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A Christian Engagement and Interpretation of Ga Rites of Passage and the *Kpelelogical* Theological Method

Rev. Charles Amarkwei (PhD)

Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon-Accra, Ghana

Lecturer of Systematic Theology

camarkwei@yahoo.co.uk / c.amarkwei@trinity.edu.gh

+233207735515

Abstract

The paper studies the dialogical relationship between the gospel and Ga rites of passage. There is a paradox in this relationship which only becomes meaningful only by considering its mediation through the person and works of Jesus Christ. This view allows a mutual critical approach which resolves the paradox of the initial rejection of Ga rites of passage by the gospel and their later acceptance after they have been transformed and preserved by the mystery of Christ. In this way, Ga rites of passage become useful in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, while the gospel adds on to itself the contextual elements of Ga holistic existence. The paper looks at how this paradoxical relationship between Ga rites and the Christian gospel underlies the processes transforming the liturgy of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and helping to preserve important Ga traditions and culture in Christianity for of church and of society.

Keywords

Rites of passage, Ga, paradox, theology, religion, *Kpele* and *Kpelelogical*.

Introduction

The study of world Christianity has heightened the theological principle that Christianity manifests its essence in consonance with the context in which it resides. Hence, insofar as the essence or the form of Christianity remains one, it has diverse expressions. For example, although the message of Jesus Christ carries the same meaning all over the world, it is transmitted through many different cultures and languages. So, it is often said that Christianity is universal while at the same time, it is particular.¹

In this paper, the *Kpelelogical* method is used to analyze how Christianity has engaged the traditional Ga rites of passage. Ga people are indigenes of the Greater Accra region and of the capital city of Ghana. The church has been engaging the Ga language and its culture since the arrival of the missionaries. The results of the engagements have transformed the liturgies of some of the churches. For example, those which have brought transformation into the church include *kpojiemɔ* (outdooing/child naming), and *okulafeemɔ* (widowhood rites).² The work presents the theological paradox approach known as the *Kpelelogical* method.³ The *Kpelelogical* method stands as an improvement of other contextual theological approaches such as translation⁴ which does not guarantee mutual critical engagement between culture and the gospel. The *Kpelelogical* method is the paradoxical rejection and acceptance of the Ga rites of passage in Jesus Christ the Redeemer. It is an inherently trinitarian theology revealed in the soteriology of Jesus Christ and human culture as conversion. As there is a

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1. 3vols. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967), 16-17; Robert J. Schrieter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, foreword by Edward Schillebeeckx (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 37-38.

² Presbyterian Church of Ghana, *Ghana Presbyterian Asafo Jamɔ Wolo: Klenkley Mlijaa* (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1987), 100-109.

³ Charles Amarkwei, *An Introduction to Theology in Africa and the Kpelelogical Foundations of Christian Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2021).

⁴ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 27-28; Lamin, Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

conversion of the Ga cultural rites on one hand, there is the renewal and expansion of the church on the other hand.⁵

The results show that it is a win-win situation for the Ga culture as well as the Ga Christian community in favour of the survival and growth of the future of both the Ga local church and the Ga indigenous culture. The theological word conversion is used instead of translation or any of the inculturation approaches that include, incarnation, indigenization, acculturation, and accommodation because of they do not represent the holistic African worldview among other critiques.⁶ Moreover, the *Kpelelogical* method which is seen as a theological conversion is used to show that it is not only human beings as Africans who convert to Christianity because of the new life in God, but also, they and their cultures and languages are received by God but transformed with a new sense of usage which is according to the tenets of Christianity while maintaining their original essences.

Nature of Ga Rites of Passage: Marriage and Procreation

The beginning of life, growth, and maturity leading to death for the Ga society involves passages. In other words, there are passages through which every Ga person becomes a human being, a 'canal' for birth and living with other human beings, a 'canal' of growth and maturity, a 'canal' for reproduction, and a 'canal' for life after death.⁷ Thus, life is actually in stages. At every stage of transition, there is a rite of passage that ushers the individual Ga of a community into another stage. The rites of passage include rites of puberty, marriage, and childbirth; it also has the outdooring and naming of the children, training of developing children in vocations and professions, puberty rites, as well as funeral rites and widowhood rites.

The rites of passage may begin with the marriage ceremonies which prepare the ground for procreation and proper socialization of children. Generally, it is held that rites of passage begin from birth to death. However, in her ethnographical studies of the Ga people, Margaret Field presented her work starting with

⁵ Amarkwei, *An Introduction to Theology in Africa*, 108-110.

