



The Significance of the *Aponnwa* (Blackened Stool) within the Bono (Akan) Sociopolitical and Religious Context

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ABSTRACT

Across cultures, death does not signify the severance of an individual's ties to their community but rather marks a transition to a revered ancestral presence. This enduring connection between the living and the dead is particularly evident in Akan society, where the black stool (*Aponnwa*) is a sacred symbol of ancestral authority, continuity, and communal identity. This article examines the socio-religious and political significance of the black stool within the Akan community, highlighting its role in legitimising traditional leadership, preserving cultural memory, and maintaining spiritual cohesion. Drawing on empirical data from three Bono communities in Ghana—collected through interviews and participant observations—this study engaged with existing literature to provide a comparative analysis of the black stool's function in Bono and other Akan societies. The main argument of the paper is that the Akan black stool (*Aponnwa*) is not merely a cultural artefact but a powerful socio-religious and political symbol that legitimises traditional leadership, preserves ancestral authority, and reinforces communal identity. The paper contributes to broader discourses on African indigenous institutions, demonstrating how ancestral veneration shapes contemporary socio-political structures.

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INTRODUCTION

In many African societies, the relationship between the living and the dead remains integral to social, religious, and political life. Among the Akan of Ghana, this connection is vividly expressed through the institution of the black stool (*Aponnwa*)¹, a sacred object that embodies ancestral authority and continuity. Unlike ordinary stools used for everyday purposes, the black stool has deep symbolic significance, serving as a vessel for ancestral spirits and a legitimizing force for traditional leadership. Through the black stool, Akan people maintain a tangible link with their forebears.

The socio-religious and political functions of the black stool extend beyond mere symbolism. It plays a key role in the enthronement of chiefs, the preservation of historical memory, and the

¹ *Aponnwa* is also referred to as *Akonwa tuntum*; the latter is more common among the Bono people who are studied in this research.

reinforcement of moral and ethical values within the community. The stool is revered not only as a representation of past rulers but also as an active spiritual entity that guides and protects the people. This intricate relationship between the black stool, chieftaincy, and ancestral veneration underscores its continued relevance in the Akan society, even in the face of modernization and external religious influences.

This study examines the socio-religious and political significance of the black stool by exploring its role in traditional governance, spiritual practices, and communal life. The research, qualitative and employing a purposive sampling approach, was conducted through primary and secondary sources. Bono traditional stools were studied through observation and interviews. Additionally, three individuals from Nkoranza, Japekrom, and Dormaa-Ahenkro were interviewed in the Bono and Bono-East regions to gain further insights. Drawing on empirical research conducted in these three Bono communities, as well as a comparative analysis with other Akan societies, the paper provides insights into how the black stool functions as both a religious object and a political institution.

The Origin of the Akan People

The Akan are one of the main tribes in West Africa (inhabiting Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and some other parts of West Africa) that speak the Akan/Twi language. The name "Akan" is believed to have derived from *Akane* or *kan/kane* (meaning "first", "foremost," "beginnings," or "to lead"), which was, however, corrupted by early Europeans, who visited the coast of West Africa.² When understood this way, Akan signifies that they were the first people to settle in what is today known as Ghana. The word *kan/kane* may also be considered as meaning "to read," and thus, Akan could mean they were the first people to have been given the gift of oratory and public speech.³ *Kan* may also be interpreted as "light" to underscore that the Akan see themselves as "the first to have seen light and would therefore, as leaders, have a message to impart to others."⁴ This interpretation may also explain why the Akans consider themselves the first people to spread civilization. In any case, Akan implies the implied (cultural) superiority of this group of people as illustrated by the saying "*Aninguasee mfata akanni ba*" ("Disgrace does not befit the Akan").⁵

Though they exist in about fifteen subgroups today, the Akan had a common ancestry. The people who founded the Akan states were the descendants of Dia, Za (Diaga or Zaga), Libyan Berbers, and Gara of the Tibesti region who lived in the "White Desert" or *Sarem* ("the country of the sand").⁶ At the beginning of the eleventh century, they were conquered by Arabs who pushed the Lemta Tuaregs from the Fezzan into the territory of the Akan ancestors and thus forced them to move and settle along the Niger Bend between Djenne and Timbuktu.⁷ At this site, they "incorporated many of the inhabitants into their clans, as was the custom among matrilineally organized peoples. These people were originally of much the same stock as themselves but over time had intermarried with negro aboriginals."⁸ Given the facts of the conquests and intermarriages of this and other Dia, Libyan Berber, and Gara refugees, one may say that it is possible that the Akan had white ancestry who came from beyond the Sahara is true.⁹ The remarkable similarities in belief and practices among some North African and Middle Eastern civilizations and the Akan may be due to this reason.

Later, having had their kingdom seized by Islamized Berbers, thousands of the people migrated southward to establish the Mo (Gurunsi-speaking) state.¹⁰ When they were shortly defeated again close to the end of the 12th century by the Mossi people, who were the original inhabitants of the land, some

² N. K. Kyeremanteng, *The Akan of Ghana: Their Customs, History and Institutions* (Kumasi: Sebewie De Ventures, 2010), 26.

³ Anthony Ephraim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestor* (Trenton & Asmara: African World Press, 1997), 3-4.

⁴ Ephraim-Donkor, *African Spirituality*, 4.

