



Hamartiology: An Akan Perspective

Augustine Kojo Peprah¹ 

¹ Department of Social Sciences, St. Louis College of Education, Kumasi, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

Hamartiology, a branch of theology dealing with the nature and effects of sin is orally preserved in the Akan religious thought but not documented as they exist in Islam and Catholicism. Authors of African Traditional Religion have contributed to the problem when they wrote briefly on sin and reconciliation only in relation to other topics. This article uses the literary approach, specifically secondary sources to elucidate on the Akan concept of sin to dispel the notion that Africans have no or poor concept of sin. Issues like, what is sin? the evaluation of sin, conditions necessary for the forgiveness of sin and the effects of sin and reconciliation among the Akan would be illuminated. The findings and discussions on the problem elucidate that, the Akan have a profound harmatology. The Akan perceive sin as a stain. The Akan morality has aesthetic value. Sin is a transgression against God and humanity. Sin from the Akan perspective is classified into serious and less serious wrongdoings. Three conditions necessary for the remission of sin among the Akan are, acceptance of guilt, confession of sins committed and penance, reparation of sins. Reconciliation restores the penitent to full communion with the divine and humanity. The paper fills the vacuum created that the Akan has poor harmatology because it is not documented. It also serves as reference material on harmatology from the Akan perspective.

Correspondence

Augustine Kojo Peprah

Email: frpeprah6@gmail.com

Publication History

Received 5th May, 2022

Accepted 9th August, 2022

Published online 16th August, 2022

Keywords: *Harmatology, African Religious thought, Akan concept of sin, Effects of Sin and Reconciliation in African Worldview*

© 2022 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Publishers.

This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

INTRODUCTION

Some writers of Western origin have asserted that the traditional African religion has no or poor hamartiology. A. Burdon Ellis one of such writers, for instance, has asserted that among the Akan of Ghana, morality is not linked to religion in any way.¹ He is also of the conviction that religion and

¹A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), 10-11; The Akans of Ghana are the Ashanti, Akuapim, Akyem, Akwamu, Adansi, Denkyira, Bono, Fanti, Kwahu, Nzema, Sefwi, and Wassa. They occupy seven (9) out of the sixteen (16) administrative regions of Ghana.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Publishers.

This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

morality merge when humanity is socialized by a higher culture.² Another remark Ellis made concerning the concept of sin among the Akan is that they limit sin only to offences against the gods and not crimes against humanity like murder and stealing.³ These statements by Ellis suggest that the Akan doctrine on sin and reconciliation is inadequate unless they are influenced by higher civilizations like Western culture which is predominantly Christian. Kofi Asare Opoku refutes the assertion made by Ellis and posits that in the African culture, morality and religion are inseparable, and morality springs from religious considerations.⁴

The inability of some African authors to write extensively on sin but in passing has also not helped to promote the African hamartiology.⁵ Societies from time immemorial have had their own ethnic metaphors for the forgiveness of sin. Joseph Martos a Catholic theologian even proposes that because all cultures have a concept of sin “non-European Catholics may have to find their own cultural imagery for the forgiveness of sin and develop liturgical representations that speak to them of God’s mercy and pardon, as clearly as Western Sacraments once spoke to Catholics of Europe.”⁶ It is in the light of these that the Akan of Ghana would be used to examine if the African has profound hamartiology.

What is Sin?

Sin is perceived by many cultures and religions as a moral evil. Sin is a conscious and purposeful violation of the will of a Supreme Being. It is often ascribed to human actions such as pride, lack of self-control and disobedience.⁷ Sin in African Traditional Religion is widely considered a stain that renders the sinner polluted. E. Evans Pritchard alludes to this when he says “a man’s spiritual state is changed and polluted when he sins.”⁸ J. Omosade Awolalu, admits that it is generally held that in traditional African societies, the divine has a role to play in the sin of an individual. Ultimately the moral character of the African is judged by God. The divinities and the ancestors also punish offenders.⁹ Sin committed in African traditional societies is remitted through reconciliatory processes like ritual bath, ritual shave, confession, fasting and offering sacrificial animals. Sin again in some African traditional communities is linked to the bodily and mental health of a person. It is through the remission of sins that one is restored to good health.¹⁰

