

**LIBATION IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: A**  
critical comparison of the views of Kwasi Sarpong, Kwesi Dickson, John  
Pobee and Kwame Bediako

BY

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has been prepared by myself, that it has not been previously submitted to any university or institution of higher learning or for publication. All the sources of information specification in this research have been acknowledged both in the text and the bibliography.

Signed.....

Robert Owusu Agyarko



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## ABSTRACT

The issue of libation poses an important challenge to Christianity in Africa and, more specifically, among the Akan people in Ghana. Libation is traditionally a key ritual for the Akan as an ethnic group. However, the European missionaries who operated in West Africa condemned this ritual as idolatrous.

Following the emergence of African Christian theology, especially within the Ghanaian context, various African theologians have contributed to a more systematic discussion of such libation practices.

This thesis entails a critical comparison of the views of four Akan (in Ghana) theologians on Christian participation in libation practices. On this basis, the research problem in this thesis is stated in the following way: “What are the points of divergence that lie beneath the different positions of Kwesi Sarpong, Kwesi Dickson, John Pobee and Kwame Bediako on the question of whether and in what forms Christian participation in libation practices in an Akan context in Ghana may be regarded as compatible with the Christian faith?”

This thesis describes analyses, compares and assesses the cultural and theological presuppositions of the views of these four Akan Ghanaian theologians on Christian participation in libation rituals.

It shows how the views of these four theologians on libation are influenced by their views on the status which is attributed, both in Akan culture and in contemporary Christianity in Ghana, to *abosom* (lesser divinities) and *nsamamfo* (ancestors) in relation to *Onyame* (Supreme Being).

The purpose of this thesis is therefore to clarify the cultural and theological assumptions underlying current debates on the observance of libation rituals by Christians in Ghana. The task is a description of the views of Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako on the compatibility of Christian participation in libation practices in an Akan context with the Christian faith - just as they themselves understand its content and significance.

In this thesis I approached the debate on libation in African Christian theology in two ways, namely following a direct and a thematic approach. In the direct approach the focus is explicitly on libation as a topic either in the context of African traditional

religion and culture by itself or in its encounter with Christianity. In the thematic approach the focus is on libation within the context of its wider religious (with reference to God, the lesser divinities and ancestors) and cultural (the relationship between Christianity and African culture) contexts.

The research indicates that the point of divergence amongst the four theologians mentioned above is almost always related to the invocation and petition of the lesser divinities and the ancestors.

In addition to these major theological issues, “ecclesiastical sanctions” also forms a major determining factor that influences the positions of these theologians.

On their respective views, Sarpong asserts that libation in its present form is not incompatible with the Christian faith. By contrast, Bediako maintains that libation as is presently practiced among the Akan is not compatible with the Christian faith neither can it be adapted into the Christian faith. On the other hand, Dickson and Pobe maintain that libation rituals are not compatible with the Christian faith, but that it can be adopted and adapted into the Christian faith if the content of the accompanying prayer is made in consonance with Christian theology.

The thesis is comprised of eight chapters and a postscript. In the postscript, I offer some personal views and argue that libation has to be adapted before it can be compatible with the Christian faith. I suggest that libation should be made only to God and to the ancestors. Petitions during libation rituals should be made only to God, while the presence of the ancestors should be recognized in a “symbolic manner” by an invitation to join the living human beings to make such petitions.

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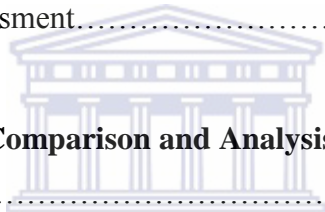
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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Introduction

The context within which this thesis is situated is that of current debates on the observance of libation rituals by Christians in Africa. The issue of libation poses an important challenge to Christianity in Africa and, more specifically, among the Akan people in Ghana. Libation is traditionally a key ritual for the Akan as an ethnic group. However, the European missionaries who operated in West Africa condemned this ritual as idolatrous. This has resulted in an identity crisis among the Akan Christians with regard to participation in libation rituals.

Given these debates, it is understandable that Christian participation in libation rituals would be treated as an important topic following the emergence of African Christian theology, especially within the Ghanaian context. Various African theologians have contributed to a more systematic discussion of such libation practices. This thesis will describe, analyse, compare and assess the cultural and theological presuppositions of the views of four Ghanaian Akan theologians, namely Kwasi Sarpong, Kwesi Dickson, John Pobee and Kwame Bediako, on Christian participation in the observance of libation rituals. It will show how the views of these four theologians on libation are influenced by their views on the status which is attributed, both in Akan culture and in contemporary Christianity in Ghana, to *abosom* (lesser divinities) and the *nsamamfo* (ancestors) in relation to *Onyame* (Supreme Being). The purpose of this thesis is therefore to clarify the cultural and theological assumptions underlying current debates on the observance of libation rituals by Christians in Ghana.

### 1.2. Context and relevance of the study

#### 1.2.1 Traditional libation practices in the African context

a) Libation has a long tradition in human history. It is the sacrificial pouring out of liquid to God, ancestors and divinities. It is an act which was practiced among various ancient civilizations and also in primal cultures in Asia, Latin America, Australia and Africa. The word libation is derived from the Latin *libatio* which means the sacrificial offering of drinks. In the Babylonian and Assyrian religions it was primarily the king's responsibility to offer libation to the gods. It was also common in the Greco-

Egyptian period and in Israelite religion libation was central to the cult (Anti 1987: 1-4).

b) Libation may be understood as a form of prayer. It is regarded as an indispensable ritual in traditional African culture. The African traditionalist sees it as a means of communicating with the Supreme Being, the lesser divinities and the ancestors. As prayer it is primarily directly addressed to the Supreme Being. In theory, it could also be addressed indirectly to the Supreme Being through the lesser divinities and the ancestors. The basis of this theory is that the lesser divinities and the ancestors are the intermediaries of the Supreme Being and they exercise their executive powers only in as far as the Supreme Beings permits them (Sarpong 1999:2, Idowu 1962:116). It should be noted that there are different views on the status of the lesser divinities and the role of the ancestors among various ethnic groups in Africa (see Dickson 1984:56, Pobee 1979: 66). As a result, there also exist different opinions amongst scholars of African traditional religion and culture in this regard.

The impact on traditional religion and culture of historical changes and of the advent of Christianity should also be taken into account. In order to avoid generalisations on libation practices, and drawing on my personal experiences, I will focus in this research project on libation within the context of the Akan people in Ghana, given the complexity of debates on such ethnic differences,

c) The Akan people live predominantly in the countries of Ghana and Ivory Coast though there are also descendants of Akan people living in Europe and North America. In Ghana they inhabit the southern and central half of Ghana. The Akan consist of several subgroups of which the Asante's are numerically dominate. The groups have a common socio-economic and cultural system and speak a common language. The Akan people represent over fifty-three percent of the twenty million people of Ghana. In the Akan worldview the living are surrounded by a host of spirit being -some good, some evil -who are able to influence the course of a human beings life for good or for ill. Prominent among these spirits are the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and the ancestors. The *abosom* are spirit beings who reside in streams, rivers, trees and mountains. As I will argue in this thesis, there is considerable difference in opinions on the status that is attributed to the *abosom* amongst the Akan although there is agreement that the

*abosom* cannot be equated with the Supreme Being. The word may be translated in English as lesser divinities (Dickson 1984: 53) or gods (Pobee 1979: 46), or deities and also as intermediaries (Sarpong 1996: 43); as spirit beings or even the children of God (see Bediako 2000: 22). Such differences cannot be described here in any detail, but it should be noted that this is of great significance in debates on libation.

The ancestors are the illustrious members of the family who have passed away previously. To ensure the good will of these spirits, offerings are regularly made to them. One such offering, next to food offerings and blood offerings, is libation. Libation is poured at birth, puberty, marriage, death, funerals and indeed all the significant events in the life of a person, family or community. Libation also forms a crucial part of every traditional festival and the institution of kingship. In short, libation is an important and prominent aspect of Akan culture, belief and daily life.

### **1.2.2 The legacy of Christian mission on libation practice**

Christian mission activities in Ghana in the 19<sup>th</sup> century opposed the pouring of libation on the grounds that it was idolatrous. For such missionaries libation rituals entail the worshipping of lesser divinities and the ancestors whereas worship properly belongs to the triune God only. This view of the missionaries was also adopted by the early indigenous Christian leaders in Ghana. Two classic examples of the attitude of the church to libation illustrate this tension.

In 1957 a controversy broke out on whether the traditional rite of libation could be poured at the celebration marking the independence of Ghana. The Christian Council of Ghana protested to the proposal to pour libation and most church leaders subsequently stayed away (Pobee 1979: 48). A 1959 report by the Libation Commission of the Roman Catholic Church, submitted to the Archbishop of Cape Coast, categorically indicated that libation in its traditional form could not be reconciled with Christian doctrine or integrated in a modified form in a Christian context (Weijden 1959).

In spite of the church's official condemnation of Christian participation in libation rituals, there emerged some resistance against the position of the missionaries. The classic example of such resistance is that of Rev. Fr. Kwabena Damuah. In 1979

Damuah resigned from the Roman Catholic Church as a priest and formed his own religion called Africana that includes libation rituals as one of the major elements in worship (see Bediako 1995:18).

### **1.2.3 Libation in African theology**

a) Since the 1960s an indigenous African theology has emerged and has led to the creation of a group of Africans who define African theology as theological reflection and expression by African Christians (Mbiti 1977: 72). Following this emergence of an indigenous African theology, and given the significance of libation practices in traditional African religion and culture, it was to be expected that African theologians would address problems related to libation in their writings. The debate on libation in African Christian theology has been approached in two ways, namely following direct and thematic approaches. In the direct approach, authors deal explicitly with libation as topic either in the context of African traditional religion and culture by itself or in its encounter with Christianity. In the thematic approach, authors discuss libation within the context of its wider religious context (with reference to God, the lesser divinities and the ancestors) and cultural context (the relationship between Christianity and African culture).

b) There are several publications focusing explicitly on libation. Five of these scholarly publications may be mentioned here:

- An early article on “Libation and the First Commandment” by A. van der Weijden appeared in the *African Ecclesiastical Review* in 1959.
- A seminar paper entitled: *The debate on libation in some Ghanaian Churches* was also presented by Ankra (August 1985) at the conference of the West African Association of Theological Institutions.
- A Dissertation, entitled *Libation in the Old Testament and Akan life and thought: A critique*, by K.K. Amost Anti (Anti 1987) was submitted to Selly Oak College, Birmingham. Anti concludes that libation as a way of worship should be adapted in a Christian context.

- An M.A. thesis entitled *Debates concerning the role of libation in contemporary Ghanaian ritual* was submitted to the University of London by Rev Father Ankra (Ankra 1995).
- A book simply entitled *Libation* by Archbishop Kwasi Sarpong (Sarpong 1996) is the only scholarly book bearing a title which includes the word libation.

c) From this discussion it is clear that there is a corpus of literature in African Christian theology that deals explicitly with the issue of Christian participation in libation practices. In addition to such literature, it is also important to take into account a corpus of literature that deals with libation issues implicitly, if not explicitly. Firstly, there are numerous publications in African Christian theology that deal with the relationship between Christianity and African culture - of which libation forms an integral part. One may assume that issues of libation are included or implied in examples in such literature (see, for example, Pobee 1979:53-81, Dickson 1984:47-74).

Secondly, and more importantly within the context of this study, there is a corpus of literature in African Christian theology which discusses themes such as the concept of God, the status of the lesser divinities and the role of the ancestors. The relationship between these concepts is particularly important for an assessment of Christian participation in libation rituals.

As I will argue in this thesis, one of the core issues in debates on libation in African Christian theology relates to the status of the One / ones to whom libation is offered. In discussions of African traditional religion and culture there is a debate on the question whether libation may be offered directly to the Supreme Being only, or whether it may also be offered to the lesser divinities or to the ancestors. This debate is made more complex since there are also debates about the exact status of the lesser divinities (Akan: *abosom*) as well the ancestors.

The question is whether or not the *abosom* (and even the ancestors) may be considered as gods. These debates would obviously have an impact on Christian

assessments of libation rituals. To make matters even more complex, the relationship between such traditional African concepts (of God, the lesser divinities and the ancestors) and African Christian notions of God, Jesus Christ and biological and spiritual ancestors, is understood in different ways in the context of African Christian theology. These complex debates cannot be resolved here. There are contributions on such issues by theologians such as John Mbiti (1977:72), Bolaji Idowu, (1973:137-178), Bang Kato (1995:91-93), Christian Nyamiti (1984:23), Kwasi Sarpong (1996), Kwasi Dickson (1984:47-73), John Pobee (1979:53-66), Kwame Bediako (1995). The contributions are within the context of Christianity amongst the Akan.

d) From this brief synopsis of the available literature on Christian participation in libation practices from the perspective of African theology, the following provisional observations may be offered:

- This matter is so sensitive that theologians often do not want to issue explicit statements to clarify their positions. Those who issue such explicit statements particularly against the position of the missionaries are mainly university lecturers who do not depend on the support of Western Christian missions or denominational structure to carry out their work.
- There remains considerable difference of opinion amongst proponents of African theology on the basic question, namely whether African Christians may participate in libation practices. In this regard there are three main positions: First, there are those who hold that the early missionaries were right in their assessment that libation is incompatible with Christianity and that it cannot be adapted in conformity with the Christian faith. By contrast, there are others who hold that the missionaries misunderstood libation rituals, and that the traditional practice of libation ritual is compatible with the Christian faith. The third group hold that the missionaries were only partly right in their understanding of the libation ritual and that libation may be integrated into Christian practices in an adapted form.



### **1.3. Demarcation and statement of the research problem**

#### **1.3.1 Demarcation: Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako**

This study will explore the discussion that has taken place within the context of African Christian theology on Christian participation in libation rituals. More specifically, it will investigate the contributions to this discussion by four Ghanaian theologians, namely Kwasi Sarpong, Kwesi Dickson, John Pobee and Kwame Bediako. The selection of the work of these four theologians calls for further clarification:

The selection is restricted to Ghanaian Akan theologians, particularly those whose publications on Christianity and culture provide evidence of an Akan perspective. This is to avoid a generalization of libation practices.

a) Kwasi Sarpong has been the Catholic Bishop (now Archbishop) of Kumasi, Ghana since 1970. Bishop Sarpong is the pioneer and leader in the inculturation of the Roman Catholic Mass in Ghana. That the only scholarly book on libation which engages Christian doctrine was written by Sarpong has made him the obvious choice. He has written many books and articles on Christianity and African culture. He is also considered to be an authority on Akan traditional religion.

b) Kwesi Dickson, who was the Director of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, has been a professor in the same university for a number of years. Dickson's book, *Theology in Africa*, offers a survey of the issues involved in the development of African Christian theology.

c) The views of Sarpong and Dickson invite a comparison with that of John Pobee, whose view offers an alternative approach to Christian participation in libation rituals. Pobee's book *Toward an African Theology* has a section which deals directly with the debate on Christianity and libation. John Pobee is a retired professor of New Testament and Church History at the University of Ghana.

d) Kwame Bediako is Director of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre in Ghana and a visiting lecturer in African theology at various institutions, including the University of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa. Bediako has dealt extensively with

ancestral Christology, a theme which relates to libation. His book *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian perspective* is relevant to the debate on Christianity and libation.

All four theologians are members of the Akan ethnic group, they were born and bred in Akan land and thus have first hand knowledge of Akan cultural traditions. They have each studied in theological institutions in Europe or North America, and have been influenced by the methods of doing theology in the Western context, albeit that they are self conscious participants in debates on an indigenous African Christian Theology. All four are ordained ministers in their respective denominations and have taught in higher academic institutions. While Sarpong is a Roman Catholic the other three persons are members of protestant churches.

### **1.3.2 Statement of research problem**

This thesis will entail a critical comparison of the views of these four theologians on Christian participation in libation practices. On this basis, the research problem in this thesis may be stated in the following way:

What are the points of divergence that lie beneath the different positions of Kwesi Sarpong, Kwesi Dickson, John Pobee and Kwame Bediako on the question whether and in what forms the participation of Christian in libation practices in an Akan context in Ghana may be regarded as compatible with the Christian faith.

This statement of the research problem calls for further clarification on a number of minor issues:

a) This study will entail a *comparison* of the similarities, but focus especially on the differences between the views of these four Akan theologians. Their views are, as may be expected, influenced by a whole range of theological and cultural assumptions and presuppositions. The task of this research will be to identify the underlying issues where there remains a difference of opinion amongst these four authors.

b) To what extent is Christian participation in libation rituals *compatible with the Christian faith*? This question, which is embedded in the formulation of the research problem, raises several difficult problems since there are, of course, very different views on the content and significance of the Christian faith. There is no standard

inside or outside African Christian theology that may be used as a criterion to judge compatibility within the Christian faith. However, for the purposes of this thesis it is not necessary to offer a standard view of the Christian faith. Instead, the task would be to describe the views of Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako on the compatibility of Christian participation in libation practices in an Akan context with the Christian faith - as they themselves understand its content and significance.

#### **1.4. Statement of research hypothesis**

Although Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako are all members of the Akan people, ordained Christian ministers and professional theologians, they differ from one another in terms of their understanding of traditional libation rituals amongst the Akan and in their assessment of Christian participation in contemporary libation practices. In this thesis I will show the position of these four theologians on libation as influenced by their views on the status that is attributed, both in Akan culture and in Christianity, to the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and *nsamamfo* (ancestors) in relation to the Creator *Onyame* (God).

According to Sarpong (1996:2), the *abosom* and the ancestors serve as representatives of God. If libation is a form of prayer to God through such representatives, it may be regarded as compatible with the Christian faith since the *abosom* are not themselves worshipped.

Pobee agrees with Sarpong that the *abosom* (lesser divinities) may, in theory, be regarded as representatives of the Supreme Being. However, he argues that in libation ritual practices the *abosom* are themselves regarded as divine beings while the ancestors become ends in themselves. Pobee (1979:66) therefore concludes that there is a serious danger that Christian participation in traditional libation practices can become a form of idolatry.

Dickson agrees with Pobee that the *abosom* may in ritual practices be regarded as self-sufficient divine beings and that for Christians to offer libation to such divine beings in such a context would amount to idolatry. However, he insists that in traditional Akan religion and culture the ancestors are not worshipped but only venerated. Dickson seems to assume that the *abosom* (lesser divinities) were not only

in practice, but also in terms of the traditional worldview and religion of the Akan regarded as self-sufficient beings (Bediako 2000:22-23, 54-55, Dickson 1984:56-58).

Bediako agrees with Dickson in his positions on the ancestors. The most important difference between these two scholars relates to their understanding of the status of the *abosom* in traditional Akan religion and culture. Bediako suggests that the *abosom* (lesser divinities) were traditionally regarded amongst the Akan (at least in theory) as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings, but that the *abosom* (lesser divinities) are regarded as self-sufficient divine beings in actual libation practices.

In this study, I will test and develop this set of theses through a critical examination of the work of these four authors.

### **1.5. Research procedure**

The above mentioned research hypothesis will be tested on the basis of the following steps:

The first step of this research project will be to offer a description of libation rituals in the context of traditional Akan religion and culture. This will require a brief introduction on the history of the Akan people, a description of its traditional religious worldview (with specific reference to the relationship between the Supreme Being, the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and the ancestors, social structures and cultural practices. A somewhat more detailed description of traditional libation rituals (before the advent of Christianity) will also be provided. These aspects will be addressed on the basis of an overview of the available literature on the topic, with specific reference to the contributions of Kofi A. Opoku (1978), J.B. Danqua (1968), Kwasi Sarpong (1974), R.S Rattray (1959) and K.K. Amos Anti (1978). The results of such research are documented in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

The second step of the research entails a description and analysis of debates within the wider context of African Christian theology on Christian participation in libation practices. Firstly, it deals with a brief overview of the available literature on this topic, with specific reference to the contributions by John Mbiti (1977:72), Bolaji Idowu, (1962, 1973:137- 178), Byang Kato (1995:91-93), (1961), R.S. Rattray (1959), E.G.

Parrinder (1961), and M.J. McVeigh (1974). The contributions by Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako will be mentioned in this overview but not discussed in any detail. An analysis of such views will require attention to the debates in African theology on the relationship between the Supreme Being of African tradition theology and the God proclaimed by Christianity, the role of intermediaries between God and human beings and the status of the ancestors in this regard. The purpose of this discussion is not to provide a comprehensive overview of such complex debates, but to describe the wider context within which debates on Christian participation in libation practices amongst the Akan in Ghana have to be understood.

For the purposes of this chapter the views of Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti and Byang Kato will be used to represent the spectrum of opinions in African Christian theology in this regard. The results of these two aspects are documented in Chapter three.

In the third step of the argument, I will describe and analyse the view of Kwasi Sarpong on Christian participation in libation practices. This will be done on the basis of a critical reading and analysis of his writings, with specific reference to his explicit treatment of libation (Sarpong 1996) and his views on the relationship between God, the intermediaries and human beings. The result of this investigation is documented in Chapter 4 of the thesis.

The fourth to six steps will follow the pattern of the third step. The research in these chapters will focus on the following publications: Chapter 5: Dickson (1984:53-57); Chapter 6: Pobee (1979:64-66); Chapter 7: Bediako (2000:50-56).

In the final step, I will offer a critical comparison of the positions of these authors based on the descriptions above. This is documented in Chapter 8.

### **1.5. Research limitation**

Libation is practised widely in Africa, particularly in the west and east African societies. Christian theologians from all parts of Africa have contributed to the libation debate either explicitly or implicitly. The main title of the thesis “Libation in African Christian theology” appears to deal with the libation debate in the African context in general. Although we endeavour to discuss the debate in the context of an African worldview, the research is limited to the views of the four Akan theologians

in Ghana in the context of Akan worldview. Therefore, the debate is limited to the context of the Akan in Ghana. Such an approach will enable me to be specific on the issues of the debate.

The research helps to provide clarity on the points of divergence of the views of the four Akan theologians namely: Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako. It also offer a constructive proposal for the debate on whether libation practises are compatible with Christian faith and what form it should take.



## CHAPTER 2

### Libation in Akan culture

#### 2.1 Introduction

Traditional libation practices are found in many countries and cultural groups in Africa. There are differences in these practices. Given the complexities of differences, my focus will be on the Akan in Ghana.

The Akan inhabit the southern half, excluding the southeastern corner of Ghana. They are composed of the Asante, the Bono, and the other Twi groups such as Akwapim, Akim, Akwammu, the Fante the Dankyera and the Wasa. They are basically agricultural communities, although there is some fishing on the coast. They are, by and large, matrilineal with the exception of the Akwapim of Larteh and Mampong who are patrilineal (Pobee 1979:44). They show common political, economical, social, and religious patterns. They also speak a common language with slight variations.

Religion is an integral part of traditional Akan culture. Usually, one does not need any instruction in religion. One picks it up as one grows and begins to participate in the communal rituals and ceremonies. However, the religious leaders such as priests, priestesses and chiefs require special instructions to perform their official duties.

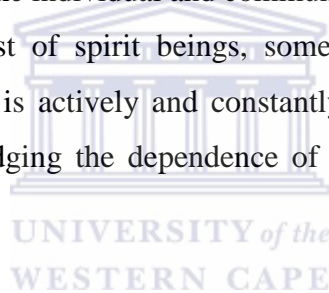
Generally the Akan religious leadership is diffused or widely spread. The head of the family or lineage often acts as the religious head of the household. Among other things, the regular performance of ancestral rites such as *libation and sacrifices* is a primary duty of the head of the family. In performing the rites, the social bonds which unite the family together are usually also identical with religious ties, and the family becomes not only a social unit but also a cultic one (Opoku 1978: 11).

Libation practices have to be understood within the context of the traditional Akan worldview. This is still very influential, but amongst Christian communities there is divided opinion of its participation by Christians.

In this chapter therefore I will therefore discuss the traditional Akan worldview at some length and then describe traditional libation practices within its context.

## **2.2 The structure of the traditional Akan worldview**

For the Akan, the spirit world is considered to be as real as the world of the living. The dual worlds of the mundane and the sacred are linked by a network of mutual relationships and responsibilities. The action of the living, for example, can affect the spirits of the departed, while the support of family or ‘tribal’ ancestors ensures prosperity of the family lineage and the entire nation. Failure to recognize the gods and the ancestors, it is believed, might spell doom (Busia 1953:12, Sarpong 1994: 37). Behind all such acts, at both the individual and communal levels, stands the idea that a person is surrounded by host of spirit beings, some for good, and some for ill. Consequently their goodwill is actively and constantly sought through libation and sacrifices, thereby acknowledging the dependence of the living on the spirit world (Pobee 1979: 45).



The Akan’s traditional worldview expresses belief in a Supreme Being referred to as *Onyame* or *Onyankopong*. The Supreme Being is acknowledged especially on the individual level in contrast to the other spirit beings that are recognized in family and tribal worship respectively (Sarpong 1974:12). In light of that, some outside observers wrongly assume that the Akan Supreme Being is remote from daily religious life and is therefore generally not worshipped directly.

There are also the lesser divinities who reside in streams, rivers, trees and mountains. These divinities and the ancestors are perceived as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and society by some African scholars (Sarpong1974: 19, Pobee1979: 46, Idowu 1973 169, Mbiti 1969, Awolalu 1977:50). However, as I will argue in this thesis, this does not necessarily express the traditional beliefs of the Akan people. There are also numerous other spirits and powers that are recognized as part of the traditional cosmological order.



### 2.2.1 The belief in God

The concept of God as the creator of the world and human beings, and the final authority in all matters, is original to the Akan. This idea is firmly entrenched in the religious beliefs of the Akan people and it is fundamental to their religious systems (Opoku 1978:14, Sarpong 1974:13, Gyekye 1996:7).

The Akan have names for God, which are unlike the names given to other spiritual beings they recognize. These special names express the idea of the uniqueness of God and reflect the attributes given to him (Opoku 1978:14). The name *Onyame* or *Onyankopong* is exclusively used for the Supreme Being. It is singular and it does not in any sense express a divine assembly (Ryan 1980:162, Sarpong 1974: 10).

To the Akan God is essentially a spirit, a being who is invisible to humankind but omnipresent. The invisible nature of God is usually expressed in concrete terms. He is likened to the wind, which is also invisible and everywhere. As the Akan maxim says: “if you want to speak to God, talk to the wind.” He is never represented in the form of images nor worshipped through them. Akans also rarely dedicate temples and shrines to Him. They firmly believe that He is everywhere and can be called upon anywhere.

This is in sharp contrast to their concept of the *abosom* (lesser divinities), to whom they consecrate numerous shrines and temples (Sarpong 1974:12). God is also thought to be unique and different from all the other spirits or divinities. Thus the *obosom* (lesser divinity) or *abosom* (lesser divinities) are never referred to as *Onyame* or *anyame*; neither has *Onyame* ever been put in the category of the *abosom* (Sarpong 2002:97). It is on this basis that Ryan rightly argues that it is wrong to put *Onyame* and *abosom* in the same class and refer to them as God and gods as if they have the same personality.

Ryan rightly observes that there is no authentic dialect of the Akan language that yields an adequate equivalent of the Semitic and Greco-Roman pair called God and gods (Ryan 1980:164).

He further rightly argues that the recent translation of the Bible into Asante Twi, which translates the plural “*elohim*” of Psalm 82:6 as *anyame* a neologism foisted on

the traditional unique Onyame in the nineteenth century, is not correct. He contends that by so doing, the translators have over-dignified the divine antagonist of Yahweh in Israel and they have underrated the Supreme Being in West Africa (Ryan 1980:164).

The non existence of shrines, temples and the feast days specifically devoted to God among the Akan has led many casual observers to conclude that God is not worshipped (Opoku 1978:29, also see Der 1980:170-173). Such a conclusion, however, overlooks the fact that the Akans do not regard these as necessary in the proper worship of God. The Akan saying: “If you want to speak to God, speak to the wind” illustrates this. God is compared to the wind, which is everywhere. Therefore, since God is everywhere, and can hear our supplications at any time, He is not to be identified with anything in particular or with any place (Opoku 1978:30). The Akan believe that there is no priest or priestess who alone has access to *Onyame* as is the case with the lesser divinities. Akan believe that every person has direct access to Onyame by virtue of possessing *okra* (soul). In this regard the Akan has no priest or priestess specifically appointed to the worship of God (Opoku 1978:30).

Sacrifices to God are also less frequent and less spectacular than the innumerable sacrifices to the other divinities and the ancestral spirits. This, too, is a reflection of the understanding the Akan have of God. God is always good and does no harm to anybody. The other spirits however lack consistency in their attitude towards human beings. They have a tendency to get angry and they especially resent being neglected by human beings. Thus, to avoid the danger which the anger of the gods could invoke, human beings must sacrifice to them. The need to sacrifice to the lesser divinities emphasizes the basic differences between them and God. To the Akan, God is perfect and so sufficient unto Himself that He does not need sacrifices made up of the things He has made (Opoku 1978:30).

The Akan believe that God is accessible and that He pays heed to the needs and petitions of people. Prayers and petitions addressed directly to God by individuals may be in the form of a libation ritual or casual exclamations. God’s name is mentioned or implied in many constantly used phrases in the Akan language. Such phrases give the recognition that God is the controller of Destiny, and that things

happen according to his wishes. The Akans frequently use the expression *Se Onyame pe a* (if God wills ..., if God permits....) to show that the only condition for success is God's permission. God's name is also invoked when one wakes up and before one goes to sleep (Sarpong 1974:11, Gyekye 1996:9).

As has already been noted, it is not the practice among the Akan people to erect or dedicate shrines and temples specifically to God. There are however, some notable exceptions. To the ancient Akan, the *Onyamedua*, (God's tree) (*Alstonia boonei*) served as a symbol of their dependence on God. The tree either grew in the palaces, shrines and houses, or a stump of it with a forked branch was placed at the entrances to these places. A pot containing rain water *Nyankonsu*, (God's water) was placed on the tree or stump. Periodically the water was used to bless the inmates of the house and any other persons who needed to be blessed (Opoku: 1978:32).

Worship to the Akan is not an intellectual submission to rules based on the knowledge of God. On the contrary, it is an expression of their dependence upon a power superior to the human being. They firmly believe that God is involved in the affairs of this world and their worship points to the very intimate relationship which they have with him. However, the Akan at the same time regard God as entirely different and unlike human beings and He is completely above his creation. These ideas about God are deeply rooted in all facets of Akan life and are basic to Akan beliefs, as it is commonly said: *Onyame nntese Onipa*, "God is not like man" (Gyekye: 1996:7).

### **2.2.2 The belief in lesser divinities**

The general belief concerning *Onyame* (Supreme Being) is that he is wholly good and nothing evil is found in him (Gyekye 1996:9-11). It is further believed that nothing evil emanates from God, neither did he directly create evil.

However the general belief concerning the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and *ahomhom* (spirits in general) is that they were directly or indirectly created by God Their existence is credited to nothing more than the Akan belief that some physical objects have *sumsum* (soul) and some of these *sumsum* can vacate their residence and become mobile spirits (*homhom*), and can also reoccupy another physical objects or roam

about. They are therefore not confined to the objects in which they reside (Opoku 1978:54).

In this regard some spirits like the *bayie* (witchcraft) and *sasabosam* (forest monster) can only rightly be said to be indirectly created by *Onyame* as the Akan will not accept a belief that *Onyame* directly created *bayie* and *sasabonsam*. One possible explanation for the existence of *bayie* and *sasabonsam* is that such spirits might emanate from some of the *Onyame*'s creatures as a result of contraction. One classic example is the term *sasabonsam*. The name *sasabonsam* (Sasa- ghost, *bonsam*-witch) literally means the ghost of the male witch (Rattray 1959: 27).

However, *mmoatia* (dwarfs), who are not wholly evil and do not have any physical form of their own, cannot be said to be spirits of physical objects. Nevertheless, they are known to be roaming spirits who can reside in many physical objects. It is believed that they were directly or indirectly created by *Onyame*, since nothing exists outside *Onyame* in Akan life and thought (Rattray 1959:26).

The *abosom* in the Akan society belong to two categories and a distinction must be made between them. Similarly, the *ahonhom* (spirits in general) also have various groupings that are named collectively namely *abayiefoo* (witches) and *mmoatia* (dwarfs) (Opoku 1978: 73).

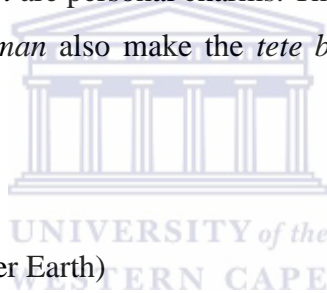
#### **a) *Tete Abosom* (Ancient lesser divinities)**

First, there are the ancient tutelar divinities called *tete abosom* who belong to the community and who have been worshipped from time immemorial. They are believed to be friendly to the community. Their main function is to protect the community from harm. Among the Asante the *tete abosom* are mainly reside in water: river, lake, or stream. The various forms of water are more or less looked upon to contain power based on the spirit of the water that *Onyame* directly created (Rattray 1959:11-12, Opoku 1978:55). *Tete abosom* receive libation and sacrifices both as thanksgiving and appeasement.

### **b) *Suman Abosom* (Fetish)**

The second category of lesser divinities is of a more recent origin. It is perhaps better to refer to them as “medicine”. They are physical objects or instruments used in the practice of magic and have been elevated to the status of gods. They are called *Suman Bosom* by the Akan. This category of *abosom*, unlike the *tete abosom*, who belong to the individuals and they operate in the interest of the owners who may put them to beneficial, or harmful and destructive use for personal ends. They are believed to hate and to kill of witches (Rattray1959: 9-12).

It is believed that the power of *suman bosom* comes from the *mmoatia*, *sasabonsam*, *saman bofou* (*fetish spirit*) and *abayifo* and sometimes from plants and trees. Although *suman* may be part of *obosom suman* and *obosom* are in themselves distinct. *Suman* do not have *Osofo* (Priest) who serves them, although an *Osofo* may usually have *suman* of his own. *Suman* are personal charms. They help the *Osofo* or the owner personally for protection. *Suman* also make the *tete bosom* more powerful (Rattray 1959:14).



### **c) The spirit of the earth**

*Asase Yaa* of the Akan (Mother Earth)

Africans generally regarded the Earth as a spirit. In the Akan society, she is next to God and is the second deity to be offered a drink at libations. She is called *Asase Yaa* in Asante and other Akan areas, and *Asase Efua* among the Fante. Special days are devoted to her and on those days there is no tilling of the land (Opoku 1978:56).

There are no temples or shrines dedicated to *Asase Yaa*, nor are there priests to serve her, for everyone has direct access to her. Besides, she is not an oracular deity whom people may consult in times of crisis. The Akan say: “*Asase nye bosom, onkyere mmusu* (the Earth is not a lesser divinity, she can not be consulted) (Busia 1961: 38). This puts Mother Earth in a class by herself). Like the other deities, the Spirit of the Earth receives offerings and sacrifice, especially in the planting season.

The Spirit of the Earth is also offered a sacrifice when a grave is about to be dug. It is firmly believed that all human beings have emerged from the bowels of the Earth and death is a return to the Earth. Before a grave is dug, libation is offered to ask

for permission to dig a hole so that a child of *Asase Yaa* may be buried in her womb. This is the explanation given for why drink can be poured to the ground for the ancestors.

### **2.2.3 The belief in spirits**

In offering libation one usually calls numerous spirits to come for a drink. Before such a call is made to the unknown spirits, one must have a proper understanding of these spirits and why they are offered drinks. Akan traditional religion recognizes and accepts the existence of spirits who may use material objects as temporary residence and manifest their presence and action through natural objects and phenomena. Technically this may fit in the definition of animism, but Akan traditional religion is more than a belief in spirits to be accurately labeled as animism.

We make reference to the spirits here as those apparitional entities which form separate categories of beings from those described as lesser divinities. We also distinguish them from the ancestors since they are different from the ancestors. Lesser divinities and ancestors are no doubt spirits. However, lesser divinities and the ancestors could be described as domesticated spirits. The ancestors have always been part of the human family, and the divinities are intimately a tutelary part of the personal lifestyle or the community set-up (Idowu 1973:173, also see Sarpong 2002: 96-97).

