

FUNERAL RITES PARTICIPATION AND SABBATH OBSERVANCE AMONG THE AKAN ADVENTISTS IN GHANA: TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract

For the sake of the value placed on departed relatives in the Akan community and most tribes in Ghana, funeral rites are perceived to be very significant that no true child of the family of the deceased can afford to stay aloof in times of death. As a result, Adventists in these communities face a dilemma of a religious nature anytime death strikes. This situation becomes challenging in the instance of losing a non-Adventist relative. In this situation, fixing the funeral rites on Saturday, the Sabbath, becomes non-negotiable. Though the Adventist church offers some directives on the issue of Sabbath observance and funeral participation on Sabbath, this study finds those directives too generalized to be relied upon by Adventists in communities such as that of the Akan. Through the method of a dialogue, this study reveals that the optimal thing to do in such circumstance is for the church to show comfort and sympathy to the bereaved members as well as to the entire bereaved family in a manner agreeable with sound biblical and missiological outlooks.

Key words: Akan, Adventist, Funeral rites, Sabbath observance, religious dilemma, bereavement.

1. Introduction

The following is a narration that one of the authors of this paper encountered:

In the year 2008, I had the opportunity to conduct an evangelistic campaign in the city of London. In the course of the campaign, a visitor (Comfort) who had taken delight in the presentations was introduced to me. In the course of my frequent visits to her home, Comfort confided in me her desire to join the Church through baptism. Comfort asked many questions which I joyfully answered. As a result of her

understanding and appreciation of our teachings she accepted Jesus as her personal savior.

However, on the appointed Sabbath for the baptism, when I went to Church I could not find her and all attempts to reach Comfort failed. At the end of the service, I visited her home to find out why she couldn't make it. She told me that her sister visited her from Holland on the Sabbath when she was about to come to Church for baptism. Comfort told her about her new found faith and her decision to be baptized. Her sister was shocked that she was joining a church that does not permit its members to attend the funeral of their parents, siblings, husband and children on the Saturday. The sister asked her, who will bury your parents or husband when they die? As a result, she could not be baptized.

Comfort is not alone, there are others who love the Adventist teaching and would love to be part of the church but are hesitant because of the perceived unsympathetic attitude of the church towards those who attend funerals of deceased relatives on Saturdays. In some instances, members are disfellowshipped or censored for attending the funeral of their parents, siblings or close relatives on Sabbath. This perceived antisocial attitude towards Sabbath funeral attendance has led to the church not gaining root in certain parts of the country and among some tribes in Ghana. This paper attempts to call for a theological dialogue on appropriate Christian attitude to show towards bereaved church members who cannot help but to participate in funeral rites of their dear ones or close relatives that fall on Saturdays.

2. The Akan Community of Ghana and Funeral Rites

The Akan, originally "Akane" or "Akana" and meaning "foremost" or "genuine" (Danquah, 1968: 198), live in the coastal south and forest zone of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire (Crentsil, 2007: 5). Tracing their origin to an Akkad or Agade or Akana, an ancient non-semitic Babylonian race who lived on the Tigris and Euphrates, Danquah (1968: 198) notes that they were driven from their settlement on the bend of Niger "by the Almora-vides (Molaththemum or Muffled Moslems) in A.D. 1076." He continues that they settled in West Sudan. According to the Ghana demographic record, the Akans constitute about fifty per cent of the population of Ghana (Crentsil, 2007:5; Nkrumah, 2005, pp15-16; Aboagy-Mensa, and Hama, 2000, p. 289). The Akan tribes are found mainly in the southern half of Ghana, excluding the south-eastern corner. The present-day Akans are made up of many sub-groups such as the Ashanti, Fanti, Akim (Akyem),

Akwapim, Assin, Kwawu (Kwahu), Bono (Brong), Ahafo, Adansi, and Nzema (Danquah, 1968: 198; Crentsil, 2007: 5). Their basic occupation is agriculture, though some also engage in some fishing on the coast. When it comes to inheritance, they are by and large, matrilineal.

These sub-groups are marked by different dialects of the Akan language—mainly Twi or Fanti. But they all have a society that is composed of corporate lineages—“*mmusua*, sing. *Abusua* (Crentsil, 2007: 5).” For Crentsil (2007: 1), these lineages “emphasize the welfare of individual members for the good of the whole group.” Such prime value on the unity of the community and particular attention given to individuals in the Akan community fit the society well into Louis Dumont’s (1986) portrayal of a holistic society. As on other occasions such as weddings and naming rites, this cohesion among the people is seen in the planning and performance of funeral rites.

