

# THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL IN THE TALENSI EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

*This work, 'The Christian Gospel in the Talensi Experience' examines the encounter of the Talensi with the Christian Gospel and the response of the people to the gospel. The study contends that even though conflicts or challenges often crop up, indigenous Talensi Christianity is possible. The major finding of the research is that the proclamation of the Christian gospel among the Talensi often produces variant responses ranging from full embrace, to partial embrace as well as complete rejection. Whereas personal conversions sometimes result from personal convictions, tensions on the other hand result from lack of understanding of the Christian faith which sometimes opposes some of the religious practices of the people. The study recommends that the Talensi culture can be a preparation for the gospel through the adoption of its cultural forms which can enable the people to respond to Jesus as their tendana (chief priest), bakologdan (diviner or prophet) and nyaadan (healer) or tiimdan (medicine man).*

## Introduction

From the inception of Christianity, the issue of the engagement between the gospel and traditional cultures has been a continuous phenomenon. In as much as the issue was evident in the ministry of Jesus, and was also evident in the early Church period, the gospel which represents the mind of God, needed to be made relevant to people of every race as stipulated in the Great Commission. According to Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Ghanaians

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believed in God before the Good News about Jesus was brought to them, and they continue to believe in God. He contends that any translation of the Bible that has to do with belief in God should take into consideration the

people inherent knowledge about God.<sup>2</sup> This is significant in the sense that the indigenous African possesses a belief about God which cannot be disputed. What remains is for the African to embrace Jesus meaningfully and relevantly within his or her socio-cultural environment. In this sense the meaning of the gospel as revealed in the scriptures can be much relevant to the understanding of the engagement between the Christian faith and culture if the right understanding is achieved.

In this engagement, it becomes very imperative that we understand that the gospel can become an interpretative tool for culture. Ernestina Afriyie posits that 'the gospel needs to engage the religious beliefs and practices of the people so that a Christian response can be given that meets their spiritual needs'. She contends that, 'the Christian gospel is not against the African or more specifically Akan religious ideas, Akan's religiosity and spirituality. On the contrary, it can be shown that they find their fulfilment in the

gospel'.<sup>3</sup> In the view of the author, the Christian gospel is not an enemy of African culture. Rather it answers the many questions that Africans seem to have. Therefore, we can come to a self realization of our identity as Africans in the light of the gospel. This is so because, it is the gospel which reveals our true identity, that is, where we are coming from as humans, where we are now, and where we are going to from this life. Against this background, the engagement of the gospel with Talensi religion can provide the needed answers to the many questions posed by the Talensi. Which chiefly centre on who Jesus is and the meaning of life.

Susan Campbell maintains that, the Apostle Paul, in addressing the people of Athens and recorded in Act 17:16-34, 'proclaims God as creator, sustainer, ruler, father and judge, thus grounding his Christology in theology.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan E T Kuwornu Adjaottor. 'You Believe in God and Believe in God', *European Journal of Scientific Research*(Vol. No 9, Issue 19, July 12, 2014) 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ernestina Afriyie, Christ Our Perfect Sacrifice: The Odwira Festival and Christianity in Contemporary Ghana. *Journal of African Christian Thought*, (vol 17 No 1 June 2014) 27

This perspective is comprehensive, holistic and lays a solid groundwork. In her view, contemporary people are uninterested in the gospel because they perceive it to be trivial, narrow and disconnected from their lives. They seek a gospel that integrates their worldview and life experiences'. Drawing lessons from Paul's message to the Athenians, the author seeks to justify the assertion that the gospel cannot be accepted by its targeted audience if it is disconnected from their worldview and experiences. The significance of worldview in shaping a people's understanding of the issues of life is very much crucial in the transmission of the Christian gospel. Thus, the gospel cannot make any meaningful impact if it fails to take cognisance of the people's culture and experiences. People need to perceive and respond to Jesus Christ in ways that are meaningful to their own understanding, and to enable them to encounter him in their own socio-cultural milieu. According to Ekran Lamie Hennawie and Emad Azmi,

when Christianity spread in the area now known as the Arab world, it encountered a variety of local cultures such as copic, syriac and Berber as well as a widespread use of Greek in the east and Latin further west... the new faith was fairly successful in 'translating' and transporting itself across these and other cultural barriers.<sup>5</sup>

The views of the authors seek to underscore the fact that the Gospel, since its inception, has had to encounter diverse cultures. Even today it continues to encounter the different cultures of the world. Because the Gospel was revealed to humankind through culture, it presupposes that, the engagement of gospel and culture is a continuous phenomenon. Thus, no culture can 'imprison' the gospel.

