

A Look at Hebrews in the Light of an Akan Perspective on Personality¹

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Abstract

To interpret biblical texts appropriately, it is important to understand the social institutions and scripts that underlie the text. The similarities between some concepts of personality in first-century Mediterranean society and the Akan society of Ghana makes it possible to read the letter to the Hebrews (hereafter referred to as Hebrews) through the lens of an Akan understanding of personality, enabling us to appreciate Hebrews in much the same way as first-century Mediterraneans. To demonstrate this, this article discusses some relevant theories on personality in first-century Mediterranean society, as well as some concepts of personality of the Akan people of Ghana. It further discusses the portrait of the persons addressed in Hebrews through the lens of some relevant aspects of an Akan concept of personality.

Key Terms

Hebrews; Akan people; Akan personality; social-scientific criticism; collectivist personality

1 Introduction

This article seeks to understand Hebrews in the light of the Akan collectivist view of personality, because the latter provides relevant ways of understanding the issues being examined in Hebrews. The article does not assume that Akans have one concept of personality. Indeed, Gyekye (1995, 154–162) addresses the tensions between the collective and the individual in Akan concepts of a person. Awinongya (2013, 60) and Deng (2008, 86)

¹ This article represents a reworked version of portions of the Ph.D. dissertation submitted by Seth Kissi, titled “Social Identity in Hebrews and the Akan Community of Ghana,” in the Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, with Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck as supervisor.

also provide similar insights. Beyond the Akan society, Triandis, Bontempo and Villareal (1988, 324) have highlighted the tension between the collective and individual selves in a study conducted in the United States, Japan and Puerto Rico. This article, however, does not concern itself with this tension. Rather, it uses the relevant Akan concepts that provide ways by which one can understand aspects of the message of Hebrews. Since one cannot assume that all Akans have the same concept of personality, this article does not assume that all Akans reading Hebrews would interpret it in the light of the Akan concepts used in this article. The article therefore puts forth Akan concepts worth considering as lenses through which one can appreciate the message of Hebrews.

The article gives a concise representation of the concept of personality, mainly based on Malina's theory of collectivism, with a focus on the Mediterranean society. The choice of this theory is informed by the fact that Hebrews was written in a first-century Mediterranean society that was largely collectivist. The article proceeds to discuss the Akan people of Ghana with their communal orientation and explains the Akan collectivist view of personality. The social context of Hebrews is given attention, after which relevant aspects of the Akan collectivist view of personality are presented as lenses through which aspects of the message of Hebrews are to be appreciated. It ends with some concluding remarks.

2 Personality

Theories on personality are usually concerned with the identification of the *selves* that are at work in people and the socialisation that makes people sample some particular *selves*. Insofar as personality theories are concerned, scholars identify two types of societies: individualist and collectivist societies. Malina (1996, 47) intimates: "In collectivist cultures most people's social behaviour is largely determined by group goals that require the pursuit of achievements that improve the position of the group" (see also Burnett 2001, 48; Hartin 2009, 22). Western cultures as individualist societies "focus on self-reliance, in the sense of independence, separation from others, and personal competence" (Malina 1996, 46). It is therefore the values of particular communities that provide the orientation for the selves that people often employ in their decisions and actions. Three types of selves are identified. They are "the private self," "the collective self" and "the public self" (Triandis 1989, 507). Triandis (1989, 507) identifies the private self as the self that is concerned about how one sees oneself in terms of personal traits and interests; the public self as the self concerned with what

people in the general public think of oneself; and the collective self as the self concerned with what people in one's group think of oneself.

That most Mediterraneans have group-oriented selves in a collectivist society, to the extent that their groups are important determinants for their lot in life, has been established (Esler 1994, 29; Malina 1996, 45). This means that though most Mediterraneans, like all other people, are conscious of their personal goals and interests, as well as those of their groups, they are socialised to place group goals and interests before their individual goals and interests (Malina 1996, 47; see also Burnett 2001, 48; Hartin 2009, 22). Burnett (2001, 48) observes: "typically, in collectivism, there is a much greater emphasis on the needs and goals of the group rather than personal ones, and there is a greater readiness to cooperate with group members" (see also Hartin 2009, 22). In the choices and actions of the individual in a collectivist society, therefore, lies the desire to satisfy the expectations of one's group rather than one's own personal interest (Burnett 2001, 48). The important place that the pursuit of honour occupied in the life of Mediterranean people is attested (Esler 1994, 31). "The defining attributes of collectivist cultures are family integrity, solidarity, and keeping the primary ingroup in 'good health'" (Malina 1996, 53). Their belief in a shared group fate comes with implications, such as the need to control the conduct of individuals, as well as group and interpersonal responsibilities. It also leads to stereotypical ways of evaluating people, so that people of a particular group are expected to "share common qualities" and behave in the same way (Malina 1996, 44, 49). This does not mean that all Mediterraneans have collective selves. Triandis (1989, 513) lists factors that make people sample private, public or collective selves, concluding that in every society—collectivist or individualist—people sample all three selves. This explains why there are deviants in all societies.

