



The Akan Indigenous Concepts of Religion and Nyame (the Supreme Deity) and the Promotion of Inter-religious Relations in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper in revealing that the adoption of foreign religions has not eradicated the lingering influence of indigenous spiritual and religious values, explores the coexistence of Christianity, Islam, and indigenous Akan religious values among the Akan people. The study, employing a mixed-methodological approach, including interviews with three respondents and ten focus group discussions in Ghana's Central Region, delved into the Akan conception of religion as a prevailing system. It highlighted the Supreme Deity's role as the Great Ancestor, emphasizing how these concepts foster apathy towards religious differences and cultivate a trans-religious attitude among the Akan people. The findings suggest that Akan's general indifference to religious disparities not only contributes to a tolerant society but also potentially serves as a model for interreligious harmony. This resilience is evident in the face of efforts by some Christians and Muslims to discourage trans-religious practices among the Akan. This showcases the enduring nature of Akan inclusivity in matters of religion.

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INTRODUCTION

The world is currently in an era when it is almost meaningless to talk of religion as a force for unity and peace in the world. This is particularly true when the term “religion” is frequently described in a narrow sense of “institution” with defined boundaries akin to political parties and business enterprises.¹ As an institution, religion is described strictly in terms of religious organizations or traditions such as Christian and Islamic religions with beliefs and practices, leadership and structures, objectives and purposes which are completely distinct from one another.² The achievement of the missions of these religious institutions, which is mainly enlarging their frontiers of control by spreading their beliefs and practices is considered paramount and often carried out irrespective of the interest of the larger society.³ Describing religion in solely institutional terms, relative to interreligious dialogue, implies that religious institutions eventually come to see themselves as competitors or even rivals or enemies. These religious institutions engage in cultural and superiority wars which tend to create suspicion, deepen acrimony, and generate further divisions instead of building bridges amongst them.⁴ The models of interreligious dialogue which spring from the “institutional” conception of religion are exclusivist and inclusivist.

¹ Ifeanyi A Menkiti, “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” in *African Philosophy*, ed. Richard A. Wright, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 171-182.

² Marc Augé, *A Sense for the Other: The Timeliness and Relevance of Anthropology* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 29.

³ Peter Sarpong, *Ecumenical Relations in Ghana* (Gaba Publications, Pastoral Institute of Eastern Africa, 1974), 45.

⁴ Cosmas Ebo Sarbah, “Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Ghana: Competition or Co-Operation?” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, 3 no. 1(2017), 47-71.

The Akan are negroid people, constituting the largest ethnic group in Ghana.⁵ The Akan are located in the southern and middle parts of Ghana. They have cultural and religious values which have remained with them although they have embraced Islam and Christianity. Despite the widespread adoption of Islam and Christianity, the Akan have retained their distinctive cultural and religious values.⁶ Within the Akan worldview, religion is conceived as a comprehensive system comprising diverse religious traditions. The paper examines the Akan understanding of religion as a prevailing system and its organizing and unifying function of bringing together and actually integrating into a whole its parts. It fosters effective encounters both within and between religious traditions. It also argues that although most Akan people are now Christians and Muslims, certain Indigenous African religious values, ideas, and ideals not only continue to linger in the hearts and minds but also, directly or indirectly, have a strong impact on the attitudes and behaviours of many African and Akan people. Finally, the paper identifies and discusses Indigenous Akan religious values which promote fruitful interreligious encounters among the Akan Christians and Muslims in contemporary times. In particular, it argues that the indigenous Akan conception of religion as a prevailing system and the Supreme deity as the father of all people produce religious (doctrinal) apathy and a trans-religious attitude which are the bedrock of the effective interreligious encounters of the Akan people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Akan, like most African communities, have a religious conception of the universe. They believe that *Nyame* (the Supreme Deity) created the universe. *Nyame* is the *Obɔɔdze* (the creator) of everything that is.⁷ Mbiti says of all Africans and so the Akan that "...God is the explanation of the origin of the universe, which consists of both visible and invisible realities."⁸ The Supreme Deity is "...the creator and origin of all things" says Gyekye.⁹ Since the Supreme Deity created the universe, it is subsequently dependent on Him for its continuity and harmony. The Supreme Deity is the sustainer, the keeper, and the upholder of the universe.¹⁰

The Akans also believe that *Nyame* is the father of all human beings. Writing about the relationship between the Supreme Deity and human beings, Mbiti states that the African and also the Akan look at the Supreme Deity "...as a father and human beings as his children".¹¹ The Akan proverb emphasizes the Supreme Deity as father: *nyimpa nyinara ye Nyame mba, obiara nnye asaase dze* (All people are *Nyame*'s children; no one is the child of the Earth).¹²

Even though most African writers like Mbiti (1975) and Fisher (1998) seem to highlight the vertical relationship between the Supreme Deity and human beings, the horizontal relationship (the relationship among people), which is the inevitable and obvious outcome of the vertical relationship, is also justifiably implied. People are closely related to each other if they really belong to the same father. As the father, the Akan people believe, the Supreme Deity creates human beings and also keeps them in existence, just as the earthly father is the head and breadwinner of the Akan family. In their prayers, the Akan present their petitions to the Supreme Deity like that of children speaking to their parents about themselves and their needs.

