

# THE ABAM RITUAL OF THE PEOPLE OF SEKONDI AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

**Doris EkuaYalley**

*Lecturer of the School of Theology and Missions, Central University College, Ghana*

## **Abstract**

*It is important for contemporary Ghanaian Christians to re-examine their stand on their cultural beliefs and practices. Christians may adjust to their culture but not necessarily compromise God's laws. God calls us from our culture into newness of life. And we are to love and worship him within our culture. Like Christ's incarnation; the word which became flesh dwelt among men. His annunciation, birth, death and resurrection, took place within a historical context; the Jewish culture. This article seeks to suggest appropriate Christian responses to stall the dissonance between Christianity and African culture as it surveys the consequences of neglect of the Abam ritual in the Sekondi-Takoradi area of the Western Region of Ghana.*

## **Introduction**

Wearing Abam is a typical Ghanaian practice enjoined on most ethnic societies including Sekondi-Takoradi area. There are three discernible groups in the Sekondi traditional area;

1. Christians who know the repercussions associated with such a traditional practice and as a result refrain from it.
2. Church-goers who are neither fully committed to Christ nor to the Abam deity. Such people may secretly perform the Abam ritual though half-heartedly or have it performed on their behalf.
3. Church-goers who might be in leadership positions in the church, and who without recourse to biblical injunctions dabble in the Abam ritual.

The lifestyles of those in the second and third categories must be of serious concern to the Christian Church.

The motivation for undertaking this study stems from two remarkable experiences in the researcher's background. Firstly, growing up in an urban area but within a typical African traditional background exposed the researcher to the double standards some people adopt in their

religious practices, especially regarding Christianity and African traditional religion. This meant living at two levels of society. Living at two levels of society implies professing the Christian faith and in the same breath dabbling in African traditional religious practices. Somehow, practitioners of the Abam ritual are fully aware that an unsuccessful life is one of the repercussions for not being fully committed to the Abam deity.

Secondly, the researcher, as the spouse of a pastor, got involved with some church members who had psychological problems due in part to their wavering faith and also to their involvement in traditional rituals. Such people, burdened with a sense of guilt, would always shift the blame unto their clan elders for performing rituals on their behalf.

This article's founding premise is that with a better understanding of our cultural norms and traditions as African Christians, we will be better disposed to adopt appropriate Christian responses to stem dissonance within the two traditions of Christianity and traditional religion. Though the study area is Sekondi, the issue of people living at two levels of society is typical of most towns and cities in Ghana. For the church to identify such people to offer them the necessary counselling will be a fulfilment of the mandate spelt out in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18). Another benefit of this work is that people living in fear because of the performance or non-performance of some traditional rituals will be empowered to live fulfilled Christian lives when they fully appropriate Christ's victory in their lives.

### **Objective of study**

The concern of this article is to:

1. Discuss the 'Abam' ritual
2. Identify certain pastoral dynamics which can be adopted in the evangelization of indigenes of the various ethnic groups of Ghana, especially those of the rural communities; people who are deeply steeped in the customs and traditions of their communities

### **Scope of Work**

As an essay in practical theology, the study surveys the nature and practice of the Abam ritual of the people of Sekondi-Takoradi. The phenomena of rituals, their basic understanding and the scholarly perceptions of the diverse approaches to their study, constitute the midpoint of the discussion. The concluding segment reviews the cultural implications of the 'Abam' ritual, and

its possible transposition into the Christian tradition. The closing remarks appeal to scholarly views on the subject of inculturation. This is intended to endorse claims for a Christian transformation of certain traditional practises.

### **Methodology**

The approach of study is multi-dimensional, namely; phenomenological and theological. The sources for the study are drawn from primary data comprising field surveys and interviews. The field survey was carried out within a period of two years and it was organised in two parts.<sup>1</sup>The first year saw some brief negotiations and contacts. In all, 22 people were interviewed. The second part involved interviewing five (5) indigenes from Sekondi who still use or had used Abam. The snowball sampling technique was employed. Also interviewed were five (5) evangelists from the Methodist Church Ghana in Accra, who had handled cases involving Abam. The bias in the choice of evangelists was for easy access to information. Sequel to the interviews, the researcher was invited to a deliverance session for a twin having serious psychological problems, where the objects encasing her Abam and that of her twin-sister, together with others' had been assembled for burning. There were snapshots of the encounter. There was also a video coverage on the preparation of Abam in a typical traditional household during one of the festive occasions for the Abam celebrants.

### **Sekondi-Takoradi**

The focus of this paper is on the people of Sekondi but their story is never complete without Takoradi, a city which was annexed to Sekondi administrative area on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1946. The people of Sekondi-Takoradi, though predominantly Fante speaking, are located within the Ahantagroup and regard themselves as Ahantas.

