

Agyarko, R.O. (2013). God of life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of the ecological crisis. *The Ecumenical Review*, 65(1): 51-66

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/erev.12026>



God of life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of the ecological crisis

Robert Owusu Agyarko

A community's conception of God is the central point for much of the rest of its belief. It might even be thought of as supplying the whole framework within which the community is constructed, lives its life, conducts its activities, and relates to non-human forms of life. Looking at the human and non-human forms of life relations from this perspective, the current environmental crisis may be seen as a theological problem. Our perceptions of who God is and who we are shape our actions in the direction of a just and sustainable society. Thus, how Akan Christians relate to non-human forms of life may largely depend on their social construction of God– nature relations. If one sees oneself as superior to non-human forms of life, then one will act in ways that support this position and therefore maintain one's superiority. This suggests the importance of communities' conception of God–nature relations in our effort to address the current environmental crisis. This contribution offers reflection on the Akan concept of God and its implications for justice, peace, and sustainability.

The Akan people live predominantly in the countries of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. In Ghana they inhabit the southern and central half of the country. The Akan consist of several subgroups of which the Ashanti are numerically dominant. The Akan have a common socio-economic and cultural system and speak a common language. The Akan represent over 53 percent of the current human population in Ghana of more than twenty million.¹

God of Life in Traditional Akan Religion

The Akan's traditional worldview expresses belief in a supreme being referred to as *Onyame* or *Onyankopong*. *Onyame* stands as a rational, eternal, and absolute being. There has never been a need to debate the existence of *Onyame*; the challenge has been how to discern God at work. The Akan people do not regard, and never have regarded, *Onyame* as their tribal god. Rather, *Onyame* is seen as the supreme being whose benevolence extends to all people. The creation of the universe is attributed to *Onyame* and he/she is regarded as the governing principle of the universe. According to the Akan belief, *Onyame* has *sunsum* and so do all forms of life, including human beings; the latter's *sunsum* (spirit or personality) emanates from the former's as sparks emanate from a fire. The concept of God is directly

¹ For detailed discussions of Akan traditional cultures, see K. A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Singapore: FEP International Private Ltd., 1978).

connected with the Akan concept of life, for the Akan recognize God as the source of all life (as is the case in African traditional religion in general).

The Akan regard human and non-human forms of life as constituting a single, undifferentiating whole. It is believed that God sustains every living thing: human beings and non-human forms of life. All relationships – between persons, the living and the dead, and between person and nature – are rooted in God and point towards God and towards the end of all things in God. The Akan have a sacramental notion of nature, proclaiming that all forms of life, including every person's future, lie with God. It must be added that for the Akan *Onyame* cannot be imagined without his/her creation, nor without his/her saving will for humankind.

Onyame is acknowledged especially on the individual level in contrast to the other spirit beings that are recognized in family and tribal worship respectively.² In light of this, some outside observers wrongly assume that *Onyame* is remote from daily religious life and therefore generally not worshipped directly. However, prayers and petitions addressed directly to God by individuals may be in the form of a libation ritual or casual exclamations. God's name is mentioned or implied in many constantly used phrases in the Akan language. Such phrases give the recognition that God is the controller of destiny, and that things happen according to God's wishes. The Akan frequently use the expression *Se Onyame pe a* (if God wills or if God permits) to show that the only condition for success is God's permission. God's name is also invoked when one wakes up and before one goes to sleep.³

In addition to *Onyame*, the Akan also express their belief in mother earth, lesser divinities, ancestral and other spirits, and material things. It is firmly maintained that all these spirits, as well as other material things, were created and sustained by *Onyame*.

The concept of God as the creator of the world and of human beings and the final authority in all matters is original to the Akan. This idea is firmly entrenched in the religious beliefs of the Akan people and it is fundamental to their religious systems.⁴ The Akan have names for God that are unlike the names they give to other spiritual beings they recognize. These special names express the idea of the uniqueness of God and reflect the attributes given to God. The name *Onyame* or *Onyankopong* is exclusively used for the supreme being. It is singular and it does not in any sense express a divine assembly. Ryan rightly observes that there is no authentic dialect of the Akan language that yields an adequate equivalent of the Semitic and Greco-Roman pair called God and gods. He further rightly argues that the recent translation of the Bible into Asante Twi, which translates the plural "elohim" of Psalm 82:6 as "anyame," a neologism foisted on the traditional unique *Onyame* in the 19th century, is not correct. He contends that by doing this the translators

