

The Akan View of The Composition of the Human Being and the Concept of *Saman* in their Religious Cosmology: Its Implications for the Christian Concept of Life After Death and Christian Mission

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Abstract

The Akan of Ghana believe that human beings are composed of tangible and intangible materials. They also believe that there is life after death and that, when a human being dies, there is a part of him/her which continues to live. This part may become an intermediary between living human beings and the Supreme Being or may just exist as a spirit. This paper is about what the Akan believe as the components of the human being, which component or components continue to live and, thus, become the *saman* some of which may become the ancestor and what the implications of the Akan understanding of life after death are for the Christian concept of the same. It also examines the implications of all these for Christian mission. It concludes that, for the Akan, the components of the human being are *nipadua*, *ôkra*, *sunsum* and *mogya*. *Nipadua* is the tangible or material part of the human being, while *ôkra*, *sunsum* and *mogya* are intangible. It also concludes that the component which becomes the *saman* is the combination of *sunsum* and *mogya*. The Akan understanding of life after death has implications for the Christian concept of life after death as, in its own way, it affirms the Christian concept and may be a “stepping-stone” for the Akan into faith in Christ.

Keywords: *abusua, asamando, mogya, ntorô, ôkra, saman, sunsum*

Introduction

One of the categories of spirits in African Traditional Religion is that of the ancestors. Africans believe that there is life after death, that when people die, they continue to live as spirits, so they join the realm of spirits. This view is based on the Akan view that a human being is made up of both material and immaterial substances, tangible, and intangible components. The Akan view on the composition of the human being agrees with the Christian view of the composition of the human being.

The Christian religion maintains the body-soul dualism that a human being consists of two distinct entities or substances body and soul (mind), and their distinctiveness lies in their essentially different natures: “the body is material, spatial and mortal substance”, and the soul is immaterial, non-spatial and immortal; hence, the soul is identified with the self. The expressions *mind* and *consciousness* are used as equivalent to the *soul* or *self* in dualist metaphysics. The Christian dualist conception of human nature is anchored to the Bible. This view has been rejected by some neuroscientists. They have done this by rejecting the non-physical attributions of the soul or mind or self and by reducing mental states or mental events to brain states or brain events. However, the doctrine of the body/soul or mind/brain dualism goes back to Socrates, Plato, Saint Augustine, The Church Fathers, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, and many other contemporary scientists, philosophers, and theologians. It is noteworthy that the Akan view of the composition of the human being follows that of these great thinkers. What are the components of the human beings in Akan thought, which of these are material and which are not? The next part of this paper looks at these components and determines which are material and which are immaterial.

The composition of the human being in Akan thought

The Akan conceive of a human being as made up of components, some of which are tangible, material, and some not. The components that make up the human being is believed among the Akan to come from three main sources, namely, the Supreme Being, the father, and the mother. It is not, however, clear what the components are since the

findings differ from one researcher to another. For example, while Kwabena Amponsah¹, Kofi Asare Opoku² and W. E. Abraham³ contend that the Akan conceive the human being as comprising *ôkra*, *sunsum*, *ntorô* and *mogya*, Peter Sarpong says that the components are *bogya*⁴, *sunsum*, *ôkra* and *honhom*⁵ while Eva Meyerowitz found that, among the Akan, it is believed that the human being is made up of *kra*⁶, *honhom* and *sunsum*⁷ and Kwame Gyekye states that the constituents of the human being in Akan thought are *ôkra*, *sunsum* and *nipadua* or *honam*⁸.

In an initial work⁹, Kwasi Wiredu gives the constituents of the human being as *nipadua* (a body), *ôkra* (soul), *sunsum*, *ntorô* and *mogya* (blood). He explains that the *sunsum* is what gives rise to a man's character; the *ntoro* is what a father passes on to his children and which is the basis of inherited characteristics, and the *mogya* is passed on from the mother and which determines a person's clan identity. However, in a later work¹⁰, he gives the Akan constitution of the human being as *ôkra*, the life principle, *mogya*, the blood principle, and *sunsum*, the personality principle. Having collected the views of Akan people, Kwasi Wiredu has analysed the material to clarify things and

¹ See Kwabena Amponsah, *Topics on West Africa Traditional Religion* (Vol. One), Legon-Accra: Adwinsa Publications (Ghana), 1977, pp. 25-29.

² See Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, pp. 94-100.

³ See W. E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1962, pp. 59-74.

⁴ *Bogya* is the same as *mogya*, *bogya* being the Ashanti variant. It literally means blood. The pronunciation differs from dialect to dialect.

⁵ See Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, p. 37.

⁶ *Kra* is the same as *ƙkra*. It is just a difference in the way it is pronounced from one dialect to another, *ƙkra* being the Asante variant.

⁷ See Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, [1949], pp. 84-87.

⁸ See Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Revised Edition), Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995 p. 85.

⁹ See Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 47.

¹⁰ See Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 157.

come to this conclusion. This later view of his is shared by Kofi Appiah-Kubi¹¹ who also gives *mogya*, *sunsum* and *ôkra* as the constituents of a human being.

From the foregoing, it is clear that when enquiring into the Akan concepts of the constitution of the human being, one comes across six distinct components or concepts, namely, the *ôkra*, *sunsum*, *honhom*, *mogya*, *ntorô*, and *nipadua* or *honam*. Each of these entities is discussed now to know what they are in Akan thought.

