

GODS IN NATURE, GODS AT HOME: DOMESTICATING THE DIVINE IN AKAN LATE 19TH CENTURY RELIGION

Abstract

This article addresses four questions. 1) How did the Akan in the 19th and earlier centuries link the divine to wild nature? 2) How did they domesticate it? 3) Is pre-colonial Akan indigenous religion a 'nature religion' (*Naturreligion*)? 4) If it is, did it inspire conservationist sentiments into the Akan?

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that there is an intrinsic connection between a part of Akan late 19th century indigenous religion and (wild) nature, conceived in modern terms as the uncultivated natural environment of the Akan societies of the Gold Coast, now Ghana. I will present an analysis first of the material aspects of Akan notions of 'God', or 'the divine', i.e. of that part of Akan religious beliefs about unseen realms and beings which modern Westerners as well as modern Africans virtually all, and exclusively, view as transcendent and as purely spiritual, and as such pre-eminently associate with 'religion'. In Akan religion, 'the divine' consists of the sky god *Nyame*, the goddess Earth Thursday (*Asase Yaa*),¹ and the gods (*abosom*).² Akan, however, identified them intrinsically with wild uncultivated nature, i.e. with their natural environment, and in particular with the forest, hills, rocks, rivers, brooks, lakes, the sea; and with visible, touchable and audible celestial phenomena such as the sky, clouds, the brilliant sun, thunderstorms, lightning, thunder, rain pouring down, morning mists, and thick fog. Many of these

¹ Akan have a system of seven male and seven female *akradiŋ*, 'soul names'. Each weekday was associated with its own tutelary god, and each Akan person received his or her personal *kradiŋ* after the weekday on which he or she was born (cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 263, 599-600). Akan extended this naming system also to other 'persons' they deemed addressable, e.g., addressing the sky god *Nyame* in prayers as *Kwame*, a male born on a Saturday, and/or whose day of worship is Saturday (cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 280); and Earth as *Asase Yaa*, a female 'born' on, and/or worshipped on, a Thursday (cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 429-430). But so was *Sika Dwa Kofi*, 'Golden Stool Friday', the famous Asante national emblem believed to have been 'brought down from the sky [on a Friday] in a black cloud, and amid rumblings and in air thick with white dust', and said to contain the *sunsum*, 'soul', of the Asante nation (Rattray 1923: 280; cf. also McLeod: 1981: 12; McCaskie 1995: 309). Day-names however implied no, or at most a minimal, attribution of anthropomorphism, for *Nyame*, and all other divinities, were 'generally considered non-anthropomorphic' (Rattray 1916: 18). The same goes for praise names with which meta-empirical beings were addressed in prayers and in drum language (Cf. e.g. Rattray 1916: 17, 133-138; 1923: 266-286). It is only in the Akan *anansesɛm*, the folk stories about the smart Kwaku Ananse, Wednesday-born Spider, that *Onyankopɔn*, the Sky God, is anthropomorphized by being vested with all the attributes of an Akan *ɔhene*, 'king'/'chief' (cf. Rattray 1930: 15, 27, 55-63, 73-81, 95, 129, 133, -137, 193, 201-203, 215-219, 239-241, 249, 257-261, 264-267, 269).

² I will qualify that below.

they experienced as fear- and awe-inspiring, and dangerous.³ In brief, they conceived of the sky god and the gods, in our terms, as primarily material and as also spiritual, or better as spiritual in material forms.

Secondly, I will detail how the gods were domesticated. Having dealt with these two issues, I will conclude by briefly addressing two more questions: was Akan religion a *Nature religion*, a 'nature religion'? And, if so, did it inspire conservationist sentiments and behaviour into the Akan in pre-colonial time?

Akan stories about 'long ago'

Pre-colonial Akan indigenous religion had no cosmogony, i.e. no story or body of stories about how the world had come into being, whether by a Creator God,⁴ or by emerging from chaos,⁵ or from a cosmic egg,⁶ or in some other manner. Nor did Akan have stories about how humans had been created. In pre-colonial time, Akan only had bedside stories, told by grandmothers to their grandchildren, about 'long ago' (*tete*), the primordial time, when the first humans were said to have emerged from holes in the ground, or from caves, or to have descended along chains or in baskets from the sky into their forested world. Which primal world was thought to have been no different 'long ago' from what it was at the time a grandmother (*Nana*) told these stories to her grandchildren in a 19th century Akan village. In these stories, 'long ago' was also the time when the sky god (*Nyame*) was said to have been close to these first humans, males and females, and to have provided them with whatever food they had requested when they had touched and addressed him. At the time, say these stories, these first humans had not yet been aware of sex and procreation, had not yet suffered death, and had not yet known about gods.⁷

These stories about the sky god *Nyame* being close to humans in this imaginary monotheistic primordial period demonstrate that Akan in the 19th and earlier centuries conceived of the skygod *Nyame* in material terms: in those of specific visible, touchable and phenomena of wild nature, probably those of mist and fog, and regarded these, and him, as addressable.⁸

That is also true for Akan beliefs about the gods, for the gods too were thought to be intrinsically linked to wild nature. Like *Nyame* they were conceived in material terms. The gods, however, were linked by the Akan to the post-primordial, polytheist period of Akan religion, i.e. to normal life, when people did have sex, procreated and died, and *Nyame* was believed to have

³ Cf. Platvoet 1985: 177-178

⁴ Cf. Pettazzoni (1951: 72): 'The notion that God created the world is that ingrained in our religious tradition that it is difficult for us to imagine that this essential part of our faith plays a much more modest role in other historical milieus, or even none at all' [my translation from the French].

⁵ Cf. e.g. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theogony>; Pettazzoni 1951: 72-73

⁶ Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_egg

⁷ For references, cf. Platvoet 2012: 44-45, 46n23, 52-53

⁸ For a history of Akan notions of *Nyame*' God', cf. Platvoet 2012

withdrawn to on high (*soro*) because of some rude behaviour of women towards him,⁹ and to have left humans in the care of his children, the gods.¹⁰

The main subject of this article therefore is: how did Akan link the gods to wild, untamed nature? And how did they domesticate them?

