

# The Multiplicity of *Ahonhom* (Spirits) in the Akan Spiritual Cosmology

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## Abstract

African tradition and thought consider spirits to be elements of power, force, authority, and vital energy underlying all existence. There is therefore this huge fear of what goes on in the unseen world since spirits are known to operate in this realm. Invisible though this power may be, Africans perceive it directly. This has led to the adoption of all manner of strategies in order to get closer to *Onyankopon*, 'the Supreme Being' so that the necessary support and protection may be received. Without the spirits, the Akan feels that there is no way to reach God. In this paper I will discuss the role of *Onyankopon*, 'the Supreme Being' and some other spirit beings in the Akan spiritual cosmology and the various roles they play in the affairs of human.

**Key words:** *Onyankopon*, *ahonhom*, Akan, ancestors, deities, spirits, *abosom*

## 1.0 Introduction

*Onyankopon*, 'the Supreme Being' as the creator of this world created both "visible and invisible" things (Guthrie, 1994). It is in this invisible world that we see the operation of *ahonhom*, 'spirits'. And since spirits are thought to be invisible and ubiquitous, people can never be sure of their presence around them (Mbiti, 1969). This seems to create some sort of fear in the life of human beings as people will do anything possible to explore those spirits to their advantage and to ensure that they do not offend the spirits in order not to receive their wrath. The Akan people also believe in the spiritual world (*ahonhom wiase*) of powers. For them, there are two groups of *ahonhom*, namely *ahonhom pa*, 'benevolent spirits' and *ahonhom bone*, 'malevolent spirits'. These *ahonhom* are believed to impinge on human life either positively or negatively. The *ahonhom pa* function in a way that leads to the welfare of the Akan people (Afriyie, 2010). On the other hand, the *ahonhom bone* work against human beings and try to keep them from enjoying *nkwa* (life that is filled with good health, prosperity, among others).

## 2.0 The Akan People of Ghana

The Akan people inhabit most of the southern parts of Ghana. Thus, they are mainly found in Regions like Ashanti, Eastern, Central, Western and Brong-Ahafo, and are culturally ethnic and homogenous group consisting of the Ashanti, Mfantse, Akyem, Akuapem, Sefwi, Agona, Wassa, Akwamu, Kwahu, Ahanta, Nzema, Bono, Assin, Ahafo and Denkyira. With the exception of some of the Fantis, who are engaged in fishing, the Akan are predominantly crop farmers, growing cash crops such as cocoa, coffee and oil palm, and food crops like maize, beans, cocoyam, yam, tomatoes, pepper and plantains. Some are also engaged in livestock farming or rearing of animals such as sheep, goats, cattle, poultry and pigs. Though, all the Akan ethnic groups speak a common language called Twi, there are considerable amount of variations in vocabulary (Evans, 1950; Ekem, 2009 & Ntow, 2014).

## 3.0 Socio-Political Structure of the Akan People

Akan socio-political organization, inheritance and successional structure are matrilineal in nature; where a group of people claim their root or lineage to one particular ancestress. Thus, members of each *abusua* (clan) are believed to come from the same ancient ancestress hence in the past, marriage between members of the same *abusua* was forbidden. The *abusua*, 'clan' which constitutes a political unit is headed by the *abusuapanyin*, 'family head' and several clans may be headed by a chief and a council of elders who are basically the family heads of the various clans. The chief so chosen must come from the royal family of his mother's clan, suggesting that a son cannot succeed his father when he dies or abdicate the throne (Tweneboah, 2012). Apart from one belonging to his or her mother's family, a person may also inherit their *ntorɔ* or *ntɔn* from their father but, they do not belong to their father's family (Opoku, 1978). The *ntorɔ* or *ntɔn* of a person determines his or her name and *akyiwade*, taboos or hated things or avoidances, and the particular *ɔbosom* that protects him or her.

## 4.0 Classification of Spirits in Akan Traditional Religious Thought

The Akan spiritual cosmology is made up of different classes of spirits, the Chief of all been, *Onyankopon*. They have a great belief in, *Onyankopon* (Supreme Being), *abosom* (deities), *Nananom Nsamanfo* (ancestors), and other divinities such as *Asase Yaa* (earth spirit), which are considered as benevolent spirits while *Sasandua*

(Vindictive Trees), *Sasammao* (Vindictive Animals), *Sasabonsam* (The Forest Monster), and *Mmoatia* (Dwarfs or Fairies) falls within the malevolent spirits.

