



Exploring the Nexus between Akan and Christian Perspectives on Atonement

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Abstract

One of the key Christian doctrines is atonement. The subject of atonement is very important in Christian theology because it is the basis for God's reconciliation of the world onto himself. The concept of atonement is found in many other religions apart from Christianity. From an Akan socio-religious perspective, atonement is required to maintain the relationship between humans and the supernatural realm. This paper explored the nexus between the Akan primal concept of atonement and the Christian doctrine of atonement using a literature-based research methodology. The paper demonstrated how an Akan primal understanding of atonement might enhance the Akan Christian understanding of the atonement of Christ. The discussions serve to facilitate the contextualization of the Christian doctrine of atonement for the Akan Christian community so as to make God's salvific work relevant and meaningful to the Akan people. The main thesis of the paper is that an adequate understanding of the Akan traditional concept sin, priesthood and atonement prepares one to appreciate Jesus' role as the ultimate high priest whose once-for-all sacrifice brought to an end the repetitious and imperfect sacrifices offered in Akan traditional religious context.

Keywords: *Akan; Atonement; Christ; Christianity; Sacrifice*

Introduction

Cultural anthropologists classify the indigenous people of Ghana into five major ethnic groups—namely; Guan, Ga-Dangme, Akan, Ewe and Mole-Dagbani—based on language and culture. This paper focuses on the Akan ethnolinguistic group which comprises many autonomous sub-groups with closely linked economic, political, social, religious and cultural institutions. Historians trace the root of the Akan to the Sahel from where they migrated to establish the Bonoman kingdom around the 12th century, with Bono Manso as its capital (Ankrah, 2018). The Twi language of the Akan can be traced to an ancient Bono king, called Nana Twi (Tsi) of Takyiman whose language was referred to as Twi's language (*Twi kasa*) (Anane-Agyei, 2012).

The Akan consider a human being (*nipa* or *nyimpa*) as comprising both spiritual and material components. Most Akan subscribe to a tripartite composition of *nipa*. The first component is *honam/nipadua* (body) which derives from the *mogyaa* (blood) of the mother and accounts for the strong physiological bond people have with their mothers. Since it is the *mogyaa* that makes a child a human being, a person's lineage is traced from the mother's descent (Ephirim-Donkor, 2018). This matrilineal descent also governs inheritance, succession, and land tenure. The second part of *nipa*, *sunsum* (an individual spirit), derives from the father at conception and bears one's distinctive personality, character, suppositions and behavioral or psychological attributes. It perishes when the *honhom* (the force that animates the body) is disintegrated. The third part is *kraa* or *akra* (the soul) which comes from *Nyame* (God) as an unperishable source of life, energy and vitality, and as the bearer of ones *nkrabea* (destiny).

Like other Africans, the Akan have a communal worldview of life with a strong family bond (Kyeremanteng, 2010). Family, in Akan worldview, traditionally comprises the living, the dead and the yet-to-be-born. However, globalization and colonization have introduced the Akan to the nuclear family comprising spouses and their children. The traditional family system is the extended family; it comprises parents, children, uncles, nephews, nieces, grandparents and others. The Akan family bond is underscored by the saying "I am related by blood; therefore, I exist or I exist because I belong to a family" (Pobee, 1979, p.49). The Akan feel doomed if they are isolated from the community because life is not based only on the effort of an individual but also on sharing resources with others.

The Akan, like other Africans, are very religious. Their religious beliefs include belief in a Supreme Being who is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The Supreme Being (*Nyankopɔn*) has control, power, knowledge, and ability over everything. The Akan believe that the human personality survives after death; therefore, death is a transition of the soul of the departed to the world of the ancestral world (Akan: *Asamando* or *Asamanadze*) (Mcveigh, 1974; Salm & Falola, 2002; Ephirim-Donkor, 2018). In the Akan worldview, "ancestors" (*Nananom nsamanfoɔ*) are the section of the community who, having completed its earthly life, has gone ahead to the spirit world to constitute the elder relatives of the living (Pobee, 1979). The Akan also believe that there are many minor deities—referred to as *abosom* (lesser gods, *bosom*, singular)—created by God to represent him on earth and to take care of his children on earth (Quarcoopome, 1987). Also, the Akan religious worldview also accommodates the existence of lower spirits including *sasabonsam*, an evil spirit believed to reside on tall trees, *mmoatia* (dwarfs), very short creatures with feet pointing backward which live in the forest, with powerful and good knowledge in herbal medicine, *abayie* (witchcraft) spiritual entities with the ability to aid or harm humans (Quarcoopome, 1987; Acheampong, 2014).

