

The Inculturation of the Asante Culture into Catholicism, Peter Kwasi Sarpong's Perspective

Augustine Kojo Peprah¹ 

¹ Department of Social Science, St. Louis College of Education, Kumasi Ghana.



ABSTRACT

The Catholic Church was born out of the European culture in terms of rite and language. This makes the African Catholic feel somehow culturally removed from the liturgical life of the Church. The Catholic Church knowing how culture plays an integral role in the propagation of the Gospel, has given room for the adaptation of peoples' culture into most especially the liturgical life of the participating community. The Church allows any form of adaptation, insofar as they are in conformity with the universal teachings of the Church. Many scholars and clergy have sought to make good use of this provision to inculturate their culture into Catholicism. In Ghana, Most Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong is a household name when it comes to the inculturation of the Asante culture into Catholicism for the liturgy to be at home for his people. Sarpong prefers the term "inculturation" to "adaptation" for the latter smacks of imposition. The article thus articulated Sarpong's attempt to inculturate the Asante dance, music, gestures, symbols and the chieftaincy institution into the Catholic liturgy. This article used ethnographical sources like interviews and observations in gathering data. It also used a literary approach to elucidate the inculturation of the Asante culture into Catholicism from Peter Kwasi Sarpong's perspectives. The paper thus celebrates the contributions of Most Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong to the Asante culture and Catholicism. It also affirms the notion that there could be the inculturation of peoples' culture to make the liturgy meaningful to them.

Correspondence

Augustine Kojo Peprah

Email:

frpeprah6@gmail.com

Publication History

Received: 4th January, 2024

Accepted: 7th March, 2024

Published online:

27th March, 2024

Keywords: Asante, Catholic, Culture, Peter Kwasi Sarpong, Inculturation, Liturgy.

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church has Europe as its continent of origin and its liturgy is influenced greatly by the European culture. When the Church spread to Africa and Asia, the rite, symbols, colours and language looked foreign to them. There was the need for the Church to integrate peoples' culture into the Catholic liturgy. This was to make non-European Catholics own and understand the liturgy. Inculturation was seen as the methodology which could be used to attain these objectives. The early apostles were the first to use the concept of "inculturation" to accommodate the gentile Christians. The early Church did not want to force Judaism on the converted Gentiles by not allowing them to go through the rite of circumcision (Acts 15: 1-12). St. Paul also employed inculturation when he used the Athenian culture to teach them about God the Creator (Acts 17: 22-32).

Anscar J. Chupungco, a renowned Catholic liturgist posits that inculturation is the creation of a worship that is suited to the local assembly to claim it as their own. He adds that inculturation aims at strengthening the spirituality of the assembly through a fuller encounter with Christ who is made known in the language, rites, arts and symbols of the people.¹

The Catholic Church respects the culture of all peoples. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (S.C) The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Catholic Church stipulates that "The Church desires that all her members to be led to

¹ Anscar J Chupungco, "Inculturation of Worship: Forty Years of Progress and Tradition," *Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers*, 2003. http://scholar.valpo.edu/ils_papers/5.

participate fully, consciously and actively in the liturgical celebrations. It behooves bishops and priests to strive strenuously to achieve active participation in the liturgy through the requisite education.”² The Church accepts people's culture into the liturgy which is not inextricably bound up with superstition and error. The Church at times admits such things into the liturgy, on condition that they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit. The Catholic Church gives room for the adaptation of mission lands’³ culture into the liturgy provided the considerable unity of the Roman rite is well-kept.⁴

The Church gives guidelines to be followed to avoid abuses in the attempt to adapt some cultural elements into the liturgy. The constitution says that it is prudent that when an area of the people’s culture is to be adapted into the liturgy, the bishop of the area must submit the aspects to be adapted to the Holy See.⁵ The Holy See after careful look at the issues would approve their use.⁶

Most. Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong took the Church’s provisions on adaptation very seriously. The Constitution of the Church on the Sacred Liturgy says, “It is the responsibility of the bishop, the High Priest of the people of God to promote the liturgical life in the diocese and parishes.”⁷

Sarpong observes that all ecclesial documents like the one stated above prefer the term adaptation when it comes to incorporating some elements of people’s culture into the liturgy. He believes “Adaptation is worse than imposition. Adaptation implies conforming yourself to someone’s idea and making it your own.”⁸ Emmanuel Asante⁹ in his preface to Sarpong’s book, *Peoples Differ, An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*, states that Sarpong prefers inculturation to adaptation. Inculturation describes well the process of making the Christian faith our own. Asante thinks that inculturation is seeking to present the Gospel to diverse religious and cultural contexts in such a way that, they are not estranged from their own culture but find their culture enriched and satisfied.¹⁰ Sarpong believes inculturation began with the incarnation of Jesus Christ- God becoming man. Inculturation is making the faith our own just as Jesus used the Jewish culture to teach about the kingdom of God.¹¹

