

CHINCHIRISI:

THE PHENOMENON OF “SPIRIT CHILDREN” AMONG THE NANKANI OF NORTHERN GHANA¹

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Abstract

The identity of the 'spirit child' may be ambiguous, but 'its' place in the experiences and in explaining the intricacies between the human nature and the spirit world remains a vital component of the Nankani religio-cultural system. Yet, in line with the current globalized world, can the Nankani continue to live out all the dynamics surrounding the phenomenon of 'spirit children'? To those who possess the power of identification, it is not about what others say or do, 'it is in our blood', they say. This raises concerns. In what ways and to what extent is this religio-cultural phenomenon a challenge to euthanasia, human rights and rural development in the contemporary society? This paper examines the phenomenon of 'spirit children' from an insider perspective.

1. Introduction

The shift from generalizations to specific contextual studies in the study of Africa's religio-cultural traditions is gaining considerable grounds in the academic study of religions (Adogame 2004:380). Recent developments in the field have also shown that not only are the intertwined areas of religion and culture needed to be unravelled to clearly situate such discussions for adequate understanding, the researcher's own position needs to be established as well (Gellner 1992:23 and Juschka 2003:85). This is especially important for African researchers whose multiple identities as members of these religio-cultural communities and who had hitherto been a part of 'the researched' are now crossing the boundary to become 'the researchers'. These developments have not only created methodological problems for those involved, they also question the predominant notions of the 'Other'. That is to say, how do indigenous

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researchers view and position themselves in respect to their research communities?

Richard Shweder's introduction to *Thinking Through Cultures* provides an entry point for the engagement with the above challenges (Shweder 1991). In his opening paragraph on 'The Astonishment of Anthropology', Shweder argues that, when people think of, see or reflect on other cultures, a number of issues come to the fore. At the core of these, he declares, is astonishment. Shweder contends that:

If there is a piety in cultural anthropology it is the conviction that astonishment deserves to be a universal emotion. Astonishment and the assortment of feelings that it brings with it – surprise, curiosity, excitement, enthusiasm, sympathy – are probably the [e]ffects most distinctive of the anthropological response to the difference and strangeness of “others”. Anthropologists encounter witchcraft trails, suttee, ancestral spirit attack, fire walking, body mutilation, the dream time, and how do they react? With astonishment. While others respond with horror, outrage, condescension, or lack of interest, the anthropologists flip into their world-revising mood (Shweder 1991:1).

It stands to reason that the title of this paper alone can precipitate different forms of reactions from prospective non-Nankani readers. Yet, without being particularly concerned about these possible reactions at the moment, since such reactions are subject to the individual, it can be observed that Shweder's statement fails to take cognisance of the view that scholarship is fast moving away from the one-sided exotic anthropological narrative descriptions of the 'Other' and their worldviews to a variety of indigenous accounts whose writers might not view “witchcraft trails, suttee, ancestral spirit attack ...” with the same level of astonishment, or if any at all, from the same perspective (Wright 2000:86).

On the other hand, Shweder's perceptions raise other questions. How would the student of religious studies react to such a situation? Will s/he respond with a self-projected notion of neutrality and objectivity, flip into a description mood, presumably bracketing out his/her preconceived presuppositions while empathetically entering into the mode of the believer in the bid to provide that 'objective' data on the phenomenon, outlined by classical phenomenology of religion? (See Cox 1996:26-43) This is based on James L. Cox's assertion that "the phenomenology of religion defines the methodology that is uniquely associated with religious studies as a distinct discipline studying 'religion' itself" (Cox 2006:3). In the context of this paper, the questions what or who is a *chinchirigo* (singular)² and what sort of reactions, worldview or frame of mind one would enter into to adequately understand the phenomenon within this thematic section of 'Religious Experience and Methodology' raises crucial issues that cannot be expatiated fully in this discussion.

Writing on 'Religious Studies' in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, Robert Segal looked at that which may be interpreted as the three sequential levels of the subject area in the form of first, data gathering; then, data gathering with a specific focus on presenting such data from the believer's point of view; and lastly, as a specific discipline in which the sacred, the focus of data gathering, is upheld as 'irreducible' (Segal 1998:409-410). These three interconnected stages, although important in their individual right, can also be viewed as a single unit. That is, if the desired aim is to gather data from a particular context and to make sure such material reflects the subject groups' viewpoint. Then, it follows that if the subject groups' notion of its sacred is 'irreducible', that aspect has to be accounted for by those who have chosen that line of inquiry as their focus of study. Without any undue disregard for the challenges and criticism levelled against this field of study and its theoretical and methodological precepts (Flood 1999 and Wiebe 1999), African scholars seem to particularly come under additional scrutiny in the presentation of their data. This is especially so when they do not endeavour to carefully balance their multiple identities and the perspectives from

aim is to provide a narrative description of a religio-cultural phenomenon that is experiential in diverse ways by different members of the community.

2. Research Background

This study is an off-shoot of a major research (Amenga-Etego 2007:35-36,170). The realm of the *chinchirisi* had nothing to do with the original thoughts of that investigation; hence, it had a minor role in that discussion. Nonetheless, its appearance and significant illustrative function resulted in a call for further examination of the phenomenon in the concluding remarks. This paper is therefore a response to that call.

The *chinchirisi* phenomenon emerged during my field study among the Nankani. Having already worked in the area as a development worker,⁴ I was predisposed to some of the internal dynamics of working within the ambiguous position of an “insider-outsider” (see Adogame 2005:99) with community members. That is, a position in which the indigenous development worker, although perceived as a member of the group (insider), is by virtue of his/her job viewed as an ‘outsider’. It is a position in which the dual identity status of the indigenous fieldworker is alternatively taxed for the benefit of the community. Such situations demand constant identity renegotiations, a task the researcher must endeavour to fulfil.

