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FEATURED ROUNDTABLE

BLACK LIVES MATTER? AFRICANA RELIGIOUS
RESPONSES TO STATE VIOLENCE



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JOURNAL DESCRIPTION

The *Journal of Africana Religions* (JOAR) publishes critical scholarship on Africana religions, including the religious traditions of African and African diasporic peoples as well as religious traditions influenced by the diverse cultural heritage of Africa. This interdisciplinary journal embraces a variety of humanistic and social scientific methodologies, encompassing history, anthropology, Africana studies, gender studies, ethnic studies, religious studies, and other allied disciplines. The chronological scope of the journal is comprehensive and invites research into the history of Africana religions from ancient to contemporary periods. The journal's geographical purview is global and comprises Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Atlantic islands (such as Cape Verde and São Tomé), the Caribbean, and Europe. The journal is particularly concerned with publishing research on the historical connections and ruptures involved in the spread of Africana religions from within and beyond Africa. We encourage authors to examine multiple dimensions of Africana religions, including the relationship between religion and empire, slavery, racism, modern industrial capitalism, and globalization. For more information, please visit our web site www.africanareligions.org.

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Medial Deities and Relational Meanings

Tracing Elements of an Akan Grammar of Knowing

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Abstract

To date, few phenomenological studies analyze African religions at the level of epistemology. This essay engages in such an analysis with a focus on the cosmological tradition associated with the Akan of southern Ghana. I argue that medial Akan deities can be understood as constitutive elements of a grammar of knowing, the latter designating a mode of meaning construction serving as a formative component of an epistemology rooted in the significantly relational idea of *sunsum* (spirit). I argue further that Akan conceptions of the *abosom* (medial deities) in conjunction with certain attendant ritual observances and practices signal three epistemological principles that can be described as follows: (1) knowing as a function of regular contact with the spiritual world (*asamando*), (2) knowing as a heterogeneous, paradoxical experience marked by both power and limitation, and (3) knowing as an ethical mandate.

Keywords: Akan culture, African religions, phenomenology of religion, epistemology

Where might one locate foundational sources of indigenous knowledge within distinct yet heterogeneous West African cultural systems? To what degree is this possible? Yorùbá sociologist of knowledge Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí reminds us that “Africa is already locked in an embrace with the West; the challenge is

how to extricate ourselves and how much. It is a fundamental problem because without this necessary loosening we continue to mistake the West for the Self and therefore see ourselves as the Other.”¹ In our ever-changing, increasingly technocentric contemporary context of Western modernity, with its universalist scope, Judeo-Christian moorings, and far-reaching preference for totalizing categories such as “religion” and “world religions,” does indigenous African knowledge exist in any significant way? Is such knowledge anything more than an antiquated vestige of the so-called premodern world, with little to no purchase in the current global theater of ideas? These questions represent the basic concerns informing this study.

Engaging the queries leads to serious consideration of discrete African cosmologies. It is my general position that these cosmologies contain the conceptual, theoretical, and practical building blocks with which indigenous African knowledge is meaningfully constructed. We find a specific example in the focus of this study: namely, the expansive—and at points internally contested—cosmological repertoire of the Akan, a sizable West African ethnolinguistic group found mainly in the southern half of Ghana—particularly the Asante, Brong Ahafo, and Eastern and Upper Volta regions—as well as parts of Togo and Côte d’Ivoire.² The Akan language (Twi or Twi-Fante) contains variations that reflect a range of subgroups, including the Abuakwa, Ahanta, Akuapem, Akwamu, Asante, Akyem, Bono, Bosome, Fante, Kotoku, Kwawu (or Kwahu), Sefwi, and Wassa.³ The social organization of each subgroup or clan (*abusua/ntɔn*) is based on a traditional system of matrilineal descent that now includes eight consanguinal descent groups, each having a related subgroup.⁴ These descent groups and subgroups, whose names may differ from region to region, consist of the Oyoko (Dako), Bretuo (Tena), Aduana (Abrade), Asakyiri (Amoakaade), Aseneɛ (Adonten), Agona (Toa), Asona (Dwumina, Dwum), and Ekoɔna (Asɔkɔre).⁵ As the previous points indicate, the term “Akan” has multiple referents. Rather than eliding this fact, my use of the term draws attention to an intricate cosmology that informs how the various Akan subgroups interpret reality.

We also find among the Akan an approach to knowledge construction, or, if you will, an epistemological orientation, predicated on a profound appreciation of the importance of ethical relationality in both the spiritual and physical domains. If we accept the idea that one of the most vexing problems of the twenty-first century is that of forging more humanely equitable transnational *relationships* across diverse ethnocultural boundaries in a globalized world yet to purge itself of reconstituted modes of imperialism, then Akan cosmology, as an ethically relational thought system, emerges as a particularly relevant cultural tradition

deserving of investigation in its own right.⁶ This article treats specific deities in Akan cosmology classed by Akan oral tradition as ontologically medial between the cardinal Akan deity Onyame, humans, and the natural world. This treatment is informed by the seminal work of distinguished religious theorist Charles Long, which strongly suggests the need for *African-based phenomenologies* of Africana religious experience grounded in African indigenous structures of meaning. Also informing this study is Akan scholar Anthony Ephirim-Donkor's recent work, which emically analyzes patterns of meaning making and critical religio-philosophical interpretation among the Akan.⁷

Therefore, unlike other efforts to examine African cosmologies, the focus adopted herein does not privilege "mythology" as the category best suited to the critical exploration of Akan cosmology. Rather, Akan cosmology will be considered as an epistemology shaped by a distinct *grammar of knowing*, by which I mean a mode of meaning construction giving rise to an epistemology. Moving past a limited emphasis on the principal deity Onyame, I argue in this essay that medial Akan deities (*abosom*) can be understood as constitutive elements of a grammar of knowing rooted in the significantly relational idea of *sunsum* (spirit). I argue further that Akan conceptions of the *abosom* in conjunction with certain attendant ritual observances and practices signal three epistemological principles that can be described as follows: (1) knowing as a function of regular contact with the spiritual world (*asamando*),⁸ (2) knowing as a heterogeneous, paradoxical experience marked by both power and limitation, and (3) knowing as an ethical mandate.

Scholarly Background

It is necessary to provide, if only briefly, some academic context for this study so as to further clarify its significance. Twentieth-century researchers placed a heavy emphasis on interpreting African cultures through the Western-constructed prism of "religion." It is difficult to overstate the importance of this emphasis. Through the prism of "religion" we have come to erroneously imagine African traditions as dangerous, inferior products of the "other" lacking in autonomous intelligibility apart from Christianity or Islam and unworthy of philosophical exploration uncontrolled by popular academic discourses on the complexities and pressures of modern globalization.

The twentieth century witnessed a proliferation of scholarly efforts by Western observers such as Belgian missionary Placide Tempels, British missionary Geoffrey Parrinder, and British anthropologist Godfrey Lienhardt

to explain the problem of “African religions.” In the latter half of the same century, by which time colonial discourses constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by such figures as Friedrich Max Müller, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl had already declared the “primitive” status of precolonial non-Western cultures,⁹ scholars like Tempels, Parrinder, and Lienhardt were busy demonstrating what they believed to be the theo-philosophical proximity of African religions to Christianity.¹⁰ As argued in 1970 by Ugandan writer Okot p’Bitek, this methodological preoccupation with examining African religions primarily through reliance on Christian conceptual schemas reflected not only Christian apologist agendas but also a studied disinterest in African religions as such.¹¹

Also marking the twentieth century was the appearance of studies by *African* scholars that addressed the handling of African religions in Western discourses. Motivating these studies was a need to correct egregious misrepresentations of African religious cultures authored by Western experts. Doubtless, studies produced by Jomo Kenyatta, Joseph (Kwame Kyeretwie) Boakye Danquah, John Mbiti, and others played an important role in elucidating some of the fundamentals of African religions for the Anglophone West. But equally if not more important was the role of these studies as bulwarks against the primitivization of Africa in Western scholarship.¹² Put differently, early interest in the academic study of African religions on the part of African scholars was shaped by a concern with disentangling a web of errors woven mainly by European interpreters. Many African scholars of this period were also influenced by African nationalist thought. As Willie Abraham notes, African nationalism emphasized the “fortification of [African] independence or the regaining of it,” and the belief that “the identity of . . . African cultures, impregnated by a common experience of extra-continental domination and common aspirations, creates a magnetic bond which can be used to bind all regions into a pan-Africa” that can “triumph over” its “colonial Jeremiad.”¹³ These ideas gained considerable traction after the Second World War in part because of successful independence movements in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Guinea-Bissau, to name a few.

Its partial African nationalist roots notwithstanding, the study of African religions remains strongly influenced by the methods of ethnography and cultural anthropology. Nonetheless, Western scholars seem to have learned from the critical voices of African scholars. As a result, subsequent scholarship on African religions appears to have largely abandoned many of the biased assumptions and theological schemes of previous discourses.¹⁴ Yet, when current studies turn their attention to African religions, they often investigate

African forms of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam under the “world religions” rubric, thereby subordinating or ignoring altogether indigenous African spiritual systems.¹⁵ Such narrow investigation is understandable given the long history of Judaic, Christian, and Islamic presence and imposition in Africa. However, this approach runs the risk of maintaining the dualistic, hierarchical, and otherizing “ours/theirs,” “Christian/pagan,” “civilized/primitive” frame of perception that, as the work of Jonathan Z. Smith and Tomoko Masuzawa suggests, forms the originaive core of the “world religions” typology as a preeminently Western intellectual construct.¹⁶

Unsurprisingly, scholars since at least the early 1960s have also been preoccupied with the sociocultural impact of *Protestant* Christianization in particular, Islam, urbanization, cultural commodification, deforestation, and other effects of modernity on various regions in Ghana.¹⁷ In differing ways, these scholars seem determined to imagine Africa—especially Ghana—as a context on which modernity has left an indelible imprint somehow more apparent than that found in other modern societies. Ghana has emerged over the past six decades as a popular target for historians and social scientists keenly concerned with the cultural consequences of industrial development and the rise of elite Christian social classes. Industrial development and the ongoing correlation in contemporary Ghana between Protestant Christian identity and socioeconomic and political power represent major historical dynamics in the country and thus are not insignificant. Indeed, Birgit Meyer, Benjamin Kankpeyeng, Christopher DeCorse, and Mariama Ross have drawn attention to cultural cleavages and erasures resulting from these and other historical dynamics in Ghana.¹⁸

In continuity with the long-standing preoccupation just discussed, studies from 1987 onward that specifically address themselves to indigenous religion and healing in Ghana and other African countries often rely on interpretive models that stress social change and perceived interreligious influence. An example is Charles Anyinam’s article “Traditional Medical Practice in Contemporary Ghana.” Based on research conducted in the mid-1980s in the Kwahu region of eastern Ghana as well as in Kumasi, Anyinam analyzes the impact of such factors as population growth and the introduction of new systems of administration and production on traditional medicine. He concludes: “On the one hand, the number of priest-and-faith healers in both the urban and rural areas as well as urban herbalists has increased substantially; on the other hand, a process of attenuation seems to be occurring in the recruitment level among urban and rural cult-healers as well as rural herbalists.”¹⁹ Studies published by Birgit Meyer and Adam Mohr in 1992 and 2009, respectively, examine the imposition of “pagan” concepts among the Ewe

of Ghana's Volta Region and the eventual recognition of Western biomedicine and "Christian therapy" by Akan Presbyterians in southeastern Ghana during the 1960s.²⁰

Two other recent studies worth noting are "'Akwantemfi' ('In Mid-Journey'): An Asante Shrine Today and Its Clients," a 2008 article by T. C. McCaskie, and "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa," a survey-based report produced in 2010 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Concentrating on the historic Medoma shrine in southern Ghana (particularly the city of Kumasi), McCaskie's article calls attention to the resilience of indigenous Asante belief despite the rise of Pentecostalism.²¹ Similarly, the Pew Research Center report indicates, among other things, the persistence of African indigenous religions in Tanzania, Mali, Senegal, and South Africa despite the northern spread of Islam in Africa and the southern spread of Christianity on the continent since 1900.²² It is clear from the Pew Research Center report and McCaskie's article that indigenous spirituality remains an active component of Africa's religious landscape, calling into question scholarly discourses that give the opposite impression.

