



INDIGENOUS WORK ETHICS AMONG AKAN OF GHANA

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Introduction

Local societies, the world over, engage different occupations meant to provide economic livelihood and nutritional sustenance. Farming, trading, fishing and hunting are pursued on subsistent or commercial levels, for aesthetic or functional reasons. Each work activity has certain stipulated regulations, manners and attitudes, which govern the participants. These ethics of work are often formulated from certain assumed divine directions and/or ideas obtained from the people's religious environments, and experiences and discoveries gathered over the years. This paper examines the phenomenon of work ethics of the indigenous professions of the forest and coastal Akan of Ghana.

It uses ideas from religious studies, history, art and cultural studies, to discuss the ethics of work within the crafts of agriculture and fishing. It explores the spiritual and socio-economic reasons and philosophico-ecological considerations and benefits that shape the ethics. The observance of the work ethics is deemed an act for the engineering and sustaining of a beautiful state of existence –an orderly and agreeable co-existence of humankind with the natural and spirit worlds, whose fruits – health, fertility, longevity, the sense of peace and enjoyment of justice, and pleasure in living – constitute wealth for humankind. It specifically discusses the ethics of the observance of certain days as holy and work free, isolation of

certain land spaces from human work encroachment, celebration of some sacred agrarian and fishing festivals, and protection of various flora and fauna of the forest and marine animals.

The Akan and their Topography

The Akan, which is largest of the major ethnies in Ghana, predominantly occupies two major zones –the tropical rainforest, and the south-bound coastal shrub – in the country. Although the Akan constitutes several ancillary groups, it can be conveniently categorised as forest Akan and coastal Akan. The Asante, Akyem, Sehwɛ, Akwapim and Assin are some of the groups that constitute the forest Akan. The Fante group primarily constitutes the coastal Akan. Although the forest people are into hunting, herbalism and art and craft, agriculture/farming is their main indigenous occupation because of the fertile land and forage that they inhabit. The coast people are mainly into marine fishing. It is these two groups that we intend to explore in terms of the ethics that govern their work as farmers (*akuafoo/ekuafɔ*) and fishermen (*apofɔfoo/afarfo*).

Agriculture and Fishing as Professional Terrains of the Akan

Archaeological evidence suggests that from about 10,000 BC late Stone Age hunter-gatherers who established intensive food gathering, fishing (from inland rivers, streams, lakes) and hunting economies occupied the woodland savannah and forests. Remnants of the Neolithic group and some migrants possibly evolved into the Akan, within the forest zone between 500 BC to AD 1000.¹ This forest Akan overtime developed a sedentary culture encased in the Iron Age and mastered the science of agriculture. According to Owusu and Kwarteng, the for-

est, which is known as *kwaɛ* to the Akan had a multi-purpose value because it formed the backbone of their pharmacopoeia as well as food and shelter needs. Products from the forest, which the people domesticated, furnished them with various articles of trade e.g. gold, kola and ivory.²

The coastal Akan, according to oral traditions, migrated from their Akan kith and kin in the forest and settled on the coast and engaged in fishing, especially in the sea, which is their greatest natural asset. This migration predated the arrival of the European explorers and colonists to the Gold Coast.³ The oral account about the anteriority of indigenous fishing among the littoral society before the arrival of the Europeans is corroborated by written historical evidence from early European explorers. Duarte Pacheco Pereira who helped to build the first Portuguese fort in Elmina (also known as Edina), which was started around 1481, and at a point governed it, observed that fish was a mainstay for the coastal Ahanta people. He noted that Elmina had an “abundance of fish upon which the negroes live...”⁴ The local fishermen used the *hembra*, which is a canoe sculptured from a single tree, often obtained from the fringes of the forest bordering the coast. They were propelled by mat sail and wooden paddles. They also used nets made from plant fibre and sisal. Muller, a German priest who stayed in Cape Coast in the 17th century, described two types of coastal Akan local nets (*ebuwa*), namely a small cast net, and a large one of about twenty or more fathoms.⁵ Wicker baskets, hampers, hooks and line, and harpoons were also used to fish. Local blacksmiths made the hooks and harpoons. Pereira further stated that “Twenty leagues beyond Cabo de corso (now the historic town of Cape Coast) is a promontory which we call Cabo des Redes

