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# Onipa: The Human Being and the Being of Human Among the Akan people of West Africa. Towards an African Theological Anthropology.

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## Abstract

The concept of an existential numinous being, known in Akan terminology as *Onipa*, provides the basic framework upon which Akan socio-religious and political structure is constructed. *Onipa* is the Akan term for the human being. The Akan rationalistic conception that “all human beings are the children of God and none is a child of the earth” establishes three basic ontological realities for understanding Akan anthropology. First, the human being has a numinous substance (ontology) and not only natural. Second, the human being does not live in isolation but has a relational ontology. And third, the human being has a functional ontology according to the ways of God. This paper gives a considerable amount of space to discuss these aspects of the human being and how they form the basis for the development of Akan theological anthropology.

**Keywords:** Akan anthropology, theological anthropology, human being, *onipa*.

## Introduction

The proposal towards the development of Akan theological anthropology forms part of the theological quest into the Akan socio-religious conceptual narratives. In this paper, I intend to formulate a theological anthropology from the religious elements of the Akan people. This formulation takes a step towards a theological framework for the practice of faith, theology, and appreciation of Akan religion.

Akan is an ethnic group comprising of several different tribes whose current settlements are in the tropical areas of Ghana and the south-east of Cote d'Ivoire.<sup>1</sup> In both Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, the Akan constitute the majority with an average population of more than twenty million citizens.<sup>2</sup> Each Akan belongs to a consanguineal group called "abusua".<sup>3</sup> An abusua is a unit of persons who trace their ancestry to a common ancestress called Aberewa (old lady). It is the *abusua* that imposes upon the individual identity of Akan citizenship.<sup>4</sup> The Akan, like many world societies, esteem their religious traditions and are notable of their proud celebration of festivals, arts and music, and diverse religious activities. The continual social dynamism, as a result of Westernization, has not caused Akan traditions to dwindle; they thrive along with the global dynamics.

The Akan conception of the human being, personhood, and community is a social ontology. The social structure begins with the con-

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<sup>1</sup>There are also few Akan found in Togo per the accounts of Louise Muller, "Ghanaian Films and Chiefs as Indicators of Religious Change among the Akan in Kumasi and Its Migrants in Southeast Amsterdam", in Robert W Hefner, John Hutchinson, Sara Mels, Christiane Timmerman (eds), *Religions in Movement: The Local and the Global in Contemporary Faith Traditions*. New York: Routledge, 2013, 246.

<sup>2</sup>Some prominent Akan figures in modern history include Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), the first Prime Minister of Ghana and father of African Nationalism; Kofi Annan (1938-2018), the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations between January 1997 and December 2006; and Nana Addo Danquah Akuffo-Addo (1944- present), the current president of the Republic of Ghana since 2016.

<sup>3</sup>Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience Among the Akan." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 1, March 2008, 57.

<sup>4</sup>Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Religion Defined: A Systematic Study of Ancestor Worship Among the Akan*. Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 2010, 12, 30-32. There are eight major abusua among the Akan with each being represented by a totemic animal, namely, Aduana (Dog), Agona (Parrot), Asona (Crow), Ekoona (Buffalo), Asakyiri (Vulture), Asene (Bat), Biretuo (Leopard), and Oyoko (Hawk).

cept of the human being known in Akan terminology as *onipa* (*nipa* is singular, and *nnipa* is plural). *Onipa* is the generic Akan term for the human being. Gyekye and Wiredu have identified the word as ambiguous because it expresses both the concept of the human as a “being” and the idea of a person as a degree of quality.<sup>5</sup> We can express these in the categories of descriptive and normative judgments. By descriptive judgment, *onipa* refers to the distinct features of a person called “human being” as opposed to an animal or a ‘thing’.<sup>6</sup> Phrases in the Akan language such as “*ɔye nipa*”, meaning, “she is a human being,” and “*ɔnnye nipa*”, meaning “she is not a human being,” distinguish the human being from what is not human.

The second category presents the human being as a “person”, the criterion for moral judgment. Normative judgments like “*ɔye nipa*” (she is a person), suggest the individual represents commendable social norms and standards such as kindness, generosity, and sympathy.<sup>7</sup> The opposite, “*ɔnnye nipa*” (she is inhuman), denotes the individual falls short of socially commendable norms and standards. It may suggest the person is unkind, corrupt, unloving, unfaithful, etc. These expressions of the human being provide the basic framework to construe Akan socio-religious and political structures.

