CHAPTER TWO: THE AKAN RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL SETTING

2.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is to provide the background information needed to situate this study within a context.

To begin with, a brief description is presented of the main features of Akan traditional religion. This is to enable the reader to fully appreciate the influence of religion on the lives of the Akan in order to understand them as a people. The next major section of this chapter is devoted to the Akan people. The discussion in this section will, specifically, be focused on examining who the Akan people are, what constitutes Akan worldview, what notions they hold about the human person, the mother-child bond, the father-child bond and the God-human bond. These areas will be focused on because they are also crucial to understanding the traditional worldview, which is, to a large extent, resilient and which underpins most of the spirituality, practices and taboos associated with menstruation. Again, a discussion of the Akan worldview will help us locate the role and value of women in the Akan traditional religion in the next section of this chapter. We shall also briefly discuss the Akan concept of the sacred and profane – a topic that will throw light on the reasons why the Akan consider female blood as profane and dangerous.

The last section of this chapter will be devoted to a brief discussion of the essence of blood in Akan/Africa religious culture. This discussion will expose the reader to how crucial issues relating to menstrual blood are to the Akan, what is the traditional way of dealing with profanity and why the role of women in Akan society is ambivalent.

2.2 The Akan Traditional Religion

The proof for the statement that the Akan have a religious worldview lies in the belief that people are surrounded by hosts of spirit-beings - some good, some evil which are able to influence the lives of the living for good or for ill.55 This Akan concept of the

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supernatural, ideas about man, society and nature, form a system which gives meaning
and significance to the Akan and for that matter the African.

At the root of all these ideas lies a particular notion which runs through Akan culture.
The unseen is as much a part of reality as that which is seen; the spiritual is as much a
part of reality as the material, and there is complementary relationship between the two,
with the spiritual being more powerful than the material.\(^{56}\) For example, the Akan
conceives of a person made of i. body (honam), ii. Spirit (sunsum) and iii. Soul (okra).
Again, the community in Akan is made up of both the living and the dead and the reality
of this concept is concretized in libations and other sacrifices to the dead whose
participation, involvement and blessings are sought, as continuing members of the
community.\(^{57}\) With regards to nature, there is also a similar belief that behind visible
objects lay essences, or powers, which constitute the true nature of those objects.

A close observation of Akan and its societies reveals that religion is at the root of Akan
culture and is the determining principle of Akan life. We share Kofi Asare Opoku’s view
that ‘it is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that in traditional Akan, religion is life and
life is religion.’\(^{58}\) Akans/Africans are engrossed in religion in whatever they do- whether
it is farming, fishing or hunting; or simply eating, drinking or traveling. Religion gives
meaning and significance to their lives, both in this world and the next. Religion is
therefore part of an everyday life. Thus in the Akan/Africa indigenous thought system,
culture and religion are not distinct from each other, the sacred and the secular, the
spiritual and material, the natural and the supernatural. Therefore culture and religion in
Akan/Africa is one and the same thing.\(^{59}\) They embrace all areas of one’s total life. There
is no sphere of existence that is excluded from the double grip of culture and religion.
The presence or absence of rain, the well being of the community, sexuality, marriage,
birthing, naming children, success or failure, the place and form of one’s burial, among
others, all come under the scope of religion and culture.\(^{60}\) Religion in Akan/Africa is
made up of a set of beliefs and practices which are a consequence of, the beliefs.

\(^{58}\) K. Asare-Opoku *West African*, 1.
Geoffrey Parrinder has classified the four main categories of West African religions as: The supreme God, divinities or gods, ancestors and charms or amulets. Kofi Asare-Opoku on the other hand classifies them into 6 main categories as: The supreme God, the ancestral spirits, supernatural entities or lesser deities, totemism agents of witchcraft, magic and sorcery and charms, amulets, and talismans. Our discussion will follow Asare-Opoku’s categorization.

The Supreme Being

Common to Akan traditional worldview as well as all African worldviews is the widespread belief in an all-powerful God who is known by various local names. He is essentially a spirit for there are no images or visible representations of Him. He is regarded as the creator (obooadee) and the owner of (asaase wura) of the world. Power, justice, beneficence, omniscience and eternity are attributed to Him. He is the source of all power and has power over life and death. He rewards human beings and also punishes them when they do wrong. He is thought to be immanent as well as imminent. Thus he is believed to be present and active in the affairs of humans. The Akan conceive of God as the preserver of the world and he is known principally in terms of what he is believed to do for humankind. Thus there are such descriptions of God as giver of sun (amowia), giver of water (amonsu), giver of rain (totrobonsu) and the reliable one (twereampong). There are traditional names, attributes, myths, symbols, proverbs greetings, and everyday sayings that together express God’s omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, dependability, immortality and other beliefs in him. He is not worshipped directly. However, he is called upon for help in times of crisis. Thus there are very few approaches to God. There are no regular and formal cults to God. It must however be mentioned that, in the past, most Ashanti houses had small shrines in the form of a pot in the fork of a particular tree (Nyame Dua, God’s tree), which was dedicated to God (Nyame). The Asante have sometimes thought of God (Nyame) as both male and female. Thus his name obaatanpa-capable mother-, an image derived from the natural and biological roles of women as

63 The Asante are a major Akan ethnic group in Ghana who speak Asante, an Akan dialect.
mothers. The female principle is symbolized by the moon which created human beings with water. The sun symbolizes the male principle. The sun shot life-giving fire into the human veins and made human beings live.\textsuperscript{64}

God is generally viewed as transcendent. Thus he requires intermediaries through whom he functions and humankind also approaches him through these means- deities and ancestors.\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{Ancestral Spirits}

A significant category of Akan traditional Religion is the place of the ancestors (\textit{Nananom nsamanfo}). John S. Pobee observes, ‘The most potent aspect of the Akan religion is the cult of the ancestors.’\textsuperscript{66}

All reputable scholars who have written on the Akan share this opinion. Pobee says that the term ancestors refers to those in the Akan community ‘who have completed their course here on earth and are gone ahead to the higher world to be the elder brothers of the living in the house of God.’\textsuperscript{67}

Kwesi Dickson notes, however that,

\textit{In African thought those who became ancestors must have lived exemplary lives; it is not everyone who dies who becomes ancestor, so that the cult of the dead is not to be equated with that of the ancestors.}\textsuperscript{68}

‘The ancestor is, according to Emmanuel Asante,\textsuperscript{69} therefore a saint in the Akan community, one who is perceived as a moral example worthy of emulation.’ The ancestor is an ideal Akan, an immortal, dignified and venerated person who is believed to mediate God’s Kingship and to maintain the bond of relationship between the individual Akan

\textsuperscript{64} K.K. Anti, ‘Women in Africa Traditional Religions,’ \url{http://www.mamiwata.com/women.htm}. Retrieved on May 30\textsuperscript{th} 2005.
\textsuperscript{65} C. Omenyo, \textit{Pentecost}, 26.
\textsuperscript{67} J.S. Pobee, \textit{Toward an African Theology}, 52.
\textsuperscript{68} K. Dickson, \textit{Theology in Africa}, London: Longmans &Todd, 1984, 198.
\textsuperscript{69} E. Asante, \textit{Toward an African Christian Theology of the Kingdom of God}, 124.
and the community at large. Dickson remarks ‘the African sense of community requires the recognition of the presence of the ancestors as the rallying point of the group’s solidarity.’ 70 Thus ancestors are treated with reverence and held in awe.

The ancestors are part of the Akan community. They are believed to be the custodians of its land, laws and customs. As custodians of law and morality, they are believed to possess the divine power to ‘punish or reward in order to ensure the maintenance of the group’s equilibrium.’ 71

The ancestors can be contacted by putting food on standards that represent them, for it is believed that the ancestors continue to live the same kind of life they led when they were on earth and they require food and drink to sustain them, in their spiritual state of existence. Thus, offerings are made to them either by individuals daily, or by religious officials who perform on behalf of the entire society during festivals or rituals. 72 The Asante, who symbolize their royal ancestors with black stools, believe that by smearing these stools with blood (the seat of life) they are brought into close contact with the ancestors who are symbolized by the stools. 73 Akans have festivals such as Adae, Apoo and Odwira during which the dead are remembered and venerated through their stools (apunnua) that are “cleansed” and “anointed.” 74

In the Akan religious culture the ancestors worshipped/venerated appear to have been always male ancestors. Although descent among the Akan is traced in the female line, female ancestors are scarcely mentioned during the pouring of libation. For example, when a member of the royal clan marries, libation is poured on the stools to ask for children and happiness for the new couple. If the girl belongs to “a stool” then the bride-price is given to the linguist for the chief. The chief gives one-half to the parents and uses part of what is left to buy a sheep to be offered to the ancestors. The prayer is:

O grandfather spirits, here is wine for you... your grandchild...has married. Her husband has paid his head wine or bride price and this is

70 K. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 70.
71 K. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 70.
73 K. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 70.
your share. Give them good health, good and happy marriage, and when she bears children let them survive.\textsuperscript{75}

In the pouring of libation during Akan festivals or when a chief enters the stool-house,\textsuperscript{76} the ancestors are usually addressed as Spirit Grandfathers\textsuperscript{77} and so it appears that men pour libation to male ancestors. Again Pobee commenting on the ancestors as we have seen above, spoke of ancestors as elder brothers of the living at the house of God. Mention is not made of grandmothers in the pouring of libation nor are ancestors spoken of as elder sisters.

However, female ancestors, especially queen mothers are recognized in Akan Religion. This is seen on special occasions like \textit{Adae} festival (the most important festival in honor of the ancestors) when the queen mother “feeds” the ancestors. As she puts the \textit{Eto}\textsuperscript{78} on the stool\textsuperscript{79} during special festivals, she addresses the ancestress saying:

\begin{quote}
Give me health and strength, and give health also to the king and the people of B-and to the women of B-and to strangers in this town. May women bear children and men gain riches. Anyone who wishes evil to the town may that evil fall upon him.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

In addition, Akan ethnic group is matriarchal and so believes in the existence of a common ancestress through which all clan members, both male and female trace their lineage. Thus though the Akan believe in the existence of female ancestors, they, like their living counterparts, are relegated to the background.

\textsuperscript{75} Sarpong. \textit{The Sacred Stools of the Akan}, Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1971,82.

\textsuperscript{76} Stool house is a special room in the chief’s palace where the stools of all dead chiefs are kept. The stool resting in its stool house, is the point where the living and ancestors meet.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{77} P. Sarpong, \textit{The sacred Stools}, 57, 58.

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Eto} is special food prepared from mashed yam or plantain, palm oil and eggs)

\textsuperscript{79} Apart from its real meaning as a wooden seat, the word “stool” is used to denote the office of the traditional ruler or the king. To say “The Ashanti stool” means the same as saying “the Ashanti throne”. Every traditional ruler and every queen mother in Akan has a stool he or she occupies and this represents his or her throne. He or she also has in his or her possession a number of stools of important chiefs and queen mothers who have died. These stools are kept in the palaces and are given food on special festivals like \textit{Adae} festivals.

\textsuperscript{80}P. Sarpong, \textit{The Sacred Stools} , 59
Divinities/Deities and Spirits

The Akan worldview also has a belief in non-human spirits, some of which are personified in the form of deities. They are believed to manifest themselves into various tangible forms such as water, rocks and caves, house deities and other natural objects.81

Generally, these divinities are perceived to provide solutions to many social problems, personal problems and mishaps as well as to reveal witches and to witness to the truth of an event. They are also believed to have powers that can destroy. The popularity of a deity depends largely on its reputed ability to perform by way of providing material and spiritual prosperity. Such deities attract devotees from far and near. However, they are abandoned if they fail to meet specific needs of groups or individuals.

The general belief concerning the divinities in Akan society is that they were created by God to fulfill specific functions and that they did not come into existence on their own volition. As creatures, the divinities share the limitations of all other creatures. Their power is limited to the performance of specific functions and none of them enjoys the unlimited powers ascribed to God. The Akan society regards some of them as children or messengers of God, while others are regarded as His agents. The divinities may be male or female, good or evil, and they are given places of abode in the environment, such as in hills, rivers, trees, rocks and even certain animals. They however remain ‘essentially spirits’, and are distinguishable from the habitats. Thus the trees, rivers or stones must not be confused with the spirits which dwell in them. The spirits have unlimited mobility and can come and go from their places of abode. They are therefore not confined to the palpable objects of the environment in which they reside.

