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"ARISE, O GOD!" THE PROBLEM OF 'GODS' IN WEST AFRICA*

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The first outside observers of the ways in which West Africans have approached reality religiously came respectively from Muslim North Africa at the end of the first millennium A.D. and from Christian Western Europe a half millennium later. As Muslims and Christians, both to a greater or lesser extent inheritors of Semitic traditions of faith insistent on the oneness of God, these outsiders brought to their descriptions of African religiousness scriptural prejudices against shirk, the ascription of partners to God (Qur'an 4:48), and "the idols of the nations" (Psalm 135:15). A more irenic understanding of the forms of West African faith in the transcendent has generally become possible only in the twentieth century, often under the prodding of anthropologists. Nowadays, such positive evaluation of traditional African religious forms is commonplace, especially among intellectuals of Christian or formerly Christian heritage. African Muslims have, however, proved notably less prone to this point of view.

But even the modern, relatively meliorative understanding of how West Africans have traditionally looked upon the transcendent betrays a tendency to impose upon West African religious experience conceptual categories inherited from the Middle East or from the Greco-Roman world. Not only outside observers but also certain African Christian insiders have perpetuated a tendency, perhaps unconscious, to describe African conceptions of the transcendent in Semitic or Indo-European theological categories that are still basically foreign. To call these intellectual categories foreign implies that they impose on the forms of traditional African piety, without adequate interval equivalencies, alien patterns of thought.
I

What precisely is this foreign schematization derived from Semitic and Indo-European sources?

In the Semitic Middle East, the generic name for the personified transcendent object of human religious intentionality has usually been 'el or 'il or one of its linguistic variants, usually translated into English as 'god', 'deity', or 'divinity'. In much of the Semitic language area, the gods (Hebrew, 'elohim; Arabic, alihat) were originally conceived of as a divine assembly, although at various times in different areas, one or other god might ascend over the others.

The mythic pattern of an individual god rising to presidency over a divine assembly may have originated in Mesopotamia even earlier than the invasion of that area by the Semitic Akkadians in the late third millenium B.C. The Babylonian creation myth, Enuma elish, "in its original form describes the dangers which once beset the gods when they were threatened with attack from the powers of chaos...; how the gods assembled and chose young Enlil to be their king and champion; and how Enlil vanquished the enemy, Ti'amat, by means of the storms, those forces which express the essence of his being." For all his supremacy, however, Enlil (or, in a later revision, Marduk) still belongs to the genus 'god', as Jacobsen's rendering of Marduk's enthronement makes clear:

They made a princely dais for him
And he sat down, facing his fathers, as a councillor
"Thou art of consequence among the elder gods...
What thou has spoken shall come true, thy word shall not prove vain
Among the gods none shall encroach upon thy rights."

Once such a god had achieved supremacy in the divine assembly, he might retain his proper name or become more formally known as the God. Psalm 82 reflects something of this mythic pattern, entailing not only the rise of the God (ha-'Elohim) to presidency over the divine assembly but also the demotion of the other gods into insignificance.

Dahood describes the beginning of Psalm 82 as a "heavenly tribunal where God passes judgment" on other gods: "God presides in the divine council, in the midst of the gods adjudicates" (Psalm 82:1). Dahood interprets the concluding section of the psalm as the author's realization that the gods "are nothing,
because they are quite incapable of defending the poor and rescuing the downtrodden":5

I had thought, "You are gods,
all of you sons of the Most High;
Yet you shall die as men do,
and fall like any prince."
Arise, O God, and govern the earth,
rule ever the nations yourself! (Psalm 82:6-8)6

Semitic have eventually come to understand the uniqueness of God—His arrival at "upper-case" status in English7—as the result of God’s ousting His former colleagues, the "lower-case," plural gods. God’s status as God, however, has not been absolutely assured, inasmuch as He shared, at least to some extent, the linguistic category of godhead (deity, divinity) with the other members of the Semitic divine assembly. Only when the other members of the divine assembly fell into oblivion, or were transformed into angelic choirs, was the onliness oraloneness of the God assured.