Danquah observes that the Supreme Deity, *Nyame*, father of all people is the "Great ancestor." Danquah describes the Supreme Deity as the "...Great Ancestor, with all other ancestors in between as the mediators" (Danquah, 1968:19). For this reason, the Supreme Deity is given the title '*Nana*'. The Fante refers to the Supreme Deity as *ɔbaatanpa* i.e. good mother or father.¹³ Gyekye and Fisher also admit that the Supreme Deity is "...Grand Ancestor."¹⁴ However, Danquah's claim of the Supreme Deity has been criticised by scholars and religious commentators. Parrinder, for instance, states that the Supreme Deity of the Akan people "...is not human and was not an ancestor."¹⁵ In this way, Parrinder mistakenly takes Danquah's expression "Great

⁵ R. K. Aboagye-Mensah, *Mission and Democracy in Africa: The Role of the Church* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1994), 18.

⁶ David Owusu-Ansah and Emmanuel Akyeampong, "Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Coexistence: Ecumenicalism in the Context of Traditional Modes of Tolerance," *Legon Journal of the Humanities* 30, no. 2 (December 31, 2019): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.4314/ljh.v30i2.1>.

⁷ Max Assimeng, *Religion and Social Change in West Africa* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1989), 54.

⁸ John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1975), 32.

⁹ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Temple University Press, 1995), 34.

¹⁰ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 35.

¹¹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 35.

¹² Robert B. Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 139.

¹³ Matthias K. Forson, *Split-Level Christianity in Africa: A Study of the Persistence of Traditional Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Akan Methodists of Ghana* (Michigan: Bell & Howell Company, 1993), 69.

¹⁴ Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 69; Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*.

¹⁵ Geoffrey E. Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (London: The Epworth Press, 1961), 25.

Ancestor” for “a deified ancestor” and in this way gives it a misleading interpretation.¹⁶ Parrinder argues that if, in Danquah's view, the Supreme Deity who is the “primordial ancestor of the tribe” and “the first father of the tribe” is also the “Great Ancestor” then the Supreme Deity is a “deified ancestor.”

Parrinder therefore creates the impression that Danquah's Supreme Deity is a human being and so the first ancestor, the first Akan. To the Akan people and also to Danquah, the Supreme Deity has never been a human being. The names and attributes of *Nyame* (the Supreme Deity), ultimately attest to the sense of human dependence on a power that requires veneration and submission.¹⁷ The Akan names of the Supreme Deity, therefore, depict or allude to a utilitarian Supreme Deity who provides for his people and keeps all of them in existence.

Nyame (The Supreme Deity) is the Absolute Reality. *Nyame* is *Ɔdomankoma*. According to Dankwa the root of the word *Ɔdomankoma* is from *adom* (‘grace’ or ‘mercy’ and *ankoma* (‘plentiful’ or ‘complete’).¹⁸ They interpret the name as “The One full of mercy”, “the only giver of mercy” or “He who is uninterruptedly, infinitely and exclusively full of grace.”¹⁹ *Nyame* is also referred to as *Nyankopɔn* depicting Him as a dependable deity in the sense of a utilitarian Supreme Deity. In the same sense, he is also referred to as *Twerammpɔn*.²⁰ The term ‘*Twerammpɔn*’ is derived from *twer* (to lean on) and *ammpɔn* (that which never gives way, never breaks). So *Nyame* is again the most dependable. He is *Totorobonsu*, the “unfailing copiousness of the source of the water”, i.e., a flowing or outpouring of all those things which water or ease the lot of man or of being.²¹ He is *Nyaamandzekosoi*, the one upon whom one calls in time of need or distress.²² *Nyame* is Almighty (*Ɔkokroko*). He is *Ɔsagyefo* (The War General, the saviour, leader at war). The Supreme Being has a personal name and so is a personal and caring deity.²³

As a utilitarian Deity, *Nyame* cannot be a remote and deist God.²⁴ He cares and has concern for all his people.²⁵ He ensures the sustenance of his people by providing security, health, prosperity, and good friendliness.²⁶ *Nyame* (the Supreme Deity) functions or responds to the needs of his people through lesser divinities that are considered his sons and intermediaries.²⁷ To the Akan, the *abosom* are the sons or children of *Nyame*. They are in to serve the will of God.²⁸ The place of the lesser divinities underscores the great importance the Akan attach to the role of intermediaries.