The Akan Concept of Sin as a Stain

Many African societies have a notion of a state of bliss in which God was very close to humans. However, this state was curtailed as a result of the disobedience or greed of humanity. The Akan also have a myth of such nature. The myth has it that, the use of the pestle by an old lady made God who was very close to humans move far away from humans because, despite his persistent complaints, the old lady did not stop her activity of disturbing the peace of God with her pounding of cassava and the plantain, *fufu*. This myth explains why God is far away from the activities of his creation and the Akan idea of original sin. It was a sin of disobedience.¹¹ Sin makes the sinner far removed from God and the

² Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), 10-11.

³ Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast*, 10-11.

⁴ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 152.

⁵ J. Omosade Awolalu, “Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Oxford University Press, Jun., 1976):276, accessed October 21,2020. <http://jstor.org/stable/1462340>. 282.

⁶ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred* (New York: Image Books, 1980), 362.

⁷ Wendy Doniger, ed, *Merriam – Webster’s Encyclopedia of World Religions*, (Merriam-Webster’s Incorporated, 1999), 1013.

⁸ E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 195.

⁹ Awolalu, “Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion”, 276, 282.

¹⁰ Oyeronke Olademo, *Theology of African Traditional Religion*, National Open University of Nigeria. 2008, 56, accessed March 4, 2021 <https://nou.edu.ng/coursewarecontent/CTH%20792.pdf>

¹¹ Awolalu, “Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion”, 282.

society. Hence, Africans try possibly not to offend the Supreme Being, the deities and the ancestors. However human as they are, when they go against the norms of the society, they make the conscious effort “to remove the stain and blemish which sin imposes upon them as individuals or as a community.”¹²

Sin may be simply defined as refusing to do the right thing which is sanctioned by one’s object of worship or the society. The common words for sin in the Akan language are *bcne*, *mmusuo* and *akyiwadej*. *Bcne* is the generic term for doing something bad, evil or sinful.¹³ *Akyiwadej*, a taboo is also a prohibition sanctioned by the gods. All the Akan names for sin are perceived to render the offender and the society filthy.

According to Peter Kwasi Sarpong, the term taboo is coined from *tabu* a Polynesian word which means “forbidden”. Taboo has been taken to represent a proscription of a distinctive kind.¹⁴ Taboos are found in every society even if they are technologically and scientifically advanced, and are not only an African phenomenon. Taboos may not be sacred or religious. The Akan see sacred taboos as “ritual prohibitions” and transgression of them results in the ritual transformation of the breaker of the taboos because they are sanctioned by supernatural powers. Taboo breaking has both spiritual and corporal adverse effects on the society and the offender. For example, if a man had sexual relations with a minor, it is a taboo among the Akan. The spirits would punish the offender and the society if he is not ritually cleansed.¹⁵

Sarpong categorizes taboos into minor and major taboos. Major taboos are prohibitions like murder, incestuous sexual relationships, adultery with the chief’s wife, suicide, insulting the chief and treason. For him, they are serious offences because in the olden days infractions on these came with harshest punishments like death, hefty fines or banishment. These offences, according to Sarpong threatened the life of the community and they also offended the Supreme Being, the gods and the ancestors.¹⁶ Minor taboos on the other hand are lighter offences in nature; some might not even be a moral transgression. They are things that are done daily but with caution and are made effective when they are tabooed. They ensure the well-being of the Akan. A typical example is not to sing while eating. To sing and eat at the same time is not a moral issue but a health issue, one will get choked if he eats and talks at the same time. Minor taboos do not render the offender ritually unclean.¹⁷