This paper gives a considerable amount of space to discuss these aspects of the human being and how they form the basis for the development of Akan theological anthropology. The Akan social ontology reveals a unitary relationship between society and God. Therefore, our study will show how Akan theological anthropology is symmetrical to Akan religion.

### Akan pre-Christian Religion

A unique characteristic of the Akan group is the practice of religion. John Pobee notes that religion is all-pervasive in Akan societies, and a lot of communal activities are tightly knit together with it.<sup>8</sup> In Akan

<sup>5</sup>Kwasi Wiredu, and Kwame Gyekye, *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I*. Washington, D.C: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992.

<sup>6</sup>Kwame Gyekye, "African Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/african-ethics/>>.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979, 44.

religion, the worldview is structured in a hierarchy, from the highest to the lowest. We find in the hierarchy (in order of the highest), God, the pantheon of gods, ancestors, various spirits, and finally human beings. These are given details below.

Akan spirituality is deeply rooted in the belief of a unique God called Nyankopɔn,<sup>9</sup> a suprasensible deity transcending all in His absolute reality. The derivation of the name from Nyame (God) kro (Only), pɔn (Great or Supreme), thus “The Only Supreme God,” asserts the supreme importance attached to this God. The Akan attach anthropomorphic characteristics to him such as Nana Nyankopɔn (The Great Eminent God/ The Great Ancestral Spirit), and Tetekwafra moa Nyankopɔn (The Most Ancient of Days God). Others include ɔboadeɛ Nyankopɔn (God the Creator), Totorobonsu Nyankopɔn (The Maker and Giver of rain), and Nyankopɔn Kwame Twiaduampɔn (The Great dependable God of Saturday, in other words, He whose day of birth or worship is Saturday). He is the only Creator, “the sustainer of the universe, the final authority and Overlord of society who has power of life and death.”<sup>10</sup> God is a part of the cognitive development of the Akan. The Akan maxim supports this fact: “Obi nkyere abɔfra Nyame”, literally, “No one teaches a child to know God.” God is self-evident and self-

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<sup>9</sup>The origin of the name Nyankopɔn remains obscure and the meaning remains controversial as well. Ephirim Donkor’s discussion with Rattray, Danquah and Ellis, postulates the name to mean the Lord of the Sky, Ultimate Friend and Blazing One. Ephirim Donkor rejects the latter. Etymologically, it is quite unfortunate the oral tradition fails to offer clues. However, the various arguments seem to support that Nyankopɔn means “The One Supreme Sky God”. “Nyanko” is often associated with the sky. There are few Akan terms which denote this conception. For example: Nyankontɔn (rainbow) literally “Arc of the sky” or as it is in French “Arc-en-ciel”. The term Nyankomade is used to describe a miraculous or magical act. Nyankoyerɛ means mysterious revelation. Again, Nyankonsuo (rain water) literally “Water from the sky”. The Akan understanding of the sky, in this sense, transcends beyond the elements of the sky (sun, moon and stars). There is little iconoclastic evidence of such veneration in Akan land. To the Akan, the “Sky God” lives beyond. Nyankopɔn often comes with other appellations such as “Nana- Nyankopɔn” (The Great Eminent God), “ɔboadeɛ Nyankopɔn” (God the Creator). Nyame or Nyankopɔn or Onyankopɔn express the same idea of the unique God. The spellings may differ in this article depending on the orthograph of the various authors. This also follows for other names like Kwame and Kwaame, etc. See Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Religion Defined Book Cover African Religion Defined: A Systematic Study of Ancestor Worship Among the Akan*, Second Edition. Lanham: University Press of America (Rowman Littlefield Group), 2013, 38-40.

<sup>10</sup>John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 46.

announced in the Akan epistemological experience.<sup>11</sup> These honorific attributes of God make the Akan come to discover the value of independent awareness or discovery of God and how the depths of those revelations inspire their communal spirituality.<sup>12</sup>

The second and third aspect of the spirit-world of the Akan is the Abosom (lesser deities) and Nananom or Mpayinfo (ancestors). The Akan esteem God as a potentate who may, therefore, not be approached lightly or bothered with the trivial affairs of human beings. Consequently, God the Supreme Being has delegated authority to the Abosom (gods) and to the Mpayinfo (ancestors), who, therefore, act “in loco Dei” (in the place of god) and “pro Deo” (for God).<sup>13</sup> The pantheon deities are localized and geographically protective deities who identify themselves with a group of people in a given place. These entities manifest their presence in natural objects such as stones, mountains, trees, and rivers, which serve as their residence.<sup>14</sup> The ancestors are deceased family members who are apotheosized. They are benevolent spirits who can help the living because they were once living and therefore can relate to the plight of the living. The concept of ancestors further expresses solidarity and communality since Akan community involves the living and the dead.

