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## **The Impact of Christianity on Traditional Naming Ceremony in the New Juaben Traditional Area**

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### **Abstract**

*This study sought to explore the influence of Christianity on the African Akan naming ceremony with focus on the people of New Juaben Traditional Area. The developmental stages of human life experience have been earmarked by rites of passage that represent crucial facets in the cultural outlook and make-up of every society. These rites of passage include birth and childhood rites (naming ceremony), puberty, marriage and death rites. The Akan like every other society practises the naming ceremony in a way that reflects their cultural values, beliefs and traditions. Unfortunately, this culturally engineered practices have posed an ethico-religious dilemma regarding the ideal naming ceremony approach for an African Akan Christian. The aim of the study was realized through sampling 20 participants who were subjected to in-depth interview sessions. The study found out that Christianity has impacted Akan traditional naming ceremony in ways such as timing of naming ritual, traditional familial roles, naming rituals and emblems and the type of name given to the child. Conclusively, traditional religious adherents must constantly uphold its cultural heritage in the face of modernism which may sometimes demand a change in customs and societal traditions. Giving relevance to traditional naming ceremonies is the first step. The study recommends the need to document cultural practice for future generations as lived experiences may be tainted by factors that tend to demonize the Akan cultural practice of naming ceremonies.*

**Key Words:** *Christianity; Traditional Culture; Naming Ceremony; Rites of Passage; Cultural Resilience*

### **1. Introduction**

Humans experience a variety of developmental stages in life which include birth, puberty, marriage and finally, death. The transitional rituals and ceremonies that follow the developmental stages represent an essential element in the cultural makeup of every society. Van Gennep (2019) termed these transitional ceremonies as “rites du passage” which literally means “rites of passage”. Culture is the embodiment of the total way of life of a particular people that brings about a great influence on the way of living, choices, thoughts and actions of those who practise it (Idang, 2015). Every society has its own tradition and culture which is characterized by symbols, ceremonies, values, philosophies, perspectives, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, rituals, rites, language, taboos and myths.

These elements are what come together to give the culture its distinctiveness and rareness and the cultural elements exert a strong influence and power on those who practise it, hence, affecting the choice, thinking, actions and way of living of the persons involved (Asante et al., 2013; Oppong & Osei-Bonsu, 2018). The Akan have unique cultural practises which are vital to their existence as a people and among them are the birth and childhood rites (naming ceremony), puberty rites, marriage rites and funeral rites. Christianity has had a meaningful effect on the way of life of the followers of Jesus Christ which causes them to make decisions in favour of their religious creed in opposition to their cultural disposition, as in this case, the Akan traditional naming.

Naming ceremonies are very critical aspects of the life cycle for many African social structures, which basically entails complex rituals. Adogame (2005) argues that it is among the most obvious transient events that facilitate the life’s



journey. A person's name in African society symbolises a crucial part of their transcendental makeup and may also be a sign of their future. Basically, a name is a meaningful designation given to a child at birth by the parents or received from god by the new-born following their birth because a person cannot exist without one (Adogame, 2005; Bamidele, 2010).

Human beings were created to establish a noble identity above all else, according to the Akan philosophical saying *Onipa begyee din na wammeye hwee ara*, which means that a name becomes a religious marker of characterisation and a show of reverence (Adogame, 2005). A crucial constant is that names have meanings, despite the fact that the structure and style of the rite varies from one African society to the other. Consequently, the naming of new-borns is a significant event that is frequently celebrated by rituals in many societies, and some names commemorate the event of the date of delivery (Nwandiokwu et al. 2016). The new-born may even be given a name that means “rain” or “water” if the birth takes place in the rain, or “traveller,” “road,” or “wanderer” if the mother was travelling when the child was born.

According to Antia (2005), human interaction with and assimilation of other people’s cultures results in cultural change and modification rather than culture being constant and unalterable. Culture must be flexible since it is passed down through the generations as people change their societal expectations, structures, ideologies, and even their principles and occupational skills. Other parts of culture are impacted, either directly or indirectly, when one component of culture alters or evolves in response to environmental changes. This can be said of the impact of Christianity on African traditional naming ceremony.

