



Chieftaincy and the Church: A theological reflection on misconceptions, distance and engagement

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the historically tense relationship between the Akan Chieftaincy and the Church in Ghana, specifically focusing on the Theology of Distance propagated by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG). Rooted in missionary perspectives and codified in the 1926 Regulations, Practice and Procedure (RPP), this distance was built upon the derogatory classification of indigenous knowledge systems as heathen. Utilizing a qualitative research design within the framework of Public Theology and hermeneutical analysis, the study deconstructs core misconceptions surrounding the Black Stool, the office of the Chief, and the nature of ancestral veneration. The research argues that early Western missionary interpretations suffered from a monotheistic bias that failed to distinguish between religious worship (*latría*) and cultural veneration (*dulia*). By re-evaluating the Black Stool as a political symbol and historical "book" rather than a deity, and the Chief's Oath as a living constitution for governance rather than a religious conversion, the study exposes the artificial dualism that has long forced Christian royals into a state of Nicodemus Christianity. Drawing on the concept of the Kingship of Christ and the *Missio Dei*, the article proposes a Theology of Engagement. This framework moves beyond reactionary withdrawal toward a transformation of culture, where the palace is viewed as a legitimate space for Christian witness and community development. The study concludes that a healthy synthesis of the Palanquin and the Pulpit is essential for national social cohesion, allowing the Church to maintain its theological integrity while honoring the indigenous heritage that provides the bedrock of Ghanaian cultural identity.

Keywords: African Christianity, Theology of Distance, Theology of Engagement, Public Theology, Black Stool.

INTRODUCTION

The historical relationship between the Akan Chieftaincy and Christianity in Ghana has long been characterized by a profound Theology of Distance. For over a century, these two foundational pillars of Ghanaian society have operated as wary neighbours, sharing the same geographical and social landscape, yet divided by a fence of theological suspicion and missionary legacy.¹ This article explores

¹ Noel Smith and Brian Watson, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society* (Ghana Universities P., 1966); Peter A. Schweizer, *Survivors on the Gold Coast: The Basel Missionaries in Colonial Ghana* (Accra: Smartline Limited, 2000).

the roots of this alienation, the misconceptions that sustain it, and the urgent necessity for a transition toward a Theology of Engagement.

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) provides a critical case study for this tension through its 1926 Regulation, Practice and Procedure (RPP). This document codified a posture of withdrawal, viewing the indigenous palace as a heathen space fundamentally incompatible with the Gospel.² Rooted in the Eurocentric Civilization Mission of 18th- and 19th-century missionaries, this perspective failed to distinguish between African cultural identity and religious worship.³ By labeling traditional governance and its symbols as heathen, the Church inadvertently forced a generation of Christian royals into a state of Nicodemus Christianity, practicing their faith in the light while fulfilling their cultural obligations in the shadows.

This article proposes a framework of Public Theology that seeks a healthy synthesis between the Palanquin and the Pulpit. By moving beyond reactionary condemnation toward cultural humility and interdisciplinary reflection, the Church can honour indigenous heritage without compromising its theological integrity.⁴ Ultimately, the flourishing of the Ghanaian person depends on a partnership where the Chief provides the cultural roots and the Church provides the moral compass, working together for the holistic development of the community.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a theological hermeneutical methodology supported by phenomenological engagement with Akan Chieftaincy as a cultural, political, and social institution. The research is situated within the framework of Public Theology, which examines how Christian convictions contribute to public life, social institutions, ethical leadership, and community transformation.⁵ Public Theology assumes that Christian faith cannot be confined exclusively to private spirituality or ecclesiastical spaces. Rather, Christian theology must engage the realities of society, including governance structures, cultural institutions, and systems of human organization. In this regard, the Church's withdrawal from the palace creates a limitation in its ability to contribute meaningfully to public transformation.

Public Theology requires faith values to influence public space issues. However, a posture of withdrawal from traditional institutions makes meaningful engagement within those spaces difficult. The Church cannot effectively contribute to the moral and social transformation of communities if it remains distant from the institutions that shape community identity and public leadership. The study therefore adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from theology, African philosophy, anthropology, history, and political studies. This approach recognizes that Akan Chieftaincy cannot be understood adequately through theological categories alone because it represents a complex institution involving governance, social identity, historical memory, conflict resolution, and community development.⁶

The methodology is guided by cultural humility toward indigenous knowledge systems. This does not imply uncritical acceptance of every traditional practice; rather, it requires careful interpretation before theological evaluation. Such an approach recognizes that Christian engagement with culture must begin with understanding rather than condemnation.⁷ The purpose of this study is therefore constructive. It seeks to move beyond historical conflict by examining how the Church and Akan traditional

² S.G. Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith* (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1965); Smith and Watson, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society*; Schweizer, *Survivors on the Gold Coast: The Basel Missionaries in Colonial Ghana*.

³ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh Univ. Press [ua], 1995); Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West* (Eerdmans, 2003); John S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Waveland Press, 2015).

⁴ David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis books, 2011); Andrew F. Walls, "The Missionary Movement in Christian History. Maryknoll" (NY: Orbis, 1996).

⁵ Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (scm Press, 2013); Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, "Public Theology and Leadership Rudiments in African Christianity: The Expectations and Deficiencies in Ghana," *E-Journal of Religious & Theological Studies (ERATS)* 9, no. 9 (2023): 429.

