

## **‘Covenant’ in the Grassroots Christologies of African Christianity: An inquiry into a Translation of Doctrine**

Jiofack Kana Jésus

Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary, Ndu, Cameroon

Email: [charlesjesuskana@gmail.com](mailto:charlesjesuskana@gmail.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

The Christian faith has been part of the religious landscape of Africa from the early centuries. History records that believers in Egypt and Ethiopia perceived Christianity as a religion which, far from being confined within the spheres of speculative theology, promoted their overall well-being. In an almost similar manner, the revitalization of Christianity in the twenty-first century Africa owes part of its impetus to grassroots theologies that translate biblical doctrine to address people’s experiences. However, some of the formulations seem to divert from mainstream academic discourses. This paper uses a phenomenological approach to examine the meaning of ‘covenant’ in the representations of Christ at the grassroots. The paper hypothesizes that the theme of ‘covenant’ is pervasive in African Christianity, and reflects deliberate efforts from Christian community members to translate soteriology in their existential realities. From the findings, it appears that grassroots Christologies are a form of contextual theology, and ethno-musicology a central element in their formulation. This study fills the methodological gap between academic theology and the pews in contextual theology.

*Keywords: African Christianity, Contexts, Grassroots Christologies, Translation.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today, African Christianity acclaims its influence in the world religious movement and in global missions. It is noteworthy that the Christian faith has been part of the religious landscape of Africa from the early centuries.<sup>1</sup> In the early Middle-Age, believers in Egypt and Roman North Africa perceived Christianity as a religion that promoted their overall well-being.<sup>2</sup> Christianity later on experienced a decline, and almost disappeared with the coming of Islam and Islamic conquests. Remarkably, North-African theologians and church leaders dedicated their lives to articulating Christian theology in Latin and Greek. Two exceptions to this pattern are frequently mentioned by church historians: the Coptic and the Ethiopian churches; because of their usage of local cultural symbols and local languages – Coptic and Amharic, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The missionary paradigm that was implemented during the colonial period put forward written education as the main tool for spiritual formation, and insulated biblical knowledge by promoting academic theology as referee in matters of orthodoxy.

However, recent occurrences indicate that the revitalization and sustainability of the Christian faith in the twenty-first century Africa owe their impetus to grassroots theologies that translate biblical doctrine into the experiences of the masses. Some of these theological formulations seem contrary to the concepts and theories propounded by academic theologians. Joshua Settles notes eloquently that these theological expressions are “in contradistinction to more formally constructed theologies developed within the academy.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>David T. Ngong, “Christianity in Africa,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion*, edited by Elias Kifon Bongmba and Jacob K. Olupona (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 208.

<sup>2</sup>David T. Ngong, “Christianity in Africa,” 209.

<sup>3</sup>Calvin E. Shenk, “The Demise of the Church in North Africa and Nubia and Its Survival in Egypt and Ethiopia: A Question of Contextualization?” *Missiology: An International Review* 21, no. 2 (1993): 93.

<sup>4</sup>Joshua Settles, “Through a Glass Darkly: Grassroots Theology and the Music of Ghanaian Hip-Life Artist Kofi Kinaata,” *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2024): 57.

This paper uses a phenomenological approach to examine the meaning of ‘covenant’ in the representations of Christ by believers in Africa Christian communities. The paper hypothesizes that the theme of ‘covenant’ is pervasive in African Christianity, and reflects deliberate efforts from the grassroots to translate soteriology in the existential contexts of believers. Therefore, the main question of this research is: What meaning do African Christians make of their experiences of the New Covenant in Christ Jesus? The analysis is based on available data in biblical theology and Africa Christian theology, and empirical data obtained through ethnographic interviews with members of Evangelical churches in Douala Town and Ndu municipality, in Cameroon.

The first part of the article which is the literature review, discusses the place of covenants in the Old Testament, in the early Christianity and in African Religion. The section ends with some highlights on Christologies in African Christian theology and grassroots Christologies. This overview aims to situate the current research within the biblical narratives and reflections on contextual theology in Africa. The analysis of empirical data that follows the literature review contextualizes the findings within this body of knowledge. The last part of the article that is recommendations, proposes specific steps for fostering grassroots reflections on Christology within the Church in Africa. This article fills the methodological gap between academic theology and the pews in contextual theologies in Africa.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This review establishes the context of the present research, and elucidates its scope. Hence, it showcases five main discussions that provide background information on covenants in the Bible and in African Traditional Religion, and aspects Christologies in African scholarship.

