

BROOKE

Hello, welcome to the Humanities Research Center's meet VCU Authors podcast series. I'm your host, Brooke Newman, Associate Professor of History and Associate Director of the Humanities Research Center at Virginia Commonwealth University. Today I will be talking with Dr. Vivian Dzokoto, Associate Professor of African American Studies, about her new project *Once Upon a Shrine: Stories from an Unusual Field Site*. Dr. Dzokoto received her PhD in clinical and community psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and completed an APA accredited internship at the University of Michigan Counseling and Psychological Services. She is a licensed psychologist and health service provider in the state of North Carolina and was an assistant professor in psychology at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina for four years before joining the faculty at VCU. Welcome to the program Dr. Dzokoto.

VIVIAN

Thank you.

BROOKE

So why don't we start with having you tell us a little bit about yourself and your general area of expertise.

VIVIAN

A little bit about myself, I was, I'm originally from Ghana, I was born in Germany and came to the United States for graduate school, and then started working academia. I have been interested--I think partly influenced by the fact that

I made trans-continental transitions--I've always been interested in culture and how culture shapes the way people

behave, think, and feel.

BROOKE

So can you tell us some about your current research project? It sounds really fascinating.

VIVIAN

So the research project is part--It's an international study of which I am not the primary investigator, so I was just pulled into do rural field work in Ghana but it's part of a much larger project and compared to other research that I have done, which has taken me to generic places and some interesting places--so I have done things like paper and pencil studies which used to be the norm in psychology, but I've also done textual analysis, and gone to museums to do some museum studies of particular artifacts. I've done interviews in marketplaces and such, but I think of all the field studies I have been to and done research in this project ended up being the most interesting, and probably the most challenging because of what I was supposed to do, which was interview people about their spiritual experiences, and because that was the focus we tried to get people who had, would have a big contrast in spiritual experiences; so we interviewed a group of christians, charismatic christians and then

interviewed a group of traditional healers. So it was the traditional healer component that ended up being a very fascinating experience.

BROOKE

So how did you find the healers?

VIVIAN

Fortunately I did not have to do that, there were other people in the field and they did all of the leg work before I got there. Fortunately in contemporary Ghana the healers have formed regional associations, and so it was a matter of the researchers going to--well finding out where the meetings were held, finding the executives, talking to them, and asking for permission, and then locating them one by one; so by the time I got to the field all of that groundwork had already been done.

BROOKE

So what sort of questions did you ask the healers and the christians that you interviewed, and did you ask them different questions?

VIVIAN

No it was a structured interview, it was a very long interview, and we were pretty much interested in the same questions, but if, you know we would ask for follow up clarifications of people, to give examples of particular things, but the general format of questions the order of questions was pretty much the same because we were interested in particular aspects of their

spiritual experiences, things like how often they practiced specific aspects of their spiritual practice, and how it affected their everyday lives, and so the questions were pretty much the same for both groups.

BROOKE

So what did you learn from these interviews?

VIVIAN

We haven't finished analyzing the data yet.

It's a very huge data set because it's multiple countries. We are looking at within country experiences, and then also looking to explore things that remain the same across different cultures, and as well as things that vary across different cultures. Some things that we picked up during the interviews were very culturally specific, and so there were things like an express need for engaging in spiritual practice for the purpose of safety. So there was a general perception that the world that people lived in was very dangerous and so people used religion and immersion in religion and engagement with religion on a daily basis as a way to protect themselves from evil. This did not differ by religion so, whether people were traditionalists or whether they were charismatic christians that theme came up. I think that was one of the most striking things that we noticed, but there were lots of very interesting stories particularly with the traditionalists, because their pathways to becoming who they were--these were people, unlike the

christians who were active participants in their various churches, the traditional healers, they actually worked at the shrines. They ran the shrines, they managed the shrines, they communed with the gods, and so their involvement was very different from a Christian who was a member of a congregation who might volunteer to play a particular role in the church. Here they were not volunteering, they were actually sort of in charge of the shrine, and they had really interesting stories about how they ended up becoming in charge of the shrine. Most of the time it was an experience in their mid-to-late teens or early adulthood, where they would have a strange experience and it would be concluded that they were being called by the gods, and then they would have to do a multi-year apprenticeship before they actually became qualified if you will, to become--to be called a priest and set up their shrine and then begin providing services to their community.