⁶ Kwame Gyekye, "African Cultural Values: An Introduction," 1996; Irene K Odotei and Albert K Awedoba, "Chieftaincy in Ghana: Culture, Governance, and Development," (*No Title*), 2006.

⁷ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*; Walls, "The Missionary Movement in Christian History. Maryknoll."

institutions may engage one another in ways that preserve Christian theological integrity while contributing to the transformation of Ghanaian society.

Deconstructing the Misconceptions

The historical distance between the Church and Akan Chieftaincy has been sustained by several misconceptions concerning traditional symbols, institutions, and practices. Three areas require particular attention: the meaning of the Black Stool; the nature of the office of the Chief; and the theological interpretation of ancestor veneration. These misconceptions emerged largely because early missionary interpretations frequently viewed African cultural institutions through Western theological categories. As a result, cultural symbols were often interpreted primarily as religious objects rather than as expressions of history, governance, identity, and community responsibility.⁸ Contemporary African theological scholarship has challenged such approaches by emphasizing that indigenous African institutions must first be understood within their own cultural contexts. The Gospel does not enter cultures as a foreign replacement system but engages existing realities, transforming them in ways consistent with God's purposes.⁹

Far from being an object of worship, the Akan Black Stool is re-evaluated as a political symbol and an educational resource. It serves as a living book that records lineage, validates land ownership, and preserves the collective wisdom of the ancestors. The Office of the Chief has equally suffered from the misconceptions. Rather than a religious position, Chieftaincy is primarily a political, judicial, and developmental institution. The Chief's Oath is analyzed not as a religious conversion, but as a living constitution that binds the leader to the service and accountability of the people. The third misconception is the Veneration vs. Worship of ancestors. Utilizing a phenomenological lens, the research distinguishes between *latria* (worship reserved for only God) and *dulia* (veneration of ancestors, parents, etc.). In the Akan worldview, ancestors are the living-dead, guardians of morality and legacy, not rivals to the Supreme Being (*Onyankopon*).¹⁰

The Architecture of Misconception: The RPP and the "Heathen" Label

The constitution of the PCG, the RPP, was promulgated in 1926 at the Abetifi Synod. While no longer the active constitution (succeeded by the General Assembly system in the year 2000), the RPP remains the genetic blueprint for the Church's current stance on traditional culture.

Western missionaries and early anthropologists utilized derogatory descriptions, e.g. heathen, barbaric, superstitious, animistic, fetish, to categorize indigenous knowledge systems. The legacy of the heathen label has subsequently remained with the Church. As noted by Kwame Bediako, these were tools of "European value-setting," where Western culture was positioned as the universal standard of civilization.¹¹ The RPP adopted this language, using heathen to justify a policy of separation.

Monotheistic Bias

The 18th and 19th-century missionary worldview suffered from a rigid separation: Christianity versus everything else. This monotheistic bias failed to recognize that the Akan religious system is inherently monotheistic.¹² Because Akan spirituality involved intermediaries (deities and ancestors), it was misinterpreted as polytheism. Furthermore, because Akan spirituality was oral and symbolic, integrated into festivals and Black Stools, rather than confined to a "Holy Book," it was dismissed as mere superstition.¹³

⁸ Smith and Watson, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society*; Schweizer, *Survivors on the Gold Coast: The Basel Missionaries in Colonial Ghana*.

⁹ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*; Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West*; Stephen Bevans, "Models of Contextual Theology," *Missiology* 13, no. 2 (1985): 185-202.

¹⁰ P. K. Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan* (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation., 1971); Gyekye, "African Cultural Values: An Introduction"; Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹¹ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.

¹² Oseadeeyo Addo Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future* (Gold Type Limited, 2004).

¹³ Gyekye, "African Cultural Values: An Introduction"; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, vol. 3 (Ocms, 2002).

The Civilization Mission

Labelling a culture as heathen served a functional political purpose. It created a moral imperative for European intervention. Heathen people and cultures were uncivilized who needed civilization something that could be received from Europe and Christianity.¹⁴ It provided justification for colonialism. If the Akan were heathen, they were perceived as being in a state of spiritual, cultural and moral peril. This allowed colonial powers to frame their presence not as an invasion for resources, but as a rescue mission for souls and development.¹⁵

By defining indigenous practices, such as traditional naming ceremonies, marriage, funeral rites, drumming, and festivals, as heathenism, missionaries could demand that converts abandon their heritage to prove their conversion and civilization. Many early missionaries and anthropologists failed to understand the complex indigenous leadership and governance system. Instead of seeing a different social system, they saw a lack of modern (European) logic. The word heathen itself carries a connotation of being unrefined and uncivilized. It stripped away the indigenous knowledge systems, the humanity and complexity of their legal, medical, and philosophical systems.¹⁶

Chieftaincy as Heathen

Early missionary theology categorized chieftaincy rites as heathen. The concept was accepted and used in official church documents like the Constitution of the PCG. According to the RPP, 'As long as stool, especially, Black Stools of chiefs and elders are regarded by the heathen and treated as objects of worship, a Christian cannot conscientiously occupy the office of a chief or Elder' (RPP 111:308). The perception further considered the Black Stool as an 'object of worship' and hence a deity. Christians who involved themselves in the indigenous leadership are involved in ancestral worship.