The custom of providing my respondents with the opportunity to ask questions and discuss issues of relevance to them was made available. These occasions served as opening grounds for the group to make contributions to the on-going discussion. The question: ‘Are there any religio-cultural beliefs and practices that any of you think should be maintained, streamlined, developed or abolished’ provided one such avenue for a vibrant and elaborate deliberation. One of the issues discussed was the *chinchirisi* phenomenon. Whereas witchcraft, female genital mutilation (FGM), marriage and bride wealth, funeral and widowhood rites were discussed and resolved reasonably within short periods of time that of the *chinchirisi* was never resolved,

which they present their data (Jacobs 2002:93). Yet similar to Shweder's perspective, some of the theoretical and methodological prepositions contain inbuilt outsider approaches, meant for the study of non-Western cultures and their religious traditions. Although this has to do with the respective conditions under which these methodologies were or are still being developed, the approaches are sometimes problematic for indigenous researchers, who can generally be classified as insiders in this area of study. Thus, with the emergence of indigenous researchers, some of these issues are in need of a critical examination. This notwithstanding, this paper is not about the problems of indigenous researchers and research methodology, but about the *chinchirisi* phenomenon as a type of religious experience. In this respect, the underlying methodological issues are relative to the researcher whose 'insider perspective' is brought to bear in the study.

The paper is both descriptive and analytical. It deals with the Nankani belief in a spirit world of *chinchirisi* and its impact on the religio-cultural life of the people. Like other belief systems in Africa, the *chinchirisi* phenomenon is not limited to the people's spirituality. It transcends the realm of the sacred to the daily lives of the community as a form of explanation to life's puzzles and complexities. Thus the essay unveils the intertwining dynamics of the phenomenon in the lives of the Nankani and their neighbouring communities in the Upper East Region of Ghana. It also examines how some of the practices associated with the phenomenon are becoming a source of concern in the contemporary global society.³ With traditional arguments that purport to distance the phenomenon from other contemporary practices like euthanasia, the study brings to the fore the intertwining struggle for human rights and religious freedom on the one hand, and the problematic task of the scholars of religion and their desire to maintain the irreducibility of the sacred on the other. That is to say, the essence of this presentation is not about providing proof, truth or otherwise of the existence of this phenomenon. Similarly, it is not about justifying or denouncing its practices. The

despite the considerable amount of time spent on discussing the issue. Baba,⁵ the proponent in the Kandiga discussion wanted the dissolution of the phenomenon of 'sending *chinchirisi* away' but he was quickly challenged with counter arguments by one of the elders in the group. Not only did his opponent argue on the significance of that aspect of the phenomenon, he viewed it as part of their religio-cultural heritage. For him, 'it is in our blood. This is not something we just do; it is a part of us'.⁶

The peculiarity of the issue was not limited to the time frame or counter arguments, the discussion evolved to a point where the group began to discuss the dynamics underlying the phenomenon. Each argument had a purpose and some were supported with elaborate examples. It was clear from the arguments that the phenomenon was part of the traditional religio-cultural setup, significantly bordering on the worldview of the people, a perspective Shweder describes as:

... a world in which we see what it is like to live not just with metaphysical uneasiness but with ontological terror of the "form-destroying powers of existence" ...symbolized by dirt, symbolized by every conceivable danger, symbolized by a myriad of radical philosophical doubts ... doubts about one's control over the ramifying consequences of one's actions, doubts about the possibilities for enchantment in the material world (Shweder 1991:13-14).

Although some points of concessions were evident, no agreement on the future of the phenomenon was attained. Perhaps, this was because of the lack of focus from my part, resources and time constraint at that point, since the issue of *chinchirisi* had no priority in that research. This notwithstanding, the discussions were significant and later proved useful for illustrative purposes. This led to some follow-ups and up-dates on the phenomenon. This paper is therefore a reflection on some of those discussions, my own involvement and understanding of the phenomenon both as a Nankani and a researcher.

3. What is a *chinchirigo*?

A *chinchirigo* is a mischievous wild spirit or creature. As a wild spirit, it is believed to live in the wild space. This includes the bush, groves, hills and river sides. It is neither evil nor good. Although similarities can be drawn from the Akan concept of the *Motiah*, the Nankani are not particularly interested in describing the features of a *chinchirigo*. Perhaps this has to do with the multifaceted ways in which the phenomenon is perceived and applied to real life situations. This notwithstanding, there is a notion that a *chinchirigo* is a short looking humanlike being with wide-spread toes, whose footsteps presents features of a person walking backwards. The belief in the manifestation of these sorts of spirits is prevalent in many African communities. It has been observed, for instance, by John S. Mbiti that “[m]yriads of spirits are reported from every African people, but they defy description almost as much as they defy the scientist's test tubes in the laboratory. Written sources are equally confusing” (Mbiti 1990:77).

Although perceived as non-human and mischievous, there are interactions between *chinchirisi* and humans. However, these relationships with humans vary, depending on the circumstances; hence, there are diverse forms of relationships between *chinchirisi* and human beings. While some are linked to healers and their source of healing, others are associated with hunters, entertainers and other culturally specific forms of practices that are akin to divination and/or sorcery. In their wild environment, tales about *chinchirisi* relates to their roles in helping lost people find their way back home or, in some cases, being the source of people getting lost in the bush or forest. Mbiti's discussion on this subject matter only provides the general frame for that which can be collectively referred to as spirits. Within this structure are a number of individual embodiments of spirits, of which the *chinchirisi* are a part. Unlike Mbiti's explanation, however, the *chinchirisi* have not sunk into the horizon of the Zamani (see Mbiti 1990:78). They are an active part of the continuous present and have nothing to do with ancestral spirits or ghost. This is because the *chinchirisi* are a special category of spirits, one that is distinctively

not human. They do not belong to the cycle of human life. Thus, even though they possess the ability to manifest physically in human forms, the *chinchirisi* are “strangers, foreigners, outsiders, and in the category of 'things'. They are often referred to as 'ITs'” (Mbiti 1990:78).