What I find acutely troubling in the studies considered above is the implication that indigenous Africa is of interest only when seen from a perspective privileging Western notions of global modernity and their obsessive attention to the issues of intercultural contact, technological development, social change, and cultural hybridity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in academic discourses on African indigenous religions. These discourses suggest that the contemporary relevance of African religions depends on their conceptual confinement within ever-unfolding historiographies of Protestant Christian and Islamic expansion and influence. Accompanying this suggestion is the much deeper assumption that indigenous Africa does not on its own merit serious investigation at the level of theory, and certainly not at the level of *ideas*.²³ We are encouraged to think of Africa mainly as a context struggling to adjust to changes wrought by the impositions of Western modernity. Generally speaking, Africa is made intelligible to the West principally through the language of "social change," and the term "social change" often encodes predominant concerns about the degree to which African societies have achieved cultural conformity with the modern West. It appears scholars deem most important the conjoined problems of what the modern West is doing to Africa and how Africa is *responding*.

It may seem that I am moving in the direction of the Western-derived, dehistoricizing orientalism that Palestinian American theorist Edward Said exposed in the late 1970s.²⁴ However, this impression is specious at best, for it

lends itself to two questionable presuppositions: (1) historiographic methods endorsed by Western scholars, which overwhelmingly privilege *written* records as authoritative data, are somehow most appropriate to the study of *orally* based cultural traditions such as those of the Akan of southern Ghana, and (2) these methods, along with ethnographically informed approaches, provide greater access to the sociopsychological processes that shape human behavior, thereby yielding the most robust understandings of human cultures. Such presuppositions fail to seriously consider, for example, the late Haitian anthropologist and historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, whose work cogently suggests that “history” is less about direct “truths” and more about fundamental ambiguity, authorized narratives, and power.²⁵ We find in the work of Dianne Stewart and Tracey Hucks a critique that is especially instructive on this matter:

We should not misread the project of cogently analyzing and presenting African epistemologies, philosophies, and “theologies” as naively static treatments of African religious thought and cultural patterns. . . . [P]rematurely dismissing all such projects assumes that Africans lack the capacity and cultural mechanisms to establish ideals and ethical norms that endure over time. . . . The human sciences have always taken for granted the import of reflections on grand Western (Christian) ideals such as love, justice, democracy and human rights, despite their imperfect application across governing apparatuses of the diverse nation-states constituting “the West.”²⁶

When scholars privilege the discursively buried meaning systems of indigenous Africa, they often encounter disciplinary resistance requiring adherence to methodological standards that generally discourage imagining Africa as a multifarious constellation of discrete thought traditions. Yet, as Stewart and Hucks rightly point out, these standards tend not to be invoked against scientific and philosophical studies that presumptively position Western civilization as the true matrix of all significant intellectual activity and innovation. Indeed, scholars in agreement with the perspectives of Timothy Fitzgerald and Russell McCutcheon, for instance, would likely dismiss out of hand studies focusing on the epistemologies embedded in African cosmologies. Studies of this kind would be regarded not as rigorous scholarly inquiry but as veiled theology.²⁷ In addition to hermetically enclosing the academic study of religion within the constructed boundaries of the social sciences, the perspectives of Fitzgerald and McCutcheon also foreclose the possibility of methodological debate.

Other concerns about the phenomenological analysis of Akan cosmology pursued herein may cite the fact that the data included are not primarily ethnographic in nature. To be sure, ethnography can be of tremendous value in developing emically pitched investigations that temper extrinsic factors which otherwise may lead to an overly impositional refashioning of data according to the researcher's own culturally determined theoretical imagination.²⁸ Nevertheless, like any method, ethnography is not without limitations. If we take seriously the work of social theorists C. Wright Mills and Stuart Hall, then we must acknowledge that no methodology furnishes unmediated knowledge of human beings and the world; such knowledge is rendered largely opaque by the ever-compounding ideational constructions, negotiations, and consensuses of sociocultural environments and institutions.²⁹ What modern ethnographers would do well to understand from this insight, argues Norman Denzin, is that "the real world is no longer the referent for analysis. Ethnographies of group life are now directed to . . . televisual and cinematic narrativity and its place in the dreams, fantasies and interactions of everyday people."³⁰ As expressions of society's ideational constructions, instances of "televisual and cinematic narrativity" complicate ethnography's interest in human experience and meaning. This complexity invites an expansion rather than a contraction of methodological approaches to studying modes of human knowledge production.

To be clear, the study presently undertaken is not an ethnography. While I at times use sources that include ethnographic data, my primary aim is to investigate Akan cosmology as a knowledge system fully capable of instructing researchers on its mode of meaning construction. My work takes a major cue from Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (of the Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou of northern New Zealand), whose groundbreaking 1999 book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* impugns the very notions of "history," "writing," "theory," and "research" as constructions of Western imperialism severely in need of a critical reimagining that makes rehumanization and cultural reclamation among indigenous populations a principal academic agenda.³¹ The phenomenological method I employ in this essay takes an additional cue from Stewart and Hucks's innovative emphasis on transdisciplinarity. They explain that "the transdisciplinary scholar transgresses all relevant disciplinary boundaries to interlace varied tools, methods, frameworks, and datasets in pursuit of a research problem. . . . Inter/multidisciplinary scholarship leans toward transdisciplinarity but does not necessarily proceed from problem-driven inquiries that demand consolidated research methods in the pursuit of comprehensive proposals."³² To the extent that it "proceeds from" the "problem-driven inquiries" introduced at the beginning of this essay, which require pliable methods

geared toward understanding intricate, irreducible “datasets” rather than policing rigid disciplinary boundaries, the phenomenological study below moves in the direction of transdisciplinarity. Moreover, a goal of the essay is to contribute to the “research lineage” developed by Ghanaian scholars such as Kofi Asare Opoku, Noah Komla Dzobo, Kwasi Wiredu, and Kwame Gyekye.³³ This lineage interpretively examines Akan and other African thought systems in accordance with the linguistic, symbolic, and performative repertoires through which African communities traditionally articulate these systems.

Organization

The remaining analysis is divided into three main sections. The first section discusses *sunsum* (spirit) both as a category whose meaning is somewhat contested in the Akan intellectual tradition and as a conceptual bedrock underpinning Akan notions of the *abosom* (medial deities). The second section examines a range of *abosom* described in Akan cosmology. These spirit beings include *Asase Yaa* (the earth deity), the *Tete Abosom* (an expansive class of tutelary deities), the *Suman Brafoɔ* (ritually inspirited physical objects most often used to repel negative spiritual activity), the *Mmoatia* (dangerous forest-dwelling spirits who are regarded as masters of plant medicine), the *Sasabonsam* (a frightful spirit also believed to dwell in forests), and the *Nsamanfo* (ancestors). Due to their profound significance within Akan communities as well as the epistemological clues they provide, certain ritual observances and practices related to *Asase Yaa*, the *Tete Abosom*, the *Suman Brafoɔ*, and the *Nsamanfo* will also be considered. The final section elaborates the examination of the previous section. This elaboration is accomplished through a critical exploration of how Akan notions of the *abosom* and practices buttressing these notions suggest the status of the *abosom* as integral elements of a grammar of knowing upon which rests an epistemology that can be partially described in terms of knowing as a function of regular contact with the spiritual world, knowing as a heterogeneous, paradoxical experience marked by both power and limitation, and knowing as an ethical mandate.

Sunsum

Sunsum is a foundational concept in Akan cosmology signifying belief in a deeply relational universe densely populated with unseen powers that formatively impact all facets of the spiritual and material worlds, including the lives of human beings. As such, *sunsum* frames how the *abosom* are generally

understood by the Akan. We must note, however, that some Akan scholars dispute the meaning of sunsum. This disagreement centers on the question of whether sunsum should be interpreted *primarily* as spirit or as human personality. For instance, J. B. Danquah and K. A. Busia—both of whom were writing around the mid-twentieth century—highlight the latter connotation of sunsum by emphasizing the term's apparent connection to the notion of personality. Danquah writes that “we now know the notion which corresponds to the Akan ‘*sunsum*,’ namely, not ‘spirit’ as such, but personality which covers the relation of the ‘body’ to the ‘soul’ (*ɔkra*).”³⁴ Similarly, Busia describes sunsum as the basis of the human ego.³⁵

In his monograph *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, first published in 1987, Kwame Gyekye challenges the perspective of Danquah and Busia as well as other researchers whose interpretations of sunsum attenuate its spiritual meaning.³⁶ Gyekye concedes that both Danquah and Busia correctly identify evidence within Akan culture indicating a semantic association of sunsum with personality and ego. This evidence exists in the form of common sayings. For example, when a person is regarded as having a strong personality, the Akan often say *ne sunsum ye duru* (“[Her] sunsum is ‘heavy’ or ‘weighty’”). Likewise, when in the presence of someone with an unusually “impressive” or powerful personality, the Akan say, *ne sunsum hye me so* (“[She] has an overshadowing sunsum”), or *ɔwɔ sunsum* (“[She] has spirit”). Persons may also be described as having a “submissive” or “weak” sunsum.³⁷

However, in Gyekye’s view, it does not follow from the adduced evidence that sunsum is understood by the Akan *primarily* in reference to human personality or ego. Gyekye makes three main points in support of his claim: (1) The Akan generally use sunsum when discussing realities believed to be fundamentally “mystical, nonempirical,” or spiritual in nature, such as *sunsum yare* (“spiritual disease”).³⁸ (2) As an immaterial “force” that vivifies spiritual entities and all other created things, sunsum is ultimately an expression of the power of the cardinal Akan deity Onyame. Unlike *ntoro* (a “semen-transmitted characteristic” that stems from a human father), sunsum “derives” only from Onyame.³⁹ (3) The Akan identify sunsum as the part of the self that is active during dream states, which are understood to be purely nonphysical experiences.⁴⁰

Gyekye’s perspective is especially compelling given its continuity with the spirit-based orientation of Akan cosmology. His interpretation of sunsum facilitates an understanding of the abosom both as nonempirical instances of sunsum and as active agents whose sunsum enables their efficacious presence in the physical world. As Gyekye explains,

The spiritual beings are said to be insensible and intangible, but they are also said to make themselves felt in the physical world. They can thus interact with the physical world. But from this it cannot be inferred that they are physical or quasi-physical or have permanent physical properties. It means that a spiritual being can, when it so desires, take on physical properties. That is, even though a spiritual being is nonspatial in essence, it can, by the sheer operation of its power, assume spatial properties.⁴¹

Sunsum participates in the tangible world, but sunsum itself is not a tangible reality. Absent the principle of sunsum, the abosom would be unintelligible. Sunsum establishes the inseverable relationship of these deities to Onyame as well as the ontological conditions under which these deities interact with the “spatial” world. As Gyekye, Danquah, and Busia indicate in various ways, sunsum is a source of spiritual meaning and activity that grounds the human personality. But unlike the interpretations proposed by Danquah and Busia, Gyekye’s interpretation clarifies the basic notion that, as an essentially numinous reality, sunsum is reducible neither to the human personality nor to the material realities related thereto. The religio-philosophical category of sunsum lends a measure of intelligibility to the abosom. Yet, this intelligibility is not exhaustive; as beings that have their origin in Onyame, the abosom are only partially available to human knowledge. Therefore, one cannot master knowledge of the abosom.⁴²

What follows is a phenomenological analysis of Akan notions of the abosom. An understanding of sunsum as an outgrowth of Onyame’s power is vital in establishing a working sense of what Asase Yaa, the Tete Abosom, the Suman Brafo, the Mmoatia, the Sasabonsam, and the Nsamanfo mean within the larger religio-philosophical framework of Akan cosmology. Sunsum establishes this working sense by providing a conceptual context within which to think about the abosom in relation to both the spiritual and material worlds. We begin our analysis with a consideration of Asase Yaa.