The predominant religions in the Sekondi-Takoradi metropolis (Shama-Ahanta East Metropolitan Area) are Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. The major traditional festival is the Kundum festival, which is a major agricultural festival of the Ahantas and Nzemas of the Western Region. It is celebrated between July and August every year to strengthen people's mutual bond for development and for increase in agricultural activities. The 'Abam' ritual usually precedes the celebration of Kundum. It is celebrated a week earlier, and on a Friday known as 'EdzimFida' (sacred Friday).

## **Rituals, Meaning and Significance within the African Context**

Rituals feature prominently in every human society. They are symbolic and are usually carried out by individuals or groups at specified places or any place that is conducive. It may be performed either in public view or in secret. Every facet of the human life, be it social, political or religio-cultural is characterised with one form of ritual or the other. And these range from normal everyday gestures like greeting to very elaborate ones as a swearing in of a political leader before a National Assembly. A number of theories have been propounded to explain ritual action, majority of which are from anthropologists and sociologists like Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and Michael Silverstein. These theorists interpret ritual actions as cosmic events intent at changing lives.<sup>2</sup> Judging from the above, such theories can be said to be limited in outlook. Thus with its multifaceted nature, several elements from anthropology, sociology, psychology, religion among others can be deduced from it. Catherine Bell buttresses this claim and declares,

*... there is no shared explanation of what constitutes rituals or how to understand it. There are only various theories, opinions or customary notions all of which reflect the time and place in which they are formulated.*<sup>3</sup>

Bell's view suggests that even though the diverse nature of rituals has led to the varied perspectives from which they are studied, every ritual needs to be understood and explained within its social context. Derived from the Greek term 'dromenon' which means a thing done,<sup>4</sup> rituals unmistakably aim at specific ends. Radcliffe-Brown is also of the opinion that not all rituals can be explained in their manifest purposes. To him, there are times when meanings of rituals may not be apparent to even the celebrants. Similarly, the reasons for which some rituals are performed may not be consistent with their apparent purposes.<sup>5</sup> In effect, apart from being symbolical, rituals may be said to have both latent and manifest purposes.

Rituals and rites are used interchangeably in this essay but they show some degree of difference. Rites are ceremonial acts formally established and rituals are a pattern of actions observed regularly as a ceremony or ordinarily performed in an unremarkable way. From a religious perspective, a ritual is the heart and soul or the very essence of religion. Emile Durkheim is a social anthropologist who sees rituals as formalized and repeated behaviours giving content and meaning to religious life. A ritual, he adds, has 'a revitalizing function which reminds a people of their commonality' and hence 'strengthens' their filial ties.<sup>6</sup> Rituals celebrate and promote fertility in humans and nature. It brings about social harmony and communicates values about

society.<sup>7</sup> These views are both religious as well as sociological.<sup>8</sup> Examples of these multi-dimensional rituals are agricultural festivals, New Year celebrations, Enstoolment rites/induction ceremonies, initiation and widowhood rites. Beyond their religious and sociological functions these same rituals may represent psychological ends.

Enstoolment rites or induction ceremonies basically serve sociological ends by strengthening the social order or resolving social tensions associated with distribution of power but psychologically too they are means of channelling pent up emotions in socially accepted ways.<sup>9</sup>

In social anthropology rituals enact and communicate certain primordial or archetypal beliefs/behaviours so as to strengthen or authenticate them (beliefs/behaviours). These beliefs/behaviours usually have supernatural backing, and the Abam ritual is one clear example of such rituals, which dates back to antiquity. Just like those cited above, the Abam ritual may express religious and sociological ends but it may also evidence some psychological traits. Abam allays some anxieties among the celebrants. With all these views in focus, a study of this nature can be carried out from varied perspectives, to re-emphasize Bell's claims.

### **A Phenomenological Study of 'Abam' as a Religious Ritual. Its Raison d'être**

A religious/sacred ritual is an agreed-on formalized pattern of ceremonial movement and sacred expression carried out in a sacred context.<sup>10</sup> Studying a religious ritual from a phenomenological perspective is very appropriate because a religious phenomenon is best interpreted within its own context. To explain a religious phenomenon in non-religious terms as sociological or psychological is to fail to grasp the true meaning of the religious action, according to Mircea Eliade.<sup>11</sup> Evans Pritchard buttresses the point by observing that,

*...a non-believer studying religious phenomena takes into consideration observable things and searches for some scientific theories to explain it. The believer on the other hand seeks to understand the manner in which people conceive reality and their relation to it.*<sup>12</sup>

