
THE WORSHIP
OF THE
TANO FETISH

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THE GOD TANO

There are innumerable gods and fetishes in the Gold Coast, varying from the genii of natural phenomena such as rivers, rocks and trees, to those lesser spirits which take up a temporary residence in some carved effigy or other small material objects, which are easily portable and whose strength lies in some aspect of their history. One of the most famous of the natural gods is the River Tano; this river worship has become most widely known in connection with Ashanti, from Captain Rattray's books on Ashanti, and from the description he gives of local beliefs in his book of Ashanti proverbs. The worship of Tano is not, however, confined to Ashanti. The river which gives its name to the worship, and which plays a varying part in the ritual, rises in northern Ashanti near Techiman, and flows in a general southerly direction through Sefwi, where also it is worshipped, thence down between Aowin and Wassaw Amanfi, until at the end of its course it forms international water between the Gold Coast and the French Ivory Coast, flowing into the sea near Half Assini. This essay is limited to the worship of the Tano amongst the Aowins.

The Aowins are a small, and, even now, fairly remote tribe scattered through the thick forest area of S.W. part of the Gold Coast. The land they occupy is about 1,000 square miles in area and is bounded in the west by the Ivory Coast, in the south by Western Nzima, in the east by Wassaw and the north by Sefwi. In the south and east the physical boundary is the Tano itself. The Aowins do not figure largely in Gold Coast history. We presume that they originally came down from the north, and they are first heard of about 1700 as a powerful and wealthy tribe living in an area now occupied by the Wassaw Amanfis. Their wealth excited the greed of the Denkyiras who attacked them. After a long war the Aowins suffered a very heavy defeat, lost many killed and all their wealth, and were driven west across the Tano. From the Tano the remaining Aowins, or Brissas, occupied their new land which stretched west from the Tano. They spread right across into what is now the Ivory Coast, and are to-day divided by the French-British Boundary. The language, an Akan dialect, is the same and the two paramount stools of Enchi and Krinjabo have a common origin. From this time onward little contact with the outside world was made until the late 19th century. Bounded on all sides by miles of thick forest, with a big river, and mountains as additional barriers, it is no wonder that "civilization" was long in reaching Aowin. The result is that they have preserved their old beliefs which have not been contaminated by the addition of alien influence. The belief in Tano, may, perhaps have been brought down with them from Techiman, but now it bears no resemblance to the Ashanti worship, except in coincidental details, such as the fact that in both cults though for different reasons, a goat is anathema,

Tano is one of the two State gods in Aowin, of which the other is called Effue. This god is believed to be more powerful than Tano and is directly related to the paramount stool: it is said to be a rock suspended in the air just above the earth, situated in the hilly forest country towards the Aowin-Sefwi boundary. If this rock, which is presumably precariously balanced, falls, it is firmly believed that the Oman also will fall. It is impossible to get guides or carriers to go near the place, and although reputedly no one but the priest knows the site, there are many stories of Europeans, on timber survey, who have been deserted by their carriers on getting near the place. Besides Effue and Tano there are a number of smaller fetishes such as Esongo and Nzole and many very localised ones which have been brought from the Ivory Coast.

On the outskirts of every village you can see the small clearings with offerings to Tano, Effue and probably a local god; yet in spite of this widespread spirit cult there is surprisingly little public or communal observance of the worship, the knowledge of the ritual and the meaning of the worship is limited, and there is almost no pomp or pageantry even in the big November festival. However the innate belief is extremely strong, certainly by far the strongest supernatural belief at the present time. Of these many fetishes the Tano is the most widely observed and worshipped, and it is the only one to have a priest paid by the Native Authority; and it is also for many reasons by far the most interesting.

The worship of the Tano is centred on an island amongst the rapids upstream from Tanosu, on the southern boundary of Aowin State. The island is made remarkable by the presence there of a number of small carved stone figures. The origin of these figures is historically uncertain, but it is believed that they are the work of one of the earlier tribes who were driven down through the Gold Coast and eventually into oblivion. The figures, which occur elsewhere in the Gold Coast and in Nigeria, form a historical visiting card for these legendary tribes. The local belief is that in the old days there was, as there is now, a small fishing community on the island. One day one of the wives was due to give birth and her pains started, but after seven days' labour she was unable to deliver. The family therefore called in a doctor from south of Tano, a stranger, who told them that a goat would have to be sacrificed and that the woman could then recover. The goat is forbidden in Aowin, for reasons I will mention later, and the faithful protested against this sacrilege. The family however thought more of the survival of the woman and child than of piety and accordingly the goat was put in a canoe and brought over. The Tano then in a rage rose up and flooded the whole island, and all the villagers were turned to stone on the spot. The figures indeed show a woman giving birth, men playing dice, a woman pounding fufu and other daily happenings. These stones now form the outer circle of the worship and of the god's court. This story of a supposedly supernatural origin varies, but it may be interpreted as meaning simply that the stones were in place when the Brissas arrived and that their origin is unknown.

