

# NYAME NE ABEREWA: TOWARDS A HISTORY OFAKAN NOTIONS OF 'GOD'<sup>1</sup>

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[Asante] belief is a historical phenomenon  
and must be treated as such.<sup>2</sup>

## *Old Lady and death*

In the late nineteenth century, missionaries and other Westerners who were curious to learn what notions the Akan of the Gold Coast, now Ghana, entertained about the 'Creator of the Universe', were told the following story:

*Long, long ago, Onyankopon<sup>3</sup> lived on earth, or at least he was quite close to us. He was that close that Old Lady [Aberewa] constantly hit him when she pounded her fufu.<sup>4</sup> Onyankopon therefore told her: 'Why do you always do this to me? Because you treat me in this [uncivil] manner, I will retire to on high [soro]<sup>5</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup>I dedicate this article to Gerrie ter Haar, close companion in the study of the religions of Africa since 1984, on her attaining *Aberewa* status, having retired from her chair at the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague; and to John Pobee for his friendship since we first met at Lancaster in August 1975.

<sup>2</sup>McCaskie 1995: 103

<sup>3</sup>Nyame, 'God', was often addressed in prayers by three of his several praise names (*mmeranne*) as *Onyankopon Tweadumpon Kwame*. *Nyame* means both 'heaven', 'sky', particularly as 'radiant' and 'bright' [from *nyàm*, 'shining', 'bright', 'splendid'] and '[Sky] God' (Christaller 1933: 356). *Onyankopon* likely means 'the Shining One who alone is great' (Christaller 1933: 358). *Tweadumpon* praises him as reliable: 'the one upon whom one may lean without falling'. And *Kwame*, being the *kradin*, 'soul name', of a male person born on a Saturday, indicates that Akan regarded Nyame as male.

<sup>4</sup>*Fufu* is the Akan staple food. It is made of boiled pieces of yam, cocoyam, cassava or plantain which are pounded in a mortar with a heavy long pole into starchy mash that is eaten with a peppered palm oil soup seasoned with vegetables and *ènām*,

<sup>5</sup>'meat': venison, chicken, snails, mushrooms, fish or any other seafood (Christaller 1933: 327). 'the space above', 'the upper part', the upper world', 'sky', 'heaven', 'on high', 'upwards' (Christaller 1933: 472).

Which indeed he did. As people could no longer go to Onyankopong [to ask for 'meat'], 'Old Lady ordered all her children to collect as many fufu mortars as they could find and stack them on top of one another till they would reach to on high where Onyankopon lived. Which her children did: they stacked all the mortars [they had found] on top of each other. But in the end they were one short to reach to on high where Onyankopon lived. When they could not find that one mortar anywhere, their grandmother, Old Lady, told her children: 'Pull out the bottom and place it on top in order that it reach [to on high]'. But when her children pulled the bottom one from the stack, the whole pile came crashing down, killing many people.<sup>7</sup>

This story is not a myth in the sense of a holy story, carefully memorised, to be recited at set times on solemn occasions in a fixed form in a religious rite. This story was never recited solemnly in an Akan religious rite. Akan indigenous religion has no myths of this kind. It is also not an aetiological myth explaining the origin of death. It is rather a bedside story with a wink, of the fairy tale kind in which extraordinary events occur as if they were absolutely normal, new versions of which the narrators, grandmothers in particular, were fond of inventing, some of which will be discussed below.

If it is not a religious or aetiological myth, what then is this bedtime story about? It is first of all about the contradictions in the position of an *aberewa*, elderly woman, in Akan traditional societies. She was usually the grand old lady, the honoured and revered, assertive *nana*, grandmother,<sup>8</sup> who was used to take the lead and to brook no contradiction. Being assertive, she might at times also be perceived as overbearing and troublesome, witness the proverb:

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<sup>6</sup>See below.

<sup>7</sup>Rattray 1916: 20-21, my translation. For other Akan versions, cf. Barth 1856: 456-457; Perregaux 1906: 198-199; Groh 1922: 65; Busia 1970<sup>o</sup>/1954<sup>1</sup>: 192; Schipper 1980: 121; for a Nuer version, cf. Evans-Pritchard 1956: 76. *Nana* means 'grandparent', male and female, but is also used as an honorific title for anyone to whom respect is due such as *abusuampanyimfo*, elders who head Akan matrilineages; *ahemfo*, rulers at various levels of Akan political organisation (village, town, state, confederation of states); *nsamanfo*, ancestors; Nyame, God; and *abosompon*, the greater gods (Christaller 1933: 328).

<sup>8</sup>Christaller 1879: 9, nos. 103-104; Akrofi [z.j./1958]: 19, nos. 103-104; Appiah & Appiah [2000]: 94, no. 353.

'If an old lady knows that well [herself how to do] something, let her build her own fence';<sup>9</sup> and 'if an old lady gets beaten, it is because of her [sharp] But she might also be the lonely elderly woman with no surviving kin to take care of her, and that poor that she could not afford 'meat' in the soup over her fufu.<sup>11</sup> An *aberewa* would often also be suspected of *bayi*, 'witchcraft'.<sup>12</sup> One proverb even counsels one should not blame all *bayi* on elderly ladies only.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, it is a story that counsels one should not do stupid things. And it teaches that all humans must die. Traditionally it was concluded with a proverbial comic sigh of regret: 'If Old Lady had not been there [or had behaved better towards Nyame], we would all still be happy',<sup>14</sup> for we would not have to face death. Lastly, and most importantly, this story tells us much about ancient Akan beliefs about Nyame, e.g. that he lived on earth 'long, long ago', in the imaginary primeval time of 'creation'.

### Paradise lost

The stories about *tete*, 'long, long ago', told about the primeval time, when Nyame was on earth 'making everything' (*a abo aade nyinaa*). At that time, he also encountered, it was said, the first humans: seven men, several women, a leopard, and a dog who brought fire for cooking.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Appiah & Appiah [2000]: 94, no. 350

<sup>11</sup>Christaller 1879: 9, no. 106; Akrofi [n.d./1958]: 20, no. 106; Appiah & Appiah [2000]: 94, no. 356

<sup>12</sup>*Bayi*, 'taking [the lives of] children away', i.e. living a long life at the expense of others, especially young children. Cf. van der Geest 2002; Christaller 1933: 11. Perinatal mortality was high. The first eight days a newborn was kept indoors and hidden for fear that it was a *saman ba*, 'ghost child', not intent upon staying in this world (cf. Rattray 1927: 59-61).

<sup>13</sup>Appiah & Appiah [2000]: 76, no. 262: 'witchcraft suits the old lady, but at times a youngster may also be bad'.

<sup>14</sup>Perregaux 1906: 198

<sup>15</sup>Rattray 1923: 123-124; Owusu 1976a: 55, 57; 1976b: 37, 57. In another version, the first humans had fire with them when they were lowered from heaven in a basket (Perregaux 1906: 198). In Bono tradition, the first people brought the god Biakru with them when they emerged from a hole in the ground (Warren & Brempong 1971a: 61, 168; 1971b: 148-153; Gyamfi 1975: 14-18; Owusu 1976b: 59), as well as their golden state stool *puduo* (Gyamfi 1975: 55) and other stools (Warren & Brempong 1971a: 31). Three brass bowls are preserved in the area, which were believed to have descended from heaven (Gyamfi 1975: 72-73). They therefore were thought to have arrived complete with traditional Akan political and religious organisation and possessing brass casting technology.

