

THE RITUAL OF BLOOD SACRIFICE  
AS EVIDENCED IN COLOSSIANS 1:20 AND ITS  
IMPLICATIONS IN AKAN TRADITIONAL CULTURE

by

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## ABSTRACT

The subject of this thesis is “The Ritual of Blood Sacrifice as Evidenced in Colossians 1:20 and its Implications in the Akan Traditional Culture.” It first explores the traditional Akan cultural worldview in terms of their concepts of God, deities and ancestors. Then it deals with their concept of sacrifice by looking at three examples of ritual sacrifice: the “Ritual Killing after the Death of a Chief,” “Human Sacrifice for Victory,” and “Sacrificing Living People.” After an exegesis of Col. 1:20 within the context of the “Christ Hymn,” the thesis examines some elements of human sacrifice in the Greco-Roman world and describes the wider early Christian understanding of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice. This analysis will help us to engage those aspects of Akan theology and cosmology that have a direct correlation with the Akan-language translation of the Colossians Hymn. Drawing on examples from recent newspaper articles on ritual killings in Ghana, the thesis tries to determine the rationale for these sacrifices within the traditional Akan context. The thesis draws the conclusion that for Pentecostal-Charismatic believers Christ’s death on the cross is a blood ritual sacrifice that meets the sacrificial needs of the Akans; however Christ’s sacrifice is more efficacious and superior to the Akan traditional ritual sacrifices for maintaining the cosmological balance within the universe in regard to peace, protection, prosperity and power.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the church in Ghana, especially the Pentecostal-Charismatic church, has experienced tremendous growth and great “revival.” This recent growth did not happen in a vacuum, but the churches utilized the traditional culture as a vehicle of their growth. The major themes of Christian preaching and teaching in Ghana center on peace, protection, prosperity and power, which also happen to be the essential components of Akan traditional culture.

Christianity was believed to have been propagated by some Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries attached to the merchant ships in the fifteen century. They are said to have established a school at Elmina in 1529. They had so little success that by the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was hardly any trace of Christianity in Ghana. These attempts were later to be followed by the Church of England Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in 1752. Following at the heels of the SPG was the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (1829). The Wesleyan Christian Mission (1834) followed and was also followed by the Bremen Mission (1847). In spite of the initial difficulties with the language and culture, the Akan culture and religion became the vehicle for propagating the Gospel.

Some of the practices like circumcision and sacrifices within the Akan culture run parallel to some of the Jewish rites. The indigenous people were able to identify with some of the activities in the biblical world due to the many similarities that bind communal people together, hence this paper, “The ritual of blood sacrifice as evidenced in Colossians 1:20 and its implications in the Akan Traditional Culture.” Colossians 1:20 is of particular importance to an Akan cultural understanding due to the fact that the text is part of a “heroic hymn” (1:15-20) and the final phrase “αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ” (the blood of his cross) could be understood in the

light of blood ritual sacrifice ending in death. I would like to explore some of the similarities and differences between the Akan notion of human sacrifice and that of Christ's sacrifice as evidenced in the Colossians text, as well as the challenges/conflicts embedded in these concepts.

The Akan mythology also is full of stories of heroism, power, and wisdom. Most of these stories are embodied in the folkloric songs and poems. The primal religious experiences are part of the culture and it is virtually impossible to separate the Akan private/cultural life from religion. The rites performed by individual and/or community keep the balance in the Akan cosmology.

The phrase “αἷματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ” the blood of his cross (Col.1:20), is synonymous with death and has some implications of sacrifice, which is a special component in the Akan culture. In the Akan cultural understanding, the attainment of peace, protection, prosperity and power is through the rituals of blood sacrifice. These blood sacrifices are graded, depending on the kind of victims that are offered. Human sacrifice is considered to be the highest prize.

When the Akan compares the benefits derived from ritual sacrifices to the benefits of Christ's death to the believer, there are many compelling similarities, which is of great interest to an Akan Christian. The Akan Christian understanding of holistic salvation is an embodiment of peace, protection, prosperity, well being and power over the works of evil. This holistic view could be seen in terms of the blessings of peace, prosperity, protection and power, when the Akan ritual sacrifice is compared with Christ's sacrifice in Colossians 1: 20.

It must be understood that Christianity is a foreign religion that has been introduced to the Akans who are cultural people. The Akan cannot be devoid of his or her culture. Their culture is their religion and their religion is their culture. When an Akan professes Christianity, he/she becomes bi-religious. Christianity does not transform, transfer or translate the Akan

religious experience. There are rather internal and physical conflicts between the two religions, hence the seeking of similarities or common concepts as the basis of balance for the Akan Christian. It is therefore from this underlying principle that I would like to fully explore from an emic perspective these concepts of sacrifice as the bedrock of the growth of the church in Ghana.

## THE AKAN CULTURAL WORLDVIEW<sup>1</sup>

John Mbiti states emphatically that “Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of belief and practices.” He continues to write that religion permeates all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate.<sup>2</sup> This statement is a true reflection of the Akan tribe.

Much of the history of the origin of the Akan people is shrouded in legends. However, the arts, songs and festivals tell the story of the individual groups within the Akan tribe. These festivals are colorful and vibrant part of the culture. Each year festivals and durbars (community assembly) are held in various parts of the country, to celebrate the heritage of the tribal people. Festivals are not only occasions for joyous celebrations, but also the retelling of the history of the community for the future generation. It is a period in which the community renews their allegiances to their local deities, ancestors and the Supreme Being through rituals of sacrifices. Akan festivals may generally be classified into two broad categories: (1) Purification festivals and (2) Harvest festivals. There are variations as one moves from one purification festival to another. However the underlying principles are similar across most of the tribes in Ghana.

In regard to human sacrifices, some traditionalists claim the ancient rituals have been modified and substituted with animal sacrifices and servitude of victims. A typical example is the *Aboakyer* festival of people of Winneba in southern Ghana. *Aboakyer* derives from an ancient ritual where sacrifices are traditionally offered to the deity *Penkyi Otu* in order to remove

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<sup>1</sup>J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* (London: Cass, 1968) provides an excellent ethnography of the Akan worldview from an emic perspective, whereas Fisher, Robert, *West Africa Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana* (New York: Orbis, 1998) provides the etic perspective. Most of the ideas expressed also come from my personal encounter growing up within the culture. The Fanti people were the first Akans to encounter European (Portuguese) Merchants in 1471, hence the Akans have been in Ghana long before the dating of their history.

<sup>2</sup>Mbiti, John, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969) 1.



evil and predict a good harvest (prosperity). In the folklore, it is said that the people from the ancient Western Sudan Empire migrated south, and settled in Winneba. To celebrate this, the deity ordered the fetish priest to offer a young male (prince) from the Royal Family every year as a sacrifice. After some years of losing the best cream of royal sons, the people appealed to the deity, *Otu*, and the substitution of a leopard was accepted as a sacrificial offering, provided it was caught alive and beheaded before the deity. In attempting to capture the live leopard, many more people lost their lives in the course of time. They again appealed a second time to *Penkyi Otu* who accepted the offering of a young deer as their annual sacrifice. This story is part of the oral history of the people of Winneba and it is chanted in their “war songs.”

The Ashanti “*Papao*” festival also reminds the chiefs and people of the Kumawu area of the bravery of their ancestors, especially, *Nana Tweneboah Kodua I*, who offered himself as sacrifice in order for the Ashantis to emerge victorious in the battle of independence fought against the Denyiras in 1701 C.E. The festival also seeks to purify the state by driving off evil spirits that may hinder the search for elephant tusks, which are important paraphernalia of their royalty. The sacrifice of *Nana Kodua* is one event in the Ashantis’ history that has served as a symbol of their unity even till now. He is classified as the king-savior of the Ashanti kingdom, whose blood not only purified the state but keeps it together.

In order to fully comprehend the Akan notion of sacrifices, let us examine some basic concepts in the Akan cosmology: God, Deities, Ancestors and Traditional ritual practices.

