

# Rhetorical use of *Sobolo* (Hibiscus drink) as *Yesu Mogya* (Blood of Jesus) for Holistic Healing in Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity: A Critical Analysis from the Perspective of Biblical Theology and Christian Ethics



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## ABSTRACT

This article sought to survey the rhetorical use of *Sobolo* (hibiscus drink) as *Yesu Mogya* (the blood of Jesus) for holistic healing in contemporary Ghanaian Christianity. From the perspective of Biblical Theology and Christian Ethics, it argued that the phenomenon of using plant products and symbolic objects for miraculous healing is both explicitly and implicitly rooted in the Bible. Contrary to the dispensationalist perspective with its emphasis on the cessation of miraculous healing in some Western contexts and within scholarship, the continuous relevance of miraculous healing in Ghanaian Christianity is not much debated in the ecclesial context. It is, therefore, maintained that the use of symbols such as *Sobolo* for healing creates opportunities for the wholistic needs of the members of the church to be met. These needs are claimed to be fulfilled by spiritual means. From a Christian ethical perspective, this paper, however, cautions that *sobolo* as a miraculous drink in the Ghanaian Christian context should not be used as an exclusive means of physical well-being and development of society. It is further argued that the cyclical use of *sobolo* as a healing juice for all and diverse kinds of miraculous healings needs to be questioned in the light of biblical theology.

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## INTRODUCTION

Prevalent within contemporary Ghanaian pentecostalised Christianity is the use of symbols to effect holistic healing.<sup>1</sup> Among others is the popularity of using hibiscus drink (*sobolo*) as the blood of Jesus (*Yesu mogya*) for miraculous healing.<sup>2</sup> Such claims of miraculous healing pertaining to the use of symbolic

<sup>1</sup> John Kwasi Fosu, *Pentecostalism and Charismatism: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Kumasi: Glocal Publications, 2022), 183-188.

<sup>2</sup> Discussions on the use of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* are common in the Ghanaian Christian context in that pictures and issues surrounding such uses abound on various social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp. See [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=SOBOLO+AS+YESU+MOGYA](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=SOBOLO+AS+YESU+MOGYA).

objects in Ghana may, however, appear to be a challenge to standard Western theological formulations where personal religious experiences around objects are sometimes considered superstitious.<sup>3</sup>

Within scholarship, therefore, the concept and phenomenon of holistic healing and its challenges are a complex topic of investigation. The reason is that this subject could be and has been approached from different perspectives namely anthropological, religious science, and philosophical perspectives all arriving at different conclusions.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding the complexities surrounding the topic of miraculous healing, the subject remains a theological issue and biblical ethics in particular in that many miracles are recorded in religious texts as in the case of Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Within Christianity, the possibility and credibility of miraculous healing could therefore be discussed in light of their ecclesial and practical relevance in meeting existential needs. This paper aims to study the phenomenon of healing from the perspective of biblical theology and Christian ethics with particular attention to the rhetorical<sup>6</sup> use of the hibiscus drink (*sobolo*) as the blood of Jesus (*Yesu Mogy*) for holistic healing.<sup>7</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed the inter-discipline approach of biblical theology and Christian ethics through a review of both primary and secondary documents on the subject. Specifically, the paper made use of the biblical moral reasoning approach as a unit of analysis of the subject of investigation. This approach brought together, two kinds of thoughts namely reflection and deliberation. On one hand, the tool of reflection sought to ask the question: ‘What is the truth.’ On the other hand, following O’Donovan, deliberation is conceived of as asking the question, ‘What are we to do?’ and so this is directed towards action.<sup>8</sup> In other words, following the Aristotelian lines of thought, this approach makes use of both theoretical reason and practical reason as an alternative pair. The rationale for selecting this approach lies in the fact that discourse on the subject of miraculous healing must involve both a theoretical framework (reflection) and deliberation (praxis). In this regard, the biblical basis of the subject serves as the criterion for examining the practice. The use of symbols such as hibiscus drink (*sobolo*), for instance, for miraculous healing thrives on the fact that first, similar stories are variously recorded in scripture and second, there are testimonies regarding their usage in the contemporary Ghanaian Christian context.

As a variant of qualitative research, therefore, the procedure adopted in this paper included, first a review of scholarly literature on miraculous healing within biblical theology and Christian ethics. Next, an attempt was made to present the biblical summary of miraculous healing through the lens of Burkan Pentadic Criticism for brevity and enhanced understanding.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, there was a critical analysis of the use of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogy* from the perspective of biblical moral reasoning before giving

<sup>3</sup> This seems to be the position that Robin Horton has attempted to highlight. See a critical review of his work: “Tradition and Modernity Revisited,” in *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, ed. Robin Horton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> C. Brown, “Miracles,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. S. B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 433, amply observes that the credibility of miracles depends upon the worldview within which we view them .