Sarpong identifies two schools of thought when the issue of the adaptation or inculturation of the African culture into Christianity is being discussed. The first school of thought are those who think that Christianity is a superior culture and must supplant any culture. They see Christianity as sacred and untouchable. To them Christianity is distinct and the Christian must do away with all their indigenous cultural trappings. The patrons of this philosophy cite Islam which makes their adherents assimilate the Islamic culture at the neglect of their native cultures. This school is perhaps oblivious to the different traditions underpinning Islamic sects like the Sunnis, Shiites and Ahmadis. Christianity like any institution has gone through a lot of cultural transformation.¹² There were times that same-sex unions were not discussed but now some ecclesial bodies even give blessing to these unions. The second school of thought are of the view that anything cultural is good and must be adopted by Christianity. Sarpong disagrees with this view. He said it would be absurd for instance to break eggs or use palm wine in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is not everything cultural that must be adapted. He advocates that it is only the good elements of our culture that are praiseworthy and should be inculturated into Christianity.¹³

Sarpong as a priest and a bishop inculturated the Asante music, dance, symbols, gestures and chieftaincy, that are praiseworthy into the Catholic liturgy. Pashington Obeng wrote on the efforts of Sarpong on inculturation titled his work “An Asante Catholicism...” and Sarpong recalled his struggles and successes in inculturating his culture into the Catholic liturgy titled his book “An Asante Liturgy.”¹⁴

The stiff opposition faced by Sarpong was influenced by the infamous perception that, the African culture is inferior. This notion made some European anthropologists use derogatory terms like “paganism” and “fetishism” to describe the Traditional African Religion.¹⁵ The European anthropologists measured the African cultural heritage with

² Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2001), 27.

³ Mission lands refers to the Churches in African, the Americas and Asia.

⁴ Flannery, *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, 32.

⁵ The Holy See is the central governing authority of the Catholic Church, representing the Pope and functioning as the seat of ecclesiastical and diplomatic activities in Vatican City.

⁶ Flannery, *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, 32.

⁷ Peter K. Sarpong, *Peoples Differ, An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2013), 31.

⁸ Sarpong, *Peoples Differ, An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*, 31.

⁹ Emmanuel Asante is a Professor of Religious Studies at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi and past Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Ghana.

¹⁰ Sarpong, *Peoples Differ, An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*, 8.

¹¹ Sarpong, *Peoples Differ, An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*, 23.

¹² Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Culture and the Kingdom* (Accra: Cabo Publications, 1980),5.

¹³ Sarpong, *Culture and the Kingdom*, 5,6.

¹⁴ Pashington Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996);

Peter K. Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy* (Kumasi: : Good Shepherd Publishers, 2011).

¹⁵ B. E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. (London: SCM Press, 1973), 108.

their European standards.¹⁶ It must be appreciated that the Asante of Ghana has rich indigenous theology and is comparable to Christian theology.¹⁷

This paper looks at how Sarpong has inculturated the rich theological values inherent in the Asante culture into Catholicism for the liturgy to be relatable to his people. This article uses the qualitative research method because the study of the Asante culture is involved. It employs ethnographical sources like observation, photographic documentation and interviews. The Catholic liturgy like the Holy Mass, ordination rite and the celebration of the solemnity of Christ the King were observed. There was also a visit to the St. Peter's Minor Basilica Cathedral to take photographic records of how the Asante culture has been inculturated into the liturgical life of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi. Two priests were also interviewed.

The paper discusses the Catholic and other Christian denominations presence among the Akan. The personality of Most Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong is also discussed. It would also elucidate on how Sarpong has inculturated the Asante music, dance, colours, gestures, symbols and chieftaincy into Catholicism for his people to own and understand the liturgy. The paper ends with the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

The Catholic/Christian Presence among the Akan

Peter Kwasi Sarpong intimates that just as the European colonialists scrambled for territories in Ghana, the Christian missionaries also struggled for dominance and even became rivals. Every Christian denomination tried to consolidate and create strongholds among the Akan. The Wesleyans/Methodists dominated the Western and Central Regions of Ghana. The Eastern Region is predominantly made of Presbyterians. The Catholics and the Anglicans however increased sparsely in all parts of Ghana specifically in the urban settlements.¹⁸

The early Christian missionary activities started in Ghana in 1828 with the Basel/Presbyterian missionaries who served as chaplains to the Danish traders. The chaplains focused their attention on evangelizing the natives.¹⁹ The missionary activities among the Akan started in Akuapim Akropong in 1835 and Aburi in 1847.²⁰ The Methodists (Wesleyans) also began their mission in 1935. In Kumasi, Thomas Birch Freeman and Andreas Riis made significant inroads in the establishment of the Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches respectively due to their diplomatic relationship with the then-Asante king, Nana Kwaku Dua I.²¹