With the belief in these supernatural entities who relate with humans in one way or the other, Akan religious traditions make provisions for maintaining a healthy relationship with the supernatural realm. One of such ways is to be of good conduct. Should one offend supernatural beings, sacrifices are made to appease the angry beings. Central to this sacrificial system is the traditional priest who makes offerings on behalf of his people. At Akan traditional festivals, communal sins are dealt with through sacrifices made on behalf of the community. The Akan take the issue of sin and atonement seriously. There is a remarkable link between the Akan and biblical concepts of atonement. Therefore, in espousing the doctrine of atonement for the Akan Christian community it is important to use the Akan background to make the Christian doctrine of atonement relevant and appreciable to Akan Christians. This paper examined the concepts of sin and atonement from Akan primal religious worldview to ascertain how this understanding might enhance the Akan Christian understanding of the Atonement of Christ.

Akan Concept of Sin

According to Adeyemo (1976) "Myths and oral traditions abound in African stories about the Fall of man and the separation of heaven and earth." Yet, these stories and myths may differ somewhat from a

strictly biblical understanding of sin. The Akan believe that, a long time ago, God lived in the sky which was very close to the earth, but an old woman pounding *fufu* (a meal of mashed cassava and plantain) kept hitting the underside of heaven (the sky) with her long pestle (Agyarko, 2009). The disturbance from the woman made God angry and so he withdrew to a higher plane where people are no more able to reach him. The people gathered all their mortars and piled them up in an attempt to reach God in the heavens. They realized that they needed one more mortar, and so the old woman asked the people to remove one mortar from the bottom and place it on top of the others in order to reach God (Agyarko, 2009). In the process, all the piled-up mortars fell on the people and killed them. This, according to the Akan, is the only instance where humans sinned directly against God. The other cases of sin are sins committed against other humans or other creatures, not directly against God (because he is now geographically removed from humans and so cannot be affected directly by human sin) (Agyarko, 2009). Yet, it is still held that sin against other humans also affects God (Agyarko, 2009). In Akan religious thought, sin makes the offender ceremonially impure, brings disharmony between the physical and the spiritual worlds, and makes one unworthy to approach God.

As noted earlier, the Akan believe that one can sin indirectly against God. The Akan saying *woabra Nyame* (“You have sinned against God”) underscores their understanding that sin is against God. The word *abra* literally means “to stop someone from doing something” and so one can say *wabo no abra no su* (“He/she has beaten him/her and yet prevented him/her from crying”) (Agyarko, 2009). In this context, *bra* signifies “extreme suppression.” *Wabo no abra no su* may be understood in the modern context as institutional evil or suppression. Therefore, *woabra Nyame* underlines the Akan belief that the suppression of humanity amounts to sinning against God, because, as noted earlier, each Akan is linked to God by the *kraa* (Agyarko, 2009). The expression about sin is *Nyame ntua wo ka* (“May God punish you”) also stresses the belief that sin is against God. This expression is used by a victim of evil deeds as a way of appealing to God to judge the evildoer. Though the victim appeals to God for revenge, once the offender settles the issue with the offended, the issue is automatically settled with God. The Akan hold that it is the offended person that the offender has to settle first and foremost, not God. Yet, it is God who is the ultimate Judge of all human actions. It is for this reason that an Akan who is treated unjustly would normally sigh with the statement, *made m’asem ama Nyame* (“I leave my case into God’s hands”) (Agyarko, 2009). Also, from an Akan perspective, a child who has not been observed doing something sinful is not a sinful person. A person is born holy without any sinful pollution.