Asase Yaa

The term *Asase Yaa* conveys the idea that the earth itself is a spirit being. Unlike Onyame, Asase Yaa is a sexed being and thus also carries the name Aberewa (“old woman/mother”).⁴³ Asase Yaa is “outranked” only by Onyame. Therefore, ritual libations (which typically consist of millet-infused water or

schnapps) are poured as an offering to Asase Yaa only after they are poured for Onyame.⁴⁴ Furthermore, no shrines are erected in honor of Asase Yaa, just as no shrines are erected for Onyame, nor does one find priestly traditions specifically related to her. This reflects the belief that “everyone has direct access to [Asase Yaa] and her bounty is accessible to all.”⁴⁵ Hence, unlike other oracular deities in the Akan tradition, Asase Yaa is not consulted for assistance in times of travail. She alone constitutes a unique class of spirit being. This belief gives rise to the Akan saying, *Asase nye bosom, ñkkyere mmusu* (“The earth is not a god, she does not divine”).⁴⁶

Asase Yaa’s unmediated accessibility notwithstanding, she is the subject of a sacred day of observance. On Thursday, Asase Yaa’s sacred day, the cultivation of land is considered a taboo, the violation of which exposes the community to harm or evil. Commenting further in his classic 1978 text *West African Traditional Religion*, Opoku adds, “It is also believed that anyone who ventures into the forest on these special days will encounter the most unpleasant things imaginable and may not even survive to tell his experience.”⁴⁷

Asase Yaa is also the focus of various forms of sacrifice (*afɔre*, *afɔrebɔ*), some of which involve farming, burial of the dead, and appeasement due to human bloodshed.⁴⁸ For instance, before planting crops, Akan farmers sprinkle the blood of sacrificed fowl on the land they wish to cultivate. Additionally, these farmers cook different foods that they then scatter in four directions (north, south, east, and west) as another offering to Asase Yaa. The belief undergirding both of these rituals is that the farmers cannot cultivate the land unless granted permission to do so by the “owners” of the land—namely, Asase Yaa and the ancestors (Nsamanfo).⁴⁹

Sacrifice is also made to Asase Yaa prior to the digging of graves. Such an offering communicates the belief that human beings originally entered the physical world through the “bowels” of the earth and must therefore return to the earth in death. Hence, before the digging of any grave, a libation is poured. The libation serves as a formal request for permission from Asase Yaa to dig a grave “so that a child of Asase Yaa may be buried in her womb.”⁵⁰ This reinscribes the Akan belief in the sacrality of the earth and human beings’ relationship with the earth. Moreover, to the extent that this practice seeks harmonious relationship with the natural world, it promotes an existential condition of balance.

The same can be said of large-scale sacrifices made to Asase Yaa in response to human bloodshed, which she “abhors.”⁵¹ Failure to appease Asase Yaa after the shedding of human blood can result in communities suffering tremendously from “untold calamities.”⁵² Harmonious relation with the natural world is also contingent on human beings’ commitment to the virtue of honesty, as

Asase Yaa is viewed as a “keen upholder of truth.” Thus, when the truthfulness of a claim is impugned, the claim’s author is “challenged” by the community to touch the tip of his tongue with soil in order to establish the accuracy of the claim.⁵³ This test suggests the involvement of Asase Yaa in the communal process of ethical discernment. When considered along with her austere commitment to truth, this test makes clearer the crucial importance of personal ethical integrity in the sacrificial appeasement of Asase Yaa. Joining Asase Yaa in her concern for the maintenance of ethical traditions and behavior within Akan communities are the Tete Abosom, a second class of medial deities to which our attention now turns.

Tete Abosom

The Tete Abosom occupy a particularly important position in 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.⁵⁴ Veneration of the Tete Abosom stems from their relationship to Onyame. As “children” of Onyame, the Tete Abosom are commissioned by Onyame to serve the interests of human communities, who in turn offer ritual devotion. In their role as *Onyankopɔn akyeame* (“linguists and mouthpieces of Onyame”), the Tete Abosom communicate with human beings and Onyame, thereby functioning as intermediaries between the two.⁵⁵

While the Tete Abosom are ambulant, they are also closely associated with particular locales as well as natural objects such as mountains, hills, rocks, trees, plants, brooks, lakes, and rivers.⁵⁶ As “communally owned” deities, the Tete Abosom can be subcategorized based on the societal sector with which they are traditionally affiliated.⁵⁷ For instance, the river/thunder deity known as Tanɔ (or Ta Kora) is traditionally affiliated with the large-scale sociopolitical institutions of the Asante and is therefore categorized as a state deity.⁵⁸ Other Tete Abosom are affiliated with, for example, specific clans or lineages, fertility, and professions such as hunting, fishing, farming, artisanry, or entrepreneurship. These Tete Abosom are therefore appropriately categorized as clan, fertility, or patron deities.⁵⁹ However, regardless of their respective societal affiliations, all Tete Abosom share the common function of protection, which is to say that their work is directed toward safeguarding human communities from danger and “misfortune.”⁶⁰ Hence, the Tete Abosom are designated as “tutelar” deities.⁶¹

Although it is said that there are “hundreds” of Tete Abosom, determining their number with precision is difficult, if not impossible, as some of these

deities are capable of “birthing” new deities in response to the needs of their devotees.⁶² Perhaps the incalculability of the Tete Abosom is to be expected, given the extensity of their field of operation. The degrees of importance attributed to the various Tete Abosom in their respective domains of operation correlate with the human needs for which particular Tete Abosom are responsible. Because “national” Tete Abosom serve the needs of large Akan political institutions on which small towns and villages depend, these deities are afforded greater importance than local Tete Abosom that serve small communities and families.⁶³ For instance, of prime *national* importance among the Asante are the river/thunder deity Tanɔ, the lake deity Bosomtwe, the earth deity Asase Yaa, and the rock deity Mmem Boɔ; Tanɔ is associated with the River Tanɔ and with thunder, Bosomtwe with a lake of the same name, Asase Yaa with the earth, and Mmem Boɔ with the rock of Mmem.⁶⁴ However, Tete Abosom such as Mmɛ Sasa (known also as Abɔfoɔ Mmɛ), Kobiri, Oboɔ, and the sea deity Bosompo (to whom Tuesdays are dedicated and to whom sacrifices [*afɔrebo*] are offered annually to “ensure an abundant fish harvest as well as safe passage for the fishermen who venture out to sea”) are considered of lesser importance because they operate only on the local level.⁶⁵

The following ontological point deserves emphasis: the focused operations of various Tete Abosom within either the national realm or the local realm do not imply captivity within the natural objects and phenomena these deities inhabit. The fact that Tanɔ, for example, is said to reside in the River Tanɔ and Abɔfoɔ Mmɛ is said to reside in the rock of Mmem should not be taken to mean that the River Tanɔ, thunderstorms, and the rock of Mmem are deities, despite the common practice among devotees of making no spoken distinction between these deities and their putative dwelling places.⁶⁶ The same is true of physical shrines built by priests (*akɔmfo*) for particular Tete Abosom.⁶⁷

In addition to their role as *Onyankopɔn akyeame* (“linguists and mouthpieces of Onyame”), the Tete Abosom also serve as “spokespersons” for the ancestors (Nsamanfo). The ancestors act as spiritual custodians of society’s moral “code.”⁶⁸ Opoku writes, “The ancestors are believed to have the power to punish or reward the living. They punish those who violate the traditionally sanctioned [moral] code, and reward those who keep it. The traditionally sanctioned code includes the customs and traditions of the society . . . which constitutes what is acceptable in the community.”⁶⁹ It is therefore of paramount importance that human beings maintain a working knowledge of the traditional moral obligations to which they are subject. The Tete Abosom are crucial in the maintenance of such knowledge. They clarify for human beings the “wishes” of the ancestors, thereby facilitating proper appeasement of the

ancestors and the procurement of the latter's protection and favor. This is a reason that veneration of the Tete Abosom through ritualized prayers, songs, and offerings is so integral to the spiritual life of the Akan. The function of the Tete Abosom relative to the ancestors signals their role as moral agents who buttress human beings' relationship to Onyame and the spiritual world. This ancestral function also accentuates the Tete Abosom's role as spiritual bulwarks against "calamities" such as "bad crops, poverty, and sterility."⁷⁰

As mentioned earlier, though nationally affiliated Tete Abosom and local Tete Abosom share in common a tutelary role, the former's role is considerably broader in scope. For instance, national Tete Abosom are often relied on for information regarding the future welfare of a nation.⁷¹ Historically, this has been especially true during periods of war. Detailed foreknowledge of the result of an armed conflict provides a nation with a strategic advantage that increases the chance of success. In reference to the wartime prognostications of national Tete Abosom, Peter Kwasi Sarpong writes in 1967 that "should they [the Tete Abosom] foresee defeat, it becomes incumbent on them to prescribe the necessary 'medicines' for victory."⁷²

Similar expectations are placed on national Tete Abosom amid other forms of social crisis as well. Sarpong explains the point further: "When a nationwide epidemic breaks out, all eyes and hopes turn to them [the Tete Abosom] for relief and solace. If a chief falls sick, he is left at the mercy of his divisional gods to find out why he is sick and how to cure him. Certain calamitous events are attributed to angry gods, and so, not infrequently, people go to them to propitiate them."⁷³ The efficacy of the Tete Abosom in various situations bespeaks their adaptability.⁷⁴ This characteristic explains why "war-gods turn into agricultural gods when adopted by farming people, agricultural gods beat their hoes into spears in time of war, [and] a black-smith-god becomes a fishing-god when he falls into the hands of fishermen."⁷⁵

Specific Tete Abosom are the focus of communal worship at local shrines in Ghana. Such worship may occur on a deity's (*ɔbosom*'s) "sacred day" or during the *Adae* festival, which is held on "unlucky days." The state festivals of Ohum, Odwira, and Ahobaa, all of which feature "thanksgiving and rejoicing," are also occasions for communal worship. Moreover, annual festivals held in honor of certain Tete Abosom involve communal worship as well.⁷⁶

Communal worship of the Tete Abosom is a highly rhythmic, performative event in which drumming, singing, and dancing are all central practices. Having been ritually "purified" through sexual abstention and other traditional means prior to devotees' arrival at a Tete Abosom's shrine, the priest (*ɔkɔmfo*) plays an integral role in the worship experience as the main "actor"

and therefore, accompanied by “attendants,” positions herself in the center of the ritual space as songs are sung.⁷⁷ Songs performed at shrines during communal worship are usually drawn from a repertoire that celebrates an *ɔbosom*’s “origin, prowess, and dependability.”⁷⁸ When worship commences, the *ɔkɔmfo* has usually already entered an altered state (*kom*) in which the *ɔkɔmfo* “carries” a single *ɔbosom* or multiple *abosom* who use the body of the *ɔkɔmfo* to express themselves to those present.⁷⁹ Once the *ɔbosom* “alights” (*nsie-yee*) on the “head” of the *ɔkɔmfo*, the *ɔkɔmfo* performs *Akɔm* (“ritual dancing”) for much of the ceremony while dressed in a *dɔɔ* (“raffia skirt”) or *batakari* (“smock”).⁸⁰ Before performing *Akɔm*, the *ɔkɔmfo* will sometimes toss *hyirew* (“white clay”) into the air above and look upward. This symbolic gesture indicates the *ɔkɔmfo*’s “recognition” of and “dependence” on Onyame. The *ɔkɔmfo* then tosses some of the *hyirew* on the ground as an acknowledgment of Asase Yaa and humans’ dependence on her. During other worship ceremonies, the *ɔkɔmfo* might make the same gesture of recognition and dependence with a sword by pointing the sword upward and then down toward the ground below, at which point *hyirew* is used to draw a white circle on the ground. The *ɔkɔmfo* will then dance within the circle.⁸¹

Akɔm is a ritual pregnant with meaning. The dancing may “re-enact some period or incident in the sacred history of the deity or the tribe,” or “depict the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of the deity which distinguish him [or her] from others.”⁸² As suggested earlier, the principal goal of *Akɔm* is communication, and this communication is mediated by movement. As Opoku notes, “There is communication between the priest and the deities as well as between the worshipers and the priest. Through the dance movements the priest communicates, and the movements say more than verbal utterance.”⁸³ *Akɔm* highlights the “dramatic” element of communal worship among the Akan. This dramatic element compels devotees to be active participants in the worship ceremony, responding verbally and physically to the communications of *Akɔm*.

