

**WRITING CULTURE: *ORDAINED BY THE ORACLE* BY ASARE KONADU
AS AN AFRICAN ETHNOGRAPHIC NOVEL UNVEILING
THE ASANTE'S TRADITIONS**

Youssoupha MANE

University of Assane Seck, Ziguinchor, Senegal

Department of Applied Foreign Languages

y.m6@univ-zig.sn

Abstract: The paper beams its searchlights on the ethnographic mode of narration in the crafting of the narrative fiction — *Ordained by the Oracle* (1969) by Asare Konadu. The novel is scrutinized as an inventory of Asante's customs, moral, social, and religious philosophy. It is an art of thick descriptions, the intricate interweaving of plots and counterplots. Asare Konadu is labeled 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 an imaginary Asante hero and heroine through a hybrid 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. The objective of this research paper is to ferret out the Asante ethnographic data, and their cultural experience and appreciate how they are crafted into this creative writing's narrative framework.

Keywords: African ethnographic novel, literature, Asare Konadu, Akan, Asante, culture, Ghana, tradition

**ÉCRIRE LA CULTURE: *ORDAINED BY THE ORACLE* D' ASARE KONADU COMME
UN ROMAN ETHNOGRAPHIQUE AFRICAIN DEVOILANT LES TRADITIONS DES
ASANTES**

Résumé : L'article braque ses projecteurs sur le mode ethnographique de narration dans l'élaboration de la fiction narrative — *Ordained by the Oracle* (1969) d'Asare Konadu. Le roman est examiné comme un inventaire des coutumes, de la philosophie morale, sociale et religieuse des Asantes. C'est un art de descriptions épaisses, l'imbrication complexe d'intrigues et de contre-intrigues. Asare Konadu est qualifié ici de journaliste-romancier et d'ethnographe-romancier qui a adhéré strictement aux faits ethnographiques sociaux en ce qui concerne la description d'une culture. Konadu a sélectionné certaines données ethnographiques Asante (performances rituelles funéraires, mythologie, divination, chefferie, etc.) et les a tissées dans une intrigue autour d'un héros et d'une héroïne Asante imaginaires à travers un genre d'écriture hybride - une fiction ethnographique englobant des événements fascinants et des détails ethnographiques utiles qui boostent la capacité du lecteur à comprendre les contraintes des circonstances des personnages. L'objectif de cet article est de découvrir les données ethnographiques des Asantes, leur expérience culturelle et d'apprécier comment elles sont conçues dans la structure narrative de ce roman.

Mots-clés: Roman ethnographique africain, littérature, Asare Konadu, Akan, Asante, culture, Ghana, 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's traditional culture, through a simple plot and characterization, thoroughly portrays the Asante's funeral rituals and dirges, their specific way of performing wedding and naming ceremonies, their myths, pharmacopeia, and musicology. To all that must be added their firm beliefs in 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 varied and manifold African communities. 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 ethnocultural 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 labeled as *Omenala* and which refers to the whole set of Igbo cultural values. Besides, Wole Soyinka's tragedies specifically *The death and the King's horseman* and *The Strong Breed* communicate the Yoruba socio-religious philosophy—the tradition of *egungun* ranging from scapegoatism raised in the literary texts to the *Orisha*. In both Soyinka's literary outputs, the round characters' names acutely reflect different socio-cultural backgrounds and highlight as well the theme of death. It should be noted 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 that like many other West African novels 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 resorting to ethnographic materials. The research question of this paper is: to what extent can this novel be considered ethnographic? Nonetheless, whatever may be Konadu's drives, it is sure that the reader can easily come across the Asante cultural heritage. The motivation behind this contribution to African ethnographic fiction can be explained by the fact such a theme— ethnographic fiction does not usually represent a corpus of sustained focus in African literature.

I. Tracking down the Ethnographic Mode in the Narration

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 then at Strasbourg University. After he returned, he joined the Ghana News Agency in 1957. The author's journalistic background has deeply contributed to the realistic and ethnographic nature of his novel. In this way, Ulf Hannerz (2004: 217), 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' instated in the archives or in the collective memory". Consequently, ethnography and journalism share the dimension of representation concerning the accounts of events and peoples. Steered by a realistic description, 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's 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 language in naming, and 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. He is assigned in this ethnographic novel the role of the participant-observer — a concept derived from the epistemology of the 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 the 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, 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 15th century where the first Ghanaians had been converted to Christianity by the Portuguese settlers. Archbishop Peter K. Sarpong professed the second wave of Catholicism brought by the French Alsations: "began again from Elmina in 1880" (46:2002). This place of strong Christian domination has certainly and profoundly influenced Boateng's inner desires to put an end to some old-fashioned traditional practices 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 areas like Kin-nta-mpo, and from there, most of them migrated to places namely Takyiman and Akurofuom. As a united people, the Akan started with the nucleus of the Oyoko clan around Asantemanso. After several years of subjugation by other empires such as Denkyira and Akwamu, the 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 became united as a people for the sole purpose of taking over their enemies hence the term *Asante* 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), and Atwea Buo (116) are all representative geographical names. Geographical names contain priceless historical information that can document the history and archaeological shreds of evidence. 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 (2002: 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 of a culture revealing some aspects of the person's appearance and behavior. In the course of the narration, there is a squabble opposing the Christians and the traditionalists. They blame each other for perverseness and obscurantism. While being at it, the custodians of the traditions reported and besmirched 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 counterattack, 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 misdemeanor. 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 ethno-fictional text dirty and debauched behaviors like the adulterous Kwabu Mosi. The novel in the rather documentary sense, and journalism—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 a theory

