The Relation of Ōkra (Soul) and Honam (Body): An Akan Conception

Kwame Gyekye

What is a person? Is a person just the bag of flesh and bones that we see with our eyes, or is there something additional to the body that we do not see? A conception of the nature of a human being in Akan philosophy is the subject of this chapter.

Ōkra (Soul)

We are given to understand from a number of often quoted, though mistaken, anthropological accounts that the Akan people consider a human being to be constituted of three elements: ōkra, sünstum, and honam (or nipa dubious: body).

The ōkra is said to be that which constitutes the innermost self, the essence, of the individual person. Ōkra is the individual’s life, for which reason it is usually referred to as ākra tseese, that is, the living soul, a seeming tautology that yet is significant. The expression is intended to emphasize that ōkra is identical with life. The ōkra is the embodiment and transmitter of the individual’s destiny (fate: nkrabea). It is explained as a spark of the Supreme Being (Onyame) in man. It is thus described as divine and as having an antemundane existence with the Supreme Being. The presence of this divine essence in a human being may have been the basis of the Akan proverb, “All men are the children of God; no one is a child of the earth.”

(nnipa myinaa ye Onyame mma, oṣiara moye atase ba).

So conceived, the ōkra can be considered as the equivalent of the concept of the soul in other metaphysical systems. Hence, it is correct to translate ōkra into English as soul.

... The conception of the ōkra as constituting the individual’s life, the life force, is linked very closely with another concept, honhom. Honhom means “breath”; it is the noun form of home, to breathe. When a person is dead, it is said “His breath is gone” (ne honhom ko) or “His soul has withdrawn from his body” (ne ’ṣe aṣi ne ho). These two sentences, one with honhom as subject and the other with ōkra, do, in fact, say the same thing; they express the same thought, the death-of-the-person. The departure of the soul from the body means the death of the person, and so does the cessation of breath. Yet this does not mean that the honhom (breath) is identical with the ōkra (soul). It is the ōkra that “causes” the breathing. Thus, the honhom is the tangible manifestation or evidence of the presence of the ōkra. [In some dialects of the Akan language, however, honhom has come to be used interchangeably with sünstum (“spirit”), so that the phrase honhom bine has come to mean the same thing as sünstum bine, that is, evil spirit. The identification of the honhom with the sünstum seems to me to be a recent idea, and may have resulted from the translation of the Bible into the various Akan dialects; honhom must have been used to translate the Greek pneuma (breath, spirit).] The clarification of the concepts of ōkra, honhom, sünstum and others bearing on the Akan conception of the nature of a person is the concern of this chapter.

Sunsum (Spirit)

Sunsum is another of the constituent elements of the person. It has usually been rendered in English as “spirit.” It has already been observed that sunsum is used both generically to refer to all unperceivable, mystical beings and forces in Akan ontology, and specifically to refer to the activating principle in the person. It appears from the anthropological accounts that even when it is used specifically, “spirit” (sunsum) is not identical with soul (Okra), as they do not refer to the same thing. However, the anthropological accounts of the sunsum involve some conceptual blunders, as I shall show. As for the mind — when it is not identified with the soul — it may be rendered also by sunsum, judging from the functions that are attributed by the Akan thinkers to the latter.

On the surface it might appear that “spirit” is not an appropriate rendition for sunsum, but after clearing away misconceptions engendered by some anthropological writings, I shall show that it is appropriate but that it requires clarification. Anthropologists and sociologists have held: (1) that the sunsum derives from the father; (2) that it is not divine; and (3) that it perishes with the disintegration of the honam, that is, the material component of a person. It seems to me, however, that all these characterizations of the sunsum are incorrect.