⁵ Kyeremanteng, *The Akan of Ghana*, 26.

⁶ Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1958), 17.

⁷ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 17-19.

⁸ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 19.

⁹ Esther E. Acolatse, *For Freedom or Bondage? A Critique of African Pastoral Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 60.

¹⁰ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 19.

of them moved southward again, mainly into Gonja (present-day northern territories of Ghana).¹¹ The Falcon clan moved farther southward below the black Volta under the leadership of Nana Asaman who, in the latter part of the 13th century (1295), founded the Bono¹² Kingdom as the first Akan state in Ghana. Part of the Bono people who later became known as the Fante people left Takyiman (around 1250) under the leadership of three great Bono warriors, Obrumankoma (the whale), Odapagya (the eagle) and Oson (the elephant) and settled at Mankessim. Nana Asaman founded the Bono kingdom in the latter part of the 13th century (1295) as the first Akan state in Ghana.¹³ They first settled at Amowi, from where they moved to Pinihinand Yefri. In the late fifteenth century, the Bono people founded the Gyaaman kingdom as an extension of the Bono state in what is now Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁴

The capital of the Bono Kingdom, Bono Manso, served as a trading state between the Akan and the neighbouring people.¹⁵ The Bonoman kingdom was rich in minerals such as gold.¹⁶ Ancient Bono people used the gold dust as a measure of currency in Bonoman and at the various market centres of Djenné, Timbuktu, and North Africa. The Bono people were noted for brass casting, weaving of cloth (*gagawuga*, *kyenkyene*, and *kente*), pottery, and others. Begho of Bonoman was one of the largest ancient cities in West Africa (with an estimated population of 12,000) when the Portuguese arrived on the Gold Coast in 1471. People travelled from the Malian empire to the Bono kingdom to trade in gold, kola, textiles, salt, brass, and slaves. Caravans from Egypt, North Africa, and Arabia came yearly to exchange their goods for gold and kola nuts.¹⁷ Consequently, the “Bono Kingdom became the wealthiest and most civilised among all the Akan states, including Asante.”¹⁸ During this era, some Akan states became vassals to the Bonohene (king of the Bono), who was considered “a king of kings.”¹⁹ In some sense, the Bonohene came to embody the position of an emperor.²⁰ Meyerowitz described the link between the kingship system of the time and the ancient Egyptians:

The more I became acquainted with the Akan beliefs and customs, the more I realised that they were not isolated phenomena. It became clear that they were ultimately based on those of Ancient Egypt. Time and place and historical change had so much modified these religious forms as to produce effects which made them not indeed repetitions of the Egyptian example but obvious derivations from it.²¹

Bonohene Akumfi Ameyaw was the one who introduced drums such as Fontomfrom and Atumpan, talking drum from North Africa in the 1320s.²² “Traditionally, Bono is the hub of Akan culture and most aspects of Akan culture emanate from Bono, for instance, clans (*abusua*), *ntoro*, Akan drums (*fontomfrom*, *atumpan*), Akan nomenclature, umbrellas used for kings, *adinkra* symbols, fly whisk, ivory trumpets, head gears, swords of the nation, and many more.”²³ During different phases of the Bonoman kingdom, different groups of Akan people migrated out of the area to establish their societies elsewhere.

Other Dia, Libya Berber and Gara refugees having left the Niger area colonised negro aborigines in Ivory Coast and founded the Bona and Kumbu Kingdoms by the Asakyiri and Aduana

¹¹ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 20.

¹² The word Bono means “pioneer”, “first” or “maiden.” See Nana Agyie Kodie Anane-Agyei, *Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region: The Story of an African Society in the Heart of the World*. Accra: Abibrem Books, 2012), 8.

¹³ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 20.

¹⁴ Bono / Abon / Brong, [https://www.101lasttribes.com/tribes/bono.html]

¹⁵ G. K. Ankrah, “The Effect of Lexical Borrowing in Techiman: A Case Study in the Brong-Ahafo Region of Ghana.” In *European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies*. Vol. 2(4) (2018):53-74, 59.

¹⁶ Kyeremanteng, *The Akan of Ghana*, 36; Ankrah, “The Effect of Lexical Borrowing in Techiman, 59.

¹⁷ Emmanuel Kumi-Amoah, *Pentecostalism, Chieftaincy and Festivals in Ghana: Engagement between Pentecostals and the Fellowship of Christian Chiefs and Queens (FCCQ) as a Shift in Mission Strategy* (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2019), 72.

¹⁸ Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Divine Kingship in Ghana and Ancient Egypt* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1960), 16.

¹⁹ Basil Davidson, *A History of West Africa 1000-1800*, New Ed. (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1977), 90.

²⁰ Davidson, *A History of West Africa 1000-1800*, 90.

²¹ Meyerowitz, *The Divine Kingship*, 16.

²² Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 106.