Apart from the supernatural deities and the benevolent spirits, are the evil spirits. In Akan mythology, Sasabonsam<sup>15</sup> (forest monster) is known to be the prince of evil powers, the master of evil acts.<sup>16</sup> Sasabonsam works in tandem with other cohorts like witches and evil dwarfs (Mmoatia) who come under his command. The dwarfs possess magical powers and can lead one astray into the forest. Legend says they possess the secrets of healing and can train a person to become a magician.<sup>17</sup> The witches and wizards are responsible for particular human sufferings such as illness, accidents, bareness, and all other suspicious ailments and misfortunes that are beyond scientific explication.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>12</sup>Joseph Boakye Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*. London: Cass, 1968, 1.

<sup>13</sup>John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 46.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>15</sup>For more about Sasabonsam, refer to Theresa Bane, *Encyclopedia of Demons in World Religions and Cultures*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland Co, 2012, 281.

<sup>16</sup>John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 48.

<sup>17</sup>Joanne M. Greer and David O. Moberg (Eds), *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion: Vol. 9*. Stamford, Conn.: London: JAI, 1999, 195.

These evil spirits give reason to why Akan people rely largely on benevolent spirits for protection, which is the expression of their religious faithfulness.

The last aspect of the hierarchy is the anthropological dimension. This aspect of the Akan worldview defines the human being as the subject of experience.

### **Onipa: The subject of experience in Akan Anthropology**

Broadly, the Akan do not define a human being with physical components such as flesh and blood. The Akan indigenes perceive a human being as possessing immaterial,<sup>18</sup> material, and social elements. These are *okra* (aw-krah')<sup>19</sup> "life-force," *mogyā* (mo-ja) "blood," *ntorɔ* (n-to-ro) "fatherhood," *nipadua* (ni-pa-du-a) "body," and *sunsum* (sun-sum) "spirit." *Okra* and *sunsum* are immaterial whereas *ntorɔ* and *mogyā* are biogenetics responsible for the social affiliations of the child. The *nipadua* is only a physical material and the subject of perceptible experience of the whole person. These are the basic substances of the human being.

*okra* and *sunsum* are immaterial in the sense that their origin comes both/either directly or indirectly from God.<sup>20</sup> The *okra* is the life principle, "the innermost self, the essence, of the individual person", "the embodiment and transmitter of the individual's destiny (fate: *nkrabea*)", "a spark of the Supreme Being", "the divine essence" and "having an antemundane existence" with God. A separation of the *kra* and the body is death. The *sunsum*, on the other hand, is a volatile substance, or dynamic spiritual element, an "activating principle" of all-natural objects.<sup>21</sup> It is believed to be the operational force for human morality and that which is responsible for *suban* (character), genius, temper, and quality.<sup>22</sup> Akan people believe individuals receive their *sunsum* from the father.

Besides the spiritual essences of the person, the Akan believe the

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<sup>18</sup>The term immaterial is used in this sense to denote nonphysical and nonperceivable objects.

<sup>19</sup>It is often shortened as '*kra*.'

<sup>20</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 85.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 73, 75, 88, 98.

<sup>22</sup>Asante K. Molefi, and Abu S. Abarray, *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996, 453.

human being is composed of social biogenetics. This biogenetics is the basis for the social experience of the individual. They are ntorɔ (fatherhood), mogya (blood), abusua (clan) and nipadua or honam (body). The ntorɔ and mogya are biogenetics that gives social affiliation to the Akan child. These genetic components are emitted during sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. The mogya is understood to come from the mother and the ntorɔ, which is understood as the semen, from the father.<sup>23</sup> The ntorɔ is a biological input believed to be a tutelary spirit from a river god.<sup>24</sup> Akan do recognize twelve river gods responsible for the transmission of the ntorɔ.<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting the fact that the ntorɔ is a proto-psychological character from the father or members of the patrilineage.<sup>26</sup> The ntorɔ does not give a physical resemblance to the child.<sup>27</sup> It is only “responsible for the degree of personal presence that each individual develops at the appropriate stage.”<sup>28</sup> Akan thinkers also believe that the biological input from the father is responsible for the formation of the child’s “degree of charisma.”<sup>29</sup> The mogya on the other hand “represents a physiological bond to one’s mother and an independent membership into her clan (abusua), or maternal lineage.”<sup>30</sup> The Akan matrilineal system is based upon the mogya that legitimate a person’s citizenship in Akan society as well as one’s ancestry in the postmortem life.