The RPP further noted that, 'In Ghana almost every stool functionary must take part in some ceremony with *suman*, *abosom*, or *ansamanfo*, and it is evident that no categorical declaration on the purely civil significance of the various stool emblems and ceremonies can be made' (RPP 110:303). Church members were hence instructed not to get themselves involved in matters of chieftaincy, which was participation in the worship of another object of worship which is different from the worship of the One Great God. The chieftaincy institution was noted to be incumbent with deities and ancestral worship; hence the instruction for withdrawal and distance. 'The Church believes in indigenisation, that is, adoption of non-heathen practices and norms, but Christians should refrain from the exercise of an office upon which fetish rites (*nsamansom*), *abosonsom*, *asumansem* etc.) are incumbent. (RPP 111:306).

The instruction to church members to distance themselves from the chieftaincy institution was further extended to leadership qualities and models. Church elders have a unique role to play in the ministry of the Church. In the creation of the office of the Senior Presbyter, however, the chief was presented not as an ideal example that Christian leaders should emulate. It stated, 'The Senior Presbyter is the first among equal presbyters, and he should not exercise any authority over church agents and other presbyters. He has no court of his own, and he shall not behave like a small village chief.' (RPP 9:23)

Deconstructing the Black Stool: Object of Worship or Political Symbol?

Death may be viewed as a finish line, a definitive snapping of the thread. However, for Akan human history and cultures, death is not an exit, but a transition in status. The deceased do not disappear; they simply relocate. They move from the world of the seen to the realm of the unseen. For the casual observer peering into the Black Stool room of an Akan palace, the sight of blackened wooden carvings, drenched in libations and surrounded by solemn ritual, often leads to a singular, hasty conclusion of the Black

¹⁴ de Gruchy and John W, *Theology and Development: A Reformed Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*; Schweizer, *Survivors on the Gold Coast: The Basel Missionaries in Colonial Ghana*.

¹⁶ Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future*; Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*; Opuni-Frimpong, "Public Theology and Leadership Rudiments in African Christianity: The Expectations and Deficiencies in Ghana."

Stool as an object of worship and therefore idolatry, as stated in the RPP. Translating the Akan spiritual experience into the English word worship, however, is more than a linguistic slip. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between the living, the dead, and the symbols that bind them.

By labelling the Black Stool as an object of worship, the missionaries effectively stripped it of its primary political and significant power. If the stool was merely a pagan god, it could have been confiscated or destroyed (as seen in the War of the Golden Stool in 1900) without acknowledging that they were actually attacking the legal and sovereign heart of the Akan people. The Asante would have easily given out the Golden Stool to the British army without a fight if it was just an object of worship. At least they could have produced more. They fought for it because it is considered the Soul of Asanteman. The Asante nation ceases to exist without the Golden Stool.¹⁷

The Black Stool functions less like a crucifix, which may be considered an object of worship and more like a constitution in Akan Chieftaincy.¹⁸ It represents land ownership. The Black Stool symbolizes the Soul of the nation and its right to the land. It ensures legitimacy. A chief is only valid if he has been enstooled and has possession of the Black Stool.¹⁹ To call the Black Stool an object of worship is to ignore the nuance of Akan social structure. It is a memorial, a legal seal, and a connection with the past, the present and the future. The Akan do not bow to the wood; they bow to the history, the lineage, and the collective wisdom that the wood represents. The Black Stool presents the profound weight of a family that refuses to forget its own and its governance system.²⁰

Perspectives of the early Students on the Black Stool

Early researchers who studied the Akan people paid significant attention to the Black Stool. Even though they viewed the Black Stool through a strictly religious lens, they did not conclude that the Black Stool was an 'object of worship'. Robert Sutherland Rattray, a foundational colonial anthropologist, documented the belief that stools absorb the soul (*sunsum*) of their owners.²¹ He described the Black Stool as the 'Soul' of Asanteman. K.A. Busia, a leading Ghanaian scholar and statesman, highlighted the stool as the source of political power and legitimacy.²² He clarified that the Akan do not worship the wood itself, but honor the predecessors whose memories the stools represent.

Peter Sarpong, a Catholic Bishop, argues that while the stool is "sacred," the rituals performed are not worship in the sense of addressing a god. Instead, the stool serves as a physical point of contact for the spirits of the ancestors.²³ Kwame Bediako, a prominent African theologian, explored the impact of culture on Christian thought. He argues that many traditional practices labeled worship by outsiders were actually deeply misunderstood forms of ancestral respect and social identity.²⁴ Nana Addo Dankwa III, Okuapenehene of the Akuapem Traditional Area, for over four decades has described the Black Stools as books and chapters in Akan history.²⁵ My studies on Akan Chieftaincy in the Asante and Akuapem Traditional areas indicate that the Black Stool is primarily educational material.²⁶ The early students of Akan Chieftaincy did not describe the black stool as an object of worship. The usage of the concept in the RPP raises questions about the source and authenticity.

¹⁷ Robert Sutherland Rattray et al., "Religion and Art in Ashanti," 1927; K A Busia, "The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute. 1954." "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast," *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1951; Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, "Akan Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Christian Faith in Ghana: A Review of the Major Works of Robert Rattray," *E-Journal of Religious & Theological Studies (ERATS)* 7, no. 8 (2021): 107.

¹⁸ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*.