The phenomenological approach is thus adopted here as the best method to discuss the 'Abam' phenomenon. The method affords the researcher the ability to re-experience the essential character or structure of the religious phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Hence the aim is to seek understanding and not to interpret, so as to avoid biases.<sup>14</sup>

## **Types of Religious Rituals**

There is no standardized typology of religious rituals since most of them overlap in form and meaning. Some scholars however, have identified certain distinct forms namely; corporate as in an entire community, individual and domestic rituals existing among clans and families. Others also recognize rituals associated with the cycle of events in nature and the seasons. While all these categories of rituals are recognized, the following are the more common rituals practiced by many African societies:

- a. Crises rituals (rituals of affliction) e.g. barrenness, sickness, epidemics, drought, etc
- b. Life cycle rituals e.g., birth, puberty, marriage, etc,
- c. Rebellion rituals e.g. factionism among clans, royals.
- d. There are also seasonal agricultural rituals and normal day to day rituals too.

Crises rituals transform and stabilize society. They avert the effects of epidemics, natural disasters etc. Life cycle rituals ensure continuity of life and integration into the larger community of the neonates or neophytes. Rituals of affliction spite evil spirits who cause harm to individuals. Rebellion rituals offer hope for change and create an atmosphere of peace. It is performed to seal arbitration and peace accords. Most rituals perform purificatory function by averting curses or cleansing people of their sins. Some are votive which is meant to express thanks through sacrifices or offerings. In all these cases, it is the ancestors and the gods that are honoured, propitiated or pacified thus bringing with them an atmosphere of newness and restoration. With these rituals, the African's life is imbued with meaning and significance. The 'Abam' ritual is propitiatory; it courts the favour of its tutelary spirit, it is purificatory; it cleanses devotees and the entire community and it is also a votive sacrifice offered by an individual in appreciation of his or her wellbeing. As a cultural requirement a whole community is enjoined to show appreciation to the gods of the land annually.

## **Usage of Term**

The word 'Abam' has multiple interpretations. It can be used for some individuals of special births, like twins ('Ata' or 'Ndaa' in the local dialects); the one that comes after twins (*Tawiah*). The term is also used for a bracelet of white, red and black, beads inset with a specially designed gold ornament called *Taaba* in the Ahanta dialect. These are threaded on a raffia thread, and worn by all special children as a mark of identification and dignity. Another kind is prepared

with thick raffia and is mainly hung on a wall in a woven pouch (*birefi*). The term 'Abam' in local parlance among the Fantes or the Ahantas is also used to refer to any scarce or expensive commodity. Assuming it is a food item, one would normally hear, for instance, 'ndeabeboAbam,' literally, 'of late the palm fruit wears 'Abam'. This in reality suggests that 'Abam' is a symbol of prestige.

### **The 'Abam' Mythology**

According to the Fantes and Ahantas, the 'Abam' ritual got instituted as a means of offering gratitude to the divinities for condescending to be part of the living as they gave special babies to certain individuals in the society. Through this relationship the lifestyles of certain individuals became enriched. These beneficiaries were believed to be people who ordinarily would have been miserable in life. Among the Akan, such will be called the 'kohweaban', the down-and-outs. It was and is still believed that parents who will not acknowledge the divinities and appreciate them in the birth of their special children lose these children within few weeks of their birth.

As a cultural requirement, 'Abam' is carried out by most ethnic groups in Ghana under different labels. It is observed among the Gas, the Krobos, the Ewes and the Fantes in the Central Region of Ghana. Beside the people of Sekondi and other Ahanta communities, almost all the people of the western region of Ghana, the Nzemas, the Aowins, the Sefwis, and the Wassas celebrate this ritual.

The ritual also exists in many diverse forms and shades among the various African tribes within the sub-Saharan region. The Yorubas for instance, perform very elaborate rituals for their twins who are believed to bear marks of distinction in the society. But in the past they would kill their twins and possibly the mother. They believed twins were of evil omen and that the mother must have been with two men to have had two children at once. They held on to this idea until the introduction of Christianity. Now twin shrines and special observances have replaced traditional infanticide.<sup>15</sup> In contemporary Africa the case is also very different now on the issue of twins. The aura which shrouded multiple births is eroded by the function of genetic engineering. Hormonal treatment can now be administered for couples to have multiple births. But this is not an issue in the current discussion.

In all the cases where the 'Abam' ritual is performed, the basic principle behind it is the same. With these similar principles shared among the people of the sub-region, the researcher has drawn on the rich store of information existing in other cultural milieu to buttress some claims made on the observance of the ritual among the people of Sekondi.