If, in linguistic terms at any rate, the onliness of God took time to be fully recognized in the Semitic world, the theoi and dîi (dei) of the Greeks and Romans had an even weaker claim to any pre-Christian paramountcy in their ranks, much less to any transcendent onliness. The presidency of Zeus, "the most excellent and just among the gods"8 according to the mythmakers cited by Euthyphro, had been achieved by his shackling of his own father, Kronos, to punish Kronos for swallowing his other sons, the brothers of Zeus. Earlier, Kronos himself had displaced Ouranos from the supreme rank by castrating the Sky-god. All such myths perturbed Socrates. In the Republic, he condemns Hesiod and Homer for propagating such tales, "the greatest lie about the things of greatest concernment."9

The foibles of the Greek and Roman gods were such that the Septuagintal translators of the Hebrew scriptures and early Christian authors in Greek and Latin never seem to have considered the possibility of using the proper name of Zeus or Jupiter to render the name of the God of Israel or the Father of Jesus Christ. 'Elohim and ha-'Elohim were both rendered in the Septuagint as ho theos, even when 'Elohim is addressed in the vocative, as in the Septuagintal translation of the last verse of Psalm 82 cited above. Latin, lacking a definite article, was even less well-equipped than Greek to render with deus the Biblical notion of the only God.
In summary, then, it can be said that in Semitic languages (and most notably, in the scriptural languages, Hebrew and Arabic), the term 'god' is common, albeit with distinctive modifications, to the members of the divine assembly and to the God who at first comes to dominate and eventually to eliminate His colleagues. In the Greek and Latin languages (and most of the languages of Western Europe), the God may have only attained genuinely supreme status after Jews, Christians and other worshippers of an only God made their presence felt in the Roman Empire, although philosophical criticism of the mythical pantheon may have paved the way for these later developments.

II

West African biblical translators, apparently reluctant to render the plural sense of 'elohim with the words for lesser transcendent beings known in West Africa, have sometimes created ersatz words in order to render plural reference to gods in Hebrew. In so doing, they have over-dignified the divine antagonists of Yahweh in Israel and they have underrated the Supreme Being in West Africa. Thus, the most recent translation of the Bible into Asante Twi translates the plural 'elohim of Psalm 82:6 as anyame, a neologism foisted on the traditionally unique Onyame in the nineteenth century. So, too, even the corrected edition of the Bible in Yoruba, although it translates 'elohim in verse 1 of that psalm more suitably as awon oriṣa, by verse 6 it addresses these lesser transcendent beings as lower-case orilun. Not only these translations but also most of the scholarly literature on the traditional forms of faith in West Africa ignore the fact that there is no term or category in any authentic ('deep') dialect of the Yoruba or Akan languages, spoken respectively in southwestern Nigeria and southern Ghana, that yields an adequate equivalent of the Semitic and Greco-Roman pair called 'God and the gods'.

Furthermore, the figures usually referred to as 'gods' in descriptions of the transcendent realm in these two ethnic areas should not be confused with each other. The orìṣa in Yoruba do not equal the abosom in Akan, even if there are greater similarities between Yoruba and Akan understandings of the Supreme Being (not a 'High God', because of the above-detailed terminological lack) Who presides over these lesser beings. (Of course, it must also be
admitted that even this abstract usage of 'Being' and 'beings' has no equivalent in these languages either).

Yoruba understandings of the transcendent differ, at the very least, from area to area within the region now loosely defined as Yorubaland, and very probably from person to person as well. In Ile-Ife, the sacred capital from which the sixteen principal Yoruba city-states derive much of their religious and political traditions, different words are used to designate the less-than-supreme beings who created or now rule the cosmos at the bidding of Olodumare or Olorun, their Overlord. Of these terms—oriṣa, ebora, irunmole—the first is the most common and is widely used throughout Yorubaland. Ebora is apparently a term unique to Ife, where the term oriṣa tends to be reserved for the primeval demiurge Oriṣanla (Great Oriṣa) and certain of his supernal associates. The term ebora, on the other hand, would seem in Ife to designate other transcendent beings, especially those latecomers like Oduduwa, who, Yoruba mythic sources claim, supplanted Oriṣanla (also sometimes called Obatala), particularly in the work of creating human beings, as well as in founding the royal dynasty of Ife. Iruunmole, finally, seems to be a collective designation for mysterious beings associated with the earth.