They had just emerged from a hole in the ground, or – in other versions – from a grotto, or had just descended from above (*soro*) along a chain, or had been lowered down from the sky in a basket.<sup>16</sup> These stories also told that Nyame lived on earth then, and that he was that close to men that they could touch him, for instance when they were in need of *ènam*, ‘meat’, to season their meal. These stories also told that humans, though male and female, were unaware of sex – Nyame had not yet sent Python to teach it to them<sup>17</sup> – and therefore did not yet procreate. But also did they not die, yet. Another version of the first part of the story quoted above runs as follows:

Long, long ago, Nyame lived quite close to men. When the children [of Aberewa] were cooking a meal on fire, they would grab a pounding stick, touch Nyame and say: ‘Nana Nyame, [please,] give us meat for our meal’; and whichever meat they named, it dropped down in front of them. And they collected it, prepared it, and ate it. One day, however, it happened that Old Lady struck Nyame with her pestle while she was pounding fufu, and told him [angrily]: ‘Move upwards a bit in order that I have [enough] room to pound my fufu’. Whereupon Nyame withdrew a bit upwards and asked: ‘Is this far enough?’ To which Old Lady responded: ‘Move a bit further up’. Which Nyame indeed did: he withdrew to on high. He is therefore no longer close to us now.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Perregaux 1906: 198; Rattray 1923: 48, 121, 124-125, 214-215; 1929: 198; Busia 1951/1966: 46; Warren & Brempong 1971a: 99, 131; 1971b: 148; Gyamfi 1975: 14 20; Owusu 1976b: 37, 57, 75, 85, 142; Platvoet 1982a: 85, 87, 250-251n5, 251n8, 251n10; Posnansky 1987: 15. Rattray (1923: 48n1, 214-215) held that these stories express the Akan notion of ‘the dual origin of man’, from earth as well as from heaven, for whenever in Akan stories about *tete* a pair of humans emerged from the earth, another pair descended from the sky. Stories about first humans descending from heaven, or emerging from the ground, or from a tree, or from a reed bed, or a termite hill, or from a barrel, primeval gourd or world egg, were told among far-flung peoples all over Africa, e.g. among the Dinka and Nuer pastoralists in South Sudan (cf. Lienhardt 1961: 33-37; Evans-Pritchard 1940: 230, 231; 1956: 6, 10, 20-21, 72, 75, 76, 241, 243, 244, 268-269) and other peoples (cf. Schipper 1990: 10-16, 32, 39, 40, 69, 77, 88, 90, 91, 93, 121, 122, 130, 132-133, 135, 141, 145). These stories also tell about what happened to the first people in primeval time, when sex and death were not yet known, and how this ‘paradise’ was lost.

<sup>17</sup>Rattray 1923: 48-49

<sup>18</sup>Perregaux 1906: 198.

This story, therefore, ‘explains’ why paradise – the Akan version of it: life without toil for food, without sex, procreation and death – was lost. People must now farm their food themselves, procure their meat, procreate and die, because Nyame had retired to on high and was no longer available to provide them with whatever food they requested.<sup>19</sup> Akan believed Nyame had therefore send them his ‘sons’: the water gods (*nsuobosom*) of rivers, lakes, brooks and the sea, some of which were often also identified as rock gods (*bosomboo*), and the gods of forests and trees (*wurambosom*), in order that they assist men in their current predicament of toil and death, e.g. by manifesting themselves in *akom*, the trance rituals, in which gods were believed to take possession of their *akomfo*, priestmediums.<sup>20</sup>

### *Did Nyame create?*

Akan traditionally said that Nyame had ‘made everything’ (*abo adee nyinaa*) and made it in abundance: *Odomankoma a abo adee nyinaa*.<sup>21</sup> They also praised him, in biblical fashion, as *Borebore*, ‘Carver’.<sup>22</sup> But had Akan always believed that Nyame had ‘made everything’? Had Akan always regarded Nyame as creator? Had he, in their view, e.g., created men?

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<sup>19</sup>Akan have fascinating proverbs about *Odomankoma* – God as abundant ‘creator’/provider – and *Owuo*, Death: ‘*Odomankoma* created Death before Spirit Possession’ [Death is older, and therefore more powerful, than faith/trance healing]; ‘*Odomankoma* created Death in order that Death kill him’ [Death will kill (anyone,) even God]; ‘When *Odomankoma* went to his death, he left deliberation behind’ [the death of God is a mystery we must ponder about]. Yet, ‘*Odomankoma* made Death eat the leftovers’ [God determines whom Death may kill]. As are the proverbs about *Odomankoma Wuo*, Almighty Death, ‘whose rainbow lies [like a necklace] round the neck of all humankind’; ‘who takes you away whether you call him Father or Mother’; ‘who brooks no delay’; ‘against whom you cannot appeal in court’ (Appiah & Appiah [2000]: 362-363, nos. 1982-1985, 1987-1991, Rattray 1927: 151n3, 176).

<sup>20</sup>Rattray 1923: 145-150; Busia 1970<sup>6</sup>/1954<sup>1</sup>: 192-193; Warren 1974: 98

<sup>21</sup>Christaller 1933: 90

<sup>22</sup>Christaller 1933: 39, 40

To address these questions, I should point out first that Akan indigenous religions, like all indigenous religions of sub-Saharan Africa, have always been open and receptive religions. As preliterate, or oral religions without scriptures and doctrines, they easily adapted to new situations of cultural and religious contact and smoothly adopted and incorporated new belief notions. But they also never bothered to integrate new and older belief notions into a consistent belief system, for one reason because their believers never felt a need for a coherent set of beliefs; for another, because their societies lacked the means, intellectually and institutionally, for creating internal consistency between beliefs.

That is also true of Akan notions of 'God'. Akan notions of God as creator, who 'made everything' (*a abo adee nyinaa*), have been added to, but seem not to have been integrated with, older Akan representations of Nyame dwelling on earth in primeval time and withdrawing to on high at its conclusion. I suggest therefore, first, that the Akan belief in God as creator is a more recent arrival which Akan believers added to their earlier beliefs about God sometime after 1500. And secondly, that till 1900, they had never bothered to bring their older beliefs, that did not attribute a creator role to Nyame – particularly in respect of humans –, in line with the later belief that Nyame had 'made everything', humans also. After their older beliefs, Nyame was not a creator in the sense Western Christians and Muslims understood it.<sup>23</sup> Thirdly, Akan expressed this recent notion that Nyame was a creator in a particular manner, to wit in the praise-name *Odomankoma*, 'the copious one', which signifies that he had provided them with things in abundance, without further specifying what he provided them with, or that he had done so by 'creation'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>The only other author on Akan indigenous religion who took this position also was Edith Clarke (1896-1979), the Jamaican anthropologist who studied with Malinowski at the London School of Economics from 1926 tot 1931, and spent two years of research (1932-1933) in Africa. Subjecting the ethnographical data of Rattray on Nyame as the Supreme Being of Asante religion to a critical analysis, she concluded that 'Nyame is in no sense the Creator of the world and of men as Jehovah is in Hebrew mythology. According to one myth, the earth was there already, with men and women on it. [...] According to another myth men and women were already on earth going about their business when the Creator was "on his journey about the earth making things" [Rattray 1923: 48]. There seems, therefore, to be no belief in a creation of the earth and men by Nyame' (Clarke 1930: 437-438). She also pointed out that Akan conceived the sky god in a 'quite materialistic' way. She proposed that Nyame be regarded, not as the Supreme Being of Akan indigenous religion, as did Rattray, but as one of four 'departmental gods', each manifesting itself in a different department of nature: Nyame in the sky; *Asase Yaa* in the earth; *Opo* in the sea; and *Etwie*, Leopard, in the forest (Clarke 1930: 438n2). On *Bohemo Etwie*, Leopard as 'ruler of the forest', cf. also Platvoet 1982a: 90-92, 95-98.

<sup>24</sup>*Onyankopon yee ade nyinaa domankoma*, 'God made all things in abundance' (Christaller 1933: 90). Cf. also McCaskie 1995: 104s

I suggest this historical perspective on Akan notions of 'God' for three reasons. One is the different manner in which earlier and recent belief notions about Nyame were expressed by Akan believers (*abosomfoo*). The older beliefs about Nyame dwelling close to men in primeval time and moving up to on high (*soro*) reluctantly at its conclusion, are told in bedtime stories for entertainment. The recent ones are expressed in two of Nyame's praise names only; and they express merely the abstract notion that Nyame 'made everything'. The two other reasons are the history and morphology of these belief notions. The historical reason explains why Akan came to adopt the belief in the past few centuries that Nyame was creator. The morphological one explains why that notion was absent originally, and why it was never integrated with Akan older views of 'God'.

