

## On Human Life: Traditional AKAN Ethical Perspectives

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**ABSTRACT:** Prior to the advent of foreign cultures and religions such as Christianity and Islam, issues such as teenage pregnancy, abortion and suicide that threaten the dignity of human life were very rare among traditional Akans. Currently, the acute prevalence of these aforementioned issues indicates that the success chalked by traditional Akan ethics with its traditional religious values is eroding. Is it because the traditional Akan ethics, with its strong deontological basis, is now gradually being replaced by the modern western cultural eudaimonistic and utilitarian ethical value systems? This paper explores this fast paradigm shift on the dignity of human life among the Akans in Ghana.

**KEY WORDS:** Ethics, Traditional Akan,

### I. Introduction

The Akans, like all traditional Africans, cherish greatly human life and consequently the importance of fertility, preservation and continuity of life. For example, among the traditional Akans, respect for human life is so integral in the culture that Sarpong correctly puts it as follows: “even when one kills an enemy in war, one has to undergo spiritual ablution to purify oneself.”<sup>1</sup>

#### Traditional Akan<sup>2</sup>

The Akans consist of a number of tribes which together form an ethnic group in Southern Ghana. Famous among the tribes are the Ashanti and Denkyira. The Akan ethnic group outnumbered the other ethnic groups in Southern Ghana. According to the 2010 census,<sup>3</sup> the Akan represent (47.5%)<sup>4</sup> of the total population of Ghana. They are in Ashanti and BrongAhafo regions; Greater parts of the Western and Eastern regions; the whole of Central region except the Efutu and Awutu districts around Winneba; and a small area in the Northern part of the Volta region. They include the Asante, Bono, Denkyira, Twifu, Assin, Wassaw, Sefwi, Akwamu, Akwapim, Akyem and Adansi.<sup>5</sup> The main languages they speak are Twi and Fanti.

Among the traditional Akans the respect for the sacredness of human life has a cultural anthropological background.

#### The Akan Cultural Anthropology and Human Life

According to the Akan cultural anthropology,<sup>6</sup> the human being (whatever be its stage of development) is essentially composed of the body, the corporeal matter that we see, called *honammamogya* (literally flesh and

<sup>1</sup>Sarpong, P. K. (No date). *African theology. A simple description*. Unpublished, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>By “traditional” Akan, we mean the Akan who, in spite of the inroads of western civilisation and religions such as Christianity and Islam, have still not abandoned the indigenous religion bequeathed to them by their forebears, which is commonly referred to as African Traditional Religion. Cf. Appiah-Sekyere and Awuah-Nyamekye, (2012). Teenage Pregnancy in the Life and Thought of the Akan: Moral Perspectives, *Sociology Study*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup>For the 2010 Population Census Statistics, cf. <http://www.niica.on.ca/ghana/people.aspx>, Retrieved on 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2016.

<sup>4</sup>The Akan. See [http://www.indexmundi.com/ghana/demographics\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/ghana/demographics_profile.html), Retrieved on 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2016.

<sup>5</sup>Appiah-Sekyere, P. (2016). Traditional Akan Ethics and Humanist Ethics: A Comparative Study, *Advances in Social Sciences Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 6, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup>See Appiah-Kubi, K., (1983). The Akan Concept of Human Personality, Ade Adegbola, E. A. (Ed.), *Traditional religion in West Africa*. Ibadan: Daystar Press, pp. 295-264; See also Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*. Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, p. 37.

blood), the *okra*- an element that may be translated into English as the soul, then the *sunsum* which is the spirit, and a few other elements not easily known to the ordinary mind.

The *mogya* is supposed to be contributed by the mother and this forms the basis of kinship relationships. Family ties, ranks, inheritance and succession are matrilineally determined and reckoned because of this cultural anthropological belief in the contribution of the woman towards the procreation of a human being. The *sunsum* is that component of a person that is contributed by the father. It is a kind of personality element. It gives the human being his/her unique personality. The fact that he/she is eloquent, or despicable, or a kleptomaniac, etc., is all said to be due to the kind of *sunsum* he/she has.<sup>7</sup> The *sunsum* from the father, therefore, is that element which moulds the child making him either a kind, or a clever, or a lazy, or a hardworking, etc., personality.

