

Disobedient Asante shall die, but Okomfo Anokye will live forever! A Note on an Asante Eschatological Response to the Mystery of Death

De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway, University of Cape Coast

Yaw Sarkodie Agyemang, University of Cape Coast

Emanating from the contexts of history, cultural studies, and religious studies, this work explores oral history about Okomfo Anokye, the legendary priest of the Asante people, to investigate the meaning and representation of death within the milieu of indigenous Asante cosmology. The Asante are an aboriginal group, within the larger Akan ethnic group, in Ghana, West Africa. Asante became a polity in the second half of the seventeenth century and a supreme West African chiefdom by the end of the eighteenth century. The confederacy started under two leaders – Osei Tutu, the first chief, and Okomfo (Priest) Anokye, the spiritual advisor and high priest. These “almost apotheosised” men used pragmatic politics, diplomacy and magico-religious means to engineer an Asante history, culture, and national image. Moreover, Okomfo Anokye’s legendary mystic-magician personae inscribed in Asante oral history and traditions certain myths for the explanation of the mystery of life and death. Renowned African philosophers such as Danquah,¹ Wiredu² and Gyekye,³ have discussed Asante and Akan philosophical responses to death. Conversely, this essay explores Asante conceptions and rationalisation of death within the context of an Okomfo Anokye-centred and inspired myth. This study will unpack the narrative of this indigenous myth and present a hermeneutics of inner ideas therein which enable Asante to personify death, interpret its pervasiveness and invincibility, and explain physical expiration of bodily (transient) life as an inevitable transit into another type of life, the spiritual. This showcases an indigenous people’s contribution to the larger discourse on humankind’s attempt to deal with the reality of death.

¹ J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God*, 2nd edition (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968).

² Kwasi Wiredu, “Death and the Afterlife in African Culture,” in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Washington D. C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992), and Kwasi Wiredu, “African Philosophical Tradition: A Case Study of the Akan,” in *African-American Perspectives and Philosophical Traditions*, ed. John P. Pittman (New York: Routledge, 1997).

³ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

Introduction

Asante, of *Asanteman*, is one of the African aboriginal groups that constitute Ghana in West Africa. The word Asante can be contextualised to mean the people, their territory, and their language. Other orthographical constructs of Asante are *Asuantsi*, *Asiante*, Ashanti and Ashantee.⁴ However, the Asante people and nation, collectively known in the Asante language as *Asanteman* (literally, Asante state),⁵ form part of the cluster of other several peoples and ancillary indigenous states that make up the Akan ethnic group. The Akan, the largest ethnic group in Ghana, originally and predominantly occupies the tropical rainforest, although a few constituent-ethnic groups of the Akan, such as the Fante, occupy the southern coastal shrub of Ghana. The Asante territory is in the tropical rainforest zone of Ghana.

This work explores the oral history of Asante about Okomfo Anokye, the legendary priest of the Asante people, in order to unpack the key Asante conception and rationalisation of death within the framework and hermeneutics of the inner ideas of an Okomfo Anokye-centred and inspired myth. Okomfo Anokye was also known as Kwame Agyei Frempon, and he had different appellations such as Kotobre, Obiri Komfo, and Osiahene. In this work we shall refer to him as Okomfo Anokye or simply Anokye. The Okomfo Anokye-centred and inspired myth has enabled Asante to further personify and interpret the pervasiveness and invincibility of death, and explain physical expiration of the ephemeral bodily life as an inevitable transit to a spiritual life.

A Brief Mapping of the History of the Evolution and Establishment of Asante

Asante evolved in the last years of the second part of the seventeenth century as an organised confederacy comprising a small constellation of related minor matrilineal chief-ruled *aman*. Mary Owusu, in *Prempeh II and the Making of Modern Asante*, posits that it is difficult to trace the genesis of the Asante because their ancient indigenous history is unwritten, and steeped in oral tradition and myth.⁶ She states that the common answer that is likely to come from an Asante when the question about origins is posed is: “We [Asante] came out of a hole in

⁴ J.G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Twi)*. 2nd edition. (Basel: Basel Evangelical Society, 1933), 427.

⁵ *Asanteman* is an agglutination of two words: Asante and *Oman*. *Oman* (plural is *aman*) is the Asante word, derived from the Akan language, for indigenous state/community. When *oman* is shortened, it becomes *man*, and it can be transposed as an Asante suffix to produce the term *Asanteman* (Asante state).

⁶ M.A.S. Owusu, *Prempeh II and the Making of Modern Asante* (Accra: Woeli Publishing, 2009), 1.

the ground at Asumegya Asantemanso (a place in Ghana) *the Eden of the Asante* [our emphasis] many years ago.”⁷ She, however, suggests that the allegorical legend can be understood from the perspectives of the individual *aman* that constituted *Asanteman*. The Asante *Amantuo Nson* (seven premier states) namely: Kumase (also spelt Kumasi), Mampon, Bekwai, Dwaben, Kokofu, Nsuta and Kumawu, which pioneered the formation of the confederacy, with Kumase as its capital, may have created the myth in their quest to necessarily forget, and make future generations forget, their individual past statuses and histories for the greater unity of the Asante nation.⁸ We, however, say that the myth about coming from a hole in the ground is similar to a primordial myth of origins of several indigenous cultures and peoples of Ghana and Africa, and among some of the First Nations in the Americas, and hence may have older meanings that predate Asante. Despite this similarity and the chance that the Asante type may be rooted in an older emergence myth that has been reconstituted, we find reason in the strength and legitimacy of the notion of multivocality of myths to locate grounds in Mary Owusu’s observation that the myth for the Asante, which evolved in the late years of the second part of the seventeenth century as an organised confederacy, was a tool of nation building. It, therefore, symbolically marked a rebirth of the states under a new leadership, and signified their “... new birth and a new emergence... from... the bowels of Mother Earth herself who gave life to humanity.”⁹