### YHWH’s Covenant in the Old Testament

Covenants, understood in the basic sense of *binding alliances*, are part of human experiences in all societies: either in human relationships or in religious practices. As noted by Danijel Časni: “The notion of Covenant is related to the human reality that has marked many relationships throughout history.”<sup>5</sup> It is a central theme in Jewish theology and African Christian theology.<sup>6</sup> Časni concurs: “The covenant is an idea common to the Jewish and Christian religious traditions.”<sup>7</sup> Scholars like Peter Naylor have suggested that the Hebrew word for ‘covenant’; *ברית* (*berit*) or ‘oath’, is connotative of the binding agreement that YHWH engages with specific people or with the Jewish nation in the Old Testament (OT).<sup>8</sup>

The covenants that YHWH establishes with people contain stipulations that engage individual or collective responsibility, and promises concerning what YHWH will do. One example is the promise of preservation of Noah and his family in the midst of the universal flood, as recorded in Genesis 6 and 7. According to the stipulations of the Noahic covenant, Noah has to build an ark that will serve as a shelter for his family and the animals, following the specifications given by YHWH (Gen. 6:14-21; 7:1-2). Paul Krüger clarifies that, “In covenantal theology, this *ברית* with Noah before the Flood and the *ברית* after the Flood (Gen.

<sup>5</sup> Danijel Časni, “God’s Own Covenant as the Foundation of Judaism and Christianity from the Perspective of Joseph Ratzinger,” *Unity and Dialogue* Vol. 76, No. 1 (2021): 64. Doi: 10.34291/Edinost/76/Casni

<sup>6</sup> Koert van Bekkum, “Biblical Covenants in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context A Methodological, Historical and Theological Reassessment,” in *Covenant: A Vital Element of Reformed Theology – Biblical, Historical and Systematic-Theological Perspectives*, edited by Hans Burger, Gert Kwakkel and Michael Mulder (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 43.

<sup>7</sup> Danijel Časni, “God’s Own Covenant as the Foundation of Judaism and Christianity from the Perspective of Joseph Ratzinger,” 64.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Naylor, *The Language of Covenant: A Structural Analysis of the Semantic Field of Berit in Biblical Hebrew, with Particular Reference to the Book of Genesis* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 1980), 380-390.

9:9–12) are usually telescoped into a single Noahic covenant.”<sup>9</sup> In other instances, like in the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants, there are particular rituals related to the covenant.

The calling of Abraham involves a covenant in which YHWH promises a blessing, a land, and an off-spring (Gen. 12:2-3). On his part, Abram is to go from his country and kindred, and simply follow YHWH (Gen. 12:1). YHWH seals this covenant with a ritual that involves the sacrifice of an animal (Gen. 15:9-10, 18). He specifically guarantees His promises by means of a covenant (Gen. 15:18). In his analysis, Koert van Bekkum writes: “The ceremony associated with the institution of the covenant in Genesis 15, whereby a smoking oven and burning torch pass between the two halves of a heifer, goat, ram and goat (Gn 15:9, 17), served as a reminder that adherence to the covenant is a matter of life and death.”<sup>10</sup> The change of the names Abram into Abraham, and Sarai into Sarah by YHWH appears as a witness of the עֲרִיבָה; while circumcision is a sign for the posterity (Gen. 17:1–14).

As concerns the Mosaic covenant, it is consecutive to the deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian captivity. The Bible relates it to the Abrahamic covenant (Ex. 3:6-7). “Deliverance from the slavery in Egypt was entirely the result of God’s initiative, who carried them on eagles’ wings and brought them to himself (Ex 19:4).”<sup>11</sup> God then establishes a covenant with Israel, and institutes the Sabbath as the sign of the covenant (Ex. 31:16-17). Koert van Bekkum states: “YHWH is the overlord in the covenant and Moses its mediator...”<sup>12</sup> The condition of this covenant is obedience to God’s decrees, and the promises include the privilege of being God’s special people among other nations (Ex. 19:5-6).

In addition, the biblical narratives indicate that YHWH’s covenant is a central element in the Jewish theology. Most importantly, the theme of covenant is embedded in the oral tradition of ancient Israel. According to Emmanuel Osewe Akufor, “Oral tradition is historical information transmitted orally by processes peculiar to each community...”<sup>13</sup> In the context of the Jewish community of the OT, oracy served a vehicle for the expression of faith at the grassroots level. This grassroots theology manifested itself in rituals and festivals. Two examples of these are the ceremonial laws in the Leviticus canon and the worship songs recorded in the Book of Psalms. All these pointed the people to YHWH’s covenant enshrined in the Law. The OT presents a continuity between this covenant of Law and the promise of a new covenant, which is a covenant of peace and salvation; as it appears in the prophets’ discourse – for e.g., Jer. 31:31-34; and Ez. 11:19-20; 36:26-27.

### Grassroots Understandings of the New Covenant in the Early Church

The *διαθήκη καινή* (*diathékē kainē*) or new covenant established through the sacrificial death of Christ; and confirmed by His resurrection, is the major theological theme of the New Testament. The passage of Hebrews 8:7-12 that states the superiority of the new covenant over the old is actually a citation from Jeremiah 31:31-34. Luke 22:20 appears as the main passage in the New Testament, where Christ explicitly speaks of Himself as the mediator of a new covenant that will be established by His blood. One parallel text is 1 Corinthians 11:25ff.

