Advaita Vedanta and Akan

Inquiry into an Indian and African Ethos

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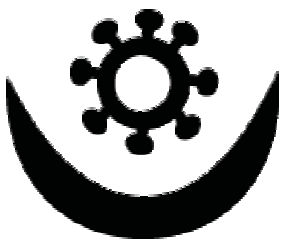


Author's Note

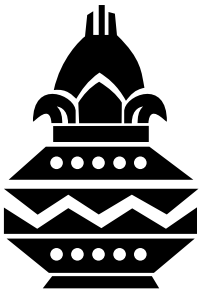
My objective in this work was to understand two disparate traditions — Advaita Vedanta from India and Akan from West Africa — by descriptively placing them beside each other. The idea was also to make them accessible to anyone who may wish to know something about these ancient and influential traditions.

The starting point of the work is my own understanding of Advaita which I had the good fortune of studying with some great Masters as a seeker. In this work, Advaitic concepts are understood in the light of Shankara's commentaries on the Upanishads and my personal conversations with knowers of the tradition. Since the study is the result of my personal understanding, I have not used terse terminologies or opaque philosophical language from the classical tradition. Throughout the work my aim was to enhance and internalise the knowledge gained, and to put it in simple terms to make it available to the readers who may not be familiar with these traditions.

My journey in understanding the Ghanaian tradition is based on field work in Ghana as also on a study of primary texts by modern Ghanaian and African scholars. During my work in Ghana I had occasion to converse with a number of eminent scholars and visit some traditional Akan priests and practitioners, as also some shrines that are located in remote places, away from urban centres. The interpretations and commentaries of modern African scholars are based on observation and analyses of the tradition as it is practised on the ground. The tradition is still very much alive and plays a significant role in satisfying the psychological and emotional needs of the people at large. My purpose in visiting those shrines and speaking with traditional practitioners of the religion was to become, to some extent, a participant in the process and see it through the eyes of the believers. My efforts in the field were richly rewarded, as I was received with friendliness and was allowed to participate in some local rituals that are important in substantiating and explicating the subject at hand. This generous inclusion by local practitioners enabled me to feel like a cultural participant, who could almost speak for the tradition from 'within'.

References in the work are eclectic — the aim being to explicate the basic tenets of each tradition without digressing from its core meaning. I have not used diacritical marks but have placed indigenous words in the italic form, and have tried to keep the spellings as close to their pronunciation as possible. This is done in order to keep the text as simple as possible — both for the reader and for myself, as a writer exploring complex spiritual themes.

Acknowledgements



It would not have been possible for me to work on this theme had I not been given the privilege and the opportunity of using the resources of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, in the capacity of a Fellow. Africa was not quite within the ken of the work hitherto undertaken at the Institute, and a comparison of an African spiritual tradition with that of an Indian one was even further removed from the Institute's focus. Despite many dissenting voices in the projects screening and selection committee, the Director, Peter Ronald deSouza was able to carry through the decision to support this work.

During my tenure as a Fellow I was also privileged to be given a grant by the Director General of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Sh. Suresh K. Goel, to spend three months in Ghana so as to gain a first-hand knowledge of the Akan tradition as practised on the ground. Prof. Helen Lauer, the Head of the Department of Philosophy and Classics, University of Ghana, Legon, steered through my request for placement there so that I could use their rich library and meet some of their learned faculty. The university assigned no less a person than Prof. Kwame Gyekye to be my mentor during my stay there. The University had a number of other luminaries also who readily gave of their time and knowledge to enable me to understand some Akan concepts. It is not possible to name them all but my gratitude goes to Reverend Abamfo Atiemo, Head of the Department for the Study of Religions and his colleague Prof. Elom Dovlo. I am also grateful to Prof. Kofi Agyekum, Head of the Department of Linguistic and Reverend Emanuel Asante, Bishop of Accra, to both of whom I had been introduced by Prof. Gyekye.

The grant provided by the ICCR enabled me to travel within Ghana and meet with a number of scholars and traditional priests in the vicinity of Accra — villages such as Obosomase and Larteh in the Akuapem region — and Kumasi, in the southern central part of Ghana. Osofo Quarm was crucial to my meetings with traditional practitioners in the Akuapem region. In Kumasi I had the good fortune of attending an Akwasidae festival, held every forty days, at the Palace of the Ashanti King. I was able to converse with the Sumankwahene, the chief Priest of

the Ashanti King and the well known Bishop Peter Sarpong who has explained many concepts and rituals of the Akan to the outside world through numerous books and articles. From Kumasi I travelled to Akomadan near the border of Techiman in the Brong Ahafo region to the North of Kumasi and to Lake Bosomtwe, the Sacred Lake of the Ashanti, somewhat to the south of Kumasi. Dr. Samuel Asiedu Amoako of the Department of Religious Studies of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, provided me the help of Kwadwo Ntiamoah, who was then a teaching assistant, about to enrol as an M.Phil student, to act as an able interpreter. The people everywhere were receptive to our questions and willing to answer them.

Besides these, it was a surprise for me when Reverend Atiemo enabled me to meet with a Ghanaian Hindu monk, Swami Ghananonda who runs a very active 'Hindu Monastery of Africa' in Accra where a large number of African devotees who have become Hindu come and chant Sanskrit *slokas* and *bhajans* regularly. It gave me an insight into the highly religious nature of the Ghanaian people and how they are willing to accept any tradition that would give them spiritual satisfaction. It was Mr. Adu Mensah, a trustee of the Hindu temple at Kumasi who enabled our meeting with Bishop Sarpong and directed us to the shrine of Kwaku Bonsam at Akomadan.

During my tenure at the Institute in Shimla, I travelled to Hawaii in the winter of the year 2012, where I met with Prof. Eliot Deutsche whose lucid exposition on Advaita Vedanta had been of importance to me. In Kenya, during a conference of the African Association for Study of Religions, I met the Dutch Professor Jan Platvoet who had lived in Ghana for several years. His suggestions with regard to the Akan section of the work were of great value.

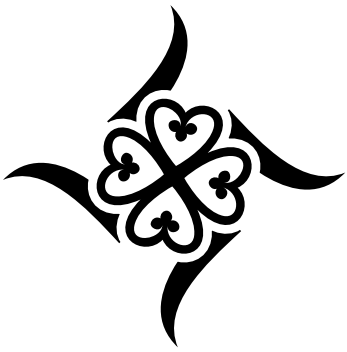
At the Institute in Shimla I was fortunate to have the possibility of discussing my work with a number of Fellows who provided incisive insights. Prof. T.R.S. Sharma always found time to read the work and share his thoughts. Prof. G.C. Tripathi, a National Fellow, provided enriching inputs. Again I was fortunate to share my study/ofiice space for sometime with Prof. Vrinda Dalmiya who teaches Philosophy at the University of Hawaii and joined the Institute as a fellow during the later part of my stay. She helped me to express some of the concepts more clearly. Pankaj Basotia, a Philosophy teacher at Rajiv Gandhi College, at the University of Himachal Pradesh, always made himself available to make helpful academic inputs even as he provided moral support in times of need. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Kanchana Natarajan for her enriching and continual support.

Last but not least my heartfelt appreciation goes to Nandita Singh for her diligence in creating and laying out the symbols, images and diagrams.

Besides this, all the staff of the Institute, made every effort to make the stay in Shimla comfortable and productive. Without their help it would not have been possible to function in the new environment away from the comfort of home. I am grateful for their simple and heartfelt hospitality.

I

Prologue



Two personal callings — one internalised intuitively, because of having been born into a particular culture; and the other discovered over time through observation and interaction — coalesced to provide the motivation and framework for this work. Interest in Advaita Vedanta had been a part of my mental conditioning and I pursued it by following and sitting at the feet of established sages and seers whom I searched for. I found them in varied places — on the banks of the Ganga, be it in Ashramas, in Haridwar or Rishikesh or Varanasi or along the Bhagirathi in Uttarakashi, as also in seemingly mundane places of human existence, sites which are not necessarily associated with India's sacred or spiritual geography. The loving kindness that emanated from these learned persons and their generous giving of knowledge to any sincere seeker that approached them radiated magnetic attraction. The only qualification required, by a seeker who approached them, was a sincere desire to know the truth. The effort they made to explain and drive home truths they themselves had discovered and realised was an indication of the compassion they felt for humanity. It was also an expression of a 'pure' desire, arising from selfless compassion, to help others reach the state of equanimity, untainted joy and freedom from suffering and struggle, and a perfected ground of stable wisdom that is the ideal of Indian philosophical and spiritual quest. The quest for Truth is a highly individuated exercise wherein self-effort is given prime importance. The dialogic mode of teaching encourage questioning and self-effort, slowly leading to an inner evolution and transformation in the aspirant's mind.

Though arising from a highly intellectual tradition the world view upheld by Advaita Vedanta permeates the mind sets of large sections of the population of India. With all the linguistic and ethnic differences that characterise India one feels culturally connected in practically all parts of the country. At the popular level the all pervasiveness of the

Divine is seen to express itself through an inexhaustible variety of forms and names even when there is an underlying recognition that they all refer to one entity that ultimately is unnameable. The system which aims at providing an experiential knowledge, that all persons and everything that exists is permeated by the same singular consciousness, seeks ideally to evoke an attitude of reverence and respect for everything — sentient and insentient. It is this recognition that has given rise to the commonly used phrase '*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*' — i.e. the whole universe is like one family. The hospitality and openness displayed even to strangers and other beings is a result of this world view. The pluralism and heterogeneity that India is home to would have to have its roots in a belief system that recognises the right of others to follow their own ways of approaching the Divine.

My 'discovered' interest in Africa began to manifest itself with my first contact with the Continent in the mid-1970s when I got an opportunity to live in Tanzania. During my stay there I was able to visit other countries like Kenya, Zambia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and others. I was surprised by the warmth, politeness and elegance of social interaction I encountered in these eastern and southern African countries. I was also impressed by the way Africans undertook collective responsibility with regard to caring for children, for the elderly and for the extended family. This was evident in the context of their day-to-day behaviour. Another thing that was evident was a respect for learning and learned ones.

The ability to articulate was highly regarded and most leaders had a repertoire of proverbs, maxims and idioms by means of which they connected to the people at large, held them together, and provided them a sense of solidarity and identity. My interest in language led me to a recognition that this was more than just a spontaneous mode of communication; that in a largely oral culture it was a mode of transmitting *values* that bound people together, providing and reinforcing a sense of belonging. I began to recognise African culture as a repository of human values and ethics that taught people to be supportive of each other within a community setting.

Later I had occasion to visit Ghana, in West Africa, where I witnessed similar sociological patterns. People there were, perhaps, even more deeply entrenched in their traditions. There was a palpable respect in the community for the 'human person'[1] (a term used in the Akan symbolic domain) reflecting an amalgam of social and metaphysical beliefs.

[1] An English translation of the Akan term *onipa*, the phrase 'human person' has both descriptive and normative connotations as it refers to the human creature (a biological being) as well as to a human being who has attained an iconic status by leading a moral and ethical life. The latter refers to a possibility of 'becoming'.

Traditional metaphors, maxims and symbols upholding a belief in the existence of God and in human and social values, held in high esteem by the culture, were publicly visible — pasted on walls, backs of vehicles, or any other suitable surface or background. They were also used as logos and emblems by many institutions. Good-byes, salutations and greetings were accompanied, on many occasions, with phrases such as 'Go with God', 'Stay with God', or 'Pass the night with God'. Academic meetings and ceremonies, almost always started with prayers and an acknowledgement of God's Grace. Rituals — funerary, propitiatory, or any other — asserting the strength of indigenous culture and values were a familiar feature of daily life.

Kwame Gyekye's statement about an underlying commonality of cultures in sub-Saharan Africa, despite linguistic and ethnic differences seemed to hold good. He wrote:

> I believe that in many areas of thought we can discern features of the traditional life and thought of the African peoples sufficiently common to constitute a legitimate and reasonable basis for the construction (or reconstruction) of a philosophical system that may properly be called African — African not in the sense that every African adheres to it, but in the sense that that philosophical system arises from, and hence is essentially related to, African life and thought.[2]

So, a sufficiently deep insight into one African culture could give some idea of sub-Saharan culture as a whole.

In India the phenomenological expressions of religious and traditional values were somewhat different to that which I observed in Africa. Hospitality, warmth, respect for the human person, elders and learning are deeply embedded in the Indian culture also. However, there is something that is fundamentally different: there is a deep respect for the renunciate, for one who has moved out of affiliation to norms that bind him/her to a particular community or idea, and dedicates him/herself to purely spiritual pursuits. Such a person, having seen through the ephemerality of life and having connected him/herself to a deeper, more stable and all-pervasive truth, lives freely, unattached to any particular community yet equally available to all. S/he, as Swami Venkatesananda states, becomes like "a lamp in whose light all actions

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[2] Gyekye, 1995, p. 191.

According to historian Basil Davidson cross-Continental migration due to the 'population explosion' caused by better varieties of food and better tools and weapons after the coming in of the iron-age during the middle of the first millennium B.C., affected an intermingling of peoples across "western and central Sahara, between North Africa and the regions of the Niger River" and right down to the southern tip of Africa. This movement brought about a "diversity that is nonetheless rooted in a profound and ancient unity....[whose] roots go far back into the past." (Davidson, pp. 13-14)

take place and in which the lamp itself is not interested [perhaps not even aware], he/she lives and acts but is free from volition..."[3]

A renunciate's actions are not limited to any prescribed group, they are undertaken for the good of all. His/her aim is the overall development and upliftment of humankind — from the mundane to the spiritual. Society has the highest regard for the renunciate and takes on responsibility for his/her upkeep. This can be seen in most parts of India, among most communities, regardless of religious affiliations. Such a person often becomes a guide and philosopher to even those who aspire for mental and spiritual wellness while remaining embedded in the material and the mundane. This may be because one who has plumbed the depths of Reality can provide wise counsel in many fields of human existence.

Both Advaitic and Akan cultures are deeply religious, yet the public manifestations of their religiosity take different forms. Clearly, the differences cannot be explained in inclusive terms — regarding them as just different paths leading to the same destination. Rather, they are different paths directed to different destinations, based in their underlying metaphysical beliefs. Advaita is directed to a goal that goes beyond the social, being primarily oriented to aligning the individual aspirant with an impersonal, unchanging Absolute, while yet honouring the social. It is through its logical propositions that the social is eventually recognised to be none other than an emanation of the Absolute, called Brahman. The empirical is realised to actually be a meta-empirical reality. As such, spiritual enquiry in the Advaita Vedantic framework leads to the subsumption of the phenomenal within an Absolute that is unchanging, axiomatic and all-inclusive. When realised, the ultimate goal transcends the empirical and merges into an experiential realm which is spiritual in nature, a realm in which doubts, differences and discussions cease.

Akan, on the other hand, aspires to a morality that, through an embedment in the material and the existential, firmly supports the collective — the aim being social harmony and mutual respect. As John Mbiti, the well known African philosopher writes, "The individual believes what others in his community believe: it is corporate 'Faith'. And this faith is utilitarian, not purely spiritual, it is practical and not mystical."[4] Mbiti goes on to say, "There is little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life.... No line is drawn between the spiritual and the physical. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms."[5] The religion is pragmatic and utilitarian. Mbiti also distinguishes traditional African religion as

[3] Venkatesananda, p. 713.
[4] Mbiti, 1969 reprint 1971, p. 67.
[5] Mbiti, 1969 reprint 1971, pp.4-5.

being "not primarily for the individual, but for his community of which he is a part."[6] He emphasises the communitarian spirit as against an individualistic one. The point to be noted here perhaps is that a spiritual or religious person does not aim to move beyond his/her community, nor does s/he view it as something to be seen through, or transcended, in favour of a greater truth. Yet, it may be noted that both the traditions — Indian and African — do not see a distinct cleavage between the physical and spiritual, even though the emphases and end goals are different.

My observation and study, combined with interaction with a range of people, suggested that the two religions do not offer different answers to the same fundamental questions.[7] Rather, the very core questions raised are different. Seen from this point of view it seemed erroneous to suppose that there could be an overarching universal religion that could include and supersede all the diverse traditions. As such, each is required to be studied on its own terms so that the points of convergence and divergence may be highlighted. This approach is well summed up by G. Rupp when he says:

> ...the frequently advanced if somewhat facile assertion that the various religious perspectives and correlative practices are simply different paths or ways to the same ultimate destination ... is ... inadequate because it does not do justice to the situation of pluralism .... Hence, a more accurate aphorism would be: each of the various religious traditions includes different approaches leading to different goals.[8]

While at the deepest level, one could say, human quest in all communities is initiated by similar yearnings, motivations or needs, yet their understanding and articulation is influenced by the social, cultural, ecological, and technological particulars of each culture, as also by history and geography. That is what formulates the fundamental search and quest of each culture and that is what qualifies the need to connect to, even manipulate, the unknown. "What people do is motivated by what they believe, and what they believe springs from what they do and experience,"[9] writes Mbiti. With regard to changing social and political conditions Mbiti asserts that even when traditional beliefs are undermined they are not actually overthrown.[10] The ideals and vision reinforced over millennia continue to assert their power and presence in contemporary times.[11] The ideals are formulated by the particular quest, and the goal,

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[6] Mbiti, 1969, 1971, p. 2.

[7] This idea is explicated by S.A. Nigosian in his book on world religions.

[8] G. Rupp ("Religious Pluralism in the Context of an Emerging World Culture"), quoted in Nigosian, p. 509.

[9] Mbiti, 1969, 1971, p. 4.

[10] Mbiti, 1969, 1971, p. 262.

[11] See appendices for a confirmation of this in Ghanaian life as it is currently lived.

that a society or group dedicates itself to. For example, the fundamental quest in Vedanta is dedicated to answering the question: "What is it by knowing which everything gets to be known."[12]

The quest in the African written tradition, more recent in nature, carries an undercurrent of response to colonial attitudes which caused Africans to search for, justify and re-establish their cultural roots. As such, African thinkers are logically working out their tradition to establish its rightful place in world civilization as it had suffered systematic denigration and diremption at colonial hands. So, as Mbiti says, "The main strength and contribution of African traditional religions lie in the Zamani[13].... Religion in Africa has produced its own society with a distinctly religious set of morals, ethics, culture, governments, traditions, social relationships and ways of looking at the world."[14] Yet, he goes on to assert, traditional religion lost its ability to hold its own once new challenges and radical changes overtook African life. The institutional requirements in the new dispensation (under the colonial regime) were different and the question arose as to how African religion contributed and fitted into this situation. As such, the valid trajectory and the fundamental question here could be the one stated by Wiredu (in the context of the need to understand concepts through African languages): "Conceptually speaking, the maxim of the moment should be 'African know thyself!'"[15] This calls for going back to indigenous traditions and culling out, examining and re-processing the idea-fields that shaped the African mindset. Hence, the important and eminent position occupied by the Akan symbols *Sankofa* (meaning 'go back and get it') and *Hwe mu dua*, which stands for a measuring stick, stressing the need for looking critically and closely examining the current relevance of tradition.[16]

Advaita, as already mentioned, is primarily concerned with the relationship of the human to the unchanging, ever-present Source while Akan metaphysics and spirituality concern themselves with community

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[12] Mundaka, I.1.3, Chandogya, VI.1.4.

[13] The Swahili word Zamani refers to a time gone by, or an ancient time. The reference here is to wisdom as encapsulated in a time gone by where sages and seers had intuitively arrived at truths with regard to the Divine and the human's relationship to It.

[14] Mbiti, 1971, p. 272.

[15] Wiredu, 1996, p. 104

[16] Akan culture is rich in artistic symbols that convey complex concepts. Sometimes they are representation of proverbs. The symbol *Sankofa* portrays a bird looking back to its tail, which has an egg on it, signifying the value of past traditions. It is often accompanied by the symbol *Hwe mu dua* which stands for a measuring stick signifying the need for evaluating a thing with regard to its current relevance.

identity and corporate life. Since the fundamental questions posed in the two traditions are different, the resulting ritualistic forms and methodologies for reaching the goals are different, and have far-reaching sociological impacts on the community concerned. Over time, some of the rituals had tended to get congealed, formulaic, even distorted, proving to be inadequate, thus calling for new understandings. That is where the interpretations offered by present-day African scholars are of relevance.

A comparative approach, by placing one tradition besides another, can help to recognise the redundancies, deficiencies and accretions, and foreground the essential teachings and presupposition which may be of perennial and universal value as they provide new insights and solutions to contemporary situations. My initial observation led me to trace certain trajectories that brought up mutual resonances between Advaita and Akan, as though each tradition was in its own particular way addressing some universal human concern. I sensed that though the ultimate spiritual goals might indeed be different and be rendered through different symbolic and phenomenological frames, the underlying quest was directed to the relationship of the human to the Divine. Both are deeply religious societies and each appeared to have elements of value, the recognition of which could enrich the understanding of the other. I found that a comparison and juxtaposition of the two also became valuable in deepening the understanding of my own orientation to Advaita Vedanta. A descriptive and interpretive approach helped to highlight the points of convergence and divergence.

Both Indian and African cultures had been exposed, especially in the first half of twentieth century, to economic, social and cultural modernisation which could have led to the "withering away of religion as a significant element in human existence," as Samuel Huntington has said in another context.[17] But this conclusion did not hold good because as Huntington himself quotes George Weigel to stress that the "unsecularisation of the world ... is one of the dominant social facts in the late 20th century."[18] According to Huntington, the most obvious, most salient, and most powerful cause of the global religious resurgences, paradoxically, was just that which was supposed to cause its death. As people from different ethnic backgrounds migrated from countryside into the city in search of new jobs, they interacted with large numbers of strangers, a fact that exposed them to new sets of relationships and possibilities that distanced them from their roots. Long-standing sources of identity and systems of authority came to be disputed. New forms of stable communities, new subjectivities and new sets of moral precepts

[17] Huntington, 1996, p.9.
[18] Quoted in Huntington, 1996, p. 96.

were needed to provide the uprooted and disenfranchised with a sense of meaning and purpose. Religion, met those needs.[19]

If we accept the prognosis that we are at present witnessing "the end of the progressive era" dominated by Western ideologies, and an indigenisation process through the revival of religions in many parts of the world and are moving into an era in which multiple and diverse civilizations are called upon to interact, compete, coexist, and accommodate each other,[20] common sense tells us that the best way to harmoniously coexist would be through an understanding of these plural cultures and their spiritual origins.

Religions, as S.A. Nigosian declares, have guided, shaped, and inspired a large segment of humanity.[21] While on the one hand they provide "a way to live peacefully in spite of forces that tend toward destructive conflict," on the other they answer "the eternal quest for a purpose for our existence....Both," he states, "are legitimate goals: to look for ways of avoiding or escaping dangers that threaten our life, on the one hand, and to look for inspiration or a profound motivation to justify our existence, on the other. Those two timeless goals are inseparable and together represent the ultimate goal of all religions."[22] One may add here that it is not just the institutionalised forms of religion but the spiritual core, expressed in the ultimate goals aspired for, that persists, which continues to give shape to human thinking. This work is focussed on the core spiritual and metaphysical substratums of the Akan and Advaitic traditions.

Africa and India have both seen the co-existence of major and minor cultural traditions, but despite the common factor of their colonial history, or perhaps because of it, there has not been enough engagement with each other's faiths and belief systems. Such an engagement, as proposed by Diana L. Eck in a suggestion for coping with cultural diversity in the United States, calls for a pluralistic approach as opposed to a mere recognition of diversity. Diversity, she states, "is just plurality, plain and simple — splendid, colorful, perhaps threatening. [But], pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that plurality."[23] Pluralism, she says, is more than mere tolerance of differences. "Tolerance does not require people to know anything at all about one another. As a result, tolerance can let us harbor all the stereotypes and half-truths that

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[19] Huntington, 1996, p. 97.
[20] Huntington, 1996, p. 95.
[21] Nigosian, p. 206.
[22] Nigosian, p. 508.
[23] Eck, http://pluralism.org/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_ to_pluralism.php accessed 5.5.2012

we want to believe about our neighbors.... Tolerance is definitely important, but it is probably too thin a foundation for a society ...[that is] religiously diverse and comple ...."[24] Pluralism, she goes on, "makes room for real and different religious commitments." It "invites people of every faith...to be themselves, with all their particularities, and yet... be engaged in creating a civil society, through the critical and self-critical encounter with one another. Pluralism is a process of...acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences."[25] A pluralistic approach would allow for a "constructive dialogue, revealing both common understandings and real differences."[26] As suggested by Nigosian, an exploration of deep rooted differences can enable those to be negotiated and resolved so as to meet the challenge of religious pluralism in an emerging world culture.[27]

A pluralist approach would also belie the notion that all traditional religions can be placed in one basket as modes of worshipping a God through lesser deities; belief in a cyclical nature of reality; and viewing all nature as being imbued with a spirit hence worthy of being worshipped, etc. In such an approach, the use of labels such as 'pagan' or 'animistic' or 'primitive', to describe these spiritual traditions, would become open to scrutiny. It would belie the prioritisation of concepts such as objectivity, rationality, good method, real science, social progress, civilization — which Sandra Harding (in the context of feminist studies) sees as self-proclaimed modern achievements that are measured in terms of their distance from whatever is associated with the 'primitive',[28] or traditional. A systematic comparison would bring out the deeper aspects of the traditions concerned by placing them on a relational platform.

I felt that an exploration of the concepts of God and of the understanding of the human being as envisaged in the metaphysical postulates of Advaita and Akan, and the meanings of spiritual and social goals upheld and framed in each tradition, could reveal much about the communities that subscribe to these traditions and cultures. Such an exploration could strengthen respect for each other's perspectives and ways of life. It could also facilitate a recognition of the universal values

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[24] Eck, http://pluralism.org/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_ to_pluralism.php accessed 5.5.2012

[25] Eck, http://pluralism.org/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_ to_pluralism.php accessed 5.5.2012

[26] Eck, http://pluralism.org/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_ to_pluralism.php accessed 5.5.2012

[27] Nigosian, p.513.

[28] Harding, p. 3.

which guide each of these societies and a mutually positive engagement with them.

I found that Sanskrit and Akan words used for God and deities and other sacred matters did not convey the same ideas. That they could not be interchanged. And when translated into English, they moved even further away from the meanings intended in the indigenous expressions. English equivalents for Akan or Vedantic referents, such as God, soul, human person, did not transfer the meanings encoded in the original languages and symbols. The fundamental concepts, thus, had to be decoded and assimilated within the context of their own social, geographical, environmental and historical situations if one were to get to the rich core of their wisdom and ethics. When read in the context of their original ground, the words had nuanced and subtle connotations that connected them to a network of ideas that would generally get lost when accessed through parallel English words. As asserted by Gispert-Sauch, words like religious, profane, sacred (dealing with the inner life of a human group) cannot succeed in transferring fully to another culture and civilization "the immense load of human reality with which they have been charged throughout the history of the civilization to which they belong."[29] The idea then would be to evaluate the cultures as participants, to the extent possible, so that cultural meanings and their roots may be understood in their own settings.

Thus, a flexible attitude that would refrain from compromising the fundamental and valuable differences between these varied traditions — each emphasizing a different path to a different goal,[30] — would be helpful. By allowing an unbiased reflection on each tradition and deciphering the deeper meanings encoded in the concepts, the approach would help to probe the fundamental core ideas that shaped the world view of the tradition. It would not make any claim of prioritising one system over another. Rather, it may affirm and validate the different viewpoints that describe both constructs, while demonstrating the invalidity of the *absolutes* posited by some approaches. The aim would be, as suggested by Gispert-Sauch, to examine their multiple notions in all the aspects to apprehend them in all their richness,[31] without recourse to any value judgements.

Finally, it needs to be stated that while much commitment has been

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[29] Gispert-Sauch, p. 4.
[30] See Nigosian, p. 509.
[31] Gispert-Sauch, p. 6.

displayed by India and Africa at the level of political engagement and collaboration, it has not been supported by a parallel effort on the cultural front. In fact, the two regions — India and Africa — have continued to look at each other through the prism of colonial scholarship which was informed and motivated more by power relations, by a need to dominate and prove superiority, than by pure intellectual curiosity. There is a need to understand each other through our own indigenous epistemological constructs rather than rely on those devised by erstwhile colonisers. There is a need that we set up a meaningful dialogue, as dialogue invites and respects plurality and difference, even as it gives due epistemic place to the other. We need to understand, to the extent possible, the ultimate values and elements that are, as stressed by Karl Potter, "of paramount importance in the lives of the people... [and which constitute] the highest ideals [upheld by the] wisest"[32] in the two cultures. I see my work as a tentative attempt in this direction, a small contribution to the nascent discourse on Indo-African mutuality in a domain other than the political.

[32] Potter, p. 1.

II

Vedanta: Background

Before going on to analyse the concepts of God and of the human being and the values upheld in the Advaita Vedantic and the Akan traditions it is fitting to take account of the social milieu in which each tradition emerged. Vedanta, an important factor in the formation of an Indian world view emerged in a context of complex socio-economic and cultural changes in the earlier part of the first millennium BC. The old pastoral system of social organisation was giving way to urban formations and territorial arrangements which called for psychological and social adjustments leading to deep reflections regarding the role of the human in the universe as also of the relationship between the individual being and cosmic forces that were perceptible in the form of natural phenomena. The relationship between the seen and the unseen forces became a subject of exploration and study. The earlier body of knowledge contained in the Vedas was felt to be inadequate, and new understandings were called for.

Though the term Vedanta refers to the Upanishadic part of the Vedas, it can be taken to mean several things. The literal meaning of Vedanta is the 'end of the Veda' (*Veda+anta*). It may, as such, be taken to refer to the texts that appear at the tail-end of the Vedas or even to the end of the Vedic system of beliefs. Paradoxically, it is also taken to refer to the quintessential and most significant teachings of the Vedas when actually the knowledge posited in Vedanta is often contrary to that propagated by the earlier part of the Vedas. This may be because it does not actually negate the Vedic system of knowledge, but places it in a different context. Some scholars have also suggested that traditionally it referred to the instruction imparted during the final period of the Vedic study[1] as the study rendered the mind of the student 'pure' and ready to receive the esoteric teachings of the Vedanta.

[1] Nakamura, 1983, p. 96.

Vedas, the oldest of which (*Rg* Veda) dates back to around 2000 B.C.,[2] consist of different segments. The *Samhita* segment is made up of ritual incantations offered to the forces of nature that were seen to control, and be separate from, humans. The *Brahmanas* are commentaries and explanatory notes on the rituals prescribed in the *Samhitas* to better propitiate the presiding deities of natural forces. These are followed by *Aranyakas* (forest texts) that engaged themselves with deep philosophical ruminations and speculations which even questioned the significance of religious ceremonies as prescribed in the preceding segments. The *Aranyakas* can, so to say, be looked upon as an intermediate step in the transition from the *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas* to the Upanishads (also called Vedanta), which declared that mere rituals and external actions were not sufficient to satisfy the ultimate spiritual yearning of the human being. A distinction between material good and spiritual fulfilment was recognised and a conclusion arrived at that the gods of the Vedas and the rituals prescribed by them could not provide the latter. Moving away from the plurality of external phenomena and perceptions, the search in the Upanishads came to be directed to the discovery of the "First Principle, through which the multiplicity of the universe"[3] could be explained and understood. An appetite for knowledge to get to the bottom of the world of plurality, leading to a truth that was "non-contradictory and free from fear and friction,"[4] came to engage the attention of Upanishadic seers and thinkers. Since these texts were appended to the Vedas, they came to be termed Vedanta.

The earliest Upanishad was manifested more than a thousand years after the emergence of the first Veda (the *Rg* Veda). A number of socio-cultural factors contributed to the arising of such a radical change in attitude from the ritualistic *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas* to that of the Upanishads which sought to trace the world to a single primordial cause.[5] There were economic and political factors that impinged on the patterns of thought prevalent at the time. Historians as well as philosophers have corroborated that the age of the Upanishads (800 BC to early ADs) saw complex socio-economic movements that imperceptibly, and over time, reacted against the Vedic Brahmanas[6] even as they made a "bold leap forward" in the human's understanding of the world and of him/herself. The leap forward was not just in terms of the subject of exploration, but in the mode of transmission as also in terms of the sources from which

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[2] See Sharma, p. 13.
[3] Nikhilananda, 1962, p. 22.
[4] Nikhilananda, 1962, p. 22.
[5] Hiriyanna, p.15.
[6] Pande, p.63; Reincourt, p. 39; Thapar 2003, p. 37.

knowledge came to be gleaned. As historian Romila Thapar writes, "The nature of the change was a shift from the acceptance of the Vedas as revealed and as controlled by ritual to the possibility that knowledge could derive from intuition, observation and analysis."[7] It is not just the teachings of the Upanishads but "how they are presented"[8] that shows their innovativeness and shift. So much so that in time the *Samhitas* and the *Brahmanas* came to be considered *karma kanda*, the section of the Vedas dealing with rituals and works, and the Upanishads, along with the *Aranyakas*, as *jnana kanda*, the part of the Vedas dealing with knowledge and philosophical subjects.[9]

While the age or historicity of the Vedas and Upanishads is not considered germane to the significance of their teachings as they are seen to be origin-less and unrelated to human authorship,[10] yet an inquiry into their socio-economic context is pertinent to understanding the emergence of the world view, why it took the form it did, and what led to it becoming a more or less overarching thought form of India in the succeeding centuries.

The Vedas arose after the decline, by the second millennium B.C., of the urban centres that had reached a high degree of development during the Indus valley civilization. Thereafter, a second urbanisation arose around the early centuries of the first millennium B.C. At that time, Vedic pastoralism began giving way to settled agriculture, and numerous cities emerged as a result of trade. A rise in territorial states[11] took place around this time, as stated by historian Romila Thapar.

By the early part of the first millennium BC, tribal allegiance had begun to give way to territorial loyalty. Kinship-based alliances that were

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[7] Quoted in Black, p. 2.

[8] Black, p. 15.

[9] See Black, p. 2.

[10] Nikhilananda,1962, p. 9.

Regarding the authorlessness of the Vedas and Vedanta J.N. Mohanty writes, "The authorlessness of the *sruti* (the Vedic texts) means for me minimally the following: in the case of texts such as the *sruti* the intention of the author is not relevant for understanding the texts. The text itself is primary and autonomous. (...[t]he imperative sentences themselves by virtue of their grammatical form should be able to generate in a person the desire to act accordingly.) Secondly, the *sruti* constitute the founding texts for the Hindu world by opening up the horizon...within which the tradition has understood itself and we who belong to that tradition have understood ourselves. Thirdly, the *sruti*, has exhibited...a plasticity of meaning, an inexhaustible reservoir of meaning which is not exhausted by any system, but has made room for new interpretations. These three features, to my mind, capture the essential core of the belief that the *sruti* is authorless (*apauruseya*)..." see Bilimoria et al, p. 65.

[11] Thapar, 2003, p. 37.

supreme earlier could now be ignored in a quest for power and territory.[12] Besides, in the urban centres and monarchical states two systems of economic redistribution of wealth came to exist alongside each other. One was based on taxes, revenues, etc collected by the state and then redistributed as awards, salaries, grants and ceremonies, as also spent on "prestige economy", a process described as "burning of excess wealth".[13] The other system was operational among merchants and bankers who retained a good portion of the capital accumulated for further investment. The power of money liberated these merchants to some extent from the overarching political control of kings and rulers, writes Thapar.[14] These factors were joined with considerable social and demographic fluidity which created an environment that was stimulating and at the same time upsetting for the old order.

Several new ideological thought systems arose that posed views contrary to, and even challenged, the Vedas. As such, the "context during this period was different from any that had existed before. The outcome of this recognition was the growth of ideologies that were at the same time innovative and germinal to the social and religious philosophy and ethical thought of subsequent periods."[15]In this fluid socio-political and economic environment it was natural for questions regarding the place of the human in the larger scheme of things to arise. The older patterns of social organisation and of connecting to the divine by appeasing some remote deities did not satisfy anymore. Vedanta, asserting itself in the midst of a new sociological environment and among breakaway ideological movements, sought answers to new questions that arose not only from within the Vedic cultural milieu but also from the breakaway schools of thought.

The most important question that the Upanishads engaged themselves with was finding out what the substratum of the universe was, wherefrom it emerged and what the nature of its underlying reality was. They also sought an answer to what the relationship of the individual to that reality was. All other knowledge became secondary as it was seen to deal with externalia bypassing the fundamental truth of the individual's own being. In the seventh chapter of the *Chandogya* Upanishad (one of the earliest Upanishads along with *Brihadaranyaka*, *Kaushitaki*, *Taittiriya* and *Aitereya*[16]), Narada approaches Sanatkumar requesting him to 'teach him'. When asked what he already knew Narada replies (VII.1.2-3):

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[12] Thapar, 2003, p.41.
[13] See Black, p. 15.
[14] Thapar, 2003, p. 42.
[15] Thapar, 2003, p. 37.
[16] See Black, 4.

"Revered Sir, I know the Rgveda, the Yajurveda, the Samaveda, and the Atharvana, as the fourth, the Itihasa-Purana as the fifth, grammar, the rules of worship of the ancestors, mathematics, the sciences of portents, the science of treasures, logic, the science of ethics, etymology, the ancillary knowledge of the Vedas, the physical sciences of the stars, the science related to serpents, and the fine arts — all this I know, revered Sir."

He goes on to say, "Revered Sir, however, I am only a knower of verbal texts, not a knower of Atman."[17] All that had been accumulated under the rubric of 'knowledge' was not seen as real knowledge now when the search was related to the original source that was beyond intellectual understanding.

Uddalaka Aruni voices a similar concern (*Chandogya* chapter VI) when his son Svetaketu returns bloated with twelve years of exposure to Vedic learning but has no idea of the intuitive knowledge which enables a person to know the essential truth of everything. After having pierced the boy's intellectual pride, Uddalaka, the father, himself takes on the role of the teacher for imparting the knowledge which proves that everything is inhered by one singular spiritual principle.

Even so, Vedanta was not a total breakaway from the earlier knowledge. Assimilation and incorporation of the new and strange had been a part of the Vedic system of social organization in which, at the social level, a new caste was easily devised to accommodate new entrants — be it foreigners, or persons belonging to new professions — for the sake of smooth and harmonious functioning of society. Given the large number of disparate tribes, the maintenance of harmony through accommodation was seen to be an imperative necessity. In keeping with this accommodationist tradition Vedanta found ways of incorporating the new ideologies into the existing ideology.

It was the capacity of the Upanishads to assimilate and synthesize the ideologies of other emerging systems of thought that gave them a foundational status in the formation of what came to be called the Indian ethos. G.C. Pande sees the construction of Indian self image, tradition and identity in terms of the Vedantic system of ideas and presuppositions.[18] The system by its resilience and capacity to assimilate, adjust and transform — a quality that connected it to already existing thought patterns — provided continuity and became acceptable to large sections of society.

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[17] *Chandogya Upanisad*, pp. 481-483.

[18] Pande, 1984, pp. 2,3,4.

The term ethos here refers to the spirit that motivates ideas and customs. Romila Thapar (2003) writes: "The sixth to the third centuries B.C. in northern India saw the emergence of patterns of thought that were embryonic to the evolution of what was called in later centuries the Indian ethos."

It, thus, became an important subject of study for scholars and philosophers during the succeeding ages allowing for varied interpretations. As a result, traditional practitioners and teachers of Vedas and Vedanta are seen to exist alongside those who have tried to find its relevance in the changing socio-cultural contexts, even during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Besides incorporating new ideas regarding the place of the individual in the world, stress came to be placed on the freedom of the individual from the insecurity of a fast-changing world. The idea of freedom came to be seen in terms of freeing the individual from the fetters of impermanence and limitations inherent in the interaction of the body and mind with the universe and its forces. A realisation arose that while material happiness may be gained by observance of ethical laws and performance of worldly duties and rituals, it yet remained subject to the laws of causation and change, and would come to an end in time. Earlier knowledge was assimilated and absorbed into the new ideas and yearnings — in which a desire for a worthier living having higher spiritual value took over from a belief in dogma and ritual.[19] The emergence of an intellectual distinction between *abhyudaya* (social and personal well-being) and *nisreyasa* (the Highest Good), that transcends these laws and continues to exist as the substratum of all that appears and is perceptible to the senses, created new aspirations. An experience of the latter came to be seen as true knowledge, true happiness, true liberation.[20] High spiritual value came to be placed on experiential knowledge in which divisions were merged, as everything was recognised to be inhered by the same singular substance.

As Vedanta was not a suddenly developed system of thought produced at a given time, it was not the result of speculations of any one philosopher or any particular school founded by any one person.[21] The teachings did not all emanate from a particular class or caste either. Rather, they were a compendium of efforts and queries made over a period of time, in different places among diverse sections of society, whatever their social rank. Knowledge came to be given a place of paramount importance irrespective of where it came from. As such, the ways and practices of seekers of knowledge were highly varied.[22] Expounders of knowledge belonged to varied strata, practicing very different ways of life. Kings and nobles had much wealth and many attendants as seen in the Upanishads, while others are seen to live a life of penury as poor wanderers. The lives

[19] Hiriyanna, p. 25.
[20] Nikhilananda, 1962, p. 10.
[21] Nakamura, 1983, p. 109; see also Hiriyanna, pp. 44-45.
[22] See Nakamura, 1983, p.107.

of even the Brahmins and Seers who appear in the Upanishads are very dissimilar. Some live in well-endowed hermitages supporting several disciples, who regularly carry out the rituals prescribed in the Vedas. Others are wanderers. Some are married, having children, others espouse the life of celibate mendicants.

Social hierarchy ceased to matter when knowledge was to be gained. Instructions came to be given by a variety of people — kings, nobles and warriors, and Brahmins, as also persons of lowly origins. It could be imparted in Great Assemblies supported by kings, or in hermitages run by ascetics and knowers of Truth. It could also be imparted in intimate discourses carried out between husband and wife or father and son. People of lower castes are seen to be teaching those of higher castes in the Upanishads. Raikva, who lived under a cart and was a man of poor economic means, he may even have belonged to a lower cast, is seen to teach King Janasruti, who seeks him out after he hears two swans flying over his palace discussing how small the virtue of Janasruti was in comparison to that of Raikva (*Chandogya*, IV.1.3).[23] Gods are seen to be teaching other gods as well as humans. In the eighth chapter of the *Chandogya* Upanishad, Prajapati, the Creator, is seen to teach two rival pupils — Indra, the king of devatas or benevolent gods, and Virochana, the king of demons. Gods sometimes teach in anthropomorphic forms, at others as elemental forces like wind, fire, etc., thus mingling the spiritual and the material. Satyakama Jabala and Upakosala Kamalayana are taught by the winds and fires when their teachers put them through rigorous tests (*Chandogya*, chapter IV, Sections 5-8 and Sections 10-13). The one focus and rallying point in all this plurality and diversity is the quest for knowledge that would liberate. The liberation sought is liberation from transience and death.

Though common tendencies and characteristics regarding search for an underlying Truth could be traced in them, a given 'system' of thought had not emerged in the early stages of Upanishadic formulations.[24] They were more in the nature of queries and speculative answers within the Vedic canon, which was nevertheless given new symbolic meanings and connotations. Rituals were deconstructed and transformed with the aim of organically aligning the presiding deities of rituals to the organs of the human body, together with the mind, thus turning them into psychological realities. Gods, that represented elemental forces in the Vedas, instead of being displaced, were turned into deities that presided over, and were connected to, different parts of the body. The human being became the

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[23] See *Chandogya Upanisad*, pp. 258-270.
[24] Nakamura, 1983, p.109.

means for a larger understanding of the universe by using rites as a mode of sublimating and transcending, and dissolving bodily limitations. The whole exercise became "associated with an internal rather than an external practice."[25] The aim was to "liberate the soul from the trammels of intellectual opposites,"[26] to use the words of Loy. An understanding arose that while the world of opposites is the experience of every individual it 'can be undone' and 'deconstructed,' in order to experience its very origin, the substratum of existence. Logic was transcended in the quest to grasp the reality behind the contingent, empirical world. Yet, the contingent was not denied, rather it was seen as a manifestation of, or an appearance in, the transcendent. What was sought was a subordination of the intellect to a direct intuitive experience, through a *dialectical*[27] progression — an intellectual exercise that examined and analysed existential states of being (such waking, dream and sleep) that every human is subject to.

While the value of rites was recognised, stress was laid on the fact that they would have greater efficacy if performed after knowing their deeper meaning[28] and relationship to the individual. At the same time it was recognised that results from Vedic rituals would remain in the transitory domain of change and decimation. So, what was required was to go beyond mere rituals. Yet the break, or shift of emphasis, from tradition was gradual. For, Upanishadic teachings were more, as philosphers like R.D.Ranade and M. Hiriyanna have asserted, in the nature of a *shift in emphasis* from ritual to *knowledge*, from cosmology to psychology.[29] They were not a form of protest of philosophy against the "excesses of religion," as stated by Swami Nikhilananda.[30] It is also not as though the mystic pursuit, that came into primary focus in Vedanta, had been totally absent in the earlier part of the Vedas — the *Purusa Sukta* (*Rg* Veda, X, 96) and the *Nasadiya Sukta* (*Rg* Veda, X, 129)[31] which raise questions about whether there at all is a creator of the universe and what his relationship or role in it might be, among many other Vedic utterances, bear testimony to this. On the other hand, as already seen, performance

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[25] See Hiriyanna, pp. 44-45; see also Loy, p. 39.
[26] Loy, p. 42.
[27] G.C. Pande, p. 2, writes: 'The dialectic... does not have to be conceived as a purely logical process. It appears to be rather a psychological process where instinctive seeking and practical experience, rational reflection and spiritual understanding mingle and clash'.
[28] Nakamura, 1983, p.103.
[29] Ranade, p. 34.
[30] Nikhilananda,1962, p. 20.
[31] For text and translation see Sharma, pp. 108-111 and 113-115

of rituals prescribed in the Vedas did not cease during the Upanishadic times. They were made subservient to the goal of the Vedanta. Characters from the earlier sections of the Vedas continue to appear in the Upanishads in different textual and social contexts. In the eighth chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad leaders of gods (*devas*) and demons (*asuras*) — characters from the *Rg* Veda — are seen to compete over knowledge of the *Atman*,[32] the indestructible core of the living being. The two compete for this knowledge in order to "obtain the worlds and have their desires fulfilled."[33] As Brian Black rightly states, "...knowledge of the *atman* replaces the sacrifice" as the element that would enable victory, as also the gaining of material wealth. Paradoxically material wealth and prosperity are not completely overlooked or ignored in the search for the *atman*. Thus the emerging 'doctrine' of Vedanta aimed at putting together in "one harmonious whole the results obtained by all previous orthodox thinkers and [came to be]... looked upon as the most perfect expression of Indian thought."[34]

Relationship between the Micro and the Macro

Even as rituals and the concomitant polytheism were outgrown, they were assigned a place as pegs in the spiritual development of the seeker. Vedanta did not reject anything but changed its symbolic significance. In giving way to the path of knowledge ritualistic activity and external acts were sublimated and introverted to correspond with human faculties and turned into rungs in the ladder of mental evolution and attainment of the final goal of liberation. Concomitantly, a subtle correlation between the micro and the macrocosm came to be gradually established. Through rational analysis it was shown that gods were inferior to human beings. Gods as spiritual beings were seen to be changeless, for as 'pure will' they could not grow. Humans alone could attain the highest stage of self-realisation as they were endowed with the intellectual capacity to analyse and understand. The human being, thus, came to be given a centre-stage position in the emerging scheme of things.

Integration of the individual personality with the universe and ultimately with Brahman, the Primal Reality, gained high value. Phenomenological analyses of the universe and of the human being pointed to a single primordial cause which itself unfolded as the universe of diversity[35] and multiplicity. The *Taittiriya* and the *Aitareya* Upanishads, among others,

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[32] See Black, p.41.
[33] Black, p. 41.
[34] Hiriyanna, p. 151.
[35] Hiriyanna, p.15.

show the unfolding of the singular being into diversity and then trace it back to the source to prove its oneness. This, perhaps, is what provided impetus to the central, fundamental question raised in the Upanishads — *what is it by knowing which one comes to know all.*[36]

Advaita

This highly complex scenario gave rise to divergent ways of thinking even within the Vedantic system of thought. The major ones were the non-dualist — Advaita — and the dualist — Dvaita — schools. The Advaita school, with which this work is concerned, posits that the human being in his/her essentiality is identical with the Primal Reality. It means that the human in his/her profound dimension is not the individual that s/he ordinarily takes him/herself to be. As Reality itself, the human is spiritual and partakes of the freedom which characterises Ultimate Reality. This position is based not on mere speculation, but upon experience supported by a phenomenological analysis of the composite human person — as explicated in the *Taittiriya* and *Aitereya* Upanishads and more succinctly in the *Mandukya* Upanishad.[37] Phenomenological analysis of the universe and the human being points to a single primordial cause which itself unfolds as the universe of diversity[38] and multiplicity. Thus, as stated by Eliot Deutsche, the central "metareligious or metapsychological affirmation" of Advaita Vedanta is that knowledge of non-difference with Brahman leads a person to an experience of freedom, a freedom that is not subject to change and thus, does not disappear in time.[39]

As against the teleological approach of the Vedas in which rituals promised a material result in a future time, it came to be recognised that this Truth was to be realised by direct perception and right knowledge in the here and now. Reality needed to be discovered, and 'recovered', as it existed in the finite world as its very substratum. Intuitive knowledge, *aparokshanubhuti*, gained a place of prime importance.

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[36] *Mundaka*, I.1.3., *Chandogya*, VI.1.4.

[37] The five metaphorical *koshas* posited in the *Taittiriya* point to the knowledge of an underlying Consciousness, which inheres all activities – intellectual, emotional, motor and material, while an analysis of the three states of being (waking, dream and sleep) in the *Mandukya* also points to the same Truth.

[38] Hiriyanna, p.15.

[39] Deutshce, p. 65.

Human as a Means for Knowledge

The mode of this 'recovery', or recognition of identity with the Supreme Consciousness, was direct experience. This could be gained by examining the world around as also one's own mental psychological composition. Emotions and intellect, when subjected to scrutiny, became tools for a greater end as, finally, they too were transcended when their source was tapped into. While intellect was an important tool for understanding the "scheme of contingent things," to use the words of Reincourt, it was realised that, "intuition rather than ratiocination will give ... immediate insight into reality, an instantaneous apprehension of the Absolute." By stilling the senses and going beyond the body, mind and ego, a person "must apprehend Brahman, the Godhead, the undying impersonal essence of the universe."[40] It was realised that while faith and reason play a vital role, only direct experience (which is beyond intellect and reason) would destroy doubts leading finally to an "inner reassurance and peace" which are the "ultimate proof of Truth".[41] This Truth, or essence, also constituted the inmost being of the person. Epistemology (as an analytical process) and ontology (a realisation of one's core identity) were thus meshed, one into the other, to get to the essential truth of existence. Integration of the individual personality with the universe and ultimately with Brahman gained high value. Thus, religious beliefs gradually gave way to systematic spiritual quest.

Methodology

Innovation in Vedanta pertained not only to ideas but to also the style of their presentation. Dialogues and narratives took the place of doctrinal formulas and teaching. The narratives and stories were not just literary embellishments, but were integral to the understanding of the core teaching. Upanishadic conversations present specific individuals in specific contexts with which seekers can relate. Simple 'experiments' are set up using observable phenomena and natural processes with the aim of leading to proper understanding. An example of this can be seen in the section in which Uddalaka calls upon Svetaketu (*Chandogya*, Chapter VI) to bring the seed of a *Nyagrodha* tree, dissect it to know that that which looks like nothing in its core is actually the essence which inheres the large tree. So, too, with dissolving a chunk of salt in water which, when dissolved, spreads evenly through the water, and can be tasted, even though it is not visible any more.

[40] Reincourt, p. 39.
[41] Nikhilananda, 1962, p. 19.

Dialogues and stories are supplemented by riddles and aphoristic statements. One example of a riddle can again be found in the *Chandogya* Upanishad (IV.3.6-7) where a hungry student is given food by two Brahmins — Saunaka Kapeya and Abhipratin Kaksaseni — only after he satisfactorily answers an enigmatic metaphysical question posed by them. Debates and discussions are held in courts; between husband and wife; and among sages in recognisable contexts. The stories relating to everyday experiences and aspirations give insights into the life and times of the Upanishads and the types of persons engaged in these pursuits. The characters and their mental agonies are recognisable.[42] Among other instances this can be seen poignantly exemplified in the case of Upakosala (*Chandogya*, IV.10. 1- IV. 15.5) and Maitreyi (*Brihadaranyaka*, II.4.1-14). Both characters undergo existential crises when faced with critical situations in their lives. Upakosala is denied a certificate by his Guru after the completion of a rigorous training course; and Maitreyi is to be left behind by her husband, her life-long partner, who wishes to leave everything in order to set out in pursuit of higher learning.