¹⁹ Busia, "The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute. 1954." "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast,"; Rattray et al., "Religion and Art in Ashanti."

²⁰ Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future*; Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: (Perspectives of Akan Leadership Formation on Christian Leadership Development)* (SonLife Press, 2022).

²¹ Robert Sutherland Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, vol. 1 (Clarendon Press, 1929).

²² Busia, "The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute. 1954." "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast,".

²³ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*.

²⁴ Kwame Bediako, "Facing the Challenge: Africa in World Christianity in the 21st Century--A Vision of the African Christian Future," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1, no. 1 (1998): 52-57.

²⁵ Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future*.

²⁶ Opuni-Frimpong, "Public Theology and Leadership Rudiments in African Christianity: The Expectations and Deficiencies in Ghana."

The Process of Blackening Stools

To understand why the stool is not primarily an object of worship, one must understand what it actually is. In Akan Chieftaincy, a white stool is a personal piece of furniture. But when a great leader or elder passes, their domestic stool undergoes a ritual transformation. The stool is smeared with a mixture of soot, egg yolk, and sheep's blood. This blackening serves as a preservative for the purposes of history, education, governance, and physical and spiritual preservation.²⁷

The stool becomes a symbol for governance. Just as a museum might preserve a founding father's pen, the Akan preserve the stool as a physical docking station for the memory of the departed ancestor. The Black Stool is not a god. It is a consecrated medium through which the living relate to the past and to the ancestors. Even if some palace functionaries create the impression, it's a departure from the original purpose of the Black Stool. The Akan concept of the world and life is a deep connection between the past, the present and the future and the Black Stool is the symbol for that intention.

The Black Stool as Educational Material

The Black Stools are chapters in Akan history. It provides historical records. Each stool carries the aura of a specific era, acting as a tangible link in the chain of a clan's history. Primarily and more importantly, the Black Stool is educational material.²⁸ The Black Stool is a living memory. The *Adae* festival provides the learning moments when the Black Stool functions as an educational resource.

Nana Addo Dankwa has noted that, 'our forefathers, who at their time had not developed the art of writing and recording events, gave special significance to their culture and rituals by using such sculptural items as Black Stools etc. as symbols which were made to represent various important historical events. In effect, these special sculptural items became their books in which were embedded their early history, practices and experiences for posterity.'²⁹ In his attempt to trace the early beginnings of the creation of the Black Stool, he pointed out that the Black Stool was created to serve as material for documentation. Moreover, according to him, 'there was a time that we did not have a means of recording history, and our ancestors used all sorts of things to represent historical events. The long and short of the whole thing is that the basic means of educating our people are the symbols that we use, and the major one is the Black Stool.'

Veneration vs. Worship: The Status of the Ancestor

The primary argument against the worship label is the distinction between veneration and worship. In Akan cosmology, worship is reserved for Nyame, the Creator only. The ancestors are perceived as elder relatives who have graduated to a higher plane of existence. They remain ancestors and not gods worthy of worship.³⁰

Nana Addo Dankwa has argued that in Akan religious thought, people don't become who they were not when they died. While alive, if a person was not worshipped, death does not make them gods and objects of worship. If parents and elders were not worshipped when they were alive by their families, they do not become gods to be worshipped when they die by their families.³¹ The Akan consider the ancestor as the living-dead and the living as living-living. They are connected by symbols like the Black Stool. Rituals related to the ancestors, like pouring of libation, feeding of the ancestors, etc are ceremonial. The ancestors are dead, and there is no scientific proof to support the position that they are invited to participate in a physical meal, drink, etc. They are symbols for their memories and honour.³²

²⁷ Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future*; Opuni-Frimpong, "Public Theology and Leadership Rudiments in African Christianity: The Expectations and Deficiencies in Ghana."; Irene Odotei and George Hagan, "The King Returns: Enstoolment of Asantehene Osei Tutu II," *Accra: Institute of African Studies* 133 (2002).

²⁸ Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future*.

²⁹ Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future*.

³⁰ Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*.

³¹ Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future*.

³² Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future*.

Becoming an Ancestor

In a broad sense, ancestors are the deceased members of a family, clan, or community from whom living individuals are descended. However, in Akan traditions, being a biological forebear is not enough to be considered an ancestor in a significant sense. True ancestry often requires moral character for having lived a life of integrity and followed community values. It also involves completion of life cycles by reaching a certain age or status, such as parenthood before passing. The dead must also have a decent and proper burial. The performance of specific rites that transition the deceased from the world of the living to the realm of the dead must be done.³³

In a general sense, ancestors are the deceased biological or lineage predecessors of a living person. However, in many cultural contexts, particularly the Akan, not everyone who dies automatically becomes an ancestor in the formal sense. It is often an earned status. To be recognized as an ancestor, one usually must have lived a moral life, reached a mature age, and left behind a positive legacy or lineage. They are the foundation of a family or community's identity, representing the historical link between the past and the present.

The Office of the Chief: Leadership, Not Religion

Akan Chieftaincy has been considered by some churches, e.g. PCG, as a religious institution and therefore Christian chiefs and palace functionaries are perceived as participating in another religion and hence syncretism. The moment a person crosses the threshold of the palace, they are considered to have forfeited their Christian salvation and must attract church sanctions. There is no denial that Akan Chieftaincy is embedded in symbols, rituals and religious activities. However, reducing the institution to a religious organization is disingenuous. Akan chieftaincy is a leadership institution and not a religious organization. Contemporary Akan Chieftaincy has seen a surge of Christian Chiefs who maintain the dignity of the office of the chief while gradually refusing to participate in rituals they find personally incompatible with their faith. For such Christian chiefs, the office of the chief is for service and leadership and not a religion.