#### **a) Witches**

The Akan concept of witchcraft is based on the belief that the spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands to cause havoc to other persons in body, mind, or estate. Witches have guilds that operate singly, and the spirits sent out of the human body in this way can act either invisibly or through an animal or a bird (Sarpong 2002: 100, also see Idowu 1975:176).

It is generally believed that the guild of witches has their regular meetings and ceremonies at the top of trees or in open places in the middle of the night. The meeting is a meeting of 'souls' or 'spirits' of the witches. Among the Akan, it is believed that the witches assume the form of a particular kind of bird or animal. It is said that they supply human flesh in turn. They are spirits who operate upon human spirits.

Thus, in the case of witches or their victims, spirits meet spirits; spirits operate upon spirits, while the actual human bodies lie asleep in their homes (Idowu 1973:176, Dickson 1984:62).

Witches are believed to have the power to cause death, sterility, sickness and misfortunes. The main purpose of the witches is to work havoc to other human beings. (Sarpong 2002:100, Idowu 1973:176) Among the Akan, it is believed that it is against the ethics of the witches to bewitch one outside the witch's maternal family. Among the Akan, witches could be controlled or appeased by libation, sacrifices and any higher spiritual power.

The question of the reality of witches must be connected with the problem of evil in general as any evil in Africa is attributed to witches. Thus, until we can unravel the problem of evil, the question of the reality of witchcraft will to a great extent remain a mystery (Idowu 1973:176).

**b) *Sasabonsam* (the forest monster)**

The *Sasabonsam* (generally known as 'evil spirit'), of the Akan is a monster which is said to live in a "dense forest" (Rattray 1959:27). *Sasabonsam* is said to live in trees such as *Odum* (*chlorophora excelsa*) and *Onyina* (*ceiba pentandra*), and to be in league with witches. It is believed that *Sasabonsam* is a monster of frightening appearance. It has wings with which it flies about the deepest of the forest, terrorizing unwary travelers and hunters who may venture into the forest.

*Sasabonsam*, being evil by nature, always associates with witches, who inflict harm on the society. The Akan describe the relationship between the two with the saying: *Sasabonsam ko ayie a, osoe obayifo*, (when *Sasabonsam* attends a funeral, it lodges with the witch – which is another way of saying that birds of the same feather flock together) (Rattray 1959:28, Opoku, 1978:72, Pobee 1979:48).

Forest monsters may also be appeased by offering a drink in libation when one feels that it necessary to ward them off.

c) *Mmoatia* (dwarfs / little people)

Some other spirits who are said to assume personalities are the *Mmoatia* or “little people”. *Mmoatia* are not wholly evil, for they have a creative aspect, but they can also work to cause havoc to human beings. They are said to be very short in stature, not more than 30 cm tall, and that their feet point backwards. They use whistles as a means of communication and their favourite food is bananas. The *Mmoatia* have their camps in the forest, but their favourite sites are rocky places to which they take those who venture into their territory.

The *Mmoatia* are said to have a phenomenal knowledge of medicines, and it is believed that many herbalists and medicine men acquire the cures for some unusual diseases from the *Mmoatia* who tutored them. Dwarfs could be appeased through libation and sacrifice or manipulated by magic (Rattray 19259:26, Opoku 1975:78).

**d) Spirits of trees**

Africans believe spirits are everywhere; there is no area of the earth, no object or creature which does not have a spirit of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. Thus, there are spirits of trees, that is, spirits which inhabit trees. There is a distinction between the spirit that is supposed to be in a tree and the tree itself. According to the Akan, the spirit dwelling in a tree may either be the tree’s own original spirit or might have entered it from elsewhere.

There are special trees which are considered sacred by the Akan and these are believed to be special residences of spirits. Among the Akan, *Odum* (*chlorophora excelsa*) and *Onyina* (*ceiba pentandra*) are reputed to be a residence of certain non-descript spirits (Rattray 1959: 46). The tree which the spirit inhabits becomes its emblem. Offerings are made at the foot of such a tree to the spirits. In the same way, there are spirits, which inhabit rocks, mountains and hills, forests and bushes, rivers and watercourses. These natural objects are accepted as their emblems and the media by which they are approached. (Sarpong 1971:9-10 Idowu 1973:176) In libation, all the unknown and unseen spirits including trees are invited for a drink as a way of forestalling any evil intention. The fact is that libation rituals give one opportunities to insure himself or herself against any evil intention from both known and unknown powers.



### **e) Ghost spirits**

It is believed by the Akan that a person, whose dead body is not buried, following the appropriate rites, will not be admitted at *asamando*, the abode of the ancestors. Therefore the person will become a wanderer, with an aimless, haunting existence. This is also the fate of those who die bad deaths – by suicide or drowning, from bad diseases, or during pregnancy. Since they are accursed, they do not qualify to be ancestors; therefore they will not be accepted in the abode of the blessed. This category of wandering spirits also includes those who were wicked while on earth and were therefore excluded from the fellowship of the good. These ghost spirits haunt trees, rocks, rivers and watercourses, or hills (Sarpong 2002:35 also see Idowu 1973:174).

The Akan call such spirits *samantwentwen* (a wandering spirit). It is strongly believed that these spirits destroy things or molest people. However, they have a chance to be born again into the world (Sarpong 2002:39-40). Ghost spirits are also sometimes offered a drink in libation ritual as an appeasement to forestall their evil activities.

### **2.2.4 The belief in ancestors**

The most important aspect of Akan religion is the ancestral cult. The ancestors are always held in deep respect and some think they are even worshipped (Pobee 1979:46, Busia 1951:23) After God, the ancestors are next in importance. All other beings may be spoken ill of, or even ridiculed occasionally, but God and the ancestors are always held in awe (Gyekye 1996:16, Opoku 1978: 36).

#### **a) The nature of an ancestor**

The Akan have the belief that after death, the departed ones enter or take a spiritual form or body. The ancestors are believed to be the living dead. They are the senior members of lineage who have died, but still continue to wield influence in the lives of the living. They are always revered and held in high esteem. It is believed that after death, they enter into a spiritual state of existence and they are ranked second in importance after to God in Akan Traditional Religion (Opoku 1978:36, Sarpong 1974:35).

### **b) Qualifications for becoming an ancestor**

Not every dead person can become an ancestor. Before one can be an ancestor, one must fulfill certain conditions. One must be an adult, and must have attained an old age and must have children. Thus children cannot be ancestors. Would be ancestors must have led a life worthy of emulation, that is an exemplary life while on the earth. A “natural” death is also an important condition for an ancestorship. One cannot be an ancestor if one dies through an accident or suicide, or through an unclean disease such as lunacy, dropsy, leprosy or epilepsy or HIV-AIDS (Sarpong 1974:34).

### **c) The role of the ancestors**

Ancestors are believed to be ever present among the living in daily and household life. Their presence is always felt by the living and they called upon to share in the food and drink that their relatives are taking. Years ago, most traditional Akan will not drink water or wine without pouring some of it for the ancestors, who are the owners of the land. Also offerings and sacrifices are offered to them when new ventures are being undertaken (Busia 1951: 24).

They are also believed to be the unseen presidents of family meetings. Thus they are always consulted when any important decision is taken affecting any member of the family. It is in this respect that Danqua (1987:46) argues that the ancestors are not invoked but invited to join the living to invoke God and the lesser divinities. However, such a view fails to account for the offered animal and food sacrifices, which the ancestors are invoked to eat.

Their help is solicited during child birth and marriage and any other important venture. It is in this regard that it is believed that ancestors appear to their relatives in dreams. There is a belief that they send material things such as clothing and money to the living (Busia 1951:25-26).

Ancestors are believed to be the custodians of the social and moral laws of the tribes. In this respect, they are said to punish family members who neglect their duties or break the laws and customs of the tribe with series of misfortunes, but reward good service with abundant life (Busia 1951: 24).

There is a belief, mainly held among African scholars that the ancestors mediate between human beings and the Supreme Being. They are believed to be friends of God's government and to mediate between human beings and the Supreme Being, and to get prayers and petitions of human beings quickly answered (Sarpong 2002:96, Pobe 1979:46).

### **2.3 Libation in Akan life and thought**

In West African societies, libation is commonly noted and performed in a variety of situations, but rarely discussed in detail in academic literature. The act of libation involves two ritual actions: one verbal, the other non-verbal. These actions are performed one after the other in a set sequence: the officiant prays before he or she pour the drink. Sometimes a number of such sequences of ritual action may comprise a single act of libation. Hence, the officiant may begin to pray, pour the drink, resume the prayer, pour the drink, conclude the prayer, and pour the drink once more.

For the sake of a clear understanding of the libation ritual, it is methodologically useful and theoretically important to maintain a distinction between the prayer and the pouring of the drink. For each communication channel is distinctive, though they complement one another in the meaning of libation in Akan rituals (Kilson: 1970: 169).

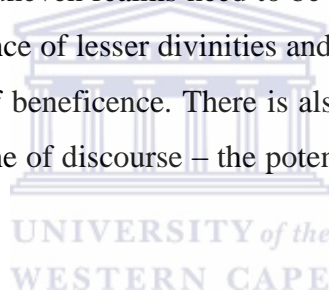
#### **2.3.1 Verbal action: Praying**

The initial calling of spirit beings in libation prayers serve both as a recognition of the distinction between human beings and spirit beings, and an attempt to establish communication between these classes (Kilson 1983:170). In Akan thought, these classes are always separate and distinct; there is never any question of an intermingling or a fusion of these classes. Rather, through the ritual act of praying, the officiant attempts to make contact with spirit beings.

While the form of a prayer is constant, the length and content vary not only with the ritual context, but also with the ritual knowledge of the officiant. Prayers said by the same person at different rites may have a similar form but vary in the themes. Certain stock phrases recur in every prayer irrespective of the officiant or the occasion. Thus, the content of each libation prayer shows certain formal and distinctive features.

Although everyone, even a minor, may pour libation when the need arises, the delivery of *mpae* or *apae* (prayers) on public occasions among the Akan is generally believed to be the duty of the Chiefs, *Okyeame* (linguist) and the traditional priests. As the political and religious heads of their people, the chiefs, elders and the priests constitute the link between the human and spirit worlds. Thus it is their responsibility to invoke the help of the spirit world through libation prayers on festival days and in times of crisis and joy.

*Mpae-yi* (prayer delivery) involves a highly structured recital accompanied by drops of gin (or wine) for the spirits. It requires mastery of lineage history and genealogy, familiarity with the pantheon of benevolent lesser divinities, and a good memory of the formal appellations of the various entities named in the prayers (Yanka 1995:173). Two types of audience from uneven realms need to be distinguished here. The first is a primary but invisible audience of lesser divinities and spirits for whom the prayer is meant; these are the forces of beneficence. There is also a secondary audience, those physically present on the scene of discourse – the potential beneficiaries of the prayer (Yanka 1995: 173).



In recognition of the power difference between the officiant and the spirit world, a libation ritual requires the officiant to humble himself/herself. He bares the shoulders and feet to signal humility, and speaks with a tone of politeness (Pobee 1979:56, Yanka 1995:173). Nevertheless, the act of libation is not essentially a single-voiced one. The libation prayer offers a unique occasion for words spoken by the officiant to be affirmed by the other worshippers. The responders form an integral part of the act of libation.

The responders in this prayer maintain consistency almost throughout the worship. Their answers varies from *ampa* (it's true), to *sio* and *wie* (both meaning 'yes') at the end of pauses. The final congratulatory phrase, *Mo ne kasa* (Well spoken), is uttered in unison by all the worshippers. It is a sign of collective appreciation for a prayer well executed. The response in libation prayer is an intrinsic part of Akan worship. Besides responding, it is the duty of the assistant (one of the responders) also to hold

the bottle and refill the officiant's glass as it progressively empties in the course of the prayer.

The rigid structure of *mpae* is notable. Even though the officiant is allowed an unlimited scope of creativity in his diction, he sticks to the following sequence in the organization of his message (Kilson 1970:169-170, Yanka 1995:174, Sarpong 1996:17).

- a) Invocation
- b) Message or explanation
- c) Supplication
- d) Curse

An analysis of some elaborate versions of prayer in terms of the four formal elements elucidates many Akan ideas about the ordering of the universe.

During the invocation, the officiant invokes the forces of beneficence, observing the Akan religious hierarchy. The officiant lists the significant spirits in order of importance, beginning with God, whom the Akan believes is the ultimate Supreme force, and Mother Earth on which God has displayed His wonders. Names of the river spirits and ancestors are occasionally accompanied by their notable deeds or appellations. These are the targets of the communicative act, the principal benefactors of human people (Yanka 1995:174).

Each invocation is followed by a drink offering marked by a drop of liquor. The linguistic realizations of the invitation to drink vary from the full illocutionary forms, *begye nsa nom* (Come and receive drinks) and *gye nsa nom* (receive drinks), where the invitation is directly expressed, to shortened indirect illocution in which reference is only made to the item offered, *nsa* (drinks). The latter pattern is the most regular in this prayer. In some cases, polite address like *opeafo* will be suffixed to the explicit formula in order to emphasize the speaker's courtesy to the sublime forces (Yanka 1995: 178, Sarpong 1996: 17).

In case the audience forgets the essence of invocation, the officiant sometimes makes a passing meta-statement, an educative allusion to the criteria for ancestorship (Yanka 1995:179). Prayer invocation is aimed at forebears who led worthy lives; social

misfits pass into oblivion (Opoku 1978:36). Such meta-statements are evidently made to inspire exemplary behaviour among the human audience (Yanka 1995:178-179).

The message segment of libation often highlights the occasion and the purpose of the prayer. Officiants here often exploit the occasion to make oblique references to delicate political problems for which the society needs help or counselling. In a few cases, a chief's misdemeanor receives indirect mention, in the hope that wiser counsel from the spirit world may prevail on him. Even though the main targets of the prayer are supernatural forces, the speaker demonstrates the relevance of the potential beneficiaries of the prayer. He will briefly address an important person in the human gathering, a newly appointed lineage head about to be added to the pool of elders (Yanka 1995:178). He calls the name and pours the drink with words *wo nkwa so* (may you live long).

Yet the address here is not as focused as the dialogue with the spirit world. When the officiant directs his address at the newly installed functionary, it is ostensibly to emphasize the latter's secondary significance in the interaction.

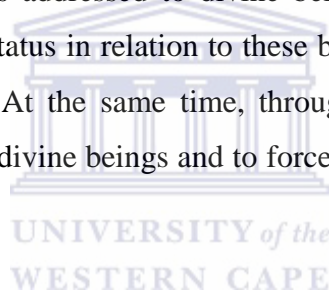
This is followed by solicitation, in which the speaker solicits support for the spiritual, moral, and material well being of the lineage or society. For the new lineage head, the officiant solicits the fair judgement and devoted statesmanship typical of female leadership. Underlying this act are the notions that in the spiritual world the lesser divinities and the ancestors perform the tasks which human beings enact on earth and that the efficiency of human action depends on the backing of divine will. Thus, the third part of libation prayer expresses the dependence of mortal human beings upon immortal spirits, in Akan thought.

The supplication, the third part of the libation prayer, sets the reciprocal basis of the relationship between gods and living men. Essentially, this relationship is a contractual one based on moral reciprocity. Thus, the two central themes of supplication are that the spirit beings should reward the faithful who celebrate them and that they should punish the enemies of the community of believers Yanka 1995: 179).

The officiant prays for success in human activities, for maintenance and improvement of human life, for the means of perpetuating life, for blessing and peace, for protection and assistance, and for the casting away of misfortune. The concluding segment of *mpae* is often reserved for the pronouncement of a curse on the forces of evil. This will constitute the curse on negative forces and agents of chaos. The officiant will pray: may the society be rid of these (Sarpong 1996:46).

When the officiant has finished praying, he/she would either pour the remaining liquid of libation on the ground or may serve it to those who have witnessed the act of libation. It is believed that the invoked spiritual beings consume the essence of the spilt liquid (Sarpong 1974:42, Kilson 1883:109).

The libation prayer in the final analysis signifies how human beings depend on spirit beings. By performing rituals addressed to divine beings, living men acknowledge their subordinate dependent status in relation to these beings and partially fulfill their obligations to honour them. At the same time, through the act of libation, human beings attempt to manipulate divine beings and to force them to honour their duties to human beings.



Although human beings can never know whether or not a spirit being would accept an act of libation, the Akan believe that by accepting the drink which is offered, divine beings not only sanction the acts of living human beings, but acknowledge their responsibilities towards them.

### **2.3.2 Non-verbal action: Pouring the liquid**

The second phase of libation is the pouring of the liquid without prayer or any accompanying words. The act of libating (the pouring of drink) serves as means of giving food-beverage drink to the spirit being. A traditional Akan person will not drink unless some of it has first been poured down to the ancestors without any accompanying words. Sometimes this practice appears to be forgotten. Nevertheless it continues particularly when a new bottle of whiskey or any alcoholic drink is open at funeral. In such an instance, libating is done without any accompanying prayer (Busia 1951:24 Pobee 1979:45, Amponsah 1975:51).

Normally, the remaining drink of libation is shared among the participants as symbolic way of dining (fellowshipping) with the ancestors. The liquid of libation corresponds with blood sacrifice or food offering. It strengthens the relationship between the spirit beings and human beings.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

It is not an exaggeration to affirm that a traditional Akan libation ritual forms the heart of the Akan culture. There is no celebration or function without libation. Its significance extends from the birth ceremony to the funeral rite. It is therefore a key point in understanding the Akan worldview.

Of all the rituals in Akan culture, none give better insight into the Akan worldview than the libation ritual. An analysis of libation prayers elucidates many Akan ideas about the arrangement of the universe. During the invocation, the officiant invokes the forces of beneficence, observing the Akan religious hierarchy. The officiant lists the significant spirits in order of importance, beginning with God, mother earth, ancestors and lesser divinities.

The traditional libation rituals signify how human beings depend on spirit beings. By performing libation rituals addressed to spirit beings, living beings acknowledge their subordinate dependent status in relation to these beings and partially fulfil their obligations to honour them. At the same time, through the act of libation human beings attempt to manipulate divine beings and to force them to honour their duties to other human beings.

This chapter helps us to understand the background under which an Akan offers libation to the spirit beings. An outside observer may just be interested and impressed by the language that is used in the act of libation. For traditional Akan, it is a matter of life and sustainability, and it is a life insurance if it is done regularly and conscientiously.



## CHAPTER 3

### Libation in African Christian Theology

#### 3.1 Introduction

Libation is widely practiced in West Africa as an integral part of almost all the traditional rituals and ceremonies. It is a means of invoking the presence of the Supreme Being, the lesser divinities, and the ancestors for the traditional ceremonies. Of all the West African ritual acts, there is none which gives a deep insight of how African cosmology is perceived as much as the act of libation. However, the European missionaries who operated in West Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century opposed the pouring of libation on the grounds that it was idolatrous. For such missionaries libation rituals entail the worshipping of lesser divinities and the ancestors whereas worship properly belongs to the triune God only. The view of the missionaries was also adopted by the early indigenous Christian leaders in West Africa.

Following the emergence of African Christian theology, various African theologians have contributed to a more systematic discussion of libation practices. Consequently, there is a serious debate on whether participation in libation rituals is compatible with the Christian faith, and what form it should take.

A variety of different arguments relating to this question have been put forward. This chapter will consider three aspects of this debate. The first relates to the African concept of the Supreme Being as the God of Christianity. This raises the vital concern of identifying the Akan's Supreme Being who is a recipient of libation with the God of the Christians. The second relates to the lesser divinities as intermediaries between God and human beings. The question is whether the lesser divinities receive the libation for themselves or on behalf of the God that Christians proclaim. The third aspect constitutes worship or veneration. This deals with the issue of whether pouring libation to the ancestors constitutes worship or veneration.

The purpose of this discussion is not to provide a comprehensive overview of such complex debates, but to describe the wider context with which debates on Christian participation in libation practices amongst the Akan in Ghana have to be understood.

This chapter has been divided into five sections. The first three sections, give a survey of the relevant literature that deal explicitly with libation and Christianity. It also gives a detailed review of one text, namely: *Libation in the Old Testament and Akan life and thought: Critique*. The last two sections offer a description and analysis of the debates within the context of African Christian theology on Christian participation in libation practices. It provides an overview of the available literature on this topic with specific reference to the contributions by Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti and Byang Kato. For the purposes of this chapter, the views of the three above mentioned theologians are used as representative of the spectrum of opinions in African Christian theology. The contributions by Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako will be mentioned in this overview but not discussed in any detail.

### 3.2 Previous contributions

There are several theological publications that focus explicitly on the theme of libation. Five of these scholarly publications are mentioned here:

- An early article on “Libation and the First Commandment” by A. van der Weijden appeared in the *African Ecclesiastical Review* in 1959.
- A seminar paper entitled *the debate on libation in some Ghanaian Churches* was also presented by Ankra (August 1985) at the conference of the West African Association of Theological Institutions.
- A Dissertation entitled *Libation in the Old Testament and Akan life and thought: A critique*, by K.K. Amos Anti (1987) was submitted to Selly Oak College, Birmingham. Anti concludes that libation as a way of worship should be adapted in a Christian context. His argument is that there is no better way for the Akan to feel “at home” with Christianity than to see the gospel within her own traditional religion.
- An M.A. thesis entitled *Debates concerning the role of libation in contemporary Ghanaian ritual* was submitted to the University of London by Rev Father Ankra (1995).
- A book simply entitled *Libation* by Archbishop Kwasi Sarpong (Sarpong 1960) is the only scholarly book bearing a title which includes the word “libation”. It is only 54 pages in length and it does not include any references or an index.

Sarpong's book directly engages Christianity with libation practices from Roman Catholic and Akan perspectives. Sarpong argues that, in the light of a proper understanding of Akan Culture, the Akan traditional libation is not incompatible with the Christian faith.

### **3.3 Anti's contribution to the libation debate**

In this section, I will offer a detailed review of Anti's PhD dissertation as a scholarly contribution on the debate of Christianity and libation. As an Akan, and University professor of African studies, Anti's view point will offer a considerable contribution to the debate.

K.K. Amos Anti is an Akan from Ghana. He is a professor in African Studies in the faculty of Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. He has also been involved in ministerial training at St. Nicholas Anglican Theological College in Ghana where he has served as part-time lecturer since 1981. Anti's contribution to the Christianity and libation debate is his Ph.D dissertation; *Libation in the Old Testament and Akan life and thought: A critique*. It was submitted to Selly Oak College, Birmingham United Kingdom in 1987. His earlier related work, which forms the basis of his dissertation, is his M.A. Thesis (unpublished); *The Relationship between the Supreme Being and the lesser gods of the Akan*. It was submitted to the University of Ghana, Legon in 1978.

In "Libation in the Old Testament and Akan life and thought: A critique", Anti concludes that libation as a way of worship should be adopted and adapted in a Christian context. His argument is that there is no better way for the Akan to feel "at home" with Christianity than to see the gospel within her own traditional religion.

Anti's description of libation in the Akan context and in the Old Testament is explicit. However, his weakness lies in his failure to discuss libation from the perspective of Christian doctrine in order to justify his conclusion. Anti could not convincingly argue why traditional libation practices does not imply idolatry.

“Libation in the Old Testament and Akan life and thought: A critique” has five chapters<sup>1</sup> structured around four main themes:

- (a) The challenge of *Africana Religion*
- (b) Libation in Akan life and thought
- (c) Libation in the Old Testament
- (d) Libation Debate

Below is a brief presentation of what each of the four themes is about.

### **(a) African culture and Christianity: The challenge of Africana Religion**

(i) In the introduction, Anti cites with approval, the proposition of *Africana Religion*:<sup>2</sup> *that the Church in Africa is under mental and colonial bondage and it has to unchain itself*. Anti argues that Christianity when introduced to Africa was embedded not only with Jewish and Greco-Roman concepts but also the Western worldview. As a result, there is a lot of influence from many foreign cultures in all spheres of African life. He therefore suggests that the negative attitudes of the Western missionaries and the clergy whom they trained were due to a lack of understanding of the true nature of the culture with which these religious leaders were dealing (Anti 1987:3). Anti’s intention is to attribute the African Christian’s negative attitude towards traditional libation practices more to colonial mental slavery than theological issues (Anti 1987: 3). However, the bases of the debate on Christianity and libation practices are more theological than what Anti assumes it to be; that is, cultural ethnocentrism.

### **(b) Libation in Akan life and thought**

In chapter one, the author discusses the spirit powers, namely *Onyame* (Akan Supreme Being), lesser divinities, the ancestors and the host of Spirits as the recipients of libation. To Anti, libation is a form of prayer. Thus, it is a spiritual act used as a means of communicating and soliciting blessings from these spirit beings.

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of flow of thought, I have not followed Anti’s table of contents.

<sup>2</sup> The Africana religion was founded and led by Rev. Father Dr. Kwabena Damuah, a former Priest of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the main features of the *Africana Religion* is the pouring of libation during worship. Damuah maintains that in pouring libation Africans invoke the spirit of God and our ancestors. He held that this is the authentic way Africans pray to God and in so doing, Africans portray their culture and tradition in worshipping God.

Anti also maintains that *Onyame* is none other than the God whom Christians proclaim. He also rightly maintains that the Akan names for God *Onyame* and *Onyankopong*, are the same and are used interchangeably. He disagrees with J.B. Danqua on the issue of making a distinction between *Onyame* and *Onyankopong*. Anti further disagrees with Rattray<sup>3</sup> who equates the Akan *Onyame* with the sky. He said, “we must however dispel any thought of identification of God with sky or any celestial phenomenon for the Akan never regards the sky as God.” He adds; Akan only think of a being on high” (Anti 1987).

On the issue of the relationship between God and the lesser divinities, Anti contends that the lesser divinities are the intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings. He points out that the lesser divinities are usually associated with natural phenomena such as the sea, lagoons, mountains, rivers rocks and the earth, which are thought to be their place of residence. He states that their functions are to look after the welfare of human beings, give them good harvests, and children and attend to their needs and also to effect moral sanctions. He contends that the cult of the divinities is essentially aimed at achieving harmony between human beings and the cosmic order.

(ii) Anti devotes the third chapter to the Akan concept of libation. In this chapter, he offers a thorough description of libation rituals as practiced among the Akan. He rightly observes that among the Akans of Ghana, libation features prominently in almost all political, social, economic and religious activities. He contends that the frequent making of libation even in recent times shows the importance of the ritual among the people. He says it all goes to prove that libation is deeply rooted in the heart of the Akan and it fulfils, for the individual as well as for the group, an important religious need.

In the same chapter, the author examines the drinks used in libation, those who qualify to pour libation, the spirit beings who receive libation, and the reasons for pouring libation. Anti also explains three Akan terms for libation which affirm that

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<sup>3</sup> Rattray was one of the early anthropologists who was very sympathetic to Akan culture, however, he did not recognise the Akan *Onyame* (Supreme Being) as the same as the Christian God. In all his writings, Rattray maintains that *Onyame* is a sky god.

libation is basically a prayer. Also alcoholic drink was the original drink for Akan libation practices. One of these terms is *nsagu*, a word made up of two Akan words *nsa* (drink) and *gu* (to pour). He explains that libation is connected with the act of pouring wine, or any other liquid substance.

Notably, libation to the Akan is the pouring of wine accompanied by prayer as the term for the ritual affirms. All the other liquid substances used to pour libation come second.<sup>4</sup> The other terms are “*mpaebo*” (*mpae* - prayer; *bo* - to say) and *mpaeyi* (*mpae* - prayer; *yi* - to remove). The author explains that both terms mean “pouring”, and that they refer to prayer which accompanies the pouring of the liquid in libation; that is the act of pouring together with the prayer.

Anti further explains that when used as a libation prayer, *mpaebo* has the special connotation of libation in which blessings are requested for those on whose behalf the libation is poured. The term *mpaeyi* on the other hand has the special connotation of a libation prayer for the removal of curses or the forestalling of evil or mishaps. He concludes that the terms are used interchangeably. Anti’s exegesis of the Akan terms for libation clearly show above all that libation is a prayer and pouring of alcoholic drink as (food beverage) for the spirit beings.

(iii) In chapter four the author gives samples of prayers that accompany the pouring of drinks on different occasions. On this, Prayers 1-3 form the pattern of prayer offered to commence work. Prayers 4-8 are connected with rites of passage. Prayers 9 and 10 are examples of thanksgiving prayers. Prayers 11-14 are the type of prayers offered to the ancestor's during an *Adae* festival. This chapter is important to the libation debate because Anti is able to give an example of libation prayer in various rites for non-Akan readers to understand the nature of the prayers that accompany the pouring of the drinks.

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<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Bediako (1995:222) suggests that the original drink for libation in Akan was water.

### **(c) Libation in the Old Testament**

In chapter two, the author deals with drink offering in the Old Testament. He identifies it with the libation of the Akan. Anti asserts that the central place of libation in the Old Testament needs no further evidence. He points out that it is found in all the main divisions of the Old Testament except in the Wisdom Literature. He states that it is the core of ancient Israelite religion, a cultic act of communion and communication between the people of Israel and their ancient God, Yahweh. He observes that the main elements used in the pouring of libation were water, oil, wine and the blood of sacrificed animals. He points out that libation was an act of worship. It was acknowledged by God as the source of both material and spiritual blessings.

The author notes that no attempt is made in the Hebrew Scriptures to explain the purpose of the libation, and where it is given. He points out that the practice is nowhere condemned except for its abuses, for instance, when it is offered to foreign gods. He further notes that as a cultic act, libation was jealously guarded and its practice in non-Yahweh cults vehemently denounced (Deuteronomy 32:38, Jeremiah 7:18; 19:13; 44:17-19; 25:32, Ezekiel 20:28, Isaiah 57:6, Psalms 16:4). He adds that the place of libation in Hebrew religion was well recognised and it was one of the important cultic practices to be restored after the exile as a means of reconciliation between Yahweh and his people.

Anti points out that in the Old Testament, the priests and kings, as well as the common people poured libation. He also points out that on formal occasions, it was the duty of the priest to pour libation. The author, very importantly, observes that not only water and fruit beverages were used in libation (drink offering) but also hard drinks. The observation gives a response to those who object to libation on the grounds that it contains alcoholic drink. He further notes that, among the Hebrews, libation serves as a means of fellowship and a symbol of total commitment to God.

On the basis of the above analysis, Anti compares libation in the Old Testament and Akan culture and assumes that the two are similar. However, if libation is defined as the pouring of edible drink with accompanying words, then there seems to be differences between drink offering in the Old Testament and the *nsagu* (pouring of

wine) in the Akan traditional religion. In the Old Testament, it seems that drinks were poured without any accompanying words.

Anti's interpretation of II Samuel 23:7 is to prove that some words were said in Old Testament during a drink offering, but it fails to justify his argument. This is forced interpretation in that he did not take the context into consideration. Apparently, David was making a remark on why he (David) should not drink the water. Of course it is a form of prayer, but the content of the statement is not the kind of prayers that accompany the Akan formal libation prayers. He says: "It is important to note that the pouring of libation was accompanied by prayer". He quotes: "Yahweh keep me" he said, "from drinking this. This is the blood of men who went at the risk of their lives."

Nonetheless, the Akan also has something like drink offering whereby one will pour a drink on the ground without any accompanying words. Yet strictly speaking, pouring alone would officially be considered as an incomplete form of libation in the any formal religious gathering amongst the Akan. Moreover, with regards to the libation debates, whereas the pouring of the drinks also serves as communion between the human beings and the spirit beings, it is the accompanying words that raise more theological problems (Pobee 1979: 153). The main theological question that emerges from libation practices rests on the mention of names of the lesser divinities and the ancestors. In the case of the Old Testament drink offering, such theological issues are not raised as the drinks were poured to God only.

#### **(d)The libation debate**

Anti discusses the contemporary libation debate in chapter five. The intention here is to attribute the African Christian negative attitude towards libation more to colonial mental slavery than to theological concerns (Anti 1987: 3). To buttress his contention, Anti cites the report of a Commission appointed by the Synod of the Methodist Church in Ghana regarding the Africanization of Christianity. The commission is said to report that: "We should not aim at Africanising Christianity but rather Christianising Africa. It adds: there is practically nothing in the African form of worship that can be taken over by the Christian form of worship" (Anti: 1987: 3).



He also cites the response of the Presbyterian Church of the Gold Coast in a memorandum from the Akim-Abuakwa. It reads, "For the Christian, there is but one God and one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ. The Christian therefore, by the nature of his belief, cannot take part in any ceremony in which worship is offered, or superhuman honours paid to beings other than God. This is not a matter of rules and practices of a society; it is a matter of the very essence of faith" (Anti 1987:16).

Anti further cites a Roman Catholic report<sup>5</sup> which strongly maintains that libation could not be reconciled with Christian faith. The report reads:

Under the New Covenant there is only sacrifice acceptable to God, the sacrifice of the God – man, Jesus Christ. The “abosom” (i. e. the divinities or lesser gods) are simply non existent and the pouring of libation to them is obviously superstitious. The pouring of libation to “nsamanfo” (i. e. ancestors) is likewise superstitious. The honour rendered to them as superior beings, the help which is expected from them autonomous powers and the acknowledgement of total submission and dependence on the part of the living, are many of the errors which are at variance with the revealed Christian truth. The report added: “The prayers to God, the spirits and the ancestors, which accompany the pouring of libation, do not satisfy the condition which would render them acceptable for “Christians”.

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On the basis of the above reports, Anti points out that the negative attitudes of the missionaries and the clergy were due to a misapprehension of African culture. He rightly observes that the “matter of the very essence of faith” in the reports is the assumed conflict between the First Commandment and the Akan ritual emphasis on the ancestors and the divinities. He also poses questions which would have engaged him right in the heart of the libation debate. He asks: “Does the pouring of libation constitute worship? Is the pouring itself considered as a sacrificial act as well as an act of prayer? Can the Christian sincerely pour libation to the ancestors and the gods?” Nonetheless, he turns to discuss other issues instead of examining the questions he poses.

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<sup>5</sup> The Roman Catholic Church committee on libation was commissioned in 1957. The report was submitted to the Archbishop of Cape Coast and approved in January 1959.

For Anti, the Akan traditional libation practices may not be incompatible with the Christian faith. However, Anti did not defend this position adequately. He resorts to the description and narratives of libation practices and reports on libation without engaging with the contentious theological issues in the debate; why do libation practices not constitute idolatry in a Christian context. Nevertheless, Anti has made two significant contributions. First, he has offered an excellent description of Akan traditional libation practices. Second, he has assembled the relevant historical data on the contemporary libation debate.

### **3.4 A survey of literature on the recipients of libation rituals**

In this section I will offer a brief review of some important contributions from African Christian theologians on the three recipients of libation, namely God, the lesser divinities and the ancestors. I will demonstrate that there are different ways in which these theologians understand African traditional culture and religion where these three recipients are concerned. These different views are influenced by geographical location and cultural differences within the African context.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, I will demonstrate how such different views influence Christian responses to traditional African views on the Supreme Being, the lesser divinities and the ancestors. Such responses also shape (implicitly) the position of these theologians on Christian participation in libation rituals.

#### **3.4.1 The Supreme Being in African as the God of Christianity?**

African theologians and scholars generally agree that God is unique, supreme and totally distinct from all other creatures. As the creator and sustainer, *God* is father of all lesser divinities and therefore not a part of a pantheon of *lesser divinities*. There is also a general agreement that God is supreme over all in an absolute sense.

The concept of God as the creator of the world and human beings, and the final authority in all matters, is native to the Africans and not, as some early writers on the subject asserted, of foreign origin. Different African societies have a name for God which is unlike the names given to other spiritual beings they recognize. These special

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<sup>6</sup> Although there are significant similarities between the Yoruba and the Akan understanding of the Supreme Being the *orisha* (lesser divinities) in Yoruba do not equal the *abosom* (lesser divinities) in Akan, (Ryan 1980:164).

names express the idea of the uniqueness of God and reflect the attributes given to him. The name *Onyame* and *Oludumare* are exclusively used for the Supreme Being in Akan and Yoruba respectively. It is singular and it does not in any sense express a divine assembly (Ryan: 1980:162).

Idowu (1973:147) contends that the God of the African tradition is not intrinsically different from the God of Christian proclamation and experience. He rejects any such distinction, affirming that Africa recognises only one God, the Supreme Universal God, One and the same God, the creator of all the ends of the earth. For Idowu, “God” also means *Olodumare* God was known and experienced in Yoruba pre- Christian religious tradition (see Bediako: 1992:270).