### *History*

By the mid-nineteenth century, Akan societies had been in intensive commercial relations with Muslim and Christian traders for four centuries already. The belief in Nyame as creator is, I suggest, a by product of those close contacts.<sup>25</sup> Those with Muslim traders from the Sahel began in the early fifteenth century when Mande Dyula merchants settled, in Begho, or Bighu, a medieval town just north of the tropical forest. Begho 'was at its peak from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century' when its population reached 'possibly the five figure range'.<sup>26</sup> These Muslim merchants traded at first mostly with nearby Bono-Manso, close to Techiman in present Brong-Ahafo.<sup>27</sup> Bono-Manso, however, was conquered by Asante in 1723 and incorporated as an outlying province into the Asante empire.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>I am not siding with A.B. Ellis. He maintained that Nyankopon was 'really a god borrowed from Europeans'. Basle and Bremen missionaries were wrong, he wrote, to assert that Nyame was 'a conception of the native mind' and 'a quasi omnipotent [god], residing in heaven instead of upon the earth, and unapproachable by sacrifice' (Ellis 1887: 28; also 14, 24-28). Rattray, though overly romanticizing and spiritualising Akan notions of Nyame, is right in rejecting the view of Ellis (Rattray 1916: 17-23; 1923: 139-141, 237n1). I assert only that the Akan belief that Nyame is a creator god was adopted from Muslims and Christians.

<sup>26</sup>Wilks 1961: 5, 1975: 244-245; Owusu-Ansah 1987: 90-91n5; Posnansky 1987: 17-22

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Gyamfi 1975: 27, 48-49, 51-52, 57-58, 70-71

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Gyamfi 1975: 56-61; Wilks 1975: 244-245

After which Begho declined, because Asante rerouted all northward bound trade in such a way that it converge exclusively on Kumase, the Asante capital.<sup>29</sup> As a result, by 1800 a large Muslim community of over one thousand traders, literate clerks and *imāms* was living in Kumase, some of who served as advisers and secretaries at the court of the *Asantehene*, the king of the Asante nation and the ruler of the Asante empire.<sup>30</sup> Muslims were given a special status in Asante: when captured in war, Muslims were not put to death or sold into slavery, as were other prisoners of war, but rather either taken into Asante military service and stationed at the frontiers of its outlying northern provinces, or resettled in Asante as household slaves or as free men.<sup>31</sup> They provided it, says Wilks, with an embryonic bureaucracy.<sup>32</sup> The *Asantehene* Osei Bonsu (1800-1823) allowed Muhammad alGhamba<sup>4</sup>, or Bābā – *imām* and *qadi* (judge) and leader of the Kumase Muslims<sup>33</sup> to run a Koran school with seventy pupils, young male slaves, some of them Asante. They had converted to Islam after Bābā and other Muslims had adopted them into their households having either purchased them, or having received them as a present from the *Asantehene*.<sup>34</sup> Muslims were termed *Onyamefrefoo*, ‘those who call on God’, and *nkramofoo*, ‘those who pray’.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Cf. Wilks 1975: 3-7, 14-79 (*passim*), 243-305; Owusu-Ansah 1987: 81; Posnansky 1987: 20-21

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Bowdich 1818/1966: 56, 67, 85, 90-92, 112, 114, 122, 124, 129-130, 143, 144, 146, 151, 240, 272-273, 277 295, 392-398, 403-409, 411, 413; Dupuis 1824/1966: 11, 71-73, plate 2, 78, 94-99, 101-102, 104-110, 126, 128, 137, 142, 147-148, 151-153, 160-161, 163, 170-171, 176-181, 213, 229, 236, 245, 246-247, X-XI, XIV, LII, LVIII.

<sup>31</sup>Owusu-Ansah 1987: 81-82

<sup>32</sup>Wilks 1975: 203, 204, 248-268, 277-278, 310-318, 344-353, 398, 399, 440; cf. also Owusu-Ansah 1987: 82-83, 85. McCaskie (1995: 332n29) argues that Wilks overrated the significance of Muslim clerks for Asante bureaucracy: ‘Muslim literacy was most valued in Asante for its supernatural potency (as a cabalistic component of *unread* talismans)’. Yarak (1991: 18-27, 281-287) stresses that Asante rulers took care that offices in the Asante administration remained favours from the monarch. Thereby office holders stayed under their personal control. Asante government had therefore a patrimonial rather than a bureaucratic character.

<sup>33</sup>Bowdich 1819/1966: 90, 179, 240, 392, 411; Dupuis 1824/1966: 78, 94, 97, 107, 170; Wilks 1975: 257, 263, 345; Owusu-Ansah 1987: 82

<sup>34</sup>Bowdich 1819/1966: 90; Dupuis 1824/1966: 97, 107; Wilks 1975: 257

<sup>35</sup>For Twi terms by which Muslims and other religious groups were and are indicated, cf. Warren 1974: 94-97.

They were allowed not only to conduct their religious services in public,<sup>36</sup> but were often also called upon by the *Asantehene* to perform religious functions for *Asanteman*, the Asante 'nation', such as praying for victory in a war, or demanding from ambassadors from the coast that they swear an oath to the sincerity of their intentions on the Koran.<sup>37</sup> In 1844 *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua (1834-1867) even appointed the Muslim scholar 'Uthman Kamaghtay, better known Kramo Tia, as *Asante nkramo adiman*, 'imām of the Muslims in Asante'. He and his (extended) family were called *ohene nkramofo*, 'the king's Muslims'. Unlike other Muslims, they became citizens of Kumase and were settled in a quarter of Kumase apart from other Muslims. Kramo Tia's imamate became a hereditary position in Kumase and has been filled to this very day.<sup>38</sup> Muslim literates made much money in 19<sup>th</sup> century Asante from the sale of charms,<sup>39</sup> and especially from selling 'bullet proof' *batakaris*, smocks studded with little leather bags containing tightly folded pieces of paper with Koran texts, which were believed to provide protection against bullets in battle. A Muslim scholar may also have composed a chronicle of the Asante kingdom<sup>40</sup> in Arabic.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>For Twi terms by which Muslims and other religious groups were and are indicated, cf. Warren 1974: 94-97.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Bowdich 1819/1966: 56, 67, 240, 272, 273, 393-394, 397-398; Dupuis 1824/1966: 160-161, 176, 179-180, 247-248, X; Wilks 1975: 151, 239-241, 258, 316-318, 399, 506; Owusu-Ansah 1987: 86-87; Bravmann & Silverman 1987: 102-104

<sup>38</sup>Wilks 1975: 277-278; Owusu-Ansah 1987: 89-90, 91-92n23.

<sup>39</sup>Danish archives contain over 900 Arabic manuscripts from Asante, written between 1795 and 1823, 'over 90 percent of which are magical formulae for the making of amulets and charms' (Owusu-Ansah 1987: 91n6). Cf. also Bravmann & Silverman (1987: 94-99) on the 'cloth studded all over with Arabic writing in various coloured inks, and of a most brilliant well formed character' (Dupuis 1824/1966: 142), worn by *Asantehene* Osei Bonsu (1800-1823) in public during the *wukudae* on 15 March 1820; and on the pair of sandals of *Asantehene* Kofi Karikari (1867-1874), 'with traces of Arabic writing and Islamic magical squares drawn in sepia ink' (Bravmann & Silverman 1987: 99-107).

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Bowdich 1819/1966: 32, plate 1, 90, 271-272, 395; Dupuis 1824/1966: XI; Rattray 1927: 20-21, fig. 16; Wilks 1975: 256-261, 317; McLeod 1981: 69, 145-148

<sup>41</sup>Wilks 1975: 344-353; Dupuis 1824/1966: 229. If he did, it was lost, having been destroyed probably during the sack of Kumase on 6 February 1874, when a British expeditionary force blew up *aban* (Wilks 1975: 345-353). *Aban* was the large two-story stone house Dutch masons had built at the request of *Asantehene* Osei Bonsu in 1822. The kings of Asante used it primarily to store and expose some of their regalia and the numerous treasures they had received from the Dutch and other embassies, or had ordered from abroad, mostly through the Dutch at Elmina (Yarak 1990: 42, 80-81, 115; McLeod 1881: 50-52).

Muslims also served in the Asante army.<sup>42</sup> Though Muslims gained much prestige as an additional spiritual resource, they never gained political power in Kumase.<sup>43</sup> The influence of Islam was also particularly strong in the Techiman-Bono area where four *kramo* (Muslim) *abosom* were part of the local pantheon.<sup>44</sup> Those with Christian traders date from 1471, when Portuguese seafarers landed for the first time on the Coast of Guinea at Shama. The trade in gold dust they found there and at other towns along the coast soon proved that lucrative that the Portuguese king decided in 1481 that a permanent trading post must be built on this 'Gold Coast'.<sup>45</sup> So, in mid January 1482, a fleet of thirteen ships arrived in the roadstead before the town of Edena, now Elmina.