4. Defining the human *Chinchirigo* (the Spirit-Child)

The link between the mischievous wild spirit and the domestic human-child emanates from two premises. For the lack of adequate identifications, I will refer to these respective descriptions as the spiritual and biological premises. From the spiritual dimension, a child identified as a *chinchirigo* immediately falls into a special category of life form that is not entirely human; hence, not carved out for the normal human domestic life system. In this regard, it is a misplaced spirit. It is a belief that if such a spirit should feel trapped in the wrong environment, it has the potential to cause havoc for those among whom it is found. The basis for this line of thought comes from the belief that the ancestors are not responsible for bringing *chinchirisi* into their families. Not only are the *chinchirisi* nonhuman, even in their perceived human forms, their ability to 'destroy' families puts them at the opposite end of the spectrum. It is argued that even though ancestors punish their descendants with some forms of misfortunes, these are disciplinary measures. In that respect, they do not invite other spiritual entities who possess the ability of obliterating their families.

The general opinion is that ancestors stand for the good and longevity of their lineage, a perspective that ensures their own existence as ancestors. Similarly, *Wine* (the Supreme Being or God) who is the ultimate source of creation and the embodiment of goodness, already gave every being its space. By implication, *Wine* will not swap the place of the *chinchirisi* by placing them in human families. For these reasons, it is believed that the presence of *chinchirisi* in families is due to the individuals' own wrong doing, brought about by human interferences with the wild spaces of the environment and with the lives contained in those spaces. Another view attributes its source to

the work of evil people (sorcerers) in the community. Other explanations relate to the very mischievous nature of *chinchirisi* or a 'genuine straying of paths'. Whatever the source, this is usually revealed through divination. Divination is an important determinant for formulating the spiritual basis of this particular strand of the *chinchirisi* phenomenon.

The biological or physical manifestations of *chinchirisi* relates to specific culturally perceived notions of human abnormalities. This includes unusual biological features or behavioural traits found in children, either at birth or during the early years of growth. For the Nankani, distinct pre-natal or biological sex distinctions are an integral component of classifying and placing humans in their respective gender groups (see Okely 1972:173). This is because the Nankani adhere to "the two-sex model" (Juschka 2005:230). The respective placing of human beings into the two definitive categories of male and female is believed to be religiously enshrined to facilitate their earthly roles of production and reproduction. Anything other than that is an anomaly. Under such premises, unclear biological sex determination is not only inconceivable but generally placed within the realm of *chinchirisi*. This anomaly is however not attributed to the source of human creation (*Winε*) or the ancestors, but to the other possibilities named above. It is argued that as mischievous intruders, accuracy in their transformation (human appearance) is less; hence, the cases of malformation, queer features, hermaphrodites or even sexless features.

Other ways for confirming these cases as *chinchirisi* include divination or when it is difficult to find a guiding ancestor or benevolent family spirit for a given child. The questions that arise in these cases are 'who is this child?' Or 'where from this child who has nothing to do with what we relate to?' Once classified as a *chinchirigo*, an official religio-cultural outlet is created for the removal of the incomprehensible being. At this point, the 'child' (*chinchirigo*), technically ceases to be human. Thus the 'spirit-child' was, and to a very limited extent in recent times, ritually removed by

nyusigo. *Nyusigo* is an act of 'force feeding' a child with liquid substances. This particular substance is specially prepared by those who have the spiritual resources to determine and remove *chinchirisi* from the midst of 'humans'.

It is, to some extent, unclear why the *chinchirisi* phenomenon is limited to the childhood phase. Is this a case of a socio-cultural selection of the 'fittest' from the onset of community integration? This, I can only hazard since I have no means of seeking clarifications at the moment. Alternatively, we could classify the period between childbearing and the early years of growth as the first part of these communities' rites of passage, and describe it as the stage of 'determination' (the liminal stage). Yet, uncharacteristic of the usual analysis of liminality, only the accepted are incorporated into the community. By implication, it represents the period where the 'true' identity, humanness and dignity of personhood is conferred on a category of children before their social integration. In other words, this first stage of early childhood is a very important period in the cultural scheme of 'normalizing' their human community. This argument is however far fetched because the situation does not apply to all children. Thus, there is need for further research.

5. Other uses of the word '*Chinchirigo*'

The word *chinchirigo/chinchirisi* is also casually applied to children of various categories. This strand of usage is symbolic and it is applied to children with inexplicable inquisitiveness, wittiness, early talent development or outrageous behaviour. For instance, the possibility of the four year old boy, Ben Kasperczak of Potters Bar, Hertfordshire, becoming a racing champion led the Scottish news papers to call the boy a "wizard" (METRO 2007:9). For the Nankani, the word *chinchirigo* would have been applied. *Chinchirisi* is also used on children with mischievous, queer, recalcitrant or incorrigible behaviour.

