

Language, Literature, Prayer, and Music Repertoires as Sources of African Christian Spirituality and Values

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Abstract

Every interreligious encounter produces a cross-fertilization of ideas and values. To what extent is the Christian-African indigenous religious encounter mutually impacting? And what aspects of the African worldview make it receptive to Christianity? This article addresses these questions by engaging the underexplored phenomena of African literature, music, and prayer as sources of African values and

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spirituality, as well as of Christian theology. Through in-depth interviews, focused group discussions, participant-observation, along with archival data and African literary works, it argues that the wealth of African metaphors and values therein richly express African spirituality, values, and Christian theology.

Keywords

African spirituality, Christian theology, values, language, literature, orality

This article reports on an interdisciplinary study that challenges the current overlooked and undervalued state of literature, music, and prayer in the study of African Christianity. The authors argue that contemporary orality and literature constitute important expressions and resources of African spirituality and values.

Background

In 2001 British theologian Andrew Shanks argued that the Christian faith is not a matter of opinion but, rather, “a community-building or community-transformative appropriation of the very deepest poetic truth.”¹ Shanks further argued that any religion that is “poetically impoverished” is insufficiently religious.² Christianity in Africa faces no such impoverishment but offers an abundance of linguistic riches that serve as important sources of African spirituality and values. While much current scholarship that engages African Christianity focuses on the incredible growth and diverse expressions of the faith, both on the continent and in the diaspora, the role of language and literature as significant articulations of African spirituality and values and as a rich resource for African Christian theology remains largely unexplored. This is a serious oversight, especially if one considers that “literature is a leading but unexamined influence in nearly everyone’s life and in culture as a whole.”³ This article addresses this gap, engaging literature, music, and prayer repertoires as sources of African values and spirituality, and as critical resources for Christian theology.

Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that in “traditional Africa”—that is, Africa apart from Christianity, Islam, or Western ideologies—God is experienced as “an all-pervading reality,” a “constant participant in the affairs of human beings.”⁴ This reality is expressed in the day-to-day language and interactions of West African communities. Oduyoye further underscored the role of language in the context of religious encounter when she observed that “the way we experience God is portrayed in the language we use about God, especially the names by which God is known.”⁵ In the context of Christianity and African indigenous religions, she argued that names are the embodiment of the contemporary experiences and descriptions of people’s perceptions of God. Expanding upon this insight, we could say that African literature, proverbs, songs, prayers, and appellations are not only repositories of these

names but also fuller expressions of African experiences and perceptions of God and important expressions of spirituality and values.

In the extemporaneous praises of Afua Kuma, a Ghanaian oral theologian, Kwame Bediako saw “evidence of a theological articulation within Ghanaian Christianity . . . rarely mentioned in the usual discussions about African theology, but important for our understanding of what has happened and is happening in the life of many Christian communities in Africa.”⁶ Similar claims can be made about the popular gospel music by Suzzy and Matt or the worship songs heard in various Christian gatherings. From this study, we see evidence of what might variously be called grassroots, oral, spontaneous, or implicit theology, each of which represents a type of “reflective theology” in its own right.⁷

Theory and method

The research group found the following statement and question to be fundamental to its work: “One cannot separate African values from African spirituality, which suffuses human experience, animates the natural world, and richly populates all planes of existence. How have these traditional spiritual traits survived in the contemporary scene and modulated within Christianity?”⁸ In our study we thus explored how these traits appear in contemporary African Christianity, focusing on the critical role of language, literature, and oral forms as repositories and vehicles of these values. This article addresses these and other questions, strategically engaging interdisciplinary perspectives and utilizing wide-ranging sources to produce our conclusions.

The study engaged theories of performance and of identification, finding performance theory as the most significant. Although early anthropological studies focused on ritual and ceremony, recent studies are interested in how performance informs and is informed by religious experiences and activities.⁹ The study was anchored in Richard Schechner’s theoretical framework,¹⁰ which views performance as everyday life, involving rituals, plays, dance, music, theater, language use, and identities of “doing,” not just “being.” The interdisciplinary nature of performance theory ranges from J. L. Austin’s and J. R. Searle’s linguistic performatives, Judith Butler’s performance of identities, Jean-François Lyotard’s societal performativity, and Richard Bauman’s performance-oriented verbal art to Jacques Derrida’s postmodern performance studies and David Rhoads’s performance criticisms.