3 The Akan People

As the largest ethnic group in Ghana, with a population of 47.3% (Ghana Statistical Service 2013, 61), the Akan people are made up of the Bono, Asante, Adanse, Twifo, Asen, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwahu, Sehwi, Awowin, Nzima and Ahanta (Buah 1998, 8). The Akan language is one important feature of Akan identity. Many of the Akan dialects share common vocabulary to various degrees. The Akan language has the following dialects: Asante, Akuapem, Akwamu, Fante, Akyem, Agona, Assin, Denkyira, Twifo, Wassaw, Kwahu, Bron and Buem (Agyekum 2006,

206).² On the language divisions of Akan, Buah (1998), a Ghanaian scholar of history, relates the following observation:

The Akan speak dialects of a common language also called Akan, which is enriched by local varieties of vocabulary, expression and idiom. The two main varieties of the Akan language are Twi and Fante, which are very closely related. Fante is spoken in the coastal parts of the country, and Twi by most of the Akan in the hinterland. In addition to these two major variants of the Akan language there are four other inter-related dialects which differ significantly from Twi and Fante. These are Nzima, Ahanta, Awowin and Sehwi, all spoken in the Western Region of the country. (p. 8)

The Twi and Fante dialects are the most widely spoken of all the Akan dialects. They are also the dialects that most non-Akans tend to speak due to the large geographical area occupied by Akans who speak these dialects. On Akan identity, Adu Boahen (1966, 3), a professor of History, lists the use of a common calendar, common religious beliefs, naming ceremonies, marriage, matrilineal systems of inheritance, a monarchical system of government and language as cultural traits and institutions shared by all Akans. Chieftaincy used to be a unique mark of the Akan communities according to Dolphyne (personal communication, 4 July 2016). She intimates that it was the British who, for the convenience of governance, introduced chieftaincy among the Gas and Ewes, who were previously ruled by local priests.

4 The Communal Orientation of the Akan Society

The clan system of the Akan people provides a very important means for their communal living. Akans have seven matrilineal clans to which their children belong.³ However, when it comes to the *nton* (the clan that determines the taboos that a person must observe), the child belongs to the clan of the father. This explains why the child observes the taboos observed

² Kofi Agyekum is a professor in the Linguistics Department of the University of Ghana.

³ Busia (1954, 196) recognises the assertion by some writers that there are eight clans. He, nonetheless, follows “some of the best authorities on Ashanti custom” and lists seven Akan clans as follows: (1) Oyoko and Dako; (2) Bretuo and Agona; (3) Asona; (4) Asenie; (5) Aduana; (6) Ekuona and Asokore; and (7) Asakyiri. Ekem (2008, 29) follows the list of seven clans found among the Fantes. They are given as follows: (1) Anona; (2) Aboradze; (3) Kona; (4) Nsona; (5) Adwenadze; (6) Twidan; and (7) Ntwea.

by his father (Buah 1998, 8; Ekem 2008, 29). The purpose for the observance of the taboos is to “strengthen the spiritual bond between father and son” (Busia 1954, 199). The *nton* is a virtual clan and less visible than the matrilineal clan (*abusua*). The fact that the father was held responsible for his son’s moral behaviour and “was liable for any damages that were claimed” for the offences committed by his son, emphasises the spiritual bond between the father and the son (Busia 1954, 199).

When it comes to acceptable conduct in Akan society, communal interests generally by far outweigh individual interests. Consequently, “a person’s membership of the community is emphasised more than his individuality” (Opoku 1977, 11). Gyekye observes that ethics in the Akan context is defined in terms of what promotes the good of society, namely, “social welfare, solidarity and harmony in human relationships” (Gyekye 1995, 132). For this reason, there is priority of obligation over personal rights in the sense that “one assumes his or her rights in the exercise of his obligations, which makes society a chain of responsibilities” (Opoku 1977, 11). It is therefore understandable that “[t]he solidarity of the community is maintained by a strong sense of corporateness, undergirded by laws, customs, taboos and set forms of behaviour which constitute the moral code” (Opoku 1977, 166). The application of oneself to these norms and obligations is what defines good conduct, and the failure to apply oneself to them amounts to moral evil, which is defined in terms of what one does against one’s fellow person (Opoku 1977, 166).

Gyekye argues against the notion held by such scholars as Opoku (1977, 152), Sarpong (2002, 41), Busia (1954, 10, 16) and Danquah (1968, 3) that religion is the foundation of Akan morality. He maintains that “[i]n Akan moral thought the sole criterion of goodness is the welfare or well-being of the community” (Gyekye 1995, 132). Conversely, evil (i.e., moral evil) “is that which is considered detrimental to the wellbeing of humanity and society.” In this light, what is “evil is determined by members of the community and not *Onyame* [God]” (Gyekye 1995, 133).⁴ To further establish the communal orientation of social norms and values, Gyekye (1995, 143) argues that even conscience (*tiboa*) is the product of society. Gyekye therefore implies that Akan social interests and sanctions meant for the welfare of the community have, over the years, given birth to conscience

⁴ Gyekye (1995, 138, 141) explains that “[t]he thought that God is good and what is good comes from God as well as the religious sanctions associated with morality represent a complex sociological system by which morality gains religious basis whether or not God is the originator of the moral rule.”

and religious regulations that govern moral conduct in the Akan society.⁵

5 The Akan Collectivist View of Personality

The Akan collectivist view of personality has its focus on the promotion of a good communal life, where social harmony defines everything (see Wingo 2006). This way of life has come about through a long process by which Akans have learnt to fashion for themselves those values needed for their life as a people. These values are reflected in their concept of personality.

