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**“Why are Whites Richer?”:  
Negotiation of Gonja Locality Through  
Oral Narratives of Disparity and  
the Image of the “White Man”**

Galia Boneh

Using research done while visiting and living in Ghana over several years, the author analyzes the perception of whites among the Gonja of Northern Ghana and the explanations given to white people's economic and technological advantage. In the analysis, Boneh examines the ways in which the character of “the white man” becomes relevant to constructions of a Gonja identity in face of a rapidly changing society. Engaging in discussions of the ‘Other’ and the ‘self’, the article examines myths, personal reflections and inter-generational discussions to explore understandings of whiteness and self in northern Ghana.

*I am going to tell a story about why whites are far ahead in terms of advancement and development than blacks: Once upon a time whites and blacks alike were asked to go for a race. At the end of the race they had to climb a big tree. The first to reach the top of the tree will have blessing and development and riches will follow.*

*Now the race started. At first, blacks were leading. The first person was black, second, third; whites were left far behind. Then the first man, who was black, got to the tree and grabbed it to climb up. Unfortunately, he was finding it very difficult to climb this big tree. He would reach half way and then fall back until the second man, who also happened to be a black, got to him. When he got there and the first man was struggling to climb, he pulled him back and then grabbed the tree to climb up. Then the first man who was pulled back also pulled this man down. When the third person came, also a black, they were all pulling each other down, until the whites who were left far behind in the race caught up with them and got to the tree.*

*The first white who grabbed the tree to climb up was given a push by his colleagues, the whites. He climbed the tree and became first among whites and blacks alike, and plucked this blessing of development and advancement. In the end it became a boon to all whites and the development spread and covered all of them.*

*So that explains why we blacks have been left behind. We didn't give ourselves any push. The*

*meaning of this story is that blacks have the habit of pulling each other down. When we see a black fellow progressing in life we envy the fellow, and we take all steps possible to pull the fellow back. Instead of making strides to also catch up.... This story shows the individualistic nature of blacks....*  
(28-year-old Gonja college student, Damongo, Ghana Aug. 6<sup>th</sup> 2003)

Throughout my several visits to Ghana and other African countries, and throughout the two and a half years in which I lived in Ghana and studied for my B.A. in dance, my position as a “white person” was inescapable. Some people, including myself, do not think of themselves as “white,” as an ethnic category, even if their complexion resembles the creamy color popularly referred to as “white.” However, when the non-African arrives in Ghana, no matter how complex her ethnic background may be, no matter how “un-white” she may feel (or be), no matter her political affiliation or economic condition – she is automatically labeled: “Obroni” (or “Kabroni” in Gonja), roughly translated as “white person.” Although this label can serve as an advantage, most of the time it is a source of discomfort, always a reminder of one’s outsider position and often attracting unwanted attention.

The main issue that strikes both the “Kabroni” and the Ghanaian in their encounter with one another is the economic difference between them. For many visitors from Western countries, even though the differences in the economic condition between their country and Ghana is what in fact made their trip possible and enjoyable, it is often this difference and the tension surrounding it that becomes one of the strongest memories and probably the most uncomfortable aspect of their visit.

But what does it mean to the Ghanaian? What do Ghanaians make of their encounter with the Obronni and his economic advantage? How do they view whites and how do they use these impressions to explain whites' greater wealth? What role does the image of the "white man" play in the society and what does it say about Gonja and Ghanaian society?

Because of the large scope of these questions, I limit this paper to the Gonja of northern Ghana, where I conducted most of the research, although many of the findings may be true for other Ghanaians as well, and I do draw on my experience living in Ghana between 1998 and 2000. Research for this paper was conducted during the summer of 2003, in three Gonja towns in Northern Ghana: Bole, Damongo and Sawla, and some of their surrounding villages, and was carried out in collaboration with my husband, Iddi Saaka, himself a Gonja-Ghanaian. The method we used was a series of interviews, often conducted in groups in order to stimulate conversation. Most interviews were conducted in Gonja, documented on video and translated by Iddi Saaka into English. In some cases we used my position as a white woman to generate data. For example, in schools we allowed the students to ask me questions about the "white man's world", a method which generated rich and informative data.

The Gonja are an ethnic group in northern Ghana. According to SIL International, the Gonja speaking population as of 1995 was 250,000<sup>1</sup>. Although relatively small in number, the Gonja occupy a vast land. The major towns of the Gonja are Bole, Damongo, Salaga, Kpembu, Daboya, and Gbipe. Some live in other parts of the country such as Tamale, Kumasi and Accra. However, most Gonjas live in smaller towns and villages in the southern part of the Northern Region of Ghana and in west central Ghana

(ibid).

