

READING HEBREWS IN THE LIGHT OF SOCIAL CREATIVITY IN AKAN SOCIETY OF GHANA

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Abstract: *The Epistle to the Hebrews has been studied from many interpretive perspectives. In recent times, social-scientific approaches in which theories and models like honour and shame, patron-client relationship, ingroup and intergroup behaviour and social creativity have been used. These theories are based on the social context of the Mediterranean society in which the biblical text was produced. What this article attempts to do is to analyze Hebrews in the light of social creativity in another society (the Akan society of Ghana). As an explorative study borne out of curiosity, the article gives a description of the Akan people of Ghana and the social context of Hebrews. Some strategies in social creativity are then identified within the Akan society in the light of which Hebrews is examined.*

Key Words: Epistle to Hebrews; Akan; Social-scientific criticism; honour; shame.

Social Creativity in Intergroup Behaviour¹

Studies on ingroup and intergroup behaviour have revealed similar social reactions of people across varying societies. One of such social reactions is social creativity. Social creativity is a social mechanism employed by groups to resist social pressure. It is an important tool used by leaders to forestall social mobility. Social mobility is about members leaving a group on account of the group's lower social status and power or other unfavourable conditions. According to Ball, Giles and Hewstone, social creativity is about finding new ways of looking at ingroup-outgroup comparisons.² Among other strategies, a group in a disadvantaged position in a current comparative assessment might choose other weaker and less privileged objects of social comparison

¹ This article represents a reworked version of aspects of my PhD dissertation, titled *Social Identity in Hebrews and the Akan Community of Ghana*, in the Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, supervised by Prof. Dr. Ernest van Eck.

² P. Ball, H. Giles and M. Hewstone, "Second Language Acquisition: The Intergroup Theory with Catastrophic Dimensions," in *The Social Dimension – European Studies in Social Psychology*, ed. H. Tajfel (London - New York - New Rochelle - Melbourne - Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2: 673.

and focus attention on the area where the group finds the comparison favourable.³ For instance, if Team B is considered a loser because it was beaten by Team A in a match, Team B may resort to shifting the object of comparison from Team A to Team C which had suffered loss in previous matches with Team B. This redefinition of intergroup comparison helps group B to feel better and superior than in its comparison with Team A. The redefinition is usually done so that what was previously regarded as weakness is now seen as strength as in the case of “Black is beautiful” declaration in the USA in the 1960’s.⁴ There are other forms of social creativity but in all, the objective is to refocus attention of members of a group on what is helpful for their survival and growth.

The choice of social creativity for the study of the letter to the Hebrews⁵ is informed by one basic reason. As will be discussed later, there is discernible use of social creativity in Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews found the need for some social creativity in addressing the readers’ situation. This is because joining the Jesus minority group had placed the recipients in the fringes of the social order in which they were disadvantaged in the power balance, the honour scale, and other socio-economic conditions of the society. The social and economic abuse they suffered is attested to in Hebrews 10:32-34. This included public reproach and affliction, and plundering of their property.

To reverse the effect of these ill treatments on the recipients, the author resorts to a number of strategies in social creativity. Since these strategies are going to be considered in the light of social creativity in the Akan society, it is appropriate to offer a brief description of the Akan society of Ghana. The choice of the Akan society is informed by its dominant influence on the social life of Ghana. Many Ghanaians can, therefore, appreciate examples from the Akan society.

³ Ball, “Second Language,” 53. See also P. F. Esler, *New Testament Readings: Galatians* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 53.

⁴ Esler, *New Testament Readings*, 53.

⁵ The Epistle to the Hebrews is referred to in this article simply as “Hebrews.”

The Akan People of Ghana

Some extensive work on the Akan people of Ghana have been undertaken by scholars including Rattray,⁶ Busia,⁷ Meyerowitz,⁸ Danquah,⁹ Fortes,¹⁰ Opoku,¹¹ Appiah,¹² Gyekye,¹³ Buah,¹⁴ Sarpong,¹⁵ Nkansa-Kyeremanteng,¹⁶ and Awinongya.¹⁷ For this reason, this article presents only a brief introduction of the Akans of Ghana before discussing social creativity as practiced within that society.

Akan is the largest ethnic group in Ghana, constituting 47.3% of the population of Ghana.¹⁸ It comprises the Bono, Asante, Adanse, Twifo, Asen, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwahu, Sehwi, Awowin, Nzima and Ahanta.¹⁹ The name Akan, according to Danquah, means “foremost, genuine” (from *kan*, first,) and is the corrupted form of Akane or Akana, corrupted by the early Arabs of the Sudan in Ghana and the early Europeans who visited the coast of West Africa in Guinea.²⁰ The Akan language is an important feature of Akan identity.

⁶ R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1929).

⁷ K.A. Busia, “The Ashanti”, in *African worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, ed. D. Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

⁸ E.L.R. Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana: Their Ancient Beliefs* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1958).

⁹ J.B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1968).

¹⁰ M. Fortes, “Kinship and Marriage among the Ashanti,” in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, ed. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975).