In examining the position of Kwame Bediako on the significance of language in the early Christian enterprise in Africa, B.Y Quarshie asserts,

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Campbell. 'Scratching the Itch: Paul's Athenian Speech, Shaping Mission Today'. *Evangelical Review of Theology*. (Vol. 35 No. 2, April 2011), 180-181

<sup>5</sup> Ekram Lamie Hennawie and Emad Azmi Mikhail. 'The philosophy behind the Arabic Translation of the True meaning of the Gospel of the Messiah'. *Evangelical Review of Theology* (vol. 37, No 4 October 2013) 353

that through the mother –tongue scriptures, new truths are taught and learnt about Jesus Christ, as happened in the New Testament itself...mother-tongue scriptures do not only facilitate a meaningful participation in the world of the Bible, they also afford a communal study of the Bible. Those who do not speak any international language can nevertheless hear God speaking to them in their own languages as happened at Pentecost.(Acts 2:1-11) <sup>6</sup>

The position of Quarshie seems to suggest that language is the medium that enables people to understand biblical truths. Thus, language is significant for indigenous people to name Jesus by themselves and to appropriate him in their own socio-cultural environment. As people hear God speak to them directly through their mother-tongue, they come to appreciate God in his dealings with them in their own socio-cultural environment.

In the view of Kuwornu –Adjoattor, Christ is one of the most familiar terms by which Jesus is known, both in the New Testament and in subsequent Christian tradition. All the canonical Gospels apply the term to Jesus, but each has its own interesting variation in the way Jesus is presented as Christ. In reference to the, the word “Kristo” which appears 531 times in the Greek New Testament has been translated as “Kristo” <sup>7</sup>. It can be noted that the title Christ as referring to Jesus in his salvific work is understood by the Dangbwe as the source of their salvation. Thus, it is possible for each people group to appropriate Jesus within their own understanding.

### **The Talensi People**

The Talensi are a sub sect of the Frafra people group. They speak a dialect called Talni and Talen. A single person is referred to as Talenga, where as a group of such people is referred to as Tallis <sup>8</sup>. The people are made up

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<sup>6</sup> B Y Quarshie. ‘The Bible in African Christianity: Kwame Bediako and the Reshaping of an African Heritage’. *Journal of African Christian Thought* .( Vol. 14. No. 2 December 2011), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan E T Kuwornu Adjoattor. ‘The Translation of *Kristos* as *Kristo* in the Dangme Mother –Tongue Translation of the New Testament Visited’. *Journal in Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, (Vol. 5, No. 8, 2014)203-208.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Barker. *Peoples, Languages and Religion of Northern Ghana*. (Accra: Asempa Publishers / GEC. 1986) 119.

of different clans referred to as *yilzuk* who have a unique history and political structuring. These include the Nalerigu, the Tendana clans, and the Hill-Tallis. The Namoo clan is believed to have migrated from Nanlerigu, precisely from the Nayiri led by their great ancestor Musuol. When they arrived in Tongo, they found some groups of people already residing on the land. These people were the Zubeougu, Zuo, and Baare constituting the Tendana clans, as well as Wakii, Yindiri, Gorogo, Sii and Tenzuk, constituting the Hill-Tallis.

According to Talensi tradition, Musuol is believed to have come along with the chieftancy institution from Nalerigu, and as far as chieftaincy in Tongo is concerned, only members of the Namoo clan, represented by the gates of Dikpieng, Gbeogo, Puhig, Pusunamong, Tongo-Biug, Shiega and Kuoreg can ascend to the Tongorana skin. Therefore the chief of Tongo referred to as the Tongorana, is the overlord of the Talensi Traditional area. The Talensi skin is of Paramountcy status which, when it becomes vacant upon the death of the sitting *Tongorana*, is subject to the powers of the Nayiri at Nalerigu to enskin a new *Tongorana*.

