

# The reality of spirits? A historiography of the Akan concept of ‘mind’

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**Abstract:** **The reality of spirits? A historiography of the Akan concept of ‘mind’ (La réalité des esprits: Vers une historiographie de la conception akan de l’esprit).** In this article the following thesis is considered: *the classifications used to define African Indigenous Religions are ‘inventions’ of Western scholars of religion who employ categories that are entirely “non-indigenous”*. The author investigates the presumptions of this statement and discusses the work of scholars of religion studying the Akan and in particular the Akan concept of mind. In the analytic philosophical tradition the precise meaning of Akan concepts of mind such as *okra* and *sunsum*, described by various scholars of religion in different eras, are reviewed. The pre-colonial, colonial and the postcolonial era all have had specific influence on the conceptualisation of the mind. On the basis of an historiography of the Akan mind the author concludes that, contrary to the originally thesis under review, ‘cultural background’ and ‘academic discipline’ are relatively unimportant in the classification of ‘indigenous religions’. The ‘paradigm’ prevailing within a discipline, ‘personal belief’ and the spatio-temporal context in which conceptualisations are created, turn out to be far more significant.

**Key words:** spirits, Akan, ‘mind’, classifications, African Indigenous Religions, non-indigenous, *okra*, *sunsum*, historiography

## Introduction

The thesis of this essay is as follows:

‘the classifications used to define African Indigenous Religions are ‘inventions’ of Western scholars of religion who themselves employ categories that are entirely “non-indigenous”’.

I would like to look at the following presumptions that underlie this statement, in order to discuss its validity.

1. 'African Indigenous Religions' have been defined by scholars as a unity, by using certain characteristics.
2. These classifications are 'inventions' of Western scholars.
3. These scholars have only been Western scholars of religion.
4. The word 'are' presumes that these scholars made these classifications nowadays.
5. The categories these scholars use are entirely non-indigenous.

A short research on the conceptualisation of African Indigenous Religions (AIRs) shows that the first presumption is valid. There are indeed scholars who have defined AIRs by giving certain common characteristics of these beliefs, which can be used to classify these African religions as 'Indigenous'. With this opinion these scholars are opposed to those who believe that there is only one 'African Indigenous Religion' that can be compared with monotheistic world religions such as Islam and Christianity (Cox 1999: 231-232).

The second presumption is valid if 'indigenous' is an invention of Western scholars, but there have been non-Western scholars using the term 'indigenous' as well. Presumptions 2 and 3 are therefore invalid. The fourth presumption is valid if the classification 'indigenous' of 'African Indigenous Religions' has been made only recently. But classifications of what we now call 'indigenous' religions are as old as the intercultural encounters of Africans with other parts of the world since 1400 (Wolf 1982: 3-24). As soon as there was contact with other cultures, there was a necessity for scholars to classify African religions (Platvoet 1996: 105). Although the term 'indigenous' is thus new, the problem of classifying African indigenous religions has a long history. The fifth presumption is logically invalid, because of the word 'entirely'. The translation of concepts shows that an entirely 'non-indigenous' category is by definition non-existent. A translation from a concept from one language to the other, for example from Twi (the Akan language) to English, implies that there must be something in the original language which contains elements that make a translation possible (Cox 1998:19-20). We can thus only say that classifications are partly non-indigenous and can study to what extent

they are as such (Platvoet 1996: 105). So, although we can easily conclude that presumption 5 as such is invalid, the question to what extent the categories of Western scholars are non-indigenous needs further research.

In conclusion, an initial investigation shows that only the first presumption of the given statement is valid. All the other assumptions need further research in order to draw a conclusion about their validity. Since it is impossible to investigate the validity of these assumptions for every AIR in Africa, I will concentrate on one concept in one specific AIR, namely the religion of the Akan; the major socio-linguistic ethnical group in Ghana and the Cote d'Ivoire (Buah 1980: 1-20). Therefore, without changing the assumptions of the original statement, I have narrowed the thesis as follows: *'the classifications used to define the concept of mind in Akan thought are inventions of Western scholars of religion who employ categories that are entirely non-indigenous.'* First, I will discuss the cultural background and paradigms of scholars studying the Akan religion (Presumption 2, 3, 4). Secondly, I will describe how some of these scholars conceptualised the Akan 'mind' and to what extent these conceptualisations are non-indigenous (Presumption 5).