ôkra: While there may be differences in the findings of researchers on the constitution of the human being in Akan thought, all researchers mention that one of the components of the human being is the *ôkra*. The *ôkra* is conceptualised as the part of the human being which makes him/her a living being and, to use Kwasi Wiredu's expression, it is the "life principle"¹². All agree that it has its origin in the Supreme Being, God, and it is therefore "a part of the divine" in the human being. It is unique to human beings in that animals and plants do not have it.¹³ Believing that every human being comes into the world with *nkrabea*, destiny, the Akan generally hold that the *ôkra* is the bearer of a person's destiny¹⁴. It is a person's guardian spirit even though all its actions are automatic, that is, it always acts to fulfil the individual's given destiny. The *kra* is immortal. When a person dies, his or her *kra* leaves the body and returns to the Supreme Being.

¹¹ See Kofi Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures, God heals*, New Jersey: Allanheld, Osmun & Co., 1981, p. 10.

¹² Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 157.

¹³ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, p. 95.

¹⁴ According to Eva Meyerowitz, when a child is about to be born, a ghost or shadow without a soul or *kra* leaves the *asamandow*. When it is leaving, it states the way in which it would want to express itself, the plans it would want to put into action, and what it wants to do through its *sunsum*. If, as she says, a human being has a *sunsum*, a shade or shadow, then she is also saying that it is the *sunsum*, and not the *kra*, which bears the *nkrabea*. In that sense, then we cannot say that all Akan hold that it is the *kra* which bears the *nkrabea*. See Eva Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, p. 87.

In Kwasi Wiredu's view because it is possible for *nnunsifo*¹⁵, medicine men, and people with extra-sensory perception to see and communicate with the *ôkra*, it is a quasi-physical entity.¹⁵ Contrary to this view, the general Akan conception of the *ôkra* is that it is non-material. Making his point against Kwasi Wiredu's argument, Kwame Gyekye¹⁶ says that the fact that not everybody is able to see and communicate with the *ôkra* shows that the phenomena that Kwasi Wiredu uses to argue his case do not take place in the ordinary spatial world. This, he continues, means that what the medicine men and those with extra-sensory perception see and communicate with is non-spatial. The conclusion, therefore, is that the *ôkra* is intangible.

Honhom: The human being also has *honhom*. It is mentioned as one of the components of the human being by Peter Sarpong¹⁷ and Eva Meyerowitz¹⁸ while Kwame Gyekye¹⁹ states that it as "closely associated" with the *ôkra* but not a component in itself.

The *honhom* is the breath. It is a non-physical non-material entity. According to Peter Sarpong²⁰, the *ôkra* is accompanied by the *honhom*. Eva Meyerowitz²¹ also acknowledges that the *honhom* is bound up closely with the *kra*. According to her, when a person dies, the *honhom* goes back to God. This is understandable as it is a close companion of the *ôkra* which goes back to God when a person dies.

Sunsum: Like the *ôkra*, there appears to be no dispute about the *sunsum* as a component of the human being. It is believed to be non-

¹⁵ Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 126.

¹⁶ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, p. 86.

¹⁷ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, p. 37.

¹⁸ Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, p. 85.

¹⁹ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, p. 88.

²⁰ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect, Culture*, p. 37.

²¹ Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, p. 85.

physical, that is, it cannot be seen by ordinary people. Only the *nnunsifoô*, and those with extra-sensory perception can see it. The Akan generally believe that the *sunsum* comes from the father. This is, however, refuted by philosophers like Kwame Gyekye²². According to Kwame Gyekye, the *sunsum* derives from the Supreme Being. He argues that, because the *sunsum* is a non-physical component, it must be derived from the Supreme Being²³. It is known that character traits of a child can often be seen in that child's parent or a family member. While it is true that personality is not a physical thing, it is also true that character is inherited. One may not be able to say that a person's character traits are all inherited from the father, but the point here is that the fact that personality, though a non-physical component can be derived from a human being, indicates that, even though the *sunsum* is a non-physical component, it can be derived from a human being. It could also be said that the *sunsum* was derived directly from God in the first man. It is part of the divine in a man which a man passes down to his offspring. If human beings are conceived as consisting of both spiritual and physical elements, then they can pass on to their offspring something of their spiritual element unless, the argument is that the spiritual cannot be passed on to a human being by another human being. K. A. Busia discloses that one part of a human being is "the personality that comes indirectly from the Supreme Being"²⁴. It could be said that the *sunsum* is a spiritual element, it is divine and yet it comes indirectly from God to a person through the father.

²² Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, pp. 88-94.

²³ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, pp. 88-94.

On this point, Philip F. W. Bartle states that the *sunsum* is the individual or specific personality spirit inherited from the father.²⁵ He goes on to say that very little distinction is made between nature and nurture when the Akan say that the morality, training, and personality of a child are the father's responsibility. This is because it is believed that they are all passed down through the semen as *sunsum* or spiritual character and reinforced after birth by the spirit and behaviour of the father.

Ntorô: It is also derived from the father. It is often confused with the *sunsum* in that some people believe that the two are the same. In K. A. Busia's view, the *ntorô* is the general term of which *sunsum* is specified instance.²⁶ R. S. Rattray, renders *ntorô* as "spirit" but then reckons that the word *ntorô* is a generic term that covers "all those exogamous divisions to which every Ashanti belongs either to the one or the other."²⁷ His view on *ntorô* differs from that of K. A. Busia, as in this case, the *ntorô* includes the *abusua*. However, he also states that the Ashanti think that the *ntorô* is one of the two great elements in every human being, the other one being the *bogya* (or *mogya*) for which the general term is *abusua*. This shows that R. S. Rattray does not include *abusua* in the exogamous divisions covered by the word *ntorô*. For Philip F. W. Bartle, the "*sunsum* must be seen as a representative and a part of a more general category, the *ntorô*"²⁸.

K. A. Busia says that the *ntorô* and *sunsum* are synonymous.²⁹ This

²⁴ K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti", p. 200. It is interesting to note that, while K. A. Busia acknowledges here that a person gets his or her, personality indirectly from the Supreme Being, yet he says on p. 197 of the same work that a person's *sunsum* which is his or her personality, distinctive character, is not divine.

