



## A Christological Reflection on Papa Yaw Johnson's *"Fa wo ntoma bæbo me deæ and"*

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### ABSTRACT

Africans express most of their religious beliefs in oral and symbolic forms. Music is one of the major sources of African theology and traditional wisdom. As the church in Africa strives to decolonize the Christian faith, African theologians must explore various means by which oral and symbolic theologies can contribute to the overall theology of the church. The present paper contributes to this theological exploration by examining key socioreligious ideas embedded in Papa Yaw Johnson's "*Fa wo ntoma bæbo me deæ ano*", a popular Ghanaian dirge. This paper used a literary analysis research approach to analyze the selected dirge. It began with the general concept of death and continued to consider dirges in the context of Ghanaian funerals. After offering a socio-linguistic analysis of the dirge, the paper offered a Christological reflection based on two key thematic areas: *Nkwamafoɔ* Christology and *Nyansaboakwa* Christology. The main thesis of the paper is that Jesus, through his life, ministry, death and resurrection, has reversed Adam's actions that placed humanity under the power of sin and death. Therefore, with Christ at the centre of life, one should not fear (physical) death.

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### INTRODUCTION

Death is a reality in every human society.<sup>1</sup> Nature takes its course by presenting death to humankind. All humans await the day of their death; yet, one cannot be certain when this awful event will occur. Death is a common human phenomenon and enemy that affects all aspects of human life.<sup>2</sup> Death has a devastating effect on the living though it is expected in human life.<sup>3</sup> Jacob Mokhutso cites Biwul as noting that "[d]eath comes to its victims without notice when it is time; it gives neither option of choice nor opportunity for negotiation. It is a perfect timekeeper as it neither wastes nor loses time. Death is

<sup>1</sup> Mpsanyana Makgahlela, "The Psychology of Bereavement and Mourning Rituals in a Northern Sotho Community" (PhD Thesis: University of Limpopo, 2016), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Biwul cited in Jacob Mokhutso, "African Traditional Bereavement Rituals Amongst Methodist Church Members in Mamelodi, Pretoria" (Master of Theology: University of the Free State, 2019), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Makondelele Sarah Radzilani, "A Discourse Analysis of Bereavement Rituals in a Tshivenda Speaking Community: African Christian and Traditional African Perceptions" (PhD dissertation: University of Pretoria, 2010), 1.

a close friend and an active participant in every human community, yet no one ever gets used to it.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, death does not negotiate its terms with anyone; neither does it postpone its activities. It takes all people, including close friends.

Beliefs about death and the afterlife differ from society to society. Africans generally believe that the universe comprises three worlds, namely, the world of the unborn, the world of the living, and the world of the dead.<sup>5</sup> In most African societies, the dead are mourned over a long period. The burial and funeral rites of a people reveal their religious, social and other cultural preoccupations. African traditional mourning and grieving traditions are associated with a number of rituals which reveal their worldview. One such ritual is the singing of dirges. A dirge is a song, poem, or hymn composed or performed as a memorial for the dead.<sup>6</sup> From the Latin verb which literally means “to lead” or “to direct”, the word “dirge” refers to a sad and mournful song, poem, or hymn composed or performed in memory of the dead.<sup>7</sup> A dirge serves to eulogize the dead, mourn the dead, and advise the living.

In Ghana, dirges feature in most traditional funeral rites. The performance of a dirge is an organized activity in which poet-cantors lead mourners to chant and sing. In performing a dirge, the cantor may lead the singing and allow the mourners to sing the chorus or he/she may act as both the lead singer and the chorus singer.<sup>8</sup> Ghanaian dirges employ linguistic material of everyday speech with additional expressions and repetition that are not common in everyday speech. For example, dirges differ from ordinary speeches by their rhythmic construction which aids singing and chanting.

Though dirges play a key role in Ghanaian funeral rites, they are not meant for anyone because of their value. For example, the Sisaala socio-political set-up does not allow dirges to be sung formally at the funeral of children or adolescents.<sup>9</sup> Two reasons account for this. First, the death of children and adolescents is tragic and extremely painful.<sup>10</sup> Dirges seek to recount the well-lived lives of the deceased. A well-lived life in this context connotes a life with wife/wives/husband, children, and grandchildren who in most cases are well-to-do. A well-lived life also refers to the life of a person who dies naturally at a ripe age after leading an exemplary life. Since children and adolescents do not meet these standards, their funerals are often not celebrated with dirges. In the Sisaala society, like in other African societies, funerals of young adults are celebrated within a relatively short time.<sup>11</sup> The other reason why dirges are not sung at the funeral of children and adolescents is that these people “are not yet fully incorporated into the social order” and so “there is no reason to exclude them from it slowly and painfully” through such rituals as the singing of dirges.<sup>12</sup> Their death is painful but excluding them from human society is easier. One may, therefore, say that dirges are sung in honor of ancestors. This is the reason why special dirges are composed and sung for special people such as kings, queen mothers or other prominent members of the society.

The foregoing discussion provides the right socio-religious and cultural framework for examining Papa Yaw Johnson’s “*Fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ ano*” (a popular Ghanaian dirge) from socio-linguistic and Christological perspectives. The purpose of this discussion is to explore the

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<sup>4</sup> Mokhutso, “African Traditional Bereavement Rituals Amongst Methodist Church Members in Mamelodi, Pretoria,” 20.