### ***A historiography of scholars studying the religion of the Akan***

In my narrowed statement it is presumed that 'scholars' have classified indigenous religions. My historiography therefore does not start before the time the first scholars researched the indigenous religion of the Akan. The first Akan studies were namely non-academic. They were the work of Arab travellers of which Ibn Battuta is a reliable example (1354), merchants such as the Dutch Bosman (1688 & 1702) and of Western missionaries, such as the English Freeman (1838). These persons gathered knowledge of the Akan for pragmatic reasons. They wanted to explore the area as Battuta did. Other study reasons included wanting to convert the indigenous population or wanting to know how to convince them to buy their products. Although they gathered some information, due to a lack of methodology, academically their work was limited (Platvoet 1996: 105-

138). The first step to academic fieldwork on the Akan was made by R.S. Rattray. In 1908, this anthropologist had the honour of working for the English colonial government. As a government anthropologist, he reported on the indigenous customs of the Ashanti; the major ethnic group of the Akan. From the 1920s onward he became an academic anthropologist.

The above introduction to the historiography of the Akan gives information about the validity of presumption 3 and 4. First, it shows that it is incorrect to use the present tense of 'be' in relation to the invention of classifications, for the first scholar made his classifications in the Akan religion in the 1920s. This invalidates presumption 4. Secondly, it shows that not all Western scholars who studied the Akan were scholars of religion. For example, Rattray was an anthropologist. This means that presumption 3 might be invalid as well. Still, critical readers amongst us could say that anthropological work includes the study of religion and that anthropologists can therefore be classified as 'scholars of religion'. For an utterance about presumption 3 then, we will first have to look if scholars studied the Akan from disciplines other than religion or anthropology. It seems thus that presumption 2, 3 and 5 are still left to be validated. I will therefore look from which cultural background the scholars studying the Akan came (presumption 2), from which discipline they wrote (presumption 3) and how they conceptualised the Akan concept of mind (Presumption 5).

#### *Western & non-Western scholars studying the religion of the Akan*

This paragraph deals with the cultural background of scholars studying the religion of the Akan. It gives an answer to the question whether the classifications made *to define the concept of mind in Akan thought* were made by Western scholars only (presumption 2) or if non-Western scholars also played a part in these classifications. I will also pay attention to the *emic* or *etic* character of these qualifications made by the Western scholars Rattray, Parrinder and Platvoet and the Ghanaian scholars Danquah, Busia, Gyekye and Wiredu.

*Western scholars studying the Akan religion: Rattray, Parrinder & Platvoet*

As I mentioned before, the first Western academic anthropologist writing on the Akan religion was R.S. Rattray. Since his work had to be useful for the colonial empire it was descriptive and non-theoretical. In the paradigms of the first academic anthropologists the functionalism of the Akan indigenous belief was emphasised. The religious belief was studied as if it was a static system, not sensitive to transformations (Platvoet 1996: 105-138). This point of view fit with the mainstream idea in the academic world at this time that non-Western societies did not develop and therefore could not have a history (Wolf 1982: 3-24). Although Rattray's work was thus a-historical, he studied and learned Twi – the language of the Akan.

Besides, the work of Rattray, G. Parrinder, a Western liberal missionary, contributed to the study of the religion of the Akan. He was trained in theology and philosophy. Instead of emphasizing the non-existence of African indigenous religions as a world religion, as most of his colleagues did in the 1950s, Parrinder tried to show that African religion as a conceptual unity could contribute to the understanding of world religions, which were believed to be rooted in the African Indigenous Religion. In order to validate his research he started to universalise the particular elements in different AIRs. By defining AIR as one concept, the roots of world religions such as Christianity and Islam could be found easier (Parrinder 1954: 1-15). The Dutch scholar of religion J. Platvoet describes Parrinder's work as being decontextualised.

