

**CHRISTIAN SERVICE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

**THE ONYANKOPON OF THE AKANS AND THE YAHWEH OF
ISRAELITES; A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

**PROJECT WORK
(LONG ESSAY)**

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DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY

JUNE, 2019

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BY

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**A LONG ESSAY SUBMITTED TO CHRISTIAN SERVICE UNIVERSITY
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DECLARATION

I, Dennis Owusu Agyei, do hereby declare that this project work report is the result of my own original research except for sections of which references have been duly made and to the best of my knowledge no part of it has been presented to this University College or any other institution for the award of a degree.

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DEDICATION

To Mr. Yaw Antoh who has contributed immensely to my University Education and my siblings as well as my nieces and nephews.

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CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The concept of God is an important and interesting aspect of theology, especially when approached from inter-cultural perspective. Mbiti after a thorough study of 300 peoples from all over Africa concluded that the notions of God as the Supreme Being is deeply rooted in African thought without a single exception. The Ashanti proverb ‘No one shows the child the Supreme Being’ justifies this notion.

Thus in Africa, everybody including children knows the existence of the Supreme Being. This knowledge of the existence of God is deeply rooted in their songs, proverbs, folklore, and oral tradition, among others. Almost all renowned African theologians, including Idowu, Danquah and Busia do strongly intimate the fact that idea of God in Africa did not arise from contact with the outside world. Mbiti remarks that African soil is rich enough to have germinated its own original religious perception.¹ Gyekye concurs that, belief in the existence of one God or in a life after death were deeply rooted in Africa before the advent of Islam and Christianity.²

This does not rule the fact that there has been notable influence on the idea of God through contact with the outside world. Though African Christian theologians strongly affirm the existence and originality of the notion of God in African thought, they usually conceptualize this Supreme Being according to the God proclaimed by the European missionaries.³ The message of the Christian gospel in particular brought by the missionaries to Africa included several aspects which were easily recognized and assimilated within the traditional culture and worldview of the Africans. This

¹John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heineman, 1998), 29- 30

²Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, (Sankofa Publishing Company,1996),4

³Agyarko, R.O. “God of life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of the ecological crisis.” *The Ecumenical Review* 65 no 1,(2013),51-6

entails the notions of the Supreme Being, the creation of the world and humanity, the alienation between humanity and the Supreme Being and the need for sacrifices to restore the relationship between the Supreme Being and human beings.⁴ The Akan worldview has come under scrutiny by many renowned scholars due to this notion. Of particular interest to this research paper is the Akan concept of the Supreme Being, *Onyankopon*.

The Akan are a meta-ethnicity predominantly speaking Central Tano languages and residing in the southern regions of the Ghana.⁵ They also make up a plurality of the populace in the Ivory Coast. The Akan consist of several subgroups of which the Ashanti are numerically dominant. The Akan have a common socio-economic and cultural system and speak a common language. The Akan people represent over 53% of the current population of twenty million in Ghana.⁶ Onyankopon has been their one and only God. The striking semblance between Onyankopon and the God of the missionaries influenced the translation of the bible into the Akan Language. However some scholars have raised serious objection to this. Okotp'Bitek, a philosopher accused Idowu, Danquah, Busia and other scholars as “intellectual smugglers” who draped the African gods in “awkward Hellenic garments.”⁷ He is of the view that identification of Oyankopon with Yahweh is creation of students of African religions and that the ordinary African in the countryside does not recognize it. This issue has serious implication for theology and Christianity in Africa. And this underscores the choice of the researcher, to critically examine the attributes of Onyankopon of the

⁴Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 29- 30

⁵ Isaac K. Chinebuah and H. Max J. Trutenau, *Languages of the Akan area: papers in Western Kwa linguistics and on the linguistic geography of the area of ancient*, (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 1976) 168.

⁶Agyarko, *God of life*,51

⁷Okotp' Bitek, *Religions of the Central Luo*(Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971), 7, 46.

Akan and Yahweh of the Hebrews to bring out points of divergences and convergences.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The European missionaries had a very negative attitudes towards almost all elements of the culture of the Akans. However, it is interesting to note that the notion of Onyankopon or Supreme Being became an exception with time. There have been concerns on whether the Onyankopon of the Akans, an indigenous deity, is the dynamic equivalent of Yahweh of the Israelites.

The rendering of God or Yahweh as Onyankopon in the translation of the Bible into the Akan language has attracted the concerns and critique of many scholars. If such critiques are justified theologically and linguistically, then it poses a serious question to the contextualization of the gospel in the Akan context. A rigorous comparison between the attributes of both deities is needed to resolve such tension.

1.2 Research Question

This research paper attempts to compare the Onyankopon of the Akan and the Yahweh of Israelites in order to answer these questions.

The major question: Is the Onyankopon of the Akan a dynamic equivalent of Yahweh of the Israelites?

The specific question the work looks at is “Can the Akan concept of God be deemed as a cult, as well as being fetish and idolatry in nature”?

1.4 Research Aim

The aim of the research is to examine if the concept of the Onyankopon of the Akans is the dynamic equivalent of the Yahweh of the Israelites.

1.5 Scope and Focus of the Study

Even though this research aims to draw a wider implication for the contextualisation of the gospel in Africa, it is limited to Twi speaking Akans.

1.6 Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative research and employs the comparative and historical critical approach. Comparative research is often employed in cross-cultural studies to identify, analyze and explain similarities and differences of a thin or a phenomenon across societies.⁸

1.6.1 Method of Data Collection

This research primarily deals with secondary data. Such data were accessed from books, thesis, journals, articles that are relevant to this work. Thus the study draws upon both published and unpublished materials of scholarly opinion.

1.8 Literature Review

The Akan Culture and the Gospel.