²³ Bono / Abon / Brong, [https://www.101lasttribes.com/tribes/bono.html]

clans, respectively.²⁴ Defeat in war also forced the people of the Bona and Kumbu Kingdoms to seek refuge in the Bono Kingdom, from where they later moved to establish the Akyerekere Kingdom in 1500 around Twifo-Heman.²⁵ A royal from the Akyerekere Kingdom named Werempe Ampem rebelled against the Akyerekere king and eventually formed the Denkyera Kingdom, which was once the most powerful kingdom among the Akan.²⁶ The Akwamu Kingdom was established in 1575, and the Dormaa in 1600 as sister states that were part of the people who founded the Kumbu Kingdom in the Ivory Coast and migrated because of attacks.²⁷ Meyerowitz asserts that the refugees from the Bona Kingdom sought refuge in the Bono Kingdom in 1701 and later founded the Asante Kingdom, which became a great Kingdom among the Akan states.²⁸

From the 15th century to the 19th century, the Akan people became dominant in the mining and trading of gold in the West African sub-region. From the 11th century, the Akan became popular for their military might. They fought many battles against the European colonists to maintain autonomy. They were also a key player in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Some enslaved Akans, including the Coromantins of Jamaica and descendants of the Akwamu in St. John, led a rebellion against the slave masters. By the early 1900s, all Akan people had come under colonial rule; those in Ghana under the British government and those in the Ivory Coast, under the French government. The Akan in Ghana were freed from British rule on 6th March 1957, while those in Ivory Coast became independent on 7 August 1960.

Bono-Techiman oral tradition says that there was a Bono king, called Nana Twi (Tsi), whose language was referred to as Twi's language, Twi kasa.²⁹ This historical antecedent makes the proper name Twi very important in the Techiman royal tradition.³⁰ Later, the term Akan was used generically to refer to the various dialects spoken within the Akan territory.³¹ Bono, the language spoken by modern Techiman, can therefore be traced to the ancient Bono king, Nana Twi, as the language from which other Akan languages developed.³² Three Akan dialects (Fante, Akuapem, and Asante) have a well-developed literature. The Bono-Twi dialect (of Akan) is currently being put into written form due to the ongoing Bono Bible Translation Project undertaken by the Bible Society of Ghana.

In modern Ghana, the Akan occupy eight of the sixteen administrative regions, namely Eastern, Ashanti, Central, Western, Western North, Bono, Bono East, and Ahafo regions and some parts of the Oti region. The 2010 population and housing census revealed that the Akan constitute 47.3% of Ghana's population. They comprise Adansi, Akwamu, Asante, Asen, Akyem, Akuapem, Awowin, Ahanta, Nzema, Bono, Fante, Sefwi, Kwahu, and Twifo.

The Akan Chieftaincy System

The chieftaincy institution was and still is an important institution in traditional governance in contemporary Ghana. It offers chiefs, queen mothers, priests, and other traditional leaders the opportunity to exercise their social, political, religious, and, in some cases, economic authority. The Chieftaincy Act 795 defines the chief as "a person who, hailing from the appropriate family and lineage, has been validly nominated, elected or selected and enstooled, enskinned or installed as a Chief or Queen mother under the relevant customary law and usage."³³ The political kinship organisation in Ghanaian society integrates the nuclear and the extended families. The Akan chieftaincy institution

²⁴ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 20.

²⁵ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 20; Anane-Agyei, *Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region: The Story of an African Society in the heart of the world*, 2.

²⁶ Anane-Agyei, *Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region: The Story of an African Society in the heart of the world*, 2.

²⁷ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 20.

²⁸ Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana*, 20.

²⁹ Anane-Agyei, *Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region: The Story of an African Society in the Heart of the World*, 2-3.

³⁰ Anane-Agyei, *Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region*, 2.

³¹ Kyeremanteng, *The Akan of Ghana*, 26.

³² Ankrah, "The Effect of Lexical Borrowing in Techiman", 60.

³³ Chieftaincy Act 795.

The origin chieftaincy institution in Ghana dates back to pre-colonial days and has remained the cornerstone of traditional governance.³⁴ Although different societies have different histories of the institution, there are enough reasons to suggest that the chieftaincy institution predates colonialism. The Techiman people, for example, have had a centralised political system since their existence as a society. Techiman was named after Nana Takyi Firi, who was once the Krontihene of the then Bono-Manso state. History has it that the Bono people were the first of the Akan groups to have settled on the then Gold Coast. Bono-Techiman is therefore acknowledged as the *Akan Piesie* (“the firstborn of the Akan”) and the “spiritual home” of the Akan people.³⁵ As noted earlier, the Bono kingdom flourished for many years before the establishment of other Akan societies.³⁶

Oral history traces the institution’s beginnings to the time when a group of people migrated to a specific location, started organising their society, and then chose someone to lead them. In those days, the ability to speak publicly, act proactively, and lead efficiently qualified one for this position. Since tribal war was common in those days, the leader was also expected to have military ability. The leader of the victorious group assumed control over the vanquished group. Thus, a person could also rise to the position of chief through valour and distinction in the military during conflicts or disasters such as hunger, drought, and floods. The point is that leaders were expected to be capable of addressing the existential problems of their people. With time, traditional leadership evolved into a well-organised institution of chieftaincy with the invention of stools and skins as representations of royalty and power.³⁷

The importance of the chieftaincy institution is evident in the role that chiefs played before, during, and after colonial rule. When European missionaries arrived on the Gold Coast in 1471, the first person they contacted was the chief because they knew that the chief had authority over the land and the people, and before they could start anything, they needed the chief’s blessing. They acquired lands to build forts, castles and trade centres from the chiefs. As respected and venerated people in the society, when a chief got converted, his subjects could easily be converted as well because they knew that the chief was their leader, and whatever he accepted was also right for them to accept.