The majority of Gonjas are Muslims, although there are also Christians and practitioners of the traditional religion. Most Gonjas make their living through subsistence farming.<sup>2</sup>

### **Historical Background**

The Gonja are said to have originated from the Mande of Mali. They migrated to Ghana in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as armored horsemen of the Mande king who sent them to investigate why the supply of gold from the south was diminishing (Braumah, 1997:11). From 1740 – 1874 the centralized Gonja state was under Ashanti control. In 1874 the British invaded Ashanti and the Gonja rebelled and killed the Ashanti officials in Gonja land (Eades, 1993:25). This was followed by an invasion of the Samorians, the followers of the slave raider Samori from Ivory Coast.<sup>3</sup>

From 1897 until Ghana's independence in 1957, Gonja territories were under the colonial rule of the British:

The response of Bole people to the coming of the British was two fold. On the one hand they were pleased. They liked the British because they had driven the Samorian forces away... While there was this good will towards the British, there was also a feeling of frustration about some British practices. (Haight, 1981:82-83)

Under colonial rule, northern Ghana was neglected due to its lack of natural resources. Eades explains:

The Gold Coast had well-defined core and

peripheral areas, and increasingly in the twentieth century it was the coastal and forest areas in the south which provided the economic core, while the savanna areas, which became the Northern Territories under colonial rule, became increasingly peripheral. This was not always the case: in the nineteenth century this area had been of strategic importance in the economy of the Ashanti state. Its marginalization resulted from the collapse of the Ashanti economy after the British invasion of 1874, and the increasing redirection of trade towards the coast. (Eades, 1993: 24)

Eades quotes a colonial officer, Governor Hodgeson, who wrote in 1898: "I would not at present spend upon the Northern Territories... a single penny more than is absolutely necessary for their suitable administration" (Eades, 1993:29).

This colonial policy has carried on to present day Ghana. As a result of the colonial neglect, the northern part of the country did not benefit from the development of infrastructure and public services that accompanied the exploitation of those areas that were profitable for the British. Today northern Ghana is still lacking in adequate roads, hospitals, schools and employment. While the cost of living is lower in the north than in the south, opportunities to earn a living are significantly lacking. Most people live "from hand to mouth" and are engaged in the daily struggle of fulfilling basic needs. For this reason, economic issues are a main concern in people's lives. The perceptions of white people and the explanations of their advantage must be understood in this context.

For many Gonjas, the answers to the question “Why are whites richer?” lie in the characteristics and traits of the Kabroni individuals they encounter – in person, on television and in narrative, in comparison to their own traits. Such explanations locate the root cause of economic difference in personality traits and cultural differences, rather than in structural and historical causes. This interpretation of the causes of economic difference can be understood through Fritz Kramer’s explanation of the wide range of African myths that blame the Africans themselves, rather than whites, for their economic disadvantage:

Perhaps we can better understand the older versions of the myth of difference by bringing to mind the fact that underprivileged social strata everywhere, inasmuch as they have not developed a resentment against the rich and powerful, like to blame themselves for their unfortunate situation in order to avoid despairing at the injustice of a world which is outside their effective grasp. (1993:28-29)

The act of self-blame can therefore be seen as an act of claiming a certain degree of control, as opposed to recognition of powerlessness. Likewise, situating the explanations to the question of disparity in individual and societal behavioral traits opens up the possibility that Gonjas – as individuals and as a society - have the power and ability to change their economic conditions if they choose to. While in some narratives the behavioral traits can be understood as primordial characteristics,



essentialized as 'black' and 'white' differences, and as such imply a certain degree of pessimism regarding the prospect of change, in others there is indication that Gonjas can change their situation through careful study of the white man, and an understanding of the traits that hold the secret to his success. This proposition unleashes the possibility of change in the Gonja moral universe, value system and behavior codes. As such, the interpretations of the white mans' traits become crucial to the negotiation of the prospect of change. The oral narratives presented in this paper, and the ambiguity that arises from them, can, therefore, be seen as sites of contestation at the core of Gonja identity and moral universe, in the face of the liberating and threatening implications of change.

As the data will show, the discussion of economic difference between "Gonjas" and people from Western countries often collapses into a question of racial difference<sup>4</sup>. The term Gonjas is often replaced with the term "blacks," and the local term Mbroni (plural) / Kabroni (singular) can be loosely translated as "white people". And yet, Kabroni can also be translated as "foreigner," depending on the context. Thus, African Americans, for example, are often referred to as Kabroni (or Obroni in Twi) by virtue of their being foreigners (Schramm, 2004).

The importance of this study is twofold. First, as bell hooks writes:

Searching the critical work of postcolonial critics, I found much writing that bespeaks the continued fascination with the way white minds, particularly the colonial imperialist traveler perceives blackness, and very little expressed interest in

representations of whiteness in the black imagination. (1992:339)

To complement the more extensive engagement with the representation of Africa in the West, this study seeks to reveal representations and understandings of the West, or for that matter "white people", in Africa, and as such "reverse the gaze". This is particularly relevant for anthropologists, whose traditional role involves observing "the Other", and often ignores the inevitable state of being observed. As Fritz Kramer writes in his foreword to *The Red Fez*:

One would imagine that anthropology, which observes people in foreign societies, would be the most likely place to find a hint of discomfort at the one-sidedness of this obsession. Observation in anthropology is called participant observation; but the anthropologist tends to exclude himself from actual participation, reducing himself to an observing point which itself cannot be perceived. (Kramer, 1993; vii)

Regardless of the subject of inquiry, it is important that foreign "participant observers" recognize the ways in which they are being perceived and understood by the people they "observe".

Second, the study attempts to understand local cultural production in the context of global political and economic processes and power relations. Jean and John Comaroff claim one future for anthropology is:

to interrogate the production, in imaginative and material practice, of those compound political, economic, and cultural forms by means of which human beings create community and locality and identity, especially on evanescent terrains; by means of which, in the face of material and moral constraint, they fabricate social realities and power relations and impose themselves on their lived environments; by means of which space and time are made and remade, and the boundaries of the local and global are actualized. (1999:295)

In this paper I examine Gonja oral narratives as production through which Gonjas create and negotiate "community, locality and identity" in face of increasing visibility of economic disparity between themselves and "the white man."

