

WHAT DID CAPTAIN ROBERT SUTHERLAND RATTRAY SAY ABOUT THE AKAN CONCEPT OF SUNSUM?

Clifford Owusu-Gyamfi

Abstract: The Akan people of West Africa have the general belief that the world is powered and interpenetrated by an invisible force or 'energy' called sunsum. Many scholars who study the concept of sunsum consider it the basis of Akan pneumatology. One of the foremost scholars who studied the concept in the early twentieth century was Robert Sutherland Rattray, a Scottish who worked in Ghana (then Gold Coast) as a colonial official and anthropologist. Rattray remains one of the most detailed researchers of Akan religion and culture. This article reviews Rattray's ethnographical definition of sunsum while it pays keen attention to how he characterized it. In the end, the purpose is to present the best possible perspective of his characterization of the sunsum and how such characterization has contributed to Akan literature and ideas.

Key Words: Anthropology; Asantes; Captain Rattray; Sunsum; Spirit.

Introduction

Robert Sutherland Rattray, popularly known as captain Rattray (1881–1938), is an important figure in Akan anthropology, and his name is almost synonymous with the discipline.¹ His research focused on the customs and folklore of West Africans, specifically the Asante cultural group of the Akan in Ghana. Rattray's contribution to scholarship is mostly related to the Asantes. As an anthropologist, he embarked on a wide range of studies in Asante social organization and

¹ Akan is an ethnic group comprising of several unique cultural groups whose current settlements are in the tropical areas of Ghana and the southeast of Cote d'Ivoire. In both Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, the Akan constitute the majority with an average population of more than twenty million citizens. The term 'Akan' is both singular and plural. The term expresses any person or group of persons or cultural groups that belong to one larger ethnic group called Akan. The Chokosi's of Togo are identified as Akan according to Louise Muller, *Religion and Chieftaincy in Ghana: An Explanation of the Persistence of a Traditional Political Institution in West Africa* (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2013), 246. Some prominent Akan figures in modern history include Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), the first prime minister of Ghana and father of African Nationalism, Kofi Annan (1938-2018), the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations between January 1997 and December 2006, and Nana Addo Danquah Akuffo-Addo (1944 to present), the current president of the Republic of Ghana since 2016.

law, art, and religion.² This article focuses on Rattray's pneumatological conception of the Akan people of West Africa, specifically among the Asantes of Ghana.

According to the Akan, the human being possesses immaterial, material, and social biogenetics, namely: *ɔkra* ('life-force'); *sunsum* ('spirit'); *mogya* ('blood'); *ntorɔ* ('fatherhood'); and *nipadua* ('body'). *ɔkra* and *sunsum* are immaterial by nature while *mogya* and *ntorɔ* are social biogenetics responsible for the social affiliation of the child. The *nipadua* ('body') is only a physical material and the subject of perceptible experience of the whole human being.³ We can say the *nipadua* is that part of the human being that can be felt by physical touch. The *ɔkra* is the life principle, the innermost self, the essence of the person, and the embodiment and transmitter of the individual's destiny (*nkrabea*). It is the spark of the Supreme Being, the divine essence and having an antemundane existence with God.⁴ The *ntorɔ* (symbolically 'fatherhood') is character resemblance. It is a genetic component emitted from the father during sexual intercourse as semen. *Mogya* ('blood') is from the mother and is symbolically the *abusua* (matrilineal family). The last to mention is quite ambivalent and multivalent in conception, and the central focus of this paper is the *sunsum*.

It is generally held that *sunsum* is an immaterial substance that is responsible for personality, interacts and operates on various aspects of a person's whole life, but is not limited to the social, emotional, mental, and spiritual faculties. In fact, *sunsum* involves the qualities peculiar to one's individuality, especially moral and ethical qualities.

Scholars studying Akan religion and culture have tried to construct and reconstruct the notion of the *sunsum*, particularly its ontological character, as to whether it is supposed to be a spirit or a vital force. Rattray is a key figure in the definition of *sunsum* and its significance to Akan religion, culture, and spirituality.

² "Captain R. S. Rattray, C.B.E." *Nature* 141 (May, 1938), 904. <https://doi.org/10.1038/141904a0>

³ Clifford Owusu-Gyamfi, "Onipa: The Human Being and the Being of Human Among the Akan people of West Africa. Towards an African Theological Anthropology," *Trinity Postgraduate Review Journal* 18, no. 1 (2019), 6.

⁴ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 85.

Robert Sutherland Rattray

Rattray was born in 1881 to Scottish parents in India where his father, Arthur Rattray, worked in the Indian Civil Service. He received his education from Stirling High School and Exeter College, Oxford, where he earned a diploma in anthropology as well as his doctorate (D.Sc.). He served the English colonial administration in different capacities. Before joining the Gold Coast colony in 1907, Rattray served as a trooper in the Boer War in South Africa and received the Queen's medal with five clasps.⁵ Between 1902 and 1907 he was on the staff of the African Lakes Corporation in British Central Africa. From here, he published *Some Folk-lore Stories and Songs in Chinyanja with English Translation and Notes* (1907) which contains a collection of Chinyanja folklore and customs of Central Africa. Upon arrival on the Gold Coast in 1907, he served in the Customs Service. Later, he was transferred to the administrative department and became an Assistant District Commissioner in 1911, a District Commissioner in 1915, and acting Senior Assistant Colonial Secretary and Clerk to the Legislative Council in 1920.⁶ As a government official, his task was to report colonial activities in the Gold Coast – specifically the customs of the Asante.

The first anthropological department in Ghana was set up in the Asante region as part of the colonial exploration of practical administration among the indigenes of their colonies. The initial plan came from Charles Henry Harper, the then Civil Commissioner of Asante, and was later set up by the Governor, Sir Frederick D. Guggisberg in 1921.⁷ It was required of British officials serving the colonial administration to acquaint themselves with the customs and languages of the indigenes of the colony to effectively manage the relationship between the administration and indigenes. Regardless of its positive impact on Akan studies today, the newly created Anthropology Department served the colonial interest. It was more of an academic policy of the colonial administration than for the Akan people.

⁵ Gyekye, *The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 928.

⁶ E. W. S. "Robert Sutherland Rattray: 1881-14th May, 1938." *Man* 38 (July, 1938), 108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2792895>.

⁷ Ivor Wilks, "Asante Nationhood and Colonial Administrators 1896-1935," in *Ethnicity in Ghana: The Limits of Invention*, ed. Carola Lentz and Paul Nugent (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 82.

Rattray became the first head of the department, and whatever he thought of this newly created department – concerning preparing the Asante for self-governance or preserving their customary integrity – it did not change its colonial agenda. This placed him at a more significant advantage, or responsibility, to begin a scientific inquiry into anthropological research within the Asante territories. As Rattray himself observed, he had a choice of two methodological approaches. The first, which he found nonproductive, was to make the Department the centre of independent research where each research would be reviewed, examined and classified. However, he feared such an approach would create a greater collection of materials that may fail to receive proper scrutiny. The second approach was for him to take the work of research upon himself to investigate the beliefs and customs of the Asantes, which he did, producing a trilogy on Asante customs, arts, religion, laws, and constitution. The volumes became useful resources for all colonial officials and helped bring together the colonial administration in harmony with the Asantes.

