



# Service and Care in the Johannine and Akan Conceptual Schemas: Inculturation Hermeneutics

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## ABSTRACT

The Johannine and Akan ideologies pertaining to communal existence place significant emphasis on the cultivation of values such as reciprocal service and care. Nevertheless, upon careful examination of the Akan conceptual framework, it becomes apparent that these principles are espoused and upheld due to Akan belief in the indispensable nature of interdependence of human beings. This belief stems from their recognition of the inherent insufficiency of the human being which consequently gives rise to imperfect expressions of service and nurturing. Thus, the study aims to provide a biblical response to these challenges by employing Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics. This approach presents a framework for interpretation that enables an exploration of sociocultural matters in a manner that not only enhances the comprehension of the biblical text but also permits the text to function as a discerning evaluation of the Akan culture and propose possible remedies for its sociocultural challenges. The findings reveal that the Akan concepts foster a form of reciprocal care that is propelled by individual motivations and also service that is incentivised by rewards. Consequently, this paper proposes that the Akan believers must emulate the servanthood of Jesus and see reciprocal care as a response to divine instruction. This pursuit should be undertaken with the intention of fostering a sense of familial unity, rather than with the anticipation of receiving equivalent treatment in return. This article makes a valuable contribution to the field of African Biblical Hermeneutics and the ongoing discourse surrounding the integration of the New Testament into the African cultural framework.

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## INTRODUCTION

A critical study of the Johannine and Akan community ideations reveals some cultural affinities between both, that is, the emphasis on collectivism and its concomitant appreciation of collectivistic values such as care and service.<sup>1</sup> However, an academic investigation of the Akan concepts exposes the lacunae in the theoretical values and what exists in practice. For instance, the Akan understanding of service and care is predicated on their anthropological view that theomorphic (human) beings require interdependence for their well-being.<sup>2</sup> This often culminates in the demonstration of values driven by personal interests. For Akan Christians, this sociocultural malady necessitates a theological remedy. John's Gospel is crucial for this purpose because one of the goals of

<sup>1</sup> This article presents a reworked version of aspects of my PhD-dissertation, titled, 'The Concept of Community in the Johannine Gospel,' submitted in the Department of New Testament and Related Literature, University of Pretoria, and supervised by Prof. Dr. Ernest van Eck.

<sup>2</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 45.

its emphasis on the community theme is to create a believing community that replicates the divine community, thereby becoming the remedy for such sociocultural maladies.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, this study employs Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics to engage the two contexts. Ukpong defines inculturation as a dynamic interaction between the biblical text and a specific contemporary sociocultural matter, wherein the gospel message functions as a form of cultural criticism whilst the culture enhances the understanding of the text.<sup>4</sup> To examine the cultural values in the two sociocultural milieus, the article extrapolates the Akan concepts from their proverbial lore and examines relevant narratives in the book of John to establish John's "gospel message" about care and service. Then, it engages the two through inculturation hermeneutics to explore how the Akan concepts enlarge the understanding of the text, and John critiques the interpreter's culture to propose potential solutions for the Akan cultural maladies.

Thus, the study is split into three parts. The first part is an analysis of service and care in John. The second part analyses 'service' and 'care' in the Akan thought, and the last part takes a look at a conversation between the two cultures.

### Service in John

The character of service that is redolent of a believing community can be gleaned from the exemplary lifestyle of Jesus in the foot-washing narrative, where he epitomises and redefines service and calls on the believing community to emulate his lifestyle (cf. Jn 13:3–17). In the symbolic act of foot-washing, Jesus establishes the pillars on which the future fellowship of the believing community as the church in the world could rest.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the activity and the perlocutionary force of the illocutionary act it prompted, serve reciprocal service in God's community.