Other uses relate to unexpected child survival from premature or

complicated births, orphaned babies or severe cases of early childhood diseases. These instances relate to a perceived 'tenacity of spirit' in the children. The belief is that the 'spirit of endurance or survival' is akin to *chinchirisi*. Hence for those children who survive, especially where many others have failed, it is this same spiritual trait that has helped to sustain them, enabling them to 'fight against the odds' of the unusual cases of childbirth, disease and early childhood. Again, we find the word *chinchirisi* applied to twins, single children or the 'last born'. The basis for this last set of reference stems from a view that twins or multiple births are not the norm in the human reproduction system. Similarly, a 'one-child' family life is inconsistent with the African system. The perceived 'one-child' or 'last born' obtains that position because such children have succeeded in preventing other children from coming after them, the objective of which is to obtain maximum attention and pampering from the family. Sometimes, children who have lost their younger siblings through death and are now left alone may also be referred to as *chinchirisi*. This is because solitary children are viewed by close relatives as unfortunate situations. The immediate desire for a large family is unattainable in this line of descent and at this particular stage of the family's history. It is also a part of the socio-cultural system for grandchildren and grandparents to use the terms *chinchirigo* and 'witch' playfully on each other. This is a cross-generational cultural construct. In this context the child is the *chinchirigo* and the grandparent, the witch. In this cross-generational perspective, it is often quite difficult to determine the context under which the word is used unless the general framework under which the word appears is considered.

This category of *chinchirisi* is not perceived as the 'wild spirit creature'. However, its supposed characteristic tendencies are used as explanatory factors for the communities lived realities. Unlike the former discussion, there are no rituals associated with this aspect of the phenomenon; hence, it does not lead to elimination and no rituals. It is simply a part of the socio-cultural system. Although this second strand is the most common, it is not included in the contemporary

socio-political discussions on the phenomenon. Yet the belief in and persistence of the phenomenon entails these two strands and the need for a comprehensive examination of the situation is essential in obtaining a sustainable resolution of the problems.

6. 'Sending the *Chinchirigo* Home': Euthanasia?

The cultural etiquettes of the Nankani demands that a visitor is properly 'seen off' (escorted) at the end of the visit. This may involve a ritual or a walking distance depending on the situation. To 'see someone off' is expressed in terms of *basika* (leaving) or *tari ta basi* (going to leave). In this paper, I am not dealing with the emerging difficulties of language translation and the debates associated with it. My objective is to try to describe the symbolic ways in which *chinchirisi* are 'sent away' or eliminated from the domestic community in the context of the Kandiga discussion. This provides focus and contextually situates the discussion within the specific current realities of the people. It also explains why the phenomenon is perceived to be different from other practices. Here, I am referring to the manner in which the elimination of *chinchirisi*, couched in the symbolic language of 'seeing someone/thing off', is perceived as a genuine ground for arguing a case of difference.

Once the presence of a *chinchirigo* is acknowledged in a family, s/he (it) is viewed as a temporary visitor. Consequently, the notion of 'seeing this child off' (or sending this child home) is an ultimate conclusion. The human *chinchirigo*, the disguised wild dwelling *chinchirigo* that has either missed its way (to the wild space) or has intentionally changed paths so as to cause trouble, can be appropriately led out of the human environment to facilitate its return home. The process, however, requires a re-transformation, the shedding-off of the current human form. To help with the transformatory process, since he/she (it) is a child, the people go through a series of practices and this is carried out by the appropriate male ritual authorities. These include divination, the *nyusigo* described above, 'burial' and the other associated rites that remain the

secret knowledge of this special class of people. Nonetheless, it is important to note that *chinchirisi* are not 'buried' around the homestead and there are no mourning and funeral rites for them. This is because the return of visitors does not result in these rites. Besides, the process of sending the *chinchirisi* home, although involves physical death, is not interpreted as such. Again, as a 'non-human agent' it does not belong to the 'spirit-world of the dead', if even it appears dead. It does not form part of the life cycle of the human kind. In short, it is simply a ritual of transformation that enables *chinchirisi* to return to their normal abode and life style.

This sort of argument does not talk of murder or killing; neither does it refer to death. At one level, the vocabulary is formulated in human reciprocal terms and on another, it is depersonalized and dehumanized for the process to be effected. Although complex, this should not obstruct understanding (theoretically). Rather, as in the context of the people, *chinchirisi* are related to in human terms as long as they are still members of the human community. However, to effectively return the *chinchirisi* to their rightful abode, and to enable them assume their rightful identity, they are dehumanized, depersonalized, reclassified as spirits and dealt with 'appropriately'. It can be argued at the human level that this conceptualization and reconstitution aids both the process of detachment and the ritual process of elimination. Although this view requires further psychological analysis, it is my contention that it forms part of the process of conditioning the families and communities to accept the loss of their 'child'.

We see in the first instance, as in this subheading, that the language is not constructed to depict intent to harm or any specific provision of relief to the *chinchirisi*. Rather, it is one of 'seeing someone off' on a journey, a principle that is attached only to 'its' humanness, and which is quickly removed at the end of the associated human phase. Consequently, all notions of human relations or that which is shared with the people's immediate spirituality (the ancestors) is detached. As explained above, this is associated with the belief that the

ancestors, who already know the precarious nature of *chinchirisi*, will not send them to their lineage. Hence, from this point onwards, the practices associated with the phenomenon assume a different dimension. The dehumanization process forms the basis for disassociating the phenomenon from both euthanasia and murder which carry specific religio-cultural rites alongside those of cleansing, mourning and funeral performance.

In response to the case of euthanasia, the argument is that the process is not about helping human beings die. It was argued that the conceptual frame from which *chinchirisi* are said to be aided home is different from other religious connotations of aiding people to die. In this traditional setting, the latter implies sending people to 'the spiritual world of the ancestors'. But this is not the case with *chinchirisi* because they are not considered as humans. Their world of spirituality does not relate to the ancestral realm but to the wild space of nature. Thus the issue of euthanasia does not arise. This is irrespective of the symbolic formulation of the language. Euthanasia, which is the practice of ending life in response to relieving people from intolerable suffering or an incurable disease, embodies a number of practices in different societies. For the Nankani, euthanasia is linked to the reversal of oaths or ritual practices that might have been undertaken by the victim to harm others or prevent one's own death (to provide long life), for which reason the victim is held bound. The need for families to undo these 'spiritual contracts', as well as perform rituals of retributions and restorations to enable the individual die and be accepted by the ancestors is the main understanding of euthanasia in this religio-cultural context. Hence, possessing their own forms and criteria of assisted deaths, they sternly disassociate the case of the *chinchirisi* from that which they ascribed to euthanasia.