The Catholic Church made the first effort to the evangelization of the people of Ghana in 1880 but failed. However, in 1890 they came back strongly. They were able to build more schools and hospitals than the Basel and the Wesleyan Missions under the auspice of the colonial government. The provision of social amenities was the trump card for their successful evangelization.²² Catholicism among the Asante started in 1878. Fr Augustine Mureau in 1882 like Freeman and Riis was accorded a durbar by the Asante king, Nana Mensah Bonsu. The first Mass was celebrated in Kumasi on April 23rd, 1882 at the guest quarters of Nana Mensah Bonsu. In 1932, the Kumasi Apostolic Vicariate comprising the Ashanti and the then Brong Ahafo Regions was carved out of the Gold Coast Vicariate.²³ Kumasi Vicariate grew into a Diocese and is now an Archdiocese with Sunyani, Konongo-Mampong, Obuasi, Goaso and Techiman as the suffragan Dioceses in the Kumasi Province.²⁴

Who is Peter Kwasi Sarpong?

Peter Kwasi Sarpong was born in Gyaameyc Cottage near Maase Offinso in the Ashanti Region of Ghana on February 26th, 1947. He had his primary education at Offinso Maase Roman Catholic School. He continued to St. Teresa Minor Seminary at Amisano in the Central Region. He entered St. Peter's Seminary in 1957 for his studies to the priesthood. In 1959, he was ordained to the Catholic priesthood. Sarpong was sent to Rome, Italy in 1961 where he obtained his licentiate and doctoral degree in Sacred Theology. His quest for knowledge sent him to Oxford University, London, where he received his master's degree in Social Anthropology. Sarpong was privileged to have been taught by the renowned anthropologist E. Evans Pritchard. Sarpong's love for the study of his culture made him write about the Asante for his doctoral and master's thesis. He wrote "*A Catholic View of the Blackened Stool of the Asante*" and "*Girls Nubility Rite in Ashanti*" for his doctoral and master's degrees respectively. All his

¹⁶ Augustine Kojo Peprah and Richmond Osei Amoah, "The Akan and the Catholic Concept of Sin and Reconciliation Compared," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, June 16, 2022, 129–36, <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2022853>.

¹⁷ Peprah and Amoah, "The Akan and the Catholic Concept of Sin and Reconciliation Compared," 135.

¹⁸ Peter K. Sarpong, *Aspects of Ghanaian Ethos* (Tema: DigiBooks, 2019), 194.

¹⁹ Nathan Samwini, *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950: Its Effects upon Muslims and Muslim-Christian Relations*, vol. 7 (LIT Verlag Münster, 2006), 43.

²⁰ Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Orbis Books, 2015), 113.

²¹ Samwini, *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950: Its Effects upon Muslims and Muslim-Christian Relations*, 47.

²² Peter B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity* (London: Edward Arnold Publishing, 1986), 60.

²³ Peter K. Sarpong, *Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi Year Book 2019* (Kumasi: Kumasi Catholic Press, 2019), 1.

²⁴ Sarpong, *Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi Year Book 2019*, 17.

theses were published in toto in Ghana by the Ghana Publishing Corporation.²⁵ Sarpong was elected Catholic Bishop of Kumasi in 1969 after serving as the rector of the St. Peter's Seminary, Pedu Cape Coast, his alma mater. On July 14, 2002, he was elevated as the first Archbishop of Kumasi. Most Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong is a nonagenarian and retired as the Archbishop of Kumasi in 2008.²⁶

The Inculturation of the Asante Culture into the Catholicism

Peter Kwasi Sarpong, a scholar in Asante culture, summarises the effort he has made since 1970 to make the Roman Catholic Church feel at home with the Asante/Akan Catholics. In the preface to his book, *An Asante Liturgy*, Sarpong observed that the liturgy was "alien" to the Asante Catholics. He decided to work around the clock to make the Catholic liturgy meaningful and effective for his people. He recounts "the many obstacles, misunderstandings, frustrations and disappointments from the clergy, religious and the laity."²⁷ The opposition was due to the popular notion that anything African or traditional was pagan as some Christian groups and anthropologists sought to portray.

The Asante Music and its influence on the Liturgical life of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi

Singing, drumming and the writing of inspired songs accompanied by the playing of musical instruments, have been part and parcel of the Church's liturgical celebrations. They date back to the Old Testament era to the present. The Catholic Church emphasizes that songs, music, words and actions are more meaningful and effective when conveyed in the cultural wealth of the people who celebrate. The Church however cautions that in an attempt to inculturate indigenous elements into the liturgy, they should be in conformity with the doctrines of the universal Church and must be drawn mainly from scripture and other liturgical sources.²⁸ Sarpong painstakingly with these provisions made use of the Asante music and dance to make the liturgy relatable to the locals.