² Peter Kwesi Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspect of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 14.

over-dignified the divine antagonist of Yahweh in Israel and underrated the supreme being in West Africa.⁵

To the Akan, God is essentially pure spirit, a being that is invisible to humankind but omnipresent. The invisible nature of God is usually expressed in concrete terms. God is likened to the wind, which is also invisible and everywhere. As the Akan maxim goes, “If you want to speak to God, talk to the wind.” God is never represented in the form of images nor worshipped through them. The Akan also rarely dedicate temples and shrines to *Onyame*. They firmly believe that *Onyame* is everywhere and can be called upon anywhere.

In Akan anthropology, some elements in human beings are directly derived from the nature of God. In the traditional belief, human beings are regarded as a composition of *okra* (the soul or bearer of destiny), *sunsum* (the spirit or personality),⁶ *ntoro* (genetic ability),⁷ and *mogya* (blood).⁸ According to traditional Akan anthropology, all human beings receive *okra* and *sunsum* from the supreme being, while *ntoro* is derived from the biological father and *mogya* from the biological mother. *Ntoro* is regarded as more spiritual in nature, a being that originates from Godelf.⁹ From the myth of the first *ntoro* ever bestowed upon the Akan – the *Bosommuru ntoro* – it can be deduced that *ntoro*, although genetically associated with human fatherhood, is a spiritual entity that originated from God.¹⁰ The activities attributed to *ntoro* and *sunsum* sometimes overlap. But the distinction between the two gains weight on the basis of the Akan belief that the three, *okra*, *sunsum*, and *ntoro*, share information and interact in distinct ways.¹¹ There is no subordination among them.¹² These three vital forces – together with *mogya*, which is purely physical – constitute being human.

On this basis we may now consider *okra*, *sunsum*, and *ntoro* as inseparable yet distinct vital forces in human beings. The relationship between *okra*, *sunsum*, and *ntoro* is clearly set out in cases where a woman commits adultery. According to the traditional Akan belief, if a man’s wife commits adultery, the husband’s *okra* will inform his *ntoro*, which will then let the *sunsum* know, and this last entity will nag the woman; thus the expression, *Me kunu sunsum akyere me* (my husband’s *sunsum* has caught me). It is believed that if a woman fails to confess such unfaithfulness to the husband, she may fall ill and die.¹³

⁵ P. J. Ryan, “‘Arise, O God’: The problem of ‘Gods’ in West Africa,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11 (March 1980), 162–64.

⁶ The suggestion, particularly by Opoku, that *sunsum* dies with the person cannot be sustained in terms of traditional Akan thinking. As rightly argued by Gyekye, if *sunsum* entails a spiritual entity, then it is an element that does not die. Also see Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 91.

⁷ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 98.

⁸ Ibid. Also see Kwasi Wiredu, “An Akan Perspective on Human Rights,” in *The Philosophy of Human Rights*, ed. P. Hayden (Minneapolis: Paragon Press, 2001).

⁹ Actually, some of the functions of *sunsum* and *ntoro* overlap, yet the Akan recognize the distinction between the two, as Opoku rightly maintains.

¹⁰ Kofi Abrefa Busia, “The Ashanti,” in *African World Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹¹ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 99.

¹² Peter Kwesi Sarpong, *People Differ: An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelism* (Accra: Sub-Sahara Publishers, 2002), 91. Also see Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 85.

¹³ Any contraction of the three entities betrays the interactions between them, while adding other entities may introduce non-core aspects. *Okra*, *sunsum*, and *ntoro* are inseparable yet distinct entities that operate in harmony with each other. The permanent absence of

The Akan firmly believe that *Onyame* is involved in the affairs of this world, and their worship points to the very intimate relationship they have with *Onyame*. However, the Akan at the same time regard God as entirely different and unlike human beings or any other form of life. God is completely above creation. These ideas about God are deeply rooted in all facets of Akan life and are basic to Akan beliefs, as it is commonly said, *Onyame nntese Onipa* (God is not like a human being).¹⁴

Onyame is regarded as person. *Onyame* could either be referred to as *Onyame Kwame* (the male-God who emerged on Saturday) or *Onyame batan pa* (God the excellent mother). However, in Akan thought, these categories are regarded as anthropomorphisms as *Onyame* is regarded as a non-material being.