How did Rattray gather information? How accurate was his knowledge of the Asantes? Rattray considered the Asante territory to be an area he had earlier termed as *terra incognita* to the Europeans.⁸ He felt this area was free from the contamination of European customs.⁹ As a consequence, he saw a world of anthropological opportunities that could provide an epistemological legacy to successive generations. Rattray describes how he sought information:

It must be remembered that in Ashanti really valuable anthropological information is possessed by comparatively few of its inhabitants. Those who have accurate knowledge are the older men and women who have few dealings with the foreigner, live secluded lives in remote villages, and are ignorant of or indifferent to the social and religious changes brought about by the Europeans.¹⁰

Rattray's discussants were the grey-headed Asantes. Why? There are details to be given here which will facilitate rationalization of the relationship between old age and knowledge or wisdom among the

⁸ Robert S. Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs: The Primitive Ethics of a Savage People* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1915), 9.

⁹ Robert S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 5-6.

¹⁰ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 7.

Akan. These details will bring to light the perception of ageing among the Akan and how that perception is construed in Akan societies.

There is a growing feeling of ageism among many world societies – even in Ghana and beyond.¹¹ Many aged persons live under the fear of rejection and diverse stereotyping. Among the Akan, ageing engenders positive feelings and it is a period of leadership and political power.¹² Even in today's complex societies, old age continues to hold high social standards in Akan societies. It is often associated with gerontocracy, a society governed by elders.

Traditionally, the Akan conception of knowledge is informal and closely related to the elders. *Nana* or *ɔpayin* ('elder') are Akan terms for the aged and both express a degree of honour. The English term 'old age' may not have a direct bearing on what the majority of Akan people consider as aged since the English term 'old,' may somehow suggest expiring. *Nana* is a fundamental term that captures the ideology of respect, especially in the Akan conception of God and ancestors. God is often assigned the title *Nana* 'Nyankopɔn, meaning the 'Great Ancestor' or 'The Ancient of Days.' He is all-powerful and all-knowing.

The same title is accorded to the ancestors (*Nananom*). Ancestors are a body of spiritual entities who were once among the living but are dead, and their spirits continue to live in the spiritual world. Because the Akan consider life as linear, meaning a journey, age and death are a journey towards perfection. Ancestors have attained spirituality to possess great power with which they can assist the living. Ancestors can provide visions and protect and respond when the living summon

¹¹ Ageism is a word associated with prejudicing attitude towards people because of their advanced age. In many parts of the world, the term "old age" may carry "negative connotations of 'decrepit', 'decaying', 'worn out' and 'senile'" (Sjaak Van der Geest, "From Wisdom to Witchcraft: Ambivalence towards Old Age in Rural Ghana," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 72, no. 3 [2002], 438). Ageism has risen to become a culturally embedded attitude among several African societies today. In Ghana, for instance, accusations of witchcraft are linked to old age, and this advertently causes panic among the growing youth for fear of being killed or meeting with misfortunes in life. Material wealth, childbirth, good health, and manifold prosperous dimensions of life are said to be the targets of witchcraft. Consequently, being accused of practicing witchcraft is a crime. Witchcraft accusations are commonly the new form of ageism in Africa and several old people have to face death or mutilation as a result. Traditionally, old age was never an indication of witchcraft among the Akan. Witchcraft-ageism is a modern phenomenon and distortion of social customs. Further information about ageism among Akan people is found in the research work of Van der Geest.

¹² Van der Geest, "From Wisdom to Witchcraft," 438.

them. In Akan societies, it is the *Nana* (aged) with excellent social values who is revered as an ancestor. During the pouring of libation, the ancestors who form this band of spiritual elites are invoked and their presence is duly recognized as such. For that reason, old age is considered a moment or stage in life where people reach their full potential to act in that respect as ancestors or guardians since they have now acquired wisdom and experience and can guide and protect the young to success.¹³

Akan people further believe age comes with experience and knowledge. The more one advances in years, the more knowledge, experience, and power the person acquires. This is a clear indication of why the power of performance is identified with gerontocracy in most Akan societies. For example, elders or older people who offer counselling relating to matters of kingship surround every king. Hence it is said, *Ohene a w'antie ne mpanyinfoɔ asem no na ɔwe takraboa ɔnni ti*, literally, “A king who refuses to heed to advice from his elders eats a bird without a head.” A bird without a head may somehow be a taboo bird supposed not to be eaten. Another maxim states, *Wo nni panyin wɔ wo fie a, due*, literally, “Woe to you if you do not have an elderly person in your house.” The maxim describes the role of elderly persons in guiding the affairs of the next generation.

A popular Akan adage exhorts, *Yen kɔ bisa aberewa*, meaning, “Let us consult the old woman.” The proverbial saying is applied when a group of elders overseeing a case withdraws into seclusion to render the final verdict on a matter.¹⁴ *Abrewa* is a symbol of progeny among the Akan people. This maxim stems from popular Akan folklore in which an old woman exhibited extraordinary wisdom that eventually repented the heart of a vicious king. For her reward, the king built a house for her, and whenever the elders found it hard to judge a case,

¹³ Van der Geest, “From Wisdom to Witchcraft,” 438.

¹⁴ An informant explained this thus: “This expression is used when the elders pronounce judgement over a case. The *ɔkyeame*, and a few important personalities who are trying the case, retire after the expression has been pronounced. They go to a secret, quiet place and decide what the judgement should be. After the decision, they come back and the group’s spokesman pronounces the judgement thus: *Wie mpanyinfoɔ, yesoree se ye rekobisa aberewa. Yekɔee no na aberewa te awia mu reto awia*. ‘Well, elders, we retired to consult the old lady. When we went, the old lady was sunning herself.’ If it is evening, they will say, *Yekɔee no na aberewa renom n’abua, bo, bo, bo*. ‘When we went, the old lady was smoking her pipe – bo, bo, bo [the sound of her smoking]. When we related the case to her she said we did well to come and seek her advice. She listened and explained to us that if we hadn’t consulted her we would have passed a wrong judgment” (Van der Geest, “From Wisdom to Witchcraft,” 442; Twi corrected).

they would consult her for advice. Hence, the expression “Let us consult the old woman” came into use.¹⁵ All of this presupposes the importance of the elderly in Akan societies even though gerontocracy was not always connected with old age.

Now coming back to Captain Rattray, we have no difficulty concluding why he resolved to consult the elderly for information. If Rattray’s work were to bear any credibility at all, it would be because of its direct reliance on his aged informants who were considered as people of great authority and honour in Akan societies, and not just abandoned, stereotyped, and a class of good-for-nothing persons suffering from societal seclusion. His interlocutors helped him to produce the following books for the Anthropology Department: *Ashanti* (1923, 1955), *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (1927, 1957), and *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (1929, 1956).¹⁶

In the *Ashanti*, Rattray set out the social ontology of the Asantes by taking stock of the social stratification system from the *ntorɔ* exogamy, festivals and ceremonies, and belief systems. His initial assignment was to investigate the legal and political life of the Asantes. However, he felt a proper understanding of the social organization would serve as a source of reference and background to future research in Asante politics.¹⁷ Hence, he focused on the non-political, non-legal aspects of the Asantes.¹⁸ A further systematic inquiry led to the publication of *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (1927) which Rattray claimed was a continuation of the former. In this book, Rattray provided an ethnographic sketch of the Asante religion by taking stock of the notion of God, pantheon deities (*Abosom*), and how religion pervades in the daily life of the Asantes. Rattray’s final legacy to the Asante Anthropology Department was *Ashanti Law and Constitution*.