<sup>9</sup> P.P. (Paul) Krüger, “Life in the Pentateuch (1) – Genesis 1-11: Life Created and Sustained,” in *Biblical Theology of Life in the Old Testament*, edited by Albert J. Coetsee and Francois P. Viljoen (Cape Town: AOSIS Books, 2021), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Krüger, “Life in the Pentateuch (1) – Genesis 12- Numbers 36: Life to God’s Chosen,” 53.

<sup>11</sup> Krüger, “Life in the Pentateuch (1) – Genesis 12- Numbers 36: Life to God’s Chosen,” 53.

<sup>12</sup> Koert van Bekkum, “Biblical Covenants in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context A Methodological, Historical and Theological Reassessment,” in *Covenant: A Vital Element of Reformed Theology – Biblical, Historical and Systematic-Theological Perspectives*, edited by Hans Burger, Gert Kwakkel and Michael Mulder (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 60.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Osewe Akufor, “The Role of Oral Tradition in Preserving Religion, Religious and Moral Values: The African Example,” *Economic History* (2016): 163. <https://www.academia.edu>

Jesus Christ is therefore the supreme Lord and mediator of the new covenant (Heb. 9:15). The stipulations of this covenant are faith and obedience (John 3:16; Rom. 1:16). The promises of the covenant include deliverance from the captivity of sin (Luke 4:18-19), a special relationship with God (Gal. 3:6-9), and eternal life (John 3:16). In this regard, Časni comments that, “In the New Testament, the Covenant is based on God’s grace and love giving birth to the Law of Freedom in Christ. By his incarnation, Christ did not abolish the Law, but rather fulfilled it.”<sup>14</sup> Many New Testament passages suggest that at the grassroots, the fundamental truths concerning this new covenant were expressed in various ways.

For example, addressing the problem of ethnocentrism, Apostle Paul asserts that by virtue of the new covenant, Jews and non-Jews who were once separated now form one community in Christ. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13 – ESV). He goes further to state that they constitute one family as “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19 – ESV) and “one body in Christ” (Rom. 12:5 – ESV). Thus, the blood of the new covenant is foundational for a different kind of ethnicity and kinship. Talking about sexuality, Apostle Paul says by Christ’s atonement, Christians have become God’s temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Cor. 6:19). He equally affirms that on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ, God has given a new life to Christians, a privileged position in Christ, in the spirit places. Here, Christians’ covenant with Christ is presented as the basis for a privilege position in the spirit realm. Thus, believers are secure in Christ, the Saviour and the Lord in the heavenly places.

Similarly, 1 John 5:20 sounds like a response to the prevalent mystical cults of the first century. Mystics claimed an intuitive direct contact with the divine; as the product of contemplation and personal quest for, and love of wisdom.<sup>15</sup> Apostle John affirms that as partakers of the new covenant, Christians “are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” In other words, Christians have a direct experience with God through the new covenant established by the historical *χριστός* (*Christós*) that is Christ.

These examples are illustrative of the biblical writers’ commitment in translating the knowledge about Christ into a simple language that engages the experiences of the people at the grassroots. This knowledge was communicated during Christian gatherings; through teaching, hymns singing, prayer recitations, preaching, and formal speeches.<sup>16</sup> Through this tradition of oracy, the theology of the New Covenant was made accessible to all Christians. Interestingly, in many African languages, “New Testament” is translated “New Covenant.”

### **Covenants in the Practice of African Religion**

Covenants are a central theme in African Religion and ethics, and these two elements of African societies permeate all aspects of life. Talking about the peculiarity of African Religion, Valentine Iheanacho states: “It is a religion of the heart that is enshrined in the cultural identity and value system of the people.”<sup>17</sup> He goes further to remark that the main tenets of this religion are communicated through oral traditions.<sup>18</sup> The theme of covenant is better understood in the light of this integration of religion into people’s daily living.

<sup>14</sup> Danijel Časni, “God’s Own Covenant as the Foundation of Judaism and Christianity from the Perspective of Joseph Ratzinger,” 65.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism vol 1 – The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> Valeriy A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 31-33.

<sup>17</sup> Valentine U. Iheanacho, “The significance of African oral tradition in the making of African Christianity,” *HTS Theologese Studies/ Theological Studies* Vol. 77, No. 2 (2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6819>

<sup>18</sup> Valentine U. Iheanacho, “The significance of African oral tradition in the making of African Christianity,” 2.

