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## The Poiesis of Writing Culture: *Ordained by the Oracle* by Asare Konadu as an African Ethnographic Novel Unveiling the Asante's Traditions

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper specifically beams its searchlights on the incident of the ethnographic mode of narration in the crafting of the narrative fiction — Ordained by the Oracle (1969) by the Asare Konadu. The novel is scrutinized as an inventory of Asante customs, moral, social and religious philosophy. It becomes the art of thick descriptions, the intricate interweaving of plots and counterplots. Asare Konadu is labelled here as a journalist-novelist and ethnographer-novelist who has adhered strictly to social ethnographic facts as he pertained to the etched culture. Konadu has selected some Asante ethnographic data (funeral ritual performances, mythology, divination, chieftainship, etc. and woven them into a plot around imaginary Asante hero and heroine through a blurred writing genre—ethnographic fiction encompassing compelling events and useful ethnographic detail which advance the reader's ability to understand the constrictions of circumstance on characters.*

**KEYWORDS:** African ethnographic novel, Asare Konadu, Asante, culture, Ghana, Akan, customs, literature, tradition

### Introduction

Ethnography is more often than not equated directly with fieldwork. Ethnography is not merely fieldwork. It is, rather "the scientific description of nations or races of men, with their customs, habits, and points of difference" (Oxford English Dictionary,1971), or simply as « thick descriptions » (Burke,1957,122). In the same way as standard ethnography, ethnographic fiction has a conscious and integral part of its goal which is to accurately describe another way of life. But unlike ordinary ethnography, ethnographic fiction adds in its inner configuration characters and plots. *Ordained by the Oracle*, an ethnographic-oriented novel by Asare Konadu breaking into the depths of the Asante traditional

culture, through a simple plot and characterization, thoroughly renders the Asante's funeral rituals and dirges, their specific way of performing wedding and naming ceremonies, their myths, pharmacopeia, musicology. To all that must be added their firm beliefs to the world of the spirits and witchcraft. In African colonial and postcolonial literature, a great amount of literary works encompasses meaningful cultural patterns of the depicted ethnic group. It is in this way that Denise Coussy in *Littératures de l'Afrique anglophone* (2007) qualified Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as an ethnographic novel insofar as in the narrative framework of the Nigerian novelist the reader is liable to grasp some ethno-cultural features of the Igbo religious system or mystical philosophy locally known as *Odinala*, the significance of the new yam festivals, the masks and the masquerades, the chieftaincy title, the symbolism of the kola nuts, dance and divinatory art labelled as *Omenala* which refers to the whole set of Igbo cultural values. All the more, Wole Soyinka's tragedies specifically *The death and the King's horseman* and *The Strong Breed* in which the playwright imbued his plays with the Yoruba socio-religious footprint—the tradition of *egungun* ranging from scapegoatism raised in the literary texts to the *Orisha*. In both Soyinka's magnum opuses, the round characters' names acutely reflect different socio-cultural background and highlight as well the theme of death. It should be kept in mind that the novel *Ordained by the Oracle* was originally published under the title *Come Back Dora!* in Accra in 1966 before being revised and reissued by Heinemann for international distribution three years later. In his survey of the *Emergence of African Fiction*, Charles R. Larsen stressed tersely that like many others West African writers namely the Nigerian John Munonye's *The Only Son* 1966, Clement Agunwa's *More than Once* (1967), Onuora Nzekwu's *Wand of Noble Wood* (1961), Camara Laye's *The Dark Child* (1953), Konadu relied too heavily on ethnographic material for his fictional subjects but he did not explain his criteria for making this curious indictment. Nonetheless, whatever are Konadu's impetuses, it surely does not matter from the moment the reader can easily recognize the patent incident of the ethnographic mode in the novel. The motivation behind this contribution on African ethnographic fiction can be explained by the fact such theme does not usually represent a corpus of sustained focus. This is, in fact, the objective of this research paper which

is to ferret out the slightest Asante ethnographic datum, cultural experience and appreciate how they are crafted into this creative writing's narrative framework.

### **1. Tracking down the ethnographic mode in the narration**

The ethnographic features of *Ordained by the Oracle* are shown up by the biography of the author himself. Asare Konadu's professional track record includes the positions he held as a journalist. Born in 1932 in Asamang, Asante Region, Ghana. In 1951, He joined the Ghana Information Service, and also worked as a reporter for the Gold Coast Broadcasting Service. Konadu was sent abroad in 1956 by the government to study in London and Strasbourg University. After he returned, he joined the Ghana News Agency in 1957. The author's journalistic background has deeply contributed to sketching the realistic and ethnographic nature of his novel. In this way Ulf Hannerz referring to the meddling of ethnography and journalism which he considers as continuums rather than dichotomies, pinpoints: "in a different epistemic register, journalism tends to rest on, and indeed reproduce 'cultural values' and 'institutional memories' (Hannerz,2004,217) instated in the archives or in the collective memory. Consequently, ethnography and journalism share the problem of representation concerning the accounts of events and peoples. Steered by a realistic description, a literary Photo-Realism, the reader can easily notice that instead of changing the geographical names that constitute the fictional setting, the novelist-journalist has faithfully reused referential and authentic Asante toponyms in his novel while depicting the Ghanaian rural life and traditional practices of the Akan culture. It is along the same line that the novel theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin stated that a novel is a: "a self-consciously designed work; a complete prose narrative, and a work written not for entertainment, but to encapsulate a social and moral agenda" (Bakhtin,1975: 67) that would connect with a reading audience.

