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## Ghana: Dipo Ceremony

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Africa many cultures celebrate a child's Coming of Age. In the Krobo Hills of Ghana, young girls carry on a centuries-old tradition. Odumase is a Krobo village famous for its bead-making industry. Every year at springtime, eligible young maidens undergo a passage to womanhood. Also known as "outdooing", the Dipo Ceremony is in danger of becoming extinct. Historically the Dipo lasted up to two months, but the expense has made this an impossibility for most families. Over the past two decades it was reduced to two weeks and is now only five days.

Virginity is taken seriously, and with the invasion of cell phones, VCRs and motorcycles into isolated rural areas, more and more girls are exposed to outside influences. The Dipo symbolises a girl's eligibility for marriage, but today many parents fear the repercussions of embarrassment should it be discovered that their daughter is not pure.

The Dipo is no longer the exclusive realm of 14 to 18 year olds. Children as young as five are now routinely outdooed as a precaution that their virginity is still intact. The absence of chastity will surely be uncovered by fetish priests who preside over the ceremony-bringing shame on the family and requiring delinquent parents to pay large sums for additional rites of purification.

### Day 1

The Sonimouni-the girls are paraded in total nudity before the entire village. Various rituals are performed, including admonishments to always tell the truth. One by one, each girl is shown how to crush corn, symbolising her initiation into cooking and other womanly duties.

### Day 2

This is marked by Ke Pam Yami, when the girls are taken to a river and ritually bathed. In the afternoon each girl shares a traditional meal-Ho Fufui Yemi-with her family. Over the entire five days she may not eat corn or rice. She is forbidden to look into a mirror and cannot giggle or exhibit silly behaviour.

### Day 3

Bua Sia Mi-each girl is painted with clay marks and must tell a priestess all about her virginity. Should she lie, a clay pot placed upon the chest will break or explode, bringing shame upon the family. In the evening, she is led to a sacred stone-Tekuo Mi-and is thrice seated on it. She is now a woman and may not speak for the rest of the Dipo. A brother or the son of a neighbour will carry her back to the village on his back.

### Day 4

This is a solemn day-Blemi Ke Yi Fo Mi-where the girls gather to receive instruction from the fetish priest. He tells them they are now women and must act accordingly. They must honour their families and not bring shame on their parents.

### Day 5

Mahe Ya Mi-is a day of rejoicing. Each girl dons kente cloth or the richest cloth her family can afford. She will wear beads that have been passed down from many generations of grandmothers, symbolic of her family's wealth. Bead adornments may weigh up to 25 kilograms!

Finally all the girls assemble at the village common. As many as 60 maidens-many from nearby villages-sit in a perimeter and dance for their parents in small groups. Boys from the villages stand in the back, each carefully assessing which girl might become his future wife. It is a time of joy as mothers play gourd instruments and the young girls breathe a sigh of relief.

Each year it becomes more and more difficult for parents to outdoor their daughters. The expense can easily consume from 20% to 50% of a family's annual income. It is now more common for each Dipo ceremony to be hosted by only three or four of the bead-making villages, as it has become just too expensive for every village to do it. Even the girls from larger cities, miles away, travel to the rural areas for their "coming out".

Although few tourists ever come to witness the Dipo, those who do are welcomed with genuine hospitality. Perhaps the Dipo Ceremony will only survive through its formalisation as an eco-tourism event. Tourist dollars may be the salvation that preserves the continuity of a time-honoured tradition.

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Published in Travel Africa Edition Ten: Winter 1999/2000 Text is subject to Worldwide Copyright (c)