



Research Article

Mother-Tongue Theology: Akan Christian Christological Re-interpretations

ABSTRACT

The importance of the mother tongue in the planting and growth of African Christianity has been stressed by scholars such as Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako. Bediako, for instance, states that “the ability to hear in one’s language and to express in one’s language one’s response to the message which one receives, must lie at the heart of all authentic religious encounters with the divine realm.” The paper discusses how the translation of the Bible and the use of the mother-tongue—has facilitated the production of new theological idioms by Akan Pentecostals/Charismatics in particular and Christians in general. Particularly, the paper discusses how the use of the mother-tongue has contributed to the re-interpretation of classical theological concepts such as Christology. Christ as an Ancestor and Christ as Healer-*Duyefo* is among the topics to be discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Mother-Tongue Hermeneutics, Akan, African Christology, Pentecostal-Charismatic, Translation, Gospel.

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INTRODUCTION

Lamin Sanneh in his argument on the translatability of the Christian religion notes that “Christianity, from its origins, identified itself with the need to translate out of Aramaic and Hebrew, and from that position came to exert a dual force in its historical development.”² From its origins, Christianity has taken language and culture seriously. An example from the church of the early centuries shows how it destigmatized, as well as challenged the Gentile culture in which it formed its new image. “By that stage, the vernacular character of Christianity had been established in numerous parts of the empire and beyond, with Armenians, Copts, Goths, and Ethiopians all following a version of the faith expressive of their national character.”³

Sanneh points out that the translation of the Christian gospel into local languages, especially in Africa, not only initiated a localized form of the religion but also brought about a cultural re-awakening which culminated in cultural self-understanding, vernacular pride, religious and social re-awakening, the reciprocal nature of missions, among others.⁴ Sanneh further states that the missionary initiative of translating the Bible into the vernacular languages “was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization” which is far greater than how missionaries have been portrayed as an arm of Western cultural imperialism.⁵ Translation of the Gospel into mother-tongues brought a fresh theological discourse by placing the word of God in the categories of African life and belief, thus engendering and empowering local interpretations.⁶ The Ghanaian biblical scholar, John Kwamena Ekem not only concurs with Sanneh, he also contextualizes the debate on the translatability of the Gospel in the Ghanaian context. According to Ekem, “[t]he varied mother tongues of Africa have a lot to offer by way of biblical

² Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (MaryKnoll: Orbis Books, 1989)

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

interpretation in Ghanaian/African languages as viable material for interpretation, study Bibles and commentaries.”⁷ Mother-tongue exegesis, Ekem would argue, opens the way for a dynamic encounter between the Christian Gospel and indigenous worldviews.⁸

But what is mother-tongue? Briefly defined, mother-tongue refers to one’s native language. “It is a person’s first language as compared to other languages one might learn later in life, for instance, at school.”⁹ J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, distinguishes mother-tongue from the vernacular. This distinction is important because their meanings are too often conflated.

A mother-tongue is not the same as a vernacular which is the common language of a region or group, no matter how naturally a person may be well vexed in such a language and its usage. Rather, the mother-tongue is a person’s own native and indigenous language, very much intertwined with a person’s identity; it confirms and affirms who a person is, where one comes from and one’s sense of identity.¹⁰

The mother-tongue is more than a language for communicating. It is “a repository of indigenous wisdom, knowledge, insight, science, theology and philosophy.”¹¹