He argues that of the three religions in Nigeria - Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity – there is not one which has the right to speak as if there are many Gods of which each religion or nation takes its own exclusive choice. Idowu also contends that the basic theology of the Traditional Religion (as of Islam and Christianity) in each locality has always insisted on one God, one universe. Idowu follows the argument that because God is one, the traditional religious worshippers in Africa serve the same God worshipped by Christians and Muslims worship, but with different approaches.

Idowu further affirms that the Yoruba people do not only know God; they even worshipped Him before the advent of the missionaries. He admits that though there is some abuse of such worship, that happens only when a person makes the image an end in itself. He lamented that by a miscarriage of purpose, the church has succeeded in preaching to and in teaching Africans about a strange God whom they have somehow come to identify as the God of their forefathers.

John Mbiti also deals with the concepts of God in Africa in his two books: *Concepts of God in Africa* (1969) and *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969). In *Concepts of God in Africa* which deals with the concept of God in a larger way, his study covers nearly 300 groups from all over Africa outside the traditional Christian and Muslim communities. Mbiti’s conclusion is that in all these societies, without a single exception, people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being. Therefore, God is no

stranger to African people, and that, in traditional life there are no atheists. He located the notion of God among the African societies in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies. He attributed the similarities and the differences of the African society's concept of God to the fact that it is strongly coloured and influenced by the historical, geographical, social and cultural backgrounds, and environment of the people.

Mbiti (1969:29-30) concedes that certain ideas have had an influence in Africa, but he points out that there are cardinal teaching doctrines and beliefs of Christianity, Judaism and Islam that cannot be traced in traditional religions. He then argues that these major religious traditions therefore cannot have been responsible for disseminating those concepts of God in traditional religion which resemble some biblical and Semitic ideas about God, while at the same time omitting their more important aspects of belief and practice. While recognizing the differences of the local concept of God, Mbiti maintains that there are sufficient elements in the African's belief of God which make it possible to discuss the African concept of God as a unity and on a continental scale. In his comparison of the African concept of God and the Old Testament literature, Mbiti contends that God did not only reveal himself to Abraham and other Old Testament fathers but also to African forefathers.

Kato (1975: 113) admits that the African traditional worshippers have an awareness of the Supreme Being who is none other than God, the Father of our Lord Jesus. He however holds that the knowledge that Africans had of God was only enough to convict them of their sin, and that God was not known enough to be worshiped in Africa (Kato 1975: 29). Kato further criticises the claim that God spoke to the priests of African traditional religions as He did to the Jewish Prophets, a view which some African scholars maintain.<sup>7</sup> He contends that the problem lies not so much in the existence of such knowledge, but in the type and extent of that knowledge. Moreover he contends that the knowledge that the African traditionalist has of God is woefully inadequate to warrant the claim that God has spoken to a priest of African tradition religion.

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<sup>7</sup> Bediako (1995:225) has criticized Kato for failing to accept that God did not speak to only the Hebrew fathers but also African forefathers.

Looking at the contributions of the above theologians, it is sufficient to conclude that the concept of God is encountered all over Africa and that there is no debate anymore with regards to the originality of the concept. More importantly, it is also clear that the African theologians see the Supreme Being in Africa as none other than the God proclaimed by the Christianity. However, this equation does raise further theological questions on the relationship between the Supreme Being and lesser divinities in African belief on one hand, and the relationship between God and lesser divinities in Christian belief on the other.

In Christianity, God tends to be isolated from the lesser divinities who the African (traditionally) has believed were closely related to him. Meanwhile, many African societies have already identified their traditional concept of the Supreme Being with the Christian God. This is clear in Bible translation, as the various African names for Supreme Being is used for the Christian God.

Nonetheless, this is done in the midst of theological confusion. For instance, *Onyame* (the Akan Supreme Being) is not only completely cut-off from the *abosom* (the lesser divinities) but also considered as a competitive enemy. The Christian concept of *Onyame* clearly, could not be the Akan concept of a Supreme Being who regularly dines with the lesser divinities and the ancestors (in libation ritual).

On the other hand, if *Onyame* is not only seen as closely related to the *abosom*, and if the latter also serve as intermediaries between Him and human beings, then such a concept of the Supreme Being definitely cannot be regarded as the same as the Christian God by Christians. On this issue, there are three main ways that African theologians approach this issue.

Firstly, there is a contention that the lesser divinities were not only closer to the Supreme Being, but that they also served as intermediaries between him and human beings. However, in Christianity, Jesus has replaced the intermediary role of the lesser divinities. This however raises a question: What is the current position of the lesser divinities in relation to God, and how should Christians relate to these intermediaries? Secondly, there is a denial of any cordial relationship between the Supreme Being and the lesser divinities, and that the latter do not serve as intermediaries between the

Supreme Being and human beings in African traditional belief. This approach also betrays the common understanding of the cordial relationship between the Supreme Being and the lesser divinities in African traditional belief. However, with regard to the question whether or not the lesser divinities serve as intermediaries, it has to be noted that this is not clear in African traditional belief.

Thirdly, there is a widespread contention that the lesser divinities do still have a place in Christianity. One may, for example, on theological grounds identify their role as similar to that of the angel as portrayed in biblical literature.

Looking at the first two approaches, we are still left with the unanswered question of why the *abosom*, who enjoyed a cordial relationship with *Onyame*, have turned to become his enemies. Such an unanswered question genuinely raises problems with regards to the identification of *Onyame* with the Christian God.

From the analysis of the above approaches, it is evident that the first approach is not consistent. By asserting that the lesser divinities serve as the intermediaries between God and human beings in African belief, there is the need to prove the point where we must determine when their service was terminated; otherwise, there may be two *Onyame* (Supreme Beings), the one who hates the lesser divinities and the other who works with them.

The third approach makes an attempt to maintain theological consistency by adopting and adapting into Christianity the Supreme Being who is known to the traditional people. Nevertheless, whether or not there are adequate theological grounds to identify the lesser divinities with the biblical angels is an issue that needs further research elsewhere.

In relation to the libation debate, those who see the African concept of the Supreme Being as different from the Christian God will definitely regard the whole libation practice as idolatry. Similarly, those who identify the African Supreme Being with the Christian God, but see the lesser divinities as enemies of God will also see the traditional libation practices as idolatry, though subject to adaptation into Christianity. For, libation can be addressed to God only as was practiced in the Old Testament and

as is also (rarely) done among the Akan.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, those who contend that the lesser divinities are part of God's government in the Christian era will not see any incompatibility of the libation ritual with Christian faith.

### **3.4.2 The relationship between God and the lesser divinities in African Christian theology**

Discourse on libation practices and the Christian faith can best be understood within the context of the cultural and theological positions attributed to the lesser divinities in relation with the Christian concept of God. Libation, sacrifices and petition prayers are the key items in an African's relationship with the lesser divinities. The implication of these religious acts from the point of view of the Christian faith is that lesser divinities are worshipped by human beings. It is argued that if the lesser divinities receive libation as ends in themselves, then the African traditional religion appears to be a mixture of a high God who rules concurrently with lesser divinities. The theological issue that arises in Christian participation in libation ritual is therefore idolatry. On this issue, many African theologians hold different opinions. Some concede that the lesser divinities receive worship and also insist that they do so on behalf of the Supreme Being (Sarpong 2002: 96; Idowu 1973:169).

The debate between the Western and African theologians on African traditional religion is particularly based on the identity of the lesser divinities. Both the African Christian theologians and the Western Christian theologians view African beliefs with reference to Judeo- Christian tradition. However, Western scholars tend to see African traditional religions as distinct from the Christian faith. On the other hand, African theologians portray African religions as more or less analogous to Christianity.

This debate was triggered by E.B. Tylor about one hundred years ago. Tylor asserted that in a strict sense, monotheism has never been known in the primal religions. He elaborates that the doctrine which the primal religions hold is polytheism culminating in the rule of one supreme divinity. In 1923, R. S. Rattray in his classic work on Ashanti asserted that Ashanti religion appears to be a fusion in which an

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<sup>8</sup> Libation is generally poured to Onyame (the Akan Supreme Being) together with the lesser divinities, the ancestors and the other known and unknown spirits (ahum ne ahum). However, it is not common among the Akan to pour libation to God alone.

unquestionable High God ruled simultaneously with lesser divinities and ancestral spirits. Busia a Ghanaian sociologist later confirmed Rattray's observation that the Asantes address their petition prayers to the lesser divinities and Supreme Being (see Parrinder 1970:81-88).

Meanwhile, J.B. Danquah, in his book the *Akan Doctrine of God* (1968:19, 30), has criticised Rattray for a misapprehension of Ashanti religion. Danqua objected to the term *sky God* which Rattray used to refuse the *Onyame* (the Akan God) the status of Christian God. Danqua also declares that altars and shrines to ancestral and lesser divinities are unknown to the Akan as Rattray (1959: 142) claimed.<sup>9</sup> Danqua's work has been severely criticized by both African and Western theologians for ignoring the presence of lesser divinities in Akan, which Rattray pointed out (Dickson 1984: 54).

After another twenty years a further attempt to solve the diversity of beliefs in spirit beings appeared in the work of E.B. Idowu. Here, some of the divinities are described as servants of the Supreme Being in the creation and governance of the world. Idowu considers that the Yoruba pantheon cannot be described as polytheism. He argues that, strictly speaking, that would suggest that God is one among many divinities, whereas he is not only sovereign but wholly different from the lesser divinities. Idowu explains that the divinities are collectively named *orisha* (gods or spirits), a term which is never applied to the Supreme Being.

Idowu further maintains that the Supreme Being has delegated some of his powers to functionaries who work at his command. He argues that the fact that one Supreme Being and many divinities rightly constitute plurality does not amount to polytheism, and thereby does not constitute idolatry in African traditional religion. He asserts that polytheism is a qualitative and not a quantitative concept. That is, it is not a belief in the plurality of gods but rather the lack of a unifying and transcendent ultimate which determines its character. He explains that polytheism depends on the nature of the divinities and their relationship with the Supreme Being.

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<sup>9</sup> Danqua (1968:19, 30) has advanced a view that worship to God was mostly offered through the intermediary of the ancestors.



Idowu further argues that in Africa, particularly among the Yoruba and the Akan, the divinities have no absolute existence of themselves. They were brought into being as functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe. Also the divinities exercise executive powers only as far as they are permitted by the Supreme Being. He therefore argues that, technically, the divinities are only a means to an end and not ends in themselves. It is however in consequence of Priestcraft that the divinities have largely tended to become ends in themselves instead of the means to an end that they are meant to be.<sup>10</sup>

Mbiti (1975:68) echoes Idowu's observation that the lesser divinities are on the whole thought to have been created by God. They are associated with him, and often stand for God's activities or manifestations either as personifications or as the spiritual beings in charge of these major objects or phenomena of nature. In effect, to Mbiti, the pantheon of divinities acts as God's servants and intermediaries between Him and other creatures. Mbiti remarks that it is an African belief that God purposely created the lesser divinities to guard human beings. Notably, many African theologians also share the view that the lesser divinities are indeed, the intermediaries between God and human beings (Imasogie 1985:26 see Turaki 1999).

By contrast, Kato (1975:114-115) argues that the attributed position of an intermediary role for the lesser divinities is an imposition of a foreign idea into African traditional religion. He explains that in practice the traditional people do not regard the divinities as the intermediaries between God and human beings but as self-sufficient deities. While Kato (1975:75) concedes that it is inadequate to sum up the whole of the African traditional religion as idolatry, he argues that it is unrealistic to deny that the worship of lesser divinities and ancestors is part and parcel of African traditional religion.

Kato unduly equates the lesser divinities in Africa to the *gods* in the biblical tradition. Consequently, he regards all the lesser divinities as evil and an abomination before

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<sup>10</sup> Parrinder (1970:81-88), however, criticises Idowu for attempting to diminish the role of the lesser divinities and claim a degree of monotheism for African traditional religion. To Parrinder, this may appear to be influenced by preconceptions and a misunderstanding of the term 'polytheism' that is wrongly applied this as the belief of the savage tribes. Parrinder suggests 'pantheism' as the proper description of African traditional religion.

God. Kato imposes upon the African religious experience conceptual categories inherited from the Middle East and from the Greco- Roman world. Though this is the position of a majority of African Christians (largely influenced by the missionaries) some African theologians argue that such a position is a generalisation of the status of the lesser divinities and a misapprehension of African culture.

The lesser divinities as intermediaries between God and human beings have become almost the standard concept for African Christian theologians. Such a concept was conceived in the debate on polytheism and monotheism. It was important to diffuse the Western notion that Africans worship many gods. Nevertheless, many African theologians accept this view as culturally valid without critically assessing its basis and its implications.

### **3.4.3 Ancestor cult: worship or veneration?**

The question whether the ancestors are really worshipped or simply revered like elders of the family, is one of the two most contentious issues in the Christianity and libation debate. These difficulties manifest themselves either in the forthright suggestion that this is abominable idolatry or in the denial that the ancestors are worshipped. The underlying assumption of the debate is that, if the ancestors are worshipped, then making libation to them raises theological issues that appear to conflict with the Christian faith. On the other hand, if they are simply revered then libation to the ancestors may be compatible with the Christian faith. Nonetheless, some African theologians<sup>11</sup> regard the English words *worship* and *veneration* as ambiguous words, the difference of which is only in the mind of the user.

The ancestors are some of the most powerful spiritual forces in African belief, and in many places they take the place of the lesser divinities which are more prominent in

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<sup>11</sup> With regards to the term 'ancestor worship' Idowu echoes Farmer's observation that the English word 'worship' is ambiguous. Idowu (1973:186) contends that both 'veneration' and 'worship' can be seen in the ancestral cult. He points out the fact that, "Your worship" as used in addressing a judge among others shows that 'worship' is not confined to the specifically religious. He also points out that those who set up the cult of the ancestors inside churches are careful not to use the term 'worship', but they choose veneration instead. He cites the use of the word veneration in the Roman Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, or in Westminster Abbey, or in a household or at a wayside shrine in Europe to substantiate his point as classical examples (Idowu 1973:180).

West Africa than in East or South Africa. The Yoruba will remember his ancestors at every meal, and will never fail to pour libation to them (Sawyer 1996:53). Rattray tells us that the predominant influence in Ashanti religion is neither *Onyame* (Supreme Being) nor the hundreds of the *abosom* (lesser divinities) which cover the whole land, but are the *nsamanfo* (the ancestors). So indeed, before an Ashanti drinks wine or alcohol he pours a little on the ground for the shades of the ancestors. Of all the African ritual acts dealing with ancestors, there is none which gives as deep an insight into how ancestors are perceived as the act of libation (Bediako 1995:219).

The concept of ancestors differs from one society to another in Africa. Among the Akan, to qualify to be an ancestor, one must be dead, one must die a “good” death, one must lead a good irreproachable life, and one must be an adult. In many societies in Africa, it is believed that when good people die, and die a good death, they go to a place of bliss Akan call *asamando*. The ancestors are believed to continue leading the life they were leading on earth in peace; they are believed not to suffer pain or any hardship. There a chief is a chief, and a farmer is a farmer.

In many societies in Africa, it is believed that from the place of bliss, the ancestor can come back to be reborn in order to finish a job he or she started, but could not complete. It is also believed that some of the dead can decide to come back for another lease of life. Another belief is that those who could not get entry into the bliss (place of rest), roam about as ghosts frightening people until they are born again. Sarpong (2002:99) suggests that this type of return into the world is a kind of re-incarnation. It is a very firmly held belief that the ancestors are keenly interested in the living and form one family with them.

The ancestors are said to be one of the custodians of the social norms and values. They reward good behaviour with good harvest, good health, successful business and many others. They are also said to punish wrongdoing with sickness, poor harvest and failure in business among others. Constantly before the African and serving to regulate his/her conduct, the ancestors are believed to be watching him/her, and that one day, when he/she joins the ancestors in the world spirits, they will ask him or her to give an account of his or her conduct towards his or her kinsmen. Of course some ancestors are said to have come in dreams to prescribe certain medical herbs to the

descendants in times of illness (Busia 1959: 25, Sawyerr 1996:43). According to Oduyoye (1983:111), the ancestral cults have been the custodian of the African spirit, personality and a sense of community demonstrated in socio-religious festivals.

From my point of view, the nature of the ritual which takes place when the ancestors are invoked for libation calls for careful analysis. Among the Mendes in Sierra Leone, the Creoles in Liberia, the Yuroba in Nigeria and Akan in Ghana, the ritual involved the offering of drink; water or usually alcoholic drink, accompanied by a prayer. The purpose of the drink is to offer food beverage as a means of communion with the ancestors. The prayer is either thanksgiving or petition or both. It is not easy to be categorical about the end of the prayers, but evidence suggests that the ancestors are expected to make the required responses. Among the Mendes and Creoles (Sawyerr 1996:47), the end of the response is usually “bai God pauer” “by the power of God,” Creole) and “Ngewo jahun” (“by the will of God”, in mende).

The above analysis suggests that the ancestors are believed to be capable of fulfilling the requests in the petitions, but among the Mendes and the Creoles they are also somewhat dependent in the ultimate analysis on the sovereign will of God, who has greater power than the ancestors (human beings now spirit), and control all what happens in the world. The Akan in Ghana however, does not have such phrases in the libational prayer that suggest that the ultimate end of the prayer is the Supreme Being. Nonetheless, this does not suggest that the ultimate end can not be the Supreme Being by inference.

There are two arguments. On the one hand, there are those who hold categorically that Africans worship their ancestors. On the other hand, there are those who say categorically that Africans do not worship their ancestors. The former group contends that the ancestors are spirit beings, and Africans petition them in prayers. On that basis there is a conflict with the Christian faith that insists that Christians should pray only to God through Jesus Christ (see Idowu 1973: 182).

Moreover, the latter group cede that the ancestors are truly petitioned in prayer but the cult is nothing more than a projection of the Africans social behaviour. Some maintain that it is not a religious attitude, for no African prays to his/her dead grandfather any

more than he/she prays to his living father. It is further argued that in both cases the words employed are the same. Furthermore, it is argued that the African community is a single, continuing unit, conscious of no distinction in *quality* between its members still here on earth and its members now *there* wherever it may be that the ancestors are living. Nevertheless, there is some element of enhanced power that is attributed to the ancestors. Because of this enhanced power, human beings pray to the ancestors for that which they cannot get by their own means. It is insisted though, that it is nothing more than a communion of the family.

By contrast, Parrinder (1954:63) contends that if one compares prayers made to the lesser divinities and to the ancestors, there is often remarkably little difference between these two groups. Sawyerr (1996:47-48) argues that the fact that prayers to the ancestors differ a little in tone and content from those directed to God and other spirits only gives a partial answer to the question of whether or not the ancestors are worshipped.

Meanwhile, in “Religion and Art in Ashanti”, Rattray (1959:122-147) describes the religious ceremonies of the Ashanti in detail and concludes that the religion of the Ashanti is mainly ancestor –worship. Libation also features prominently within the organized ceremonies by which the people express their sense of dependence on the ancestors. J.B.Danquah, in “the Akan Doctrine of God,” echoes Rattray’s view that most worship of God was said to be offered through the mediation of the ancestors. God himself was called the great ancestor by Danqua.

In “God: Ancestor or creator?”, Harry Sawyerr ( 1970) shows that at first he was bewildered by Danqua’s claim that God is the great Ancestor, but finally came to accept it wholeheartedly and apply this notion not only to the Akan but also the Yoruba and the Mendes. Sawyer draws a conclusion on his discussion on “Ancestral worship” by saying Africans do worship their ancestors as they do their lesser divinities. He explains that this worship consists of prayers, sacrifices, and divination on communal occasions or prayer and divinations on private occasions. The prayers themselves consist of petitions related to the welfare of the worshippers, their children, their harvests, peace and goodwill in the country (see Parrinder 1954: 63ff).

In another phase of the debate, there is a contention that the ancestors are also identified with the lesser divinities. On that basis, it is argued that if the cult of the lesser divinities is accepted as worship then the ancestral cult falls into the same category since some ancestors also act as lesser divinities. While Akan theologians will not accept this classification,<sup>12</sup> Idowu (1973:186) does not reject the argument totally. He concedes that speaking from a strictly theoretical point of view, the ancestors are also included in the Dahomean religious system where they comprise the third category of gods.<sup>13</sup> However, he insists that the ancestors are fundamentally parts of religious life as they are of social life. He explains that Africans make a distinction between the Supreme Being, the lesser divinities and the ancestors.

Analyzing both sides of the argument, Idowu contends that the central issue of the debate, namely whether the ancestors are worshipped or not, cannot be conclusively settled because of the ambiguous nature of the English term “worship”. The term “worship” is said to be a cluster concept because it cannot be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Given this lack of defining features, Idowu suggests that we cannot say whether an ancestral cult is a form of worship or of veneration; it remains in a conceptually fuzzy borderline area. However, he concludes that while technically Africans do not put their ancestors on the same footing with God or the lesser divinities, there is no doubt that the ancestors receive veneration that may become so intense as to resemble worship. They are sometimes even worshiped (Idowu 1973:180).

By contrast, Mbiti contends that Africans do not worship their ancestors; they simply revere them. He also maintains that like the lesser divinities, the ancestors also serve as the intermediaries between God and human beings. For Mbiti (1969:61) the ancestors are the living dead. They are the closest link that men have with the spirit world. They are the spirits with which African people are most concerned; it is

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<sup>12</sup> Among the Akan people there is a strict distinction between the ancestors and the lesser divinities. The ancestors are not elevated to become lesser divinities or vice versa.

<sup>14</sup> According to Idowu (1973:172), in almost every case, an ancestor becomes a divinity only by absorbing the attributes of original divinity. There is usually a foundation cult to which the strong person is closely associated as a priest or king before his death. Idowu cites Sango, a Yoruba solar and thunder lesser divinity as a classic example (Idowu 1973:171-173).

through the living dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men. They are still part of their human families, and people have personal memories of them. The two groups are bound together.

On the other hand, Kato (1975: 74-75) contends that Mbiti has rationalised the “ancestral worship” into terms of respect. Kato thereby condemns ancestral cult as pagan worship and idolatry.

### **3.5 Analysis and Conclusion**

Idowu, Mbiti (1969:74) and Kato agree that God in African thought, like *Oludumare* in Yoruba culture and *Onyame* in Akan culture, is the same as the Christian God. Idowu and Mbiti also contend that in African Traditional Religion the people not only know but also worship a Supreme Being. By contrast, Kato holds that the knowledge that the African had of God was only enough to convict them of their sin and that God was not worshipped in Africa. He contends that the problem is not so much what they knew, but the type and extent of that knowledge.

To Idowu and Mbiti, the lesser divinities were created by God to serve as the intermediaries between God and human beings, and technically they are not an end in themselves but a means to an end. Kato on the other hand, regards the lesser divinities as “gods” and therefore evil and an abomination in Christianity. He said of Idowu: “What the word of God calls idols, Idowu calls ministers of God in order to provide room for monotheistic universalism”.

Mbiti’s position on the ancestors is that they are not worshipped but simply revered. His basis is that Africans relate to them like their living elders. Yet Idowu contends that the ancestor cult comprises both veneration and worship. Kato differs from the two on cultural and theological grounds. He regards the ancestral cult as necromancy, demonic and therefore as idolatry. While Kato concedes that it is inadequate to sum up the whole of African Traditional religion in terms of idolatry, he argues that it is unrealistic to deny that idol worship forms part and parcel of African traditional religions.

The cultural and theological views of the above three theologians; namely: Idowu, Mbiti and Kato on the nature and relationship between God the lesser divinities and the ancestors, represent the broad spectrum of African theologies. Admittedly, no two theologians may hold the same beliefs but generally, all the emerging theologies in Africa follow the views of the above three theologians.

From the analysis of this chapter, we conclude that the debate of libation practices and Christian faith can better be understood within the context of the cultural and theological attributed positions of the lesser divinities and the ancestors in relation with the Christian concept of God.





## CHAPTER 4

### **Kwasi Sarpong on Christianity and Libation**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The Rt. Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong was ordained as Priest into the Catholic Church in 1959. He has been the Catholic Bishop (now Archbishop) of Kumasi, Ghana since 1970. He holds a Doctorate in Sacred Theology (STD) from the University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum), Rome. He also holds Masters of Letters (M.Litt.) in Social Anthropology from University of Oxford, England. Archbishop Sarpong spearheaded the inculturation of the Roman Catholic Mass in Ghana. He has written many books and articles on Christianity and African culture. Sarpong is also considered an authority on Akan traditional religion (Sarpong 1996:1).

Sarpong asserts that libation in its present form is not incompatible with the Christian faith. According to Sarpong (1996:2), the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and the ancestors serve as representatives of God. If libation is a form of prayer to God through such representatives, it may be regarded as compatible with the Christian faith since the *abosom* (lesser divinities) are not themselves worshipped. He further maintains that libation to the ancestors does not constitute worship. Rather, it is a symbolic way of recognizing the presence of the departed members of the family.

Section 4.2 of this chapter will consider Sarpong's approach to the task of inculturation. Section 4.3 will then discuss Sarpong's view on the practices and significance of libation practices in Akan life. Section 4.4, which is the core of the chapter, will assess Sarpong's contribution to a critical engagement regarding the recipients of libation. Section 4.4.1 will deal, more specifically with the issue of whether *Onyame* (Supreme Being) is the same as the God of Christianity. Section 4.4.2 will deal with the most contentious question, whether the *abosom* (lesser divinities) are intermediaries between God and human beings or not. Sarpong's response to the reconfiguration of the African ancestors into Christian sainthood will receive attention in section 4.4.3. Section 4.5 will consider Sarpong's views on whether the act of libation constitutes idolatry or not. Section 4.6 will assess Sarpong's overall position on Christian participation of libation rituals.

#### **4.2 African Christian theology as a contextualization process**

Sarpong's view on African Christian theology can be understood in the context of inculturation. Inculturation in Christian missiological context implies the use of African culture as a medium of communicating the Christian faith. Inculturation therefore aims at giving a purified meaning, in conformity with Christian truths, to African cultural practices.

Sarpong's proposal for the development of African Christian theology is to be found in his recent book *People Differ: An approach to Inculturation in Evangelisation (2002)*. Sarpong is keen to clarify where his approach to the development of African Christian theology should be placed within the range of approaches currently being used. Seven main approaches are described as comparative approaches: pedagogy, imposition, translation, adaptation, indigenisation, contextualisation and inculturation. After comparing inculturation with other concepts, Sarpong argues that the best way to describe the process of making the faith our own is inculturation (Sarpong 2002:27-32).

Being aware of the other definitions of inculturation, Sarpong settles for Schinler's definition which describes inculturation as: "the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes principles that animate, direct and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about new creation" (Sarpong 2002:32).

Sarpong explains that the aim of inculturation is to purify the society and to get rid of the obnoxious things in the society. He says inculturation does not mean the outright condemnation or commendation of a culture. Sarpong maintains that inculturation allows a re-interpretation of cultural practices. To illustrate this view, Sarpong suggests that *abosom* are intermediaries between God and human beings; thus the *abosom* can be likened to angels. In consonance with an inculturation approach, Sarpong suggests that libation is not to be condemned. He suggests a refinement, adoption and adaptation for Christian observances (Sarpong 1996:51).

### **4.3 The significance of libation practices in Akan life**

Sarpong maintains that libation should be understood as an act of prayer. As prayer, libation is the heart of Akan culture, as it is being practice from naming ceremonies to funerals. Sarpong explains that libation is meant to link human beings to God and to their fellow human beings. Libation give a sense of protection as one invokes the Supreme Being, the ancestors and the lesser divinities. It also brings about solidarity and helps to cement relationships. In this respect, libation has both religious and social significance to the Akan (Sarpong 1996: 1).

According to Sarpong, libation expresses the Akan belief in the Supreme Being, the ancestors and lesser divinities, and the dependence of human beings upon them. Sarpong points out that libation shows the relationship between the Supreme Being and the lesser divinities as the name of God is never mentioned in the middle of the prayer, but first and last. This shows the uniqueness of the Supreme Being. Through libation the Akan takes cognisance of the presence of the dead who have an interest in daily affairs. He also observes that sin against ancestors is sometimes put right by the pouring of libation, since it is regarded as prayer. This brings a harmonious relationship between the living and the memories of the dead.

During libation, the people present who hear the officiant link the people to their common ancestry heritage and realize that they belong to one group and have a common heritage. Sarpong therefore maintains that libation as prayer promotes mutual trust.

In libation prayer, the officiant will link the people to their common root through their ancestors. This helps the participants to realize that they belong to one group and have a common heritage. Sarpong therefore maintains that libation as prayer promotes mutual trust, confidence and social harmony as the people come together to pray to one God.

In consideration of the importance that Sarpong attaches to the traditional libation ritual, coupled with his inculturation approach, he suggests that libation should not be condemned outright. He proposes refinement, adaptation and adoption for those who are offended with any aspect of the ritual. Sarpong maintains that Christians can observe the traditional libation ritual as it stands. The next section which deals with

Sarpong's engagement with the main recipients of libation will help to clarify his position.

#### **4.4 Christian participation in traditional libation practices: A critical engagement on the recipients of libation**

##### **4.4.1 *Onyame* as the God of Christianity?**

Sarpong maintains that *Onyame* is unique, supreme and totally distinct from all other spirits. As the creator and sustainer, *Onyame* is the father of all *abosom* and spirits and therefore not part of a pantheon of *Abosom* (lesser divinities). He further asserts that *Onyame* is supreme over all in an absolute sense, and spirit being or human being cannot question his authority. He is therefore in full control of all issues. The *abosom* and the ancestors therefore *exercise executive powers* only in so far as *Onyame* permits them. To *Onyame* belongs the ultimate function of everything. He is the author and giver of all good things that human beings can possess namely wealth, children or property. In consideration of the nature, the role and the functions of *Onyame*, Sarpong maintains that *Onyame* is none other than the Christian God (Sarpong 1974:19, 2002:96-97).

He also states that if worship is defined in terms of temples and priests, then little worship is given to *Onyame*. He points out that temples are rarely built for *Onyame* and that He seldom has priests. Images of *Onyame* are almost non-existent, but there are countless representations of other lesser divinities in wood, clay, brass and stone (Sarpong 1974:12).

He further argues that if worship includes prayer, then *Onyame* receives much worship. He maintains that prayer is worship. Prayer in the form of ejaculation, formal appeal and libation is offered to God on regular basis by the Akan.

Sarpong explains that God comes to the limelight especially on the individual level, as opposed to the ancestors and the lesser gods who come to the forefront in the lineage and tribal worship respectively. For this reason, sacrifice to God, while not being altogether lacking, is a rare occurrence, so also is what one may term *worship*. He remarks that the true Akan would never think of representing God in art (Sarpong 1974:12).

Sarpong contends that God may be approached without priest or intermediary, with empty hand in any place: since He is Almighty and Omnipresent, He can hear the slightest voice and the humblest cry. Sarpong further points out that *Onyame* is the *final court of appeal*, the judge of all, and to him human beings turn in despair. At the same time, He is regularly contacted on very small issues. Sarpong's description of Onyame differs from what has often been said about Onyame: He is only contacted as last resort.

From the analysis, Sarpong's concept of *Onyame* (Akan's Supreme Beings), seems to be in sharp contrast with any view that necessitates the need of intermediary between God and human beings. Now the question that arises is: What is the need of having the lesser divinities as intermediaries to represent God before human beings? In the following section we will see how Sarpong addresses this contentious issue.

#### **4.4.2 The lesser divinities as intermediaries?**

Sarpong maintains that all the lesser divinities are creatures of God, subject to Him in every way and only do His will. He explains this to mean that God manifests Himself through the *abosom* (lesser divinities). Sarpong follows this with a claim that they are God's sons and ministers and that He executes His plans through them.

He postulates that the term *abosom* (lesser divinities) suggests that the habitat of lesser divinities were formerly only stones. This suggestion is based on the etymological meanings of the two words *abo* and *som*. However, the habitats of the *abosom* in Akan are not always stones or rocks. Particularly among the Asantes (on whom Sarpong's studies are based) almost all the ancient and original *abosom* are water deities (lesser divinities). On the basis of that, Sarpong's suggestion does not bring out the true meaning of *abosom*.<sup>14</sup>

Sarpong (1974: 15) admits that it is not easy to determine the precise nature of *abosom* (lesser divinities), but he maintains that they were created by God; they are

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<sup>14</sup> There is another suggestion, particularly by some Christians that, *abro* (useless) and *som* (worship) connote the meaning of *abosom*. However, such a suggestion is just a negative expression by which Christians show their contempt and disregard for *abosom*.

spirits and have, as their earthly abode, anything from rivers to creepers, and from beasts to rocks. He asserts that they have never become human beings nor have they ever been in the category of God before. They are supposed to possess astonishing powers that they may use, some to the advantage of human beings, others to his detriment. They may be male or female, and their influence is independent of their sex.

He contends that even though they are creatures of God and subordinate to Him, they may use their enormous powers independently of Him. They are distinct from the spirits of the dead and may reside also in human made shrines. However, they seem to have a special love for those “residential areas” which induce fear and reverence.

According (1974: 17) to Sarpong, the *abosom* are said to have a means of supplying the needs of their subjects. They demand worship and obedience from human beings in response to the needs they meet. Their importance is commensurate with the kind of needs that they are supposed to provide. He points out that not every lesser divinity is benevolent to human beings. Some indeed are, but others are mischievous. They punish those who do not give them the due worship and obedience. Sacrifices are made to them either to repay the benignity of the good ones or to avoid the malignity of the ill-disposed ones.

Sarpong (1974: 15) makes a distinction between good and evil *abosom* (lesser divinities). Yet he fails to indicate when and how some of the *abosom* and spirits became evil. He suggests that the good ones be likened to angels and the bad ones to demons. The issue however is not a matter of *abosom* acting badly or well; it is a matter of whether the so called evil *abosom* are distinct in personality from the good ones and whether the evil *abosom* can be called intermediaries or not. If they can not be called intermediaries between God and human beings, then the question is: what are these evil *abosom* and who do they represent? This presupposes a dualism whereby good *abosom* are messengers of God and evil *abosom* and spirits are messengers of the devil as head of the evil forces. This concept is foreign to the Akan worldview where the forces of evil do not have a leader. Thus a classification of the *abosom* as good and bad is based on a foreign concept of dualism which is unacceptable in the Akan culture.

In response to that, Sarpong contends that the Akan are in a universe which is largely beyond their control. Even when events contradict the most reasonable human expectation, God is still a good God; the people take things as a reflection of the will of God. Thus fortunes or misfortunes are said to be God's activities or another of his reflections.

He further explains that the Akan does not rely on organized religious doctrines or on theology to answer Akan's questions, because the Akan have no organized doctrine or theology. The Akan rely entirely on experience. Experience tells them that fortune and misfortune happen. It must be God's messengers who bring them: however, God is not to be blamed any more than a king is personally blameworthy if his messenger misbehaves. In this respect Sarpong maintains that whereas the spirits are representatives of God, their moral actions cannot be said to be of God.

In response to Sarpong's claims, we can say that even though in principle the Akan believe that everything depends on God they do not attribute evil as the work of God. There is a sharp distinction between the good acts and acts of sheer evil. Evil acts are usually attributed to *bayie* (witchcraft), evil spirits or are interpreted as a punishment from the lesser divinities or the ancestors. On that basis, the Akan make libation to lesser divinities and spirits not only as the means of giving them food (beverage) but sometimes also to appease them so that they do not harm anyone out of sheer wickedness. This concept illustrates the Akan maxim: *se Sasabonsam eba wo fie a, ye de eto ne kosua ena epam no* (if an evil spirit intends to harm you, you should treat it with kindness).

#### **4.4.3 The ancestors as saints?**

For Sarpong, the most important aspect of Akan religion next to God is the ancestral cult. After God, the ancestors come next in importance. He contends that all other spirit beings may be spoken ill of or even ridiculed on occasion, but God and the ancestors are always held in awe. Assessing the nature, the role and functions of the

ancestors in Akan society, Sarpong (200: 98 ) suggests that (all)<sup>15</sup> the ancestors can be considered as saints in the process of inculturation.