The island itself is in an impressive natural position, being separated from the banks by huge boulders, between and under which the river flows, except at flood seasons; the combination of thick forest and the mass of rocks and the river rushing beneath your feet as you clamber over to the island creates an atmosphere which conditions the visitor favourably for any subsequent impressions. From the crossing to the island worshippers go to the village and then on to the clearing in which are the stone figures and a cave. The cave is the centre of the cult and the dwelling of the god and no one but the priest and the priestess are allowed inside; all visitors must stop at a barrier some way short of the entrance. It is therefore not possible to say exactly what is inside, but the general beliefs are as follows:—

Over the entrance there are two conical bees' nests hanging down. As you enter you must not look at the bees, or try to avoid them; but must walk straight on. If the bees sting you as you go in, it means that some one has offended the god, and you must not proceed further. The present priest was stung once, and it was divulged later that the then Omanhene (now destooled) was having a disagreement with his wife. Further inside the cave you will meet three snakes and three crocodiles, who will allow the priest to pass if the god is not displeased, and who also will protect the god if anyone continues after first being stung by the bees. In the innermost part there are three leopards, the god himself and certain other things which no one will specify, but which are probably stone figures, and which form the immediate entourage of the god.

In addition to the cave and the figures there are also various other stones with special attributes. Immediately on reaching the island there are two large stones which are placed in the position of the large twin drums, and are called the "Atumpan"; or talking drums. These are not, I think, artificial, but an accident of nature and erosion, and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that when Tano is in flood they may produce a noise like the talking drums. There is also nearby a circular hole in one of the rocks, which goes deep down and in the bottom of which the water swirls around forming a whirlpool. This is called the "Mortar". It is said that a leopard came marauding on to the island and fell into this hole.

The major festival of the Tano takes place usually in November at the time of the Yam Festival and is indeed called Yam Festival or Alooie. This begins in Enchi, the capital. When the Omanhene has decided the time for the festival, he calls all the elders, linguists, worshippers and priests together to the Enchi worshipping place which is at the bottom of a silk cotton tree on the River Disue, a tributary of Tano. The sheep which is later to be sacrificed on behalf of the State on the island, is carried to the site and is offered to the god. Libations are poured and the Omanhene tells the priest the message which he wishes him to take to the god. They then return to the Ahenfie and are given drinks and the remaining offering. The total offering to be made by the priest is one ram, two white cocks, two eggs, gin and

7s. 6d. This sum is for the seer who will later at Jema tell the priest whether he may proceed with the worship. (The ordinary visitor gives the same with the difference of 1s. 3d. in place of 7s. 6d., I was told when I visited the island, that this represented the two small pinches of gold dust which were in the old days dropped into the Tano on crossing.) On completion of these ceremonies the priest departs, on his journey south, and the Omanhene is confined to his house for one week, and has his face and arms smeared with white clay. This is done by his senior wife who makes marks on his face and shoulders with her three middle fingers for Asase, Nyame and Tano. The priest leaves on foot the same afternoon so that he may arrive at Kwamokrom (about six miles) in the evening. It is important that he should arrive that evening as the town of Kwamokrom (which is third from the Paramount Stool) has the duty of providing the priest with the yam which is later offered to the Tano. This yam is in three pieces, one for Tano and two for his court, and must be pure, untouched by any animal. The only way to ensure this is to have the yam dug up on the day the festival starts, and to have the priest arrive in Kwamokrom that same day as well. He stays the night in Kwamokrom and then goes on southward to Mape (about 14 miles), the Tufuhene's town. Here and elsewhere, he stays in a special house, in which no married person who has lost a wife or a husband, and no woman who is having her period may enter. At this town and in all the villages along the road money is given and offerings to the god for the prosperity of the village. Free food is also given to the priest, his horn-blower, and two bearers.

The next day he continues to Jema (17 miles), which is the nearest town to the island and is about six miles from the boundary; here he meets the priestess, who has made preparations for his arrival, and the seer called the Ngondwumatwefoe, or the man who casts lots, who discovers whether they may proceed (*see* Note A). With the omens propitious they continue to the island, and at 6 in the evening go to a large silk cotton tree which is near the fishing village. At this place there is a linguist of the god (a stone) and at his feet the ram is placed and the message from the Omanhene is given. If the ram lies still, and moves not at all, the god has accepted the offering, and the assembled people shout three times for joy. If the sheep moves, more lots must be cast to discover the reason for his displeasure. After the acceptance of the sheep they return to bed. At 2 in the morning the priest and the priestess go and call on the god three times to warn him that they wish to see him and they repeat the messages. At 5 a.m. the worshippers are awoken by the noise of the Tano's court drumming and blowing horns in preparation for the meeting and accordingly they get up and make ready. The priest and priestess go to a special place to bathe, put on their white robes, white clay and gold ornaments and set out for the cave. The lots are cast again and if they are still propitious they continue. The visitors all remain outside the cave while the priest and priestess go in and slaughter the sheep and make the other offerings due to the god himself. The remains of the sheep are brought out again and the sheep and yam and other offerings are all cut up and boiled without salt or pepper and then

