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# IS GOD TOUCHABLE?
# ON THE MATERIALITY
# OF AKAN SPIRITUALITY[1]

> The basic Euro-Christian notion of the super-natural world is deeply alien to Ghanaian traditional thought.[2]

> In fact, the later metaphysical notion of immateriality could scarcely have conveyed any meaning to the savage. [Actually …], the lower philosophy escapes various difficulties which down to modern times have perplexed metaphysicians and theologians of the civilised word.[3]

The conceptual opposition between the material and the spiritual has become increasingly fundamental, paradigmatic and absolute[4] in modern Western Christian cosmology since the rise of the natural sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[5] For Western scholars of reli-

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[1] I am grateful to Dr. Jacqueline Borsje (Utrecht University) for her critical comments; to Dr. Henk van Rinsum (also of Utrecht University) and Dr. Anthony Thorpe (City of Bath College) for carefully reading an earlier draft of this article; and to Prof. Elom Dovlo (University of Ghana) for drawing my attention to the debate on Akan traditional views of the human being between Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, two prominent modern Ghanaian philosophers.

[2] Wiredu 1992a: 70n2. Cf. also Wiredu (1992a: 64-65): 'The traditional Ghanaian does not bifurcate the world into a natural and supernatural world. […] The Christian doctrine of a supernatural world of heaven and hell existing in metaphysical isolation from the world [is …] very far removed from Akan traditional religious thought'. Cf. also Wiredu 1992b: 4-5

[3] Tylor 1913⁵, I: 457. Cf. also Andrew Lang's criticism of Tylor's minimal definition of religion as 'belief in spiritual beings': '[…] certain moral and creative deities of low races do not seem to be envisaged as "spiritual" at all. They are regarded as *existences*, as *beings*, unconditioned by Time, Space, or Death, and nobody appears to have put the purely metaphysical question "Are these beings spiritual or material?"' (Lang 1913⁵: 2; cf. also Lang 1898: 201-210).

[4] In its double meaning of conceptually 'dissolving' the universe, as imagined by humans, into empirical and meta-empirical worlds, and of rendering their separation complete and final.

[5] There are, of course, other earlier underpinnings of this divide, especially religious ones. They are in particular the several dichotomies which were variously postulated by the Abrahamite religions between their one and only god – Jahweh/God/Allah – and 'his creation'. One is the total transcendence attributed to this 'creator'. Another his omnipotence *versus* the total dependency of 'the world' and humans on him. A third is his omniscience *versus* human total ignorance particularly of the pagans 'unenlightened' by his revelation. A fourth is his unstained holiness *versus* human sinfulness and depravity. Others are the ethical and doctrinal absolute dualisms of 'good' and 'evil', of true and false religion, etc., which the orthodox varieties of these religions have always preached, and dramatised in their apocalyptic visions. I imply all these oppositions by expressly referring to the modern

gions, it is therefore very difficult to conceive of (other) religion(s) in terms other than the Western dichotomies of 'the natural' *versus* 'the supernatural'.[6] The opposition is so important that we multiply synonyms for it with great ease. One is 'the material' *versus* 'the spiritual', another the 'physical' *versus* the 'metaphysical', a third 'the empirical' **[176]** (world) *versus* 'the meta-empirical' (realm), and a fourth, the 'seen' *versus* the 'unseen'. A fifth, finally, is the testable world, which is taken as the (one and only) object of research of the sciences, *versus* the meta-testable realm(s) postulated by religious beliefs (and by certain kinds of metaphysical philosophy). This rigid cosmological divide coincides with another modern Western Christian sharp conceptual dichotomy, that of 'the holy' *versus* 'the profane' of Émile Durkheim and Rudolf Otto.

These categories have been guiding virtually all of Western academic research of religions, Christian and other.[7] This is apparent from the ways in which three major modalities of academic study of religions have deeply determined, each in their own way, the various disciplines – philological, historical, and social-scientific – that constitute the conglomerate of the Western (now globalising) 'Science of Religions' (*Religionswissenschaft*).[8] They are in chronological order, first the 'positivist-reductionist', irreligious approach that emerged during the Enlightenment and is imbued with its rationalism. It departs, explicitly or implicitly, from a one-tier cosmology, i.e. from the axiomatic assumption that 'of course' only the empirical testable world exists. The second is the 'religionist' (liberal) theological approach. It originated in the Romantic era and thrived on its intuitions and emotions. It assumes a plural-tier cosmology. It believes that apart from the visible world, one or several other invisible realms do really exist. The third is methodological agnosticism. It arose after World War II, at the time of the de-colonisation of Africa and the religious pluralisation and secularisation of Europe. It is pregnant with postmodernist tolerant scepticism. It holds that neither the one-tier cosmology nor the plural-tier cosmologies can be verified or falsified. As meta-testable belief systems they are objects of the (agnostic empirical) sciences of religions rather than their foundation. As all axiomatic verdicts about the truth claims of religions are outside the province of the empirical **[177]** study of religions, the academic study of religions ought to be, for reasons of scientific methodology, a secular agnostic empirical science.[9]

Western Christian cosmological dichotomies have also informed and constrained the research into the religions indigenous to Africa before it was missionised and colonised by the West. But these dichotomies have been, and continue to be, fatally misguiding in the research of these religions as they are in many other religions. For they are alien to the cosmologies and

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Western *Christian* mind-set as also informing the use of the several dichotomies of the natural *versus* the supernatural by the modern Western academic study of religions.

[6] Cf. also the opposition created by Robertson Smith between ancient Semitic religion and all 'savage' religions on the one hand, and the Abrahamite religions on the other. In the former 'gods […] have a physical environment, on and through which they act, and by which their activity is conditioned'. In the latter God is viewed as 'an omnipotent and omnipresent being standing wholly outside nature' (Smith 1972[4]: 91). His residence in Zion is 'almost wholly dematerialised' by Isaiah, even though he 'has not risen to full height of the New Testament conception that God […] is spirit and is to be worshipped spiritually'. Smith concluded that the ritual systems of 'savage' religions had not been able 'by mere natural development to shake themselves free from the congenital defect inherent in every attempt to embody spiritual truth in material forms', for 'a ritual system must always remain materialistic, even if its materialism is disguised under the cloak of mysticism' (Smith 1972[4]: 90-91, 117, 439-440).

[7] Cf. Platvoet 1990, 1994b

[8] Much wider boundaries are used in Departments of 'Religious Studies' in the Anglo-Saxon academic tradition. They include Philosophy of Religion and other disciplines of a theological kind in the academic study of religions despite their normative character. Cf. Platvoet, 1993a, 1993b, 1994a; Wiebe 1999.

[9] For the history of these three modalities, and especially the last two, in Dutch Science(s) of Religions, cf. Platvoet 1998a, 1998b, 2002a

ritual practices of pre-colonial African (and numerous other) societies as I will show by an analysis of the Akan religion in the period of 1850 to 1920.

The structure of my essay is as follows. First, I explain agnostic methodology somewhat further because it is part of the problem I address in this essay. Then I briefly introduce the wider contexts – geographical, historical, cultural, etc. – of the Akan religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and present a very brief outline of the religion. That will bring me to my main subject: Akan beliefs about the incorporation of the 'spiritual' realms, beings, powers and qualities into the visible worlds – 'forest' and 'town' – of the Akan. I will conclude my essay with a few points for further reflection and discussion.

*Agnostic methodology*

Modern Westerners will agree – virtually unanimously – that the 'spiritual' realms, beings, powers and qualities to which religions[10] refer have never been **[178]** seen. As unseen, they are by their very 'nature' – in modern Western view – metaphysical. Therefore, the spiritual realms, beings, powers, and qualities are, for all modern Westerners (whether believers or not), a-empirical meta-testable putative worlds, beings, powers, qualities, etc.