The word “sin” is captured by four key Akan terms: *mfomsɔɔ*, *mmarato*, *musuo* and *bɔne* (Agyarko, 2009). The first word, *mfomsɔɔ* (error, wrongdoing, or inadvertent sin) is a noun which derives from the verb *fom* (to offend) (Agyarko, 2009). *Mfomsɔɔ* means “an error or wrong action without a malicious intention.” *Mfomsɔɔ* normally occurs in the context of interpersonal relations and can be settled with or without a third party. There are, however, some *mfomsɔɔ* that amount to the breach of societal laws and norms. Ordinarily, *mfomsɔɔ* does not require any sacrifice. An *mfomsɔɔ kɛsɛɛ* (a severe error), however, has to be dealt with by making sacrifices to the ancestors and the gods (Agyarko, 2009). An example of *mfomsɔɔ kɛsɛɛ* is a situation where a man unknowingly has sexual relations with his blood sister which is a taboo in Akan. Though the act was committed unintentionally, it brings *musuo* (misfortune, taboo) upon those involved and must be dealt with through sacrifices.

The second term for sin is *mmarato* (breach of state laws and norms) which comes from *mmara* (laws) and *to* (breach) (Agyarko, 2009). Unlike *mfomsɔɔ* which is always unintentional, *mmarato* may be intentional or unintentional. Again, unlike *mfomsɔɔ* which can be committed against an individual or the state, *mmarato* is usually committed against the corporate community rather than an individual (Agyarko, 2009). If a person who does not know an existing law (such as a stranger) breaches the law, it is not taken as sin and so the Akan would say, *hɔhɔɔ nto mmara* (a stranger “to the law” does not breach the law). Therefore, for the Akan, ignorance of a law is a valid excuse.

The third Akan word for sin is *musuo* (abomination or curse), derived from *mnoa* (animals) and *su* (behavior). *Musuo* signifies a grievous evil and literally means “the behavior of animals.” When someone commits *musuo*, the Akan will say *wabɔ musuo* (“he/she has committed an abomination”) (Agyarko, 2009). This means the person has acted in a way that contradicts what is deemed as befitting human dignity and so he/she can be said to have behaved like an animal. The one who *bɔ musuo* (commits an abomination) incurs the wrath of the deities. Consequently, the situation is dealt with through *musuyi* (the removal of the abomination). To *yi musuo* refers to the act of removing the curse that a sinful act will bring upon the society. *Musuyi* is achieved through the offering of *afɔdeɛ* ([a sin] offering or sacrifice). In some cases, another animal referred to as *musuyideɛ* (a curse bearer) is offered in addition to the *afɔdeɛ*. The carcass of the *afɔdeɛ* is consumed by the traditional priest and the elders but it is a taboo to consume the carcass of *musuyideɛ* because of the notion that it carries some curse.

The last Akan term for sin is *bɔne* (evil) which has the stem *bɔn* (stink) (Agyarko, 2009). Though *bɔne* may be used generally for all sins including *mfomsoɔ*, *mmarato*, and *musuo*, it also carries a distinctive meaning which excludes what the other terms may include. For example, if someone breaks the law of not going to farm on a certain day, the act is considered as *mmarato* (breach of law or norm) but not *bɔne*. If two unmarried people consent to engage in sex, it is not *bɔne*. Similarly, smoking is not *bɔne*. *Bɔne* has to do with an evil plan (*adwene bɔne*) and an evil act against another human being. Technically, an evil thought alone is not *bɔne* and an evil act in itself is also not *bɔne*, unless the evil act was preceded by an evil intention (Agyarko, 2009). Murdering someone is *bɔne*. *Bɔne* may also be referred to as *amumuyɔ* which means intentional sin. The one who commits *bɔne* knows that what he/she is doing is a sin and yet does it.

Priesthood in Akan Religious Context

Before considering atonement, it is important to discuss priesthood because in the Akan religious-cultural setting it is the priest who offers sacrifices for atoning purposes. A traditional priest is a person chosen by the gods, trained and dedicated to a particular deity, temple, shrine or sacred grove to perform rituals for the benefit of the society in which he/she serves (Quarcoopome, 1987). The Akan refer to the traditional priest or priestess as the *kɔmfɔɔ* or *ɔkɔmfɔɔ*—a person possessed by *bosom* (a deity) to perform priestly functions—and to his/her priestly vocation as *akɔm*. Quarcoopome (1987, p.74) identifies two kinds of traditional priests, namely, the lay priest who leads his/her family to make sacrifices to a family deity and a professional priest, who is connected with the cult of the deities. The present discussion focuses more on the professional priest.