The office of the chief is primarily political, developmental and judicial.³⁴ While the chief has a sacral role as the link between the living and the dead, his daily functions involve land administration by acting as the trustee of the community land. The chief is into conflict resolution by settling disputes within the traditional area. They are agents of development by spearheading socio-economic growth for their people.

The Oath and the Purpose of the Office of the Chief

At the heart of Akan Chieftaincy governance structure lies a unique and potent mechanism: the Oath. It is more than a simple promise. It defines the purpose, legitimacy and scope of the office of the chief. The oath further serves as the primary instrument for legal adjudication, social cohesion, and the validation of executive power. To understand the office of the chief, one must first understand the rationale and gravity of the Oath.

The relationship between the chief and the people is most vividly expressed during the enstoolment ceremony. This is a bilateral exchange of oaths that defines the boundaries of leadership. When a chief is enstooled, he publicly swears to his people and the paramountcy. Holding the State Sword (*Akofena*) in his right hand, he declares his readiness to serve. He vows to respond to the call of his people at all times, whether in rain, sun, or darkness, and to provide quality leadership and service as was done by his ancestors. In case of failure to fulfil the obligation of the Oath, he will submit himself to sanctions including destoolment from the office. The chiefs come into office to serve the people and provide relevant leadership as their ancestors provided, and not to join a new religious institution. A primary reason for a chief to suffer destoolment is failure to provide relevant leadership and not religious activities. The essence of the Oath is a commitment to accountability and good governance and not a

³³ Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana--the Future*.

³⁴ Busia, "The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute. 1954. 'The Ashanti of the Gold Coast,'."

declaration of conversion into a new religious organization. During his installation as Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II swore the *Ntamkese* (the great oath) of Asante as follows:³⁵

Two Version of the Asantehene's Oath

Osei ne Poku Nana ne me; Bonsu Nana ne me; Agyeman Nana ne me; Me wɔfa ne Kwame Kyeretwie; Opoku Ware II yɛ me nuapanin; Osei ne Poku Nana ne me; Bonsu Nana ne me; Agyeman Nana ne me; Sɛ ɛnɛ, me nuapanin Opoku Ware kɔ n'akuraa, Na Kumasefoɔ adaworoma, mode ne tuo ama me, Sɛ manfa anhwɛ mo so hwɛ pa, Amma mo amanmuo pa, sɛ deɛ me nananom yɛɛ a, Meto Ntam Kɛsɛ.

Translated Version of the Asantehene's Oath

I am the grandson of Osei and Poku; I am the grandson of Nana Bonsu; I am the grandson of Nana Agyeman; Nana Kwame Kyeretwie was my uncle; Opoku Ware II was my senior brother. If today my elder brother Opoku Ware is gone to the village, and by the grace of the people of Kumasi, you have given his gun to me to rule. If I do not rule as well as my ancestors did, I violate the great oath.

The Oath as Living Constitution

The Oath is a covenant of accountability. The essence of the Chief's office is captured in the Oath. When the Asantehene swears the *Ntamkese* (Great Oath), he is not declaring a new faith; he is entering a social contract with his people. The Asantehene's Oath, "If I do not rule as well as my ancestors did, I violate the great oath", is a "living constitution" that ensures the leader remains accountable. If a chief fails to provide relevant leadership, they face destoolment, not for religious reasons, but for a breach of governance.

The Oath ensures that the Chief remains accountable to the history of his people. In a modern context, the persistence of these oaths demonstrates that the office of the chief is not an archaic relic, but a dynamic institution that utilizes the power of the spoken word to maintain order, respect, and continuity in the face of social change. Through the oath, the chief is reminded that his power is a loan from the ancestors, to be paid back through justice and service to the living.

The Theology of Distance

Historically, a theology of distance and withdrawal created a significant gap between the two institutions. Many converts were encouraged to move to Salem (Christian quarters), physically and socially distancing themselves from the palace and community activities, e.g. festivals. Church laws often barred chiefs from taking Holy Communion or holding leadership roles within the Church if they performed certain traditional rites, leading to a guilt-induced distance. The Church often viewed the palace as a secular or dark space, while the palace viewed the Church as an exclusive club that ignored the ancestral foundations of the community.

The statement that "no Christian is expected to be a stool/skin functionary" is a significant missiological and ecclesiastical position held by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG). It addresses the complex intersection of Christian faith and Akan Chieftaincy. In the Ghanaian context, a "Stool" (common in the south) or "Skin" (common in the north) represents the seat of traditional authority. A "functionary" in this sense refers to an individual holding a traditional office or participating in the ritualistic duties associated with the palace.