²⁵ Philip F. Bartle, "The Universe has Three Souls: Notes on Translating Akan Culture", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, 1983, p. 97.

²⁶ K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti", p. 197.

²⁷ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, p. 45.

cannot be right as the two words, though elements derived from a father, refer to two different things. They have the same origin, but they are not the same. On the source of the *ntorô*, other researchers like Kofi Asare Opoku³⁰ assert that the *ntorô* is derived from the father, and Rattray, the *ntor* is transmitted through the male only.³¹

The *ntorô* is mainly related to the prescription and avoidance of certain practices. It, therefore, leads to moulding temperament through the operation of taboo. Members of each *ntorô* group have specific characteristics which are considered peculiar to them. Those, for example, of the *Bosompra ntorô* are tough. Those of the *Bosommuru ntorô* are distinguished and noble, while those of the *Bosomtwe ntorô* are compassionate.

The *ntorô* are described as “children” of the *abosom* (divinities), hence the names of the *ntor* groups: *Bosommuru*, *Bosompra*, *Bosomtwe*, *Bosom-Dwerebe*, *Bosomakom*, *Bosomafi*, *Bosomafram*, *Bosom-Konsi*, *Bosomsika*, *Bosompo*, *Bosomayesu*, and *Bosomkrete*. According to tradition, it commenced from a time when the clans were led by priest-chiefs.³² Each clan. Therefore, had an *ôbosom* to which it owed allegiance. The different clans had to observe the prohibitions and the taboos of the *ôbosom*. These *abosom* live in water – rivers, lakes, ocean – and their children are said to “bathe” the *ntorô*, hence the question: “*wo dware ntorô ben?*” (which *ntorô* do you bathe?) when one wants to know the other’s *ntorô*.³³

²⁸ Philip F. W. Bartle, “The Universe Has Three Souls”, p. 97.

²⁹ K. A. Busia “The Ashanti” p. 197.

³⁰ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, p. 98.

³¹ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, p. 46.

³² Philip F. W. Bartle, “The Universe Has Three Souls”, p. 97.

A child cannot be conceived unless a man's *sunsum*, which gives him his *ntorô*, cooperates with a woman's *mogya*, another component of the human being in Akan thought. Thus, even though the *ntorô* appears as a spiritual entity guarded by the *abosom*, it can rightly be said to be derived from the father. Before puberty, a child's father's *sunsum* acts for him/her through the *ntorô*. After puberty, however, the child's own *sunsum* and so *ntorô* takes over, assuming greater control even though the father's *sunsum* does not completely cease to exert influence on the child. For this reason, a spiritual bond is established between a child and its father which balances the relationship between the child and its mother.

Mogya : It is the constituent element of the human being that is derived from the mother. *Mogya* literally translates as blood and is the basis of the mother-child bond, a biological bond. According to Kwasi Wiredu, it is taken as the basis of lineage or clan identity, making it socially the most-important constituent of the human person.³⁴ Through the *mogya*, a person is a member of his or her mother's *abusua*, lineage or clan. Although *mogya* is the name of a physical or material element, as a component of the human being, it has spiritual connotations. This is because if *mogya* were the same as the red liquid that flows through human veins, then all children would share the same blood group as their mother. This, however, is not so. There are children who have the same blood group as their fathers and not their mothers.

Nipadua: (body) is seldom mentioned when the Akan talk about the human being. This, however, should not be interpreted to mean that the

³³ Philip F. W. Bartle, "The Universe Has Three Souls", p. 97-98.

³⁴ Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 127.

Akan do not consider it as one of the constituent elements of the human being. The Akan take it for granted that anyone talking about the human being first acknowledges the *nipadua* (body), as it is obvious. They, therefore, rather talk about the elements which are not tangible. As people who believe that the world is full of spirits, that the spirits of the ancestors are always present with them³⁵, it would be difficult for one to even think that they do not see the *nipadua* as a constituent element of the human being. This is because any being without a *nipadua* considered a spirit of one kind or other, and not a human being.

Nipadua is a material component, and it may sometimes denoted as *honam* (flesh). It comes from the mother³⁶ and consists of all the internal and external organs of the body. The constituent elements already discussed are believed to be in this. These elements, together with the *nipadua*, make each person unique. Sometimes the state of the *nipadua* is used to determine whether one can be deemed a human being or not.

From the discussion so far, it is obvious that in the Akan conception, the human being is made up of two basic elements, material (physical) and non-material (spiritual). While all may agree to this, it cannot be overlooked that certain things are not clear; for example, the relationship between the *sunsum* and the *ntorô*, and between the *ôkra* and the *honhom*. There are obviously some overlaps, and an attempt will be made to clarify these before making a final statement on the

³⁵ K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti", p. 191.

³⁶ Philip F.W. Bartle, "The Universe has Three Souls" p. 93.

constitution of the human being in Akan thought.

Sunsum and Ntorô: are two components which are said to be derived from the father. Sometimes, both are mentioned as components of the human being while at other times only one of them is mentioned as a component; but even then, the other will also be mentioned. For example, when Kwame Gyekye says that the constitution of the human being is *ôkra* (soul), *sunsum* (spirit), and *honam* (body)³⁷, he also mentions that, in their conception of the nature of a human being, the Akan distinguish the *ntorô* and the *mogya* (blood).³⁸

Clearly, there is a relationship between the two concepts - *ntorô* and *sunsum*.; they are believed to have the same source. In addition, both are said to have something to do with the personality of a person. Kwame Gyekye says that it appears that the *ntorô* is the basis of inherited characteristics.³⁹ He also agrees with J. B. Danquah⁴⁰ and K. A. Busia⁴¹ that the *sunsum* determines the personality and character of a person.