### **Special children**

The expression 'special children' in this discussion is not of physically challenged nor children with high intelligent quotients. It refers to healthy children who are either of multiple births from one pregnancy, same sex preceding all births (of a couple) in three successions or children of specific ranks within a set number of siblings. The children of special births are believed to be endowed with special graces and they come with a number of blessings. The people of Sekondi thus accord them with lots of dignity. This ritual observance had seen so much pomp and pageantry in Sekondi in the past. It was so fashionable for mothers to clad their twins especially, in white, parading through the streets but now the ritual is seen to be languishing in antiquity for most of the adherents. Among the ethnic groups mentioned above, if a couple brought forth the first three male children in succession without a female, the third one was a special child and was called "Mensa". The "Mensa" automatically wears 'Abam' as a sign of distinction, for recognition and honour. The third female child coming in similar fashion is called "Mansa" and equally wears the 'Abam'. Writing on the special children of the Gas, Margaret Field says that these third-borns are 'semi-divine beings and must be given a yam-feast annually' just as well as the seventh child. 'After the seventh child, all the odd numbers are venerated'.<sup>16</sup> Apart from the odd numbers, the tenth born is also highly respected in the community. Twins, triplets or quadruplets and the child that comes after them wear 'Abam' and all 'Abam' users are believed to be spiritually strong. According to the Yoruba, twins are of divine origin and thus no evil can affect them. They are really cherished and pampered; they are rarely scolded for fear of offending their sensitive okra (soul).<sup>17</sup>

As noted above, the Friday preceding the main annual festival, *Kundum*, in the twin-city of Sekondi-Takoradi and *AddaiKesse* as in the rest of the Akan tribes are set aside for the communal celebration of 'Abam'. Apart from this day, every Friday is a special day for anybody who is of special birth. They must be smeared with white clay.

### **The Divinity, Kofi Abam**

The presence of the divinity, 'Kofi Abam,' is acknowledged during the celebration of all the special birth rituals in Sekondi. This divinity, Kofi Abam is believed to be behind the birth of all special children though not the only one who offers them as gifts to the parents. He is depicted as an arch divinity or a mediator between man and the Supreme Being. He protects the special children throughout their lives. It is as a result of the day name of this deity that all the rituals pertaining to the special children are celebrated on a Friday.

### **Preparation of 'Abam'**

Apart from twins who require special ritualists to perform their 'Abam', every parent or guardian who is a devotee or has given birth to special child or children; young or old could prepare the 'Abam'. When the Kundum festival, is about to be celebrated and the new yams are harvested, all children of special births are not supposed to eat any of the new yam until the ritual is performed for them. Items provided for the ritual are a hen and a cock, or sometimes a sheep in the case of twins, yam (one tuber) and palm oil. The blood of the animal is used as sacrifice for the deity Kofi 'Abam' and also for ritual cleansing. During the preparation some types of herbs which have very special medicinal values, namely:<sup>18</sup> 'nyanya', 'esuan', 'odwunhataw' 'nkyekyer', 'mpar', 'nkyer' 'adaa', 'akokonansa', 'sonmenaber' (female) and 'nyin' (male) and 'saawebofun' (the normal chewing sponge but already chewed) are put in a big bowl of water, and squeezed to mix well with the water. All mothers with children of special births, the special children, and all those who are seeking pregnancies splash their faces, hands and shoulders with the herbal preparation. This initial stage is believed to be purificatory. The "Abam" bracelet is also prepared. Before it could be worn special prayers are offered to invoke the spirit of Kofi Abam into it.

Food preparation constitutes an aspect of the celebration. Two kinds of mashed yam will be prepared: one mixed with palm oil and another without any oil. Boiled eggs will be added to both and these will be sprinkled all over the vicinity. All the children of 'special birth' observe certain taboos like, not going to farm on the celebration days and not travelling on the day of the ritual, among others.

## **Celebration of Twins**

Twins are accorded more dignity and respect just as much as their parents. In the traditional society Mothers of twins for instance are specialists in bone setting. Very elaborate ceremonies are observed for parents and children. The “Abam” ritual is performed alongside these elaborate ones. On the eight day when the naming ceremony is held, these items are provided, sheep, calico, six tubers of yam, plantain, eggs, palm oil, other food items and drinks. The two raffia twines that will be worn by the twins are prepared first by a ritualist and placed beside them. As in the case of the other special children, prayers are offered. In a prayer, the ritualist will invoke the spirit of ‘Nana Kofi Abam’ to inhabit the Abam. His blessings are solicited for all present, especially the twins. During this prayer session a young boy carries a sheep at the back of his neck for about two minutes and lowers it to be killed in the presence of the twins. While the slaughtering goes on, the celebrant continues in prayer. Among other things he declares;

