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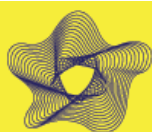
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One Option, Divided Opinion

By IMTFI Researcher *Francis Niagia Santuah*



The soothsayer's equipment (Photo by author)

The proliferation of mobile phones is enabling more and more people to have access to a variety of lifesaving information and critical services, including sending and receiving money. However, mobile phone utilization is still relatively low in rural communities in Ghana. Factors cited as constraining wider mobile phone utilization include unfavorable legislation, the price of handsets, poor network coverage, cost of recharge cards, low literacy, and the high cost of phone maintenance. Since ancestral consultation shapes everyday decision-making among the Kassena-Nankana in northern Ghana, would it not be wise to consult the ancestors before availing oneself of the services of a mobile phone? After all, individuals employ soothsayers for contacting ancestral spirits to explain the past, interpret the present, and forecast the future on matters concerning the wellbeing of their households. Under the assumption that people are more likely to use mobile phones if they are certain that their ancestors approve of the technology, we set out to sample the views of the living and the dead, and to compare their responses.

We compiled a list of all clan heads in Chiana, a fast-growing town of nearly 15,000 nestled in the hills of the Upper East region where nine out of ten people live below the poverty line. We narrowed this list down to 39 clan heads before purposively sampling 10 clan heads and their corresponding ancestors. Through the medium of divination, or soothsaying, we interviewed 20 key informants--10 ancestors and their 10 corresponding clan heads--to understand how the Kassena-Nankana (both the living and the dead) perceive the mobile phone as a tool for community development. These data could potentially motivate mobile network operators to pursue evidence-based and culturally appropriate approaches for promoting the use of mobile phones.

The Kassena-Nankana worldview--like the typical African cosmovision--spans the living, the dead, and the unborn. Ancestral worship is at the center of their cultural practices. Every compound has a shrine for making sacrifices and pouring libations to the spirits of ancestors, thereby establishing links between past generations and the

"I am the lineage head and I perform every sacrifice to the ancestor and I am using a mobile phone. Due to the change that we are witnessing, these days the ancestors would also agree to the use of mobile phones."

Clan head of Chiana Kalivio Alingnia in the Upper-East region of Ghana.

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present. Consulting the ancestors is the responsibility of the clan or lineage head, who serves as the moral authority of the clan. If the Kassena-Nankana seek the opinion of ancestral spirits on just about anything, would they not consult the ancestors before buying a mobile phone or accepting one as a gift? And if they do decide to consult them, what might the ancestors say? What if the ancestors and clan heads do not share the same opinion about the use of mobile phones?

Consultation starts with the deposit of a consultation fee--the exact amount of which is at the discretion of the client--and the statement of the mission. Our research assistant said, "We wish to consult your ancestor for his opinion on the use of mobile phones and the related issues of concern in our communities." This was followed by incantations by the soothsayer to seek the ancestor's permission for consultation. The soothsayer said, "I was on the farm when the visitors came. You said you know [everything], that is why they are requesting your knowledge. I only assume, I cannot prophesize. This is their token for you." He shook a gourd with items in it that made a jingling sound. Our client then chose two objects (a fowl skull and a piece of metal) from an assortment of over 150 objects from the soothsayer's collection to represent the two options in the questionnaire. Our research assistant held one end of the soothsayer's probing staff and asked the questions in his mind. The probing staff involuntarily hit one of the objects, and the research assistant noted the response on the questionnaire.

Three ancestors and one clan head declined the interview requests, and one soothsayer also declined to play the mediating role for consulting the ancestors. The remaining nine clan heads had heard about mobile phones, and eight approved of their use by members of the clan. Two-thirds of the ancestors had also heard of mobile phones, and the same proportion approved of their use. One ancestor who said he had not heard of mobile phones thought that they were good for business transactions, while another ancestor who had also heard of mobile phones disagreed. One ancestor said that he had not heard of mobile phones or mobile money and thought they were not good, but would encourage members of his clan to use them. One ancestor could not make up his mind about whether the mobile phone was a good thing or not.

Where the ancestor declined to take a side by not hitting either of the objects the soothsayer probed:

Soothsayer: *"Would it [the mobile phone] be good for everyone or would it be good for specific people?"*

Ancestor: *"It is good for specific people. Some people will pass through the phone to get money, but it [the phone] will tell lies for others, full of lies, stealing cases which will not augur well for people."*

Soothsayer: *"Should we stop the olden means of communication and stick to the new technology? Stop the past and stick to the new technology? Or we should take to the two means of transmitting information and combine them together? We are using the new medium of communication because it is good and nice, but since you are no longer alive to give directions and guidance, we don't know how to go about things."*

Ancestor: *"It is left unto them to follow which way will be good for them, but they should not abandon our [the ancestral] ways of doing things for they are all good and beneficial."*

Our study also revealed that while both the living and the dead have reservations about the use of mobile phones, the living are more positive about their use than are the dead. The ancestors probably fear that the adoption of mobile technology would diminish their importance among the living as indicated above.

Though they have their strengths and limitations, mobile phones and the ancestors are both important tools for social organization. Just as mobile money is a complement to cash rather than a replacement for it, mobile phones complement ancestral consultation in strategies for problem-solving rather than replacing the ancestors. Mobile phones offer practical solutions to everyday life challenges, but the ancestors offer divine solutions to issues that arise only occasionally and that are not perceptible to everyone.

The general conclusion we draw from our study is that the posture of the ancestors shows that they may not necessarily be fighting a lost battle, but rather that they are in favor of a win-win arrangement. Also, though the Kassena-Nankana are thoroughly religious and revere the ancestors, their culture is not impervious to change, including the embrace of mobile technology. They are not unaware of the changes sweeping across their traditional societies. Technology, however, is a double-edged sword. It is therefore imperative for the Kassena-Nankana to position themselves to take full advantage of the opportunities unveiled by mobile technology, but at the same time to

“The world has changed and it is now monetary affairs [everything has to do with money].”

Ancestor of Chiana Saboro in the
Upper-East region of Ghana.

minimize any inherent unpleasant consequences. Our study demonstrates to mobile phone companies that their clientele do not necessarily leave behind their religious and socio-cultural beliefs and practices when they embrace new technologies. Understanding this will enable these companies to develop culturally-sensitive communication messages to improve uptake of their services.

Posted by TSF at 9:04 AM



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