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Female Cleansing of the Community The *Momome* Ritual of the Akan World

The purpose of this paper is threefold. The prime aim is to provide an account of a female ritual, known as *momome*¹ in its Sefwi variant, and to discuss the meaning of the choreographic props used in the performance by positioning these within the wider cultural framework of the Akan world of West Africa. Second, the historical transformations of the ceremonial occurrence in the course of the twentieth century will be examined closely to show that even though the performance has—informants claim and pre-colonial sources confirm—not been altered significantly, the timing and motives have. Finally, the paper evaluates the ideological autonomy of the ritual—presented by some analysts as a “ritual of inversion”—from institutional politics, both “traditional” chieftaincy and “modern”—colonial and postcolonial—governments. The conclusion will be concerned with a brief outline of the influence of political institutions upon the various forms of supernatural protection sought in the course of the twentieth century.

The choreography of the *momome* is strongly female-dominated in terms of participation as well as in the cultural resources activated. The motive of the ritual is, in most instances, not gender-specific: the preservation of the community from external threats. Male-dominated rituals, mostly associated with the chiefly establishment, address the same existential preoccupations but are perceived as needing female support—and precisely the *momome*—in times of crisis. The *momome* can therefore be seen as the public recognition of female autonomy and importance or as a space of reversal of the established gender order. Colonial ethnographer Maurice Delafosse (1913: 267) provides a thorough description of the *masculinisation* of female

1. I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Selenia Marabello in the elaboration of the paper and wish to thank the women who shared their knowledge of the *momome* as well as Francis and Stephen Mensah.

behaviour during a ritual termed *agya*, a variant of the *momome*, performed further east:

“One of the most interesting aspects of this ceremony of the *agya* is that, over the whole length of the performance, women should transform themselves in men. Each one should be called with the name of her husband, her brother or her son; the sticks they carry are adorned with the names of guns. When the dancers are tired, sit on the ground and converse as men, addressing each other with male greetings.”

Delafosse’s short article is centred on alteration of gender conduct during what he terms “*la comédie d’inversion sexuelle*”. He describes women taking up male characters, their mock invocation of military performances and of the masculine sexual pleasures resulting from the capture of female prisoners.

The theme of inversion pervades the performance of the *momome* and catches observers’ glaze. Eschlimann (1984: 19, 21-22) similarly points out that women “take the place of men”, arm themselves, perform mimic battles and take over the control of the community. Sexual relations are prohibited, wives stop performing household chores and “adopt a masculine behaviour”. Moreover, they “insult the male order, incapable of protecting from such a great drama [...]”. Where the masculine order is unable to generate life and safeguard it from evil, society reverts, in the last instance, to the potency of the forces of life of which the sex of women is the locus and the symbol. This is the last barrier to the annihilation of social and individual life”. Short discussions by Gilbert (1993: 8) who stresses “women’s dangerous creative power”, and Cutolo (2004: 224) who associates the *momome* to the suspension of the social order, lead analyses in the same direction.

Similarly, Jones (1993: 553, 557) lengthy review of pre-colonial sources underlines reversal relating it to the work of Turner (1969): “War made it possible (or necessary?) to invert or reverse some of the etiquette which normally governed gender roles [...] in my view, the roots of this practice lay in the tension that existed between sexes: *mmobomme* offered women the opportunity to turn the tables.” Jones (1993: 556) raises the issue of the historical transformations of the ritual and of the dynamic relation between its “form” and “function”. The author, however, does not “consider a field-work project focused upon this question a viable proposition” because “even those scholars who have lived in the region for many years have not found out very much”.

Here an attempt is made to address some of Jones’s concerns by examining oral narratives on twentieth-century performances. The concern with ceremonies held for reasons other than military confrontation—on which most of the literature is focused—enables to gain insights on the ritual’s rationale in the colonial and postcolonial settings and to reflect further on the characterisation of the ritual as one of gender inversion. The *momome*

maintains a strong female presence in the management of the choreography but not in the capacity to decide what represents a threat and what crisis merit a ceremonial cleansing. Performances have been a ritual space of apparent female autonomy used to render women's therapeutic resources manifest and to express their concerns but the pacing of the occurrences over the last century was largely dictated by "traditional" political institutions. This paper—after having outlined female specificity—examines the ritual's rationale to provide insights on gender dynamics of ideological hegemony, even where discourses, dances, locations are monopolised by women (Boni 2003).

Akan Communal Rituals and the *Momome*

As elsewhere, in the Akan area, covering most of Southern Ghana and of south-western Ivory Coast, political festivals were privileged *loci* of in depth anthropological and historical research. The principal communal festivals of most Akan states—the *odwira* of the Asante, Akim and Akuapem, the *ahuba* of the Fanti, the *kundum* of the Nzema and Ahanta, as the *eluo* of the Sefwi—are spectacular events held to call the ancestral blessing on the first fruits of yam (Rattray 1927: 122-143; Danquah 1928: 125-144; Akomiah 1992; McCaskie 1995: 144-242; Valsecchi 1999; Ofori 2005). These rituals are quite explicitly aimed at representing the yearly re-establishment of a cultural, spiritual and political order through what McCaskie (1995: 144) aptly termed "a cathartic communal or societal purification" (Gilbert 1994). The cleansing exercise is guaranteed by two potent unearthly forces: the *abosoe*², normally termed in the academic literature "smaller gods", and the ancestors of prominent kin groups. The king is not only the administrator of the rituals but covers a central performative role as mediator between unearthly forces and the community of the living. The unfolding text of these rituals—covering numerous days—is highly complex, dynamic and grandiose. Less elaborate cleansing performances, consisting of the call on *abosoe* and ancestors for a private blessing of the stools, occur every three or six weeks according to the local calendar in most Akan states and share the same overall intent of the more ostensive annual ritual. Authors have normally focused on the official, grand festivals which occur at regular intervals and express the ordinary process of cleansing. The *momome*, while making ideological statements similar to those expressed by chiefs' festivals, displays peculiar features in terms of choreography, organisation, gender participation and timing. The festival has been regarded as curious because it does not conform to the general pattern of Akan ritual performances, but of little relevance to the structuring of political ideology.

2. Non-English names are in Sefwi. In an attempt to standardise Sefwi orthography, I follow recent work of a Sefwi scholar (OFORI 2005).

Performances similar to the Sefwi *momome* are documented—mostly in short papers or in hasty notes included in works concerned primarily with other topics—in several locations between the lower Bandama River (in the Ivory Coast) and the Volta (Ghana). The ritual was witnessed since the early seventeenth century on the Gold and Ivory coasts of the gulf of Guinea and in the nineteenth century by travellers heading inland (Delafosse 1913; Jones 1993; Perrot & van Dantzig 1994: 132, 186-187, 606). In pre-colonial Asante it was held often and known as *mmumue*, *mmusu(o)yiedee*, *momome* or *mmobomme* (McLeod 1981: 28-29; Arhin 1983: 96; McCaskie 1995: 295, 2000: 76-77). Recent ethnographies show regional variations—in both denomination and choreography—within patterned performances that appear throughout the western portion of the Akan world. The ritual is known as *momome* amongst the Aowin (Ebin 1982, 1989: 280); as *mume*, *mumune* or *momone* amongst the Anyi (Perrot 1982: 31-32; Eschlimann 1984; Duchesne 1996: 228-230); as *adjanu* amongst the Baule (Viti 2004: 143-145, 171-173); as *aworabe* amongst the Akwapim (Gilbert 1993: 8); as *mumune* or *mume* amongst the Anno of the Ivory Coast (Cutolo 2004: 224)³.

