



## An Analysis of the Practice of *Akwankyerε* in Neo-Prophetic Churches in Ghana

Victor Washington<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Social Development Section, Centre for Languages and Liberal Studies – Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi - Ghana

### ABSTRACT

Contemporary prophets are characterised by several neo-prophetic practices. One such practice that has become very common and attracted much attention in Ghana is ‘prophetic guidance’ or *Akwankyerε*. It is a practice that tends to provide specific directions and solutions to most life challenges. It is believed that religious experts are able to identify the root of the problem, give directions to prevent additional harm, or offer preventative measures to do so. This study sought to identify the theological bases for the practices of *Akwankyerε* among contemporary Neo-Prophetic movements in Ghana and also identify some common methods used for *akwankyerε*. The researcher adopted the qualitative research approach for the work. It was identified that *akwankyerε* is a very common practice among Neo-Prophetic churches in Ghana. Also, some biblical basis through which *akwankyerε* is being established among Neo-Prophetic churches were identified and discussed. It was concluded that although *akwankyerε* is highly linked to Neo-Prophetism in Ghana and not practiced by most mainline churches, it is premised on theological/biblical principles. This paper is significant because it contributes to the academic literature on Neo-Prophetism in Ghana. The findings of the paper will also help to open up more discussions on what can be done to shape the practice of *akwankyerε* among Neo-Prophetic Churches and Christianity in general.

Correspondence

Victor Washington

Email:

[sirwash47@gmail.com](mailto:sirwash47@gmail.com)

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### INTRODUCTION

According to Omenyo, there is a link between prophetic practice in the indigenous religion and current renewal movements.<sup>1</sup> As a result, he defines prophetism as the practice of using divination to find one’s destiny and to find the root of ill occurrences so that one may either cope with them or prevent them from happening again in the future. With its traditional roots, Neo-prophetism in Ghana has attempted to influence indigenous people’s worldviews by incorporating parts of the gospel. As a result, the Christian faith has been placed within the setting of the African culture. In Ghanaian Christianity, *Akwankyerε* has become a common religious expression, especially among the “prophetic churches.” The term is an Akan expression that actually has different meanings. Some are “spiritual direction”, “divine instruction”, or “spiritual ways”. At its core, is the synthesis of conventional or

<sup>1</sup> Cephas Omenyo, “Man of God Prophecy unto Me: The Prophetic Phenomenon in African Christianity,” *Studies in World Christianity* 17, no. 1 (2011): 30.

fundamental religious doctrines and practices.<sup>2</sup> Some mainline churches however do not see it as based on Scripture and speak against it. It is in light of this that this paper sets out to examine the practice of *akwankyerε* among Neo-Prophetic churches and to find out if there are any theological and biblical basis supporting the practice. The researcher adopted the qualitative research approach. Secondary sources of data were gathered from journal articles, theses, and published books. The article first defines the term *akwankyerε*. The practice is then discussed and findings on *akwankyerε* are provided to ascertain if the practice is based on theological/biblical principles.

### Defining *Akwankyerε*

*Akwankyerε* is a phenomenon that has been present in many cultures. Through agents, people have always attempted to communicate with the spiritual realm, which is thought to be more powerful and advanced and to possess knowledge of both the present and the future. These agents are believed to have unique access to the spiritual world and can communicate with it to provide solutions to existential problems. Beyond the physical realm, which is the habitation of incarnate spirits (mankind) exists the spiritual realm which is the habitation of discarnate spirits. There has been a conscious effort to constantly bring the two realms together by consultation.

Omenyo and Atiemo describes *Akwankyerε* as prophetic guidance.<sup>3</sup> He goes on to describe it as a Neo-Prophetic activity, that the prophetic figure or leader is expected to provide knowledge that is meant to explain a person's circumstance and also prescribe a solution.<sup>4</sup> According to Marylin, *Akwankyerε* has come to be perceived as an important meeting in which an expert or higher master guides a novice through a process to achieve their goals.<sup>5</sup> Akoma also adds that it is the process of getting advice from an expert who has deep insights about the happenings or things that will happen.<sup>6</sup> *Akwankyerε* could simply be expressed in two ways; to ask or inquire for “spiritual direction” and to take counsel, “advice”.