<sup>5</sup> Werner Kahl, “New Testament Miracle in New Exegetical and Theological Perspectives, Part 2,” *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* 20, no. 2 (2020): 1–9. From an exegetical perspective, Kahl has identified the problematic nature of defining miracle and its cognate terms - miracle-worker and miracle story. To him, Miracle, miracle-worker, and miracle story are terms that fall short of representing appropriately early Christian understandings of the miraculous dimension of Jesus’ existence. All three exegetically used terms are imprecise umbrella terms that need to be redefined and differentiated.

<sup>6</sup> The designation, “*rhetorical use*” in this context serves as an attempt to describe the persuasive motives of the phenomenon of miraculous healing associated with the use of the symbol, hibiscus drink (*sobolo*) in the Ghanaian Christian context. As it will be highlighted later, the use of *sobolo* appears to aim, first, at bringing about healing as affirmation of God’s continuous use of symbols to heal and second, as a demonstration of power by the therapist who is usually the prophet or priest who blesses the object.

<sup>7</sup> *Sobolo* and *Yesu mogy* are the Asante Twi (Akan) translation of *hibiscus drink* and *the blood of Jesus* respectively. Twi is the language spoken largely by the Akans of Ghana. It is the local and popular language generally spoken in Southern Ghana by both natives and non-Akans. Emmanuel Asante, *Towards an African Christian Theology of the Kingdom of God: The Kingship of Onyame* (Gueenston: The Edwen Mellen Press, 1995), 75.

<sup>8</sup> O. M. T. O’Donovan, “Christian Moral Reasoning ,” in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David J. Atkinson (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 122–26.

<sup>9</sup> Developed by Kenneth Burke, Pentadic Criticism is an approach used to analyse how people use language to change beliefs and influence actions. By applying the Burkan Pentadic criticism to present a summarily view of the biblical record on the miraculous healing, the elements employed include act, agent, scene, agency and purpose. For further elaboration on these elements see John Kwasi Fosu, *Experiences of Pneumatic Phenomena in Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity as Appropriations of 1. Cor 12–14: A Critical Analysis* (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2019). Fosu has successfully applied this method to study 1 Cor 12–14 and the pneumatic phenomena in contemporary Ghanaian Christianity. Also, see John Kwasi Fosu, “Biblical Approach to Development: A Theological Reflection from the Perspective of Burkan Pentadic Criticism,” *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 3, no. 4 (2022): 149. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2022345>

recommendations and a conclusion. Here, attention was paid to the interpretation and prospects of using *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* as well as its challenges posed in doing biblical theology and Christian practice.

## DISCUSSION

### Perspectives on Miraculous Healing within Biblical Theology and Christian Ethics

Within theological scholarship, diverse views exist regarding conceptions of healing and health. The concepts of healing and health refer to the bringing of wholeness and soundness to any or every aspect of human life. Kinds of healing are often identified within theological scholarship as natural, medical, miraculous and inner healings.<sup>10</sup> Natural healing describes the body's use of intrinsic and environmental resources to bring about wholeness and soundness. Medical healing pertains to the use of preventive and therapeutic action. A reference is made to miraculous healing when there is a spectacular divine intervention to speed up natural or medical processes. In this case, miraculous healing does not completely rule out medical or natural healing, but to some extent, supplements it. According to R. F. Hurding, inner healing is used when the focus of restoration of good health is on past psychological and emotional damage, both known and hidden.<sup>11</sup> In all these aspects and kinds of healing, it is held within theological scholarship that God is the source of healing.

With particular attention to the debate on the relevance of miraculous healing today, whereas some theologians interpret it from the dispensationalist<sup>12</sup> or cessationist perspective,<sup>13</sup> others argue in favour of its non-cessationism or continued existence. The latter view could be described as a triumphalist approach.<sup>14</sup> Some other scholars interpret it from the perspective of partial cessationism.<sup>15</sup> Dispensationalism is one of the perspectives on miracles and for that matter, spectacular manifestations of the Spirit within scholarship that maintains that miracles are revelations of God within particular periods. According to this view, God has given gifts to humanity at certain important stages in biblical history such as the time of apostasy during the days of Elijah and Elisha and the coming Messiah.<sup>16</sup> In his book *Miracles: Yesterday and Today, True and False*, B. B. Warfield opines that the miraculous belonged "exclusively to the Apostolic age." He then concludes that the miraculous healing in later centuries demonstrates an infusion of heathen modes of thought into the church.<sup>17</sup> In this light, Paul's inclusion of the gift of miracles and healing in his list of charismata in 1 Cor 12:8-10, for instance, is interpreted as linked exclusively to the apostolic period or presented as ambiguous in interpretation.