It is through the translation of the Christian Gospel into mother-tongues and the hearing of the Gospel in the mother tongue that the word of God became ‘flesh’ to African Christians. The Gospel took on a whole new meaning to local hearers, as they, also, could now hear God speak to them in their own language. This prompted what has been silent in the 19th century missionary enterprise — the local, indigenous missionary initiative. Local hearers of the Bible found parallel categories within the Biblical worldview and their world. These parallels in the ancient world of the Bible and the African worldview became a major catalyst in the growth of Christianity in Africa. The stories of the works of prophets such as Wade Harris, Samson Oppong and Joseph Egyanka Appiah, among many others, are examples of Africans who, with literacy in the local languages, led massive revivals and conversions among their own people. Wade Harris, for example, is said to have baptized between 100,000 to 120,000 converts in a year, whereas the Catholic missionaries had recorded very little success in about two decades of missionary work.¹² In reference to Harris’ success, Bediako, quoting one Kwaku Haward, writes that, “[o]ne man preached the Gospel in West Africa for nine years and only converted 52. But another man preached the same Gospel just for two years and 120,000 adult West Africans believed and were baptized into Christianity.”¹³

The African initiative in the missionary enterprise generated a new Christian leadership who started teaching and nurturing the new converts. According to Elom Dovlo, “this created a situation in which new converts heard about Christianity from African evangelists and therefore the seeds of African flavor in the gospel were sewn.”¹⁴ The active participation of Africans in the evangelization process led Africans to interpret the Christian Gospel in idioms, nuances, and symbols with which they were familiar. The African preachers and hearers of the Gospel also realized the disconnect between the scientific worldview of the missionaries and the Bible. “[T]he scientific outlook of the missionary could not be reconciled with both the outlook of the world of the Bible and African religiosity as ‘ancient themes were released in the propitious setting of the vernacular Bible’.¹⁵ Thus, the ancient worldview of the Bible informed the construction of local idioms that which led to the re-interpretation of the traditional Christian concepts. The paper analyses how the traditional Western concept of Christ has been interpreted in Akan Pentecostal and Charismatic theology.¹⁶ Important to the topic under discussion are key terms such as the Akan of Ghana, incarnational, dialectical and dialogical models, which will merit some definition.

Akan of Ghana and their Concept of Salvation

Akans are the major ethnic group in Ghana. The word Akan “is a generic term for those who speak a variant of the *Twi*

⁷ John D. Kwamena Ekem “Interpreting ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ in the context of Ghanaian Mother-tongue Hermeneutics”, *Journal of African Christian Thought*, vol. 10, 2, (2007), 48.

⁸ See Ibid; . E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Current Trend in Biblical Studies in Ghana” *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, vol. 3, 4 (2012),

⁹ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics”, 577.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics”, 577. Kwame Bediako, *Religion, Culture, and Language: An Appropriation of the Intellectual Legacy of Dr. J.B. Danquah*. J.B. Danquah Memorial Lectures, Series 37, 2004 February 2014, 2004. Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, Accra, 2006.

¹² George Bond, Walton Johnson, and Sheila S. Walker, eds. *Christianity: Patterns of Religious Unity* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 9.

¹³ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 91.

¹⁴ Elom Dovlo, “African Culture and Emergent Church Forms in Ghana” *Exchange*, vol. 33, 1 (2004), 35.

¹⁵ Ibid, 34.

¹⁶ The Author acknowledges and gives credit to the *Sunsum Sores* who were the progenitors of this concept under discussion. However, in this research project, the intended focus is on the contemporary usage and understanding of Christology among Classical and neo-Pentecostal/ Charismatic churches/ministries.

language—these include the Fantis, the Ashantis, the Akims, the Akwamus, the Kwahus, and the Akuapims.”¹⁷ For a better understanding of the Akan concept of salvation, one has to understand, at least in brief, Akan cosmology or primal worldview.

“The basis of Akan society is religious, and the foundation of Akan religion is social. The whole political and social organization is inextricably interlocked with religion, and at its heart lies the *abusua*, the clan or kindred group.”¹⁸ In the Akan family system, family ties are closely kept as the social unit of father, mother and children become large. Akans are matrilineal, meaning children belong to the lineage of their mother. It is believed that the family or *abusua* derives its origins from the female line and as such inheritance is also through the female line of the *abusua*. The *abusua* not only includes the living, but also the dead. The dead, rightly the living-dead, are considered as those physically absent but spiritually present.¹⁹ This explains why one of the most important rites and ceremonies of the Akan happens at death and at veneration ceremonies to the ancestors.