Over the years, Christianity has been an agent of great change in Africa. However, in its quest to bring new opportunities to the African people, it has destabilised the status quo as well as undermining the power of the African culture (Mbiti, 2015). Additionally, the impact of Christianity on the African cultural outlook and its people can be seen in areas such as education, health as well as the socio-political life of the African people. It was essential to differentiate between Religion and traditions due to the universality of Christianity and Christian missionary efforts. Although Christianity can exist in every culture, every society will have specific beliefs and behaviours that speak against it and must therefore be ignored or considered as an apostasy (Mbiti, 2015).

Essentially, before the inception of Christianity in Africa, names had always been given and such names are descriptive of the cultural values of the African people (Igboin, 2014; Kanu, 2019). Nevertheless, some Akan people, especially Christians who are from traditional homes are grappled with a “moral dilemma” to which they tend to contemplate on their decision-making regarding naming their children in the traditional home or the church.

The purpose of the study was to explore the influence of Christianity on the African Akan naming ceremony with focus on the people of New Juaben Traditional Area, Koforidua.

### **1.1 Conceptual Framework**

This study is grounded on the concept of *Cultural Resilience* as the conceptual framework. The researcher is of the view that the concept of cultural resilience helps to build on the understanding of the impact of Christianity on traditional naming ceremony which is an African Akan cultural practice. The ability of a culture to sustain and grow ethnic heritage, knowledge, and behaviours in the face of challenges is referred to as cultural resilience (Clauss-Ehlers, 2010). The resilience of the African culture is instigated by the interaction with other cultures (e.g., Western culture, Christianity, Islamic) and the need to embrace modernity (e.g., education, urbanization, technology).

According to Gyekye (1996), a society must undergo substantial, possibly even radical, changes in many facets of its culture in order to evolve to modernism. However, the concept of significant adjustments must be adequately forward-thinking to improve and satisfy human existence rather than at the expense of expunging the societal cultural values which are purportedly negative. This is because every culture maintains the right to re-evaluate its cultural framework by identifying elements it deems to be either ethical or unethical. This is reflected in the words of Gyekye (1996) which explains,

The growth of human culture, its capacity to avoid decadence and dysfunction and to adapt itself to new situations and demands, its capacity to constitute itself into a credible and viable framework for human fulfilment. All this is due, surely, to the reinterpretation and critical re-evaluation of a cultural tradition as it moves through history. The critical re-evaluation of a received cultural tradition will not only suggest refinement or appropriate amendment that ought to be made to it but also direct attention to the aspect of that ought to be expunged from the cultural life and thought of a people (p. 178).



Gyekye (1996) asserts that many of the cultural values and practices of the traditional African religious people consist of positive features which can undergo some level of refinement and pruning as it has been for many cultural practices in generations past, nevertheless, the scheme of African modernity must function in a satisfactory fashion within the cultural system. The Akan naming ceremony is a continued cultural practice that has lived through time and when parents are about to name their child, the decision to employ the Akan naming ritual rests on their accumulated knowledge of their tradition. Besides, Gavelek and Kong (2014) emphasizes that culture is not static and continually evolves with new cultural practices and different means to improve their interaction with the environments (physical and social). Christianity forms part of the new evolution process of change and learning of a group's culture for many African societies of which the Akan culture is no exception.

## **2. Research Methods and Procedures**

This study employed the phenomenological qualitative research method to explore the impact of Christianity on African Akan naming ceremonies among the people of New Juaben. This study focuses on the people of New Juaben Traditional Area as they give their views concerning the issue of naming ceremonies as well as the moral struggles that comes with going about such rites of passage in a contemporary Christian dominated society. This is because there is something to be learned in all settings for qualitative researchers (Taylor et al., 2016).