Akans believe that a human being is made up of *okra* (“soul”), *honhom* (“spirit”), *sasa* (“evil ghost”), *saman* (“good ghost”), *sunsum* (“spirit”), *nton* (“father’s spirit”) and *mogya* (“blood”) (see Sarpong 2002, 90; Opoku 1977, 96).⁶ For the purpose of our discussion on personality in Hebrews, the focus will be on *okra*, *sunsum* and *nton*. The *okra*, the soul, is the bearer of the destiny of a person, and is given directly by God at the time of departing from God into the world. It is the principle that makes one a human being as distinct from other creatures (Sarpong 2002, 91). While Opoku (1977, 96) finds constancy in the *okra*, Sarpong (2002, 91) finds in it the principle of luck that makes one happy or sad. According to Tiekou (2016, 134), it can, for instance, be said that one’s “*kra*⁷ has run away (*ne kra aguan afi ne ho*) when one is overcome by excessive fear.” It is believed that one’s emotional state can affect the soul to the point of becoming sick, for instance, especially as a result of the commission of a social crime, such as the abuse of one’s parents (Tiekou 2016, 134). Opoku (1977, 102–103) calls attention to “a two-sided view of destiny,” arguing that the fact that Akans make attempts to alter an unfavourable destiny implies their belief that destiny, though constant by definition, can be altered. This is why destiny is not the only way of explaining the lot of people (Opoku 1977, 102–103). The implication for Opoku is that “Akans do not take a fatalistic attitude towards life.” The realisation of one’s destiny therefore depends

⁵ Gyekye (2013, 223) argues that “[b]ecause God is held by the African people not only to be the overlord of the human society but also to have a superbly moral character, and because the ancestors are also supposed to be interested in the welfare of the society, including the moral life of the individual, religion constitutes part of the sanctions that are in play in matters of moral practice. Thus, religion cannot be totally banished from the domain of moral practice, notwithstanding the fact that the moral values and principles of the African society do not derive from religion.”

⁶ Not every writer includes every one of the seven elements. Opoku (1977, 96) does not include *honhom*, *sasa* and *saman*.

⁷ Another form of the word *okra*.

also on one's own cooperation, for which one's character is important (Opoku 1977, 102–103).

The *sunsum* “accounts for the character (*suban*), disposition and intelligence of a person,” and it is said to be responsive to training, so much so that a weak *sunsum* can become strong through training (see Opoku 1977, 96). The *sunsum* is believed to be imparted to the child by the father at conception and is responsible for the personality that the child will have (Appiah 1992, 98). It is the *sunsum* that is “reflected in the appearance of the person and in the qualities peculiar to the person's individuality, especially moral qualities” (Opoku 1977, 96; cf. Appiah 1992, 98). One's dreams are believed to be a reflection of the night journeys of the person's *sunsum*, since the *sunsum* can leave a person at night during sleep (Appiah 1992, 98). The taboos that a person observes are those of his father's lineage, because every person has the *nton* of his father (Buah 1998, 8; Ekem 2008, 29). The *nton* has already received some attention under the subheading “the communal orientation of the Akan society” above. As has been noted, the taboos of the father's *nton*, which the children observe, establish (and strengthen) a spiritual bond between a person and his or her father (Buah 1998, 8; Ekem 2008, 29).

6 The Social Context of Hebrews

If the authorship and audience of Hebrews is a puzzle, its social context and aim is certainly less of a puzzle, thanks especially to current scholarship that examine Hebrews from the perspective of social-scientific criticism. The readers, who lived in an unknown Roman city, had come to join the Christian group from some dominant social groups (DeSilva 2012, 66). The reaction of the members of these dominant groups, who held either a Jewish or a Greek orientation, or both (see Muir 2014, 427), entailed mostly the social sanction of rejection, public abuse and economic hardship (Heb 10:32–34). According to DeSilva (2012, 46), the social and economic hostility endured by the recipients was typical of deviancy-control measures of Mediterranean societies. That the readers suffered such hostility reveals the image of the believers as deviants in a Christian messianic group. Messianic groups did not usually foster a good image in the eyes of both city authorities and ordinary citizens, who would typically refuse to have anything to do with these groups (Acts 4:13; 5:36–37). DeSilva (2012, 49) notes that “people who failed to acknowledge the gods' claim on their lives and service, as the believers did, could hardly be counted upon to honour the claims of the state, law, family and traditional values.” For the Jews,

Jesus was a sinner, and, as is evident from John 9:24, 35, those who professed faith in Jesus were to be excluded from the synagogue.⁸ As DeSilva (2012, 49) observes, joining the Christian group was not a simple matter of affiliation, since it amounted in some sense to subversion, or at least to anti-social conduct within Roman society. The readers had been Christians for quite a considerable amount of time, so much so that they were expected to have become mature enough to be teachers (Heb 5:12). As second-generation Christians, who had past leaders whose ways the readers were expected to recall and emulate (Heb 13:7), the believers had endured a long period of difficult times, to the point that they were beginning to lose their confidence in the message they had heard (Heb 10:32–36). They were now showing some tendency towards leaving the Christian group, and some of them had forsaken their meetings (Heb 10:35). If these developments continued unchecked, they would have dire consequences for the group. Considering that social mobility involves people leaving groups with lower social status and power (Esler 1998, 50), it must have reflected negatively on the Christian group when some of its members left. DeSilva (2012, 16) maintains that such social mobility would have negatively effected the commitment of those who remained, as well as the image of the group. The author's disappointment with his readers lies in their failure to recognise the dangerous implications of their tendency to abandon the group. The inappropriateness of this tendency provides the occasion for the author's urgent appeal for the right conduct of the believers. This comes in the forms of encouragement, reaffirmation of hope, a call to hold on, and stern warnings. In voicing his concerns, the writer employs some concepts of personality in order to appeal to his readers for their appropriate response to God, with implications for their continued membership within the Christian group. These concepts in the message of Hebrews are now considered through the lenses of some Akan concepts.