The people from Zubeougu, Zuo and Baare on the other hand are represented by their various *Tendandem* (landlords) or earth priests, who though are religious officials, who offer the required sacrifices on behalf of their clans of which they are the heads and are also the custodians of the lands. Thus, as far as farming is concerned, these areas headed by the *Tendana* are supposed to cultivate crops and donate some portions to the *nayir* or the *Tongorana* annually. In the Talensi tradition, the chief has no power over the land. Land is vested in the power of the *Tendana* to administer on behalf of the clan of which he is the head. Again the various *Tendandem*, apart from their religious functions, and their headship of their clans which they represent, they also preside over marriages, agreements, funerals and other social activities within their clans.

With Tongo gaining district assembly status, and with electricity connected to the township, many have taken advantage to set up business ventures which has improved the lives of the people. These business enterprises do not serve only the indigenes of the township but also people from other parts of the region and beyond who are workers of the decentralised departments of the district assembly, and who also reside in the township and its environs.

The Talensi are located at the east of the main Tamale - Bolgatanga trunk road. Their chief town is Tongo which is also the capital of the Talensi District Assembly. The communities are characterised by lowlands and hilly sites, such as the notable Tongo hills which is a major tourist destination. Economically, the chief vocation of the people is farming, which is on subsistence basis. Crops such as millet, guinea corn, groundnuts, cowpeas, Frafra potatoes popularly called *pieha*, bambara nuts, rice and maize. Vegetable crops such as tomatoes, peppers and leafy vegetables mostly used for soups are cultivated. Other people are also engaged in hunting, fishing, and petty trading. The major marketing centre is the Tongo market called *Kaya Daa*. There are also small markets at Gorogo and Baare. The chief staple is *saabu* which is prepared from millet flour and is eaten with vegetable or okro soups.

### **The Talensi Religion**

The Talensi like all other traditional people in Africa are very religious. Samuel Atinga writing generally about the Frafra maintains that “the Frafra religion and religious practices fall within the general frame work of traditional religious practices all over Africa.”<sup>9</sup> The religion of the Talensi is informed by their worldview which is defined by their belief in the Supreme Being referred to as *Naawun* or *Wunaam*. Like all other traditional societies in Africa, the Talensi believe that *Wunaam* is the Creator of the universe and all that is in it including man, and also holds all the power. However, they also believe that even though this Supreme Being is far removed from human existence, he superintends over all human affairs. This is why, the people believe that as far as ethical standards are concerned, God's eyes are everywhere observing every human activity on earth. According to Barker, *Naawun* is believed to be “above all other gods; he knows all, sees all, and is all powerful.”<sup>10</sup> This belief in the Supreme Being is evident in some Talensi prayers of thanksgiving and petition expressed as *tete wun fara* (we give God praise), and *yin nan song te* (God will help us).

The belief of the Talensi in the existence of a Supreme Being *Wunaam*, is

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel A Atinga. *Death and Dying: A study of the Mortuary Rites of the Frafra of Northern Ghana in the light of the Christian Funeral Liturgy. An Attempt at Inculturation.* Doctoral Thesis, Katholieke University, Leuven. (unpublished). 6

<sup>10</sup> Peter Barker, *People, Languages and Religion of Northern Ghana*, 102

also underscored by the names they often give to their children as well as in their daily sayings. For instance, some children are named *Yinnbot* (God wills), *Yininteso* (whom God has given), *Yinmanna* (God has provided) and many others. Again, some day-to-day sayings such as *Wunaam nbot siem ka wotomit* (whatever God decides is what He performs), *Wunaam nan song* (God will help), *Wunaam te te biog* (God gives us tomorrow or another day).

Much as the Talensi believe in the Supreme Being, the belief in the spirits of the *Yabnam* (ancestors) forms the cardinal point of the Talensi society. This is because when a *Talenga* dies, he or she is said to have gone to the ancestors. Therefore, the ancestral cult determines every other socio-religious activity among the people such as marriages, funerals, child naming, festivals and chieftaincy. The *Yabnam* or *ancestors* are believed to be the custodians of the land and its people and their wishes determine the ethical standards and spirituality in the Talensi homeland. Compliance with their wishes and directives brings blessings such as fertility of the land, people and domestic animals, good health and peace. On the other hand, lack of compliance or disobedience incurs the wrath of the ancestors and can bring misfortune in the form of *toog* (disease), *wolog* (drought), *kom* (famine), barrenness, as well as miscarriages and death in humans and livestock.