because of the many nets that we found here when this land was discovered. . . ; midway along there are three fishing settlements, Fante the Greater, Fante the Less and Sabuu (now Moree)".⁶ These historical accounts⁷ point to the long history of fishing as a coastal Akan mainstay. Changes in aspects of this industry and practice have occurred because of the influence of new fishing methods, introduced through contact with Europe, yet vestiges of the indigenous old order linger in the traditional terrain of the coastal Akan. This also applies to farming. While new agricultural methods associated with western "modern" industrial techniques and ideas prevail in the forest Akan zone, remnants of the old indigenous methods and concepts exist. What about the ethics of these occupations?

The work and participants of farming and fishing are governed by knowledge and insight derived from the indigenous worldview of the forest and coastal Akan. Time and again, the work and the worker have on the local terrain have been confronted by new ideas spawned by the dynamics of hybridisation and inculturation initiated by certain endogenous so-called "progressive" religious ideas, and technological, scientific, and economic ways from colonialism and globalisation. Indeed many local ideas and concepts about work have been labelled as primitive and unscientific because they tend to be steeped in the frame of spirituality, which characterises Akan worldview. Mbiti and Parrinder were apt when they identified the indigenous African mind and worldview as "notoriously"⁸ and "incurably"⁹ religious – to connote that religio-spiritual notions pervade and permeate and condition all aspects of life. This is true of Akan outlook concerning science, technology, politics, economics, and general ways of life. However, the incompa-

rable global dominance and hegemony of Western knowledge, epistemic values and social-cultural mores, including Eurocentric Christianity, have largely made indigenous ideas about the conduct of agricultural work and fishing to become secondary. In spite of the onslaught of old and new ideas of colonialism and globalisation respectively on the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (I.K.S.), including work ethics, many resilient vestiges of Indigenous Knowledge continue to feature constructively in the politics, economics and decision making processes of African communities, particularly rural and peri-urban ones.

Indigenous African Cosmivision as Context

We present Indigenous Knowledges as the complex set of knowledges, constituting the mental and spiritual concepts, beliefs and practices, skills, and technologies of indigenous populations and communities, which arose overtime from their deep thoughts (philosophical reflections), experiences and experiments from long term occupancy of a particular area. Such knowledges exist to guide, organise, and regulate their ways of living and to serve as the basis for their livelihood including agriculture, food preparations, educational curriculum, health care, environmental conservation, law, nation building, and political administration.¹⁰ Over time every human society evolved a culture that inculcated an understanding of its place in the cosmos and informed ways of perceiving and relating to the cosmos. The collective knowledge and beliefs of each society make up a "cosmovision". Cosmovision consists of assumed interactions between the human, natural, and spiritual worlds. These interactive worlds give humans physiological and

spiritual insights both about what to do (right thought and action) and what not to do (wrong thought and action), and explanation of phenomena. Moreover, the cosmovision embodies and determines the moral basis for human intervention in nature. It dictates the way humans should behave, relate and use nature's land, water, plants and animals, and how humans should decide, experiment, solve problems, and organise themselves.¹¹

The Akan outlook on work involving the manipulation of land and sea is informed by some main categories of understanding about the composition of the world. There is a self-generating Creator (*Onyame/Nyame*), who is unseen and is the genesis of and ultimate explanation for everything; spirits (*ahonhom*) and spirits of ancestors (*Nananom*); human beings (*Onipa/Nyimpa*); animals (*mmoa/mbowa*) and plants; and minerals without biological life. These live in three worlds of reality – spiritual, human, and natural. The Indigenous Knowledge therefore stipulates that all humans are deeply embedded in and dependent upon the natural and spiritual worlds. Interaction between the three worlds and survival of humankind depends on the harmonisation of these worlds. The holistic connection between the social, spiritual and natural worlds shapes the perfect balance and beautiful state of understanding where answers to all questions reside.