Looking at the description of the *ntorô*, one discovers that a group of people who may not be related, that is, people from different parts of Akanland, may belong to the same *ntorô*. On the other hand, only the offspring of a man can have his *sunsum*. The males pass on their *sunsum* to their children, but the females do not. This is like what pertains with the *mogya* and *abusua*. Like the *ntorô*, Akan people from different parts of Ghana, people who are not related, may belong to the

³⁷ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, p. 93.

³⁸ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, p. 94.

³⁹ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, p. 94.

⁴⁰ J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God*, pp. 75, 205.

⁴¹ K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti", p. 200.

same *abusua*. That which puts a person in an *abusua* is the *mogya* inherited from the mother and only the children of women related through a single woman can have the same *mogya*. The females pass the *mogya* on to their children, but males do not. This similarity helps to clarify the relationship between the *ntorô* and the *sunsum*. There are two social kinship groups to which every Akan belongs. One is *ntorô* and the other group is the *abusua*. Every Akan belongs to an *abusua* and a *ntorô*. A person's relationship to the *abusua* is through the *mogya* which s/he inherits from the mother, while a person's membership of a *ntorô* is by virtue of the *sunsum* inherited from the father. The *abusua*, therefore, consists of people of the same *mogya* while *ntorô* consists of people of the same *sumsum*. We can, therefore, say that "*ntorô* is a traditional kinship group which supplies the legitimate context within which the filial bond between the child and its father is given institutional expression."⁴² This means that that which is a component of a human being is the *sumsum* and not the *ntorô* just as the *mogya* and not the *abusua* is the component of the human being,

***ôkra* and *Honhom*:** Another area of controversy in the Akan concept of the constitution of the human being is that of the relationship between the *ôkra* and the *honhom*. Researchers like Peter Sarpong⁴³, Kwame Gyekye⁴⁴ and Eva L. R. Meyerowitz⁴⁵ are of the view that the *honhom* and the *ôkra* always go together. Sometimes they are both mentioned as constituent parts of the human being, at other times, only

⁴² Abamfo Ofori Atiemoh, "Mmusuyi and Deliverance", Thesis Presented to the University of Ghana in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Award of the Master of Philosophy Degree in the Study of Religions, 1995, p. 11.

⁴³ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, p. 37.

one of them, usually the *ôkra*, is mentioned.

Both elements are believed to come from the Supreme Being. Peter Sarpong holds that the *ôkra* is always accompanied by the *honhom*.⁴⁶ According to Kwame Gyekye, though the *honhom* is not identical with the *ôkra*, “it is the tangible manifestation or evidence” of the latter’s presence.⁴⁷ He argues that the conception of the *ôkra* as constituting the individual’s life, the life force, is linked very closely with another concept, *honhom*. *Honhom* means “breath”; it is the noun for *home*, to breathe. When a person is dead, it is said that “His breath is gone” (*ne honhom kô*) or “His soul has withdrawn from his body” (*ne kra afi ne ho*). These two sentences, one with *honhom* as subject and the other with *ôkra*, do in fact, say the same thing; they express the same thought, the death of the person. The departure of the soul from the body means the death of the person, and so does the cessation of breath. Yet this does not mean that the *honhom* (breath) is identical with the *ôkra* (soul). It is this that “causes” the breathing. Thus, the *honhom* is the tangible manifestation or evidence of the presence of the *ôkra*.⁴⁸

From this, it can be said that the Akan believe that whenever the *ôkra* is present, the *honhom* is also present. There can never be one without the other. If this were so, there would never be the situation where there would be one without the other. This, however, is not the case. One practice among the Akan in the past was that a person was not buried as soon as the person stopped breathing. Time elapsed before burial. This

⁴⁴ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, p. 88.

⁴⁵ Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, p. 85.

⁴⁶ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, p. 37.

⁴⁷ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, p. 88.

⁴⁸ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, p. 88.

was done because there is the belief that, even though a person may have stopped breathing, the *ôkra* may still be present in the body. It is only when the *ôkra* has departed from the *nipadua* that death may be said to have occurred. As one discussant put it, “*sâ obi gyae home a na âno nkyerâ sâ w’awu, ebia na ôkra no da so wô hô*”, (“the fact that someone has stopped breathing does not mean that the person is dead, the *ôkra* may still be present”). If the *honhom* were embedded in the *ôkra*, it would not be possible to have one without the other. It is more likely that the two are separate entities in the constitution of the human being. The relationship between them is such that the presence of one means the presence of the other. While the *ôkra* may exist in the body without the *honhom*, the *honhom* may not do so without the *ôkra*. If the case were that there could never be one without the other, it would mean that it is likely that the two are joined. As it is, however, they are two distinct elements.

Another point that must be considered where the relationship between the *ôkra* and the *honhom* is concerned is the fact that, in Akan thought, all living things have *honhom* as they all *home*, breathe, but not all living things have *ôkra*. If the *honhom* were identical, with the *ôkra*, or were its “tangible manifestation”, then animals and trees, which have *home*, would have *kra*. However, this is not the case. In Akan thought, animals, and trees, even though they have *home*, have *sasa* and not *ôkra*. This means that it is possible for the *honhom* to be present without the *ôkra*. This, in turn means that the *ôkra* and the *honhom* are separate entities. We can, therefore, conclude from this that, in the Akan conception of the constitution of the human being, the *ôkra* and the *honhom* are two different components.

