Global Missiology

Current Issue

Vol. 23 No. 1 (2026): January

Published: 2026-01-17

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Editorial

Thanks be to 하나님, Dios, याहे, God, 上帝, Awurade—and to Prof. Bediako

J. Nelson Jennings

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2026

First and foremost, in this editorial I want to thank the triune God for graciously drawing close to stubborn, wayward, yet marvelously created communities of people like yours and mine. God has always done that: in the Garden, in the Old Covenant tabernacle and temple, in the Incarnation, in his New Covenant people. Yes, God reigns in heaven with the earth as his footstool, but he also looks to those who are "humble and contrite in spirit and tremble at his word" (Isaiah 66:1-2). In the contextualized language of Western philosophical categories, God is both transcendent and immanent. It is for his immanent presence, the personal relationships he cultivates with his people collectively and individually, that I wish here to express deep, heartfelt thanks.

A central feature of how God graciously draws close to people is how he relates to us in our own languages. In turn, we can relate to each other within (and across) our pockets of shared languages—thus collectively making up the mind-boggling linguistic tapestry of the great multitude of worshippers described in Revelation 7:9-10. Jokes about "the language of heaven" notwithstanding, there is no favored language that God requires people to know in order to belong to him. Salvation is by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, not by any linguistic proficiency. That multilingual trait of the Christian faith enables worship, fellowship, daily life, research, and journals like *Global Missiology* to function among the panoply of human languages.

Many readers will appreciatively know of the seminal writings of Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh on Christianity's translatability. Their teaching and published works have guided many mission thinkers in developing a framework for understanding the Christian faith as both one, unified religion and a multiplicity of diverse traditions due its various cultural expressions. The Christian gospel—indeed the very Word of God, the Bible—is translatable into all linguistic contexts. God graciously draws close to all people in our own mother tongues instead of culturally unifying us through requiring proficiency in a specially anointed religious language.

The title of this editorial attempts to exemplify both divine unity and relational diversity in how people linguistically identify him. The six divine labels/names in the title—in Korean, Spanish, Hindi, English, Chinese, and Twi—are used by Christians who speak those languages. The same triune God has graciously drawn close in relating to us in languages we already know. Walls points out how the Christian faith thus "comes home" in our linguistic contexts. Sanneh, in particular reference to Africans and Bible translations within the Modern Missions Movement, notes how communities received the Bible translated into their own languages. For Africans and for all human communities, hearing God speak in our respective languages provides assurance that this God and faith are "ours," not simply an exotic religion imported by foreign missionaries.

While Walls's and Sanneh's publications have been widely circulated, not as many readers worldwide will be as familiar with the writings of the Ghanaian Kwame Bediako. Having known all three of them personally as well as sat under each professor's lectures, I can attest that Bediako, Walls, and Sanneh were close acquaintances who held each other in high esteem. They rowed their missiological boats in a similar direction of Christianity's translatability. In Bediako's case, one of his most valuable emphases (the one for which I wish to express particular thanks here, as

indicated in the editorial title) concerns the transforming implications of the Christian faith being understood, believed, and lived in vernacular languages. God has not remained distant, exclusively discussed religio-philosophically in some esoteric religious tongue: rather, he has come close so as to transform normal, daily life, thought, and communication—including accepted religiosity—by his permeating presence in everyday, inherited human thought and speech.

Bediako's fluency in several African and European languages shaped his relationship with God through a kaleidoscope of linguistic nuances, accents, and insights. Having been brought from the darkness of atheism into the light of Jesus Christ, Bediako experienced and explored how (as he often described it) Jesus "shoulders his way" into various cultural and linguistic contexts. Communities of Jesus's followers, then, must always wrestle with the transforming effects of Jesus's presence by his Spirit and his Word as understood and expressed in each community's vernacular tongue.

Examples that Bediako cited illustrate well the point of Christianity's transforming power in vernacular languages. One example was how much of contemporary African Christianity has features that many etic analysts have labeled as "charismatic," "Pentecostal," and (thus) "shallow." Proclaiming that much of African Christianity, with its preoccupation with spiritual forces rather than growth in "sound biblical theology," is "a mile wide and an inch deep," such outside analysts have used their own descriptive categories rather than understanding from the inside what African Christians encounter in their own languages. In Bediako's southern Ghana, for example, believers functioning in Twi, Ga, Ewe, and other inherited languages must grapple with what the Bible teaches in their own languages. Africans' vernacular Bibles, i.e., God coming close and addressing Africans in their own mother tongues, necessarily address the various spiritual powers that are alive and active in African universes (that are more highly populated than Western scientific universes tend to be). Bediako would thus point out that avoiding spiritual forces would, for most African followers of Jesus Christ, be a failure in gospel application to their lives and contexts. When Jesus "shoulders his way" into cultural settings filled with ancestors and other potent spiritual beings (that others who are scientifically hardwired have supposedly explained away), he and his followers must deal with them in the potency that vernacular languages enable rather than through distant, sanitized, and irrelevant linguistic and conceptual frameworks.

Another striking example Bediako gave involved a Christian community dealing with their "ancestors" (labeled differently in vernacular terms, of course). On one hand, ignoring the ancestors would lead to living parallel lives of Christian piety and inherited patterns of ancestors' central roles in the community. On the other hand, boldly declaring through an imported language (e.g., English) and its accompanying conceptual framework, "Our ancestors are dead and gone," would not adequately touch the reality of the "ancestors" that wield real influence through inherited language and rituals. What one Christian community therefore decided to do was to observe—intentionally as Christians—a traditional ancestral ritual within which the community thanked the "ancestors," explained that Jesus was now among their community and was fully sufficient to meet all their needs for guidance and protection, and bid farewell to the "ancestors" with the assurance that as ones who had passed on before the living community they could henceforth rest in peace. External Christian observers might see such an example as "syncretistic" or "non-biblical." Prof. Bediako would point out, however, that within their vernacular setting—as guided by the Spirit and vernacular Word of God, and despite inevitably being misunderstood by etic analysts unfamiliar with that particular setting—observing that ancestral rite is what that Christian

community decided to do in order to put to rest what otherwise would have been an ongoing conflict within the community's devotion to Jesus and to their traditional "ancestors."

Prof. Bediako's insights regarding Christian faith and vernacular are extremely helpful both for theoretical analysis and for personally following Jesus. On a macro-theoretical level, realizing that God deals with human beings in their own languages buttresses a framework that simultaneously embraces the unshakeable unity and the radical diversity of the Creator-Redeemer's relationships with his followers. On a personal level, praying both in English to "God, our Father in heaven" and in Japanese to 「在天の父なる神様」expands my appreciation for the breadth and the depth of God's gracious and loving dealings with people throughout history and the entire world. Knowing from history that the label "God" has pre-Christian, Germanic etymological roots assures me of Jesus having "shouldered his way" into my own linguistic heritage. Also realizing from history that "Lord" was a more pertinent English translation in feudal times than in today's mostly religiously-confined and video-game usages urges an openness to more biblically faithful and relevant labels (e.g., "Boss"? "King"?) in contemporary English-vernacular settings.

This issue's articles wrestle with implications of how Jesus "shoulders his way" into various communities. Thanks be to "God," and in a secondary way to the late and distinguished Professor Kwame Bediako, for guidance in embracing and coming to grips with the Father, Son, and Spirit's presence among myriad communities.

Revisiting Contextualization: Missiological Parallelism as an Alternative

A. K. Amberg and Michael T. Cooper

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2026

Abstract

When Shoki Coe introduced the term "contextualization" in 1972, his intent was to take the sociocultural realities of those receiving the gospel message more seriously. For many, however, the word has lost its original focus. Years of Western missionaries eager to defend locally developed theologies against heresy have attached a colonial connotation to the term, as some theologies were deemed "contextual," in juxtaposition to Western ideas. In contrast, missiologists such as David Bosch (2011, pp. 186) and Stephen B. Bevans (2018, pp. 1-3) have made the case that all theologies are influenced by their context. This article argues that new language is needed in order to support their conclusion. It briefly surveys the history and meaning of contextualization, before proposing polemical parallelism as an alternative. The article recasts polemical parallelism, originally coined by German theologian Adolph Deissmann in 1910, as missiological parallelism to better identify God's work within a culture, irenically introducing Jesus Christ as the best solution for human struggle.

Key Words: contextual theology, contextualization, missiological parallelism, missiological theology

Introduction

When the idea of polemical parallelism was first introduced in 1910 by German theologian Adolph Deissmann, it escaped the attention of most missiologists. Colin Hemer (1986) reintroduced the idea in his treatment of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. Continuing with the idea in 1989, Paul Barnett applied its traditional understanding to the entire apocalypse of John. Simply stated, a polemical parallelism constitutes a rhetorical device where two ideas are juxtaposed with the implication that one is better than the other. In its application to NT apocalyptic literature, Jesus is viewed vis-a-vis Satan and the Roman Empire as not only the victor but the better way.

The rediscovery of polemical parallelism as a means to describe the ways in which biblical texts address cultural realities provides missiology an alternative to contextualization. The manner in which early Christians engaged culture irenically, while still holding Jesus over and against anything a respective culture offered, reorients missionary focus on the preeminence if not also omnipresence and omnioperatio of Christ in culture. In so doing, this study suggests that this rhetorical device may be a strategy still available to those missions practitioners today who wish to maintain biblical fidelity while engaging meaningfully with culture.

This article picks up the idea of polemical parallelism as a useful tool in cultural engagement yet with a missiological theology bent. Instead of a nomenclature which might feel confrontational, the article introduces a missiological parallelism that is inherently focused on juxtapositioning Jesus Christ as better than the offerings of culture, whether in the domains of politics, economics, academics, or religion, while asserting his ongoing work if not self-revelation in these domains. This study defines missiological parallelisms within both an OT and NT framework by highlighting several examples of their usage as a preferred means of missionary engagement.

Before moving to these examples, however, a brief discussion on the meaning and history of contextualization is in order.

Definition and History of Contextualization

Contextualization has been defined as "the process of learning to express genuine Christianity in socioculturally appropriate ways" (Kraft 1996, p. 376). However, this definition seems to imply a hermeneutical relativism that can lead others away from presumed objective biblical truth (Hesselgrave & Rommen 2000, p. 140). For this reason, Paul Hiebert suggested a critical approach to contextualization which "affirms what is good in each" culture "and condemns what is evil" (2001, p. 64).

The term "contextualization" was introduced by Shoki Coe in 1972 to illustrate his misgivings about the prevailing Protestant model of indigenization (1973, p. 238). In the Catholic Church, however, enculturation was proposed (Vatican Council II, 1965, pp. 26-28). The following years witnessed Protestant indigenization and Catholic enculturation fade in favor of the language of contextualization. Stephen Bevans surveyed its many theories and models:

> The "anthropological" model, which lays particular stress on listening to culture; the "translation" model, which lays stress on the message of the Gospel and the preservation of Church tradition; the "praxis" model which sees as a primary *locus theologicus* the phenomena of social change, particularly the change called for by a struggle for justice; the "synthetic" model which attempts to mediate the above three by employment of an "analogical imagination;" the "semiotic" model which attempts to listen to a culture by means of semiotic cultural analysis; the "transcendental" model, a meta-model which focuses not on theological content but on subjective authenticity within theological activity (Bevans, 1985, p. 186).

Table 1 below elaborates and slightly modifies these contextualization models:

Method	*Description*
Translation Model	The "translation" model is a model that places emphasis on Christian identity rather than cultural identity. It is concerned with translating the meaning of biblical doctrine into another culture using dynamic equivalence for cultural understanding (see Kraft, 1979).
Anthropological Model	The "anthropological" model is a model that places emphasis on the inherent goodness of humanity. Divine revelation is discovered in man who acts as the focal point for theology. Therefore, divine revelation is hidden in the cultural context of humanity (see Mbiti, 1970).
Praxis Model	The "praxis" model is a model that emphasizes the necessity of human action (praxis) in a cultural context in order to contextualize theology. Theology is contextualized

	by reflecting critically on praxis. Its aim is to liberate culture from social reality (see Gutierrez, 1970).
Synthetic Model	The "synthetic" model is a model that attempts to preserve the importance of the gospel message while interacting with cultural context(s). It attempts to synthesize the cultural context of the interpreter with that of the respondent in order to form a larger understanding of the gospel (see Tracy, 1981).
Transcendental Model	The "transcendental" model is a model that is anthropocentric in that it is the experience of the individual that determines the meaning of the gospel (see Longeran, 1972).
Countercultural Model	The "countercultural" model is a model that tends to regard context as a hindrance more than an inherent good. It seeks to challenge what causes pain within a culture by confronting it with the fact of scripture (see Hauerwas & Willimon, 2014).

Table 1: Six Models of Contextualization (adapted from Bevans, 2018, pp. 13-28)

Among evangelical missiologists in particular, dynamic equivalence (Kraft) and critical contextualization (Hiebert) emerged as leading methods. The seminal debate among evangelical missiologists over contextualization grew prominently in the late 1970s with Kraft's articulation of "dynamic equivalence" as a functional approach to gospel communication (Kraft, 1979). Although Kraft did not explicitly employ the term "contextualization" at the time, he was responding to the reductionism prevalent in missionary evangelism and advocated for a model that reinterpreted cultural forms with new, gospel-centered meanings. His approach, however, was critiqued for allegedly diminishing the authority of Scripture and neglecting the theological implications of cultural forms. Central to Kraft's model was the assertion that forms are value-neutral and may be imbued with new meaning, an assumption that opened the door to "over-contextualization," especially when those forms were adopted without critical scrutiny of their embedded cultural presuppositions (Brotherson, 2021, loc 993–1019).

As noted earlier, in contrast to Kraft's model, Hiebert introduced the paradigm of "critical contextualization," which rejected an uncritical equivalence between form and meaning. He argued that forms must be examined with respect to their functions and cultural meanings and then evaluated in light of biblical standards (Hiebert, 1984, p. 290). This approach acknowledges the indispensable role of a discerning interpreter. However, as William Dyrness cautions, the critical evaluator, presumably a missionary or other etic theological agent, must inevitably bring their own interpretive framework to bear on biblical interpretation, a process fraught with the risk of misapplying or misconstruing biblical authority (Dyrness, 2016, p. 22; cf. Brotherson, 2021, loc 1010–1064). Thus, the challenge is not only hermeneutical but epistemological: contextualization is mediated through human agents whose theological lenses shape the reception and application of

Scripture. Consequently, more reflection on the very terminology and methodology of contextualization itself is appropriate, given the interpretive role played by the critical evaluator.

A Nomenclature Challenge

Terms such as contextualization, contextual theology, reductionism, and syncretism function not merely as missiological nomenclatures but as powerful rhetorical instruments. When employed by Western theologians and missiologists, these terms often serve as so-called gatekeepers of orthodoxy, ostensibly safeguarding local theologies from perceived heretical deviation. In this sense, the role of the Western theologian or missiologist is perceived colonially as it imposes foreign paradigms on culture. For example, in relationship to contextual theology, Christopher Wright notes: "This term in itself betrayed the arrogant ethnocentricity of the West, for the assumption was that other places are contexts and they do their theology for those contexts; we, of course, have the real thing, the objective, contextless theology" (2006, p. 42).

As Eugene Heideman astutely observes, such terminology frequently operates as a form of coded language subtly reinforcing control over the trajectory of indigenous theological development (1997, p. 41). Even when missionaries strive to honor cultural values, their theological frameworks, often internalized as universally normative, are imposed as though biblically prescriptive for all contexts. Consequently, what they label "contextualization" may, in practice, become a projection of their own enculturated theology. Meanwhile, when local believers adapt Christianity with reference to their own cultural categories, such adaptations are swiftly labeled "syncretism" as a veiled accusation of theological aberration. This asymmetry of theological authority highlights a broader power dynamic wherein the missionary's cultural expressions are privileged over those of the host context.

By contrast, missiological theology constructively and irenically engages these dynamics and proposes a humble posture: one that seeks to discern how God is already revealing Himself within a culture and to make those expressions explicit rather than overwritten by the etic instrument of contextualizing. In this sense, missiological theology employs a dialogical engagement with culture by recognizing missiological parallelisms as evidence of God's continued movement (*motus Dei*) of self-revelation to a culture or people (Cooper 2020, 2021). For instance, in the case of *ekklēsia*, missiological theology explores indigenous patterns of gathering, communal eating, teaching, and caregiving as legitimate parallel expressions of "church" rather than assuming Western forms as normative and contextualizing them with indigenous garb (Sunday worship, building-centrality, pastor led, etc.). Alternatively, missiological theology reframes the missionary task, not as one of importing ecclesial structures but of recognizing and clarifying the Spirit's activity already present in the culture.

In place of traditional contextualization with its tendency to mask the missionary's neo-colonial tendency, a model of missiological parallelism offers a constructive alternative for cultural engagement. This approach recognizes and engages existing cultural and religious narratives not as neutral forms but as veiled revelation indicating God's ongoing self-disclosure. These forms along with God's perceived activity in them are then placed in dialogue with the biblical narrative in ways that provoke theological clarity rather than syncretistic accommodation or reductionistic colonialism.

A closer examination of missiological parallelism should lead to further clarity.

Defining Missiological Parallelism

A missiological parallelism is a literary, rhetorical, and missiological device in which a cultural or religious form mirrors a biblical narrative, image, or idea that subsequently both clarifies what God is doing within a culture and confronts the spiritual distortions within the form. These parallels can be identified by such literary genre as allegory, typology, metaphor, and analogy as well as observed phenomenologically in the particularities of cultural actors expressed in religious, political, economic, and philosophical forms that juxtapose and clarify related or contrasted ideas and actions. This engagement follows what Cooper calls "missiological exegesis of culture through dialogue and observation, and missiological reflection that meaningfully expresses theological ideas developed in a hermeneutical community" (Cooper, 2020).

Rooted in the theological insight of Justin Martyr's *logos spermatikos* ("seed of the Word"), a missiological parallelism recognizes that elements of divine truth are often embedded in culture. However, this approach re-centers those fragments around the fullness revealed in Jesus Christ. In this manner, missiological parallelisms affirm that traces of divine truth exist across cultures and properly reorients them as the omnioperatio God self-revealing in Christ and His *ekklēsia*. As a tool of redemptive engagement, the missiological parallelism critiques veiled hopes while offering a clearer, truer vision of Jesus, not merely as an alternative, but as the fulfillment of every cultural longing. This approach allows the hermeneutical community to engage culture not through wholesale rejection, but through subversive reorientation as it always presses the questions: "What is God doing here?" And consequently, "Why is Jesus better?"

Seasoned missionaries know that when missiology ignores cultural forms it risks irrelevance. At the same time, a missiology that simply affirms culture uncritically risks syncretism. Missiological parallelisms thread the irrelevant-syncretistic needle. They allow missiologists and theologians to engage culture with both discernment and hope recognizing *logos spermatikos* while declaring that they now see with unveiled faces (2 Cor 3:18). These parallels are theologically and missiologically pregnant actions of the God who desires all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4). In this sense, missiological parallelisms reframe familiar cultural narratives to make Christ known, not as one option among many, but as the very image of the invisible God and therefore the better option. These parallels are seen both in the Old and New Testaments.

Parallelisms in the New Testament

Considering the above definition of missiological parallelism, the New Testament exhibits clear examples of its use. Granted, the term is being applied anachronistically. Nevertheless, this study maintains that missiological parallelism provides a better missiological foundation for cultural engagement than contextualization. Some examples from the Gospel of John offer support.

John presents Jesus in missiological parallel to the culture of Ephesus (Cooper, 2021). Whether it is clarifying the meaning of *logos* (1:1, 14) in juxtaposition to the philosophy of Heraclitus, or Jesus's connection with the Samaritan woman juxtaposed to the Ephesian courtesan (4:1-26), John's portrayal of Jesus unveils the faces of the readers so that they can genuinely see the glory of Christ as better than the cultural parallels. Perhaps most revealing are John's *ego eimi* statements. The Greek words from Moses's encounter with God (Ex 3:14, LXX) reveal both Jesus's nature ontologically—He is God—and His character functionally—His life emulates God. John uses *ego eimi* a total of 21 times. While not every reference can directly tie to Jesus as God, six make the emphatic ontological declaration that He is God (4:26; 6:20; 8:24-28; 13:19; 18:5),

and seven focus on His characteristics which demonstrate His ontological reality (Table 2). As missiological parallelisms to Ephesian culture, John juxtaposes Jesus to religion, philosophy, and politics. He is the better way (John 14:6).