Connections came to be established between natural processes and the human person to show that they were subject to similar processes and were interdependent. Physiological connections were established between matter and spirit — such as between nourishment and memory, like when Uddalaka asks his son, Svetaketu to refrain from eating for fifteen days only to find that he cannot remember any of the texts that he had learnt (*Chandogya*, Chapter VI).[43] It is only after he eats that he begins to remember again. The emphasis in all these is on the interconnections between Truth and perceptible existents which call for being discovered in the here and now.

To enable seekers after Truth to probe into the reality of the seemingly real, sense perceptible universe, the Upanishads resort to a method of establishing the reality of varied existents only to disprove it by subsequent analysis. The method, called *adhyaropa apavada nyaya*, provokes the student to probe deeper to realise that that which earlier looked real is ultimately not so. The method takes the seeker from the visible, perceptible reality to the sensually imperceptible which is the substratum of all. One example of this can be seen in Chapter VIII of the *Chandogya* Upanishad, wherein Indra (the leader of *devatas*, the benevolent gods) and Virochana (the leader of *asuras*, demons, who are materialistic in their aspirations) approach the teacher Prajapati to gain insight into a Truth that would free them from existential sorrows. Prajapati leads

[42] See Black, p. 17, 37.
[43] See also Black, p. 37.

them by asking them to examine their own images reflected in water. Virochana, the materialistically oriented disciple, is satisfied with the realisation that his own well adorned image is the final truth, while Indra, given to deeper questioning continues to challenge each perceptible level of his being which is puzzlingly presented to him as the reality by his Guru. By this means Prajapati, the Guru, provides the methodology for analysing and deciphering the truth underlying each seemingly real layer. But it is through his own intellectual effort, guided by the Guru, that Indra ultimately comes to the realisation of the ultimate Truth. So, each student reaches the level of realisation that his own inner evolution allows him to do. The disciplines required for purifying the mind before one can attain higher knowledge demand a high level of moral qualities, so one agrees with Black when he states that

> ... in the Upanishads, philosophy is something that is achieved through discussion and debate, confrontation and negotiation, with the dialogue form emphasizing intersubjectivity...There is emphasis on real, concrete situations, with the specificity of the details of each scene ..... [T]he Upanishads are as much about teaching etiquette and proper behaviour as they are about personal transformation. [Besides]... personal transformation can only take place through strict adherence to the proper practices."[44]

Ethics and morality are, thus, not divorced from a search for individual transformation. Yet, even though the Upanishadic enquiry begins at the immediately personal level, effort is directed at the annihilation and overcoming of narrow individuality and a materialistic conception of it. The aim is to inculcate a deep awareness of the impersonal and timeless Absolute. For one who has realised that there is no 'other,' the very question of a separate individuality gets dissolved.

As such one may say that in Vedanta

- introspection and dialogue supersede unquestioning belief and faith.
- there is a gradual shift from the cosmological world view of the Vedas to a psychological and metaphysical perception of the world that can be verified personally by the individual through observation and intellectual enquiry.
- the individual person becomes the methodological and spiritual centre of the world, leading to a coalescing of epistemology and ontology within the individual being.
- a spirit of accommodation and synthesis becomes perceptible. New

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[44] Black, pp. 22-23.

and differing concepts are assimilated and absorbed, even as they are given new meanings to fit into the Vedantic world view.

- the knowledge evolves gradually over a period of time from vague questionings to statements and declaration of truth that had been personally experienced and verified by sages.
- the knowledge is a compendium of ideas collated from the ruminations and dialogues of varied persons in different social settings.
- the texts are not dogmatic. Multiple ways of reaching the ultimate goal are suggested.
- emphasis is laid on the experience of a freedom that cannot be decimated at any point in time.[45]
- the search is very much an individual/personal exercise as against rituals conducted in a group or community.

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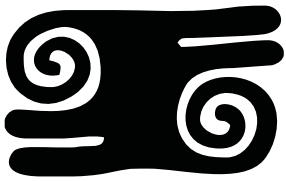
[45] The texts themselves give a definition of the word Upanishad, which means knowledge that *liberates* one from transience by removing the erroneous association with birth, old age and death etc. and takes one near to Brahman (*Taittiriya Bhashya*, p. 21).

The Taittiriya Upanishad, 1993, p.1, states: 'The prefix 'upa' means *near*; ...nothing can be nearer to one than one's own inner Self... The three meanings of the root 'sad' ...[are] to *decay*, to *go* or *know*, to *destroy*.... Atman, the Self... is devoid of duality, thereby a knowledge of it brings about the *decay* of avidya or unwisdom...; because it destroys ...ignorance...[it] gives one to *understand* that the Supreme Being who is devoid of all duality is none other than one's own *inner* Self; ...[and it] *destroys* ...germs of outward activity by... cutting up their root (avidya).'

III

Akan: Background



The nature and origin of the Akan spiritual and religious tradition remains a matter of some debate among scholars. In the absence of written material or a formally structured oral tradition, it is constructed on the basis of current religious practices and rituals, folk traditions and tales, and axiomatic statements prevalent among practitioners. Some scholars, like Norman Klein,[1] have attempted to use evidence from carbon dating, emergence of sickle cell among the populations for adapting to the disease-prone environment, and slaving practices to deconstruct history and some of the beliefs of the settlers in the deep forests. (Klein refers to beliefs like the stress on exogamy, high value on fertility, rites related to care and support for women in childbirth and for raising children, and practices developed for incorporating outsiders through adoption so that population depletion caused by slaving and death, could be countered. I suggest that the great deal of importance given to the *human person* also stems from the need to retain members of the clan.) Further complexity is created by colonial as well as African scholars trained in the Western and Christian traditions, who interpret and examine the tradition in the light of their own epistemological traditions and in the process implant their own spiritual and religious concepts on the African. The conceptual framework embedded in the foreign language, in this case English, in which the tradition came to be expounded also caused it to suffer distortions. Besides, the capacity of the Akan, like other sub-Saharan religions, to assimilate other traditions is often misinterpreted as lack of core religious and spiritual traditions which become hard to be accessed. Jan Platvoet writes, that indigenous sub-Saharan traditions, as also Akan, "have always been open and receptive religions." He goes on to say that as preliterate, or oral religions without scriptures and doctrines, they easily adapted to new situations of cultural and religious

[1] See Klein, 1996.

contact and smoothly adopted and incorporated new notions. But, he says, they also "never bothered to integrate new and older belief notions into a consistent belief system." One reason for this, according to him, was because the believers "never felt the need for a coherent set of beliefs;" and another was, because their societies lacked the means, "intellectually and institutionally", for creating internal consistency between beliefs.[2] Platvoet goes on to say that the concept of a Supreme God who created the universe is an implant from Christianity, a statement that has been contested by African scholars. His contention about intellectual capability is also contested as Akan and other African scholars have, in modern times, made major inputs into documenting Akan beliefs and the context which influenced the formation of their concepts.

Continuance of Indigenous Beliefs

There are certain beliefs that are fundamental to the Akan so that even when notions from other traditions are incorporated they take on the colouring of those beliefs and concepts. A study, however blurred, of the origins of the tradition provides us with an insight into how the Akan metaphysical beliefs have remained enmeshed in the formulation and evolution of their social and political life and contrarily, how some of the beliefs and values themselves were formed by the social, political and ecological needs of the time. Modern interpreters of tradition seek out the core concepts of their religion as they explore the rites and rituals that continue to be practised on the ground even after the onslaught of colonial and Christian missionary activities. Emmanuel Larbi underscores the "irrepressible nature of the ideas underpinning the primal religion," by quoting Margaret Field who writes:

> ...though it is not difficult by warfare, foreign administration, modern industry and other means, to smash up an ancient religious organisation, the ideas which sustained it are not easily destroyed. They are only disbanded, vagrant and unattached. But given sufficient sense of need, they will mobilise again.[3]

John Mbiti stresses the same point when he says, "... a careful scrutiny of the religious situation shows clearly that in their encounter with traditional religions, Christianity and Islam have made only an astonishingly shallow penetration in converting the whole man of Africa, with all his historical/

[2] Platvoet, see pp. 39-65.
[3] Larbi, p.1, www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj10/larbi.html, accessed 9.9.2011.

cultural roots, social dimensions, self-consciousness and expectations,"[4] leading to a complex picture of religion in Africa. With regard to the continuation of some traditional practices he says, "Attacks on the custom by Christian missionaries have not met with much success." He goes on to quote scholars who stress that, "...for many, Christianity is quite superficial, and ... has no real answers to life's personal difficulties, nor any real influence on the people's social problems."[5]

Peter Ekeh, in another context, speaks of the emergence of two 'publics' in Africa. One, the 'civic' public which has been historically associated with the colonial administration and with popular politics in post-colonial Africa, and second the 'primordial' public that remains rooted in traditional values and beliefs and the moral fabric of tradition. He argues that the former, though it wields much power, has little authority as it is obliged to draw its legitimacy from the latter, which is rooted in tradition.[6]

The same trend can be discerned in the new forms of Christianity that have emerged in Ghana which carry strong undertones of traditional approach to divinity and their expectations from it. Speaking of the search for "salvation" through Pentecostal churches and healing centres, Larbi, clarifies what salvation means to the Akan: "For these people, the concept of salvation cannot be divorced from their existential needs. The 'Saviour' in this sense is not only the one that saves them from the curse and blight of sin ... He is also the one who supremely helps them in their day-to-day existential needs."[7]

The core religious ideas of the Akan, Larbi goes on, could be "equally applicable to the various ethnic groups in Ghana, and indeed the fundamentals of the traditional African perception of reality as a whole."[8] Emphasising the point that African indigenous religions are pragmatic and utilitarian in their approach, Mbiti stresses the same when he states, "Converts appreciate more deliverance from the physical evils than anything else that would be in the nature of spiritual or moral depravity."[9]

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[4] Mbiti, 1971, p. 263. According to Prof. Abamfo Atiemo, of the University of Ghana, this idea was also stated by Paul Bola Oye. He stated this in his paper, "The Influence of Traditional Religion on Christianity and Islam" presented at the AECAWA Interreligious Dialogue Commission at the Eucharistic Heart Sisters Generalate, Ikeja, Lagos, 19-23 April 1993. (http://www.recowa.org/inter-religious-com/Aecawa1993.htm. Accessed 23/12/2013).

[5] Mbiti, 1971, pp. 130 and 238.

[6] Ekeh, p. 93.

[7] Larbi, accessed, www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj10/larbi.html, 9.9.2011.

[8] Larbi, www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj10/larbi.html, accessed 9.9.2011.

[9] Mbiti, quoted in Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.

"The harsh natural environment of many parts of Africa" and the "economic, social, and political upheavals that perennially plague the continent" cause "material concerns [to] play a very important role in [the] religious consciousness, and in African perceptions of the role of the 'saviour' in this regard."[10] The saviour is one who can fulfil these needs. That is what the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches have been doing to survive in Africa. To quote Larbi (even if a bit lengthily) again:

> The success of the Pentecostals ... lies in their ability to place the traditional understanding of the cosmic struggle in the realm of Christian belief. The stand taken by the Pentecostals is thus the antithesis of the stand, which was taken by the emissaries of the historic churches who assumed the position that these forces were non-existent, much to the dismay of the majority of their followers....Pentecostals have taken the issue of material prosperity to the realm of Divine blessings. The traditional African understanding of salvation and the biblical motif about God's desire to intervene to rescue people in desperation, has continued to form much of the background of the way Pentecostals in particular and African Christians in general, perceive, appropriate and experience the concept of 'salvation'.[11]

This shows that Christianity, even though accepted, has had to be Africanised. This is no longer the Christianity which denied the "validity of supernatural powers [and looked down upon them] as psychological delusion."[12] Physical security and economic well being for the Akan is part and parcel of what they consider salvation. "Unless these are fully addressed, church members will inevitably seek succour from other realms."[13] These realms are available in the primal religion (see Appendix II, where Nana Ansa Oparebea II, Chief Priestess of the Akonedi Shrine at Larteh, states how avowed Christians come to her secretly at night for healing and other help.)

Origins

The Akan form the largest ethnic group in Ghana and the Ashanti among them form the largest Akan group.[14] The word Akan connotes 'those who came first'[15]. The history of the Asante, or Ashanti, has been well documented and serves to provide an insight into Akan beliefs. The Ashanti were a group of people who moved from the old Ghana (currently in Mali), to the west of present-day Ghana where they are said to have come from the eastern Sahara driven by Islamic invasions and the

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[10] See Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.
[11] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.
[12] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.
[13] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.
[14] Ryan, p. 167.
[15] Kofi Agyekum, conversation, 1.2.2011.

imposition of a new religion. Like the other Akan groups the Asante, who worshipped their own God, and were matrilineal in their familial organisation refused to submit to a foreign religion.[16] They first settled in Gonjaland in present-day northern Ghana in the thirteenth century.[17] The new economic and climatic situation they encountered did much to mould their world view.

Much hard work and demographic engineering[18] would have been required to clear the forests as they moved further south along river valleys. The need for more people to work on the lands and loss of population due to inter-clan and inter-tribal wars, and disease called for the incorporation of other peoples into their fold. The social cohesion and political bonding of the Akan communities draw their strength and validity from their religious/metaphysical conceptions and beliefs. The bonds created through matrilineal descent played a major role in this incorporation. The rule of exogamy, the requirement to marry outside the clan that supposedly came from a single ancestress, enabled the assimilation of other groups. Intermarriage into other clans created alliances and bonding that enabled them to help each other in times of war. This could have been one of the original factors in the adaptation and assimilation of other belief notions that Platvoet has commented on.

Comingling of Spirits, Ancestors and Humans

Since the first comers to the region lived under trees with buttresses, and perhaps in caves due to their nomadic mode of life, a myth was created that the ancestors of present-day Akan (particularly the Asante group) came from holes in the ground. The myth was also perpetuated to prevent a repetition of the old history of defeats and divisions, between different clans, writes Kwadwo.[19] In fact, it came to be considered taboo to relate stories of actual origins, as those would highlight the strifes and divisions that marked the early history of the groups that came to make up the Akan as one umbrella group.

As such, the Akan peoples give much more mythic attention to anthropogony than to cosmogony (and that could also be one reason

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[16] Kwadwo, 1994, p.1.
[17] Kwadwo, 1994, p.1.
[18] Klein, p. 262, has shown how the loss of population to disease and slaving, which in turn would have led to greater child mortality, was countered by stress on fertility. This loss was also countered by devising ways of incorporating children born of slave women who had been 'adopted' into the clan.
[19] The historical account of the Akan is reconstructed from Kwadwo's work.

that creatorship of God is not given so much importance as the origins of the clan). As Patrick Ryan states:

> Certain clan-centred myths... seem to suggest a certain priority for anthropogony over cosmogony. ...The clan-centred notion that the matrilineal ancestors (*nananom nsamanfo*) had emerged from the earth even before the creative .... journey of Odomankoma [the Akan name for the Supreme God] may serve to underline the contention ... that veneration of matrilineal ancestors is more fundamental to Akan religiousness than the sacrificial worship of another set of transcendent beings [the *abosom* or gods].... Identified, for the most part, with rocks, large trees (especially the silk-cotton tree) and the rivers that flow through the Akan areas, these *abosom*, usually referred to in English as the 'gods', serve as specialists deputized by Onyame [Supreme God] to exercise more-than-human but less-than-supreme power...[T]he reality of matrilineal clanship and the ancestor veneration it entails remain vital elements in the lives of our Akan contemporaries, even those who have forgotten or renounced the patrilineally inherited *abosom*.[20]

Oral tradition has it that around the late fourteenth century, the Asante moved to the Adanse area. With increase in population they moved further to build new townships. While there was goodwill among certain rulers as they traced their descent from a common ancestress, wars broke out with others since they were all highly autonomous. One Akan group, the Denkyira, conquered the Asante states and imposed tributes of firewood, plantain fibre and red clay on them.[21] Great humiliations were inflicted on a proud people, till one of the kings Nana Obiri Yeboa of Kwaman (Kumasi) had a dream that the clans should come together, fight the oppressor and free themselves. He revealed the dream saying that the ancestors had come and told him that the Asante states were like a broom which when bound together would be difficult to break but when apart, very breakable. He advised that a meeting of Asante chiefs be called. The dream was interpreted and a decision taken to find a way for uniting the chiefs. But the problems underlying the idea were who would be made the head of all the chiefs, as none was prepared to kow-tow to the one that may be chosen, and more importantly how would the ancestors be served if the stools that represented them were given over to one paramount chief — since the chief of each clan is responsible for pouring libations to the ancestors at regular intervals. To give in to the paramountcy of another would mean surrendering the stool (which, politically, is the equivalent of a throne, connoting sovereignty), and their identity. So a loose confederation, in which all would be independent,

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[20] Ryan, pp. 167-8.

[21] While there is no agreement as to when the Denkyira conquered Ashanti it is clear that in 1701 Ashanti freed themselves of the yoke of Denkyira, which had become the most powerful Akan state. (See, T. C. McCaskie, (p.3) 'Denkyira In The Making Of Asante C. 1660 –1720' *Journal of African History,* 48 (2007), pp. 1–25.)

except in the area of defence, was formed. They decided to appoint a war leader to defend themselves if any other Akan state invaded them. Nana Obiri Yeboa was chosen leader. But even as the federation was being crystallised, they were attacked and badly defeated by a neighbouring state, the Brong. Several chiefs, including Nana Yeboa, lost their lives.

Having learnt a great lesson, the Asante decided to form a stronger union for the future. Nana Osei Tutu succeeded Nana Obiri Yeboa as head of Kwaman (later Kumasi) in 1697. He promised that he would undertake to unite his people. Osei Tutu was helped by his friend Nana Akomfo Anokye, the priest king of the Agona clan. Both had been enstooled on the same day in their respective towns. A meeting was called by Nana Osei Tutu to choose one under whom all would agree to unite. It was now decided that the problem be solved by appealing to the ancestors and the gods. They would pray to the ancestors and on a particular, predetermined day, the one on whose lap a stool from the gods would descend would be declared the chosen chief. Starting on a particular day, all the chiefs were to fast and pour libations to their gods and ancestors till the chosen day. On the appointed day all gathered amidst drumming, and performed ritual dances. The Agonahene, Okomfo Anokye, suddenly stopped in the middle and started calling to something in the sky. In a deafening noise from the sky a golden stool descended on to the lap of Osei Tutu. Now there was no question or doubt as to who would lead Asante nation. Small collections of hair and finger nails from each chief were collected and burnt. The ashes were collected and smeared on the golden stool and the rest were mixed with palm wine for all to drink. The Chiefs are also said to have burnt their blackened stools (representing their particularised ancestors) as a symbol of the spirits of all their ancestors joining together to enter the Golden Stool. It was a sign of individualised identities merging into one group identity.[22] With the intervention of the ancestors and the gods, the problem of constant disunity was solved. The Stool sent by God now became the symbol of the spirits of all the ancestors. Till today the Stool is revered by all and the Ashantis are held together by it.[23] The King became responsible for the welfare of the group. Myth, belief in spirits, and pragmatic political

[22] Prof. Dovlo, conversation, 19.1.2011

[23] The story of golden stool is adapted from Kwadwo, Part I, 1994.

Even today the unity of the Ashanti can be witnessed during the Akwasidae festival held every forty-two days, when the Ashanti King pours ritual libations to the ancestors, and later appears in public where different chiefs pay homage to him, signifying Ashanti bonding.

necessity came to be coalesced into the symbol of the Golden Stool and in the person of the king.

But the attitude which pertains to the *abosom* (the gods) also holds good for the King, in that he can be de-stooled if he goes against the wishes of the group. The king remains in power at the pleasure of the people. If people are not satisfied, he has to give up. The king Osei Kwame (1777-97) was referred to as the most merciful king. He disliked human sacrifice and execution in any form and was secretly converted to the Muslim faith and was even meditating on the introduction of Koranic law into his kingdom. Asante belief in magic and the power of amulets and talisman to help win wars, made rulers fall into the hands of Isalmic preachers.[24] Muslim traders began to come to the court at Kumasi and influence the King. Other than being given political and economic influence the Muslims were allowed to practice their faith.[25] Even though Islamic education was introduced in Kumasi, there were very few converts to the religion, and Islam had very little influence on the Asante and the Akan in general. As such, some chiefs, having tasted power, and capitalising on the merciful nature of the king wanted to destool him. On hearing this he ordered their execution. But the people had lost confidence in him and felt dissatisfied with his ability to extend the Asante nation. They also feared that under him the conquered too would break away. They feared his inclination to bring in a foreign religion which would threaten the Asante culture. So, he was destooled in 1797. The threat of the superimposition of a foreign religion was unacceptable to the people as they avidly guarded their religion and culture.[26]

Another Ashanti trait is a belief in omens. Despite bravery the belief in spirits and omens, such as the falling of the old tree planted at Kumase by Okomfo Anokye (who was instrumental in bringing down the Golden Stool that unified the different clans) on the day the Asantehene received a threatening letter from the British leader Sir Garnet Wolseley (in 1874) led to retraction of the idea of war against the the British, even though they could have won it.[27]

Belief in a Supreme God and Divinities

The belief in ancestors and magic continues to play a role in the lives of the Akan and providing them an identity. Ideas about an all powerful

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[24] Kwadwo,1994, p. 90. Islamic preachers were known to provide amulets and talisman for physical and spiritual protection particularly in times of war.

[25] Kwadwo, 1994, p.90.

[26] Kwadwo, 1994, p. 90.

[27] Kwadwo, 1994, p. 32.

and all-knowing Supreme Being and His accessibility to human beings through intermediaries such as ancestors, called 'agents' of the Supreme Being,[28] other spirits and gods, and the hierarchy in the spiritual or supernatural world indicating that higher entities could manipulate and control lower ones, came to be expressed in the evolution of the Akan as a political and religious community. "The Akan cosmos," as Larbi writes, "like other African peoples, is divided into 'two inter-penetrating and inseparable, yet distinguishable, parts' namely the world of spirits and the world of human [sic]."[29] Larbi goes on to state that the spirit world consists of the Supreme God, divinities or gods, ancestors and charms or amulets.

> The Supreme Being is variously referred to as *Onyakopon*, *Onyame…or Odomankoma*...Onyakopon denotes the supremacy of God, the One Greater Nyame. *Odomankoma*, denotes the infiniteness of Nyame...In addition... there is a host of divinities or gods (*abosom*), capricious spirit entities, believed to be the children of God.... Some of the most famous gods are associated with lakes, rivers, rocks, mountains and forests. The continued featuring of a particular god (*obosom*) in the religious pantheon of the Akan largely depends upon the ability of that *obosom* to function to the satisfaction of supplicants.[30]

Patrick Ryan elaborates on the relative importance of the intermediate beings when he says,

> Ranged in the intermediate levels between Onyame and mortal beings are two fairly independent lines of less-than-supreme beings: matrilineally-inherited ancestors and the nature-connected *abosom*, often transmitted in the patrilineage, the former line being dominant in Akan culture and the latter somewhat submerged. Confusion is seldom possible between *nananom nsamanfo* [ancestors who are matrilineally connected] and *abosom* [gods who are inherited from the father's line] in Akan areas.[31]

While the ancestors continue to be venerated, the abosom are offered libations so long as they perform, i.e. provide the material benefits requested. That is why a number of gods are ignored and forgotten as they are replaced by new spirit beings. Both categories of these lesser deities continue to remain under the Supreme God. To quote Larbi again: "The Akan esteem the Supreme Being and the ancestors far above the *abosom* (gods) and amulets... The Akan never confuse the identity of *Onyame* and the identity of the *abosom*."[32] That is why when the first missionaries arrived, contrary to their presuppositions regarding local

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[28] Poebee, p. 2.
[29] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.
[30] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.
[31] Ryan, p. 169.
[32] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.

beliefs, they found that the Akan worshipped a Supreme God. Ryan, while comparing the Yoruba and Akan concepts of God states that both these

> ...populations of West Africa are better equipped linguistically than are Semites, Greeks, Romans ... to express the absolute uniqueness of God. There is no need for Olodumare (Olorun) or Onyame (Onyankopon) to arise above the "other gods," as Psalm 82 bids Him. It would seem, in fact, that even before Muslims and Christians arrived in the West African forest zone..., speakers of Yoruba and Akan were assured of the supremacy of the One whom a modern theologian calls "the incomprehensible term of human transcendence."[33]

What the colonisers and missionaries did not understand or recognise was that the Akan notion of the Supreme God was not the same as that of the Christian God.[34]

Pragmatic Nature of the Religion

The Ashanti King who became responsible for the welfare of his people was the one who offered prayers to the ancestors on behalf of all the chiefs. The tradition continues till today. An annual festival in remembrance of the ancestors is held and what is asked for from the spirits and non-human entities is power and prosperity. A translation, by Rattray, of one of the prayers offered by an Ashanti King goes as follows:

> The edges of the year have met, I pray for life.
> May the nation prosper.
> May the women bear children.
> May the hunters kill meat.
> We who dig gold, let us get gold to dig, and grant that I get some for the upkeep of my kingship.[35]

D.N. Beckmann, referring to the continuing vitality of West African religion writes, "There is no self-abnegation in the king's prayer. He called for power, life, prosperity, fertility, success and wealth."[36] Till today

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[33] Ryan 169-70.

[34] In this context I have quoted Parrinder and McVeigh in the chapter on Nyame but quote them here again. "Missionaries have often found to their surprise that they did not need to argue for the existence of God, or faith in a life after death, for both of these fundamentals of world religion are deeply rooted in Africa.", (Parrinder,1969, p. 39) "God was there before the arrival of the gospel of Jesus Christ.... Christianity did not identify God for the Africans. The Africans had already identified Him." (McVeigh, p. 24)

[35] Quoted in Larbi.

[36] Quoted in Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.

libations seek and pray for the support of the powers that exist in a Supreme God and in non-human spirits (see Appendix VI for a ritual Libation in a village).

A critical examination of Akan prayers in a traditional setting leads to the conclusion that a major concern of the Akan is "enjoyment of life (*nkwa*). This is not a life in abstraction but rather life in its concrete and fullest manifestation."[37] C. A. Ackah corroborates this when he states that the two important motives or objectives that an Akan seeks to attain are wealth (*ahonya*) and reputation or prestige (*dzinbo*).[38] So, as Larbi states salvation in Akan has to do with "immediate realities, things that one can identify with in day-to-day life" and that it embodies *"ahonyade* (good health, general prosperity and safety and security); it also embodies *asomdwei* (the state of being which radiates peace and tranquillity)."[39] He goes on to say that other than human endeavour there are other forces responsible for the realisation of the *nkwa*:

> The religious person is well aware that much as he or she works hard to experience *nkwa* in its full manifestations, there comes an overwhelming realisation of the fact that there are powerful forces fighting against the individual and his or her community. Abundant life can only become available... through the mediation of the spirit beings — divinities and the ancestors.[40]

Further:

> ...in the primal religion, the followers are reaching out to a form of salvation that relates to the *existential here and now*. Their concept of salvation embodies the enjoyment of life, vitality, vigour, and health; a life of happiness and felicity; the enjoyment of prosperity; that is, wealth, riches, and substance, including children; life of peace, tranquillity; and life free from perturbation. The concept of salvation in the primal world is single-faceted, relating solely to the here and now. There is no concept of heaven tomorrow.[41]

This search for *nkwa* would remain an illusory dream if left to the individual alone. The individual is responsible for maintaining a certain equilibrium through the performance of rites as also upholding right conduct. The harsh climate, and the dense forests that lead to a fear of spirits and other beings necessitate the quest for a force that would counter them. This force is contacted and appealed to through certain purificatory rites and rituals that would remove the polluting influence of unfavourable forces. Observance of certain taboos becomes an important part of the maintenance of purity and avoidance of pollution that may

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[37] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.
[38] Ackah, p. 106.
[39] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.
[40] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.
[41] Larbi, accessed 9.9.2011.

lead to non-enjoyment of *nkwa*. Violation of prescribed rites, rituals and taboos may cause great harm to the individual concerned and even to his/her family, even the community. That is why when propitiatory acts are carried out the whole community joins in. Observance of these rites is what helps maintain societal bonding and equilibrium.

Belief in the supernatural and the intervention of gods continues to play a role in the social life, governance and the unification of the Asante and the Akan people in general. So one may say that in the Akan world view

- there is an intermingling of spirit and matter — both are seen to act and react on each other.
- the spirit world — ancestors and gods — continues to intervene in and play a role in the day-to-day lives of the people.
- the relationship with spirit beings (other than the Supreme God) is based on a give and take. If they do not provide, they are bypassed and new gods are appropriated to serve the goals that the Akan world view sets for itself. So if Christianity seems to have been accepted it is not because it has supplanted the Akan world view. It is because Christianity has moulded itself to assimilate and adapt to the Akan expectations from religion.
- right conduct and upholding of certain norms of behaviour is essential for the enjoyment of a full life which is the goal of the Akan. Practising the right code of conduct helps to maintain the cosmological balance. It is also seen to be an essential element for gaining the status of a complete human being.
- as such, adherence to the codes of ethics and morality is an important part of daily life.

The Akan world view has been moulded by the demands of history, emerging social environment, and the geography of the place into which the Akan were obliged to move in order to retain their traditional beliefs. If they moved from place to place with the aim of preserving their culture, it would be ironic if it were to be assumed that the traditional religion has been supplanted by a foreign religion as a result of a short-lived colonial period.

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IV

Isvara : Concept of God in Advaita

Brahman — the Non-dual Abstraction

To seek for a concept of a creator God in Advaita Vedanta seems, at first sight, like a contradiction in terms. Advaita refers to a singular non-dual Divine, called Brahman, which alone is the reality of everything. And Brahman "suffers no dualism,"[1] as stressed by R. Das. Brahman is not an entity that can be called a creator — a being who undertakes an act of creation — as there is nothing outside It that can be created and no material, other than Itself, from which to create. Being complete and all-pervasive, this entity does not, cannot, act as action arises from a sense of deficiency, a sense of lack, or need. Action also calls for effort, which is possible only in the context of time and space, and Brahman being all-comprehensive is not differentiated by time and space. In fact, Brahman is the ground in which the notions of time and space arise. As such, a theistic notion of God, which calls for a Creator, and perhaps a controller, outside of Creation is alien to the Advaitic mind. Brahman, thus, is not a God who is relative to the world of humans, a God that can be adored or worshipped. Brahman, as *param,* pertains to a non-theological entity that is beyond the divisions of time and place but can be *known* experientially. As the substratum and 'substance' of everything, Brahman can be realised through reflection, and consequent experiential knowledge.

Etymologically, the word Brahman drawn from the root *brh* refers to growth or expansion while the suffix *man* connotes absence of limitation.[2] It thus refers to a Reality that is limitless, outside of which there can be nothing (consequently, even the connotation of growth or expansion

[1] Das, 1968, p. ii.

[2] *Brahman-Sutra Bhashya,* p. 12.

becomes redundant). The Upanishads repeatedly refer to Brahman as one without a second— "There is no second entity other than the Self which one might know separately" (*na tu tad dvitiyam asti tato anyadvibhaktam yad vijaniyat*).[3] (The word Self here is a translation of *tad* which refers to Brahman, the ultimate Reality. As the immediate reality, it is the Self, the essence, of everything and of the individual being). Another Upanishad refers to it as a singular entity which does not see or know another — *Na anyat pasyati…ekam advitiyam.*[4] Brahman is also referred to by the word '*Atman'*. Drawn from the roots '*ap'*, '*ad'* or '*at'*, atman connotes that which is all inhering, all absorbing and all pervasive.[5] Being One, all-encompassing Reality, it has no attributes by which it may be cognised by any of the normal human faculties of perception.

The *Taittiriya* Upanishad unequivocally states that It is "That from which the senses, together with the mind, return, unable to grasp It," (*yato vacha nivartante aprapya manasa saha*).[6] Another text states that, being reflected in its own light and glory, this ungraspable entity cannot be grasped (*agrhyo nahigrhyate*)[7] by the faculties of sense perception. As speech and mind belong to the limited world of causation, to relative reality, they cannot describe, leave alone comprehend, the Infinite. To overcome the difficulty associated with words the Upanishads often describe it in negative terms such as *neti neti,*[8] (not this, not this) or even as a state, a totality, which is "Infinite" (*bhuma*),[9] and all comprehensive. The negative connotations are meant to point to a Reality that is beyond the sense perceived reality which can be pointed out as 'this' or 'that'.

Even when described in seemingly positive terms in statements such as *Satyam jnanam anantam Brahma*[10] (Truth/Existence, Knowledge/sentience and limitlessness), the words used are meant to serve only as pointers[11] or indicators (*lakshna*-s) of an ever-existent Fact. Each of the three words in the above statement are meant to *negate* the limitations, and the literal sense, of the other, so as to establish Brahman as an

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[3] *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, IV.3.30.
[4] *Chandogya*, VII.24.1.
[5] *Aitareya Bhashya* I.1, p.25.
[6] Taittiriya, II.9.1. *The Taittiriya Upanishad*, p. 653, states, 'All cognitions which are transformations of mind (buddhi) are incapable of reaching Him who is the Witness of the mind and its functions. Therefore, as cognitions fail to reach Him, words which generate cognitions 'recede, as well as mind,'...".
[7] *Brihadaranyaka*. IV.2.4.
[8] *Brihadaranyaka*. III.9.26.
[9] *Chandogya*, VII.24.1.
[10] *Taittiriya*, II.1.1.
[11] *Chandogya*, VII.24.2.

existent, conscious (in the sense of knowingness, or 'knowledgeness') and ever present entity. The word '*Satyam'*, connoting truth or reality, is a technical term that distinguishes 'Truth' from that which is conveyed by another term *mithya* ('false').[12] It points to a Fact that cannot be falsified, cancelled or contradicted under any circumstance, a reality that does not cease to be in any time-frame — past, present or future. The term 'false', also called 'appearance', in Advaita, pertains to an entity that is visible and sense perceptible but has no independent existence of its own[13] (examples of the appearance of mirage in sand, nacre in shell, a man in a stump of wood when seen in darkness, are often posited to elucidate this fact. All of these have their basis in something else which forms their substratum. They disappear when the substratum is seen). To be Real or True in the Vedantic sense it must remain uncontradictable or unchanged in all points of time.

The word '*jnanam'*, or knowledge, does not refer to a process of knowing, a knowledge *of* something, or even the act of thinking, all of which arise and disappear. It refers to an inherent awareness or consciousness which is the very ground in which thinking occurs. The word frees the existent reality connoted by the word *satyam* from being misconceived as inert matter so as to stress that the ever-existent Fact is also a *conscious* reality. Both the words, existence (*satyam*) and consciouness (*jnanam*), are further amplified by the use of the word '*anantam'*, unlimitedness — freeing them from spatial or temporal connotations. The words establish that Brahman is an ever-existent Reality which is of the nature of consciousness and bliss — bliss because it does not suffer from any limitation and is complete unto Itself. That is why it is also referred to as *Sadchidananda* (existence, consciousness and bliss). As Infinite, It is self-existent having no causal relationship with anything. It is self-sustained and non-dependent on anything.[14]

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[12] The term *satya* (drawn from the word '*sat'*) refers to an entity that is ever there as against an entity that *disappears* when the knowledge of a higher Reality is gained. As explained by P.T. Raju, 'Mithya or illusion, is utilised by the Advaitins, not because the world is not there facing us, but because it disappears through higher knowledge.' (Raju, 1982, p.110.) Vedantic methodology adopts the approach of making a clear distinction between that which is ever there and that which appears and disappears.

[13] Count Herman A. Keyserling denoting Truth by the term 'significance' writes, "Significance is the primary, the eternal and the truly real force;... the importance of appearance can be gauged only by the degree in which it expresses [this] significance." P. 21.

[14] see *Chandogya*, VII.24.2

Brahman and the World

A question then arises, that if Brahman is the sole reality then what is the status of the perceived world? How can this abstract, all-encompassing and singular entity help humans to understand the universal experience of a visible and perceptible world in which everything appears and disappears? Where would the world be located and how can it come into being if there is none to create it? Since a cause and effect relationship links all phenomena in the perceptible world, humans look for a cause of the origin of this complex world of multiplicity also.

Upanishadic statements with regard to Brahman could, result in two theoretical positions with regard to the perceptible universe: a) that the world does not exist, as there can be nothing other than Brahman or b) that the perceptible world is Brahman alone since there is nothing other than It. Both positions are contrary to our experience, empirical observation and common perception. The world is not non-existent as it is universally evident as an everyday experience. Nor can the world be nothing but Brahman as it does not conform to any of the stated definitions or attributes that pertain to Brahman.

The Upanishads being geared to practical knowledge, as also an immediate experiential realisation of that knowledge, do not stop at mere statements with regard to the nature of Brahman. They posit methods of analysis and reflection on the world and daily human experience to *prove* the Brahman's existence and indicate how He (the pronoun is used for the sake of convenience as Brahman is beyond gender) can be realised by the individual being as his/her own true self — which is the ultimate aim of the Upanishads.

The question of the universe and its creation would remain unresolved if the Upanishads were not practical in their orientation, and quest. As a matter of fact, the perceptible world itself becomes a tool in the Upanishadic quest for the realisation of Brahman at the immediate personal level. Being in touch with the reality on the ground, and the daily human experience, the Upanishads do not deny the truth or reality of anything that arises from any source of knowledge, even if it arises from the faculties of perception, resulting in a transactional truth (*vyavaharika satya*) regarding the physical world of day-to-day give and take. They also do not deny the reality of apparent or imagined truth as in dream or imagination (*pratibhasika satya*). The thing to note is that prime importance is given to the Absolute, unsublatable truth (*parmarthika satya*)[15] that remains the same in all conditions and times and is given the name Brahman. The former two types of reality fall in the category of

[15] See Deutsche, p. 26.

illusory truth as they are not permanent — since they tend to appear and disappear. The last category is not a part of the sensually realised reality of daily life, yet it is perceived to be the basis in which the other two arise. It is through reflection on Upanishadic statements and an analysis of the world, and the human's own composition, that an experiential knowledge of this all-inhering entity can be gained.

Creation and Isvara

To overcome the dilemma of explaining the world while at the same time proving the reality of Brahman, Upanishadic texts postulate paradoxical theories of creation within the one Brahman. A unique method that posits the status of reality to a non-real thing, only to retract and disprove that status later — with the aim of revealing an underlying truth — is adopted by the Upanishads. As such, they posit a Cause, and the relationship of that 'cause' to the world and to humans, to finally prove that the Cause, as well as the effect, is none other than Brahman.

In this attempt they even posit Brahman as a Creator. Vedanta Sutras, an elaborate commentary on Upanishadic statements, introduce Brahman as the primal cause of birth as also the foundation in which sustenance and death take place (*janmadyasyayatah*).[16] Creation arises in, is upheld by, and resolves in the one Brahman. To explain this, some Upanishads refer to the arising of a 'desire' in the all-knowing, all-pervasive and complete Brahman; a desire to 'look' upon, to 'visualise', itself. An 'action' seems to arise when that singularity 'saw' and willed "May I become many, may I grow forth,"[17] as the *Chandogya* states, or when "It saw, willed, May I create the worlds,"[18] as stated in the Aitareya Upanishad or as another text states, "It willed, desired, May I become many," (*so akamyat bahusyam prajayeyeti*).[19] Here, Brahman undertakes *tapas*, a *jnanamaya* or conscious meditation, to grow forth and become sense perceptible,[20] to give rise to a world of plurality and differentiation as though to *see* its own potential and limitless possibilities. Having done that, He 'entered' the same — thus reiterating His immanence. He did this without losing his original nature of being undifferentiated, abstract and undescribable.

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[16] *Brahman-Sutra Bhashya (*BSB), 1.1.2.2, (This sutra is a commentary on the Taittiriya Upanishadic statement — III.1.1. — *yato va imani bhutani jayante* — That (Brahman) in which all beings take birth, are sustained and resolve.

[17] *Tadaikshat bahusyamprajayeyeti, Chandogya*, VI.2.3

[18] *Sa ikshat, lokannusrjaiti, Aitareya*, I.1.1.

[19] *Taittiriya*, 2.6.1.

[20] *Mundaka*, I.1.8.

Since there is nothing other than Brahman to create from, Brahman Itself becomes the instrumental cause, substantive cause, as also the observer, and the other.[21] He does this effortlessly, and naturally — "just as a spider emits and withdraws its web, as herbs sprout on earth, as hair grow forth from the body of a man."[22] All this is the result of a 'playful' desire that arises in Brahman, as its very nature. The eternality and all pervasiveness (*vyapakatva*)[23] of Brahman inheres the manifest universe. Consequently all oppositions and contradictions are contained within that one entity. So, He Himself remains the undifferentiated and the differentiated, the non-utterable and the utterable, the invisible and the visible.[24] "He himself is all matter and spirit and the connecting link between them — ... himself is the subjective world, objective world and the entire subject-object relationship."[25] Brahman, thus, becomes both the efficient and the substantive cause of the universe. This He does without losing His inherent nature of all-knowingness and complete sentience.[26]

This concept of creation stresses the idea that the world is not an independent entity. It is just an emanation, an appearance, in Brahman. Without Brahman as the substratum, the world would not exist. It also shows that it is not unreal either, as all that is perceived is nothing but Brahman since there is nothing else to create from. The manifest world is Brahman alone, expressing His infinitude as well as the freedom to *appear* in any shape or form.

How does this transformation in Brahman — from a purely abstract formless entity to a concrete perceptible projection — come about? Here, to "explain the otherwise inexplicable production of the phenomenal world,"[27] the texts bring in the concept of a seemingly transformatory power of 'primal ignorance' (which also is inherent in the nature of Brahman). This primal ignorance is imbued with two capacities: the capacity to conceal or cover and the capacity to project forth.[28] The former capacity 'hides' the all-pervasive eternal nature of Brahman to make Him look limited. While the latter capacity 'enables' Him to spread out into a universe of infinite multiplicity and diversity. Brahman, when he subjects himself to these two limitations, comes to be called Isvara, the

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[21] See Krishnananda, p. 36.
[22] *Mundaka*, I.1.7.
[23] BSB, p. 85.
[24] *Taittiriya*. I.5.1, II.6.1, and II.7.1, I.5.1.
[25] Ranade, quoted in Gispert-Sauch, p. 95.
[26] Das, 1968, p. ix.
[27] Nikhilananda, 2006, p.23.
[28] Nikhilanananda, 2006, p.40.

Creator God. Brahman, perceived as having a desire (a pure desire to merely project or 'see' himself) becomes the creator God, Isvara. As the one who 'enters' his creation, He becomes the connecting link underlying all creation as also the regulator who enables the elements to function. Drawn from the root *iit* the word Isvara connotes rulership,[29] - as the one who inheres and enables his creation to move and function he remains the governing force. By His very nature of being all-knowing and singular He remains all powerful and, as though, *controller* of all that is 'projected', or 'created' — because it is from his conscious resolve, and the 'knowledgeful' effort in the form of *Tapas*[30] that the universe of multiple names and forms comes to be manifested. If he chooses to withdraw that projection, unto himself, it would cease to be.

The *Taittiriya* Upanishad then, in a dualistic mode, goes on to say that it is due to the fear of Him as the regulator that the wind blows, the sun rises and other deities function (II.8.1). But, it states, that the one who knows Him goes beyond all fear,[31] because fear arises only when one sees a distinction. In the individual human being this creator Brahman, as Isvara, is the innermost enlivening essence, the knowledge of which rends asunder the knot of ignorance[32] (ignorance which is the cause for the arising of the world of plurality).

The whole story of creation is posited not to prove an event in time but rather to show the oneness of the universe with the supra-self which is the immediate substratum (*aparoksha atman*) of everything. This substratum is the non-sublatable Truth of the individual being, and the world. The *Brihadaranyaka* states that after creation the creator stressed his non-difference from the created as he knew that, "Indeed, I am the creation, for I have created all this."[33] As part of their teaching, the Upanishads highlight the distinction between the truth of the *aparoksha*, a never exhausting reality, and the falsity of the *paroksha* (the phenomenal), a reality that appears and disappears. At the same time they prove that there is no real division between the source and the manifest universe. Creation is not something that stands outside of the creator, as a separate reality.

In fact, before positing theories of creation the different Upanishadic texts make sure to declare that before creation there was nothing except the one singular entity: "In the beginning this was Being alone, one only,

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[29] Apte, p. 179.
[30] *Tapas* here refers to intense mental concentration. *Brihadaranyaka*, III.8.7-11
[31] *Tairririya*, II.9.1.
[32] *Mundaka*, II. I.10.
[33] *Brihadaranyaka*. I.4.5.

without a second," (*sadeva saumyedamagra asid ekamevadvitiyam*).[34] Or, "Atman, the one alone was there before this" (*atmeva idameka evagra asit*).[35] In the *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad sage Yajnavalkya repeatedly explains to his philosopher wife, Maitreyi, the nature of the ultimate Reality in which the universe is a mere appearances, "the universe [is] an expression and not something apart and distinguishable from the Self which is its abode, as it were."[36] The same truth is reflected in the *Chandogya* when it states, "The face reflected in the mirror merges back into the real face when the mirror is broken, similarly, the 'living self' reflected therein also remains as Brahman."[37] Or when it says that name and form are mere modifications, mere appearance, Brahman alone is the truth.[38] So, even though Creation, as the visible universe seems dissimilar from the source in which it arises, it is not disconnected or cut off from that Source, rather it is suffused with that Causal Consciousness.[39] It may be repeated here that in this 'becoming', Brahman does not, and by His very nature *cannot*, undergo any transformation. Isvara, the Creator God, is none other than Brahman. It is the perception of the individualised being that makes the distinction.

Giving credence to lived human experience, Vedanta gives visible reality the status of *sadasadvilakshana* or *sadasadanivrvachaniya*[40] — something that is neither real nor unreal, neither existent nor non-existent. It is posited as something that is undescribable — that which cannot be described as either a real entity or a false one.[41] It cannot be designated unreal as it is sense perceptible, and is a daily human experience. Nor is it real in the Vedantic sense as it does not continue to be in all points of time, and as appearance it calls for an actual substance on which it can appear. It cannot be labelled as totally false either, because the world has an Existent Reality as its underlying basis. When seen in its true perspective it is Brahman. As a tangible, universal, perceptual truth the world has "practical efficiency,"[42] which allows interaction between different existents as also the possibility for analysis and reflection on the Ultimate Reality.

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[34] Chandogya, VI.2.1.
[35] *Aitereya*, I.1.
[36] *Brihadaranyaka*, II.4.11, p.210.
[37] *Chandogya*, VI.8.6, p 453.
[38] *Chandogya*, VI. 4.2.
[39] See Krishnananda, p.36.
[40] Hiriyanna, 156.
[41] Nikhilananda, 2006, p.21.
[42] Hiriyanna, 156.

Isvara
Saguna Brahman: Brahman with Attributes

To differentiate between a Creator Brahman, called Isvara, and Brahman as the Ultimate Reality, the Upanishads posit an apparently dualistic notion of Brahman. Brahman, as Isvara, has been called *saguna* — Brahman with attributes — as against the Brahman without attributes — *nirguna* — who can only be referred to in negative terms since He cannot be described by any words.

A number of Upanishadic *vakya*-s (statements) posit two vidyas, or two types of knowledge, pertaining to the two 'types' or 'categories' of Brahman. The fourth mantra of the *Mundaka Upanishad*[43] posits the *para* and *apara vidya*-s, the former pertaining to the attributeless Brahman and the latter to Brahman with attributes, a notion of Brahman that relates to the world of humans. Katha also posits the same,[44] when it posits a 'lower' Brahman 'with attributes' (*Saguna*) and a 'higher' Brahman 'without attributes' (*Nirguna*). The Bhagvad Gita recognises the *kshara*, the terminable, and *akshara*, the interminable aspects of Reality.[45] The second section of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, through paradoxical statements, gives a *saguna* indication of Brahman. It also posits modes of attaining Him, through sense organs, etc. when the section[46] actually begins by saying that the sense organs, together with the mind, return as they are unable to attain Brahman. The Upanishads thus give indications of a dualistic theism for the purpose of reaching a non-dualistic understanding of the Ultimate Reality. As knowledge arises, Isvara becomes a prop for attaining the attributeless *para* Brahman.

Isvara and Brahman — some distinctions

- Brahman as the substratum of everything remains without attributes as It is beyond the grasp of instruments of human perception and knowing. It is described through negative connotations such as 'not this, not this' and is realised experientially through reflection. The same Brahman as Isvara, is imbued with apparent attributes, which allow Him to be seen as a creator God, though both Isvara and His attributes arise in Brahman alone.
- While Brahman is the general underlying factor behind all that is perceptible, it is as Isvara that He provides the particularised qualities to each object.

[43] *Mundaka*, I.1.4.
[44] *Katha*, 1.2.16.
[45] *Bhagvad Gita*, XV.16-17; and chapter XII.
[46] *Taittiriya*, II.4.

- While Brahman is unalloyed consciousness and knowledge (*shuddha chaitanya*), as Isvara He is associated with an element of ignorance, or limitation which, as it were, *covers* the all-pervasiveness of Brahman and gives rise to a universe of plurality, in which the pluralities are subject to appearance and disappearance. That is why Isvara is subject to disappearance, so to say, as he merges back into Brahman at the end of a creative cycle, a *yuga*.
- Since Brahman is both the material and the efficient cause of the phenomenal universe, it is through Its material or substantial manifestation that enquiry into It is sought. Isvara represents Brahman's conscious potential for manifestation. Isvara is the first emanation, the first point, so to say, at which the Supreme begins to 'appear', at which Spirit seems to 'manifest'. Isvara is, as such, a link between Spirit and creation. Isvara, as a means for analysing creation, becomes a method for realising Brahman which otherwise remains an abstraction.
- While Isvara is approached through his attributes, Brahman-knowledge calls for a dissolution of all attributes which are seen to be limiting adjuncts. One cannot *know* Brahman without *being* Brahman as it is not an *object* of knowledge, it is knowledge itself — the ground in which knowing, knower and the known arise. It is the knower of Brahman who gains Brahman — *brahma vid apanoti param* as the Upanishads state.[47]
- Brahman, as such, is *jneya Brahma* — that which is to be realised through corrective knowledge, knowledge that enables the individual to pierce the veil of ignorance. Brahman is to be known through the practice of *Sravana, manana, etc.*,[48] modes of abstract reflection and intellectual inquiry that are difficult for the ordinary person. Isvara, on the other hand, is *dhyeya Brahma*, i.e. a *form* that can be an object of *Upasanas* or worship, which enable an individual to surrender him/herself to a larger entity through love and devotion.[49] This surrender may eventually lead one to an experiential knowledge of Brahman as the substratum in which Isvara appears.
- Brahman is, as though, non-active, indifferent to the world of humans, while Isvara keeps the cycle of cause and effect moving.

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[47] *Taittiriya*, II.1.1.

[48] *Brihad*aranyaka IV.5.6, p. 469.

[49] *Brihadavanyata*, BSB, I.1.5.12.

The same Brahman when looked upon as attended by attributes which show his splendour and creative power is to be worshipped, but when recognised as bereft of any limiting adjuncts, in its attributeless nature, is to be realised through conscious reflection. (BSB, p. 99-101.)

- The goal sought from each entity is different — Isvara, as the generator and sustainer of the universe remains relevant to the world of humans, as a fulfiller of desires, and a giver of boons, and eventually a conduit for gaining higher knowledge. A pursuit for Brahman calls for realising ultimate identity with Him, by surrendering attachments to all names and forms, and limiting adjuncts, so as to gain Freedom from continuation in a changing transmigratory world. Identification with Brahman would provide emancipation from the cycle of birth and death while Isvara may give a good life, till such time as the results of one's good deeds are exhausted, in the here-and-now and in afterlife.
- By giving appropriate results for the deeds done Isvara sets the rules for morality and conduct in the world. In the *Katha* Upanishad even Yama, the god that rules Time and Death, is seen to follow certain codes of conduct for fear that he may suffer the consequences of violating the set rules of appropriate conduct. Brahman is beyond rules as He is the ground in which rules come into being.
- Isvara ultimately is none other than the Supreme Being. He has his locus in Brahman.
- At the end of an epoch, when He gives up his association with limiting adjuncts, Isvara merges back into the Absolute thus estabilising that any emanation is non-different from the ground in which it appears.
- Ultimately, the difference between Brahman and Isvara is a perception in the mind of the perceiver according to the intellectual and spiritual evolution that s/he may have arrived at.

