

Conflicts Between Akan Traditional Bereavement Practices and Church Practices: A Case Study Of Ebenezer Congregation, Old Tafo Presbyterian Church, Kumasi

Samuel Adjei, Samuel Abosi and Ebenezer Abrokwah

Samuel Adjei
Samuel Abosi
Ebenezer Abrokwah

ABSTRACT

Christianity does not erase an individual's cultural identity. However, it does call for discernment—affirming what aligns with the gospel and rejecting what contradicts biblical truth. The paper addressed the conflict between Akan traditional practices regarding bereavement and those of the church. This paper focused on the theological frameworks the church can employ to address conflicts between Akan traditions and Christian doctrines on bereavement. The paper employs an empirical approach, utilising qualitative research methods, specifically through interviews. The findings of this paper are that there is a need for liturgical reinterpretation of ancestor worship and the need for doctrinal guidelines for traditional rituals. Moreover, certain Akan traditional bereavement practices must be allowed in Church settings. The authors recommend that the church harmonise and separate some traditional beliefs from Christian teachings, and that it also promotes education and respect for both traditional and church practices regarding bereavement. The findings of this paper contribute to Christian ethics by resolving the conflict between Akan traditional bereavement practices and Church practices within Akan Christianity.

Keywords: *Akan Christianity, Bereavement management, Grief, Death, Culture*

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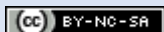
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Correspondence

Samuel Adjei

Adjeisamuel2001@gmail.com



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Akan are the largest ethnic group in Ghana.¹ Among the Akan, death is not viewed as the end of existence but rather as a transition into the ancestral world. Funerals are elaborate social events that serve both to honour the deceased and to strengthen kinship ties.² The mourning process includes public displays of grief, wearing of mourning cloths (often red and black), libations, drumming, and funeral dirges, which serve as expressions of sorrow and remembrance. The bereaved family plays a central role, and specific elders or traditional leaders, such as the *Abusuapanyin* (family head), guide the process to ensure that customs are followed appropriately.³

With the arrival of Christianity, particularly through European missionaries and African evangelists, many Akan funeral customs have been challenged or modified. Christian teaching emphasises resurrection and holds that eternal life is found only in Jesus Christ (John 11:25, NIV), shifting the focus of funerals from ancestral veneration to faith in Christ. Some Church denominations discourage traditional practices such as libations and elaborate mourning rituals, viewing them as inconsistent with Christian teachings.⁴ Churches play a crucial role in providing pastoral care, counselling, and structured funeral services for bereaved families. The communal nature of the Akan society aligns with the Christian emphasis on fellowship, leading to collective forms of support such as church-organised funeral donations and visitations.⁵ The Akan people of Ghana have a rich tradition of bereavement management deeply rooted in their cultural and religious beliefs.⁶

However, the Church, on the other hand, provides pastoral care, prayers, and counselling to the bereaved but often neglects certain cultural expectations that are significant to the Akan people. As a result, many bereaved families struggle with navigating both traditional and Christian responses to bereavement, leading to emotional distress and family disputes. There is a need to examine how Christian Churches respond to Akan bereavement traditions, the extent to which they accommodate cultural elements, and how Akan Christians negotiate their dual identities in times of bereavement.

In light of this concern, the article examines bereavement management from both biblical and Akan traditional perspectives. The paper highlights, among other things, the Akan concepts of life and death and the Christological approach to grief. It further examines the findings from the interview conducted on Akan bereavement practices and the Church practices. The researchers recommended that the Church integrate some traditional beliefs into Christian teachings while separating others; it should also promote education and respect for both traditional and Church practices regarding bereavement. The conclusion emphasised that the Church should make room for traditional practices that do not conflict with the Word of God. The article contributes academically by serving as a guide for other researchers to undertake further studies in the topic area, and its findings will add to the knowledge base of prior publications. Again, this article will help resolve the conflict between Akan

¹ Daniel Asante Boamah, "Akan Indigenous Religio-Cultural Beliefs and Environmental Preservation: The Role of Taboo" (MA, Queen's University, 2015), 1-66, 20.

² Kofi Abrefa Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), xi-288, 19

³ Busia, *The Position of the Chief*, 19.

⁴ Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 1-261, 164.

⁵ Kwabena J. Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 1-194, 114.

⁶ Busia, *The Position of the Chief*, 19.

traditional bereavement management and Church practices by examining the differences between the two perspectives and the conclusions reached.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The choice of method depends on the type of information to be collected. The paper used a qualitative approach, interviewing five individuals from the aforementioned Presbyterian Church to reach an accurate conclusion that reflects the topic. Data are numerical facts and figures from which conclusions can be drawn. In evaluating the gathered data, qualitative analysis was employed. This method relies on the quality of the information rather than the quantity of responses to a particular issue. It assesses its relevance to the subject under study.⁷ This method of data analysis was also employed because the researchers relied largely on interviews to elicit detailed information from respondents. The article also drew data from journals, books, websites, and dissertations. The data was analysed thematically.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Who are the Akan Christians?