holds the truth that literature is nothing but a matter of testing whether the writer's descriptions correctly portrayed some artifact 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 as follows:

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 (1960:9)

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 practices 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 truth 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 marketplace. 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 novel. Asare Konadu does not select his facts for real literary effectiveness seeing that his genuine purpose is basically grounded on portraying the whole of Asante's 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 in the sea. It constitutes 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). In 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 a 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, are 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 ethnocultural 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 firstborn 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 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. This ethnographic datum that consisted in performing the mortuary ceremony in the marketplace 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 his/her 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 practices has been described herein. In that way, Frederick Hale (1966) examining the didacticism that dwells in 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 the 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 beings interpret their experience and guide their action. The proximity of journalism, ethnography, and literature gives birth to the creation of narrative hybrids.

The author’s sense of detail also stems from his profuse and keen description of the funeral preparations for Dora’s burial resorting to simple, unambiguous language. Like the

Christians, the Asante indulges 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 a 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 honors highlights its topicality and high value within the Asante community. Additionally, Dora's favorite 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 honors.

Besides, Kofi Amapa, the guide who should stay with the widower for 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 anyone but to his guide. When the funeral rituals were getting more and more unbearable because of their 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 receives concerning the lot reserved for anyone who attempts to commit suicide is that he will be publicly jeered and chastened. That's why he pulls himself together and scrapes the spooky plan. The guide's comment on such a situation is resumed by the all-knowing narrator-ethnographer's voice in the 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 honorable.

Konadu (1969: 175)

Kofi Amapa, the character-informant goes on to communicate 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 have been dragged through the streets to the cemetery," (176) the same way as dead sheep and dogs are dragged into the bush. It's in this context that Platt & Perisco (1992) elucidated that a group's 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 stools means that the Asante traditional chiefs, instead of sitting on a throne, 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 detail the author-journalist shows up is seminal in this fictional ethnography. In this highly descriptive/documentary novel, the slightest detail associated

with the funeral ceremony and other cultural facts are 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 commonplace among many African ethnic groups devoted to 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 action in detail to avoid violating taboos while the forty-day mourning period go on, to not take things lightly. Here are Madam Kai's exhaustive requirements which deeply sound like cultural prescriptions that shall resolutely be observed:

- You must not eat anything while the sun has not set and not more than once a day;
 - You must not eat anything growing underground and these include, yam, cassava, cocoyam;
 - During the mourning period of forty days this should be your dress. (They thrust at him a mourning black cloth called kuntunkuni.
 - 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.
- Konadu
(1969:43)

Any reader who is familiar with the Asante culture can easily realize that the author has taken ethnographic material and weaved it into his fictional 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 analyzing the relationship between Ethnography and Journalism argues: “ethnographic journalism is the inner truth of groups through an immersion” (Hermann, 2016, 266). It helps to understand 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) — an insider’s perspective. Asare Konadu, through this novel *Ordained by the Oracle* and others like *A Woman in her Prime* (1967), and *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 Asante’s cultural practices have been portrayed by the author. Among them are the Asante naming ceremony, the communal labor, the

wedding ceremonies, the funeral dirges, etc. Out of these experiences, the Asante has developed a wealth of mythological narratives, a highly-structured and hierarchical political system, proverbs, music and dancing, and another form of artistic expression within which the Asante's moral, philosophical and socio-political foundation are embedded.

2.1 *Mythology*

In Asante's mythology, Tano is the second son of Nyame, the supreme creator god, and Asase Ya, the earth goddess. 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 (*Encyclopaedia of African Religion*, 2008: 11-16). 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 demeanor 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 the "shape of an elephant with a duiker sitting on its back" (37). The posture of the duiker, in other versions of the same mythological narrative like the one mentioned above where it is about an antelope, is not a 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 behavior" (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 advantage of the moment when Dora's dead body was being laid in state to depict the people's 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 artifacts like the ritual of eating, food ingredients, and 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 spirits are driven away, back to the earth to spend the rest of their days in cemeteries and lurk in the dark forest and ghostly corners. The connectedness of the Asante's mythology and superstitions is highly interpenetrating that is why it is tricky to set them apart. The all-knowing narrator-ethnographer enlightens it arguing that society of custom and tradition superstitions played a part, and the 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, and 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 “monkeys 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 belief, these spots are the 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 myths are functional to the existence of the group rituals. Myths in this community contribute to the construction and consolidation of societal structure.