So, next to Rattray and Parrinder, a present-day theologian has contributed to the study of the Akan religion. Platvoet describes the spirit-possession of the Akan (the Bono from the Brong-Ahafo region) from a positivistic point of view. He writes, that in the Western academic tradition there is a dichotomy between the supernatural or spiritual and the empirical or material world. The spiritual world is a world that scholars can not empirically observe and cannot investigate with scientific tools. Platvoet states: 'Scholars (of religion) have no means of investigating the meta-empirical world, because they cannot verify, nor falsify, whether

spirits actually ‘take possession’ of their medium and ‘heal’ or perform other ‘work’. The only research scholars can do is study the behaviour of people practising the indigenous religion, who have become possessed by spirits. Scholars can, for example, study the meaning of amnesia after the spirit has left a medium. According to Platvoet, this strengthens the belief that mediums are ‘really’ possessed and that thus their condition of possession is not merely a neurological event, but also a culturally conditioned, ‘normal’ trait in Akan possession (Platvoet: 1999: 80-95). From this statement it becomes clear that Platvoet does not believe in spirit possession. He adds that the behaviour of persons possessed by spirits includes the study of the spirit belief of indigenous people, but does not study the Akan belief in spirits and thus does not conceptualise the Akan ideas about the ‘mind’.

We see that the work of Western scholars of various disciplines studying the Akan has been more or less positivistic. Rattray tried to understand the Akan from the inside out and produced emic knowledge, but failed to do so accurately because of a lack of historical knowledge. After Rattray the orientation of research became increasingly positivistic. According to this paradigm, the ‘Other’ can only be studied as an object and not as a subject. Therefore the scholar has to keep his distance and cannot afford to identify himself with the people he is studying. For the classifications in religion used to study the concept of mind, this means that these classifications are made from a distance. In anthropological terms anthropologists speak in this sense of an etic language and terminology.

*Ghanaian scholars studying the Akan religion: Danquah, Busia, Opoku, Gyekye & Wiredu*

The contributions of Ghanaian scholars studying the Akan religion are made by the theological philosopher J.B. Danquah (1895-1965), the anthropologist K.A. Busia (1913-1978), the present-day anthropologist Kofi Asare Opoku and the philosophers K. Gyekye and K. Wiredu.

As in the Western academic tradition the first contribution made to the study of the Akan came from an anthropologist. In 1928, J.B. Danquah published *The Akan Doctrine of God*. Platvoet describes this work

as follows:

‘Though the book contained important ethnographical elements from Akim-Abuakwa traditional religion, its description of the Akan religion, ‘as it really was’, was a parade of Danquah’s speculative ethical philosophy: a normative exposition, by means of a selective use of elements of Akan culture of what Danquah thought Akan traditional religion must have been like - and should continue to be like - despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary’ (Platvoet 1996:119).

Danquah – who was a politician until 1947– held that Akan traditional religion was as ethical and monotheistic a religion as were Christianity and Islam and delivered academic work with these assumptions.

Another anthropological study came from Kofi A. Busia, who was a government anthropologist in charge of a survey of the Takoradi district from 1947 until 1949. During that time he was appointed Lecturer in African Studies in the new University College at Achimota. He became Professor of Sociology in 1954, but resigned in 1956 to become leader of the opposition to Nkrumah in Parliament. His work was thus political anthropology and politically motivated. Because he was a full-time politician from 1956 onwards, his contribution to the study of AIRs remained limited to one major essay on the religion of the Akan. Although his study is still one of the best brief introductions to Akan traditional religion, the weakness set in the book its last pages. In this Busia presented a static picture of Akan traditional religion in the ‘contemporary situation’ and in the elements which Busia ignored: the belief in the spiritual world including witchcraft and natural spirits.