The Akan people are predominantly in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. They live in the central and southern regions of Ghana. The Ashanti is the largest subgroup among the Akan. The Akan speak a common language and share a common social and cultural system. The Akan make up more than 53% of Ghana's contemporary population of over 20 million people.⁸

The Akan Christians hold that Ghana is the creator, a perspective influenced by both traditional religious practice and Christian missionary efforts. It is crucial to understand the origins and development of Christianity among the Akan people in Ghana, and how it interacted with African traditional religion, to understand how modern Akan Christians conceptualise God and creation.⁹

Around 1482, Roman Catholic missionaries from the West planted the first Church in West Africa, in Ghana. A sterile European institution that was securely confined in "hygienic" enclaves along the Sanneh coast was the kind of Christianity that was introduced into Ghana. From that point on, the Ghanaian Church began to engage with the native populace periodically. Sections of the Akan population were exposed to Christianity early on because they resided along Ghana's coast.¹⁰ Akan Christians are Akan people who have accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ and who follow the teachings of the Bible. They do not completely disregard their culture, but rather practice those aspects that do not conflict with Christian doctrine.¹¹

3.2 Life in the Akan Context

The Akan acknowledge God as the origin of all life; the idea of God and the Akan concept of life are closely related.¹² The belief in a supreme deity, known as Onyame or Onyankopong, is central to the traditional Akan worldview. *Onyame* is an absolute, eternal, and logical being. Debating *Onyame's*

⁷ Tom K. B. Kumekpor, *Research Methods and Techniques of Social Research: Sections 1 - 3* (Accra: Ghana, SonLife Press & Services, 2002), 72.8

⁸ Robert Owusu Agyarko, "God of Life: Rethinking the Akan Christian Concept of God in the Light of the Ecological Crisis," *The Ecumenical Review*, 65(1) (2013): 51 -66,1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/erev.12026>

⁹ George Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1959), 3–51, 3.

¹⁰ Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (London, C. Hurst & Company, 1983), xvii-286, 20.

¹¹ Agyarko, "God of life,"2.

¹² Agyarko, "God of life,"1.

existence has never been necessary; the difficulty has been identifying God at work.¹³ *Onyame* is not and has never been considered the tribal deity of the Akan people. Instead, *Onyame* is regarded as the highest entity, whose kindness extends to everyone. *Onyame* is considered the universe's governing principle and is credited with creating it.¹⁴ The Akan believe that all life, including human life, contains *sunsum* (spirit or personality), just as *Onyame* has. The latter's *sunsum*, or personality or spirit, comes from the former in the same way that sparks do from a fire.¹⁵

In contrast to the other spirit beings that are honoured in tribal and family worship, *Onyame* is particularly recognised on an individual basis.¹⁶ In light of this, some outside observers mistakenly believe that *Onyame* is not actively worshipped because it is far from everyday religious activity. However, people may use informal exclamations or libation rituals to direct their prayers and petitions to God. Many commonly used expressions in the Akan language allude to or suggest the name of God. For instance, "*Se Onyame pɛ a*" (if God wills or permits) is a common Akan phrase that indicates that the sole requirement for success is God's approval.¹⁷ When one gets up and before going to sleep, the name of God is also called upon. These statements recognise that life is under God's control and that things happen according to God's will.¹⁸ In addition to *Onyame*, the Akan also express belief in Mother Earth, lesser deities, ancestral and other spirits, and material objects. There is a strong belief that *Onyame* created and kept all these spirits, along with other tangible objects.¹⁹

All life, both human and non-human, is said to have been saved by God. Except for suffering, life in the afterlife is thought to be a duplicate of life on earth. After death, all creatures return to God since they share God's nature (*sunsum*).²⁰ Therefore, the Akan believe that all creatures will eventually be redeemed. The Akan believe that death does not instantly destroy life in human forms. While individuals who do not qualify as ancestors walk around as ghosts, frightening people until specific rites are carried out or until they are reincarnated, the deceased continue to exist in the spirit world; the ancestors reside in *asamando*, a haven of rest.²¹

3.3 Death in the Akan Context

The Akan, with differing degrees of local variation, have built shared political, social, religious, and cultural institutions.²² According to the Akan, humans (*onipa*) are made up of three parts: the soul (*kra*), which comes from God (said to be the only parts that remain after death), the spirit (*sunsum*), which comes from the father at birth, and the body (*honam*), which is made up of the mother's blood.²³

¹³ Agyarko, "God of life,"1.

¹⁴ Agyarko, "God of life,"11

¹⁵ Agyarko, "God of life,"11.

¹⁶ Peter Kwesi Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 1-134, 12.

¹⁷ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 11.

¹⁸ Agyarko, "God of life,"2.

