

AN ANALYSIS OF KWAME GYEKYE'S CONCEPTION OF 'SUNSUM' IN AKAN PHILOSOPHY

Hasskei M. Majeed

Abstract: *The concept of sunsum has been a subject of disagreement among Akan philosophers. Gyekye criticizes the views of Akan writers such as Kofi Busia, Joseph Danquah and Kwasi Wiredu despite his acceptance of their position that sunsum is the basis of an individual's personality. This paper examines Gyekye's critique of these authors (especially Busia) and shows how Gyekye's arguments are not only sometimes inaccurate, but also how they do generate a major problem of attribution that hampers a good understanding of his thesis.*

Key Words: *Sunsum*; personality; personal identity; genetic influence; human behaviour.

Introduction

Sunsum is one of the entities postulated by Akan thinkers as a constituent of the human individual.¹ Individual is to be understood, for the purpose of this paper, in the ontological sense of a person – that is, in the sense of an entity whose identity is either metaphysical or empirical, or both.

The existence of the human body is not denied in Akan philosophical conceptions of a person. However, in addition to the body (*nipadua* or *honam*), the *sunsum* is also postulated and, in some sense, separated from another entity called *okra*. Although these two entities are often translated as 'spirit' and 'soul' respectively,² these translations are heavily contested in Akan thought. For instance, while Kwasi Wiredu and Safro Kwame disagree with Gyekye and postulate that the *okra* is

¹ The Akan is the dominant ethnic group in Ghana, West Africa.

² Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

quasi-physical,³ Martin Ajei and Hasskei Majeed affirm the metaphysical character of the *ɔkra*.⁴ By the account of Gyekye, the *ɔkra* acquires a “substantive” identity,⁵ similar to the Platonic and Cartesian characterizations of the soul.⁶

Akan thinkers such as Kwame Gyekye, Kofi Busia, Joseph Danquah and Kwasi Wiredu disagree over the rendering of *sunsum* as “spirit” because of (i) how the word *sunsum* is employed by the Akan people in their linguistic expressions, and (ii) the sort of activities that are attributed to the *sunsum* in Akan thought. In this paper, I analyze Gyekye’s conception of *sunsum* and how he interprets the views of the other thinkers. Gyekye’s conception of *sunsum* is built upon the views of writers whom he characterizes as anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers. Specifically, he groups for discussion the views of such anthropologists as R. S. Rattray, Peter Sarpong and Eva

³ Kwasi Wiredu, “The Akan Concept of Mind,” *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* 3 (October 1983): 113-134; Kwasi Wiredu, “The Concept of Mind with Particular Reference to the Language and Thought of the Akans,” in *African Philosophy*, Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey, 5, ed. Gutter Fløistad (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 153-17; Sefro Kwame, “Quasi-Materialism: A Contemporary African Philosophy of Mind,” in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

⁴ Martin Ajei, “Problems with Wiredu’s Empiricism,” *Legon Journal of the Humanities* 23 (2012): 185-204; Martin Ajei, “Human Rights in a Moderate Communitarian Political Framework,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2015): 491-503; Hasskei M. Majeed, “A Critique of the Concept of Quasi-Physicalism in Akan Philosophy,” *African Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 1-2 (2013): 22-23; Hasskei M. Majeed, “Reincarnation, Predestination and Moral Responsibility: Critical Issues in Akan Philosophy,” *Thought and Practice*. New Series 7, no. 2 (2015): 105-122.

⁵ Mogobe Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 2002); Segun Gbadegesin, “Ènyàn: The Yoruba Concept of a Person,” in *Philosophy from Africa*, ed. P. H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 2002).

⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*. G.M.A. Grube trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1977); René Descartes, “Of Doubt and Certitude,” in *Introductory Readings in Philosophy*, ed. Marcus G. Singer and Robert R. Ammerman (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1962).