At least, this strategy kept him from not being taken seriously in the academic world, such was the case with the Ghanaian anthropologist Kofi Asare Opoku, who was academically doomed after attacking the Western anthropologist Evans-Pritchard for declaring witchcraft an ‘imaginary offence’. To Opoku witchcraft was ‘real beyond the fantasy of mere imagination’ (Platvoet 1996: 105-138). A better academic strategy has been followed by the present-day Ghanaian philosophers Wiredu and Gyekye. Instead of contributing to the Akan religion with an empirical study, they chose a career in philosophy that enabled them to study the metaphysical world, without being academically doomed. Both philoso-

phers developed a completely different but successful strategy to approach the Akan religion academically. Gyekye, who is a professor with the Philosophy Department at the University of Ghana, Legon, approaches religion as if he is a Western philosopher. He is a Christian who does not believe in indigenous spirits and treats the Akan religion as if it is a coherent and consistent religious scheme, which fits into the rules of the North Atlantic bivalent logic. He does not examine the Western conceptions he uses to explain the indigenous thoughts but has instead incorporated Western academic bivalent thinking in order to be accepted in the mainstream North Atlantic academic world (Gyekye 1995a: 153-169). Wiredu, who does believe in indigenous spirits, has a more multivalent approach to the Akan concept of mind. While working in his department at the University in Florida, he is already accepted by the North Atlantic academic world and can therefore allow himself to emphasise the multi-stranded, unsystematic and multivalent character of Akan religion (Wiredu 1995:123-153).

To conclude the discussion of presumption 2 not only Western but also Ghanaian scholars have made a useful contribution to the classification of the Akan religion. While the classification of Western scholars was merely etic, Ghanaian scholars have contributed with both emic and etic academic work. The work of Danquah, Busia and Gyekye had a more etic character than that of Opoku and Wiredu. With regard to all Ghanaian scholars it can be said that they have developed a more or less successful strategy in order to be accepted by the mainstream North Atlantic academic world.

#### *Academic disciplines of scholars studying the religion of the Akan*

The underlying question of presumption 3 is if scholars classifying the Akan religion were scholars of religion only, or if they came from disciplines other than religion or religious anthropology. In order to validate this assumption, I will summarize from what discipline our Western and Ghanaian scholars approached the Akan religion. The first studies of the Akan were anthropological or philosophical-theological. Rattray, Busia, Opoku and Danquah were anthropologists, while Parrinder wrote in a philosophical-theological discipline. From the 1960s the discipline of



history and philosophy independent from theology, and theology independent from philosophy, took the Akan in their field of study. One example of such a theologian is Platvoet. Two examples of philosophers in this field of study are Gyekye and Wiredu.

In conclusion, there have been anthropologists, theologians and philosophers active in the field of African religion, which means presumption 3 is invalid. What still has to be discussed is the validation of presumption 5, which discusses the extent to which the characteristics used to classify African religions are indigenous. Due to my narrowed statement, I will only discuss to what extent the conceptualisation of the Akan 'mind' is non-indigenous.

### ***The contributions of scholars to the Akan concept of 'mind'***

In this paragraph, I will describe the different conceptualisations of the mind made by the Western scholars Rattray, Danquah and Busia and the Ghanaian scholars Gyekye and Wiredu. I do not deal with all scholars who have been introduced in the last paragraph, since they have not all articulated their view on the concept of mind of the Akan.

#### *African & Western anthropological views on the Akan concept of mind from the early twentieth century: Rattray, Danquah & Busia*