*it's a Friday and your parents offer you your sheep so that all the good spirits accompanying you will have some to eat. We offer you good wine too for the same purpose. We turn away all wicked spirits. Bless your parents and all your relations. We ask for perfect health, may we see growth, peace, unity and may all evils be banished. Let us stay very alert. When we pull strings may they drop down successfully for us.*

After the libation the blood of goat and an egg will be splashed on the raffia twine that will be used to thread the ‘Abam’ beads. The rest of the blood of the animal will be poured beside ready prepared herbal water (meant for bathing the twins) amidst some invocations and appellations. After these rituals, white clay will be smeared on the twins.

All other people gathered to observe the ritual will be splashed or sprinkled with the herbal preparation referred to above. As this ritual takes place, some will be preparing food with the meat of the sacrificed animal. The food types are fufu, mashed yam (one type with palm oil and another without palm oil) with boiled eggs. The mashed yams with eggs will be sprinkled on the raffia twine which now inhabits the spirit ‘Kofi Abam’. The twins’ mouths are touched with the yam. This in local dialect is ‘*wɔkahɔnano*’. All those who are twins or have delivered twins are required by tradition to share in the meal of yam and mutton.

### **The Element of Spirit Possession**

At all such gatherings where drumming and dancing and libation pouring are done, one is bound to witness a manifestation of one divinity, and this is an indication of spirit possession. Spirit possession constitutes an aspect of the 'Abam' ritual, but there are diverse forms, which occur on occasions other than the 'Abam' celebration. The two main recognised forms are the 'executive possession and pathogenic possession'. In the former, there is a 'transformation or replacement' of self and in the latter the possessing spirit(s) is/are seen as the cause of illness and misfortune.<sup>19</sup> The executive type is usually observed at funerals, durbars of ritual practitioners and during the Abam ritual. There is a voluntary or culturally sanctioned 'displacement of the personality' before possession. Kofi Abam possesses many devotees during this instance. The possessed utter mysteries; mainly cautions about activities of malevolent spirits. After the celebration, leftover items like entrails of the animals sacrificed, feathers of fowls used for the meal, peels of yam and the herbal preparations from the various households will be collected in basins. The special children would carry the basins in a procession to a heath believed to be the stronghold of all the deities in the community to pour out everything as a sign of transference of curses and misfortunes to climax the celebration.

### **Maintenance of 'Abam'**

The raffia twine inhabiting the 'Abam' spirit is hung on a wall. It receives mashed yam and rum on all Fridays and during the annual celebrations. Sometimes devotees in good business will drop coins into the small woven pouch that contains the 'Abam'. Margaret Field in *Religion and Medicine of the Gas and the Krobos*, talks about different pots which are prepared for the 'Abam' wearers on the occasion of their naming ceremony.<sup>20</sup> The pots could be one or double depending on whether the celebrants are twins and identical (monozygotic, with one placenta) or fraternal (dizygotic, with two placentas). Among the people of Kpong in the Shai Hills, the mother of the twins also receives a pot from her husband as a token of his gratitude.

Offerings of pork, herbs, rum, cowries and monies are put into these pots. Chickens are slaughtered and their blood sprinkled on them at the yearly anniversaries. As has been mentioned earlier as regards variations in the ritual performances, there is a common belief underlying the celebrations. Parents of special children, likewise the adults who are themselves of special birth stand the risk of not prospering when their 'Abam' is not performed. They fail in business because the deity saps all their earnings. They also find themselves mixed-up in quarrels and

may become partially mad. In short the deity troubles them.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes even parents or an entire family do not succeed in life for neglecting such rituals. They undergo all sorts of setbacks. There is much cost involved in the ritual celebrations, and parents usually get the support of friends and relatives to go through it successfully.

Currently in most traditional homes after the preparation of the ritual, adults among the special children will be made to wear only the gold *Taaba* on their fingers. The rest of the 'Abam' will be kept in *birefi*. This *birefi* is kept under a bed or any secluded spot in the room of a devotee.