God gives *okra* (the soul) and the *honhom*<sup>8</sup> (the breath of life). The *honhom* (breath of life) accompanies the *okra* (soul) enabling one to breathe as a living human being. Since the *okra* is that part of the human being which comes directly from God,<sup>9</sup> when the breath of life leaves the person, the *mogya* dies, and it is this part of God, namely, the *okra* which returns to God for judgment. It is this same *okra* that determines a person's destiny. God tells the *okra* of each person what to do before it departs from God to come into this world.<sup>10</sup>

The divine involvement in the procreation of each human being is therefore, deeply rooted in the traditional Akan culture and transmitted to younger generations through proverbs, witty saying, *ananse* stories and the like. One of such famous proverbs is "*Obi rekra ne Nyame no obi nnyinaho*, literally meaning, "when each human being was receiving his/her *okra*(soul) from God, there was no other human being present."<sup>11</sup>

With this anthropological basis of the Akan culture, one sees that among the Akans, there is an element of direct contact between the Supreme Being (God) and the life of the newly procreated human being who is an integral whole complex reality that cannot be fragmented. Human life therefore has God's divine elements (the *okra* and *honhom*). Anything done in relation with human life, therefore, logically has a bearing on God.<sup>12</sup>

The Akan cultural anthropology, as discussed above, with the belief in the God-given *okra* and *honhom*, establishes a fundamental innate supernatural link between God and human life. This God-human link runs through the entire life of the Akan. In the traditional Akan culture, therefore, each significant moment in the life of an Akan is marked with religious rites. These significant moments or keyturning points in the passage of an Akan's life are generally held to be three, namely, birth, adulthood (which is marked by marriage), and death are commonly known as "Rites of Passage" (*Rites de Passage*).<sup>13</sup>

### Birth

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*, Op. Cit., p. 37.

<sup>8</sup>Sarpong, P. K. (1974). Op. Cit., pp. 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> The Akan cultural anthropology and, in fact, in the Akan Traditional Religion, God is known as the Supreme Being called *Nyame* (the Satisfier) or *Onyakopon* (the greatest friend) with attributes like *Ammowia* (creator of the sun), *Ammosuo* (creator of waters/ivers), *Twereduapon*(the most reliable One), cf. Amponsah, K., (1977). *Topics on West African traditional religion*, Legon-Accra: Adwina Publishing Ghana Ltd., pp. 25-28; See also Sarpong, P. K. (1974). Op. Cit., pp. 9-13.

<sup>10</sup> This belief that God tells the *okra* what to do before it leaves God to inhabit a person is reflected in an Akan proverb like "*Nyame ne nkrabeawonnbo no adane*" meaning "God's destiny is immutable". The same person might also be determined by other factors, for example, the *sunsum* of the father. These beliefs about one's destiny do not imply that the Akan does not believe in personal responsibility. As Peter Sarpong rightly says: "it is only the inexplicable habitual traits of a person, either towards good or evil, which are explained through appeal to destiny." See Sarpong, P. K. (1974). Op. Cit., pp. 37-38.

<sup>11</sup> On the nature of man and his link with God among the Akans, cf. Amponsah, K. Op. Cit., pp. 43-44.

<sup>12</sup> Because of this God-element in human life, everything that deals with human life has a religious bearing. It is just inconceivable to think of man as a being without his God-element or spiritual dimension. For example, in the Akan culture ill health or disease is not seen and treated only as a biological issue but also and more importantly as having a spiritual dimension. For the Akan then, "good health is not merely the absence of disease." Cf. Appiah-Kubi, K. Op.Cit, p. 261.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites, of passage*, translated by Vizadom, M. B. & Caffé, G. L. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 6-45; See also E. A. ADE Adegbola, (Ed.), *Traditional religion in West Africa*, Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1983, pp. 73-128; Sarpong, P. K. Op. Cit., pp. 71-76; Amponsah, K. Op. Cit., 60-77.

