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RECOGNISING OTHER DIMENSIONS OF EPISTEMOLOGY: CONCEPTUALISATION OF *ABOSOM* ("DEITIES") IN GHANAIAN EXPERIENCE.

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In recent times mission churches[1] have made renewed efforts at evangelisation in Africa. The churches have realised the need for dialogue with non-Christian Africans if they are to succeed in their endeavour. This objective, however, seems to have entered a dead end with regards to the concept of *abosom* (Akan, sing. *ɔbosom*), also called "deities", that is the recognition of other spiritual potential in African indigenous belief systems. First of all, the agents of mission Christianity, both European and African, are intransigent towards a direct communication with the custodians, *abosomfo*, and the priests/priestesses *akɔmfo* (sing. *ɔkɔmfo*) of the shrines. On the other hand they have failed to restrain their Christian members from soliciting at the shrines, a practice they regard as pagan, devilish and barbaric. As a result of Christianisation and European domination, Africans have suffered "mental and spiritual bondage", that "makes [African] people despise their own culture.... lose their self respect and with it, faith in themselves" (1962: 7).

This paper draws on insights from Ghanaian epistemology and cultural practice mainly from documeted sources, and personal interviews. It seeks to rethink very basic ideas about the *abosom* and their relationship with human society, particularly, in the use of spiritual knowledge to solve human problems.

Epistemology

Epistemology is neither especially complex nor divorced from the mundane concerns of everyday life. It is the discourse about the nature and status of knowledge. Questions raised in connection with epistemology concern the practical and the theoretical aspects of knowledge, which is, obviously, not lacking in any human society (Jenkins 1992: 45-6). This statement therefore contradicts the general assumption propagated by writers , including, Horten (1977) and Moore (1994) that seeks to deny Africans of philosophical thought. African philosophers such as Busia (1962), Gyekye (1987), Mudimbe (1991) Rodney (1988), have challenged this assumption. For example, Gyekye (1987) disputes Horten's assertion that the traditional cultures did not develop logic and epistemology, and "since Logic and Epistemology together make up the *core* of what we call philosophy, we can say that traditional cultures have never felt the need to develop Philosophy" (Horten 1977 quoted in

Gyekye 1987: 4). Both Busia (1962) and Gyekye (1987) think the lack of writing by Africans is one of the reasons for this misunderstanding. Gyekye (1987:3-5) delineates African epistemology as being embodied in concepts such as truth, mode of reasoning, explanation etc., adding that African linguistic expressions, proverbs and the general metaphysic of African peoples are replete with epistemological ideas. Gyekye (1987: 202) stresses that:

> an important feature of African epistemology that makes it distinct from Western epistemology, [is].... spirit mediumship, divination, and witchcraft. These modes of cognition are of course occasioned by means that differ from but work alongside (para), the normal. (Gyekye 1987: 202).

Minkus (1980: 183) also agrees that certain individuals with special powers, innate or gained through the application of medicine or by divine gift, are believed capable of perceiving what is not ordinarily perceivable. Yet, I suppose the reproduction of knowledge by these "powerful" individuals is not to demonstrate power relations but to assist human beings to deal with everyday affairs as will be apparent in this paper. I agree with Minkus (1980: 184) when she writes that practitioners of divination, for example, are able to provide information on the spiritual causes of misfortune, illness and death and to predict the future outcome of a proposed venture.

I think very often researchers, particularly in anthropological studies, assume that the people they are studying do not know anything about what they practice since they presume that "natives" do what they do because their predecessors had done so. In other words they do not know why they know what they know. Knowledge is diversified and its utility is manifested not only in times of necessity, as Malinowski (1977) would have us believe. Also as opposed to Malinowski, there is nothing magical about knowledge which is very crucial in the production and restructuring of social action and behaviour. According to Busia, the African in "his expression in conduct of awe, and reverence for nature, no less than in his use of his natural resources....demonstrates his own epistemology" (Busia, quoted in Gyekye 1987: 6).

In this paper the interaction between the material and spiritual worlds, and particularly the modes through which the *abosom* are consulted and their functions give ample evidence of aspects of epistemology in the Akan society.

The Concept of *Abosom* in African Religion

African Religion refers to the indigenous beliefs and ritual systems of Africans. Many Ghanaian beliefs, for example those of the Akan, follow the general structure of most African Religions. These

comprise belief in spiritual and material worlds which are two distinct, yet interdependent and constantly interacting worlds. The interpenetration of these two worlds is aptly described by Rigby (1981: 106) as a venture in which "the efforts of men (the material) and God (the spiritual) are conjoined ... in a common enterprise". Briefly, the religion comprises the belief in *Onyame* or God, whose distinctive features are embodied in his manifold attributes that portray him as creator and sustainer of all creation.Onyame is the highest ranking spirit in the spiritual world. There is belief in a host of male and female *abosom* also known as lower or lesser deities; belief in ever-vigilant ancestor spirits; a concept of reincarnation; a belief in a myriad of other spirits that can be exploited by men for good or evil purposes. There is also a complex concept of man which stresses the inseparable spiritual and material essences of the human being, as well as a moral code of conduct around which all human practice and behaviour revolve. However, most acts of religious devotion centre around the "deities" and ancestors because they are believed to be the representatives of God, as well as custodians of the moral order, rewarding good conduct and punishing adverse behaviour respectively (see also Sarpong 1974).