Even though there is an overt neglect of the ritual, owing to modern influences like formal education and other religions like Islam and Christianity, the concomitant effects of the neglect continue to linger on. Counselling cases show proof of this situation. It is quite crucial to understand why the African, the Akan in this context, who in spite of belief in Christ, still entertains belief in the divinities, ancestors and the lesser deities. These are the salient elements of the African religion which Mbiti refers to when talking about the African being notoriously religious. He asserts;

*...even if they are converted to another religion like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion immediately. It remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries.*<sup>22</sup>

Among the Akans in particular, one may surmise that the singular belief in 'Salvation' explains it all. Salvation is 'nkwagye'. From the *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages*, the word stems from the two Akan words 'nkwa' meaning life, vitality, health, abundant life, and 'gye' which also means rescue, redeem, ransom. The two briefly put, thus mean liberation, preservation or saving from an undesirable situation to abundant life.<sup>23</sup> E. K. Larbi says that to the Akan salvation has to do with deliverance or freedom from physical and immediate dangers that militate against an individual's survival and enjoyment. The Ghanaian, Larbi continues, believes that abundant life is available through the mediation of the spirit beings; the ancestors and the divinities.<sup>24</sup> Often in the churches, syncretic lifestyles of members raise so much concern. But the views expressed above readily explain the great attachment towards the African deities. Usually at annual traditional festivals all Christian organisations will grind to a halt as devotees either stay at home or travel to their hometowns to observe the occasion.

It is not the intention of the researcher to endorse the observance of the Abam ritual. Paul in I Corinthians would ask whether we can drink the cup of God and Baal at the same time (I Corinthians 10:14-22). This would amount to serving two Lords. The Christian community is rather being challenged to approach the situation in a way that will let the Ghanaian believer, the Akan for that matter, appreciate that Jesus is the sole answer to meaningful existence as well as the protector from all malevolent spirits. Hence the following proposals:

### **Inculturation - A Christian Response to the African Tradition and Christian Encounter**

Inculturation is described by Alyward Shorter as the process by which a particular people respond to the saving word and express their response in their own cultural forms of worship.<sup>25</sup> Inculturation must thus be seen as a situation where certain non-Christian concepts capable of communicating the Christian experience within a particular culture are identified and purged. Historically, the term is attributed to Pope John Paul II who used it in an address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission within the Catholic Church in 1979. An earlier usage however, is ascribed to a Pan African Congress of the Third World Theologians held in Accra in 1977. Inculturation in simple terms entails rooting the Christian faith into a local culture. According to K. Dickson, Gregory I issued out instruction to Augustine as he worked among the people of southern England. Augustine was advised to adapt Christian rituals to local circumstances, and that temples that were dedicated to pagan deities, should be transformed into chapel buildings.<sup>26</sup> This directive perhaps, stemmed from the Christian Churches' initial regard for enculturation, but under different designations, such as Missionary Adaptation and Accommodation. Over the years, several terms have been used but in almost all cases these words fall into disuse. Among these are indigenization and incarnation.

Within the African context, this entails blending Christian doctrines with aspects of local customs and traditions with the aim of making the gospel message alive to Africans. There should be an interpenetration and integration of the Christian faith so as to arrive at a synthesis. The African culture becoming better enhanced thereby. There is the need to check against compromises since holiness is paramount and very necessary in the process of evangelization.<sup>27</sup> The point cannot be belaboured that throughout our colonial history and the advent of western missionary work, the African has been exposed to too much European Christianity. The trend now is for us as Ghanaian theologians to make the Christian truth speak relevantly to the needs of Ghanaians today. And how should this be done?

Speaking on the theme 'Theological Education in Africa' Walter Khotso Makhulu was of the view that beyond the desire to draw on appropriate traditions and cultures to contextualize the Christian message, young theologians need to be equipped with the appropriate skills to do that<sup>28</sup> so that they will be in a position to express, as Dickson puts it 'in a vital way, what it means to be African and also express themselves in a medium that makes original thinking possible'. What Dickson meant, among other things, was that theology should not be too abstract, it should be meaningful, and it should take cognizance of a people's worldview.<sup>29</sup>

Walter and Dickson are not alone in making these suggestions. Some ordained African ministers, have tried to correct certain misrepresentations of the indigenous culture in western scholarship, whilst at the same time showing that Africa has some rich traditional religious ideas, ritual practices, institutional values that could be adapted to benefit Christianity on the continent. They are of the view that African Traditional Religion is a formidable force to reckon with. Even though the Church of Christ has made significant inroads on the continent of Africa, African religion has still not disappeared, not even in the face of technology, industrialization and urbanization.<sup>30</sup> All these discussions stemmed from the hypocritical lifestyles exhibited by some Christians. More often than not we hear of Africans living at two levels of society; that is, practising their culture as well as the Christian faith. The lifestyles demonstrated by these African Christians are described as syncretistic. Rather than criticising syncretism, these theologians believe our viable institutional practices should be recovered and integrated into the Christian faith. The important question to ask is whether integrating local customs and traditions into the Christian doctrines with the aim of making the gospel message alive to Africans really amounts to syncretism.