Saying	*Cultural Parallel*	*Missiological Point*
"I am the bread of life" (John 6:35)	Ritual meals, Dionysus /Artemis feasts	Jesus, not civic religion, satisfies eternally
"I am the light of the world" (8:12)	Artemis as light-bringer; temple lampstands	Jesus is not a light, but the Light, moral and ontological clarity
"I am the door" (10:9)	Temple thresholds and sacred space	Access to God is not through the temple or cult, but through Christ
"I am the good shepherd" (10:11)	Imperial imagery of emperor as shepherd of the people	Jesus lays down His life, unlike political or mythic shepherds
"I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25)	Artemis as protector in childbirth and death	Jesus conquers death itself, not just preserves life
"I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6)	Competing paths: Stoic logos, Epicurean truth, Artemisian ritual	Jesus is the exclusive and embodied path, not just a better idea, but a better reality
"I am the true vine" (15:1)	Dionysian cult of wine	True flourishing is found in union with Christ, not indulgence or ecstasy

Table 2: Missiological Parallelism in the "I am" Statements

John's Shepherd Motif

To further examine John's *ego eimi* statements, his shepherd motif provides a compelling example. The image of the shepherd has been variously described, with many Christian commentators commonly referring to the trade as lowly and poor (Tucker & Kueker, 2020, p. 11). That is, as Joel Green puts it, the shepherds were at the "opposite end of the social spectrum…representative of the peasantry" (1997, p. 61). Such emphasis on Jesus's presumed social marginality reflects a romanticized reading that casts Him primarily as an underdog figure, a kind of champion of the

oppressed rising from the lower classes to confront the elite. This portrayal risks reducing the incarnation to a socio-political statement rather than a theological act grounded in divine mission.

These inaccurate portrayals may comfort the marginalized, but they misrepresent the social status of the holy family. Joseph, a craftsman (*tektonos*), practiced a respected and skilled trade (Matt 13:55). As members of the family of King David, both Joseph and Mary likely held some degree of social standing among their peers (Matt 1:20). Furthermore, Mary's relation to a priest connected her to the religious elite (Luke 1:36). While stereotypes about Galileans, fishermen, and others certainly circulated, and continue to influence biblical interpretation today, the shepherding motif itself remained a powerful image. From Israel's second king, who was called from shepherding sheep (1 Sam 16:11), to the shepherding responsibilities assigned to church leaders (1 Pet 5:2), the metaphor carried deep theological and communal resonance.

The role of the shepherd also contributes to an understanding of the ideal Greek ruler who cares for people in Socrates's image of the just city. Socrates, in dialogue with Polemarchus, Cleitophon, and Thrasymachus about the expectations of a civic leader, uses the metaphor for those who hold responsibility to tend to the well-being of the citizens:

> But the skill of shepherding surely does not care for anything else apart from what it has been put in charge of, and how to provide what's best to this, since, as long as it does not fall short of being shepherding, whatever belongs to itself has, of course, already been provided to a sufficient extent, so that it can be best. Accordingly, I think we need to accept at this stage that all rule, insofar as it is rule, does not consider what's best for anything else, except what it rules over and tends upon … (Plato, Republic 1.345d).

Similarly, the imagery of the ideal Roman ruler borrowed the Greek imagery in the shepherd motif. Suetonius writing about Tiberius, during whose reign John the Baptist receives a word from God (Luke 3:1-2), relates an account when governors were recommending more taxes be weighed on citizens. Tiberius' response was, "It is the part of a good shepherd to shear, not flay, his sheep" (Suetonius, *Tiberius Nero Caesar* 32). Indeed, Suetonius portrayed Tiberius as maintaining the public good during his rule, and the shepherd motif served to solidify an image of caring for the empire.

With such a backdrop of the positive image of the shepherd in both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman imagination, John introduces Jesus as the good shepherd (John 10:11). The good shepherd exhibits a number of important characteristics including protection of the flock with his life, intimately knowing them, seeking others to care for, and more. Jesus as the good shepherd is not simply on par with other shepherds, whether political or religious. Rather, he is better than any who might be called a shepherd. The functional distinction is critical for an effective missiological parallelism as it demonstrates God's missional movement to people.

Application of Missiological Parallelism

The ontological and functional aspects of Jesus Christ as God are not compromised in missiological parallelisms. Ontologically, Jesus has no comparison. However, functionally, Jesus provides a better way. In John's shepherd motif, he makes a functional claim regarding Jesus's character. He is the "good shepherd" in as much as he demonstrates the abilities corresponding to a cultural definition of shepherd (*poimēn*). In this sense, he is a better shepherd than what is understood by the equivalent term in the recipient culture. Similarly in the OT, God's provision of

a sacrifice in place of Abraham's son is a better way than the child-sacrifices of the Ancient Near East (Snaith 1966, 123-24). Just as Jesus is the better shepherd, he is also the better sacrifice.

While both shepherd and sacrifice reveal one facet of Jesus's ontological identity, the scriptures juxtapose them functionally in relationship to their cultural understanding. To safeguard from reductionism or syncretism which can occur due to the functional parallel, this study proposes six criteria for identifying and applying proper parallels: (1) cultural proximity, (2) functional analogy with ontological distinction, (3) Christological supremacy, (4) irenic engagement with prophetic clarity, (5) biblical and theological coherence, and (6) missional fruitfulness. Each criterion ensures that missiological parallelisms function not as abstract rhetorical devices but as missiologically and theologically sound as well as culturally rooted strategies for gospel engagement. These criteria flow directly from the theological witness of early Christianity and align with contemporary missiological reflection.

Each criterion needs its own explanation.

First, a valid missiological parallelism arises from the actual worldview, religious system, or social imagination of a particular culture. It reflects an embedded symbol, ritual, or concept that carries spiritual or existential significance. Effective parallels are not imposed from outside but emerge from within the cultural landscape, making the gospel both recognizable and personally resonant.

Second, parallels must share a functional similarity such as a redeemer figure, a provider, a judge, or a spiritual mediator while maintaining a clear ontological distinction. Jesus may function as a better ancestor, shepherd, or savior, but he is ontologically superior to any cultural counterpart. This distinction guards against syncretism while allowing meaningful engagement with cultural expectations.

Third, every missiological parallelism must present Jesus not simply as a relevant alternative but as the true and better fulfillment of the cultural concept. He is not one savior among many, but the Savior of all. The aim is not to affirm cultural truth claims on their own terms but to reveal how they find their ultimate expression in the person and work of Christ.

Fourth, missiological parallelisms should engage culture peacefully, not with hostility or dismissal, but must still confront spiritual error, idolatry, or false hope. This dual posture of respect and clarity reflects the tone of New Testament witness: honoring what is present while pointing beyond it to what is ultimate.

Fifth, parallelisms must arise from sound biblical exegesis as determined by the hermeneutical community and alignment with the theological arc of scripture. They are not clever rhetorical devices or pragmatic tools for persuasion, but they are deeply rooted in the redemptive story of God. Each parallel must be theologically faithful and contribute to a robust understanding of the gospel.

Finally, a missiological parallelism is validated by its impact: does it lead to greater gospel clarity, spiritual transformation, and the formation of faithful communities of disciples? If a parallel does not bear fruit in terms of deeper worship of Christ and faithfulness to His mission, it may obscure more than it reveals.

Conclusion

This article has argued that a missiological parallelism is a missiological and theological device that mirrors cultural or religious narratives to both clarify God's activity within a culture and irenically engages its distortions. In light of this study, missiological parallelism emerges not merely as an exegetical curiosity or rhetorical tool but as a robust missionary posture, one that resists syncretism and reductionism so often latent in contemporary models of contextualization. Rather than accommodating the gospel to culture or extracting it from cultural situatedness, missiological parallelism reframes cultural narratives by orienting them in proximity to Christological fulfillment. Such an orientation models a more ancient and arguably more faithful method of engagement, one that does not neutralize cultural meaning but subverts and redirects it toward the *telos* of God's redemptive mission (Matt 24:14).

Indeed, early Christian writers like John and Justin, far from offering a systematic theology of culture, consistently employed the theological imagination of parallels to clarify who Jesus is in contrast to the religious, political, and philosophical icons of their day. Whether in the foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice in the OT or the shepherding motif of John's Gospel, even Justin's *logos spermatikos*, the biblical witness demonstrates an intentional juxtaposition that honored the embedded truths of culture, just as it exposed their insufficiency apart from Christ. Such a model not only invites contemporary missiologists to return to a more biblical paradigm but also challenges us to rethink contextualization as a hermeneutic of encounter rather than translation.

In short, a missiological theology of missiological parallelism invites missionaries, theologians, and local church leaders alike to take seriously what God is doing in culture, not as an endorsement of every cultural form but as a summons to see culture as both mission field and missiological interlocutor. A disciplined attentiveness, a Spirit-guided discernment, and most of all, a Christological clarity that renders Jesus not as merely relevant but as preeminent will be required. In the end, the goal is not simply to contextualize the gospel, but to address every veiled hope with the singular and superior hope found in our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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Toward Unity and Reconciliation: An Analysis of a Cultural Application of the *Qutux Qniqan* among the Atayal Tribe of Taiwan through Biblical and Anthropological Principles

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2026

Abstract

This article investigates how the *Qutux Qniqan* ceremony becomes an origin of conflict when Christian groups perceive its relational and reconciliatory activities as possible syncretism. The article is based on five years of field interviews with Rev. Tali Behuy, his family, and other Atayal people, both non-Christians and Christians. The study asserts that the Lord's Supper provides an essential theological framework for redefining its purpose by integrating Atayal cultural significance with biblical interpretation. This integration enables Atayal Christians to affirm their cultural identity while staying faithful to biblical truth.

Key Words: Taiwan, Atayal, *Qutux Qniqa*, cross-cultural communication, contextualization, eating together

Introduction

In recent years, both mission practitioners and scholars have revisited the relationship between Scripture and anthropology, particularly where Christian communities encounter cultural traditions shaped by strong relational commitments in communities anthropologists have defined as "egalitarian" (Lingenfelter, 1998, pp. 30-31). Anthropological insights have long helped missionaries communicate the gospel across cultural settings more effectively (Hiebert, 2006, pp. 291-293; Rynkiewich, 2012, pp. 7-8), while cultural hermeneutics has reminded Christians that their reading of Scripture is influenced by their own assumptions and worldview (Kraft, 1991, pp. 139-140; Wrogemann, 2016, pp. 45-46).

When the dialogue between the Bible and culture is approached without intentional care, misunderstandings surface easily (Sanneh, 2009, pp. 68-72; Walls, 1996, pp. 53-58). Such conflict is evident among the Atayal of Taiwan. Ever since Christianity spread widely after 1948 (Atayal Presbyterian Church Council (APCC), 2017, pp. 3-5), the traditional reconciliation rite known as *Qutux Qniqan* has remained contested. Early missionaries discouraged participation, because the ceremony included orientations to ancestral spirits. Over time, many Atayal Christians came to see abstaining as part of their commitment to God, while non-Christian relatives viewed that absence as a break in family and clan relationships.

This article is grounded in interviews conducted from 2020 to 2025 with Rev. Tali Behuy, his family, pastors, elders, and non-Christian Atayal. Their stories reveal how deeply Christian teaching and Atayal cultural expectations continue to clash. Although anthropologists like Kraft and Hiebert offer practical theological frameworks, the discussion that follows relies primarily on the voices heard in these interviews. Across these conversations, two movements became clear: (1) the initial Christian refusal to attend the *Qutux Qniqan* ceremony, and (2) a neutral position, which this study takes, acknowledging both the existing ritual and the concerns articulated by the church. As a result, this article inquires whether there exists a biblically faithful approach that might allow the Atayal church to engage the cultural meaning embedded in *Qutux Qniqan*.

Cultural Background and Interview Reflections

For the Atayal, relationships include social, spiritual, and ancestral responsibilities. *Qutux Qniqan*—often described as "friends and enemies eating together"—is not merely a shared meal but a covenantal act meant to repair strained relationships. Food, stories, and the public act of eating together reaffirm ties within the family and clan. Traditionally, spiritual beings are invited to witness the reconciliation and to safeguard the renewed harmony (T. Behuy & Y. Kuray, 2020; A. C. Tali, 2020). Because of these dynamics, participation holds significance, and refusing to attend is often seen as withdrawing from one's relational duties. Many Christian families' absence has created years of misunderstanding (E. C. Lo, 2016, pp. 104-105; Y. Lo, 2023, p. 153).

Rev. Tali Behuy's story reflects this tension. Although his grandparents first encountered Christianity through a Japanese physician in 1913, fuller teaching reached the family after 1949 (T. Behuy, 2020). Rev. Behuy's ministerial training taught him that Atayal rituals were spiritually dangerous; he even recalled burning traditional clothing when he converted to Christ in the 1960th, because he believed wearing that clothing would dishonor the God of Israel. His daughters remembered relatives urging him to attend family gatherings, yet the family consistently declined, convinced that doing so would be an act of faithfulness (A. C. Tali et al., 2023). Later, while teaching culture and Bible stories in public schools, Rev. Behuy began to sense how earlier missionary teachings had created a divide between Atayal Christians and their cultural identity. Teaching the Ten Commandments prompted him to revisit the Fifth Commandment (Exod. 20:12). That command to honor parents encouraged him to inquire whether cultural expressions he had previously rejected might carry meanings compatible with the Christian faith.

For the first time, Rev. Behuy considered whether *Qutux Qniqan* might be understood through biblical lenses rather than dismissed outright (T. Behuy, 2020; Y. Tali, 2020). Anthropological perspectives help explain this shift. According to Lingenfelter (1998, pp. 25-26), Atayal can be classified as a high-group, low-grid society, where mutual responsibility and shared norms shape

daily life. Stepping away from communal rituals, therefore, has significant relational consequences. *Qutux Qniqan* became the point where two systems of meaning—Christian concerns and Atayal expectations—intersected and, for some, opened a space for reconsideration. For Rev. Behuy, this marked the beginning of imagining how the ceremony might be reintroduced—not in its traditional spiritual form, but as a way for the church to restore its relationship with the surrounding community.

Analysis of Interviews and Findings

The interviews reveal several layers of tension that help explain why *Qutux Qniqan* remains contested among Atayal Christians. Much of the conflict has centered on the relationship between Rev. T. Behuy's family and their non-Christian relatives, a situation familiar to many Atayal households. In a collectivistic, high-context society, identity is tied to family and clan (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, pp. 75-76). Thus, when the Behuy family withdrew from the ceremony, relatives interpreted their absence not simply as a private decision but as a breach of loyalty. Several interviewees also expressed anxiety that disrupting harmony could provoke ancestral displeasure (Y. Hayong et al., 2022; Y. Piho et al., 2023). Relational and spiritual concerns, therefore, blended into a single moral expectation.

A second tension surfaced when Rev. Behuy and his family later attempted to reintegrate the rite into Christian practice. Their application emphasized honoring ancestors and restoring unity through shared meals, but the Atayal Presbyterian Church Council (APCC, 2017, pp. 1-2) viewed their approach as a move toward syncretism. Although Scripture affirms honoring parents (Exod. 20:12) and frequently uses meals to reinforce communal relationships, the theological reasons behind these practices differ from traditional Atayal assumptions and worldview (L. Tali et al., 2023). The Behuy family understood *Qutux Qniqan* as a symbol of relational healing, whereas the APCC regarded its invocation of spiritual beings as incompatible with Christian belief (T. Behuy et al., 2021).

These tensions point to deeper interpretive issues. In the traditional Atayal worldview, communication with spiritual entities is not considered idolatry but as a means of safeguarding relational integrity and respecting the surrounding nature. Lingenfelter (1998, pp. 25-26) notes that in high-group, low-grid settings, social stability depends on shared expectations, and rituals function to maintain cohesion. *Qutux Qniqan* plays this role by reaffirming belonging through the act of eating together. However, early missionaries instructed converts to reject all Atayal rituals and ceremonies, since they may have been associated with spiritual beings and components. These teachings unintentionally created a divide between Christian Atayal and their non-Christian relatives. Christian abstention, meant as faithfulness to God, was perceived by relatives as a

betrayal of both ancestors and community (W. Taru et al., 2025; A. Taru et al., 2022). Over time, some community members began to perceive Christianity as weakening rather than strengthening the relational core of Atayal life.

Within the Behuy household, this tension became deeply personal. For many years, Rev. Behuy taught that Christians should avoid the ceremony. Only after retirement, while teaching Scripture and reflecting on the Fifth Commandment, did he begin to question long-held assumptions. The command to honor parents prompted him to consider whether cultural expressions he had previously rejected might carry meanings consistent with Christian faith (T. Behuy, 2020). His transformation was influenced not only by theological study but also by familial recollections and decades of ministry within Atayal communities that continued to cherish the relational profundity represented in *Qutux Qniqan* (Y. Hayong et al., 2024).

The interviews also show how cultural biases shaped both Christian and non-Christian responses. Lingenfelter (1998, pp. 30-31) observes that worldview commitments serve as filters through which people interpret new ideas. This filtering was evident in the mutual skepticism at work: Christians feared spiritual compromise, while non-Christian relatives feared relational abandonment (Lo, 2016, pp. 56-60; Wu, 2015, pp. 19-21). Both concerns were genuine, yet neither group fully understood how the other interpreted the same actions.

The research findings offer an essential missiological insight: the conflict was less about ritual practice itself than about differing understandings of relationships, honor, spiritual mediation, and communal harmony. The Behuy family's effort to reinterpret *Qutux Qniqan* aimed to close these gaps and restart the conversation between Christian faith and Atayal culture after years of distrust (C. Silan et al., 2023). Their application lacked clarity for the APCC (Atayal Presbyterian Church Council), which feared that reintegrating the ceremony could lead to confusion or doctrinal fault. However, the interviews suggest that the Behuy family was not seeking to restore the ceremony to its traditional spiritual form. They were looking for a means for Atayal Christians to embrace their cultural identity while grounding their spiritual significance in the God revealed through the Bible (Y. Lo, 2023). Their efforts pose an essential question for the church: How could cultural expressions of relational harmony be understood, transformed, or guided in accordance with the gospel and biblical truths while being an Atayal?

Exegetical Study

The Behuy family's attempts to reinterpret the *Qutux Qniqan* ceremony were fundamentally based on two biblical motifs that became pivotal to their theological reflections: the Fifth Commandment's directive to honor one's parents and the covenantal importance of communal

eating as represented in the Lord's Supper. Due to the misunderstandings around these two issues that influenced the disagreement between the Atayal Presbyterian Church Council and the Behuy family's suggestion, it is imperative to scrutinize the biblical texts and their interpretive traditions more thoroughly.

The Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12), transcends a mere moral principle. The Hebrew verb *kabed* signifies "weight" or "substance" (Biblica, 2015, p. 83), implying that honoring entails bestowing appropriate significance through tangible manifestations of care, respect, and obedience. Kaiser (2008, p. 482) asserts that this commandment is foundational to Israel's covenantal identity; revering parents sustains the framework through which Yahweh's teachings are conveyed throughout generations. Lai (2014, pp. 60-62) contends that the commandment instructs children to honor Yahweh, as parental authority—despite being mediated and flawed—exists within the divine order of the family. Lai observes that the biblical focus is not on ritualistic actions following a parent's demise but on maintaining an appropriate relational stance throughout the parent's life, thereby contributing to the stability of the covenant community.

Moreover, biblical history emphasizes the seriousness of dishonoring parents through the instructions and penalties stated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, where such actions are seen as destructive to Israel's covenantal foundation (Kaiser, 2008, p. 482; Lai, 2014, pp. 60-62). Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas (2014, p. 124) emphasize that the Ten Commandments are inseparable from the broader narrative of liberation and covenant establishment. The family serves as the focal point for Israel to commemorate God's actions, teach His commands, and maintain communal fidelity. In the New Testament, when this idea of multigenerational family responsibility is reiterated—exemplified by Paul's assertion that he serves God "as my ancestors did" (2 Tim. 1:3)—the veneration of ancestors is explicitly contextualized as adherence to those who remained loyal to God's promise, rather than participating in ritualistic communication with the deceased. Cheung (2005, pp. 399-400) argues that Paul's recollection of his ancestors is theological rather than ritualistic, serving as a reaffirmation of continuity with those who truly worshiped Yahweh.

Dialogue between Atayal Cultural Worldview and Christianity

These biblical interpretations, along with those that follow, become particularly significant when situated within the Atayal cultural context. The Atayal's traditional practices of honoring ancestors embrace relational and spiritual aspects linked to the existence of the *utux* (spiritual beings), residing within the community (E. C. Lo, 2016, pp. 56-60; Y. Lo, 2023, pp. 150-160). The relational goal aligns with the biblical focus on honor, although the spiritual ways of communicating with the ancestors significantly deviates from biblical doctrine. The Behuy family

regarded the honoring in Scripture as a conduit for cultural affirmation, whereas the APCC considered the spiritual implications of *Qutux Qniqan* to be inappropriate with Christian beliefs (Atayal Presbyterian Church of Taiwan, 2017, pp. 3-5). Their concept was often misinterpreted due to the lack of a clear distinction between relational honoring and spiritual invocation (T. Behuy et al., 2022; H. Normin et al., 2020).

In addition to honoring, the second biblical element that influenced the Behuy family's contemplation was the theological significance of communal eating. In Scripture, meals are not mere social gatherings but relational interactions filled with covenantal implications. From the Passover dinner in Exodus 12, which commemorates Israel's liberation, to Jesus's eating together with sinners, meals serve as moments through which God redeems and redefines His relationship with the chosen people. This meaning of communal meals is most clearly articulated in Paul's teaching regarding the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11. Flemming (2005, p. 178) asserts that the Supper goes beyond mere memorialization: it serves as an active declaration of Christ's sacrificial love, uniting believers into a reconciled community. Keener (2005, pp. 98-99) notes that early Christians perceived the meal as an engagement in Christ's self-sacrifice, analogous to how Passover involved Israel in God's redemptive work. Murphy-O'Connor (2009, p. 208) also observes that Christ constitutes the essence of the assembled community, rendering the act of communal eating and drinking a re-entry into the unity established by His death.