History, Rationale and Preparation

In Sefwi, as elsewhere, women perform the *momome*, to purify and protect themselves and their community: participants hold that the ceremony is aimed at chasing away danger when their settlement is threatened. Society periodically underwent and undergoes periods of crisis that are viewed as attacks of evil spirits, *sunzum bɔne*. Malign strikes are considered to be both spiritual and tangible: negative supernatural dispositions are seen as leading to concrete disasters and palpable threats are perceived as being the product of an attack by evil spirits. The performance consists of a mimic fight, the terrestrial visible expression of a spiritual clash between malignant forces and the supernatural allies defending the community. While mystical entities combat in the unearthly confrontation, women support protective spirits with an allegoric battle. The *momome* is a symbolic shield against outside dangers threatening the community and is aimed, as a long-term participant put it, at “*pa mmusoe*”, wipe away the evil.

Contemporary witnesses, as well as oral sources and academic research, associate the pre-colonial occurrence of the ritual principally to the community's participation in warfare (Delafosse 1913; Arhin 1983; Jones 1993; Perrot & van Dantzig 1994: 606; McCaskie 2000: 76-77; Viti 2004: 143-145). Akyeamong and Obeng (1995: 492) suggest that the *mmomomme* was a “distinctly female form of spiritual warfare”. The ritual was thought to influence the outcome of the confrontation and was also aimed at disgracing potential war-dodgers. The fact that the *momome* is a female ritual

3. Personal communication kindly offered by Fabio Viti and Giulia Almagioni.

and that the religious-political establishment does not directly participate, is explained with the absence of men—warriors, chiefs and “fetish priests” (“*akɔmiɛ*”)⁴—busy in the battlefield. The performance of the *momome* during warfare was viewed as compulsory and there was therefore no need to dictate its occurrence. Delafosse (1913: 268) holds that the *momome* was considered amusing but was—at the same time—“obligatory; when women show signs of fatigue, the elders insulted them by saying: ‘The men are fighting and you should perform the *agya!*’” With the establishment of colonial peace, the *momome* lost what was its primary rationale but did not die out. In colonial Gold Coast and independent Ghana other threats were seen as appropriate in provoking the performance.

Besides war, the second cause normally mentioned for the performance of the ritual is the spread of diseases (McCaskie 1995: 295). In Sefwi *momome* were often held to protect the community from epidemics. In the first half of the twentieth century memories associate the ritual to the spread of small-pox, influenza, measles and chicken-pox⁵. In the Sefwi and Anyi areas, rituals which recall closely the *momome* have been held upon the death of pregnant women as their passing away was viewed as a general menace⁶.

A further motive that justified the performance was the occurrence of real or potential environmental disasters. A *momome* was held to avert the flood of river Tano in 1968⁷. Unusual meteorological and astronomical occurrences are also thought to announce danger and should be countered by a *momome*, even though there is little agreement on what particular manifestations merit a performance. Some mentioned the appearance of the rainbow in any direction other than the usual eastwards location or at any time other than evening. An unspecified “circular” rainbow associated with menstruations, *manzaa*, is said to merit a performance⁸. Moreover, the *kontonkroyie*, the appearance of a dark halo covering the sun, different from

4. Following some academic literature and popular translation I use, with some regret, “fetish priest” to refer to the Asuo Suborɛ *kɔmiɛ*, the administrator of the relationship between the Sefwi Wiawso state and the river Suborɛ, abode of a powerful *bosoe*, small god, which, it is believed, has historically supported the former.
5. Even though the exact dates of the performances are uncertain since memories are fading and because of the frequency with which the ritual was held, women recall that in the 1970s the ceremony was held before the vaccination for cholera and to combat the spread of convulsion and diarrhoea. See Akosua Buakua, 22 May 2000; Afiua Kintoh, 22 July 2001; Stephen Mensah, 24 June 2001; Akosua Badu, 16 December 2005 (DUCHESNE 1996: 229).
6. See Afiua Badu, 22 May 2000; Akosua Dua, 16 December 2005 (ESCHLIMANN 1984: 19-21; PERROT 1982: 31-32).
7. NAG Sekondi WRG 13/2/154 and 155. See Akosua Buakua, 22 May 2000.
8. Rituals associated with “menstrual” rainbows were held in the Sefwi village of Wiawso in the late 1940s and early 1960s and one in Nsawora in 1999; Afiua Badu, 22 May 2000; Akiua Bennie and Nana Boakye, 4 January 2003 (PERROT 1982: 31-32).

the eclipse, has also triggered the ceremonial cleansing⁹. The *momome* is an adequate response to a broad spectrum of adverse spiritual signals: in the mid 1970s, for example, the ritual was held in south-western Ghana to cleanse the community before a witch-detecting exercise (Ebin 1989: 280).

Even though those listed above are the most common causes mentioned when speaking of the ritual, actual occurrences indicate that in the course of the twentieth century performances were increasingly connected to political instability. *Momome* were held to react to national political threats such as the fall of Busia in 1972¹⁰ or the expulsion of over a million Ghanaians from Nigeria in 1983 (Perrot & van Dantzig 1994: 132). During the past century the Sefwi *momome* was largely used as a political weapon adapting itself to the transformations of chieftaincy. While land disputes were largely resolved violently in the past, during the twentieth century they are negotiated in the framework of the colonial and post-colonial judicial system (Boni 1999, 2000). The *momome* adapted to the new context: rituals were held in the 1920s and in the early 1970s during court hearings over a boundary dispute between Sefwi Wiawso and the adjacent Aowin¹¹. Performances were also aimed at averting decisions of the national government considered hostile to the Sefwi people, such as the creation of forest reserves in the 1930s or the arrest of the king of Sefwi Wiawso in 1972¹². The ritual was also activated in 1973 and 1992 when the king sought the government's commitment towards the improvement of the road network within the district¹³. Rituals were increasingly performed to counter perceived threats to the chiefly establishment. The sickness of prominent chiefs was and is viewed as a communal menace and therefore a *momome* may be held when the infirmity of the king, his mother or of the *shemma*, the female counterpart of the king, is publicly acknowledged¹⁴. In Sefwi the ritual was held over the last half a century for the illnesses and deaths of kings and other prominent figures of the chiefly establishment¹⁵.