The Akan believe that *Onyame* is pure, just, and perfect – containing no evil. *Onyame* always stands behind the just and is the protector of all forms of life, both human and non-human. As the Akan adage puts it, *Onyame na oka dei onibie asem ma no* (God is the advocate of the vulnerable). The Akan saying, *Aboa oni dua Onyame na pra no ho* (literally, God is the protector of the tail-less animal) also indicates God's protection of non-human forms of life.

To the Akan, no one can explain God. Since no single hand can cover the eye of God (*Nsa baako ntumi nkata Onyame ani*), the Akan grant a plurality of approaches to God and experiences of God. Thus the Akan believe that there is no priest or priestess who alone has access to *Onyame*, as is the case with the lesser divinities. It is believed that every person has direct access to *Onyame* by virtue of possessing *okra* (soul) and *sunsum* (spirit). All non-human forms of life also have direct access to God by virtue of possessing *sunsum*. The vitalities of *Okra* and *sunsum* are constituent of God's nature, which human and non-human forms of life share. To the ancient Akan, the *Onyamedua* (God's tree, i.e., *Alstonia boonei*) served as a symbol of their dependence on God.¹⁵

To the Akan, no one sins directly against God, but the Akan phrase *Wo abra Nyame* (You have sinned against God) indicates an offence against God. Because nature constitutes God's own being, any unnecessary hurt (oppression) against human and non-human forms of life constitute evil against God. To the Akan, to hurt someone is to hurt God. To hurt non-human forms of life unnecessarily is to hurt God. Pobee therefore argues that if creation is through the decisive will of God, as affirmed by both African tradition culture and the Christian faith, then human beings must seriously consider the intention and will of God in creating the world in their interaction with non-human creation.

any one of these connotes the death of a person. To the Akan, one is a human being only when one possesses all these three components together with *mogya*.

¹⁴ K. Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 7.

¹⁵ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 30.

Pobee therefore says, “The careless and irresponsible use of creation can only be regarded as assault on God.”¹⁶

All human and non-human relations are affected by the belief that we all belong together in God. *Onyame* is immediately present to each creature through their *sunsum* (spirit). This view of the immediacy of God to creatures has consequences for the way the Akan, at least theoretically, value and treat one another and other creatures. *Onyame nti* (because of God or for the sake of God), one acts or refrains from acting against another person or non-human forms of life.

Amongst the Akan, redemption has both physical and spiritual implications. Whether used in reference to earthly life or the hereafter, the term salvation conveys the same meaning, namely deliverance. Salvation is concerned as much with such basic needs as food, clothing, and shelter as with matters of the spirit. Salvation is a social, political, and economic matter and not just a matter of the spirit’s independent existence. It is believed that God is the saviour of all forms of life, human and non-human. Life in the hereafter, with the exception of suffering, is understood as a replica of life on earth. Every creature has God’s nature (*sunsum*) and thus returns to God after it dies. The Akan thus believe in the ultimate redemption for all creatures.

For human forms of life, the Akan believe that death does not immediately annihilate life. The departed continue to live in the spirit world; the ancestors live in *asamando* (a place of rest), while those who do not qualify as ancestors roam about as ghosts terrorizing people until certain rituals are performed or until they are reborn. Sarpong suggests that this type of return into the world implies a kind of re-incarnation. He also maintains that the Christian concept of hell has no analogy within the Akan worldview and is therefore foreign to traditional Akan thinking. For the Akan, life entails a participating in God’s being.¹⁷

The God of Life Proclaimed by the Early Missionaries to the Akan People

The prevailing notions of God and creation as found among Akan Christians in Ghana have been shaped both by Akan traditional religion and by missionary activities in West Africa. Understanding the introduction and growth of Christianity amongst the Akan people in Ghana and the ways in which it engaged with African traditional religion is indeed essential to an understanding of notions of God and creation among contemporary Akan Christians.¹⁸

The first church in West Africa was planted in Ghana by Roman Catholic Western missionaries around 1482. The Christianity transplanted into Ghana was in the form of a sterilized European institution, safely quarantined in “hygienic” enclaves along the Sanneh coast. From there the church in Ghana occasionally started to reach out to the indigenous population. As sections of the Akan population lived in the coastal region of Ghana, they

¹⁶ John Pobee, “Creation Faith and Responsibility for the World,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 50 (1985), 16–26. Pobee has therefore widened sin to include actions that are harmful to other created beings.