Sin or immoral behaviour in the Akan religion is conceived as a stain or dirt and makes the offender ugly. The Akan or Twi words for dirt or ugly are *fi* and *tan* respectively. However, there exist other phrases for sin which bring out the concept of sin as a stain or dirt clearly. The Akan will use the expression *Abrantej no agu ne ho fi* “meaning the young man has stained himself”. To the Akan, certain human acts such as rape, incest, murder etc. make the human body stained with “filth”, hence the expression *wagu ne ho fi*. Antisocial acts like bearing false witness, murder, adultery and stealing are considered as stain/dirt, which the Akan also call *fi*. The sin (*fi*) makes stains the soul of the individual as well as the life of the community.¹⁸

Pashington Obeng observes that the *tutuobc*, (the hooting rite) at the *Antoa Nyamaa*¹⁹ shrine elucidates the Akan concept of sin as a stain. He says the women employed for the hooting rite use

¹²Awolalu, “Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion”, 284.

¹³Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 157.

¹⁴Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 51.

¹⁵Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 52, 53.

¹⁶Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 53, 54.

¹⁷ Peter K. Sarpong, *Peoples Differ, An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*, (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2013), 106.

¹⁸Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2012). 105-106.

¹⁹*Antoa Nyamaa* is a river deity located at Antoa, a town in the Kwabre East in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Akan religious reconciliation is practiced there.

discarded utensils which in reality are dirty. The penitent symbolically has to leave the stain of sin behind on the outskirts of the town as the women continue to beat the stained utensils.²⁰

Kwame Gyekye and Sarpong see sin or immoral behaviour in aesthetic forms. Beauty is not seen only in works of art but also in moral behaviour. Gyekye intimates that an approved moral behaviour is considered for its aesthetic value. This is why moral behaviour is described as beautiful or fitting and a person's character may be described as not beautiful (*ne suban nyj ffj*). Similarly, the word ugly (*jjj tan*) is used as both an aesthetic and a moral term. Thus, the Akan will say "his character is ugly" (*ne suban yj tan*).²¹ Sarpong shares the views of Gyekye on how the Akan see morality in an aesthetic term; beauty. Sarpong ascribes beauty and ugly (*ffj* and *tan*) to money which is said to be the root of all evil. The expression *Ne sika nya yj ffj*, literally translated as, "the source of his/her money is "beautiful", is used by the Akan to mean, one uses legitimate ways to get his wealth. Among the legitimate means of acquiring money include, inheritance, legal trade or gift; such a person is liked by the society and people are not skeptical about their show of wealth and kindness. In the same way when the Akan says *Ne sika nya yj tan* literally it means "the source of his/her money is ugly". The Akan dislike people whose source of money is "ugly" through dubious means like robbery, ritual murder and deceit. The philanthropic gesture of such a person is not appreciated by the society.²²

It must be affirmed from the above discussion that; the Akan see sin as a stain which makes the human being dirty and ugly in the sight of the community. One must wash the body of the dirt to be beautiful or clean. The Akan who has made him/herself dirty by the sin committed must be cleansed by the *obosomfo* (the custodian at the shrine or a sacred water body).²³

Sin as an Offence Against God/Deities/Ancestors in the Akan Religion.

The Akan religion refers to the indigenous religion practiced by the Akan of Ghana before the advent of Christianity and Islam among the people. Sarpong gives the outline of the main features of the Akan religion as follows, the Supreme Being, *Onyankopon* is the creator of the universe, and he occupies the first place in the hierarchy of beings or spirits. God is followed by the ancestors (*nsamanfoc*) and lastly the divinities, the supernatural beings (the *abosom*).²⁴ Kofi Asare Opoku agrees with the outline of Sarpong but adds to the features of the Akan religion totemism, magical powers and charms which the Akan call *suman*. He also prefers to call the supernatural powers or the smaller gods, deities.²⁵ Kwasi Yankah adds that the religion of the Akan is like a pyramid, at the apex is God, followed by the gods, and the ancestors, and at the bottom of the pyramid are the charms and talismans.²⁶

It must be noted that the terms "divinities" and "deities" are used interchangeably by many writers on African Traditional Religion. Sarpong for example in his writings is caught in this web. In the outline of the Akan religion, Sarpong uses divinities to describe the spirits that dwell in nature while Opoku uses deities for the same phenomena. This has generated the debate about whether deities and divinities are the same. Attempts have been made to distinguish between the two terms. Deities or lesser gods are spirits that inhabit artificial objects like amulets, talismans, rings etc. Divinities on the other hand are spirits that dwell in natural objects like the sea, earth, trees etc.²⁷

The place of the supernatural in maintaining the moral order in West African cultures is based on the assumption that all infractions of humans are offences against God, the gods and the ancestors.