Now, this is a curious state of affairs, for the believers of virtually any and every religion – of whatever time and place, even of the modern Western world – have always viewed them as real. They have most often even viewed them as more real than the empirical world, for they regarded them as constitutive of, and fundamentally basic to, the empirical world in which we move. They saw them moreover as constantly governing it and interfering in it, and as really being present in it, in numerous modalities, not only by their 'spiritual' influence but also by their tangible presence in it in material forms.[11] Yet, modern Westerners – most modern Western believers included – agree that the existence and operation of these realms, beings, powers and qualities cannot be verified, and that the very varied beliefs in them should be viewed equally as as many putative postulates, i.e. as unverifiable hypotheses.

Certainly for the modern secular scholar of religions like myself, these beliefs are first of all postulates about putative realms, beings, powers and qualities. For these scholars, they are mental constructs in the minds of the believers, *i.e.*, crucial elements in their religious cosmolo-

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[10] My 'operational definition' of 'religion' is in the neo-Tylorian tradition in which the (presumed) communication between believers and the unseen beings, postulated by their religious beliefs, is the *definiens* (cf. Platvoet 1990, 1994a). Operational definitions are culture-bound, heuristic and analytical tools, informed by specific time- and place-bound theories about religion. Unlike the (essentialist) definitions, proposed by Aristotelian philosophy and its successors, operational definitions do not claim to constitute transcultural, transtemporal, universally valid knowledge (cf. Platvoet 1999a, 1999b). Michael Pye's definition of 'religion' is in a different tradition, the Tillichian-Geertzian one. In that approach the focal point of research is the cosmological function of religions by which they provide an encompassing orientation to their believers (cf. Pye 1972: 11-12). The massive shift from Tylorian communication definitions to the Tillichian-Geertzian orientation ones after 1950 is intimately connected with the growing cosmological chasm between the seen and the unseen in modern Western societies. It also caused Westerners, in particular Protestants and intellectuals, to shift from ritual to doctrine in modern Western Christian religion. 'Faith' became the focal category instead of 'religion' with pleas being mounted, e.g. by Cantwell Smith, to ban the latter concept from the study of religions altogether (cf. Smith 1964[3]).

[11] Cf. also Robertson Smith on the gods 'too being in some sense conceived to be part of the natural universe' in ancient religions, 'and that this is the reason why men can hold converse with them only by the aid of certain material things' (Smith 1972: 85). Smith (1972: 84) emphasises that 'all acts of ancient worship have a material embodiment'. 'In […] ordinary […] heathenism […] the gods […] are not exempt from the general limitations of physical existence' (Smith 1972: 85). Though as 'spiritual forces' they were seen by 'savages' as 'more or less detached in their movements and action from the material object to which they are supposed properly to belong', their detachment from them, he says, is never complete (Smith 1972: 87). '[… T]he gods, [therefore], are not ubiquitous but subject to limitations of space and time […]. In no region of thought do men begin with transcendental ideas and conceive of existencies raised above space and time' (Smith 1972: 114). 'We find it hard to think of a visible manifestation of the godhead as an actual occurrence, but all primitive peoples believe in frequent theophanies' (Smith 1972: 119). Cf. also Smith (1972: 48-50, 194-195) on the conception of God being as immanent in nature in early Semitic religions as in Aryan religions.

gies, their ways of viewing this world and human life. As mental constructs they are part and parcel of the cultural histories of humankind. As such they are invisible, yet part of our empirical worlds. They are, therefore, available as historical matter to the academic study of religions as beliefs that are not only unverified but also unverifiable. But it follows also from the fact that we modern Westerners hold that these postulated spiritual realms, beings, powers and qualities are unverifiable parts of our empirical researchable world, that the truth claims of believers in respect of their reality and operation cannot be falsified. Religious beliefs are, therefore, both non-verifiable and non-falsifiable. The first reduces them to unproven postulates, the second to incontrovertible assumptions.

From their non-verifiability/non-falsifiability also follows that the beliefs of any and every religion are equal in at least one respect: they are all equally meta-testable, and therefore unprovable, for the methodologically agnostic scholar of religions – as well as for most Westerners, particularly unbelievers. For them Christian beliefs in e.g. God as creator, in the salvific sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and in the human soul and sin do not, in this respect, differ from Akan beliefs in Nyame as creator, in gods (*abosom*), ancestors (*nsamanfo*), in the three 'souls' of a human being (*kra*, *sunsum*, *mogya*), in witches (*bayifo*) and witchcraft (*bayi*), in the **[179]** 'little people' (*mmoatia*) in the forest, and in the healing, prophylactic, protective and vindictive powers of 'medicines' (*nnuru*). Moreover, very many Western Christians nowadays profess, explicitly or implicitly, a liberal theology of religions that is 'metaphysically neutral'.[12] They have abandoned the traditional orthodox claim that salvation is through the Christian faith only (the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), and also the tenet that all other religions are false (the *omnes dii gentium daemonia*). Since Schleiermacher, they have considered humans to be religious by their very nature and constitution, and all religions as in some way and to some degree part of God's economy of salvation for humankind.

What we have here, therefore, is a massive Western cultural and cognitive collusion in which atheist sociologists like Durkheim, methodological agnostics like Ninian Smart and myself, and numerous liberal Christian theologians and scholars of religions such as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade conspire in dichotomous thought.[13] We tear apart and oppose as fundamentally distinct and essentially different the natural and the supernatural  (in Dutch: *natuur* and *bovennatuur*), the material and the spiritual, the profane and the holy (or sacred), the empirical and the meta-empirical. We fundamentally oppose our world with its landscapes and cities which we can see and the universe with its galaxies which we can explore by radio-telemetry, to the numerous religious cosmogonies and cosmologies with their beliefs about God, gods, ancestors, witches, etc., who are assumed to be interfering in human lives and worlds for good or evil. The first we consider real, and our knowledge of it, we say, is based on hard-nosed, well-tested 'facts', established by experimental science. The second we regard as beautiful systems of beliefs, enticing and seductive as imaginary systems of imputed meanings but of a constantly diminishing probability. For not only are we faced with a measurable universe of mind-boggling dimensions at all levels: the microscopic, the mesoscopic and the macroscopic, all of which are increasingly being sucked empty of the meta-empirical, the divine and life-after-death. Recent technologies also enable us to live in many other 'virtual realities', all patently the works of our own imagination.

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[12] I borrow this term from Gombrich (1988: 7-8)

[13] This is also true for modern African intellectuals, theologians and scholars of religions, says Kwasi Wiredu: 'Such concepts as 'God', 'Spirit', 'Soul', […], 'the Supernatural', […] have wormed their way deep into our scheme of concepts and are used by us, Western educated Africans, especially the Christians amongst us, as if their intelligibility or internal coherence in all human language and thought can be taken for granted. So that the exposition of even our own traditional religious thought is couched in these terms without a thought of possible conceptual incongruities. I happen to think that that these concepts have the most imperfect fit, if they have any fit at all, with our indigenous categories of thought' (Wiredu 1992a: 67).

These dichotomies are crucial elements in modern Western cosmology. Let me now oppose it, as a historian of religions, with core elements of Akan worldview but first introduce the Akan themselves and say something about their religion.