Many of the songs, rituals, prayers, and ceremonies of the Akan are reaffirmations of their dependence on nature and the spiritual world, which provide the space for work and living. All facets and entities of the three worlds contain the divine energy of the Creator (Life Force) and are held together in an adamantine interconnection, where none is to disconnect or exists in isolation. This Life Force manifests movement, rhythm and cycles

in all things, and is itself energised by the activity of all, so “Even lightening, or rain, being lively, they (Akan) would say, has life, i.e., is a being”¹² Hence the sea, wind, fire, thunder, sun, moon, rainbow, stars, rivers, earth, animals and plants are beings of energy, whose activities give verve and sustain the Life Force. The Akan also deem the seasons of the natural world as all enlivened and governed by this spiritual energy, which also animates human life and activities. Consequently, it is believed that seasons, which regulate human activities, correspond with life cycles. For example the season of planting, which is associated with fertility, and harvesting/gathering correspond with birth (fertility), and death respectively. The time of the appearance of green shoots corresponds with human rebirth/regeneration/procreation. If human activities are dependent on a vital energy, which moves in a rhythmic cycle in things, then, according to Akan cosmovision, endeavours like farming and fishing, or even hunting, must be done in a way that will preserve the effect and increase the boons of this Vital Force. It is the quest for this amplification of such energy and harmony between humans and the other worlds that certain ethical injunctions and rituals are observed, for “ritual means can increase it, moral degradation can decrease it and accidents [and violent acts against nature] can diminish it completely”.¹³

Within the frame of the Akan notion of a divine vital force centred interconnectedness of things, humans actions have consequences determined by the world constituted by the Creator (God/Goddess), deities, ancestors and elemental spirits inhabiting natural objects such as the celestial bodies, water bodies, flora and fauna. It is therefore essential for the Akan who work with land and sea to endeavour to behave properly in order to have

harmony with nature and blessings from the spiritual powers. They follow certain dos and don'ts often amplified as taboos that regulate their action in order to avoid throwing existing natural and cosmic balances into chaos, and to ensure a good standing with the Divine Originator and spirits for the averting of natural calamities and dangers and potential wrath and punishment from the spiritual powers. They connect the workers to the dignified beautiful life, whose gift is wealth – good health and longevity, social justice, and a sustained environment and its resources. In the indigenous cosmology of the forest and coastal Akan, both the land, which accommodates the forest, and the marine world are concurrently natural and supernatural spheres. The land known as *Asaase* is governed by a venerable great telluric mother spirit called *Asaase Yaa*, whose birth day and therefore holy day is Thursday (*Yawoada*) hence the name *Yaa*.¹⁴ The veneration of the earth, Daniel Hillel notes, is found in many cultures, and it “long predated agriculture and continued after its advent. The Earth was held sacred as the embodiment of a great spirit, the creative power of the universe, manifest in all phenomena of nature. . . . believed to give shape to the features of the landscape and to regulate the seasons, the cycles of fertility, and the lives of the animals and humans. Rocks, trees, mountains, springs and caves were recognized as the receptacles for this spirit”.¹⁵ Some deities also occupy the fauna, mountains, rocks, and caves, and they assist the Earth goddess to animate the land. Water, on the other hand, constitutes a very powerful spiritual fluid. It is used in ritual ablution and libation to divinities. It symbolises peace, fertility, and growth. Among the Akan the sea known as *Po* is presided over by great marine deity called *Bosom Po*, whose sacred day is Tuesday. Although a

host of auxiliary deities inhabit the ocean and assist *Bosom Po* to control its resources, the sea is actually the physical representation of *Bosom Po*.