According to J. H. Nketia’s study *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*, which appeared in the early 1960s, *Akɔm* consists of twelve dances.⁸⁴ The first dance performed during *Akɔm* is *ntwaaho*. While performing *ntwaaho*, the *ɔkɔmfo* spins around continuously as singers invoke the appropriate *ɔbosom*. The following is an example of a song sung during this initial dance:

Ɔbɔɔnyame ee,
Asase oo nyee.

Ɖbɔɔnyame aboa me.
Asase aboa me,
Akɔm ba.

Hail Onyame, the Creator.
Hail the Earth.
Onyame, the Creator has helped me.
Earth has helped me,
Child of cult.⁸⁵

Working in conjunction with the singing and drumming of shrine worshippers, ntwaaho sets the stage for the manifestation of an ɔbosom or multiple abosom. Without communal singing, drumming, and the performance of ntwaaho, abosom will neither manifest nor communicate with assembled worshippers.

Ntwaaho is followed by a second dance known as *adaban*. In this dance, the ɔkɔmfo moves back and forth in a linear manner during songs of “invocation and supplication.”⁸⁶ Adaban is important in the sequence of Akɔm movements because it helps further establish a ritual atmosphere conducive to the manifestation of spirit. As adaban is performed, the following song may be sung:

Nyee ee!
Yee Akyena e, bra oo.
Bribi reye me oo,
nyee, nsuo a snyaa agyinaeɛ,
Tanɔ, bra oo.
Bribi reye wo mma.
Nyee ee!
Yee Akyena e, bra nnɛ oo.
Bribi reye yen oo.

All hail.
Yes, Akyena, come along.
Something is happening to me.
Hail the water that found a stopping place.
River god, Tanɔ, come along:
Something is happening to your children.
All hail.

Yes, Akyena come today,
for something is happening to us.⁸⁷

Adaban is followed by two similar dances known as *abɔfoɔ* and *abɔfotia*. These dances simulate the movements of a hunter pursuing prey while also symbolizing the Tete Abosom's role as "hunters" of evil.⁸⁸ The movements of *abɔfoɔ*, *abɔfotia*, *adaban*, and *ntwaaho*, and the various other movements of the many dances comprising the Akɔm repertoire, are regarded by the Akan as signs of the presence of spirit. Said differently, the movements of Akɔm serve as tangible nodes of contact between shrine worshippers and the spiritual dimension. Nketia's analysis is helpful here:

The dance motions are interesting to watch, but the combination of these with trembling motions, leaps and gesticulations instills awe and terror into the onlookers. For believers, there is assurance of the divine presence in all these, for while trembling and falling into ecstasy a priest is no longer himself but the embodiment of the spirit of his god working through him. The words that fall from his lips, his suggestive gestures, and any features he introduces into the drama such as impersonations of creatures, climbing of trees, etc., are carefully noted.⁸⁹

Akɔm may last for an entire day or night. However, there are rest periods during which the ɔkɔmfo might "walk around the circle and shake hands with worshipers and onlookers" while sharing messages from his deity via an *ɔkyeame* (linguist).⁹⁰ Also, during this time the community's infirm are brought to the ɔkɔmfo for healing, which then prompts the ɔkɔmfo to communicate with the spiritual world through divination (*ebisadze*, "to ascertain or inquire") in order to precisely identify necessary ritual procedures and medicines.⁹¹

Communal worship ends when the manifesting ɔbosom concludes its communication with the assembled worshippers. The ɔbosom departs from the ɔkɔmfo, who immediately "collapses into the arms of attendants."⁹² Gradually, the ɔkɔmfo regains her original personality, which was previously "displaced" by the visiting ɔbosom. As a malleable vessel of spiritual power and insight who behaves as the visiting ɔbosom wishes, an ɔkɔmfo typically has no recollection of what transpires during manifestation (*nsie-yee*). Having communed with spirit and among themselves over a meal at the conclusion of worship (food and drink are often served), devotees are reinvigorated and sometimes continue singing and dancing after the ɔkɔmfo exits the ceremonial area. The communal worship described above is an important means of fortifying the

Akan belief in the tutelar function of the Tete Abosom.⁹³ Protection is a role also fulfilled by the next group of deities to be examined: the Suman Brafoɔ.

Suman Brafoɔ

The Suman Brafoɔ constitute another class of deities in Akan cosmology. 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.”⁹⁴ Importantly, it is misleading to associate the term “deity” with the Suman Brafoɔ in the same way the term is associated with the Tete Abosom. This is so because Tigare, Kune, Nana Tongo, and other Suman Brafoɔ are, as Opoku explains, “physical objects or instruments used in the practice of magic which have been elevated to the status of gods.”⁹⁵ Though, as deified “objects or instruments,” the Suman Brafoɔ occupy an ontological position that often “merges” with that of the Tete Abosom, they are nonetheless regarded as distinct.⁹⁶ For instance, while the Suman Brafoɔ are engaged through privately owned shrines and are sometimes described as “medicine,” they do not always operate in a tutelary manner.⁹⁷ Unlike the Tete Abosom, the Suman Brafoɔ “can be influenced to kill or bring sickness upon one’s enemies.”⁹⁸ However, it seems the Suman Brafoɔ are most commonly invoked as protection against harmful interference stemming from the activity of “evil powers.”⁹⁹

As an inspirited “instrument,” a Suman can be composed of a number of different materials. Substances extracted from plants and trees are often used in the construction of a Suman because of their well-established efficacy as sources of spiritual power.¹⁰⁰ In some cases, a Suman’s power may also derive from the Mmoatia (unpredictable and frequently malevolent forest-dwelling spirits who are masters of plant medicine), the Sasabonsam (a “monstrous, evil” spirit also said to dwell in forests), *abayifo* (humans who regularly utilize spiritual power in destructive ways), or communication with the nonancestral dead.¹⁰¹

A person seeking assistance from a particular Suman may elect to visit a shrine and place herself “under the protection” of the deity affiliated with the Suman.¹⁰² After obtaining the Suman from a shrine or purchasing it from an ɔkomfo or Mmoatia-trained herbalist (*Sumankwafo*), the person must then privately worship the Suman at home on a daily basis to secure the Suman’s protective services.¹⁰³ Such worship, which requires moral rectitude, may involve prayers, gifts of libations and kola nuts, or the sacrificial “sprinkling” of animal blood on the Suman.¹⁰⁴

Some smaller Akan communities are organized around the worship of the Suman Brafoɔ. Devotees in these communities declare their “allegiance” to the Suman Brafoɔ and, in so doing, subject themselves to strict moral regulations prohibiting “adultery, thieving, scandal-mongering,” and the like.¹⁰⁵ Historically, the penalty for violating this moral code involved large fines or, in severe cases, death by the power of a Suman. Moreover, because of Suman priests’ facility in communicating directly with the Suman Brafoɔ via *ebisadze*, other devotees commonly request private shrine “interviews” with these priests in hopes of gaining personal “favors” from a Suman such as “prosperity in trade, increased cocoa yield, cures for barrenness and illness,” and “victory over enemies.”¹⁰⁶ Such requests entail obligatory prestation in the form of “money, fowls, sheep,” or other items desired by the Suman. A Suman will inflict serious punishment on devotees who do not fulfill this obligation.¹⁰⁷ Punitive behavior in response to relational transgressions—especially those involving the sacred realm of the forest—is also demonstrated by another group of spiritual entities, known as the Mmoatia.

Mmoatia

Unlike the Suman Brafoɔ, the Mmoatia (“little people”) are often malevolent. The Mmoatia are forest-dwelling spirits who assume the form of short creatures no more than twelve inches tall. According to Akan lore, these spirit-creatures rely on a “whistle language” for communication, have “curved noses and yellowish skins,” and feet that “point in the opposite direction.”¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, bananas are their favorite food.¹⁰⁹

Those who wittingly or unwittingly enter the forest home of the Mmoatia uninvited are met with hostility. Trespassers may be “beaten” and temporarily held in secluded locales. In most cases trespassers are kept alive while in captivity through the provision of bananas, and after a period of time are instructed to return home.¹¹⁰

As suggested previously, the Mmoatia are not entirely malevolent. They are renowned among the Akan for their expertise in plant medicine. Furthermore, instead of hoarding this knowledge, the Mmoatia occasionally share it with humans who later become specialists in plant medicine (*Sumankwafo*) with the ability to devise potent cures for “unusual diseases.” When considered together, the malevolent and educative tendencies of the Mmoatia indicate the ambivalent nature of their relationship with the human world.¹¹¹ Such ambivalence is

typically not referenced in descriptions of the fearsome Sasabonsam, the next medial spirit to be discussed.

Sasabonsam

Distinguishing the Sasabonsam from the Mmoatia, the Suman Brafoɔ, and the Tete Abosom is its characterization as a categorically “evil spirit.” The Sasabonsam takes on the form of a winged “forest monster” and often resides in the *odum* (*Chlorophora excelsa*) and *onyaa* (*Ceiba pentandra*) trees. Moreover, the Sasabonsam keeps company with *abayifo*, those who deploy spiritual power for pernicious reasons.¹¹² Hence the Akan saying, *Sasabonsam kɔ ayi a, ɔsoɛ ɔbayifo* (“When Sasabonsam attends a funeral, it lodges with the ɔbayifo”).¹¹³

The appearance of the Sasabonsam is frightening. It is described as having “the head of an animal with long black hair, a flaming mouth and a long tongue which sticks out most of the time.”¹¹⁴ The Sasabonsam also has hooves, wings, and a unique tail, at the end of which is attached a snake head. The creature wraps its elongated, snakelike tail around the trees on which it perches and uses its formidable wings to fly deep into the forest. It preys on hunters, travelers, and others who enter forests intentionally or wander into them accidentally.¹¹⁵ On the spectrum of spiritual power that dynamically articulates the Akan cosmos, the Sasabonsam is firmly situated on the extreme destructive end, whereas a sixth class of medial spirits, the Nsamanfo (ancestors), are ensconced on the constructive end.