The nipadua is only a physical material and the subject of perceptible experience of the whole person. We can say it is the part of the

<sup>23</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 94.

<sup>24</sup>A. C. Denteh, “Ntorɔ and Nton”. *I.A.S. Research Review*, vol. 3 no. 3, 1967, 91-92.

<sup>25</sup>These are : 1) Bosompra (Tough/Strong/Firm), 2) Bosomtwe (Human/Kind/Empathetic), 3) Bosompo/Bosomnkôteaa (Proud/Audacious), 4) Bosomafram (Liberal/Kind/Empathetic), 5) Bosommuru (Respectable/ Distinguished), 6) Bosomkonsi (The Virtuous), 7) Bosomdwerɔbe (Eccentric/Jittery), 8) Bosomayensu (Truculent), 9) Bosomsika (Fastidious), 10) Bosomkrete (Chivalrous), 11) Bosomakim (Fanatic), 12) Bosomafi (Chaste). See Denteh 1967: 96.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>27</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 226.

<sup>28</sup>Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I*. Washington, D.C: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992, 196, 197. [Italics are mine]

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>30</sup>Helen A. Neville, Brendesha M. Tynes, and Shawn O. Utsey (Eds), *Handbook of African American Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, 2009, 51.

person that can be felt by physical touch. The nipadua has many biological elements such as cells, tissues, muscles, and organs. Again, it contains some other vital components such as akoma (heart), amene (brain), and mogya (blood). In other words, the nipadua is the house for all the biological components of the human being. The formation of the nipadua begins from the womb when the immaterial and the biogenetics combine to form a fetus. It is the nipadua that suffers death and corruption.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Social Experience of the Human Being**

Another aspect of the Akan' concept of personhood is the social experience. According to Akan, the unborn child is already a member of the social groups.<sup>32</sup> Each Akan child is born with an affiliation to a social unit already mentioned as abusua (clan/extended family). This is the social unit where the child shares strong ties of kinship to affirm the Akan worldview of the individual as a social being. As Pobee pointed it out, the Akan child's existentiality is based on the blood relation.<sup>33</sup> The mogya from the mother establish the physiological bond to the matrilineal family system (abusua).<sup>34</sup> The matrilineal system claims the child as belonging to the mother's bloodline, and they offer support and protection. This social theory confers on the child the power to inheritance such as in the kingship. The child's right to ancestry is established in the extended family of the maternal lineage.

Akan children also have a paternal group relationship<sup>35</sup>. The father's ntoro is believed to be a transfer of the father's lineage charisma to the child, which gives the child the right of affiliation to the father's clan. As Wiredu noted, "[t]he biological input from the father is responsible for the degree of personal presence that each individual develops at the appropriate stage."<sup>36</sup> Each Akan child bears this spiritual image of the father, often referred to as charisma. This affinity does not make the child a member of the father's clan. However, the child is greatly

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<sup>31</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 88.

<sup>32</sup>John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 49.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>34</sup>Helen A. Neville, Brendesha M. Tynes, and Shawn O. Utsey (Eds), *Handbook of African American Psychology*, 51.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>36</sup>Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye. *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I*, 196, 197.



esteemed as near kin because of the common blood ties. This affiliation is “the framework of a lot of goodwill” such as economic protection after the death of the father from his brothers and sisters<sup>37</sup>. The Akan proverb, *Agya bi wu a, agya bi te ase*, literally, “When a father dies, another father lives,” captures the *ntorɔ* social affiliation of the child to the brothers of the father, or in a larger sense, fatherhood extends beyond one’s biological father. This notion provides the understanding of why the Akan child addresses the brothers of the father with the title “father.” The *ntorɔ* social affiliation makes each Akan child bear the surname of the father as a symbol of paternal identity and authority of the father over the child.

Given the above analysis, a person is social in the sense that the social fiber of the community confers a social identity on the child. The expression of the individual’s existence stems from the social system and construction. Gyekye rightly pointed it out that “If one is by nature a social being, and not merely an atomized entity, then the development of one’s full personality and identity can best be achieved only within a communal social system.”<sup>38</sup> Such a social framework of the Akan existentiality promotes a community in communion with each other. A person’s individuality becomes a means of achieving social ideals. This background leads to the discussion of the individual’s functionality in the broader community.