The triumphalism perspective appears to be the opposite pole of dispensationalism. This view claims that experiencing miraculous healing is the birthright of every Christian. This position regards the miraculous works of Jesus and the apostles as a paradigm for all time. In this case, the church which is gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit continues in the reign of God through signs and wonders including miracles of healing. Those who take the extreme form of this view argue that the only hindrance to living in this divine blessing of miracles is the lack of personal faith.<sup>18</sup>

Another scholarly view about the possibility of miraculous healing today is inaugurated eschatology.<sup>19</sup> This perspective seeks to hold the other two theologies in balance. The idea behind this view is that today's church lives in the future present. In other words, the Kingdom of God has come and

<sup>10</sup> R. F. Hurding, "Healing," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D. J. Atkinson and D. H. Field (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 431.

<sup>11</sup> Hurding, "Healing," 431.

<sup>12</sup> Hurding, "Healing," 433.

<sup>13</sup> Theologians of cessationism argue that the belief in the continuation of the gifts of prophecy, miracles and tongues poses a serious threat to *Solar Scriptura*. See also Robert G. Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967); John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> Hurding, "Healing," 433.

<sup>15</sup> Partial cessationism argues in favour of the continuous existence of some *χαρίσματα* as listed in 1 Cor 12. This perspective affirms the position on non-cessationism with regards to some of the *χαρίσματα* such as teaching, helps and administration (1 Cor 12:28). However, they appear to follow the view of cessationism with regard to some spectacular *χαρίσματα* such as miracles, healing, and glossolalia (1 Cor 12:28-30). To them, the more spectacular *χαρίσματα* such as glossolalia, miracles and prophecy cannot be exercised as they were during the times of the Apostles. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit – In Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries, and Today* (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Hurding, "Healing," 433.

<sup>17</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Miracles: Yesterday and Today, True and False* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1965).

<sup>18</sup> Hurding, "Healing," 433.

<sup>19</sup> Hurding, "Healing," 433-434.

it is yet to come. For that reason, healing, whether natural, medical, or miraculous is regarded as the estate of the final consummation when the victory of Christ over every evil including sickness is realized in the bodily resurrection. From this perspective, God is conceptualized as the sovereign healer. With particular attention to healing, in some instances, God heals spectacularly. At times, God brings healing slowly, and at other times, God allows continuance of suffering to demonstrate God's power in human weakness (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Within Christian Ethics, the phenomenon of miraculous healing is looked at in the major areas of normative and applied ethics. Ethical normative theories are often referred to as deontological ethics, teleological ethics, virtue ethics and ethical relativism. The word deontological is based on the Greek verb *deon* denoting that which is an obligation, is necessary and should be done.<sup>20</sup> Thus, deontological ethical systems are based on rules for right and wrong, what ought to be done and ought not to be done. From this perspective, the Christian's command to heal is rooted in the scripture. The Early Church received Jesus' command to "heal the sick" (Mt 10:18) alongside the promise that "they will lay their hands on the infirm, and they will be well" (Mk 16:18).<sup>21</sup> By teleological ethics, the phenomenon of healing is looked at in the light of its utility and for that matter, its benefits to society. The word teleological is based on the Greek noun *telos*, literary meaning "end, goal, outcome."<sup>22</sup> Teleological ethical systems are based on seeking the best results for action. In contrast to secular teleological systems, Christian ethical systems have a God-centered dimension in that the Bible invites the Christian to seek the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31) in all actions.

Ethical relativism is the belief that there is no absolute right and wrong, and so ethical decisions should be based on what is commonly accepted in each person's culture (cultural relativism) or on each individual's personal preferences (individual relativism). One particular type of relativism that has gained much influence is Situation Ethics.<sup>23</sup> This is the view that there are no right or wrong actions, but a person should always do the most loving thing based on the facts in each new situation. In this theory, the phenomenon of miraculous healing appears to be in line with the contemporary scientific and thus medical perspective that some diseases are culturally specifically defined and should be treated as such.<sup>24</sup> The ethical system of virtue ethics describes the moral character of the individual.<sup>25</sup> In virtue ethics, the primary concern is whether you are a virtuous person or not. In this regard, the rightness of a healing action is determined by whether it is in line with the healing nature of God who is the healer, or Jesus Christ, who made miraculous healing an integral part of his nature, mission and ministry. Edmund D. Pellegrino has well observed that "Christ's healing ministry transformed medicine forever from an occupation to a vocation, to a call to serve God and our neighbours."<sup>26</sup> He explains further that Christian healing is "centred on respect for the human sufferer who shares in Christ's suffering." From this perspective, to heal one's neighbour is to heal Christ as well. It presents the Christian physician's attempt to help the patient carry his or her cross in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. These two images of Christ as patient and doctor, have far-reaching implications for medical practice and the phenomenon of healing in contemporary times. Health care and the phenomenon of healing, from Christ's perspective, should not be as a business, an opportunity to make a profit, or a corporate enterprise.<sup>27</sup> Within the field of applied ethics, discussions on the phenomenon of healing are centred around issues of abortion, euthanasia, embryo research, and assisted suicide.<sup>28</sup> These ongoing discussions appear to serve as a Christian's call to protect the sanctity of all human life.

