



Plural *Elohim* as *anyame* in Psalm 82 of The Asante Twi Bible: A colonial imposition



Authors:

Roland Owusu-Ansah¹ 

Kojo Okyere¹ 

Alice M. Nsiah¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Religion and Human Values, Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana

Corresponding author:

Kojo Okyere,
kokyere@ucc.edu.gh

Dates:

Received: 06 May 2024

Accepted: 09 July 2024

Published: 06 Nov. 2024

How to cite this article:

Owusu-Ansah, R., Okyere, K. & Nsiah, A.M., 2024, 'Plural *Elohim* as *anyame* in Psalm 82 of The Asante Twi Bible: A colonial imposition', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a9893. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9893>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Postcolonial theoretical examinations on the translation of the Bible in Africa have revealed the systematic process of domination and restructuring of the worldview of Africans. The colonial agenda that coloured the missiological thrust influenced the choice of words and concepts used to translate the Scriptures. By examining the word *Elohim* in Psalm 82, this article highlights how this development is realised in the translation of the Asante Twi Bible. For instance, in Psalm 82, the plural *Elohim* has been translated as *anyame* in the Asante Twi Bible, a translation that is not only inappropriate but alters the religious worldview of the Asante people. As a mission agenda, the term *anyame* was coined to redefine the religion of the Akan people as polytheism. This redefinition has had a profound and longstanding impact on the language and religious thinking of the people. At the least, this article recommends a constructive reading of Psalm 82 in the Asante Twi Bible in order to decolonise it from colonial impositions that sought to wrongly qualify the life and thought of the people. At the most, the article calls on African biblical scholars to pay more attention to the impact of colonialism in their interpretation of the Bible in order to draw attention to changes in structure of the indigenous language and thought patterns, and to look for creative ways to redeem traditions of the African people.

Contribution: The study demonstrates the continuous need to decolonise the Bible in Africa in order to help recover some of Africa's religio-cultural identity lost during the missionary drive.

Keywords: *anyame*; translation; postcolonial; Psalm; *Elohim*; *abosom*.

Introduction

Postcolonial theoretical examinations on the translation of the Bible in Africa have revealed the systematic process of domination and restructuring of the worldview of Africans in the translation process (Kinyua 2013:58–95; Rakundwa 2008:339–351). The primary goal of this article is to highlight how this development is realised in the translation of the Asante Twi Bible. Thus, this article is situated in the ongoing discourse on post colonialism, a concept that explains how colonised communities continue to be affected by the structures and institutions put in place by the colonisers. The epistemologies of former colonies and communities from the global south have unavoidably become the concern of postcolonial scholars as they aim to reconstruct and legitimise knowledge from the periphery. In this article, we explore how these issues play out within the context of theology and biblical studies.

Within the knowledge decolonisation framework, there is a palpable connection between translation and exegesis. Traditionally, the two have had a hierarchical relationship with exegetes providing meaning while translators render the meaning in another language (Ellingworth 1978:396). This is not to suggest, however, that the two operate separately; there is a nuanced connection between the two processes that makes them close partners. For instance, both exegesis and translation deal with the expression of meaning. But while the exegetes in many cases wrestle with meaning as situated in a given text, the translator in addition to this needs to carry the meaning across into a different language. As both science and art, translation requires skills and competencies that are crucial for a successful translation. In the specific case of Bible translation during the missionary-colonial era, these requirements were further compounded by a host of factors including language barrier and racial prejudice. For instance, translators were sometimes confronted with terms and concepts in the source text that do not lend themselves to easy translation in the receptor's language. As translation and exegesis are densely intertwined in the production of meaning, when a translation fails to deconstruct Western ideologies underpinning the process, exegesis can be of help by critically bringing out the understanding of the text in a manner that reveals and corrects the misuses and misrepresentations. Symbiotic connection between language and culture in the translation process during the colonial era reveals

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

how Western translation practices heralded, aided and perpetuated colonial expansion. For instance, colonial rule employed an aggressive policy of conversion, aided by an active translation project, which aimed at indoctrinating the local people into the colonisers' worldview (Shamma 2009:182–196).