The *kɔmfɔɔ* is the main figure in the worship of the gods (*abosomsom*). The word *kɔmfɔɔ* derives from the word *kɔm*, “to prophesy,” “to predict,” or “to dance” (Onyinah, 2002, p.55). The priest serves as an intermediary, symbolizing the presence of God and the divinities among the people. He takes messages from the divine and translates and interprets this message to the people; thus, he is the mouthpiece of the divinities (Onyinah, 2002). In addition, the priest performs ritual sacrifices and offerings on behalf of the community. Aside from his/her religious duties, the traditional priest (together with the chief) is the custodian of societal or communal customs, knowledge and wisdom, taboos and the history and general culture of the society. The priest also advises the king on both personal and state issues. The priest acts as a judge, managing and resolving conflicts related to witchcraft accusations and curses. He/she is also an opinion leader and an elder in the society.

Many of the deities have *abisa da*, a day when people come to the shrine for consultation. Therefore, the priest often sits for people to consult him/her about life matters. It is through *abisa* that most *akɔmfɔɔ* advise the society regarding the cause, the type and the treatment of a disease or causes of misfortunes like barrenness, accidents, sudden deaths and others or inform society about an impending calamity, and how it can be avoided. People may go to the shrine to seek protection and the Bono (Akan)

people refer to this as *bɛdɛ bɛ ti akɔhyɛ bosom ase* (or *wɔdɛ wɔn ti akɔhyɛ ɔbosom ase*, literally, “they have put their heads under the protection of the god”) (Onyinah, 2002). The client of a *kɔmfɔɔ* is supposed to visit and pay homage to the deity at least once every year. Failure to do so may bring serious negative consequences to the worshipper.

Atonement in Akan religious context

Almost all Akan traditional societies have a sacrificial system which fundamentally constitutes sacred reconciliatory rituals, facilitated by priests with the aims of achieving “at-one-ment” with the unseen world—the state of “at-one-ment” being the most desirous thing in Akan religious life and practices. A sacrifice refers to the ritual of offering something to a supernatural being in propitiation or homage (Wiafe, Anson & Enam 2016, p.2515). Usually, the sacrificial victim is a domestic animal (such as cattle, sheep, goats, and chicken) because of their close connection with the one giving the sacrifice. There is a close association between life and blood in Akan primal religion just as it is in biblical context (cf. Lev. 17:11).

The object for sacrifice must be selected carefully. Ngewa (2006) considers the following factors as very important in choosing an animal as a sacrifice. First, a sacrificial animal must not be a stolen animal. If it is for a whole community, it must come from a noble person. Second, while the specific color may differ across societies, the sacrificial animal must have a uniform color. Third, the animal must be perfect, without defects or injuries. Factors that determine the value of the sacrificial object include the situation that necessitated the sacrifice (for example, epidemic, famine, taboo-breaking, death or irreverence), purpose or expectation of the worshipper, and event or person involved in the sacrifice (Wiafe, Anson & Enam 2016).

Traditional Akan religious sacrifices include the following kinds: thanksgiving, communion, foundation, preventive, votive, propitiatory and substitutionary sacrifices. Thanksgiving offering is given to show appreciation to the gods for something good received from them; communion offering is a form of sacrifice (usually a meal) in which both the worshipper and the gods participate to deepen the relationship between the parties involved; foundation sacrifice is given before the foundation of a building is laid; preventive sacrifice is given to prevent a calamity from befalling the society or an individual and votive sacrifice is given in fulfillment of a vow (Quarcoopome, 1987; Awoniyi, 2015; Wiafe, Anson & Enam 2016). The paper focuses on propitiatory and substitutionary sacrifices because of their direct connection with the subject of atonement. These two sacrifices are explained below.