#### 4.1 *Onyankopɔn* (The Supreme Being)

The Akan, like many other Africans, have belief in a Supreme Being, *Onyankopɔn*, who is responsible for the creation and maintenance of all the creation order, including *abosom* (lesser deities), who serve as intermediaries between humankind and Him. God is omnipresent, but He is evident through His creative works. This is the reason why people will unsuccessfully look for anything to represent the person of God (Evans, 1950). As the Akan proverb expresses it, *Wope asem aka akyere Nyankopɔn a, ka kyere mframa*, 'If you want to say something to God, say it to the wind'. In Edwin W. Smith's engagement with Emil Ludwig about the Africans' perspective of God, Smith indicated to Ludwig that "there was no need to persuade pagan Africans of the existence of God: they are sure of it, but not sure of Him as a living power in their individual experience" (Smith, 1950) which confirms Danquah's position that "Akan religious doctrine knows only one God" (Danquah, 1968). This suggests that, the African and for that matter the Akan, truly knows God and who He really is. And this affirms an Akan proverb that: *Obi nkyere abɔfra Nyame*, 'God needs no pointing out to a child'. The Akan expresses the supremacy and incomparability of the Supreme Being through various names that they have coined for Him, such as *Tweduampon* (the God in whom one may put all trust), *Tetekwaframua* (enduring from ancient time), *Brekyirihunuade* (all-seeing, even from behind), *Bɔrebɔre / Ɔboɔdee* (the Creator, Originator) and *Ɔdomankoma* (the only giver of mercy). The Akan designation of various names to *Onyankopɔn* is based on the fact that He reveals Himself in various ways through His creative works.

The Akan also believe that *Onyankopɔn* is the Creator and protector of human being, and has the power and authority to sustain life and to take it. But, because of the awesome and transcendent nature of God, the Akan hold the belief that God is unapproachable and can only be approached through the *abosom* and other divinities. This also account for the reason why though the Akan has great respect and reverence for God, there is no shrine or place created for Him to be worshipped, except through the *abosom* and other divinities. In His benevolence, *Onyankopɔn* causes rain to fall and the sun to shine on all mankind. Providing food and other needs of mankind at all times.

#### 4.2 *Nananom nsamanfo* (Ancestral Spirits)

In Akan community, there is the general belief that "after death, the departed ones enter into a spiritual state of existence and interfere in human activities" (Opoku, 1978). This suggests that, the community is made up of both the living members and the *nananom nsamanfo*. Bediako (2014) has posited that "ancestors represent a more enduring reality in the African world-view than do the divinities, other non-human spirits, amulets and charms". And to Turner (1977), "the ancestors figure so prominently in the first level or region of the spirit world that they seem to create an ancestral cult and to obscure the spirit beings before whom they otherwise serve as mediators between the transcendent and the human". So who are the ancestors? They are the spirits of people who have lived here on earth, and are dead and have gone to live at a special place called '*asomando*' (which is similar to heaven though the Akans do not have a concept of heaven), who are "essentially clan or lineage ancestors. So, they have to do with the community or society in which their progeny relate to one another and not with a system of religion as such" (Bediako, 1999). Mbiti (1975) reiterates that the ancestors are "family spirits going back four or five generations, and the living are conscious about the need to remain on good terms with these spirits". This suggests that no one can take somebody's ancestor to be his or her ancestor. And to qualify as an ancestor, one must be married, give birth to children, live a good life, dies a natural death and be properly buried (Opoku, 1978).

Since, the Akan believe that, the ancestors play a significant role in their daily affairs and keeps watch over them; they also honour the ancestors with various offerings, in the form of food, drinks, among others.

#### 4.3 *Abosom* (the lesser deities)

The Akan consider the *abosom* (the deities,) as *Onyamemma* (children of God). Apart from sons of *Onyankopɔn*, the *abosom* can also be described as *abrafo* (executioners) and *akyeam* (linguists or spokesmen) (Dickson, 1984). Since *Onyankopɔn* is remote, transcendent and unapproachable (Smith, 1950 & Parrinder, 1976), the *abosom* are His most competent representatives on earth (Onyinah, 2002). Most of the *abosom* are identified with rivers, seas, trees, and rocks as their place of habitat (Evans, 1950). To Onyinah (2002), "the *abosom* are not considered to be in these objects or places, such as the stones, the rivers or the sea, but that as deities they may be consulted or worshipped at such places". In giving another perspective to the *abosom*, Evans (1950), has indicated that "one of the most distinctive objects in this cult is a brass pan which becomes the localized dwelling-place of the spirit-god on solemn occasions. These pans are filled with various sacred objects and medicinal herbs, and the *abosom* is summoned by the sounding of bells and an elaborate ceremonial dance".