<sup>5</sup> Adebite O. Tobalase, *Dirge as Literary and Cultural Expression: A Study of the Awori People of Lagos State, Nigeria* (Adeleke University, Ede Osun State, Nigeria, 2017),3.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Ochieng Atoh, “A Discourse Analysis of Luo Traditional Dirges” (PhD Thesis: University of Nairobi, 2017),72; Prosper Kofi. Agroh, “Trend of ‘Avihewo’ Performance among Women Dirge Songwriters in Tafi Traditional Area, Ghana,” *Journal of African Arts & Culture* 4, no. 4 (2020): 26–42, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence A. Boadi, “Remarks on J.H. Nketia’s Funeral Dirges of the Akan People.,” *Legon Journal of the Humanities* 24 (2013): 3–17, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Agroh, “Trend of ‘Avihewo’ Performance among Women Dirge Songwriters in Tafi Traditional Area, Ghana,”27.

<sup>9</sup> Confidence Gbolo Sanka, “The Sisaala Dirge: A Critical Analysis” (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2010),69.

<sup>10</sup> Sanka, *The Sisaala Dirge: A critical Analysis*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Sanka, *The Sisaala Dirge: A critical Analysis*, 70.

<sup>12</sup> Sanka, *The Sisaala Dirge: A critical Analysis*, 70.

theology embedded in this dirge and how such theology can help Africans make sense of the Christ-Event. The next section deals with the background and lyrics of the dirge under consideration.

### Background and lyrics

Papa Yaw Johnson was a renowned Ghanaian high-life musician. He was born in 1954 and died in 2008. He was survived by a wife, Maame Akua Nyarko and five (5) children. He composed several songs such as “*Fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ ano*,” “*Susuka*,” “*Friends of today*,” “*Maye owuo den?*” and “*Bisa me*,” “*Ɔregro ɔdɔ ho*,” and others. The present study focuses on “*Fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ ano*.” The lyrics of this song are as follows:

#### Akan

*Yee!! Nea owuo aye me ni!*

*Opoku Gyima a ofiri Kwahu Mpraeso,  
Obontomase woawu ama efie gya adum.*

*Saa ara na Nomoanaprase Nifahene, Ofori  
Dankwa, ɔse nea owuo beye no ara na waye no  
no, ɔse owuo amma no anka n’asem.*

*Obi mesu me bi oo, owuo ama maye mmɔborɔ,  
owuo ama maye ankonam menenam wiase a  
menni obiara.  
Owuo ama manka masem oo, owuo ama ye  
mmɔborɔ oo.*

*Me maame Agie, ɔne Obaa Yaa Dwobia ɔse owuo  
amma woanka n’asem.*

*Obi mesu me bi oo, owuo ama maye mmɔborɔ,  
owuo ama maye ankonam menenam wiase a  
menni obiaa.  
Owuo ama manka m’asem, owuo ama maye  
mmɔborɔ oo.*

*Awisia biara ne boafɔɔ ne Awurade, efiri se obi  
nhwe obi ba.*

*Anomaa ketewa bi si kwaem na ɔredwene ne ho  
dii, osu a ɔresu ne se “fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ  
ano.”  
Na yei a mereguso reto dwom yi, awisia bi te  
baabi dinn osua ɔresu ne se “fa wo ntoma bebɔ  
me deɛ ano.”*

*Papa Osei Kwasi a ofiri Pakyi nti, maame Abena  
Kwabena ye okunafoɔ.  
Nea owuo afa ne kunu no ɔmfa ne ntoma nkɔ bɔ  
ne deɛ ano.  
Enti fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ ano, fa wo ntoma  
bebɔ me deɛ ano. Fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ ano,  
fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ ano, onipa a ɔno deɛ oni  
awuo, ɔmfa ne ntoma mmebɔ me deɛ ano, nea*

#### English

Oh! This is what death has done to me!

Opoku Gyima from Kwahu Mpraeso Obontomase has died and extinguished the fire/light in the house.

In the same way Nomoanaprase Nifahene, Ofori Dankwa says death has done its worse to him. He says death did not allow him to say what he wanted to say.

Someone should mourn with me for death has rendered me sorrowful; death has made me lonely; death has made me walk in this world without any helper. Death did not allow me to say what I wanted to say; death has made me sorrowful oo!

My mother Agnes and Obaa Yaa Dwobia say death did not allow them to say what they wanted to say.

Someone should mourn with me for death has made me lonely in this world without any helper.

Death did not allow me to say what I wanted to say; death has made me sorrowful oo!

The Lord is the helper of every fatherless person, for no one cares for another person’s child

A small bird sits quietly in the forest thinking about itself, weeping and saying “come and tie your cloth with mine.”

As I am now singing, a fatherless child sits quietly in the forest thinking about itself, weeping and saying “come and tie your cloth with mine.”

Because of Papa Osei Kwasi who comes from Pakyi, Maame Abena Kwabena has become a widow.

Anyone whose husband has been taken by death should go and tie her cloth to hers.

So come and tie your cloth with mine, come and tie your cloth with mine. Come and tie your cloth with mine; come and tie your cloth with mine; the one who has lost his/her mother should come and tie his cloth with mine; the one who has been rendered lonely

*owuo ama n'aye ankonam ammra ma yensu su korɔ oo.*

*Owuo nnim abɔfra ee, owuo nnim ɔpanin oo.*

*Owuo nnim abrantee ee, owuo nnim akokoraa oo.*

*Asare Kwaa se owuo nye oo, ayee owuo nye koraa.*

*Obi mesu me bi o, owuo ama maye mmɔborɔ, owuo ama maye ankonam menam wiase a meni obiara.*

*Owuo ama manka masem, owuo ama ye mmɔborɔ oo.*

*Nana Kufour a ofiri Pakyi No. 2, ɔne ne nua Osei Bobie a ɔwɔ abrokyiman mu, wo kaakyire Osei Raymond a ɔye adwuma wɔ Abidjan, ɔse ɔma mo awerekyeyerɛ efiri se owuo ama mo anka mo asem.*

*Hwe nee owuo aye Kwabena Mmaboa yere Mama, enti me owuo nye. Hwe nee owuo aye Paa Gyima guitarist; eno nti mese owuo nye.*