**[180]** *Context*

The Akan are a number of distinct societies in the southern, forested half of the former Gold Coast, now Ghana, and the south-eastern part of the Ivory Coast. They exhibit many linguistic and cultural similarities and a greater or smaller number of minor distinctive traits. Archaeological research makes it probable that they have lived in those parts of the West African forest for at least five thousand years and most probably much longer, and so are properly native to that area. Linguistic research shows that they all speak dialects[14] of Akan, the western-most language of the Kwa-group of languages, which are spoken in West Africa from the river Bandama in modern Ivory Coast to beyond the river Niger in modern Nigeria. These languages show great glotto-chronological depths. This linguistic evidence also supports the hypothesis that the speakers of the Kwa languages have lived in this area for many thousands of years.

Anthropological research shows that the major trait which Akan societies share is their matrilineal social structure.[15] They reckon descent in the female line. It constitutes the mother as the focal point of a nuclear family and brought her children under the jurisdiction of her eldest brother, their maternal uncle (*wofa*). With their father, the husband of their mother, children have only a weak, mainly spiritual, moral and sentimental bond, termed *ntoro*,[16] in traditional thought. In matrilineal **[181]** societies, the bond between sisters and brothers is much stronger than that between wives and husbands. The fundamental social and political units of Akan pre-colonial societies were the *abuasuaban-ason*, the seven exogamous matri-clans which are found throughout the Akan linguistic area and are each deemed to descend from a mythical primeval mother. The localised matri-clans (*abuasua*) are, in anthropological terminology, maximal lineages, or extended families, with a remembered genealogical depth of usually ten to twelve generations, 250 to 300 years. They varied in size from a few score to a few hundred members. In the pre-colonial period, the members of a local matri-clan (*abusuafo*) usually lived mostly in their own quarter. Akan towns were divided by a very wide south-north street and a few east-west streets into as many quarters as there were matrilineages in that town.

Historical research shows that the Akan began to develop towns and mercantilist state structures on top of this matrilineal social foundation from at least the early fifteenth century on-

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[14] The largest one being Twi, with several subdialects, one being Asante(-Twi).

[15] Urbanisation, westernisation and industrialisation have weakened Akan matriliny, but it is still a major feature of present-day Akan societies (cf. Barttle 1980).

[16] The *ntoro* was the spiritual link which patrilineal relatives were believed to have with a specific river-god (*nsu-obosom*). It is termed *egyabosom*, 'father's god', among the Fante, (a coastal Akan society between Winneba and Cape Coast). An Akan person was part of a *ntoro* through his/her *sunsum*, the 'soul', or 'spirit', which he/she was believed to have obtained through the *semen* of her/his father at conception (cf. e.g. Busia 1970: 197-200). Complex functions were attributed to the *sunsum*. On the one hand, it was held to endow a person with personality, moral character, and bravery and to be a source of strength and protection for a person, if it was 'strong'. But it was also thought to 'travel', that is to leave the body at night to do in a different place and/or time the deeds or experience the events a person was dreaming about. As 'dream-soul at large' it was thought also that it might implicate a person into *bayi*, 'witchcraft', the pre-eminently immoral nocturnal activity of stealing the vitality (-'soul', *okra*) of one's (matrilineal!) kinsmen, especially of newly born babies and young children (*bayi*, 'to take away a child', cf. Christaller 1933[2]: 11). It was believed that witches (*abayifo*) assembled at night in the large trees in the perimeter (*kurotia*, 'end of the town') of an Akan town or village in order to 'cook' and 'eat' their victims. On the dense symbolism of the *kurotia* as *limen*, threshold, between the 'town' (*kurow*) as the domesticated world of humans, and the forest as the undomesticated world of the unseen, cf. Platvoet 1982b: *passim*; 1985a: 177-179. It is also important to note that the *sunsum* was thought not to survive death, *i.e.* it was held that it did not accompany the *saman* (ancestor) to *samando*, the realm of the dead (cf. Rattray 1923: 53; 1927: 319), but to return to the *ntorobosom/egyabosom* (Christensen 1954: 93-94). For the close parallels of the Akan concept of *sunsum* with the Ga notion of *susuma*, cf. Engmann 1992: 159-164.

wards. They did so first in the north-western part of the Akan area in response to Mande-Dyula long distance trade carried on by Muslim families of traders and clerks from Gao on the river Niger and other kingdoms to the North in the Sahel. Coming south in search for gold dust and cola nuts and later also for salt and slaves, they developed the town of Bighu just north of the forested area as their main trade and crafts centre from the fourteenth century onwards.[17]

Urbanisation and state building received further impulses in the coastal parts of the Akan area after 1482 when the Portuguese built the first European trade stronghold on the coast, the stone castle of Sao Jorge da Mina in what is now Elmina in modern Ghana. Because the European traders found gold dust in abundance on offer there, that stretch of coast soon became known as the Gold Coast. In the 17th century, it became the scene of commercial contest and at times of armed conflict between several European nations, their chartered companies, and these and the 'interlopers' (intruders into these 'protected' markets). The Dutch expelled the Portuguese from their forts at Elmina, Shama and Axim[18] in 1637 and 1642, and built nine more forts. The British also built ten, the Danish five, the Brandenburgers, or Prussians, two, and the French also constructed two forts.[19] By 1700, there were some thirty fortified trading posts on **[182]** the Gold Coast trading European goods, especially weapons, for gold dust and increasingly also for slaves. Their supply steadily grew as a result of the wars the Akan inland states fought with the latest European weaponry over the control of the trade routes up north and towards the coast. The Europeans shipped the gold off to Europe and the slaves to the sugar and cotton plantations in the Americas.

The main outcome of this development was the rise to power of Asante around 1700 as a successful military confederacy of the 'five single states' (*amantoonum*) and Kumase. Asante grew into an empire in the course of the 18th century by incorporating virtually all other Akan 'states' as provinces and much non-Akan area to the North as outlying border districts from which annual tributes of slaves and other goods were extracted.

By 1800 Akan statecraft operated on four levels. The bottom one was the local matrilineages (*abusua*), each resident in their own town quarters. The next level was the town (*kurow*) as the coalition of these local matrilineages. Above it was the 'state' (*oman*) comprising a town and its outlying villages or the confederation of a few small towns. The top level was that of the large successful military confederacies such as *Asanteman*, the 'Asante nation', of Kumase and 'the five single states'.

This political structure was also ordered matrilineally. Each level above the bottom one was ruled by a male and a female representative of the core or 'royal' (*adehye*) matrilineage of a town, state, or confederacy. In its quarter an *abusua* was headed by its elected *abuasuapanyin*, male elder, and its *obaa panyin*, female elder. A town was ruled by its *ohene*, male ruler, elected from and by the *adehye* ('royals'). They likewise elected its *ohemmaa*, female ruler, who was either his (classificatory) 'sister' or his mother.[20] The *ohene* was advised by a council on which sat the *abuasuampanimfo*, the male elders of the matrilineages of the town, as well as the *ohemmaa*. Likewise a state was ruled by its elected *omanhene* and *omanhemmaa*. The first headed a council on which sat the *omanhemmaa* and the *ahemfo*, the (male) rulers of the participating villages and towns. The same was the case for *Asanteman*. It was ruled by the *Asantehene*, and the *Asantehemmaa* sat on *Asantemanhyiamu*, the council of the Asante nation,

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[17] Cf. Kea 1982: 53-55

[18] Cf. Ryder 1965: 217, 221, 223

[19] Cf. Fage 1965: 30-31

[20] *Ohemmaa* has usually been translated by 'queen mother' in European literature on Akan societies. The *ohemmaa*, however, never was a 'queen' in a European sense, for she was not married to the former or present ruler but elected from among his female matrikin. Moreover, the wives of an *ohene* belonged to a matrilineage different from that of the ruler and therefore did not qualify for the office of *ohemmaa*.

together with the *ahemfo*, the male rulers of the *amantoonum*, the five states that had allied with Kumasi in the late eighteenth century to form the original Asante nation.[21]

So much, briefly, for the cultural, social, historical and political contexts in which Akan traditional religion developed during the pre-colonial period. I will now present a very brief outline of late nineteenth century indigenous Akan religion.