Let us first take up the third characterization, namely, as something that perishes with the body. Now, if the sunsum perishes along with the body, a physical object, then it follows that the sunsum also is something physical or material. Danquah's philosophical analysis concludes that "sunsum is, in fact, the matter or the physical basis of the ultimate ideal of which okra (soul) is the form and the spiritual or mental basis." Elsewhere he speaks of an “interaction of the material mechanism (sunsum) with the soul,” and assimilates the sunsum to the “sensible form” of Aristotle’s metaphysics of substance and the okra to the “intelligible form.” One might conclude from these statements that Danquah also conceived the sunsum as material, although some of his other statements would seem to contradict this conclusion. The relation between the honam (body) and the sunsum (supposedly bodily), however, is left unexplained. Thus, philosophical, sociological, and anthropological accounts of the nature of the person give the impression of a tripartite conception of a human being in Akan philosophy:

- Okra (soul) — immaterial
- Sunsum ("spirit") — material (?)
- Honam (body) — material

As we shall see, however, this account or analysis of a person, particularly the characterization of the sunsum ("spirit") as something material, is not satisfactory. I must admit, however, that the real nature of the sunsum presents perhaps the greatest difficulty in the Akan metaphysics of a person and has been a source of confusion for many. The difficulty, however, is not insoluble.

... The explanation given by most Akans of the phenomenon of dreaming also indicates, it seems to me, that sunsum must be immaterial. In Akan thought, as in Freud's, dreams are not somatic but psychical phenomena. It is held that in a dream it is the person’s sunsum that is the “actor.” As an informant told Rattray decades ago, “When you sleep your ‘Kra (soul) does not leave you, as your sunsum may.” In sleep the sunsum is said to be released from the fetters of the body. As it were, it fashions for itself a new world of forms with the materials of its waking experience. Thus, although one is deeply asleep, yet one may “see” oneself standing atop a mountain or driving a car or fighting with someone or pursuing a desire like sexual intercourse; also, during sleep (that is, in dreams) a person’s sunsum may talk with other sunsums. The actor in any of these “actions” is thought to be the sunsum, which thus can leave the body and return to it. The idea of the psychical part of a person leaving the body in sleep appears to be widespread in Africa. The Azande, for instance, maintain “that in sleep the soul is released from the body and can roam about at will and meet other spirits and have other adventures, though they admit something mysterious about its experiences. ... During sleep a man’s soul wanders everywhere.”

The idea that some part of the soul leaves the body in sleep is not completely absent from the history of Western thought, even though, as Parrinder says, “the notion of a wandering soul is foreign to the modern European mind.” The idea occurs, for instance, in Plato. In the Republic Plato refers to “the wild beast in us” that is in pursuit of desires and pleasures bestirs itself “in dreams when the gentler part of the soul slumbers and the control of reason is withdrawn; then the wild beast in us, full-fed with meat and drink, becomes rampant and shakes off sleep to go in quest of what will gratify its own instincts.” The context is a discussion of...
The Relation of Ṭokra and Honam

...or analysis of the rial, is not the real greatest person and many. The

...nomatic but a dream it tor." As an 'When you ou, as said to be s it were, it as with the s, although ee oneself a car or desire like (that is, in with other actions) is in leave the nchical part pears to be r instance, d from the meet other ough they experiences. ers every-

...e leaves the t from the hough, as ing soul is n. The idea ubic Plato pursuit of eams when the control east in us, mpant and will gratify cussion of

tyranny. But Plato prefaces his discussion with remarks on the psychological foundation of the tyrannical man, and says that desire (Greek: ἔθιμα) is the basis of his behavior.