William Bascom who has studied the Yoruba over four decades, once formulated a somewhat rationalistic definition of an oriṣa based on his questioning of Yoruba informants who might not otherwise have attempted quite so flat a conceptualization:

An orisha is a person who lived on earth when it was first created, and from whom presentday folk are descended. When these orishas disappeared or 'turned to stone', their children began to sacrifice to them and to continue whatever ceremonies they themselves had performed when they were on earth. This worship was passed on from one generation to the next, and today an individual considers the orisha whom he worships to be an ancestor from whom he has descended.

Although the oriṣa are considered to be ancestors, especially of certain royal dynasties in Yorubaland, the cult of the oriṣa is not be confused with the somewhat limited cult of paternal ancestors who are called orisun (source), or, more generally, babanla (grandfathers). In fact, the Yoruba commoner sacrifices only to his deceased parents and very seldom venerates paternal grandparents or more remote paternal ancestors, unless, of course, they are considered to be oriṣa. Beyond this, communal masquerades serve to preserve the memory of the ancestral spirits of the dead.
The patrilineal limitations on the veneration of ancestors among the Yoruba do not, however, apply to the cult of the orisá. Not only does one inherit one or more orisá patrilineally but one can be called in a dream or by divination techniques resorted to in times of distress to worship orisá in the patrilineal line or even orisá previously not venerated by one’s father or mother or their forebears. Once called to worship such an orisá, moreover, the traditional Yoruba looks upon this transcendent being as something of an ancestor. The cult of any orisá, patrilineally inherited or mandated by a personal call, is “conceptually ancestor worship,” according to Bascom. He goes on to note that the elaborate Fon cult of the ancestors, as described by Herskovits, “resembles the worship of the orishas more closely than it does the Yoruba ancestor cult.”

Among the Yoruba, then, although some ancestors can be clearly distinguished from the orisá (one might be tempted to describe them as the less eminent ancestors), most orisá are regarded as ancestors, either because they are inherited patrilineally by their devotees or have been, as it were, adopted as ancestors by them. The orisá are not only eminent ancestors; as might be guessed from their roles in the creation, they are strongly identified as well with aspects of nature: rivers, rocks, climatic phenomena, disease.

Over all these orisá, Olodumare (Olurun) reigns supreme, the ancestor of no patrilineage, adopted as the direct recipient of no individual’s sacrificial worship. Bascom, having noted that “Olurun has no priests, no festival, and no cult-group,” confuses the singularity of Olurun by ending that sentence with the words “in the sense that other orisha do.” He never offers concrete evidence (nor do I think he intended to do so) that Olurun belongs to the same conceptual category as “other orishas.” Idowu somewhat reluctantly concedes that Olodumare is sometimes, if rarely, referred to as an orisá, but the usage seems to be uncommon. If this limited linguistic usage may be taken as evidence that Olodumare (Olurun) was once considered to be one of the orisá, at least in some parts of Yorubaland, little memory remains today of such a conception of the transcendent. The complete absence of any patrilineage dedicated to Olodumare (Olurun) as well as the almost total lack of any direct ritual worship of the Supreme Being may be taken not as indicators of Olodumare’s otiose nature but of His absolute transcendence. He is not merely God above the gods.
Understandings of the transcendent among the Akan peoples (Asante, Fante, Akyem, and others) also differ from area to area and, to some extent, from person to person. The monumental corpus of R. S. Rattray's early twentieth-century anthropological studies of the Asante has made a sympathetic comprehension of this largest Akan group readily available to contemporary scholars.