### **The Concept of God**

The knowledge of God is expressed in songs, prayers, names, myths, and stories as well as in religious ceremonies. The Akan cultural symbols point to the strong belief in God. The

most common is the “*Gye Nyame*” symbol which means “except God.” Out of the countless proverbs within the culture, the following express the existence of God in the cosmology. “*Aboa nni dua, Onyame na epra ne wo*” (it is God who keeps the flies from a tailless animal).

“*Obi nkyere abofra Nyame*” – (no one shows a child the Supreme Being), it simply means, even children know that God exists within the tradition. “*Se wobu Okoto Kwasea, Onyame hwe wo to*” (If you play tricks on the crab, God sees your bottom). The Akan concepts of God are influenced by the historical, geographical, social and cultural disposition of the people. The Supreme Being has many attributes which are expressed in the names ascribed to him. *Onyankopon, Onyame* (also spelled *Nyame*) implies the basic concept of deity as understood in Christian theology. *Onyankopon* expresses the supremacy of God, the one great *Nyame* who is “*Borebore*” the creator. “*Odomankoman*” denotes the infiniteness of God. The title of *Onyankopon* is seen in the manifestation of the Supreme Being over nature. This is experienced through his power as rain-giver.

The Supreme Being as “*Odomankoman Borebore*” denotes the idea, that “the Supreme Being is the creator and carver of the world.” The title represents the creative intelligence of the Supreme Being. The appellation of *Onyankopon* (God) is “*Twaduumpon*” – (lean on a tree and not fall), gives the Akan ability to trust *Onyankopon* knowing he or she will not fall, since *Onyame* (God) is dependable. The proverb “*Wope se woka biribi kyere Onyankopon, ka kyere mframa*” (If you want to say something to the Supreme Being, say it to the wind), fully expresses omnipresence among his people.

### **Deities and Ancestors**

The Supreme Being (*Onyame*) is so great that he has “offspring” and “subjects” to bring balance within the cosmology. The deities and the divinities are considered as the “offspring” of

the Supreme Being. These deities could be both female and male in respect to gender. Meanwhile, these deities are different from one community to the other. The divinities or deities are also known as “*Abasom*” (literally stone worship). This denotes that these *Abasom* could be deities in rocks, earth, rivers or in the forest. The Akan also consider the earth as mother earth. Some consider the earth as goddess and deity; however there are various divisions as to the status of the earth within the pantheon.

The *Onyame*'s subjects are the ancestors, (The souls/spirits of the departed elders of society). It is not any elder in the family that qualifies to be an ancestor.<sup>3</sup> To be considered ancestor, one has to die at a ripe age, should have lived a worthy life, been a benefactor to the community, and might have died of a natural cause. An accidental death is considered a curse. Ancestors are believed to be the agents of *Onyame*'s blessings to the people. The ancestors are not worshipped but they are venerated and respected as custodians of the community. They serve as unseen police officers in maintaining order between the world of the living and the unseen spiritual world. They have the ability to punish and reward a community for their actions.

### **Traditional Ritual Practices**

Within the Akan cultural worldview, some men and women are found to have the power to manipulate the spirit forces for evil purposes. These are the *akaberekyerefo* and *adutofo* (charmners, enchanters and sorcerers), and *abayifo* (witches). The activities of these forces are directed against humankind. It is within this context that prayers, sacrifices, charms and amulets play a very important role. The forces of evil are always at work against human beings in order to prevent them from enjoying a great and a rewarding life, or fulfilling their *nkrabea* (destiny).

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<sup>3</sup> The individuals who did not qualify to be ancestors may be reborn into a new life, if their previous life was worthy and good but through no fault of their own died at a young age. However a wicked person ceases to exist, thereby cutting off their root.

The central focus of the religious exercises of the Akan is therefore the harnessing of power inherent in the spirit force for his or her own advantage. To the Akan, just like other African peoples, whatever happens to the human being has a religious interpretation. To them, behind the physical is the spiritual; behind the seen is the unseen. Every event here on earth is traceable to a supernatural source in the spirit realm, hence the importance of the notion of blood sacrifice within Colossians 1:20, through this worldview.

## THE CONCEPT OF SACRIFICE IN THE AKAN CULTURE

Sacrifice, offering and prayers are closely knitted together within the African traditional culture. And they serve to preserve the cosmological equilibrium in the society. Sacrifices are the special means by which the Akan culture maintains and restores broken relationships between God, deities, ancestors, and the community. Its rituals practices also provide protection, prosperity and power to individuals and the community.

Thomas writes: “In some ancient African societies human beings were sacrificed to carry a direct message to the ancestors to intervene on behalf of a suffering community. In times of national crisis such as war and drought, a human was sacrificed to provide the community with direct line to the other world.”<sup>4</sup> Due to the Colonial influence, rituals involving human sacrifices are abhorred by the secular public and majority of the populace, however the religious obligations to the deities/ancestors and the benefits to be gained in terms of protection, prosperity and power make the performance of the rituals shrouded in mystery and secrecy; it is rarely discussed in the Akan community. However, the idea of human sacrifices from ancient to modern times is common knowledge to all through oral traditions and folklore.

Thomas draws our attention to the fact that “Sacrifices and offerings are acts of restoring the ontological balance between God and man, the spirits and man, and the departed and the living. When this balance is upset, people ‘experience’ misfortunes and sufferings, or fear that these will come upon them. Sacrifices and offerings help, at least psychologically, to restore this balance.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas, Douglas E, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005) 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Based on this understanding, I would like to explore three basic concepts of human sacrifice in the Akan cosmology that deal with the issue of balance in the society and its effects on Christianity within the culture.

### **Ritual Killing after the Death of a Chief**

The Akan chief is very significant and plays a very important role in their community as well as the entire nation. Various honorific titles they bear identify them with their responsibility to the community. The title *Nana* and/or *Ohene* (*for the male and Ohemaa*<sup>6</sup> *for the female*) connote the position of an elder and regent or custodian of an ancestral position. In essence they are living ancestors. The titles *Odikro*, *Mankrado*, *Omanpayin* are strictly reserved for chiefs and they mean king, owner of the town/community, elder statesperson. In order to appreciate their position, a brief understanding of the process of becoming a chief would be helpful.

Before a person is enstooled as a chief, he or she must belong to the designated royal clan. Potential chiefs are trained and educated from childhood on the roles of the chief. These include: Akan history and poetry, law and order, warfare, traditional medicine and all the cultural and social norms within the community. The chief is an historian, judge, commander in chief of town warriors, and most times the traditional healer due to his/her shamanic powers. He/She must be kind, firm in decision, brave and blameless, without physical deformities or handicap.

The potential chief is confined to a special room for forty days prior to his or her public installation. During this period of seclusion, detailed instruction and training amid secret rituals are performed daily by kingmakers to both fortify and obtain help from the ancestors for the new

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<sup>6</sup> Ohemaa is sometimes translated as Queen-mother or Queen. The Queen is not the wife of the King but rather maternal mother or grand mother or aunt from the mother's side of the family in relation to kinship in matrilineal societies, of which the Akan is part. It is also acceptable to have a female chief in Akan society, whenever the Royal line has no male heir to the throne (stool).

chief. A new stool (throne) name is chosen for him, from the list of names of previous chiefs. The new chief's reign will have resemblance with the reign of the chief whose name was chosen and invoked. The final process of installation is the outdoor ceremony where the community recognizes their new chief, as introduced to them by the kingmakers in celebration. The new chief swears the great oath of allegiance, that he/she will be available to them rain or shine, night or day, and will deal with them rightly in the matter of justice and will continue to serve as a link between the ancestors and the community.