¹⁵ For an account of this folklore, see Van der Geest, “From Wisdom to Witchcraft,” 442.

¹⁶ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955); R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957); R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956). Other books by Rattray are: *Some Folk-lore Stories and Songs in Chinyanja with English Translation* (1907), *Hausa Folk-lore, Customs, Proverbs, etc.* (2 vols.; 1913), *Ashanti Proverbs, Translated from the Original with Grammatical and Anthropological Notes* (1916), *An Elementary Male Grammar, with a Vocabulary* (1918), *A Short Manual of the Gold Coast (British Empire Exposition)* (1924), *Akan-Ashanti Folk-tales (Text and Translation)* (1930), *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* (2 vols.) (1932), *The Leopard Priestess* (1934).

¹⁷ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 7.

¹⁸ Melville J. Herskovits, “Robert Sutherland Rattray,” *American Anthropologist* 41 (1939), 130.

This book was his initial assignment, but for the reasons given above, it became the last to be published. The book outlines the legal and political structure of the Asantes.

With this extraordinary ethnographical inquiry, Rattray became the foremost European specialist on Asante socio-religious culture. His magnanimous contribution to Akan studies has distinguished him as an outstanding anthropologist and authority on the native people of West Africa. Although his research works focused primarily on the Asantes of the Akan people, he extended the study among the geographical affiliations to the Asante territories of the hinterlands. The result led to the production of two volumes on the tribes of the Asante hinterlands in 1932. In 1933, he received the Rivers Memorial Medal from the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland for his contribution to the field of anthropology in the then Gold Coast (West Africa).

Captain Rattray possessed high linguistic intelligence, had a humble personal demeanour and approached his discussants with the spirit of a seeker of truths.¹⁹ As head of the newly established Anthropology Department, Rattray emerged as a positive influence and one with great importance to both the British and the Asante. His roles as a scholar and colonial official came out of the British need to facilitate colonialism. As an anthropologist, Rattray's work stood at the heart of the colonial administration where anthropology became an imperial device to establish British conquest in Ghana. However, the necessity of anthropological studies was primarily informed by the advancement of British interests and partly by the academic progress of the Asante. Rattray, therefore, became an instrument for extending British imperialism. His academic status in the colonial administration, coupled with great access to power (among colonial administrators and traditional rulers), made him successful in all aspects of his career in the colony. It is also noted that the range of his interest in research was unlimited as he could travel far and across the dense Asante forest with his car.

Having said all this, there is no direct intent to exonerate Rattray from any form of criticism. Several criticisms have been levelled against Rattray, from the point of view of the historical background to the

¹⁹ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 11.

assessment of his accuracy on the information. Although we have pointed out how old age plays a role in oral knowledge in Akan, it does not, however, become a yardstick for accuracy. Tom McCaskie is an expert in Asante history, and his appraisal of Rattray's ethnography is a valuable source for studying the shortcomings of Rattray.²⁰ Nonetheless, for the sake of this present article, we shall defer the criticism of Rattray's major works since his construction of the *sunsum* comes with many criticisms.

Generally, Rattray's work has had inevitable positive consequences on scholars – both past and present – studying Akan religion and culture. Besides his academic influence, Rattray set out a contextual framework upon which critical retrospection and constructive investigation of Akan realities permit interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scholarship. Rattray retired in 1930 and died on May 14, 1938, while gliding as a pilot at Farmoor, near Oxford at the age of fifty-six years.

Rattray's Conception and Definition of *Sunsum*

Rattray's introduction to the *sunsum* concept appears in his trilogy on Asante customs, religion, and laws. Before these publications, the term was completely absent in his earlier translation and commentary on the *Ashanti Proverbs*, compiled by Johann Gottlieb Christaller in 1879. Two possible reasons can be given for this. First, Christaller did not use the term in the *Ashanti Proverbs* because *sunsum* is a rare term in Akan proverbs. Second, Rattray might not have been introduced to the term then, and even if he had had any knowledge about it at all, he might have preferred a substitutionary word instead.

There is enough reason to suggest that Rattray may not have had enough knowledge then about the *sunsum*. I will point out one instance in the *Ashanti Proverbs*. When speaking of the construction of Asante religion and how the traditional priest encountered the *Obosom* ('pantheon deity'), Rattray writes: "If you ask what the 'it' is he captured, he cannot tell, but will probably say vaguely '*Onyankopon tumi*', or '*honhom*', that is, 'the power, spirit, or *mana*'

²⁰ See Tom C. McCaskie, "R.S. Rattray and the Construction of Asante History: An Appraisal," *History in Africa* 10 (1983), 187-206.

of Onyankopon.”²¹ Here in the *Ashanti Proverbs*, he uses *mana* four times to translate an impersonal power emanating from God, all linked to the essence of the *Abosom* (pantheon deities) whose nature is thought of as part of the power ascribed to God.²² As to whether the terms he used were right or not, Rattray’s use of *honhom* and *tumi*, herein for the *Abosom*, concerning the emanating force from ‘Nyan-kopon establishes the first fact that Rattray never used the term *sunsum* to essentially denote God. It appears the identification of *sunsum* with God is completely absent in his writings as we shall soon see.

Now, let us turn our focus to Rattray’s trilogy, *Ashanti* (1923), *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (1927), and *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (1929), where we encounter his ideas about the Akan *sunsum*.

The General Definition of Sunsum by Rattray

The pneumatic character of the *sunsum* first appeared in *Ashanti*, published eight years later after *Ashanti Proverbs*. In this book, Rattray translated *sunsum* into English as “spirit,” leading to a suspicion of a pneumatic character. Rattray defines *sunsum* as

...that *spiritual element* in a man or woman upon which depends – not life, i.e. breath, for that is the *okra* or ‘*kra* – but that force, personal magnetism, character, personality, power, soul, call it what you will, upon which depend health, wealth, worldly power, success in any venture, in fact, everything that makes life at all worth living.²³

The definition by Rattray admittedly presents a wider scope of meaning that is multivalent and dynamic. We can only understand it when further analysis is conducted within the larger context of his literature. Therefore, we shall focus on key conceptions in his definition.

Sunsum as ‘Spiritual Element’

Sunsum as a ‘spiritual element’ in Akan worldview is a description of all objects that are conceived and perceived as physically nonconceptual. When Rattray used the term in connection with a human being, what did he mean? Is *sunsum* an astral component or a mysterious

²¹ Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs*, 22.

²² Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs*, 22, 30, 32.

²³ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 46. My emphasis.

force? What is its origin? Rattray gives little information, but what is clear is that he brings out the dimension of a pneumatic character of the *sunsum* leading to the translation of it as ‘spirit.’