The Function of Isvara: A Prop to Understand Brahman

Though the concept of Isvara in Advaita may be taken to belong to the realm of the illusory, because of its association with limiting adjuncts, it has an important epistemological value and significance. As a matter of fact, for most people the oneness of *jiva* (the individual being) and Brahman — the avowed aim of Advaita — remains a remote aim, more a matter of belief, as a rigorous intellectual enquiry into this statement is generally not conducted. As such, Advaita, in the initial stages allows itself to be treated as a religion, based on a belief in which a dualistic God is loved and worshipped, till such time as the desire for non-dual understanding of unity with Brahman arises. That is why a number of *Upasanas,* or modes of worship, are prescribed in almost all the Upanishads, and Brahman is falsely attributed certain qualities.[50]

[50] Satchidanandendra, p.1.

To help the seeker understand the true nature of Reality the texts themselves posit, as mentioned, the idea of two Brahman-s — the *para* and *apara* — *jneya*, or one to be realised through reflection and corrective knowledge and *dhyeya*, the one to be attained through faith and worship. The latter, the *apara* — relative to the world of humans — is the aspect of Brahman that can be worshipped, as it is a personified emanation of Brahman. The *Upasanas*, worship of various forms, posit a being other than oneself. They do not, necessarily, call for a discovery within oneself of an ever-existing reality but, by promoting an attitude of surrender and self-discipline they help to render the internal instrument — the mind and the intellect — worthy of receiving knowledge that could eventually lead to a recognition of oneness. The *apara Brahman* (the one with attributes) is required only till such time as the *jneya Brahma* (the one to be attained through reflection) is realised experientially, as one's own self. Till this happens a reflection on all the relations and equivalences between various manifested forms, helps to gradually lead the seeker towards higher knowledge. This could finally lead to Liberation, *mukti*, from the world of phenomenal change. When experiential Brahman-knowledge dawns, the *saguna* (or attributeful) Brahman may become a secondary entity or one that is not required any more.[51]

The concept of Isvara, as such, posits an important method followed by Vedanta — that of superimposing an illusory reality on an ever-existent Fact, only to gradually retract it to reveal the base on which the illusion has been founded. The concrete multifold manifestations of names and forms are gradually equated, by the Upanishads, to subtler and subtler levels of existence, and the seeker is helped to move beyond the limitations, to subtler, planes of existence, so as to realise the one Source. Finally, by a quantum leap of intuitive understanding, one may know that Isvara too, was an imagined entity that is nothing other than Brahman.

It is from an *inferential* enquiry of Isvara that a direct realisation of Brahman as a complete entity not given to any action or limitation is sought. Isvara, as the Creator, thus becomes an important factor for the discovery of Brahman, the non-dual entity free of conditioning adjuncts — duality being posited for the sake of teaching. Isvara, becomes the connecting link between Brahman and the individual and can be realised in the individual self as the inmost entity when all the external faculties of perception have subsided, as in deep sleep (this is dealt with, in greater detail, in the chapter on *jiva*).

[51] BSB, p. 52

Isvara may thus be looked upon as a kind of bridge, a double-faced entity — whose one face symbolises the Absolute and the other the universe. To realise His true nature one needs to reflect on the ever-present reality, Brahman. When the universe is seen as Brahman alone, as inhered by Him in His Isvara aspect, everything becomes sacred.

Because Isvara is the pointer to Brahman he is also seen as the original teacher. The Vedas, the singular instrument for attaining Brahman knowledge, are perceived to be his (Isvara's) expirated breath.

What Isvara is not

- While creator-ship is attributed to Him, Isvara is not a real creator as He is in actuality Brahman, as there is nothing outside of Brahman from which to create. He *seems* to create due to his association with primal ignorance. Ignorance, too, being based on an existing ground (Brahman), has no independent existence of its own, it also is one of the innumerable potentialities of Brahman.
- Though arising in Brahman and being associated with His potentialities Isvara is not the same as Brahman. Brahman is an abstraction in which Isvara and all other entities arise. Brahman cannot have Its base in Isvara, while Isvara has its base in Brahman.
- Isvara does not arise in time (since time only arises with Creation). He is beginningless but being subject to disappearance he is not eternal. At the end of an epoch He merges back into Brahman.
- He is not a limited entity like His creation. Being outside the illusory universe, He becomes the Supreme Teacher who can impart knowledge with regard to the Truth of the universe. He is, therefore, the first and the most authentic teacher, even visualised in the form of *avataras* such as those of Krishna, Rama, etc.
- While Brahman is not a subject matter of faith, but of 'discovery' through knowledge, Isvara allows for worship and ritual to be conducted as a matter of belief. He fulfils an important human need — the need for relying on an external power. The positing of an Isvara — both as an originator and as a teacher — strengthens the role of faith in the undertaking of practices such as analysis, reflection and meditation, which are the means for direct, non-mediate, realisation of Brahman.

The 'Places' where a Perception of Isvara may be gained

The attributes ascribed to Isvara enable the positing of certain forms to facilitate the performance of a dualistic worship for the sake of purifying

the mind and making it capable of receiving higher knowledge, when sought. For this purpose Isvara is seen to be *located* in certain places where contact with Him can be made. In their attempt to show the oneness of the individual with the ultimate Reality, the Upanishads state that the real abode of Isvara is in the heart of the individual.

Different methods are posited for experiencing and knowing Isvara as one's own innermost being, even while He is given externalised forms for the sake of comprehension and to fulfil the human need for a relationship with a higher Force. An analysis of the deep sleep state, one of the three states of consciousness,[52] that all living beings experience, gives an insight into the causal factor behind the other two states — the states of waking and dream experience. The deep sleep state, which contains the seeds of dreaming and waking possibilities, is posited as being closest to Isvara-hood. Drawing from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad Gispert-Sauch writes, "...there is a frontier between this world and the next, the state of sleep, in which the activity of the *purusa* [the Creator], who is light unto himself appears at its best, because in it he shares in the state of the other world..."[53] The *Taittiriya Upanishad* gives a detailed description of the different physical, mental and spiritual layers or *koshas*, of which the human is composed. Of these the innermost, the *anandamaya*, is purely spiritual in nature, and can be equated with the deep sleep state. This *kosha* defines an attribute of Isvara — a state of pure consciousness, of Supreme Bliss, as it is freed of the limiting adjuncts of sense perceptions and of intellection. (See the chapter on *jiva* for a detailed description of the *koshas*).

Conclusion

The concept of Isvara and the supposed creation make for a complex metaphysical world view. On the one hand, the appearance of the world remains an enigma, an illusion, as there is no one to create a thing other than Brahman, a thing which is outside of It. Isvara becomes an important tool for explaining, and then explaining away, the universe. Since Brahman as Isvara is seen to 'enter' the universe, the concept helps to collapse and unify the ideas pertaining to transcendence and immanence of Divinity. As the 'thread' running through all creation, Isvara becomes the underlying connection between all that is seen to exist.

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[52] See *Mandukya*, 2.1.13-19, and *Brihadaranyaka*, 4.3.1-9.
The three states which the Upanishads use as epistemological tools are the states of waking, dream and deep sleep. Deep sleep state is analysed as being free from any mental or physical transaction.
[53] Gispert-Sauch, p.,109.

On the other hand, Isvara being none other than Brahman, the Creation that seems to emanate from Him is also non-different from Brahman, making everything in the universe spiritual and sacred. As such, in this world view, there is nothing in the world that is non-sacred.

Analysed and posited as being equivalent to one's own inmost state of consciousness, Isvara is shown to be not different from the essential human being, thus providing a reason for respect for oneself and for other beings. Yet despite being seen as one's own inmost self when intellectually analysed, Isvara can be worshipped as an external entity, in a dualistic mode — a possibility that makes a purely spiritual entity accessible to humans.

As a perceived creator and controller of the Universe, Isvara also becomes a repository of moral and ethical values which regulate life in the world, and prepare an individual to purify his/her mind to become amenable for Brahman realisation. It is through the his/her capacity to reflect and act that an individual may realise Brahman, the Ultimate Reality.

As an entity that manifests the potential of Brahman to appear as a concrete world of names and forms, Isvara provides important insights into the unity of Being as He inhabits, and connects, two worlds — the world of the attributeless Brahman and that of the sense-perceptible universe. As such, He serves an epistemological as well as an ontological purpose. In His Brahman aspect he is the all-pervasive inmost entity, and as a Creator God he becomes approachable through various names and forms, an entity with whom humans can strike a relationship.

V

Nyame: the Shining One God in the Akan Tradition

As drawn from myths and tales of origin, as also proverbs, phrases, everyday rites and rituals, and from the interpretation of these by present-day scholars, God (*Nyame*) in the Akan conception is a complex entity that does not give in to being boxed into neat, exclusive categories such as monotheistic or polytheistic, personal or impersonal, or any other. *Nyame* has to be understood in His own terms from within the context in which He[1] has arisen. Akan God while being Supreme and transcendent is also all-pervasive and not averse to doling out some of His powers to other gods and beings who attain a secondary reality for the purpose of day-to-day running of the world and for the welfare of its constituents. He is, thus, both transcendent and immanent. An understanding of the concept enables an insight into the relevance and meaning of rituals and ethical codes practised and upheld by the Akan as also the relation of the human to the Divine.

Since the religious concepts of African traditional societies have been 'lived' experiences for centuries, the need to document, explain or philosophise those beliefs had not been felt. It was as a result of the incursions, and consequent disparagement of the religion and customs by European colonisers and missionaries, that Africans found it necessary to expound on, clarify and justify their metaphysical concepts. So far as colonial scholarship was concerned, it was the lack of knowledge of local languages and customs, as also the need to justify their own superiority — cultural, religious and social — that coloured their constructions of

[1] Though a gender neutral term, *Nyame* as Odomankoma Kwame (a name denoting His power) is seen to be a masculine term. Kwame is the name given to a male child born on Saturday. Even so, the Akan Supreme God remains beyond gender.

African religions and cultures. This is not to say that some European scholars did not attempt to delve deeper into the African mind, find ideas of value hidden therein, and open them up to the larger, particularly Western, world. Had it not been for these external forces Africans may even have been content to go on with their conceptions regarding the way humans related to the Divine and to the environment, thus denying to the world an alternative way of perceiving the universe.

So far as Christian colonisers were concerned many of them were surprised, even relieved, to find that Africans, and the Akan, had knowledge of and definite ideas about a Supreme God. Evidence of this is seen in the writings of E.G. Parrinder [2] and McVeigh. That made the missionaries feel, even if erroneously, that their work was made easier as they now only had to paste the concept of a Christian God on them. The more surprising thing is that African scholars, too, felt satisfied with this 'discovery' as it made them feel that they were metaphysically as capable as the Europeans were. While Europeans saw and interpreted African practices and beliefs through the prism of their own understanding of God, ironically the African interpreters of their traditions also initially explained them through Western concepts, tending to "dress up African deities with Hellenic robes and parade them before the Western world to show that Africans were as civilized as Europeans", to borrow a statement used by Emefie Ikenga-Metuh.[3] Paradoxically, this was also meant "to defend Africa from the intellectual arrogance of the West,"[4] and at the same time repudiate the colonisers' project regarding evolutionary phases of religion like "Fetishism, Polytheism and Monotheism" to show that Africans were on the lowest rungs of evolution, as argued by Sandra Greene.[5] That is the reason why earlier exegeses on African religious concepts are permeated with imported concepts and phrases, as also farfetched efforts to link them with those (Okot p'Bitek has particularly named writers like J.B. Danquah, Jomo Kenyatta, K.A.Busia, in this category[6]), as though to prove that the African had (or even needed) the same ideas of God as those of the coloniser. Even

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[2] "Missionaries have often found to their surprise that they did not need to argue for the existence of God, or faith in a life after death, for both of these fundamental of world religion are deeply rooted in Africa." Parrinder,1969, p. 39.

"God was there before the arrival of the gospel of Jesus Christ.... Christianity did not identify God for the Africans. The Africans had already identified Him." McVeigh, p. 24.

[3] Ikenga-Metuh, p. 12.

[4] Greene, p. 122.

[5] Greene, p. 122.

[6] Greene, p.136.

Kwame Gyekye seems to be a party to this complacency when he writes that the "Akan, living in deep forests of the hinterland, well knew of God prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries...". He goes on to authenticate this with a well-used Akan proverb — "No one teaches God to a child"[7] — without the need to explain the difference. Neither the colonial nor African scholars seemed to express the need to recognise that each tradition, though having a concept of one Supreme God, expressed an alternative understanding that arose in a very different context and addressed a different felt need. The African concept came with a panoply of other ideas that linked God to a network of relationships. As Ronald Green points out, a "closer examination of African religious beliefs reveals that the contrasts to Western ways of thinking are far more striking than are the similarities."[8]

This alternative understanding underscores the fact that the African concept of the One Supreme enables an insight into the human being's organic connections with the rest of the universe, be it with seen or with unseen entities. And that the One Supreme does not preclude the existence of other venerable entities that neither extinguish nor diminish His supremacy and significance. In fact a pluralistic understanding of Divinity embellishes and strengthens the possibilities of experiencing the Supreme in multifarious things and existents in a variety of ways. As such, even though terms like 'transcendent', 'all-powerful' etc., which resonate with Western concepts, are used for the African God they are more striking in their difference than in their similarity. This is because the end sought from religious rituals and adoration of deities is different to those of the colonisers. Sandra Greene quotes p'Bitek who says, "Africans were most concerned about interacting with religious forces in order to obtain the good life here and now...health and prosperity...success in life, happy and productive marriage"[9] than with ontological definitions. Consequently, "African religious thought revolved principally around the desire to 'explain and influence the working of one's everyday life by discovering the constant principles that underlie the apparent chaos and flux of sensory experience.'" It was, thus, directed more "toward explanation/prediction/control over daily life rather than on 'communion' with the holy as an end in itself,"[10] she goes on to say.

What then becomes important is an understanding of the total environment in which the concepts arise, even if on the surface they

[7] Gyekye, 1995, p.222-3.
[8] Green, 1983, p. 3.
[9] Greene, p. 123.
[10] Greene, p. 123.

seem to be similar. As Innocent Onyewuenyi writes:

> ...[I]t becomes necessary to know what African metaphysics, namely, the science of *being* as such, is. The adjective 'African' is significant in order to differentiate it from Western metaphysics...[as] there is a difference between African and Western metaphysics, i.e. each culture's understanding of what "being" or "reality" is... .[11]

Philosophy provides insights into the character and spirit of the historical and social experiences and arrangements of the peoples and places in which they arise. Onyewuenyi quotes Georg Hegel:

> The particular form of a philosophy is...contemporaneous with a particular constitution of the people amongst whom it makes its appearance, with their institutions and forms of government, their morality, their social life and their capabilities, customs and enjoyments of the same.[12]

There is indeed an important connection between the geography, natural environment and the history of the Akan in the development of concepts and cults related to the Supreme God. It is, thus, significant that from about the last decades of the twentieth century onwards, African scholars themselves began to examine their traditions and explain them from standpoints based in their own cultural experiences, linguistic usages and functioning traditional practices. Writing from 'within' their own social and cultural structures and by decoding and critically examining the meanings underlying the words, phrases, maxims and proverbs, they brought out "clarifications and definitions of epistemic terms"[13] that had hitherto remained unanalysed, thus acting as interpreters, or *akyeame*, of an otherwise inadequately analysed tradition and practice.

The complexity and uniqueness of the Akan cosmological constructs and their application to situations of daily life confronting humans can be gauged from their understanding and conception of God. Their world view, as also the way in which they relate to the universe and the environment in which they live, is drawn from their concept of God on the one hand and, on the other, it is what gives their concept of God its particularity. Their idea of God and the resulting metaphysical arrangement is also reflected in the institutional and interpersonal organisations of the Akan.

While the Akan, as Darryl Forde posits, have been no different from many other peoples in "postulating mysterious forces and beings in nature, and mysterious powers among their fellows" which in good and bad fortunes "remain largely unknown and uncontrollable by practical

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[11] Onyewuenyi, p.30-1, (emphasis added).
[12] Onyewuenyi, p.31.
[13] Dzobo, p.73.

means,"[14] the arrangement they ascribe to these powers is different from that of other cultures. Though they have based the routine of their life on "principles of causation... and the logical implications of ideas,"[15] it is in "the depth and range of their collective knowledge of natural processes and in the degree of control and security that they could thereby command"[16] that they differ from others, particularly the Europeans.

As such, their ideas about God and divinity do not necessarily fit into readymade frames such as monotheism or polytheism, unity or plurality, remoteness or nearness, transcendence or immanence, personal or impersonal. God in the Akan conception could be any of these, all of these, or none of these as He has to be understood on terms devised by and growing out of certain cultural needs. An understanding of the concept of God could explain the notions regarding tribal and universal, distant and near: notions of singularity and plurality, spirituality and materiality, individuality and communality; or the understanding of terms such as unitary and diverse, secular and religious, arrived at by the Akan. The metaphysical concepts of the Akan fuse contradictory notions in conceptual as well as practical terms.

The Akan notion of God's relationship with humans and the universe is reflective of the way in which the flux, chaos and confusion of day-to-day life is understood and dealt with. It is through their understanding of God that they strive to maintain a balance and harmony in the empirical world of quotidian experience. It is through their conception of God that one may apprehend the rationale behind the socio-political institutions, inter-personal relationships and responses to individual problems, rituals and other practices evolved over a period of time.

An analysis of the language, of the words and phrases, art patterns and symbols used by the Akan, gives us an idea of their conceptualisation of God, of Creation and the relationship between the two. So far as the knowledge of, and belief in, God is concerned the self-evidence of God is expressed through common Akan phrases like 'Nobody needs to show God to a child' (*Obi nkyere abofra Onyame*),[17] as quoted in Gyekye's statement earlier. The 'creation' of a human being, in Akan conception, stresses that a person has a speck of God in him. This could be taken to imply that knowledge of God is inherent and natural to humans, since the element of God in their makeup enables them, knowingly or

[14] Forde, p.x.
[15] Forde, xi.
[16] Forde, xi.
[17] Danquah, proverb no. 227, p. 188; Sarpong, 1974, p. 9.

unknowingly, consciously or unconsciously to recognise the existence of a Supreme Reality. Since a speck of *Nyame,* as light,[18] resides in every human being (see chapter on the human person, *Onipa*) the fact of Nyame's existence does not have to be explained. Since belief in the existence of God is deep rooted, the Akan do not feel the need to question how or when *Nyame* came to be since they *know* that He *is* and has always been. In this capacity *Nyame* is intuitively, or perhaps naturally, known. There is then, no curiosity to rationally analyse this entity. There is no need to even think or question whether God exists, as that is a given and humans have, as though, *a priori* knowledge of it without making any effort, or raising a doubt about Him.[19] One may surmise that the knowledge of God also arises from an observation of the empirical world which functions according to certain laws and which, therefore, calls for a creative intelligence behind it. As to *what* God is, is indicated by the terms that ascribe intrinsic and abstract qualities as well as positive capacities and capabilities to Him. Questions among the Akan only relate to the nature and function of God and thereby to the relationship between God and humans and God and the universe and not to whether God actually exists. By delving into these questions humans may understand their own role and final place, and goal, in the larger scheme of the universe.

Creator and Creation

As already mentioned, questions regarding God, and whether there is at all such an entity do not arise. The existence of the universe and a semblance of order therein is proof enough of the existence of a creative power, a Creator. That Creator would have to be orderly and intelligent.

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[18] Emmanuel Asante and Gyekye translate *Nyame* as light or radiance. (Conversations)

[19] Conversations with Okomfo Ayibea a Priestess of Obosomase and Nana Operebea II, Chief Priestess of Akonedi shrine at Larteh (see Appendices I and II) drew shrugged laughter when I asked them how they knew that an entity such as God existed. To them the question was meaningless as God was all around. How could one even pose such an absurd question?! They seemed to say that we are there because God is there. This understanding is reflected in proverbs like, 'If God were to die I would die' and in symbols like *gye Nyame,* 'except God'. Though a scholar like Jan Platvoet may argue that *gye Nyame* ('except God') as an ontological interpretation connoting God's omnipotence and omnipresence is a nineteenth century interpolation, it is nevertheless there to stay now. Traditionally it was used during war time by Akan heads of state, Platvoet stresses, to express that they feared no one 'except God.' (See Platvoet in '*Nyame* ne Aberewa: Towards a History of Akan Notions of "God,"' *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol. 4, 2012, pp39-65.)

Creation myths among the Akan are scarce as both God and the universe are entities, that ante-date the descent of the human on earth. Modern scholars trained in Western modes of thinking, many in seminaries, adopt the idea of Creation from Christianity, intermeshing Akan myths and Christian theology. Creation myths ascribe the creation of sky, earth, rivers and plants in that order to *Odomankoma*. Then He is said to have created humans and animals, who fed on plants, and animals in turn were food for man. For the protection of man "God created spirits of the waters, forests and rocks."[20] At another level He imbued man, in this orderly creation, with knowledge and memory. This is expressed by the Akan in the ancient language of drums (as it would be in the court of a chief). As explained by Kofi Asare Opoku:

> ...Odomankoma created the *Essen* (court crier); then the *Okyerema* (drummer); and lastly *kwawu kwabrafo* (death).
> The *Essen*, the *Okyerema* (or *Odomakoma Kyerema* — the Creator's own drummer) and *Kwawu Kwabrafo* are each a symbol of a stage in the act of creation. The *Essen* represents order, for it is his duty as the court crier to keep order at the chief's court. The *Okyerema* symbolizes knowledge, for he knows the history and lore of society and can recite it on his drum. *Kwawu Kwabrafo* is the executioner, or death. So, to the Akan, in the order of creation in the drum language, there is first, order in the universe; then knowledge; and lastly, death.[21]

Though these may be taken to be artificially imposed stages in the act of creation as traditionally the Akan may not have had to consciously think of it in this manner, yet the point to note is that all the elements in this creation are organically linked as they connect to each other in their ultimate source which is God, from whom they draw their qualities and functions. This organic linkage not only allows each one of the elements to act on the other and be acted on, it also makes them dependent on each other.

Though originating from God they are not *like* God, who depends on none but on whom all creation and creatures ultimately depend. Dependence on God's existence for one's own existence is encapsulated in the proverb: *If God could die I would die*. Creation and creatures, are capable of doing and controlling some things in life, yet they are subject to death, while God is beyond death. Creatures do not have the power to defy death, but the soul as a speck of God lives on after death.

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[20] Opoku, 1978, pp. 21-2.
[21] Opoku, 1978, p. 22.

Attributes of God

The Akan believe God to be Supreme. He is the creator of everything while Himself has not been created as He has always been there. Having had no beginning He also does not have an end. He is beyond death and time.

As Peter Sarpong says, "God is considered to be the final explanation of all things, the point beyond which further questioning is meaningless."[22] As such the concepts developed by the Akan touch upon an underlying spiritual reality that is the foundational base of everything, a substratum beyond which one cannot go. Since there is nothing beyond the reality of a spiritual God there might be nothing other than Him to strive for or appeal to. Yet this God, as a spiritual reality only, does not explain the existence of the sense perceptible universe. So, in order to explain the existence of the empirical world this abstract spiritual reality, which is beyond sensual or mental experience, has been given attributes as a Being who can *will* or do anything. Even as abstract spirit, God is contactable and approachable through lesser deities, who are seen to be his children; or through ancestors that are spirits of humans who earlier lived on earth. That is why any offering is first addressed to the Supreme God and later to other deities.

Functions of God

Other than proverbial expressions and phrases that are crucial to an understanding of God and the order ascribed to Him, Akan names for God and their etymological meanings also convey the depth of understanding about His nature and functions. Some of the names and appellations are considered below:

Nyame — The word has many etymologies. Derived from the word *Onyam* it means light, radiance, brightness.[23] Some other interpreters believe it to be a combination of *nya* — get, *and mee* — be satisfied. It could then mean, 'God who gives satisfaction', it could also, perhaps, mean one in whom all desires get satisfied. Emmanuel Asante,[24] however, takes the earlier explanation to be closer to the truth for, he says, that when referring to God, the Ashanti people would always point upwards to the sky where the sources of light appear. So the Europeans erroneously termed this being 'sky god'. It is not that God resides in the sky or is synonymous with sky, the indication points to a 'beyond-ness' and God

[22] Sarpong, 1974, p.10.
[23] Kwame Gyekye, Emmanuel Asante (Conversations).
[24] Emmanuel Asante, conversation, 20.1.2011.

may be seen to reveal himself through sky phenomena,[25] like rain, light, thunder.

Present-day scholars provide many new meanings to the words associated with God, meanings that traditionally may not have been delved into. So, the first part of the word *Nyame* may be interpreted to have an indirect connotation of knowledge or wisdom, as in the word *Nya nsa* (wisdom, knowledge). The word *nya* in Akan means " 'to find', 'to experience', 'to gain', 'to come by'."[26] N.K. Dzobo goes on to write, "...if the verb *nya* is used epistemically it implies that the subject of the verb *nya* is doing something — observing or experiencing something and then deriving something out of it. What is derived from such an experience is *nunya* (knowledge)."[27] *Nyame*, then, is the source of wisdom. The concept of knowledge or wisdom is, thus, connected to light as it were. Dzobo writes, "...knowledge is light considered especially as moral enlightenment. As enlightenment, knowledge makes the individual free and in this sense it is said to be creative of a better life."[28] So, as a repository of wisdom and knowledge (as denoted by the idea of light), *Nyame* is the dispenser of moral order, since knowledge here is seen to be connected to morality and to action arising from that knowledge or wisdom.[29]

Knowledge, for Dzobo is a pre-requisite for freedom and for a better life. Thus, knowledge of, and belief in, *Nyame* lead to morality in conduct and that, in turn, leads to a free and better life.

Nyame is both an abstract impersonal energy and a personal God who can be approached or relied upon as the last resort in times of need. Some of the attributes that reflect His infinitude and thereby His impersonality, abstraction and spirituality are:

Odomankoma: Infinite, Boundless, Absolute and Eternal.[30] It is an appellation that expresses the uncaused, abstract nature of God. Since causality operates in the relative world of empirical perceptions, it cannot apply to the Infinite God, who is beyond change even though He remains the source of causation and change.

Obianyew: Uncreated. It has the same connotation, that of being a

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[25] See Kwesi Dickson, in Danquah, xvii

[26] Dzobo, in Wiredu and Gyekye, p. 74

[27] Dzobo, in Wiredu and Gyekye, p. 74.

[28] Wiredu & Gyekye, p.79

The actual nature of that knowledge — other than it having a moral connotation and also conveying the idea of freedom — is not clarified. How knowledge of God gives rise to wisdom that makes one free and what the nature of that freedom is, remain unexplained points.

[29] Danquah sees God, as Creator, to be imbued with intelligence, p.44.

[30] Gyekye, 1995, p.71.

Causeless Cause. (This is more a 20th century praise name as modern scholars add new meanings to traditional knowledge and phrases.)

Tetekwaframua: One who endures from ancient times and is forever.[31] It connotes a 'beyond-time' abstraction that is a non-sensual, non-physical reality. As such it is beyond the limited comprehension of humans, who have the capacity to know only things that are in time and space and are available to sense perception.

Atoapem: A final or unsurpassable entity, it is an ancient appellation connoting 'one who has killed a thousand enemies'[32]. It also refers to a quality beyond which it is not possible to go, that which is the final ground of all reality. It is the substratum of all that exists. It connotes that all other realities would get merged into or collapsed into that final thing as nothing can surpass that.[33]

Brekyirihunuade: the all-knowing, Omniscient one.

Enyiasombea: Omnipresent one;

and *Otumfo*: An all-powerful, omnipotent entity.

These qualities though also applied in a limited, euphemistic or symbolic way, to some other beings, like Chiefs or Kings, are basically applied (especially in their togetherness) only to a special and singular being, i.e. God.

Other than being a repository of abstract qualities, God is also visualised as a special personalised being who, because of His omnipotence and omnipresence, can *do* things that are beyond the possibilities of any other being. *Nyame* is often written with an 'O' prefix as *Onyame*, especially when it precedes a sentence. The pre-fix 'O' is suggestive of 'humanness', of a conscious living thing. It connotes something that is born, grows, proliferates and can move about, thus suggesting that God is not a stick, river, animal, or stone[34]. This resonates with the word *jnanam* (knowledge, consciousness), in Vedanta, which is posited alongside *satyam* (existence), to free the latter concept of any connotation of non-consciousness. While animals also have these capacities, they still are not the same as humans (the 'O' prefix does not apply to animals, things or sticks as explained to me by Kofi Agyekum). The prefix does away with any connotation of pantheism, while other terms used for *Nyame* do away with the idea of birth, growth, death, etc., as He is boundless.

The term *Nyame* does not convey the idea of any gender either. Eva L.R. Meyerowitz (in *The Sacred State of the Akan*), reading her own notions

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[31] Gyekye, 1995, p. 70.

[32] This was pointed out to me by Platvoet.

[33] Sarpong, 1974, p.10 expresses the same idea.

[34] Kofi Agyekum, conversation, 1.2.2011.

into the word, regards *Nyame* as a bisexual entity which by splitting the male and female within it gave rise to the creator God, *Nyankopon*, and subsequently to Creation. As per her interpretation, the word harbours within it both male and female energies that continue to create and sustain all beings.

The personalised qualities and capacities of God that complement His abstract conception, also belong only to an entity that is not limited in time and space and has the power to do what He wishes to. Some of these terms are:

Onyakopon: "Alone, the Great One, the Supreme Being."[35] According to Danquah, it refers to a "personality not an abstraction: a concrete knowable person... not a distant notion...[Is the] God... most objectified in Akan religious ceremonies...."[36] As *Onyakopon*, *Nyame* is given a personalised name of *Kwame*, i.e. one who is born on Saturday, whose ruling deity is the spirit of Saturday, which is most powerful. Danquah considers this personalised form as greater since Onyame remains an abstract entity. But as argued by Gyekye it is Onyame that is "the Absolute Reality, the origin of all things, the absolute ground, the sole and whole explanation of the universe, the source of all existence. Absolute Reality is beyond and independent of all categories of time, space and cause."[37] According to him all other forms and descriptions of this reality arise from this conception. It is this abstract conception that forms the ground of all existence. Onyame is then beyond personalisation. "He is not bound or limited to any particular region of space. He is omnipresent (*enyiasombea*), all-pervading."[38] According to Peter Sarpong, Onyame is the final explanation of all things.[39] Yet, he goes on to say, the two are used interchangeably as no real difference is seen between God as an 'absent' entity which could, perhaps, be taken to mean an 'abstract', entity and a Creator,[40] — thus encapsulating both the transcendent and the immanent capacities of God.

Obo/adee: "The Bountiful One who made/'created' [all] things,"[41] (as expressed in *Odomankoma a oboo adee [nyinaa]*, a combination of thing and Creation), referring to the creation of everything in the universe. It conveys the idea that that which was seen as an abstraction, having unique powers, can from those powers, create whatever He wants. In the

[35] Gyekye, 1987, p.4.
[36] Danquah, p. 46.
[37] Gyekye, 1987, p.70.
[38] Gyekye, 1987, p.70.
[39] Sarpong, 1974, p.10.
[40] Sarpong, p.9, Also Danquah, 46.
[41] See Platvoet, '*Nyame* ne Aberewa: Towards a History of Akan Notions of God' *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol 4, 2012, pp. 39 -65.

conceptualisation of God as *Onyame* and *Onyakopon* a personalisation of the Supreme had already been indicated. And it is to God visualised in this form that prayers are offered. Prayers cannot be offered to an abstract concept like *Nyame* who is known intuitively but is without form. That is why there are no shrines for *Nyame*, the Supreme God, and no priests for Him either.[42] *Oboadee* is a designation for an all-powerful God having the capacity to create that which He wishes. A part of *Nyame* goes to form that which is created — since there is nothing other than God to create from, *Nyame* being a unitary, singular and infinite presence. So God, as an abstract yet energising spirit remains both beyond, and *in*, the universe. The same unitary being, somehow, becomes a part of the plural, multiple forms that humans are confronted with and are themselves made up of.

Borebore: A carver or hewer. Creation cannot be ex-nihilo, as nothing can be created out of nothing. *Nyame* as *Borebore* can be understood as one who gives form and shape to things out of an undifferentiated, non-defined, mass — a mass that is yet characterised by omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence.[43]Having the 'O' prefix *Nyame* has the human-like capacity to create, it is from Him that things *emanate* and appear, they take perceptible form from his own spiritual, non-sense-perceptible, non-empirical being. From this emanation He creates an orderly universe. While He Himself is never born into the world of humans He creates *abosom*, tutelary deities, who are known to be His children, to carry out His work of helping humans.

This Creator is also the sustainer and in that capacity becomes approachable. He Himself, as the underlying spirit, remains the provider of things that are essential to the sustenance of life. As such He is the one on whom, as *Twereduampon*, (one on whom persons can rely without being let down, without falling), humans can depend and rely at all times.

Other terms for this personalised God are related more to provision of concrete things for a good life. *As Amosu* he stands for a giver of rain. As *Amowia,* He is the giver of sun. He is also known as *Amaomee* which implies one who gives satisfaction (as in *Nyame*). The satisfaction is related to provision of health, prosperity and other things in life.

These last three qualities provide the material aspect of God. While

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[42] Okomfo Ayibea, a priestess of Abosomase (Appendix I) felt perplexed when asked why she could not pray to *Nyame* the over ruling spirit. "But how?" she ruminated. *Nyame* is a spirit, one with which a personal relationship cannot be established, but one who is everywhere, and she pointed to the space around.

[43] See Ikenga-Metuh, p. 14.

lesser gods fulfil day-to-day human ends, it is from God that these major requirements for the sustenance of life come.

Resolution of Paradox

The paradox of transcendence and immanence, *impersonality* and personality, the purely spiritual and material, gets resolved and merged into the One when all these conceptions are taken together. As no one being can be the possessor of all these attributes it can be taken to mean that God cannot actually be defined. The terms used are symbols pointing to an indescribable entity who is a composite of all these attributes, and more. They point not to a being, but a Supreme Spirit that cannot be categorised into segments of personal and impersonal. He has the capacity to be both. For this reason, human beings have the freedom to visualise Him as both.

This is what enables the unification of what looks like a paradox — the viewing of things in binary, oppositional and divisionary terms. The logical and 'illogical', the rational and the emotional binaries do not have meaning for the African traditional mind, which does not perceive the world in dichotomous ways. For the African, it is possible to encapsulate both within the same belief system as both are palpably experienced in the same entity, at the same time, by the same individual being. The daily language and the models of behaviour of the African are reflective of, and are replete with persistent permeation and subsumption of a personal God who is also transcendent in His glory. The inclusivist mind does not see an anachronism or contradiction in the idea of a plurality existing within a unity, or a unity being both the source and content of plurality.

From the projections made about the Supreme, one may draw the conclusion that God as the Creator of all beings, is different to the creatures and things that he creates. It is from God that they originate, as such they may have some God-like characteristics. But by the mere fact of having been created and being bound by time, they cannot be like Him. They have their particular domains into which they fit in the scheme of things while God is omnipresent and omniscient. He is the generalised entity from which all the particulars emanate and from which they draw life and sustenance. The particular spirits and deities belong to a category in which the creatures or created beings have no independent reality. They would cease to be if the sustaining reality of the Supreme Being, *Nyame*, were not there. (The proverb, 'If God were to die I would die,' connotes not only the deathlessness of God but also the dependence of created beings on God's eternality for existence.)

Looking at the Akan concept of God one may speculate that while God is the Being, the ground, in which the world of plurality arises, He is not a participant in the affairs of the created universe. One may, thus, claim that in the Akan scheme of the universe there are *two categories of Reality*. One is that which is independent, and ever there. The other, dependent, which exists only because of the existence of the Independent One as it is reliant on that for its sustenance. This secondary reality is relative. In the domain of the relative it is possible to have a hierarchy of realities as also an interaction of one thing with another. But ultimately all originate in and draw their strength from the One which is unlimited and stands outside of it, even while permeating it. A unique thing about this secondary reality, in Akan thought is, that once created, it continues to exist whether in physical form or as a subsidiary spiritual reality as that of an ancestor, since it draws sustenance from God who continues to be.

Nyame the Supreme

The commonly quoted myth regarding Nyame's move away from humans[44] provides an insight into one aspect of the Akan understanding of God. Rather than projecting a *remote* God, as often stipulated, the myth seems to symbolise a leap of consciousness regarding the idea of a Supreme Being. In order to have all the powers, mentioned above, attributed to this one entity, it would have to be an abstraction — beyond space and time. Only an entity that is conceived at the subtlest of levels can be omnipresent and by dint of its all-pervasiveness also be available to humans at all times. That is why, even though seemingly distant, God can be spoken with directly — through the wind which also is all-pervasive but invisible (As a proverb states: If you want to speak to God speak to him through the wind).

By being removed from within the world of humans God ceases to be just one among others. He becomes unique, unlike anything else that exists. By this means God is turned into a cosmic, universal being and not the God of a particular tribe or group. As Ikenga-Metuh states, he ceases to be "the head of a local pantheon" and in his supremacy "transcends tribal boundaries."[45]

Nyame is a supra energy, a consciousness that pervades the universe.

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[44] The myth refers to an ancient time when God lived near humans — just above them. An old woman who used to pound *fufu* kept hurting him with her pestle. Since she did not listen to His complaints about being hurt, God moved away to stay above, far from humans, in a space where they could not touch him.

[45] Ikenga-Metuh, p.,18.

By moving into a beyond, *Nyame* becomes a Supreme abstraction that can be *known* — through belief, but *not worshipped* since worship calls for a relational entity. The Supreme is neither subject to relationship nor is He subject to an *idea* of relationship. A distinction can, thus, be made between a God that is known because the world and living beings exist, and gods that manifest in the form of natural entities and can thus be related to. This is the kind of understanding that both the priestesses, Okomfo Ayibea of Obosomase and Nana Oparebea II of Larteh seemed to reflect in their understanding of God and their *relationship* with Him. (See Appendices I and II)

The existence of One Supreme Being who is the originator and controller of all that exists (since all prayer is finally addressed to Him both for rectification of wrongs and provisions of things) does not prevent the existence of other deities, since God "shares himself out through them."[46] The other deities become, as though, agents of God to carry out certain functions, thus allowing his authority to be diversified, or decentralised! It may then be seen as a kind of henotheism, if at all, where there is no problem with the Supreme allowing other deities to exist, and be worshipped by humans.

Besides, being a creator, the Supreme is also an organiser, who puts order into that which He creates. Though sparse, creation myths among Akan show that God creates in an orderly fashion — linking one element with another — that would enable sustenance and harmony in the created universe. Like in the Kalabari and Igbo conceptions of a Supreme Being,[47] in the Akan conception also *Nyame*, as he 'shares himself out', allots destinies or arrangements within which the created beings function. They are not left completely to their own devices but work within a framework regulated by the Supreme. The "prerogative of giving human life belongs to him"[48] and one may add to this that the prerogative of designing the particular life — as is the case when He allocates a person his *hyebea*, or the pattern of life (see chapter on the Human Person) also rests with Him. He puts into the human mind the ability to know and gain an identity (as shown through the linguist's, *okyeame's*, ability in the drum language and his ability to know the lore of the tribe, as expounded by Ackah).

God, as *Nyame*, may thus be seen to be imbued with a supra intelligence that enables Him to visualise and then execute His plan. Only *Nyame* is capable of this unique act as no created being can replicate or share this

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[46] Ikenga-Metuh, p. 19.
[47] Ikenga-Metuh, p.19.
[48] Ikenga-Metuh, p. 20.

with Him. That is why all other beings remain either creatures, or 'children' of God. This is the reason that many of the terms used for God are not used for any other being or entity. This understanding of God defies the label of pantheism as corroborated by Parrinder,[49] as some part of Him that goes into creation goes back to him.

God, as *Nyame*, may thus be seen as

- both transcendent and immanent.
- a singular, abstract and spiritual entity.
- having no beginning or end as He is ever there.
- being an abstract entity that cannot be worshipped directly.
- all-pervasive, since a part of Him goes into creation. He is yet distinct from the created world which is subject to causation, and decimation.
- a personalised being, since He is the provider of all things in life as also one who wards off evil.
- the only entity that is totally reliable.
- one who alone can fulfil all the needs of humans.

Even though creation is dependent on Him, it yet continues to exist in some form even after it ceases to be manifest to the senses. This is, perhaps, because it has a part of God in it.

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[49] Parrinder, 1970, p. 6.

VI

Jiva: The Human Person[1] in Advaita

The human person, i.e. the body-mind-spirit complex, called the *jiva*[2] is visualised in a dichotomous, paradoxical way in Advaita Vedanta. While, on the one hand, it is an externally-oriented mechanism grappling with discrete objects that are subject to change, on the other it is the unique and only tool through which the ultimate experience of an ever-existent unchanging Reality, Brahman, can be gained. *Jiva* is characterised by a tension between opposing pulls of the sense organs with their outward propensities and the innermost principle, the true being, with its inward integrating nature; by a struggle between the arbitrary, phenomenal desires to grasp material objects externally, and the aspiration to realise an ideal, original state of existence which does not rely on discrete

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[1] I have taken the phrase 'The Human Person', which is the English translation of the Akan word *onipa*, and applied the same to *jiva*, even though *onipa* connotes the possibility of 'becoming' — implying the evolution of a biological creature into a morally responsible person — while *jiva* in Advaita calls for a 'discovery' of the being's identity with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality.

[2] I have used the term *jiva* to connote the whole human complex. *Jiva* could, perhaps, more technically be restricted to the *jivatman*, the soul which 'dwells' in the body and which continues to exist after the body disintegrates. I have taken the word to refer to the physical, intellectual and spiritual complex as stated in *The Supreme Yoga* of Swami Venkatesananda: "The eternal and infinite consciousness is indeed free of all modifications; but when there arises the notion of 'I am' in it, that notion is known as the *jiva*. It is that *jiva* that lives and moves in the body. When the notion of 'I' arises (*ahambhavana*), it is known as the ego-sense (*ahamkara*). When there are thoughts, it is known as the mind. When there is awareness, it is intelligence. When seen by the individual soul, it is known as the senses. When the notion of body prevails it appears to be the body.... However, through the persistence of these notions, the subtle personality condenses into material substantiality." (p. 406) This complex of materiality and consciousness is referred to as *jiva* in this essay.

externalities. The opposing poles of the phenomenal and the nuomenal, individual and universal, the mundane and Divine, of matter and spirit are all present within the *jiva*. By virtue of its being imbued with a spirit that transcends external, phenomenal activities the *jiva* becomes the "starting point of philosophy,"[3] the site for understanding, exploring, and realising the highest principle that Advaita posits.

The Advaitic understanding of *jiva*, the individual being, is a construct embedded in the metaphysical conception of the universe visualised by this system of knowledge. The ultimate goal set by Advaita calls for an experience of Freedom, a freedom that is unfettered by the struggles and tensions of mundane life. This is achieved through the realisation of *jiva's* identity with a singular, ever-existent Divine, called Brahman. By a number of logical devices Advaita gives an insight into the nature of this Freedom and the methods by which it may be attained by the individual being. It proves that this Freedom, characterised by Bliss, is the very nature of the individual. But it has to be *discovered*, as it is also part of the nature of the individual to *not* be aware of his/her true being. The person, thus, becomes the seeker as well as the sought, the one who enquires as also the object of enquiry — for, both are contained within the same being.

This chapter looks into certain facets of Upanishadic enquiry with regard to *jiva* through:

- a decoding of Upanishadic myths of origin and composition of the human person.
- an understanding of the Vedantic notion of organic linkages and interconnections between the cosmic and the human, the conscious and the inert, to help realise the contiguity of the One Singular Principle and the sanctity of all that exists.
- an inquiry into the Vedantic notion of Freedom.
- an inquiry into the Vedantic methodology for the realisation of the ever-existent Reality in which the limited, transitory *jiva* emerges and even becomes a tool for its discovery. (Paradoxically, the ultimate aim of the methodology is to disprove the world that it initially posits.)
- an inquiry into the social role of a self-realised person, and the ethics and morality expressed through such a person.

Jiva

Drawn from the root *jiv*, the word *jiva* means 'to breathe' or 'that which

[3] See Raju, in Radhakrishanan and Raju, 1966, p. 223.

breathes,' that which is driven by 'the life principle'. The individual being is also referred to by the word *prani*, again implying a complex characterised by breathing or the life principle*. Another word *jivatman* also refers to the conscious principle that enlivens the mind body complex. Both *prani* and *atman* are drawn from the root verb *an* meaning 'to breathe'. Atman also refers to the conscious principle which when freed of the limiting adjuncts of body and mind is none other than Brahman itself. The word *jiva*, thus, does not refer merely to the inert biological aspect of the person but to a conscious being which is an amalgam of the atman, the intellect, the mind and the body. It refers to an "individual self, who is the agent of thinking seeing, hearing etc."[4]

Atman, a vital constituent of *jiva*, came to have two connotations in the course of Upanishadic thought. In earlier Upanishadic texts, the word was used synonymously with Brahman to connote the ultimate ground of the universe. Over time it came to refer more to the "inmost essence in man," while the word Brahman increasingly came to denote the ultimate reality, the substratum of all perceptible things — to distinguish it from Brahman's manifestation in the form of the human person[5] in which It (Brahman) subjects itself to embodiment and to temporal pleasures and pains. The *atman* "as embodied is affected by [temporal] pleasure and pain," as stated in the *Chandogya* Upanishad[6] in the teaching given by Sanatkumar to Narada in Chapter VII.

Since it is Brahman Itself that takes on the embodied form one may say that by its very composition *jiva* has the capacity to operate in two worlds — the spiritual and the mundane. It becomes the location at which the spiritual and the material coalesce. Being, "the result," as P.T. Raju states, "of the creativity of the *Atman,"*[7] the individual becomes the "meeting point of the gods ... of their realms of activity and fields of enjoyment...[As such, the individual being is] the unifying principle ... of the processes of the natural elements... [The human, thus,] provides the clue to nature's mysteries."[8] In "non-theological language," Raju goes on to say, "man is the unifying principle of the processes of sense organs (like vision and audition), of organs of action (like hands and feet), and their corresponding objects."[9]

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* See Apte, pp. 29, 688.

[4] Radhakrishnan, 2008, p. 148.

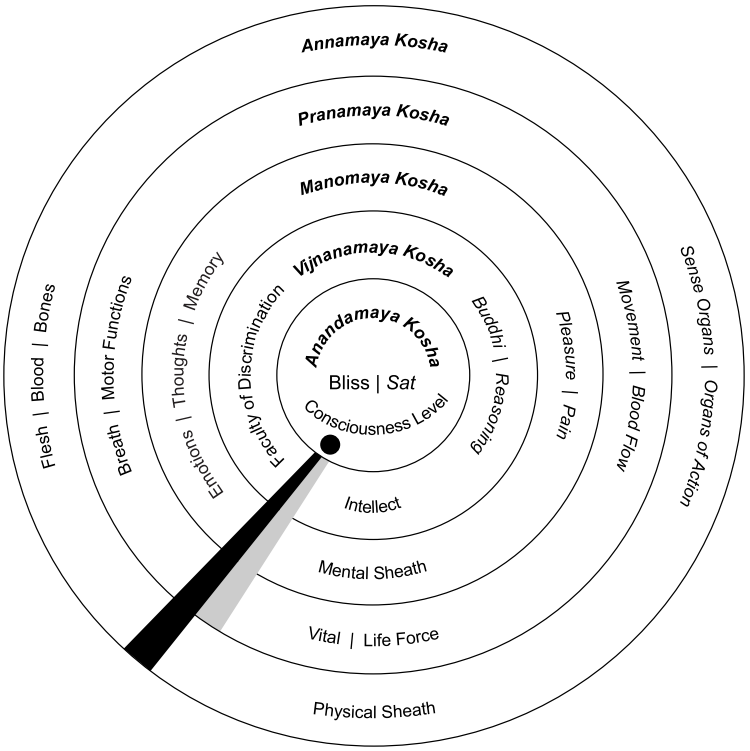
[5] Radharishnan, 2008.

[6] *Chhandogya*, VII, 1. 7-12, also VII.26.2 wherein the Self becomes manifold - as three-fold, five-fold etc. In this process of multiplication, it assumes endless forms and subjects itself to limitation.

[7] Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju,1966, p. 232.

[8] Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju, 1966, p. 231, 239, 240.

[9] Raju, Radhakrishnana and Raju, 1966, p. 239.



Vyavaharika Reality	*Adhibhautika* level Material physical level Transactional reality Functions in the waking state
Pratibhasika Reality	*Adhyatmika* level Ego | Subtle body Distinct individuated personality Seat of imagination | Illusory perception Functions in waking and dream states
Parmarthika Reality	Autonomous | Ontological Being Free from subject-object division Seat of total bliss Experienced in deep-sleep state

Note: Though shown here as separate segments, the *koshas* are actually contiguous - one merging into the other.

Notional Representation of Physio-Psychological-Spiritual Composition of *Jiva*

Annamaya Kosha

> Composed of material elements: space, air, fire, water and earth.
> Nurtured by food, breath and physical products.
> Transacts with other existents through sense organs and organs of action.
> Limited and contained in space and time.
> Undergoes birth, growth, decay and death.
> Active in the waking state, inert in the dream and deep sleep state.

Pranamaya Kosha

> Subtler than *Annamaya*.
> Sustains and supports the physical body; itself is sustained by air.
> Closely connected to the mind.
> Facilitates digestion, absorption, excretion, flow of blood, motor functions.

Manomaya Kosha

> Most dynamic and refined form of matter.
> Nourished by the subtlest essence of food.
> Subtler than breath (*prana*), yet vitally connected to it and the body.
> Seat of memory and thoughts.
> Swayed by emotions; imagines past and future; can distort truth.
> Functions in waking and dream states but not in deep sleep.

Vijnanamaya Kosha

> Seat of discrimination, reasoning, decision making, analysis, speech and knowledge.
> Bridge between non-sense-tangible spiritual essence of *Anandamaya Kosha* and the other extroverted, perceptible sheaths.
> Can be introverted – turned towards *Anandamaya* – or extroverted, as it turns towards the outer sheaths.
> Functions in dream and waking states, but not in deep sleep state.

Anandamaya Kosha

> Autonomous, ontological, blissful Being.
> Seat of harmony, equilibrium, total knowledge.
> Not supported by any material element; itself is the support of all other *Kosha*s.
> Experienced and known through reflection and intuition.
> Experienced in deep sleep when all other faculties are dormant.

Being driven by a desire to find out the ultimate ever-existent reality which is not dependent on anything, Upanishadic seers were not content with a knowledge of just external reality. Mere biological understanding of the individual being did not satisfy. Besides, the biological was seen to be "subservient to and dependent on something else" for its existence. It could not represent the whole. The Upanishads state that "the biological [by its very nature] serves the end of another, [which here refers to] the soul ...,"[10] the *atman*. It is by knowing the non-dependent, spiritual part of his/her composition that total knowledge of the person may be gained.

It is, thus, not a coincidence that the Upanishads provide detailed descriptions of the origin and composition of the human person. Creation myths which are a combination of theology and metaphysics are crucial to the understanding of the human person and of his/her capacity for realising the ultimate Truth, the final goal of the Upanishads.

Origin and Composition of jiva

The myths of creation, posited variously in the different Upanishads, are one of the various ways of leading the seeker and scholar to an experiential as well as intellectual understanding of a singular source, which is characterised by Freedom. Crucial to the understanding of *jiva*, the purport of these myths is to show the oneness of the *atman* and Brahman, and to prove that there is no division between the manifest world of plurality and Brahman, the undifferentiated Source, which alone exists[11] in the ultimate analysis. The Upanishads, as S. N. Dasgupta states, are "emphatic in their declaration that the two [the Atman/Brahman and *jivatman*] are one."[12]

The origin of the universe is attributed in the Upanishads to the arising of an enigmatic *desire*, 'May I become many', in the all-pervasive, all-knowing, Singular Being referred to as Brahman or Atman. To fulfil this desire, He *performed* tapas — intense concentration or rumination — and brought forth all that exists.[13] Having *created* multiplicity, He 'entered'

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[10] Radhakrishnan, 2008, p. 148.
In Sakalya Brahmana, (*Brihadaranyaka*. III. section 9), Yajnavalkya proves to Sakalya that every phenomenological reality rests, for its support, on another preceding force which is subtler in nature. Brahman alone is non-dependent and is the support of everything else. So it may be said that all that is perceptible, exists, as though, 'to serve' the subtle that precedes it.