An ancestor is believed to take an active interest in the family or community and his power over it is ... considerably increased as he is no longer restricted by earthly conditions. Matters affecting the family or community are thus referred to him for sanction or judgment. Therefore, he is naturally brought into the picture as a superintendent spirit who gives approval to any proposals or actions which make for the well-being of the community, and shows displeasure at anything which may tend to disrupt it.²⁰

Those who have not yet been born are also considered part of the family, as such some of the important Akan religio-cultural rites are concerned with child birth, naming ceremonies, puberty, and marriage.²¹ The Akan concept of family, therefore, considers every man and woman to belong by blood relations to a particular *abusua*.²²

Akan life is therefore very communal, with emphasis on the prosperity and success of this community life. The welfare and prosperity of the communal life bring in the vital roles played by the spirits. In the Akan spirit filled cosmology, there is the Supreme God, who is also referred to as “*Onyankopon*, *Onyame* (also spelled, *Nyame*), or *Odomankoma*. *Onyame* implies the basic idea of deity as understood in Christian theology. *Onyankopon* denotes the supremacy of God, the One Greater *Nyame*. Next to *Onyame* is *Asase Yaa*, the earth goddess, who is responsible for fertility. *Asase Yaa*, in some sense, is also the “custodian of morality and social decorum, the traditional ethical code.”²³

In addition to *Asase Yaa*, there is a host of divinities or (gods), capricious spirits entities, believed to be the children of God. These nature spirits are of three categories: state gods, family or clan gods, and gods of the medicine man...The Akan esteem the Supreme Being and the ancestors far above the *abosom* (gods) and amulets. Attitudes to the latter depend upon their success, and vary from healthy respect to sneering contempt and rejection.²⁴

In a cosmology, where the peaceful, prosperous, and successful existence of humanity depends very much on their good relationship to the benevolent spirits, maintaining “the balance of power [or the]...tilting of cosmic power for one’s own benefit or for the benefit of his or her community” is very crucial.²⁵

The search for salvation among the Akan, therefore is mainly to seek abundance of life from these benevolent spirits and protection from malevolent spirits and their evil cohorts. The word for Akan salvation is *Nkwagye*. Inherent in this word are meanings such as *nkwa*, which is life abundant, and *gye*, which means, “to rescue, to retake, to recapture,

¹⁷ Abraham Ako Akrong, *An Akan Christian View of Salvation from the Perspective of John Calvin’s Soteriology* (PhD Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, May 1991); Here Akrong rather provides the Anglicized versions of the Akan ethnic groups. In the Akan language/s the names of the ethnic groups are Mfantse, Asante, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwahu, and Akuapem.

¹⁸ Noel Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1966), 65.

¹⁹ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Jurong: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 155.

²⁰ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Jurong: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 155.

²¹ See Robert Charles Snyder, *Akan Rites of Passage and their Reception into Christianity: A Theological Synthesis* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2003)

²² See Opoku, *West African*; Pashington Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction among the Akan of Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); J. B Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 2nd edition (Oxon: Routledge, 1968)

²³ Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, “The Nature of Continuity and Discontinuity of Ghanaian Pentecostal Concept of Salvation in African Cosmology,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5. 1 (2002), 90.

²⁴ Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi “The Nature of Continuity and Discontinuity of Ghanaian Pentecostal Concept of Salvation in African Cosmology” *CyberJournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research*, n.d. <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj10/larbi.html>, accessed 3 July 2020. N.p. Larbi, “The Nature of Continuity and Discontinuity”, 90; John D. Kwamena Ekem, *Priesthood in Context: A Study of Akan Traditional Priesthood in Dialogical relation to the Priest-Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and its implications for a relevant functional Priesthood in selected Churches among the Akan of Ghana* (Hamburg: Verlag and der Lottbek, 1994); Obeng, *Ashante Catholicism*.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 91.