To fully comprehend the significance of the symbolic gesture, it is crucial to carefully consider the narrative context. In the Gospel, the author presents Jesus' awareness of his impending departure to the Father as the driving force behind his subsequent actions (cf. Jn 13:4–5). Recognising the finite nature of his temporal existence, Jesus formulates guidelines for communal living through his teachings and actions.<sup>6</sup> In this narrative, he demonstrates through his actions and words the nature of service that is reminiscent of the believing community. He stood from the dining table, removed his outer garment, fastened a towel around his waist, and proceeded to fill a basin with water to cleanse and dry his disciples' feet (Jn 13:4–5). Peter, being the first individual chosen by Jesus for the foot-washing ritual, considering the cultural implications associated with foot-washing, initially resisted by raising inquiries regarding the underlying intention behind this action. Historically, this act was typically performed by servants.<sup>7</sup> It is important to acknowledge that whilst Gentile servants were primarily responsible for the practice of foot-washing, there were instances where wives and children also engaged in this activity.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the current situation differs significantly as there is a lack of literary evidence in Jewish or Greco-Roman sources indicating that superiors engaged in the act of washing the feet of those of lower social status.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Harris asserts that only the expression of the deepest love would warrant the performance of the most humiliating acts of service.<sup>10</sup>

The character of this love-motivated service is apparent in the sequence of events leading to the act of foot-washing (Jn 13:4–5). Through the act of removing his outer garment and fastening a towel around his waist, Jesus displays humility to engage in a task considered menial.<sup>11</sup> In addition, some Johannine scholars argue that the expressions "lay aside" and "take up" bear resemblance to the words spoken by Jesus in the account of the

<sup>3</sup> Godibert K. Gharbin and Ernest van Eck, "Johannine Prologue: A Hermeneutical Key to the Community Theme," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (2022): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2621>.

<sup>4</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 91 (1995): 6.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids-Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 458.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 458.

<sup>7</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 402; Murray J. Harris, *John: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 243.

<sup>8</sup> Harris, *John*, 243.

<sup>9</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 405.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, *John*, 243.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 404; Harris, *John*, 243.

Good Shepherd (Jn 10:17–18).<sup>12</sup> If so, John ties the foot-washing to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, painting a portrait of sacrificial service.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the act of foot-washing serves to reinforce the aforementioned point. Through this action, Jesus achieves something that the disciples had no prior historical precedent for, thus reversing the role.<sup>14</sup> To the disciples, executing any act of service to a master is an obligation.<sup>15</sup> However, it excluded dealing with the feet since that was too degrading for a free person.<sup>16</sup> It explains Peter's initial resistance (Jn 13:6). The Greek construction clarifies the force of the implication of the decision to wash the feet of Peter and its concomitant astonishment. By juxtaposing the Greek emphatic pronoun *σύ το μου* and commencing the sentence with *Κύριε* and ending with *πόδας*, the narrative indicates indignant emphasis: Jesus, their Lord and master is performing what the society classified as ignominious for even disciples to do for their masters.<sup>17</sup> The narrative later affirms the humility demonstrated by Jesus in his appropriation of the servile act for the disciples through the inversion of the order of *κύριος* and *διδάσκαλος* (cf. Jn 13:13–14). As Harris correctly notes, it highlights the humility of the *κύριος* in acting as a *δοῦλος* in the foot-washing.<sup>18</sup>

The primary objective behind the inversion of the order of *κύριος* and *διδάσκαλος* is to signify the perlocutionary impact of the servile action on the communal existence of the disciples. This inversion establishes a paradigm that will shape the future interpersonal relationships among the disciples and subsequent members of the believing community (Jn 13:14–15). The culture considered it honourable for leaders to motivate followers through the virtues they epitomised.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the imports of *ὑπόδειγμα* and *καθὼς* in the narrative suggest that Jesus does that and even more. The Greek term *ὑπόδειγμα* refers to a pattern or an example.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, several Second Temple texts and Greco-Roman writings associate the word with virtues.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, Jesus, through the foot-washing act, motivates the disciples to demonstrate virtues worthy of their calling by his example. The Greek conjunction “*καθὼς*” serves to establish a correlation between the pattern and its influential impact on the disciples. It signifies not only similarity and dedication to a prescribed norm but also the foundation upon which discipleship is built and the origin from which it derives its potency.<sup>22</sup>