Bible translation spans a spectrum of approaches designed to bridge the gap between source text and reader. It involves adapting ideas from one language and culture to the syntax, style and vocabulary of another language and culture. Thus, translation is a valuable tool in sustaining the ongoing relationship between the reader and the Bible, as it awakens the audience to a new appreciation of the source (Fox 2008). Contrary to the popular belief of switching one Hebrew word for an English or an Asante term, the translation process is impinged by many factors and involves several levels of complications. For instance, interpreting the original text is key to the translation process, but that is also hinged on a clear understanding of the context and nuances of the author (Owens 1989:ix). A translation then is a reading created from a source text of a different language, and this reading exhibits features, either grammatical or semantics, that are equivalent to those of the source text (Frank 2008). This process is shaped by several factors, including questions such as what type of translation is desired and what translation philosophy, theory, method or approach should be used (Barker 2003:51)?

The understanding that European worldview and languages are adequate for African translations compromised the translation of the Bible into African mother tongues (Morgan 2002). Translators had the easier but often superficial option of directly borrowing words and concepts from the language of the European missionaries, particularly when the source text was in an European language rather than in Hebrew or Greek (Ekem 2011:52–53; Mojola 2002:206–207). White (1999:397–414) explains that several factors including language barriers and poor communication by the indigenes of their faith may have accounted for the misconceptions missionaries had of the indigenous faith. However, Ekem points out that the missionaries and translators did not dig deep enough to live in close touch with the African mind to discover and discern the life and thought of Africans; in effect they, missionaries, failed to note that Africans had the knowledge of God (Ekem 2011:73). It can be observed that because of this lack of depth and close touch, the missionaries and translators missed out on understanding the African religion and cultural thought patterns that would have enhanced the work of translators. Besides, a translator's task, as complicated as it may be, is to render the entire worldview of the culture from which the source text originates into the worldview of the culture of the receptor language emphasising accuracy, naturalness and clarity. It is not to superimpose an alien worldview simply because it is easier to do so or it fits the theological agenda of the translators.

As African exegetes within the larger framework of African biblical hermeneutics try among other things to decolonise the way the Bible is read and studied, especially in relation to

the history behind the various vernacular translations of the Bible in Africa, one of the problematic issues that emerges is the idea of 'gods' within the African culture and the most appropriate way of interpreting or representing this idea in translations. While there is a debate in the Masoretic text concerning the identity of plural *Elohim* [gods], a similar debate exists in the translated text of the Asante Twi Bible. According to Ryan (1980:164), 'West African biblical translators ... have sometimes created *ersatz* words in order to render plural reference to gods in Hebrew'. These grammatically created correct words, although may have a referent at best is a forged one; the very convenience of these newly created words places it in a more Western framework than an African one. Language is a vehicle for knowledge creation; therefore, it does not suffice to compare grammatical correctness to language correctness.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Methodology

According to Stam and Shohat (2012:371–390), postcolonial theory has a long history going as far back as the 15th century with events such as the 'conquest of the "new" world, the expulsion of the Moors and the Inquisition' (p. 373). These events birthed important ideologies including slavery, racism and imperialism. In relatively recent times, especially from the 19th- and 20th-centuries, the postcolonial theoretical framework emerged from what Stam and Shohat (2012:379) refer to as 'seismic shift', an intellectual response to the events of the past, and the present recognition 'for a broad decolonization of knowledge and academic culture' (p. 379). In this development, the Bible was considered as a text that can serve as a powerful tool for reinforcing or counteracting imperial powers. Imperialism refers to the tendency of metropolitan centres to impose their values and beliefs on foreign lands. The Bible, a colonising text, has been a prime example of imperial sponsorship (Dube 1997:11–26). When we read the Bible from a postcolonial literary perspective, we analyse the biblical texts and show how they function to justify imperialism. Postcolonial texts are born in settings of struggle and often justify imperialism through their portrayal of inequality, expansionist aims, fear of difference and the authority of certain travellers (Dube 1997:15).

Calls to decolonise could be seen as a part of this accepted evangelical challenge to appropriately contextualise our theology by critically assessing the ways colonial Christianity, colonial languages and imposed Western educational values and methods have shaped the cognitive environments and social contexts in which the mother tongue Bible translations took place. Valuable insights from the recently renewed calls to decolonise theological education could inform the way Bible translation organisations go about training local translation workers to exegete Scripture, so that they can produce well-contextualised translations that are not as

hindered by arbitrary Western cultural norms and values (Hemphill 2022:94–110). Postcolonial critical hermeneutics calls for Biblical texts to be appropriated on both practical and theoretical levels, reinterpreted objectively and descriptively as a hermeneutics of trust. It is, therefore, understood as a methodological process that ensures a critical engagement of biblical texts in order to generate an understanding that is corrective, dialogic and liberated for African readers (Ahiamadu 2011:74–92). There is an inextricable link between texts and culture, as well as the political climate that shapes both; thus interpretations that do not take these intricate relationships into account are damaging.