Nsamanfo

In Akan cosmology, the Nsamanfo function as a source of spiritual connection between the living and the dead. As deceased humans now existing as wiser, more powerful spiritual beings in the ancestral realm (*Nsamankyir*, *Samanadzie*), the Nsamanfo can be felt “everywhere” and “at any time.”¹¹⁶ The Nsamanfo live in “close” relation to Onyame and are eclipsed in esteem among the Akan only by Onyame and Asase Yaa.¹¹⁷ It should clearly be noted that not all deceased humans become Nsamanfo. The attainment of ancestorhood depends on the kind of life a person led prior to death. The role of the Nsamanfo as the “backbone” of Akan society requires that the Nsamanfo consist only of persons whose physical lives were “exemplary.” The Nsamanfo are individuals

who “lived in anticipation of the end [death]” while also acquiring “material opulence” and demonstrating the sociocultural norms and moral “virtues . . . extolled by the matrikin.”¹¹⁸ Furthermore, ancestorhood is reserved exclusively for those who reach old age, produce children, and die a “good death.” A “good death” is a death resulting from a cause other than an accident, suicide, cowardly violence, or so-called unclean diseases such as “lunacy, dropsy [edema], leprosy and epilepsy.”¹¹⁹

The moral authority of the Nsamanfo encompasses earthly communities. This moral authority compels the Nsamanfo to regularly visit their matrikin as family elders in order to impart their accumulated wisdom.¹²⁰ The great wisdom of the Nsamanfo explains, in part, why they are frequently the recipients of prayers, libations, and other offerings. Such rituals also signify the role of the Nsamanfo as intermediaries who can “negotiate boons for their living descendants.”¹²¹ However, the significance traditionally afforded to the Nsamanfo by Akan societies is not strictly limited to moral authority and material blessings. For the Akan, the Nsamanfo are also “founders” of Akan societies.¹²² As such, the Nsamanfo are protectively concerned about the well-being of their descendants and the human communities of which they are a part. The Nsamanfo will therefore punish anyone whose behavior threatens the well-being of descendant communities.¹²³

The presence of the Nsamanfo in the lives of Akan communities is especially manifest in traditions relating to the treatment of a particular category of Nsamanfo known in English as “stool ancestors.” Stool ancestors are Akan chiefs (*Ahenfo*) who formerly “sat” on special wooden stools regarded in the Akan tradition as “symbols of office for kings and chiefs.”¹²⁴ Like other candidates for ancestorhood, candidates for the title of “stool ancestor” must meet certain criteria. Opoku discusses these criteria as follows: “A stool ancestor must have died on the stool, that is, he must not have been destooled or removed from office. He must also have led an exemplary life and conducted himself in accordance with the prescribed rules of society concerning chieftaincy and the precedents of his forbears; his rule must also have been marked by peace and general prosperity for the entire society.”¹²⁵ If a *Ohene* (chief) meets these criteria, then upon the *Ohene*’s death his stool will be stored in a secure location until it is “blackened” in his memory during celebratory funeral rites performed by the “chief stool-bearer” (*nkonguasoqfohene*) with the assistance of additional “stool-bearers” (*nkonguasoqfo*).¹²⁶ The blackening of this stool is an important ceremony that “saturates” the stool with the “spirits of the individual chiefs,” thereby marking the perduring ancestral presence of past chiefs within Akan communities.

The blackening of an ancestral stool is a private ceremony conducted “at night in a sacred grove” by the *nkonguasofohene* and *nkonguasofo*. All previously blackened stools are transported to the ceremonial site in preparation for the addition of the new stool.¹²⁷ After being washed, the new stool is blackened using a mixture of soot and egg yolk. Later in the ceremony, the blood of a sheep is smeared on the stool and a piece of animal fat is positioned on the central part of the stool. When the ceremony concludes, all of the stools are carried back to a “stool-house” where they are safely stored together.¹²⁸

Blackened stools are shrines to the ancestral spirits of former chiefs, and thus sacrifices including various foodstuffs and beverages are brought to the blackened stools for the ancestral spirits, who require regular sustenance, even as noncorporeal beings.¹²⁹ The belief among the Akan that the ancestral spirits of past chiefs saturate blackened stools explains the focus on these stools in such traditions as the Aday festival, which occurs twice every forty-two days on a Sunday (*Akwasidae*) and a Wednesday (*Wukudae*).¹³⁰ A living *Ohene* presides over the Aday festival as the primary representative of his people during their celebration of the presence of the ancestral spirits dwelling within blackened stools. After humbly “baring his shoulders and removing his sandals as a sign of respect,” the *Ohene* performs rituals on behalf of the community in an effort to solicit the ongoing protection and support of the stool ancestors.¹³¹ The Aday festival is a public tradition that acknowledges the authoritative role of the ancestors in everyday life.¹³² Traditions such as the nocturnal stool-blackening ceremony and the Aday festival maintain the vital connection between Akan societies and the moral guardianship of the ancestral community.

The Abosom as Elements of an Akan Grammar of Knowing

The following question can be posed in response to the foregoing discussion of the relational idea of sunsum, the various abosom populating the Akan cosmos, and certain attendant ritual traditions: do Akan conceptions of the abosom and the ritual traditions undergirding them in any way suggest an epistemological status on the part of the abosom as elements of a grammar of knowing? I posit that through phenomenological exploration of these conceptions and some of their attendant ritual traditions, one can identify three principal epistemological insights that bring to light the status of the abosom as elements of an Akan grammar of knowing. These insights include (1) knowing as a function of regular contact with the spiritual world, (2) knowing as a heterogeneous,

paradoxical experience marked by both power and limitation, and (3) knowing as an ethical mandate. Let us now consider these insights sequentially.

Knowing as a Function of Regular Contact with the Spiritual World

Akan conceptions of the abosom suggests that a distinct mode of knowing ensues from regular contact with the spiritual realm (*asamando*). Far from being superficial or irrelevant, this contact is profoundly relational and directly influences how the Akan interpret the world and conduct themselves in the world. Take, for instance, the Akan conception of the Tete Abosom as tutelary deities who safeguard the well-being of communities, communicate with the Nsamanfo and Onyame on behalf of human beings, and, when propitiated, can be of great assistance to human beings in the pursuit of a wide range of material goals such as professional success and childbirth. Relationship with the Tete Abosom, whether as a nonspecialist devotee or as a trained *ɔkɔmfo* onto whose head these deities “alight” and are “carried” during sacred festivals such as the Ahobaa festival, makes available a mode of knowing that affirms the existence of the Tete Abosom as a meaningful presence in the world whose power can be ritually enlisted to constructively address the precarious realities with which humans must deal.

Relationship with the Tete Abosom also underscores the preeminence of a cultural logic in which physical realities are meaningful only to the extent that they are formatively pervaded by spiritual realities. In Akan societies, the operation of this cultural logic extends beyond the familial level to the state level, as we have seen in the case of the Asante political establishment and its centuries-long veneration of the river/thunder deity Tanɔ, the lake deity Bosomtwe, and the rock deity Mmem Boɔ. The logic just mentioned implies that to know anything in the world is to know spirit. Perhaps this is, in part, why an *ɔkɔmfo* will say, *Ɔbosom na ɛkyere ɔkomfo ntwaho* (“It is the spirit that teaches the priest to whirl around”).¹³³

Other medial abosom treated earlier—namely, Asase Yaa, the Suman Brafoɔ, the Mmoatia, the Sasabonsam, and the Nsamanfo—bring into view the risk inherent in the form of knowing we have identified, which may be described provisionally as *spirituo-centric* in nature. While relationship with Asase Yaa, the Suman Brafoɔ, and the Nsamanfo can be beneficial to humans in a multitude of ways, these abosom nevertheless share the potential to inflict serious harm. In an Akan perspective, then, knowing is not without a significant dimension of danger. This dimension of danger is evident in the earlier point that harmonious

relation with Asase Yaa is contingent on appeasement, especially prior to the cultivation of land and following the shedding of human blood. Such appeasement is of paramount importance, for failure to do so will likely result in “untold calamities” being visited upon communities.

Our exploration suggests that the risk of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world as constituted by the Akan cosmological tradition is a deeply *existential* risk. Within the framework of Akan cosmology, gaining knowledge about oneself and the world through relationship with the spiritual realm requires human agents to meet rigorous ethical demands. The epistemological orientation formed through ongoing relationship with the spiritual world necessitates a courageous investment of self as well as a careful, committed understanding of traditional moral and ritual obligations, the fulfillment of which generatively nurtures this relationship. Put otherwise, knowing through relationship with the spiritual world is literally a matter of life and death in the sense that responsible management of one’s relationship with spirit is life-sustaining, whereas irresponsible management of this relationship is life-threatening. Spirituo-centric knowing, then, is an experience of “endangerment.”¹³⁵ However, this epistemological experience of endangerment is undoubtedly sacral in nature because it is an effect of exposure to the complex, tempestuous spiritual community and its diverse repertoire of power.

Knowing as a Heterogeneous, Paradoxical Experience Marked by Both Power and Limitation

The complex spiritual community attested by Akan cosmology also signals another important aspect of knowing that contributes to the critical perspective being developed. Upon considering the diversity of type and purpose among the medial spiritual beings of the Akan cosmos, it becomes clear that any artificial reduction of the experience of knowing through relationship with these beings would be a mistake of the first order. Such reduction would be misleading because, as we have seen, this spiritual community is marked by heterogeneity. We will recall that while deities such as Asase Yaa, the Tete Abosom, and the Nsamanfo operate as guardians of the natural world and of human well-being, this custodial role is not commonly shared among the Suman Brafo, the Mmoatia, and the Sasabonsam.

Although the behavior of the Suman Brafo and the Mmoatia is at times salutary, both can just as easily behave in ways that militate against human well-being, as is routinely the case with the Sasabonsam. Therefore, the

experience of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world is not one of naively hopeful solace. As a theoretical framework, Akan cosmology makes clear that to know the protective power of the Tete Abosom and the Nsamanfo is to simultaneously know the threatening power of the Suman Brafoɔ, the Mmoatia, and the Sasabonsam. This heterogeneity creates a potentially volatile environment that underscores the importance of regular spiritual engagement for human beings. This engagement is crucial because relationship with custodial spirit beings provides humans with access to the power needed to counteract the constant threat posed by noncustodial spirit beings. Thus, knowledge of the spiritual world and its heterogeneity is an *active* knowledge that requires persons to make engagement of the spiritual world an integral part of their daily lives.

Knowing through relationship with the spiritual world also contains an element of paradox. This paradoxical element stems largely from the multifaceted personalities of Asase Yaa, the Nsamanfo, and the Mmoatia, and from the diametrically oppositional possibilities made available by the Suman Brafoɔ. As discussed earlier, the Akan believe that Asase Yaa is a key source of life upon which all humans depend. Yet if not propitiated before the cultivation of land, after the shedding of human blood, or in other situations mandating a sacrificial response, Asase Yaa can become a destroyer of life.

Furthermore, out of a commitment to the well-being of their living descendants and in response to proper veneration, the Nsamanfo work to procure “boons” for their living descendants. However, if these same descendants behave in ways that violate the ethical values and norms of Akan societies or fail to remember the Nsamanfo, then the Nsamanfo punish the descendants. Readers will also remember that the Mmoatia are inclined to physically assault those who venture uninvited into the forest home of the Mmoatia. Yet in other cases the Mmoatia elect to train particular humans extensively in the science of plant medicine, thereby enhancing the human community’s capacity for lasting health. Somewhat similarly, the Suman Brafoɔ function within Akan communities as sources of spiritual power that can be ritually enlisted to help others or to inflict mortal harm.

The paradoxical element of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world highlights the dynamism of this form of knowing. Far from being a static epistemological orientation, knowing through relationship with the spiritual world is remarkably fluid, often oscillating between an acute awareness of the ever-present specter of mortal danger and an equally keen awareness of the ceaseless quest for human well-being. This paradoxical ingredient requires a pliability of mind that embraces the tensive realities of existence

without resolving them while also acknowledging the simultaneously uncertain, dangerous, and salutary spiritual power inhering within these realities. This establishes a sense of the seriousness involved in such spirituo-centric knowing.

Spirituo-centric knowing is not a means of escaping the weighty demands of material existence. Rather, spirituo-centric knowing helps humans remain connected to spiritual resources with the power necessary to effectively manage these demands. Spirituo-centric knowing sacralizes the ambiguous complexities of the spiritual and material worlds instead of eliding them. This sheds further light on why, before the performance of Akom (“ritual dancing”) in Akan communities, an okomfo, with full knowledge of Asase Yaa’s ability to both sustain and destroy life, tosses hyirew (“white clay”) on the ground as a way of respectfully acknowledging Asase Yaa and her volatile power. This also helps explain why the Akan believe that the continued efficacy of a particular Suman (an inspirited object or “instrument”) is contingent upon a devotee offering daily worship to the Suman.

Thus far we have discussed the experience of spirituo-centric knowing in reference to specific spiritual *beings*. We can also think of spirituo-centric knowing in terms of power. This should not be taken to suggest that the spiritual beings treated above are ultimately insignificant with respect to Akan epistemology or that our analytical exploration is now departing from the framework through which the Akan conceptualize these beings. Rather, the point here is to emphasize the centrality of power in the experience of spirituo-centric knowing. Relationship with the spiritual world of Akan cosmology has everything to do with humans gaining access to an economy of power that enables them to more effectively manage the unpredictable existential threats imposed on them by the material world. Hence, we can speak, for instance, of the communal worship that takes place during the ancestral Aday festival and of a person choosing to place herself under the protection of a Suman as practices intended to fortify a connection to the economy of power that organizes the spiritual world.