### **How do the Gonja and the Kabroni meet?**

The image of the Kabroni is formed primarily through past and present accounts of experiences with Mbroni in Ghana and abroad, mass media such as television and movies, and products imported from the "white man's land." The impressions from these encounters set the stage for the formation of oral narratives that give meaning to the wide range of often-contradictory impressions. These narratives thus become not only a vehicle for Gonjas to share information about Mbroni, but also a way to negotiate tensions over wealth and "traditional" values. As such, they become central to negotiation of Gonja

locality.

Accounts of real experiences with Mbroni are circulated between and within generations. In the inter-generational discussion, impressions formed through encounters with colonial officers and missionaries in the 1950s meet impressions formed by Ghanaians who have traveled abroad or interacted with tourists or foreign students. These impressions simultaneously contrast and influence one another. Within the generations, ambiguous impressions and their implications stimulate contestation and contemplation over central Gonja values. Thus, as I shall demonstrate, the Kabroni "other" is instrumental in formation and reconstruction of the Gonja "Self".

One way Gonjas meet Mbroni is through individual Mbroni who, over the years, passed through Gonja territories, leaving their impressions on the local people. These include different "types" of Mbroni. Few colonial officers were present in Bole and Damongo during the colonial period, since colonial activities were largely based in Southern Ghana. Missionaries were a predominant "type" of whites since they lived in the communities for long periods of time. Missionaries from the Evangelical, Presbyterian, Catholic and Methodist churches began arriving in major Gonja towns in the 1950s from Britain, Germany, Italy and the USA, and some can still be found today.

Tourism also started around 1950 when the Mole National Park, which features a large population of elephants, was established about 10 miles south of Damongo. However, since the National Park has its own guest house, tourists tend to concentrate in the National Park and have minimal interaction with the local population. Other "types" of Mbroni include Peace Corps and NGO workers and volunteers, businessmen,

anthropologists and other scholars.

Differentiation between Mbroni from different countries and continents is largely dependent on the level of education and interaction with "white people." As compared to other parts of Ghana, there are not many whites living or visiting among the Gonja since Northern Ghana is less developed than the South, and the distance from the capital is significant (about 15 hours car drive). Other accounts of personal experiences with white people are told by Gonjas and other Ghanaians who have traveled abroad for work or study. These accounts get circulated and retold through relatives and friends.

At the time of the research (2003) there was no television reception in most of the Gonja territories, including the bigger towns. However, some people in Bole and Damango owned television sets and video or DVD players and occasionally watched American films. From the 1950s through the 1980s, missionaries used to show American religious films and Westerns on Sunday evenings. From the 1980s until early this century, some people who owned television sets and video players operated small "cinema theatres" in their houses, showing Nigerian films, Chinese kung-fu films, American war films and Westerns, and Indian Bollywood films, which they rented from video shops in the bigger cities. Many perceptions of Mbroni have been formed through these films. In addition, the actual products and technology of mass media, such as TV sets and DVD players, also play a role in forming impressions of Mbroni.

In schools, both teachers and textbooks contribute to the formation of perceptions of white people, especially through the teachings of slavery and colonialism as major events in Ghanaian history. For example, Laura Dull, who studied narratives of the nation in Junior Secondary

School textbooks in Ghana, found that “Africans emerge in the textbooks as honest and morally superior to Europeans who deceived and cheated them” (2003: 13). This demonstrates one of the ways in which essentialized characteristics of ‘Whites’ and ‘Blacks’ are formed in popular imagination.

Through the various ‘meetings’ of the Gonjas and Mbroni – through personal interaction, mass media, and narratives – specific traits arise as typical of Mbroni. As we shall see throughout the paper, recurrent in the narratives is the polarized ambiguity in the interpretation of the Kabroni’s personality. This ambiguity will then be analyzed in order for us to comprehend its implications on the Gonja perception of self in face of global processes and influences.

### **Traits of the Kabroni and the Gonja Selfishness**

In the opening narrative of the article, the “black” is portrayed as selfish and “individualistic,” while the “white” is portrayed as one who cares for the betterment of his people in general and not about his own personal interests. The following narrative portrays a similar explanation of the difference between “blacks” and “whites”:

Two white men and two black men lived together. They told the black people that they will give one of them money to go to America, [and they should choose] who will go. And they also told the white people [the same thing] and asked, “Which of you will go to America?” The two Gonjas, this one said I will go and

this one said I will go. But the white people agreed that only one should go. So that's why they are there. And the Gonjas chose jealousy and that is why they are backwards. (Personal communication: 13-year-old student, Bole, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

In both narratives, "wealth," "development," and "advancement" are conceived as a physical object or place: in the first story, as a fruit at a tree-top; and in the second story, as "America." America is portrayed as a place that was wealthy even before it was populated; the advantage of the Kabroni is in the fact that he arrived there earlier. Similarly, in the first narrative, the "fruit of development" existed before the people plucked it, and the Kabroni acquired it by winning the race. "Development" is thus not portrayed as a process but as a finished product, a condition that exists in one place or object, and does not exist in the other. The goal is not to acquire wealth, or "develop," but to reach the place or object in which these are inherent. This idea is consistent with the common perception in Ghana, that if a person manages to get to "the white man's land," he will surely become rich. A person is often said to have "traveled outside" without mention of his destination. This figure of speech can be explained by the common perception that the promise of success and wealth lie primarily in the ability to leave Ghana (Boneh, 2004: 33).

