

A Theological Reflection on the Akan Doctrine of the Human Soul

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Abstract

The Akan doctrine of the human soul (*nipa-kraa*) expresses the indigenous Akan worldview and theology. As a contribution to the contextualization of Christian theology within the Akan community, this article explored the Akan doctrine of the soul and then reflected on this doctrine from a Christian theological perspective. The article used a qualitative research approach through a critical review of relevant literature on the subject. In the process, it analyzed selected portions of the Nana Kwame Ampadu's highlife song titled *Yaa Amanua* to provide further insights into the Akan understanding of the human soul. The article shows that Christianity can better serve the Akan community if indigenous ideas are connected to relevant aspects of the Christian faith. Yet, in the process the Bible must be the final authority of that contextualization process.

Keywords: Akan, *kraa* (soul), Christian theology, Nana Kwame Ampadu

Introduction

Like many other African societies, the Akan people in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire have diverse and intricate cultural and spiritual heritages that have been handed over to them from their forebears. In Ghana, the Akan people form the most populous ethnic group consisting of various subgroups, including the Bono, Asante, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Kwahu, and others. Despite the diversity among these subgroups, the Akan people share common cultural traditions, beliefs, and a profound worldview that has endured through generations.

Like other African people, the Akan people believe in the existence of God, lower divinities, ancestors, and spiritual beings. They have a communal worldview of life with a strong family bond (Kyeremanteng 2010:112). Family, in the Akan worldview, comprises the living, the dead and the yet-to-be-born. The Akan people have two kinds of family – the nuclear family comprising spouses and their children and the extended family, which is made up by parents, children, uncles, nephews, nieces, grandparents, and many more. Due to the communal sense of life, the Akan people feel doomed if they are deprived of their social life. The upbringing of children is a communal responsibility.

At the heart of the Akan anthropology lies the doctrine of the *nipa-kraa* (human soul). The Akan doctrine of the human soul permeates every aspect of Akan life. It is not a mere philosophical concept. *Nipa-kraa* embodies the Akan understanding of the human essence, depicting the soul as an eternal entity that transcends physical existence. This belief system has a significant impact on the Akan perspectives on life, death, and on the human relationship with God and other creatures.

This article focuses on the Akan concept of the human soul and establishes its connection with aspects of Christian theology. It used a qualitative research approach through a critical review of relevant literature on the subject. The exploration goes beyond the realm of academic discourse to that of artistic expression where it examines relevant portions of Nana Kwame Ampadu's *Yaa Amanua* to provide a deeper understanding of the concept of the soul. The theological connection is based on three key thematic areas: Divine presence in humankind, immortality of the soul, *nkrabea* (destiny), and human responsibility.

With the above introductory notes the article proceeds to consider Akan anthropology.

Aspects of Akan Anthropology

The Akan people refer to the human person as *nipa*, *nyimpa*, or *onipa*. From the Akan perspective, even though it is *Nyankopɔn* (God) who ultimately creates the human being, the father and mother also contribute to the composition of their child. Thus, the elements that make a person a human being derive from three sources: *Nyankopɔn*, the biological father, and the biological

mother (Gyekye 1987:85). The Akan people consider the human being as consisting of both material (physical) and immaterial (spiritual) elements. The physical part – the part that can be observed, touched, and felt – enables a person to communicate to the physical world while the spiritual part facilitates communication to *Nyankopɔn* and the spiritual realm.

The term *nipa* does not only refer to the idea of the human as a being but also refers to the concept of a person as a degree of quality. For example, the Akan may describe someone as *ɔyɛ nipa* (*he/she is a person*) to indicate that the person has commendable social values such as kindness, generosity, and sympathy. The opposite expression, *ɔnyɛ nipa* (*he/she is inhuman*) suggests that the person in question lacks social commendable values. Such a person may be impatient, unkind, corrupt, unloving, or unfaithful. Thus, the term *nipa* may be used as a criterion for moral judgment aside from its use to denote a human being.

From the Akan sociocultural perspective, the human person comprises different parts. The next section focuses on selected aspects of the composition of a human person as perceived by the Akan.

The *Nipadua* (Human Body)

The Akan people refer to one's physical component as *nipadua* (*human body*), derived from the terms *nipa* (*human being*) and *dua* (*tree*). According to Owusu-Gyamfi (2023:26), the reference to the human body as *nipadua* (lit. *human-tree*) is rooted in the Akan perception of the figure of a human being as fashioned in a tree-like shape with the hands and fingers as branches, the head/hair as leaves, the body to the feet as the trunk, and the toes as roots. Scientifically, a person's *nipadua* comprises biological components like cells, tissues, muscles, and organs. It derives from the *mogyaa* (*blood*) of the mother and accounts for the strong physiological bond that children have with their mothers (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde 1975:264; Antwi 2016:65; Opoku 1978:99; Sarpong 1974:37).