This connection is essential both to the production of knowledge in Akan societies and to the very survival of those societies. From an Akan purview, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine meaning construction in a material world devoid of spiritual presence and connection. Indeed, human existence itself—especially human existence that achieves longevity—is unlikely in this scenario. Akan epistemology is predicated on an abiding belief in the existence of an unseen economy of power manifest in the purposeful activities of a diverse community of spiritual beings, and on a belief in humans’ fundamental existential need for access to this unseen economy. And yet Akan epistemology is also

predicated on the belief that knowing through relationship with the power of the spiritual world is an experience of limitation.

Relationship with the spiritual world and its power does not bestow on humans a knowledge of all things, nor does this relationship lead to humans becoming infinitely powerful. Human relationship with the spiritual world does *not* amount to a transaction wherein the knowledge and power of that world are simply delivered in toto to the human world in exchange for ritual offerings and worship. Ontologically speaking, humans are not equivalent to spirit beings. Therefore, humans are de facto incapable of possessing the full range of knowledge and power utilized by spirit beings.

In Akan thought, humans are construed as beings whose knowledge and power are limited. This belief in the fundamentally limited human condition does not stem from nor lead to an idea that humans are inherently defective and in need of rescue by the spiritual world. Instead, the limited condition of humans is regarded as an innate characteristic that engenders a relational orientation to the spiritual world that connects humans to powers greater than themselves. The tossing of hiyew onto the ground by an *ɔkomfo* prior to the performance of *Akɔm* emerges then as an embodied recognition of Asase Yaa's superior power that encodes the limited condition of human beings. In addition, the indispensable role played by the *Mmoatia* in humans' attainment of expertise in the science of plant medicine functions to encode the limitations of the human condition. The same can be said of situations in which a person enlists the power of a *Suman* as protection against a threat that the person alone lacks the power to neutralize. What is more, this understanding of the experience of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world as an experience of limitation is operative even at the level of spiritual training and practice, as evidenced by the previously referenced Akan maxim, *ɔbosom na ɛkyere ɔkomfo ntwaho* ("It is the spirit [not another human] that teaches the priest to whirl around"). In an Akan point of view, human life *requires* relationship with spirit. Thus, the choice to ignore this relationship as well as the knowledge and power ensuing from it is a choice made to one's own peril.

Knowing as an Ethical Mandate

The significance of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world is not restricted to an experience of paradoxical heterogeneity, limited power, or the pursuit of well-being. The significance of such spirituo-centric knowing is found also in its ethical dimension. The knowledge accruing through regular

contact with the spiritual world is not intended to be hoarded as a personal possession or to become the subject of speculative abstraction bearing no relevance to the complex exigencies facing human communities. For the Akan, spirituo-centric knowing involves an obligatory, expansive concern for one's life, one's family, and one's community. In this sense, spirituo-centric knowing in the Akan tradition is a shared phenomenon that amplifies our humanity.

The highly ethical orientation of the Akan cultural tradition is helpful in understanding why, for example, the Akan deem it compulsory to be in relationship with the Tete Abosom, whose tutelar powers serve as a spiritual bulwark against forces that threaten the life of communities. Therefore, persons with knowledge of the tutelar powers of the Tete Abosom are compelled to enlist these powers in the interest of their community. This ethical aspect also figures prominently in the knowledge acquired through relationship with Asase Yaa, who must be shown proper respect before land is cultivated and who abhors human bloodshed. A preoccupation with ethical concerns is detectable as well in the knowledge developed through relationship with the Nsamanfo, who demand that their living descendants faithfully adhere to the traditional moral codes of Akan society, and in the knowledge generated through relationship with the ambiguous Mmoatia, who share their mastery of plant medicine with Sumankwafo so that it may benefit the human community.

The ethical dimension of spirituo-centric knowing is also quite salient in the role performed by Akan priests (*akomfo*). Having been "entrusted with the esoterica of their professions" and having "mastered the secrets of the universe," *akomfo* are believed to be in possession of the "spiritual and medical knowledge needed to address [the] magico-medical, psychosomatic, and spiritual welfare of society."¹³⁶ By way of their natural spiritual talents and the rigorous training (*nkomo mu*, *akomo mu*) they undergo during initiation into the Akan priesthood, *akomfo* can claim a uniquely intimate relational knowledge of the spiritual world that enables them to function as expert spiritual servants within the public and private spheres.¹³⁷ While some *akomfo* use their power in unethical ways, the clear traditional expectation among *akomfo* is that their specialized knowledge be used in a manner consistent with the "moral standards" of Akan society.¹³⁸ The ritual discussed below (*Nhyia*), which is sometimes performed by an *akomfo* in situations involving the "suspicious" death of a local family's elder relative, exemplifies an ethically appropriate use of an *akomfo*'s spirituo-centric knowledge:

Deaths of elders believed to have occurred under suspicious circumstances, prompts family members to meet the posthumous abstract

personality of the deceased (Osaman), when a medium undertakes a highly dramatic ritual encounter called *nhyia* (meeting) of the deceased. The reason for *nhyia* rituals may be necessitated by a family's need to ascertain vital information from the deceased about cause of death. This rite called for a special ritual perfume ablution by an *okomfo*, because the *okomfo* must journey to the ancestral world . . . in order to bring the dead (Osaman) back to the mundane. The preferred perfume is *Samanadzie ye sum* (the *Samanadzie* is dark). In other words, to enter *Samanadzie* (the world of the ancestors), an *okomfo* must be sprayed with this particularly strong perfume to enable her to return without being contaminated by the unique odor of the ancestral world. To enter a world utterly different from the mundane, one required a special protective shield or aura of perfume otherwise a medium became [defiled] by the unique odor of *Samanadzie*, characteristic of the metamorphism of the residents of the ancestral world. In the same way as an *okomfo* carried a deity, she/he must also "carry" an Osaman. For this reason, the journey to and [from] the *Samanadzie* must be conducted in a way that would not prevent the *okomfo* from carrying other deities, hence the perfume.¹³⁹

The *Nhyia* ritual is a compelling instance of the communally oriented, ethically motivated service that reputable *akomfo* dutifully provide in Akan villages, towns, and cities. The Akan believe that in order to effectively manage life's crises, one must rely on the most potent forms of spiritual knowing, which are accessible only to well-trained *akomfo* whose knowledge enables circum-spect, productive engagement with *Samanadzie* (the world of the ancestors). The reliance of the Akan on *akomfo* bespeaks the status of *akomfo* as integral components of the ethico-spiritual fabric of Akan society.

Conclusion

This essay contests the generally regnant assumption that Africa's indigenous cultural traditions lack coherent systems of knowing that are dynamically useful within human communities. I have demonstrated the status of medial Akan deities (*abosom*) as formative elements of a traceable grammar of knowing that grounds a relational epistemology significantly informed by the concept of spirit (*sunsum*). I further demonstrated that Akan conceptions of the *abosom* in

conjunction with particular ceremonial practices such as the observance of Asase Yaa's sacred day and performance of related sacrificial customs, the rituals of Akom and Nhyia, and the Adae festival signal three epistemological principles identified above: knowing as a function of regular contact with the spiritual world (*asamando*), knowing as a heterogeneous, paradoxical experience marked by both power and limitation, and knowing as an ethical mandate.

Concerning the first principle, a major emphasis was placed on the idea that relationship with the Tete Abosom among the Akan suggests the operation of a cultural logic that interprets risk-ridden physical realities in terms of volatile spiritual power. Therefore, knowing through relationship with the spiritual world from an Akan perspective was discussed as an *existential* risk. With regard to the second principle, the heterogeneous, paradoxical dimension of knowing in an Akan context was attributed to the multivalent personalities of Asase Yaa, the Nsamanfo, and the Mmoatia, as well as to the oppositional possibilities associated with the Suman Brafo. It was noted that these multivalent personalities and oppositional possibilities can serve both to nurture and to destroy life. As to the third principle, it was explained that Akan knowing carries with it an inescapable ethical responsibility to community that, for instance, compels an individual with knowledge of the tutelar powers of the Tete Abosom to enlist these powers for the benefit of her community.

As a culturally focused phenomenological exploration, this study avoids the widely popular and well-worn rubric for examining Africa that privileges the motifs of colonialism, war, poverty, disease, and corruption.¹⁴⁰ The study suggests that much is to be gained from engaging African societies at the level of experience and knowledge, as anthropologist Kathryn Linn Geurts does in *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community*, her 2002 book on the Anlo-Ewe of southeastern Ghana. More such studies are needed because they continue the painstaking but imperative work of hewing a space for indigenous Africa on the stage of globally recognized human thought.

Notes

1. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 25.
2. The term "Volta," as used in the geographic descriptor "Eastern and Upper Volta regions," references the Volta River, which is the largest river in Ghana, extending one thousand miles with a basin containing nearly 80 percent of the country's total surface area.
3. K. Nkansa Kyeremateng, *The Akans of Ghana: Their Customs, History, and Institutions* (Accra: Optimum Design, 2004), 9.

4. Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International, 1978), 99.
5. Ibid. Akan tradition holds that there are seven original clans (*abusua asɔn*) commonly known as the Asona, Twidan, Kɔnna, Anɔna, Aboradze, Asakyiri, and Aseneɛ. Among the Akan, the Fante still adhere to this number, and thus accordingly divide themselves into the following clan groups: (1) Nsɔna, (2) Anɔna, (3) Twidan, (4) Aboradze, (5) Ntwea, (6) Kɔnna, and (7) Adwenadze. Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 1 (2008): 57; Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 99.
6. The work of cultural anthropologist Walter Mignolo is helpful in explaining contemporary modernity as a fundamentally imperialist arrangement. Building on Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano's notion of "coloniality," which he first introduced in the late 1980s, Mignolo contends that

"modernity" is a complex narrative whose point of origination was Europe; a narrative that builds Western civilization by celebrating its achievements while hiding at the same time its darker side, "coloniality." Coloniality . . . is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality. Hence, today's common expression "global modernities" implies "global colonialities" in the precise sense that the colonial matrix of power is shared and disputed by many contenders: if there cannot be modernity without coloniality, there cannot either be global modernities without global colonialities. Consequently, decolonial thinking and doing emerged and unfolded, from the sixteenth century on, as responses to the oppressive and imperial bent of modern European ideals projected to and enacted in, the non-European world.

Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 2–3.

7. See Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Long, "African American Religion in the United States of America," *Nova Religio* 7, no. 1 (2003): 11–27; Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 1997).
8. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 86.
9. See, for instance, F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institute in February and May, 1870* (London: Longmans, Green, 1882); Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (New York: Holt, 1889); Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La Mentalité Primitive* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1922); Lévy-Bruhl, *L'âme Primitive* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1927); and Lévy-Bruhl, *Les Fonctions Mentales Dans Les Sociétés Inférieures* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1928). Important to note here is the pioneering work of German-born anthropologist Franz Boas,

- which challenged the racist underpinnings of scholarship produced by contemporaries such as Tylor and Lévy-Bruhl. Boas's work was instrumental in charting a new course in modern anthropology that veered away from Eurocentric evolutionary models of cultural analysis. See Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man: A Course of Lectures Delivered before the Lowell Institute, Boston, Mass., and the National University of Mexico, 1910–1911* (New York: Macmillan, 1911); and Boas, *Race, Language, and Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1940).
10. Some representative texts include Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959); Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (London: Epworth, 1969); Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1976); and Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).
 11. Though largely disregarded in Africanist discourses, the short book in which p'Bitek develops this thesis remains one of the most theoretically important examinations of the study of African religions. See Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1970).
 12. Some examples include Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938); J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Lutterworth, 1944); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*; and Wándé Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976).
 13. Willie E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 152, 197.
 14. Three texts that come to mind are Andrew H. Apter, *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967); and Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968). This shift away from older theo-colonial biases has been aided as well by studies that unearth the constructed nature of categories such as "Africa" and "African traditional religion." See V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and Rosalind Shaw, "The Invention of 'African Traditional Religion,'" *Religion* 20, no. 4 (1990): 339–53.
 15. See William F. S. Miles, *Jews of Nigeria: An Afro-Judaic Odyssey* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 2013); Joel E. Tishken, *Isaiah Shembe's Prophetic Uhlanga: The Worldview of the Nazareth Baptist Church in Colonial South Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013); Hagai Erlikh, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2010); and E. Thomas Lawson, *Religions of Africa: Traditions in Transformation* (San Diego: Harper and Row, 1984).
 16. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World*

Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). We might also mention esteemed religious scholar Huston Smith, whose work has played a major role in maintaining the "world religions" typology. Having first emerged in the writings of Cornelius Petrus Tiele in the late nineteenth century, the category "world religions" (then "universal religions") originally included Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The term now refers to at least eight general religious trajectories, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and so-called primal religions. See Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991); and Cornelius Petrus Tiele, "Religions," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed. (1884), 20: 358–71.