ôkra and Sunsum : At this point, there is the need to discuss the relation between the *{kra* and the *sunsum* as both of them are immaterial or intangible elements. They are, sometimes, thought to be identical in terms of their referent. This cannot be right for at least two reasons. First, while it is true that both the *ôkra* and the *sunsum* are said to be different kinds of soul, they are not identical in that they are believed to have different sources. The *ôkra* comes directly from God while the *sunsum* comes from the father. Christian Gaba distinguishes two kinds of soul among the Ewe of Ghana: the life soul and the personality soul.⁴⁹ From what he says, what he refers to as the life soul is what the Akan call the *ôkra* and what he calls the personality soul is what the Akan refer to as the *sunsum* and the two are different entities

Secondly, there are statements made of the *ôkra* which are not made of the *sunsum* and vice versa. Kwame Gyekye cites several of such statements.⁵⁰ He says for example that the Akan exclaim: *Ne ôkra di awerêhow* (his/her *ôkra* is sad), but do not say *ne sunsum di awerâhow* (his/her *sunsum* is sad). He goes on to say that a semantic analysis of *ôkra* and *sunsum* shows that the one cannot be substituted for the other in predications. This shows that the *ôkra* and the *sunsum* are two distinct components of the human being in Akan thought.

The components of the human being, among the Akan, are the *ôkra*, *sunsum*, *mogya* and the *nipadua*. The first three of the components are immaterial or intangible, and the last, the *nipadua*, is material or tangible. This thus agrees with the biblical view of the nature of the

⁴⁹ Christian Gaba, "An African People's Concept of the Soul", *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol. 3, No. 10, June 1971, pp. 1 – 8.

⁵⁰ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, pp. 95-96.

components of the human being. In translating the word soul in the Bible into Akan, however, the word *Ôkra* has been used. A thorough study of what the Christian faith understands by soul, shows that it does not fully indicate *Ôkra*.

The concept of ancestors

The Akan, like many other African peoples, believe that when people die, there is a part of them that becomes the ancestor. In the Akan view, the ancestors continue to serve the family, *abusua*. They are seen as still being part of the family or community and are part of every gathering of the family or community. Family ancestors are the spirits of family members who have died, while the community ancestors are the spirits of the leaders of the community who have died, such as chiefs. They belong to the entire community. As spirits, ancestors protect, and guide their families and communities; they mediate between the living members and the Supreme Being. John S. Pobee claims that they are more revered than the deities or divinities:

Whereas the gods may be treated with contempt if they fail to deliver the goods expected of them, the ancestors, like the Supreme Being, are always held in reverence or even worshipped.⁵¹

Becoming an ancestor may be said to be the goal of African peoples as they live in the world. People are expected to live so that, when they die, they will be revered as ancestors; becoming an ancestor is not automatic, it is achieved.

Most African peoples believe that there is always a part of God in the human being. When a person dies, this part goes back to God. It is not

⁵¹ John Pobee, *Towards an African Theology*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979, 48.

clear, however, what happens to the other components, especially the intangible ones. This also leaves people with the question of the component which becomes the *saman*, which may become the ancestor and mediate between the living and the Supreme Being. This paper seeks to establish the component of the human being which becomes the ancestor in the Akan world view, and what the implications of the concept of ancestors are for the Christian beliefs on life after death. It discusses first the Akan and their world view, then considers their view on the composition of the human being, and then goes on to show why certain components are what become the *saman* which becomes the ancestor when a person dies. Finally, it looks at the implications for the Christian concept of life after death.

The Akan world view

The Akan are a group of people who live in the southern part of Ghana and the south-eastern part of Cote d'Ivoire. They include the Mfantse, the Asante, the Bono, the Adanse, the Akyem, the Twifo, the Asen, the Akuapem, the Akwamu, the Kwahu, the Sehwi, the Aowin, the Ahanta and the Nzema. Like other African peoples, they perceive the world, created by the Supreme Being, to have both a physical side and a spiritual side. These dovetail into one another, they cannot be separated. In this world, there is what Turner refers to as a sense of kinship. The human beings, animals and plants have their own spiritual existence. Human beings may, therefore, enter into a spiritual relationship with the animals and plants so that the latter may serve as guardian spirits to the humans.

The spirits in the world are of two kinds – good and evil. The spirits

that are evil seek to destroy human beings. Demons, witchcraft spirit and the like, are evil spirits. The good spirits are *abosom abosom* (the spirits of the deities) which are believed to derive their power from the Supreme Being; “they come from him and are part of him”,⁵² and the ancestors. The good spirits mediate between human beings and the Supreme Being as there has been a separation between them. This work is about the ancestors. Ancestors are human spirits. It is, therefore, necessary to consider the Akan concept of the composition of the human being in seeking to establish which component becomes the ancestor.

The concept of *saman* is an important one in the Akan world. It is the name given to the spirit of a dead human being. Everything is done when a person dies to ensure that the *saman* gets to *asamando* (the land of *asaman*) where the dead must be. All the mortuary rites of the Akan are geared towards this. The view that the Akan waste money on funerals comes from the observation of what goes on at death. This is also because the Akan believe that how a person’s death is celebrated has something to do with how the person is received in *asamando*. One may not become an ancestor because one may not have died at a ripe old age, or may not have had children, but one could be welcomed to *asamando* if his/her death is well-celebrated.

The *Saman*: It is the Twi word which is literally translated as “ghost” in English. Whereas ghost translates an aspect of the word *saman*, it does not capture it aptly. There is, in the view of the Akan, the *saman* which is *twântwân*. This is the *saman* of one who died through an

⁵² K. A. Busia, “The Ashanti”, Daryll Forde, (Ed.) *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 193.

accident – a tree fell on him/her, he/she drowned, she did not make it through childbirth, he/she died in a motor accident, and so on. The *saman* of one who died from diseases which the Akan refer to as evil diseases, like tuberculosis, dropsy, leprosy, also becomes a *samantwântwân*. These are the *Nsamanfo* which haunt people and places. They may or may not be vicious, depending on the cause of death. *Nsamanfo* of people who die in accidents tend to be strong and so cause mischief among the living; they may come into homes and turn pots up-side-down. People in the house may hear the noise but see nobody. They may also remain where the accident which caused that their demise occurred and scare people, or in the case of motor accidents, cause more accidents to occur at the spot. The *saman* of people who have died from evil diseases tend to be gentle because they were weakened by the diseases before they died. It is these *asaman* that are referred to, in English, as “ghosts”.