The Akan have two main divisions of *abosom*, and these are the *Tete abosom*, ‘tutelar gods’ and *Abosom abrafo*, ‘executing gods’. The first, *tete abosom* such as *tanɔ* and *antoa abosom*, are the gods that are communally owned and they function as guardian spirits, protecting its members from any harm and mischief. The *tete abosom* are derived from *Onyankopɔn*, and are positive and work to help people as they mediate between humanity and *Onyankopɔn*. Opoku (1978) describes them as “gods who have been worshipped from time immemorial”, and occasions such as festivals are marked to honour them. Onyinah (2002) has suggested that the *tete abosom* “do not necessarily hunt for witches...these gods are very flexible”. For the second division of *abosom*, the *abosom abrafo*, Opoku (1978) prefers to refer to them as ‘medicine’ because “they are physical objects or instruments used in the practice of magic which have been elevated to the status of gods” and have their “main activities centred on witch-hunting” (Onyinah, 2002) by executing quick retribution to wrongdoers.

#### 4.4 *Asuman* (Fetish Spirit)

Aside the *abosom*, are the *asuman* (*suman*, singular). According to Onyinah (2002), the “*asuman* are numerous classes of objects such as amulets, charms and talismans”, and are “constructed of a strange variety of ingredients – fibre, the skin of wild animals, the tail of a porcupine, the horn of an antelope, the claw of a leopard, a snail-shell, feathers, seeds, beads” (Evans, 1950) with the blood of sacrificed animals like fowls, and eggs been smeared on them (Onyinah, 2002). Unlike the *tete abosom* which protect the whole state or community, the *asuman* are used as a form of personal protection, and “most Akan men and women possess *suman* for protective purposes, and they often hang them round the necks of their infant children” (Evans, 1950). Others may use the *suman* as offensive magic to inflict pain and even cause the death of their enemies. And one of such “dreaded *suman* is the one called *sabe*, which contains needles embedded in a variety of objects. By sticking one of the needles into a lime and uttering the proper incantation it is believed that the death of one’s enemy is rendered inevitable”. According to Onyinah (2002), “there is *suman* for everything that a person needs among the Akan societies; these include *suman* for marriage, fighting, protecting against witchcraft, business, playing football, learning and hunting.”

#### 4.5 *Asase Yaa* (The Earth Goddess)

In Akan traditional culture, the next deity that ranks after *Onyankopɔn* is His consort, *Asase Yaa* (the Thursday Earth Goddess), who is often referred to as His wife, ‘*yere*’. And this is mostly reflected in Akan libation pouring practices where the linguist or the one pouring the libation will say, ‘*Tweduapon Nyankopɔn nsa* (Almighty God this is wine or drink), *Asase Yaa nsa* (Earth Goddess this is wine or drink), *nananom nsamanfo nsa* (Ancestors this is wine or drink), ...’ In other Akan tribes like Mfantse, she is called *Asase Efua* (Friday Earth Goddess), and can generally be referred to as *Aberewa*, ‘old lady’ in most cases in all the Akan tribes (Opoku, 1978). Like *Onyankopɔn*, there are no temples or shrines for her to be worshipped there since everybody is believed to have access to her though various offerings are often made to her. This account for the Akan maxim, *asase nye bosom na w’akyere mmusuo*, ‘the earth is not a god to provide divination’. To the Akan, *Asase Yaa* is a mother, and as such provides for the needs of her children. *Asase Yaa* serves as the fertile ground for the production of food crops. In most Akan tribes, the day of the Earth Goddess, that is, either Thursday or Friday is set aside as a sacred day and no tilling of the land takes place. This also conforms to that of the Ga people of Ghana, who do not go fishing in the sea on Tuesdays, which is a day considered sacred for the sea goddess, ‘*Nana Bonsompo*’. Severe punishment was meted out in the past to whoever infringed this taboo for it was feared that evil might befall the entire society if this rule was not rigidly observed. It is also believed that anyone who ventures into the forest on these special days will encounter the most unpleasant things imaginable and may not even survive to tell his experience (Opoku, 1978). Today, most of these taboos which served as a means of protecting the land, vegetation and other natural resources are no longer in force, leading to land degradation and wanton destruction of virgin forests.