The relationship between culture and the gospel has been a subject of great interest to many renowned scholars. Particularly how the gospel brought by the missionaries engages the culture of Ghanaians has attracted the concerns of many scholars. Dankyi

⁸Fons J. R., *Types of Comparative Studies in Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Netherlands: Tilburg University Press, 1996), 112

talks of how the Gospel has adopted many cultural elements throughout its journey from Asia Minor and Egypt in North Africa through Greek, Roman, German, British and American regions. He then concludes that Christianity has more or less become a beggar of some sort from the cultures it encounters in its never ending and winding journeys and wonderings.⁹ Bediako also agrees that in the propagation of the gospel, there is an ‘engagement’ between culture and the Good News.¹⁰ The result of such engagement is that the gospel and culture influences each other for their mutual benefit. Such were the hopes of Addae-Boateng who holds that indigenous culture and the gospel should enrich one another through inculturation.¹¹ To the disappointment of many, the European missionaries’ attitude to the culture and worldview of the indigenous people is entirely different. According to Idowu the missionaries branded the Akan culture as ‘superstition’, ‘savage’, ‘primitive’, ‘fetish’, ‘animist’, ‘pagan’, ‘tribal’, ‘nature worship’, ‘idolatrous’, ‘ancestor worship’, ‘heathen’, and ‘primeval’ among other derogatory.¹² He lamented on the failure of the missionaries to build bridges between the two cultures and therefore established no real communication. Idowu says the missionaries spoke to the Africans in strange tongues.¹³

Dankyi endeavored to study how Akan cultural elements have influenced Christian worship in Kumasi. He studied elements like the celebrations of rites of passage, festivals, traditional motifs, art and crafts, songs, architecture, poems, dirges, forms leadership and administration. He observed that there appears to be a division or

⁹ Kwame Dankyi Ansong, *The Influence Of Indigenous Akan Cultural Elements On Christian Worship In The Kumasi Metropolitan Area*. (M. A. Dissertation, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, 2012), 28

¹⁰ Bediako .K., *Christianity In Africa* (Edinburgh University Press. 1995), 45

¹¹ Addae-Boateng J., *Inculturation of Christian Arts in Ghana: Roman Catholic Church in Selected Akan Speaking Diocese in Focus*, (Unpublished PhD Thesis, KNUST,2001), 23

¹² Idowu B., *African Traditional Religion*. (SCM Press Ltd, 1973), 28

¹³ Idowu *African Traditional Religion*, 28

dichotomy between the cultural elements or worldview of the Akans and that of Christianity. In the end the indigenous people of the Kumasi Metropolitan area who go to church feel alienated from their worldview.¹⁴ After his study he concluded that “to state, therefore that some cultural elements of the Akan people of the Kumasi Metropolis have influenced “the way the Gospel is received and practiced” among the Akans would not be an exaggeration.¹⁵ However, despite the dichotomy, Christianity has been incubated, nurtured and developed through the language of the Akan people. The role that the Akan language played and continues to play in Ghanaian Christianity cannot be overstated.

Christology in Akan context

The relationship between the Akan culture and the gospel over the years has given rise to many interesting theologies. The African Traditional Religion is now seen as a possible model for interpreting some of the very difficult issues in Christology. Not long ago Udoh observed that the problem of faith in Africa is fundamentally Christological. He lamented that “It is as though Africans are saying, God we know; ancestors we know; but who are you for us, Jesus Christ?”¹⁶ Perhaps this issue is rooted in the presentation of Christ as “the answer to the question of the white man, the solution to the needs of the Western man, the savior of the world of the European worldview, the object of adoration and prayer of historic Christendom.” John Taylor thoughtfully asks that if Christ were to be as the answer to the question that Africans are asking, what would he look like?¹⁷ Interestingly a number of theologians in

¹⁴Dankyi, *The Influence Of Indigenous Akan Cultural Elements On Christian Worship In The Kumasi Metropolitan Area*, 33

¹⁵Dankyi, *The Influence Of Indigenous Akan Cultural Elements*, 34

¹⁶Udoh Ben Enyi, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problems in Africa* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1988), 263

¹⁷ Taylor John V., *Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (Nairobi: Action, 2001), 1

Africa, in response to this Christological dilemma, have suggested that certain categories taken from African tradition could help build a meaningful Christology, equally relevant to the African context and the universal Church. Many have developed a variety of categories, metaphors, images, and names for Jesus Christ within the African context. Jesus Christ has been described as healer, master of initiation, linguist, chief and priest. Of the various themes which have emerged in African Christology, that of Christ as Ancestor seems to be at once the most distinctively African and the most profound. The one most prominent characteristic of African culture is the belief in ancestors.¹⁸ It is in this light that Shorter remarked that the notion of ancestors is so deeply embedded in African religious consciousness that the idea of Christ as ancestor seems to have arisen independently in the minds of different theologians in diverse sectors of the continent.¹⁹ The category of ancestor is of particular interest because it focuses not just on one aspect of Christ's work but on the being of the person of Christ. There is truth in the assertion that Africa is more likely to produce more theologies rather than a theology, given the great variety of religio-cultural, social and political realities in this vast continent. This is exemplified in the many diverse strands of the concept of Jesus as ancestor from virtually all corners of the African continent.

1.8 Significance of the study

This research draw parallels between the Onyankopon of the Akans and Yahweh of the Israelites. This will help clarify the tension as to whether Onyakopon can be viewed as the Yahweh of the Israelites. Such a comparison will be of benefit to the

¹⁸Shorter A., *Folk Christianity and Functional Christology*(London: Chapman, 1978), 134

¹⁹Shorter., *Folk Christianity*, 130

translation of the bible into local dialects in Africa. It will also be useful in academia as it provides information for future research purposes.

1.9 Organization or Structure of the Work

The work has been organized into five major chapters. Chapter One of this research constitutes the general introduction and captures issues such as the background of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, aims and objective, scope and focus of the study, research methodology, data analysis, literature review, significance of the study, organization of chapter or structure of work and definition of terms.