The *chinchirisi* phenomenon thus lies within a specific conceptual frame of thought which is embedded in their worldview. The belief that *Chinchirisi* are undomesticated spiritual entities who have crossed their boundaries is the first aspect of the phenomenon. The second aspect then defines such an action as an anomaly which

represents a grave socio-cultural danger to the family and community. Such a process produces disharmony which must be rectified. Fiona Bowie examines this form of conceptualization in her study of the body as a symbol (Bowie 34-35). In her analysis, the body is a symbol from which people can identify cases of anomalies. She argues that sometimes the process involves a variety of classifications. Using Mary Douglas' treatment of purity and danger, (see Douglas 2002) Bowie relates it to the case of anomalies, emphasizing her view that such re-conceptualization involves a series of symbolic classificatory processes. In such instances, anomalies are not simply viewed within the context of impurity, they are considered as a source of danger to those involved; hence, the need for some specific forms of action.

Various societies have adopted different methods of dealing with such situations. In a discussion with an Irish lady, now a social worker in Edinburgh, she noted that in the past, Irish women who gave birth to children with severe disabilities were told by the midwives to forget of their children because the fairies (wicked) had either interfered with or taken the children. These children were then taken and placed in a special care facility until they died. Her emphasis was on the view that their parents never saw or had contact with them after birth. Although she wondered what the case might have been before the turn of the twentieth century, she compared the case of the fairies to the *chinchirisi*. Other examples are captured by Bowie in her subtitle 'Dealing with anomalies'. Here, Bowie recaptures the five ways given by Douglas, three of which relate to the practices surrounding *chinchirisi* (Bowie 45-47. See Douglas 2002: 47-50). That is, the child is first classified as an anomaly, the anomaly is labelled dangerous – for which its identity and position is redefined and classified, and lastly, it is eliminated through physical control. The examples given are those from the Nuer where a handicapped child is redefined as a hippopotamus and laid in water and the Ibo who considered twin births to be a treat to the social classificatory system; hence, were left in the bush in the past.

7. The *Chinchirisi* Phenomenon and Human Rights

One of the questions arising from the above is, in the absence of euthanasia, can the practice of 'seeing off the *chinchirigo*' be conceived as murder or infanticide? If so, could it be an infringement on the fundamental human rights of these 'children'? According to W. E. Hewitt, the concept of human rights has had a fair share of controversies from religious groups and communities. This he argues is because its principles are "[p]rincipally political and economic". Besides, "it seems to promote the rights of the individual over the community" (Hewitt 1998:231). Such a notion of human rights as individual rights conflicts with the African spirit of communal rights, where the individual and his/her rights are subject to the group, which in many occasions are tainted with the religio-cultural traditions of the people. In some situations, the collective rights of families, clans and communities' are bound up with the survival, identity and self-determination of the group. This composite form of viewing the indigenous concept of human rights vis-à-vis the international, poses problems for the smooth application of relevant human rights laws in rural African communities.

In line with this discourse, J. D. Van der Vyver quotes a portion of the Ghanaian constitution for his illustration. For him, the statement "[e]very person in Ghana, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinion, colour, religion, creed or gender shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual contained in this Charter but subject to respect for the rights and freedom of others and for the public interest" is subjective (van der Vyver 1999:120). He argues that the last part of this statement presents a form of limitation because it subjects the individual's rights to that of 'others' and state. He also observes that the situation is further complicated when one examines those that are particularly related to religious freedom. Van der Vyver, however, notes that even though the law provides a significant form of limitation to both the individual and his/her religious rights, this is only in so far as the state sees it

necessary to intervene. That is to say, where the state perceives a religio-cultural practice otherwise, it may remain an issue of the respective community. This is, perhaps, the case of the *chinchirisi* phenomenon.

The work of Abdullahi A. An-Na'im provides further understanding to this intricate situation. For An-Na'im, despite the importance and universal nature of the 1945 United Nations (UN) Charter on human rights, "[t]he modern concept of human rights remains bound to domestic frameworks for its practical specification and implementation, including questions of competing claims of religious freedom" (An-Na'im 1999:14). He observes that the charter "presupposes the sovereignty and exclusive territorial jurisdiction of the state. Not only must a state freely ratify a treaty in order to be bound by its terms, but the international legal obligations assumed by a state under such treaties are supposed to be implemented by the state itself through its own domestic jurisdiction" (An-Na'im 1999:14-15). Although written under a different context, An-Na'im's observations are applicable to this study. As he points out, "the purported transition of certain norms from domestic civil liberties into universal human rights of all human beings retains some of the features of their conceptual origin" (An-Na'im 1999:15).

Thus, although some of the above elaborations on the *chinchirisi* phenomenon provide justification for concern, there is the need to transcend the immediate thoughts of bewilderments, puzzles or reactive tendencies. It calls for an in-depth examination of the situation from within the respective local environment before placing it in the wider context in which conclusions are drawn. This does not exonerate the practice, especially, from the perspective of the fundamental rights of the individual; nor does it eliminate the distressing aspects of the practice or the negative effects of some of its symbolic references on some children. At best, it only helps to provide new avenues for understanding and, perhaps, a guide towards the search for a more humane and amicable solution to the problem in line with current global scientific knowledge and

technology. In this regard, we cannot deny the challenge it poses to the principles of human rights and its quest for the right to life.