divided among the stone figures according to their rank. (Note B). The priestess who gets 1s. 3d. for lighting fire and 2s. 6d. for quenching it, then puts the fire out, and they sleep the night on the island. If the fire is still smouldering in the morning they may not leave the island (hence the extra money for quenching). On the completion of these things they return to Enchi.

In addition to the main festival they observe a small festival every third Friday—the Anaya Friday—which is preceded by Anaa Kisei, Monday, on this day the priest alone makes offerings in the local offering place, for fertility, etc. Any offerings made by individuals in trouble, or wishing some blessing, may be made at these times.

There are some other aspects of the worship which may be noted. Firstly, the ritual, as in other worships, lays emphasis on white. All the village altars and that on the island itself, have silk cotton trees on the spot. The worshippers must wear white, the Omanhene is smeared with white clay and the priest must bathe *every* day, etc. This simply symbolises the god's desire for what is clean and open. For the same reason women with periods, considered dirty, are not allowed on the island or in any of the priest's houses. Secondly, I have already said that goats are anathema; the reason is that in the old days the Brissas were attacked and were defeated by the Denkyiras and were driven from Wassaw Amanfi. In their flight they reached the Tano, but were unable to cross. They prayed therefore to the river and were told that they should procure a goat and drive it into the river. This they did, and the river parted in the middle and they crossed in safety. On reaching the other side they slaughtered the goat and made a law that no goats should be allowed in, or their enemies would be shown the entrance to the State. (This law was repealed by the State Council in 1946) for the same reason when visiting the island shoes must be taken off, and leather objects of all kinds left behind (e.g. camera cases) though canvas shoes may be worn. A further condition of visiting the island is that you should be married, have one child living, and not have lost a wife. I cannot discover any satisfactory reason for this.

There do not appear to be any metaphysical beliefs attached to the Tano worship. The attitude generally is one of thorough-going empiricism. The people believe that what they see is there when they see it, but as they only go once a year to the island they believe that it is unlikely that the figures and other members of the court will be there at any other time. In fact many go further and state that they will not be there, and for this reason enquiries are often halted at the beginning by a flat denial of any knowledge of such figures and caves; the priest believes that he will join the court of the Tano, where his predecessors (of whom he only knows 7) are now elders; libations are poured to the earlier priests but generally speaking it is not believed that the souls of the faithful join the Tano, or reside in the cave or that Tano is concerned with any but the living. The god himself is regarded as a very powerful chief and has his full complement of sub-chiefs, elders and people, of whom a few are recognisable among the stone figures. These people appear once a year for the food offerings,

but the chief has powers at other times to do well or ill. The worship does not appear to be consciously related to that of *Nyame*, and the figures are not, as is the case with many freaks of Nature, attributed to the direct action of *Nyame*. The Tano has in fact an immanent rather than transcendent personality.

The priest comes from a particular family and his successor is chosen by senior members of the family appointed by the Omanhene. The priestess is also taken from the family and is on "first appointment" sent down to the island and must thenceforth stay there. The Omanhene must never see her after this, and may not go down to the island. The present priestess is temporary as the normal priestess misbehaved in some way and was given a child by the Tano as a punishment. I gather she will return after pacification has been made.

On my visit to the island the priestess became possessed by the god. The possession was in the nature of a fit, panting breath, jerky utterance and rapid walking up and down and occasional hysterical cries. The linguist who accompanied me, however, asked questions, and generally the language is perfectly normal and intelligible. The woman did not show any lack of control and her eyes were quite normal. After giving her message which was a repetition of her previous remarks to me she was brought back to sanity by the liberal application of white clay over her body. I do not think that this forms any regular part of the worship. There are no set invocations or forms of words used in delivering message or in pouring libations, or in any part of the worship.