²⁰Pashington Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), 66-67.

²¹Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Co. Ltd., 1998), 101.

²²Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Aspects of Ghanaian Ethos* (Tema: DigiBooks, 2019), 227.

²³Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 65.

²⁴Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration in Asante, A Catholic View* (Kumasi: Good Shepherd Publishers Ltd, 2011), 139, 146, 167.

²⁵Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 9-10.

²⁶Kwasi Yankah, *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric* (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2012), 46.

²⁷ Seth Asare-Danso, *African Traditional Religion*, (Cape Coast: Beret Outlook Press 2019), 39.

This is also true about the Akan, the sin of an individual is perceived as offence against the supernatural.²⁸

The Supreme Being and humans are perceived as the owner and originators of morality. God implanted into man the sense of good and bad. To the African traditionalist, God is a moral being who is involved in an ethical relationship with humankind. He rewards good deeds and punishes evil deeds.²⁹

The Akan hold the conviction that “God’s greatest taboo is evil.”³⁰ This is expressed in the Akan saying that *Onyame mpj bcne* (God hates sin). The Akan believes in the holiness of God. It also implies that He is the wellspring of morality and expects his creatures, humans to do good.³¹ The Akan believes in the justice of God. An Akan proverb says *Onyame mpj kwaseabuo nti na wama obiara din* (because God hates cheating, he has given each one a name). God wants everyone to be responsible for his/her action. God recompenses people for their good deeds and reprimands them when they go wrong.³² The Supreme Being of the Akan is also the chief custodian of morality. Nothing can be hidden from him hence his attribute, *Birekyirehunade* (the Omniscient).³³ The God of the Akan sees everything and even sees beyond what humans see and therefore brings all people to justice and his judgments are right without bias.³⁴ The Akan saying “It is God who has punished him” (*Onyame na watua no ka no*), underscores the notion that God punishes evil deeds even if they go unnoticed or unpunished by the limitations of humans.³⁵

The Akan believe in the power and justice of God and they implore Him for justice if they feel cheated or treated unfairly by their fellow humans. In their demand for justice from the Supreme Being, they use expressions like *Onyame ntua woka*, (God punish you!!!), *Onyame ngu n’amimase*, (May God disgrace him), and *mmusuo nka no* (Woe to the person). In these expressions, the offended wants to see the fate of the sinner. In the situation when the Akan is very much affected by the offence, he will ask God to strike the offender with lightning (*Agradaa nnwa nsi no ti mu*). The severity of this curse is that God kills the offender so swiftly that he cannot have time to atone for his sins.³⁶

Opoku has argued that “customarily, no distinction is made between the moral injunction stipulated by God and those of the deities in West African traditional societies.”³⁷ In the Akan religious concept, God (*Onyamkopon/Nyame*) rules the world through his delegates, the lesser gods (*nananom abosom*) and ancestors (*nananom nsamanfoc*). The gods, Sarpong affirms are the delegates of God and also have the power to reward and punish both good and evil. The sin of the individual also affects the gods.³⁸ The *abosom* are subordinates of God because he created them. They have extraordinary powers over human beings. They abide in natural objects like trees, rivers and grooves. The gods also reside in artificial objects like shrines.³⁹ The gods also have their own rules which are to be followed by their devotees in the form of taboos (*akyiwadej*). The conformists and nonconformists of the taboos are blessed and punished respectively by the gods.⁴⁰

²⁸Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 156.

²⁹ Seth Asare-Danso, *Philosophical and Psychological Foundations of Religious and Moral Education*, (Cape Coast: Beret Outlook Press 2019), 67.

³⁰J. Omosade Awulalo and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonjo Press & Book Industries (Nigeria) Limited, 1979), 217.