There is also, however, in Akan conception, the *saman* who is given the title Nana; this is the *saman* who qualifies to be an ancestor. It is the *saman* of one who lived an exemplary life and died a natural death at a ripe old age. This is a person who served his/her family and community well, married and had children, children who also do well in the community. Funerals of such people should be well-celebrated with mourning. No matter how qualified one is to be an ancestor, if he/she is not mourned well, he/she will miss the mark. As dead people cannot mourn themselves, it is the responsibility of the family, those who have benefitted from the person’s goodness, to ensure that he/she is properly mourned. It must be mentioned that gallant young men

who die while fighting for their nations also become ancestors.

Every family depends on their *Nananom Nsamanfo* to protect and guide the living members. The *saman*, which is intangible, is believed to be able to serve the living as intermediary between them and the Supreme Being. Being human spirits, they know what it is like to be human and having become spirit and close to God, they are able to mediate. Opoku depicts it thus: “they have their feet planted in both the world of the living and the world of spirits”. Due to this, he says, they know more than the living. What this paper is interested in is to establish which of the components of the human being ends up becoming the *Nana Saman*.

The component that becomes the *saman* and thus the ancestor

From the discussion so far, one can say that the constitution of a human being, according to Akan thought, is *ôkra*, *sunsum*, *mogya* and *nipadua*. The question then is: “which of these components becomes the ancestor?” The *nipadua* is perceived as disintegrating when a person dies; it is not immortal and, therefore, cannot be considered as a possible element that becomes the *Nana Saman*. Almost all writers on the subject agree that it disintegrates when a person dies.

The Akan perceive the *sunsum* as immortal, but generally, they do not talk about what happens to it when a person dies. However, its immortality is implied in the fact that it is conceived to be spirit, and spirit, according to the Akan, does not die or disintegrate. Some writers like Eva L. R. Meyerowitz believe that it is the *sunsum* which becomes the *saman* or ghost.⁵³ According to her, because the *sunsum*

is not of divine origin, it cannot go back to Nyame when a person dies. It is, therefore, changed into a *saman* that wanders to *samandow*, literally, the place of ghosts. Peter Sarpong agrees with her as he says that the *sunsum*, which he refers to as the spirit, turns into a ghost or an ancestor and sets out for the world of the ancestors.⁵⁴

W. E. Abraham, on the other hand, holds that the *mogya* is the factor of the human being which at death becomes the *saman*.⁵⁵ As the *saman*, it bears a physical resemblance to its owner. It can, therefore, be reincarnated, but this is possible only through a woman of the same clan. W. E. Abraham adds that it is this *saman* “which is invoked in what is miscalled ancestor worship”⁵⁶.

From the above discussion, the two components of the human being which come up for consideration are the *sunsum* and the *mogya*. Every Akan person belongs to two groups, the *ntorô* and the *abusua*. The *sunsum* gives a person *ntorô* and the *mogya*, *abusua*. To determine which of these two becomes the *saman*, there is the need to look again at the way the ancestral cult operates among the Akan. The whole cult seems to be centred on the social grouping known as the *abusua*. The Akan are a matrilineal people. This means that inheritance is through one’s mother. As a person is believed to get the component of *mogya* from his mother, a person shares *mogya* with his/her mother. The component of *mogya* puts a person in the *abusua*. Often *abusua* is translated into English as “family” but it is not the same as what the English mean by family. When the English say family, it is made up of

⁵³ Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, p. 86.

⁵⁴ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, p. 37.

⁵⁵ W. E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, London, p. 61.

⁵⁶ W. E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, p. 61.

a man, his wife, and their children. When the Akan use the word *abusua*, it refers to a woman, her children, her siblings, her mother, her mother's maternal siblings, all who share the same *mogya* with her. This means that the Akan father and his children do not belong to the same *abusua*. A father and his children belong to the same *ntorô* as they share the same *sunsum*. It is the *abusua* that forms the home.

The Akan society is divided into *mmusuakuo*, usually translated into English as clans. There are seven of these clans.⁵⁷ These are matrilineal clans as membership is acquired through the female line. A person thus belongs to his/her mother's clan. The clans are: *Ôyoko ne Dakô*, *Bretuo ne Agona*, *Asona*, *Asenie*, *Aduana*, *Âkoôna ne Asôkôre*, and *Asakyiri*. One's ancestors are the spirits of those with whom one belongs to the same clan. Whenever the members of the clan meet, they call upon the ancestors of the clan to be with them and give them help in what they do. When libation is poured and the help of the ancestors is sought in the *abusuafie*, the family-home, the *abusuapanin*, head of the lineage, is the one who does so on behalf of the *abusua*. Those addressed are the ancestors of that *abusua*. To be a member of an *abusua*, one must share in *mogya* with the other members. Opoku has said that ancestors operate in their *abusua*.⁵⁸ The ancestors of one *abusua* cannot help the members of another *abusua*. Thus, the ancestral cult is *abusua* specific. That which identifies a person as a member of the *abusua* is the *mogya*. All names mentioned in libation are names of those known to be part of the specific *abusua*. The *abusuapanin* therefore does not mention his

⁵⁷ According to K. A. Busia, sometimes, the number of clans is given as eight but some authorities on Asante custom say that there are seven. The Mfantse who are also Akan, have eight.