### *Akwankyerε* as “To Ask”, “Inquire”, “Seek Advice”

Omenyo asserts that *Akwankyerε*, which means “practice of the diviner giving instruction or direction in life to avoid any future mishap,” is a practice that goes hand in hand with *abisa* (spiritual consultation in the Akan language).<sup>7</sup> People who are viewed as powerful, such as religious experts are asked for *Akwankyerε*. Before making a significant life decision on issues such as marriage, jobs, long journeys, war, etc, it was customary in primordial communities to consult (*abisa*) or obtain *Akwankyerε* from religious experts. It is taught that religious experts have access to the universe’s power source and energy channels.<sup>8</sup> They can discern the desires of the spiritual world because of their special access to the universe’s power source. Additionally, religious experts are able to identify the root of the problem, give directions to prevent additional harm, or offer preventative measures to do so.<sup>9</sup> According to Magesa, these religious experts play a role of offering a variety of approaches to dealing with suffering and employ a variety of religious authorities whose job is to ascertain the cause of the cosmic disorder. In most cases, they are expected to not only understand the causes of catastrophes but also to recommend remedies or solutions for these issues. It is their duty to provide advice that should be performed to regain the force of life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Kouessan Degbe, “Sumsum Akwankyerε: Emerging Modes of Mediation and Appropriation of Spiritual Power in Sections of Ghanaian Christianity,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 2015,i.

<sup>3</sup> Cephas N Omenyo and Abamfo Ofori Atiemo, “Claiming Religious Space: The Case of Neo-Prophetism in Ghana,” 2006, 62.

<sup>4</sup> Omenyo and Atiemo, “Claiming Religious Space: The Case of Neo-Prophetism in Ghana,” 62.

<sup>5</sup> Marylin Anderson, *The Introduction to Consultation in Every Aspect of Life* (McGraw Hill Publication, 2012), 47.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Akoma, *The Era of Consultation and Consultancy of People* (Accra: Afram Publications, 2012), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Omenyo, “Man of God Prophesy unto Me: The Prophetic Phenomenon in African Christianity,” 32.

<sup>8</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Orbis: Maryknoll, 1995), 106.

<sup>9</sup> John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 167; Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), 197.

<sup>10</sup> Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 175.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative, an approach that is often used to explore a phenomenon that has not been previously well described.<sup>11</sup> It is usually context-specific as it describes the real-world settings of people to better understand social realities, processes, meaning patterns and structural features.<sup>12</sup>

## FINDINGS/DISCUSSIONS

### Biblical and Theological bases of Akwankyere

The foundation of the universe is held by Elohim the all-powerful creator.<sup>13</sup> From the beginning, Elohim has been the only ruler of his people. This is identified as Theocracy. Israel was not born yet. Through Judges, Kings, Priests and Prophets, Yahweh had led his people. As identified as the Oracle of God, the prophets had a major influence on every political issue that has arisen among God's people. The prophets directly or indirectly served as guides for the Kings, the Priests, and the Judges. In confirming this, Deke states:

In the Old Testament, a prophet (or seer) was one inspired by God through the Holy Spirit to deliver a message for a specific purpose. God's calling as a prophet is not to elevate an individual for their own glory, but for the glory of God and to turn people to him. Some would limit that role and exclude those who receive a personal message not intended for the body of believers but in the Bible, on a number of occasions, according to the bible, prophets were called to deliver personal messages. The reception of a message is termed revelation and the delivery of the message is termed prophecy. Old Testament prophets were not interpreters of God's will; they uttered the actual words which God gave them...The Old Testament Prophets gave direction to the nation of Israel. Their role was not only limited to matters affecting the congregation or individuals. To a great extent, the prophets suffered for the truth (Jer.20:1-3).The national agenda was set by prophets in the event people lost direction (2 Chron.12:5). Besides providing people with direction, prophets also acted as encouragers, preachers, and predictors or rebuked and corrected people when necessary (Jdgs 6:7-9). History shows us that Prophets originally were made to be representatives of God. Then the Lord said to Moses; See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country."<sup>14</sup>

It is been recorded that some prophets performed some strange acts ordered by God. Though some of these acts performed by the prophets did not make sense to the people to whom it was to be administered, they however received their miracles and prevailed by their obedience to the direction of God. Some of the biblical references that are often made to confirm the biblical bases of Akwankyere are hereby discussed below:

- **Moses striking the rock for water to come out (Exo. 17:1-6 ESV)**

Moses is considered one of the most important figures in the Bible. In Judeo-Christian religion, he is not only considered a prophet or liberator but the one through which the LAW (Torah) was established and also the only figure that God himself testifies to revealing himself to him (Numb 12:4-8). As

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Risjord, Margaret Moloney, and Sandra Dunbar, "Methodological Triangulation in Nursing Research," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 31, no. 1 (2001): 40–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004839310103100103>.