to redeem, to ransom...to protect ... The term *nkwa-gye*, thereof, is pregnant with rich meaning. Among other things, it means the liberation or preservation of abundant life, or the saving of abundant life. It is the liberation and preservation of life and that goes with it".²⁶ Salvation among the Akan, from the foregoing definition has to do with concrete realities, things one can identify within day to day life. It has to do with the physical and immediate dangers that militate against individual and communal survival and enjoyment of *nkwa*. It also embodies *asomdwei* (...peace and tranquility).²⁷

The Akan primal conception of reality, specifically the conception of salvation as total wellbeing of the individual and the entire community has arguably informed Pentecostal/Charismatic theology. Even though Pentecostal/Charismatics see salvation as including the atonement, the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God, their emphasis seems to lie with what brings blessings to life in the 'here and now.' This is evident in the emphasis they place on practices such as healing, financial blessings, deliverance from, for example, spirit of drunkenness, sexual immorality, spiritual marriage, barrenness, etc.²⁸

Three Models that Frames Debates on Christ and Culture

To analyse Akan Pentecostal-Charismatic conceptions of Christ, three models that broadly frames debates on Christ and culture introduced. The attempt to explain these models is not exhaustive, nor is it to introduce them as there are many ways to examine Christ and culture debates. The attempt here is aimed at a brief categorization of paradigmatic Christ and culture perspectives that are significant to Christian mission and contextualization debates in African Christian theology. They are Incarnational, Dialectical and Dialogical models. These models are a loose application of Richard Niebhur's categorization of how Christ or the Gospel relates to culture.²⁹

The Incarnational Model

The incarnational model of Christology hinges on the argument that "the mystery of the incarnation of God in the historical Jesus Christ provides a paradigm for the incarnation of Christianity in all cultures."³⁰ There is therefore the need to find cultural specific models which elaborate who Christ is and what Christ does in the specific context in which he is proclaimed, for "the incarnation was the incarnation of the Savior of all people, of all nations and of all times."³¹ In this instance, it is important to proclaim Christ to the Akan from within the perspective of their culture. The logic of this approach is that just as the eternal Word of God became incarnate in a human culture to bring redemption to humanity and creation, God's word and the Christian faith must become 'incarnated' in human cultures and attain expression through these cultures. As Andrew Walls has pointed out, the Word of God did not just become flesh, "the Word was made human."³² Christ was thus fully appreciative of the human reality in a particular socio-cultural and historical context. In the words of Walls, he was "fully translated into the functional system of language into the fullest reaches of personality, experience, and social relationship."³³ The mystery of the incarnation, therefore, offers a Christological model for inculturation.³⁴

The Dialectical Model

The dialectical model in terms of relating the Bible to African cultures is premised on the argument that Gospel and culture are not to be equated with each other: sometimes they are opposed to each other. Thus, language such as the Gospel is from above, culture is from below, the gospel is divine, culture is human, etc., are characteristics of this model. Other words such as light for Gospel and darkness for culture are also used in support of this model. To proponents of the dialectical model, mostly from Evangelical and Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, culture should yield to the Gospel because Gospel and culture cannot be reconciled. The dialectical model draws heavily on Niebhur's Christ above culture and Christ against culture models.³⁵

The Dialogical Model

The dialogical model, on the other hand, views culture and Gospel as reconcilable and compatible. The language of dialogue is used here to mean that both culture and Gospel could blend to provide an enriched theology in the various contexts in which it is used. While Pentecostals/Charismatics are more open to the dialectical model, in other instances

²⁶ Ibid., 94.

²⁷ Ibid., 95.

²⁸ Ibid., 94-96.

²⁹ See H. Richard Niebhur, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

³⁰ Obeng, *Ashante Catholicism*, 201.

³¹ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 24

³² Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Bks, 1996), 2.

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Rosino Gibelini, *Paths of African Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 41.