9. Afuia Kintoh, 22 July 2001; Adwua Nkrumah, 14 July 2001; Stephen Mensah, 12 January 2003.

10. Akosua Buakua, 22 May 2000; Afuia Kintoh, 22 July 2001.

11. Akuia Bennie, 12 January 2003; Akosua Badu, 16 December 2005. For details of the dispute see SWTCA/F10B, Karlo Stool Affairs.

12. Akosua Buakua, 22 May 2000; Akuia Bennie, 12 January 2003.

13. Stephen Mensah, 12 January 2003.

14. The *momome* is often performed after the death of kings but before this is publicly announced. The king's soul is thought to be in a limbo and the *momome* is seen as a final attempt to prevent expiration and call back his spirit to life.

15. Oral narratives confirm performances for the illness of the king, Aduhene II, in 1975 and 1988, for the deaths of kings (Kwame Tano I in 1932 and Aduhene II in 1996), chiefs (Gyaasehene Afrishie in 1973) and of women of the royal matrilineage (Yaa Asantewa—Aduhene's mother—in 1986 and Ama Sarlie—the *shemma*, a female office-holder—in 1987). *Momome* for which I was unable to trace a definite date were those held for the death of the *shemma* Abena Fra, the Abakomahemma Adwua Amoah and Akosua Benna, the royal lineage elder (*abusua bain*) Kwame Nkuah, the elder Nana Bremuia. In the

The ritual may also be held when violent confrontations occur between different sections of the community. Performances were promoted by malcontents to oust reigning chiefs or could be organized by the king's supporters when his opponents were trying to oust him (Viti 2004: 173). In 1935 an unsuccessful *momome* was held to resist to the deposition of Kwame Tano II; the king was ousted soon after. Another ritual was held to protect the office of his successor, Kwame Nkoah II, in the early 1940s as the king's principal "fetish priest" ("*kɔmiɛ*") had perceived signs of troubles in his dreams and in the sky. Notwithstanding the *momome*, Nkoah II was also deposed in 1945¹⁶. Even though experience had thought that the ritual was not always successful in preventing depositions, Aduhene II called for a "protective" *momome* during the attempt to oust him in the early 1960s. He had better luck than his predecessors: he was deposed in 1966 but readily re-enthroned (Boni 2000).

The extension of the ritual occurrence to innovative threats marks an innovation of its rationale. Up to the twentieth century, sources suggest that the *momome* was performed principally in instances of tangible, palpable (one would be tempted to call them "real") threats such as warfare and epidemics. Over the last century the ceremonial purification has been increasingly used to counter immaterial, imaginary, metaphorical and supernatural dangers (Viti 2004: 144). The performance of the *momome* in cases of non-evident, intangible threats marks a crucial transformation. While in pre-colonial times the necessity of the ritual was to a certain extent self-evident and there was little need to program and orchestrate its performance, in the course of the twentieth century a legitimate interpreter of cosmological dangers became increasingly decisive in determining when the ceremony was needed. The elders, the principal "fetish priest" ("*kɔmiɛ*"), or the chiefly establishment—often through a combined hermeneutical process—have been those considered able to perceive the gravity of a menace which is presented to the community as immanent, even though not apparent to most. They have been the ones who decide that a ritual is indispensable and mobilise the community. In short, the ritual necessity is no longer manifest to the community but is announced.

While the *momome* was and is a ritual performed collectively by women, the "traditional" political and religious institutions play a major role. The authority to hold a *momome* comes from the king as he is the mediator and regulator of the relationship between the population of the kingdom, the Sefwi *mman*, and the cosmological order within which this fragment of humanity is inserted. The king's entourage decides when, and for which purpose, the *momome* is required¹⁷. One of the king's linguists or the

village of Akwantombra a performance was held in 2001 upon the death of the local chief.

16. Akosua Badu, 16 December 2005.

17. *Kɔmiɛ* Asuo Subore, 4 January 2003. The few ethnographies which address the issue indicate the (male) elders or the chiefly establishment as the ones who call women to perform the ritual (DELAFOSSE 1913; EBIN 1982: 142).

ohemma, the female counterpart of the king, will then inform prominent women of the sovereign's intention to perform the ritual. The women normally subscribe to the establishment's interpretation of the cosmological presage and agree with the need for the ritual. A date is fixed for the beginning of the performance and the recruitment of women begins both through public announcements calling adult females to participate, as well as informally through the mobilisation of neighbours and kin by elderly women. While the political-religious authority decides the necessity of the *momome*, it plays only a marginal role in the performance.

The Ritual Cycle

The *momome* is a repetition of a standardised happening repeated thrice daily (early morning, noon and late afternoon) for a number of days that ranges from one to up to three weeks¹⁸. The wiping away of epidemics is deemed to require a special effort and therefore the *momome* will normally be repeated insistently, while other threats, such as the wrong positioning of the rainbow, necessitate a less sustained effort. There are no fixed days of the week in which the *momome* should begin. Some women, however, indicate as privileged choices Thursday (the day dedicated to the divinity of the soil, *Azee Yaa*) in which farming is forbidden and more people are present in the village or Saturday (the day of veneration of *Asuo Subore*, the spiritual protector of the Sefwi Wiawso nation). Performances display continuous variations within patterned performances: some key, characteristic features are present throughout the Akan world while these are adjusted locally and contextually to adapt to the particular threat facing the community. Each ceremony thus assumes a unique form varying in length, intensity and importance: certain parts of the usual choreography may be omitted while additional, innovative ones may be inserted. The ritual cycle described below outlines the performance's characteristic, recurrent features¹⁹.

While participation in the *momome* has decreased in recent decades, in Wiawso—the capital of the homonymous Sefwi kingdom—the number of women taking part in the last performances was normally easily over hundred and exceptionally close to thousand. Even though only some respond, all adult and elderly women identified as Sefwi who live in Wiawso and in neighbouring villages are asked to participate in each occurrence with the exception of women who have not yet given birth, those in their menstrual period and widowers who have not completed the post-widowhood

18. DUCHESNE (1996: 230) states that the performance lasted either three days or a week (PERROT 1982: 31-32). Sefwi informants suggest that there is no pre-definite number of days: the length varies according to the gravity of the danger.

19. JONES's (1993) work had clearly shown patterns of variations, some authors—following local taxonomies—distinguishing between types of rituals (ESCHLIMANN 1984; McLEOD 1981).

purification. The former are said to lack the knowledge of songs and appropriate behaviour (for example falling down during the *momome* is considered a bad omen); the latter, lack the purity. During the ritual no man should be present. If some are, they run the risk of being beaten and to see their spiritual strength permanently damaged.