*Hwe nee owuo aye Mpraesohene Nana Wiafe Kwagyan; enti me owuo nye. Na hwe nee owuo aye Kwabena Nyarko, enti meka daa se owuo nye.*

*Kofi Abokyi ee gyae su, nee owuo aye wo no, fre wo nua Kwabena Agyei, fre Yaw Agyare montena baabi dinn mfa mo ho adwene Akosua Yeboah nti, owuo ama momfa aye ankonam, monenam wiase a mmonni obiara a moate.*

*Enti fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ ano, fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ ano, fa wo ntoma bebɔ me deɛ ano, onipa a ɔno deɛ oni awuo, ɔmfa ne ntoma mmebɔ me deɛ ano, nea owuo ama n'aye ankonam ammra ma yensu su korɔ oo.*

*Owuo nnim abɔfra ee, owuo nnim ɔpanin oo.*

*Owuo nnim abrantee ee, owuo nnim akokoraa oo.*

*Asare Kwaa se owuo nye oo, ayee owuo nye koraa.*

because of death should come so that we cry the same cry.

Death does not mind if you are a child; death does not mind if you are an adult; death does not mind if you are a young adult; death does not mind if you are an old person.

Asare Kwaa says death is bad, death is very bad.

Someone should mourn with me for death had sorrowed and made me lonely in this world without any helper.

Death did not permit me to say what I wanted to say; death has made me sorrowful oo!

Nana Kufour from Pakyi No. 2, and his brother Osei Bobie who lives abroad, your last born Osei Raymond who works in Abidjan says accept his condolences because death did not permit you to say what you wanted to say.

Look at what death has done to Kwabena Mmaboa's wife Mama; so I say death is bad. Look at what death has done to Paa Gyima, guitarist, so I say death is bad.

Look at what death has done to Mpraesohene Nana Wiafe Kwagyan, so I say death is bad. Look at what death has done to Kwabena Nyarko, so I say death is bad.

Kofi Abokyi stop crying, because of what death has done to you, call your brother Kwabena Agyei, call Yaw Agyare and sit somewhere quietly and make plans for yourselves because of Akosua Yeboah; death has made you lonely; you walk in the world without any helper.

So come and tie your cloth with mine, come and tie your cloth with mine. Come and tie your cloth with mine; come and tie your cloth with mine; the one who has lost his/her mother should come and tie his cloth with mine; the one who has been rendered lonely because of death should come so that we cry the same cry.

Death does not mind if you are a child; death does not mind if you are an adult; death does not mind if you are a young adult; death does not mind if you are an old person.

Asare Kwaa says death is bad, death is very bad.

## **Linguistic and Socio-religious Analysis**

### ***Death extinguishes the fire in the household***

The dirge highlights the devastating effect of death on human life. In the line, *Opoku Gyima a ofiri Kwahu Mpraeso, Obontomase woawu ama efie gya adum* ("Opoku Gyima from Kwahu Mpraeso Obontomase has died and extinguished the fire/light in the house") the songwriter indicates that the death of Opoku Gyima from Kwahu Mpraeso Obontomase has rendered his home desolate.

Apparently, the composition of this song was informed by the death of Opoku Gyima and some other people indicated later in the song.<sup>13</sup> It is typical of African songwriters to compose songs on the occasion of the death of their loved ones. African songwriters may compose a song to eulogize the living as well. Whatever the case may be, one is certain that the composer related closely with Opoku Gyima and used this song to eulogize him after his death.

It is apparent that Opoku Gyima was a prominent person, both in the family and in society. This fact is derived from the composer's metaphorical description of the consequence of Gyima's death as having *dum efie gya* ("extinguished the fire/light in the house"; *efie gya adum*). The noun *gya* ("fire") symbolizes the source of light, the source of warmth and the means of cooking food, among others. In a traditional Ghanaian society, people use firewood as fuel. Normally, pieces of large firewood (Bono-Twi: *nkukua*, singular: *kukua*) are arranged in the traditional tripod (Bono-Twi: *bokya*) and smaller pieces are arranged on top before the fire is set into the arrangement to produce energy for heating, warming and drying, among others. The smaller pieces are easily set on fire but they easily get exhausted; the *nkukua* take a relatively long time to catch fire. They burn slowly and take a relatively long time to get exhausted. Some *nkukua* may take days or even weeks before getting exhausted depending on their size and the rate at which they are burnt. In the olden days, the fire in the *kukua* was not deliberately extinguished as it was to serve as the source of fire for the subsequent days. In those days, fire sources like matches and lighter were not available; therefore, people used fire pans to get fire from their neighbors. Should all the fire in a community be extinguished, that community had to collect fire from the next community. It is for this reason that people kept the *kukua* burning until the wood got finished. The rate at which the *kukua* burnt in the day when its heat was required for domestic purposes was faster than during the night when it was only expected to keep the source of fire till the following day. Later, when a regular source of fire such as matches was invented, the fire in the *kukua* was put off in the evening/night after it had been used for its purpose for the day. When the fire in the *kukua* is finally extinguished in the night, the Akan people would say *efie gya adum* (the fire in the house has extinguished). The expression *efie gya adum* literally underscores that the cooking activities of the day have ended and so the source of heat for cooking is no more. Figuratively, it means that all activities of the day have ended and people are about to sleep and take their rest till the following morning. Given this understanding, one can say that "*efie gya adum*" connotes an end or finality (at least as far as daily life is concerned).