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<sup>42</sup>Dupuis 1824/1966: 98, XXXVIII

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Owusu-Ansa 1987: 80, 86; Bravmann & Silverman 1987: 107

<sup>44</sup>Warren 1974: 389; Warren & Brempong 1971b: 47. Two of them were Taa Mensa, or Taa Kesee ('Taa the Great'), and Taa Kwasi Kramo. They were state gods (*amanbosom*) of the Techiman-Bono state. In April 1922, when Rattray attended the annual Apo festival at Techiman, their shrines were donned with 'red fez caps – the badge of the Mohammedan in these parts' (Rattray 1923: 164) when they were taken down to the river Tano under their own 'enormous' state umbrellas for their annual cleansing with water from the river Tano, Taa Koraa, their 'father' and highest *atano* god (Rattray 1923: 152-171). Silverman, however, was told by Kofi Mosi, *exabosomfoo* for Twumpuduo, a major *atano* god at Tuobodom, in an interview in 1980, that the red fez worn by the shrine when it is carried [in procession to the river for its annual lustration], was a war trophy taken from the *Gyamanhene* Adinkra in the Asante-Gyaman war in 1818-1819 (Silverman 1987: 288n38). Cf. also Christaller (1933: 599) who lists Karamo Kofi, 'Kofi the Muslim', in his long list of names of Akan gods. When Rattray visited the temple of Taa Koraa at Tanoboase on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1922, he noticed the shrine of another Taa Kwasi, which was also 'known as Taa Kramo' (Rattray 1923: 184; cf. also Warren & Brempong 1971b: 136). The *Techimanhene* at the time of Rattray's visit was Yaw [Frimpong] Kramo, 'the Muslim' (Rattray 1923: 166, 168, 169; Gyamfi 1975: 65). He acquired the by name *Kramo* because a Muslim had predicted his birth and election as *Techimanhene* (Warren & Brempong 1971a: 89). Another *Techimanhene*, Nana Akumfi Ameyaw III (1942-1960), was an Ahmadiyya Muslim (Warren & Brempong 1971a: 100-101).

<sup>45</sup>Wiltgen 1956: 2-4

They carried the brick, stone, tiles and wood and everything else that was needed for the building of a fortified trading post, as well as one hundred masons and carpenters for building it, five hundred soldiers for guarding them, and all food they would need during the building of the fort, as well as its cannons and ammunition. After mass had been said under a tree on the beach on January 20, the building of the fortress commenced on January 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>46</sup> However, as soon as the Portuguese began to quarry stones from a nearby rock for the foundation of the castle, a fierce fight with the people of Edena broke out. They drove the Portuguese back to their ships. The *Edenafo* were furious, because they venerated that rock as the river god Benya, the tutelary deity of Edena.<sup>47</sup> After they had been pacified 'with rich presents', the building of the fort in its earliest, defensible form, was completed in twenty days' time. It consisted of a palisade, a citadel, a church dedicated to São Jorge, the patron saint of Portugal, and a number of other buildings.<sup>48</sup> Building continued, however, till 1486, when the castle was completed as it had been designed in Portugal.<sup>49</sup> São Jorge da Mina was the first of the odd fifty European fortresses and fortified lodges that were built along the Gold Coast between 1600 and 1830. The Portuguese built two more stone forts: Santo Antonio at Axim in 1515; and San Sebastian at Shama in 1523. São Jorge was captured by the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in 1637, and the other two in 1642. WIC built, captured or bought another odd-twenty fortified lodges and stone forts on the Gold Coast for its trade in gold and slaves.<sup>50</sup> Its main competitor was the English Royal African Company (RAC), which had its headquarters at Cape Coast Castle since 1664 and possessed another fifteen lodges and castles on the Gold Coast. The third major chartered company on the Gold Coast was the Danish West India Company (DWIC). It had Fort Christiansborg at Accra as its headquarters from 1658 till 1850. It possessed five more forts.

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<sup>46</sup>Wiltgen 1956: 6

<sup>47</sup>Wiltgen 1956: 7, 7n21

<sup>48</sup>Wiltgen 1956: 7-8

<sup>49</sup>Delepeleire 2004: §2.a

The Swedish Africa Company (SAC) also tried to establish four lodges and two castles on the Gold Coast between 1650 and 1663. It lost them all to its Dutch, Danish and English competitors. The Brandenburg (Prussian) African Company built three forts, but abandoned them in 1717. French traders also briefly had three lodges on the Gold Coast.

William Bosman, who lived as a merchant in the WIC castles at Shama and Elmina for eighteen years (1688-1702), noticed a widespread belief in Nyame as creator among the Akan on the coast as early as the late seventeenth century.

*On the coast, nearly all Negroes believe in the one, true and genuine God. And they ascribe to Him the creation of heaven, earth, sea, and of everything that is on [the earth], under [the sky] and in [the sea]. But [they do so] in a rather coarse manner, for they are unable to fashion it into a solid [and] neatly defined concept. And they believe also [that God] maintains and governs all that He has created day by day.<sup>51</sup>*

Bosman, however, did not think that belief was native to them:

*But, however imperfect their belief may be, they did not acquire it themselves, nor [inherited it] from a tradition of their forebears, but solely [gained it] through their constant commerce with Europeans, who have tried, time and again, to plant it into them.<sup>52</sup>*

In addition, Bosman reported beliefs that were not compatible with the belief in Nyame as creator of every thing, men included, without noticing their incongruence

*One finds on the coast again other [people] who assert that the first people emerged from holes and pits, one of which was shown to us even now in a big rock on the seaside quite close to our fort at Accra.<sup>53</sup>*

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<sup>51</sup>Cf. Van Brakel 1985: 5, 87-94 for a map and list of 44 of these lodges and forts. Cf. also Yarak 1990: 94-99

<sup>52</sup>Bosman 1704: 137; 1705/1967: 146; 1737: 135 (my translation from the Dutch original)

<sup>53</sup>Bosman 1704: 138; 1705/1967: 147

By the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>54</sup> the belief in Nyame as creator was commonly expressed in three of his many praise-names: *Odomankoma a abo ade [nyinaa]*, 'the Copious One who made [all] things'; *Odomankoma a boo nnamerenon*, 'the Copious One who created the seven day [week]';<sup>55</sup> and *Borebore*.<sup>56</sup> The latter was never used in prayers, and only seldom in proverbs.<sup>57</sup> *Odomankoma*, however, was and is regularly used in prayers, drum language and proverbs, in the meaning of 'creator'.<sup>58</sup> It is commonly used in the meaning of 'creator of things' (*oboo adee*). The explicit assertion that Nyame 'made all things' (*a oboo ade nyinaa*) seems a more recent development.

It is important to note that the stories about *tete* were told to missionaries mostly by converts. The missionaries wrote them down in order to publish them in mission journals. This Christian context and use is reflected in the use of biblical motifs in some versions of stories about *tete*. E.g. in one version the role attributed women in Akan 'paradise' is cast into that attributed to Eve in Genesis 3.

*[Long ago], Nyame and people still met every day. Nyame visited them, and spoke with them, and people were happy. For instance, if a child roasted yam on a fire and longed for a piece of meat [to go] with it, he just touched the air with a stick and said: 'Nyame, please, give me a piece of fish', and he received it at once. One day, [however,] a few women were pounding fufu. Unfortunately they felt*

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<sup>54</sup>In a conversation with the Methodist missionary Chapman in 1844, the *Dwabenhemmaa* Amma Sewaa, 'queenmother' of Dwaben, attributed the creation of all things (*adee nyinaa*) to *Odomankoma* (McCaskie 1995: 105).

<sup>55</sup>Christaller 1933: 27, 90; McCaskie (1995: 104, 279) paraphrases *odomankoma* as 'eternally abundant; fecund creator of all; absolute; boundless; limitless'.

<sup>56</sup>*Borebore* is a reduplicative of *bore*, 'to hollow, scoop, cut or hew out' (Christaller 1933: 39, 40). Christians often translate it as Carver. Cf. also McCaskie 1995: 104

<sup>57</sup>Rattray 1927: 293 [no. 69], 294 [no. 77]; Appiah & Appiah [2000]: 361 [no. 1980]

<sup>58</sup>Rattray 1923: 102, 208-209; 1927: 143, 176, 234, 279, 286, 293, 294, 301; cf. also footnote 19.