The fact of using accurately and faithfully language in naming, portraying things is critical in truths elaboration as it is expressed by Roland Barthes: "a fact never has anything but linguistic existence" (Barthes, 1969: 45). Among those typically geographical names, there are Asamang, the main referential setting representing the ancestral home in the novel where Dora's dead body should be taken for the forty-day funeral ritual to be

performed by the widower, her husband Boateng, to whom it is assigned in this ethnographic novel the role of the participant-observer — a concept derived from the epistemology of ethnographic approach of the participant-observation defined by Florence Kluckhohn as “(...) a conscious and systematic sharing, in so far as the circumstances permit in the life activities, and on occasion, in the interest and effects of the groups” (Kluckhohn, 1940 :313). Asamang is all the more significant because it means in Akan language the place of the dead, of the spirits of the ancestors (*Samanfo*). In this sense, the all-knowing narrator-observer put it as follows: “when Madam Dora Boateng died everybody at Asamang and outlying district came to the funeral, not only for the love and respect they had for her and her family but to mourn with her husband Kwabena Boateng (20). Elmina, located on the south coast of Ghana in the central region, situated on a bay on the Atlantic Ocean, is where the main character Boateng held a shop. Cape Coast, in Central Ghana of South Ghana, has been a place where the protagonist had stayed to grow his business since he is described in the novel as a very successful trader. The naming of Elmina is far from being fortuitous in this ethnographic text since it had been the area at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century where the first Ghanaians had been converted into Christianity by the Portuguese settlers. Archbishop Peter K. Sarpong professed the second wave of Catholicism brought by the French Alsatians: “began again from Elmina in 1880” (46:2002). This place of a strong Christian domination has certainly and profoundly influenced Boateng’s inner desires to put an end to some old-fashioned traditional practice like the ritual of mourning.

Oyoko (58) is another toponym whose history dates, according to some historians like Markowitz (1958:17-19) back to the period when the first Akan group migrated from the Mali Empire to settle in area like Kin-ntampo and from there, most of them migrated to places like Takyiman and Akurofuom. As a united people, the Akan started with the nucleus of Oyoko clan around Asantemanso. After several years of subjugation by others empires such as Denkyira and Akwamu, Asante eventually grew to become a very powerful empire under the leadership of King Osei-Tutu (1695-1717), after defeating the Denkyira King Ntim Gyakari in 1701 and annexed the whole Akan clans under his kingdom and administrating them from Kumasi, his headquarters. Therefore, the toponym Okoyo was

basically the name of the first Asante clan around which the Asante become united as a people for the sole purpose of taking over their enemies hence the term *Asante* which means “because of war”. It is derived from the Twi words *csa* meaning war and *nti* meaning “because of”. Sekyere (58), Kumasi (80), Accra (80), Apowa (89), Pepetrem Street (105), Atwea Buo (116) are all representative geographical names. Throughout these realistic toponyms, a good mapmaker can let out the Asante territories within which evolve their etched culture in the fiction. Geographical names contain priceless historical information that can document history and archaeological evidences. Tjeerd Tichelard explains how toponyms can be carriers of cultural heritage:

Geographical names sometimes embody a population’s historical roots, or even a location’s history preceding the presence of the ancestors of those living there now. They are valued by historians, historical geographers and linguists for the light they may shed on a past otherwise dark, for the window they may provide to look back beyond the beginnings of history. Apart from actual, verified historical details, legends and popular anecdotes often at some time in the past got attached to them. Even if proven untrue, these played or still play a role in the connection people perceive with locations in geographical space (Tichelard, 5)

Next to toponomastics which plays a decisive part in appreciating the culture of a given ethnic group—a clue symbol of identity, the reader can also bump into the Akan anthroponomastics, another efficient conveyer of culture and history. The significance of anthroponomastics should not be merely circumscribed to proper human names’ inventory but as a reflection and a witnessing of a culture revealing some aspects of the person’s appearance and behaviour. In the course of a heckling opposing the Christians and the traditionalists, blaming each other for perverseness and obscurantism, while being at it, the custodians of the traditions reported, besmirching all at once that Kwabu Mosi, a Christian who was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment for his affair with another man’s wife. To counter attack, the catechist voiced: “well in every town there is a Mensah — the third born” (49) as part of the answer to their brother in faith’s misdemeanour. The mention of the most widespread

patronym, *Mensah* carried by a great deal of Ghanaians is all the more noteworthy since it discloses the etymological connotation that turns around that name. The nameless character instantaneously and metaphorically offers an ethnographic glimpse about the personality of those individuals—the Mensah name bearers who have in this ethnographic text dirty and debauched behaviours like the adulterous Kwabu Mosi.

The novel in the rather documentary sense, and journalism as the craft of objective reportage seem to be grown from the single root of consciousness in the work of writers like Asare Konadu. The latter's approach is akin to Emile Zola's literary theory: realistic naturalism. Such theory holds the truth that literature is nothing but a matter of testing whether the writer's descriptions correctly portrayed some artefact of nature—perhaps a person, an ethnic group, some feelings, a landscape, or ways of making a living, since these could be objectively verified in themselves. Hans Meyerhoff in his critical work *Time in Literature* quotes Emile Zola in these terms:

The naturalistic novel is simply an inquiry into nature, beings, and things. The work becomes a report, nothing more; it has but the merit of exact observation, or more or less profound penetration and analysis of the logical connection of fact...  
“Like an experimental scientist, “the novelist is but a recorder who is forbidden to judge and conclude. “He “should equally keep to known facts, to scrupulous study, if he does not wish to stray among lying conclusions. (Meyerhoff,1960)

In *Ordained by the Oracle*, a novel in which observation constitutes a cornerstone in the crafting, the readers are also liable to realize that they don't really need at all to lose time to understand some cultural concepts or practice insofar as at whatever time they pop up they are straightaway enlightened either by the narrator-participant-observer or by a character. The lack of metaphors, allusions, and other fiddly figures of speech and intricate narrative techniques helped to enhance the ethnographic flavour of the novel which undoubtedly aims at rendering as best as possible cultural facts and their symbolic meaning. In this ethnographic fiction, the evaluation of truths claims is prior to rhetorical analysis. The other distinctive particularity of this ethnographic fiction is the plot itself. The

plot is roughly structured around the chronological succession of Dora's ritual funeral ceremony, from her dead body lying in state up to the final obsequies down the market place. The journalist-novelist, stepping into the shoes of an ethnographer seems to renounce aesthetic impression since the multiplicity and complexity of stylistic devices available for the construction of a literary work have been traded for more flexible literary tools that can serve the context-specific needs of this ethnographic novelist. Asare Konadu does not select his facts for a real literary effectiveness seeing that his genuine purpose is basically grounded on portraying the whole of Asante cultural realities.