Sarpong observes that "the life of the African is very musical. Music is played during farming, marriage, funeral, war and worship."²⁹ The *kete* used to be a royal band. It is played when a chief sits in state. The *kete* ensemble comprises five drums and one idiophone, *dawuro*.³⁰ The *Kete* is played at the start of Mass, the offertory procession and the recession after Mass. He explains that the *kete* is played during the Mass "to honour God, to tell God that the entire people respect, love and adore him." He cautions and replies to his critics that the playing of the ensemble is not to honour the priest or the celebrant but God whom the priest represents and serves.³¹ The Church's theology on the priesthood is that "Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers."³² The priest only acts (*in persona Christi Capitis*), in the person of Christ.³³

Adowa an Asante music and dance is "an all-weather orchestral ensemble."³⁴ It is a popular ensemble played at funerals and any social gathering. It is made up of membranophones and idiophones played by men. The singing is done by middle-aged women, a lead singer and the other women sing the chorus accompanied by clapping of the hands. The *adowa* lyrics express the social, moral and religious values of the Asante. The *adowa* dance is performed by the movements of the body and is very symbolic. Men and women may dance while the music is being played.³⁵

During the celebration of the Eucharist after the doxology,³⁶ the *adowa* ensemble is played and two or more women dressed traditionally dance gracefully from their stands to the sanctuary. Sarpong explains that symbolically, the *adowa* dances performed show the congregation's dependency on Jesus Christ who has appeared to his people under the appearance of the bread and wine.³⁷

Fontomfrom is another Asante royal music which is made up of all the *kete* set and two giant drums. The *fontomfrom* is played when the king is paraded on the streets carried in a palanquin.³⁸ It must be noted that the *fontomfrom* orchestra is a preserve of the *Asantehene*, Asante King and his *amanhene* (paramount chiefs).³⁹ The Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi has inculturated its use in its liturgy. It is performed during the celebration of the

²⁵ Peter K. Sarpong, *From the Hut to Oxford the Autobiography of the Most Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong Emeritus Archbishop of Kumasi* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2019), 21, 48,50,53,59,60,61,68..

²⁶ Sarpong, *Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi Year Book 2019*, 12,14.

²⁷ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 1.

²⁸ Flannery, *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, 49.

²⁹ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 3, 4.

³⁰ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 5, 6.

³¹ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 10, 11.

³² "Catechism of the Catholic Church, (C. C.C.) Popular and Definitive Edition, ." (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2000).

³³ C.C.C., # 1548

³⁴ Sarpong, *Aspects of Ghanaian Ethos*, 63.

³⁵ Ghana Dance Ensemble, "Adowa Dance," Institute of African Studies, accessed July 18, 2023, https://ias.ug.edu.gh/sites/ias/files/styles/thumbnail/GDE-Brochure_reduced.pdf.

³⁶ In Catholicism, doxology is a short hymn or prayer of praise and glory to the Holy Trinity.

³⁷ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 14.

³⁸ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 6.

³⁹ Kwadwo Osei, *A Handbook on Asante Culture* (Kumasi: Cita Printing Press, 2002), 107.

solemnity of Christ the King of the Universe. The playing and the sounds of the *fontomfrom* exhibit the skill of a valiant fighter. It is also a processional dancing and drumming to celebrate the victory, achievements and superiority of a fighter.⁴⁰ It is apt that the *fontomfrom* is inculturated to make the celebration of the solemnity of Christ the King of the Universe very meaningful to the Asante Catholic.

Mpintin is another royal orchestra inculturated by Sarpong in the Eucharistic celebration. *Mpintin* originated from the Dagomba.⁴¹ It was used to sound praises to royals. The Asante chiefs adapted this orchestra due to their relationship with the Dagomba. This ensemble is made up of three drums. The *mpintin* is played when the king is walking. The sounds march with his footsteps. It informs the king what to do, for instance, if the terrain where the king is passing is rocky, the tempo of the drums would be slowed to inform the king, so that he will not stumble.⁴² During the celebration of the Eucharist, the *mpintin* is played on a low pitch before the Epiclesis⁴³ to signify the coming of the Holy Spirit. When the priest lifts the bread on the paten and the chalice filled with wine, the *mpintin* pitch is heightened and when they are placed on the altar the pitch is lowered.⁴⁴

To show the universality and the cultural diversity nature of the Catholic Church, dance and music of other ethnic groups in Ghana are also performed after the reception of the Holy Communion. Sarpong has adapted non-Akan ensembles and dances like *agbekor* of the Ewes,⁴⁵ *takai* of the Dagomba and *bawaa* of the Dagaaba. Dagaaba are the ethnic group inhabiting the Upper East of Ghana and some parts of Burkina Faso.⁴⁶ These ensembles and dances are carefully selected due to their religious significance. *Bawaa* is singled out for emphasis. It is an agrarian dance to celebrate the joy that comes with harvest. They thank the gods and the ancestors for a good season that would ensure the well-being of the community. Libation is poured before it is performed.⁴⁷ Likewise, the congregation thanks God for giving them the body and blood of Christ despite their unworthiness.