Methodologically, the research was qualitative, making use of ethnographic interviews, focus-group discussions, observations, and participant-observation in selected church and worship settings. Ethnographic data were gathered from this field research. Geographically, our research was divided between Ghana and Nigeria; chronologically, it involved the mid-nineteenth and the late-twentieth centuries, as well as the present. Specifically, the fieldwork was conducted in Ghana (Accra, Tema, Akropong, Nsawam, Abetifi, and Kumasi) and Nigeria (Abakaliki, Owutu Edda, Akwete, Amichi, Nnewi, and Enugwu Ukwu). In addition to interviews, the main field data-gathering tool, focus-group discussions were carried out at Owutu Edda.

The other aspects of the project made use of textual analysis, involving the analysis of historical archives and other literary works. The archival study took place in Akropong, Accra, Ghana, and Basel, Switzerland (Basel Mission archival documents were consulted in March 2019), while recorded songs and the other forms of documented oral materials by Afua Kuma took place in Ghana and the United States. Significantly, even though Kwakye's research was originally designed to be an archival study, once he discovered the insufficiency and lack of depth in the archival data that were at his disposal, he joined the rest of the team by including some ethnographic field research. In all, the project involved a lot of transcription, translation, and interpretation, yielding data that will continue to produce publications far beyond the life cycle of this project. The overarching methodology in this project is ethnographic fieldwork, which further stresses the fundamental role of orality in research, not only in African Christianity, but in all aspects of Africa life and values.

African spirituality and values in context

As indicated above, the study was primarily focused on the role of literature and orality as important yet underexplored sources for African spirituality and values, which are significant resources for the study of African Christian theology. The five individual researchers brought expertise in African literature, theology, history, religious studies, Christianity, and indigenous religious traditions. As such, each became responsible for unique yet complementary aspects of the research project. Although the research team worked individually on the various trajectories of the project, their findings can be generally grouped into two areas: the orality theme and the historical theme.

The two teams

The three women constituted the orality team: Rose Mary Amenga-Etego, with her research on the Ghanaian gospel duo Suzzy and Matt and their songs "Appellation" and "Jehowa"; Sara Fretheim, with her focus on the praise poems of Afua Kuma; and Ngozi Emeka-Nwobia, with her examination of church-based worship music and prayers among the Igbo of Nigeria. Collectively, their research illustrates how music, praise, and prayers permeate almost every aspect of African life, not just for aesthetic or entertainment purposes but also for conveying spirituality and values.¹¹ Orality thus remains a critical factor that can explain how traditional spiritual traits have survived and taken on new forms and meanings within contemporary African Christianity, especially through praise poems, prayers, storytelling, and music.¹² This observation suggests that the near-total absence of oral theologies from academic scholarship on African Christianity is a serious oversight, also that much work remains to be done to preserve and analyze oral theologies in order to better grasp the complexities of contemporary African Christian spirituality and values.

The two men constituted the historical team: Abraham Nana Opare Kwakye, who researched Paulo Mohenu (1809–86), a Gold Coast traditional priest who became a Basel Mission evangelist; and Paul Onovoh, who studied Chinua Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). Onovoh traced the Igbo Holy Sabbath movement to its founder, Dee Ekeke Lolo, and discovered he was the priest of Nwaiyieke in Akwete, Nigeria. The team provides ways of studying and understanding African history. Their research also demonstrates how literature or biographical studies can unearth data that show how West African indigenous priests have contributed to and transformed what is currently referred to as African Christianity. Thus, through examining orality, literature, and African agency within Christian mission history, the project has shown innovative ways in which African spirituality and values have survived and influenced Christianity in the continent.

Amenga-Etego

Apart from the above overarching themes, the project produced specific, significant findings in relation to each distinctive focus. Amenga-Etego's transcription, translation, and analysis of Suzzy and Matt's songs, which were carried out in conjunction with ethnographic field interviews, revealed that even though the songs contain elements of the indigenous Akan female song genre *nwonkoro*, they embody many more elements of other indigenous song genres. Therefore, they should be described broadly as African music and not specifically as *nwonkoro*.¹³ In addition, the songs are richly embedded with references to the Creator God and to royal praise poetry. They are also a rich repository of views regarding other important life circumstances, including death and war. The research therefore revealed that some aspects of the indigenization and inculturation of the gospel were actually at variance with the indigenous religiocultural worldview, thereby transforming the latter within contemporary Ghanaian society.