Chapter two of this research focuses on getting to know the history and traditions of the Akans with regards to the concept of Onyankopon. This chapter focuses on the attributes ascribed by Akans to Onyankopon and seeks to find out who Onyankopon of the Akans is and how He relates to them. Chapter Three of this research focuses on the, Yahweh of the Israelites, His attributes and how He relates to the Israelites. Chapter four draws attention to analysis by comparing the Onyankopon of the Akans and Yahweh of the Israelites and seeks to find out their difference and similarities. Chapter five is the final concludes this research with summary, recommendations and conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND OF THE AKAN

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter serves as the background to the study. This chapter focuses on the Akan. A brief history, geographic location, subgroups, language and religion is described in this chapter. The sources of religious information are also briefly captured in this section. Particular attention is paid to the Akan cosmology with its hierarchical arrangement of spirits beings. The concept of God is omitted since it forms the core of the next chapter.

2.2 Background of the Akan

Over the years the people of Ghana has been categorized into five main groups by cultural anthropologists on the basis of language, culture and geographical location. The Ewe, the Guan, the Mole-Dagbani, the Ga-Adanbge and the Akan make up the five groups. The Akan group, which is of particular interest to this research work, currently lives on the west and south of Ghana's Black Volta.²⁰ It is believed that they initially occupied the northern part of Ghana, but migrated in the 13th century to the forest and coastal belt in the south. Some even went as far as the eastern parts of Cote d'Ivoire, and formed the Baule community. The Akans make up about 53 percent of the population of Ghana.²¹ There are many subgroups that make up the Akan group in Ghana and they include, the Asantes who occupies the central forest belt, the Akwapim who occupies the southeastern part, the Fantes who occupies the central region, and the Kwahu and Akyem who occupy the eastern part of Ghana.²²In the

²⁰Isaac and Max, *Languages of the Akan area*, 168

²¹Isaac and Max, *Languages of the Akan area*, 160

²² Benjamin Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Michigan: Zondervan Press, 1990), ix.

seventeenth century, many small states came together under the chief of Kumasi, and formed the Asante kingdom. They did this in order to amass enough strength to defeat the Denkyira people to enjoy political freedom. This resulted in the Asantes becoming numerically dominant than all the other groups. The dialect spoken by the Akans include is predominantly Twi. In general the current predominant religions practiced by the Akans include Christianity, Islam and the traditional religion.²³ The traditional religion practiced by the indigenous people of the Akan influenced every other aspect of the culture of the Akan people.

However, there is no scripture to point in an attempt to study the religious practices and culture of the indigenous people. Unlike the Christians who have the bible and the Moslems who have the Quran, the Akan depended on oral tradition in passing their culture and religion from generation to generation. Such precious information can be gleaned from myths, proverbs, meaning of God's name, personal theophoric names, pithy sayings, ordinary day speech, liturgy and songs. There are also archaeological discoveries which at times substantiate the oral stories told by the Akan people.

2.3 The Akan Cosmology

Every society has its set of beliefs. Africans in general are deeply religious, because their religious perception affects all endeavors of their lives. It was Mbiti, a renowned African theologian who opined that Africans are notoriously religious.²⁴ The Akan are not an exception as every action and principle in the Akan world has its root in their religious thought. The Akan is deeply aware that life is not just made up of what can be seen with the naked eye. There is a strong belief that life continues even after death. The Akan are deeply concerned about the meaning of life, the right

²³ Benjamin, *African Religions*, ix.

²⁴ John .S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*(London: SCM Press, 1997), 1.

relation among human beings, the correct relationship with spiritual beings and the natural world. Many of their religious activities also attempts to deal with evil and suffering. Mbiti chimes that the religious world of the African is densely populated by spiritual beings, spirits and the living-dead.²⁵ According to the Akan there are two categories of spiritual beings; the ones originally created as spirits beings and those who have passed from humanity to the spiritual realms. Without an iota of doubt, the Akan believe in the Supreme Being is the creator and sustainer of all other spirits and things.²⁶ This concept will be thoroughly discussed in the sequent chapters. However there are myriads of spirits that operates below the Supreme Being.

2.4 The Cult of Divinities

The divinities are next to God in terms of the power that they wield in the hieratical structure of spirits. They are believed to be brought into being or derive their existence from God and therefore possess no absolute existence. They are created ontologically as spirits and acts as the personification of God's activities and the manifestations of natural events or objects.²⁷ In effect sacrifices and libation are poured through the divinities to the Supreme Being. Some of the most popular divinities are associated with lakes, rivers, mountains, forest and rocks among others. Particular among the Asantes, it is held that the Supreme Being manifest himself through the divinities called *Abosom*. The *Abosom* are believed to act as His servants carrying out His commands and thereby serving as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and other creatures. A typical example is the earth goddess called *Asaase Yaa*. She is believed to be the goddess of fertility. Since the indigenous people were mainly agriculturalists, they revered this divinity in order to get plentiful harvest.

²⁵Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 74.

²⁶Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 73.

²⁷Quarcoopome, T.N.O, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: African University Press, 1987), 25

There are also tribal divinities that are worship by an entire tribe and periodic festivals are celebrated for them. An example is the Antoa gods, who has become the tribal deity of the people of Nkoranza, Wenchi, Tano and Techiman. Annual festivals are celebrated in their honor.²⁸The divinities are worshipped in temples and shrines and directly by priest and priestesses. Directly under the rank of the divinities is the cult of ancestors.

2.5 The Cult of Ancestors

The cult of the ancestors is one of the most important aspect of the Akan worldview. The ancestors are the souls of the departed heroes and heroines of the Akan community. They live in the land of the dead, designated as *Asamando*.²⁹ The *Asamando* is believed to closely resemble the land of the living. The death of a man is merely an entry into the next life so the Akans bury their dead with items like clothes, gold, pomade, comb and mat among others. It is interesting to note that chiefs are buried with human heads in order for them to occupy their position in the land of the dead.