Meyerowitz,⁷ that of a sociologist like Kofi Busia,⁸ as well as those of philosophers such as Joseph Danquah and Kwasi Wiredu.⁹

In critiquing these authors, Gyekye states that the anthropological and sociological accounts entail "some conceptual blunders,"¹⁰ which are incapable of justifying the translation of *sunsum* into English as 'spirit.'¹¹ The blunders, as summarized by him are: "(1) that the *sunsum* derives from the father, (2) that it is not divine, and (3) that it perishes with the disintegration of the *honam*, that is, the material component of a person."¹² What Gyekye accepts, nonetheless, from the anthropologists and sociologists is their view that *sunsum* is the personality or the basis of the personality (or character) of the human being. He associates this view with Busia, Rattray and Meyerowitz.¹³ In addition to these writers, the philosopher Danquah also identifies *sunsum* with personality,¹⁴ just like Wiredu. For Wiredu maintains that *sunsum* is that which "gives a person's personality its force."¹⁵ Therefore, it may be said that the establishment of a link between personality and *sunsum* is a position which Gyekye accepts from all those he criticizes.

Gyekye comments widely on the views of Busia and suggests that both Busia and Danquah interpret *sunsum* in physical terms. And, that this is inconsistent with his (Gyekye's) belief that the *sunsum* is a spiritual entity.¹⁶ On this background, the paper aims at showing: (i) where Busia is not accurately understood by Gyekye, and (ii) that

⁷ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1916); Peter K. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publishing, 1974); Eva L. Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana: Their Ancient Beliefs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958).

⁸ K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti," in *African Worlds*, ed. Daryll Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

⁹ J.B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1944). Wiredu, "The Akan Concept."

¹⁰ Gyekye, *Essay*, 88.

¹¹ Gyekye, *Essay*, 88-91.

¹² Gyekye, *Essay*, 89. In the next section of this paper, I will be guided by these blunders.

¹³ Busia, "The Ashanti," 197. Rattray, *Ashanti*, 46. Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 98.

¹⁴ Danquah, *Akan Doctrine*, 67.

¹⁵ Wiredu, "The Akan Concept," 119.

¹⁶ Gyekye, *Essay*, 89-91.

Gyekye's supposedly correct conception of *sunsum* leads him inadvertently to the difficult situation of not knowing where to locate with certainty the source of personality traits. Thus, I show how Gyekye's analysis leads one to a state of insoluble confusion.

In this paper, I discuss, first, Gyekye's critique of the anthropologists and sociologists (that is, the three blunders identified by Gyekye), followed by an assessment of his views on the two philosophers (Danquah and Wiredu). Finally, I bring to fore the problem of attribution of qualities of personality that proceed from Gyekye's argument.

The Three Blunders: Gyekye's Critique of the Anthropologists and Sociologists

This section identifies the three main issues in the critique of Gyekye and examines each in its proper context.

1. Gyekye attributes to Busia¹⁷ and Sarpong¹⁸ the idea that the *sunsum* derives from the father. However, he denies the paternal origin of *sunsum* on the bases that all spirits, including this *sunsum*, derive from the Supreme Being, and that it is *ntorɔ*¹⁹ (responsible for genetic influences) which is acquired from the father.²⁰ But to understand this debate properly, it is important to interrogate the position of the paternal arguers in some detail. I concentrate on Busia whom Gyekye also discusses at length. I intend to establish whether Busia's reference to the father necessarily makes him deny the Supreme Being as the source of *sunsum* and whether he denies that *ntorɔ* is passed on from father to child. If my analysis yields positive findings on these, then, Gyekye's assessment of Busia would not be correct.

Gyekye's first reason for his attribution of a person's *sunsum* to the Supreme Being – that is, his belief that all spirits come from the Supreme Being – is not strong enough to confute Busia's argument. It can only be a straightforward rejection of the position that the father

¹⁷ Busia, "The Ashanti," 197.

¹⁸ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 37.

¹⁹ Gyekye spells this word as *ntoro* while Busia spells it as *ntorɔ*. For the sake of consistency, I use the latter throughout this paper.