Early in the morning, women bath, smear their body with kaolin, a white clay (*ɛwule*), wear beads (*tɔmaah*), cover their heads with white handkerchiefs (*nwera*) and wear white cloths over red underwear (*asiaa*). After the domestic preparation, participants move towards the gathering point. The ritual for the cleansing of the whole nation is held at the nation's political and religious centre, the principal road of Wiawso approximately three hundred yards long crossing the flat hilltop from side to side (Perrot & van Dantzig 1994: 132; Boni 2007). The gathering occurs in front of the major crossroad: from there, participants move towards the Southern end, or meet directly at the extremity. The *momome* proceeds from the southern to the northern limit of Wiawso as the community tries to block the evil forces at the edges of the settlement (*kurotiwaa*) (Parkin 1992). This liminal area between culture and nature contains ambiguous, alien and impure products: huts of menstruating women and confinement areas for those struck by epidemics in pre-colonial times, latrines, rubbish piles, and burial grounds still nowadays. The *momome* thus expresses and reinforces the distinction between human space and the hostile, natural and spiritual environment, surrounding it. Delafosse (1913) and Bonnat (Perrot & van Dantzig 1994: 132) state that, during pre-colonial wars, women performing the *momome* stopped at the edge of the village, in the direction of the enemy's land, waved their sticks and shouted insults.

Contrary to most Akan rituals, a song rather than a libation marks the beginning of the collective ritual activity.

1. "Osei Yie! Yie! Yie!
 Glory Yes! Yes! Yes!
 Nana Suborɛ apasuee o! Ye dan wo!
 Nana Suborɛ the Great o! We rely on you!
 Ye dan wo ahenewa!
 We, the least privileged, rely on you!
 Ye dan wo! Yed dan wo awura!
 We rely on you, we rely on you Lord!
 Yengɔtuabe so! Yetua be so! (several times)
 We shall not disturb you! We shall disturb you!"
 Akosua Boakoa, 4 January 2003.

Participants perceive themselves as depending on the "fetish priest" ("*kɔmiɛ*") of *Asuo Suborɛ*. The *momome* is a disturbance to the fetish required for the collective good.

The women begin a procession. The main street of Wiawso is passed back and forward thrice. During the procession participants dance and

sing. In cases of war, motifs insulted the rival chief and compelled men to join in the confrontation (Delafosse 1913), nowadays the message, especially when the threat can not be personified, is highly metaphoric and often difficult to discern for most of the participants themselves. Even though single passages may be obscure, both in the Sefwi area and elsewhere, participants agree that tunes are imprecations against the evil and injunctions aimed at its retreat (Jones 1993; Perrot & van Dantzig 1994: 186-187; Viti 2004: 171-173). Nketia (1962: 16) characterises the “*momo-bomme*” motifs as “songs of exhilaration and incitement”. *Momome* songs are performed by women alone and do not belong to the choreography associated with chiefs and festivals. Tunes do not follow a fixed order and there is no single person who calls the motifs: any women may begin a song and other will follow. Motifs may change to a certain extent from performance to performance but are often based on the repetition of some key, short phrases at times slightly altered from line to line. The works cited above transcribe some of the tunes performed during the ritual: the fact that motifs are different in all locations confirms that performances have manifested—within a clearly recognisable recurrent characterisation—a high degree of variability and geographical specificity. Here I transcribe a selection of the tunes presented by participants as “*momome* songs” and I focus, specifically, on those concerned with gender issues.

2. “*Nana Nyame se yen o!*”

God told us!

Osee no sen ne! Osee momma yen sere na yanya adee! Sere kwa ei!

He told us! He told us let us laugh and get some benefit! We laughed for nothing ei!

Momma yen sere na yanya adee! Sere kwa ei!

Let us laugh and get some benefit! We laughed for nothing ei!

Momma yen sere! Hay, hay, ei!

Let us laugh! Hay, hay, ei!

Nana Subore se yen o!

Subore told us!

Osee yen sen ne o! Osee momma yen kyiam na yanya adee!

He told us! He told us let us work and get the thing!

Kyiam Kwaw ei!

Work for nothing!

Moma yen kiyam na yanya dedee o! (×2)

Let us work and get the thing!”

Mame Koko, Wiawso, 15 May 2000.

This motif is sang—normally in instances of chiefs’ depositions—when the women want to accuse an office-holder of embezzlement of funds or of incapacity to fulfil promises. In sharp contrast with motif 1., this tune evokes the ineffectiveness of chiefs’ protective shield.

3. “*Yie! Ekoz adwu so! Yie! Yie!*” (×2)

Yes! The war has come! Yes! Yes!

Me ye Badu Aso me wanzε ekohε bieoo! (×2)

My wife Badu Aso, I thought you would join us!
Yie! Ekoe adwu so! Yie! Yie!
 Yes! The war has come! Yes! Yes!
Me ye Badu Akoma ee yie ɔwɔnuɑ nkɔhɔ bieoo!
 If Badu Akoma is included, I will also take part!"
 Mame Kɔkɔ, Wiawso, 15 May 2000.

Badu Aso is remembered as the senior wife of the Suborɛ “fetish priest” (“*kɔmiɛ*”) while Badu Akoma is the younger spouse. The first part of the song is the invitation to join him pronounced by the “priest” to the senior wife. She replies—in the last line—that she will go only if the junior wife joins. The spouses can be seen as evoking metaphorically soldiers, inviting all to join in war.

The *momome* offers the opportunity to express women’s concerns and viewpoints on issues not directly related to the ritual’s rationale.

4. “*Adeɛkyea toto bɔdeɛ!* (×2)
 Since daybreak roast plantain!
Menye odwan mawe bɔdeɛ!
 I am not a sheep to eat only roast plantain!
O enonom!
 Mothers!
Eh Seliwa! Mampong nsuo!
 Eh Seliwa! River Mampong!
Menye odwan, meye odwan! Eno oo!
 I am not a sheep, I am a sheep! Mothers!
Eh Seliwa! Meto asuo a mabɔ wo din na asuo besom!
 Eh Seliwa! When I reach a river I shall call your name and the river will handle it!
Adeɛkyea nom nsuo! (×2)
 Since daybreak water!
Menye kraman na manom nsuo! Enonom!
 I am not a dog to drink only water! Mothers!
Eh Seliwa! Manom nsuo!
 Eh Seliwa! I drink water!
Menye kraman na manom nsuo! Eno oo!
 I am not a dog to drink only water! Mothers!
Eh Seliwa! Meto asuo a mabɔ wo din na asuo besom!
 Eh Seliwa! When I reach a river I shall call your name and the river will handle it!”
 Mame Kɔkɔ, Wiawso, 15 May 2000.

This song contains a lamentation and a threat of a woman who calls on female companions. The woman laments that her man is not taking good care of her, providing only basic goods (plantain, water) and thus treating her like an animal. She threatens to “call his name”, that is curse him, as soon as she reaches a river. Rivers are thought to host powerful spirits and are therefore privileged loci of curses’ evocation.

5. “*Aya nnieɛma ngɔle deede dɔ nyamaa asosɔ me!*
 My elder sibling, I went far away and some liana tied me!
Yie! Yie! Na ɛkwaayɛ nzuo dɔ bɔ nyamaa asosɔ wɔ?