⁸ However, at the time of the healing of the blind man, the practice of casting those who believed in Jesus out of the synagogue had not yet started as is generally believed. Instead, the practice is reflected in the Gospel of John because it was in vogue by the time that the Gospel was written, and is therefore anachronistic. It does, however, provide an important clue as to how the believers were treated by Jews at the time when John was written.

7 Relevant Aspects of the Akan Collectivist View of Personality for the Study of Hebrews

A number of aspects of the message of Hebrews can be appreciated by looking at them in the light of some concepts of the Akan collectivist view of personality. These concepts include the collective self and group orientation, shared group fate, control of individuals' behaviour, interpersonal obligation within the in-group, training and integration of the individual into society, acting in accordance with one's nature, and honour and conduct.

7.1 *The collective self and group considerations*

The Akan collectivist view of personality holds that an Akan person has a self that is to be considered primarily in relation to other persons in the social order of society, including especially one's family and other significant social groups. Deng (2008, 86) concludes that "[t]he Akan view sees personhood as constituting an individual self within a larger social self, which in turn is reflected in successively expanding selves such as family, lineage, clan, nation, country, and collective humanity." Opoku (1977, 160) maintains that for the Akan a person is more of a member of the community than a person perceived in isolation. Like every other person in any other culture, the Akan has the capacity to independently express himself or herself, yet the individual knows that society is not simply interested in one's self-fulfilment and expression, but is only interested in the latter as they meet the expectations of the society or group. This awareness is one of the reasons why individuals tend to place group and social considerations ahead of their own. Sometimes, this awareness is not in the consciousness of the Akan as he or she acts; it simply finds expression in one's choices and actions as a collectivist person. Rattray (1929) notes for instance:

The stool was in every sense greater than the man or woman who "sat" upon it. The lives of the kings or queens or war captains were of little value compared with the overriding necessity for guarding and preserving the shrines upon which were thought to depend the very existence of the Nation, tribe, or kindred group. (p. 350)

Yaa Asantewaa reminded the kings of Asante Kingdom of their obligation to fight and be prepared to perish for the sake of their heritage, which was the Golden Stool (Tieku 2016, 244–245). The concept of the collective self

in Akan society, described in the foregoing, provides a useful way of appreciating the portrayal of the collective selves of the readers of Hebrews, for whom group interests and goals are of priority.

Hebrews presents the recipients as people characterised by group orientation, who had until now demonstrated great concern for group interests and goals. Heb 3:6b attests to the earlier confidence and boasting of the believers in their group hopes and aspirations. These believers are also urged to continue to hold fast such confidence and boasting in their group hope, thereby proving to be God's house. The author maintains: ". . . we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope"⁹ (Heb 3:6). They are urged not to throw away this confidence, which has a great reward (Heb 10:35). Previously, they had taken risks in order to relieve group members who were in trouble (Heb 10:33). They appeared unconcerned with their own safety, placing the interests of the Christian group before their own. They had themselves come under some public hostility, during which their property was plundered and they were publicly abused and mistreated due to their membership of the Christian minority group (Heb 10:33–34). Like the Akan, who would risk his or her life in fighting to defend the family heritage of the stool, the readers were prepared to lose their possessions for the survival of the Christian group. The readers, however, were confident that they had better and abiding possessions by being Christians and part of God's people (Heb 10:34), just as the Akan people hope to be received favourably among the ancestors when proving to be faithful in the defence of the family's heritage. In all of this, the pride and confidence of the readers in their hope were bound to the group, finding expression in group activities. For the author, there is hardly any private hope or confidence that find expression without relation to the group or others in the group. It is through the group that they have a Saviour and hope (Malina 1996, 45). This is one of the reasons why the believers should not give up their attendance at the assembly of the church (Heb 10:25). The Akan understanding and experience, according to which group interests are defended as a matter of priority (as seen above), are similar to what we find in Hebrews. Even in twenty-first-century Akan society, many Christians can hardly conceive of a Christian who does not belong to any church. It is common to hear rebuttals to claims that one need not belong to a church in order to be a Christian, as represented by the phrase *nyameson de ewo akoma mu* ("we worship God in our hearts"). What Akan Christians

⁹ In this article, all direct quotations from the Bible are from the ESV.

do in church worship and other church-related activities are important expressions of their confidence and hope in their own faith, and evidence of the collective selves at work in them.

