

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

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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 conception¹ 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*, *sunsum*, and *honam* (or *nipadua*: 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 *ōkrateasefo*, 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: *nkra-bea*). 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"

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(*nnipa nyimaa yē Onyame mma, obiara nnyē asase 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 When a person is dead, it is said "His breath is gone" (*ne honhom kō*) or "His soul has withdrawn from his body" (*ne 'kra afi ne ho*).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 *sunsum* ("spirit"), so that the phrase *honhom bōne* has come to mean the same thing as *sunsum bōne*, that is, evil spirit. The identification of the *honhom* with the *sunsum* 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*, *sunsum* 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 (*ōkra*), 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 (2) that it is not divine,³ and (3) that it perishes with the disintegration of the *honam*,⁴ that is, the material component of a person. It seems to me, however, that all these characterizations of the *sunsum* are incorrect.⁵

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 *ōkra* (soul) is the form and the spiritual or mental basis."⁶ 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 *ōkra* to the "intelligible form."⁷ 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:

<i>ōkra</i> (soul)	immaterial
<i>Sunsum</i> ("spirit")	material (?)
<i>Honam</i> (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."⁸ 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 *sunsum*. 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."⁹

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."¹⁰ The idea occurs, for instance, in Plato. In the *Republic* Plato refers to "the wild beast in us" that 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."¹¹ The context is a discussion of

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tyranny. But Plato prefaces his discussion with remarks on the *psychological* foundation of the tyrannical man, and says that desire (Greek: *epithumia*) 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."¹² The classicist Paul Shorey observed that "The Freudians have at least discovered Plato's anticipation of their main thesis."¹³ The relevance of the Platonic passage to Freud has been noted also by other scholars of Plato such as Renford Bambrough¹⁴ and Thomas Gould,¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

It is clear that the passage in Plato indicates a link between dreams and (the gratification of) desires.¹⁷ 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 imagining or thinking. The latter occurs during waking life, whereas the former occurs only during sleep: *wōnda a wōnso dae*, 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."¹⁸ Mbiti observed that "Spirits are invisible, but may make themselves visible to human beings."¹⁹ 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 psychical, 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 *ōkra* (soul) – undoubtedly held as a spiritual entity – and as the subject of the psychical 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:

<i>Ōkra</i> (soul)	}	immaterial (spiritual)
<i>Sunsum</i> ("spirit")		
<i>Honam</i> (body)		material (physical)

Relation of *Ōkra* and *Sunsum*

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

translate *sunsum* as "spirit"), we must examine whether the expressions *sunsum* and *ōkra* are identical in terms of their referent. In the course of my field research some discussants stated that the *sunsum*, *ōkra*, and *honhom* (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 *ōkra* and *honhom*, the two cannot be identified; likewise the identification of *honhom* and *sunsum* is incorrect. What about the *sunsum* and *ōkra*? Are they identical?

The relation between the *sunsum* and *ōkra* 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 'kra 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."²⁰ 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 *ōkra*, and vice versa; the attributes or predicates of the two are different. The Akans say:

- A(1) "His 'kra is sad" (*ne 'kra di awerēhow*); never, "His *sunsum* is sad."
 (2) "His 'kra is worried or disturbed" (*ne 'kra teetee*).
 (3) "His 'kra has run away" (*ne 'kra adwane*), to denote someone who is scared to death.
 (4) "His 'kra is good" (*ne 'kra ye*), referring to a person who is lucky or fortunate. [The negative of this statement is "His 'kra is not good." If you used *sunsum* in lieu of 'kra, and made the statement "His *sunsum* is not good" (*ne sunsum nnyē*), 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 'kra has withdrawn from his body" (*ne 'kra afi ne ho*).
 (6) "But for his 'kra that followed him, he would have died" (*ne 'kra dui n'akyi, anka omui*).
 (7) "His 'kra is happy" (*ne 'kra aniagyē*).

In all such statements the attributions are made to the *ōkra* (soul), never to the *sunsum*. On the other

hand, the Akans say:

- B(1) "He has *sunsum*" (*ōwō 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 *ōkra*," soul, for it is believed that it is the nature of the *sunsum* (not the *ōkra*) 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 yē duru*), that is, he has a strong personality.
 (3) "His *sunsum* overshadows mine" (*ne sunsum hyē me so*).
 (4) "Someone's *sunsum* is bigger or greater than another's" (*obi sunsum so kyēn obi deē*). To say "someone's 'kra is greater than another's" would be meaningless.
 (5) "He has a good *sunsum*" (*ōwō sunsum pa*), that is, he is a generous person.