Today, the Akans and other tribal communities deny and denounce the rituals that involve human sacrifices. In primal time, people were sacrificed at the death of chiefs. They believed that the chief must have some subjects to serve him or her in the underworld. Some of those sacrificed were slaves or strangers who found themselves in the community where the chief had died. Another person also sacrificed in ancient times is the *okra*.<sup>7</sup>

With the coming of colonization, ritual murder was outlawed and overt killings were done in secrecy to avoid the prosecution by the imperial courts. Much as human rights and the right of the individual to live is highly promoted, there is a common knowledge that ritual killing is still being practiced among certain communities of the society.

On the death of a chief, there are forty days of mourning, among the many animal sacrifices that are offered daily. There is a great fear within the community due to potential human sacrifices that may likely occur. People literally impose curfews on themselves in order to avoid being a victim of ritual murder. Sometimes the death of a chief is kept in secret, unannounced to the community until they have all the needed sacrifices in place before a formal announcement is made. "Missing people" have been victims since the practice is done in secret.

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<sup>7</sup> The Okra (Soul) is a little boy who is the soul of the chief. He always sits before the chief, eats with him and sleeps in the chief's bedroom and dies with the chief by being sacrificed in funeral rituals.

The purpose of the ritual killing after the death of a chief is to restore balance between the living community and the spirit world of the ancestors. It is also to appease the gods and avert any calamities that are bound to occur due to the death of the chief. The chief is the highest person in the community and his or her death may be a result of a punishment from the ancestors or the deities, so a higher form of sacrifice is required, hence human sacrifice.

### **Human Sacrifice for Victory**

During the time of inter-tribal wars, human sacrifice was needed to ensure victory. The Akan do not wage war without consulting the oracles for their approval. Inter-tribal wars occurred when there was dispute over lands or breaking of the greatest taboo in their tribe. This taboo may include rape of a princess or prominent member of their tribe.

Before the war begins, a servant is sent to the erring tribe to announce the charges being brought to them. If the servant is sent back without harm, then peace is made through rituals of restitution. Sometimes the erring tribe kills or cuts off the hand of the servant, sending a message of war. Battle rituals are elaborate and detailed and require different kinds of sacrifices. Animal and human sacrifices of various degrees are needed for a particular kind of victory.

To ensure victory, the victim for the sacrifice could be a servant, a male or female member of the community. A prince or chief may offer himself for the sacrifice for victory. This is a highest kind of sacrifice. The sacrifice of *Nana Tweneboah Kodua I* is a unique example in this regard.

### **Sacrificing of Living People**

Another important form of human sacrifice is the act of offering a person as a perpetual slave to the gods. These are not priests who have offered their lives in service of the deities but



individuals offered as restitution for crimes committed by members of their family or clan. To avoid a calamity, obtain the blessings of a deity, or seek protection, a clan may be required to offer a person as a sacrifice, who may serve that shrine for good. In most of these cases, a virgin is required.

A typical example of modern day servitude is the *Trokosi*<sup>8</sup> system of the Ewes of the Volta Region of Ghana. Under this type of servitude, a clan or family must offer a virgin daughter to the gods to atone for the “sins and crimes” of a relative who had committed a heinous crime. These crimes may range in severity from murder to petty thefts. Whatever the crimes are, offending individuals and families have a duty to turn their young girls between the ages of eight and fifteen over to serve as slaves to the gods/deities or risk living lives of perpetual misery, misfortune, diseases and even a succession of deaths within the family.

In order to atone for the sins of an offender, *Trokosi* originally required the killing of an innocent virgin as a sacrifice of atonement. In some cases the offender may have died or may be living to experience the pain of having an innocent victim as a substitute for his/her offence. In the course of time, the ritual of killing of virgins was transformed into the life of perpetual servitude. In the unlikely case of the death of the virgin anytime during the servitude, the family is obliged to provide another virgin as replacement or risk incurring the wrath of the deities. In the *Trokosi* rituals, offences are not eradicated until there are continual services by a virgin to the deities. This is an endless circle of servitude and there are victims serving in the shrines for an offence that was committed over a hundred years ago. These slave virgins are denied any access

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<sup>8</sup> Ameh, Robert Kwame, “Human Rights, Gender and Traditional Practices: The Trokosi System in West Africa,” in Kalunta-Crumpton, Anita. & Biko Agozino, *Pan-African Issues in Crime and Justice* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2001) 24-5. Ameh’s article presents the problem of the system and the collaborative efforts by the Government of Ghana, United Nations and some Christian Non –profit Organizations to liberate the shrine slaves and outlaw the custom.

to education or health. Their duty is to work on farms, and in the shrine. They are known as the wives of the gods and sex slaves of the priest. It is a crime for non-fetish priests to engage in sex with Trokosi victims and any breach of this code will require the offender's family to atone for the crime with a new virgin to the shrine.

## THE COLOSSIANS TEXT

In recent scholarship, the Epistle to the Colossians has been regarded as an “important document in the Christian tradition primarily because of its theological content.”<sup>9</sup> Colossae was a small city in the Lycus Valley in the region of ancient Phrygia in modern Turkey. “By the first century it was very much in the shadow of neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis.”<sup>10</sup> McRay from an archeological perspective writes: “A similarly interesting inscription reminds us that Laodicea is intertwined with Colossae, and Hierapolis in the New Testament. Christianity was probably brought to all three cities by Epaphras, a companion of Paul and native of Colossae (Col. 1:5 – 8; 4:12; Philem. 23).”<sup>11</sup> The Colossian text follows the Pauline epistle’s format of the ancient Hellenistic letter form. The Letter begins with the traditional identification of the sender and recipients with greetings (Col.1:1-2). Then follows a “thanksgiving statement” with an opening formula (Εὐχαριστοῦμεν - *we thank God*) in vv. 3 to 8, and prayer for the recipients (1:9 – 12). The body of the letter begins in Col. 1:24-4:9, and the closing of the letter and benediction is 4:10-18. The structure of the Epistle therefore yields the following outline:

- I. Opening of Epistle – Address and Greetings (1:1-20)
- II. Thanksgiving Statement (1:3-23)
- III. Body of Epistle (1:24 – 4:9)
- IV. Closing of Epistle – Greetings, hortatory remarks, autographic subscription and benediction (4:10 – 18).

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<sup>9</sup> Barclay, John, *Colossians and Philemon* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004) 11. He further expresses the significance of studying the Colossian and Philemon Letters together as well as their theological importance.

<sup>10</sup> Lincoln, Andrew T. “The Letter to the Colossians: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000) 580.

<sup>11</sup> McRay, John, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 247.

The Letter begins with the identification of Paul and Timothy as the senders of this important document. The question of authenticity of the letter as Pauline has generated lively debate in the past and still is a question of interest in biblical scholarship. Establishing a convincing proof of authorship is not only impossible, but also beyond the scope of this paper. However Barclay writes:

In the ancient world Pseudonymity (writing under a false name) was not an uncommon phenomenon. When the reputations of great figures were established, it was natural for subsequent writers to compose works in their name (including drama, philosophy, historiography and letters) which imitated their styles and continued their traditions. Thus we find clearly pseudonymous texts created by Greeks and Romans, but also by Jews and early Christians. The production of such works did not necessarily involve the mercenary or deceptive characteristics we associate with ‘forgery.’<sup>12</sup>

Whereas the debate on authorship revolves around the style, vocabulary and theological differences in comparison with the accepted authentic letters of Paul, in the case of the Colossian Epistle, there is no one decisive argument in regard to its authenticity. The Letter was written to “the saints at Colossae.” Much as gaining historical and archeological information is difficult due to the lack of excavation at the site, clues from the text in the light of social-scientific studies could be very helpful in this direction.

The text contains the “Christ Hymn” (Col 1:15-20), which is very significant to both early Christianity and even for our post-modern theological understanding. The hymn is preceded by vv.13-14, which outlines what God has done through Christ and vv. 21-23 describes how Christ has affected the Colossian community and their response. The stylistic features of Col.1:13-23 are clear in the text. Whereas in vv. 13-14, first person pronouns are used (rescued us, transferred us, we have redemption), the hymn (vv.15-20), is cast in the third person (he, him) and finally vv. 21-23 is in the second person (you).