However not all dead relatives meet the requirements to be ancestors in the Akan world. An ancestor should have led a good life and contributed to the welfare of the community. He or she should have died a decent death. Ancestors are considered part of earthly family, who take keen interest in the day to day affairs of the family. They are believed to be the custodians of family customs and also act as intermediaries between the living and the divine beings. They possess the power to bless, punish,

²⁸ Samuel Duodu, *Apoo Festival*, accessed on 20th March 2019, url: https://wikimili.com/en/Apoo_festival

²⁹ Charles Sarpong Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publication, 2013), 36

protect and give health and wealth obedient members of the family. This power that they possess is derived from the Supreme Being.³⁰

The ancestors are believed to visit their earthly families regularly. They are often invited to join the table during meals. The first drop of wine is poured on the ground and morsels of food are put on the ground before eating. Some Akans leave food before the fire for ancestors to enjoy. There are some festival celebrated to honor ancestors. Chief among them is the Odwira and Adaye festival which is concerned with a Periodic remembrances of ancestors, cleansing of the clan from filth and purification of the shrine of the ancestors. The blackened stool serves as the shrine of the ancestors.³¹

2.6 Magic, Charms and Amulets

Another important component of the Akan cosmology are magic, charms and Amulets. Magic has been defined as the attempt on the part of man to control nature and spirit beings by mysterious and magical means. It has already been noted that the Akans are heavily surrounded by spiritual beings who possess the power to influence aspects of their life either for good or for bad³². The attempt of by the Akan people to devise certain means to control the nature spirits in their favor is what is termed as magic. In order to achieve this, a particular formula has to be followed which brings into view the role of charms and amulets. Charms and amulets are often used for personal protection.³³ They consist of a mixture of leaves placed in horns and gourds among others worn around the neck, waist or ankle of the owner. There are charms

³⁰Abraham Akrong, *Introduction to African Traditional Religion* (Chicago: McCormick Theological Seminary), 34

³¹Akrong, *Introduction to African Traditional Religion*, 34

³²Kwabena Amponsah, *Introduction to West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: Adwinsah Publications, 1977), 12.

³³ Amponsah, *Introduction to West African Traditional Religion*, 12.

and amulets like packets of sticks, animal skins, feathers and dried bats used for community protection. Magic can be used for both protection and destruction. Kwabena Amponsah draws a difference between magic and religion in the assertion that religion is epitomized by dependence on divine beings with trust in them to help whereas magic is primarily concerned with control.³⁴

2.6.1 Akan Polity

The word Akan mean the civilized or the enlightened one. The Akans as a result see themselves as one nation and organized into groups of many extended families with a council of elders as their head. The families or clans are namely, *Ekoonna*, *Asona*, *Biretuo*, *Dyokoo*, *Aduana*, *Asenee*, *Asakyiri* and *Agona*. The Akan world is a strong matrilineal community as all property and power are bound with the matrilineal system. They are therefore united as a political unit as land disputes, inheritance, succession, marriage and important decisions are taken within the matrilineal system. The Akans are however united through 12 patrilineal spirit groups. This patrilineal groupings, namely *Bosomptra*, *Bosomtwe*, *Bosompo/ Bosomnketeaa*, *Bosomafram*, *Bosommuru*, *Bosomkonsi*, *Bosomdwerebe*, *Bosomayensu*, *Bosomsika*, *Bosomkrete*, *Bosomakom*, and *Bosomafiare* more concern with their philosophy and are called *Ntoro*. The Akan states called *Aman* is rule by kings referred to as *Ahenfo*. Some states sometime come together to form a confederacy or an empire. The Akan kings are therefore ranked on the basis of their jurisdiction. The head of an empire is referred to as King which several heads of the constituent clans working with and under him. Some chief examples are the Asantes, the Akyem and the Akwapim.

³⁴Amponsah, *Introduction to West African Traditional Religion*, 13.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the background to the Akans. The world view of the Akans has been thoroughly discussed. Attention was paid to the divinities, ancestors and magic and charms. Their concept of God was however reserved for the next chapter which comprehensively discusses the both the Akan and Jewish Concept of God.

CHAPTER THREE

THE AKAN CONCEPT OF GOD AND THE HEBREW CONCEPT OF GOD

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter entails a background to the Akan people. This section focuses on the Akan concept of God and the Hebrew concept of God. This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on the essential characteristics of the Supreme Being among the Akan. The second section focuses on the distinguishing features that characterize the Hebrew God. In Both sections the sources of the knowledge of God as well as his attributes are discussed.

3.2 The Akan Myths of God

African traditional religion and for that matter the Akans have no written or sacred text. Rather the African notions of God are found in myths, proverbs, stories, short sayings, songs, names, prayers and religious ceremonies. It is through the above mentioned sources that oral tradition containing the concepts of God are passed from generation to generation. Myths for instance play a very important role in conveying knowledge about the Supreme Being. Quarcoopome defines myths as sacred stories that are told to explain how people reason about the universe and themselves.³⁵ Kofi AsarePoku documented a myth that is relevant to this study. In this myth, it is told that God and man lived so close together that man could reach out and touch God. However a stubborn old woman used to hit God with a long pestle any time she pounded fufu. This eventually caused God to move further and farther away in to the sky beyond the reach of man. They then tried to reach to God by constructing a ladder

³⁵Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 25

with their mortars. By putting on top of the other, they pile the mortars till it was left with only one to reach God. They then tried to pull the bottom-most one to put on top, an attempt that crumbled all their efforts. This myth gives a picture of how the Akans understand the relationship that exists between man and God. Asare Poku comments that the notion of God as creator is original to the Akan rather than a borrowed concept introduced by foreigners.³⁶