Given the above fact, to say that the death of Opoku Gyima amounts to the extinguishing of the fire/light in the house has several implications. First, it implies that Opoku Gyima was the fire of the household when he was alive. To be the fire of the household means to be the backbone of the household, the breadwinner, the one who keeps the household warm by providing and caring for the entire members of the household. Such a person is also referred to as *dupɔn* ("a great tree"). One may say "*dupɔn bi atutu*" ("a great tree has uprooted") to announce the death of a prominent person. The Bono-Twi word *atutu* ("has uprooted") presents a dramatic picture of what death does to a person. The agricultural metaphor of uprooting a tree suggests that the tree is completely lifeless because it has no root(s) left in the ground to supply it with the resources needed for survival. The use of the word *atutu* signifies a more devastating situation than *abu* ("has broken"). A tree whose stem breaks and causes it to fall is capable of shooting up again because its roots remain in the soil to supply it with nutrients and water. This prominence of Opoku Gyima is evident in the songwriter's reference to him as *efie gya* ("the fire of the household"). As the fire of the household, Opoku Gyima was the one who provided economic warmth to the family and dried their tears in a similar way that heat from the sun dries up unwanted water in damp clothes. Linguistically, the expression *efie gya* suggests that Opoku Gyima was the main (if not the only) source of fire in the family. The death of such a person will definitely bring economic hardship upon the family with such possible consequences as school dropout, streetism, single parenting and debt.

<sup>13</sup> It seems that the death of Opoku Gyima was the immediate reason for composing the song.

One finds an equivalent of the metaphorical expression for the prominence of the dead person in a Bette dirge which reads in part: “*Ukong ugyi; Kugaba ugyi; Too ugyi; Ma nde ukwauan uka ndi abmu, Inim ipa ha buo*” (“My Tiger; My lion; My Elephant; Behold the cotton tree has fallen, the gods have scattered”).<sup>14</sup> History has it that Bette Adie-Utim Nwandor originated from South-Central Africa and made a settlement near the Camerounian Mountain.<sup>15</sup> The Bette dialect—“a Southern Bantoid language of the sub-Bendi family of Cross River Languages of the New Benue-Congo”—is spoken generally in Obudu and parts of Obanliku and Boki traditional areas.<sup>16</sup> The above dirge draws on the Bette socio-cultural worldview to indicate how death has taken a prominent member of the family. In the Bette community, the cotton tree is associated with sacredness and influence.<sup>17</sup> The writer’s use of the cotton-tree metaphor is meant to underline how revered and influential the dead was in the society. The deceased person was the backbone of the family and custodian of all the family values and beliefs.<sup>18</sup> The appellations “Tiger”, “Lion” and “Elephant” stress the might of the deceased. The death of this mighty person is dramatically captured in the words “the cotton tree has fallen, the gods have scattered.” The fall of the cotton tree and the scattering of the gods are both unusual and tragic.

Secondly, the expression “*efie gya adum*” implies that death has brought an end to the life of a great person (Opoku Gyima). That the extinguishing of fire symbolizes finality has been mentioned earlier. The finality that death brings is also evident in the lyrics of Nana Acheampong which say: *efie gya adum anya adwo, asem de n’asem ko* (“the fire in the house has been put off, the [tripod] has cooled off, various issues have become calm”). Nana Acheampong’s point is that when a person dies, all the struggles of life are brought to an end, and people who had issues with the person can no longer pursue their issues because death has sent the dead into another world. At the same time, Nana Acheampong stresses that death ends the struggles that people go through in this world. The idea of death putting off the fire and allowing the tripods to cool alludes to the rest that people enjoy after death. It agrees with the saying that “there is more sleep after death.” It means death is the end of all human struggles (*berε twa wuo*). After all the struggles, life ends with death. Death prevents people from executing their plans. In the dirge under consideration, two women, Agnes and Obaa Yaa Dwobia make this point by saying: “*owuo amma woanka w’asem*” (“death has prevented them from making their words known”). When death occurs the plans of the deceased are shattered.

Thirdly, the expression “*efie gya adum*” alludes to the power of death. It underlines that when a person’s death is imminent, nothing can be done (from the human perspective) to extend the person’s life. Death is a powerful figure which makes the living giant powerless and lifeless. Just as putting the fire in the *kukua* off renders the wood (*kukua*) lifeless (“fireless”), so death puts off the fire in a person and leaves him/her without life. Fire in a small wood may be extinguished just by blowing air on it. Extinguishing the *kukua*, however, requires a great effort such as pouring many cups of water on it. In the view of Papa Yaw Johnson, Opoku Gyima was the fire which provided light to his household and even lightened up other households. Death’s ability to extinguish *kukua* (Opoku Gyima) is a manifestation of its power over the living. To sum up, death has the ability to put off the fire that lightens the human household.

Fourthly, if the fire that warms everyone in the household can be extinguished by death, then death is both inevitable and a respecter of none. The Akan express the inevitability of death in the saying *owuo atwedε baako mforo* (“Everyone will climb the ladder of death”). Here, death is compared to climbing a ladder and this ladder is climbed by all manner of persons. Thus, people have the common belief that “sooner or later, the inevitable phenomenon called death will come upon them

<sup>14</sup> K.B.C Ashipu, “A Socio-Stylistic Analysis of Some Selected Bette Dirges,” *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research* 7, no. 2 (August 10, 2010): 113-124, 122. <https://doi.org/10.4314/lwati.v7i2.57538>.

<sup>15</sup> Ashipu, “A Socio-Stylistic Analysis of Some Selected Bette Dirges,” 113.

<sup>16</sup> Samson Nzuanke and Zana Akpagu, “Onomastics and Translation,” *Sociolinguistic Studies* 13, no. 2-4 (February 21, 2020) : 273-294, 276, <https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.37821>.

<sup>17</sup> Ashipu, “A Socio-Stylistic Analysis of Some Selected Bette Dirges,” 122.