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<sup>12</sup>Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 18.

### Christ Hymn – Col.1:15-20

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (NRSV).

There are many voluminous literary and major scholarly debates in regard to the “hymnic nature” of the verses above. Among the many questions that arise if it is considered as a hymn are: was the hymn composed by the writer of the Epistle? Or was it an existing hymn used by the church in other locations? And if it existed, did the writer make some modifications? Another important question has to do with the structure of the hymn and the role it played in their liturgy.

There is no clear cut solution to many of the questions that arise from the text, although without doubt, the hymn is one of the most influential units of the entire Epistle to the Colossians. “Käsemann held that, once the additions ‘of the church’ and ‘through the blood of his cross’ were removed, the original hymn no longer displayed any specifically Christian characteristics. It could, in fact, be seen as a pre-Christian Gnostic hymn that dealt with the metaphysical and supra-historical drama involving the Gnostic redeemer.”<sup>13</sup>

The hymn can be divided into two parts depending on the roles attributed to Christ in the hymn. Verses 15 to 17 deal with Christ’s role in relation to creation and vv.18-20 deal with his role in redemption. Much as almost all the contents of the hymn are also expressed in different parts of the New Testament, the Christology within the hymn does not fully express our modern Pentecostal notion of Christology.

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<sup>13</sup> Lincoln, “The Letter to the Colossians,” 604.

The hymn begins by expressing Christ as the εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου (image of the invisible God). In the light of this affirmation, Thurston writes: “Certainly all the biblical writers assume that God is spiritual and invincible. So in proclaiming Christ as ‘the image of the invisible God,’ the hymn draws on the tradition of both Greek and Hebrew religion to demonstrate how he participates in the nature of God.”<sup>14</sup> Christ as the “image of the invincible God” may be understood in the light of his manifestation of the divine nature in the realm of human beings. However, the word “εἰκὼν” is a difficult word and carries a wide range of meanings which include the idea of likeness, form, appearance or statue. “Εἰκὼν also carries not only the meaning of a figurative representation, in which we are dealing with the exterior form of a person or a thing, but rather with the ‘depiction’ of its being or essence.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Christ as εἰκὼν does not only express him as the representation of God, but then the very essence of God. In the light of the “εἰκὼν” understanding, Christ is the representation of the invisible God in flesh, which is however not comprehensible in human understanding.

The Greek word πρωτότοκος appears frequently in the LXX to indicate genealogical or historical order. However the description of Christ as being “πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως” (the firstborn of all creation) does not describe the order of birth but rank or status in the order of creation. In v.16, Christ is described as the agent of creation. For all things were created “for him” and “through him.” By being πρωτότοκος, Christ is ascribed the first place of supremacy in the cosmos. The language shifts from “all things have been created” “for him” and “through him” to that of cosmic significance: θρόνοι, (thrones) κυριότητες, (dominions) ἄρχαί (rulers), ἐξουσίαι (powers). Barth contends that “Whether the above enumeration means powers of angels

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<sup>14</sup> Thurston, Bonnie Bowman, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1995). 21.

<sup>15</sup> Barth Markus and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 34B; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 195.

or earthly powers or both is an open question.”<sup>16</sup> This expression of the supremacy of Christ over cosmic powers and creation, the writer of the epistle has brought to light the importance of individual having access to God through Christ and not through other cults figures or deities, spirits or angels that existed in their cultural worldview. From the text, we are made to understand that cosmic powers derive their existence from Christ. The four terminologies used to describe these cosmic powers are “thrones” “dominions,” “rulers,” and “powers” often seem hostile to Christ and his kingdom, which the saints in Colossae have assurances of Christ victory over them through his death (2:15).

Moreover knowing that Christ is supreme over visible and invisible powers, the author affirms to his readers the sufficiency of God’s revelation and redemption in Christ. Barclay argues that the hymn indicates early development of Christology, “which is after all, the heart of Christian faith.”<sup>17</sup> However, Thurston writes:

Some scholars have felt this pre-Pauline hymn was marked with the Semitic stamp of the wisdom tradition, while others have argued that it has much in common with Gnostic redeemer-myth material. The phrase “firstborn from the dead” (v. 18b) suggests that the hymn was originally part of a Christian liturgical tradition. Käsemann suggests its context in the early church was baptismal, while Bornkamm argues it was Eucharistic.<sup>18</sup>

The writer of the epistle also describes that the supremacy of Christ transcends the heavenly and the invisible realms as well as the earthly and the visible, which includes cosmic powers.

Christ is the personality through whom all things hold together (v.17). “Verse 17 is in itself a summing-up of the two previous verses. Because of his agency in creating all things, Christ,

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<sup>16</sup> Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 195.

<sup>17</sup> Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Thurston, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians*, 21.

again like Wisdom (cf. Sir 1:4) can be said to be before all things and, like the logos (cf. Sir 43:26), the one in whom all things cohere. The one who, because of his preexistence, helped to bring things into being is also the one who continues to sustain the whole creation and prevent its disintegration into chaos.”<sup>19</sup>

In verses 18-20, the language shifts to that of relationship. Christ plays the role as God’s agent in reconciling the world through “the blood of his cross.” The hymn outlines the relationship of Christ to God and to creation, and to the church. Here Christ is described as the κεφαλή τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας (head of the body, the church). The metaphor of bodily anatomy was also used in other Pauline letters (Rom 12: 4-8; 1 Cor 12:12-17), however, in this text, since the hymn as a whole celebrates the primacy and superiority of Christ, the term κεφαλή must be seen in that perspective. Christ is the supreme controller and authority of the church, which is also his body. In order not to stretch the body metaphor in the text, the church as a body is a living organism which derives its source of life from the pre-existing Christ, who continues to hold all things together firmly.

In v. 18b, Christ is referred to as the ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν (beginning, the firstborn from the dead). The word ἀρχή does have several distinct meanings but in this text it connotes primacy in regard to time and status, time as in the beginning and status as in power or dominion over the cosmos. When ἀρχή is used with the “firstborn from the dead,” Christ’s preeminence is declared not simply by the fact that God raised him from the dead ahead of time but his primacy in all things is made manifest. The terms “firstborn” and “beginning” together express Christ as the founder and originator of a new group, the church.

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<sup>19</sup> Lincoln, “The Letter to the Colossians,” 598.



“For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (v.19), has been described by Thurston as follows:

The grammar of vs. 19 is notoriously difficult, but is well rendered in the RSV, which explains that the totality of divine power and saving grace of God were pleased to dwell in, or ‘settle down permanently’ (κατοικῆσαι) in Christ. ‘Fullness’ (πλήρωμα) is a loaded term. Its non-technical use in the ancient world suggested the ‘filling out’ of something. But it was also used in the language of religious syncretism of late antiquity to designate the uppermost spiritual world, that closest to God. As filling the space between heaven and earth, it was a sort of intermediary between God and humans. The necessity for such mediation is precisely the sort of thing Paul argues against in 2:8ff. The hymn undercuts the necessity for an intermediary since it makes it clear that the full nature of God rests exclusively in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

The Christological richness of the hymn is seen in the fact that Christ is God and also fullness of God. He is the ruler of the cosmos and the church. Through his death on the cross, Christ has offered peace to the cosmos by bringing it in conformity with divine order. This order has eschatological implications when all things would align according to Christ’s pre-ordained harmony.

“And through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things...by making peace through the blood of his cross.” “Not only has God created the world and continued to sustain through Christ, but through Christ God also ‘reconciles all things to himself, by making peace through the blood of the cross.’”<sup>21</sup> However Thurston argues that “By his own suffering and death on the cross, Jesus Christ has returned all things to proper relationship with God. Heaven and earth are brought back into divinely created order.”<sup>22</sup>

The phrase τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ (the blood of his cross) explains how the reconciliation process occurred. The harmony in the universe was brought about by Christ’s

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<sup>20</sup> Thurston, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, Marianne Meye, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 33.