Yie! Yie! But what were you doing there for the liana to tie you?
Yie! Yie! Ɔɔɔyɛwu ati nyamaa kɔhu me oo!
 Yie! Yie! Because of my lover these liana will kill me!
Ɔɔɔyɛwu ee! Nyamaa ee!
 Oh lover! Oh liana!
Ɔɔɔyɛwu ati nyamaa kɔhu me!
 Because of my lover these liana will kill me!
Aya nnieɛma ngɔle Wiawso oo nyamaa asosɔ me!
 My elder sibling, I went to Wiawso and some liana tied me!
Yie! Yie! Na ekwaaye nzuo dɔ bɔ nyamaa asosɔ wɔ?
 Yie! Yie! But what were you doing there for the liana to tie you?
Yie! Yie!
 Yie! Yie!
Na edwule bɔ ɛse ne na afei ɛbisa me!
 You know the reason but you are asking me!
Edwule bɔ ɛse ee! Nyamaa ee!
 You know the reason! Oh liana!
Ɔɔɔyɛwu ee! Nyamaa ee!
 Oh lover! Oh liana!
Edwule bɔ ɛse ne na afei ɛbisa me!
 You know the reason but you are asking me!"
 Mame Kɔkɔ, Wiawso, 15 May 2000.

A woman explains that since she left her parents, she has faced some difficulties, literally she was tied with liana. Her sibling responds asking the reason of her departure. The woman left to join her lover.

6. "*Moni ye na ee! Moni ye na!*
 My mother is valuable! My mother is valuable!
Ngɔwuoo! Hi ngo!
 I will die! Hi ngo!
Eni ye ɔle eni! Eni ye ɔle eni bɔ ɔworo wɔ oo! Hi ngo!
 Your mother is your mother! Your mother is your mother who gave birth to you!
 Hi ngo!
Hi Ese ye ɔle ese! Ese ye ɔle ese bɔ ɔworo wɔ oo!
 Your father is your father! Your father is your father who gave birth to you! Hi ngo!
Hi ngo!
 Hi ngo!
Agyaa Mako ee! Agyaa mako alɔ me!
 Pepper marriage! Pepeer marriage is hurting me!
Ngɔwuoo! Hi ngo! (x2)
 I will die! Hi ngo!"
 Mame Kɔkɔ, Wiawso, 15 May 2000.

The wife cherishes the memory of her mother and father while oppressed by a "pepper marriage", an expression used by women to refer to conjugal unions in which women are maltreated or disregarded.

7. "*Ama bɔɔse alee to!*
 Ama knows how to cook food!
Ama bɔɔse ampesi to!

Ama knows how to cook ampesi!
Ama bɔɔse ngeka yɔ!
 Ama knows how to prepare stew!
Ama Mmra ayira me oo! Ayira me oo! Ayira me oo!
 Ama Mmra has divorced me! Divorced me! Divorced me!
Ama Mmra ayira me oo! Wa maa mabɔ tronka!
 Ama Mmra has divorced me! I was made lonely!
Ama bɔɔse likyɛɛ yɔ!
 Ama knows how to prepare everything!
Ama bɔɔse ngeka yɔ!
 Ama knows how to prepare stew!
Ama bɔɔse alee to!
 Ama knows how to cook food!
Ama mmra ayira me oo! Ayira me oo! Ayira me oo!
 Ama Mmra has divorced me! Divorced me!
Ama Mmra ayira me oo! Wa maa mabɔ tronkea!
 Ama Mmra has divorced me! I was made lonely!"
 Mame Kɔkɔ, Wiawso, 15 May 2000.

In this parody, a man laments that his resourceful wife, Ama, who could cook very well *ampesi* and stew—local dishes—, has divorced him. The last sentence which should be translated literally as “she makes me a private car (tronkea)” should be understood as a sign of loneliness.

A privileged stopping point is in front of the household where the “fetish priest” (“*kɔmiɛ*”) resides. Here the women form a semi circle and tune some specific songs to render homage to the protective spirit of river Suborɛ. The “fetish priest” (“*kɔmiɛ*”), at times, appears in the course of the ritual to spiritually support and legitimise it: possessed by his spirit, he may dance briefly and frenetically, throw or smear kaolin clay over himself and the participants and follow or precede the procession for a while.

8. “*Yie! Asuo Suborɛ apasuee!*
 Oh! River Suborɛ the Great!
Yie! Ɔto apenten a ye yɛfrɛ wo hoo!
 Oh! In difficult times we call upon you
Yie! Asuo Suborɛ apasuee!
 Oh! River Suborɛ the Great!
Yie! Ɔye sea ye yɛfrɛ wɔ hoo!
 Oh! When things are becoming hard we call upon you!”
 Akosua Buakua, Wiawso, 4 January 2003.

Besides songs, certain ceremonial actions are associated with the performance of the *momome*, even though they do not occur in every ritual. Delafosse (1913) states that women, when rituals were held to facilitate success in wars, proceeded armed with sticks and that action intensified when gunshots were heard. Similarly, Asante narratives suggest that women, at times, pounded empty mortars with pestles, “as a form of spiritual torture” of the enemy (Akyeampong & Obeng 1995: 492). In Sefwi women are thought to chase away the evil by howling (“*Huuuu! Huuuu!*”)

at the edges of the settlement and by waving the *asiaa* and an herb known as *anyain*. In rituals aimed at the expulsion of a disease, often dirt, *efiee*, is placed on the street (normally peels of foodstuffs) and ritually swept in the course of the performance. As the concept of *efiee* covers material and metaphorical dirt (van der Geest 1998), the removal of the litter was a way of removing mystical pollution (Ebin 1989). The following song accompanies the cleaning exercise.

9. “*Mprae* *ɣewon oo!*
Sweeping ourselves!
Yɛprae! *Yɛprae ɣewon oo!*
We are sweeping! We are sweeping ourselves!”
Mame Aya, Wiawso, 25 July 2001.

The women are sweeping—cleansing—themselves from malign attacks.

The dirt is placed—together with some foodstuffs and two herb, known locally as *amumunyaa* and *anyain* (*costus afer*, ginger lily), all bathed in kaolin—on the roads that lead to the town. The use of the *anyain* and *amumunyaa* is particularly significant: these herbs—principally used by female healers—are thought to facilitate fertility and cure sexually transmitted disease. *Anyain* is also used to keep evil spirits away from vulnerable locations²⁰. The mounts of *anyain*, dirt and food are placed at what used to be the outskirts of the town up to some decades ago, and what is now only its political and religious centre (Boni 2007). It is thought that when the evil spirits try to enter the town, they will be repelled by the dirt and the herbs and may be satisfied with the consumption of the foodstuffs placed thereon.

In rituals performed to purify the community from the mystical disaster potentially provoked by the appearance of the *kontonkroyie* or the rainbow in a wrong location, the *ɔhemma*—a female office holder—is called upon to shoot a gun, provided and loaded by a male attendant, at the direction where the rainbow improperly appeared²¹.