<sup>20</sup> M. T. Nelson, "Deontology," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D. J. Atkinson and D. H. Field (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 297.

<sup>21</sup> Josip Blažević, "The Phenomenon of Miraculous Healing through Suggestion in the Context of Faith and Magic-Psychological-Theological Approach," *Psychiatria Danubina* 33, no. suppl 4 (2021): 933

<sup>22</sup> C. Brown, "Teleology," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D. J. Atkinson and D. H. Field (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 835.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966).

<sup>24</sup> Sana Loue and Martha Sajatovic, *Encyclopedia of Immigrant Health*, ed. Sana Loue and Martha Sajatovic (New York, NY: Springer New York, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-5659-0>.

<sup>25</sup> John Kwasi Fosu, *Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Kumasi: Global Publications, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Edmund D Pellegrino, "Christ, Physician and Patient, The Model for Christian Healing," *The Linacre Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (1999): 70–78.

<sup>27</sup> Pellegrino, "Christ, Physician and Patient, The Model for Christian Healing."

<sup>28</sup> R. A. Higginson, "Ethics of Medical Care," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D. J. Atkinson and D. H. Field (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 93–99.

## The Phenomenon of Miraculous Healing in the Bible: A Rhetorical Summary

The phenomenon of healing is explicitly and implicitly presented in the Bible. This section of the study summarises the biblical view of healing from the Burkan Pentadic perspective through the elements of Act, Agents, Scene, Agency (means) and Purpose. Beginning with the act and for that matter the meaning of healing in the scriptures, different Hebrew words are used for healing depending on the context and the type of healing in the Old Testament. The word מרפא (marpe) refers to cure, soothing, remedy, or balm. Another Hebrew word, רפואה (refuah), refers to medicine, drug, remedy, or cure. Also, the word רפא (rapha) means to cure, heal, or restore to normal and pertains to God's healing power. Moreover, the word ארוכה (arukah) connotes healing or restoration. In the New Testament, the main Greek verbs that are used are θεραπεύω, ἰάομαι and ὑγιαίνω. θεραπεύω means to heal or cure; ἰάομαι means to restore; and ὑγιαίνω means to be well again, to heal the whole person and to deliver in order to heal the whole being. The use of these verbs seems to portray the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of the healing ministry. From the perspective of Scripture, therefore, the act of healing depicts a restoration of good health. It involves bringing wholeness and soundness to any or every aspect of human life.

With particular attention to the agent of healing (this refers to the person who does the healing) the main agent of miraculous healing in the Bible is God. Yahweh is revealed in the Torah as the healer (Rapha) in Exodus 15:26. According to Hurdling, God's healing work can result in physical as well as material well-being and in forgiveness as well as in deliverance from impending danger in the historical accounts of the Old Testament (2 Kings 4:32-5:14).<sup>29</sup> It is important to recognise that the Old Testament admits that powers, other than Yahweh can produce 'signs and wonders' but such miraculous healing is regarded as inferior (Exod. 7:10-12). The story of the healing and recovery of Hezekiah's sickness, however, demonstrates that God is the source of all true healing, whether by direct intervention or medical means (2 Kings 20:4-7).

Jesus is presented in the Gospels as the one who healed specific people from particular physical ailments. Not only is Jesus known to have healed many people, but the Gospel writers (except John, of course) also report that Jesus commissioned his disciples to continue his healing ministry. The early disciples participated in Christ's healing ministry having been commissioned by Jesus (Matth. 10:1). After the Pentecost Event (Acts 2), the disciples continued in Christ's healing ministry as a demonstration of the power of the risen Christ.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, the Early Church continued in the healing ministry of Jesus as a demonstration of the power of proclaiming the gospel and as a manifestation of the Spirit in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:7-10).

With regard to the agency of miraculous healing, various means are employed in the Scripture. Sometimes a prophetic direction is given as in the case of the healing of Naaman (2 Kings 5). In this instance, the patient required obedience to God through God's servant.<sup>31</sup> In some other instances, there is the use of symbolic objects such as the use of saliva mixed with mud (Mk. 8:22-27). In many other circumstances, the human victims or agents require faith, prayer, declarative words, and laying of hands (symbolic gestures) to experience healing. Luke, for instance, records that the shadow of Peter had healing powers (Acts 5:15) as well as the handkerchiefs of Paul (Acts 19:11-12). Sometimes, the use of medicine was employed (Luke 10:34). Erwick Buck has well affirmed that there is no contradiction between prayer for healing, on the one hand, and the use of medical insight, on the other hand.<sup>32</sup> To him, healing accomplished by employing medical insight and resources can, however, be ascribed to God and can thus be described as miraculous.<sup>33</sup> In this light, it is not the manner or means in which healing is done, that makes the difference, but the fact that it is done in the name of, and in obedience to Jesus.