The main reason for the early union among the states was their shared desire, as vassals, to overcome the imperial hegemony of Denkyera (or Denkyira) – a powerful chiefdom in pre-colonial Ghana. Thus, the term Asante evolved from the agglutination of the Akan Twi language radices *Asa* or *Esa* (war) and *Nti* (reason or because), which suggests that the vassal states became integrated because of a war to liberate themselves. The victorious confederacy assimilated other communities, grew in size to become *Asanteman*, and flouted the conventional understanding that alliances collapse when their common enemy is overpowered. The Asante realm used diplomacy, intimidation, coercion and straightforward conquest to dominate its neighbours during the first century of the Union.¹⁰ Its leaders helped her to engineer a national and cultural ideology, identity and image, and a complex way of life, which emanated intricate socio-political aspects and useful features. By the end of the eighteenth century, Asante had become a supreme chiefdom in West Africa.¹¹ By the late nineteenth century, Asante had developed a sophisticated bureaucratic government, tiered in structure, and in an imperial mould. The nation had developed its political

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Adu Boahen, *Topics in West African History* (London: Longman, 1980), 70.

traditions. The *Asantehene*, the Paramount Chief of the Union, was the custodian and occupant of the revered *Sikadwa Kofi* (the legendary Golden Stool Kofi of the Asante).

Legend has it that *Sikadwa Kofi*, the Golden Stool that the Asante hold in the highest regard as a national spiritual and political treasure, was generated by the *Abosom* (deities) and spiritual ancestors of Asante, and magically conjured from the sky by Okomfo Anokye, the first *Okomfopanyin* (High-priest) of Asante, to be the symbolic soul of Asante, emblem of political authority, and evidence of the unique and sacred ordination of the *Asantehene*.¹² The first *Asantehene* was Osei Tutu. An Asante can therefore be “defined politically as any person who owes allegiance to the Golden Stool [and its occupant].”¹³ The *Asanteman Hyiamu* (Asante Council) supported the *Asantehene* to govern and to direct the socio-political affairs of Asante. The council was constituted of the *Amanhene* (Paramount chiefs) of the member states of the confederacy, and the *Asantehene* was their *primus inter pares*. The *Amanhene* also governed their domains with the help of councils made up of the correct representatives (chiefs) of districts within the constituent states.¹⁴

The imperial ambitions of *Asanteman* threatened smaller African polities and imperial European powers. The colonising British succeeded, after several failures, in capturing the Asante capital Kumase in 1896, and arrested, deposed and exiled the *Asantehene*, along with his mother and some members of the royal family, together with some *Amanhene* and Kumase divisional chiefs. The British crushed a subsequent rebellion – the Yaa Asantewaa War – and, in 1901, declared *Asanteman* as a colony of Great Britain.¹⁵ The colonising of Asante did not obliterate most of the conceptual anchors of her indigenous worldview and political traditions. But who were the main leading architects of the primary political, constitutional and legal structures and myths of Asante? The confederacy started under two leaders, who were also personal friends – Osei Tutu and Okomfo Anokye. These almost apotheosised men used pragmatic politics, diplomacy and magico-religious means to engineer an Asante history, culture, and national image. However, it was the awe-inspiring Okomfo Anokye

¹² S.A. Shokpeka, “Myth in the context of African Traditional Histories: Can it be called ‘Applied History’?,” *History in Africa* 32 (2005): 485-91; Yaw Sarkodie Agyemang, “Okomfo Anokye and Nation Building in Ghana: A Reflection on Ancestors, Myth and Nation building,” *Drumspeak: International Journal of Research in the Humanities*, 2/3 (2009): 150-76. See also R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 289-290.

¹³ Agyemang, “Okomfo Anokye and Nation Building,” 152.

¹⁴ K.A. Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951); J.E. Casely-Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions* (London: Frank Cass, 1905).

¹⁵ Adu Boahen, *Yaa Asantewaa and the British-Asante War of 1900-1901* (Accra: Sub Saharan Publishers, 2003).

who, purported to have used his magical powers to help Osei Tutu and the Asante confederacy to defeat the Denkyera, was responsible for binding the foundational states of the union with a mystical oath, and laying the foundation of the Asante constitution which made Osei Tutu the *Asantehene*, and his clan, the Oyoko, the sole providers of future *Asantehene*. As a divine lawgiver, Okomfo Anokye is remembered in Asante lore as the giver of the seventy-seven laws of Asante. Anokye may be popularly remembered for many magical feats, including his conjuration of the Golden Stool, and the seventy-seven laws, which constituted broad moral and political injunctions and civil and criminal codes to regulate social life and the command that gave the *Asantehene* the exclusive right to exercise the death penalty.¹⁶ However, a stronger memory about Anokye is also alive among the Asante because the confluence of his mysterious persona and religious life and the Asante community and history helped the Asante to fashion a key myth from that intersection to have a comprehension of the mystery of death.