¹⁷ Sarpong, *People Differ*, 99.

¹⁸ George Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1959), 3–51.

came into contact with Christianity from early on.¹⁹ The early missionary activities remained restricted. From 1820, a new wave of Protestant missionary activities led to the growth of Christianity amongst the Akan.²⁰

By bringing the Christian gospel into Africa, the missionaries assumed that they were introducing a new concept to the Akan. However, for the Akan, the God that the missionaries proclaimed was simply identified with the supreme being traditionally known amongst the Akan as *Onyame*.²¹ The claim of such identification is largely affirmed by the Akan and by African theologians. Sarpong maintains that *Onyame* is none other than the Christian God.²² Dickson asserts that the concept of *Onyame* as the ultimate leads to an understanding of *Onyame* as the God who is none other than the God proclaimed by Christianity.²³ Bediako holds that God is not foreign to the Akan, as the missionaries seemed to imply. He identifies *Onyame* with the God proclaimed by Christianity.²⁴ Pobe also maintains that *Onyame* is none other than the Christian God.²⁵ In equating *Onyame* to the Christian God, these four Akan theologians echo a view widely accepted among African theologians. Thus, the Supreme Being in an African traditional context is none other than the God the missionaries proclaimed.²⁶ By contrast and from an African evangelical perspective, Byang Kato admits that African traditional worshippers have an awareness of the Supreme Being as none other than God, the Father of our Lord Jesus.²⁷ However, he holds that the knowledge that Africans had of God was only enough to convict them of their sin, and that God was not known enough to be worshipped in Africa.²⁸

Though African Christian theologians strongly affirm the existence and originality of the notion of God in African thought, they usually conceptualize this supreme being according to the God proclaimed by the missionaries. This approach was criticized by the philosopher Okot p'Bitek. He accused Mbiti, Idowu, Danquah, Busia, and others of being “intellectual smugglers” who draped the African gods in “awkward Hellenic garments.” He adds that “African deities of the books . . . are creations of students of African religions. They are all beyond recognition to the ordinary African in the countryside.”²⁹

¹⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Imp act* (London, C. Hurst & Company, 1983), 20.

²⁰ The Basel Missions Society began its work in 1828. After a brief stay in Accra, they moved to the Akwapim area to work among the Akan groups. In 1835 the Wesleyan Methodist society (WMS) also started their activities in Ghana. The Methodist missions began their activities among the Akan (Fantes) in the coastal areas and later extended their work to other parts of Ghana. See Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 119–126. Currently, up to 70% of the people of Ghana are considered to be Christian, including 56% Protestants and 14% Catholics.

²¹ From the writings of African theologians about the Supreme Being, it may be concluded that this concept is encountered all over Africa and that there is no debate with regard to the originality of the concept. More importantly, it is also clear that African theologians see the Supreme Being in Africa as none other than the God proclaimed by Christianity.

²² Sarpong, *People Differ*, 96–97.

²³ Kwasi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 36.

²⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990), 10.

²⁵ John S. Pobe, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 46.

²⁶ This equation of the God that the missionaries proclaimed and the supreme being in Africa raises further theological questions about the relationship between God and the lesser divinities (as well as the ancestors) in African belief systems and in Christianity.

²⁷ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangelical Publishing House, 1975), 113.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁹ Okot p'Bitek, *Religions of the Central Luo* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971), 7, 46.

While p'Bitek's accusation may be regarded as too harsh, one cannot deny the importance of the point it seeks to convey. For example, looking at the relationship between God and nature according to traditional Akan thought, one may not be wrong to view it as panentheistic. However, because panentheism nudges towards animism – which has long been condemned by African scholars as an overreaction – the God proclaimed by missionary-oriented Akan Christians has lost an essential quality found in the traditional notion of the Supreme Being. This participation of everything in God may be regarded as a necessary foundation for justice, peace, and ecological sustainability.