The study considered a phenomenological approach which is a qualitative research design. This study used the phenomenological method because naming ceremony is a conceptualized subject in the life experiences of the people of New Juaben. However, this study seeks to understand the impact of Christianity on the cultural phenomenon (naming ceremony) among the people of New Juaben. The study employed bracketing, which enables the researcher to set aside personal beliefs or assumptions about the phenomenon being examined in order to experience the event from a new perspective, in order to ensure data accuracy and control researcher bias (Richards & Morse, 2007). Journal-keeping notes was utilised for "any assumptions" made during the study, and field notes was used for the data analysis process to recall information "not visible in the interview transcripts" (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

The sample for this study was taken from the New Juaben Traditional Area. A sample size of 20 interviewees was drawn out from members of the traditional council, parents practising the Akan naming ceremony, pastors and members of the church who are parents. This was done using purposive sampling technique. In purposive sampling, the selected interviewees for the study is based on a non-probability procedure, where the researcher intentionally picks interviewees that satisfy certain characteristics which is of interest to the study (Neuman, 2014). Since the researcher wanted to interview participants who were well-versed in matters relating to the Akan cultural norms, the chiefs, queen mothers, linguists, and elders were contacted as a result of their wealth of experience. Pastors between 2-5 years' experience in the ministry, who have officiated a naming ceremony were also contacted. Ultimately, Parents who have carried naming ceremonies from the traditional Akan culture and Christian perspectives were part of the study's inclusion criteria. The breakdown of study interviewees includes; two (2) chiefs, a queen mother, two (2) elders, a linguist, four (4) pastors and five (5) parents each from the church and also community members who are not members of the church. The study employed the rule of thumb for sample size determination recommended by Ritchie et al. (2014, p. 118). The rule of thumb suggests that samples for qualitative studies involving interviews should generally lie under fifty (50). The criteria for selection of the study interviewees was on the assumption that they have some experience and possesses the relevant information and opinions from the religious institutions (i.e., African Akan culture and Christianity) that was considered to be key in this research. Through informed consent, the study aimed to reassure participants that it would maintain ethical standards for human research. Participation in this study was purely voluntary, with no one being compelled or offered incentives to do so. Consequently, participants had the choice to stop the research without suffering any consequences if they do not really feel comfortable in continuing doing so. This acted as a precaution against participants giving false information, which could distort the originality of the findings.

An in-depth interview procedure was employed to gather the views of interviewees in exploring how traditional naming has been impacted by Christianity, among other factors. In gathering the views of the interviewees on the concept of naming ceremonies, this method gives them the opportunity to explore their thoughts more deeply or exert more control over the interview, because the interview session is more flexible. Similarly, the researcher also has the freedom to prompt for more information if something interesting or novel emerges because they are not restricted to a pre-planned, rigid list of questions, as with the use of the quantitative questionnaire method (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). The inductive thematic analysis was employed on data collected from the in-depth interview session for this study. In an attempt to gain insight into the impact of Christianity on Akan traditional naming ceremony, the researcher



collectively brought together the opinions of the interviewees so as to analyse them. This resonates with the six-process thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke's (2006).

### **3. Analysis of Results and Discussions**

The Akan traditional naming ceremony, like many other African cultural practices, has been impacted by Christianity and it is against this background that this section discusses the impact of Christianity on Akan naming ceremony from the perspective of interviewees in the New Juaben Traditional Area. The opinions from the interviewees discuss how Christianity is shaping Akan naming ceremony. The study interviewees pointed out that some of the ways in which Christianity influences the Akan naming ceremony include timing of the naming ritual, change in naming ceremony officiants and place, naming rituals and emblems as well as the type of name given to the new-borns.