⁶ Amarkwei, *An Introduction to Theology in Africa*; 108-110; Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 74; Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus in Africa: Intercultural Theology*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2001), 15-36.

⁷ Margret Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 161-206.

the marriage rites. It cannot be farfetched that procreation or birth is central and since it is central the act of procreation is given all the needed attention. This study is peculiar to the Ga people and cannot be done on generalizations. In all the Ga communities there are customary marriage rites involving both the man and woman with emphasis on the woman. However, the Tema customary rite that involves the preparation of the man where he undergoes rituals of purification and fortification among others underscores the procreation intention in the rite.⁸ Moreover, after the purification, fortification, grooming, and adornment of the male he is required to stay in the room with the pregnant wife for about three days. After the three days, some rituals may be performed for her too.⁹ In the La community there are houses where traditionally, pregnant women need to be presented to the deities for blessing at night among other things. These rites mentioned above are all performed by a *Wulɔmɔ*. Now, for a rite to be performed by the *Wulɔmɔ* in the Ga traditional community shows the level of commitment and priority given to customary marriage and procreation.

Again, for a place like Osu where a woman is getting married to a *dipo* family, a *dipo* puberty rite has to be performed before she delivers a child. So, in many ways, for ladies in the *dipo* culture, *dipo* is a rite of passage for marriage and procreation.¹⁰ *Dipo* prepares the woman in question to be a good companion and help to her husband. It shows the lady how to groom herself, take care of the house, and provide all the needs of her husband including food. The fact that it has to be done for a woman before the delivery of a child may imply that the *dipo* rite of passage prepares her for the period of pregnancy and the successful delivery of children.

Women who are in dire need of children also visit the priests and priestesses and other rites of passage for childbearing are done.¹¹ These include the preparation of special herbs in a basin and soaking them in water from the lagoon, river, or sea ascribed to a deity. These women or girls are bathed with it after prayers are said in the form of libation. In the prayer God and the primary deities of the Ga, communities are invoked for the gift of children for the women. Miniature symbols of babies such as dolls are presented to the deities for the prayers of the barren women to give

⁸ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 162.

⁹ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 162-64.

¹⁰ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 161-70.

¹¹ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 162.

birth. When the women are done with the rites of purification and prayers, they all hope to conceive and bear a child in a year. After all the rituals the dolls and the herbs in the basin are deposited at the dumpsite.¹² Surely, bathing at the dumpsite means cleansing and removing all dirt and refuse symbolically and dumping them outside the place of human abode. All the woman's burdens are no longer with her but dumped on the refuse heap.¹³

A Religious, Anthropological, and Psychosocial Analysis of Ga Rites of Passage

According to Marion Kilson, the Ga Kpele religion is holistic. Therefore, the rites of passage also aim at addressing the holistic needs of the persons undergoing the rite so passage. The focus includes the focus on spiritual well-being, psychological well-being, and physiological well-being among others.¹⁴ These different realities as different as they are, are held meaningfully together. Spiritual well-being is fundamental to the Ga person. If God is not brought into any situation, there is a fear of failure or fear of trouble or challenges in life. The whole idea of God is found in the *Kpele* religion.¹⁵ It is a belief in God who the Creator of all things is and the greatest and mightiest of all who is good. *Ataa Naa Nyɔŋmɔ* (God) is masculine and feminine symbolically because of providence. The providential God is the one who has made the whole universe and oversees its upkeep including the upkeep of all human beings and leads them to goals and missions of self-realization and fulfilment. God is *Okpelejen*.¹⁶ It is keeping the harmony of the world and promoting the blessedness of being. It promotes human flourishing.

Some of the other spiritual rites are associated with the deities of the land.¹⁷ In addition, other spiritual needs are met through prayers in the form of libation to the ancestors. Today, the Ga prayers are said to the constellation of the deities and spirits known to them. Therefore, they could mention God as their Creator

¹² Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 161-62.

¹³ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 161.

¹⁴ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 92-99.

¹⁵ Marion Kilson, *Kpele Lala: Ga Religious Songs and Symbolism* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), 7-8; 58-61.

¹⁶ Kilson, *Kpele Lala*, 115-27, 135-37; Charles Amarkwei, *An Introduction to Theology in Africa and the Kpelelogical Foundations of Christian Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2021).