The PCG's stance is rooted in its historical Theology of Distance. Historically, traditional offices in Ghana have been deeply tied to ancestral worship, libation, and rituals that the Church perceives as inconsistent with monotheistic Christian worship. By saying a Christian shouldn't be a "functionary," the Church is warning against performing traditional rites that might conflict with one's primary allegiance to Christ. The statement suggests that one cannot serve the "sacred" demands of a traditional stool while simultaneously adhering to the Reformed tradition's emphasis on the Lordship of Christ

³⁵ Odotei and Hagan, "The King Returns: Enstoolment of Asantehene Osei Tutu II"; Opuni-Frimpong, "Public Theology and Leadership Rudiments in African Christianity: The Expectations and Deficiencies in Ghana."

alone.³⁶ Christian chiefs therefore suffered denial of Holy Communion, Christian burial, pastoral care, and chaplaincy, etc.

Misconception of the Church as a Culture Destruction Agency

The distancing was not only an act of the church. Many traditionalists viewed the church as an alien institution that seeks to strip Africans of their identity. They often perceive Christian leaders as arrogant and as not respecting the spiritual geography of the land. There is a lingering belief that one cannot be fully Christian and fully African. This creates a spiritual schizophrenia where believers participate in traditional rites in secret while maintaining a pious front at church.

The perspective of the church as an eraser of Akan culture refers to a historical and sociological critique of how missionary Christianity interacted with the indigenous traditions of the Akan people.³⁷

The view suggests that the introduction of Western religious frameworks often came at the expense of local identity, social structures, and spiritual heritage. By teaching that traditional protocols were heathen, the church created a dualism where converts felt they had to choose between being a good Christian and a loyal subject of the stool. This undermined the authority of traditional leaders and shifted the centre of community life from the palace (*Ahemfie*) to the Manse chapel. Conversely, a common misconception within traditional circles is that the Church aims to destroy Akan identity and turn the black person into a white person in black skin.

Missio Dei* vs. *Missio Ecclesiae

The concepts *Missio Dei* and *Missio Ecclesiae* represent two different starting points in the theology of mission. While they are interconnected, the primary distinction lies in who is considered the initiator and owner of the mission.³⁸ *Missio Dei* (The Mission of God) has been considered the sending of God. The concept shifts the focus of theology from what the church does to what God is doing. Mission begins with the nature of God. God is at work in the entire world, not just within the four walls of a church, to bring about reconciliation, justice, and healing. The church does not have a mission of its own; rather, the church is a tool used by God to participate in his mission.³⁹ *Missio Ecclesiae* (The Mission of the Church) refers to the specific activities, programmes, and outreach efforts organized and conducted by the church. It is often more specific and task-oriented, focusing on evangelism, church planting, discipleship, and social services. It emphasizes the responsibility of the believers and the ecclesiastical structure to go out and perform work on behalf of the Christian faith.

The Church exists because of the Mission of God. The Mission of God therefore must be the primary goal and programme of the Church. In the framework of *Missio Dei*, the task of the church is more about stewardship and discernment. The church is to identify where God is already active in a community or institution and align resources to support that existing work. *Missio Ecclesiae* then becomes the practical, organized expression of that alignment. The mission of God implies that the Church must be present where the people are.

Towards Theology of Engagement: The Mission of God (*Missio Dei*)

The *Missio Dei* underscores the Christian understanding that mission is primarily God's work. The Church is only a participant in God's plan to redeem all of creation, including the transformation of culture, as Paul stated that the church and its members are co-labourers with God (1 Cor. 3:9). In the Book of Titus, the Apostle Paul further declares that the grace of God that brings salvation is available to all people. Titus 2:11 states, 'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. This verse highlights the fact that God's grace is revealed through Jesus Christ, offering salvation to everyone. It serves as the foundation for Christian living, emphasizing that this grace is accessible to all people, not

³⁶ Schweizer, *Survivors on the Gold Coast: The Basel Missionaries in Colonial Ghana*; Smith and Watson, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society*; Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*.

³⁷ Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*.

³⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*; N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

³⁹ Stephen B Bevens, Roger P Schroeder, and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, vol. 30 (Orbis Books, 2004).

just any special group. The mission of the church must be informed and directed by the bigger mission of God.⁴⁰ The church must consider re-discovery and re-imagination whenever its mission disconnects from the mission of God. This has always been the message of Christian advocates for Reformation.

The implication is that God's mission does not require the destruction of culture. It is rather for its transformation.⁴¹ The Church's mission is to help individuals to navigate their dual identity of being a faithful subject of the heavenly Kingdom while also serving as a chief on earth. The Church's mission must include producing leaders who serve their communities (the Stool) through the lens of stewardship rather than distancing themselves from service to their families and communities.

The Palace as Mission Field

Akan Chieftaincy involves rites of passage, libation, ancestral invocation, festivals, funerals, and installations that the church insists Christians must distance themselves from. The mission of God demands that the church must provide alternatives for Christian chiefs. The lack of Christian alternatives to traditional practices creates a vacuum for Akan Christian chiefs. The lack of alternative liturgy, pastoral care and chaplaincy creates Nicodemus Christianity, where royals and chiefs who are Christians feel they must practice their faith in the shadows of the night, fearing that their traditional duties will lead to church discipline by their pastors. The Mission of God (*Missio Dei*) includes the palace as a legitimate space for Christian witness.

The Church must recognize the palace as a vital mission field and subsequently develop a theology of Christian presence in the palace. Theology of the Palace will develop the theological framework to guide the church and Christians to serve as salt and light to maintain their integrity in the palace. While acknowledging the traditional heritage of Stools and Skins, the Church must encourage members called to such offices to serve as witnesses of Christ. The Church ought to accompany and provide pastoral guidance to ensure that their service honours the Lord, seeking to distinguish between cultural identity and religious worship, and promoting the transformation of traditional institutions through the Gospel.