¹⁹ Agyarko, "God of life,"2.

²⁰ Agyarko, "God of life,"2.

²¹ Agyarko, "God of life,"5.

²² Alfred Korankye and Isaac Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care: Toward a Therapeutic Approach to Addressing the Needs of Grieving Persons in the Akan Community of Ghana," *International Journal of Social Science and Review* Vol 7(8) (2024):188-197, 189, <https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssr.v7i8.2204>

²³ Isaac Boaheng, "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Akan Dying, Death and Mourning Rites," *African Journal of Culture, History, Religion and Tradition* Vol 4(1)(2021):15-28, 17, <http://doi.org/10.52589/AJCHRT/S1M4JBR6>

Samuel Adu-Gyamfi et al. define death as "the physical cessation of life" of an individual. Among other things, the Akan believe that death is cruel, heartless, sadistic, and merciless.²⁴

Adu Gyamfi et al. define bereavement as "the emotional and psychological feeling of those involved with or close to the dead person," while dying is defined by the authors as "the visible process of decline and physical expiration of an individual."²⁵ Adu-Gyamfi et al. postulate that in the Akan worldview, a person dies when their soul leaves their body.²⁶ Among the Akan, it is believed that death solely impacts the body because the soul (*kraa*) and spirit (*honhom*), which are inextricably linked, automatically leave the body.²⁷ The Akan community do not reject the idea of immortality, or the soul's ability to live on after death.²⁸ According to Akan religious belief, death is a passage from the land of the living to another realm. To ensure a seamless journey for the deceased's spirit from the world of the living to the ancestral realm, specific rituals must be performed. Over the course of the several-day adventure, one will climb and descend high slopes, cross rivers, become tired, rest, eat, drink, and spend money.²⁹ Because of this concept, the Akan offer water to the dying person, either willingly or upon request, to help their souls return to the ancestral world in preparation for their journey. After drinking water, the person usually dies immediately.³⁰ The phrase "Receive this water and drink and do not permit any evil to come whence you are setting out, and permit all women of this household to bear children" is typically recited in conjunction with the ritual of pouring water into the neck of a dying Akan.³¹

The Akan believe strongly in the existence of a Supreme Being who created and sustains the cosmos. The Akan also believe in ancestor worship, in which ancestors have superhuman abilities, can influence the lives of the living, and are next to the Supreme Being.³² To reach the divinised state of the ancestor, a person's soul must meet specific requirements, which include: First, lineage determines ancestry. A person cannot be another person's ancestor unless they are blood relatives. Ancestors are typically thought of as deceased parents, grandparents, and uncles. A deceased friend cannot be a relative of a surviving friend, since they are not related by blood. Once more, ancestorship necessitates an admirable lifestyle. Ancestors are seen as morally pure, and their way of life is admirable.³³ Therefore, a person's spirit cannot become an ancestor unless they lead a virtuous life.³⁴

Funeral ceremonies in Akan society give surviving family members and friends a chance to express their grief; the Akan people shed many tears during the ceremony and also express their feelings in words as they read tributes to the dead.³⁵ It is a moment where long-distance family

²⁴ Samuel Adu-Gyamfi, Emmanuel Antwi Fordjour, Charles Ofoosu Marfo and Isaac Adjei Forson, "Funerals Among the Akan People: Some Perspectives on Asante," *Revista de Etnologie Şi Culturologie* Vol XXVII, (2020):44-53 45, <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3956748>

²⁵ Adu-Gyamfi et al., "Funerals Among the Akan People," 45.

²⁶ Adu-Gyamfi et al., "Funerals Among the Akan People," 45.

²⁷ Adu-Gyamfi et al., "Funerals Among the Akan People," 45.

²⁸ Adu-Gyamfi et al., "Funerals Among the Akan People," 45.

²⁹ Isaac Boaheng, "A Socio-economic and Religious Analysis of the Adesiedee (Burial Items) Rite in Akan Dɔteyie (Pre-burial Funeral)," *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* Vol 5(8), (2023): 125-136, 126, <https://doi.org/10.38159/motbit.2023581>

³⁰ Boaheng, "A Socio-economic," 126.

³¹ Boaheng, "A Socio-economic," 126.

³² Boaheng, "A Socio-economic," 126.

³³ Boaheng, "A Socio-economic," 127.

³⁴ Boaheng, "A Socio-economic," 127.