It is not surprising that both scholars of Plato and modern psychologists have noted the relevance of the above passage to the analysis of the nature of the human psyche. On this passage the classical scholar James Adam wrote: "The theory is that in dreams the part of the soul concerned is not asleep, but awake and goes out to seek the object of its desire." The classicist Paul Shorey observed that "The Freudians have at least discovered Plato's anticipation of their main thesis." The relevance of the Platonic passage to Freud has been noted also by other scholars of Plato such as Renford Bambrough and Thomas Gould, and by psychologists. Valentine, a psychologist, observed: "The germ of several aspects of the Freudian view of dreams, including the characteristic doctrine of the censor, was to be found in Plato." It is clear that the passage in Plato indicates a link between dreams and (the gratification of) desires. In Akan psychology the sunsum appears not only as unconscious but also as that which pursues and experiences desires. (In Akan dreams are also considered predictive.) But the really interesting part of Plato's thesis for our purposes relates to the idea of some part of the human soul leaving the body in dreams. "The wild beast in us" in Plato's passage is not necessarily equivalent to the Akan sunsum, but one may say that just as Plato's "wild beast" (which, like the sunsum, experiences dreams) is a part of the soul and thus not a physical object, so is sunsum. It might be supposed that if the sunsum can engage in activity, such as traveling through space or occupying a physical location - like standing on the top of a mountain - then it can hardly be said not to be a physical object. The problem here is obviously complex. Let us assume, for the moment, that the sunsum is a physical object. One question that would immediately arise is: How can a purely physical object leave the person when he or she is asleep? Dreaming is of course different from imaging or thinking. The latter occurs during waking life, whereas the former occurs only during sleep: wónd a wŏnso dęe, that is, "Unless you are asleep you do not dream" is a well-known Akan saying. The fact that dreaming occurs only in sleep makes it a unique sort of mental activity and its subject, namely sunsum, a different sort of subject. A purely physical object cannot be in two places at the same time: A body lying in bed cannot at the same time be on the top of a mountain. Whatever is on the top of the mountain, then, must be something nonphysical, nonbodily, and yet somehow connected to a physical thing - in this case, the body. This argument constitutes a reductio ad absurdum of the view that sunsum can be a physical object.

But, then, how can the sunsum, qua nonphysical, extrasensory object, travel in physical space and have a physical location? This question must be answered within the broad context of the African belief in the activities of the supernatural (spiritual) beings in the physical world. The spiritual beings are said to be insensible and intangible, but they are also said to make themselves felt in the physical world. They can thus interact with the physical world. But from this it cannot be inferred that they are physical or quasi-physical or have permanent physical properties. It means that a spiritual being can, when it so desires, take on physical properties. That is, even though a spiritual being is nonspatial in essence, it can, by the sheer operation of its power, assume spatial properties. Debrunner speaks of "temporary materializations," i.e., as spirits having taken on the body of a person which afterwards suddenly vanish. Mbiti observed that "Spirits are invisible, but may make themselves visible to human beings." We should view the "physical" activities of the sunsum in dreaming from the standpoint of the activities of the spiritual beings in the physical world. As a microcosm of the world spirit, the sunsum can also interact with the external world. So much then for the defense of the pyschical, nonphysical nature of sunsum, the subject of experiences in dreaming.

As the basis of personality, as the co-performer of some of the functions of the ṭokra (soul) - undoubtedly held as a spiritual entity - and as the subject of the pyschical activity of dreaming, the sunsum must be something spiritual (immaterial). This is the reason for my earlier assertion that "spirit" might not be an inappropriate translation for sunsum. On my analysis, then, we have the following picture:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ṭokra (soul)</th>
<th>immaterial (spiritual)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunsum (&quot;spirit&quot;)</td>
<td>material (physical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honam (body)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relation of Ṭokra and Sunsum

Having shown that the sunsum is in fact something spiritual (and for this reason I shall henceforth
Kwame Gyekye

translate *sunsum* as “spirit”), we must examine whether the expressions *sunsum* and *ôкра* are identical in terms of their referent. In the course of my field research some discussants stated that the *sunsum*, *ôкра*, and *konhom* (breath) are identical; they denote the same object; it is one and the same object that goes under three names. I have already shown that although there is a close link between *ôкра* and *konhom*, the two cannot be identified; likewise the identification of *konhom* and *sunsum* is incorrect. What about the *sunsum* and *ôкра*? Are they identical?

The relation between the *sunsum* and *ôкра* is a difficult knot to untie. The anthropologist Rattray, perhaps the most perceptive and analytical researcher into the Ashanti culture, wrote: “It is very difficult sometimes to distinguish between the *ôкра* and the next kind of soul, the *sunsum*, and sometimes the words seem synonymous, but I cannot help thinking this is a loose use of the terms.” Rattray was, I think, more inclined to believe that the two terms are not identical. Such a supposition, in my view, would be correct, for to say that the two are identical would logically mean that whatever can be asserted of one can or must be asserted of the other. Yet there are some things the Akans say of the *sunsum* which are not said of the *ôкра*, and vice versa; the attributes or predicates of the two are different. The Akans say:

A(1) “His *ôкра* is sad” (*ne ôкра di amøróhom*); never, “His *sunsum* is sad.”
(2) “His *ôкра* is worried or disturbed” (*ne ôкра teeteec*).
(3) “His *ôкра* has run away” (*ne ôкра adwane*), to denote someone who is scared to death.
(4) “His *ôкра* is good” (*ne ôкра ye*), referring to a person who is lucky or fortunate. [The negative of this statement is “His *ôкра* is not good.” If you used *sunsum* in lieu of *ôкра*, and made the statement “His *sunsum* is not good” (*ne sunsum meyey*), the meaning would be quite different; it would mean that his *sunsum* is evil, that is to say, he is an evil spirit, a witch.]
(5) “His *ôкра* has withdrawn from his body” (*ne ôкра afi ne ho*).
(6) “But for his *ôкра* that followed him, he would have died” (*ne ôкра dii n’akyi, anka awui*).
(7) “His *ôкра* is happy” (*ne ôкра aniagye*).

In all such statements the attributions are made to the *ôкра* (soul), never to the *sunsum*. On the other hand, the Akans say:

B(1) “He has *sunsum*” (*ônôô sunsum*), an expression they use when they want to refer to someone as dignified and as having a commanding presence. Here they never say, “He has *ôкра*, soul, for it is believed that it is the nature of the *sunsum* (not the *ôкра*) that differs from person to person; hence they speak of “gentle *sunsum*,” “forceful *sunsum*,” “weak or strong *sunsum*,” etc.
(2) “His *sunsum* is heavy or weighty” (*ne sunsum ye dura*), that is, he has a strong personality.
(3) “His *sunsum* overshadows mine” (*ne sunsum kyé me so*).
(4) “Someone’s *sunsum* is bigger or greater than another’s” (*obi sunsum so kyén obi deé*). To say “someone’s” *ôкра* is greater than another’s” would be meaningless.
(5) “He has a good *sunsum*” (*ôwô sunsum pa*), that is, he is a generous person.

In all such statements the attributions are made to the *sunsum* (spirit), never to the *ôкра* (soul). Rattray also pointed out correctly that “an Ashanti would never talk of washing his *sunsum.*” It is the *ôкра* that is washed (*ôkraguare*). In the terminology of the modern linguist, sentences containing *ôкра* and *sunsum* differ, according to my analysis, not only in their surface structures but also in their deep structures.

It is pretty clear from this semantic analysis that *ôкра* and *sunsum* are not intersubstitutable in predications. Intersubstitution of the terms, as we saw above, leads either to nonsense as in B(4) or to change of meaning as in A(4) and B(1). Semantic analysis suggests a nonidentity relation between *sunsum* and *ôкра*. One might reject this conclusion by treating these distinctions as merely idiomatic and not, therefore, as evidence for considering *ôкра* and *sunsum* as distinct. Let us call this the “idiomatic thesis.” In the English language, for instance, it is idiomatic to say “He’s a sad soul” rather than “He’s a sad spirit,” without implying that soul and spirit are distinct. But in English the substitution of one for the other of the two terms — even if unidiomatic — will not lead to nonsense and would not change the meaning; in Akan it would.

. . . . It may be the easiest way out of an interpretative labyrinth to identify *ôкра* and *sunsum,* but I do not think it is the most satisfactory way out. There are, I believe, other considerations for rejecting the “identity theory.”

First, most Akans agree that in dreaming it is the
The Relation of Œkra and Honor

Relation of Œkra (Soul) and Honor (Body)

Understanding the sunsum and Œkra to constitute a spiritual unity, one may say that Akan philosophy maintains a dualistic, not a tripartite, conception of the person: A person is made up of two principal entities or substances, one spiritual (immortal: œkra) and the other material (honam: body).