The importance of life for the Akans is also reflected in how much the Akan culture abhors barrenness. Appiah-Kubi (1983) expresses it as follows: "Barrenness can cause divorce. The extended family must be prolonged and continued and each member of the family must contribute to its survival, prolongation and continuation."<sup>14</sup>

Birth ushers a person into this world. Talking about birth implies conception and the period of pregnancy<sup>15</sup> which necessarily precedes birth. The family helps its pregnant woman by rendering the latter services (such as the fetching of water from the pond/stream side or pipestand, whatever may be the source of water for the community, supplying of foodstuffs, firewood, etc.) which the pregnant woman in her present condition, cannot easily do for herself. When in labour, some family members are present with the traditional midwife to assist her in childbearing. After parturition, members of the family send gifts like soap, powder, foodstuffs, firewood, etc., to the new born baby and the mother.

The rites termed *Dintoo*,<sup>16</sup> naming ceremony, is another event for family members to be present to give the child a name. A child is almost always named after an exemplary living or dead member of the family. This child, a new member of the family is taken care of not only by his genitors, (the nuclear family), but also and indeed, by the entire extended family. In fact, when the child reaches the age when he can move about on his/her own, he/she can go, eat, play, sleep, etc., in the house of any of his uncles, aunts, etc. after just having informed the genitors. The youngster's education is sponsored by the parents, an uncle, or an aunt, or all together, each of the latter group contributing according to his/her capability.

From the above, it is clear that after conception, the birth and education of a child among traditional Akans, involve not only the genitors, but also members of the extended family. Worth noting for this study is this fact that, among the Akans, human life after conception is not an exclusive affair of the genitors. The new life is not only for the nuclear family but also for the entire extended family community. Consequently, each member of the extended family community contributes (according to his/her capability, even if it is just a matter of fetching a bucketful of water for the pregnant woman or a bar of soap or whatever little the contribution may be), towards the development and up-bringing of the new human life.<sup>17</sup>

#### Adulthood

As the individual grows, there is a transition from infancy to adulthood. This transition may be considered both as a physiological phenomenon and a sociological fact. Physiologically, the mark of puberty distinguishes one as entering adulthood. Sociologically, one gains access to sexual life with its marital implications and assumes social rights and duties of daily life.

For the Akan culture, similar to other African cultures, marriage is the basis for the family and society. Mbiti rightly notes this fact when he writes:

For African peoples, (obviously including the African Akans), marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized.<sup>18</sup>

Marriage is for adults. Before one marries one must have passed through the rites that mark adulthood. Traditional Akans have rites for girls marking their stage of adulthood, namely, "*Bragoro*."<sup>19</sup> *Bargoro* involves

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<sup>14</sup> Appiah-Kubi, K. *Op. Cit.*, p. 261.

<sup>15</sup> Because of the importance that traditional Akans place on human life, sexual intercourse which is the means through which human life is conceived is reserved for married adults with strict traditional ethical norms to prevent unwanted pregnancies such as teenage pregnancies that may tempt the perpetrators to resort to abortion. Cf. Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 74; Sarpong, P. K. (1977). *Girls' nobility rites in Ashanti*, Tema: Ghana Publishing Corp., p. 48; Appiah-Sekyere, P. & Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2012). Teenage pregnancy in the life and thought of the Akan: Moral perspectives, *Sociology Study*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> Appiah-Kubi, K. *Op. Cit.*, p. 260; Sarpong, P. K., *Op. Cit.*, pp. 87 – 91; See also Mbiti, J. S. (1991). *Introduction to African religion*, Second Edition, Oxford: Heinemann, pp. 92-95.

<sup>17</sup> Since the difficulty involved in bringing up the new human life is not left to the genitors only, the love and support from the extended family encourage the said genitors to see to the preservation, protection, nourishment and development of the new human life. This family support has an enormous moral value.

<sup>18</sup> Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy*, Second Edition, Oxford: Heinemann, p. 130.