For numerous Atayal Christians, the cultural substance of communal meals presented an unforeseen opportunity (T. Hayong et al., 2021). The cultural essence of *Qutux Qniqan*—reestablishing connections via communal eating—parallels the social role of the Lord's Supper, despite significant differences in spiritual rationale. In the conventional ritual, relational harmony is reinstated through the participation of the *utux*, whose presence validates and finalizes reconciliation (E. C. Lo, 2016, pp. 110-130; Y. Hayong et al., 2022). In Christian theology, reconciliation is entirely achieved through Christ, who facilitates unity and forgiveness independently of other spiritual entities. The difference is fundamental to the APCC's interpretation of the Behuy family's application as inclined towards syncretism, notwithstanding their goal to supplant the *utux* with the presence of the Holy Spirit (Y. Tali et al., 2023).

The underlying challenge highlighted by the interviews pertains not only to spiritual disagreement but also to cultural confusion. Nevertheless, this repurposing necessitates rigorous explanation and collective deliberation. The Behuy family attempted to achieve this redirection by preserving *Qutux Qniqan* 's relational structure while substituting its spiritual essence with Christ (A. Behuy et al., 2022; T. Behuy et al., 2020). The APCC, however, regarded the form as closely associated with its pre-Christian connotations. Lingenfelter's (1998, pp. 25-31) observation that

cultural institutions function as filters is evident here: each party understood the significance of the rite through its own cultural beliefs. Christians apprehended doctrinal compromise, and the broader Atayal society feared relational forsakenness. Both functioned consistently within their respective worldviews, while neither acknowledged the other's interpretive framework.

The exegetical analysis sketched above indicates that the issue transcends the mere acceptance or rejection of a cultural practice. The inquiry pertains to how Scripture addresses cultural identity, relational responsibilities, and spiritual mediation, while respecting both the biblical text and the experiential reality of the Atayal community. The Behuy family's idea, if inadequately articulated, demonstrates a sincere effort to address these tensions by anchoring cultural expression in biblical significance (P. Losing et al., 2023). The APCC's caution demonstrates a passionate commitment to preserving doctrinal clarity. Amidst these considerations exists the persistent challenge of contextualization—that is, the critical faithful process by which Scripture engages local cultures, allowing cultural forms to be evaluated, transformed, and reinterpreted so the gospel is communicated meaningfully within contexts while remaining obedient to biblical authority (Hiebert, 2006, pp. 88–92; Kraft, 1991, pp. 384–395; Sanneh, 2009, pp. 51–54; Flemming, 2005, pp. 17–19).

Contextualization for the Atayal Church

The theological and cultural insights derived from the interviews lead to a broader examination of how *Qutux Qniqan* could be interpreted within a Christian context—an interpretation that cautiously integrates its traditional spiritual framework. The data indicate that the core of the tension lies not in the ritual's relational meaning, but in the technique by which relational harmony has historically been facilitated. For the Atayal, reconciliation is unattainable without the participation of the *utux*, whose presence assures that restored ties are both genuine and binding (E. C. Lo, 2016, pp. 110-130; Y. Lo, 2023, pp. 150-160). In Christian theology, reconciliation is achieved solely through Jesus Christ, who unites and forgives through His death and resurrection.

This distinction clarifies the task rather than removing the possibility of contextualization. Shaw (2018, p. 2) contends that rituals frequently embody significant cultural values that can be realigned with divine intentions through the guidance of Scripture and collective discernment. The concern is not whether Atayal Christians need to appreciate reconciliation through communal meals—Scripture consistently supports this practice—but rather how the significance of the rite might be recontextualized by placing Christ at the center rather than the *utux*. Various interviewees indicated that the conventional supplication of supernatural entities was the specific factor that led Christians to disengage from the rite. Their disengagement was perceived by non-Christian relatives as a rejection of relationship obligation, highlighting a profound disruption in cultural

communication (Y. Hayong et al., 2022; W. Piho et al., 2023).

The problem, consequently, resides in formulating a contextual strategy that enables Atayal Christians to validate the relational dimension of the rite while distinctly differentiating Christian theology from the traditional spiritual beliefs inherent in *Qutux Qniqan*. Rev. T. Behuy articulated a significant insight throughout the interviews, revealing that his enhanced comprehension of the Fifth Commandment enabled him to value the cultural significance of venerating ancestors while rejecting the conventional spiritual paradigm (T. Behuy 2020). His methodology regarded honoring as a relational practice rooted in biblical doctrine rather than a mere ritual responsibility to the spirits (A. Behuy et al., 2023). Upon presenting this concept to his students as he taught in governmental school systems, he recognized that he had discovered a way to articulate honor that aligned with both Scripture and Atayal principles.

The Lord's Supper

The identical interpretive action can be applied to the theme of communal eating. The Atayal perspective on communal meals as manifestations of unity aligns with the biblical concept of fellowship, culminating in the Lord's Supper. Flemming (2005, pp. 178-210), Keener (2005, pp. 98-99), and Murphy-O'Connor (2009, pp. 208-210) all assert that the Supper establishes and maintains covenantal union through Christ's sacrificial act. The Supper does not eliminate cultural perceptions of fellowship but recontextualizes followers within the reality of Christ's presence. If Atayal Christians acknowledge that communal meals convey a relational truth supported by Scripture, then the cultural essence of *Qutux Qniqan* need not be entirely rejected (W. Taru et al., 2024). The question concerns the significance of the meal and the individuals through whom reconciliation is perceived to occur.

Discussions with many pastors and elders revealed that the primary barrier to reinstating the rite was the absence of meaningful theological dialogue (L. Taru et al., 2023; I. Hetay et al., 2022). The APCC misunderstood the Behuy family's application as validation of the ceremony's traditional spiritual aspect, even though the family sought to reframe its significance completely. This misinterpretation highlights a broader problem in contextualization: the church must discern not only which aspects of a cultural practice can be endorsed but also which must be altered or abandoned in accordance with Scripture. In the absence of this clarity, efforts to integrate cultural forms may be misconstrued as an unexamined approval of pre-Christian practices.

The interviews indicated that the complete rejection of *Qutux Qniqan* has led to consequences often discussed in relation to idolatry, since participation in the ceremony is commonly understood as signaling agreement with its spiritual assumptions, especially those involving ancestors or other

spiritual beings, regardless of whether the participant actually partakes of the ritual food (L. Takun et al., 2024). Some participants expressed apprehension that Christian withdrawal from the ceremony undermined both the familial relationship and the church's reputation in the broader community. Suppose the Atayal conception of relational obligation is preserved. In that case, a Christian's refusal to engage—regardless of theological justification—might be viewed as a failure of ethical accountability rather than adherence to Scripture (U. Yumin et al., 2021). This dynamic raises a pastoral question: how can Atayal Christians respect their families, live in harmony within the community, and acknowledge Christ's unique role as mediator?

The solution may lie in a reinterpretation of strategy that preserves engagement in culturally significant actions of fellowship while refraining from embracing the spiritual beliefs conventionally associated with them. The Behuy family's attempt to reinterpret the rite in light of the Fifth Commandment and the Lord's Supper signifies progress in this regard, despite the church leadership's incomplete understanding of the effort. Their perspective indicates that relational reconciliation—a fundamental Atayal principle—can be preserved, while spiritual mediation is reinterpreted via Jesus Christ. Scriptural instruction alters the ritual's inner value, while its visible form serves as a reminder of oneness. This approach aligns with both Kraft's (1991, pp. 389-395) assertion that cultural forms can acquire new meanings when rooted in Scripture and Hiebert's (2008, pp. 315-320) claim that comprehending worldview dynamics is crucial for adequate contextualization.

This study suggests that contextualization means the church should neither accept all cultural practices without question nor forsake culturally significant expressions without question. Contextualization necessitates a rigorous negotiation of meaning—a readiness to embrace what Scripture affirms, to modify what it contests, and to redirect what can be altered for the advancement of the gospel. The Atayal church's objective is not merely to determine the appropriateness of practicing *Qutux Qniqan*, but to ascertain how the relational virtues inherent in the ceremony might be aligned with the lordship of Christ to enhance the unity of both the family and the church.

Conclusion

Years of interviews show that the tension surrounding *Qutux Qniqan* is felt on both sides: Christians navigating earlier teachings and non-Christian relatives expecting participation as a sign of harmony. Rev. Tali Behuy's reflections reveal how Scripture opened space to revisit this divide. Read alongside the Lord's Supper, these accounts suggest a way for Atayal Christians to affirm the relational meaning of eating together while reforming the ceremony's traditional spiritual elements.

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Muslim Background Believer Attrition Study

Gordon Bonham, Gene Daniels, and Sara Hewitt

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2026

Abstract

A mixed methods study of about 100 church leaders working with Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) estimates that about 7% of known MBBs later return to Islam. This estimated percentage is a significant contrast to past reports of very high rates of return to Islam. A key issue in coming to this figure is differentiating between those who actually return to Islam and those who do not continue with the existing church for various other reasons. Although many MBBs find fellowship in local churches, the study suggests that integration into MBB fellowships is both a key factor in the strong individual faith of MBBs and a primary element of support against the great pressures on them to return to their former faith.

Key Words: church, fellowship, MBB, Muslim, reversion

Background

The last few decades have been an unprecedented time of ministry in the Muslim world, with evidence pointing toward large numbers of Muslims turning to Christ around the world. Exact numbers are impossible to know, but in a summary of sources Daniels published an estimated growth from 1850 to 2020, as seen in Figure 1 below (Daniels, 2021).

Together with recognizing this tremendous growth comes acknowledging that ministry in the Muslim world is full of difficulty and uncertainty. Such ministry can be rewarding and disappointing at the same time. One issue that vexes many analysts is that of Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) who seem to leave the faith. This apparent reality raises many questions, for example: What happens when Christians lose touch with new MBBs? Do they return to Islam or just become secret believers? What are the real numbers for those who leave their newfound faith, and what are the factors that most contribute to that move?

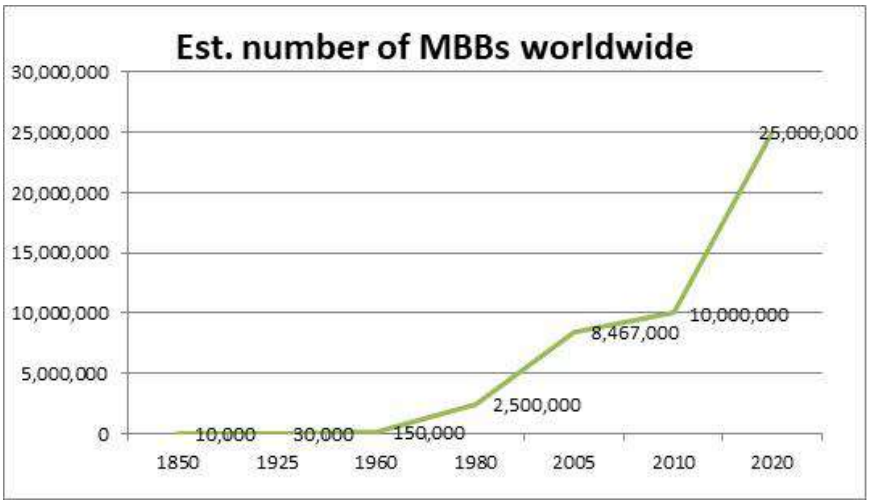

Fig. 1. Growth of MBBs worldwide

Various researchers and writers have raised similar questions, often suggesting that the rate of those returning to Islam is quite high, even in the 90% range (Span, 2020). And while many have recognized the need for further research, the complex theological, social, and security issues involved are a daunting obstacle. Nevertheless, in 2024 the Communio Messianica (Communio

Messianica, 2025) approached the Global Research Team (GRT)—of which we the authors are members—with a request for us to conduct an empirical study of questions associated with MBB reversions. With some trepidation we decided to take up that request because it seems to be God's *kairos* time for a better understanding of what he is doing in the Muslim world.

Methods

It was important that the research yield two results: one, offer a measurable rate of perceived return of MBBs to Islam that happens after a clear profession of faith in Christ, and two, better understand the pressures MBBs face as well as what helps keep them strong in Christ. The investigation of the first, that is the rate of return to Islam, was not easy to investigate: that is why the MBB survey was designed to explore the issue through the perspective of those who serve in ministry—what they had seen. The survey focused on the various forms of both church integration and faith reversion. A set of Likert-structured questions was developed to assist the measure of a rate of return to Islam that study participants had observed. The twelve-question survey included six questions about the current relationship with Jesus and the Church of Muslims who had put their faith in Jesus Christ and six standard demographic questions. In anticipation of its broad distribution, the survey was developed in four languages: Arabic, English, French, and Turkish. A PDF form of the survey was approved for use, and a secure online survey link was established, including the same four language options.

The survey was promoted and distributed in the summer of 2024 among church leaders working with Muslims, primarily in the Middle East and diaspora populations in Europe. During the first month of the survey, participants were mostly church leaders and members attending regional ministry conferences. During the second month, participants were primarily from the attendees of an international organization's conference promoting gospel ministry to the Muslim world.

Most of the questions in the survey had pre-defined answer choices. However, two questions had a place for participants to make comments on their choice, or lack of choice, of a pre-defined answer. Then, beginning in late 2024, additional qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews with survey participants who said they were willing to participate in follow-up interviews.

During the summer of 2024, 94 people ministering with MBBs completed the online survey. The majority (57) completed the English version, 36 completed the Arabic version, and one completed the French version. (The Turkish version was not used.) There were 54 participants who reported Arabic as their primary ministry language, with more than ten other ministry languages mentioned. Qualitative data was collected in both Arabic and English. Most participants live in the Middle East and North Africa, with many in Turkey. Twice as many men (50)

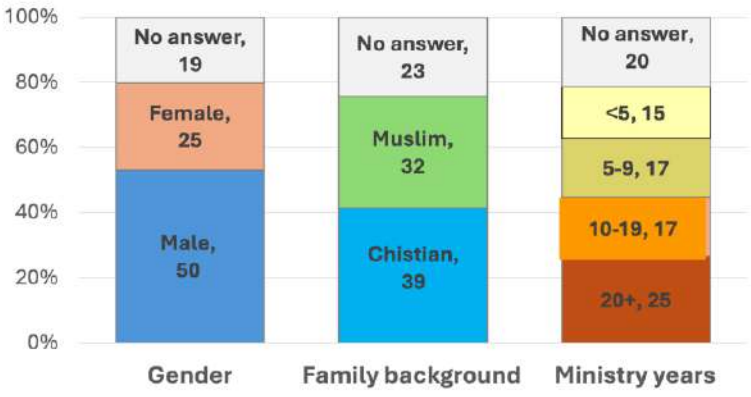

Fig. 2. Characteristics of survey participants

as women (25) responded to the question on gender; slightly more came from a Christian background (39) as from a Muslim background (32); the largest group (25) had been in Muslim ministry for 20 or more years, and the fewest (15) had been in ministry less than five years (see Figure 2 above). Participants gave a wide range of answers to their ministry positions, including pastors, worship leaders, church members, missionaries, Bible teachers, and organizational leaders.

As a follow-up during the first few months of 2025, 13 of the survey participants responded to a set of in-depth questions. Seven were interviewed through Zoom (three through an Arabic translator), and six responded via email. Many of the quotations in this article are from these follow-up responses, which have been lightly edited.

Findings

The responses to the first five of the questions in the survey were used to estimate the percent of MBBs who have returned to Islam. Next were two questions to better understand the pressures MBBs face and what helps keep them strong in Christ. Qualitative data from responses entered in the online survey and given during the follow-up interviews have been included whenever they offer further insights.

Question 1: Number Known

"About how many former Muslims do you personally know who became a true follow of Jesus?"

This question helped orient the participant to the purpose of the study and gave a context to understand their subsequent responses. Most participants (27) indicated that they knew either fewer than 25 Muslims or 100 or more (33). (See Figure 3.) The others knew various numbers in between. On average, they knew about 68 MBBs. There was no statistical relationship between any of the participants characteristics and the number of MBBs whom they have known.

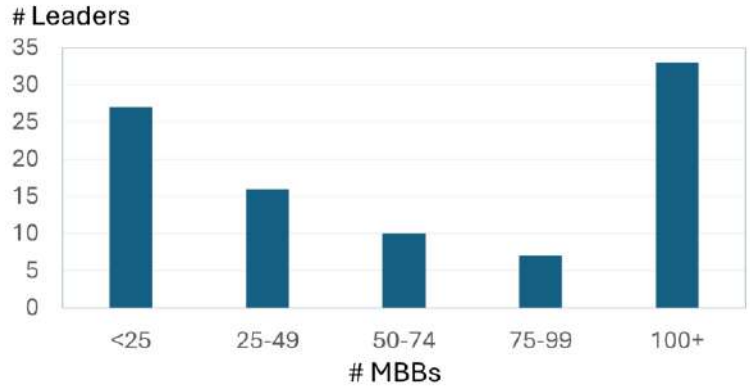

Fig. 3. Number of MBBs leaders have known

There was no statistical relationship between any of the demographic information and the number of MBBs whom the respondents have known.

Question Two: Number Dropped Out

"How many of these Muslim Background Believers (MBB) do you know who have simply dropped out of contact with you and other Christians?"

Three-fourths of the participant church leaders said that *None* (light blue-colored) or *Few* (light green-colored) of the Muslims they had known that had accepted Jesus have subsequently dropped out of contact with them (see Figure 4 below). This result paints a very encouraging picture. It also suggests the reliability of the participants' answers to the remaining questions. The remainder of

the church leaders said *Many* or *Most* (reddish and dark blue) of the MBBs they had known had dropped out of contact. The more MBBs that the leader had known, the more likely they were to say either *Many* or *Most* of them had dropped out of contact, but the number was never more than 40% for those who had known 100 or more MBBs.

We should point out that church leaders with Muslim backgrounds reported a greater proportion of MBBs who have dropped out of contact than did those with other religious backgrounds. None of the other demographic characteristics of the leaders had any relationship with the percentage dropping out.

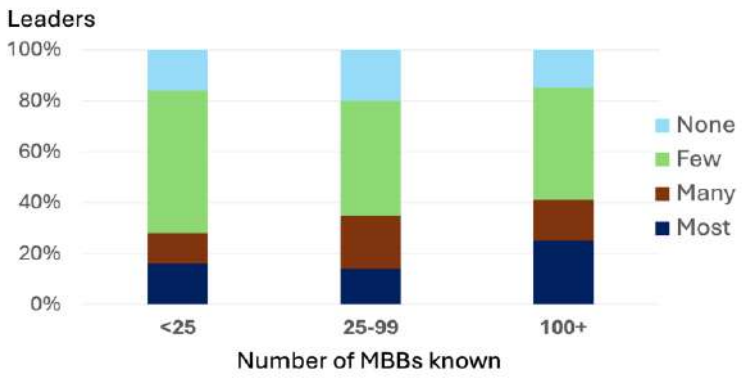

Fig. 4. % of leaders by # of MBBs who have dropped out of contact

We have so much compelling qualitative data on this point that it is difficult to select what to use. First, one major reason that MBBs "disappear" is that, in retrospect, it is questionable if they were ever believers in the first place. This reality turned up in several interviews, for example the following two:

> There are actually people in our location who have become Christian, and as soon as they get their residence permits in the country, they actually leave the church at that point and they start attending the mosque.

> One of the goals of pretending to be a believer, that we faced a lot in our church that some believers after they get baptized, they want [a special] baptism certificate to be able to leave [country] and live abroad. So when the Church does not help them with this traveling abroad thing, they don't have anything more to do with it. They leave the church.

However, sometimes there is a problem with both the MBBs *and* the church; both seem to have questionable motives:

> Refugees come to the church hoping that they will have a stable kind of income… [But they] are showing themselves at churches who are interested in collecting people, and taking photos, and then send it to the donors. [They say], 'Look, we have believers.' So the church in the first place isn't a real church, or perhaps the believer himself, is not a believer.

One participant painted an even more disturbing picture:

> [Sometimes] what is taking place here is that churches are selling Christ. 'Come to the church and have aid' [they say]… so the Muslim will believe in Christ, thinking that the church will keep supporting him for the rest of his life… then [after] he accepted Christ, the support of the aid could end, so he will stop being a Christian. He will quit the Christian faith because from the first place it was given for a price and that price is no more.

But such insincerity and deception are not the only reasons MBBs disappear. Sometimes it is against their will:

> [As for a new MBB woman] her family could lock her up at the home and never allow her to go out to meet other Christian women who are from the first place introduced Christianity to her and [her] daughters.
>
> In Eastern culture a man can always move to another city, start over. A woman cannot. She doesn't have many options. Girls are raised in prison-like homes, so they are more apt to hide their faith, whether a wife or daughter.