³⁵ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care," 191.

members and friends can reunite to express their affection for the bereaved family and say goodbye to the departed.³⁶ According to Akan custom, the mourning family and those who are supporting them wear primarily crimson or black clothing during this time to symbolise their anguish, grief, and the loss of their loved ones.³⁷ In the Akan community, the gathering of surviving family members with sympathisers is the most significant part of the burial ceremonies.³⁸

3.4 Life from a Christian Perspective

The idea that God is the origin and creator of life is the foundation of the biblical perspective on life (Psalm 36:9 NIV). Being the origin of life, God lives independently and does not need any further help to continue to exist. Classical theologians know this quality of God as his "aseity," which denotes that he is the only being whose existence is completely independent of other entities.³⁹ The Christian narrative is distinguished from other versions that either assume a pre-existing universe or present it as the product of numerous hands by the account of life's genesis in the book of Genesis. Because Christianity is monotheistic, every life—aside from God's—is interpreted as a continuation of God's own life.⁴⁰ The concept of "life" in the Greek New Testament is described through several key words: *βίος* (bios), *ζωή* (zoe), and *ψυχή* (psuche). These terms carry different nuances. Bios refers to the manner or means of physical life—such as livelihood, possessions, or one's earthly existence (1 Jn 2:16, NIV). Zoe denotes life in the absolute sense, often referring to the divine or eternal life that comes from God through Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6, NIV). *Psuche*, originally meaning "breath" or "soul," is used for the life of a person as an individual being, sometimes translated as "soul" or "self." (Acts 2:41, NIV).⁴¹

3.5 Death from the Christian Perspective

According to Christian teachings, death results from sin (Rom. 6:23, NIV). Disobedience to God, the ultimate source of virtue, is the main definition of sin.⁴²

There is a major belief by most religions and cultures that everything ends with death and that there is no life after death. However, the Christian faith does not endorse this viewpoint. Christians also hold the perspective that death is not the end of a person's life (2Cor 5:8 NIV).⁴³ Most People typically think that a person's entire existence ends when one passes away.⁴⁴ For the Christian, death marks the start of a new life in either paradise or hell. (2 Cor 5:8 NIV).⁴⁵ Olowu Ayodeji opines that death is viewed as "a kind of sleep," as captured in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14. Just as the sleeper does not stop existing

³⁶ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care," 191.

³⁷ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care," 191.

³⁸ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care," 191.

³⁹ Loe-Joo Tan, "A Christian Theology of Life and Death," ResearchGate, April 20, 2020, accessed June 3, 2025 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/34054658...>

⁴⁰ Tan, "A Christian Theology of Life and Death,"

⁴¹ Frederick William Danker, "*Elpis*," *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1-1188, 282.

⁴² Tan, "A Christian Theology of Life and Death,"

⁴³ Olowu Ayodeji, "Christians' Perception of the Concepts of Death and Judgment: A Multimodal Discourse Analytical Study of Selected Editions of Christian Women Mirror Magazine," *International Journal of English and Literature* Vol 4(10), (2013):508-515, 509, <https://doi.org/10.5897/IJEL2013.0446>

⁴⁴ Ayodeji, "Christians' Perception of the Concepts," 509.

⁴⁵ Ayodeji, "Christians' Perception of the Concepts," 509.

while his body is asleep, the deceased person does not stop existing even though he is no longer in the area where he can communicate or be seen.⁴⁶ As sleep is known to be transient, so too is a person's death.⁴⁷ Death is sometimes viewed by Christians as "a return to the dust" (Gen 3:19 NIV). Christians assert that death is the dissolution of the body, notwithstanding how difficult it may seem to the carnal man. Humans were denied access to the "tree of life"(Gen 3:22-24 NIV) and, consequently, bodily immortality, as a result of Adam and Eve's sin. Humans are consequently destined to return to the earth.⁴⁸

3.6 Understanding the Concept of Bereavement

The term "bereavement" might be defined as the emotional state of deprivation that follows the death of a loved one. It is possible to view bereavement as a comprehensive psychobiological state that includes sadness and grief.⁴⁹ It is a state that manifests as sadness and grief and activates cognitive, emotional, and behavioural schemata. Feelings of loss tend to intensify during this phase and are linked to loneliness. Though the memories of the deceased person endure, the grieving process does come to an end.⁵⁰ The end of grief is achieved in various ways as the loss's overwhelming impact fades over time. In most traditions, this happens, for instance, when the corpse is viewed, during the cleaning ceremony, during the actual burial, when the coffin is gradually lowered into the ground, and when the tombstone is unveiled. Every person reacts to loss, how it manifests, and the necessary coping strategies in a unique way. Personal grieving experiences naturally vary widely, even when individuals share commonalities.⁵¹ Every member of the family grieves and observes different mourning customs in response to the loss.⁵²

Confronting the certainty of one's own mortality and the death of loved ones is one of life's major challenges.⁵³ Meaning that everyone admits that as they grow up in life, one has to die; the knowledge of death being unavoidable, something that no one accepts in good faith, yet nothing can be done to change it.⁵⁴

3.7 Christian Bereavement Management

A considerable number of people—possibly the majority—find that their faith in Jesus Christ is their most crucial tool for coping, healing, and personal development when it comes to death and huge losses.⁵⁵ When death touches the lives of their loved ones, many people go to God for comfort.⁵⁶ What distinguishes Christians from non-Christians in times of bereavement is their faith and hope in Christ

⁴⁶ Ayodeji, "Christians' Perception of the Concepts,"509.