In both stories, the cause for the failure of the "black" is his selfishness, as opposed to the "Kabroni" who succeeds due to his non-selfish ways. In the first narrative, the narrator emphasizes that in terms of capability, it was the blacks who were leading the race. Their only disadvantage, according to the narrative, was

their selfishness and “individualistic nature.”

On the other hand, there is a prevailing image of the Gonja as non-individualistic, non-selfish, with strong commitments to extended families and communities, as opposed to the individualistic Kabroni. Consider the following dialogue between two men and a woman in Bole:

*Takora:* When you compare the West to ourselves, you sometimes see that part of their way of life is fine but part worse [than ours]. We have in fact a much nicer way of living than them.

*Saaka:* Socially we are just better than them....

*Biba:* Look, a black, when he meets you, whether he knows you or not he will greet you.

*Takora:* Eh! The very human one is the black.

*Biba:* But a white person if he does not need anything from you, if you ask him within the next 30 minutes the kind of shirt you were wearing when he met you he will not be able to tell you...Because he doesn't have time for you.... But an African, when he sees you...

*Saaka:* He will show concern.... As for Gonjas, we love each other, we have a lot of family relationships.

(Personal Communication: Saaka, Takora, 40+ year-old man, Biba, 40+ year old woman, Bole, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003)



In these statements, the images of the Gonja, or “black men” for that matter, are of people who are not selfish and individualistic, but rather of people who care about each other, love and share with one another, as opposed to the Kabroni who is portrayed as caring only about himself. The images of the “black” and the “white” are juxtaposed back to back, emphasizing the opposition between them. Sharing wealth, being unselfish and caring especially for one’s family members, are reinforced as central Gonja values through the contrast with the “Kabroni Other.” At the same time, these central values of the Gonja, offer an explanation to the inability of the Gonja to acquire wealth:

It is their nuclear family which is bringing everything ... his wife and his two children or one child. That is all. Africans – you will give birth to many children, your paternal aunt is there, your maternal aunt is there, your grandmother is there, and all of them are still your burden. How will you ever be able to save money? (Personal Communication: Biba, 40+ year-old woman, Bole, July 15<sup>th</sup> 2003)

The “burden” of relatives is one of the reasons why “traveling outside” is considered the key to becoming rich:

The money you used for traveling, if you had invested it in Ghana, maybe you would have made the same profit. But your relatives will always come for help, and you will not be able to save

anything. If you are able to go outside, even if your relatives write you, you can always say you didn't receive the letter. That way you can save money and come back after a few years and be in a better position. It gives you a push. (Personal Communication: Iddrisu, 30-year-old man, Bole, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003).

From looking at the reality and living conditions of the Mbroni on one hand (as they are seen and perceived in Ghana), and the Gonja on the other, what might be considered as "selfish" behavior does, it seems, lead to wealth, while "non-selfish" behavior can serve as an obstacle to acquiring wealth.

The contradictory images of the Kabroni can be explained by noting the types of narratives that produce each image: the first image is produced through fictitious narratives or parables, told for the purpose of teaching a moral lesson. The figure of the Kabroni resembles the way certain animals, known for specific traits, are used in folktales. The second image derives from "realistic" accounts based on personal experience and rumors about "how Mbroni really are." According to the parables, the "development race" and the "trip to America," the Kabroni becomes wealthy because he is not selfish. But in reality, according to the informants, the Kabroni is wealthy and is selfish. Moreover, the non-selfish ways of the Gonja, the commitment to supporting relatives financially, have not proven to be effective in acquiring wealth. On the contrary, this aspect of the culture seems to serve as an obstacle to acquiring wealth.

This realization is a cause for anxiety; according to Chiraba Amantanah, a 93-year-old woman from Bole,

the belief that selfishness is a path to wealth has already begun to effect change in Gonja society:

In the old days, people used to take care of each other. When you have something you share it with all your extended family, but now people don't do that. If you ask someone for anything, that person will ask you why don't you have your own. (Personal Communication: Chiraba Amantanah, Bole, July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

Fundamental Gonja values of sharing and not being selfish are gradually being compromised, and run the risk of losing ground. The image that arouses from the "realistic" accounts of the Kabroni as selfish and wealthy accelerates this risk. In response, stories such as the "development race" and the "travel to America" can be seen, in this context, as attempts to protect Gonja values by portraying reality in a different light, a light that strengthens these values rather than proving them non-beneficial.

A similar ambivalence can be found in narratives and accounts pertaining to the work ethic and abilities of the Kabroni. Since work is perceived as the ultimate medium to acquire wealth, the Kabroni's traits with regards to work are crucial for understanding the secret to his wealth and success.

### **Hard Work**

Mbroni like work; when you work with a Kabroni, you will know that he really works. If you don't take time he will work more than you. (Personal Communication:

Mahama, 50 year old man, Bole, July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

Many people say that whites are lazy.

A Kabroni will never do the hard work that a Gonja will agree to do.

(Biba, 40+ year old woman, Bole, July 15<sup>th</sup> 2003)

In the course of the research, both perceptions of the Kabroni – as hardworking and as lazy – repeated themselves several times. In response to the last statement made by Biba, Saaka asked: “But if he is not strong, how can he do hard work?” thereby differentiating between the Kabroni’s willingness and his ability, and clarifying his understanding of hard work as physical work.