Colonialism flourished in Africa during the 19th and early 20th centuries, building upon the influence of Christian missionaries and providing a basis for interpreting biblical scriptures that actively bolstered the colonial endeavour. Postcolonial hermeneutics places emphasis on the appropriation of biblical texts within the religious context of Africa while also prioritising the preservation of intellectual freedom and addressing the topic of relevance in a more direct manner compared to traditional hermeneutical paradigms. This methodology encompasses the assessment of value judgements, ethical implications, evaluation and critical analysis, focusing on the semantics and syntax of individual morphemes, words and phrases within the sentence structure of a given text (Ahiamadu 2011:82).

To establish what the text of the Bible has to say in its original context using semantics and syntactical structures is to develop an interpretation that communicates to audiences in today's words from an African and authentic perspective. Postcolonial analysis evaluates texts objectively and descriptively by tracing common features at the cultural, literary and textual levels in order to analyse them critically. Such analysis has the potential to identify and confront any imposition of alien values and domination (Ahiamadu 2011:82). A translated text ought not to be displacing individuals from their cultural and religious backgrounds, but rather it should integrate the Gospel into their cultural and religious identities (Mugambi 1995:15–17, 50–51).

Our methodology is therefore informed by two main frameworks: postcolonial theory and African biblical hermeneutics. The former helps us to unravel the ideologies that underlined the translation process of missionary-colonialism as revealed in the particular case of the Asante Twi Bible. Within the framework of the latter and with emphasis on the interpretation of plural *Elohim* [gods], we attempt a contextualised reading of Psalm 82, with the Asante religious and cultural contexts framing the hermeneutical discussions.

Context for the discussion

Psalm 82 is a peculiar psalm that has provoked many reactions from scholars because of its stance on the presence of other deities (*Elohim* [gods]) alongside God [*Elohim*] although these deities are subordinate to him. The psalm

opens with a dramatic scene of a somewhat divine council where *Elohim* [the God of the Israelite faith], prosecutes other *Elohim* [gods] who are later described as 'sons of *Elyon*' (v.6). Verses 2–4 depicts the Israelite God as a judge who outlines charges against *Elohim* [gods], 'sons of *Elyon*'. These *Elohim* [gods] are accused of unjust judgement and favouring the wicked (v.2), opting for these unjust practices when their intended role was to promote the cause of the vulnerable (vv.3–4). In verse 5, an explanation is provided for their action; the unjust gods have no knowledge and understanding, as a result they threaten the very creation of God by refusing to ensure justice (Mays 1994:269). God pronounces judgement on the unjust gods and assigns them a fate of mortality as humans (vv.6–7). The concluding verse (8) calls on God to replace the rule of the unjust gods with his rule, this is what is right for the world. The psalm's likely *sitz-im-leben* is the prophetic scene of the divine assembly such as Isaiah 6 or 1 Kings 22 (Tate 2002:333). One of the issues which has exercised the mind of scholars on this psalm is the meaning assigned to the *Elohim* [gods].

Verse 6 is one of the key verses in the Psalm. It reads, 'I say, "You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you"' (NRSV Translation). The pronoun 'you' – '*attem*' refers back to the plural *Elohim* of verse 1b, but this time, the psalmist defines them as 'sons of the Most High'. In addition to the word '*attem*, *kullakem* affirm the plural identity of *Elohim*. From the text, therefore, there is good reason to identify the *Elohim* as gods although the interpretation history behind this text shows different proposals such as human judges (Terrien 2003:588).

In Psalm 82, therefore, *Elohim* [God] has taken a stand in the divine council, and he is judging the *Elohim* [gods] himself. The poet contrasts *Elohim* [God] and *Elohim* [gods] using parallel structuring as well as other literary devices. *Elohim* [gods] are portrayed as being unfair; they show prejudice to evil; they do not uphold the rights of the poor and the needy and they do not render justice to the poor and orphans (vv.2–4). They have been failing for so long because they walk about in darkness (v.5).