In all such statements the attributions are made to the *sunsum* (spirit), never to the *ōkra* (soul). Rattray also pointed out correctly that "an Ashanti would never talk of washing his *sunsum*."²¹ It is the *ōkra* that is washed (*okraguare*). In the terminology of the modern linguist, sentences containing *ōkra* 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 *ōkra* 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 *ōkra*. One might reject this conclusion by treating these distinctions as merely idiomatic and not, therefore, as evidence for considering *ōkra* 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 *ōkra* and *sunsum*,²² 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

sunsum, not the *ōkra*, that leaves the body. The departure of the *ōkra* (soul) from the body means the death of the person, whereas the *sunsum* can leave the body, as in dreaming, without causing the death of the person. Second, moral predicates are generally applied to the *sunsum*. Rattray wrote: "Perhaps the *sunsum* is the more volatile part of the whole 'kra," and "... but the 'kra is not volatile in life, as the *sunsum* undoubtedly is."²³ Moreover, the *ōkra* and *sunsum* appear to be different in terms of their functions or activities. The *ōkra*, as mentioned before, is the principle of life of a person and the embodiment and transmitter of his or her destiny (*nkrabea*). Personality and character dispositions of a person are the function of the *sunsum*. The *sunsum* appears to be the source of dynamism²⁴ of a person, the active part or force of the human psychological system; its energy is the ground for its interaction with the external world. It is said to have extrasensory powers; it is that which thinks, desires, feels, etc. It is in no way identical with the brain, which is a physical organ. Rather it acts upon the brain (*amene, hon*). In short, people believe that it is upon the *sunsum* that one's health, worldly power, position, influence, success, etc. would depend. The attributes and activities of the *sunsum* are therefore not ascribable to the *ōkra*. Lystad was wrong when he stated: "In many respects the *sunsum* or spirit is so identical with the *ōkra* or soul in its functions that it is difficult to distinguish between them."²⁵

Now, given *x* and *y*, if whatever is asserted of *x* can be asserted of *y*, then *x* can be said to be identical with *y*. If there is at least one characteristic that *x* has but *y* does not, then *x* and *y* are not identical. On this showing, insofar as things asserted of the *ōkra* are not assertable of the *sunsum*, the two cannot logically be identified. However, although they are logically distinct, they are not ontologically distinct. That is to say, they are not independent existents held together in an accidental way by an external bond. They are a unity in duality, a duality in unity. The distinction is not a relation between two separate entities. The *sunsum* may, more accurately, be characterized as a part — the active part — of the *ōkra* (soul).

I once thought that the *sunsum* might be characterized as a state,²⁶ an epiphenomenon, of the *ōkra*. I now think that characterization is wrong, for it would subvert the entitative nature of *sunsum*. The fact that we can speak of the inherence of the *sunsum* in natural objects as their activating principle means that in some contexts reference can be made to the *sunsum* independently of the *ōkra*. This, however,

is not so in the context of the human psyche: In man *sunsum* is part of the *ōkra* (soul). Plato held a tripartite conception of the human soul, deriving that conception from his view of the functions said to be performed by the various parts of the soul. So did Freud. There is nothing inappropriate or illogical or irrational for some Akan thinkers to hold and argue for a bipartite conception of the human soul. Neither a tripartite nor a bipartite conception of the soul subverts its *ontic unity*. As already stated, the *ōkra* and *sunsum* are constitutive of a spiritual unity, which survives after death. Therefore the soul (that is, *ōkra* plus *sunsum*) does not lose its individuality after death. It survives individually. Beliefs in reincarnation (which I do not intend to explore now) and in the existence of the ancestors in the world of spirits (*asamando*) undoubtedly presuppose — and would be logically impossible without — the survival of each individual soul.

Relation of *Ōkra* (Soul) and *Honam* (Body)

Understanding the *sunsum* and *ōkra* 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 (immaterial: *ōkra*) and the other material (*honam*: body).

But Akans sometimes speak as if the relation between the soul (that is, *ōkra* 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 "*ōkra* is blood" (*mogya*),²⁷ or "*ōkra* 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