[11] *Brihadaranyaka*. 1.4.5; also see Swami Nikhilananda, 1963, p. 191.

[12] SN Dasgupta, pp 45-6. In *Vivekachudamani* (*sloka* 20), when Shankaracharya declares *"Brahma satyam jaganmithya jivo Brahmaiva napara*," he stresses that Brahman alone is real and the universe unreal, but also goes on to state that *jiva* is not other than Brahman.

[13] *Taittiriya*, II.6.1, and II.7.1, I.5.1.

the same — thus stressing the idea of His all-pervasiveness and immanence. He did this without losing his original nature of being undifferentiated as there is nothing other than, or outside of the one Being. The spiritual force that 'enters' into, and the outer which appears as concrete multiplicity, are made of the same substance.[14] The singular and the multiple are intermeshed. The *Isa* Upanishad starts with the declaration that all that exists is inhered by *Isa*, which is both the material and the efficient 'cause' of the universe.

The centrifugal force (in the form of a *desire* to multiply) that arose in the all-pervasive Brahman (etymologically the word Brahman connotes a spreading out) led, initially (as stated in the *Taittiriya* Upanishad in Valli II), to the creation of the subtle and the gross elements, followed by vegetation and food, and thereafter the human being. The Upanishad then describes the physio-psychological-spiritual make up of the individual person as being made up of interconnected and contiguous *koshas,* or sheaths imbued with varying capacities. The 'sheaths' are not separate from one another like the peels of an onion. They are a continuation of the Atman's urge to multiply and spread. They are, as Swami Krishnananda states "forces of objectivity that pull the consciousness outward...they are urges of consciousness to move outward in greater and greater density...towards externality of experience."[15] The Upanishad refers to each sheath as drawing life, and remaining inseparable, from the preceding one. The *koshas* are, thus, five metaphorical levels of 'self'. They are stages of densification of the innermost entity from which the outer sheaths proceed forth. They represent the integrity of the material, the subtle and the spiritual in one composite whole.

Gispert-Sauch in his analysis of *Ananda* in the Upanishads argues that the five sheaths (*kosha-s*) may be looked upon as stages on the way towards liberation.[16] The outer are transcended to reach the inmost. The transcendence here is not a going beyond, or going past, but through analysis and knowledge, an *assimilation*, a collapsing, of the outer into the 'inner', till one gets to the innermost, integrated experiential core.[17]

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[14] *The Taittiriya Upanishad*, p. 336, states that through these words "the *sruti* declares that the Thinker Himself becomes manifold...*Isvara* is the ...material cause as well...[Thus declaring] that the One Brahman being known, the whole universe, though not taught, becomes known." Thus justifying its declared aim whereby the knowledge of One thing leads to the knowledge of everything (see p. 22 in Chapter II 'Vedanta: Background').

[15] Krishnananda, 70.

[16] Gispert-Sauch, p. 84.

[17] Gispert-Sauch, p. 84.

The Taittiriya Upanishad, p. 473, states "...it is by an (investigation of) these kosas that one attains Brahman. By *anvaya* and *vyatireka*, — by the method of conjoint presence and absence — applied to the five *kosas*, the *Atman* is realised."

To enable intellectual understanding the *Taittiriya* Upanishad analyses the *koshas* from the outer, sense perceptible, material level, to the inmost imperceptible-to-the-senses-and-the-mind level. The outermost sense perceptible sheath (*annamaya kosha*) of the human personality is metaphorically posited as being made up of food, *anna* or matter, and seen to be purely material in nature. It is the repository of the organs of perception which become the conduits for the conscious *atman* to act and interact with the physical world. The next level, the *pranamaya kosha*, the energy, or vital body, is made up of breath or vital force, which infuses the sense organs and the organs of action (*karmendriya*) with life force. It is also called the life principle (*prana*, etymologically connotes the life principle) as this is what enables the inert material body to function. Without this enlivening force the outer sheath would be incapable of any action.[18] Disassociated from the living, conscious principle the material outer self is described by words such as *sarira* or *deha*. The word *sarira* is drawn from the root *siryati* (meaning that which is subject to change and decay).[19] The word *deha*, drawn from the root *dahati*, refers to that which is ultimately given to being exhumed, which is impure — *kalanko deha ucyate*.[20]

The third level, the *manomaya kosha*, or mental body refers to the mind, which is the repository of thoughts, emotions, doubts and feelings. The data supplied by the sensory perceptions is deciphered and decoded into meaningful units by this level of the self.

These three outermost sheaths — comprising the material body, motor functions, thoughts and feelings — are concerned with physical sensations and emotions, and are nurtured mainly by physical products and activities. Enjoyment, or gratification experienced at this level is dependent on external factors and is subject to waxing and waning according to circumstantial and environmental influences. The instability of these sensations is what leads to an underlying, unstated anxiety about their loss. The three together represent the material, the *adhibhautika,* aspect of the human person.

These three outer layers are 'connected' to the innermost life giving core by a fourth level, that of the intellect, the *vijnanamaya kosha*, which refers to the discerning and rational faculty. It consists of the *buddhi* or

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[18] It has been stated that those "who are not aware of the distinction between the body and the Self, regard the body as the Self. [As in the case of Virochana who, when taught by Prajapati, in the *Chandogya* Chapter VII, was satisfied by the thought that his well adorned body itself was the Ultimate Truth.] That this view is false is here indirectly taught by the *sruti* teaching of the *Pranamaya* self." (*The Taittiriya Upanishad*, p.409)

[19] *Sarira,* the body, is made up by a coming together of the sentient and the insentient (Apte, p. 1005) — which, by implication, can also come apart.

[20] Quoted in Sharma, p. 39.

intellect, that enables considered choices and decisions to be made. While the mental self, the *manomaya kosha*, concerns itself with waxing and waning experiences, with "association and disassociation,"[21] with external objects, this faculty enables definitive knowledge. It has the capacity of determining the nature of things and is also the basis of Will.

The level of the intellect is subsumed by the *anandamaya kosha*, "something ... deeper than reason, [an] unconscious bliss... in which man attains the unity of subject and object and intensity of being."[22] 'Intensity of Being' here refers to a unitary state which, not being given to multiple pulls, is a state of fullness, of plenitude, as all externality is collected into a oneness in it. All physicality resolves in this core, thus providing the possibility of a 'release' or Freedom from the world of mutation and change. According to the Upanishad this innermost self is spontaneous and self-sustaining, beyond the physical, rational or intellectual transactions. Being characterised by 'plenitude' alone, it "cannot be expressed in intellectual terms but only in terms of pure experience."[23] This core represents the autonomous, ontological being that is the basis of the other 'sheaths'. It is not subject to flux, nor is its experience of plenitude and freedom from mutation contradicted by a competing experience.

The intellect, or the *buddhi*, being enmeshed between the three external phenomenological layers and the inmost conscious self, acts as a bridge between the changeable 'outer' and the quintessential 'inner'. When associated with the outer sheaths, and the data supplied by the *manas*, or mind, whose knowledge is rooted in physical sensations and appetites, the intellect remains engaged in discursive reasoning. In this role it may arrive at conclusions that are imperfect as it gets caught in the unending chain of cause and effect relationships. This forms the ordinary level of intellectual understanding in which the *jiva* gropes with discrete knowledge, with objects that are extrinsically opposed to one another.[24] At this level the intellect remains engaged with processes of doubt, logic, and 'skilful demonstration'. In conjunction with the two layers of the *pranamaya* and *manomaya* koshas, the intellect forms the ego self, the distinct, individuated personality — the "highest level of individuality conceivable".[25]

On the other hand, being closest to the *anandmaya kosha*, the intellect also has intimations of the ultimate energising spirit, the *atman*. It is this

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[21] Raju, in Radhakrishnan and Raju 1966, p. 246.
[22] Raju in Radhakrishnan and Raju, 1966, p. 240.
[23] Gispert-Sauch, p. 64.
[24] Radhakrishnan, 2008, p. 152.
[25] Raju, 1982, p. 62.

faculty that realises that if the enlivening core is not recognised, no experience can be of lasting value. *Buddhi* is capable of gaining integral knowledge by turning towards the inmost Self.[26] Turned towards the inmost self *buddhi* develops intuition or true knowledge, Wisdom. As distinct from discursive and mediate knowledge arising from its conjunction with the outer layers, the intuitive knowledge gained by *buddhi* penetrates into the very nature of things and perceives a thing "as it is."[27] It is through an exercise of this faculty that the individual being engages in the search for ultimate Freedom.

Jiva, may thus be said to refer to "a unity of body, life, mind and intelligence...[in which] Intelligence [is] the unifying principle."[28] In conjunction with the intellect the *jiva* becomes a conscious agent behind the organs of cognition and activity enabling transactional behaviour in the physical world. But in "the absence of the functioning of the *buddhi*, [as in sleep, it] becomes one with *Sat*, or Pure Being.... [In this state it] transcends ...[the] human form, ... [as it] reverts to its own pristine nature of Pure Being."[29] This Pure Being refers to a state that is freed from the limiting adjuncts of the intellect, mind, physical organs, etc.

Each inner layer, thus, refers to a self which is "more inward or deeper"[30] and 'higher' than the outer one. The 'lower', or external, here refers to the perceivable "body of the higher, and the higher [to] the *atman* of the lower."[31] The word *atman* here refers to an inner enlivening force without which the lower, the outer, could not exist.

It is noteworthy that the *annamaya kosha,* the outermost material sheath, being matter alone, is not able to enliven anything and, therefore, "is not the *atman* of anything."[32] Contrary to that, the innermost core, the ultimate *atman*, being spirit alone, is not the body of anything.[33] Not being the 'body' or object of another it is not dependent on another and exists in itself, not *for* another.[34] It, thus, represents a potential 'causal' state in which the other states appear and resolve. All other levels are dependent realities as they rely on other, underlying sources for their existence.[35] While the other four selves (including *vijnana* or *buddhi* in association with the outer three), function at the level of duality, while

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[26] Radhakrishnanan, 2008, p.152
[27] Radhakrishnan, 2008, p. 153.
[28] Radhakrishnan, 2008, p. 149
[29] Nikhilananda, 1959, p.306.
[30] Raju, in Radhakrishnan and Raju, 1966, p. 246.
[31] Raju, in Radhakrishnan and Raju, 1966, p. 240.
[32] Raju, in Radhakrishnan and Raju, 1966, p. 240.
[33] Raju, in Radhakrishnan and Raju, 1966, p. 240.
[34] *Taittiriya Bhashya*, pp. 176-78.
[35] *Taittiriya Bhashya*, p. 161.

this inmost self characterised by "*ananda* implies the fundamental identity of the subject and object."[36] This self cannot be qualified by any attributes or adjectives[37] as all qualifications and qualities arise in it.

The human person, thus, appearing as an entity caught between matter and spirit, between object and subject, becomes the appropriate tool for realising the Atman.[38] The expanding, concentric levels of existence and their location within one individual being reflect the integrity and inseparableness of the physical (*adhibhautika*), personal (*adhyatmika*) and spiritual (*adhidaivika*) principles, representing a singular contiguity. The existence of these varied aspects in togetherness is what enables the *jiva* to function in the world. While matter is needed "as a means for man's physical life and as a field of his activity" in the world, the spirit acts as "the necessary... foundation of the world of human life and activity" and a "source of ethical principles." Each level, so to say, "check[s] the excesses and mistakes of the other."[39] *Jiva*, thus, has a self corrective possibility built into it which enables it to function ethically.

In another creation myth, the *Aitareya* Upanishad, in a semi-theological mode, posits two levels of creation. On the first level, Atman/Brahman, the one singular existent, resolves to create the subtle planes of existence, the *lokas* — heaven, earth and the netherworld. As in the *Taittiriya* Upanishad, here, too, it is a *desire* to 'create' that leads to the emanation of multiple planes of existence out of a singular entity. Having created those, the Atman/Brahman undertakes *tapas* — intense meditation, rumination — to bring forth guardian spirits for these. He, thus, creates a cosmic form (*virat purusa*) in which, by His will, different spaces (*golaka*-s) burst open. Out of these spaces arise the different organs of perception, followed by their their functions and then their particular presiding deities — in that order. For example, from the opening of the mouth comes forth the organ of speech followed by the faculty of speech and then its presiding deity *agni* (fire). From the openings of the eyes comes forth

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[36] Radhakrishanan, 2008, p. 155.

[37] The *Taittiriya* Upanishad equates it to Brahman in that both Brahman and the *anandamaya kosha* can only be known through experience or by indicative words, words that cancel the limitations of each other and release them from their association with their counterparts. *(Taittiriya Bhashya*, p. 103.)

[38] The *Aitareyaka* Upanishad (as quoted in *The Taittiriya Upanishad*, p. 311) declares: "...in man the Self is more manifested, for he is most endowed with knowledge. He says what he has known, he sees what he has known, he knows what is to happen tomorrow, he knows heaven and hell. By means of the mortal, he desires the immortal; thus is he endowed. With regard to the other animals, hunger and thirst only are a kind of understanding. But they do not say what they have known, nor do they see what they have known."

[39] Raju, in Radhakrishnan and Raju, 1966, p. 252.

the organ of sight, the capacity to see and then *surya* (the sun) as the presiding deity and so on from all the various organs.[40] The whole of creation is integrated within the body of one cosmic person.

The Creator, then, inflicts the deities with hunger and thirst, i.e. a yearning for objects *outside* of themselves. The deities ask for abodes, locational spaces, for themselves to satisfy their cravings and appetites. After being offered various forms like the horse and the cow, they settle on the human form as the most appropriate and perfect (*sukrita*) of forms for the satisfaction of their yearnings.[41]

Till this level of creation the Atman/Brahman retains complete lien on His creation. The immanence of the original Cause, as the one who seemingly projects and spreads Himself out as the many, *clearly* remains the underlying connection behind everything at this stage. He remains the integrating principle, commanding and regulating all functions and assigning different roles to the presiding deities created by Him. At this level of creation, as Swami Krishnananda states, the "gods [the deities] were not the controllers; rather, they were controlled by the forces that worked integrally behind them, which [in turn] arose from the total being of the Universal Virat [the Cosmic Person in whom all the organs and deities arose]."[42]

The Upanishad now goes on to give a second level of creation. When the deities are given the human form as their abode, a reversal in their status takes place. Deities, which till now, were 'external' to the Cosmic Person, now become 'internal' to the human person, as they assume the forms of sense organs and define their own functions. In the macro creation, the deities represent elemental forces, while at the micro, they, metaphorically, assume the shapes of the organs they represent — thus playing a dual role, one at the macro and the other at the micro level. At the micro level, *Agni* taking the form of the organ of speech enters the cavity of the mouth, *Surya* as the organ of sight enters the space for the eyes, etc. *Agni* and *Surya*, and other gods, which in the earlier creation were 'effects', arising from the desire of the Creator, now assume the position of 'causes' in the individualised creation.[43] They now become the 'rulers' of their specific organs as they occupy separate abodes to satisfy their needs. "The external gods became internal to man... The subordinate gods became the presiding deities of mind... and the senses, on the one hand and of their objects on the other."[44]

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[40] *Aitareya*, Chapter I, Section 1.
[41] *Aitareya*, Chapter I, Section 2.
[42] Krishnananda, pp. 46-47.
[43] Krishnananda, pp. 46-47.
[44] Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju, 1966, pp. 230-31.

What becomes pronounced at this second level of creation is the desire of different deities to satisfy their cravings and appetitions. All the organs of perception of the human being are afflicted with hunger and thirst, i.e. desires, or 'appetitions',[45] that yearn for satisfaction. All of them have, thus, a tendency to turn outwards[46] to grasp objects for their satisfaction. The initial *causeless* or playful 'desire' in the Atman/Brahman for a joyful expansion, to *see* its potential for spreading out, now becomes a need-based desire in which each element considers itself as a separate, discrete, limited entity, forgetting its contiguity with the source. At this level of discrete multiplicity ignorance (*avidya*), which connotes the "complete oblivion of the very reason behind this hunger...,"[47] takes over. An apparent isolation of the parts from the whole takes place and the integral connection of each to the Whole is forgotten, so to say.

Having thus 'created' a number of beings with multiple desires, the Atman/Brahman realises that to enable each of them to function as fundamentally integrated entities, He, the Conscious/Integrating Principle, must 'enter' the forms. Since all the openings in the human person (which is a micro replica of the Cosmic Person) had become occupied by the entry of the various deities, He rent open a space in the middle of the head (*viddriti*, "the door of division"[48]) for Himself. This space is not a particularised limited enclosure but is unique, as it allows the all-pervasive Atman to 'enter'. This place, as Ranade writes, is also the "place of rejoicing"[49] because it is not limited to a particular organ or function but refers to the whole person, as it enlivens all the other senses. Upon entry, the Creator identifies himself with all the other organs that are afflicted by hunger and thirst, thus distancing Himself from his attribute of self-sufficiency and all-knowingness (*sarvajnata*). The all-pervasive conscious Being is now, so to say, subjected to or *covered* by the limitation that envelops the various organs of perception. Ranade writes:

> When the Atman entered the body by the door of division, and was so born as the individual Soul, he began to be subject ... to the three states of consciousness, namely, the waking, the dreaming and the deep-sleep.... After having been born, the individual Soul began to look about himself ... but to his great astonishment [He] only saw the

[45] Krishnananda, p. 43.
[46] See *Katha* Upanishad, II.4.1. "The self-existent (God) has rendered the senses (so) defective that they go outward, and hence man sees the external and not the internal self. (Only, perchance) some wise man desirous of immortality turns his eyes in, and beholds the inner Atman." (*Kathopanisad*, 1962, pp. 73-4.)
[47] Krishnananda, p. 49.
[48] Ranade, p. 69.
[49] Ranade, p. 69.

supreme Brahman spread everywhere. (*Aitareya*,I.1.3)...[T]here is [thus] a metaphysical identity between the individual soul and the supreme Soul.[50]

But due to identification with the limited organs of perception, this identity is forgotten. The Atman that created the subtle worlds from his own macrocosmic being now, through a process of grossification, or densification, begins to see Himself as a limited microcosmic perceiver, as due to the limiting nature of primal ignorance, *avidya*, he forgets his true nature.[51] In reality, the individual person is integrally connected to the Atman or Brahman. S/he is not something detached from, or a "stranger"[52] to the world, "thrown out of a Garden of Eden by an angry God".[53]

The last to emanate in both the myths and the most distanced from the spiritual source the human person, encased in a physical sheath and subject to material appetites, is thus a conglomerate of discrete as well as unifying pulls. The Brahman, through his activity of 'entering' the *jiva*, for the purpose of integrating the individual's psychological and perceptual tendencies, becomes a kind of "controller" of his/her "inward nature."[54] Being imbued with the power of intellect, *jiva* has intimations of the Self — the Spirit, the atman — that is more than just a material component.[55]

Made up of a Brahman core, the *jiva* has a tendency to seek for his/her true nature. The onset of an inward centripetal pull begins with a recognition of the ephemeralness of the outer world and a search for a stable centre of which s/he has dark intimations.[56] It is by examining the tangible instrument, the material body, that Vedantic seers arrived

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[50] Ranade, pp. 69-70.

[51] "*Jiva* is the same as Brahman but is hidden due to association with the body. Both bondage and freedom are derived from Him." (Nikhilananda, 2006, p. 594.)

[52] Raju, 66, p. 239.

[53] Krishnananda, p. 55.

[54] Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju, 1966, p. 230.

[55] See Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju, 1966, p. 232.

[56] This is so because the total structure of the *jiva* is one integrated whole in which one *kosha* is organically linked to another. As *The Taittiriya Upanishad*, pp. 475-76, states: "Just as motion which is a function of *Prana* is experienced throughout the body permeated by *Pranamaya*, just as sentiency or sensation (*jnana-sakti*) which is a function of manas is experienced throughout the body which is endued with *Prana* and permeated by the Manomaya, and just as the consciousness of agency — "I am the doer" — is experienced throughout the body which is endued with both *Prana* and Manas and permeated by the *Vijnanamaya*, so also special forms of pleasure are experienced throughout the whole body, — in the hands, feet, etc., — which are endued with *Vijnana*, Manas and *Prana*, and permeated by the *Anandmaya*."

The experience of small quantities of pleasure provides intimation of a deeper reservoir of *Ananda,* or joy, that the human seeks.

at an understanding of the ultimate Subject, the experiencer of all experiences.[57] The human person, thus, became the refinery, the crucible, in which external impressions came to be churned by seers and seekers for the sake of getting to their essential truth. The inward pull takes the form of *tapas*, deep rumination and reflection, but in an order that is opposite to that which the Atman/Brahman undertakes for the purpose of creation. While the *tapas* of Brahman is a playful exercise for *spreading out* and seeing His potential for multiplicity, that of the individual is performed with the aim of *regaining unity* with the Supreme. The individual starts his/her *tapas* from the outer physical, visible, multiple forms to the innermost, immanent Being that underlies and connects everything. As such, the *jiva* starts enquiry through his/her own composition — discovering the connections of the organs to the deities and of the deities to their sources (like the sun, fire, wind, etc) and then unto the Atman or Brahman. Keeping up their declared promise of proving the oneness of *jiva* and Brahman, the Upanishads repeatedly remind the oblivious *jiva* of his/her true nature.[58]

Organic Linkages

Before pronouncing the identity of the individualised *jiva* with the all-pervasive Brahman, the Upanishads posit a number of interconnections

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[57] The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, I.4.7, uses the analogy which states that an animal may be known by the footprint it leaves behind . Similarly, here the material body with the capacity to function in the world becomes an indicator of something deeper. (see also Nikhilananda, 1957, p. 119.)

[58] The *Mahavakyas*, the Great Statements in the Upanishads are reminders of this. The *vakyas* are: *Tat tvam asi* (Thou art That), *Chandogya*, VI.8.7; *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am Brahman), *Brihadaranyaka*, I.4.10; *Prajnanam Brahma* (Consciousness is Brahman), *Aitareya*, III.1.3; and *Ayam Atma Brahma* (This Self or Soul is Brahman), *Mandukya*, Mantra 2.

Paul F.Y. Loke, in his analysis of *Aham Brahmasmi*, writes: 'Through the limiting adjunct of the mind, which is a projection of ignorance (*avidya*) when the true nature of the self is concealed, the state of *jiva*-hood ...comes into existence. As the not-Self comprising the mind, the senses and the body gradually manifests, the resultant complex acquires the quality of sentience. The process begins with reflection of the Self, which is of the nature of pure consciousness, in the internal organ which until then has been material and inert. Once that happens, the senses and the body in turn come 'alive'. With that, the *jiva* is said to be 'born'. Over time, through the mutual superimposition of the characteristics of the Self and the not-Self on each other, the *jiva* becomes a *karta* [doer], *jnata* [knower] and *bhokta* [enjoyer]. In essence, both *jiva* and God are reflections...of consciousness. The state of being a *jiva* is superimposed on the Self ....What is superimposed is illusory (*mithya*)....the illusion of *jiva-bhava* [*jiva*-hood] vanishes when Brahman, the ground of all things, is realised.' (quoted in Natarajan, 2012).

between the material, intellectual and spiritual faculties and their connections with the elements and deities. A recognition of his/her links with the elements frees the individual from the propensity to see him/herself as a separate, discrete, entity. After establishing this identity with a larger whole, the Upanishadic quest moves on to the realisation of the Source which is free of the phenomenality that binds the perceived world. It is this possibility of an experiential realisation of the source that makes Freedom, or *moksha*, possible.

The individual being and the universe are shown by the Upanishads to be connected not only at the fundamental, non-manifest, core level but even at the level of the manifest. *Jiva* is a microcosmic replication of the Cosmic Person, the singular person manifested at the subtle level, in whom the universe appears as one integrated whole. In both creation myths, cited above, it is Brahman that 'enters' and 'becomes' the innermost reality of *jiva* and, so to say, looks out through the limited and particularised sense organs, at the world which also is an emanation of Brahman Himself.

The gods, the spiritualised presiding deities of the organs of perception are also presiding deities of the elements that constitute the universe. Since the gods "chose man as their habitat in order to enjoy themselves;...it came about that every action performed by man was indirectly an action performed by the gods themselves. If man sees, then it is the sun that is seeing through him; if he touches, then it is the god of wind that touches through him. Again the objects seen and touched are the objective aspects of the respective gods."[59] The human becomes the meeting point of the external and internal forces. Thus, the universe and the human person act and react upon each other and produce effects. The metaphorical connections between the micro and macro-cosmic conceptions can be represented diagrammatically as follows:

Connection of States of Consciousness with the Micro and Macro Cosmos		
States of Consciousness	*Microcosm*	*Macrosom*
Waking	Visva	Virat
Dream	Taijasa	Hiranyagarbha (also called Sutratman)
Sleep	Prajna	Isvara
Pure State	Atman	Brahman

Source: Radhakrishnan and P.T. Raju, ed. *The Concept of Man: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1966, p. 244.

[59] Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju, 1966, p. 236.

"When right action is performed, gods are satisfied, the natural forces over which they preside yield to human desires."[60]

Many of the meditational practices, the *Vidyas*, in the Upanishads call for connecting the presiding deities of organs with their functions 'within' the individual to their macro-location 'outside'. One such, the *pankta vidya,* given in the *Taittiriya* Upanishad,[61]for example, recommends contemplation on sets of five, which are seen to be a feature common to both external objects, and to the bodily organs. "The former should be meditated on as being identical with the latter. The two together constitute the whole universe, which is a manifestation of Brahman."[62] In this manifestation, the externals that refer to the earth, the mid-region, heaven, the four quarters and the intermediate quarters; to fire, air, sun, moon and the stars and to water, herbs, trees, space and the body, are linked to the internal. The body is also constituted of five *prana*-s, the five sense organs, and five physical constituents.[63] *Prana* refers to the life principle that pervades the phenomenal body as also to the *hiranyagarbha* — the Cosmic Person — the first subtle manifestation emanating from Brahman in His role as the creator. It is the subtle cosmic prana that transforms itself into an internal force manifesting in the body, dividing itself in a "five-fold way, supporting, nourishing and ordering the functions of the living being."[64] The organs of cognition and of action are also called *pranas* as it is from the subtle *prana* that they draw their sustenance.[65] The *pranas* are seen to be connected to the deities through the organs of perception.

The third section of the first *Valli* of the *Taittiriya* Upanishad (*samhita upasana*) is dedicated to showing interconnections between various entities like earth and space, student and teacher, parent and child, the connection between the lips and mouth, with speech as the intermediary that connects them. Interconnections at the limited phenomenal levels are meant to lead to a perception of oneness at larger levels. This projection of a coherence and congruence between the phenomenal constituents is meant to give intimations of a unified substratum that is *bhuma*, a "plenum [in which] all empirical dualities are absent and [which] is not established in anything else like the finite objects [are]."[66]

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[60] Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju,1966, p.235.
[61] *Taittiriya*, *Valli* I, section 7.
[62] Nikhilananda, 1959, p. 27.
[63] Nikhilananda , 1959, p. 26 and *Taittiriya Bhashya*, p. 55.
[64] *Chandogya Upanisad*, 1975, p. li.
[65] *Chandogya Upanisad*, 1975, p. li.
[66] *Chandogya Upanisad*, 1975, p. li.

All this is meant to remind the individual to not "start taking any one category, or even all the categories of divided reality, for the whole."[67]

The human mind, with its outward pulls, needs a visible symbol to connect to the "transcendental consciousness." To help the sense-oriented individual to grasp the truth behind the perceptible universe, the visible body (made up of various physical parts) is "described as a symbol of the Atman."[68] The material, destructible, body is seen to be "the support of the deathless and the bodiless self,"[69] for the sake of understanding. It is meant to lead to a realisation of the non-alienation of any category from the Whole. The non-differentiated, non-tangible subtle is shown to be one with the differentiated and tangible.

In this knowledge the perception of the 'other' vanishes as all the 'others' are contained within the one unity. For, it is "seeing things as separate [which] is the sole cause of otherness."[70] A sense of anxiety and fear arises from the notion of multiplicity, from division and limitation. The realisation of unity, the Upanishad declares, leads to a state of *abhaya*, freedom from fear.[71]

Freedom

The Freedom sought by Vedanta is a freedom from mortality. It is not an exercise in finding ways to perpetuate or prolong the existential body or *jiva*-hood in this or an after world. Nor is it a quest for a salvation that frees a person from sin and thus save his/her soul for the attainment of a heaven. Vedantic freedom is freedom from transience, a state of being in which one experience is superseded by another. It refers to the yearning of the human person to not remain a '*jantu'*, a creature, subject to the vicissitudes of the world but to gain a state of being where all creatureliness resolves in an experience of pure bliss. Freedom here refers to the actualisation of an experience that is devoid of subjection to old age, decrepitude and death, hunger and thirst, therefore from fear and anxiety, as luringly declared by Prajapati in the Eighth Chapter of the *Chandogya* Upanishad.[72] Called *Moksha*, this state of Freedom is ever present, *nitya*,[73] and cannot be contradicted by any other experience in any period of time. It is the ground in which everything arises and provides

[67] Easwaran, p. 133.
[68] Nikhilananda, 1959, p. 42.
[69] As taught to Indra by Prjapati in *Chandogya*, Chapter VIII, 7-12.
[70] Sankara Quoted in Easwaran, p.133.
[71] *Taittiriya Bhashya*, II.7.1, p.69.
[72] *Chandogya*, VIII.7.1.
[73] *Taittiriya Bhashya*, p. 19.

the answer to the fundamental question posed by the Upanishads: "what is that by knowing which everything becomes known."[74]

Freedom refers to a move from the finite to the Infinite as "[f]initude is the cause of all pain" since its freedom is "restricted".

> All empirical existence or embodied existence is finite, and therefore painful... Birth is bondage, growing old is a bondage, death too is a bondage. Life as such is bondage. On the other hand, that which is never born and never dies is free from all bondage.... Unlike the individual, it is free from birth and death (*asamsari*) and eternally free... (*nitya mukta*). It is immortality itself (*amrtam*). The individual can attain to this state of immortality when he knows Brahman.[75]

Freedom is the gaining of a state beyond worldly and material pleasures, which are not independent entities. They disappear when the underlying reality on which they depend is withdrawn. The *atman*, the final reality of beings, on the other hand, is beyond the conscious, intellectual, emotional and physical aspects of human experience, beyond the "great flux of the universe".[76] It can neither be grasped objectively, nor through the mind, nor expressed in intellectual terms (...*yato vacha nivartante aprapya mansa saha*, the *Taittiriya* Upanishad — II.4.1, II.9.1). Not being material in nature it does not have a substantive location and can, therefore, be expressed only in negative, non-adjectival terms. The statement — *adresyam agrahyam agotram avarnam acaksuh asrotram tadapanipadam*[77] - indicates that it is free from all conditioning adjuncts and particularities, yet has all the capabilities and capacities as it is the source of the particularised capacities.

The joy or bliss that characterises this Freedom is intrinsic to it and is "desired for its own [sake].... [It] is not a means to some other end".[78] The *Chandogya* Upanishad declares that "That which is Great is full of joy; there is no joy in the small, the less" (*yo vai bhuma tat sukham, nalpe sukham-asti*).[79] This Freedom is not the result of works in the world but of *knowledge* that results in an experience of Oneness. It frees a person from mundane desires and consequently of continuous and tiresome effort.[80] Describing the state of bliss as a "state of utmost intensity", Raju states, "So long as the objective world is felt to be separate, man feels unhappy

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[74] *Chhandogya.*, VI.1.2., and *Mundaka*, I.1.3 in which Saunaka asks this question of Angirasa.
[75] Malkani, p. 54-55.
[76] Gispert-Sauch, p. 64.
[77] Mundaka, I.1.6.
[78] Malkani, p. 52.
[79] *Chandogya*, VII.25.1.
[80] *Mundaka*, III.2.2.

until he makes it his own. But when it is taken into one's self, nothing is left out to be attained, and so man feels completeness and is happy."[81] Desire at the individual level is a sign of deficiency and is equivalent to death. "Desire, fear, death form one whole," states Swami Nikhilananda.[82] "Mortality," as Swami Krishnananda states, "is the consciousness of the isolation of the parts from the Whole."[83] The parts cannot be satisfied and freed from yearning till they recognise their identity with the Whole.

Can such a state be actually and realised? The underlying ground, being beyond the linearity of cause and effect, is not a *thing* to be reached by creating or obtaining some external product (*nastyakrtah krtena* — the uncreated cannot be obtained by works).[84] It can only be *discovered* as the base of the ever-changing phenomenal world.

The desire to know the ultimate truth arises from an observation, examination and analysis of the sense perceptible universe, of the human condition (*parikshya lokan*[85]) which brings ephemeral, unsatisfactory results.

Tools for realisation of Freedom

The role of the individual as perceiver is crucial to the Upanishadic quest. The notions of bondage and liberation pertain only to the human person as s/he alone has the discriminating faculty of seeing her/himself as caught up in a chain of causal connections. "It is the individual who is subject to ignorance and who rises to self-knowledge. ... The Eternal in His transcenden[ce],...does not see any limitation or causal connections...."[86]

Paradoxically, the very human complex that was recognised as the appropriate form for the satisfaction of appetitions and yearnings of the different deities in the *Aitareya* Upanishad (see p. 82), is the very organism that has the capacity to gain freedom from those yearnings and recognise its unity with the whole. It is through the bodily organs and capacities that the deities grasp external objects.[87] The same physical, mental and intellectual capacities can also free the individual being from the ceaseless

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[81] Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju, 1966, p. 242.
[82] Nikhilananda, 1963, p.64.
[83] Krishnananda, p.43.
[84] *Mundaka*, I.2.12.
[85] *Mundaka*, I.2.12.
[86] Radhakrishnan, 2008, p. 152.
[87] *Katha* Upanishad, II.4.1.

and tiring need to reach out and grab. The human complex, being imbued with the capacities for action and knowledge — for karma and *jnana*[88] — can do this.

The human is created with 'gateways' for gaining the knowledge of Brahman, as the Bhriguvalli[89] in the Taittiriya Upanishad expounds. The very sense organs which, together with the mind and the intellect 'return' unable to grasp the Ultimate, become gateways or "channels for the Knowledge of Brahman."[90] The capacity to perform *tapas* and draw the sense organs (*indriyas*) 'inwards' enables reflection on their essential nature. The *Chandogya*[91] refers to this possibility when it describes how the organs in conjunction with the *prana*-s, provide access to "the Lord, who dwells in the heart."[92] The Lord, here, refers to the indwelling Atman which 'enters' the being after its creation.

Thus as a complex of subtle and gross forces the *jiva* has both capacities — to realise an inner non-physical state of the Complete, as also the objectified outer world of discrete particularities that seem separated and alienated from each other.

Methodology

The methodology employed by Vedanta is unique to it as the subject of enquiry is not an ordinary, external object. Being imbued with external and internal capacities, the human person, the *jiva*, represents both the seeker and the sought. All Vedantic texts strive to make the individual realise his/her identity with Brahman, which according to Vedanta, is ever there but is not known due to *ignorance*.[93] Ignorance, or *avidya*, is that which sees the world as made of discrete independent, mutually exclusive units. It arises from error, from a non-understanding of the essential unified nature of the world and thus identifying the self with the body only,[94] without recognising its contiguity with the spirit. Knowledge of the Whole is, as it were, concealed in ignorance. When the latter is removed, the former manifests. The quest for Freedom arises from a discrimination between the transient, with which the person is constantly

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[88] *Taittiriya Bhashya*, p. 146; Nikhilananda, 1962, p. 50.
[89] *Taittiriya Bhashya*, pp. 214-5.
[90] Nikhilananda, 1959, p. 6.
[91] *Chandogya*, III.13.6.
[92] Nikhilananda, 1959, p. 203.
[93] Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju, 1966, p. 241.
[94] *Taittiriya Bhashya*, pp.141, 143, Nikhilananda, 1962, p. 49.

grappling, and the stable, which also exists within human experience but is not normally recognised. Since it aims at removing ignorance, the methodology adopted by Vedanta is basically a corrective exercise.

The self-reflexive and experiential method of Vedanta is different from the ordinary modes of discursive logic that rely on data provided by the senses, and through that, seek to arrive at cause and effect relationships that are linear in nature. As such, the analytical process of Vedanta runs "counter to the usual way of thinking,"[95] as Raju correctly points out. There is, in this methodology, a reversal of the ordinary processes of knowing (*pratyavartana* as mentioned in *Taittiriya Bhashyam*, II.8.5). The enquiry initially starts from a standpoint of faith and trust in Upanishadic statements, which declare that there is a Reality, beyond the changing external data, and that it is realisable by the individual.[96] The teaching is not in the form of imperative statements but adopts a dialogic and analytical stance striving to make the seeker understand and recognise his/her true nature. All its logical postulations are tested on the anvil of human experience. The aim being to lead the aspirant to an experiential knowledge as against intellectual probing which, however intense, remains in the objective world of multiplicity.

The process of Vedantic enquiry may take two courses — one of examining the 'external', changing universe, analysing and exploring its reality, and methodically discovering the interconnections between the multiple perceptible existents through the Source in which they arise. The second is the course of examining the individual human person to discover his/her real identity by turning the mind inwards. In the first course, an analysis of the orderliness, the essential soundness and decency[97] of the universe and its components, points to an intelligent cause behind it. But the mere intellectual inference of a source and the consequent organic interconnectedness of the universe do not do away with the sense of duality, between the enquirer and the enquired. Relationally interconnected existents remain distinct from the knower. Their understanding does not lead to a resolution of the knower, known and knowledge into the One Intelligence, the avowed objective of Vedanta. This latter experience is gained only by an examination of the human person and the experiential states s/he is subject to.

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[95] Raju, 1966, p. 247.

[96] The *Mahavakya*-s, the Great Statements of the Upanishads, point (as already mentioned), by different names, to the one innermost Reality (Brahman) which is, in fact, the true identity of the individual being.

[97] Radhakrishanan, 2008, p. 158

Vedantic epistemology adopts a philosophical and theoretical position that posits an existential reality only to disprove and negate it as it proceeds to point to an underlying reality. The process is called *adhyaropa-apavada* nyaya.[98] The methodology does not immediately deny or reject external reality but places it in a perspective that conforms to the Vedantic view of Reality. It posits an intellectual practice that facilitates the practical realization of the theoretical position (that there is nothing other than Brahman) at the immediate personal level. As such, that "which cannot be expressed (in its true form directly) is expressed (indirectly) through false attribution and subsequent retraction."[99] Having established Brahman as a somewhat tangible reality (as a Creator), through creation myths, the Upanishadic seers go on to retract all that has been projected on the creator Atman (be it in the form of human faculties or other worldly appearances) as false — the idea being "to purify it [Atman] of all particular notions."[100]

The enquiry begins with an intellectual recognition of a distinction between the false and the real (*nitya-anitya vastu viveka*). The false here refers to that which is adventitious, which appears and disappears. It remains in relational interaction with other similar entities and can apparently influence them.[101] The mutual influences and relational identities belong to the world of change, therefore are given a status different to that of the ultimate reality which is beyond flux. 'False' is not false in the sense of being non-existent. It is so only in relation to the ultimate reality which is incontrovertible in all times. The false here are the 'layers' of the personality as expounded through the *kosha* theory, with regard to the individual being, in the *Taittiriya*. They are valuable in that they are tangible and sense perceptible and thus provide graspable tools for the exploration of an underlying Truth. It is the report of the senses that, even though falling in the domain of the false, becomes "the basis from which we have to proceed.... [It is] through ... distortion [that] we arrive at the reality."[102] It is not a coincidence that the Brahma Sutra, a systematic commentary on the Upanishads is referred to as '*Sariraka sutra'* i.e. 'aphorisms about the indweller of the body'. After stating that

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[98] Nikhilananda, 1957 (on *Aitareya* Upanishad, I.3.12), writes: "Vedanta arrives at the Knowledge of the Atman through the discussion of illusory superimposition (*adhyaropa*), followed by its refutation (*apavada*). Having described superimposition, which accounts for the appearance of the universe and diversity, the Upanishad now deals with its refutation in order to arrive at the Knowledge of the Atman."

[99] Bhagvat Gita Bhashya, XIII.13 quoted in Satchidanandendra, p. 41.

[100] Hiriyanna, p. 41.

[101] Nikhilananda, 2006, p. 31.

[102] Radhakrishnana, 2008, p. 154.

the *sutras* are about the quest for Brahman,[103] which is beyond common perception, the second sutra commenting on the *Taittiriya* Upanishad (*yato va imani bhutani jayante yena jatani jivanti* III.1.1) goes on to describe Brahman as the source in which birth and death arise and into which they resolve.[104] The changeable, thus, becomes valuable for an exploration of the changeless, which is the ultimate object of enquiry. The incidental, when withdrawn through analytical enquiry, reveals an underlying reality in which the appearance and disappearance take place. Absolute reality is also, Vedanta points out, a part of the daily human experience but is not recognised or given credence till such time as the desire to know the Truth arises.

Different levels of reality are, thus, posited to highlight the distinction between the true and the false, between the permanent and the impermanent, the good and the pleasant and at the same time to show their interconnections. Upanishadic postulations point to three levels of reality. All three are intermingled and suffused into each other in the composition of the human person as elucidated in the *Taittiriya* myth regarding the composition of the human person. The levels are:

Vyavaharika or transactional: This refers to the empirical, existential reality at the physically perceptible level. The experience gained at this level is the result of data supplied by the sense organs through an interaction with the world of multiplicity differentiated by a "subject/object situation."[105] The knowledge gained here is subject to change and therefore to doubt and uncertainty. In the human person this reality pertains to the three outermost koshas — the *annamaya*, the *pranamaya*, and the *manomaya*, which deal with the material world of multiplicity.

Pratibhasika or imaginary: This is the level of imagination, hallucinations, or illusions as in dream. This reality also exists in the realm of duality and is similar to the experience of reality in the first level, except it is experienced in imagination and dream, without the intervention of the sense organs. The three inner koshas — the *pranamaya*, the *manomaya* and the *vijnanamaya* also called the subtle body — represent this level of reality.

Parmarthika: This is the highest level, the 'pure aspect', that is totally unqualified by any properties, and is beyond the subject-object division. It is the final point to which all search is directed, when analysing the

[103] BSB, (*athato Brahma jijnasa*) I.1.1.
[104] BSB, (*janmadyasya yatah*) I.1.2.
[105] Deutsche, p. 24.

human being. It refers to the '"real" which in Advaita is defined as *trikalabadhya*, which is "unsublated through the three times (past, present and future....)....It is, by definition, eternal,"[106] as succintly stated by Karl Potter. This is represented by the *anandamaya kosha* in the human person. It is characterised only by incontrovertible bliss as there is no duality or time frame in this.

The *koshas* are predicated on the Absolute and then denied,[107] explained away as belonging to a world of illusion or mere transactional reality. The *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad states that the only possible method is to refer to Brahman through a comprehensive denial of whatever positive characteristics have been attributed to it, so that it is "neither this nor that."[108]

All these levels are contiguous realities. They all fall within the lived experience of the person. The first two levels of reality (*Vyavahanke* and *pratibhasika*) exist in the realm of duality and remain dependent realities as they rely on an underlying enlivening factor which, if removed, would lead to their non-existence. They are perceived to be absolutely real as long as the Truth, the uncontradictable *parmarthika* reality, is not realised.

As a 'synthesis'[109] of the real and the false, forming a conjunction between the conscious 'knower' and the insentient 'field', the *jiva* becomes the means for gaining knowledge of the incontrovertible Reality. Seemingly a combination of reality and appearance[110] the *jiva* is eventually shown to be nothing but Reality itself. From the standpoint of ultimate reality the world is not Real but it is not wholly unreal either as the unreal cannot appear as an object or datum of experience. It hangs somewhere between the real and the unreal. It has an apparent or practical reality, at the transactional or *vyvaharika* level. It is, thus, given a status that is different to both *sat* (the Absolute Real) and *asat* (absolutely unreal). For this reason it is described as *sadasadvilaksana* — other than either Real or unreal; *anirvacaniya* — indescribable in terms either of being or of non-being.[111]

Another method used by Vedanta to prove the oneness of all sheaths/ *koshas* is the analysis of the three states of consciousness universally experienced by the *jiva* in the course of each day. The analysis of the three states of waking (*transactional*), dream (*illusory or imaginary*) and deep sleep (*the real*) is meant to point to a reality that is free from

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[106] Potter, p. 221.
[107] Satchidanandendra, 1989, p. 42.
[108] *Brihadaranyaka.*, II.3.6 (*neti neti*), see also Satchidanandendra, 1989, p. 44.
[109] Satchidanandendra, p.46.
[110] Deutsche, 1969, p. 51.
[111] See Deutsche 1969, p. 32.

alterations of change and mutation. The first two states that operate in the realm of multiplicity come to be denied, rather assimilated, into the deep sleep experience, which underlies and animates the two. The two are congruent with the four 'outer' *koshas* of the human person. The last, the state of deep sleep, is congruent with the innermost, *anandamaya kosha* in which the unified undifferentiated consciousness continues to remain and from which the other states and koshas are seen to arise. In this state there is a "cancellation of the bipolarity of experience and the withdrawing of the two poles, subject and object, into one's self."[112] The in-drawing, and merging into one whole, of the subject-object polarity leads to an experience of wholeness in which there is no yearning for anything external. Duality, which is the source of fear and anxiety, is transcended (BSB II.2.28) and a realisation arrived that duality also is not disconnected from ultimate reality. Using this logic Vedanta declares that everything in the universe is Brahman alone, *Sarvam khalvidam Brahma*.[113]

One can thus say there is "a merging of knowledge and reality, epistemology and ontology, in[to] nonduality"[114] in this methodology. This epistemological stance gives an insight into the Advaitic view of ethics in which the ultimate goal is emancipation, freedom from transitory superimpositions. It places the world and the individual's relationship to it in a perspective which divinises all that is perceived, and the perception of the world as made up of discrete, unrelated objects is corrected.

Ethics and Morality, and the Self-Realised Soul

The quest of the individual for his/her identity with Brahman transcends the binaries of good and evil. As "a person transcends his identification with the body and the physical world, and realizes the oneness of existence, he is no longer troubled by the idea of good and evil".[115] Yet it is seen that a realised, or a spiritually evolved, person never performs an action that is contrary to the welfare of other beings at the transactional level. This is because the goal is not dissociated from the practice of what Swami Nikhilananda has called "subjective or personal" virtues and the objective ethics "dealing with social welfare."[116] The existential reality of the world and its norms are not seen to be non-existent even when all perceptible existents are known to be just an appearance in one constitutive reality.

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[112] Raju, in Radhakrishnan and Raju, 1966, p. 245.
[113] *Chandogya Upanisad* (III.14.1), p. 265.
[114] The phrase is used by Dissanayake while analysing Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 600.
[115] Nikhilananda, 1963, pp. 62-3.
[116] Nikhilananda, 1963, pp. 61-2.

The *jiva*, as the meeting point of the Infinite and the finite, being related to two worlds,[117] cannot dissociate him/herself from the phenomenal in which moral and ethical values operate. The performance of prescribed daily duties and those relevant to one's station in the social and chronological hierarchy are, infact, a means for preparing the ground for higher knowledge. Performance of duties, as such, is not a "dispensable means."[118] Duties are

> performed for the realization of one's essential relationship with the cosmos and for the deepening and expansion of one's self.... [T]he way is the way of inwardness; and, in order to be put on the path of inwardness, man has to perform duties and enjoy the values of the world. Action and enjoyment open up the inward paths of the spirit...[119]

The law of cause and effect, of karma, continues to operate in the empirical world. Therefore, "ethical preparation is insisted on."[120] The instructions given to the disciple at the end of formal education in the *Taittiriya* Upanishad show that each stage in life calls for the performance of particular type of duties which are a must for living a full life as also for the purification of the mind.

Even those who have realised the Truth of Brahman are seen to continue to uphold certain codes of conduct for the upkeep of social and cosmic order. Yama, the Lord of Death, in the *Katha* Upanishad also conforms to the requirement of respecting a guest who appears at his door,[121] as neglect of the right conduct would lead to unfavourable consequences, even for him. Freedom, for the self-realised persons, is not freedom from moral laws. Rather, conformance to moral laws comes naturally to them. Duties, as Radhakrishnan states, "are the opportunities afforded to man to sink his separate self and grow out into the world."[122]

Almost all the Upanishads begin with sections that pertain to performance of duties that would lead to the understanding of the interconnections between the outer and the inner, the material and the spiritual and the development of virtues conducive to the gaining of higher knowledge. The *vidyas*, meditational practices, contained in these sections help the individual to recognise the inherence of the divine in the sense perceptible. An estrangement from the whole is the greatest sin and its root is ignorance. A realisation of one's true being enables the right mode of approaching the basic human needs, which would not only fulfil one's own individualised self-interest but protect the social

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[117] Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 612.
[118] Raju, 1966, 261.
[119] Raju, 1966, 261.
[120] Radhakrishnan, 2008, p.158.
[121] *Katha* Upanishad, I. 9.
[122] Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 614.

and natural environment of which the individual is an integral component. If the whole is disturbed or interfered with, the individual cannot enjoy a sense of felicity. Violence to the structural order is violence to one's own self.

The individual, thus, becomes responsible for the maintenance of that order by *not* appropriating that which is not his, as the *Isavasya* Upanishad declares in its opening statement.[123] The individual may judiciously enjoy all, even while preserving the integrity of the Whole. This understanding prevents over much engagement with one's limited personal desires. The striving of the individual for attaining his/her own personal development or salvation, the ultimate good, *nisreyasa*, is thus, not dissociated form the larger social good, *abhyudaya* (ascent or progress in the *samsara*[124], the empirical world).

The *Mundaka* Upanishad (I.1.4) refers to two kinds of knowledge — one dealing with empirical reality the other with the higher knowledge. Both have a place in the evolution of the individual towards the knowledge of the Truth.[125] *Tapas* and *dhyana* — reflection and meditation — as methods for gaining higher knowledge would fall on arid ground till such time as the mind has been purified by good behaviour, following certain disciplines.

Four great aspirations, or values, that humans strive for are laid down based on Upanishadic texts. Called *purushartha*-s these are *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. P.V. Kane suggests that this categorisation recognises 'a scale of values,'[126] as it lays down an order of priority for the fulfilment of human needs and the attainment of joy and prosperity. The four are not discrete, unrelated, aspirations but are intermeshed with each other so as to make each one meaningful. *Artha*, the un-negatable material and economic needs of human beings, and *kama*, the essential instinctive human desires, are sandwiched between *dharma* and *moksha*. If there is a valorisation of one at the expense of another, there is imbalance — both at the individual and the societal levels. Pleasures are enjoyed and human needs fulfilled in a manner which does not conflict with the dictates of *dharma* which among other things refers to one's duties according to one's station in life. And *moksha*, whether achieved or not, becomes the underlying current towards which activity is directed. The first three

[123] *Isavasyam idam sarvam yad kinchit jagatyam jagat*, the first verse of *Isa* Upanishad, emphasizes that every speck in the world is inhered by, and as though covered by, the Supreme Spirit. It, thus, does not belong to a particular individual.
[124] Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 615.
[125] In this context one may also refer to the Seventh Chapter of the *Chandogya* where Narada has full mastery over one kind of knowledge, qualifying him for the next step.
[126] Kane, p. 1628.

purusharthas are held subservient to the spiritual goal. All these, when performed well, become a means for and come to be dedicated to the quest for Brahman, the goal that gives an experience of a deep and lasting Freedom and joy.[127] The *Taittiriya* Upanishad delineates an exponential scale of bliss experienced by the individual through the attainment of worldly things.[128] This is meant to encourage the individual to see the Infinite reflected even in the atomic, apparently discrete experiences of life, wherein, the Bliss of Brahman is experienced in limited quantities, by all humans. It does not prescribe that all beings should attain *moksha*, ultimate Freedom. But the underlying thought of it tends to place human striving in an appropriate context which would lead to a deeper enjoyment at the individual level and a larger good at the social level.

Isvara and Jiva

The contiguity that is seen between the five *koshas* from *anandamaya* to *annamaya* is the same as that which pertains between Isvara and *jiva.*[129] Both are emanations of Brahman. Vedanta *vakyas* like *tat tvam asi, aham brahmasmi*, establish the Atman-hood of *jiva.*[130] Neither *jiva* nor Isvara in reality has a separate existence. When the limitations of *jiva* are removed by right knowledge, the *jiva* is seen to be the same as Brahman.[131] Both *jiva* and *Isvara* are phenomenal beings. Isvara may be purer and more powerful, yet he remains phenomenal, in that He ceases to exist when the *jiva* realises his/her identity with Brahman.