17. See Birgit Meyer, "If You Are a Devil, You Are a Witch and, If You Are a Witch, You Are a Devil': The Integration of 'Pagan' Ideas into the Conceptual Universe of Ewe Christians in Southeastern Ghana," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22, no. 2 (1992): 98–132; Meyer, "'Make a Complete Break with the Past': Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 316–49; Marleen DeWitte, "'Living Word': Televised Charismatic Christianity in Ghana," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 2 (2003): 172–202; Tim Heaton, Spencer James, and Yaw Oheneba-Sakyi, "Religion and Socioeconomic Attainment in Ghana," *Review of Religious Research* 51, no. 1 (2009): 71–86; Ivor Wilks, "The Growth of Islamic Learning in Ghana," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, no. 4 (1963): 409–17; Raymond A. Silverman and David Owusu-Ansah, "The Presence of Islam among the Akan of Ghana," *History of Africa* 16 (1989): 325–39; Misbahudeen Ahmed-Rufai, "The Muslim Association Party: A Test of Religious Politics in Ghana," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, no. 6 (2002): 99–114; John Campbell, "Urbanization, Culture and the Politics of Urban Development in Ghana, 1875–1980," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 23, no. 4 (1994): 409–50; Ian Yeboah, "Subaltern Strategies and Development Practice: Urban Water Privatization in Ghana," *Geographical Journal* 172, no. 1 (2006): 50–65; Mariama Ross, "Art at the Crossroads: The Contested Position of Indigenous Arts in Ghana's Post-Colonial Education Systems," *Studies in Art Education* 45, no. 2 (2004): 117–34; George S. Dei, "Deforestation in a Ghanaian Rural Community," *Anthropologica* 32, no. 1 (1990): 3–27; Dei, "A Forest beyond the Trees: Tree Cutting in Rural Ghana," *Human Ecology* 20, no. 1 (1992): 57–88; and Benjamin W. Kankpeyeng and Christopher R. DeCorse, "Ghana's Vanishing Past: Development, Antiquities, and the Destruction of the Archaeological Record," *African Archaeological Review* 21, no. 2 (2004): 89–128.
18. See Meyer, "Make a Complete Break with the Past"; Kankpeyeng and DeCorse, "Ghana's Vanishing Past"; and Ross, "Art at the Crossroads."
19. Charles Anyinam, "Medical Practice in Contemporary Ghana: A Dying or Growing 'Profession'?", *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 21, no. 3 (1987): 315, 333.

20. Meyer, "If You Are a Devil"; and Adam Mohr, "Missionary Medicine and Akan Therapeutics: Illness, Health and Healing in Southern Ghana's Basel Mission, 1828–1918," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 39, no. 4 (2009): 452–53.
21. T. C. McCaskie, "'Akwantemfi' ('In Mid-Journey'): An Asante Shrine Today and Its Clients," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 38, no. 1 (2008): 57–80.
22. Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Pew Research Center*, April 15, 2010, <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/04/15/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa/>.
23. This insight was stimulated by a recent conversation with Professor Dianne Stewart, whose research increasingly explores African and African-derived religious cultures at the level of ideas. See Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Dianne M. Stewart Diakit , "'Matricentric' Foundations of Africana Women's Religious Practices of Peacebuilding, Sustainability and Social Change," *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* 25 (2013): 61–79.
24. In his now-famous work *Orientalism*, Said examines the dominant tendency among Western scholars to construe the cultural regions of the Middle East and Asia in otherizing, essentialistic terms that render the inhabitants of these regions incapable of diachronic complexity and change, thus "freezing" them in time as ancient subjects permanently available for investigation by self-proclaimed historically dynamic Western researchers. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
25. In particular, see chapter 1, titled "The Power in the Story," of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).
26. Dianne M. Stewart Diakit  and Tracey E. Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013): 28–77.
27. For Fitzgerald, McCutcheon, and others, rigorous academic study of religious phenomena is best accomplished through social-scientific methods. See Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescr bing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); and Ninian Smart, *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).
28. I should mention that I recently conducted a series of ethnographic interviews in Nigeria and Ghana as part of a larger research project. My interpretive analysis of the data gathered from these interviews, however, is more phenomenological than ethnographic.

29. See C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); and Stuart Hall, "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Poststructuralist Debates," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2 (1985): 91–114.
30. Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997), xvi.
31. See the first five chapters of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin, N.Z.: Zed Books, 1999). Importantly, Smith devotes half of the book (the last five chapters) to constructive anti-imperialist research proposals calibrated to the concerns of the Māori.
32. Stewart Diakit  and Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies," 39.
33. Ibid., 28. See Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*; N. K. Dzobo, "African Symbols and Proverbs as Sources of Knowledge and Truth," in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992), 85–98; Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); and Gyekye, *Essay on African Philosophical Thought*.
34. Danquah, *Akan Doctrine of God*, 66.
35. See K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast," in *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, ed. Daryll Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 197.
36. For examples of materialist interpretations, see M. Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 199; Robert A. Lyttad, *The Ashanti, a Proud People* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 155; Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of the Ghanaian Culture* (Accra: Ghana Publishing, 1974), 37; and P. A. Twumasi, *Medical Systems in Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Publishing, 1975), 22.
37. Gyekye, *Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 90.
38. Ibid., 72–73.
39. Ibid., 72, 91, 93.
40. Ibid., 93.
41. Ibid.
42. On a practical level, this is all the more true if we accept as valid an observation made by Madeline Manoukian in *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples* (London: International African Institute, 1964), 56:

At any time a new *obosom* [sing. *abosom*] may be "created" by a priest ordering a man or woman possessed by a spirit to make a shrine: the possessed one will dance sometimes for two days to drums and singing, and then suddenly leap up and catch something in his hands or plunge into a river and bring up something; this object will be "cooled" by sprinkling water on it, placed in the brass pan and quickly covered. Various ingredients will then be added, while special prayers are repeated and sacrifices made. The possessed person will become a priest of this new *obosom*.

43. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.
44. During a lecture I attended at the University of Ghana, Legon, in 2007, Professor Elom Dovlo identified millet-infused water as a beverage traditionally used in the pouring of libations in Ghana and other parts of West Africa.
45. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. This translation of *afɔre* was provided by Professor Emmanuel Lartey.
49. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.
50. Ibid., 56–57.
51. Ibid., 57.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 55.
55. John Pobee, “Aspects of African Traditional Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 37, no. 1 (1976): 11.
56. Ibid., 10.
57. Gyekye, *Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 73. Drawing on some of the work of the British colonial captain and anthropologist R. S. Rattray, Madeline Manoukian (*Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 55–56) offers the following analysis of the Tete Abosom:

Among the Ashanti . . . the four main *abosom* are *Tano*, *Bea*, *Apo*, and *Bosomtwe*. *Tano* is the greatest of these. They were all sons of ‘*Nyame*, sent by him to earth to receive and confer blessings on mankind. They became the principal lakes and rivers of Ashanti. All other rivers are regarded as being “sons of ‘*Nyame*” and as containing some of his essence or spiritual power, which is transmitted through water. . . . All other *abosom* are lineally descended from the four main ones, though the association of them with ‘*Nyame* is neither self-evident nor easy to discover.

58. R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), 145–46. The following background information on *Tano* provided by Opoku (*West African Religious Tradition*, 65) is indicative of the complex traditions associated with individual deities in Ghana:

The worship of *Tano*, the river god, is prominent in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, especially among people of Akan origin. *Tano* is believed to be a son of God and, according to an Akan myth, an arch-rival of his elder brother, *Bea*, also a river god. *Bea* was the favourite of Onyame, who wanted to reward his dutiful son by giving him the fertile and well-wooded lands when he reached manhood; the dry and infertile lands would go to his disobedient son, *Tano*. God disclosed his intentions to his messenger, the goat, and asked him to summon the boys to come and receive their lot. It turned out, however, that *Tano* was the goat’s favourite. The goat disclosed the

secret to *Tanɔ* and told him to go to his father's house early in the morning, disguised as Bea, his brother, to receive his lot. Afterwards, the goat went to deliver the message to Bea, but added that there was no need to hurry because God was busy. Bea, therefore, took his time, feeling sure that he would get his just share. Early the next morning, *Tanɔ* dressed up and went to God, disguised as his brother, and was given the rich fertile lands. Later on, Bea went to his father and the mistake was discovered, but nothing could be done about it. Bea was, therefore, given the dry and infertile lands as his inheritance. To this day, the goat is taboo to all worshippers of Bea and *Tanɔ*. *Tanɔ* . . . is believed to be the father of such gods as *Ta Mensa*, and *Ta Kɛsɛ*. He is not only a river god; evidence from Asante shows that he is also regarded as the god of thunder and is propitiated during thunderstorms. In the olden days he was also consulted in times of war and was regarded as a protector of the Asante nation. *Tanɔ* is still an important deity and is consulted in times of crisis.

59. Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 10.
60. Ibid., 11.
61. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55.
62. Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 55. Peter Kwasi Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," *Anthropos* 62 (1967): 9.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 9–10.
66. Ibid., 10.
67. Ibid. For a detailed discussion of the extensive process of traditional priestly initiation in Akan culture, see Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 74–90.
68. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 155.
69. Ibid.
70. Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," 10.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. M. J. Field, "Some New Shrines of the Gold Coast and Their Significance," *Africa* 13 (1940): 145.
76. Kofi Asare Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," in *The Black Experience in Religion*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1974), 288–89.
77. Anthony Ephirim-Donkor argues that the term *ɔkɔmfo*, which is used to refer to a priest or priestess who is also a trained medium, is to be distinguished from the terms *ɔɔfo* ("priest/priestess") and *ninsenyi* ("doctor"). This is so because, according to Ephirim-Donkor, "the *okomfo* alone was uniquely trained to enter into a trance (*kom*). These ancient references, especially *osofo*, have been usurped by

western-trained Akan clergy, to the extent that they now refer condescendingly to their more ancient counterparts as ‘fetish priests’ rather than traditional priests. Yet, among the many clients of the *akomfo* are some western-trained clergy, who visit *akomfo* surreptitiously for fear of being labeled hypocrites” (“Akom,” 59). Ephirim-Donkor identifies another distinction when he writes, “Privately . . . an *okomfo* is more a diviner than an *osofo* (priest) proper, since an *osofo* does not prophesy (*kom*) like a medium, at least not in public” (65).