Also, the conventional view of Muslim culture would assume this family pressure only goes one way because of an almost all-powerful Muslim husband. However, some respondents spoke of the opposite; one MBB leader put it this way:

> I know several of these situations where the pressure from the wife at home is so strong that it's very difficult for the husband to come to church… And also there's like a blackmailing. If there's a child in the family and the [unbelieving] wife is saying 'if you go to church, I will go with our child to my parents' … or something like that. It's like punishment pulling the family apart.

All this information reminds us that the picture can be quite complicated when an MBB drops out of sight from their fellowship, since only God truly knows the heart.

Question Three: No Spiritual Home

"How many of these MBB's do you know who could not find a spiritual home in their local church and desire to be part of a congregation primarily composed of MBBs?"

More than half of church leaders reported that None (17) or only a Few (41) of the MBBs about whom they still had information desired an MBB congregation, as they had not found a church home (see Figure 5). One-third said Many (16) or Most (16) had not found a church home and desired an MBB congregation or fellowship. The remainder did not answer the question. This information suggests that the majority of the MBBs that participants were still in contact with remain strong in their faith and are involved in local churches.

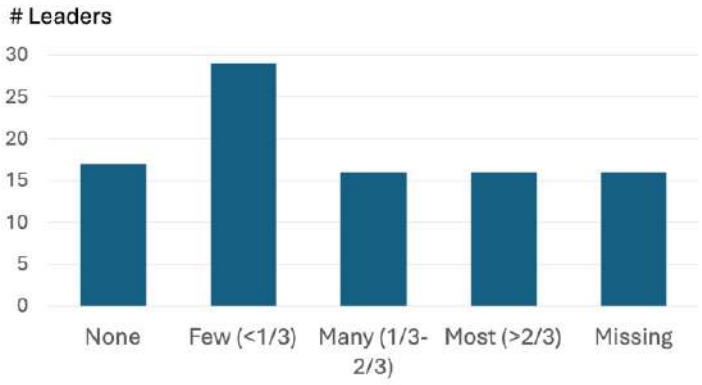

Fig. 5. No spiritual home, desire an MBB congregation

We find this perseverance very encouraging. Nevertheless, there appears to be a very real need for more MBB congregations if one-third of MBBs need an MBB congregation to find a spiritual home. This survey also suggests the need for more robust follow-up with MBBs so fewer church leaders would feel the need to skip answering this question (*missing* category).

The qualitative interviews provide a wide range of reasons why some MBBs do not find a spiritual home in the local church:

> Although the two [groups] are belonging to the same society, they are two different cultures, so they don't understand each other correctly and they keep being skeptic about each other.

This cultural gap can cause frustration for the MBBs:

> Some of them [MBBs] are angry at how Christians treat them in the church, or feel that they do not believe them or question their faith. Some of them feel that they are second or third class ... *Some of them [MBBs} feel that they are not wanted to marry their children because they are from an Islamic background and their parents are Muslims*" [*emphasis* added].

That last sentence is particularly noteworthy. Social and cultural differences may seem abstract, but here is an example of one very practical problem those differences can cause—resistance to intermarriage. One person explained how devastating this resistance can be:

> And singles [MBBs] have not found opportunities to marry in the [Christian] communities. Some say that rejection by Christian background people is more painful than rejection by unconverted Muslims. Their only hope is to find an MBB community.

The last part of the previous quote is powerful: "Their only hope is an MBB community." This is perhaps the core reason why many MBBs do not find a spiritual home in the existing church—they are not looking for an organization to join, but a *community* to be part of:

> It's not pressure, but the desire to be part of community. And the MBBs have not found acceptance with Christian background believers. They have not found a Christian replacement for the family and community that they lost.

Another way that cultural difference negatively impacts MBBs is how it affects discipleship:

> The primary reason that a MBB leaves is because the church does not have effective discipleship methods. Most are originated in the West and have little relevance in the Middle East and East.

This interviewee highlights the concern that the Western Church has made assumptions about their teaching and training models being universally appropriate, which has caused them to be much less effective in the very different cultures of the East. We heard one additional way that cultural differences with the existing church can have a negative effect on MBBs:

> So even if he [the MBB] is accepted in Evangelical churches, the worship style will still be strange to him. Weird, more than strange. It's just weird.

The goal of these examples is not to denigrate the precious churches of the Middle East, as if Christians who live in other contexts would do any better under their difficult circumstances. What is important is that other Christians not try to make MBBs more like themselves but instead encourage them to become more like Jesus.

Question Four: Distanced Themselves

"How many of these Muslim Background Believers (MBB) do you know who have professed belief in Jesus, distanced themselves from the Church, and yet still maintain their faith?"

More than half of the responses were that *None* (11) or *Few* (42) MBBs had distanced themselves from the church while remaining strong in their faith (see Figure 6 below). A minority in our survey, 30% of the leaders, indicated that *Many* (22) or *Most* (6) had remained strong in their faith even if they distanced themselves from the Church.

It is noteworthy that those who knew 100 or more MBBs reported a greater proprtion of them to have distanced themselves from the Church while remaining strong in their faith. Also, the survey leaders with a Muslim background reported knowing a greater proportion of MBBs who had distanced themselves while remaining strong in their faith than did leaders with other religious backgrounds. Based on these quantitative survey results, our team's follow-up qualitative interviews were able to uncover some practical realties about this issue.

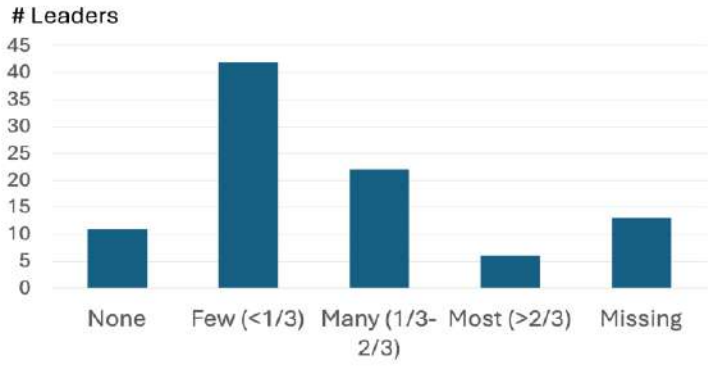

Fig. 6. MBBs who have distanced themselves from the Church

A couple of short stories from our interviews will be helpful to give substance to this idea that an MBB can be strong in their faith, yet distant from the Church:

> I knew two people who had accepted Lord Jesus Christ in their lives, and they used to come to the church and worship joyfully, then they stopped coming… One of them is married, and his wife is still Muslim. When she had found out that he is coming to the church, she threatened him by applying for divorce. They had children, so, he made a benefits-risks-ratio evaluation. And stopped going to the church, but he is still a believer in his heart. I do not say about him that he has denied Christian faith. But he wanted to preserve his family. And he is still sending messages to us asking to pray for his family to be saved. He is still having the heart for Christ, but we consider him wise guy who is trying not to destroy his family.

Or the case below illustrates the wide grey areas that many MBBs must navigate:

> [One believer] is a member of a devoutly religious family residing in a relatively remote district… He could not stop going to the mosque. He had not any choice. However, he said to me that even if he prays at the mosque according to the Islamic rituals, he is praying for Jesus Christ and in His Name. This man knew the Truth, the Way and Life. His circumstances are overwhelming. I do not know his heart. Only God knows. I can say that he is Christian, but in a wrong way.

Question Five: Returned to Islam

"How many of these Muslim Background Believers (MBB) do you know who have returned to Islam?"

This question directly addresses the original concern that initiated this research. Almost all the church leaders said that they know of *None* (44) or only a *Few* (40) MBBs who had returned to Islam (see Figure 7 below). Only one reported that they know *Many*, and one reported that *Most* had returned to Islam. While at least some MBBs with whom church leaders had lost contact may have returned to Islam, few MBBs are actually known to have done so.

The qualitative data strongly aligned with our survey findings that few Muslims who truly turn to Christ ever turn back to practicing Islam. Note the following three responses:

> No one I know who believed in Christ has left the faith.

> If the MBB is a real believer and the real accepter of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior all his life. Even if he left the church, he will never go back to Islam. He will [maybe] practice his Christianity by himself, or he will look for another church to be a member of it… If he tasted Christ and if he knew about the deformity of Islam. He will never go back there.

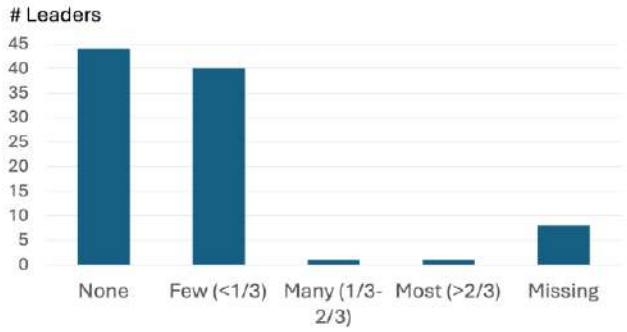

Fig. 7. MBBs who have returned to Islam

> [If] he lived the Christian faith and [then] quit the Christian faith, but [he would] never go back to Islam. He [could] become non-religious, OK. Perhaps he may seek in ancient religions like the Greek culture or Egyptian, or even Buddhism or Hinduism, OK. But he will never go back to Islam.

Only one person said they personally knew an authentic Muslim background believer who later went back to *practicing* Islam. In this sad case it was her younger sister:

> My sister was young and saw in Christianity a beautiful community far from the strict Islamic pressure. She decided to believe in Christ. But when they wanted to disciple her, they talked to her about Islam and its heresies, which caused her to have a negative reaction and withdraw from faith. Since we believed, my husband, children and I, have been trying to talk to her about Christ and that her path is wrong, but she does not accept it.

Combined Estimate

The information in the previous five figures (Figures 3-7) was combined to help understand their combined meaning and to provide a single estimated level of reversion. Each choice on the Likert scales had an associated number or ratio range. The midpoint of each range produced an average numerical response for each question for those who answered the question. This average was imputed to those who did not answer the question. The averages for questions two through five were applied to the midpoint of the number of MBBs the leader still had contact to compute overall averages (see Figure 8 below).

The first item to notice is the leaders had lost contact with one-fourth (24%) of those who they knew had placed their faith in Jesus. Those with whom they still have contact can be classified into three large and one small group:

- The largest of these (25%) are MBBs who are strong in their faith but have not found a church home and desire a MBB congregation.
- A slightly smaller group (22%) are those strong in their belief in Jesus but have distanced themselves from the local church.
- A third group (22%) of MBBs involved in local churches is inferred, although participants were not specifically asked about it.
- The smallest group (7%) is the estimate of the percent of Muslims who had put their trust in Jesus but have since returned to Islam.

Participants who came from Muslim backgrounds themselves knew about 20 more MBBs than those who came from families with other religious backgrounds. However, from our survey analysis, the number of MBBs a participant had known had no relationship with the proportions they had lost contact with or had returned to Islam.

Participants using the Arabic survey and who lived in the MENA region were less likely to report MBBs returning to Islam than were those who responded in English and lived outside the MENA region. Together, the two characteristics explain one-fourth of the variation among participants; the language in which they responded explained more of the variation than where they lived.

Care should be taken before arriving at firm conclusions from the information just cited. Moreover, discernment is needed regarding the missiological meaning behind the numbers. One can assume that anyone who used the Arabic version of the survey is either a native speaker or at least very deeply embedded in that culture. Thus, whatever statistical significance that might be attached to that linguistic distinction could very well relate to deeper cultural understanding. And if so, some reports of MBBs "going back to Islam" might be due to English-preference leaders having inadequate understanding of the social factors at play when the MBB "disappears." This inference is not to imply that native speakers are automatically better gospel workers, but it does suggest they have insights that are important to understand the reality of this issue.

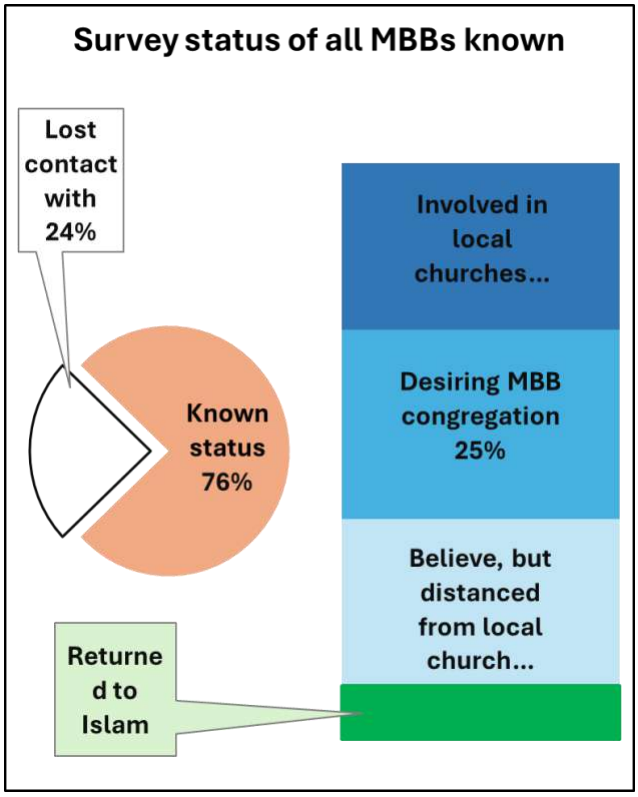

Fig. 8. Survey status of all MBBs known

Question Six: Leave Faith

"What do you feel is the main reason Muslim Background Believers leave the faith?"

Responses to question four indicated this outcome of MBBs leaving faith in Jesus was rare, so some participants did not answer question six. Among those who answered the question and selected a main reason, the most (35) said it was *Community pressure* (see Figure 9 below).

It is noteworthy that 17 participants did not specify a main reason and, along with 25 of those who did, wrote responses giving various reasons. Eleven of these included Community pressure among their reasons, again, emphasizing that issue's importance. While Government persecution was listed more frequently than Family pressure as a main reason, the reverse is true when listings from "other reasons" are included. Theological reasons constituted the fourth most frequent reason, but a wide range of reasons were listed: confusion, doubts, inadequate discipleship, and those who rejected Islam but were not actually a believer. Also, the list of main reasons in the survey did not include No CBB church engagement, but eight participants wrote that not becoming engaged in a traditional church of mostly Christian background believers (CBB) was as important a reason for returning to Islam as financial issues. Closely related, but shown separately, were six responses that Isolation and lack of acceptance by the Christian community can be a factor, as can be MBB fellowship disappointment, such as not finding a place to serve or differences with the MBB leader.

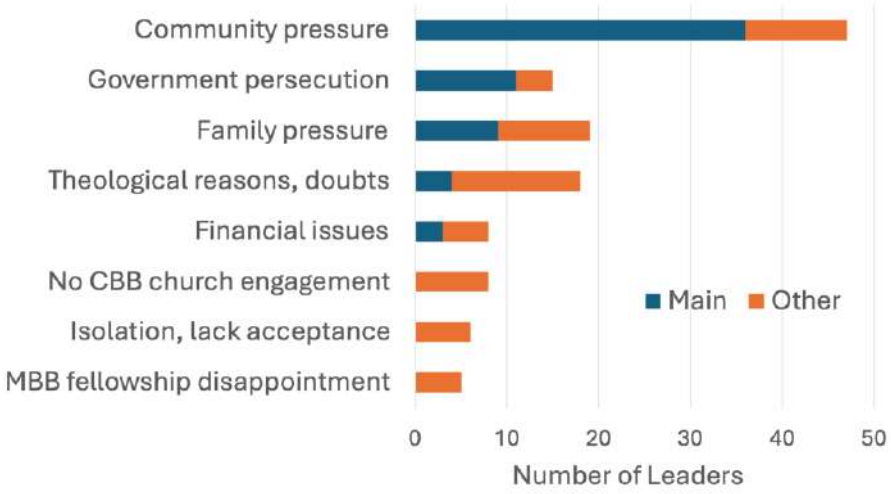

Fig. 9. Reasons MBBs leave faith in Jesus

The interrelationships of survey question answers and the themes found in the comments about the reasons MBBs leave the faith and return to Islam provide some additional insights:

- The greater the proportion of MBBs the church leaders followed, the more likely they were to say *Community pressure* is the main reason for returning to Islam.
- The greater the proportion of MBBs that church leaders report to have not found a church home and desiring an MBB congregation, the more likely they were to include *Isolation and lack of acceptance*, and the less likely they were to include *Theological reasons* for returning to Islam.

There is still no consensus in the qualitative interview data on what the "main" reason was for MBBs turning back to Islam, but community pressure and being isolated by the community were mentioned:

> I stated Community pressure, but in reality, that would be family pressure combined with community pressure—the two go hand in hand.

> So, becoming a Christian, you cut yourself from a huge support group and [are] left alone… So suddenly the MBB will find himself with all his relationships are cut off and he is standing in the open air, in the desert by himself.

What a sad picture at the end of the above quote, "in the desert by himself." Whether the speaker intended or not, the picture gives the image of hunger, thirst, and impending death.

Important to note is how several study participants mentioned the same kinds of issues that arise in any context. MBBs who leave the faith are often those who:

- neglect their relationship with God;
- don't apply the Word of God to their lives;
- do not spend time in prayer or meditation on the Word of God.

This list reminds us that, while some reasons are linked to the harshness of the Muslim context, others are problems common to any cultural background. This point in our discussion leads perfectly to the next and final question from our survey.

Question Seven: Strengthen Faith

"What is the main practice that helps MBBs remain strong in their faith in Jesus?"

A majority (57) of participants indicated *Fellowship with other MBBs* is the "main" practice that maintains strong faith. An additional 19 included this reason among the survey's "Other" responses. That is, a total of 76 out of the 94 church leaders who took the survey (81%) cited "Fellowship with other MBBs" as either the main practice, or one of the significant practices, that keep MBBs strong in Christ (see Figure 10).

Some written comments help to explain this finding:

> If Muslims don't have a house church comprised of other MBBs or other family members who believe, there is enormous pressure to return to Islam.

> [It's the] lack of contextualized community that allowed them to remain their ethnic identity, while growing in their faith, in the face of the other pressures.

One person put it slightly differently:

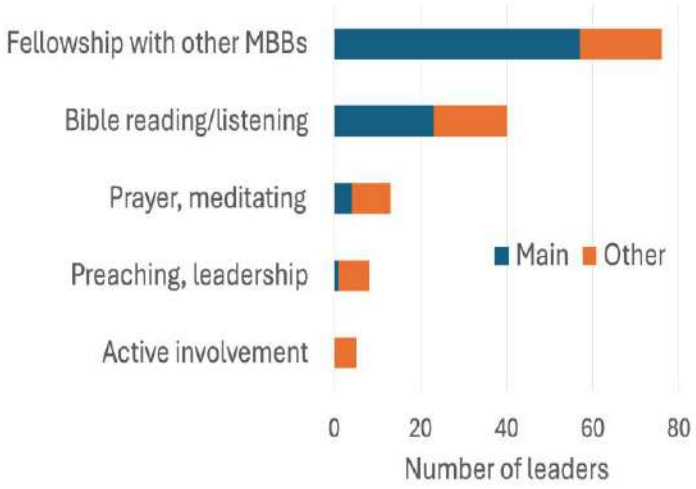

Fig. 10. Practices helping MBBs remain strong

> It's not pressure but the desire to be part of community, and the MBBs have not found acceptance with Christian background people, or they have not found a Christian replacement for the family and community that they lost… Their only hope is to find an MBB community.

MBBs do not encounter problems with churches they try to join because those churches are bad, nor are the Christian background believers the MBBs meet uncaring. Rather, problems between MBBs and churches can arise due to vast cultural differences. MBBs have trouble finding the same level of community they knew in Islam because Christian background believers do not interact well with them. It is important that MBBs find community with other believers who have the same expectations.

Important to note is that a significant number of respondents selected a much more common, and less contextually particular, practice as important to MBBs being strong--*Bible reading/listening*. Several other issues were volunteered, like *Prayer* or *Preaching*, but not often. This relative lack of mention does not mean that those practices are unimportant, but it does appear they are secondary to fellowship with other MBBs and being in God's word.

Correlation is not the same as causation, but church leaders who report a greater proportion of MBBs dropping out of contact tend to also report that Bible reading, prayer and other Christian actions are the main practices that keep MBBs strong. Collectively all the data strongly suggests that MBBs having fellowship with other MBBs is key to their perseverance in Christ.

Discussion and Recommendations

The research team was encouraged by the number of church leaders who participated in this study. This sensitive topic of MBB attrition is not easy to inquire about, but we were blessed with a diversity of the participants across several dimensions: geography, gender distribution, family background, and length of ministry among Muslims. This combination of sample size and diversity gives our team confidence in our findings, especially when applied to the Middle East and North Africa. This article also helps shed light on a range of MBBs issues related to integration into churches, a topic that should be explored in additional research.