The *abosom* are spirit beings localized in some forms of natural phenomena e.g. trees, rocks, stones, hills, rivers, the sea and some animals. They may be male or female and are approached through the medium of a priest or priestess (*ɔkɔmfo* in Akan). Others are represented by anthropomorphic imagery. Akan deities generally are spirits as opposed to the Yoruba where the concept of apotheosis or deification of human heroes is prevalent (Isola 1991: 97). According to an Akan myth, after the separation of *Onyame*, the creator, from humankind, he sent these spirits to attend to the immediate needs of human beings. Their very origin and the functions for which they were created place them in a special relationship with the creator, but they are never put on a par with *Onyame* (Sackey 1993). Unlike *Onyame*, these spirits are approached through a medium.[2] *Onyame* does not compete with the deities; neither do the Akan *abosom* compete with each other as exists in the ancient Greek religious pantheon. They simply recognise each other's jurisdiction and may even collaborate.[3] Though the deities are subordinate to God, they nevertheless possess some autonomy in reacting to human conduct. It is believed that, like the ancestors, the *abosom* reward good human conduct with abundant rain, food, children and general prosperity while they punish adverse conduct with drought, famine, diseases, infertility and even death. These 'checks and balances' on human conduct by the deities are means to exercise their function as custodians of morality. Although every deity has its own powers and speciality the *abosom* are also generally concerned with medicine and healing but they also have their specific functions and limitations. Some deities heal, others reveal secrets, witches and so on.

From the foregoing it seems the *abosom* have positive and responsible functions, yet it is also believed that the *abosom* can be used for evil purposes by individuals, and invariably it is their negative aspects that are embellished. At this juncture it is important to explain why some of these spirits are connected with evil. Sarpong (1974) and Gilbert (1989) distinguish between the *abosom* and *asuman* (sing. *suman*). The lower spiritual world is hierarchically differentiated and while the *abosom* are at the apex of this hierarchy the *asuman* occupy the lowest rank. Even though both are equally powerful and their cults are similar, the *asuman* are spirits that inhabit small man-made objects that can be carried or hung in the house such as charms (Sarpong 1974: 14). The *asuman* are 'fetishes' in the proper sense of the word, man-made objects in which mystical power resides. They may be bought, sold, or reproduced by their owners (Gilbert 1989: 72). While human beings acknowledge both the protective and destructive powers of the *asuman*, they are generally believed to be destructive and are therefore responsible for evil. However Gilbert thinks that the *asuman* are subordinate to the *abosom* and indeed, describes them as "the messengers or spokesmen (*akyeame*) of the *abosom*, sent to perform errands, and their executioners (*abrafo)* sent to punish a man if he offends a deity". I agree with Sarpong (1974: 14) when he says that, "there are inconsistencies in the postulation" of this spiritual potency because "how can a good and kind God create and act through a spirit which is essentially evil. How can a malevolent spirit be a manifestation of an all-merciful God"? Here, I think Sarpong's profession as a Catholic bishop is evident but in African thought God has a balanced nature. He is good, yet he can punish people for wrongdoing. For example the Akan say, *Onyame ma wo yare a, omma wo edur so*, meaning, when God gives you sickness, he also gives you medicine. In effect, sickness is a temporal measure or lesson for the wayward to come back home and for the evil to do good. Good and evil should exist to make the moral order functional, or in other words to remind human beings of the power of God. It is a source of knowledge for Africans and Ghanaians generally and the Akan specifically to live a morally worthy life.

Since the concept of *abosom* is one major element that is obstructing the success of evangelisation it is worth situating it in the context of the Christian missionary enterprise.

The Problem

The historical development of Christianity in Ghana, like elsewhere in Africa, can be seen as the penetration of specific ideological forms related to the existing Christian ideologies of the time and their dominant capitalistic mode of production (Rigby 1981: 98). Rigby argues that the missionary institutions, as social groups, themselves also had their own ideologies within the overall context of intrusion of peripheral capitalism in its colonial form. These ideologies conflicted with those of the people they penetrated, who possessed "a socio-economic formation of a relatively unique kind, with

its own systems of religious, ideological, economic and political practices, with their associated forms of discourse... " (Rigby 1981: 98).

The merits and demerits of the missionary activities have been heavily documented (eg. Debrunner 1967; Sanneh 1983; Rodney 1982). According to Odamtten (1978: 12), the desire to create Holy Faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ and to save souls desirous of being saved was great, as well as the urge to "civilise" and convert Africans believed to be "fallen men" (Rigby 1981: 110). With this preconception they set out to evangelise Africans at all cost, reaching the Ghana coast in 1471 (Sanneh 1983). In their zealous enterprise, they attempted to decimate African customs and institutions. However, "Their worst fault lay in the condemnation of African culture. African art, dancing, music, marriage, and even names were condemned as pagan, barbaric, or evil" (Boahen 1975: 87).

