Totemism, *Akyeneboa* and Plant Ethics

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"Totem" is a term derived from the North American Ojibwe word *ototomen*. The cultural applicability of the word in other social contexts has been the focus of much discussion within anthropology and religious studies.[2] Regardless of the academic debate, the broad phenomenon of "totemism" is relevant for a discussion of plant ethics because it refers to "relationships of mutual life-giving between human beings and natural species (or rarely, other natural phenomena)".[3] In Ghana, the country of my birth and the focus of much of my research, "totemism", as a phenomenon such conceived, is widespread. A survey conducted by Conservation International in 2003 revealed that Ghana has over 200 totems.[4] Amongst the Akan people, the largest ethnic group in Ghana,[5] the word which most closely fits the understanding of totem is *akyeneboa.* This term is literally translated as "an animal that one leans upon or relies on for spiritual protection". For the Akan, the origins of *akyeneboa* are expressed in myths and concretely manifest in rituals, ceremonies and festivals. Even though the direct translation of *akyeneboa* refers to animals; plants may also be treated as *akyeneboa*. These *akyeneboa* are important to consider, because their status confers an ethical position upon a number of plant species. Totemic animals or plants may be brought into the sphere of ethics because:

a) Their ancestors trace their origin to that animal or plant
b) The *akyeneboa* may have helped the forbears of the ethnic group or they have benefited from it in a special way or
c) The totemic object may have some time ago disclosed itself (revelation) to the head or some members of the ethnic group concerned.

Totemic plants of the Akan

The worldview of the Akan reflects in all their endeavours. In Akan life and thought, the universe consists of both the spiritual and physical but the two are conceptualised as one entity and must unite permanently to become meaningful.[6] In the words of Kwame Gyekye "The religious is not distinguished from the nonreligious, the sacred from the secular, the spiritual from the material". [7] In view of this, the Akan feel it is incumbent on them to harmonise the relationship between the spiritual and the physical for their own good. In this context, Akan morality derives from relationships, primarily with the gods and the ancestors.[8] The Akan have a firm belief that their physical life depends on the physical environment and as such have designed ways to ensure the sustainable use of natural resources. Many of these implicit or explicit mechanisms for nature conservation (totemism, sacred groves) also have distinctly religious connotations. Such connotations are powerful because they ensure that people

abide by the rules, even in solitude, for all their codes of conduct are sanctioned by the ancestors, who are greatly revered.

The special relationship between a clan or a community and its *akyeneboa* enjoins the clan or the people concerned not to destroy but to protect their totems, for the *akyeneboa* is considered as part and parcel of the social group. This protection ensures that the kinship relationship between people and their *akyeneboa* is maintained. The Akan view numerous herbs, shrubs and climbers as totems for specific clans and families within the larger Akan ethnic group. It is important to note that for the Akan, trees that are believed to be spiritually powerful are usually found to be *akyeneboa* of the various clans and communities or families.

Among the people of Nsuta traditional area, *Atoa* (*Spondias mombin*) is the *akyeneboa*. Oral tradition has it that the *Atoa* plant saved the founding ancestors of Nsuta from starving to death on their journey to their present settlement. As the ancestors journeyed, the food they were travelling with ran out and starvation stared them in the face. They luckily bumped into this plant, which had plenty of fruit at the time, plucked some and fed themselves with it. For this reason, the *Atoa* plant has been viewed as the saviour of the Nsuta people and hence their special relationship with this species.

To the people of Akwapim traditional area, the *Odii* plant *(Okuobaka aubrevillei)* is their *akyeneboa*. This relationship is the result of the protective power associated with this species. Although the Akwapim are associated with the *Odii,* this plant is one of the most respected or feared plants among the Akan in general. It is usually referred to as the "king" of all plants in the traditional Akan societies due to the powerful spirit that they believe it possesses. This tree usually has no fallen leaves and it is said that only very few animals can pass under it. My interactions with some Akan hunters confirm this. They said any animal which is not spiritually powerful would die instantly if it passes under it. It is said that one would find a lot of bones of dead animals under the *Odii* plant. The *Odii* plant is clearly culturally powerful and the power it possesses may have influenced the Akwapim to take it as their totem, at least for protection. In view of the special quality that is ascribed to the *Odii,* its conservation is guaranteed among the Akan.