Among the Gonja, being “hardworking” is a highly valued trait. Children are taught from a young age to participate in the work efforts of the family, and a “good wife or husband” is considered one who is “very hard-working.” Since much of the common jobs Gonjas do are physical, such as farming, carrying heavy loads, etc., good work ethic and physical strength are often intertwined. Thus, in order to be considered hardworking one must have physical strength. In the case of the Kabroni, however, there is the need to differentiate between the two.

As a white person in Ghana, I was often assumed not to have enough strength to do things on my own, such as wash my clothes and carry heavy loads. Often was I asked at mid-day whether I needed to rest. In a visit to a classroom, the children asked whether my skin would cut if they touched it. One of the students explained:

When I first saw [Mbroni] I was afraid of them. Because people say their skin is not strong. When you touch them the skin will cut. So me, up to date when I see them I fear them, I don't want to touch them. I feel pity for them and I don't want to touch them so that their skins will not cut. (Personal Communication: Female student, 14-years-old, Sawla, August 12th, 2003)

In this statement the Kabroni is portrayed as fragile and delicate; so much so that the Gonja girl feels pity. The feeling of pity puts the girl at an advantageous position as compared to the Kabroni, for the latter's weakness and fragility highlight her relative strength. But in the following narrative, the advantage of physical strength is questioned:

Do you know why blacks and whites came into existence? In the past God created the human being; he created him a black man. There were two friends whose relationship was very strong and they decided to make a farm together. Every time they went to weed they would also prepare food and eat. One day they decided to cook beans. When the beans were on fire, one said that the other should take care of the beans and he will go and look for meat. He told the friend that when the beans are ready he should shout "hoooooi" and call him. When the beans were ready the friend shouted "hoooooi;"

but he didn't hear anything. So the friend climbed on a tree to check whether he will see him. He shouted again "hoooooi";... He was still shouting when a branch of the tree broke and he fell into the beans. [Cooked] beans are hot.... His skin peeled and all the black skin went away and he became a white person. The hair became soft; you know yourself when you put hot water in your hair how does it look? That was how the Kabroni came into the world.

When a black person burns, you see that the skin suddenly looks like that of a white person. Because it is a sore, that is why many people fear to touch Mbroni because they still think that it is a sore and when you have a sore it is sickness, right? That is why white people are not able to do heavy work; because they are sick people. For example, can you weed when you are sick? So because Mbroni can't use their strength to weed, they manufacture something to weed for them. (Personal Communication: Abu, 32-year-old teacher, Bole, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003)

In this narrative, Abu also mentions the perception of the Kabroni's skin as fragile and delicate, similarly to the girl quoted earlier. He explains this fragility as a sickness and by so doing he also puts the "black" at a superior physical stance. Yet the Kabroni's weakness becomes the source of his advantage. Because he is sick and unable to work, he had to manufacture machines to do the work for him. This eventually puts him in an economically superior

stance as compared to the "black." Once again, the Gonja values are questioned; the Kabroni's physical weakness, fragility and sickness, which caused him to be pitied by the Gonja, who is strong and healthy, is in fact the secret of his success.

The superior stance and advantage of physical strength and willingness to do "heavy work" is also questioned in face of the fact that in interacting with the Gonja/black, the Kabroni often holds the position of a manager, supervisor, instructor, etc. He does not do the "heavy work," yet he is at a superior position and gets rewarded economically and socially much more than those who do.

*Biba:* When you go to work with a Kabroni, the amount of work the black can do for 3 days, if he takes even 10 years he can never finish it.

*Saaka:* He knows that you have black skin. You are a donkey so you will work ... the amount of money they will pay you will never get anywhere near theirs. (Personal Communication, Bole, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

In the conversation above, Biba refers to the Kabroni as unable to work like the black man, ("he can never finish it"), whereas Saaka sees the Kabroni to be unwilling, since he can get the black man to do the work for him. His unwillingness to work hard is due to his position of power over the Gonja.

Once again we can note what may seem to be a disjuncture: one type of narrative perceives the Kabroni to be hard-working, which explains his economic advantage. The other perceives him to be not nearly as hardworking as the Gonja. This can be explained by his inability, due to

physical weakness, fragility and even sickness, or by his unwillingness, due to having the option of blacks doing the work for him. In both cases, the fact that he does not do the physical work himself, serves to his advantage: in the first case the machines do the work for him, and in the second case - the blacks.

In a society which values "hard work," the benefit the Kabroni seems to gain from lack of work raises an anxiety similar to the anxiety raised by his selfishness. If being "hard-working" is believed to be the right way to succeed in life and acquire wealth, why is it that the Kabroni's laziness (unwillingness to work) and weakness (inability to work) help him to become wealthy? Since Mbroni are weak and lazy, they need to develop other strategies, such as technology and a mentality of exploitation, in order to succeed. Rather than using physical strength, they use their "brains", a strategy that has proven more effective. As such, it questions the value of hard, physical work.

The anxiety regarding the Kabroni's relationship to work is directly related to the question of his wealth. In the following section, I discuss another set of traits that are of great significance to Gonjas: honesty and respect. While these traits are not perceived as directly related to acquiring wealth, there is an underlying assumption that ultimately, moral behavior is – or should be - rewarded. Once again, however, the Kabroni brings this assumption to question.

### **Honesty and Respect**

*James Braimah:* The way I see Mbroni, it's because of two things I like them. One – they like work. Two – they tell the



truth.

*Mahama*: They don't like lies....