#### 4.6 *Sasandua* and *Sasammoa* (Vindictive Spirits of Trees and Animals)

The Akan also believe that certain tree plants, *sasandua* and animals, *sasammoa* have spirits. The word, *sasa*, ‘evil revengeful ghost’ is a non-human spirit (Opoku, 1978). *Sasandua* such as *tweneboa* (*Entandophragma*), *nyamedua* (*Alstonia gongensis*) and *odum* (*chlorophora excelsa*) can only be felled when libations are poured to appease the spirits (Opoku, 1978), and failure to do that may come with its own consequences, such as *sasa yare*, ‘disease’ (Onyinah, 2002). *Sasammoa* such as *ekoɔ* (the roan), *ɔtromo* (the bongo) and *ɔsono* (the elephant) are killed by hunters who pacify them or are well protected spiritually.

#### 4.7 *Sasabonsam* (The Forest Monster)

Another supernatural being which inhabit the forest is *Sasabonsam*. The Akan believe that there is only one *Sasabonsam*, unlike the other spirit forces which are many (Onyinah, 2002). *Sasabonsam*, who is the most feared, is known to be “a tall, hairy, wild-eyed monster, with misshapen feet, facing both ways. He sits high up

among the branches of *odum* tree, and is said to use his feet to hook up unwary hunters or other passers-by” (Evans, 1950). The modus operandi of *Sasabonsam* is wholly evil in nature, and above all “he is in league with the witches and magicians” (Evans 1950 & Opoku, 1978). This relationship that exist between *Sasabonsam* and witches is expressed in the Akan maxim, *Se Sasabonsam kɔ ayi a, ɔsɔɛ ɔbayifo*, ‘when *Sasabonsam* attends a funeral, he lodges with the witch’.

#### 4.8 *Mmoatia* (Dwarfs)

*Mmoatia*, ‘the little people’ are a group of spiritual forces that dwell in the forest and assume personalities. They are also believed to enjoy rocky areas as their place of abode. According to Evans (1950), the *mmoatia*, are “about eighteen inches in height and of three varieties – black, red and white. Their feet point backwards, and they converse by means of whistling” and eat banana as their food. He indicated further that “they are invisible, and, except to be initiated, their presence is usually only to be detected by the mischief they do. Some of the black ones can be trained and, it is said, are employed in various capacities in the courts of Chiefs”. It is believed that the black dwarfs are less innocuous to Africans, and for the red dwarfs, they steal and cause mischief, while the white dwarfs are noted to be insidiously evil. However, it is widely acknowledged that, “the better *mmoatia* are believed to be the instructors of the *oduyefo*, ‘medicine-men’, while the more evil kind both provide *suman* for witches and act as their agents” (Evans, 1950).

#### 5.0 Conclusion

*Onyankopɔn*, the Supreme Being has a strong place in Akan ontology. The Akan regard Him as self-existent, unchanging, and reliable God whose power transcends all powers. He is seen as the Creator, Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent Being who is immortal and directs all human affairs. Though no temples have been erected for Him as a place of worship, He is still worshipped in diverse ways. Again, there is no image of Him because He is incomparable and beyond human comprehension.

*Onyankopɔn* according to Akan ontology has so many deputies, the *abosom*, ancestors and other divinities, who work with Him in the unitary theocratic governance of the universe. They do not have absolute power themselves but derive their power from *Onyankopɔn*, and as such serve as intermediaries between humanity and *Onyankopɔn*. Shrines and temples are erected for these divinities, where they are worshipped and various sacrifices are offered to them.

Since the Akan and for that matter the African believes in the existence of *Onyankopɔn*, the only missing link would be the introduction of Jesus Christ to him as the only and better intermediary to *Onyankopɔn*, other than the deities that they worship as a way of reaching out to God. This is to make relevant what Jesus said in John 14:6, ‘...I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’. Despite the Akans’ full knowledge of God; he can only have full access to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Additionally, on the part of the malevolent spirits like *bayie* (witchcraft), *asuman*, *mmoatia* and *sasabonsam* who can cause harm to humankind and therefore requires all manner of sacrifices and restitutions to appease them, the Akan traditionalist can be well assured of maximum security in Jesus Christ. This because all authority is vested in Jesus as he has indicated ‘... All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18), and no evil shall therefore befall those who put their trust in Him as it is assured that ‘But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one (2 Thessalonians 3:3)’.

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