Another powerful plant that commands awesome reverence among the Akan is *Homakyem* (*Spiropetalum heterophyllum*). The colour of the sap in this plant is like blood. When one cuts part of it, its sap oozes out the way blood comes out from the body of a person when he/she is wounded. This easy association of red sap with blood is found in ancient European and pre-Semitic cultures and may be one of the bases of recognising personhood in plants. [9] The plant is medicinally valuable, but because of the powerful force that the Akan believe it possesses, only spiritually fortified (i.e. a person who is strong enough to stand spiritual attacks) traditional medical practitioners can use it in their herbal preparations.

The *Odum (Chlorophora excelsa)* is the totem of the people of Ekumfi traditional area. The foundation of the link between Ekumfi and the *Odum* is not clear. The *Odum*, it is believed, can change into a human being in the night and visit the chief and reveal hidden things to him. Such metamorphoses between plant and human forms is a cross-cultural motif which suggests shared ontologies.[10] Again, as a result of its totemic status, the *Odum* is well protected among the Ekumfi people.

At times, Akan people show their connection with their *akyeneboa* by representing these species in their arts. These representations are usually found on the tips of staffs that are held by their respective *akyeame* (linguists or spokespersons of chiefs) or on top of the *akyiniye* (umbrellas) of the local chiefs during ceremonial occasions like festivals or traditional durbar of chiefs. At times, the *akyeneboa* are shown on the *asesedwa* (carved stools) of the traditional rulers. In the case of animals, the people would be obliged to

bury a dead *akyeneboa* in much the same way a human being is buried. Another way the Akan renew their relation with their totem is through the offering of sacrifice to them usually on sacred days or during the year when festivals are being performed.

Akan attitudes towards plants

For the Akan, plants are believed to have *tumi* (roughly translated as power) but these *tumi* are not of equal standing. That is, some species of trees are believed naturally to possess more *tumi* (power) than others; hence, the Akan are very careful in their attitude towards such plants. Such plants are regarded as the dwelling places of other powerful *tumi* which spiritually take temporary abode there. One may cite the *Odii (Okuobaka aubrevillei)* plant as a typical example. Also, some are believed to have the ability to ward off evil spirits. Therefore, the founding ancestors of the community would intentionally plant such trees in their community. Usually rituals accompany the planting of such trees. This ritual is known in Akan as *gyinae*. This tree planting is seen as a foundation ritual for a town or village. There is no Akan settlement that this ritual does not precede it (all my key informants have stressed this fact). Trees such as *Nyamedua* (God`s tree), *Sinduro (Alstonia gongenis*) and *Sumee* (*Costus afer)* are usually used for such purposes. The area where such plants stand usually becomes a shrine (sacred place) for the community and people and livestock are restricted from entering the area where such plants are found. This area in turn becomes a sort of sanctuary for natural species. Furthermore, one would find in many Akan villages big trees such O*dum (Chlorophora excelsa),* Mahogany (*Khaya ivorenses*) standing at the outskirts. These trees may have shrines under them where rituals such as libation or sacrifices are performed.

Generally the following are the major trees that command a lot of respect among the Akan: *Onyina (Ceiba pentandra), Wawa (Triplochiton scleroxylon, Pepaa (Margaritaria discoigea),* Gyapong, Danan, Abeko, *Tweneboa (Entan drophragma), Nyamedua or Sinduro (Alstonia gongenis), Kyenkyen (Antiaris africana), Kusia (Nauclea diderrichii), Esa (Celtis mildbraedii), Kyenkyen (Antiaris Africana), Ofram (Terminalia superba), Kasapenpen* (*Rauofia vomitovia), Senya (Ficus spp.).* These trees are protected not just because of an ethereal, intangible spiritual relationship, but also because of a direct recognition of their fundamental practical uses for human beings, particularly their medicinal[11], environmental, economic and structural importance. The Akan proverb that "the tree may stand in the street but its roots are in the house"[12], depicts the Akan recognition of their intimate dependence on plants.

One effective way to ensure their protection in Akan society is through the use of *ntam* (traditional powerful oath). This *ntam* usually spiritually binds all the members of a community to either a stool (symbol of a traditional ruler`s authority) or to a god. This makes it obligatory for each and everyone in the community to comply with the state or community *ntam*. The non-conformists are usually sanctioned for their transgressions. In this way the cultural laws regarding protection of plants are enforced.