BROOKE

That sounds so interesting. So did anyone give you an example of an experience they had where they thought they were being called by the gods?

VIVIAN

Actually each of them did. There were some which weren't that interesting, in that it was that they had a relative who used to be the shrine attendant, the person died, and

they sort of knew that they were the people who were supposed to take over, so there were those. But then there were very fascinating stories of people who didn't have relatives, or none of their immediate family were shrine attendants, who would experience sort of dissociative experiences if you will. So they would just start behaving strangely, and interestingly they found it very hard to describe those experiences. So they would just say things like "I don't want to talk about it, it was very strange, the gods were calling me, I was sort of out of it." It would be something like they were in school and then they would mysteriously find themselves somewhere else hours later. They lost awareness for specific periods of time when not in control of their behavior or their bodies for specific periods of time. These things would result in their families getting very concerned for them, and so they would be taken to, sometimes hospitals, sometimes prayer camps to figure out what was going on and for all of the people that I interviewed who became priests the diagnosis was that it was a god who was calling them.

BROOKE

So is this very different from the Christians you interviewed in terms of their spiritual backgrounds? Did they feel as though they had a calling, or was this an inherited belief system?

VIVIAN

That's hard to say, I mean Ghana where I did the field work is about 71% Christian. So Christianity as a tradition has been there for a long period of time, however there has recently been a transition from what in Ghana would be called orthodox churches, so Catholic church, Methodist church, Presbyterian, Anglican, to more interdenominational, charismatic types of churches. It's been very interesting looking at the movement of preferences for people who used to attend the more traditional ones and have slowly shifted to the newer ones. Part of that shift was a generational one, so you had more younger people finding the newer churches more attractive because their worship format was more lively, and I guess more contemporary. But as that generation has grown older, they have remained in there, so you have a little bit of an age difference between some of the traditional churches and then some of the charismatic ones. At the same time I think, in part to counter the differences in preferences, some of the orthodox churches have now adopted some of the worship practices of the charismatic churches. But there is that sort of tension between the two and migration of people. People generally do not feel called to belong to

one church or another as far as I know. People may feel called to start a church, but that's very different from feeling called to belong to church X or church Y.

BROOKE

So what drew you to this particular topic?

Did you go into the field research thinking it was important already, or did you come out afterwards thinking this is a really important research topic?

VIVIAN

Well, this is not a project that I'm in complete control of, I'm just doing a little piece of a larger project, and so I was initially interested simply because it was an opportunity to do field work in Ghana, that somebody was sponsoring, and it was something that hadn't been done before, it was related to the work that I did previously on emotions, because it tapped into people's internal experiences, and so there was certainly that interest, but as I started doing the field work I realized that it was interesting in its own merit, and also because I had never really looked at spirituality as a research question, I realized that was something really interesting to study, and I got to meet really really interesting people in the field, so that made it really awesome.

BROOKE

So could you give us the sense of a typical



day for you in the field, what that was like, and how many days you spent or weeks you spent interviewing people?

VIVIAN

Well I spent two months in the field, except one week where I was out because I got typhoid fever,

BROOKE

Oh wow

VIVIAN

But I spent two months in the field, I went into the field every single day because the interviews were long. I would work with between one to three people a day because they would get tired. So basically I would maybe do part of an interview with someone, and then do another part with somebody else, and then meet them the next day and follow up. But a typical day would start out usually at seven, I was collecting the data from multiple villages and so I was living about an hour from most of the research sites, and so the first part of the day would just be getting to the research site, and then starting the interview. I had already met all of the potential people, scheduling had been taken care of by research assistants, and so all I had to do was get there and do the interview basically. But because the interview was long, depending on how forthcoming the individual was, and also depending on the experiences, it could take anywhere between three hours to ten hours. The ten hour interview was not done

in a day, we split it up into two I think.

BROOKE

So the person who was willing to talk for two [ten?] hours, was that a traditional healer, or a Christian?