If we accept that plural *Elohim* in verse 6 are gods, how is verse 6 to be read in Asante Twi? The meaning assigned to *Elohim* [gods] is significant for comprehending the translation, *moye anyame* [you are gods], as given by Asante Twi Bible. What is the relevance of this translation, *moye anyame*, when plural *Elohim* are considered gods? In order to communicate meaningfully with their target audiences, European missionaries and their African co-workers were faced with the challenge of repackaging theological concepts in appropriate local African thought categories. Sacred texts cannot speak to the hearts of a people unless they are communicated in a writing system that the people can read and understand (Ekem 2011:52–53). For such an impact to be realised among the Asante, the missionaries embarked on the noble quest of providing a vernacular bible that captured the word of God in its true authenticity as much as possible.

Interpreting *Elohim* as *anyame*

A good translation ought to communicate the message faithfully from the original language to the receptor's language. It must be natural and intelligible to the people (Sule-Saa 2022). But the translation process is sometimes fraught with complexities that do not lend themselves to easy resolution (Israel 2004). For instance, it is not always the case that an idea in a source text can be faithfully rendered (that is finding the exact literal meaning) into another language, especially when there is a sharp cultural gap. The translation theory of dynamic equivalence may be a response to this translation difficulty as emphasis shifts to semantics, but even this approach has its problems such as the exegetical choices that shape the process (Ellingworth 1978:397). This may have been the case with the interpretation of *Elohim* as *anyame* in Psalm 82, a choice made but fraught with problems. Was there no appropriate Akan word that could be used to translate *Elohim* as gods or sons of the Highest? Were there no Akan religio-cultural concepts that depict or come close to depicting gods or beings who are sons of God? What is *anyame*? It is important we find an answer to this question when there is the tendency to translate every supernatural being in the Asante Twi Bible as a 'god' – *nyame*. In Akan religious worldview, however, this is not so; only the Supreme Being is *Onyame* or *Nyame*.

Although the term *anyame* is a morphological plural construct for *Onyame* or *Nyame*, it is an alien construct. In an interview conducted with Dr. Appah 05 September 2021, an Akan morphologist at the University of Ghana, he stated that *anyame* is a word that is properly motivated in Akan. This means that there is a direct connection between the lexical meaning of the component morphemes, the pattern of their arrangement and the meaning of the word. He, however, remarked that the Akan rarely uses *anyame* because they associate *Nyame* with the Supreme Being. In Appah's reasoning, morphologically there is a construction type that allows the term *anyame* to exist because in principle every Akan noun can be pluralised. There is a constructional pattern in Akan used to identify the *primus inter pares* [the unique one among the lot]. This constructional pattern he calls the *N mu N* construction in Akan:

| Plural | | Singular |
|---------------|-----------|--------------|
| [] | <i>mu</i> | [] |
| <i>ahene</i> | <i>mu</i> | <i>hene</i> |
| <i>awura</i> | <i>mu</i> | <i>wura</i> |
| <i>anyame</i> | <i>mu</i> | <i>nyame</i> |

So, if one wants to say God of gods, you use this construction:

| | | |
|--------------|-----------|---------------|
| <i>nyame</i> | <i>mu</i> | <i>anyame</i> |
|--------------|-----------|---------------|

The term *anyame* makes morphological sense, but the problem is that it was not used by the Asante. This being the case how did the term come into usage? It appears that the term *anyame* was introduced by Christaller (1933:43) under the entry *Onyame*, which he did indicate had no plural in the Twi dictionary he compiled. According to Christaller (1933:43),

Onyame is a reference to the Supreme Being, the Deity, God, the creator of all things. On the other hand, he acknowledges that *anyame* is a newly introduced plural to denote the gods of polytheists, although per his explanations of Akan terms such as *nyame* and *Oyankopon* he seems to suggest that the Akan, which includes the Asante, in many ways believe in one God. Bediako (1999:292–293) confirms the creation of the term *anyame* by the great missionary scholar of the Basel Mission in the Gold Coast, Johannes Christaller, when he intimates that by 1881 the plural *anyame* had been introduced by missionaries to describe the religion of people who were generally believed to be polytheists. Ryan (1980) also referencing Christaller writes:

[... T]he most recent translation of the Bible into Asante Twi translates the plural '*elohim*' of Psalm 82:6 as *anyame*, a neologism foisted on traditionally unique *Onyame* in the nineteenth century. (p. 164)