¹¹ K.A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1977).

¹² K.A. Appiah, *In my Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹³ K. Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing company, 1996).

¹⁴ F.K. Buah, *A History of Ghana*, rev. edn. (Oxford: Macmillan, 1998).

¹⁵ P.K. Sarpong, *Peoples differ: An Approach to Enculturation in Evangelisation* (Legon, Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2002).

¹⁶ K. Nkansa-Kyeremanteng, *The Akans of Ghana: Their Customs, History and Institutions*, 2nd rev. edn. (Santasi, Kumasi: Sebewie De Ventures, 2010).

¹⁷ M.A. Awinongya, *The Understanding of Family in Ghana as a Challenge for a Contextual Ecclesiology* (Zürich: Lit Verlag, Zweigniederlassung, 2013), <https://books.google.com/gb/books?id=0iCOB41Sa50C&pg=PR3&dq=communal+living+akans+in+ghana&source=gbs>

¹⁸ Ghana Statistical Service, *National Analytical Report: 2010 Population & Housing Census* (2013), 61. http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/docfiles/2010phc/National_Analytical_Report.pdf

¹⁹ Buah, *A History of Ghana*, 8.

²⁰ According to Danquah, “The best-known representatives of the Akan race are the Ashanti, Fanti, Akim, Akuapim, Assin and several of the present (Twi-speaking) races of the Gold

Akans have a rich variety of dialects which are related. These dialects share vocabulary and other linguistic elements in various degrees. Kofi Agyekum lists the following as Akan dialects: Asante, Akuapen, Akwamu, Fante, Akyem, Agona, Assin, Denkyira, Twifo, Wassaw, Kwahu, Bron and Buem.²¹ According to Dolphyne, some scholars' use of the name Akan for "languages spoken by various groups" makes their use of the term "coincide more or less with the ethnographic use of the name Akan."²² Akan is spoken as a native language in five of the ten regions in Ghana, namely Ashanti, Eastern, Western, Central, and Brong Ahafo Regions.²³ Adu Boahen lists the use of common calendar, common religious beliefs, naming ceremonies, marriage, matrilineal systems of inheritance, language and monarchical system of government as cultural traits and institutions identical with all Akans.²⁴

The Social Context of Hebrews

In my view, Hebrews can be described as an epistle which deals basically with social problems, in spite of its elegant theological treatise

Coast." Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God*, 198. Salm and Falola divide Akan into two groups of the Fante and the Twi without identifying any basis for the division, noting that the Fanti came first, settling predominantly in the area around what is now Cape coast, probably in the thirteenth century to be followed later by the Twi some of whom inhabited much of the central region, the forest country to the south, between the Volta and Tano Rivers. Some of them also migrated east and created the Baule community in what is now Côte D'Ivoire. See J.S. Salm and T. Falola, *Culture and Customs of Ghana* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 6, accessed 3rd July 2015, https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=UpEeXthzCc&pg=PR3&dq=ethnic+groups+in+ghana&source=gbs_selected
The Bono was the first Akan kingdom to be established in the then Gold Coast in the thirteenth century, long before the Portuguese first arrived in 1471. See Salm and Falola, *Culture and Custom*, 6; Nkansa-Kyeremanteng, *The Akans of Ghana*, 36.

²¹ K. Agyekum, "The Sociolinguistic of Akan personal names," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 206.

²² Dolphyne, F.A. "The Language of the Akan people," 2, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://anyi-literacy.org/publications/dolphineFlorence1986HistoryoftheAkanPeople.pdf>

²³ Agyekum, "The Sociolinguistic of Akan," 206. Though he mentions six, he ends up listing five. It is only when Brong Ahafo is understood as two groups made up of Brong and Ahafo as is traditionally done that one can reckon 6 regions, but as the case is, Brong and Ahafo do not constitute two political regions in Ghana. Politically, therefore, one can speak of five regions where the Akan language is spoken.

²⁴ A.A. Boahen, "Origins of the Akan," *Ghana Notes and Queries* 9 (1966): 3-10, cited in Dolphyne, "The Language of the Akan people," 3. Chieftaincy used to be a unique mark of the Akan communities according to Dolphyne. She intimates that on the coast, the Gas and Ewes were ruled by their local priests and that chieftaincy among them was introduced for the convenience of governance by the British. Dolphyne, interview by author, 4th July 2016.

with Jewish cultic system. The harsh social implications of the recipients' membership of the Jesus group accounted, in part, for the tendency of the believers to leave the Jesus group as witnessed in the attitude of those who had stopped attending their group meetings (Heb 10:25). The fact that the recipients had not resisted to the point of shedding blood in their struggle against sin (pressure to commit apostasy) is indicative of this social situation (Heb 12:4).