Anointing with oil has been traditionally associated with divine blessings and empowerment. However, in the context of the New Testament, using olive oil was seen as medicinal as well as a symbol of divine healing (Jam. 5:14; Mk. 6:13).<sup>34</sup> In the worshipping context, James identifies the Church's

<sup>29</sup> Hurdling, "Healing," 431.

<sup>30</sup> Hurdling, "Healing," 431.

<sup>31</sup> Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, "Obedience as Healing Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs," *Sacrum Testamentum: The Dread of Legalism and Delight of the Law*, 3 (2023): 1-17. Gyamfi has drawn our attention to the fact that from the book of Proverbs, and for that matter, from biblical perspective, obedience to God gives wisdom which offers health and healing to the human body.

<sup>32</sup> Erwin Buck, "Healing in the New Testament," *Consensus* 17, no. 2 (1991): 76.

<sup>33</sup> Buck, "Healing in the New Testament," 76.

<sup>34</sup> Hurdling, "Healing," 432.

corporate responsibility to bring good health by calling the elders to pray for the sick with a dual expectation of forgiveness and healing. This pictures the link between healing and forgiveness, sickness and sin and the element of sacramentalism. In the Johannine Writings, good health was part of the prayerful wish from the author of 3 John to the beloved Gaius. The content of the prayer portrays the holistic need for good health with material prosperity and a sound mind.

In the Apocalyptic Literature, among the four images that Rev. 22:1-3 identifies is the tree of life of which the leaves of this tree will be used to bring about healing. Although this verse pictures the eschatological reign of Christ, its image has been popularly attached to the use of a tree and its leaves to effect healing that evokes the image of the garden of Eden where humankind was placed with the Tree of Life. In this light, the leaves possess medicinal properties that heal the nations.

On the note of the scene and for that matter, the occasion that enabled healing, healing usually takes place during desperate moments in the life of the sick. Sometimes, the sick cried out for help depicting being in a painful situation and in need of mercy. Several times the sick plead for mercy as they request Jesus' help. Some examples of this are the appeals of the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:22) and that of the father of the boy in Matthew 17:15. These instances received immediate responses from the merciful Jesus.

Among other things, the purpose of healing in the Scripture includes the fulfilment of God's glory, freedom from pain which is a lack in the life of the patient, bringing about wholeness and fullness of life and reconciliation. Regarding Jesus' overall motive and purpose, for instance, it is needless to point out that Jesus healed out of love and compassion (Matth. 14:14).<sup>35</sup> In addition to the quest for good health, there is also the notion of inaugurated eschatology and thus for the glory of God (Lk. 11:20). Jesus' bringing of healing was not only a public display of the coming Kingdom but a verdict from all who witnessed as the foretaste of the coming banquet where Christ will wipe every tear from their eyes and there will be no more death and crying (Rev. 21:4). To Paul, the power of God accompanied the proclamation of the gospel. In this regard, Paul used the rhetorically loaded term, ἀπόδειξις to describe the role of miracles in the proclamation of the gospel. Twelftree has amply explained that ἀπόδειξις was a technical term for a compelling conclusion drawn from a reasoned argument.<sup>36</sup> In the case of Paul, this argument was not presented orally, but of spirit and power. This pictures both the transforming power of God and miracles that formed an essential part of Paul's presentation of the gospel. Paul seems to suggest that the demonstration of the gospel is different from Paul's preaching. According to Buck, the signs (σημεῖα) in the Gospel of John are important not so much because they bring healing, but because they are signs which point to something much greater. The important thing for John is not that, the man, for instance, gained his physical sight, but that his eyes were opened so that he could recognize and acknowledge Jesus as the saviour.<sup>37</sup> An attempt has been made in this aspect of the write-up to present a summary view of the concept and phenomenon of healing in the Bible. The phenomenon of healing is thus implicitly and explicitly taught in the Bible. In what follows, a critical reflection is given on how some contemporary Ghanaian Christians use *Sobolo* as *Yesu Mogy*a for healing.

### ***Sobolo* as *Yesu Mogy*a for Healing in Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity: A Critical Analysis from the Perspective of Biblical Moral Reasoning**

Prevalent within contemporary Ghanaian Christianity is the popularity of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogy*a.<sup>38</sup> This is a way of saying that belief in miraculous healing is common in contemporary Ghanaian Christianity probably due to the influence of Pentecostalism with its feature of using symbolic objects such as

<sup>35</sup> Hurdling, "Healing," 431.

<sup>36</sup> G.H. Twelftree, "Signs and Wonders," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 780.

<sup>37</sup> Buck, "Healing in the New Testament," 74.