The question we pose then is: was this term *anyame* based on a colonial mentality or the reality of Akan worldview? We can infer from the views of Christaller and Bediako that the missionaries rejected the Akan worldview without making any attempt to understand what it was. As Tembo (2020:2) indicates, although the missionaries seem enthusiastic 'to learn vernacular languages and to sympathise with African culture. However, this sympathy was often lacking, and consequently, this created room for misunderstanding and controversies'. Largely, the missionaries had conclusively given a descriptive image of Akan religion they were unwilling to change. When they discovered that Akan people were monotheists, no attempt was made to correct that impression. They still went ahead to reject the use of Akan concepts to translate the plural *Elohim*: thus, sealing the missionary enterprise attempt to impose its brand of Christianity by replacing an Akan worldview with a European one.

The interpretation of plural *Elohim* as *anyame* was not done in a vacuum. It was and still remains a polemic against the religion and culture and by extension the *abosom* (the name for gods or children of God) of Akan culture and people. The interpretation of plural *Elohim* as *anyame* was conducted from the colonial European mind-set from which the missionaries perceived Akan people as polytheistic, a perception that some of them, like Christaller, later conceded as erroneous. According to Bediako (1992:292), Christaller indicated that the Akan have been perceived by outsiders as polytheists; however, he (Christaller) perceives them as follows: 'The heathen negroes are, at least, to a great extent rather monotheists, as they apply the term for God only to one supreme being'. Why then did the word *anyame* remain? Plural *Elohim* interpreted as *anyame* set the stage for the development of the term *abosom* as demons or demonic, a grave misrepresentation of the ontological relevance of these beings in Akan life and thought. The creation and use of the word *anyame* as a plural for *Onyame* tells us more about the world of the translators than about the Akan people for whom the Asante Twi Bible was made.

Why was the Akan term *abosom* abandoned for the created word *anyame* in the translation of the plural *Elohim* in Psalm 82? In the Asante Twi Bible, there are several passages, including 1 Corinthians 8:4, 7; 1 Corinthians 10:19–20; Leviticus 19:4; Isaiah 42:17; Psalm 97:7; Jeremiah 10:11 and Acts 17:18, where the term ‘*abosom*’ has been employed as a translation for the words ‘gods’ and ‘idols’. This conflation may have aided in the negative evaluation of the concept of *abosom*. Consequently, they [*abosom*] have been subjected to the level of being perceived as demons or evil entities. According to Afriyie (2020:19), a comprehensive understanding of the *abosom* notion might have potentially facilitated the dissemination of the gospel among the Akan, as it would have enhanced awareness of the significance of Jesus Christ’s role. Idols in Akan are *ahoni* (physical representations) not *abosom*.

We are of the opinion that the term *abosom* is a better reference for *Elohim* [gods] than *anyame*. This is not to suggest that the term *abosom* is a direct and perfect rendition of the Hebrew expression *Elohim* [gods] and ‘son of *Elyon*’. As several scholars including Ryan (1980:162–164) and Afriyie (2020:15) have indicated, there are considerable differences between the concept of *abosom* and the idea of gods in the Hebrew Bible. Nonetheless, it is our conviction that a translator needs to operate within the language world of the receptor. It is the resources within the receptor’s language that the translator works with to create meaningful references. In the case of the Asante people, the closest reference to plural *Elohim* within their life and thought would be the idea of *abosom*. After all, just as there are considerable differences between the two, there are significant connections as well such as both the *abosom* and *Elohim* [gods] are involved in human affairs, and both are subordinate to God.

Who are the *abosom*?

The *abosom* (singular, *obosom*/*bosom*) usually referred to in English as the ‘gods’ are a set of transcendent beings who serve as specialists deputised by *Onyame* [God] to exercise power more-than-human, but less-than-supreme power. The *abosom* pass from generation to generation by transmission along the submerged patrilineal descent group (Ryan 1980:168). The translation of gods and idols as *abosom* in the Asante Twi Bible has led many Christians to believe that *abosom* are ‘other gods’ and therefore are detested by God. But properly speaking *abosom* in traditional Akan religious worldview belong to the category of *ahonhom papa* [good spirits]. Their source is in *Onyankopon* also known as *Onyame*, the Supreme Being. This means that for the Akan, there is a positive relationship between *Onyankopon* and the *abosom*. The *abosom* bring people’s sacrifices before *Onyankopon*, thus acting as couriers carrying the requests of human beings to *Onyankopon* and bringing messages from *Onyankopon* to the people. *Onyankopon* has authorised the *abosom* to deal with human beings.

