

ENGL 120
Professor Derek Green

shohoh

By Rachel Ababio '22

The summer of 2013 was hot. My damp dress stuck to me like cling wrap as we descended deeper and deeper into the jungle. *Wo ka Twi?* Do you speak Twi? *Wo te Twi kasa ase?* Do you understand it? Chief Odikro's figure filled my vision. I lowered my head. The other elders scoffed. I looked down at my arm. I saw a line of ancestors standing tall and proud.

On that July day, my father, three of my aunts, and I woke up with the sun. It was the day of my grandfather's burial service in Kɔtwia, Ghana. My father and I dressed quickly. Ama Dankwa, Gifty, and Akosua struggled with their shoes. By that afternoon, we'd make the six-hour journey from Ama's large house in Accra, Ghana to the remote village in the Ashanti region.

If you look at a map of Africa, look to the western coast. There you'll find us—the Ashanti. We're part of the Akan, a meta-ethnicity concentrated in the southern regions of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. It's a melting pot. Hundreds of dialects, tongues, tribes, and traditions make up its body. Northern men hoard wives and practice scarification. Their southern counterparts follow every European trend. At Ghana's center, the Ashanti form the Akan's top caste. Our language, Twi, is dominant. Our people inspire respect. Our people are in office buildings and government. Our people are in prosperous villages.

Charles arrived; he was a man we had paid 50 cedis (10 U.S. Dollars) to act as our driver in the country. We all crammed in the back of his small jeep for the long ride. Accra was tall buildings, billboards, fast cars, and foreigners. The capital city was a hub of activity, waves of people and walls of sound. Kids weaved in between vehicles to sell fish, toys, and toiletries. There were no traffic rules. By the end of the first hour, we'd ended up in a bottleneck trying to leave town on the highway. I took to staring out the window to pass the time.

As we drove, I looked back at the fading cityscape. Buildings became trees. Produce stands became lush vegetation. Voices became rustlings and chirps hidden behind vines and tall grasses. Eventually, the plant life became too dense to drive any longer. Charles stopped the jeep.

“Sirs, we walk. Continue.” He glanced at me as we piled out. I smiled weakly. I knew he spoke English for my benefit. My Twi was weak, decayed after years of disuse across the Atlantic. In Platteville, Wisconsin, I was talkative, witty, thought on my feet. Here, I couldn't keep up with my family's conversations. I stuttered and muttered along choppy sentences. I was silent.

Pushing through leaves, the road gave way to a narrow dirt path. Charles pointed forward. We followed. My father leaned on me for support as we trudged through the undergrowth. Anthills came to our shoulders. Insects bit at our exposed skin. Monkeys swung overhead. It was humid, everything damp to the touch.

Finally, the trees opened to reveal a small clearing. Charles extended his palm upwards.

“Kɔtwia is here.” I looked around. I’d always known my paternal grandfather’s family lived in isolation, but I’d never seen a place like this. There were six metal shacks arranged in a circle. Frayed fishing nets, wooden spoons, and metal pots and pans were strewn across the ground. Everything seemed to slant; I wondered if any of the shacks were structurally sound. The path had become a jagged, unpaved road that led back into the jungle. Weeds and vines encroached on the clearing from all sides. Nature was taking a final stand against land lines carved with a rusty machete.

We stepped between the shacks to the village’s center. Five elders were seated dressed in kente cloth, men with their right breasts exposed to the sand and searing sun. They were seated in front of an electric fan in the largest structure; it was made of weak tin, held together by a combination of dried clay, cassava, and bamboo. At the head was Chief Odikro, tall and imposing. He lifted his hand. People slowly filtered out of the shacks. I counted fifteen or twenty. Children were dressed in rags. All were barefoot.

As was custom, they all came around to shake our hands and welcome us into their homes. *Akwaaba! Welcome! Medaase.* Thank you. The cycle continued amidst background chatter. Some introduced themselves as my family—Lucy Mensah, an older woman with a beard, was my cousin. Soft-spoken Kofi Adjepong was my distant uncle. Kwabena Okyere approached me with a swagger and told me he was the new head of the family after my grandfather’s passing. My father bristled. Kwabena smirked.

The Ashanti believe that a mother gives her children their flesh and blood through childbirth. A father provides something more important—a soul. The strongest soul resides in

first-born sons. My grandfather was the last head. My father was his first-born son. Kwabena had stayed in Kotwia. My father had not.

As Kwabena basked in his new-found authority, my aunts turned to engage old friends in pleasant conversation. Hearing my pitiful replies to villagers, Chief Odikro turned his back. He leaned towards another elder's ear. *shohoo*. Foreigner. The barb stung. Friendly conversation towards me turned to silence. Odikro's word carried a weight unchallenged.

He raised his hand once more. The bracelets on his wrists jangled. All conversation ceased. The burial proceedings had begun. He spoke in a dark tone. Old vernacular was muddled in my ears, strange and unfamiliar. *shohoo*.

He gestured back into the jungle. I simply followed the crowd. People were restless. Lucy's eyes held trepidation. She yelped. *honhom bone wo ho!* There are evil spirits there! The herd-mentality of the village was evident. People began to shake and shiver, folklore of time's past floating in their minds. Kofi looked pale. Kwabena's ever-present smirk faltered. Odikro pushed them forward. Odikro was a shield from all of Satan's harm.

shohoo. I examined Odikro's figure silently. Was I the foreigner? The forty-nine-year-old's limbs were adorned with golden jewelry. He was large and healthy. A cellular phone emblazoned with a faded World Cup sticker was tucked into his kente cloth. A sea of hungry people followed him blindly. I had learned from my father that they were primarily farmers, many with little to no education. A large share of the crops went to Odikro and the elders, even during droughts; they said it was the will of the Old Gods. No one would defy them out of fear of Satan's devils. His people walked eight miles for water. He sat in front of an electric fan. Was

this proud? Were these the Ashanti at their core? A child near my leg wore a tattered T-shirt that hung to his ankles. There was a Hot-Wheels Car on the front. He reached for my hand to avoid tripping. His hand was small, too small.

I thought about the children I had seen in my grandmother's hometown, Nkwatia-Kwahu, two years prior. They were fed, happily living in one of Ghana's most profitable sectors. The Kwahu's were an industrious people in the Eastern Region of Ghana. My first-born father had elected to grow up there instead of here. He'd chosen to go to college, to come to the United States for graduate school. He'd raised a family free from the superstition and tradition abroad. He'd fostered English in his children rather than his mother tongue.

I now go to Yale University. I have more fluency in Spanish than I do in Twi. What is the strength of my father's soul? What would mine have been under Odikro's sway?

We arrived at a rectangular box covered in dirt and plant growth. Kofi later told me quietly that Odikro had forbidden people from keeping their cemetery tidy; if anything was cut, spirits would see it as an invitation to kill people. My grandfather was in that box. Kwabena quickly moved it, so Odikro could pray over my grandfather's spirit. He jumped away as if my grandfather would rise from it at any moment. Before he began the prayer, Odikro turned towards me. *Wo ka Twi?* Do you speak Twi? *Wo te Twi kasa ase?* Do you understand it? Chief Odikro's figure filled my vision. As he began to chant, the people stood rapt at attention. I understood nothing. A stomach grumbled behind a picture of a Hot-Wheels Car.

The Ashanti say that Satan gave the Kwahu their success.

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