THE UNIVERSE HAS THREE SOULS

Notes on Translating Akan Culture

BY

PHILIP F. W. BARTLE

INTRODUCTION

Before I began living with Kwawu people, learning the Twi language, and looking at the world, as the Akan do, I had my own idea of reality and how the world, with me in it, was constructed. As I became more and more able to live like a Kwawu person, I realized that I began thinking in Twi—some things, some responses, some events, just did not translate into my native Canadian English. Ultimately I discovered that it was difficult to bridge the European-African gap within myself. Now I am trying to do so: to put together some ideas—learned in Kwawu—into a composition that would be understood by people in my culture of origin.

I will start by describing my early perceptions of reality, and go on to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of language in categorizing perceptions. I will then go on to describe what I learned about Kwawu perceptions of reality. The three fundamental elements of the physical universe and the spirits which animate it, the three fundamental elements of the physical individual and the three souls which animate each human being, each parallel the three fundamental ritual and symbolic colours, red, black, and white. Learning this different way of looking at the world, self, and society, made it difficult to answer questions, in English, based on Western assumptions, when they were asked about life and living in an African society. Perhaps this essay will explain some of the reasons.

CHANGING ONE'S CULTURE

The Canadian me is a person with some basic notions about the world: materialistic in theoretical outlook, atheistic in religion, but brought up with a sense of respect and appreciation for other peo-
ple’s beliefs and rituals, whether they be primal, Christian, Hindu, or other. Culture, to me, is everything which human beings learn that makes them human: a superorganic level of complexity based on the organic (biological) level, but transcends the inorganic (physical) level. Culture has dimensions such as the technological, economic, political, social or institutional, ideological, and cosmological, similar to the physical dimensions of length, width, height, and time; culture would not exist if it lacked them. I see an immediacy about technology and economy, which puts me closer to the materialist camp that views the economic substructure as having a deterministic relationship towards the super-structural dimension of behaviour and norms. Yet all the cultural dimensions—from using tools to speculations about reality—are learned. They are transmitted by symbols rather than by genes, and thus they belong to the realm of ideas. That sketches my Western perspectives. It is to those symbolic dimensions of culture, learned while I learned to live in Akan society, that this essay is directed.

I started learning to speak Twi in 1965 when I first went to the Kwawu district of Ghana for two years to set up an economics department in a secondary school. I was adopted by the chief of a nearby town, Obo, and returned to Canada with the intention of changing my field from economics to anthropology (M.A.). I returned in 1972 to do my Ph.D. at the University of Ghana, under the supervision of Professor D. K. Fiawoo, and did a sociological study of migration from Obo, and its effects on social organization. In the course of the study I got deeper into the culture. I learned more Twi rather than depend on translators, was adopted into a matrilineage of an Obo elder (a lineage that provides one of the stool wives of the chief), became a recognized lover of a priestess of a tutelary deity (commonly called “fetish” or god), and was appointed state horn blower. That, plus the administration of numerous surveys for research, as well as merely surviving day to day, forced me to learn how to “operate” in an Akan society. My responses, thoughts, and plans became adapted to the culture. I continued my association with Obo from 1975 to 1979, as a lecturer at the University of Cape Coast, meeting Obo migrants in Cape Coast and Accra, maintaining ties, and returning frequently to Obo for festivals and funerals. After leaving Ghana in 1982, I continue somehow partly see myself as an Obo person, seeking out and talking Twi with Ghanaian migrants wherever I go.