⁴⁷ Ayodeji, "Christians' Perception of the Concepts,"509.

⁴⁸ Ayodeji, "Christians' Perception of the Concepts,"509.

⁴⁹ Pearl N.Y. Adubea Hammond, "Bereavement Among Middle-Aged Christians in Effutu Municipality, Central Region, Ghana" (PhD, University of Cape Coast, 2020), xvi - 272, 40.

⁵⁰ Hammond, "Bereavement Among Middle-Aged,"40.

⁵¹ Hammond, "Bereavement Among Middle-Aged,"41.

⁵² Hammond, "Bereavement Among Middle-Aged,"41.

⁵³ Dexter May Muselman, "Spirituality and Loss: Approaches for counselling grieving adolescents," *Counselling and Values* 57(2), (2012): 229-240, 229, <http://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.2012.00019.x>.

⁵⁴ Richard K. James and Burl E. Gilliland, *Crisis Intervention Strategies, 17th ed.* (Belmont CA: Brooks and Cole Publications, 2013), 1-752, 419.

⁵⁵ James and Gilliland, *Crisis Intervention Strategies*, 420.

⁵⁶ Muselman, "Spirituality and Loss," 229.

that their loved ones, at some time in the future, will rise again (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).⁵⁷ The cornerstones for coping with death and the loss of loved ones are faith, beliefs, and religious rituals.⁵⁸ The secret to the grieving process is hope. Christians' primary response to the death of a loved one is hope in Christ's resurrection. (John 11:25).⁵⁹

For believers and non-believers alike, grief and sorrow at the loss of a loved one typically manifest in similar ways.⁶⁰ In his letters to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul seeks to distinguish between the kind of grief appropriate to Christians and that which is entirely devoid of hope, a feature of pagan grief.⁶¹ Knowing that their loved one is in a better place and will be reunited with them in heaven should make Christians happy rather than sad when they lose a loved one.⁶² While receiving support from their fellow Christians and encouragement from the hope of Christ's resurrection, Christians must be able to express their sadness publicly.⁶³

4.0 A CHRISTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO GRIEF FOR THE AKAN COMMUNIT

4.1 Understanding Christological Approach to Grief for the Akan Community.

Following the loss of a loved one, grief manifests as pain.⁶⁴ Everybody will probably lose a loved one at some point in their lives, whether it is a parent, a kid, a sibling, a spouse, or a close friend. Those close to the deceased may experience grief and mourning as a result of such a loss. In some cases, loss is sudden and unanticipated, while in others, it is predicted. In either case, pain results from loss.⁶⁵ The wound does not stay as raw as the original sorrow of separation, even though the scar of grief does not go away.⁶⁶ Grief is unavoidable, but its negative effects—such as physical discomfort, despair, anxiety, and phobias—can be lessened.⁶⁷

Alfred Korankye and Isaac Boaheng argue that a Christological-therapeutic approach to mourning among the Akan community entails integrating Christian theological ideas with Akan customs and cultural norms.⁶⁸ This method aims to provide comprehensive care that honours customs while offering the comfort of Christ's teachings, acknowledging the significance of both the spiritual and cultural aspects of the grieving process. A potent example of pastoral care can be found in the life and work of Jesus Christ, especially in his dealings with the bereaved.⁶⁹ Pastoral caregivers and Christian clergy

⁵⁷ James R. White, *Grieving: Our Path Back to Peace* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 1997), 1-96, 42.

⁵⁸ James and Gilliland, *Crisis Intervention Strategies*, 419.

⁵⁹ Hans Boersma, "Numbed with Grief: Gregory of Nyssa on bereavement and hope," *Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 7(1), (2014):46-59, 47, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/dmae.83643>

⁶⁰ Brain Holmes, *what are you Crying About?: Defeating Grief for Christians* (Pittsburgh: Holmes House Press, 2014), 1-173, 33.

⁶¹ Boersma, "Numbed with Grief," 47.

⁶² Boersma, "Numbed with Grief," 47.

⁶³ Charles Reynolds, "A Guide for Understanding and Coping with Grief: A Christian's Perspective" (Degree, Murray State University, 2017), 1-71, 62.

⁶⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 1-111, 5.

⁶⁵ Thomas Wayne Doss, "Comforting the Grieving Through Worship" (PhD, Liberty University School of Music, 2020), 1-155, 37.

⁶⁶ Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 5

⁶⁷ Wei Wang, Dong-dong Chen, Yebing Yang, Xufeng Liu, and Danmin Miao, "A Study of Psychological Crisis Intervention with Family Members of Patients Who Died after Emergency Admission to Hospital," *Social Behaviour and Personality* 38, no. 4 (2010):469-478, 477. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2010.38.4.469>

⁶⁸ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care," 188.