Christian missionaries seem to have been somewhat accommodating with other aspects of African beliefs, namely the ideas about God and, lately, the ancestors[4], because they seem to fit into their epistemology, but would not compromise on the concept of other "deities"[5]. The problematic of the concept of "deities" is double-edged: it is the cardinal prohibition of the Christian doctrine, precisely against the first tenet of the Ten Commandments which says: "I am the Lord your God... Worship no god but me" (Exodus 20:1-3)[6]. In Christian beliefs the *abosom* are regarded as gods and therefore the pouring of libation to them is seen as worshipping them and that is unacceptable. "If there is anything objectionable in the pouring of libation, it is the mention of the *nsamanfoɔ* (spirits), the *abosom* (gods) and *Asaase Yaa* (mother earth) and not any other thing (Sarpong 1996: 27). On the other hand, Ghanaians believe that despite the mention of other spiritual beings during libation, the end recipient of libation prayer is the Supreme Being. This idea is supported by Idowu, who argues that African theology centres on a diffused monotheism in the sense that, even though the sole goal of worship is God, it is done through the lesser divinities (Dickson 1984: 54, quoting Idowu). In African religious beliefs, especially among the Akan of Ghana, the *abosom* form an integral part of the religious system, and the spiritual world is incomplete without them. Relinquishing the latter in order to embrace new concepts, built on experiences within a different cultural matrix, would not only render deficient the African religious system, but will rob Africans of their very identity (Sackey 1998).

The objective of Christian missionaries to destroy African religion and customs with their 'left hand' has been an illusion because religion remains the most enduring topic in the history of mankind. This is because it is the basis of human thoughts and actions. Marx (1964: 50-1) shares this idea when he says that everything is born out of religion and that even the revolution [Reformation] evolved from religion: it "began in the brain of the monk (Martin Luther)". Religious persuasions, at all times, are hard to repress as events between the Branch Davidian religious movement, led by

David Koresh, and U.S. federal officials at Waco, Texas in 1993 revealed. This is because every religious group is convinced of its dogma. Even though the confrontation (28/2/93-20/4/93) between state and religion claimed several innocent lives, many of David Koresh's adherents still resolutely supported him[7]. Similarly, the Christian and Muslim convictions that it is only through Jesus Christ and Mohammed respectively that salvation can be achieved are unquestioning entrenchments of their religious ideologies. The fact that African religious adherents do not engage themselves in these discourses does not mean they are inferior to other faiths, but as Opoku explains, "the truth is like a baobab tree and the hands of one person alone cannot embrace it".[8] The truth therefore is not a monopoly of any one religion but a phenomenon that is shared.

Africans, therefore, do not make a claim to one universal religious founder. Indeed as Mbiti (1975: 15) rightly observes, African religions have neither founders, reformers[9] nor missionaries. Hence they do not embark on crusades and jihads to make converts or to explain religious truths. African religions are rather interested in human concerns, promoting their welfare and regulating their affairs. These concerns reflect the recognition that religion has sociological functions, "it produces or maintains certain kinds of social relations... and it is our task to study these sociological functions" (Spiro 1966: 118). My contention is that people within their own religious community do not need to study these sociological functions nor explain their religion. Explanations regarding religious beliefs become necessary only when researchers—outside the particular religious realm—determined to explore this knowledge assail practitioners with questions that are not part of the concerns of the ordinary believer, but to which the researchers expect answers that will conform to their own epistemological background. Research of any kind is prompted by the assumption or the acknowledgment that there are other epistemological truths, hence the need for comparative studies. The investigator, therefore, would do well to imitate Stoller who shifted from the "arcane, other-worldly goals of academe to the immediate, mundane, and practical field of Songhay existence... apprenticing himself to Songhay teachers, accepting their knowledge in their terms, and exploring the contexts in which that knowledge was used"[10]. It needs to be restated that researchers should recognise that, "conversation *with* others [is] more "edifying" than a systematic explanation *of* others".[11] Although this approach may not afford complete penetration into other people's culture and particularly religion, it may provide better insight and more accuracy than other conventional methods of inquiry.

That African religions have been tenacious—though not without some modification—regardless of the diverse attempts at their obliteration, may be due to the reasons mentioned earlier, for example, the non-solicitation of religious truths, non-adhesion to one religious founder, as well as their flexibility. One can therefore say, with conviction, that the less rigid the religious beliefs and

fanatic claims to a particular human leadership, the more effective and enduring the religion, and this has been generally the case with African Religions.

Functions of the *Abosom*

The main functions of the *abosom* as already indicated are seen in the area of medicine, healing and problem-solving. The *akɔmfo* are the media through whom these duties and requests of both the divinities and human beings are transmitted. The predominant concern among human beings is health. The Akan, for example equate health with wealth in the saying, *wowɔ nkwa a, nna wowɔ ade* ,"if you have health, you have wealth". A usual explanation why African Christians drift to shrines of *abosom* and spiritual churches for healing is that the Christianity brought to Africa was devoid of healing, an essential component of African religion (Opoku 1988: 249). Christian healing was more or less a preserve for those who were extremely 'physically' and not 'spiritually' sick, who also received the Extreme Unction (last anointment) as the last resort (Sackey 1993: 133-4). African notions of sickness rather focus on spirituality. It is believed that disease is an attack by a spirit upon one's spirit, and it can be overcome by medicine whose spirit is stronger than the spirit of the disease (Appiah-Kubi 1983: 261).