But Akans sometimes speak as if the relation between the soul (that is, œkra plus sunsum) and the body is so close that they comprise an indissoluble or indivisible unity, and that, consequently, a person is a homogeneous entity. The basis for this observation is the assertion by some discussants that “œkra is blood” (mangya), or “œkra is in the blood.” They mean by this, I think, that there is some connection between the soul and the blood, and that ordinarily the former is integrated or fused with the latter. I think the supposition here is that the blood is the physical or rather physiological “medium” for the soul. However difficult it is to understand this doctrine, it serves as a basis for a theory of the unity of soul and body. But Akan thinkers cannot strictly or unreservedly maintain such a theory, for it logically involves the impossibility of the doctrine of disembodied survival or life after death, which they tenaciously and firmly hold. The doctrine of the indivisible unity of soul and body is a doctrine that eliminates the notion of life after death, inasmuch as both soul and body are held to disintegrate together. The doctrine that the
souls of the dead have some form of existence or life therefore cannot be maintained together with a doctrine of the indivisible unity of soul and body. The former doctrine implies an independent existence for the soul. I think their postulation of some kind of connection between the soul and body is a response to the legitimate, and indeed fundamental, question as to how an entity (that is, the soul), supposed to be immaterial and separate, can “enter” the body. Though their response certainly bristles with difficulties and may be regarded as inadequate, like most theses on the soul, Akan thinkers had sufficient awareness to focus philosophical attention also on the intractable question regarding the beginnings of the connection of the soul to the body, of the immaterial to the material. Other philosophies attempt to demonstrate that man consists of soul and body, but they do not, to my knowledge, speculate on the manner of the soul’s “entry” into the body.

In the Akan conception, the soul is held to be a spiritual entity (substance). It is not a bundle of qualities or perceptions, as it is held to be in some Western systems. The basis of this assertion is the Akan belief in disembodied survival. A bundle theory of substance implies the elimination of the notion of substance, for if a substance is held to be a bundle or collection of qualities or perceptions, when the qualities or perceptions are removed, nothing would be left. That is, there would then be no substance, that is, a substratum or an “owner” of those qualities. Thus, if the soul is held to be a bundle of perceptions, as it is in the writings of David Hume, it would be impossible to talk of disembodied survival in the form of a soul or self since the bundle itself is an abstraction. One Akan maxim, expressed epigrammatically, is that “when a man dies he is not (really) dead” (onipa wu a na onsawo). What is implied by this is that there is something in a human being that is eternal, indestructible, and that continues to exist in the world of spirits (asamanda). An Akan motif expresses the following thought: “Could God die, I will die” (Onyame kewu na m'awu). In Akan metaphysics, God is held to be eternal, immortal (Odumankoma). The above saying therefore means that since God will not die, a person, that is, his or her 'era (soul), conceived as an indwelling spark of God, will not die either. That is, the soul of man is immortal. The attributes of immortality make sense if, and only if, the soul is held to be a substance, an entity, and not a bundle of qualities or perceptions (experiences).

But where in a human being is this spiritual substance located? Descartes thought that the soul was in the pineal gland. The Akans also seem to hold that the soul is lodged in the head, although they do not specify exactly where. But “although it is in the head you cannot see it with your natural eyes,” as they would put it, since it is immaterial. That the soul is “in the head (i)” may be inferred from the following expressions: When they want to say that a person is lucky or fortunate they say: “His head is well (good)” (ne ti ye), or “His soul is well (good)” (ne 'era ye). From such expressions one may infer some connection between the head and the soul. And although they cannot point to a specific part of the head as the “residence” of the soul, it may be conjectured that it is in the region of the brain which, as observed earlier, receives its energy from the sunsum (spirit), a part of the soul. That is, the soul acts on the brain in a specific locality, but it is itself not actually localized.