*disturbed by Nyame being that close. They demanded that he withdraw. When he did not comply with their request at once, they beat him with their sticks. In anger, Nyame withdrew from the world and left its government to the gods.*<sup>59</sup>

This biblicising story blames women for having chased off Nyame because he was that close physically that he could overhear their intimacies. It suggests that women had caused Nyame to become a deist *deus remotus et otiosus, et absconditus*: a supreme god residing at the far backdrop of the Akan universe, uninvolved and uninterested in human affairs. Nyame was thereby portrayed by missionaries as quite unlike the Christian creator god, whom missionaries and converts viewed as not only omnipotent and omniscient, but also as deeply concerned about, and constantly involved in, the salvation of men.

Because of women, mortal men, in their present predicament of death, disease, dissent, barrenness, *bayi*, and other misfortunes, could have recourse in Akan indigenous religion only to his 'sons', the *abosom*, the impotent surrogates Nyame had sent down to them.

As Christian ideas became more widespread in early colonial times, Westernising influences, such as the bible story about Eve and other Western Christian beliefs and notions may have affected not only converts to Christianity (*Kristofoo*) but also believers of Akan indigenous religion (*abosomfoo*). In another story about *tete* recorded by Perregaux, an even more patent example of Christianisation is found. In one of several stories about the 'twisted message' about death, it is said:

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<sup>59</sup>Perregaux 1906: 198

*One day Nyame sent Goat to earth with a message for the seven people living there. The message ran as follows: 'A thing exists called owu, death. One day it will kill some of you. However, even though you <sup>60</sup>die, you [need not be sad, for you] will not be lost forever, because you will come and live with me in heaven.'<sup>61</sup>*

In the message of consolation Nyame ordered Goat to deliver in the version quoted above, a set of meanings is attributed to *soro*, 'heaven', that was not only new, but that was also alien to older Akan religious imagination. They are the denotation and connotations of the concept of 'heaven' as current in Christian cosmology in nineteenth century Europe. At that time the dominant cosmology in Europe was that of the natural sciences.

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<sup>60</sup>Note the inversion between Akan matrilineal society (in which women had a much stronger position, socially, economically and politically, than in patrilineal and bilateral societies) and the heavily masculine character Akan believers attributed to the supernatural world, from which goddesses were nearly completely absent. The only female goddess who is a structural part of the Akan pantheon is *Asase Yaa*, Earth Thursday, in whom, it is said, the dead were buried and on whom humans farmed. She was also *Aberewa* (Rattray 1923: 215) and regarded as the greatest deity after Nyame (Rattray 1923: 214). Like him, she had no priests and temples and received no sacrifices. Nor was she consulted in divination, as were the *abosom*, gods: *Asase nye bosom: onkyere mmusu*, 'Earth is not a *bosom*, [for] she does not divine [the cause of] misfortunes' (Busia 1951<sup>1</sup>/1968<sup>2</sup>: 40; Asare Opoku 1978: 56). Like Nyame, she received only very limited cult, mostly in connection with horticulture and burials, and certain 'abominations' (*akyiwadee*), like the spilling of blood on the ground in executions, suicide, sexual congress outside human habitation, and prepuberty pregnancies (Busia 1951<sup>1</sup>/1968<sup>2</sup>: 71-72).

In prayers, however, she was nearly always addressed, immediately after Nyame. She was never thought of as wife of Nyame nor as mother of the gods. They were conceived solely as Nyame's [male] children (*Onyame mma*). While lower gods addressed higher gods as *agya*, 'father', in spirit possession rituals, 'in no case [was] a god said to be a daughter of another deity' (Warren 1974: 389). Female goddesses were, however, exceptionally found. Christaller (1933: 598-599) listed over 150 gods 'adored' in the Akim Akwapim regions in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Six of them are identifiable as female. Warren (1974: 101, 118, 374, 497-514) listed 399 shrines in the Techiman area. Fifteen were considered female (Warren 1974: 389; Warren & Brempong 1971b: 82). One of them, at Tanoso, was a Mame Wata shrine (Warren 1974: 382, 507; see below). Curiously, in Techiman, (the river) Taa Koraa (Tano) was said to be married to the goddess Afua Kranka. Two of their four 'sons' were *oman abosom*, gods of the Techiman-Bono state (Warren 1974: 429n3). The matrilineal patrilineal opposition between the realms of men and deities is reflected also in spirit possession (*akom*) rituals: female *akomfo* never carry the shrine of a god (Warren 1974: 97).

<sup>61</sup>Perregaux 1906: 199. In the story, Goat tarried that much on the road to human habitations that Nyame sent a second messenger, Sheep. But Sheep twisted the message. It told the first people that they would be lost forever at death (as missionaries and converts then believed).

As the concept 'heaven' was completely beyond its pale and could not be reconciled with 'naturalist' views of the universe, European Christians were forced to conceive 'heaven' ever more as a completely transcendent realm, immaterial, unseen, and exclusively spiritual. They believed it to exist above and beyond the visible sky and to be completely different, and completely divorced, from the visible, material, empirical world of humans. The modern Western conceptual dichotomies of the 'material' *versus* the 'spiritual', the 'natural' *versus* the 'supernatural', the 'physical' *versus* the 'metaphysical', the 'empirical' *versus* the 'metaempirical', the 'seen' *versus* the 'unseen' realms are all the cosmological by products of the rise of the natural sciences in the Western world in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It provoked a cosmological battle between two polemically opposed world views, the religious, plural tier worldview of Christians (and other Western believers), and the secular, monotier worldview of European non-believers.

That battle forced an ever more radical separation of the spiritual from the material upon 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Christian cosmology. It forced it to remove the supernatural ever more completely from the natural, empirical world, till it had finally denuded it from all materiality and had removed it to an utterly unseen, immaterial realm, which it transcendentalized as *das Ganz Andere*, Rudolph Otto's 'the completely different [domain]' of the divine.<sup>62</sup>

Nyame's promise, just quoted, that the dead will 'live with me in heaven' signals the onset of a process of (Western-Christian) transcendentalisation and spiritualization in Akan indigenous religion: from Nyame being regarded as tangible and observable and close to men, to Nyame as 'supernatural' and spiritual only, as a completely transcendent being who is believed to reside far away in a realm that is totally meta-physical and super sensible. Who cannot therefore be seen and touched.

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<sup>62</sup>On the impact of this battle on scholarship in religions, cf. Platvoet 1990: 183-187; 2004: 175-177; 2010: 1-2

*Adee* is a broad concept. It may mean ‘things’ separately, but also a lot of ‘things’ taken together and constituting an observable reality, ‘the world’, as a particular person may perceive it. An example is: *adee akyee*, literally ‘things have appeared’, meaning ‘the world became visible again’, ‘a new day has dawned’, ‘daybreak’. Though Christaller’s translation, ‘God created the world’, was correct, by translating *adee* as ‘world’, he did introduce also his own, much wider and abstract, Western notion of ‘world’ into his rendering of *Nyame boo adee*. He exchanged the Akan notion of the visible ‘world’, of which Nyame and the gods were a part, as I will demonstrate below, for the Western-Christian notion of ‘world’, in which God lives in a separate realm outside and above the empirical world, despite Genesis 3.<sup>64</sup> His translation contributed to conceptual and semantic processes that located Nyame in a transcendent realm denuded of all materiality. Another example of the process of this subtle Christianising process of Akan indigenous religion since 1850 is the etymology of Nyame presented by McCaskie. He derives it, most likely on the basis of his conversations with his Asante informants in the 1970s or later, from *onyamee*, ‘to be full up’, ‘to achieve fullness plenitude’. Which he then interprets as referring to ‘the omniscience of Nyame’.<sup>65</sup> Two unsubtle, nasty examples of Christianisation are the satanisation of the theriomorph god of the deep forest, *Sasabonsam*, upon which the demonic traits of the Christian Satan were projected;<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup>On the impact of this battle on scholarship in religions, cf. Platvoet 1990: 183-187; 2004: 175-177; 2010: 1-2

<sup>63</sup>Christaller 1933: 69-70

<sup>64</sup>Yahweh walking in the cool breeze of the evening in the garden of Eden after the fall (Genesis 3: 8) and stitching clothes for Adam and Eve from animal hides (Genesis 3: 21) before sending them out of paradise to face toil and death in punishment for eating the forbidden fruit.