The chieftaincy institution was affected by colonialism. In pre-colonial times, a chief had been nominated, elected, enstooled, or enskinned as the leader of a society in accordance with the custom of that society.³⁸ This means that the communities over which the chief rules have the power to make and unmake a chief, without any external interference. The pre-colonial chief was endowed with a lot of authority, including legislative, executive and administrative authorities.

Later, with the introduction of the western system of governance, the nation was governed by a few educated elites who were elected to participate in the political process introduced by the colonial masters. With this system, chiefs were no longer involved in active participation in mainstream national governance. However, the chieftaincy institution continued and continues to contribute to national development, especially in areas of security, justice, health, and finance infrastructure, among others.

The Traditional Stool

The Akan ancestral stool is a wooden seat. Before the introduction of chairs by Europeans, every Akan house had many stools for everyday use. Even though the introduction of chairs has eradicated the use of stools, there is a general preference for chairs in contemporary Akan societies. According to

³⁴ George Kojo Oku and Leo Andoh Korsah, “Examining The Historical Development Of The Chieftaincy Institutions In Ghana”, *Journal of African Studies and Ethnographic Research*, 1 no.1 (2019): 69-74, 70.

³⁵ Anane-Agyei, *Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region: The Story of an African Society in the heart of the world*, 92; Kumi-Amoah, *Pentecostalism, Chieftaincy and Festivals in Ghana: Engagement between Pentecostals and the Fellowship of Christian Chiefs and Queens (FCCQ) as a Shift in Mission Strategy*, 50.

³⁶ Anane-Agyei, *Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region: The Story of an African Society in the heart of the world*, 8.

³⁷ Isaac Boaheng and Ebenezer Asibu-Dadzie Jnr, *Essays in the Old Testament & African Life and Thought* (Accra: Noyam Publishers, 2020), 85. DOI: 10.38159/npub.eb20701.

³⁸ Nana Addo Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana: The Future* (Accra: Gold Type Ltd, 2004), 19. In some cases, one may be appointed and installed as a chief over a people.

Agyemang, chiefs/kings use the stool rather than an ordinary chair because they are not ordinary people in the society.³⁹ He draws on the Akan tradition to make a case for the use of the stool.⁴⁰ He opines that the stool makes the leader distinct from his/her subjects.⁴¹ An Akan stool has three key parts: the base, the middle portion, and the top (seat).⁴² The base typically takes the form of a rectangular piece of wood, with a width that is approximately one-fourth of its length.

The middle portion of an Akan stool often features intricate patterns and designs that hold cultural significance. The skill of the carver, the status of the owner and the owner's preferred pattern and symbols of the owner are key determinants of the appearance of the middle portion. It may be designed with Adinkra symbols (such as Sankofa or Gye Nyame), geometric patterns (like triangles, squares, or circles), animal figures (such as an elephant, a lion, a leopard, or a bird), plant and other natural figures (like leaves, trees, or flowers), human figures and/or abstract, non-representational designs. According to Sarpong, the design of the middle portion determines the kind of stool it is, who qualifies to own it, and its economic and cultural worth.⁴³ The meaning and use of specific patterns may vary across different Akan communities. However, the fact remains that Akan stools are not only functional pieces of furniture but also profound works of art and cultural expression. The design of the middle part determines the name of the stool.

The top is a smooth but curved piece of wood connected to the middle portion. In terms of size, the top typically matches the breadth of the base while being longer.⁴⁴ This deliberate design choice emphasises the visual balance of the stool while providing a spacious and comfortable seating area. The top of the stool is characterised by its smooth, polished surface, which ensures comfort for anyone who sits on it.⁴⁵ It has an ergonomically curved shape, that serves more than an aesthetic purpose; it serves a dual role of safety and practicality. The curvature not only cradles the sitter, providing a secure and stable seating experience but also offers a convenient means of transport during ceremonial events.⁴⁶ There is a strict cultural taboo against carrying the stool on one's head.

Even though the Akan land is mainly forested with many trees available for carving, not all trees are considered suitable for carving the traditional stool. In addition to its supernatural character, the tree for carving the traditional stool needs to be durable, easy to carve and light enough to be carried around.⁴⁷ Two trees that are most frequently used to carve the stool are *sesɛ* (*fontumia africana*) or *Nyamedua* (*alstonia boonei*).⁴⁸ Both trees are white, light and soft. The white colours make it easy to judge whether the stool is clean or stained; the lightweight makes it easy to carry it about, and the soft nature makes carving easier.⁴⁹ The *sesɛ* tree is used more often than any other tree, and so the stool is commonly referred to as *sesɛdwa* (stool made from *sesɛ* wood).⁵⁰ The *drum*, *Mahogany*, and *tweneboa* may also be used to carve *Asipem*.⁵¹ They are heavier and more durable than *sesɛ* and *Nyamedua*.

Sharing his perspective within the framework of Bono sociopolitical tradition, Agyemang distinguishes between two types of stools based on the gender of the leader who uses them. He explains that the stool designated for male leaders is known as *Asipem*, a symbol of authority, power, and governance.⁵² The *Asipem* stool is closely associated with kings, chiefs, and other male traditional

³⁹ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*; Mary Ampomah, *Interview by Author*.

⁴⁰ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*; Ampomah, *Interview by Author*.

⁴¹ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁴² Peter K. Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1971), 7.

⁴³ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 7.

⁴⁴ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 7.

⁴⁵ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 7.