2.2 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 others. Chieftaincy has from the precolonial period to the present day in the history of Ghana. According to Akrong (2006, 197), “the Akan chieftaincy institution is based on a 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 by his mother's 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's socio-political organization is portrayed in this ethnographic novel. For the good functioning of the yearly yam festival, a kind of association is settled down to better prepare the festivities. For the 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's "mother's brother" (24) who should be the *saanahene*. But owing to his young age, that responsibility was bestowed on Boateng.

The Asante's way of performing or expressing democracy even appears in the type of garments they don on their backs. The first assembly summoned by the 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 the role of the chiefs which includes protecting their land from encroachment and 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.

2.3 *The Asante Ethno-Divinatory Proverb*

As in many African societies, whether they are deeply rooted in traditions or acutely influenced by modernization, divination remains a rife phenomenon. In the Asante community where witchcraft is commonplace among individuals, each death is suspected to be the wrongdoing of a 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 unknown — meaning whether it is brought about by natural death or the endeavor 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 the 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 oracle 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 pearls of wisdom 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 on Dora's premature death— a worrying phenomenon among the Asante culture, the oracle 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 effect signaled 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 oracle was 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 consulters 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, the old way of penetrating the future had been harmful and awful for the consulters whose prospects are bleak and grim. Consequently, the profoundly thwarted and psychologically enfeebled consulters 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 oracle talks 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 an oracle 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 his mother was suffering from an incurable disease, hence the motive for their visit to the oracle 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 that the orthodox and highly-sophisticated medical technology cannot sense.

2.4 Ethnomusicology

In this ethnographic fiction, the musical instruments used by characters vary according to occasions and each encompasses a specific meaning. The Obonu drum usually found at the courts of the chief is used in the kings or queens' presence to announce their arrival, to start a meeting, adjourn it, or 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, 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 the Akan ethnomusicology. 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* is made. The occasion

determines the types of kente to be worn. The funeral clothes 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).

2.5 *Ethno pharmacopoeia*

The Asante traditional medicine 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 fetish man (*suman*). The first thing the healer asked to reanimate Dora is the latter's "childhood name" (29). The *suman* makes a diagnosis of Dora's sluggish body using cowries and some kola nuts, murmuring in the process before ending up in this gloomy conclusion: "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* and are invoked on 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.

Kanadu (1969: 32)

The role of a medicine man is not only restricted to the fact of handling and mixing herbs and plants, but he or she can also be at the center of the funeral ritual. For example, when Dora showed up in Boateng's dream unwilling to talk to her, the service of a medicine man at Akrofoso was required so as to invoke the spirit to 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.

2.6 *Women's Role in the Funeral Ritual*

Because of the inevitability of death and the 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 in this depicted Asante traditional are considered as "the custodians of the custom" (21) When the news about Dora's death broke out "the old women were the first to arrive" (21). Their leader was Madam Kai. "She was in her seventies" (21). At 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 a position enabled her to be one of the highest authorities who were normally

consulted on occasion when grief struck the village. But Madam Antwiwaa 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 death of the widower and the widow 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 traveling away from the body of his wife." (22). This counter-value really did not only discomfit Mai Kai but also 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 realizes that it is not solely the central role of women in performing ritual ceremonies that is hinted at 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.

2.7 *Christianism vs Tradition*

Notwithstanding the acute presence of Christianity in Ghana which dates back to the 15th 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 practices like the way mourning ritual is celebrated was still commonplace among the great majority of Ghanaians. In *Ordained by the Oracle* even the main character 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 a drink. So that you will drink and bless us all [...]

Konadu (1969: 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 is first taken to the church of the Methodists before being delivered to the Asante's traditional mourning practices. 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. Madam 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 people like Boateng are bound to be traditional worshipers no matter what the spirituality they claim to pertain to. This is attested in this subsequent 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 are Christian practitioners like most of the Asante people who are 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 testified by an anonymous character who reported: “but I have never seen her at Apontuaso when we went to worship” (23). She goes further to argue 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 that is deeply embedded 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 rumors or far-fetched speculations to justify social events.