#### **3.1 Timing of Naming Ritual**

The interviewees indicated that Christianity has indeed impacted the way Akan traditional naming ceremony in the New Juaben Traditional Area was organised. According to majority of the interviewees, the impact of Christianity on Akan naming ceremonies is evident in the day set aside to name the child. Traditionally, new-born children are named early in the morning on the eighth day after childbirth, however, Christianity has given parents the leeway to decide at will when they deem it necessary to organise the ceremony for the child (D. T. Sarpong, personal communication, January 13, 2021). The basis of this decision according to the interviewees sometimes rests on the parents' financial capability and readiness to outdoor the child. The decision to organise the naming ceremony at the preferred time for many parents has been attributed to Christianity (B. Anampa, personal communication, November 10, 2020), and this situation has also made it difficult for the Akan indigenes who are Christians to abide by the eighth-day 'rule of thumb' for naming a child.

#### **3.2 Change in Naming Ceremony Officiants and Place**

As part of the changing trends in contemporary New Juaben Traditional Area, Christianity has influenced traditionally established familial roles of the Akan naming and ritual process. The traditional interviewees indicated that the family system has been broken as a result of the demonization of the Akan culture by Christianity. Majority of the interviewees stated that contemporary organization of naming ceremonies which were formally held in traditional family homes have been replaced by the church while the roles played by the *sewaa* or *nanabarima* have also been replaced by the pastors (A. A. Kwame, personal communication, November 25, 2020). In an interview with one participant, it was stated that:

In the olden days, the naming of the child (i.e., children born to Akan indigenes) was done by the family members, however, such roles have now been taken over by the pastors. Most people in Asokore now name their children at the church. It is wrong for the pastors to name a child either at home or the church as the family members according to culture are responsible for such roles (B. Anampa, personal communication, November 10, 2020).

Some of the traditional interviewees highlighted that many indigenes have been misguided and given false doctrines by the pastors regarding the traditional cultural setting to be viewed as an avenue for idol worship or idolatry when undertaking naming rituals and ceremonies. A. A. Kwame (personal communication, November 25, 2020) pointed out that families are sometimes described to be possessing witchcraft and wizardry spirits, hence, the children are not given to their families, especially the grandparents. Besides, the interviewees question the role of the pastors and the spirit backing or living in them as they endeavour to lay their hands on the new-born child by means of spiritual impartation. A. A. Kwame (personal communication, November 25, 2020) indicated that:

We need to do the right thing by naming our children in the traditional way. We the traditional people are not happy about what Christianity is doing to our culture. Even now, when a child is named in their traditional home, they still send the new-born to the church for prayers.

The traditional interviewees further stated that it is wrong for parents to give their child to be named by someone (pastor) from a different family or one they have no knowledge about. Some pastors name children at the church because of the money they stand to gain during the occasion as donations made are given to them (B. Anampa, personal communication, November 10, 2020). Consequently, when there is a disagreement in the family regarding naming the child in a traditional or Christian way, it can lead to a break in marriage (A. Afrah, personal communication, November 13, 2020).



A participant juxtaposed the Islamic religion to the Christian religion to make a point regarding the appropriate place to name a child. The participant indicated by saying that “how Muslims name their children is nice because they do not name the child in the mosque but rather at home” (B. Anampa, personal communication, November 10, 2020). Ultimately, traditional people cannot throw their culture away since cultural practices come with blessings as names are given to new-born children by their families A. Afrah, personal communication, November 13, 2020). Surprisingly, one interviewee indicated disagreement with the other traditional interviewees:

I do not think Christianity has influenced our culture in anyway. Today, most people are Christians and I do not think it is bad to carry the child to church. The grandparents especially should not be angry over this situation as Christianity is now the order of the day (B. Afrah, personal communication, November 15, 2020).

Most parents do not allow their children to be named in the traditional way due to the fact that they are Christians and the responsibility to name the child for Christians is just a matter of choice (E. Serwaa, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

### **3.3 Naming Rituals and Emblems**

The majority of the Christian interviewees stated that the traditional people performed certain rituals which negatively affected the child in their later life, hence, the reason to name the new-born child at the church premises or by the pastors. D. T. Sarpong (personal communication, January 13, 2021) indicated that:

We cannot leave the naming ceremony in the hands of the traditional people. If we leave it in their hands, they will make our children taste alcohol. As a result, we cannot allow such situations as there are a lot of drunkards in the villages and there is the need for a change which is driven by Christianity.