Thus, it can be stated that both ethnographic and naturalistic novels are characterized by the seriousness of tone and tragic colouring. The second step of the funeral ritual consisted in taking a nightly bath into the sea constituted a cultural fact whose meaning is given by an old woman who led the procession: "This is the ceremony to cleanse yourself of any association spiritually and bodily you have had with your wife" (63). At the midst of the funeral ceremony, a sheep was slaughtered, cooked and must be eaten by the entire family members of the widower. In the course of such period of mourning named *sora divan* nobody is entitled to weep because this step of the funeral ritual is expressly carried out "to tell the departed soul that everyone is happy at home" (184). The narrator-ethnographer keeps providing other additional factual information about the *special food*: "they were eating mutton representing the flesh of his wife" (183). Likewise, another unnamed character, a man of the clan bestows the reader with a very dramatic but informative item that the widower has wept when he was at the cemetery and inappropriately this misdeed is considered as something that is liable to "nullify the whole ceremony" (184). The drawbacks of his weeping, according to the Asante belief is thought to prevent infertile women from nourishing and toying with dreams and joys of motherhood. Another upset and disturbed character who was in the funeral procession put his concern as follows: "yes, I am particularly thinking of the barren women who expect the departed soul today to send them children" (184). Seemingly, the die was already cast and those hapless women are even doomed to be cursed owing to Boateng's blunder. Boateng's weeping, the *sora* degustation constitute facts that are basically grounded on the novelist's journalistic experience

which relies upon epistemological objectivity, believing that an account is true if it “rests upon certain types of sources, method” (Ward,2009,72), and evidence. Pointing out cultural facts and providing immediately the ethno-cultural beliefs or motives that creep around has definitely been the main task Asare Konadu has assigned to himself. Through secondary female characters’ conversations, the reader is told that in this Asante community a woman who loses a child before he is ten is not allowed to weep or show any sign of grief because according to customs the first child is always a “pathfinder and his departure is a good omen if nothing else” (73). This is what Robert Hertz (1960) in his treatment of mortuary rituals examined. He argued that the intensity of grief expended by any individual or group was dependent on a socially constructed common-law-based system, rather than a natural feeling. For instance, the mourning of an infant or a first-born child is more often than not cursory or even non-existent, while the mourning of an elder or an adult like Dora was not. In the Akan community, the longer a person has lived, the more elongated the period of mourning tends to be as it is rendered in this ethnographic novel. In Kofi Antubam’s *Ghana’s Heritage of Culture* (1963), it is stated that this type of the management of death is fundamentally entrenched in the belief that the departed elder or adult could transform into a post-mortem jural authority over his or her living lineage members. In this ethnographic novel, the reader can have noticed as well that Dora’s body had been laid in a public place more precisely in Jamasi street for the needs of the final obsequies. Such ethnographic datum that consisted in performing the mortuary ceremony in the market-place is not incidental insofar as in Robert’s S. Rattray *Religion and art in Ashanti* (1927) it is clarified that this Asante cultural aspect of the public mourning is to secure the happiness of the departed on its journey to the spirit world. These *facts* completed by their symbolic *meaning* as it happens all along the narrative framework of the novel are dispersed by the author—to some extent by the novelist who is part and parcel of the Asante community whose traditional funeral practice has been described herein. In that way, Frederick Hale (1966) examining the didacticism that dwells the literary work in point stated that Konadu “becomes ethnographically didactic at times describing the series of rituals that Boateng must undergo” (31). Asare Konadu’s role of bringing forth *meaning* to almost all significant *facts* in

the novel is a role that is scientifically allocated to ethnographer—the researcher probing for meaning through a contextual thick description. Culture, according to Geertz (1973) becomes a fabric of meaning in terms of which human being interpret their experience and guide their action. The proximity of journalism, ethnography, and literature facilitates passages between spheres and the creation of narratives hybrids.

The author's sense of details also stems from his profuse and keen description of the funeral preparations for Dora's burial resorting to a simple, unambiguous language. Like the Christians, the Asante indulge in bestowing the deceased with the most craved items in the course of her earthly life. In this respect, Dora's body was placed carefully on a bed covered on all sides with length of *kente* cloth and twelve blankets each showing on the side: "a gold necklace adorned the chest, and three gold nuggets shaped into rings on the fingers" (49). The acute presence of the gold in Dora's funeral honours highlights its topicality and high value within the Asante community. Additionally, Dora's favourite dish of "mashed yam mixed with palm oil was set before her on a small table and a hen placed with the head twisted rested on the on the brass pan and beside it six eggs in stand" are the other religious and cultural objects that are bound to go along with the mourning honours.