*James Braimah*: A Kabroni doesn't like lies. Why people think that Mbroni are better than us is because they tell the truth in their lives. What I have seen is that before we black people can also go further, we have to take the Mbroni's way of life and add it to ours. (Personal Communication: Braimah and Mahama, 50-year-old men, Bole, July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

From the last statement we understand that the honesty of the Mbroni is to their advantage. It is inferred from the statement that blacks do not "tell the truth in their lives," and that this is a reason for their disadvantage. On the other hand, there is a common contrasting perception of Mbroni as people who are not truthful. The following story (of which we heard a few other versions) was told by a 13-year-old schoolgirl:

A certain Kabroni and a lizard lived together and were working together. Each time they make money, the Kabroni hides his money and the lizard uses his money to buy food for both of them. After some time, the Kabroni bought a car and was driving. The lizard managed to hide in the engine and was singing, "We are sigi, sigi, sigi, [singing syllable] driver, I'm in the engine, Takoradi, Takoradi!"<sup>5</sup> The Kabroni came out and opened the engine but didn't see anything. So he closed it again and the lizard started singing again the same song, "We are sigi, sigi, sigi,

driver, I'm in the engine, Takoradi, Takoradi!" This time when the Kabroni opened the engine he saw the lizard there, took him out and said he should come and sit in the front and sing for him, so that when they get to Takoradi he will buy food for him. When they got to Takoradi he bought a lot of banku<sup>6</sup> for him [the lizard]. By the time he finished eating he \ didn't see the Kabroni again. The Kabroni ran away with his car. So when you are working with someone and he's doing his plans, you should also be doing small small and hiding some of the money. (Personal Communication: 13-year-old girl, Sawla, August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

In this tale, the Kabroni is portrayed as a cunning person. Whilst in the statement made by James Braimah, the reason for the Kabroni's material success is in his truthfulness, in this story it is in his cunningness. In the story, the lizard represents the Ghanaian: he eats Banku, a Ghanaian staple food, and sings the name of a Ghanaian town "Takoradi". The lizard shares his portion of the money by buying food for both himself and the Kabroni, and ends up at a loss. The Kabroni, who hides his portion and also deceives the lizard at the end, gains material wealth from his deeds. Although the subtext of the story paints the cunning ways of the Kabroni in a negative light, the lesson stated by the girl at the end is that in some cases it is necessary in order to gain wealth. The story also relates to the benefit inherent in the trait of selfishness, as discussed earlier. The dilemma in this narrative is therefore between being truthful and sharing – but possibly losing– and being

cunning, selfish and greedy – but profiting from it. The usage of the Kabroni, who in real life is known for his wealth, as the “cunning” character in the story, further emphasizes this dilemma.

In the following conversation, Saaka, Takora and Iddi complicate the notion of honesty:

*Saaka:* When he [the Kabroni] says he dislikes this, then he really dislikes it.

*Takora:* His no is no and his yes is yes.... Most of them are straightforward. If he dislikes something he will let you know that he dislikes it.

*Saaka:* Yes, they are open.

*Iddi:* They are open? When they came to our land at first I don't think that they told our ancestors that they came to deceive them and to take some of our people to their place?

*Saaka:* No they didn't say that...Even as they still come... they are not open. But it's like – let's say you step on his leg and he will say he has forgiven you, then he has really forgiven you.

*Takora:* But not like a black person who will say I have forgiven you but he is still tracking you, waiting for the next time he will get you.

*Saaka:* But his [the Kabroni's] real intention for coming here – as for that one he will never tell you.

*Takora:* If he discloses that to you, you will become alert and he wouldn't get what he wants.

(Personal Communication: Bole, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

In this conversation the informants complicate the notion of honesty; the Kabroni will be dishonest to take land and people as slaves, but will be forthright about his feelings in personal interactions – whether positive feelings (forgiveness) or negative ones (disliking). While this may seem contradictory, both types of honesty in fact stem from the fact that the Kabroni does not have moral consciousness and firm behavior codes as Gonjas do. The Kabroni does not do what is proper in the eyes of society, but rather does what he wants: he takes what he wants and says what he feels. Honesty is thus not a principle, but rather a behavior of liberty that is applied when the Kabroni has nothing to lose, and shelved when he does.

The informants contrast this behavior with that of the Gonja/black man. The Gonja morals require that even if a person dislikes or is angry with another person, he must not show it and must behave “properly” by saying he has forgiven even if he has not, and he must never reveal his negative feelings. The Kabroni’s behavior seems, in some cases, to be admirable by the informants. The Kabroni seems to have a freedom from binding norms, which Gonjas do not have. The appeal of this freedom causes the informants to question the “Gonja ways.” Similarly, in the following conversation, Gonja norms regarding respect to elders are questioned:

*Biba:* Look at their children the way they talk freely to their parents; if an African

talks that way to his parents they will disown him. A Kabroni can insult his father that "you are foolish," but here can you do that?

*Saaka:* It's not like he insulted him. He told him the truth, he did something foolish and he told him.... We watched a film one day and a [Kabroni] woman held her child and apologized to him and then asked him how he felt. So he said because his mother apologized he has forgiven her.... Do you understand it? The mother wronged him and she apologized! But Africans, we don't have that.

*Takora:* One of our brothers, brother Issah, was one day talking with his mother and he told her, "What do you mean?" [in English]. It was not small beating his mother gave him! He is a grown up and she beat him very well and he was crying!

*Saaka:* But he wants to find out the meaning of what she has said!

*Biba:* But here we don't have that. If you ask your mother like that she will say you have insulted her.

*Saaka:* So that is what we mean by saying they are open.