As deSilva has argued, discussions about the sacred and the heavenly in Hebrews could make one lose sight of the fact that the recipients were struggling with how "to come to terms with some very mundane realities in their changing social circumstance."²⁵ Despite its enigmatic aspects in respect of the author and the specific location of its audience, Hebrews presents us with some clear information about the readers and the social pressure on them. Membership in the Jesus group created problems in their families, trade associations and the city at large. If the recipients were mainly Jews as traditionally held by many scholars, their monotheistic belief shared by the believers in Jesus meant that they stayed away from a number of norms such as sacrifices to the gods and emperor veneration that were considered necessary for social and political cohesion in the Roman Empire. If the recipients were a mixed audience as deSilva,²⁶ Ellingworth,²⁷ Ekem,²⁸ and Schenck²⁹ hold, then the faith of the non-Jews in Jesus would make them withdraw from these practices.³⁰ Their withdrawal or non-participation in these practices would be considered antisocial and even subversive since in some cases they threatened the peace and

²⁵ David A. deSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews in Social Scientific-perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012), xi.

²⁶ deSilva, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 33-36.

²⁷ Paul Ellingworth, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI - Carlisle, Cumbria: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company - The Paternoster Press Ltd, 1993), 25.

²⁸ J.D.K. Ekem, *New Testament Concepts of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2005), 108-109.

²⁹ K. Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story behind the Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 103-104.

³⁰ deSilva, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 49.

wellbeing of the empire.³¹ Some social sanctions were therefore applied to the recipients in order for them to abandon membership in this Jesus group (Heb 10:32). It is to urge his readers to withstand this social pressure that Hebrews was written (Heb 10:35-39). The author's use of social creativity is to be appreciated against this background.

To forestall members' tendency of withdrawing from the group's meetings and committing apostasy, the author found social creativity an important tool. Examining the social creativity of Hebrews in the light of similar strategies in the Akan society helps one to appreciate the relevance of the social creativity for the audience. This should also bring to light how the imageries chosen by the author both reflect and address the audience's experience.

Hebrews in the light of Social Creativity in Akan Society

In the following, the strategies of social creativity of Hebrews are examined in the light Akan social creativity under redefinition of victim of suffering as courageous contestant, redefinition of shame as honour, redefinition of abuse as required training, use of prototype, use of superordinate identity, and appeal to sacrifice and investment.

(a) Redefinition of Victim of Suffering as Courageous Contestant

It is natural to feel like a victim under oppression or persecution, and to think some of the readers of Hebrews felt this is not out of place. However, this was not the way the author wanted his readers to feel. He therefore employed imageries that challenged his audience to see themselves as people who have boldly stepped forward in a contest for honour.

The Akan perspective that gives meaning to such redefinition describes life as war or a fight when situations get tough. As intimated by Nketia, *Abrabo ye animia* (life takes endurance) and *Obra ye oko* (life is war or a fight) are Akan sayings that are used to encourage one going through hard times in life.³² Such redefinition of life situations

³¹ Ibid. Sacrifice to the gods was encouraged and urged in the Roman Empire because of the belief that these sacrifices make the gods pleased so as to bless the Empire with peace and prosperity.

³² J.H. Nketia, interview granted the author, July 5, 2016.

tends to invoke in a person the attitude of one engaged in a contest such that instead of looking for comfort as a victim of some unfortunate circumstances, one is stirred up to go through the hardship with the aim of emerging victorious. When the struggle is over, the recount of victory over such difficult situations usually goes with the feeling of a victor's pride.

On the 30th of March 1900, Nana Yaa Asantewaa³³ is said to have made a remarkable speech at her palace in Edweso. This was during the formation of her war council in preparation to fight the British. The war was in response to British provocative demand for the Asante Golden Stool.³⁴ In her speech, Yaa Asantewaa creatively redefined their situation of intimidation in order to inspire boldness and courage in the Asante chiefs for the defence of their heritage. In her redefinition of their situation, Yaa Asantewaa described the intimidated chiefs as “women;” their British oppressors, “rogues;” and the chiefs in general as “Men of Osei Tutu and Opoku Tenten.” The British army was presented not as powerful oppressors but as rascals. The Asante chiefs were no longer intimidated chiefs but men of the calibre of great Asante warrior kings (Osei Tutu and Opoku Tenten), fearless and daring in battle. In this redefinition, she reminded the chiefs of their pride and heritage in the Golden Stool and the fact that traditionally, it is better to perish than to be robbed of their heritage.³⁵ By this redefinition, Yaa Asantewaa managed to turn their state of intimidation into that of courageousness. The effectiveness of this social creativity is evident in the courage that resulted in the chiefs' resolve to go to war with the British.

³³ Nana Yaa Asantewaa ruled Edweso from 1896-1900. See A. Tiekou, *Tete Wo Bi Kyere: History & Facts about Asante Kingdom and Ghana* (Kumasi: Schrodinger's Publications, 2016), 244.

³⁴ In this speech she is reported to have said: “I am asking you all here, shall we sit down as cowards and let these rouges take away our pride? We should rise up and defend our heritage because it is better to perish than to look on sheepishly while the White man whose sole business in our country is to steal, kill and destroy and shamelessly demand for our sacred stool. Arise!! Arise! Men of Osei Tutu and Opoku Tenten, because I am prepared to lead you to war against the White men. I am urging all the ‘women’ here to go home and stay behind because ‘we’ the ‘men’ are ready for War. Should anyone of you be afraid to fight: may he be punished for his shameful act by the great Asante god Odomankoma.” Tiekou, *Tete Wo Bi Kyere*, 244-245.