<sup>12</sup> Uew Flick, Ernst von Kardoff, and Ines Steinke, "What Is Qualitative Research? An Introduction to the Field," in *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, ed. Uew Flick, Ernst von Kardoff, and Ines Steinke ( Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2004), 3–11.

<sup>13</sup> Kallai Eric Mawuko, "'Akwankyere', An Assessment Of Spiritual Direction in Messiah Our Souls Shepherd Ministries" (Pentecost University College, 2019), 18.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine Deke, "The Politics of Prophets and Profits in African Christianity," *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, 2015,12.

recorded in Exodus 17:1-5, the Israelites in their journey from Egypt to Canaan encountered many troubles through the wilderness. The least to mention is the shortage of food and water. Moses appealed to God and he was given a directive to obey.

“So Moses cried to the Lord. ‘What shall I do with the people? They are almost ready to stone me.’ And the Lord said to Moses, ‘pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock, the water at Horeb and you shall strike the rock at Horeb, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.’” (Exo. 17:4-6)

From the verse, it is noted that the cry of the people of Israel for water did not yield any results until a direction from God was performed by Moses. The emphasis here is on the direction which produced the result needed, which was the water to drink.

- **The widow and the jars of oil (2 Kgs. 4:1-7, ESV)**

In the narrative, a widow received direction after she was faced with the challenge of paying her creditor. She received direction from the prophet Elisha which she obeyed and had enough to pay her debts and also live comfortably with her sons.

“And Elisha said to her, ‘Go outside, borrow vessels and not too few. Then go in and shut the door behind yourself and your sons and pour into all these vessels. And when one is full, set it aside.’ So she went from him and shut the door behind herself and her sons. And as she poured, they brought the vessels to her. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, ‘bring me another vessel,’ and he said to her, ‘there is not another.’ Then the oil stopped flowing. She came and told the man of God and he said, ‘Go and sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on the rest.’” (2 Kgs. 4:3-7)

The story is quoted to indicate the place of prayer and that of a particular act of *akwankyerε* (direction) that produces the results one expects.

- **Healing the bitter water, “Marah” (Exo. 15:23-25, ESV)**

“When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah). So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?” Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet” (Exo. 15:23-25).

According to Clarke, the tree used by Moses was not known: some think that the tree was extremely bitter itself, such as the *quassia*; and that God responded, as usual, correcting inconsistencies with inconsistencies, which was a favorite axiom of the ancient physicians. These biblical examples highlight the point already made that, most of the acts performed by the prophets did not have to make sense but got results through obedience. Clarke adds that when Moses prayed, “the word of the Lord showed him the tree *ardiphney*, on which he wrote the great and precious name of (YAHWEH) and then threw it into the waters, and the waters thereby became sweet.”<sup>15</sup>

A similar miracle happened in the city of Jericho (2 Kgs 2:18), where the waters of Jericho became bad. Here, prophet Elisha used salt as recorded in the Bible to heal the waters.

“Now the men of the city said to Elisha, Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful. He said, bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it. So, they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said. Thus, says the Lord, I have

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<sup>15</sup> Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary* (Nashville : Abingdon Press, 2005), 12.

healed this water, from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it. So, the water has been healed to this day according to the word that Elisha spoke.” (2 Kgs 2:19-22).

### **Akwankyerε as a Modern Religious Practice**

The Neo-Prophetic movements in Ghana are especially notable for the emphasis on healing and deliverance, asserting that in both the Old and New Testaments, the Lord provides spiritual revelation to his followers. In particular circumstances, he communicates with them through prophets, visions and dreams to uplift, comfort, forewarn and assist them. It is noted that the practice of *akwankyerε* which is one notable feature of Neo-Prophetic ministry is an Akan idea approximately equal to ‘spiritual guidance or direction.’ *Akwankyerε* (directions) is seen as God’s express direction for the here and now, to deal with and address the individual’s problem and concern for a particular moment. Most likely, *akwankyerε* as a Christian activity has attracted so much attention and controversy. Its popularity has made it seem to be the facilitator for an answered prayer. A Neo-Prophetic church service is rarely held without either one or the other *akwankyerε*. Many Neo-Prophetic Christians believe that they must follow God’s explicit commands. Neo-Prophets view this as being extremely congruent with the apostolic experiences described in the Old and New Testaments prophetic ministries. For example, in 2 Kings 13: 14–19, Elisha did not only pray when King Joash of Israel came to him about the war with Syria, but he also gave directions as well. Therefore, anyone who ignores *akwankyerε* does so at their peril because it is beneficial for both individuals and groups, Prayer alone may not be sufficient: *akwankyerε* supplements the solution. The keen desire for *akwankyerε* is often a direct result of the desire for *yiedie* (success and well-being).