From forest ecology to farm ecology

In October 2011 my wife and I took our three grown-up sons on a sentimental journey to Ghana, to show them the places where she and I had lived between 1961 and 1966, my wife serving as a nurse and midwife in a mission hospital at Assin Foso, some 100 km. inland on the Cape Coast-Kumase road, and later in a clinic in Elmina on the seaboard. It was there, in March 1965, that we first met. At that time I was teaching history classes at St. Teresa's Minor Seminary at Amisano near Elmina.

As we drove at first along the coast from Accra to Elmina, a grassy plain a few miles wide and bare of forest, our sons were eagerly waiting to see the tropical forest and its huge trees we had told them about. We promised they would see proper forest when we would drive from Cape Coast to the hospital at Assin Foso, for both of us remembered well the long stretches of forest that had lined the road in the 1960s. However, when we actually did drive to Assin Foso, we saw no forest at all along the road. By the time we arrived at the hospital we had not seen a single huge forest tree. In the past five decades all forest had been cleared for farms to feed the hugely expanded population of Ghana, from 6,6 million in 1960 to 18,9 million in 2000,¹¹ and close to 27 million in 2014.¹² It was only later that week, when we visited Kakum National Park,¹³ that we saw forest of the kind that had massively covered Akan territory in the 19th and earlier centuries.

Modern Akan therefore live in a farm-forest ecology that is significantly different from the dense forest ecology in which their forebears lived in pre-colonial times. That ecological shift is likely to have been a major factor, be it only one among several others, to have gradually but fundamentally transformed Akan notions of the divine. E.g. since 1850, their notion of *Nyame* changed from a sky god, visible, touchable, audible, and therefore material and empirical to them, to a spiritual, transcendent, invisible Creator God believed to reside, after Christian/Muslim fashion, in a meta-empirical, immaterial heaven behind the sky.¹⁴

⁹ For examples, cf. Platvoet 2012: 41, 44-45, 53-54

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: 86

¹¹ Cf. *Ghana Demographic and Health Survey 2008*, par. 1.2: Demographic Profile, at [http://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR221/FR221\[13Aug2012\].pdf](http://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR221/FR221[13Aug2012].pdf)

¹² Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghana>

¹³ Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kakum_National_Park

¹⁴ Cf. Platvoet 2012

The 19th century Akan world

Until the advent of colonial times (on the coast in 1874;¹⁵ for the Asante kingdom in 1901),¹⁶ Akan towns, villages and hamlets were islands in a sea of tropical (rain and semi-deciduous) forest. For trade, diplomacy and other purposes they were connected by narrow, twisting footpaths, and a radial system of *akwɛntempɔŋ*, 'great roads', four northwards from Kumase, the Asante capital, and four southwards, all of which were fit for trade by head portage only.¹⁷ Transport of any bigger item, e.g. a hammock, through the luxurious vegetation of tropical forest along muddy footpaths over trunks of fallen trees and across rivers was often virtually impossible,¹⁸ as may be illustrated from two random examples.

One is the 'immense deal of trouble'¹⁹ the Methodist missionary Thomas Birch Freeman had in 1841 on his second visit to the ruler of the powerful Asante kingdom, Kwaku Dua (1834-1867). Hoping to obtain permission to start a school and a mission in Kumase, Freeman had brought a phaeton,²⁰ a light, open, 4-wheeled carriage, to be drawn by two horses, as one of his presents for the *Asantehene*.²¹ It was very fashionable in England at the time. Freeman had even shown it to the young Queen Victoria before he shipped it to Cape Coast Castle, British trade

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. Boahen 1975: 34, 43, 56

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Boahen 1975: 76; Wilks 1975: 661-662

¹⁷ On the history of the 'great roads', cf. Dupuis 1824/1966 II: xxvii-xxx; Dickson 1971: 109-115; Wilks 1975: 1-42; and esp. 39 on the failure to maintain them: 'between 1820 and 1870 no real revolution in communications was achieved. [...] In 1872 twenty days was [still] the regular fixed time for the couriers to travel from Kumase to Cape Coast and back'; McCaskie 1995: 9-10, 296. For maps of this system, cf. Dickson 1971: 110; Wilks 1975: 19, 45, 62; McLeod 1981: 8. For descriptions of the 'exceedingly bad' conditions of the 'great road' from Cape Coast to Kumase, cf. Dupuis 1824/1966: 16-18, 20, 23, 30-31, 37, 39, 52; Freeman 1844/1968: 16, 63, 67; McCaskie 1995: 335n34.

¹⁸ Cf. McLeod 1981: 20-21; for a graphic description of footpaths made slippery by rain, cf. Freeman 1844/1968: 63; for a picture, cf. McLeod 1981: 21.

¹⁹ Freeman 1844/1968: 99; cf. also 97-109 *passim*, 118-119, 180

²⁰ Cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaeton_\(carriage\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaeton_(carriage)); Freeman 1844/1968: 71, 124-127, 176, 186

²¹ It was never pulled by horses in Kumase, but by men (McLeod 1979: 24; 1981: 17, 18), as horses were rare and never survived for long in Asante due to trypanosomiasis [sleeping sickness] transmitted by the tsetse fly. The *Asantehene* seems to have been eager, however, to show that he might be able to procure horses for the phaeton, for Freeman reported that on Sunday 12 December 1841, at his last stop before Kumase, 'the chief of the party [bringing him a present of palm-wine from the *Asantehene*] rode on a strong Ashanti pony, with an Arabic or Moorish saddle and bridle' (Freeman 1844/1968: 122). Bosman had already reported that, though horses were never seen on the coast, they were found 'in the interior', be it as a dwarfed horse that small that a big man riding on one nearly touched the ground with his feet. He added that they were ugly, resembling asses rather than horses, for they always drooped their neck and head; and could not be spurred on except by heavy blows with a stick (Bosman 1704, part 2: 20). A few days after his arrival in Kumase on Monday 28 February 1820, Dupuis was also given 'a horse [...] of a diminutive breed, and of unsightly appearance [but] moderately fleet and active' by the *Asantehene* (Dupuis 1824/1966: 104). Domestic horses were bred in the Sahel since 2,500 BP, but had dwarfed to ponies 90-110 cm high, that were fit for slow travel only because they had acquired only a partial resistance against trypanosomiasis. As they were not suited to serve cavalry horses in Sahelian warfare, Sahelian nobility imported them from North Africa but kept them indoors in stables (Blench 1993: 88-89).