In this narrative, what Jesus models and motivates the community to imitate through the performance of the menial task is humility for service.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the command to imitate his example is not to wash the feet of one another as a required act of devotion but to emulate the servanthood of Jesus through humility, mutual service and renouncing every form of power game in the believing community.<sup>24</sup> Jesus demands that orthodoxy beget orthopraxy or that orthopraxy accompany orthodoxy concomitantly.<sup>25</sup>

## Caring in the Gospel

John distinguishes between pastoral and reciprocal communal care. Pastoral care requires leaders in a believing community to support and guide their followers whilst the latter refers to members' responsibility to one other.

### Pastoral Care

In John's epilogue, the encounter between the resurrected Jesus and his friends offers a teachable moment for an informed understanding of the Johannine concept of pastoral care.<sup>26</sup> Following a night of unsuccessful fishing, Jesus instructs his disciples to gather a significant quantity of fish. Subsequently, he invites them to join him for breakfast (Jn 21:3–12) and engages in a dialogue with Peter, posing slightly different inquiries on three

<sup>12</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 458; Charles H. Talbert, *John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, rev. ed. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 2005), 199.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 405.

<sup>14</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 405; Harris, *John*, 243.

<sup>15</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 405.

<sup>16</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 911.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Harris, *John*, 243; Köstenberger, *John*, 405.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *John*, 245.

<sup>19</sup> Keener, *Gospel of John*, 904.

<sup>20</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 405; Harris, *John*, 245.

<sup>21</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 405.

<sup>22</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 463.

<sup>23</sup> Harris, *John*, 245; Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 462.

<sup>24</sup> Harris, *John*, 245.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Harris, *John*, 245.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Jn 21:1–17; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids-Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 678; Talbert, *John*, 272.

separate occasions (Jn 21:15–17). The Greek construction of the initial inquiry (*ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων;*) has elicited two primary perspectives. According to scholarly consensus, the phrase “more than these” in the Gospel narrative is understood to refer to the disciples as indicated by Peter’s claim of a greater loyal love for Jesus compared to his companions before the crucifixion (Jn 21:15).<sup>27</sup> For these scholars, Jesus is asking if Peter still stands by his confession considering the present action – fishing. Moreover, it has been argued by certain scholars that Jesus may have considered Peter’s occupation when he posed the question.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to consider the potential connection between the question and the emphasis on prioritising Christ over material sustenance, as exemplified in the metaphor of the Bread of Life. This connection is noteworthy due to the chronological sequence of events, with the breakfast preceding the questions.<sup>29</sup>

The repeated questioning of Peter’s love for Jesus by Jesus himself is a topic of inquiry. There exist two potential reasons for this. The first is the act of betrayal committed by Peter and the second is the significance of love within the subsequent task assigned to him after his reinstatement. The repetition of the question can be attributed, in part, to the betrayal of Peter.<sup>30</sup> Peter’s act of betraying Jesus on three separate occasions necessitates that his subsequent restoration be commensurate with the frequency at which he exhibited such perfidious behaviour.<sup>31</sup> Primarily, it is crucial to note that the reinstatement of Peter, accompanied by the corresponding charge, provides a basis for inferring that the question was essential due to the entrusted responsibility bestowed upon Peter in relation to the believing community.<sup>32</sup>