The distinction between *jiva* and *Isvara* may be delineated as follows:

- One (i.e. *jiva*) savours the fruits of life, while the other (i.e. *Isvara*), as the underlying reality, merely watches as a witness. *Mundaka,* (III.I.1), and *Katha* (III.1), Upanishads provide a metaphorical analogy of two birds to exemplify this.
- One (i.e. *jiva*) is dependent on, and is restricted by, *upadhi*-s, or material adjuncts and does not, under normal circumstances, have recourse to higher truths. The other (i.e. *Isvara*) is Free, all-knowing, and aware of Himself as the source of the universe.
- *Isvara* remains hidden to the external world of names and forms

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[127] Raju, in Radhakrishnana and Raju,1966, p. 264.
[128] *Taittiriya*, II.8.1.
[129] Dasgupta, vol 1, p. 486.
[130] BSB (Gambhirananda), p.88.
[131] See Dasgupta, vol 1, pp. 476-477.

(even though He may be intellectually inferred through an analysis of deep sleep, etc), while *jiva* is sensually perceptible as s/he moves about in the world of names and forms.

- *Jiva* needs external means/organs and instruments for seeing, etc, but *Isvara* being of the very nature of knowledge, does not require any external means for perception — just as the world of multiplicity appears in the dream state even when no physical organs of perception are present.

Expounding on the *Katha* (5.13) and *Svetasvattara* Upanishads (6.13), Mukhopadyaya writes:

> ...Isvara and *jiva* have these aspects in common, viz. that they are both eternal and conscious, while they differ in this that the one is singular, the other is plural, and the one lacks the objects of desire, while the other supplies them to the other. This last feature reveals that the *jivas* lack *ananda*, while they share the nature of *sat* and *chit* with *Isvara*. ... *[A]nandamaya* is verily *Isvara*, as expressed in the Mandukya (5-6) ...hence bliss is the marked feature of *Isvara*, which distinguishes him from the *jivas*. This bliss signifies fullness, and as the *Isvara* is not limited within the bonds of finitude, his fullness and bliss are inherent in his very nature, while the *jivas* being essentially limited and imprisoned in finitude, suffer from a lack of fullness and are deprived of bliss.[132]

Jiva, then, is potentially *Isvara*, but cannot know this fact till, through self effort, s/he realises his/her true nature by the removal of *avidya*, ignorance. The 'duty', the ultimate aim of the individual is to know this Truth, which is characterised by Freedom. The process of knowing is not divorced from moral and ethical imperatives in the empirical world.

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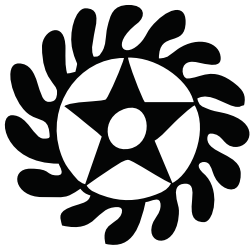
[132] Quoted in Gispert-Sauch, p. 211.

VII

Onipa: The Human Person in Akan



The human person in Akan metaphysical thought has been given a place of primary importance. As the meeting point between the physical and the spiritual, the human person has a vital bearing on honouring and maintaining the integrity and harmony of the universe. At the level of the social the human keeps up the solidarity in the community of beings — an important element in Akan world view. As a proverb states, "It is the human being that counts. I call on gold, gold does not respond; I call on drapery, but it does not respond. It is the human being that counts." Again, "A human being is more beautiful than gold (money)."[1] As Kwasi Wiredu states, "The first axiom of all Akan axiological thinking is that man or woman is the measure of all value (*Onipanaohia*)."[2] Ethical and moral norms are drawn from, and also apply, to the human person.

At another level, the human being is responsible for communion with the ancestors who are crucial to the welfare and cohesion of the community.[3] The community or clan in the Akan world view consists not only of the living but also of the dead and the yet to be born. Through rituals and practices the human acts as a mediator, a link, between the world of spirits and that of the living. Both, the physical and the spiritual realms, have an important bearing on life as it is lived.

As a speck of the one Supreme Source, which inheres everything, the human person is organically connected to all that is created by the

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[1] Opoku, 1997, p. 10, no.36 and p. 12 no. 45. According to Reverend Abamfo Atiemo gold was highly valued by the Akan as it is something that does not change form or perish, it is ever there. It's value ever remains. Akans, traditionally, were not supposed to sell gold. (Conversation,11.1.2011)

[2] Wiredu, 1996, p. 65.

[3] Pobee, p. 8.

Supreme, thus having the capacity to act on and be acted on by all that exists. Besides, being divine in origin, the human being encapsulates within him/herself both the potential as well as the agency for the unfoldment of the Divine plan. S/he has the capacity to act on herself, to transform him/herself from a mere biological being, a creature, into a virtuous person, while also having an impact on others around him/her.

As a synthesis of the material and the spiritual, the human becomes the symbol of a *unity* made up of diversity since all the varied elements of which s/he is composed are coalesced into a singular whole and act as one during the course of his/her life.[4] S/he also becomes an expression of *diversity* drawn from a unity as all the varied elements having different functions originally draw existence from one singular whole, the Supreme God.

Modes of decoding the Akan worldview

As C.A. Ackah states, Akan religion and metaphysic are not postulated systematically through a "series of coherent and logically related propositions." Those have to be deduced from the "pragmatically worked out system from the day-to-day living of the people." The "denotations and connotations of the Akan terms" also have to be done accurately as a number of them are not binary propositions but convey an in-between situation between good and bad or black and white. As such, there are statements that do not make something to be exclusively one or the other.[5]

Concepts regarding the human being, about morality, and regarding meaning and purpose of life and beliefs concerning the supernatural are derived and formulated from a decoding of the proverbs, linguistic formulations, religious rituals and practices and statements of wise persons among the Akan. They need to be seen from the perspective of their impact on the social hole. The role of correct understanding of terms and their usage becomes an important factor and that may be arrived at by a reading of the modern interpreters of those terms, the present-day *akyeame* (interpreters), and by observing and participating in actual practices and rituals where possible.

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[4] A Fanti priest, Nana Baidu of Cape Coast, stated that the three elements that make up the individual act as one during the course of life but separate and go their own ways after death. According to him, the *Okra* goes back to God, the *mogya* becomes an ancestor and he did not know where *sunsum* goes. (Conversation, 23.2.2011). His statement is relevant to the unity in diversity, and diversity through unity, concept of the Akan.

[5] Ackah, p. 20, see also Mbiti, 1969.

Sankofa
Go back and get it.

The egg in the mouth of the bird represents the gems of knowledge drawn from the past. This symbol is often associated with the axiom, "it is not wrong to go back for that which we have forgotten". It emphasizes the belief that the past illuminates the present and that the search for knowledge is an ongoing process.

Hwe Mu Dua
Measuring stick

Symbol of critical examination and quality. It connotes a thorough examination of all aspects of life and human endeavour so as to achieve perfection in all that is done.

Stress is laid on knowledge of the past and on the tradition of the group, as it is from the past that wisdom is drawn. But it is important to analyse and critically evaluate the past so that it may make reasonable sense in the present context. The symbol *Sankofa* shows a bird turning back to its tail, searching into the past. This symbol is often accompanied by a symbol representing a measuring stick, which stands for critical examination. The aim being to examine its relevance in contemporary situations.

The Metaphysical Birth of the Human Person: Coalescing of the Transcendent and the Immanent

The myth pertaining to the metaphysical origin of the human manifests both the transcendence and the immanence of the God principle as it shows aspects of both — an impersonal (transcendent) and a personal (immanent) God. The origin of a person as a pure spirit called *Okra* in a trans-human world shows its conception and emanation out of a subtle, physically and sensually unknowable entity called *Nyame* (translated as God in English), who as creator is also called *Oboadee* (one who hews, carves or makes something), who resides in a realm unknowable-to-humans through their instruments of cognition. Since *Nyame* as *Odomankoma* is both eternal and all-pervasive there is nothing other than Him from which He could create. [6] The axiom and the *adinkra* symbol *Gye Nyame*, 'except God' validates the point that there is nothing other than God that is eternal. Other aphorisms state that it is on Him that all existence depends.

As such, some philosophers argue that *Okra* (translated as 'soul') is an *emanation* of Nyame, something *created* by him out of his own being.[7] It begins to exist as pure spirit even before it manifests in the world as one

[6] Gyekye, 1995, p. 70.

[7] Drawing from the words used in some West African religions, Ikenga-Metuh uses the word emanation, an activity by which God 'shares himself out and allots destinies to different individuals' (see p. 69 in Chapter on *Nyame*). But, he says, this 'emanation of God remains quite distinct from the individual and returns to God after death' (pp. 19-20). Wiredu gives a 'spatial' connotation to the omnipresent God, as he posits that

Nyame Nnwu Na Mawu
God never dies, therefor I cannot die.
Symbol of perpetual existence, signifying the immortality of man believed to be a part of God.

of the constituents of the human being. As Sam Akesson states, the Okra, or soul, has an ante-natal existence as it "existed with Nyame, God, long before it became incarnated."[8] It thus partakes of the "substance of Nyame's immortality."[9]

It can thus be deduced that originally all *kra* (souls) are equal in quality and substance as all come from *Nyame*. It is when they enter "the world of the living [they] assume [a] physical and social role ...in the Akan tribal or clan hierarchy."[10] Once the *okra*, as a separate speck, carved out of the impersonal and abstract Divine, is ready to incarnate into a human body, it is recognised by the hitherto impersonal Supreme Being who now seems to take on a very personalised character for the benefit of this crystallised speck, the *Okra*, to set up a relationship in which there is a give and take at a highly abstract level. The, till now, abstract or purely spiritual Supreme Being takes on an almost anthropomorphic character to both bless and regulate the worldly life of this speck. The *kra* is, at this stage, given a 'natal' or 'religious' name which is both 'sacred' and 'secret' as it is the name of the day on which a person is born. This acts as a 'doorway' for it to enter the world. Originally known only to God it is the name that the individual Akan holds sacred.[11]

Nkrabea

The word *kra* is drawn from a verb which conveys the idea of 'taking leave', 'bidding good bye', "carrying a farewell message for oneself or for someone else." Prefixed to the word *bea* which stands for the "manner of doing something," the compound word *nkrabea* stands for the *manner* of bidding farewell which also gains the potential human being his/her "appointed lot"[12] before s/he enters the world. This *kra*, in the prenatal stage (as a potential human being) is presented before the Supreme by the ruling deity of the day on which its entry into the world is to take

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creation takes place from 'something' and not from nothing. Creation is not *ex-nihilo*, it has in it an element that only God has access to.

[8] Akesson, p. 280.

[9] Akesson, p. 281.

[10] Akesson, p. 284.

[11] Akesson, p. 282.

[12] Opoku, 1978, p. 100.

place, to ask for leave to go into the world. It comes to be called Okra, the life soul, only when it is aligned with the human body[13]. At the death of the body it is called the ghost soul, *Osamang* or *Sesa.*[14] "The *nkrabea* is the goodbye gift of God to each person at birth."[15] It is a blessing from God that a person is accompanied by. Translated as 'destiny', *nkrabea* "is concerned with the general quality and ultimate end of life."[16] It bears an inscription of the person's lot and the "manner of death,"[17] for it is the manner of life which determines the mode of death and the situation in afterlife. It, refers to an errand given by the Supreme Being which "determine[s] the manner in which the individual [is] to live in the world."[18]

When sent into the world to become a human it is the *kra* (as the soul) "that animates the body...which makes man a living person... Though...invisible, it is known through the activities of the living person. The nature of the soul is determined by the character and the actions of the living person."[19]

Translated as destiny, *nkrabea* does not stand for total pre-determination in which the human has no agency whatsoever. Were that so, then as Gyekye says, *nkrabea*, coming from God, who is all good, would have no room for an action that is reprehensible. So what Gyekye, along with some other thinkers says, is that "*nkrabea* expresses only the basic attributes of the individual, and because *nkrabea* is *general* and not specific, human actions are not fated or necessitated...[rather] actions and behaviour originate from thought, desire, choice, etc..."[20] *Nkrabea*, thus, refers to an ultimate goal that a human aspires to fulfil, through his/her own efforts, starting from the situation that s/he has been placed in. And that goal is set by the Supreme God in the very constitution of the human. This is where the 'becoming' aspect of the human gets highlighted.

Some thinkers attribute a double role to *nkrabea*. For, they state that though a part of it is given solely by God, there is an other part in which the 'speck' also states its desired destiny before God, in the pre-natal stage, this leads to the conclusion that a human being carries a 'double destiny'[21] — one given by God, and the other requested by the *kra* itself.

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[13] The prefix 'O' denotes the quality of being human, as distinct from other existents.
[14] Akesson, p. 281.
[15] Bartle, p. 98.
[16] Appiah-kubi, p. 10.
[17] Christaller, in Opoku, 1978, p. 100.
[18] Gyekye, 1995, p. 108.
[19] Akesson, p. 281.
[20] Gyekye,1995, p. 121.
[21] Opoku, 1978, p. 100; Sarpong, (conversation, 19.2.2011).

This statement regarding double destiny causes some confusion as the two destinies would have to be in harmony for life to go on. Gyekye's argument that humans have some choices seems more logical. For, when the *kra* enters the human body it is impacted by other elements that play a role in its behaviour as a human. Irrespective of the belief regarding the inscription on the *kra*, the more important role of this conception of Okra as being created by the Supreme and being given an errand is to establish the fact of a singular *source* from which all humans arise. Perhaps it shows that the Supreme God is involved and interested in the manner in which creation and the world are perpetuated and their order kept up.

This whole ante-natal drama is enacted in a subtle, generally unknowable-by-humans environment that is charged with power and potential as it is the realm of God the Supreme. Being ordinarily, or sensually, unknowable it is often seen to represent purity, power, potentiality, fertility, unknowability, inapproachability.[22] The origin of *Okra*, thus, takes place in a sacred ground, which ante-dates physical birth. This ground is not directly known to the human.

The Akan Supreme God is, thus, *organically connected* to the whole scheme of things as the human is an extension of God, created from God, and it is His general plan that the human aspires to actualise, and it is He who determines whether the human has fulfilled that plan or should go back to the world to make some more effort in order to be elevated to the normative category of a 'human person' as expounded below.

Onipa: The Human Person

The concept of the human person, as embedded in Akan metaphysical understanding of the universe, is founded on a tension between a Divine existential component and an alterable character element; between the individual and the social; between the personal good and the good of the community as a whole. It connotes a highly ethical and moral conception of the human person.

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[22] Bartle, p. 89, uses the colour black to symbolise all the qualities related to the realm of *Nyame* from which *Okra* takes birth. But all my informants were opposed to the use of this symbol. Purity and goodness among Akan is symbolised by the colour white. Modern scholars are more inclined to look upon Nyame as a spiritual entity rather than seeing Him as a God related to sky things, such as thunder, which is denoted by the colour black. Bartle might be associating the colour black for *Okra* from that association. The colour white is also used for the *sunsum* component of the human due to its association with things like semen and water which are associated with the colour white.

The translation of *Onipa*, as a 'human person' is not a tautological statement, for it has two meanings — one normative and the other descriptive or empirical. The latter distinguishes a human from an animal, beast or stick. The former "embodies ethical presuppositions" which refer to an ideal that the person is expected to aspire for.[23] But by dint of the descriptive connotation of the word, a person does not cease to belong to the category of being human even though s/he may not have elevated him/herself to personhood. It continues to give him/her the status of a human being, as a living creature, but does not qualify him/her for personhood — the ideal sought by every Akan. The descriptive understanding implies an unalterable, existential status that is not subject to change or transformation as it refers to the element that comes from God directly. The normative aspect implies that a person is subject to change, to transformation, to alteration. "The individual ... is to grow in[to] ...a creative personality and to develop the capacity to maintain creative relationships."[24] The human is, thus, a work in progress. S/he cannot be called a human person (in the normative sense) merely by dint of birth as a human. To be worthy of respect, s/he must act in an appropriate manner. Both understandings of the human being are given due weightage.

Gyekye states that though judgement on a person is made on moral grounds yet when a person is declared to be '*onnye onipa*', which means falling short of the ideal behaviour, or displaying a conduct that is contrary to social, communal good,[25] as not having fulfilled his/her duties and obligations, his/her *nkrabea*, which would exalt him/her to a category that would give him both a social and spiritual status,[26] the existential status of the person, as a 'human creature', is not denied.

The question then arises as to what is morality or ethics in the Akan universe. Where is it embedded? Does it arise in religious rituals and beliefs, as upheld by thinkers like Mbiti, Danquah, Ackah, Opoku[27] and others? Or is it secular in the sense of being contingent on the social empirical situation as projected by thinkers like Gyekye, Wiredu and Thaddeus Metz? Gyekye argues that Akan being a 'natural' and not a revealed religion (in the sense of having been revealed by some Prophet

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[23] "African Ethics", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, www.plato.stanford.edu , accessed 25.2.2011

[24] Dzobo in Wiredu and Gyekye, 131.

[25] "African Ethics", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, www.plato.stanford.edu , accessed 25.2.2011.

[26] "African Ethics", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, www.plato.stanford.edu , accessed 25.2.2011.

[27] See Opoku, p. 130.

or God-man at a particular point in time) morality is not the result of a command of God. It is not prescriptive in nature and that ethical values come to be laid down by humans.[28]

I venture to postulate that though it is not laid down in terms of religious injunctions, Akan morality is embedded in the metaphysical conception and origin of the human person (as postulated by modern Akan thinkers when they decode the rituals, proverbs, metaphors, axioms and symbols used in day-to-day life) on which the framework of life and the possibility of agency are inscribed. It is also the result of religious beliefs in certain spiritual existents who act as custodians and guardians of moral values. Besides this, moral codes are an outcome of social needs and draw their validity from the ultimate goals projected by the particular world-view. The Akan conception of the human also determines the quantum of freedom and choice that a person would be allowed while in the world, and even in the spirit world. To recognise this, we need to look into the metaphysical makeup and the fundamental constituents of the human person in this system of thought.

Metaphysical Constituents of the Human Person

The human person in the Akan metaphysical scheme is seen to be constituted of three inseparable elements which I propose refer to three fundamental human values or aspirations. One of these, *Okra*, is drawn directly from God the Supreme and the other two — *mogya* and *sunsum* — the blood and the personality (mental/emotional) elements are supposed to be transmitted through the mother and the father, respectively. This supposed transmission through human agencies of potentially divine elements[29] enables the conceptual unification of the male and the female, the spiritual and the mundane, by the intervention of the first element, the *Okra*, which is drawn directly from the Supreme God. *Sunsum* and *mogya* are activated and enabled, and made functional only when imbued with and made active by the enlivening spirit, the Okra. Of these, *mogya,* or the blood element, has a vital connection with the physical form, the body, and *sunsum*, a non-sensible spiritual element, refers to the capacity of the human to think, feel and interact with other agents and existents in the world.

[28] Gyekye, 1995, p. 128.

[29] Though the blood element and the personality have transactional value in the physical world they yet have spiritual connections. The blood element joins the person to the ancestral world and the personality element to the gods, the presiding deities of the clan.

Yet, each category is not a discrete entity as each is a blend of the spiritual and the material, the subtle and the physical. Each category expands from being a limited particularised entity into a larger more generalised one. In other words the sensually-experienced physical element is subsumed by a spiritual referent and vice versa. The sense perceptible particulars have an underlay of non-sensual, categories that inhere them and spread beyond. (For example, the blood element has a close linkage with ancestors, that are spiritual entities. It is this possibility that gives to the human being, indeed all of creation, a significance that is greater than that which it is ordinarily perceived to have. Each empirical manifestation has an abstract conceptual form which gives it a deeper value. By the same token, the purely spiritual entities have a physical referent whereby they can be sensually perceived. Thus the material and the mundane are not divorced from the spiritual and the elevated — they cannot thus be classified as purely one or the other but are intermeshed. As W. E. Abraham writes in *The Mind of Africa*, "the whole forms one internally contiguous order."

The person is, thus, viewed not in physical, biological terms alone — as a mere composite of some material/chemical elements — but, more importantly, in spiritual terms as an integral part of universal, cosmic interconnections. The proverb "All human beings are children of God, none is a child of the earth"[31] underscores the spiritual aspect of the apparently physical dimension of humans.

Besides, the composition of the human carries on it an inscription of the purpose that s/he is to fulfil in God's providence — thus having the possibility of transforming him/herself from a mere creature into a *human person, onipa*.[32] This possibility of 'becomingness' imbues the human with a certain freedom and consequent responsibility, which in turn restricts that 'freedom'. Okot p'Bitek writes: "Man is not born free. At birth he is firmly tied to his mother through the umbilical cord. He is physically cut free from her. But *this cutting free* is not merely a biological act. It is symbolic and significant. Henceforth, he is an individual, who through upbringing is prepared to play his full role as a member of society."[33] This statement could be transposed to the *kra* in relation to the Supreme with whom it is inseparably connected till sent out to play a role in the

[31] Opoku, 1997, p. 11. The term 'earth', here, refers to the material aspect of this element and not to AsaseYaa – 'Mother Earth' which has reference to the spiritual force behind it. The latter, in its deeper aspect, has a connection with ancestors and thus shows an underlying connection of the material with the spiritual. – Emanuel Asante (Conversation, 18.1.2011)

[32] Gyekye, conversation, 6.1. 2011.

[33] p'Bitek, in Eze, p. 73.

world as an individual. The *kra* is, so to say, tied to *Nyame*, the Supreme God, till such time as it is separated and sent to the world to perform his role. A responsibility, in the form of *nkrabea*, is already inscribed on it even as it enters the world.

Okra

The first constituent, Okra, translated into English as the soul, is the invisible non-sensual element, a "pure divine intelligence"[34] that makes up the human. It is a complex spiritual substance that being unable to act on its own yet becomes the driving agent for other components of the human form. Drawn from God, it refers to a vitalising principle, "a life-force which animates the body; and suffuses every part of it, it is that which makes man a living person...," it is a "stuff of some kind; it is in the blood; in the breath; in the hair; in the finger and toe clippings; it is in every part of the human body."[35] In itself it is a non-differentiated, passive mass of consciousness that needs other constituents to enable its capacities and potentialities to become functional. Yet, it is imbued with a capacity called *tumi*,[36] an enabling force that empowers and enlivens the other two categories (*mogya* and *sunsum*) providing them with the ability and drive to function. Being spiritual and non-sensual, *Okra* is yet physically experienced in the body as *home*, or the breath of life. "It is the *okra* that 'causes' the breathing. Thus, the *honhom* [breath] is the tangible manifestation of or evidence of the presence of *okra*."[37] Okra plays an important part in maintaining the organic integrity of the physical and the spiritual realms. Just as air, experienced physically as wind, originates in God, breath in the human originates in the Okra.[38] As air connects heaven and earth, so *Okra* manifesting itself through breath in the body, becomes the medium that links the spiritual (*Okra*) to the physical (*mogya*). "In its terrestrial life the main function of the *kra* is to animate man to function and to enable him to accomplish his daily tasks."[39]

Okra is the part of the human that refers to something that is eternal, something which continues to be. While it is imbued with an activating power, it is not a bundle of qualities, for, as Gyekye asserts, if it were a bundle of qualities or perceptions it would disintegrate when those

[34] Ackah, p. 9.
[35] Akesson, p. 281.
[36] Bartle, p. 94.
[37] Gyekye, in Eze, p. 59.
[38] Bartle, p. 94.
[39] Akesson, p. 288.

qualities disband. But the Akan soul does not die. As a maxim declares, 'when a man dies he is not really dead' (*onipa wu a naonwu*). This is because it has a spark of *Nyame* or God in it, and God does not die. Hence, the proverb, "Could God die, I would die" (*Onyame bewu na mawu*).[40] So, while there is a close connection between the body and the soul, the two are distinct as the kra detaches itself from the body at the time of death.[41] The soul is, thus, not the body that one perceives,[42] rather it is "the impersonal, vital basis of life which comes directly from Nyame and which retraces its steps back to God when it is disembodied."[43]

Coming directly from God, Okra stands as a symbol of purity, fertility, divinity, immortality. Thus the Akan, who use symbols for expressing complex concepts that a word or sentence cannot fully communicate, use the colour white for Okra and things related to God and divinity. White, among the Akan is a symbol of purity, victory, openness, truthfulness and joy.[44]

Other than these enabling characteristics, Okra is imbued with another important quality, i.e. — it carries *nkrabea,* the inscription or design, of 'the plot of life' or the manner in which life is to be lived out and unfolded when it combines with the other elements to form the human creature. As already stated *nkrabea* does not stand for total pre-determination in which the human has no agency whatsoever. *Nkrabea* refers to the ultimate goal that an Akan aspires to fulfil in life. While the goal is maintaining harmony and integrity of the already existing universe, the manner in which the particularised individual will achieve this is inscribed on the *nkrabea. Okra,* thus, harbours in it *the highest human aspiration* conceptualised by the Akan, the fulfilment of which gives him status in this and in the other world. As the carrier of life's message and the possibilities of its fulfilment, it represents the idea of perpetuating group harmony and remembering the organic interconnections of the universe, symbolising the attainment of the highest wisdom possible for an Akan.

As the element that is responsible for causing the body to function and the removal of which would cause the death of the body, Okra may be called the *causal element.* Besides, it is Okra that makes possible the union of the *sunsum* and *mogya*, the male and female, the spiritual and

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[40] Gyekye, 1995, p. 100.
[41] Gyekye, 1995, p. 101.
[42] Akesson, p. 281.
[43] Akesson, p. 289.
[44] This is contrary to Bartle's thesis which claims that *Okra* is depicted by the colour black. All those I spoke with were inclined only to use the colour white for *Okra* which stands for purity. (Elom Dovlo, Dawson Assam, among others.) (see f.n. 22 for Bartle's interpretation.)

the mundane, enabling the coming into life of a human being. Without this, the birth of a person would be impossible. It is, thus, both the agent and the fundamental substance that make up the human being.

It is Okra that becomes a tangible metaphor for explaining the transcendence and the immanence of God and gives substance to the statement that all humans are children of God, not just matter. It also gives indication of all existents being interconnected as they take birth from the same source. Before appearing in the human form, the *kra* goes through a preparatory process in a transcendental realm.

Mogya

The second component *mogya*, which signifies blood is seen as a substance responsible for giving physical form and locomotion. Believed to be transmitted through the mother, this is the element that gives one a social identity and status as well as eligibility for inheritance of material property which in the matrilineal Akan system is determined by the blood that connects one to the maternal line. *Mogya* also has deep spiritual significance to the extent that it connects one to the ancestors and validates and maintains social and group solidarity. Wise persons and ancestors are responsible for perpetuating this solidarity in the community, since they (particularly the ancestors) were themselves once in the human form.

Martin Ajei, looking at the internal structure of the word *mogya,* analyses it as a conjunction of two words: *mo* and *gya. Mo* is the plural form of the second person pronoun 'you' and *gya* has two meanings: 'fire' and 'to accompany'. On the basis of these two, it could mean: a) the fire which is in you (connoting all humans), or b) that (something) which accompanies you. Ajei, thus, translates *mogya* as "the energy (fire) of life that accompanies you from the time of your birth."[45] The fire refers to the *Okra* and blood becomes the dwelling place for it. That is why life departs when *mogya* is spilled. "*Mogya* ... is the vessel that sustains the activity of the *okra*. It is, thus, the physical manifestation of the spirit."[46]

Being inspirited by Okra, *mogya* becomes active and gains a spiritual significance. Ajei, refering to an interview with Nana Arpaku, an Akan wise person (10.10.1999), states: "*Mogya* is the container of life. In the case of the human being it is the dwelling place of the *okra*. The blood must be there circulating in the person before the okra will be there in the person."[47] The circulation of blood, it would seem, would rely on the

[45] Ajei, p.62.
[46] Ajei, p.63.
[47] Ajei, p.63.

enabling capacity imbued into it by the Okra. The material and the spiritual are thus inseparably intertwined in this element, where one cannot be manifest or active without the other. The two remain in dynamic interaction complementing each other.

Being connected to the physical body and to the mother (by virtue of its being transmitted through her), *mogya* symbolises material provision, sustenance and nurture, as the mother is the one responsible for pre- and post-natal care, and is the provider of all material needs for the upkeep of life.[48] For the same reason it also stands for "the essence of fecundity - the potential to bring forth." Phillip Bartle goes on to write, "The close association of women with activities related to this essence illustrates its sociological parallels or its cultural significance. Women bear babies, provide milk, farm the land, cook the food, dig the clay, make the clay pots, and trade food, pots, and farm produce in the market."[49]

By this token *mogya*, and the mother who transmits it, is equated to the earth, which also symbolises fecundity, and once fertilised, has similar characteristics of being a provider and sustainer of life. The Earth also receives all beings into her stomach at the time of death and this is equated with the womb in the human mother. Just as the mother principle is fertilised by semen the earth becomes fecund by contact with rain. Both fertilising agents are drawn from God. Even though semen is seen to be transmitted through the agency of the father, its real source is God Himself, as Bishop Samuel Asante asserts.[50] His contention is that being quasi-spiritual in nature it cannot arise from a human agency even though it may be transmitted through it.

While this constituent has the potential to provide, it carries in it an element of defilement or profanity. As Bartle goes on to say, "Just as one must get one's feet dirty in the mud...to become wealthy, so touching Mother Earth is serious; one gets defiled, but wealthy...."[51] Edith Clarke, commenting on Rattray's seminal work on the Ashanti, also states that the earth "was sacred and dangerous."[52] That is why the Ashanti king is not allowed to touch the earth with his bare feet. The proverb, "Fear woman," completes this description, as Bartle continues to say in the same context. Since there is no particular word that sums all these — fecundity, provision, nurture, seriousness, danger and defilement — into

[48] Bartle, p. 89.
[49] Bartle, p. 89.
[50] Bishop Emmanuel Asante (conversation 20.1.2011).
[51] Bartle, p. 89.
[52] Clarke, p.438 and p. 216 in Rattray's *Ashanti.*

one category, Bartle states that the Akan symbol of the colour red signifies this element.[53]

The source of material provision thus connotes both sanctity and danger. It is sacred because of its ability to sustain life and its connection with the sacred world of ancestors. But it also carries in it a defiling potential. The defiling potential may not so much pertain to getting 'one's feet dirty', as suggested by Bartle, but could even be interpreted to mean that if just the material advantage is sought, ignoring the larger good of the community, it can become a force that is immoral. Neither Bartle nor Rattray, nor Clarke have probed this metaphorical and possible deeper meaning of this concept of defilement, whereby it could mean that an overmuch engagement with the materially-oriented aspect of one's makeup and one's sense of individuality could pollute one's soul. Such engagement risked the hindering of the requirements of social obligation and responsibility that are necessary for the maintenance of social and cosmological solidarity and harmony. In other words unless tempered by discrimination and an awareness of the underlying spiritual force this aspiration can lead to selfishness and a destruction of the sense of community which is held together by a tension between different pulls that a human being is subject to.

The material and mundane has value only when connected to the spiritual and the elevated. Without the spiritual referent *mogya* is lifeless. If *Okra*, the spirit, departs *mogya* is merely matter. It is notable that while Mother Earth is deeply venerated there are no shrines for her. Like *Nyame* or *Onyakopon*, *Asaase Yaa* (Mother Earth) is also not worshipped directly.

Mogya, at one level, can thus be equated to the *physical body* and can be taken to refer to the material and mundane aspirations of the human. But by virtue of its being inspirited with *Okra* and thus connected to the ancestors who are the guardians of morality and clan solidarity, it represents a tension between the mundane and the spiritual or moral.

Since it links humans to ancestors, the metaphysical status of *mogya* would be ambiguous if it did not come from God. Besides, since God is singular (in that it is He alone that exists, all else is dependent on Him) all creation must emanate ultimately from Him. It is only the degrees of distance and relationship of each element to Him that vary.

Sunsum

The third constituent, *sunsum*, the most difficult category to understand, refers to a force or power which determines the individual's personality,

[53] Bartle, p.91.

and gives a person his particularised emotional and psychological traits. As it refers to the character or personality of a person it has been called the 'personality soul' by G. Parrinder. Minkus draws from Busia and Meyerowitz, who translate *sunsum* as "personality, ego or character" but then goes on to say that Danquah's description of it as "the power that sustains a person's character or individuality" is more apt.[54] Danquah sees it as the subject of experience as it makes it possible for the destiny inscribed on the soul to be 'realized' or 'carried out'. But there is some ambiguity, even disagreement, with regard to its source — some believe it is passed genetically through the father's sperm whereas others, like Gyekye, affirm that being spiritual and non-sensual in nature it must come directly from God and so forms a part of the *Okra*, the soul.[55] Whatever the origin, the *sunsum* belongs to a spiritual/meta-sensory realm, the concrete presence of which can be felt in the conduct and the discriminatory faculties that a person exhibits and is endowed with. This is the constituent that (being endowed with the faculty called *adwene)* enables a person to think, to discriminate between right and wrong, and thus help regulate behaviour and conduct. According to Gyekye, there are two levels at which *sunsum* needs to be understood. At the generic level it refers to "all unperceivable, mystical beings and forces in Akan ontology," and at the level of the specific to "the activating principle in the person."[56] Martin Ajei, resonating Gyekye's thesis says that, "Possession of this force makes a thing what it is and enables it to act. It is because of this power that a physical agent can be a causal agent in the world." At the general level it is "a power that constitutes the essence of all existents... [while] at the specific level ... [it] empowers a person to initiate an act self-consciously... [At the general level] it becomes one species of a universal phenomenon."[57] Asserting its spiritual nature, Minkus writes that "*sunsum* is the essence of the being or object, its intrinsic activating principle." As a principle underlying everything, she affirms that "*sunsum* explains the unitary nature of the universe."[58] Ajei goes on to say, "The sunsum inside of man would appear to be a power to which both mental and physical predicates are applicable in space-time."[59]

Like *mogya*, sunsum is seen to exercise contradictory pulls — one that aligns it to the 'higher' non-personal concerns of the social whole and the other that confines it to individual concerns. Unlike *Okra*, this

[54] Minkus, p. 185.
[55] Gyekye, 1995, p. 91. Bishop Emmanuel Asante also stresses that it comes from God. (conversation 20.1.2011).
[56] Gyekye, 1995, p. 88.
[57] Ajei, pp. 45-6.
[58] Minkus, p. 182.
[59] Ajei, p. 60.

constituent has the capacity to move outside the body and interact with other *sunsums* on the spiritual plane. In dream, for example, this is the agent that can leave the body and "fashion for itself a new world of forms with materials of its waking experience."[60] The phenomenon of dream is utilised by the Akan to prove the existence of a spiritual entity that can function without the help of sensory organs and move about without the aid of bodily motor organs.

Sunsum, as Gyekye states, is the source of dynamism, the active force of human psyche, "...it is the energy as well as the ground [from which] interaction with the external world"[61] takes place. Okra as an undifferentiated conscious energy does not itself undertake any activity but *sunsum* as spirit has extrasensory powers, and it is sunsum which thinks, feels, desires. It is on *sunsum* that worldly power, health, position, influence, success depend. Gyekye adds that together with Okra, it forms a spiritual unity which survives after death. That the two, *Okra* and *sunsum*, though logically distinct, are ontologically one. Sunsum is the active part of *Okra* reflecting a unity in duality and duality in unity.[62] This understanding may also help to explain Wiredu's claim of Okra being a "quasi physical" entity. Yet sunsum is the aspect of the human make up which is subject to being *polluted* since it can be affected by other external forces that are similar in nature.

Given its capacity to function in different realms sunsum can be seen as a *subtle constituent*, without which neither *Okra* nor *mogya* would be able to interact with the external world and other existents. To the extent that it is imbued with the capacity to desire, discriminate and act, it may be equated with the *moral yearnings* of the individual. Yet, like the *mogya* constituent this, too, is subject to contradictory pulls by the very nature of the makeup of the human.

Thus, at a deeper, spiritual level, all three constituents are connected while at the phenomenological level (the level of feeling and acting) they perform different functions. All three are characterised by physiological as well as spiritual pulls, and being connected they have the capacity to influence and regulate each other's functioning.

The three constituents, thus, seem to stand for causal, material and subtle elements, each representing one of the fundamental human aspirations — the ultimate, material and the moral — that together exhaust the possibility of human striving within the created universe. All the aspirations are a part of the makeup of the human.

A good life, at the individual and community levels, calls for a balance

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[60] Gyekye, 1995, p. 91.
[61] Gyekye, 1995, p. 97.
[62] Gyekye, 1995, p. 98.

of the material and the moral, in order to attain the highest goal encompassed in the first constituent, the *Okra*. The fulfilment of the *nkrabea* inscribed on the *Okra* would enable a person to fulfil his role in the given situation in the social whole. Unless the physical/material needs are regulated by the moral force wielded by the *sunsum* the organism can go astray and fail to realise the *nkrabea*, thus failing to reach the ultimate aspiration of serving the whole.

Morality, which is what makes a mere biological creature into an *onipa*, a human person, is not the result of external social sanctions alone or fear of some spirits acting on one but, as Ackah says, is part of the human makeup. The human cannot go against his deepest constituent or conscience[63] and when he does, he harms the whole.

Before examining the values that the Akan uphold, it is pertinent to examine the factors that connect the human individual to the larger order, the unitary Whole, in which the actions of one impact the social and cosmological levels of being.

Interconnections/Interdependence, Organic Unity

Consciousness (as *sunsum*), in the Akan conception of the universe, pervades all and connects everything, making it one integrated and interactive whole. "....[T]his notion of Whole as One simply means...that each existen[t] ...[is] merely a pattern of interactions within a whole; that each existing entity has the power to interact with every other entity and, as such, is a key to universal knowledge."[64] Ajei refers to Gyekye's description of *sunsum* as, 1) a conscious being and, 2) a power that constitutes the essence of all existents. This, he goes on to quote from Minkus, is the concept that accounts for the basic similarity of all existents, which are "alike in being spirited or active and are unified, or organically linked by their indispensable possession of this spiritual category."[65] According to Minkus, everything in Akan world view is 'inspirited'[66] by virtue of its being imbued with a force which arises from one singular source and for that reason enables one thing to be connected to and act on another. Wiredu, in another context, states that "this universe of being is ontologically homogeneous. In other words, everything that exists is exactly the same...as everything else."[67]

It is for this reason that beings can become causal agents in an interactive world. They can become regulatory forces — favourable or

[63] Ackah, p. 110.
[64] Ajei, p. 53.
[65] Ajei, p. 45-46.
[66] Minkus, p.182
[67] Wiredu,1996, p. 49.

unfavourable — acting on each other. As such, each component within the being has the capacity to work on or impact the other. Therefore, a breach or violation of code of conduct at the physical phenomenological level tends to violate the spiritual order as well, as the physical is underlaid by the spiritual. This also explains why a number of physical ailments are treated at the spiritual level by Diviners. The Akan Universe is, thus, a highly religious and moral universe heavily populated with beings having different categories and degrees of potencies and potentialities that have the capacity to impact each other.

Sociality of the Human

Conceived in religious/spiritual terms, the human being is viewed not through theoretical, conceptual categories only but through the prism of concrete situations in which s/he enacts and unfolds his/her day-to-day life. Human behaviour is judged from a highly relational standpoint in which s/he is required to uphold the social and cosmological order. A proverb (*onipafirisorobesi a, obesionipakuro*[68]) states "when a person descends from heaven, he descends into a human town." It supports the idea of a pre-existing universe — a universe that ante-dates the descent of the human and whose origin is known only to God — and the consequent social nature of the person. The Akan take the universe to be as it is, an existing reality, without worrying too much about theories of its origin, and the human being is seen to come into this pre-existing state.[69] Creation in Akan is a concrete entity having its own reality, even though a subsidiary and dependent one, and has existed since a hoary past as no one except God can know its origin. Since God is immortal — without beginning or end, so, society as his creation also continues to exist. The human, as a part of this great spiritual process and, by the very nature of his origin and composition, and descent into

Gye Nyame

Except God.
Symbol of the supremacy of God.

The great panorama of creation dates back to time in memorial; no one lives who saw it's beginning and no one will live to see it's end, **Except God**

[68] Gyekye, 1995, p.155, Danquah, p. 193, no. 2380

[69] Edith Clarke incorrectly interprets the paucity of creation myths of origin to mean that God is not seen as a Creator of the universe, showing through a proverb that "'the earth was there already', with men and women on it" (p.437) and God was "merely a factor in the fertility of men and women" (p. 438). This cannot be upheld,

an already existing universe, becomes actively involved in keeping up the integrity of this reality at all levels — perceptible and imperceptible, material and non-material.

While the proverb only states 'human' town, by implication the human being comes into a rich population of beings and existents — visible and invisible, animate and inanimate — that affect and impact his aspirations as well as his prescribed role in the world which is inscribed on his being. The individual does not remain a unitary, disparate or alienated entity but irrevocably becomes a part of everything else that exists and is given a purpose to fulfil in God's providence, having the possibility of transforming himself.[70] The human, thus, cannot act without reference to other beings and existents. Not only is s/he a part of this organically connected universe in which there is a high degree of interdependence between the different elements, s/he also becomes *responsible* for the perpetuation and welfare of the clan right from the beginning.[71] His/her prime task then is maintaining this harmonious interdependence and the well-being and cohesion of the community at both the social and cosmological levels i.e. between humans and humans, and humans and ancestors and the spirits.[72]

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as Clarke does not take account of the spiritual beings that are also present in the existing universe. The gods that were there in the universe, are known to be 'God's children and spokesmen' (Ackah, p. 12) and are referred to as *Abosom*, the root 'som' meaning 'to serve'. As children of the Supreme God, the gods serve Him and also derive their power from a Creator God. They are not independent beings. And since words that relate to God posit Him to be ever there, His creation, too, as an 'emanation' of Him (Ikenga-Metuh, p. 19) can be taken to be always there, and its origin is not known to humans, only to God.

Minkus also emphasises the 'unitary nature' of the universe by stressing that *Sunsum*, the spirit that inheres all, is derived from the Supreme Being, "the Creator and source of all existence. All that exists is spirited or active." (p.182).

Besides, the applelations used for *Nyame*, God, also provide linguistic evidence for his power and functions,. Those words would not be used for God if they were not to connote something distinct (Gyekye, 1995, p. 70-71 and conversation, 6.1.2011.) One of the appelations, *Oboadee*, refers to this creative aspect. The axiom *Gye Nyame*, meaning 'except God' refers to the fact that since no one else was present when the world was created it is God alone who can know of its origins, i.e. it is beyond the capacity of humans to even think about it.

[70] Gyekye, conversation, 6.1. 2011

[71] "African Ethics" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.plato.stanford.edu , accessed 25.2.2011

[72] 'It is the living person who makes the inhabitants of the spirit world long for the mashed yam," says a proverb stressing the point of interdependence between humans and ancestors. (Opoku, 1997, p. 7.) This also connotes that it is humans that create and sustain the spirits of the dead, which in turn are symbols of the solidarity and perpetuation of the clan.

The responsibility is consonant with the social and hierarchical position in which the individual is placed within the group. As Driberg states:

> Every individual is born into a certain status relative to all other members of his community. It is not a personal status, as it might be in an individualistic society, and does not imply rank, but reciprocal obligations and benefits which he incurs as a member of the community. All his conduct is conditioned by his status, which is not a permanent one but changes with his age and experience and may be affected by the decease of relatives and the inheritance of new responsibilities.[73]

By virtue of holding certain hierarchical positions in society, the human has specific responsibilities. Through a lineage, that connects him to the ancestors, a person is also conferred certain "rights, privileges and obligations."[74] Through a series of rights and rituals, and through right conduct, humans are enjoined to keep up the solidarity and harmony between the material and the non-material, the humans and spirits, between the dead, living and yet-to-be-born.[75]

In view of this situation, Okot p'Bitek contradicting Rousseau's declaration that "Man is born free..." writes: "Man is not born free. He cannot be free. He is incapable of being free. For only by being in *chains* can he be and remain 'human.' What constitutes these chains? Man has a bundle of *rights* and *privileges* that society owes him. In African belief even death does not free him." He goes on to say:

> Man cannot, and must not be free. "Son," "Mother," "Daughter,"...and many other such terms, are the stamps of man's unfreedom. It is by such complex titles that a person is defined and identified. They order and determine human behaviour in society.... Permanent bondage seems to be man's fate. Because he cannot escape, he cannot be liberated, freed. The so-called "outcast" is not a free agent. Being "cast out" from society, for a while, does not sever the chains that bind him to society.[76]

Referring to the natural eligibility to rights and privileges, Gyekye asserts, "Rights and duties are not polar concepts."[77] Duties, he confirms, do not derive "from a social contract between individuals,"[78] they are a part of the metaphysical conception of the universe and of the individual. They are concerned with preservation of society, which needs to be preserved because not being a "soulless machine" it derives its value from God.[79] If a person is able to fulfil his prescribed duties — according to the *nkrabea* inscribed on him and according to his station in life — he gains the

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[73] Driberg, p. 232.
[74] Pobee, p. 8.
[75] Apiah-kubi, p. 8.
[76] Okotp'Bitek, in Eze, pp. 73-74.
[77] Gyekye in Eze, p. 331.
[78] Gyekye in Eze, p. 330.
[79] Gbadegesin, in Coetzee and Roux, p. 296.

prestige of becoming a human person, *onipa*, which gives him status both in this life and in after-life.

Morality

An overarching ethical framework is thus, implicit in Akan metaphysics, which gets translated into the everyday life of the people. Gyekye, as already mentioned, stresses that there are no religious sanctions behind Akan moral precepts and that they are the result of goals of life set by humans according to their material, social and cultural environment and needs. While not the result of certain pre-given normative adages prescribed by a religious leader or a prophet, Akan ethics is not divorced from its metaphysical conception of the universe and of the human. In fact, it is a result of the fusion of those conceptions with the socio-economic conditions of life as it is lived on the ground.

The human in Akan metaphysics is social by nature[80] as he descends into a pre-existing community in which he "already has well-defined social affiliations... [And society] presupposes rules, and moral rules are the most essential of these."[81] As such, this 'natural relationality', as Segun Gbadagesin states "immediately plunges him/her into a moral universe, making morality an essentially social and trans-individual phenomenon focused on the wellbeing of *others*. Our natural sociality then prescribes or mandates a morality that, clearly, should be weighted on the side of duty, i.e. on that which one has to do for others."[82] Morality is, thus, weighted by obligations and duties.[83]

Stressing on the relationality aspect, James Kigongo writes, "African ethics places considerable value on conformity of the individual to the social group in order to preserve the unity of human relationship. It...is...more concerned with the relationship than with the different entities which constitute the relationship."[84] He refers to Mbiti, who states that it is only in terms of other people that the individual is conscious of his own being, his duties, privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." He goes on to state that this is "a morality of 'conduct' rather than a morality of being," which means that one's relationships and conduct in the social sphere dictate one's sense of morality. He contrasts it to a morality in which "the individual's sense of self, autonomy or being...

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[80] "African Ethic" *Stanford encyclopedia*, www.plato.stanford.edu, accessed 25.2.2011.
[81] Wiredu, 1996, p. 309.
[82] Gbadegesin, in Coetzee and Roux, p.332.
[83] "African Ethics" Stanford Encyclopaedia, accessed 25.2.2011.
[84] kigongo, p. 3.

does not place much value on ... social relationships." In Akan and African ethics, the stress is on the "social self."[85] The individual and the social group are obliged to look after each other for the continuation of the community. Kigongo goes on to say, "[T]he support of others was more important than one's capacity to achieve one's existential ends — hence the value of corporate existence... [which] signified a responsibility of the many for one. First, the others had to look after the well-being of the individual, i.e., the responsibility of many for one. Second, the individual had to look after the well-being of others." This is what "helped to build and sustain moral character in a person and moral order (social harmony) in the society."[86] This also helped build a strong sense of identity and belonging. The human came to be perceived as the centre of this relationship, as without his active involvement it could not go on.

Importance of Duties

While rights are not marginalised in the interconnected universe of the Akan, yet "duties trump rights."[87] As the Stanford Encyclopedia states,

> ...morality of *duty* is one that requires each individual to demonstrate concern for the interest of others. The ethical values of compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence, and social well-being ...primarily impose duties on the individual with respect to the community of its members. All these considerations elevate the notion of duties to a status similar to that given to the notion of rights in Western ethics.... The attitude to, or performance of, duties is induced by a consciousness of needs rather than of rights. In other words, people fulfil — and ought to fulfil — duties to others not because of the *rights* of these others, but because of their *needs* and *welfare*.[88]

So the right thing is done not because of social sanctions but because of the social and metaphysical make-up of the human in which individual good is subsumed within the larger good. A certain sense of 'ought' is built into the mental structure of the person, since the "natural sociality or relationality of the human being ...prescribe[s] the ethic of duty."[89]

There is, a moral connection between 'good' and 'ought'. If an act is morally good it *ought* to be performed. There is no question of option, as in the case of acts of supererogation — acts beyond the call of duty, so they may or may not be performed.

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[85] Kigongo, p. 3.
[86] Kigongo, p. 3.
[87] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.plato.stanford.edu , accessed 25.2.2011
[88] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.plato.stanford.edu , accessed 25.2.2011. First emphasis added.
[89] Stanford Encyclopedia, www.plato.stanford.edu , accessed 25.2.2011

African humanitarian ethics would seek to collapse moral duty and moral ideals — the latter being the basis of the so-called supererogatory duty — into one capacious moral universe inhabited *both* by the morality of duty 'proper', obligation, and justice *and* the morality of love, virtue, compassion, benevolence, and other 'moral ideals.' Such a capacious morality would make no distinction between a morally obligatory act and a morally optional act. It would insist that no act that is morally good in itself or that ... the well-being of some individual or group of individuals should be considered morally optional....[90]

Rights and Entitlements

Yet, in this communitarian ethic, the person is at the same time an individual, having individual entitlements and individual responsibility — that is why God "gave everyone their own name (thereby forestalling any misattribution of responsibility)."[91] Just by the mere fact of being human, he has some inalienable entitlements and rights — since he is a 'speck' of the Supreme itself. Gbadagesin's exposition of the human in Yoruba metaphysics resonates with the idea of *onipa* as conceptualised by the Akan. The word *iwa* in Yoruba, he says, stands for both existence and character. "Existence is primary ... [while] character is derivative, based as it is, on human ideas of morality. Each creature of *Olodumare* [God] is thought of as having its beauty... by the fact of its existence, and it is not to be undermined by human evaluation."[92] He goes on to state that the

Yoruba expression '*Iwal'ewa'* depicts their understanding of existence itself as constituting beauty, while the cognate expression '*Iwa rere l'eso eniyan'* (Good character — good existence — is the adornment of a human being) depicts the significance attached to good character....[E]xistence, in virtue of its source in the deity, is good and to be appreciated.... Existence itself is beautiful. But however beautiful a thing is, there is always room for improvement....

Gbadegesin quotes a proverb which states, "we do not throw a child to the tiger just because he/she is bad." Similarly, "physically deformed persons are also expected to be appreciated and respected in virtue of their special relationship to *Orisa-nla*, the creation divinity who is supposed to have made them specially as his devotees."[93] While the character aspect of the person is subject to change or transformation, the existential element is unalterable, and must be respected.

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[90] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, www.plato.stanford.edu , accessed 25.2.2011
[91] Wiredu, 1996, p. 308.
[92] Gbadegesin, p. 139.
[93] Gbadegesin, p. 139.

Gyekye stresses the same when he states that, by virtue of his being a spark of the Supreme every individual counts. Even when he fails to fulfil his given role in the world and is judged to be a "useless person" (*onipahunu*), s/he cannot be divested of his/her fundamental entitlement of being human.[94] As a potential 'human person' and by virtue of his/her being a spark of God, s/he continues to *deserve* help and is worthy of attention from his/her fellow human beings. Consequently, every effort is made to continue to keep the person within the fold of the group and help change his/her ways.

There is, thus, a tension between the individual and the social (the ever-existent and the contingent), both ineluctable parts of the human constitution that have to be harmonised by the individual through his conduct and behaviour. As already seen, the very composition of the human person contains within it a tension between the material personal and an obligation to the larger whole. There is, thus, a dual sense of 'ought' that inheres in the concept of the human. A human being is part of the same organic whole and arises from the same source as another being, and because every being makes up the whole,[95] s/he is an object of moral concern. By that token s/he himself/herself *ought* to be helped since s/he, too, belongs to the same category of beings who draw their identity directly from God.