⁴⁶ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 7.

⁴⁷ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 10; Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁴⁸ Agyemang adds that *Dum* and *Tweneboa* can also be used, *Interview by Author*. He however said *Tweneboa* is mainly for calving *Atumpan* (talking drum).

⁴⁹ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁵⁰ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁵¹ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁵² Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

rulers. In contrast, the stool for female leaders is referred to as *asesedwa* (stool made from sese wood).⁵³ This stool is primarily used by queen mothers and other female traditional authorities. Unlike the *Asipem*, the *asesedwa* is typically lower and simpler in design, a distinction that highlights the structured yet complementary nature of male and female leadership roles in Akan governance.

There are significant spiritual considerations associated with stool carving that must be acknowledged. According to Sarpong, the Akan believe that non-human entities, including animals, plants, and trees, possess souls of varying degrees of power.⁵⁴ This belief influences the selection of materials for carving stools, as the spiritual potency of the wood is thought to affect the stool's sacred essence. Certain trees are considered more suitable for carving stool because they are believed to house stronger spirits, making them appropriate vessels for ancestral and spiritual connections. Among trees, *sese*, *Nyamedua* and *Tweneboa*⁵⁵ (or *Kodua*) are believed to possess very vindictive spirits. *Tweneboa* is mainly for calving drums; for example *Atumpan*, the talking drum. They are believed to have the power to become invisible to humans who want to molest them. It is believed that the *Tweneboa* tree can turn into a poisonous snake to protect itself from human attack.⁵⁶

Akan stools are traditionally carved from a single piece of wood and consist of three distinct parts: the seat, column, and base. The column, which connects the seat to the base, is particularly significant, as its design reflects the rank or status of the chief. These designs may take various forms, including anthropomorphic (human-like), zoomorphic (animal-like), vegetal, geometric, or symbolic patterns, each carrying cultural and spiritual meaning. The base of the stool provides stability, symbolising the strength and endurance of the kingdom or the chieftaincy institution itself. The seat, where the chief rests, represents his authority and leadership, while the column serves as the structural and symbolic link between the ruler and his domain. Together, these elements reinforce the sacred nature of the stool, making it more than just a physical object; it is a vessel of political power, spiritual significance, and cultural heritage in Akan society.

One must be spiritually attuned to handle the sacred responsibilities associated with the carver's task. Among the Akan, it is customary to appease the spirit of the tree before cutting it down, often through sacrifices such as eggs, fowl, or sheep. Sarpong (citation) provides an example of the words that may accompany this ritual: "Sese tree, here is a chicken for you. I am going to cut you down and make a stool out of you; receive an offering and eat. Please. Let not the tool cut me. Do not let me suffer afterwards and let me have a good price for the stool."⁵⁷ These words serve as an acknowledgement of the tree's spirit and reflect the Akan people's deep reverence for nature. They also suggest the belief that the tree possesses spiritual agency and can influence the carver's fate and the quality of the stool. Beyond the inherent spirit of the tree, it is also believed that a carved stool can become inhabited by an external spirit. For this reason, similar sacrifices are performed after the stool is completed to ensure its spiritual purity. The Akan usually put an empty stool on its side or against the wall because of the belief that dislodged spirits of trees and other spirits can occupy it.⁵⁸ The perspective underscores that stool carving is not merely a craft but a sacred practice that requires both technical skill and profound religious knowledge. Success in this profession is believed to depend not only on craftsmanship but also on spiritual insight and the ability to navigate the unseen world. Among the Akan, stool carving is traditionally restricted to males; however, (as noted earlier) ownership of stools is not gender-exclusive, as any Akan individual, regardless of gender, may possess one.

The Blackening of the Stool

In the Bono (Akan) sociopolitical context, traditional stools are blackened and named after deceased chiefs, symbolising their continued presence and authority in the ancestral realm. However, not every

⁵³ Agyemang, Interview by Author.

⁵⁴ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 11.

⁵⁵ This tree is used for carving drum; Daniel Asomah Gyabaa, *Interview by Author*.

⁵⁶ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 10.

⁵⁷ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 11.

⁵⁸ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 11.

deceased chief qualifies for this honour; specific conditions must be met before a black stool can be consecrated in a chief's name. First, the chief must have "died on the stool," meaning he must have remained in office until his death and not been removed due to misconduct or other disqualifying reasons.⁵⁹ Chiefs who are destooled for violating taboos associated with their office or engaging in misconduct are not granted the honour of having a black stool preserved in their name. Second, the chief must have led an exemplary life, upholding the customs and traditions of his society with integrity and wisdom.⁶⁰ His reign should have been marked by peace, prosperity, and stability within the community. Only those who fulfil these criteria are deemed worthy of ancestral veneration through the blackening and preservation of their stool, ensuring their enduring legacy in the spiritual and political life of the Akan people.

Traditional stools hold a central place in the Akan chieftaincy institution, serving both functional and symbolic roles. The installation of a chief is referred to as enstoolment, a term that reflects the significance of the stool in Akan governance. During the enstoolment of a chief, the candidate is made to sit on it three times to signify his assumption of office.⁶¹ However, the person needs to be clothed with special clothing (referred to as *amrako*) that covers the private parts, or else the candidate will be left impotent.⁶² The three-time seating of the candidate on the stool draws from the Akan saying that *bosom anim beko no mpreensa* (one has to consult a god thrice to have a complete consultation). This act elevates the candidate to the status of a king/chief. Furthermore, the chief continues to sit on the stool during public functions and state gatherings, reinforcing his authority and legitimacy.