<sup>22</sup> Thurston, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians*, 26.

death on the cross. Barth argues concerning the phrase “the blood of his cross” that “This expression is unusual and unique in the NT. It most closely resembles expressions like ‘blood of the covenant’ (Heb 9:20; 10:29) or the ‘blood of sprinkling’ (Heb 12:24). The central significance of blood in the OT sacrificial cult leads us to ask whether we have a reference to OT sacrificial imagery in Col 1:20, and whether the designation ‘blood of the cross’ was formulated in association with similar utterances from the cultic language.”<sup>23</sup>

Although blood is commonly linked with sacrifices, it also sometimes ends in violent death. Lincoln however contends that “Paul employed the two images separately: ‘blood,’ to denote Christ’s violently taken life in contexts where sacrificial nature of his death was to the fore, and ‘cross,’ the more general image, to convey the ignominy of this death by Roman execution.”<sup>24</sup>

The idea that the theme of sacrifice should be excluded and that the text be simply understood in the light of death on the cross needs to be revisited. Barth argues that “The imagery of sacrifice is less prominent and significant than the emphasis on the incarnation and the death of Jesus on the cross.”<sup>25</sup> I beg to differ from Barth’s argument, in that sacrifices are offered in anticipation of results and the role that Christ plays in the Colossian hymn attests to that. Although Barth explains that “blood is universally used to denote a violent death whether blood actually flowed or not (cf. Matt 27:25; Luke 11:50f; Rev 6:10; 19:2 etc.) crucifixion itself could not be described as a bloody form of execution.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 217.

<sup>24</sup> Lincoln, Andrew T, “The Letter to the Colossians”, 601

<sup>25</sup> Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 217.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

Because of Christianity's Jewish heritage, typological implications could be drawn from the Jewish sacrificial systems in regard to Christ. Since the Colossians lived in the Greco Roman world, the concepts of sacrifice in their social location would have some parallels with the notion of Christ's sacrifice. A brief understanding of human sacrifice in the Greco Roman world and Jesus' death as a sacrifice would help justify the importance of Christ's redemption and reconciliation in the Akan cosmology. Beate Pongratz-Leiten argues that "The portrayal of Jesus' death as sacrificial in the New Testament literature is complex and is present in varying ways and to different degrees in the Gospel narratives, in the Pauline and Deutro-Pauline Epistles, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in the Epistle of Peter, James, and John, and in Acts and Revelation."<sup>27</sup>

### **Human Sacrifice in Greco-Roman Culture**

As described above, human sacrifice, which includes ritual killing and animal sacrifice, is the offering of the victim to a deity. The victim is ritually killed in a manner consistent with rituals that appease the gods or deities. There are examples of human sacrifices in Greek mythology. "The practice of human sacrifices is often imputed to the respective enemies, but also to political agitators. However, it can be noticed that the contemporaries shrank back from these acts more and more considered as cruel and uncivilized."<sup>28</sup>

Some archaeological evidence and vase paintings reveal some elements of human sacrifice. Weiler classifies human sacrifice in Greek culture into nine models. These models offer examples and kinds of situations that demand human sacrifice. In a situation in which a

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<sup>27</sup> Beate, Pongratz-Leiten, "Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East," in Finsterbusch Karin, Armin Lange and K. F. Diethard Römhel, *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Boston: Brill, 2007) 4.

<sup>28</sup> Weiler, Gabriele, "Human Sacrifice in Greek Culture" in Finsterbusch Karin, Armin Lange and K. F. Diethard Römheld, *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition*. (Boston: Brill, 2007) 37.

person violates “consciously or unconsciously divine rule” or insults a deity, there must be expiation by the offender by sacrificing a relative. Human sacrifices are required to assure victory in war.

According to Porphyry from Tyre, a Neoplatonist of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. A. D. who refers to Phylarchus (3<sup>rd</sup> cent. B. C.), it was common practice in Greece to make a human sacrifice before the army went to war.<sup>29</sup> In order to prevent a catastrophe, an epidemic, a famine or something similar, a human sacrifice has to be made on a recommendation of an oracle or a seer. In this context we often find in the literary sources local traditions. The example of the daughters of the mythological king Leon of Athens (*Leokorai*) have to be mentioned who sacrifice themselves in order to prevent famine (according to another tradition they tried to prevent the pest).<sup>30</sup>

Weiler argues that expiation, victory, catastrophes, model of killing and revenge, initiation, envy and ill will, xenophobia and aversion to foreigners, tribute, and sacrificing living people as personnel of cult are all models of sacrifice which has human beings as its goal. However, she stresses “these nine models reveal conceptions and concepts which find their expression in permanently modified myths, but which do not reflect historical situations or events.”<sup>31</sup>

### **The Sacrifice of Jesus**

Christ’s death on the cross is very significant to the core of Christianity’s belief and very important to the affirmation of one’s faith in Christ. In a personal evangelism training practice, members of an evangelical group of which I was part were admonished to memorize this threefold statement: “Jesus died on the cross is a historical event,” “Jesus died for the sins of humanity is a theological statement” and “Jesus died for *my sins* is affirmation of faith in Christ for my salvation.” Understanding of the soteriological nature of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice would be

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 44-5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 55.

helpful in our understanding of the strong stance by which African Christianity views the nature of Christ's atoning death.

The legacy of New Testament writings about the death of Jesus is given in details in the Gospel narratives. The life of Jesus, his birth, his ministry, betrayal, trial to crucifixion and his resurrection have been interpreted for generations in church traditions as fulfillment of some prophecies and ritual practices within Jewish traditions. An example is the Passover rituals.

The Christian terms, atonement, redemption, reconciliation, forgiveness, and justification, just to mention a few, have been tied to the soteriological work of Christ. As one reviews these concepts from Jewish understanding to early Christian writings, the notion of sacrifice is made clear as to the development that it has received in modern Christian perspective.

What does the cross have to do with the salvation of humanity? These questions among many other theories related to the atonement have been a significant debate. The "theory of atonement" is theological terminology for understanding the work of Christ. McGrath writes:

The New Testament, drawing on Old Testament imagery and expectations, presents Christ's death upon the cross as a sacrifice. This approach, which is especially associated with the Letter to the Hebrews, present Christ's sacrificial offering as an effective and perfect sacrifice, which was able to accomplish that which the sacrifices of the Old Testament were only able to intimate, rather than achieve. In particular, Paul's use of the Greek term *hilasterion* (Rom. 3:25) points to a sacrificial interpretation of Christ's death.<sup>32</sup>

As one understands the death on the cross as a sacrifice, it is important to note that there are early Christian traditions that explain Christ's sacrifice in terms of the Jewish Passover sacrifice of the lamb. "For Christ, our Passover is sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7). Christ's death on the cross also expresses his victory over sin, death and Satan. This has been in the past described as "*Christus victor*," which suggests the idea of "ransom" and its related concepts of liberation, payment and the person to receive the ransom. The death of Christ also offered the grounds on which God is

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<sup>32</sup> McGrath, Alister, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 411.

able to forgive the sinner. The doctrine of the fall of humanity through the sin of Adam also requires the restoration of humanity into fellowship with God which is achieved through appropriation in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. "...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22).

Paul presents Jesus as Christ who died and was raised from the dead and enthroned as Lord (*kurios*) and seated at God's right hand. (Rom. 1:4). Lampe argues that "In Paul, Christ's death on a Roman cross can be seen in analogy to the offering of the Passover lamb, and in analogy to the covenant 'burnt offering' and 'peace offering' of Exod. 24. Contrary to widespread opinion, however, Paul did not interpret Christ's death as a 'sacrifice of atonement' for sin (Lev 4f; 16)..."<sup>33</sup>

Using imagery from the Hebrew Bible, Christ's death on the cross has been described as perfect atonement of the sins of humanity. The Epistle to the Hebrews presents Christ as the perfect sacrifice who accomplishes of which the sacrifices of the Hebrew Bible were only an imitation. This typology includes slaughtering an animal and sprinkling the altar with its blood, which offers protection to the sacrificing person from imminent danger or consequences as a result of sinful behavior.