<sup>65</sup>McCaskie 1995: 104, 303

<sup>66</sup>In line with this demonisation, Asare Opoku portrayed *Sasabonsam* as an ‘evil spirit’ and ‘a forest monster of frightening appearance’ (Asare Opoku 1978: 72-73; cf. also McCaskie 1995: 116-117, fig. 9). In late 1970, a rumour swept through southern Ghana that *Sasabonsam* was catching people at night. To stop him one should paint the sign of the cross on one’s bedroom door with the text ‘God is / King’ above, ‘Good / God’ below the horizontal bar of the cross (Warren 1974: 422). *Sasabonsam*, however, had a ‘poor press’ already in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Akan societies due to the suppression of the *Abonsamkomfo/Domankoma* movement in early 1880 by the *Asantehene* Mensa Bonsu (1874-1883). When these witch finders attempted a coup d’état against him, he had over two hundred of them rounded up and executed (Platvoet 1991: 163-167).

and *Mame Wata*,<sup>67</sup> a goddess demonised in particular in recent decades by the Pentecostal churches.<sup>68</sup> It should be noted that the belief in Nyame as creator was an isolated notion till 1900. It was not integrated with other elements of Akan religion nor elaborated upon in any way. Akan religion had no stories about how, when, where and what Nyame created;<sup>69</sup> and, with one exception, no story told that he created men.<sup>70</sup> The two titles, *Odomankoma* and *Borebore*, that were used to express the belief in Nyame as creator, do not seem to express it aptly. Why this is so is explained in the final section below on the morphology of the supernatural in Akan indigenous religion in the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>67</sup>Mami Wata is the umbrella term for the numerous cult groups that emerged in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century along the coast of West Africa from Senegal to South Africa (with concentrations in Ghana, Nigeria and the Congo), but which are found also in Brazil, Surinam, Haiti and North Africa. Mami Wata cult groups mostly venerate a water goddess who is believed to reside in an underwater palace in the sea or other water body, and to provide cult members with wealth and/or healing. She is a fusion of (beliefs about) spiritual beings symbolising foreign wealth or vitality, such as the European mermaid, a Melanesian snake girl with abundant hair, and/or Hindu gods and goddesses (especially Lakmi), with local water deities, mostly female. See Drewal 2008 for a survey of the wide spread of Mami Wata cults; Jell-Bahlsen 2008 for an Igbo case study; and O'Brien Wicker & Asare Opoku 2007, and Asare Opoku & O'Brien Wicker 2008 for two Ghanaian case studies.

<sup>68</sup>Cf. e.g. Meyer 2008

<sup>69</sup>*Pace* Asare Opoku ((1978: 21-22) who asserts there is an 'Akan myth' detailing the order in which *Odomankoma* created things, but he provides no evidence for it.

<sup>70</sup>The exception is a story about *tete* that was patently inspired by the presence of white traders on the coast and sought to account for their apparent superiority. It said that God 'long ago' had created white as well as black people. It attributed the 'inferiority' of black people to their greed, for they had chosen gold, and not literacy when God, at creation, had given them the choice between the two.

For that story as told on the coast in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, cf. Bosman 1704: 137; 1737: 135-136; 1705/1966: 146-147. It was also told in Asante in 1817 to Bowdich (1819/1966: 261-262) by the *Adumhene* Adum Ata: '*In the beginning of the world, God created three white and three black men, with the same number of women. He resolved, [in order] that they might not afterwards complain, to give them their choice of good and evil. A large box or calabash was set on the ground, with a piece of paper, sealed up, on one side of it. God gave the black men the first choice, who took the box, expecting that it contained every thing, but, on opening it, there appeared only a piece of gold, a piece of iron, and several other metals, of which they did not know the use. The white men opening the paper, it told them everything. God left the blacks in the bush, but conducted the whites to the waterside (for this happened in Africa), communicated with them every night, and taught them to build a small ship which carried them to another country, whence they returned after a long period, with various merchandise to barter with the blacks, who might have been the superior people.*' Cf. also Dupuis 1824/1966: 176.

## Morphology

In the belief notion of 'life after death with God in heaven', a huge semantic shift had been introduced into the meaning of *soro*. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, no such shift had as yet occurred in Akan indigenous religion, from a concept of Nyame as touchable, visible, and materially present within the empirical world of men to one depicting him as a fully transcendent and 'essentially spiritual'<sup>71</sup> creator god in an invisible 'heaven' beyond the visible sky. This conceptual opposition between the material and the spiritual was alien to the believers of Akan indigenous religion (*abosomfoo*) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. To them, all matter was also, in varying degrees, spiritual, and all spirit was, at least in some manner and to some degree, material.<sup>72</sup>

Traditionally, *soro* referred to 'heaven' as the visible sky in all its tropical varieties: the sky with the brilliant (*nyam*) sun and dazzling white clouds in daytime;<sup>73</sup> the sky from which rain habitually falls in the late afternoon, either softly or beating down as in an attack (*Totorebonsu*)<sup>74</sup> in a thunderstorm; the black sky during a tropical thunderstorm, with the constant flicker (*nyam*) of lightning and the mighty roar of thunder; the sky at night, brilliant (*nyam*) with stars. In the *tete* stories, *soro* referred both to Nyame before he withdrew as a cloud close by resting upon hill tops, or as a mist or fog heavy with dew hanging over a river, over fields and between trees in the forest; and after he had retired to on high, to all the higher up sky phenomena just mentioned, but especially in rain coming down, as is clear from the close association between Nyame and water in the (limited) cult he received at the *Nyamedua* ('tree of God') in many Akan homes before 1900.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, just as Nyame was believed to descend in water and as water, so also rivers, and other bodies of water, were likewise *abosom* to Akan believers. Rivers were at once spiritual and material to them. The *nsuobosom*, water gods, were, like Nyame, in their perception both material and spiritual. Gods were not spiritual beings resident in bodies of water. Rather, the bodies of water themselves were gods (*abosom*) to Akan believers (*abosomfoo*).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Asare Opoku 1978: 18, 27, 33

<sup>72</sup> Platvoet 2004: 193; 2010: 13.

<sup>73</sup> On *nyam*, 'to move quickly', *nyam*, 'shining', 'bright', and Nyame, cf. Christaller 1933: 356

<sup>74</sup> On *Totorebonsu* as an appellation of Nyame, cf. Christaller 1933: 531; McCaskie 1995: 104

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Rattray 1923: 142

<sup>76</sup> Pace Asare Opoku 1978: 10, 55.

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Gods manifested themselves, they believed, to them in untamed nature<sup>77</sup> as water, rock, or forest gods (*nsuobosom*, *bosomboo*, *wurambosom*).<sup>78</sup> This tripartite division is not a hard and fast one, as is apparent e.g. from the fact that Tano or Taa Koraa as he was called in the Techiman-Bono area was both the river Tano to Akan believers, but also *Obomuhene*, ‘king within the rock’, i.e. Tano was also identified with the rock promontory from which the river Tano springs. The fluidity of this classification as is also clear from the fact that a stone recovered from a river was often the essential element element of the brass pan (*yawa*) that served as the shrine of an *atano nsuobosom*.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup>‘The origins [of the *abosom*], crucially, lay beyond human society [...]. By definition, the *abosom* were powers in and of that [wild] nature that had preceded culture’ (McCaskie (1995: 108).