³¹Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 153.

³²Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 140.

³³Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 141.

³⁴Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion* 154,155.

³⁵Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 145.

³⁶ Kofi Agyekum, “The Pragmatics of Duabo, Grievance Imprecation Taboo among the Akan” *International Pragmatics Association. Pragmatics* 9 (3), (1999):366

³⁷Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 156.

³⁸Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 145.

³⁹Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 172.

⁴⁰Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 156.

According to Agyekum, the deities of the Akan are believed to be the “fast track court system.” Unlike the Supreme Being, they do not temper justice with mercy. The Akan resort to invoking curses on their offenders for instant justice. This is popularly called *duabc*.⁴¹ They demand justice from powerful deities like *AntoNyamaa*, *Tegare*, *Offin*, *Kyinaman*, *KwakuFiri*, *Ayanta* and *Akonnedi*.⁴² *Duabc* is the Akan word for imprecation, it is the act of invoking curses or evil on a person for an offence meted out to an individual. It is the Akan traditional way of seeking divine justice. *Duabc* comes from two Akan words. *Dua*, noun “stick” and *bc*, verb, meaning “to hit or strike”. When combined *duabc* means “to hit or strike with a stick”. The Akan believe *duabc* is handing over a person to the spirits to be killed with the stick of justice.⁴³

The Akan do not consider the ancestors as deities but as living spirits of the dead. They are the “relatives” of the living who show concern for their living relatives. The ancestors are human spirits.⁴⁴ They are the unseen custodians of the morality of the people for they had led a good life when they lived in the world. Like God and the gods, the ancestors see beyond what humans see, because they live in the spiritual world (*asamando*). They also have the power to punish or reward the living for their deeds. The ancestors of the Akan reward the good with blessings like good health, children and prosperity and punish the evil with strange diseases and death.⁴⁵

The act of sinning or immoral behaviours of a person as bringing shame or polluting the family is common in many African cultures. John S. Mbiti intimates that in many African societies, there exists what he calls “family morals” which must be maintained by members of the family. This is to ensure that the good image of the family is intact. When kinsmen fail to honour their moral responsibilities “the wider community may punish the family through pouring shame on them”.⁴⁶ Sin in the Akan society also has a communal dimension. This is expressed in the Akan language as, *Cde fi aka cman no* or *wagu abusua no ho fi* (he has stained the community or the family). The sin of the individual affects the entire community. Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong adds that the Akan make serious efforts to ensure that members of the family live a good life so that their immoral behaviours will not bring disgrace to the individual and the extended family.⁴⁷

Sarpong adds that some offences are regarded as sins against the community. He quotes Busia who posits that transgressions against the community are “offences which estranged or threatened to estrange the ancestors or the gods from the community and endangered its well-being”.⁴⁸ Some of the sins of the individual that affect the society adversely are murder, sexual taboos, offences against the chief and breaking of oaths.⁴⁹

Opoku however establishes a great deal of difference between infractions of the moral law by the individual that does not affect the life of the community and those that affect the community. *Bcne* the generic name for sin in the Akan language may bring a conflict between two people which is settled without involving the whole community. *Mmusuo* on the other hand are acts that cause mishaps in the community as a result of one’s sinful acts. *Mmusuo* goes beyond *bcne*, because the effects of the former affect both the offender and the entire society. Acts like sexual intercourse in the bush and incest are seen by the Akan as *mmusuo*. The offender of such a crime has “cursed or disgraced” himself and the community. This is expressed in the Akan language as “*Wabc mmusuo* or *cde mmusuo agu cman no ho*. It must be noted that *wayj bcne* and *wabc mmusuo* are not the same in the Akan language. *Mmusuo* is grievous than *bcne*. The offender of the *mmusuo* is not only reconciled with the offended but with the

⁴¹Agyekum, “The Pragmatics of Duabc”, 359.

⁴²Agyekum, “The Pragmatics of Duabc”, 370.

⁴³Agyekum, “The Pragmatics of Duabc”, 360.

⁴⁴Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 152-153.

