

Rites of Expiation in Ga of Ghana Traditional Religious Belief: A Penitential Step for Acceptable Worship Services to Naa Nyonmo – God

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Abstract- Expiation and Propitiation refer to the removal of guilt but technically expiation has an object (sin) in mind. Expiation is what is done when crimes, sins or evil deeds are committed. Whereas propitiation more accurately focuses attention on some one's relationship with God. This paper therefore examines rites of expiation in the religious experience of Ga people of Ghana. The paper argued that some Ga people are traditional religious worshippers although many of them are Christians or Muslims, the traditional beliefs and worship remain. The Ga believe and cherish the indigenous religion of their forbears since the religion is the way of life of Africans it permeates into their daily activities as well as their social lives. To this end, the Ga ensure that they are in right relationship with Naa Nyonmo – the Supreme Being at all time. This paper which adopts historical and analytical research methods, explores the rites of expiation in Ga traditional religious belief. The paper concludes by revealing the importance of expiation as penitential step for acceptable worship services to Naa Nyonmo the Supreme Being and recommend that expiation is necessary in religious worship because it is a medium of renewing communion or fellowship with God.

I. INTRODUCTION

African traditional religion is the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans¹.

This religion has been existence from time immemorial and is still adhered to today by many Africans. In the words of Ekwunife, African traditional religion is the belief and practices of indigenous Africans rooted in the past African religious culture, transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions².

African belief that God is holy therefore his holy therefore his worshippers must approach him without

spot, blemish or wrinkle. He is both ritually and ethically holy. He is thought of as absolute clean and pure. He is never spoken of as being involved in anything immoral. He is described as one clothed in white robes who dwells in heaven³. It is on this premises that the Africans, Ga people especially the adherents of African traditional religion purifies themselves before appearing in the presence of the pure king (God) who is without blemish.

Hilasterion is translated from Greek word as “Expiration” as “the means of expiating sin”. In Christian theology, the New Revised standard version and the New International version translate this as “Sacrifice of atonement”⁴.

To the Ga and other Africans, rites of expiation is therefore compulsory as a means of cleansing of worshippers of various divinities who has in one way or the other defile themselves. Base on this fact, the concept of hilasterion – expiation is needed for the appeasement of God's wrath.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF GA PEOPLE

The contemporary Ga, who speaks a kwa dialect: one of the sub-languages of the Niger-Congo language family, are an ethically and culturally diversified people⁵. “Their cultural heterogeneity arises from a variety of factors which include penetrable natural boundaries; the entrepreneurial role of the Ga in pre-history and historic times; the Akwamu domination of Ga society during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the location of the centre of colonial and later national authority and international commercial activities of Accra”⁶.

The Ga-Dangbe, Ga-Danbe, Ga-Danme are an ethnic group in Ghana, Togo and Benin. The Ga and Dangbe people are grouped respectively as part of the Ga-Dangme ethnolinguistic group⁷. (2/3). The Ga-

Dangme are one ethnic group that lives primarily in the greater Accra of Ghana.

Under their great leader king Ayi Kushi (Cush) (1483-1519) they were led from the east in several states before reaching their destination in Accra. Oral traditions state the Ga came from the region of Lake Chad and reached their destination in the 16th century⁸. It is also believed that by the 17th century they travelled down the River Niger and crossed the volta to reach present day Ghana⁹.

The Ga people were organized into six independent towns (Accra (Ga Mashie), Osu, La, Teshie, Nungua and Tema). Each town had a stool, which served as the central object of Ga ritual and war magic. Accra became the most prominent Ga-Dangme towns and is now the heartbeat and capital of Ghana¹⁰. The Ga people were originally farmers, but today fishing and trading in imported goods are the principal occupation. Trading is generally in the hands of women, and a husband has no control over his wife's money. Succession to most offices held by women and inheritance of women's property are by matrilineal descent. Inheritance of other property and succession to male-held public offices are by patrilineal descent. Men of the lineage live together in a men's compound, while their women, even after marriage, live with their mothers and children in a women's compound. Each Ga town has a number of different cults and many gods, and there are a number of animal festivals¹¹.