In spite of Lampe's argument, in other letters in the Pauline corpus, Christ's death was interpreted as a sacrifice (Eph 5:2, Heb 9:28). The institution of the Eucharist points to the element of the sacrifice of Christ and the establishment of the new covenant with the church. Much as there is no evidence that Eucharist was interpreted as sacrifice, there is ample evidence of the believer's identification with Christ's death in the ritual of the Eucharist. Lampe concludes:

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<sup>33</sup> Lampe, Peter, "Human Sacrifice and Pauline Christology," in Finsterbusch Karin, Armin Lange and K. F. Diethard Römheld, *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Boston: Brill, 2007) 192.

The interpretative category of “sacrifice” was picked up by the early Christians in order to explain the saving power of Christ’s death, and therefore they necessarily ended up talking about a “human Sacrifice” – which seems like an archaic regression to a level even lower than the *animal* sacrifices of Old Testament cult. The early Christian sensed the scandal of this regression and tried to soften it by using the animal metaphor of the “lamb” when talking about Christ (e.g., Rev 5:12) Moreover, they even burst open the category of “human sacrifice” by confessing the resurrection of the victim. The victim becomes Lord (*kurios*) with power (*en dunamei* Rom 1:4). The dead sacrificial creature became the living center of communion and community.<sup>34</sup>

In the light of this discussion I would like to consider the aspect of Akan theology which has direct correlation with the Colossians hymn of Christ.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 208.

## THE COLOSSIANS TEXT IN AKAN PERSPECTIVE

In the Akan cultural worldview, the spiritual world is real and tangible and any help to marshal the forces of the unseen to their advantage is not only necessarily, but paramount to survival and perpetuation of the community. Protection from malevolent forces is very much desired. Prosperity in material goods and bringing forth more offerings are deep seated ambitions. The quest for power, both physical strength and supernatural vitality, is very passionate to the Akan.

It is in this light that stories, songs, folklore and legends about heroes are not taken at face value. Dead heroes were not only role models but they were also classified in the domain of ancestors. The Akans have a continuous cycle of existence with new heroes/ancestors emerging every passing day. It was therefore not surprising for Christ to be seen and accepted as another incarnation of a deity or/and an ancestor by the early forbearers of the Akans when they encountered European missionaries. As established, some aspects of the culture have some form of resemblance to the biblical text.

The unique description of Christ in the Colossian hymn (1:15-20) becomes an important focus in Akan theology because it is a hymn about a hero, whose “blood” brings about harmony (balance) in the cosmology. It must be understood, that in spite of the fact that the Akans are an oral society, the written biblical text is also highly regarded. However, the early translations of the Bible have many shortcomings due to the inability of European translators to find the right terminology to describe some of the biblical concepts. Some of the dynamic equivalence translations used have conflicts with traditional religions and others only show similarities. Those concepts with striking similarities in the culture became the vehicle for the propagation and spread of the Gospel among the Akans.



In Col 1:15 Christ is described as εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου (the image of the invisible God). The term εἰκὼν in the Akan has been translated in the following words: *sesow*, *suban*, and *sumsum*. The word *sesow* could mean likeness, template or a copy, whereas *suban* has to do with nature, personality or/and character of a human being or a deity and *sumsum* is soul or/and shadow. So, Christ as εἰκὼν of God is seen in the light of the *sesow*, *suban* and *sumsum*. In other words, Christ is a copy and a template of God. He is the nature and character of the invisible God, who is also the soul and shadow of God. The Akan has no trouble seeing Jesus Christ as God because of the shades of meaning derived from description of Christ.

Firstborn is *abakan*.<sup>35</sup> *Abakan* etymologically consists of two words: *Aba* (seed) and *kan* (first, earlier). Christ as *abakan* of creation connotes the “earlier or first” seed of creation. The role of *Abakan* within the society is unique. He serves as the head (Lord) of the household after the passing away of the father. He is the priest, judge and mediator on behalf of his family. The role of *Abakan of Creation* places Christ in charge of creation as the custodian, judge, priest and mediator who negotiates peace and prosperity for his household, which in this case the entire creation.

The creation to the Akan is the entire cosmos, with all the deities, spirits of ancestors and human beings. Christ as the *suban of the invincible God* and *abakan of creation* puts him above the rank of humans, ancestors and local deities. Verses 16-17 then buttress the point that Christ is superior and has been in existence before time. “*For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together*” (Col 1:16-17). The issues of invisible powers (both good and bad) are

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<sup>35</sup> *Abakan* is mostly the first male in the family. It is not just a birth position but that of status. There may be ten daughters in a family but the first male child becomes the *Abakan*, irrespective of his appearance in the family tree.

considered as reality. The rankings of spiritual entities as *thrones or dominions or rulers or powers* are not compatible with Akan theology, however there are evidences of some shamanic activities which involve these spiritual entities. Professing Christians appropriating the power in Christ's name and blood have had dominion over such (wicked/evil) entities.

In v. 18, Christ is the head of the church, which is his body. Some Akans have considered the church as a newcomer that has come to challenge and corrupt their traditional values and religious systems, whereas others view the church as the new replacement of the archaic and uncivilized culture. However strong the debate on each side is, both traditions are growing strong amid the opposition to each other. The church belongs to Christ and as *abakan*, he serves a mediator between humanity and God. The mediatory role of Christ has made many consider him as an ancestor. The "head" and "body" metaphors of Christ and church have some similarities with *communal living* where the *Abusua Payin's* (Elder, head of family) role in the household is that of administering the goods and services within their community.

"*The firstborn from the dead*" (1:18) is not only understood in terms of his resurrection but also his power and ability to control the dead and world of the dead. By this Christ is superior to the princes, kings and "virgins," because he transcends in all the worlds in Akan cosmology: world of the spirits (*heaven*), human (*earth*) and the dead (*underworld*). For example, ancestors are believed to operate in the world of the dead and humans only. Christ is able to operate in all these realms because "in him all the πλήρωμα (fullness) of God was pleased to dwell" (1:19).

"*And through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross*" (1:20). In the Akan translation, the words "reconcile" and "blood" are very significant. *Apata* (reconciliation) and *mogya* (blood) are two words that are specifically used in relation to sacrifices to restore relationship and balance.

*Apata* also carries the idea of pacification and peacemaking ritual. However, whenever the term *mogya* (blood) is used in conjunction with *apata*, the frame of reference changes to sacrificial rituals. In the Akan worldview, *mogya* (blood) is life and soul of the community and it is delivered through the matriarchal line of the extended family. In this context, the creation and the church are brought into harmony by the combine rituals of *apata*. Rituals relating to *apata* may even involve non-blood sacrifice; however the rituals that involve blood sacrifices are rated high in the cosmic order and they are redemptive in nature.

“*The blood of his cross*” in this regard is not only about the brutal and violent death of Jesus on the Roman cross, but it involves a process that unifies and establishes balance in the cosmos and the church. Christ, who is understood as the character and “soul” of God, is also the Lord of all the creation and the church. Christ in the Akan worldview is more than an ancestor, because he is the “*abakan*” (firstborn, Lord) of the creation and from the dead. This status of Christ as the son of the Supreme Being, the *suban* (character, soul) of God makes him superior to the Akan deities and ancestors.