(Personal Communication: Bole, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

Although respect towards elders is a fundamental value among the Gonja, the honesty of the Kabroni towards his elders seems to be admirable by the informants. The Kabroni behavior illuminates the frustration the

informants feel with Gonja values and behavior codes that do not allow the slightest challenging of elders. In the story about Issah, the informants criticize the mother's behavior. The image of the Kabroni mother who apologizes to her son in the film, offers an "Other" way, an alternative to Gonja ways.

For the informants, as middle aged men and women who function both as sons and daughters and as parents, this alternative is both liberating and threatening. The Kabroni, being uncontrolled and unbound by society and its morals and norms, has the freedom to do whatever he wants and whatever benefits him: not share with others, not do physical work and not hide his feelings and thoughts even from elders. While these behaviors may be perceived as being uncivilized, uncultured and immoral, it is nevertheless a liberating image that is an attractive alternative to the Gonja ways which control and regulate the individual to behave in "proper" manner, proper meaning: sharing, working hard, being polite, (especially towards elders), and not expressing negative feelings. The attractiveness of this "Other" alternative also serves as a threat, for the lack of values, morals and norms mean a collapse of Gonja society as they know it.

The same freedom that allows the Kabroni to express his feelings and thoughts freely, also allows him to use cunningness to achieve or acquire what he wants. The threat inherent in the attractiveness of the Kabroni's freedom to behave "immorally" is intensified through the benefits he reaps from his cunning ways.

Yakubu, a farmer from Damongo, differentiates between cunningness of "whites" and "blacks":

As for us, our cunningness, we use it to save ourselves. So that no one will come

from somewhere and overpower us. We have that kind of cunningness. (Personal Communication Damongo, Aug. 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

The differentiation between the cunningness of the Kabroni and that of the Gonja resembles the distinction De Certeau makes between the "strategies" of the powerful/system and the "tactics" of the weak/individuals (De Certeau, 1984; 29-39). According to Yakubu, the cunningness of the Gonja is cunningness for survival, a cunningness of the weak. Thus, it does not taint the righteousness of the Gonja. The cunning nature of the Kabroni, on the other hand, is seen as a "strategy" which he uses in acquiring wealth and gaining power over the Gonja. Thus, it is evidence of his lack of morality and virtue. Nevertheless, it works in his favor.

Perhaps the highest level of anxiety caused by the Kabroni has to do with his relationship towards God. The assumption that moral behavior is rewarded, and the importance of maintaining proper behavior and order in society ultimately stem from the belief in God's superiority, and the consequent humbleness required of man.

### **The Kabroni and God**

There are some bad things that white people did and I am surprised. They said they want to challenge God. I've seen that they make their dolls and some of them look like human beings. One is even hanging in my auntie's store here. When I go I always fear it. They made it and

wanted to put life in it. But they are not able. Then they will go and look for some things and put in it and it will be walking. And I want to ask: Do they want to say they know where God is? (Personal Communication: 12 year old student, Bole, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

The same lack of restrictions that allows the Kabroni to challenge an elder, allows him to challenge or compete with God as well. While the walking doll is understood as a symbolic product that attempts to imitate human life, it is a result of the Kabroni's outstanding technological abilities. Although he can never reach the same level as God, he can come close in his abilities to produce what God does. And yet, the girl clearly criticizes the Kabroni's aspiration to "challenge God," by saying that these are "bad things white people did." Although the Mbroni inventions call for awe and amazement, they pose a threat to the girl's belief in God's superiority.<sup>7</sup>

In the following statement, another student explains how the Kabroni acquired these abilities:

I want to tell a story about why white people are able to make a human being but they are not able to put life in it [Also in reference to dolls]; When they [blacks and whites] were with God, God said they should close their eyes and he will make something. Black people closed their eyes, and white people did like this [the student puts hands over his face but peeps through his fingers]. Then God made a person but didn't put life in him,



he left him like that. That's why they also make a human being without putting life in him, because they haven't seen God putting life in the human being.

(Personal Communication: 12-year-old student, July 8<sup>th</sup>, Bole)

The cunning nature of the Kabroni resurfaces in his relationship with God. The black, who was obedient and did not think of cheating, did not learn the secret of how to make a human being. Here as well, we sense a disjuncture, symbolized by the Kabroni, between the action and the reward. When God instructs the people to close their eyes, the right thing is to do as they were told, but the Kabroni, who did the wrong thing, ended up benefiting from his deeds, leaving the Gonja behind in terms of their technological abilities.

The benefit the Kabroni reaps from being cunning towards God, and trying to imitate his abilities, questions the fundamental Gonja values of humbleness, respect and obedience towards God, stemming from God's absolute superiority. In both of the statements above, as well as in the examples that follow, the students emphasize that the Mbroni are bound to fail in their goal of challenging God. This anticipation of failure protects them from the threat of the implications of these inventions:

I heard that there were two Mbroni and they wanted to know where the sun sets. So they went, but they couldn't see it. They wanted to copy God but they cannot.  
(Personal Communication: 14-year-old Student, Bole, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

Other technological inventions, such as space ships and rockets, are perceived in a similar manner:

They say Mbroni have made a star and sent it up in the sky. When I heard that,... it means that they want to say that they can do what God does. (Personal Communication: 12-year- old Student, Bole, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

They say that the Mbroni are able to send the air-cars to God. And I want to ask is it true or not? (Personal Communication: 14-year-old Student, Bole, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

I hear that they go up to God to look at things there. So I also want to go, so that I will also see what is there (Personal Communication: 13-year- old Student, Bole, July 8<sup>th</sup> 2003)

The last student is the only one who explicitly expresses curiosity and attraction towards the attempts of Mbroni to get nearer to God, either physically closer or in terms of abilities. It is possible that the other students feel a similar attraction to the power and magic of technological inventions, alongside their criticism. However, they realize the danger it poses to their moral universe and fundamental conceptions of life.