We will not be quick here to think that there is a purported assertion by Rattray to characterize the *sunsum* as an entity – even if that is the case, there are few indications of that thesis. Rattray suggested somewhere that the tutelary deity called *Bosomtwe* is the child of the great Asante tutelary god *Ta Kora* of whom one of his informants, a priest to be precise, was introduced during a ritual at *Bosomtwe* as *Sunsum kɛsɛɛ a ɔwɔ baabi ara*.²⁴ Rattray translated the statement in English as “great spirit which is everywhere.”²⁵ In as much as such an idea of omnipresence may underline the statement, which is true based on the invocation of *Ta Kora* in the ritual, what the priest meant to say was “*Ta Kora*, the great god (*Bosomkɛsɛɛ*) who is everywhere.”²⁶ Rattray had already used the expression “great god” to designate the same deity.²⁷ Akan pantheon deities (*Abosom*) are considered *sunsum* in the sense of their mysterious essence or nature.²⁸

A similar scenario is described by Rattray that purportedly characterizes *sunsum* as an intermediary spirit. At Tafo, near Kumasi, Rattray tells the story of an altar of *Nyame Dua* (‘God’s tree’) that was located on the bank of the river Santan.²⁹ Upon inquiry, the chief told him the altar was erected on behalf of one of his wives who was barren; after

²⁴ Lake *Bosomtwe* is the largest natural lake in Africa, situated approximately 30km South-East from Kumasi in the Asante region. Scientifically, the lake was created by a chondrite meteorite. Legend says, according to an informant of Rattray, that “Lake *Bosomtwe* did not always lie in its present locality but was situated near the *Bosomtwe* Rock in Northern Ashanti.” Rattray “was taken and shown a large natural depression, now perfectly dry and covered with trees and vegetation, which the local people say was in ancient times the site of this lake, but owing to it not being able to get on with ‘his brother’ Tano it departed from here and went and made its home where it is now found” (Rattray, *Ashanti*, 195).

²⁵ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 195-196.

²⁶ In Akan thought ‘*ɔwɔ baabi ara*’, in reference to lesser divinities, refers to most or many places. Akan people do not attribute omnipresence to lesser divinities. They are regarded as creatures of God and limited in their activities.

²⁷ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 102, 117, 157, 175.

²⁸ See, Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Personality and Spirituality: The Role of Abosom and Human Essence* (Lanham, MD: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2016).

²⁹ Tafo is a sub-region of the Kumasi Metropolitan District area in the Asante region. It was a village during the time of Rattray’s research and was notable for its crafts in pottery. There is a belief that the first potter came from Tafo. Her name was Osra Abogyo and legend says she learnt the art from the eternal God called *Odomankoma* (Rattray, *Ashanti*, 301).

consulting a god, he was instructed “to set up the altar, so that the *sunsum* (spirit) of the river might intercede for him to *Nyame* (the Sky God).”³⁰ Every well-informed Akan knows the expression “*sunsum* (spirit) of the river” was in reference to the *Obosom* (god) of the river.³¹ When Rattray further asked whether the river had a *sunsum*, the chief replied, “not only had it a spirit (*sunsum*), but that the whole village of Taffo belonged to it and owed its origin to the river.”³² Unless *sunsum*, in this context, is in reference to an entity it cannot intercede for the chief or become a progenitor of the village. Rattray’s use of *sunsum* for the river gods in the two scenarios is exactly the conventional description of the *Abosom* by the Akan people. The nature of *Ta Kora* and the other deities is interpreted synonymously as *sunsum*. The attribution of ‘great’ and ‘everywhere’ to *Ta Kora* defines the essential quality of the deity as *sunsum*. Therefore, *sunsum* becomes an alternative term to describe the nature of the lesser deities.

Sunsum ‘in a Man or Woman’

Rattray grapples with an important dimension of the *sunsum*, i.e. its anthropological connection.³³ The definition given above by Rattray is anthropological. As already stated, Akan anthropology suggests that every human being possesses an immaterial substance called *sunsum*. The central idea here presents *sunsum* as a vital component of the human being. The human being is only a subject of its operational experience but the *sunsum* is never indispensable from the body. Rattray underlined this assertion with several experiences of the *sunsum* in the human being. A person’s *sunsum* can take sleep peregrination, and it can get knocked about by other *sunsum*, after whence the person may fall sick and die. For these reasons, Rattray identified the

³⁰ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 305.

³¹ Rivers, although they can be considered sacred, are not in essence spiritual as one can fetch water and drink, but rivers may host or possess a spiritual agent. This relationship between water and spirits can be confusing, but it seems clear to the Akan that rivers are quintessentially deities and once the river dries, it will suggest the deity is departed.

³² Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 305, 306. There is no trace of the Santan River today since Tafo is now populated with houses and lies in the center of the city. Urbanization in most parts of the country has affected the ecological integrity of river bodies and the Santan River may be a victim.

³³ The anthropological aspect of *sunsum* is mostly talked about because it occupies a central place in understanding the concept of a person.

sunsum with a volatility of the *ɔkra*. The *sunsum* is an advanced guard that protects a person.³⁴

Among the Akan, only males transmit the *sunsum*. Rattray supports this assertion with a popular saying among the Asantes that *Obaa nni sunsum*, literally, “A woman has no *sunsum*.” Further details given by Rattray imply that

...a woman has no real soul (of this kind) of her own; it is true, they say, that she has ‘a small kind’ of *sunsum* which her father gave to her, but for all practical purposes she is nevertheless soulless, because she cannot transmit any kind of *sunsum*, but only her blood.³⁵

Given the account by Rattray, the *sunsum* of a person cannot be said to be divine, neither is it feminine. It is exclusively a physiological and spiritual element coming from the father.

Sunsum as ‘Force’ and ‘Power’

The character of the *sunsum* appears in Rattray’s understanding as force and power. There is no equivalent word in the Akan Twi for ‘force’ other than *sunsum*.³⁶ Power may be rendered in Akan Twi as *tumi*, which is also equivalent to ‘authority.’ *Tumi* may capture the intrinsic power of the *sunsum*, but it is never synonymous with it. Therefore, Rattray’s use of “force” should be understood as an emanating power or mysterious aura, even though sometimes he will use ‘spirit’ to translate such notions. An informant recounted to him that in the event of a divorce, the children will always return to their father, without opposition from the mother or her clan because the mother is

³⁴ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 152; cf. Id., *Religion and Art*, 154.

³⁵ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 318. Ephirim-Donkor later expounded on this notion by taking it beyond the lesser deities to God as the supreme *Sunsum* who transmits His *sunsum* to activate the *mogya* (blood) of the female to become active, thus making conception possible. Hence, God becomes the progenitor or Father (*Agya*, meaning “Father”) of creation (Ephirim-Donkor, *African Personality*, 78). In theory, the all-encompassing nature of *sunsum* as divine never appeared in Rattray, neither did he give any clue of that except our own deductive reasoning of the Abosom whose essence is thought of as *sunsum* and are said to be children of God.

³⁶ The usage of “force” here is not the application of pressure on an object to cause motion or act which in the Akan language is “*ɔhyɛ*.”

afraid of the father's *sunsum* ('spirit').³⁷ Rattray elucidates the idea of the father's *sunsum* seizing the wife in the event of adultery: "If a man's wife is unfaithful, it is his '*kra* which will inform his *Obosom* (*ntorɔ*), which will then let his *sunsum* know, and this last will seize the woman so that she may become ill and die."³⁸ Does this notion make the *sunsum* a spiritual entity?