<sup>38</sup> Discussions on the use of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogy*a are prevalent in the Ghanaian Christian context. Pictures and issues surrounding such uses are also common on various social media platforms such as YouTube, facebook, WhatsApp. As a religious phenomenon and 'product,' claims of its original use (patency) has resulted in conflict (beef) among two major Neo-prophetic pastors popularly known in Ghana as Prophet Obofour of Anointed Palace Chapel and Propet Adom Kyei Dua of Believers Worship Center.

<https://www.ghbase.com/you-stole-my-yesu-mogy-a-and-made-it-sobolo-with-your-dirty-beard-like-dog-youre-a-witch-pastor-rev-obofour-disgraces-prophet-adom-kyei-duah/>.

See [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=SOBOLO+AS+YESU+MOGYA](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=SOBOLO+AS+YESU+MOGYA).

handkerchiefs, porridge, *sobolo*, oranges, soup, and other paraphernalia objects to bring about healing.<sup>39</sup> The popularity of *sobolo* lies, on the one hand, in its acclaimed efficacy in its medicinal properties supported by scientific research.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* for healing has become popular due to the phenomenological description of its religious effect backed by the popular sharing of testimonies on social media platforms and television in Ghana.

It could be observed that the use of the blood of Jesus in biblical terms is associated with the redemptive act of Jesus in sharing his life on the cross. In addition to its eternal and thus redemptive and salvific efficacy, the blood of Jesus is used in the contemporary Ghanaian context as a spiritual weapon to ward off evil spirits, to give protection, and for healing in declarative prayer terms.<sup>41</sup> In this light, it is claimed that the wheel or medium through which the blood of Jesus operates is faith and positive confession. By subjecting the phenomenon and practices pertaining to the use of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* to critical analysis through the lens of biblical moral reasoning, it could be observed that the phenomenon has a far-reaching prospect in doing (biblical) theology in Africa, on the one hand, and challenges on the other hand.

On the one hand, the phenomenal use of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* brings about some prospects in theology in Africa. These could be observed in three major ways which are enriching material spirituality, serving as a symbolic demonstration of the power of the gospel and providing holistic healing. To begin, similar to Jesus' use of symbols such as saliva for healing (Mk. 8:22-26) and his institution of the Lord's supper as reiterated by Paul in 1 Cor. 11:23-25, the contemporary use of *sobolo* in Ghana as a sacramental and symbolic rite could be conceptualised within religious language as a material spirituality.<sup>42</sup> Following the words of Rudolf Bultmann, a sacrament is an "act which by natural means puts supernatural powers into effect, usually employing spoken words which accompany the act and relate those powers by the mere utterance of their prescribed wording."<sup>43</sup> A sacramental rite may be limited completely to the speaking of a word or a formula. In this case, the idea of a sacrament is based on the assumption that under certain conditions supernatural powers can be connected to natural objects of the world of which spoken words serve as their means and mediators. Should the conditions be fulfilled and should the act be consummated in the light of the prescribed formula, then the supernatural power goes into effect. In this light, apart from these conditions, the acts would only be purely worldly, natural ones like a meal.

Thus from the perspective of material spirituality, those who use *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* expect some divine blessings of healing and other miraculous experiences when they participate in the drink. Using *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya*, it is claimed that, as in Paul's line of thought and discourse on the related subject of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-28), participants are led to the metaphysical world by means of sacrificial rites.<sup>44</sup> Greater emphasis is hereby placed on symbols and the sacrament to make the invisible world somewhat tangible or concrete to the world of normal sensory perception. Following the words of Peter Sarpong, "symbols are of sacramental value. They cause what they signify."<sup>45</sup>

Next, the use of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* has the prospect of rhetorically demonstrating the power of God and the human agents in the phenomenon of healing. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion or the means of argumentation.<sup>46</sup> Used in this context, it denotes the compelling conclusion drawn from a reasoned

<sup>39</sup> Fosu, *Pentecostalism and Charismatism: A Ghanaian Perspective*, 183-188.

<sup>40</sup> Chinju M Sivaraman and Fels Saju, "Medicinal Value of Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis: A Review," *International Journal of Pharmacognosy and Chemistry* 1 (2021): 1-11.

<sup>41</sup> Reference is usually made to Revelation 12:11 and applied in a literal sense in the context of praying against one's enemies popularly known as warfare prayers.

<sup>42</sup> Material spirituality refers to the notion of spirituality that are believed to be intertwined with the material conditions of humans. In this case, the spiritual is always considered as being intertwined with the physical. Rothney S. Tshaka, "A Perspective on Notions of Spirituality, Democracy, Social Cohesion and Public Theology," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no. 3 (August 20, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i3.1336>; S. Biko, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity," in *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, ed. B. Moore (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), 36-47.

<sup>43</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Kendrick Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1965), 135.

<sup>44</sup> John David Kwamena Ekem, *Priesthood in Context: A Study of Akan Traditional Priesthood in Dialogical Relation to the Priest-Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and Its Implications for a Relevant Functional Priesthood in Selected Churches among the Akan of Ghana*, vol. 19 (Verlag an der Lottbek, 1994), 172.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 180.