headquarters on the Gold Coast.²² Despite orders of the king to clear the road during the last legs of the journey in Asante proper and throw bridges over streams,²³ it took Freeman 37 days and a company of 150 carriers to transport the phaeton from Cape Coast to Kumase,²⁴ a journey of 130 miles which he had completed on foot on his first visit in 1839 in 16 days.²⁵

The other is warfare in these forests. Asante warfare was perfectly adapted to this forest ecology but European warfare was not. As long as 'the bush [was] stronger than the cannon', as Kwaku Dua confidently remarked as late as 1863,²⁶ the Asante were easily a military match for the British, until 1872 when British forces in the Gold Coast began to be equipped with breech-loading Snider-Enfield rifles²⁷ and lightweight rapid speed Gatling machine guns, first used in the American Civil War (1861-1865).²⁸ Their head start in gun technology, and their ability to impose a strict embargo on arms sale to Asante since the Dutch had left the Gold Coast in 1872,²⁹ enabled the British at last to establish their rule over Asante, be it only in 1901.³⁰

Akan forest ecology is reflected in the threefold symbolic and spatial division by which the Akan ordered their world in the 19th and earlier centuries. They are *kurow*, the town; *kurotia*, 'the ends of the town': a marginal area around the town; and *kwaebibiri*, the 'black' or 'dark forest', i.e. the dense, virgin forest.³¹ I discuss them briefly.

Akan towns consisted of several closely huddled quarters separated by a wide south-north main road (*abontey*) and a few, a bit less wide, East-West side roads.³² Akan compounds - the *abusuafie*, matriclan houses in which the *abusuafio*, the members of a local matriclan, lived together under their *abusuapanyin*, 'family elder', and *obaapanyin*, 'senior woman', one of his

²² Freeman 1844/1968: 126. Cf. also McLeod (1979) on the carriages governors of the castles in Elmina and Cape Coast, rich mulatto traders, and, exceptionally, missionaries occasionally used for small trips in other seaboard town in the 19th century, where they were always pulled by men, except for one instance in late 19th century.

²³ Cf. Freeman 1844/1968: 118; cf. also Dupuis 1824/1966: 59

²⁴ From Saturday November 6 to Monday December 13, 1841 (Freeman 1844/1968: 97-124; McLeod 1981: 17, 18).

²⁵ From Tuesday 29 January, 1839, to Saturday 9 February, when Freeman arrived at Fomena. He was kept waiting there till Thursday 28 March, when he received permission to travel on to Kumase, where he arrived on Monday 1 April 1839. Cf. Freeman 1844/1968: 13-19, 43-51. Monday, *Dwoda*, day of coolness (*dwo*) and calm, was regarded as the propitious day for the reception of foreigners and guests. On his second visit, Freeman also entered Kumase on Monday 13 December 1841 (cf. Freeman 1844/1968: 112, 123-125). Dupuis (1824/1966: 58, 75) was likewise invited to enter Kumase on Monday 28th February 1820, 'for that is a good (auspicious) day'.

²⁶ Cf. Boahen 1975: 32

²⁷ Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martini-Henry>; Wilks 1975: 682; Platvoet 1991: 151

²⁸ Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gatling_gun;

²⁹ Even so, by 1881 Asante too had acquired at least 1,000 Snider-Enfield breech loading rifles from French merchants at Assini and Grand Bassam in the Ivory Coast (cf. Wilks 1975: 613-614, 616-617, 619-620, 638, 660). But they were used mainly in factional struggles (cf. Wilks 1975: 286, 298, 527-528, 552-553, 561, 572, 617, 677, 713)..

³⁰ Cf. Boahen 32-33; Wilks 1975: 682

³¹ Cf. McLeod 1981: 20-40

³² Cf. Dupuis 1824/1966: 34, 35, 44, 65, 70; Freeman 1844/1968: 54; Wilks 1975: plate 1, facing p. 206; McLeod 1983: 22, 27-31

sisters.³³ Akan towns were sedulously kept clean of all *wura*, wild vegetation (grass, weeds, gardens, but also bush, forest, etc.). were bare of all plant life except for the *gyennua*, 'trees of reception', that were planted as meeting points and reception places in the main road at a considerable distance from one another.³⁴ *Gyennua*, however, were highly esteemed, for providing shade and cool (*dwo*) they were believed to produce calm, harmony and peace in an Akan town. *Gyennua* had important social, political and religious symbolic functions in 19th century Akan towns.³⁵

The *kurotia* was the transitional area around the town between this ideally cool, ordered and safe world of the town, and the dense forest conceived as the untamed and therefore dangerous world of the divine.³⁶ This margin contained the middens, public toilets,³⁷ the *bradaŋ*, menstruation huts, the cemeteries, the *sóredaŋ*, 'house of departure',³⁸ and *asèŋsie*, 'place of the pots',³⁹ and other places perceived as evil and dangerous, such as *asamampów*, 'the grove of the ghosts', where strangers, women who had died in childbirth, and slaves were buried and the bodies of those decapitated were dumped.⁴⁰ The *bosombuw*, the houses/temples of the *bosommmaa*, 'younger gods', whose cult had recently been established in a town, were also built in this marginal area.⁴¹ And the coven of local *abayifo*, witches, was said to congregate at night in a big tree in the *kurotia* for its cannibalistic feasts in which they were believed to devour the *akra*, 'vitality

³³ Akan societies were, and are, matrilineal. Cf. Rattray 1923: 35-37, 77-85; Fortes 1969: 154-177; Okali 1983: 7-9, 12-16; McLeod 1981: 18-19. Cf. also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matrilineality>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abusua>