⁶⁹ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care," 188.

can develop a framework that speaks directly to the hearts and minds of grieving members of the Akan community by fusing the teachings and example of Christ with the Akan people's customs. Korankye and Boahen assert that a meaningful example of dealing with loss that transcends cultural barriers can be found in Christ's teachings and deeds, especially in John 11:32–35.⁷⁰ The pain of losing a beloved is not particular to a specific culture, but it affects people from all walks of life.

In the Bible verse above, Martha found full comfort in the Lord who had said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."⁷¹ Also, verse 35 tells that "Jesus wept". Jesus, who is the "resurrection and life", wept as a demonstration of sympathy (John 11:25, NIV). Men of God and leaders are to show the same sympathy to the bereaved, just as the Bible admonishes that Christians are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15 NIV)—weeping to mean that Christians sympathise with the bereaved by comforting the bereaved with words and actions to bring peace and hope to the bereaved. Jesus demonstrated this by resurrecting Lazarus to put the bereaved also at peace (John 11:41-42 NIV).

4.2 Show compassion to those grieving

Darcy Harris argues that a common misconception is that compassion is the same as other prosocial traits, such as kindness or empathy.⁷² While empathy does not always entail a desire or intention to ease suffering, compassion encompasses the capacity to perceive and comprehend another person's emotional state.⁷³ Chidinma Precious Ukeachusim et al. observe that compassion is highly regarded. It is the trait of feeling deep empathy and sadness for someone else who is experiencing misfortune. In the Church's mission and mandate and in Christian social connections, compassion is a crucial virtue. Sincere compassion was a defining feature of Jesus' ministry.⁷⁴

Ukeachusim et al. affirm that, as the author narrates the events of Matthew 14:14, Jesus responded when he saw the multitude who had fled their cities and followed him, and who were afflicted with various illnesses.⁷⁵ The authors also suggest that the New Testament Greek word "*splanchnizomai*", which means to feel moved in one's internal parts, to be moved in relation to one's bowels, and therefore to be moved with compassion (since the bowels were believed to be the seat of love and pity), was used to describe the type of compassion that Jesus felt toward the crowd.⁷⁶

Furthermore, Jesus demonstrated his profound emotional connection to humanity and his readiness to share in the suffering of those who weep over their loss by crying with Mary and the others as they mourned the death of their beloved Lazarus (John 11 NIV). This demonstration by Jesus plays a big role in the bereaved family's grief process.⁷⁷ The role this demonstration of Jesus' emotional connection

⁷⁰ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care," 188.

⁷¹ Delmar C. Brick, "Exegesis: John 11:28-57," in WELS Manitowoc Pastoral Conference at Calvary (Sheboygan, Wisconsin, 1991), 1-15. accessed April 8, 2025. <http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/755>

⁷² Darcy Harris, "Compassion-focused grief therapy," *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, (2021):1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.1960948>

⁷³ Harris, "Compassion-focused grief therapy," 2.

⁷⁴ Chidinma Precious Ukeachusim, Ezichi A. Ituma and Favour C. Uroko, "Understanding Compassion in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 14:13–21)," *Theology Today* 77(4), (2021): 372-392, 373, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573620956712>

⁷⁵ Ukeachusim et al., "Understanding Compassion in the Gospel of Matthew," 373.

⁷⁶ Ukeachusim et al., "Understanding Compassion in the Gospel of Matthew," 373.

⁷⁷ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care," 188.

and readiness to share the suffering of the bereaved implies that how people treat the bereaved significantly influences their ability to get through the grief process. Since opposing reactions can leave people feeling even more alone and troubled, Christians in the Akan community must exhibit compassion and offer helpful responses that provide consolation, validation, and a sense of connection during times of suffering.⁷⁸

4.3 Convey the Message of Hope in Christ

Carol Farran, Kaye Herth, and Judith Popovich contend that hope is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, encompassing a person's thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and relationships with both themselves and the outside world.⁷⁹ It can be flexible in its expectations and persist even if the desired outcome does not materialise. Hope is the act of looking forward to something or the expectation of a possible outcome. Frederick William Danker notes that *Elpis*, a Greek word meaning "joyous expectation," is used to denote hope.⁸⁰

Donna Gillian Bailey contends that when people experience pain of all kinds, God promises to give them hope (Rev 21:4, NIV).⁸¹ The author also emphasises that because of His death and resurrection, Christ gives believers hope to bear suffering.⁸² Bailey argues that the hope that Christ offers through the Holy Spirit is lived by those who have embraced God's promises by trust. Hope and mercy are spiritual and emotional comforts rather than material ones.⁸³ Korankye and Boaheng rightly opine that as Paul stated, "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13-14 NIV), Jesus' words and deeds are in line with the Akan belief that a person is in transition when they pass away.⁸⁴ According to the author, this gives the bereaved family comfort and hope that everything is still possible. The living Akan Christian must be reassured that their loved ones have hope for resurrection, just as it is comforting for the deceased to join their ancestors. Christ's compassionate presence is embodied in such a message of hope, which helps individuals move from their darkest moments into the light.⁸⁵