As an inalienable part of the social whole, even when adjudged to be inadequate so far as human values are concerned, society does not excommunicate him/her or deprive him/her of the status of being *onipa*, a biological creature. The innate capacities of the human that have to be honed to their utmost by a community which through "socialisation, love and concern" and by tracing, through *blood*, their origin to a common, even if mythical, ancestor[96] make him feel an essential part of the Whole. From his/her very childhood the human is inducted into the mores of the clan through rituals, example and even remonstrance as Ackah has elaborately brought out is his book. As such, whatever the capacity or behaviour of the individual, the social whole takes responsibility for him/her.

Wiredu distinguishes between two kinds of morality — one, the minimal conception that refers to mere observance of rules for harmonious adjustment in society and the other "inspired by an imaginative and sympathetic identification with the interests of others even at the cost of a possible curtailment of one's own interests."[97] He

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[94] Gyekye, in Coetzee and Roux, p. 326.

[95] *Stanford Encyclopedia*, www.plato.stanford.edu , accessed 25.2.2011.

[96] Gbadegesin, in Coetzee and Roux, p. 293.

[97] Wiredu, in Coetzee and Roux, p. 306.

goes on to stress that morality, in both these senses, provides different understandings in different communities based on their metaphysical conceptions of the universe and the social and cultural contexts in which the moral principles are applied.[98] Analysing the Akan statement *onipa na ohia* — a human being has value[99] — he explores the double meaning of the word *(o)hia* which connotes both value and need. While the value derives from social interests, the second meaning stresses the fact that "human fellowship is the most important of human needs." Hence the saying (*Nyimpa ne nyenko nye nyimpa*) "every man is a friend to any other man." Ackah states that "in its simplicity" this proverb suggests "a better and more positive type of social relations than any number of negative injunctions posited by legal adages could do."[100] It is in recognition of mutual dependency and of the capacity of the human to 'respond' both by his/her very metaphysical make up that gives him the ability to judge situations and empathise with them, and by the 'natural' fact of having been placed in a situation of relationality — that the human is seen to be of value and is, therefore, needed.

The final recognition with regard to right and wrong comes from the, inbuilt, faculty called *ahonim*, meaning self-knowledge or conscience. It is this faculty which is also related to knowledge of God — God's witness is conscience (*Onyankopon danseni ne ahonim*).[101] The faculty that makes a human being aware of his divinity is the faculty that gives him the capacity to discern right from wrong. So, it may be inferred that right conduct is drawn from that part of human make up which is intimately connected with God consciousness. It is connected to the *Okra* part of the human make up that calls for the fulfilment of God's providence at all levels. And this becomes possible by harmoniously bringing together the gross and subtle elements of the human personality that pull in opposing directions. To do this s/he must go beyond the just material aspirations which, without being tempered by the moral, would make a person individualistic and divorced from the Whole which makes up 'the human town'.

While the material category is essential for sustenance of life, it may yet lead to 'defilement' and 'danger', if not tempered by good sense. The acquisition of material goods by one, in order to be fruitful, must be shared with others. This is where the tension symbolised in the *mogya* component of the human needs to be recognised. One aspect of *mogya*

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[98] Wiredu, in Coetzee and Roux, p. 306.
[99] Wiredu in Coetzee and Roux., p. 307.
[100] Ackah, p. 110
[101] Opoku, 1997, p. 97.

stresses provision of material comforts and needs while the other pulls the individual towards fulfilment of certain principles which uphold the connection to the ancestors who uphold communal solidarity. As such, the proverb "If one person alone eats all the honey, it plagues or bloats up his or her stomach" (*Obiakofo di ewo a, etaa ne yam*)[102] decries greed and selfishness. This could also lead to wrath of the ancestors, a thing that is feared. Green, citing the example of Bakweri of West Cameroon, says "excess wealth not shared with kinsmen or neighbours is almost everywhere regarded as an invitation to spiritual aggression."[103] He gives the example of the *ngbaya* ceremony wherein accumulated wealth is 'destroyed' as in that ritual it has to be distributed among relatives and neighbours. This does not prevent the person from starting to accumulate again as wealth is a sign of status. But used for one's own purposes it invites the wrath of the spirits and of the social group. Among the Akan, in one of the rituals, the accumulative instinct is 'played out'[104] for highlighting its negation. (This is my own reading into a ritual that I had occasion to attend.)

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[102] Opoku, 1997, p. 14.

[103] Green, p.17.

[104] I found it interesting to note how the acquisitive aspect of the human person is 'played out' as a game in a good humoured way part of as a ritual. While the abilities of the ones who have the capacity to acquire are recognised, they are not overstressed by being revered. I observed at a festival , held on 6.3.2011 in the Obosomase village (in the Akuapem region, near Accra). The Festival was organised by a family to offer sacrifice with the aim of appeasing their god, *Nsu Kwa Kwa.* Libations (see appendix VI for a description of the Festival) were poured to the gods and ancestors for forgiveness, as they had neglected their duties towards the deity. An appeal was made for good health, welfare and prosperity of all and for evil to be kept away.

One can say that particular gods refer to specific human aspirations. As such, they are evoked in different ways, in consonance with their characteristics. In this ceremony it could be seen that while communal good is held to be the ultimate goal, individual aspiration and achievement is not neglected, rather it is even encouraged, and given its due place.

After the pouring of Libations, a game was played. The game is supposed to be presided over by a god who is aggressive in nature (the name of the god was not mentioned and even later enquiries showed that they were not really interested in the name and did not care to know it. Even Okomfo Ayebea of Obosomase, who had taken us there, could not find out the name. But they all knew that the game was presided over by an *aggressive* god) It represented the acquisitive aspect of the human make up.

A huge cauldron containing steaming hot yams was brought out in the open compound by two persons who carried it with ropes tied around its neck. It would have been impossible to touch it due to the high temperature. As soon as the lid was removed, people holding large-sized plastic bowls (most of them at least fifteen inches in diameter), using their bare hands, had to grab and fill their bowls with the maximum amount they could take.

Funtunfunefu-Denkyemfunefu
Two crocodiles, one stomach.
Symbol of individuality and unity.

The two crocodiles share one stomach yet they fight over food. This symbolizes the unification of people of different cultural backgrounds for achieving common objectives despite the divergent views and opinions. It symbolizes unity in diversity.

It is recognised that one person may produce, or achieve, by his or her efforts but the community as a whole consumes the product thus acquired. According to a proverb, an elephant is killed by one person but all enjoy the meat. The idea is represented through artistic and symbolic representations also. The monitor lizard and the crocodile belong to the same clan. They are shown to have two mouths but one stomach. The symbol conveys the communal consumption of that which is produced and acquired by individuals. This also applies to giving up of divergent individual opinions, in a democratic manner, in the interest of a larger good.

The two important motives or objectives that an Akan seeks to attain, as mentioned by Ackah, are wealth (*ahonya*) and reputation or prestige (*dzinbo*).[105] While one is individualistic and the other relies on the social group, both are interrelated. It is in the harmonisation of the two that the ultimate good of the community lies. It is here that the concept of responsibility, of *asodzi*, comes in. The word "implies some sort of authority (some law...) which will check its [an act's] rightness and wrongness."[106]

Here one may draw from Thaddeus Metz, of the University of Witwatersrand, who attempted to bring out a coherent and comprehensive *African* moral theory. Metz's linguistic and intellectual analysis of the

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There was massive pushing and scrambling when the lid was removed and within minutes every bit of the steaming yam was emptied out of the cauldron. While muscle power determined the winner in this game of fulfilling a material end, the other aspect — that of community appeasement in which the interests of others are also kept in mind — was not forgotten. There was enough yam for others who did not get, and the 'winners' were also seen to share it with those who, due to various reasons like old age or not-enough muscle strength, were unable to grab.

While played out good humouredly, as a sport, it was a symbol of balance of the material and the altruistic or moralistic aspirations that keep life going. To me, it was significant (even at the risk of reading too much into it) that the game was played out after a ritual sacrifice and pouring of Libations, which are collective in approach. It was also noteworthy that while the game was dedicated to an 'aggressive' god, nobody cared to know his name.

[105] Ackah, p. 106.

[106] Ackah, p. 107.

word *Ubuntu* resonates with that of the Akan *Onipa*. Like *Onipa*, *Ubuntu*, too, has a descriptive as well as a normative sense. The first refers to the fact that a person's "identity as a human being causally and even metaphysically depends on the community."And the normative sense refers to the fact that "one ought to…morally…. support the community..."[107] Here, as in Gyekye's analysis, morality refers to having and exhibiting certain traits of character, which in Akan is called *suban*. So as Bishop Desmond Tutu states, a praise to someone would be to say that a person has Ubuntu i.e. he is "generous...hospitable...friendly ...caring and compassionate." That he shares what he has. "It is to say," he states, that "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours." This is like calling him *onipa* in Akan. Translated as humanness, *Ubuntu*, as he puts it, "figures into the maxim that 'a person is a person through other persons.'"[108] Metz goes on to say that this "...includes the idea that moral value fundamentally lies not in the individual, but rather in a *relationship* between individuals."[109] Highlighting the contextual, as against a categorical, aspect of this morality, he writes, "Focussing on relationship, as opposed to just personal self-development, presents an interesting contrast to what is dominant in Western ethics and in any event better coheres with firm moral judgements about when, how and why to help others."[110] Echoing the Akan idea of the intrinsic worth of the human, Metz states, "Similarly, one might morally value something about people as they are in themselves or as being part of certain relationships. The idea that interpersonal relationships of some kind have basic moral status is not often found in Anglo-American or Continental normative theory."[111] African ethics, thus, is communitarian as against individualistic. Yet paradoxically, the communitarian framework gives a higher status to the individual as a human being than perhaps other systems of morality, as is brought out in the following paragraphs.

Drawing from these fundamental tenets Metz, through negative formulations, lays down what for Africans is uncontroversially *immoral*. Some of these formulations are:

1. *To make policy decisions in the face of dissent, as opposed to seeking consensus*[112]. (Every voice is given a hearing till eventually the

[107] Metz, p. 323.
[108] Tutu quoted in Metz, p. 323.
[109] Metz, p. 333.
[110] Metz, p. 340.
[111] Metz, p. 333.
[112] Metz, p. 324.

dissenting voice agrees to disagree. The idea is "to harmonise ... warring interests through systematic adjustment and adaptation."[113] A person must be able to listen to others and give his or her opinion so as to enhance the decision arrived at. African village life is known for long drawn out discussions for arriving at a consensus. The idea of consensus shows that there could be different approaches to the same situation, but the coming together of many heads results in the continuation of bonds and respect for others. Personal opinions may be held back in the interest of harmony of the whole. Ideas of majority and minority have little place, as all individuals must be carried along.)

2. *To make retribution a fundamental and central aim of criminal justice, as opposed to seeking reconciliation.*[114](Justice among the Akan is restorative rather than punitive, expecting a good result of some kind for all rather than just punishing an erring individual. The law is not penal or vindictive. Driberg confirms the same when talking about the concepts of restitution and reparation in traditional jurisprudence. He says that African law is a code of positive rules rather than of negative prohibitions and is based on the maintenance of equilibrium. As such, penalty would be directed only towards a readjustment of the status quo. The idea is to make the punishment fit the crime. That is why, he says, under native law a thief so often goes unpunished. If theft is committed, material equilibrium has been impaired; but if restitution is made, by paying back a mutually agreed amount, there is nothing more to be done![115] He goes on to say that this is "a system which is a living, sentient organism, part of the general cultural complex, based on a collectivist society, depending on sanctions of its own which are not penal..."[116] Ronald Green states, "a strict order of retribution cannot be tolerated if the dual human ambitions of enduring moral virtue *and* well-being are to be realized."[117] The law is thus intrinsically and organically linked to the culture and not arbitrarily imposed as a set of abstract rules. But, all the legal sanctions for the maintenance of solidarity and harmony apply only within the clan or the descent group. They do not apply to inter-tribal or international issues.[118] That is why

[113] Wiredu, in Coetzee and Roux, p. 309.
[114] Metz, p. 325.
[115] Driberg, p. 233.
[116] Driberg, p. 243.
[117] Green, p. 20.
[118] Driberg, p. 238.

the role of the ancestors in the upholding of morality becomes important.)

3. *To create wealth largely on a competitive basis, as opposed to a cooperative one.*[119] (Individual effort to create wealth is encouraged but its use needs to be in consonance with the ethics of the group. Green provides instances of rituals where excess wealth is distributed among those attending the ritual, as in the case of the Bakweri. The ritual at Obosomase (cited in f.n. 104) is also reflective of that.)
4. *To distribute wealth largely on the basis of individual rights, as opposed to need.*[120] (This also is based on a moral 'response' rather than on the 'rights' of the recipient. As Gyekye states, people carry out their duties to their fellow human beings, "without the conviction that the latter have rights against them. Our positive duties towards others... are not based on their rights: it is not so much a consciousness of the rights of others as our moral responsiveness to their particular situations..."[121] A person is morally obliged to help others.)
5. *To ignore others and violate communal norms, as opposed to acknowledging others, upholding tradition and partaking in rituals.*[122] (Metz cites the example of two groups of nuns at a convent after prayer. One group, consisting of Germans, immediately went off to work after the prayer, while the Africans sat back and conversed with each other, because "one had some moral obligation to engage with one's fellows and to support the community's way of life."[123])
6. *To fail to marry and procreate, as opposed to creating a family.*[124] (Progeny is needed to appease ancestors and to perpetuate the social group. God sent the human person to continue His creation. The human is obliged to fulfil this responsibility. Proliferation and propagation of the clan is a foremost requirement.)

Taking all these into account, Metz suggests that an action is right just in so far as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop the community. He posits certain relationships as constitutive of the good that a moral agent ought to promote. "What is right is what connects people together; what separates people is wrong."[125] The same sentiment was conveyed by McVeigh in the earlier part of the

[119] Metz, p. 325.
[120] Metz, p. 326.
[121] Gyekye in Coetzee and Roux, p. 333.
[122] Metz, p. 327.
[123] Metz, p. 327.
[124] Metz, p. 327.
[125] Metz, p. 334.

last century when he stated, "the right builds up society; the wrong tears it down."[126]

Bishop Desmond Tutu has stated: "Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* — the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good."[127]

Caring and supportive relationships (good will), wishing well for others (conation), because one sees them worthy of help (cognition), the desire to help (intention) and therefrom to act to help (volition), act for other's sake not because the other demands it (motivation), and then feel good when others are benefitted (affection) — these are the fundamental qualities that make for an *onipa*.

The codes of morality may have been influenced by contemporary social, geographical needs but it is eventually the metaphysical conception of the world and of the human that places a compulsive pressure on the person to continue to act ethically. One's behaviour is determined by the *nkrabea*, which determines one's position in the social group, and by the fundamental need to be as close to fulfilment of the general good as possible. The conduct of an *onipa* strives to harmonise the fundamental — often contradictory — physical, mental and moral aspirations of the human being to enable movement towards the ultimate goal. It is the manner of their harmonisation that turns a mere creature into a *person*. In the process it also brings together and resolves the dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical.

The result of a morally lived life is, thus, twofold: it leads to prestige and status in the social world of here and now; and it continues to give status in the world beyond. The ultimate aspiration of the human, one may say, is to attain jural authority in life as also in the *post mortem* state, as an ancestor, by exercising a regulatory influence on the world of the living.[128] Ancestors are venerated because of their power to keep up harmony, and to reward good acts or cause affliction if there is a breach

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[126] McVeigh quoted in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, www.plato.stanford.edu, accessed 25.2.2011.

[127] quoted in Metz, p. 334.

[128] Gyekye, in a comment on this essay stated that "Ancestorhood is not aspired for. No Akan grows up aspiring to become a 'Nana'. To attain 'Nanahood' is not a fundamental human aspiration in Akan."

On the same issue Wiredu writes, that "everybody hopes eventually to become an ancestor, but this is not seen as a craving for self-apotheosis. Ancestorship is merely the crowning phase of human existence." Wiredu, 1996, p. 48.

of morality on the part of the individual. Ancestorhood can only be attained if life is lived in a manner conducive to the social whole. It may also be attained by a person who, by dint of wisdom, commands jural authority in life.

Ancestors

Among the moral injunctions of the Akan is the need to perpetuate the family for the propitiation of ancestors by pouring libation and making sacrifices to them as and when required. As Pobee says, libation is another reminder that the family consists of the living, the dead and the still to be born. He goes on to say that libation has a social function, as it is a solemn and collective expression of solidarity. Pouring of libations only to one's own ancestors stresses the fact that moral injunctions and the regulatory force exercised by them pertain only to a *particular descent group*. By this token to pour libation to another's ancestors is considered most inhospitable, indeed hostile, even amounting to a declaration of war on the ancestors of another group.[129]Despite their "post-mortem ontologic transformation, the ancestors ... are regarded as members of their families," states Wiredu. "The libations...poured...are simply invitations to come and participate in family events."[130] Fortes stresses the same when he states that the "ancestors acknowledged in a given situation are primarily those who are exclusive to the *worshipping group...*"[131] The law enforcement system, as such, is an organic growth from within the group and not some imperatives imposed from outside. The ancestors are able to settle disputes that living members are unable to do. The authority of ancestors is, thus, "an internal part of the kinship system, not an external idea applied discretely to certain social relations."[132]

But who are the ancestors? Arguing that there is no semantic distinction

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[129] Pobee, pp. 9-10.

[130] Wiredu, 1996, p.48.

Driberg also says that their power over religious sanctions is based on the belief that the clan is a continuous entity comprising the living, dead and yet to be born. The law has moral support of those who lived in the same group and experienced similar situations. Ancestors form part of the collective responsibility of the group. – Driberg, p. 238

[131] Fortes as quoted in Calhoun, p. 315 (italic mine). 'Worship' is a word that has been objected to by many scholars. Mendonsa states that "ancestors maintain jural relations with their living descent group members which are similar to the relations of [respect and fear]... which exist between a father and son or an office holder and an heir." p. 612.

[132] Calhoun, p. 315.

between an elder or wise person, and an ancestor — since both are referred to as Nana[133] — Kopytoff states that both enjoy the same structural position so far as authority and reverence is concerned. He stresses the age factor which gives a person wisdom, a quality required for Nanahood — whether as a living elder or as a dead ancestor.

But everyone does not become an ancestor. According to Fortes veneration of ancestors is a "representation or extension of the authority component in the jural relations of successive generations." As such, "Ancestorhood is conferred on persons of the parental generation who have jural authority in living social relations, not on those who imprint their personalities on their offspring by virtue of their part in bringing them up."[134] Akesson supports the idea that ancestors are those who have lived a moral life (striving to fulfil their *nkrabea*), who as exemplars of morality and agents of God regulate moral behaviour and act as retributive authorities on earth.[135]

The status of an elder in life has to do with knowledge of community wisdom from which normative ideas, moral codes and their proper operation arise. Ancestors represent what in the true sense represents the "traditional" — "something that has been perfected and handed down as the foundation of the community," as Newell Booth writes.[136] They represent something "complete and perfect." Booth says that for this reason they belong to a "sacred" or a "normative" time.[137] Being repositories of traditional wisdom and belonging to a "perfected event", they connect the past and present. Yet, "wisdom is not a sufficient and a necessary condition to become an ancestor. An elderly bachelor may be considered the wisest man in the village but when he dies, he will not become an ancestor."[138]Age is also not a sufficient condition. For, a relatively young man may have to succeed to headship of a lineage due to several deaths within the family and thus attain jural status which would give him ancestorship in case of death.[139] A person occupying a jural status in life, even if he happens to be young, is raised to the status of an ancestor.[140]

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[133] Kopytoff, p. 132.
[134] Quoted in Calhoun, p. 311.
[135] Akesson, p. 284. Here again Gyekye, in a personal discussion differs, saying that many chiefs who lived immoral and corrupt lives became ancestors. But the distinction made is that in the case of an ancestor the human foibles are forgotten and overlooked and what is retained is the jural authority that he commanded in life.
[136] Booth, p. 88.
[137] Booth, p. 88.
[138] Mendonsa, p. 61.
[139] Mendonsa, p. 61.
[140] See Calhoun, p. 306.

Yet, an elder is only "dedicated to the *abusua*,"[141] the line of matrilineal descent connected by blood through the mother. When promoted to ancestorship, the person continues to carry out this function, and does not give up his relationship to the clan of kinship group.

Even though in life he was a particular person, as an ancestor he "does not behave as anyone in particular. He represents the abstracted principles of lineage structure, authority and values." Here Calhoun quotes Kuper who says, "the ancestors are the ideal, not the actual personality."[142] Besides, "The fact that ancestors are dead makes it much easier to idealise them, to have them represent lineage values as opposed to personal interests...[and] judgement."[143] So, even those who in life were not the best role models become idealised in death. For ancestors are "qualitatively different in death from the more idiosyncratic existences they had earlier in life."[144]

Mendonsa adds another feature to the status of an ancestor. They have 'power', a power that is created by the High God. "Occult or mystical beings have more access to this power than the living...."[145] "They have the power of affliction and periodically use it to maintain the social order"[146] while the living may stray from the true path. So other than being looked up with respect as protectors of the living, they are also 'feared'.[147]

Since the Akan person finds the meaning of existence in the community, the kind of life approved by the ancestors is what would make for the well-being and cohesion of the society. Intransigence and implacability in family disputes are seen to be a serious breach of family cohesion, which is punished by the ancestors with death. The ancestors settle what the living could not.[148]

Conclusion

Not being ordained by some religious injunction Akan morality is contextual. It relies on the inbuilt discretionary capacities of the individual to judge right from wrong. Though these capacities are brought out and strengthened by social conditioning and training, the final enactment of

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[141] Geest, p. 477.
[142] Calhoun, p. 311.
[143] Calhoun, p. 313.
[144] Calhoun, p. 318.
[145] Mendonsa, p. 61.
[146] Mendonsa, p. 61.
[147] Mendonsa, p. 61.
[148] Pobee, p. 10.

these comes from the innate make up of the individual himself. Thus, other than social sanctions, there is the human conscience, *tiboa*, that arouses a sense of guilt.[149] So whether observed by a judicial system, or by others, or not, a person is called upon to do the right because of being governed by a conscience. A sense of guilt can only arise from discernment, an inbuilt discriminative quality that enables a choice between good and evil. Since the human arises from the Supreme, s/he cannot be separated from the fundamental attributes that the Supreme is endowed with. The human, as Ackah states,[150]is not born in sin but remains a Divine speck. As such, there is in him an innate purity that comes from God the Supreme who is known to be all good. The sojourn in the world may sully or cover up that purity. Society, by its grooming, endeavours to help unfold that potential which is already there. So far as maintenance of the social order is concerned, it is the whole community, assisted by ancestors, that comes into play.

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[149] Ackah, p. 110.
[150] Ackah, p. 17.

VIII

Epilogue

Even though on the surface Advaita and Akan appear to be two totally disparate systems, and seem not to justify a comparison especially when observed at the sociological and phenomenological levels, yet I found that an examination of core conceptual constructs brought up convergences from which differences could be examined. An exploration of the concepts of God and the Human Person, leading to ethical and aspirational goals framed by each tradition, provided insights into the points of similarity and dissimilarity. They also provided understanding, however tentative, of how each construct pointed to a different approach to the universe and relations between the Divine and the world, and between humans and humans, and humans and the environment, causing different responses and approaches to social formations and related issues. I look at these similarities and dissimilarities in the light of the foregoing chapters.

It is noteworthy that neither tradition was founded by a Prophet or a Godman at a particular point in time. Both were the result of reflections of wise persons and sages resulting in differing constructs of Divinity and ethical and moral goals according to the particular socio-economic and historico-geographic conditions they were faced with. As such, the beginning of neither tradition can be located in a historical point in time. Reference to a hoary unknown antiquity gives to each tradition a supra-historical relevance. Yet, each has assimilated and adapted to new cultural and historical influences, displaying an openness and ability to accommodate, without losing its fundamental tenets.

Some concepts that are looked at for purpose of comparison are given below.

Ultimate Goals

The ultimate goals of the two traditions stress and point, not only to

different degrees of perfection sought by the human, but to differences in the method for approaching the Divine and understanding the human person. While the Akan give greater attention to the social aspect of the person, Advaita reminds that the real identity of the person is his/her Brahmanhood. The ultimate goal in Akan is connected to morality, a morality that cements social bonding, while Advaita aims at Freedom, freedom even from morality, as morality pertains to the phenomenal world of duality. Vedantic Freedom or Liberation calls for Knowledge.[1] Knowledge is not the result of morality, even though conforming to ethical codes of conduct is an important, even necessary, requirement for attaining this Freedom. The Akan tradition remains within the realm of creation, though creation, being imbued with the spirit of God, is sacred. Vedanta aims at 'transcending' the world to gain a non-dual immediate experience of the Supreme. Once that is realised, the world is seen to be nothing but Brahman, hence sacred.

Advaita is concerned more with the *source* of the manifest universe, the point or the 'substance' from which it arises and its relationship to that source. It does not engage itself so much with questions regarding *why* or *what* causes it to arise, as with the *nature* of that Source. All creation theories point to a Supreme Self in which everything arises and into which it resolves, enabling a creation that is contiguous with and organically connected to It. The aim is to lead to an experiential realisation of that singular Reality as one's own self. This is possible only through knowledge, a knowledge that corrects the erroneous notion of oneself as a limited being. The method for knowing this one source is systematic reflection. This reflection is different from the linear intellectual exercise that one is engaged with in the phenomenal world. It is more a self-reflexive undertaking.

Akan, on the other hand, engages itself with the social world into which a person descends when s/he is born. It is with the maintenance of community solidarity and social harmony, both in this life and after death, as an ancestor, that the tradition is engaged. God, as the creative source, remains in the background, as the Supreme and immanent energy. The tradition does not exhort a person to know Him as one's own self. Rather, the knowledge of His existence as a superior Being is taken for granted and His attributes, as stated in maxims, aphorisms and proverbs, are also taken for granted without question. The world in Akan, unlike Vedanta, is a real creation and it is the duty of the human to maintain and perpetuate this creation by upholding moral and ethical norms. The goal is to maintain harmony and order in the phenomenal world, a sacred creation imbued with the spirit of God.

[1] See Nikhilananda, 1963, p. 63.

Brahman/Isvara and Nyame/Oboadea:
God in Advaita and Akan

At the core fundamental level the ultimate God in both is a singular spiritual entity. In Advaita, as in Akan the "Supreme Being is entirely spiritual."[2] He alone exists as an impersonal metaphysical essence, but in His role as a creator He is perceived differently in the two traditions. Advaitic Brahman being beyond location, temporality and theological dogma, is projected as a metaphysical Reality that is proved logically,[3] — initially through inference and then realised experientially. The Supreme, being beyond space and time cannot be known by ordinary language or organs of perception. There can be no epithets to describe Him as those also fall in the realm of time and space. The attributes ascribed to Brahman are merely *pointers,* meant to facilitate understanding and subsequent realisation. The terms aim at leading the seeker to an ideational, inarticulatable entity, to be realised experientially. The Upanishads often use a negative terminology to *point* to Him — 'not this, not this' (*neti, neti*). For, the moment He is given a name He would become limited, since words are locational and temporal in connotation. Brahman is not a real creator. The notion of a creator god, according to Advaita, is due to ignorance. He is posited as a creator, as *Isvara*, only for explaining and then explaining away the universe. The Supreme appears as a personal god only as long as the idea or notion of creation, or the manifest world, lasts. Till such time as the illusion of a real world lasts it is treated as real, and it is through a *correction* of illusion that the Real is apprehended. Advaitic aim of realising the true nature of God is achieved by realising Him as oneself, by going beyond all the limiting adjuncts that qualify the human being.

In the Akan tradition, God is seen to be a real creator.[4] He is seen to encapsulate transcendence and immanence at the same time and the epithets and applications attributed to Him in that regard are real. Even when recognised as a 'purely spiritual' being He is not an absolutely abstract entity that can be known only experientially. When the human is created the 'purely spiritual' God takes on a somewhat personalised form and appears to be almost like a father who blesses his child to go forth in the world, and even assigns him his place and errand in the world — i.e. his/her *nkrabea*. The words used for God are descriptive rather than

[2] Sarpong, 2002, p. 95.
[3] The *Mandukyopanishad*, 1955, p.xi.
[4] Platvoet (*Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, vol 4, 2012) has argued (as already mentioned) that the idea of God as a creator is a later interpolation in Akan metaphysics. That it is borrowed from Christian theology. But that is how God is understood now so we take Him to be a creator the way Akan philosophers and theologians see him currently.

mere pointers to an otherwise inarticulatable entity, as in the case of Advaita. God, as Sarpong states, "has a name in all African societies; he is unique; he is creator of everything, including all the spirits, human beings, indeed the universe."[5] The visualisation of God as a spatial, locational entity, makes the world a concrete reality. As Kwasi Wiredu states, all "the extrahuman beings and powers, even including God, are spoken of in a language irreducibly charged with spatial imagery."[6] Sarpong also speaks of a certain kind of tangibility of God, even if inferential, when he says, "Our approach to God is practical...most of the names we give him describe what he does for us rather than what he is in himself."[7]

Even so, there are no shrines for the Supreme God among the Akan. For, being an all-encompassing energy that pervades the universe, He is beyond the ordinary human capacities of perception. The symbol *Gye Nyame* which connotes that God alone knows the beginning of the universe, indicates that He remains beyond human conception. (The responses of the two priestesses to whom I posed this question are representative of this fact — (see Appendices I and II). It may also be that as a Reality that pervades everything, and also transcends it, He cannot be worshipped in a particular location or through a particular shrine. Besides, once creation has taken place God does not play a role in the day-to-day life of humans except through enabling interactions between the created entities,[8] such as spirits and gods. Worship to the Supreme is offered through tutelary deities that represent particular natural forces, or through ancestors, who are deemed to fulfil certain needs and have qualities that are accessible to humans.

In Advaita, too, the Supreme God, Brahman, is not approached through ritual as He is without attributes. He is represented, for the sake of human understanding, by means of abstract symbols, that may be sonic or visual — such as '*Aum*' or the '*lingam*'. Prayers may be offered to gods that are given attributes with which humans can connect. The final goal is to go beyond the deities that do not have an independent reality of their own. This is done not so much through *worship* of the Supreme as through reflection and knowledge, which alone can lead to a realisation of the Ultimate. Even so, worship is not neglected as it helps to purify the mind for reflection.

In this sense neither Advaita nor Akan is a monotheistic religion. The Supreme God in each case is a Divine Presence from whom the universe

[5] Sarpong, 2002, p. 95.
[6] Wiredu, 1996, p.52.
[7] Sarpong, 2002, p. 95.
[8] See Wiredu, 1996, p.50-60.

emanates but which cannot be worshipped as a personal God. In Vedanta the Supreme is impersonal and translocational. In Akan thought the singular Supreme Being appears to have a locational connotation, but His locationality is not restricted to a heaven as he also emanates Himself in everything.

Not Judgemental

In neither tradition is the Supreme God a patriarch who demands absolute obedience. He is not punitive but rather affords chances to the human to reach the ultimate goal by providing him/her with renewed opportunities through rebirths. Akan tradition posits the possibility of rebirth till such time as the *nkrabea* prescribed by God is fulfilled. In Advaita, rebirth continues till the individual by his/her self-effort realises identity with Brahman.

Both traditions are connected to, and concerned with the here and now and not an after-world in which rewards of acts on earth would be dispensed by a judgemental God. In fact, the very possibility of positing various gods shows, as Abinash Chandra Bose points out, that the human "...is attached to the earth and thinks in terms of life and the joy of living, [while] monotheism is attached to a hereafter and lives for heaven...."[9] Even when some rewards seem to materialise in a post-mortem after-world, their connection with the world of here and now is not abrogated. Ancestors, in the Akan tradition, remain connected to the world of humans even though they are supposed to live in a hereafter, in a spirit world. In Advaita, the results of works in this life determine the next birth which is a stepping stone for realising identity with Brahman.

Deities

The Divine in both metaphysical systems is seen to pervade the universe through beings having various potencies and capacities. In both traditions nature and the elements are seen to be governed by 'lesser' deities instituted by a creator god. In Akan the deities are called 'children of God'. They connect the human to the Divine. In Advaita, initially projected as presiding deities of the elements, the gods gradually become psychological forces governing the different capacities of the human person, thus directly linking the human to cosmic forces. So, it is stated that when the eyes see it is the sun that sees, etc. The elements, as deities, can also become teachers for the spiritual seeker when s/he opens

[9] Bose, p. 19.

himself/herself to the cosmos. Fire, wind, sun, etc. are seen to be teachers in many instances in the Upanishads.

Erroneously termed as 'paganism' or 'polytheism' this is actually a method by which the immanence of the one God is realised. "True polytheism," as Peter Sarpong states, "exists when different gods are independent"[10] and the one God is not seen to be their source or creator. In both traditions creation comes forth from one Divine Being. As everything is an emanation of the one Divinity, it is correct to state as Bose does, that there is "a thin dividing line between the sacred and the profane, the human and the Divine, the mortal and immortal...."[11] The deities, here, are imbued with the same spirit which enlivens the human being. As such, all creation is sacred and needs to be treated with respect and sanctity.

Interconnections

Being imbued with the same sentient energy, all created beings and things are subject to mutual interactions and influences, leading to cause and effect linkages. Existence is relational and continues to be, so long as God continues (as in the Akan belief) and so long as primal ignorance continues (as in the Advaitic postulation). God — as both *Brahman* and *Nyame* or *Onyakopon* — is the very ground in which all organic interconnections and interactions take place.

The Akan believe all matter to be subsumed by spirit. As Sarpong says, "In ... Africa, we deal in dualities. Everything has two sides — the visible side and the invisible side; the spiritual side and the material side...."[12] It is the spiritual side that connects everything to each other and enables it to interact with and impact the other.

Advaita expounds on the interconnections between the micro and the macro universes — between the human person, the *jiva*, and the original creative impulse in Brahman. The Upanishads repeatedly state that there are two kinds of knowledge — the spiritual (*vidya*), and the phenomenal (*avidya*). According to Radha Krishnan, "*Vidya* stresses the harmony and interconnections of elements which make up the world; *avidya* the separateness, mutual interdependence, and strife. *Vidya* helps us to appreciate intellectually ... the nature of the Divine ground and the nature of the direct experience of it in relation to other experience. It indicates the means by which we can attain Brahman."[13]

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[10] Sarpong, 2002, p. 97.
[11] Bose, p. 19.
[12] Sarpong, 2002, p. 90.
[13] Radhakrishnan, 2008, p. 159.

Advaita recognises an underlying unity between the different levels of reality as expressed in the different states of consciousness, experienced universally, and the larger cosmological phenomena. The universe, in Advaita, is seen to be one contiguous whole in different stages of crystallisation or grossification, while in Akan everything is imbued by the same spirit arising from one supreme reality. Matter and spirit in both traditions intermingle with each other without strict or well-defined boundaries.

Creation

Creation myths, expounding on the metaphysical origin of the person and the universe, are indicative of the way in which the world is visualised. In Advaita creation myths are meant to prove the unity and singularity of all that exists and thereby to disprove existential, relative truth. The world of relationality lasts only so long as, by self-effort, the human person does not realise the indivisible oneness of all that appears. Even *Isvara*, as a Creator God, is part of illusion and regains his position as Brahman when He withdraws the world unto himself. Creator God, or *Isvara*, is constructed only to explain, and then explain away the world. Creation myths in Vedanta are, thus meant to

1) disprove the reality of existential, relative truth which is shown to be illusory, an appearance in the ultimate Reality, the Brahman.
2) prove that everything is nothing but Brahman since nothing other than Him exists, leading to a sacralisation of all existents. The *Isa* Upanishad opens with the declaration that all that exists is inhered by God.

Creation in Vedanta is the result of a self-reflexive 'desire' in the all-comprehensive, all-knowing Brahman to 'see' Himself. It is a fulfilment of Brahman's own 'illusory' desire. For, an all-encompassing entity that is complete unto itself cannot have a real desire. The universe is thus, an emanation, that is "perpetually sounding forth the nature of an unchanging God,"[14] as Michael Nagler poetically states. Creation is the result of Brahman allowing Itself to become many through the positing of an Isvara who is accompanied by the veiling power of metaphysical Ignorance, which also arises in Brahman. Since there is only one Reality, anything other than it would have to be non-reality,[15] or a subservient

[14] See Easwarn, p. 175.
[15] Dasgupta, vol II, p.73-4.

and dependent reality. It is through the human organs of perception that the creator god perceives everything to be none other than Brahman, after he 'enters' the person, as stated in the creation myth posited in the *Aitareya* Upanishad.

Akan cosmology, on the other hand, establishes the reality of both the world and of God, even though the world is seen as a hierarchically lower, dependent reality, since it cannot continue to exist without the existence of God (*I am because God is*, as a proverb states). Like the Advaitic Brahman, Akan *Onyakopon* seems to hew and carve the world without reference to, or association with, any other entity outside of Himself. Yet once created, the world becomes a real concrete creation. Akan metaphysics sees no contradiction in seeing God as a purely spiritual entity as also a real creator, at the same time. Being omnipotent and all-knowing He can be both an abstract spiritual entity as also an anthropomorphic creator. When the human being is created He blesses him like a personal being.

The existence of the universe is taken for granted as it pre-exists the descent of the individual into it. Humans are created for the perpetuation of the social and natural order, to further continue the process of creation and keep it going — hence the stress on procreation.

Jiva and Onipa : The Human Person

The metaphysical conception of the human person is central to understanding the world views of both. The human being is the only mechanism through which the ultimate goal of each tradition is realised. The person, thus, becomes the methodological tool for decoding the universe by providing insights into the cosmological order of the world.

In both traditions the human lurks between the material and the spiritual, and becomes a link between them. Both *jiva* and *onipa* are emanations of the Divine, because of whose Will they take birth. Neither is thrown out of an imaginary heaven by an angry God. Their birth is not a historical event — in Akan the *kra* has an ante-mundane existence, so cannot be said to take birth just when biological appearance is made. *Jiva*, metaphysically speaking, is just an emanation of the Atman which is ever there. God from whom they arise is outside of time ('eternal' in Akan). In Advaita Time arises when creation arises.

Jiva, though a manifestation of the Supreme, remains a part of the illusory creation, which results from erroneous perception. In Akan, once created, *onipa* continues to remain in one form or another — in the post-mortem state s/he may become an ancestor if s/he dies a good death. Though s/he begins life in the form of *kra* which is a speck of God

Himself, s/he starts having a separate identity in the antemundane existence itself where s/he is given a secret name by God. Then, once s/he enters the world as *onipa*, s/he establishes relational interactions with other individuated existents, thus continuing to have an individuated existence. The aim is not to prove *onipa's* identity with the Supreme, of which s/he is originally a speck, but his/her continuation, because of being born out of God.

The whole edifice of the psycho-physical-spiritual make-up of the individual in Advaita (as seen in the *Taittiriya* Upanishad) is constructed to provide a possibility of its resolution back into the One being, the Supreme Brahman, which is the substratum. Akan concern is "with more practical problems of living and work;" there is less "speculation about the composition of body and soul, about sleep, about the eternity of the soul."[16]

Concept of 'Other'

The individual in Akan is a social being and draws identity and sustenance from other beings — '*I am because you are*'. The social existence of the 'other' becomes essential to the individual's own identity. The continued possibility and need for the existence of, and interaction with another spirit also generates a sense of caution, a fear arising from a knowledge that the other may impact one unfavourably under certain circumstances. Vedantic texts stress the identity of the person with the Ultimate — 'I am That' and 'That thou art' are fundamental Upanishadic statements. Thus, in Vedanta it could be stated, 'I and you are Brahman, we are none other than That (Brahman), therefore you and I are One'. Once that fact is realised the 'other' is nullified, and s/he ceases to exist as a separate 'other'. By ideally obliterating the 'other', this knowledge frees one from all fear and conditionality.

Atman, Kra: Soul

In both traditions, the soul has an intimate connection with the Supreme God. Neither has a metaphysical reality of its own bereft of God. Being a part of God, this innermost essence of the human person in both is perceived to be indestructible, immortal. The concept of immortality leads to different results in the two — in one (Advaita), it leads to its ultimate merging with the universal, ever-existent Reality, while in the

[16] Parrinder's, statement regarding the Old Testament can also apply to the Akan tradition. (See, 1972, p. 54.)

other (Akan), it continues to exist and play a role in the world even in a post-mortem state, as an ancestor.

Atman has no substantive location. Being the same as Brahman it is beyond time and space, while in Akan it has a vaguely locational connotation, as suggested by Wiredu, though this has been contested by thinkers like Gyekye and Gbadagesin.[17]

Immortality of the soul and the consequent idea of its rebirth is taken for granted in both. In Advaita, the soul or *jivatman* can be reborn anywhere and in any form of existence (till the knowledge of Ultimate Reality is gained), but among the Akan the soul is reborn only within the clan or the family and only in human form. In the Indian concept a person is reborn according to the action s/he performs in the world of relationality. Since God, as creator, does not 'prescribe' a role in this tradition, the law of Karma inviolably holds good in the concept of rebirth. The only 'duty' of the human person is to strive to realise his/her oneness with the Divine through living by the right codes of conduct so as to render the mind pure enough to realise that truth. The soul, after death, goes beyond the social — hence the possibility of rebirth in any form and any place.

In Akan it remains connected to, and continues to play a role in the social group — in the clan or tribe — even in the post mortem state. Edwin Smith, referring to Danquah's postulates in this matter writes, that rebirth is

> not a matter of sins committed in a previous birth. The Akan know nothing of *karma*... the inexorable law of moral causation that what a man sows he also reaps, whether in the present incarnation or some other. According to Akan belief, man is not born a sinner; he is imperfect only because 'his fullness in goodness is not complete.'"[18]

Rebirth in Akan is directed towards a 'becoming', a fulfilling of the *nkrabea,* the inscription of God's plan, inscribed on the human soul. Danquah, in a vague sort of manner, compares the human to a

> bucket of water drawn from a well; as the drawer pulls it up he feels that it is not full, so he lets it down again, perhaps for a third of fourth time, until the weight assures him that it is full. When the *nkrabea* is fully carried out... then for the soul there is a glad home-going..."[19]

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[17] Gbadegesin, in Coetzee and Roux, p.158-9, states that concepts such as extrasensory perception are based on the non-physical nature of the human spirit (as seen in the analysis of *sunsum*) which can communicate with others across the boundaries of the physical. Giving a spatial connotation to the soul would limit it.

[18] Smith, 1945, p. 26.

[19] Quoted in Smith, 1945, p. 26.

Advaita calls upon the soul to *discover* its identity with Brahman, through deep reflection.

As an undifferentiated sentient mass, the soul, in both, remains basically inactive or passive. Though in the composition of the human it is the enlivening factor, it does not act on its own. In Advaita, the Atman, though essentially Brahman, remains covered by *avidya*, ignorance; while in Akan the *Okra* is part of God and continues in the human person as an undifferentiated consciousness. It is the other constituents of the person, *sunsum* in Akan and the mind body complex in Vedanta, that play an active role in the life of the individual, even as they are enlivered by the soul.

Both *okra* and *atman* have a connection with breath — the vital life principle. *Honhom*, breath, in Akan is ontologically connected to Okra, while the Vedantic *prana* has the same etymology as *Atman*, *both of which have a connection to breath.*

Epistemology

The epistemologies of the two traditions differ in consonance with their ultimate goals. Though origin in both takes place from a similar abstract entity — Nyame in one and Brahman in the other — the ultimate relationship of the human to this entity is different. Akan epistemology deals with a real world. On the other hand, the whole epistemological structure of Advaita is constructed in order to ultimately be negated for the sake of proving the identity of the manifest names and forms with the Divine, the Brahman.

Epistemological construction of the human person in Advaita makes it possible for him/her to return to, rather to recognise identity with the original Being, by proving his/her phenomenological status to, ultimately, be illusory. Both *Isvara srishti* (God's creation) and *jiva srishti* (human creation in the sense of a person's perception of the universe around him/her) are but "unsubstantial appearance[s], a mirage imposed upon Brahman, the real *par excellence*,"[20] as Dasgupta states. In Akan the constituent elements, such as *mogya* and *sunsum* as also the *ntoro* (which, being drawn from the father, connects a person to a nature deity), are meant to show the organic linkage of the individual with the larger clan, such as ancestors, and with environmental forces.

Both make epistemological use of the experience of the *dream* state. In Akan it is used to show that the spirit, as *sunsum*, can leave the body

[20] Dasgupta, vol. II, p. 53.

and interact with other *sunsums* in this state. This establishes a separate ontological status for the spirit. It is used to show the possibility of spiritual interaction between all beings even when they continue to have individual identities and their own separate *sunsums*. In Advaita, it is utilised to show the illusoriness of phenomenal experience. Just as a seemingly concrete creation and physical transactions take place in dream out of no available physical material and with no organs of perceptions for cognition to take place, so too the world that we see is only seemingly real.

Ignorance in Advaita is given epistemic value. It is a tool that helps explain the existence of the world and the individual while providing a clue to the underlying reality, the ultimate goal. The erroneous perception of the universe as a real entity becomes a gateway for understanding and knowing the Divine. On the other hand, creation being real in the Akan conception, there is no concern with ignorance or erroneous perception. It focuses on social reality and with ways of maintaining social harmony and equilibrium.

Levels of reality in both are conceived differently. These are defined elaborately in Vedanta. While there is one existential Reality, the secondary or phenomenal realities are not denied a status of reality. Yet they are placed in hierarchically lower categories. The secondary realities cease to exist when the Truth of the Ultimate Reality is realised. Akan, too, recognises a hierarchy of realities. The secondary is a dependent reality that continues as long as God continues. Since God continues to exist eternally the secondary reality also continues to exist.

There is no linguistic distinction between Truth and Fact in either. The root word *sat*, in Vedanta conveys both relative truth and fundamental, existential Reality. In Akan, too, according to Wiredu, the phrase *nea ete saa* stands for both.[21]

Morality

In both traditions, ethics forms an important part of attaining the ultimate goal. Advaita seeks Freedom from duality. Morality, applying to a world of duality, falls in the sphere of the illusory. Yet morality is by no means ignored, rather it is seen as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for reaching the ultimate goal of non-duality. Prime value is accorded to an experiential unconditionally satisfying state of Freedom, of Bliss, which is a state of ontological purity, bereft of any dualistic distractions. Morality

[21] See Wiredu, 1996, pp. 106-110.

is required to reach that state. Morality thus becomes one of the means for the attainment of that goal. An abrogation of moral rules would not render the mind pure enough to attain the highest goal. Vedantic ethics is, thus, constructed to render the covering *veil* of ignorance transparent so as to enable a vision of the Brahman which is the substratum.

Morality in Akan has intrinsic value. Ethics is a vital part of existence as it enables perpetuation of the world. Being rooted in social obligations it enables a fuller realisation of a harmonious life — the goal that Akan ethics engages itself with.

There is no concept of a heaven or hell or retribution in an after-world in either as that has to be worked out in the here and now. But a life lived in accord with ethical norms embedded in the world views of each tradition leads to differing results in the *post mortem* state, ancestorhood in one and a more evolved form in the other.

The fundamental goal of existence, in both, is realised only through fulfilling certain responsibilities that the human is born with. Morality, in either, is not so much rights oriented as it is oriented towards fulfilment of duties prescribed according to one's station in life. In Akan, it is according to one's social and chronologiccal positions and as inscribed by the Supreme God in the *nkrabea* of a person and in Vedanta, one may say, it is according to the *Ashrama* dharma — the stage of one's life as per one's biological and intellectual evolution. The approach in both is contextual. The stages — *Brahmancarya*, dedicated to learning; *Grihastha*, given to raising a family, looking after the larger family and engaging in economic activities; *Vanaprastha*, in which a person moves to the periphery of social life but remains in the capacity of an advisor and; *Sanyasa*, in which the person is solely dedicated to spiritual pursuits — impose their own specific duties on a person in Vedantic thought.

The individual's responsibility in Vedanta is to know his/her intrinsic reality. Preparation is required to fulfil this responsibility, which enjoins certain norms of behaviour on the individual. The world as such, even though seen to be illusory in nature, becomes a training ground for self-realisation.[22] The norms of phenomenal life cannot be neglected as long as one is in the human form, living in society. The *Katha Upanishad* shows that even Yama, the presiding deity of Time, is governed by the norms of social behaviour. He, too, has to atone for having neglected Nachiketa who had come to his house as a guest. The tests, that a prospective candidate for higher learning is subjected to in the Upanishads, reflect that s/he should fulfil certain conditions as laid down

[22] Raju, 1966, see pp. 260, 263, 264.

in the form of *sadhana chatushtaya*[23] before s/he can embark on the final path of self realisation.

Seeing oneself as a separate, individualised, existent is denounced in both. In Akan it is the identification with the community that has prime value. It is essential for being recognised as a complete 'person'. Identity with the community is gained by recognising oneself as a part of the communal whole. In Advaita, on the other hand, the individual is required to realise his/her identity with the universal Whole. It is the removal of wrong identification with the individualised self and recognition of the true Self that is emphasised. This Absolute identity is universal in nature in which, ideally speaking, the notion of an 'other', of separation, is altogether dissolved.

Death, in Vedanta, takes a person out of social grouping,[24] but in Akan s/he never ceases to be part of the community, even in death. The sociality of the person and the moral values attached to it continue in after life.[25]

In neither case is the individual doomed to a perpetual hell. In Vedanta there is no notion of 'sin' other than *avidya*, or ignorance. What it offers in terms of teaching is a correction of the conceptual error, about oneself and the world. In Akan, any abrogation of the laid-down code of conduct is correctible as the individual, through certain purificatory rituals is inducted back into the group and not subjected to an eternal hell. The spirit can be cleansed by certain rituals.

Communication of Knowledge

A one-to-one Guru-shishya relationship is crucial to the dissemination of Vedantic knowledge. Since this knowledge requires an experiential transcendence of empirical binaries, it cannot be gained through the normal instruments of perception and phenomenal knowledge. Since Reality is *not one of the many items of the universe* but the *substratum* of all, it requires an inner transformation, a shift of perception, for its realisation. Such esoteric knowledge can only be imparted by a realised person who has him/herself had an experienc of this reality. It is generally imparted to a student who is mentally and emotionally disciplined and

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[23] *Sadhana chatushtaya* refers to four important disciplines that an individual is required to pracrtice. One of them — *satsampatti* — six virtues pertains to disciplines necessary for the purification of the mind to render it fit for higher knowledge. They consist of moral injunctions, norms of conduct and rules for self-discipline, for living life in the world. These norms are both social and personal.

[24] Raju, 1966, p. 260.

[25] Calhoun, 1980, p. 314.

so, ready to receive it. To the extent that it is given selectively to an eligible seeker, it may seem to be exclusive, yet it is available to all who aspire to approach it, and have the keenness to learn.

The urge for gaining such knowledge arises from within the individual when s/he, for one reason or another, feels compelled to find a truth greater than what is phenomenally experienced — a truth that is beyond the mutations of change, hence stable. A high degree of self-effort and self-reflection is involved in this.

The mode of teaching is generally dialogic and takes a structured form following Vedantic methodology to enable the arising of a non-mediate, experiential knowledge. The Guru chooses the mode that is appropriate for a particular student as by his/her perspicacity and closeness to the student, s/he is conversant with the mental make-up of the disciple.

Repetition of the teaching from different angles plays an important part in Vedanta. As Yohanan Grinshporn states, repetition, by touching on different levels of consciousness, enables an inner transformation which is an important part of the training.[26] It also facilitates retention.

With the Akan, on the other hand, those who enter into the spiritual mode, are often called upon by a deity or Divine agency to do so (see appendices I, II, III). The call comes to them without any inclination on their part to this calling. They are, as though, taken unawares. Some of them even try to avoid or ignore this call but finally have to give in. The training then begins in the particular shrine that one is called to. It often continues for three to five years and pertains mainly to taboos with regard to the particular god they are to serve. It opens them up to the spirit that would communicate through them. It also pertains to knowledge of herbs and plants. The chosen one learns to communicate with and control the spirits that would heal and help his/her people. Only such a person can communicate with the spirits and ancestors on behalf of the group.