The origin of *akyeneboa* and its application among the Akan is generally thought to be restricted to the religio-cultural sphere. However, it is obvious that the Akan attitude towards plants and *akyeneboa* in general, also underpins the sustainable use of natural resources in Akan communities. Here a worldview is translated into applied ethics through a suite of simple actions. The application of totemism has become one of the major traditional strategies for nature conservation, particularly of flora and fauna. The role of *akyeneboa* in the Akan society provides a general framework for respecting and conserving nature.

It could be argued that totemic plants are generally few among communities and thus, may not significantly contribute to nature conservation. However, as Rose *et al*[13]

contest, the function of the totem falls within the realm of interspecies ethics. With the active inclusion of plants and animals in respectful, familial relationships, the *akyeneboa* can be viewed as a way of breaking down human-centred ethics to include non-human beings. *Akyeneboa* therefore act as a "way in" to more respectful relationships with all "other-than-human persons".[14] On a practical level, it is noted that *akyeneboa* are mainly rare plant species, which, it could be argued, benefit most from special consideration.

Indeed, among the Akan, the notion of familial relationship with *akyeneboa* is strong. Each of the various clans or families within the general Akan ethnic group has its own individual totems and some have more than one totem in addition to the general totems for the community.[15] For instance, the Akwapim people have the rat and the pied crow as totems in addition to the *Odii* plant, whilst the Ekumfi in addition to the *Odum* tree, have the parrot, buffalo, leopard and the antelope as their totems. The Nsuta people also have the black kite as another totem. These personal and collective kinship relationships stand in sharp contrast to the literal interpretation of Christian theology by others that humanity should take dominion over other creatures (Genesis 1:28). Akan are under a religious and moral obligation to protect their totem because their *akyeneboa*, which are seen as part and parcel of the tribal group and are thus, accorded them due respect.

Contemporary *Akyeneboa*

Unfortunately, although the *akyeneboa* represents a powerful platform for environmental ethics, approximately 98% of the totemic objects in Ghana are "endangered, threatened or extinct." [16] In contemporary Ghanaian society, Akan have to contend with a multitude of influences on their traditional lifestyles including, secularisation, increased dependence on science and technology, Western education and culture, foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam,[17] market economics, and overpopulation. All these factors, have to some extent affected the Akan religio-cultural worldview. The foregoing discussions have emphasised that among the traditional Akan, moral laws are related to kinship and are usually placed within the realm of religion and, therefore, factors which weaken Akan religion weaken moral action towards non-humans.

A recent study in Akan communities in the transitional agro-ecological zone of Ghana by Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro[18] revealed that *tumi* (the traditional belief in super natural power suffused in nature by *Onyame,* the Supreme Creator Deity) and *suro* (the awesome reverence and fear) that was usually attached to nature are waning.[19] In local understanding, Christianity is a serious threat, for Christians in Ghana and Africa in general have embarked on a sustained attack on the indigenous spirituality of the African including the dialogical relationships with non-humans on which *akyeneboa* thrives. In addition to these, one of the most pervasive threats to the persistence of *akyeneboa* in Ghana is the over exploitation of the country`s forest products by legal and illegal loggers.[20] *Akyeneboa* such as the *Odum* have been badly affected, as this tree is of high commercial value.

In Ghana, indigenous nature conservation methods are generally frowned upon, because of the belief that such methods are unscientific or are contrary to Christian teachings. This assumption may not be entirely true. A deep interaction with the indigenous Akan people reveals that their indigenous nature conservation knowledge is influenced to a large extent by common sense. Akan people know that cutting trees close to the river source will endanger the life of the river and hence most Akan communities prohibit farming close to river channels. Akan people know that all humans are ultimately dependent upon plants for their survival and incorporate this humbling knowledge in their practice of *akyeneboa*. This is the reason why Teye[21]

suggests that an "attempt must be made to explain the science behind these (religious) by-laws, so that they are not seen as fetish...that both the religious significance and the environmental benefits of obeying such by-laws must be emphasised in the contemporary world".