Every Akan chief is expected to commission a personal stool for use throughout his reign, which, upon his death, is blackened and preserved in his honour as a symbol of his transition into the ancestral realm. When the chief dies, his body is normally placed on his stool and bathed, after which the stool is kept until the time comes for it to be blackened for preservation.⁶³ The ritual blackening of the stool of a deceased chief, which normally takes place at night under strict supervision, is done during the final funeral rites by the chief stool bearer (*nkonwasofohene*), who is assisted by other stool bearers (*nkonwasofofo*).⁶⁴

Traditional black stools are kept in a sacred house and are only brought out for specific ritual purposes.⁶⁵ On certain occasions, the black stool is taken to a stream for purification, a process shrouded in strict customary protocols. Ordinary people are not permitted to see the stool, and when it is brought out, it is typically covered with a white cloth as a sign of its sacredness. As the stool is carried to the stream, it is believed to exert a mystical influence on the carrier, guiding their path and determining where they should stop.⁶⁶ At these stopping points, libation is poured to invoke the ancestors and seek their blessings.⁶⁷ The washing of the stool takes place in a specially designated pan, followed by another libation to honour the spirits. In the past, the water used to cleanse the stool was considered spiritually potent and was repurposed for various ritualistic and practical uses.⁶⁸ Farmers would sprinkle it on their lands to ensure soil fertility and a bountiful harvest. Barren women would drink it in the hope of conceiving, believing in its power to restore fertility.⁶⁹ Additionally, the water could be sprinkled on the people as a symbolic act of protection and a blessing for longevity.

According to Agyemang, the process of blackening is referred to as "dye."⁷⁰ The blackening of Akan chieftaincy stools is a traditional practice that adds a distinct aesthetic and cultural significance

⁵⁹ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ontario: FEP International, 1978), 39.

⁶⁰ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39.

⁶¹ Boaheng and Asibu-Dadzie Jnr, *Essays in the Old Testament & African Life and Thought*, 90.

⁶² Agyemang, *Interview by Author*; Gyabaa, *Interview by Author*.

⁶³ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39.

⁶⁴ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 40.

⁶⁵ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁶⁶ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁶⁷ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*; Gyabaa, *Interview by Author*.

⁶⁸ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*; Gyabaa, *Interview by Author*.

⁶⁹ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁷⁰ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*; Gyabaa, *Interview by Author*.

to these stools. Akrong observes that the blackening of the stool “symbolises how a chief, who, through the rituals of installation, becomes a *de jure* ancestor, proceeds on to become a *de facto* ancestor through the burial and funeral rites.”⁷¹ Once a chief’s stool is blackened and added to the other stools, he becomes a permanent link in the chain of ancestors that begins with the founding members of the society.

On the day appointed previously, which is made known well in advance to the sub-chiefs of the state, all the ancient stools are assembled in the open hall of the chief’s house. The new one about to undergo the ceremony is put among them. Beginning with the oldest to the newest, the new chief pours libation with palm wine on each stool, to invoke the blessings of the good ancestors on such an important function and the whole state. The old stools are washed in a brass basin, and the same water which is used for washing the old ones is also used for washing the new ones.⁷² This act symbolises the incorporation of the new stool completely into the fold of the old stools.⁷³

The eggs are then broken and, in a calabash or earthenware, mixed with soot (Bono-Twi: *wisidāā*) collected from the kitchen.⁷⁴ The egg thickens the mixture to make its application easier and more effective. Here, the new stool is smeared with the mixture until it becomes as black as coal. After this, a sheep is killed, and its blood is sprinkled on the stool, as well as on the rest.⁷⁵ Its fat is carefully collected and placed on it. In the olden days, it was blackened with human blood. All these are done to ensure the preservation of the stool so that it can be kept throughout the life of society.

In the absence of human blood, the blood of a dog could be used. Dogs are also considered powerful animals (*akyeboa*) in the realm of the spirit; their blood could substitute for humans. This underscores substitutionary sacrifice. Prayers are then made for the prosperity of the nation, and the stools are returned to their temple. Because blood is life, the stool has power. To maintain the stool’s blackened appearance, periodic reapplication of the blackening substance may be necessary over the years, as the black colour may fade or wear off with time and use.

The Significance of the Black Stool

Socio-Religious Significance

The stool carries the soul of the community. Therefore, it is taboo to steal or to displace it.⁷⁶ The stool is the most important object in the Akan chieftaincy institution. According to Nana Addo Dankwa III, “the Black Stool is the most important object in the palace.”⁷⁷ Every would-be chief is made to provide a stool before his enstoolment begins. After the death of a chief, the stool he provided is blackened and added to the stock of stools in the stool room in the palace.

The Black Stool also symbolises the identity, unity, and continuity of the society. Before the institution of chieftaincy, different communities lived independently from one another. In other words, the communities that are now found under one umbrella used to live on their own before they were put together under one leader. Having come under a central leadership, the communities that form a kingdom now see themselves as one people with a common identity and goal. The black stool that embodies the chieftaincy institution binds them together. There is the belief that the black stool has the deceased chief’s spirit residing in it. This makes the black stool an important element in most Akan festivals.

