

THE PROBLEM OF "GOD AND THE GODS" IN ASANTE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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INTRODUCTION

The Asante are the major ethnic group in Ghana of West Africa. The first outside observers of the ways in which the West Africans approach reality religiously came respectively from the Muslim of North Africa at the end of the first millennium A.D. and from Christian Western Europe a half millennium later. Since both Islam and Christianity are inheritors, to some extent, of Semitic traditions of faith they insist on the oneness of God they brought to their descriptions of African religiousness scriptural prejudices against the association of any other being with God. In sum, these foreign agencies imposed upon West African religious experience and thought conceptual categories inherited from the Near East or from the Greco-Roman world. To make the situation worse, many African Christians have effected a tendency, perhaps unconscious, to describe African conceptions of the transcendent in Semitic or Indo-European theological categories that are essentially foreign. One of such is the use of the word "gods" in describing the various *abosom* (divinities) in Asante religious thought.

In the Asante translation of the Bible, one comes across the use of the term *anyame* ("gods") for the *abosom*. This usage assumes these spiritual entities somewhat equal standing with the upper-case God,

Onyame. Therefore, in this article I use the word *deity* to mean the only one God, *Onyame*. I also use the word *divinities* in reference to the *abosom*, spirit beings, who are believed to be "sons" of God. Thus, the divinities are of or from God, but are not gods as it appears in many literature.

It is the intention of this article to point to the inappropriateness of the term "gods" in describing the divinities, and that in Asante religious thought the term is inapplicable; and to propose an alternative explanation based on an understanding of the relationship between God and the divinities. I shall point out that the problem is methodological, arising from an uncritical application of a Judaeco-Christian system of thought to understand an African religious fact. In other words, an imposition on the forms a traditional Asante piety, without adequate interval equivalencies, alien patterns of thought.¹

THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM

The problem can be traced to the idea of God and the gods in Semitic religions. The concept of God and the gods can be understood within the context of the divine councils. The concept and imagery of divine councils is a common thought world of ancient Near Eastern (ANE) mythology. Pantheons are found in literature and inscriptions in third millennium BCE in Sumer and Egypt and the second millennium in Mesopotamia and Ugarit. Paternal gods sitting in council with their children, grandchildren, viziers, courtiers and numerous soldiers, was the standard conception of the organization and function of the divine world. These gods held council sessions to debate plans of action and to vote on propositions, all to administer the cosmos. The edicts of the assembly were then executed by the appropriate member deity. Human worshippers in the ancient Near East usually associated themselves with one of the lesser, local deities, believing that the

High Gods were too busy to give them a hearing. Although the names, rituals and myths might vary, the overall conception of the heavenly world in the ANE was that a "divine government" existed.

Mesopotamia

Thorkild Jacobsen² has shown that the Sumerian pantheon contained 3, 000 to 4, 000 deities. He indicates that initially, it was organized on the pattern of a country manor (lords and servants), but later as a city assembly (lord-mayor and officials).³⁻⁴ The god An ("the Sky" or "Heaven") was the Father and King over the assembly. He and his three children were the four principal gods, who also represented four fundamental cosmic elements. Enlil ("Lord Wind") stood for heaven's dynamic energy and was symbolically present in storms. He was also administrator over the fertile earth. His sister (and sometimes consort) Ninhursaga was the Great Mother, the "Lady Fashioner/Potter" or "Lady of (embryo) Form-giving" or Lady of the Stoney Ground" (where foothill animas birthed). The youngest brother was Enki, manager/lord (en) of the earth and controller of the "sweet waters" of the marshlands and the two major rivers (Tigris and Euphrates), which contained earth's needed fertility powers.⁵ The wife of father-god An, Ki ("the Earth") was not prominent in the myths. In some texts, An's headship seems to have passed to his eldest son, Enlil. One hymn extols the grandeur of Enlil, whose epithets include: Father, Lofty Bellwether of the Universe, the Great Mountain, Shepherd and Herdsman. When he "seats himself broadly on the holy dais, on the lofty dais," the earth-gods do obeisance and the Anunnakis "humble themselves" before their exalted god (ANET 573).

When the Semite Akkadians under Sargon I seized power from the Sumerians in 2360 BCE, they adopted the Sumerian pantheon, albeit with modifications. The Akkadian high god was called Il, but major interest seemed to fall on the divine triad of Shamash, Sin, and Ashtar ("Sun, Moon, and Star"). As in Sumer, numerous city-gods

and lesser deities of thunder, rainstorm, and battle (usually goddesses) were also worshipped.

Egypt

Egyptian religion was not a monolithic entity; it slowly evolved over three millennia in relative isolation from other cultures. There were some thirty-nine gods and goddesses worshipped in scattered temples throughout the empire. There were three types of gods: (1) divinities of *place* such as Ptah of Memphis and Sobek of the Faiyum; (2) *cosmic* or nature deities such as Re, the sun-god; Geb, the earth-god; Nut, goddess of the sky; and (3) gods responsible for some *function or aspect* of life such as Sekhmet, goddess of war and disease; Bes god of the household and childbirth; and Ma'at, goddess of truth and justice.⁶ The texts show that some organization existed among the gods, but without a systematized theology of hierarchy (ISBE 4.104). During the 6th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom, there was a pantheon called the *Ennead*, or "The Nine (gods)"⁷ worshipped in the city of Heliopolis. The pantheon consisted of Atum (Aten, Atum, "the All") and his self-engendered children and grandchildren.⁸ At the city of Hermopolis, a pantheon called the *Ogdoad* or "The Eight" was honoured. It was made up of different deities headed by Nun and Naunet (ISBE 4.104).

Erik Hornung posits that the earliest (1st Dynasty) name of an Egyptian pantheon is *Ht*, the "Corporation," and that pharaoh was the "most divine one of the Corporation." Individual members of the Corporation were "Gods," "Spirits," or "Lords." The head deity was "the All-Lord," "Lord of Ma'at," "Lord of the gods," or "the One God among the *Ennead*." They assembled in the "great council chamber" or "the Hall of Geb,"⁹ where they engaged in various activities. The Council sometimes exercised its authority to choose a new chief-god and gave "the office to its lord, the kingship to its rightful owner." In addition, they acted as judges¹⁰ and waged holy war against the enemies of a pharaoh.¹² members of the Egyptian pantheon acted

kings, judges and warriors.

Canaan

The *Baal Cycle* (or "Poems About Baal and Anat"), an elaborate 14th century theogony, describes how the fertility and storm-god Baal rose yearly from the grave and rose to permanent power over Ugarit at the expense of his father El.¹³ The *Baal Cycle* envisioned an organized heaven in which the *Puhru Mo idu* ("the Gathered Assembly") of holy ones met in a "house" (temple), seated on "thrones of princship," and ruled the cosmos.¹⁴ Many of the minor members were he-lamb gods, ewe-lamb goddesses, bull-gods, cow-goddesses, and even throne and chair-divinities, while the major deities represented natural phenomena (ANET 134). The creator-god El was known as "Father Shunem" (Father of years), "Puissant Bull," "Bull El Benign," and "King over the Assembly of Divine Beings" (ANET 129, 232). His wife, Asherah (Astarte, Ashtoreth), was the "Progenitress of the Gods" (ANET 132). Their most notable sons included Yam ("Sea"), Mot ("Death") and Baal ("Lord, Possessor").

Lowell Handy¹⁵ indicates that at Ugarit, the heavenly council was based on a hierarchy of divine offices. Handy posits that this was typical of the "theological construction of the divine realm" in all Syria-Palestine. He proposes a four-tiered divine hierarchy. On the executive level was El and the divine *gebirah* or Queen Mother Asherah, who formed an administrative team. On the second tier were powerful "patron deities," Mot, Baal and Yam, as the managerial stratum of the cosmos. On the third tier were the craft-gods, Kothar-wa-Hasis, a master-builder and metalworker, and Shatiquatu, a healer as the functional managers, the specialists. The fourth tier was occupied by minor messenger deities, the *mlkm* or angels. The members of the assembly at Ugarit are unambiguously classified as *'ilm* ("gods"), *bn 'il* ("sons of the gods") (KTU1.16; 1.15; 1.40:7-8, 42).¹⁶ Specifically, in the Keret Epic, the Canaanite chief deity El sits at the head of the assembly and four times addresses its

members as either *'ilm* ("gods") or *bny* ("my sons") (KTU 1.16.V1-28).

Ancient Israel

Ancient Israel lived in contact with Mesopotamia, Egypt and Canaan. That Israel also believed in some sorts of heavenly council would be no surprise. Most scholars believe Canaan was the major source of Israel's concepts of a divine council. Mullen, for example, asserts that "the Israelite view of the assembly agrees in every detail with that of the council of the gods seen in the RasShamra texts."¹⁷

Numerous biblical texts testify to the belief in a heavenly council consisting of YHWH the King and his staff.^{18,19,20,21} According to Patrick Miller, the council imagery is in fact "one of the central cosmological symbols of the Old Testament."²² The imagery expresses how the biblical writers understood the "machinery and systems" of the universe. Similar to the Mesopotamian view in which an assembly of gods ruled the cosmic state, the council of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible is responsible for maintaining order in creation at large, but especially order on earth and among Israel. Some texts need mention here.

Deuteronomy 32:8-9

This text reveals that until YHWH became the head of the divine assemble he was of equal rank and power with his colleagues as the Septuagint (hereafter, LXX) and Qumran readings of Deut 32:8-9 suggest. Unfortunately, the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible (hereafter, MT) has the reading of verse 8:

When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel.

However, the unrevised LXX thus has the MT "according to the

number of the sons of Israel" as "according to the number of the sons of God." Text criticism of the verse favours the LXX rendering and that the text was intentionally altered in MT to eliminate a reference to divine beings in the name of expunging allegedly polytheistic language. It is inconceivable to suppose that a scribe would have done the reverse, altering an innocuous **larfyyab** (sons of Israel) to a potentially explosive **-yhlabyb** (sons of God). So, the LXX reading adequately explains how the MT reading could have arisen, but the alternative fails this test.

This text explains that with time YHWH took over the position of El (chief deity and leader of the council at Ugarit) as the chief deity. Although the **lae** of the Bible does not share his Ugaritic counterpart's behaviours, the Hebrew text makes it clear that El is Israel's God as well. In Gen 33:20 he is referred to as **la, r"fylyhiloa/ lae** ("El, the God of Israel"). In addition, YHWH is referred to as El (cf. Deut 7:9; 10:17; 2 Sam 22:31 [parallelism]; Ps. 85:9 [Eng. v. 8]; Isa. 42:5; Jer. 32:8). The equation in the literature is also seen by virtue of the numerous epithets at Ugarit for the high god El that are used of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible.²³ So, YHWH becomes YHWH-El and took upon himself the characteristics of El. As indicated by de Moor, YHWH-El's struggle with Baal for supremacy explains why in early Israelite sources YHWH-El has Baalistic traits.²⁴ As the LXX reading of Deut 32:8-9 shows, YHWH is not the father or begetter of the divine beings of the assembly.

1 Kings 22:19-23

In a scene that resembles Ugaritic council scenes, YHWH is pictured as the chief deity, enthroned among the members of his council before directly addressing its members, who "stand" before him.²⁵ The question asked by YHWH occurs in a form paralleled in Ugaritic literature and other passages involving YHWH's presence in the Hebrew Bible (cf. *KTU* 1.16). The omniscient leader then approves the course of action he knows will be successful, and the

messenger (the "spirit" here, but often a prophet) is commissioned. It is not that YHWH is lacking ideas, or that the members of the council exercise any actual authority, but rather that the council only serves to "reemphasize and execute his decisions."²⁶ This is the same pattern as in the Ugaritic council texts.²⁷ Micaiah in this instance is permitted to observe the deliberations of the divine "boardroom meeting" and thus pronounce with certainty "thus saith the LORD" as a messenger of the divine assembly.

Psalm 82:1-8

This text is another example of the divine assembly in the Hebrew Bible. As Michael Heiser (nd) demonstrates, internal features of the psalm also show that **-yhilooa/** (gods) in verses 1b and 6a describe the divine council and its "divine beings." For instance, as much as the **-yhilooa/** in 6a are called **!Ayl. l, yn:B.** (sons of Elyon) we can argue that they are divine beings, because it is clear that **!Ayl. l** is a title for deity in both Hebrew and Ugaritic. The word refers only to God/El in the Bible and Ugaritic religious texts. The Ugaritic texts show the divine character of the offspring of El. The same descriptive appellation is used for those offspring that are used many times in the Hebrew Bible of nonhuman inhabitants of the heavens and so renders the translation "human judges" nonsensical and requires ignoring the comparative semitic philology.²⁸⁻²⁹⁻³⁰ In addition, as Smick states, "if they are going to die *like* mortals, they are not mortals."³¹

Plural Pronouns and Verbs

One other evidence for a heavenly assembly is the use of plural pronouns and verbs in statements attributed to God. In Genesis 1-11, three of these occur:

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| Gen 1:26 | Let <i>us</i> make humankind in our image,
according to <i>our</i> likeness |
| Gen 3:22 | The man has become like one of <i>us</i> , |

Gen 11:7 knowing good and evil
 Come, let us go down

Jewish commentators from Philo onward held that these plurals were used because God was addressing his heavenly court. Unfortunately, early post-Apostolic Fathers such as Barnabas and Justin Martyr saw the plural as a reference to the pre-incarnate Jesus and an adumbration of the Trinity. However, old scholars such as Franz Delitzsch indicate that these texts refer to God's conversations with the angels.³² For his part, A. B. Davidson wrote: "These Elohim, or sons of Elohim, form the council of Jehovah. They surround Him, and minister to Him. He and they are Elohim."³³ Recent scholars agree with the ancient Jewish opinion, believing that the Fathers' interpretation was anachronistic and that the Hebrew Bible writers "had no such conception in mind."³⁴ F. M. Cross, for example, posits: "In both Ugaritic and biblical literature, the use of the first person plural is characteristic of address in the divine council. The familiar 'we' ... has long been recognised as the plural address used by Yahweh in his council."³⁵ Donald Gowan³⁶ refers to this grammatical form as "consultative we," reflecting God's consultation with his spiritual creatures in heaven. Franz Delitzsch had used a similar term, "communicative plural."³⁷

Another evidence for a heavenly assembly is the use of plurals at courtroom settings, which commonly occur in the book of Isaiah. For example, the statement in Isaiah 6:8: "Whom shall I send, and will go for us?," likely "reflects the idea that God was surrounded by the court made up of his heavenly servants."³⁸ In Isaiah 40:1-8, the second person plural imperatives and the reference to various "voices" indicate a heavenly council session, which apparently included the prophet himself.³⁹⁻⁴⁰

In the Hebrew Bible, the heavenly beings are referred to as: (1) *'lohim* or *'elim* ("gods" or "divine beings", or "godlike beings";

- e.g., see Job 41:25 [Heb. = 41; 17]; Psa 8:5 [Heb. = 8:6]; 86:8; 97:7, 9; Exod 15:11; Dan 11:36);
- (2) *b^enê 'elîm* or *b^enê 'lohîm* or *b^enêha 'lohîm* ("sons of the gods"; see e.g., Pss 29:1; 89:6 [Heb. = 89:7]; Gen 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1);
 - (3) *'dat el* ("assembly of God"; e.g., Ps 82:1);
 - (4) *sod yhw* ("assembly of Yahweh"; e.g., Jer 23:18) and *sod 'elohîm* ("assembly of God"; e.g., Job 15:8);
 - (5) *kokebeboqer* ("morning stars"; e.g., Job 38:7) and *kokebe 'elohîm* ("stars of God"; e.g., Isa 14:13);
 - (6) *qedosim* ("holy ones"; e.g., Ps 89:6-7 [Heb. 89:7-8]; Zech 14:5; Job 5:1; Job 15:15);
 - (7) *seba'ot* ("hosts"; e.g., Isa 13:4; 24:21).

The activities of the council members include:

- (1) praising and worshipping God (Deut 32:43; Isa 6:3; Ps 103:20-22, 148:1-6; Job 38:7; Neh 9:6);
- (2) serving as ministers (Isa 6:6-7; Ps 103:21);
- (3) serving as witnesses, fellow judges and bailiffs in YHWH's court (Isa 1:2; Ps 82:1-4; Zech 3:3-5);
- (4) acting as God's throne or chariot (Pss 18:10, 99:1);
- (5) carrying God's throne (Ezekiel 1, 10);
- (6) serving as captains and soldiers in the supernatural army (Job 5:14-15; 2 Kgs 6:17);
- (7) interpreting visions (Zech 1:9, 19, 21; Dan 7:15-17, 8:15-19);
- (8) serving as shepherds of men or as patron angels of nations (Gen 48:15-16; Deut 32:8; Dan 10:21, 12:1).

We can conclude this session by saying that the concept of "God and the gods" was perceived by the ANE nations including ancient Israel. Similar to the Mesopotamian view in which an assembly of gods ruled the cosmic state, the council of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible is responsible for maintaining order in creation, especially order on earth and among Israel. It is important to note that the concept of a heavenly council did not threaten the positions of

YHWH as "God of gods and Lord of lords" (Deut 10:17). As Vriezen notes,

The conception of a host of angels or heavenly beings surrounding Yahweh is always present in Israel. ... People could not conceive Yahweh in another fashion. ... Far from clashing with monotheism this conception lays the greatest stress on the Majesty of Yahweh. Yahweh is a unique God, but he is not alone.

In addition, the council imagery served an important polemical role by providing Israel a way of asserting the superior majesty and authority of her God over the "demons" and "no-gods" (Deut 32:17) worshipped by her neighbour. Yet the council concept was not just a theological construct developed mainly for apologetics: it was a living element of Israel's religious system as shown in various texts.

Semites eventually came to understand the uniqueness of God – his arrival at "upper-case" in English – as the results of God's ousting his former colleagues, the "lower-case," plural gods. God's status as God, however, has not been absolutely assured, inasmuch as he shared, at least to some extent, the linguistic category of godhead (deity) with the other members of the Semitic divine assembly. Only when the other members of the assembly fell into oblivion, or were transformed into angelic choirs, was the aloneness of the God assured. It is this Semitic idea of God and the gods that led Christianity to erroneously categorize Asante *abosom* as gods.

Onyame (God) and the *abosom* ("gods") in Asante Religious Thought

Translators of the Asante Bible, apparently reluctant to render the plural sense of *-yhilooa/* with the words for lesser transcendent beings known among the Asante, have created *ersatz* words in order to render plural references to gods in Hebrew. By this action, they have,

in the religious thought of the Asante, over-dignified the *abosom*, in their mind, the divine antagonists of YHWH in Israel and have underrated *Onyame* in Asante. For example, the Asante translation of the Bible translates the plural *-yhilooa/* of Psalm 82:6 as *anyame*, a neologism imposed on the traditionally unique *Onyame*.⁴² Apart from these translations, most of the scholarly literature on the traditional forms of faith among the Asante ignore the fact that there is no term or category in the Asante language that yields an adequate equivalent of the Semitic and Greco-Roman pair called "God and the gods." Similarly, it is inadequate to refer to *Onyame* as "Supreme God" since it connotes God *primus inter pares*. The concept of divine assemble paved way to refer to YHWH as "God of gods" (Deut 10:17; Josh 22:22; Ps 50:1; Dan 2:47) or "Lord of lords" (Deut 11:7), which was "condensed into a Yahwistic title meaning "the supreme god."⁴³

Onyame

Among the Asante, *Onyame* is quite simply God, the creator of the material world, of time, destiny, and the human soul, a theological concept not different from the biblical God. Thus *Onyame* implies the basic idea of Deity as understood in Christian theology. Although the perception of the Asante about God may be imprecise as systematized knowledge, the Asante know God in an experiential and living manner. The Asante do not need to prove the existence of God. As life itself, God does not need proof, for God is. He exists. This conception of deity seems consistent with the Asante proverbial expressions and drum texts.

The God-names, *Nyame* or (*Onyame*) and *Nyankopon* (*Onyankopon*) are derived from *nyam* or *onyam*, which means "shining" or "brightness."⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵ Both names have a link with the sky because of a certain connection between the *Nyame's* nature and the elements.⁴⁶ Yet, *Nyame* or *Nyankopon* is not a sky-God as referred to by Rattary and others. Although he and the sky are connected in an undefined or indefinable way, his dwelling is not identified with the

sky. Rather, these God-names may refer to certain natural processes associated with the sky, as raining and thundering; but it may also have merely the sense of "on high" or "above." God is Spirit, which, like wind and air, is invisible and ubiquitous. But though God is not these things he is in them in the sense that he reveals himself in them. In this sense he is in the sky, falls in the rain, shines in the sun and moon, and blows in the wind.⁴⁷

Some common by-names, of which there are many, are:⁴⁸

Ɔdomankoma	eternally abundant; fecund creator of all; infinite; absolute; boundless; limitless
Onyankopɔn	supreme embodiment of the shining expanse of the sky; solitary; alone in grandeur
Otweduampɔn	the almighty overseer; the watching one; the dependable one
Otumfoɔ	the omnipotent one; the possessor of visionary insight
Bɔrebɔre	creator; inventor; builder; "architect" of all
Totorubonsu	progenitor and bringer of rain
Atoapem	final; unsurpassable; beyond which one cannot go
Ɔbeannyɛ	uncreated; without beginning
Tɛtɛkwaframua	enduring forever (outside of time)
Brɛkyerehunnyadeɛ	knowing all; omniscient.

In sum, for the Asante, **Onyame** is everywhere, dominates everything, and sees everything - including the thoughts of the minds and the graving of the hearts of human beings. Above all, He is personalized as **Onyankopɔn Kwame** (the Great One who appeared on Saturday).

Abosom

There is no English word for "*abosom*." As already indicated, the *abosom* have often been referred to as "gods" in many writings describing the Asante conceptions of the *abosom* in Semitic or Indo-European theological categories that are foreign to the Asante thought. The origin of the *abosom* lay beyond human society, and their appearances and manifestations in the affairs of human beings are unilateral, arbitrary and interventionist.⁴⁹

An *abosom* (singular) is classified with reference to its source or point of origin within the natural universe. This produces a classificatory subdivision of the *abosom* into three categories: *Atan*, *Ewim*, and *Abo*: water, sky and earth respectively.⁵⁰ Among these *abosom*, the *atan* are the most prominent in the Asante state. Technically, the *atan* are the Asante state divinities. They are believed to derive their powers from rivers. The manifestations of these spirits are known by the term *taa* (derived from River *Tano*), and are further classified by the day of their revelation; for example: *Taa (Tano)*; *Kwabena (Tuesday)*; *Taa (Tano)*; *Kofi (Friday)*. It is generally believed that the *atan* are the most powerful of the *abosom* and that they protect the community but are vengeful if shown disrespect. A well-known myth teaches that there are four main *abosom* in this category: *Tano*, and *Bea* (both rivers), *Bosomtwe* (lake) and *Ɛpo* (the great sea).

The myth shows that these *abosom* were children of *Onyame*. *Onyame* decided to send his children to the earth. He had planned where he would send each of the children. The goat got to know of the plans of *Onyame*. The goat and *Bea* were great friends, so he told *Bea* of the plans of *Onyame*, urging him to arrive before his brothers and their father sent for them. One day *Onyame* sent for his children and *Bea* ran quickly and got there first; so *Onyame* assigned to him the cool and shady forest country which he had intended for *Tano*, his favourite son. *Tano* therefore, was sent to the grassy plains, and each

in turn was given a place different from the original plan, due to the goat having revealed the plan to **Bea**.⁵¹

Onyame sent them to earth so that they might receive honour from humankind and in turn bestow benefits upon them. As the myth indicates, the Asante regard the rivers as having spirits which they derive from the "great Spirit," *Nyame*. The tributaries of these rivers are "their children," and many *abosom* are, in turn, the "children" of rivers. It is believed that as a woman gives birth to a child, so may a river to an "abosom". Therefore, these rivers and streams are regarded as "grandchildren" of *Onyame* and as containing some of his essence or spiritual power, which is transmitted through water.

The relationship between *Onyame* and the *abosom*

The relationship between *Onyame* and the *abosom* defines the place of the latter within spiritual system of the Asante. First, the *abosom* were brought into being, or that they came into being in the nature of things with regard to the divine ordering of the universe. Secondly, the *abosom* are derivatives from Deity. They have no absolute existence; they are in being only in consequence of the being of Deity. Because they derive from Deity, their powers and authorities are meaningless apart from him. Thirdly, each 'abosom' has his own local name, which is descriptive either of his allotted function or the natural phenomenon which is believed to be a manifestation or emblem of his being. For example, 'Tano' is a manifestation of the river 'Tano'. Fourthly, the *abosom* are brought into being as functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe.

The Asante use three expressions to show *Onyame's* relation to the *abosom*. The first expression is *Onyamemma* ("sons of God"). It is in consequence of this derivative relationship that the *abosom* are entitled to be called divinities. It is also in this sense that the Asante

consider these *abosom* as intermediaries. Thus, this relationship is "considered to be one of sovereign and delegated ministers."⁵² The second expression is "abrafoɔ" ("executioners"). As Onyame hates evil, it is believed that the *abosom* are his executioners, bringing sicknesses, disasters and death upon offenders. Thirdly, the *abosom* are known as *Onyame akyeame* (singular-*ɔkyeame*) ("God's linguist or spokesmen"). We can say that the *abosom* serve as special deputies deputized by *Onyame* to exercise more-than-human, but less-than-supreme power. Free to exercise their authority over the world and humans they are responsible for their actions.

Some Causes of the Problem

We are faced with the problem as to whether the *abosom* can be called gods. The crucial question here is: within what frame of reference do we search for an answer? What are the basic assumptions taken and what is the method used in trying to give an explanation? Emefe⁵³ is right when he states that a Judaeo-Christian background is a "perplexing factor" for any scholar who undertakes the study of African traditional religion. Unfortunately, most scholars who study African traditional religion are of that background. This creates a problem in that certain situations in African traditional religion which are quite normal within the context of that religion, when viewed in the light of our Judaeo-Christian background become perplexing, and we tend to ask questions and seek answers not in the context of African frame of reference, but rather in the context of Judaeo-Christian frame of reference. This is where one sees the sense in Okotp 'Bitek's critique referring to African divinities being used "as mercenaries in foreign battles."⁵⁴

One other cause of the problem is the Asante people's practice of praying to and offering sacrifice to the *abosom*. But the Asante pray and offer sacrifice to the *abosom* not because they are gods, a practice which perhaps contributed to the erroneous claim of the Europeans

The Europeans understood sacrifice from their Judaeo-Christian concept. In Judaeo-Christian religion, sacrifice is the highest form of worship and so must be given to God alone. However, in Asante mentality, cultic actions are not categorized in vertical terms of the higher and the lower, but in qualitative terms of the more potent and less potent. Thus, sacrifice is conceived of a cultic action that is most potent in establishing communication with the spirit beings. It is not therefore reserved for God alone but can be offered to all and any spirit being when contact with such beings is required.⁵⁵

A Possible Solution

One important factor in any theoretical reflection is method. And one significant aspect about method is its relation with the object studied. As stated by Paul Tillich, a method is not an "indifferent net" in which reality is caught, but it is an element of the reality itself.⁵⁶ This means that to be appropriate the method for explaining African religious phenomena must incorporate frame of reference of African culture within which such phenomena are intelligible.⁵⁷ Our point of departure in such an investigation must therefore always be a critical examination of the basic assumptions used in our explanation or reflection. African religious thought or situations must be reflected upon within the African cultural context. In other words, an understanding of any African religious fact must always be sought first of all within the context of African worldview and thought system. It is only after this that it is legitimate to attempt to relate such facts to Judaeo-Christian thought and practice.

Unlike the Mesopotamia mythology where gods fought for supremacy against the headship of their father, this is not the case in Asante religious thought. In Asante family the father is the head; his children cannot fight for this position. In addition, unlike the YHWH and the gods, it cannot be said of the Asante religious that *Onyame* was once of equal rank and power with the *abosom* before he rose to supremacy. Among the Asante it is anathema to call an

]bosom, *Nyame* even in lower-case (*nyame*). Therefore, it is incorrect to translate "gods" as *anyame* (pl.) in Asante religious thought as the *Asante Twi Bible* suggests. *Onyame* is known as the only source of every good thing. On this concept of God by the Akan, Rattray⁵⁸ affirms Christaller's observation that "the heathen negroes [sic] are at least to a great extent, rather monotheistic, they apply the term for God only to one supreme being."⁵⁹ Thus just as the portrayal of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible, with the Asante *Onyame* is simply the "Existing One," the only deity.

To solve the problem we may have to find an alternative term for the *abosom* in Judaeo-Christian conception. The nearest but not exactly is to call them "angels" similar to Handy's four-tiered system of divine hierarchy where the lowest level of deities is classified "angels."⁶⁰ However, such a classification is not without problem. The angels, as messengers of the Ugaritic texts, according to Handy, have no volition, but just take orders from above; they cannot do anything except they are ordered to do.⁶¹ On the contrary, the *abosom*, it is believed, have volition and have administrative power; they are semi-autonomous.

In view of this, there is the need for greater terminological care in the description of how the Asante approach the transcendent. The Western missionaries confronted with conceptual-linguistic comparability categorize the *abosom* as "gods." The *abosom* deserve separate and distinct places on a list of technical terms. The term "god" is applied to the only one God, *Onyame*, among the Asante. Before the advent of the European missionaries, the Asante held to the absolute uniqueness of this God. *Onyame* is known as the only source of every good thing.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have shown that the problem of God and the gods in Asante religious thought had its source from the Semitic religions.

including ancient Israel. The article has also shown that the cause of the problem is methodological. Christian missionaries tried to understand Asante religious fact in terms of Semitic and Judeo-Christian categories. The article has shown that *Onyame* is the only deity among the Asante. The *abosom* are not gods and that the idea of gods fighting for supremacy is unheard of among the Asante. The equivalent of the Semitic "divine council" will probably be "divine family," where *Onyame* as father is the head of his humble sons, the *abosom*. It is in the light of this that with p'Bitek and Masolo, I object to the term "Supreme Being" in referring to *Onyame* because it is derived from the transcendental notion of a unified reality at its highest level over against the problem of many. It is clear that the *abosom* are of different category of spirit beings. To refer to them as *anyame*, plural of *Onyame*, is therefore an error of a higher degree. The Asante never confuse the identity of *Onyame* and the identity of the *abosom*. The *abosom* can be discarded whereas *Onyame* cannot. Before the advent of Western missionary traditions of faith, the Asante attitude towards the *abosom* could be said to "depend upon their success.... [They] are treated with respect if they deliver the goods, and with contempt if they fail."⁶² Ryan was right when he wrote:

Finally, it should be noted, in the process of dismantling the category of 'God and the gods' in West Africa... (the Asante)... are better equipped linguistically than are Semites, Greeks, Romans and their inheritors to press the absolute uniqueness of God. There is no need for... *Onyame* (*Onyankopon*) to arise above the "other gods".... It would seem, in fact, that even before Muslims and Christians arrived in the West African forest zone... [the Asante] were assured of supremacy of the One Whom a modern theologian calls "the incomprehensible term of human transcendence".⁶³

END NOTES

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