, are locally produced. Incidentally, these war objects - spears, knives, and guns, are within *ogun's* operation domain and, by extension, *Okule* members. So obtaining some form of blessing from them is very necessary for war.

### **The challenges**

Even though *Okule* plays an important role in their communities, there are a number of factors that inhibit the smooth operations and progression of the cult. The first has to do with changes in the geopolitical landscape of Ghana. Following partitioning of Africa, almost all the Nawuri, Krachi, Nchumburu, Adele, Ntrubo, and Achode areas fell under German rule. As part of the German administration of the area all manner of traditional worship was put under strict regulations. Two Dente shrine priests were executed, and a number of priests of various shrines fled their communities (Public Records and Archives Administration Department, hereafter PRAAD, Accra, ADM 11/1/782, History of the Kete-Kractchi People, 1920; ADM 11/1/751, Dente Fetish). *Okule* cult members could not perform freely. After the defeat of Germany during the World Wars, the area came under British colonialism. Just as the Germans, the British were already against traditional religion (PRAAD, Accra, ADM 11/884, Objectionable Native Customs, 1904). They either banned the worship of particular deities or interfered in their operations (PRAAD, Tamale, NRG 8/2/210, Nawuri and Nanjuro Under United Nations Trusteeship. 1951-1954). The *Okule* cult was not spared from these regulations.

---

<sup>3</sup> In war, Nawuri warriors are not supposed to kill women. They believe it is difficult to neutralize the spirit of a woman who has been killed in the war. If one kills a woman in war, that person cannot live his full life on earth, since her spirit will definitely take revenge on the culprit.



One would have felt that after colonialism, post-colonial governments would work towards the protection of cults, but instead, there were instances where actions of government directly or indirectly affected most cultural practices, including activities of cults. Starting from 1966 until 1993, Ghana did not have a smooth and continuous democratic rule. There were several military interventions in Ghana's politics. Military regimes often impose curfews, and once curfews are imposed, there are no exceptions for individuals or groups. Such a lack of appreciation of unique groups, such as the *Okule* and their activities, certainly affected recruitment and training. For example, since the 1980s, some Nawuri communities have not had new recruits. This is a clear case of extinction of the cult in the future.

The second factor has to do with Islam and Christianity. Islam was introduced to the area around the fourteenth century and has co-existed with the cult until the introduction of mission-oriented Islam in the 1940s. Mission-oriented Islam has strict regulations regarding the practice of Islam. For example, worshipping any other deity aside from Allah is not acceptable. With such prohibitions, it becomes difficult for those who have converted to Islam to participate fully in activities of the cult.

Additionally, from the 1960s, the area of study has been experiencing activities of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. These two branches of Christianity are completely against the worship of deities and ancestors. Unlike the Catholic and Presbyterian churches that offer members the chance to reflect and convert, the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches launch direct attacks on the cult and their activities. Prayer sessions are organized to pray against the cult and its members. Those members that have converted to charismatic and Pentecostal churches are told to stop participating in the activities of the cult with immediate effect.

A third threat is Western Education. The curriculum of Western education makes it difficult for girls to be able to combine both systems. Getting enrolled in school means that one would have to spend a lot of time in the classroom. Since the time needed for training requires more time and could range from three to four months, it makes it difficult if not impossible for children of school-going age to be part of the *Okule* cult. Even if women have the intention of joining the cult after their education, they are hindered by the kind of jobs that comes along with the attainment of western education. Most educated people in the communities where *Okule* is popular prefer employment within the government sector. Such employments have strict rules involving work, such as reporting to work in the morning and closing in the evening. Also, apart from teaching, the area does not have other jobs available, so any other form of employment has the chance of one being

placed outside of her community. So, even if one becomes a member, practicing the cult would be problematic since they would be far removed from the daily realities and demands of the cult.

Finally, the introduction of modern technologies, such as electricity, sound systems with mega speakers, and other non-traditional illuminants, such as flashlights, seems to work against the smooth operation of the cult. The *Olami* noted that particular rituals need to be performed in the darkness. But with the introduction of electricity and flashlights, they are forced to relocate the arena of performance to the bush. *Chankpana*, at times, appears as a tall figure, usually with the head above all buildings in the community and wearing white robes. With these distinguishable features, one does not need light to recognize the presence of *Chankpana*. So once *Chankpana* appears for the night rituals, no one is supposed to use a flashlight to watch the face of *Chankpana* or the devotees. They indicate that at least once or twice, there were some attempts to use flashlights into the arena of performance, forcing them to relocate. They are worried because relocating the night rituals has the tendency to rob communities of blessings. A similar predicament exists when they try to receive messages from *Chankpana*. With the introduction of sound systems, noise levels have gone very high, making it difficult for them to get messages since some of the messages from *Chankpana* are sent through whispers.