In contemporary Ghana, there is, therefore, a need to re-orient the minds of Ghanaian youth and particularly the Christian community, to view *akyeneboa* as a positive way through which people show respect to the environment or in Christian terms, to God`s creation. These are not backward, naïve "fetishes" to be abandoned for more "civilised" activities. A project is needed to increase the awareness of *akyeneboa* and their potential for contributing positively to environmental action. In Ghana, such a project could be spearheaded by the National Commission on Culture (NCC), with contributions from other relevant environmental NGOs, institutions and government agencies. The aims must be to encourage traditional peoples to continue to protect their *akyeneboa* and to properly protect (and in many cases actively restore) the overexploited Ghanaian forests which themselves provide the physical (and cultural) basis for *akyeneboa*.

Notes

1. University of Cape Coast, Ghana and University of Leeds, United Kingdom.
2. For an excellent summary of the historical development of the phenomenon of totemism, see D. Rose, D. James and C. Watson (2003) *Indigenous kinship with the Natural World in New South Wales*, New South Wales National Park and Wildlife Services. Accessed online 27/2/12 http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/cultureheritage/IndigenousKinship.pdf
3. See D. Rose, D. James and C. Watson (2003), op. cit., p.5.
4. O. Ampadu-Agyei (2003), Forward to Conservation International – Ghana (2003), *Handbook of Totems in Ghana: Traditional Mechanism for Biodiversity Conservation*, ii. Innolink, Accra.
5. The Akan are mainly found in the central and the southern part of Ghana. The 2000 Population Census put the population of the Akan at 49.1% of the total population of 18,800,000.
6. S. Awuah-Nyamekye (2009), "Salvaging Nature: The Akan Religio-Cultural Perspective", *World Views: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology 13 (3).* p. 255.
7. K. Gyekye (1996), *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Sankofa Publishing Company. Philadelphia and Accra, p. 4.
8. A. K. Opoku (1978), *West African Traditional Religion.* FEP International Private Limited, Accra, Bangkok, Hong Kong, p. 152.
9. M. Hall (2011), *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. SUNY Press, Albany, NY.
10. Ibid.
11. D. K. Abbiw (1990), *Useful Plants in Ghana*. Intermediate Publications. The Royal Botanical Garden, Kew.
12. G. Parrinder (1974), *African Traditional Religion*, 3rd ed. Sheldon Press, London, p. 52.
13. See D. Rose, D. James and C. Watson (2003), op. cit.
14. M. Hall (201), op. cit.
15. Conservation International – Ghana (2003), *Handbook of Totems in Ghana: Traditional Mechanism for Biodiversity Conservation, P. 8 &14.*
16. O.Ampadu-Agyei (2003). op. cit., p. ii.
17. J. Dercher (1997), Conservation, Small Mammals, and the future of sacred groves in West Africa, *Biodiversity Conservation*. (6), pp. 1007-1026.
18. P. Sarfo-Mensah, and W. Oduro (2010), Changes and perceptions about environment in the forest – Savanna traditional zone of Ghana: The influence of religion. Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei Working Papers available at http://www.bepress.com/feem/papers398 Accessed 20/10/10.
19. P. Sarfo-Mensah, and W. Oduro (2010), Changes and perceptions about environment in the forest – Savanna traditional zone of Ghana. See also : Y. Ntiamoa-Baidu (1995), "Indigenous vs. Introduced Biodiversity Conservation Strategies: The case of protected areas systems in Ghana". *African Biodiversity Series*, Number I, May 1995, 1-11. Washington: The Biodiversity Support Program; A. Abayie Boateng

(1998), "Traditional conservation practices: Ghana's example". *Institute of African Studies Research Review,* 14(1), pp. 42-51; S. Appiah-Opoku and B. Hyma (1999), "Indigenous institutions and resource management in Ghana". *Indigenous Knowledge and Development Monitor*, 7 (3), pp. 15-17.

20. See C. O. Dorm-Adzobu *et al*. (1991), *Religious Beliefs and Environmental Protection: The Malshegu Sacred Grove in Northern Ghana*. Water Resources Institute and Act Press, Nairobi; L. Opoku-Agyemang (April 2003). *The Ghanaian Times;* F.A.O. (1999), *State of the World`s Forest*, Food and Agriculture Organisation website (www.fao.org); B. N. Donkor, and, R.C. Vloski (2003), *A Review of the Forestry Sector in Ghana: A Louisiana Forest Products Development Centre*, working Paper No. 61.
21. J. K. Teye (2010), Network Management of Water Resources in Ghana: A framework of for Integrating Traditional and Scientific Methods, in *Report of the National Conference on Culture and Water, the Continental Hotel*, Akosombo, 24th- 26th February, 2010.