³⁴ Cf. McLeod 1981: 21

³⁵ Cf. Rattray 1916: 182, proverb 770; 1927: 4n2; Platvoet 1984, 1985; McLeod 1981: 29-30. Cf. also Dupuis (1824/1966: 60, 63, 70-71, 102); Freeman (1844/1968: 19, 23, 48, 54, 57, 107, 151-152, 158, 159, 172) for the *gyennua*, termed *Banyan* trees by him, under which he was received and preached; and that nearly got him into trouble on Sunday 7 April 1839 at Bantama, where Asante kings are buried, because people thought Freeman's interpreter had plucked some leaves from a *gyedua* (Freeman 1844/1968: 58). For pictures of 19th century *gyennua*, cf. Wilks 1975: plate 1, facing 206; McLeod 1981: 27, 28, 29, 37

³⁶ Cf. McLeod 1981: 35-40; McCaskie 1995: 119-120

³⁷ Cf. Dupuis 1824/1966: 48

³⁸ A makeshift structure of a few sticks and branches at which, on 'the day of departure' (*sóreda*) a few days after the burial, a rite was conducted in which the deceased was informed that his/her funeral had been duly conducted, and was requested 'to go [and] sleep peacefully' (*kó da dwo*), and 'to depart' (*sóre*) (cf. Christaller 1881-1933: 471; Rattray 1927: 163-166; Platvoet 1982).

³⁹ A spot in the grove of the ghosts towards which a few women, at sundown at 'the day of departure', carried the *abusua kuruwa*, 'matrikin pot', containing the hair the members of the matrikin of the deceased had shaven off earlier that day, as well as the food and utensils that had been placed in the *sóredaŋ*, 'being very careful not to look behind them'. When they had placed them there, they informed the deceased again that the burial rites had finished. Then they closed the way back to town symbolically by laying a creeper across the path and returned to the *sóredaŋ* to join their matrikin (cf. Rattray 1927: 164-165).

⁴⁰ Like the one Freeman (1844/1968: 56) saw and smelled in Kumase on Saturday April 6, 1839; cf. also Christaller 1881/1933: 423.

⁴¹ Cf. Rattray 1923: 188; McLeod 1981: 38, 61, 66

souls', of family members, particularly the weak souls of newly born babies and young children.⁴²

The nearby forest, in as far as it was farmed, did not have any significant symbolic function in respect to the gods, *abosom* in 19th century Akan culture and religion. The religious connection of farms and farming was rather to *Asase Yaa*, the goddess Earth Thursday.⁴³

The dense, dark forest (*kwaebibiri*, *kwaebarentuw*), however, was inspiring fright (*ehu*). It was the world into which the brave hunter went to hunt elusive animals that were believed to be endowed with *sasa*, power for revenge,⁴⁴ and the healer (*odunsinni*) and trance-priest (*ókómfo*) to search for powerful (*sasa*-endowed) 'medicine' (*aduru*). But they did so only after they had protected themselves well with charms (*asuman*)⁴⁵ against the dangers the forest was thought to pose, or because they felt assured of the protection of their god who belonged to this forest world. Apart from animals, trees and plants endowed with *sasa* (power for revenge), the forest was also inhabited by the *mmoatia*, the 'little creatures':⁴⁶ three foot high imps of various sorts and character, some deemed naughty, some helpful, and credited with much knowledge of *aduru*, 'medicines'.⁴⁷ They were also believed to serve as messengers to the gods. And the forest was the home of *Kwaku Sasabonsam*, the anthropo-theriomorphic god of the dense forest, said to have fierce red eyes and to be covered with lots of long reddish hair, and to be in league with witches. He was believed to live in the tops of huge trees in the deepest recesses of the forest, and to be on the outlook to pull up humans straying into the dense forest unawares with his long dangling legs in order devour them.⁴⁸

⁴² Cf. e.g. Debrunner 1959: 24-26, 29-30; Field 1960: 35-38; Fortes 1969: 179-183

⁴³ Cf. Rattray 1923: 214-217; 1927: 161-162

⁴⁴ On *sasa*, with which, it was believed, revengeful dead (who had died e.g. in battle, or in an accident, or had been executed, and were therefore spiritually dangerous) were endowed as well as certain animals, trees and plants, cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 415, 429-446; Rattray 1916: 37, 47, 64-65; 1923: 59, 60, 99-100, 208; 1927: 2, 5-6, 22, 132, 153, 183-186; McCaskie 1995: 43, 52, 220, 357n77

⁴⁵ In this article, I disregard the *asuman*, which Akan grade as a distinct category of 'superhuman powers' between *abosom*, 'gods', and *nnuru*, 'medicines' (which I discuss below). *Asuman* constitute a fairly broad category comprising 'minor deties' (Rattray 1916: 30), and other 'lowest grades of superhuman powers' (Rattray 1923: 86), such as charms, amulets, talismans, 'fetishes', of a more derived, specific, personal, instrumental and temporal nature than the gods (cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 483; Rattray 1916: 30; 1923: 86, 90, 99-100, 158, 201; 1927: 9-24; McCaskie 1995: 51, 111-122, 382n111).

⁴⁶ Cf. Rattray 1927: 22-23, 25-26, 38, 44, fig.19; McCaskie 1995: 111, 119, 121, 300

⁴⁷ On *aduru*, cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 100-101; Rattray 1916: 28; 1927: 22-23, 25-26, 38-39; McCaskie 1995: 111, 119, 300; and below.

⁴⁸ Cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 429; Rattray 1916: 49-50; 1927: 28; McCaskie 1995: 118-119, 307-308; Appiah & Appiah [2000]: 909. For a *Sasabonsam* statue, commissioned by Rattray for the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, London, in 1924, cf. McCaskie 1995: 116-117. Cf. however also Rattray 1927: 29, 31, 147, 148; Platvoet 1991: 163-167 on *Sasabonsam* as the witch hunting god of the *abonsamkómfo*, a large movement of witch hunters in Asante in the troubled time after the British had sacked Kumase on 4/5 February 1874. In 1879-1880 they attempted an attack on the life of the *Asantehehene* Mensa Bonsu (1874-1883), after which 200 of them were captured, tried and executed.