The Akan of Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo believe that the blood covenant binds the living, the ancestors and the unborn babies through kinship ties.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, one way of restoring broken relationships between the living and the dead is to offer sacrifices through the mediation of a priest.<sup>20</sup> Kasomo Daniel reports that after a long period of war and conflict among the Luo and Maasai of Kenya, babies were exchanged across the fence by nursing mothers; who suckled one another's babies during oath taking, to seal a covenant of peace indicating that the two parties had become kith and kin.<sup>21</sup> In the covenant between the Abagusii of Kenya and their antagonists, there was pouring of libations by the elders of both sides and a sacrifice of a white goat, a bull and a black cock, and their blood was spilled into the earth, to placate the aggrieved ancestors so that they may accept the covenant.<sup>22</sup>

Among the Yémba of West and South-West Cameroon and the Babajou, the elders of the community can also take oaths to seal an agreement of enmity against someone, who is said to have committed a deliberate act of wickedness to destroy the community. During the wars of independence of the 1950s-1960s, many of such oaths were taken against the Western missionaries and some natives, considered as traitors. Cancelling such oaths necessitates another ritual with animal sacrifices and libations, and specific pronouncements by the elders.

Among the Yoruba, covenants act like a spiritual bond that keeps people together, causes members of the same ethnic or cultic group to remain faithful to each other, and prevents evil within the community. The ritual involves taking an oath in front of a divinity or emblems of the ethnic group. It is believed that acting contrary to oath can be disastrous upon the offender or the entire community.<sup>23</sup> This recourse to oaths appears as a characteristic of societies of oral tradition. There is parallel between this practice and the early Hebrew societies, where spoken words "invested with ritual solemnity"<sup>24</sup> replaced written documents. In Africa, covenants indicate the commitment of the whole person or entire communities with the transcendent aspects of relationships that bring deeper meaning and purpose to life.

### Christologies in African Christian Theology

Historically, African Christian theology developed as a response to the cultural gaps left by the European and Western missionary enterprise in African societies. The qualifier "African" underlines the *culturalist* aspect of this theology that is, its deliberate intention to engage local cultures. According to Gabriel Tchonang, this theological framework emerges as a response to an uncritical transfer of a form of Christianity molded in the Western culture in African soil, with little regard for African values.<sup>25</sup> Etymologically, the term "Christology" comes from the Greek terms *Χριστός* (*Kristós*); 'Christ' and *λογία* (*logia*); 'word' or 'speech'. By definition, Christology deals with theological statements about Christ: for example, His nature, works, and role in human life. Christology is the very foundation of the Christian faith.

<sup>19</sup> Isaac Boaheng, "Afɔdepreko Christology: An Akan Christian Theology of Jesus' Once-For-All Sacrifice," *Journal of Religion and Theology* Vol. 4, Issue 3 (2020): 36.

<sup>20</sup> Boaheng, "Afɔdepreko Christology, 36.

<sup>21</sup> Kasomo Daniel, "The Position of African Traditional Religion in Conflict Prevention." *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* Vol. 2(2), 26. pp. 023-028, February, 2010. Available online <http://www.academicjournals.org/ijasa>

<sup>22</sup> "The Position of African Traditional Religion in Conflict Prevention," 26.

<sup>23</sup> Richard A. Ogunleye, "Covenant-Keeping among the Yoruba People: A Critique of Socio-Political Transformation in Nigeria," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, no.9 (May 2013): 82, 85.

<sup>24</sup> John L McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Collier Books, McMillian Publishing Co., New York, NY, 1965.

<sup>25</sup> Gabriel Tchonang, "Brève Histoire de la Théologie Africaine," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* Vol. 84, n° 2 (2010): 177.

African scholars like Jonas Sello Thinane advocate for a Christology that focuses on the hypostatic nature of Christ, the mystery of His incarnation and ascension onto eternal glory, on the one hand; and on the other, Christ's earthly ministry, redemptive work for humankind, and his ascension to heavens. These dynamics between transcendence and immanence have been termed Christology from above, and Christology from below, respectively.<sup>26</sup> African Christologies portray the concerns of African Christians and theologians to engage their cultures and religious traditions, in order to coin titles of Christ that can possibly enable a better understanding of the mystery of incarnation.<sup>27</sup>

African scholars have made diverse attempts to achieve this goal. John Mbiti posited that Christological titles drawn from African Religions and cultures will help believers understand Jesus better.<sup>28</sup> According to Charles Nyamiti, Christ's incarnation is the ultimate revelation of God to human-beings as Ancestor-Parent; and by the same token, Christ has become the Brother-Parent to all Christians.<sup>29</sup> Nyamiti sees a parallel between the qualities of an ancestor and Christ: which, according to him, suggests that "Ancestor" is a befitting Christological title for the Messiah.<sup>30</sup> Benezet Bujo uses the Roman Catholic theology concerning the Fellowship of the Saints as a stepping stone for his Christology. In that light, he posits the possibility of the ancestors in the spiritual realm of the saints.<sup>31</sup>