Besides direct medical practice, the shrine also provides preventive medicine. Kudadjie (1983: 172) reports the story of a thief, who on entering a farm to steal found himself under a spell to weed the farm for three days. One can say that the thief's evil intentions turned into a productive venture. Thus Gilbert (1989: 66) observes rightly that a protective deity placed in a field to stop thieves is effective because people fear the consequences if they do not take heed.[12] Again an illicit sexual act was made public when the offended married partner consulted an *ɔbosom* whose spiritual power caused the inability of the illicit sexual partners to separate after the sexual activity. When at the hospital the case was declared hopeless, the families of the couple sought the intervention of an *ɔkɔmfo* who solved the problem.[13] These experiences demonstrate the recognition that Western trained medical doctors give to African medicine; they accept the limitation of Western knowledge and its effective applicability in spiritually generated afflictions. The above examples also affirm the function of the deities as custodians of the moral order. This consciousness provided epistemological guidance which invariably led to the maintenance of a reasonable degree of stability and harmony in Ghanaian societies prior to foreign influences.

Dialogue with "Animism"

Okot p'Bitek (1992: 40) has also observed the persistent efforts being made by Christian Mission churches to have "a dialogue with animism". This, in my opinion, has become necessary not because

Christians want mutual collaboration with "animists", but because the former are losing members to other religions.[14] Their efforts are geared toward finding solutions to remedy the defects of Christianity. How sincere is this dialogue with "unequals"? Is it a means to gain deeper insight into African religion in order to reformulate better strategies towards re-evangelisation? Or is it an effort to recapture European religious hegemony in postcolonial Africa?[15] The question is, how could Christian evangelists explore or understand the religion of a people they want to convert without talking with the very custodians of the faith? Their attempt to talk about others, rather than talking with them makes the theme, "Dialogue with Animism", suspect. They seem to seek a dialogue with the phenomenon (animism) and not with its practitioners. This obscure intention smacks of a reinvention of the tactics applied by social anthropologists, who acted as "handmaiden of colonization" disclosing "important information about the social institutions of colonized people to ensure efficient and effective control and exploitation" (p'Bitek 1992: 52). Some modern anthropologists acknowledge the collusion of their predecessors with missionaries but they do so within a defensive framework. For example Warren (1986: 66) writes that "government anthropologists facilitated colonial development efforts by recording Ghanaian culture histories, and ethnographies that could be useful by government officials to further the understanding of local populations and institutions" while Moore (1994: 123-4) writes:

> Their agenda was not the same as that of the missionaries, the settlers and the administrators... they went to Africa to understand African societies, African lives, and African ideas. The early generation of Africanists saw the colonial presence as something about which they could do little, much as anthropologists today. What is overlooked is the extent to which European acquisition of knowledge of African systems and practice actually benefited or alienated Africans within their own culture.

Moore (1994: 84) even personalises her criticism by attacking V. Mudimbe for attempting to postulate positively an African epistemology in his writings. Moore disdainfully describes Mudimbe as a "Zairean who lives in the United States", "who is not an anthropologist" but has "his own ideas of what anthropology is", and whose works are "complex, indigestible and opinionated". According to Rodney (1982) and Mudimbe (1991: 5-6). and, the role of the missionaries/anthropologists extended beyond that of agents of imperialism. They collaborated with Europeans, namely the colonialists and were part and parcel of the obliteration of the African epistemology or experience, replacing it with Western epistemology.

Mystification, Resilience and Ambivalence

New forms of education and new forms of agricultural techniques designed to boost European

capitalist expansionism constitute the main weapons used in breaking down the cohesion of African social structures. Rodney (1982: 240-1) writes that Western education deprived young Africans of "confidence and pride as members of African societies", and instilled in them a sense of deference towards all that was European and capitalist. Mobley (1970: 148) makes reference to Armattoe who shares similar views about how West Africans were made to study the history of the British Empire, and to eulogize men like Cecil Rhodes, who consecrated his life to subduing African peoples. Armattoe regarded this as a contradiction that undoubtedly resulted in demoralisation and mystification among Africans. One would have thought that with the end of colonialism Africans would deconstruct the psychological havoc created by European bondage. They certainly needed a new ideological framework but it seems that some Ghanaians, and particularly the new churchmen, adopted the missionaries' attitude toward "pagan rites" and were, if anything, comparatively more rigid in their opposition... Mobley (1970: 156). This demonstrates how deeply Africans were taught to internalize their supposed human and cultural inferiority, condemning everything African without attempting to find out any merit the culture may contain.