To give the charge its proper context, Jesus employs the metaphor of the imagery of a shepherd which is one of the most recurring portraits of the care of the church.<sup>33</sup> The metaphorical shepherd is prevalent in both the Old and New Testaments. The concept can be traced to the depiction of God as the shepherd of his people. Given that it originates from God, the Old Testament establishes a relationship between devotion to God, the source, and the care for his flock (Ezr 34; Jer 3:15). It explains why John portrays only Jesus, the incarnate Word, as the Good and Chief Shepherd (cf. Jn 10:11–18).<sup>34</sup> Consequently, the utilisation of this imagery serves as a means to invoke John 10, to direct attention towards a concept that mirrors the care and concern exhibited by the Good Shepherd towards the believing community (cf. Jn 10:11–18). It elucidates the inquiries posed by Jesus to Peter prior to entrusting him with certain duties, given that their execution must flow from his love for the Lord.<sup>35</sup>

As a natural consequence of his love for Jesus, Peter must demonstrate pastoral care for the community. To provide elucidations, Jesus employs the verbs βόσκω (to feed) and ποιμαίνω (to shepherd) because they collectively embody the comprehensive nature of the undertaking.<sup>36</sup> According to Carson, the emphasis of defining the ministry lies in the utilisation of verbs rather than nouns, highlighting the act of working rather than holding an office.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the notion of Peter’s ascension to pastoral supremacy as advocated by certain scholars based on this account, is founded upon questionable presuppositions.<sup>38</sup> Similar to the other disciples Peter is also an undershepherd of Jesus.<sup>39</sup> The verb βόσκω signifies the responsibility to feed the flock.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the role encompasses a comprehensive range of duties including the tasks of directing and safeguarding the flock, as indicated by the verb ποιμαίνω, associated with shepherding.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the two verbs are purposefully combined to stress the all-inclusive care of a shepherd required from Peter and pastoral care.<sup>42</sup> Performing the functions of a shepherd, just like Jesus epitomised, is a call to utter self-sacrifice and potential death, given that the work of the Chief Shepherd, the model for Johannine pastoral care, culminated in sacrificing his life for the flock (Jn 10:11, 15; Jn 21:18–19).

<sup>27</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 597; Carson, *John*, 675–676.

<sup>28</sup> Talbert, *John*, 271; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1236; Harris, *John*, 343.

<sup>29</sup> Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1236.

<sup>30</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 595; Harris, *John*, 343.

<sup>31</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 665; Köstenberger, *John*, 595.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Jn 21:15–17; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1237; Köstenberger, *John*, 596.

<sup>33</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 666.

<sup>34</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 666.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Carson, *John*, 678; Harris, *John*, 343.

<sup>36</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 597.

<sup>37</sup> Carson, *John*, 678.

<sup>38</sup> See Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 666; Harris, *John*, 343; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1237.

<sup>39</sup> Carson, *John*, 678–679.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, *John*, 343; Köstenberger, *John*, 597.

<sup>41</sup> Harris, *John*, 343; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1237.

<sup>42</sup> Harris, *John*, 343; Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 666.

## Reciprocal Care in John

The Johannine narrative explores the imperative for individuals within the believing community to demonstrate mutual care. This phenomenon can be approached either through an analysis of the new relationship formed at the base of Jesus' cross or by exploring the interconnectedness between this relationship and other communalistic principles in John.

John employs what transpires at the foot of the cross, which depicts profound care, to establish the new framework of interpersonal relationships that must characterise the believing community.<sup>43</sup> Within the crucifixion scene, Jesus establishes a maternal bond between Mary and the beloved disciple, designating the beloved disciple as Mary's caretaker and reciprocally ascribing the role of a mother to Mary (Jn 19:25–27). The beloved disciple responded to Jesus' words by bringing Mary to his (the disciple's) residence (Jn 19:27). Jesus' words and the disciple's response have been viewed as evidence of the disciple's obligation to take care of her.<sup>44</sup> It is pertinent to note that the import of the actions portrayed in the narrative, which involve caring for one another, applies to the believing community.<sup>45</sup> This implies that what transpired here depicted reciprocal care as one of the values that Jesus requires from the believing community. It also reveals the portrait of care redolent of a community of God.