Humanity and Life After Death

In the worldview of Asante, death (*owuo*) was part of the universal order, whose main feature was life (*nkwa*) as created by God (*Onyame*, a name which could be translated as Absolute Satisfier). Life in the spiritual world follows life in the physical world hence the saying *Obra twa owuo* (death is the outcome of life). There was thus an intimate link between the earthly life in the created organic world and that in the spiritual after world. It was for this reason that those who had life on earth offered prayers of veneration, remembrance, and requests, sacrifices, and made libation to the elevated blessed ancestors (*nananom*)¹⁷ of the spiritual realms to make different appeals and maintain their familial relationship with the ancestors. Ancestors have a specific meaning here. The Asante ancestors are the *special* dead, for example, men and women who have physically died and have moved on to live in solace in the spiritual world where they continue to be active members of the lives of their living relatives. The emphasis on special shows that not all dead people become ancestors. Instead the special dead are those who led exemplary and just lives when they were alive. Those who led bad and unjust lives are punished by the ancestors and they are made to roam

¹⁶ We wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of our work who drew our attention to the fact that there are many interesting parallels between the Asanteman of Ghana and the Haudenosaunee Iroquois confederacy of North America. We agree with the reviewer that it would be an interesting comparative study since both evolved in much the same way with the mystical Peacemaker confederating the Five Iroquois Nations much like Okomfo Anokye did with the Seven Nations. Even the Haudenosaunee story of Journey to Day Light land has to do with defeating death.

¹⁷ Singular is *ana* or *nana*.

aimlessly and be on the periphery of the spiritual abode and circle or court of ancestorhood known as *Nananom nsiedo* or *asamando*. Ancestors can seek the permission of *Onyame* and choose, for different reasons, to reincarnate; they are born, as children, into their societies to help with the development of society and the perpetuation of physical life.

The conception of the duality of reality by the Asante therefore suggests that the human being (*onipa*) is also made up of physical and spiritual parts. The physical, is the body (*honam dua*). It is transient and destined in due time to expire and decompose into the bowels of the earth (*asaase ase*). The spiritual part consists of the soul (*okra*), spirit (*sunsum*) and male totemic spirit (*ntoro*). They are not subjects of this transience. The soul, which is the main breath and divine essence of life (*nkwa*), comes directly from God. God is immortal, so the immortal soul returns to its source when the body perishes. Death is therefore physical and not spiritual. Audacious pithy proverbs of Asante like *Onyame bewu ansa mewu* (God [the Pre-existent and eternal one and the effective cause of all reality] will die before I die) brings to light the Asante belief in the eternity of this spiritual essence of humans. The experience of life (*nkwa*) on earth (*ewiasi*, which literally means beneath the sun) is therefore a transitory one for the soul to continue living, either in happiness or misery, in another dimension of existence. The Asante worldview thus embraces the life of the living, the unconsciousness of the dead, and the afterlife or life after death experience of the ancestors, in a continuous stream of transitions, between arcs and dimensions of reality, which together forms a vast dynamic cosmogony and eschatology. Expressively, the concept of an afterlife gives people the hope that life is a cycle and does not end with physical death. It helps to deepen human consciousness to view the image of death not as a terrifying irremediable loss and destruction.

Yet, the Asante have also worried about the physical termination of life on earth. Why should humans die and leave their possessions behind? Why should they leave loved ones behind with the notion that someday, somewhere in the spirit realm they shall meet again or if God permits reincarnation would bring them together in the physical realm? The end of human life on earth, which is seen as a return to a state of emptiness as far as ownership of material goods are concerned, a condition of fundamental destitution and a reduction of a once vigorous mortal to a state of permanent inaction, putrefaction and oblivion, thus incites several forms of pain, weeping, grief, and mourning. These manifestations of loss express human discomfort in the face of the fundamental mysterious phenomenon of death. Thus, in an Asante dirge death is personified as wicked (*Owuo tri mu yeden* or *Owuo ye onipa boneni*). Death is anthropomorphically deemed as one who will never give out what he or she holds. *Owuo kuta ade a odasani nntmumi nngye*, (literally, no living person can collect something (a dead person) from the hands of death), is what another Asante dirge says. Death has the

final say over life suggest these two dirges.¹⁸

Why can humans not live forever on earth? The Asante people have two sayings: *Asem biara wo ne farebae* and *Biribiara wo ne nkyerease*, which explicitly mean “everything has what brought it about” and “everything has its explanation,” respectively. The Asante therefore have produced psychological, rational, quasi-physical explanations and their various combinations of them as eschatological responses to the mystery of the invincibility, prevalence and imminence of death. One dominant response is a myth which we refer to as the Okomfo Anokye myth of death (hereafter OAMD). We shall subsequently visit the relevance of the OAMD to Asante cosmology and its status in the oral tradition of Asante.

Myths, including aetiological ones, according to Jan Vansina, in his seminal work on the vitality of oral traditions within the context of African history and historiography,¹⁹ are significant sources of factual historical information, which can aid in the construction of aspects of African history, particularly the pre-colonial and pre-literate periods.²⁰ They are very valuable sources for the history of religion, particularly for the history of beliefs.²¹ However, in the context of this study, the OAMD, found in the frame of Asante history is not being viewed as a source of historical information about Asante. It is being examined as a people’s eschatological response, and explanation, fashioned in the flow of their history, to the mystery of death.