### Akan Social Setup

The community exists to achieve a common goal. The Akan worldview of community is the participation of each person. Gyekye has seen this as “amphibious,” that is to say the social composition is characterized by “both communality and individuality” rather than being strictly communalism.<sup>39</sup> The vital element towards achieving an ideal societal system is by the collective participation of each individual. Hence, both the community and the individual share a common level of mutuality. So, in this conception, individualism is a negation in the Akan sociology. Gyekye thus writes: “The reasons for this statement are that the communal social order is participatory, and that it is characterized by such social and ethical values as social well-being, solidarity, interde-

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 197.

<sup>38</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 161.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 154.

pendence, cooperation, and reciprocal obligation – all of which conduce to equitable distribution of the resources and benefits of the society.”<sup>40</sup> The social network confers worthiness on the individual, “making it almost impossible for an individual to feel socially insignificant.”<sup>41</sup>

The social scheme forms the bedrock for each individual to realize certain goals in life. And by virtue of the communal cooperation, the community supports, encourages and inspires worthy cause of individuals. Since one’s socio-economic welfare contributes to the larger good of the community, the concept of pushing individuals to reach higher standards is essential. Many phrases and proverbs encourage this. One phrase is *sɔ n’asene*, literally meaning, “To hold the waist of someone,” thus, giving an idea of pushing or holding someone firmly. There is also the proverb, “*Se wo foro dua pa a na yepia wo*”, literally, “It is when you climb a good tree that we push you.” Implicitly, the society is apt to support any worthy cause of its individuals, and the individual is assured of receiving the necessary support.

Because of the strong ties in human relations among the Akan, any attempt to fall away from the social network has grave consequences on the social welfare of the individual and is a threat to the social fraternity of the community. Since the Akan existentiality is social, and personhood is defined in that sense, an individual’s security is measured by the individual’s level of intimacy within the social network. Hence, individualism (unlike individuality) and egocentrism are classified as an immoral state of being.<sup>42</sup> The Akan expresses this state of being in the following phrases, “*ɔmp nipa*” (He dislikes people) or “*ɔy pɛɛ-menko-nya*”, (He is selfish). Other proverbs capture the same idea, *Nipa nua ne nipa*, literally, “A human being is a human being’s neighbor,” and “*Onipa hia mmoa*”, meaning, “A human being needs help.” The mutual solidarity is quite imperative as Akan see it as a natural ontology.

### **Morality and Virtues**

The communal solidarity becomes a catalyst for all morality. Since a community is a cluster of individuals, moral stability depends on the level of an individual’s ethical standards. A person’s morality finds

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 157.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Kwame Gyekye. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Philadelphia, PA: Sankofa Pub. Co, 1996, 58-62.

expression in character. Akan may define the character (suban) as the nature of a person's sunsum as discussed above. A person's character defines one's personality. Hence, moral virtues underline almost all of the Akan' pedagogy in the proverbs and folklore. Moral virtues form a greater portion of the telos of the larger Akan epistemology. Every Akan child is therefore inculcated with principles of faithfulness, probity, responsibility, justice, honesty, moderation, patience, generosity, kindness, respect for human life, respect for aged persons, faithfulness in marriage, submissiveness, humility, hospitality, and so on.<sup>43</sup> These moral values are spoken off and promoted because of their social effects and lasting consequences on one's family identity.

A person's moral aptitude is pervasive in the sense that Akan people relate character to posterity. There is the Akan proverb that says, "Sε wo rekɔ awadεε a bisa" (Make inquiries before you marry). This proverb points out to the priority of the worthiness of the suitor and the bride-to-be, and how the two lineage groups are satisfied with the marriage.<sup>44</sup> There is a strong belief among the Akan that a person's character can have effects on the progeny. We know this because of the proverbs "ɔkɔtɔ nwo anoma" (A crab does not give birth to a bird) and "Sedεε sekan tεε no, saa ara na bɔha tεε", (Like the cutlass, like the knife). These expressions are similar to the English maxim, "Like father, like son." Hence, Akan people are sensitive to the moral goodwill of the particular family from which their children seek to affiliate in conjugality. This and many other social structures put a responsibility on the individual to fulfill and promote the required communal ideals.

<sup>43</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, 58.