Most Akan people relate their lineage from their mother's descent by blood and trace. This matrilineal descent also governs inheritance, succession, and land tenure. People bound by blood form an *abusua* (*clan*), an idea underscored by the Akan saying *abusua baako, mogyaa baako* (*one family, one blood*). Members of the lineage constitute *nipa korɔ* (*the same person*) because all the members have the blood of their first ancestor running through them. This idea highlights the corporate unity of the Akan lineage.

Since the members of a family have the same blood, they are forbidden to intermarry. A breach of this rule of exogamy is a taboo referred to as *mogyafra* (*mixing of blood*) – an incestuous act that constitutes a serious crime and sin.

***Sunsum* (an Individual Spirit)**

One of the immaterial parts of the human, according to the Akan worldview, is *sunsum* (an individual spirit) which derives from the father at conception and bears one's distinctive personality, *subane* (*character*), intelligence, and behavioral or psychological attributes (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde 1975:266; Antwi 2016:65; Opoku 1978:96; Sarpong 1974:37). *Sunsum* comes to play at various aspects of one's life, including the social, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions. It perishes at death.

A person's *sunsum* can be trained to change from a state of being 'light', indicated by the Bono-Twi (Akan) saying *ne sunsum ɔɔhare* (*his/her soul is light*), suggesting that that person has a weak personality, to a state of being 'heavy' (indicated by the saying *ne sunsum ooduru* – indicating that his/her *sunsum is heavy*), suggesting a strong personality and courage (Opoku 1978:96). A person with an imposing personality is stated to have an overshadowing *sunsum* (*ne sunsum hyɛɛ me so*). All these sayings underscore a close relation between one's *sunsum* and personality.

According to Gyekye (1987:88), the term *sunsum* is used 'both genetically to refer to all unperceivable, mystical beings and forces in Akan ontology, and specifically to refer to the activating principles in the person'. *Sunsum* is the part of the human being which is attacked by evil forces like witchcraft. It is believed that people with a 'light' *sunsum* can easily be attacked by evil forces. Therefore, as part of fortification, one may have to increase the 'weight' of their *sunsum*. There is therefore an Akan (Bono-Twi) saying, *sɛ wo sunsum ooduru a, bayifoɔ ntumi wo* (*if your sunsum is heavy, witchcraft cannot overcome you*). The Akan people believe that the *sunsum* may be the spiritual cause of sickness besides the physiological cause. For this reason there is a strong connection between Akan religion and the practice of medicine.

The Kraa (Nipa-Kraa – the Soul)

Another immaterial component of the human person is *kraa* (*nipa-kraa* or *ɔkra* – *the human soul*), an unperishable source of life, energy, and vitality,

and the bearer of ones *nkrabea* (*destiny*) (Gyekye 1987:108-111). The Akan people hold that the *nipa-kraa* emanates from the *Nyame-Kraa* (*God's soul*) in a similar way that sparks emanate from fire (Agyarko 2009:163; Gyekye 1987:85; Sarpong 1974:37). As a divine spark, the *kraa* connects humans to God and forms a divine-human bond. The *kraa* has an ante-mundane existence with God. It differs from the *sunsum* in that the former is constant and cannot be changed while the latter can be trained to change its status (as outlined above). Again, the *kraa* remains within a person and is not apparent, while the *sunsum* externalizes itself in one's appearance and personal qualities.

In its incarnated life, the *kraa* lives partly as a separate being and serves as a guardian spirit to protect its bearer (Opoku 1978:96). This fact is underlined in the Akan saying *me kraa di makyi* (*my soul is following me – meaning my soul protects me*) or *ne kraa apa nákyi* (*their soul has failed to guide them*) (Opoku 1978:96). In this case, the soul is perceived as a person's twin or double. Opoku (1978:96) asserts that the *kraa* may also be considered as an object of worship that received thanks and sacrifices. The associated ritual is *kradware* (*the washing/purification of the soul*).

The *Honhom* or *Ahomee* (Breath)

Intrinsically and symbiotically connected to the *kraa* is *honhom/ahomee* (*breath of life*), derived from the Akan verb *home* (*breathe*), which animates the human body and enables a person to breathe, thereby becoming *kraateasefoɔ* (*a living soul or human being*) (Ephirim-Donkor 2021:110; Antwi 2016:87; Sarpong 1974:37) in a similar way that the first human became a living soul after being animated by the breath of God (Gn 2:7). The expression *kraateasefoɔ* underscores the strong connection between the soul (*kraa*) and life (*nkwa*) (Gyekye 1987:85). The presence of *honhom/ahomee* in a body indicates the presence of life in that body. Similarly, the cessation of *ahomee* or the departure of the *honhom* indicates death. Thus, the Akan people may express the death of a person euphemistically as *ne honhom kɔ* (*his/her soul is gone*) or *ne kraa afiri ne mu* (*his/her soul has withdrawn from their body*). Here, the terms *honhom* and *kraa* express the same thing: Their departure from the body results in the person's demise (Gyekye 1987:88). However, it does not mean that *honhom* and *kraa* are identical, as the former depends on the latter.