Both the sea and land are therefore highly charged symbols in Akan cosmology. In order for the workers of the terrestrial and oceanic spaces to fully reap the bounties in them, they fashion certain work conventions to guide them in maintaining an ideal cordial relationship with the land and sea spaces and the powers therein. These work ethics form an imperative part of the Akan indigenous ecological context and eco-social order. To borrow Akyeampong's definition, eco-social emphasises “the dynamic and symbiotic relationship between a people and their environment”.¹⁶ This orientation is part of the Akan “existence”, or their land and seascape. This land/seascape or “existence” is not just the physical territory and demography of the forest and coastal Akan, but “the culture through which the people work out the possibilities of the land [and sea]”.¹⁷ Meillassoux's understanding of a man-land link is vital for an understanding of such an orientation in the societies of the forest and coastal Akan. “For a peasant nothing comes from the land [earth and so by extension the sea] unless something is given in exchange for it: he invests his labor and seed and draws his subsistence food in return. In this respect, activities which are predatory or merely extractive disturb him: they must be compensated by ‘sacrifice’ which re-establishes equilibrium since extracting resources from nature infringes the principle of advances and returns which dominate the domestic agricultural [and fishing] economy”.¹⁸ Thus, spiritual powers are supplicated and venerated with prayers (*mpaee/mpae*), libations and sacrificial animals and other offerings, and observed taboos (*akyewadie/akyewadze*)

and rituals (*atomuadie/atomadze*) to coax the land and marine realms to favour the Akan farmer (*okuani/okuafo*) and fisherman (*epofoni/farnyi*).

Indigenous Agrarian Ethics

The agrarian communities have tabooed days, which regulate their activities on the land. The holiday for the farmers is Thursday. The day is sacred and observance of it as holy is ethical. Otherwise it is unethical and sinful which will bring disharmony between man and nature and the spiritual world. Farmers do not till the land or tamper with it and its resources on Thursday. They remain at home and rest for general health. They may offer prayers and offering to the land and ask for its guidance. The sacredness and veneration of the land prevents pollution by the people. Furthermore, the agrarian community believes that certain plants and groves are the abode of spirits – deities and ancestors. An example is the *Nyame dua*, (lit. the Creator's/God's tree) which is known in botany as *Alstonia boonei*. It is sacred and not to be destroyed. The agriculturalists are therefore forbidden and/or obliged to observe some rules. They do not cut any 'sacred' flora specie, except a part is approved by a sacerdotal official for medicine. They neither farm or dump refuse in the restricted hallowed spaces of the plants, nor engage in practices that will destroy such sacred flora. It is also unethical to harm fauna inhabiting such sacred spaces. Some of the consecrated groves are called *Nananompow* (Ancestor's Grove) and others are called *Kyiridade* (lit. Abhors metal i.e. farming implements like the machete and hoe). The observance of this is ethical. This however, allows afforestation and preservation of the environment's flora and fauna.

Because the agrarian craft holds the

idea that certain mountains, rocks, hills and geological formations are the home of spirits, it deems it ethical to preserve them. These landforms are left intact as the farmers embark on their farming activities. This helps preserve the natural topography. Before tilling a new land or starting a new planting season, the agrarians perform ritualised planting prayers to the land and spirits on/in it to elicit their protection against harm and support for good harvest. They also offer sacrifices of food to the land and spirits. The latter rite of course has an ecological basis since birds and other fauna will feed on these for sustenance. These observances show dependence on the supernatural but also affirm the agrarians' custodianship of nature. Moreover, the celebration of agrarian festivals is ethical to agrarian livelihood. Such festivals allow them to usher in the harvest season and celebrate the bounty, and worship the Creator and venerate the Earth goddess, deities and ancestors to show appreciation for their blessings and ask for their enduring guidance and protection. Apart from serving as a formal time which compels the farmers to offer sacrifice and offering to the spirits and land goddess to ensure the fertility of the land, the festivals often take the farmers off the land and give them time to eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labour in the fields and time to rest which is good for their health. In addition such periods allow and afford the land some time to fallow and rest and regain its nutrients. The community uses such periods to clean their surroundings, which ensures hygiene; the farmers are also freed to engage in other social responsibilities while they wait for the new planting season. The ban on certain practices on the land such as hunting before the festivals also allows the fauna to breed and increase. These injunctions founded on the idea of

taboos, aimed to respect the sanctity of the land and spiritual world, constitute a corpus of ethics that surround the agrarian activities of the forest Akan.