Besides, Kofi Amapa, the guide who should stay with the widower during forty days can be regarded as the author's informant. Having already undergone the same funeral ritual, Amapa is sensibly more knowledgeable and wiser. Hence he informs Boateng about the ritual and by extension the reader. According to traditional customs, the guide is bound to answer all queries of the widower and the latter is not allowed to talk to no one but to his guide. When the funeral rituals were getting more and more unbearable because of its onerous requirements, Boateng took advantage of the Amapa's momentary loss of focus to sneak his way into the bush so as to hang himself to death. The teaching the widower received concerning the lot reserved for anyone who attempts to commit suicide is that he will be publicly jeered and chastened, that's why he pulled himself together and scraped the spooky plan. The guide's comment on such a situation is resumed by the all-knowing narrator-ethnographer's voice in these following words:

Kofi Amapa's light comment was deliberate. The right approach to the confession Boateng had made would be to report to the Chief of the town and Boateng would be taken through the street of Asamang to the dance of *Okrawa*. Children would come forward to jeer at him or slap him because any act of suicide was regarded in their society as cowardice and the one who attempted it should be made to realize in a fitting manner that the attempt was not honourable. (175)

Kofi Amapa, the character-informant goes on communicating some additional ethno-factual information about the theme of suicide. He states that if Boateng had succeeded in killing himself, his dead body, according to tradition "would be dragged through the streets to the cemetery," (176) the same way as dead sheep and dogs are dragged into the bush implying to honourable funerals like the one Dora. It's in this context that Platt & Perisco (1992) elucidated that a group response to suicide or death from retaliatory sorcery may be different from how the group responds to death from an illness or from old age or death like Dora's one attributed to witchcraft. Likewise, the narrator-informant directly gives the meaning of the black stools "symbolizing the soul (*kra*) of the departed were brought out to be aired" (24). This ethnographic piece of information related to stool means that the Asante traditional chiefs, instead of sitting on throne, they use stools. When they die, their stools are painted black and stored in a sacred room. This sacred room is called *Nkonwafie* (stool house). The sense of details the author-journalist showed up is seminal in this fictional ethnography. In this highly descriptive/documentary novel, the slightest details associated with the funeral ceremony and other cultural facts are carefully and acutely depicted leaving no space for personal interpretation and ambiguities. Madam Kai who pertains to the custodians of the Asante tradition talked to Boateng in this pedantic tone full of cultural knowledge: 'as soon as they hear you say this it means your wife's soul has left you behind and several other rites will have to be carried out in search of the cause.' (42) These rites which are geared towards seeking the root cause of the death of an individual are common place among many African ethnic groups devoted in the traditional religion. Most of the time, witchcraft is a rife phenomenon in these societies as it is encapsulated in

Boateng's invocations of her wife's soul: "if you die of no natural death but someone sought to cut your life short in this earth seek revenge... (55). To trigger the ritual procedure, Boateng the widower's trousers are soaked "in drink, water, urine and sweat" (42). Madam Kai recommends Boateng to follow each act in detail to avoid violating taboos while the forty-days mourning period lasts taking things lightly. Here are Madam Kai exhaustive requirements to be sternly followed which deeply sound like:

- 1) You must not eat anything while the sun has not set and not more than once a day.
- 2) You must not eat anything growing underground and these include, yam, cassava, cocoyam.
- 3) During the mourning period of forty days this should be your dress. (They thrust at him a mourning black cloth called kuntunkuni.
- 4) You will be provided with a guide for that period and he will accompany you everywhere you go. You will eat when he eats and you will sleep when he sleeps. In other words, he will guide you in all that you must do (43)

Any reader who is familiar with the Asante culture, can easily realize that the author has taken ethnographic material and weave it into his fictional work. Asare Konadu's journalistic background and insight and his cultural knowledge, portraying the Asante culture from an inside point-of-view, have also been obliging insofar as they are used as the raw materials for the crafting of this literary work. Being an insider who is fully-impregnated with his native culture, tagged along with a highly-elaborated reporter's style, Konadu did not need to undertake any ethnographic research to back-map up to the slightest detail both the Asante micro and macro cultural data in his novel. In this sense, Anne Kirstine Hermann analysing the relationship between Ethnography and Journalism argues: "ethnographic journalism the inner truth of groups through an immersion" (Hermann, 2016, 266) so as to comprehend the world on their term, but in this case study the journalist-ethnographer coupled with fictional writing emerges as an Asante who renders his own culture; his "native point-of-view" (Harrington, 2003,150), that is an insider's perspective. Asare Konadu, through this novel *Ordained by the Oracle* and

others like *A Woman in her Prime* (1967), *Devils is waiting* (1989) seemed to have responded efficiently to Chinua Achebe's appeal to all African writers to win back the power to describe their own cultural, historical, and contemporary world — a right confiscated from them by the colonial overlords.

## **2.The Asante ethno-cultural patterns in the novel**

In this ethnographic novel, numerous are the Asante cultural practice that have been portrayed by author. Among them are the Asante naming ceremony, the communal labour, the wedding ceremonies, the funeral dirges, etc. These traditional practices would later on be studied in our upcoming research projects. Out of these experience the Asante have developed a wealth of mythological narratives, a highly-structured and hierarchical political system, proverbs, music and dancing, and other form of artistic expressions within which the Asante moral, philosophical and socio-political foundation are embedded.