³⁵ Rattray observes, “The stool was in every sense greater than the man or woman who ‘sat’ upon it. The lives of the kings or queens or war captains were of little value compared with the overriding necessity for guarding and preserving these shrines upon which were thought to depend the very existence of the Nation, tribe, or kindred group.” Rattray, *Ashanti Law*, 350.

How can Hebrew's description of the readers' situation be appreciated in the light of Akan redefinition of difficult life situations as *oko*? What will be the implication of the understanding resulting from such redefinition? To encourage the readers to hold on to their faith in the face of suffering, the author of Hebrews resorts to redefining their experience in terms of race and wrestling. The two imageries – race and wrestling – are used to redefine the same experience. Both call for similar attitudes such as wearing no weighty or restricting clothes and endurance in order to win the contest. The author combines the two imageries such that the readers' suffering becomes a contest for which they must endure just as Jesus for the joy set before him endured the cross and despised its shame (Heb 12:1-4).

In the light of Akan understanding of the readers' situation as *oko*, their suffering should be seen as occasions for the display of bravery and courage. Real men are bold and courageous. Those who run away from the battlefield live the rest of their lives in reproach. Such people cannot dance to certain drums reserved for only the bold in battle.³⁶ Such experience of reproach was so bad that it was better to die in battle than save oneself only to endure the resulting reproach. It is said that the Asante king Nana Osei Kwadwo took to wars instead of concentrating on the internal stability of the Asante kingdom just to prove that he was a courageous king.³⁷ Reading Hebrews in the light of Akan understanding of *oko* views the readers' suffering as an occasion for the display of courage and boldness in contending for the heritage of their faith. Thus, the readers ought to make their suffering an experience from which they should not run away since doing that would be shameful and attract ridicule. In this light, bold engagement in the contest becomes the only imperative.

The author presents Jesus as an illustration of how to go through suffering as a contest of race and wrestling. When Jesus went through suffering he despised the shame and endured the cross rather than run away from them (Heb 12:2). The believers are therefore urged to take up the contest (ἀγῶνα [fight, athletic contest]) set before them (Heb 12:1). They should do this by publicly displaying courage in defying

³⁶ Nkansa-Kyeremanteng, *The Akans of Ghana*, 63.

³⁷ Tiekou, *Tete Wo Bi Kyere*, 143.

(ἀντικαθίστημι [resist]) the pressure intended for them to abandon their faith as they did in their previous actions (Heb 12:1,4; cf. Heb 10:32-35).

Looking at the readers' suffering in the light of the Akan understanding of *oko* implies that the readers see themselves not as victims of persecution in which they look with pity on themselves as helpless, mournful people, but as people who have stepped out boldly to contend for their faith against the contempt, abuse and infliction of physical and economic hardships.

Understood in this way, standing firm in their suffering implies different perspective on the comfort and peace the dominant society denied them. Seeking comfort and peace from the larger society would be inappropriate clothes and weight that would prevent the readers from winning the contest. Breaking loyalty with the faith as a result of the pressure from the dominant society is now the sin against which the readers are struggling.³⁸ The readers should therefore strip themselves completely naked for their bold contest (Heb 12:1). In this respect, the desire for the approval of members of the larger society, property, safety and honour are all weights that must be laid aside.³⁹ This means that love for wealth, attachment to the world, preoccupation with earthly interests, or self-importance are impediments in the kind of contest they are engaged in. The sin of rebellion and the offer of temporary advantage that draws one away from God's people must be put away as inappropriate clothes and baggage. Many Akans know the battlefield is not the place to seek comfort. It is a place where one fights with all of one's strength as one is prepared to die for a cause. This is what Jesus did when he despised shame and endured the pain of the cross in faithfulness to God. This is what the readers too must do (Heb 12:2). The recipients should therefore keep their eyes fixed

³⁸ That experience in persecution sometimes involved the shedding of blood is a common knowledge. The statement that in their struggle (wrestle) against sin they had not yet resisted to the point of shedding their blood gives meaning to what this struggle against sin is about – struggle against the temptation to break faith with God – apostasy – the very end to which they were being persecuted (Hebrews 12:4).

³⁹ Since the disapproval by the general society of the believers accounted for the suffering of the audience, the temptation to revert to that which would make the audience attract the approval of the society was high and it was the very thing that could make the audience break faith with the Jesus group.

on Jesus so that they can contest in the same way as Jesus did (Heb 12:2).

(b) Redefinition of Shame as Honour

The author was also concerned about the exposure of his readers to public shame. His address of this condition focused on making them feel not ashamed in their lot as believers. To achieve this, he resorts to a redefinition in which what is naturally shameful is presented as honourable.