Rattray writes that he recognizes three souls in Akan thought: the *ntoro*, the *sunsum* and the *okra*. The *ntoro* is a kind of totem. In the myth of origin of the Akan the first human beings are brought together by a snake (*onini*). The child they had, bared the spirit of this snake who was transmitted to him by the father. When this child bared his own children he gave his *ntoro* to them and so to all future generations. While the *ntoro* is transmitted by the father it is also known as *sedum*. It is one of the great elements in every man and woman, together with the 'mogya' or blood transmitted to the child by mother. The combination of the *mogya* and *ntoro* give a child his *sunsum* or personality (Rattray 1923: 45-77). A character of the *sunsum* is that it can be separated from the body. It can

leave the body to travel through the spiritual world if a person goes to sleep (Rattray 1927: 27-35). Although Rattray gave these characteristics, he did not really know how to define the concept, since he wrote: 'the *sunsum* is the soul, or power, or whatever we like to call it' (Rattray 1923:198). At least this definition was clearer than the one he gave of the *okra*, which he called: 'that force, personal magnetism, character, personality, power, soul, call it what you will, upon which depend health, wealth, worldly power, success in any venture, in fact everything that makes life at all worth living' (Rattray 1923:46). On the field of the concept of mind Rattray's work was thus not very accurate.

The philosopher J.B. Danquah delivered a contribution to the concept of mind by making a comparison between the Christian and the Akan ideas about morality. In his version of Christianity human beings had to follow God's will in order to live a moral life. Acting against his will was a sin. Because Adam and Eve ate from the God's forbidden fruit, all human beings were born with sin. Therefore, the Christian soul is not pure from the beginning. The Akan, on the contrary, are born as 'pure souls'. Their soul or *okra* is a piece of the Highest God. And since God is good, the *okra* has to be good as well. Only the *sunsum* or personality of a human being can be evil. By knowing God this evil can be eliminated (Danquah 1944, 85-90). The question is now how something purely good (*okra*) can bear a part which can be evil (*sunsum*). Danquah thinks the '*okra*' is 'the end of *sunsum*', or that part of the soul where someone's self-controlled personality stops and Nyame comes into the field. A human being (*onipa*) is thus born as a good person, but can do evil when the rational part of his soul-the *sunsum*-brings him to evil thoughts. Danquah thus believes in a dualism between body (*honam*) and mind *okra* and *sunsum*. There is only one divine soul (*okra*) of which a small part is filled with the not-divine *sunsum*. So, instead of linking the *sunsum* to the *ntoro*, as Rattray did, Danquah links it directly to the Akan God. For him this God (*Nyame*) is comparable with the monotheistic Christian God (Danquah 1944:8).

Ten years after Danquah's contribution, Dr. K.A. Busia seems to agree more with Rattray's basic ideas. He uses Rattray's study and con-

tributes to it by expressing himself more accurately about the mind. He writes that the *ntoro*, like Rattray thought, is not the same as the *sunsum*. Instead, it is a generic term of which the non divine *sunsum* is a specific instance (Busia 1954: 197). This means that like Rattray and unlike Danquah, Busia believes that the Akan have three separated souls. Of these souls the *sunsum* is connected with the *ntoro*, and not with the *okra* (Busia 1954: 209).

In conclusion, I have answered the question to what extent the conceptualisation of the mind by Rattray, Danquah and Busia is non-indigenous. Rattray tried to conceptualise the mind in an indigenous way, but did not have enough knowledge on the Akan to do it accurately, which means it was not very indigenous. Danquah used a philosophical scheme, which didn't have any connection with the social reality, which made it not at all indigenous. Busia made Rattray's first contribution to the conceptualisation more accurate and can be seen as the social scientist that created the most indigenous concept of mind.

*African philosophical contemporary views on the concept of mind: Gyekye & Wiredu*

In contemporary times two Ghanaian philosophers have written about the Akan concept of mind. I would like to compare the ideas of Gyekye and Wiredu, keeping the idea in mind that Wiredu believes in spirits, while Gyekye does not believe in the reality of such entities. Like in the above comparison, Wiredu and Gyekye's main point of disagreement is on the character of the '*sunsum*'. According to Wiredu the *sunsum* is not immaterial but *quasi-material*. Wiredu thinks that the fact that the *sunsum* can travel through the spiritual world does not mean that it is a part of that world. But the fact that it can travel means it is not entirely material as well. In contradiction to his predecessors, Wiredu thinks that the Akan concept of mind has not primarily to do with the *ntoro*, *sunsum* or *okra*. The Akan word for mind, he says, is *adwene*. The character of *adwene* is that it is non-substantial, because it also means thought. In Western philosophy the mind is the same as the brain, because the mind is an immaterial entity producing immaterial thoughts. This means that there can be no