³⁵ See Niebhur, *Christ and Culture*

the incarnational and dialogical models apply. For instance, Pentecostals/Charismatics in Ghana do agree with the cultural view and with practitioners of African religions that evil spirits are most often the cause of sickness, poverty, and other ailments and catastrophes; they will disagree, however, with the theological concept of Christ as an African Ancestor. They associate the ancestors with demons and curses. Pentecostals/Charismatics therefore pick and choose paradigms or models which speak to an immediate or specific situation. At other times, they may object to the use of such paradigms.

African Christology—Christ as an African Ancestor and Healer

Using an incarnational approach to Christology, one may argue that because Christ is or should become relevant to the needs and expressions of all human cultures, Christ in this case should meet the spiritual expectations and needs of Africans. It is in this context that many African scholars such as Kwame Bediako, Justin Ukpong, Charles Nyamiti, John S. Pobee, among others, propose Christ as an African Ancestor. Bediako writes:

Since salvation in the traditional African world involves a certain view of the realm of spirit-power and its effects upon the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence, our reflection about Christ must speak to the questions posed by such a world-view. The needs of the African world require a view of Christ that meets those needs. And so who Jesus is in the African spiritual universe must not be separated from what he does and can do in that world. The way in which Jesus relates to the importance and function of the ‘spirit fathers’ or ancestors is crucial.³⁶

In the context of this argument, Christ who died and rose from the death on the third day does not only sit with the Father, but with the ancestors, so to speak. In the traditional Akan context, both good and evil are believed to come from the spiritual realm, where the ancestors reside. The understanding here is that, with Jesus’ death and victory over death, Jesus can be classified as an African Ancestor par excellence. In a very justifiable way, it can be argued that Jesus is an ancestor, but one who has gone to the world of the spirits/ancestors as “Lord over them in the same way that he is Lord over us. He is Lord over the living and the dead, and over the ‘living dead’, as ancestors are called. He is supreme over all gods and authorities in the realm of [the] spirit, summing up in himself all their powers and cancelling any terrorizing influence they might be assumed to have upon us.”³⁷

Another African scholar, Benezet Bujo, advanced his Christological argument in a way not very different from Bediako’s. Bujo portrays Christ as a “Proto-Ancestor”: who by analogy is the Ancestor or elder whose suffering and misfortune, success and joys are recorded as “autobiographies” which are handed down to the descendants. As Proto-Ancestor... Christ is the source of life, happiness, genealogy and the center to which he draws everything and every person as well.³⁸ Christ consecrates humanity through the cross and restores dignity to all, vigorously defending the rights of the weak, of women, of children and identifying with “outcasts and sinners.”³⁹ Christ the ‘Proto-Ancestor’ is the one from whom all life-force flows, as such Africans can retain their cultural categories and still be Christian.⁴⁰ The significance of relating Christ to the traditional understanding of Africans about the ancestors is to create parallels whereby the gospel speaks to the African mind and context. The Christian gospel in an African environment needs to portray Christ as Savior, but as a savior who saves and protects us from malevolent spirits which pervade the traditional worldview.

Difficulties with Christ as Ancestor Imagery

However significant and convincing as this argument may be, there are difficulties associated with this paradigm. Before discussing them, it must be admitted that these are just paradigms, and paradigms as in any human endeavor are not perfect. Paradigms may seem convincing in academic books, but in real life they become very difficult to implement. The first difficulty with this incarnational model/paradigm of Christ’s ancestral role is that of ancestors’ strong connection with specific families. In the Akan concept, ancestors relate to specific clans or families and so their functions and significance relate to members who share a common ancestry. The question, then, is: how does one relate to Jesus who does not belong to one’s ethnicity? In addition, how does Christ influence one’s life when he does not come from one’s ethnicity? Christ as an Ancestor therefore is a theological academic construct which is not applicable in real Christian life in Ghana, especially among Classical and the neo-Pentecostals/Charismatics.