But how profound and enduring is this adaptation or new "civilization" that alienates religion from social life? Does it ensure stability in the relationship between belief and social demands, so as to prevent Christians from wavering in the faith? Indeed the notion that religion is inseparable from African life is still persuasively alive. It is part and parcel of the African heritage, a source of knowledge and meaning. Therefore it is not surprising when the Catholic bishop of Tamale, P.P. Dery (1973: 53-54), makes the observation that Christianity cannot unmask the mythical and superstitious man completely... The African is a good Christian when all is well with him, he resorts to mythical healing when he is in serious trouble.

This ambivalent attitude was earlier recognized by Idowu (1968: 301), who expressed the view that, "Africans have welcomed the Gospel, but have not yet said goodbye to their beliefs and practices". Mbiti (1975:13), however seems to underscore the idea of "syncretism" as a hallmark of Africans and argues that when Africans are converted to other religions, they often mix their traditional religion with the one to which they are converted. In this way they think and feel they are not losing something valuable, but are gaining from both religious systems.

It is important to note that according to Mbiti, the new religion does not replace the old religion, but it is added to the old. This may also explain the tenacity of African religions against all odds. It should however be emphasized that religion, like any cultural or social phenomenon is not static but susceptible to change and adaptation in order to prevent its complete obliteration.

But is the retention of old religious beliefs and practices a unique characteristic of Africans? Christianity itself demonstrates ample evidence of European, Greek and Jewish "pagan" survivals,

notably purification rituals and the use of fire (candles) and others, which have become integral parts of the Christianity package exported to other parts of the world. It is often asserted that had Christ appeared among Africans, Christianity would have certainly taken on some traits of the existing cultural heritage. For Christ himself built upon the tradition he encountered and sought to improve and *enforce* the law, but not to *destroy* it (Matthew 5:17, my emphasis). In a similar vein, Ghanaians generally and the Akan, for example, believe that *amambrɛ yenntow nnkyene* (culture heritage is not discarded). In their own epistemology, Ghanaians can conceive that culture is not stagnant and allow changes and modifications when appropriate. Internal changes were going on within African societies long before the encounter with Europeans. This can be demonstrated with the history of the *Ábɔakyer* festival of the Effutu of Winneba, Ghana. This festival has undergone a series of historical changes as the consciousness of the people developed within their own cultural environmental context. The annual sacrificial offering of a royal being to the deity, Penkye Otu, was replaced with a leopard, the best of all animal species in Effutu thought. This change became necessary when the dwindling royal population was seen as a threat to the political security of the ruling clan. Later, when it was realized that the leopards were killing the hunters, the antelope, a less dangerous animal, was substituted. This history, which is recounted every year, pre-dates any foreign encounter. "If Christianity and Islam were not present... African Traditional Religion would have responded to changes within its communities" (Olupona 1991: 32).

Many people in Ghana today will agree with me that the dual allegiance towards Christianity and African Religion is even more obvious than before. Most of the traditional concepts and values are being revitalized in contemporary Ghanaian life. This becomes more evident in questions relating to health, morality, marriage and its affiliated problems e.g. childlessness, sexual impotency, witchcraft and other situations of uncertainties, which to most people are beyond human competence and strength. In such situations the Ghanaian Christian consciously believes that the only remedy lies within his/her familiar epistemological realm, the supplication of the ancestors and *abosom*. The dilemma becomes more revealing because, as Christians, they have been made to reject these spiritual entities, yet as Africans they also acknowledge that in consulting the deities, spiritual knowledge is being utilized to alter a specific condition of life, a situation for which the Christian religion provides no solution. The *ɔbosom* possesses and imparts to the *ɔkɔmfo* knowledge to cure a disease, to find solution to pressing life problems, to restructure broken human relationships etc. All these are issues that are meaningful in the context of African life.

However neither the church nor her African converts will openly compromise on the adherence to the *abosom*. But how long can this paradox be made to endure? Does one become evil or inferior by soliciting their help? Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Ghana 1980, had this to say:

I therefore say to Ghana and all Africa. Preserve your culture. Let it be enriched through exchange with other cultures, but do not let your own die. Keep it alive and offer it as a contribution to the world community.[16]

The Pope will certainly not advocate adherence to *abosom*, but is there nothing worth considering about the concept of deities, an integral part of African culture, "as a contribution to the world community"? African Traditional Religion is part and parcel of a people's culture just as Christianity is a mixture of heterogeneous cultures, namely the Graeco-Roman-Jewish cultures.

Shrine Healing and Christian Antagonism

As already mentioned African Christians consult shrines contrary to Christian principles, because they think Christianity is appropriate for some situations only, while the *abosom* are better placed to deal with others (Nukunya 1986: 95). The anxiety of the church on consulting *abosom* or shrine healing is especially directed against libation and blood sacrifice. However the structure of libation demands invocation of all spirit beings beginning with *Onyame*, God, Mother Earth, the *abosom* of the locality, the ancestors as well as the good and evil spirits. The latter, presumably *asuman*(?), are mentioned so that they may not disturb the function. This indicates the integrative and balanced nature of religion of the Akan and most other people in Southern Ghana. It accounts for good and evil; it is unbiased and gives every spirit its due. Yet Christian churches see only evil in African religion. The anxiety over blood sacrifice can be alleviated if its significance is understood. Briefly, the sacrificial blood of the animal in shrine healing denotes cleansing of the disease demons as well as symbolising new life to the patient (Opoku 1988).