In this light Sarpong (1974: 40) asserts that the Akan do not consider the spirits of the dead to be lesser divinities, although in venerating them, they may easily give the impression that they think that the ancestors possess absolute power which is autocratic and is used without reference to God. They may be benevolent towards the living, they may also be malevolent. They deal with people according to what they deserve. Sarpong explains this to mean that the relation between the dead and living are based on the assumption that an ancestor is by definition a good person. Yet they can act badly or well towards human beings depending in the situation (Sarpong1974: 40).

Sarpong further asserts that the ancestors are empowered by God, but they seem to operate independently of God in their intervention of human activities. In this regard, their providential care, sanctions, and their judgments relating to human beings are based on the virtue of their own higher human power, acquired through entering the spiritual world. Sarpong compares the position and power of the ancestors to that of a Prime Minister or a President of a country who gets his authority to rule as soon as he is elected to office.

He also maintains that the ancestors are relatives but not gods. The Akan do not offer sacrifices to them, but symbolically use food as a point of communion with them. This is in line with the belief that in a place where they are, *asamando*, (eternal resting place for good people) they are not hungry or thirsty any more than God can be hungry or thirsty. Also, in the Akan tradition food and drink are signs and symbols of cordiality, friendship and good relationships. Therefore when the Akan pour drink calling upon the ancestors to come and take the drink, they are only expressing vividly and symbolically that they want to be with the ancestors.

Sarpong (1996: 37) therefore argues that Christians (Roman Catholics) do the same, namely by asking the saints to come and help them. However, he admits that petitions

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<sup>15</sup> An ancestor, by definition, is a good spirit being. Thus, there is nothing like bad ancestor in Akan. Those who do not qualify to become ancestors turn to become *samantwentwen* (hunting ghosts).



are sometimes addressed to the ancestor. This implies dependence. He maintains that this does not mean worship to the ancestors since they are intermediaries and the ultimate request goes to God. He cites the social structure of the Akan whereby one can put one's request to a chief through another person as an intermediary to buttress one's claim (Sarpong 1996:37).

In contrast to Sarpong, Buti TLIhagale (2004:48), another Roman Catholic archbishop in South Africa, argues against the compatibility of the ancestors and the sainthood in Roman Catholic tradition. However, looking critically at TLIhagale's argument, the differences lie not so much in the approach, but with the traditional understanding of the ancestral cult in their respective localities.

TLIhagale's three main objections are (1) there is no reference to God at all in the ancestral ritual, (2) women and children are excluded from the ancestorship (3) ancestors are always referred to in the plural. They are said to be collective (TLIhagale 2004: 45-48). Looking at TLIhagale contentions, with the exception of the exclusion of the children from the ancestorship, it seems that the issues he raises will not be a problem when one interprets the ancestral cult from the Akan perspective. In the Akan ancestral cult, before the ancestors are invoked, God's name will be mentioned first. The Akan ancestral cult also does not exclude women from being ancestors: there are women ancestors amongst the Akan. Further, unlike the South African context where TLIhagale draws his experience, the Akan ancestors are not only referred to collectively but also individually.<sup>16</sup>

#### **4.5 Libation and idolatry**

The central focus of the discussion on libation practices is the debate on whether or not the act of libation constitutes idolatry. In this section, we will discuss some contentious issues on libation and idolatry, and Sarpong's responses to them.

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<sup>16</sup> These differences raise an important issue that African theologians have taken for granted in their theological formulations: the cultural differences seems more than what theologians assumed them to be.

#### **4.5.1 Libation and the First commandment**

Sarpong (1996: 27) rightly observes that if there is anything objectionable in the making of libation, it is the mention of the *nsamamfoo* (ghosts), the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and *Asaase Yaa* (mother earth). He points out that it is this aspect of libation that seems to go against the First Commandment: I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, where thou lived as slaves. You shall have no other gods to rival me (Exodus. 20:1-2). However, Sarpong insists that the ancestors, the lesser divinities and the *Asase yaa* (Earth) are not gods neither do they rival Yahweh.

As he considers libation basically as prayer, Sarpong asserts that every true prayer in the last analysis acknowledges God as the only source of all grace. He maintains that libation as prayer is neither superstition nor idolatry. Leaning on Catholic tradition, he explains that the acts contrary to the virtue of religion are classified in two categories. He says that one can sin against this virtue either by “defect” or by “excess”. One sins by defect through want of due reverence to God, such as blasphemy, perjury, tempting God. One sins in excess, by giving to a creature the honour which is due to God alone, or by giving to God himself honour which is false or superfluous.

According to Sarpong (1996:22), the general term for acts by which divine honour is given to creatures is “superstition” or vain observance. He defines superstition “as ... performing acts or using inanimate created or man-made things in order to obtain effects, which can only be produced by God”. He added that when such honour is explicitly given to such creatures, it is called idolatry (Sarpong 1996:28).

He argues that libation is neither superstition nor idolatry because it has nothing to do with divination; it is the practice of trying to find out the hidden, the unknown or the future through mysterious means. It is also not magic which is the use of inanimate means to produce spectacular effects. Further, it is also not sorcery, which is the use of inanimate means to cause harm to others.

#### **4.5.2 Communion with the dead**

Sarpong also argues that an ancestral veneration is practiced everywhere. He asserts that in developed nations, monuments in the form of cenotaphs can be raised to unknown soldiers for what they have done in the past to defend the nation. He argues

that if these acts are not considered to be religious but are acts of gratitude to remind the living of people who have meant something to the society in the past, then it would appear that on public occasions, it is quite permissible to pour libation, mentioning the ancestors.

#### **4.5.3 Petitioning the ancestors and the lesser divinities in libation**

Sarpong concedes to the idea that prayers are truly addressed to the ancestors and the divinities and the things are sought from them. They are asked to bless living human beings, to give them children, to make their businesses succeed, to give them long life, to give them happiness. However he points out that, in the Akan belief, the ancestors and divinities exist because God wants them to exist and that they cannot do things outside the context of God's will.

He therefore argues that such expressions of dependence should be interpreted in the light of the role that the lesser divinities and the ancestors play as intermediaries, for they are supposed to be nearer to God than ordinary people. They also serve as representatives of God to man. He illustrates his argument with the idea that in ordinary life, we implore chiefs and other leaders for favours. The words we use seem to indicate that the favours are coming from them. He argues that it is this type of behaviour towards our elders and our leaders that is extended to the ancestors and the divinities in a more elevated way. He maintains that the ancestors are in a totally different category from God and the lesser divinities. He contends that the signs of deference that are exhibited when libation is poured to the ancestors are exhibited also towards human beings.

He explains that when libation is being made, the one pouring it adopts a certain posture such as baring the shoulders, removing the sandals, and bowing down. Yet in ordinary life, these same external signs of respect are shown to the chief, the king, leaders, and other men and women of repute. People, before they greet their chief, will remove their sandals from their feet and bare their shoulders.

Sarpong then argues that if in the case of ordinary human beings, these are not supposed to be signs of religion, signs of worship and signs of idolatry, why should they be so considered in the case of the ancestors? He asserts that it is reasonable to

suppose that it is the same type of respect that is accorded to the ancestors. Drawing an example from the Catholic tradition to buttress his point, Sarpong (1996:38) points out that in Catholicism, a lot of prayers are said to saints. Thus the fact that the prayers are addressed to the ancestors and to the *abosom* (lesser divinities) cannot be a prohibiting factor in itself to Christianity.

He cites a prayer to Mary as an example, “we fly to thy patronage, Oh Holy Mother of God. Despise not our prayers in our necessities but deliver us from all dangers, O glorious and Blessed Virgin” (Sarpong1996:36). He argues that, if one considers the prayer in itself outside the context of the teaching of the Catholic Church, then there is nothing in that prayer that suggests that it is intercessory; everything is addressed to Mary (Our Lady). The Catholics ask her “to deliver them from dangers”. He states that the impression created is that favours are being requested from Mary directly. However in the light of Catholic doctrine he maintains that there is only one God who is unique, the Creator and Master of all, thus this interpretation cannot be correct with respect to Catholic teachings (Sarpong 1996:36-37).

Again drawing on the Catholic teaching, Sarpong observes that there is only one mediator between God and us. He states, even if we call Mary a mediatrix, as the Roman Catholics do, this does not in any way detract from the unique mediatorship of Jesus Christ (Sarpong 1996:37).

He argues that just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways, both by sacred ministers and by the faithful, and just as the oneness of God is really communicated in different ways to his creatures, in the same way the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather embraces creatures whose co-operation in the Redeemer’s mediation is but a sharing in this one Source.

Sarpong argues that it is therefore unfair to accuse the Akan of robbing God of his excellence through libation. He contends that prayers said to the ancestors and to the divinities are not meant to replace the uniqueness of God. He claims they share in God’s power in a way which He himself has allowed the ancestors and the divinities to.

#### **4.5.4 Food and drink to the lesser divinities and ancestors**

Sarpong admits that the ancestors and the divinities are asked to drink and to eat. “*Gye nsa; nsa nie. Gye nsa nom*” (Here is some wine, take this and drink it). He however argues that the offering of drink and food is a symbolic way interacting with the spirit beings.

He substantiates his argument in favour of libation to the lesser divinities and the ancestors that among the Akan, food and drink are often used as items to express cordial relationships, as the Akan often say *Mene no to nsa adidi* (I eat with him or her from the same pot). When somebody enters your house and you are eating, the first thing you say is *Woato me* or *Woato yen* (literally “You have met us eating”, that is, “please join us to eat”). If the guest does not feel like eating, he does not say, “No, I will not eat”; he says “*Me nsa da mu*” (“My hand is already in the pot” that is, I am full).

He therefore argues that the overall meaning of all these ceremonies or acts connected with food and drink is to express cordial relationships, solidarity and the desire to keep them. One who fails to do these things will be regarded as anti-social.

He states that explaining the act of libation symbolically does not, of course, mean that Christians should whole heartedly accept everything in it. He says the crucial question is the identity of those whom we implore in libation, especially the lesser divinities.

Sarpong concludes that, the ancestors are not worshipped, but receive veneration like the living elders. The lesser divinities are also not worshipped but receive worship on behalf of God as God’s representatives. In consideration of this, traditional libation practices are compatible with the Christian faith, and therefore not idolatry.

#### **4.5.5 Curses**

Sarpong (1996:46) also observes that, another common objection by Christians to libation in the context of worship is that, normally at the end of the libation prayer, curses and evil wishes are heaped upon the enemy. The person praying may end by saying: “let the person who does not want us to achieve our aim, or let the person who

is evil force to us, who is thwarting our efforts, be cursed, or let the burden of his or her sin fall upon him or her or something to that effect”.

He admits that the objection to the curse can be understandable but at the same time, the curse can be understood in a different light. He says libation never condemns an individual by name; it condemns evil people; it condemns those who are disposed towards evil. He further states that a curse in itself is not reprehensible; it depends upon what you mean and whom you are cursing. He further argues that going through the Holy Scripture, one literally finds many of curses, and the Psalms are full of those curses. Psalms 89 was given as an example to buttress his point Sarpong 1996:46-47).

#### **4.6 Conclusion and Assessments**

As a theologian and an anthropologist, Sarpong discusses libation in a theological and anthropological perspective. His suggestion that religious rituals in a given time become social symbolic acts and that libation should be interpreted symbolically and given a time to become social symbolic acts, is worth considering. This suggestion is in line with Sarpong hermeneutical approach of inculturation. However, the focus of the thesis is to assess the theological implications; how the libation ritual in the Akan tradition conforms and conflicts with Christian doctrines.

Sarpong maintains that *Onyame* is unique and distinct from creation. He is the creator of all things including all the spirit beings and he is none other than Christians proclaim. Therefore *Onyame* is in a class by himself. This conception of *Onyame* should clarify the confusion, which put *Onyame* among some of his creatures and thereby distorted the relationship between *Onyame* and the *abosom* as *God and the gods*. Sarpong rightly observes that *Onyame* has never been in the category of *abosom* nor have any of the *abosom* or spirit beings ever been in the category of God. Similarly, *Onyame* was never once an ancestor nor have any of the ancestors ever been elevated to the class of *Onyame* (Sarpong 2003:97).

Such a traditional understanding calls for a dismantling of the category of God and gods as applied to the Akan traditional religion. In this context, libation practices among the Akan are not offering libation to many gods but to one God and His creatures that are spirit beings (Sarpong 2002:97).

Sarpong (2002: 97) maintains that these spirit beings are representatives or ministers of God. Regarding the *abosom* and the ancestors as ministers of God, he says that they are not an end in themselves but a means to an end. This is because *abosom* (lesser divinities) do not exist by themselves and they can exercise their powers only as far as God permits them.

Nevertheless, there is a missing link between Sarpong's argument that *abosom* are the children of God and his argument that the *abosom* are the representatives of God. To the Akan, the son is not necessarily the father's representative. The traditional common understanding is that the *abosom* are creatures of God and not ministers of God. The fact that *abosom* were created by God is not sufficient enough to consider them as intermediaries between God and human beings.

Sarpong's only explanation to the missing link seems to be the Akan saying: *nnsem nyinaa ye Onyame asem* (all things depend on God). In reference to that, Sarpong argues that the *abosom* (lesser divinities) exercise their power to the limit that God has set for them. However, Sarpong is right as far as he extends the same statement to all of God's creatures. If Sarpong arrives at a decision that God created each one of his creatures to perform a special task and thereby every creature is God's representatives or ministers then there is nothing special about the *abosom*, (lesser divinities) and spirits being as the sons of *Onyame* (Supreme Being). In consideration of this analysis, the role of the *abosom* as intermediaries between God and human beings seems to be on shaky ground. If every creature is God's representative then the *abosom* have no special role to play.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Kwesi Dickson on Christianity and Libation**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

Kwesi Dickson is an Akan from Ghana. He is a Methodist ordained minister in Ghana where he served as the National presiding Bishop from 1990 to 1997. Dickson holds a B.Litt. from the University of Oxford. Subsequent to that, he has spent many years in Britain and the United States, studying and teaching. He has taught for many years at the University of Ghana, first as professor of Theology and Religion and was later appointed as the Director of the Institute of African Studies. Dickson has travelled widely to attend international conferences in many parts of the world. Trained as an Old Testament Scholar, he has written many text-books on Old Testament and New Testament for use in Ghanaian Schools. His interest in the African religious heritage was indicated early in his career by his introduction to the second edition of Danqua's Akan Doctrine of God (Danqua 1968). Dickson has written many books and articles including "Theology in Africa" (1984), the embodiment of his theology of Christianity and African culture.

Dickson maintains that libation rituals, which are very vital to the Akan, may not necessarily be acts of worship, and that Christian participation in libation rituals therefore does not constitute prima facie idolatry. Nevertheless, Dickson attacks the concept that the lesser divinities serve as the intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings, and demonstrates that the assumption is weak, particularly, in the thought and practices of Akan traditional religion. He contends that while libation to the lesser divinities would constitute disloyalty from the Christian perspective, libation to the ancestors needs not to be. He argues, though not convincingly, that the ancestors are not worshipped but are simply revered. He maintains that it is the libation prayer which would give the real indication of whether or not libation to the ancestors constitutes idolatry.

Dickson's approach to the task of contextualization is to be outlined in section 5.2 of this chapter. Section 5.3 will then consider Dickson's view on the practices and the significance of the libation ritual in Akan life. Section 5.4, which is the core of the



chapter, will discuss the contribution that Dickson makes to the critical engagement on the addressees of libation. In this regard, section 5.4.1 will discuss the question, of whether *Onyame* (the Akan Supreme Being) is the same as the God of Christianity. Section 5.4.2 will deal with the most contentious question, namely whether the Akan *abosom* (lesser divinities) are intermediaries between God and human beings or not. Dickson's response to the question of whether or not offering libation to the ancestors constitutes idolatry will receive attention in section 5.4.3. Section 5.5 will offer a conclusion and an assessment.

## **5.2 African Christian theology as a contextualisation process**

In "Theology in Africa", Dickson maintains that the only meaningful way that theology can be done is to develop it in relationship within a cultural context (Dickson 1986:34). He says this is precisely what was left out in much of the missionary preaching of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. He contends that traditional cultures of Africa were rejected, and the gospel was presented in the theological terms developed in European cultural contexts. As a consequence, when the church was set up, it unavoidably had a Western ethos (Dickson: 1984:34). To Dickson the theological confusion of the church in Africa has led to an uncertainty about what are appropriate patterns of worship, and the inability to speak or act effectively on contemporary social issues.

Dickson's aim in *Theology in Africa* might be to state principles for doing theology in Africa that may be used across the boundaries of different African societies. However, it is mostly from the Akan cultural context that Dickson illustrates his general account of the African religio-cultural reality. Dickson (1984:9) justifies his general approach by contending that there is a certain unity in the nature of the problems arising from the setting up of the Christian church in Africa. With such an approach, Dickson is following other Christian theologians in assuming that there are sufficient common features among the religions of different African societies to justify a general account of African societies. By contrast, most anthropological studies focus on particular societies, interpreting religious rituals and beliefs in relationship with other aspects of a particular cultural context. The underlying assumption is that religion is one aspect of a culture which is interpreted most effectively through local knowledge of a society (Geertz 1983, Fulljames 1993:38).

It is the religious aspects of the cultural context which are claimed by Dickson to be important in the development of the authentic African Christian theology. In contrast to Karl Barth's rejection of religion, Dickson regards religion as an acknowledgement of God's rule over mankind (Dickson 1984:30). The study of beliefs and practices related to the traditional spirit powers, through the phenomenal-logical study of religion, is thus an important preliminary task for the theologian (Dickson 1984:37). According to Dickson, if these beliefs and practices are to contribute to the development of a Christian theology, it is necessary to establish that there is one God of the whole earth and that *Onyame* (Supreme Being in Akan) is the same as the God of Christianity (Dickson 1984:36).

### **5.3 The significance of libation practices in Akan life**

In his personal experience and opinion about Christians participating in libations, Dickson makes it clear that he has personally not made libation before. However, he has witnessed his mother doing that in a difficult moment of her life. It was a crucial time that her husband, a Methodist minister, had just passed away, and they had to move to another place. The mother found herself alone, taking care of the children.

According to Dickson<sup>17</sup>, he was about to set out from Winneba to Cape Coast where he attended school. He saw his mother take water and simply say "ancestors; take care of my son on his journey to Cape Coast". She then poured the water on the ground. Dickson says that he did not think about this until years later when he enrolled in the theological seminary. Then he began to reflect on his mother's action. Since then he has given talks and written about Biblical revelations and Christianity.

When asked about his views on the Christian pouring libation only to God or *abosom* (lesser divinities) or ancestors, he replied that he may not have a problem with libation to God alone. However, he is not certain about doing so to the ancestors. He says that it would all depend on the content of the words addressed to them. If it implies religious dependence, then he deems it to be contrary to his faith. On the issue of pouring libation to the lesser divinities, Dickson states that they are sometimes

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<sup>17</sup> This following story was narrated to me by Dickson on my first interview with him at his house in Accra on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2004.

treated as ends in themselves, thus pouring libation to them would constitute disloyalty to Christ.

On the significance of libation to the Akan, Dickson (1984: 68-69) states that the importance of libation may be seen more in the context of the ancestral cult. He remarks that the ancestors represent the beliefs, attitudes and values which are held in common within a community and which together shape its identity. He points out that the best known means by which communion may be achieved with the ancestors is libation.

Dickson is right to observe that libation is the best known means for the human beings to contact the spirit world. Libation is used to invoke the ancestors to participate in all the activities of the living. As the Akan traditional customs demand, no one appears before a chief for important discussions without first presenting a drink to the chief. Similarly, when the ancestors are invited to participate in any important family meeting, which cannot be done without them, they are invoked through the pouring of libation. Thus every important occasion such as marriage, social agreements and funerals, demand pouring of libation. Among the Akan, the chiefs who are the immediate direct representatives of the ancestors are supposed to pour libation to the ancestors on a regular basis and failure to do so can call for the distoolment of the chief.

Dickson asserts that no one can claim to be an adequate chief and fail to perform the functions of his office; *pouring* libations to the ancestors whom they had succeeded. In Ghana one is a chief because the ancestors have made one so, and one is made a chief in order to render due respect to the ancestors (Sarpong 1974:43). Prominent among these is the making of libation to the ancestors.

Dickson observes that chieftaincy involves a uniting of the past and the present in the chief's personality. This role of uniting the past and present in the chief which has been subjected to questioning by the church, according to Dickson, involves the pouring of libation. Dickson states that in the Akan cultural context, the social structure and religious practices are closely related to the ancestors. He explains that

the ancestors as well as the yet to be born are regarded as part of the community. By their presence they express the solidarity of the community.

#### **5.4 Christian participation in traditional libation practices: A critical engagement on the recipients of libation**

In this section I will discuss the view of Dickson on the three recipients of Akan libation rituals namely: *Onyame* (Supreme Being), *abosom* (lesser divinities), and the ancestors. I will present his views on the relationship between the Supreme Being of African tradition theology and the God proclaimed by Christianity, the role of the lesser divinities as the intermediaries between God and human beings, and the status of the ancestors in this regard. I will demonstrate that the ways in which Dickson understands African traditional culture and religion on these three recipients influence his views on Christian responses to traditional African views on the Supreme Being, the intermediaries and the ancestors. Such responses also shape his view on Christian participation in libation rituals.

##### **5.4.1 *Onyame* as the God of Christianity?**

An analysis of the names and the epithets given to *Onyame* in the Akan cultural context shows that *Onyame* is understood as the ultimate, the one on whom all things depend. *Onyame* is the Supreme Being, the creator, the originator, the power that sustains all things and the infinite. On the basis of this evidence, Dickson asserts that the concept of *Onyame* as the ultimate leads to an understanding of *Onyame* as God who is none other than the God proclaimed by Christianity.

At the beginning of the anthropological and sociological studies of African culture, there was an assumption that Africans do not have a concept of God. Further studies disproved this assertion, and proved beyond reasonable doubt that the concept of God, in many African societies is original with the people. Yet this understanding was quickly countered by the argument that it was borrowed either from Muslims or Christians' missionary preaching. Dickson flatly contradicts these findings and asserts that the concept of God is to be encountered all over Africa. He further asserts that: "no one seriously believes now that the concept of God in African religion is a borrowed one" (Dickson 1984: 52).

Dickson argues that, if Christianity is to be authentic in Africa, it is necessary to establish that the African concept of God (in the various societies) is original, there is one God of the whole earth, and that every religion is to a certain measure an embodiment of the drama of God meeting human beings (Dickson 1984: 36). Dickson does this in two ways; first with reference to the Bible and second by drawing on a recent debate in the theology of religions.

Dickson admits that there is a theme of exclusivism in the Old Testament which sharply distinguishes the Hebrews from other peoples. He points out further that there is also a theme of universalism which recognises the purposes of God for all people (Genesis 12:3). He also affirmed that God is worshipped in many nations according to Malachi 1:11 (Dickson 1984:18-19).

Dickson quotes Hick (1973) and Küng (1978) to support his rejection of the idea that God is originally only known to the Hebrews. He states that the best known representative of that position is Karl Barth (Dickson 1984:38). Dickson criticises both Hick and Küng for limiting their discussions to what they regard as the major religious traditions of humanity. He argues at length that if they were aware of the true nature of African traditional religions, they would recognise that God may be revealed to some extent in these religions (Dickson 1984:101-109). Also, the Supreme Being in African societies is none other than the God in Christianity.

Another argument is that Africans do not have a clear concept of God; that is, God is not worshipped in African traditional religion. Byang Kato is the best representative of this view. By contrast Idowu argues that no religion can make a claim of having a clear concept of God. He points out that the concept of God that Christianity (and even Islam) has today is the product of a long process of development led by the elite of the religion. Even then, there is no consensus among the members of Christianity regarding the concept of God. Idowu further asserts that God is equally worshipped in African traditional religions as He is in Christianity but in different ways.

In between these two radical positions of Kato and Idowu, Dickson takes a middle position: that God is known and worshipped in African societies but to some extent this worship needs Christian revelation to make it complete. Mbiti shares this view, and so do most African theologians.

Nevertheless, Dickson admits that African traditional religion and Christianity meet without common grounds except in one respect, the idea within the African traditional religion of a Supreme Being. Even here the discussion is superficial, for God tends to be cut off from other spiritual powers which the African has traditionally believed were closely related to him.

#### **5.4.2 The lesser divinities as intermediaries?**

Dickson attacks the view that the lesser divinities serve as the intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings. He demonstrates that the assumption is weak, particularly, in the thought and practice of Akan traditional religion. Dickson offers three criticisms of this view, and argues that the proponents have overstated their case. The proponents of intermediary concept contend that: (a) the myth of God's withdrawal suggests the need for intermediaries between God and human beings, (b) the relation within the world of spirits is patterned after the relations within human social structures, and that in African societies just as a chief communicates through a series of functionaries, so does God act through different levels of intermediaries, the lesser divinities being the first in line; and (c) in African belief there is nothing that happens unless it has been permitted by God, thus the lesser divinities function under God.

##### **(a) “Deus absconditus” (the hidden God) and intermediaries**

The proponents of the intermediary concept contend that the myth of God's withdrawal has an implication of *Deus absconditus* (hidden god); human beings could not read God's mind and understand his intention in order to use His power. It therefore suggests that God has delegated his authority to the lesser divinities to act as His intermediaries (Idowu 1973:166-179, Sarpong 2002: 97).

Dickson notes that many of the African scholars assume that the myth of God's withdrawal has an implication of the need for an intermediary role, and that the presence of the lesser divinities fills that gap. Thus the issue of the relationship between God and the lesser divinities is answered by the intermediary role which they fulfil. On that basis, the lesser divinities exist to serve as the intermediaries between

God and human beings. Dickson disagrees with the proponents of the intermediary view. He engages with the two main views of this concept.

First, Dickson (1984:52) points out that the myth of God's withdrawal does not mean for Africans that God is redundant and that there is a need of intermediaries. He gives two examples to buttress his point. He points out that some African societies, including the Asante in Ghana, do offer sacrifices to God. He also cites informal ejaculatory statements which feature God's name in many situations. On this basis, he goes on to argue that this evidence shows that God is still regarded among the Akan and Africa in general to be close enough to be approached formally and informally in worship without the need for any intermediaries.

**(b) The Spirit world is patterned after the relations within human social structures?**

The proponents of the intermediary concept also maintain that the relation within the world of spirits is patterned after the relations within human social structures. They contend that in African societies, just as a chief communicates through series of functionaries, so does God act through different levels of intermediaries, the lesser divinities being the first in line.

In arguing against this contention, Dickson contends that such a conception is not an adequate explanation. He says that considering the role and functions of *akyeame* (linguists) in the court of the Akan chief, one will obviously accept that their role and functions are that of an intermediary and that the ultimate is the chief; nothing is done or happens unless he allows it. He argues that if the analogy fits lesser divinities, then the expression may very well reflect the belief that the lesser divinities are intermediaries and the ultimate is God, so nothing is done or happens unless God has allowed it. But he argues that the analogy of the intermediary role of the lesser divinities (to that of Akan *akyeame*) is not exemplified by experience and rituals in Akan religion; the Akan do not regard the lesser divinities as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings in their practical life and also in the rituals. Needless to say, Dickson accurately points to the fact that the analogy is evidently inadequate at best and inappropriate at worst in the Akan rituals.

### **(c) Nothing happens unless it has been permitted by God**

The proponents of the intermediary theory, particularly Idowu (1962:116), argue that since in African belief nothing happens unless it has been permitted by God, it can be said that in libation prayer it is the object of worship who grants the wish. The wish is not granted because the petitioner wills it so. Dickson (1984:57) dismisses the argument of the intermediary concept as a simplistic explanation. He explains that in the view of the urgent appeal and threats, *if you do not fulfil our desires, we abandon you and look for another deity*, that sometimes form the conclusion of libation prayer, the obvious implication is that it is the will of the petitioner that is done. He argues that this also confirms the suspicion that lesser divinities are treated as self-sufficient beings; for they are seen as the ones who actually fulfil the desire.

He further explains that the libation prayer offered in a ritual situation is often such as to cause one to wonder whether the gods are not addressed as self-sufficient entities. In response, Dickson points to two issues which are very enlightening. First, if worship is being directed to several lesser divinities, the leader of the cult sometimes takes the precaution of apologising for his inability to remember each and every name of the lesser divinities. This is for the purpose of pacifying any deities who might be present but unknown. Second, he also points to petitions which include requests for material blessings for long life, children and generally the good things of life. Following this, Dickson argues that in libation prayer, it is the object of prayer but not the petitioner whose will is done.

However, Dickson (1984:56) concedes that Asantes in Ghana consider some *abosom* (lesser divinities) as sons of *Onyame*. He makes clear that the description of sons of God in the Asante tradition is limited to only the water lesser divinities (Dickson 1984:56). Besides, in the Akan context, the phrase “God’s child” is a cluster concept; because it cannot be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. In the Akan tradition any elderly person can call anyone he or she can give birth to as *meba* (my son or my daughter or my child) or *memma* (my children). Thus, *sonship* in Akan does not necessarily denote filial relationship as is claimed.

On the other hand, Dickson argues that monotheism, whether qualified as a description of African traditional religions or not, raises problems. He points out that

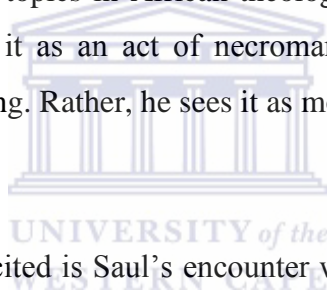


the preference of monotheism or polytheism in the final analysis depends on what definition one gives to these terms. While declining to give definitions to these terms, he comments that there has sometimes been considerable haste in the application of these terms to African traditional religions.

### **5.4.3 Libation to the ancestors as idolatry?**

Dickson maintains that libation to the ancestors may not necessarily be idolatry, but it all depends on the content of the prayer that accompanies the pouring of the drink. He substantiates his position with three points: (a) there is similarity in the ancestral cult of the traditional Akan religion and the Old Testament, (b) the Akan does not worship his/her ancestors, and (c) the content of the prayer is the determining factor.

(a) The question of an African Christian understanding of the role of ancestors is one of the most frequent debated topics in African theology. Whereas some theologians (O'Donovan 1992: 231) see it as an act of necromancy, Dickson (1984:70) flatly differs from such understanding. Rather, he sees it as more similar to the ancestral cult of the Old Testament.



The classic example usually cited is Saul's encounter with the witch of Endor whom he asked to call up the prophet Samuel from death. This example is used to contend that Deuteronomy chapter 18 categorically condemns necromancy. Moreover, it is explained that it is not the efficacy of the necromancy that is being dismissed. Rather, it is the morality of it according to the moral standards of Christianity. Based on this explanation, it is argued that this is precisely the point that many African theologians have misunderstood to the peril of "syncretism" in African Christianity.

To Dickson what the above argument misses is the premise of the argument; it fails to recognize the difference between the cult of the dead and the cult of the ancestors. Dickson rightly points out that, among the Akan, the cult of the dead is not the same as the cult of the ancestors. The cult of the dead generally known as necromancy is the practice whereby the living human being invokes and consults the "spirit" of the dead for knowledge about the past or present or future issue. Obviously, the cult of the dead is an act of divination.

By contrast, the ancestral cult does not dabble with divination; when in contact with the ancestors, the Akan do not ask “on the spot” knowledge about issues. Admittedly, the prayer that accompanies the drop of the drink has in part a formal request. Nonetheless, it is certainly not divination.

The Akan has two terms for divination, namely *abisa* and *nsamankom*. The former is an act of formal consultation from a priest or priestess or “mediceman” for knowledge of the past or present or the future. The latter is the spontaneous utterances from, usually, the ordinary person, who claims to be possessed by the “spirit” of the dead, who has a message to be given to the living human beings. The difference between the two is that, whereas the *abisa* is a formal request made to a professional religious person, *nsamankom* is usually unsolicited spontaneous utterances from a person “possessed” by the “spirit” of a dead person. Strictly speaking, *nsamankom* is not an act of necromancy but is more akin to it by its context than the *abisa* which fits divination as well.

However, the ancestral cult differs markedly from necromancy because it does not invoke the spirit of the dead for (mutual) communication. Generally speaking, the Akan tradition does encourage any contact with the “spirit” of the dead for the purpose of divination. Moreover those who dabble with the *nsamakom* are generally looked upon with contempt.

The significance of the ancestors is that they represent the beliefs, attitudes and values which are held in common within a community and which together shape its identity. Dickson states that in the Akan cultural context, the social structure and religious practices are closely related to the ancestors. He explains that the ancestors as well as the not yet born are regarded as part of the community. By their presence they express the solidarity of the community.

Dickson contends that in the Old Testament too, the community is believed to embrace those who have not yet been born and those who have died. The honour that is shown to the ancestors reflects the solidarity of the community as a whole, and the authority of the ancestors legitimates the code of conduct.

He concedes that there is a rejection of certain cultic practices related to the dead in the Old Testament which are similar to some of those practised in the Akan cultural context. Among the Akan, the ancestors are not only revered, petition prayers are also addressed to them. Moreover, food and drink in the form of sacrifice and libation are offered to them. These acts were strictly forbidden in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, Dickson remarks that, in ancient Israel the dead were part of the community in the conscience of the living.

(b) On the issue of whether the ancestors are worshipped or venerated, he contends that the Akans do not worship their ancestors but simply revere them. Dickson explains that there are several ways by which the Akan establish contact with the ancestors. He cites three instances. First, it may be done by placing food on the stool of the ancestors. Second, sometimes blood is used as a means of contacting the ancestors: animals are sacrificed onto the stool of the ancestors. The third and perhaps the best known approach by which communion may be achieved with the ancestors is libation.

Dickson maintains that in all three of these approaches the motivating factor is communion not propitiation. He says, in contacting the ancestors, the living are not expiating for an offence or giving a bribe: their only desire, it is insisted, is to maintain filial relationship with the ancestors; that is, communion with the ancestors. To buttress his argument, Dickson (1984:70) points out that the phrase ‘ancestor worship’ prejudices the whole debate. He points out that the term is used to describe African Traditional Religion, especially in the negative attitude adopted towards the ancestral cult. He asserts that it is basically a religious term and description taken from a Western context and applied without qualification to the African religion. He also notes that such an assertion has also been both championed and decried with equal passion. However, in his view, the phrase “ancestor worship” is certainly misleading

He argues that among the Akan, the verb typically used to describe the process of contacting the ancestors is *fre* (call); never the verb *som* (to worship). He suggests that the terms worship and veneration should be replaced with new terms: “communion” and “propitiation” respectively.

(c) Dickson contends that, although libation contains some elements of worship, it may not necessarily constitute an act of worship. He maintains that it is an act of communion with the ancestors. To him, the church's difficulty with pouring libation to the ancestors lies in the act of petition which implies dependence. According to Dickson, the stool which symbolises the presence of the ancestors is approached through the pouring of libation. While maintaining that libation may not necessarily be an act of worship, he cedes that, it is an act of communing with the ancestors. In this act, petition which implies dependence is an essential ingredient. He notes that being a Christian involves faith in Christ, also it implies the sufficiency of relying on Christ.

This raises the question of the compatibility of petitioning Christ and the ancestors in prayers. To him, this constitutes a significant religious fact which raises a serious theological issue for the Church. He however states that a great deal depends on the prayers that accompany the pouring of the drink which would give the real indication of our Christian commitment. Dickson rightly points out that among the Akan, the cult of the dead is not the same as the cult of the ancestors. Thus libation to the ancestors is not an act of necromancy. It may be something else which may not be compatible with the Christian faith.

Notably, it is not all the dead that receives libation drink as ancestors. Nevertheless, among those considered dead, it is not only the ancestors that receives libation. Libation is offered to both good and evil (dead) spirits either as an appreciation offering or as an appeasement. In the case of the ancestors, making libation to them is a means of communion with them. Conversely, libation to the evil spirit is an appeasement to ward off their evil deeds or as atonement for someone's act. Interestingly, how this concept corresponds to the atonement theory is another study that could be taken up elsewhere.

## **5.5 Conclusion and assessment**

Akin to polytheism and monotheism, the definition of worship and veneration and the difference between both pairs has become the determining factor to what may

constitute idolatry in African traditional religion. In this context, the crucial issue for Christian participation in the libation ritual is the accusation that it is a form of worship of spirit beings next to God. If this accusation holds, then libation becomes idolatry, therefore, Christian participation in it becomes disloyalty to Christ. To this, Dickson both agree and disagrees.