An alternative approach to examining the responsibility of community members towards one another involves evaluating the manifestation of communalistic values, which ultimately leads to reciprocal care within the divine community. The existing correlation between pastoral care, love and service, highlights the fact that displaying care for members of a community is not a standalone value, but rather a concept that is intricately interwoven. John establishes a correlation between the aforementioned communal values, placing notable emphasis on the principles of communalism, unity, reciprocal love and service (cf. Jn 13:3–17; Jn 17:11–26). As a result, the establishment of a cohesive and compassionate community that exemplifies reciprocal support is impossible without the presence of mutual care which is required by the divine model and the imperative to imitate these communal principles (cf. Jn 13:3–17; Jn 17:11–26).

In the first place, the fundamental basis of the divine community centres around the principle of mutual care. Borchert affirms that community and unity are two harmonious aspects of God.<sup>46</sup> He clarifies that this denotes the existence of God in the form of a community. The prologue provides clarification to warrant the delineation of this union as a community. It does so by highlighting that the distinct ontological coequals do not exist in isolation but rather exhibit community and unity through their coeternity and intimate union or communion.<sup>47</sup> The depiction of the community which can be attributed to both the divine nature of God and the shared values embraced by the community members exhibits a strong sense of mutual care and support among its members.

Furthermore, a comprehensive examination of the communalistic principles depicted in John reveals a profound interconnection between mutual affection and care. The Gospel author asserts the mutual exchange of love within the everlasting bond between the Father and the Son, signifying that the Son enjoys intimacy and communion with the Father.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the narrative effectively establishes the Father as the primary originator of love and highlights how Jesus mirrors this paternal love to the community of believers (cf. Jn 15:9).<sup>49</sup> Within the eternal community, love serves as the impetus for the act of bestowing and revealing the Father's works to the Son (Jn 5:19–20; Jn 13:3; Jn 17). Within the framework of the believing community, Jesus exhibits love through the act of granting the disciples an elevated status to warrant the disclosure of what he receives from the Father and the ultimate sacrifice of laying down his life for his companions (Jn 15:13; Jn 15:15; Jn 17:26). He portrays this affection as an exemplar to be emulated and emphasises the importance of a reciprocal display within the community of believers (cf. Jn 13:34; Jn 15:9, 12, 17). Based on its inherent nature, the reader can deduce that the concept of reciprocal care is intrinsic to the love command; making love-motivated sacrifices for people is proof of profound care. Furthermore, Jesus, who serves as an exemplar of love, designates himself with a title that conveys a sense of nurturing and concern: the Good Shepherd (cf. Jn

<sup>43</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 613; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1145.

<sup>44</sup> Harris, *John*, 316; Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 613.

<sup>45</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 613; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1145.

<sup>46</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, The New American Commentary*, vol. 25 (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1996), 106.

<sup>47</sup> Borchert, *John 12-21*, 103–106; Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 34; Harris, *John*, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Borchert, *John 12-21*, 103; Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies*, 34; Gharbin and Van Eck, *The Johannine Prologue*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 519.

10:11–18).<sup>50</sup> He additionally interprets his sacrificial love within the framework of the comprehensive care provided by the Good Shepherd, thereby establishing an inseparable connection between care and the profound love that he expects the community to imitate (cf. Jn 10:11–18).

Furthermore, the narrative establishes a connection between reciprocal service and mutual care by emphasising the role of love. There are two justifications for the assertion that love serves as the cohesive force for these communalistic principles: the depiction of the exemplar and the directive to reciprocate what Jesus embodied. Various scholars interpret the act of Jesus laying down his garment in order to wash the feet of his disciples as a deliberate reference to the Good Shepherd narrative which serves as a metaphor for the concept of care (Jn 10:17–18).<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, this event is closely linked to the crucifixion, thereby imbuing it with the significance of sacrificial service.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the act of footwashing can be understood as a manifestation of deep affection, as it is only through love that one, particularly the divine figure, would engage in such humbling acts of service towards his or her followers.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, John asserts that the act of sacrificial service, which emanates from a place of love, serves as a model for the community to reciprocate (Jn 13:15). This makes love critical to the concept of reciprocal care in John.