<sup>18</sup> Ashipu, “A Socio-Stylistic Analysis of Some Selected Bette Dirges,” 122.

at whatever age.”<sup>19</sup> This fact is expressed in the dirge in the line: *Owuo nnim abofra ee, owuo nnim ɔpanin oo, owuo nnim abrantee ee, owuo nnim akokoraa oo...* (Death does not mind if you are a child; death does not mind if you are an adult; death does not mind if you are a young adult; death does not mind if you are an old person”). This underscores both the unmerciful nature of death and the fact that death awaits all humans. Experiences from everyday life show that every person can die no matter the age, gender, race, educational background, socioeconomic status and so on. Definitely, the extinguishing of the fire in the household triggers grief, which the paper discusses in the next section.

### ***Death leads to grief***

Though the inevitability of death is widely known and accepted, death causes great pain, sorrow and shock anytime it happens. People grieve for days, weeks, months and years when they lose their loved ones. Grief is a sorrowful response to significant emotional loss of any kind. Grief has bodily, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects. Therefore, it is not enough to heal a grieving person bodily, emotionally and mentally without addressing the spiritual needs in relation to the grief. Since the death of a person is analogous to extinguishing fire or putting off light, it goes without saying that death brings darkness into the household, the word “darkness” (Bono-Twi: *sum*) symbolizing misfortune, despair, sorrow, hopelessness and pain, among others. It is for this reason that most Akan people mourn in black clothing to symbolically express the pain that death inflicts on them.

Papa Yaw Johnson’s dirge highlights the pain and sorrow that death brings. The opening statement of the dirge is “*Yee! Nea owuo aye me ni!*” (“Oh! This is what death has done to me!”). The exclamation “*Yee!*” is usually used to express great shock resulting from one’s experience of a tragic situation. It is usually associated with wailing. In this dirge, it is used to show the mourner’s surprise at the way death has adversely affected his/her life, hence the statement “*Nea owuo aye me ni!*” The mourner compares his/her life situation in the past to the present and exclaims “See how devastating death has been to me!” The use of exclamation in dirges is not uncommon. It is used for dramatic effect, or to get a point across. The songwriter is not wailing because of his/her own death but because of the situation in which death has put him/her. Death might have made him/her lonely, poor, or sad. Whatever its consequences, bereavement leads to grief.

Grieving over death takes place in three stages: reaction, disorganization and reorganization, and reorientation and recovery.<sup>20</sup> The first stage is the reaction stage which refers to the phase of shock that takes place at the news of death. Three emotional reactions take place at this stage. The first is emotional numbness, occurring in the immediate aftermath of a death.<sup>21</sup> Emotional numbness is a coping mechanism people use to deal with physical or emotional trauma, overwhelming stress, and depression. This reaction can be connected with “inhibited grief,” which is characterized by suppressed emotions. The second emotional reaction is bewilderment (a state of being emotionally perplexed and confused). At this stage the bereaved attempts to make meaning of the concept of death. Attempts to make sense of what has transpired may lead to crying out to the loved one. In the bewilderment phase where an attempt is made to cry, some even lose their mind and become mentally unstable for the rest of their life. The third reaction is anger which the bereaved expresses toward the deceased for leaving or toward God for having allowed death to take the deceased.<sup>22</sup> People may lose their faith in God for allowing a beloved to pass on since they believe he (God) has enough power to avert such a situation. They may ask: “Where is God?” They may also ask if God really answers prayer. Thus, grief deprives a person of happiness and may lead to loss of religious faith; yet, it prepares a person for the life

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<sup>19</sup> Omosade J. Awolalu and Adelumo P. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979), 253.

<sup>20</sup> Mokhutso, “African Traditional Bereavement Rituals Amongst Methodist Church Members in Mamelodi, Pretoria,” 18.

<sup>21</sup> Mokhutso, “African Traditional Bereavement Rituals Amongst Methodist Church Members in Mamelodi, Pretoria,” 18.

<sup>22</sup> Mokhutso, “African Traditional Bereavement Rituals Amongst Methodist Church Members in Mamelodi, Pretoria,” 18.

ahead.<sup>23</sup> Some key emotions triggered by the death of a loved one include guilt, disbelief, anxiety, yearning, and depression. These emotions may be the results of “unkept promises, unfinished business, or perhaps conflict, which might have transpired before the deceased passed on.”<sup>24</sup>

The second stage in the grieving process is disorganization and reorganization whereby the bereaved accepts the reality of the loss or death of a loved one. The bereaved realizes and accepts the fact that the “loss will not be recovered”, and this leads to a state of deep despair “accompanied by varying degrees of sadness, loneliness, and yearning.”<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the bereaved begin the process of adjusting and rebuilding their lives in the absence of the deceased. Because “[r]ebuilding is frightening and painful as it springs from a sense of uncertainty and helplessness ... there is often a preoccupation with the deceased, an obsessive review of the past, and a lack of emotional closeness with others.”<sup>26</sup>

After disorganization and reorganization, we have the third stage in the grieving process, namely, reorientation and recovery. After going through all the emotional upheavals, the grieving person now begins to return to a new state of “normal.” At this stage, the grieving person is able to think of the deceased without much pain or great sadness. In the latter part of this stage, “memories of the deceased enrich the life of the bereaved, and bring joy rather than sadness.”<sup>27</sup> This does not, however, mean the bereaved no longer mourns the deceased; rather, it means the bereaved has now adjusted to cope with the situation and move on with their lives.