In 1991, the electronic news media were replete with reports about Okomfo Nana Drobo of the famous Kwaku Firi shrine, in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana, who claimed to have found a cure for HIV/AIDS. Nana Drobo immediately became the target of antagonism, particularly from the Ministry of Health and Christian groups. In an attempt to save his AIDS clinic, Nana Drobo issued a public statement, that his AIDS Clinic was separate from the main shrine. Unconfirmed rumours say that the influx of Christians to the shrine after this announcement was remarkable. Certain questions immediately come to mind; first, have capitalistic aspirations that seem to have penetrated the precincts of every society in the country also affected the shrine, and perhaps, become the basis of religion? In other words, did Nana Drobo distinguish the clinic from the shrine so as to attract more people and as a result more income? Secondly, did the Nana Drobo have to disown his *ɔbosom* to please and attract Christian clients? If it were so, it would be a betrayal of African Religion and of the shrine he served. This would also confirm Busia's (1962) lamentation on the loss of self-esteem for things African. Furthermore, if these assumptions raised here were valid, would it mean that the

ɔkɔmfo has convinced Christians to disabuse their consciences that they can, without guilt, receive treatment for HIV/AIDS (and not for other ailments) from him? Whichever way, there is some sort of irony because the *ɔkɔmfo* is first and foremost a channel of the *ɔbosom* from whom he acquires his healing powers. Therefore, whatever treatment is being sought cannot be effected without the intervention of the *Ɔbosom*, whether it is for HIV/AIDS or other ailments.

This aversion to *abosom*, evidently, has been the result of Christian penetration and its attempts to create distortions in African culture (Sanneh 1983; Sackey 1993). The antipathy has been carried on by their African successors, yet Ghanaians, in describing their image of the missionary to Mobley (1970), were generally aware that "the missionary was a simple soul, full of zeal, but woefully lacking in knowledge". "He was generally neither aware of the values in Ghanaian religions nor inclined to respect the ceremonies associated with the social events" (Mobley 1970: 154-55).

To attempt to answer why the concept of *abosom* is still misinterpreted, a discussion of the semantics of the term itself is necessary. The first element in the misunderstanding comes from the designation, *abosom* which literally means (*bo* stone, rock + *som* serve, worship) stone /rock worship. Yet not all of these spirits inhabit stones and rocks as we have seen, thus the meaning "rock worship" is an erroneous interpretation. According to Sarpong (1974: 14), the term *abosom* "suggests that the gods which the Akans worship were formerly only stones". Perhaps Ɔsofo Ɔkomfo Damuah's[17] inversion of the term to *boasom*[18], meaning to assist worship, extracted from the verb *boa* "assist, help" and *som* "worship" would seem more appropriate if one stresses their intermediary function between God and humankind. Inversion of words is a familiar linguistic feature in Akan. For example, the word *ndaase* (gratitude, thanks) can be reversed to *aseda*, which contains the same meaning while the word *ntoboase*, (patience, gentleness) can be upturned to *boaseto*.

Again, the word *bosom* can be derived from *som bo*, "be precious to". For example, *me na som me bo*, or *me na ye mo bosom*, that is, my mother is precious to me. People metaphorically refer to a loved one as *mo bosom*. Often a mother who wishes to praise a child for good conduct or cajole him/her to go on an errand will refer to the child as *mo bosom* (my precious one). Similarly, the meaning of the word *ɔbosom* as something valuable, treasure etc. becomes relevant when one analyses the esteem attached to the ingredients used in the preparation of a shrine, namely gold dust and beads. Appiah (1992: 100-12) gives these objects a symbolic function of respect; but I think their significance transcends that of respect. These two objects play very important roles in the material culture of Southern Ghanaians. Apart from being the most valuable personal property and heirloom, they have religious significance, and their economic value, especially of beads, became very evident during the trade with Europeans (Sackey 1985). The *abosom* are valued because they

are powerful, provide guidance and counsel; they can reward (enrich) and punish (impoverish) people according to their conduct. In short they play an active role in human life. Therefore in attempting to describe the nature of the "deities" we must go beyond the literal meaning of their name and look into their functions. Finally, the reference to the deities as *ɔbosom* (even if *ɔbo* is taken literally to mean stone) can be seen as an emphasis pointing to the indestructibility of spirit beings.