⁴⁵Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 155,156.

⁴⁶John S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion* (Lusaka: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1975), 177.

⁴⁷Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge*, 105-106.

⁴⁸ Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 162.

⁴⁹Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 162.

divinities. The reconciliation is done through the pouring of libation and the offering of blood sacrifice to appease the gods of the land because the land has been desecrated through the act of the offender.⁵⁰

The conduct of an individual in the community can affect both parties either for good or bad. It is for this reason, rules and regulations are set to regulate the life of the community. Observance of the norms in the society is to the benefit of the individual and the community. In the same vein when the norms of the society are flouted, the individual and the community are visited with mayhem.⁵¹ Gyekye intimates that *mmusuo* leaves an indelible mark on the community. Acts of *Mmusuo* are grievous so much so that, they are not only abhorred by the society but also by the supernatural beings. *Mmusuo* brings *ahokyerej* (trouble or calamity) not only to the transgressor but also to the society.⁵²

Evaluation of Sins

The Akan concept of sin as offences against God, the gods, ancestors and the community give the idea that sin is graded in levels of severity. They do not have Catholic terms as mortal sins and venial sins but they are implied in *bcne* and *mmusuo* and also in minor and major taboos. *Bcne* and minor taboos are venial sins. They are less serious offences that do not affect the community adversely.⁵³ *Mmusuo* and major taboos on the other hand are serious offences that affect the offender and the community and as a result of that elaborate reconciliatory rites are performed to remit the sin. *Mmusuo* would lead to the death of the transgressor and calamity to the community.⁵⁴ *Mmusuo* and major taboos in the Akan religion can be classified as mortal sins.

Preconditions for the Forgiveness of Sin in the Akan culture

The presence of sin in the African Traditional Religion also comes with its removal. Oyeronke Olademo identifies acceptance of guilt, confession and pacification as indispensable for the remittance of sin in the African Traditional Religion.⁵⁵ In the Akan culture too, the three conditions, acceptance of guilt, confession, and repairing damage caused or pacification are also identified as necessary for the forgiveness or removal of sin.

Acceptance of Guilt

The first step to make reparation for sin is an admittance of offence or guilt (*ahonu*). The penitent must have sorrow or accept his/her guilt for the dirt to be washed away. The person must be mindful of the sin and be convinced that the offence has been committed.⁵⁶ The Akan who has remorse for a sin committed will say *m'anu me ho* (I feel guilty or I am guilty).

The admittance of guilt (*ahonu*) must be done by the human conscience (*ahonim/tibua*). The conscience is the faculty that pricks the individual to distinguish between what is wrong and what is right. The *tibua/ahonim* is very powerful in that it makes one know that he is guilty of an action. The Akan who does not have a good conscience does evil and is said to have a "dead" conscience (*ne tibua awu*). In the same way, a sincere person who has an informed conscience will say *me tibua bu mefo* (my conscience condemns me) to show the acceptance of guilt.⁵⁷ The Akan with a good conscience enjoys inner peace and the one with a "dead" conscience falls sick, becomes insane and even dies prematurely because he/she carries the guilt or the burden of sin.⁵⁸

⁵⁰Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion* 157.

⁵¹Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Tradition Religion*, 211-212.

⁵² Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought. The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 133.

⁵³Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 157.

⁵⁴ Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 153.

⁵⁵Olademo, *Theology of African Traditional Religion*, 56.

⁵⁶Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Tradition Religion*, 219.

⁵⁷Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 162; A. Owusu Akyaw, *Twi Dictionary*, (Accra: Sako Press Ltd., 1999), 47, 395.

⁵⁸Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 163.