METHODOLOGY

The Field work for this project was conducted for three months from the 15th of June 2008 to the 20th of September 2008 and continued from May 2019 to October 2022. One-on-one in-person interviews were conducted for the selected group of seasoned religious leaders and academicians. Besides their immense knowledge of their religious traditions, these are people well-grounded in Akan Indigenous culture and also highly involved and experienced in matters and issues of Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana. The following religious leaders were selected for the interviews: Rt. Rev. Peter Akwesi Sarpong (Metropolitan Catholic Archbishop Emeritus of Kumasi), Rev. J. Yedu Bannerman (Retired minister, the Methodist Church, Ghana) and Professor G. F. Kojo Arthur (Associate Professor in the Educational Foundations and Technology Division, Marshall University, Huntington, USA).

All respondents were interviewed individually in their homes. The researchers introduced themselves by providing the respondents with relevant information about their identity and clarifying the purpose, objectives, nature, and academic significance of the research. At the end of each interview, the respondents were allowed to make suggestions to the study to which they made useful comments and suggestions. The average length of time for the interview was approximately 2 hours. The researchers also undertook focus group

¹⁶ Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples*, 31.

¹⁷ J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1968), 48.

¹⁸ Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 49.

¹⁹ Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 49.

²⁰ Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 49.

²¹ Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 55.

²² Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 139.

²³ Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples*, 25.

²⁴ Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples*, 25.

²⁵ F. C. Anyanwu, “African Religious Experience,” in *African Philosophy: An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa*, ed. E. A. Ruch and K.C Anyanwu (Rome : Catholic Book Agency, 1981), 161–69.

²⁶ Forson, *Split –Level Christianity in Africa: A Study of the Persistence of Traditional Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Akan Methodists of Ghana*, 69.

²⁷ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 141.

²⁸ Forson, *Split –Level Christianity in Africa: A Study of the Persistence of Traditional Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Akan Methodists of Ghana*, 69.

discussions of five (5) Christians and (5) Muslims in each of ten (10) communities, that is, Cape Coast, Elmina, Abora, Gomoa Assin, Ekumfi Ekrawfo, Gomoa Kokofu, Gomoa Apam, Ekumfi Essaakyir, Mankessim and Agona Nyakrom in the Central Region of Ghana between May 2019 to October 2022. The results of the interviews and the focus group discussions were presented using a simple, descriptive analysis. Generally, the researchers were satisfied with the whole process of the interview, cooperation and positive responses to every question asked. The researchers used a tape recorder, which they considered the most effective way to collect and record information. At the same time, they made notes as a safety valve, in case they missed something important, and to clarify all the issues discussed for their reference. Furthermore, since a cassette tape recorder, an audio instrument, was used, it was significant the non-verbal language was recorded in the personal notes. Other pieces of information about the Fante Indigenous values were obtained from available literature, which included books and articles in libraries, archives, and local newspapers on the Fante (Akan) customary laws and traditions. The various themes discussed in the interviews are presented in subsequent sections.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Religion as a Prevailing System and a Broader Conception

Discussions on religious relations should not be restricted to whose deposits of faith are superior or authentic or which is the best way to salvation as presented by the classical models of religious encounters. Such discussions must also include a religion's capacity to serve as a unifying force in society. In the religious imagination of the Akan people, the terms 'Religion' and 'religiosity' are expressed in the broader sense of 'a prevailing system' which embraces all shrines and priests/priestesses for the good of the communities.²⁹ There is no competition or war among religions. They collaborate for the common good. Rt. Rev. Peter Akwesi Sarpong noted that Akan religiosity is understood in "a broader perspective with undefined, immaterial and intangible boundaries."³⁰ Professor G. F. Kojo Arthur opined that the Akan language does not have an equivalent term for the Western word 'religion' or indeed 'ritual.'³¹ Rev J. Yedu Bannerman confirmed the submissions of Arthur and Sarpong stating that "no word can actually capture completely the Akan understanding of religion."³² The Akan people talk more about 'religiosity' than 'religion.'

Consequently, religion (religiosity) is presented as a system in which the various religious traditions are vital components. It is in line with this that Sarpong noted "...any Akan society presents a set of religious values or imperatives that are acceptable and expected to be promoted by the various religious communities."³³ These religious values largely reinforce common attitudes, religious, and social integration aimed at advancing the common good which is the survival and continuity of the social entity.³⁴ Acknowledging the problems religious communities face when they fail to promote societal values, Sarpong noted that "religious communities which fail to act in accordance with this common good are either isolated or allowed to escape into oblivion."³⁵

Describing the values of the co-existence of religious traditions in the Akan indigenous communities, Bannerman noted "...the people and religious traditions are united in this one prevailing religious system and are united by it."³⁶ In line with this, Bannerman further noted that "...the land and the people- individuals, families, villages and clans- are all organized by religion." Thus, all the respondents spoke to the Akan conception of religion as a system, which unites the totality of society by integrating the various religious communities into one complex whole. It is this essential religious quality that the Akan brings to the fore as the challenges of religious pluralism stare humanity in the face of contemporary societies. It is this quality that is indispensable in the quest for viable models for interreligious encounters.