This study had as its primary research question, "What is the rate of MBBs who return to Islam?" Our research team came up with our best numerical estimate of 7%. This finding makes it clear that the rate of MBBs returning to Islam in the Middle East region is not nearly as high today as in the past as suggested by early reports. However, the 7% rate only applies to MBBs about whom these ministry leaders still have knowledge. What if all those who have dropped out of contact have all returned to Islam? We can estimate this worst-case scenario by combining those MBBs known to have returned to Islam with the MBBs who have dropped out of contact. However, these two percentages, found in Figure 8 above, are based on different wholes and cannot be added directly. Once we account for the differing percentage bases, we arrive at 29% of the original that could have possibly turned back to Islam. However, findings from both the quantitative and qualitative parts of our study show that about half of the MBBs the leaders know about are not actively in a church fellowship for many different reasons. When considered in this way it becomes clear that "dropping out of contact" is not the same as "returning to Islam." Reason suggests that some who have dropped out of contact became "secret believers," others formed connections to different churches or fellowships not known to the leaders, and some emigrated.

While our choice of study methodology does not give us a precise answer, we have calculated a very small 7% rate of apostasy based on the experience of nearly 100 ministry leaders in the Muslim world. Even the very worst case of 29% is much less than some have feared. A written comment in the survey's question about reasons MBBs leave the faith may partially explain why:

> Around 2007, I talked with XXX who had served as the director of the Arab World broadcast of Trans World Radio for 15 years. He said that they had an organization do a survey in N. Africa of radio listeners that gave opportunity to follow up on MBBs who came to faith… They found that over 95% reverted back to Islam within 3-5 years… As I recall, they attempted to connect these people by forming small groups/churches, but without much success.

However, from 2008 to 2013, the Global Response Management System, a consortium of 17 TV, radio, and website broadcasts composed of 17 broadcasters, documented results of listeners' contacts. The results showed that 6% of people who contacted the broadcasters were interested enough in Jesus to requested visits by local MBBs. Relevant to retention, half of those who received a local visit by an MBB were known to be involved in a fellowship of local MBBs by the end of the six-year data collection period (Bonham, 2023).

Our study confirms that leaving behind their community and culture are one of the primary pressures faced by MBBs as they seek to live out their faith in Christ. Furthermore, our survey supports the idea that many MBBs, perhaps most, attend local fellowships or churches, even while they navigate many cultural, sociological, emotional, and spiritual difficulties which are part of that integration. However, many if not most would benefit by being part of an MBB community in which they could grow in their faith and resist the pressure of their Muslim family and community.

Based on this initial study, our team has three recommendations related to further study needed regarding MBB reversion, and their communities:

1. This survey was designed in such a way that it can be used in other ministry settings, other languages, or other focused regions of the Muslim world. We anticipate that this study can be easily replicated in populations other than those we sampled with this study.
2. Because this kind of study can generate opposition, we highly recommend that a prayer team be formed for actively moving forward in this kind of inquiry and for greater clarity about God's work in the Muslim world.
3. With Europe receiving so many Muslim immigrants the past few years, it might be wise to study this issue there. Perhaps the global mission community elsewhere, where churches receive thousands of MBBs, could learn from the challenging experience of MBBs in Europe.

We also recommend that readers join us in the following prayer points:

- Lord, we seek you for what ministry leaders can do to safely and appropriately maintain better connection with MBBs who have come to faith in you and grow in discipleship.
- Lord, may your Holy Spirit lead and guide your Church into empathy and compassion for meeting the many challenges that MBBs face in finding healthy communities of faith for their families in local churches and fellowships.
- Lord, are their courageous and practical ways that local churches and congregations with MBB communities can gather in mutually supportive community to learn from each other what the other might share about the whole Body of Christ worshiping God in spirit and in truth?

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From Mortality to Memory: Death and Ancestorhood in African Spiritual Systems

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2026

Abstract

This article explores the ontological, moral, and spiritual dimensions of death within African cosmological thought, contrasting them with dominant Western paradigms. Drawing on personal bereavement, ethnographic observation, and African-authored scholarship, the study investigates how death functions not as an end, but as a transition to ancestorhood—a morally contingent status embedded in ritual, memory, and intergenerational accountability. In African spiritual systems, the dead are not absent but remain active agents in communal life, guiding the living, enforcing ethical norms, and maintaining cosmic harmony. Through analysis of myths, burial customs, and ancestral veneration in Cameroon, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, the article highlights how African ontologies frame death as relational and spiritually mediated rather than biologically final. By engaging postcolonial theory and comparative theology, the study critiques epistemological reductionism and affirms the intellectual legitimacy of African metaphysical systems. How Evangelicals assess that legitimacy is not directly considered here. Instead, the article argues that ancestorhood represents a form of moral personhood sustained through ritual, memory, and social ethics, offering a holistic vision of life, death, and continuity beyond the grave.

Key Words: African cosmology, ancestorhood, death rituals, ancestral veneration, African spirituality, metaphysics of death, moral personhood, postcolonial theology, communal identity, African ontology

Introduction

In June 2021, my father, Daniel Che Wachong, passed away in his eightieth year. Though he had endured a significant period of illness, the news of his death struck me with a profound force for which I was unprepared. As the first loss within a family of ten siblings, his departure marked a deeply unsettling rupture in the fabric of our collective life. I wept with a grief that my own children had never seen in me. Often I would excuse myself from the living room, where relatives and friends had gathered, and retreat alone to my bedroom to cry. My father's passing was not merely a personal bereavement; it was an existential reminder of a universal truth: death confronts every human being. Yet, while its emotional impact transcends cultures, the meanings we assign to death remain embedded in particular cosmological frameworks.

In many African cosmologies, death is not viewed as a definitive end but rather as a threshold between the visible and invisible realms. It is a transition fraught with both fear and reverence, mystery and meaning. Its causes are not always attributed to biomedical or accidental factors but may be explained through spiritual forces, ancestral displeasure, or metaphysical violations. As Parrinder observes, death appears simultaneously proximate and distant, eliciting anxiety due to its ambiguous origins (1967, pp. 54–56). Mbiti (1969, p. 199) affirms that in African thought, the inability of medical explanations to fully contain the significance of death often invites recourse to invisible agents—witchcraft, spiritual retribution, or ancestral withdrawal.

Among the various explanatory frameworks, myths of broken taboos or disrupted social obligations provide moral and metaphysical lenses for interpreting death. Jindra (2005, p. 323) notes that the deceased themselves may play a causal role, especially when burial rites are

incomplete or ancestral duties are neglected. Okwu (1979, p. 19) similarly argues that the breakdown of reciprocal responsibilities between the living and the dead may invite misfortune, suggesting that the dead are not passive in African worldviews—they are moral actors in an ongoing intergenerational drama. Within this ontological structure, death is social, spiritual, and moral, not merely biological.

By contrast, dominant Western paradigms tend to approach death through clinical, legal, and psychological frameworks that emphasise finality, individualism, and rational control. In this context, death is not treated as a threshold between realms, but as a biological event that must be measured, managed, and explained. Sociologist Karla A. Erickson, in *How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying* (2013), illustrates how contemporary Western societies have increasingly medicalised death, removing it from familial, communal, and spiritual spheres and relocating it within institutional and technological settings. Here, the moment of death is often determined by the cessation of heartbeat or brain activity, with sophisticated machines standing in for ancestral invocations, rites of passage, or symbolic meaning.

This clinical detachment reflects deeper philosophical commitments rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and Cartesian dualism, which separate the mind from the body and regard the self as fundamentally autonomous. Thinkers like Martin Heidegger, however, have challenged this sterile conception. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927) argued that death is not merely a biological endpoint but the most personal and defining horizon of human existence—what he later called the "possibility of the impossibility of being" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 294). Yet in much of Western praxis, death is displaced from this existential core and relocated into the purview of doctors, lawyers, and funeral directors, reducing it to a bureaucratic or medical procedure.

From a psychological perspective, this institutionalisation of death may contribute to a collective denial of mortality. Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death* (1973), contends that modern societies repress the existential reality of death by cloaking it in euphemism, professional distance, and technological control. This repression, he argues, breeds anxiety, disconnection, and a loss of symbolic frameworks for grief. When death is no longer part of communal life but hidden behind hospital curtains and sanitised euphemisms, the bereaved are left without adequate rituals or meaning structures to navigate their loss.

An illustrative example can be found in the common experience of death in modern hospitals. A patient dies in the ICU, surrounded not by family and ancestral symbols but by the hum of machines and the procedural pace of medical staff. The body is quickly removed, paperwork signed, and arrangements made for cremation or burial—often without ritual continuity. As Atul Gawande notes in *Being Mortal* (2014), this mode of dying often strips the process of emotional and existential depth: "In modern society, we treat death as a failure, not as a part of life" (Gawande, 2014, p. 186). In this schema, the social and sacred dimensions of death are largely eclipsed by institutional procedures and biomedical objectivity.

My father's death illuminated this cultural dissonance for me in vivid terms. Though I grieved deeply, my mourning did not occur solely within the parameters of individual emotion. Rather, it brought forth a constellation of social obligations, metaphysical concerns, and ancestral awareness that resonated more strongly with African understandings of death than with Western clinical detachment. His death stirred questions about continuity, spiritual presence, and moral responsibility—questions that Western models often neglect. In African cosmologies, the dead continue to participate in the moral and spiritual life of the community. In much of the West, death marks a rupture—an end beyond which no further agency is assumed.

This article investigates the ontological and metaphysical dimensions of death within African cosmological thought, with a specific emphasis on the role of ancestors in shaping moral life, ritual practice, and communal identity. It argues that while death is a universal human experience, its interpretation and significance are profoundly shaped by cultural and religious worldviews. In contrasting African conceptions with dominant Western paradigms—where death is often framed in biomedical or secular terms—the article illuminates the symbolic, ethical, and relational meanings that underpin ancestral veneration in African societies.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, integrating insights from ethnography, theology, and philosophy. Drawing upon oral traditions, ritual practices, and cosmological narratives from the Grassfields of Cameroon, as well as relevant examples from Nigeria and Sierra Leone, the analysis engages both textual sources and lived realities. The author's pastoral experience within local communities further informs the discussion, allowing for a grounded understanding of how death and ancestorship are enacted and interpreted in contemporary African contexts. Primary attention is given to African-authored scholarship, ensuring that indigenous epistemologies are centred rather than filtered through externally imposed theoretical frames.

The article is organised into four interrelated sections, each tracing a key dimension of the African understanding of death and the afterlife. The first section examines the mythical and spiritual origins of death, exploring narratives involving ancestral displeasure, witchcraft, and divine miscommunication as symbolic frameworks for interpreting human mortality. The second section focuses on death and burial rituals, analysing how funerary customs not only prepare the deceased for spiritual transition but also reaffirm social hierarchies and communal obligations. The third section explores ancestral passage and moral continuity, interrogating how the veneration of ancestors functions as a living ethic—governing behaviour, shaping memory, and reinforcing the interdependence between the living and the dead. The fourth section, titled "Living Through the Dead: Ancestors and the Spiritual Ecology of African Societies," explores the enduring presence of ancestors as moral anchors and spiritual mediators. This section examines how ancestral figures not only safeguard communal values but also serve as vital agents in the negotiation of harmony, guiding the living through times of conflict, uncertainty, and moral crisis. The article concludes with a comparative reflection on African and Western worldviews of death, challenging reductionist or universalist assumptions about mortality and spiritual agency. It argues that the African model offers a relational metaphysics of personhood—one that integrates the spiritual and social dimensions of human existence and affirms the enduring presence of the dead as part of the moral fabric of life.

The Origin of Death: Myth, Meaning, and Postcolonial Interrogations

Within many African cosmological systems, death is not simply a biological inevitability but a spiritually significant event, rooted in a network of myth, morality, and metaphysical causality. It is often understood as having entered the world through a breach in divine communication, the fault of a messenger animal, or the consequence of disrupted harmony between the physical and spiritual realms. Far from being random, death is interpreted as intentional, moralised, and often personalised.

Among Bantu-speaking communities across Africa, and particularly within the Grassfield ethnic groups of Cameroon's Northwest Region, mythic narratives about the origin of death are foundational. One such story tells of a time when the first human died, and the community, unfamiliar with death, decided to consult God to determine whether the deceased would return

to life. God initially sent the chameleon with the message that death would be final, but soon reconsidered and dispatched the dog with a new decree: that human beings would rise again. However, the dog was distracted by the scent of palm oil at an oil well, delaying its journey, while the chameleon—slow yet unwavering—arrived first and declared the permanence of death. By the time the dog delivered the opposing message, the divine word had already been established. In many communities, this myth remains symbolically potent, so much so that chameleons are still regarded with suspicion or hostility, viewed as bearers of the original curse (Parrinder, 1967, p. 64; Dah, 1988, pp. 78-79).

Parallel versions of this myth circulate widely. Among the Mende people of Sierra Leone, for example, the toad and the dog assume these same roles in a similar cosmological drama (Sawyerr 1996, p. 64). In both narratives, mortality is not a neutral event but a consequence of cosmic delay and communicative failure. These stories convey powerful insights into African worldviews: they portray death not as an impersonal biological endpoint, but as the outcome of morally charged actions and divine intentions thwarted by fallible messengers.

Yet the African understanding of death extends well beyond its mythic origin. In many societies, death is expected to occur in old age, as a peaceful transition in the natural order. It is perceived as a rite of passage reserved for elders—those who have fulfilled their communal obligations. When death occurs outside this expected trajectory—through accident, suicide, childbirth, homicide, or prolonged illness—it is seen as unnatural, even suspicious. In such cases, communities often shift their inquiry from *what* caused the death to *who* caused it (Okwu, 1979, p. 21; Mbiti, 1969, p. 199). The presumption is not that life ended arbitrarily, but that some unseen hand—human or spiritual—intervened with malevolent intent.

This belief in intentional causality was vividly illustrated during my time of pastoring a church in a semi-urban community in Cameroon. In 2004, a two-year-old girl died suddenly. Her mother, the second wife in a polygamous marriage, was widely perceived to be the favoured spouse—a situation that had long generated friction with the first wife. In the aftermath of the child's death, accusations of witchcraft quickly emerged, with the first wife cast as the prime suspect. Although medical professionals at the district hospital identified malaria and possible head trauma as the causes of death, these explanations failed to resonate with the broader community. Instead, a local diviner who was consulted by family members attributed the death to ongoing conflict within the household. The diagnosis was not specific, but it served as confirmation: the child's death had been spiritually engineered as a result of unresolved domestic tensions. In the eyes of the community, the scientific account could not account for the deeper moral and relational dynamics at play.

This case reveals a broader principle in African ontologies: that death, even when medically explained, remains spiritually encoded. As Mbiti (1969, pp. 200–201) observes, African people speak of spiritual causality not as superstition but as part of their lived reality—a world in which invisible forces are not abstract but active agents in daily life. Diviners, mediums, and spiritual elders function not merely as cultural relics but as interpreters of events that elude the reach of biomedical or legal rationality.

Among the more persistent explanations for untimely death is the failure to appease ancestral spirits. Ancestors are believed to maintain an active presence in the lives of the living, and when they are neglected—whether through the omission of rituals, disrespect for tradition, or the breaking of taboos—they may withdraw their protection or even inflict punishment. In such contexts, witchcraft is not an exotic or marginal belief but a coherent explanatory framework. It allows communities to make sense of misfortune, restore moral order, and assign

responsibility within a cosmology that fuses the physical and spiritual worlds (Jindra, 2005, p. 359; Okwu, 1979, p. 22).

Yet such understandings of death are often dismissed or misunderstood within Western epistemologies. From the perspective of biomedical science and secular rationalism, myths about talking animals or ancestral punishment may appear irrational or primitive. Western anthropologists of the colonial era frequently pathologised these beliefs, framing them as obstacles to development or remnants of a superstitious past. Within the lens of postcolonial theory, however, such interpretations are now recognised as acts of epistemic violence—instances where the West's claim to universal knowledge marginalises and silences indigenous ways of knowing (El Masri, 2025).

Edward Said's critique of Orientalism offers a useful framework here: just as the East was historically constructed as irrational and mystical in contrast to a rational West, African belief systems have often been cast as inferior or backwards, their internal logic denied recognition **(**Said, 1978**)**. Similarly, Homi Bhabha's concept of "colonial mimicry" warns against the demand that the colonised think and speak in terms acceptable to Western rationality **(**Bhabha, 1994**)**. In the case of African cosmologies of death, these non-Western insights mean rejecting the colonial compulsion to "translate" myths into psychological metaphors or dismiss them as pre-scientific folklore.

Moreover, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us that the colonial encounter was not only about land and labour but also about language and consciousness **(**Ngũgĩ, 1986**)**. The devaluation of African understandings of death is thus part of a broader legacy of epistemological domination. To restore dignity to African cosmologies is not merely an academic exercise; it is an act of intellectual decolonisation.

Death and Burial Customs: Ritual, Protest, and Transformation

In African cosmological thought, death is rarely viewed as a final cessation of life, but rather as a passage—an existential turning point that reshapes communal bonds, spiritual relations, and moral responsibilities. While Africa is home to a multiplicity of ethnic groups, each with its distinct cosmological worldview and ritual practices, there are shared patterns that reflect a broader metaphysical understanding of death as a transition rather than a termination. Burial customs, though diverse and deeply contextual, serve a common purpose: to facilitate the smooth passage of the deceased into the ancestral realm and to protect the living from spiritual retaliation or disorder.

In many traditional settings, particularly in the rural regions of sub-Saharan Africa, death is marked by intense emotional and ritual outpourings. Among the Grassfield ethnic groups of Cameroon, for example, the announcement of a death is accompanied by loud weeping, ceremonial dirges, and the firing of Dane guns. It is a symbolic gesture to alert the spirit world and guide the soul of the departed on its journey (Jindra, 2005, p. 367). In the Meta community of Cameroon's Northwest Region, expressions of grief are highly codified: widows shave their heads, avoid bathing for a prescribed period, sleep on mats or leaves on the bare floor, and are confined to mourning spaces. These acts are not only expressions of loss but also performative symbols of spiritual vulnerability and social transition (Jindra, 2005, p. 361).

Death is rarely accepted passively. Funerary prayers, public lamentations, and oral poetry express both grief and protest. Among the Bamileke people, traditional dirges contain existential commentary, such as: "Safe journey, go with less worries; we are remaining behind with many quarrels. What shall I sing? Our enemy spares neither father nor mother; he will not spare me either. They are ahead, and I shall follow them" (Nicod, 1943, pp. 152-153). Such

utterances reveal a worldview where death is both feared and expected, a communal sorrow that echoes across generations.

The preparation of the body is itself a sacred act. In many communities, the deceased is washed by close relatives, anointed with palm oil or camwood, and dressed in their finest garments—often with symbolic holes cut into the fabric to allow the spirit to "breathe" or escape the body (Nicod, 1943, pp. 153–154). Burial location and orientation also bear ritual importance. Among some Grassfield groups, a family head may be interred within the household compound, positioned with feet facing the doorway so they can symbolically observe the movement of the living (Drummond-Hay, 1925, p. 160). In villages like Oku and Babungo, small shelters are erected over graves, marking the continued presence of the dead in the spatial and moral fabric of the household (Drummond-Hay, 1925, p. 161).

Burial rites are intimately tied to the deceased's social standing. Chiefs and nobles among the Kedjom people, for example, are buried in seated positions within carefully constructed grave chambers. These structures may include bamboo or wooden doors, symbolising both closure and continuity (Jindra, 2005, p. 358). In contrast, women and those deemed socially marginal are typically buried in simpler, less ceremonially significant graves—reflecting gendered hierarchies in traditional cosmologies. Before the grave is filled, mourners cast handfuls of soil while declaring their innocence in the death—an act, which is both reconciliatory and defensive. During my ministry in Ako, a town in Cameroon where I served from 2003 to 2006, I encountered numerous instances of this act. As people threw soil onto the body, they often invoked phrases such as: "Go safely. My hands are clean. I know nothing about your death. If you know the one responsible, do not rest until you have avenged it."

Such declarations illustrate a critical dynamic in many African interpretations of death: suspicion. Despite medical or natural causes—whether illness, childbirth, or accident—there is often a prevailing belief that spiritual forces or human malevolence (especially witchcraft) are at play. The question is not *what* caused the death, but *who* caused it. This suspicion is rooted in a metaphysics where death is rarely accidental. Instead, it may result from broken social obligations, ancestral displeasure, or mystical manipulation by others (Mbiti, 1969, p. 200; Okwu, 1979, pp. 21–22; Crafford, 1996, p. 6).

Consequently, proper burial rituals are viewed as essential—not merely as acts of mourning, but as protective strategies to appease the spirit of the deceased and ensure communal harmony. Failure to conduct these rites adequately risks angering the dead, who may return as malevolent forces or "wandering spirits," disrupting the living with illness, infertility, or continued misfortune (Mbiti, 1969, p. 123). Libations, food offerings, and sacrificial rites remain central to burial customs across many regions. These acts not only affirm the deceased's transition to the ancestral realm but also reinforce the moral obligations of the living to maintain spiritual order.

However, these customs are far from static. With the advance of modernisation, urbanisation, Christianity, and Islam, burial practices across Africa are undergoing significant transformations. In urban centres, funerals are increasingly formalised, influenced by Western aesthetics, modern mortuary services, and religious liturgies. Embalming, casket funerals, professional choirs, and printed obituary programs now accompany rituals that once required no written script. Economic migration, shrinking communal ties, and the nuclearisation of families have also altered how communities engage with the dead.