Confession

The acceptance of guilt is followed by a verbal confession of the sins committed. The confession of sin “gives a person new life and unloads the burden of his mind. It prepares the penitent to make reparation to begin a new and unstained life caused by sin.”⁵⁹ In the Akan culture, there is a connection between religion and health. There is a belief among the Akan that some diseases are not caused by bacteria, viruses or witchcraft, but by sins committed. In the case where an ailment is suspected to be as a result of sin or curse, the healing process should involve confession, atonement and forgiveness.⁶⁰ The sinner ought to tell the community or the panel of judges and the priest what he/she did. Obeng confirms the popular belief among the Akan that, if a person is cursed for wrongdoing and confesses to the act, the curse (*duabc*) placed on him like the onset of diseases could be averted. If the sinner fails to confess, he will die as a result of the sin committed.⁶¹

The sinner must confess to all the sins committed and must not intentionally fail to confess all. Partial confession does not grant forgiveness of sin. It is said that at the *Antoa Nyamaa* shrine, during the reconciliation rites, when a chicken is slaughtered for the forgiveness of sin, the kidney of the chicken is removed. If the kidney turns white it means the gods have accepted the plea of the sinner and he/she is forgiven after making a true confession. On the contrary, if the kidney turns white with a black spot, it means the gods did not accept the plea of the sinner because he/she did not make a true confession of sins. He/she must go back to reflect and make a better confession remembering all sins before another chicken is sacrificed.⁶²

Penance/Pacification

The final condition necessary for the remission of sin in the Akan culture is pacification, *mpata*. The offender after accepting responsibility and confession of the sin committed must go through the laid down rites for the remission of sin. In the case of pacification, the offender is either asked to return stolen goods, restitution or pacify the offended with any item stipulated by the elders of the town or the priest. The items, *mpata* could be in the form of fowl, egg, sheep or money.⁶³ Eggs and sheep are considered sacred in the Akan traditional society. An egg is seen as a symbol of beauty; beauty can mean an acceptable character as pointed out that the Akan sees sin as dirt. Sin renders the human body dirty and to make it beautiful once again, an egg is offered either to the gods or the offended for pacification. The offended party is given an egg to bless his/her soul which has been disturbed by the offence.⁶⁴ The sacrifice of a sheep as a peace-maker animal is common among the Akan. The sacrificial animal is used to mend the estranged relationship between an individual who has broken a taboo that affects the entire community which is termed *mmusuo*, according to Opoku.⁶⁵

When *mmusuo* or taboos like incestuous relationships, assaulting a chief or murder occur, the process of reconciliation starts with the sacrifice of a sheep to appease the deities and the ancestors. The question that may be posed by curious persons is, why the sacrifice of a sheep and not a goat in the process of reconciliation in the Akan culture? The sheep is chosen over the goat because the former is the proverbial animal of peace and innocence and the latter is a troublemaker. Sarpong has this to say in answer to the above question, “the sheep in sacrifice, therefore, signifies the sacrificers’ desire for peace and their purity of mind, intention and body”⁶⁶

⁵⁹Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Tradition Religion*, 220.

⁶⁰ E. A. Ade Adegbola, ed, *Traditional Religion*, (Ibadan: Sefer Books Ltd, 1998), 263-264.

⁶¹Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 68.

⁶²Akyempong, Emmanuel and Owusu-Ansah, Emmanuel, *Interview with Nana Kwame Owusu Agyeman and Nana Kwaku Tutu at Antoa*, 12/07/2008. kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/60/396/3C-18C-17-104-22_Interview%20with%20Nana%20Owusu%20Agyeman-Antoahene_May2009.pdf.7, accessed 16/05/2022.

⁶³Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 66; Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 161.

⁶⁴Sarpong, *Aspects of Ghanaian Ethos*, 95.

⁶⁵Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 157.

⁶⁶Sarpong, *Aspects of Ghanaian Ethos*, 95; Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 110.

Effects of sin and reconciliation in the Akan culture

Firstly sinners in the Akan religion do not enjoy inner peace for sin alienates them from God, the gods, ancestors and society.⁶⁷ Secondly, sin among the Akan burdens the yoke of sinners' minds for they live a stained life. Sinners must be cleansed from the stain of sin and be reconciled with the divine and the community.⁶⁸ Thirdly, sin in the Akan culture plays a major role in the health of a person. It is believed that the remission of sin can restore a sinner back to health if the ailment was a punishment due to sin.⁶⁹ Fourthly, individual sin has a ripple effect on the community. The sin of a person also stains the community and can bring untold hardship to the community.⁷⁰ Lastly, God, the gods and the ancestors might punish the sinner with death.