Aside from the above social significance, the black stool has a religious function. According to Akrong, “The stool on which the chief sits symbolises the link between him and the founding ancestors. The stool, therefore, becomes a sacred location or the temple that represents the abiding

⁷¹ Akrong, 198. In the olden days, it was blackened with human blood; Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁷² Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 40.

⁷³ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 40.

⁷⁴ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁷⁵ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 40.

⁷⁶ Agyemang, *Interview by Author*.

⁷⁷ Nana Addo Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana – The Future* (Accra: Konrad Adenauer Foundation 2004), 67

presence of the founding ancestors.”⁷⁸ In some Akan societies, the chief-elect is made to sleep in the stool room of the founders of the society, the belief being that the ancestors would transfer their virtues to the chief so that he can represent them very well and have the ability to mediate between his subjects and the ancestors. It is believed that life is tied to the demands of the stool that he occupies. Regular sacrifices are offered and libation is poured in the stool room on behalf of the people to maintain the relationship between the physical community and the spiritual community and to ask for blessings from the ancestors.

Political Significance

In addition to its basic meaning as a physical wooden seat, the term “stool” has political significance; it can refer to the political office of the chief or the king.⁷⁹ In the Akan socio-political context, the stool is a symbol of the office of kings and chiefs. This is so because each chief or king has a designated stool associated with his office. When someone is said to occupy the “stool” (*oodi akonwa*; lit. he/she is eating the stool), it means that they hold the political office of a chief or king.⁸⁰ The death of a ruler is an incident referred to as *akonwa ato* (“The stool has fallen”). The expression “the Techiman stool” (*Takyiman nkonwa*) is equivalent to saying “the English throne.” The Akan, therefore, use such expressions as “stool land” or “stool money” to denote land and money attached to the chieftaincy or kingship of the place in question.⁸¹

As noted earlier, the black stool symbolises the power, authority, and spiritual connection of an Akan chief to his ancestors. It is revered for containing the spirit of the community and its history. Central to the installation and enthronement ceremonies, the stool represents the chief's role as a representative of his forefathers, transforming into a sacred object that embodies the influence of the founding ancestors. This cultural symbol commands respect and reverence, transcending its physical form to serve as a reminder of tradition, ancestral connection, and the enduring spirit of the Akan people.

Pedagogical Significance

Furthermore, the stool has a pedagogical function. The black stool is “an educational resource that facilitates teaching and learning”, especially during festive seasons.⁸² As a symbol of the authority of the chief, it also reminds the chief of the need to have adequate knowledge “in history, governance, diplomacy, legal system, and spirituality.”⁸³ Addo Dankwa III captures the educational function of the black stool in these words: “Since the Black Stool constitutes the history books of the periods of reign of the chiefs whose memories the stool represents, when a chief goes to the stool house during the Aday festival period, the court historians take the opportunity to narrate to the chief the good deeds of the past chiefs, whose memories have been preserved with Black Stools.”⁸⁴ The reference to the black stool as “the history books” of the chiefs means that each of the stool covers a particular historical context of the people, and so by narrating the history associated with each stool, the entire history of the community can be recounted. It is therefore important to note that during the period of confinement, the elected chief goes through the history of his people from the reign of one king to another based on the stools.

As the chief goes through the history of each of the past chiefs, he learns from their achievements and mistakes and becomes better equipped to emulate their good deeds and avoid their

⁷⁸ Abraham Akropong, “Religion and Traditional leadership in Ghana” In Odotei, K. Irene, Awedoba, K. Albert. 2006. Eds. *Chieftaincy in Ghana: Culture, Governance and Development* pp. 193-212 (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2006), 198

⁷⁹ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 8.

⁸⁰ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 8.

⁸¹ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, 8.

⁸² Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, “The Significance of the Black Stool as an Educational Resource in Akan Traditional Patterns of Learning,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)* 7(10) (2021):153-165, 154.

⁸³ Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, “The Significance of the Black Stool as an Educational Resource in Akan Traditional Patterns of Learning, 154.

⁸⁴ Dankwa, *The Institution of chieftaincy in Ghana-The Future*, 73.

failures. The oral nature of the Akan society is underlined by the fact that the court historians teach the chief the history of each stool by oral means. Thus, “[t]he educational values in the Black Stool exist in the oral tradition.”⁸⁵ Given the foregoing discourse, the black stool should be considered a teaching and learning material that creates the opportunity for the chief to have a moral, historical, political, ethical, and theological education.⁸⁶

Is the Akan Black Stool a Deity?

The question of whether the black stool is a deity or not needs consideration at this point. In the Akan context, deities are supernatural beings that humans reach through mediums and fetish priests. They are classified as personal deities, family deities, societal deities and national deities, each having a different jurisdiction of operation. The Akan traditional worship (*abosonsom*) comes from the words *aboo* (stone) and *som* (worship); thus, *abosonsom* means “the worship of stones.” That is the object considered as a deity that was made of stone. In the Akan context, when one wants to communicate with the *abosom*, one has to pass through a person or medium who is possessed by the *bosom/ɔbosom*. The person speaks a strange language that is interpreted by the fetish linguist *kɔmfoɔ*, so that the intentions of the deity may be made known to the worshiper.⁸⁷ This makes the traditional priest a key figure in the African traditional religious context. The priest not only functions as an intermediary between the deities and the worshipers but also plays a very important role in other aspects of the lives of the people.⁸⁸

The office of the priest is a respected office in the Akan religious setup. One cannot just get up and claim to be a traditional priest. Before one can become a traditional priest, the person should have a call, just as ministers of God also have a call. This is true whether the person receives the priesthood or is called through non-hereditary means. In any case, the call must be authenticated by a senior priest. The call normally comes in the form of possession by the deity; the Akan will normally say of the person “*bosom afa no*” or “*akɔm aka no*”, meaning that a deity has possessed the person. A senior priest is invited to verify the authenticity of the call and which *bosom* has possessed a person. The concept of a call to the Akan traditional priesthood, therefore, involves the person called, the deity calling the person, and other people including a (senior) priest.