Siting the OAMD in the context of Asante Cosmology and History

Central to the focus of this essay, it was the Okomfo Anokye’s legendary mystic-magician personae, which inscribed in Asante oral history and traditions certain myths for the explanation of the mystery of life and death. One of such myths, the OAMD, explains the invincibility of death and why every Asante dies. Thus, an interesting aspect of Okomfo Anokye’s existence, a life of a religious individual, in Asante oral history, is how it became a rallying point for the Asante collective to draw a self-understanding about death which is unique to their Asante community identity and special to their particular history within the broader history of the Akan and Ghana in general.

The people who founded Asante, like all humanity, were, in fact, not new to death. They knew death and had suffered from that natural phenomenon.

¹⁸ Dirges derived from participant observation of Asante funeral rites in Kumasi, Kwaman and Asante Mampon.

¹⁹ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, H.M. Wright (trans.) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 1-5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Actually their wars had brought death to many and one of the seventy-seven laws of Okomfo Anokye gave the *Asantehene* the power of life or death, which is the exclusive right to exercise the death penalty. As members of the Akan group they had an aetiological myth, commonly shared by the Akan, to explain how death came into the world when *Onyame* created the world and humans.

The myth simply relayed that God gave a message of life to the dog and the message of death to the tortoise (but one variation says it was the chameleon). The message of the animal, which would reach humankind first, would be the divine order. In one way or the other, the bearer of the message of death got to humankind first hence death became the lot of humans.²² This myth has been given several interpretations. Despite the multivocality of the myth, what is important at this point is the seemingly puzzle of death.

Asante, under Osei Tutu and Anokye conquered many states and became powerful. Yet death proved to be more powerful than the *Asantehene*. Osei Tutu himself, virtually considered a divine leader, tradition avers, was killed in a war with the Akyem, who were rivals of Asante. So naturally, the powerful Asante could not fathom the invincibility of death. They did not have an explanation for it. It is for this reason that Asante oral tradition asserts through the OAMD that Okomfo Anokye decided to find the panacea to death for the Asante. It is this supposed singular quest of the mysterious priest that would ultimately bring out an eschatological explanation to why death has continued to take the Asante.

Conceptualising Myths

The intellectual, historical, and social relevance of myth, from the Greek root *muthos*, have gained much academic attention. Langer²³ and Malinowski²⁴ have all noted the *truths* in myths. Shokpeka sees the historicity in African oral narrative and defines myths in the African cultural milieu as "...stories about the very earliest past that explain the origin of the societies, their institutions and culture, the activities of some noteworthy men in those societies, and their relationship with one another..."²⁵ Eliade throws much light on myths and defines a myth as a narration of

a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings' ... [M]yth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of

²² See Uli Beier, ed., *The Origin of Life and Death: African Creation Myths* (London and Nairobi: Heinemann, 1966) for similar stories.

²³ Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956).

²⁴ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (New York: Norton and Co., 1926).

²⁵ Shokpeka "Myth in the context of African Traditional histories," 487.

reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behaviour, an institution...

with the supernatural beings as the actors.²⁶ He also describes myth as the sacred tradition, primordial revelation, exemplary model.²⁷ Eliade's observations about myth are consistent with the general understanding of myths as sacred stories concerning the origins of the world or how the world, creatures and certain societal phenomena originated or came to have their present form. Since myth narrates events that are attributed to the supernatural, it often forms the basis of theology. According to Bascom,

Myths are prose narratives which in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful account of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith, they are taught to be believed, and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt or beliefs. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred, and they are often associated with theology and ritual.²⁸

As embodiments of dogma, and normally sacred in character, and related with theology and religious ceremonies²⁹ myths account for the origin of various phenomena and features in the world in the cosmological accounts and ideas of cosmogony of societies.

Myths have commonly been deemed as those things that deal with the primordial past and are associated with the sacred. However, can myth not transcend the confines of antiquity to the present? Do myths not tell stories about the immediate past, which can be empirically attested to by the living? Is it justifiable to call the notion that says that the United States of America is a land of opportunities and anybody no matter the educational and social status has the chance to succeed in life endeavours there a myth? Is this not an attempt to reinforce individualism and hard work? Do Americans not use the lives of Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Carnegie, Henry Ford, George Washington and lately Bill Gates to create and perpetuate this myth?³⁰ There is a myth that Ghanaians are hospitable especially to strangers. While it is true as in

²⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 5-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1

²⁸ William Bascom, "The Forms of Folktale: Prose Narrative," *Journal of American Folktales* 78 (1965): 2.

²⁹ Patrick Pender-Cudlip, "Oral Tradition and Anthropological Analysis," *Azania* 7 (1972): 6.

³⁰ J.G. Boswell, *The role of national development in determining the policy and structure of education: A study of education as an essential factor in the development of the nation state*, 24, [.http://www.gwu.edu/~edpol/manuscript](http://www.gwu.edu/~edpol/manuscript).

the case of America that not everyone succeeds in life and in the Ghanaian context it is equally true that not all people are hospitable towards strangers, the general notion is that such stories are true. The two examples are social and intellectual constructs that explain the two societies' self image. Myth builds stereotypes to portray certain characteristics that a society deems relevant for nation building. Is it justifiable to call such stories myths and do they have the same status as those ancient stories that involve humans and the sacred?