### **a) Mythology**

In the Asante mythology, Tano is the second son of Nyame, the supreme creator god and Asase Ya, the earth goddess. Tano is associated with several origin of death. In one version of the mythical story, it was said that Tano got into a feud with the personification of Owuo, the Akan god of death over the competition to catch up with a hunter. Whoever got to him and was invited for supper first would claim humanity. Tano transformed into an antelope and let the hunter chase him before turning around and assuming his huge god form again. He tried to set off with the hunter, but Owuo stopped him. The contest details changes according to the sources. But the outcome is the same nonetheless —neither won. They reached an agreement: whoever arrived first when a human was sick or wounded, will be able to claim their life. So if Death came first, the person's life was forfeited, but if Tano showed up instead, they would continue with their life. In the *Ordained by the Oracle*, the chief was mindful that Boateng and his anti-traditionalist squad have committed a sacrilege, a felony against the benevolent ancestors; a demeanour which is liable to punishment ranging from natural disasters to death. To prevent death from striking those anti-conformists, the chief whose primary

function is to be the head shield for the community summoned Tano through his priest to be the first at the crime scene (Asamang) so as to chase away death: “that night the priest of Tano was called in the chief’s house and with white clay pounded into power he walked around the town sprinkling it on all the footpath leading to the town” (38). The imagery of the white clay spread out in the vicinity of the town is evocative because it has, according to the Asante tradition, the power to face adversities or to repel death. Furthermore, the narrator mentioned while describing the stool on which the chief sat down that it was in into the “shape of an elephant with a duiker sitting on its back” (37). The posture of the duiker, in other version of the same mythological narrative like the one mentioned above where it is about an antelope, is not sheer coincidence since it was revealed that Tano is gifted with the power to change or morph into that animal of which he is the embodiment. Hence, the dominance of Tano the protective god and life provider over the other living being (the elephant) no matter how strong they may be. The priest of Tano’s prayers are uttered as follows: “Seventy-seven gods of Asamang we call you, *kose, kose, kose*. To relieve the soiled town from the sacrilege. Now the night comes with its darker shades. Rid this town of all evils and watch over us from all evil designs.” (38). Tano, being among the most revered and charismatic divine figures in the Asante pantheon is for Mircea Eliade the primordial creature who “provides patterns of human behaviour” (Eliade,2), with the Asante people. Tano is the humanizing hero.

In his yearning to provide the reader with a faithful portrayal of the Asante traditional culinary art, the narrator-ethnographer takes advantages of the moment when Dora’s dead body was being laid in state to depict the people evening meal components as well as their dietary habits: “Others were still preparing the evening meal of pounded plantain or cocoyam eaten with vegetables soup palm oil soup.” (21). Like many West African societies, Yam is considered as the “King crop” representing the local staple food. Hence, Boateng and his fellows “talked over current affairs which included the next date for the annual yam festival” (33). Cultural artefacts like the ritual of eating, food ingredients, the plates all linked groups together to form social identification and meaning to the Asante culture. Being already described as an ethnographic novel, *Ordained by the Oracle* confines itself to portraying the Asante religious system that appears in

their mythology. *Nsamansie* according to the Asante belief is the world of the dead and premature deaths have no place there and their spirit are driven away, back to the earth to spend the rest of their days in cemeteries and lurk in dark forest and ghostly corners. The connectedness of Asante mythology and superstitions is highly interpenetrating that is why it is pretty tricky to set them apart. The all-knowing narrator-ethnographer enlightens it arguing in that society of custom and tradition superstitions played a part, and coincidence was never ruled out in “any act the hands of gods were said to operating” (54). In the Asante spirit world of “supernatural beings who are invisible but are nonetheless felt as active presences” (Soyinka, 1983:196) partake the individuals’ day-to-day as best as they can. This Asante worldview is a clear indication that divinity, spirits, transcendence permeate every aspect of their life. Boateng the widower and the participant-observer evolved in a world of superstitions populated by ghosts and bad spirits. In this ethnographic novel, those bad spirits lived in an ominous and grim natural environment jammed packed with “monkey sending a deep mourning sound” (59), “crickets chirping away noisily” (59) and “bats making the all area seem like an arena of discord singers” (59). According to popular these the spots are most preferred dwelling for the roaming soul waiting to join *Nsamansie* despondently. In the Asante traditional religion, myths are sacred stories that are meaningful to its adherents because they are functional to the existence of the group rituals. Myths in this community contribute to the construction and consolidation of societal structure.

### **b) Chieftainship**

Chieftaincy remains a very important traditional system of governance in modern Ghana. Each Akan dialect pertains to a kingdom with a chief and traditional headquarters. Some are larger and more powerful than the others. Chieftaincy has stood the rest of time from the precolonial period to the present day in the political history of Ghana. According to Akrong (2006,197) “the Akan chieftaincy institution is based on kinship system in which the authority of the family head is derived from his position as the link between the living and the departed ancestors and founders of the kinship”. Given that the Akan practice matrilineal inheritance, the chief is nominated from his mother family. These various chiefs owe allegiance to

the paramount chiefs at the middle of the hierarchy, called *amanhene*. Any squabble between villages is settled at the paramountcy level. A paramount chief may have about 50 villages under his jurisdiction, depending on his power and on historical achievements and conquests. All these paramount chiefs serve under the state's king. The chieftainship system is hierarchical. The Asante socio-political organisation is portrayed in this ethnographic novel. For the good functioning of the yearly yam festival, a kind of association settled down to better prepare the festivities. For a good management of money, a *sanaahene* meaning literally Head of the treasury is essential. According to the Asante line of succession, a matrilineal one, it's Afram, Boateng "mother's brother" (24) who should be the *saanahene*. But owing to his young age, that responsibility was bestowed to Boateng.

The Asante's way of performing or expressing democracy even appears in the type of garments they donned on their backs. The first assembly summoned by chief in the ethnographic fiction and whose agenda was about the Asamang Scholars Association's longings to ban this ancient way of mourning. It shows out the role of the chiefs which include protecting their land from encroachment, acting as the spiritual heads and intermediaries between the living and the ancestors. They also acted as the chief judges and settled disputes involving land, invectives, or violation of *ntam* verbal taboos. The clothing he wears for the occasion was the "kente woven cloth of "one head does not counsel" (37); that is why he brought the people together to ask them about their opinions for the purpose of taking a consensual decision.