For the Akan, there is a sense of wholeness about the world which they conceptualise as having two parts: the physical world and the world of spirits [*ahonhom*]. The world of

ahonhom is an invisible world to the human eye and includes *Onyankopon* [the Supreme Being], *Nananon Nsamanfo* [ancestors], *abosom* [gods], *asuman* [amulets], *bayie* [witchcraft] and *mimoatia* [dwarfs]. Some *ahonhom* are good and work with the Supreme Being to make the quest of human beings for *nkwa* [life] possible. The other *ahonhom*, known as *ahonhom bone* [evil spirits], are against human beings and always seek to keep them from enjoying *nkwa* [life] (Afriyie 2014:15).

Unlike the *abosom*, *Onyame* is not held to be spatial. He is not bound or limited to any particular region or space. He is omnipresent and all pervading. As the ultimate source of being, *Onyame* created the whole universe, including the deities or lesser spirits, out of nothing. *Onyame*, the deities and the ancestors are said to be spirits with intelligence and will (Gyekye 1987:70–71). In Christian theology, *Onyame* corresponds to the idea of God; thus, he is perceived as the God of Heaven or the celestial Godhead. The Akan conception of the Supreme Being is that of a living God. He possesses qualities and powers that are illustrious, glorious, luminous, shining and bright (Danquah 1968:30–42). Among the Asante, like all Africans, the Supreme Being stands at the centre of religion, making it a monotheistic religion. In Asante thought, none of the deities or divinities or gods is regarded as God or equal to God, as is the case in classical polytheism or biblical polytheism. What in English, or non-African languages have been considered as gods or deities qualified with terms such as ‘minor’ or ‘lesser’ are all supposed to be creatures of the Supreme Being, his children, his superintendents, his representatives. The Asante never speak of a lesser or minor *Onyame* or *Onyankopon* (Sarpong 2006:145–149). Agyekum (1996:148–149) explains that among the Akan, it is a taboo to mention the name of the Almighty God and the other deities in an inappropriate context. There is much respect for *Onyame* and also the other deities.

In relation to *Onyame* or *Onyankopon*, we can conclude that *abosom* [gods], therefore, is the term for the divinities who serve under the Supreme Being. They are spatially defined as some are in their natural habitats while others have been domesticated. They also have specific names such as *ɔboɔ*, *dopo* and *hunuhata*. The names do not only indicate the identity of the deities but also inform us of the relationship they have with the people. The other classes of divinities include the *asuman* [charms]. These are among the lowest grades of super-human powers who derive their powers and efficacy from the *abosom* [gods]. In the hierarchy of the spirit world, the *abosom* are highly placed as they are sons or grandsons of God. The Asante and Akan religion knows only one God (Addae 1970:179).

According to Christaller (1933:43), ‘*tete abosom no a mpanyinfo som wɔn*’ [the tutelary gods worshipped by the ancestors] are the guardian spirits that are revered or sought after by the local inhabitants of a certain town or family. These *abosom* are subordinate to the divine being. Christaller’s statement suggests that there is evidence supporting the notion that the elders engaged in the worship of these deities in ancient times. He, however, gives an evaluative comment that these

entities are imaginary spirits. What would make him say that the *tete abosom* are imaginary spirits? Did that suggest the *abosom* are ethereal entities? Does Christaller's use of the term 'imaginary' to characterise the *abosom* suggest his belief that they resided solely in the realm of imagination or were completely non-existent? Comments like this from early Europeans living among the indigenes reveal at the very least misunderstandings and sentiments of belittlements of the indigenous people's life and thought.

Conclusion

The impact of translating colonialism

The Western missionary enterprise approached the Akan people in an unsympathetic and unapologetic manner, dismissing their traditional religion with contempt. As a mission agenda, the term *anyame* was coined to define the religion of the Akan people, which includes the Asante, as polytheism. The missionaries brought a Christianity that replaced the Akan worldview with an European one, a situation that impacted missionary translation activities. The challenge for European missionaries and their African colleagues was to repackage theological principles in appropriate local Akan thought categories.