The way Akans creatively redefine negative perceptions and remarks made of them offers a good way to look at how Hebrews attempts to shift the readers focus away from their exposure to shame. For instance, the people of the Kwahu tribe are described as stingy. Much of their wealth is deemed to have come from juju (*Sikaduro*).⁴⁰ Members of the Kwahu tribe reinterpret this popular negative perception as their prudent management of resources and the reason for their success in business. Following the resulting positive self-concept from the reinterpretation, Kwahu people are not ashamed to own and enjoy their wealth. This positive way of relating to their wealth has also earned them another derogatory impression as people who love to show off their wealth. The Akan expression *Wo huuhuu se Kwahu ni a wato car* presents the Kwahu person as the standard against which those who show off their possessions are measured. The expression literally means, “You show off like a Kwahu person who owns a car.” By their reinterpretation of these negative perceptions, the effect of the slur cast on their success in business is weakened so that their confidence in their abilities is upheld.

In Hebrews, the shame of the death of Jesus is suppressed. The mention of his death is always framed in expressions that set attention on the blessedness and glory of his death. Even when the believers are invited to go outside the camp to bear the shame Jesus endured, their attention had already been called to the sanctifying effect of his death (Heb 13:12-13). Thus, Jesus who died a shameful death is now the celebrated one who is anointed above his companions with the oil of gladness for his achievements through the cross (Heb 9:1; cf. Heb

⁴⁰ It must be noted that the notion that much of their wealth comes through juju is no more as popular as it used to be.

1:3).⁴¹ In Hebrews, his death is not the death of a messianic pretender or of one guilty of treason as the non-believing people of the society considered it.⁴² Rather, it is the making of purification of sins after which he sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high, becoming much superior to angels, and inheriting a name more excellent than theirs (Heb 1:3-4).⁴³ The death on the cross becomes the way Jesus pursued the joy set before him as he despised the shame and consequently took his place at the right hand of God (Heb 12:2). The connection between his death on the cross and his subsequent exaltation in Hebrews 1:3 and 13:2 is the author's positive way of portraying the death of Christ. A similar connection between his death and his exaltation is presented in Hebrews 2:9 where the author says: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour."

Seeing Jesus glorified was meant to change the readers' perception of their lot. In Akan, the honour of one prominent member of a family becomes the honour of all the members of the family. There is a constant concern for members to behave honourably because what one member does affects the image of all members of the family. In this light, the author of Hebrews is seen to be attempting to set the focus

⁴¹ In Hebrews 9, the author does not simply describe what Christ did in his sacrificial work. His use of *παρουσενόμενος* (having appeared; Heb 9:11) creates the mental image of one who presents himself publicly for action, probably, of contest. His action comes after the description of the earthly mediation of the Levitical order so that what Christ presents becomes better forms of what had been there. Christ appears as a high priest of the good things that would come, entered into the holy places by his own blood, not with that of goats and calves, securing eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-12). The author speaks of the efficacy of the sacrifices made with goats, bulls and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer as sanctifying for the purification of the flesh (Heb 9:13). This is the first part of his *fortiori* statement which ends with: "how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Heb 9:14; cf. Heb 9:9-10). It is because of this (*διὰ τοῦτο*) that Jesus has become the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, and this on account of a death that has occurred to redeem them from transgressions committed under the first covenant (Heb 9:16).

⁴² Jesus' triumphant entry in Jerusalem with the cry of the crowd to save them now carried strong significance for how he presented himself politically as the king of the Jews (their liberator) and religiously as the Messiah. When he was asked to instruct the crowd to keep quiet, his answer that even the stones would cry out was so instructive for those who had demanded silence from the crowd. It meant that Jesus saw himself as the Messiah King and approved of what crowd was saying (Lk. 19:37-40).

⁴³ Reckoning the death of Jesus as sacrifice for sin was a common tradition among New Testament writers (Rom 3:25; Col 1:20; 1 Jn 2:2; Rev 1:5).

of his readers on Christ's glory rather than the image of shame they have in the eyes of the general public. The author sounds like, "Look at your lot as members of the household of your glorified brother!" The readers were to redirect their attention to their glorified brother and identify positively with Christ, his death and the Jesus group just as by refocusing attention on their positive redefinition of their situation the Kwahu people could relate positively to their lot.

(c) Redefinition of Abuse as Required Training (παιδεία)

The fact that the public abuse of the audience was of grave concern to the author is evident in the many imageries used in its redefinition. By redefining their public abuse as *παιδεία* (required training), the author presents the readers' suffering as necessary and as an experience to be embraced with its benefits in mind.