Rattray did not give further details beyond the statement. For all practical purposes, Rattray defined *ɔkra* as the life principle, *ntorɔ* as a physiological principle, and *sunsum* as a spiritual element. An exception is given here to the *ɔkra*, whose nature presupposes properties of an entity according to the majority of Akan people. Rattray describes the *ntorɔ* as "the male totemic spirit which every child, male or female, inherits from its father. Like all supernatural elements, it is powerful."³⁹ Most Akan will not say that the *ɔkra* is powerful; such a character belongs to the *sunsum*. For Rattray, the relationship between the *ntorɔ* and *sunsum* is mutual, and both are forces without too much differing character.⁴⁰ In the case of the saying discussed, logically it is the *Obosom* (*ntorɔ*) of the father that seizes the woman by its *sunsum* in the man. The *sunsum* remains the pervasive force that protects, acts, and experiences.

Further, Rattray talks about *sunsum* and witchcraft. Is the *sunsum* always protective? The answer lies in its moral character. Rattray says: "One's *sunsum* may be an *obayifo* (witch)."⁴¹ The mystical allusion here refers to the dynamic nature of the *sunsum* in becoming something else. The question as to how one's *sunsum* becomes a witch is enigmatic since witchcraft is not possession by a foreign spiritual agent as understood by the Akan but rather, it is the use of one's *sunsum* for such evil supernatural prowess. In fact, the *sunsum* is only an instrument and a power for achieving the ends of witchcraft.

³⁷ Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, 9. Rattray shortly nuanced this statement with a different meaning when instead of using the term *sunsum* used *nton* (totem) to speak of same statement (p. 11).

³⁸ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 154.

³⁹ Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, 8.

⁴⁰ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 154, 155.

⁴¹ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 155. Prior to and during the advent of the Europeans, witchcraft ranked as one of the anti-social crimes. In most cases the penalty was excommunication or the culprit "was smeared all over with palm oil and cast into a fire, or clubbed or strangled or drowned" (p. 313). Most Akan communities continue to eschew witchcraft and victims often have to face brutalities from perpetrators if a quick intervention by rescuers does not take place.

Witchcraft is a mysterious force and a power that can manifest its supernatural abilities all day long.⁴² This description adds to the popular assertion that witchcraft is a nocturnal peregrination.

An informant named Yao Adawua described to Captain Rattray how a witch was known: “The conclusive evidence that any person is a witch is, he said, the discovery of her *bayikukuo* (witchcraft pot).”⁴³ Witchcraft pots or cauldrons are mostly made of clay and may contain several amulets or ritual artefacts from whence the powers of the witch are derived. They are mostly kept out of reach, under a person’s bed, beneath the earth, or under a tree. The pot, just like a shrine, is transferable, making witchcraft inheritable.⁴⁴ In cases where the cauldron is discovered and destroyed, the person will lose the spell of witchcraft. This makes the connection between witchcraft and one’s *sunsum* accidental rather than ontological. Adawua further told Rattray of how “he could tell a witch practically at sight” and when Rattray asked how, “he replied he could ‘see red smoke coming out of their heads’.”⁴⁵ Adawua finally told Rattray about his ability to “cure people of being witches without having to kill them, provided that once he had treated them they did not resort again to their evil practices; if they did so, they would die.”⁴⁶ The power of witchcraft, according to Rattray, is a practice in relation to which a person’s *sunsum* becomes vulnerable to carrying out such evil activities.

Sunsum as ‘Personal Magnetism,’ ‘Character,’ ‘Personality’

A key feature of Rattray’s interpretation of the Akan *sunsum* is its operational force or determining principle for the experience. The *sunsum* is responsible for the moral and psychological qualities of an

⁴² It is unclear which spirits empower a witch. Our earlier discussion referred to *Sasabonsam* as the chief agent of evil and master of dwarfs and witches but there is no apparent evidence that witchcraft is a product of the power of *Sasabonsam*. Asare Opoku thinks the power of witchcraft stems from mysterious forces in the universe that manifest themselves as witchcraft, magic, and sorcery. Read further from Kofi A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra, Ghana: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 140-147. At one point, Rattray did mention *sunsum bone* (bad spirit), but it is not clear what he meant by that statement (Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, 213).

⁴³ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 30.

⁴⁴ That transfer has no boundaries like the *ntoro* and *sunsum*, of which only males are said to be transmitters.

⁴⁵ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 30.

⁴⁶ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 30.

individual. The human being is the subject of physicality and the projector of several psychosocial experiences. Rattray underlined this with specific descriptions such as ‘personal magnetism, ‘character,’ and ‘personality.’ These aspects of a human being in the Akan worldview are not interpreted in abstract terms; instead, they are the ontological wholeness of a human being and a person’s spiritual and social experience.

Personal magnetism is the power of attraction and influence that a person exerts in society with valuable results of goodwill. Rattray talks of degrees of *sunsum* as strong, weak and evil: *Me sunsum edu* (‘My *sunsum* is heavy’), *Me sunsum ye den* (‘My *sunsum* is strong’), *Me sunsum gyina m’akyi* (‘My *sunsum* stands at my back’).⁴⁷ In the same way, personality varies from one individual to another. Thus the *sunsum* remains a versatile force differing from one person to another. *Suban* ‘character,’ according to the Akan, is a spiritual phenomenon of both inner and outward dimensions.⁴⁸ The inner being is the real element, which is called *sunsum*, and the outward is the peripheral (*suban*). A person’s *sunsum* is the operational force for the formation of character and the art of being, which is personality. It is a person’s *sunsum* which interacts and operates on various aspects of personality and social interaction. The evil *sunsum* is the witch or wizard discussed above.

Sunsum as the ‘Soul’

Rattray gives us a conceptual dualism about the soul. In his *Religion and Arts in Ashanti*, Rattray suggested that *ɔkra* is best rendered by the word ‘soul,’ i.e. the soul of a man from God.⁴⁹ Then shortly afterwards he wrote: “‘In life the *’kra* is considered partly as the soul or spirit of a person (cf. *sunsum*, *honhom*), partly as a separate being,

⁴⁷ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 154. See also Rattray, *Ashanti*, 198. The evil *sunsum* is not only exclusive to human beings but also to trees (Rattray, *Ashanti*, 258).

⁴⁸ *Suban* is one of the closest words supposed to have derived from *sunsum* with the *su* (nature) being the prefix and short form of *sunsum*, while the *ban* means character. Hence, *suban* would mean the expression of a person’s *sunsum* in life. Ephirim-Donkor defines the *su* as the raw essence of the *Obosom* materialized in the corporeal world as a driven force in human beings. *Su* therefore corresponds with the intangible *sunsum* of the *Obosom* manifested as character and experience of physicality. Ephirim-Donkor emphasized that “the *Su* is raw essence and basis for all character traits and ethical principles...The *Su* develops into the *Suban* (essential character formation) when a child first develops awareness of itself as a child or *self*” (Ephirim-Donkor, *African Personality*, 89-92).

⁴⁹ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 153.

distinct from the person, who protects him.”⁵⁰ Having said this, he then purports to assert that the ‘*kra* and *sunsum* are both souls: “It is very difficult sometimes to distinguish between the ‘*kra* and the next kind of soul, the *sunsum*.”⁵¹ Rattray’s identification of the ‘*kra* as a divine soul, and *sunsum* as man’s soul, creates a dual polymorphism of the term ‘soul.’ In effect, a human being consists of a bipartite soul. Here, we see how the English term ‘soul’ can be played with to describe two separate Akan realities. This suggests that Rattray created confusable alternative use of the term ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ in reference to Akan spirituality. Rattray accepted his difficulty in finding the right word to define the concept when he wrote, “the *sunsum* is the soul, or power, or whatever we like to call it.”⁵² This linguistic ambiguity did not stem from what the Akan meant by *ɔkra* and *sunsum*, but rather from Rattray’s limitations in finding appropriate terms to characterize them. What Rattray does here with the *sunsum* is a description of *how* it operates but not *what* it is. How a thing expresses itself and what that thing is can vary.