The normal run of the people, in the Akan tradition, gain insights into their knowledge system by participating in certain rituals, especially in moments of crises, when elders and learned persons are called upon to resolve the issue at hand. It is through their pronouncements and discussions that the younger generations learn. Knowledge is gleaned by listening to the goings on and internalising the vocabulary of maxims, metaphors, proverbs and aphorisms. Most of it concerns social relations and dispensation of justice for a good life in the phenomenal world. The pithiness, and often the rhyming nature, of the pronouncements serves a mnemonic purpose, as being heard over and over again they come to be

[26] Grinshporn, p. 130.

memorised. Even when ritual libations are poured and the gods are invoked the participants call for a repetition of the same (see appendices III, and VI). The call serves several purposes. It enables participation, it ensures that the deity invoked actually hears the call, and indirectly it becomes a mode of teaching as repetition helps retention.

Time

Time in the African thought system is "not an academic concern," it does not have a "notion of abstract time which can be measured apart from events.... In traditional Africa 'time' does not really exist apart from human activity; time is created by human beings."[27] In Advaita, Time arises only when creation arises, it has no independent reality of its own.

Conclusion

While the singularity of God, as the essential Existent and the Creator, is extolled in both traditions, at the level of manifestation the concepts take different forms. In the Akan tradition it is relationality, the recognition of oneself through another, that is emphasised — '*I am because you are*'. Vedantic texts stress the identity of the person with the Ultimate. '*I am That*' and '*That thou art*' are fundamental statements that have to be realised experientially. This realisation frees one from fear and conditionality, as they lead to the negation of a separate 'other'. In Akan, the possibility of interaction of one spirit on another generates a sense of caution, a fear that the other may harm one, especially if one does not follow the right code of conduct.

Ancestors, in the Akan tradition, are nearest to God, they can intervene and plead on behalf of humans. In Advaita, the experience of the ultimate has to be an immediate experience without mediation by an external agency. It is the result of individual self-effort.

Viewed from another perspective, it may be said that while both traditions cater to different goals, certain points of similarity between the two can be seen by recognising elements that differentiate and distinguish them from the Judaeo Christian traditions. Some of these are enumerated here:

- Neither religion is propagated by a Prophet or through revelation received by a particular person at a given point in time. Both are the result of knowledge gained intuitively by wise persons and sages.
- In both traditions, the Divine is transcendent as well as immanent

[27] Booth, 1975, p. 83.

at the same time. While God is beyond the grasp of normal human organs of perception yet everything is seen to be pervaded and permeated by that Divinity. Hence, all phenomena — animate and inanimate — are sacred.

- As everything proceeds from the one Divinity, the whole cosmos is seen to be an organically interconnected unit, there being no discrete independent entities.
- While both look upon the Supreme God as an abstraction, a spiritual essence, since He is beyond words or concepts, yet in both, He is contactable, either through experiential realisation, or through some agencies for gaining material ends.
- Knowledge is valued highly in both and wise persons are looked up to with great veneration. Notwithstanding where wisdom comes from, it is respected. As one African proverb proclaims: '*A child who has washed his hands may eat with the elders*'. In Vedanta, too, the background of the wise one is immaterial, what is valued is knowledge. Several Upanishadic texts corroborate this.
- There is a concept of reincarnation in both — even if in differing ways. This changes the attitude to death, as physical death is not a final end.
- The spirit, or soul, can cleanse itself through ritual or penance, so it is not doomed forever.
- Orality and oral communication continue to be an important element for spiritual transmission in both. Dialogue, maxims, aphorisms, proverbs, riddles form an important part of transmission of knowledge in both traditions. Pithy statements, that can be easily remembered, form an important part of the spiritual repertoire.
- The 'other' in each is not a discrete unconnected entity. In Advaita the other is conceptually the same as oneself as there can be no real other. In the African tradition, it is a related entity arising from the same common Divine ancestor but retaining its distinct identity.

These similarities are subsumed by some fundamental and significant differences, some of which are:

- Advaita propagates a non-dual oneness which establishes identity of the individual with the Supreme Reality. The African religion seems to be dualistic in nature. Even though the person takes birth in a seemingly non-dual environment the Supreme God seems to take on an anthropomorphic form after the *Kra* takes shape. While the human being originates from God, s/he does not remain identical with Him. The human in Akan continues to have a separate

identity and does not seek to prove oneness with the Supreme from which s/he originates.

- Family and propagation of the family is of the greatest importance in African religion and is a divinely ordained duty. In Advaita that is not relevant to the ultimate goal, even though procreation is emphasised as a duty so long as one identifies with the phenomenal world.
- In the African religion, external ritual plays an important part in connecting to the divine. Pursuit of knowledge, without relying on ritual, through specific logical presumptions is the method of Advaita. Yet, ritual is not decried as it is used for disciplining and purifying the mind.
- Advaitic pursuit of divinity is an individual enterprise, while in the African tradition it is a communal concern. Ritual, an expression of the spiritual pursuit, is mostly community-oriented.
- Time in Advaita is ultimately non-existent, a part of the apparent world, a world that does not stand scrutiny when examined from the standpoint of the Real. In the African conception, time stands for relations between activities.[28] This is in keeping with the pragmatic and concretistic African conception of creation.

Strengths and Weaknesses

In the final analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of the two systems of thought and belief can be seen to be based on their ultimate goals. Advaita calls for Freedom from duality, through a possibility for recognising one's identity with the Supreme that is beyond mortality and relational limitations. But this engagement with a higher than phenomenal reality tends to undermine the sense of community identity as also of the kind of nationalistic consciousness that is a feature of the African tradition.

As Mbiti says, African traditional religions "cannot but remain tribal and nationalistic, since they do not offer for mankind at large, a way of 'escape', a message of 'redemption' (however that might be conceived)...Such 'redemption' involves rescue from the monster of death, regaining immortality and attaining the gift of resurrection."[29] Mbiti calls it a two-dimensional religion — a religion that remains engaged with the world of here and now, and its perpetuation. It does not concern itself with a final aim of going beyond that, an aim which he calls the "third dimension". Paradoxically, this very element generates the strong point of the African tradition, which gives rise to an ethical consciousness that

[28] Booth, 1975, p. 83.
[29] Mbiti, 1971, p. 99.

lay great stress on care for the other. This is the element that was highlighted by African leaders during their struggles for independence as they created and projected theories of African Socialism, Consciencism, and more recently, the philosophy of Ubuntu — all of which stress the African concern for the other and for human dignity. In the current socio-political environment, African leaders have striven to stretch these concepts to include all those who now form a part of the new boundaries (irrespective of tribal or ethnic backgrounds) of the postcolonial nations, enabling them to experiment with concepts that would enhance the dignity of all.

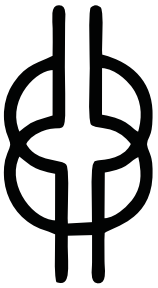
The Indian philosophy is more concerned with individual evolution and self-disciplines, that would eventually connect one to all beings. The Indian liberation struggle, laid emphasis on *svaraj* or *svarajya*. This term as Makarand Paranjape states, "in its modern parlance has political overtones, [though] the idea of svarajya is as old as the Upanishads. In the *Taittiriya svarajya* is defined as the complete sovereignty and uncontrolled dominion that is obtained upon attaining oneness with the Ultimate Reality (*Taittiriya*,1. 6.2)....[Hence] in striving for one's individual *svarajya*, one is ... striving for svarajya of all."[30] The pursuit, begins at the individual level, calling for a deep inner transformation at that level. While the term connotes

> liberty, freedom and independence, *svaraj* also suggests a host of possibilities for inner illumination and self-realization... [and] greater resonance and complexity. It is also not directed *against* anyone else. One's own svaraj can only help others and contribute to the svaraj of others.... We cannot be free unless all others are free too; they cannot be free unless we are free. Svaraj allows us to resist oppression without hatred or violence....[31]

Thus, both systems, as they draw from tradition, stress on an inclusivity that engenders a spiritual enhancement of all concerned, even when they are placed in oppositional relationships of oppressor and oppressed.

[30] Paranjape, p. 57.
[31] Paranjape, p. 70. Emphasis added.

Bibilogrpahy



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Prof Emeritus Kwame Gyekye, Department of Philosophy, University of Ghana, Legon, several meetings in January, February and March 2011.

Rev Abamfo Atiemo, 11.1.2011.
Bishop Peter Sarpong, Kumasi, 19.2.2011, 20.2.2011
Rev Emmanuel Asante, Bishop of Accra, 20.1.2011, 15.2.2011.
Rev Professor Elom Dovlo, Department of for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon, 19.1.2011, 2.2.2011.
Prof Kofi Agyekum, Head, Department of Linguistics, University of Ghana, Legon, 1.2.2011.
Professor Emeritus Brigid Sackey, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, 9.2.2011.
Dr. Martin Ajei, Department of Philosophy, University of Ghana, Legon, 14.3.2011.
Rev Ernestina Afriyie, Senior Lecturer, Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Akropong, Akuapem Region, 29.1.2011.

Priests and Priestesses:

Okomfo Ama Ayibea a priestess of Obosomase, Akuapem Region, 6.2.2011.
Nana Ansah Oparabea II, Chief Priestess, Akonedi Shrine, Larteh, Akuapem Region, 6.2.2011.
Okomfo More, Kwaku Bonsam shrine at Akomadan, near Techiman, 18.2.2011.
Nsumankwahene, Chief priest of the Ashanti King, Kumasi, 19.2.2011
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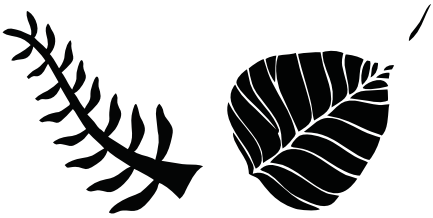
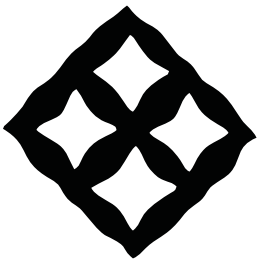


Appendices



In this section I have reproduced some of my conversations with traditional priests who continue to perform rituals and provide services to the general populations in Ghana. Visits to these priests established that, despite the assumption in some quarters that African traditional religion and practices are no longer in existence, as they have been overtaken by Christianity, actually they are very much in evidence. In a comment on my paper presented at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (in June 2012) Prof. Abamfo Atiemo, Head of the Department for the study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon (who was visiting the IIAS at that time) said: "One might raise the legitimate question as to whether these traditional values of the African (in this case, the Akan), still exist and continue to hold any promise for making societies better." And he himself went on to provide the answer, "Admittedly, what we talk about as 'African values' today, must necessarily be hybrid: they include elements drawn from the historical experiences of African peoples. These experiences include colonialism, Christian missionary encounters and the presence and growth of Islam on the Continent. However, in spite of these experiences, the indigenous values have proved resilient and, in many cases, constitute the driving force underlying the behaviours of individuals and groups."

As examples of these he said that both in the cities and the countryside, citizens frequently resort to traditional ways of settling disputes. Community leaders such as Chiefs and other officials of indigenous institutions, as also Christian and Muslim leaders, continue to settle cases through arbitration. This is due to the traditional concern with regard to keeping the harmony in society.

He said this factor also accounted for the mollifying nature of the people — making possible the peaceful nature of Ghanaian politics. Drawing from Lamin Sanneh (Professor of History at Yale University), he stressed that foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam have all been 'domesticated'. Their originally, exclusivist and intolerant orientation has been blunted because they have been schooled into the traditional culture.

The traditional view of the human being as a composite of spirit and matter (a belief that links humans to God), and beliefs about ancestors and the society, influence the understanding of health and healing.

Yet, Reverend Atiemo said, we talk about a synthesis because everything in the African culture is not glorious. Thus "we take from our own those aspects which are noble, and reject those which do not fit the overall intent of the underlying metanarrative that encapsulates the high humanitarian values of the contemporary world."

I found that Akan metaphysical concepts, as they are understood today, are deduced from the articulations of traditional practitioners who continue to mould the mindsets of the citizens — even those who are educated in the 'modern' western way. They show the impact of traditional values and ethical sensibilities on what Peter Ekeh calls the 'primordial public,' whose primordial groupings, sentiments and ties, and activities, "nevertheless impinge on the public interest," [1] because the "same political actors simultaneously operate in the primordial and 'civic publics'."[2]

Visits into the interior of the country and into spaces on the periphery of towns and urban areas — where many of the priests and religious practitioners live[3] — were revelatory, as they showed how 'gods' lived on the intersections of towns and forests, connecting two disparate areas. Conversations with priests in their own habitats authenticated and validated the formalised expositions of African metaphysical and philosophical conceptions put forth by modern scholars.

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[1] Ekeh, p. 92.

[2] Ekeh, p. 93.

[3] Jan Platvoet writes that in Akan indigenous religion the gods remain in 'wild nature' as they are constituted not merely by the *union* of the material and the spiritual, but by the 'co-incidence' of the material and spiritual. He states that the gods bridge wild 'nature' and 'culture.' As present in the natural world of forests, mountains, rocks and rivers, surrounding human habitations, the gods are regarded as the 'awesome, untamed, threatening and potentially destructive powers inherent in that universe'. (Platvoet, Jan G., 'Nyame ne Aberewa: Towards A History of Akan Notions of God' *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol 4, 2012, pp. 39 -65.)

Appendix I

Okomfo* Ama Aiyebea Obosomase

February 6.2011

We drive about Thirty-five kilometres east from Accra on a very good and scenic road through the Akaupem-Togo mountain range into the Akuapem region. The air becomes cooler as we get further away from Accra, and from the sea, and closer to the mountain range. Osofo Kwasi Quarm drives me there to meet Okomfo Aiyebea as he insists that I see the religion as it is practised 'on the ground' and not go just by conclusions arrived at by philosophers and scholars. We go past Osofo's house in Adante beyond Madina on the outskirts of Accra to greet his wife before setting out. Osofo himself works on traditional medicine and tries to revive and propagate it nationally and internationally as much as possible.

On the way to Obosomase where we are headed, Osofo drives off the road onto a rough gravelly surface. Getting off we walk through a brambly fence into a compound set in the midst of some trees. A couple of women sitting on a stone bench to our right seem to be getting some food items ready. A little further, on their right, is a wooden rack meant for sacrifices. A goat is being slaughtered on it by two young men. I did not realise how easy it was to just slit the neck and wring it off. The meat will perhaps be offered to the deity and the devotees.

A few more steps in front of us on the right is a room which is supposed to be a shrine. In front of it, in the porch covered with an asbestos roof sits the priest on a stool placed on the rough floor. He is eating from a plate containing mashed yam and some whole boiled eggs — sacred food that is consumed before performing a ritual. He cannot see us today as we have come at a time when he is busy. He will be performing a ritual on behalf of some people who have approached him with a problem. Straight ahead, a bit to the left and past an open space, there are some rooms. We see a couple of young men standing around outside

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* A priest or priestess, one who gets 'possessed'

— perhaps part of the family of the priest. After eating a little he pushes away the plate which is picked up by one of the youngsters and taken to the women sitting on the side. Perhaps they will eat the blessed food. The priest is willing to let us take a photo of him, but not before he puts on the frock which is his priestly attire. His benign face reflects tranquillity and wisdom.

Soon, we leave him and drive on.

Obosomase is a small village with, at most, a couple of dozen houses erected next to each other, some of them in a haphazard kind of manner so that one has to zigzag through them to reach a particular house. As we approach the village we see a few vendors selling bright red palm fruit laid out on canvas squares spread on the ground. The colour glistens in the sun and makes them look like red chillies from a distance. There are some open shacks with matted coconut fibre coverings. The rough hewn wooden tables under them have not yet been mobilised into action as platforms for selling bits of produce. So, the shacks are empty.

We weave our way to the Okomfo's house through what look like mud plastered structures into a narrow veranda with rooms along the right side and an open courtyard on the left in which there is a structure in the middle that houses a kitchen. At the end of the yard, on the entrance side is a wall with a door that leads into a toilet that is open to the skies.

We sit outside on plastic chairs in the veranda as a young man who, I learn later, is her brother and also acts as her *okyeame* (interpreter or 'linguist'). He informs us that she will be with us soon. From inside the curtained room we can hear voices of children and the loud sounds of some television programme.

An easily approachable stocky looking woman comes out to greet us. She is short and looks younger than I had expected and is willing to answer questions that we pose. We offer the obligatory schnapps that we have brought for her which is received by her *okyeame* as the priestess does not herself take the gifts that are customarily brought. Initially I am at a loss regarding how to begin the conversation and what to ask. Osofo Quarm is going to interpret for us as she does not know English and I do not speak Twi. I ask her to pray for us and bless us.

She pours a little schnapps, given to her by the *Okyeame*, onto the ground and mumbles a prayer. She takes her feet out of the slippers but stands on them as she does not touch the ground with her bare feet. The prayer, for our well being and protection, is offered first to Onyakopon, the Supreme God.

I ask her how she became priestess.

Through Osofo she explains that she finished school in the year 1982 in Adanse, an area near Kumasi. One day she was going for a wash in the river. Her brother asked her not to go as on Tuesdays her clansmen don't wash in the river. She went nevertheless. There she saw a man on other side of the river who beckoned her to come to him. She told him that she was aware that nobody crosses that river on Tuesdays. So she didn't go but started collecting water. The moment she dipped her bucket into water both she and the bucket went straight down into the river. Some people saw her drowning and ran to her brother to tell him that. He looked for people to come and help and they pulled her out.

That was the beginning of her possession. It was also an indication that she was preparing, she said, to come here to a foreign territory as on foreign territory she would be allowed to go and wash on a Tuesday. [Obosomase is foreign territory as it is well over two hundred kilometres from Kumasi. Customs here are different to those she was brought up in.]

How did she know?

After she was recovered from the river, a deity was consulted and it was disclosed that she was chosen by the deity of Obosomase. So they brought her to obosomase. She did not talk after being rescued from the river but when she recovered consciousness she found herself at Obosomase. Her brother brought her here in her speechless condition. Then, after some rites were performed, she became conscious of her new role and mission.

Before being possessed she was just a normal girl. Was she not surprised at what happened and why she was chosen by the deity?

For her, it runs in their house, she says. There is a long line of priests in her family. So it was a normal event and that was accepted. It was not a surprise.

Did she have to undergo any training for her new role? I ask.

When brought to the shrine the priestess in-charge discovered that the deity possessing her was a very old person who did not need her priestess to be taken around for training. So, she herself was going to teach her. She also got a priest to train her there itself.

Was the training rigorous?

It was tough and strenuous. You serve the priestess or the priest. (Osofo Quarm explains:) He would take her to forest to collect herbs, she would get up early. She was always directed and was not really herself as she was fully under the control of the priest. Besides she was always fasting till two in the afternoon.

What for her was the significance of fasting?

It was a part of training. You have to accept it as normal.

Was it for cleansing?

He won't tell you, you learn to do it as a part of the training. You accept that work is more important than stomach. He knows it, but he also knows that you are learning something by obeying, and through discipline.

How did she recognise the herbs?

The man himself led her into the bush saying you take this, dig that, collect that.

Did her life change after the possession?

Yes, she is in a new state now. She can't do what her peers can do. She has to keep herself chaste and separate from ordinary life.

Chaste?

(Quarm answers for her:) She is now a special person in the eyes of the community. Her moral behaviour and the way she carries herself, everything had to change. Besides, she has to remain much to herself.

Do a lot of people come? What do they come for?

Yes, many come. More of them are pregnant women and women with infants and she invokes the deity to help them.

There was Tigare (a new deity that had displaced some older ones) here, before she was possessed. Now Tigare has been moved from here.

How did Tigare move?

It was her uncle who brought Tigare here. When he grew old he asked

his children to take it back. Tigare, a type of deity, is an effigy while the Obosom is natural, says Quarm. 'I make them alive', the Okomfo says. 'They don't have image, they are only in spirit'.

I ask them about her concept of the makeup of the human being?

(She laughs. Now her brother also speaks to help her out.) A human being is not just a physical body, but spiritual. You can know that from your dreams. If you can dream you can know that some part of you is a person with some other thing. Dreaming enables a person to know not just physical body but a spiritual element in it. The human is both divine and natural. Human beings are formed and created, they are divine. Nobody was there to counsel God when he created, so it is difficult to say.

When a person dies, how do we believe that he is still there?

(Brother responds while she laughs heartily:) She was preparing her food when you came. We are hungry.

How do we know the person is still there?

For us it is tradition, we have come to inherit it as a belief. We cannot experiment it. That is why it is belief, established belief, that the dead are not yet gone.

What is the significance of libations?

When we want to talk to, or speak with, God we pour libation. (Quarm speaks:) As we pour the schnapps the vapour from it mixes with air, the liquid goes down and mixes with the earth and the air goes to wherever God is. Air is everywhere, it will reach god. In the same way when we pour libation it reaches ancestors wherever they are. We have known that they've passed from the stage of physical visibility to the realm of invisibility where we cannot see them. Same way this alcohol will pass from physical visibility to the realm of invisibility and the gods will get our message.

When she pours libation does she think it will go to God or only to the particular god that she is a priestess for?

(Quarm:) Did you observe when she poured libation this morning? The first reference was to *Nyankopon*. Whatever she does to gods, the ultimate

belief is that it reaches God, and God is not absent from the deity, just as it is not absent from her body. The deity becomes the medium, the *Okyeame,* a servant of God.

So she never speaks to God directly?

(Laughs again and shrugs at the invalidity of the question:) From where? How can it be possible? How can you talk to God?

You spoke of speaking to the wind?

That is through the agency of ancestors, or of *obosom.* Agency is everywhere — on ground it will light, put on your body it will light. There is energy everywhere. Everywhere you speak to God he will hear it. He is alive, never born or dead.

Is Nyame not accessible because He doesn't have form?

(Brother + *Okomfo:*) There's no radical dichotomy between obosom and God, between human being and god. God is in creation and creatures manifest His presence and essence. *Obosom* is a recognition of the transcendence and immanence of God.

Does Nyame belong to a tribe or group?

(Much laughter) The sex of God is never determined. He is for everybody. God is God. When we pour libation, it is through ancestors and ancestors are my own people, *Obosom* are also tribal?
(Brother, and Okomfo laugh)

I ask Quarm if she is unhappy or irritated with my questions.

He says: These questions are academic. (I say that my intent is to understand.) For them their knowledge is that God is real, they don't probe into who God is. He is nearest to them, but to be near God one needs to be near deities. They believe that when you die you go to God. So they remember their ancestors and call upon them. For, having been human they (ancestors) are nearer to them. They knew them in the conditions in which they were before they left. So they'll be able to answer their prayers. That is why they call upon ancestors. They are part of the whole creation which defines God.

If you want to know God know it from yourself, from your neighbour, from creation around you. God is in the image of the human being.

Africans are not interested in abstractions but in immediate solutions, in how to get food, good health, enjoy happiness, long life, avert misfortune.

Definitely, nobody is forever. A time comes to make way for others. We can't be greedy and selfish and block the way for others. We know that the physical body will be rotten, yet there is an element that remains, the emotional being. So we bury the body with good omens.

Nyame is *Nyame*. The moment you single out Nyame you've lost the essence of our religion. Nyame is not only in you, him, air, plant, rock. The whole of creation has got Nyame — visible invisible, known unknown, seen unseen, all is His creation. Creation is not just what you see.

Suddenly he stops and says: I don't want my personal thinking to get into it that is why I would like someone else to interpret. I don't want you to go back with another academic interpretation.

She wishes she could speak directly with you. (Lots of laughter.)

Rattray could talk directly to the people so he got the truth and wrote that which changed the minds of Europeans. He describes only what he has seen. But there's never a shrine for *Nyame*. Though Rattray wrote it....

Does the deity speak through her? I ask.

It is not all that get possessed. Some speak when not possessed. Some speak when possessed.

Does she do something to be possessed or does possession just happen to her?

When she's getting possessed there's some strange feeling momentarily in the body. It may also begin when the *Okyeame* pours libation and invites the deity. (The brother who is the Okyeame also knows the language of the deity). Then *Okyeame* communicates with the deity that comes through her. He presents the message of the people to her. Then when she regains consciousness he summarises the message to her.

When possessed she doesn't know what is happening?

She doesn't see what she is saying. God, or the deity (God is spirit too, he says) speaks through the medium. The deities speak for us. The *Okyeame* will ask any question and she will answer.

When not possessed she does prayers, pours libation. Still she needs an *Okyeame* to witness whatever is happening. He is like a server to her. And she is a server to God.

What does she treat with — herbs or prayers?

She starts everything with libation.

Again I ask if she finds my questions to be inconsequential or meaningless.

She's not disturbed by your questions and thinks that what you are doing is worthwhile. If you want to follow, she will take you anywhere else to meet other *Akomfos* and you can ask them also. Actually they are going to celebrate a festival. This community celebrates by sacrificing a cow or a calf every three years. But this year it is a family that has erred who is going to do the sacrifice. She will let you know the date. You should come and witness it to get a feel of the whole thing. She'll call you.

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Appendix II

Nana Ansah Operebea II
Chief Priestess
Akonedi Shrine, Larteh

February 6.2011

Akonedi, or Nana Akonedi Abena, is an ancient shrine with branches and affiliates in other countries. It is about ten kilometres from Obosomase and is located in a sacred house on the hill at Kubease. We drive through an undulating forest to reach it. On the way Osofo Quarm points out some *Nyame Dua* (they look like Alstoma) trees whose forked branches (a branch which has three prongs coming out of it) are used for placing a pot of water for the spirits outside homes. Nana Akonedi is supposed to mete out justice and give the final decision in difficult disputes related to Chieftaincy, hierarchy, property, land, family and other major issues.

The Shrine is located in a sort of grove on the upper section of the hill. It covers a large area. We approach it from the rear through a kind of corridor and enter a courtyard with corn and some other grains spread on the ground, and chickens pecking on them. A goat and a sheep saunter around. A wizened old woman cooks something in a large pot over wood placed in an earthen fire-place in the front part of the courtyard. Further down there is a tin roofed structure with a pile of firewood stacked alongside its wall. There are some more mud-plastered fire places, some have round stones placed on them, perhaps for placing cooking pots. In front of us is a row of two-three rooms. Nana Ansa Operebea II, Chief priestess of Akonedi, sits on a plastic chair against the sunbathed wall of one of the rooms.

The shrine is known for training priestesses who come from great distances so that they may go back and practice wherever they are located. People come to the shrine from anywhere, and for whatever trouble they may bring. It could be sickness, or any other problem. And "we are able to help," says the *Okyeame* of the Chief Priestess.

We, Osofo and I, offer the customary schnapps that we have brought. Her *Okeyame* places it before her. We ask for blessings and prayer on our behalf. The *Okyeame* pours out a little liquid in a bowl and hands it to her. She takes her feet out of the sandals and places them on top of the sandals as she pours a libation saying, "Nana Akonedi, here is a drink please accept it. We cannot drink without first offering it to you," etc. She goes on to bless Osofo Quarm, saying anyone who offers a drink to his (Osofo Quarm's) enemies should be drowned. She wishes both of us long life and prosperity. The *Okyeame* affirms the statements with what sound like grunts.

I ask her if some people come not just for material gains or family problems, but also for spiritual elevation, for making a connection with god, to savour His bounty. Would they come for anything like wanting to become more spiritual?

The *Okyeame* can speak good English. He interprets for her. She says, through him, that they come for consultations regarding some problem. Some do come for other reasons. Some pastors also come for spiritual *powers* so they may perform some wonders etc. for their parishners.

Does she have direct contact with the god of the shrine?

Yes, normally she has consultation with the god.

How was she trained to serve as the Chief Priestess? I ask.

She was trained by her predecessor. As of now she is the Head of all the branches and affiliates. Every new comer comes under her. Akonedi shrine has some other shrines under her. The Shrine will pick somebody whom the shrine loves, and if that happens, then the person has to be brought to her.

Is the training long and strict?

(Laughs) Previously it was harsh but now it is not like that. The longest would be three years. Earlier it used to be even more than five years.

[A website titled *Asomdwee Fie Shrine of the Abosom and Nsamanfo, Int'l* states: *Akomfo* receive divination, healing, interpretation, discerning and other powers from the Deities. The *Akomfo* take on the characteristics of the Deities when possessed and are able to dance, sing and relay messages from the *Abosom*. After a number of years of formal training (usually three (3) or more), the *Akomfo* are able to establish their own Houses.]

What do they learn — chanting, history, physical disciplines?

They come for training, to learn customs and rules of the shrine that possesses them, to know its rules and regulations. For example, if she [the deity] doesn't like this corn, and you touch it you are in trouble. You have to learn what to eat. There is a lot to know before one graduates as a priest.

How does one get chosen? What must one do for it?

The Shrine possesses the one to be brought here. She says, 'I am the person possessing this woman and want her to be trained as my priestess.'

Where was she (Nana) earlier?

She was far away, near Kumasi.

How was she found by the deity?

At that time she was going to school. At some time she started to perform things in school that she normally didn't do. It was strange to her peers. So they reported it to the parents.[1]

She did this for a few days, performing some wonders, etc. The parents then found that it was the deity of the Akonedi Shrine that was doing it. The Shrine itself told them that she was on Nana — 'I Nana Akonedi am on her'.

She was here for ten years under training.

What is particular or special about Akonedi as compared to others, for it is so well known even outside of Ghana?

Akonedi is a wonderful shrine and a big one. She performs a lot of wonders, like if someone has lost something, like this bucket for eg., Nana Akonedi can find it for the person. Definitely at the end the person who took the bucket would be brought here. If someone brought any disease which is strange, she can cure it.

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[1] With regard to this kind of 'strange' behaviour Platvoet says, it sets into motion a process of divination that causes a community to recognise that the 'mad' person is an elect of a new god and needs to be trained in order that he or she might serve as that god's *okomfo*, priest-medium.

(Platvoet, Jan G., "*Nyame ne Aberewa*: Towards A History of Akan Notions of God" *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol 4, 2012, pp. 39 -65.)

Does she cure by prayers or by herbal medicine?

Spiritual aspect and herbal medicine are attached together.

Did she belong to another shrine before being possessed by this one?

No, her parents also did not belong to any other shrine. Actually she doesn't clearly know about this as she was a young girl then.

Did she know Akonedi?

No.

It is strange. Is she the priestess for the town?

This shrine is international. This is the Head Quarters.

What role does it play? Do others come here from time to time?

The Head Quarter takes care of the Shrine, which has branches in America and in other countries. People come here twice every year for festivals — once in September-October and then in the second week of January. And then if someone has a problem they can come.

What happens in a festival?

They come during festival to worship the Shrine and give it food. Special food — mashed yam, one with palm oil on it and one without anything on it — is sprinkled out for the god. Other rituals are also performed for the Shrine during that time.

Is it connected with harvest?

It is known as yam festival as it is performed at the time of digging yam. If rites are not performed they can't eat the yam.

The first festival is for Akonedi Shrine — that is the Yam Festival. The other one is for the subsidiary deities that are under Akonedi.

What is the connection of the shrine to the human being? For, both the god of the shrine and humans are children of Supreme God? What is the difference between this spirit god and the human who also comes directly from god? The only difference seems to be that we have a physical body so we can act. The spirit cannot act like we can.

(She laughs) Before Christianity we were connected to God through these shrines. When Christianity came we started throwing shrines away and going to them (the Christians). They also obey the Ten Commandments. Priests and priestesses go by the same rules. Direction from god is almost the same.

Nana is a Christian and also becomes possessed. Can she be both without any conflict?

(Again laughs) She can't give an answer to that.

We look for spiritual answers because we ourselves are spirits. So, why should we look for material things from a spiritual source? I ask.

Yes...everything has spirit, not only humans. So our knowledge that everything has spirit makes us respect everything.

Humans continue to live after death, what of animals and trees?

We don't know. We know that we live.

How?

(Laughs) From tradition. Spirit belongs to the whole system — it is in the blood, soul, everything, so we don't need to separate it into segments... they are all divine, spiritual. They are all one.

Perhaps we imagine it to be so?! I Persist.

Yes, it is just our imagination.

So in Akan tradition there is no need to think of origins, etc?

She doesn't quite answer... but indicates a sort of yes.

What of the woman pounding the fufu?[This refers to the myth about the old woman pounding fufu and repeatedly hitting God with her pestle even when he warned her to refrain from doing so.] She made God move further away from humans.

(All of them laugh heartily) It's only a story. Nyame is supreme, beyond time and space. He was first. He was everything.

So what did he create from?

(Laughter again) Its a wonderful thing, a mystery, we don't need to know. And we won't get an answer. It is human knowledge. We only know that *Nyankopon* made it and laid the rules and we follow.

Are there any special rituals that she performs as Chief Priestess? I ask the Okyeame

The shrine has rules, regarding tradition and customs. She has to follow them all.

Is she seen to be a kind of physical representative of that spirit?

Yes. The Spirit is personified through her, they can come to her and see it.
(Laughs heartily)
[Then Nana Ansah wants to know if *I* want to become a priestess.]
(much laughter)

I am a bit taken aback as I answer: No, as one has to be chosen, it is not a choice that one makes. It is all nkrabea!

(Much laughter again)
Everything has its time, maybe your time has not yet come, she says.

Yes, I just need your blessings.

(Hearty laughter again)
So you may become one?

So that I may understand through your blessings!

You become one and understand, she says.

No, I have to have nyansa (wisdom) first, I answer.

Do you get possessed in the Hindu tradition? It is now Nana's turn to pose questions to me!

We have more stress on knowledge and learning.

Don't get possessed?

I can only answer in some kind of a negative.

She wants to know what a Hindu is, says the Okyeame.

I try to give a kind of explanation: They believe in one God, though He can be worshipped through whichever form one may like. The ultimate aim is to have knowledge of the Supreme, that the Supreme is none other than our own inner self. That is the most important thing. Through their wisdom the learned ones can also advise us regarding how to deal with mundane situations so as to get closer to our own Truth.

So it is important to have a cool mind so that we may know how best to act?
Then the *Okyeame* asks on her behalf, saying if *she* wants to become a Hindu, will you accept her?

I am not a teacher. I will have to be your student.

(Hearty laughter among all.)
If she wants to come to your place how could she come?

Travel there first and then I would like to take you to some of our holy places. God willing one day you will come.

Is the god of the shrine a male or female?

Female.

Can it have male priests also?

No, it is always female. Other shrines under it have male priests also. But not this one.

How are others chosen?

Same way as she was, and then brought here for graduation. Their station is also chosen — sometimes by the god and at other times by their own choice. She herself, after she graduated was sent back to her parents to practice there.

What of new ones?

The Shrine normally chooses a place where a priest or priestess needs to go. They may be possessed in Accra and then come here, but they may also be sent back. Then they have to settle somewhere out of the family house.

Do they then separate themselves from their original families?

The possessed one has to first look for a place and then bring the family to her side. She can't take the shrine to her place but can bring the family to the shrine. But at the Head Quarter only the Head Priestess can occupy the premises. At other places you bring your family to settle, as you can't stay alone. You definitely have to have some people around.

She is without family here?

Some of them are here but not the large family.
Nana then goes on to say that Christianity is not helping the society at all.

Yet everyone is becoming Christian, how do you answer this? I ask.

There's a difference between the Christianity they are practising currently as compared to the previous one. At present they don't tell the truth. They have spoiled Christianity. Earlier if one were worshipping god one could leave this bottle of schnapps here and go to Kumasi and back and still find it here. Now even if you leave it for a moment it will all be gone. Where is Christianity then?

Can we not say that it is not the fault of Christianity?

(There is some discussion between them) The same people who say they are Christian are the ones who commit these crimes. So we can say there's a connection. (The *Okyeame* then says:) She was invited to deliver a lecture at the University and she said this in front of the Christian priests and Reverend Ministers. They didn't like it. They argued why a traditional priestess should stand in front of them and say this.
Nana Operebea comes in: They don't worship God, they worship Christ. We are the people who worship God through our shrines and spirits. Because we know God is there and through these shrines we are with Him. Our forefathers, during their time, would put *nyamedua*, worshipping god through the water in that pot, kneel down before the pot and say

prayers. Whatever they wanted they got through that water. That is their contact point. It will definitely get to gods and they will answer. Because we have thrown away our traditions and customs we follow what others bring. They bring sugar. Before that we had '*alasan*' (a sweet fruit). Even if you ate one, your mouth was sweet. Here we worship spirit.

I ask: What about ancestors? Are they worshipped through shrines or separately?

Nana Operebea: Through ancestors also we worship God. Here we worship God through the Shrine.

Is there another way for worshipping ancestors?

(Quarm... I thought you had finished.....)

I continue: Is the shrine different to ancestors then?

Yes, every home can have a *nyamedua*. Those who like it do it. Others to whom some stones are fine, pour libation on those.

If they can do it themselves, then why come to this Shrine?

We are talking about olden days. Today no one places this, because of the so-called Christianity. Some Christians hide themselves before coming here. They don't want to show they are consulting the Shrine. But even having *nyamedua* in the house does not make you an *Okomfo*. So you still had to consult a priest or priestess because they have wisdom. It is still a continuing tradition.

In that case it may again become powerful and be revived?

Now they do it in hidden ways, then they could do it openly, says Nana. (Quarm laughs and says:) You have a problem and you know that if you come to the Shrine the problem will be solved. It is up to you to make a decision. When they give you medicine it cures you and you can still go back to your church. They don't make medicine a condition to exclude you. Whereas they make it a condition that you give up your tradition to come to the Church.... A woman was in university, her husband was an elder.... She had a problem and went to many places — even to Kumasi. She was told to come here. Nana cured her and she is now back in the Church. A Christian priest had told her she'll die. Here Nana used both herbs and prayers.

[It came up in conversation that Nana herself is a fee paying member of the Christian Church in the area. She remains a member to retain contact with the people. It does not interfere or conflict with her traditional practices. She said that many Church members come to her secretly during the night as they do not wish to be seen coming to her for the solution of their problems. Subsequently they go back to the Church without necessarily acknowledging who they had been cured by.]
I ask for her blessing and we take our leave.

Appendix III

Okomfo More
Kwaku Bonsam Shrine at Akomadan

February 18.2011

We travel by '*tro tro*'[1] some 70 kilometres north of Kumasi to a famous shrine where they 'manage' dwarfs and some other deities. The vehicle is packed to the hilt but people are quiet and orderly. The road is good, a number of trucks loaded with produce — from neighbouring Niger, Burkina Faso or Mali, we are told — pass by. From time to time we go past small tin-roofed houses scattered along the way. The journey seems endless. We are almost near the border of Techiman. Soon we see a non-obtrusive sign announcing Akomadan and the shrine of *Kwaku Bonsam*. We are relieved to come out of the bloated van that serves as a wonderful and cheap mode of transport for the common person but can be strenuous when a long journey is undertaken.

No shrine is visible anywhere near the road. There are just a couple of asbestos covered odd shops selling sundry goods for the villagers. We ask, and are informed that we need to walk along the gravel path and turn left till we get to the shrine. The walk on the red dusty track is not more than a kilometre. Almost in the middle of nowhere we see a compound on the right. A long row of rooms constructed along a veranda-like corridor stands to our right. Straight across the large gravelly yard is another row of rooms at right angles to this one. In front of that is a medium sized mango tree that is fenced in, and beside that is a hand pump for drawing water. To the left, a little away on the border of a

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[1] *Tro tros* are privately owned commercial minibuses, like shared taxis, that travel on fixed routes. They leave when they are filled to capacity. Operated by a driver and a conductor (who collects money, shouts out the destination, and is called a "mate"), they stop frequently to disembark and collect passengers, as they provide intra services. Most of them are decorated with religious metaphors, maxims, slogans and sayings etched on their sides or backs — making one aware of the strong emphasis on morals and ethical behaviour. *Tro tros* are the most popular way of travelling — short and longish distances — for ordinary people.

scrubby bush is a small house bearing the label 'Dwarf House' in English. Near that, closer to where we stand is another small house below a big tree. This small house has a small window like aperture that opens onto the mango tree side.

In front at the far end of the compound, in the right hand corner, are three or four fancy looking cars. They look anomalous in this environment.

We are met by a 'secretary' at the entrance who wants to know the purpose of our coming. Kwadwo Ntiamoah, from the Religious Studies Department, has been assigned by Rev. Samuel Asiedu-Amoako Samuel of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, to accompany and interpret for me. On learning that we have come to see Kwaku Bonsam, the Chief Priest, he goes in to find out only to come back and tell us that he is not available and that we can meet with the secretary himself. We refuse as we have not come all this way to get second hand information. If he is not there we might as well go back. The person goes in again. After a while we see a couple of persons enter another room. They come out and say that we can meet with the junior priest as Kwaku is away to Accra. Later Kwadwo surmises, perhaps correctly, that they had gone into the adjoining room to consult with the deity whether at all they should meet with us. For, when later we are taken in there we see that that room makes up the main shrine where the gods are housed.

The junior priest, Okomfo More, is Kwaku Bonsam's younger brother. He accompanies him in most of the rituals and he himself also gets possessed by a certain deity. Before coming out to meet us he puts on his smock with blue and golden stripes — his priestly gear — over his knee length trousers. He seems to be cautious as he does not know us and I am, quite obviously, foreign. We move along the corridor to a space where there is a raised platform with a throne-like carved chair on it — this is Kwaku's seat. Behind it are two traditional stools. Okomfo More sits beside it on a lower chair, to the left of the big chair as we face him.

He expresses a desire to know our purpose of coming. I explain through Kwadwo. We tell him that we came to get the blessings of the priest and also understand the religion as it is practised on the ground and that book reading alone is not enough for that purpose. We tell him that Mr. Adu Mensah of the Hindu Temple advised that we meet the Okomfo. We want to know how he became a priest, and his understanding of the Supreme God, *Nyame* or *Onyakopon* as also of the human person.

Okomfo says that initially Nana Kwaku Bonsam was a Christian Adventist. One Friday he went to work and found a man lying on the floor. He looked sick so he took him to the hospital where he was treated.

The man promised Nana that he would give him something that would make him world famous. After three days when he was discharged he gave him something and it is with that something that he eventually became world famous! Initially Nana thought that the gift was some sort of ritual money so he put it in his bedroom. But every time he went back after placing it somewhere he would find that it had moved to another place.

What was the thing?

That was the gift. It was a small thing that you could hold in the palm of a hand. Nana thought it was ritual money so he decided to throw it away as he did not believe in those things. So, he threw it into the river. After that he found that his car wouldn't move. Somehow he moved the car but after driving a hundred metres or so he found 'the thing' in the car. Someone advised him to throw it in the river again. Upon this second throwing the car wouldn't move at all. So, he brought a mechanic to tow it. The 'gift' was again in the car! The third time he threw it into a toilet pit in Mamponteng, in the Asante region. And 'the thing' destroyed the toilet completely and even killed some people.

So, he brought it once again into the room. Then someone said he would help him to get rid of it. He gave it to Osofo Quarm [not the osofo Ouarm who guided me to Obosomase] who burnt it but the Osofo died on the third day after doing so. Finally, that man directed him to Nana Abbas, who told him 'the thing' was a spirit and it was the gift through which the man had decided to make him famous. Then Nana decided to go and find the man who gave it to him. He was directed to Larabanga, in northern Ghana. When he went to that town, he was directed to take a particular route. The gift itself made him turn into that direction by manifesting itself as a human being. Then the spirit in the gift told Nana that it was 'me that was giving you direction'. The man who was in actual custody of the 'gift' was 360 years old. He stayed in a pit. In daytime they brought him out to give him some sunshine. The old man told Nana that the thing given to him would make him an Okomfo and also famous. He directed him to name the spirit Kofi O Kofi. Initially Nana settled in the town, at Kumasi, with the deity. When the town started developing the deity directed him, after some eight months, to move here into the forest.

Is 'the thing' an idol? What is it?

It is not stone, it can also be in a free form, he says. Initially Kofi O Kofi was the only deity Nana had. Later Kofi manifested himself as a dwarf also — so he combines two powers in himself. Then he directed Nana to

do this or that and it led to manifestation of other deities and so many others appeared and were added on. It was one deity that directed them and now they are operating with 4,800 *moatia* or Dwarfs[2] and 360 deities. They also have twelve *abosom* (gods) called Tano.

I thought there was only one obosom called Tano?

Tano is a river for which there is one deity. There are others named Tano, which are not the river. They can also harm or kill, that is why they are named after the river Tano.

It seems that the person who gave the gift to Nana chose him specifically. That is why he was lying in church on that Friday. Why did he pick him or choose him? He didn't even believe in it and even tried to throw it away.

When on that day he went to the shop, not the Church — and it wasn't his own shop — he saw him lying in a pool of vomit. It struck him that he should help him.

Exactly

Since the man was from the North and had no reason to be there he must have been there for a specific purpose.

Do you think he created this drama to rope in Nana?

Kwadwo translates him saying that they were surprised that being devoted Christians they were come to this. Even their father was surprised and later, Okomfo More, who is his blood brother — one mother one father — realised that he should support his brother who is the eldest. Eventually he also became possessed and that landed him here.

How did he know he was possessed?

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[2] The web site of *Asomdwee Fie Shrine of the Abosom and Nanasamanfo Int'l* (AFSAN) says: *Mmoetia* (or moatia) is a system of dwarfs who have traveled and settled throughout Ghana. They live in the forest and are quite proficient in the use of herbs. They specialize in working with nature spirits for healing body, mind and spirit and to address personal, family, social, financial and environmental issues. They can be playful, mischievous generally, and very cruel to evil doers, and those who try to ignore them. They are considered the spiritual gatekeepers.

Later Quajo informed me that the word *moatia* means 'short animal': *moa*-animals (plural of *aboa*) and *tia*-short.

You do not experience it when you are possessed. If some of us do not tell him what he did when possessed he would not know. They may not know when the *Obosom* comes to possess them. It happens automatically.

Then how do they know which deity possessed them?

He himself may not know the particular deity. Nana may not identify the particular deity. Unless some devotees around prompt you that this particular deity possessed you, you may not know. Those devoted into the religion may know the particular deity that may possess him.

So, Kofi O Kofi possessed him?

You can be possessed at any point of time.

Was the brother possessed by the same deity because he wanted to support his elder brother? I ask.

True.

One deity Kofi O Kofi became 4,800 deities.... When one can do whatever is required then why create so many. What is their role or purpose?

He it is that advised the creation of so many because they all are there to solve problems somehow or other. The deity may also direct him to add still more. Kofi knows who or what will help at a particular point. It is the direction of Kofi...

Nana was chosen to play a role to do good to suffering humans. Dwarfs we hear represent evil forces. So what are they doing here?

We have a particular deity called *ataim*...[I cannot make out what that word is]. People may bring some problems which it can't solve. It depends on how you handle and take care of that deity. *Moatia* are part of practice and because we give them what they need — banana, tiger nuts, minerals, a whole lot of sweet things — and take good care of them, we have a good relationship with them. They are helping us to improve the standards of humans.

When did this place start?

It is seven years now.

He got the gift thirteen years ago. For some years he practised in Kumasi and other places.

People come here to get something. Do they also come to just to be blessed, to be good humans, to become god-like, not just for material gain, but just to be in the presence of a good priest, to gain knowledge?

It is not always so...even Otumfo, the paramount chief of the Ashanti may send his chiefs with gifts and to thank them [i.e Kwaku and Okomfo More] for their contribution.

What about getting blessings to become more evolved human beings?

(Kwadwo continues to translate:) People always come here to seek blessings from Nana. They also consult him to find out about their destiny. They may find that someone is blocking a good destiny so they do something to help them clear it to have a good life. Nana and Okomfo also have another deity called *mfa nfiri* (i.e. unforgiving). If someone in your family becomes a stumbling block between you and success that deity shoots. So you can just fire a gun and someone from your family could die because of that, or you come back and that person would confess that he was doing it. Then Nana would prepare a potion to enable your success.

What of praying to God, the Supreme?

We don't pray to God, because God is far. (Kwadwo continues:) He believes in the existence of the Supreme Being and of ancestors. He believes this because when pouring libation the first libation is for *Nyankopon*. They first pray to *Nyankopon* so he *knows* there is a God. But he himself doesn't know whether he'll go to the heaven that people pray to. He doesn't know whether he belongs to God or to the *abosom*. He has a doubt whether people will go to it. He even has a doubt whether it is there. He also believes that traditional religion is fetish. In his own innermost being he believes that when he dies he'll be part of those that go to God and become part of people that'll go to heaven.

But he doesn't know that there is a heaven?

He believes there is a heaven.

That is where the Nananom are?

He knows from the Bible that there are no distinctions, heaven is not

where the ancestors are and there are no two places like heaven and hell.

So his real belief is Christian?

He believes in both, that God as well as Nananom exist.

Will he become an ancestor when he dies and join the Samanfo?

He believes you have to live a Christ-like life. Something forbidden in the Bible, or things forbidden by deities — eg. adultery, killing, stealing — should not be done. You can have devoted Christians who pray from 6.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. but may do what is forbidden. In his person he doesn't do what is forbidden in the Bible and in tradition.

But he said that the traditional religion is fetish yet that is what he's practising. Where does he stand with regard to it?

He says he is deeply rooted in tradition and in the indigenous religion.

He has doubt, yet is rooted?

No, he has no doubt. Believes that this is where his roots are. He has no doubt at all. He also has no regret in coming to serve this indigenous religion.

He has both traditions in his mind, does he combine them?

He says, initially and traditionally this is our religion. Western type religion was introduced by westerners but before they came this is what we were practising. We were serving rivers, trees, or stones, here and there.

Is this how he serves society?

That is what he thinks, that is what will come to be.

Is he actually serving the Supreme through the deities?

Yes, after this he'll go to the one ultimate source.

So when he becomes an ancestor and goes close to God does he remain separate from but close to Him?

He says, because of your deeds you'll be judged by God. He quotes from

Christian point of view saying you'd go either to heaven or hell, the Supreme will judge accordingly. You serve him fully through do's and don'ts. The end will justify the means.

Can those who go to hell also be helped by those living here? Can they be made to come out and become Nananom or would they be left there for eternity? Is it God that would help them in this or is it humans, because they are their ancestors?

Nothing of that sort, he doesn't even think about them.

Only good humans become ancestors?

Yes, he believes that. Other spirits we pray to are also spirits. Yet we pray saying God willed it.

I ask how they make a distinction between great and small spirits as spirits have never been human beings, unlike ancestors.

He says, they are also from God. In order to worship we make a relationship with them, and God we add from our own inside, our own being, as a human being is also made directly from God. These deities we have to please by giving them some things. God is everywhere, yet we don't pray to God directly but through *abosom*, who are spirits, not physical.

How do they know what the deities want, and how do they keep so many of them contented?

Okomfo then holds me by the hand and takes us into the shrine room[3] *— a rare honour. Kwadwo continues to interpret. Okomfo says we must not take any photos though we can record. The room is completely dark and it takes a while for the eyes to become accustomed to make out anything. They use a small torch light. I feel a slight tremor of trepidation. This is the room he had entered before he met us, to get permission of the deity. Directly in front of us is a white gauze curtain which when drawn to the side uncovers some brass plates/pans with*

[3] This might be what Platvoet calls the *bosombuw*, small temple, or *bosomdan*, 'room of the god(s)'. The rituals of propitiation and possession usually take place in them, or in front of them, he says. And these 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 un-domesticated domain of the gods)'. (Platvoet, Jan G., '*Nyame ne Aberewa*: Towards A History of Akan Notions of God' *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol 4, 2012, pp. 39-65.)

sacred objects placed on them. They seem to be vegetal materials in different forms. One of the plates has three eggs and some stones in it.[4]

Okomfo goes on: This is the quarters of the supreme among all the deities. Of all spirits he is the head, the supreme. His name is *Agrada Kweku*. He says, even if he as the second in command wanted to uncover him to see it he can't do it unless the custodian (called *obosomfo*) does it. (The custodian, a youngish man happens to be there, so it could be uncovered now.) He is more like a house father, as he is the custodian and is in-charge of all the gods in this house. We only uncover this every forty days for the *Akwasidae* ritual. At other times we don't uncover the supreme of the spirits. But because you are coming from afar and for the sake of research we open him for you. He's is named Agrada Kweku.

Because they open them only every forty days they can't uncover them all, he says. But all here are spirits.

Do they make daily prayer to them or every forty days?

They only visit here during sacred days — *akwasidae, fofie,...*

These spirits intercede on their behalf. If you go contrary to the injunctions of the gods you'd be killed. They also will bring certain natural calamities, like accidents, diseases. They'll announce those beforehand.

Do they give methods of preventing them also? Or give methods and directions to cope with them.