¹⁷ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 4-6, 29-30; Kilson, *Kpele Lala*, 69.

and all the deities as well as their ancestors.¹⁸ They call upon all of them for help and for things to be harmoniously and successfully done. The ancestors conform to the hierarchy of being created in the Ga community since they were brought on board as aids for guaranteed success and protection. The deities are known to the ancestors and the ancestors have also known them.¹⁹ The next is harmony with all the spiritual entities with the whole of the physical world through nature.²⁰ Since all these spiritual realities are in harmony with nature given the holistic nature of the rites, the righteousness and success of the initiate is dependent on the right spiritual connection.

Therefore, spiritual aid has a direct impact on the psychological well-being of the person.²¹ The Ga psychological wholeness is of utmost importance. This is based upon the anthropological terminologies for the composition of the human being such as *susuma*, *kla*, and *gbɔmɔtso*, and how each could be affected.²² For example, the driving out of bad *gbeshi* associated with an individual is a spiritual activity yet it achieves a psychosocial healing for the person in question. *Gbeshi* is a type of influential reality or power behind an individual for fortunes or misfortunes. *Gbeshi* for good fortunes is called good *gbeshi*. And *gbeshi* for misfortunes is bad *gbeshi*. A bad *gbeshi* could be driven out through a ritual by a priest. An awareness of a bad *gbeshi* itself may cause psychosocial problems such as self-isolation, stigmatization, and ostracisation. Thus, all the processes involved in the healing process of a human being is not taken only as physical, but in addition, it is taken as psychosocial and spiritual.²³ This is the basis of the holistic worldview of the Ga people. However, having been aware of contemporary science and psychological analysis, it has become very clear and more meaningful to note that rites of passage could be described as *kairos* moments.²⁴ As a

¹⁸ Philip Laryea, *Yesu Hɔmɔwɔ Nuŋtsɔ: Nikasemɔ Ni Kɔɔ Bɔ Ni Kristofoi Naa Yesu ye Gamei Akusumfeemɔ ke Blema Saji Amlɔ*. Foreword by Kwame Bediako (Akropong-Akuapem: Regnum Africa, 2004), 60-62.

¹⁹ Kilson, *Kpele Lala*, 64.

²⁰ Kilson. *Kpele Lala*, 58-78.

²¹ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 2, 15-16.

²² Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 92-9; Kilson, *Kpele Lala*, 62.

²³ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 96-7; See how the word “*gbeshi*” became legally meaningful in Ghana’s Supreme Court. See Mabel Aku Banaseh, “Ayikoi’s Humor, Maturity Saved Sir John” *Daily Graphic* (August 16, 2013) accessed September 20, 2022. <https://www.modernghana.com/news/482543/1/ayikoi-otoos-humour-maturity-saved-sir-john.html>.

²⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology* III: 369-72; Charles Amarkwei, “The Kairos of COVID-19 Pandemic and the Quest for a New Life: A Paul Tillich Interpretation of History” *E-Journal*

Christian interpreting the reality of the rites of passage, *kairos* is key because *kairos* is a moment in which the spiritual meets the temporal and there is a revolutionary impact that could shift the negative into a positive and the positive into the negative depending on the situation. Such a situation could shift the barrenness of a woman caused by a bad *gbeshi* and healing could be obtained through the process.

This healing is intended to bring fruitfulness and purpose to those who suffer all manner of challenges. This is why for the pregnant mother who carries a child, there is a need to engage these rites of passage. In the end, the rite of passage has an impact on not only the spiritual and psychological well-being of the Ga people, but also impact on the socioeconomic, cultural, and political well-being of the community.

Theological Paradox in Jesus Christ: The *Kpelelogical* Method of Engaging the Ga Rites of Passage

The Christian theological approach to Ga rites of passage in this paper looks at it as a paradox. There is an initial 'no' or rejection of the rites and yet there is a 'yes' or acceptance in such a seeming ambiguous state.²⁵ The unambiguous meaning is derived only from the mediation of Jesus Christ as fully human and fully divine in the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁶

The Christian Theological Rejection of the Whole Creation of God and all Cultures

The revelation of God as presented to the world in the person and works of Jesus Christ as the Son of God is a direct position that points to the response of God to his rejection and condemnation of the world and the whole of the created order. The rejection is very logical insofar as Christ appeared on the scene to salvage the situation. It points to the reality that no human civilization or culture can save itself. If the culture of the world has any capacity

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<https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2022851>.

²⁵ Paul Tillich, "Autobiographical Reflections," 5; Horton, "Tillich's Role in Contemporary Theology," 29-31; See how Tillich says yes to German national socialism as a cultural creation on one hand, and on the other hand, he says no to it.