The propitiatory sacrifice is offered to the gods and spirits when disasters such as famine, epidemic, calamity, floods, drought and others threaten the security of the society as a result of the anger of the gods and spirits against the community (Quarcoopome, 1987; Awoniyi, 2015; Wiafe, Anson & Enam 2016). This sacrifice is not only for the appeasement or pacification of the gods and spirits but also for the purification of individuals and the community. The substitutionary sacrifice is performed for a person who should have suffered privation, discomfort or even death (Quarcoopome, 1987). The sacrificial victim saves the person who should have suffered the consequences of his/her own sinful action by dying in the person’s stead. This sacrifice is not only meant for prevention and substitution but also for propitiation in that through the sacrifice the anger of the gods is removed (Awoniyi, 2015). Usually, the sacrificial victim for substitutionary sacrifice is a sheep. The carcass of the victim is not eaten but treated like a corpse and buried (Quarcoopome, 1987). There is an element of sin transfer from the worshipper to the animal and this is achieved either by scratching the animal with the sinner or through the laying on of hands. This Akan practice can be compared to a ritual performed by the Chagga people of Tanzania in East Africa. These people usually offer a goat to the gods to seek healing for the sick. In the process of praying over the goat, the priest spits on it after which it is made to wander in the

wilderness and to disappear (Mojola, 1999). The ritual act of spitting on the goat symbolizes the transfer of the sickness and other misfortunes to the goat.

Substitutionary sacrifice is not uncommon in the Akan traditional religious institution. The example of the voluntary, vicarious, substitutionary, and representative sacrifices of Agya Ahor and Tweneboah-Koduah need attention at this point. It is believed that long ago the Abura-Fante people experienced famine and a deadly epidemic, which according to an oracle, required human sacrifice to deal with (Ekem, 2005). At the time that no one was willing to suffer for the community, Agya Ahor (a traditional chief priest of the Fante god, *Akyen*) willingly offered himself to be killed on behalf of his people to stop the plague that threatened to annihilate the Fante population (Ekem 2005). After slaughtering him, Agya Ahor's blood was mixed with water and aspersed on the people to effect healing and cleansing (Ekem, 2005). This act did not only avert the plague but also strengthened the faith of the people in their god. Another story is that of Tweneboah-Koduah (the paramount chief of Kumawu in Asante) who offered himself as a sacrificial lamb to save and protect the then Asante Confederacy during one of the Asante-Denkyira wars. The result of this sacrifice was the defeat of the Denkyira state by the Asantes.

Atonement forms a key part of most Akan festivals. For example, in the Odwira (*purification*) festival celebrated by the Akuapem people of Ghana, there is a ritual sacrifice of a dog (referred to as *dawn-kɔkɔ* or *odwan-kɔkɔ*; literally, a red sheep) for both purification of the Akuapem people and renewal of their covenant with *Odosu*, their protector (Afriyie, 2020). The need to enforce their covenant with *Odosu* through the Odwira festival is throughout the year, the people commit many sins and these sins only make them impure but also break their covenant with their deity, *Odosu* (Afriyie, 2020). Therefore, it is not sufficient to cleanse the people from religious impurity (due to sin) without renewing their covenant with their object of worship (Afriyie, 2020). The Odwira ritual constitutes a sacred reconciliatory act that signifies communal reverence to deities and ancestors.

The substitutionary nature and atoning efficacy of festive sacrifices are also expressed in the Fokuo festival celebrated by the people of Nkoransa-Sensima. The festive rituals include the tearing apart of a live sheep (referred to as *Ntomaboo-dwane*) by a group of strong men until it dies. The interpretation given to the ritual is that, as the sheep goes through afflictions until its death, it symbolically takes away the afflictions that were to come upon the people in the ensuing year. Thus, the sheep is substituted for the people in its afflictions just as Christ suffered on behalf of humanity.

A brief biblical Account of Sin and Atonement

According to the Bible, God is the Creator of the universe and everything that exists in it (Gen. 1:1). Sin was not part of God's creation; this is evident in God's declaration that everything he created was very good (Gen. 1:31). Sin means "to fall short of" or "to miss the mark" (Judg. 20:16; Prov. 8:35ff; Job 5:24), an offense against either God or human (Gen. 31:36; Lev. 4:14). It is "wickedness" or "guilty" that comes as a result of one's departure from the right and approved path (cf. Exod. 9:27; Isa. 57:20-21; Jer. 5:26). Sin is that which is "bad", "evil" or sin that is hurtful (1 Sam. 30:22; Esth. 7:6; Job 35:12; cf. Psa. 10:15), "iniquity, vanity, sorrow" (see Psa. 90:10; Prov. 22:8); "violating God's laws" (Matt. 1:21; Mark 1:5; 1 Tim. 5:24); "trespass" (cf. Matt. 6:14-15) and ungodliness (Rom. 5:6; 1 Tim. 1:9).