On the sidewalls a number of garments for priestly wear hang from pegs. We see them now as the eyes get accustomed. The Okomfo shows us the one that he

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[4] This could be what Platvoet refers to as a 'man-made shrine or tabernacle', consisting of a *yawa*, brass pan, consecrated as the temporal abode of a god. This is the abode at which the god can be addressed. Platvoet also mentions that it contains 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.' He also found, as we did, that it was covered with a piece of white calico, and sprinkled with *hyirew*, white clay dug from the bottom of certain water courses. He states that at a *yawa*, a god could be addressed and propitiated, or honoured, with libations, gifts of food, and animal sacrifice. Male *akomfoo* go into possession trance by carrying the shrine (*yawa*) of their god on their heads and are thought to be 'possessed' for as long as they carry it. We saw the possessed person carrying a *yawa* on his head at the *akwasidae* festiwal at the *Manhyia* palace in Kumasi.

(See Platvoet, Jan G., '*Nyame ne Aberewa*: Towards A History of Akan Notions of God' *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol 4, 2012, pp. 39 -65.)

generally wears when performing a ritual. The garment appears to be an important part of the ritual. The deities come with different types of dress. Each and every deity has a different dress. In his case, for example he wears only "this" dress. Kofi O Kofi has this dress (he points to another one on the wall.)

Do they automatically take that dress when possessed?

He is in charge and he will only be possessed by this, and the deity whose dress he wears is called *Odoso*. It is not a mask but is made of fibre. He ties it around the waist like this.

How did Nana (Kwaku Bonsam) get trained?

Nana himself can call you and give you a special deity to become Okomfo, but at times people also get possessed on their own.

Who would have taught Nana how to help or heal? It's not really one person who teaches?

You may not know or get direct direction like in a class room. But you may get possessed and then everything you do is part of the training, for the deity directs you. After possession he may tell others you should do this or that. Nana himself may not even know. They make a record of whatever manifests through Nana when he gets possessed. So they can even teach Nana what this deity said and that you should do this or that. But Nana himself may not know.

So it is important to have another person there?

Yes, it is true they remain assisted by another person, so that whenever he gets possessed then whatever he says, they make a record of it.

Okomfo then takes us to another room in which there is a small side room. He opens the door and tells us that that is the room where offerings for the dwarfs are kept. There is a very large number of bottles of sweet soft drinks stored in the room. He has never been to this room before. Only Nana and the custodian enter it. He dare not go in there. Even if you dare to open door, as soon as you open it they'll beat you. They open it every forty days and feed them with sweet things.

These are Fantas and other soft drinks here for the dwarfs, he says. We don't go there. They only take sugary stuff, no alcohol.

What happens to all these bottles? Are they eventually taken away, or given away?

Dwarfs themselves take some of them away. They will come for them. Even some days after *Akwasidae* if there are even fifty bottles there, we may come back and find only ten or twelve. They do take them away.

Another person adds: one interesting and surprising thing is that when you open it after forty days and even when you have bottles of drink left over, and even if they are not opened, you'll not find any of the contents there. Even if you leave a genuine one there and you come the next day and open it and drink you will not find any taste in it, it will just be water.

They take the taste out of it?

They do take the taste out of it. They keep on changing them from time to time.

When they manifest, whatever they wish to do they would do.

Like what?

If you ask them to conjure money, they conjure money. Even if you give palm nuts and ask them to grow instantly, they'll grow instantly. If you ask them to command shirts or any dress they'd do it. The head of the dwarfs gave Nana a mango seed and it immediately germinated like this and since that day it has been like that. (He refers to the fenced in mango tree in the middle of the large courtyard.)

There are also deities that are in charge of providing social services — to help, to heal, even provide blessings. Even those seeking to travel, come here for blessings. They can also be harmful. They do kill if you misbehave.

How do they know which deity to appeal to for a particular request?

In this particular room you can't even appeal to the deities for forgiveness. You just have to obey their commands.

How to know what they demand?

They manifest themselves and tell us. Truly speaking the devotee or the *akyeame* who are possessed may know. After they are possessed they may tell us what they say and then we obey.

Not all of the deities are here. Those here prefer blood, animal sacrifice. Not all prefer that. So they cannot be here. These like ram, fowl, chicken, cow, dog, etc. Others are different, they are in other rooms, some around the bush, some even in the trees.

He says they offer animal blood from time to time. At an appointed

time they can come and ask for a specific type of sacrifice. For example, on *akwasidae* they may come and say we need a goat or cow.

Come *akwasidae* they will bring all of them out and display them, says Kwadwo. A lot of people come for that. They'll be performing a ritual, and displaying all these images, on the following Sunday (the one after we leave). The festival will come to an end around six in the evening.

(During all this time a goat has been making loud bleating sounds in the background.)

He goes on to say that when displayed here they are given various types of animals like cows, goats, dogs, animals. And those who make requests will also come with some kind of sacrifice offerings.

So preferably they should only come on akwasidae?

They sometimes bring them out on other days apart from *akwasidae*. For example had they known we were coming today they would have even brought all of them out today.

Does Okomfo see this tradition becoming stronger or weaker?

Stronger and stronger.

Even Christian pastors come to get powers from Nana.

(There's laughter in the background and sounds of 'Plenty, plenty of them.')

Every blessed deity comes here to get blessings. Preaching there and getting powers here!

So what do they do here?

(One of the group replies:) When coming for help to install their Christian deity they may even pretend to insult our gods. Nana can allow you to insult them. So that when you go out there you can tell the people without fear that you are not using Nana's powers.

Does he think these exist in other parts of the world also?

It can't be that they exist only here. Must be elsewhere also but people don't cater to them.

We now come out into the open courtyard near the mango tree. Okomfo leads us towards the stable beyond the mango tree.

He says that the deity directs them what kind of carriage to use while going for a particular ritual. At times when they are going to perform somewhere some of the deities don't like this carriage (he points to a fancy car) so they ask him to use one of the horses. Coming *Akwasidae*, for example, he will not take a car. He'll have to use the horse. Have you seen the horses?

No, I say

They are in that room.

As we walk past the tree we see some women cooking on open fire places. Two little girls are pounding fufu. They are relatives of the people who have been 'admitted' there to be cured. There are rooms behind the tree for these people to stay till they are cured.

Near the hand pump for drawing water he shows us three things - a gun, a cutlass and a piece of wood in a mortar. He says they prepare medicine from that. In the water in a tub kept there, there are some kind of palm leaves with which they make a concoction.

If someone uses a gun on you it will not harm you, or cutlass or a stick it will just break. If you have a headache or anything, you just drink a little bit and that's all. Then you have to bathe also. You see some palm inside it, you have to bathe with it after soaking it at night. When you bath with it, the next day nobody can kill you till the time is due.

(Later Kwadwo and our companion Trudy, say they saw a person who had just come back — from Accra it seemed — using that water to bathe, to wash off any evil, that may have accrued during the journey.)

Have you tried it?

Ah yes.

When you bathe, there are rituals that you have to perform to keep it pure.

(There is a lot of noise of people talking in the background. They are surprised to see us but because of Okomfo being there they do not complain.)

Beyond that point (he points to an area beyond the pump), there is a river where the dwarfs reside. Every year they perform a kind of ritual there, Kwadwo explains. They go to the river side and slaughter a cow and then cook. Sometimes if you want to say anything to the dwarfs you buy either a mineral bottle or a Fanta and send it to the riverside or even leave it there and say whatever you want to say and it will get to them.

Do people come and do this?

They do. When they gather they send most of the minerals to the river side.

Do the dwarfs take them away?

They do.

The sun is low now and Okomfo takes us, through the scrub, to the adjoining forest that he had pointed. We all have to take off our foot-wear. The scrubble and the pebbles are prickly. We reach a big tree in the forest. A number of clean white strips of polyester cloth are tied around it. All people are not allowed into this place. They might even be sacred to enter into this area.

Okomfo says, if you come to this point and have bad intentions you cannot come closer, they'll beat you. If you want to have prosperity or success, then you can buy a white piece of cloth and tie it like this and then more success will come your way. The river is just beyond. It is called Nana Botamsu. 'Tam' is rock and 'nsu' is water. They have a cave from which water is coming. That is why the name.

Be careful, there are grass cutters and snakes too. Pythons.
(They bring my shoes as the ground is rough and pebbly. I hesitate as no one else is wearing them. Trudy says, 'Wear them. It is an honour.' I'm grateful.)

Kwadwo asks whether in Accra too they have so many deities. He says no. Here is the Head Quarter, whereas there they are just a few. He says they've got five more branches — Kumasi, Accra, Obuase, Takoradi... so many.

That means many people would come to them.

Yes.

By now we are back, near the small shrine with a window like aperture and the big tree near it. One of the group says that if someone comes here and is a witch, Okomfo or Nana will see it. They can immediately identify such a person.

Do they do rituals to de-witch or do they isolate them?

Yes, first they'll try to cleanse the person but if the person goes back to it, they'll get rid of the person.

Kill them?

Yes, they kill them.

At times, When you are killing, and they found it, then the deity can just take away the witch and free the person who has been bewitched. But some people like witchcraft. For example, when it happens that we deliver you from witchcraft and you go back to it. If that happens, the deity will eliminate the person.

I ask Okomfo to pray for us and bless us. He agrees, mumbling something to the effect that in the beginning he thought we would be arrogant, but he found us to be humble and respectful. He gets inside the little room with the window-like aperture on one side. He pours schnapps and chants while the group standing outside rings bells and makes supporting and affirmative sounds. The atmosphere feels charged and taut with energy. I get a tingling sensation down the spine as I kneel outside the little window. At the end Okomfo sprinkles some liquid on us. The prayer has been for protection and success in the work we have undertaken.

Kwadwo later transliterates and translates the prayer, from Asante Twi:

Transliteration

Ka kyere no se mere bo mpae ama no se dee ebeye a, be hunu nyansa, nhunumu ne nkwa tenten.

Twereduampong Kwame nsa, Asase Yaa nsa, asuo Tano nsa, Kofi o Kofi nsa!

eye Dr. Veena a, ofiri India man mu se w'ate won ka na ne nsam nsa nie o, a mede ma mo se mo nye se ebey a, mmo ntaa n'akyi akyigyina pa, mo ma no nyansa ne nhunumu. Nananom, yc sre mo se biribiara a, obeye no mo ma no nye yie. Nnipa a edi nakyi baa ha nso Nananom, Kwadwo ye abrantie afei na w'asi so. Mo moa no, mo ma no abotare, nyansa, nhunumu, ne odo.

eye Trudy nso, mo nhyira no, mo ma no nyansa, mo ma n'adwuma nye yie, nkwa tenten, ne sika sem nyinaa. Nnipa bonefoo a, ompe wom yiye dee, saa nnipa no mmo mo no nhwe, afei nso nananom mma no nhunu anigye da!

Mo ne kasa! (Cheers from the crowd)

(This transliteration is in normal roman letters as the Twi font was not available)

English translation;

Tell her (he asks Kwadwo to inform Dr. Veena) that I (Okomfo More)

am coming to pray for her so that she may get wisdom, become knowledgeable and have long life.

(*Twereduampong Kwame*) Dependable God who is called Kwame[5] (among the Akan), here is drink, *Asase Yaa*[6] (Earth goddess) here is drink, river *Tano* drink, Kofi o Kofi (the main deity of the shrine) drink.

Dr. Veena from India has heard a lot about you and has paid you a visit. This is her drink that I am giving you so that you can solidly support her in her research. Grant her wisdom and knowledge in all things. *Nananom* we ask that in all her endeavours let her see good results.

Those who followed her here we ask that, Kwadwo who is a young man and has begun life, help him; grant him patience, wisdom, knowledge and love. Bless Trudy, give her wisdom, and let her business prosper, give her long life and also let her financial matters be well.

For the evil person who wishes them ill, we say that no one buys drink to pour libation to bless his enemies. Such a person, we ask that you strike him down and also don't let him ever enjoy life.

[The crowd endorses the prayer by saying: 'well said'!]

By this time it is almost dark. I make a financial offering saying it is a small amount, yet he may accept it as an expression of our gratitude. He reprimands me saying nothing is small, even indicating that he does not expect it. This is the first such person who has not demanded anything. Rather he even offered us some very nice cool drinks. It is gratifying to know him.

Okomfo gives us a bunch of bananas and instructs the secretary to take us to the main road in one of his cars and find us a vehicle that would take us back to Kumasi. The secretary drives us in a convertible Ford limousine and waits with us on the road till we get a 207 Benz bus to get to Kumasi.

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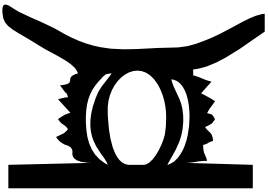
[5] *Kwame* is a name for a Saturday born male.

[6] *Yaa* is a Thursday born name for a female

Appendix IV



Nsumankwahene
Chief Priest of the Ashanti King, Kumasi

February 19.2011

From Accra to Kumasi the bus had passed through thick green forests, including tall Silk Cotton trees. We passed towns and villages every few kilometres, some of them prosperous looking from cocoa farming and trading. Part of the route may have been a left-over from old times, when they traded with Europeans who had established themselves along the coast, on the Gulf of Guinea. We saw small trades-persons, mainly women, selling *gari* in clean white sacks. Gari consists of grated cassava, After water is squeezed out of it, it is roasted and ground. Hot or cold water is added to the flour, to make balls, to be eaten with soup or stew. It can also be drunk, as a brew, when mixed with water. Perhaps every home has a stock of *gari*, to be used when nothing else is immediately available.

Kumasi has more character and looks more of a bustling trading town than Accra and the other towns we had passed on the way here. Everyone is busy selling one thing or another. The undulating topography adds to the charm and interest of the city. Hundreds (they seem to be several hundred!) of trucks loaded with yam and other commodities can be seen everywhere. The Kejetia market is a vast expanse of stalls under temporary sheds and large colourful umbrellas, with a huge number of vehicles parked there ready to carry and bring in stock. Women with babies tied to their backs with colourful cloths, a load of some produce on their heads, hands free for other work are busy selling wares. Lanes and streets full of goods of all kinds criss-cross throughout the city. Every tree and foot path seems to have sellers under or alongside it. In the middle of the town is a lively statue of Okomfo Anokye who caused the Golden Stool to descend in the lap of Osei Tutu.

The palace, *Manhyia* (O-*man*= group or community, or town, implying 'heads' for deliberation, and *hyia*= gathering, meeting with someone), of the *Asantehene* (the Ashanti King) is set in the middle of vast grounds.

It is possible to visualise how all the surrounding area, that is now a massive well-kept space for ceremonial functions, would have been wooded and some rituals may have taken place there. The area around *Manhyia* is called Ashanti New Town (Ashtown for short). The various radial streets are inhabited mainly by 'royals' — persons connected to the royal family in one way or another. On the opposite side of the *Manhyia* is the National House of Chiefs where all Ghana chiefs, from all over the country, come and meet. (Other regions have only Regional Houses of Chiefs). The headquarters of all Regional Houses of Chiefs, the National House of Chiefs, is here in Kuamsi.

In one of the radial streets, taking off from the *Manhiya*, lives *Nsumankwahene* — the traditional authority on religion and spirituality in the Asante Kingdom. It is not possible to meet the *Nsumankwahene* without prior appointment. We have none. (Protocol and formalities for meeting with people, especially those in position, are strict.) But we were lucky to meet Nana Nketia, a small otherwise unnoticeable figure, who was sitting outside the Performing Hall at the Kwame Nkrumah Cultural Centre. Perhaps he is the gate keeper for the Hall. Nana was sleeping on a chair outside. But, he is the person who teaches many of the chiefs how to put on the ceremonial Kente cloth which they must wear on particualr occasions. Each one must wear it in a way that is suitable to his station in the hierarchy. When worn correctly, the heavy, (mostly) nine-yard cloth drapes elegantly, as though without effort.

Nana has also been the keeper of the skin bag in which Okomfo Anokye, after he had invoked the Golden Stool to descend on the lap of Chief Osei Tutu, with the aim of bringing the Ashanti nation together, placed the spirit of the Ashanti nation. The bag is now housed in the Museum. No one has opened it till now in all these two or three hundred years. Nana says he will help us to meet with the spiritual authority of the Ashanti King. He directs us to the house of the Chief Priest.

The building that we enter from the street is a large double storied structure with some women and children hanging around in the courtyard. We ascend an open staircase into an entrance-corridor where we see some old persons sitting on plastic chairs and stools. *Nsumankwahene*, an old man with some teeth missing, looks ordinary. I did not realise we were talking to the *Nsumankwahene* till after a while. Before starting any conversation he first asks us to, one by one, greet all those present. We go from right to left, as demanded by custom, shaking hands with each one.

On learning of our purpose he says he is very busy because *Akwasidae* is to take place in two days' time. Yet, he will meet us. He asks for 300 Ghana cedis (equivalent at that time to nearly ten thousand rupees!). He

says he would perform a ritual, and that we should bring a sheep or goat also. I am taken aback as I have many priests to meet with and this kind of money would be difficult to garner. Kwadwo bargains, brings down the price, and requests him to do a ritual and talk to us on Saturday. From 300 Ghana Cedis he comes down to 100 GH C.[1] He says that we should also bring along Nana Nketia, whom we had met at the Cultural Centre.

On Saturday we arrive at the appointed time. Nana is not there but, we learn, he has called home and checked if we had come. We sit in a kind of waiting room outside his living roon. On coming back, he goes into his room where he is served some food — as he may have left home early — before he meets us. (We see some trays of food going in and out.) He must have been performing many rituals, as a strong smell of schnapps pervades the environment with his arrival.

The Chief Priest takes us into his living room. It seems he has to go back to the Palace for some more rituals. We offer the obligatory gifts and money. He seems to have forgotten about the ritual he was going to perform.

(Seeing his mind is preoccupied I quickly try to articulate some questions.) Kwadwo interprets for both of us.

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[1] At a later date Kwadwo informs me that such negotiation is a part and parcel of the Akan tradition. When the elders call for some kind of token, especially where you have not been told earlier about the amount or quantum of the token, one is expected to crave their indulgence for reduction. He recounts a similar incident that he faced when doing research at a later date. He says:

It happened to me when I was collecting data for my Master's thesis in 2012 at the Larteh (Akuapem) Palace. Initially I went to ask for permission to come and meet the Chief and his elders for an interview. They asked me to come the following week at 8: 30 am (Sunday). We (myself and other colleagues) got there around 9 am. When we got there, they were already in state (they were seated). The linguist (the *okyeame*) asked our mission. We gave it, and he said what did we bring before the chiefs? We gave our schnapps (2 bottles). After that the linguist said that they gave us the time of 8: 30 am and we arrived there at 9 am. Within that 30 minute time, he told us, they had already consumed two bottlers of schnapps so we should provide them with that! Our delay had compelled them to drink.

We sat down quietly and then I stood up and ask permission to talk. I told the linguist to tell the chief and his elders that we admit our charges but that they should reduce the cost for us. They all applauded us because to them what it means is that we know the tradition!

So, Kwadwo felt, that it is a good idea to write about it so that others may know what to do in such situations especially, in impromptu cases like ours. Initially, I was not going to write about the negotiation.

We came to seek your blessings. Being in Kumasi, the heart of Ashanti country, I did not want to go back without paying respects to you and get blessings.

He welcomes us.

May I humbly ask you how the Chief Priest gets appointed and what his role is in the glorious kingdom of the Ashanti.

(*Nsumankwahene's voice is low. In the background there are children calling out and women talking loudly.*)
One of the means is that they [the Royals, perhaps] will notify him and then he goes there alone. He can also go in the company of someone he trusts, a second-in-command so to say. When they go, they consult the gods and then he does exactly what they tell him to do. And he never tells anyone what they said to him. The second-in-command is called 'two eyes'. The Chief-Priest-to-be doesn't even tell him what the gods said.

What roles does he play?

(*There is much discussion... as Kwadwo tries to understand*)

Tomorrow on *Akwasidae*, he moves before (in front of) Otumfo (the King). There is a god that is before him (i.e. before Nana *Nsumankwahene*) and then he is followed by Otumfo.

How does he know there is a god in front of him? Does he 'feel' him, or 'know' him?

Ah, he is in charge of that *Obosom*. He feels it.

Is he then totally concentrated, fully focussed, on that spirit?

He is then deeply in the spiritual, not in the physical state.

Who chooses him as the Chief Priest and what qualities is he required to have?

It is *Otumfo* who appoints him. Even as we are having this conversation and if he were to die now, *Otumfo* knows who to appoint next.

As the Chief Priest he speaks directly with the gods, not the Otumfo? Or can we say that Otumfo also is a priest?

Otumfo doesn't speak with the gods. But when the time is due he names the priest.

How does he know whom to appoint? It should be someone who can speak with gods.

When he (*Nsumankwahene*) goes to consult with the gods, *Otumfo* is also there. There are some others around also. So, *Otumfo* can consult with them always.

I thought he is appointed because he comes from royal ancestry. His lineage may have qualified him to be picked up.

It is true, it is lineage. No one distant from the family can become the head. It is always inherited from the father. Those who accompany him are his sons.

His father was the Chief priest?

Yes.

So, it doesn't go by matrilineage. It comes more through the Ntoro or the father's lineage.

He is the Chief Priest of the whole Ashanti nation.

Whole Ashanti...the kingdom, has twenty-five other priests and they are all under him. They work under him, he supervises them. As Chief Priest of the nation he is supreme. He supervises twenty-five priests and as the Head he is in-charge.

During his time has he had to make some very important prayers or prediction concerning the Otumfo or the nation?

During his time nothing happened. But when needed, the gods will speak through him and give remedies through him.

Gods give remedies to him?

Yes.

When praying for the Asantehene (the king) or the nation, does he pray to a particular god or to ancestors?

When he pours libation it is to an *Obosom*. That one will come and see,

and provide even some kind of security for Otumfo. But first of all he seeks guidance and a message from *Onyakopon*, the Supreme God.

When guidance comes from Onyakopon Himself, where is the role of the gods? It is the Supreme that is doing everything, He gives strength and guidance. So why pray through the gods to Onyakopon?

(*There is some discussion*) It is a tradition. They all believe that God is Supreme, He created everything including himself (the Priest). But it is tradition that you must approach Him through the gods. So, that is what they are doing.

So even while you follow tradition, basically you know in your heart that you are praying to the Supreme God?

Exactly so. He believes that the Supreme Being is everything and that it is tradition they are following.

The Asantehene chooses the Chief Priest. But when Asantehene himself is chosen there are many persons, the Queen Mother also plays a role. Does the Chief Priest also have a role in the selection?

He has no role in selecting the *Otumfo*. It is just the will of the Queen Mother and her family. He has no role. He always asks the Queen Mother.

At the time of installation, does he have a role?

Eh... (*discussion*) he has a specific role but he cannot tell us a whole lot of things as he is under oath of secrecy. But they cannot install Otumfo without the *Nsumankwahene*.

You are very busy now, since we here at akwasidae time. Can we request you to give us a little description of the event as also the importance and real meaning of the festival? Why does it take place every forty days and what it is about?

Some of it is a tradition based, according to the Akan calendar. Every Chief observes that particular day. During that day the Chief visits the stool house and slaughters, and offers a sacrifice. They smear blood on the stool to protect the stool. They prepare special food for the *abosom* and leave it in the stool room. They also pour libations to seek for blessings, guidance, prosperity, and for avoidance of all bad occurrences that may happen.

The ancestors are also invoked to protect the kingdom and the Ashanti?

Ancestors are invoked to come in.

Would you say it is a connection of lineage, so it is like a remembering of history so that they may not forget?

This is exactly what we practice.

What is the importance of mogya? Some say it is physical blood. But that cannot be, as ancestors are connected through mogya. Mogya which remains here when a person dies is not important. Rather, it is something else in mogya that remains and becomes an ancestor. What does Nana think about the meaning of mogya?

They believe that the blood protects and that there is spirit in the blood. That is why they always want to believe in blood and blood sacrifices. He has been on this stool for the past forty-five years. Tradition demands that they use blood because of what entails in the blood. They've been following tradition.

Sacrifice of blood means that there is a spirit in the blood which is offered to the spirit!

Yes, that is what he says.

Spirit of blood offered to spirit?

Yes.

Yesterday we were told some deities prefer a particular type of blood during sacrifice. Do gods tell Nana this is what we want?

Tradition demands they use ram. So they always use ram. No chief uses any other blood except ram or sheep. That is what they always maintain.

(*I have a feeling that Nana has got a lot of work to do, so perhaps, we should leave. I ask Kwadwo to state if he has any questions to ask of the Chief Priest. He asks that the Otumfo is celebrating his 10th anniversary and he went out to the stadium for that. But, nobody can come on that route before Otumfo, Nana was the only one patrolling that route.*)

Nana says yes, only he can patrol that route before Otumfo goes on it. No one else is allowed on that route.

Kwadwo goes on, Libations happen in the shrine in the stool room on Akwasidae. But after that the Otumfo comes out into the public. And we call it a celebration. What is the celebration for? What do all the people come for, because prayers and other rituals have already been done? Do they come just to see Otumfo, or is it because it is a sacred occasion? What is the distinction?

The ritual actually happens in the stool house but then they come out to let the people know that that has happened. It is more a formality.

I come in again: In a way then the celebration is like a solidarity symbol, but also a symbol of having worshipped the ancestors, who are symbolised in the stool room where only the Asantehen and the Chief Priest can enter. Can we then say that it means that now people are informed that we have done it and that we are connected as a people?

It is exactly like that. To stress that we have come down from one ancestry and that we are one.

This is the Paramount stool. We are told that the spirit of the Ashanti resides in it. Is the Golden stool also kept in the shrine?

It is not in the shrine where the Golden Stool is kept, because you don't smear blood on the Golden Stool. During every *Akwasidae*, they call for the Golden Stool from a different room. They bring it to the blood stool-room to perform all the rites and then send it back.

The Golden Stool is kept in a different room. It is housed in a room within the same apartment where the Asantehene is, whereas the other stools are in the shrine in a separate place, downstairs. It is actually only on *Akwasidae kesia* — the big annual *Akwasidae* — that they bring the Golden Stool into the blood stool-room, not on every *akwasidae*.

When the Asantehen is installed is there a role for the Golden Stool? Does he touch it or do they put him on it?

At every installation of the Asantehene, there is a role for the Golden Stool as they actually make him sit on it. They make him sit on it three times, that is all. It means that he has sat on it.

Does it mean that the spirit has gone into him from the Stool?

Exactly. The spirit is transferred into him from the stool. That is why it remains in the same building as the Asantehene. Because of the spirit.

We now request the Chief Priest to pray for us.

Kwadwo transliterates and translates the Prayer (from Asante Twi into English):

Transliteration

Twereduampong[2] *Nyankopon, w'adawroma, oburoni yi, ofiri aburokyire aba Ghana ha; w'aba Kumasi. W'abesra me. Me sre nkwa a emu ye duru ma no. Me sre se ema bone biara nka no wo Ghana ha, ewo ne dwumadie mu no, ma no nya nhunumu na biribiara nso nko yiye ma no. Mede no hye wo tumi mu wo nna a, wo bedi wo Ghana ha nyinaa mu. Na se wo wie nso a, fa no ko duru ne krom mu asomdwoe mu. Medawase!*

English translation;

Dependable God, your Majesty, (he addresses the Supreme God, Nyankopon who as *Twereduampong* is the most dependable one) this white skinned person who has come from overseas, has come to Kumasi and to me (*Nsumankwahene*). I ask for her long life (there is emphasis on 'life' as he expressed it, which literally means; heavy-life... i.e, *nkwa*-life and *duru*- heavy).

I ask that don't let any bad thing happen to her as long as she stays with us in Ghana. In all her dealings, grant her the necessary understanding so that everything would go well for her. I commit her into your mighty power in all the days ahead of her in Ghana, and when she has finished her work, take her back peacefully and safely to her country.

I thank you God!

[2] *Twereduampong*, an appellation for God, meaning 'dependable'. *Twere*- lean, *dua*- tree, *mpong*- not falling.

Appendix V

Akwasidae at the *Manhiya* Palace in Kumasi

February 20.2011

This is the most colourful and important ceremony for the Ashanti. Held once every forty days one may get to attend it if one happens to be in Kumasi at the right time. Special entry passes are required to attend it. We were lucky both to be there at the right time and also to be introduced to the King's protocol officer, an erstwhile Foreign Service officer of the Ghanaian civil service. Adu Mensah, a disciple of Swami Ghanananda, an African Hindu monk heading a large Hindu monastery in Accra with five branches in other cities, introduced us to him. The officer provided us with entry passes and seats in the same pavilion in which the king was to sit. The king comes into this area after he has spent a good length of time offering libations to the gods and ancestors at the royal shrine, as explained to us by the Nsumankwahene, the Chief Priest of the King.

We reach *Manhiya* around eleven in the morning. The public appearance of the Otumfo will take time. Yet, there is a good amount of activity — various types of people are gathered here. Ghanaians in their traditional costumes — men wearing colourful *Mmarima* Ntoma (translated as 'men's cloth', as Kwadwo explains, often consisting of a wide twelve yard piece of intricately woven cloth, which calls for special skill for putting it on) wrapped in the traditional way — all looking tall and regal. Many are shaded by large colourful umbrellas (*bankyim*), held up by their attendants, proclaiming their chiefly status.

We use the time to visit the Museum located in the old palace and see a film on the enstoolment of the Asantehene. The Queen Mother, who is now 115 years old, is prominently present in the film. The Museum displays the history of the Ashanti and also gives a background of the various wars they fought, mainly against the British. The splendour of the Ashanti Empire — things like the first refrigerator (which still works!) and other gadgets obtained by the earlier Asantehenes — are on display. There are life-size photographs of well-known Asantehenes and also of Yaa Asantewaa, the brave Queen Mother who provided strong and invaluable

inspiration to the Ashanti to fight the British. In 1900, she led the Ashanti rebellion known as the War of the Golden Stool, as also the Yaa Asantewaa war, against the British. In 1896 the British had exiled King Prempeh I to the Seychelles and in 1900 the Governor General, located at Gold Coast, demanded that the Golden Stool, the symbol of Ashanti sovereignty and unity be handed over to him. Seeing the chiefs dithering, the Queen Mother delivered a powerful speech and threatened to create an army of women if the Ashanti men, known for their valour, had lost their grit. It took several months for a strong armed force under the British, to quell the uprising. After that Yaa Asantewaa, along with fifteen of her closest advisors, was also sent into exile, ending almost a century-long resistance against the British by the Ashanti forces.

From the museum we move on to the palace grounds and into the main courtyard where invitees are gathered. We are given seats in the covered veranda-like space where the *Asantehene* himself would come and be seated. Ordinary, plastic chairs fill the covered area as also the open courtyard in front. A number of chiefs and paramount chiefs are seated in the open courtyard, under a panoply of large colourful umbrellas, carrying large staffs bearing the insignia of their positions, with their servants seated behind them, giving a festive and splendid look to the place. Other visitors, some look like foreigners, also sit in the open courtyard under the strong simmering sun. Water vendors, selling plastic pouches of water, move through the chairs as it is very hot at this time of the year.

One side of the courtyard is lined with big drums — large *Fontomfrom* and *atumpan*, the first covered in colourful *kente* cloth. The *Fontomfrom* seem to be something like five-foot high and two-foot wide. They are played by men standing behind them. Even a particular orchestra that includes other drums like *atumpan* is named after these. *Atumpan* — consisting of a male and female pair — are the famous talking drums that play phrases and proverbs from the Twi language. They are played with a particular kind of branch or twig that is in the shape of the number 7. Nana Nketia had played these for us at the Cultural Centre earlier. The drums begin to play sometime before the arrival of the *Asantehene*. Long horns, and tubular pipes, also play from time to time. The *Asantehene* arrives from behind the building in which we are seated preceded by a man carrying some leaves and other material in a brass pan (*the yawa*) on his head (we can see the retinue through iron bars that enclose and protect the veranda on that side). The *Asantehene's* chair precedes him. The man carrying the brass pan is possessed and moves in some kind of wavering, dancing steps (see f.n. 4 in Appendix III). The pan has in it the spirit of the *asumankwahene* (the Chief Priests that have protected the

kingship for a long time). He is followed by people carrying different kinds of long swords and staffs with golden ends. Then comes a man carrying a silver vessel on his head. This, like the first one, is meant to ward off all evil forces that could potentially affect the *Asantehene*. Behind him walks the *Asantehne* dressed in thick gold bracelets all the way up the forearm and massive rings on every finger, and a gold head-band studded with golden insignia. His ankles are also covered with thick gold bracelets. Drums now play at a crescendo, and the pipes and horns are blown without stopping to welcome him.

A massive umbrella has already been erected in the slightly elevated covered area where the *Asantehene* will sit. All the visitors stand up to offer respect to the King. The retinue takes time as it enters the courtyard through the big gate on the side. The man with the brass pan on his head and trance like movements, moves up to the elevated section of the courtyard, stands and waits for the king to arrive behind him. The King moves slowly while bearers bring his large chair and place it under the huge umbrella. A number of servants take their positions — many to wave fans over him, others to stand in attendance, and one person to continuously wipe the sweat, gently and with great respect, from the king's face and body. Some special drummers have also followed the *Asantehene* and take their place in front of him in the open courtyard. A black curtain is raised around the chair on which the *Asantehene* is to sit. (This, we are told, is to prevent him from being seen by the public in case he stumbles a little while taking his seat.) Everyone sits down after the king is seated.

One by one the chiefs come to pay homage and their attendants announce the appellations for the *Otumfo/Asantehene* in impromptu and highly flowery language ascribing to him all the qualities that his ancestors would have had. After that many other important people pay homage. All do so from the open section of the courtyard, maintaining a respectful distance from the king. It is after this that some paramount chiefs come up to where the Otumfo is and shake hands with him — their cloth on the right shoulder slid down so that both shoulders are bared before the king, as a mark of respect.

Government representatives, regional ministers and the Ashanti regional security coordinator come up. Then their gifts, together with drinks, are presented. (Innumerable cases of alcoholic drinks — perhaps Schnapps — are presented. I wonder what happens to such a large quantity. But it might be used for pouring libations on behalf of the whole Ashanti nation, as and when required.)

Today seems to be a historic day. Ex-President of Ghana, John Kofi Agyekum Kufuour, an Ashanti, is there with a large retinue of people, including his brother. He has just come back from the U.K. where he

was presented with a Ghanaian stool as a gift. He did not realise that it was this stool that the British had taken away when they fought the Ashanti in 1900 till he read the inscription attached to the gift. The stool had been taken away from Yaa Asantewaa's room. She was the fighter queen who had given moral courage to her people. Kufuor then felt that this special gift did not belong to him but to the Ashanti King who represented the soul of the Ashanti nation. He and his retinue have come to this *Akwasidae* with the specific purpose of presenting the stool to the King.

The king, who had made a resolve that during his reign he would retrieve all the things that had been taken away by anyone from the Ashanti, feels moved as he accepts this unique gift. He gets up to perform a special, regal, dance amidst much drumming and horn blowing.

Later he presents drinks and sealed packets to all those who have come with gifts for him. There are some light hearted complaints, accompanied by laughter, from those who do not receive gifts from their chief.

Then all those present are invited to come and greet the King, us included!

The King sits till all have been through this ritual. At the time of leaving he turns around to greet all those present, shakes hands with each one, goes through the crowd in the open courtyard, meets everyone, and walks out through the passage on the side. Again, he makes a turnabout to come and meet with people lining up and making a retinue on the other side of the passage. The drumming, and the flutes and pipes continue, and those who carry the brass pan and the silver vessel continue to hover around the *Asantehene*. He does not leave till he has greeted each and every one in person. This is a symbol of solidarity, and the belief in the mind of every Ashanti that the King is there for them, to represent them in all situations even as he keeps up their pride and dignity.

The Ashanti king almost represents an alternate authority to the secular authority that rules Ghana, since he draws the same kind of respect and adoration (particularly in this area) as the President of Ghana does.

Appendix VI

A Ritual/Festival in Obosomase Village, Akuapem Region

March 6.2011

True to her word *Okomfo* Aiyebea informs us when the ritual to appease a village deity would be performed by a family that had erred and defaulted in making offerings to the shrine. I had remained in touch with the *Okomfo*, who acted as a kind of an intermediary between the other *akomfo* in the village. As the ritual festival was to continue for some three to four days *okomfo* advised us regarding the best time to visit there. We were to reach the village before six in the morning and first go to her house and then proceed to the place near a rivulet where the family have a house, as also a shrine close to it, with a large open ground in front.

The family had been facing ill health and other misfortunes due to having neglected the deity they were supposed to serve. To avert these misfortunes, it was divined that the family perform a series of sacrifices to the river deity. They had initially planned to sacrifice a cow and, perhaps for that reason, the ritual kept getting postponed. Finally when we go there it is some chickens, a ram and two goats that are sacrificed.

Reverend Abamfo Atiemo, Head of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Ghana, Legon, provided me the help of Evelyn Efua Arhin-Sam, a Masters student for purposes of interpretation and interaction. There is very little traffic in the early morning hours, as Evelyn and I leave home around 4 am and our '*tro tro*' moves along at a nifty speed through the cool quiet air. We get off on the main road and walk to *Okomfo's* house on the dirt track. A little girl carrying a load of yams in a large tin tray on her head, the common method of carrying load, goes past us selling her wares from door to door. We deposit our customary schnapps and other requirements (that the Okomfo had made known to us beforehand) at her place and wait in her veranda while she gets ready.

Okomfo takes us through a kind of grove, and past a rivulet where

children are filling small drums of water. The house where the ritual is to take place is not far. There are two tarpaulin covered structures with a number of chairs placed in them. There is hardly anyone there at this hour. Many people would have stayed till late into the previous night. They will come back a little later, we are told. In the meantime we go and sit on the chairs placed in front of the house, which is perhaps the shrine part of the compound as the erring family is also a family of traditional priests. At one end of the little house is a small platform open to the sky. Some black items of different shapes and sizes have been placed on it. These are the effigies of gods, made mainly of vegetal material, that have been brought out of the shrine on this day. The black coating is the result of the dried up sacrificial blood that would have been poured on them during rituals performed at earlier times.

Palm wine poured into a small gourd bowl is passed around and every one savours a little from that. Those who do not drink it can pour a little from it on the earth in front of them as an offering. There are also some other *akomfo* there. We try to talk with them but they are reluctant — we have not offered them anything. In fact, what we brought had been left behind at the first *okomfo's* house. But they do not know that. Some of them later agree to be interviewed after Evelyn tells them to "see *Okomfo* Aiyebea," who was in possession of the items we had brought. Even so, we could not talk to the priestess of the river deity who was performing the ritual. It may also have been because she was too busy with the many activities that she had to supervise.

After a short while we move to the larger open space. In front of us on a slightly elevated ground are huge bundles of bananas, yams in baskets, along with other offerings and behind them stand a ram and two goats. *Okomfo* Aiyebea stands on the elevation and announces the contributions made by different member of the village, who might also be part of the clan. The process takes a little while. The ritual is made possible by the joint contributions of many persons from the same village.

After a while we all walk some two hundred metres down to the rivulet. There are, by the river, a couple of tables with several items like biscuits, toffees etc. placed on them. One person (the eldest male member of the family experiencing the misfortunes) stands behind a table to offer libations and say a prayer. All others present stand around to join in the prayer at the appointed moment. Evelyn translates the prayer for me.

First the elder welcomes the deity called Nsu KwaKwa (the deity of the family that offended). Nsu Kwa Kwa is a river deity. Evelyn says the name means 'the river that does not cry anyhow.' It is only when the river is offended that it "cries." The 'crying' is manifested in the misfortunes.

The elder calls on the gods to come and drink, he specifically mentions

the name of Nsu KwaKwa. He says it is not for any bad reason that they call on her. He says: You are our father, mother, and everything. (He mentions the word *sankofa*, which stands for going back to tradition and drawing from the good things of the past. *San*-to go back, *kofa*- take). We are children, he continues, and if we forget to go back to tradition it is not a crime, or taboo (hearty affirmations mumbled with deep devotion by the assembled community intersperse every sentence of the elder, who calls on Nsu KwaKwa time and again). He goes on to plead with the deity saying: The father who is now dead did what was required when it was time to do it. Now the elder pleads and begs and asks for forgiveness from Nsu KwaKwa, saying that they had forgotten to serve her but when you forget, you go back for it. (The women shout, Nsu kwakwa forgive us OOOOh if we have sinned against you.)

The elder mentions some of the gods and the names of some of the dead asking them to come for a drink. All of you are called...if I call one I call all of you. He then commits all — all those who have come, *akomfo*, children, Christians, everyone in Akuapem, the whole town — into the hands of the gods and the dead. He says, the gods go before and behind them, the heavens and the earth are theirs. Any child who goes to school should be brilliant, whether he be the child of an *okomfo*, a Christian or anybody. He asks for good health, long life, prosperity and for general blessings. He continues with prayers for blessings and protection, repeating what he said earlier.

Then he prays that Otamfo Bonsam (enemy devil), or anyone having any evil intention when they get to the river, should be dealt with. And one of those assembled shouts that it should let the evil ones fall (there is more excitement in the group as they provide words to the libation pourer to be used for the devil). He then asks the elders around 'isn't it so', and all shout, 'yeaaah'. 'Isn't it so' and the answer is repeated. When he seems to be done with the prayers, people shout, 'Nsu Kwakwa, I'm sick, heal me' 'Nsu Kwakwa, my leg...' putting forth their personal problems before the deity which now seems, as though manifest.

(They then chant something like '*na no otobum nsu kwa kwa*', like a communal song.)

At this point one of them (the drummer) pointing to the eldest man who offered the prayers, asks him to pray to Nsu KwaKwa to accept what they are doing. So, the whole process begins again (and the same person pours the libation over again). And now the priestess of the river deity, the host *okomfo*, who is also the Chief Priestess of Obosomase, gets possessed and comes into the arena screaming as she performs a dance. She is the wife of the man who died and on whose behalf the ritual is being performed. She herself is also an *okomfo*. Every one sings the Nsu

Kwakwa song while clapping. Drums and claps accompany her frenzied dance. The possessed *okomfo* doesn't sing, she's in a trance, almost all are barefooted. For a while they stop singing. One woman addresses the possessed *okomfo* saying (with respect to other dead relatives), 'my husband, oooh, welcome..I alone..., my husband, welcome.' They begin to sing again and stop. One woman shouts, 'we need to sing once more for it to be completed.' They sing a different, more rhythmic song this time, and mention a different name — a male one, Kofi. The song continues with claps and dancing. During this time the *okomfo* seems to be coming back out of the trance-like state, and the rhythm becomes more joyous.

She runs towards the river and they try to restrain her to prevent her from falling into the river. She bends down takes some water and sprinkles it on the people from over her head.

The prayer is over. Now they decide on what they would do with the pieces of bread and toffees etc used for the sacrifice. Those will be distributed among the children, since this is a goddess that gives freely.

(The prayer is marked by active participation of all, and by repetition. All present feel free to put forward their demands to the deity that is supposed to manifest itself through the ritual and through the *okomfo*.)

After this we go back to the open space and to the platform where the gods are placed. A chicken is sacrificed and thrown on the ground. It falls with its legs upwards — a good omen meaning the sacrifice will be accepted by the gods. Then the ram and goats are sacrificed and their fresh blood poured directly on to the effigies.[1] During the course of the day the blood will dry up and form another black looking encrustation on the effigies.

After this all go back to the open space where a game of grabbing yams is played out. Since it is played as part of the ritual and is dedicated to an 'aggressive' god, I read a moral meaning into it — that of not grabbing everything for oneself. (see f.n. 104 in the chapter '*Onipa*: The Human Person in Akan')

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[1] The Fante priest Nana Baidou, whom I had met at Cape Coast, explained to us that fowl is sacrificed for divination. When its neck is wrung and it is thrown, it is a good omen if it falls with its legs up and tongue sticking out. If that does not happen then they must find out why it is so. They must then repeat the exercise with other fowl. Goat is sacrificed to atone for sins, he said. Sheep is sacrificed for affirming/restoring unity of the family.

Glossary of Symbols

Religious truths, being intangible, have given rise to bodies of symbols that immediately convey particular ideas that the religion or spiritual tradition stands for. Partly because they are seen to possess certain qualities that are analogous to the idea they represent, symbols express the invisible through visible, sensory representations. Through sensual and material imagery, without the use of lengthy verbal explanations, symbols successfully convey non-sensual truths, and associated concepts, that are essential to the understanding of a tradition.

Symbols are often esoteric in nature as every spiritual tradition has its own understanding of the Divine, and of the relationship of the human to the Divine. Only those who subscribe to, or understand, the tradition would fully comprehend, and connect with their meanings. The traditionally oral Akan have a rich repertoire of symbols, both visual and verbal, which connect the people even as they convey concepts and values that bind them into one identifiable group. Known as *Adinkra* symbols, they represent complex concepts, aphorisms, proverbs and ideas, and are seen to adorn fabrics, pottery, taxis and cars, walls or any other suitable backdrop. They also serve as logos for organizations or commercial houses. They connect people to their spiritual/intellectual heritage in every walk of life.

Advaita, even with its highly abstract and idealistic understanding of the universe, takes the help of symbols to point to truths that are beyond the ken of normal sensory and cognitive human faculties. Though symbols are not regarded as the ultimate truth, they are stepping stones to higher understanding, as Brahman is too abstract a concept to be grasped without some help. That is why idols and external forms of worship are not looked down upon — they are there to help the seeker gain the desired goal. Those who follow this tradition can deconstruct the meaning of symbols to get direct insights into concepts that otherwise would require lengthy explanations.

This book has made a selective use of symbols to highlight some major

concepts that define the two traditions. The idea is to provide a better understanding of the concepts embedded therein.

Half Title. ***Hamsa***: Mythical swan. The swan is a symbol of purity as well as discrimination. It is the vehicle of Saraswati, the goddess of learning. The white colour (though depicted here in black) stands for purity. A swan can glide on water without getting its feathers wet, signifying the capacity to live through the material world without being mired by its materialistic and limiting propensities. *Hamsa*, has another faculty — that of discrimination. It is believed to be endowed with the capacity of separating milk from water, i.e. it can distinguish Truth from untruth. It is believed to live on a diet of pearls — pearls of wisdom. *Sankofa*: 'Go back and get it', stands for the importance of learning, especially learning from the past. It is in the past that wisdom gained by learned persons is stored. The egg in the beak of the bird signifies gems of wisdom. The past, or tradition, cannot be ignored. It also signifies the bonding among those who follow the tradition.

p. vi. ***Osram ne Nsoromma****:* symbol of love and harmony. Though this Akan symbol mainly represents the love and bonding between a man and woman. We have taken the liberty here to use it to reflect harmony and accommodation between two disparate traditions that are placed side by side in this work — traditions that long needed to understand each other on their own terms.

p. viii. ***Peepul Ficus Religiosa*:** known as the tree of knowledge, is considered sacred in the Indian tradition. The heart shaped leaves tapering at the tip dance when touched by the slightest breeze. Besides giving shelter to a large variety of birds and animals the tree is known to carry out a kind of photo-synthesis even during the night, so it does not give out carbon di-oxide as most other plants do. Different parts of the tree have varied medicinal properties. It is also believed to be the abode of gods connected to creation, sustenance and dissolution. It throws down roots from its branches, making a number of other trees dependent on the one tree. The roots emanating from above, and spreading out into many as they come down, serve as an appropriate symbol for Brahman and the world. The tree is a an appropriate symbol for inquiring into and gaining higher knowledge.

p. ix. ***Kalash:*** Sacred Pot. This is a symbol of abundance and wisdom. A symbol of auspiciousness, a *kalash* is ritualistically placed at the commencement of important events or works. It can also be a sign of welcome, especially when receiving holy personages. Here it represents gratitude for the abundance of knowledge that has generously been made available to the author by numerous learned persons.

p. 1. ***Nyame Dua*:** Tree of God, altar. *Nyame Dua* is crafted from a tree of the same name from which a branch is cut at a point where three branches come together. The branch thus cut makes a stake which when dug into the ground provides a three-pronged fork on which a pot can be rested. The earthen vessel is filled with water and herbs or other symbolic and ritual materials. Prayers are offered through this water. The water is also used for purification and blessing. The branch and the water pot were traditionally placed outside all homes, and acted as a symbol and reminder of God's presence and protection, as also approachability. This symbol is embedded into Vedantic symbol,

***Swastika*:** The well recognised Hindu symbol stands for auspiciousness. It represents *Brahman*, the Supreme Being, in all His creative dimensions. It can be seen to represent the four cardinal directions, or the four *purusharthas* — *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. The symbol is drawn on the walls of homes or any other place as a reminder of the dynamic aspect of Divinity.

p. 13. ***Spiral:*** The spiral is a Universal symbol depicting evolution. Here the upward turning end is meant to show a continuing spiral of evolution reaching out to a universal abstract Consciousness.

p. 27. ***Kwatakye Atiko*:** Hairstyle of Kwatakye, an old Asante War Captain. The symbol has come to represent bravery and fearlessness. It is also given as an earned title to any brave son of an Akan community. The symbol has been used here as a reminder that out of innumerable wars that called for martial prowess the Akan communities decided to come together on the basis of shared spiritual beliefs.

p. 39. ***Aum*:** A reflection of the Absolute Reality. *Aum* or *Om*, a vibration of the Supreme, is a name for God. The most ubiquitous Hindu syllable, the meaning of the symbol has been extensively elaborated in different Upanishads. The three letters comprising the syllable, 'A', 'U' and 'M' — stand, among other things, for the three states of consciousness (waking, dream and sleep) that all beings are subject to. They also represent creation, sustenance and dissolution. *Aum* is the golden nucleus from which all creation issues forth and into which it resolves. It is through the correct understanding of this syllable that the Ultimate Truth can be grasped and experienced.

p. 55. ***Nyame ye Ohene:*** God is King. This is a symbol of the majesty and supremacy of God. All existence depends on the Supreme God. Nothing could exist if God didn't exist. God is the giver of all things in life. It is to God that all prayers are finally addressed.

p. 71. ***Padma:*** Lotus. This is a symbol of beauty as also of non-attachment. While being rooted in mud and muddy water it yet remains pure and unaffected by them. It provides an example of how *jiva* should live in the world — being in it but not *of* it. This is because the essential nature of *jiva* is divine. The emphasis here is on 'discovering' one's true nature even when enveloped in a world of illusion and ignorance.

p. 101. ***Sesa wo Suban:*** Change or transform your character. This combines two symbols — the 'Morning Star' placed inside a 'wheel'. The former symbolises a new start of the day while the wheel represents rotation or independent movement. It represents evolution into something newer, better. The stress here is on 'becoming'.

p. 137. ***Aya:*** Fern. A hardy plant that can grow in difficult conditions the fern is a symbol of endurance and resourcefulness among the Akan. It is used here to show the durability of tradition and the need to examine it on its own terms, even when placed beside another tradition.

Shankha: Conch. Of great religious importance in the Hindu tradition, the conch is sounded before ritual prayers. The conch-sound or *shankha-naad* was also sounded as a war trumpet. The shell of a large sea-snail that lives in the Indian Ocean, *Shankha* is seen to be a cleanser of sin and also a giver of fame, longevity and prosperity.

p. 157. ***Nyansapo:*** Wisdom Knot. A symbol of wisdom, ingenuity, intelligence and patience. Revered by the Akan, this symbol conveys the idea that 'a wise person has the capacity to choose the best means to attain a goal. Being wise implies broad knowledge, learning and experience, and the ability to apply such faculties to practical ends.' The Bibliography expresses an aspiration towards this goal.

p. 167. ***Nyame Nti:*** By God's Grace. A symbol of faith and trust in God. It symbolizes to the Akan that food is the basis of life and that they could not survive if not for the food that God has placed here on earth for their nourishment. The words used in the text are like food for the book!

Peepal leaf: A symbol of knowledge and learning.

p. 171. ***Eban:*** fence. A symbol of love, safety and security. A home which has a fence around it is considered to be an ideal residence. The fence symbolically separates and secures the family from the outside. The symbol is associated with security and safety. Here we used it to symbolise the safety that is sought in shrines and sacred spaces as they may be said to have an invisible spiritual fence around them!

p. 229. ***Adinkrahene:*** Chief of Adinkra symbols. This symbol is said to have played an inspiring role in the designing and shaping of other symbols. It symbolises greatness, charisma and leadership.

Inner Blurb. ***Bi Nka Bi:*** No one should bite another. Akan Symbol of peace and harmony. The image showing two fish biting each other's tails cautions against strife. Here it is used as a symbol for understanding two disparate traditions in a spirit of fellowship.

Outer Blurb: ***Om in Lotus:*** The two most popular symbols in the Vedantic tradition — one symbolising the dynamic energy of the Supreme Brahman and the other, the need to recognise, and remain in, the essential purity that is the core of the individual being.