4.4 Use Sensitivity to Integrate Christian Virtues in Various Cultural Contexts

Korankye and Boaheng assert that Christians should be mindful of the customs and traditions important to the Akan people, such as funeral rites, funeral gifts, and group mourning practices.⁸⁶ In the authors' view, Christian clergy can establish rapport and trust with the bereaved by offering culturally appropriate care that honours and respects these customs. This is crucial because understanding the customs that give the Akan people their identity is essential to providing pastoral care in culturally

⁷⁸ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care,"188.

⁷⁹ Carol Farran, Kaye Herth, and Judith Popovich, *Hope and Hopelessness; Critical Clinical Constructs* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1995), 1-250, 6.

⁸⁰ Danker, "*Elpis*," *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 319.

⁸¹ Donna Gillian Bailey, "A Practical Christian Ministry for Parental Grief and Loss" (PhD, Southeastern University,2021),3-263,19.

⁸² Bailey," A Practical Christian Ministry,"19.

⁸³ Bailey," A Practical Christian Ministry,"19.

⁸⁴ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care,"189.

⁸⁵ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care,"189.

⁸⁶ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care,"194.

sensitive cultures like the Akan.⁸⁷ This means that, without compromising the integrity of Scripture, the qualities of empathy, love, and compassion, among others, can only be articulated and understood in ways consistent with the customs and culture of the Akan people.⁸⁸ During the grieving process of members of the Akan community, pastoral caregivers must acknowledge and honour certain customs and traditions rather than dismissing and labelling them as heathen. The authors concluded that to maintain tradition as an important aspect of society, Christian ministers should approach bereaved families in Akan communities with humility and an openness to learning about and adopting their cultural customs and norms.⁸⁹

The following section presents the discussion and analysis of findings from interviews with five interviewees regarding the conflict between Akan bereavement practices and church practices. The interviewees comprise two members of the leadership and three members of the congregation of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Ebenezer Congregation, Old Tafo-Kumasi. The respondents were purposely selected because four are the royals of the Old-Tafo traditional family, and one is the linguist to the Paramount Chief of the Old-Tafo traditional area.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Liturgical Reinterpretation of Ancestor Worship

Christianity in Ghana came into contact with traditional practices that were already thriving among the Ghanaian people, especially among the Akan. Christianity has gained ground among the Akan because Christian propagandists have presented the faith in terms of Akan culture and beliefs. Christianity does not elude culture. However, Christianity is thriving alongside some Akan cultural beliefs and practices. The interviewees affirmed that Christianity must incorporate some Akan cultural practices. The interviewees agreed with the "liturgical reinterpretation of ancestors," that is, the Church's reinterpretation of the idea of ancestorship without disregarding Akan cultural beliefs about venerating ancestors. During church services, pastors should reframe ancestor worship as "honouring the departed" rather than "worship." For example, All Saints' Day services include prayers for deceased family members, aligning with the Christian "communion of saints" while respecting Akan cultural memory. Boaheng supports this claim by saying that "ancestors are spirits of heroes and heroines who, after death, have acquired superhuman powers, who can affect the lives of the living."⁹⁰ Their role is mediating between God and human beings, for which reason prayers are offered through them."⁹¹ Ancestors play a crucial role in the life of the Akan, sometimes just as Christians believe, in the role of Angels. Christians believe angels to be holy beings from God. The Akans also believe and see ancestors as venerated spirits who work with God (*Onyame*)

An Akan Christian may deny their Christian faith because of disregard for the ancestors whom they hold in high esteem. Moreover, of course, even in Christian belief, Saints are honoured for their good works in support of the Christian faith and the advancement of the kingdom of God (Heb 6:10 NIV). This provides Akan Christianity with another understanding of bereavement practices.

⁸⁷ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care,"194.

⁸⁸ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care,"194.

⁸⁹ Korankye and Boaheng, "A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care,"194.

⁹⁰ Isaac Boaheng, "Towards a Contextual Theology of Poverty for Ghana" (MA , South African Theological Seminary, 2019),1-163, 28.

⁹¹Boaheng, "Towards a Contextual Theology"28.

5.2 Some Akan Funeral practices must be allowed in Church Settings

The interviewees agreed that traditional Akan funerals held in churches should blend drumming of traditional drums, wearing of 'kente' cloth, and eulogies with scripture readings, hymns, and communion." For the Akan Christian to be at ease in the Church, they are not to be denied their traditional instruments at funerals held in the Church. Not everything cultural or traditional is a sin. Some things lie with the usual practices of Israel and Christian practices. It is important to know that the designs and colours of dressings have significance and implications. Hence, the Akan must be allowed to wear their traditional cloth, play their traditional drums and sing traditional songs at funerals held in the Church. This does not deny their faith in Christ but makes them comfortable and helps them grow in it.