In his discussion on idolatry Dickson maintains that polytheism and monotheism are not explicit terms, but become what one wants them to be according to the definition one gives. However, he refuses to give any definitions but contends that the terms are not helpful to describe African traditional religions. Similarly, Dickson (1984:69-70) in his discussions on ancestor *worship* or *veneration* avoided the terms. He contends that the phrase “ancestral worship” as applied to Akan traditional religion is a misleading term. He asserts that it is basically a religious term and description taken from a Western context and applied without qualification to African religion.

Nevertheless, Dickson comes to the conclusion that while libation to the lesser divinities definitely constitutes idolatry, libation to the ancestors will be determined by the content of the prayer that accompanies that libation; whether or not the prayer entails dependence on spirit beings other than God.

Dickson rightly asserts that the Akan verb normally used to describe the process of contacting the ancestors is *fre* (meaning call). However, Dickson overstates his case when he claims that the Akan verb *som* (to worship) is never used in reference to cultic dealing with ancestors. He therefore draws a conclusion that it is inappropriate to refer to the ancestral cult as ancestral worship.

More to the terms and the traditional concept of ancestral worship is the analysis of what the ancestor cult ritual actually entails. It is at this level that Sawyerr differs from Dickson. Sawyerr (1996:54-55) concedes that the African traditional religions do not conceive that in dealing with their ancestors, they are worshipping them in the Christian sense of the term. However, he points out that the act of communion with the ancestors entails dependence on spirit beings that are sometimes treated as ends in themselves.

It is a fact that Africans do not see the ancestors as Gods or lesser divinities, but their conception of them is more than human, as is often claimed. Beyond the human, the ancestors are regarded as self sufficient spirit beings that intervene in the course of the life of the living for either good or evil.



## Chapter 6

### John Pobee on Christianity and libation

#### 6.1 Introduction

John Pobee, an Akan from Ghana, is an ordained Anglican minister. He was a Professor of New Testament and Church History in the University of Ghana for several years. Pobee also worked with the World Council of Churches in Geneva as associate Director of the program in Theological Education. After studies at the University of Ghana, Pobee was further trained as a New Testament scholar at the University of Cambridge. He has subsequently studied and lectured in the United States, Germany and Sweden. *Toward an African Theology*, a book which contains his view on libation, was written during his sabbatical year in the United States in 1974-75. Extensive references will be made to this book (Pobee 1979:42-79) as it is the only work that contains his views on libation.

Pobee maintains that libation rituals are very significant to the Akan, yet it is not compatible with Christian faith. He argues that even though the lesser divinities and the ancestors are in theory intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings in Akan traditional belief, in practice, the lesser divinities are approached as self sufficient deities and the ancestors as ends in themselves. On that basis, Pobee contends that Christian participation in the traditional libation practices could lead to idolatry. However, he suggests that libation could be adopted and adapted into Christian theology.

Pobee's views on Christian participation in traditional libation rituals have to be understood against the background of his understanding of the relationship between African traditional culture and religion, and Christianity in general. This influences the way in which he regards the relationship between traditional libation rituals and Christianity more specifically. In this chapter, I will therefore first discuss Pobee's contribution to methodological debates in African Christian theology, before focusing on his views on libation.

Pobee's approach to the task of contextualization will be outlined in section 6.2 of this chapter. Section 6.3 will then consider Pobee's view on the practices and significance of libation ritual in Akan life. Section 6.4, which is the core of the chapter, will discuss the contribution that Pobee makes to the critical engagement on the addressees of libation. In this regard, sections 6.4.1 will discuss the question, whether if *Onyame* (the Akan Supreme Being) is the same as the God of Christianity. Section 6.4.2 will deal with the most contentious question, whether the Akan *abosom* (lesser divinities) are intermediaries between God and human beings or not. Pobee's response to the reconfiguration of the African ancestors into Christian sainthood will receive attention in section 6.4.3. Section 6.5 will offer a conclusion and an assessment of Pobee's views on Christianity and libation.

## **6.2 African Christian theology as a contextualisation process**

Pobee shows that one significant factor that influences the development of any Christian theology is the culture in which the theology is developed. Due to the significant differences in the African cultures he proposes that African Christian Theology should be developed in the context of a particular culture, like that of the Akan, rather than in a general African context. Pobee's method differs remarkably from that of Dickson and Mbiti who use the Africa cultural context in general to construct their theology (Pobee 1979:79).

Pobee's method of developing an African Christian theology has three stages. First, a topic is selected and the biblical view of the topic is considered. Second, the Akan cultural context of the topic is studied to understand the Akan perspective on the topic and to identify statements as used in particularly proverbs. These may be appropriate for expression of the Christian view. In the third stage, particular statements or images in Akan are selected to express the core message, which he assumes to be free of cultural propositions in Christian theology. On this basis there is an "Africanization" of Christianity as an attempt is made to couch Christian theology in genuinely African images and sayings without betraying the authenticity and core of Christianity.

Pobee's approach suggests that there is a core gospel (theological proposition) that can be distinguished from a culture. Such a method seems to correspond fairly closely to

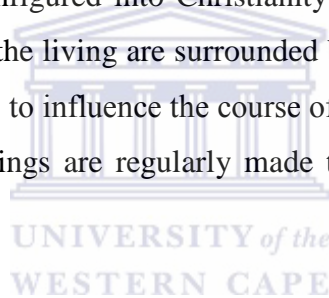


the stages in Kraft's (see Schreier 1985:7) method of dynamic equivalence that is widely regarded as a typical translation model.

Again, the positive use of the Akan context in the development of a Christian theology assumes that God may be known, at least to some extent, through the religious tradition of the African society (Fulljames 1993:68). Though Pobee maintains that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is regarded as complete and definitive, he argues that there are revelations of God other than the revelation in Jesus Christ. He justifies this view with reference to Hebrews 1:1-2 and Romans 1:19-20 (Fulljames 1993:63).

### **6.3 The significance of libation practices in Akan life**

Pobee maintains that libation is an important ritual in Akan culture, belief and practice and that, it needs to be reconfigured into Christianity (Pobee 1979:65).<sup>18</sup> He notes that, in the Akan worldview, the living are surrounded by hosts of spirit-beings, some good, some evil, who are able to influence the course of a person's life for good or ill. To get their good will, offerings are regularly made to them. One such offering is libation (Pobee 1979:45).



He also states that libation is made at all the crisis points of Akan life: at home, at the stool house, in private, and in public. Pobee points out that in the olden days, an Akan would not drink water or alcohol without first pouring some of it on the ground in offering to the ancestors or the lesser divinities. He points out that Christians have been notorious for attacking the practices of libation. Once when he visited a Methodist clergyman who had been denouncing libation, he observed him. Before every drink, the clergyman poured some of it to the ground.

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<sup>18</sup> Asante-Antwi a former presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church in Ghana, who took over from Dickson, echoes Pobee's assertion. However, Asante-Antwi's approach to Christianity and libation differs from Pobee's approach. Whereas Pobee suggests a total overhauling of the libation ritual to fit into Christian theology, Asante-Antwi contends that the Akan traditional libation ritual is compatible with Christian faith. Asante-Antwi position is more akin to Sarpong's views. However there are subtle differences between the two views because of their theological background; whereas Asante-Antwi is a protestant, Sarpong is Roman Catholic (Sarpong 1996:39-47). My Sources of information about Asante-Antwi views is a personal interview with him on 9th December 2004 at his house in a suburb of Accra.

To Pobee, the clergyman's explanation that "a fly was getting into the glass" only partly answered his actions; houseflies are a humbug in tropical Africa. However, he contends that the consistency with which the pouring was done always before a drink, morning, afternoon, evening, and night, makes him believe it was a clever after-the-fact rationalization of a world-taken-for-granted, (which is just beneath the surface). Pobee states that behind all such acts, at both the individual and communal levels, stands the rationale that a person is surrounded by numerous hosts of spirits.

He states that, among the Akan groups, every forty-two days, the Chief and the people observe the *Awukudae* (a special day set aside to give the ancestors food and drink), when the chief enters the stoolhouse to pour libation to the ancestors. Every traditional festival, such as the *Odwira* of the *Akwapim* or the *Fetu Afahye* of the Cape Coast, also has a place for libation.

On the act of libation, Pobee points out that the ritual has two parts: first, the act of pouring the drink, and second, the words which declare the intention of the pouring of the drink. He contends that the crux of the matter is only the accompanying words that express the intention, (asking for blessings from the ancestors and the lesser divinities)<sup>19</sup> that express the intention. Pobee maintains that, in a traditional society, the purpose of making libation was to secure the goodwill of the ancestors and the lesser divinities. Before they are mentioned, there is an invocation of the Supreme Being. This raises a question as regards to whether the Supreme Being is one of the recipients of libation or if reference is just made to His name. Whereas Pobee seems to suggest the latter, he does not discuss the issue explicitly (Pobee 1979:44-45).

To some Africans, mainly the intellectuals, the only importance of the libation ritual is to project an African identity, and to bring solidarity among the people. According to Pobee, this is a bogus and fraudulent rationalization given to the practices of libation. In 1957 the Christian council of Ghana had a conflict with the late Kwame Nkrumah, the then leader of the government, on the issue of libation. The Council threatened to

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<sup>19</sup> Pouring of the drink (alone) implies a *contractual* relationship: human beings give the Spirit beings food and the spirit beings are in turn expected to reward them. In this regard, the pouring of the drink as a religious rite is not by itself neutral.

boycott the ceremony to be held at the Ambassador Hotel to welcome the Duchess of Kent, who was representing Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain at the Independence Celebration of Ghana. The reason for the Council's threat was that libation would be poured. Nkrumah replied that he would go ahead with it because libation projected the African personality (Pobee 1979:54).

Of course this is not the authentic reason for pouring libation. Such a view recognizes only the social importance of the libation rituals. Notably, it seems to be the reinterpretation of the libation ritual in response to the pressure of the enlightened worldview and enlightenment-sponsored technology (Walls 200: 792-799).

Pobee contends that, such a view of libation amounts to saying *we are doing it and it has no meaning*. He condemned the view as “frivolous, superficial and bogus”. He rather maintains that libation is a religious act intended to maintain a harmonious relationship between human beings and spirit beings. These spirit beings are *Onyame*, who Pobee identifies as the Christian God, *abosom*, (lesser divinities), and “*mpaninfo*”, elders (ancestors) and other host of spirits.

#### **6.4 Christian participation in traditional libation practices: A critical engagement on the recipients of libation**

In this section I will offer the view of Pobee on the three recipients of Akan libation rituals namely: *Onyame* (the Supreme Being) *abosom* (the lesser divinities) and the ancestors. I will present his views on the relationship between the Supreme Being of African tradition theology and the God proclaimed by Christianity, the role of the lesser divinities as the intermediaries between God and human beings, and the status of the ancestors in this regard. I will demonstrate that the ways in which Pobee understands African traditional culture and religion with respect to these three recipients influences his views on Christian responses to traditional African views on the Supreme Being, the lesser divinities and the ancestors. Such responses also shape his view on Christian participation in libation rituals.

#### 6.4.1 *Onyame* as the God of Christianity?

Pobee asserts that *Onyame* is the Supreme Being, creator, sustainer of the universe, and the final authority of all things. He also maintains that *Onyame* is none other than the Christian God. In equating *Onyame* to the *Christian God*, Pobee echoes the widely accepted view of African theologians.<sup>20</sup>

Pobee argues that it is wrong on the part of the Western missionaries to make a claim that they brought God to the Africans. Quoting the Akan maxim: *obi nnkyere abofra Onyame* (No one needs to tell a child about the Supreme Being), Pobee agrees with Sarpong and many African theologians that atheism is foreign to the Akan and the African in general (Pobee 1979: 46).

Gyekye however rightly points out that the maxim does not mean that a child becomes aware of “God by natural instinct or by intuition as has often been understood. It means, rather, that the child, lying on his back, sees the sky, which is believed to be the abode of the Supreme Being”. Gyekye adds: “From this experience, God existence is inferred” (Gyekye 1996:7).

There are two alternative implications of the above debate. First, if *Onyame* is just one of the traditional lesser divinities as Rattray portrayed (the sky god), then making libation to *Onyame* becomes worship to a lesser divinity, and therefore idolatry. Second, if *Onyame* is the Supreme Being, distinct from the lesser divinities, and no Being other than the Christian God, then making libation to *Onyame* may be rightly seen as a form of prayer to God.

The question that arises in this regard is: can Akan Christians today use libation as a means to pray to God? Pobee in all his writings has not yet made explicitly known his intention about Christian participation in a libation ritual when it is only made to God alone. His silence about this would not be difficult to understand. Whereas libation is usually made to God, the lesser divinities and the ancestors together, it is sometimes

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<sup>20</sup> The implication of Pobee’s view is that, there are other avenues of God’s revelations besides God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. This approach makes Pobee a religious inclusivist.

made to the lesser divinities or the ancestors alone. However it has never been made to God alone. This raises a question as to whether *Onyame* is a recipient of libation or reference is just made to his name. Nevertheless, it is when libation is instead made to the ancestors and more particularly the *abosom* (lesser divinities) that Christians raise an objection.

#### **6.4.2 The lesser divinities as intermediaries?**

Pobee maintains that, traditionally, the lesser divinities are called *Nyame mma* (children of the Supreme Being). Pobee gives the etymology and the breakdown of the term *abosom* as: “a” a prefix which makes a root plural; *bo*, a stone or rock; and *som*, to serve or worship. He therefore draws a conclusion that the term “abosom” literally, is the worship of stones or rock. Pobee however admits that lesser divinities are not always manifested in the form of stone or rocks; they also inhabit rivers and trees. He rightly distinguishes between the habitat of the spirit and the spirit itself (Pobee 1979:46).

Pobee (1979:46) advances another view, namely that the etymological association of the lesser divinities with a rock gives a hint of a stone that is usually put as security to support the shrine of the lesser divinities. Phil Bartle, a Western sociologist and a former lecturer at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana supports this view (Bartle 2005:1).

He further explains that the lesser divinities do not have physical bodies, so their personalities (namely their values, attitudes, and thoughts), are likened to those of human beings. Thus they command the love, attention, and respect of human beings. He contends that *abosom* (lesser divinities) also look after the welfare of human beings, giving them good harvest, children, and providing moral sanctions for society by rewarding or punishing people where and when necessary (Pobee 1979:48).

Pobee, however, offers no explanation for his statement that *abosom* are the children of the Supreme Being. This is based on his assumption that a son of God automatically becomes the representative of God. However, in the Akan context, the phrase ‘God’s child’ is a cluster concept, because it cannot be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

In Akan tradition, any elderly person can call anyone he or she can give birth to as *meba* (my son or my daughter) or *memma* (my children). Thus, *sonship* in Akan does not necessarily denote filial relationship as is claimed by Pobee, without any defence. Referring to the Akan social structure, Pobee again assumes that the Akan's concept of *Onyame* is like a big king who may not be approached lightly or be concerned with the minor affairs of human beings. Pobee unwarrantedly claims that *Onyame* has delegated authority to the *abosom* and the *mpanyinfo* (ancestors) who therefore act as the intermediaries between God and the human beings (Pobee 1979: 46).

Pobee not only has the support of many African Christian theologians, as already stated, he also has many Western theologians (McVeigh 1974 :115) and sociologists on his side (Bartle 2005:1). Bartle commenting on the Akan lesser divinities contend that the "tutelary deities, *abosom*, are all seen as children or extensions of the Supreme Being".

The basic and perhaps the most potent objection raised against Pobee is that his view does not correspond with traditional understanding and practices. The concept that lesser divinities are intermediaries between God and human beings is a scholar's created concept which rarely has the sympathy of the average African's understanding of the relationship between God and the lesser divinities. It is also flatly contradicted by other African theologians (Dickson 1984:57, Ukpong 1983: 187 Kato, 1983 187). According to Busia, the Akans want to prosper in everything and want their women to bear children. "Those who give these things are the gods, Supreme Being, and the anestors" (Busia 1958: 36). Analysing the statement, Busia says that to the Akan, the lesser divinities and the ancestors, do not give blessings on behalf of the Supreme Being as has often been claimed. The Akan regards the lesser divinities and the ancestors as real givers of necessities in life.

Admittedly, the Akan has a belief that God is the ultimate giver of all gifts. Yet the Akan makes a distinction between the blessings from *Onyame* and the blessings from the lesser divinities. No Akan will make a mistake of giving a thanks offering that is meant for an *abosom* to *Onyame*. The particular gift is given to the lesser divinity as a distinct entity.

### 6.4.3 Ancestors as saints in the household of God

The issue of whether the African ancestors should be seen as saints in the household of God has been widely debated by African theologians recently. It is an important issue because it concerns fundamental theological questions about how African Christians should relate to their ancestors. Two main arguments have been put forward about this issue whether the ancestors are saints or not. This section will critically analyse Pobee's suggestions that the ancestors should be seen as saints. I will point out some of the problems with this view but I will not take any position in this debate.

To Pobee the most vibrant aspect of Akan religion is the cult of the ancestors. Pobee notes that the Akan worldview primarily revolves around twin pillars, namely the Supreme Being and the ancestors. Between the two pillars are the lesser divinities and other spirit beings namely: *sasabonsam*, (evil spirit of a male witch), *bayie* (witch), *mmoatia* (dwarfs), spirits of trees and other known and unknown spirits. Pobee notes that the attributed roles of the lesser divinities and ancestors may give the impression that the two are in the same category. However, he explains that there are distinct differences between the lesser divinities and the ancestors, at least in the life and thought of the Akan. He elaborates that, whereas the lesser divinities 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 (Pobee 1979:46).

Pobee suggests that the Akan has hierarchy worldview. At the apex is *Onyame* (Supreme Being), the ancestors come next, followed by the lesser divinities and the other spirits. At the base are human beings. Many Africans, particularly Akan theologians, conceive the African world in terms of the hierarchy which Pobee describes, but some bring the lesser divinities before the ancestors.

Edwin Smith (1950:81), on the other hand, suggests a pyramid concept to describe the African worldview. At the top is God, on the two sides are lesser divinities and the ancestors, at the base are the lower spirits and in the middle are human beings. Smith's pyramid concept roughly corresponds with the hierarchy concept suggested by Temples (1959: 30, 40) Alternatively, Parrinder (1986:87) suggests that the figure

image of a circle or an egg may offer a more appropriate model to portray the African worldview (see Parrinder 1986: 82-87).

Pobee points out that in the olden days, an Akan would not drink water or alcohol without first pouring some to the ground in offering to the ancestors. Pobee (1979:46) states that the ancestors are part of the clan who have completed their course here on earth and are gone ahead to the other world to be elder brothers or sisters of the living. He rightly points out that not all the dead are ancestors. To qualify to be an ancestor one must live to a ripe old age, live in an exemplary manner, and must have done much to enhance the standing and prestige of the family, clan, or tribe. In Akan, an ancestor by definition is a morally good person. Those who fail to become ancestors turn to become roaming ghosts.

Given such moral criteria as the qualification for ancestorship, what prevents Akan Christians from recognising their ancestors as holy people? A typical and a classic point of comparison is the idea of the holy people in the Old Testament. The morally good people in the Old Testament are regarded as holy people, though they did not attain salvation in terms of the Christian understanding.

Pobee does not explicitly discuss this issue. However, his two statements, namely that the “ancestors are members in the household of God and ancestors receive their authority from God” (Pobee 1979:46) can be construed in the context of the statement to ascertain his position. Meanwhile, to Pobee, the “household of God” here refers to the resting place of Christian Saints.

For Pobee to assume that the ancestors are in the household of God presupposes, first, that the ancestors have met the criteria for Christian salvation or that God has already granted them a place of rest. Second, the Akan concept of *asamando* (the resting place for the ancestors) is being equated with the Christian heaven or any intermediate place for Christians. Granted that Pobee is right in his assumption, the implication here is that to be ancestor is like being a holy person in Christianity. As a religious inclusivist, Pobee maintains that though the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is regarded as complete and definitive, there are revelations of the God other than the revelation in



Jesus Christ. He justifies this view with reference to Hebrews 1.1-2 and Romans 1.19-20 (Pobee 1979:74).

Pobee's suggestions that the ancestral cult should substitute for the communion of saints is a bone of contention in ongoing current debates in African Christian theologies. In one early treatment of the subject, Ezeanya (1992:386-425) of Nigeria recommends the substituting of the communion of saints for the ancestral cult. Sarpong (1998:26) echoes this view. By contrast, Tihagale (2004:48) and Gehman (1987:133) contend that the belief of the ancestral cult conflict with the Christian belief of the communion of saints.

Granted that the ancestors may be considered to be holy people and for that matter saints, can Christians pour libation, as prayer, to or through them? An answer to such a question calls for Pobee's analysis of the relationship between human beings and ancestors. Pobee states that by virtue of being in the spirit world, ancestors are believed to be powerful in the sense that they maintain the course of life here and now, and that they do influence it for good or for ill. He explains that the ancestors give children to the living; they give good harvests; they provide the sanctions for the moral life of the nation and accordingly punish, exonerate, or reward the living as the case may be.

In the light of such a relationship between the human beings and the ancestors, Pobee contends that the living depends on the ancestors for their necessities of life and that the dead are inextricably involved in the Akan family. Pobee says that since the living depend on the ancestors, the attitude of the living towards the ancestors is something more than veneration, it is undeniably a worship of the ancestors. Pobee maintains that the act of libation implies a contract; human beings offer spirit beings beverage, accompanied by a petition prayers, and the spirit beings are expected to respond positively to human beings.

He argues that insofar as there is a dependency, the attitude of the living towards the ancestors is something more than veneration. Contrary to Sarpong and Dickson, Pobee maintains that the ancestors do not receive only veneration they are also worshipped.

Idowu (1973:182-183) also maintains that it will be unrealistic to separate veneration from worship. Sawyerr in his article *Ancestor Worship* points out that there is no difference between propitiating a lesser divinity, and pacifying an ancestor. On that basis, Sawyerr (1996:54) asserts that undeniably, Africans worship their ancestors.

Whereas Pobee and Idowu see the ancestors as an object of worship, they differ in their cultural understanding of the status of the ancestors. Idowu sees the ancestral cult as compatible with the Christian faith whereas Pobee does not. To Idowu, the ancestors as representatives receive libation or worship on behalf of God. Pobee on the other hand maintains that Africans, particularly the Akan, relate to the ancestors as an end in themselves. Thus, libation to the ancestors, in the understanding of the Akan, is worship. Pobee maintains that worship to the ancestors as ends in themselves is incompatible with Christianity.

Pobee raises an argument against libation on the grounds that it implies worship of spirit beings other than that of God. For Pobee, these spirit beings are treated as ends in themselves. Therefore they assume the category in which God alone is worthy to be. In this regard, Pobee sees libation as idolatry and therefore against the first commandment.

He admits that in the life and thought of the Akan, the lesser divinities and the ancestors are not in the category of God. For Pobee, that is a theory, but not the actual practice. He contends that, for all practical purposes the ancestors and the gods are treated as ends in themselves, and are petitioned in prayers, when Akans make libation to them (Pobee 1979:66).

Pobee's main contention for branding traditional libation ritual as idolatry is that the accompanied prayer entails petition. Such petition is usually addressed to the lesser divinities and the ancestors for necessities of life. Pobee argues that God alone is worthy of such dependence from human beings.

## **6.5 Assessment and Conclusion**

Pobee's treatment of libation in the context of the Akan worldview attests to the fact that libation is inseparable from Akan culture. He states that the content of libation

prayer should be brought to bear with Christian theology in order to incorporate it into Christian worship.

Pobee attacks the intermediary role of *abosom* (lesser divinities) and ancestors between God and human beings on the basis that it is not a factual description. He argues that, for all practical purposes, the *abosom* and the ancestors are treated as ends in themselves, and as the real givers of the good things of life. However, Pobee maintains that, in theory, the lesser divinities and ancestors are intermediaries between God and human beings. Pobee's contention that the theory is not practised is well answered by Idowu.

According to Idowu, the main shortcoming of the divinity system is that it very easily lends itself as a tool to priestcraft: the manipulations of the priest to draw attention to the lesser divinities instead of the Supreme Being. Idowu (1973:173) argues that it is in consequence of *priestcraft* that the divinities have largely tended to become ends in themselves instead of the means to an end which they are meant to be.

In support of the intermediary role of the lesser divinities, Mbiti (1969:68-69) also argues that, in some cases sacrifices and offerings are directed to one or more of the following categories: God, spirits and the living dead. The recipients in the second and third categories are regarded as intermediaries between God and men, so that God is the ultimate recipient.

No religion is free from conflict on doctrines and practices. Such conflict is seen not only in the African traditional religions but also in Christianity and Islam. Making a distinction between belief and practices regarding the theoretical concept and practical perception of the role of the lesser divinities and the ancestor' amounts to selective judgement. It is also selective to condemn African traditional religion where the adherents fail to live by their beliefs. If the lesser divinities and the ancestors are indeed the intermediaries between God and human beings as Pobee claims, then the apparent conflict on Christian participation in libation rituals is an apostasy. For the problem is not with the tenets of the African traditional religion, rather a deviation from the beliefs in the practices. Nevertheless, in any apostasy, there is a remnant.

On the basis of this, Pobee's argument is probably conclusive in showing that Akan libation rituals are inconsistent with the Christian doctrine only when some people treat the lesser divinities and the ancestors as self sufficient deities and as ends in themselves. It does not show that Christians may not pour libation in cases where the subject sees the recipient simply as an intermediary - as Pobee claims the lesser divinities and the ancestors are in Akan belief. If Pobee were to pour libation with his understanding that the lesser divinities and the ancestors are not ends in themselves (as he believes they are in theory) but simply intermediaries, would libation be wrong for him as a Christian in this context? Pobee needs to show the inconsistencies of Christianity and libation in a case where one treats the lesser divinities and the ancestors as intermediaries.

The suggestion that the lesser divinities and the ancestors ceased to function as intermediaries with the coming of Jesus as the only mediator is inadequate. Such a view does not show how and when the lesser divinities and the ancestors were cut-off from *Onyame* (the Supreme Being). The view also presents two inconsistent views of *Onyame*: *Onyame* who hates the lesser divinities and the ancestors, and the *Onyame* who is closely related to the lesser divinities and the ancestors.

Pobee asserts that traditional libation as practiced among the Akan is not compatible with Christian faith. However, he remarks that "if the content of the prayer could be made consonant with Christian theology, libation could be incorporated into Christian worship" (Pobee 1979: 65).

## Chapter 7

### Bediako on Christianity and Libation

#### 7.1 Introduction

Kwame Bediako was born on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1945 in Accra. He had his secondary education at Mfantsipim Secondary School, Ghana. Bediako studied French at the University of Ghana, Legon. He did his post-graduate studies at the University of Bordeaux, France. There he majored in modern French Literature and African Literature in French, gaining his doctorate degree in 1973. After his conversion, Bediako studied Theology, at the London Bible College. He was subsequently ordained into ministry in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Under the guidance of missiologist and church historian Andrews Walls, Bediako completed his doctoral thesis in Theology in the University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom. The thesis was later published as *Theology and Identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and modern Africa* (Bediako 2000:7-9).

Currently, Bediako is the director of Akrofi-Christaller memorial centre in Ghana. He is also a visiting lecturer in Theology at various institutions, including the University of Kwazulu Natal South Africa. Bediako has dealt extensively with ancestral Christology, a theme which relates to libation. His book, *Jesus in African culture: A Ghanaian perspective*; is relevant to the debate on Christianity and libation.

Bediako gives two major reasons for his total rejection of Christian participation in libation rituals. First, he maintains that there is more than one strand of libation practice, and that the present popular form is an adulterated form that he deems as tainted with idolatry. Secondly, he maintains that the primal world view presents itself as a unified cosmic system. Thus he objects to any of the components of the Akan worldview being isolated for particular treatment. Particularly, adapting the libation ritual to the point of pouring it to the selective individual spirit beings as one wishes, which is only to God or to God and ancestors alone, leaving the lesser divinities and the other spirits out. He argues that in this way one would itemise the primal world view which presents itself as a unified cosmic system as the traditional people

understand it. To him, to isolate one element would break up the worldview and thereby destroy the harmony of the whole worldview.

Bediako's views on Christian participation in traditional libation rituals can best be understood within the context of his understanding of the relationship between African traditional culture and religion, and Christianity in general. In this chapter, therefore, I will therefore discuss Bediako's contribution to methodological debates in African Christian theology, before focusing on his views on libation.

In section 7.2 of this chapter Bediako's approach to the development of African Christian theology will be described. Section 7.3 will describe his view on the practices and significance of libation practices in Akan life. Section 7.4 which is the core of the chapter will discuss Bediako's contribution to the critical engagement of the recipients of libation ritual. Sections 7.4.1 will thus assess Bediako's views on the nature and status of *Onyame* (the Akan Supreme Being) in relation to the God of Christianity. Section 7.4.2 will deal with the most contentious question, namely whether the Akan's *abosom* (lesser divinities) are intermediaries between God and human beings or not. Bediako's discussions on the reconfiguration of the African ancestors into Christian sainthood will receive attention in section 7.4.3. Section 7.5 will assess Bediako's overall position on Christian participation of libation ritual.

## **7.2 African Christian theology as a contextualization process**

Bediako makes a two fold point as the basis for developing African Christian theology. He argues that we cannot avoid a serious engagement with the religious and spiritual issues that African Traditional Religion raises for us. He notes that these issues form the cultural background of the Christian faith of most African Christians. He also contends that it is necessary for Christians to give logical and coherent reason to Christian affirmations in order to make them sensible to non- Christians.

Bediako labels his approach for developing African theology the *translation approach*. He uses the term *translator* to mean a process of translating the *eternal Gospel* or the *core Gospel* into African terms without injury to its essential Christian content (Bediako 2000:55). In this approach, Bediako contends that the Gospel, which he takes to be the core of Christianity and separate from culture, can be translated into

African Christian terms without injury to its essential content. For Bediako, the core of the gospel can be stated in a culture-free form. However, such an assumption is not without its critics (Fulljames 1993:70).

He asserts that the translation approach offers the most hopeful signs for the development of a sustainable tradition of African Christian thought into the future.

After comparing the translation approach to some other approaches that Bediako labels as indigenisation and *Biblicist*, Bediako contends that these approaches are two extremes; so the translator's approach fits in the middle of the two extremes (Bediako 200:54-55).

### **7.3 The Traditional Libation of the Akan: New perspectives and questions**

Bediako rightly observes that of all Akan ritual acts dealing with the Supreme Being, the lesser divinities and the ancestors, libation gives us the deepest insight into how these spirit beings are perceived and the relationship between them. However, he maintains that the present form of traditional libation practices is an adulterated strand and may not be the original form of Akan libation. He argues that the present strand has been altered and reshaped to suit the practice of traditional priests. Thus, what we see today as the traditional libation practice is rather the modified version of the traditional priest. According to Bediako, the present strand of the traditional form of libation practices has now become the dominant one, standing out above other strands due to the influence of the traditional priests who are influential figures in Akan society (Bediako 1995: 222).

To substantiate his claim, Bediako asserts that some elements in the libation ritual as practised today are foreign to the Akan traditional culture, thus these foreign elements raise questions with regard to the originality of the present strand of the traditional libation ritual. He points to two such issues.

Firstly, he points out that the use of alcoholic drinks for libation is a common feature in present libation practices among the Akan. The alcoholic drink frequently used is schnapps, an imported alcoholic beverage (usually from Holland, though it is now also manufactured locally). Bediako therefore argues that the original liquid substance

of libation was water, specifically rain water called *nyankosu* (rain water) or *adukrosu* (water collected in the hollow of a tree or stone) in Akan.

Secondly, Bediako sees the practice of libation in which drink is offered to the ancestors by setting it on the ground as a problem. He argues that it would be considered the utmost discourtesy to offer drink to living elders by setting it on the ground in their presence. Thus the suggestion that one could in fact give drink to revered ancestors by pouring it on the ground, to him, raises very grave questions. To Bediako these issues pose the question as to how truly indigenous the present common practice of traditional libation really is.

Bediako bases his argument on the views of Nana Addo Dankwa “original cultural” libation (Dankwa 1990: 50-56 see Bediako 1995:219-223). To understand Bediako’s views we first need to consider the position reached by Dankwa, the paramount chief of one of the Akan groups, on whose views Bediako’s opinions are based.

In a seminar paper entitled “Original cultural libation”, Dankwa points out that libation rituals are commonly believed to be a purely religious act, virtually the traditional equivalent to Christian prayer - but he does not think so. Dankwa maintains that, originally, libation was never intended to be a completely religious act. He asserts that libation practices consist of three separate acts. The first act is an invitation to the ancestors to enable them to actively participate in whatever activity the living are engaged in. The second part is the welcome address in which the purpose of the invitation is explained. He explains that from that point onwards, the ancestor is presumed to have joined the living in taking part in whatever activity that is about to take place. He argues that it is these customary preliminaries that are, at times, mistakenly considered as prayers to the ancestors. Dankwa insists that such customary preliminaries are nothing more than a projection of the African social behaviour. The third part constitutes the prayer.

Dankwa regards the third act as the main ritual. It is only in this aspect that it is said to be prayer. Dankwa claims that the prayer is strictly addressed to the lesser divinities or the Supreme Being but never to the ancestors. However, it depends on which one the officiant wants to petition.



With this argument in view, Bediako echoes Dankwa's view that, originally, libation is as religious as the traditional priest has made it to be. The first two acts are purely cultural acts and it is only the last one has a religious nature. To Bediako, Dankwa's *Original cultural libation* gives enlightenment and leads to a sharpening of focus on true Akan libation practices. Bediako refers to the traditional ritual, as in practice today, as a strand which is idolatrous and leads to a distortion of truth of the Akan traditional libation practices.

For a critical analysis of Bediako's views on libation and Christianity, it is worth commenting on the extent to which Bediako agrees and disagrees with Dankwa on the "Original cultural libation". It seems that Bediako accepts Dankwa's view on the whole. On this note, we proceed to analyse Dankwa's "Original libation" as the basis of Bediako's point of view.

As Dankwa and Bediako may suspect, the present structure and format of libation prayer suggests that it has been refined and purposely structured to embody the core theology of the Akan; the existence of God, the mother Earth, the lesser divinities, the ancestors, the other good and evil spirits known and unknown spirits and the relationship between them, as well as their relationship with the human beings.

Though the content of libation ritual may differ, depending on the occasion and the issue to be dealt with, there is a clear format for any official libation pouring which clearly shows an attempt to systemise the practice.

Within the present format, there is a sense of hierarchy in which divinities are given positions over and above the ancestors. This conflicts with the assumed Akan understanding of the order of importance of the spirit beings. In libation prayer, if God's name is mentioned, it either appears first or last but never in the middle. *Asase Yaa* (Mother Earth) is always next to God. If there is a mention of the divinities, it is clear that they come before the ancestors, and their importance over and above the ancestors is clear here.

The format reinforces the sense of a hierarchical relationship and the subordinate roles of not only the ancestors but also the divinities to the Supreme Being. It can be meaningfully argued that such a structure by the fetish priest is necessary; for, the practices of the fetish priest portray a practical sense of independence, which threaten to cut-off lesser divinities from *Onyame* the (Supreme Being) as self-sufficient deities. This can create unnecessary rivalry between *Onyame* and the lesser divinities to the disadvantage of the lesser divinities. Akans believe that everything that comes from *Onyame* is good; thus, it is always advantageous to be connected with *Onyame*.

For all practical purposes, addressing God, the lesser divinities and the ancestors separately seems to be original. Invoking them together in one prayer only becomes necessary at a ceremony where the people need to recognise all of them at the occasion. Even presently, addressing God or divinities or ancestors separately in a prayer or / and sacrifice is the general practice. Generally, the Akan informally invoke and petition, *Onyame*, or *abosom* or *ancestors* individually without mentioning any other spirit being.

Another reason to suspect that the libation ritual has purposely taken other form in addition is the alcoholic imported gin that has now taken the place of the original drink – assumed to be water as the major material for pouring libation. It is obvious that the imported gin was introduced by the European traders who used marketing principles to effect the replacement of the original drink. To Dankwa and Bediako, even the saying: *de yede nsa ye no yede nsou ye nnyeyie* (whatever we use alcohol to do, water cannot be used) betrays the true nature of libation and shows the invested interest of leaders of the priesthood cult. The question is whether people were not performing the same ritual before imported gin was used?