The living descendants have some responsibilities by way of sacrifices and offerings towards their ancestors which bring *sumaahom* (peace) to them. Against this background, Fortes asserts that the ancestors “though dead and gone from the physical world of the living [are] invisible but effective, and are accessible through the special medium of religious rituals.”<sup>11</sup>

These *Yabnam* are believed to be near their living descendants and the shrines dedicated to them are often situated within the homesteads. Sacrifices are offered to them periodically in the form of *zomkuom* (four mixed with water), *pito* (local beer brewed from guinea corn) and animals such as sheep, goats, dogs and fowls. The type of sacrifice to be offered to each ancestor is often ascertained through divination. Because of their significant place in the Talensi spiritual life and thought, one cannot embark

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<sup>11</sup> Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on the Talensi Religion*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). 195

upon any enterprise without first invoking their blessings. Embarking on a journey, before any farming season, or constructing a room, one needs to consult the ancestors, in order to forestall any unforeseen misfortune of any kind.

## **Festivals**

The celebration of festivals in the Talensi homeland is informed by two reasons. Firstly, historically the festivals commemorate the founding fathers or any significant event in their history. For instance, the celebration of the *Goleb* by the Hill-Talis is historical and commemorates their victories in ancient wars. Secondly, because the Talensi are agriculturally inclined, the celebration of the *Daa* festival by the Tongo-Nayir clans as well as Zubeougu, Zuo and Baare communities is a commemoration of the ancestors and serves as a form of thanksgiving to them for providing the people with a good farming season and good harvest. It also serves as a platform to solicit the blessings of the ancestors for the coming season. Other festivals celebrated in the Talensi area include *Boaram* and *Tenglebeg*, which also commemorate the ancestors just as the *Daa* festival.

The festivals stress the obligatory cooperation required for the rituals, their imperative necessity to ensure the well being of the land and its people. Most of all they stress the commemoration of the ancestors and the homage offered to them in prayers and in sacrifices in order to enlist their

benevolence for the coming year.<sup>12</sup> Even though there are some social and economic benefits associated with Talensi festivals, the cardinal objective lies in the religious observance which are meant to cement the bond of relationship between the living descendants and their departed relatives who are their ancestors.

## **Child Naming**

Because of the strong bond that exists between the living descendants and their departed relatives, and the strong belief in the return of the ancestors in the form of newly born babies, it is imperative for Talensi parents to consult the oracle to determine which ancestor of their family or clan has been reborn. This is necessary in order to determine the name that should be

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<sup>12</sup> Fortes, *Religion, Morality and The Person*, 51



given to the child. For instance, a child maybe called *Mbalebna* which means my father has returned or *Mmalebna*, my mother has returned. Other names include, *Mbasongya* (my father has enabled or helped) or *Mbasaaya* (my father has agreed). These names, to a large extent underscore or tend to cement the relationship between the living descendants and their departed relatives.

The names that are given to the children serve as a mark of "ownership" in the sense that through the naming, the spirit of the child is dedicated to a patron ancestor who is expected to take care or protect the child's soul throughout his or her life. This is the reason why some sacrifices are often required of would be bridegrooms so as to pacify the patron ancestors of their would-be brides. Throughout the Talensi land, personal shrines dedicated to these ancestors popularly called *Shiar* can be found in every compound. Periodic offerings are made to these ancestors to ensure their continuous protection and blessing. Some Talensi, who reside outside the traditional homeland need to make time and travel home in order to offer these sacrifices and offerings to their *Shiar* (patron gods).