The cessation of the *ahomee* or the departure of the *honhom* from the body is a proof of the *kraa*'s departure from the body (Gyekye 1984:201; Sarpong 1974:37). The *ahomee/honhom* is an invisible evidence of the presence of the *kraa*. This means that even though *honhom/ahomee* is not divine, its presence indicates the presence of *kraa* and hence the presence of God in humans. When one exhales, the exhaled air joins *mframa* (the *air*) outside the body. The Akan-Bono people therefore depicts God as *mframa*, stating *se wope se woka biibi kyere Nyame a ka kyere mframa (if you want to talk to God, speak to the air)*. This is an Akan expression of the omnipresence of God. The departure of the *honhom* from the *kraateasefoɔ* (*living soul*) takes place at a time that is decreed and known only by God. This makes God the only one who gives and takes life. The *kraa* is permanently seated within the body and leaves to go back to God only at death (Akesson 1965:289; Ephirim-Donkor 2021:110-111). As the *kraa* leaves, its accompanying *honhom* also leaves the person to become a *samane* (a *ghost*) in the image of the deceased and journeys to *asamando* (*the ancestral realm*) (Meyerowitz 1951: 27; Antwi 2016:87; Sarpong 2002:91; 1974:37). A wicked *samane* is not allowed entrance into *asamando*, and therefore becomes an evil and dangerous spirit that hovers around.

The Ntorɔ

Another immaterial part of the human being is *ntorɔ* which is the spiritual-genetic aspect transmitted from the father to the child through the semen to determine a child's character and personality (Opoku 1978:98). The father's *ntorɔ* represents a child's being until the person reaches puberty when their own *ntorɔ*, *kraa*, and *sunsum* work together to determine how they interact in the world (Opoku 1978:96). A person's *ntorɔ* returns to the patrilineal family after their death (Rattray 1929:319).

The Akan people consider the *ntorɔ* as river deities (spirits) that fall into twelve patrilineal groups responsible for governing, guiding, and protecting their clans patrilineally (Denteh 1967:91-92; Opoku 1978:98). These groups and their associated features are *Bosompra* (*tough/strong/firm*), *Bosomtwe* (*compassionate/kind/empathetic*), *Bosompo/Bosomnkóteaa* (*proud/audacious*), *Bosomafram* (*liberal/kind/empathetic*), *Bosommuru* (*respectable/distinguished/noble*), *Bosomkonsi* (*virtuous*), *Bosomdweróbe* (*eccentric/jittery*), *Bosomayensu* (*truculent*), *Bosomsika* (*fastidious*), *Bosomkrete* (*chival-*

rous), *Bosomakim* (fanatic), and *Bosomafi* (chaste) (Owusu-Gyamfi 2023:25-26).

The *ntorɔ* vividly comes to play in everyday conversation in response to greetings. A person may enter a house and greet the people, *Mema ho akye oo!* (Good morning!) and then adds, *Bɛgye me Anyaado oo!* (The response for my greeting is Anyaado). The response is indicative of the *ntorɔ* group to which the person belongs. The Akan greeting responses *anyaado*, *ɔson*, *amu*, *abrao*, and others indicate one's *ntorɔ* group (that is, *ntɔn*) (Bartle 1982:97). Knowledge about these responses is very important especially when dealing with traditional priests, chiefs, and elders (Bartle 1982:97).

Since the concept of *kraa* is the main focus of this essay, the next section examines this concept further.

The Akan Concept of Soul in Nana Kwame Ampadu's Thought

This section explores what Ghana's Nana Kwame Ampadu's highlife song *Yaa Amanua* reveals about the Akan doctrine of the soul. Ampadu (1945-2021) is one of the foremost Ghanaian highlife musicians. He was born in Obo (Kwahu) in the Eastern Region of Ghana. He started his music career in the mid-1960s and composed over 700 songs in his lifetime (Owusu-Gyamfi 2023:180). He was the lead singer, chief composer, and founder of the *African Brothers Band*, founded in 1963 and renamed the *African Brothers International Band* in 1973. In 1973, the Arts Council of Ghana crowned Ampadu as *Adwontofɔɔhene* (king of musicians), indicating his status as the most prolific and influential musician of all times (up to that time). Ampadu's musical genre has spread to Western Anglophone African countries like Liberia, Sierra Leon, Nigeria, and Gambia. His lyrics usually draw on traditional African values and philosophy. He died on September 28, 2021, at the age of 76.

In the song *Yaa Amanua*, Ampadu tells a story of a woman named Yaa Amanua, who was barren for years and always blamed *Nyame* (God) for her barrenness. One day, while on her farm, a man in white apparel appeared to her and upon following him, Yaa Amanua got to a large city and eventually entered the palace where the King welcomed her and asked about her mission. Upon hearing how Yaa Amanua went to the palace, the King explained to her that he is not the cause of her childlessness because it is the children

who choose who should conceive them. He asked Yaa Amanua to sit beside him while souls of children came to say goodbye to him before leaving for their earthly lives.