Another issue, according to Nana and Bediako is that pouring the drink on the ground betrays the culture that has respect for God and ancestors. They maintain that it becomes more serious when one recognises that in giving drinks to the chief one cannot put it on the ground unless it has been accepted. This seems to suggest that the libation ritual has taken some forms in addition to the simple ritual that it perhaps was. Looking critically at the above analysis of the possibility of a purposely altered and adulterated form of the traditional libation ritual, as assumed by Dankwa and Bediako,

our first comment is that to argue about the originality of a traditional ritual such as libation is not an easy task. Culture or religion is not static, and it is very likely that a lot of changes have been made as a result of inter-cultural influence. Nevertheless, the suggestion of Dankwa that the present traditional libation practice is adulterated version of the original libation ritual is a bold suggestion. Yet, it has many weaknesses that make a typical Akan wonder about the intention behind such a suggestion that the Akan do not worship their ancestors. Here I will consider some of the obvious weaknesses of Dankwa's argument.

There are, I think, three weaknesses in Dankwa's argument. The first of these is that Danqua is wrong in suggesting that the original drink for making libation was water and not alcoholic drink. He has failed to take into account that the use of Schnapps in the libation ritual is just for the replacement of the local alcoholic drink palm wine (*nsafufuo*). The assumption that the original drink for making libation was water does not have cultural backing. Indeed, it may well be the case that water is used on some occasions to pour libation, but the main drink for making libation has consistently been *nsa* (alcoholic drink). The Akan name for libation has been *nsagu* (pouring of alcoholic drink). Further, the popular Akan adage: "*ade yede nsa yeno yede nnsou yee nnyeie*" (water cannot do what alcoholic drink can be used to do) affirms the originality of alcoholic drink in the Akan libation making.

The second objection is that Bediako fails to grasp the Akan's reason attached to the pouring of libation to the ancestors by setting it on the ground. To the Akan, the ancestors are dead and buried in the womb of the mother Earth. The ancestors, though, are not restricted in movement due to the new nature that they have acquired. Nevertheless, the ancestors are generally considered to be in the womb of the mother Earth. Thus, it is permissible in the Akan to pour libation to the ancestors by setting the drink on the ground if it becomes inconvenient or not possible for one to set the drink on the "stool" which is taken to be the embodiment of the ancestors. Notably, it is only the chiefs, queen mothers, priests and priestesses who can be ancestors with stools.

The third objection is raised against what Bediako seeks to use against the originality of the present form of traditional libation practices: the introduction of foreign elements into Akan culture. Bediako's assertions that the liquid substance poured on

the ground was meant to be water to symbolically wash the dust covered feet of the invited ancestors is strange in Akan culture. Indisputably, the ritual of feet washing has never been part of Akan culture. Undoubtedly, the ritual of feet washing is an alien element in the Akan culture, probably from Semitic culture. Besides, libation to the ancestors is commonly believed to be a food beverage to the ancestors. For this reason, when a chief refuses to pour libation to the ancestors for a long time, it is said that *woma ekom ade nananum* (literally, he has let the ancestors go hungry). Such a case is sufficient grounds to disstool the chief.

Indeed, there are obvious changes to the traditional libation practices as seen today. Nevertheless, these changes may not be too far from any thing that might be called original to justify any conclusion that it has been altered and adulterated. By contrast, is it Dankwa who has made such an attempt to justify his position that libation to the ancestors is not petition prayer. Libation to the ancestors as petition prayer is a vital and decisive issue that make libation to ancestors as worship and therefore constitute idolatry. Dankwa as a Christian, and also as a chief who sits on the stool and is obliged to pour libation to the ancestors, has a clear interest to do what he has done. However, it is a clear twist of the Akan concept of libation, of course for a good purpose.

#### **7.4 Christian participation in traditional libation practices: A critical engagement on the recipients of libation**

Bediako points out that African Christian scholars who have examined the spiritual universe of African primal religions so far, have done less than full justice to the complexity of the African primal world. He remarks that by stressing the centrality and uniqueness of God in the African tradition, African theology has left the wider spirit-world of African primal religion – divinities, ancestors, natural forces – unaccounted for. He cites two figures, Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti, as classical examples. To Bediako, when one reads through their works, one gets the impression that both of these writers wish the multiplicity of other spirit beings, namely lesser divinities, the ancestors and the other spirit beings, was not there (Idowu 1962:63, 1962:202, Mbiti 1969:77).

In this section therefore, I will offer the view of Bediako on the three recipients of Akan libation rituals namely: *Onyame* (Supreme Being), *abosom* (lesser divinities), and the ancestors. I will present his views on the relationship between the Supreme Being of African tradition theology and the God proclaimed by Christianity, the role of the lesser divinities as the intermediaries between God and human beings, and the status of the ancestors in this regard. I will demonstrate that the ways in which Bediako understands African traditional culture and religion on these three recipients influence his views on Christian responses to traditional African views on the Supreme Being, the intermediaries and the ancestors. Such responses also shape his view on Christian participation in libation rituals.

#### **7.4.1 *Onyame* as the God of Christianity?**

Bediako holds that God is not foreign to the Akan as the missionaries seem to imply. He contends that there is adequate evidence to prove the conception of God in the Akan tradition is original to the Akan. He points to myth, proverbs and also stories to buttress his assertion. However, in spite of the fact that Bediako identifies *Onyame* (Akan's Supreme Being) with the God proclaimed by Christianity, he disapproves the Akan traditional libation offered to God, even to God alone.

To Bediako the Akan's worldview consists of *Onyame* (God), creator and sustainer of the universe. Subordinate to God are the *abosom* (lesser divinities), and the ancestors or spirit fathers (*nsamamfo*). Bediako does not only believe that the Akan knows God, he also maintains that God is worshipped by the Akan. He contends that God has also spoken through African prophets and / or prophetesses through spirit-mediums in the pre- Christian era (Bediako 1990:10).

For Bediako, if the God of the African pre-Christian tradition has turned out to be the God of Christians as could be seen in Bible translation in parts of Africa, then it is to be expected that he has not left himself without testimony in the past. Concerning the relative position of God, lesser divinities and ancestors, Bediako suggests that, whereas God's power surpasses all others, the ancestors appear to come next to God. He echoes the views of Busia, and Sarpong and Pobee that, the Akan attitude towards the lesser divinities depends upon whose success. Such an attitude varies from healthy

respect to sneering contempt. He maintains that the lesser divinities, unlike God and the ancestors, are dispensable.

Bediako maintains that the African primal religions are not a neat hierarchy of divine beings and a spirit- force held in harmony. He suggests the African primal can be conceived of as a universe of distributed power, perhaps even of fragmented power. It is a world not of one centre (God), but many centres. Also there is the recognition of unity and multiplicity of the transcendent in the African world also reveals a deep ambivalence.

#### **7.4.2 The lesser divinities as intermediaries?**

To Bediako the Akan believe that the *abosom* (lesser divinities) are creatures of God. He refers to the *abosom* as the children of God with delegated authority from God. Thus, to Bediako, the lesser divinities in Akan function as intermediaries between God and the human beings. Bediako's claim of the role of the lesser divinities as intermediaries can also be seen in his criticism of Byang Kato (Bediako1995:225).

Bediako believes that the African tradition has experienced the revelation of God. He contends that God spoke to the pre- Christian prophets and prophetesses. Bediako criticises Kato on the grounds that Kato's theological view point predisposes him not to recognise God's prophecies and prophets in African traditional religion.

The basis of Bediako's criticism is consistent with his theology of religion and his approach to African Christian theology. As a religious inclusivist, he believes that the Akan *Onyame* (the Supreme Being) is none other than the Christian God. His dealing with humankind is not limited to the Jews but all human society, though the level of the knowledge of God differs from one society to another. Thus, God did not speak to only the Jews but to Africans as well. Nevertheless, Bediako's criticism raises questions regarding his views on the relationship between God and the lesser divinities.

In Akan traditional religion, the spirit mediums and the prophets rarely operate outside the *abosom* (lesser divinities) or the ancestors. There is almost nothing like the

spirit of God possessing and speaking through someone. The Akan rarely, if ever, make a claim of hearing directly from the Supreme Being.

A question therefore arises from Bediako's criticism of Kato. Does Bediako maintain that the *abosom* (the lesser divinities) and the ancestors really function as intermediaries? Bediako's criticism states that God spoke to the pre-Christian spirit mediums and the prophets. The pre-Christian mediums and prophets were also connected to the lesser divinities. To Bediako, the traditional people regard these lesser divinities as the intermediaries between God and human beings. Inevitably, Bediako assumes that God through his intermediaries, the lesser divinities or ancestors spoke through these traditional prophets or priests to the people.

It is one thing to believe that traditional religions have such a belief, and entirely another thing to say that it is a reality. For Bediako, as deduced from his criticism of Kato, God used the prophets or priests in connection with the lesser divinities or ancestors as intermediaries to speak to the people.

Another question that needs to be asked in this regard is: if some of the lesser divinities were really intermediaries between God and the human beings, when did their role or functions as intermediaries cease? Among the Akan, there is no myth nor story that suggests that lesser divinities fell from their position as the intermediaries between God and human beings. Thus there is a problem of continuity and discontinuity of the relationship between God and the lesser divinities.

Looking critically at the view that the lesser divinities function as the intermediaries between God and human beings, it seems that African theologians developed that concept to defend African traditional religion against the charge of polytheism. However, the view has more serious theological implications for African Christian theology.

First, there is a serious need to prove that the lesser divinities are no more a part of God's government. This could not be done by simply pointing to Jesus as our new and only mediator. Some Roman Catholic theologians, particularly Sarpong (1996:36-39) convincingly argues that, although Catholics regard Jesus as the only mediator

between God and human beings yet Mary (holy Mother), the saints and angels also serve in some sense as intermediaries between God and human beings. Sarpong cites some examples that indicate that petitions are made not only to Mary. At the face value of some of the petitions, it looks as if Mary is the ultimate recipient of the petition. He also points out that it would be contrary to Catholic teaching to make Mary the ultimate recipient of petition prayer. On the basis of this, there is a strong argument to the effect that the unique mediator role of Jesus does not necessarily terminate the intermediary role of the lesser divinities for the Akan.

Now the questions that confront those who believe that the lesser divinities serve as intermediaries among the Akan are: What is the relationship between *Onyame* (now the Christian God) and His (former) representatives? How should the African Christian relate to these ministers?

In response to the questions, those who want to maintain consistency in the argument would like to consider the lesser divinities as angels and the ancestors as saints in Christianity. This suggestion has been made by some theologians, mainly from the Roman Catholic tradition where the veneration of the Angels and Saints give more grounds for its development. However there is a serious question that arises in this regard: whether or not there is sufficient theological ground to reconfigure the lesser divinities into angels and the ancestors into saints in Christian theology. However, such a key theological issue has not yet been taken up in detail by African theologians.

#### **7.4.3 Ancestral cult as myth of solidarity?**

Bediako (2000: 29-30) asserts that from an intellectual point of view, the cult of the ancestors belongs to the category of myth since ancestors are a product of the imagination of a community. He therefore suggests that ancestral cult should not be seen as anything more than a created myth by a community to ensure social solidarity and harmony.

He argues that ancestral spirits which have not demonstrated any power over death cannot be presumed to act in the capacity the Akan tradition ascribes to them; that is, they intervene in the lives of the living relatives and respond to their petitions



(Bediako 1990:10-11). In this regard, Bediako doubts the factuality of the ancestors' intervention in human affairs.

He explains that to characterise the cult of ancestors by the word "myth" is not to say that the cult is not worthy of serious attention. Rather, the term stresses the functional value of the cult of ancestors as against its factuality. He says that myth is sacred, enshrining, and expresses some of the most valued elements of the community's self understanding, (Bediako 2000:30-31).

To support his claim, Bediako explains that ancestors are family members who have died and are believed to be in a spiritual world where they maintain the course of life of the living, and influence it for good or ill, but their potency lies not in themselves but in the potency of the myth.

He points out that not all persons become ancestors - only those who lived exemplary lives and from whom the community derived some benefit (Bediako 2000:30). He states that in traditional societies, beliefs link the living and the departed in a common life. Also the ancestors have no independent existence from the community. He asserts that it is the cult of the ancestors that provides the basis for locating the source of authority and power in the community in the transcendent realm. It is thus authority that gives the leadership, the chiefs and elders themselves a secret quality.

He further argues that the ancestors do not originate from the transcendent realm; it is the myth-making imagination of the community itself which made them sacred. The community therefore confers upon them the sacred authority which they exercise through those in the community, like chiefs, who also are expected to become ancestors (Bediako 1990:38-42). Hence those ancestors actually function for the benefit of their communities. He points out that such a presumption is part of the same imagination which projects departed human Beings into the transcendent realm in the first place.

In this respect, Bediako asserts that the potency of the cult of ancestors is not the potency of the ancestors themselves but the potency of the myth. He maintains that the persistence of the cult of ancestors is owed, accordingly, not to their demonstrated

power to act, but to the power of the myth that sustains them in the corporate mind of the community (Bediako 1994:116-118).

On this basis, Bediako argues that the myth of the cult of ancestors therefore points to the role of the cult in ensuring social harmony by strengthening the ties which knit together all sections and generations of the community, the present with the past and with those yet unborn. He thus argues that ancestors are in effect a projection into the transcendent realm of social values and spiritual expectation of the community. Bediako points out that although the ancestors and the lesser divinities may be found together within a particular religious structure in the African primal world, they nevertheless belong to two quite distinct categories of spiritual reality.

Divinities can be acquired and also discarded should they prove ineffectual. Thus, they receive worship according to their performance. Ancestors, on the other hand, being lineage personages, are irreplaceable. Nevertheless, they are simply revered but not worshipped. For Bediako, the ancestors therefore represent a more enduring problem for theological inquiry than the lesser divinities. In primal religions, lesser divinities unlike the ancestors will eventually fade away through Christian impact.

To buttress his suspicion, Bediako points out that the spread of the Christian faith has been through a process of the “demonisation” of these divinities in the Christian religious consciousness. Such a development no doubt has a negative impact to the proper understanding of the nature and functions of the divinities and also threatens their very existence.

### **7.5 Conclusion and Assessment**

Bediako maintains that *Onyame* is none other than the God Christians proclaim. He regards the lesser divinities as intermediaries between God and the human beings in Akan belief. Nevertheless, he insists that in Christianity Christ has fulfilled the role of an intermediary as the only mediator between God and human beings. Thus, the presence of the lesser divinities is no longer needed in Christian theology. For Bediako, the cult of the ancestors belongs to the category of myth, that is, they are product of the imagination of a community. Thus, the significance of the ancestral cult is not to intervene in the lives of the living relatives or to respond to their petition;

they are a created myth to ensure social solidarity and harmony in a community. On this basis, Bediako does not see the ancestral cult, particularly the original form, as worship but as veneration.

From the summary of Bediako's view on the recipients of libation in the Christian context, following a deductive logic, one may conclude that, while Bediako will not accept libation making to the lesser divinities, he should accept it when making it to God and the ancestors alone. However, this is not the case.

Bediako gives two major reasons for his total rejection of the libation ritual. First, he maintains that there is more than one strand of libation practice, and that the present popular form is an adulterated form that he deems is tinted with idolatry. Secondly, he maintains that the primal world view presents itself as a unified cosmic system, and he objects to any of the components of the Akan world view being isolated for particular treatment; that is adapting the libation ritual to the point of pouring it to the selective individual spirit beings as one wishes, that is to only God or to God and ancestors alone, leaving the lesser divinities and the other spirits out of it.

He argues that in this way one would itemise the primal world view which presents itself as a unified cosmic system in the understanding of traditional people. To him, to isolate one element would break up and so destroy the harmony of the whole worldview.

Bediako's rejection of libation rituals as an adulterated version of the original ritual leaves much to be desired because his analysis of Akan libation practices is culturally weak. Again, Bediako's second reason for rejecting libation practices outright is not strong argument. Bediako asserts that none of the Akan rituals gives better insight into the ancestral cult than libation does. Why not leave the lesser divinities out, mention only God and the ancestors if the ancestors are not worshipped but simply revered as Bediako maintains. Experientially, there are several occasions when libation is only poured to either the ancestors or the lesser divinities alone. Further, nothing culturally restricts the words one should use to address the spirit beings. The words are based on one's needs.

More important is the socio-cultural and political implication of the total rejection of libation ritual. To reject libation totally is to reject chieftaincy among the Akan. To the Akan, one is a chief because he sits on the stool of his ancestors. The legitimacy a chief has, is based on the recognition that he gives to the ancestors. The libation ritual is the main means a chief uses to commune with the ancestors.

In conclusion, I am of the view that Bediako's total rejection of the libation rituals is not only based on his theological analysis. It appears that his desire to maintain an orthodox position as an evangelical Christian has influenced his position.



## CHAPTER 8

### Conclusion: Comparison and Analysis

#### 8.1 Introduction

This research has been an inquiry into the views of four Akan theologians, namely Kwasi Sarpong, Kwasi Dickson, John Pobee and Kwame Bediako, on the debate on whether Christian participation in traditional libation rituals is compatible with the Christian faith, and what form it should take. More precisely, it has been a critical theological engagement on the relationship between the Christian faith and the Akan libation rituals, with specific reference to; the recipients of the libation ritual, namely: *Onyame* (the Akan Supreme Being) *abosom* (the lesser divinities) and *nananom nsamafo* (the ancestors). A variety of different arguments relating to this question which have been put forward has been examined. In this respect, the following three arguments have been considered: (a) the African concept of the Supreme Being as the God of Christianity (b) The lesser divinities as intermediaries between God and human beings, and (c) The ancestral cult as worship or veneration?

#### 8.2 The research findings

The aim of the study has been to test the hypothesis that the positions of Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee, and Bediako on Christianity and libation are influenced by their views on the status that is attributed, both in Akan culture and in Christianity, to the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and *nsamamfo* (ancestors) in relation to the Creator *Onyame* (God).

Our findings have confirmed this hypothesis in that their various positions in the debate, namely total rejection, acceptance with modifications, or full acceptance are almost always based on the issue of invocation and petition of the lesser divinities and the ancestors.

All the four theologians readily identify *Onyame* with the God that the Christians proclaim. None of the four theologians raise any issue with regard to the appropriateness of making libation to *Onyame*.

The four also regard libation as prayer, at least, to *Onyame* and the lesser divinities. None of the four raise the issue of alcoholic drink being a problem in the libation debate. With the exception of Sarpong, the rest, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako have no comment about curses in libation as a major issue in the debate.

Nonetheless, this is not to conclude that the issue of making libation to God (regarded libation is prayer), the use of alcoholic drink in libation, and the curses in libation are a part of the debate on Christianity and libation in Ghana. My contention here is that these four theologians do not regard the above mentioned issues as serious theological problems.

In addition to the status attributed to the lesser divinities and the ancestors as the major theological issues, we also identified another issue that require attention, namely “ecclesiastical sanctions”. Whereas this is not a major doctrinal issue, it is a major determining factor for which has influenced the positions of these theologians. The fact is that these four theologians occupy leadership positions in their respective denominations, namely: Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican and the Presbyterian. These denominations were founded and (still financed to some extent) by the Western missions which totally rejected libation practices. Over the years, those in the leadership position in Ghanaian mission churches were trained by the missionaries. Notwithstanding the fact that the assessment of the missionaries on the Ghanaian culture in relation to Christianity is still the measuring rod, the “ecclesiastical sanctions” play a major role in the libation debate. This is because the average Ghanaian, though unconsciously, would strongly sanction them.

In summarizing our findings the most helpful procedure is (a) to give a summary of the background chapters, (b) to compare and contrast the four views and (c) to critically analyse the major assumptions that create different views in the debate on libation in general.

### **8.3 A summary of the background chapters**

From chapter one to three, we have offered some background information which forms the context within which the Christianity and libation debate has to be understood. In this respect, the introduction, which form chapter one, situates the

issue of the debate as an ongoing debate about African traditional rituals, precisely libation practices, in the context of Christianity and Western culture. The chapter also deals with the research question, research hypothesis, the research procedure and the research limitation.

In chapter one, I made it clear that the study will entail a *comparison* of the similarities, but especially the differences between the views of these four Akan theologians. Thus the task of this research will be to identify the underlying issues where there remain differences of opinion amongst these four authors.

There is no standard inside or outside African Christian theology that may be used as a criterion to judge the compatibility of libation with the Christian faith. Instead, the task was to describe the views of Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako on the compatibility of Christian participation in libation practices in an Akan context with the Christian faith - just as they themselves understand its content and significance.

Chapter two provides a detailed description of traditional libation practices in the larger context of Akan culture. I asserted that libation is a form of a prayer for the Akan and that in libation prayer; the Akan invokes and petitions the Supreme Being, the lesser divinities, the ancestors and other spirits to provide physical necessities and to ward off the spiritual enemies. I concluded by maintaining that libation forms an integral part of the Akan culture and that it cannot be done away with without causing irreparable damage to the culture and the identity of the Akan.

Chapter three has been divided into five sections. The first three sections, gave a survey of the relevant literature that deal explicitly with libation and Christianity. It also gives a detailed review of one of them namely: *Libation in the Old Testament and Akan life and thought: Critique* by Amos Anti. In this section, we see that Anti's intention to attribute the African Christian's negative attitude towards traditional libation practices more to a colonial slavery mentality is only partly right. The issue has a more Christian doctrinal dimension than Anti assumed it to be. I further argued that Anti could not argue his points to substantiate his conclusion that libation should be adapted into Christian faith. However, that is not to say that libation can not be adopted and adapted into Christian faith.

The last two sections of chapter three offered a description and analysis of the debates within the context of African Christian theology on Christian participation in libation practices. They provide an overview of the available literature on this topic with specific reference to the contributions of Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti and Byang Kato. The views of the three above mentioned theologians were used to represent the spectrum of opinions in African Christian theology. I admit that no two theologians may hold the same beliefs, yet any approach to the emerging theologies in Africa will follow the argument of one of the above three theologians.

Chapter three concluded that the debate of libation practices and Christian faith is best understood within the context of the cultural and theological positions attributed to the lesser divinities and the ancestors in relation to the Christian concept God.

#### **8.4 Christianity and libation: Comparing and contrasting the views of Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako**

In this section I will compare and contrast the different views of Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako (as described in chapter four to chapter seven) on whether Christians can participate in libation practices in an Akan context and in what form it may be regarded as compatible with the Christian faith. The issues that we must consider include the identification of the Akan Supreme Being who is a recipient of libation (and also not cut-off from the lesser divinities) with the God that Christians proclaim; and whether or not the lesser divinities really receive the libation on behalf of God or for themselves in the Akan thought and life. Moreover, we have to ascertain whether or not, in libation, the ancestors are really worshipped or simply revered; this is a major critical issue concerning ancestral cult and idolatry.

##### **a) A summary of the four views**

Sarpong asserts that libation in its present form is not incompatible with the Christian faith. According to Sarpong (1996:2), the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and the ancestors serve as representatives of God. If libation is a form of prayer to God through such representatives, it may be regarded as compatible with the Christian faith since the *abosom* (lesser divinities) are not themselves worshipped. He further maintains that



libation to the ancestors does not constitute worship. Rather, it is a symbolic way of recognizing the presence of the departed members of the family.

On the issue of cursing, Sarpong contends that it should not be a serious theological problem for a Christian observing the libation ritual. He points out that the scripture particularly the Psalms are full of curses against one's enemies. However, he cedes that it is not good reason to maintain curses in libation rituals. He therefore suggests that curses should be replaced with a statement to effect that the evil ones should have a "change of mind". For Sarpong, a Christian may justifiably have some reservation about certain aspects of libation as this is practiced in Ghana today. To condemn libation outright, and maintain that it is not compatible in any form with Christianity, seems to be a rather extreme position.

Dickson (1984:70) maintains that libation rituals, which are very vital to the Akan, may not necessarily be acts of worship, and therefore cannot constitute *prima facie* case of idolatry. Nevertheless, Dickson attacks the concept that the lesser divinities serve as the intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings. He demonstrates that the assumption is weak, particularly, in the thought and practices of Akan traditional religion. He contends that while libation to the lesser divinities would constitute disloyalty from the Christian perspective, libations to the ancestors need not be. He argues, though not convincingly, that the ancestors are not worshipped, but are simply revered. He maintains that it is the libation prayer which would give the real indication of whether or not libation to the ancestors constitutes idolatry (Dickson 1995:10-11).

Pobee (1979:65) maintains that libation rituals are very significant to the Akan, yet it is not compatible with Christian faith. He argues that even though the lesser divinities and the ancestors are in theory intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings in Akan traditional belief, in practice, the lesser divinities are approached as self-sufficient deities and the ancestors as ends in themselves. On that basis, Pobee contends that Christian participation in the traditional libation practices could lead to idolatry. However, he suggests that libation could be adopted and adapted into Christian theology. Pobee has not made any suggestion as to how libation should be adapted into the Christian faith.

Bediako gives two major reasons for his total rejection of the libation ritual. First, he maintains that there are more than one strand of libation practice, and that the present popular form is an adulterated form that he deems to be tainted with idolatry. Secondly, he maintains that the primal worldview presents itself as a unified cosmic system. Thus he objects to any of the components of the Akan worldview being isolated for particular treatment: adapting the libation ritual to the point of pouring it to the selective individual spirit being as one wishes, which is only to God or to God and ancestors alone, leaving the lesser divinities and the other spirits out. He argues that in this way one could itemise the primal world view which presents itself as a unified cosmic system as the traditional people understand it. To him, to isolate one element of the worldview would break up and thereby destroy the harmony of the whole worldview (Bediako 1995: 219-222).

#### **b) Comparing and contrasting**

Although Sarpong, Dickson, Pobee and Bediako are all Akans and ordained Christian ministers and professional theologians, they differ in the understanding of traditional libation rituals amongst the Akan and their assessment of Christian participation in contemporary libation practices. The positions of these four theologians on libation are influenced by their views on the status that is attributed, both in Akan culture and in Christianity, to the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and *nsamamfo* (ancestors) in relation to Onyame (Supreme Being).

According to Sarpong (1996:2), the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and the ancestors serve as representatives of the Supreme Being for human beings, and exercise their powers only as far as this is permitted by the Supreme Being. If libation is a form of prayer to the Supreme Being (understood by Christians as the God of Christianity), libation may be regarded as compatible with the Christian faith, since the *abosom* are not themselves worshipped, but are just representative of the Supreme Being.

Pobee agrees with Sarpong that the *abosom* may, in Akan belief, be regarded as representatives of the Supreme Being. However, he argues that in ritual practices the *abosom* are themselves regarded as self-sufficient spirit beings while the ancestors become ends in themselves. Pobee (1979:66) therefore concludes that there is a

serious danger that Christian participation in traditional libation practices can become a form of idolatry. This danger can only be averted if such libation practices are adapted on the basis of a Christian worldview.

Dickson (1984:57) agrees with Pobebe that the *abosom* may in ritual practices be regarded as self-sufficient spirit beings and that for Christians to offer libation to such spirit beings in such a context would amount to idolatry. However, he insists that in traditional Akan religion and culture the ancestors are not worshipped but only venerated. He therefore suggests that Christians participation in libation that is offered to the Supreme Being (understood by Akan Christians as their God) or that is offered to the ancestors may be compatible with the Christian faith. On this basis, Dickson argues that it is necessary to determine the context within which libation rituals take place and the actual content of the prayer before a position on Christian participation in such libation practices can be taken (Dickson 1995:11).

Bediako suggests that the *abosom* were traditionally regarded by the Akan (at least in Akan belief) as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings, but they are regarded as self-sufficient divine beings in actual libation practices (Bediako 2000:22-23, 54-55). Contrary to his three colleagues, he maintains that it is not necessary to reconfigure the traditional libation ritual within the context of the Christian faith, for the worldview differs from Christianity. Also, to itemise the key components of the Akan worldview and deal with them individually would distort that worldview.

The most important difference between Dickson and the other three scholars lies in their understanding of the status of the *abosom* (lesser divinities) in traditional Akan religion and culture. Dickson seems to assume that the *abosom* are regarded as self-sufficient not only in practice, but also in terms of the traditional worldview and religion of the Akan. Thus, Dickson does not only question the practice of *abosom* worship but is skeptical about the validity of the intermediary role of the *abosom* and the ancestors in the life and thought of Akan (Dickson 1984:56-58).

Though there are lots of issues, both culturally and theologically, that these four theologians disagree on concerning libation practices, it is also equally true that there

are some issues on which at least some of them share the same view. One of such issues is the problem on dependence of the *abosom*. Dickson, Pobee, and Bediako (Dickson 1984:56-58, Pobee 1979:65 Bediako 1983:216) categorically state that to make libation to *abosom* to solicit or appease or offer thanksgiving amounts to idolatry (Dickson 1984 56-58, see Dickson 1995 10-11). Sarpong, however, suggests that since the existence of the *abosom* is a matter of faith and Christians do not believe in them, it would appear proper that their names are left out when Christians are making libation (Sarpong 1996 43).

Similarly, Dickson, Pobee, and Bediako, though implicitly, also object to the curses in libation prayer. Pobee comments that if the content of the libation prayers could be made consonant with Christian theology, libation could be incorporated into Christian worship. Dickson and Bediako point out that it is the content of the libation prayer that determines one's commitment to Christ. Interestingly, none of the four have made any theological case on the alcoholic drink that is normally used to make libation. Meanwhile, Anti has pointed out that in the Old Testament alcoholic drink was used for the drink offering in the cult rituals.

### **8.5 The major assumptions on libation debate: A critique**

The conceptual basis for Christians' acceptance or rejection of Akan traditional libation practices is generally based on two concepts that I prefer to call: the *Communion of the Elders* and the *Intermediary Theory*. This is not to say that everything fits well into these assumptions; for there seems to be an ecclesiastical factor which is a contingency for individual theological decisions, namely sanctions to protect denominational doctrinal positions. Thus, deductively, it can be assumed that for the sake of internal theological consistency, one will hold to a certain theological position. Yet, one will decide otherwise, thereby creating inconsistencies in one's theological position.

Nevertheless, the proposed two concepts largely determining one's position as to whether one will see traditional libation rituals as compatible with the Christian faith or not. These concepts serve as the premises for the arguments of offering libation to the lesser divinities and the ancestors. On the basis of this assertion, I offer the

following as the major assumption beneath the debate on Christianity and Akan libation rituals.

The proponents of the “communion of Elders” contend that the Akan relationship with their ancestors is purely secular, and nothing more than human relations. The intermediary theorists seek to redefine the role of the *abosom* (lesser divinities) in the traditional belief system. They contend that the Supreme Being created the lesser divinities for a purpose; therefore their functions should be seen as that of representatives of the Supreme Being.

Granted that these two concepts are valid in the Akan traditional belief, the traditional libation ritual may be compatible with the Christian faith, at least in theory. Generally, it is on the basis of these two concepts that African Christian theologians hold different opinions on the question: whether and in what form Christian participation on libation rituals are compatible with the Christian faith.

#### **8.5.1 The Intermediary theory**

According to this theory, the Supreme Being is such a great king that he may not be approached directly most of the time. Thus He has delegated authority to the ancestors and lesser divinities to deal with the relatively trivial affairs of human beings. Thus, the ancestors and the lesser divinities, in theory operate as representatives of God. On the other side of the theory, God is conceived as retiring into heaven after creation, leaving the governing of the world in the hands of the lesser divinities. However, it could be argued that the Intermediary theory is not an original concept of the Akan but a created one with a very weak basis in Akan thought and life. It could be argued that the story of God’s withdrawal from human beings and the need to use his power (which necessitated the role of the *abosom* as the intermediaries) overstates the meaning of the myth.

On both sides of the theory, either the great king, or retiring creator, the conception that the lesser divinities and the ancestors serve as intermediaries between God and human beings, and the numerous sacrifices they receive is done on behalf of God (Pobee, 1979:65, Dickson 1984:52-53, Ukpong 1983: 188, Parrinder 1983, McVeigh

1974). In what follows, I have offered a description of various aspects pertaining to the basis of the theory of intermediary and my reactions to it.

**(a) An argument in support of the theory**

First, the concept of God in Akan traditional religion goes with a myth about God withdrawing from human beings. According to the myth, it was the pestle of the woman pounding *fufu* (a local Akan dish), which finally drove God upward. The myth is quite explicit on God being far away from the world of human beings (Dickson 1984:52).

Second, it is assumed that certain spirits particularly the *water spirits* are God's sons and the relationship between God and these lesser divinities is considered to be one of the sovereign and delegated ministers. In this regard, Pobee maintains that the Supreme Being and the ancestors provide the sanction for good life and punishment for evil.

Third, there is also an assumption that the *abosom* (lesser divinities) and the ancestors are *akyeame*, (linguists or spokesperson) between God and human beings (Dickson 1984). In the Akan court, the linguist is a very important personality. Being close to the chief, requests and pronouncements are passed through him to the chief. He sometimes even acts for the chief in his absence. The use of the expression "intermediary" may very well reflect the belief that the ultimate is God, so nothing is done or happens unless he has allowed it.

In theory, this expression would imply that the lesser divinities are intermediaries between God and human beings. According to Pobee, the Supreme Being is conceived of as a great paramount chief who is 'so big that he has to be approached through sub-chiefs and his official spokesman, called *Okyeame* who in public matters is like the chief. He exercises royal authority, even if it is subordinate to that of the paramount chief.

Fourth, polytheism has been defined as a qualitative and not a quantitative concept. It is argued that polytheism is not "a belief in a plurality of gods but rather the lack of a unifying and transcending ultimate which determines its character". The definition

given by Idowu removes the Akan traditional religion from the category of polytheism. To him, since the *abosom* are regarded as creatures of God, it can at least be said that some good works are credited to them, and that they are ministers of good works for human beings on behalf of God. For that matter, they are ministers of God, since, in Akan thought and life, all good works come from God.

**(b) An argument against the theory**

In reaction to the intermediary theory, I argue that the myth of the nearness and the subsequent withdrawal of Onyame (Supreme Being) seeks to explain the gap between the earth as the abode of humans, and the sky as God's abode. It has nothing to do with the psychological nearness of God which has made him less active in His activities in the world He created as the theory of *Deus absconditus* (Latin for hidden God) seems to suggest (Ukpong 1983:180). The Akan saying: *Onyame fa ebo unto no ntem* (literally, when God takes a stone He does not throw it quickly) suggests that the way God deals with human beings portrays Him as a patient, and a more mature being as compared to the lesser divinities who are perceived as more brute and fickle.

The Akan perceive God as one who will give the offender enough time to act before making any judgment. Thus God is unlike the lesser divinities who love to display brute powers. It is in this regard that the Akan more frequently solicit the powers of the lesser divinities than *Onyame*, not because He is far away but because of how patiently God works.

It is common among the Asante to explain a valley as the abode or deserted abode of a certain river *obosom* (lesser divinity) who left due to the misbehaviour of the people in the area towards "him" or "her". It is generally believed that such lesser divinities disguised themselves in some form, usually a wretched person, to ask for water, but was subsequently denied. Thus, almost all the valleys and dried rivers have a story of a departed river spirit who was defied by the people.

With respect to such common stories about the withdrawal of the river spirits, can we not also say that the withdrawal of "the God who has the sky as His abode" is based on something similar to that of the river spirits? To connect the presence of the lesser divinities to the myth of God's nearness and withdrawal, and to make the lesser

divinities intermediaries between God and human beings is more like introducing a foreign idea into a simple myth meant to explain why the sky is far away from the earth.

Another issue that undermines the theory is that the lesser divinities in practice, as known to the Akan, do not operate as the intermediaries between God and human beings but rather between the ancestors and human beings. Busia (1953: 25-26) notes that the wishes of the ancestors are believed to be made known to the human community more often through the *abosom*. Sarpong (2002:96) also affirms that the lesser divinities are the *spokesperson* for the ancestors. Whereas the gods usually have messages from the ancestors or something relating to the ancestors for human beings, they rarely, if ever, have a message from *Onyame* (Supreme Being) to human beings. Also, whereas the lesser divinities at times receive sacrifices on behalf of the ancestors, they rarely, if ever, receive sacrifices on behalf of *Onyame*.