In the Talensi society which is a patriarchal one, the responsibility of offering the required sacrifices to the ancestors often falls on the head of the family. However, the male-child especially the firstborn also acts as priest in his family. This is because they are by tradition responsible for offering sacrifices and offerings to their late fathers and also to their *Shiar* (patron gods) to cement the bond between them. Again, it is the male children who are often initiated into the *bayaah* (sexton cult) to be responsible for all mortuary and burial rites in connection with the dead. Therefore the Talensi society places much premium on the male child who apart from his religious role, also perpetuates the family line by carrying the name and status of his father. Again, it is he who inherits the father's property when it becomes necessary, and this includes the ritual responsibilities. Against this background, the male child is given much ritual training right from infancy through participant observation and grows up to gain much experience in religious matters.

### **Death, Funeral, and Widowhood**

The idea of *kum* (death) also goes to underscore the Talensi belief in the spirit of the ancestors. This is because it is believed that death is the channel

through which the elders can be translated to the land of the ancestors. Against this background, one is required to live a responsible life, by marrying and managing his family well. As noted earlier, the belief in the spirit of the ancestors determines how death is handled in the Talensi society. Special people called the (sextons), are spiritually trained to handle death issues including the mortuary rites, grave digging and burials. Three days after the burial, divination is carried out to determine the cause of the death, which is sometimes attributed to the ancestors because of a non-compliance with their wishes.

The final funeral rites, which are often carried out mostly in the dry season are held to usher the spirits of the dead finally to their ancestral homes. Divinations are carried out to determine the *buar* (right to inheritance) and the administration of the estate of the deceased. Because the Talensi society is a patriarchal one, it is only the women who are made to undergo widowhood rites upon the death of their husbands. These rites are believed to sever the marital bond that existed between the woman and her deceased husband. This is evidenced by the widow carrying what is referred to as *dakoul nwan* (widowhood calabash), for some time until the final funeral rites are held. It is often after the final funeral rites that the woman is free to remarry either within the family or outside the family.

### **The Christian Gospel and The Talensi**

The Gospel, in the true meaning of the word, is about who Jesus Christ is, and what he means in his Person, his life as well as his work on earth and afterwards and how all these relate to humans in their various cultures. Evangelisation seeks to make Christ part of the peoples' culture (their worldview). The gospel seeks to appeal to human conscience demanding a response, therefore as individuals evaluate the options opened to them, conversion can result through a change of direction from a self life to a new life in Christ. A person who becomes converted changes his course of direction and action, and his total way of life including relationships.

The Christian Gospel as we have it today came to us within some cultural settings and it tends to encounter cultures wherever it goes. This is equally true of the Talensi, who have demonstrated varying responses since their encounter with Christianity. Christianity was first introduced into the Talensi land as far back as 1959 when the first Roman Catholic missionaries

set foot in Tongo. They made some converts, whom they baptised and administered the Eucharist to them. The missionaries took time to learn the *Talen* dialect, and they made a significant impact on the local people, causing the church to grow in numbers.

The Assemblies of God also established its presence in Tongo in 1986 when Rev. Job Tindanbil led what came to be known as the “Talensi homeland mission”. He and his team of missionaries held series of open air meetings at Baare and this resulted in the establishment of the first Assemblies of God church in the Talensi homeland. Today there are branches of the Assemblies of God Church at Gorogo, Tongo-Central and Duusi and Poose Namoogo.

With the grounds opened up for Christianity, other Churches such as the Apostolic Church, Church of Christ, and Salvation Army also came into the area. There are also, Churches of the Charismatic tradition such as the Fountain Gate Chapel, Amazing Power Church, God’s Chapel and others who have established their presence in Tongo and its environs. It is significant to note that some Talensi encountered the Christian faith with the emergence of these churches. Some others became converted outside their traditional homeland. Since it is a yearly ritual for some of the people to travel to the southern parts of the country to look for jobs, it seems to open doors of opportunity for some of them to come into contact with Christianity. It is on record that some Talensi have settled permanently in Southern Ghana and are very committed Christians and belonging to many Christian denominations.

In connection with the Talensi encounter with the Christian faith, it is significant to examine the nature of their response to the gospel. In the first place, it can be noted that, some of the people demonstrated a full embrace, abandoning their traditional religious ties and fully accepted the Christian faith. Such people can be found in the Churches today occupying leadership positions with some being pastors and other Christian workers. Examples include Rev. Tindanbil, Rev. Samuel Lawaaba, Rev Thomas Yin and others. Secondly some response could be a partial embrace whereby they accept the Christian faith but refuse to break with their traditional religious ties. This is what is often referred to in religious circles as syncretism. The reason often given by such people is that they cannot fully abandon their ancestral ties even though they desire to be Christians. The underlying reasons could be either for the fear of being disowned by their families or fear of ridicule from friends and close associates.