J. B. Danquah (1945: 5; Debrunner, 1967: 2) a respected politician and sociologist, points out that “the word *okanni* [Akan] ordinarily means a nice, refined, well-mannered man, a civilized or cultured person.” In view of this definition, an immense value is placed on “ordered behaviour and on character training in Akan education. By this a man should prove himself polished and gentlemanlike.” As result, emphasis is placed on well cultured speech that makes use of idioms and proverbs to demonstrate one’s upbringing (Debrunner, 1967: 2). It is interesting to note that Akan tradition and society are engraved in Religion. As John Pobee (1979: 44) points out, Akan cultural activities and social institutions are “inextricably bound up with religion and the spirit-world. Birth, puberty, marriage, death, widowhood, harvest, and installations to traditional offices all partake of a religious nature.” This suggests that religion and traditions are intertwined in the worldview.

In the Akan society, the death of an individual affects the whole community. Opoku (1978: 134) notes that “it brings about a complete physical separation and constitutes a great loss not only to the immediate family in which it occurs but also to the whole community.” Anytime death strikes, whole communities plunge into a state of sorrow and despair—a situation that calls for an assembly of distant and close relatives, friends, and acquaintances (Bosman, 1967: 230). In his observation of an Akan funeral ceremony, Cruickshank (1966: 214) describes the agony death brings thus “the sting of a serpent, or the application of a horrible instrument of torture, could not produce more excruciating distortions than we behold them suffering, while writhing under the first stroke of their bereavement.” Perhaps this explains why death is known by many names in the Akan community. Some call it a “monster,” others call it an “animal,” and still more refer to it as a kind of wicked “spirit” (Mbiti, 1991: 117). But this mournful situation is temporary. This is because death only severs the

bond between relatives physically but not spiritually. "It is only a change of status, from lesser to a higher authority (Opoku, 1978: 135)."

Such consideration of death finds its basis in the context of the Akan worldview concerning family unity. The Akan community extols a family that is made up of the continuous interaction between the living and the dead (Mbiti, 1991: 119, 122; Opoku, 1978: 133, 135, 137). This explains Gyekye's argument that the ontology of the Akan community is "essentially or primarily spiritual, the Akan universe is a spiritual universe, one in which supernatural beings play significant roles in the thought and action of the people. What is primarily real is spiritual (Gyekye, 1987: 69)."

From such worldview, one can infer the dependence of the living upon the departed family members. These departed ones are referred to as ancestors, collectively referred to as *nananomnsamanfo* (Crentsil, 2007: 38). These "(a)ncestors symbolise the continuity of the social structure and social relations created by kinship and descent (Fortes, 1965: 137)." They are regarded as "that part of the clan who have completed their course here on earth and are gone ahead to the other world to be elder brothers of the living at the house of God (Gyekye, 1987: 68)." These dwell in a place called *Asamando*, the Neitherworld (Gbedegesi, 1991: 93; Gyekye, 1987: 69; Opoku, 1978: 133). From here, these ancestors play meaningful roles in the daily life of their living relatives. For this reason, they have unsurpassed honor among the living (Pobee, 1979: 68). Busia (1951: 39) asserts that the living reverence these ancestors because the "solidarity" and "continuity" of the family depend on them. In this vein, "meticulous care is taken to fulfill the funeral rites, and to avoid causing any offence to the departed (Mbiti, 1991: 119)."

From the honor due their ancestors, members of the Akan community derive certain obligations. One significant obligation of the living towards the dead is to perform funeral rites for the departed in a fitting manner. Concerning this duty, one cannot fail. Opoku (1978: 133) opines that "it is the responsibility of the living to perform the funeral rites of the dead properly and to give them a fitting burial." At the extreme, it is believed that these ancestors rain either "blessings" or "curses" on the living depending on how such rites are performed (Mbiti, 1992: 119; McCaskie, 1989: 428).

Consequently, participating in funeral rites appears to be an opportunity for the living relatives or associates to express feeling of sorrow and loss and at the same time point to the fact that "death is not the end of one's existence (Opoku, 1978: 133)." Thus, the funeral ceremony happens to be a form of reunion between the living and the dead as well as between the living members of the family who might live apart from each other (Bosman, 1967: 229). The gathering of the living members of the Akan family at the instance of death is significant that some scholars have

emphasized it as being the most important aspect of the performance of funeral rites in Akan communities (Appiah, 1992; Van Der Geest, 2000: 107). Though the primacy of the social dimension of the Akan funeral ceremony is yet to find more support among scholars, it appears more likely to have influenced the choice of *memeneda*, Saturday, as a day for organizing funerals in modern Akan societies. This is because Saturday is generally thought of as a free-day for all. For this reason, it is highly inconceivable for any member of the community to absent himself or herself from funeral programs without any convincing reason. Bosman (1967: 230) rightly points out that "he who is negligent being sure to bleed freely if he cannot urge lawful reasons for his absence (non-participation)." Such a behavior is thought of as an upfront to the norms of the society and disrespectful to the dead, who might respond with curses on the entire community.