<sup>19</sup> Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Girls' nobility rites in Ashanti*. Tema: Ghana Publishing Corp., pp. 13-53; See also Kese-Amankwaa, B. (1980). *Indigenous religion and culture*. Legon-Accra: Baffour Educational Enterprise Ltd., pp. 56-58. For the significance of initiation rites among Africans, cf. Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 131-132.

initiation rites or puberty rites. It, as it were, gives the initiand the license to sex and marriage life. Marriage and all that is entailed in a marriage life become the natural consequences of adulthood. Hence, the corresponding well-known proverb, “*w’aso aware ato wopretee*,” which can be literally translated as “if you have reached the marriageable age, buy your plates.” This proverb means that if one is entering marriage, one must be ready for all that is entailed in the marriage life, here symbolized by plates with which the young lady will prepare food for her marriage partner. Adulthood is terminated by death.

#### *Death and Life after Death*

According to the Akan traditional cultural belief, death terminates physical life.<sup>20</sup> Death is an inescapable phenomenon for all. Burial and funeral follow death consecutively. The Akans believe that after death, the dead person continues living. Among these “living-dead,” those who led good lives are called ancestors - *nananom*.<sup>21</sup> The ancestors are family/clan/tribe, members who were known to have led good lives here on earth and they are remembered by the living and the latter have practices which manifest their communion with the former. These practices could be summed up as “*Ancestral Cult*.”<sup>22</sup> From the above discussion on the Akan cultural anthropology and the rites of passage, one can see that human life has a special divine dimension among the Akans.

During Akan’s life then, “there are important rites (performed in relation to God the source of life) to ask for blessings or to obviate possible spiritual or bodily dangers.

When one dies, the *honhom* and *okra* return to God. Respect for the sacredness of human life, therefore, has a deontological basis. Hence, abortion, suicide and murder are serious crimes. Notwithstanding this cultural relevance, there are some particular issues among the Akans that can be seen as threats to human life.

#### **Threats to Human life Among the Akans.**

The sacredness of human life has been encountering particular threats among the Akans. Samples of these threats include abortion, suicide, human sacrifice, ritual murder and tribal wars. The traditional Akan cultural anthropology coupled with the Traditional Akan Religion and traditional Akan ethical<sup>23</sup> values were able to sustain, protect and promote the sacredness of human life.<sup>24</sup> Since human life begins with pregnancy and pregnancy takes place through sexual intercourse, traditional Akans had ethical norms that sought to prevent extra-marital sexual relations and teenage pregnancies.

#### *Teenage pregnancy*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The expression “Death terminates physical life” connotes that the Akans believe in life after death. For example, practices like the giving of gifts to the deceased person as he journeys to the afterlife, and ancestral veneration depict the cultural belief in the life hereafter among the Akans. Cf. Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect, Op. Cit.*, pp. 29-32; See also Kese-Amankwaa, B., *Op. Cit.*, pp. 12-13, 16-17, 40-44; J. S. Mbiti (. *African religions and philosophy, Op. Cit.*, pp. 155-161; Ade-Adegbola, E. A., *Op. Cit.*, pp. 128-136; Amposah, K. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 97-104.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Sarpong, P. K. (. *Ghana in Retrospect, Op. Cit.*, pp. 33-36.

<sup>22</sup> For further knowledge on Ancestral Cult, cf. Dickson, K. & Ellingworth, E. (1970). *The biblical revelation and African beliefs*. London: Lutterworth, pp. 4-23; Amposah, K. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 96-102.

<sup>23</sup> For further knowledge of traditional Akan ethics, confer the following authors Ackah, C. A. (1988). *Akan ethics. A study of the moral Ideas and the moral behaviour of the Akan tribes of Ghana*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press; Sarpong, P. K. (1972). “Aspects of Akan ethics, *Ghana Bulletin of Theology, Vol. 4, No. 3*, pp. 40-54; Danquah, J. B. (1944). *The Akan doctrine of God: A fragment of Gold Coast ethics and religion*. London: Lutterworth Press;