Yet, while we deliberate the issues with reference to the prevailing laws and technological advancement, we are reminded of the spiritual component of this *chinchirisi* phenomenon. In this specific context, it is the humanity of the children that is religio-culturally denied and not issues that not only relate to, but also, affirm their humanness. As emphasized in the field discussion, 'you talk of human beings, we talk of spirits. Do you think we don't value human life? What does your law say about spirits? Tell us that aspect and we will see if we can respond to you'.⁷ It is possible to argue that the statement was not just meant to enable the researcher to come to terms with their views and the differences they place on their conceptualization of the phenomenon or their concerns about human life, it provided an opportune outlet to examine the conditions surrounding and perpetuating it. This is because the basis for the elder's statement continues to hinge on the view that despite the apparent human appearance, a *chinchirigo* is not human. Secondly, it is not in its proper environment. Thus out of its proper place, a *chinchirigo* is destined to cause havoc. Douglas, somehow, makes a similar statement in *Purity and Danger* when she contends that "dirt is matter out of place" (Douglas 2002:44). As of normal consequence, dirt must be removed (cleaned). In this instance, it is best to do the 'right thing' as early as possible so as to forestall the problems that are bound to ensue in the future. This, we might argue, is circumstantial. Nevertheless, it provides the premises for the actions that are taken. Besides, with their religio-cultural aid of divination, it is conceived as a formidable ground to act as recommended by tradition.

The basis for this line of discussion relates to the way the subject was introduced. The elder who introduced the subject proposed an end to the *chinchirisi basika* (the 'seeing off' of *chinchirisi*). Baba, as he is affectionately called, is a Christian (church elder) and a landlord (traditional elder). In my recent reflection on his request, I have become quite intrigued by the fact that his request was not about

eradicating the entire phenomenon but only the aspect that eliminated those we might loosely refer to as the perceived 'real' *chinchirisi* (as opposed to the symbolic *chinchirisi*). This shows that he was only interested in the eradication of one aspect of the phenomenon. Yet, the fact that there was no breakthrough in the discussion that followed his proposal indicates the persistence of the beliefs associated with this very aspect of the phenomena. As one of the community elders remarked, 'that does not just happen like that, it is in our blood'.⁸

'It is in our Blood', what does this elder mean by such a statement? Is he speaking scientifically? Of course not. Can we presume this to be a case of 'religious genetics'? I wonder. How then can one possibly explain this? I have found a similar statement, 'It is in us, in our blood' in Lamén Sanneh's book *Encountering the West* (Sanneh 1993:82). Is this just a characteristic statement among some groups of Africans? Or, is it a way of explaining the inexplicable aspects of life and belief systems that have become an inherent part of a community's (African) way of being? These are interesting questions but they cannot be adequately explored in this limited space. As at now, we can only conjecture, since we cannot really fathom what the individuals concerned meant by the statements. Again, although an important piece of resource data, we cannot examine it scientifically as a laboratory specimen. This is a setback as it hinders proper analysis and understanding. Hence, the need to examine the framework in which the statement is used in the Nankani context is important to its understanding in this study.

Africa's religio-cultural traditions are passed on, verbally and practically, from one generation to the other. This involves different processes of training and learning, but there are also cases of inheritance. Although there are many forms of inheritance, I am at this point dealing with that which the individual is chosen by the sacred source through the lineage in which both the human and the spiritual entity are associated. In the West, this can be identified from works describing shamanic practices but among the Nankani this is common with families associated with healing and divination

practices. Therefore, to speak of something as 'it is in our blood' refers to that which is in the lineage or ancestry, capable of being inherited genealogically without the individual's effort. This perspective of a genealogical heritage is akin to the additional explanations given by the elder at the meeting. As he noted, having the power and ability to deal with *chinchirisi* is no longer a power to be acquired. Rather, for they who belong to families with such a heritage, it is a duty that is itself circumscribed by prohibitions. Two views were given for this. In the first place, it is believed that *chinchirisi* cannot 'enter the homes' (be born into) of these families. The inherent 'anti-*chinchirisi*' spirituality in the lineage keeps them at bay. Any forceful intrusion at the point of pregnancy will naturally result in a miscarriage. Secondly, the elder explained that the rules surrounding this inborn spirituality is particularly important where babies are concerned. As a member of such a heritage, one is barred from intimate contact with babies that are not from one's own family or lineage, especially where there is suspicion of *chinchirisi*. Those particularly gifted with the power and ability to deal with alleged *chinchirisi* are the last to be consulted. Therefore, their presence, which is a heritage, is not meant to hunt out *chinchirisi*, but to provide the necessary assistance whenever the need arises. The elder however noted that this seldom takes place; hence, even though people are aware of the phenomenon, it is rarely invoked.

The statement 'it's in our blood' can also be interpreted in terms of the process of 'authentication' and 'elimination', not the 'creation' of *chinchirisi*. In this context we may consider the statement as 'a creative mechanism for restoring balance'. That is, as long as the beliefs in the 'human *chinchirigo*' exist, some form of imbalance is created. To restore the balance, specialists in that area are needed; a kind of contingency plan. This perspective of dualism (opposing forces) is quite common in many African communities. This is especially common to places where witchcraft beliefs are prevalent. There are always a group of people working or responding to

'emergencies' in order to restore balance, life, health, peace and order in traditional societies. Perhaps, it is the awareness of these dynamics in traditional worldviews and practices within communities that the government, as it was noted, referred to the phenomenon as a religio-cultural practice with a limited scale; hence, it does not deserve any special national attention (Amenga-Etego 2007:36). We can however argue that as a developing nation with enormous religio-cultural problems including witchcraft accusations and camps, FGM and *trokosi*, (see Owusu-Ansah 2007) the *chinchirisi* phenomenon, which is by far the least case in numerical value, will not attract the nation's attention and resources. Besides, with the current state of modern health facilities and diagnostic opportunities, religious pluralism, education, urbanization and globalization, it may simply be hoped that the phenomenon will be eradicated, if not greatly curtailed with time.