An Akan proverb states, *Onipa tese brode a eda egyam; w'ankisa a, ehye* (a human being is like a plantain being roasted on coal fire, it gets burnt when you fail to keep turning it). This proverb underscores the importance of training and the need to maintain efforts aimed at moulding the character of members of one's family or other social settings that one has charge of. Another adage says, *Wofase nantikuro, womia a, eye no ya, wammia nso a, ne nan reporo* (The wound at the ankle of one's nephew [the heir] is either dressed in pain for it to be healed or left for the ankle to be rotten). The necessity of dressing the wound (discipline, training) lies in the fact that the nephew is the heir to the uncle who performs the dressing.⁴⁴ This adage implies that if the uncle fails to take the nephew through the pain of proper training, the nephew will be a misfit for his role of assuming the inheritance of his uncle. This saying is often used to redefine situations in which suffering is deemed necessary. It is used to shift attention from the temporal pain of suffering to the good suffering would bring in the end. While the adage encourages the trainer not to be deterred by the pain from carrying out the training, it also exhorts the one being trained to endure the pain for his or her good.

⁴⁴ Akans have matrilineal inheritance in which the nephew inherits from the uncle.

For Hebrews, the suffering of the readers is God's way of raising them as legitimate children.⁴⁵ They should therefore embrace their suffering as God's nurture with their good in mind.⁴⁶ They should know that it was through suffering that Jesus, their brother was made perfect for his role as one who brings many sons to glory (Heb 2:10). Jesus suffered when he was tempted so he is able to help those who are being tempted (including the readers; cf. Heb 2:18). The writer maintains, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8). His perfection and becoming the source of salvation derive from the obedience he learnt through suffering (Heb 5:9). In these ways, the author extols the importance and benefits of suffering as good training for his readers. An Akan understanding of training as preparation for one to competently take up the role of an heir should provide the appropriate lens for appreciating Hebrews' redefinition of the readers' suffering as God's training. In this light, the benefits of discipline (training) for Jesus in Hebrews are the reasons why the believers should appreciate suffering as their required training. In view of this, the author should be understood as saying to the readers, "If suffering as training worked for the good of Jesus, it will certainly work for your good also." The readers should therefore consider Jesus who endured from sinners such hostility so that they may not grow weary in their own exposure to public reproach and affliction (Heb 12:3; cf. 10:32). They should therefore lift their drooping hands and strengthen their weak knees, and make straight paths for their feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed (Heb 12:12-13).

⁴⁵ The writer maintains, "It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Heb 12:7b-8; The stress on legitimate sons (as the contrast between νόθοι [illegitimate sons] and υἱοί [sons] suggests) implies that while those sons who have no inheritance to take care of receive no discipline (nurturing), those who will inherit need their father's discipline. παιδεία translated as discipline means more of training than punitive action.

⁴⁶ The writer maintains, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11). See also Hebrews 12:7, 10-11.

(d) Use of Ingroup Prototype

The call to faithfulness in Hebrews was necessitated by the readers' perceived tendency to break faith with God and the Jesus group (apostasy). With this in view, the author finds the need for the use of a prototypical member who embodies the ideal virtue needed to address this tendency of his readers. When a prototype is used, what is highlighted is the quality he or she embodies and deemed necessary for the members in a particular situation.

The way Akans use prototypes to inspire the required virtue for a specific situation provides a relevant way to appreciate Hebrews' use of Christ as a prototypical member of the Jesus group. In the speech of Yaa Asantewaa referred to above, she presented two important prototypical members of the Asante people, namely, Osei Tutu and Opoku Tenten who were the embodiment of courage and boldness in warfare. Getting the Asante chiefs to go to war shows how effective her use of these prototypical Asante warrior kings was. Her ability to use the right prototypes for the situation was crucial. The mention of Osei Tutu and Opoku Tenten in a situation of intimidation evoked the ideal image that must characterise all Asante chiefs. The chiefs in the audience at once felt that they needed to rise to the occasion in being the ideal chiefs expected of them.

In daily experiences of life, a deviant or lazy person in the Akan society may be urged to consider a sibling or some other relative whose life stands out in a relevant virtue to emulate that particular virtue. Depending on the need of the situation, certain individuals who symbolise the desired value or attitude in one's family may be held up for emulation. To encourage members in the attitude of sacrifice for the good of their society, the people of Kumawu traditional area frequently appeal to the voluntary sacrifice made by Nana Tweneboah Koduah which, in part, ensured the success of the Asante Kingdom in their war against the Denkyira Kingdom.⁴⁷ For similar purposes, Agya Ahor is remembered for voluntarily offering himself as a sacrifice that averted a famine and a deadly epidemic that threatened the entire Abura-Mfante community.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Tiekku, *Tete Wo Bi Kyere*, 143.

⁴⁸ See Ekem, *New Testament Concepts*, 62.

The foregoing provides important Akan perspectives on Hebrew's presentations of prototypes for its audience to identify with and emulate. Everything the author draws attention to about these prototypes centre on faithfulness and endurance, which are the critical virtues needed by his audience. The list of these prototypes is found in Hebrews 11 where the faith (faithfulness - πίστις) of the prototypes is highlighted. When Abraham was held up in this list, attention was called to the fact that he accepted to live as a stranger because he was looking forward to the city that has no foundations (Heb 11:8-10). Abraham was presented as a prototype for the readers to learn that enduring the condition of a stranger in waiting for a better homeland is better than breaking faith with God to gain earthly citizenship. The Akan can see the faithful prototypes as well-behaved members of one's family who are being held up as models for the readers to emulate their virtues of faithfulness and endurance.