It is also worthy of note that the Akan people do not see any difference between the terms, 'life,' 'culture' and 'religion.' Sarpong noted that "... traditionally, life is religion and religion is life...Religion is also the way of life, and it is culture itself."³⁷ The three terms are used in Akan indigenous societies interchangeably. It is in view of this Sarpong reiterated that religion permeates life starting "... from cradle to grave, and there are important religious rituals, which mark the three most important stages of human life: birth, adulthood, and

²⁹ Charles Stewart, "Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture," *Diacritics* 29, no. 3 (1999): 40–62.

³⁰ Sarpong, interviewed, May 20th 2015.

³¹ Arthur, interviewed, September 8th 2015.

³² Bannerman, interviewed, September 9th 2015.

³³ Sarpong, interviewed, May 20th 2015.

³⁴ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure, Revised and Enlarged* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957), 30.

³⁵ Sarpong, interviewed, May 20th 2015.

³⁶ Bannerman, interviewed, September 9th 2015.

³⁷ Sarpong, interviewed, May 20th 2015.

death.”³⁸ All aspects of life-belief systems, activities, habits and behaviours are understood through the eye of religion. In relation to this connectivity between religion and life, Opoku observed:

“The phenomenon of religion is so pervasive in the life of the Akan, and so inextricably bound up with their culture, that it is not easy to isolate what is purely religious from other aspects of life. It may be said without fear of exaggeration that life in the Akan world is religion and religion is life.”³⁹

This observation of Opoku about the Akan notion of religion and religiosity confirms what Rev. Baudin earlier noted in his fascinating comment:

“The religious and political systems, the ceremonies of worship, and the domestic customs of the African people are so intimately connected one with the other that a knowledge of their religion is indispensable to the understanding of their history and their national organization, and above all to the effectual work of their evangelisation.”⁴⁰

This statement of Baudin reflects his frustration as a Christian missionary who was not able to effect a quick conversion of the Akan people because of the resilience and pervasiveness of the indigenous religion. It is in line with this pervasiveness of the religion that Arthur notes a striking distinction between the terms ‘religion’ and ‘religiosity.’⁴¹ By describing ‘religiosity’ in the sense of a prevailing system and ‘religion’ in the sense of an institution with unique, codified sets of doctrines, Arthur indicates that ‘religiosity’ actually renders an apt description of the Akan notion of religion.⁴²

Nyame, The Transcendent, His Unity and Multiplicity

A critical study of the spirit world of the Akan people reveals the existence of divinities, spirit entities and spirits of ancestors who have ambivalent relationships with the Supreme Deity.⁴³ Arthur observes two main aspects of the Supreme Deity of the Akan people which is worthy of discussion here. First, at the very top of the spiritual ladder is *Nyame* (Supreme Deity) who is the Father of all people. This means that all human beings are the children of *Nyame*. The vertical relationship that exists between *Nyame* and His children must also translate into a horizontal relationship between all human beings. Second, Arthur also noted the relationship between the Supreme Deity and lesser deities “...He works with the lesser gods and divinities for the execution of His purposes” which depicts a master-agent relationship.⁴⁴

The relationship between the divinities and the Supreme Deity appears confusing and has been a great puzzle to Akan Muslim and Christian theologians who have presented the Akan Supreme Deity with a monotheistic lens.⁴⁵ In an attempt to equate *Nyame* with the monotheistic Christian God many African theologians and philosophers have grappled with the idea and come out with various propositions to escape the hurdle of the confusion.⁴⁶ In his book *The Akan Doctrine of God* J. B. Danquah, an Akan philosopher and lawyer, treats extensively the Supreme Deity (*Nyame*) of the Akan as the Great Ancestor in the like of the ‘Christian God’⁴⁷ who provides for the needs of his people. His exposition details the essential attributes of *Nyankopon/ Nyame* as a personal God without making any reference to the divinities and their relations to the *Nyame* and their all-important role in the religious universe of the Akan people. It is obvious that the silence of Danquah, and many like him, on the affairs of the lesser deities, is an effort to downplay not only the existence of divinities and the spirit of the ancestors but also the prominent place they occupy in the Akan spiritual realm. It is appropriate to say that other African religious scholars such as Idowu, Mbiti and later Assimeng (an Akan himself), who endeavoured to acknowledge the existence, placed the divinities at the periphery of African

³⁸ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974); Peter Sarpong, “Christianity Meets African Traditional Cultures,” in *Mission Trend No. 5: Faith Meets Faith*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 242–51.

³⁹ Asare K. Opoku, “African Traditional Religions: An Enduring Heritage,” in *Religious Plurality in Africa*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993).

⁴⁰ P. Baudin, *Fetichism and Fetich Worshipers, M. McMahon (Trans.)* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1885), 6.

⁴¹ Arthur, interviewed, September 8th 2015.

⁴² G. F. Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor: Re-Reading the Adinkra Cloth Symbols of the Akan of Ghana* (Legon: CEFIKS, Inc., 2001), 67.

⁴³ Timothy Callender, *Religion: The Basis of African Culture* (Yoruba, 1977), 46.

⁴⁴ Arthur, interviewed, September 8th 2015.