The research showed how contemporary social change has affected African indigenous values and spiritual proclivities, doing so through the examination of concepts and terminologies used by Suzzy and Matt in their songs, as well as the translation, interpretation, and analysis provided by the interviewees during the field study. Additionally, the research highlighted the role of women in the processes of indigenization, the inculturation of the gospel, and the internationalization of Akan (Ghanaian) gospel music, as well as illustrating the dynamism, transformation, innovation, and revitalization of the indigenous religions of Africa.¹⁴ The group's international reach shows the global growth, not only of gospel music alongside the worldwide growth of Pentecostalism, but also of African spirituality and values.¹⁵

Fretheim

Fretheim's study of Afua Kuma's praise poetry led to similar results. Fretheim considered how the traditional values and spiritual traits initially conveyed within praise songs have been reinterpreted and innovatively incorporated into Christian worship

within women's oral praise traditions. Her research also discovered the prayers of two other female praise poets, Esther Asantewa and Hannah Darkoa, and how such female performances subverted a traditionally male-held role and transformed a performative genre intended to honor chiefs into a vibrant form of Christian praise and worship. Additionally, her research evaluated the reception and lasting impact of these women's praises within contemporary Christian circles, with considerations as to how such expressions may be seen as a continuance of traditional traits, while also pointing to the creative flourishing of African women's oral spiritualities within contemporary Ghanaian Christianity.

Emeka-Nwobia

Also arguing that in Igboland, a southeastern Nigerian society, songs and prayers reflect the people's spirituality, values, history, and cosmology, Emeka-Nwobia states that such expressions constitute an encounter between people and divinity.¹⁶ As such, they are creatively patterned with indigenous imageries, metaphors, repetitions, and paralinguistic renditions, which transmit extraordinary powers and emotions across the three different Christian churches she studied. Consequently, she conceptualized song as a form of prayer rendered in melodious tunes that may be fast or slow in delivery. She notes that across the churches visited, "Various forms of traditional values and spiritual traits were visible: they have survived and modulated within contemporary Igbo Christianity."¹⁷

Emeka-Nwobia's research also revealed the synergizing of African religiocultural practices with Christianity, especially in the Roman Catholic Church. Some indigenous practices that were portrayed as demonic and unacceptable are presently making inroads into the church. For example, practices like Igbo traditional title-taking and African cannon salutes (*mkponani* or *nkuruali*, gun salutes used to herald the entry or exit of a dignitary), which are usually accompanied by appellations, music, and dance, are now used during intense praise and worship sessions to celebrate the presence of the Supreme God. Overall, songs are seen as an inevitable instrument of expressing an intense Christian spirituality among the Igbo people.¹⁸

Kwakye

As indicated above, Kwakye's work on Paulo Mohenu, a traditional priest in the Gold Coast who became a Basel Mission evangelist, added a theological-historical perspective to the project and focused on African agency within the work of the Basel Mission. Mohenu converted to Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century and became an African agent of the Basel Mission church. Kwakye discovered that only after Mohenu's conversion was the Basel Mission able to expand into Ga territories, a region that had previously blocked mission efforts. One major revelation was that Mohenu's evangelistic work in the Accra plains dynamized the work of the Basel Mission in Ghana. The difficulties of the Basel missionaries in the Ga communities of La, Teshie, and Tema were soon overcome once Mohenu had entered

the sphere.¹⁹ As indicated above, although Kwakye's research was meant to be an archival one, he discovered during the study that he needed to augment his data with some fieldwork. Eventually, he relied more heavily on the oral tradition than on archival sources.

Kwakye's research demonstrated that incorporating Mohenu's traditional spiritual traits and values into his Christian faith had a positive influence on the work of the Basel Mission. Mohenu could be regarded as a nineteenth-century African prophet who employed his knowledge of African cosmology to bring many to the Christian faith. Although Mohenu, unlike other African agents of the Basel Mission, did not receive formal Western education, his gifts were recognized by the church and led to significant church growth. The work demonstrated that before the appearance of early twentieth-century prophets in West Africa, such as William Wadé Harris, John Swatson, and Sampson Oppong, others such as Mohenu, who were willing to serve with the Western missions, had preceded them. This aspect of the study has also brought to the fore how Western missionaries frequently relegated these oral sources to the background, while African Christians (both past and present) bring them to the fore, further highlighting the critical role of language as a source for African Christian scholarship.

Onovoh

Onovoh's work on Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* not only unearthed the historical background of African spirituality and religious innovation within the Igbo Holy Sabbath movement but also provided the link with its prophetic and healing ministry. Thus, from its initial conception from Achebe's novel, this aspect of the team's project explored the roots of the Igbo Holy Sabbath movement, evaluating its uniqueness and harmonization of African spiritualities, religious symbolism, and values, as well as its interaction with contemporary life in Africa and the larger Christian world. Hence, from this illustration, this dimension of study shows the value of using African literature as an important source for revealing African spirituality and values and their encounter and interaction with Christianity.