3. Seventh-day Adventist and Sabbath Observance

Seventh-day Adventists are a specialized group of Christians who "accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teachings of the Holy Scriptures (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005: v)." With regard to name, this divine movement is defined by two central doctrines of the Bible that are representative of other core doctrines of the Bible—the Seventh-day Sabbath and the second appearing of Jesus Christ. Since the former has relevance to the aim of this study, we have chosen to throw more light on it.

The Sabbath has root in the creation and points us to God as the Creator (Exod 31:1-7) and the One who Sanctifies us (Exod 31:13; Ezek 20:12). For this reason, the Sabbath does not only have universal significance (Exod 20:11; 23:12; Deut 5:13; Isa 56:1-8), but also serves as the basis of all true worship. Andrews (1873: 575) has noted correctly that the Sabbath "lies at the very foundation of divine worship, for it teaches this great truth in the most impressive manner, and no other institution does this." Thus the Sabbath is a period designated for the worship of our Creator and Redeemer and for building better relationship with our Creator and other human beings.

The Sabbath begins from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset (Gen 1; Mark 1:32). The Bible intimates principles that should guide the observance of the Sabbath (Ex 16:29; 20:8-11; 34:21; Isa 58:13; Ne 13:15-22). It is worthy of note that keeping the Sabbath Holy does not imply inactivity on the day. The Scriptures are replete with passages calling on humankind to care for and alleviate the suffering of others on the Sabbath (Ex 23:12; Matt 12:10-13; Mark 2:27; Luke 13:11-17; John 9:1-21). The need for

rest on the Sabbath is very significant and it implies both physical (Ex 23:12; Isa 48:13; Matt 12:1-8; Je 23:32; 2 Kings 4:23) and spiritual rest in God (Matt 11:28; Gen 2:1-3; Isa 56:1-8).

The seventh-day Sabbath began to be kept by Adventists starting from 1844, a period following the disappointment (Dederen, 2000: 526). Rachel Oaks, T. M. Priebe, and Joseph Bates were among the earliest Sabbath advocates (Dederen, 2000: 526). The practice of Adventists during the Sabbath hours follows from scriptural evidence for the Sabbath. Based on the Bible,

SDAs have adopted the practice of keeping Sabbath from sundown Friday night to sundown Saturday night. All of these hours are considered sacred to God. They are a time when personal pursuits and interest are set aside for spiritual refreshment (Dederen, 2000: 528).

Further, Adventists find in the writings of E. G. White useful information regarding the use of the Sabbath hours. One significant reference in this regard is the statement below:

The Sabbath is not intended to be a period of useless inactivity. The law forbids secular labor on the rest day of the Lord; the toil that gains a livelihood must cease; no labor for worldly pleasure or profit is lawful upon that day; but as God ceased His labor of creating, and rested upon the Sabbath and blessed it, so man is to leave the occupations of his daily life, and devote those sacred hours to healthful rest, to worship, and to holy deeds (White, 2007: 207).

Elsewhere, White continues that “the Sabbath is not to be given to the repairing of garments, to the cooking of food, to pleasure seeking, or to any other worldly employment (White, 2010: 355) such as “devoting this day to pleasing ourselves, to being involved in secular interests, conversations, and thoughts or to be engaging in sports” these would “detract from communion with our Creator and violate the sacredness of the Sabbath (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005: 296).” Thus in Adventists’ thought, a true Sabbath observance calls for cessation of all manner of personal work on the Sabbath.

4. Religious Dilemma of the Akan

Adventist

These principles notwithstanding, the Akan Adventist seems to face a dilemma of a religious nature when funeral rites of a close non-Adventist

relative is held on Saturday, the Sabbath. Should one simply ignore the Sabbath and participate in these funeral rites or one must observe the Sabbath and ignore such funeral rites? Determining the exact line of action in such situations has always been a difficult call to make.

To help resolve this dilemma, the Adventist Church holds that as much as possible the practice of holding funeral rites on the Sabbath should be avoided unless the climate or the conditions pertaining to the geographical area necessitate the conduct of the funeral service on the Sabbath without any delay. "In Some instances a memorial service could be held on the Sabbath, and interment take place later" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee, 1990: n. p.). Samuel Bachiochi traces the background of this directive to the Old Testament era. He writes

it is advisable to avoid conducting funerals on the Sabbath, since these disrupt the spirit of rest, joy, and the celebration of the Sabbath. It is noteworthy that in Biblical times, even mourning was interrupted on the Sabbath in order to experience the Sabbath joy and delight, which were seen as a foretaste of the blessedness of the world to come (Bachiochi, 2000: n. p.).