The three stages of grief highlight both the negative and positive effects of grief on a person. Grief is, therefore, a form of “tidal wave that overtakes you, smashes down upon you with unimaginable force, [and] sweeps you up into its darkness, where you tumble and crash against unidentifiable surfaces, only to be thrown out on an unknown beach, bruised, reshaped, and unwittingly better for the wear.”<sup>28</sup> To illustrate this point there is a need to consider the following words in the dirge: *Papa Osei Kwasi a ofiri Pakyi nti, Maame Abena Kwabena ye okunafoɔ, nea owuo afa ne kunu no mfa ne ntoma nkɔ bɔ ne dee ano* (“Because of Papa Osei Kwasi who comes from Pakyi, Maame Abena Kwabena has become a widow”). In Africa, widows and orphans are among the least on the socio-economic ladder. In most societies, women are prohibited from undertaking economic ventures. Therefore, they rely mainly on their husbands for daily provisions. In such a context, to be widowed is very tragic as it renders one vulnerable and hopeless. The effect of the death of Maame Abena Kwabena’s husband on her life is comparable to one being smashed down with a tidal wave of great force. This finds expression in the following quote by a widow:

Living as a single, widowed woman is not easy. I met my husband when I had lost both my parents to death. He then filled the gap and became my intimate friend as well. ...The vacuum his death created can never be filled. I have no one to talk to or share my worries and joys with and that makes me feel very sad and lonely.<sup>29</sup>

This assertion reminisces the story of Naomi who lost her husband and two sons during her stay at Moab. On her return home, she blamed God for bringing her home empty even though she left in full (Ruth 1:22). She further asked people to call her “Mara” instead of Naomi for the Almighty had dealt with her bitterly. Clearly, her anger was directed at God for allowing such a calamity to befall her. In spite of the difficulties that people go through, the period of grief reshapes and prepares the bereaved to move on in life.

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<sup>23</sup> Isaac Ishmael Arthur, *Grief and Bereavement Counselling in the African Setting*. (Sunyani: Cobby Advertising Agency, 2020),1.

<sup>24</sup> Mokhutso, “African Traditional Bereavement Rituals Amongst Methodist Church Members in Mamelodi, Pretoria,” 18.

<sup>25</sup> Gere B. Fulton and Eileen K. Metress, *Perspectives On Death and Dying* (Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Publishers, Inc., 1995), 351.

<sup>26</sup> Fulton and Metress, *Perspectives on death and dying*, 351.

<sup>27</sup> Mokhutso, “African Traditional Bereavement Rituals Amongst Methodist Church Members in Mamelodi, Pretoria,” 19.

<sup>28</sup> Ericson cited in Arthur, *Grief and Bereavement Counselling in the African Setting*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Fosua cited in Isaac Boaheng and Ebenezer Asibu-Dadzie, *Essays in the Old Testament and African Life and Thought* (Accra: Noyam Publishers, 2020),74. <https://doi.org/10.38159/npub.eb20701>.



### ***Death makes one vulnerable, lonely and helpless***

The foregoing discourse underlines that the bereaved will always need loved ones for consolation. Papa Yaw Johnson's dirge makes this point in the line: "*Obi mesu me bi oo, owuo ama maye mmaborɔ, owuo ama maye ankonam menenam wiase a menni obiara*" ("Someone should come and mourn with me for death had sorrowed and made me lonely in this world without any helper"). There is nothing that seems to prepare one for death; death does not give prior notice to anyone. No matter the cause of death, one is caught unawares by death. The impact of death on the bereaved may be personal or communal. There is a loss of a loved one after one dies and with every loss, there is grief.

In Africa, mourning is a social event, sometimes involving many communities. The African communal sense of life is a possible reason why African mourning rites are social events. Africans share this practice with ancient Israel. The account of the mourning rites for Jacob (in Gen. 49—50) attests to the communal dimension of mourning among ancient Israelites. In the dirge under consideration, the songwriter invites others to come and mourn with him, saying, "*Obi mesu me bi oo*" ("Someone should come and mourn with me"). The Akan pronoun "*Obi*" is a generic term referring to no one in particular. The songwriter is inviting anyone who is willing to come and console him. In a state of grief, one may desire the presence of certain people; however, anyone who comes around contributes in one way or the other to the process of overcoming the shock that has resulted from the loss.

The reason why the songwriter is inviting others to come to his aid is that death has rendered him sorrowful, lonely and helpless. He declares, "*Owuo ama maye mmaborɔ, owuo ama maye ankonam menenam wiase a menni obiara*" ("death has rendered me sorrowful; death has made me lonely; death has made me walk in this world without any helper"). The songwriter attests to the fact that death brings sorrow. Again, death has rendered him lonely. The fact that death leads to loneliness is evident in the fact that the dead and the living cannot relate or interact physically. The human body has material and immaterial components which get separated in the process of death. Some Africans believe that when a person dies the spirit returns to God, whilst the soul enters the ancestral world with the body buried and subsequently decomposed. Thus, death results in the separation between two people who belong to two different worlds.<sup>30</sup> The dead are separated from the living and cannot physically relate to them. Death results in loneliness because separation occurs as soon as the death occurs and the deceased ceases to physically relate to his/her relatives and friends. The living cannot see those in the ancestral world and so death serves as a barrier between the living and the dead. The songwriter also says death has made him helpless. Most members of the family become vulnerable, helpless, sorrowful and lonely upon the demise of a member. The songwriter's call on others to mourn with him draws on Romans 12:15 where Paul encourages his audience to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.