⁴⁵ Cosmas O. Obiego, *African Image of the Ultimate Reality: An Analysis of Igbo Ideas of Life and Death in Relation to Chukwu-God* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984), 78.

⁴⁶ Peter A. Sarpong, *People Differ: An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelisation* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Press, 2002), 67.

⁴⁷ Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 30-58.

religious thought.⁴⁸ In their many discussions on the spiritual universe, religious scholars such as Idowu and Mbiti and in particular Bannerman, Arthur and Assimeng have placed the divinities at the fringes of the African religious and spiritual conception and present them as mere ministers of the Supreme Deity.⁴⁹ In light of this, Idowu describes the Yoruba religion as “a defused monotheism” in which the ancestors and spirit-deities are functionaries of the Supreme Deity whose eventual disappearance is imminent:

“...to those whose worship the divinities and derive succour from belief in their existence to such they are real; but to those who have outgrown them, all reality is concentrated in the Deity.”⁵⁰

In the interview, Arthur agreed with Idowu and Mbiti to even doubt the reality of the divinities given the omnipotence and omnipresence of the Supreme Deity.⁵¹ Mbiti’s conclusion which brands lesser deities in African imagination as figments of imagination finally even predicts their eventual extinction, stating:

“Most, if not all, of these attributive divinities are the creation of man’s imagination. This does not, however, cancel their reality: the divinities are real beings for the people concerned. With increasing scientific knowledge, no doubt, most of the divinities will be explained away and the major divinity of science will take over.”⁵²

However, it is difficult to accept the dismissal of the ideas of divinities by Idowu, Mbiti and Arthur which have tended to brand them as insignificant aspects of the African spiritual worldview.⁵³ It is easy to notice in almost every Akan town and village the evidence of these divinities in the various shrines and priests/priestesses whose services, including healing and cursing as well as diverting curses are very well patronised by some Akan Christians and Muslims on daily basis.⁵⁴ The long line of Christians and Muslims from all walks of life at the *Antoa Nyamaa* deity in the Asante Region is clear evidence of the continuing belief of Akan people in cursing and diverting curses upon individuals who have wronged them.⁵⁵ The shrines of the ninety-nine gods of both Oguaa (Cape Coast) and Edina (Elmina) continue to be important centres of annual Fetu Afahye and Edina Bakatue festivals as well as the Akwasidae Festivals celebrated also by Fante and Asante Christians and Muslims people.⁵⁶ The importance of the world of divinities is also highlighted in the stories told to explain how the Supreme Deity (Nana Abrewa) left the earth to reside in the sky, preventing direct access to her, often used to depict the Supreme Deity as a deist god and emphasise the important role of the lesser deities.⁵⁷ The problem with the Akan world of the divinities in relation to the Supreme Deity is that not much is known about them.⁵⁸ This limited knowledge is because the divinities are not given the academic attention they deserve. Inadequate research into the stories of the divinities is a result of the fact that many Christians claim such studies could derail all efforts to present *Nyame* (Akan Supreme Deity) in the likes of the Christian God to indicate that Akan people knew God before the arrival of Christianity in the 19th century AD.⁵⁹ However, African theologians such as Kwame Bediako, the founder of the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, are optimistic about the outcome of research into the world of divinities of the people. Bediako maintained that such studies could even help deepen Christian and Muslim comprehension of the Supreme Deity in his remarks that:

“...while the affirmation of continuity has been made on the properly religious grounds of the ‘unity’ of God and is supported by the evidence of African religious thought, African theology has failed to wrestle adequately with the ‘multiplicity’ of the Transcendent and has undercut the contribution which it can make towards a fresh Christian account of the Transcendent, drawing on its background in the primal imagination of African primal religions.”⁶⁰

⁴⁸ B. E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. (London: SCM Press, 1973), 141; John S. Mbiti, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief (Memorial Ed.)*. (New York: Wazobia, 1994), 56; John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*. (London: SPCK, 1970); John S Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990), 77 .

⁴⁹ Assimeng, *Religion and Social Change in West Africa*.

⁵⁰ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 141.

⁵¹ Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor: Re-Reading the Adinkra Cloth Symbols of the Akan of Ghana*, 45.

⁵² Mbiti, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief (Memorial Ed.)*, 56.

⁵³ E. Akyeampong, “Christianity, Modernity and the Weight of Tradition in the Life of ‘Asantehene’ Agyeman Prempeh I, c. 1888-1931,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 69, no. 2 (1999): 279–311.

⁵⁴ Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 26 .

⁵⁵ David Owusu-Ansah and Emmanuel Akyeampong, Fieldnotes: Interviews at Antoa with Elders of the Antoa Shrine, dd. 12 July. Antoa, <http://aodl.org/islamicolerance/asantehistory/>

⁵⁶ Bannerman, interviewed, on September 9th 2015

⁵⁷ Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: on Becoming Ancestors* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, Inc., 1997), 89.

⁵⁸ J.N.K. Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2009), 111.