The origin of sin in the human world is traced to Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. This act of disobedience was engineered by Satan who, acting through the serpent, deceived Adam and Eve to disbelief God and act contrary to God's will. This event had negative consequences on the entire universe. The Fall of humanity, the first human sin, broke the divine-human, human-human and human-environment relationships (Gen. 3:8-10, 12, 17-19). It also led to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from their initial residence, the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:23-24). Death came into the human world through the Fall (cf. Rom. 5:12-14). More importantly, the Fall affected all the

descendants of Adam (that is the entire human race) such that all human beings who came after Adam (except Jesus Christ) became polluted by sinful nature.

The need for atonement became evident in the account of the Fall. God made his first promise about the *Savoir* of the world, described as the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). The search for a way of atoning for human sin resulted in the Old Testament sacrificial system which God put in place as a temporal way of dealing with sin until the ultimate sacrifice by his Son. Old Testament perspective on atonement brings out some principles. First, every sin (whether committed knowingly or unknowingly) needs to be atoned for. Therefore, on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) the high priest made sacrifices for every sin committed by his people and by himself. This means that in the biblical context, ignorance does not set the sinner free from guilt and penalty of sin committed by that person. Secondly, atonement for sin requires the death of a perfect victim (Lev. 3:1). Whether the Passover sacrifice, the *Yom Kippur* sacrificial victim or any other, it is required that atonement be made with a victim without defect (cf. Lev. 3:1). Though the animals which died in place of humans could not best represent the worshipper, their non-defected nature symbolically signified their holy status. Thirdly, the need for the shedding of blood to restore and/or maintain a right relationship with God is evident in the Old Testament sacrificial system. The significance of the blood in atonement is based on the close connection between an animal's blood and its life (Lev. 17:11). The fourth principle is the substitutionary nature of Israel's sacrificial system (Isa. 53:1-12). The animal whose blood made atonement for the worshipper in the Levitical religious setting died in the stead of the worshipper. Life, in the form of blood, was taken from the animal to allow the worshipper to continue to enjoy life which should have been taken from him/her because death is the wage for sin (Rom. 6:23a). In the atonement ritual performed during the *Yom Kippur*, the transfer of the penalty of sin to the substitute was achieved symbolically by the high priest's act of laying his hands on the animal's head (Lev. 16:20-22). Fifthly, atonement for sin involved propitiation and expiation for the restoration of the divine-human relationship.

The New Testament perspective of atonement makes it clear that the Old Testament sacrificial system could not achieve atonement in the strict sense of the word. These sacrifices only foreshadowed what the Messiah was to accomplish on the cross. This discovery is not surprising because while the Levitical sacrificial system was still in place, Israel received many prophecies about the Messiah who was to suffer for the sins of humanity (cf. Isa. 53). The promise of a New Covenant which unlike the Old, has God's Law inscribed on the hearts of his people rather than on stones (Jer. 31:31-33; cf. Heb. 8:6-13, 10:16) meant that God was one day going to abrogate the Old Covenant and its system of atonement.

In his life and ministry, Jesus made it clear that he knew his identity as the Savior of the world. In this light, he declared himself as the Son of Man who came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (cf. Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). In these passages, Jesus applied to himself Isaiah's description of the suffering servant (see Isa. 53:10-12) and hence underscored the vicarious nature of his death. The concept of ransom means, by his death, Christ purchased humanity from slavery. Christ mentioned his salvific agenda in Luke 4:18-20 where he alluded to both spiritual and physical ramifications of the Christian gospel. Jesus's words at the institution of the Eucharist explicitly meant that his death was a substitutionary atonement. Jesus's assertion that his blood is "blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24 RSV) underlined the fact that his death was the fulfillment of God's promise to establish a New Covenant with his people (cf. Jer. 31:31-33). At the same time, Jesus underscored the need for the shedding of blood to achieve atonement.