<sup>24</sup> Using the Ashanti as an example, Sarpong states that murder was prohibited in the olden days among the Akans. Even when one killed one’s slave captured in war or another person in self-defence, one had to face trial. It was even the practice that people who killed their enemies in war had to go through ritual ablution. Cf. Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Op. Cit.*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>25</sup> The term “teenage pregnancy” is a modern term and strictly speaking, it does not have an exact linguistic equivalence among the Akan people. Perhaps, the only Akan term that may best explain the concept of teenage pregnancy is *kyiribra*. Among the Akan, *kyiribra* means becoming pregnant without going through the *bragoro* rites (puberty rites). See Appiah-Sekyere, P. & Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2012). Teenage pregnancy in the life and thought of the Akan: Moral perspectives, *Op. Cit.*, p.131. Explaining the term “*kyiribra*,” Sarpong says, *Kyiribra* is derived from two Akan words “*kyiri*” that is “to hate” and “*bra*” that is “life” or “menses.” *Kyiribra*, therefore, is an offence which a girl with her accomplice commits by becoming pregnant before the performance of her puberty rites. The same word *kyiribra* is used in reference to the parties that committed the offence. Cf. Sarpong, P. K. (1977). *Girls’ nubility rites in Ashanti, Op. Cit.*, p. 48.

To prevent teenage pregnancy and its associated problems, traditional Akan ethical norms promoted sex in marriage and prohibited sexual intercourse among teenagers. Sexual intercourse was for married couples and not for teenagers as Osei-Adu rightly opines:

According to traditional law no woman is allowed to get married without having gone through the puberty rites and every young woman must remain a virgin prior to this. These laws ensure that young women grow up disciplined enough to control their sexuality and to prevent them from premature motherhood and unwanted babies. So important are these laws that any woman who gets pregnant or breaks her virginity before the rites are performed is sometimes ostracized together with the man responsible for it.<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned above, to prevent unwanted pregnancies and their associated problems, traditional Akan ethics tabooed not only teenage pregnancies but also all forms of pre-marital and extra-marital sexual intercourse. Analytically, one can perceive that the strenuous efforts that Traditional Akans made to prevent unwanted pregnancies contributed in no little measure towards ensuring that people would not resort to committing abortion which was seen as a heinous crime.

#### *Abortion*

The issue of abortion poses a threat to the dignity of human life among the Akans just as in any place where abortion is being practised. In many villages, the woman who wanted to abort a fetus made use of the local herbs. Sometimes the pregnant woman died together with the fetus because the herbs might be too powerful for her system or simply because of the difficulty in determining the right dosage of herbs to be used. With the above mentioned fatal local methods, the application and the use of which often resulted in the death of both the mother and the fetus, traditional Akan ethical norms endeavoured to prevent unwanted pregnancies such as teenage pregnancy and its associated problems by promoting sex in marriage and tabooed sexual intercourse among teenagers, as well as pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations even among adults. To a very high degree, traditional Akan beliefs and ethical norms were able to prevent unwanted pregnancies, teenage pregnancies and abortion from threatening the dignity of human life.

#### *Abortion and Traditional Akan Beliefs*

The importance of the tradition of any group of people or any community to the members of the said group is a registered fact. Among the traditional beliefs of the Akans is this that the destruction of human life in the womb, namely, abortion is an abominable and heinous crime.

Abortion which is traditionally called 'nyinsentuo' or 'yefonutuo' among the Akans is a great offense against "AsaaseYaa" or "AsaaseEfaa" who is the traditional goddess of the earth and of fertility. Such an offense incurs upon the culprit and the entire society the displeasure of "Onyankopon" (the Supreme Being), the "abosom" (the gods of the land, especially the goddess of the earth and fertility), and "Nananom" (the ancestors). The said displeasure causes plaques, disasters, epidemics and other misfortunes which affect both the culprit and the entire community. Members of the community, therefore, cooperate in protecting and respecting the life in the womb lest they may all have to suffer.

#### *Abortion and the Akan Cultural Anthropology*

Abortion is also contradictory to the traditional anthropological beliefs of the traditional Akan. For example, among the Akans, the human being (whatever is its stage of development) is essentially composed of the body, the corporeal matter that we see, called *honamnamogya* (literally flesh and blood), the *okra* - an element that may be translated into English as the soul, then the *sunsum* which is the spirit, and a few other elements not easily known to the ordinary mind.