These divinities are known in Akan as Obosom (singular), Abosom (plural). Because of their nature and function, the divinities are placed above human beings. They are believed to have wider powers; yet each has his or her area of competence and jurisdiction. Hence, there are gods of war, fertility, epidemics agriculture and various other spheres of human endeavor. In this area of specialization, to which they have been assigned by the Creator, the deities have full powers to act. Sometimes, however they fail

81 E. Asante, Toward an African Christian Theology, 119.
men in their expectations. So the attitude towards them is ambivalent. They are treated with respect when they fulfill human expectations but may be despised when they fail.82

We now turn to a discussion of some of the principal divinities in Akan and their role in the religious life of the people.

**Spirit of the Earth- ‘Asaase Yaa of the Akan’**

In Akan society, the earth is given a feminine image and is regarded as a goddess. Among the Akan she ranks after the Supreme Being and the second deity to be offered a drink during worship (libation). Her day of rest is Thursday in Asante and other Akan areas and so she is called *Asaase Yaa*. She is called *Asaase Efua* among the Fante (an Akan ethnic group near the coast) and so for them Friday is her day of rest. These days are specially set-aside for her by these tribes and severe punishment was meted out in the past to those who infringed this taboo for it was feared that evil might befall the entire society if this rule was not rigidly observed. It was also believed that anyone who ventured into the forest on these special days would encounter the most unpleasant things imaginable and might not even survive to tell his or her experience.83 There are no temples, shrines nor priests dedicated to her, because her bounty is accessible to all.

Besides she is not an oracular deity whom people may consult in times of crisis. The Akan say: *Asaase nye bosom, onkyere mmus*: the earth is not a deity, she does not divine.84 This puts Mother Earth in a class of her own.

Like the other deities, the Spirit of the Earth receives offerings and sacrifices at the beginning of the planting season. The land generally cannot be farmed without asking for her permission. When a grave is about to be dug the spirit of the earth is offered sacrifice. This is to ask for permission to dig a hole so that a child of *Asaase Yaa* may be buried in her “womb.” *Asaase Yaa* is a deity who abhors the spilling of human blood. Whenever this occurs, enormous sacrifices have to be made to appease her. It is believed that untold calamities will befall the community if she is not appeased.

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82 A divinity who fails is simply replaced by a more powerful one or one who promises greater satisfaction.
Asase Yaa is also known to be a keen upholder of truth.\textsuperscript{85} Whenever the truthfulness of a statement is questionable, the person who made it would be challenged to touch the tip of his tongue with some soil to prove that he or she is telling the truth. \textsuperscript{86} Aside the Earth goddess, several other deities are found residing in bodies of water.

Asaase Yaa is the queen of the underworld, is venerated as the owner of men and custodian of public morality with the ancestors\textsuperscript{87} because she gives birth to fruits that feed humankind. In the same vein, the woman in Akan is respected for her childbearing abilities and also seen as the owner of the children she bears. Thus the Akan is matriarchal. However, unlike Asaase Yaa whose day (Thursday or Friday is recognized and respected, because she needs rest, the menstruating woman who also needs rest as she prepares to conceive to give birth is seen as dangerous and impure. Mother earth is sacred and there are taboos to protect her sanctity from being violated because she gives birth. Women also give birth and before a woman can give birth she has to menstruate. However, the phenomenon associated with childbearing by a woman, namely menstruation and child birth blood are seen as impure unlike the Earth deity who is always seen as sacred and venerated.

\textit{Spirits of Water}

The Akan community believes that there are deities inhabiting the waters, great and small. They are regarded as beneficent deities, who preside over the rivers and lakes, which are crucial to the life of the people. Hence, these divinities, wherever they may dwell, are treated with great reverence. Some of the water divinities are worshipped at shrines and have specially appointed priests who perform elaborate rituals. Others are only invoked when protection is sought for those who have to cross waters or travel over them.

Kojo Anti has said that the allegation that the sexual identity of spiritual beings suggests that female deities like their human counterparts, ordinarily have domestic rather than

\textsuperscript{85} K. Asare- Opoku, \textit{West Africa}, 56-57.
\textsuperscript{86} K. Asare- Opoku, \textit{West Africa}, 57.
communal orientation is untrue.⁸⁸ Evidence at our disposal, however does point to the subordination of female deities to the male deities. According to a young man called Kwasi Boateng⁸⁹ who is very conversant in Akan traditional region that the writer interviewed, River Tano⁹⁰ is a male spirit while all the other river spirits in Brong Ahafo are females. It is said that because the Tano river spirit is a male, it is the most powerful river spirit in the area with all the other female river spirits serving under him. Tano who is believed to be a Son of God is still an important deity and is consulted in times of crisis.⁹¹

**Evil Deities**

Almost all the gods of Akan are believed to be kind and their favor always assured when sacrifices and appropriate acts of worship are offered them. However we find that there are certain spirits or deities, which are said to be specifically evil. These deities have many sides to them. They are feared, but they are also worshipped so that their malevolence may be warded off. They are regarded as evil because they are antagonistic towards man and can cause untold misery. Yet they can come to man’s aid when their assistance is sought against enemies. We discuss a few of these evil deities.

**Sasabonsam**

The Akan believe in an evil spirit called *Sasabonsam*, which literally means “evil spirit,” who can assume the identity of a forest monster. *Sasabonsam is said to live in trees such as odum (chlorophora excelsa) and onyaa (ceiba pentandra.)*

*Sasabonsam* is a monster of frightening appearance. It has the head of an animal with long black hair, a flaming mouth and a long tongue which sticks out most of the time. It has hoofs and a long tail which ends in the head of a snake and which coils around the trees on which it sits. *Sasabonsam* has wings with which it flies about in the deepest

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⁸⁹ The writer interviewed Mr. Kwasi Boateng on the 3rd of December 2005 at his work place in Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration.
⁹⁰ River Tano is the major river in the Brong Ahafo an Akan Tribe.
recesses of the forest, terrorizing unwary travelers and hunters who may venture into the forest.

*Sasabonsam*, being evil by nature, always associates with witches, who inflict disaster on society.  

**Mmoatia**

Other spirits believed to assume personalities are the *mмоatia* or “little animals.” These particular spirits are not wholly evil, since they have their creative aspects. They can however inflict punishment. Like *Sasabonsam*, the *mмоatia* live in the forest. They are believed to be very short in stature, standing not more than one foot high, and have curved noses and yellowish skins, while their feet point in the opposite direction. The *Mmoatia* communicate with each other through a whistle language and their favorite food is bananas.  

The *mмоatia* have their camps in the forest but their favorite sites are rocky places where they take those who venture into their territory. They are believed to overwhelm the trespassers by beating them and taking them to their camp, usually feeding them on bananas. Such people are never kept there permanently. They are released after a while and sent back to their homes.

The *mмоatia* are credited with a phenomenal knowledge of medicines which they impart to herbalists or medicine men or women. 

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**Totemism**

Besides the natural objects that are believed to be the habitats of the lesser deities, some African societies also regard animals and plants as emblems of hereditary relationship. This is what is implied by the term *totemism*. Usually the animals and the plants are said to have played a crucial role in the survival of the forbears of a particular society. Therefore a sacred relationship is formed between the objects and the descendants of these people. The general attitude of these African societies therefore ascribes a certain power to objects in nature that calls for periodic acts of propitiation.

**Witchcraft, Magic, and Sorcery**

In addition to the divinities or supernatural entities, there is the recognition of the existence of other mystical forces in the universe. Some of these forces, according to traditional belief, can be tapped by men and women who have the knowledge and ability to do so. These other spirits or mystical powers are recognized and reckoned with for their ability to aid or harm man. Among these are agents of witchcraft, magic and sorcery. There is a distinction between witchcraft and bad magic or sorcery. In the latter, the magician or sorcerer may prepare a magical substance to kill or injure a person; in the former, however, no such method is used. The victim suffers only when the witch thinks harm of him, and this fact about witchcraft has led to its being described as an “imaginary offence.” Evans- Pritchard wrote: ‘Witchcraft is an imaginary offence because it is impossible. A witch cannot do what he is supposed to do and has in fact no real existence.’ 95 Yet, the experience of the victims of this strange and frightening power which has left its indelible marks on them, as well as the claims made by those who possess the power, should caution a more guarded assessment of the witchcraft and its consequences. 96 Belief in witchcraft and its effect on human beings in society may be

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regarded as part of the religious heritage in Akan. Witches are usually women, although one occasionally encounters confessed witches who are men and children.

**Charms, amulets, and talismans (Suman)**

In Akan, what is usually referred to as *suman*, or man-made objects such as charms, mascots, amulets, juju, *aduro*, etc. all fall under the category of magic, because they signify the means through which occult forces are generated into action. These forces are used both for good or beneficial purposes, and for bad or injurious ends. Those who practice good magic use their power for the welfare of the community. Such people may be diviners, herbalists or medicine men and women etc who through their activities can heal diseases and offer protection against the effect of witchcraft on individuals and the entire community.

The general Akan/African belief concerning man is that he is made up of material and immaterial substances and although there may be variations of this idea from one African society to another, the fundamental assumption among them is the unity of the personality of man. Man is a biological (material) being as well as a spiritual (immaterial) being. It is the material part of man that dies while the spiritual (the soul) continues to live. Death therefore does not end life; it is an extension of life.

There is the firm belief that a community of the dead exists alongside the community of the living and that there is a mutually beneficial partnership between them. Human society, therefore, has an extra human or supernatural dimension to it because the dead remain part of it. The dead, the living, and the yet unborn, form an unbroken family.

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With regard to man’s relation to society, we notice that man’s membership of a community is emphasized more than his individuality. John Mbiti points this out by saying that ‘to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involve participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community.’ Society is based more on obligation than on individual rights; one assumes his or her rights in the exercise of his or her obligations, which makes society a chain of relationships. In addition man’s life is a cycle of birth, puberty, marriage and procreation, death and the afterlife. One cannot stay in one stage of existence forever; he/she must move on to the next, and in order to make the transition smooth, special rites are performed to ensure that no breaks occur and movement and regeneration continue perpetually.

2.3 Religion and Society

One of the typical aspects of the Akan/Africa traditional religion is its ubiquitous role or what J. O. Lucas described as its “absorbing character,” where the whole life is wrapped up in religion. This pervasiveness alone, however, does not exhaust what may be said about religion in Akan/Africa societies. Religion binds man to the unseen powers and helps him form right relations with these non-human powers. Religion also binds him to his fellow human beings. In addition religion acts as cement holding our societies together, and provides the necessary support and stability for our societies.

In effect, religion rounds up the totality of Akan/African culture. Normally, a person does not need any special instruction in religion. He/she picks it up as he/she grows and begins to participate in the communal rituals and ceremonies. It is only priests, chiefs or leaders of religious associations who require special instructions. Although a particular society may recognize the need for leaders who have special powers or training, or both to officiate on some important religious occasions, one finds that generally in Akan/Africa, religious leadership is diffused or widely spread. The head of a family or lineage often

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acts as the religious head of the household. Among others, the regular and conscientious performance of ancestral rites and sacrifices is a prime duty of the head of the family, and the respect and the reverence paid him is due, in no small measure, to his role as priest of the household. Naturally, he needs to manifest superior wisdom and strength in addition, but the primary basis of his authority takes its source from spiritual considerations. As further proof of religion forming the totality of Akan/African culture, we find the social bonds that unite Akan/African families together are usually also identical with religious ties, and the family becomes not only a social unit but also a cultic one.

Traditional rulers and kings play a dual role in Akan/African societies. They are the political or administrative officials as well as religious personages. Queen mothers play subsidiary role. K.A. Busia points out that the chief derives his authority from the fact that he sits on the stool of the ancestors. He is also the religious official who represents his people before their ancestors, and in the context of Akan society, the chief is a Pontifex Maximus, an ‘intermediary between the royal ancestors and the tribe.’

106 From the moment that the chief is enstooled his person becomes sacred. This is emphasized by taboos. He may not strike, or is struck back by anyone, lest the ancestors bring misfortune upon the tribe. He may never walk bare-footed, lest when the sole of his foot touches the ground some misfortune befall the community. He should walk with care lest he stumble. If he stumbles, the expected calamity has to be averted with a sacrifice. His buttocks may not touch the ground. That would also bring misfortune. All these taboos remind the chief and everybody that he, (the chief) occupies a sacred position. He is the occupant of the stool of the ancestors. For this reason, he is treated with the greatest veneration.

The Akan traditional ruler has to officiate at the Adae festival, - the most important festival for the Akan when the ancestral spirits are offered food and drink. This festival is celebrated twice every 42 days. As a servant to the ancestors, the Akan chief offers them food and drink. The traditional ruler also plays a principal role in the annual Odwira festival and makes periodic sacrifices to national deities. In times of emergency or misfortune too, the chief has to perform special sacrifices.108 It is very rare to find a woman chief in Akan society since in the Akan tradition women do not lead men.