Colours, Gestures and Symbols

Colours and gestures speak a lot in the Asante culture. White among the Asante is a symbol of peace, joy, purity and victory. When disputes are settled at the traditional court, the accused who is acquitted of all charges, puts on white clothing as a sign of victory or freedom from guilt or blame. Even in modern times, right after the pronouncement of a verdict by a judge at the law court, white powder is smeared all over the person to signify victory.⁴⁸ The Catholic Church has inculturated the waving of white handkerchiefs in the Mass during the singing of the *Gloria*, *Alleluia* and the *Sanctus*, the joyful parts of the celebration.⁴⁹

Postures and gestures speak a lot when it comes to reconciliation in the Asante culture. An Asante gesture of contrition is “putting the back of the right hand into the left palm to express sorrow and pleading for mercy.” This gesture is inculturated in the Catholic liturgy among the Asante of Ghana. They substitute the European gesture of beating the chest to show remorse.⁵⁰ On the contrary, to beat the chest in the Ghanaian culture is a gesture of denial of wrongdoing and a sign of bravery, suggesting, “I did it”.⁵¹ It is for this reason Sarpong says it would be out of place for the Asante Catholic to dance and wave the handkerchief during the singing of the *Kyrie*⁵² or the penitential rite.⁵³ It is not an Asante way of showing remorse for the forgiveness of sins.

The use of the Akan traditional symbols especially the Adinkra and the Asante language have been adopted by the Christian community in Ghana. The Adinkra is an Akan traditional symbolic language. It is characterized by an assemblage of symbols and motifs that carry varied connotations and represent concepts, maxims and the philosophical thought of the Akan culture.⁵⁴ The Adinkra symbols with theological and moral meanings are used to design vestments and adorn churches. The commonly used Adinkra symbols by Christianity are *Gye Nyame* (God’s power), *Nyame biribi wo soro ma me nsa nka* (Hope) *Krapa* (Sanctity) *Dwaninmen* (Strength), and *Funtunfunafu ne Denkyemfunafu*.

⁴⁰ Ghana Dance Ensemble, “Adowa Dance,” 15.

⁴¹ Dogombas are the ethnic group populated in the northern part of Ghana

⁴² Osei, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 105 - 106.

⁴³ The invocation of the Holy Spirit by the priest to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

⁴⁴ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 12.

⁴⁵ The Ewes are the ethnic group living in the Volta Region of Ghana and some parts of Togo and Benin.

⁴⁶ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 14.

⁴⁷ Ghana Dance Ensemble, “Adowa Dance,” 15.

⁴⁸ Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect* (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 113.

⁴⁹ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 20.

⁵⁰ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 18.

⁵¹ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 115.

⁵² Kyrie meaning “Lord have mercy”

⁵³ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 20.

⁵⁴ Peter Acheampong, *Christian Values in Adinkra Symbols* (Kumasi: University Press, 2008), vii.

The *Funtunfunafu ne Denkyemfunafu* is a Siamese crocodile. It is a symbol of unity.⁵⁵ It is one of Sarpong's favourite symbols. He has some of his mitres and his crozier with these symbols.⁵⁶ The *Funtunfunafu ne Denkyemfunafu* "depicts two crocodiles with individual parts joined together by one stomach. They feed the same stomach but for no apparent reason squabble for food."⁵⁷ The symbol speaks of his motto as a bishop, *Ɔɔ ne Nkabom*, love and unity. Another contribution of Sarpong which is depicted by his motto is the use of the Asante language. Most often bishops would have their motto in Latin. He prefers his motto to be in the Asante language, Twi for easy reading and understanding by his flock. The *Gye Nyame*, the buffalo, the porcupine and the traditional stool with a cross are the African traditional symbols that Sarpong used in the designing of his episcopal emblem. The *Gye Nyame* is the most popular Adinkra symbol meaning, the belief in the omnipotence of God. The porcupine is the totem of the Asante. Sarpong belongs to the *Ekwo* clan and they have the buffalo as their totem. It must be appreciated that Sarpong's emblem is typically Asante from the symbol to the motto.



Figure 1. The Episcopal Emblem of Archbishop Sarpong



Figure 2. The front view of the St. Peter's Cathedral, Kumasi with some adinkra symbols "Gye Nyame, Dwanimen, Nyame biribi wo soro, and akoko nan tia ba, na enkum ba ". The latter is a symbol of discipline.