### Serving and Caring in Akan Thought

The article extrapolates the Akan concepts of serving and caring from their proverbs because they are a compendium of valuable information on Akan philosophy, anthropology, and culture.<sup>54</sup> The reason is that the summaries of knowledge acquired through the practical experiences of the community are encapsulated in their aphorisms,<sup>55</sup> thereby making it impossible for any academic assessment of their culture to be done without recourse to their proverbs.<sup>56</sup> Since the Akan concepts fall within this framework, the work excavates the Akans' understanding of communal service and care from their proverbs.

Within the realm of Akan's proverbial tradition, a discernible correlation emerges between the notions of service and care. This phenomenon is apparent in the potential to derive both concepts from a shared set of proverbs. In the Akan conceptual framework, it can be argued that the act of serving is closely intertwined with the notion of caring, and reciprocally, caring is also connected to serving. The examples offered encompass the proverbs, “The left arm washes the right arm, and the right arm washes the left arm (*benkum guare nifa, na nifa guare benkum*);” “The hand goes and a hand comes’ (*nsa kɔ na nsa aba*);” and “The reason two deer walk together is that one must take the moth from the other’s eyes (*huw m’ani so ma me, nti na atwe abien nam*).”<sup>57</sup> In the following instances, two deer are observed engaging in acts of service or caregiving towards each other. Likewise, the left arm assumes the responsibility of tending to or fulfilling the needs of the left arm and conversely. Consequently, the aphorisms depict a representation of care or service.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the abovementioned proverbs. First, they reveal that the Akan conceptual framework advocates the practice of reciprocal service and care. The aforementioned instances illustrate the reciprocal nature of serving and caring, wherein an individual both bestows and receives these acts.

Moreover, they suggest that the significance of service and care in Akan philosophy is contingent upon two factors: the Akan perspective on ontological equivalence and the inherent limitations of human beings. Elements such as the “hands,” a synecdoche for human beings, and the “two deer,” a metaphorical representation of humankind, point to the ontological equality of human beings in Akan philosophy. Additionally, the projection of the inability of one hand to clean itself or a deer to remove the mote from its own eyes without the assistance of another deer serves as a continuous memorandum of human inadequacies in Akan thought.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 666.

<sup>51</sup> Talbert, *John*, 199.

<sup>52</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 405.

<sup>53</sup> Harris, *John*, 243.

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence L. Boakye, 2018, “Akan Oral Tradition as Functional Epistemology in Scholarship, Social Change, and Development in Ghana,” in *Religion and Sustainable Development: Ghanaian Perspectives*, eds. George Ossom-Batsa, Nicoletta Gatti and Rabiato Deinyo Ammah (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 2018), 27-44; Kwasi Asare Opoku, *Hearing and Keeping: Akan Proverbs*, vol. 2 (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1997), xviii.

<sup>55</sup> Boakye, *Akan Oral Tradition*, 35; Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 14-15.

<sup>56</sup> Peggy Appiah, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Ivor Agveman-Duah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans*, (Oxfordshire: Ayebia Clarke, 2007), xii.

<sup>57</sup> Opoku, *Akan Proverbs*, 17, 86; Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, 188-189.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Opoku, *Akan Proverbs*, 17; Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 37.