According to Asare-Opoku, the distinctive feature of traditional Akan/Africa religion lies in its being a way of life, and the purpose of religion is to order our relationship with our fellow－men and with our environment, both spiritual and physical. At the root of it is a quest for harmony between man, the spirit world, nature and society.109 Asare-Opoku again writes that the Akan/Africa traditional religion represents our forefathers’ effort to explain the universe and the place of human beings in it in their own way, and that they did this through myths or supernatural stories.110

2.4 The Akan People: Who They Are

On the basis of language and culture, historical geographers and cultural anthropologists classify the indigenous people of Ghana into five major groups. These are the Akan, the Ewe, Mole/Dagbane, the Guan, and the Ga-Dangbe.

Akan is the ethnic name of the Twi-speaking peoples of the Guinea Coast of West Africa. They consist of Ahanta, Akwapim, Akyem or Akim, Agni or Anyi, Asante or Ashanti, Asen or Assin, Bono or Brong, Brusa, Chokosi, Fante, Guan, Kwahu, Nzima, and Wasa or Wassaw. The Akan inhabit the Eastern part of the Ivory Coast, the Southern half and part of the North of Ghana and the North of Togoland. Thus the Akan people occupy practically the whole of Ghana south and west of the Black Volta.111

Historical accounts suggest that Akan groups migrated from the north to occupy the forest and coastal areas of the south as early as the thirteenth century. Some of the Akan

111 K. Asante, Toward an African Christian Theology, 74.
ended up in the eastern section of the Cote D’Ivoire, where they created the Baule community. Though the Akan consist of many autonomous sub-groups, their culture and religion exhibit a fairly uniform and common pattern. They are linked together by language, social institutions and religion.¹¹²

The Akan philosopher, Joseph Boakye Danquah,¹¹³ traces the origin of the Akan from the “kush” races in the North-east of Africa. But K. A. Dickson disagrees with Danquah’s understanding of the Akan’s origin.¹¹⁴ Eva L. R. Meyerowitz argues, ‘The ancestors of present Akan aristocracy were Libyan Berbers.’¹¹⁵ Although the origins of the Akan cannot be discerned with any certainty, the scholarly consensus is that they migrated to their present settlement from somewhere in the North.

Patrick Akoi states that:

[The] exact origin [of the Akan] is difficult to determine, there being no documentary evidence available. It has been held for some time that some of them, the Ashanti emerged from the ground in a grove near Asumengya (in Ashanti). Annual sacrifices are still offered in that grove in honor of the first Ashanti. But a study of their oral tradition, folk stories, myths, customs and crafts, as well as their religion would incline one to support the hypothesis that their original home was in the north when they migrated southwards.¹¹⁶

When the Europeans arrived at the coast in the fifteenth century, the Akan were established there. The typical political unit was the small state under the headship of an elder from one of the seven or eight clans that composed Akan society. From these units emerged several powerful states, of which the oldest is thought to be Bono (also called Brong). Due to military conquest and partial assimilation of weaker groups, well –known political entities, such as Akwamu, Asante, Akyem, Denkyira, and Fante emerged before the close of the seventeenth century. Asante, for example, continued to expand

¹¹² E. Asante, Toward an African Christian Theology, 4.
throughout the eighteenth century and survived as an imperial power until the end of the nineteenth century, when it succumbed to British rule.  

**Akan World View**

Willie E. Abraham correctly notes that ‘the Akan thought very much about the world, not, indeed, as the world inside which he found himself, but as the world of which he formed a part.’ In this view of the world, which is shared by all Africans, reality is both relational and international. K. C. Anyanwu expresses this view of the world and of reality when he treats of the wider context of Africa as a whole:

> The African culture makes no sharp distinction between the ego and the world, subject and object. In the conflict between the self and the world, African culture makes the self the center of the world. Since the African world is centered on the self, every experience and reality itself are personal. In other words, whatever reality may be, it must have reference to personal experience.

W. Abraham observes that the Akan did not have an attitude of externality to the world. Like all Africans, the Akan makes no sharp distinction between the self and the world, man and nature, subject and object. For the Akan these are one inseparable reality. This Akan view of the world and its basic cultural assumptions about the world and reality underlie the Akan theory of knowledge. K. Anyanwu confirms that the African culture did not assume that reality could be subordinated to human reason alone. Imagination, intuitive experience and feelings are also modes of knowing. This is why the deepest expression of African cultural reality has been through art, music, folksong and myths rather than logical analysis. Through these procedures, the African culture

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constructed an edifice of truth that enabled the people to achieve a relative balance with the environment.\textsuperscript{123}

The Akan attitude of mind is, therefore, intuitive, essentially unanalytic and unscientific. In light of this view of the world and this mode of understanding, the traditional Akan, like other Africans, experience as living what the Western mind takes to be merely an inert or lifeless material world. To the Akan the material world is animated, Trees, forests, rivers, stones, animals, etc., have spirits in them. These tress and so forth are, then, forces and energies to be reckoned with in life. Matter and spirit are understood as inseparable. Underlying the various forces and energies of the material world and, indeed, of the whole of the universe, is a Vital Force, who gives meaning to these forces and energies. What K. Busia said with reference to the whole of Africa is true of the Akan:

\begin{quote}
Their cosmologies were based on the existence of a Supreme Being who was Spirit and Creator, and source of all power and energy. He granted existence to all created things. He animated the gods, the spirits, and human beings, animals, rivers, trees, rocks and all matter. Their metaphysics conceived the Creator as a universal vital Force that animated and energized all created things whose real essence consisted not in matter but in the energy and power infused into them by the Creator.\textsuperscript{124}
\end{quote}

The Akan understanding of reality as animated or energized by the creator conceived of as the universal Vital Force establishes an ontological relationship among all things in the context of a hierarchical (\textit{bi da bi akyi}) order of things. The assumption that there is such a hierarchically ordered ontological relationship among all things does not allow the Akan, or other Africans, to see things in isolation. It has been noted that in the mind of the Akan, as in the mind of all Africans reality is both relational and interactional. This understanding of reality affects their understanding of the human person. Anyanwu

observes correctly that the African denies the existence of the individual as an isolated entity unrelated to others.125 In the same vein, Busia notes:

The African feels, thinks that he can develop his potential, his originality, only in and by society, in union with all other men indeed with all other beings in the universe.126

In general, the African is, in self-consciousness and overall existence, a relational and related being.127

The Human Person

For the Akan, the human person is a tripartite being with three inseparable components, one biological and two spiritual. This conception of the human person finds its expression in the Akan belief that the human person is formed from three elements, namely, mogya, and “blood” from the mother, ntoro, “patrilineal spirit” from the father, and okra or kra, “soul” from onyame.128 This belief establishes three sets of bonds, namely, the blood or the maternal bond, the spirit or the paternal bond, and the soul or the theological bond.129

The Mother-Child Bond.

At the same time as making a wider group, her clan, as every lineage belongs to one of seven clans in Ashanti.130

The blood bond is the mother-child bond. Apart from the Akwapim of Larteh and Mampong, who are patrilineal, by and large the Akan are matrilineal.131 Underlying this matrilineal understanding of lineage is the belief that it is the mother who transmits blood (mogya), one of the elements that constitute the Akan human person, to the child.

127 E. Asante, Toward an African Christian Theology, 4.
129 E. Asante, Toward an African Christian Theology, 76.
131 J.S. Pobee, Toward An African Theology, 44.
According to K. A. Busia, the Akan believes that the blood so transmitted provides the bridge between one generation and another. Consequently, descent is traced through the mother’s lineage. This lineage consists of all descendants of both sexes, including the dead and the yet to be born, all of whom trace their genealogy through the female line to a common ancestress. Therefore the blood bond establishes the individual Akan as a relational being. The individual Akan understands her or himself as one who owes her or his individuality to the collective. As J. S. Pobee notes: The Akan worldview is the sensus communis. Whereas Descartes spoke for Western man when he said *cogito sum* – I think, therefore I exist – Akan man’s ontology is *cognatus ergo sum* – I am related by blood, therefore I exist, because I belong to a family.

The “house” or the family from which she or he comes identifies this relational being, the individual Akan. All individual Africans share this understanding of the self as relational. Max Assimeng observes that:

*Groups are interrelated with one another in affinal, juridical, economic, political, and religious-mythical orders. Such groups live in localities of adjoining and socially interrelated homesteads. One way to identify an individual in such societies is to ask from what ‘house’ does he come, or as the Akan ... would ask: ofi ofie ben mu?*

The point is: the Akan, like all Africans, define the individual’s identity in terms of her or his relationship with the collective. To be an outcast (*opanyifo*) or one without a family (*kontekro*) is to lose one’s identity as an individual. Therefore, the Akan fear falling into such conditions. The blood or the maternal bond ensures that the Akan individual is always related to a family. Therefore, the maternal bond is very important for the Akan, as can be seen from the following Akan maxim: *Wo na wu a wo abusua asa*, when your

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133 J.S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* 49.
mother dies, it is the end of your family, or your family is terminated’. ‘For then, there will be no more increase of your blood relatives.’

Despite the matrilineal focus of Akan societies, men hold most traditional leadership positions. Male succession to inherited positions is, however determined by relationship to mothers and sisters. Consequently, a man’s valuable property is not passed on to his children, but to his brother or sister’s son. A man may also be expected to support the children of a maternal relative, whether deceased or alive, an expectation that may conflict with the interests of his own children.

**The Father-Child Bond**

In contrast to the mother-child bond, which the Akan consider to be a biological one, the father-child tie is regarded as spiritual. Besides inheriting her mother’s blood, every person is believed to receive a *sunsum* and a *kra*. The *kra* is a life principle, a small indestructible part of the Creator (*Obooadee*), which the latter gives to a man when he is about to be born, and with a destiny, and which returns to the Creator when the person dies. A father also directly transmits the *sunsum* to his child. This is what is thought to mould the child’s individual personality and character. The child cannot thrive if its father’s *sunsum* is alienated. Hence, a priest sometimes traces the cause of a child’s illness to the grief of its father’s *sunsum*.

According to K. A. Busia, the *ntoro* determines an individual’s *sunsum* or ego. The Akan father is therefore responsible for his child’s moral behavior. It is believed that the father transmits his *ntoro* through his semen during sexual intercourse. The Akan word for semen is *ho*. This word is translated as being, self or personality. It is believed that the *ntoro* mingles with the blood transmitted by the mother to bring about a child’s conception. After a child’s conception, the *ntoro* continues its creative functions,

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136 P. Akoi, *Onyame in Akan*, 72
moulding and building the embryo, *mota*, in the womb.\textsuperscript{139} The *ntoro* continues with the child after its birth as the child’s character-determining spirit.

The *ntoro* also links the individual Akan to her or his father and to the father’s *ntoro* division. Busia refers to members of the same *ntoro* divisions as a “spirit-washing or cleansing-group.”\textsuperscript{140} Just as every Akan belongs to a clan, so every Akan belongs to an *ntoro* group. The latter consists of a group that shares the same spirit. A person’s *sunsum* is a child of her/his *ntoro*; and all who belong to the same *ntoro* are believed to have similar *sunsum*. Hence it can be rightly said that a man transmits his *ntoro* to his children.

There are about seven of these *ntoro* divisions. It is believed that each of these seven-*ntoro* divisions is under the aegis of a god (*obosom*). As a “spirit-washing” or “cleansing-group” under the aegis of a particular *obosom* or god, the *ntoro* presents to the Akan a spiritual context within which her or his biological nature, as defined by the *mogya* or blood transmitted by the mother, is widened and extended into a biological-spiritual being. The *ntoro* element transmitted by the father, then, allows the Akan to belong to two lineages. But it also allows for the spiritual heightening of the Akan human person. Here the *homo Akanus* becomes a biological-spiritual being.

Jural rights over a child lie with its matrilineage members. But as it is believed that by reason of the spiritual bond, dissatisfaction on the part of its father could be fatal to his child, conflicts between him and his child’s matrilineage members are kept at a minimum.