The songwriter further expresses the devastating nature of death by citing the case of a hypothetical bird which lives quietly in the forest and invites others to form company with it. The use of the forest setting is expected to make the audience understand the song with ease. The Akan community, like many other African societies, is forested and has most of the people engaged in farming activities. The inhabitants of forested areas derive their means of living from the forest. They get firewood, meat, food, medicine and water, among others from the forest. To illustrate his point the songwriter says *Anomaa ketewa bi si kwaem; na ɔredwene ne ho dii; osu a ɔresu ne se fa wo ntoma beɛɔ me deɛ ano* ("There is a little bird in the forest that is sitting quietly and crying that someone should come and make company with it"). The hypothetical small/baby bird is left alone in the forest due to the death of its mother. Normally it is the mother that takes care of the young ones providing them with food and security. The Bono-Twi saying *akokɔ batane ne nim nea ne mma bedi* ("It is the mother hen who knows what its chicks will eat"). The death of the mother hen renders her chicks

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<sup>30</sup> Rabi Ilemona and Bolatito Lanre- Abass, "African Cultural Concept of Death and the Idea of Advanced Care Directives," *Indian Journal of Palliative Care* 22, no. 4 (2016): 369–72, 370.

lonely and helpless. The same thing applies to the bird in question. The baby bird is now exposed to wild animals, adverse weather and hunters, among others. The death of the mother has rendered it vulnerable and lonely; it therefore cries for company.

Children become lonely and helpless when their parents die; a spouse becomes lonely when the other spouse dies and so on. The vulnerability, loneliness and insecurity that come upon children at the demise of their father are expressed in the Bono symbolic saying “*Agya bi wu a, agya bi te ase des, beka de daadaa awisia*” (“To saying that there will always be a father to replace a dead father is a deception [meant only to console the fatherless]”). The fatherless feel empty and lonely because the death of their father has taken away the cream of their family. Papa Yaw Johnson observes that the fatherless have no support because *obi nhwe obi ba* (no one cares for another person's child). The African traditional extended family system ensures that all the people in the society are catered for. However, colonization, modernization and urbanization have introduced and promoted the nuclear family system at the expense of the extended family system. Consequently, people no longer cater for other people's children as the dirge rightly asserts. For this reason, the fatherless go through a lot of hardship.

Amidst their difficulties, God is there to provide for the fatherless. The dirge makes this point by saying “*Awisia biara ne boafɔ ne Awurade.*” The Lord is the helper/provider of every fatherless person. There is a Bono saying that *aboa a omni dua he Nyame ne pra ne ho* (“God is the one who drives flies away from a tailless animal”). Most animals live in the bush and at one point in time get injured. The injury normally attracts flies which disturb the injured animal. When this happens, the animal uses its tail to drive the flies away. A tailless animal becomes vulnerable and helpless. God comes to the aid of such an animal and drives the flies away. The fatherless are like the tailless animal. No one caters for them. God comes to their aid and provides the needed assistance. God comforts his people in times of sorrow; hence the need to trust him in all situations. He is the Father of the fatherless. This gives some form of hope that even though they are bereaved and lonely, the fatherless can rely on God for support, even greater support than what their parents would have given if they were alive.

With the foregoing discussions as a background, the paper proceeds to reflect on the dirge in question from a Christological perspective.

### **A Christological Reflection on Death**

This section considers aspects of Christology that respond to the issues raised in the dirge under consideration. The discussions will be limited to two themes: *Nkwamafoɔ* Christology and *Nyansaboakwa* Christology.

#### ***Nkwamafoɔ* Christology**

Earlier, the point was made that death extinguishes the fire of the household, fire symbolically representing the source of life/livelihood. The dirge teaches that death takes life without replacing it. The dirge uses the *gya* (“fire”) metaphor to relate the death of a person to the taking away of the life of the death as well as the source of living for the rest of the family. The dirge uses the expression *efie gya adum* figuratively to indicate end or finality. This situation is true for all human societies; death keeps putting off the fire in every household.

From a Christological perspective, Jesus incarnated as a life-giving Messiah to deal with death. Jesus' living-giving mission (*Nkwamafoɔ* Christology) serves to reverse the life that death takes away from humankind. Before considering this theme further, it is proper to consider what the Bible says about the origin of death in human life (Gen. 3:1ff.). From the biblical perspective, death became part of the human experience due to sin. The Bible says when God created the first human pair, Adam and Eve, in his image he placed them in the Garden of Eden, full of good things (Gen. 2:8). He permitted them to eat every fruit in the Garden except the fruit of one tree, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God told Adam that he would die the day he eats of the forbidden tree (Gen. 2:17). This tree was not inherently evil, but eating of it was not allowed by God. The third chapter of Genesis records how Lucifer (acting through the serpent) led humankind to sin by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. This

act of disobedience affected the divine-human, human-human and human-environment relationships. It brought death (both physical and spiritual) into human life. It also polluted the descendants of Adam with a sinful nature. Death has (since the fall of humanity) reigned in human life and the dirge under consideration attests to that fact.

The life-giving mission of the Messiah is evident in the first announcement about his coming (Gen. 3:15). This passage states that the Messiah would come for the purpose of destroying the works of the devil. Among the works of the devil is the introduction of death into the human world due to his deception of Adam and Eve. Death takes life; therefore, reversing death means giving life. Jesus came for this purpose. He came that people would have abundant life. The life-giving mission of the Messiah is underlined by his name “Jesus” (Heb. *Yeshua*, meaning “God is salvation”) which according to the Matthean gospel was given to him because his mission was to deliver his people from sin (Matt. 1:21). Jesus also spoke of his life-giving mission in the Good Shepherd pericope of John 10:1-18 when he described himself as the Good Shepherd who gives abundant life (v. 11) in contrast with the thief who only comes “to steal and kill and destroy” (v. 10 RSV). The thief takes life, but Jesus gives life. The life-giving mission of Christ caused him to lay down his life on the cross as foreshadowed in the statement “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11NIV). Shepherding in ancient Israel was a dangerous task involving encounters with adverse weather conditions and wild animals such as lions, wolves, jackals, panthers, leopards, bears, and hyenas (cf. Gen. 31:38–40; 1 Sam. 17:34–35, 37). Yet, Jesus was ready to take on the shepherding role.