8. The *Chinchirigo* Phenomenon and Rural Development: Socio-economic Considerations

Two forms of the phenomenon have been identified in this discussion. That is, the alleged mischievous wild spirit and the casual symbolic references made to children. Irrespective of the context in which we examine the situation, the phenomenon raises a series of questions. What does it mean for a society to perceive a category of its children as something 'other-than-human', a classification that not only puts them at the margins of the society, but renders them as anomalies, capable of causing suffering to those involved? Is this a symbolic way of projecting the socio-economic and psychological implications of having *chinchirisi* (first category) in a family? The fact remains that we are never really aware of the complete health status of these alleged *chinchirisi* before they are 'sent away'. This makes it difficult to determine or provide any significant socio-economic analysis.

Nonetheless, if we take, for instance, the extreme case of poor health or physical disability, we may hazard some socio-economic implications. That is to say, in a society where no special health care,

aid or support is given to children with disabilities or to their families, and where families have to spend long hours in search for food, water, fire wood, etc, we might want to examine these in relation to the socio-economic impact of having *chinchirisi* in the family. In such a situation, it may be reasonable to envisage the complexities of the family's development and lifestyle in relation to a child that might have the potential need of twenty-four hours of supervision or care, and to calculate thereupon, the economic, social and psychological cost. At the same time, there might be the need to take into consideration the view that the Nankani are not a monetary society. Even though there are a few wage and/or salary earners, a majority of the populace are subsistent farmers; hence, the traditional reckoning of wealth and property is in animal and food crops, both of which are still labour intensive occupations.

Together with their neighbouring communities of the Upper East Region, the area is the poorest region in the country. This involves that which the national statistical data outlines as living below the national poverty level of less than one dollar (\$1.00) a day. Although its value is contextually relative, it is also placed alongside poor infrastructural development, low educational and health status, and high perennial food shortages. Without justifying the practice, we can intuit that under such circumstances there can be difficult socio-economic implications for families with alleged *chinchirisi* (severe disabilities). In this case, the mystical conception of *chinchirisi* as a source of punishment and suffering to families can be analysed from a socio-economic viewpoint, where the notion of disharmony and suffering is linked to the underlying problems of poverty and underdevelopment. Thus, without neglecting the spiritual component of suffering, the socio-economic aspect can be added.

We could also argue that the other forms of the phenomenon create undue labelling which can pose psychological problems for some of the children. This can be positive or negative depending on the child's disposition. It can affect their personal development or attitude to life and creativity. As noted above, this second aspect of the phenomenon is often linked to the drive to live and to strive beyond the odds. For instance, the association of children who have survived severe cases of the five childhood killer diseases or children with ingenuity with *chinchirisi* can form a positive disposition since the analogy is founded on a traditionally identified positive element of the phenomenon. In such instances, the attribute is a form of acknowledgement and support; hence, it provides the requisite freedom, space and opportunity for those involved to expand their horizon. In this sense, the attributes of *chinchirisi* can be an incentive, and where this is associated with creativity and talent, as in the case of the Scottish four year old Ben, it can enable the individuals to develop their talents in an enhanced supportive atmosphere.

9. The Insider Perspective

My recent research findings on the insider/outsider debate among the Nankani has left me wondering if such a broad labelling as 'an insider perspective' is a good way of projecting the self into a research endeavour (Amenga-Etego 2007:227-233). It is clear that the critical perspectives introduced by post-modern analysis have not only dominated discussions in recent decades, but have significantly provided new lines of inquiries in the research arena. Not only is the subjective positioning of oneself a line from which studies can be conducted, the underlying dynamics with which such a positioning can be navigated so as to "make explicit the value judgements behind our academic work" provides great resources for discussion (Bourdillon 1996:151). Thus, although the above phrase makes sense

within the context of academic studies, for the Nankani, it does not really define the researcher's position. Questions like 'how can a woman claim to be an insider on issues relating to *chinchirisi*? Is she by implication saying she is one'? demand clarifications. That is to say, in what way and to what extent can one, especially, a woman in a male dominated (patrilineal) society, claim insider status to a male religious activity? By this, I am relating to the case where it is only the male members of the community who have the preserve knowledge of the intricacies of the phenomenon, as well as the exclusive right and authority to act on matters of *chinchirisi*. These questions are gender based and they attest to the fact that mere community membership is inadequate when dealing with issues relating to religion. Yet, the theoretical polarization of these concepts within the Western conceptual scheme of thought makes the above generalization possible.

James Cox's definition of the insider/outsider dichotomy, for example, illustrates this. According to Cox, "[a]n outsider is one who conducts research on religious communities of which he or she is not a member. The insider is one who portrays what it is to be a member of a religion as one who actually is (or at least knows what it feels like to be) an adherent and a participant in the religion under study" (Cox 1998:2). Although this polarized form generally helps to place researchers, within the broad categories, we find in his insider statement a somewhat lack of clarity. With the outsider status, the focus is on the "religious communities" but with the insider it seems to rest on the "religion". He strengthens his statement with "as one who actually is (or at least knows what it feels like to be) an adherent and a participant in the religion". This raises concern for African researchers, especially, in cases where a researcher may willingly claim insider 'cultural status' while opting out of the religious corpus;

unless, we are to consider Cox's statement in line with Mbiti's view that:

Traditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for his community of which he is a part. Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in traditional society no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community (Mbiti 1990:2).

Even in this context, we might still suggest that the phrase religious communities should be applied to both categories. After all, it is their community membership that forms the basis of their religious membership. Besides, not all community members know the details of their religious beliefs and practices. Very often, this is the preserve of those in the position of ritual authority.