⁵⁸ Kofi Asare Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship", *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (June 1972), p. 8.

own father, instead he mentions his mother's siblings born by the same mother as himself, his own maternal siblings, his maternal grandmother's siblings and so on. These people are related to him through *mogya*. When there is trouble in the clan, the living members of the clan call upon the ancestors of the clan. These must be beings who also belong to the clan. Thus, those mentioned in the pouring of libations are those who are matrilineally related to those who call upon them.

That which makes people belong to the same *abusua* is the *mogya* which people derive from their mothers. The ancestral cult is based on *abusua*, and since *abusua* is based on *mogya*, it would not be far-fetched to say that the part of the human being which becomes the *saman* and *Nana Saman* is the *mogya*.

The view of scholars like Sarpong and Meyerowitz that it is the *sunsum* that becomes the *saman* may, however, not be overlooked. Arguing from the fact that the *sunsum* is immortal, they both say that the *sunsum* becomes the *saman* and goes to *asamando*. This would mean that it becomes the ancestor. The *sunsum* is, however, given to a person by one's father who is not part of the *abusua*. One's *sunsum* does not make one part of an *abusua*, it is the *mogya* that does so. To say that it is the *sunsum* which becomes the *saman* would constitute calling on "someone" who does not belong to the *abusua*. *Abusua* is about *mogya* and not *sunsum*. It would, therefore, appear that it is not possible for the *sunsum* to become the ancestor in Akan thought.

Spirits in Akan thought

Considering the foregoing, it would be logical to say that the part of the

human being which becomes the ancestor is the *mogya*. However, the *saman* may have more than one component. In Akan conception, there are three intangible components of the human being. Of these, one goes back to the Supreme Being, the *ôkra*. What needs figuring out is what happens to the other two immortal components. Scholars are clear on the fact that these are immortal and, therefore, make either of them the component that becomes the *saman*. If one is chosen as the component, what becomes of the other becomes a question that must be answered. Perhaps what has not come up for discussion yet is whether the *saman* has one component or more. It could be that the *saman* is made up of both the *mogya* and the *sunsum*. A look in this direction would solve the issue of what happens to the intangible components of the human being derived from parents. The conclusion would, therefore, be that the *saman* is composed of the *mogya* and the *sunsum*.

Life after death in Akan thought

From the discussions above, the Akan see human beings who die as living still. They may live as spirits partaking in the work of the Supreme Being among the living, or they may be spirits which do not qualify to serve as ancestors, *Nananom Nsamanfo*, but are also in *asamando*. They may also continue to exist as *samantwântwân* and roam about until they are reborn or attain the years the Supreme Being allotted them on earth, and then move on to *asamando*.

Asaman is, therefore, an active spirit. The *saman* who are ancestors are partners with God and serve Him. They protect the living, mediate between them and God, and ensure morality in the communities of the living. They also are the source of authority for leadership in the

families and the communities. It is said that life in *asamando* continues as pertained on earth. This belief accounts for the fact that people were killed when chiefs died so they would accompany them to serve them. Chiefs on earth maintain their status as chiefs in *asamando*, ordinary people maintain their status as such. *Asamando* is an active place.

The Bible and life after death

Even though both Christianity and Akan religion have a concept of life after death, the two are not the same. A look at some biblical passages and thoughts makes the point clearer. The Old Testament does not say much about what happens after death. People like Enoch⁵⁹ and Elijah⁶⁰ were taken away by God, and what they do there is not mentioned. When Saul was in trouble and sought the assistance of a medium to contact Samuel, the spirit of Samuel, when it appeared, scolded him for disturbing his rest.⁶¹ Dying is denoted in the Old Testament as “being gathered onto the fathers”⁶² and that is all.

The New Testament view of life-after-death comes up clearly in the life and resurrection of Jesus. In the New Testament, at the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear on the Mount of Transfiguration, and they talk with Jesus.⁶³ This story gives an idea of the afterlife in biblical terms. Another biblical story is that of the rich man and Lazarus.⁶⁴ Lazarus rests in the bosom of Abraham and is not allowed to come back to warn the brothers of the rich man so they

⁵⁹ Genesis 5: 21-24.

⁶⁰ 2 Kings 2: 11-12.

⁶¹ 1 Samuel 28: 3-25.

⁶² Genesis 25: 8.

would change their lifestyle. The conversation between the rich man and Abraham shows that there is consciousness after death. There have been suggestions by biblical scholars that this story is not just a parable but something that really took place as Jesus calls the poor man Lazarus by name. For those who make this suggestion, this is because Jesus never uses names in parables. Whatever it is, the story gives us a view of the Bible on life after death.

In John 14: 2-3, Jesus speaks to His disciples:

In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also.

This passage does not talk about life after death per se, but it talks about a life beyond this one. It is a passage usually read at burial services because of the interpretation given to it. Jesus tells His disciples that there is a place beyond this world, and He is going to this place. The whole conversation of Jesus with them informs readers that it is a place of conscious life. He would be there, and His disciples, also, would be there.

In Hebrews 12: 1, mention is made of the great cloud of witnesses. Whether they are witnesses in terms of watching living Christians as they run the race "set before" them or witnesses in terms of having gone through what living believers are now going through is hard to tell. However, considering what is in chapter 11, it is likely that the "cloud of witnesses" refers to believers who have finished their course

⁶³ Mark 9: 2-8.

⁶⁴ Luke 16: 19-31.

on earth and are watching those who are still in the race. If this is so, then the verse gives a glimpse into the afterlife.

In I Thessalonians 4, Paul talks about those who are asleep in reference to believers who have died. They will sleep until the trumpet of God sounds, then will rise, and together with the believers who are still alive, they will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air⁶⁵. Unless “those who are asleep” is taken as Paul’s term for the dead, the statement may be taken to mean that the dead remain inactive and do not interfere in the affairs of the living. From the information on the dead in the Bible, it is not clear what happens after death, between the time of dying and the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. What is clear is that there is life after death. In Revelation 6: 9, John sees the souls of the martyrs under the altar, and they were speaking, asking a question. Though this is part of apocalyptic literature and may not be interpreted literally, it portrays these souls as being conscious.