10. “*Nyangozonoomaa e fi abra oo!*
The rainbow has set at the opposite side!
Ofi abra be kyioo!
Setting at the opposite time is abhorred!”
Akuia Bennie, Wiawso, 4 January 2003.

20. *Anyain*, for example, may be placed on the doorstep of the room of someone suffering from a disease or to safeguard the palace of a newly nominated chief, who is seen as lying in a liminal, dangerous state. See Afuia Kintoh, 22 July 2001; Yaa Foriwah, 2 August 2001; Akosua Dua, 16 December 2005 (ESCHLIMANN 1984: 19-21; DUCHESNE 1996: 228-230).

21. *ɔhemma* Yaa Denta, 25 May 2000.

At the end of every ritual cycle the women enter the king's palace, inform him of the successful completion of the event and receive a symbolic offering of money as thanks-giving for their services. The money is too small to be shared amongst the numerous participants and is therefore used to buy consumables. If the threat is considered serious, a delegation may be sent to Subore river, either before or after the performance, to inform the smaller god, *bosoe*, of the occurrence and of the ritual.

Even though the largest *momome* in the Sefwi Wiawso kingdom are performed in the capital, the ritual can be organized at the village level as well. Communities may have local problems for which a *momome* is needed (lack of childbirth, death of local chief, rainbow in wrong position). The king at Wiawso is normally informed and his consent received before the ritual is performed. The procession passes on the main street where the palace and the shrines of smaller gods, *abosoe*, are concentrated. Overall the performance is very similar in form and semantics, but not in its size, to the one held at Wiawso. Villagers are also asked to perform local rituals when the *momome* is performed at Wiawso or are called upon to join the one at Wiawso.

The *momome* has survived the great transformations of the twentieth century even though participation in recent decades has dwindled. Some women complain that nowadays menstruating women at times participate in the ritual weakening its effects, others that the population is increasingly subject to diseases because attendance has decreased, still others complain that strict adherence to Christianity has reduced participation both in terms of number and conviction. Overall, however, the *momome* is still felt as an important ritual and many women, especially those less involved in church activities, still believe it has beneficial effects on the community and especially on those taking an active part in the performance.

Chromatic Classification

White appears as the dominant colour of the ritual. *Fufue*, is a chromatic range that includes light colours such as yellow and milk but is conceptually centred on immaculate white. It is a ritually auspicious colour associated with victory; it stands for health, success, spiritual purity and joy. For example, women on their first public exit after having given birth should wear white to mark their success over a liminal period, that of the pregnancy characterised by impurity. White is also the colour of church attendance, especially at festivities. Kaolin (*ɛwule*), a fine white clay, is used in a number of rituals amongst the Akan. It "whitens" persons chromatically and conceptually to indicate success, purity, sanity and absence of evil. The talc is gently placed on the shoulders of the party who has won the case at "traditional" court. It is smeared on the body of divorcees, young women performing their puberty ritual, newborn babies and in the past on

slaves who were freed (McCaskie 1995: 287-288). In precolonial Asante it was used to signal the end of the menstrual period (Perrot & van Dantzig 1994: 606). *Ɛwule* is used in rituals of purification of the soul (*kra*) and often placed on chiefs during festivals and in the ceremony of their enthronement and thrown on possessed “fetish priests” (“*akɔmiɛ*”) (Duchesne 1996: 125, 266). The talc is thought to have therapeutic qualities and is used by local healers to prevent malformations of the foetus and diseases. Before the *momome*, *ɛwule* is smeared by women all over their bodies, including their faces. During the performance it is at times thrown by the “fetish priest” (“*kɔmiɛ*”) on the crowd gathered outside his house as a sort of collective blessing. Together with *anyain*, the medicinal herb, *ɛwule* is positioned on the village outskirts to keep the evil spirits from entering the settlement. In a neighbouring area, kaolin was spread at the limits of the towns during the *momome* (Ebin 1989). The *nwera*, a string of white cloth, is waved as handkerchief during the ritual. *Nwera* can be seen adorning drums and chiefly umbrella during the yearly festival and have been used to indicate the sanctity of locations. During the *momome*, women remove their cloths to show their underwear which may be a white *nwera* tied to a waist chain made with beads, or the red underwear, *asiaa*.

While white characterises the ritual, the other colour that appears in the *momome* is red. *Kɔkɔrɛ* invests a wider chromatic spectrum than that rendered with “red”, including a range from pink to purple and is associated with an ambiguous set of notions connected with blood (Hagan 1970: 9; Breidenbach 1976). McCaskie (1995: 290) describes red as the colour of “heightened (and confused) emotional states-combinations of danger, sorrow, impurity, anger, defiance”. Rattray (1927: 29-34, 134) claims it is associated with war and witchcraft. Red is the colour of vitality and danger, or the violent attempt towards the re-establishment of peace. Participants, especially those with the highly valued rounded body, may, in the course of the procession, remove the white top cloth, to show the red underwear as a sign of defiance and to scare evil spirits away. The ritual uncovering—some women go as far as stripping themselves temporarily half naked—occurs most frequently at the two extremities of the settlement and is a way to menace the evil, to threaten the threatening (Perrot & van Dantzig 1994: 132). Red denotes both the evil that the women are trying to get rid of and the resolution with which they are prepared to oppose to it: the violence, associated with the colour, precipitates the crisis and leads to overcome of the liminal uncertainty of danger (Boni 2004).

Out of the three principal chromatic polarities recognised by Hagan (1970), the one absent in the *momome* is black, associated primarily with (male-managed) ancestors and stools. The colours activated in the *momome* confirm the gender dimension of the ritual. While in pre-colonial *momome* the absence of the political and religious establishment could be justified with their involvement in warfare, the female monopoly persisted in twentieth-century rituals that no longer justify such exclusion. The persistent feminisation of the performance acquires a specific meaning that deserves to be explored.

Male and Female Community Protection in the *Momome*

Community members do not have the capacity to invoke spiritual forces: friendly supernatural entities need to be revered, pleaded and obeyed through specific mediums. Chiefs and “fetish priests” (“*akɔmiɛ*”) are thought to be in privileged contact with sources of supernatural support; their ritual activities are paced by a calendar which guarantees the ordinary shield from menacing supernatural interventions and a “safe”, peaceful, stable environment (McCaskie 1980; Gilbert 1987, 1989; Boni 2004, 2007). The apparatus activated by these choreographers is strictly linked to the chiefly establishment both in terms of the locations of the rehearsal (palace, historical sites, graveyards, water sources, etc.) and of the symbols displayed (libations, exhibition of stools, drumming, chiefly gatherings, sacrifice of sheep, volleys of celebratory gunfire, chiefly movements in palanquins, ritual pilgrimages, etc.). There are, however, instances in which the ordinary protection proves ineffective; occasions in which danger approaches; times in which the cleansing exercises performed by the political-religious establishment prove incapable of delivering the valued stability, peace and security; moments in which the ideological apparatus is shaken. When severe threats appear, when a societal crisis occurs notwithstanding the prescribed ceremonies, a diverse source of remedy is sought.