**[183]** *Akan religion*

Before I do so, I must first stress however that systematic presentations of preliterate religions by means of a systematic outline are misleading and dangerous. By the nature of their cultural and historical contexts oral, inarticulate, non-doctrinal religions lack the lucid systematisation we are used to associate with religions through our habituation to doctrinal religions such as Christianity with their strong tradition of theological and philosophical reflection, scholastic debate, doctrinal controversies, 'heresies' and persecution of 'heretics'. Nineteenth century Akan religion, however, was a loose conglomerate of diffuse belief notions that were never explicitly and systematically ordered and hardly ever consciously present in the minds of Akan believers. Rather they hid there as chunks of subliminal beliefs emerging into consciousness for brief periods only as guides for appropriate ritual action when a particular situation – e.g. the 'outdooring' of a newly born child on the eighth day – required that certain words (often proverbs, stock phrases or set prayers) be said and certain moods or sentiments be shown in ritual actions. The limited space allowed to a contribution to a *Festschrift* however forces me to use this defective means for a brief introduction to Akan religion.[22]

**[184]** Akan precolonial religion was very complex. It consisted of seven loosely connected compartments. One was constituted by the rituals, 'rules of respect' (*akyiwadie*)[23] for and beliefs[24] about *Nyame* (God), *Asase Yaa* (the goddess Earth) and the *abosom* (the lower gods). The *abosom* were the numerous male gods of Akan religion who were regarded as the 'children' of Nyame and to serve as his 'spokesmen' (*akyeame*) and plenipotentiary 'messengers' on earth after he had 'retired' to the sky. *Sasabonsam*, the monstrous god believed to reside in the depth of the damp forest also belonged to the gods. Another department consisted of Akan rituals, rules of respect for and beliefs about the *nsamanfo*, the 'ancestors', divided in *nsamanpa* ('good ancestors'), *nsamantofo* (unfortunate ancestors who had fallen in battle or been killed in an accident and were easily angered) and *nsamantwentwen* ('tarrying ancestors', ghosts). In particular the *nsamanpa*, mainly those who had been male or female rulers in their

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[21] On Asante and its history, cf. Wilks 1975

[22] For realistic pictures of Akan religion, as it actually functioned in Akan social and political history, cf. my analyses of Akan ritual events and institutions in Platvoet 1973, 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1985a, 1985b, 1991, 1999c, 2000. Adrian Hastings remarked in his editorial to *Journal of Religion in Africa* 15, 3 (1985), that essays such as my 'Cool Shade, Peace and Power' (Platvoet 1985a) present a picture very different from 'the uniformly religious character of all traditional African society', which theological scholars, European and African, of 'ATR', African Traditional Religion, have presented. 'The impression these [new] studies provide is far more of a pragmatic secularity in which an underlying religious connotation may seldom be wholly absent but is often far more muted than students of religion have suggested. The secularism of African tradition is a dimension still inadequately explored, but we would be wise not to ignore it' (Hastings 1985: 173). I have examined this secularism, and the allied phenomenon of religious indifference, in pre-colonial and modern societies of Africa further in Platvoet 1998c and in Platvoet & Van Rinsum 2003.

[23] Literally: 'the things abhorred' by the unseen being addressed.

[24] In that order! The position and function of religious beliefs in preliterate and folk religions is a minimalist one compared to the place beliefs have in religions with a doctrinal, or other kinds of traditions of reflection and articulation. They are analogous to that of the 'self-evident' pre-reflexive notions about key social relations, which members of any society – the modern Western ones included – acquire in the socialisation process. Both these and religious beliefs in preliterate religions serve as the mental steering mechanisms in the minds of the members of a society that instil in them a sense or feeling for what is 'proper' behaviour in a particular social situation. They are the pre-reflective, mainly sub-liminal 'notions' that shape, control and constrain social behaviour and forestall 'deviant' acts. On this 'multi-stranded' and 'deferential' type of 'thought', cf. Gellner 1988: 43sq,

lifetimes, held a very prominent position in Akan religious life in pre-colonial times. The third division was that of rituals, rules and beliefs about the three 'souls' of each human being: *okra*, the vitality 'soul' and 'charge for life' (*nkrabea*) with which a person was endowed by Nyame;[25] *sunsum*, a person's patrilineal 'soul' or 'spirit';[26] and *mogya*, the 'blood'(-'soul')[27] which a human obtained from her or **[185]** his mother and by which his or her position in society during this life and as an ancestor after it was determined.[28] A fourth division respected rituals, rules and beliefs with respect to animals and plants, i.e. the uncultivated 'natural' world of the forest outside human society. Animals and plants were thought to have one 'soul' or 'spirit' only, of the *sunsum* type, and either a 'weak' or 'strong' one. In the latter case they were termed *sasamoa*: beings which, like the *nsamantofo*, were said to possess much *sasa*, **[186]** the dangerous power of '(spiritual) revenge'.[29] They were, therefore, to be handled with much circumspection and to be regularly pacified. But if treated 'properly', it was believed they might also be used for purposes beneficial to humans by incorporating their *sasa* into *suman* (amulets, charms, talismans) and *nnuru* ('medicines') through the correct rituals. Rituals, rules and beliefs with respect to these *suman* and *nnuru* constituted the fifth department of Akan religion.

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[25] The *okra* was said by Rattray 'to accompany the *saman*' (ancestor) after death (Rattray 1927: 319), and by others to return to God at death to account for its task in life (Christaller 1933: 262; Busia 1970: 197; Sarpong 1974: 37; 1977: 5; Pobee 1976: 8.

[26] Cf. on *sunsum*, cf. above note 17. Apart from designating the patrilineal 'spirit' or 'soul' in humans (cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: 46, 55, 92), *sunsum* also served as a general category for anything 'spiritual'. As such it included not only the collective 'soul' or 'spirit' of a community (e.g. that of the Asante nation as located in the famous *Sikadwa Kofi*, 'Golden Stool' (cf. Rattray 1923: 289-290), but also any 'spirit' or anything 'spiritual', from Nyame to the *sunsum* of animals and plants and in charms and 'medicines'. By extension, it came also to be used for Christian notions of the disembodied 'spiritual', as in *Sunsum Kronkron*, 'Holy Spirit' and Pentecostal *Sunsum Asore*, 'Spirit Churches'.