7.2 *Shared group fate*

Many Akans believe that one's conduct has either positive or negative effects on other people in one's group. If one's actions generate honour, it does so not only for the individual, but for the group as well (Opuni-Frimpong 2012, 124–127). This belief in a shared group fate may be found in a number of cultures around the globe. For many Akans, however, there is a spiritual dimension to this notion of a shared group fate. For the Akan whose understanding of the family includes the ancestors and the unborn, the belief that some actions by individuals bring social calamities of woe (*mmusuo*) unto one's community as a whole is of grave concern (see Opoku 1977, 162). The belief in a shared group fate underlies the Akan observance of taboos, customs and norms. It provides the reason why norms and customs must be followed. It also explains why certain specific rituals must be performed to avert any evil consequences for the community whenever these norms and customs are broken (Opoku 1977, 162).

It is as a result of this belief in a shared group fate that social sanctions are exercised either spontaneously or deliberately. Supernatural beings with an interest in the society exercise some sanctions on the living for the same purpose of sharing in the group fate of the living. The ancestors, the living dead, who are considered to be an integral part of Akan society, should be singled out for mention here. If the elders of a community are meticulous in protecting the traditions and customs of that community, one main reason for this is that they are afraid to incur the wrath of the ancestors, whose interests the elders serve by ensuring compliance to the traditions (Rattray 1929, 309–310).

Admittedly, the author of Hebrews was concerned that if some of the members left the Christians group, as their tendencies showed, it would have a negative impact on the image and fortunes of the in-group. DeSilva (2012, 16) notes that the author's "principal aim is to strengthen commitment to the Christian group among those who are wavering who might themselves be moving toward defection (thus eroding the Christian plausibility structure further, and jeopardizing exponentially the commitment of those who remain thereafter)." The question was therefore not merely: Why not let them leave if they are suffering for being members of the group? The truth for the author was that the group would disappear if the salvation and hope

of its members disappeared, or would survive if the salvation and hope of its members survived. If, therefore, some were showing signs of leaving, they were about to do great harm, not only to themselves, but also to many others. The fact that leaving the Christian group was seen as crucifying the Son of God all over again and holding him up to contempt (Heb 6:6) is expressive of the damage that such an act would do to a group in a society of inter-group competition. It is the seriousness of such a sin that makes restoration to repentance impossible (Heb 6:4–6).

The description of the tendency to withdraw from the group as a “root of bitterness” (ρίζα πικρίας) that could affect other members of the group (Heb 12:15) affirms the idea of a group fate that is shared by the readers. They stand together and share in the blessing of the group; therefore, those who shrink back lose their salvation (Heb 10:38–39). For the author, the promised rest for his readers would only be a reality so long as they remained in the in-group as part of those who believe (Heb 4:3). Some of the group expressions used by the author to address his readers gain significance in light of the foregoing explanation. Their identity as God’s house serves to impress upon them the united identity they share (Heb 3:6). The statement that the exemplars of God’s faithful people (from whom the readers are to take inspiration) should not be made perfect without the readers points to the readers as people bound together in fate with those exemplars (Heb 11:40). In all of this, the author is appealing to the readers’ collective selves, so that they would work for the interest of the group, in which their own interests are guaranteed. Though this is not easy, it is still worth striving for, since not only the readers, but others as well, including the heroes of faith, have their hope at stake in the decision that the readers make. Akans, who believe that they share a common fate with both the yet-unborn and the living dead (ancestors), are well-positioned to appreciate this message of Hebrews. The message of Hebrews is very accessible to Akans, whose belief in a shared group fate includes responsibility for their decisions and conduct, as these uphold the interests of others in the group.

7.3 *Control of individual’s behaviour*

The control that a father exercises over his children in the Akan society is a practical one that stems from the fact that the children live with him, though traditionally the children do not belong to the father’s clan (Rattray 1929, 8–14). The expectation of members of the community is that the father should train his children well; if his children misbehave, the father is deemed to have failed in his responsibility (Rattray 1929, 8–14). When it

comes to discipline and helping children at home, the older children also assume some responsibility, such that the younger children could be left in the care of older siblings under certain circumstances (Fortes 1975, 272). Regarding the control of people's behaviour, punishment is an important measure. Several offences in the larger community attract corporal punishment. Depending on the gravity of the offence, one could be made to face a cruel execution called *Atopre* ("death by torture"),¹⁰ other corporal punishments or the imposition of a fine (Nkansa-Kyeremanteng 2010, 60; Opoku 1977).

Besides punishing offenders, threats of punishment are also levelled in Akan society against those who show tendencies toward irresponsible conduct. In order to warn against the commission of very serious offences, a parent might even threaten his or her child (adult or not) with not being allowed to participate in his or her funeral. The threat of exclusion from one's family similarly comes as a warning against the tendency to commit a very serious offence. The usual effect of these severe threats upon the person being threatened is that he or she exercises restraint. In Hebrews, one comes across similar tendencies, to which many Akan believers can relate given their understanding of the need to control people's behaviour. Considered from the perspective of the Akan collectivist view, the role of the author of Hebrews can be seen as that of an older sibling trying to control his younger siblings (who are about to do the dishonourable) through his words of exhortation. His authority stems from the fact that he is recognised as a leader by the group (Heb 13:8), that he is a member of the group, and that he is their brother (Heb 10:19).