In connection with this, Rattray says: ‘It (The *ntoro* spirit) might possibly resent any too highly handed action, based on their strictly legal claim, on the part of the mother or mother’s clansmen, to children of their own blood.’\textsuperscript{141}

Thus is established an equilibrium between avuncular rights and paternal affection. Although the authorities realize that the *ntoro* groupings underlie the importance of the father’s in role among the Akan, nevertheless they tend to think the Akan are most

\textsuperscript{140} K.A. Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 97.
\textsuperscript{141} R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 8.
profitably considered together with matrilineal societies.\footnote{J. Goody, ‘The Classification of Double Descent Systems’, \textit{Current Anthropology}, 2/1(1961), 3-25.} Fortes says of “complementary filiations” that, it provides the essential link between a sibling group and the kin of the parent who does not determine descent but that, 

\begin{quote}
Most far far-reaching in its effects on lineage structure is the use of the rule of complementary filiations to build double unilineal systems...
This applies to the Akan though in their case the balance is far more heavily weighted on the side of the matrilineal lineage than of the jurally inferior and noncorporate paternal line.\footnote{M. Fortes, ‘The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups’, \textit{The American Anthropologist}, 55/1/(1953), 34, 77.}
\end{quote}

In Akan, although there are two descent groups, inheritance occurs only in the matrilineal unilineal groups with named complementary unilineal descent groups.\footnote{J. Goody, ‘The Classification of Double Descent’, 11.}

Thus the Akan believe that the human person is also made up of the father’s \textit{ntoro}, “patrilineal spirit.” This \textit{ntoro} or patrilineal spirit is believed to be the defining factor of a person’s character and personality.

\textbf{The God-Human Bond}

When we speak of the soul or the theological or God-Human bond, we are concerned with the relationship existing between the individual Akan and the Supreme Deity referred to as \textit{Onyame}.\footnote{E. Asante, \textit{Toward An African Christian Theology}, 78.} As noted, the Akan believe that a person has a soul, \textit{okra} (or \textit{kra}), and that this soul comes directly from \textit{Onyame}. Meyerowitz defines the Akan concept of \textit{okra}, ‘soul’, in terms of a ‘man’s vital force, the source of his energy, his great reservoir or strength and sustenance.’\footnote{L. R. Eva Meyerowitz, ‘Concepts of the Soul among the Akan of Gold Coast,’ in \textit{Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute}, London: Oxford University Press, 21/2/1951/24-31.} This definition of the Akan concept of \textit{okra} finds support in Kwame Gyekye:

\begin{quote}
The \textit{okra} is considered to be that which constitutes the very inner self of the individual, the principle of life of that individual, and the embodiment and transmitter of his destiny. It is thought to be a spark of
\end{quote}
God (Onyame) in man. It is thus divine and has an ante-mundane existence with God. The okra, therefore, might be considered as the equivalent of the concept of soul in other metaphysical systems.\textsuperscript{147}

Although this is the basic definition of the Akan concept of okra, as Wright correctly observes, ‘The conception of okra as the life principle in a person, his vital force, the source of his energy, is linked closely with another concept, namely Honhom.’\textsuperscript{148}

_Honhom_ means “breath.” It is derived from the Akan verb home, “to breathe.” When a person passes away the Akan say: _ne honhom ko_, his breath is gone’, or _nekra afi ne ho_, ‘his soul has withdrawn from his body’. In these two statements, _honhom_ and _okra_ or _kra_ express the same thing, namely, the death of a person. ‘The departure of the soul from the body, says Gyekye, means the death of a person, and so does ceasing to breath.’ Yet _honhom_ is not to be identified with _okra_ or soul. According to Gyekye, The _okra_ is that which “causes” the breathing. Thus, the _honhom_ is the tangible manifestation or evidence of the _okra_. The _honhom’s_ departure from the body evinces the soul’s departure from the body to enjoy post-mundane existence with Onyame. The _okra_ is undying.\textsuperscript{149}

The linkage of the _okra_, that divine element in a person, with the _honhom_, or “the breath” of a person expresses the Akan’s belief in Onyame as giver of the Akan’s soul Onyame is the one who animates the individual and makes life possible. The human person is non-alive (in the sense of mundane of this worldly existence) without this _okra_ element that comes directly from Onyame. The _okra_ is also connected with a person’s _nkraea_ or “destiny” or “manner of being.” _Nkraea_ is derived from the verb _kra_, which means: a) a farewell meeting in which the one about to travel is blessed and advised by her or his parents, kinsmen and friends on how to behave on arriving at a destination; b) a message sent to a person through another who is traveling to where that person is. The Akan believe that, when a child is about to be born, what is to be the divine element in the child, that is, the _kra_ or soul parts with onyame, where it has enjoyed ante-mundane or pre-worldly existence, and carries with it a message which is prescriptive of what the


\textsuperscript{148}K. Gyekye, ‘The Akan Concept of a Person’, 201.

\textsuperscript{149}E. Asante, _Toward An African Christian Theology_, 79.
child is to become and to do in this world. A person’s nkrabea or ‘destiny’ then defines not only what one is to be, but also one’s life project here in this world. Through the concept of nkrabea purpose or meaning is given to the individual human life. So for the Akan, the human person has a God-given project to carry out here in this world. This project can be flouted by the human but it can never be bypassed because of destiny is part or humanity. The Akan say: “Onyame nkrabea nni kwatibea.” (There is no bypassing to Onyame’s or God’s destiny.)

All that has been said about the Akan concept of okra underscores that, in the mind of the Akan, the individual person is directly bonded to God through her or his soul. This direct relationship between the individual and God implies obligation. The individual’s life is not meaningless or purposeless. Every Akan has a God-given destiny, including a God-given project to be carried out in this world. Pobee succinctly expresses the Akan conception of a person:

_A man is a compound of mogya (blood, sunsum, also called ntoro (spirit), and kra (the soul or individual personality). The mogya he inherits from the mother, it symbolizes his material aspect. The blood makes him a biological being; it gives him status and membership within a lineage, and obligations as a citizen. The sunsum and kra make a spiritual being. “As a spiritual being a man receives two-fold gift of the spirit: that which determines his character and individuality he receives through his father [i.e., sunsum or the ntoro]; but his soul, the undying part of him, he receives from the Supreme Being [i.e., kra].” It is important to emphasize that by virtue of the sunsum he belongs to his father’s kinship group. Thus an Akan belongs by birth to two kinship group. From birth to death, through puberty and marriage, the kinship group is involved with him and him with them._

For the Akan, the human person is a being in relationship with others. She or he is an inseparable body-spirit being who is ontologically constituted in relationship with all

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150 P. Akoi, _Onyame in Akan_, 9.
things in the universe. Therefore the Akan see, feel, imagine, reason or think and intuit at the same time. This being in relationship with all things is defined by or rooted in the existence and the presence of a “Universal Vital Force,” a Supreme Deity or Being referred to as *Onyame*, who is believed to be the Creator-animator of all things. This all means, then, that society is not structured along individualistic lines. Rather, according to traditional Akan understanding society is looked at in essentially communal terms. However, the traditional attitudes of the Akan have undergone some change. Too much has happened since their contact with the outside world – the Arabic world, Europe, Islam and Christianity – for their world and religious worldview to remain untouched.\textsuperscript{152}

\textit{Contact with other Cultures}

K. A. Busia, documents that Christianity was a source of conflict in Akan. He quotes from the 1905 British Colonial Reports on Ashanti: “Native converts cut themselves so completely adrift from the rest of the community that the chiefs are afraid to encourage a movement that experience tells them will, in course of time, undermine their power.”\textsuperscript{153} Busia also quotes the Colonial Official Report showing that there was a conflict between Christians and the traditional rulers:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The tendency of Christian converts to alienate themselves from the communities to which they belong is very marked, and is naturally resented by the chiefs, who claim their hereditary rights to make the converts [i.e. converts to Christianity.] in common with their fellow tribesmen obey such laws and orders as are in accordance with native custom.}\textsuperscript{154}
\end{quote}

In speaking of Ghana as a whole the Ghanaian sociologist Max Assimeng also states,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{152}E. Asante, \textit{Toward An African Christian Theology}, 80-81.
\textsuperscript{154} K. A. Busia, \textit{Colonial Reports}, 34.
\end{flushleft}
The traditional attitudes of Ghanaians to their former gods and the whole conception of religious association, religious leadership and organization, and the very functions of religion in society have been modified as a result of Christian missionary activities in the provision of western education and medical technology.\(^{155}\)

What Assimeng say concerning Ghana in general can be said as well of the Akan of Ghana in particular. In fact, numerous changes have occurred with regard to the religious outlook, life and practice of the Akan since their culture came in contact with the outside world and particularly with Western Europe. In the view of C. G. Baeta, Africans were swept off their feet by their contact with Europe, and became, if anything, only too enamored of the material things brought to them, and the new ways of life to which they were introduced.\(^{156}\) The Akan’s contact with the West, through the spread of Christianity by Western missionaries, Western education, the introduction of a Western style cash economy, Western culture and technological artifacts and other factors,\(^ {157}\) has weakened traditional institutions. Robert A. Lystad observes:

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\text{Where once birth and growth to adulthood in a royal lineage conferred honor and opportunity, now the acquisition of literacy, education, and greater economic wealth places a man in a strong position to gain prestige and even to manipulate royalty and to challenge the traditional royal claims to political leadership.}^{158}
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Lystad further notes, ‘There is an almost magical quality to the desire for schooling which is accelerating [social] changes. It is as if the familiar maxim had been altered to read: ‘in schooling there is power any schooling and as much as possible.’\(^ {159}\) The role of education in the weakening of traditional Akan institutions is also pointed to by Kwame Arhin, who notes in his study that,

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\(^{156}\) C. E. Baeta, Theology as Liberation: Four Contemporary Third World Programmes, Accra: Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences publications, 1983, 35.

\(^{157}\) E. Asante, Toward An African Christian Theology, 81-83.


\(^{159}\) R. Lystard, The Ashanti, 26.
Two elements of the European presence were of decisive significance as factors in the dissolution of the Fante ‘traditional’ rank system. These were European styles of life as an alternative status index, and the progress of formal Western education, which reinforced wealth as the basis of the emergent class system.\(^{160}\)

Western education challenged traditional institutions, but Christianity challenged the Akan’s very sense of community. Assimeng writes ‘Christianity gave Ghanaians a sense or feeling of independence, arising out of individual appeal to the Bible and the subsequent legitimating of the autonomy of the individual conscience.’\(^{161}\)

The introduction of a Western style cash economy has altered the traditional land tenure system and weakened the lineage system. In the traditional system the ancestors owned the land from which the individual earned a living.\(^{162}\) The yields of the land, therefore, were therefore all members of the lineage to enjoy. The prosperous member of lineage was seen as a channel of blessing to the whole lineage. With the introduction of a Western cash economy, however, the traditional land tenure system has been affected and economic individualization engendered.\(^{163}\) In relation to West Africa as a whole, Philip Garigue states:

New occupational groups appeared, and the development of cash crops created a number of problems relating to ownership of land. The traditional system of land tenure, in which rights were vested in the lineage, has tended to disappear, especially in areas of cash-crop cultivation and in the vicinity of towns. New forms of land ownership in which money payment figures prominently are gradually replacing it. The emergence of the concept of individual wealth has meant a weakening of the lineage system. Reluctance on the part of members of lineage groups to pool wealth, and the rise of occupational

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\(^{161}\) M. Assimeng, *Social Structures*, 4.


differentiation, has meant the breaking up of the localized lineage group. The direct ownership of land has also meant that the landowner no longer cared to recognize the authority of the lineage head as to its use or disposal. Changes in occupational distribution have produced an urban professional group, which together with some of the wealthy farmers has formed new economic elite.\footnote{164}{P. Garigue, ‘Changing Political Leadership in West Africa’, \textit{Africa: Journal of the International African Institute} 24(1954) 220-221.}

The Western style cash economy has engendered an economic individualization that was hitherto unknown among the Akan. And this economic individualization has in turn created a situation where the lineage or the family system with its inherent obligations to one another can be undermined. Through this economic individualization the individual Akan can now live outside the context of her or his lineage. With the introduction of a Western style cash economy into the Akan world, the Akan’s experience, expressed in terms of the dictum, \textit{Cognatus ergo sum}, “I belong to a family therefore I am,” is challenged. The Asantes were right when they said \textit{kookoo sei abusua}, meaning Cocoa destroys the lineage system. A new definition of the individual has arisen alongside the Akan definition of the individual in terms of the collective. This new definition defines the individual in terms of her or his economic achievement and worth. Now of course not only the maternal and paternal bonds determine relationship, because money too attracts blood relationship or as the Akan say: \textit{Sika fre bogya}, ‘money makes a family.’\footnote{165}{E. Asante. \textit{Toward An African Christian Theology}, 83.}

We have pointed to the changing situation of the Akan as a warning against any understanding of the Akan in terms of fossilized communities with static religio-cultural traditions. What J. S. Pobee says in relation to the whole of Africa is appropriate here:

\textit{In Africa there has been the impact of westernization expressed through art, science, technology, learning, and social contact, In any case, as a result of Christianity becoming a part of European culture, African man after colonialism acquired laws, learning art, and a concept of the state that was shaped by Christendom. Thus homo Africanus of 1976 is different from homo Africanus of 1876. The}
communication and scientific revolution of our day means that even the most “primitive” African has advanced from his pristine stage to something else, precisely what we do not know. In other words, the question is, how indigenous is indigenous? How traditional is traditional? This warns against fossil culture and fossil religion.\textsuperscript{166}

In addition, Akan/African regions and cultures have had to contend with new political realities, the formation of new identities, and interaction with the surrounding and new-contact cultures and religions.