The hymn in 1:15-20 highlights some very important roles of Christ as the Lord of the creation and the church. Through the blood of his cross, Christ has offered peace which is harmony to be restored in the cosmos and between humans and God. It is from the notion of blood sacrifices in the Akans’ worldview, that Christ’s accomplishment is understood. The various Akan blood sacrifices are incomplete in themselves, due to the continuous demand for new sacrifices. The perfect nature of Christ’s once and for all sacrifice tends to challenge the culture’s regular requirement of new sacrificial ritual. The church in the community needs not to offer regular blood sacrifices to succor cosmological balance in respect to peace, prosperity, power and protection but rather to appropriate the sacrifice of Jesus regularly through spiritual

songs and prayers. These invocations of the symbolic blood of Jesus have therapeutic effects and are more efficacious than the cultural demands of regular sacrifices. It is against the laws of Ghana to kill humans for ritual purposes and animal sacrificial practices are believed to be less efficacious, yet expensive, hence many resort to Christianity to meet their sacrificial demands.

Rene Girard explains that “in many rituals the sacrificial act assumes two opposing aspects, appearing at times as a sacred obligation to be neglected at grave peril, at other times as a sort of criminal activity entailing perils of equal gravity.”<sup>36</sup> The ritual of human sacrifice is shrouded in mystery and has often been described as an act performed as a form of mediation between a petitioner or a “sacrificer” and a deity within African traditional culture. “Human sacrifice not only involves the killing of a person or the use of human blood, flesh, or bones for ritual purposes; the victim must also be offered to a deity.”<sup>37</sup>

Christ’s sacrifice finally overrides the human sacrifices and other blood sacrifices within the Akan culture through the adherent’s mental and symbolic identification with Christ. Therefore, if you are a Christian in the Akan land, you need not offer another blood sacrifice to maintain your cosmic balance because the death of Christ is enough to meet any religious requirement.

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<sup>36</sup> Girard, Rene, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press 1972) 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

## CONCLUSION

The rituals of human sacrifice in this era are not a matter of discussion. However due to the efficacious nature of blood sacrifices, there are ongoing ritual murders about which the Government of Ghana and Christian and Islamic leaders are concerned.<sup>38</sup> It is a known fact that human sacrifice brings out the best result in ritual practices. Albinos, pregnant women and young virgins, males and females, are the highly prized victims for sacrifices for the three most essential components in the Akan cosmology: prosperity, protection and power. However, since these victims may have their personal short-comings, though a sacrifice of any of them may prove efficacious, their sacrifice may be limited as compared to that of Christ as *suban* (character/soul) of God and the *abakan* (Lord) of the creation.

Since the advent of the Western missionary movement, traditional rituals have their sacred space and the church has been known to neutralize the powers of traditional rites and ceremonies. Ancestors and deities have refused to respond to the call of their adherents due to the presence of a Christian, a Bible, or a cross. For this matter, most traditional areas forbid the church activities during the months of traditional festival and ancestor veneration rites. These clashes infringe on the rights to worship as enshrined in the Constitution of Ghana.

The church, with particular reference to Pentecostal-Charismatic believers, gives testimonies of glossolalic experiences that offer power to destroy the works of evil. These experiences are also manifested in transformed (changed) lives. For example, the drunkard quits drinking and becomes a good and loving husband and father. This transformed life is also a product of protection and prosperity.

The church places a high premium on the power of the blood of Jesus. Believers in Ghana are constantly admonished to appropriate the blood for their peace, protection, prosperity

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<sup>38</sup> See Appendix I.

and power. This understanding of ritual appropriation of blood sacrifice for peace, protection, prosperity and power is one of the major reasons Ghana has been a peaceful and progressive nation in midst of nations torn apart by civil wars in West Africa.

The sharing of the communion is significant in that the bread and the wine which represent the blood and the body of Jesus Christ are also the elements that connect the Akan in his or her consciousness with the living Christ whose salvation entails peace, protection, prosperity and power. The notion of the power of blood sacrifice in Akan traditional rituals stands side by side with Christian understanding of the power in the blood of Jesus Christ. However, when Akan Christians compare of the two, they see Christ's blood as superior in maintaining the cosmological balance within the universe in regard to peace, protection, prosperity and power.

## APPENDIX I

**Man allegedly severs a boy's head for 12,000 Ghana cedis  
November 09, 2007**

Sunyani, GNA - For 12,000 Ghana cedis a 34-year-old farmer at Bechem in Brong Ahafo Region allegedly severed the head of an eight-year-old boy, Emmanuel Agyei for sale to a spiritualist at Enchi in the Western Region.

Assistant Superintendent of Police Emmanuel Lartey-Lawson, Deputy Brong Ahafo Regional Crime Officer, told Ghana News Agency in Sunyani that the suspect Thomas Kwame Amponsah had been placed in police custody to assist in investigations and would appear before court soon.

He said the suspect, who formerly resided at Bechem left for Enchi to undertake farming but returned about three months ago after a deal with Yaro, a spiritualist, to get him (Yaro) a human head for 120 million cedis

ASP Lartey-Lawson said on Sunday, November 4, this year Amponsah, a very close neighbour to the boy's parents invited the deceased to accompany him (Amponsah) to the bush for oranges. He said the suspect on the way struck the boy's neck with a club, making him unconscious, after which he severed the head with a kitchen knife he had hidden on him.

ASP Lartey-Lawson said the suspect then wrapped the head with a black polythene bag and hid it in a travelling bag and set off for Enchi. He said at Dadiesoaba, a village near Enchi, a witness in the case became suspicious when the suspect approached him and asked of Yaro, the spiritualist.

ASP Lartey-Lawson said the witness reported to the Dadiesoaba community police, who arrested Amponsah and handed him over to the police at Tarkwa, who searched the bag and discovered the human head.

He said during interrogation the suspect initially claimed he had the head from Dwenewoho, near Techiman but following an appeal on radio by the police for identification of the head, the deceased's uncle, the Reverend Stephan Edward Aning went to Tarkwa and identified Amponsah as a neighbour at Bechem.

ASP Lartey-Lawson said it was then that the suspect confessed that he brought the head from Bechem and was that of the missing boy, Emmanuel Adjei.

He said the police at Tarkwa then handed the suspect and the boy's head to their counterparts at Bechem to continue with investigations.

ASP Lartey-Lawson said because of the tension at Bechem the police sent the suspect and the head to the Brong Ahafo Regional police headquarters.

He said Yaro, who is in police custody at Tarkwa, would be brought to Bechem to assist the police in investigations. In another development, police sources at Tarkwa told GNA that the suspect Amponsah, who was arrested at Dadieso, near Enchi in the Aowin-Suaman District in the Western Region, misinformed the police.

The source said the suspect gave the name of the deceased as Kwame Berko, aged 15, but Reverend Aning gave the correct name of the deceased as Emmanuel Agyei alias Koo Emma, who was eight years old.

It said the incident occurred at Bechem and not Dweneho, near Techiman as claimed by the suspect and he (suspect) lived at Breme near Bechem and not Mile 4 near Tafo in Kumasi, also the incident occurred on Sunday November 4 and not on Saturday November 3.

The source said the suspect threw the beheaded body in a bush after the act but suspect said it was buried. It said the deceased was playing with his friends at Roman Catholic Cluster of Schools last Sunday at about 1:00 pm when the suspect called the deceased to assist him (suspect) to plug oranges and on the way killed the deceased.

The source said sometime in July this year, the suspect went to Dadieso to visit his uncle but did not see him and contacted one Yaw Ankonah a motor repairer for a loan but was refused.

It said the suspect alleged that Ankonah told him there was Yaro, a spiritualist who could assist in selling a human head if suspect could secure one for 12,000 Ghana cedis and left for Bechem.

The source said the suspect alleged that from July until the day of the incident Yaro usually called him on his mobile phone to enquire whether he had secured the human head.

It said the suspect a divorcee with two children, a boy and a girl decided to kill the deceased and after the act returned to Dadieso where Ankonah welcomed him and was going to inform Yaro but rather returned with the police to arrest the suspect.

The source said Rev. Aning told the police that the deceased went out to play but did not return until he heard on the air that he had been murdered. It said the suspect used to send the deceased because they lived in the same vicinity.

The source said the severed head that was deposited at Tarkwa Government Hospital together with the headless body had been sent to Brong Ahafo Regional Hospital, while the suspect was sent to the Sunyani.