[27] Most authors on Akan indigenous religion and thought mention only two 'souls' of human beings, *sunsum* and *kra*, because they considered *mogya* to be a purely physical element. But there are a few exceptions. One is Rattray. He was the first to conclude, in 1927, that *mogya* too must have been regarded by the traditional Akan as in some ways also a 'spiritual' element in humans. He did so in consequence of his investigations into cross-cousin marriage (*mogya aware*, 'blood marriage'). Akan males in the past had authority, as *wofanom*, 'maternal uncles', over the sons and daughters of their sisters, and in particular over their marriages. They often preferred them to marry their own daughters and sons, because they considered such 'blood marriages' a means to secure a 'pure reincarnation' (*kra pa*, 'good soul') for themselves. They reckoned it would allow them to return after their deaths into their matrilineages as members of the same *ntoro* as they belonged to now, and so as endowed with the same *sunsum* and names expressing it (cf. Rattray 1927: 317-331, esp. 318. Authors who have followed Rattray in regarding *mogya* as also a 'soul' are the Ghanaian philosophers Willy Abraham and Kwasi Wiredu, and the anthropologists Kofi Asare Opoku and Philip Bartle (cf Abraham 1970: 61; Opoku 1975: 21; Wiredu 1980: 47; Bartle 1983: 94). That nineteenth century Akan regarded *mogya* as not merely physical seems to have dawned on these authors, however, only as a result of their attempts to solve the problem of the 'spiritual' basis of Akan *post mortem* ancestorhood in mortal men. The part-'spiritual' character of *mogya* seems, therefore, an *etic* (analytical) conclusion rather than an *emic* (indigenous) meaning of which the traditional Akan were themselves explicitly aware. For they never explicitly referred to the part-spiritual, part-physical character of *mogya*. Which they did in respect of *sunsum* and *kra*. But Akan thought being 'un-analytic', 'pre-scientific', and 'non-discursive' (Wiredu 1980: 11-15, 29, 39, 41, 47), as well as 'multi-stranded' and 'deferential' (cf. Gellner 1988: 43 sq.), the Akan did not construct conceptual oppositions between the physical and the spiritual, for they regarded their indistinct union by interpenetration as quite normal, natural, and unremarkable.

[28] On the numerous postulated relationships between (1) *mogya*, *abusua*, 'matrilineage', and *nsamanfo*, ancestors*;* (2) between *sunsum* and the patrilineal *ntoro* and *ntorobosm* (father's god); and (3) between *okra* and *Onyame*, God, cf. Christaller 1933: 35, 54, 262-263, 318, 423-424, 484, 527, 529, 600-601; Rattray 1923: 35-39, 45-54, 77-80, 153; 1927: 152-155, 317-324; Christensen 1954: 77-79; Busia, 1970: 196-197; Nketia, 1955: 19-38; Sarpong 1974: 36-40; Sarpong 1977: 4-7; Opoku 1975: 15-24; Pobee 1976: 7-8; Bartle 1983: 85-113. Cf. also Engmann's discussion of the closely related Ga notions about the human person (Engmann 1992).

[29] All humans, animals and plants that had met with an untimely death were viewed as *sasamoa*: beings with an inclination towards capricious revenge because of this grudge.

Rituals, rules and belief notions about *abayifo* ('witches') formed its sixth compartment, and those about the *mmoatia* ('the little people', or gnomes, of the forest) its seventh.[30]

*The materiality of Akan spirituality*
All these seven distinct, loosely connected, postulated realms of Akan belief are 'spiritual' in the Western sense that they are non-verifiable/non-falsifiable, i.e. unseen and a-empirical from the point of view of modern Western cosmology. For the Akan believer, they were all also properly 'spiritual' as possessing to a smaller or greater degree unseen dimensions or aspects. So they were part of what I define analytically as their 'religion'. But, for the Akan, their spirituality implied no opposition at all to the material, the empirical, the touchable and the testable. On the contrary, Akan believers postulated several kinds and degrees of materiality for the spiritual and thereby integrated the spiritual into their own physical world. Actually, the dichotomous categories 'spiritual' *versus* 'material' and so on were completely absent from Akan minds and language. It is only in *etic* (Western-analytical) terms and not in *emic* (indigenous) Akan terms that we can say that for the Akan everything 'spiritual' or 'mystical' was to some degree and in some manner also 'material' or 'empirical'.

This can be shown in several ways. One is that there was clearly an order among these postulated unseen worlds. It was expressed in the degree of materiality imputed to a particular category of the spiritual: the more material a particular spiritual entity was thought to be, the lower was its place in the 'hierarchy' of the spiritual. This can be seen especially if the most material 'things' in Akan religion, the *suman* and *nnuru*, are compared with the highest realm, that of God and the gods. The former were clearly man-made religious artefacts, made from parts of animals and plants believed to be endowed with a strong *sunsum* and therefore powerful and though dangerous also potentially useful for protective, prophylactic, therapeutic, vindictive, judicial, political and divinatory purposes. These artefacts were on sale and so could be owned and worn or consumed in various ways. There was a brisk trade in them, and they were also readily imported from **[187]]** neighbouring foreign markets and religions.[31] There was also a high turn-over of them, 'impotent' ones being regularly replaced by new, especially foreign ones that promised a better return for the money invested in them.

Another is that God and the gods, in their 'wild' (undomesticated) state, were clearly not viewed as man-made constructs in this sense but regarded as much more spiritual, elevated and powerful.[32] But even here the distinctions were fluid and never radical. That can be shown by taking a closer look at the putative realm of the divine and in particular by comparing Akan views of their undomesticated gods – *Nyame*, (the male) creator god; *Asase Yaa*,[33] (the female)

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[30] For these Twi terms, cf. Christaller 1933; McCaskie 1995: 274-318.

[31] E.g. Muslim *malams* did profitable business for centuries in selling all kinds of Koranic charms to their Akan customers. They did the best business with Akan chiefs in times of war by selling them *batakari* tunics, Sahel type of dresses without collar and sleeves which were sewn all over with small leather packages containing a piece of paper with a text from the Koran. The dress was believed to safeguard its wearer from bullets. For pictures of chiefs wearing these battle dresses, cf. Rattray 1927: fig. 16; Kyerematen 1964: 69; Cole & Ross 1977: 21.

[32] I should point out that the matrilineal structure of Akan societies is not reflected in Akan notions about Nyame and the deities. Their realm seems rather conceived as patrilineally ordered, i.e. in terms structurally opposed to how Akan human society is ordered. Though the gods are regarded as Nyame's 'sons', Nyame did not 'beget' them in marriage, for Nyame is never viewed as married to Asase Yaa. She has a complementary but quite distinct position in Akan religion from that of Nyame. In addition, Akan deities are Nyame's 'sons': they are virtually all (said to be) male. Apart from Asase Yaa, female goddesses are rare. Only a very few are found in coastal Akan religions.

[33] In Akan societies, humans as well as gods – and *e.g.* also central, symbolic paraphernalia such as the famous *Sikadwa Kofi* ('Golden Stool Friday') (cf. Rattray 1923: 9-10, 287-293) – received a *kradin*, 'soul-name', after the day of the week on which they were said to have been 'born' – *i.e.* to have appeared – in human society. I explain below how gods were thought to have become 'house-gods' when they were 'born' among humans. It is important to note, however, that *Nyame* ('Sky') and *Asaase* ('Earth') were never thought of as having been 'born' into hu-

'Earth Thursday'; and any other god thought to be resident outside human habitation – with those about their domesticated gods, the *fiebosom* ('housegods).

I must first point out, however, that we meet here with a case of 'inclusive monotheism'. Though Akan religion was thoroughly polytheist, the worship of numerous gods was harmoniously included in a background monotheism, *Nyame* being regarded as the creator, the source and origin of, the gods, his 'sons', included.

Secondly, in Akan belief, everything 'spiritual', even the highest, *Nyame*, the creator-god, was viewed as also material, however faintly. Nothing 'spiritual' was ever purely immaterial, purely a-empirical. And the lower a being, or power, or quality ranked in the hierarchy of the spiritual, the denser was the materiality that was imputed to it, as I may demonstrate by comparing the materiality imputed to *Nyame* to that assigned to the *abosom,* gods.