For many Akans, the stern warnings in Hebrews would be indicative of something serious that must be avoided. If the severity of the threat shows the enormity of the offence, then the stern warnings in Hebrews reveal the seriousness of the offence(s) that the readers were prone to commit. The audience is warned of extreme forms of punishment, worse than those ever experienced by the wilderness generation, with the reminder that God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:25, 29). Hebrews speaks of a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that would consume those who are not on the side of God (Heb 10:27). The author expects his readers to restrain themselves in their tendency to apostatise in the face of the terrible judgment that awaits apostates. The author levels threats of judgment as part of a sense

¹⁰ Sharp metal tools are inserted into the jaws of the victim so that, as the victim is tortured to death, he or she cannot utter curses against the torturers.

of divine responsibility, in order to restrain his readers from their dangerous tendencies in much the same way as Akan elders exercise control for responsible action on behalf of the ancestors. The readers are expected to obey their leaders and submit to them as those keeping watch over their souls, and as those who will give account of them to God (Heb 13:17–18). The severity of the warnings in Hebrews is intended to make the readers appreciate the worse fate that would await them as apostates when compared to their suffering as faithful members of the Christian group. This makes sense from an Akan perspective, since the sterner the warning, the more serious the offence that is being warned against.

7.4 *Interpersonal obligation within the in-group*

The focus of an Akan concept of personality on the promotion of healthy communal living involves a sense of responsibility on the part of members to ensure responsible conduct of one another. Traditionally, every Akan is expected to know his or her obligations and rights within the social system. These are not written codes, but are known through traditions, and are both observed and expected of others. The priority of obligation over personal rights in Akan society, where “one assumes his or her rights in the exercise of his obligations,” has been noted (Opoku 1977, 11). It is therefore understandable that “[t]he solidarity of the community is maintained by a strong sense of corporateness, undergirded by laws, customs, taboos and set forms of behaviour which constitute the moral code” (Opoku 1977, 166). A good person would live in accordance with the expectations of the community as these are expressed in social customs, but a bad person would not (Opoku 1977, 166). Hebrews’ insistence on an appropriate response to God that involves gratitude, acceptable worship, reverence and awe (Heb 12:28) should be seen in light of the Akan expectation that people conduct themselves responsibly in accordance with the social regulations and customs that define good and evil. Here, the author is concerned with their conduct towards God as people who stand in a relationship to him as their God.

Certain acts committed against one’s parents are unforgivable and bring ill fortunes (*mmusuo*) to the offender. These acts may include any form of abuse or assault committed against one’s parents (Fortes 1975, 268). As such, the Akan will appreciate Hebrews’ depiction of withdrawal from the group as a dishonourable public act of contempt against the Son (Heb 6:6), as well as the fact that such an unacceptable act spawns the severest forms of punishment, with no chance of repentance (Heb 10:27; cf. Heb

6:6). The fact that the Son is God's agent for the good of the readers (Heb 1:2; 2:9, 17) makes the act even more grievous—it is to throw God's goodness back in his face.

The interpersonal obligation that the author impels his readers to take up makes sense when considering the concept of a shared group fate. The fact that in Akan society the outcome of one's conduct affects all other group members either positively or negatively provides a useful way to explain the interpersonal responsibility that the author encourages from members of the Christian group. The author urges his readers to take up the responsibility of ensuring that no conduct that has any infectious effect is allowed for any of the members of the group (Heb 12:15). The mention in Heb 12:15 of "many" (πολλοί) who could be defiled by what the author calls a "root of bitterness" is a pointer to the author's concern for the group's integrity and health, as well as an affirmation of his belief in a shared group fate. The readers' obligation is to encourage one another all the more as they see the Day drawing near, and not to neglect their group meetings.

Hospitality is another way in which the author expects his readers to exercise interpersonal obligation for the good of the Christian group. Christian travellers who visit the city as strangers are to be shown hospitality by the readers (Heb 13:2). The call to show love to other members of the group, who are regarded as "brothers" (as φιλαδελφία suggests [Heb 13:1]), illuminates this understanding. The fact that the recipients of their hospitality are considered to be part of the same "body" (σώματι) as the readers is worth noting (Heb 13:3). Following this, the readers are urged to remember those in prison as though they themselves were in prison with the beneficiaries of their hospitality (Heb 13:3).

Hebrew's description of the readers as members of the house of God (Heb 3:6; 10:21) is also further illuminated when read against the Akan concept of a household (usually of the same family, where the sense of a shared group fate is strongest). The call on the readers to "go to him [Christ] outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured" (ἐξερχώμεθα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔξω τῆς παρεμβολῆς τὸν ὀνειδισμὸν αὐτοῦ φέροντες) is to be understood in terms of their public identification with Christ and the resultant public abuse (Heb 13:13); what a practical way of giving expression to the sense of a shared group fate! That all these are to be done in the form of interpersonal obligations shows how a shared group fate gives rise to interpersonal obligations within the group.