VIVIAN

I think both, I don't think that one group had more to say than another, because we were basically asking about the same experiences and people would generally elaborate on the experiences that they had, or just say no they didn't have the particular experiences that we were interested in.

BROOKE

So how many people all together did you interview over those two months?

VIVIAN

Forty

BROOKE

So that's a fairly significant sample size.

VIVIAN

Yeah, yep.

BROOKE

And is the project still ongoing?

VIVIAN

Yes the project is still ongoing because it had multiple phases. So the interview component was part of one phase, and there are questionnaire experiments and stuff like that in the second phase of the project. So

a lot of work is being done in the second phase, but the interviews are done and now being transcribed and analyzed, which is going to take a while.

BROOKE

So since this is going to take a while in terms of this project being released, what would you like to share that excited you the most about the project? What do you want people to know about it now while it's still in its early phase?

VIVIAN

So part of making sense of the data--So we're trying to make sense of the data within sites, but then we also need to make sense of the data between sites. For that reason it is very difficult at this stage to talk about what we found, because we're really trying to make sense of what the coherent story actually is. The most interesting parts of the field work for me are not the overall average story of "what can we learn from the research set as a whole?" I think for me, particularly doing the field work, the most fascinating experiences for me were the atypical ones that happened, so having unique stories. For example even though I said most of the stories were of people who were called by the gods when they were teens, there was one interviewee who was called by the gods when she was two weeks old, which was very unusual, but that was a fascinating story. I think the most interesting field experience had to do with one of my interviewees who got

possessed by the god in the middle of my interview. So basically the god came into the interview, and it was one of those things where, well first of all I wasn't really sure what was going on but then I realized what was going on, and my first thought was "do I turn the tape recorder off? Do I leave it on?" The IRB hasn't covered deities, it's human subject stuff, so what do you do when a god interrupts the interview? So I was just going through the interview, transitioning between two questions, and all of a sudden the priestess's demeanor just changed-- female voice, friendliest woman I had come across in the field turns into this, well not physically turns but her voice turns into this male, low, angry voice, you know like "why are you calling my name?" and you know a bunch of stuff, and it was then that we realized it was the god. So the priestess's assistant engaged with the god and explained what was going on, and then the god left, and then she came back to, and said "what happened?"

BROOKE

So what do you do as a researcher with those atypical cases? How do you fit them into the larger study? How do you quantify an atypical moment like that?

VIVIAN

Well you can't. You can use it as a face case right? This is clearly something that I did not anticipate going into the field you know. We were going to look at spiritual experiences and people talked about

the fact that they would get possessed, but it was very interesting to actually see a possession happen, one which was intrusive. And that really showed a little bit of what that experience for them was like--the priests and priestesses was like--because the gods would basically intrude on whatever they were doing, and take control of their bodies and do whatever they wanted right, which was usually to heal someone or do something like that, or perhaps in a festival or gathering of priests, the gods would possess them and then they would just dance, stuff like that. I think it was just so fascinating and striking to be in the room, and just see this happen un-cued, when we were asking people to talk about what happens when they get possessed, and then you actually see the possession. You can't quantify things like what it feels like to be in the room with somebody who just got possessed: the chill that runs down your spine, the thing about "well, should I turn the tape recorder off or leave it on? Oh my god what would the IRB say?" You know you can't quantify that. I think there are a bunch of nuggets in there that will provide very rich descriptive information, and those things can only come from interfacing with people, in the way that field work, you know, did. I do some archival stuff, I do some textual analysis, and with those you're engaging with things that happened a while ago, and you're being a detective, you're trying to unpack what the

story is. And that can be really awesome and fun, when you're like "oh! There's information about this thing, or there's information about that thing," but it's very different from you have the person in front of you, and you're giving them a voice, and they're willing to share their experiences with you, and then the god decides "let me join the party" you know?

BROOKE

That's definitely never happened to me at the archives.