### **Syncretism, a Christian response?**

Syncretism is mixing different religious belief systems. It is a Greek derived word meaning uniting two things. This mixing together of two things or faiths did not have a negative connotation in its original usage. Today most religious movements in Africa are seen as practising syncretism because their members integrate traditional elements with the dominant religions of the world. Are we justified in branding these movements syncretic? Lawrence Lassie rhetorically asks whether being faithful to orthodoxy debars one from adapting traditional elements if that should make one's faith culturally relevant?<sup>31</sup>

A critical study of most writings and arguments put forward by the eminent African scholars referred to above emboldens one to agree that adapting traditional elements to make a people's faith relevant should rather be the norm. Theologizing, as a matter of course ought to take cognizance of the particularities of a people's culture and it must be relevant to uphold the lordship of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

It is known that the Christian Church adapted pagan practices in the past. Systems that pertained in the Graeco-Roman world like Christmas have received Christian embellishments.

### **Christian Interaction with Culture**

Kwame Bediako, writing on Christian interaction with culture, said,

*Far from constituting a prison that inhibits our human development and from which we are to break free in order to experience salvation...our primal cultural heritage is in fact the very place where Christ desires to meet us in order to transform us into his own image.*<sup>33</sup>

Ghanaian Christians, especially, theologians engaged in missions among the rural folks ought to take a closer look at the pastoral implications of the negative attitude that are sometimes adopted towards our culture. OgbuKalu, comments on rituals that,

*Rituals and festivals become re-energizing sacred moments. This explains why the spirits that guard the gates of communities have remained unconquered.*<sup>34</sup>

He further comments that,

*Christianization process must take cognisance of the element of continuity in the religious lives of Africans instead of banding everything under the umbrage of syncretism.*<sup>35</sup>

As God's people, we may adjust to our culture as long as we do not compromise God's laws. Real excellence is recognized in any culture. In the Book of Daniel in the Bible, Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, learned all they could about their new culture so they could do their work with excellence. But whilst they learned, they maintained steadfast allegiance to God, and God gave them skill and wisdom (Daniel 1:1-21). Culture does not need

to be God's enemy. If it does not violate his commands, it can aid in accomplishing his purpose. We who follow God can become competent leaders in our own culture, but we are required to pledge our allegiance to God first. Jesus crossed all barriers to share the gospel, and we must do no less.

The discussion does not seek to romanticize culture knowing that the world of culture has its own difficulties too, including association with evil spirits. This notwithstanding, Christian doctrine teaches that Christ is able to overpower evil spirits and bring about transformation of a people within their cultural matrix. The implicit suggestion is that rather than demonizing our culture, Ghanaian Christian theologians should consider getting the new believers fully transformed and settled in a culturally-fulfilling society so that they do not lose their identity; then they can also avoid hypocritical lifestyles.

### **The Way Forward**

How should the Ghanaian Christian Church address the issues connected with the Abam ritual? Theologians must go beyond inserting the Gospel into cultures. They should make the gospel a principle that animates, directs and unifies. Thereby culture will be transformed.<sup>36</sup> Bediako in the same source also says "there should be a shift in the conception of Christian and African primal religions as the correlation of two entities that are to be independent. We should not neglect nor deny the validity of most of the traditional beliefs and practices to the point of brushing them off as psychological delusions."<sup>37</sup> No amount of denial on the part of the church will expel belief in supernatural presence from the minds of the African. Contemporary Christianity with its western trappings is merely a thin veneer or at best a superficial presence that so readily crumbles in times of real crisis. It is because we are really Africans at heart. We live in a world of mysterious forces. When our business or marriages are not successful we blame it on the demons and this is really African! We see a spiritual side to everything. We hardly assess our own lives as to what we ought to have done right. Further to his previous assertion, OgbuKalu again declares that the relationship between Africans and their gods goes beyond mere belief and ritual observances. Rather, there is a covenant relationship existing between them. The rituals and festivals are re-energised sacred moments. Do we acknowledge the presence of these deities at all? What efforts are we making to dissociate our lives from them? Honestly, most traditional homes have tutelary spirits. True believers however, have broken ties with them. But what about those who still remain in the villages and small towns in the ancestral homes? These, whether consciously or

unconsciously, are linked up with the tutelary spirits. Instead of downplaying their existence, and pretending they are not real, people should be educated on the limitations of these deities and what Christ does in the life of the believer.