<sup>44</sup>It has been recognized among Akan—and many other African societies—that marriage is not only a union between the individuals willing to be joined together. The marriage ceremony is also a union of the two clans who are giving their "royal" children to the marriage. Gyekye writes: "A marriage might seem to be between two families. The man and the woman are both warned straightaway that they are not being married to an individual but to a family. In many societies in Africa, then, marriage is said to be a union of families rather than of just two individuals" (Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, 78-79). This union is also witnessed by the ancestors of the two clans uniting in this respect, as they are invoked as witnesses and guardians of the marital posterity by the pouring of libation. The union also has a lasting effect on the yet-to-be-born Akan child in both clans as now their children would have their social group membership in both clans. The child will belong to the abusua of the mother, and will share in the father's ntorɔ. This communal ethos characterize marriage with the most importance and sacred ceremony.

## Justice and Equity

Community development lends itself on social norms and laws. Though they may form part of the fabrics of society, they need to be protected and promoted. The Akan political theory of communal rulership aims at achieving these ends. This in its totality is enshrined in the chieftaincy (*ahenesem*).<sup>45</sup>

Traditional Akan politics is enshrined in the kingship or chieftaincy. Kings and queens rule Akan communities. The role the king plays is among other things a sacred role as he maintains the religion and social order of the community.<sup>46</sup> The queen mother represents the traditional feminist's voice. It is part of her duties to protect and ensure women's equity and justice.

When a king swears to the throne, it is part of his duties to promote the security of the entire community. These require strict enforcement of the laws and customs of the society. Since the chief is to enforce these values and to promote them, every Akan chief, before the ascension to the throne, is vilified of his level of integrity.<sup>47</sup> A chief's integrity is indispensable from his governmental jurisdictions. The king must lead the way to ensure peace, justice, and equity in the community. Because the king's role provides the maintenance of both the religious and social system, he becomes accountable to both God and the people he serves.

## Evil

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<sup>45</sup>The English translation "kingship" and "chieftaincy" for *ahenesem* is quite masculine. In the Akan language *ahenesem* has to do with both the "*ɔhene*" (chief) and "*ɔhenemaa*", literally, "*ɔhene maame*" (the mother of the chief). Contrary to other cultures, the queen mother, among Akan, is not the wife of the chief.

<sup>46</sup>John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 44-45. Religion and politics in the Akan ethnic group are indispensable. The chief who is the political leader also represents the people in their religious experience and maintenance in various intricate ceremonies such as festivals, pouring of libation and various pacifications. The stool (reserved stools from previous chiefs venerated as pioneer ancestors) upon which the chief is enthroned and crowned is considered to contain ancestral spirits who are venerated as living spirits. It is also important to remark that most of the relics around the chief are considered to be containing *sunsum* (*tumi*/power). So, the office of the chief is both political and sacerdotal. For more information on Akan' chieftaincy, refer to: Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Philadelphia, PA: Sankofa Pub. Co, 1996, 109-121, and Louise Muller, *Religion and Chieftaincy in Ghana: An Explanation of the Persistence of a Traditional Political Institution in West Africa*. Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2013.

<sup>47</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, 113.

The Akan worldview of evil is cosmic, and its effects can affect natural objects. One aspect of Akan' universalism is the presence of evil in the world. The Akan metaphor, "Wiase yɛ sum", meaning, "the world is full of darkness" or literally, "The world is mystic," points to the fact that evil is an integral aspect of the world. Another proverb says, "Suro nipa na gyae 'saman" literally, "Fear a human being than a ghost" also, explains why the human being can be wicked or how the human person can be an instrument for wicked courses.<sup>48</sup> But who is responsible for evil and from where did it come?

The two primary sources of evil identified by Gyekye are first, the lesser deities, which are held to be either good or bad, and the second is the human freewill which makes individuals and communities architects of their moral standards<sup>49</sup>. God is never the source of evil and evil is not associated with him<sup>50</sup>.

The lesser deities, or the lesser spirits, according to Gyekye, "are held either to be good and evil or to have powers of good and evil."<sup>51</sup> Such potency to cause evil stems from their very nature that is partly evil.<sup>52</sup> These lesser deities have the power to cause sickness, natural disasters, disobedience in people, and even to facilitate a person's death if the individual's sunsum is not strong. Gyekye notes that "though the