3.3 The Concept of God among the Akans.

God is referred to as Onyame or Onyankopon among the Akans. The name *Onyame* is common among the Akans as it is found popularly in their songs. However, there is no consensus among scholars concerning its meaning. Quarcoopome asserts that it means the ‘God of fullness’ or the ‘God of ultimate satisfaction.’³⁷ He also interprets Onyankopon as the ‘Only Great God’. To the Akan, Onyame or Onyankopon is real and not an abstract concept or an imaginary being. This assertion is justified by the personal theophoric names which resulted from personal contact and experience of His mercy and grace. Onyankopon is a Spirit Being in fact the perfect Spirit. He is believed to live in the air or the sky yet nothing escapes his oversight. Interestingly there is no imagery or substantial representation of God among the Akan people. This alone justifies the notion that they do not deem him as a physical being, who can be spotted with the eyes. The Akans see him as rational eternal and an absolute being.³⁸

There is no doubt among the Akans concerning the existence of God. The concept of atheism has never been part of the Akans. In fact the Akans are so religious to the extent that whatever happens in life, whether good or bad is interpreted from a

³⁶Asare Poku, *Introduction to West African Traditional Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 1

³⁷Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 63

³⁸Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 63

religious perspective. Mbiti says that God is no stranger to the Akan.³⁹ This is justified by the Ashanti proverb that ‘no one show a child the Supreme Being’. The Akans understand the universe from a theistic and theocentric perspective and God stands in the center of all their culture and thought.

He is one and the only God of the entire universe. Despite the belief in a myriad of gods, there is only one God among the Akans from whom all others came into existence. The Akan never confuse the identity of the Supreme with the other deities. The early Europeans who made contact with the Akan falsely concluded they were polytheists. However they soon discovered from a closer examination that there is a distinction between the gods and the God and that the title the Supreme Being was a term given to only God. Johannes Christaller concluded after a study of Akan language that the Akan to a large extent is monotheistic in faith since the term God is applied to only one Supreme Being.⁴⁰ He is unique and therefore is different from all other known beings in the Akan cosmology.

3.4.1 Attributes of God

The attributes of God can be categorized into two; intrinsic and moral. The intrinsic attributes primarily concern with who he is whereas the moral focuses on what he does. The intrinsic attributes of the Supreme Being is what differentiate him from his creation. Due to their abstract rather than concrete nature, intrinsic attributes are hard to grasp particularly among the Akans. This is due to the fact that African thought is more concrete than abstract. To the Akan, the Supreme Being is creator, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, immortal, self-existent, king, judge and transcendent.⁴¹

³⁹Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 29

⁴⁰ Johannes Christaller, *A Dictionary of Asante and Fanti Language* (Basel: Evangelical Missionary Society, 1881), 342

⁴¹Ericson, *Christian Theology*, 238

3.4.2 *Creator and Sustainer*

That the Supreme Being created and sustains this universe is an uncontroversial and unquestionable statement among the Akans. Aside the fact that the existence of Supreme Being is not debatable among the Akans, they also hold that he is self-existent. Thus he is the creator or originator of all things. Akan myths confirm Onyame as the creator of the world. The Akans call him *Borebore*, which means originator, the first or creator. He is never equated with any comic forces or spirit rather all those forces originated from him. This also presupposes that he is eternal and for that matter immortal.⁴² The Akans call him Odomankoma which means the One who is. This stresses the fact that he is an eternal, immeasurable and infinite entity. Not only is he the Creator but also the Sustainer of the world. He cannot be compared with any other in terms of supremacy and authority. As sustainer of the world, he has the power over all seasons as he is referred to as Amosu meaning giver of rain, Amowia meaning giver of sunshine. They believe he created man and gave man his life force that is why the Akans depend on him for their sustenance.⁴³

3.4.3 *King*

The mere mention of the word 'King' brings into mind a ruler of a group of people. The Akans are well vexed with this word as they have a lot of kingdoms and kings. However, they strongly believe that God is the king of all the universe, a position that no other spirit or man is powerful enough to handle. They regard Onyakopon as the governing principle of this world. He is referred to as Otumfo, the powerful one. This title is only given to the King of the Ashanti kingdom to stress his sovereignty over

⁴²Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56

⁴³Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 57

the kingdom. Since the Supreme Being cannot be equated to earthly kings, he is then the King of Kings.⁴⁴

3.4.4 Omnipotent

God is really regarded as the all-powerful God among the Akans. There is an art symbol called *Gye Nyame* which means Except God. Thus the Akans believe that to him all things are possible and he the last resort in all things.⁴⁵

3.4.5 Omniscient

Onyame is regarded as the Sky God who see all things and for that matter knows all things. As a result he is known as the all wise one. Among the Asantes, he is praised as *Ananse Kokroko* meaning the great spider. The spider is depicted in Akan folklore as the symbol of wisdom. The depiction of God as spider means he is the repository of wisdom. This also means that man knowledge is acquired, limited and incomplete.⁴⁶

3.4.6 Omnipresent

The Akans hold that God is spirit and for that matter likens him to the wind. They believe that even though he is invisible he is everywhere like the wind. A popular proverb amongst the Akan says “if you want to tell God something, tell the wind.” This stresses the notion that his invisible presence is everywhere.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 60

⁴⁵Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 60

⁴⁶Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 61

⁴⁷Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 60

3.4.7 The Moral Attributes of God

Moral attributes are also called communicable attributes. They are the characteristics that can be seen in human nature. The Akan regard the Supreme Being as a trustworthy and dependable entity. He is designated as Tweadumpon, a Twi word which literally means 'Lean-on-a-tree-do-not-fall'. This depicts the idea of a firm, constant, reliable and dependable being. Onyame is also regarded as compassionate, thus he is not indifferent with the suffering of men. He is seen as a kind, merciful God who always protects the helpless in society. The Akan also say that Goodness is the first nature of God, a proverb which stresses goodness and holiness of Onyame.⁴⁸