The naïveté of the questions and comments quoted above is unique to children, but they are based on stories and sayings that circulate in the communities across generations. While each generation has had

different experiences and relates differently to the image of the white man, it would be misleading to present the ambiguity of the white man's image as a contestation between generations. Rather, the ambiguity exists within the generations and even within the individuals themselves: the elderly, who have had limited direct experience with the Kabroni, tend to idealize the "white man", but are also more suspicious of him. Middle aged men and women, who have had more personal experiences and greater understanding of global politics, are more cynical about the white man's personality, and yet they recognize the liberty and opportunity his image offers as an alternative to the traditional Gonja ways. The younger generation absorbs the meanings that arise from the narratives and perceptions of the older generations, as well as from their own experiences with the Kabroni, such as through mass media and interaction with tourists. These meanings become instrumental to their own processes of constructing their identities as Gonjas and as individuals: shaping their dreams and aspirations, as well as their moral universe and codes of behavior.

## **Conclusion**

From the interaction of Gonjas with the Kabroni, through personal experience, movies and oral narratives, an ambivalent image of the Kabroni's characteristics emerges in an attempt to explain his economic and technological advantage. Oral narratives and popular discourse raise a discussion on traits such as selfishness, work ethic, honesty and respect towards elders and God. It is assumed that the secret to the Kabroni's wealth lies in these traits. Derived from this is the assumption that changes in the Gonja moral universe and behavior codes could be the

key to improving their own economic conditions. Thus, the interpretation of the Kabroni's personality becomes a site of contestation on the future of Gonja society and culture.

For the Gonja, the "white man" is the ultimate "Other." The "Other" is marked by its difference from the "self," and as established in linguistics, anthropology and psychoanalysis, "difference is essential to meaning" (Hall, 1997:234). Meaning and identity of the "self" are negotiated through contrasts with the "Other." For this reason, the construct of the "Other" is essential in the formation of both individual and social identities. According to Stuart Hall, a constant feature in the representation of the Other is ambiguity:

... People who are in any way significantly different from the majority – "them" rather than "us" – are frequently exposed to this binary form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive.... And they are often required to be both things at the same time.... "Difference" is ambivalent. (Hall, 1997: 229, 238)

Consistent in all the tales and discussions of the Kabroni's character is this element of polarized ambivalence. It is this element that assists in the production of meaning and re-construction of Gonja identity in the face of sweeping changes brought about by global processes.

The changes triggered by modernity and globalization occur on many levels: in individual,

communal and national economic realities, in living conditions, in expectations, in dreams and aspirations and in values and social structure. Change has many faces, some ugly, some beautiful, some scary, some promising, some threatening and some liberating. Opposing forces come into play – some pulling towards change, while others strongly resisting it. As a society, the promises and threats of change are constantly negotiated, weighed, constructed and reconstructed.

Much of this negotiation is done through the image of the “Kabroni.” Although he is not physically present in the daily life of the Gonja, the Kabroni has a symbolic presence that relates directly to the lives and moral universe of Gonjas. The ambiguity of the Kabroni’s image is manifested in his relationship to fundamental Gonja values. In some images, the Kabroni represents a reinforcement of Gonja values: he is sharing, non-individualistic, hardworking. In other images, the Kabroni represents a contradiction to Gonja values: he is selfish, lazy, weak, cunning, expresses his true feelings even if they are negative towards elders, and does not fear to challenge God. This image of the Kabroni is in some ways liberating: it represents a freedom from binding norms, culture, and proper behavior. But it also threatens society, structure and order, as well as the norms, values, and morals of the Gonja.

What makes this threat even greater is the fact that the Kabroni always seems to benefit from his behavior. This is evident in his wealth, technology, high standards of living and positions of power. If he really is selfish, cunning, lazy, weak, and disrespectful, yet also rich and “advanced,” what does this mean for Gonjas who perceive themselves to be sharing, hardworking, physically strong, respectful to both God and elders, yet who are also

wrestling with poverty on a daily basis?

The Kabroni is thus a de-stabilizer. He shakes up fundamental values and truths of the Gonja, by proving them unbeneficial or unrewarding. The Kabroni stimulates change and becomes a symbol of all that is both disastrous and desirable about change. Through the various narratives and images of the Kabroni, the informants in this paper negotiate their own identities as Gonjas in the face of the promises and threats of change.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=DUM](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=DUM). Accessed Oct. 27<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes/guan.html>. Accessed on Oct. 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://www.atidekate.com/Northern/Gonja.html>. Accessed on Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> For a broader discussion on racial politics of identity formation see Frantz Fanon 1967 and bell hooks 1992

<sup>5</sup> Takoradi: a town in South-Western Ghana

<sup>6</sup> Banku: Ghanaian staple food made of fermented corn flour

<sup>7</sup> The girl is not aware of other, more ambitious inventions of "Mbroni" to create life, such as artificial insemination and cloning. Even among "Mbroni," these scientific inventions have been received with ambiguous feelings because of their philosophical and religious implications. Such inventions threaten basic conceptions of human life and the superiority of God over man.

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