Yet, despite these changes, many traditional practices endure—particularly in rural or peri-urban areas, where indigenous cosmologies still shape everyday life. For example, even among Christian converts, rituals such as casting soil while speaking to the dead, shaving heads, or

performing cleansing ceremonies remain widespread. These rituals may now be overlaid with prayers from pastors or recitations from sacred texts, but their symbolic logic—rooted in ancestral cosmology—persists.

Recent research by scholars such as Ernest E. Uwazie (2019) and Ogungbile & Akintunde (2021) shows that the hybridisation of burial rituals is now common across many African societies. While church funerals and public memorials dominate urban life, rural ceremonies often incorporate both Christian and traditional elements, revealing the complex negotiation between modernity and ancestral continuity. In some cases, Christian leaders have decided to accommodate these traditions, believing that spiritual legitimacy in many communities depends on a respectful integration of the old and the new.

In this evolving landscape, death and burial customs continue to be a site of cultural resilience, adaptation, and negotiation. Even as modernity encroaches, the enduring belief remains: that the dead must be properly honoured—not just for memory's sake, but to preserve the fragile balance between the seen and the unseen worlds.

Ancestral Passage and Moral Continuity in African Thought

In many African cosmologies, death is conceived as a transformative passage, a transition from the material world to the spiritual realm, and in some traditions, back to the physical through reincarnation. The metaphysical understanding of death is integrally linked to African notions of time, morality, and community. As Kalu (2000, p. 55) aptly summarises, “Death marks a journey, a passage through the spiritual world for yet another pilgrimage.” It is an event deeply embedded within a cyclical and relational understanding of existence.

In numerous Cameroonian languages, the vocabulary of death evokes departure, return, and summons—expressions such as “called by the ancestors,” “taken on a journey,” or “escaped from the troubles of life” suggest that death is a continuation, not a cessation (Jindra, 2005, p. 358; cf. Okwu, 1979). This vision transforms death into a ritualised rite of passage, signifying not an end, but an altered state of being within the continuum of life.

The Cameroonian novelist and theologian Nsanda Eba Jumbam (1980, p. 118) poignantly illustrates this tension in his narrative of *Yaya*, a widow being urged to accept Christian baptism. When told that in the afterlife there is no family or marriage, Yaya protests, “How does one not need their beloved ones? Is God a source of unity or of division? I cannot understand this.” Her resistance reflects an African philosophical concern: the posthumous social continuity of the self, not merely one’s reconciliation with a transcendent deity. In African thought, to die is not to dissolve into abstraction, but to assume a new relational identity within the spiritual ecosystem of the community.

John Mbiti’s well-known concept of the “living-dead” captures this ontology. The living-dead are those who, though physically deceased, remain active presences in the lives of their descendants. They are remembered by name, venerated in ritual, and appealed to in moments of crisis. As long as one is remembered and honoured, one continues to exist in personal immortality (Mbiti, 1969, p. 25). This continuity is ritually enacted through libations, sacrifices, ancestral shrines, and especially through proper burial rites—the essential gateway into ancestral status (Jindra, 2005, p. 359).

Among the Tikari clans of Cameroon, improper burial disrupts this process. If a family member dies away from home and is interred elsewhere, it becomes the successor’s responsibility to retrieve the remains—often the skull—and return them to the family compound. If neglected, the ancestral spirit is believed to wander restlessly, causing misfortune

or illness within the family (Drummond-Hay, 1925, pp. 93-94). Even graves of unknown individuals found by roadsides are given offerings by passers-by, not simply as a gesture of respect, but as a protective measure against the possible wrath of unappeased spirits (Drummond-Hay, 1925, p. 95). Möller (1979, p. 123) confirms that ancestral spirits denied proper rituals may become malignant, actively disrupting the harmony between the living and the dead.

Beyond the spiritual realm, African cosmologies also embrace the idea of reincarnation as a form of return and renewal. In Yoruba culture, for instance, children born soon after the death of a grandparent or parent are named *Babatundé* ("Father Returns") or *Iyàntundé* ("Mother Returns"), affirming the belief that the ancestor has returned to complete another life cycle (Sawyerr, 1996, p. 13). This cyclical vision of time, which is so different from the linear temporality of Western modernity, frames history through ritual events, agricultural seasons, and moral continuities, rather than abstract chronology (Mbiti, 1971, p. 24; Okwu, 1979, p. 20).

Not all the dead, however, become ancestors. The elevation to ancestral status is not automatic. As Kalu (2000, p. 56) and Sawyerr (1996, p. 13) explain, one must have lived an honourable, socially productive life, died at an appropriate age, and received proper burial rites. Those who die from suicide, violent accidents, or disgraceful causes may be denied this honour. Thus, the afterlife is not merely spiritual—it is a moral reflection of earthly conduct. As Kalu notes, those who possessed social status and moral integrity in life are believed to carry their "titles" into the afterlife, even being buried with their attendants or symbols of power to aid them in the next world.

This belief system functions as more than theology. It serves as a form of ethical regulation. The aspiration to be remembered and honoured as an ancestor motivates individuals to live in alignment with communal values. Ancestral belief operates as a moral compass and social control mechanism, as Opoku (1978, p. 39) suggests, ensuring that actions are judged not only by present society but also by the ancestors. Misdeeds, particularly those that break customary law or harm the community, are believed to invite ancestral disapproval, often manifesting in illness, barrenness, or unexplained misfortune (Okwu, 1979, p. 20).

Living Through the Dead: Ancestors and the Spiritual Ecology of African Societies

In many African cosmological traditions, the relationship between the living and the dead is not severed by physical death; rather, it is transformed. Ancestors are believed to serve as both moral guardians and spiritual intermediaries—protectors of the living and facilitators of communication with the Supreme Being. This conviction stems from a metaphysical worldview that perceives reality as an intricate interplay between the visible and invisible, the material and the spiritual. Within this framework, the spiritual realm is not abstract or distant but directly involved in the affairs of human life, shaping events, enforcing ethical norms, and guiding individual destiny.

Pauw (1975, p. 151) observes that ancestral spirits are understood as enforcers of social morality, maintaining balance and favour between the community and the divine. Their influence is sustained by the belief that life itself is animated by powerful, impersonal spiritual forces—ranging from the Supreme Being and divinities to the living-dead, as Driberg (1936, p. 3) suggests. Mbiti (1969, p. 167) affirms that the psychological fabric of African village life is suffused with faith in this "magic power," a force that manifests through rituals, sacrifices, and libations not as empty formalities, but as essential actions by which the living invoke the moral oversight and protection of their ancestors (Adogame, 2007, p. 5; Parrinder, 1961, p. 122).

This veneration of ancestors is grounded in their perceived dual proximity: having passed into the spiritual realm, they are closer to the divine, but having once lived among humans, they remain accessible, familiar, and sympathetic. Okwu (1979, p. 19) characterises ancestors as "lobbyists" in the spirit world—advocates who possess both divine insight and human empathy. This position explains why, in many communities, individuals are more likely to petition their ancestors directly rather than God, who is often conceived as remote or too exalted to approach casually (Mbiti, 1969, p. 83; Sawyerr, 1996, p. 44; Kasambala, 2005, p. 4). The ancestors' mediating role is therefore essential to the spiritual ecology of African societies.

However, this belief has not been without its detractors. Critics from monotheistic traditions—especially Christianity and Islam—have expressed concern that ancestral veneration may blur the line between reverence and worship, or worse, promote superstition. Some reductionist perspectives within Western scholarship have gone so far as to label these practices "primitive" or irrational (Gray, 1990, p. 5). Yet such critiques often reflect a Eurocentric epistemology that fails to appreciate the cultural and ethical complexity of African spiritual systems. They overlook how these practices function not only as religious expressions but also as tools of moral education, social regulation, and communal bonding.

Rather than contradicting belief in a Supreme Being, ancestral veneration in African traditions complements it. Ancestral veneration represents a relational theology—one that integrates the divine, the departed, and the living into a continuous moral universe. Within this system, the ancestors act not as objects of worship but as spiritual elders who enforce communal ethics and mediate divine order. Their enduring presence contributes to a sense of accountability among the living, reinforcing values such as justice, respect, and communal harmony.

This moral and spiritual function extends further into the realms of justice and social cohesion. In many African societies, ancestors are believed to be custodians not only of moral codes but also of land, tradition, and family identity. They are invoked in moments of communal tension, land disputes, and rites of passage as arbiters of fairness and continuity. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the *Odo* divinity appears cyclically to restore societal balance and reaffirm the moral order, as Kalu (2000, pp. 58–60) recounts. Similarly, Turaki (1999, p. 178) notes that ancestral approval is sought before planting or building, as ancestors are seen as spiritual co-owners of the land and stewards of communal prosperity.

Ancestral rituals, particularly funeral celebrations and family reunions, are not merely commemorations of the dead; they serve as vital moments for healing, reconciliation, and the reaffirmation of familial bonds. Möller (1979, p. 123) observes that such occasions often compel relatives to confront lingering grievances, encouraging the restoration of fractured relationships. In this sense, death becomes more than a personal or spiritual event—it becomes a communal process of social recalibration. Jindra (2005, p. 362), in her study of the Oshie community in Cameroon, similarly notes that funeral rites function as both spiritual transactions and social mechanisms, facilitating the reweaving of kinship ties and communal solidarity.

This role of funeral rituals as catalysts for reconciliation became personally evident during the burial of my father in our home town in Wum in July 2021. It was the first time in over a decade that most of us—his children—had gathered together under one roof. Though individual family members had visited our parents over the years, we had not held a full family meeting since we had dispersed across different cities in Cameroon and abroad for work. The night before the funeral, we gathered in our parents' bedroom for a private meeting, chaired by our mother, Cecilia Bei Wachong. Her words were both a benediction and a gentle rebuke: she

urged us to stay united in both joy and hardship, to uphold the spirit of kinship our father had cherished, and most poignantly, to release any bitterness or unresolved conflicts we held toward one another. “If anyone here harbours anger or hatred,” she said, “this is the time to let it go—so that your father may pass on in peace, and we too may live in peace.”

This moment underscored the social and spiritual function of the funeral ritual. It was not only a farewell to our father but also a renewal of our sibling relationships. His death summoned us not only to mourn but to reconcile. In this way, the burial was not simply an end—it was also a beginning, an act of communal restoration deeply consonant with the African understanding of death as a bridge between worlds and a catalyst for moral and social realignment.

Still, ancestral rites are not universally embraced. In modern urban settings and among more individualistic generations, such practices are sometimes seen as outdated or excessively burdensome. Some Christians and Muslims worry that these rites conflict with scriptural teachings or lead to “syncretism.” Meanwhile, economic pressures and the shift toward nuclear family structures have reduced the centrality of ancestral veneration among some younger Africans. Yet, even in these evolving contexts, ancestral traditions continue to function symbolically—as reminders of cultural identity, moral obligation, and social responsibility.

What sustains the enduring relevance of ancestral belief is not simply ritual continuity, but the existential aspiration it inspires. For many Africans, to become an ancestor is the highest spiritual honour. It is an affirmation that one’s life was worthy of remembrance and reverence. This aspiration is both a cultural and an ethical motivation. One must live justly, serve the community, raise upright children, and die at a ripe old age under dignified circumstances to qualify for ancestorhood (Okwu, 1979, p. 21). Ancestral status is not inherited but earned, representing a form of spiritual meritocracy.

Kalu (2000, p. 55) calls this system a “moral compass”—one that aligns present conduct with future legacy. The fear of being forgotten or excluded from the community of the living-dead motivates individuals to act ethically in life. Opoku (1978, p. 39) affirms that ancestral belief operates as a form of social control, reinforcing communal values through both promise and threat.

Conclusion: Death, Personhood, and the Enduring Presence of the Dead

This article has explored African cosmologies of death not as static traditions or archaic curiosities, but as dynamic systems of meaning that continue to shape how life, loss, and legacy are understood across many African societies. In reflecting comparatively on African and Western interpretations of death, what becomes clear is not merely a difference in ritual practice or theological emphasis, but a fundamental divergence in metaphysical assumptions about personhood, time, and the moral agency of the dead.

In dominant Western paradigms, particularly those shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and biomedical science, death is primarily understood as the irreversible cessation of biological functions—an endpoint marked by clinical definitions and institutional rituals. Within secular and even many Christian frameworks, the dead are often perceived as absent or resting, their agency terminated, their role in the moral life of the community concluded. Commemoration may persist in the form of memory, heritage, or sainthood, but these are typically detached from a belief in the direct influence of the dead upon the living.

By contrast, African cosmologies articulate a relational metaphysics of personhood—one in which death is not an ontological rupture but a transition into another mode of existence.

The deceased, particularly those who attain ancestral status, continue to participate actively in the moral, spiritual, and communal life of their families. They are not simply remembered; they are invoked, honoured, consulted, and feared. Their ongoing presence serves both as comfort and caution, reinforcing social norms and intergenerational accountability. This presence is not a metaphorical afterlife, but a socially and ritually enacted reality.

To view these beliefs as "primitive" or "irrational" is to fall into the trap of epistemological reductionism, which privileges a singular way of knowing while dismissing others. It is to misrecognize the ethical and ontological coherence that ancestral veneration brings to African societies. When Western frameworks reduce death to biological finality or psychological grief, they often miss the depth of relational continuities and communal metaphysics that define much of African religious life.

Moreover, African perspectives on death and the dead are not as isolated or culturally exotic as they may appear. Comparative insights reveal striking parallels across world religions. In Confucian thought, ancestors remain present as moral exemplars and spiritual protectors, playing a crucial role in shaping familial ethics and social harmony **(**Tu, 1998**)**. In Catholic Christianity, saints mediate divine grace and serve as models of virtuous living, forming a "communion of saints" that connects the living with the spiritually departed (Woodward, 1990). In indigenous North American traditions, the spirits of the departed are honoured as custodians of land and wisdom, with rituals and oral traditions affirming their ongoing guidance in communal life (Cajete, 2000). Even in Islam, where formal ancestor veneration is not permitted, the practice of offering prayers (*du'a*) for the dead affirms a continuing spiritual relationship and moral responsibility toward deceased kin (Nasr, 2002).

What African cosmologies offer uniquely, however, is a holistic integration of life and death, the spiritual and the social. They present a view in which personhood is not confined to the flesh, nor is community restricted to the living. The dead remain embedded in the ethical life of the people, not merely as historical figures, but as metaphysical agents whose presence is sustained through ritual, narrative, and moral conduct.

In this view, dying well—at an appropriate age, in moral standing, and with proper rites—is not only an individual aspiration but a communal achievement. To become an ancestor is to attain a kind of spiritual citizenship, and to live in such a way that one's name will be invoked with reverence and hope, not fear or silence. Ancestorhood stands in sharp contrast to the anonymity and institutional sequestration that often mark death in modern Western settings, where dying is increasingly managed by hospitals, and remembrance by legal wills or memorial stones.

Ultimately, the African cosmological model resists universalist claims about death by offering a relational and spiritually embedded understanding of human existence—an understanding in which the dead do not simply vanish but continue to shape the world of the living. This model insists that mortality is not merely about the end of life but about the moral legacy it leaves behind, the community it affects, and the cosmological cycles it enters.

To take African conceptions of death seriously, then, is not only to expand our understanding of religious diversity but also to challenge narrow epistemologies that overlook the enduring bonds between the living and the dead. It is to affirm that personhood does not end at death but is extended through memory, ritual, and relational presence. And it is to acknowledge that in many parts of the world, including among diasporic communities, the ancestors are still with us, not merely as symbols, but as moral agents woven into the very fabric of communal life.

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The Witchdoctor's Craft

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2026

Abstract

Much confusion over the roles and presence of witchdoctors in Africa is clarified through careful attention to epistemology. Witchdoctor's provide utility, usually deceptively, through arranging for suffering or demise of others on your behalf so as to enable you to feel good. In contexts in which others' feelings hurt you, the witchdoctor's craft may be essential, until Jesus enters the scene. Jesus's Way of Truth brings fulness of Life to believers. Informed etic articulation of traditional African ways of life in this article throws light onto contemporary concerns over fake news.

Key Words: Africa, epistemology, Jesus, witchcraft, witchdoctor

Introduction: Some Discussion on Epistemology

A witchdoctor's craft builds on people's innate orientation to outdoing others. Positively this orientation inspires hard work. Negatively, it requires eradication or invalidation of those trying to outdo me or us, one's enemies. Because someone can feel better even should that eradication or invalidation be delusional, witchdoctors can be rewarded for deceiving their customers regarding others' failures. As Helmut Schoeck states,

> It must have been one of Christianity's most important, if unintentional, achievements in preparing men for, and rendering them capable of, innovative actions when it provided man for the first time with supernatural beings who, he knew, could neither envy nor ridicule him. By definition the God and saints of Christianity can never be suspected by a believer of countering his good luck or success with envy, or of heaping mockery and derision upon the failure of his sincere efforts (Schoeck, 1969, pp. 91-92).

There is much semantic confusion in English regarding terminology associated with witches. Using native English, reference to witches or witchcraft is usually to outdated practices once engaged by European and American ancestors that are now considered primitive and "unenlightened." English terms about witchcraft are widely used to translate various expressions from a broad variety of African languages. Thus, the term "witchcraft" always means two things at once, that which is European, and that which is African. My focus in this article is on elaborating African understandings. I articulate the witchdoctor's craft, as practiced in Africa, and why it is so widespread. Of course, I do so as someone who is not native to Africa—hence I offer an etic description.

This article is both academic and rooted in experience. As a Brit who has lived and served as a missionary in sub-Saharan Africa for over 37 years, I have acquired much personal experience of the witchdoctor's craft, of the contexts in which witchdoctors do their work, and on how witchdoctors are opposed. This article builds on that experience, interpreted through certain scholarly literature.

This article is not a survey of everything found in the literature about "the witchdoctor's craft." The reason for this limitation is related to epistemology. Western explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists wrote many of the early texts that describe ways of life of people in Africa

"discovered" between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. Etic accounts written by the original Western explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists were, and are, for formal scholarly purposes considered authoritative—foundations on which to build further knowledge.

When Africans themselves began to take on formal scholarly roles, these accounts became required sources of information for them. African scholars looking for recognition are typically forced to use the same languages as had the explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists (Alexander, 1999). (Particularly in focus here is English.) For reasons explained in more detail elsewhere (Harries, 2013), the practice by which Africans use English and imitate etic accounts has frequently resulted in supposed emic accounts being unduly influenced by etic descriptions. The difference between etic and emic accounts becomes highly unclear. Emic accounts must for formal purposes give deference to accounts written by outsiders and in the outsiders' languages. Outside researchers and writers are required to take emic accounts seriously regardless of whether they match with their own observations. As mentioned, those emic accounts are distorted through having to reflect etic accounts. Thus, everything can be thoroughly distorted. In the view of this author, the confusion between etic and emic accounts has had the serious result of implicit lies and distortions being incorporated into formal scholarship about Africa. The assumption that African scholars should produce output that falls in line with their Western scholarly predecessors and compatriots, and vice versa, has made a mockery of formal scholarship on Africa.

I will endeavour to illustrate the above described "mockery" with reference to witchcraft. A truly emic account of (African terms routinely translated into English as) witchcraft would not take account of native English speakers' association of witchcraft with prior practices in Europe now considered primitive. Rather, witchcraft, the need to be alert to and to take account of the social workings of envy, would in emic terms be simply a matter of fact, part of interhuman engagements. Yet when emic writers discover that witchcraft is using English understood as primitive, they may well conceal it to avoid shame. Then outsiders who notice rampant witchcraft in Africa will attempt to conceal their observations in order to fall in line with emic descriptions. A widespread and key important phenomenon as a result disappears from view.

I can again illustrate the above-described confusion with a very simple example. A visitor from Europe may find Africa to be hot. Africans do not say their context is "hot." To them it is "normal." So, is it "hot" or not? Africans visiting Europe may find Europe to be cold. To Europeans, Europe is not cold but normal. So, is Europe cold, or not? In globalized education—guided from the West using Western languages—the understanding of African insiders has been expected to be the same as that of outsiders. Hence in formal terms, even in discourse led by Africans (emically), Africa is hot, something abnormal that arises through comparison with Europe.

While the necessary scholarly theory to build upon can arise from libraries, provision should also be there for theory to arise from fieldwork and field experience. In this article I prioritize the latter, learning from field experience. Being rooted in long-term field experience, this article draws heavily on learning directly from African people heard in their own contexts expressing themselves in their own languages. The article unapologetically ignores much previous work by Westerners and those Africans who have followed the lead of Westerners if what is stated does not tally with what is locally obvious—for reasons outlined in the above paragraphs. Contemporary scholars often fail to pay sufficient attention to how indigenous African people use their own terms for their own purposes. There is a need for some new beginnings to save descriptions of Africa's on-the-ground realities from the heavy hand of the politically correct requirement to always build on

previous formal scholarship. There is a need to validate scholarship that draws on local experience, whether emic or etic, without always expecting justification with reference to the "wider literature."