⁵⁹ Owusu-Ansah and Akyeampong, “Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Coexistence: Ecumenicalism in the Context of Traditional Modes of Tolerance.”

⁶⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture Upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 99.

In this statement, Bediako also suggested that this “virtually untouched” field of matters of divinities is regrettable given the positive impact it could have on Christian tradition in Africa. Both Arthur and Bannerman have also agreed and asserted with Bediako that adequate knowledge of the concept of the existence, nature and role of the divinities concerning the Supreme Deity could help explain, to a large extent, the trans-religious and the inherently religiously tolerant attitude of the Akan.⁶¹ The interest of Bediako in the tensions of the spiritual realm between the various divinities in relation to the Supreme Deity is evident in his comment:

“...is not a neat hierarchy of divine beings and spirit-forces held in unitary harmony. The African primal world can be conceived of as a universe of distributed power, perhaps even of fragmented power; it is as much a universe of conflict as the rest of the fallen world in that it is a world not of one Centre, God, but many centres; the unity and multiplicity of the Transcendent in the African world also reveals a deep ambivalence.”⁶²

Thus, while acknowledging the ambivalence of the Akan notion of the world of divinities, Bediako refused to accept the position of Idowu, Mbiti and Asseming that it is one of constant melodious, harmonious co-existence in a hierarchical order of beings. Regarding the source of powers of these divinities, Bediako preferred to use the noble weapon of silence. He was, however, surprisingly, loud on the fragmentation in the distribution of the divinities to the extent of making it the cause of the endless tension and conflict that exist between them. Nevertheless, this fragmentary distribution of powers among the divinities in the realms of the spirits, as Bediako pointed out, is the reason for their differences and similarities, limitations, and strengths. This understanding of the divinities and their powers, when put at the disposal of human beings, irrespective of their source, are meant to complement each other in the spirit of harmony and synchronisation and not to oppose each other by sowing seeds of tension and eventual disharmony.⁶³ In other words, these divinities have both profoundly irreconcilable and reconcilable aspects which are manifested in the contradictions of their existence and activities. The dissimilarities and similarities, limitations and strengths, reconcilable and irreconcilable aspects of these divinities are comparable to or could be likened to the differences and similarities, particularly doctrinal and even structural, that largely exist between the various religious traditions that are found in Akanland and in other parts of the world.⁶⁴ If, in the Akan conception of the realm of the spirits, divinities exhibit differences and similarities of aspects and powers in seemingly constant strife and dissension yet demonstrate eagerness and sheer willingness to co-exist then it is possible for religious institutions as well as communities to do likewise.⁶⁵ The Akan understanding of religion as a prevailing system which encapsulates the totality of the culture as well as the belief in the Nyame (Supreme Deity) who in his unity embedded a multiplicity displayed in the spirit world of divinities and lesser deities have two observable implications: a general doctrinal apathy and a trans-religious attitude to life.

A General Doctrinal Apathy

Focus group discussions were organised for ten (10) communities selected from the Central Region of Ghana for the study. Various questions were put to these respondents in relation to their understanding and appreciation of the Akan Indigenous religion as well as their relationship with people who belong to other religious traditions. Some of the questions, specifically, sought answers from Christian and Muslim respondents about the extent to which their Akan Indigenous knowledge of religion and God as Father of all people are influencing their decision regarding their relations with people who belong to other religions. About eighty-two (82) percent of the respondents demonstrated an appreciation of the Indigenous knowledge of religion as a prevailing system in which all religious traditions are vital parts. Hussein, a Muslim, noted in affirmation that: “...they all worship the same God.”⁶⁶ Catechist John observed that religious traditions: “...must support one another.”⁶⁷ The responses, generally, suggest that religious differences must be seen as assets for the good of society and not liability. Seventy-five (75) percent of respondents also indicated their knowledge of the Supreme Deity as their great Ancestor who is in charge of everything that goes on in the world. Nana Kumah noted: “...there is only one God for all people.”⁶⁸ The responses pointed to a certain level of general doctrinal apathy of religious

⁶¹ Arthur and Bannerman, interviewed September 8th 2010 and September 9th 2021.

⁶² Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 100.

⁶³ Owusu-Ansah and Akyeampong, “Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Coexistence: Ecumenicalism in the Context of Traditional Modes of Tolerance.”

⁶⁴ Callender, *Religion: The Basis of African Culture*, 29.

⁶⁵ Callender, *Religion: The Basis of African Culture*, 56.

⁶⁶ Hussein, participant, focus group A, July 4th 2021.

⁶⁷ John, participant, focus group B, September 10th 2021.