It is also in this respect that Jesus, the Chief among the prototypes is presented in Hebrews 12 with a specific call on the audience to imitate him. As they fix their gaze on him who endured the cross for the joy set before him, they will learn to despise the shame of their current situation and endure their suffering in view of the promised rewards of a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:1; cf. Heb 12:17-28). The explicit call on the readers to consider Jesus so that they would not grow weary and fainthearted is instructive on Hebrews' use of Christ as the group's prototypical member (Heb 12:3).

(e) Use of Superordinate Identity

There existed subgroups within the Jesus group in Hebrews. This could pose a threat to the members' continuing allegiance to the Jesus group in a situation in which the same group was the reason for the social stress they were experiencing. To stem this threat, the author presented a superordinate identity of the Jesus group to his readers. We have superordinate identity when a group's identity is made so important that members' affiliation to other groups does not pose a threat to that group.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ G.J. Lornardelli, L. Cynthia, J.E.J. Pickett and Y.D. Hess, "Optimal Distinctiveness in Nested Categorization Contexts: Moving from Dueling Identities to a Dual Identity," in *Social Cognition, Social Identity, and Intergroup Relation: A Festschrift in Honor of Marilyn B. Brewer*,

The use of superordinate identity in the Akan society is a helpful way of appreciating Hebrews' use of the same identity. For practical utilitarian purposes, Akans look for common grounds to dissolve ethnic differences among members of different Akan tribes by highlighting their common ethnic identity in the clan. The clan and *nton* systems provide important avenues for the expression of superordinate identity which cuts across all Akan tribes whether Fante, Akuapem, Asante, Kwahu, Akyem, or any other.⁵⁰ Members of a clan are believed to have come from one ancestor no matter their geographical location. For this reason, they are forbidden from marrying each other. The same is true of members of an *nton*.⁵¹ When it comes to the clan or *nton*, the identities of the various Akan tribes become insignificant. What is important is that the members of a clan or *nton* are one people. The superordinate nature of the clan and *nton* is, however, not always active until it is made salient. When made salient, their superordinate identity may be exploited for practical purposes. A case in point is the following incident as narrated by Dolphyne, an Asante who hails from Achina and belongs to the Asona Clan.

A cousin of mine married a man from Aburi. When the man died she was accused of being the cause of his death. While we were keeping wake during the funeral we recognised that the head of the family of the deceased (*Abusua Panyin*) held a staff of the Asona Clan. When we got to him as we were greeting, my mother knelt before him and told him, "Nana, my brother is the Asona Chief of our hometown." The *Abusua Panyin* responded with *O me nua bea* (O my sister) and held her up. Meanwhile, the sister of the deceased had hired some boys to beat up the widow. As the boys rushed on

ed., R.M. Kramer, G.J. Leonardelli and R.W. Livingston (Hove, NY: Psychology Press, 2011). <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=ipB5AgAAQBAJ&pg=PA113&dq=superord>

⁵⁰ Every individual belongs to an *nton* of his father believed to be the spirit of the father that protects the person. It is believed that the bond established by the *nton* between the individual and the father determines the characteristics that the child takes such as intelligence, wisdom, knowledge and general character. People who belong the same *nton* share some common features. There are twelve *nton* and each has its own totem, taboos, peculiar characteristics and responses to their greetings. See Nkansa-Kyeremanteng, *The Akans of Ghana*, 33.

⁵¹ Anthony Appiah notes, "Both *abusua* [clan] and *ntoro* were traditionally exogamous: that is, it was incestuous to marry a member of the same matriclan or patriclan. See Anthony Appiah, "Akan and Euro-American Concepts of the Person," in *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, ed. Lee M. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 27, <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=Dqc4mydHbxwC&pg=PA27&dq=can+mebers+of+the+same+nton+marry?&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjDxdDi0u>

the widow, the Abusua Panin put her in a room and asked one of his older sons to protect her. Had it not been for the protection she enjoyed from the head of the Asona Clan, no one knows what would have happened to my cousin.⁵²

This story demonstrates how insignificant the differences in tribe and hometown become in the face of the superordinate identity of the clan. In this case, their common identification with the Asona clan evoked the sentiment and sense of obligation that made it possible to satisfy the need of the moment regardless of the difference in their Asante and Akuapem tribes.

Recent studies show that there existed subgroups within the Jesus minority group in Hebrews. Mention can be made of Jewish believers in Christ, proselytes and God fearers who previously had various degrees of affiliations with the Jewish religion. Others were Gentiles converted straightway to the Jesus group who had their immediate background in the Graeco-Roman pantheon and Emperor Cult.⁵³ Ellingworth assumes that due to the previously existing tension between the Jewish and Gentile subgroups of Jesus' believers, the author is cautious on subjects that might reawaken such tensions.⁵⁴ In a situation where their common faith in Christ had become the reason for the social pressure they were going through, their individual subgroup identities could begin to emerge salient. The tendency could then be to deemphasize their identity as believers in Jesus and reassert their individual subgroup identities.