CONCLUSION

The Akan have rich harmatology, they perceive sin as a stain on the individual and the community. Sin is regarded as an offence against the Supreme Being (God), his delegates, the divinities and the ancestors. Sin thus affects the community. The Akan also have a myth or doctrine of original sin. The Akan categorise sins into major and minor offences. The three conditions necessary for the forgiveness of sin in the Akan culture are acceptance of guilt, confession and pacification. The Akan is assured of the forgiveness of sin and the repair of the severed relationship between the sinner, the community, the Supreme Being, the gods and the ancestors with these three conditions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ade Adegbola, E. ed, *Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Sefer Books Ltd, 1998.
- Agyekum, Kofi, "The Pragmatics of *Duabc*, Grievance Imprecation Taboo among the Akan", *International Pragmatics Association. Pragmatics* 9: 3.357-3829 (1999).
- Akyempong, Emmanuel and Owusu-Ansah, Emmanuel, *Interview with Nana Kwame Owusu Agyeman and Nana Kwaku Tutu at Antoa*, 12/07/2008. Accessed 16/05/2022.
kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/60/396/3C-18C-17-104-22_Interview%20with%20Nana%20Owusu%20Agyeman-Antoahene_May2009.pdf.
- Asare-Danso, Seth, *African Traditional Religion*, Cape Coast: Beret Outlook Press 2019.
- Awolalu, J. Omosade "Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Oxford University Press, Jun., 1976):275-287. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://jstor.org/stable/1462340>.
- Awulalo, J. Omosade, Dopamu, and P., Adelumo, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Onibonoje Press & Book Industries (Nigeria) Limited, 1979.
- Doniger, Wendy, ed, *Merriam – Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions*, Merriam-Webster's Incorporated, 1999.
- Ellis, A. Burdon., *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast*, London: Frank Cass, 1966.
- Evans-Pritchard, E., *Nuer Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.
- Gyekye, Kwame, *African Cultural Values*, Accra: Sankofa Publishing Co. Ltd., 1998.
- Gyekye, Kwame, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought. The Akan Conceptual Scheme* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.
- Martos, Joseph, *Doors to the Sacred*, New York: Image Books, 1980.
- Mbiti, S. John, *An Introduction to African Religion*, Lusaka: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1975.

⁶⁷Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 163.

⁶⁸Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Tradition Religion*, 220.

⁶⁹Adegbola, ed, *Traditional Religion*, 263-264., Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 68.

⁷⁰Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion* 157., Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge*, 105-106., Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration*, 162.

- Obeng, Pashington, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana*, New York: E.J. Brill, 1996.
- Olademo, Oyeronke *Theology of African Traditional Religion* National Open University of Nigeria.(2008) 56, 2008. Accessed March 4,2021.
<https://nou.edu.ng/coursewarecontent/CTH%20792.pdf>
- Opoku, K., Asare, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978.
- Opuni- Frimpong, Kwabena, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions*, Accra: SonLife Press, 2012.
- Owusu Akyaw, A, *Twi Dictionary*, Accra: Sakoa Press Ltd., 1999.
- Parratt, J. K. "Religious Change in Yoruba Society," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 2, (1969):113-128. Accessed 21/05/ 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1594906>.
- Sarpong, K. Peter, *Ancestral Stool Veneration in Asante, A Catholic View*, Kumasi: Good Shepherd Publishers Ltd, 2011.
- Sarpong, K. Peter, *Aspects of Ghanaian Ethos*, Tema: DigiBooks, 2019.
- Sarpong, K. Peter, *Ghana in Retrospect*, Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974.
- Sarpong, K. Peter, *Peoples Differ, An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*, Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2013.
- Yankah, Kwesi, *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric*, New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2012.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Augustine Kojo Peprah is a priest of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi and a tutor at the Department of Social Science, St. Louis College of Education, Kumasi-Ghana. His areas of research are Religious and Moral Education.