Building on the mediatory role of the ancestors, Bénézet Bujo speculates for an African understanding of Christ's incarnation as the Proto-Ancestor: human ancestors being foreshadows, and Christ's resurrection and ascension evidences of His uniqueness.<sup>32</sup> Just like Nyamiti, Bujo considers ancestor veneration part of general revelation. This view of Christ seems to align with what Kwame Bediako depicts as a "tradition response"<sup>33</sup> to the mystery of incarnation. Bediako goes further to argue that, "Christ, by virtue of his incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension into the realm of spirit-power can rightly be designed in African terms, as ancestor indeed Supreme Ancestor."<sup>34</sup> However, Isaac Boaheng retorts that all these Christological titles do not provide an accurate description of the person and works of Christ. He propounds a "Christian *Afodepreko* Christology"<sup>35</sup> that highlights Christ's unique priesthood and sufficient once-and-for-all sacrifice. These frameworks are characterized by intellectual sophistications that may seem too complicated; and even incomprehensible to ordinary Christians. Hence, grassroots Christologies employ a different methodology.

### Grassroots Christologies in African Christianity

Every Christian has a theological worldview that is, some personal reflections concerning God, Christ, and implications for their lives. In this sense, Harvey Kwiyani and Joseph Ola see it well, when they affirm that "all Christians have some thoughts (knowledge, reason)

<sup>26</sup> Jonas Sello Thinane, "Missio Dei and Missio Hominum: Top-Down-up Christology in Mission," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)* Vol 10, Issue 10 (October 2024): 363, 365, doi: <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.202410104>

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Doré, "Présentation," In *Chemins de la Christologie Africaine*, revised edition, edited by F. Kabasélé, J. Doré and R. Luneau (Paris: Desclée, 2001), 3.

<sup>28</sup> John Mbiti, "Main Features of Twenty-First Century Christianity in Africa," *Missio Africanus Journal of African Missiology* Vol 1, Issue 2 (January 2016): 82.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Nyamiti, *Christ our Ancestor* (Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984), 63.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Nyamiti, "Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of humankind: Methodological and Trinitarian Foundations," *Studies in African Christian theology* vol. 1 (Nairobi: CUEA publications, 2005), 63-70.

<sup>31</sup> Benezet Bujo, "Nos Ancêtres, Ces Saints Inconnus," *Bulletin de Théologie Africaine* vol. 1, 2(1979):165-170.

<sup>32</sup> Bujo Bénézet, *Introduction à la Théologie Africaine* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2008), 85-91.

<sup>33</sup> Kwame Bediako, "How Is Jesus Christ Lord?" – Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism," *Exchange* Vol. 25, no. 1 (January 1996): 39.

<sup>34</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of A Non-Western Religion* (Mary knoll: Orbis book, 1997), 257.

<sup>35</sup> Boaheng, "Afodepreko Christology," 34-38.

about God but, surely, this does not make all Christians theologians (in the professional sense of the word).<sup>36</sup> However, scholars consider that the epistemological gap between academic theologians and the pews is an adverse effect of the Enlightenment; which considered truth to be deducible only through rational demonstration. According to Joshua Settles, developments in Christian scholarship like systematic theology, the historical-critical method of biblical studies, and religious studies “limited the scope of sources for Christian theology to the biblical texts and exacerbated the division between theology and the cultural life of people.”<sup>37</sup>

Grassroots Christologies attempt to fill this epistemological gap. These are descriptions of Christ that reflect people’s experiences and reflections on biblical texts or on the messages preached in the parish by the priest or in the local church by the pastor. Unlike academic Christologies that use writings as a medium of communication, grassroots Christologies are disseminated orally. As Samuel Donor puts it, “The voices of African proverbs, myths, names, songs, stories, folklore and biblical texts serve to express the activity of God, Jesus and humanity in the overarching realm of visible and invisible realities.”<sup>38</sup> These reflections on Christ stem from life situations of believers, and therefore seem to guide a different type of theologizing in the local church without replacing academic theology.<sup>39</sup>

In *Aladura* churches or praying churches of Nigeria, Christians’ prayers and songs are filled with Christological titles like *Olusegun* or ‘The Conqueror’, *Olugbala* or ‘Saviour’, *Alufa Giga* or ‘The High Priest, and *Oluwosan ode Orun* or ‘The Healer from Heaven; which reflect people’s experience of faith.<sup>40</sup> Kwiyani and Ola relate that Afua Kuma, a Ghanaian Christian woman and traditional midwife, made use of traditional Akan poetry in public prayer. She called Jesus a Chief, and underlined Jesus’ supremacy over earthly chiefs, but without undermining the power and authority of the latter.<sup>41</sup> They equally mention Tope Alabi, a Nigerian musician and Christian worship leader of Yoruba heritage, who “conceptualizes God as a mighty warrior who is capable of illogical feats of power.”<sup>42</sup>

These grassroots formulations suggest another expression of doctrine that diverts from the pattern employed in the academia. They equally indicate that what Africans really think about Christ is proclaimed orally through popular songs and symbols.<sup>43</sup> The methodology employed for this research was based on this understanding of the African Church culture.