Consequently, the culture promotes the practice of reciprocal care or service as the panacea to these challenges. This is the import of the two abovementioned proverbs.<sup>59</sup> The inherent limitations of the human condition necessitate the establishment of a communal framework in which individuals engage in reciprocal care and service towards one another. Opoku and Gyekye elucidate that the second proverb conveys the notion that individual hands lack self-sufficiency as they are unable to cleanse themselves without the aid of the other hand.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, reciprocity plays a significant role in this context. Accordingly, the cleansing process necessitates a mutual dependence between the right hand and the left hand. In a similar vein, it can be argued that a deer relies on the assistance or attention of another individual to remove any foreign objects obstructing its vision, as noted by Opoku and Gyekye.<sup>61</sup> According to Opoku, these aphorisms suggest that the individual's development, security and survival needs are influenced by human interdependence.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, they emphasise the significance of communal values such as reciprocal care and service as essential factors for individual well-being.<sup>63</sup>

Although the main goal of these values is for community members to complement one another, individual interests ultimately shape how the Akan view care and service. These 'communalistic' acts are undergirded by personal interests. This does not imply that one cannot find genuine care and service among the Akans, but that the community members generally tie reciprocal care and service to personal benefits. The basis for this deduction can be inferred from the nature of the aforementioned proverbs.

Certain similarities between the first two proverbs exist. Employing how human hands function during bathing, the adages demonstrate how reciprocal service and care culminate in mutual helpfulness in the Akan culture. However, the relationship pertains exclusively to a "pair of hands," not any other anatomical component. The latter scenario depicts a situation in which the likelihood of reciprocity is extremely low. For instance, the head cannot reciprocate the services of the hands after washing it. However, the first scenario, which is the intent of the adage, warrants reciprocity. The two hands bathe each other because complete cleansing requires mutual care and service. Therefore, they are conditional services grounded on personal benefits, not simply a genuine concern for others.

The third adage bears a semblance to the preceding two. Additionally, it establishes a connection between two entities of equal ontological status (two deer) who possess a common interest. The depiction illustrates a representation of service that is interconnected with an individual inclination and the anticipation of mutual exchange: a deer engages in acts of service and nurturance towards another deer with the expectation of receiving similar advantages in return. The implication is that it is not common to see members be of service to people who cannot meet their needs, knowing that it would not occasion any substantial gain.

The notion that rewards or personal benefits are factors in the Akan ideation of service (and care) is corroborated by the proverb, "A slave who possesses the ability to serve inherits the possessions of their master." This proverb signifies that engaging in good service leads to reaping its associated rewards.<sup>64</sup> This discernible correlation that exists between service and rewards affirms that rewards motivate service. It also presupposes that the type of reward one envisions can even influence the service one renders.

Upon examining the concepts of service and care within the different cultural contexts, the subsequent phase involves employing inculturation hermeneutics to explore how Akan notions can contribute to the interpretation of the text whilst also considering John's role as a critique of these Akan ideas.

### **Inculturation Hermeneutics**

This section explores the use of inculturation hermeneutics as proposed by Ukpong. It focuses on how the Akan notions can contribute to a deeper comprehension of the Johannine ideations as well as the text's role in critiquing the Akan culture and proposing potential solutions for the challenges in their concepts of service and care.

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<sup>59</sup> Opoku, *Akan Proverbs*, 17; Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Opoku, *Akan Proverbs*, 17; Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 37.

<sup>61</sup> Opoku, *Akan Proverbs*, 17; Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 188.

<sup>62</sup> Opoku, *Akan Proverbs*, 11.

<sup>63</sup> Opoku, *Akan Proverbs*, 17.

<sup>64</sup> Peggy Appiah and Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Some Akan Proverbs," *New England Review* 21, no. 1 (2000): 123.

### **The Culture Enhances the Understanding of the Text**

These aphorisms demonstrate how the Akan concepts can contribute to enhancing the Johannine ideations of care and service. They reveal the necessity and benefits of the reciprocity of service and care in communal life. John does not elaborate or state the social benefits of these communalistic values. He only indicates that they are divine imperatives that the believing community must obey and characterise. However, the Akan concepts specify and demonstrate that serving and caring for one another is necessary for the survival and progress of the individual and community because human beings are not self-sufficient. Thus, the Akan believing community's preconceptions of these communal values can enrich one's understanding of the Johannine concept.