Once the senior priest has confirmed the authenticity of the call, the family members are asked to give their consent and the person is sent to the shrine of the deity that possessed him/her for training to begin. The curriculum for the training includes such areas as the laws governing the vocation, taboos, dances, songs, and idiosyncrasies of the gods.⁸⁹ The priest in training also learns herbal medicine as well as the customs, traditions, and history of the society that he/she is going to serve. The accumulated wisdom the priest possesses explains why the Nigerians, for example, refer to him/her as “the wise one.” The period of training of the priest and what goes into the training differ from society to society and from shrine to shrine. The training of priests at the Akonnedi shrine, for example, takes at least three (3) years under a senior priest or priestess.⁹⁰ After training and graduation, the priest begins to work at a shrine.

Against the background of the foregoing discussions, Danquah contends that the black stool should not be categorised as a deity due to the absence of specific attributes associated with deities in Akan culture.⁹¹ For instance, unlike traditional deities, the black stool lacks designated priests or mediums believed to be possessed by the stool and as intermediaries through which it communicates with the chief or the community. In the Akan community, deities are typically associated with shrines, rituals, and spiritual agents. In contrast, the black stool functions primarily as a symbol of ancestral authority, political legitimacy, and communal identity rather than as an object of worship.

⁸⁵ Opuni-Frimpong, “The Significance of the Black Stool as an Educational Resource in Akan Traditional Patterns of Learning, 156.

⁸⁶ Opuni-Frimpong, “The Significance of the Black Stool as an Educational Resource in Akan Traditional Patterns of Learning, 156.

⁸⁷ Dankwa, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana*, 74.

⁸⁸ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 74.

⁸⁹ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 74.

⁹⁰ Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 76.

⁹¹ Dankwa, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana*, 74.

Danquah further notes that the early European missionaries and anthropologists who initially classified the black stool as a deity did so without seeking a deep understanding of Akan cultural practices.⁹² He argues that their ethnocentric perspective led them to misconstrue various aspects of African culture as fetish or superstitious.⁹³ This highlights the importance of approaching cultural practices with an open mind and a desire for comprehensive knowledge, rather than imposing external judgments. Danquah's argument highlights the need to seek complete knowledge about one's culture before classifying it as biblical or unbiblical.

Danquah then provides a linguistic insight to support his argument. He indicates that the word “*adae*” means “sleeping place,” that is, “a sleeping place or a resting place for the ancestors.”⁹⁴ Therefore, the Adae ceremony is not a form of deity worship but rather a memorial occasion to honour and remember the ancestors. In his view, ancestral veneration can be likened to the concept of saints in Christianity, where individuals are revered and commemorated for their spiritual significance.⁹⁵

The question of whether the Akan black stool is a deity reveals the complexity of Akan's religious and cultural practices. While Danquah presents a compelling argument against classifying the black stool as a deity, his analysis could benefit from further engagement with the nuanced spiritual dimensions of Akan traditional belief. Though the stool does not possess mediums or priests in the conventional sense, its veneration and the rituals surrounding it suggest a form of sacred reverence that goes beyond mere symbolism. The careful handling, periodic rituals, and the belief that it embodies the spirit of the ancestors indicate that it carries a quasi-religious significance. Additionally, Danquah's comparison of ancestral veneration to the Christian concept of saints, while useful, may overlook the fundamental theological differences between the two. The veneration of ancestors in the Akan worldview involves an ongoing relationship where the ancestors are believed to influence the living, whereas, in Christian theology, saints are commemorated but do not interact with the earthly realm in the same way. Therefore, while the black stool may not fit the strict definition of a deity within Akan cosmology, it occupies a liminal space between the spiritual and the political, making it more than just a cultural artefact.

CONCLUSION

The black stool (*Aponnwa*) remains a vital socio-religious and political symbol in Bono and broader Akan societies. Its significance transcends a mere material culture to include the collective ancestral authority, spiritual presence, and historical continuity of the people. The black stool functions as a repository of communal memory, preserving historical narratives and reinforcing the values that sustain social cohesion. Despite the challenges posed by modernisation and external religious influences, the reverence for the black stool persists, demonstrating the resilience of indigenous institutions in contemporary Ghanaian society. This article highlights the need for further research into the evolving role of traditional symbols like the black stool in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. As Ghana continues to navigate the tensions between modern governance structures and indigenous leadership systems, understanding the black stool's enduring relevance can offer insights into the broader discourse on African traditional governance, spirituality, and cultural identity.

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⁹² Dankwa, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana*, 74.

⁹³ Dankwa, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana*, 74.

⁹⁴ Dankwa, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana*, 74.

⁹⁵ Dankwa, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana*, 74.

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