3.5 Worship of the Supreme Being

The Supreme Being is mostly approach through the lesser divinities. It is believed that the divinities or the Abosom are the children of Onyame, acting as intermediaries between him and humanity. However, there are was also times when Onyame was approached directly. Quarcoopome comments that there were temples for the Onyame with dedicated priests.⁴⁹ Even quite recently there is regular worship of Onyame in many Ashanti Communities. Many Ashanti compounds have alters called Nyamedua meaning God's tree. This is a three fork three with a basin in-between the fork. Sacrifices are made to Onyame on this alter.⁵⁰

3.6 The Hebrew concept of God

The sources of knowledge of God in Judaism is primary derived from the sacred text of the Hebrews. Judaism is the religion, philosophy and of life of the Jews or the Hebrew people. The religious Jews regard Judaism as originating from the covenant

⁴⁸Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 64-65

⁴⁹Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 52

⁵⁰ Ruther Heinz et al, *World Heritage Sites* (Cape Town, University Of Cape Town, 2006), i

that God established with the nation of Israel. It is a monotheistic religion with roots in the Hebrew bible. This God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and gave the commandments on Mount Sinai as spelt out in the Torah. The name of the God of Israel mostly referred in the Hebrew Scripture is Yahweh (יהוה), derived from the future present past of the Hebrew word translated 'to be.' Yahweh then literally means 'The self-existent one'.⁵¹ Yahweh is the national God of Israel and the center of worship. In modern Jewish culture *Adonai* is often used in place of Yahweh as it is forbidden to pronounce the name the way it is spelt.⁵² Aside Yahweh the Maimonides distinguishes six other names of God from one which are mere attributes. These include *El*, *Eloah*, *Elohim*, *Shaddai*, *Ehyeh* and *Tzevoat*.⁵³

Yahweh is understood to be a spirit, thus an invisible, non-corporal relational being. Yahweh is not perceived as a mere projection of human psyche but an actual ontological reality. Thus God is not a product of human philosophy, an abstract concept but a real being. The in Judaism it is held that God is not like man and therefore cannot be considered as anthropomorphic. However anthropomorphism is adopted in the Hebrew Bible in the rabbinic literature as linguistic conceits or metaphors, without which it would be impossible to talk about God. Many religious Jews and scholars hold that the many names for God like *Elohim*, *El Shaddai*, *Adonai* and *Elyon* among others are only titles describing certain aspects of God or designating the roles played by God in the lives of Mankind. In the Maimonides

⁵¹Maire Byrne, *The Names of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: A Basis for Interfaith Dialogue* (A&C Black), 24

⁵²Maire, *The Names of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*: 24

⁵³ Maimonides. *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, accessed on 14th March 2019. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Names_of_God_in_Judaism

description of God, he is considered as a being perfect in every way, who is the ultimate cause of all existence.⁵⁴

Another feature worth mentioning in relation to the Hebrew concept of God is personality. George Hegel and Paul Tillich holds that God is not the cause of being but being itself, the basis of all beings. According to this notion God is not a person but the entirety of universe makes up the absolute God.⁵⁵ The Hebrew bible describes a notion of God that is diametrical to the one held by Tillich and Hegel. From the scriptures it is clear that God is personal, individual being who possesses a will and self-consciousness. Thus even though God is invisible he has feelings and can enter into relationship with other beings. He entered into a covenant with Abraham and his descendant. He also covenanted with the nation of Israel under the leadership of Moses.⁵⁶ It is clear from the Hebrew scripture that God communicated with humans in several many ways and forms.

3.7 Essential Features of God

There are two primary feature of God that is central in Judaism. Monotheism and the idea of God as creator are key component of the concept of God among the Jews. A distinctive mark of Judaism is strict monotheism. Monotheism from a Hebrew perspective is the belief in one indivisible God. Polytheism or the worship of a plurality of gods and the Trinitarian concepts of God that there a singular God having multiple persons is strange in Judaism.⁵⁷ The Shema which defines the God of the Hebrews in their holy scriptures says: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is

⁵⁴ Maimonides. *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, 2

⁵⁵ George Hegel, *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Humanities, 1962), 90-105

⁵⁶ Hegel, *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion*, 90-105

⁵⁷ Millard J. Ericson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2013) 238

One”.⁵⁸ Monotheism is what distinguished Judaism from the religions of other nations in the period of the Old Testament.

Moreover, God is conceived as the self-existent, creator and sustainer of the universe. The Bible begins with the creation of the world. In this story, the universe and all that is in it except man were created with the words of God in six days. However God formed man with in his image distinguishing him from other creation. Jeffry Radon argues against the Aristotelian notion which has crept into the Maimonides concerning eternity of the universe. He holds according to the Hebrew the world was created by a transcendent Creator, Yahweh, as an act of conscious will as depicted in the first chapter of the book of Genesis.⁵⁹

3.8 Characteristics of Yahweh

This God is conceived as an eternal being that is the source of the universe and morality. In Judaism, essential features of God like omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience are rooted in the Hebrew. Since God is spirit he is not confined to a particular geographical location. Aside this Yahweh is thought of as possessing all moral attributes cherished among the Hebrews.⁶⁰

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the major features of Akan and Hebrew concepts of God. The first part focused on the Akan notions of God and the second part focused on the notions of God in the Hebrew culture. The data in this chapter will be used for the analysis which will be done in the subsequent chapter.

⁵⁸ Deuteronomy 6:4

⁵⁹ Jeffry Radon, *Exposing the Distortion of Orthodox Dogma And Ideology* (US: Mazo Publishers, 2013), 12

⁶⁰ Ericson, *Christian Theology*, 238

CHAPTER FOUR

COMPARING ONYANKOPON OF THE AKANS AND YAHWEH OF THE ISRAELITES

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the characteristics of the Yahweh and Onyankopon. This section compares these two concepts of God in order to bring out points on convergence and divergences. Of all the aspects of these concepts that will be compared monotheism feature predominantly.