²⁰ Gyekye, *Essay*, 91, 94.

is the source of *sunsum* only if Busia is not aware of or does not hold this view as well. For that would mean that all Busia knows and can attribute *sunsum* to is the father. But a closer examination of Busia's text reveals that he holds this view too. He admits that all spirits and, indeed, "all spiritual power derive from the Supreme Being."²¹ The challenge now is how to provide a comprehensive analysis of his position, and determine whether Gyekye is right in the way he criticizes him.

In the thinking of Busia, the English term 'spirit' is the proper designation for a complex Akan concept which envelopes both *sunsum* and *ntorɔ*. In this concept, *sunsum* is presented as a speck of the *ntorɔ*. In his words, the *sunsum* is "a child of the *Ntorɔ* and shares its nature."²² By 'nature' he has in mind spiritual nature. This is the first point of disagreement between Gyekye and Busia. According to Gyekye, *sunsum* is spirit but *ntorɔ* is not. *Sunsum* is derived from the Supreme Being but *ntorɔ* is derived from the father's semen; *ntorɔ* is a set of genetic factors or inherited characteristics received from the father.²³ Busia, however, regards the *ntorɔ* to be spirit because each distinct *ntorɔ* is, in Akan thought, "under the aegis of a god (*bosom*)" and is thus, a spiritual child of that god or deity who, in turn, is a child of – or proceeds from – the Supreme Being.²⁴ Indeed, Meyerowitz confirms this spiritual connection between the *sunsum* (an individual's personality) and the *ntorɔ* deities.²⁵

But in what sense is *sunsum* spirit? In the first place, it could be maintained, as Gyekye notes, that *sunsum* is an Akan term used to refer to anything spiritual – either in the form of a spiritual action or entity.²⁶ As an entity in the human being which bears his or her personality, Busia implies that there are major personality traits in the child which he or she acquires from the father. And if *sunsum* is or bears personality, then, a child's personality traits most probably largely come from the father. In spite of the fact that in modern, scientific terms

²¹ Busia, "The Ashanti," 198.

²² Busia, "The Ashanti," 198.

²³ Gyekye, *Essay*, 94.

²⁴ Busia, "The Ashanti," 198.

²⁵ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 98.

²⁶ Gyekye, *Essay*, 88.

these traits are significantly attributed to genetic factors, the indigenous beliefs of the Akan suggest that these genetic factors would be “spiritually” acquired from the father who is just the closest in spirit to the child. In other words, this spiritually transmitted personality traits trace back to the father’s *ntorɔ*, then to the *ntorɔ* deities, and finally to the Supreme Being. The father is only the immediate transmitter of personality. Busia reveals this multi-transitional character of the spirit (or *sunsum*) in his explanation of *ntorɔ*:

In the same way that these children of the Supreme Being [that is, *Ntorɔ* deities] share his spirit, so the *Ntorɔ* are children of the rivers [that is, river deities] from whom they derive their spirits; and in the same way that the *Ntorɔ* is a child of the river, so the *sunsum* of a man is a child of the *Ntorɔ* and shares its nature; thus again, all spiritual power derives from the Supreme Being ... [T]he father ... is the immediate transmitter of his son’s *sunsum* from the *Ntorɔ* ...²⁷

From the foregoing, Busia’s position is that the *sunsum* comes from the Supreme Being although it passes through a chain of beings before one acquires it. It can be noted that, contrary to Gyekye’s thinking, his claim that the *sunsum* derives from the Supreme Being is not different from Busia’s view. Therefore, Gyekye does not succeed in showing that Busia does not conceive of the *sunsum* as divine. Secondly, Gyekye’s intervention that the *ntorɔ* is inherited from the father is a belief which is neither new to nor rejected by Busia. From some other activities attributed in Akan thought to *sunsum* – for instance, its ability to act in dreams – Gyekye is able to postulate, quite brilliantly though, that *sunsum* must be an entity capable of acting independently.²⁸ However, his inability to interrogate deeply the implications of the characterization of *sunsum* as the basis of an individual’s personality gives rise to serious problems in his interpretation of *sunsum* – and I discuss this further in the last section of the paper.

2. Gyekye also raises a serious issue about the position of the anthropologists and sociologists in connection with the divinity of *sunsum*. According to Gyekye, this account does not regard *sunsum* as divine.