⁶⁸ Nana Kumah, participant, focus group B, September 10th 2021.

traditions which enables religious people to go beyond religious boundaries in their quest for religious answers to the challenges of life. Two implications can be deduced from this general apathy to life which fosters or is the bedrock of peaceful co-existence of various religious traditions. First, the apathy to religious differences explains the tolerant attitude and open-mindedness of both Christian Akan and Muslims. It is this tolerant nature and attitude that British Captain Ellis, many years ago, observed of the Akan on his pastoral and missionary journey to Africa:

“...there is an absolute toleration, and it is considered quite natural that other people should have other gods. The endeavour to force upon others his own views, whether concerning religious or other subjects, is altogether foreign to the primitive man, who so highly values personal independence.”⁶⁹

The statement of Ellis to Africa is an apt description of Akan lethargy to religious differences and religious freedom. To a large extent, the appreciation of the differences of the Akan people contributes significantly not only to the co-existence of diverse religions but also to the promotion of multiparty democracy in Ghana. Rev Bannerman noted that “...people who can accommodate religious differences can also accommodate any societal differences, be they social, economic and political.”⁷⁰

Second, the apathy explains why the Akan people have consistently, consciously and rightly so, been rejecting the aggressive religious exclusivist tendencies of some Christians and Muslims.⁷¹ It is no wonder that religious nationalists (who claim that their religious tradition must be the religion of the religiously diverse state) and fundamentalists (who claim that their religion is the only religion and all others are wrong and must be outlawed from the state) are not able to make a stronghold in Akan towns and villages.⁷² Thus, the general apathy to religious differences generates a certain religious consciousness that is inclusive and all-embracing.

Lochmann alluded to the Akan people’s general apathy to religious differences in his comment:

“The Negro is rather indifferent to religious questions. He respects the principle ‘live and let live’. Attacking him in the street preaching, one will seldom meet with resistance.”⁷³

Thus, this indigenous religious consciousness of also recognising truth outside one’s religious persuasion is a laudable feat which must not only be encouraged but also be promoted if the challenges of the religious plurality of contemporary societies are to be confronted. An open attitude to all religious traditions is more needed with an upsurge of Muslim-Christian polemics in Ghana. The emergence of extreme Christian and Muslim groups on the Ghanaian scene that promote polemic ideas is a problem which needs to be nipped in the bud. It is gratifying to see in Accra that some Christian groups such as Christ to the Muslim Mission at Osu and the Centre for Good News at Nima are involved in “working amongst” Muslims for peaceful co-existence.⁷⁴ These seem to have learnt the lessons as to the futility and dangers that characterised public polemics and so take to the distribution of free literature to Muslims/Christians and engage Muslims on a one-on-one basis.

A Noticeable Trans-religious Attitude

A religious dynamic, often referred to as trans-religiosity, is the obvious consequence of this broad understanding of religion and doctrinal apathy to religious differences. A religious person has a trans-religious attitude when they are willing to access religious and spiritual benefits from any religion depending on their needs. Even though the trans-religious attitude is downplayed in academic circles, it is a common occurrence among a significant number of Akan people. Bannerman notes that “traditionally, it is normal to leave behind your family god, and go for help elsewhere... and come back to it.”⁷⁵ Sarpong argued that trans-religious attitude “...is the reason why individuals go beyond the ‘live and let’s live’ attitude to actually appropriate religious ideas and rituals of all the available religious institutions”⁷⁶ while at the same time remaining in their own tradition. According to Arthur and Bannerman, underlying this trans-religious attitude is a deep-rooted belief

⁶⁹ A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking People of the Gold Coast of West Africa* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd, 1887), 20.

⁷⁰ Bannerman, interviewed, September 9th 2015.

⁷¹ Owusu-Ansah and Akycampong, “Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Coexistence: Ecumenicalism in the Context of Traditional Modes of Tolerance.”

⁷² Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: Perspective of Akan Leadership Formation on Christian Leadership Development* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2012), 45.

⁷³ P. Lochmann, “The Dynamics of African Indigenous Religions,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 1, no. 7 (1959), 29.

⁷⁴ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 56.

⁷⁵ Bannerman, interviewed, September 9th 2015.

⁷⁶ Sarpong, interviewed, May 20th 2015.

that “religious institutions are not enemies of each other...they are meant to complement each other.”⁷⁷ All the shrines and their priests are available to all.

This trans-religious quality does not only offer the attitude of acceptance and tolerance but also occasions for celebrations proudly displayed at public ceremonies of marriage, funeral, the naming of a newborn child, and festivals which attract Akan people from different religious backgrounds, Muslims and Christians alike.⁷⁸ From the focus group discussion, 85% of respondents acknowledged that they have attended programmes and activities organized at a facility of religious tradition other than their own. Christians have joined their friends and family members at the Mosque for marriage and naming ceremonies. All Christian respondents indicated they have attended Muslim feasts and celebrations in solidarity with Muslim brothers and sisters. About 77 percent of the Christian respondents confirmed that they have either patronised or accompanied a close relative to Mu'allims (*mallams*) for spiritual and other material support. About 64 percent of Muslim respondents admitted to having regularly appropriated Christian prayers, healing, and counselling programmes.⁷⁹ Thus, Christian and Muslim celebrations and ceremonies often attract a significant number of Muslims and Christians who may not only be classmates or colleagues at work but also very close relatives. Often, the presence of the other is so important that they are allowed to actively participate in the singing, preaching, or praying. In his book *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Cultures* Anthony K. Appiah, Professor of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University narrates a typical Akan marriage ceremony, stating:

“...It was, as it happens, my sister's wedding and the legal ceremony occurred in a Methodist church...But, not long after we began, the Catholic archbishop of Kumasi (remember, this is after a Methodist ceremony) said prayers, and this was followed by the pouring of libations to my family ancestors, carried out by one of the king's senior linguists.”⁸⁰

This scenario of people from different religious or denominational backgrounds, congregating to celebrate a religious or social event is so common that Akan (Muslim or Christian) does not recognize any religious contradiction associated with it. It is at this level of active engagement with one another that religious pluralism in the Akan people is to be comprehended and appreciated. The plurality of religions does not merely involve the recognition of religious institutions displayed in the many temples, churches, and Mosques; it also involves active involvement with one another.

Many, like Appiah, prefer to call trans-religious ceremonies of this kind “non-traditional.” Probably, it is “non-traditional” to Christianity and Islam but not to the Akan people and their Indigenous religions. Rather, trans-religiosity is ‘traditional’ not only in the sense of its regular occurrence but also because this is an innate quality which results from successful indigenous means of socialisation. Appiah has asked legitimate questions in relation to trans-religious ceremonies. How can all these religious elements co-exist in such an ordinary way and peaceful manner? What is it that “makes this conceptual melee, not a source of intellectual tension and unease but a resource for a tremendous range of cultural activity?” Appiah finds answers to his questions when he writes that:

“Most Africans, now, whether converted to Islam or Christianity or not, still share the beliefs of their ancestors in an ontology of invisible beings...It is this belief in the plurality of invisible spiritual forces that make it possible.... a Catholic bishop praying at a Methodist wedding in tandem with a traditional royal appeal to the ancestors. For most of the participants at the wedding, God can be addressed in different styles- Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Muslim, traditional- and the ancestors can be addressed too. Details about the exact nature of the Eucharist, about any theological issues, are unimportant: that is a theoretical question, and theory is unimportant when the practical issue is getting God on your side.”⁸¹

Appiah's observation of Akan indigenous inclusive religiosity, open-mindedness and positive acceptance of other people's religious and spiritual values have been criticized by some Puritan Christians and Muslims (Akan and foreign), describing it as ‘nominalism’, lack of faith or incomplete conversion, descriptions that reveal a lack of appreciation of the sense of Akan religiosity.⁸² Some Akan Christians and Muslims have

⁷⁷ Arthur and Bannerman, interviewed September 8th and 9th 2015..

⁷⁸ Anthony K. Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 119.

⁷⁹ Emilio Castro, *When We Pray Together* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), 78.

⁸⁰ Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Cultures*, 119.

⁸¹ Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Cultures*, 135.

⁸² Abraham A Berinyuu, “The Encounter of Western Christianity and Civilization, and Islam on Ghanaian Culture: Implications for the Ministry of Pastoral Care and Counselling,” *Africa Theological Journal* 17 (1988): 140–49, 140.

rejected this trans-religious attitude of indigenous Akan and have attempted to discourage the practitioners from engaging in such practices have been futile.

Summary of Discussion

The discourse has delved into the distinctive Akan perspective on religion, highlighting a comprehensive understanding of religiosity as a prevailing system that harmonizes diverse religious traditions for societal welfare. Notably, the Akan seamlessly integrate 'life,' 'culture,' and 'religion,' erasing artificial distinctions and emphasizing their interconnectedness. The intricate relationships within the Akan spiritual realm, involving Nyame as the Father of all people and the ambiguous dynamics with lesser deities, pose challenges for those interpreting it through a monotheistic lens. Despite a noteworthy segment of Akan respondents exhibiting doctrinal apathy and embracing Indigenous religious knowledge as a prevailing system, this inclination fosters a tolerant mindset conducive to peaceful coexistence among varied religious traditions. Moreover, the observed trans-religious attitude, with which individuals seek spiritual benefits across different religions, exemplifies inclusivity and tolerance. The Akan's general indifference towards religious differences not only contributes to a tolerant society but also potentially serves as a model for interreligious harmony, showcasing resilience against attempts by some Christians and Muslims to discourage trans-religious practices among the Akan.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the Akan indigenous conception of religion as a prevailing system that functions to organize, unify and integrate its parts for the continuous survival of the society. The adoption of Christianity and Islam by the Akan people has not prevented their use of Indigenous African religious values, ideas, and ideals. These spiritual and religious values continue to linger in their hearts and minds as well as impact their attitudes and behaviours. The Indigenous Akan religious values which promote fruitful interreligious encounters among the Akan Christians and Muslims in contemporary times have been discussed. The indigenous Akan conception of religion as a prevailing system and the Supreme deity as the father of all people produce religious (doctrinal) apathy and a trans-religious attitude which are the bedrock of the effective interreligious encounters of the Akan people.

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