But the dense forest with its brooks and rivers, hills and rocks was first of all regarded as the world of the gods, that is of the divine in its post-primordial, polytheist manifestations, after *Nyame*, the sky god, had removed himself upwards (*soro*), into the sky because of the rude behaviour of women who were said to have beaten him with their long pestles while they were pounding *fufu* for the evening meal.⁴⁹ It was then, it was said, that *Nyame* had handed over the weal and woe of the *ateasefo*, the humans ‘sitting down below [on earth]’, to his ‘sons’ (*onyamemmaa*) and ‘messengers’, the gods (*abosom*). Akan distinguished three kinds of gods in wild nature:⁵⁰ water-, rock- and forest-gods:⁵¹

- *nsuobosom*, ‘water gods’, the main and most numerous category, and most clearly representing on earth the sky god *Nyame*, who is primarily associated with rain, rainstorm, mists and fog, and with thunder and lightning, but also with the sky, clouds, and the sun. One may say, poetically, that to the Akan sky god *Nyame*, by coming down on earth as rain, had dispersed himself on earth in the post-primordial, polytheist period in the (water) gods, that is in all water bodies on their forested earth: brooks, rivers, lakes, the ocean, etc.;
- *bosomboó*, ‘rock gods’, a much smaller category, who represented the sky god in his thunder and lightning aspect, for rock and stone were associated with the sky god beating the clouds with his *nyamekuma*, *Nyame*’s axe,⁵² thereby causing thunder, lightning and rainstorm;
- *wurambosom*, ‘gods in the wild forest’, i.e. the dense vegetation of the forest as divine in a vague, general sense, and as a small category of specific gods ‘found’ in the forest.

It should, however, be noted that these three categories represent no strict division. They are merely emphases, for each god is associated with all three forms of ‘God on earth’:⁵³ water, rock, and dense vegetation. That is also apparent from their general name, *óbosom*, ‘cult’/‘ser-

⁴⁹ Cf. Platvoet 2012: 44-45, 53-54

⁵⁰ Cf. McCaskie (1995: 108, 117): ‘The origins [of the *abosom*], crucially, lay beyond human society [...]. By definition, the *abosom* were powers in and of that [wild] nature that had preceded culture. [...] They furnished a [...] topography of the encompassing natural universe [...] awesome, untamed, threatening and potentially destructive’.

⁵¹ Cf. Platvoet 1982: 89; 2012: 59-63. Bowdich (1819/1966: 202) noted the same tripartite division in 1817: ‘Their [...] subordinate deities are supposed to inhabit particular rivers, woods, and mountains’; as did Beecham (1841: 174-175) and Gramberg (1861: 51, quoted in L’Honoré Naber 1912: 68n2). Cf. also Christaller (1933: 598): gods ‘are said to [...] dwell in stone, caves, trees’, and were named after rivers; Rattray (1916: 29): ‘a mountain, a river, [...] a rock or tree’; (1923: 145): ‘a rock, a stone, or a tree [...] is the potential abode of a spiritual something’; Evans (1950: 255): ‘Many [gods ...] are identified with rivers [...]; others make trees and rocks their abode’; Silverman (1987: 272): ‘*abosom* are tutelary spirits associated with rivers, rocks, mountains, groves, etc.’.

⁵² On *nyameakuma*, cf. Rattray 1916: 110; 1923: 124, 142, 322-331; McLeod 1981: 13

⁵³ To the Akan, *Nyame* was not, in post-primordial time, a ‘typical West African “withdrwn” god’ (McLeod 1981: 57), a deist *deus otiosus*, *remotus*, *absconditus et incertus*, but rather a *deus mediatu*s: God mediated on earth in the gods, who ‘come from, and have their power only as part of the power ascribed to, Onyankopon’ (Rattray 1916: 22, 29). Gods were termed, moreover, *Onyankopón akyeame*, ‘spokesmen of God’ (Rattray 1916: 22). Akan religion is therefore a monotheistic as well as a thoroughly polytheistic religion. Or rather, the incompatibility deemed inherent in the dichotomous labels ‘monotheism’ and ‘polytheism’, as coined in Axial Age History of Religions, makes no sense in Akan indigenous religion.

vice' of 'rock'/'stone',⁵⁴ and e.g. from the ingredients of their *ayawa*, shrines, to be discussed below. Gods might also develop a special association with two of these three components. E.g. the greatest of all Akan gods, Tano, was not only identified with the river Tano, and as such a *nsuo-bosom*, but was also addressed in prayers with the praise names *óbomuhene*, 'king within the rock', *boótirimuhene*, 'king within the protruding rock' [from which the river Tano springs], and *Ta Koraa Bodan*, 'Tano [who has a] rock chamber/cave', all indicating that Tano is also intimately associated with rock.⁵⁵

Domesticating gods

For Akan, the cult of the *nsamanfo*, the ancestors, was the central and innermost part of their religion,⁵⁶ and the only part that was regarded as absolutely safe.⁵⁷ The rituals for the ancestors were the central feature of Akan political life. They were performed in the *apuuñuadan*, the room of the blackened stools in the *ahemfi*, the king's residence,⁵⁸ or in the family houses, *i.e.* within the Akan towns. They were ordered by the Akan forty-day calendar (*adaaduanan*) and were performed twice each 'month'.⁵⁹

Safe also was the cult of the *abosompón*, the 'great gods', who were believed to have been part of a local human society since long, and were considered an integral part of it. These gods, since long domesticated, had their residence also in the town, in a *bosomdan*, a room of the gods, in a compound in the town, the 'state gods' (*ómanbosom*) being lodged in *ahemfi*, the residence of the local ruler; the *abusuabosom*, the gods of a local matrigroup, in the main family home governed by the *abusuapanyin*, the elder overseeing the local matrikin group.⁶⁰

The *bosondan* of recent, younger gods, however, were built outside the town, in the *kurotia*, the transitional area around the town.⁶¹ That indicates that these gods, and their cults, though regarded as possibly powerful and useful, were also viewed as invading the society of men from outside, from the dangerous world of the forest, and therefore as never fully to be trusted nor as fully reliable until they had been resident and working among humans for a long time. Akan political leaders therefore kept a strict control on *akómfo*, the bare-chest male and female priests in raffia skirts with *mpèsèmpèsè*, dreadlocks,⁶² and dowsed with white powder.⁶³ In their trances

⁵⁴ Cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 43; McCaskie 1995: 276

⁵⁵ Cf. Rattray 1923: 172-198; Platvoet 2012: 60-61

⁵⁶ Cf. Rattray 1923: 92-138; Busia (1951: 23): 'The religion of the Ashanti is mainly ancestor-worship'; 1951- 23-39; 1954:200-2005; Fortes 1969: 188-189. As it was in many other indigenous African religions, such as the Xhosa (cf. Hodgson 1982: 26).