Based on the above, any argument that is dependant on community membership will still encounter some difficulties. This is because there are no such clear cut views or stable status as insider/outsider positions (Amenga-Etego 2007:229-231). It is in this case that this view of 'an insider perspective' seeks to question the rational of importing such broad classifications into specific religio-cultural contexts. As Judith Butler explains in *Giving An Account of Oneself*, these universal categorizations can be problematic but:

[T]he problem is not with universality as such but with an operation of universality that fails to be responsive to the cultural particularity and fails to undergo a reformation of itself in response to the

social and cultural conditions it includes within its scope of applicability. When a universal precept cannot, for social reasons be appropriated or when - indeed, for social reasons - it must be refused, the universal precept itself becomes a site of contest, a theme and an object of democratic debate (Buttler 2005:6).

Unlike the above, the situation in this study is not as dramatic. The internal dynamics of the insider/outsider debate among the Nankani are, to a large extent, dependent on the gendered structure of the community, one which prevents females from participating in certain religio-cultural and political structures, as well as the practices associated with them (Amenga-Etego 2007:117-118). These restrictions exclude females from active participation, especially, in the core rituals of those institutions. This has given room to exclusive male knowledge in those areas. The ritual dynamics of 'dispensing spirit children' is one of those exclusive male preserves. This is irrespective of whether or not the female is part of the family (spiritual heritage) or the female is the 'spirit child's' mother. It is in this respect that the implied 'insider perspective' in the above abstract is questionable. In other words, this projected insider view is relative, subject to the degree of the researcher's internal insider status and gender. Thus such a broad category as the 'insider perspective' in this study is apt, only in so far as it does not seek to engage the core rituals of 'sending off' the spirit child.

This notwithstanding, there are aspects of the traditional conceptualization of the insider status that enables different categories of people in the community to claim reasonable insider knowledge of the phenomenon, as shown under the second strand of the phenomenon. This is to say, although there might not be full

knowledge of the phenomenon, especially, the specific ritual details which are the preserve of the privilege few of *chinchirigo* 'dispensers', the researcher's community membership is a significant consideration. Secondly, even though the classificatory process of *chinchirisi* is genderless, the said 'children' are delivered by women. That apart, there are some forms of experiential knowledge, relative to the symbolic references of the phenomenon, which the indigenous researcher might possess to the disadvantage of the non-indigenous researcher.

As Ifi Amadiume reminds non-Western researchers, “[o]ne of the dangers of having our feet stuck in Western-produced literature is the tendency to use European terms and expressions uncritically when addressing non-European cultures and experiences” (Amadiume 1997:1). The system may be foreign, but if it must be applied and made relevant to the African context, then it must be done in relation to the specific socio-cultural context. There is no such general status as 'insider' or 'outsider', African societies are saturated with different forms of categorizations including generational, sex and age. These are important for placing people in relative positions. Thus to speak in dualism is to neglect or eliminate a whole variety of positions with nuances that gradually shrink or sink to the bottom, thereby, trivializing the African experience in those areas of discourse.

10. Conclusion

There is an implicit dilemma regarding any discussion on this issue. While we cannot deny the problems it poses for our humanness and the value-laden questions it raises, it asks us to critically reflect on the contextual situation (worldview, environment and socio-economic conditions) of the society in which this is taking place. For, it is these multidimensional aspects of the *chinchirisi* phenomenon that makes it enduring; hence, there is need for a comprehensive study, one which engages the diverse religio-cultural experiences of the

community. It is clear that although it has been acknowledged that there are varieties of religious experiences, the trend of discussions are on the individualistic and/or ecstatic modes, relegating these community forms to the background. In this particular study, however, the focus is on the community as a whole. It is their supposed experiences of the spirit world of *chinchirisi*, one which entails fear, apprehension and the related methods of responses, that is the focus of this study. In other words, the spirit (*chinchirisi*) in this sphere of study is passive, except for its 'intrusion into the domestic environment', which, in its most potent form, is deemed undesirable; hence, the steps taken to remove it. Mbiti on a related issue of twins observes that:

The people concerned experienced them as a threat to their whole existence, as a sign that something wrong had happened to cause the births, and that something worse still would happen to the whole community if the 'evil' were not removed. So they killed the children for the sake of the larger community to cleanse, to 'save', to protect the rest of the people..." (Mbiti 1990:114).

As a religio-cultural phenomenon, these perspectives cannot be undermined. Nonetheless, even though some of the arguments deny the case of euthanasia or the violations of human rights, we cannot fully neglect some of the intriguing yet ambiguous perspectives presented in these lines of discussions. Thus, there is need for further studies in this area.

NOTES

- ¹First presented at the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR), University of Edinburgh, Scotland, 04/09/2007.
- ²Although this discussion is focused on the Nankani, the phenomenon is practiced throughout the Upper East Region. Among the Gurunne or Frafra communities it is referred to as kinkirigo/kinkirisi.
- ³Afrikids – Bringing Big Smiles to Little faces, 'Afrikids Saves 'Spirit Children''.
<http://www.afrikids.org/new/main.php?option=news&suboption=displaynews&newsID=184>, 24/10/07.
- ⁴This reference is made to my period of service as the Gender and Development Coordinator of the Navrongo-Bolgatanga Diocesan Development Office, Bolgatanga, Ghana from 1999-2002.
- ⁵Baba is the landlord of the Kandiga Chief House. He is also a church elder at the community Catholic Church, Kandiga, group discussion, Kandiga market, Ghana, 18/06/06.
- ⁶Anon. group discussion, Kandiga market, Ghana, 18/06/06.
- ⁷Elder, group discussion, Kandiga, 18/06/06.
- ⁸Anon, group discussion, Kandiga, 18/06/06,

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