OseiSafo-Kantanka also thinks the Ghanaian culture needs to be transformed by means of a strategic and thoroughgoing evangelism.<sup>38</sup> It is by means of that that the core issues within the world view of the traditional societies could be addressed. He declares that Paul has left us an example to follow in I Corinthians 9:19b-23. In matters that did not violate any principle of God's word, Paul was willing to become like his audience in order to bring them to Christ. Three groups of people are mentioned in these verses: Jews, Gentiles, and those with weak conscience. When speaking to the Jews, Paul adapted his life on the practices of those who followed the Jewish laws, though he was no longer subject to the law. He did that in order to bring them to Christ. Paul never violated any of God's commands in his attempt to serve the interests of his listeners. Such references should embolden Ghanaian Christians to reckon with the socio-cultural realities in the mission fields.

Finally in conclusion, the views posited in this article do not suggest that even where the Abam ritual is abandoned, Christians are to revive it, far be it! The Christian focus should be directed at those members who are already deeply involved or secretly maintaining the Abam objects. Ghanaian Christian theologians and Christians in general must feel obliged in the process of discipling, to search for appropriate concepts to communicate the Christian faith. And this must include:

- An assurance of salvation and an affirmation of the Christian faith.
- Pastors and Evangelists should learn the values within the African tradition and culture.
- Educating Abam candidates in very clear terms about basic Christian doctrine.
- Calling for baptism of the "Abam" ritual for those who are still into it.
- Providing alternate insignias to replace the Abam wristbands or rings.
- Recognition of all the special individuals by celebrating their day in church with prayers, deliverance and anointing service. Back home they could eat the usual mashed yam and eggs, since that is the traditional food for all such occasions.

- Most of the twins are from lower income homes so they could be supported from the church's welfare fund or be given scholarships.

## Endnotes

1. The researcher interviewed people between May 1, 2009 and August 16, 2009. A second series of interviews were held between August 17 and August 21, 2010.
2. [http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Cultural\\_Anthropology/Ritual\\_and\\_Religion](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Cultural_Anthropology/Ritual_and_Religion) (accessed, 05/03/13).
3. Catherine Bell, *Rituals Perspectives and Dimension* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 199.
4. J. C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the sacred* (USA: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1998), 96.
5. J. C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred*, 96.
6. Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 47.
7. <http://science.jrank.org/pages/11042/Religion-African-Rituals-Ceremonies.html>>Religion-Africa-Rituals
8. <http://science.jrank.org/pages/11042/Religion-African-Rituals-Ceremonies.html>>Religion-Africa-Rituals.
9. J. C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred*, 99.
10. J. C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred*, 96.
11. J. C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred*, 42.
12. J. C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred*, 42.
13. J. C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred*, 40.
14. J. C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred*, 39.
15. W. P. Livingston, *Mary Slessor of Calabar* (New York: Doubleday, 1920), 299.
16. Margaret Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Gas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 180.
17. Margaret Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Gas*, 180.
18. At the Centre for Research into Plant Medicine in Mampong, the botanical names given are: *odwunhataw-solanummelongena*, *nkyekyer-panicum maximum*, *akokonansa - Carissa edulis*, *nyanya-momordicacharantia*, *esuan - parkia bicolor*.
19. Emma Cohen, 'What is Spirit Possession? Defining, Comparing, and Explaining Two Possession Forms' (*Ethnos*, 2008), 73: 1, 101-126.
20. Margaret Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Gas*, 180.
21. Margaret Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Gas*, 179. See also J. K. Minta, *AkanAmanbu Mu Bi* ((Accra: Bureau of Ghana Languages, 1996), 57.
22. J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1990), 14.
23. J. G. Christaller, *Dictionary of The Asante and Fante languages*, 1933.
24. E. K. Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: CPCS, 2001), 11.
25. K. A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 81, 90.
26. Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2008. © 1993-2007.
27. J. S. Pobee & J. N. Kudadjie, *Theological Education in Africa: Quo Vadimus?* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990), 4.
28. J. S. Pobee & J. N. Kudadjie, *Theological Education in Africa: Quo Vadimus?* 35.
29. J. S. Pobee & J. N. Kudadjie, *Theological Education in Africa: Quo Vadimus?* 35.
30. Lasisi in T. Adeyemo (ed.), *African Bible Commentary* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishers, 2006), 900.
31. Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 90.
32. Kwame Bediako, *Journal of Biblical Theology* (Dec. 2008), 11: 2.
33. OgbuKalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (South Africa: Business Print Centre, 2005), 8.
34. OgbuKalu, *African Christianity: An African Story*. 8.
35. OgbuKalu, *African Christianity: An African Story*. 8.
36. T. Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 900.
37. O. Safo-Kantanka, *Can A Christian become a Chief?* (Ghana: Payless Publications Ltd., 1993).