### **Items used for Akwankyerε**

As identified earlier *akwankyerε* takes various forms. In contemporary Neo-Prophetic movements, various items are used for different types of *akwankyerε*. In most cases, the type of *akwankyerε* given to an individual may depend on the kind of problem faced and the solution expected. The kind of *akwankyerε* given to someone looking for marriage might be different from a married couple who has a problem with childbearing or a married couple having a problem in their marriage. Similarly, the kind of direction given to someone looking for traveling opportunities may differ from one looking for healing. For some forms of *akwankyerε*, mystical/spiritual elements and practices must be involved. In contemporary neo-Propheticism, the most common items(elements) mostly used in performing *akwankyerε* include, anointing oils, candles, camphor, handkerchief, water, salt, etc. These elements are used to perform different forms of *akwankyerε* as instructed by the prophets. Some of such directions include bathing with certain kinds of infused water, sprinkling substances, giving alms, reciting special prayers based on the bible, etc.

#### **• Anointing Oil**

The anointing oil is a very important spiritual symbol and tool in the prophetic ministry. It is used during prayer ministrations and for special directions. The use of oil is mentioned in scripture. The primary purpose of anointing with the holy anointing oil was to sanctify, to set the anointed person or object apart as qodesh, or "holy" (Exo. 30:29). This biblical practice appears to have become of intense interest to modern African Christians in their search for the guidance of God in their lives, and activities, and to protect their belongings. To anoint, as popularly understood, means “to smear, pour oil or other unctuous substance upon.”<sup>16</sup> The Bible does not teach that the oil itself has any divine powers. Reasonably, the strict process for making the oil was emblematic of the Israelites' obedience to God’s law. In the New Testament, there are a few passages that illustrate the use of anointing oil. In Mark 6:13, the oil is used for the blessing and healing of the sick. In Mark 14:3-9, a woman anoints Jesus’ feet with oil as a symbol of worship. In James 5:14, the people were encouraged to call for the

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<sup>16</sup> Mawuko, “‘Akwankyerε’, An Assessment Of Spiritual Direction in Messiah Our Souls Shepherd Ministries ,” 18.

elders of the Church to anoint and bless any who were sick. In a similar vein, Neo-Prophetic ministries have adopted such uses of the anointing oil as direction for their members. The most common directive given is adding some portions of the anointing oil to their bathing water to bath. This is mostly done to attract favour and protection from God.

- **Salt**

There are numerous references to salt in the Bible. It is mostly used to signify purification or cleansing.<sup>17</sup> In the book of 2 Kings 2:19-22, the prophet Elisha used salt to heal water that was made bitter for drinking. Immediately he released the salt into the water, it was made pure for drinking. This is one of the miracles Elisha performed with salt during his time. It is identified that historically salt has been considered a great spiritual element for purifying, neutralizing and preservation.<sup>18</sup> In contemporary Neo-Prophetic practices, salt is a very important element for spiritual direction. To be salt means seeking to influence the lives of people, as Jesus indicates in Matthew 5:13. Therefore prophets give directions using salt to people who are seeking to restore some dead circumstances in their lives. Also, others seeking to gain political influence or favour are mostly directed to bathe with salt for some days and allocated times. This is a very common *akwankyerε* identified in Neo-Prophetic practices.

- **Candles and praying with psalms**

Light is used as a symbol to signify awareness, knowledge and understanding.<sup>19</sup> Candles that are used for prophetic directions come in different colours and vary in size. The prophet prescribes a particular candle according to the problem of the client at hand. This means that a wrong prescription of a candle to a psalm will never yield fruits. One must know the right candle against the right psalm to be applied. Candles also have deep roots in Catholicism. In prayer, anytime a candle is lighted, the flames signify the light of God in worshippers and one keeps the fire aglow by prayer.