<sup>78</sup>Cf. Platvoet 1982a: 89. Bowdich noted the same division in 1817: ‘Their [...] subordinate deities are supposed to inhabit particular rivers, woods, and mountains’ (Bowdich 1819/1966: 202); cf. also Gramberg (1861: 51) quoted in L’Honoré Naber 1912: 68n2). Christaller (1933: 598) implicitly used the same division when he wrote that gods ‘are said to [...] dwell in stone, caves, trees’, and were named after rivers. As does Silverman (1987: 272): *abosom* are tutelary spirits associated with rivers, rocks, mountains, groves, etc. McCaskie (1995: 109-111, 115) proposes a different tripartite division: *atano*, *ewim*, and *abo*. *Atano* is another collective name for the water gods. They were believed to ‘descend’ from the river Tano, reputedly Nyame’s eldest son’ (*Piesie*). McCaskie collapses the *bosomboo* and *wurambosom* into the *abo*, ‘powers derived from the [wild] forest [...] (*wura*)’, as does Warren (1974: 120). They were believed to have a special relationship with the *mmoatia*, the ‘impish ‘small people’. These little tricksters were believed to live in the uncultivated forest and to possess great knowledge of *nmuru*, herbal ‘medicines’, and healing powers. McCaskie places the *ewimbosom*, ‘gods in the sky’, between *atano* and *abo*. He identifies these ‘unbending, merciless gods’ with the ‘executioner gods’, *abosommerafo*, which, he says, were held to have special relationship with *Sasabomsm*. Executioner gods became prominent especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in witch finding and witch cleansing cults, i.e. at the time when Akan states had lost the right to execute humans (cf. Platvoet 1973; Silverman 1987: 285). Warren found only *atano* and *abosommerafo* in the Techiman area and noted that the latter ‘were usually taken from the forest’ (Warren 1974: 119). Classifying *abosommerafo* as *wurambosom* rather than *ewim[bosom]* seems to better sense of the link McCaskie postulates between ‘executioner gods’ and *Sasabomsm*. The divisions proposed by Warren, McCaskie’s and myself seem to reflect not only different time, place, and informant specific developments in Akan indigenous religion, but also to be approximate only and somewhat arbitrary. Further morphological analysis will show that. Neither the division between *bosomboo* and *nsuobosom* (see my remark on Tano), nor that between *ewim* and *atano* seems to be hard and fast. The latter is apparent from a report in 1945 about the ‘arrival’ of an *atano* god that was said to perch as a globe of light on a *gyedua* tree in the centre of the little village of Adebeba. Which event was said to have occurred in the reign of *Asantehene* Kofi Karikari (1867-1874) (McCaskie 1995: 115-116).

<sup>79</sup>Cf. Rattray (1923: 147) on how the shrine of a god was made.

Likewise, the division between *bosomboo* and *wurambosom* is tenuous, and a matter of perspective. The triple division proposed is therefore not exhaustive.

To the believers of Akan indigenous religion the gods in wild nature were constituted therefore not merely by the union of the material and the spiritual, but by their unity, i.e. by the coincidence of the material and spiritual.<sup>80</sup> In addition, the gods also bridged wild 'nature' and 'culture' as order. As present in the natural world of forest, mountains, rocks and rivers, encompassing human habitations, the gods were regarded as the 'awesome, untamed, threatening and potentially destructive powers inherent in that universe'.<sup>81</sup>

As Nyame's children (*Nyame mma*), however, it was also believed that they were sent to serve humans, and therefore were eager to be 'born' into human society. By this domestication they became *fi abosom*, 'housegods'<sup>82</sup> for the Akan believers, and part of the ordered world of humans. In the domestication process, a god in wild nature was 'born' in human society by him acquiring five additional forms of materiality and visibility, human or man-made, of a more occasional and pragmatic kind. A god was believed to retain them, in addition its 'materiality' in wild nature as water, rock or forest, for as long as he was believed to be incorporated in human society.<sup>83</sup>

The first was anthropomorphic: a god in untamed nature was believed to manifest its intention to enter human society and to attach itself to a matrilineage by coming down upon (*si so*) a human being, often driving him or her for some weeks into the deep forest. His or her 'strange' behaviour set processes of divination in

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. also above, note 78 on McCaskie collapsing *wurambosom* and *bosomboo* into *abo*.

<sup>81</sup> McCaskie 1995: 117

<sup>82</sup> Platvoet 1982b: 89, 254-255n.25. 'Housegods' were of different kinds. One was *abusuabosom*, gods owned by local matrilineages. Another was *amanbosom*, gods owned by a matrilineage ruling a state (*oman*). These 'state gods' were believed to be more narrowly concerned with a state's political and military fortunes. The shrines of both had usually been in the care of these matrilineages for several generations and their *okomfo*, priest/medium, and *obssomfo*, 'priest', belonged always to the matrilineage that 'owned' a god. These older gods were termed *abosompon*, 'great gods'. 'Young gods', recently incorporated into human society, were termed *abosommmaa*, 'children of the [great] gods'. Christaller (1933: 598) also termed them *okomfo abosom*, because they usually had only an *okomfo*, 'priest-medium', and no *obosomfo*, 'priest-caretaker'.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Platvoet 1982a: 89, 254-255n.25

train that caused a community to recognise that 'mad' person was an elect of a new god who needed to be trained in order that he or she might serve as that god's *okomfo*, priest-medium.

The second was a man-made shrine or tabernacle, usually a *yawa*, brass pan, consecrated as more narrowly the temporal abode of a god, at which the god could be addressed. It contained various things from untamed nature: soil, herbs, roots, creepers and leaves from the forest and from under water, and most often also a stone (*obo*), often taken from a body of water (*nsuo*), and a nugget of virgin gold, and beads.<sup>84</sup> It was covered with a piece of white calico, and sprinkled with *hyirew*, white clay dug from the bottom of certain water courses. At a *yawa*, a god, it was believed, could be addressed and propitiated, or honoured, with libations, gifts of food, and animal sacrifice. Male *akomfoo* went into possession trance by carrying the shrine (*yawa*) of their god on their heads and were thought to be 'possessed' for as long as they carried it. Once a year, the shrine of a god was taken in procession to the river for ritual cleansing.

The third was the *bosombuw*, small temple, or *bosomdan*, 'room of the god(s)', in which the shrines were kept. The rituals of propitiation and possession usually took place in them, or in front of them. The temples are usually situated in the *ntiantia*, or *kurotia*, the transitional area between a town (the cultured domain of humans) and the forest (wild nature as the undomesticated domain of the gods).<sup>85</sup>

The fourth was the *nsuo-yaa*, or *ekoro* or *kunkuma*,<sup>86</sup> the pot of divination, filled with water and certain 'significant' objects. Gazing into it, often in a light trance, an *okomfo* scooped an object by means of which, it was believed, the god in it gave clues what was likely the outcome of the situation troubling a client; or what propitiatory actions he or she might take to foster health, wealth and harmony; or how an evil (*mmusu*) feared might be averted.

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. Rattray 1923: 145-150; Busia 1970<sup>6</sup>/1954<sup>1</sup>: 193-194

<sup>85</sup> Cf. McCaskie 1995: 119-120

<sup>86</sup> Christaller 1933: 257, 271

The fifth was the god as deemed present in, and identical with, *asuman*, 'charms, amulets', and *nnuru*, 'medicines', two broad groups of manmade objects in portable, potable or administrable form.

However, Akan believers also felt that housegods never became thoroughly and completely integrated in human society by the domestication process by which they 'born' into it. They did not become subservient to humans by it nor fully reliable sources of help. They felt that even domesticated gods remained outsiders, at the margins of human society. They remained intensely linked, after domestication, to their original material form and habitat in wild nature. That persistent link with wild nature caused them to be regarded as *ehu*: fearful, awe inspiring, unpredictable, fickle and at times spiteful and vengeful.

Their ambiguous position in the margin of human society was apparent in several ways. Gods drove a newly possessed person into a wild, deep and at first speechless trance, and often into the deep forest, that is into an ambiguous relation with untamed nature and its 'inhabitants': gods, *mmoatia*, *Sasabonsam*, potent *suman* and *nnuru*, potentially beneficent as well as destructive, some of which, it was feared, might also be in league with *abayifo*, 'witches'. And it took a training of the *okomfo* for several years before the god became a marginal part of human society. *Akomfo* exhibited this marginality in their unkempt (*mpesempese*) hair, in the raffia skirt (*odoso*) they wore during possession rituals, and in their celibate, yet reputedly promiscuous life style.<sup>88</sup> The content of the shrine also expressed that the home of the gods was really outside human habitation, in wild nature, as did the location of the temple in the marginal *nantia* area. Ambiguity also prevailed in the allusive, vague manner in which in divination answers to questions asked were given.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. McCaskie 1995: 118-119. Akan believers needed the gods and their *akomfo*, but also distrusted them because of their marginality, unreliability and greed (McCaskie 1995: 122-123). Akan rulers (*ahemfo*) in particular kept a close check on *akomfo*. They sought the assistance of gods only at highly critical moments, such as before embarking on a war. Rulers rather placed their royal ancestors (*nsamanfo*) at the centre stage of state religion. They viewed them as a much more reliable source of assistance than the gods, because these royal ancestors had held a central position in human society during their lives. And they had become relatively less marginal in respect of human society by death and burial, when they too 'departed' from human society into wild nature (cf. Platvoet 1982b: 115), than were the gods.