4.2 Monotheism in Judeo Christian Faith

Monotheism is the belief in the existence of one God. It is also the belief in the oneness of God. Monotheism is one of the most important features of the Hebrew concept of God that made the religion of the Hebrews different from that of the other nations referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures. All creeds in this religion begins with the belief in the existence one God. The acknowledgment of other beings as God was conceived as the worst sin in Israel as clearly spelt out in the Old Testament.⁶¹This does not imply that there are no other spirit beings or deities in the Hebrew cosmology. There are saints, angels and other heavenly creatures who are revered among the Hebrew people. There is also frequent mention of a powerful being called Satan who always opposes the will of Yahweh. However none of these beings is acknowledged as God among the Hebrew people. The angels for instance are regarded as spirits who were created by Yahweh to carry out his will.

Fashole-Luke makes an interesting statement on the interrelatedness of religions that no religion that has moved man has been able to start with a tabula rasa and express it

⁶¹ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 34

as if religion was beginning for the first time.⁶² This statement is true at least in the light of the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Because of the influence of Judaism, it is not surprising to find that both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic in their concept of God. It is important to note that despite the doctrine of the trinity, Christians still hold to the fact that their faith is a monotheistic one. Many scholars have struggles with the ambiguity and complication that emanates from the Christian doctrine of the trinity and monotheism. Richard McBrien for instance posed that question that “if God is one, how is it that Christian scriptures and creeds affirms a pluralism with God, that in God there is Father, Son and Holy Spirit?”⁶³ The Doctrine of the Trinity portrays God as three persons in one God. The trinity is not just different manifestation of the same one God rather the doctrine holds that each of these three persons is an individual, distinct from the other. Yet still Christians affirm in their creedal statements that the three persons coexist as one God and therefore their faith is a monotheistic one. Therefore it can be argued that despite the belief in and veneration of several deities among the Akans, it is possible for the Akan traditional religion to be a monotheistic one.

4.3 Akan Traditional Religion and Monotheism

About one hundred and fifty years ago, E. B. Taylor remarked that there is no savage tribe which is monotheistic in faith. Rather they are characterized by polytheism which culminates in the belief on one supreme divinity.⁶⁴ These words were spoken at time when little was known about the religious believes in Africa. This statement, even though disputed by African scholars, is deemed as a bit fair in contrast to the

⁶²Fashole-Luke E, *Ancestor Veneration and the Communion of Saints: New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World* (London: SPCK, 1974), 109

⁶³ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 34

⁶⁴ E. B. Taylor, *Primitive Cultures* (London: SCM, 1929), 309

prejudicial remarks at that time. The traditional religion of the Africans was then wrongly designated as primitive, paganism, heathenism, fetishism, idolatry, animism and polytheism.⁶⁵ The perceptions of the early Europeans about the Akans was that they were Polytheist and had no knowledge of God. However, many years down the line, it was discovered from field studies that those assertion held no truth. R. S. Rattray, a Western anthropologist, in the 1920's rejected the dissemination of these false ideas about the Akans.⁶⁶ He was unable to take the bold step of accepting Onyankopon, as the Akan equivalent of the Yahweh. He rather translated Onyankopon as the Supreme Sky God throughout his career. J. B. Danquah, an Akan scholar was convinced that the Akans worshiped the Supreme Being who was thought of as a personal and infinite being.⁶⁷ However this Supreme Being was approached through intermediaries like the ancestors and divinities.

Prominent feature of the Akan traditional religion is the pantheon of divinities, which results in the tendency to regard the Akans as polytheists. Quarcoopome explains that polytheism is a qualitative rather than a quantitative term. Thus it is not the belief in several gods, rather it is the absence of unifying or supernatural ultimate that determines whether a religion is polytheistic or not.⁶⁸

For instance in Greek mythology there are many gods with Zeus considered as their father. However he is the first among equals like Jupiter, Mars and Venus. He is never regarded as the creator of the world.⁶⁹ This is a perfect example of a polytheistic religion. This is not how the Akans view Onyankopon. He is not of the same rank and file of the divinities rather he is the supernatural ultimate and wholly other. The divinities derive their authority and power from Onyankopon and they act as his

⁶⁵Quarcoopme, *West African Traditional Religion*, 14

⁶⁶ Robert S. Rattray, *Ashanti Folktales* (London: SCM, 1996), 12

⁶⁷ Joseph B. Danquah, *Akan Doctrine of God*, (London: SCM, 1994), 21

⁶⁸Quarcoopme, *West African Traditional Religion*, 23

⁶⁹ Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*, 36

ministers and intermediaries. It based on the fact that there is a cohesive religious factor, who is Onyankopon the Akan traditional religion can be viewed as a monotheistic one.⁷⁰

4.4 Points of convergences between the Hebrew and Akan Concept of God

This section looks at the various features that both the Akan and Hebrews concepts of God have in common. If the Akan God shares in all the important and essential characteristics as the Hebrew God, then it can be concluded that the Onyankopon is the dynamic equivalent of Yahweh. It is has already been stated that the two most important features of the Hebrew concept of God is concerned with monotheism and creation. As has been established above both religions have a monotheistic concept of God.

When it comes to creation, it has already been established through Akan Myths proverbs and songs that Onyakopon is the creator and sustainer of the universe. This explains why he is been referred to among the Akans as *Borebore*, *Odomankoma*, *Amosu*, *Amowia*, titles given only to the Supreme Being.⁷¹ Onyakopon is thought of as the self-existent and self-sustaining one. All other things, be it physical or spiritual is created and sustained by Him. Indisputably same can be said of Yahweh as depicted in the book of Genesis.

Moreover both concepts describe God as essentially a spirit being. Thus He cannot be seen with that naked eye or be touched. Unlike the divinities in the Akan world, Onynakopon has no physical representation. Similarly among the Hebrews, graven images or any physical representation of Yahweh is forbidden.⁷² This also implies that idolatry is far from these concepts of God. Aside being a spirit, he is also thought of

⁷⁰ Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*, 36

⁷¹ Quarcoopme, *West African Traditional Religion*, 50-60

⁷² Deuteronomy 20:4

as a person or an individual being capable of feeling and entering into reciprocal relationship with other personal beings.