Summary

In its engagement of the themes of orality and history, the project bridged theology, social sciences, and the arts, making creative contributions through the analysis of selected literary works, gospel songs, prayers, oral histories, and praises from selected societies and individuals in Ghana and Nigeria. These literary works have helped the research team to discern some of the ways in which African Christian spirituality and values are perceived, embodied, and expressed by the members of these communities. This study has unearthed issues of gender, ethnicity, identity, and colonialism/postcolonialism through the interviews, focus-group discussions, and participant-observation among the selected groups and Christian communities in these two West African countries and from their text-based sources. In doing so, the research team

has demonstrated the ways in which these linguistic works are indeed sources of “reflective theology” in and of themselves, while also elucidating the importance of these oral and written forms as critical resources for wider theological reflection and scholarship. Additionally, this study has demonstrated the importance of inter- and cross-disciplinary scholarship between the arts, humanities, and social sciences for a holistic engagement with African theology.²⁰

It is important to note that such grassroots theology is neither a replacement nor a competitor for academic theology. Rather, when the two function in tandem, “theology acquires its authentic character—as a task, not of scholars alone, but of a community of believers who share in a common context, and are committed to the task of bringing the Gospel into contact with the questions and issues of their context.”²¹ This is not to deny that academic theology also sprang from oral data. Within the scope of this article, and as a community of theological scholar-practitioners ourselves, we have elucidated multiple ways in which African writers, singers, historians, and church laypeople theologize.

Conclusion

Capturing various oral, stylistic, and linguistic performances in selected Nigerian churches, analyzing unpublished transcripts of earlier female “oral theologians” in Ghana, and reconstructing African agency through archival studies, this project has contributed to the deeper understanding of African Christianity in a number of ways. It has raised awareness of the significant role of textual literature and orality within African Christianity, showing that they are important expressions of African spirituality, as well as a rich resource for African theological studies. In so doing, it has challenged its currently ignored and undervalued status in these study areas. Currently, some of the books, field data, and theoretical and methodological lessons from field studies are already making significant inputs to our teaching. Other contributions include the expansion of interdisciplinary horizons within the study of African Christianity; capturing, analyzing, and preserving oral resources for future scholarship; audio and video documentation and dissemination fieldwork and oral data; and expanding the international scholarly network and collaboration.

This international, cross-cultural, ecumenical scholarly network from Ghana, Nigeria, Canada, and the United States will have a lasting impact within and beyond African theological discourse. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye states, “In lyrics, traditional and modern, [Africans] sing about the God who says and does and they invite all to come and see what God has actually done. . . . To respond to these expectations and experiences of God in Africa is to build up the Body of Christ, not only in Africa, but worldwide.”²²

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Notes

1. Andrew Shanks, *What Is Truth? Towards a Theological Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2001), 5.
2. *Ibid.*, 140.
3. Leland Ryken, "Literature in a Christian Perspective," in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), 215–16.
4. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman," <http://www.crosscurrents.org/african.htm>, section "The Living God," paragraph 2.
5. *Ibid.*, paragraph 5.
6. Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Yaoundé, Cameroon: Éditions Clé; Akropong, Ghana: Regnum Africa, 2001), 8.
7. *Ibid.*
8. African Theological Advance Project Topical Areas and Key Questions, *African Values and African Spirituality*, <https://calvin.edu/centers-institutes/nagel-institute/projects/african-advance/>.
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18. Matthew Ojo, "Indigenous Gospel Music and Social Reconstruction in Modern Nigeria," *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 26, no. 2 (August 1998): 210–31.
19. Toyin Falola, *The Power of African Cultures* (Rochester, NY: Univ. of Rochester Press, 2003).
20. This perspective was underscored by the presentations made at the project's conference—the International Conference on Literature, Music, and Prayer as Sources of African Spirituality and Values—held in July 2019 at the University of Ghana, Legon. The conference attracted national and international scholars and students from the areas of music, theater arts, linguistics, philosophy, history, sociology, and psychology.
21. Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 18.
22. Oduyoye, "The African Experience of God," section "Building Up Christ's Body," paragraph 7.

Author biographies



(Left to right: top) Rose Mary Amenga-Etego, Abraham Nana Opere Kwakye, Ngozi Emeka Nwobia;
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