Indigenous Fishing Ethics

The oceanic fishing inclined coastal Akan view the sea as a complete world and hold an interesting view about that realm and its denizens. Oral traditions about fishing in the Gold Coast (Ghana) comment on the prevalence of rites and beliefs associated with fishing or marine deities.¹⁹ Rough seas, accretion of the coast land by erosion, and lean catches are attributed to the anger of the spirits of the sea especially the supreme one, Bosom Po, the protecting deity of fishermen/folks. Offerings are thus made to the sea to calm it and make it operational for humankind's economic and navigational dealings with it, and facilitate its magnanimity of bumper harvest. This includes the sending and throwing of a live cow in deep sea²⁰ or sacrificing a sheep or cow on the beach.²¹ Such an offering meant placing the deity under obligation to do something in return – according to the law of reciprocity – for the giver of the offering. Ritual, as indicated by the maritime ethnological studies of Prins²² and Malinowski²³, is a key part of fishing ethics in many societies. The coastal Akan observance of Tuesday as a holy day for the sea is not only to be used to propitiate the spiritual realm of the sea. It is a time for the fisher folks to rest, leisurely mend their nets, hold meetings to discuss matters affecting them and attend to other familial and social responsibilities. It is a time for the chief fisherman (*Apofofohen*), who heads the fishermen guild, to deal with issues like the settlement of disputes between the fisher folks and fining of offending people.

The veneration of the sea compels the

fishers to desist from using bad chemicals to fish, lest they pollute it. Some fishes are not to be fished in certain times of the year and it is considered unethical and therefore sinful to catch fingerlings. Using of nets and methods, which will catch fingerlings is therefore abhorred because the belief is that it will invite the wrath of the marine spirits. Thus, the sustainability of marine biological ecology, which is necessary for the continuation of fishing, is ensured. Interestingly when these restrictions are examined from a physical angle, they reveal ecological friendly scientific mechanisms, which ensure the survival and boost of certain species and the preservation of fish life. Fishing festivals, which the ethics of fishing enjoin the community to partake in, honour the deities and ancestors, and afford the fishing community rest and time for general recuperation and general planning for the next season. It is also a time for the sea to rest and the fishes to breed and replenish the fishing area.

Conclusion

This study has explored indigenous agrarian and fishing ethics and their observation among the Akan of Ghana. These ethics strongly emanate from indigenous spiritual beliefs. In this Akan social space, which accommodate the worldview that there is no dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical, the occupational ethics are conceived and instituted to have both spiritual and intangible purposes, and practical and tangible functions and implications for the communities. The work ethics of the agrarians and fishers have such an orientation because they are based on three assumptions. First, the powers of the land and sea deities transcend human power, second, humans can communicate with these powers,

and third, by observing certain rites and practices, which are considered ethical, it is possible to appease the spiritual powers and by extension exert some physical manipulation of nature/environment to access certain favour and benefits from both the spiritual world and physical environment. The ethics of agriculture and fishing which are shrouded in spiritual-

ity and common sense ensure human and ecosystem well being. They are targeted at maintaining harmony between the forces of life, thereby preserving a state of cosmic beauty out of which wealth – abundance of harvests, increase in biodiversity, health and longevity, and social justice – may flow to the people.