7.5 *Training and integration of the individual into the society*

An Akan proverb states: *Onipa tese brode a eda egyam*; *w'ankisa a, ehye* (“a human being is like a plantain being roasted on coal fire, it burns when you fail to keep turning it”). This proverb underscores the importance not only of training, but also of the need to keep moulding the character of a person as part of one’s exhortation, especially in the family. Before the advent of Western education in Ghana, Akans had informal and formal ways in which they educated and trained their children. The informal ways involved observation and participation, while the formal ways took the form of institutionalised periods during which specific lessons and skills were imparted to young ones. According to Opoku (1977, 102), the Akan proverb *Opanyin ano sen suman* (“the words of an elder are greater or more potent than an amulet”) bespeaks the importance of the words of the elderly, as they come from a wealth of experience. The worth of the words of the elderly in shaping one’s character is one element that finds expression in this saying. It stresses at the same time the spiritual effect of the words uttered by the elderly, so that if the elderly utter any unfavourable words against a young person out of provocation, it is bound to happen (Opoku 1977, 102). Hence, the elderly reckon it their duty to give pieces of advice to their young ones, especially when the young are seen doing wrong. The emphasis on training in Akan society for responsible conduct illustrates the relationship between training and the formation of one’s character and personality. This provides a useful lens through which Hebrews’ emphasis on training and responsible conduct can be considered.

The author expects peaceful fruits of righteousness from those who have been trained in God’s discipline (Heb 12:11). Hebrews’ use of παιδεία (“training”) as discipline speaks to the required training of legitimate children as preparation for their roles as heirs (Heb 12:7, 8). Likewise, the emphasis on being skilful in the word of righteousness and thereby exercising one’s sense of discerning between good and evil (Heb 5:13–14) speaks to the importance of training in responsible conduct. The author’s disappointment is that having gone through many learning experiences over a considerable period of time, the readers, who should have become teachers by now, still need someone to teach them (Heb 5:12). As a result, they have failed to distinguish what is right from what is wrong (Heb 5:12–13). The author’s positive perspective on discipline as God’s training for those he loves (Heb 12:6), and as God’s way of treating the readers as legitimate children (Heb 12:7–8), is worthy of note. Even Jesus had to learn obedience

through what he suffered (Heb 5:8). The notion that suffering is God's training (discipline) for his people gives meaning to what Jesus suffered (Heb 5:8), and underscores the importance of training for the author. In this light, Jesus's perfection (Heb 2:10) and his role in becoming the source of eternal salvation (Heb 5:8–9) are the result of his training during his suffering. If Jesus acted appropriately in his suffering by loving righteousness and hating evil (Heb 1:9)—that is, by resolving to be faithful to God—it was because he had been through God's training.

The place of the elderly in training, as emphasised in Akan society, gives meaning to the author's call upon the readers to obey their leaders (Heb 13:17). Similarly, his call upon them to perform the right conduct in their suffering is a way of asking his readers to prove that they have been properly nurtured—not as a land that has received the required nurture, but has failed to yield the expected crop (Heb 6:7–8). When an Akan goes through *nteteē* (“training”), he or she is expected to be equipped as *onimdefo* (a knowledgeable person) to act responsibly in every situation (Opuni-Frimpong 2012, 124–127). This has relevance for our understanding of Hebrews' identification of the readers as enlightened people (φωτισθέντας), for whom inappropriate conduct towards God (Heb 6:4) will certainly be a deliberate evil act for which the severest form of retribution must be expected (Heb 10:26).

7.6 *Acting in accordance with one's nature*

The author of Hebrews employs arguments that assume that his readers should conduct themselves in accordance with their nature. In other words, it is what they are that must determine how they act. Many Akans expect people's conduct to conform to their nature, as derived from their parents. *Okoto nnwo anomaa* (“the crab does not give birth to a bird”) speaks to the Akan expectation that one derives one's nature from one's parents. It is therefore instructive to know that the *sunsum* and *nton* derived from the father are important determining factors of the individual's character (Appiah 1992, 98; Sarpong 2002, 91; Opoku 1977, 96; cf. Appiah 1992, 98). Children are therefore expected to behave in such a way that they show the fatherly influence on their lives, at least in the taboos they observe. Key in the author's exhortation is his emphasis that the readers and the one who sanctifies them all have the same source as children of God (Heb 2:11; 12:5). It is for this reason that the author demands that they consider Jesus, the archetype of God's children and their brother, who endured from sinners such hostility against him, so that they may not grow weary or fainthearted

(Heb 12:3). As they look at Jesus, they will see who they are as people and that they have a common source with Jesus, which is why they must act accordingly (Heb 2:11). It is significant in this regard that, in enduring hostility from sinners against him, Jesus was displaying the same faithfulness to God (Heb 10:23; cf. Heb 2:17; 3:2); a virtue that must characterise all the children of God. For the author, then, God's faithful people are those who endure hostilities to the end as did Christ, who bears his father's nature (Heb 12:3–4; cf. Heb 12:7).

7.7 *Honour and conduct*

Honour is a basic virtue cherished by all Akans. It is the one virtue that is actively sought and defended in every Akan family or clan. Actions and achievements that bring honour are usually encouraged and praised, no matter how difficult their attainment might be. People whose accomplishments give their families or clans honour are celebrated. Honour is one of the most important incentives regarding the acts that people either engage in or avoid. As such, withholding honour is a powerful tool to control the conduct of people (Gyekye 1995, 139). Gyekye (1995) observes:

The possibility of undergoing shame, disgrace, or dishonour in consequence of unethical behaviour is a real sanction in Akan moral practice. The moral maxim “it is unbecoming of the Akan to be in disgrace” (or “Disgrace does not befit the Akan”: *animguase mafata Okanniba*), is so ever-present in the consciousness of every adult Akan that it undoubtedly constitutes a potent influence on moral conduct. (p. 139)

Gyekye therefore believes that the avoidance of an act or the commission of it by an Akan are determined by whether or not the act will bring honour, not by the rightness or wrongness of the act itself. This for Gyekye (1995, 139) gives Akan morality “a consequentialistic stamp.” Though conscious efforts are made to teach the Akan child in many traditional ways to pursue honour, he or she learns the virtues that one must pursue as an Akan by observing and becoming familiar with conducts and achievements that are either praised or reprobated. Rattray (1929, 299) lists treason, cowardice, slander and abuse of the head chief as some vices that attracted severe social sanctions, whereas the display of boldness, courage and respect for oaths received the social reward of honour.