Implications of the Akan concept of the afterlife for the Christian concept

Both the Akan and the Christian faiths hold that there is life after death. The Akan concept of *saman* affirms the biblical view that life does not end when this physical life is over. The biblical view of life after death may seem to make the death of a loved one a real loss as it does not show the dead as being of any use to the living. In the Akan view, a dead relative who qualifies to be an ancestor is a gain for the family. Such a one becomes a mediator for living family members in addition to protecting and guiding them. Losing a family member may,

⁶⁵ I Thessalonians 4: 13-18.

therefore, be a gain; the family gains what Danquah refers to as a “friend at the king’s court.” A dead relative may become an asset in Akan worldview, but the same cannot be said in terms of the Christian faith. Perhaps, the Catholic theology of saints captures the Akan concept of ancestors. The living may call on the saints to support them. Having a friend at court is important to the Akan as they believe that evil spirits are always attacking and human beings are weak. The person of Jesus gives a response to this.. In Christianity, Jesus Christ is the superior mediator. He is the only mediator that human beings need. With Him, the need for a “friend at court” is met. The believer in Jesus Christ is, therefore, able to access God and is also truly protected from all the evil spiritual forces that are always seeking to destroy human beings. While the ancestors protect from evil forces, Jesus has conquered them.⁶⁶

Concerning one’s status in the afterlife, in Akan thought, people maintain their status on earth in the afterlife. People of low esteem remain as such, and people of high esteem remain as such; kings and chiefs remain kings and chiefs while slaves and servants remain slaves and servants. This means that the hope of a better world does not exist in Akan thought. This is the opposite of what pertains in Christian thought, for believers, there is the promise of heaven where all are equally valued in God’s sight. Every person has been purchased by the same blood of Jesus; the chief and the slave are both equal in the sight of God. The poor on earth, as in the case of Lazarus, and the rich person who believes in Jesus, are both worth the blood of Jesus. The Christian view, therefore, gives hope of a better life in the life beyond

⁶⁶ Colossians 2: 15.

this one. For the Christian, life after death is life in the presence of God, and not at *asamando*. The Christian view of life after death also deals with the anxiety of having a dead relative become a wanderer who never gets to rest because of the circumstances of the death. This is in reference to the idea of *samantwântwân*. Christianity teaches that all believers in Jesus Christ who die, regardless of the cause of death, rest with the Lord. The Christian belief that there are no ghosts stems from here. All who die in the Lord are blessed as they rest from their labours.⁶⁷ African Christians, therefore, say that any spirit that presents itself as a *saman* is an evil spirit and not the true *saman* of a dead person.

The Akan understanding of life after death and Christian mission

The concept of life after death is an important concept for Christian mission among the Akan. Salvation in Christianity is meant to ensure that mankind will spend eternity with God. This is the goal of mission and evangelism, to bring human beings into relationship with God through Jesus Christ so that life in eternity which is also life after death will be spent with God. For the Akan, it offers a reason to live well, and the comfort of knowing that dying does not mean cessation of existence. That Christianity also believes that there is life after death is a good point for a dialogue between the two faiths. The Akan concept helps to bring out the hope that the Christian concept gives to human beings on life after death. The Akan who becomes a Christian comprehends the whole concept of life after death as taught by the Christian faith and what it really means.

⁶⁷ Revelation 14: 13.

Conclusion

With the understanding that the human being is made up of tangible and intangible materials, the *nipadua* being tangible, and the *ôkra*, *mogya* and *sunsum* being intangible, the Akan believe that human beings continue to live when the *nipadua* disintegrates and the *ôkra* goes back to the Supreme Being. In the Akan world view, there is life after life in this physical world. This is where the concept of the ancestors comes from. The human being continues to live as a *saman* or *samantwântwân*. As *saman*, one may serve as an ancestor, *Nana Saman*. With the ancestral cult being built around the *abusua*, the social grouping based on *mogya*, one's ancestors, are those with whom he/she shares at least, the same *mogya*. For a *saman* to be one's ancestor, that *saman* must have the same *mogya* as the living person who calls him/her ancestor. Based on this then, it may be said that it is the *mogya* which becomes the ancestor. This leaves people still wondering what happens to the *sunsum*. Due to the intangible nature of the *sunsum*, it is believed that it does not disintegrate, it is immortal; but what happens to it is not clear. Some scholars believe it is the part which becomes the *saman*. The *mogya* is surely a component that becomes the *saman*, but it may not be the only component of the *saman*. A *saman* may be the *sunsum* and the *mogya*. This paper is suggesting that the *saman* is composed of the *mogya* and the *sunsum*.

The Akan concept of *saman* goes with the belief in life after death. The Akan believe that, when people die, they continue to live as *saman*. Whatever their status on earth is at the time of dying, is the status they have in the other world. This means that human beings must achieve all

they desire in this world before leaving. It leaves certain categories of people without much hope of anything better even after suffering in this world. In addition, it leaves relatives of people whose deaths have been caused by accidental situations in continued anxiety of their loved ones finding no rest. While the Christian idea of some people going to hell may also cause similar anxieties, but the difference here is that, in the Akan view, those who become wandering spirits are usually not to blame for how they died.

The Christian concept of the afterlife responds positively to these weaknesses in the Akan concept and gives hope of a better life and assurance of rest for those who believe in Christ. In terms of mission, this concept serves as a stepping-stone for bringing the African to appreciate Jesus Christ and what He has done for mankind.

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