Ga society was at first ruled by the Nae Wulomo, that is, the priest of the sea-god called Nae. He was also the chief priest of Ga. Their present system rule by mantse was borrowed from the Akan tribes near whom the Ga settled¹². Mantse literally means 'father of the town'; it is now translated 'Chief'. When the Ga-Adangme tribes arrived, they had to fight many wars with the Akan tribes. It became necessary to appoint war captain to lead the wars. Nae Wulomo had to stay at home to look after the religious interest of the people, and so, in course of time, the Wulomo lost his political power to the chiefs and war captains. The first known Ga Mantse was Nii Ayi Kushi (Cush), like we have said earlier on that ruled between 1483 to 1519. In modern Ga towns and clans. The Ga mantse is the official political and administrative head of the Ga people; and the chief priest, Nae Wulomo is the spiritual head. He advises on various matters affecting the religious and

spiritual life of the Ga community. He leads in prayers and rites at ceremonies which affect the whole Ga community¹³.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF THE GA PEOPLE
The Ga have their own traditional religion through many Ga are either Christians or Muslims but African traditional religious belief still remain and develops. The Ga believe in the five structure of African traditional religion as noted by E.B Idowu in African World View.

The Supreme Being, the Divinities, the disembodied spirits, the Ancestors and Magical forces¹⁴. They believed that the Supreme Being – God. Naa Nyomo is believed to live in the sky. He created everything; heavens and earth inclusive, with waters. Naa Nyonmo created the sea. These are the three great creations. Nothing can be done successfully without their help. Therefore, in everything, the traditional Ga calls on Heaven, the earth then the sea for help. Naa Nyonmo himself has no priest or shrine like other divinities or deities. The Ga believe that he is too far away from men, but they invoke his name and power whenever they pour libation or sacrifice to other spirit – power.

THE DIVINITIES OR DIETIES OF THE GA PEOPLE

African Traditional Religion was of immense significance to our forebears, it is still important today and surely will continue to be relevant in the future¹⁵. This is largely because the world of the Africans is not different from their religion and their world will have no meaning without their religion. Both are inextricably interwoven.¹⁶

The Ga believe that Naa Nyonmo – God as dzemawodzi (that is, the gods of the world). These gods or divinities walk about the world, though they have their own abodes in the sea, lagoons, mountains, rocks, trees, and other natural objects. They are powerful and intelligent. Naa Nyonmo has handed over his authority to them. They are in active contact with the world of nature and men. Each Ga clan has its own divinity.

The gods are not of the same rank, some are more senior than others: The senior gods are the original Ga gods. Few of them are: Nae, the sea god; Sakumo, a river god, who is also the god who leads in war; and Lakpa, a Lagoon god. The most senior god is Nae.

Afriyee is his wife. He has many children, two of whom are Koole, a lagoon goddess, and Ashi Akle, a sea goddess. The priest of Nae is also the chief priest of the Ga and he is called the Nae wulomo. The Ga worship and offer sacrifices to these gods and goddess.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD 'EXPIATION'

Hilasterion is translated from Greek word as 'expiation' as 'the means of expiating sin'. In Christian theology, the New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version translated this as "Sacrifice of atonement".

In the vocabulary of expiation the Hebrew verb *kepper* has first importance. Twice in the Old Testament it occurs in a profane sense according to which one placates an angry or ill-disposed man (Gen. 32:21; Prov. 16:14). As a religious term it has two uses. God expiate sin, i.e. He wipes out, removes, or forgives it; in passive forms of the verb, sin is expiated, i.e. wiped out removed, forgiven.

rites of expiation

Rites are act or ceremony especially in religious services. The Nae Wulomo performs special rites and services. The Nae Wulomo performs special rites and prayers for people when they came to him to make some request to Nae, or thank him for granting some request.

Among the people who come for special prayers of thanksgiving or intercession are those who have offended the god and have some to confess their sins and beg for pardon. These are done at solemn occasion. A person may offend god in many ways. For example, he may have sworn in the name of Nae and failed to redeem or fulfill his vow, or he may have cursed in Nae's name. such offences cannot be pardoned without that taking of life. Curses are particularly offensive, because they hinder every effort and hope of the people for the increase and well-being of society. They are also against the wishes of the god himself.

When an offender confess his or her sin and admits his guilt, he is made to bring various items for sacrifices. These vary according to the nature of the offence. Often, he is made to bring a goat and two fowls (one male and the other female).