The Basis for the Practice of Witchcraft

One major insight from an insider's perspective can help Westerners understand why so-called witchcraft is widespread in Africa. This insight relates to how people perceive their own wellbeing in comparison with that of others. People like to assess themselves relative to others both in Africa and in the West. For example:

- Many people will not think of their car as big or small, but rather as bigger or smaller than other people's cars.
- People often do not want to know only the percentage their children have achieved in a school exam, but also their position in their class.
- Women evaluate the ways their husbands behave towards them by comparison with what they hear and see as being the behaviour of other women's husbands.

This complicated relativizing feature of people's behaviour has many ramifications and may be more worthy of attention than is sometimes considered. The relativizing tendency demonstrates that the short-falls, suffering, or failure of others may add to one's own contentment, personal satisfaction, or good feeling. Such comprehension of the impact of others' shortfalls may have an unfortunate outcome: a person may desire—for the sake of their own satisfaction or happiness—that others live problematic lives characterised by failure, poverty, and/or suffering.

Contentment arising from others' short-falls may be acquired by a group as well as by an individual. The contentedness of a family may increase should they become aware of another family's shortfalls. The same applies to a wide variety of groups such as schools, sports clubs, clans, countries, genders, age-cohorts, a set of relatives, one's workforce by comparison with another workforce, one soccer team as against another, and so on.

Making others suffer for one's own benefit, or rejoicing in others' problems or shortfalls, is rarely considered virtuous social behaviour. While the implicit desire that others fail is socially undesirable or embarrassing and may not be overtly acknowledged, it may still be a palpable source of perceived thriving and might direct or transform people's lives. Imagine the effect on a family of discovering that their child, who usually seriously under-performs, has taken first position in their class for all subjects. Imagine a woman being told that a woman she tends to enviously admire is mortally ill, is in pain, or is being abandoned by her husband. Imagine a person being told that someone who has always shown them up in the workforce has been fired for having been found pilfering. How do these circumstances impact someone? Potentially at least, they could give one an invigorating rush of glee, making one feel better than otherwise would have been the case. Life is often unkind. What we have here described can make it more bearable. It provides people with a singular kind of satisfaction and/or happiness. Economists might call this utility (Economics, n.d.).

Existence of the above kinds of acquisition of utility leads to the possibility of the development of a market. One is likely to have people who are ready to sell, and others to purchase, the suffering and loss of others. After all, as they say, "bad news sells."[1] That there be a market in bad news is not a new phenomenon. People have often rejoiced in those who harm their enemies or those of whom they are envious. Such utility is surely likely to create a market. Perhaps what is new in this

article is a particular way of describing this phenomenon of there being a market for damage done to others, and looking at some implications of the existence of such a market. (The possibility of the existence of such a market was not considered in Foster's classic 1965 article, perhaps a very consequential omission (Foster, 1965, pp. 293–315).)

News one receives does not have to be true in order for it to impact how one feels about oneself. Being told something can have an impact even if it is not true. The utility a person or group gets from bad news seems not to be contingent on the truth of that news. The market of bad news may be one in which what is exchanged are deceptions. Sometimes truths may be mixed with deceptions. Clearly, a deception—to the effect that certain bad things have happened or are the case for someone else or another group—can be of value to the person who is deceived by such a deception. Deceiving someone that other children have flunked their exams, or that their competitor is failing, that a certain person is not as happy as they seem to be, can provide utility—provided, that is, that the deception is in some way concealed so that the deception is taken as truth. While the deception is believed, the person who receives bad news about others is helped to feel better about themselves. They might even thrive on this kind of "bad news."

This kind of utility that leads to thriving could presumably acquire some kind of financial value. The person receiving the utility may be ready to part with money, cattle, chickens, sexual favours, praise, or other goods in exchange for the utility they are getting. That is to say, a witchdoctor can demand compensation for the utility they offer. The initiator of the deception, provided that it is believed, may well be paid. As already mentioned, deceiving people into an understanding that others are suffering or failing can give individuals (or groups) many of the benefits that would be associated with the actual failure or suffering of others. Potential benefits arising from deceptions makes it likely that certain people would want to take advantage of such means so as to sell, provide, or acquire such benefits. They may seek to make a living by being rewarded by people whom they successfully deceive regarding the failures of others.

We can add a further level to all of the above. Is it possible that an awareness that one is being deceived might not even nullify or reduce the positive impact arising from hearing about someone else's difficult news? While the deception lasts, I seem to do better, I feel better. That deception can be worth propagating even if known to be a deception. Whether originating in oneself or acquired from others, deceptions regarding one's own or one's own group's relative thriving may be important so as to make life bearable or even pleasant.

One might propose that the existence and "use" of such deceptions for the propagation of personal thriving may be needed for the perpetuation of peaceful human co-existence. In other words, perhaps this kind of deception is foundational to the thriving, survival, or at least contentment of many or even all human communities? If this is the case, it could mean that deception lies at the base of all that humankind ever successfully is and does. "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19).

This issue, of the need for others to suffer in order for one to feel good, is not new. But it may be under-recognized or insufficiently acknowledged. It being under-recognised or insufficiently acknowledged in Western-led endeavours at understanding Africa, as seems to be the case, it may be a very important factor to explore. The importance of this market for the suffering of others, whether actual or by way of deception, should it be known by one group such as Africans but not by Western scholars, may point to major foundational inter-cultural misunderstandings. It may by some people and at times not be perceived at all. Certain members of a population may not be able

to recognize it, while others do. I want to consider the scenario in which a human community, blinkered to its own dependency on receipt of bad news about others, is at the same time dependent on it for its thriving, or even survival. It would not take much for certain people to become operatives, practitioners, experts, professionals, in provision of bad news about others. Those could be people who a community could not do without.

The Witchdoctor's Craft

I believe I have above introduced the reader to the witchdoctor's craft. Witchcraft is widely known to be rooted in deception. That being the case may not in itself make witchcraft either ineffective or unnecessary. A practitioner of witchcraft who realizes that bad news of others is desirable can help an individual or a group to acquire an understanding through which they thrive. Bringing about suffering of the other is not necessarily core to acquisition of utility. Most important in order to have a saleable product that produces utility is to convince a person that the other is suffering or failing, whether this is the case or not. Many witchdoctors pride themselves in being able to make others suffer, or seem to suffer (Cimpric, 2010). Someone feeling inadequate or badly about themselves can get a personal boost by having a witchdoctor appear to bring misfortune on others.

We need to add another related human feature at this point. That is, people do not like to have enemies. Partly at least, a dislike for enemies may be very pragmatic. People do not like to have enemies because those enemies may at some point do them harm, even should that be in a distant future. I believe this desire to not have enemies extends further. In the African communities I am familiar with, a person would not want to upset a man who is at the point of death who, because he is about to die, would not be able to avenge himself about what upset him. That is to say—people try to avoid overt enmity even with people for whom there is no clear mechanism by which they may ever harm one in return. In traditional Africa, human perception includes the possibility that ill-will may translate into harm, even in the absence of a clear mechanism through which that might happen. In other words, the displeasure of others can itself harm someone. Or, one fears the ill-feelings of others. For some, the ill-feelings of others is related to a fear of "spirits" (when the term "spirits" is used as a euphemism for "envies") (Harries, In Press).

The possibility, or even likelihood, that someone can translate their ill-will in a way that might make someone else suffer or cease to thrive (likely motivated by their own desire to thrive), with or without the use of a "professional" witchdoctor, empowers feelings. That is, a person will know that should someone feel negatively about you, then one way or another that bad feeling can reduce the level of your thriving. The bad feeling that arises from negative comparisons is widely known as envy. It follows that some people believe that the bad feeling of envy toward someone can itself hurt them by bringing about misfortune.

The above-described ability of someone's ill feelings to hurt you in the absence of a clear mechanism through which this happens describes the beliefs of witchcraft—that someone's envy can make the envied person suffer or lose utility (satisfaction, happiness). It follows that someone who suffers or loses out on utility is a victim of someone else's ill feeling or envy, which makes that envious person feel better about themselves. The possibility that someone's envy itself can harm you makes envy into something that should be feared. The knowledge that one's suffering is bringing another person joy means that joy is perceived as a limited good. Someone else having more joy will likely result in your having less of it. It means that it is in everyone's own interests for others to suffer. If it is in your interests for others to suffer, then it is logical to assume that they know that it is in their interests for you to suffer. Thus, others are likely to desire your suffering.

They want the worst for you. Should they suggest the contrary, then such a suggestion is likely to be a deception. Their articulating that they have your best interests at heart, for example, should not be believed. From the above, someone—typically a so-called witchdoctor—who can deceive people into believing that others are suffering makes a contribution to the overall contentment of a human community. He (or she) might at the same time offer to protect you against others' efforts at making you suffer, or cease to thrive.

These days modern people like to point out that witchcraft is not "true" or does not "exist." Witchcraft may indeed not exist in the modern use of the term "existence." But pointing out that witchcraft does not exist may be missing the point. The point may be that belief in witchcraft is required for its benefits to accrue. People looking to acquire the benefits want to believe the deception. Removal of the deception can, and perhaps frequently will, make life unlivable. For human societies to thrive may require building on deception, and not on truth (Steiner, 1998, p. 228). To suggest that witchcraft does not exist can be to endeavour to cancel utility acquired from deceptive means that consider others to be failing. For example, imagine that a woman is angry with her neighbour. She is intent on taking a club and beating her neighbour to death. She is determined that the other woman suffer. Physically beating someone to death can have many negative repercussions. The woman may be deterred from approaching her neighbour so as to batter her with a stick, if she can be convinced that a witchdoctor will kill the neighbour. To question the reality of witchcraft can therefore be to promote an orientation to physical violence and aggression. Stated conversely, belief in witchcraft can reduce violence and aggression.

The description of witchcraft given above has parallels with sacrifice. A sacrifice, a drawing of thriving from what is sacrificed, can boost the apparent or actual prosperity of the person or group offering the sacrifice. As above, this may be a deception, i.e., a sacrifice may not be an "actual" sacrifice. Or, performance of a sacrifice may not actually boost your thriving. It can be enough to believe that it has happened even should it not have happened. The feeling derived from the belief that the act of sacrifice has happened is what is important, not the sacrificial act itself.

To sacrifice is to put an animal or person through suffering that may well end in death. The beneficiary of this practice is clearly not the one sacrificed. It is the person who remains alive. The person who remains alive gains utility from the suffering or death, or perceived suffering or death, of another, or of others, who have been sacrificed. Sacrificial practices are therefore a part of the same system whereby people acquire utility from the suffering of others. Sacrificed animals are normally those animals that live close to people. (The killing of a wild animal that lives in a jungle or forest does not qualify to be a "sacrifice.") Such animals are symbolically taken as extensions of the people they live with—typically their owners. The suffering animal symbolizes a suffering person.

Animal or human sacrifices are often thought to please the gods. Such pleasing of gods makes sense when one realizes the close relationship between "gods" and "spirits" and emotions/feelings. (It has become very clear to me that in indigenous African churches with which I have interacted for many years a successful driving away of spirits results in someone feeling better, i.e., in an improved emotional state for the person concerned.) The practice of sacrifice, as the suffering of another—whether actual or as a deception—is thought to be able to reduce fraught tensions. It brings utility. It can make someone feel better about themselves. It can result in healthy emotions. It is a part of acquiring good mental health.

Until the coming of Christ, the practice of animal or human sacrifice was frequently not optional. It was required to ensure the thriving of human communities. The Old Testament tells of God's discontentedness with sacrifice (see for example Isa. 1:11). Yet up to Jesus's time, God's people the Jews had not managed to put sacrifice aside. They were still practicing sacrifice in the Temple. It took Jesus's self-sacrifice, as alternative sacrifice, to allow human communities to thrive without routine ritual slaughter. So for those who believe in what Jesus did, Jesus's self-sacrifice can render the services of a witchdoctor nullified or superfluous. A focusing on the cross can make both recourse to a witchdoctor and performance of animal or human sacrifice unnecessary.

Jesus's Overcoming of Deception

The term "peace" is sometimes used as an alternative for wellbeing or thriving, as in the title of a book by David Maranz, *Peace is Everything: Worldview of Muslims in the Senegambia* (Maranz, 1993). To live in peace is to have subjugated one's enemy, which is to ensure that, at least according to certain measures, their level of thriving is lower than your own. The Bible hints at another form of peace, a peace that does not arise from someone else's failure or suffering: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27, KJV). It is a peace that comes from Jesus.

That scientific truth arose in contexts dominated by Christianity is widely known (Merton, 1970). That some may think this was a coincidence demonstrates a lack of deep thinking on this theme. Such a person does not realise what Jesus's self-giving on the cross actually achieved. Jesus himself said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6, NIV). To reiterate, this biblical passage has a specific meaning; Jesus's *way* brings a singular means to *truth* that in turn enables *life*. We need to consider this reference to truth in the context in which deception was a constant necessity for human thriving guided by witchdoctors. Jesus's act was singularly the truth. The truth brought by Jesus is revolutionary and radically transformative. It is a truth that is intended to penetrate societies previously guided by non-truth, i.e., deceptions regarding the suffering of others, frequently manipulated and propagated by witchdoctors.

In New Testament times, some Jews rejected Jesus, especially according to John's Gospel. (For example, see John 19:7.) They were taken in by the deceptions on which their communities thrived. They considered the deceptions to be true. They believed that sacrifice brought actual thriving by means of a (simple) cause-and-effect. Yet, this failing was not unique to the Jews. If they were in any way more guilty than others, it was because they should have known better. It is not hard to suppose that had Jesus been put on trial by non-Jews they would have been as likely to have wanted to crucify him as were the Jews. The Jews, despite being people of God (and not of gods), can be said to have failed in that they continued to desire the suffering of victims. Jesus is the case in point. Hence the ongoing sacrificial system in the Temple. Those who believed in what Jesus had done, not as a deception but as something singularly true, initiated a revolution that resulted in sacrificial systems and fear of witchcraft being significantly reduced if not abandoned in many parts of the world.

Jesus's self-sacrifice also exposed the fact that sacrifice works by means of a deception. It was commonly supposed that someone sacrificed in some way deserved to die. But Jesus exposed that myth through his own sinless life, death, and resurrection. In every other case apart from that of Christ, sacrificial victims could no longer speak once they had been sacrificed. The utility acquired by, say, the onlookers as Jesus hung on the cross was a result of the above-described self-deceptions.

Unlike other victims, however, Jesus rose from the dead. Following his resurrection, by talking with people who believed, Jesus exposed the error of their ways—God is not in favor of sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22). God wanted people to abandon their prior ways of living based on deception and instead to embrace truth. Thus, Jesus began an enabling of perception of the "real," as that which is "really true." This perception of the real acquired by Christians in turn led to the discoveries of modern science and many enabling technologies.

Characteristically, once a person was designated for sacrifice, few if any would stand with them. The person who stood for a sacrificed or to-be sacrificed person would be taken as countering the thriving of the living. Sacrifices happened so that, through means of deception, they could enable thriving of the living. To question the value of sacrifice was to question the foundation of "peaceful" intra-human existence. Such was also the questioning of the role of the witchdoctor. Those who questioned feared for their own lives and prospering. Jesus's rising again exposed the folly and deception behind the "feel-good" factor associated with others' sufferings. This feel-good factor associated with others' sufferings underlies the craft of the witchdoctor. Jesus enables those who take note, and who take him seriously and believe in him to live a uniquely new way of life, a way other than that prescribed by the witchdoctor. A *way* not of deception, but *truth*, that brings "real" *life*. A way that exposes the witchdoctor.

How, Jesus?

The above does not mean that only "blind faith" will enable us to understand the power of the cross. The resurrection of Jesus was indeed a supernatural occurrence. Yet I do not believe that we necessarily have to attribute its impact entirely to the supernatural. The miracle of the cross is alive and well and found amongst many. It is, I believe—in the sense in which this term is often used—psychological, as something that impacts the human mind and comprehension. I am aware that psychology is often taken to be unfriendly to Christianity, and perhaps rightly so. But it is wrong to consider psychology distinct from faith in Christ. The foundations for the discipline of psychology—as so much that arose from the Enlightenment—are in Christianity. In other words, I do not think it is either erroneous or reductionist to realise that part of the impact of Christianity on people is "psychological."

Careful believing thought and meditation on the death of Christ, the all-powerful and sinless Son of God, is a part of being saved. Focusing the mind on the act of Jesus's death on the cross contributes a part of the outworking of salvation. For maximum effect, salvation requires a continual total dedication to Christ. It requires faith that Jesus's death on the cross happened, that he died for me, that he rose again. It requires a conscious orientation of one's mind. This would seem to be a psychological act. That orientation should be away from the world's deception that sacrifices enable utility from others' sufferings. Instead, faith in Christ orients one to believing that Jesus's once-for-all sacrifice is sufficient for all of us. Those who are less devoted to Christ are more prone to being in need of others to suffer so that they can thrive.

It should be noted that there are modern forms of sacrifice. The media feeds us with many of them. It brings us images of war, suffering, failure, death. That is a form of sacrifice and encourages searching for personal peace on the back of the sufferings of others. Use of so-called swear words, such as "bloody," or using Jesus's name in frustration, can wrongly substitute for a clear positive focus on the cross that should be a hallmark of Christian belief.

Questions are important regarding justification of use of violence to protect one's means of avoiding violence. Using violence to avoid violence at times results in violent responses by Christians to Muslims. Christians like to preserve and share the peace that God gives them. Muhammad has pitched his followers against understandings that are key to Christians' acquisition of peace from and with God. The question of whether, or how, or to what extent, resistance to Muslim's occlusion of truth is justified so as to protect a peaceful way of life is complex. In the long term, action in defense of the way, truth, and life offered by Jesus is justified by its potential for increasing the overall amount of peace. Ascertaining of the preferred nature of that required action in defense of truth is complex. The failure by many to perceive Jesus's bringing of peace distracts from serious engagement with this kind of action in defense of truth. In this sense, contemporary blasé attitudes to what Jesus did (that have contributed to atheism amongst European people) result in siding with the witchdoctor.

The opposition between godliness and witchcraft is not new and should not surprise us. Solving problems using the craft of the witchdoctor has many ramifications. Reducing one's own problems by transferring them to others, or being in favour of others suffering and dying so as to thrive oneself, results in an overall negative impact. Solving one's problems using the craft of the witchdoctor propagates enormous deception and mis-trust. The way of life that results easily produces poverty which brings much suffering in its wake, resulting in high infant mortality, few safety nets, abuses of all kinds, disease, fear, truncated life expectancy, and so forth. This prospect for suffering under the rule of the witchdoctor (as of course also Islam) amounts to a massive justification for faith in Christ.

Jesus as the Word of God can save someone from all of the above ramifications, and many more. If Jesus's death is sufficient, then Christians should have no desire for others to die on their behalf. Instead, they should love their enemies (Matt. 5:44) and rejoice in their enemies' thriving and not in their suffering or death. They should realise that God favours victims. "The age-old mythological drama is presented again: a crowd surrounds an innocent victim and heaps abuse on him. The point of view however has changed; the victim is innocent and vindicated by God as is Jesus" (Peebles, n.d., p. 7). God is not in favour of sacrifice (1 Sam. 13 and 15; Hos. 6:6, Matt. 9:13). God prefers obedience, faith, and love to sacrifice. Within the term sacrifice here I believe we should include witchcraft as described above, which is also a means of endeavoring to improve people's lives by the suffering of others, "real" or imagined.

This article is written from an overtly Christian position. It is written this way because it is Christianity, foreshadowed by Judaism or Old Testament faith, which has enabled perception of the witchdoctor's craft as something which one may be able to elude.

Conclusion

Something of the witchdoctor's craft has been revealed in this article. This revelation is intended to clarify the nature of an area of understanding that is often wrapped in a cloak of mystery. Witchdoctors are revealed to be pragmatic people who take advantage of human traits that are widely seen as negative, to bring utility to individuals or communities. Utility arises from people's tendency to compare themselves with others, and the glee they experience when they find themselves to be ahead of others. Witchdoctors utilize the resultant desire for primacy by bringing suffering and failure to others—whether actually or deceptively. Their apparently competent declarations and use of logic can persuade a gullible person regarding benefits to them of the failure, suffering, or even death of someone they compare themselves with. Witchdoctors often deceive

their clients into believing that the actions they perform on their clients' behalf cause the perceived enemy to suffer. The utility received as a result justifies payments to witchdoctors in exchange for their services.

Witchdoctors engage the power of the contentment acquired by the perceived suffering of another, to manage human feelings in such a way as to enable themselves to make a living, and often make their services essential to a community's thriving.

Brutal killing involving shedding of blood creates a horror in people's minds. That horror acts as a cleansing, essentially from sin. This cleansing can be illustrated by the example of a thief, who after observing a fellow thief being caught stealing and then being brutally killed, may as a result cease from stealing. Witchdoctors who simulate such horror thus cleanse their client, adding to the contentment or "peace" of the client and their community.