⁵⁷ Cf. e.g. Fortes (1969: 189): 'The lineage ancestors [... were] not visualized as mystically persecutory agencies, but rather as just and watchful arbiters and protectors of the social order'.

⁵⁸ Cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: 92-120, 133-138

⁵⁹ Cf. Bartle 1978; McCaskie 1995: 152, 278

⁶⁰ Cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: 173, 176-187; Swithenbank 1969: 13, fig.8; 14--63; McLeod 1981: 38

⁶¹ Cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: 188; McLeod 1981: 35-38, 61; Platvoet 2012: 63-64

⁶² For pictures of priests with dreadlocks and/or in raffia skirts, cf. Rattray 1923: figs. 59, 60, 62, 64, 67, 68, 70; 1927: figs. 4, 8; McLeod 1981: 63; McCaskie 1995: 112-113, 304

it was believed the gods time and again entered the society of men from the untamed, wild nature and interacted with them. Therefore when a new god was believed to announce his intention to enter human society by falling upon and catching a person, often driving him or her in a deep, violent (hyperkinetic), mute trance into the forest for a period,⁶⁴ that god had to be domesticated in order that it become a *fiébosom*, a house god.⁶⁵

In Akan terms, a new god had to be born into human society through first a lengthy training of the novice by an experienced *ókómfo*, medium priest, in order that the new god might learn to speak the language of man. And after that training had been completed, the god had to be set up as a house god, i.e. as a god attached to, and owned by, by the *abusua*, the local matri-clan kin, of his now fully trained *ókómfo*, medium priest.⁶⁶

A god was installed in society by acquiring (in addition to his material manifestation in wild nature: water, rock, or forest) four more human or man-made, i.e. material (and therefore to the believers empirical) means for manifesting himself:

- his *ókómfo*, medium priest, in whose trance he was believed to become present in the local congregation and converse and interact with them;⁶⁷
- his *yawa*, shrine,⁶⁸ and his *bosomdan*, temple, in which the shrine was housed.⁶⁹ The *yawa* was a bronze pan with rock, water, and forest ingredients,⁷⁰ at which, it was believed, the god could be contacted and addressed with prayers and offerings. His medium, if male, carried the *yawa* on his head to enter into the possession trance and kept it there to signify that he spoke and acted as the god for the duration of the trance;⁷¹
- his *nsuo yaa*,⁷² 'Water Thursday', divination pot, a black earthenware pot filled with water and some carved objects.⁷³ When a believer had come to consult the god on a matter, the medium divined by listening to the questions the believer put to the god while he was looking into the shimmering surface of the water reflecting the sun. By entering thereby into a light state of dissociation, and ladling up with a spoon one of the carved objects in the pot, and deducing the answer of the god from its shape;

⁶³ On priests (*akómfo*) being put to death, cf. e.g. Rattray 1916: 32, 33-34, 169; 1927: 113; Platvoet 1991: 163-167; McCaskie 1995: 121, 132, 276

⁶⁴ Cf. McCaskie 1995: 120-121

⁶⁵ Cf. Rattray 1923: 147-150; 1927: 38-47

⁶⁶ On this process, cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: 147-150; Platvoet 2012: 61-63

⁶⁷ For pictures of priest and priestesses in trance, cf. Rattray 1923: figs. 57-60, 62, 64, 66-69, 78, 91; for a 19th century wooden sculpture of an *ókómfo*, cf. McLeod 1981: p. 59

⁶⁸ For pictures of shrines, cf. Rattray 1923: figs. 53-56, 67, 68, 71, 72, 77, 78, 96, 97, 99; McLeod 1981: 61, 66

⁶⁹ For pictures of shrine houses/'temples', cf. Rattray 1923: figs. 74-76, 80, 81; Swithenbank 1969

⁷⁰ Cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: 145-150; Swithenbank 1969: 10-11

⁷¹ For pictures of an *ókómfo*, medium-priest, carrying 'his god' in trance, cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: figs. 53, 54, 67, 78, 95, 99; McCaskie 1995: 114-115

⁷² It is also termed *abosonsu*, 'god water' (Christaller 1933: 43).

⁷³ Cf. Christaller 1933: 43 (*óbosom*), 257 (*èkoro*), 271 (*kun̄kuma*); Rattray 1927: 44-46; McCaskie 1995: 105-106

- his *nrruru*, ‘medicines’. To the believers, they were the god in consumable form, or, in Christian terms, in sacramental form. In this form, the god e.g. might be drunk (*abosonom*)⁷⁴ as an ordeal to testify to the truth of one’s statement, or to prove one’s innocence in a trial, or to conclude a pact, or a peace treaty, or to swear an oath of fealty to a ruler, the underlying assumption being that the god would take severe revenge on the one drinking the god if he was cheating. A god would also be drunk for protection against witches,⁷⁵ or for protection from, or a cure of a disease. Medicines did also have other material forms, such as smoke to be inhaled, powder to be sniffed or to be rubbed into the skin, or into incisions in the skin; or as dried little pasta balls of vegetation that could be strung on cords of raffia and worn on the joints of arms and legs or around the neck, especially again for protection against witches. These pasta balls might also be ground to powder, or ground and mixed with fluid to be drunk, or put into the water in which a person took a bath.