²⁶ He employs the knowledge of the Chalcedonian creed regarding the unity without confusion and without separation in the person of Jesus Christ as a guide to engaging his context. See Horton, "Tillich's Role in Contemporary Theology," 32-33.

to redeem itself of its predicament of “*ana ημε anaaa te; ana te anaaa ημε*”²⁷ (ambiguity of fortunes and misfortunes), the Christian gospel and the agenda of God for redemption would have been needless. Therefore, the Christian claims that:

1. Symbolized as the fall in Genesis 3, the world’s effort aimed at self-redemption through cultural creativity without God and or without the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is in vain. Throughout human history, the strive for meaning has been exhibited in morality and religion. Yet, meaning has been drawn from cultural creations such as language, cognitive abilities, aesthetics, and science and technology. In today’s world, however, it is plain that all human cultural creations including science and technology, and its gadgets remain both a positive and a negative force and not redemptive at all. The goal and purpose of culture therefore cannot be said to lie in the culture itself no matter how good and fascinating it is. This position is grounded among others in the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).²⁸ Therefore, the meaning of the world’s existence truly lies outside all cultural creations including the Ga rites of passage for fulfilling life and progressive life.
2. The effort of the world to bring meaning by providing a solution to the human predicament is an effort in futility without the God it has rejected through pride and falsehood (Genesis 3). In the attempt to provide solutions to the human predicament over the ages, it is plain that no human civilization including that of the Ga has ended the challenges completely. The ideas and rites, though good and quite relevant to the needs of the people, never go away. This is what is known as the utopian cultural creations, they are repeated endlessly because the problem they seek to address persists in history and never goes away.²⁹ And so is the Ga cultural rite of passage.
3. The act of culture is directly opposed to God the Creator of all things. The very element of sinfulness associated with creation through the elements of self-pride to the disobedience of God and rebellion has never left any culture. The sheer boldness in

²⁷ A common appellation of Ga people. It however reveals the critical and realistic position that Ga people possess regarding the futility of all human efforts no matter how progressive it is.

²⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III: 73, 151.

²⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III: 345-46.

declaring that other spirits and deities have to be involved amounts to a contemptuous boldness against the justice, righteousness, and holiness of God. It is a reasonable thought and action when it cannot be taken in that God alone is enough and it is wrong for us to determine our helpers of deities whom he has not assigned to us. It is a total rejection of God when the deities worshipped become the center of the religion of Ga culture. And this is what the gospel stands up against and says a big “No” to.³⁰

Moreover, the church will reject human culture insofar as it expresses itself in ungratefulness because it fails to recognize what the Lord has done in providing its being for existence. It fails to acknowledge that its being in existence for the opportunity to experience life in all its joyous and sad moments through cultural creations is based upon how it has come into being. This ungrateful spirit inherent in human culture makes human culture a culture of deception. It presents itself in a manner that it exists on its own and it is independent. Thus, it causes the ethnic communities and the nations to assume absolute power as if they were God. This deception and falsehood lead many people away from God. Leading people away from God also means leading away from order to chaos and further into destruction and non-existence.

Taking the place of God and deceiving people is complete evil. It is this evil, which has been described effectively by Paul Tillich as the demonic. The demonic arrogate all power to itself and thus negates itself and the sustaining power of being which is beyond all creation. It is failing to notice that culture no matter how good, is having inherent ambiguities that could be creative and destructive.³¹ It is distorting the essence of God’s agenda for the new earth and the new heavens. The demonic negates the power that sustains culture and the created order. It means a spiral out of control leading to the deprivation of other creatures of their being through oppression, suppression, and dehumanization. Other elements of the demonic include actions of death and destruction of life and creation. Culture in its demonic mode could manifest in racism, colonization, imperialism, oppression of women, gerontocratic oppression, classism, and environmental destruction.

³⁰ Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising “Nature and Grace” by Professor Dr Emil Brunner and the Reply “No!” by Dr Karl Barth*. Translated from the German by Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

³¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I:222-7; III:102-6, 375-8.

In the case of the Ga traditional rites of passage, there exists an example of the oppression and dehumanization of widows. Some of the rituals involve the use of stones as pillows, starvation, and other physical abuses. Others include socioeconomic as well as religious and cultural exploitation.³² For many of these women, they have to suffer a lot from fear and anxiety until the end of the process.