The Akan conception of a person, in my analysis, is dualistic, not tripartite, although the spiritual component of a person is highly complex. Such dualistic conception does not necessarily imply a belief in a causal relation or interaction between the two parts, the soul and body. For instance, some dualistic philosophers in the West maintain a doctrine of psychophysical parallelism, which completely denies interaction between soul and body. Other dualists advance a doctrine of epiphenomenalism, which, while not completely rejecting causal interaction, holds that the causality goes in one direction only, namely, from the body to the soul; such a doctrine, too, is thus not interactionist. Akan thinkers, however, are thoroughly interactionist on the relation between soul and body. They hold that not only does the body have a causal influence on the soul but also that the soul has a causal influence on the body (konam). What happens to the soul takes effect or reflects on the condition of the body. Thus, writing on Akan culture, Busia stated:

They [that is, Akans] believed also that spiritual uncleanness was an element of ill-health and that the cleansing of the soul was necessary for health. When, for example, a patient was made to stand on a broom while being treated, it was to symbolize this cleansing. The broom sweeps filth away from the home and keeps it healthy; so the soul must be swept of filth to keep the body healthy.
The Relation of Ókra and Honam

Similarly, what happens to the body reflects on the conditions of the soul. It is the actual bodily or physical behavior of a person that gives an idea of the condition of the soul. Thus, if the physical behavior of a man suggests that he is happy they would say, “His soul is happy” (ne ‘kra aniagyae); if unhappy or morose they would say, “His soul is sorrowful” (ne ‘kra di awerehewn). When the soul is enfeebled or injured by evil spirits, ill health results; the poor conditions of the body affect the condition of the soul. The condition of the soul depends on the condition of the body. The belief in psychophysical causal interaction is the whole basis of spiritual or psychical healing in Akan communities. There are certain diseases that are believed to be “spiritual diseases” (sunum yare) and cannot be healed by the application of physical therapy. In such diseases attention must be paid to both physiological and spiritual aspects of the person. Unless the soul is healed, the body will not respond to physical treatment. The removal of a disease of the soul is the activity of the diviners or the traditional healers (adunifo).

Conclusion

The Akan conception of the person, on my analysis, is both dualistic and interactionist. It seems to me that an interactionist psychophysical dualism is a realistic doctrine. Even apart from the prospects for disembodied survival that this doctrine holds out—prospects that profoundly affect the moral orientation of some people—it has had significant pragmatic consequences in Akan communities, as evidenced in the application of psychophysical therapies. There are countless testimonies of people who have been subjected to physical treatment for months or years in modern hospitals without being cured, but who have been healed by traditional healers applying both physical and psychical (spiritual) methods. In such cases the diseases are believed not to be purely physical, affecting only the body (honam). They are believed rather to have been inflicted on the sunum through mystical or spiritual powers, and in time the body also gets affected. When Western-trained doctors pay attention only to the physical aspects of such diseases, they almost invariably fail to heal them. The fact that traditional healers, operating at both the physical and psychical levels, cope successfully with such diseases does seem to suggest a close relationship between the body and the soul.

From the point of view of the Akan metaphysics of the person and of the world in general, all this seems to imply that a human being is not just an assemblage of flesh and bone, that he or she is a complex being who cannot completely be explained by the same laws of physics used to explain inanimate things, and that our world cannot simply be reduced to physics.

Notes

1 I say “a conception” because I believe there are other conceptions of the person held or discernible in that philosophy.
5 Here the views of W. E. Abraham are excepted, for he maintains, like I do, that the sunum is not “inheritable” and that it “appears to have been a spiritual substance.” W. E. Abraham, The Mind of Africa (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962), p. 60.
7 Ibid., p. 116.
11 Plato, The Republic, 571c, beginning of Book IX.
Kwame Gyekye


21 Ibid., p. 318. Soul-washing is a symbolic religious rite meant to cleanse and purify the soul from defilement. "This cult," wrote Mrs. Meyerowitz, "adjudges the person to lead a good and decent life." *Sacred State*, p. 117; also p. 88.

22 Incidentally, the "identity theory" immediately subverts any physical conception of the *sunsum*, since the *öbra* (soul), with which it is being identified, is generally agreed to be a spiritual, not a physical, entity.


24 The dynamic and active character of the *sunsum* has given rise to metaphorical use as in the sentences, "there is 'spirit' in the game" (*agbor yi isunu wọ ma*), "the arrival of the chief brought 'spirit' into the festival celebration." Not long ago the dynamism, action and energy of a late Ghanaian army general earned him the by-name of "Sunsum" among his soldiers.

25 Lystad, p. 158.


27 This view was expressed also to Meyerowitz, *Sacred State*, p. 84.