## METHODOLOGY

The empirical data for this study were obtained through ethnographic interviews. “Ethnography is the work of describing a culture.”<sup>44</sup> The *culture* under investigation has to do with people’s experiences in Christ, especially as regards the meaning they give to Christ’s New Covenant. The author used an interview guide to carry out an interview in Yémba,

<sup>36</sup> Harvey Kwiyani and Joseph Ola, “God in Oral African Theology: Exploring the Spoken Theologies of Afua Kuma and Tope Alabi,” *Conspectus* Vol. 31 (April 2021): 55.

<sup>37</sup> Joshua Settles, “Through a Glass Darkly: Grassroots Theology and the Music of Ghanaian Hip-Life Artist Kofi Kinaata,” *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2024): 57.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel H. Donkor, “African Christology from an African Christian Theological Perspective,” *ERATS* (June 2016): 8.

<sup>39</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Ghana: Regnum Africa, 2000), 17.

<sup>40</sup> Emmanuel O. Babalola, “A Selected Yoruba Christological Titles among the Aladura Churches: An Insight into African Perception of Christ,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Invention* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2019): 14-18, url, doi: 10.35210/jhssi.1.1.3

<sup>41</sup> Harvey Kwiyani and Joseph Ola, “God in Oral African Theology, 61.

<sup>42</sup> Harvey Kwiyani and Joseph Ola, 61.

<sup>43</sup> John Mbiti, “Main Features of Twenty-First Century Christianity in Africa,” *Missio Africanus Journal of African Missiology* Vol 1, Issue 2 (January 2016): 82.

<sup>44</sup> James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1979), 3.

English, and French languages with twenty-five Christians of five denominations in Douala Town and Ndu Municipality, in Cameroon. The informants answered the following questions: Can you think of the title of any song that praises God for His covenant with believers in Christ? Please, help me write a few words of that song on a piece of paper. What are some things that come to your mind when you sing or pray mentioning Jesus Christ's Covenant?

The answers were recorded in the form of structured notes taking instead of verbatim transcription, to avoid raising suspicion, and to reinforce trust with the informants. The answers were put in the context of the main research question,<sup>45</sup> and interpreted to understand the lived experiences of the informants concerning Christ, and the various meanings they make of those experiences, as partakers in the New Covenant in Christ Jesus.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results of the analysis reveal two types of findings: the meanings of Christ's covenant at the grassroots level, and the processes used by the pews to formulate those Christologies.

### Significance of 'Covenant' in Grassroots Christologies

The findings suggest that believers understand that they are in a covenantal relationship with a sovereign monarch. This idea transpires from lyrics like "Jesus, you are King forever!" and in a doxology like: "Glory to the Lamb, He is the King of kings!" This Christological title is in line with Afua Kuma's Christology, which depicts Jesus as the Chief of chiefs.<sup>46</sup> It is a proclamation of Christ's rulership over the believer's life and over temporal authorities.

Another understanding of Christ is that of the Mighty God in battle, warrior, as seen in lyrics like "You are a covenant keeping God, the mighty warrior in battle." This is a depiction of the authority that Christ has to defend His people against spiritual attacks, on the basis of the New Covenant. This is even more explicit the following lyrics: "By your blood, you crushed the powers of witchcraft!" These expressions are in line with Valentine Iheanacho's assertion that, "The emphasis on 'power' in the re-appropriated African Christianity strikes a familiar chord in the African context where the supernatural realm is invoked upon for active power, intervention..."<sup>47</sup> African Christians consider power a benefit of the New Covenant.

Christ is also depicted as the Deliverer from all predicaments, as suggested by these lyrics: "Do not be worry, do not be downcast/for you have a friend called Jesus./He has paid the price." Or "Just raise your hands/And declare, "I will make it; my life is in His hands." One can relate the faith in Christ expressed in this declaration to the following lyrics: "By your Name, you established authority." In other words, the authority of the declaration of blessings in the face of predicaments lies in the Name of Jesus, who is believed have given the same authority to all those who are in a covenantal relationship with Him.

Again, the following lyrics state the permanent nature of Christ's covenant with believers: "Covenant keeping Father, Covenant keeping Son" and "Jesus has given a covenant to His people, Alleluia!" These lyrics suggest that the covenant shall be permanent because it is maintained by Christ Himself. This understanding resonates with the security of believers' salvation in this life and in the afterlife, as stated in the Bible (e.g. Heb. 13:15ff).

<sup>45</sup> Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data: A Mixed Methods Approach*, Second Edition (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2013), 15-16.

<sup>46</sup> Harvey Kwiyani and Joseph Ola, "God in Oral African Theology, 61.