According to this traditional Akan belief, the *mogya* comes from the mother, the *sunsum* from the father and the *okra* comes directly from the Supreme Being - God. The divine involvement in the procreation of each human being is therefore, deeply rooted in this tradition and transmitted to younger generations through proverbs, witty saying, Ananse stories and the life. Since the traditional Akan cultural anthropology establishes the spiritual presence of the Supreme Being in the fetus, to destroy the fetus is a serious offence against the Supreme Being.

In another perspective, traditional Akans believe in reincarnation. That the Akan culture and, in fact, Ghanaians believe in reincarnation. Sarpong writes: "Ghanaians believe that any ancestor who considers that his work on earth was not completed before he died may decide to come back to complete it. Many people are

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<sup>26</sup> Osei Adu, David. "Puberty Rites." Retrieved July 20, 2016. (<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes/pubertyrites.php>).

thought to be reincarnations of ancestors...."<sup>27</sup> In this context, to destroy a baby in the womb is to prevent a human being from coming into this world and that human being could possibly be an ancestor who was coming back into this world to complete his/her uncompleted God-given task. Hence, for the traditional Akan, direct procured abortion is not only a sin against the Supreme Being, (for destroying the being that carries His *okra* and *honhom* (the divine soul and spirit respectively), but also against *Aasaase Yaa* or *Aasaase Efua* (the earth goddess),<sup>28</sup> the ancestors (because the fetus could be an ancestor wanting to be reincarnated) and the living who have been denied of a community member whose contribution could have improved their lives.

### Suicide

Similar to abortion, suicide is also detested among the Akans. As regards how deplorable suicide is considered among Akans, Sarpong (1974) states

One who killed himself was assumed to have committed a heinous crime ... On who kills himself proclaims himself an enemy of everybody. He refuses to confide in anybody in times of difficulty. Suicide therefore is an anti-social act.<sup>29</sup>

For the Akan, anyone who commits suicide cannot be regarded as an ancestor<sup>30</sup> and his/her name will never be passed on to any child at a naming ceremony. The logical deduction is that if human life is a gift from the Supreme Being or deities or ancestors, then no one can take away or terminate human life except the giver(s). To commit suicide is to bring disgrace and calamity upon oneself and one's family/community. In fact among traditional Akan, "a suicider is traditionally considered a wicked person and his spirit is simply dreaded."<sup>31</sup>

### The Current Status of the Threats to Human Life

The state of the art status of the threats<sup>32</sup> (including the aforementioned ones) to human life among the Akans is acutely alarming. The occurrence of teenage pregnancies<sup>33</sup> is astronomically high, abortion is not only a clandestine offence against the earth goddess (*Aasaase Yaa* or *Aasaase Afua*) but also a legalized practice and suicidal acts are rampant. Appiah-Adjei (2002) affirms the acute situation of teenage pregnancy by saying "For instance, a study conducted in Berekum, revealed that 70% of the high school drop-outs in the area was due to teenage pregnancy." In another development Ghanaweb.com<sup>34</sup> also reports of the dismissal of 17 pregnant students of the Aduman Senior High School in the Afigya-Kwabre District of the Ashanti Region by their headmaster.

## II. EVALUATION

From the foregoing discussions, it can be deduced that Traditional Akan ethical norms, among other objectives, aimed primarily at preventing unwanted pregnancies like teenage ones since such pregnancies could

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*. Op. Cit., pp. 39-41.

<sup>28</sup> Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Ghana in Retrospect*, Op. Cit., pp. 10-144, on the earth goddess see especially p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Op. Cit.*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>30</sup> See Sarpong, P. K. (1974), *Op. Cit.*, pp. 33-44.

<sup>31</sup> Sarpong, P. K. (1974), *Op. Cit.*, pp. 35.