²⁷ Busia, “The Ashanti,” 198; Square brackets are mine.

²⁸ Gyekye, *Essay*, 91-92.

And here again, he cites Busia.²⁹ Yet, there is ample evidence in the very work of Busia cited by Gyekye to the contrary. For instance, Busia writes: "... the Ashanti believes that every man receives a *sunsum* and also a *kra*. A man's *sunsum* is his ego, his personality, his distinctive character. It is divine, but perishes with the man ..."³⁰ Despite Busia's unequivocal statement that *sunsum* is divine, it is quite difficult to understand why Gyekye would refer to the same page where Busia's statement is and, perhaps, with some awareness of this same quotation, to impute non-divinity of *sunsum* to Busia. It is therefore relevant at this stage to understand Gyekye a bit more. Gyekye provides the reason for his position as follows:

Busia says that one part of a person is 'the personality that comes indirectly from the Supreme Being'. By 'personality' Busia must, on his own showing, be referring to the *sunsum*, which must, according to my analysis, derive directly from the Supreme Being, and not from the father ... It must therefore be divine and immortal, contrary to what he and others thought.³¹

In this quotation, Gyekye suggests that Busia only discusses the indirect origin of the *sunsum* – but not the question of the divinity of *sunsum*. Gyekye also gives the impression that the divinity of *sunsum* is guaranteed by his analysis alone. But these suggestions are incorrect. Moreover, he does not explain why in spite of Busia's explicit affirmation of the divinity of *sunsum*, he would still insist that Busia does not argue for the divinity of *sunsum*. In the absence of this, Gyekye's critique of Busia's argument is not fully justified. But if I grant that he (Gyekye) is aware of Busia's postulation of the divinity of *sunsum*, then, I can assert that he believes Busia cannot maintain that *sunsum* is divine and at the same time claim that *sunsum* comes 'indirectly' from the Supreme Being.

The suggestion here is that one can only claim that something comes from a being if that thing comes *directly* from the being. But this reasoning is problematic and unhelpful to the course of Gyekye. In the context which this debate is taking place, to be divine is, if properly

²⁹ Gyekye, *Essay*, 89.

³⁰ Busia, "The Ashanti," 197. Ashantis are one of the Akan peoples who speak the *Twi* dialect. Not all Akans speak *Twi*.

³¹ Gyekye, *Essay*, 91; he quotes Busia, "The Ashanti," 197.

understood, to emanate from the Supreme Being. In view of this, it seems to me, something received indirectly from the Supreme Being can be said to have *emanated* from the Supreme Being. This may be illustrated with the analogy where a posted parcel is said to emanate from its sender even if an agent of the postal service is the one who gives it directly to the receiver. This analogy commits Gyekye to the unintended position that the parcel did not emanate from the sender. But I need to caution that the process of acquiring divinity status as held by Busia, which I deem correct, does not prevent Gyekye from maintaining that *sunsum* emanates directly from God – that is a different issue altogether. In other words, a debate about what it means to be divine (that is, whether directness or indirectness of origin of something makes it divine) is different from one which is about whether or not something (like *sunsum*) actually has a direct or indirect trace to the Supreme Being.³²

3. Gyekye also attributes to the anthropologists and sociologists the view that the *sunsum* perishes along with the body when a human being dies. I have stated above that Busia holds this position. Gyekye's rebuttal that *sunsum* is not mortal makes sense to me because this attribute is rather applicable to the body.³³ This notwithstanding, I reject aspects of Gyekye's argument. Gyekye states in opposition to the perishability thesis that "... if the *sunsum* perishes along with the body, a physical object, then it follows that the *sunsum* is something physical or material".³⁴ This statement cannot fully apply to Busia because he holds that *sunsum* is spiritual, not physical or material. He notes, "A child receives two spiritual gifts, a *sunsum* and a *kra*".³⁵ He implies therefore that the *sunsum* is spiritual, but it can perish. This means that Busia is right about the spirituality of *sunsum* but only wrong about its mortality. I therefore do not support Gyekye's argument fully.