Another point worth mentioning is incommunicable attributes shared by both Onyankopon and Yahweh. Both Gods are thought of as omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. Thus, they are regarded as all-powerful, all-knowing and present in all places and at all times. As a spirit being, God is not limited to a particular geographical or spatial location. Only God possess the power to all that he wills.⁷³ Aside the incommunicable attributes, both concepts depicts God as having moral attributes. Almost all good qualities that are cherished in our societies are characteristic of God in both concepts. Thus in both concepts God is conceived as dependable, reliable, merciful, compassionate, kind, pure and holy in all his deeds. There are however some dissimilarities between these concepts.⁷⁴

4. 5 Points of divergences

From an analytical point of view the main difference between these two concepts has to do with worship. The Hebrews pray to God directly without any intermediaries. Even though they have priests and prophets, there are no intermediaries between the people and their God. However there are spirit beings who functions as intermediaries between Onyankopon and the Akan people. Even the Supreme Being can be worshiped directly, this was seldom the case. The community relied on the spirits of dead relatives and divinities to reach the Supreme Being.⁷⁵ Thus the worship of divinities and ancestral veneration is only means to an end. It is the Supreme Being who is the ultimate and an end in himself.

⁷³ Ericson, *Christian Theology* 238

⁷⁴ Ericson, *Christian Theology* 238

⁷⁵Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion*, 52

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has so far analyzed the finding in the previous chapter. Particular attention was paid to the concept of monotheism in both concept. The chapter also brought to the fore the points of divergences and convergences between the two concepts of God. The subsequent chapter concludes this study with summary conclusion and recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This research was done with the intention of comparing the Onyankopon of the Akans and Yahweh of the Israelites. It aimed at bringing out the points of divergences and convergences which were duly highlighted and scholars, theologians and students can also throw more light on this topic. This chapter concludes the entire research with a summary, general conclusion and recommendations for the purpose of this research.

5.2 Summary

This research work aimed at examining the Hebrew and the Akan concepts of God in order to verify if the Onyankopon of the Akans is a dynamic equivalent of Yahweh of the Hebrews. This study is a qualitative research and employed the comparative and historical critical approach. This method was chosen because comparative research is the best option for cross-cultural studies which seeks to identify, analyze and explain similarities and differences across societies. It also used both the primary and secondary sources as a method of data collection for the study. A review of scholarly works on the subject was done to discover significant gaps.

The work is divided into five chapters with each chapter addressing relevant issues that are significant to the study. The first part of this study looked at the background issues which included research questions, aims and objectives, methodology and related literature of the subject under study. The second chapter also looked at the background of the Akan people. The language, culture, geographical location, cosmology and religious believes were all described in the second chapter. The third

chapter was divided into two. The first part focused on the Akan concept of God. Akan myths, names, and attributes of the Akan God, Onyakonpon are discussed. The second chapter also focused on the Hebrew concept of God. The names, characteristic and attributes of Yahweh are discussed in this part. The fourth part was dedicated to comparison of the two concepts. Points of divergences and convergences were highlighted. This chapter serves as a conclusion to the study.

5.3 Conclusion

The name for God in the Hebrew bible is translated as *Onyame* or *Onyankopon* in the Twi bible. Due to the recent concern raised by some scholars on this translation, it became necessary to examine the Akan notion of God to ascertain if indeed it is theologically justifiable to translate Yahweh as *Onyankopon*. From an analytical point of view the two most distinct characteristics that set the Hebrew notion of God apart from the others conceptions are monotheism and creation. Aside these there are intrinsic characteristic and moral attributes that are embedded in the Hebrew Scriptures. From the review of scholarly opinions it was discovered that the Akan were monotheistic in the notion of God. Despite the veneration and worship of many divinities and ancestors, the Akan believed in a unifying supernatural ultimate who is wholly other. Therefore they cannot be categorized as polytheist. Aside this the Supreme Being is thought of as the creator of the whole world. This is confirmed in the Akan myths, songs, appellations and proverbs. He is also the sustainer of the universe. It was observed the all the intrinsic and moral attributes ascribed to the Yahweh are equally ascribed to the Onyankopon of the Akans. However, the only significant disparity that was discovered has to with mediation. It was observed that the Akan approach God through intermediaries like the divinities and ancestors.

In the translation of the bible into other languages, scholars apply both formal and dynamic equivalence. Nida, Eugene and Charles .R. Taber explains dynamic equivalence as the quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors.⁷⁶ In the light of this, Onyankonpon of the Akan, regarded as the ultimate unifying supernatural being, who created and sustains the universe, and possess all the intrinsic and moral qualities of the Hebrew God, can be regarded as a dynamic equivalent of Yahweh. Therefore, it is theologically justifiable to translate God as Onyankopon in the Twi rendering of the Bible.

5.4. Recommendation

Base of the discussion in this research, the researcher wishes to make the following recommendations.

Due to the erroneous impression of the early European missionaries, it resulted in some theological discrepancies in the translation of the bible into the Twi language. Chief among them is the translation of the word ‘gods.’ Because of the wrong notion they had about the Akan concept of God, they ended introducing the plural for *Onyame* to translate the word ‘gods’. Exodus 15:11 says “who among the gods is like unto you oh Lord”. In the translation of this text, *Anyame* is used for ‘gods’. This give rise to a theological problem. Because Onyame is the personal God of the Akan and he is one. The other divinities is not of the same rank and file as Onyame and therefore does not merit that title. There the researcher recommends that the proper word to translate ‘gods’ is ‘*abosom*’.

⁷⁶Nida, Eugene A., and Charles R. Taber. (1969). *The Theory and Practice of Translation, With Special Reference to Bible Translating*, 200. Leiden: Brill.

The researcher also recommends that further research be done on the notion that God as a grand ancestor of the Akan, and also how this notion affects the contextualization of the gospel in Akan context.

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