On the whole, the creation-mythology of the Akan peoples seems less elaborate than that of the Yoruba, and is more accurately described as a mythology of origins rather than of creation. Onyame (Onyankopon), the Being honoured above all else by the Akan, called Oboadee (Creator), when origins are in question, a name that would, along with certain myths, suggest that the Supreme Being, far from being otiose or retiring, Himself undertook the task of making the world. Appointment of a creative demiurge from among lesser transcendent beings is not characteristic of Akan mythic allusions to beginnings. As in much of West Africa, the separation between the Supreme Being and mortals is often attributed to a post-creational offence: an old woman pounding fufu (mashed yam or other starchy tubers) kept striking Onyankopon, symbolized by a nearby and accessible sky, until He withdrew from the range of human pestles. This original sin was further compounded by the old woman's laughable attempt to re-bridge the gap between earth and the sky by raising a column of mortars, from which she foolishly borrowed the bottommost mortar to add the topmost link.

Furthermore, among the Akan peoples, much more mythic attention is given to anthropogony than to cosmogony. Thus, traditional Akan tales attribute man's origins to weaving by the Great Spider (Ananse Kokuroko, "a nickname for Onyame") or to man's emergence from the earth or descent from the sky. Certain clan-centred myths, with understandable hyperbole, even seem to suggest a certain priority for anthropogony over cosmogony. Such a myth, for instance, was first disclosed to Rattray at the sacred grove in Asantemanso by the venerable queenmother, who told him that "Odomankoma (the Creator) on his journey about the earth 'making things' met these people (the matrilineal ancestors of the Aduana and Oyoko clans) already settled here.'" Rattray notes that this curious motif of Asantemanso tradition "recurs in the myths of other clans."

The clan-centred notion that the matrilineal ancestors (nananom nsamanfo) had emerged from the earth even before the creative
journey of Odomankoma may serve to underline the contention of Busia\textsuperscript{28} that veneration of matrilineal ancestors is more fundamental to Akan religiousness than the sacrificial worship of another set of transcendent beings (once again, of course, there is no common term), the abosom (singular, abosom). Identified, for the most part, with rocks, large trees (especially the silk-cotton tree) and the rivers that flow through the Akan areas, these abosom, usually referred to in English as the ‘gods’, serve as specialists deputized by Onyame to exercise more-than-human but less-than-supreme power.\textsuperscript{29}

Whereas Akan ancestors are inherited in the culturally dominant matrilineal clan (abusua), the abosom generally pass from generation to generation by transmission along the submerged patrilinage descent group (ntoro).\textsuperscript{30} In modern times, the combined effects of missionary history and secularization have often whittled away the memory of ntoro groupings and their respective abosom. But the reality of matrilineal clanship and the ancestor veneration it entails remain vital elements in the lives of our Akan contemporaries, even those who have forgotten or renounced the patrilineally inherited abosom.

As is the case with the oriṣa among the Yoruba, the abosom can be acquired not only by patrilinage descent but also as the result of a ‘call’ experienced by those whom the abosom are said to possess. Even before the advent of missionary traditions of faith, however, Akan attitudes towards at least some of the abosom could be said to “depend upon their success...(They) are treated with respect if they deliver the goods, and with contempt if they fail.”\textsuperscript{31} Attitudes towards the ancestors, however, are much more consistently reverential: their authority is often invoked, even today, as laying the foundations for the moral order.

Although, among the Yoruba, ancestors more remote than one’s grandparents are seldom revered individually unless they are considered to be oriṣa, among the Akan peoples, little confusion is possible between the matrilineal ancestors and the abosom.\textsuperscript{32} The latter are generally not ancestors, even if they are sometimes respectfully addressed as Nana (Grandsire); so, too, is any great personage. Yoruba devotion to the oriṣa, characterized by Bascom as “conceptually ancestor worship”, has only a partial parallel in Akan reverence for the abosom. Akan veneration for generations of named matrilineal ancestors does not, in any sense, correspond to
the rather limited Yoruba devotion to deceased parents and (occasionally) paternal grandparents, individually named as such.