Despite such encounters, it is amazing to see how alive and well cultural practices in Akan/Africa are alive and well in spite of their hospitality to new encounters.\textsuperscript{167}

**Continuity of Culture**

The changes discussed above with regard to the Akan traditional ways should be taken neither as indications that the Akan have completely abandoned their religio-cultural traditions nor as a call to reject all past Akan traditions. As Assimeng writes, ‘traditional conceptions of religious behaviour and the attitudes [of Ghanaians and for that matter the Akan] have not changed entirely.’\textsuperscript{168} Asante has stated that: ‘The ancestral principles are [still] working like metaphysical principles in the mind of [Asantes or the Akan].’\textsuperscript{169} According him, kinship relations are still crucial between the Akans, and underlying this crucial importance of kinship relations is a strong belief in the ancestral spirits.\textsuperscript{170} Asante also notes:

> Modern forces such as education, industries and urban living have not changed the basic core of kinship relationship. Rural dwellers and urban migrants interact with kinsmen. They refer to their original homes as natal homes. There is a strong religious commitment and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{166}J.S. Pobee, *Toward An African Theology*, 8. \\
\textsuperscript{168}K.A. Busia, *Social Structures*, 49. \\
\textsuperscript{169}E. Asante, *Toward an African Christian Theology*, 7. Ashanti are used as a paradigm of the Akan – speaking peoples. \\
\textsuperscript{170}E. Asante, *Toward an African Christian Theology*, 206.
\end{flushright}
attachment to natal homes, the origins in the worship of lineage ancestors. Rural folk must cooperate to survive. The urbanite must depend on his relatives for psychological and socio-economic reasons. To the urbanite too the village remains the real home. Periodically he visits his relatives to help with harvest to take part in ceremonies or to find a woman to marry.  

In the same vein, Busia maintains that,

Traditional religious rites continue, and there is evidence that converts to Christianity or Islam participate in them, and resort to practices which are part of their [traditional] religious heritage even if they imply beliefs denied by their new faith.

Such controversial elements of life in Akan, such as culture, sexuality, rituals and rites of passage are part of the Akan religion. Although the Christian church has struggled to replace them with other possibilities that passed for Christian culture, these Akan elements did not just survive the Christian onslaught- they adamantly resisted being touched.

What we have seen so far allows us to say that when we use the expression ‘Akan religio-cultural tradition’, to borrow Pobee’s words, we refer to the Akan peoples and their religio-cultural traditions in the flux and turmoil of the modern world. We wish the Akan to be understood in the inseparable context of their past, present and future. This temporality of past, present and future is understood against the wider horizon of the total Akan experience of life.

2.5 The Role of Women in Akan Socio-Cultural Religion

We wish to examine the place and the role of women in Akan socio-cultural religion. The position of women in Africa today- both within the wider society and within religion- is

171 E. Asante, Toward an African Christian Theology, 204.
172 K.A. Busia, Africa in Search, 14.
174 J.S. Pobee, Toward An African Theology, 18.
normally prescribed by what is deemed to be beneficial to the welfare of the whole community of women and men. Unfortunately, most of the prescribing tends to be carried out by male authorities, and the resulting role of women tends to be circumscribed by an unchanging set of norms enshrined in a culture that appears to be equally unchanging.\(^{175}\)

A proverb from Ghana declares that: ‘A woman is a flower in a garden; her husband is the fence around it.’\(^{176}\) This proverb is a picture of women in Akan society and basically sums up the condition of women across the Ghanaian nation. Women are the center of the society, most women keep the families together, and they bear the enormous responsibilities for their families. Economic activities such as trading are more often than not in the hands of women. Women also constitute an important reservoir of wage earning agricultural labor and are in general the backbone of the socio-economic activities in Ghana.

However, women in Akan society are generally considered the weaker sex and inferior to men.\(^{177}\) With respect to Africa as a whole, Peter K. Sarpong observes that the woman ‘is considered only as a second class citizen, the mother of man’s children.’\(^{178}\) Akan women in our view are at par with their male counterparts. This is prominent in the agricultural sector where male and female farmers toil their lands. Women are the most important actors in the food chain, which begins from production on the farm, distribution on the market and within the households. They are therefore the center-piece of food security and hold the key to a sound and healthy economy.\(^{179}\) It can be said literally that women actually feed the nation. Available data on the role of women in agriculture suggests that women form an estimated 52% of the agricultural labour force and produce 70% of the


subsistence crops. Women also constitute 90% of the labor force in the marketing of farm produce.  

In the Akan society where relationships go by blood every person is considered to belong to his/her mother. In this case without the woman the man is without foundation because one belongs to the mother’s family. Because of this central role, women are also economically potent because they inherit property and hand it over to their children. So basically women in the society have the economic independence, economic potency and the social standing that recognizes their value because they are the people that create and hold society together. This value of women is however attached to motherhood and motherliness which are generally connected with domesticity with the woman’s ability to cater for her husband and her husband’s children by another wife, and with her ability to tend the issues of her marriage. As a result of this, the statement that the Akan society is a male-dominated matrilineal may sound like a contradiction, but it is a fact.

Women also play a central role in Akan/ African religion, mythology and proverbs. In the Akan mythology the earth itself is considered a woman (*Asaase yaa*).

*Through the myths of origin, we get a picture of the woman as someone placed by God in a special position. She shares with Him the creative process of life. In some ways her position and her role in these myths eclipses the position of the husband (male). She is in a real sense the mother of human beings, the dispenser of life, howbeit as an agent of God. At the same time the woman shares in the misfortunes, suffering and death that in various ways came into the world.*

Mbiti goes on to say:

*It is clear, that women both participate in the religious activities of society and make contributions for the spiritual welfare of their lives,*

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181 It has to be noted that the Akan recognizes polygamy as an acceptable practice.
182 The Akan upholds the value of both motherhood and motherliness, yet a case can still be made that the Akan society is a male-dominated society.
their families and the society at large. The prayers are small window
that opens into their spirituality, which indeed is the spirituality of all
human beings. As they share with God in the great mysteries of passing
on life, so they share also in giving human life a spiritual orientation.
They are truly flowers in the garden. They give life beauty, scent and
seed.\footnote{J. Mbiti, ‘The Role of Women’, 5.}

We now consider some specific roles of women in Akan/Africa traditional Religions

**Women as Priestesses**

In the activities connected with the worship of the deities, there is in Akan, a very highly
developed tradition of priesthood. Individuals do not become priests by their own choice;
the initiative rests entirely with the deities. Each candidate therefore receives a call to the
priesthood. For this reason, a person cannot independently work his or her way into the
The priesthood, which is a highly respected office in Akan societies, is
open to both men and women.\footnote{J.D.K. Ekem, *Priesthood*, 43.}
As a rule they are formally trained and commissioned after receiving the call. Spirit possession usually indicates a call. It is the duty of the
priest\footnote{Okomfo is the Akan name/word for a fetish priest.} who has received special training, to serve as an intermediary between the
divinity and the devotees and she/he is often called upon to perform rituals and
ceremonies. Her/his function however, is not restricted to religious matters alone, for
every aspect of human life is a concern of hers/his. The training therefore includes
instructions in the laws, taboos, dances, songs and the idiosyncrasies of the divinities, as
well as general priestly duties. The initiate also acquires knowledge of herbs and roots
and other medical values of the environment. There is also training in traditional methods
of psychiatry.\footnote{J.D.K. Ekem, *Priesthood*, 43.}
The priests and priestesses fulfill their obligations as intermediaries between their people and the spirit world. In Larteh at the Akonedi shrine\footnote{Akonedi shrine is one of the most powerful shrines in the whole of Ghana but it is a female spirit and she possesses only females. This is a well-known fact in Ghana confirmed by the people of Larteh.} for example,
and other places, special convents are established where only women are trained to become priestesses and these are accorded great respect in the society.\textsuperscript{191}

\textbf{Women as Traditional Doctors}

Women like men, also train hard to become traditional doctors, healers, or herbalists. They are often wrongly described as witch doctors. ‘These are well trained in the traditional medical practice, psychology and psychiatry and symbolize the hopes of their society; hopes of good health, protection and security from evil forces, prosperity and good fortune, and ritual cleansing when harm or impurities have been contracted.’\textsuperscript{192}

Every village in Africa has a medicine–man or woman within reach. As friends of the community they are accessible to everybody and at all time. They are concerned first and foremost with disease, sickness and misfortune which in the Akan experience are caused by mystical forces. The traditional healer has therefore to diagnose the nature of the disease, discover the cause of the sickness and apply the right treatment, together with a means of preventing its re-occurrence. Here, both physical and spiritual methods are applied to assure the sufferer of good health. Furthermore, they protect people from witchcraft and sorcery by supplying charms and other medications. It is important to note that many diseases especially those related to mental disorders which cannot be cured in the modern hospitals are being treated in the homes of these traditional healers.

\textbf{Women as Mediums and Diviners}

In general, women practice as mediums and diviners. Through mediums and diviners spiritual beings make their wishes known to human beings. They relay messages from the other world and also reveal the secrets of the past, present and the future when their deities possess them. People resort to them freely for both private and public consultation and when in crisis or stress. Like the traditional doctors, they are regarded as friends of their community. They play the role of counselors, judges, advisors, fortune-tellers and

\textsuperscript{191} For details in the training of priests and their functions see K. Asare-Opoku, \textit{West Africa}, 74-90.
\textsuperscript{192} K..K.. Anti, ‘Women in Africa’.

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revealers of secrets. They are highly respected in the community and cannot be described as “inspired auxiliaries.”

Much has been said to suggest that the participation of women in Akan/African religion is adequate. It has also been suggested that equality as a concept cannot be applied to Akan/African culture, since role differentiations in Akan/Africa are clear and are not meant to be valued hierarchically. Although it is true that, in Akan custom, women are in charge of shrines and cultic centers, it is also observable that there are more women in the secondary roles of mediums and cultic dancers than there are women who serve as high priests of shrines or as healers. Even more obvious is the fact that more women than men are clients of the divinities of the cults. These can be explained by the fact that traditional taboos associated with menstruation exclude women from sacred roles. 193

Musical Role of Women in Traditional Religion

A lot of festivals abound in Akan traditional religions. Many of these are in honor of the most important divinities and ancestors. The phenomenon of singing and dancing by well-dressed women, form a major part of the festivals. Although the songs and dancing add color to the celebrations, they have a veiled but most important effect of curbing recalcitrant and criminally minded members of the society who had broken the norms, convictions, and customs prevalent in the community during the year. The songs are deliberately composed to highlight the abuses and crimes committed and expose the criminals. 194 The singing groups, protected by the community’s traditions, perform the role of “the people’s court” to whose verdict the culprits and their relations cannot pretend to be indifferent and against which they have to appeal. This has been a very significant and effective mechanism of social control in Akan.

194 K.K. Anti, ‘Women in Africa’.
2.6 The Value of Women in Akan Culture/Society

Women are extremely valuable in the Akan society. Not only do they bear life, but also they nurse, they cherish, they give warmth, they care for life since all human life passes through their own bodies.

The value of woman begins already when she is born and not when she gets married. Already at birth the woman’s destiny is to be married. In Akan society, this entails a bride-wealth in the form of expressions of marriage contract. Before a marriage is effected, gifts are normally exchanged between the families of the bride and the groom. However, what the groom provides is always substantially higher in value than what is provided by the bride.195 Furthermore, the woman will bear children and thus enrich her husband and the wider circle of relatives from both sides.196

In Akan worldview, the unmarried woman has practically no role in society. Thus it is expected that all women get married. This thought is bound up with the value of bearing children. The childless woman goes through sorrows in Akan society. If a woman has everything else, except children, she would have no cause or joy to give thanks. The sentiment is expressed in Akan society that the more children one has the better. So the Akan say ‘A serviceable wife is often blessed with the birth of a tenth child, the ‘Role of Women bees!’”197 This means that motherhood is a woman’s fulfillment as far as the Akan is concerned.

The important roles women play in the Akan society is that they help to uphold community by acting as guardians of lineage and morality and through their womanhood, they are the procreators and nurturers of the community.