In conclusion

In conclusion I briefly address two more questions: can we, and should we, term Akan pre-colonial religion as I presented it, a ‘nature religion’? And if so, did it as such contribute to the conservation of the environment? I am tempted to admit that the data I presented may justify that we classify Akan pre-colonial religion as a ‘nature religion’ in as far as it concerns the skygod Nyame and the *abosom*. However, it is not wise to do so, for three reasons.

One is that ‘nature religion’ is a term and a concept with a history that is heavily tainted by a century of colonial prejudice. It is one of three terms for denigrating preliterate societies and their religions that began to gain currency among scholars and the general public in Europe in mid-19th century, when Africa was on the verge of being carved by the hegemonic powers of Europe. British scholars soon termed them the primitive religions of the rude societies of savages.⁷⁶ Mark the word *rude*, that is ‘not at all polite’, ‘wild’, ‘untaught’, ‘uncivilized’. French scholars referred to preliterate religions as the religions of ‘the non-civilized’ (*les non-civilisés*).⁷⁷ And the Italians followed suit by calling them the religions of peoples without culture (*di popoli incolti*).⁷⁸ Germans and Dutch expressed these biased views of these religions by referring to them as the ‘nature religions’ (*Naturreligionen*) of ‘nature peoples’ (*Naturvölker*).⁷⁹ Actually, these three terms, ‘primitive’, ‘non-civilized’/‘without culture’ and ‘nature’, expressed the same

⁷⁴ Cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 43; Rattray 1923: 109-110; 1927: 31; 1929: 392

⁷⁵ Cf. Platvoet 1973: 32-37

⁷⁶ Cf. e.g. Tylor 1871, I: 2, 21, 22, 30, 31, 36, 68, 138, 217, 224, 275, 293, 369, 418, 451, 478, 490, 498; II: 2, 17, 52, 60, 66, 81, 83, 90, 96, 102, 103, 110, 123, 144, 181, 183, 185, 215, 269, 316, 318, 334, 340, 356, 360, 443, 445, 446, 555

⁷⁷ Cf. Réville 1901: v; 1902; Anonymous 1925: 2. At times *religions naturistes*, ‘nature-religions’, was also used in French (cf. e.g. Réville 1901: 12).

⁷⁸ Cf. Pettazzoni 1956: 7; redressed [?] as the religions of *popoli di civiltà inferiore*, ‘of peoples of inferior civilisation’ [Pettazzoni 1956: 141-169]

⁷⁹ Waitz 1859-1870; Tiele 1871: 99; 1873: 7; 1873: 7, 12, 25; Bertholet 1905: 6

basic biased dichotomy: the view that we Europeans had mastered 'nature' by literacy, science and technology and had thereby achieved culture and civilization, and power. Late 19th century European nations therefore felt that they were 'naturally' the masters of the world, and were entitled to that position, especially in respect to the societies of the 'primitives': the rude savages who were thought to be still completely subject to nature because their minds were thought to be too dull, and they themselves too full of uninhibited desires, and lacking a steadfast drive, to improve themselves and attain, by *Bildung*,⁸⁰ culture and civilization.⁸¹ It was held, therefore, that the rude savages of 'nature peoples' had not as yet attained any civilization or culture and were as 'primitive'⁸² as all mankind had been long, long ago, in paleolithic times.⁸³

Some leading scholars were not at ease with these primitivizing terms and regularly qualified them. E.B. Tylor's definition of culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and *any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*'⁸⁴ made it clear as early as 1871 that no human society, whether pre-literate or literate, could be denied culture.⁸⁵ Humans are cultured by the very fact that they constitute societies, that their members are born into a specific social order and acquire through education the bodies of knowledge, technological, economical, social, and other, of earlier generations, the rules and norms governing social behaviour, the morals, and the traditions and beliefs of the other members of their society. All humans therefore possess a specific, ecology-, place- and time-bound civilization. That is abundantly apparent from the wisdom they have accumulated over

⁸⁰ It is not easy to render *Bildung* in English. It refers to the rigorous, disciplined formation of character and intellect by which members of an elite, in particular the upwards mobile *bourgeoisie* of the numerous small 18th/19th century German kingdoms and dukedoms, strove to attain the refined manners of the well educated gentleman scholar; cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildung>. It is important to note that late 19th century metropolitan academic authors of books on primitives did not compare and contrast primitive peoples with 19th century European societies at large, but with themselves as their properly trained intellectual elite. They set themselves and their own ideas of rationality, religion, etc. as norm, not only over against the primitives, but also in opposition to the common folk, the illiterate or barely literate peasant and factory laborer, of late 19th century Europe.

⁸¹ Waitz 1859: XI, *passim*.

⁸² Tiele explicitly equated 'nature peoples' with 'savages', and 'nature religions' with the 'religions of the savages' (Tiele 1871: 99; 1873: 7); as did Chantepie (1871: 38).

⁸³ Cf. Tiele (1874: 447): 'The less developed religions of our age are the living remains of an earlier age. They have surfaced [in our time] as [do] the strata of the earliest [geological] formations'. Tylor (1871/1920: 32) held that 'the savage state in some measure represents an early condition of mankind'. In 1912, at Leiden, Goblet d'Alviella (1913: 61, 63) proposed that the term 'primitive religion' be replaced by 'prehistoric religion', for all non-civilised animists had remained at, or had fallen back to, that inferior [lowest] level of culture [characteristic] of the period of savagery through which all peoples had passed at the onset of their history. [... Therefore,] the beliefs of the non-civilized inform us about prehistoric religion'.

⁸⁴ Tylor 1871, I: 1

⁸⁵ Note that section 1 of the Third International Congress for the History of Religions, at Oxford in 1908, of which E.B. Tylor was Honorary President, was not termed 'Primitive Religions', but 'Religions of Lower Cultures' (cf. Allen 1908: v, xx-xxi, xxxiv, 21-91).

generations in their proverbs,⁸⁶ from their arts, their social organization, their commerce and trade, their political, legal and military organization, etc.

