ANI-BUEI: CIVILIZATION AND THE OPENING OF EYES

You know, at first the Asante didn’t take education seriously. It was only those people on the coast, Cape Coast and all that. So that is why you had the Fantes, lawyers and doctors. But now we also know that when you study hard you become somebody through education. So now the Asantes, you know, took to learning and now they are better off. So you have lawyers, doctors and it’s here in Accra that all the . . . everything is centered. So they’ll like to come here. If I can come and then make a living, my family too should join me.1

Exposure to Difference

All 15 Asante women use the words anibuei, or enlightenment, to describe the eye-opening experiences that they had had in many different contexts, especially during the process of travel to improve their lives. These eye-opening experiences are said to change character, enable personal growth, and reconstitute Asante identity. From the women’s accounts, anibuei can be simply defined as the derivatives of exposure to, and encounters of, difference. From this basis, anibuei for these three different generations of women2 is said to be derived from instances when they traveled from place to place; when they were sent to stay with and be raised or trained by enlightened individuals; when they learned how to comport themselves as ladies, for example, by studying other enlightened role models; when they attended boarding schools that were mainly Christian;3 when they encountered diverse others who had traveled to live in their hometown or the place where they were living and/or attending school; and/or when they learned different languages that provided access
to alternative worlds or commercial enterprises (i.e., other Ghanaian languages or, in today’s global world, English).

As the first generation of women describe it, for the generations above them, difference was encountered through movement from place to place in order to access important trading posts, centers of industry, and/or fertile land for cocoa farming. For example, a woman describes her parents’ enlightenment as being the result of their travel to Ivory Coast to become successful cocoa farmers. In particular, she says: “My parents were very enlightened. They weren’t educated, you know, but they had traveled and everything.” She goes on to describe how her father would travel from the Ivorian village where they were farming to Abidjan to then travel by boat to Accra, in order to sell his produce and to purchase goods that they, in turn, needed. As a result of this travel she argues: “My father; he even spoke a little bit of French and a bit of English, even though he wasn’t [educated]. He was a very enlightened man. I remember he used to play the guitar when we were small.” In this way, the first generation of women’s parents often obtained enlightenment, that is, anibuei, as an accidental by-product of akwantu (travel) that was instigated with the explicit intention of resolving sikasem (money matters) through farming and concomitant trading.

In contrast, their children and their descendants enter into akwantu with the intention of acquiring new forms of anibuei through secondary schools and the like, which then have the potential to also resolve sikasem through white-collar jobs, the civil service and other professional or business enterprises. This change in pattern suggests that more Asantes now consciously seek out the fixed and ordered location of schools for the acquisition of new forms of anibuei versus what was before just an aftereffect, unexpectedly derived at the chaotic and fluid points where different traders, for example, encountered each other.

Even when the new, transformative, eye-opening experiences resulted in personal or communal conflict, the women do not talk of them as a rupture from Asante culture. They rather describe these experiences as part and parcel of a “natural” and expected transition of complex, complicated, and dynamic systems such as Asante identity and culture. Beyond this, they appear to also not see any conflict in maintaining Asante tradition alongside significant sociocultural change. A case in point is when Nana Sarpoma insists: “Tradition should not be destroyed because God gives it to us, you understand. We should keep on with the tradition” (Author Translation). Yet in this very statement lies a contradiction since, as becomes clear during interview, Nana Sarpoma is referring to the God of Christianity, versus that of Asante traditional religious practices, as the mandate for insisting on the perpetuation of Asante culture and