Although women play significant roles in the Akan traditional society and religion both as ritual specialists and upholders of community norms and traditions, many of these roles that women play in the religion and society seem to be somewhat ambivalent and viewed as both helpful and detrimental to society. Rosalind Hackett best describes this idea of ambivalence when she states: ‘Women are respected for their procreative powers

197 K.K. Anti. ‘Women in Africa’.
and nurturing role, and their links with the earth and the ancestors. However, in some societies, women may be regarded as the purveyors of evil and misfortune, often in the guise of witches, and polluters of the sacred. It is very clear that apparent prejudices are shown to women in religion and society by virtue of their sex in Akan society.

2.7 Women and Ritual in Akan

Importance of ritual

Edet has said that ritual is a means by which humanity controls, constructs, orders fashions, or creates a way to be fully human. Edet maintains that rituals give meaning to the world, renew, and makes things right. It saves, heals and makes whole again. For this reason, ritual is essential for our lives. Akan rituals are religion in action. They are rites, ceremonies and symbols through which the Akan express humanness. Since the Akan operate with an integrated worldview that assigns a major place to religious factors and beliefs, Akan rituals have an import that is at once psychological, spiritual, political, and social.

For the sake of the community as a whole, Akan religion gives a major role to rites of passage. An individual’s path through life is monitored, marked, and celebrated from before birth to death and thereafter, and the events in the life of a community echo this same cycle. Throughout a person’s life several rituals may be celebrated. Starting a new farm, a new business, a journey, a building-new venture demands a foundational ritual. Rituals include supplication rites for rain, good health, and children. There are also purification rites to expunge negative influences and contaminations that one has acquired in daily interactions with other people, animals, or objects that are taboo. There are thanksgiving rites for harvest, and other accomplishments ad festivals to celebrate significant events of a community.

We agree with Edet’s view that women’s rituals in Africa and for that matter in Akan society fall under ideology which aims at controlling, in a conservative way, the behavior, the mood, the sentiment, and values of women for the sake of the community as a whole.\textsuperscript{202} Elaborate ritual ceremonies for women include puberty, childbirth and widowhood. A brief examination of key rituals and festivals in Akan societies can give us insight into how religion informs and shapes women’s lives, and to some extent how life shapes religion.

\textit{Birth}

Birth is marked as a passage from the spiritual world to this one. Among the Akan, all the rituals of this stage apply equally to boys and girls. On the eighth day, infants of both sexes undergo operations with sexual connotations of beauty and potency. Girls may have their ears pierced and boys are circumcised. Though belonging to the Akan group, the Asante touch neither boys nor girls, as a person deformed in any way is unfit to perform religious rites. Despite changing fashions, some people from traditional ruling families take care to observe this taboo in order not to jeopardize the chances of their progeny to assume traditional rule in the community.

On the eighth day, a ritual separation from the spiritual world is effected as the baby is introduced to this world and to the human community of which she or he has become a part. A family name is added to the soul name associated with the day and given to the child at the same time of birth. Family names are derived from the generation before one’s own parents and may be the masculine or feminine version of a grandparent’s name.

When the men and the women of the community have assembled for the ritual of naming, the father pronounces the name of the child for all to hear. The mother and all other omen have no role in selecting the name. The oldest member of the father’s family performs the actions of the namegiving ceremony, those of carrying the baby and putting water and

wine into its mouth, and a woman may participate. When paternity is disputed, the whole ceremony is usually performed by the mother’s family.²⁰³

Puberty

Puberty rites are rites that in some cultures include circumcision for either males or females, mark the passage from childhood to adulthood. The Akan performs special rites for their girls when they reach puberty. These rites celebrate blood as dangerous/salvific, life/death and contagious/efficacious.²⁰⁴ No other ritual or rite in the life of a female in the olden days was of greater importance than the puberty rites referred to in Akan as Bragro which takes the form of a social activity that manifests itself in the drumming, joyous dancing and singing and the schooling which the novice is given in social behavior and womanhood. In the ritual sense however, it is a period during which the novice conceived as “profane” is ushered into “sacred life” through performance of purificatory rites. The purification tends to eliminate all vestiges of menstruation or any bodily defilement. Once she has gone through purification rites, the novice has to submit to a set of ritualistic observances. The point above all is to become separated from the profane world in order to make possible the penetration of the sacred world without peril. There are still numerous prohibitions on the novice many of which are connected with the sacred places, objects and personalities. When these rites are performed, a young person becomes a member not only of her family but also of the whole community, and takes on adult responsibilities, including that of replenishing the race.

The basic belief underlying most of the prohibitions on menstruation is that menstrual blood, besides being profane or impure is also dangerous or potent to any sacred being or object, which has direct or indirect contact with it. It is because of the impurity that is associated with a menstruating woman that she is made to undergo purification rites. Non-adherents to menstrual prohibitions in the olden days were socially ostracized for the simple reason that they were antagonistic to anything sacred, especially the earth goddess, the gods of the land and the ancestral spirits. It was also conceived that if

²⁰³ M. Oduyoye, ‘Women and Rituals, 12.
²⁰⁴ For more information on puberty rite, see P. K. Sarpong, Girls’ Nubility Rite in Ashanti.
Bragoro was not performed, it jeopardized a girl’s chances of having a happy marriage as the protection of the god’s and ancestral spirits was withheld from her. This made parents (especially mothers) compel their daughters to undergo the Bragoro rites without compromise.

Among the Akan, pregnancy is an abomination if the puberty rites have not been performed, and the prospective father and mother may be banished.

In Akan societies, puberty rituals are performed for women by women and for men by men. This according to Oduyoye is the beginning of the bifurcation of the Akan society. The ritual for girls includes fertility rites, while for boys the rites elicit evidence of bravery. Among the Asante, it is significant that one of the euphemisms for a girl’s first menstrual period is that ‘she has killed an elephant’. In a similar way, a woman who has given birth is described as ‘one who has returned safely from the battle front.’ For women, coming face to face with one’s own blood is itself an act of bravery and part of what it means to be a human being. In Akan, a man does not have to kill a lion to be biologically male, but some African societies require this or some comparable achievement before a man is admitted to the rank of “husband.”

**Marriage**

The Akan recognize a young person as matured only when she or he is married. By marrying the individual accepts the responsibility of childbearing and rearing publicly. The marriage ritual is one of bonding. It is the physical bonding of two individuals as sexual partners and the covenantal bonding of two families. The ritual performance however emphasizes the transfer of the woman from the spiritual power of the father to that of the husband. (The spiritual bond of the father is treated in detail later in this chapter). The Yoruba performs ritual of crossing–over with a washing of feet at the threshold of the husband’s house. In connection with this Oduyoye has said that the

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bride’s old self is buried with the marriage ceremony as she begins a new life in the husband’s house. This transition then becomes more significant for the woman than the man, as the threshold ceremony is also a definition of territory by the husband’s family. The new bride is “hedged in” by him and his people.  

The Akan’s main interest in marrying off a daughter is in the daughter’s duty and capacity to become a channel for ancestors to return through her offspring.  

Birthing

For the Akan a marriage is not truly stabilized until all the prayers and the rituals have been completed and a woman gives birth. The birthing chamber and in some cases, the house where a birthing is taking place are taboo to men. Men are strictly forbidden to share the secrets of childbirth. If the birthing is normal, no special rituals are required except for thanksgiving rites and soul washing to congratulate the soul of the woman for a job well done. Her husband and relatives shower the new mother with gifts. If however, birthing is complicated, the woman in labor is encouraged to confess her sins. She may be accused of adultery and she will be asked to mention the name of the illicit partner. Sacrifices may be made on her behalf to ensure safe delivery. A lot of deaths have undoubtedly resulted from what is essentially a religious belief.  

Death

The final ritual of passage, death, comes to women and men alike and–apart from elaborate mourning by husbands–women’s funerals are meticulously performed as men’s funerals. In Akan society departed spirits of both men and women are equally powerful and so an improper funeral for either might call down a great deal of trouble for the living. Since both male and female ancestors will be reincarnated, men and women must be equally honored in the prescribed manner so that they might return. Women’s souls

however do not demand the humiliation of their husbands for them to rest in peace.\textsuperscript{213} But men’s souls do.

\textit{Widowhood Rites/Mourning}

The death of a spouse marks another stage in the life of the individual, and separation rites are performed to terminate the coital rights of the deceased partner. Little has been recorded of rituals for the death of a wife, as these practices are minimal. Oral evidence indicates that a widower is encouraged to obtain a sexual partner as soon as possible in order to disgust the spirit of the deceased wife, who will then never again visit him.

On the other hand it is assumed that a husband’s soul will not rest until the widow, going through complex mourning rites, has been purified. It is only then that she can remarry safely. For the Akan woman, mourning a husband is an extremely intense period. The separation ritual intended to free the widow from her deceased husband’s soul is marked by purification rites that may involve acts like walking to a stream for a pre-dawn bath. There are hair care rituals where the hair is shaved in weeping and wailing rituals. The hair is sometimes kept uncombed for one to twelve months. There are also wailing rituals where the widow wails twice a day morning and evening from eight days to six months. She must accompany anyone who comes wailing; even if she is eating she must stop eating and wail.

In sitting and sleeping rituals the widow sits on a mat on the floor and sleeps there, or she sits in one position until the burial day.

The widow can remarry only after completion of a formal mourning period followed by ‘decent’ length of time. Even at this stage the widow may not have a choice of husbands, as provisions may have been made for her to be inherited by her deceased husband’s successor. If the widow refuses, she receives no material benefit from the marriage.

The loss of a husband in Akan societies is viewed as extremely inauspicious, and this inauspiciousness is so contagious that prior to purification none of the people who stream

in to mourn with the bereaved family can shake hands with the widow. Oduyoye has written that widowhood in African religion and for that matter Akan religion usually involves three factors.

1. Surviving a husband attaches negative influences to the widow who may then contaminate others. This necessitates purification of the woman.

2. The spirit of the deceased husband stays with the widow until rites are performed to separate them. This separation is needed so that she can safely be passed on to another man. The unspoken assumption is that a woman must always be married.

3. A man’s soul can rest peacefully only when his spouse has meticulously observed all the rites of widowhood. Before his spirit can rest in peace, a deceased man requires not only proper burial but also a thoroughly dejected widow who at times is thoroughly humiliated by her in-laws.

Several groups have opposed these demeaning rites demanded of widows over the years. Although the rites have been modified over time, the fundamental religious belief of inauspiciousness still remains, as do the socioeconomic and legal consequences of a system that give widows no official status. Oduyoye’s view that in most African societies, female sexuality has no autonomous value outside of marriage and motherhood applies also to Akan societies.

**Rituals: A matter of Religious Belief**

At every stage in this passage through life, a principle of religion is involved. Since religion plays such a key role in enforcing societal norms and ethics, each stage has a social significance and reflects the status of women in the society and the relationship that exist between men and women. Participation in society is thoroughly imbued with these religious beliefs, even if they are not explicitly stated. Generally, Akan societies have more rituals for women than men. However there are no Akan rituals to mark

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menopause or special purification rites after child birth whether the child is a boy or a girl.

2.8 The Taboo of Menstruation in Akan Religious Culture

A taboo against women during menstruation is common in Akan communities. Menstrual blood is seen as “dirty”. Not only are women considered to be ‘impure’ during these periods, but in danger of communicating their impurity to others. Thus though the onset of menarche is celebrated in Akan communities, the general trend is to stigmatize the event. Menstruation is not mentioned by name in many Akan communities. It is referred to in some local languages as oko afikyire (“she has gone outside the house,”) wabu nensa (“she has broken her hands”) and nensa aka fam (“she has touched the ground with her hands.”)\(^{216}\)

Although women are regarded as producers of life, they are also seen as spiritual sources of danger. The ritually “dangerous” nature of women is expressed in notions about the polluting nature of blood, especially the blood of menstruation and childbirth. It is such notions of pollution, which underlie rituals intended to separate “unclean” women from contact with others or to neutralize the sources of pollution.

Thus in connection with religious functions menstruating women are banned from the shrines, neither are they allowed handling or touching of religious objects or personalities. For instance, among the rules to be observed by trainee priestesses is one, which stipulates that she should voluntarily absent herself from the shrine for seven days each month during her menstrual period. This ban stems from the belief that menstrual blood is impure and dangerously harmful to sacred objects. Hence during this period women are banned from entering palaces, shrines, and other places where rituals are performed. This taboo must be rigidly upheld and severe penalties are levied if it is infringed.\(^{217}\)


It is interesting to note that though women serve as mediums, a virgin, preferably before she attains puberty, is chosen for this office. Otherwise, a woman of advanced age or one who has ceased from childbearing and cohabitation is qualified to hold this office.\textsuperscript{218} Sex with a woman in her period is also forbidden. In the olden days (and even now in some rural areas), menstruating women have to move to an outer house meant for those regarded as “ritually unclean.” They were also forbidden to cook for their husbands.