⁵⁵ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 7.

⁵⁶ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana*, 130.

⁵⁷ Acheampong, *Christian Values in Adinkra Symbols*, 16.



Figure 3. Archbishop Sarpong wearing a mitre made with kente cloth and with his favourite adinkra symbol, *funtufunafu ne denkyemfunafu*

The Inculturation of the Asante Chieftaincy in the Catholic Church

The bishop in the Catholic Church holds ecclesial power over a particular territory called a diocese. In ancient Europe, an official who was equivalent to the bishop in terms of territory was called Lord. It is for this reason that a bishop in the Church is addressed as His Lordship. The Archbishop of Kumasi is preferably called *Nana*, the title of a chief among the Asante. Sarpong prefers to be called *Nana* than “My Lord” or “Your Grace”.

He is called *Nana* because he had oversight responsibility of a territory which was equivalent to the Asante kingdom. The then Kumasi Diocese comprised the Ashanti, Ahafo, Bono and Bono East regions of Ghana. Currently, Kumasi Archdiocese administratively covers five districts namely, Greater Kumasi (Kumasi Metropolis, Suame, Asokwa, Kwadaso, Ofrikrom and Asokore Mampong Municipal) Offinso North, Offinso South, Atwima Mponua and Atwima Nwabiagya.⁵⁸ James Bour Mensah and Stephen Opoku assert that the use of the title *Nana* by the Asante Catholic bishops does not smack of arrogating to themselves chieftaincy titles. The bishops are chief priests or grandfathers of their Catholic communities. They intimated further that the title *Nana* among the Asante is also used by grandparents and traditional priests.⁵⁹

It is very characteristic for an Asante chief, *Nana* to sit in state or attend a function under an umbrella. The primary function of an umbrella is to protect against the sun or rain. However, among the Asante, the umbrella is an essential political insignia mostly for chiefs. The usage of the umbrella can be traced to the first Asante king, Nana Osei Tutu. When a chief rides on a palanquin amid drumming and dancing, umbrellas are swayed up and down in the air intermittently but stationed when he sits.⁶⁰ This has also been inculturated by the Catholic Church in Kumasi. At the St. Peter’s Minor Basilica Cathedral, in the sanctuary is found an umbrella. The umbrella is over the presidential seat of the Archbishop. Obeng said that the bishop, referring to Sarpong sits on *asipim* and under an umbrella like the Asante king. He also noted that when Sarpong embarks on every pastoral visit he is accompanied by a retinue made up of priests, female religious, dancers and drummers just like the king of Asante.⁶¹

At the forecourt of the museum at St. Peter’s Minor Basilica Cathedral, Kumasi, there stands a huge statue of Jesus Christ with a spectre and a globe as the king of the universe. To give it a traditional touch, Jesus stands under an umbrella.

⁵⁸ Statutes of the Archdiocese of Kumasi (Kumasi: Kumasi Catholic Press, 2020), 9.

⁵⁹ Rev. Frs. James Bour Mensah and Stephen Opoku (Catholic Priests of Kumasi Archdiocese), interviewed by the author November, 2023.

⁶⁰ Sharon F. Patton, “The Asante Umbrella ,” accessed August 21, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3336160>.

⁶¹ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana*, 130.



Figure 4. The Statue of Jesus, the King of the Universe under an umbrella at the St. Peter's Cathedral, Kumasi.



Figure 5. The presidential seat of the Archbishop of Kumasi at the Cathedral. He sits on an asipim over an umbrella



Figure 6. Asipim with ate.

The Archbishop as *Nana* must be under an umbrella at his palace, the Cathedral and sits on his *asipim*. *Asipim* means “I stand firm”. It is an Asante royal chair which symbolizes the prestige and power of an Asante chief. It must also be noted that the *asipim* is found only at the palace and is a preserve of the chiefs. The royal chair has wood as its frame. The wooden chair is decorated with brass or silver studs.⁶² The seat is made from the hides of goats, sheep or cattle. To prevent the hide from tearing and give the occupant comfort, a small decorated pillow is placed on the hide. The Asante call the pillow *ate*.⁶³ This is to say the *asipim* always moves with the *ate*. One cannot sit on the *asipim* without the *ate*. Three *asipims* are also found at the Cathedral used by the Archbishop and two other ministers who would flank him. It must be noted that the *asipim* of the bishop is bigger than the other two. Sarpong had an *asipim* embossed with his coat of arms. It must be noted that apart from the Archbishop of Kumasi, no one is allowed to sit on this *asipim* or under the umbrella at the cathedral. This is so because no one is allowed to sit on the chair of a chief or an elder even if you are his son in the Asante culture.