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<sup>48</sup>The origin of their evil nature is unknown by Akan. The most possible reason may be attributed to Akan' understanding of the essence of evil as a phenomenon that corrupts one's thoughts and communal health. It is the moral act that is judged mostly as either wanted or unwanted, or whether it promotes comfort or discomfort. The ontology of these evils is quite complicated to ascertain. But Akan have a clear knowledge about the evil nature of these entities.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 12. Gyekye names lesser spirits, supernatural forces such as magical powers (probably dwarfs) and witches as part of the deities. To classify these entities under deities is questionable in so many respects according to the Akan religion. The deities as understood by Akan comprise of *Onyame* or *Onyankopon* and the lesser gods. These entities protect human beings and seek to promote humanity's well-being. Even though the lesser deities can trigger calamities on humanity, these are retributive justice meant to course a communal repentance after the gods have been desecrated (*efi*) by human evil deeds. Aside God and the *Abosom* (gods), all other supernatural forces or dwarfs or witches are not considered as deities among the Akan.

<sup>50</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 9, 12. Akan also consider God as just. God's justice is captioned in proverbs such as *Aboa onni dua no Onyame na ne ho*, literally, "God helps to drive away flies from the animal without a tale", and "*Onni bi agya ne Nyame*," literally, "God fathers the needy." Thus, God's distributive justice is fundamentally part of His nature.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

deities were created by God, they are believed to operate independently of God and in accordance with their own wills: they can, and do, use their independent wills to pursue evil."<sup>53</sup>

The second source of evil, which is the freewill, is considered to stem "from human character, conscience, thoughts and desires."<sup>54</sup> The freewill makes human beings to be architects of their moral standards. A person has the capability to choose to practice what is good as well as evil. However, since the practice of evil is an unacceptable norm, the freewill becomes a means by which persons exercise it for the good of one's self, and in harmony with the society.

The next to mention under evil is atonement among the Akan religion. How do Akan make peace and reconciliation with the gods after desecrating the gods? The concept of making peace and reconciliation with the gods is central in the African Traditional Religion. Among the Akan, it is called "afodeɛ", literally, "guilt offering." The word stems from two Akan compound words namely "efo", meaning "guilt" and "adeɛ", meaning "thing." Therefore, afodeɛ is what is offered after being found guilty by the gods. Magesa has noted that "[t]he fundamental meaning of sacrifices and offerings lies in their efficacy to restore wholeness. If wrong-doing causes a dangerous separation of the various elements of the universe, sacrifices and offerings aim to reestablish unity and restore balance."<sup>55</sup> The sacrifices can be personal or collective. Akan see this expiation as "mmusu yi", or, "removal of blasphemy." The slaughtering of a ram or presentation of certain foods or items as prescribed by the traditional priest is necessary to appease the gods.

### **Destiny (Nkrabea)**

The Akan believe that each person is born with a destiny to fulfill. This destiny was fixed before the individual's entrance into the world. The concept is fashioned in the Akan word nkrabea, which means destiny. Nkra means "message" and bea means "manner" that is, to bid farewell or take leave.<sup>56</sup> It is the okra, which is the bearer of a per-

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. Orbis, Maryknoll 1997, 203.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 104, 112.

son's destiny.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Akan metaphysics postulate the fact that the *okra* had preexistence with God. In other words, it is deathless. The notion will, therefore, be understood as the manner that one receives his fate from God. This interpretation leads Gyekye to affirm the general understanding of *nkrabea* as "manner of," indicating the way an individual's temporality is fixed in the world. Gyekye translates *nkra* as "message" and *bea* as "manner" after critical semantic analysis of the word *bea*. Gyekye's interpretation is based on the fact that the *okra* receives its message from God who will determine the totality of the various temporal events and occurrences in the course of the person's whole life on earth.<sup>58</sup>

### Death and Reincarnation

Whereas science may be limited by what happens in the death of an individual, the Akan' traditional thanatology provides answers to some difficult questions often asked about what happens in and after death. Akan people accept death as part of life. Such an idea is found in the Akan proverbs "Owuo atwedee *ɔ*baako nfor<sup>ɔ</sup>," (One person does not climb death's ladder) and "Owuo da amansan *kɔn* mu," (Death is everyone's yoke) These bring to mind the idea of death as a movement from one point to the other, and as a natural condition. To the Akan, death is ontologically a separation. It is the separation of the *okra* and the *nipadua* that results in death.<sup>59</sup> Because the life of the individual has both material and immaterial dimensions, life and death are determined by the unity or disembodiment of these elements. For example, Gyekye noted that the body (*nipadua*) suffers death while the *okra* survives it.<sup>60</sup> The destruction of the body leads to the separation of the person from the living. This separation seems to be only the physical disappearance of the individual since the dead lives always with the living according to Akan tradition. The *okra*, travels to *Asamando* (the spirit world of the dead) as an apotheosized being called ancestor. In rare cases where the individual's destiny was altered by evil spirits or accidents, the *okra* returns to life to fulfill its divine destiny.<sup>61</sup> The Akan

<sup>57</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 85.