Source: GNA (Ghana News Agency) <http://www.ghananewsagency.org/?s=gVpE04&r=q7nq>



## **Pregnant woman rescued from ritual murder**

Posted by VIBE GHANA at [23 Oct 2007](#) and is filed under [General News](#)

A 22-year-old pregnant Ghanaian woman, Abena Dansowaa, who was allegedly sold by her boyfriend, Kwabena Boateng, to a Nigerian for ritual purposes, has been rescued by the Lagos State Police.

Confirming this to the Daily Graphic in a telephone interview at Akyem Oda, the Lagos State Commander of the Motor Traffic and Transport Unit (MTTU), Superintendent Alice Awudu, said upon a tip-off, the police stormed the residence of the suspect, John Bull, alias J.B. where some people were performing rituals on Abena after which she was to be murdered.

Throwing more light on the issue in a telephone conversation, Abena said about one-and-a-half months ago, her boyfriend went with her to Lagos with the intention of transacting business with his partners in Nigeria.

She said she did not know that she had been sold to a Lagos businessman when Boateng left her with J.B., after collecting large sums of money in Euro and dollar denominations and absconded, leaving her to her fate.

Abena, who claimed to be a native of Obo-Kwahu, said before leaving for Lagos, she had stayed with Boateng at Adenta in Accra for some time, during which she became pregnant. She said her Lagos host gave her the assurance that her boyfriend had left for Ghana and would return to Nigeria soon to take her back home.

She thanked God and the Lagos police for rescuing her from imminent death.

Abena gave her father's name as Mr. Kwaku Kissi who resides with her mother, Maame Abena Serwaa, at Kwahu-Praso. Abena, who is seven months pregnant, stated that she was the first born of the five children her parents had.

She said her boyfriend hailed from Boankra in Ashanti and his father was from Asante Juaben. When the Daily Graphic contacted the victim's father, Mr Kissi, at Kwahu Praso on phone, he said his daughter had been missing for the past two months and all efforts to trace her had proved futile until Supt. Awudu contacted him on phone last Saturday to tell him that she had been found in Lagos.

Mr Kissi said he did not know his daughter's boyfriend until about three months ago when Abena introduced him to her parents at Kwahu Praso, after which Boateng promised to come back to perform the customary marriage rites later on.

Supt. Awudu, who had known Chief Supt. Ben Atadana, the Oda Divisional Police Commander since the United Nations Mission in East Timor in 2000, contacted him also on telephone to inform him about the plight of the young lady.

When the Daily Graphic contacted Chief Supt. Atadana at Oda, he confirmed the telephone

conversation with Supt Awudu, who had assured him that she would pass the information through the INTERPOL process in Nigeria for the young woman to be repatriated to Ghana.

At the moment Abena is in the custody of Supt Awudu, who is taking care of her in Lagos. Meanwhile, the suspect is helping the Lagos State Police in their investigations while Boateng's whereabouts is unknown.

Source: Daily Graphic

<http://blog.vibeghana.com/2007/10/23/pregnant-woman-rescued-from-ritual-murder.aspx>

### **Kill my 2 year old girl – Father to Fetish Priest**

A 22-YEAR-OLD man, Kwaku Badu, who allegedly sent his two-year-old daughter to a fetish priest to be murdered for rituals to enable him to get rich overnight, has been arrested by the Agona Duakwa Police in the Central Region. Also in police grips is Badu's 22-year-old friend, Kwabena Atta, who accompanied Badu and the innocent girl, to the shrine at Kwasi Amoakwa, a village near Agona Duakwa.

Briefing the Daily Graphic at Agona Swedru at the weekend, Chief Superintendent Christian Tetteh Yohuno of the Agona Swedru Divisional Police Command said about four months ago, Badu, a native of Akyem Abenase, near Oda, approached the complainant, Okomfo Agesu Kudorkpo, at Kwasi Amoakwa for spiritual assistance to become rich. He said the fetish priest feigned interest in the request and asked Badu to produce his biological child to be sacrificed for the ritual or pay an amount of GH¢1,000 (¢10 million) demanded by his gods who were dwarfs.

According to Chief Supt Yohuno, Okomfo Agesu said he had been surprised that the suspect, whom he had not known before, approached him for such a sacrifice and, therefore, made a report to the Duakwa Police. He stated that the police advised the priest to insist that Badu bring the child for the sacrifice and Agesu conveyed the message to the suspect.

The Divisional Police Commander said about 1.00 p.m. on October 18, this year, when Okomfo Agesu and his family were working on their farm at the village, Badu called him on his cell phone that he (Badu) had brought his daughter for the sacrifice. He stated that Okomfo Agesu returned home at 3.00 p.m. to meet Badu, Atta and the little girl in his house.

Chief Supt Yohuno said in his bid to cause the arrest of the two suspects, Okomfo Agesu sent for the police and intentionally told his clients that his dwarfs had gone deep into the forest so they should wait for their arrival for the commencement of the rituals.

He said after a while the police arrested the two suspects and sent them to the Duakwa Police Station and later transferred them to the Agona Nyakrom District Police Headquarters for further investigations.

According to Chief Supt Yohuno, on October 19, this year, when he made a whistle stop at the

Agona Nyakrom District Police Headquarters on his way to Duakwa, the District Police Commander, Superintendent Henry Amankwatia, briefed him on the incident.

He said during in-depth interrogation, Badu confessed that he had gone to Okomfo Agesu's shrine with his daughter because the girl's mother and her grandmother had been worrying him because he was irresponsible.

According to Chief Supt Yohuno, when the girl's 21-year-old mother, Madam Ama Serwaa, and her mother were brought from Akyem Abenase to the Duakwa Police Station for interrogation, Madam Serwaa said on October 17, this year, Badu had come to her house, in the company of Atta, for the daughter, with the intention of sending her to Akyem Oda to buy her some dresses.

He said Madam Serwaa claimed that she never saw Badu or the daughter again until the police informed her about the nasty incident. Chief Supt Yohuno stated that the two suspects would be prosecuted at the law court as soon as possible on charges of conspiracy to commit crime, that is, attempted murder.

Story by Samuel Kyei-Boateng of Graphic Corp. <http://www.graphicghana.com/default.asp?>

## APPENDIX II

## SCRIPTURES

**Colossians 1:13-23**

<sup>13</sup> ὃς ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκοτοῦς καὶ μετέστησεν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ,

<sup>14</sup> ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν·

<sup>15</sup> ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,

<sup>16</sup> ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι· τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται·

<sup>17</sup> καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν,

<sup>18</sup> καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας· ὃς ἐστὶν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,

<sup>19</sup> ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι

<sup>20</sup> καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι' αὐτοῦ] εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

<sup>21</sup> Καὶ ὑμᾶς ποτε ὄντας ἀπηλλοτριωμένους καὶ ἐχθροὺς τῇ διανοίᾳ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς ποιηροῖς,

<sup>22</sup> νυνὶ δὲ ἀποκατήλλαξεν ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου παραστήσαι ὑμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους καὶ ἀνεγκλήτους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ,

<sup>23</sup> εἴ γε ἐπιμένετε τῇ πίστει τεθεμελιωμένοι καὶ ἐδραῖοι καὶ μὴ μετακινούμενοι ἀπὸ τῆς ἐλπίδος τοῦ εὐαγγελίου οὗ ἠκούσατε, τοῦ κηρυχθέντος ἐν πάσῃ κτίσει τῇ ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανόν, οὗ ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ Παῦλος διάκονος. (NA27)

**Colossians 1:13-23**

<sup>13</sup> He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,

<sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;

<sup>16</sup> for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him.

<sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

<sup>18</sup> He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

<sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

<sup>20</sup> and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

<sup>21</sup> And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,

<sup>22</sup> he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him--

<sup>23</sup> provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. (NRSV)

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