To many Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians, including those in mainline churches, the idea of Christ as an ancestor is a return to the old ways from which the gospel came to liberate us. Pentecostals/Charismatic attitude to the primal worldview is ambivalent. “In one vein, they tend to represent continuity with the primal culture and

³⁶ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁸ See Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006)

³⁹ See *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Obeng, *Ashanti Catholicism*, 202.

religion; in another vein they tend to oppose the same.”⁴¹ In this sense, Pentecostal/Charismatics are both dialectical and dialogical. By being dialectical, they claim the Gospel is and should be above culture and therefore culture should yield to the Gospel. By being dialogical, they agree that culture is compatible (not in all instances though) with the Gospel and therefore both could blend and provide an enriched contextual theology. One way in which they agree that Gospel and culture meet is the belief that evil spirits abound and they (evil spirits) can truncate success in one’s life. For many Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians, their call is ultimately hinged on liberating their cultures and its people from demonic clutches of the ancestors, the gods and evil spirits.

Pentecostals/Charismatics would prefer to see Christ from the perspective of the Bible rather from the perspective of the primal worldview or culture. This is true for two reasons. First, there is their literal reading of Scripture in which “they bring biblical [and not cultural] perspectives to bear on all salvific concerns of African worldview by demonstrating that the Gospel provides alternative and the ‘best’ response to all such questions, hence their stubborn insistence on following the Bible.”⁴² In supporting a Pentecostal/Charismatic dialectical approach to the understanding of the relationship between Bible and culture, Ukpong notes that “[t]he Independent African Churches... remain conservative in believing that the Bible is universal and not subject to cultural interpretations. Thus, such accompaniments to worship as hand clapping and dancing are seen as biblical, not cultural.”⁴³

Pentecostals/Charismatics would therefore not start their Christological construction with the primal background. Christ is not a protector, healer, deliver because he is playing the role of the ancestors but because the Scriptures portray him to be the only Son of God endowed with power over all principalities, demons and authorities in both the physical and spiritual realm. Jesus Christ in Pentecostal/Charismatic thought reigns supreme over the culture of ancestors, and any association with the ancestors is considered demonic. In the prayers of Afua Kuma, which is widely used in particularly the CoP, she says:

Our ancestors did not know Onyankopon, the Great God
they served lesser gods and spirits and became tired.
But as for us, we have seen holy men and prophets.
We have gone to angels
how Jehovah helped us reach this place.
Jehovah has helped us come this far;
With gratitude we come before Jesus,
the One who gives everlasting life.⁴⁴

In this Author’s view, this prayer portrays how Afua Kuma perceives the Ancestors—as those who did not know God, in this case the Father of Jesus. The first line of this prayer is seen as contrary to Akan belief, because it is believed that the ancestors knew God. This must however be understood in the context of Pentecostal/Charismatic theology where born again, in Akan Pentecostal-Charismatic context entails a “break with the past” and the rejection of local cultures and religions.⁴⁵ “Being born-again is perceived as a radical rupture not only from one’s personal sinful past, but also from the wider family and village of origin.”⁴⁶

In this approach, reference is made to the Christian God and not the god that the ancestors knew and worshipped.⁴⁷

In Ghanaian Pentecostal/Charismatic theology, the ancestors are considered as demonic doorways through which curses enter and operate through a family. Here it is believed that sins committed by one’s ancestors can have a negative influence on the family line. Ailments like recurrent miscarriages, chronic and hereditary diseases such as diabetes, unnatural death like suicide, and financial difficulties are associated with ancestral/generational curse which has to be broken before an individual, the family, and even the nation will be free. Robert Ampiah-Kwofi, a very popular Pentecostal/Charismatic preacher in Ghana, relates the curse of the ancestors to the many problems that confront the

⁴¹ Cephas Omenyo, “Charismatic Churches in Ghana and Contextualization” *Exchange*, vol. 31, 3 (2002), 265-66.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴³ “Interpreting the Bible in African Contexts” Minutes of the Glasgow Consultation held on 13th-17th August 1994 at Scotus College, Bearsden, Glasgow, Scotland, 16-17, in “Gospel and Culture” a paper written by Dr. Julius Gathogo, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow. University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, 23/01/2009,5.