The expression “lays down his life”, a unique in Johannine literature (see 10:11, 17, 18; 13:37–38; 15:13; 1 Jhn 3:16), underlines the voluntary nature of Jesus’ death. The substitutionary nature of his death is underscored by the expression “for the sheep.” Jesus did not lay down his life for his own benefit, but for the benefit of his sheep (John 13:37; 15:13; cf. Luke 22:19; Rom 5:6–8; 1 Cor 15:3).<sup>31</sup> The “life” in view here goes beyond just physical existence to include personality.<sup>32</sup> Jesus willingly encountered the dangerous entity (death) for humanity’s sake. He defeated death and offered a final victory shout, “It is finished,” before he gave up his spirit (John 19:30).

Christ achieved his life-giving goal by reversing Adam’s disobedience through his own perfect obedience to God. He reworked and fixed the elements that led to the enslavement of humanity to sin, death and the devil, thereby releasing humanity from that slavery and hence reconciling humanity back to God. Paul’s Christology and pneumatology in 1 Corinthians 15:45 alludes to *Nkwamafoɔ* Christology. Here, Paul says that in his resurrection, Christ, the last Adam, became a life-giving Spirit: “The first man, Adam, became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45 RSV, cf. Rom. 5:18-21). However, Paul simply considered Christ’s coming (as another human being) as the rectification of the wrongs of the first Adam. The solution to the human problem of death is Christ. Without Christ, there is no life in human life. Christ’s death and resurrection have made death powerless and so his followers are not to fear death. He is indeed the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45).

### ***Nyansaboakwa* Christology**

Dealing with death is not an easy task; it requires great wisdom. The expression *Nyansaboakwa* Christology denotes the wisdom Christ exhibits in dealing with life issues, especially the issue of death. Afua Kuma alludes to the wise way in which Christ dealt with death when she describes him as *Nyansaboakwa* (possessor of all wisdom).<sup>33</sup> The Bono-Twi maxim *Nyansa nni baakofoɔ tim* (“wisdom is not the exclusive possession of one person”) underlines the Bono/Akan belief that no individual can have unlimited wisdom. Therefore, no human being is *Nyansaboakwa*; only God is *Nyansaboakwa*. To refer to Christ as *Nyansaboakwa* means acknowledging that he has absolute wisdom, that is, he is the custodian of wisdom. Kuma’s attribution of *Nyansaboakwa* to Jesus comes in the context of his

<sup>31</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *John. Vol. 9 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 109.

<sup>32</sup> Tenney, *John. Vol. 9 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 109.

<sup>33</sup> Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises Translated by Jon Kirby* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2011), 20.

death and resurrection and so she says Jesus “blockades the road of death with wisdom and power.”<sup>34</sup> It is therefore Kuma’s contention that Jesus dealt wisely with death and he resurrected by the use of his unlimited wisdom. Here, Kuma again serves readers well in referring to Jesus as “[the] Wisest of soothsayers, the resurrected body, who raised himself from three days in the grave.”<sup>35</sup> Satan thought death could pin down Christ, failing to realize that it is impossible for death to take the Creator captive. Consequently, Christ “disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15 NIV). The wisdom of Christ in dealing with death brings the foolishness of Satan to the fore.

In the African socio-political certain, traditional priests are considered as people with great wisdom and power. People look up to them for the solution to life challenges. Over the years, many attempts have been made by different traditional religious leaders to find a solution to the problem of death. From the Akan perspective, one person that people thought could deal wisely with death and find an antidote to its troubles was Okomfo Anokye, the most celebrated traditional priest in Ghana’s traditional religious history. The story has it that Okomfo Anokye promised his people that he was journeying to the spirit world to get the antidote to death. Contrary to expectations, Anokye got captured by death and never returned. Christ must therefore be superior to Ghana’s most celebrated high priest in order to succeed in getting the antidote to death, something that Okomfo Anokye and other priests failed to achieve. Philip T. Laryea therefore rightly states that “[i]f all the heroes in Akan mythology have wrestled with death and have failed, we have in Jesus one who confronted death and came back alive. The Akan then can appreciate the superiority of Jesus over this powerful priest and all other traditional priests.”<sup>36</sup>

The superiority of Jesus over all traditional priests is also evident in the superior sacrifice he offered on the cross. He did not offer the blood of animals as traditional priests do or as Old Testament priests did; rather he offered his own blood, serving both as the offeror and the offering (Heb. 9:12). Because he has offered the greatest sacrifice for sin, and by this attained salvation for all, there is no need to offer any traditional sacrifices. God does not require any other sacrifice for the salvation of humanity.

## CONCLUSION

Death is part of human existence. It entered the human race due to the fall of Adam. Death causes sorrow, pain and shock. It has socio-economic implications for the bereaved, rendering people helpless and hopeless. However, from a Christological viewpoint, Christ addresses the challenges that death brings upon humans. Through his death and resurrection, Christ gives eternal life to repentant sinners so that even if they die physically, they will spend eternity with their Maker. Christ, therefore, reverses the effect of Adam’s sin on humanity; Adam introduced death, but Christ offers everlasting life. Christ addresses the loneliness of the bereaved because he has promised his abiding presence with believers till the end of the world (Matt. 28:20). He has also made provisions for the socio-economic needs of believers, whether bereaved or not. Therefore, he gives hope to the economically deprived. Given that Christ is the answer to the challenges one goes through due to bereavement, this paper demands the centrality of Christ in all aspects of human life because Christ is the answer to every question death poses.

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<sup>34</sup> Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises Translated by Jon Kirby*, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises Translated by Jon Kirby*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Philip T. Laryea, “St. Ignatius of Antioch and Afua Kuma of Kwahu: A Study in Some Images of Jesus in Second Century Christianity and Modern African Christianity” (Master of Theology dissertation: University of Kwazulu Natal, 2000), 88.

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