³² This does not mean that an Akan thinker cannot hold that *sunsum* is never derived at all from the Supreme Being but is derived just from the father. For example, Sarpong traces *sunsum* to the father and rather traces only *akra* (which he translates as soul) to the Supreme Being – (Sarpong, *Ghana*, 37). Wiredu however translates *akra* not as soul but as a life bearing quasi-physical entity - Wiredu, "The Akan Concept," 121.

³³ Gyekye, *Essay*, 91.

³⁴ Gyekye, *Essay*, 89.

³⁵ Busia, "The Ashanti," 197.

Gyekye on the Views of the Philosophers: Danquah and Wiredu

Danquah does not only consider *sunsum* to be that which provides an individual's personality,³⁶ but also suggests that it (*sunsum*) has material properties unlike the *ɔkra* (soul).³⁷ Danquah attempts to strengthen his argument for the materiality of *sunsum* by claiming also that *sunsum* is that part of the human being that undergoes "conscious experience."³⁸ Gyekye correctly rejects this claim with the analogy that "a purely material thing, such as wood or a dead body, cannot experience anything."³⁹ And for the same reason that I accepted Gyekye's criticism of Busia's claim above that *sunsum* "perishes with the man," I think that Gyekye is right in denying Danquah's assertion that *sunsum* has material properties.⁴⁰

Wiredu also supports the view that the *sunsum* is not spiritual. He observes that the *sunsum* "is believed by the Akans to perish at death whereas spiritual beings are supposed to be immortal by nature."⁴¹ It is noteworthy that Wiredu's position that the *sunsum* perishes at death is not based on any evidence from the Akan language or practice which he, as a native Akan, has observed. He mentions Busia as the source of that belief. But Busia himself does not support his claim with any evidence (in terms of Akan language or practice). He merely states it. Therefore, the view that the *sunsum* perishes at death is not an argued position. In any case, I have (in agreement with Gyekye) rejected this view.

Wiredu's perspectives on the functions and the relationship between the *ntorɔ* and *sunsum* are also worthy of philosophical attention. According to him, the *ntorɔ* 'is that which is responsible for the cast of his [that is, an individual's] personality' and is acquired from the father,⁴² while *sunsum* is "that which is responsible for the total effect

³⁶ Danquah, *Akan*, 67.

³⁷ Danquah, *Akan*, 115-116. He writes *ɔkra* as *okara*.

³⁸ Danquah, *Akan*, 112.

³⁹ Gyekye, *Essay*, 91.

⁴⁰ Gyekye, *Essay*, 89-91.

⁴¹ Wiredu, "The Akan Concept," 121.

⁴² Wiredu, "The Akan Concept," 119; my square brackets. This is an adaptation of Busia's analysis of the account given by his (Busia's) informant. The informant first states: *sunsum*, transmitted by the father, is 'the personal power, or cast of countenance, or personality of man'.

communicated by an individual's personality."⁴³ It is difficult not to see the dovetailing of the two definitions into each other; "personality" being the unifier. Wiredu implies here that *ntorɔ* casts personality but *sunsum* brings it into effect. This is particularly so if one also takes into account Wiredu's earlier statement that *sunsum* is, "that which gives a person's personality its force."⁴⁴ In terms of general outlook, Wiredu's treatment of *ntorɔ* and *sunsum* is similar to Busia's since Busia has also technically sought to merge the two concepts. This shows Wiredu's indebtedness to Busia as he further taps into Busia's ideas in support of his treatment of the concepts: "According to some accounts, there is a close relation between 'sunsum' and 'ntorɔ'. (Thus, Busia says 'A man's *sunsum* is a child of his *ntorɔ*')."⁴⁵

I make two observations about Wiredu: first, his claim that the *ntorɔ* derives from the father cannot literally be attributed to Busia without qualification. For I have explained above that, the latter meant the father was just the immediate transmitter of *ntorɔ* when he stated that it is derived from the father. However, it is quite possible that given Wiredu's dependence on Busia for the development of his (Wiredu's) argument, he understands the father factor in the Busian sense, yet there is no explicit evidence in his work that shows he does. Secondly, Wiredu does not only mention *ntorɔ* and *mogya* (blood [believed to be inherited from the mother]), but he maintains, most importantly, that these are probably related to genetics – unlike *nipadua* (body), *okra* and *sunsum*.⁴⁶ In this sense, he comes closer to Gyekye, despite