<sup>32</sup> Other threats include ritual murder, human trafficking and child prostitution to mention just a few. On ritual murder, examples include, the Kofi Kyintoh's case - cf. Serwaa Berko, A. (Thursday, June 30, 1988). Sefwi-Bekwai Ritual Murder Trial: Thousands Throng the Routes to Catch Glimpse of Accused ... As Tribunal Moves to Scenes of Crime in Sefwi Area, *Daily Graphic*, p. 3; The Sefwi Bekwai Case (1988). How the Killers were killed, *Joy Ride*, Vol. 94, No. 100, pp. 7-8; For the Madam Lamle Sampawho was the victim of the Abesim ritual murder *Joy Ride*. Cf. (1988). The Woman Who Haunted Her Killers: The Full Story of the Abesim Ritual Murder, *Joy Ride*, Vol. 94, No. 100, pp. 3-13; The Abena Assor case (June 25, 1994). Sefwi Murder Case - Four Before Court, *Daily Graphic*, p. 7; The Salam case (July 22, 1994). Wiamoasi Ritual Murder: What Action So Far?, *Daily Graphic*, p. 3; Sam K. (October 24, 1994). Killings in Abura Dunkwa, Asebu Area - Police can't Trace Murderers, *Daily Graphic*, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Appiah-Adjei (2002). The Attitude of Parents Towards Female Education in Berekum and Its Surroundings Village." Undergraduate Dissertation, Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Coast, p. 35; Cf. also Appiah-Sekyere, P. & Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2012). Teenage pregnancy in the life and thought of the Akan: Moral perspectives, *Op. Cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Citifmonline* (March 1, 2011). Retrieved July 12, 2016. (<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=204095>). See also Appiah-Sekyere, P. & Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2012). Teenage pregnancy in the life and thought of the Akan: Moral perspectives, *Op. Cit.*, p. 135.

lead to abortion as observed by Nana Yaa Ntidwuma, Queen of Kurofa, near Adomfe in the Asante-Akim South District. "Pregnant teenage girls, particularly students, have been urged not to resort to unsafe abortion, in order to save their education."<sup>35</sup> She obviously identifies a connection between teenage pregnancies and abortion as she gave the advice at a forum held to educate young girls in the area about the dangers of unsafe abortion.

It is obvious that traditional ethical norms were effective in curbing the incidence of teenage pregnancies,<sup>36</sup> abortion and suicide making their occurrence very rare as Sarpong affirms, "...this element of African thinking is the fact that human life is composed of divine life also. One cannot simply do away with human life without tampering with the life of God himself. That is why in the past practices like abortion, contraception and euthanasia were almost unheard of."<sup>37</sup>

Within the context of traditional Akan ethical analysis, one can perceive abortion as a form of Malice against the unborn "neighbour." Actually, to do evil to one's neighbour is against traditional Akan ethics. Traditional Akan ethical principles detest performing malicious<sup>38</sup> act against a neighbour. For the Akan, abortion is an extreme<sup>39</sup> form of malice because the unborn child is fragile, defenceless and innocent. If among the traditional Akan, the killing of an enemy at battlefield even call for ablution and purification rites, then what will the killing of an innocent human being demand?

Within the context of traditional Akan ethics, abortion and suicide can be perceived as a form of egoism. Generally, traditional Akan ethics abhors egoism/selfishness. In fact, Gyekye (1996) rightly affirms that the "Akan community is a communalistic type but not individualistic."<sup>40</sup> Akans have proverbs that express the negative effects of selfishness/egoism on community life. One of such Akan proverbs is "Onipabaakodidimeeakuro mu nnyede" which literally means - if only one person has food to eat in a village, there is no joy in the said village.<sup>41</sup>

In the past, traditional Akan norms ensured that abortion was prevented. For example, according to traditional law no woman is allowed to get married without having gone through the puberty rites and every young woman must remain a virgin prior to this. These laws ensure that young women grow up disciplined enough to control their sexuality and to prevent them

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<sup>35</sup> Ghana News Agency. (July 15, 2011). Students sensitized on unsafe abortion. Retrieved July 17, 2016, (<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/health/artikel.php?ID=213749>).

<sup>36</sup> Osei-Adu affirms that "These traditional norms and rites were effective means of preventing premarital sex and teenage pregnancy in the society." Cf. Osei Adu, David. Puberty Rites. Retrieved July 20, 2016. (<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes/pubertyrites.php>).