It is important to resolve the question of whose perception of the African heritage is to be taken as authoritative whenever expatriate and local perspectives are at variance in a translated work. Verbal language is a basic endowment of human species, and it is an engine for the development of culture. Culture in turn helps in creating an identity. Every society upholds its humanity in as much as its peoples are free to name themselves and interpret their world in which they live, move and have their being (Mugambi 2001:13, 16–17). In this regard, the creation of the word *anyame* as the plural for *Elohim* by Christaller and the missionaries is a wrong that has to be corrected.

Bediako (1999:268–272) argues that missionary efforts tried to instil Christianity by replacing the Akan worldview with a European one. Points of encounter for the missionary enterprise with the African was indigenous religion. African indigenous religion gives a very vivid and concrete point of meeting between Christianity and the followers of indigenous religion. The missionaries, however, dismissed African indigenous religion with contempt, describing it inappropriately in terms such as fetishism, heathenism, paganism, idolatry, ancestor worship, polytheism, animism, tribalism and primitive. They failed to acknowledge those elements in the religion that are compatible with the gospel or the Scriptures (Sarpong 2006:81–85).

Based on the progression of linguistic development, the term 'anyame' has been incorporated into the translated biblical text and eventually into the language repertoire of the Akan. However, it should be noted that this inclusion is retrospective in nature. In the pre-Christian era preceding the emergence of the name 'anyame' in Asante society, the concept of *anyame* was non-existent. The term 'anyame' appears to lack a

pragmatic referent. Within the framework of decolonising knowledge, the phrase *anyame* is inadequate. The only plausible option that should have been considered is *abosom*, although not an exact replacement, but a better decolonised designation compared to the translated and grammatically accurate created term 'anyame'. To the Asante the universe is always full of spirits, and the Supreme Being, the eternal creator of all the other gods, and of men, of all things, including the animate and inanimate resources of the universe, is outside the pantheon of *abosom* [gods]. He manifests his power over the living group through the *abosom* [gods], and they derive their power from him.

To end the discussions, we reiterate that the translations of the Bible into the local languages in Ghana and by extension Africa need to be reviewed, especially when the translated texts and revisions emerge from a colonial past where bias and misunderstanding of the African culture and language compromised the work that was conducted. Calls to decolonise could be seen as a part of this accepted evangelical challenge to appropriately contextualise God's word by critically assessing the ways colonial Christianity, colonial languages and imposed Western educational values and methods have shaped the cognitive environments and social contexts in which the word of God currently resides.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

R.O-A. was responsible for conceptualising the topic, writing the draft and making revisions. K.O. was responsible for the revisions, editing, supervision and administration of the project. A.M.S. helped in the conceptualisation stage and revision and editing of the article.

Funding information

This research received no grant from any agency. The research was personally funded by the authors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Addae, T., 1970, 'Some aspects of Ashanti religious beliefs', *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e documentazione dell'istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 25(2), 157–182.
- Afriyie, E., 2014, 'Abosom (Onyame mma – Children of God) and Jesus Christ (the Son of God): An Engagement of the Intermediary Role of Abosom in Akan Religion with that of Jesus Christ in the Christian Faith', in G.M. Bediako, B.Y. Quarshie & J.K. Asamoah-Gyadu (eds.), *Seeing new facets of the diamond, Christianity as a universal faith – Essays in honour of Kwame Bediako*, pp. 261–268, Regnum Africa, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana.
- Afriyie, E., 2020, 'Abosom: A theological issue in the celebration of Odwira by the Akuapem of Ghana', *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* (MOTBIT) 2(1), 9–20.
- Agyekum, K., 1996, 'Akan Verbal Taboos in the context of the ethnography of communication', Dissertation, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim.
- Ahiamadu, A., 2011, 'Delineating a postcolonial critical approach to biblical interpretation', *International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition* 2011(3), 74–92.
- Barker, K.L., 2003, 'Bible translation philosophies with special reference to the New International Version', in G.G. Scorgie, M.L. Strauss & S.M. Voth (eds.), *The challenge of Bible translation: Communicating God's word to the world*, pp. 51–64, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Bediako, K., 1992, *Theology and identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and in Modern Africa*, Regnum Books, Oxford.
- Bediako, K., 1999, *Theology and identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and in modern Africa*, Regnum Books: Oxford.
- Christaller J.G., 1933, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Twi)*, 2nd edn., Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, Basel.
- Danquah, J.B., 1968, *The Akan Doctrine of God*, 2nd edn., Frank Cass and Company Limited, London.
- Dube, M.W., 1997, 'Toward a post-colonial feminist interpretation of the Bible', *Semeia* 78, 11–26.
- Ekem, J.D.K., 2011, *Early scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): The historical, linguistic, and theological settings of Ga, Twi, Mfantse and Ewe Bibles*, Edizioni di storia e letteratura and St. Jerome Publishig, Rome and Manchester.
- Ellingworth, P., 1978, 'Translation and exegesis: A case study (Rom 9,22ff)', *Biblica* 59(3), 396–402.
- Fox, E., 2018, 'Torah in Translation: Rendering the story of Joseph in English', TheTorah.com, viewed 21 April 2024, from <https://thetorah.com/article/torah-in-translation-rendering-the-story-of-joseph-in-english>.
- Frank, D.B., 2008, 'What kind of theory do we need for translation?', Paper presented at Bible Translation Conference 2008: Translator and Audience, Horsleys Green, England, 04–06 February.
- Gyekye, K., 1987, *An essay on African philosophical thought. The Akan conceptual scheme*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hemphill, C., 2022, 'Theological decolonisation and training local translators', *Journal of Translation* 18(1), 94–110. <https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-3HR2J>
- Israel, H., 2004, 'Protestants translations of the Bible (1714–1995) and defining a protestant Tamil identity', PhD thesis, Dept. Languages and Cultures of South Asia, University of London.
- Kinyua, J.K., 2013, 'A postcolonial analysis of Bible translation and its effectiveness in shaping and enhancing the discourse of colonialism and the discourse of resistance: The Gikūyū New Testament – A case study', *Black Theology* 11(1), 58–95. <https://doi.org/10.1179/17431670X13A.0000000004>
- Mays, J.L., 1994, *Psalms – Interpretation, a Bible commentary for preaching and teaching*, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.
- Mojola, A.O., 2002, 'Bible translation in Africa. What implications does the new UBS perspective have for Africa? An overview in the light of the emerging new UBS translation initiative', *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 2, 202–213.
- Morgan, D., 2002, 'A brief history of Bible translation', Wycliffe Bible Translators, viewed 11 April 2024, from <https://wycliffe.org.uk/story/a-brief-history-of-bible-translation>.
- Mugambi, J.N.K., 1995, *From liberation to reconstruction: African Christian theology after the Cold War*, East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi.
- Mugambi, J.N.K., 2001, 'Foundations for an African approach to Biblical hermeneutics', in M.N. Getui, T. Maluleke & J. Ukpong (eds.), *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, pp. 9–29, Acton Publishers, Nairobi.
- Owens, J.J., 1989, *Analytical key to the Old Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Rakundwa, L.S., 2008, 'Postcolonial theory as a hermeneutical tool for Biblical reading', *HTS Theological Studies* 64(1), 339–351. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v64i1.26>
- Ryan, P.J., 1980, "'Arise, O GOD!' The problem of 'GODS' in West Africa", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11(3), 161–171. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006680X00115>
- Sarpong, P.K., 2006, *Dear Nana: Letters to my Ancestor*, St. Francis Press Ltd., Takoradi.
- Shamma, T., 2009, 'Postcolonial studies and translation theory', *MonTi. Monografias de Traducción e Interpretación* 1, 183–196. <https://doi.org/10.6035/MonTi.2009.1.9>
- Stam, R. & Shohat, E., 2012, 'Whence and Whither postcolonial theory?', *New Literary History* 43(2), 371–390. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2012.0010>
- Sule-Saa, S.S., 2020, 'The power of mother-tongue scriptures: Changing perceptions of Christianity among the Dagomba and Konkomba as a consequence of their mother-tongue scriptures', paper presented at the 12th Kwame Bediako Memorial Lecture, 8th July, viewed 12 April 2024, from <https://youtu.be/Ybpc9HWzNOY>.
- Tate, M, E., 2002, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 51–100*, Word Incorporated, Dallas, TX.
- Tembo, D., 2020, 'Missionaries and the standardisation of vernacular languages in colonial Malawi, 1875–1935', *The Society of Malawi Journal* 73(2), 1–17.
- Terrien, S., 2003, *The Psalms: Strophic structure and theological commentary*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI.
- White, S.L., 1999, 'Colonial-era missionaries' understanding of African idea of God as seen in their memoirs', *Anglican and Episcopal History* 68(3), 397–414.