Moreover, in Akan thought and life, the lesser divinities are simply regarded as creatures of God. To advance a concept that the lesser divinities are *sons of God* is a form of “Hellenisation” and is not derived from African traditional religion. In response to the proponents of the intermediary theory, some scholars point out that the concept was not originally part of African belief. The most important concern was raised by p’Bitek (1970) in his book “African Religions in Western scholarship”. He criticized Danqua, Mbiti and Idowu among others, on African religions in general and what he called “Hellenisation” of African lesser divinities. He commented that they are introducing Greek metaphysical conceptions into African religious lesser divinities, which are a creation of students of African religion yet can not be associated with the ordinary traditional Africans (p’Bitek1970).

Nevertheless, there are areas where the Akan use the concept of “sonship”. First, there are those whose parents in a special situation (where there is bareness) solicit the help of certain *abosom* to bear a child. When the woman gives birth, the child will be considered as the “son” or a child of the *abosom*. Second, all the mentally and bodily seriously deformed children are also considered to be “sons” or children of the (river) “*obosom*” (*nnsuoba*). There is even a popular story that says that river *Bia* and river *Tano* are first and second sons of God respectively.



However, in all the three cases, there is no authentic myth, proverb, or saying that denotes a sense of representation or intermediary role among the Akan. *Onyame* of the Akan is approached concurrently with the other lesser divinities without any sense of jealousy on the part of *Onyame*. As Elizabeth Amoah rightly points out, there is very little room for religious exclusivism among the Akan (Amoah 1998:3).

The concept of intermediary is being introduced to answer the problem of *giving the worship of God to the other creatures*, which is idolatry in the Judeo-Christian concept. However, such a problem is not in Akan religious life because in the Akan concept *Onyame*, unlike in the Judeo-Christian concept of Yahweh is not a jealous God in any practical sense when it comes to relating to the lesser divinities. He seems to rule concurrently with the lesser divinities, other spirits and the ancestors (without any sense of agency or representative, at least in practice). Therefore He does not need to reduce the *abosom* to intermediaries to be the sole recipient of worship.

In the light of these analyses, we can draw the conclusion that the concept of the intermediary role of the lesser divinities (and even ancestors) is not based on a solid foundation in Akan thought and life. On that basis, there is no adequate theological ground to reconfigure the lesser divinities (even the ancestors) into an intermediary role in Christian theology. However, the fact still remains that the lesser divinities were created by God and they are not in the same category of God, though they are not enemies of God in Akan traditional belief. Thus, the question still remains as to what makes it wrong to offer libation (if libation is a prayer) to the lesser divinities.

Unlike Dickson, the other three theologians (Sarpong, Pobee and Bediako) accept the concept of intermediary role of lesser divinities in Akan belief. However, Pobee and Bediako hold that the lesser divinities have no role in the Christian faith, because Christians have nothing to do with them. It is assumed here that the traditional role of lesser divinities as intermediaries has been filled by Jesus Christ. In contrast to this view, Sarpong holds that, although Jesus is the only mediator between God and human beings, the functions of the lesser divinities are more likened to that of the angels. On that basis, the mediating role of Jesus Christ does not affect the intermediary role of the lesser divinities who are more akin to the angels.

In analyzing the different positions regarding the intermediary role of the lesser divinities, the question that one likely ask is: If the lesser divinities are regarded as ministers in *Onyame's* (God) government, when was their appointment terminated since *Onyame* has been identified as the Christian God? Interestingly, there is no myth, story or proverb in Akan to suggest the fall of the lesser divinities. Obviously, the traditional Akan will get an impression that God is an enemy of his former minister when He is in a Western society but a co-worker with the same ministers somewhere else. It seems that Sarpong's approach has more internal consistence with the intermediary concept. However, the problem that remains is whether or not there is adequate theological grounds to reconfigure the lesser divinities as good and bad angels as Sarpong has proposed.

### **8.5.2 The concept of a “communion of elders”**

In the Akan society, the elders are the adult family or tribal members who have satisfied the basic moral norms and the etiquette of the society. Thereby, they are chosen to represent the family or the tribe. Among the Asante, there are designated titles, like chief, queen, and family head.

The elders in Akan comprised of the living human elders and the human dead elders called ancestors. The ancestors are the departed elders who are assumed to be actively involved in the affairs of the living descendants. Since it is assumed that the ancestors are still alive but in another world, it is considered disrespectful to disregard them in family or tribal meetings or discussions. Food and drinks are regularly offered to them to maintain fellowship and, in return, their blessings are sought for the benefit of the society. This type of fellowship and dependence forms the basis of controversy.

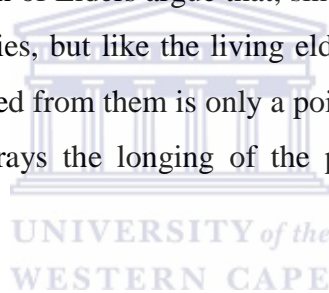
#### **(a) The basis of the concept**

The proponents of Communion of Elders maintain that the ancestors are not approached as deities, though they are dead, but as super living elders. Just as veneration can be accorded to the living, so the ancestors can be treated like the living to also receive veneration (Driberg 1936, Sarpong 1976: 39-41, Bediako 1975:23-24, Danqua 2000:5-7, Nyamiti 1984, Idowu 1973: 178-180, Mbiti 1969: 84, Fashole-Luke 1974).

Some scholars prefer the term “veneration” to “worship” as they deem God as the only one worthy of worship. Some other scholars prefer “worship” for the reason that the difference between worship and veneration is just psychological. This does not make any difference since “worship” is an ambiguous term and thereby also accorded to some living human beings (Idowu 1973: 183).

The frequently quoted statement by the proponents of the Communion of Elders was penned by J.H. Driberg: “What we have mistaken for a religious attitude is nothing more than a projection of social behavior...For no African prays to his dead grandfather any more than he prays to his living father. Driberg added that, in both cases the words employed are the same” (see Parrinder 1954: 64).

Proponents of the Communion of Elders argue that, since the ancestors are not treated like God or the lesser divinities, but like the living elders, food and drink offered to them and the blessings solicited from them is only a point of enjoying fellowship with departed relatives. This portrays the longing of the people for immortality of the human being.



In his attempt to reconfigure the ancestral cult and libation into Christian faith, Nana Addo Dankwa (200: 7) claims that the ancestral stool, which is regarded by some Akan theologians as a shrine of the ancestors was meant to be an embodiment of the family history, and therefore a secular historical symbol but not a shrine. He argues that it was rather later that it became adulterated to be a religious symbol. With the same intention to make libation more acceptable to the ancestors as against the *abosom*, (lesser divinities) Dankwa also claims that libation to the ancestors is not an invocation but an invitation for the ancestors to join the family to invoke God and the lesser divinities. If his argument could be accepted, libation to God and the ancestors then becomes compatible with Christian faith.

#### **(b) Arguments against the concept**

However, those who are also against the theory rightly argue that only on a narrow definition of religion can the ancestral cult be described as ‘purely secular’ (McVeigh 1974: 168). If the essence of religion is the sense of dependence upon supersensible

powers who are able and willing to help, then we are in the presence of religion when Africans commune with their kinsfolk in the unseen world; kinsfolk who have enhanced their powers associated with their new status and are assumed to be mediators between human beings and God.

It is further argued that Driberg's argument tends to make the African largely a non-religious person. McVeigh (1974: 168) points out that it is not possible for someone to be on both sides at once. Either the African is very religious, or he is not religious at all. If his relationship with the ancestors is secular, then he is by and large a secular individual.

McVeigh again argues that to say that the African's relations with the ancestors are secular and his relations with God are religious is to make a distinction between the two acts which the African does not make. McVeigh rightly points out that sometimes the same entreaty for help includes a mention of the ancestors, the lesser divinities and the Supreme Being. To suggest that a portion of the supplication should be classified as secular and the other portion as prayer is to confuse the situation completely.

With the exception of Pobee, the other three theologians maintain that the ancestors are not worshipped but receive veneration. However, Bediako does not accept that Christians should participate in traditional libation rituals to the ancestors. The question that may be asked here, assuming the ancestors are regarded as self-sufficient beings, does making libation to them would amount to idolatry? Why then should Christians embrace the concept of ancestorship to the extent of identifying Jesus as an ancestor? While Sarpong accepts Christian participation, Dickson wants some modification in the prayer context for Christian participation

## **8.6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the question of, whether and in what form Christian participation in libation practices in an Akan context may be regarded as compatible with the Christian faith has been given attention by African Christian theologians but it is inconclusive. With the exception of Sarpong, who has made his position clear, the other three theologians have inconclusive arguments. The sensitivity of the issue may be the reason for an assessment that is free of critique since the Western missionaries

condemned libation practices. However, it is clear from the analysis that the main concern of Christianity and libation debate rest on the cultural and theological attributed positions of the lesser divinities and the ancestors in relation to the Christian concept God. In respect of that, Anti may be partly right when he assumes that the negative attitude of the Akan against the libation ritual may be more of mental slavery. However, from the analysis, the negative attitudes rest more with theological contentions.



## **Postscript**

### **My personal views on Christianity and libation**

#### **9.1 Introduction**

It is adventurous for me to explore such a sensitive issue as Christianity and libation, particularly, attempting to find out and assess the positions of four Akan theologians who may not like to entangle themselves in the controversy involved in the issue of Christianity and libation. At first, I thought of only offering the views of these theologians and comparing their differences on Christian participation in libation practices in an Akan context with the Christian faith – just as they themselves understand its content and significance.

However, considering the fact that I am an Akan, born and bred in the village and from a family where libation rituals are practised on a regular basis, I later decided to express my views on this debate as my contribution to scholarship, hence this postscript. Admittedly, what will constitute my views obviously incorporate the thoughts of those that I have examined in this study. Nevertheless, I am sufficiently confident that my personal views presented here have relevance and significance which go beyond the current debate.

My position is similar to that of Dankwa (1990:25-36) in some aspects, but we starkly differ in our presentation. Dankwa presents his position as the original version of the Akan traditional libation. I see my views as a reconfiguration of the traditional libation ritual within the context of the Christian faith. My position shares some elements with Sarpong (1996:24-25). He suggests that if one regards the mentioning of lesser divinities as a problem, the divinities should not be mentioned. While Sarpong is not emphatic about it, I strongly want it to be removed. I do share some views with Dickson and Pobee (1979:65-56). They suggest that, although libation as it presently stands is not compatible with the Christian faith, it could be adopted and adapted within a Christian context. Whereas they have not offered what adaptation they would like to see as compatible with the Christian faith, I will state my position in this regard clearly.

The view expressed here is my personal opinion and it should not to be taken as the position of my denomination. I must confess that I do not have the authority to make any official statement on behalf of my denomination. I stand for any correction in the light of any stronger argument against my position. In suggesting that libation should be adapted as a form of prayer, I am not proposing that we should pour libation in the church or formal Christian services. My only concern is to keep at least some form of the libation ritual which is an integral part of the Akan culture and the Akan identity.

## **9.2 A summary of my views**

On the question of whether and in what form libation practices can be compatible with the Christian faith, my view is that libation has to be adapted before it can be compatible with the Christian faith. With regards to how it can be compatible with the Christian faith, I am of the view that libation should be made only to God and to the ancestors. With this, petition should be made only to God, and the presence of the ancestors should be recognized in a symbolic manner by an invitation to join the living human beings to make a petition.

I do recognise that Sarpong's suggestion, namely that the *abosom* (lesser divinities) should be reconfigured as (good and bad) angels (respectively), has some theological grounds, but this argument remains inconclusive. This is because presently, the current general understanding of *abosom* makes such a suggestion controversial and thus unnecessary.

The issue of recognising the earth as a spirit being does not constitute an enduring theological problem to the Akan. Thus, not making reference to the Earth in libation rituals will not cause a serious theological problem to the Akan. Nevertheless, this is not to say that it cannot be reconfigured within a Christian context.

The common assumption of identifying ancestral cult with necromancy is in my view wrong. Basically, in the séance of necromancy, there is either an appearance of some form of the person assumed dead or there is an assumed possession by the dead. By contrast, the ancestral cult invocation entails a simple prayer. Rattray rightly observes that, the ancestral cult of the Akan has no connection with any "sort of unholy contact with the dead"; that, it has nothing to do with necromancy.

Since the issue of alcoholic drink and the curses in libation should not be controversial, it may be adapted. Soft drink may be used instead of alcoholic drink. The curses in the libation prayer should be changed towards prayers focusing on a “change of mind”. With my point of view clearly stated, I also offer the following explanation as the context in which my position should be understood.

### **9.3 Libation as prayer?**

Among the Akan, libation is regarded as a form of prayer. The Akan term *mpaebo* (literally prayer), which is indisputably translated “libation” in English, attests to the fact that libation is a form of prayer. Moreover, libation has all the basic components of prayer: invocation, thanksgiving and petition. Libation is an invocation and petition of the Supreme Being, the earth cult, the lesser divinities, the ancestors and the other spirit beings, good and evil, known and unknown.

The assumption behind libation is that, there are hosts of spirits surrounding human beings who may either give blessing or curse. The good ones’ assistance should be sought and the evil ones’ menace should be warded off. The Akan saying: *se sasa bomsam bawo fie a, yede eto kokoo ne kosua na epam no* (if an evil spirit-called sasabonsam comes into your house, you should compromise and negotiate to ward it off) illustrates the necessity of bargaining and compromising to ward off the evil spirit. All these spirits must be recognized in acts of libation in order to avoid any attack from known and unknown sources. This accounts for the reasons why the Akan recognise all the known and unknown spirits (*ahum ne ahum*) in libation rituals.

Libation implies thanksgiving, petition, appreciation and appeasing. It is a contractual relationship whereby the spirit beings depend on the human beings for recognition and appreciation of their existence; they also need human beings to offer libation and sacrifice to them, and to recognise their power to influence phenomena. In turn, the human beings also expect the spirit beings to respond positively by providing them the necessities of life and to ward off evil from them. Thus, libation, both the pouring of the drink and the accompany statement prayer, implies a contractual obligation of the human beings and the spirit beings.



## **9.4. Christian participation in traditional libation practices: A critical engagement on the recipients of libation**

### **9.4.1 God as recipient of libation?**

The question as to whether God is actually invited to drink or is just recognized for His presence and whether the drink actually goes to the other spirit beings is not clear in Akan libation practices. According to Rev. Fr. Osei-Bonsu (1991:9), libation prayer which is first addressed to God before the other spirit beings, takes this form: “We show you drink, we do not offer you drink ...we show this drink to you so that you may touch it and remove from it all evil, so that as we pour it, whatever we say or implore for ourselves may be efficacious unto our good”.

To complicate matters further, among the Akan, libation is rarely poured to God alone. By contrast, it can be poured only to the earth, or only to the lesser divinities or only to the ancestors. This begs the question: why is the name of God then usually mentioned in libation rituals? The Akan normally give an invitation to eat or drink to all people around; even though one would clearly be aware that some of those invited do not actually eat or drink that particular food or beverage. However, it is the traditional custom of the Akan to invite all the people around to dine, even where one assumes that the invitees will not eat or drink. Thus, given the fact that God is usually invited to drink in libation ritual, it does not seem correct to conclude that God is a recipient of libation. Instead, it may be appropriate to assert that God is an addressee in libation ritual.

A casual observer may draw the conclusion from the above argument that God is not a recipient of libation. Nonetheless such prayer is one among others. Another equally valid and (even more regularly used) prayer also categorically states: “*Tweduapon Nyame, begye nsa*” (literally, almighty God, come and take a drink). Moreover, the contention that libation is rarely poured to God alone, is not a conclusive argument. Such contention should be interpreted in its wider context; why are sacrifices and libations less frequently offered only to *Onyame*?

Among the Akan, sacrifices and libation to God are less frequent and less spectacular than the innumerable sacrifices offered to the other divinities and the ancestral spirits.

This is a reflection of the understanding that the Akan have of God. God is always good and does no harm to anybody. The other spirits, however, lack consistency in their attitude towards human beings. They have a tendency to get angry and they especially resent being neglected by human beings. Thus, to avoid the dangers which the anger of the lesser divinities and also the ancestors could invoke, people must sacrifice to them. The need to sacrifice and pour libation to the lesser divinities and the ancestors emphasizes the basic differences between them and God. To the Akan, God is perfect and so sufficient unto Himself that He does not need sacrifices so much (Opoku 1978:30). Thus, for the fact libation is not frequently pour to God, does not necessarily say that God is not recipient of libation. Rather, the needs that call for the frequent libation pouring to Him do not arise so frequently.

Further, there is nothing in Akan culture that indicates that it is wrong to offer alcoholic drink to *Onyame* (the Supreme Being). On that basis, I suspect that the prayer cited by Osei-Bonsu was constructed particularly to accommodate the presence of Christians who often participate in libation rituals, but object to a Christian taking alcoholic drink. Making a prayer consonant with Christian beliefs in order to accommodate Christians is not against Akan religion. The fact is that in the Akan religious system it is not irreligious to borrow from or combine several religious traditions, as there is very little room for exclusive claims in this religion (Amoah 1998:3). To conclude, we admit that the issue is not all that clear in Akan belief. Nonetheless, we may not be wrong to say that God is a recipient of libation because it seems more probable than the contrary.

Many Christians do not have problems with the invocation of God per se, but the problem is the alcoholic drink that is offered to God. In Ghana it is generally believed, particularly among evangelicals, that a Christian should not take alcoholic drink. Thus it is assumed that it is theologically wrong to offer alcoholic drink to God.

However, one can credibly argue that invoking God with alcoholic drink should not be a serious theological problem to Christianity. As Anti rightly points out, alcoholic drink was part of the various drinks used as offering to God in the Old Testament worship. Besides, alcoholic drink, particularly fermented wine, has been familiar with the Lord's Table since the inception of Christianity.

#### **9.4.2 Earth as spirit being and an object of divination?**

The next addressee after *Onyame* in libation is *Asase Yaa* (the Earth). Some Christians may object to attributing powers to the earth and making the earth have a special spirit. The earth cult is a purely religious one, but it does not have any serious controversial theological implications. Undeniably, the earth regularly receives libation but she is not a goddess since she neither has priests or shrines, nor is she consulted for divination in ways in which the lesser divinities are (Busia 1961:38).

The Akan only seeks “permission” by offering libation and sacrifices (not divination). By so doing the Akan sees that Earth as a “spirit being” has not been taken for granted for things done which directly affect her; like digging a grave and planting. Respect and recognition is therefore given to the Earth as a conscious spirit being. Such respect and recognition given to the Earth through libation and sacrifice can better be understood in the context of the Akan belief that some objects have a spirit.

Recognition of existence is normally given to any spirit being who is assumed to be present during libation and sacrifice. Also any spirit being whose “interest” is affected, is recognized, for example, when the bark or leaves of a tree, which is believed to be the abode of the spirit, are plucked for medicinal purposes or otherwise.

Of course, whether Earth, trees, rocks and the like factually have a spirit or not is debatable, but this matter does not form part of this research. Nevertheless, the act of pouring libation to the Earth is clearly not divination. However, it can be, at worse, a superstition. Yet, no religion is totally free from superstition.

Remarkably, according a spirit personality to the Earth and thereby giving her recognition and treating her with respect, has given the Akan an effective way to protect their environment. The effectiveness of such “recognition and respect through libation and sacrifices”, though superstitions, may surpass many modern educational methods for environmental protection. Thus, one may justifiably conclude that some amount of superstition may be necessary when its benefits outweigh its problems. Notably, many Akan codes of conduct are couched in the form of symbolism, more rightly superstition. However, for the sake of avoiding “syncreticism”, the name of the Earth may be dropped from the list of the addressees of libation rituals. The term

“syncretism” raises another issue (which can not be discussed here), as to whether any religion is totally free from the charge of “syncretism”.

### **9.4.3 *Abosom*: demonic spirits or gods or angels?**

#### **(a) Introduction**

In African Christian thought, the concept of God has been identified with the God that Christians proclaim—but what happens to the lesser divinities? They are sometimes understood in terms of demons (fallen angels) and enemies of God, sometimes even in terms of gods. They are also sometimes understood in terms of angels and ministers of God. The *abosom* of the Akan are certainly not gods. To interpret them as “demons” or “fallen angels”, or even as “holy angels” and “ministers of God”, is a reconfiguration process that needs an adequate theological background.

#### **(b) Libation to the *abosom* and the first Commandment.**

If there is anything objectionable in the pouring of libation, it is the mention of the *abosom* (lesser divinities). This aspect of libation, to many Christians, goes against the first commandment: I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you lived as slaves. You shall have no other gods, to rival me (Exodus 20:1-2). Technically, the *abosom* in the Akan are not gods, neither do they rival God. Nonetheless, there is another question that needs to be asked: are the *abosom* idols? Of course verse 3 of the same passage enjoins us not to worship idols. Also in the New Testament, I Corinthians 11:8-11, Paul contends that making an offering to the idols is the same as making an offering to demons and that it is idolatry. This stand is explained by Paul’s contention that all the gods of the Gentiles are demons.

According to Barrett (1973:237), Paul was convinced that the image used to represent the idolatrous worship was a block of wood or stone and nothing more; it neither contains power to bless nor to curse. He also points out that Paul at the same time believes in the reality of an unseen world, and that idolatry was not merely meaningless but a positively evil thing. Barrett argues that idol worship is evil primarily because it robbed the true God of the glory due to him alone, but it is evil also because it meant that one is engaged in a spiritual act and is directing his/her worship towards something other than the one true God. Thus, to Barrett, the harmful

effect of idol worship is related to the way in which the worshipper commits him/herself to an evil though subordinate power.

Taking the verses Exodus 20:1-3 together, idolatry could be defined as the worship of idols (or images), as the worship of the polytheistic gods by the use of idols (or images) and even as the use of idols in the worship of the Bible's monotheistic God. The word "idolatry" (from 'idol') comes from the Greek word "eidololatria", which is a compound of "eidolon", "image" or figure", and *latria*, "worship". "Eidololatria" appears to be borrowed translation of the Hebrew phrase "avodat elilim" meaning worship of idols (Idowu: 1973: 120).

Various terms expressive of scorn and disdain, are sometimes applied to the idols. Thus, idols are stigmatized "non-God" (Deut. 32:17, 21 Jer. 2:11), things of naught (Lev.41:29), "a lie" (Isa. 44:20), and similar epithets. Idols are said to be made of gold, silver, wood, and stone, and are graven images, and, being the work of human's hand, unable to speak, see, hear, smell, eat or feel, they are also powerless, either to injure or to be of some benefit. Idols were named according to their material or manner in which they were made. At first, the gods and their images were conceived of as identical; but in later times a distinction was drawn between the god and the image.

Temples, altars, and statues were erected to the gods. Prayer was offered to the gods (Exod.20: 5).They were invoked by name (1 Kings18-19, 21), their names were praised (Josh. 23:7), incense was burned in their honour (1 King 11:8), they were invoked by the taking of oaths, and sacrifices were immolated to them (Jer.7: 18). The victims even included human beings, such as the offering made to Moloch.

Contextually, the first commandment presupposes "spirit beings" are perceived to be "gods" and thereby rival Yahweh. The sin against this commandment which we are most in danger of committing is giving the glory and honour which are due to God to any creature.

These commandments were written as rejoinders to the beliefs and practices of the polytheistic religions of the Ancient Near East and Middle-east. The Bible is clearly responding to the religions of Akkad, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. The spirit beings who

are gods to the understanding of people of the ancient- Near East and the Middle-east were rivals of Yahweh.

By contrast, *abosom* in the Akan are neither the “gods” the first commandment had in mind, nor spirit beings who in anyway rival Yahweh. Hermeneutically, it may also be inappropriate to put the *tete abosom* (lesser divinities) and the *suman* (fetish) in the same group and to classify both as evil forces or demons. In the Akan traditional belief, the *tete abosom* are intrinsically “good forces”. As Rattray rightly pointed out: “The main power, or the most important spirit in an *abosom*, comes directly or indirectly from *Nyame*, the Supreme God”. Nevertheless, the descriptions of the idol worship clearly resemble that of the cult of *abosom* in general, in the Akan: they fit most of the external description of the gods who were rivals of Yahweh (Sarpong 2000:96-98).

In such a paradoxical situation, we may be right to say that whereas in belief, the cult of *tete abosom* may not, technically, be at variance with the first commandment, in practice it appears to contradict the first commandment.

The question that arises in basing our conclusion on only the practices is: Would it be adequate to describe certain aspect of the Christian practices and draw an ultimate conclusion on a Christian position without elucidating the theological assumptions that such practices entails? Describing the activities of the cult of *abosom* (lesser divinities), and what the practitioners do, has been the easy path to follow as regards the nature of the *abosom*. It has also offered the least insight as far as theological beliefs are concerned because the actions of the cult have very rarely been contextualized.

For the Akan there is a clear distinction between *Onyame* (the Supreme Being) and *abosom*, both in belief and of practice. Sacrifices and libation are offered to *Onyame* and *abosom* separately and show no sign of rivalry. Also the libation offered to *Onyame* and the *abosom* together clearly position the two: *Onyame* (the Supreme Being) is always given pre-eminence and put in a class of his own.

In Akan traditional belief, whereas it is clear that *Onyame* created the *abosom*, and there is no enmity between *Onyame* and *abosom*, there is not sufficient clarity that one could formulate the doctrine that the *abosom* serve as God's representatives to human beings. In conclusion, I sum up that the Akan concept of *tete abosom* may not theoretically be at variance with the first commandment, but the same cannot be said of the *suman bosom* (fetishes) which at present have dominated, polluted, and totally replaced the *tete abosom*. However, the current usage of the term *abosom* is almost exclusively referred to *suman abosom*. In other words, one can hardly find *tete bosom* that has not been "polluted" with *suman* (fetishes); physical objects or instruments used in the practice of magic and have been elevated to the status of lesser divinities.

### **(b) *Abosom* as demonic spirits?**

For a proper understanding of the lesser divinities in Akan religion and culture, one needs to understand the differences between *abosom* and *suman*. Putting the two together and assigning them to the same category and branding them as evil forces has done more harm than good to the distinctive nature of the *abosom* in Akan. This, in no small way, has caused serious theological problems where there should not be any, for the Akan do not regard all the *abosom* as evil. Rather, it is only the *suman-bosom* (fetish elevated to become lesser divinities) that are generally seen as evil forces.

The knowledge about *abosom* (lesser divinities) that religious practitioners have, has not been subject to thorough investigation. Instead, scholars have opted for in-depth descriptions and surface analysis of the public actions takes place of the priest. One will find numerous texts which describe at great length what the priests and the priestesses in Akan do, but which ignore the theological structure in which their actions are suspended.<sup>21</sup>

*Suman* as compared to the *abosom* is of more recent origin in the history of Akan. They are physical objects or instruments used in the practice of magic and have been elevated to the status of gods. They are called *Suman bosom* by the Akan.

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<sup>21</sup> For detail analysis see Kwasi Bempong at : <http://assatashakur.org/forum//achive/index.phpt-6479.html>

By contrast, the ancient tutelary divinities called *tete abosom* are communally owned and have been worshipped from time immemorial. They are believed to be friendly to the community. Their main function is to protect the community from harm. In almost every Akan town and village there are stories about the *abosom* who are incarnated as human beings to intervene and help the communities' members. The issue of accusing one as a witch, which more often than not brings disharmony to the family was not part of *tete abosom*'s functions. Thus, there is an accusation against the *tete abosom* to effect that they will not reveal *bayie* (witchcraft) because they are afraid of them and they are more powerful than the *tete abosom*.

Among the Asante (the largest group among the Akan) the *tete abosom* are mainly associated with body water: river, lake, or stream. The various forms of water are looked upon more or less to contain power based on the spirit of the water that *Onyame* (Supreme Being) directly created (Rattray 1923:11-12, Opoku 1978:55). It is believed that the power of *suman bosom* comes from the *mmoatia* (dwarfs), *sasabonsam* (forest monsters), *saman bofou* (fetish spirits) and *abayifo* (witches), and sometimes from plants and trees. These sources are regarded as evil.

The *suman-abosom* unlike the *tete abosom* are owned by individuals and they operate in the interest of the owners who may put them to beneficial, or harmful and destructive use for personal ends. They are believed to hate and to kill witches (Rattray 1959:9-12).

Although *suman* (fetish) may be added to *tete abosom* (lesser divinities) but *suman* and *abosom* are in themselves distinct. The *Osofo* in charge of *abosom* usually has *suman* of his own. *Suman* are personal charms, they help the *Osofo* or the owner – anyone who acquire it – personally for protection. *Suman* are also said to make the *tete bosom* more powerful. Nevertheless, their negative impacts on *tete abosom* are well noted. One of the Tano (one of the *tete bosom*) priests told Rattray that *suman* spoil *abosom*, however, the priest did not elaborate more on that (Rattray 1959:14).

Whereas, the power of the *suman* are said to be derived from the evil forces, the *tete abosom*'s source of power is *Onyame*. The *suman abosom* employed as executioners and later witch- catchers were usually non-Akan in origin, often procured from Ghana's northern territories, but were incorporated into the pre-existing ecclesiastical



structures. Their violent proclivities are in stark contrast to the nature of *tete abosom* such as Tano in early Akan theology. *Tete abosom* do not kill, nor are they asked to hate anyone; they punish by withholding their beneficence.

In the late thirties and forties, Field (1960:88) observed the distinction between the two when he noted that the priests for the *tete abosom* as a rule were not practising spirit-possession. Instead they offered dignified prayer and other rites, not only on behalf of the individual but also the whole community who sought for help when in sick or in trouble. Field states that: “These old benign gods still exist alongside the new *abosom-brafo* (*suman bosom*) shrines, but are considered inadequate for modern needs”. Their perceived inadequacy has nearly driven the *tete abosom* to extinction. Since the first quarter of the twentieth century, the ever- diminishing *abosom* began to be dominated by non- Akan *suman bosom* and witch-catching *abosom*. The *tete abosom* loss of prestige led to a change in religious practice and a commensurate loss of theological knowledge.

The priesthood deprived of three year novitiates and stocked with priests with little or no training could not preserve or transmit the amount of the knowledge the *tete abosom* priests once possessed. This is most likely the primary reason why the religious discourse about “traditional religion” is so densely packed with allusions to witchcraft, possession, and sacrifice.

In general, the Akan are now distanced from the texts of earlier Akan theology and are, therefore, unaware of how their ancestors actually conceptualized belief prior to the political and social situation that gave rise to *suman abosom* and witch-catching cults.

On the basis of the above analysis, it will be an over-generalization for one to speak of all *abosom* as evil forces or spirits. The Akan actually do not see the *tete abosom* as evil forces as such, rather they see them as community guides who may receive their powers from God (Mbiti 1969:87). Nevertheless, the *suman bosom* can be justifiably identified with evil forces or spirits because the Akan themselves regard them as such. It is on this basis that Sarpong suggests that we should identify the good *abosom* with the good angels and the evil *abosom* with evil angels (Sarpong 1996:43).

**(d) *Abosom* as gods?**

Another common mistake that the casual observers of the Akan culture make, is to equate *abosom* to the Mesopotamia and Greco-Roman gods. When the Bible talks about the gods of Babylon, Persia, and Greece, it is talking of beings whose worshippers thought and believed that they were at least equal to the Jewish Yahweh. Hence God could say: Thou shall not serve any other god apart from me (Ex. 20:3). The “Baals” and “Zeus” were competing with Yahweh. This is simply unthinkable in African Traditional Religion. *Onyame* has no competitors and the worshippers of *abosom* know and acknowledge this (Sarpong 2002:97).

Notably, the understanding of how the Akan have traditionally regarded *Onyame* (Supreme Being) betrays a tendency to impose upon the Akan religious concepts experience an inherited from the Middle East or from the Greco-Roman world. Not only outside observers but also certain African Christians describe African concept of the Supreme Being in Semitic or Indo-European theological categories that are still basically foreign. Thus, the concept of “gods” that is imposed on the *abosom* of Akan traditional religion is without adequate equivalencies (Ryan 1980:161-162).

Akan biblical translators, apparently reluctant to render the plural sense of *'elohim* with the words for lesser divinities known in Akan, have sometimes created words in order to render plural reference to gods in Hebrew. Thus, the translation of the Bible into Asante Twi (the largest Akan group) translates the plural *'elohim* of Psalm 82:2 as *anyame*, a coin term to describe the (*abosom*) lesser divinities who they unduly regarded as small “gods”. In so doing, they have not only underrated the Supreme Being in West Africa by placing the lesser divinities in the same class of God, but also mess-up the identity of the lesser divinities by unnecessarily making them a rival to God. Apart from this translation most of the scholarly literatures on the traditional forms of faith in Akan ignore the fact that there is not a term or category in any authentic Akan language that yields an adequate equivalent of the Semitic and Greco-Roman pair called God and the gods (Ryan 1980:164).

In the Semitic Middle East, the generic name for the Supreme Being has usually been *'el* or *'il* or any of its linguistic variants, usually translated into English as ‘god’,

or 'deity' or 'divinity'. In much of the Semitic language areas, one god or the other might ascend over the others. Once such a god has achieved supremacy over the others in the divine assembly, he might retain his proper name or become more formally known as *the* God (Ryan 1980:162).

Psalm 82 more probably reflects something of this myth like pattern. This Psalm projects not only the rise of a God but also the demotion of the other gods into insignificance (McCullough 1955: 442). The crux of the interpretation of the psalm is the meaning to be attached to "the great assembly" of the "gods" in verses 1b and 6. The commentators on this differ widely. There are at least two main explanations. First, the gods are nothing but human judges who are condemned by the Great Judge for being unjust (VanGemenen: 1991:534). Such an interpretation lies behind the use of Psalm 82 vs.6 in John 10:34. Against this exegesis, one should agree that in verse 7 it is implied that those referred to here are not human beings; otherwise the statement "But you will die like men" will be meaningless (McCullough 1955: 442).

Second, there is another view that the psalmist has in mind a heavenly concourse of gods, demigods, and angels. The ancient Near-East as well as the Middle -east was acquainted with "assemblies of gods", so we should expect the Hebrews to be familiar with such an idea. This supposition is borne out by various references in the Old Testament to a heavenly gathering over which the Lord presides (29:1-6; Daniel7:9-10; 10:13, 20-21). It throws light upon allusions to the Lord's throne being in heaven (11:4; 103:19; Isa.66: 1), and his supremacy over all gods (89:5-8; 95:3; 96:4; 97:7, 9; Exodus.15:11; Deutronomy3:24; 1Kings 8:23). Eventually, of course, the concept that there were lesser gods in heaven was abandoned by the Hebrews. The heavenly host was thought to consist solely of angels; which is more likely the demotion of the other gods into insignificance (Dahood 1974: 269-271, McCullough 1955:443). Such an idea roughly seems to correspond with the Akan worldview where there is a Supreme Being and other lesser beings who unquestionably serve under Him.

### **9.5 Abosom as angels?**

The African primal world can now be looked at in a completely new light. However, the direction it will take is yet to be seen. The issue of survival of the lesser divinities in the African worldview has been discussed by many African Christian theologians.

The idea of disposability of the lesser divinities in the life and thought of the Akan seems to lean on the idea that the *abosom* (lesser divinities) may not survive the assault of Christianity and Western civilization. In this respect it is obvious that some of writings of the champions of the African traditional religions appear to give up the necessity of the existence of the lesser divinities.

Neither Idowu (1973:167) nor Mbiti fully acknowledge the existence of the lesser divinities in African traditional religion. They do not regard their existence as a positive element for Christian engagement. Instead, they make a reduction of lesser divinities into attributes or manifestations of God. Damuah (see Bediako 1995:28) also radically demythologised the lesser divinities so that their new role is honourable. The approach of these African theologian seem to correspond with the Sadducees view of angels in the in the New Testament era. Also presently, there are some theologians who like the Sadducees regard the angels as mere manifestation of God. However, in another discussion of the lesser divinities and angels, Sarpong a Roman Catholic Archbishop in Kumasi suggests that a belief in angels can replace belief in *abosom* (lesser divinities). So does Ezeanya (1969: 425).

### **9.5.1 Angels in the biblical tradition**

#### **(a) Introduction**

In Greek culture the term translated as “angel” in English refers to the one who brings a message. To the Greeks, the earthly messenger is the prototype of the heavenly messenger. The basic view of divine messengers must be very old. It spread over the whole Greek world with no spatial restrictions. The Greek and Hellenistic religion thus felt itself to be in connection with the “Ultimate reality” through the divine messengers.