The nature-culture dichotomy, implied in the German terms *Naturvölker* and *Naturreligionen*, therefore, makes no sense therefore in as far as it is meant to assert that 'nature peoples' had remained rude savages who were completely subject to, and only at home in, and as wild and unruly as wild nature. They were deemed to have no culture and no civilization because they were regarded as not yet having mastered wild, untamed nature. It was commonly thought that they needed us to teach them civilization, and proper religion, Christianity. Which is why we needed to shoulder 'the white man's burden'.⁸⁷

The biases expressed in the terms 'primitive', 'rude', 'savage', 'non-civilized', 'uncultured', and 'nature peoples' and 'nature religions', continued to rule European minds and the general scholarship of religions, anthropological as well as philological-historical, till the end of the colonial period. That is clear not only from these epithets but also from the order of the sections of the international congresses for the History of Religions. Till 1960, papers on 'primitive' religions were routinely assigned to section 1, whereas the historical study of Christianity to sections 6, 8, 9 or 10.⁸⁸ It is only in 1965, at the Claremont congress, when de-colonization was in full swing, that 'primitive'⁸⁹ was replaced by 'non-literate'⁹⁰ and 'illiterate'.⁹¹ And it took another five years to move preliterate religions away from section 1. At the Stockholm congress in 1970, the religions of illiterate peoples were at long last assigned section 8,⁹² and placed immediately before section 9: Christianity, and were thereby recognised as modern religions. The term 'preliterate'⁹³ was also introduced, but so was 'primal',⁹⁴ a romanticizing euphemism for 'primitive'.

⁸⁶ Cf. for the proverbs of the Akan, Christaller 1879; Rattray 1916; Appiah & Appiah 2000

⁸⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_White_Man's_Burden

⁸⁸ Paris 1900, section 1: *religions des non-civilisés*; section 8: history of Christianity (cf. Réville 1901: v; 1902); Basel 1904, section 1: *Religionen der sogen. 'Naturvölker'*; section 8: Christianity (cf. Bertholet 1905: 6-8, 187-195); Oxford 1908, section 1: Religions of the Lower Cultures; section 8: Christianity (Allen 1908: xx-xxi, 21-91); Leiden 1912, section 1: *Religions des peuples sauvages*; section 10: Christianity (cf. Anonymous 1913: 14, 44-70); Paris 1923, section 2: *religions préhistoriques et des non-civilisés ou sémi-civilisés*; section 8: Ancient Christianity; section 11: modern and contemporary Christianity (cf. Anonymous 1925, I: 2, 91-93); Lund 1929, section 2: *religions des peuples sauvages*; section 8: Christianity (cf. Congress Organizing Committee 1930: 16); Brussels 1935, was not organized in sections; but it had one paper, by Koppers, combating the view that only literate societies and religions had histories (Comié Directeur *e.a.* 1936, II: 765); Amsterdam 1950, section 1: Primitive Religions; section 9: Christianity (cf. Bleeker, Drewes & Hidding 1951: 87-93, 160-169); Rome 1955, section 1: religions *di popoli incolti*; section 9: Christianity; section 9: Islam (Pettazzoni 1956: 7, 141-169); Tokyo 1958, section 1: primitive religion; section 2: religions of Antiquity; section 3: Living religions other than primitive (Japanese Organizing Committee 1960: ix, 23-67, 68, 207); Marburg 1960, section 1: *Primitivreligionen*; section 6: Christianity (Heiler & Schimmel 1961: 71-88, ??-188).

⁸⁹ Paper presenters, however, continued to use 'primitive' (cf. Hermanns 1968; Honko 1968; Lnaternari 1968)

⁹⁰ Schneider & van Proosdij 1968, I: vii; II: 29-43,

⁹¹ Cf. Bleeker 1968: 10

⁹² Cf. Bleeker, Widengren & Sharpe 1975: v, 6-13, 103-118

⁹³ Cf. Bouritius 1975

⁹⁴ Cf. Turner 1975

Because of this history, Akan precolonial religion might be classified as a 'nature religion' only, if the concept were completely emptied of its colonialist denigration and classificatory use. That is, if 'nature religion' were redefined to describe specifically that religion of which the belief notions about 'the unseen', i.e. about 'the meta- and sub-empirical', were, or are, all intrinsically linked to the wild, untamed 'nature' that constitutes their believers' ecology and environment.

My second reason for not terming Akan precolonial religion a 'nature religion' is therefore that only part of Akan belief notions were intrinsically linked to their wild forest ecology, for those about the ancestors (*asamanfo*), which constituted its heart and centre, were intrinsically linked to Akan towns and Akan political life through their *apuyɔɔ*, 'black stools'⁹⁵ in the *apuyɔɔdan*, 'roon of the black stools', at which they were 'fed' during the bi-monthly *adae* ('rest')⁹⁶ and annual *ódwira* ('cleansing')⁹⁷ rites.

And my third reason for refusing to propose that we classify Akan precolonial religions as a 'nature religion' is the structural opposition in Akan culture and religion between the town as the safe and ordered and cool world of humans, and bare of *wura*, 'wild weeds, forest'; and the forest as wild, untamed, red-hot, dangerous and divine.⁹⁸

This town-forest structural opposition also provides the answer to the second question: did Akan pre-colonial religion contribute to the conservation of their environment? Even if one would view part of Akan pre-colonial religion as 'nature religion', because their beliefs about God and the gods were intrinsically linked to their environment as untamed nature, that part, and any other part of their religion in late pre-colonial time, failed to produce any conservationist aspirations in pre-colonial Akan because of this structural opposition between the town as human and safe and the forest as dangerous and divine.⁹⁹

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⁹⁵ Cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 411-412

⁹⁶ Cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 60; Rattray 1923: 92-120

⁹⁷ Cf. Christaller 1881/1933: 106-107; Rattray 1923: 203-212; McCaskie 1995: 144sq.

⁹⁸ Cf. McLeod 1981: 39-40 on the 'town/bush' opposition

⁹⁹ Cf. also Bargatzky 1992; Bargatzky 1992/1993; Bargatzky 1999

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