<sup>88</sup> McCaskie 1995: 120-121

<sup>89</sup> Cf. McCaskie 1995: 118

*Asuman* and *nnuru* were believed to be powerful by being composed from parts of *sasammoa*, animals, plants, roots, etc., that were deemed to be endowed with *sasa*, the strong but irascible, and therefore dangerous power of revenge. That *sasa* power again manifested that they and gods were wild nature rather than cultural order.<sup>90</sup>

### *In conclusion*

Except for the Techiman-Bono tradition about the god Biakuru emerging with the first humans from the 'hole' (grotto) at Amowi, stories about *tete* pictured 'long ago' as a period of primeval monotheism: the first humans knew only Nyame, who was comfortably close by for 'meat' (*ènam*), and uncomfortably near for pounding *fufu* and female chats. It was believed that only after Nyame's retirement to on high, by which toil and death became the lot of humans, the *abosom*, his 'sons' (*Nyame mma*) and 'delegates' (*Nyame akyeame*), had been sent by him. In view of this, and the materiality attributed by Akan believers to both Nyame **and the gods** – also after his retirement Nyame remained visible, audible and touchable to Akan believers: visible as the sky, sun, lightning, white and black clouds; audible as thunder; and touchable as rain pouring down; **and the gods** as bodies of water on earth and as forests and rocks –, I suggest that Nyame's withdrawal to on high should not be viewed in deist terms. To Akan believers, Nyame did not become a *deus otiosus, remotus, et absconditus*, but rather a *deus mediatus*. After his withdrawal Nyame continued to be present in this world for Akan believers in the *abosom*, his children (*mmaa*) and spokesmen (*akyeame*); and in even more dispersed and fragmented ways, in all *asuman* and *nnuru*, and in anything else in this world, such as e.g. humans, that was regarded as both material and spiritual. This mediation of Nyame by and in the gods and anything else 'spiritual' in the material world, caused Akan indigenous religion to take its place in a remarkable analytical category: it was at once a monotheist, polytheist, and pantheist religion.

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. Christaller 1933: 429; Rattray 1916: 64-65

I should add, however, that the ‘spiritual’ in the material world remained to Akan believers also something fundamentally alien and *ehu*, feared and mistrusted. Being thoroughly at home and manifest in wild, undomesticated nature to Akan believers, these untamed deities could in their experience be integrated into human culture only marginally and unreliably. This is apparent already from the *tete* stories. In them, Nyame’s presence is presented as ambiguous: it was beneficial because Nyame supplied ‘meat’, but also oppressive because he was too close for the women pounding *fufu* and chatting. It seems *Aberewa* had to hit Nyame in his face in order to make room for culture, that is for ‘secular’ society run by humans themselves.

The history of the concept of Nyame is likely also reflected in his praise names. Some seem to reflect the ancient notion: *Tetekwaframua*, ‘Existing since long, long ago’; *Totorebonsu*, ‘beating down in rain’; *Amowia*, ‘giver of sunshine’; *Amonsu*, ‘giver of water’, and *Ananse kokuroko*, ‘big [Spider] Ananse’. The others seem to reflect culture contact. They may perhaps be divided in three groups: (1) names expressing Nyame’s role as creator, inspired by both Muslims and Christians: *Odomankoma* and *Borebore*; (2) names indicating the abstract qualities which Christians especially attribute to God: almighty (*Otumfoo*, ‘powerful’); eternal (*Nyankopon Akyewa Akukuruaba ne Akukuruako*, ‘God, dawn has risen and [daylight] has gone’ [Alpha et Omega]); and omniscient (*Brekyirihunuadee*, ‘Who comes and sees [even] the rear of things’); and (3) qualities Muslims in particular associate with Allah: his greatness (*Otumfoo*, ‘powerful’) and his mercy: *Tweadumpon*, ‘unfailing support’; *Kataman*, ‘protector of the nation’; *Nyaamanekose*, ‘refuge in distress’; *Abommuwafre*, ‘[whom] you invoke in sorrow’; *Nyisaase*, ‘Father of orphans’; *Akunnafo sennifo*, ‘Counsellor of widows’; *Nea odi kwasea asem*, ‘Who defends the fool’; *Daasebere*, ‘[to whom] thanks is due [till one] is tired [of thanking]’; and *Daasensa*, ‘thanksunending’.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Some historical support for attributing the third group more in particular to contact with Muslims may be gleaned from Bravmann & Silverman (1987: 98, 106) who discuss the use of some of Allah’s ‘99 beautiful names’ (*alasma alhasuna*) in talismanic inscriptions on a white cloth worn by *Asantehene* Osei Bonsu during the *wukudae* celebrations on Wednesday 15 March 1820, and on sandals worn by *Asantehene* Kofi Karikari. The names used referred to Allah as ‘guardian’ (*hafiz*), ‘king’ (*malik*), ‘kind’ (*latif*), ‘holy’ (*qaddus*), ‘provider’ (*razzāq*), ‘sustainer’ (*fattāh*), ‘creator’ (*khāliq*, and [ultimate] ‘truth’ or reality (*haqq*).

Other than Asare Opoku, I do not hold therefore that 'the idea that [Nyame] is the Creator of the world and all there is in it is fundamental to the religious beliefs of the [Akan] peoples'.<sup>92</sup> Belief in Nyame as creator is a late accident of culture contact in the past few centuries, I suggest that it became prominent and central in Akan indigenous religion only after 1900, when a Western Christian abstract frame of mind, spiritualising and transcendentalising Nyame, became common also among the believers of Akan indigenous religion due to the Western modes of thought fostered by schools, Christian churches and other modern institutions in the Gold Coast, now Ghana.

In my view, this spiritualising frame of mind has also deeply influenced scholarship in Akan religion. It produced the romantic view of Asante religion of Rattray, and the a historical, panfrican and theological interpretation of it by Asare Opoku and other authors. As historians of religions, scholars of Akan religion should, first of all, trace its historical development by contextualising it in whatever 'secular' historical data about Akan societies, past and present, we possess.<sup>93</sup>

And secondly, they need to become aware by reflexivity by bending back upon themselves as the *sankofa* bird and *adinkra* symbol counsel<sup>94</sup> — of the historical contingencies that shaped their frames of mind that govern their scholarship in Akan indigenous religion. They need to critically examine their mindsets, whether they be Christian, as are those of most Ghanaian scholars, or secular,<sup>95</sup> as are those of most scholars in Europe, myself included.

Lastly, the 'incarnation' of the 'spiritual' in the material, empirical world, as postulated pre-eminently by older Akan notions of Nyame and *abosom*, seems vital to the very survival of any religion, even in the modern globalising world. In Europe, the thorough transcendentalisation of the supernatural will soon prove the kiss of death to religion. The driving apart of the material and spiritual, the empirical and metaempirical by the

<sup>92</sup> Asare Opoku 1978: 19.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Rattray 1927: 265, nos. 13 and 13; 266-267, no. 27; Quarcoo 1994: 17.

<sup>95</sup> McCaskie is exasperated with much Religious Studies scholarship on Akan indigenous religion. It reduced it to 'an unexceptional ethics', and to 'circular tautologies and self fulfilling pseudo profundities'. These are produced, he claims, 'within the framework of a superimposed, generally Christian orthodoxy' (McCaskie 1995: 102).

natural sciences is an important drive – in a broad range of other factors such as ever greater prosperity, ever better education and health care, ever longer life expectancy, global mobility, etc. that causes religion to evaporate rapidly from the hearts and minds of ever more Europeans. European societies rapidly secularise and become hostile to public religion.<sup>96</sup> In the near future, the powerful factors of modernisation, globalisation and prosperity will also begin to impinge strongly on Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa at large, as they do in Europe now. The ancient, and to some ‘primitive’ Akan belief notion that the spiritual and the material are not separate realms but coincide in various ways and degrees, and that even God may be viewed as visible and touchable, and therefore material, may not just have to be respected, but to be cherished and nourished as vital to the very survival of religion.