Although, the informant uses the word 'sunsum', Busia follows this sentence up with what appears to be a correction: "But most often the Ashanti will say that a man transmits his *Ntorɔ* (spirit) to his child" (Busia, "The Ashanti," 197). By suggesting that *ntorɔ* could replace *sunsum* here, Busia allows some role in the formation of personality to *ntorɔ*; and this is exactly what Wiredu appears to have adapted in the development of his position. This interpretation of *ntorɔ* is, nonetheless, rejected by Gyekye as discussed above.

⁴³ Wiredu, "The Akan Concept," 120.

⁴⁴ Wiredu, "The Akan Concept," 119.

⁴⁵ Wiredu, "The Akan Concept," 119.

⁴⁶ Wiredu, "The Akan Concept," 119. Gyekye understands *mogya* to be a "genetic factor" as well – Gyekye, *Essay*, 94.

the fact that the two of them do not necessarily share the same views on what *okra* and *sunsum* mean.⁴⁷

The Problem with Gyekye's Conception of 'Sunsum'

The inaccuracies or shortcomings in Gyekye's arguments which I have identified and discussed above are those that relate to how he has interpreted and critiqued other scholars – especially Busia. What I seek to do in this section is to discuss the major problem which I find in his own exposition of the Akan concept of *sunsum* which is partly built – as one would expect – on the way he understands authors whom he has criticized. The problem results from the way he conceives of the relation between the *sunsum* and *ntorɔ*.

Having admitted, like all the other authors, that the *sunsum* of an individual is the basis of his or her personality, Gyekye nonetheless faces a great challenge of showing clearly the source or cause of personality traits in the individual. Gyekye identifies *sunsum* as an entity in the human being that can function on its own. According to him, an individual acquires his or her character or personality only through *sunsum* – an entity which he also regards as spiritual.⁴⁸ He, then, advances that personality traits or “qualities” such as “courage, jealousy, gentleness, forcefulness, and dignity” are “spiritual” just like the nature of *sunsum*.⁴⁹ However, since he claims that these qualities come from the *sunsum* which in turn is given by the Supreme Being, a gentle individual (for example) would trace his or her gentleness to a God-given *sunsum*, but not, on Gyekye's own presentation, to a father-given *ntorɔ*. Gyekye explains that *ntorɔ* is/are genetic feature(s) thus, *ntorɔ* would be “the basis of inherited characteristics and may therefore be translated as ‘sperm-transmitted characteristics’, even though spiritual as well as physiological qualities are attributed to it.”⁵⁰

Gyekye, however, does not pay much attention to the meaning he gives to *ntorɔ* in the preceding paragraph, and this is exactly the origin

⁴⁷ For instance, Gyekye does not regard *okra* as a quasi-physical entity, contrary to the position of Wiredu which I have stated above. Gyekye regards it as metaphysical (Gyekye, *Essay*, 85).

⁴⁸ Gyekye, *Essay*, 90.

⁴⁹ Gyekye, *Essay*, 90.

⁵⁰ Gyekye, *Essay*, 94.

of the problem he faces. He does not, for instance, tell what the physiological and spiritual qualities attributed to the *ntorɔ* are, except to assert that the “introduction of inherited characteristics into the constitution of a person” makes the Akan concept of a person “complex.”⁵¹ In the absence of specification, then, it is difficult to tell whether or not Gyekye would agree that “inherited characteristics”, for any individual, might include gentleness, courage and forcefulness which he conceives as personality (traits) and has attributed to the *sunsum*. But it seems that these qualities might indeed be inherited. The question then is, what really accounts for the personality of the individual? Is it *sunsum* or *ntorɔ*, or both? Are there some qualities or personality traits that are obtained from the *sunsum* but not from *ntorɔ*? Does the reverse hold? Gyekye does not provide his reader with any clear responses to these questions. Therefore, he would find it difficult to tell what, in Akan philosophy, would be the source of any trait at any point in time.