The Christian presence in the palace may further pursue a redemptive transformation approach aiming to extend Christian values and influence to the functions of the stool rather than just tolerating any cultural practices. In fulfillment of its holistic mission, the Church may therefore actively engage with the institution of Chieftaincy. David himself, a king, observed that the earth and its fullness belong to God and therefore every kingdom must be brought under the Kingdom of God. Psalm 24:1 states, "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein." This verse asserts God's absolute ownership of the planet, its resources, and all its kingdoms. It highlights the role of God as Creator and Sovereign ruler over all humanity and kingdoms. Consequently, the Church must equip and commission members to serve as Stool/Skin functionaries. Such church members must be tasked with the mandate of modeling godly leadership and leading a gradual, respectful transformation of traditional rites to align with Biblical values. The effort may be pursued without creating the impression that the palace is a God-forsaking territory for the church.

Points of Friction and Transformation for the Engagement

There are existential points of friction in the Akan Chieftaincy and the Church engagement. The transformation of traditional Akan rites, specifically libation blood, sacrifices and the feeding of the ancestors by Christian chiefs, requires a delicate balance. It involves navigating the tension between cultural identity and Christian doctrine without stripping the institution of its community authority. In an Akan context, these rites serve as a state protocol for connecting the living, the dead, and the unborn. For a Christian chief, the goal is often re-contextualization rather than abolition.

The role of the Gospel in cultural transformation, however, has been acknowledged in the works of Richard Niebuhr.⁴² Christian influence, education, modernization and legislation have all played significant roles in the transformation of Akan Chieftaincy. The transformation in the palace has taken

⁴⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*; Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*.

⁴¹ Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951).

⁴² Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

place in areas such as the education of royals and chiefs, marriages, and Christian prayers in the palace. The key among the visible recognised transformations is the participation of the church in the burial rites of chiefs.

Akan Christian Ancestors?

The essence of church burial services for Akan chiefs lies in a complex and delicate negotiation between two distinct worldviews. They include the traditional Akan belief in the sacredness of the stool and the spiritual transition to the realm of the ancestors, and the Christian theology of the soul's journey toward eternal rest. When an Akan chief is also a member of a Christian denomination, the burial service becomes a site of dual institutional engagement, where the church and the traditional state harmonize their protocols.

The joint palace and church celebration of the funeral of Christian chiefs is a theological and cultural reconciliation effort. For an Akan chief, death is not finality but a transition to becoming an ancestor (*Nana*). Traditionally, this involves fulfillment of acceptable rites. Participation in church service acts as a public acknowledgment of the chief's Christian faith, aiming to sanctify the transition while honouring the chief's traditional position. The church focuses on the chief as a mortal individual and a congregant, whereas the traditional authorities focus on the chief as a living embodiment of the ancestors. The blend of Christian hope of resurrection with Akan traditional heroic departure makes the chief also a Christian ancestor.

The service is a rare moment where the Palace (traditional authority) and the Chapel (religious authority) share a physical and symbolic space. The joint funeral celebration is a demonstration that traditional leadership and modern Christian practice are not mutually exclusive, but can collaborate for the common good. It is institutional harmony that must be sustained. The critical question for the two institutions will be the recognition of such individuals as Akan Christian Ancestors. Does the Akan Chieftaincy recognize church funeral services for Christian chiefs as having any impact on the ancestors? The joint celebration of the burial church service of Christian chiefs, nonetheless, is an indication that the effort on engagement can be extended to other existential friction areas.

In the Akan context, leadership is a sacred trust. The church's involvement provides a moral framework to celebrate the chief's contributions to social development by highlighting the chief's role in building schools, clinics, or promoting community peace in the tributes. The service is to ensure that the chief's legacy is preserved for future generations not only by the palace but also by the church. By integrating the church service into the traditional rites, the community asserts that the values of the deceased—integrity, wisdom, and faith—are the pillars upon which the future of the state should be built. It provides a structured, public way for the youth and the community to witness the transfer of authority and the enduring nature of Akan institutional governance.

Jesus the King of kings and Akan Chieftaincy

The concept of Jesus as the King of kings provides a theological and ethical blueprint that can be integrated into the Akan Chieftaincy. This engagement centers on the reconciliation of sacred kingship in Akan Chieftaincy with the servant-leadership model found in the Bible. In Colossians 1:16, Paul indicates that all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, including spiritual authorities like thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers, were created through Christ and created for him. Jesus is the King of all kings.

The King of kings framework repositions the Chief not as the ultimate source of power, but as a steward of a higher divine authority. The earth and its fullness belong to God. The Chief's role is therefore viewed as a delegated authority of God. This allows the Black Stool to maintain its dignity while aligning with a monotheistic Christian worldview where all power is derived from the Supreme King.

The Christian framework of the King of kings introduces the model of Christological stewardship. It is the "basin and towel" model of leadership. Just as Christ demonstrated authority through service (washing feet), the chief is encouraged to see his authority as a mechanism for socio-economic development and the welfare of his people, rather than just ceremonial prestige. The chief

must be responsible for the holistic growth, i.e., spiritual, developmental, intellectual, moral, etc., of the community.