Thirdly, there are others who are totally opposed to the Christian faith either because of how it was presented to them or because of personal reasons which are often religious. The religious reason seems to be that some of the people, especially the youth, do not often see why they should abandon their ancestors who are their custodians and to accept an “unknown faith”. For such people, the ancestral cult is their security and they would not compromise with it.

### **Conflicts and Challenges**

The issue of conflict often arises out of disagreement over some issues. This is true as far as religion is concerned. The Talensi are used to many gods and the proclamation of Jesus as the only Lord and Saviour poses a major challenge to them. The question many Talensi often ask is, ‘will I be secured if I accept the new faith?’ Their fear is that their strong ties with their ancestors could be affected if they become Christians on the grounds that, for instance, they might not be buried among their ancestors when they die. Ancestorhood is therefore an important element of the Talensi society and is very much cherished by the people especially the elderly. In Talensi understanding, conversion to Christianity is often considered as indoctrination and a betrayal of one’s ancestors. Those who convert are regarded as ‘lost’. For the older people, Christian conversion means alienation which should be avoided, for the reason that the Christian Faith seems to demand a complete break with one’s “past” which to them is a risky adventure.

Tension often develops when the Gospel is presented and obeyed in traditional areas. The forms and structures by which Christians in different cultures express their faith vary, and this incites misunderstanding, suspicion, and antagonism. Among the Talensi, some do not want to embrace the Christian faith fully because of the conflicts which they are likely to face. Some Talensi who decide to become Christians are always afraid to declare their Christian identity openly, especially in their traditional homeland due to the possible conflicts that they are likely to face from relatives and friends.

It has been found out that the ancestral cult has a strong impact on the Talensi as it occupies a central position in the Talensi society. The Talensi look to their ancestors for necessary help, guidance, protection and

blessing. The Talensi Christian however, may consider the dependence on the ancestors as an infringement of biblical principles. Conflict therefore arises when a Talensi who is a Christian is required to offer sacrifices to his late father or ancestor in his lineage. Failure to comply means, that person may forfeit his right of inheritance or even be banished from the family or clan. Again, during funeral rites, young men are required by tradition to have their hair shaved as part of the rituals which mark their sympathy for their late fathers.

When one decides not to involve himself or herself in the ancestral rites, it is regarded as a betrayal of the traditional norms. Others on the other hand will accept the Christian faith, but will regard it as ungratefulness if they attempt to renounce their patron idols or their ancestral links. Non-Christians are normally afraid to commit themselves to the Christian faith since they would be required to abandon the performance of sacrifices to their patron idols or ancestors. The crucial questions that require answers are; what would be the fate of a Talensi Christian convert who is a first-born male child? Can he be committed to the new-found faith (Christianity) and still remain loyal to his traditional religious ties?

Another issue worth noting is polygamy. The Talensi society gives men the right to marry as many wives they so desire provided they have the resources to cater for them. They do so for the reason, that they need the women as farm hands to help in their farming operations. The Church's teaching on marriage seems to run parallel with the Talensi practice of polygamy. People in polygamous marriages may find it difficult to join the church. Talensi women seem to be very vulnerable in the society as they are denied property rights and the power of personal decision making. Against this background, women who convert to Christianity may profess their faith secretly or face divorce. The Talensi are confronted with these questions and challenges, and any conversion to Christianity is bound to have conflicts with the traditional religious beliefs and practices.

### **Salvation in Talensi Understanding**

For the Talensi, salvation refers to any form of deliverance from danger or calamity. This includes, healing from a deadly disease, deliverance from accident of any form and safety in times of childbirth. The understanding of the Talensi is based on the physical and this seems to run parallel with the

Christian understanding of a futurist event. According to K. Asamoah Gyadu, in the New Testament Jesus is the Saviour or deliverer from sin and its consequences as well as from Satan and his power. As he preached the arrival of the Kingdom of God those who repented and believed received<sup>13</sup> salvation. If the Talensi regard salvation as an idea of a physical phenomenon, then it presupposes that they might not regard salvation in terms of human sin. Therefore, the sin question does not arise in Talensi understanding of salvation.