- **Camphor**

According to Gupta, camphor symbolizes a strong connection with the sacred and divine. He adds that when burnt, camphor releases fumes that signify purity through the virtue of the divine.<sup>20</sup> It has been hinted that normally prophets give directions to their members to bathe with camphor for cleansing, divination, power, and also mostly against unwanted attention. One of the common uses noted is for church members to sprinkle grounded camphor at their workplaces. This is aimed at fighting against the negative forces that may attempt to hinder the progress of the business. It is also aimed at protecting the workplace from calamities such as fire and robbery.

According to Atakora, prophets claim these items are consecrated and are used to mediate the divine, which serves as contact points believed to be spiritual support for prosperity, breakthrough, success and victory.<sup>21</sup> As identified by Tetteh some prophets claim that their *akwankyerε* is sometimes based on “common sense”, depending on the situation confronting the person. He adds that it is because in most cases the problem the individual is facing might be caused by their own negligence but not caused by any evil force. Such issues just need a piece of advice.<sup>22</sup> Also, others claim that the

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<sup>17</sup> Understanding power of salt in the bible: spiritual uses of salt, Religion and spirituality (<https://religioncheck.com/salt-in-the-bible/>) Accessed 23 August, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Understanding power of salt in the bible: spiritual uses of salt, Religion and spirituality (<https://religioncheck.com/salt-in-the-bible/>) Accessed 23 August, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Significance of praying with candles in the bible <https://religioncheck.com/candles-in-the-bible-significance/>

<sup>20</sup> Kuhoo Gupta, “How to Use Pure Crystalline Camphor for Healing Yourself & Your Home,” Times of India, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/health-fitness/home-remedies/how-to-use-pure-crystalline-camphor-for-healing-yourself-your-home/articleshow/71455095.cms>.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Atakora, “Neo-Propheticism and the Mission-Established Churches in Ghana.” (University of Ghana, 2013), 50.

<sup>22</sup> Gideon Tetteh, “Analysing Perspectives on Evil, Enemy and Divinatory Consultation among Participants in Neo-Prophetic Movements in Pentecostal Ghana” (University of Oslo, 2016), 78. <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/51226>.



*akwankyerε* they give is based on the direction from the Holy Spirit. While others also claim that the Bible is their source for the *akwankyerε* given to their members.

The researcher agrees that *akwankyerε* known as Spiritual direction has become a part of Christianity in Ghana, especially among the Neo-Prophetic churches. The ripples of the New Prophetic Churches are felt even in the mainline Churches because some of their members become patrons of the prophetic ministry and thereby obliging the ministers of the mainline Churches to adapt to the new trend. Apart from prayer, ritualism and symbols have become a significant part of the prophetic ministry. In the New Prophetic Church contexts, rituals become possible because of their attribution to so-called divine directives. The whole idea of divine directives (*akwankyerε* or Spiritual direction) is unpredictable. Hence, prophets and their clients must be circumspect in their use of divine directives. Whilst many have attested to the potency of *akwankyerε* with proofs and testimonies, the use of elements such as anointing oil, salt, honey, camphor, candles and mystical materials should be divinely inspired as well.

## CONCLUSION

The paper examined the practice of *akwankyerε* in Neo-Prophetic Churches in Ghana. The paper was motivated by the premise that the practice of *akwankyerε* has been identified as a very common practice among Neo-Prophetic churches in Ghana and whether it is biblically founded. *Akwankyerε* also referred to as ‘spiritual direction’ was described as an activity in which the prophetic figure or leader is expected to provide knowledge that is meant to explain a person’s circumstance and also prescribe a solution. The activities of these churches have raised questions with regards to the theological/biblical basis by which Neo-prophetic churches have adopted *akwankyerε* as a major activity. Based on the examination of the activities of neo-prophets in Ghana in line with various scriptural examples where God directed some prophets to act in a particular manner which yielded results, the paper concludes that there are theological and biblical bases that support the practice of *akwankyerε* among Neo-Prophetic churches. The paper however suggests that, there is a need for spiritual guidance to prevent contravening biblical principles. There is also a need for further research in the area of prophets and prophecy.

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### **ABOUT AUTHOR**

Victor Washington is currently an Assistant Lecturer at the Social Development Section of the Centre for Languages and Liberal Studies – Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi - Ghana. He holds a Master of Philosophy Degree in the Study of Religions. His research interests include; African Christianity, Neo-Prophetic Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity and The Contemporary Presidential Elections in Ghana and New manifestations of African Traditional Religion.