Still on *sunsum* as the ‘soul,’ it is important to underline an aspect of Rattray’s understanding of *sunsum* as innate *anima* in creation: “In the animistic creed of Ashanti everything in nature, animate or inanimate, has its *sunsum* (soul or spirit), and the *osese* tree is no exception.”⁵³ The possession of *sunsum* by trees was the reason behind the interest in sacred arboricultural traditions among the Akan. Rattray did not pay much attention to the source of this innate power in creation. However, two propositions have emerged after him. First, there is the theory of pantheism, which suggests that the *sunsum* is the activating principle from God, a principle which is present in natural objects.⁵⁴ Pantheism presents the view that there is an unconscious divine presence that regulates matter to produce its natural and spiritual experiences. This theory is central in the pneumatic conception

⁵⁰ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 153. Cf. Christaller’s *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language*, 254-5.

⁵¹ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 154.

⁵² Rattray, *Ashanti*, 293.

⁵³ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 296. Reference to *sunsum* of trees can be found also in Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 3.

⁵⁴ See Joseph B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Cass, 1968), 67-69, 113; Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 73.

of the *sunsum*. The second is the proposal that the essence of the *Abosom* (tutelary deities) is water that permeates and interpenetrates through natural objects as water is fundamental to natural objects.⁵⁵ This may be the reason why sacrifices are performed to the *sunsum* of a natural object in the same manner as to a pantheon deity.⁵⁶ Further in this belief are the shrines of groves, rocks, caves, and mountains venerated as a residence of the lesser deities. The question of animation is a suprasensible presence of a supernatural deity which differs from the intrinsic vital consciousness found in natural objects. The offering of sacrifices to the *sunsum* of a tree agrees with sacrifices offered to a lesser deity, making this *sunsum* nothing but *sunsum* of the gods.

The Collective Sunsum 'Soul' of the Asantes

Besides the operation of the *sunsum* in the different dimensions of individual lives, Rattray discovered that the Asantes have a national stool which holds their souls together. The sacred stool, or *Sika Dwa Kofi* (Golden Stool), is said to contain the *sunsum* of the Asantes. It remains the most fascinating discovery of Captain Rattray. In his description, he saw the Golden Stool as exclusively religious and something that through hallowed custom and belief engendered the objective and consensual virtues of obedience, respect, and great loyalty,

⁵⁵ Ephirim-Donkor, *African Personality*, 54.

⁵⁶ Most of the rituals performed to the sacred trees follow such rituals performed to the deities. The protective *sunsum* of the trees are nothing but in loco the essence of the *Abosom*. Under the *osese* tree, Rattray records these ritual incantations: “‘*Osese gye 'kosua di, Aburokyire 'Hene 'ba a ɔreko awadee no, se ɛtena wo so a, ma no nkye, mma dade ntwa me.*” Translated, “*Osese* tree, accept this egg and eat, and when the child of the English King sits upon you let her have long life. May the knife not cut me.” (Rattray, *Ashanti*, 296) [*Twi text corrected by me*]. These offerings are not made as to ‘*Nyankopon* but to a lesser spirit. The ritual prayer follows a similar prayer of propitiation offered to Bosomtwe: “‘*Kwesi Bosomtwe, wadaworoma; wo se ne Ta Kora, sunsum kesse a ɔwo baabi ara, ɔno na ye fre no esono. Na Oboroni abe hwe nanim mu, na ɔse ɔrebe sene akɔhwe asuom', na wo Bosomtwe nso ɔntumi nsan wo ho nko, na me nso me ntumi mfa m'ani hunu me nhwe wo. Me kura me nsam kosua de rema wo. Me sre wo nkyere; me sre wo nkwa: me sre wo akwahosan; gye o!*” Translated, ‘Bosomtwe, (whose day of service is a Sunday), by your favour; your father is *Ta Kora*, that great spirit which is everywhere, it is he we call elephant. The white man has come and looked upon his face, and he tells you he is passing to go and look upon the water (the Tano), but you, Bosomtwe, he cannot pass by on his way (ungreeted), and I also cannot come and look upon you with my eyes alone, so I hold in my hand an egg to give you. I beg of you long life; I beg of you health; I beg of you continuing strength (and throwing the egg against the rock); receive!’” [*Twi text improved by me*] (Rattray, *Ashanti*, 295-6). However, I noted one occasion where Rattray talks about the *sunsum* of a tree being distinct from the *Abosom* that resided in the roots of the tree. When he inquired from the priest how the two co-exist, the priest said to him, “‘I do not ever give offerings to the *sunsum* (soul) of the *Akata*’ (the Ashanti name of the tree)” (Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 3).

as well as being a symbol of power, health, bravery, welfare, and the shrine of the *sunsum* of Asante nationality.⁵⁷ In this sacred object rested the historical past, present, and future of the united independent state of the Asante.

Rattray's investigation of the Golden Stool emerged out of curiosity of a supposed desecration or destruction of it in 1921. The news had thrown the Asante people into national disarray, while within the circles of the British government in Kumasi there was fear of war.⁵⁸ The communal uproar at the hint of a possible desecration of the Golden Stool expresses the intrapsychic effects it brings, much in the same way a person's *sunsum* can fret to become ill. Therefore, the sacrality of the Golden Stool engenders greater force for the welfare and unity of the Asantes, while an attack against it signifies a national decline. Rattray derived from this notion of the national *sunsum* an intra-relational intervention theory for peaceful cooperation between the British and Asante – a contribution he is celebrated for because of his Anthropology Department and knowledge concerning the Golden Stool, which proved how knowledge and politics were indispensable qualities for peaceful intervention.⁵⁹

Besides the knowledge provided to the British, Rattray's interpretation of the collective *sunsum* enshrined in the stool was that of a

⁵⁷ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 287-293. The sacrality of the Golden Stool is very much ambiguous because it also engenders political power as it is a symbol of right to rule. McCaskie's review of the Golden Stool saw it as an emblem that "propagated and fertilized dreams of power." He further underlined how it has been used as a political weapon to command authority for power and governance. He writes, "the Golden Stool was a sacred object, but its very sacrality ensured that it was a potent weapon in the strictly secular disputes of powerful – and often unscrupulously ambitious – men." He supports this statement with the following remarks: "In ca. 1800, Osei Kwame (1777-1803), in conflict with Asantehemaa Kwaadu Yaadam, seized the Golden Stool and the royal regalia and fled to exile in Dwaben, where he attempted to establish an alternative government... in 1823, Osei Yaw Akoto took possession of the Golden Stool and, fleeing to the south, used it to secure the army's support for his ambitions, thereby nullifying the claims of his rival Fredua Agyeman to be the successor of Osei Tutu Kwame... in August 1883, Akyempemhene oheneba Owusu Koko (1820-1884), sponsor of the youthful royal Agyeman Kofi, threatened to destroy the Golden Stool rather than let it fall into the hands of his client's dynastic rival, the deposed Kofi Kakari" (McCaskie, "R.S. Rattray and the Construction," 197, 198).

⁵⁸ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 287.