### **c) The Asante ethno-divinatory proverb**

As in many African societies, whether they are deeply rooted in traditions or acutely influenced by modernisation, divination remains a rife phenomenon. In the Asante community where witchcraft is commonplace among the individuals, each death is suspected to be the wrongdoing of witch or the bad spell of an enemy. The leitmotiv of this oracular literature in *Ordained by the Oracle* is propelled by Dora's death whose cause is bound to be known —meaning whether it is brought about by a natural death or the endeavour of a wicked person. To puzzle it out, the service of a highly qualified oracle or diviner like the one whose cave is located on

the Kontrokrowi hill is needed. The narrator-ethnographer, described the private and sacred sphere as spot with no particularity, utterly devoid of a priest, a go-between like the Greek Pythia (the oracle of the temple of Apollo) through whom forthcoming events are revealed, but people with requests merely hear a voice emerging from deep in the cave. Some characters-participants go further disclosing the divinatory system that the oracle has implemented to peep into the consulters' future. They argue that if the oracle has something to hand over, there is first a rush of wind through the cave the requester is ordered to pick it up from a stone table. Whatever he picks up is for him.

The other specificity of the oracles of the hill is that instead of resorting to a clear message to satisfy the ontological pain of his consulters who are reasoned by the everlasting quest for the unknown, for the secretive, he delivers the predictions through obscure proverbial utterances whose insights or wisdoms should be sought by the consulter himself as testified by the messenger: "but since the oracles spoke in proverbs, he was expected to interpret as displayed before him." (114). To shed light upon Dora's premature death—a worrying phenomenon among the Asante culture, the oracles gave the Asamang messengers "a calabash contained a handful of smooth sand and one pebble" (114). The elders of Asamang, putting the two items together concluded that Dora was knocked out of this world as she became a victim of isolation hence the imagery of the pebble which refers to isolation and obstinacy. As for Boateng he has been provided with the proverbial parcel that consisted of a leaf of tree *Nyame nwu ansu na mawu* — "God must die before I die" (117). At first sight, Boateng attempted to construct a literal meaning for the divinatory proverb before being helped by Papa Kofi who took it as a warning for Boateng to not take himself as a god, that he must always remember he is a mortal. But the interjection 'Hmm' (117) voiced by Boateng alluding to a surprising effects signalled that Boateng was casting doubt on what is interpreted from the oracles' divinatory proverb insofar as by means of an inner monologue, he asserted he had never thought of being a god, letting the reader know the oracles were absolutely mistaken.

It should be noted that the use of divinatory proverbs has been found as an alternative solution to an ancient way of performing divinatory art. According to Amapa's accounts, the old-dated divinatory system consisted

in compelling the consultants to look “into a little pool of water standing between two stones and see their future before them” (119). But the issue with this hydromancy, old way of penetrating the future had been harmful and awful for the consultants whose prospects are bleak and grim. Consequently, the profoundly thwarted and psychologically enfeebled consultants often committed suicide for not finding any particular reason to live a life entirely deprived of hopes and dreams as the saying goes ‘hope springs eternal.’ To save the lives of some patients, as of now the oracles talk in proverbs and they leave the persons to interpret them.

Diagnosing the cause of an ailment in traditional Asante medication entails a systematic intervention of oracles searching for the answers to the origins of the disease to determine, who or what caused it and why it affected a particular person at a particular time, and in a particular spot. In Papa Kofi’s youth reminiscences, it is noted that her mother was suffering from an incurable disease hence the motive for their visit to the oracles who told them that “the cause was buried in a bed-river by her dead sister” (118). To spare the young Papa Kofi from the same bad spell that stroke her mother, he was prescribed a talisman he wears to this day. This traditional system of peering into the future and past of a patient can prove effective in unearthing things which the orthodox and highly-sophisticated medical technology cannot sense.

#### **d) Ethnomusicology**

In this ethnographic fiction, the musical instruments used by characters vary from the different occasions and each encompasses a specific meaning. The Obonu drum usually found at the courts of chief is used at the kings or queens’ presence to announce their arrival, to start a meeting, to adjourn it or to deliver an urgent message to the subjects. It is in this way that the king ordered the linguist to “beat the Obonu drum and announce to all Sekyere that Asamang today mourns” (38). Moreover, Adowa, one of the most popular dances performed by the Akan community in the southern part of Ghana is portrayed in this ethnographic novel. *Adowa* dance is performed during special events such as funerals, festivals, celebrations, weddings and royal events and other public social events. The *Adowa* dance is a sign of expression that allows performers to communicate their emotions through their hands and feet. *Adowa* dance in

this ethnographic novel is part of the different steps in Dora's funeral ceremony. It's a kind of dance whose technical movements are somewhat tricky for anyone alien to Akan ethno-musicology. In this way the narrator-ethnographer specifies: "the intricate steps that made dancing of the Adowa a very difficult exercise for anybody outside the Akan tribe" (78). The dancers usually adorn themselves in kente a woven patterned cloth with which the Asante traditional dress *ntama* are made. The occasion determines the types of kente to be worn, the funerals are most of the time black and white since it is the moment of mourning and grief. The traditional dress *ntama* made of *kente* covers the breast area to the knee as it appears in the ethnographer-narrator's portrayal when describing the body movements of the dancers during Dora's funeral ritual: "this was not enough for one of them who, tightening her *ntama* around her, stepped into the arena" (78).