First *Nyame*'s materiality. He was believed to be manifest in the visible expanse of the sky, both when it was blue with a brilliant sun[34] and when it was **[188]** black with a thunderstorm. In the latter he was thought to be visible in lightning and audible in the thunder and to descend on earth as rain, the heavy as well as the soft, and as clouds on hills and mist in the forest. In brief, *Nyame* was believed to be visible and audible in sky phenomena and to be touchable in rain, for he descended on earth as water. The little worship that was directed specifically at *Nyame* in precolonial time was performed at the *Nyamedua*, a forked branch placed in the corner of the inner yard of Akan houses and 'temple'-houses (*bosombuw*). It had been cut from a tree, also called *Nyamedua*, 'tree of God', and had been placed in such a way that a bowl in the fork of the *nyamedua* caught the rain coming down from the roof of the house or temple. 'People sprinkle themselves with the water to be guarded against evil spirits', Christaller writes.[35] In that bowl moreover a *Nyamekua*, 'axe of God' – actually one of the numerous celts (neolithic stone axes) found throughout the Akan area – was placed. It was associated with God producing lightning and thunder in the regular rainstorms. In them he was said to come down as *Totorebonsu*,[36] rain beating down noisily and copiously, which made the rivers overflow.[37]

A much denser materiality was imputed to the *abosom*. The Akan made an important distinction between *abosom*, 'gods', and *fie-bosom*, 'house-gods'.[38] The first referred to any lower god,[39] but in particular to gods believed to be resident in the world of uncultivated untamed nature, which the Akan equated with the forests. Especially in the nineteenth and earlier centuries when only footpaths ran through the forest and all trade goods had to be carried on the heads of slaves, their towns as the ordered world of humans were situated as small islands in a sea of forest. In particular the dark virgin forest (*kwaeberentuw*, *kwaebiribi*) was *ehu*, fearful and frightening, to the Akan.[40] The gods resided as rivers, rocks and forest in this wild and untamed world. They were God descended on earth as water: the rivers, brooks, lakes and the sea were

man society. Yet, they too were addressed by their own 'soul-name'. That of Earth was *Yaa*, the *kradin* of females born on a Thursday. That of *Nyame* was *Kwame*, the soul-name of males born on a Saturday.

[34] Christaller (1933: 356) derived Nyame from the verb *nyàm*: 'to brandish, to flourish', the adjective *nyàm*: 'shining', 'bright', and the noun *onyàm*: 'glory', dignity', 'majesty'. He was the first Christian missionary to acknowledge the monotheist character of Akan traditional religion (Christaller 1933: 356). He also regarded that etymology, and the position of Nyame, 'Sky', in Akan indigenous religion, as supplementary proof of the theories of the Nature Myth School and of Friedrich Max Müller (cf. Christaller 1933: 356). Müller suggested that the belief contents of humankind's earliest religions could best be derived from the names of deities, for their etymologies provided keys for grasping the poetic allusions to (phenomena of) 'nature', such as dawn, sunrise, thunderstorm, etc., by means of which myths 'revealed' – *i.e.* articulated – the natures imputed to the gods (cf. van den Bosch 2002: 251-265).

[35] Christaller 1933: 357

[36] One of Nyame's numerous praise-names.

[37] Cf. Rattray 1923: 141-142, fig. 52; Christaller 1933: 531; Swithenbank 1969: 16, 17, 19, 22, 24, 27, 29, 34, 44, 47, 50, 55.

[38] Cf. Warren 1974: 374-422; Platvoet 1982b: 89, 92-93, 254-255n.25, 256.

[39] I.e. not to Nyame and Asase Yaa.

[40] Cf. Platvoet 1985a: 177-179.

the material manifestations of gods on earth, of God refracted in numerous 'water-gods' (*nsuo-bosom*). God as lightning and thunder was associated with rock through the *nyamekuma*, 'axes of God'. Gods (*abosom*: *bo* is 'rock', *som* is 'to serve') were often held to manifest themselves in rocks or caves as *bosomboo*, 'rock-gods'. A god might also manifest himself both as a water- and a rock-god, as Tano, the 'eldest son' of *Nyame*, was believed to do by being both the river Tano and *obomuhene*, 'king in the rock', as he was addressed in prayers at **[189]** Tanoboase ('Tano under the Rock'), his 'headquarters'. God descending as water was also viewed as the source of the forest and its mighty trees. This was reflected in the third category of Akan gods in untamed nature, the *wurambosom*, 'gods in the forest', one of which was the fearful *Sasabonsam*, the god of the deep forest.

But in addition to being untamed gods in wild nature, gods could also become 'housegods', *fiebosom*. They did so by being 'born' among men in a lengthy process of incorporation into a matrilineage through the acquisition of four additional material manifestations. One was the medium (*okomfo*) whom a god was believed to possess and through whom, it was believed, he physically spoke and acted. Another was the *yawa*, a 'shrine' in the shape of a flat bronze pan filled with a mixture of earth, substances from the forest and a stone. A god was believed to be present in it when libations were poured out before it, petitions were addressed to it, meals were set before it and/or the blood of sacrifices was poured out over it. The shrine was always placed in a *bosomdan*, a (square) 'room for the gods', or in a *bosombuw*, a small (round) 'temple' in the outskirts of a town. These were maintained for one or more gods by their *okomfo*, 'medium', or even by a 'priest', *obosomfo*. A third was their *nsuoyaa*, waterpot, through which it was believed that their medium or priest could divine what the god had to reveal about the problem a believer brought to his attention. And the last manifestation were a god's own charms (*nsuman*) through which he could protect his devotees, and his own *nnuru*, 'medicines', through which he could heal them or which they could eat in order to swear an oath or conclude a pact.

Lastly, Akan views of the human person (*onipa*) are another apt illustration that the several modern Western Christian dichotomies of the physical *versus* the meta-physical, such as that of the mortal physical body *versus* the immortal spiritual 'soul', are misleading in research on pre-colonial Akan religion. Akan viewed a 'person' (*nipa*) as constituted by a 'body' (*nipadua*, a person's external form; or *honam*, 'body', 'flesh') and three other elements, *mogya*, *sunsum* and *kra*, in which the physical, social and the spiritual seem to have been regarded as intermingled in various ways and degrees. Wiredu proposed to view these three 'souls' as 'attenuated materiality', i.e. as consisting of various forms of subtle, ethereal or astral corporeality.[41] Though Wiredu's 'spiritualist' interpretation is much to be preferred to Gyekye's 'dualist' approach,[42] it does still not accurately **[190]** render Akan traditional notions in all their complexi-

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[41] Wiredu 1992c: 139-140, 144

[42] In recent years, the traditional Akan notions of the human person have been hotly debated by Wiredu and Gyekye, two leading modern Ghanaian philosophers. Gyekye rejects Wiredu's 'materialist' approach (47) as 'completely wrong' and regards traditional anthropological accounts of *sunsum* as 'involving […] conceptual blunders' – e.g. that of the logical incompatibility of *sunsum* being a spirit, and so immaterial and immortal, yet perishing at death –, and therefore 'incorrect'. Gyekye approaches the traditional Akan terms as a philosopher purely by way of conceptual and logical analysis, and pays virtually no attention to their numerous sociological, emotional and other functions nor grasps their symbolic density. He regards Akan traditional notions of the human person as having been produced by past unknown individual thinkers of the same intellectual stature as the Pre-Socratic philosophers of Ancient Greece. In his view, these notions therefore constitute a proper 'traditional African philosophy', which he, as a philosopher trained in Western philosophy, is intent on developing into an authentically African modern philosophy. In his view, 'Akan ontology is essentially or primarily spiritual'. He collapses *sunsum* and *kra* by regarding *sunsum*, on philosophical grounds, as but an aspect of the *kra*. Thereby he establishes the Western-Christian dualism of the body *versus* the soul as the centrepiece of his argument. In his view, the soul (*kra*) is immaterial and immortal because it is a spiritual entity. On this debate, cf. Wiredu 1980: 47; Wiredu 1992c: 139-140, 143-144; Gyekey 1987: 3-103, esp. 10, 21, 32, 42, 47-48, 52-53, 56-57, 63, 86, 88-102. Appiah is