To illustrate this position of women, we consider an Akan proverb that says, “A woman does not pour libation on a stool.” If she does the stool will become polluted. The stool is regarded as an important element in Akan traditional spirituality. It is seen as the embodiment of the ancestors. Hence there is the need to avoid its contamination in order to avert any disastrous consequences on the victim and her community. This proverb therefore stresses the need to safeguard the solidarity of the group that is symbolized by the stool. A similar proverb states that a woman does not climb a tree. If she does the tree will die. The principle here, as well is that the woman in her impure state may pollute the tree and cause it to die.

In her paper at the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians in Accra, Oduyoye remarks ‘as far as the cultic aspect of religion goes, women now as before, are relegated.’\textsuperscript{219} She said in most traditional religious festivals, the only active participation of women is in providing the dishes for feasting that accompanies the rituals. Oduyoye again stresses that, women doing the dancing and cooking for festivals do not compensate for their exclusion from the “Holy of Holies” in the festivals. She cited an example of the Oro cult of the Yoruba where women are totally excluded from the ritual.

With the Asante (a major Akan ethnic group) of Ghana, only menopausal women, or in certain cases those who are willing to live asexual life seem to be admitted for religious rituals. In traditional religion, women are declared unclean by the natural flow of blood associated with procreation. One is seen to be unclean by the very fact that one is a

\textsuperscript{218} K..K.. Anti, ‘Women in Africa’.
woman. Women are excluded from sacred rituals until they become men.220 Women we know, become men when they no longer menstruate.

Most rituals are performed either on women or because of women. Among the Akan for example, naming children is the prerogative of men because only men are deemed to have the capacity to be spiritual protectors. A second principle to be followed is that persons who are free from any flow of blood must prepare food and drinks for the spirit world. Blood in Akan has a dual character; it is holy but it is also inauspicious when found where it should not be. As a result, women’s participation in this ritual as in others is often limited.221

In family rituals, men usually officiate, and menopausal women do so in extreme cases or in supportive roles.

Among the Akan, women feature prominently in ritual dances and singing, as in mmommome, a war support ritual of singing that is specifically a female activity. When rituals are being performed to show unity with the ancestors, women join in feasting and dressing up, but not in sacrificing. There is a prohibition, however, against women wearing masks, even when the ancestor being represented is a woman. Men have arrogated to themselves the prerogative of representing the spirits that shaped the history and the destiny of the community. The exclusion of women from such community rituals has obvious political and social implications and may lie behind men’s unwillingness to have women in positions of responsibility that include authority over men.222 Purification rituals for women are more frequent. Women may undergo purification after a man’s failure to accomplish a task, after a husband’s death, or after childbirth. These purification rituals are very often prescribed by men diviners and performed on women by women.223

As one can see, the potency of menstruation looms large in African traditional thinking and is therefore an important factor for rejecting women’s ordination (position in the church). In her study of the Asante, Oduyoye gives an impressive list of taboos

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constricting the life of women in their prime. She said for most ritual meals, the cooks were male, although sometimes the senior wife of the traditional ruler (Ohene) would be responsible. Old women fetch the water for the ancestors to wash their hands at the Awukudae festival early in the morning, and the food cooked by men. All this is done in order to prevent the possibility of having the participation of menstruating women in religious rituals. Menstruation is believed to have such potency that it is able to annul all prayers and render rituals ineffective.224

According to Oduyoye, the fear behind all these taboos and injunctions begin to be apparent when one analysis why brafo (woman in her period) must not touch a Suman (talisman). A male suman or ritual object that becomes involved with menstruating women is in danger. To be in contact with brafo is to have all one’s powers annulled. She renders one vulnerable to evil spirits because she annuls all other powers.225

The menstrual blood makes women unclean and dangerous as G. Nantakyiwah writes:

The basic belief underlying most of the views on menstruation, especially, is that the menstrual blood, besides being unclean, is also considered as dangerous, potent, so that any direct or indirect contact with it is believed to render all powers weak, impotent and interactive.226

In the Akan society in Ghana, blood is a symbol with a paradoxical character; good it symbolizes life, power, strength and dignity of inheritance; evil, it symbolizes death. Too much blood loss leads to death. It is also ominous. Therefore blood taboos are dealt with ceremonially.

The question is why has it always been accepted that blood from women is impure? In Akan/African culture and religion, female blood impurity has both religious and cultural implications. Religiously female blood is impure because it is split outside the sacrificial act. Culturally, any act that sheds blood except within a sacrificial act is considered

224 M. Oduyoye, ‘African Theology’, 7
impure. The feelings of female blood impurity was handled both religiously and culturally in the Akan/African societies through rituals. The ritual elements consist of segregation or separation, purification, exhibition, celebration and incorporation.

2.9 The Akan Concept of the Sacred and the Profane

In Akan thought, certain objects and beings with distinctive characteristics have the potential of affecting life positively or negatively; these include natural phenomena, animals, mediums and spirits. Those, which affect life positively and have pervasive and persuasive characteristics, are what the people conceive as distinctively sacred; whilst those that affect life negatively and have dissuasive characteristics are profane.227

Behind the sacred and the profane is a life-power or vital force that makes them contagious and essentially ‘dangerous.’ In religious terms, the sacred assumes a superior position to the profane. It is that which is separated from the profane and secular; and it is that which is respected and protected.

One would notice that a particular stone, for instance, which has been identified as distinctively sacred is separated from the rest. Such a stone may be placed in an obscure place, and may be fenced with barbed wire or hedges to designate its uniqueness. Sacrifices, libation and prayers offered to such a stone might signify that the stone is not a mere physical object but an impersonal force.

Even though the religious factor gains ground primarily through rituals and customary observances, the striking question as to why the stone is said to be sacred remains unanswered.228 One may be told that a traditional ruler, for instance is sacred and therefore restricted by a number of prohibitions without being told the basis of his sacredness; or that a menstruating woman is profane without knowing what impure blood implies or the basis of its profanity.


Radcliffe-Brown provides a clue to why certain objects and beings are avoided or feared. He asserts that certain objects and beings such as a newly-born infant, a corpse or the person of a chief are forbidden simply because they are taboo; they are in a state of danger. Thus they are often restricted and isolated. The inference is that they constitute the supreme temptation and the greatest of dangers. They are dreadful and command caution.\textsuperscript{229}

Among the Akan, the mysterious power that manifests in a being or an object helps differentiates it from the “ordinary”. Such a being or object is classified as taboo and what is taboo is what they may conceive as sacred or profane which is expressed almost exclusively through taboos.\textsuperscript{230} However the sacred and the profane represent two poles of a dreadful domain, they are mutually exclusive and contradictory in every sphere of lie. It is therefore imperative to create water-tight compartments between them since they cannot co-exist without one losing its unique characteristics. The contagious of the profane, for example, always causes it to debase, degrade and destroy instantaneously the essence in terms of which the sacred is defined. The sacred is therefore placed outside common usage, guarded and protected by restrictions and prohibitions.\textsuperscript{231} A traditional ruler for example by virtue of the ancestral stool he occupies is said to be sacred and therefore taboo. He has to observe a number of restrictions as custom demands. For instance, he may not talk to certain persons directly. The clothes he wears, the bowl he eats from and uneaten food should not be used by anybody except perhaps his own wife and children who share his sacredness since this could lead to illness or even death.\textsuperscript{232}

The traditional ruler is regarded as being in a state of danger if he fails to observe the restrictions or does not take cultic and customary precautions. It is believed that automatic and immediate punishment or disaster will be meted out to him if he breaks any of the taboos.\textsuperscript{233}

\textsuperscript{230} H.J. Ofosuhene, \textit{The Kwahu Traditional Concept}, 3.
\textsuperscript{231} H.J. Ofosuhene, \textit{The Kwahu Traditional Concept}, 4.
\textsuperscript{232} H.J. Ofosuhene, \textit{The Kwahu Traditional Concept}, 4.
\textsuperscript{233} H.J. Ofosuhene, \textit{The Kwahu Traditional Concept}, 4.
A sacred realm is established wherever there is mystical divine manifestation and consecration. This is related to certain objects (items of the cult), certain persons (chiefs, traditional priests, diviners), certain places (shrines, groves, forests, rivers), certain times (Thursday, Sunday, Friday, days for the deities and the ancestors, purification days, festivals etc.).\(^{234}\) It is worth noting that the Akan are interested in the divine manifestation of a being or an object more than the being or the object itself. Eliade observes that what is involved in veneration is not the veneration of the being or the object itself; rather, it is the sacrality manifested through the mode of being of the say the stone that reveals its true essence.\(^{235}\) According to Eliade, sacred trees and sacred stones are not adored as trees or stones. They are worshipped precisely because they are hierophanies (the act of manifestation of the sacred, they show something that is no longer tree or stone but numinous). The object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself and participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu.\(^{236}\) A sacred stone thus remains a stone; apparently nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom it reveals itself as mystical and sacred, its immediate reality is transmitted into a supernatural reality. The inference is that a being or an object is sacred only by negating itself in pointing to the divine of which it is the true medium.

As for the profane, the sacred must always guard against it; its debasing, degrading destroying essence prompts the sacred to shun it. Once the sacred comes into contact with the profane it loses its spiritual powers and sanctity. ‘This occurs through instant transfer of efficacious negative properties which are contagious.’\(^{237}\) In this sense, the profane is conceived as distasteful, horrible and terrible. Defilement occurs when there is interaction or contact between the sacred and the profane. A traditional ruler who comes into contact with a menstruating woman or a corpse is defiled. This is because the profanity of the profane is transferred to him and this renders his vital force inefficacious and he tends to

\(^{236}\) M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the profane*, 9-11.

lose his sacred essence. It is believed that he can get ill. He therefore takes precaution and goes through purification rite.

**What constitutes the profane?**

In Akan life and thought, the profane has undesirable religious connotations. In the ritual sense, it is anything whose nature or spiritual force could destroy the sacred essence of a being or an object and thereby renders it valueless or powerless. On account of its dangerous influence or destructive nature, the Akan refer to it as *akyeade* (that which is unclean) or *akumde* (that which pollutes).

The belief is that once the profane comes into contract with any “ordinary” or sacred being or object, the ‘ordinary or sacred is contaminated. There is a multiplicity of profane objects and beings. In the normal sense, natural phenomena and natural species, which not personified or treated with reverence or used for ritual purposes are conceived as (ordinary.) However, those, which are conceived as extremely dangerous and could, alter both the sacred and the “ordinary,” are what the Akan term profane. Menstrual women fall into the category of profanity.

2.10 The Significance of Blood in Akan Religious Culture

Nature is traditionally conceived in Ghana’s worldview as mystical and sacred, yet there are certain objects and beings that are singularly conceived to be more mystical and more sacred. This assertion is based on the assumption that nature provides unequal life force or potential power.

In their attempt to explore the forces behind nature, Akans have categorized objects and beings as valuable or non-valuable, mystical or non-mystical, sacred or non–sacred, profane or non–profane. This has been done in order to establish a close relationship with them or avoid them.

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Blood is one of the elements used in assessing and categorizing beings as sacred or non-sacred, profane or non-profane. It is normally linked with vital force. It is that which sustains or preserves biological life. Blood is not conceived as a mere substance but as a spiritual active force. It signifies that which has the act of existing—an existing “thing,”—which is endowed with spiritual power or life force. It is the qualitative and not the quantitative that the Akan uses in assessing it.

Blood is life and blood is a very cardinal element in sacred rituals. It is used as a medium of contact with the ancestral spirit world and also as medium through which the vital force of a person is vitalized (e.g. a chief). It could therefore be said that blood is the source of life.

In the spiritual sense, blood has other mystical properties apart from insuring ‘sacred life’. It restores life, it cleanses, it heals and it purifies. The curative function of blood is attributed to the belief that blood has power to nullify everything mystically. It is conceived as having potential power to nullify disease or chase out evil spirits that may cause sickness. Blood is also thought to have purifying potential power. Psychology plays a part in the use of blood in rituals.

Blood (besides its biological function) that flows out of the body or is accumulated in it represents pollution or contamination. It is said that once blood ceases to function biologically by any means, its physical element disintegrates and its spiritual power or vital force is rendered valueless or impotent. And this will negatively influence and damage the sacred essence of any being or object on contact.