B. Abekah (personal communication, January 8, 2021) disagreed with Sarpong’s assertion that alcohol may make the children to become drunkards in the future. Abekah further indicated that many factors combine to make one a drunkard like the person’s lifestyle growing up, environment where the child was raised and parenting style among others. The participant also stressed that “the amount of alcohol given to the child during the naming ceremony is in very small quantity and cannot even get to the child’s stomach”. The negative effects purported to impact the child’s life in the future led to the Christian interviewees suggesting that the use of alcohol and pouring of libation was wrong and invoked bad spirits upon the child. This is evident in the words of a Christian interviewee:

Parents are filled with joy and hope when a pastor like Mensah Otabil or Dickson Tuffour Sarpong holds their child and commits him or her to the hands of God during the naming ceremony. Such a parent has the belief that their child will be successful as the child will be prayed for as compared to the head of the family or any other member committing them to their gods (H. Asante, personal communication, January 20, 2021).

The Christian interviewees stated that Christianity impacted on the use of alcohol to the child as can cause damage to the child’s organs as well as be an introduction of the child to alcoholism. Naming ceremony is the foundation of life, hence, when the foundation is wrong the child’s future is severely affected. On the contrary, B. N. Tutu (personal communication, November 12, 2020) asserts that many children in the contemporary society are leading wayward lives in drunkenness even though they were named in the church and by a pastor. The ritual of alcohol is done to instil within the new-born child a consciousness of morality and the necessity of always living in harmony with the truth for all his or her life. Christians carry a misconception about alcohol being used in the “olden days” that it is capable of turning the child into a drunkard, hence, the need to opt for other emblems or symbols (water, salt water, honey, fanta, non-alcoholic wine) rather than schnapps or alcohol. An interviewee explains that:

I do not think the use of alcohol for us makes any difference to the Christian use of non-alcoholic drinks. When I was named as a child, my parents used alcohol, however, I have not tasted alcohol before (B. Afrah, personal communication, November 15, 2020).

According to the traditional interviewees, the Akan tradition is now fading away because when people name their children in the traditional way, they are seen to be practising fetishism and as a result people turn to look down upon the Akan culture. This situation has led to people embracing the Christian naming ceremony even against their will for the fear of what people would say. Culture is passed on from generation to generation. The acquisition of culture is a result of the socialization process in a given community (Idang, 2015). Fafunwa (1974) explains how culture is a generational heritage:



The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environments (p. 25).

This demonstrates that every human being who grows up in a particular society is likely to become infused with the culture of that society, whether knowingly or unknowingly during the process of social interaction. That is to say, the Akan traditional customs and beliefs are different from idol worship or fetishism. To the traditional Akan people when the naming ceremony of a child is organized in the church and by the pastor, the parent involved have gone against the custom and traditions of the child (A. A. Kwame, personal communication, November 25, 2020). Culture is to be understood as the way of life of a people. This presupposes the fact that there can be no people without a culture.

### **3.4 Type of Name Given**

Christianity has impacted on the type of name given to new-born children. Majority of the traditional interviewees indicated that many Akan today do not bear their “proper names” anymore, but have rather opted for westernised names in the guise of Christianity (W. G. Tinkorang, personal communication, November 12, 2020). As indicated in the earlier chapters, Akans do not just give names for the sake of it, hence, the spiritual, religious and ethical connotations ascribed to naming the new-born child are not overlooked. A. A. Kwame (personal communication, November 25, 2020) stated that:

In the Asante custom we do not give names just like that. Naming is very important. we name a child within a family because you have to know the real behaviour of the person. Because there is the spirit of God in naming, it is a bad omen to name a child after someone you do not know like using a Christian name which is not related to any ancestor or living member of the family.