One also notes that these stories make no reference to the sacred. Why is it that ancient myths are almost always associated with the sacred but contemporary myths may have no sacred reference point? The answer is simple. Myth expresses a prevailing worldview. Thus, in a society where there is a sacred underpinning to thought and behaviour, myth would capture this worldview. Alternatively, myth captures the context where the sacred impact is waning and other alternative means of explicating rise to prominence. Though myths are garnished they are either symbolised or literal stories about real events.³¹ Thus, myth in a sense is applied history. The definition is permeable to include *true* stories fixed within contemporary society that a community has socially, intellectually and purposively constructed to mirror her self image – stereotyping. Consequently, the myth of Anokye and death which we narrate below constitutes the Asante self image in their relation with death using their quintessential priest, Anokye as a model to convey this image. How does the historical experience about the intersection of Asante society and Anokye's mystical person help Asante to eschatologically deal with death? To respond to this question, let us understand the myth on Anokye and death.

Making sense of the Ambiguities in Death as a Puzzle: OAMD to the Rescue?

The Asante over the years have struggled to understand the phenomenon of death and its bond to life. Thus, the divine poet drummer of Asante society and courts, who is customarily considered as a key conveyor of Asante oral tradition and cosmovision concepts, drums thus:

Odomankoma (the Creator) boo adie

The Creator created things
(Universe)

Borebore boo adie

The Hewer created things.

Oboo adie ben?

What did he create?

Oboo Esen.

He created the court crier
(Herald in the palace)

³¹ Boswell, *The role of national development*, 24.

Oboo Okyerema

He created the Divine Poet
Drummer

Oboo Kwaowuo Kwabrafo.

He created Death, the big
executioner (killer)

In this Asante poetic expression aspect of the Akan creation story the drummer, in this context, is indicating that there is cosmic order in the created universe, which includes the human world. At the same time, he is also saying in a symbolical language that while God created order, he also animated knowledge, and finally made death in the universe. In that symbolic language, the universe is construed as the royal court of *Odomankoma*. Like the court of the Asante chief, the order in it is symbolised by the executive official called *Esen*. The knowledge is represented by the official called *Okyerema*, and the death (*owuo*) is represented by the state's chief executioner (known as *Obrafo*).

In every court of the Asante chief or any traditional political gathering where the regal officials are present it is the *Esen* that calls the people gathered into order. Because he essentially maintains order his absence would mean chaos. The *Okyerema* who skilfully uses the talking drums to communicate ideas about history and wisdom ways to chiefs and elders and the people is deemed the divine drummer who symbolises and personifies knowledge in Asante. Symbolically he, being knowledge, was a primal creation by God (*Odomankoma*, whose other manifestation is *Onyame*); thus knowledge is a vital thing to be present and acquired in the world. In fact, it was with knowledge – the divine principle of knowing which was already in the nature of *Odomankoma*, just as the timeless state of order and the principle of *ceasing to be* or death were already in the divine faculty and essence of *Odomankoma* – that cosmic order was initiated to manifest in the created universe by the knowledgeable *Odomankoma*. Knowledge was later made to manifest to dwell among humans and for humans to acquire some of it. When the court crier (*Esen*) shouts for order in the palace, and the chief speaks, it is believed that he speaks with the intelligence and awareness of the state and ancestors, which are reposed and kept in the *Okyerema* – the symbolic embodiment of wisdom and knowledge. Thus, through this sequential ordering of official roles and duties in the court one can appreciate the Asante view that knowledge acquired in the world must be brought to bear in the life of both the individual and the community. Knowledge, including the laws of the land and myth of the people, is not acquired for its own sake. It is utilitarian with the teleos of ordering the individual and collective life.³²

³² For a fuller discussion on knowledge, its purpose and its contra-distinction from wisdom in Asante thought read Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa, 1996), 137-145.

Lastly, the *Obrafo* (or *Kwabrafo*), as the name implies, is the official who executes anyone whose right to live is taken from him or her by the state. He is a dreaded official in the palace of every Asante chief because he represents death, which is indispensable in the universe and the Akan world, because it was a natural thing among the first things that *Odomankoma* made and put in the universe, his court. Death is *Odomankoma*'s chief executioner (*Kwaowuo Kwabrafo*), a feared and powerful official in God's court. Death therefore became a cosmically mandated logical and powerful corollary of life.

Because death truncates the experience of living, it is deemed very powerful, so powerful that it is a threat to even the one who created it. Thus, there is a perplexing popular Asante saying that suggests that the power of death even could take the creator. The saying is: "*Odomankoma* (God the creator) created death for death to take him" (*Odomankoma boo Owuo ama Owuo abefa no*). This confounding saying suggests that *Odomankoma* also known as *Tete Kwaframoa* (literally, the ancient of days), the author of life and death, even succumbed to the power of death. This killing of the creator is not literal. It symbolically reveals the frustration of the Asante about the unavoidability of death. However, Kofi Asare Opoku in reviewing Anthony Ephirim-Donkor's work *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*³³ has tried to unknot the perplexity of the adage by averring that the wise saying means that "God created death and death has killed him or her, and not God" because the philosophical nuance in the saying is reached when the Asante and Twi word *no* in the maxim is properly contextualised. The *no*, a pronoun which can mean him or her, refers to any deceased human being, a person, who had been created by God and ultimately devoured by death, but it does not refer to God who is immortal.³⁴

In our deliberations with some elderly Asante men and women who had much knowledge of the customs and lore of the study area, two opinions clearly emerged. Some of them understood the saying as a riddle (*asemkoa*) which needs deciphering. Though members of this school of thought could not fathom the idea of the death of *Odomankoma*, they consented that it needed a deeper reflection. The other school of thought concurred with Kofi Asare Opoku. However, we uphold the symbolic meaning of the saying that death killed its creator, *Odomankoma*. The reason is that the dirge is sung within the context of despair and frustration as we noticed in our participant observations. It is used to console the bereaved family to intimate to them that even if the Creator died mortals should not be all that dejected upon the demise of loved ones. The saying captures the ambiguity in the Asante understanding of death. It portrays the idea that if

³³ Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1997).

