



Christian Spirituality in Context: An African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

African Christian Spirituality has often been critiqued as encompassing African traditional culture and spirituality. Some scholars describe it as “syncretistic” and “superstitious” as they find it difficult to distinguish between the African traditional spirituality bound to the African culture and that of the African Christian spirituality. Further, descriptions of Christian spiritualities in the Majority World as “contextual” seem to suggest that the Christian spirituality from the Minority World is not culturally bound and thus designated. This situation could be described as an echo of a dilemma on the phenomenon of spirituality in context. This article aims to reflect on the dynamics of African Christian Spirituality from the perspective of African Christian theology. The paper argues that there can be no authentic Christian spirituality without a specific reference to a particular cultural context. This understanding should therefore be considered as an essential point of reference for tolerance and mutual respect in intercultural dialogue and ecumenical engagements within scholarship and in ecclesial contexts in the contemporary *glocal* world.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary quest for ecumenism in both local and global contexts brings to the fore a challenge of understanding the spiritualities of all representative partners who are of diverse socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. An encounter between Christians from the Majority World and that of the Minority World reveals diverse forms of spiritualities, reflecting different Christian traditions that range from orthodox to Pentecostal, Catholic to Protestant, and from conservative or fundamentalist to liberal. However, one is inclined to point out that some common forms of spiritualities could be identified with a particular group of Christians who share common socio-cultural and geographical backgrounds, while acknowledging minor differences. In this light, the need to study Christian spirituality in context becomes imperative, as it will not only serve as a resource material for intercultural theology and missiology but also promote ecumenical dialogue in the contemporary global context. Much of the tension that arises between the different partners of the global ecumenical dialogue revolves around the misunderstanding of the spiritualities of the other partners.

Significantly, therefore, this study proposes to discuss the dynamics of African Christian Spirituality. Having examined the research methodology and the meaning and theology of Christian spirituality, this study attempts to explain the essentials of African Christian spirituality, including its nature, elements, and capacity for relationship. The analysis and reflection on the study reveal that all relevant Christian spiritualities are contextually bound. This, therefore, has profound theological and

practical implications for mutual respect and tolerance, which are necessary for meaningful intercultural and ecumenical engagement.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs the academic tool of theological reflection from the perspective of African Christian theology.¹ This approach involves theological reflections that incorporate African culture, worldview, and religious realities. As a contextual approach, it seeks to reflect upon and express Christian spirituality in African thought forms, as experienced in African Christian communities, while engaging with the biblical witness and the broader Christian community.²

Theological reflection thus involves analyzing our personal and shared experiences in conversation with our religious heritage.³ It thus serves as a research tool that systematically examines relevant scriptural and theological themes, considering life experiences and critically analyzing their significance within the Judeo-Christian tradition. It involves learning through experience and, as Kinast notes, helps researchers recognize God's presence in human encounters.

From an academic research methodology perspective, theological reflection can confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand our understanding of human experiences and religious traditions. The goal is to discover new truths and evaluate their significance for life. In this study, relevant literature on Christian spiritualities in global contexts is reviewed and critically analyzed in a comparative manner. Additionally, the ecumenical experiences of the researcher, who has lived, practiced Christian faith, and engaged in theological reflection in both the global North and South, provide valuable insights for an objective analysis of the research topic.

The Meaning of Spirituality within Scholarship

Spirituality is often described as a notoriously difficult concept to define.⁴ It is used in diverse contexts to indicate "stoic attitudes, a cult phenomenon, practice of mind control, yoga disciplines, dynamic muscle tensions, assorted dietary regimens, meditations and jogging cults."⁵ It is also used to indicate the following concepts: escapist fantasies, interior journeys, appreciation of eastern religions, multifarious pious exercises, superstitious imaginations and intensive journals. Others are monastic rigours, mortification of the flesh, wilderness sojourns, political resistance, contemplation, abstinence, hospitality and a vocation of poverty. The rest are non-violent silence, the effort of prayer, obedience, generosity, exhibiting stigmata and entering solitude.

Historically, many concepts were used to describe spirituality. It was always used in close connection with temporality and life in the spirit in relation to one's concept of personality. In the abstract sense, spirituality was used to describe the interior aspect of religious life. In the Middle Ages, the French used it as an adjective to mean cheerfulness and all the properties of wit and liveliness.⁶ To the traditional Indian culture, for instance, there is no word for religion or spirituality since "to the

¹ Walter Hollenweger has amply observed that, "All theologies are contextually conditioned." See "Intercultural Theology, Intercultural Theology - Theology Today 43, no. 1 (1986): 28-35, <http://tj.sagepub.com/-content/43/1/28.full.pdf>. Accessed February 8, 2017. John Kwasi Fosu, "The Phenomenon of Akan Witchcraft (Bayie) in Ghana: Critical Observations," in Hexerei-Anschuldigungen in weltweiter Perspektive, Witchcraft accusations in global perspective, ed. Werner Kahl, Gabriele Lademann-Priemer (Hamburg, Germany: Missionshilfe Verlag), 169.

² John Kwasi Fosu, "Immortality of the Soul in Ecclesiastes and Akan Traditional Thought: A Comparative Analysis from an African Christian Theological Perspective," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, 7 no.4 (2021): 62. <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2021741>.

³ R. Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach* (Maderia Beach, FL.: Center for Theological Reflection, 1990), 3.

⁴ C. J. H. Hingley, "Spirituality" in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D. J. Atkinson & D. H. Field (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 807. To Hingley, it has a secular use, general religious use and a Christian use. See also Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling* (London: Casell Wellington House, 1997), 112. Lartey views spirituality as an omnibus term. It means different things to different people and is notoriously difficult to encapsulate in a neat and comprehensive definition. According to William Stringfellow, it is an anathema, a suspicious term which is intimidating and ambivalent, a disguise and a shield to hide ignorance and to mask incoherence. See also William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 16, 18.

⁵ Nalini Arles, "Spirituality and Culture in Pastoral Care and Counselling" in *Spirituality and Culture in Pastoral Care and Counselling: Voices from Different Contexts*, eds. John Forskett and Emmanuel Lartey (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 2004), 78.

⁶ Margaret Chatterjee, *The concept of Spirituality* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1989), 1-6.

Hindu, the whole life was religion.”⁷ But to Arles, the absence of a particular word does not mean the absence of the concept itself within a culture where it may emerge in different ways to describe certain values, and to locate certain experiences in the life of the person.⁸

As a term, spirituality is often distorted by dualism or religious assumptions. When the Spirit is assumed to mean the ‘opposite of matter,’ then spirituality is only associated with invisible thoughts or feelings. When Spirit is defined as ‘what God is,’ then Spirituality becomes a narrowly religious term. However, when Spirituality is understood as a contemporary philosophical and psychological term, these distortions are corrected. Philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur (1967) and Martin Heidegger (1962) explore our human capacity for spirituality that is for self-transcendence. Our ability to go beyond ourselves in truthful knowledge, loving relationships and free commitment exemplifies this self-transcendence. In psychology, Gerald May uses the term spirituality to refer to the aspect of personal essence that gives it power, energy, and motivation.⁹

The religious meaning of spirituality is both general and specific. General or universal religious spirituality pertains to the realisation of human self-transcendence, connected to the ability to relate to, understand, and commit ourselves to whatever is recognised as the ultimate, sacred, or religious. Within religious Spirituality are specific spiritualities such as Jewish, Christian and Hindu. With reference to particular spirituality, the basic components are the same: the human and the holy. Thus, to James Nelson, spirituality is the way in which people relate to that which is of ultimate worth to them, using their intellect, emotions, bodies, will, aesthetic, and sensitivities, all of themselves as they relate to what they value deeply.¹⁰ However, for some, spirituality is not restricted to a condition or state but is a process leading to growth. This means that spirituality is not a given but an acquired value. Similarly, Mollie Batten has noted that: “Spirituality means a search for meaning and significance by contemplation and reflection on the totality of human experiences in relation to the whole world which is experienced and also to the life which is lived and which may mature as that search proceeds.”¹¹

Samuel Rayan also relates Spirituality to everyday experiences, thereby bridging the gap between the sacred and the secular and seeing all religious experiences as human experiences.¹² He moves the method from private contemplation to involvement and emphasises the incarnation of Christ, living with and getting involved in the struggle of people. He further liberates spirituality from individualism to a community orientation. For Rayan, action and reflection should be the praxis for understanding spirituality. He goes on to say that those who are incapable of the experience of real relatedness to others are, in fact, incapable of feeling anything that could be an experience of relationship with God.

It could be observed that spirituality as a term denotes a life that is informed by one’s interest in religion and religious matters in areas of doctrinal convictions, faith and experience. Thus, Christian spirituality refers to the quality of life informed by one’s interest in the Christian faith. It involves the desire to cultivate a relationship with God, humankind and the environment through Christ and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. It is significant to point out that, in the context of Christianity, spirituality exists in diverse forms as monastic spirituality, women’s spirituality, African spirituality, Indian spirituality, Asian spirituality and American spirituality. Most of these forms of Christian spirituality are described in terms of their purposes and the geographical location in which they exist.¹³ However, for this study, the following session discusses the theology of Christian spirituality and African Christian Spirituality.

⁷ Chatterjee, *The concept of Spirituality*, 19.

⁸ Chatterjee, *The concept of Spirituality*, 7-10.

⁹ Robbert J. Wicks, *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counselling* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 38.

¹⁰ James Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988).

Quoted from the paper “Where there was Split and violence. Let there be Healing between Sexuality and Spirituality, A Theological Pastoral perspective.”

¹¹ Mollie Batten, ‘Spirituality and Living in this World’ in Eric James (ed.), *Spirituality for Today* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 61.

¹² Arles, “Spirituality and Culture,” 79.

¹³ Elizabeth Amoah, “A Living Spirituality Today,” 50, John S. Pobee, “African Spirituality” in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1983), 5.

Essentials of Christian Spirituality

Christian spirituality describes the life of the *Christian*. It is the life of grace, which begins with God the Father who calls the believing sinner to himself and makes a relationship with himself possible through the death of his Son.¹⁴ Thus, it is God who initiates and sustains that relationship through His Spirit.

Some essentials of spirituality appear the same for all Christians. These are the aims, means, marks and the test of spirituality. The aim of spirituality is that the Christian will become increasingly like Jesus. That is being conformed to the likeness of Jesus (Rom. 8:29). The means of spirituality include studying the Bible, meditation, prayer, observing the sacraments, fasting, self-examination, attendance at worship, and service in the world.¹⁵ Further, the spiritual person will be marked by a growing awareness of others' needs and a willingness to work sacrificially to meet them. According to Hingley, these explanations of spirituality do not mean that there is a uniform spirituality for all Christians. What this means is that true spirituality can never be selfish, introverted egoism, or simply a journey of self-discovery. Significantly, Hingley points out that the spiritual life is a "matter not of theology, but also temperament and background."¹⁶ Given this, all Christians are to find a personal spirituality which is also faithful to God's particular plan for them as unique individuals. Thus, true spirituality always arises from incompetence, the state of total dependence and helplessness of the creature before the creator.

In addition, the ultimate test of spirituality, as the fourth element of spirituality, is Jesus' description of Christian spirituality that "all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another ... as I have loved you' (John 13:34, 35)." In this light, loving one another constitutes the fourth element of spirituality. From this perspective, Christian spirituality can be defined as a loving relationship between a person and a holy God who has revealed Godself (himself) in creation and in the Scriptures and particularly in the person of Jesus Christ.

In an attempt to understand any given spirituality, T. R. Albin has succinctly explained the interaction between doctrine, discipline, liturgy and life. To him:

One of the critical insights offered by the study of spirituality comes from observing the interaction between doctrine, discipline, liturgy and life. Doctrine has to do with what is believed (about self, others, the world and the supernatural. Discipline has to do with the source(s) of authority, the structure of corporate life and the consequences of deviant behaviour. Liturgy has to do with the corporate life of worship and praise. Music, prayer, the sacraments, and various patterns of public acts in worship have significant impacts upon the attitudes, actions and lifestyles of the worshippers. Life refers to the individual lifestyle of the believer; not only in prayer, study, and devotion, but also at work, at play and in one's involvement with society.¹⁷

Following Albin's explanation, it is worth pointing out that it is the weaving together of these four factors, namely the doctrine, discipline, liturgy and life, that provides the basic pattern for understanding the fabric of any given spirituality.¹⁸

Dynamics of African Christian Spirituality

This section of the study focuses on the dynamics of African Christian Spirituality for an enhanced understanding. To do that, the challenge of studying African Christian Spirituality is first looked at. Thereafter, an attempt is made to describe the nature, elements and the perspective of African Christian spirituality as the human capacity for relationship.

¹⁴ Hingley, "Spirituality," 808.

¹⁵ Hingley, "Spirituality," 808. The purpose of this study is not to go into detailed discussions of the means of spirituality. However, see Richard Forster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989) for a detailed description of each of these means of authentic spirituality. Foster refers to these means of spirituality as spiritual disciplines.

¹⁶ Hingley, "Spirituality," 808-809.

¹⁷ T. R. Albin, "Spirituality" in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 657.

¹⁸ Albin, "Spirituality," 657.

The Challenge of Studying African Christian Spirituality

S. Pobee, in his description of African spirituality, identifies four main difficulties. The first challenge has to do with the problem of the source. In a largely illiterate continent where multiple traditions circulate orally, universal access to them is well nigh impossible. The second difficulty from the perspective of Pobee is that the African Church still reflects its Western origins, *vis-à-vis* organisation, polity, worship, discipline and ethos. The third aspect pertains to the complex and elusive concept of Africanness, while the fourth concerns the presence of various Christian traditions in Africa.¹⁹ Spirituality in the African context may be understood as ‘the personal relation of humans to God,’ by how Africans appropriate body, soul and mind to the salvific mission of Christ.²⁰

The Nature of African Spirituality

Following John S. Pobee, African spirituality stresses the incalculable role of the individual and commitment to action rather than reflection. In other words, the spirituality of the African is more “danced out” than “thought out.” This implies that heavy intellectual theology wears thin. To Pobee, in this context, dialogue is preferred to discourse.

Another dimension of African spirituality has to do with an inherited Christian tradition that has a certain dualism, which reflects the Pauline tension between spirit and flesh. Here, the spiritual arena is purified of all material concerns. This is a reinforced traditional African epistemology in which the soul represents permanence and continuity while the body represents change and decay. In this sense, a clergyman who shows interest in property is thought to be worldly and unspiritual. Thus, in politics as in business, it is often said ‘keep religion out of politics’ and economic pursuits are profane areas which are not for religious people. Pobee describes this as a dualistic heresy which denies the sovereignty of God over all of life.²¹ Pobee further points out another tradition in African spirituality where the sacred and the secular flow readily into each other, as in the Bible and in traditional African culture, where the borders of the sacred are much broader than in Western society. He explains that Christians persistently go back to native herbalists for healing because in their indigenous traditions, there is nothing like unconsecrated medicine.²²

The next distinguished mark of African Christian Spirituality seems to be rooted in the Old Testament, as it shares similar values such as family, hospitality, and communal identity. According to Pobee, Old Testament imagery and symbolism are embraced and highly valued. For instance, the exodus motif is frequently used, especially in discussions about liberation and salvation. The motif of Jerusalem or the holy city is also common in African songs, symbolising the hope of ultimate salvation. Thus, African Christianity, partly for the same reason, is very much legalistic in approach, following Jewish legalism.²³ Moreover, African Spirituality emphasises joy. The sacred dance, which is a feature of mainly an independent Church, is an attempt to express their joy in the Lord. The new music in African churches has taken on traditional African melodies that are used to express uplifting and joyful music. The note of joy is seen as an outward sign of divine possession. The last but not least feature of the African spirituality that Pobee observes is that of focusing on a holy man. To this, he writes, “This is part of the sense of belonging, in which the minister of religion became lineage head, the protector and defender of the members of the group both physically and spiritually.”²⁴

Elements of African Christian Spirituality

African Christian Spirituality involves the efforts to apply relevant elements in the deposit of Christian faith to guide men and women towards their spiritual growth. The progressive development of their persons flows into proportionately increased insight and joy in the African context. The central

¹⁹ John Pobee, “African Spirituality,” 5, for a detailed and interesting presentation on the difficulty in describing African Spirituality.

²⁰ Pobee, “African Spirituality,” 6.

²¹ John Pobee, “African Spirituality,” 7.

²² SPobee, “African Spirituality,” 7 for detailed explanation on this issue. He notes that they find no satisfaction in the professional Western medical practice that leaves out references to the spiritual. In this case African Christians believe in spiritual forces behind any ailment.

²³ Pobee, “African Spirituality,” 7.

²⁴ See Pobee, “African Spirituality,” 7, for an engaging and detailed illustration of this observation.

elements of Spirituality in the African context are: The Concept of wholeness, the view of the human person, the African as a communal being, and the importance of religion.

- *The Concept of Wholeness*

Wholeness in the African context is characterised by the absence of divisions between the animate and inanimate, spirit and matter, living and non-living, dead and living, physical and metaphysical, secular and sacred, and the body and spirit. Africans generally believe that everything, including human beings, is in a constant state of relationship with one another and the invisible world, and that people rely on invisible powers and beings. As a result, Africans strive for harmony, balance, and tranquillity in daily life, and society is not segmented into distinct fields like medicine, sociology, law, politics, and religion.²⁵

Berinyuu has aptly explained that the worldview of Africans can be likened to a Rubik's Cube. Every side and colour combination creates a single, cohesive pattern. If any one side or set of sides and colours changes, the entire Rubik Cube is out of order. For the Rubik Cube to be in its correct position, every side, every colour, and every cube must be in its proper place. Trying to move one piece disrupts the design's unity, but putting it back in place restores the entire Rubik Cube. Similarly, in African communities, breaking the moral rules can disrupt the cosmic ties between an individual and their community, potentially leading to widespread social unrest spreading from the individual's kinship (clan) and immediate wife and children.²⁶ The implication of this concept of wholeness to spirituality is that to the African, spirituality is holistic. It is holistic in the sense that spirituality permeates all aspects of the African life: their spiritual, emotional, material, physical and moral lives. Thus, spirituality that seeks to answer only their spiritual quests, for instance, presents a partial and narrow understanding of the subject.

- *The View of the Human Person*

For the African, the human person is not a solitary individual in the world. They are always interacting with other beings in the universe, connected by a network of relationships. A human being is fundamentally part of a community of beings, as well as a unique individual.²⁷ They are a force within a universe of living beings, a member of the human community, while also a singular individual with the responsibility to create and share life in the universe.²⁸ The essential implication of this view of the human person on spirituality has to do with the fact that the measure of the spiritual condition of the African is the degree to which he or she functions as a member of the community.

- *The African Person as a Communal Being*

This central element of spirituality in the African context is that the African is a communal being. Pobe writes that, "whereas Descartes spoke for Westerners when he said '*Cogito ergo Sum*,' meaning *I think therefore I exist*, the Akan person, as an example of African ontology, is '*Cognatus ergo sum*,' meaning *I am related by blood therefore I exist*."²⁹ Within African communities, it's clear that people's entire existence relies on the community, and this is reflected in every aspect of social life, from religious practices to economic activities and the upkeep of extended family ties. To reinforce this sense of community, key milestones in a person's life – birth, puberty, marriage, and death – are all marked with communal celebrations. The Akans have a proverb which states that "*Sj onipa firi soro bjsi fam a cbjsi nnipa kurom*," meaning "*When a man descends from heaven, he descends into a*

²⁵ Abraham Adu Berinyuu, *Pastoral Care to the sick in Africa* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988), 5. See also, J. Cilliers, "Between fragments and fullness: Worshipping in the in between spaces of Africa," *HTS Theologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 69, no. 2 (2013): 3. Art. #1296. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i2.1296>.

²⁶ Berinyuu, *Pastoral Care to the Sick in Africa*, 7.

²⁷ Jacobus Johannes Carnow, "Older Persons' Care as Life Care: A Pastoral Assessment of the Ecclesia Praxis within the African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Africa." (2015). <https://core.ac.uk/download/37437849.pdf>.

²⁸ Berinyuu, *Pastoral care to the sick in Africa*, 6. Mark Aidoo, "A Rhetorical Study of 1 Chronicles 29:1-25 and its Implications for Charismatic Leadership," *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 9, no. 1 (2019): 29-50. <https://core.ac.uk/download/524773062.pdf>

²⁹ Pobe, "African spirituality," 6.

human society.” The import of this proverb is that humankind is born initially into a society and therefore human beings are social beings from the onset.

It is therefore impossible for people to live in isolation, as individuals on their own do not have the necessary capabilities to meet basic human needs requirements. As the Akans put it, *Obi yjyie a, firi obi* meaning (*the prosperity of one person depends upon his fellow*). Therefore, the society's communal nature is seen as a result of human nature, as well as what allows one to prosper and live in good health.³⁰ However, the sense of community does not dismiss individuality. Some scholars believe that community provides no space for the expression of individuality. However, an Akan proverb submerges this view held by these scholars. There is a proverb that states that “*abusua te sj kwaej, sj wo pini ho a na wohunu sj, obiara wc ne si bia*” meaning “*the clan is like a cluster of trees which when seen from afar appears to be huddled together but which would be seen to stand individually when closely approached.*” The implication of African communality on spirituality relates to the fact that the spirituality of the African is seen in the unity they share as a family. However, they express a shared spirituality as seekers of individual independence and empowerment as the necessary elements of human dignity and genuine communality.³¹

- *The Importance of Religion*

Religion has played a significant role in shaping the character and culture of African peoples throughout history. Although African religion lacks sacred books, it is expressed throughout African life. To be African in a traditional context is to be truly religious. Mbiti, in his book *African Religions and Philosophy*, writes that “Africans are notoriously religious,”³² and Asare Opoku has also echoed that, in Africa, religion is life and life is religion.³³ This is indeed true of the African in that the African is intrinsically religious, and in all aspects of life—social, economic, and political—religion is central. Perhaps Kwame Gyekye expresses this better by writing that in Africa, being born into a human community is to be born into a religious community.³⁴ This religious nature of the African people is seen in some of their proverbs and myths. For instance, the Akans of Ghana have a maxim which says that “*Obi nkyerj abcfra Nyame.*” This literally means *the knowledge of God to an infant is so clear that no one teaches an infant where to find God.*³⁵ In each African society, religion is deeply intertwined with the local language, making it essential to understand the religious life of the people through knowledge of their language. The religious aspect of African culture reflects an acknowledgement of human limitations and the need to depend on God. This awareness fosters humility, a religious value that also affects relationships among people. Although the importance of promoting material well-being is a prominent goal in the practice of religion among the African people, they also recognise the importance of non-material (spiritual) values such as love, kindness, compassion, generosity, peace, and harmony. For them, such non-material values give meaning to life. Thus, for the African, doing the right thing is primarily a moral obligation, but it is also, in some sense, a religious duty. A moral value thus also becomes a religious value, for it is believed that supernatural beings reward those who do good to their kinfolk and neighbours. The belief or awareness that God will give due recompense

³⁰ See David W. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counselling across Cultures* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 48-49 for further explanation on this view. He writes, among others, that one of the most remarkable and tangible dimensions of African Spirituality relates to the unique notion of communality and collective solidarity that the African society exhibits in all spheres of life. There is a profound sense of interdependence from the extended family to the entire community. Everybody is interrelated, including relations between the living and those who have departed. The individual in the community is the primary unit of humanness.

³¹ P. J. Paris, “African Spiritual Values and the African Renaissance: A Christian Perspective from the African Diaspora,” *Journal of African Christian Thoughts* 4, no.2 (2001): 27. To Paris, a communally oriented culture is identified by a social framework that distinguishes between close relatives and friends. People depend on their close relatives, such as families, relatives, clans and affiliations, to look after them, and in exchange for that, they believe they owe loyalty to the group. In this culture, the significance of the individual depends upon their belongingness to the society. Thus, the “we” consciousness is eschewed over and above the “I” consciousness. The sense of belongingness and feeling of solidarity with the other in times of bereavement, happiness, as a way of expressing one’s spirituality, is strong.

³² John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 2.

³³ K. A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Jurong, Singapore: FEP International, 1978).

³⁴ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 2003), 17.

³⁵ 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), 184.

weighs heavily on the conscience of the person who does, or intends to do, that which he or she knows is morally wrong.

The underlying relationship between the importance of religion and spirituality stems from the fact that Africans' intrinsic religious interest informs the quality of their spiritual lives. And to the African, values such as love, kindness, compassion, generosity, peace and harmony serve as some dimension of their spirituality. So spirituality that does not attach some importance to these moral values cannot adequately describe African spirituality.

African Christian Spirituality as the Human Capacity for Relationship

Considering the African context, Lartey offers a perceptive description of spirituality as the human ability to connect with oneself, others, the world, God, and what lies beyond sensory experience. This is often shaped by the specifics of a particular historical and social context, which in turn leads to distinct forms of expression and action in the world.³⁶ Given that Africans are generally communal and relationship-oriented, understanding African Christian Spirituality necessitates a detailed explanation of Spirituality as a human capacity for relating to transcendence, self (intra-personal), others (inter-personal), community, and the environment, including places and objects (spatial).³⁷

- *Spirituality as a Relationship with Transcendence*

Pobee has noted that, in African mysticism, whether in traditional or Christian religion, there is an experience of the divine while one remains on earth.³⁸ This aspect of spirituality is perhaps the most common and widely recognised. In spirituality as a relationship with the transcendence, it can be said that, in the New Testament, the early church encouraged practices such as worship (Acts 2:42-47), prayers for the weak and the sick (Acts 3:1-10) and preaching (Acts 10-11:18) to assist people in their spiritual journey. Indeed, the hope is that the journey will be improved and the relationship fortified through these practices. Similarly, in the Ghanaian culture, the traditional Akan Adinkra symbol captioned “Gye Nyame” practically means that *without God, nothing holds together*. Asamoah Gyadu in describing Ghanaian Spirituality with reference to Pentecostal renewal, has observed that in the Ghanaian religious context, there exists a transcendental aspect to life. Very little in Ghanaian traditional life falls outside the jurisdiction of Onyame, God, and spiritual powers, including ancestors. Therefore, one of the most treasured symbols of Ghanaian traditions is the Gye Nyame (literally, ‘God alone’) symbol intended to convey God as the ultimate and all-encompassing force in life existence. ... Similarly, for Ghanaian Pentecostals, there is no aspect of life that God cannot influence through prayer, whether it pertains to personal, family or national matters. From the observation of Asamoah Gyadu: “Ghana is one of the few countries left in the Christian world where no meeting (whether official government business or private gathering) starts without an opening prayer and finishes without a closing prayer.”³⁹

Thus, African spirituality affirms the immediacy of God’s presence to provide, sustain and deliver from the hands of one’s enemies.

- *Spirituality as a Relationship with Self*

When the African Christian speaks of spirituality, it is the inward quest to which they usually refer.⁴⁰ Being part of the Christian life means being incorporated into a new community, a body that's understood to be of Christ. To this, the New Testament (John 4:1-26; Luke 8:1-3), for instance, identifies passages that seek to bring up the oppressed group, such as women who needed a healthy

³⁶ Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 113.

³⁷ Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 141.

³⁸ Pobee, “African Spirituality,” 6. Pobee interestingly observes that “African spirituality searches for deliverance capable of transforming one’s terrestrial condition.”

³⁹ J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill NV, 2005), 236.

⁴⁰ Pobee explains this well by noting that “The historic churches from their North Atlantic origins deify individualism. God’s challenge goes directly to the individual: a person responds primarily as an individual. A person is saved as an individual.” He further explains that “Individualism has affected even the Independent African Churches.” See Pobee, “African Spirituality,” 6.

sense of dignity and worth. On the other hand, those whose self-esteem is high to the point of bordering on inordinate pride need a realistic sense of humility and not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to (Galatians 6:3).

- *Spirituality as Inter-personal and Corporate Relationship*

To the African, to be able to cultivate an “I” and “you” relationship with another person in which mutuality, respect, accountability and friendship are sustained is indeed a spiritual task. This aligns with the New Testament examples of the need for fellowship among brethren. In Acts 2:42, the disciples are pictured as devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Furthermore, African theologians have discussed the communal aspects of African spirituality in ways that highlight the core of the matter. According to Mbiti, being human means belonging to the entire community, which involves taking part in the community's shared beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals.⁴¹ Africans cannot detach themselves from the religion of their group. Doing so is to cut themselves off from their roots, foundation, and thus their sense of security, which is rooted in kinship and the entire community that makes them aware of their own existence. To be without one of these social elements is to be removed from the whole picture.⁴²

- *Spirituality as Spatial*

This pertains to the relationship with place, objects, and time. Lartey has observed that Tinker, from the American perspective, maintains that all of existence is spiritual. Here, the primary metaphor of existence is spatial rather than temporal. Furthermore, Tinker argues that spirituality is deeply rooted in the land, which is why the displacement caused by conquest and the forced relocation to reservations remains a spiritually devastating blow to American Indians. This sense of spatiality and land connectedness is reflected in ceremonies, symbols, architecture, worldviews, and perspectives of personhood.⁴³ Part of this is also true in the African context. Emmanuel Asante, in the book *Towards an African Christian Theology of the Kingdom of God: The Kingship of Onyame*, explains that the general conception of nature is that “God, who is nature’s creator-animator and Himself essentially spirit, has placed his spirit within each creature in varying degrees. At the heart of every creature, then, there is a divine element.”⁴⁴ He explains this well by stating that because nature has life and a divine element in it, it is sacred and therefore should be treated with care and respect.⁴⁵ Therefore, the aim of spirituality here is to attain harmony and balance in all of creation. Respect and reciprocity in the relationship with the earth are key features of African spirituality. This clearly demonstrates spirituality as a connection with place and the things on earth.

As explained above, spirituality is about relationships. John V. Taylor makes this point in his seminal work on the Holy Spirit, where he argues that what makes us “Spiritual” is our ability to relate.⁴⁶ Joann Wolski Corn also observes that “Relationship is the goal of spirituality and the pathways to it are means of developing and sustaining relationship.”⁴⁷ Spirituality should be understood not in overly individualistic and esoteric terms, as it sometimes has been, but primarily as a relational concept. The Christian life involves being integrated into a new community, a body understood to be that of Christ. From the above discussions, therefore, it can be said that spirituality is holistic, relational, and culturally rooted.⁴⁸ It encompasses one’s beliefs, convictions, aspirations, thoughts,

⁴¹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2.

⁴² Pobee explains that, “In the traditional African Society the mystical life does not separate the individual from the community; rather it permits him to realise himself more fully in his daily life” See Pobee, “African Spirituality,” 6.

⁴³ Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 141-143.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Asante, *Towards an African Christian Theology of the Kingdom of God: The Kingship of Onyame* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1995), 128.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Asante, ‘He who possesses the Land Possesses Divinity Spirituality and the Biblical and African Perspectives’ *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*, vol. XI January/July, (2001). Numbers 1 & 2.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 141 – 143.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 141 – 143.

⁴⁸ This perspective is in line with the argument of, M.F. Murove, *Essentials of African Spirituality*. In: *African Spirituality and Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-45590-2_3.

patterns, emotions, and feelings expressed in thought and actions to oneself, to God and people in a contextual manner.

African Christian Spirituality Compared with Other Contextual Christian Spiritualities

This section compares African Christian spirituality with expressions of Christianity in Latin America, Asia, Western Europe, and North America. The criteria for comparison include theological views, worship styles, and cultural adaptations characteristic of each.

Starting with the African context, Christian spiritualities originate from a worldview where the spiritual and material worlds are interconnected. In this light, African Traditional Spirituality greatly influences how African Christians understand God, community, and existence. God is perceived as both beyond and actively present in daily life. Spirituality is primarily understood as communal rather than individual. A person's identity in this context is intertwined with the community of the living, ancestors, and future generations.⁴⁹

Latin American Christian spirituality has developed within a context characterized by colonial history, poverty, and socio-political inequality. A central belief in this spirituality is that God is present among the poor and oppressed, a perspective reflected in Liberation Theology. According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, this theology is developed as a pastoral response to systemic injustice.⁵⁰

Aloysius Pieris has noted that Asian Christian spirituality emerged from diverse religious and philosophical traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Islam. As a result, it often emphasizes contemplation, interiority, and harmony. Theological reflection on Asian Christian spirituality involves inculturation, interpreting Christ through categories significant to Asian cosmologies, such as dharma, tao, and emptiness.⁵¹

Unlike the worldview of Christian spiritualities associated with the Global South, those of the Global North have been shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, modernity, and increasing secularization. Worship often highlights personal salvation, theological understanding, or organized liturgical tradition. The increasing secularization has led to renewed attention to spiritual formation and social ethics.⁵²

It is also observed that while African Christian spirituality emphasizes Spirit empowerment and healing, Latin American spirituality centers on liberation, justice, and solidarity. Asian Christian spirituality focuses on compassion and wisdom. Regarding the Global North, Christian spirituality mainly concentrates on personal salvation and doctrinal adherence.

Worship in the African Christian context is characterized by expressions through drumming, singing, movement, and oral theology. Additionally, it encompasses a holistic view of salvation, encompassing physical, social, and spiritual well-being.⁵³

African Christian spirituality recognizes spiritual forces and emphasizes healing, deliverance, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, African Pentecostal and Independent Churches exemplify this experiential dimension, affirming divine power as active in contemporary struggles for life, dignity, and liberation from oppression.⁵⁴ Additionally, while Asian Christian worship is characterized by contemplation and reflection, Latin American worship often centers on symbols and justice.

In terms of cultural engagement, African Christian spirituality integrates traditional cosmologies, whereas Latin American Christian spirituality tends to blend Catholicism with indigenous identity.⁵⁵ In Asia, Christian spiritualities engage in dialogue with major Asian religions. In the case of the Global North, Christian spirituality navigates a pluralistic secular culture.

⁴⁹ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 34–36.

⁵⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxv–xxvi.

⁵¹ Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 80–84.

⁵² Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 46–50.

⁵³ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 97–103.

⁵⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁵⁵ Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15–17.

Implications for doing Theology, Ecumenism and Mission: Some Reflections

In doing theology in contemporary times, it is worth emphasising that every form of authentic Christian spirituality is culturally and thus contextually conditioned.⁵⁶ What this means is that spirituality is shaped and conditioned by the context in which it is rooted.⁵⁷ Apart from its context, spirituality has no meaning. Clarence Scrambical has convincingly observed that, “Every spirituality is conditioned by the world of people in which it is lived and by the person who lives in it.”⁵⁸ This is a way of saying that cultural orientations are significant to Christian’s spirituality because they are at the core of one’s thoughts and actions. In this regard, the reference to other Christian spiritualities as contextual appears to be problematic in theological and ecumenical discourse. Depending upon one’s context and perspective, the spirituality of the other could also be regarded as contextual. Every form of spirituality, whether past, present, or yet to emerge, can be described as culturally conditioned, reflecting the needs and cultural values of its time. These cultural values stem from broader philosophical questions that are part of society’s environment and are transmitted through various sources such as family, media, school, church, and state.⁵⁹ And it is these values that get translated into action and thus one’s spirituality. This understanding highlights the essential role of cultural values in the practice of spirituality.

In ecumenical and missiological contexts, it is worth remarking that the discourse on African Christian Spirituality brings about the need for recognition and thus the appreciation of what appears to be opposing cultural orientations and values of African Christian contexts and other contexts in matters of spirituality. To the African, for instance, the community forms the heart of their spirituality.⁶⁰ A spirituality that does not include all people, their experiences, their wealth, their hopes, and concerns cannot resonate with Africans who are inherently communal relations-oriented. By this orientation, spiritual disciplines and elements that are communally inclined, such as drumming and dancing, a spontaneous atmosphere of worship and spectacular exercise of spiritual gifts and spirituality are to be understood, respected and appreciated as authentic expressions of Christianity that flourish well in the African cultural context. On the other hand, expressions of spirituality that are linked to an individualistic way of life characteristic of other contexts of the global North, such as deep reflection, meditation in quietness and a solemn atmosphere of worship, should also be respected, cherished and thus not to be seen as a lack of spiritual fervour. In each case, the cultural orientation and values serve as a key aspect of contextual spirituality.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the dynamics of African Christian spirituality. In examining the contexts, the main cultural patterns in sub-Saharan Africa have been identified. This background information is essential for understanding Christian spirituality in these settings, helping us see beneath the surface why people from Africa behave the way they do in practicing their Christian faith. Furthermore, this article supports the thesis that every authentic theology of Christian spirituality is shaped by culture and, therefore, by its context. This study should serve as a strong argument highlighting the elusive nature of labeling some theologies as “contextual” in contemporary theological discussions.

By comparing different spiritualities across various contexts, it is clear that Christian spirituality appears uniquely in different cultural and geographic settings. However, it remains based on a shared confession of Jesus Christ and participation in the Holy Spirit. The lived experience of

⁵⁶ D. G. Bates & F. Plog, *Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 6. From an anthropological perspective, the term culture is defined as “a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. This definition appears to identify all the essential elements of culture on which most scholars currently agree: patterns of thought (shared meanings that the members of a society attach to various phenomena, natural and intellectual, including religion and ideologies), patterns of behavior, artifacts (tools, pottery, houses, machines, works of art), and the culturally transmitted skills and techniques used to make the artifacts.

⁵⁷ Arles, “Spirituality and Culture,” 78-79.

⁵⁸ Clarence Scrambical, *Mission Spirituality* (Indore: Divine World Publications, 1976), 123.

⁵⁹ M. Rokeach, *The Nature of Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 1973). 161. Rokeach sees Cultural values as learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts.

⁶⁰ J. Skhakhane, “African Spirituality” in Makobane et al. (eds.), *The Church and African Culture* (Germiston: Lumko, 1995), 110.

Christian spirituality in both the global South (Africa, Latin America, and Asia) and the global North (North America and Western Europe) shows distinct theological focuses shaped by worldview, social realities, and historical encounters with colonialism and mission efforts.

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