### **The Talensi Religion as *Prepraetio Evangelica* (“Preparation for the Gospel”)**

John Mbiti has argued that African religious background is not a rotten heap of superstition, taboos and magic as has been the perception of the earth Christian missionaries to Africa. Rather, it has a great deal of value in it, and that this rich and valuable heritage, can enrich Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Idowu also believes that African oral traditions “constitute the scriptures as well as breviaries of African Traditional Religion... they are valued authentic media of religious truths.”<sup>15</sup>

As far as the Talensi is concerned, we need to identify what constitutes the valuable preparation for the gospel and what is not. In line with this, Kwame Bediako has observed that, the positive evaluation of the pre-Christian tradition, and an attempt to derive insights from it for the declaration of Christian convictions, need not imply a theological syncretism.<sup>16</sup> Like all African societies, the Talensi religion and social life lay emphasis on communal welfare values, concerns and kingship. Based on this, the idea of the church as a community can become very relevant to the Talensi as a place of refuge and meeting their felt needs.

On the basis of this, Fortes, in examining the festivals of the Talensi observes that, ‘they serve to affirm the belonging together, the solidarity

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<sup>13</sup> K. Asamoah-Gyadu. ‘Salvation in African Independent Churches and Charismatic Ministries in Ghana’. *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*, (vol2, no.2 1992)84-90

<sup>14</sup> John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970). 432

<sup>15</sup> E Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973). 85

<sup>16</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Reguum Books, 1992). 431

and unity of a community making its members aware of their dependence<sup>17</sup> on one another... in their pursuit of common ends and values'. In the light of this evangelisation need not present Christ on the individual level by making individual appeals. Rather, it should take cognisance of the people's sense of community and brotherhood, to make it relevant.

Again, the oral traditions of the Talensi can be a great asset in Christian evangelisation. These include, *magaha* (proverbs), *solema* (stories), and *wooma* (music) and many others which are embodiments of traditional wisdom. It is worthy to note that it is possible for the Christian gospel to enrich the Talensi culture, and it is also possible for the Talensi culture to provide an opportunity for dialogue with the Christian faith. Such opportunities can exist in other areas such as, sacrifices and priestly mediation. It has been found out that the Talensi society places much premium on the offering of sacrifices as a means of appeasing the ancestors and other deities. Therefore, sacrifices of whatever form, are meant to cement the relationship between the human society and the supernatural realms. The Talensi offer sacrifices as a means of supplication, or thanksgiving in order to maintain cordial relationship with the supernatural. There can be dialogue between the sacrifices offered by the Talensi and that of Christ on the cross for the salvation of lost sinners. It is evident from the Talensi culture that the idea of sacrifice involves the issues of appeasement, which conveys the notion of sin or deviation, and prayer, which means soliciting assistance from the supernatural.

With regards to priestly mediation, the idea of the Talensi traditional priest entering the traditional grove to offer sacrifices, and also family heads offering the required sacrifices and offerings on behalf of their families can become a preparation for dialogue with Christianity. Christ became our mediator or Chief priest who offered himself once for the salvation of the world.

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<sup>17</sup> Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person*, 65

priest who offered himself once for the salvation of the world.

### **Jesus in the Talensi Experience**

Evangelisation involves the proclamation of the “good news”. As a ministry it assumes different forms in accordance with the circumstances of local situations. The proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God and Saviour of humankind has to be appropriated in different cultural contexts. Therefore, evangelisation is rooted in the Person of Jesus and His encounter with people in different cultural settings. Emmanuel Asante has noted that, a people’s encounter with the divine (experience) determines how they appropriate Jesus for themselves. In other words, one’s appropriation of Jesus is to a large extent informed by the social, cultural, economic and religious circumstances at the heart of one’s experience. To call Jesus Saviour is to do so in the face of social reality that calls for salvation. He concludes that “Christological reflections are born out of socio-cultural

concerns.”<sup>18</sup> In line with this, R. Shawyer writing about the Wolof of Senegal, points out that “the Wolof will not come to Christ in any numbers until they can see Christ in Wolof skin... worshipping God in a Wolof

way.”<sup>19</sup> Against this background, it can be asked who then is Jesus Christ to the Talensi? How can Jesus be presented to the indigenous Talensi?