³⁴ See Kofi Asare Opoku's review of *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors* by Anthony Ephirim-Donkor in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66/4 (1998): 949.

death could kill its creator (*Odomankoma*) then human beings, not excluding Anokye, the great priest, cannot have an antidote to it. All humans shall succumb to it. But it was to further accentuate the invincibility of death that the Asante fashioned the OAMD, which says that the architect of the Asante nation attempted to have the final solution to death, to help them explain their transience and helplessness and frustration in the context of the reality of life and face of death. This myth also helps to keep the mystique and awe of the architect of Asante intact among the Asante. By so doing it also keeps the sacredness of the Asante state and the sanctity of its political structure which were created by no ordinary person but Anokye who was so powerful that he had the audacity to wrestle with death, and thus did not die an ordinary death, even if he died, like other people of Asante.

Anokye's Wrestle with Death

The myth of Anokye and his conflict with death simply says that after he had finished establishing Asante as a powerful state within the forest belt of the present day Ghana, Anokye decided to have an antidote to death so that the Asante would never die. He told the Asante that he was embarking on a journey that would last for seven years and seventy-seven days to bring *Owuo ano aduro*, (literally, medicine against death). The condition he gave was that nobody should wail as it is a normal practice for the Asante to wail as part of mourning the dead. He told them that he would remain in *Owuo krom*, (literally, death's town) if anyone flouted his command. On the fifth day, a certain woman cried that Anokye was dead. Consequently, Anokye never returned and could not bring the antidote to death to the Asante but rather death kept him in his town because of the disobedience of an unknown Asante woman. Moreover, the Asante people could not benefit from Anokye's attempt to free them from death. Death continued to be the lot of the Asante like all humankind. Thus, the Asante continue to die because of disobedience.

Another version of the myth relays that Anokye decided to fall into a deep trance for seven years and seventy-seven days in order to meet death in the spirit world and wrest the power that it uses to inflict death on Asante people. He promised that he would re-enter human form. He warned his people to abstain from thinking that he was dead and not to mourn him. He entered his room and locked the door. During the waiting period, his nephew, Barima Kwame Siaw Anim, perhaps impatient to inherit his property, pronounced his uncle dead and presided over his funeral.³⁵ They later found his room empty. During the course

³⁵ A. Crakye Denteh, *Asantehene Osee Tutu* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1985). See poetry verse 432. This work is poetry written in the Asante language and authored in verse (8.8.8.8. – a.b.a.b.). It was written to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Asanteman Council. It recounts the history

of the funeral it is said that Anokye while returning to his people met a hunter at the outskirts of the town and learnt from him what had happened in his absence. He then told the hunter that he was Anokye and had found the cure to death, but would not give it to his people for their disobedience. He thus departed to an unknown place and never returned to the Asante.³⁶ Hence, the Asante have continued to die.

Before we come to a discussion of the Asante myth, it must be noted that it has come to assume a place among the other myths of the bigger Akan ethnic group that point to their enduring struggle to make sense of death. One myth says that a hero was able to collect the palanquin of death which death used to convey the dead to the land of the dead. In so doing people stopped dying. They grew very old and it got to a point that the old people wished for death. Eventually, death's palanquin had to be returned to enable people to die and dying became a relief to the Asante. These two myths, especially that of Anokye show the Asante attempt to grapple with the phenomenon of dying. The pain, the ambivalence and the inevitability associated with dying are all encapsulated in the oral narratives on Anokye and death. Had it not been the disobedience of his people, the priest Anokye could have found and brought an antidote to deal with the pain of losing loved ones. This pain is also captured in another dirge which partly says "*Anokye ekofa Owuo aduro aba na Owuo afa no yi*," (or, "Anokye went to bring an antidote to death but death has taken him").

Making Meaning of Death: The OAMD as a Tool of Asante

The study of myth invites different approaches. There is one myth, for example, which takes every story as falling into the category of children's tales or for incredible religious origin, without any endeavour to relate it to the general scheme of real events. In this case, a myth lacks historicity; it is a story told for entertainment or for moral education. This understanding of mythology alienates it from the reality of life as experienced by real human beings in their day-to-day experiences. Mythology as part of worldview tries to respond to some of the basic or fundamental questions of human existence.³⁷

about the establishment of Asante and the works of Osei Tutu and Okomfo Anokye. It also deals with the reign of Opoku Ware I of the Asante.

³⁶ The myths were retold by Okyeame Banahene, one of the Asanthe's linguist or spokesperson, Kumasi Manhyia Palace and concurred by Okyeame Bronya, Ofinsohene's Palace, Ofinso Ashanti, January 2005.

³⁷ See some of the fundamental questions about life that worldview attempts to answer in C. Vidal, "Wat is een wereldbeeld?" (What is a worldview?), in Van Belle, H. & Van der Veken, J., eds, *Nieuwheid denken. De wetenschappen en het creatieve aspect van de werkelijkheid* (Acco, Leuven, 2008), 4.