<sup>47</sup> Valentine U. Iheanacho, "The significance of African oral tradition in the making of African Christianity." *HTS Theologese Studies/ Theological Studies* Vol. 77, No. 2 (2021): 3, url: <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6819>

The formulation of these Christologies follows particular processes that are worthy of attention.

### **Grassroots Methodologies**

A careful examination of the lyrics above reveals two processes involved in the formulation of Christologies at the grassroots level: Christological hermeneutics and oral translation.

#### ***Christological hermeneutics***

Christological hermeneutic is based on the believers' experiences of the biblical teachings about Christ. Jones Maweu Kaleli remarks that, "The Church of Christ in every generation and every culture must respond to the question, "Who do you say I am?"<sup>48</sup> The peculiarity of Christians in the pews is that their answers to the question are based on lived experiences. They are a living testimony of what the Bible says about *being* in Christ. Their interpretations seem to match the apostolic teachings concerning Christ and His relation to those who have believed in Him. As stated above, African Christian theology makes a distinction between ontological and functional Christologies. These findings reveal a trend toward relational Christology, with hints of intersectionality between the function and the nature of Christ.

#### ***Translation through oracy***

The medium for translating the teachings about Christ at the grassroots is oral communication. It seems therefore appropriate to talk of an oral theology, since it is expressed through dance and music. In some of the churches that this author visited, people shared their testimonies, and spontaneously tuned a song. The congregation listened to the improvised lyrics, and joined the member in singing. This confirms Emmanuel Olusola's remark, when he states: "Most Christians prefer to worship and express their faith in oral form."<sup>49</sup>

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The most important findings of this research have to do the significance of the covenantal relationship that African believers have with Christ Jesus, understood within the context of the indigenous religious worldview, and the translations of the promises related to Christ's New Covenant. These translations which reflect the existential realities of African believers are also in line with the claims and promises of the Scriptures. Oracy plays a central role in the communication of these forms of Christologies that are formulated from the pews.

These findings suggest that Christology is central to the believers' life in African Christianity. Consequently, church leaders need to clarify possible misunderstandings related to Christ's lordship using familiar symbols, and encapsulate the teachings in songs and stories. Also, church leaders should engage grassroots reflections on ethno-musicology, namely by encouraging Christians to compose songs that express their lived experiences. This gives the minister of the gospel an avenue for understanding the real beliefs of church members, and engaging open dialogue with them for a dynamic contextualization of biblical Christology. Finally, there is need for African theologians to elaborate more on an oral theology that will facilitate good appropriation of the gospel by the Church at the grassroots.

---

<sup>48</sup> Jones Maweu Kaleli, "Theoretical Foundations of African and Western Worldviews and their Relationship to Christian Theologizing: An Akamba Case Study," PhD dissertation. Fuller Theological Seminary, 1985, 62.

<sup>49</sup> Emmanuel Olusola Fasipe, "Orality, Oral Practices and Christian Worship in West African Cultures,"

*International Journal of Advanced Research* Vol. 11, No. 8 (2023): 99, URL:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/17367>