<sup>46</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 144; Fosu, *Experiences of Pneumatic Phenomena in Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity as Appropriations of 1. Cor 12-14: A Critical Analysis*, 71.

argument that the *sobolo* in itself carries medicinal power, used as a religious symbol parallel to the efficacy of the blood of Jesus. Rhetorically, therefore, *sobolo* demonstrates the transforming power of both God and the human agents who claim to use it in the healing process. The latter is made clear in the phenomenon of *akwankyerε* (prophetic direction which is similar to divination in African Traditional Religion) and beef (rivalry) regarding the use of *sobolo*. As a rhetorical tool, the phenomenon of beef aims to portray how powerful and anointed the religious official is in using the religious symbol to effect holistic healing.

Contrary to the dispensationalist view on the cessation of miraculous healing, in the last place, adherents of *sobolo* in the Ghanaian context claim to fill the gap in orthodox medicine through holistic and miraculous healing. Just as in the ancient world, diseases in contemporary times have enormous social and economic consequences. Following the observation of Buck, a person suffering from leprosy, menstrual “uncleanness,” deafness, or an impediment of speech, would be despised.<sup>47</sup> To him, a blind or paralyzed person, for instance, would almost inevitably be poor and consequently hungry. Healing for such a person would have “life-altering, not to say life-giving, implications bringing about the possibility of reintegration into society. In a holistic sense, therefore, such healing would bring economic, physical, and emotional independence, and so it would restore to the afflicted the sense of dignity and self-respect which comes with self-sufficiency. It is primarily because of these consequences that holistic healing was sought.”<sup>48</sup>

Holistic healing in this regard thus designates the attempt at addressing various aspects of the individual’s well-being, rather than concentrating solely on his or her physical well-being. Here, *sobolo* is conceptualized, first as medicine to bring about medical healing. Second, it is food that is believed to boost one’s immune system, thus for natural healing, and it is prayed over to bring about its miraculous power and then it is likened to the blood of Jesus that is conceptualized to bring about inner healing or restoration of mental health or for psychological healing. Last, it involves the entire community in that it is locally produced and collectively received. According to Elizabeth Amoah, for the traditional African Christian, holistic healing is a combination of many systems to bring about the proper functioning of bodily organs which include mental, spiritual and emotional stability of oneself, family members and community.<sup>49</sup> This means that the holistic healing process is a crucial aspect of many African Christian worldviews. Thus, it addresses the physical, spiritual, psychological and social well-being of the people.

Notwithstanding the above perspectives on *sobolo* that may appear to encourage its continuous use, the phenomenon of using *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* needs to be further reflected upon in the light of biblical theology and Christian Ethics. To begin with, using *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* raises the question of indoctrination. To designate or use *sobolo* as an exclusive medium for holistic healing of all kinds of diseases seems to be a manipulative use of a religious symbol and thus becomes problematic. To buttress this point is an appeal by a relative of a deceased victim of a member of the Believers Worship Center popularly known as the Philadelphia Movement. She claims that her sister who was a member of the named church became pregnant and instead of attending antenatal, resorted to the purchase and use of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya*. Later in the pregnancy, she had some complications and died.<sup>50</sup> The sister of the deceased as a result was appealing to the founder and prophet of the church so he could educate his members in order not to resort to the use of *sobolo* as an exclusive medium of healing all kinds of diseases.<sup>51</sup> This appeal to the practitioners and adherents of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* seems to be tenable in the light of biblical moral reasoning. Jesus for instance, used his saliva mixed with mud to heal a blind man in John 9:6. Jesus, however, did not make it a habit or routine of using saliva mixed with mud to heal every blind person.

<sup>47</sup> Buck, “Healing in the New Testament,” 63.

<sup>48</sup> Buck, “Healing in the New Testament,” 64.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Amoah, “Shekhina – An African Utopia: A Response,” in *Lebensstörungen Und Heilungen Traditionelle Verfahren Des In-Ordnung-Bringens von Christus Bis Mami Wata*, ed. Werner Kahl and Gabriele Lademann-Priemer (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2013), 47.

<sup>50</sup> This appeal by the lady is common on social media platforms. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpXPivQCUU4>

<sup>51</sup> The corollary effect of this appeal was that the prophet in question later came out to explain that he himself uses orthodox medicine. That implies that the followers could do same in addition to taking *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya*. See “Adom Kyei Duah Reveals The Truth In Killing Church Members With His Yesu Mogya (Sobolo)”

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxQSetOWTms&t=102s>.

Subsequently, emphasising the use of *sobolo* against other forms of orthodox medicine leads to dependency syndrome thereby undermining orthodox medicine. A case in point is the predicament of Jones Nimako (not real name, though) who instead of seeking medical treatment after a professional diagnosis, resorted to raising funds on social media platforms and seeking assistance from relatives to purchase *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya*:

In times like this, I need help to go and purchase some prayer items and use them so that I can be healed completely, anyone who wishes to help me, this is my number. ...

“Mama, I beg you. Let me go and buy some of the blood of Jesus and drink before I go to do the scan. I’m dying. I feel deep pain in my throat...”

“The Doctor said the disease is spreading in my throat so I should go and do the scan for her to know if she will do the operation or know the treatment she will give me unless divine intervention and is almost two months. I have stopped taking the **blood of Jesus (Sobolo)**. Help me and save my life because I am dying.”

It is apparent from the above appeal that the patient trusted the medical diagnosis of the physician but not the healing method. For that reason, he returned to drinking *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya*. When the situation worsened, then he resorted to raising funds on social media platforms and private contacts to further purchase the *sobolo* items. Should the drinking of *sobolo* prevent the sick from taking orthodox medicine? From the biblical perspective, the accounts of the embalming of Israel in Gen. 5:2 and others such as the healing of Asa in 2 Chr. 16:12 as well as the treatment of the wounds of the patient in Luke 10:34 presuppose that the Scripture affirms medical healing or the art of medicine.

Another one of the major challenges that pertain to the use of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* in contemporary times deduced from the above instance is its cyclical use. By cyclical use of *sobolo* means its repeated use to heal all kinds of diseases. The cyclical use of signs and symbols raises the question of its affinity to African traditional religious practices. From the biblical perspective, however, Fosu has observed that God’s sovereign guidance implies that a devotee may occasionally be guided to use any medium such as oil or water to perform a miracle. However, the phenomenon may be more aligned with the notion of *spirit* in the African traditional religion when the use of such symbols becomes cyclical. Creating an atmosphere and channel through which the Judeo-Christian God is expected and determined to operate seems to become inconsistent with the phenomenon of miraculous healing in the biblical discourse.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, merely praying over *sobolo* by a religious official for all kinds of healing raises more questions than answers on the theology of contextualization. Imagining the colour of the blood of Jesus with its efficacy of healing and overcoming the devil in relation to the colour of *sobolo* as both reddish, it becomes popular to liken *sobolo* to the blood of Jesus. Similarly, merely reading Rev. 22:2 “*edua no abana yj mfa sa yadej*” may seem to endorse the use of plant medicine of all kinds. However, designating *sobolo* to be the blood of Jesus appears to be uncritical in the contextualizing attempt. Rather, the phenomenon seems to evidence a magical mentality. Magic makes people gods because it gives them control over nature, supernatural powers, and even *gods*, through the practice of proper rites.

Last but not least, the use of *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* poses the challenge of commercialization of sacramental objects in the ecclesial contexts. From the perspective of biblical moral reasoning, since the religious practitioners (Priests/physicians) sell the products to the patients (clients) usually at a relatively higher price, it seems more reasonable to conclude that they are more interested in the commercial interest. The gap that Jesus bridged between the physician and the sufferer is still left open. To follow the words of Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiénou: “Godly power is always rooted in love, not pride; redemption, not revenge; and concern for the other, not the self. God’s power is humble, not proud, and inviting, not rejecting. Its symbol is the cross, not the sword.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Fosu, *Pentecostalism and Charismatism: A Ghanaian Perspective*, 187.

<sup>53</sup> Paul G Hiebert, R Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, “Responding to Split-Level Christianity and Folk Religion,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 16, no. 4 (1999): 175-176.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of this study, some viable recommendations can be made. Given the growing interest in using symbols to effect holistic healing, there should be continuous research on material spirituality within theological scholarship. Theological reflections on the use of *sobolo* for miraculous healing suggest further that there should be an atmosphere and spaces within the church's liturgical context for the possible demonstration of the power of the gospel such as in providing holistic healing. The paper recommends further that the ambiguous use of *sobolo* as a miraculous drink in the Ghanaian Christian context should not, however, lead to a manipulative approach to healing. Also, this study recommends that *sobolo* as *Yesu mogya* should not be used as an exclusive means of physical well-being and development of society. Lastly, the cyclical use of *sobolo* as a healing drink for all and diverse kinds of miraculous healings needs to be questioned in the light of biblical theology.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has purposed to study the phenomenon of healing from the perspective of biblical theology and Christian ethics with particular attention to the use of hibiscus drink (*sobolo*) as the blood of Jesus (*Yesu Mogya*) for holistic healing in contemporary Ghanaian Christianity. It is apparent from the discourse on healing within biblical theology that the phenomenon of using plant products and symbolic objects for miraculous healing is both explicitly and implicitly rooted in the Bible. Using symbols such as *sobolo* for healing creates opportunities for the holistic needs of the church members to be met. While affirming the continuous relevance of miraculous healing in postmodern contexts, the study has called for critical contextualization in the use of symbolic objects for healing in ecclesial contexts.

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