In summary, then, it can be said that Onyame (Onyankopon) is credited with a much more active role in the work of origination than is Olodumare (Olorum), although comparatively little consistent Akan mythology describes the process involved. Ranged in the intermediate levels between Onyame and mortal beings are two fairly independent lines of less-than-supreme beings: matrilineally inherited ancestors and the nature-connected abosom, often transmitted in the patrilineage, the former line being dominant in Akan culture and the latter somewhat submerged. Confusion is seldom possible between nananom nsamanfo and abosom in Akan areas. For the Yoruba, on the other hand, the more important and distant ancestors are treated as oriṣa and the sacrificial cult of individually commemorated and more closely related ancestors is very limited, often stopping with one's own deceased parents. Under the rather august presidency of Olodumare (Olorun), who deputizes worldly matters to subordinates, various oriṣa, combining ancestral and nature-connected identities, can be intellectually ranged. Ancestors among the Yoruba, who have not become oriṣa, can hardly be described as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and mortals.

III

The distinction between the oriṣa of the Yoruba and the abosom of the Akan peoples—both usually referred to as 'gods' in synoptic overviews of what is often called, too simplistically, 'African Traditional Religion'—may be taken as a concrete illustration of the need for greater terminological care in the description of how two great West African communities have approached the transcendent. The oriṣa and the abosom deserve separate and distinct places on a list of technical terms.

Finally, it should be noted, in the process of dismantling the category of 'God and the gods' in West Africa, that both the Yoruba and Akan populations of West Africa are better equipped linguistically than are Semites, Greeks, Romans and their inheritors to express the absolute uniqueness of God. There is no need for Olodumare (Olorun) or Onyame (Onyankopon) to arise above the "other gods", as Psalm 82 bids Him. It would seem, in fact,
that even before Muslims and Christians arrived in the West African forest zone, where both the Akan and Yoruba peoples live, speakers of Yoruba and Akan were assured of the supremacy of the One Whom a modern theologian calls "the incomprehensible term of human transcendence."³³

NOTES

* This paper, in a somewhat different form, was first presented at a symposium held in honour of Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions, June 1979.


³ Jacobsen 192.


⁵ Dahood, 270.

⁶ Dahood, 268.

⁷ The Hebrew equivalent of upper-case status in English may be the singular use of the plural of respect, sometimes with a definite article, but always with a singular verb. The Arabic equivalent may be the unique word *Allah* apparently derived from the fusion of the definite article *(al-)* with *ilah*.


¹⁰ See Note 7.


¹³ *The Bible in Yoruba Lagos*: The Bible Society of Nigeria 1969.


¹⁵ Peter Morton-Williams, 'An outline of the cosmology and cult organisation of the Oyo Yoruba,' *Africa* 34 1964, esp. 245-249.


²² *Ashanti Proverbs* (1916); *Ashanti* (1923); *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (1927); *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (1929); *Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales* (1930); all published by Oxford at the Clarendon Press.
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23 J. B. Danquah, The Akan Doctrine of God, London: Frank Cass 2 ed. 1968), esp. Section two, chapter 3. Not all of Danquah’s speculations as to Levantine origins for Akan names for God should be taken seriously, although his discussions of internal etymology are sometimes illuminating.


26 Hermann Baumann, Schöpfung und Urzeit des Menschen im Mythus der Afrikanischen Völker, Berlin: Reimer 1933, 141.

27 Rattray, Ashanti, 124.


29 Although most Akan populations are matrilineal in their social structure, a minority follow patrilineal social patterns, most notably the people of Mampong, Mamfe and Larteh, as well as the Akan in the northern Volta Region of modern China.

30 It must be emphasized that, while one generally is disposed to potential possession by one’s father’s obosom, individual problems can sometimes result in possession by a completely unrelated obosom or even by one revered in the matrilineal clan. Nevertheless, the general rule still holds. I am grateful to Kenneth K. A. Anti, a doctoral candidate in the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, for this precision, as well as to Professor J. S. Pobee for further clarification.

31 Busia in Forde, 205.

32 Kenneth K. A. Anti has, however, pointed out that certain myths and varieties of ritual practices indicate the possibility that some deceased men and women of the past, most notably those who served abosom in a priestly capacity, become abosom after their death. See K. K. A. Anti, ‘Relationship between the Supreme Being and the lesser gods of the Akan’, M. A. Diss., University of Ghana, 1978, esp. 40-42 (Cited with the author’s permission.) Nevertheless, the human origins of such abosom do not necessarily imply that they are matrilineal ancestors of those whom they are said to possess.