## CONCLUSION

This paper stemmed from the observation that some formulations surrounding Christology in the African Church seem to divert from the intellectual sophistications that are obtainable in mainstream academic discourses. The findings have revealed that although grassroots Christologies use local expressions drawn from lived experiences, those formulations reflect to a greater extent the biblical teachings. It is therefore accurate to refer to them as local translations of the doctrine of Christ. These findings indicate that theology is not the monopoly of the academia, and that church leaders need to encourage grassroots reflections in local churches. The findings equally suggest that dynamic contextualization of Christian theology in Africa requires that the theologian listens to the grassroots interpretations in context, as reflected in songs, signs and symbols. Grassroots Christologies are therefore a form of contextual theology, and ethno-musicology a central element in their formulation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alikin, Valeriy A. *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Babalola, Emmanuel O. "A Selected Yoruba Christological Titles among the Aladura Churches: An Insight into African Perception of Christ." *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Invention* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2019): 13-20. Doi: 10.35210/jhssi.1.1.3
- Bediako, Kwame. " 'How Is Jesus Christ Lord?' – Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the Context of African Religious Pluralism." *Exchange* Vol. 25, no. 1 (January 1996): 27-42.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of A Non-Western Religion*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis book, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*. Ghana: Regnum Africa, 2000.
- Boaheng, Isaac. "Afɔdepreko Christology: An Akan Christian Theology of Jesus' Once-For-All Sacrifice." *Journal of Religion and Theology* Volume 4, Issue 3 (2020): 34-41.
- Bujo, Benezet. "Nos Ancêtres, Ces Saints Inconnus." *Bulletin de Théologie Africaine* vol. 1, n° 2 (1979): 165-178.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Introduction à la Théologie Africaine*. Fribourg: Academic Press, 2008.
- Časni, Danijel. "God's Own Covenant as the Foundation of Judaism and Christianity from the Perspective of Joseph Ratzinger." *Unity and Dialogue* Vol. 76, No. 1 (2021): 63–76. Doi: 10.34291/Edinost/76/Casni
- Daniel, Kasomo. "The Position of African Traditional Religion in Conflict Prevention," *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (February, 2010): 26. url, <http://www.academicjournals.org/ijjsa>.
- Donkor, Samuel H.. "African Christology from an African Christian Theological Perspective." *ERATS* (June 2016): 1-10.
- Doré, Joseph. "Presentation." *Chemins de la Christologie Africaine*. Revised edition. Edited by F. Kabasélé, J. Doré and R. Luneau, 11-18. Paris: Desclée, 2001.
- Iheanacho, Valentine U. "The significance of African oral tradition in the making of African Christianity." *HTS Theologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* Vol. 77, No. 2 (2021): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6819>
- Krüger, P.P. (Paul). "Life in the Pentateuch (1) – Genesis 1-11: Life Created and Sustained." In *Biblical Theology of Life in the Old Testament*. Edited by Albert J. Coetsee and Francois P. Viljoen, 11-33. Cape Town: AOSIS Books, 2021.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Life in the Pentateuch (1) – Genesis 12- Numbers 36: Life to God's Chosen." In *Biblical Theology of Life in the Old Testament*. Edited by Albert J. Coetsee and Francois P. Viljoen, 35-56. Cape Town: AOSIS Books, 2021.
- Kwiyani, Harvey and Joseph Ola. "God in Oral African Theology: Exploring the Spoken Theologies of Afua Kuma and Tope Alabi." *Conspectus*, Volume 31 (April 2021): 54-66.
- LeCompte, Margaret D. and Jean J. Schensul. *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data: A Mixed Methods Approach*. Second Edition. Lanham : Altamira Press, 2013.
- Maweu Kaleli, Jones. "Theoretical Foundations of African and Western Worldviews and their Relationship to Christian Theologizing: An Akamba Case Study." PhD dissertation. Fuller Theological Seminary. 1985.
- Mbiti, John. "Main Features of Twenty-First Century Christianity in Africa." *Missio Africanus Journal of African Missiology* Vol 1, Issue 2 (January 2016): 72–88.
- McGinn, Bernard. *The Foundations of Mysticism vol 1 – The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism*. New York: Crossroad, 2004.
- McKenzie, John L. *Dictionary of the Bible*, Collier Books, McMillian Publishing Co., New York, NY, 1965.
- Naylor, Peter. *The Language of Covenant: A Structural Analysis of the Semantic Field of Berit in Biblical Hebrew, with Particular Reference to the Book of Genesis*. Oxford: University of Oxford, 1980.
- Ngong, David T. 2012. "Christianity in Africa." In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*. Edited by Elias Kifon Bongmba and Jacob K. Olupona, 208-219. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Nyamiti, Charles. "Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of humankind: Methodological and Trinitarian Foundations." *Studies in African Christian theology* vol. 1. Nairobi: CUEA publications, 2005
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Christ our Ancestor*. Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984.
- Ogunleye, Richard A. "Covenant-Keeping among the Yoruba People: A Critique of Socio-Political Transformation in Nigeria," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, no. 9 (May 2013): 82-85.
- Olusola Fasipe, Emmanuel. "Orality, Oral Practices and Christian Worship in West African Cultures." *International Journal of Advanced Research* Vol. 11, No. 8 (2023): 98-107. Doi URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/17367>
- Osewe Akubor, Emmanuel. "The Role of Oral Tradition in Preserving Religion, Religious and Moral Values: The African Example." *Economic History* (2016): 163-179. <https://www.academia.edu>
- Sello Thinane, Jonas. "Missio Dei and Missio Hominum: Top-Down-up Christology in Mission." *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)* Vol 10, Issue 10 (October 2024): 362-372. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.202410104>
- Settles, Joshua. "Through a Glass Darkly: Grassroots Theology and the Music of Ghanaian Hip-Life Artist Kofi Kinaata." *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2024): 54-72.
- Shenk, Calvin E. 1993. "The Demise of the Church in North Africa and Nubia and Its Survival in Egypt and Ethiopia: A Question of Contextualization?" *Missiology: An International Review* 21 (2).
- Spradley, James P. *The Ethnographic Interview*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1979.
- Tchonang, Gabriel. "Brève Histoire de la Théologie Africaine." *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 84 n° 2 (2010) : 175-190

van Bekkum, Koert. “Biblical Covenants in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context: A Methodological, Historical and Theological Reassessment.” In *Covenant: A Vital Element of Reformed Theology – Biblical, Historical and Systematic-Theological Perspectives*. Edited by Hans Burger, Gert Kwakkel and Michael Mulder, 47-78. Leiden: Brill, 2021.