Two things emerge from the concept of impure blood:

1. The diffusion of its impure energy renders its destructive influence efficacious and contagious to the sacred.

2. It is a common belief that it is fed upon by witches and is influenced by other evil forces. Blood oozing from any part of the human body is considered as losing vital force. It is said that evil spiritual forces, which are often attracted to it, contaminate such blood. And on account of contamination, the person is ritually classified as “unclean.” He should thus not approach, touch, or talk to any sacred
being. He should likewise not perform any sacred ritual or be present at its performance. He is thought to exert a profane vital influence on the ritual by his mere presence. 240

Among the Akans, a chief who experiences bleeding for the first time should be purified without delay to avoid profaning or contaminating the sacred stools. 241 If the bleeding persists, then he has to be destooled and all other sacred objects he has come in contact with in the palace have to be purified with the blood of a sheep. It is believed that blood offered in such a situation tends to fully bridge the gulf, which has been created between the ancestral spirits and the community (which the chief represents) as a result of the profanity of the bleeding. 242 At the same time the blood offered revitalizes the spiritual force of the stools in the palace representing the ancestors. The ritual implication is that when blood profanes an object or a being, a more vital blood is ritually used to neutralize it. This is to say that, the ritual blood is able to neutralize the diminishing or dead life force of the contaminated person or being.

Circumcision, which entails the shedding of blood, implies diminishing life’s vital force in Akan belief. Since blood represents life, to shed blood by any means is to terminate life or reduce the life span. Therefore circumcision has no ritual significance for the Akan. It is alleged that whilst uncircumcision increases life’s spiritual potency and reproductive powers of man, circumcision, on the other hand, tends to destroy the genitals and reduces the vital force. Thus the royals of Ashanti of Akan were forbidden to mutilate their bodies or shed their blood, since the royal blood represented the soul of the nation. 243

In the perception of the Akan people, circumcision does not make one ritually sacred; neither does it ally one to the supernatural spirits nor serve as a ritual sign of belonging to them. Since circumcision does not enhance ritual or sacred value, but tends to diminish the vital force before the enstoolment of a traditional ruler, an inspection of the genitals

240 H.J. Ofosuhene, The Kwahu Traditional Concept, 89.
241 Every Akan chief has a special stool he occupies symbolizing that he is a ruler and a sacred person because the stool he occupies is believed to be the resting place as well as the symbol of the chief’s soul. The stool also represents the spirit or soul of the kingdom. See The Sacred Stools of the Akan by P. Sarpong
242 H.J. Ofosuhene, The Kwahu Traditional Concept, 89.
of the chief-elect is made privately by the “chief-makers” to ensure that the traditional ruler to be is ritually unblemished by circumcision.244

Because blood is used to establish links with the spirit world, some societies in Africa practice female circumcision and clitoridectomy (now banned as a violation of human right.) In such societies, the circumcision blood is like making a covenant, or a solemn agreement between the individual and his people. Until the individual has gone through the operation, he/she is an outsider. Once he has shed his blood he/she joins the stream of his/her people, he/she becomes truly one with them.

If there is any one belief, which is considered to be peculiar to women with regard to profanity, it is the one regarding the flow of blood. Even though women bear and nurture children and thus preserve life, they are by virtue of the natural flow of blood, considered to be a source of defilement or a source of danger.

In the normal sense women’s genital organs are said to have potential powers to defile the sacred. They are endowed with negative properties that can alter and cause the sacred to lose its very essence. Since women’s genital organs have been conceived as a source of danger or defilement, anyone who comes into direct contact with them becomes profane.

It is for this reason that those who have sex and have not taken a bath are forbidden to touch approach or communicate with the sacred or forbidden to take part in any cultic ritual.

A menstruate is believed to be in a “destructive state.” She is said to have lost or wasted the precious life contained in the fluid discharged. The conception is that while the blood flows, life runs out. This makes her destructive. The redoubtable force that is put into play in menses and childbirth and the contagious nature of the impure blood that is discharged have led Akans to believe that the menstruant or the parturition woman has exceptional potential power which is destructive in essence.

In many spheres of life menstrual blood is considered as repulsive (Akyide) or filthy (afide). This has led to the exclusion of menstruating women from participating in some

244H.J. Ofosuhene, The Kwahu Traditional Concept, 90.
religious activities. Due to the adverse effects of the menstruation (*bra*) it is not openly talked about especially among the sacred.

Customarily, women in their menses are made to stay away in the “menstruation house” (*bra fie*) or menstruation room (*bradan mu*). This is to ensure that menstruation blood gets to the bad bush. She is socially isolated.

It has also been observed that menstrual blood, when it comes into direct contact with any foodstuff, mystically transfers its destructive power to it thus profaning and making it dangerous for consumption. Menstruating women are thus forbidden from cooking for their husbands or any other male adult.

By the high degree of potency and destructive force, which can vitiate any other spiritual force and render the sacred profane, one, is inclined to argue that menstrual blood has a strong unfavorable flavor in Ghanaian traditional belief and philosophical thought. Most of the cultic taboos or prohibitions evolve around or relate to menstruation.

Another negative aspect of the flow of contagious blood is seen in the phenomenon of childbirth. During childbirth a woman sheds blood, which is traditionally considered “impure”. This compels the African to exclude both the mother and the newly born baby from social and religious life for at least the first seven days (that is often the cessation of the flow of blood). They are not allowed in any sacred place or to approach or address a sacred being or object or come into contact with any sacred person. The belief in profanity explains why a nursing mother is not summoned before the chief or the queen mother or the traditional priest or any sacred person.

It is a social and ritual practice to confine both mother and the newly born for 7 days after which a purification rite is performed to revitalize the mother’s life for which she has been weakened during the childbirth and to enable her regain her last sanctity. Although the flow of blood in childbirth is associated with profanity, yet prolific childbearing is cherished because it ensures the continuity of life.

From the foregoing one realizes that in Akan, blood is not conceived as a mere matter or substance, but as a spiritual force, which the Akan use as a basis of categorizing and
assessing biological beings as sacred or profane. Secondly blood could undergo changes or alterations by which it could lose its mythical and sacred essence.

Blood is normally linked with vital force. It is that which sustains or preserves biological life. Blood is considered as a spiritual active force. It signifies that which has the act of existing- an existing thing that is endowed with spiritual power or life force. Blood in Akan is a very cardinal element in sacred rituals. It is used as a medium of contact with ancestral spirit world.

2.11 Towards a Re-interpretation of Menstruation in Akan Culture

The above is a brief overview of the Akan religio-cultural tradition, which is crucial for a good understanding of the Akan as a people, their worldview, the value of women and their role in the Akan society, the Akan idea of what is profane and non-profane as well as the essence of blood in the Akan society.

As we have noted above, the Akan perceive the universe as an arena of both benevolent and malicious spirits that influence the course of human life for good and ill respectively. Quite apart from seeking good relationship with the human community, the Akan focuses on seeking a harmonious relationship with the mystical powers that control and bestow life with vitality. It is believed that this is realized through sacrificial rites for propitiatory, expiatory, reconciliatory purposes as well as guarding against the profane. Since menstrual and child bearing blood is classified as profane dangerous and something that exhibits negative influences and contaminations, traditional taboos exclude women from certain sacred roles and rites. Thus, Akan traditional religion is found to inform and shape women’s lives in Akan societies.

It was identified that the leading purpose of Akan religious culture is to make certain that harmony exits between the living and the ancestors. For the Akan, a good society is one in which there is peaceful coexistence between the living, the gods and the ancestors. Having children is a good sign that one has a good relationship with the ancestors. The living communicates with the ancestors through blood sacrifice which is usually poured

on the ground. In this way, the living supplies blood which the ancestors lack and so the ancestors are appeased and in turn bless the community or an individual. Menstrual blood is also poured onto the ground (where the ancestors “live”) through washing. Menstrual blood is human blood and so can be considered as more precious, suitable and desirable as sacrifice to the ancestors than animal blood since they were once human beings. If menstrual blood can be considered as very important to ancestors and a source of regular blood supply for the ancestors so as to maintain the continuous contact/relationship that the living Akan community seeks with the ancestors, then it will no longer be seen as impure. Akan communities may then be able to see the menstruating woman from a different perspective. She can be viewed as one who makes sacrifices on behalf of the community, one who makes contact with the ancestors on monthly basis and so she cannot be considered as impure. Menarche which is a special period in every Akan woman’s life but also seen as a period that the woman becomes “unclean” would then be viewed as a period when a young woman is first connected with her ancestors through shedding of her first blood so that she will also be blessed with many children. Again, it was recognized that the Akan believe that daughters are the media for ancestors to come back to the earth as human beings. This is possible because daughters menstruate.

Because in the Akan worldview women are the ones that are connected to a common ancestress through whose help the extended family members came into existence, it becomes easy to link menstruation with purity and divine. The menstruating woman can then be accepted as a medium of communication between the living and the divine. If it is menstrual blood that connects the living to the divine and ancestors, then it can no longer be seen as impure but something that will be celebrated and looked forward to. The period of separation of menstruating women then becomes necessary not by reason of menstruation but because they need to be secluded for effective communication with the ancestors to be made. This is reasonable because, in Akan religion, priests and priestesses go into seclusion whenever they have to communicate with the divine so as to eliminate noise and disturbances and concentrate on the communication. They also abstain from sexual intercourse on the days on which rituals are to be performed for the deities in order
to be pure to perform rituals.\textsuperscript{246} If the Akan has this new outlook toward menstruation, the menstruating woman will become very suitable for cultic leadership at all times.

In the context of Christianity the shedding of menstrual blood can be viewed as a sacred and natural phenomenon where a woman lays her life down as a sacrifice to become a co-partner with God for procreation to bring into existence human beings who are not only physical but spiritual beings as well. Thus a woman is spiritually connected with God the creator during menstruation. She therefore becomes a medium through whom God propagates the creation of human beings. If God links with a woman during menstruation, then it can be deduced that she is pure and not impure during menstruation. She is fit to administer the Holy Communion at this time since she is already connected to God. Menstrual blood can therefore be viewed as pure and not impure.

2.12 Conclusion

The Akan is found to be very religious. Their cult of the ancestors is the most powerful aspect of the religious life in traditional Akan society.\textsuperscript{247} In connection with this cult is the belief that it is through one’s mother (who the Akan believe is connected to a common ancestress in the spiritual world) that one has his or her spiritual connection. The Akan’s identity is therefore traced through the mother-bond since children are gifts from this common ancestress. However, menstrual blood which is highly associated with child bearing (something that is highly valued and at the same time coming from the ancestors in Akan culture) is considered impure, potent and dangerous in the Akan religious culture.

We have suggested that menstrual blood can be viewed as something positive, something that should be of better value to the ancestors than animal blood that the Akan use as sacrifice in order to have a connection with the ancestors. The ancestors who were once human, we suggest, need human blood to come alive and communicate with the living and not animal blood. Menstrual blood which is human blood and also connected with child bearing can be the blood that the ancestors need. We reason that, menstrual blood

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\textsuperscript{246} K. Asare –Opoku, \textit{West Africa}, 77-78.  
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and ancestors from this perspective have one thing in common, both are linked to childbearing, something that the Akan value above all else because it ensures the continual survival of the Akan society. When ancestors receive menstrual blood as a sacrifice from a woman, they in turn bless her with children. Therefore menstrual blood cannot be associated with impurity and danger.

If it is women whose blood connects both men and women in a family to a common ancestress, (the mother-child bond is the blood bond) then it should not be out of place to believe that women shed blood regularly to make sacrifices for the well being and for the continual survival of the community. Viewed this way, the state of the menstruating woman should rather render her more fit for cultic leadership than any other time of her life as it is at this time that she can connect with the common ancestress in the spiritual world to receive children from her. The menstruating woman would thus be playing a mediating role during this period of her life.

It then stands to reason that menstrual blood cannot be viewed as dirty since it is needed in a woman’s life before she can make a connection with the spiritual world. The ancestors are venerated or worshipped and so they cannot be connected with anything that is filthy or impure. Therefore, if menstrual blood is seen to be needed before this very important connection can be made, then it can no longer be viewed as dirty. Menstruating women can also not be viewed as “impure” just because she has to handle or touch menstrual blood that is supposed to connect the spiritual and physical worlds. They should rather be seen as pure as they will be communicating with the ancestors at this time. If purity is what is required to participate in cultic leadership, then the best time for women to engage in it is when they are menstruating.

One should be interested in knowing what Christianity says about the problem of menstrual “impurity” and church leadership in order to help Akan Christians who continue to experience the encounter between the gospel and their culture. Therefore a study of biblical and Jewish approach to “purity” and “impurity” could serve as a sound basis for a study of this nature.

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248 See Chapter 2 of the research for more information on mother-child bond.