Names are not just ‘signs’ for the African people but also symbols that evaluate “nature, essence, characteristics, functions and orientation of an object, person or place relative to what role it plays in the sight and understanding of the one who gives the name” (Echekwube, 2005, p. 279). That is to say, names encapsulate the totality of humanity and nature and they depict an intimate relationship between the named and the namer. Maquet (1972) affirms Kwame’s assertion as he explains that:

An individual is defined by his name; he is his name. This is an inside name which is never lost, and this distinguished from the second name given on the occasion of an increase in strength... The inside name is the indicator of a person’s individuality within his lineage. For no man is isolated: he ‘constitutes a link in the chain of vital forces, a living link, both active and passive fastened by the top to the link of his ascending line, and supporting at the bottom the line of his descent (p. 106).

The meanings of names are often linked to the circumstances of a child’s birth; and to a considerable extent, these names impact the bearer’s personality and character, and therefore his or her identity. Because certain names borne actually evoke the belief in reincarnation, names are a continual reminder of the African community’s composite conception (Mbiti, 2015). The traditional interviewees affirmed the European names do not carry any meaning related to the indigene’s personality or identity and such names can be for aesthetic relevance. That is why, for the Akan, children are named after their family relatives who in their life have been morally upright most especially. Christianity has unconsciously made people want to have an English name right next to their local names. An interviewee stated that, “My father gave me the name Ansomaa but the Janet is the Christian name that I have just added to my name.” (J. Ansomaa, personal communication, November 9, 2020).

Some Christian interviewees agreed that because of the use of Christina names, Akans are losing their identity as names tell a lot about where a person is coming from. C. Nimako (personal communication, January 13, 2021) a Christian interviewee, stressed that in recent years the name given to children distances them from their traditional roots as a result of the love most people have for English names. For Christians, names must reflect Biblical truths that can positively impact the life of the child, therefore, many parents over the years used Biblical names like Joseph, Mary, David, Abraham and Elizabeth among other names found in the Bible (D. T. Sarpong, personal communication, January 13, 2021). However, since Christianity carries with it a form of westernisation, some parents also adopted European names.



Interestingly, there is now a new dimension to the naming of the new-born child for the Akan people as a result of Christianity. Many New Juaben indigenes have embraced Biblical attributes such as Ayeyi, Aseda, Nhyira, Abotare and Nkunim among others have been embraced by many New Juaben indigenes to express names in the Akan language while acknowledging God (D. T. Sarpong, personal communication, January 13, 2021). These names have been efficiently instigated and adopted as a result of people trying to identify themselves with the Christian religion (i.e., a form of religious identity). Nonetheless, Biblical names reflect Jewish culture which is a cultural disposition different from the Akan culture which seeks to exhibit its peculiarity through its naming ceremony and rituals that come with the occasion. The traditional interviewees are of the view that some of the life vicissitudes that many people are faced with come from the names they bear, hence, the need to bear a name which does not only reflect their family identity but also a form of moral conduit for the person's soul. For the Akan, everything embodies spirit and spirituality and so are the names given to new-born children.

#### 4. Conclusions

The study revealed that the impact of Christianity on the Akan naming ceremony was evident of traditional familial roles, the type of name given to the child, naming rituals and emblems and timing of the naming ritual. Consequently, in the face of these factors contributing to a cultural change over the years, the study revealed that the adherence of the African Akan traditional religion still perseveres with the practice of the Akan naming ceremony. Nonetheless, it is instructive that informed the Akan see the urgent need for a rethink so that they may begin to end the mental enslavement imposed on them by foreign influences. This is against the background that traditional cultural practices give meaning to the life of the adherents while demonstrating a deep understanding of reality, nature and human life. In so doing, the Akan are able to efficiently construct their identity even in the event of foreign cultures.

#### 5. Recommendations

From the study results, it is recommended that there is the need to document cultural practice for future generations as lived experiences may be tainted by factors that tend to demonize the Akan cultural practice of naming ceremonies. This is a way to prevent the future generations from being disoriented from their cultural Akan values since the cultural makeup of the African traditional society is on the verge of extinction as a result of factors such as Christianity, globalization and westernization among others.

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