⁵⁹ It is necessary to reiterate how Rattray processed raw knowledge from the Asante customs to sustain the colonial administration in the Asante region. Knowledge and colonialism were like a single unit during the British presence in the Gold Coast. Rattray's knowledge of Asante customs and laws helped to forge a decisive alliance between Asante natives and the British and averted many possible wars.

transcending process upon which depended “an unfolding map of predictable development” that can forge successful socio-economic and political future of the Asantes.⁶⁰ Rattray makes the connection thus:

I have told them that they will become better and finer men and women by remaining true Ashanti and retaining a certain pride in their past and that their greatest hope lies in the future, if they will follow and build upon lines with which the national *sunsum* or *soul* has been familiar since first they were a people.⁶¹

A closer look at the above statement reveals his earlier notion of the Akan *sunsum* as the reason for health, wealth, power, success in any venture, and everything that makes life at all worth living. Rattray consistently came to the understanding that *sunsum* was the operational force for the welfare of its constituent agency. The *sunsum* in all its characteristics appears as a dynamic vanguard or as Rattray himself puts it an advance guard which often sits at the door.⁶²

The *Sika Dwa Kofi* brings out some of these significant idioms about the *sunsum* into the memory of the Asante. The Golden Stool itself is not the *sunsum*; it is a repository or, more specifically, the shrine of the *sunsum* of the Asante state.⁶³ There are two main thoughts identified in this understanding. The first is in the semantics, where the collective *sunsum* is spoken of in the singular, i.e. the *sunsum* of the Asantes. Whatever character this *sunsum* is given, it has a communal bond of strength. The single representation of *sunsum* of the nation exemplifies the unification agenda of the Asante nation as one body. The second idea is the linguistic tradition of the fact that the *sunsum* pertains to the people, not to a deity.⁶⁴ Although the Golden Stool descended from the sky – a sign from Nyankopon – there is no direct

⁶⁰ Borrowed phrase from McCaskie, “R.S. Rattray and the Construction.”

⁶¹ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 12. My emphasis.

⁶² Rattray, *Religion and Art*, 154.

⁶³ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 292.

⁶⁴ Attempts have been made by other scholars to relate the Golden Stool to the Ark of the Covenant of the Israelites. Whereas the two may have similarities in the sense of their protective potency, their innate power is far the contrary. The Golden Stool, as already established, is the shrine for the *sunsum* of the Asante, a dwelling place of the communal spirits. On the contrary, the Ark of the Covenant of the Israelites, upon which rested the shekinah, the immanence of divine presence or visible theophany, was a sort of dwelling place for God. Rattray wrote somewhere: “It was He who of old left His own dwelling above the vaulted sky, and entered the tent of dyed skins where was His earthly abode and His shrine, when He came down to protect the Children of Israel in their march to the Promised Land” (Rattray, *Ashanti*, 141). There are several other differences, but this is not the focus of discussion here.

reference of its *sunsum* deriving from Nyankopɔn; neither did Rattray offer any details beyond that.

There are a few more questions to ask. From where derived the *sunsum* in the *Sika Dwa Kofi*? Why did Rattray refer to the Golden Stool as a shrine?

The question of the nature of the *sunsum* in this national symbol of the Golden Stool is a paradox since it deviates from the usual cosmological understanding of *sunsum* and turns into an artistic object that is entirely different from the iconic representation of the *Abosom*. We could, perhaps, make a connection between the Golden Stool and the sacrality of the ancestral stools – which is believed to contain the *sunsum* of the ancestors. That connection is possible since the *Sika Dwa Kofi* is the single most sacred stool which contains the *sunsum* of the Asante. If that is the case, it will mean the spiritual energy or *sunsum* of the Golden Stool is that of the ancestors. Rattray’s definition of it as a shrine agrees with this hypothesis and further shows the source of *sunsum* of the Golden Stool.

The term shrine is often associated with a place of sacred meeting. Its root comes from the Latin *scrinium*, which means “case or box for keeping papers.” Rattray did not justify his use of “shrine” for the Golden Stool, but the Latin root may be equivalent to the Akan word *suman*. *Suman* is any consecrated object by a priest or spiritual agent that has the potency to empower or create protection against evil. *Suman* means “world of,” implying that it is an object that hosts spiritual energy. On the accounts of the coming down of the Golden Stool, Rattray reported how *Ɔkomfo Anɔkye* “caused the King and every Ashanti chief and all the Queen Mothers to take a few hairs from the head and pubes, and a piece of the nail from the forefinger. These were made into a powder and mixed with ‘medicine’, and some were drunk and some poured or smeared on the stool.”⁶⁵ The consecration ritual initiated the spiritual bond between the Golden Stool and the Asante nation, here represented by their chiefs and queen mothers. The Golden Stool, therefore, is a symbol of protection, making it a shrine or *suman* for the Asante nation. That means it possesses an intrinsic power from Nyankopɔn to enable it to contain the *sunsum* of

⁶⁵ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 289.

the people. And since the *sunsum* of the Asante and their ancestors reside in it, the Golden Stool is not supposed to be sat on.⁶⁶

What if the Golden Stool gets stolen or destroyed? Will the Asante nation fall? The shreds of evidence we have gathered so far suggest the destruction of the Golden Stool will lead to the fall of Asante as a nation. We recall Okomfo Anokye's charge to the chiefs and queen mothers to keep the stool from destruction or from being stolen, else "as a man sickens and dies whose *sunsum* during life has wandered away or has been injured by some other *sunsum*, so would the Ashanti nation sicken and lose its vitality and power."⁶⁷ Besides the security measures to ensure the safety of the Golden Stool, Okomfo Anokye made further provisions, should every measure fail. Rattray gives an account of a sacred stone at Kokofu known as *Ahantan Bo* (The proud stone).⁶⁸ It is believed Okomfo Anokye sanctified the stone with the rest of the portion used in sanctifying the Golden Stool including other ritual elements. The stone stands as an alternative shrine should the Golden Stool be stolen. Okomfo Anokye "stated that this stone must stand for a symbol of the Golden Stool, and if that emblem were ever lost or stolen, the *sunsum* (spirit) of the Nation would enter this rock."⁶⁹ The stone was not supposed to be stepped on because it embodies the same sacrality accorded to the Golden Stool, and periodic rituals are associated with it. The various rituals related to the preservation of the national *sunsum* signify its supreme importance and the place the concept occupies in the overall Asante traditional system. I have no doubt Captain Rattray understood this to the fullest.

⁶⁶ In March 1900, the Asantes besieged Kumasi, then occupied by the British, following a request by Sir Frederic Hodgson, then governor of the Gold Coast, to sit on the Golden Stool. The Asante, seeing his request as open defiance of the sacred stool, declared war against the British, led by the then Ejisu queen mother Yaa Asantewaa. The war lasted for six months resulting in fatalities on both sides. Queen mother Yaa Asantewaa was captured alongside with other traditional leaders and was exiled to the Seychelles Islands where she died. This war marked the last conflict between the Asante and the British. A peace treaty was made, and the Asante maintained their independent state though working under British rule.

⁶⁷ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 289, 290.

⁶⁸ Among the people of Kokofu, the stone is widely known as Anokye *boɔ* (The stone of Anokye). An informant from Kokofu explained to me why it came to be called *Ahantan boɔ*. The stone was given to the then chief of Kokofu to carry it from his palace and walk a distance through the streets. Wherever he will drop the stone will become the center of the town. It is said that the chief, because of pride, carried the stone for a short distance from his palace and dropped it and to date, that spot has become the center of Kokofu. The stone has been fenced and considered sacred up to date.