When the ordinary spiritual mediums fail, what is altered is not the supernatural forces from which assistance is sought but the actors and the instruments of the plea. The solution elaborated in the *momome* is orchestrated around a diverse ideological frame which—apparently—acts autonomously from male-dominated institutions. The ritual is held in the streets, it passes by locations associated with chiefs and known to be spiritually powerful without entering them. The performance lacks the atmosphere and the use of a recurrent set of ritual acts that characterise chieftaincy rituals while it activates a different array of devices. The symbolic tools are drawn from ordinary life, rooted in women’s experience: the purifying power of kaolin, medical herbs, songs and the removal of dirt are all charged with a metaphoric dimension in the feminisation of mystical dangers’ purification (Ebin 1989: 282). The transformative character of the *momome* is, at times, rendered manifest by the inversion of gender roles: women in some documented instances, dress and act as men, display mock or real arms, take temporary control of the settlement to voice female views publicly (Delafosse 1913; Eschlimann 1984; Perrot & van Dantzig 1994: 187). During the *momome*, the chieftaincy establishment voluntarily abandons the stage. It recognizes that the danger may not be addressed through the ordinary means of spiritual intervention and calls upon women and a different conception of the cleansing process. If the male-handled grandiose scenarios of chiefly rituals are thought to generate the spiritual shield, the community invokes the *momome* once such barriers have proved ineffective. The

exclusion of men and of the chiefly establishment is, however, only apparent. Even though both chiefs and the “fetish priest” (“*kɔmiɛ*”) play only marginal roles within the celebration, they have directed its rationale and occurrence.

Classification of Evil and the Ideology of Kingship

Wicked, harmful behaviour, and those committing it, are normally termed *bɔne* in Sefwi. The notion of *mmusoe* evokes something more than harm, Gyekye (1987: 133) defines it as an “extraordinary”, “uncommon”, “indelible” evil. *Mmusoe* gives the deviant conduct an intensified mystical and public dimension: it refers to acts from which the community should rigidly abstain because such deeds represent a threat to peace, stability and, more generally, to the established cultural order. This notion is central to understand the threatening forces countered by the *momome* and was explicitly mentioned by Sefwi women as the cause of the ritual. Amongst the Asante a ceremony strikingly similar to the one discussed here was termed *mmusu-yiedee*, which can be literally translated as “what concerns the *mмосuo*”²².

Mmusoe refers to diabolic, heinous human conduct that invites the wrath of supernatural powers causing disaster and calamity for the community (McCaskie 1995: 295). While the classification accepts regional, even village, variations some acts seem widely accepted as *mmusoe*: suicide, incest, certain sexual offences, witchcraft, swearing oaths as well as verbal abuse, stealing from and assaults against chiefs and their political and religious personnel (Rattray 1929: 28, 55, 290-315; Gyekye 1987: 133-134). The range of the offences is wide and dynamic, often associated to the agency of *bonzam* (often translated in English as “the Devil”) and to the production of *efiɛ* (supernatural dirt). In the sense outlined above, the notion overlaps partially to the anthropological notion of “taboo”. *Mmusoe* are deeds classified as negative by the community that are thought to bring ill fortune to a wider group than those directly involved in the “evil” act. The community—through the chiefly establishment—thus needs to control and minimise these acts through moral codes and judicial procedures for offenders.

The construction of a taxonomy of evil is structured around two overlaps that organize Akan morality. First, an overlap is between menacing signs and their devastating fulfilment: the notion of *mmusoe* comprehends both the dangers of spiritual attacks (by ancestors, spirits, witchcraft) and the actual occurrence of misfortune (war, epidemics, disasters). There is a lack

22. Another notion often evoked when discussing the *momome* is that of *bɛkyi*, that which is abhorred and religiously forbidden. Acts which are termed *mman akyi-wadeɛ*, could be translated—following RATTRAY (1929)—as “repugnant to the nation”. If the act is perpetuated it becomes *mmusoe*, correspondent to the Twi *mмосuo* and to the *monzue* of neighbouring south-western Akan languages.

of lexical distinction and a consequent conceptual assimilation of what is classified as threatening, and the practical impact of devastating forces causing death and destruction. The implicit message is that society is based on the preservation of two interconnected orders: a tangible and spiritual one. Communities must guard themselves from both menaces as supernatural crises have immediate earthly repercussions. The preservation of good relations with friendly mystical forces and the capacity to halt harmful ones is indispensable for peaceful living. Morality is not just a question of relations between persons; it concerns the human connection to the spiritual world. Those who are recognised as able to interpret and decide what is a communal threat, are able to produce a conceptual association, expressed through the category of *mmusoe*, between presumed “evil” supernatural menaces and actual sufferings. The religious and the political institutions, have the recognised capacity to interpret the wishes of the “other” world and thus to properly and adequately connect the worldly domain to the spiritual forces by dictating norms of conduct and orchestrate the appropriate rituals. While women hold centre-stage in the *momome*, it is the religious-political structure that triggers off the ritual and that offers thanksgiving after its performance.

During the colonial and post-colonial peace, the *momome* was no longer perceived as a necessary response to palpable threats: performances were no longer inevitable. Chiefs and “fetish priests” (“*akɔmiɛ*”)—legitimate interpreters of the spiritual world on behalf of the community—have been recognised the authority to determine which signs require a ritual of purification, what are the *mmusoe* that merit a ritual cleansing. This shift between evident threats and menaces that required an elitist hermeneutic process, has had important consequences on the structuring of belief. The mobilisation of women in the *momome* has expressed the political establishment’s taxonomy of danger: participants not only need to accept and assimilate the classification of what evil is and what needs to be done to combat it, they are called upon to chase it away with their performance. Belief and ritual action diffuse the establishment’s classification of *mmusoe* as both tangible and spiritual.

The second overlap is a consequence of the first. While the *momome* was previously aimed at preventing communal threats, it is increasingly used to valorise the king and its entourage. A menace to the chiefly establishment is presented not as the problem limited to the restructuring of the political elite but as a spiritual threat menacing the community as a whole. During the twentieth century *momome* were ordered upon the death and illness of the king and of his close associates. The body of the king and that of the kingdom are thus assimilated metaphorically and conceptually. The king’s illness is presented as a threat equivalent to a war or as an epidemic outbreak. Similarly, the attempt to oust the king is presented by his supporters not as a issue of personal rivalry amongst members of the

royal matrilineage played out by the high ranks of the chieftaincy establishment, but as a potential communal disaster. Over the twentieth century, the ritual drama of the *momome* has insistently communicated that only the king's persona guarantees order, protection, peace; any threat to his tenure is presented as a communal disaster.

The arbitrary, cultural order that ritually reaffirms the identification of king and kingdom is conceptually stated and practically ritualised. The *momome* not only legitimates chieftaincy, it expresses the notion that it is up to every member of the community to make an effort to safeguard it, as its demise would be an inevitable cause of communal disaster. The vitality of society is associated with the absence of tangible dangers (war, epidemics), the lack of threatening spiritual signs (death of pregnant women, "unnatural" meteorological events) and the (re)establishment of unity under the encompassing persona of the king and his royal entourage.