#### **e) Ethnopharmacopee**

The Asante traditional medicine playing an important role in the society first appears in this ethnographic novel through the Dora Serwaah. When she was overcome by a long term disease, instead of taking her directly to the hospital, as a society deeply rooted in tradition, they resorted to the talents of a fetishman (*suman*). The first thing the healer asked to reanimate Dora is the latter's "childhood name" (29). After a diagnosis by means of his cowries and some kola nuts, murmuring in the process that "the soul had already departed from her body and that she would die" (29). It is very tricky to make a line between traditional medicine and the Asante mythology whose secondary gods account for seventy-seven constituting the *Abasom* are invoke at any occasion to solve human issues as it is the case with Dora's disease. The healer's prayers encompassing and requiring the interference of the gods are highlighted in this way:

Hikiri Nriki! Big toad of the forest who waits patiently on everything and never rushes. Hikiri! Sleep comes very soon. If we sleep without you how can we be sure death instead of sleep will not come upon us. Fill the room with all the seventy-seven gods and protect me (32)

The role of a medecineman is not only restricted to the fact of handling and mixing herbs and plants, but he or she can also at the centre of the funeral ritual. For example, when Dora showed up in Boateng's dream unwilling to talk to her, the service of a medecineman at Akrofoso was required so as to invoke the spirit speak to the widower as it is customary for the mourning ritual. The soul invocations resulted in the information that Dora's reluctance to talk to Boateng turns around the fact the latter did not reward his wife with a gold ring to take away.

#### **f) Women's role in the funeral ritual**

Because of the inevitability of death and belief in an inactive life, the Asante of Ghana have developed elaborate rituals to ease the pain of physical separation and to guide the dead into the spiritual world of ancestors. Asante women play a significant role in the care and disposal of the dead and the management of bereavement. Women this depicted Asante traditional, are considered as "the custodians of the custom" (21) When the news about Dora's death broke out heard "the old women were the first to arrive" (21). Their leader was Madam Kai. "She was in her seventies" (21). By the same time, the other women were looking on the room where the bed was being prepared for the dead body. There is also Madam Antwiwaa who is not only the custodian of the sacred grove of Apontua, but also the goddess herself. Such position enabled her to be one of the highest authorities who were normally consulted on occasion when grief struck the village. But she decided by her free will to give the first place to Madam Kai on this occasion because Madam Kai's two husbands had died before her and she knew more about the ritual of the dead of the widower and the widow more than Madam Antwiwaa. As a firm believer and guardian of the traditional customs, Madam Kai rebuked Boateng's attitude for his coming around just after the dead body: "I have never seen a widower travelling away from the body of his wife." (22). This counter-value really did not only discomfit Mai Kai but also the all of the Asante people who are strongly entrenched in their culture.

Besides, the omniscient narrator-ethnographer did not restrain himself from pinpointing women's role in the Asante funeral. He stated that the people of Asamang believed firmly in the traditions of their tribe and made sure that everything was performed the way their grandfathers did them or

as these things “were mainly in the hands of the women” (48) So that things such as laying the body in state followed strictly without the least departure from the very way decreed by the ancestors. The narrator keeps on emphasizing the liminal role of women in mourning in this way: “it was important that there was no erring and three or four women called together to handle any particular tradition on the same basis that ‘one head does not counsel’” (48). In this quotation, the reader realises that it not solely the central role of women in performing ritual ceremonies that is hinted herein, but the Asante democratic philosophy and the virtue of humbleness which involves placing oneself among others and in the world at large when dealing with any situation concomitant with power management.

#### **g) Christianity vs tradition**

Notwithstanding the acute presence of Christianity in Ghana which dates back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century matching with the arrival of the Portuguese in the land, and encompassing since then a good range of denominations: (Catholics, Methodists, Pentecostals, Latter-day Saints, etc.), some traditional practice like the way mourning ritual is celebrated was still common place among the great majority of Ghanaians. In *Ordained by the Oracle* even like the main character at the same time the widower of the novel appears like a Christian who is unable to free himself from the burden of traditions that weighs on him. In this way the narrator-observer resorting to a flashback, pinpoints:

Several times, he himself had poured libation of gin and rum to his ancestors. The last time he had poured the liquor to the ground and said: Kuhkuma Bonsafo, come and drink from my hand. All ancestors of Asona Clan, for you also a drink. It is not anything that I have called you here today. Today is akwasidae fortieth Sunday of the season and as in my duty I bring you drink. So that you will drink and bless us all... (23)

This religious hybridity or syncretism with a strong dominance of the traditional religion is also apparent in this ethnographic fiction. Dora's dead body was first taken to church of the Methodists before being delivered to the Asante's traditional mourning practice. Boateng is closer

to his customs insofar as he is the nephew of Chief Kwaku Agyepong who took over the family god Kunkuma and now feeds the gods. Mad am Kai laid the stress on the fact that the latter “was not a Christian” (23). The old woman’s statement underscores the idea that the belief in Asante traditional religion is inborn in each individual from the start of existence so that people like Boateng are bound to be traditional worshipers no matter what the spirituality they claim to pertain to. This is attested in Akan proverb: “*Obi nkyere abofra Nyame*” which implies that the child does not need to be taught about the existence of God. The Ghanaian child from his birth is religious.

At some level of analysis, it can be noted that both Dora and Boateng were real Christian practitioners as the most of the Asante people who were just willing not be associated with the unwieldiness and baseness of tradition. In this respect, Frederick Hale pinpoints in his contribution: “Despite the rapid proliferation and entrenchment of Christianity during the twentieth century, indigenous religious beliefs and practices have continued to exercise a profound influence on many Ghanaians” (Hale, 1996,3). Dora is said to be Christian but as testifies by an anonymous character who reported: “But I have never seen her at Apontuaso when we went to worship” (23) She goes further arguing that it is because of this ambivalence that Dora has passed away: “In that case to whom did she belong. Indeed, it was said that if a knife has no owner it gets lost. That is perhaps why she has lost” (23). In such a society which is deeply imbedded in traditions, there is hardly any natural or accidental phenomenon. Glee and woe are supposed to have their causes, even if people have to peddle rumours or far-fetched speculations to justify social events.