thoughts without the brain. In Akan thought, on the contrary, a human being can have thoughts without a brain, because thoughts are connected to the mind. Therefore, 'adwene' means mind including thoughts, which can be actual or potential. If the Akan say that someone has no adwene, it means he has no capacity for having good thoughts and thus no potential of becoming a good thinker. This does not mean that he cannot have any actual thoughts. The brain in Akan thought is just a functional apparatus, which every human being possesses. Back to the concept of the '*sunsum*' this means the *sunsum* is the possessor of adwene, in the meaning of potential thoughts. Someone with a good personality is thus able to produce good meaningful thoughts. The *sunsum* is thus connected to adwene, which is not an entity or object because thoughts cannot be seen. Therefore the *sunsum* is not an entity either. The *sunsum* is neither material, nor immaterial but what Wiredu calls *quasi-material*, which means it only exists as a concept.

The same way of reasoning is valid for the *okra*. Wiredu thinks the *okra* is not the same as the English concept of soul, because the soul is an immaterial entity that is created by God. The *okra* instead is a seeming immaterial entity received by *Nyame* inside the body of a material human being. This means the *okra* is neither a wholly immaterial nor material entity and is thus-like the *sunsum*-quasi-material. He thus does not believe that only the body exists as an entity (materialism) or only the mind exists as such (spiritualism). Neither does he believe that there are two different entities called body and mind (dualism). In his quasi-materialism the quasi-material '*sunsum*' is part of the quasi-material entity '*okra*'. By the lack of a better concept Wiredu uses the term quasi-materialism, to define these 'concepts' that are located between the spiritual and the material world. The *okra* and *sunsum* travel through both worlds and are thus sometimes visible for human beings. This idea fits with the worldview of most Akan who believe that they live *with* ancestors at the same time and sometimes in the same space and thus emphasises the present-day (Wiredu 1995:123-153).

Gyekye does not believe in quasi-materialism but in a body-mind dualism. He believes in life *after* death instead of living *with* the dead.

Gyekye thinks that the *okra* is an immaterial entity and that the concept can be translated by the English term 'soul'. He thinks that there is one world in the present which is the material world and one world where people go after they die. After a human being has died his or her *okra* will lead him to the immaterial world, which means it has to be immaterial. Beside the *okra*, the *sunsum* is also immaterial. Otherwise Gyekye cannot explain how it can fly away during the night, while the body is still laying in its bed, for a material object cannot be on two places at the same time. From a dualistic point of view it is easy to understand Gyekye's vision on what he calls 'anthropological conceptual blunders'. Gyekye thinks that Busia and Rattrays believe that the *sunsum* comes from the *ntoro* is absolutely wrong. In his view the *sunsum* and the *okra* have both a divine origin, while the *ntoro* and *mogya* are given to people by human beings.

To summarize, Gyekye's conceptualisation of the Akan mind is more non-indigenous, than Wiredu's. The cause for the conceptual differences lies in the differences in the worldview of both philosophers. Both Gyekye and Wiredu use Akan concepts of mind to articulate the position of African philosophy opposed to Western philosophy. But, while Gyekye uses only Western or etic concepts to articulate this opposition, Wiredu creates new emic concepts such as quasi materialism, to explain the indigenous Akan thought.

## **Conclusion**

In the statement discussed in this essay two criteria are presumed to be important in the classification of 'indigenous religions': 'cultural background' and 'academic discipline'. Scholars making these classifications are supposed to have a 'Western' cultural background and are supposed to be 'scholars of religion'. I disagree with this statement because its underlying assumptions are invalid. First, the scholars who studied the Akan have not only been Westerners. Also, the academic discipline of these scholars has not only been those of scholars of religion. Further, the historiography of invention of categories by these scholars shows these categories are not only made in the present-day. Since every translation

presumes a certain degree of understanding of the other's worldview and since both Western and African scholars have contributed to the classifications of the Akan religion and the conceptualisation of mind, their invention of categories is not entirely non-indigenous. In my essay I have shown that the extent to which the conceptualisation of mind of scholars is indigenous varies.