Paul gave important teachings about the New Testament concept of atonement. He understood Christ's death in vicarious terms and so he declared "Christ died **for** our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3 RSV, emphasis mine). In Romans 3:21-26, Paul highlighted the inability of humanity to achieve a righteous status on their own. He maintained that righteousness comes from God apart from the works of the Law and it is appropriated through faith. According to Paul, this righteousness that comes from God apart from

legalism, was predicted by the Old Testament and accomplished through the death of Christ which God provided as atonement—achieving expiation and propitiation for humanity at his (God’s) own right time. This idea links beautifully with Romans 5:1-21 where Paul described how the death of Christ reversed the curse that Adam’s sin placed on the entire human race. The cross, therefore, signifies Christ’s experience of human curse in order to set humanity free from the curse that resulted from sin (Gal. 3:13). Through the death of Christ, repentant sinners are justified and reconciled with God so that believers can have continual access to God. Paul considered the Christ Event as a victory over Satan and his hosts (Col. 2:15).

In the epistle to the Hebrews, the writer presented a priestly Christology that underlines the finality of Christ’s death as God’s ordained means of atoning for human sin. The superiority of Christ’s priesthood is established in 4:14—5:10 and 7:1-28. The writer then moved on to argue that Jesus’s singular self-sacrifice on the cross supersedes the repeated sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests (9:11-14). In the light of Christ’s sacrifice, the sacrifices made on the Day of Atonement effected only ceremonial cleansing and failed to purge the conscience of the worshipper. It is not possible for the blood of animals to take away sin (9:9; cf. 10:4) and so the Levitical sacrificial tradition was given to foreshadow what Christ was to achieve on the cross. The main point is that after Christ has atoned for sin once for all, no other sacrifice is needed for atonement.

Linking Atonement in Akan Context to the Christian Doctrine of Atonement

From the Akan perspective, sin brings guilt upon the sinner. Consequently, the Akan are not only concerned about public opinion about sin but also about how the *tiboa* (conscience) or *Nyame* (God) judges the sinner.¹ The Akan say *ne tiboa bu no fɔ* (“his/her conscience condemns him/her”) to emphasize the power of the human conscience to judge the sinner. *Nyame mmpe bɔne* (“God hates evil/sin”) is another Akan saying that betrays their awareness of the fact that sin contradicts God’s will and purpose. As noted earlier, when the Akan say *Nyame ntua wo ka* (“May God punish you”) they recognize God as the ultimate Judge of all humankind. Therefore, for the Akan, certain sins offend God and need to be dealt with by making sacrifices to him.

Though aware of the fact that certain sins (in)directly affect God, the Akan do not offer (sin) sacrifices directly to God because they have no shrine or priest dedicated to God. For the Akan, God is not like one of the local deities who have local priests and shrines dedicated to them. Akan traditional priesthood involves (imperfect) mortal humans who die and are replaced from time to time. The sacrifices made by Akan priests are repetitious and imperfect. The Akan believe that God, being a perfectly holy Being, requires a perfectly holy priest to offer sacrifices to him on behalf of worshippers (Agyarko, 2009). Unfortunately, the Akan find no perfect person among themselves or among the entire human race who qualifies as God’s priest. No human qualifies to serve God as priest because no human is perfect and sinless. This situation creates a vacuum in the Akan religious set up. From the Akan Christian perspective, the religious vacuum created by the lack of qualified priest for God is filled by Christ who, in addition to being sinless and perfect, perfectly represents humanity before God.

As a priest, Christ offers sacrifice. Christ’s sacrifice, unlike traditional sacrifices, takes place on a universal plane, affecting all humankind. The writer of Hebrews made this point in his argument that Christ, the great High Priest, passed through the heavens, the greater and more perfect and unperishable tabernacle (Heb. 9:11). Here, the writer of Hebrews also highlighted the time quality and intrinsic quality of Christ’s sacrifice by pointing out that he (Christ) entered once for all into the Holy Place by means of his own blood in contrast to the Levitical high priests who entered the Holy Place every year with the blood of animals (such as goats and calves). On the cross, Christ gave his life to God as a sacrifice for the

¹ Earlier, the point was made that for the Akan God does not care about *mfosoo* (wrongdoing in the context of human relations). The sins in mind here are the other kinds of sin aside *mfosoo*.

sin of humanity and, by so doing, accomplished, in reality, what no traditional sacrifice had ever achieved or can ever achieve.