ty and numerous ramifications. It fails to incorporate their all-important sociological dimensions (matrilineal *abusua* and patrilineal *ntoro*) and their several links to the other departments of Akan religion: *Nyame*, *nsuobosom*, *fiebosom*, *ntoro* as *agyabosom*, ancestors, and witches. Wiredu's subtle corporeality of these souls also does not discriminate sufficiently between their different kinds and degrees of the 'materiality'. These ranged from the more physical *mogya* ('blood') constituting a person's body, physical appearance and membership of a specific matrilineage and thereby determining a person's ancestorhood, to the more explicitly 'spiritual' elements of *sunsum* ('spirit') and *kra* ('soul'), each of which was however regarded as endowed with its own materiality. To Akan believers, *sunsum* was the male semen and the water of the river inhabited by one's *ntorobosom*,[43] as *kra* was a person's breath and vitality. It was thought to dwell in a person's blood, from whence witches were believed to try to steal it by sucking the *kra* out.

*Points for reflection and discussion*
These particular data about the indigenous, pre-colonial religions of Akan societies in what was then Gold Coast, now Ghana, allow me to raise three points for further discussion and reflection. They are, first, how important is the 'materiality' of the 'spiritual' for its incorporation into human society? It seems that the 'spiritual' cannot be incorporated into society without some materiality. The second is: need that 'materiality' be anthropomorphic? And the third: how disastrous is the modern Western Christian radical conceptual opposition of the material *versus* the spiritual for accurate and objective scholarship in religions?

As for the first point: *Nyame*, the Creator-God, was the Supreme Being for late nineteenth century Akan. To them, he was as fully 'transcendent' and 'spiritual' as were Jahweh, God and Allah to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Apart from a *kradin*,[44] no anthropomorphic likeness was attributed to him, nor to *Asase Yaa*, 'Earth Thursday'. 'Sky' and 'Earth' also had no mediums, shrines, temples, pots of divination, charms and medicines among the Akan. They clearly were not 'house-gods' incorporated into human society for the Akan but 'cosmological' gods representing the two main departments of Akan cosmology: sky and earth.[45] Yet *Nyame*, 'Sky', was also in certain ways material and immanent to the Akan: he was visible, audible and touchable in their eyes. So was *Asase Yaa*, 'Earth Thursday', who, to the Akan, was the earth on which they walked, which they tilted, and in which they buried their dead.

The gods (*abosom*) were also, in our Western terms, properly 'spiritual' beings but endowed as gods resident in nature with an increased and permanent materiality as rivers, rocks and forests when compared to Nyame; and when they became gods among men, additional material manifestations, human as well as fabricated, were attributed to them. Akan incorporated them into human society through a medium, a shrine in a temple, a pot of divination, and charms and medicines. The shrine, temple, divination pot, charms and medicines were all artefacts constructed by humans. The material was therefore essential to the spiritual in Akan 'theology': in

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another modern Ghanaian philosopher who rejects Gyekye's 'Cartesian dualist' interpretation of Akan 'philosophical psychology' (cf. Appiah 1992: 98-100). Gyekye's dualist interpretation of Akan notions of Nyame, God, by which he introduces Greek metaphysical notions into African indigenous religions (cf Gyekye 1987: 68-72) qualifies him pre-eminently as a scholar 'dressing up African deities with Hellenic robes' (cf. p'Bitek 1971: 28, 41, 47, 50, 80-88; Platvoet & Van Rinsum 2003: 123, 136-138).
[43] Rattray 1923: 78; Rattray 1927: 319.
[44] Cf. above note 34
[45] Cf. Busia 1968: 40-42; 19070: 195. The third domain in Akan cosmology was the forest, but it is difficult to decide whether there was also a 'departmental god' of the forest, and if so, whether that was *Sasabonsam*, or *Etwie*, 'Leopard' (cf. Platvoet 1982a: 91). There are also a few indications that *nsie*, 'underworld', may have been regarded either as a sub-department of 'earth', or perhaps as a fourth department in Akan cosmology under a separate 'earth goddess', *Asase Boa nsie*, 'Earth owning the underworld' (cf. Platvoet 1982a: 91, 259, 260n56). The first seems more likely.

pre-colonial Akan indigenous religion it served to incorporate 'the divine' into the natural and human worlds.

Following up on this, I suggest that it has been normal in the history of religions of humankind for all religions so far – below I will present examples – to meet the unseen in the seen,[46] and to conceive of it not only as meta-physical, but also as intra-physical and even as physical. I put up for discussion also that the recent, increasingly sharper opposition and separation of the spiritual and the material in modern Western Christian cosmology is a highly particular and peculiar development, contingent upon the historical events in modern Western religious, intellectual and social history which I have noted above. It is also, I suggest, not only a product of present-day, wealthy, well-informed, secularising Europe with its rates of steeply rising religious disaffiliation, but also an ominous sign for the future of religion in the Western world.[47]

**[192]** As for the second point, a striking feature of the Akan beliefs about God and the gods was their an-iconicity. Despite the material shapes the divine realm took, there were no iconic representations, no idol statues. Nor were there any carved ancestor statues or masks despite the great prominence of ancestors in Akan pre-colonial religious life.[48] The only human element in the materialisation of the gods was the medium of whom they were thought to take possession. One other anthropomorphic element in their total (spiritual-material) outfit is that, like humans, they were each thought to be connected with a special weekday and addressed with the *kradin*, 'soul-name', proper for a person 'born' on that day, together with a further string of praise-names, as in Akan court etiquette. E.g. *Nyame* was addressed in prayers as *Nana Kwame Nyankopong*, 'Grandparent Saturday who alone art big'.

I suggest that, despite Biblical and Muslim an-iconicity, Western scholars of religions have looked much more favourably upon anthropomorphic materialisations of the spiritual than on non-anthropomorphic materialisations. As less personalist, they placed the latter more readily into the depreciative and biased categories of defective religion: 'magic', 'witchcraft', 'oracles',[49] 'divination', 'sorcery', 'superstition'; i.e. of non-religion. We need constantly to re-examine the cultural biases in our concepts and theories. We need not only to study religions critically by 'contextualising' them, but even more we must contextualise our scholarship about them.[50] For both the religions of humankind and our scholarship about them are thoroughly time-, place- and culture-bound events, even in this era of globalisation. It must also be admitted, however, that 'reflexivity' – the critical examination of one's own context-bound (inter)subjectivity, constantly constraining and subverting one's attempts at being objective – is a major – perhaps the major – feature of modern Science of Religions.[51]

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[46] I am not repeating here, of course, the liberal theological position of Schleiermacher, Müller and others that humans have a faculty for perceiving the infinite in the finite, and are therefore by nature religious.

[47] Cf. my analysis of religious developments in the Netherlands in the period 1850-2000 as context of Dutch Science of Religions in Platvoet 2002a: 121-127, 136-141.

[48] In some periods and places, Akan made terracotta heads of rulers who had recently died for their *sore* ('departure') rite (cf. Platvoet 1982b: Rattray 1927: 163-166). These heads served only for leave taking – to see the deceased off on their journey to *asamando*, the world of the ancestors – and to conclude mourning. At the end of these rites of farewell the heads were deposited at the edge of the forest with the emphatic message: 'We have finished your funeral. […] We have closed the path. It is finished.' At this the heads were deposited with food and drink at the edge of the forest, a stick was laid across the path to repeat the message of the closing of the path and the bearers returned home without looking back. The heads were left there to be overgrown by the forest and decay (Platvoet 1982b: 115-116). When these ancestors were approached ritually at a later time, they were contacted at their *apunnua*, 'black stools' – usually the one upon which they had bathed during their life times – in the *apunnuadan*, 'room of the black stools' (cf. e.g. the description of several *Adae* rituals in Rattray 1923: 92-120).