Also, the interviewees suggest that preachers should equate '*Onyame*' (the Akan supreme deity) with Jehovah and use Akan proverbs about '*Onyame*' to explain biblical concepts (e.g., God's omnipotence). This will greatly enhance the Akan Christian's understanding of God as depicted by His names. Earth-centred rituals, such as harvest festivals, are rebranded as thanksgiving services that emphasise stewardship of creation (Genesis 2:15). Christians are expected to use names that Akan people understand, thereby teaching them to communicate effectively. In cases where a biblical name is preferred, the exact meaning must be made known and accepted by the person or the person's parents. It is worth noting that the Akan have a deep regard for names. To them, names reflect lifestyle and, most of the time, destiny. Ghanaian Christianity must not impose Christian names on Christians, and must also not look down on locally given names, because each name has a meaning it confers on the bearer; sometimes to reflect situations or fortunes, or to mimic an expected lifestyle and behaviour.

5.3 Doctrinal Guidelines for Traditional Rituals

The Church should strategise to resolve conflicts between tradition and faith among the Akan people within the Church. The Church should not forgo the traditional background or beliefs of the Akan people in equipping them as Christians. Their background is what makes them unique and who they are. The Church must resolve conflicts within the Akan Christian community concerning the traditional Christian faith without relying solely on Christian teachings. While this is true, it is not always so, since the Akan people most often behave, understand things, and talk from the influence of their culture and tradition. The interviewees are of the view that Church councils should publish manuals that distinguish "acceptable" cultural practices (e.g., wearing black attire for mourning) from "idolatrous" ones (e.g., consulting diviners). These guidelines cite biblical precedents, such as Paul's flexibility with Gentile customs (1 Corinthians 9:19–23 NIV). Also, the interviewees affirmed that Preachers are to use parables to affirm Akan identity within Christianity. For example, comparing the Akan emphasis on community to the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–27 NIV)." These strategies would really explain to the Akan Christians their state in Christ and traditional religion when it comes to bereavement in the Akan community. Hence, the Akan Christians would know what is expected of them in such situations to please Christ, their Lord, even in their cultural practices.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors would therefore recommend the following after concluding the research conducted:

First of all, the Church ought to reconcile and distinguish certain traditional beliefs from Christian doctrines and actions. The study has shown that not all traditional practices contradict Christian practices and doctrines. Intrinsic to humankind is the knowledge of God; some aspects and lifestyles of human life can be right before God, even without Jesus Christ. Therefore, not all that traditional practices entail is wrong and evil. The Church must recognise that not all cultural elements constitute sin or idolatry. Hence, the Church has the mandate to reconcile with Akan traditional practices that can align with Church practices for the Akan people not to feel disregarded or alienated from their culture.

Moreover, there must be reciprocal respect and knowledge for both Akan traditional practices and Church practices. Both the Church and Akan traditional believers must show respect and have some knowledge of the practices of each belief. Respect for each practice would help maintain peace and avoid any sense of chaos, even as the Church continues to propagate the gospel. Also, knowledge of each belief and practice would help one understand the rationale and importance of a practice within a religion, so that others would not condemn but appreciate it.

Last but not least, the Church must teach that one can be entirely Christian while still honouring cultural heritage. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul demonstrates his adaptability to various civilisations. So, the Akan Christian can adapt to both Christian practices and some Akan cultural practices that are not in disagreement with the Christian faith, since the Bible teaches that the Christian faith is superior. The Church must promote the notion of dual identity. Thus, being an Akan could mean being a Christian, yet one can still associate with some of his cultural practices.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The article was about the conflicts between Akan traditional bereavement practices and church practices. This article is relevant to resolving the conflict between Akan traditional practices regarding bereavement and the Church's practices. The study captured both the Akan and Christian concepts and teachings on life, death, and the Christological approach to grief within Akan Christianity. The research found a need for a liturgical reinterpretation of ancestor worship; for the Church to accept certain Akan traditional bereavement practices; and for doctrinal guidelines for Akan traditional rituals. Some of the authors argue that Akan Christians need to respect and be educated about both Akan traditional practices and Church practices, and to promote the concept of dual identity.

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About the Authors

Samuel Adjei holds a Bachelor's degree in theology with administration from the Christian Service University-Kumasi. Samuel was the SRC President for Christian Service University for the 2023/2024 academic year.

Samuel Abosi is the Assistant Headmaster-Academics of Yaa Asantewaa Girls' Senior High School. Abosi is the District President of the Men's Fellowship in Akropong District, Kumasi.

Ebenezer Abrokwah is the associate minister at the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Ebenezer Congregation - Old Tafo, Kumasi. He is pursuing postgraduate degree in Religious Studies at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi