

JESUS IN AFRICAN TRADITION: THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST IN THE ASANTE PRE- CHRISTIAN RELIGIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Samuel Ofori

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Introduction

The history of Christian expansion has revealed that whenever the Christian gospel enters a new cultural milieu, new questions are asked that have to do with the nexus between the gospel and human cultures. A major question that arises whenever the Christian gospel enters a new cultural context is: How should new converts relate to their cultural past? Or, how far can the gospel be adapted to fit into a culture without losing its essential message? This has been a major issue African Christians have had to grapple with upon their conversion. Ernestina Afriyie's comment on this issue is noteworthy. She states,

For a long time, African Christians have been struggling with the relationship between the Gospel of Christ which they have accepted and their traditional practices. These struggles should have been long past by now. Yet they continue because theologians have still not been able to show the way forward in true conversion by bringing Christ into the places within African communities where He has never been before.⁸⁹

Hans Debrunner makes this observation in the introduction to his book, *A History of Christianity in Ghana*, thus:

After thirty years of experience in many parts of Africa, Dr. H. Ph. Junod said, 'Wherever I went, I found that my Master had been there before me'. This is true also for the

⁸⁹ Ernestina Afriyie, 'The Theology of the Okuapehene's Odwira: An illustration of the engagement of the Gospel and Culture among the Akan of Akropong-Akuapem', 25.

history of Christianity in Ghana. Christ was there before the arrival of the missionaries. He was there in the boisterous and lively atmosphere of that country, the peculiar atmosphere so different from that of some other African countries, animated as it is by an immense zest for life.⁹⁰

Similarly Rattray, after observing the cultural and traditional practices of the Asante, concluded thus:

I sometimes like to think, had these people been left to work out their own salvation, perhaps someday an African Messiah would have arisen and swept their Pantheons clean of the fetish (*suman*).⁹¹

From these statements, it can be deduced that they saw the customs, traditions and practices as pointing to the 'Messiah'. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they walked with the Lord without recognizing Him in their midst. Mugambi made this observation thus:

But the story of Emmaus can be brought to life in Africa. Christ walked with the disciples; He talked to them, 'but their eyes were kept from recognizing Him'. It was not until the end of the journey, by a simple unobtrusive gesture, that their eyes were opened, and the unknown figure was the Lord.⁹²

Paul wrote to the Ephesian church about the gospel as 'God's secret plan hidden through all the past ages (which) has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit' (Eph. 3:5).⁹³ The phrase, 'all the past ages' is not restricted to only the Jewish past. In fact, Paul's letter was written to a Greek audience and the phrase was thus relevant to them. The implication is that Christ is no stranger to any culture. Jesus has never been a stranger to the African heritage. In this presentation, therefore, an attempt is made to locate the Spirit of Christ in the pre-Christian Asante religio-cultural context by examining some of their religious traditions.

90 Hans W. Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana*, 1.

91 R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, v.

92 Judith M. Bahemuka, 'The hidden Christ in African Traditional Religion' in J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (eds.), *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1989): 4.

93 Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996): 66.

The Challenge in locating Jesus in the African religio-cultural context

Locating Jesus in the African spiritual world was a major challenge to most of the early Western missionaries⁹⁴ and even for majority of modern African Christians. Stinton quotes Gatu, who speaks in favor of locating Jesus in the Kenyan pre-Christian past, in an interview thus:

One time, when I was trying to talk about images of God in the African setting, and what God has done and how God has revealed himself through all nations, I found it very difficult to put it to the Revival brethren, particularly when I was trying to use traditional tunes to convey Christian messages. They were challenging me and in fact accusing me of taking the church back to heathenism.

And I said, 'Brethren, now look! If the God that I believe in, who is the Father of Jesus Christ, did not reveal himself in any way to my people of Kikuyuland, I will have nothing to do with that kind of God! Because I believe if he is that kind of God, he must have revealed himself in a certain way to my Kikuyu people, in preparation for the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ. And I said, 'This is why, for me, he's such an important person in my life. And this is why this God is so important, because he never left my people without any witness, even before the coming of missionary Christianity, as it were.'⁹⁵

Even though Gatu spoke with reference to his people, the Kikuyu of Kenya, the sentiments he expressed apply to the whole of the African cultural context, including the Asante context.

According to Andrew Walls, a major theological question in Africa, in our contemporary era has to do with how to cope theologically with the African past. And by coping theologically with the African past, he implies that Africans have the urgent

94 Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004): 11.

95 Gatu in an interview with Diane B. Stinton, cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, 33.

need to understand how God was at work among their own traditions. To him, three stages in dealing with the African traditional heritage can be identified, the missionary stage, the convert stage and the reconfiguration stage. He further contends that Africans are in the reconfiguration stage where African traditions and experience are being reconfigured in Christian terms.⁹⁶ He asserts emphatically that:

Twentieth-century African Christians have to face the question, where was God in Africa's past? It is the first question on the African theological agenda. And it is not answerable in terms of Western theological experience.⁹⁷

Serious efforts, therefore, have to be made to understand the traditions of the Asante religio-cultural context in relation to the Christian gospel. How is Jesus related to Asante religious traditions? How can we make Christianity our own? This is the crucial question that has to be answered. To put it another way, how can the gospel interpret and inhabit the cultural realities of the African context? Bediako is of the view that this is not a matter of superficially classifying some elements as bad and therefore must be discarded and others as good and must be allowed in Christianity to stay.⁹⁸ He approaches the issue through using 'Scripture as the hermeneutic of culture and tradition'.⁹⁹ According to him culture must be made to pass through the prism of scripture for its light and shade to be discerned.

In the Asante religio-cultural context, some of the traditions would be made to pass through the prism of scripture to discover the 'spirit of God already present in the deep symbols of their culture'¹⁰⁰ and draw them into God's activity in Christ. This will be discussed under the heading, Jesus and the Asante Intermediaries.

96 Andrew Walls, 'The Expansion of Christianity: An Interview with Andrew Walls', <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2052>, accessed on 16th September 2010 at 13.30 GMT.

97 Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 97.

98 Bediako, *Biblical Christologies*, 116.

99 Kwame Bediako, 'Scripture as the hermeneutic of culture and tradition', 3-6.

100 Christensen, *An African Tree of Life*, 2.

Jesus and the Asante Intermediaries

In relating to, or dealing with, the Supreme Being or the Transcendent, the Asante have three major intermediaries. These are: Asase Yaa; Nananom Abosom, and Nananom Nsamanfo. When a chief, in prayer, pours libation in the nkonwadanmu (stool room) or during ceremonial occasions, he addresses these intermediaries. How does the gospel and for that matter Jesus Christ relate to these intermediaries? Bediako makes an assertion which attempts to answer the above questions:

He comes in as Lord and Saviour. But in our own tradition before he comes, we have a concept of salvation, we have ideas of expiation, mediation, placating our ancestors. We have an idea that if we harm them, they do something to us. My view is that Christ comes in and assumes the roles of all these points of our piety which we addressed to our understanding to various sources of power; it could be God, it could be deities, it could be ancestors.¹⁰¹

What Bediako is putting across by this assertion is that Christ fulfills the roles that the traditional intermediaries performed and these give us pointers to locating him in the African context. In this presentation, an attempt would be made to examine the Asante intermediaries in relation to the roles Jesus came to perform as the ultimate mediator between God and humanity. (I Timothy 2:5).

Jesus and Asase Yaa (*Earth goddess*)

The concept of Asase Yaa is not peculiar to only the Asante people. It is, in fact, a concept that is common to most African societies. Asare Opoku is emphatic on this point. According to him,

All over Africa the Earth is regarded as a spirit, and in Akan society she ranks after God and is the second deity to be offered a drink at libations.¹⁰²

101 Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies...', 99

102 Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International, 1978), 56.

Many Christians see libation prayers as offensive to their Christian consciences because, in the prayers, drink is offered first to Asase Yaa, among the intermediaries, after it has been shown or pointed to Onyankopɔn. Who is Asase Yaa? The Akan say that Asase nyɛ bosom, ɔnkyerɛ mmusu, which means 'the Earth is not a deity, she does not divine.'¹⁰³

However, like deities, she receives offerings and sacrifices. This is done at the beginning of the farming season, before seeds are planted into the soil. Fowls are sacrificed on the plot of land for the blood to pour on the ground. Food may also be prepared and scattered on the four compass points of the plot of land to be farmed.¹⁰⁴ The Earth cannot be cultivated without the permission of Asase Yaa. The Earth is also offered sacrifice anytime a grave is to be dug for burial.

The Earth is the source of all the bounties that *Onyankopɔn* gives to mankind. In fact, no blessing of *Onyankopɔn* can be enjoyed independent of the Earth. Life itself is dependent on the Earth. Hence all petitions to *Onyankopɔn* for blessings have to pass through Asase Yaa, and that is why she is the first of the intermediaries to be called upon in libation prayers.

With the coming of our Lord Jesus, Paul writes of a new dispensation in which all things are brought together in Christ. In the letter to the Ephesians he writes:

That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in Him. (Ephesians 1:10) NIV.

Verhey and Harvard refer to this passage as God's good future, which is his plan 'to gather up all things in Christ.' (1:10).¹⁰⁵ The Greek rendering of 'to gather up' is *anakephalaioo*, in which one can identify the Greek word *kephale* which means 'head.' They are therefore of the view that 'to gather up' implies 'bringing all things together under one head, namely Christ.'¹⁰⁶

103 Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

104 Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

105 Verhey and Harvard, *Ephesians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 46.

106 Verhey and Harvard, *Ephesians*, 46.

According to Foulkes, three ideas are present in the use of the word *anakephalaioo*, and these include, 'restoration, unity, and the headship of Christ.' The implication is that all things have to be restored to their intended function when brought under the headship of Christ.¹⁰⁷ When all things are gathered together in Christ, Jesus takes over the role of Asase Yaa because he is the source of all the spiritual blessings. Paul writes to the Ephesians thus:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Ephesians 1:3) NIV.

According to Guthrie, 'Paul thinks of the contrast between a shadow and its substance as a fitting illustration of the relationship between a ritual religion and Jesus.'¹⁰⁸ In the Asante traditional religion, the Asase Yaa spirit can be seen as a shadow that finds its reality in Christ.

The gospel, our Lord Jesus, came that people might have life, and that they might have it in abundance (John 10:10). Life and the abundance of it involves both physical and spiritual blessings and Jesus, as mediator, communicates both physical and spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3). The source of blessings is *Onyankopɔn* and in Christ he gives all the spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms. Jesus becomes a better mediator because having tasted our humanity, he is in a better position to appreciate our weaknesses and know our needs, as it is written:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

The incarnation makes Jesus a better mediator because he can sympathize with our weaknesses and knows our needs better.

107 Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 60.

108 Donald Guthrie, 'Colossians' in D. Guthrie et al, *New Bible Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 1148.

The Asante also regard Asase Yaa as a keen upholder of truth. Asare Opoku states:

Whenever the veracity of a statement is in doubt, the person who made it would be challenged to touch the tip of his tongue with some soil to prove that he is telling the truth.¹⁰⁹

Jesus Christ is also a keen upholder of truth, infact, he is the truth. It is stated in John 1: 14 thus:

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (KJV).

That Jesus is full of 'truth' (Greek: *aletheia*) implies that he is 'reliable both in words and actions. He can be depended upon to carry out what he promises, and his words are always true.'¹¹⁰ He is the truth (John 14:6) and he desires from men 'truth in the inward parts.' (Psalm 51:6). With Jesus being the truth, the one who accepts him does not need to prove his integrity or the veracity of his statements, because such a person is expected to let his 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No', 'No' (Matthew 5:37).

Asase Yaa, as a deity, 'abhors the spilling of human blood'¹¹¹, or murder. Whenever a person spills the blood of another, that is, when a person commits homicide, *Asase Yaa* has to be appeased by sacrifices. Jesus Christ, or the gospel also abhors murder. Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder', and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool' will be in danger of the fire of hell (Matthew 5:21-22, NIV).

It can be deduced from this passage as France observes, that Jesus goes behind the act of murder itself to indicate that anger and hatred which give rise to murder are also blameworthy in God's sight.¹¹²

109 Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 57.

110 Kruse, John, 71.

111 Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 57.

112 R.T. France, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 119.

The day of *Asase Yaa* is Thursday. Yaa is a name given to female persons born on Thursday. The Asante people observe this special day as a day of rest and people are not to till the land.¹¹³ Anyone who broke this taboo was severely punished because of the general fear among the people that this could bring evil or calamity on the whole society.¹¹⁴ There was also the fear that whoever entered the forest on that day could encounter a danger, therefore, the Asante people celebrated Thursday, '*Yawoada*' as a day of rest. This can be compared to the biblical Sabbath by which the Jews abstained from work on Saturdays. Like the Sabbath, the Asante people do not go to farm on Thursdays. Unlike the Sabbath during which the Jews did not do any type of work at all, the Asante people could do some work at home on Thursdays.

Relating this to the gospel, Jesus is the one who gives rest. He says in Matthew 11:28-29:

Come unto me all you that labour and are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest and you will find rest for your souls. (NIV)

Jesus gives a better rest. The day of rest given by *Asase Yaa* was a shadow of the real and better rest that is in Jesus Christ. Jesus also promises an eternal rest for those who remain faithful to him. It is stated in Revelation 14:13 thus:

Then I heard a voice from heaven say: 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labour, for their 'deeds' will follow them. (NIV)

The Asante also believe that *Asase Yaa* receives all men at death into her bowels. Libation is poured to her to formally request for her permission to dig a grave 'so that a child of *Asase Yaa* may be buried in her womb.'¹¹⁵ In the gospels, Jesus is the one who promises to receive believers at death. He told the disciples:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my father's house are many rooms; if it

113 Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

114 Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

115 Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56-57.

were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am (John 14:1-3. NIV).

Jesus takes the responsibility of receiving believers into his father's house. In Luke 23:43, the dying thief on the cross pleads with Jesus to remember him in his kingdom, and Jesus promised that he would be with him in paradise that very day. If Asante Christians have to grapple with the question, 'Where was Christ in the African past?' the spirit of *Asase Yaa* has her reality in Jesus Christ who comes to assume all these roles that the Akan believed were performed by *Asase Yaa*.

It is clear from the discussion so far that *Asase Yaa* is not a demonic spirit. In fact, she is closely related to *Onyankopɔn* and performed the mediatorial role that Scripture reveals Christ has performed as evident through his death and resurrection and that he continues to perform today and forever (1 Timothy 2:5-6 and Colossians 1:19-20). Parrinder asserts that:

Heaven and earth provide the stage where the human drama is played out. Men lift up their eyes to the sky and naturally regard its spirit as transcendent and mighty. But they live on the earth, plant seeds in it, derive food from it, and in its depths the dead are buried. So Mother Earth is nearest to men and linked with them by many bonds.¹¹⁶

Onyankopɔn and *Asase Yaa* are therefore the basis or foundation for human existence. It is important to note how drummers address the spirit of the earth:

*Spirit of Earth, sorrow is yours,
Spirit of Earth, woe is yours,
Earth with its dust,
Earth, while I am yet alive,
It is upon you that I put my trust,
Earth, who receives my body.*¹¹⁷

116 Geoffrey Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions* (London: Sheldon Press, 1963), 53.

117 R.S. Rattray, *Religion & Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 162.

This implies that in death and in life, the Asante believe that human beings depend on the spirit of the earth. This spirit cannot be an evil and demonic spirit. If the spirit of Christ has always been with the Asante people and Christ had been with the Asante before the coming of Western Christianity, then he was with them as the spirit of the earth – Asase Yaa, the mediator. The Jews saw Christ in their past traditions. He was the Passover lamb, he was the High Priest, and he was the rock that followed them on the desert. In the Asante context, he can be identified with Asase Yaa.

Jesus and the Abosom

Abosom are the next after Asase Yaa to be offered drinks when libation is poured. Ernestina Afriyie has argued that in translating the Bible into the Twi language, the word '*bosom*' was used to translate 'idol' or 'god' and therefore are regarded as enemies of God. This, according to her 'directly connects *abosom* with *ahonhommɛne* (demons)'¹¹⁸ and therefore they have been the target of attack by Christians since the introduction of Christianity by Western missionaries to the Asante people.

However, traditionally, the *abosom* are believed to have been derived from *Onyankopɛn*. According to Christaller, *ɔbosom* is a '*tutelar* or guardian spirit of a town or family; imaginary spirits, subordinate to God.'¹¹⁹ They are referred to as *Nyame mma* (children of God) or *Nyame akyeame* (spokesmen of God).

Christaller further explains that they are worshipped or consulted by the 'natives' and generally called 'fetishes' by the Europeans, but contends that the term 'fetish' would better be restricted to '*asuman*', charm, or, in order to avoid confusion, the term 'fetish' should not be used at all to refer to *ɔbosom*. Afriyie is of the view that '*abosom*' are not 'gods' and are not worshipped. She contends:

Abosom are not enemies of *Onyankopɛn*. While it may seem that the *abosom* in Akan religion are worshipped as 'gods', they are not. They are only revered.¹²⁰

118 Ernestina Afriyie, '*The Theology of Okuapemhene's Odwira...*' 221.

119 Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Twi)*, 43.

120 R.S. Rattray, *Religion & Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 162.

In actuality, the *abosom* are derivatives from *Onyankopɔn* and are more or less ministers sent to the earth to perform specific functions on his behalf. The Asante people interact more with the *abosom* than with *Onyankopɔn* and seek help and other benefits from them and therefore it appears the people see the *abosom* as ends in themselves. Afriyie explains this state of affairs as deriving from a certain philosophy which is portrayed in the Asante political organization, that 'a person only goes before the *Ohene* as a last resort'¹²¹ and therefore they do not go directly to *Onyankopɔn* but have to pass through the *abosom* who thus become intermediaries between God and the people.

Afriyie argues that the concept of *abosom* must have a place in Akan Christianity because of a seeming paradox. She asserts:

There must be a place for the concept of *abosom* in Akan Christianity otherwise there is a paradox of an *Onyankopɔn* who has all along until the coming of the gospel depended on 'evil spirits' for His operations.¹²²

Before this paradox can be resolved, there is the need to examine the origins and functions of *abosom* in the traditional context which will then enable us to place them in the Christian context.

Rattray, in his work *Ashanti*, gives the genealogy of the Asante gods. He narrates an Asante myth that recounts that *Onyankopɔn* had various sons one of whom was *bayɛyere* (favorite son). *Onyankopɔn* made a decision to send the children down to the earth so that 'they might receive benefits from, and confer them upon mankind'.¹²³ These sons bore the names of the rivers or lakes and they include:

Tano (the great river of that name).

Bosomtwe (the great lake near Coomassie)

Bea (a river).

Opo (the sea).¹²⁴

121 Ernestina Afriyie, 'The Theology of the Okuapehene's Odwira...', 223.

122 Ernestina Afriyie, 'The Theology of the Okuapehene's Odwira...', 223.

123 Rattray, *Ashanti*, 145-146.

124 Rattray, *Ashanti*, 146.

The tributaries of these rivers also constitute their children. These water bodies became the abodes of Nyame mma (the children of God) or abosom and include such ones as *Bosomtano*, *Bosomtwe*, *Bosombea*, and *Bosompo*. Rattray reports a priest as saying: 'As a woman gives birth to a child, so may water to a god'.¹²⁵ The Asante have come to this theological belief because they see water coming down from the skies, believed to be the abode of *Onyame*, and when it comes down it gives life to them and also enables their farm produce to grow. These waters run off into the rivers and therefore that should be the abode of the spirit from *Onyame*. Rattray notes:

Water in Ashanti, some in a greater, others in a lesser degree, are all looked upon as containing the power or spirit of the divine creator, and thus as being a great life-giving force.¹²⁶

The Asante people therefore see the rivers or water bodies as the abodes of Nyame mma. The abosom were expected to give life, that the people may have long life and avoid death. Nyame mma (the children of God) have come down from *Onyankopɔn*, the source of life, to bring life to the people. This expectation of the people is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came down from *Onyankopɔn* to bring life to men.' John states it clearly thus:

For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16) NIV.

The *abosom* were also expected to bring healing to the sick. This aspiration is also met in Jesus Christ who brings healing. Peter said of him:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24). NIV.

125 Rattray, *Ashanti*, 146.

126 Rattray, *Ashanti*, 146.

Jesus thus fulfills all the functions that the abosom performed, and having identified himself with humanity by becoming a man, he knows our weaknesses and understands our situation and therefore is a better mediator. Afriyie asserts that:

In much the same way, what the abosom did for the Akan, Jesus Christ is now doing in a better and more comprehensive way.¹²⁷

Jesus, in the Asante context, can therefore be presented as the '*Obosom Kɛsɛ*' (the greatest *Obosom*). In the Graeco-Roman context of Christianity, Jesus was called Kyrios which means 'Lord' and therefore became the 'Lord of Lords.'¹²⁸ These Graeco-Roman lords were in competition with God and therefore enemies of God, but in the Asante context, the *abosom* have always cooperated and worked with and for God.

The Asante people go to the water bodies for life, because they see water as a life giving force. Jesus is the one who has the real water that wells unto eternal life. He said to the Samaritan woman,

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (John 4:13-14) NIV.

In that conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus said that if she had asked him, he would have given her 'living water'. The woman misunderstood Jesus' mention of water and took it literally. Jesus, however, was speaking of spiritual water that would be by far superior to any that came from the well. He meant that he was the living water that gives eternal life (John 4:14). As Harrison succinctly puts it, 'He tried to explain that He could plant a fountain of eternal life in the woman's heart'¹²⁹. In the view of Poole¹³⁰ the text, John 4:13-14, was excellently expounded by Jesus in John 7:38-39 when he said:

127 Ernestina Afriyie, '*The Theology of Okuapehene's Odwira*', 224.

128 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 52.

129 Everett F. Harrison, *John: The Gospel of Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 31.

130 Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible, Vol. 3* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 296

‘Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive’ (NIV).

In the Asante context, these words of the Lord Jesus Christ imply that the water, which is the abode of abosom now springs out of a person when he receives the gospel, so that a believer becomes the abode of the Spirit, and therefore becomes an *abosom*. He no longer needs to go to the river, since he becomes the bearer of the Spirit that gives life. In the Jewish era of Christianity, Jesus was considered by the believers as their High priest (Hebrews 3:1) and he has made believers kings and priests (Revelation 1:6), and a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9).

With the priesthood of all believers it can be deduced that the Jewish priesthood would be rendered obsolete. In the Asante context, Jesus as the *abosom Kɛsɛɛ* makes the believers abosom, who thus have access to the throne room of *Onyankopɔn* and this makes the mediatorial role of the abosom obsolete.

It must be noted, however, that not all the abosom are derived from God. Afriyie makes this observation thus:

Not all ahonhom that are called abosom are derived from *Onyame*. There are some ahonhom *bɔne*, which are also called *abosom* by the Akan.¹³¹

Asare Opoku makes a distinction between those abosom that are derived from *Onyame* and those that are not.¹³² Those from *Onyame*, according to him, are the Tete Abosom (the tutelary spirits) who have always been with the people from their ancient past. Harvey gives a description of the Tete Abosom thus:

The Tete Abosom occupy a particularly important position in the Akan cosmology. As the ‘children’ of *Onyame* (*Onyame mba*), the Tete Abosom are said to be ‘ancient’ and have been a major focus of veneration since perhaps the inception of Akan society.¹³³

131 Ernestina Afriyie, ‘The Theology of Okuapehene’s Odwira...’ 224.

132 Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55.

133 Marcus Harvey, ‘Medial Deities and Relational Meanings: Tracing Elements of an Akan Grammar of Knowing’ in *Journal of Africana Religions*, Volume 3,

The other group of *abosom*, the *abosom abrafoɔ* are those brought in from other places. Harvey calls them *Suman Brafoɔ* and according to him:

They are said to originate from northern Ghana, and appear younger than the *Tete Abosom* when understood as historical developments related to an intermingling of societies that required additional protection.¹³⁴

They cannot be associated with *Tete Abosom* because according to Asare Opoku, they are 'physical objects or instruments used in the practice of magic which have been elevated to the status of gods.'¹³⁵ They are also distinguished from the *tete abosom* by the fact that they can be consulted by people to kill their enemies or cause them to suffer ill-health or other misfortunes.¹³⁶ Afriyie contends that these are not from Onyame. She asserts:

Not all *abosom* are intermediaries between human beings and Onyame... The Akan say '*suman sɛe abosom* (*suman* spoils the (*ɔbosom*)). This is because *asuman* are not derived from Onyame but from *mmoatia* and other *ahonhom*. *Abosom* which make *asuman* cannot be derived from Onyame.¹³⁷

Opoku Onyinah describes them as anti-witchcraft shrines that arose in the early part of the 20th century characterized mainly by their witch-hunting activities.¹³⁸ Among several of such shrines were *Abirewa* (old lady), *Hwemso* (watch over me), *Tigare*, *Tongo*, *Kankamea* and *Kune*, *Kwaku Firi*, *Kwasi Kukuro* and *Mframa* (wind).¹³⁹ These were importations and a corruption of the traditional religious system. These were not intermediaries between the people and God and therefore should not be

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134 Harvey, 'Medial Deities and Relational Meanings...' 415.

135 Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55-56.

136 Kofi Asare Opoku, 'Aspects of Akan Worship' in *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 2, June 1972, 2.

137 Ernestina Afriyie, 'The Theology of Okuapehene's Odwira', 224. **Suman* refers to charms.

138 Opoku Onyinah, *Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Ghana* (Blandford: Deo Publishing, 2012), 65.

139 Opoku Onyinah, *Pentecostal Exorcism*, 69.

considered as part of the traditional Asante worship. However, Christians being ignorant of this distinction classify all the abosom as evil and enemies of God.

Jesus and the ancestral function

In libation prayers that are offered to *Onyankopɔn*, *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* come after *Asase Yaa* and *Nananom Abosom* when drinks are offered. The Asante people believe that when a person dies and his spirit successfully gets to *asamando* (the land of the dead), he becomes an ancestor. They believe that when a person dies, he enters another realm of existence characterized by power'.¹⁴⁰ Being in the spirit realm, they are closer to *Onyankopɔn* and therefore in a better position to help the living by mediating for them in the palace of *Onyankopɔn*, receiving benefits from him for their relatives or kinsmen. Among the Asante people, the relationship between the living and *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* is consanguineous, and it is traced through matrilineal descent. Death does not terminate a person's membership of the matrilineage; *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* remain part of the matrilineage and the living expect from them care and protection from sickness, death and other calamities, and the acquisition of various benefits, for example, long life, many children, or great wealth. Pobee asserts that the most potent aspect of Akan religion is the cult of the ancestors' ancestors'.¹⁴¹

Veneration of *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* is highly prominent in many African societies, and also among the Asante people. Walls acknowledges this fact when he asserts that:

If as is argued here, a new form of Christianity is emerging shaped by the configuration of African life, it will be bound to take account in some way – not necessarily always in the same way – of the ancestors.¹⁴²

Kwame Bediako attempts to demonstrate that Christ can be

140 Samuel Ofori, *Christianity and African Culture: The Gospel in Asante Funeral Rites* (Accra: Pentecost Press Ltd., 2014), 64

141 John S. Pobee, *Towards an African Theology* (Abingdon: Partlenon Press, 1979), 46.

142 Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 128; Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: the Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, 31

presented as a better or greater ancestor when he asserts that:

Jesus has actually demonstrated, through his resurrection from the dead, the possession of an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16). This can never be said of ancestors.¹⁴³

He asserts further that:

While not denying that spiritual forces do operate in the traditional realm, we can maintain that ancestral spirits, as human spirits that have not demonstrated any power over death, the final enemy, cannot be presumed to act in the way tradition ascribes to them.¹⁴⁴

According to him, therefore, 'Jesus is the only real and true Ancestor and source of life for all mankind, fulfilling and transcending the benefits believed to be bestowed by lineage ancestors'.¹⁴⁵ Jesus is a better ancestor and surpasses the natural ancestor because he belongs to the eternal realm as divine spirit, being the Son of God, unlike the ancestral spirits which are human spirits essentially. Bediako further argues that ancestors are honoured and considered worthy of that, for having lived among us, but Jesus through the incarnation has 'achieved a far more profound identification with us in our humanity than the mere ethnic solidarity of lineage ancestors can ever do'.¹⁴⁶ Jesus, therefore, deserves more honour as an ancestor. Moreover, with regard to ancestors being models of behavior, Jesus provides a better model of exemplary behavior that humanity should emulate because of his sinless life. All these arguments go to support his assertion that 'Jesus Christ fulfils our aspirations in relation to ancestral function too.'¹⁴⁷

Pobee poses a question, which raises a problem in the application of the ancestral function to the gospel. He states:

Why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe, and nation?¹⁴⁸

143 Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 31.

144 Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 31.

145 Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 31.

146 Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 31.

147 Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 31.

148 John S. Pobee, *Towards and African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press,

What makes Pobeë's question significant is the fact that *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* belong primarily to lineage and family. This makes beliefs about *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* seem to be beyond the reach of the gospel since, in his humanity, Jesus Christ of Nazareth does not belong to any lineage or family in Asante. Bediako attempts to provide a solution to this problem by arguing that *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* have no existence of their own but are a projection by the living community of their social values and spiritual expectations in the transcendent realm. This is because, according to him, *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* have no existence of their own which is independent of the community that produces them and determines who qualifies as one of the *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ*.¹⁴⁹ The beliefs about *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* are therefore relevant because of their functional value and Jesus thus fulfils, in a better way, the functions that *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* are expected to fulfil.

A prominent chief I interviewed also postulated that anyone who is seen to have contributed significantly to the Asante nation can be considered an ancestor even if the person is not related naturally. He gave the example of Okomfo Anokye, the traditional priest who facilitated the formation of the Asante nation. He is believed to be an Akuapem person by birth, but has become one of the *Nananom Nsamanfoɔ* of the Asante people because of his contribution. To him, therefore, the work of Jesus Christ on the cross for humanity, qualifies him as an ancestor of all ethnic groups.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

In this presentation, efforts have been made to examine some Asante religious traditions in the light of the gospel, that is, how these traditions relate to the gospel of our Lord Jesus. As Emmanuel Asante has observed:

1979), 81.

149 Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 30.

150 Interview of a chief on 16th August, 2014.

The essence of Christianity is the reality and message of incarnation, the message of the God who has become one of us, and the incarnational nature of Christianity demands that it enters into, and engages with, the world around it.¹⁵¹

Efforts have therefore been made to reconcile what is said in scripture with what is known of God's dealings with the Asante people in their tradition. It has been revealed that there are areas of continuity between the traditional practices and rituals and the Christian present. Magesa has noted that:

The mistake of missionary Christianity was to disregard the common stream of living history that joins one tradition to other religious traditions of humanity. Its error consisted in actually stressing aspects of discontinuity between Christianity and African cultures and traditional religion to such an extent that they excluded the aspects of continuity between them.¹⁵²

Akubueze Okwuosa, a Nigerian scholar has said 'Had missionaries taken time to view the African form of religion from a much more friendly perspective, they would have discovered a common ground for cooperation.'¹⁵³ From a friendly perspective, therefore, the Spirit of Jesus is seen in shadow in the Asante intermediaries of Asase Yaa, *Nananom Abosom*, and *Nananom nsamanfoɔ*.

All these demonstrate the fact that Jesus has never been a stranger to the spiritual world of the Asante people. This should change the attitude of the Christian church in Ghana towards the traditions of the people. As Appiah Kubi has rightly noted, 'if the churches in Africa are to grow and develop, they must be allowed to take root in the soil of Africa where they have been planted.'¹⁵⁴ This study can serve to guide the church as

151 Emmanuel Asante, 'Interpreting and Articulating the Faith: Lessons from Early Christian History for Africa Today' in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 17, No. 1, June 2014, 21.

152 Emmanuel Asante, 'Interpreting and Articulating the Faith: Lessons from Early Christian History for Africa Today' in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 17, No. 1, June 2014, 21

153 Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998): 21.

154 Akubueze Okwuosa is quoted in Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion*, 21.

it engages with the cultures and traditions of various cultural groupings of people to make the gospel relevant in their contexts.

The current shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity to the southern continent, especially to Africa, opens the way for adopting traditional African categories to develop an authentically African form of Christian worship. In this way, Africa can surely make a profound contribution to world Christianity.