[49] A famous instance is the classic by Evans-Pritchard (1937).

[50] Cf. e.g. Platvoet & Van Rinsum 2003: 131-136, 141-142, 145, 153.

[51] Cf. e.g. as *pars pro toto* for a long list of literature, Krüger 1982, and my discussion of it in Platvoet 1993a: 322-327.

**[193]** As for my third point, on the basis of the limited data presented from late nineteenth century Akan religion, I suggest that modern Western dichotomous concepts of the spiritual as radically other than the material are highly misleading in the analysis of preliterate and folk religions. In them the several degrees of materiality of the spiritual are the normal state of affairs. In them the spiritual is even more intra- or infra-empirical than meta-empirical.[52] Western radicalisation of the spiritual into the purely transcendent is a very recent and quite exceptional development in the history of religions. This contingency was brought about in part by Christian theology, which has systematically and competitively articulated belief notions into doctrines for centuries. But more recently the de-materialisation of the spiritual received its main impetus from the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Its secular positivism radicalised the findings of the modern Western natural sciences into an axiomatic cosmological dichotomy in the modern Western mind.

This opposition, which is deeply ingrained in the modern Western mind, poses severe epistemological and methodological problems in the comparative study of religions. For example it caused most anthropological scholars of religions to restrict their notion of religion to that part of preliterate religions (as defined above) which they recognised as possessing enough 'pure spirituality' and submissiveness to higher spiritual beings to be acceptable for them as 'religion' (as they define it). They regarded the rest as not-religion and dumped it into a whole range of depreciative polemical categories like 'magic', 'superstition', 'witchcraft', 'fetishism', 'idolatry', etc.[53] The fierce Protestant pagano-papism of the Reformation and the Enlightenment[54] is still a submerged but potent force in the perception, description and analysis of preliterate and folk religions, even among fully secularised non-believing European scholars. For preliterate religions are very different from the model of 'religion' in the minds of Westerners. In their eyes they are materialist, pragmatic, magical, superstitious, idolatrous, casual, irreverent, non-ethical, often sceptical, and always confusing and confused, and therefore 'in need' of clarification and systematisation by us.[55]

Western radical opposition of the material *versus* the spiritual poses problems however not only for Science of Religions but also for the historical and pastoral disciplines of Christian (and other) theology. In Christianity, **[194]** particularly in folk Christianity with e.g. its veneration of saints and relicts but also in its more elitist forms of monastic life, mysticism and theological reflection, the spiritual has always taken material forms of several degrees of density in the past. I may refer to the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation for an example: Christ, the centrepiece of Christianity, was a historical person. But also to the doctrine of transubstantiation (!!) in RC classical theology of the Eucharist, and to the other sacraments and the *sacramentalia* (e.g. 'holy water', consecrated oil and salt, etc.) in RC devotions and piety. A virtually pan-religious belief about the 'spiritual' within the 'material' is that in the human soul, or souls, as the postulated transcendental element in humans, which are often believed to be immortal, or at least to survive death in de-materialised form for some time.

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[52] Cf. Jack Goody 1961: 151, 154-155, on the absence of the supernatural-natural distinction in the European sense among the Azande, the Nuer and the LoDagaa, which, he adds, Durkheim found 'to be the case for most cultures'. In them, says Goody, '"natural" and "supernatural" forces as we conceive them are inextricably intertwined'.

[53] Cf. Gladigow 1988: 22.

[54] See Harrison1990: 9, 43, 144-146; Platvoet 1999b: 480, 485-486.

[55] Mathias Guenther is one of the first anthropologists to accept unreservedly and to respect that preliterate religions are 'a confusing tangle of ideas and beliefs, marked by contradiction, inconsistencies, vagueness and lack of culture-wide standardization'. He also terms them 'a wonderful muddle [….] beset with uncertainty, confusion and discrepancy' (Guenther 1999: 58, 59, 61; cf. also Platvoet 2002b).

*In conclusion*

The IAHR has seen exponential growth in the years Michael Pye held office as its General Secretary (1985-1995) and President (1995-2000). At the beginning of his term of office he developed bold initiatives to expand the IAHR beyond its predominantly Western, Protestant and Anglophone confines. He did that especially through the Marburg conference in 1988.[56] He invited its participants to analyse why the IAHR had not developed in the Roman Catholic parts of Europe, the 'Marxist' world – from Eastern Europe to China – and in that of Islam. The purpose of this 'institutional analysis' was to develop strategies for drawing scholars of religions in these worlds into the IAHR and by doing so convert the IAHR into a truly international and intercultural community of academic scholarship on religions. In other words, to spring its Western confines. To further this, Michael Pye initiated at the same conference moves to strengthen IAHR presence in Anglophone Africa, and in the rest of his term he worked hard to establish it in Latin America, and to expand it in Asia outside Japan.[57]

Michael Pye is to be praised greatly for having understood 'the signs of the times' and for having initiated this 'de-colonisation', after the fact, of Science of Religions. Moreover, if there is any Western academic discipline that should be eager to be truly ecumenical – embracing the whole of the inhabited world –, it is the one that has all religions, from Neanderthaler to New Age and its most recent Japanese parallels, for its field of research. Michael Pye argued that the IAHR must develop an 'intercultural' strategy to become truly world-embracing.[58] That requires in his view that the IAHR, as 'a non-religious organisation', must now be even clearer than in the past 'about its independence from **[195]** specific religious standpoints'. For interculturalism to develop, this 'methodological independence' and neutrality should be required from all members of any IAHR-affiliate.[59]

This is very much an optimistic, outward, and forward looking policy. But it is also one that imposes our standards and perspectives on new members with non-Western cultural backgrounds. Frankly, I do not share Michael Pye's optimism that this insistence on 'methodological independence' will be the panacea by which the IAHR will become truly intercultural. A more sure road for the IAHR is to take a hard look inward and backward, upon itself and its past, i.e. on the modern Western Christian contexts that shaped and constrained it, and its dichotomous cosmology.

I add two more arguments why we should travel along this more humble and humbling road. One I borrow from Michael Pye himself. He said: 'the simple point [is that] the shape of religion as viewed by perceptive specialists is affected by the major relevant historical determinants. […] And the shape of religion […] has a strong influence on the researcher and subsequent theories'.[60] The other is that, whether we like it or not, the Sciences of Religions also took their origin in, and are a product of, the secularisation of Europe. That is even the case when they are pursued by believers practising 'methodological neutrality'. However much I am fond of advocating methodological agnostic neutrality, and so fully agree with Michael Pye in matters of methodology, still I cannot escape the conclusion that the dichotomous cosmological foundation of our methodology presents severe problems to our scholarship on religions. A critical examination of our dearest position seems a more sure way towards an intercultural IAHR than imposing that perspective as a condition for admission on all scholars of religions who wish to join it. Therefore, agnostic methodology constitutes not only my preferred solution, but is also, as I said above, a huge problem. This contribution was devoted to the examination of that problem.

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[56] Cf. Pye 1989.
[57] Cf.  Pye 1996: 37-38; Platvoet & Olupona 1996: 7-11.
[58] Pye 1996: 38sq.
[59] Pye 1996: 39-40.
[60] Pye 1996: 44.

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