Furthermore, there is also the belief that the essence of worshipping *abosom* is not directed to the object (natural or man-made) but the spirit dwelling within, and deities or the images do not represent earthly but divine realities (Idowu quoted in Rambachan 1990). This gives the same credulity to the term *ɔbosom*. There is a popular Akan saying: *abosom nyinaa yɛ Onyame mba*, (all the *abosom* are sons of *Onyame)*. However these sons of God, in Akan religion, as stated earlier on are not co-equal with their creator. They are intermediaries, yet they possess some autonomy in reacting to human concerns and conduct. The concept of intermediation reflects the sociological patterns of African life. People always depend on somebody as a go-between when they want to approach a chief or an elder, especially with a request or when someone needs to be reconciled with another person after a broken relationship.[19]

The Terms *Ɔsɔfo, Ɔkɔmfo, Ɔbosomfo*

There is the need to clarify the usage of these three related words: *ɔsɔfo, ɔkɔmfo* and *ɔbosomfo*. *Ɔkɔmfo*,as mentioned earlier, refers to a male or female priest who intermediates between human beings and divinity through spiritual possession. The *ɔkɔmfo* who comes into office generally by means of a divine call by a deity serves at a shrine. The custodian of the shrine is called *ɔsɔfo*[20]. The office of the *ɔsɔfo*, who is always a male, is hereditary. Unlike the *ɔkɔmfo*, the *ɔsɔfo* does not get possessed . One of the main functions of the *ɔsɔfo* is to intrepret the divine message of the posssessed *ɔkɔmfo* because it is believed that although the *ɔkɔmfo* is the medium he/she does not remember what transpires during possession (see also Brookman-Amissah 1975: 5-6)[21]. In certain areas, the words *ɔkɔmfo* and *ɔbosomfo* are used interchangeably. This is a misnomer because according to my research the term *ɔbosomfo* refers to the custodian of the shrine who is rightly called *ɔsɔfo*. An *ɔbosomfo* does not divine. It is asserted that the use of *ɔsɔfo* to describe the custodian of the shrine lapsed when Christian missionaries, looking for word equivalents in the local languages, adopted the Akan term *ɔsɔfo* which they found to be an apt description of their priests/pastors, who are attached to a church, do not get possessed, and act as mouth-pieces of God. Having appropriated this word, the indigenous people were indirectly prohibited to continue using the word *ɔsofo*. In its stead, the term *ɔbosomfo* derived from *ɔbosom* - taking cognisance of the functions of the indigenous shrine

ɔsɔfo - was coined to refer to the shrine *ɔsɔfo*[22].

Critique of *Abosom*

Despite these positive aspects of the *abosom* they are mainly associated with evil and accused of incompetence. Christensen (1959: 278) thinks that, "The ancestral spirits, the deities and priests [of Africa] have not adequately met the present needs of the people; neither has the white man's Christianity". Similarly, Appiah (1992: 76) argues that, "The African metaphysics of Soyinka disables because it founds our unity in the gods who have not served us well in our dealings with the world..." He criticises Soyinka's inability to explain "why Christianity and Islam have so widely displaced the old gods". What these arguments seem to overlook is that the concept of "deity" is a reciprocal one and so long as humans propitiate and observe the specified taboos and good values/conduct, the *abosom* will in turn perform their obligation to human beings.

Undoubtedly the advent of new religions affected these mutual responsibilities by turning Christian converts away from their familial and communal obligations. In the light of this, the belief in *abosom* was seriously shaken, albeit the whole religious institution could not be annihilated. The blame therefore should not go to the *abosom* but to human beings' inconsistencies and diminished loyalty. Africans are aware that the *sankofa* (go back and take) ideology cannot be taken literally, but efforts should be made on what can be salvaged.

There are many educated Ghanaians who denigrate the concept of *abosom* and attack traditional medicine, which as stated earlier, involves *akɔmfo* and other healers. For example, Appiah shares Wiredu's disdain for traditional medicine (which includes shrine healing), supporting the assertion that many people in Ghana die daily through traditional medicine, which is "unanalytical". Wiredu considers the situation "not just retrograde; but... tragic" (Appiah 1992: 176). One cannot wholly say that because traditional medicine is "unanalytical", it is totally ineffective.

There are Christians of all denominations who visit the shrine as the last resort as Dery has stated above. There are also many Western trained medical doctors who constantly refer certain ailments beyond their capabilities, including psychiatric cases (Mullings 1984) and orthopaedic casualties to traditional practitioners. The question that should be asked is: why do people still adhere to traditional medicine with all its faults and inadequacies? There are many factors: people do strongly believe in its potency; hospitals are not only inaccessible and expensive but inhumane; the state is unable to offer any better alternative. These and other factors draw people to traditional medicine, which include shrine healing and treatment by *akɔmfo* and herbalists[23], whose "unanalytical incompetence" is compensated by humaneness, which in itself is a catalyst for healing.

Again, it must be stressed that the purpose of these *abosom* is to serve human beings, and carry out the requests as presented to them. People question the integrity of the deities as to why they do

not prevent the evil intentions of supplicants? African religion offers its believers free will, but it is also believed that if a person knowingly solicits an *ɔbosom* to harm an innocent victim, he will succeed in the short run but in the long run, the offender will experience the deity's wrath in diverse ways. This does not imply weakness; rather it carries a moral message to humankind that both good and evil exist, but the former invariably triumphs.