### **The Text as a Form of Cultural Criticism of the Akan Concepts**

Though the Akan's emphasis on reciprocal service and care is a means to address the inadequacy of human beings, sometimes expressing interdependence through these communal values culminates in conditional services and care because of personal interests.

As a result, John invites Akan Christians to re-evaluate their viewpoint on service in light of the paradigm that the Johannine portrayal of Jesus has established. The implementation of this model necessitates the replication of Jesus' servanthood. John establishes a connection between Jesus' example of servanthood and traits like love, sacrifice and a willingness to serve. Moreover, the Gospel establishes Jesus' love as the fundamental basis for his inclination towards selfless acts of service. Hence, this paradigm promotes the establishment of Christ's love as the fundamental basis for communal and reciprocal acts of service. Consistent with the theological perspective of John, the concept of love enables individuals within the community of believers to engage in voluntary, selfless and modest acts of service towards one another. By doing so, their conceptual scheme undergoes a transformation where the personal interest-driven mentality of reciprocal service is substituted with a mindset centred around sacrificial service without anticipating personal gains from the reciprocation of such service.

Additionally, by imitating Christ's selfless service, Akan believers, particularly leaders, can encourage other members of their community to exhibit virtues that are in line with their divine calling. Jesus adopted this novel approach to service in order to inspire his disciples and subsequent believing communities. The reversal of roles resonates with Akan Christians and makes the call to action even more perspicuous just as the proverb "A slave who possesses the ability to serve inherits the possessions of their master" makes service the responsibility of a servant.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, following Jesus' example redefines service and, thereby, creates a new concept of service wherein social status does not influence service.

Moreover, the aforementioned portrait of pastoral care demonstrates John's invitation to the Akan-believing community to examine pastoral care from the perspective of the insights derived from the interactions between Jesus and Peter. In this analysis, John presents the concept of pastoral care as a vocation characterised by love and complete selflessness. Leaders must acknowledge that the provision of pastoral care is an inherent outcome of their deep affection and devotion towards Jesus (cf. Jn 21:15–17). John establishes a connection between one's affection for Jesus and one's adherence to his commandment (Jn 14:15). Therefore, it can be argued that a fundamental requirement for individuals in pastoral positions is to have a deep affection for Jesus. This is because such a role involves carrying out the duty of nourishing and providing comprehensive care, similar to that of a shepherd. And loving Christ makes this possible. By the teachings of Jesus, therefore, Akan Christians must perceive pastoral care as a divine summons to absolute selflessness.

Finally, John redefines reciprocal care for Akan Christians. Because the latter see reciprocal care as a remedy for human insufficiency, they associate it with personal benefits. However, in John, human inadequacies are not the reason for mutual care. In John, reciprocal care is a response to Jesus' word given to the microcosmic community at the foot of the cross. This makes its demonstration a sign of obedience to the word of Jesus. Furthermore, the Johannine Jesus situates his instructions on reciprocal care in a familial context through the maternal bond he establishes between Mary and the beloved disciple, thereby making it a family obligation expected of all members of the family of God. Given that its demonstration is cast as an obedient response to divine instruction, the family members are to care for other members, whether they reciprocate or not. Thus, its adoption helps strip the Akan concept of proclivities for personal gains.

### **CONCLUSION**

Because of the cultural similarity between the Johannine and Akan concepts of service and care, and considering the flaws in the Akan concept, this article aimed to provide a biblical response to the problem. The findings

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Appiah and Appiah, "Akan Proverbs," 123.

indicate that the Akan concepts foster a form of reciprocal care that is driven by personal interests and service that is incentivised by rewards. Consequently, it is proposed that the remedy for these flaws is that the Akan community of believers must be the extension of Jesus' servanthood and see reciprocal care as a response to **divine** instruction that must be accomplished with the motive of building family-centeredness, not with the expectation of reciprocation.

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