The understanding of God and nature among early Western missionaries was couched in the gospel message they proclaimed. In its simplest form, they proclaimed that an absolute, all-powerful, transcendent God created the world from nothing for entirely gratuitous reasons. God did not need creation nor is God ontologically related to it: it was created solely for God's glory. Unfortunately, creation "fell," making it necessary for God to initiate a reversal of creation's downfall through Jesus Christ, who atones for the sins of all (only) human beings. They insisted that all must accept God's remedy through Jesus. The consequences of rejecting such an offer is eternal hell, while obedience will be rewarded with eternal bliss in heaven. Salvation as proclaimed by the missionaries is essentially concerned with the soul, except for the belief in the resurrection of the body.

The evangelistic activities of Western missionaries were largely successful.³⁰ The numerical vibrancy of churches in Ghana attested to this. The fruits of this enculturation process could be seen in three key areas of Akan Christianity today, namely Akan Christian views on non-human forms of life, the interpretation of the Bible, and Christian music.

Firstly, a few decades ago, it was common for Christian converts to dare their chiefs, traditional priests, and elders on issues such as taboos and traditional customs. For instance, Christians contravened the days that the community was not supposed to farm, and they also ignored injunctions against fishing from stipulated rivers and weeding around selected places. Christians viewed these injunctions as expressions of the fear of the lesser divinities and ancestors regarded as adjudicators of community morality. Such resistance to the traditional preservation of non-human forms of life was very common in the early years of Christianity and became rampant when Christianity became the dominant form of religion among the Akan.

³⁰ Several factors accounted for the phenomenal growth of the church and the success of the enculturation process of the Western Protestant missionary activities among the Akan. Firstly, there was the complex of war victims. Having conquered the Akan in war, the pride of the people to uphold their culture against the Western missionaries' intrusion and systematic enculturation waned out. The missionaries, who were the religious arm of the colonial government, suppressed the cultural spirit of the Akan and they even taught that for a person to be a true Christian, they must speak and act like a European. Secondly, this was at least partially the result of a general dissatisfaction amongst the Akan with the operations and perceived ineffectiveness of the *abosom* (lesser divinities) as compared to the effectiveness of Western forms of technology. Thirdly, some of the early converts were actually "cultured" to abandoned Akan culture in favour of Western culture. The missionaries went so far as separating Christian converts from their families, friends, and relatives. New communities, one of the most famous being *Salem*, were established as places where converted Christians were segregated from their families. Fourthly, the missionaries embarked on the systematic enculturation of the Akan people.

Generally, Akan Christians see humans as the masters of non-human forms of life. The missionaries assumed that the Akan's reverence for nature was only based on fear and they regarded mastery over nature as the resolution for such fears. In place of traditional sacramental rites, the missionaries introduced Western technology and the person of Jesus Christ as the one who has power over all spirits. The missionaries offered the power of God as a way to dominate nature and perceived evil forces. The new converts were taught to challenge traditional taboos and customs since these were believed to be promulgated and adjudicated by lesser divinities and ancestral spirits. The missionaries assumed that by teaching their converts to override traditional taboos and customs, they were engaging in a spiritual battle against the lesser divinities and the ancestors they labelled as evil spirits. Such teachings largely account for the disrespect and abuse of non-human forms of life among contemporary Akan Christians.

Secondly, the early missionaries in Ghana taught their converts that as Christians they had power over evil spirits and nature. The term "dominion" interpreted as a Christian's power over non-human forms of life is used especially in contemporary Pentecostal churches. Some evangelical scholars have reinterpreted the term dominion (with reference to Genesis 1:28) as responsible stewardship. However, in the Ghanaian and Nigerian contexts, the literal reading of "domination" is still dominant. It is interesting to note that the father of Ghanaian Pentecostalism, Archbishop Duncan Williams, who planted the first charismatic church in Ghana, named his headquarters "Dominion Temple" and "Dominion University College." It is commonly believed by Pentecostal and Charismatic Ghanaians (which constitute a large percentage of Ghanaian Christians) that non-human forms of life are merely available for human service and consumption. If one regards oneself as superior to non-human forms of life, then one will act accordingly.

Thirdly, church hymns and popular gospel music alike clearly promote notions of escapism – that we are strangers on this earth, and that we should focus our attention on heaven rather than the earth. Three songs, two from the Presbyterian Church of Ghana's Twi Hymnal and the other from a popular gospel musician are noteworthy.