On the appointed day, the Wulomo and others taking part in the ritual purify and cleanse themselves. The Wulomo involves Naa Nyanmo, Asase Afia, Nae, and other gods and spirits affected by the offence. He describes the offences to them. He pleads with them on behalf of the offender to accept the sacrifice and pardon the offender and restore his life to him. He then very carefully brushes the offender from head to toe with the fowls, this takes away the offence.¹⁸

Next, the Wulomo strangles and tears off the head of one the fowls with hands or toes. The dead fowl is thrown away. As this is done, there is absolute silence. If the fowl falls with its breast or chest up, this is a good sign, for it means that the offence has been pardoned. If not, the offences has not been pardoned. This may mean many things: perhaps, the offender has not confessed something; perhaps some of the gods and spirits affected have not been invoked; or some parts of the ritual has been faulty. Care is taken to find out what it is that is wrong. When it is discovered, it is put right at once. The strangling is repeated until a fowl lies breast up.

When all are satisfied that the divinities are pleased, there comes the final stage. The goat which represent the offender is slaughtered. The life of the offender is restored to him as the goat dies. Some of its blood is drained into a big round wooden bowl containing 'holy water'. The pardoned offender is given a ritual bath with the 'holy water' into which the blood has been dripped. He has now been completely pardoned and purified. He is free, and the blessing of the gods rests on him.

The carcass of the goat is skinned and cut up. One of the limbs is given to the sacrifice. But he himself must not eat of the meat; he may give to his relation. The rest of the meat is either cooked and eaten by those present at the ritual ceremony or it is distributed among the servants of gods.

FORGIVENESS AS ACT OF RECONCILIATION BETWEEN A DEITY OR THE SUPREME BEING AND WORSHIPERS

Forgiveness is a process of attaining genuine pardon for wrongdoing 'Ritual Cleansing'. This model, 'ritual cleansing', centres on community's concept of wrongdoing and genuine pardon for sins. Since, Africa views the world and everything in it both good and bad as God's creature; people believe that every aspect of national and civil life as well as human

interactions including morality is governed by God through the earth deity. Within this concept, very human misdemeanor is a wrongdoing soiling the relationship between the divine beings and humanity. Because of the inherent punishment executable by the earth deity, in wrongdoing, the community is compelled to purge itself of any misdemeanor; whether committed by an individual or collectives, through the long established tradition, which Ritual Cleansing. In this established process, God inspire the sinner by bringing misfortune, illness or any other distress that might compel the sinner to look inward together with the community. At this juncture, a diviner who divulges the sins is invited to his/her job while elder and/ or priests perform a ritual cleansing as the culprit confess his/her wrongdoing: begging God for pardon. Although what transpires during the process of forgiveness is spiritual, the action that produces the spiritual grace is performed by a visible agent spurred by God. Through the action of the agent or agents then, wrongdoing and guilt is removed by God; reconciling the culprit and the community with himself in the process. In this way, a perfect forgiveness is attained and genuine pardon achieved. The whole work therefore, presents a symbolic ritual cleansing structured in a community where all the participants are conscious of the divine cooperation in both spurring the repentance and fundamentally enabling genuine confession, forgiveness and proper life giving reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

Expiation is the blotting out or removal of sin; hence, the renewal of communion with God. The Supreme act of expiation is Christ's death on the cross the meaning of which is illuminated by a number of Old Testament themes.

In Israel a strict correlation is observable between expiation and sin, and the sense of both is controlled by covenant. Likewise in Ga traditional religious belief. Sin is crime is the breaking of the covenantal stipulation, whether moral ritual; expiation is wiping out of sin so as to restore good and the God Almighty. In liturgical usage *kippér* (Hebrew word) means to expiate or to perform expiatory rites. This subject of the verb on Biblical understanding is Moses, Aaron, or the officiating priests. The object is the sin that is wiped out or the person or the place that is cleansed of sin.

The Wulomo (the priest) is the spokesmen of the god. He is usually referred to by name of his god. The functions of the priests bring him into direct contact with the god, and, for this reason, it is necessary that he should be different from ordinary people. For example, he must be morally outstanding, and, so also must be his wife.

The Wulomo also observes certain taboos which keep him from being contaminated with *mudzi* (dirt). He must not see a dead person. If by 'accident' he sees one rituals are immediately performed to cleanse him.

In Ga traditional religious belief, it is therefore important for both the priests and the adherents to be spiritual and ceremonially clean before performing any religious act. Thus, rites of expiation is important and of interest not only religious understanding but in reconciling the offender back to his god.

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