<sup>58</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 104, 112.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 88, 98.

<sup>61</sup>Charles S. Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology: An Analysis of the Christologies of*

understanding of death makes life both cyclical and linear based on the circumstance of death and dying.

### **Towards Akan Contextual Theological Anthropology**

The information provided by the Akan traditional religion about God and human beings has been the subject for the formulation of Akan theological anthropology. The Akan anthropology has a theistic connection that brings the immanence of the transcendent God into the history of human beings. The 'kra of God in the human being translates human experiences into relationships and functionality according to the way that God exists. All these find expressions on the following aspects:

#### *Substance (Ontology)*

Having discussed the various rudimentary elements in Akan anthropology, it should be clear at this point that the conceptual thought of the Akan on human beings as children of God is inherently a designation of human beings as containing the image of God as a child bears the image of his father. Even though the term 'image of God' (*imago Dei*) does not appear in the Akan traditional experience, the Akan people saw this interconnectivity between human beings and God, and all other things, as the work of the 'kra, which is the divine vital force residing in each human being. The meaning of this conception is not an abstract but the very definition of the human being and the being of human among the Akan. In such definitions, one comes to understand the fundamental conception of the Akan theological anthropology as, first, having a *substance*. The 'kra is the divine element that unites human beings to God, and as a bearer of destiny, it transposes itself in various dynamic activities for the wellbeing of human beings. Other elements like the *sunsum* and *ntoro* are responsible for personality formation and instrumental in the social experience.

#### *Relational Ontology*

In the social experience, Wiredu noted that "a person is social not only because he or she lives in a community, which is the only context in which full development, or indeed any sort of human development

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*John Samuel Pobee and Kwame Bediako in Conversation with the Theology of Karl Barth.* Eugene, Or: Pickwick Publications, 2013, 44, 45.



is possible, but also because, by his original constitution, a human being is part of a social whole."<sup>62</sup> Humanity has an ontological relationship with God, which is rather an *ontological filiation* where God becomes the Ancestor, and humanity His progeny. However, to the Akan, there is a more social significance of such a conception than just relational ontology to God. Personhood is "being" in a relationship. It is a social experience with the community because all human beings are children of God. The Akan concepts of the *ntorɔ* and *mogya* explain this concept of relationality in the human experience. Thus, the interpersonal relationship of the individual within the social setup can be viewed as a *relational ontology*.

#### *Functionality Ontology*

Are human beings capable of functioning according to the ways of God? Yes, the human being is created to function according to the way God exists. The social identity makes the human being participative in the promotion of the wellbeing and wealth of society. The social ontology demands the contribution of the individual. In a continent that continues to suffer many socio-economic, religious and political challenges, it calls for the combined efforts of its citizens to address these challenges by exploring how the various institutions can affect the progress of the community through the promotion of human rights, human progress, and free access to government and information. The functional ontology calls for a confrontation of injustice, despotism, corruption, and leadership incompetence. A theological anthropology in this respect should be seen as a liberation theology that seeks to bring out the "Godliness" in humanity.

#### **Conclusion**

African theological anthropology is not an attempt to import God into the experience of Africans as some have already thought. The revelation of God has been an integral part of the life and experience of indigenous Africans. God is self-evident, Creator, and sustainer of life. Many of the Akan festivities, arts and music are theophoric. The human experience in itself is both divine and anthropological. This is precisely what the Akan people of West Africa, for centuries, have perceived the

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<sup>62</sup>Kwasi Wiredu, "The Moral Foundations of an African Culture". In: *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies*, vol. 1. Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992, 196.

existence of God. Akan theological anthropology is a quest to recast the Akan traditional theology. To this end, Akan theological anthropology must see history as God's, who creates human beings by a spark of himself called 'kra. Hence, the Akan rationalistic conception that "All human beings are the children of God and none is a child of the earth." Through this statement, one can assess the ontological realities that underline Akan anthropology. First, the human being has a numinous substance (ontology) and not only natural. Second, the human being does not live in isolation but has a relational ontology. And third, the human being has a functional ontology to live according to the ways of God. I, therefore, deem it appropriate and fundamental that the Akan theological anthropology should be communicated on the premise of these three ontological dimensions.

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