### **Christ as *Tendana* Par Excellence**

It has been noted that the *tendana* is a political figure in the Talensi land, administering the affairs of the clan of which he is the head. Most importantly is his role as the custodian and chief priest of the earth cult. The *tendana* therefore, is the high priest or chief priest of the land and performs the required sacrifices on behalf of the people. The epistle to the Hebrews presents Christ as the High Priest (Heb. 7:17). Therefore the Priesthood of Christ is the outstanding doctrine of the epistle to the Hebrews. In the same sense Jesus can become a *tendana* (high priest) of the Talensi who are very much accustomed with priestly functions.

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<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Asante, *Jesus The Christ* (Kumasi: Wilas Press, 2009). 209

<sup>19</sup> R Shawyer, “Indigenous Worship” *Evangelical Missionary Quarterly* (Vol38, no.3) 326-334



### **Christ as Bakologdan (“Diviner/Prophet”)**

The *bakologdan* in the Talensi society is one who is specially gifted by the deities to reveal mysteries and to determine the will of the deities concerning particular situations for the benefit of the community. Whereas the *tendana* is a popular figure, the *bakologdanis* an uncommon person, who only appears on the scene when the situation calls for his services. He is specially invited to determine the will of the ancestors concerning particular situations such as the cause of death in a family or clan, the one to inherit the lineage *boagr* (headship), and the selection of the new *tendana*. He is somehow to be regarded as a prophet who reveals mysteries. It is significant to know how Jesus carryout his prophetic ministry by foretelling future events and praying for all believers (Matt. 24, John 17). In Christ, the Talensi Christian can be assured of his destiny and future, and is not to be considered as lost.

### **Christ as Nyaadan (“Healer”) or Tiimdan (“Medicineman”)**

In Talensi understanding, the *nyaadan* is an embodiment of both biological and spiritual powers of the ancestors. He is capable of effecting about healing of some diseases, because the efficacy of whatever he does or says to his clients lies in the powers of the ancestors. Therefore, the *nyaadan* and the *tiimdan* are important religious personnel. The peoples’ belief in the spiritual causation of diseases and events underlines their resort to the services of the medicinemen, bonesetters, magicians, herbalists and diviners.

Jesus is portrayed in the New Testament as healer who healed many people of diverse diseases. In Luke 4:18, God’s servant is prophetically spoken of as bringing healing to them that are sick. In the ministry of Jesus, we read of how Jesus healed people such as, Bartimaeus, the daughter of Jairus and many others. Also, Jesus set many free from spiritual bondage of evil spirits. In the early Church period, the apostles prayed for them that were sick, calling on the Name of Jesus and who were healed. Therefore, salvation in Jesus includes healing from diseases, curses and spiritual attacks. Today, the Talensi Christian can claim the healing power of Jesus and protection from every evil.

## Conclusion

The Christian Gospel was presented to people of historical times within their socio-cultural settings. Their socio-religious environment provided a setting for the Christian Gospel to take roots. Among the Talensi, the Christian faith produced varying responses based on the people's perception of the message, and also on how the message was proclaimed. It is evident that the Gospel among the Talensi received a partial embrace, full embrace and complete rejection. But it is possible that the Talensi culture and religion, far from being opposed to the Christian faith, can be a preparation for the Gospel.

People do not need to stop being members of their tribes in order to be Christians. Rather they can establish a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and appropriate that relationship to all others within the human realm and the entire supernatural arena. As people become Christians, they need to be encouraged to integrate their beliefs and practices into a relevant worship of God. There is therefore, the need for the Talensi to perceive and respond to Jesus in ways that are meaningful to their own understanding and experience. Such an encounter is crucial for the people to name Jesus by themselves and to embrace him in their own socio-cultural and political environment as their *tendana*, *bakologdan* and *nyaadan* or *tiimdan*.

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