⁶⁹ Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, 218.

An Overall Critique

I will offer an overall evaluation of Rattray's conception of the *sunsum*. The purpose is to underline some of the methodological problems that confronted Rattray which have directly or indirectly affected the *sunsum* discourse over time and how they form part of the contemporary criticism of the nature of the *sunsum*.

First, there is the problem of language. Rattray's use of the English language to describe Akan realities was inevitable, but it led to problematic interpretations. Language embodies the essential elements of a people's culture, and through it a person is introduced or oriented into the depths of a given cultural worldview. Rattray used the terms 'spirit' and 'soul' to translate anything non-conceptual as matter or bearing spiritual properties.⁷⁰ For example, *ɔkra*, *ntorɔ*, *sunsum*, and the Abosom were often translated as 'spirit' or 'soul.' In most instances, the two English terms 'spirit' and 'soul' were used variably – if not interchangeably – to translate one word. An example relates to the nature of the *sunsum*, which Rattray saw as both polymorphic and polysemic. He translated *sunsum* interchangeably as 'spirit,' or 'soul,' and sometimes both.⁷¹ Rattray further maintained *ntorɔ* as a 'spirit' and wrote of the *ntorɔ* as a term best translated by 'spirit.'⁷² Whatever Rattray meant by the term 'spirit' is up to scholars of Akan religion today to decipher. The most obvious inference is that his understanding of what a spirit is did not stem from the Akan context, but instead from his background as a European.

Second, we encounter the problem of description of Asante realities. Rattray's work has been reviewed as descriptive and non-theoretical.⁷³ He sought to undertake a comprehensive survey of Akan customs and religion. In the preface to *Religion and Arts in Ashanti*, he wrote: "I have striven throughout this volume and in *Ashanti* to make

⁷⁰ Spirit and soul are two confusing words, both in Western philosophical and theological thinking.

⁷¹ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 12, 46, 195-6, 258, 289, 292-3, 296.

⁷² Rattray, *Ashanti*, 45, 46, 202. Rattray maintained a consistent use of *ntorɔ* without an English translation in most of his writings.

⁷³ Louise Muller, "The Reality of Spirits: A Historiography of the Akan Concept of Mind," *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* XXII, 1-2 (2008), 167.

them as purely objective as the subject and scope seem to demand.”⁷⁴ However, the description was not always “purely objective” as he encountered difficulty in distinguishing the relationship between *ɔkra*, *sunsum*, and *ntorɔ*. He wrote: “I have stated that *ntorɔ* may perhaps be translated by ‘spirit.’ Indeed, it appears to be used at times synonymously with *sunsum*.”⁷⁵ Again, in his attempt to explain the Asante concept of *Akowitzakra*, meaning “when you die, you bid farewell,” Rattray said: “before death, the *sunsum* or *ntorɔ* or *spirit*, about to quit the body for ever, flits from wherever the dying man or woman may be... and says good-bye.”⁷⁶

Indeed, there is a relationship between *ntorɔ* and *sunsum*, but the two are not synonymous. Also, an informant seems to have told him that *ɔkra* and *sunsum* are the same.⁷⁷ The complex dialectical relationship between *ɔkra*, *sunsum* and *ntorɔ* was not only a conceptual problem for Rattray, but a difficulty that has been transmitted through subsequent scholarship, where both *ɔkra* and *sunsum* are often translated as ‘soul.’⁷⁸

Third, it is evident that Rattray did not use the expression, ‘God’s *sunsum*,’ or ‘God’s spirit.’ Neither did he associate the *sunsum* with God. His discussion of the *sunsum* was more limited: it was limited to the pantheon deities, and so did not pertain to God. In speaking of the pantheon gods as the spark of God’s power, Rattray used terms like ‘*Onyankopon tumi*,’ or ‘*honhon*,’ that is, “the power, spirit, or *mana* of God.”⁷⁹ Unlike the *ɔkra* that is indisputably from God, the possible source of *sunsum* for Rattray was from the pantheon deities who transmit their *ntorɔ* and *sunsum* through Akan males; this is another reason which led Rattray to confuse *ntorɔ* with *sunsum*. *Sunsum* then appears

⁷⁴ Rattray, *Religion and Art*, v.

⁷⁵ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 46.

⁷⁶ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 55.

⁷⁷ Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 155.

⁷⁸ Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, “Concepts of the Soul among the Akan of the Gold Coast,” *Journal of the International African Institute* 21, no. 1 (Jan. 1951); Kofi A. Busia, “The Ashanti of the Gold Coast,” in *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); Louise Muller, “Ghanaian Films and Chiefs as Indicators of Religious Change among the Akan in Kumasi and Its Migrants in Southeast Amsterdam,” in *Religions in Movement: The Local and the Global in Contemporary Faith Traditions*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, John Hutchinson, Sara Mels, Christiane Timmerman (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁷⁹ Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs*, 22.

in his writings as an emanating pantheon force that protects the individual.

Fourth, there is the question of the nature of the *sunsum*. There is no clue from Rattray that the *sunsum* is an astral personality or double of the person. If anything of that sort is inferred from his writings, it will be nothing more than a linguistic conundrum of his translation of *sunsum* in the English language as both “soul” and “spirit.” Even though Rattray tried to be candid and report what he saw and heard, his English background inevitably determined the various interpretations he gave of the Akan worldview. This led to the repeated difficulty he encountered in distinguishing between the *ɔkra*, *sunsum*, and *ntoro*.

Finally, Rattray gives us an idea of the Akan *sunsum* as signifying a personal presence of an emanating force or spiritual agent. *Sunsum* will always imply, or refer to, the presence of an agent. Examples include *sunsum* of a person, *sunsum* of *Ta Kora*, *sunsum* of a river, *sunsum* of the Asante, *sunsum* of a tree, etc. When Rattray asked whether a particular river had a *sunsum*, the answer given to him was an emphatic “yes,” reaffirming the Akan view that all rivers are deities and therefore contain emanating force.

Conclusion

Captain Rattray remains an important figure in the evolution of Akan scholarship as well as the role he played as an anthropologist for the British colonial administration in the then Gold Coast. We know Rattray as an anthropologist rather than a historian because of his ethnographical sketch of Asante customs and religion, and as head of the then newly created Anthropology Department in Asante. He was an ethnographer rather than an ethnologist: he embarked on a descriptive study of the Akan culture and religion rather than doing a comparative study between two or more ethnic groups. Rattray remains influential, and the most cited scholar in Akan scholarship.

His contribution to the meaning of the Akan *sunsum*, with its various dimensions as force, personal magnetism, character, personality, power – upon which depend health, wealth, worldly power, success in any venture, and everything that makes life at all worth living – agrees with the majority of scholars studying the concept of *sunsum*

Clifford Owusu-Gyamfi

today. It is of no doubt Rattray remains a significant contributor to pneumatic discussions today in African contextual pneumatology, and any scholar seeking an in-depth understanding of African pneumatology will find in Rattray's conception a big source of help.

Clifford Owusu-Gyamfi

owusugyamfcliff@gmail.com

Department of Theological Studies,
Valley View University, Oyibi (GA)
Fellow at Emmaus Collegium, Switzerland