⁴⁴ Afua Kuma, in Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 10.

⁴⁵ See Birgit Meyer “‘Make a Complete Break with Past’”: Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1998), 316-349; Birgit Meyer, “Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 33. (2004), 447-74.

⁴⁶ Meyer, “Christianity in Africa” 457.

⁴⁷ This point shows how conservative Ghanaian/African Pentecostals/Charismatics are, and how ‘particular’ they are in proclaiming Jesus Christ alone as the Son of the One true God. Many of them will object to arguments that Hindus, Muslims and practitioners of African religions worship the same God, but through different ways. The historic mainline denominations seem more liberal than the Pentecostal/Charismatics. Several clashes among some Pentecostal/Charismatic and Muslims and practitioners of African religions confirm this assertion.

Ghanaian economy. According to him, “our...ancestry and culture were steeped in idolatry and heathenism.’ These curses are causing Ghana’s evils and must be broken.”⁴⁸ Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians in Ghana will generally oppose indigenous religious doctrines and practices because they are deemed demonic but their preoccupation with supposed demonic powers in Akan indigenous religion shows the extent to which these two religious forms are inter-related.⁴⁹ In spite of the concern with traditional religion, the concept of Christ as an ancestor will persist, at least in the realm of African academic theology for some time to come, in so far as Pentecostal-Charismatics are concerned. However, as some Pentecostal/Charismatic pastors are now getting theological training in acclaimed local and foreign universities and seminaries, they may add their own voice to this Christ and culture debate.

Christ as Healer Imagery

The following is a further attempt to discuss how the mother-tongue, has assisted Pentecostals/Charismatics in their re-interpretation and reconstruction of Christology in Ghana. It has to be noted that the local idioms and images used for Christ are not found only among Pentecostals/Charismatics, but among Ghanaian Christians in general. In saying this, it points out that the mainline denominations have not been as active as the Pentecostal/Charismatics in this area under discussion. The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, for instance, is credited with having “a heritage of indigenous Christian tradition in two of its major languages, [Twi & Ga, but] that heritage has not been built upon...”⁵⁰ However, due to the ‘Pentecostalization’ of the historic mainline churches, there is very little difference now. Mainline denominations have been influenced to a very large extent by Pentecostalism in Ghana and are now more open to language, idioms and practices which portray Christ as healer of the sick, and deliverer of those possessed by demons, among others.

The Christological concepts the Author intends to discuss are a combination of the prayers by Madam Afua Kuma and what Pentecostals/Charismatics, in particular, and Ghanaian Christians in general believe defines who Christ is. Christiana Afua Gyan is an illiterate Ghanaian Pentecostal whose oral expressions of prayers and praises “reflects a more grassroots understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Afua Kuma’s prayers in the Twi language, her mother tongue, express Sanneh’s assertion that “God was not disdainful of Africans as to be incommunicable in their languages,” and, therefore, the mother tongue /local languages are “essential vehicles of religious transition”⁵¹. The Gospel is translatable into the mother-tongues, for God speaks Twi, Swahili, Setswana, among other African languages. African languages are therefore capable of possessing a transcendental range.⁵² The use of the mother tongue and how it has facilitated the use of local images and symbols to articulate a distinctive Christology can be counted as one reason for the growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic ministries in Ghana. Africans in general understand and define Christ by what he did and said, and the New Testament account of Jesus Christ enforces this view. “Therefore [Jesus’] activity in particular, and how it impacted the sick, hungry, and outcast, became a window through which people found him relevant in their lives.”⁵³ As such Christ has been given culture specific titles and portraits which speak to what he did and said in the Bible. Having already discussed Christ as an ancestor, this work also discusses the image/title of Jesus Christ as healer. These portraits reflect Pentecostal/Charismatic understanding of Jesus in the Bible and how the same speak to issues the primal culture raises.