De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway and Yaw Sarkodie Agyemang, "Disobedient Asante shall die, but Okomfo Anokye will live forever! A Note on an Asante Eschatological Response to the Mystery of Death." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* (2017), Religious Individuals and Collective Identities: Special Issue on Oral History and Religion

Alternatively, a myth can be considered purely symbolic. In this case, the identification of the symbols will vary according to the fashion of the period. We on our part see myth through the spectacle of Shokpeka quoted above and Berdyaev, who see and configure myth as no fiction but a reality, because “[A]ll great historical epochs, even those of modern history with their tendency to discredit mythology, give rise to myths.”³⁸ Myth is also a tool of memory. That is, behind the myth lies the original primordial history. Mythology is therefore the gossamer cloak of folk memory overlaying the bare bones of pre-written history. Consequently, in the context of the OAMD, the death of an individual, or Anokye, and the Asante reflection on it partly form the basis of their understanding and response to the naked truth of death. The myth of Anokye and death relates to the shadowy beginnings of the pre-written history of Asante and the Asante concern for the mystery of death. The work of the mythographer or mythologist may not be always as spectacular and tangible as the archaeologists. However, myths contain elements of encoded facts and ideas and truths about reality or reality as understood by a given society, and for example had it not been for the mythical tales of Troy, the legendary archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann would never have dug there and another chapter to history would have been closed. The study of myth establishes a link between pre-written history and written history and shows that all super humans were once humans and the marvellous and incredible elements in these stories are mainly due to misunderstanding.

Even though the priest Anokye did not appear by name in any written historical source before the nineteenth century, Anokye has been shown as an eighteenth century historical figure who really existed in many recent history books from some indigenous (Ghanaian) authors, such as Kwamena-Poh.³⁹ Our respondents in Kumasi, the capital of Asante, also believed that Anokye was a historical figure. The British Africanist historian McCaskie suggests that the priest was a necessary element in the Asante interpretation of their history.⁴⁰ In the Asante worldview magical explanations of phenomenon are common. Reality is a confluence of the physical and spiritual. The Asante therefore foregrounded this priest who could explain the otherwise magically unexplainable in historical events, such as why the conquest of the Asante on the Denkyera was successful, as a major item of explanation of other aspects of their history and ways of life.

³⁸ Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, translated from the Russian by George Reavey, (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1936), 78.

³⁹ M.A. Kwamena-Poh, *Government and politics in the Akuapem State 1730-1850* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

⁴⁰ T.C. McCaskie, “Okomfo Anokye of Asante society: Meaning, history and philosophy in an African society,” *Journal of African History*, 27/2 (1986): 315-339.

We cannot dispute the Asante oral account that he was a real person in Asante history. Whether he fought with death or not or he found the antidote to death or not cannot be proven. It is the social significance of the myth that his person has generated and its place in Asante history that we find a rationalisation of. In an earlier article of Yaw Sarkodie Agyemang,⁴¹ it was argued that two main interpretations could be deduced from the oral narratives on the demise of Anokye. One is that he died and the Asante did not want to reduce the mystery surrounding the priest and invented the story of his failed journey to conquer death. The other interpretation is that Anokye being a foreigner, originally from Awukugua in the country of the Akwapem, became a threat to Asante state security because he, as a key builder of Asante, knew the physical and spiritual secrets of its strengths and weaknesses. He was exterminated to protect those secrets. In this work, we want to go further than that of these two perspectives of the myth. Because of the multivocal nature of myths, the current perspective is that the myth constitutes the Asante attempt to grapple with death.

Before the formation of the Asante state and even in establishing its chiefdom, and defeating their overlord state Denkyera in the Feyiase war with Anokye's magical assistance, many people lost their lives. The Asante were familiar with death as a consequence of life; an enemy of life. The drum language piece quoted above buttresses this fact. How could they deal with the antagonism of death? Anokye had helped them to become a politically free people. Could he not help them to be free from death? The answer the Asante offer in the myth of Anokye and his conflict with death is that, they (Asante symbolised by the woman or the nephew who mourned a living person) disobeyed Okomfo Anokye and that thwarted his efforts to reveal the elixir of life and exiled him in an unknown place. It is anathema in Asante thought to mourn a person who is alive. Indeed, it is sacrilegious to do so. Thus, the greatest priest who ever lived was disobeyed. Out of the disobedience the Anokye did not reveal the antidote to death to the Asante and humankind. He did not come back to the world of a disobedient people.

The behaviour of the Asante in this myth is symbolic; it portrays perhaps their recognition of having betrayed Anokye by killing him for political expediency to protect the state history. They regretted their act of betraying the architect of the nation and the originator of key *state secrets*. They saw themselves as unfaithful people who intentionally lost their institutional memory. Perhaps, this is the origin of a popular Asante saying "*Asante nnkae*" ("the Asante (people) do not remember") as explained in a focus group discussion in Kumasi. In this discussion, some of the discussants tried to attribute the origin of this popular Asante saying to the death of Anokye. The word *kae* (remember) has its negation as *nnkae* ("not to remember" or "to forget" or "to betray"). Thus, the

⁴¹ Agyemang, "Okomfo Anokye and Nation Building."

discussants opined that the Asante people forgot or betrayed the architect of their nation by killing him or by doing something that portrayed betrayal. They decided not to remember the good political, social, spiritual and cultural things that Anokye did for them as a people. Though not all the discussants agreed to this, the view of the saying “the Asante (people) easily forget” as related to their extermination of Anokye was popular among the discussants.