#### **(b) The earliest view of God’s divine messenger (angel)**

In the Old Testament, the basic meaning of angel is one who is sent. In the faith of ancient Israel an angel is not a terrifying being, but a friendly and helpful messenger of God (2 Samuel.14: 17, 20; 1 sam.29:9). Only one angel was known. He smote the foes of Israel (2 king19: 35), helped Prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19:7) guided the people (Ex.23: 20), resisted the enemy (Nu.22:22), protected Israel (Ex.14:19) and fulfils many other commissions (Joshua. 6:11ff; 2 Kings1:3, 15). This angel represented the

interests of Israel. He was the personification of Yahweh's assistance to Israel. Only in exceptional circumstance did he have to turn against Israel (2 Samuel 24:17). The prosperity of Israel was otherwise his exclusive office. However, it is impossible to differentiate between this angel and Yahweh Himself. The one who speaks or acts; Yahweh or the angel is obviously one and the same person.<sup>22</sup>

**(c) The heavenly beings: gods or angels?**

In addition to the older Israelite view of Yahweh's messenger, the Bible introduces other heavenly beings. The beings seen by Jacob in his dream ascending and descending the ladder, or the members of the heavenly court coming in and going out before Yahweh, may be described as angels even though they are roughly called heavenly beings.

The notion that Yahweh is surrounded by a host of heavenly beings who assist in His government and praise Him is quite current, even in pre-exilic Israel. A distinctive feature of this heavenly entourage of Yahweh is its warlike character. This leads us to suspect that there is at least an enrichment of the heavenly court from the Canaanite religion native to Palestine prior to the conquest (Grundmann 1964:79).

It is thus all the more surprising that in no case do these angelic beings have autonomous functions or spheres of influence alongside Yahweh, and that they are never objects of worship. Perceptibly, belief in the overpowering uniqueness of Yahweh has reduced these beings, who must surely have played a much more significant role in the older stories. However, there is no violation of the absolute transcendence of Yahweh (Grundmann 1964:74-76).

**(d) Illegitimate gods becoming angels?**

Kidner (1975:297) on his exegesis of Psalm 82 points out that in the Old Testament, the terms "gods" or "sons" of God are used interchangeable with the term angels (Psalm 82:7; Psalm 8:5; Job 1:16; 38:7). We may well suppose that the popular religion of ancient Israel had much to say of superhuman beings other than Yahweh,

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<sup>22</sup> Babylonian religion, also, speaks of divine messengers, the son of the existing god usually being his messenger. However, this is more in the areas of Christology and it needs to be pursued further elsewhere. Our interest and focus here is on the activities of angels (Rad 1964:78).

but that the inspired writers have mostly suppressed reference to them as unedifying. Moreover such beings were not strictly angels (Dahood 1974: 267-271).

This leads us to inquire about the development of the previously restricted belief in angels after the Babylonian exile, leading ultimately to a veritable angelology. We are faced with the fact that for a long time, under pressure from polytheism, Israel had had no angelology. In exilic and post-exilic times, the belief in angels then became more prominent (Rad 1964: 78).

More intensive contact with outside religions undoubtedly had some influence on the Jewish formation of the concept of a divine messenger. Yet, this hardly explains the matter. We have also had to reckon with the fact that in a unique religious situation, suppressed illegitimate gods or demons may sometimes have re-emerged in harmless forms. What has happened to European gods can be cited as typical examples.

Before Christianity entered Europe, the Europeans were worshippers of many divinities. In the process of reconfiguration, these divinities were ultimately demoted, yet they were honoured with a place they could be remembered always. The names for each day of the week in English are derived from the European divinities.

One of the oldest gods of the Teutons (a European tribal group including the Anglo-Saxons who settled in the British Isles) was Ziu (or Tiu). Originally he was the shining sky who later became the god of war. The Europeans still honour him by naming Tuesday after him. Wodin (or Odin.) was the god of war. It is believed that his spear never missed. He also became the god of prophets and poets for it was held that he knew all things and saw everyone. Wednesday is named after him.

The red-bearded god of thunder and rain and the god of agriculture was Donar (or Thor). Throughout the world of the Teutons he was pictured as a man carrying a hammer in iron gloved hands, riding a sky chariot drawn by two he-goats. He is honoured by Thursday. Friday was considered the luckiest day, for it commemorated the Scandinavian goddess of love known as Frigg. Saturday is the only day of the week in English named for a Roman god, Saturn. The sacred day of the Teutons was Sunday, the day of the sun. Monday was reserved for the moon. Thus, the names for

each day of the week in English are derived from the European divinities prior to the coming of Christianity (NWD 1981, also see Gehman 1987: 130).<sup>23</sup>

In Israel the increasingly austere belief in the transcendence of Yahweh may have favoured the interest in concrete mediatory beings. An insight into the new outlook of the autonomous divine beings ultimately reduced to the status of messengers is given by the Book of Job, which speaks of the angelic world with no dogmatic pretensions. The verdict as to the nature of angels is expressed in their description as divine messengers. Yet their holiness is limited; they are not pure when compared to God (Job 4:18; 15:15). They were witnesses of creation (Job 38:7). They could be called upon in times of need (Job 5:1), some of them possibly being intercessors (Job 33:23). The angel of death came to the dying (Job 33:22; Proverbs 16:14). Similar references may be found in the Psalter, i.e. Psalm 82 (Rad 1964:76-80).

The proclamations of the prophets, which were fused with mythology, have been retained and give full attestation of the change of the status of the fully autonomous beings now reduced to be messengers. Ezekiel is the first prophet in whose visions an interpreting mediatorial being is introduced (40:3ff.). Zechariah's distinctive view of angels also introduces heavenly riders, smiths and winged creatures, all at the command of Yahweh (Rad 1964: 79).

In Daniel a picture unfolds to indicate the operation of opposing heavenly forces. The partly increased interest in these forces corresponds with the fact that here, for the first time the angels are named. Directly under God stand the archangels. Michael is the guardian angel of Israel and there are references also to the guardian angels of other countries (Daniel. 10:13, 20), generally of other guardian angels (Daniel. 4:10, 14, 20), and of hundreds of thousands of angelic servants surrounding the throne (Daniel. 7:10). There thus opens a new phase in the history of the Jewish belief in angels (Rad 1964:79).

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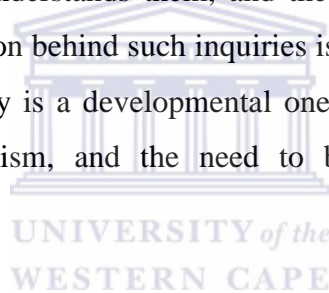
<sup>23</sup> The New Webster's Dictionary of the English language 1981. Also see (Gehman 1987:130).

In the earliest stage of the Hebrews history, these “heavenly messengers”, the angels, are depicted by the Hebrews in human form and without wings. In later Old Testament literature, there are also references to beings in the form of animals, the seraphim and cherubim. The cherubim, mixed creatures like birds, are known to the whole of the ancient Orient. The similarity of the concept of divine messengers among the Jews with its neighbours, attests to the fact that the concept of angels in the Bible was a developmental one, and it was not done without its larger context: the Near -east and the Middle- East who also have some of their gods demoted to be mere messengers after one emerged over and above “his” colleagues (Rad 1964:79).

### **9.5.2 The concepts of angels and *abosom*: a comparison**

#### **(a) Introduction**

In this section I will offer a comparison of the role and the activities of the *abosom* to the Akan as traditionalists understands them, and the role and the activities of the biblical angels. The assumption behind such inquiries is that the concepts of angels as Christians understand it today is a developmental one, which is guided by a strong desire to maintain monotheism, and the need to balance immanence with the transcendence of God.



A mediatory role becomes necessary for any system that projects the transcendence and immanence of an object of worship. Christianity and Akan traditional religion recognise the transcendence and immanence of the Supreme Being. Both also have a story that clearly indicates that human beings could not access God in full and so needed a mediator. In the Bible it is said that in time past, God used the angels and others to affect such a mediatory role, but that Jesus has replaced such intermediaries. Nonetheless, it is a fact that the angels still have a role to play in God’s government. Thus one argues inadequately if one recognises that the *abosom* serve as intermediaries but insist that Jesus has replaced them in their functions. On this basis, our comparison is strictly between the angels and the *abosom* who have more in common in terms of nature and functions than the *abosom* and Jesus Christ.

#### **(b) Angels and *abosom*: Similarities and differences**

Angels are not gods, neither do they rival God. The angels are regarded as creatures of God and their main function is to guide and protect Israel. Similarly, the *abosom* are



regarded as the creatures of God who derived their powers from Him (Rattray 1959:23). Their main function is to guard their communities, to protect them from their enemies and to sanction public morality.

In almost every Akan town and village, there are stories about the *abosom* who incarnated themselves as human beings to intervene and help the communities' members. Remarkably, such stories are not significantly different from the intervention of the angels in the Old Testament. The angels do not function as the substitutes for God but act as his servants, as vehicles of his power and will. So do the *abosom*. No Akan will ever substitute *abosom* for God, at least not in thought. *Abosom* are nevertheless objects of worship. Temples, altars, and statues are erected to them. Prayers are offered to them, their names are praised, they are invoked in oaths, sacrifices are immolated to them and libations are offered to them. By stark contrast, the Bible categorically forbids angel worship.

However, it is contended that there is an indication that the worship of angels, though not officially was part of the Hebrew religiosity before it was finally phased out. The critics point to three main sources in support of their argument. First, there are passages in apocalyptic texts where messenger angels forbid the seers to worship them (Revelation.19:10; 22:8; Isaiah 7:21; 8:5). It is insisted here that these prohibitions indicate that the worship of angels was practiced in Jewish circles. Second, the passages in Colosians.2:8, 18 and Hebrews 1 seem to indicate a polemic against the cultic practices known to the Jewish religion of the time. Third, the criticisms of Jews as worshippers of angels in pagan and Christian polemic prove that such a cult practice was known to be part of the Jewish religion of the time.

Whereas the *abosom* appear to be ends in themselves in practice, the angels are just vehicles of God's power and will. Again, it is clear in the biblical texts that the angels serve as the intermediaries between God and human beings. This concept is not the primary thought of the Africans, particularly the Akan. Nevertheless it is clear that they were created by God and the Akan has a belief that everything good comes from God. Thus, when one does a good work it is said of a person that *w'aye onyame dwuma* (you have done God's work). On this basis, one can rightly say that *abosom*

work on behalf of God. Nonetheless, this is not an adequate explanation for the said intermediary role of *abosom*.

**(d) Conclusion: abosom as angels?**

Sarpong and Ezeanya suggestion of reconfiguring *abosom* into angels may be an interesting study which has some theological basis, though inadequate for such a reconfiguration.

The old Akan concept of the *abosom* (as against the recent development of a combination of *abosom* and *suman* which Sarpong may liken to the good angels) is far fetched. The concept has long been adulterated by the inflow of *suman* from outside the Akan culture. In general, the Akan are now distanced from the texts of earlier Akan theology and are, therefore, unaware of how their ancestors actually conceptualised belief prior to the rise of *suman abosom* and witch-catching cults.

The missionaries' misapprehension of the difference between the *tete abosom* and the *suman bosom* has brought a condemnation of the two together and has also given the *abosom* an image as rivals to God. The impact of the missionaries has helped the spread of Christianity among the Akan. At the same time, it has also encouraged a process of the "demonisation" of these lesser divinities in the Christian consciousness. Such a development no doubt has a negative impact on the proper understanding of the nature and functions of the lesser divinities. It also threatens their very existence.

To worsen the matter further, the present generation hardly know about the differences between the *tete abosom* and the *suman bosom*. To many of them, all *abosom* are *suman abosom* and for that matter, all *abosom* are evil forces. In this respect, to reconfigure the *abosom* into angels will create a lot of confusion among the Christians and thereby do more harm than good in Christianity. As the Akan says; *deanntoa akoduru no ensien nuro ho*. (One can never equally undo the extent of a maligned reputation).

Moreover, the idea of disposing of the lesser divinities in the life and thought of Africans (Anyawu 1985), particularly the Akan seems to lean on the idea that the *abosom* may not survive the assault of Christianity and the Western civilization. To

worsen matters further, some of the champions of the African traditional religions appear to give up the necessity of the existence of the lesser divinities. Idowu (1962: 62) and Mbiti subsequently refuse to fully acknowledge the existence of the lesser divinities in African traditional religion. Instead, they demote the lesser divinities into attributes or manifestations of God. Damuah also radically demythologised the lesser divinities and their traditional attributed roles (see Bediako 1995: 28).

Further, the lesser divinities unlike the ancestors will eventually fade away due to the impact of the Christian faith and Western technology. These developments no doubt have a negative impact on the lesser divinities, even as Western worldview denies their very existence and Christianity “demonises” them. Therefore, in Akan, it is rather the ancestors, who might represent a more enduring problem theologically than the lesser divinities. For, in primal religions, divinities unlike the ancestors will eventually fade away through the Christian Western technological impact (Bediako 1995:216).

#### **9.6 Can Christians pray to the ancestors?**

One of the key issues in the libation debate is the petitioning of the ancestors. To me as a protestant, to petition the ancestors for the necessities of life is contrary to the “Christian faith”. It constitutes disloyalty to Christ, since it questions his sufficiency in my life.

Nevertheless, the biblical account seems to suggest that the ancestors can influence the life of the living human beings. The story of Jesus speaking to Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration clearly confirms the belief of traditional religion that those who have died have a conscious existence after physical death. In this occasion the Apostles Peter, James and John see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. Thus, the idea that physical death is a door into the spirit world is quite accurate according to the Bible.

Analysing what took place at the Mount of Transfiguration, particularly the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah, it may not be wrong for one to argue that those who have died are conscious and continue to exist. The scriptures reveal that they remember what took place during their life and they also seem to have

additional knowledge, as it could be seen by the fact that Moses and Elijah were speaking with Jesus concerning his death which was soon to take place at Jerusalem (Luke 9: 31) (O'Donovan 1992 : 220-221).

Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 also gives us a similar insight into what happens after death, as well as other important information about the condition of the dead. For example, after the rich man died, he was painfully aware of the great mistake he had made in not serving God. He very much wanted Lazarus to be sent to tell his brothers about his mistake (Luke 16: 25-28). However, this request was not granted (Luke 16:29-31). While it was not Jesus' primary intent here to teach us about the nature of the intermediate state, it is unlikely that he would mislead us on this subject (Erickson 1983:1177).

The Old Testament story about King Saul who talks with the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel (Sam.28:8-19) also has an assumption that the dead are conscious spirit beings and they do factually influence the life of the living human beings.

On the basis of this analysis, the question is not whether the ancestors can actually intervene and influence the life of the living or not. The biblical assumption presupposes that. Rather, the question that needed to be asked is: Is it appropriate to petition the ancestors for our needs? It is here that I am of the view that it is not appropriate. One may argue that the ancestors are by definition good people. If the good people have the ability to help, why is it wrong to ask them for assistance? In respond to this, we cite angels as an example. Although they are Spirit beings yet, it is against the scripture, (particularly protestant theology) to petition them directly or even address prayer to them.

However, if one argues that the petition is not made to the ancestors but through them to God, then that brings up the issue of whether Jesus, as the only mediator between God and human beings, excludes any mediatory role of any other spirit being.

To the Protestants, the mediatory role of Jesus seems to exclude all others. However, whereas Protestants will not talk about saints as patrons and thereby solicit their assistance, they freely talk about guardian angels assisting them in many ways

(Hebrews 1:14) (Olowola 1993: 31, Graham 1975). The question is, if the source of power of these guardian angels is from God, are they not acting in some form of intermediary role? On the other hand, the same issue should not be a problem to the Catholics whose theology makes provision for them to petition God through other beings. To be consistent with my line of theology, the ancestors should not be petitioned but should be invited to join the living to petition *Onyame* (the God that Christians proclaim).

### **9.7 Ancestors as saints**

The Akan term *nananom nnsamfo* literally means the ghosts of the elders. The term is translated into English as ancestor. By the definition of the term, there are no bad ancestors. Thus, the ancestors are the illustrious members of the family who have passed away previously. Those who qualify to become ancestors are “good” people and those have not yet qualified are called *samantwentwen* (roaming ghosts). In Akan belief, such spirits will have the opportunity to be reborn until they make it as an ancestor. Thus, to the Akan, no one is totally doomed. The essence of the ancestral cult is solidarity between the living and also between the living and the dead. For, the ancestral cult unites not only the living and the dead, but also the living relatives as they regularly remind each other that they are as one people from one ancestral root as they participate in the ancestral cult rituals.

In Greek the communion of saints is “*koinonia hagion*”. The word “*koinonia*” is one of the most extensively used words in the Greek language. Long before it was taken into the Christian vocabulary, it was used by the Greek writers. It describes any partnership, fellowship, activity, experience or relationship in which bring people together. The essential meaning of the word is togetherness, and always connotes the idea at the back of it that the fellowship is for the mutual benefit and the good of all in the widest sense of the term.

In the next section, I will compare and contrast the notion of the Akan ancestors with the notion of Christian saints, both in the Catholic and Protestant perspective, in order to assess the mediatory role of the Christian Saints and Akan ancestors. The Akan group form 53.6 percent of the Ghanaian population, and there are almost no differences in libation practices among the Akan and the other tribes in Ghana.

Moreover, giving both the Catholic and Protestant position is important, for the Catholics constitute 14.6 percent and the Protestant also constitute 63.7 percent of the Ghanaian population. I will rely much on Sarpong, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kumasi for the Catholic perspective (GDS 1988: 17, Sarpong 1980:28-30).

### **9.7.1 Roman Catholic Tradition: Ancestors as Saints?**

#### **a) Saints**

In the Roman Catholic tradition, a saint is a human being who, in the opinion of the church, has distinguished himself or herself by the practice of virtue to become a hero and is now in the company of the blessed enjoying the sight of God. This position is officially declared by a canonization decree or other equivalent document of the church. The consequence of such a declaration is that the dead person is entitled to receive general veneration in the Roman Catholic Church. This is on account of his dignity and close union with God.

The cult of the Saints is termed *dulia* to distinguish it from the cult which is due to God alone, called *latria* or adoration. Any prayer directed to a saint is a prayer of intercession, by which the living wish the saints to intercede on their behalf. Catholics turn their pleas to the saints to obtain for themselves and others spiritual as well as material benefits from God. Strictly speaking Catholics are not obliged to invoke the saints. It is nevertheless thought to be most beneficial to do so frequently. In Catholic belief, the souls in heaven do not fail to present to God the pleas and petitions of their brethren on earth. They take a very active interest in the living Christians, and help them in their spiritual and temporal necessities.

#### **b) Comparing and contrasting ancestors and saints**

The Akan conception of the ancestor is similar to the Catholic doctrine about saints in many ways. The ancestors were once human beings on earth. So were the saints. The ancestors are now spiritual but remain human. The same applies to the saints. The ancestor takes an interest in the affairs of the living. So does the saint. Both the ancestor and the saint receive the prayers of the living and assist them in their own way. The ancestor, like the saint, is now in a position to help the living because of the “good” life he or she led while on earth.

However, unlike the Akan, Roman Catholics do not attribute any autonomous powers to saints. They pray to saints, so that they, in turn, may pray to God for them. They are mediators, but even their mediation remains secondary. The unique, perfect and principal Mediator between humankind and God is always Jesus. His mediation is regarded as more than sufficient. Thus saints are able to intercede for Christians, and they obtain the requests for Christians through Jesus.

The words of Thomas Aquinas clearly show that the Roman Catholics invoked the saints to pray for them. Aquinas explains that prayer is offered to a person in two ways: one, as though the request is to be granted by himself or herself, the other as though the thing requested is to be obtained through him/her. Obviously, Catholics pray to God alone because to them all prayers ought to bring grace and glory which God alone deserves. But they do also pray to the angels and to saints, not that God may learn of the petition through them, but so that by their prayers and merits Christian prayers may be efficacious. This point is applicable to the prayers the Akan say to the ancestors though it is not immediately obvious. To the Akan ancestors can do things on their own, even when still dependant on God. Catholics know that saints do not act on their behalf except with the permission of God.

Looking critically at the Roman Catholic concept of saints and the Akan concept of ancestors, it is more probable that the difference (which is not so much) might be due to the different backgrounds from which the views emerged.

### **9.7.2 The Protestant tradition: ancestors as saints?**

#### **a) Introduction**

Apparently, Roman Catholics have a more elaborate view of the doctrine of the communion of saints than Protestants. This is not difficult to understand as the Protestant churches seceded from the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestants have done away with some Catholic doctrine it considers irrelevant. Now let us also see the Protestant view on the saints and compare it to the Akan ancestors.

In the Protestant tradition, the saints are not those who have the word “saint” prefixed to their names; they are not the famous examples of holiness and piety who have been canonized into saints in the ecclesiastical sense of the term. The saints are the

members of the church, those who have separated themselves and who have made themselves different by dedicating their lives to Jesus Christ, even if they still have their very human faults and failings. The Protestant idea of saints, are not so much people who are different as they are the people who, with the help of Jesus Christ, are trying to be different and to be Christlike.

The first and the simplest interpretation of the phrase “the communion of saints” is a description of the way in which Christians in mutual care and love share everything with each other, practically demonstrating the communion of saints. The fellowship of caring and sharing should be the mark of the Protestant concept of the communion of saints (Gouvea 1984: 257-258).

The fellowship of the saints includes fellowship with those who are dead. The foundation of the union between one Christian and another Christian is Jesus Christ, and therefore that union cannot be removed by death. The intimate union and conjunction between all believers with one another in Christ is a union not broken by death. For the Christian nothing will be more real than the fellowship of the unseen cloud of witnesses who compass him (Hebrews 12:1). Thus the communion of saints is a communion with those whom we have loved and lost awhile.

#### **b) The ancestors and saints: Comparison and contrast**

The Akan concept of the ancestral cult is similar to the Protestant concept of the communion of saints in many ways. Both the ancestors and the saints were once human beings on earth. The ancestors by definition were “good” and moral people. So are the saints. The key concept of both the ancestral cult and the communion of saints is the intimate union and conjunction between the living and the dead.

However, in the Protestant tradition, the saints comprise of both the living and the dead. By contrast the concept of ancestors to the Akan (and also in the Catholic concept of saints) involves death as a condition for that status. Whereas the Akan petition their ancestors to intervene in the course of life and to help provide the necessities of life, Protestants do not petition the saints. Protestants do not depend on the dead saints to help them; it is forbidden to offer prayers to or through the dead saints.



With respect to the above analysis, it seems that the Catholic doctrine of communion of saints has more in common with the Akan ancestral cult than the Protestant do.

### **9.7.3 Curse**

A curse in Akan libation prayers is a strong wish for one who has been a stumbling block in the community or the family to be removed from the scene, and at times to be destroyed. A curse in libation should not be an argument to reject the whole libation ritual. In the Bible there are many occasions where curses have been heaped upon enemies. Again, when one listens to the prayer of an average Ghanaian Christian, the curses against one's enemy assumed to be *bayifo* (witch) is more than what one can see in a libation prayer.

Nonetheless, that is not to say that heaping curses on one's enemies is justified because it is also found in the scripture or that Ghanaian Christians practice it. The contention is that it is not adequate grounds to reject the libation practices as incompatible with Christian faith. My suggestion is that the curses should be replaced with a statement to the effect that the enemy should have a change of mind.

### **9.8 Adapting libation for Christian participation?**

Having looked at the theological background of libation, and concluded that it is not absolutely incompatible with the Christian faith, I think it is also appropriate to give my reasons for wanting libation practices be maintained and adapted for Christian participation. The intention here is not to have a special version of libation practices particularly for Christians. Thus, we are not in the business of adapting libation into Christian theology or into Christianity. I am of the view that we may not need libation ritual as prayer in the Church liturgy at least for the time being. Here, we are only seeking to remove the serious theological barriers so that Christians can participate in the ritual at family and community levels without one feeling that one has betrayed the Christian faith. My main reasons are based on Cultural and theological issues. In addition to these, I will also suggest ways in which libation can be adapted for Christian participation, offering a possible format and sample prayers.

### 9.8.1 Cultural basis

Libation is intrinsically part of the Akan culture and identity. It cannot be done away with without destroying Akan traditional culture to the extent of causing an identity crisis to the Akan people. To illustrate the problem, I will consider libation and chieftaincy.

Looking at the socio-political roles that the chiefs play in Akan, to do away with chieftaincy surely calls for a total overhauling of the Akan culture. For one to entertain the idea that there could be a chief in the Akan set up who does not make libation displays one's shallow understanding of the Akan culture. In Akan chieftaincy, the ancestral cult and libation rituals are inseparable.

According to Busia, an Akan sociologist, "the position of the chief gains significance within the organized ceremonies by which the people express their sense of dependence on the ancestors" (Busia 1959: 23). He points out that no one can claim to be a true chief and fail to perform the functions of his office. Busia also remarks that "recently there are elected chiefs (men) in different parts of Ashanti who are both literate and Christian, but they have all felt an obligation to perform the ritual act of their office. They were enstooled in the stool-house, where they poured libation to the ancestors whom they had succeeded". Writing in 1951, Busia's observations are still the criteria to judge a true chief. Among the Akan, if a chief fails to pour libation to the ancestors, it is a valid charge to destool him because *wama kom ade nananom* (he has starved the ancestors). Sarpong also rightly points out that: "In Ghana one is a leader (chief) because the ancestors have made him so, and he is made a leader in order to render due cult to the ancestors" (Sarpong 1974:43).

Just as one may be right to say that there is nothing like a chief in Akan without an ancestral cult, it will be equally right for one to also say that there may be no ancestral cult without libation. As Dickson (1984:68) rightly points out, there will come a time when the ancestors will practically cease to be, when there is no one alive who knows them. However, it is the duty of the living ancestors and the chiefs to serve as a bridge to the forgotten ancestors through the pouring of libation.

In order to reduce controversy, some Christian chiefs have managed to delegate all the pouring of libation to the *abusuapanin* (elder of the family). However, Dickson is right to maintain that the responsibility will still rest with the chief since the elder is only doing it on behalf of the chief.

One wonders whether those Christians who think that making libation to the ancestors is wrong act logically in accepting the position of a chief in spite of this conviction. In recent times, there are some Christians who have accepted to become tradition chiefs and queen mothers without seriously considering the theological implications of their new role.<sup>24</sup>

The fact is that a chief must necessarily have something to do with libation. All his powers and the obedience and honour due to him as a chief flow from the recognition he gives to the ancestors by pouring libation to them. As we have seen, he could not have become a ruler without pouring libation. Therefore by becoming the ruler and accepting these honours, he implicitly approves the cult of the ancestors through the medium of libation, even if he is actually unaware of this endorsement. The legitimacy a chief has as a chief is the recognition he gives to the ancestors. The Libation ritual is the main means a chief uses to commune with the ancestors. Without exaggeration, one can factually say a chief who refuses to pour libation is not an Akan chief; sooner or later he will be removed from his position.

### **9.8.2 Theological basis**

The theological issues relating to the libation debate are many but I would like to discuss two main concerns namely: salvation and Christian growth. In Ghana, anyone who actively pour libation is regarded as a non-Christian, particularly, by the protestant mission churches. Yet no Akan can maintain his/her identity as an Akan without either actively or passively participating in the libation ritual. Of late, many Akan Christians no more actively boycott libation practices. One will find Christians

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<sup>24</sup> Anglican Priest enstooled as *Omanhene* (paramount chief). Daily Graphic Corporation April 20<sup>th</sup> 2002. Another story entitled “combining chieftaincy with Christianity” also appears in (Ghanaian) Mirror June 18<sup>th</sup> 2005, 3.

in many ceremonies where libation is poured. They may not be the one pouring the libation; undoubtedly they are part of the congregation where not only God but also the ancestors are petitioned to provide the necessities of life. On such occasions, some Christian may feel that they have betrayed their faith. Nevertheless, one can neither abandon his people nor his/her faith. Consequently there is always confusion that seriously saps spiritual energy. The question that arises in this issue is: Are traditional libation practices absolutely at variance with the Christian faith? Of course not, but traditional libation practices appear not to be compatible with Christian faith.

Then, if Christian participation in libation rituals is not necessarily in conflict with Christian beliefs, if libation rituals can be adapted, and if a failure to maintain libation rituals would have disastrous consequences for Akan culture, then it seems crucial that Christians should address this matter more creatively. This would help to prevent the Churches from placing an unnecessary stumbling block in a way that would prevent some people from becoming Christians and also prevent them from growing in the Christian faith.

Presently there are many Ghanaians who do not know their fate as far as Christian salvation is concerned. Among the twenty million Ghanaian population, about ten percent of the population may act as either a chief or an elder of their extended family. In Ghana, a chief or traditional elder is obliged to recognize the ancestors as the bridge between the living and the dead. All the extended family meetings are expected to be preceded by the recognition of the ancestors through libation. Moreover, all the family ceremonies namely: marriage, funeral, and the like are preceded by libation which the family head is expected to officiate. The fact is that, it is not only the chiefs and the family heads or elders, all the family members are expected to be present as part of the meeting. In Ghana today, any adult can hardly say that he has not been part of meeting or ceremony in which libation is pour.

However, the Church in Ghana does not consider this general participation, and has target the chiefs and elders to be practising what is deem incompatible with the Christian faith. Consequently, all the protestant churches, particularly the mission churches, in Ghana do not fully accept the chiefs and the traditional elders who take up the obligation to pour libation in their families. Some Churches do baptise such

leaders but do not give them the Lord's Supper, signifying that their salvation is questionable. Some others neither baptise nor allow such leaders to partake in the Lord's Supper, yet allow them to attend Church services as visitors. Interestingly, we have many chiefs and traditional leaders who although not recognised fully as Christian yet they attend church service regularly.

On other hand, we have some Christians, who also have become chiefs and family elders with responsibilities of pouring libation among others. Some of these leaders have even formed an association like "Christian chiefs Association".

Undoubtedly, the indecision on the part of the Church in Ghana to resolve such an impasse has become a stumbling block before many Ghanaians who would like to become Christians. Further, the issue also saps the spiritual energy of many Akan Christians in that, surely, one will attend a family meeting or a traditional ceremony where libation will be poured. One will return home feeling guilty of "syncretism".

For some time, the casual observers of African culture have branded African Christianity as largely "syncretic". Whereas, there are some rituals which have merged with Christian faith, it will do well for African theologians to revisit the issue of Christianity and libation without Western influence, in order to help many Ghanaians before whom the Churches have unnecessarily put stumbling blocks on their salvation and spiritual lives; by declaring their practices of libation rituals as absolutely incompatible with Christianity.

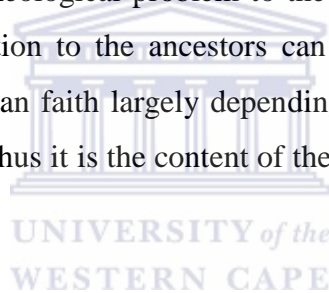
I suggest that the Church in Africa, as a matter of urgency should attend to the issues of Christianity and libation in order to properly evangelise the traditionalists in their context and also encourage Christian spirituality among the "Christian" traditional leaders, namely, the chiefs and the elders.

### **9.9 Conclusion: Libation practices in Christian context.**

We have reviewed several views on the debate on Christianity and libation and noted the strength and deficiencies of each. We must, then, present an alternate format and appropriate prayer which would be in consonance with Christian theology. This is very important because it would help those who want be realistic as an Akan without

betraying his/her Christian faith. What I am offering here is not a “magic formula” to solve the old debate. Rather, it is a suggestion which can be improved through further addition to and subtraction from the debate. Nevertheless, it will go a long way to relief the tension that an average Akan Christian would have to pass through.

Having concluded that the traditional libation practices are not necessarily incompatible with Christian faith, we also maintain that among the Akan, libation is poured to the spirit beings both collectively and also individually. Thus, libation is pour to God only, or lesser divinities only, or the ancestors only. We have also indicated that the lesser divinities in Akan are forces that are becoming spent. The Akan deal with them in “utilitarian” way; retain them only when they become beneficial to the community or the individual who work with that *abosom*. It has also been explained that the ancestors are intrinsically part of the Akan culture and they constitute a more enduring theological problem to the Akan Christians. It has been further pointed out that libation to the ancestors can become either compatible or incompatible with the Christian faith largely depending on the content of the prayer that accompanies the drink. Thus it is the content of the libation prayer that I will deal with here.



Before that, it also worth to saying that the debate on pouring libation to the ancestors does not only rest with the prayer but also with where one pours the drink. For instance if one pours libation to Akan sacred stools which are said to be “shrines” of the ancestors, will the content of the prayer be the only determining factor? Of course there is an ongoing debate as regards to whether the ancestral stools are “shrine” or mere “historical symbols” of a chief. Though very important to the debate it cannot be treated here.

Now, we offer the following format and the set of prayers with some notes as a way a Christian can participate in libation practices and which will not conflict with the Christian faith.

As already indicated, we can petition God only, but the ancestors could be invited in a symbolic way to join the living to make such a petition to God. To invite the dead in a symbolic way is not peculiar to the Akan. The Westerners do theirs by offering

wreaths and flowers to the dead, though they are conscious that it is just a symbolic way of recognizing their dead. Flowers and wreaths mean little to the Akan. Instead, the Akan offer drink, either alcoholic beverage or water. When one says *Nana Kofi Kra nsa* (*Nana Kofi Kra* here is drink), it simply means that “Nana kofi kra you are welcome”. If the dead of the Westerner are not supposed to smear the flower, I think it would be out of question for one to think that the Akan ancestors factually drink the water. It will therefore be an exaggeration for one to call such act a divination or necromancy. Having said this, I suggest the following prayer which could accompany water or non- alcoholic drink or wine for libation.

### **9.9.1 Sample prayers**

#### **a) Prayer for Birth ceremonies**

Our dear ancestors, we are gathering here today because of the joy that we have. The good news is that one of your grandchildren has given birth and she has brought the baby to be named. Since you are part of us and we cannot celebrate without you, we are inviting you to join us to present the baby to the almighty God.

Everlasting God here is drink; grant that the child presented to you will have a long and fruitful life. Long life and prosperity to the parents, long life to the entire family.

**Or**

Here is drink our dear ancestors. Your grandchild so-and- so has given birth to a baby boy and has brought him to be named. We invite you to join us to present this baby to the almighty God.

Almighty God here is drink; we present this child to you because you are the giver of every good thing. Bless this child with long life and make his life a prosperous one.

#### **b) Prayer for marriage ceremonies**

##### **Before marriage ceremony**

Almighty God receive this wine and drink, our dear ancestors receive this wine and drink. Oh dear ancestors, your grandchild so-and-so has seen this man/woman and has accepted to marry her/him. We now call on you to be part of this ceremony as we present this marriage before the almighty God.

### **After the ceremony**

Supreme God here is drink. Our ancestor so-and-so, here is drink (you can name any number of them you deem appropriate). Your child so-and-so has married. Her husband has paid her “head-wine (bride-price) and this is your share. Stand behind us as we present the couple to the Supreme God for health and prosperous life.

### **9.9.2 Analysis and conclusion**

In analysing the above prayers, two issues need to be pointed out. First, one may object that in some of the prayers the ancestors are not just invited but are offered drink. Second, one can notice at a glance that the prayers do not bear the name of Jesus. In response to the first issue, the explanation we offer is that “Here is drink” in the Akan context is the same as the recognition given to someone, as we have already explained above. To the second concern, we respond that this prayer is not to replace the formal Church prayer. Rather, it has the intention of making what is there already to be in consonance with Christian theology.

Moreover, such an approach affords non-Christians an opportunity to use the same prayer with the hope that, in the long run, the Christian version will become the dominant one. Further, we have committed no theological blunder. One gets the prayer wrong only when one passes his/her prayer through a human or spirit being other than Jesus. Here we have not done that. Besides, one can address prayer either directly to God or through Jesus. With the Christian belief of Trinity, it is assumed that addressing a prayer directly to God is the same as praying to Jesus.

In conclusion, libation as a practice is a part of all the Akan rituals and traditional ceremonies, and it is an integral part of the Akan culture. Although it is not compatible with the Christian faith as it is presently stands, it can be adapted by Christians. It is my view that it should be addressed to God and the ancestors alone, and the content of the accompanying words to the ancestors should be made in consonance with the Christian faith.



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