#### **h) Proverbial utterances: the ethnography of speaking**

Describing the Asante community which is deeply rooted in their traditional culture, the rife use of proverbial expressions become spontaneous. Characters in *Ordained by the Oracle* resorted to them to put forth their argumentations or to back up others’ viewpoints all linked with death ritual. That’s what Dundes and Arewa have labelled these linguistic formula as “the ethnography of the speaking of folklore (or ethnography of speaking folklore, more concisely) (1964,72). The following proverb

referring to Boateng: “It is like the butterfly who emerges from the cocoon and turns round to tell the caterpillar “I am mightier than you are” (36). After the Asamang Scholars Association have submitted the memorandum signed by Boateng as president, the custodians of the tradition, more precisely the chiefs became angry with Boateng who in a moment of his life has “fed his ancestors” (36) meaning the gods. The chief linguist, being unable to figure out Boateng’s behaviour, erroneously and ineptly associated it with the latter’s riches. Henceforward, the image of the butterfly, small in size matches with Boateng and the caterpillar symbolizes the Asamang community together with customs and traditions, cannot be smashed by a trivial creature who is nobody but Boateng and his fellows gross-root modernisers who crave for jettisoning all ancient and archaic customs and traditions and among which there is the on-going practice of funeral celebration.

The subsequent spiritual narrative proverb: “if you have anything to do, do it now when the river’s gates have not closed on you” (45) uttered by Madam Kai can be considered as the proverbial expression that sums up the ultimate purpose of the Asante mourning ritual. In this ethno-spiritual proverb that directly refers to the Asante metaphysical world, the definitive closure can be interpreted herein as the final separation of the departed soul from the world of the living to that of the ancestors provided that the soul managed to cross to “river” which is to some extent the boundary between the two worlds otherwise the soul now a shadow (ghost) will roam around and molest people and can even prohibit future mothers to be barren or childless. Every single step of Dora’s funeral ritual is supposed to prepare her soul for the journey, “crossing the river”. So, Boateng’s desire to see again Dora in an oneiric world will only be possible during the time framed for the funeral ritual because whence that period exceeded any possible visit of the soul will be likely to be circumscribed since the soul will be henceforth resting peacefully on the arm of the benevolent ancestors. If Dora is a good spirit, she will normally appear to say good-bye and bestow blessings and long life on him on earth. This implies that death perceived in the Western societies “as the material end of the body and social self” (Seale,1998,34) is far from being the same in the Akan community and in most African societies.

### **i) The side and non-desirable effects of funerals**

According to the Asante tradition when a person passed away, all the neighbouring villages partake in the ceremony and share the funeral expenses. Through a realistic outlook, the narrator-ethnographer put it as follows: “Dora Boateng’s funeral was no exception. People came by motor road, footpath” (20) and the narrator keeps on explaining: “It was customary that when anybody died all the people of Asamang joined the bereaved to bury the dead” (20). Questioning the big amount of money extravagantly spent during funerals, Kwame Arhin in his contribution: “The Economic Implications of Transformations in Akan Funeral Rites” (1994) observed that these rites have been transformed to some extent of world religions into an institution of economic and social rather than religious significance in response to changes in the economy, society, and material culture of the Akan peoples over the last century. Families often spend much money than they do on the care of a bedridden. In other words, they take better care of the dead than the living. They seem more interested in the post-mortem than the pre-mortem. As the Akan saying goes “the family loves the corpse”. In the framework of the novel, it can be noticed that these ancient way of mourning becomes more and more intolerable that is the reason why Boateng and his mates have implemented the Asamang Scholars Association for the reformation of the old and archaic customary practice. Had they been successful, Boateng would have been spared from the ritual (35). Its role includes also the seeking of the interest of people of Asamang and help to promote the development of the town into a modern community as asserted by Taw Atakora, a member of the executive. He continues elucidating in a querulous tone that the practice of funeral celebration should be eliminated since it is a social vice which all socialists and democrats should keep their hands off.

### **Conclusion**

Literature has always relied on facts to make fictional works more believable and useful, while nonfiction namely ethnography or journalism entice readers to be fully engaged. The proximity of ethnography and literature facilitates passage between spheres and the creation of new narratives hybrids: a *faction*. It weaves a framework within which the Asante culture and the literary pre-postmodernism to chart the same course

to result in this ethnographic novel. If European ethnographers cared little about novels, African indigenous colonial and postcolonial novelists like Asare Konadu, in contrast, often made explicit reference to the sociological nature of their writings and professed to have to some extent the same aims as ethnographers. *Ordained by the Oracle*, being fully jam-packed with the Asante ethno-cultural data can be characterized as a socio-anthropological treatise. African popular fiction can be studied as form of ethnography insofar as novels often contain detailed ethnographic description and analytical statement about social realities. That's why it can be stated that all African creative writers are in a certain way ethnographers and their readers assess the sociological validity of their fictions just as much as their aesthetic value. It is what explains the fact that an increasing number of anthropologists, ethnographers or journalists like Asare Konadu engaged with a radical appropriation of literary formats which are moulded with the nitty-gritty details of the ethnographic fieldwork experience. This controverts Chris Awuyah's viewpoint who wrote in the *Encyclopaedia of Post-Colonial Literatures* within which he has mistakenly criticised Konadu as a writer who "occasionally shows literary seriousness" (783). If literature is a vehicle of culture, if literature is never written in a vacuum, but stems from the real human and cultural experiences, so what is more serious than *Ordained by the Oracle*, a novel that passes an overview upon the Akan culture. Subsequently, to accurately convey the lives of a given community, their system of significant symbols, and their plots and counterplots of life would seem to require a rich and flexible prose style quite beyond what ethnographers have employed to date. A good deal might be learnt through a more conscious awareness and appraisal of the work of those who have experimented in ethnographic fiction—a kind of literature that preserves people's culture in the sense that it (ethnographic literature) helps to keep the record of cultural heritage of a people.

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