No matter the circumstances surrounding the demise of Anokye, that is whether he was killed or died a natural death, the position of the paper is that the Asante people have been able to use his death in a symbolically reconfigured way to deal with two nagging and fundamental issues. These issues which all humankind in every generation and civilization is confronted to answer too are: “Why do humans die?” and “Where do humans go after death?” The answer the Asante derived from the expiration of Anokye is plainly that death though the lot of all humankind cannot be explained. Even the quintessential priest, the most powerful of all people, as opined in Asante thought, could not have an antidote to the venom of death. Anokye died and hence all Asante and humankind must die. How does a nation reduce the pain of death?

Two options were opened to the Asante. The first one was to put the blame on themselves, for they disobeyed Anokye. The second option was to accept the naked truth of death and immortalise him through remembrance. To the Asante these were not two options. Rather, the two sides of the same coin. They regretted their “disobedience” as gleaned from the saying “Asante easily forget (the good deeds of Anokye).” It was this disobedience which has made them to suffer the fate of death. Thus, while death metaphorised in the demise of Anokye who was betrayed or disobeyed by the Asante (symbolised by the old lady or the nephew) is regrettable or painful, it is one side of existence. The other side is human memory which immortalises the dead. Anokye is not to be forgotten. The Asante immortalise him by attributing the best values in their nation building to him. They immortalised him through the cult of the ancestors. He is an ancestor who is always remembered in worship and invoked in times of troubles which need the intervention and mediation of a priest as depicted in the ritual song sung by elderly Asante women in the Bomso Fofie shrine in Kumasi:

<i>Bra Anokye bra</i>	Come Anokye come
<i>Bra Anokye bra</i>	Come Anokye come
<i>Mere nya obi akose Anokye</i>	I wish I could get someone one to inform
<i>Komfo se,</i>	Anokye, the priest that
<i>Yere kom</i>	We are performing the priestly dance
<i>Sika dawuro</i>	Gold bell
<i>Obi amma</i>	If no one comes (to rescue us)
<i>Yere wu</i>	We are dying

Final Remarks

Life and death have occupied the attention of humankind in all generations and cultures. Different notions bordering both the supernatural and the natural, which often flows through and emerges from the use of myths, have provided some explanations in the past and the present. Myths about heroes and heroines have been socially constructed to explain the truth about human existence including death. That of Anokye or the OAMD is one such myth.

We hope that we have been able to use a historical religious life, which has become inextricably linked to Asante state politics, to provide a different vista through which we may view how the Asante see death in this essay. At once we see that death, in Asante cosmological view, is an unstoppable inevitable “something” they cannot flee from. It is “something” that their history, which is a representation of the past, and their memory, which ties them to the eternal present with what happened in the past, and informs and instructs them, will be with for a long time. It is “something” so elusive their greatest magician-politician and their own collective effort could not arrest, and the OAMD allows us to comprehend their frustration with death, and in a way their regrets over the part they played in its continued threat over their lives. Moreover, this paper has exposed to us the part of the mind of Asante concerning death which other works have not drawn attention to, and that is the acknowledgement of the Asante in their mythology of their own part in empowering death in their own lives through their own thoughts, actions and biases.

The Anokye story and OAMD as enshrined in Asante oral history narratives have assisted the Asante to realise that death and life are not opposites to choose from. Both constitute a continuum of human existence. As the OAMD has shown, everybody is bound to die, however they can continue to live in the memory of the physically alive. The veneration and immortalisation of Anokye who did not return to the land of the living of the Asante in the OAMD of the Asante memory bank of oral history accentuates this belief.

The functional mystery surrounding the person and demise of Okomfo Anokye, and the immortalised awareness about him in the collective memory of Asante, are revealed in writing in a poetic eulogy from an Asante oral tradition, in the work *Asantehene Osee Tutu*,⁴² which celebrated the Golden Jubilee of the Asanteman Council thus:

<i>Se Anokye wui a yennim;</i>	We don't know if Anokye died;
<i>Se otui a, yentumi nka;</i>	We cannot tell if he flew away;
<i>Onyame nkutoo na onim,</i>	God is the only one who knows,

⁴² Denteh, *Asantehene Osee Tutu*, verses 442-444.

<i>Nti yede no ahye ne nsa.</i>	So we have left him in the hands of God.
<i>Anokye ko dee, nso onkoe; Ne ho nkaee b'ro aduasa;</i>	Anokye has left, but he is not gone; Memorable things about him are more than thirty;
<i>Nnooma pa nso Anokye yoe, Kotoko were remf'ri no da.</i>	Many good things did Anokye do, Kotoko (Asante) will not ignore him.
<i>Senteman tumi mfitiasee Ne 'Pemsoo See ne n'Anokye</i>	The beginning of the power of Asante Is Osei and his Anokye....

The significance of Okomfo Anokye's individuality is not just how it animated a religious life which has become inseparably connected to Asante state politics, but how it has become a means which has afforded a community – Asante – the ability to philosophically engage the meaning of dying and accept that death has become the lot of all, and it remains a part of the historical progression of Asante. Whether he lived or not, his name and personality have become important elements in the construction of Asante history of state and identity formation and the existentialist formulation of an eschatological explanation for the invincibility of death and death's inseparability from the quiddity of life.