PHB 791 states,

Ohoho ne mamfrani na Meye wo fam ha (I am stranger and foreigner on this Earth)
M'asase mmen ha baabi (My land is nowhere near here),
Minni fi pa wo ha (I do not have a home)

PHB 837 states,

Me kra kuro no wo soro noho (my soul's home is above)

And the popular gospel musician Florence Obinom states,

Osoro ne me fie . . . Asase so a mewo dea Eye akwantuo (My home is above; I am in transit on this Earth).

Analysis

Several assumptions can be gleaned from the stories on creation, redemption, and eschatological consummation as told by the missionaries. Here I offer a comparative analysis of these assumptions.

Firstly, this version of the story creates the dualistic impression that spirit and matter are entirely distinct: that God's spiritual substance is ontologically distinct from creation. Such a conception of God and nature is largely influenced by pre-millennial-oriented theology, which served as theological foundation for early Christian missionaries who operated in West Africa. Such beliefs starkly contradict traditional Akan views on the relationship between God and nature as being much more intimate. African theology has done well by identifying the "God of our ancestors" with the God proclaimed by the missionaries. Whilst such identification is necessary for African Christianity, it also faces stark challenges. The missionary proclamation of God was undoubtedly tailored towards the socio-cultural needs of Western societies. The early Western missionaries in West Africa assumed that the West had a monopoly on Christianity and that they were the sole custodians of the Christian faith. However, their model of God is clearly not the only authentic one.

Secondly, the story speaks to human concerns about why the world was made, who is in charge of it, why it is no longer harmonious, and how it can be made "right" again. The Akan has a similar story of "God's self-withdrawal," which indicates why the world is no longer harmonious and lacks an antidote to make things right again. The missionaries could have filled the gap through the proclamation of the story of Jesus of Nazareth. This might have linked the person of Jesus to the web of life in the Akan thought form; but this approach was not followed due to the policy of totally rejecting Akan culture.

Thirdly, contrary to traditional Akan views of salvation, the missionaries' version of the story encourages an escapist understanding of salvation and justifies a lack of attention to the groaning of creation. Accordingly, if God is spiritual and creation material, then God is not present on earth and Christians need not attend to it either. As Bujo rightly points out, Western Christian theology has always tended to split man into body and soul, and to preach the salvation of the soul.³¹

Fourthly, the missionaries proclaimed the idea that God will ultimately destroy non-human nature together with some human beings. Such a view is incomprehensible in the traditional Akan context given the Akan belief that God is ontologically related to nature. The Akan do not have access to any other world but this earth. No one can be doomed eternally.

³¹ See Benezet Buzo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

Fifthly, the story depicts nature as an addendum that has only transient value. In response, as Conradie rightly argues, An adequate environmental praxis can only be empowered on the basis of hope. For what will be destroyed can have only passing value; what is to be transformed retains its importance. It is hardly possible to motivate people to care for the earth unless they are convinced that there is indeed some future for themselves and for the earth. Without any hope, without any vision of a future for the earth itself, an environmental praxis will soon lose its impetus; it will consciously be fighting an unnecessary battle. Only where there is hope for the earth, can caring for nature becomes meaningful.³²

Sixth, the story implies that non-human forms of life are merely available for human use and consumption. By contrast, according to traditional Akan beliefs, all forms of life are endowed with an intrinsic value, called *sunsum* (a conscious vitality), which is a spark of God's *Sunsum* – a constituent of God's nature. The Akan show respect and fondness toward nature even where nature is used. This claim is illustrated by the fact that each of the seven traditional matrilineal clans among the Akan is represented by different animals (totems), which are treated like human beings in all respects. It would be odd in traditional Akan communities to entertain the thought that God has placed non-human forms of life at humanity's disposal. Even to think of being stewards of Mother Earth would be bizarre. This explains the reason why permission is sought from Mother Earth before digging a grave. Similarly, permission is usually sought from the sea and rivers before one embarks on fishing. The theology of dominion or stewardship fails to accentuate that we belong to the earth more than it belong to us; that we are more dependent on it than it is on us; that we are of the earth and living on the earth. In traditional Akan thought, both human and non-human forms of life co-exist for mutual benefit, and God is regarded as the sustainer, protector, and judge of all. The Akan sayings *Wo bu koto kwasea nyame hye woto* (literally, if you cheat the crab your nakedness is exposed before God) and *Aboa oni dua nyame na pra no ho* (God is the protector of tail-less animals) attest to the idea that non-human forms of life do not merely exist for human consumption.