Notes

- 1 James Anquandah, 1982, *Discovering Ghana's Past*, Essex: Longman, p. 53 as cited in M.A.S. Owusu & K.O. Kwarteng, 'The Desparacidos: A Study of Local Knowledge and Forest Culture in the Development Agenda of Ghana', in D.D. Kuupole & De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway (Eds.), 2010, *Polishing the Pearls of Ancient Wisdom: Exploring the Relevance of Endogenous African Knowledge Systems for Sustainable Development in Postcolonial Africa*, Cape Coast, Ghana: Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast, and Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development, p. 87.
- 2 M.A.S. Owusu and K.O. Kwarteng, *Polishing the Pearls*, p. 87.
- 3 The Gold Coast became Ghana when it attained political independence from British colonialism in 1957.
- 4 Duarte Pacheco Pereira, 1937, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, trans. and ed. George H.T. Kimble, London: Hukluyt Society, p. 118, as referenced in Irene Odotei, *Artisanal Marine Fishing Industry in Ghana: A Historical Overview*, Legon: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, p. 6.
- 5 Irene Odotei, *Ibid.* p. 10.
- 6 Duarte Pacheco Pereira, *op.cit.*, p. 122, in Irene Odotei, *Ibid.* p. 6.
- 7 Other key early European accounts about early fishing by the littoral Akan include Willem Bosman, 1967, *A New Accurate and Description of the Coast of Guinea: Divided into Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coast*, (4th edn.), London: Frank Cass, [Utrecht 1705]; W. J. Muller, 1983, *Die Afrikanische auf der guineischen Gold-Cust gelegene Landschafft Fetu*, Hamburg, 1673 translated in Adam Jones (Ed.), *German Sources for West African History 1599-1669*, Weisbaden: Franz Steiner, pp. 134-259; E. Tilleman, 1697, *En liden enfolding Beretning om det Landskab Guinea*, Kobenhavn. The interested reader can also see F.R. Irvine, 1947, *The Fishes and Fisheries of the Gold Coast*, London: Crown Agents.
- 8 John S. Mbiti, 1969, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, Heinemann, p. 1.
- 9 G. Parrinder, 1962, *African Traditional Religion*, New York: Harper and Row, p. 9.
- 10 See 'Introduction' to D.D. Kuupole and De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway (Eds.), 2010, *Polishing the Pearls of Ancient Wisdom: Exploring the Relevance of Endogenous African Knowledge Systems for Sustainable Development in Postcolonial Africa*, Cape Coast, Ghana: Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast, and Cen-

- tre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development.
- 11 See B. Haverskort and W. Hiemstra (Eds.), 1999, *Food for Thought; Ancient Vision and New Experiments of Rural People*, London: Zed Books / Bangalore: Books for Change.
 - 12 J.B. Danquah, 1944, *The Akan Doctrine of God*, London: Lutterworth Press, p. 134.
 - 13 Henrietta Sarpong, 'The Humanistic Values of The Dance in the Akan Society', M.A. Thesis (African Art), Ghana: University of Science and Technology (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology), p. 31.
 - 14 The fishing oriented Akan on the coast see Friday (*Fida*) as the natal day of the earth spirit. Hence, they call it Asaase Efuwa
 - 15 Daniel Hillel, 1991, *Out of the Earth: Civilisation and the Life of the Soil*, Herts, U.K: Maxwell Macmillan, as quoted in David Suzuki, 2007, *The Sacred Balance*, Vancouver: Greystone Books, p. 115.
 - 16 Emmanuel K. Akyeampong, 2001, *Between the Sea and the Lagoon*, Athens and Oxford: Ohio University Press and James Currey, p. 4.
 - 17 David W. Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, 1989, *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape*, London and Athens: James Currey and Ohio University Press, p. 9.
 - 18 Claude Meillasoux, 1981, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community*, Cambridge, p. 66.
 - 19 See for example A.P. Brown's 1936, 'Report on a survey of the fishing industry in Labadi with some reference to Teshie and Accra', PRO, CO 96/729/12, as mentioned in Emmanuel Akyeampong, op.cit., p. 121.
 - 20 Emmanuel Akyeampong, op.cit., p. 121.
 - 21 Rowena M. Lawson & Eric A Kwei, 1974, *African Entrepreneurship and Economic Growth: A Case Study of the Fishing Industry in Ghana*, Accra: Ghana Universities Press, p. 62.
 - 22 A.H.J. Prins, 1965, *Sailing from Lamu: A Study of Maritime Culture in Islamic East Africa*, Assen: Van Gorcum and Co, p. 254.
 - 23 B. Malinowski, 1948, *Magic, Science and Religion*, New York: Doubleday, p. 31.