78. Opoku, “Aspects of Akan Worship,” 289.
79. Ibid., 291. The *okomfo* is trained to adjust his or her performance in response to the arrival of multiple deities. Opoku writes, “It should be mentioned that at such gatherings for public worship, it is not only the deity being worshiped who makes his appearance; other deities, who are believed to be attracted by the music, descend on the priest, who at once changes his dress and varies his steps to portray the characteristics of the visiting deity” (ibid.).
80. The word *Nsie-ye* (“the act of a spirit alighting on an *okomfo*”) comes from the root word *sie* (“to alight”). Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom,” 71.
81. Opoku, “Aspects of Akan Worship,” 289.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. According to Nketia, these dances include *Ntwaaho* (“whirling”), *Adaban* (“circling”), *Abɔfoɔ* (“hunters’ dance”), *Abɔfotia* (“minor hunters’ dance”), *Ta kse bekɔ Takyiman* (“the great Ta will go to Techiman”), *Akamu* (“outburst”), *Sapa* (“dance of enjoyment”), *Dwenini katakyi* (“valiant ram”), *Denkyemkye* (“hat of the crocodile”), *Asɔnkɔ*, *Ɔkwaduo bedi mpreɔ* (“the antelope will receive shots”), and *Samrawa*. J. H. Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana* (Legon: University of Ghana, 1963), 94–99.
85. Ibid., 94.
86. Opoku, “Aspects of Akan Worship,” 290.
87. Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*, 94–95.
88. Opoku, “Aspects of Akan Worship,” 290.
89. Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*, 99.
90. Opoku, “Aspects of Akan Worship,” 291.
91. Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom,” 71. In precolonial Ghana, *ebisadze*-related techniques were used in the detection and ensnarement of *abayifo* (humans who deploy spiritual power in harmful ways). One such technique involved the bark of the *odum* tree (*Chlorophora excelsa*). This technique required a person accused of *bayi boro* (the utilization of spiritual power for socially destructive ends) to “chew the bark of the *odum* tree or drink a tincture made of it. If they vomited, they were innocent. If not, they died with their guilt proven.” Natasha Gray, “Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law: Evolving Anti-Witchcraft Practices in Ghana, 1927–1932,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 2 (2001): 340. In another technique, the dead corpse of a person believed to have been murdered by an *abayifo* is physically carried with the expectation that the corpse itself will lead those carrying it to the guilty individual or party. R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 167–70.

92. Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 291.
93. Ibid., 291–92.
94. Ibid., 287. Sarpong, "Sacred Stools of Ashanti," 11.
95. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55–56.
96. Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 57.
97. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55.
98. Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 287.
99. Sarpong, "Sacred Stools of Ashanti," 11.
100. Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 57.
101. Ibid. Jane Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 69, no. 3 (1999): 440.
102. Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 287.
103. Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 57. Additionally, Manoukian claims that the most significant Suman Brafo among the Asante is the Gyabom, which is primarily associated with war and is owned by important chiefs. She claims further that, in times past, human sacrifices (including children) were made to the Gyabom as a means of ensuring that the deity would bestow its power on the Asante kingdom (ibid.). Opoku ("Aspects of Akan Worship," 295–96) makes the following statement regarding the history of human sacrifice in Ghana:

In the olden days human beings were sacrificed in extreme cases. Human sacrifice was the maximum sacrifice and it was offered in situations affecting the whole tribe or nation. It was the gravity of the situation which called for such a supreme sacrifice. . . . But with the development of religion, man came to a better knowledge of the will of the deity, and animals, instead of humans, came to be sacrificed. An example of this is the annual "Aboakyer" Festival of the Winneba [an important fishing community in southern Ghana], popularly called the Deer Hunt Festival. Tradition has it that in the olden days a member of the royal family was sacrificed annually. After some time the people consulted the deity, Penkye Otu, who requested that a leopard should be sacrificed instead of a prince. Later on, the people consulted the deity again who said that he would from then on settle for the blood of a bush buck (Owansan), and that is how we came to have the "Aboakyer."

In addition to the sacrifice of humans to deities in the olden days, there was also the sacrifice of human beings on the death of kings and chiefs. This kind of sacrifice was quite different from the first category discussed above, for here the main purpose was not appeasement of a deity but rather that the king and chief may have servants and wives to accompany him to the land of the spirits so that they may serve him. There is an Akan saying that in the realm of the dead there are kings as well as servants (slaves). This practice came into being as a result of the conception which was held of life beyond the grave. It was believed that

after death people continued to live the same kind of life as they lived on earth, and the idea was not just to spill as much blood as possible on the death of a king or chief but rather to make it possible for the king or chief to continue to live as he did in the world.

This practice has been stopped without much damage to the ideas of the afterlife which is held among the Akans, for the idea of the afterlife did not need such a practice to sustain it.

104. Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 288.
105. Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 57.
106. Ibid. "Interviews" with Suman priests are held confidentially in a room that is considered sacred. Therefore, both the Suman priest and the client remove their shoes prior to entering this room. Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 288.
107. Ibid.
108. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 73.
109. Ibid.
110. Ibid.
111. Ibid.
112. Ibid., 72.
113. Ibid., 73.
114. Ibid., 72.
115. Ibid., 72-73.
116. Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality*, 4; Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom," 75. The famed Senegalese poet Birago Diop poignantly expresses the significance of the ancestors in the following poem:

Those who are dead are never gone:
 they are there in the thickening shadow.
 The dead are not under the earth:
 they are in the tree that rustles,
 they are in the wood that groans,
 they are in the water that runs,
 they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,
 the dead are not dead.

Those who are dead are never gone:
 they are in the breast of the woman
 they are in the child who is wailing
 and in the firebrand that flames.

The dead are not under the earth:
 they are in the fire that is dying,
 they are in the grasses that weep

they are in the whimpering rocks,
 they are in the forest, they are in the house,
 they dead are not dead.

This poem appears in Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 108.

117. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 36.
118. Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality*, 130.
119. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 36.
120. *Ibid.*, 37.
121. This explanation was given by Professor Elom Dovlo during a lecture delivered at the University of Ghana, Legon, in 2007 on African religions.
122. *Ibid.*
123. *Ibid.*
124. Paul A. Kotey, *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary: Twi-English/English-Twi* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 189. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39. It is interesting to note that all “enstooled” Akan chiefs actually carve their own stools. These stools are often carved using wood from the tree known as *ɔsɛsɛ* (*Funtumia africana*) or from the tree known as *Onyamedua* (*Alstonia boonei*) (*Ibid.*).
125. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39.
126. Kotey, *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary*, 189. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39–40.
127. *Ibid.*, 40.
128. *Ibid.*
129. *Ibid.*, 37, 40.
130. *Ibid.*, 40.
131. *Ibid.*
132. For a fuller discussion of the Aday festival, see Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39–43.
133. Peggy Appiah, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Ivor Agyeman-Duah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans* (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke, 2007), 62.
134. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 73.
135. My use of the term “endangerment” is informed by the Dagaran diviner and scholar Malidoma Somé’s notion of the “sanctity of endangerment.” During a lecture given at Boston University on November 1, 2011, Somé discussed the “sanctity of endangerment” within the context of ritual initiation among the Dagara people of Burkina Faso. As one who has undergone the “supernatural,” “frightening,” and permanently transformative experience of Dagara initiation, Somé was emphatic in asserting that a sense of true “endangerment” is a vital component of all successful Dagara initiation rituals. One specific experience Somé mentioned involved physically jumping into a cowhide. While inside the cowhide, he encountered beings and “incomprehensible” levels of reality that were entirely unlike anything he had encountered previously. This profoundly disorienting “supernatural”

encounter played a major role in Somé's evolution as a diviner and healer who understands both viscerally and intellectually that the world encompasses more than is perceivable by the five senses. The lasting impact this foundational initiatory experience had on Somé is evident when he writes, "A Westerner will say . . . that water always makes you wet, yet a native healer who gets into a river and stays for hours doing what healers do might get out just as dry as if he had been working in the Sahara Desert . . . true Spirit is a frightening thing to embrace." Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1998), 11, 25. Also see Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1994).

136. Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom," 59, 68. Belief in the efficacious power of the abosom managed by akomfo is widespread among the Akan, including pastors of Christian congregations and other prominent individuals who publicly decry ancestral traditions. Consider the following observation made by Ephirim-Donkor:

Visiting a diviner invariably entailed various fees and propitiatory sacrifices. Moreover, all my discussants insisted that their clients included Christian pastors, politicians, and other government officials [such as] judges, police, and army officers, etc., seeking holistic healing from them. A trend among the intelligentsia is that they assiduously but secretly seek traditional healing, because they do not want members of the public identifying them as visiting traditional practitioners. So, these high-profiled individuals visited their akomfo at night, sometimes inviting the akomfo to visit them instead, all in a bid to avoid being associated with what they consider to be pagan or unchristian acts. Information gathered on these high-profile individuals suggests that they [are] suffering from the Nicodemus syndrome, whereby certain influential persons dissociate themselves from some controversial leaders in public, but then turn around and embrace them privately or secretly. (71)

137. Ibid., 64. The experience of being selected or, to use Ephirim-Donkor's language, "called" (*Akomfa*) into the Akan priesthood by a deity is a pivotal moment in the lives of individuals who undergo this experience. This is reflected in the following accounts:

I was privy to a "call" of a teenage girl in the early 1990s in Winneba, which often resulted with the girl taking off into the forest for days. One of my interviewees, Elizabeth, maintained that she had one day gone with Essoun, the medium, to fetch water from a pond near the Winneba Water Works due to the chronic water shortages in the past. Okomfo Essoun had her baby on her back and while they were drawing water, the next thing she realized was that Essoun had disappeared, leaving her baby

there alone and crying. Terrified, she took the child and ran to Essoun's family and narrated what had just taken place. Initially, people thought that Essoun was insane or in the process of becoming mad, in spite of the fact that her grandfather was a noted *ɔkɔmfo*. We crossed paths again in the late 1990s, becoming involved in rites leading to her graduation, as the *ɔkɔmfo* of the leading deity of the Effutu of Winneba, Penkyae Otu. She had been in training in the town of Famanyah near Kwanyanko for over six years due to her family's inability to raise the necessary money for graduation.

An elderly *ɔkɔmfo* in Winneba informed me that she attended church regularly until she began experiencing what [was] later diagnosed as a call. The final straw came when she was seized by a force that drove her out in the middle of a church service and went on to spend nine years in training in the Volta Region of Ghana.

When I was in middle school a classmate of mine, Comfort, experienced what everyone thought was a call. At one time, for example, she disappeared for about a week and [was] later found inside a rocky hill not [far] from our middle school. She later claimed to have been abducted by a group of dwarfish men. It was the consensus among us, her classmates at least, that she would be sent away to train, but her educated parents adamantly refused. Her father, a lecturer at one of the local colleges in Winneba and a church elder at a local Christian church, would never allow his daughter to become an *ɔkɔmfo*, perhaps, for fear of being ostracized. Comfort loved to sing and would sing for hours. As far as I know Comfort never turned out like her other siblings. Actually, she was never really the same person after her teenage experiences and could not progress educationally as her other siblings. (ibid., 60, 63)

It is also interesting to note that "graduation" from *nkɔm-mu* (the training process for *akɔmfo*) involves the performance of certain challenging physical acts that are believed to "activate" the *ɔkɔmfo-ba*'s ("novice" priest's) ability to perceive spiritual realities, thereby enhancing her connection to the spiritual world. One such ritual act involves ingesting the eyes of a dog. In a description of a very similar "graduation" ritual practiced among the Igbo of the village of Akanu, Ohafia, anthropologist John McCall writes, "When the dog had been killed, its eyes were removed and taken into the quarters where the initiate was sequestered. After a short time he was carried out, apparently unconscious, with blood-soaked leaves covering his face. It was explained that his eyes had been replaced by those of the dog so that 'he will be able to see spirits just as dogs are able to see spirits.'" John C. McCall, "Igbo Shamanism (Nigeria)," in *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*, ed. Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 926. Ephirim-Donkor adds that, in the Akan version of this ritual, the eyes of the dog are "plucked out" and "swallowed

wholly by the medium-to-be.” Donkor is careful to point out, however, that in the Akan ritual, “it is the concomitant prayers and ritual formulae, which may include massaging certain herbs and squeezing the sap into the eyes and ears as drops that actually activate a medium-to-be’s clairvoyance.” Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom,” 68–69.

138. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 75.
139. Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom,” 75.
140. Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo draws attention to war, poverty, disease, and corruption as motifs that dominate how Western societies imagine Africa. See Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009).