Confronting Success in Spiritual Protection in the Twentieth-century Akan World

The *momome* has been one of various ceremonial options that have contended the capacity to regulate the cosmological equilibrium between stability and uncertainty, order and chaos, abundance and scarcity. The explicit ritual involvement of the chiefly establishment represents the ordinary, paced cleansing exercises. The persistent emergence of stress clearly implies a partial failure: perception indicates to Sefwi that evil and threats periodically menace the community notwithstanding the chiefly effort (Parker 2004: 401-402, 412). Alternative orchestrations have thus been activated especially when, with colonial rule, chiefs lost their monopoly over the management of mystical forces. The *momome*, Christianity and anti-witchcraft cults evoke cosmologies apparently autonomous from the ordinary enactment of chiefly ceremonial pomp. The gender and ritual specificity of the former and the "alien" origin of the latter two lead to conceive them as alternative means to address the cosmological and existential stresses which strike Akan communities. Christianity was of course seen as offering a cosmology which replaced the weapons used by what were termed "fetishes" in colonial discourse, which often included the whole, complex bundle of pre-Christian beliefs. Christianity, especially in the forms considered more respectable, was sustained by the colonial administrators, and after an initial suspicion, by chiefs as well. The *momome*—as we have seen—survived the twentieth century thanks to the indifference of colonial administrators and the incitement of the chiefly establishment, notwithstanding a fading of the original motives.

The literature on anti-witchcraft cults in the first half of the twentieth century tells a different story. These cults provided a similar cosmological

message to the one offered by the *momome*: one of harmony, stability and peace in a context of danger and evil, represented specifically by the perceived spread of witchcraft. These cults differ from the *momome* in some important aspects: the ceremonial activity is persistent while the *momome* has a volatile and temporary duration; the source of danger is sought within the community while the *momome* counters threats which are either not produced by human agency or, if human, by outsiders; anti-witchcraft practices include recourse to violence (to punish and neutralise the witches) alongside therapy while the *momome* activates the former only symbolically. These different attempts to solve society's harms through the recourse of the supernatural have, however, a further element of difference: while the *momome* was, as shown, substantially inserted at wish within the choreographic messages proposed by the political establishment, anti-witchcraft cults maintained an autonomy and often disturbed the chiefly order (Olsen 2002; McCaskie 2004; Parker 2004). While various religious practices which were aimed at installing the belief in a safeguarded and harmonious supernatural environment were tolerated, anti-witchcraft cults—which proved more difficult to manipulate—underwent persecution and thus took the form of powerful but intermittent appearances. The *momome*—supported by the chiefs—lived a longer life, only to be gradually rendered redundant by the spread of church affiliation and by the growing lack of credibility of chiefly ideology.

The compared recourse to supernatural healing since the late nineteenth century reveals the influence of the political establishment in containing, diffusing and manipulating cults. Colonial administration and chiefs were not the only but were crucial agencies in promoting the spread of convenient cosmologies. The analysis of religious practices which had a long life—such as the *momome*—and of those that were unable to flourish—such as anti-witchcraft cults—provide some insights on the extent to which our taxonomies, beliefs and associations are continuously shaped by institutional intervention. Some performances become visible, even predominant while others are no more—negated, repressed, vanished. The *momome* is a ceremonial unfolding that, in many respects, appears independent from the chiefly establishment. To view the *momome* as a ritual of inversion, as a moment of gender liberation, of successful autonomy from established predicaments is however a partial analysis. Social practices are continuously monitored and culture—as we experience it and as it is largely reproduced through disciplined subjects—is the result of a continuous process of selection—in some instances such as the ritual here examined—directed and managed to a large extent by political institutions. The pacing of the ritual, its motives and rationale show that ceremonial diversity may be tolerated, indeed encouraged, as long as it lends itself to be controlled and manipulated.

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TRANSCRIPT SYSTEM

Local terminology is in Sefwi. Even though there are a few publications in Sefwi, a dictionary or grammar have not yet been produced. Within Sefwi language there are local variations in expression and pronunciation; when literate Sefwi write their language, they often spell words differently. The spelling used here is therefore tentative and reflects the pronunciation: — e stands for an open e while ε for a close one.
— o stands for an closed o while ɔ for an open one.

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ABSTRACT

The paper provides a description of a female ritual aimed at cleansing the community in moments of impending crisis. The ceremony, known as *momome* in its Sefwi variant, is discussed by positioning the meaning of the choreographic props used in the performance (dresses, spatial dispositions and movements, chromatic symbolism, metaphoric acts, use of therapeutic herbs, songs) within the wider cultural framework of the Akan world of West Africa. The historical transformations of the ceremonial occurrence in the course of the twentieth century are examined closely to show that even though the performance has—informants claim and pre-colonial sources confirm—not been altered significantly, the timing and motives have. The *momome*, held in response to wars and epidemics in the pre-colonial setting, in the course of the twentieth century was increasingly evoked in moments of crisis (illness, deposition, death) of prominent figures of the chiefly establishment. The paper evaluates the ideological autonomy of the ceremony—presented by some analysts as a "ritual of inversion"—and comes to the conclusion that institutional politics has had a major influence in promoting and containing the various forms of supernatural protection sought in the course of the twentieth century.

RÉSUMÉ

Exclusion de femmes de la communauté. Le rituel momome du monde akan. — Cet article décrit un rituel féminin visant à purifier la communauté en période de crise. Cette cérémonie, connue sous le nom de *momome* dans sa variante sefoui, est ici analysée en plaçant la signification de certains accessoires et particularités chorégraphiques (costumes, positions et mouvements dans l'espace, symbolisme des couleurs, actes métaphoriques, herbes thérapeutiques, chants) dans le contexte culturel plus large du monde akan de l'Afrique de l'Ouest. En retraçant l'évolution de cette cérémonie au cours du XX^e siècle, nous montrerons que même si, comme nos informateurs le prétendent et les sources précoloniales le confirment, le rituel n'a pas changé de manière significative, la temporalité et les raisons d'invoquer ces rituels ont en revanche beaucoup évolué. Le *momome*, qui avait lieu essentiellement en cas de

guerre ou d'épidémie, fut de plus en plus utilisé au cours du XX^e siècle pour des crises (maladie, destitution, décès) touchant les personnes de l'*establishment*. Cet article évalue l'autonomie idéologique de cette cérémonie — présentée par certains comme un « rituel d'inversion » — et conclut que la politique institutionnelle a eu une influence majeure sur la promotion et la maîtrise de diverses formes de protection supranaturelle apparues au cours du XX^e siècle.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: West Africa, Akan, gender, hegemony, *momome*, ritual inversion, ritual history/*Afrique de l'Ouest, Akan, genre, hégémonie, momome, rituel d'inversion, histoire des rituels.*