Seventh, the dominant imagery in missionary proclamation is monarchical. The missionaries employed royalist, triumphalist metaphors, depicting God as a king and patriarch who rules over and cares for the world. Accordingly, God is related to humankind as its Creator (master) while humans are God's creatures (servants). When this relationship failed, God took the initiative to restore order through Jesus Christ. Ontologically, then, human as well as non-human forms of life are not related to God. Neither are humans ontologically related to non-human forms of life. Human beings merely exist for God's glory while non-human creatures exist merely for human pleasure, consumption, and service. In the light of contemporary concerns, such a notion of God becomes deeply harmful.

³² Ernst Conradie *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2006), 134.

Creation as Sparks of God's *Sunsum*: A Proposal

As a contribution to ecumenical discourse on the God of life from within the African context, I will now seek to retrieve and reinterpret the concept of God in African traditional culture from a Christian perspective. I will offer some reflections on the Akan concept of *sunsum* by proposing that creation may be understood as the sparks (*sunsum*) of the God of life.

I will proceed to draw on an Akan understanding of *sunsum* here employed as a Christian theological concept to construct a model of the relationship between God and nature characterized by justice and ecological sustainability. In traditional Akan thought, *sunsum* is the central, unifying vitality. Amongst the Akan, anything that exists in its natural state has *sunsum*. It is *sunsum* that enables a being to exercise power and to function in its characteristic manner. *Sunsum*, which is necessary for existence, is not conceived as an indwelling spirit foreign to the object in which it resides. Rather *sunsum* is the essence of the object; it is its intrinsic activating principle. The Akan concept of *sunsum* expresses how the "one" (*Onyame*) and the "many" (nature including human beings) are related. The traditional Akan refer to the *Sunsum* of *Onyame*, the *sunsum* of human beings, and the *sunsum* of non-human nature. The latter two are viewed as the sparks of the former so that the qualitative difference between the *sunsum* of nature, including human beings, and the *Sunsum* of *Onyame* can be explained accordingly. Whereas the Akan regard the *Sunsum* of *Onyame* as fully divine, human as well as non-human forms of life are not regarded as divine (although there are also lesser divinities), only as embodying sparks of the divine. The idea of the *Sunsum* of *Onyame* is not an inference from the notion of *sunsum* in human beings or in non-human nature – in the sense that the latter two may serve as basis for speculation about the former. Instead, it is a distinct traditional Akan belief. It is on this basis that the Akan say, "*Onyame sunsum di na akyi*" (God's spirit follows the person). This explains the reason why the term *sunsum* was readily used as the dynamic equivalent of the Holy Spirit in the Akan Twi Bible.

The Akan concept of *sunsum* may be understood in terms of the relationship between a fire and its sparks, or a mother and her children. The *Sunsum* of *Onyame* is distinct yet inseparable from *Onyame*. One may infer that *Sunsum* denotes an eternal absolute being that unfolds its nature in individual creatures. On the one hand, *Sunsum* may be regarded as being itself. On the other hand, *sunsum* in nature (including human beings) may also be regarded as the sparks emanating from Being itself. The Akan concept of *sunsum* thus suggests the possibility of a union of the concrete with the universal. The concept of *sunsum* may therefore enable one to speak of God and God's ontological relationship with nature. Creation as the sparks of God's *sunsum* implies that creation belongs to God and participates in God's very being.

Sunsum serves as an essential link between God, oneself, and other forms of life. *Sunsum* connects each individual element in nature (including human beings) with God and with others, and brings all forms of life together in one universal family. *Sunsum* thus serves as a conductor of energy (vital force). On this basis, *sunsum* may not only be regarded as the

link between God and nature but also as the locus of solidarity in nature under the motherhood of God.

Nevertheless, the Akan believe that there is a distinction between human and non-human forms of life; only human beings possess *okra*. It is *okra* that differentiates humans from non-human creatures. The ontological link between humans and non-human nature is maintained while human distinctiveness is asserted. In the Akan worldview, all things hang together, all depend on each other and on the whole. As the *sunsum* of nature are only sparks of the *Sunsum* of God, God's otherness or transcendence is maintained.