In general the worship of the Tano in Aowin seems to be very greatly simplified from that described in Captain Rattray's book on Ashanti. The only big ceremony is the Yam Festival in November, to which the Tano worship has been added and even that is not attended by any crowds or observed on any scale (except in Dadiaso). There are no shrines except those made by Nature, and the stone figures which were made before these Brissas came. The clearings where the local worship is made are no more than clearings with one or two pots where food is put for the gods. There appear to be very small celebrations in Enchi of the Tano Festival, and for some years at least, there has been no real celebration of the Yam Festival. There is no mention at all of the fishing side of the Tano Festival. Originally, perhaps, the Tano celebrations could be compared with those in Ashanti, just as the general structure of the State is that of an Akan State, but at the moment the predominant characteristics of the religion seem to reflect those of the people. The god is required to bestow wealth, children, health and nothing else and it is designed more to defend his own integrity than to assert his individuality and demand obedience; this is a very simple expression of the desires of a people who have been harrassed and poor for so long a time and want only security and peace in which to scrape a living. The increase in wealth from commercial exploitation, which is only just beginning, is tending at the moment to increase the frequency and size of the festivals. At the same time contact with the outside world seems to have awakened a desire for greater

pageantry, to demonstrate the importance and wealth of the State in the eyes of strangers. Further, a new literate Paramount Chief is attempting to reconcile the parties of progress and reaction by strict observance of all old customs as well as attending to the progress of the State. It is possible therefore that these varied influences, and the strong desire among the Aowins for individuality and recognition may produce amongst other things an increase of this worship. But whatever the development, I think it will be interesting as a cameo of the recurrent problem of reconciling Western with African civilisation.

ENCHI,

February, 1947.

Note A. Casting of Lots.

The lots which are cast are I believe much the same as those used in Sefwi and Nzima, and doubtless elsewhere also. They consist of eight separate cords about 18 inches long, with different objects knotted in the middle, and a deer skin.

The lots are drawn in this manner :—

The ends of the eight strings are held in each hand and the middle part (with the objects) is swung round so that the strings and pieces are well shuffled; generally they are also banged on the deer skin, and often the seer will make a hissing noise through his teeth, entreating the fetish to speak. When preparations are finished he takes the centre of the strings in one hand and beats the skin with the free ends which has the effect of freeing the ends so that the lots may be more easily drawn out. He then lays the strings on the skin with his hand still over the objects, and draws out either one or two or three strings. This procedure continues until the enquirer is satisfied, or until the seer is satisfied. When any series of draws has resulted in a definite answer the seer strikes the skin three times with the strings, as with a flail.

When the strings are first made, they have to be given power. This is done by the owner who must at the time of the new moon take two ears of guinea-corn and piece of kola nut, chew them and spit three times on to the objects. This is also done subsequently to restore the powers of the fetish.

The objects on the strings are :—

- | | | | | |
|----------------|-----|------------------------|-----|-------------------------------|
| 1. Noa | ... | Narrow tongue of brass | ... | the mouthpiece |
| 2. Agyale-bole | ... | Hoof of <i>adowa</i> | ... | money and life |
| 3. Bia | ... | Ant-eater's claw | ... | man |
| 4. Bala | ... | Antelope's horn | ... | woman |
| 5. Tonto | ... | Giant ant-eater's claw | ... | suman Ammoah |
| 6. Asee | ... | Broad piece flat brass | ... | Earth |
| 7. Bosoen | ... | Dog's tooth | ... | God |
| 8. Abotaboa | ... | Monitor lizard jaw | ... | man, young man or young girl. |

The permutations of these are many; one sequence which shows some of the more important combinations is as follows :—

First.—The lots are cast until Noa is drawn by itself. This indicates that the *fetish will speak*. Noa is then left out and seven strings only are used.

Second.—The question is then asked "who is dead to-day" or a kindred question, the meaning of which is, in effect, is the god ready to accept propitiation, or, in cases of sickness, will the patient live or die. This question can only be answered by either Agyale and Tonto (Life) or Bia and Tonto (death). While Noa is out only two are drawn. After this phase Noa is picked up and is used with the remainder.

Third.—Having discovered that there is some trouble, and whether there is any point in proceeding, you next discover the cause of the trouble. Thus Bala, Bia, and Noa together would mean trouble between a man and a woman, which has offended the god. Bala, Asee and Noa, that a man has committed an offence against Asase. Oral investigation then follows and if the culprit is found he must make pacification. More draws follow to see whether pacification is accepted (Noa, Asee Abotaboa), whether forgiveness is given (Tonto, Bosoën, Agyale). Tonto is probably the most important piece and has the effect of emphasising any other statement. Without Tonto no result is valid. The proceedings are accompanied by continuous talking and imprecations. The method is very much the same as any fortune teller's, with the difference that this has very much more power.

NOTE B.—Division of Meat.

The animal is slaughtered in the cave and the blood is given to the various horrific animals, and the intestines, heart, liver, etc., to the god, who is an old man and therefore has no teeth. The remainder is brought and divided amongst the god's followers and cooked with out pepper or salt. It is divided as follows:—

Odiandsue (the holder of the elephant tail whisk):
the ears

Sword Bearers: the legs.

Safohene: the jaw.

Gyasehene: the head.

Courtcrier: the mouth.

Adiakyr: the waist.

Elders—according to rank: the thigh.

Linguists: the breast.

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