[BOTH LAUGH]

VIVIAN

You never know there could be a ghost wandering around the archives or something, I don't know. And then of course there's the psychologist part of me who's like "is this really a possession? Is this the dissociative identity disorder?" And so having all these questions, and then trying to get the person's story to say, alright do they actually meet criteria for something that gives, you know, a scientific foundation for this particular experience? And so yeah I think I left the field with a lot of questions, I also got some answers, and I definitely left the field with a significant level of respect for the traditional healers whom I had never considered as being custodians of cultural information. But they certainly, definitely are. They taught me a lot, I learned a lot from them.

BROOKE

What is the role of traditional healers in contemporary Ghana?

VIVIAN

Traditional healers have spiritual and medical, I guess, roles in contemporary Ghana to an extent that I did not expect. Growing up in Ghana we kind of knew that the traditional healers existed, and that they were sort of out there, and they are portrayed in a particular, sort of caricature like way in traditional media, but it was very enlightening to be able to interact with a group of them over the summer and get an insight into what they did. The nice thing was that some of them would let me just hang, so I would basically eavesdrop on consultations that they would have, so people would come from very far, like halfway across the country to consult with them for--some of them were health needs, some of them were more, I would guess things that psychologists would call "problems of living." So let's say somebody in the family died, the grieving family is concerned and asking "well this death doesn't make any sense" and it would be the role of the traditional healer to give them a reason. And so the traditional healer would do some divination and come up with an answer of "here's why the person died." So they provide this role in terms of answering some of the questions of life that people may have. I observed a session where the priestess was doing an infertility treatment. But they

also actually serve as medical providers in their communities. It's important to realize that in the places where I did the field work, these are rural communities where some of them don't have hospitals. There is very limited healthcare. Some of the villages did have hospitals, but they're basically really tiny referral centers, and most of the serious cases would need to be referred anyway. And so having let's say three or five traditional healers in the community who knew herbal treatments, was one way in which some people were choosing to receive their healthcare. So you have particularly in low resource areas, traditional healers playing a very important role in providing healthcare to people. Critics would say "does it always work?" etc. But one could probably ask questions about the efficacy of biomedical treatment as well right? So you have two different models of treatment, but we can't say that each of them is 100% effective. So of course there are arguably some people who think all the traditional healers are quacks, but they do actually have a remarkable degree of herbal knowledge, and so they do give people remedies. The downside is that there now seems to be an increase in kidney problems in the country, and some people are pointing fingers to the herbal remedies that traditional healers are providing, so there are certainly some problems with using herbal remedies where you can't really regulate doses, because you don't know how



concentrated a particular chemical is in a particular tree bark, etc. etc. But that said, they do provide some degree of healthcare, some of them act as traditional birth attendants, and then they provide the spiritual component, and then sort of answers to daily life. In terms of the spiritual components I alluded to the protection piece right? So the traditional healers give amulets to people to protect them against a variety of different things. There are allegedly some clandestine people who have the power to actually kill other people, but none of my interviewees said that they did that, so I'm not so sure about that.

BROOKE

So due to their role as healers in these rural communities, do a lot of the traditional healers also see members of the Christian congregations?

VIVIAN

Nicodemusly, as in it would not be something that would be done in broad daylight. So they would basically, if a Christian decided to seek the services of a traditional healer, they would try and do it in such a way that no one in the community would know that they were doing that, because the belief systems on the part of Christian is conceived to be incompatible with the traditional healer. The main point being if you believe in God, God can answer your prayers, so you don't have to ask anybody else. The traditional healers on the other hand argue

that they provided--and they actually believe in God, but their perspective is that God sometimes answers too slowly, and so if you want a shortcut, then you come see them, but there might be consequences.

BROOKE

Who would a Christian go see in broad daylight, and not be ashamed?

VIVIAN

The pastor

BROOKE

For their medical care?

VIVIAN

Oh well, yeah they would probably see the pastor and then go to the hospital.

BROOKE

So what does the future hold for you? What projects do you have in mind next?

VIVIAN

Well right now I'm just trying to write up my current past projects, and we'll see what the future holds.

BROOKE

Great, well thank you for speaking with me today Dr. Dzokoto, and thank you for listening to the VCU Humanities Research Center's "Meet VCU Authors" podcast series. Join me next time for my discussion with Dr. Bernard Means, Instructor of Anthropology at VCU about his current project "On the Rooftop of the World: 3 Archeology, and Far North India."