The finality of Christ's sacrifice needs further emphasis. God has chosen to deal with sin once for all through the death of Christ. All sacrifices that preceded Christ's sacrifice are therefore inferior and not capable of attaining atonement in the strict sense of the word. God instituted and permitted the Old Testament sacrifices as a teaching aid to facilitate human understanding of Christ's sacrifice which was to come at the right time as the only acceptable and real sacrifice that truly redeems humanity from sin's dominion. Similarly, God might have permitted Akan traditional sacrificial system to be in force until the perfect and holy sacrifice was offered by Jesus and made known to the Akan community. The ultimate sacrifice of Christ was the act through which he received the punishment that humanity deserves, met the divine demand that sin must necessarily be punished, and used his blood to efface the impurity that hindered access to God (Heb. 9:22; 10:22). Thus, Christ's sacrifice had a substitutionary nature in that the justice intended and accomplished by his sacrifice is for others, not for himself (cf. Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28 see also Luke 22:19–20; John 6:51; 15:13; Rom. 5:6–8; 8:32; 2 Cor. 5:14–15, 21). The perfect efficacy of Christ's sacrifice in dealing with the problem of all sin of all time committed by all kinds of people also makes it unnecessary and unacceptable (from the Christian perspective) for any other sacrifice to be made in the post-resurrection era. That is why the writer of Hebrews could say that there is no other sacrifice left for those who fail to accept Christ's atonement as the means of salvation (cf. 10:26). Bediako (2000, p.33) made the following remarks in his study of Hebrews 1:3b in relation to the Odwira festival to show that Christ's sacrifice is efficacious, complete and final: "Jesus ... secured eternal redemption for all who cease from their own works of purification and trust in him and his perfect Odwira; that is Christ himself, (the Twi here— *ɔde n'ankasa ne ho*—being more expressive than the English versions), who has become our Odwira. The Odwira to end all odwiras has taken place through the death of Jesus Christ."

Bediako's point is that the yearly purificatory sacrifices offered at the Odwira and all other traditional sacrifices have been fulfilled and transcended by the once-for-all perfect Odwira sacrifice offered by Christ through his death on the cross. The Bono (Akan) term *afɔdepreko*² (once-for-all sacrifice) accurately captures this thought. The repetitious nature of Akan traditional sacrifices as well as the lack of a universal sacrifice in the Akan society, disqualifies any Akan sacrifice to be regarded as *afɔdepreko*—that is, complete, perfect and final sacrifice. This fact demands putting an end to any sacrifices in any human society. In other words, since Christ's sacrifice annulled and ended all other sacrifices, the blood of immolated animals is no more relevant for salvation. Animal blood has no salvific value in Christian soteriology. Hence, from the Akan Christian perspective, ancestral sacrifices are wrong and unnecessary and must be discontinued. Akan ancestors do not qualify as appropriate mediators because these are spirits of (dead) humans who are mere creatures, sinful and in need of salvation themselves. Given this understanding, the Akan no longer need to approach God through ancestors, but through Christ, who alone is the legitimate mediator between God and humanity. As Paul argued, "...there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). Obviously, Akan traditional sacrifices may be considered as picturing Christ's purifying and salvific role. The Akan traditional concepts of sin, priesthood and atonement therefore prepares Akan Christians to appreciate Jesus' role as the ultimate high priest whose once-for-all sacrifice brought to an end the repetitious and imperfect sacrifices offered in Akan and other societies and secured complete salvation for humanity.

² The word *afɔdepreko* derives from *afɔdeɛ* (sacrifice) and *preko* (once for all).

Conclusion

Christ supersedes all traditional sacrificial animals in every respect, be it the value of the sacrifice, the method of the sacrifice, what the sacrifice achieves, or any other respect. Therefore, even though Akan traditional religious beliefs and practices can facilitate a Christian understanding of God's ultimate sacrifice, these beliefs and practices cannot serve as a perfect analogy for the death of Christ and its benefits. One needs therefore to be careful not to look for point-by-point correspondence between Christ's atonement and atonement in any society because strictly speaking Christ's sacrifice is incomparable to any sacrifice in the history of the universe (whether past, present, or future). While it is true that no perfect analogy can be established for Christ's atonement, there is no doubt that insights gained from the Akan concepts of sin, priesthood and atonement can serve as a useful foundation for exploring the Christian doctrine of atonement for the Akan Christian community. The church stands a better chance of becoming more relevant and meaningful to the Akan community in particular and Africans in general if the findings from this paper are developed and promoted.

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