2.8 Proverbial Utterances: The Ethnography of Speaking

In describing the Asante community which is deeply rooted in their traditional culture, the rife use of proverbial expressions becomes spontaneous. Characters in *Ordained by the Oracle* resorted to them to put forth their arguments or to back up others’ viewpoints all linked with the death ritual. That’s what Dundes and Arewa have labeled these linguistic formulas 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 behavior, erroneously and ineptly associated it with the latter’s riches. Henceforward, the image of the butterfly, small in size matches Boateng and the caterpillar and symbolizes the Asamang community together with customs and traditions, which cannot be smashed by a trivial creature who is nobody but Boateng and his fellows' gross-root modernizers 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. It 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 the “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 cause the barrenness or childlessness of future mothers. 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 frame for the funeral ritual because whence that period is exceeded no 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 goodbye and bestow blessings and long life on him on earth. This implies that death is perceived in Western societies “as the material end of the body and social self” (Seale, 1998, 34) and is far from being the same in the Akan community and in most African societies.

2.9 The Side and Non-Desirable Effects of Funerals

According to the Asante tradition when a person passed away, all the neighboring villages partake in the ceremony and share the funeral expenses. Through a realistic outlook, the narrator-ethnographer puts 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 (1994) observed that these rites have been transformed 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 more money on a corpse 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. As the Akan saying goes: “the family loves the corpse”. In the framework of the novel, it can be noticed that these ancient ways of mourning become 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 seeking the interest of the people of Asamang and helping 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 that 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 entices 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 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 ethnocultural data can be characterized as a socio-anthropological treatise. African popular fiction can be studied as a form of ethnography insofar as novels often contain detailed ethnographic descriptions and analytical statements 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 fiction just as much as their aesthetic value. This explains the fact that an increasing number of anthropologists, ethnographers, or journalists like Asare Konadu are engaged with a radical appropriation of literary formats moulded with the nitty-gritty details of the ethnographic fieldwork experience. This controverts Chris Awuyah's viewpoint in the *Encyclopaedia of Post-Colonial Literature* mistakenly blamed Konadu for being 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 real human and cultural experiences, so what is more serious than *Ordained by the Oracles*, 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 learned through more conscious awareness and appraisal of the work of those who have experimented with ethnographic fiction—a kind of literature that preserves people's culture in the sense that it (ethnographic literature) helps to keep the record of the cultural heritage of a people.

Bibliographical references

- Awuyah, C. (1994). Konadu, Asare, in Eugene Benson and L.W. Conolly (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, London: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. (1975). *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics*. Moscow: Progress.
- Barthes, R. (1969). "The Reality-Effects" *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. Ed. Francois Wahl. Berkley: University of California.
- E. Ojo A. & Alan D. (1964) "Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore" In *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 66, No. 6, Part 2: The Ethnography of Communication, pp. 70-85.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, translated P. Mairet, London: Harvill Press.
- Florence, K. (1940). "The Participant Observer Technique in Small Communities," *American Journal of Sociology*, XLVI.
- Geertz, C. (1980). "Blurred genres: The reconfiguration of social thought". *The American Scholar*, 49, 165–179.
- Hale, F. (1996). "Akan funeral practices in Samuel Asare Konadu's '*Ordained by the Oracle*'" in *Journal for the Study of Religion*, Volume 9, n2, and p.3-19.
- Hannerz, U. (2004). *Foreign News: Exploring the world of foreign correspondents*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Harrington, W. (2003). "What journalism can offer ethnography". *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9 (1), 90–104.

- Hermann, A. K. (2016). "Ethnographic journalism" in *Journalism*, Vol. 17(2) 260-278.
- Hertz, R. (1960). *Death and the right hand*. Translated by Rodney and Claudia Needham.
With an Introduction by E. E. Evans- Pritchard. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.
- Konadu, A. (1969). *Ordained by the Oracle*. London: Heinemann.
- Kwame, A. (1994). "The Economic Implications of Transformations in Akan Funeral Rites",
Africa, LXIV, no. 3, p. 318.
- Mayrowitz, E. L. R. (1958). *The Akan of Ghana*. Faber and Faber Ltd., London.
- Meyerhoff, H. (1960). *Time in Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Platt, L. A & Perisco, V.R. (1992.) *Grief in Cross-cultural perspective: A casebook*, New York.
- Rattray, R. S. (1927). *Religion and art in Ashanti*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sarpong, P. K. (2002). *Peoples Differ: An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*. Legon,
Accra-Ghana: Sub-Saharan Publishers.
- Seale, C. (1998). *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*, Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press.
- Soyinka, W. (1983). *Aké: The Years of Childhood*. New York: Vintage Print.
- Tichelard, T. (2002). "Toponymy and Language" Lecture Notes, Enschede, Frankfurt am
Main, Berlin, 1-17.
- Ward, S. (2009). "Truth and objectivity". In *Wilkins L and Christians CG* (eds) *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*. New York: Routledge, pp. 71–83.