## CONCLUSION

This paper uses the educational practices of the *Okule* cult to make the case that traditional forms of education are relevant to society. The article argues that there was a direct relationship between *Okule* cult activities and the needs of society. These societal needs, such as morality, healing, protection, issues of the divine, festivals, the environment, warfare, and rites of passage, often brought communities closer to cult members. Despite the usefulness of the cult in communities where it exists, its activities have been affected by unstable political systems, Western education, Islam and Christianity, and modernity, specifically the introduction of sound systems, electricity, and flashlights. More than anything else, it was colonialism, Islam, and Christianity that succeeded in creating a kind of binary between cult members and non-cult members. By the activities of Islamic and Christian practitioners and colonial authorities, *Okule* was set aside and vilified. This has not only affected recruitment it has also discouraged existing members from actively participating in the rituals of the cult. Such actions have the tendency to affect community cohesion and progress since traditional systems

of education, such as *Okule*, contributes to society's development in several ways.

## REFERENCES

- Akyeampong, E. & Ntewusu, S. (2014). Rum, gin and maize: Deities and ritual change in the Gold Coast during the Atlantic Era (16<sup>th</sup> century to 1850). *Afriques*, 5, 1-20.
- Awubomu, R. (2014). A study of the Okule Cult of Nawuris of Northern Ghana (Unpublished Mphil Thesis, University of Ghana, Legon, Greater Accra).
- Awunyo-Vitor, D. (2015). Informal financial market in Ghana: Factors influencing participation by maize farmers. *Savings and Development*, 39(1), 37-58.
- Boutte, G., Johnson, G., & Muki, A. (2019). Revitalization of indigenous African knowledges among people in the African Diaspora, In Lamar, L., Johnson, G., Boutte, G., Gwenda, G., & Smith, D. (eds). *African diaspora literacy: The heart of transformation in K-12 schools and teacher education*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Brindle, J., Kambon, O., & Kropp Dakubu, M.E. (2015). Kilji an unrecorded spiritual language of eastern Ghana. *Journal of West African Languages*, XLII (1), 65-88.
- Jordan, M. (2004). *Dictionary of god and goddesses*. New York, NY: Facts on File.
- Kropp-Dakubu, M.E. (2013). Research on vanishing languages and practices in the Northern Guang area in Ghana: A preliminary report. *Ghana Journal of Linguistics*, 2 (1), 79-86.
- Meyer, B. & Houtman, D. (2012). Introduction: Material - how things matter. In Houtman, D. & Meyer, B. (eds.) *Things: Religion and the question of materiality*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press,
- Mohr, A. (2009). Missionary medicine and Akan therapeutics: Illness, health and healing in Southern Ghana's basel mission, 1828-1918. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 39(4), 429-461.
- Nah, D. (2010). A return to traditional health care practices: A Ghanaian study. *Journal of Black Studies*, 40(5), 823-834.
- Ntewusu, S. (2012). *Settling in and Holding on, a socio-historical study of Northern Traders and Transporters in Accra's Tudu: 1908-2008*. Leiden, Netherlands: African Studies Centre.
- Ntewusu, S. (2016). Appealing for grace: The guinea corn festival of the Nawuri people of Northern Ghana. In Newbold, C., & Jordan, J. (eds), *Focus on World Festivals: contemporary case studies and perspectives*. Oxford, U.K.: Goodfellow Publishers.
- Ntewusu, S.A., & Ntewusu, D.A. (2020), 'Kidila: Libation as historical methodology: Insights from Ghana's Female Cult of Okule.' In Nina Paarman and Ntewusu Samuel (eds), *Beyond Dichotomies/ Jenseits von Dichotomien. Aspects of History, Gender and Culture in Africa and Europe*. LIT Publishers.

- Peil, M. (1971). The Expulsion of West African aliens. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 9(2), 205-229.
- Ross, M. (2004). Art at the crossroads: The contested position of indigenous arts in Ghana's post-colonial education systems. *Studies in Art Education*, 45(2), 117-134.
- Twumasi, P. (2005). *Medical systems in Ghana: A study in medical sociology*. Tema, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation.
- Zimoń, H. (1989). Guinea corn harvest rituals among the Konkomba of Northern Ghana. *Anthropos*, 84, (4/6), 447-458.
- 

**SAMUEL NTEWUSU, Ph.D.**, is a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. His major research interest is in the area of historiography, history of transport and urbanization, and labor history. Email: [santewusu@ug.edu.gh](mailto:santewusu@ug.edu.gh) or [ntewusu@gmail.com](mailto:ntewusu@gmail.com).

**RICHARD AWUBOMU** is a Faculty at the University of Health and Allied Sciences in Ho, Volta Region and a PhD student at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. His area of interest is in female cults, traditional healing, and education. Email: [awubomurichard@yahoo.com](mailto:awubomurichard@yahoo.com).

**DIANA NTEWUSU** is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology, University of Ghana. Her research interest lie in education, public administration, ethnic and women studies, and the environment. Email: [dianaamoni@yahoo.com](mailto:dianaamoni@yahoo.com).

**GRACE ADASI** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Her research interests are indigenous religion, Christianity and gender. Email: [rev.graceadasi@gmail.com](mailto:rev.graceadasi@gmail.com).

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Reinvigorating Humanities Research Project at the University of Ghana (REHURE-UG) funded this project.

*Manuscript submitted: January 27, 2020*

*Manuscript revised: April 20, 2020*

*Accepted for publication: May 1, 2020*

---