By calling attention to their relationship with Jesus as their brother and the surpassing benefits the readers enjoy from him (Heb 2:11, 2:17, 3:1), the author of Hebrews makes the identity of the readers as believers in the Jesus group salient in a similar manner as the Asona woman did. He does this in a way that makes faith in Jesus that which satisfies *par excellence* all the hopes and aspirations represented in themes like high priest, sacrifice, tabernacle, city and kingdom in all the subgroups whether Jewish or Graeco-Roman (Heb 10:11-14,

⁵² Dolphyne, interview granted to the author, July 4, 2016.

⁵³ deSilva, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 162-163.

⁵⁴ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 25.

4:14-16, 8:2, 9:11, 9:12-14; 12:22, 12:28). Muir has pointed out that Roman polytheism also had high priests, sacrifices and temples.⁵⁵

The superordinate identity presented of the Jesus group becomes significant in the light of the author's presentation of related themes in such absolute terms that leave the audience with no option anywhere in their other affiliations. Whatever people sought in that world by pursuing religion is only accessible in the Jesus group so that there is nothing in any of their subgroups except a very terrible judgement and denial of rest (Heb 10:27; cf. Heb 2:3, 4:1). His presentation of Christ as the one in whom God's final speaking has taken place and his emphasis on the need to pay closer attention to the message of Christ becomes relevant in this light (Heb 1:2; cf. Heb 2:1). The Jesus group then becomes a more important group with sterling benefits that make it deserve all the emotive and urgent attention as a superordinate group. These should make more salient the group's identity and inspire more sense of commitment and obligation to it.

(f) Appeal to Sacrifice and Investment

In an atmosphere of persecution and suffering, it is understandable that the readers would consider their membership of the Jesus group to have cost them a great deal. Some of the words of the author carry a tone that recognises this cost, making sacrifice and investment relevant ways of looking at the suffering of the readers in Hebrews.

Some Akan concepts are relevant for considering the readers' suffering as investment and sacrifice. Akans believe that the venture into which one has made some investment should be pursued in a way that brings the expected returns. In this sense, they find it is not prudent to abandon a promising venture halfway. People who are about to abandon some good work are told, *adwumayesin nni akatua* (work that is half accomplished has no reward). Similarly, people who are about to give up towards the end of a good venture are told *w'akum wowo a twa ne ti* (once you kill a snake, you must complete the act by cutting off its head). In all these sayings, the one being admonished is reminded of how much it has cost one in sacrifice and investment to

⁵⁵ S. Muir, "Social Identity in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. B. Tucker and C.A. Baker (London - New Delhi - New York - Sydney: Bloomsbury - T&T Clark, 2014), 128.

have come to a particular point for which abandoning the venture is unreasonable.

Hebrews refers to the experiences of the readers in ways that suggest that the readers had made some investment and sacrifice in the Jesus group for which the group's continuing existence should be important to them. In commending his readers for their past bold public stand with the Jesus community in Hebrews 10:32-34, the author recalls not only the cost to their honour (public reproach) and comfort (struggle with suffering), but also the loss of their property (economic cost).⁵⁶ These could be seen as the sacrifices made in their becoming members of the Jesus group.

The fact that the purpose of reminding the readers of their sacrifices was to urge them to be faithful to the Jesus group is instructive. The cost of becoming members of the Jesus community should therefore be viewed as their investment into the community. Apart from the public abuse and the physical and economic hardship they endured, they also shared their resources with other members in need (Heb 10:34). They invested time and resources in attending their meeting, in encouraging one another, in visiting those in prison, and in meeting the needs of other members of the community (Heb 10:33b-34; cf. Heb 10:25). All these investments and sacrifices in the group would be wasted if the members abandoned the group. *Obereguo ye ya* (it is painful to suffer in vain) is an Akan saying that should urge the readers to make their investment and sacrifice fruitful because work abandoned halfway has no reward (*adwumayesin nni akatua*). It is in this sense that Hebrews' call on the believers not to throw away their confidence, which has great reward (Heb 10:35), is significant. Also significant is the appeal by Hebrews to the readers not to shrink back so they can receive what is promised (Heb 10:36-39).

⁵⁶ Burkitt summarises the suffering of the believers in three headings: shame, pain, and loss. They suffered in their names, by being disgraced; in their persons, by being scourged; in their estates, by the spoiling of their goods. W. Burkitt, *Expository Notes, with Practical Observations – The New Testament of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Sorin & Ball, 1844), 601.

Concluding Remarks

In the light of the foregoing, it is evident that the author of Hebrews found social creativity a useful way to address the social stress his readers found themselves in. The choice of the imageries used for the redefinition of the readers' situation both reflect the new perspective and attitudes the author expects his readers to have in their current suffering. Social creativity in Akan society provided the light in which Hebrews' use of social creativity was appreciated. The implications of the author's redefinition of the readers' situation served the writer's purpose of urging his readers on, in the path of faithfulness and bold stand for their faith.

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