The King of kings framework provides a set of universal ethics that can bolster the traditional Akan values of respect and unity. Christian principles of social justice provide a lens for traditional arbitration. It encourages the Chief to rule with a balance of traditional law and Christian compassion. While traditional structures can sometimes be hierarchical, the framework of Christ promotes the inclusion of the marginalized within the community, ensuring that development is felt by all classes.

One of the most complex areas of engagement is the intersection of Christian faith and traditional rites such as Akwasidae. The framework allows for the "purification" or adaptation of rituals. For example, instead of focusing on ancestral appeasement in a way that conflicts with Christian doctrine, rituals can be reframed as historical commemorations and prayers of thanksgiving to the King of kings for the community's heritage. The Chief acts as a bridge, ensuring that the stool remains a symbol of cultural identity without alienating the Christian majority within the modern Akan state. Traditional leadership may need to remain in service to the people and God.

Redefining Sacred Space

Moving past the misconception that chieftaincy is purely heathen and religious organization allows the Church to see the Chief's role as a steward of communal justice and order. These roles align with biblical mandates for leadership. The historical gap between the Pulpit and the Palace can be bridged through integration. The Gospel may be allowed to speak through the local idiom without losing its transformative power. By viewing the Chief not as a rival, but as a partner in social and moral development, the Church can foster a more holistic ministry and collaborative transformation that resonates with the Akan Chieftaincy.⁴³

Ultimately, the goal of this engagement is not the Christianization of chieftaincy in a way that erases heritage, nor the secularization of the Church to fit tradition. Rather, it is a call to a harmonious coexistence where the light of Christ illuminates traditional structures, and the richness of tradition provides a rooted context for faith. As the Church continues to navigate this delicate balance, it may lead with humility, seeking to understand before seeking to reform, ensuring that the message of the Cross remains both culturally relevant and spiritually sovereign.

The dialogue between the stool and the cross is far from over. It is an engagement of identity, where the believer can be both a faithful subject of their kingdom and a devoted citizen of Heaven.

CONCLUSION

The Akan Christian chiefs live in two worlds simultaneously. They are members of the family (*Abusua*) and members of the *Ecclesia* (the Church). To bridge the gap, both institutions may have to stop viewing the Palanquin and the Pulpit as enemies. The Chief provides the cultural roots and social order; the Church provides the moral compass and spiritual hope. When the misconceptions are stripped away, it can be found that both institutions are dedicated to the common good and the glory of God. The future of Ghana's social cohesion depends not on the Church defeating the Palace, nor the Palace resisting the Church, but on mutual integration and strategic partnerships.

The historical Theology of Distance that has defined the relationship between the Church and the Akan Chieftaincy is not a byproduct of irreconcilable spiritual truths, but rather a legacy of missionary and colonial-era misconceptions and monotheistic bias. For over a century, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana's RPP and similar ecclesiastical stances framed the Akan palace as a heathen space, forcing a false choice between cultural identity and Christian fidelity. This study has demonstrated that the Church's position of mutually exclusive domains is both theologically unnecessary and sociologically damaging.

The study moves the chieftaincy and church conversation from misconception to understanding. This research has deconstructed the pillars of alienation. The Black Stool is re-evaluated not as a god, but as a political symbol and an educational material for history and governance. Secondly, the office

⁴³ Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*.

of the Chief is recognized primarily as a secular and developmental role bound by a living constitution (the Oath) of accountability to the people, rather than a religious conversion into a new religion. Moreover, ancestral veneration distinguished as respect for parents and ancestors rather than worship reserved for God, aligning with a biblical mandate to honour one's father and mother.

As Ghana continues to navigate the complexities of the 21st century, the Church may need to transition from a posture of withdrawal to a Theology of Engagement. A distance-based theology effectively cedes the public square of the palace. It abandons Christian royals to a Nicodemus Christianity and deprives the traditional state of the moral and prophetic voice of the Gospel. The *Missio Dei* (Mission of God) calls for the transformation of culture, not its eradication and destruction. When the Church acknowledges chieftaincy as a legitimate institution of social order and historical identity, it moves from the impression of being a cultural eraser to a partner in the common good.

Ultimately, the Palanquin and the Pulpit need not be rivals for the soul of the Ghanaian. By replacing the heathen label with cultural humility, the Church can maintain its theological integrity while honoring the heritage that provides the bedrock of Akan cultural identity. The future of a holistic African Christianity lies in this synthesis: a faith that is fully Christian and a culture that is authentically African. The two institutions need to work together for the development of the whole person and the entire nation. The goal of the Church is not to destroy the Black Stool, but to invite the one who sits upon it to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, thereby transforming the office of the Chief for the common good and the glory of God. Churches should proactively offer chaplaincy services to traditional councils.

A chaplain for the Christian Chief will provide pastoral care, ethical guidance and accompany the Chief in the palace space. The chaplaincy ministry in the palace will consequently fill the vacuum that the Theology of Distance creates. It will further ensure that Akan Chieftaincy aligns with the provision of relevant leadership, biblical integrity and provides alternatives for palace spirituality for gradual transformation. The question that may engage the theological and missiological reflection of the church is, if Jesus were to visit a Ghanaian Palace during a festival, would he walk away in disgust, or would he take a seat among the elders to tell a parable?

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