In the Asante culture, chiefs are carefully selected and confined for some days to be trained for the new role they have to perform. The peak of the installation of a chief is the taking of oath. Until someone swears the traditional oath, he is not considered a chief. A new chief swears the oath of allegiance in the presence of a paramount chief, *omanhene*, other chiefs and a cross-section of the people.⁶⁴

The formation and the ordination of the Catholic priest can be likened to the confinement and the installation of a chief in the Asante culture. The seminary formation and pastoral formation are comparable to the confinement of a new chief to be schooled in the customs and traditions of his people. Kwabena Opuni also likens the training and ordination of the ministers of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana to the confinement and installation of a chief in the Akan culture.⁶⁵

One area of the Catholic liturgy that has seen and endured the inculturation of the Asante culture is the rite of ordination, Sarpong affirms.⁶⁶ Among the Asante, a lower-rank chief swears to a high-rank chief by holding a sword, *mponponsuo* while saying the oath.⁶⁷ The chief receiving the oath sits and raises his right hand pointing his two fingers to the new chief swearing. Sarpong has inculturated this Asante chieftaincy culture in the ordination of priests in the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi. This inculturation has since been used by his successors. On 16th December 2023, the archbishop of Kumasi was seen at the Cathedral sitting on an *asipim* receiving the oath of a deacon to be ordained a priest, with his two fingers raised. The *ordinandus* did not use a sword but the crucifix. The deacon, a sub-chief swore the oath of allegiance to the *omanhene*, the Archbishop, the priests, the religious and the faithful at the palace, the Cathedral.

⁶² <http://decoratafrica.com/item/473-asipim>, accessed 3/01/24.

⁶³ A Owusu Akyaw, *Twi Dictionary* (Accra: Sako Press Ltd., 1999), 106.

⁶⁴ Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: Perspective of Akan Leadership Formation on Christian Leadership Development* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2012), 138-140.

⁶⁵ Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: (Perspectives of Akan Leadership Formation on Christian Leadership Development)* (SonLife Press, 2012), 216.

⁶⁶ Sarpong, *An Asante Liturgy*, 216.

⁶⁷ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 25.

The Asante culture and the celebration of the Solemnity of Christ the King

The Solemnities of Christ the Universal King is celebrated on the 34th Sunday of Ordinary Time which marks the end of the Catholic liturgical year. The feast proclaims Christ as the king of all creation. His kingdom is of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice and love. The Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference admonishes that during this feast, "The signification, spirit and focus of the feast should be respected in any and every effort to inculturate its celebration."⁶⁸ Sarpong did a lot to inculturate the Asante culture in the celebration of the feast of Christ the King which has been kept till now.

The feast portrays Jesus Christ as an Asante king paraded through the streets of Kumasi. The Blessed Sacrament⁶⁹ in the monstrance⁷⁰ (Christ) is carried in a palanquin, *apakan* decorated with the *kente* cloth. *Kente* is a Ghanaian festal garment worn by royalty and others for joyous and important occasions. The palanquin is usually carried by four priests. The umbrellas, *fontomfrom* drums, *kete*, the *akofena*, swords, *mmennson*, and seven horns are always borrowed from the Manhyia Palace⁷¹ to give the celebration an Asante character for even non-Catholics to think indeed the King is passing.

The procession starts with the congregation and ends with the priests carrying the palanquin under two or more umbrellas. Four males carrying swords placed on the palanquin move with the priests. The palanquin is preceded by a man carrying the *ate* and the *asipim* also under an umbrella. When the priests stand occasionally, the congregation also stands and the shouting, singing and drumming move to a high pitch. The umbrellas are waved up and down in the air for some time and the procession continues. These are exactly what are done when an Asante chief is paraded in the streets. When the procession stops, the chief dances gracefully with a cloth, a sword or a short rifle in his hands. This attracts cheers and admiration from his subjects. The universality of Christ's kingship is depicted when the Asante culture is laced with the Frafra⁷² music and dance. The congregation also sings and dances to the brass band which is European.

It must be noted that during the procession it is only Jesus in the Eucharist who sits in the palanquin. Obeng says according to Sarpong in 1967, when the Asante King, Nana Osei Agyeman Prempeh was first approached for permission to use the royal ensemble and regalia mentioned above, the King gladly obliged and remarked, "I am honoured that the regalia used in honouring me as the king of Asante are considered fitting to honour God. I freely allow you to borrow them for this purpose."⁷³

Sarpong, then a curate, recounts that his pastor, a Dutch, understood and appreciated the inculturation of the feast. However, his bishop, Rt. Rev. Joseph Essuah objected and disliked the enterprise although he was a Ghanaian.⁷⁴ It must be noted that to date, this tradition is carried out whenever the Kumasi Archdiocese celebrates this feast. It gives the celebration a true Asante identity. Christ is indeed the King of kings. That is how the Asante king is celebrated with pomp and pageantry. These make the celebration of the solemnity very meaningful to the Asante.