The above cleansing mechanisms that are accentuated and rendered clearly visible in Africa may be more widely manipulated by other members of the human race to their own ends. I will not consider more universal patterns of behaviour related to the African witchdoctors' craft in detail in this article, but I suggest that the connection certainly is there. To just mention one example: there is certainly a link between the witchdoctor's craft as here described and contemporary concerns about "fake news." Faked news can be saleable. It brings utility to some at the cost of truth. It bypasses the cross of Christ.

Practice of the witchdoctor's craft has long resulted in much mutual suspicion, leading to lives lived doubting others. Frequent use is often made of animal or human sacrifice as a means of bringing "necessary" utility. This article sets the scene that enables understanding of the widespread and massive impact of faith in Christ on communities bound by witchcraft beliefs. This impact is today seen in many parts of the so-called Global South in which the practice of witchcraft has been prominent but where there has now been a massive uptake of the gospel of Jesus. Belief in Jesus's self-sacrifice on the cross that enables bypassing of the necessity to take advantage of witchdoctors can bring the same utility as did they, but without reproduction of enmity and suspicion that the witchdoctor's craft entails. In Jesus's own words, for those who believe in him: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27, NIV). Thus, Jesus brings healing.

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Endnotes

[1] This saying was popularized, if not originated, in 1951 by Billy Wilder, director, *Ace in the Hole* (Paramount Pictures, 1951).

Call for Papers:

Christian Conversion and Mission

For Publication in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, October 2026

Andrew Walls's posthumous *Christian Conversion and Mission: A Brief Cultural History* offers a nuanced and incisive overview of the history of Christianity's encounters with Judaism, Roman Hellenism, Germanic custom, the modern West, and the cultures of the global south from the first century to the twentieth century. The recurrent pattern in the gospel's interaction with successive cultures through the ages is conversion, understood at its most fundamental level as "turning," that is, turning to God in response to God's saving activity. By taking Christian history as a whole and inviting the reader to see it from the perspective of conversion, Walls challenges Western theology in several striking ways. First, he decenters Western theology as the standard by which to judge authentic or orthodox Christian faith and expression. Second, he suggests theological frontiers to be explored as Christianity enters the cultures of the global south. Third, he proposes a fresh way of seeing historic Christianity that is not defined by the creeds of Roman-Hellenistic Christianity.

As southern expressions of Christianity increasingly become the dominant forms of the faith, new themes and priorities that never occurred to Western Christians or to earlier Christian ages will appear. As Walls notes, "for it is the mark of Christian faith that it must bring Christ to the big issues closest to men's hearts," and it does so "through the structures by which people perceive and recognize their world," which are not universally the same. And as Christian faith is worked out within accepted views of the world in all their diversity, "those worldviews… are transformed, yet recognizable" (130).

Global Missiology invites submissions for this theme issue on "Conversion," as sketched above, from any of the following angles:

- Descriptive reports of Christian conversion in your locale: What themes and priorities are emerging? What are the big issues closest to local Christians' hearts? In what ways are local structures and worldviews being transformed, yet recognizable?

- Theological frontiers that need to be explored to reflect local realities and meet local concerns: What new issues need examination that Western theology overlooks entirely? What old issues need re-examination that Western theology addresses inadequately?

- Historic Christianity not defined by credal formula: Walls proposes a few essential convictions and responses that are observable when Christians of any culture express their faith.

  1. The worship of the God of Israel.

  2. The ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth.

  3. That God is active where believers are.

  4. That believers constitute a people of God transcending time and space.

  Along with these convictions and responses, a small number of practices or institutions have continued across the generations, namely, the reading of a common body of Scriptures and the special use of bread and wine and water (128-129).

Do these traits accurately reflect your local congregation? Is this framework of convictions-responses and practices-institutions a satisfactory way of seeing or understanding historic Christianity? Why or why not?

Proposed titles with approximately 100-word abstracts are due May 31, 2026. Full manuscripts of approved paper proposals will be due July 31, 2026. Manuscript guidelines, including a template for formatting, can be found on the *Global Missiology* website at:

http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/about/submissions#authorGuidelines

Please address all submissions and questions to globalmissiologyenglish@gmail.com.

Book Review

Jurie Kriel, *Hitting the Ball You Cannot See: Accelerating Jesus-Following into the Future*

Reviewed by J. N. Manokaran

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2026

Kriel, Jurie (2025). *Hitting the Ball You Cannot See: Accelerating Jesus-Following into the Future*. NxtMove, ISBN: 979-8-9930253-1-5 (paperback) $19.99, ISBN: 979-8-9930253-2-2 (hardcover) $35.99, pp. 174; (Ebook) $9.99, pp. 172; (Audiobook) $13.95.

The author Jurie Kriel and his colleagues have encouraged the Church to look into the future, as digitalization has redefined our lives: How we live (experiential), How the world works (structural), and How we connect (relational).

Hitting the Ball

If a ball is pitched at 90 miles per hour, it takes about 425 milliseconds to reach the bat. "For the batter, however, it takes roughly 200 milliseconds to visually process the pitch, 275 milliseconds for the brain to send the signal to the muscles, and another 150 milliseconds to complete the swing-totaling 625 milliseconds. That's 167 milliseconds too late. Biologically and physically impossible—yet, every week, thousands of these 'impossible' hits are made" (21). Christians should be pioneers, taking risks, and be like the baseball (and cricket) players who hit speeding balls. Pioneers venture into the unknown with a childlike wonder and willingness to embrace new possibilities, innovate, or find alternate methods. "As believers, we are often trying to hit the ball where it was, or even was, but maybe faithfulness is learning to swing where the ball will be" (22).

Strong Winds of Change

Artificial Intelligence, biotechnology, and societal movements challenge traditional notions of human identity and value. Innovation, adaptation in spiritual formation, collaboration, and cross-cultural understanding are needed to fulfill the Great Commission. Like a ship exposed in an open sea, we have to skillfully trim sails and adjust the course using a rudder, our agency and sails, our discernment and strategic choices.

Advice for Older Leaders

"Don't abdicate leadership, abandon experience, or simply capitulate responsibility to the most willing. Instead, team up with and champion those most focused on, and graced for, the future: the young" (11).

The Cone of Possibility

There are five kinds of perspectives for the future; disciples are called to be proactive and make a preferable future to happen:

1) Possible (Future knowledge: "might happen")
2) Plausible (Current knowledge: "could happen")
3) Probable (Current trends: "likely to happen")
4) Projected (Default extrapolation: "most probable")

5) Preferable (Desired future: "want to happen")

This desirable future is possible by faith in Sovereign God, knowing His will, discerning the times, and taking bold steps towards the desired future.

Leadership

Leadership is moving people from A to B. Position A is current understanding, comfort zones, and established ways of doing things. Position B is the preferable future: the foresight, vision, the desired destination for the Church in an evolving world. Leadership is to influence and guide individuals and communities toward the preferred end. "Raise Leaders. Reach Generations" (17).

Gospel Is Simple

"The gospel is simple and profound to essence. It appeals to every human being because it meets the heart's deepest needs" (15). Truth remains constant, love will always remain relevant in the digital age that has amplified, not diminished, humanity's longing for connection and life-on-life relationships. In the world of noise, the gospel, free of fluff, must be shared as truth and not opinion, with humility and authenticity by being present.

Valuable Lessons

Thomas Edison turned setbacks in his experiments into valuable lessons. Similarly, we need to pause, re-calibrate, and discern whether our failures are leading us closer to or further away from our true mission.

Relevance Deficit

There is an unprecedented acceleration of knowledge. "In 1900, collective knowledge doubled every 100 years, by 1942, every 25 years' by 1982, every 13 months, and today, it is believed to double every 12 hours" (22). When the pace of change outside the individual or organization exceeds the pace of change within, relevance deficit sets in, that results in a loss of connection. Strategies, approaches, and methods are valued above mission and considered sacred, irrelevance is the result. However, the focus should be the ultimate goal and being in step with the Spirit.

Catalysts that Bring Change

There are four catalysts that bring about change:

1) Crisis: Incidents like world wars or pandemics. The recent COVID pandemic accelerated video conferencing and remote work.
2) Disruption: Unlike crisis, disruption is a gradual process.
3) Innovation: Self-initiated action, which leads to personal and collective growth and improvement.
4) Obedience: Acts like Martin Luther's 95 Theses profoundly shaped the course of history.

Understanding Change Quadrants helps us to stay relevant. These quadrants are determined by two axes: changing/unchanging; known/unknown:

1) Stability: Unknown/Unchanging
2) Leverage: Known/Unchanging

3) Confusion: Unknown/Changing
4) Response: Known/Changing.

Current Location to Destination

"When we receive a call from someone who is lost, our first step is to ask about their current location. We can only lead people to a destination, if we first understand where they are" (27). A leader should know the present, discerning shifts and trends, and leading with clarity and purpose. Learning to anticipate is a skill of an effective leader. Today's turbulence cannot be dealt with through yesterday's logic. It is not about speed or faster reflexes, but sharper foresight; not reaction, but anticipation and preemptive action, remembering the Kingdom is not about speed, but being rooted.

Human Understanding

Humans are rational beings, designed to think, reason, and make sense of the world. Then the Renaissance elevated the human body as a symbol of beauty and perfection; next came the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution—which gave new power of understanding. Now it is an age of post-humanism, and transhumanism. "Technological advances—particularly artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology—reshape how society views identity, value, and existence" (37).

Complexity of Identity

Is it possible for AI to create AI? Identity is no longer a just struggle but is now a full-blown crisis. Earlier generations would ask: Who am I? or What is my purpose? Why am I like this? Humanity's self-definition across eras have been as follows:

1) I survive, therefore, I am.
2) I make, therefore, I am. Making of fire, wheels, tools.
3) I think, therefore, I am.
4) I feel, therefore, I am.
5) I create, therefore I am. Artistic expression.

The astonishing fact is that surviving, making, thinking, and feeling now could be replicated by AI. What is my purpose, if machines could do it all? Machines may one day replicate, rival, or surpass our cognitive abilities.

The complexity of identity is shaped by overlapping factors like race, gender, and class. Young people think that identity is infinitely customizable. When truth is spoken in love, young people want to fact-check online. AI, gender, and genetic editing and design reflect the ongoing struggle of humanity regarding insecurity and lack of identity. Human fluidity of image is caused digitally through filters and avatars, and physically through augmentation and medical procedures. The more we stare at ourselves, the more we reinvent ourselves, the more we replace ourselves, the less we truly know who we are. "Our true identity is found not in what we create or achieve but in the image of God in which we are made" (45).

Human Beings or Programmable Beings

Culture sees humans as programmable beings shaped by external forces rather than distinct creations of God. Mistakenly, culture asserts that we are born good but corrupted by oppression. Life's purpose is self-expression and self-improvement through social and technological progress.

Sin and Guilt

For this generation, the appeal of the gospel often diminishes when the focus centers on sin and guilt. "The desirability of the gospel weakens when it is presented primarily as a warning of punishment and eternal damnation to a society convinced it holds control over its own destiny" (41). Gospel sharing should move beyond the guilt, shame, and punishment narrative and convey a radically different understanding that is grounded in the eternal, unchanging truth of God's image and purpose. This generation does not seek certainty, but clarity. This is a generation that values openness and authenticity over knowledge and authority. By admitting we do not have all the answers is an authentic witness. That invites people to join the journey of faith. "They need an authentic expression of God's love, rooted in humility and delivered clearly" (42).

Divine Origin

"The truth is that the Creator alone defines His creation, and our highest human identity transcends humanity itself, beginning with His divinity" (43). What is a cake? The parts are layers, icing, and decorations. Its ingredients are flour, sugar, and eggs. The processes are mixed, whipped, and baked. But a cake is more than parts, ingredients, and processes. Today's description of humans revolve around perceptions, descriptions, ingredients, and processes yet never address the core of human identity at its highest level: our origin.

Church Focus

In the ever-updating digitalized world, the Church must focus on three transcendent truths:

1) The Image of God: AI may outpace human intelligence, but it will never surpass the wisdom or sovereignty of God.
2) The Spiritual reality: Humans are not merely emotional or rational, but spiritual. Knowing God and being known by God is central.
3) The Eternal perspective: Identity and purpose remain secure in God's eternal reality.

What Does It Mean To Be Human?

The gospel vision is rooted in a relationship with God, empowered by Christ's redemption, and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. In a time when innovation often overshadows introspection, the gospel invites humanity to pause, reflect, and return to its Creator.

Digital Existence

"Our digital lives are not just a tool but a defining aspect of our reality, reshaping how we communicate, form our identities, and even perceive truth" (50). Three shifts:

1) The dawn of Artificial Intelligence
2) The abundance of clean energy
3) The frontiers of bioengineering (synthetic biology)

AI is about to get physical. Dull, dirty, and dangerous jobs would be done by AI.

Human Attention

Nobel Laureate Herbert A. Simon: "He predicted a future where the value of information itself would approach zero, while the value of attention would steadily increase." Human attention is a scarce commodity. For Jesus followers: "Existence in the digital age revolves around three essential truths: digitalization is neutral, authenticity is critical, and relationships remain central" (54). The nature of scarcity has shifted, fundamentally altering the dynamics of supply and demand, particularly within the realm of information and technology.

The First Age: The Scarcity of Information
The Second Age: The Scarcity of Application
The Third Age: The scarcity of Interaction and Experience.

Hence for disciples of the Lord: "The focus must shift from guarding information or delivering application to cultivating interaction and designing transformative experiences" (56).

The Digital Rebellion

It is a surprising fact that Gen Z are drawn back to the physicality of the Bible. This "digital rebellion" isn't a rejection of technology, but perhaps a subconscious yearning for something authentic and unchanging in a fluid digital world. "For the Church, this presents an opportunity to bridge the digital, and physical, recognizing that while digital platforms can open doors, the enduring power of the Word often resonates profoundly in its physical form" (58).

Gospel Remains Incarnational

"An information-centric gospel presentation, which might have thrived in the Age of Information Scarcity, risks getting lost in the deluge of digital context" (58). The future may be digital, but the gospel remains incarnational. Digital first world considers digital and physical words as equally authentic.

Democratization of Information

The digital world has democratized information. "Crucially, this places the 'majority world' on a more equal footing in how the gospel is shared and received" (59). Hence global missions have to be more decentralized, and use collaborative methods, to recognize the Spirit of God moves freely through Digital space in a Digital age.

Digital Progress

The first generation were Digital explorers who tried to grasp and understand. The second were Digital immigrants who adapted to the technology gradually. The third, the Digital Natives, are comfortable, immersed, and welded to the device. In a survey, some teenagers ranked the Internet as a priority over water.

Trust Deficit

"A loss of certainty in our own identities has led to a collapse of trust in the institution that once provided stability" (70). The world has become polarized and untrusting. Like the Bell Curve: "The ideological center has collapsed, and the population has polarized toward extreme ends, leaving the middle ground virtually inhabited" (70). Five reasons for the polarization of society:

1) Information flow used to be centralized and shared reality; now it presents a fragmented and fractured reality.
2) Public discourse was moderated consensus; now polarized extremes.
3) Institutions: There was high trust in institutions; now low trust.
4) Range of opinions: Once they were clustered around the middle; now clustered around opposite poles.
5) Social cohesion: Earlier there were strong social ties; now eroding social cohesion.

People want to only listen to information according to their ideological alignment. When a community is fractured and institutions are questioned, the church should represent truth and humility, so that people could trust, and then believe.

Trust comes through genuine presence and authentic connection. Young people are not walking away from truth, but from trust. Trust has been relocated from pulpits to personal experience, relationships, and community. Young people need presence and not programs. Trust begins in places young people actually live; not in theological debates but in conversation, curiosity, and community. Going, loving, and listening builds trust. There is a longing for truth. Hence, the Church's invitation is: Show up. Listen well. Love deeply. Speak clearly. Be present. Authenticity still shines, and transparency is deeply attractive.

There are four major schools of thought about defining truth:

1) Consensus: It is True because we agree.
2) Practical: It is true because it works.
3) Relative: It depends: Is it true for me.
4) True in itself: A priori, fundamental, undeniable aspect of reality.

The Parable of the Sower attests to these different schools: "On the path (consensus), among the thorns (practical), the shallow ground (relative). However, the parable doesn't end there. There is the good soil (true in itself)" (80). The Bible is the most read and best seller: true by consensus. It is practical and transforms people. Relativism does not yield good fruit, and there is good soil that yields fruit. Choose the truth, the ultimate reality, and take refuge in Him.

Wrong Comparison

People trust Starbucks because they know what to expect, no matter the city or country. But churches? Even within the same denomination, congregations can vary dramatically. (To offer a word of critique here, the author has failed to understand uniformity is not the goal of the Church.)

Shifting Ground

Blockbuster Video had 9000 stores around the world. Netflix came and established itself by collecting data, refining algorithms, and building a foundation for a future where content would be streamed directly into homes, eliminating physical stores entirely. Now Blockbuster has just one store with a meagre business.

In pursuit of cheap labor, a shoe company reached a village in a faraway country. Now one robot replaced a village and a factory came to the developed world. Globalization shifted to automation and localization.

Rich and Poor Divide

It is important to bring have nots and haves together. Empowering the have nots is a critical mission. It is making a strategic shift from macro-influence to micro-stewardship. "True empowerment means engaging people's intellectual gifts and creativity, not just their physical labor or financial contributions" (95).

Moving from Independence to Interdependence

The Body of Christ has shared consciousness and the strength of the braided rope, mobilizing all from being spectators to participants. There are four keys to accelerate the transformation of culture in the midst of transactional culture:

1) Become the shoulders that others stand on.
2) Take the risk and pay the price for people to take the next step.
3) Give away responsibility, not just tasks.
4) Attract consumers, but do not leave them that way but lead them to higher purposes.

Paradox of Proximity

The Digital generation is more connected but also more isolated and lonely. In fact, there is only the illusion of connection. What the entire TV industry produces is done by YouTube in a single day. The explosion of content is because of a deep human desire to be seen, to be heard, and to connect—but on one's own terms. "In a world defined by shifting degrees of separation and a pervasive paradox of proximity, the Church is called to master a set of skills that rebuild authentic connection" (109).

Rows and Circles

Dan Blythe: "Rows can't ask questions, Rows can't wrestle with doubt. Rows can't build trust. Circles can" (111). Gen Z'ers do not need a pastor who is cool but one who remembers their name, listens, and loves them. Community is a network of circles where people are seen, heard, known, and discipled. Emphasizing community does not mean to abandon rows, but intentional cultivation of circles. Rows can inform and inspire. Circles connect, trust is built, and true belonging is discovered.

Theology of Collaboration

The Global Church should overcome the "separation paradox." In every local place a micro-consortium should be formed—and not simply by quoting John 17. The result should be accelerated local fruitfulness and building momentum. Necessary people are "architects of connection—dedicated people who actively match people and projects, forming bridges between aligned missions and emerging needs.

Raising High-capacity Leaders

Leaders need the following:

1) Values (Application)
2) Vision (Alignment)
3) Vehicles (Arranged systems)
4) Involvement (Association)

People should be moved from passive consumption of rows to the active participation of circles.

Third Space

"At its core, the gospel is about relationships—our connection with God and one another" (61). Jesus's revolution thrived in informal places like coffee shops. Digital tools should enhance and not replace human relationships. Leaders should understand the importance of presence and discernment alongside digital fluency to thrive in the Digital world. The Church is not to create an exclusive club but become a beacon of radical, outward-focused love. Humanity has always sought refuge in a space beyond the confines of home and the demands of work. That search was evidenced in seventeenth-century coffee houses. "For centuries, the Church was the quintessential third place by default in many cultures" (119). That was true not only for worship but also for social leveling, shared rituals, and collective support. Churchgoers have moved away from being a church and have become consumers of church. Religious consumerism, inwardly oriented, and cheap grace has made churches ineffective.

Involvement and Commitment

A chicken gives an egg—a repeated gift. A pig gives bacon and sausage—a contribution that demands its very life. Commitment is expressed in relationships and participation. A missional church is present for one another. Churches should have these qualities: emotional safety, relational warmth, peace, physical space, inclusive worship, and genuine relationships.

Toward 2050

An accident became a breakthrough. Alexander Fleming returned after a two-week vacation to find a petri dish contaminated in his lab. He thus discovered penicillin. In churches, in the name of efficiency, petri dishes are being thrown out. There is a need for a lab mentality for agile adaptation:

1) Curiosity and hypothesis testing
2) Learning from failure
3) Data-driven iteration

Chess or Chinese Checkers

Playing chess needs foresight and planning. Chess demands a profound understanding of interconnectedness, anticipating multiple moves ahead, sacrificing pieces for long term gain, and understanding the intricate consequences of each decision. The mission of the Church is like playing chess.

Towards the Future

Healthy teams based on truth, trust, and collaboration are needed in churches today. The Church should not be afraid of technologies but learn to leverage them to proclaim the gospel in unimaginable ways. The future of the Church would be shaped not by individual heroes but by a collective, collaborative body that shares knowledge, resources, and a vision for the future.

Conclusion

This is a stimulating book for thinking Christians to read, reflect on, and bring changes in their own context. For the Global Church to be relevant and dynamic, such prophetic insights are needed. Despite the book's limited North American viewpoint, it is a must read for all Christians

who love to share the gospel, engage in missions, and fulfill the Great Commission in our generation.