Christ as Healer (*Duyefoo*)

It must be noted that these reconstructions of the image of Jesus Christ have been influenced by Akan cosmology, where power for healing is believed to come from the spiritual realm. The Akan in general believe that illnesses or diseases are spiritually caused and will therefore need spiritual attention. In this Author’s experience of living in Akan communities, illnesses have always been defined as one that is caused spiritually. Persons seeking orthodox care will often include spiritual care as well, especially when such sickness or disease defies healing. Epilepsy and other forms of mental illnesses are, for example, regarded as *Sunsum yare*, spiritual sickness. Christ as *Duyefoo* then become just like the traditional healing practitioner, but this time as one who is the source of the healing itself. Afua Kuma exemplifies this in her prayers when she refers to Jesus as ‘Doctor of the sick.’ Jesus is healer because, in the New Testament, he performed signs and wonders through healing the sick. In healing, Jesus fights the devil and evil spirits by casting them out. In Africa, evil spirits would be the witches, wizards, sorcerers, that is, those with evil eyes and other malicious spirits in the spiritual world. One then understands why Afua Kuma, whose prayers represents the general Christological understanding of Ghanaian Pentecostals and Christians as a whole would refer to Jesus as one who turns Satan into a

⁴⁸ Robert Ampiah-Kwofi, quoted in Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 161.

⁴⁹ Meyer, “Christianity in Africa” 457.

⁵⁰ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 61.

⁵¹ Darren J. N. Middleton, “Jesus of Nazareth in Ghana’s Deep Forest: The Africanization of Christianity in Madam Afua Kuma’s Poetry” *Religion and the Arts*, 9, no. 1-2 (2005), 118.

⁵² See Sanneh, *Translating the Message*.

⁵³ Obeng, *Ashante Catholicism*, 203.

mouse.⁵⁴ According to Afua Kuma: “Jesus is the one who fills his basket with sickness and dumps it into the depths of the sea. He has been here already and taken sickness away. He stands on the sea with outstretched arms, while the devil walks the forest in agony.”⁵⁵ Afua Kuma continues, “[w]hen we meet Jesus, he had tied together both sickness and death and cast them into the sea. This is the reason why the nations rejoice and people are happy.”⁵⁶

Exemplifying Pentecostal/Charismatic understanding of Jesus, Afua Kuma portrays how Christ is conceived and met concretely in the daily lives of the African. The salvific concerns of Pentecostals/Charismatics, is not grounded in the promise of new life in the ‘here after’ but rather in the ‘here and now.’ Even though they believe and preach a future eschatology as well, their emphasis lies in seeing Jesus Christ as one who has power to meet concerns of the present life. Afua Kuma’s prayers do not reflect the petition of an individual but that of Pentecostals/Charismatic Christianity in particular. This Christology is as a result of reading or listening to and understanding the Christian gospel in the mother tongue.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel in the Mother-tongue fostered and promoted a local/indigenized understanding of the work and person of Christ. Mother-tongue hermeneutics practically bridged the gap between traditional religious experiences and Christianity. In their response to the concerns and questions raised by the primal world-view, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians in particular, have formulated theologies that support such primary experiences as healing and deliverance, prosperity gospel, miracles, prophesying, and dream interpretation. Examining Afua Kuma’s prayers and others that exist in Pentecostal/Charismatic theology, one can see words and titles which resonate local idioms, nuances and needs of a people. These prayers which include titles for Jesus Christ portray the understanding of a community which sees Jesus as one capable of providing their basic needs like food, clothing, shelter and health. In Jesus Christ, they see one who has the powers to solve the many problems that continue to plague them in their daily lives.⁵⁷

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⁵⁴ See Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 8-9, and Middleton, “Jesus of Nazareth” 127-128.

⁵⁵ Darren J. N. Middleton, “Jesus of Nazareth in Ghana’s Deep Forest: The Africanization of Christianity in Madam Afua Kuma’s Poetry” *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 9, 1-2 (2005),128.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See Middleton, “Jesus of Nazareth,” 129.

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