He however indicates that it is required of Christians to comfort the bereaved on the Sabbath by sharing with them the hope of the resurrection and of the new world, of which the Sabbath is a symbol, Luke 23:55-56 (Bachiochi, 2000: n. p.).

Similarly, the Biblical Research Institute, an institution of the Adventist church that has been established to present "biblical principles and Spirit of Prophecy guidelines that will assist the church members as they endeavor to follow the leading of the Lord (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee, 1990: n. p) has given biblical explanation to the directive of the church concerning funerals (as cited above). Central to these guidelines is the underlining notion that the only period that a funeral could be organized on the Sabbath would be when the climate or the conditions of the dead do not allow for keeping it for long. Sometimes the climatic conditions may necessitate the burial of the person immediately death occurs out of respect for the deceased (Deut 21:23; Acts 5:10; 5:6; 8:2). Since the Sabbath is a memorial of God's Creation, and not a day of grief (Isaiah 58: 13), it is advised that when it becomes necessary for one to be buried on the Sabbath, the church should not lose sight of the sanctity of the Sabbath and at the same time respecting the deceased and his/her family, Gen 50:1-3 (Yvinec, 2013: n. p).

In such circumstance, the Biblical Research Institute indicates that "arrangements should be made in advance with morticians and cemetery employees to perform their routine tasks for the deceased in advance of

the Sabbath day, thus reducing the labor and commotion on the Sabbath (Yvinec, 2013: n. p).” From this perspective, therefore, the instances leading to the holding of the funeral service of Elder James S. White and the wife, Ellen G. White on the Sabbath should be clear.

5. Reflections

Incidentally, the issue of participating in the funeral of a relative or a dear one on the Sabbath is neither in the Bible nor in the writings of Ellen G. White. It has, therefore, become imperative for the church leadership in a given locality or community to determine whether holding a funeral service on the Sabbath is in consonance with the general idea of Sabbath observance or not—Hence the directive of the church above.

However, these directives appear too generalized to apply to communities such as the Akan community in Ghana, where such services, as implied by the Bible Research Institute, are not almost always available. Where they are available, the fee is so exorbitant that the deceased family, with an average income, cannot afford. In a situation such as this, how may the church respond to a bereaved member who organizes or participates in funerals held on the Sabbath for reasons beyond their control? Again, it seems the Guidelines of the Church only addresses the situation that pertains to a deceased member without addressing what should be done in case of a non-Adventist relative dying and the funeral being held on the Sabbath. Should the bereaved Church member attend the burial and interment service of the relative or be at worship?

When a relative of an Adventist dies, there is the need for the Church leadership to meet with the bereaved family to sympathize with them and to plan how the church could assist them in the funeral and interment of the deceased. It is important for the church to show concern and be present to sympathize with the bereaved including the Adventist relative. Similarly, Church members could assist the bereaved Adventist to perform some of the labor that the funeral may require before the actual day of the funeral rites. If the bereaved church member participates fully in the events leading to the funeral rites and does not attend only on the Sabbath, there is a high possibility that the animosity and acrimony they sometimes experience from non-Adventist relatives could be reduced or possibly eliminated. Also, we have found that Adventists, in a situation such as we have described, who refrain from publicly announcing their inability to participate but seek permission from family authorities only avoid such undue confrontations.

Arguably, these difficulties call for a consensus building among church leadership in our part of the world. The building of consensus will go a long way to help the church build better relationship with the bereaved

family and not close the door to evangelism. Such consensus building opens up query into the issue of funeral rites participation and Sabbath observance in Ghana. Should the Church, as a general body in a given locality, decide for those who attend funeral on Sabbath especially when it is a close relative or should the Church leave that decision to the discretion of the bereaved member? When one is mourning the death of a close relative, should the church insist on the bereaved coming to church on Sabbath while their deceased relative is laying in state or interred? Will the bereaved, if compelled to come to church, be fully edified? More importantly, will God accept the worship of the bereaved member who sobs internally during the entire worship? Is it possible for the Adventist Church to visit the deceased family and the bereaved Adventist in the home on the Sabbath morning to have morning devotion with the family as we do sometimes when it is not on a Sabbath? If the Church decides to hold a service on the Sabbath morning for the family of the deceased will that be tantamount to breaking the Sabbath or will it help to build missiological bridges? Since there is need for the church to be close to comfort the bereaved in their bereavement, which place can this be better done than in the house of the bereaved for the benefit of the whole family?

The question of funeral service on Sabbath is indeed a grey area that calls for further dialogue to help the church come to sound biblical and missiological conclusions. Such conclusions will contribute immensely towards the removal of set-backs to evangelism particularly in the Ghanaian society. Additionally, such conclusions would bridge the social distance between the Adventist church and the members of the community in general.

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