The question of the possibility of genetic influence on human personality needs to be taken more seriously, especially now that it appears to have gone beyond possibility to the level of scientific fact. For example, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics has established that: “In view of existing evidence from studies of monozygotic (MZ) twins,” using genetic influence to predict behavioural traits “might be able to account for” up to 50% of the variance of those traits.⁵² The Council however cautions against the use of just one gene as a causal explanation for a specific trait, since a gene “will normally interact with many other genes and with many non-genetic factors” in accounting for behavior. It (the Council) also emphasizes that “the proteins that genes make and the way these affect our bodies and brains will be one part of an explanation of human behavior.”⁵³

Similarly, after Thomas Bouchard Jr. conducted a research on the effects of genes on personality traits among some twins in affluent Western societies, he concluded that “Genetic influence is in the range

⁵¹ Gyekye, *Essay*, 94.

⁵² Nuffield Council on Bioethics, *Genetics and Behaviour: The Ethical Context* (London: Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2002), 36.

⁵³ Nuffield, *Genetics*, 36.

of 40 to 50%, and heritability is approximately the same for different traits".⁵⁴ He also suggested that genes indeed do influence personality traits, and that "molecular mechanisms" do shape behavior.⁵⁵ Given these research findings, Gyekye needed to have accounted thoroughly for both *ntorɔ* and *sunsum*. This notwithstanding, *sunsum* is by no means an easy concept. It is clothed with technicalities and woven into several difficult concepts, one of which is *ntorɔ*. This observation is also made by Gyekye: "I must admit [that] the real nature of the *sunsum* presents perhaps the greatest difficulty in the Akan metaphysics of a person and has been a source of confusion for many."⁵⁶ He sets out to solve this difficulty – suggesting also that the difficulty "is not insoluble."⁵⁷ But as I have already shown, he has not been very successful in doing so.

Conclusion

Kwame Gyekye is renowned for producing original ideas in African philosophy, especially from within the Akan or Ghanaian context. His ideas on the Akan concept of the human being do not only challenge the views of previous thinkers but also offer great insights for anyone seeking a deeper knowledge of Akan thought. It is in this light that he examines the concept of *sunsum*. In Akan thought, *sunsum* is one of the entities that the human person is composed of. He accepts the accounts given by Busia, Danquah and Wiredu that the *sunsum* is personality or determines an individual's personality.

However, his arguments against these scholars, especially Busia, have sometimes been inaccurate. For instance, while his rejection of the mortality of *sunsum* is correct, I have shown that his attribution of the idea of the materiality of *sunsum* to Busia is incorrect. I have also

⁵⁴ Thomas J. Bouchard, "Genetic Influence on Human Psychological Traits," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 13, no. 4 (2004), 149.

⁵⁵ Bouchard, *Genetic Influence*, 151. He cites M. Ridley, *Nature via Nurture: Genes, Experience and what makes us Human* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003) and G. Marcus, *The Birth of the Mind: How a Tiny Number of Genes Creates the Complexities of Human Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2004). I reckon that his studies took place in the West, but it is only a matter of time before similar findings are made on Africans, if they are not already being made.

⁵⁶ Gyekye, *Essay*, 89.

⁵⁷ Gyekye, *Essay*, 89.

Hasskei M. Majeed

argued that his interpretations of the related concepts of *ntoro* and *sunsum* are unclear, and as a result, his position on the general debate on *sunsum* is cast into the sphere of insoluble difficulties. Given the importance in recent scientific studies of genetic influences on human personality, it becomes more pertinent that the difficulties in Gyekye's thesis be pointed out in an effort to understand how, from the indigenous perspective, Akan thinkers construe what is now referred to by Wiredu as "rudimentary genetics" and human personality.

Dr. Hasskei M. Majeed

Department of Philosophy and Classics,
University of Ghana, Legon
(mmajeed50@yahoo.com)