On a deeper level my essay shows that a 'paradigm' within a certain discipline and 'personal belief' play a more important role in the question to what extent categories made to define parts of the Akan 'indigenous religion' are non-indigenous, than the presumed categories 'academic discipline' and 'cultural background'. The English anthropologist Rattray, for example, wrote from an anthropological paradigm in which he explored the Akan religion. He felt attached to the worldview of the Akan, in which there is a fluid relationship between the spiritual and the material world. Although he didn't really know how to conceptualise '*okra*' and '*sunsum*', he made a great first contribution in explaining the Akan religion in emic terms. In that sense he made a more 'indigenous' contribution than the etic work of the Ghanaian scholar Danquah, who mixed his ideas of the Akan religion with a Christian worldview, which resulted in a dualistic view on the Akan body and mind due to the separation of the spiritual and material world. The Ghanaian anthropologist Busia took a position somewhere between Rattray and Danquah. His belief of the Akan concept of mind was for the far end emic, but had an etic Christian tail.

When we look at the contemporary ideas of the philosophers Gyekye and Wiredu we see that a belief or disbelief in a present-day spiritual world still determines the conceptualisation of the Akan mind. Wiredu, who believes in the reality of spirits living *beside* him conceptualises the mind (*adwene*) and the *okra* and *sunsum* as quasi-material concepts. The need for Wiredu to create the concept of quasi-materialism comes from his belief in spirits. His personal belief thus plays a role in his choice for an indigenous concept of mind. Gyekye, who believes in a spiritual world *after* live, uses a more Western dualistic scheme to describe the immaterial character of *okra* and *sunsum*. According to him

they are equivalent to the Christian concept of the soul. Due to his disbelief in a present day spiritual world he can allow himself to use already existing Western philosophical concepts to explain his ideas about the Akan concept of mind.

In a wider field, to answer the research question it is important to look at the time in which and the locality from where knowledge production on African indigenous religions takes place. As my historiography on the Akan religion has shown, the paradigms in which scholars of religions from various disciplines write change over time. These changes have everything to do with the transformations in African societies from the pre-colonial, to the colonial and the postcolonial era.

In pre-colonial times, the study of the Akan by merchants and travellers was merely pragmatic. In colonial times, knowledge about indigenous religions in general, was used to facilitate European appropriation and the realization of extraction and exploitation of natural resources in Africa (Van Binsbergen 2002; 20). Due to European expansion, North Atlantic science was able to give itself the privilege to universality. Not coincidentally, in the contemporary postcolonial era, scholars of religions introduce paradigms to decolonise African religion and take away the claim of North Atlantic science to be the only valid system of knowledge. As Van Binsbergen concludes in 'The underpinning of scientific knowledge systems', (2002) the paradigm in which scholars nowadays validate non-North Atlantic knowledge systems is beyond that of cultural relativism, which came up shortly after independence. Van Binsbergen explains that the problem of this paradigm was that scholars were not allowed to value the knowledge system of other cultures. Therefore, no claim about the validity or invalidity of these systems could be made. Van Binsbergen describes the current philosophical paradigm he adheres as follows:

"Nowadays, scholars are allowed to value non-North Atlantic knowledge systems and conclude that the South has access to forms of valid knowledge to which the North Atlantic has no access because of the admission, in these sciences, of other sources of knowledge than those recognized in North Atlantic science, as well as because of a knowledge situation in which partly different natural phenomena and different socio-cultural organization forms of knowledge are involved" (Van Binsbergen 2002; 20).