Some Implications of the Hypothesis

For Christian theology, the proposal of creation as the sparks of God's *sunsum* highlights the activity of God the Holy Spirit (*Onyame Sunsum*) that is inseparable from God the Father (*Onyame Ntoro*) and the Son (*Onyame Okra*) in creation and redemption. Thus, the concept of God's *Sunsum* may lay a firm trinitarian foundation for an African Christian concept of God. By way of perichoresis (the essential interrelatedness of *okra*, *sunsum*, and *ntoro*) *sunsum* has a trinitarian character. By joining the three "persons" in creating, everything becomes interwoven with relationships, interdependencies, and webs of inter-communication.

Sunsum as a pneumatological concept relates directly to the concept of *okra*, which may be regarded as a Christological image. The Akan concept of *okra* carries the properties of that which is both divine and human. The concept *okra* is loosely translated in English as "soul" but could better be rendered in terms of the dynamic equivalent of *logos*. This concept carries the connotation of a co-presence of time and eternity – a concept that holds together time and eternity, immanence and transcendence. That is to say, the Akan notion of *okra* may embody a synthesis of time and eternity. Thus, the Akan could suggest *okrateasefo* (*okra* that becomes material) as the point where sparks of God's nature and human flesh meet. As in the case of *sunsum*, the Akan traditionally refer to the *Okra* of *Onyame* and the *okra* of human beings. The latter is viewed as the spark of the former. One may point to the distinction between a spark and the fire as the qualitative difference between the *okra* of human beings and the *Okra* of *Onyame*. However, whereas the Akan regard the *Okra* of *Onyame* as fully divine, human beings are not regarded as divine, only as embodying sparks of the divine. As in the case of *Onyame's Sunsum*, the *Okra* of *Onyame* (God) is distinct yet inseparable from *Onyame*. The same applies to *okra* and *sunsum* in human beings.

Moreover, the implication of the concept of God's sparks is that the Creator dwells in his/her creation as a whole and in every individual created being. By virtue of the Spirit, God holds everything together and keeps them alive. The purpose of this presence is to make the whole creation the "house of God." The Creator Spirit (*Sunsum*) interpenetrates, quickens and animates the world. God rules everything through God's Spirit (*Sunsum*). This picture of the God–world relationship is one of divine intimacy, not supremacy. Moreover, the proposal of creation as the sparks of God's *Sunsum* is significant in that it allows for

understanding all creation as bound up with God (Gen. 9:1–17) through the spirit (*Sunsum*) of God. It retains an emphasis on the promise of redemption (Rom. 8:19–23; Col. 1:19–20) when all individuals will ultimately return to God in the end. This conveys a picture of redemption as encompassing “all things” and not only human beings.

Further, the concept of God’s sparks suggests a solidarity that may be interpreted as the community of creation or kinship with nature. Thus, the concept of *sunsum* may lead us to embrace the solidarity between God and nature and solidarity in nature. If we embrace a notion of kinship with nature, we may discover sympathy for all things. This may lead us towards the way of justice and peace that reflects the very being of God. It may help to embrace solidarity and resist the forces of death and the threats to life: that is, economic injustices, numerous forms of violent conflict, and environmental destruction. It offers a very particular way of looking at the world with far-reaching ethical implications; it gives meaning to our social activities – in advocacy for the vulnerable, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and combating ecological degradation. Finally, this model implies that life belongs to God and life participates in God.

In Christian theology, the concept of *sunsum* may be explained within the context of the doctrines of God, humanity, creation redemption, and consummation. The Christian concept of transcendence (*Sunsum*) and immanence (the sparks that emanate from God’s *Sunsum*) expresses this idea: God relates to individual human beings as well as all to forms of life through God’s nature (or *Sunsum*) and all forms of life representing God’s presence in the world.

Conclusion

The early Western missionary proclamation was necessary for the development of an African Christian concept of God. However, as how concepts are used is by shaped one’s social context, this concept is not only derived from the biblical roots of Christianity but also socially constructed. Since a community’s conception of God indicates the focus point of much of its other belief, it is crucial for African theologians in Ghana to engage in a sustained dialogue on an African Christian concept of God by exploring biblical sources in relation to traditional African culture. In responding to this challenge, this contribution seeks to develop an indigenous African concept of God that stresses the ontological relatedness of humans and the natural environment. According to the proposal that creation may be regarded as the sparks of God’s *Sunsum*, we meet non-human forms of life as part of ourselves. This offers a very particular way of looking at God in a panentheistic and trinitarian way – with far-reaching ethical implications.