Conclusion

The concept of *abosom* should be understood in their context as part and parcel of the Akan religious heritage in Ghana. It is a source of knowledge, particularly of medicine and morality, which in turn forms the basis of human survival, or at least in the prolongation of human life. This aspect of African belief has not only withstood the test of time, but it is still tenacious, and the concept of *abosom* keeps coming up in religious discourses in modern times. It must be evident that theories of inferiority and inadequacy associated with the concept have not prevented Africans generally to give up their belief. The *abosom* therefore cannot be completely jettisoned as the new religions desire. It must be emphasized that seeking help at the shrine is not tantamount to becoming a shrine worshipper. The shrine makes no such demands. Indeed the regular worshippers are the *akɔmfo,* who are also selected by the *ɔbosom* by means of a divine call. Also, "There is nothing ungodly or devilish about African traditional medicine" (Opoku 1988: 250), some of whose knowledge emanates from the *abosom*. It is precisely this belief in the concept of deities, a unique feature of African traditional belief, among others, that has permitted Christianity, Islam and other religions to flourish in Africa.

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Notes

[1]Mission churches here refer to foreign Christian groups that started proselytization in the 15th century along the coast of Africa. This is distinct from African Christian churches, which synthesize Christian doctrines and African culture. These churches of African origin are known under the general rubric of African Independent churches but in Ghana they are called "spiritual churches" or *sunsumsɔre*/pentecostal/charismatic churches. For more on the classification of these churches see Sackey (2001).

[2]Although Rattray's *Ashanti* (1927) and Busia's *The Ashanti* ,in African Worlds edited by Daryll Forde(1954) report of priestesses for God, *Onyame*, among the Asante there has not been evidence of this practice or knowledge of it among the wider Akan group.

[3]In 1987 I witnessed this unique solidarity of the *abosom* in my matrilineal home. The family *ɔbosom*, the community *ɔbosom* and the great *ɔbosom* of the sea all worked together to detect the whereabouts of a missing family member. In fact the services of a different *ɔkɔmfo*, rather than the lineage's own were used to avoid accusation of prior knowledge from skeptic Christian members of the family.

[4]I was amazed when a European Catholic priest, announcing the funeral anniversary celebrations for a deceased, mentioned that *libation* would take place at the graveside after the church service. Libation has been one of the most "abhorrent" African practices to Christianity because it involves the invocation of God, the "gods", the ancestors and other spirits. Has the church changed its stand against the gods; or was this an individual's approach?

[5]The term deity is very controversial since it does not carry the same English meaning as in Akan. This will be elaborated later in this paper.

[6]Goodnews Bible.

[7]I was resident in the USA when this incident took place and I therefore had the opportunity to listen to it in the news.

[8]This is an Akan proverb, which Kofi Asare Opoku (Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon) often uses to contest the claim to the possession of the absolute truth by so-called World Religions.

[9]See note 18 below.

[10]Quoted by Michael Jackson (1989:10).

[11]Quoted in Michael Jackson (1989:14).

[12]Consonant with the distinction between *abosom* and *asuman* above, the deity in this context could be a *suman*. Therefore a *suman* could effect positive conduct as well.

[13]This incident was reported in Cape Coast in the early 1960's. See also Sackey (1993).

[14]The Anglophone West African Catechetical Committee held a conference to discuss this problem in Nsawam Ghana in 1991. Its theme was "The Challenge of Evangelization in West Africa Today, In the Light of African Traditional Religion, The New Religious Movements and The Renewed Presence of Islam."

[15]The later seems more probable because a suggestion I made to a Christian gathering in 1991 to consider a direct relationship with African shrine priests/priestesses was considered heretical.

[16]Speech given by the Pope during his visit to Ghana. May 1980: 15, Pamphlet published by The Catholic Press, Accra.

[17] *ɔsɔfo ɔkɔmfo* Damuah, formerly Rev. Father Vincent Damuah, is an ordained Roman Catholic priest *ɔsɔfo* who made history in the 1960's during the Nkrumah era, when he was detained for criticizing government policies. This caused the Catholics to rise up against the government. In 1982 he became a politician in the revolutionary government PNDC to the dismay of the Catholic hierarchy. After having been fired in 1985 by the PNDC – and inspired by the Nigerian K.O.K. Onyioha's Godianism – he formed his own church, AFRIKANIA, alleged to be a "purer" version of African Religion. He took the double title *ɔsɔfo ɔkɔmfo*, both connected with the shrine.

[18]Personal conversation with Damuah, Accra, June 17, 1992.

[19]See Dickson (1984) for more details on this topic of intermediation.

[20]There are two ways to enter the priesthood. The usual one is by means of a divine call, while the other is a hereditary office. In the case of the second category there is no specific call and the most suitable

member of the family occupies the vacant seat of a former *ɔkɔmfo*. (See Sackey, October 2000).

[21]This is debatable because from my studies among spiritual churches or religious movements in Ghana, while some of these churches assert that a person under possession is conscious of what goes on - though the ability to control one's self is absent, and hence the need for an interpreter – others think that a possessed person has consciousness and does not need a mouth-piece (Sackey, 1989).

[22]Personal conversation with Nana Kweku Fraikue and *ɔkɔmfo* Esi Fiinba, Elmina, December 1989.

[23]A herbalist, *dursini*, is a healer who employs herbs, plants and tree barks to effect healing. He does not serve any ɔbosom and therefore does not divine. However, it is asserted that some herbalists require *asuman* for protection or success in their operations.