Since the contemporary postcolonial era is a period in which the non-North Atlantic systems of knowledge are slowly being recognized, African philosophers see it as their task to emphasize the validity of African (philosophical) knowledge. Wiredu, for example, emphasizes the fact that African philosophers need to explain the meaning of indigenous concepts in North Atlantic languages, such as English, so that African scholars can decolonise science. Wiredu explains the necessity of decolonisation since he and most other African philosophers are brought up in the colonial Western philosophical tradition, due to the colonial education system. Wiredu:

‘I think that it is a colonial type of mentality that regards African philosophy as something that should be kept apart from the mainstream of philosophical thinking. Compare how things stand or might stand in, say, the study of British philosophy. Surely, it would be more than mildly idiosyncratic for a British teacher of philosophy in a British university to propose, in his teaching of, Metaphysics, for example, to hold in abeyance all metaphysical insights deriving from British sources until s/he has the occasion to teach a course on British philosophy. In fact, there may be no such course in the given British university for the good reason that there may be no need for it. It would be a great day for African philosophy when the same becomes true of an African university, for it would mean that African insights have become fully integrated into the principal branches of philosophy’ (Wiredu 2004).

To decolonise African philosophy Wiredu emphasizes the importance of the study of the language in which these philosophies originate. These studies can best be fulfilled by researchers who know the languages involved well. For Wiredu, the study of the meaning of the Akan concept of mind is an example of showing the conceptual differences in the Akan language (Twi) and English. By studying the distinctions in concepts in both languages the particularity of African indigenous religions become clear and the identity of specific African communities comes into the picture. These language studies help to show the specific face of each ethnic African group and settles with the colonial project of presenting all Africans as one common group, of which the study of Parrinder is a good example. The emphasis on communality helped the colonialisers



to subjugate these groups more easily.

According to Wiredu, the nonexistence of the dichotomy natural/supernatural can also be explained by studying the indigenous meaning of Akan concepts. The absence of such an ontological chasm has everything to do with the Akan concept of God, which differs completely from the Christian notion of God. *Onnayme*, the Highest God of the Akan, is namely the creator of the world, but is not apart from the universe. Together with the world He constitutes the spatio-temporal "totality" of existence and therefore a separation between the empirical world and the metaphysics is not conceptualised in the Akan language (Wiredu 2004).

Besides time or the historical period in which different perspectives on African philosophies and religions are created, the space or locality from which they are thrown into the world play a role in the classification of indigenous religions. For example, Wiredu produces his current ideas at the University of South Florida and has worked at the University of Los Angeles and California. This places him in a position to decolonise African philosophy. While writing from a North Atlantic locality he has the financial sources to start such a project. Since he lives and writes in a North Atlantic area, he has the possibility to criticize the colonial way of thinking about African philosophies and religions. He can challenge the inheritance of colonial thoughts with the help of an intercultural dialogue between scholars of different cultures. Gyekye, on the contrary, produces his knowledge at the University of Ghana. While publishing his academic work in Africa it means he has to take part in the mainstream North Atlantic discourse. Since he lives in the least attractive continent in the world seen from the perspective of the North-South power relations he has no choice but to assimilate himself to the methodology used in the North Atlantic academic world. This means for example that his theoretical framework has to be based on bivalent logic and cannot be based on the multi-bivalent logic used by the Ghanaians he interviewed during his

fieldwork. It also means that he has no opportunity to work on the recognition of sources of knowledge that are still not acknowledged in North Atlantic- science, such as intuition, dreams and extra-sensory perception. This knowledge, about non-human realities, that is comparable with North Atlantic science can not be emphasized as being valid by African philosophers such as Gyekye. Because of their locality they are not in the position to write about this knowledge from a peripheral discourse. The North-South power relations in the (academic) world reduce the possibilities of philosophers and scholars of religion in Africa severely. Due to a lack of financial resources and academic former colonial structures the decolonisation project has more chance to succeed outside the African continent. In the discipline of intercultural philosophy philosophers such as Wiredu and Van Binsbergen are now creating the methodology to deconstruct colonial ways of thinking. May these philosophers create the right concepts to contemplate action to fulfill the project of decolonisation.

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