After two souls had come to say goodbye to the King, a third soul came and indicated that he was going to Yaa Amanua who had been blaming God for her barrenness. The soul told the King about how his earthly life would be, narrating:

After I crawl, there will be a day that my mother will leave me with her rival to go and fetch water from the stream. The rival will take a mirror to plait her hair. I will then crawl, take hold of the mirror and break it. When this happens, the woman will insult me and this will sadden my soul, cause me to fall sick and die eventually (Ampadu 1970).

When the King asked what would happen if his mother prevented him from dying at that stage, he continued:

If I do not die at that time, I will become a trap-setter at the age of ten and look after myself through this vocation. When I am about sixteen years, I will ask my father to buy a gun for me. I will use the gun for hunting and one day I will kill *wansane* (antelope). I will share its meat for all the people in my household but will give my mother only the intestines. When I do this, my mother will be angry and speak harshly to me. This will make me fall sick and die eventually (Ampadu 1970).

Then the King asked him what he would do if his mother did not say anything about the meat. He then narrated:

If my mother does not say anything about the meat, I will find another means to die because I am determined to die at that point. I will go into a lake at the back of our house to wash my knife. As I wash my hands, there is a big snake in the lake that will bite me to die (Ampadu 1970).

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The King then asked again what he would do if his mother prevented him from dying at this point too. He stated:

If my mother prevents me from dying at this point, I will grow up and become an honourable person to look after my parents. My parents will die and I will organize a befitting burial for them. When I am about seventy years, I will take leave and come back to you, *Nana*, King (Ampadu 1970).

After this, the King told Yaa Amanua to go back to Earth and expect to have this child. Ampadu's song reveals important facts about Akan anthropology, some of which are outlined below.

Preexistence of the Soul with Nyame

The Akan concept of the soul highlighted in Ampadu's song shows that the soul has a divine origin. Ampadu's song depicts the human soul as pre-existing with *Nyankopɔn* (God) in a metaphysical world before its incarnation. He presents human souls as living in a city in the kingdom of God where they have a personal interaction with God. It is from this city that souls incarnate into the human body and come to live on earth. A person is born with the soul living within their human frame because the soul cannot survive in the physical realm without being incarnated in a human body. The incarnation happens when the father supplies the *ntorɔ* and *sunsum* through his sperms and the mother contributes the *mogyaa* through her ovary during their sexual intercourse. God adds the *kraa* to these elements to complete the creation of the human person (Meyerowitz 1951:24). The Akan people believe that God shoots the life-giving spark (*kraa*) into the child's bloodstream to bring their blood to life (Meyerowitz 1951:24).

The idea of preexistence of the soul relates closely to the Akan doctrine of reincarnation. The Akan people believe in the reincarnation of the soul (Sarpong 1974:39). Therefore the soul of a new-born child could be that of an ancestor or someone who belongs to the same tribe. The Akan people aver, 'It is those who go to the land of the dead who return to be born'; 'If people don't go, others don't come'; and 'Nobody gives birth to another person's ancestor' to highlight their belief in the reincarnation of the soul (Ofori 2014:14). The Akan name *Ababio* (*the one who has come back*), like the Yoruba name *Babatunde* (*father returns* or *a father has returned*) underlines the

belief that the souls of ancestors can reincarnate in their descendants. It is believed that as the *kraa* leaves for its earthly life, it is commanded to live a good life to return as a pure *kraa* or a good *saman-pa* (*spiritual being*) – a state that every Akan person aspires to achieve to be canonized as an ancestor (cf. Mbiti 1990:74).

Nkrabea (Pre-Decided Course of Life) for the Soul

Another concept highlighted in Ampadu's song is *nkrabea* (*predetermined course of life*). The Akan people believe that the *kraa* obtains leave from God to enter the physical world (Opoku 1978:95). Before the soul comes into the human world, it says goodbye to *Nyame*. The goodbye or farewell ceremony that takes place, before it incarnates, accounts for the Akan reference to this entity as *kraa* (from the verb *kra* [*say farewell* or *goodbye*]). As part of the goodbye ceremony in heaven (depicted as a city in Ampadu's song), the soul anticipates their life-destination or future beforehand (Christaller quoted in Akesson 1965:281). Therefore, the soul enters the world with a pre-decided/predetermined course of life, referred to as *nkrabea*. *Nkrabea* derives from the verb *kra* (*say/bid farewell/goodbye* or *take leave of*) and *bea* which indicates the manner of doing something (Opoku 1978:100). *Nkrabea* refers to the manner of taking leave just as depicted in the leave-taking (goodbye ritual) or the way in which one's life was fixed to unfold during the leave-taking rites of their *kraa*. *Nkrabea*, therefore, refers to one's fate, appointed lot, allotted life, or final lot (Opoku 1978:100).

Opoku identifies two theories regarding *nkrabea*. One theory has it that it is God who gives the *nkrabea* to the soul before they leave for their earthly life (Opoku 1978:100). The *nkrabea* received this way is referred to as *hyebea* or *hyeberɛ* (*the way and manner in which one's destiny was ordered*) (Opoku 1978:100). Another theory claims that the soul decides and informs God about their life course – what they are going to do in their earthly existence – and when God approves it, it becomes fixed (Opoku 1978:100). Ampadu's song supports the view that the soul decides their *nkrabea* and informs God to finalize it. Whichever theory one follows, the fact remains that God has control over human destiny. The fulfillment/realization of the *nkrabea* in the soul's earthly life is referred to as *abrabɔ* or *bra* (*ɔbra*), which is considered in the next section.

The Soul in Earthly Life

Ampadu's song depicts the soul as coming into the world with a life frame that needs to be fulfilled. The invisible soul lives with and in a person throughout their lifetime and manifests itself through the bearer's activities (Meyerowitz 1951:24). Therefore, a person's character and actions are key determinants of the nature of their soul (Akeson 1965:281). The Akan maxim *me kra nnye* (*my soul is a bad one*) indicates that one's soul is associated with misfortunes. In Ampadu's song each of the three souls that came to God to say goodbye had their own life frame for their earthly existence. From this perspective, one may say that anything that happens in a person's life may have something to contribute to the fulfillment of the *nkrabea*.

Though present in a person throughout their lifetime, the strength or the presence of the *kraa* varies at different times. The narration by the third soul (the one that would become Yaa Amanua's child) indicates that during their earthly life, the soul may experience different moods. For example, the soul told God that when he breaks his mother's rival's mirror and he is insulted, he will be saddened, fall sick, and eventually die. In this saddened state the soul can easily become sick and die. When the soul is happy, it is strong and when sad, it is weak. The presence of the soul inside the human body in different situations is captured in various Akan sayings. One saying states that *me kraa adwane afiri me ho* (*my soul has fled away from me*) or *me kra atu ayera* (*my soul has flown away or my soul has vanished*) to indicate great fear or shock. This means that fear, grief, or shock has caused the person's life force to diminish or to take flight of them. People use the expression *ne kraa ayera afiri ne ho* (*their soul has vanished from them*) to describe someone who, as a result of sickness or a life-threatening condition, gets thinner and more lifeless on a daily basis (Meyerowitz 1951:24). In the case of Yaa Amanua's child, the sorrowful mood of his soul could cause him to fall sick and die easily.

Immortality of the Soul

Like many other Africans, the Akan people hold the concept of the immortality of the human soul. Their saying *nipa wu a na onwuiε* (*when a person dies, they are not [really] dead*) expresses their belief that the human being has something within themselves that lives on in 'the world of the spirits' after the person's death (Gyekye 1987:100; 1996:13-14). This element is the *kraa*. This belief is also expressed in Ampadu's song (analyzed above). In the song,

each of the three souls who went to say goodbye to God clearly stated that after some time of living on earth, they would return to God. This means that while their bodies could not come back into the metaphysical world, the souls would come back to live with God.

The Akan concept of the immortality of the soul also relates to the various gateways or entrances through which – that is the day on which – the soul enters the physical world. Each Akan child is given a *kra-dini* (*natal name* or *soul name*) depending on the day they are born (Akeson 1965:282-283). These names are not day-names (as they are mistakenly referred to in English) but are actually the names of the *kraa* born on specific days (Opoku 1978:95). There are seven souls for either gender – seven for the male gender and seven for the female – and each of them is known by the natal/soul name. Sunday-born males and females are named *Kwasi* and *Kosua* respectively; Monday-born are *Kwadwo* or *Adwoa*; Tuesday-born are *Kwabena* or *Abena*; Wednesday-born *Kwaku* or *Akua*; Thursday-born *Yaw* or *Yaa*; Friday-born *Kofi* or *Afia*; Saturday-born *Kwame* or *Ama* respectively (Dankwah 1968:47). The respective *akragya* are the deities of the planets of the ancients, including the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, or as the Akan people call them, *Awusi*, *Adwo*, *Abena* (*Ben*), *Aku*, *Awo* (*or Abrao*), *Afi*, and *Amen* (Meyerowitz 1951:25). They believe that the child born on a sacred day for a particular patron deity has a strong bond with that deity and is protected by that deity. This explains why children are named after the *akragya*.

Meyerowitz records that the Twi people of Wassa-Amanfi claim that the seven guardian/patron deities of the seven days of the week are responsible for distributing souls to children on behalf of God (Meyerowitz 1951:25). According to this account, after a child is formed from its clanic blood and endowed in *Asamando* (the *nether realm*) with a *sunsum* and patrilineal *ntoro*, the *akragya* takes it to God and bathes it in a golden bath (before God) by pouring water over it. God then rises and pronounces the *nkrabea* of the child, and a spark-like water drop from an *adwera* leaf falls into the child's mouth. This *nkwansuo* (*water of life*) with God's breathing image in its center then penetrates the whole body of the child until it is filled with *honhom* (the *breath of life*) to wake up the child to life. According to the story, the *kraa* is perceived as the *nkwansuo* that passes through the child's veins to give them life. In this case, God is still the source of the soul. No matter what one's views on this subject are, the immortality of the soul is underlined in the established relation between each Akan *kra-din* and its associated deity (Akes-

son 1965:283). Just as the days to which the gods are connected do not end but reoccur continuously, so the soul associated with them also lives perpetually (Akeson 1965:283).

The Akan people believe in a limited number of human souls, a concept that makes it necessary for souls to reincarnate. The immortality of the soul is necessary for the perpetuity of the Akan clan and tribe. Given the foregoing, death cannot make void the existence of the Akan clan because ‘though the group may not be immortal in the absolute sense of the word, still it is true that it endures longer than the individuals and that it is born and incarnated afresh in each generation’ (Durkheim quoted in Akeson 1965:284).

Theological Reflections

The Akan doctrine of human soul, examined above, offers a significant basis for Akan/African theological reflection. In this section I consider three key thematic areas: Divine presence in humankind, immortality of the soul, and *nkrabea* and human responsibility.

The Soul as Divine Presence

The Akan doctrine of *kraa* and the Christian doctrine of the *Imago Dei* – the belief that God created human beings in his own likeness and image (Gn 1:26-27) – are distinct yet interconnected concepts with theological and philosophical significance in understanding divine-human and human-human relationships, as well as human ethical responsibilities. First, both concepts provide the foundation for uniqueness and human dignity. The *kraa* (and for that matter the *nkrabea*) forms an integral part of one’s identity, individuality, and consciousness (Gyekye 1987:107). It is a divine gift that provides each person with uniqueness and the means to relate to God. As Gyekye (1987: 107) puts it, ‘It is your destiny [*Nkrabea* borne by the *kraa*] that makes you you, and my destiny that makes me me’. Similarly, the Christian concept of the *Imago Dei* forms the basis for human dignity. Grudem (2011:445-447) considers the *Imago Dei* as consisting of morality (the ability to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong, and to take responsible decisions), spirituality, creativity, intellectual abilities, and sociability (the ability to relate with and love others). The human attributes set each person apart. Even

though all humans possess these qualities, the degree to which these qualities are exhibited is different for each individual.

Second, both concepts form the foundation for moral agency and responsibility. The *kraa* is believed to guide one's moral and ethical choices and actions, thereby making a person responsible for the result of their actions (Gyekye 1987:116, 121-122). Gyekye (1987:121) states that even though the Akan people believe in the concept of destiny, they also believe that the individual has a role to play to be successful in life. Humans have a free will which they need to exercise responsibly. Humans as moral beings are ethically responsible for the way they relate to and/or treat other humans and the environment. Correspondingly, the concept of the *Imago Dei* presents to humans the ethical responsibility of mirroring God's character in their relationships and actions by treating others justly, compassionately and respectfully, and freeing them from their bondage to sin (Moltmann 1993:1; Vorster 2011:195). The moral consequences of the *Imago Dei* doctrine become evident when one considers that to love God, one must also extend love to fellow humans, recognizing each individual as a manifestation of divine essence.

Third, both doctrines underline the ethical responsibilities that individuals have toward others and the need to recognize and respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, no matter the person's race, color, gender, socio-political, or economic background. The Akan people believe that all human *akraa* have the same value because they come from one source, *Nyame* (Akesson 1965:284). Since *Nyame* is a perfect being, the soul also enters the world as a perfect entity. *Nyame*, being a perfect being, could not emit an imperfect *kraa* into the human being. Ephraim Amu (quoted in Laryea 2006:53) asserts that *Ɔdomankoma bɔɔ adeɛ no [he], ɔbɔɔ no krokron* (when the Creator created the 'thing' he created it holy [perfect]). The 'thing' referred to as having been created holy is the human soul (Laryea 2006:53). Imperfection only comes during the earthly life through the wrong use of one's free will. Though qualitatively the same, each *kraa* assumes a physical, political, and socio-economic role that is appropriate for them in the clan or tribe. For example, they may assume the position of a *nana* (ancestor), a grandfather, or a higher status. This means that even though all *akraa* are qualitatively equal, they differ in status in their earthly life (Akesson 1965:284).

Similarly, the Christian doctrine of the *Imago Dei* holds that all humans have intrinsic value, not simply a conditional value (Keown 2002:41). Therefore, ‘human life is not only an *instrumental* good, a necessary precondition of thinking or doing, but a basic good, a fundamental basis of human flourishing’ (Keown 2002:41; original emphasis). The value and sacredness of life is not determined by its usefulness but on the basis of the divine presence in human beings. This is the reason why God prohibits the intentional killing of innocent human beings (Gn 9:6; Jas 3:9). The fact that all souls have the same value has the ethical implication that all human beings need to be dignified no matter their health, socio-economic, or political status (as noted above).

Finally, both concepts form the basis of one’s human relationship with God. From the Akan perspective, humans communicate to God through the *kraa*. The human soul is the manifestation of an eternal absolute Being in every human being, thereby making every human being God’s offspring. This idea informs the Akan proverb *nnipa nyinaa ye Nyame mma, biao nnye asaase ba* (all humans are God’s children; no one is an offspring of the earth) (Gyekye 1987:85). The interpretation of this proverb is that the life of every human being comes from *Nyame* and can communicate freely with him. The human-divine communication, however, requires intermediaries because God is regarded as a great King who cannot be addressed directly. Similarly, the Christian idea of the *Imago Dei* highlights that human beings are designed to relate with God. The spiritual component of the *Imago Dei* is what enables humans to communicate with God because God is Spirit.

The above discussion indicates that while the Akan doctrine of *kraa* and the Christian doctrine of the *Imago Dei* have different cultural and religious backgrounds, they share common themes of individual uniqueness and the sacred nature of human beings, moral agency, and the significance of one’s relationship with the divine.

Immortality of the Soul

As noted above, the Akan people believe that the human soul is immortal. After a critical lexical and theological study, Amevenku and Boaheng (2021: 129-132) make the following conclusions: First, there is no such term as ‘the immortality of the soul’ in Scripture. The Hebrew term *olam* (*everlasting* or *perpetual*) does not in any way refer to an indefinite state of being beyond death (Renn 2014:510). Two Greek terms often translated with ‘immortality’

are *athanasia* and *aphtharsia* (Hannah 1990:245). *Athanasia* can be translated with ‘deathlessness’, ‘without death’, ‘imperishable’, and ‘incorruptible’, referring to an unending existence or exemption from death (1 Cor 15:53-54; 1 Tim 6:16). In 1 Timothy 6:16, the term *athanasia* is used to depict God as the origin of immortality, distinguishing this divine quality from humans to whom immortality is ascribed. *Athanasia* can be described as ‘more than deathlessness, but a quality of life enjoyed as death is swallowed up by life [2 Cor 5:4]’ (Vine 2015:522). *Aphtharsia*, sometimes rendered as ‘immortality’ or ‘incorruption’, occurs seven times in the New Testament and in all but one of these contexts is translated with ‘immortality’ (Rm 2:7; 2 Tim 2:10; 1 Cor 15:53, 54), but does not also relate to the/a soul. It sometimes refers to the believer’s true hope (Rm 2:7) – the glory, honor, immortality, and eternal life which Christ brings.

The Bible does not teach that the soul is inherently indestructible or that it continues to exist independently after death (Amevenku & Boaheng 2021:131). Instead, human beings are created to rely on God for their existence. Unlike God, the human soul is not inherently indestructible. Scripture does not indicate that the soul, which is a component of the person, will persist independently after physical death based on its own indestructibility. Any persistence of the soul or spirit after death is solely due to God’s preservation and sustenance. Again, the central biblical teaching regarding the future of humanity centers on the resurrection of the body (Amevenku & Boaheng 2021:132). Both the body and the soul (or even the body, soul, and spirit) are regarded as essential components of human existence. Immortality, in the biblical context, applies to the whole person and is achieved through the resurrection, not due to an inherent quality of the soul alone.

The biblical idea that the immortality of the soul depends on God’s sustenance is also found in the Akan doctrine of the soul. The Akan people believe that the soul cannot exist on its own apart from God. Thus, its continual existence relates to the immortality of God. This fact is highlighted by the Akan saying, *Nyame nwu na mawu (God does not die, so I will not die)*, indicating that ‘[i]f God dies, I shall die, but since God does not die, I shall therefore not die’ (Quarcoopome 1987:106; Opoku 1978:95). The point is that the soul will never die because God, upon whom they exist, lives forever. In this sense, the term ‘immortality’ refers to ‘the condition of not being mortal, thus being deathless, undying or everlasting’ (McKim 2014:159). This understanding of ‘immortality’ can be ascribed only to God because it is God who is

intrinsically immortal (cf. 1 Tim 6:15, 16). The human soul does not have intrinsic immortality; it is granted conditional immortality to enjoy immortality as long as it continues to depend on God.

However, the theological view that immortality applies to the whole person and is achieved through the resurrection is absent in the Akan view about the human soul. The Akan people ascribe immortality only to the soul, though (as noted above) this immortality depends on God immortality. The Akan people do not hold any belief in the resurrection of the body as it is held in Christian theology. There is therefore the need to shape the Akan worldview with the biblical worldview which is the standard and highest authority in Christian theological formulation (no matter the context).

***Nkrabea* and Human Responsibility**

The relation between destiny and human responsibility is a tough theological and philosophical issue. The Akan doctrine of the soul necessitates a discussion of this important matter at this point. The Akan people, like some other West-African tribes, hold that each human being has a destiny that is largely unchangeable. The Akan belief that one's *kraa* is predestined and the predestined course of life is difficult to deal with or change is underlined in the saying *Nyame nkrabea nni nkwatibea* (*what Nyame has destined cannot be evaded*) (Meyerowitz 1951:27). The concept of *nkrabea* also finds more meaning in the expression *Dee Nyame ahyehye he (no), dasani ntumi nnane ani* (*How God has ordered things, no human being can alter it*). The Akan people know that only God has control over human destiny and has the power to end one's life when it is his will. This is highlighted in the saying *se Nyame nkuu wo a teasefoɔ bere kwa* (*if God has not killed you, any human being makes such attempts in vain*) and *se Nyame anku wo a wonwu* (*if God does not kill you, you will not die*).

In theory, *nkrabea* is unalterable. However, in practice, it does not seem to be unchangeable because it can be influenced by certain factors either for good or for evil. Opoku (1978:102) maintains that a good destiny can be maintained and prolonged through consultation with a deity; similarly, a bad destiny can be corrected. A person's destiny may be revealed after consultation with an oracle and appropriate measures taken to forestall that bad destiny. People consult traditional medicine men/women to alter their destinies for the better. There is, therefore, a sense in which the Akan people actively take responsibility for their own destiny, with the confidence and belief

that they are able to alter their lot in life. Evil forces can also harm one's destiny and frustrate an otherwise good fate. It is believed that a witch or wizard can exchange another person's good destiny for their child's bad destiny so that the witch's or wizard's child will succeed in life.

Furthermore, the fulfilment of destiny also depends on one's willingness to give heed to the advice of the elders in the community (Opoku 1978:102). Elders have great wealth of experience which they can share with others to enable anyone who applies their wisdom to have a fulfilled life. This is the rationale behind the Akan saying *Panyini ano sene suman* (*the words of an elder is more potent than the influence of an amulet or a charm*). The point is that the fulfilment of one's life (destiny) can be better enhanced through the application of the advice of the elderly than the application of charms.

Moreover, a person's own acts and choices also affect their chances of fulfilling their destiny (Opoku 1978:102). A person who rushes in life or behaves impulsively is not likely to have a fulfilled destiny. One therefore has to act responsibly at all times. One's character also affects their destiny (Opoku 1978:102). A bad character may account for a bad fate. The Yoruba saying, 'A good destiny unsupported by character is worthless' highlights that a good destiny does not automatically lead to a fulfilled life (Opoku 1978:102; Adeniyi 2015:180). A person's *nkrabea* may be modified for the worse through an evil and/or irresponsible living. One is therefore expected to cooperate to ensure a successful destiny by acquiring and practicing a good character (Adeniyi 2015:180). It is important to note that destiny is only applied in explaining the inexplicable habitual traits of a person, either towards good or evil. It is not projected into the future; the future is open and one has to make good and responsible choices (Gyekye 1987:117-119).

Nkrabea carries a sense of inevitability, but it also involves the exercise of one's freedom (Gyekye 1987:122). It does not imply that individuals have no agency or influence over their actions. People are responsible for their actions because their fate does not deprive them of their free will. The Akan people also believe that certain things can happen *asiane* (*by accident*) and those things are not part of one's destiny. The idea that each person's *nkrabea* makes the person a unique being also implies that everyone is equipped for whatever vocation God has given them (Gyekye 1987:119). This in turn encourages people to work hard in their areas, thereby increasing their productivity and ensuring their societal development.

A Theological Reflection on the Akan Doctrine of the Human Soul

In Christian theology the foregoing discourse relates to the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. There is a tension between the fact that God is supremely powerful, all-knowing, and in complete control of the universe and all events that occur within it on the one hand, and the idea that human beings are responsible for their own actions on the other. From the Akan Christian perspective, the belief in *nkrabea* is an acknowledgment of God's omnipotence and human limitations set by God's providence (Opoku 1978:100). There are certain things that human beings are not able to control, as they are finite in contrast with God who is infinite and sovereign. The concept of *nkrabea* reminds humans of their limitedness and the sovereignty of God, and hence the need to live responsibly under divine sovereignty.

Thus, human beings need to live their lives under the sovereignty of God, knowing that every action and decision is subject to divine scrutiny. Also, because of their limitedness, humans are called to trust in God's plan and providence. This trust does not negate human effort but places it within the context of a greater divine purpose. The awareness of human finitude and God's infinite nature fosters humility. It is a reminder that despite human knowledge and power, there is an overarching divine authority. This humility leads to a dependence on God for strength, guidance, and provision. More so, understanding the sovereignty of God and human responsibility calls for a high standard of moral and ethical behaviour. Believers are motivated to uphold values such as justice, mercy, and compassion, reflecting the character of the sovereign God they serve.

Conclusion

This article has indicated that Christianity can better serve the Akan people through a responsible and authentic integration of indigenous ideas into Christian theology. It has argued that the Akan concept of the soul supports the Christian ideas of the divine presence in humankind, the belief in the immortality of the soul, and the need to live responsibility under the sovereignty of God. The integration of indigenous concepts and Christian theology should serve to facilitate the incorporation of relevant elements of the Akan culture into Christian worship so as to make the Christian faith more vibrant and dynamic to the Akan audience.

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