Figure 7. The Asante King riding on a palanquin under an umbrella followed by the fontomfrom ensemble

⁶⁸ The Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Ordo for the Liturgical Year 2022-2023* (Accra: Standard Newspapers & Magazines Ltd.) 8.

⁶⁹ Blessed Sacrament in Catholicism is the body and blood of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. Also known as the Eucharist.

⁷⁰ A monstrance is a sacred vessel, often precious receptacle, either open or with a transparent cover, in which the Eucharist is placed for veneration in Catholicism.

⁷¹ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 180.

⁷² Frafra refers to the people and language spoken in the Upper East of Ghana.

⁷³ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 181-185.

⁷⁴ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 187.



Figure 8 . The Eucharist in a monstrance in a palanquin carried by priests. Jesus is celebrated like the Asante King.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Inculturating the African culture into liturgy has been quite a success. Sarpong has contributed his quota in inculturating the Asante culture into the Catholic liturgy. Modern-day African theologians should make consented efforts at inculturating the African culture into the theological life of the Church. There should be, for instance, inculturating the Asante concept of sin and reconciliation into the Moral Theology and Hamartiology of the Church. This would make the entire teachings of the Church at home with the African Catholic.

CONCLUSION

The Catholic Church respects the cultures of all peoples especially those of mission lands. She admonishes that some cultural elements of peoples' culture could be inculturated into the Catholic liturgy. The areas to be inculturated should not be a smack of superstition and error but must conform to the theology of the Church. Peter Kwasi Sarpong an Asante Catholic prelate, a sociologist and an anthropologist, has contributed immensely in the area of inculturating the Asante culture into the Catholic liturgy. This article has elucidated the efforts of Sarpong in making the Catholic liturgy relatable to the Asante Catholics. He has inculturated the Asante chieftaincy, dance, gestures, music and symbols into Catholicism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acheampong, Peter. *Christian Values in Adinkra Symbols*. Kumasi: University Press, 2008.
- “Catechism of the Catholic Church, (C. C.C.) Popular and Definitive Edition, .” London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2000.
- Chupungco, Anscar J. “Inculturation of Worship: Forty Years of Progress and Tradition,” 2003.
- Clarke, Peter B. *West Africa and Christianity*. London: Edward Arnold Publishing, 1986.
- Flannery, Austin. *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2001.
- Ghana Dance Ensemble. “Adowa Dance.” Institute of African Studies. Accessed July 18, 2023. https://ias.ug.edu.gh/sites/ias/files/styles/thumbnail/GDE-Brochure_reduced.pdf.
- Idowu, B. E. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London: SCM Press, 1973.
- Obeng, Pashington. *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana*. New York: E.J. Brill, 1996.
- Opuni-Frimpong, Kwabena. *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: (Perspectives of Akan Leadership Formation on Christian Leadership Development)*. SonLife Press, 2012.
- . *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: Perspective of Akan Leadership Formation on Christian Leadership Development*. Accra: SonLife Press, 2012.
- Osei, Kwadwo. *A Handbook on Asante Culture*. Kumasi: Cita Printing Press, 2002.
- Owusu Akyaw, A. *Twi Dictionary*. Accra: Sakoa Press Ltd., 1999.
- Patton, Sharon F. “The Asante Umbrella .” Accessed August 21, 2023. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3336160>.
- Peprah, Augustine Kojo, and Richmond Osei Amoah. “The Akan and the Catholic Concept of Sin and Reconciliation Compared.” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, June 16, 2022, 129–36. <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2022853>.
- Samwini, Nathan. *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950: Its Effects upon Muslims and Muslim-Christian Relations*. Vol. 7. LIT Verlag Münster, 2006.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*. Orbis Books, 2015.
- Sarpong, Peter K. *An Asante Liturgy*. Kumasi: : Good Shepherd Publishers, 2011.
- . *Aspects of Ghanaian Ethos*. Tema: DigiBooks, 2019.

- . *Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi Year Book 2019*. Kumasi: Kumasi Catholic Press, 2019.
- . *From the Hut to Oxford the Autobiography of the Most Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong Emeritus Archbishop of Kumasi*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2019.
- . *Peoples Differ, An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2013.
- Sarpong, Peter Kwasi. *Culture and the Kingdom*. Accra: Cabo Publications, 1980.
- . *Ghana in Retrospect*. Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Augustine Kojo Peprah is a Priest of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, Ghana. He is a Senior Tutor at the Department of Social Science and the Acting Vice Principal of St. Louis College of Education, Kumasi-Ghana. His areas of research are African Studies and Religious and Moral Education.