Insofar as individual desires, hopes and aspirations are pursued in conformity with the social norms of many Akans, their collective selves are much more important than their private selves. Since the perception of honour is invariably a social product, with the views of significant persons in the group featuring prominently, an individual's pursuit of honour tends to draw upon his or her collective self.¹¹ In addition to this, the Akan sense of pride provides the basis for appeals to right conduct. *Akanni nkasa saa* ("an Akan does not speak this way") is a direct way of reminding an Akan of the need to act honourably, since many Akans believe they are honourable people for whom disgrace is unbecoming.

The writer of Hebrews takes advantage of the fact that his readers are dyadic persons whose conduct is largely determined by the pursuit of honour. He speaks of the Christian group in a way that highlights the members' ascribed honour and tries to awaken a sense of honour in their strivings for the Christian group. Ascribed honour is the honour of a group that is enjoyed by members of that group. The depiction of Jesus, the head and dominant male figure of the Christian group, as crowned with glory and honour (Heb 2:7, 9), and as being anointed with the oil of gladness among his companions (Heb 1:9), emphasises the ascribed honour of the Christian group. Also significant in this respect is the claim that Jesus has been counted worthy of greater glory than Moses (Heb 3:3).

If the foregoing reminds the readers of the honour that they share in the Christian group, then it places the responsibility on them to act in a manner that maintains and enhances that ascribed honour. When their struggles with suffering are explained in terms of athletic competitions like a race or wrestling, it is significant that the pursuit of honour underlies these competitions. At the time, the use of athletic imagery was found useful for encouraging members of groups whose lot was shame and suffering, so that their experiences could be seen in terms of a praiseworthy contest (DeSilva 2012, 89). In first-century Mediterranean society, it was particularly in the field of athletics that people sought honour, which they obtained when they won the contest (DeSilva 2012, 89). It therefore makes sense that as the readers are urged to pursue honourable acts, they should avoid any dishonourable moves. Akans, who perceive themselves to be more polite and civilised in comparison to the people among whom they live, often say *animguase de efinam owu* ("death is better than disgrace"). If the right

¹¹ The collective self is the self that is concerned about what members of one's group think about a person.

conduct of an Akan is motivated by his or her desire to maintain honour and avoid shame, then the call to the readers of Hebrews to pursue honourable acts in the light of their ascribed honour should be meaningful to such an Akan. This underscores the relevance of all the virtues to which the readers are exhorted in Hebrews. Given that their withdrawal from the Christian group amounts to the dishonourable act of trampling the Son of God underfoot, and counting the blood of the covenant with which they had been sanctified unworthy (Heb 10:29), the readers must avoid such withdrawal. The seriousness of this dishonourable act is also exemplified in its depiction as an act of despising the Spirit of grace, which constitutes a response of contempt for God's grace. In light of the fact that any abuse of one's parents (whose sacrifices in giving birth and nurturing the child make them worthy of honour) are unforgivable acts that attracts ill luck, Akans can appreciate the inappropriateness of withdrawing from the Christian group, as it amounts to a serious abuse of Christ, whose blood brought the readers the grace of God's forgiveness and all the benefits in which they share (Heb 10:29). For the Akan whose daily cry is *animguase mafata Okani ba* ("disgrace is unbecoming to an Akan"), such a dishonourable act is contrary to what one must pursue.

8 Concluding Remarks

The foregoing confirms the view that looking at Hebrews through the lens of an Akan collectivist view of personality offers a helpful way of understanding the message of Hebrews. The collectivist society of the Akan embraces concepts, norms and experiences in group orientation according to which the collective self is usually sampled. Reading Hebrews in this light helps one to appreciate how the readers give priority to group goals in such a way that it exposes them to public ridicule and hostility. It also explains why the author urges them to continue in those acts that uphold group goals and interests. The Akan perceptions and practices that emanate from their concept of a shared group fate illuminate the relevance of the author's attempts to control the lives of members in the Christian group, as well as the author's appeal to the interpersonal responsibility for the sake of group integrity and wellbeing. Similarly, the Akan practice of training and integrating people as responsible members into the community gives meaning to the author's depiction of the suffering of the readers as God's training (discipline). The Akan practice of urging people to conduct themselves in conformity with who they are, as well as their pursuit of what is honourable, provides relevant ways of appreciating the author's

descriptions of his readers and the Christian group. Seen through the lenses of these Akan practices, the author can be understood as requiring his readers to act in accordance with who they are. These practices also give meaning to the author's call upon his readers to pursue acts that are honourable. In all of this, there is significant overlap between the collectivist view of personality of the recipients of Hebrews and that of the Akan.

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