<sup>37</sup> Sarpong, P. K. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*, Op. Cit., p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> Traditional Akan proverbs demonstrate how much Akans detest being wicked to one's neighbour. Examples include the following: "Se wo to aduro bone a, ebika w'ano" which literally means, if you employ bad 'juju' on a neighbour, the repercussions will invariably affect you. A similar traditional Akan proverb also says "Se amma wo nyenko anntwa akron a wo nso renntwa du" which literally means, if you prevent a friend from achieving nine (9), you will never achieve ten (10). In this context, the proverb can imply that if you prevent a human being from entering the world, then you will also be prevented from living in the world. Another relevant Akan proverb would be, "Otwebebre, naobofoo so bebre" which literally means "the deer will suffer but the hunter will also suffer." The deer in this proverb is the victim of the hunter and just as the deer runs away for its life and suffers from the attack of the hunter, the hunter also suffers by running after his victim to hunt it down. In this context, the victim of abortion, the fetus will suffer death but the abortionist will may also suffer from the risks and side effects of abortion. "Dee wo bedua no na wo bebu" which literally means "what you sow is what you reap." Thus, if you sow death for the fetus, you will reap death. For other similar Akan proverbs, cf. Appiah-Sekyere, P. (2014). The Lifeboat Ethics and Akan Traditional Ethics: A Critical Comparative Study. *International Institute for Science, Technology and Education*, Vol.4, No. 2, p. 31.

<sup>40</sup> Gyekye, K. (1996), pp. 35-37. In fact, according to Gyekye (1995), communalism is "the doctrine that the group (that is, the society) constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society ... because communalism lays "emphasis on the activity and success of the wider society rather than, though not necessarily at the expense of, or to the detriment of, the individual." Cf. Gyekye, K. (1995). *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*, (rev. ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 155.

<sup>41</sup> In the context of abortion and suicide then, the joy or "good" of the individual is meaningless unless it is in communion with the joy or "good" of the other neighbour (and the fetus is a potential neighbor to be related to). Bujo (2001) expresses it beautifully in the following way: "Africans of which the Akan are inclusive do not think in 'either/or,' but rather in 'both/and' categories... for Black Africa, it is not the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am') but an existential *cognatus sum, ergo summus* ('I am related, therefore we are') that is decisive." See Bujo, B. (2001). *Foundations of an African ethic: Beyond the universal claims of Western morality*, trans. Brian McNeil. New York: Crossroad Publishers, pp. 1 & 4.

from premature motherhood and unwanted babies. So important are these laws that any woman who gets pregnant or breaks her virginity before the rites are performed is sometimes ostracized together with the man responsible for it.<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned above, anybody that acted contrary the traditional norms was punished. Unlike in the past, when traditional Akans had punitive measures against the pregnant teenage girl and her accomplice, currently there is no such punitive measure. Such a *lacuna* can create a passive or *laissez faire* attitude towards socio-ethical norms.

The alarming upsurge of the aforementioned threats to human life seems to indicate that the foreign cultures and religions have not been able to chalk the success that traditional Akan ethical norms with Traditional Akan Religion were able to do.

### **The Way Forward**

Akan and Ghanaians as a whole should objectively admit that the foreign religio-cultural beliefs and practices have not been effective in curbing threats to human life such as teenage pregnancy, abortion, suicide, ritual murder and the like.

These foreign cultures and religions should debunk their derogatory and contemptuous attitude towards traditional Akan ethical norms and traditional Akan religious beliefs and practices.

## **III. CONCLUSION**

It is crystal clear, from the above discussions, that traditional Akan ethics upholds the divine presence, the *okra* and *honhom*, in human life. Traditional Akan ethical norms meticulously defended and promoted the sacredness of human life by preventing issues that threaten human life such as teenage pregnancies, abortion and suicide. With the influx of foreign cultures and religions, the influence that traditional Akan ethical norms had has reduced drastically resulting in the astronomical upsurge of the aforementioned threats. It is the view of this paper that current efforts by the government, religious bodies, non-religious organisations and other stakeholders to curb teenage pregnancies, abortion, suicide and similar threats to human life among Akans and Ghanaians as a whole, should incorporate the traditional ethical norms that were effective in responding to threats to human life.

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<sup>42</sup>Osei Adu, David. Puberty Rites. Retrieved July 20, 2016. (<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes/pubertyrites.php>).



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