The Christian Theological Acceptance of the Whole Creation of God and the Ga Cultural Rites of Passage

Going through a major stage in life has been considered by Western psychologists as a developmental stage.³³ No matter how Western psychological issues have been presented they aim at addressing issues surrounding these major stages so that an individual can pass through the stage successfully. Psychologists such as Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, James W. Fowler, and Jean Piaget among others affirm this position poignantly.³⁴ On that score, it is plausible to accept that the Ga people like other Africans have such stages of development in the rites of passage. Moreover, the Ga have these ideas conceptualized in holistic and spiritual terms. Therefore, the spiritual has a direct impact on the biological or physiological to the psychological through the social realm and then to the creative realm of human life where culture resides.³⁵ So cultural rites of passage for the Ga people have physical foundations that are intricately linked to spirituality and religion.

And just as Jesus Christ would not conceive of a physical ailment as compartmentalized as physiological only but instead with a spiritual connection by bringing about physical healing through forgiveness of sins, (Luke 7:48; Matthew 9:5), so is the Ga

³² Michael Martey Tei-Ahontu, "Widowhood Rites in the Ga Traditional Area of Accra, A Review of Traditional Practices Against Human Rights," (Masters Thesis: Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2008): 1-2.

³³ Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (Scotts Valley, California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016); Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994); Jean Piaget and Barbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

³⁴ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 92-9; Cf. Paul Tillich, *The System of the Sciences According Objects and Methods* (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1981).

³⁵ Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*; Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*; Piaget and Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child*; Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

³⁶ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 92-9; Cf. Tillich, *The System of the Sciences*; James Luther Adams, *Paul Tillich's Philosophy of Science, Culture and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

traditional rites of passage³⁶. Furthermore, the making of Jesus Christ as the anointed one who would perform signs and wonders, do good works, die, and rise from the dead also started with a spiritual conception when angel Gabriel spoke to Mary (Acts 10:38; Luke 4:18). This was followed up by the rite of circumcision and naming in the temple on the eighth day (Luke 2:21). After that, Jesus was baptized to fulfil all righteousness as he went through that rite of passage into the Kingdom of God (Mathew 3:13). The anointing of his body for his death and resurrection is a crucial rite of passage (Mathew 26: 6-13; Mark 14: 3-9; Luke 7: 36-50; John 12: 1-8). The ascension (Luke 24:50), and Pentecost day outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all disciples (Acts 2) are all rites of passage in him. These are spiritual dimensions of life that made a revolutionary impact on Jesus and the church holistically. Therefore, the Christ event as Jesus' rite of passage is the basis of Christian suffering, death, and the hope of the resurrection as well as eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Salvation is in Jesus Christ alone and once and for all in his death and resurrection and there is no salvation without Jesus Christ. Therefore, from the Christian theological perspective which is different from the philosophy of religion, Jesus has obviated all the evil and suffering associated with the traditional rites of passage. Moreover, Christian suffering is not an endorsement for oppression, rather it is a voluntary self-sacrificing love that aims at promoting the common good. It provides liberation from taboos and norms that are inimical to the members of society while retaining the essential purpose of the rites of passage.

Nonetheless, the Christian rites of passage when understood should expand the scope and understanding of the Ga rites of passage. The reason is that the eschatological transition from the old to the new cosmos at the end of history is the ultimate rite of passage for all creation. Moreover, it has implications on not only the physical existence but also for the spiritual existence which expands the scope of the Ga rites of passage.³⁷ The Ga rite is physical as well as spiritual, yet it terminates in a spiritual realm mostly but partly with the potentiality of reincarnation.³⁸ The Ga final rites of passage terminate in the burial and funeral rites in the physical world. However, it is believed that the dead journey by

³⁶ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 92-9.

³⁷ Carl E. Braaten, "The Kingdom of God and Everlasting Life" *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1982), 274-98.

³⁸ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 197-98.

crossing a river to their destination known as the land of the dead³⁹ yet it does not deal with the future of this world and its form as the resurrection of Jesus Christ has demonstrated. The Ga rites of passage do not give hope that the dead shall rise from their graves and inhabit a new earth and a new heaven.⁴⁰

The Ga rites of passage are a wealth of information that shows that the rites as performed are efficacious in terms of the spiritual and physical benefits. The Ga with the background above is bound to interpret their Christian rites of passage similarly. Therefore, the Christian rites of passage that include baptism and Christian confirmation cannot be taken casually from the Ga Christian perspective. It reminds them that the sacraments are indeed holy and efficacious and that participating in that Christian rite of communion and baptism could generate a *kairos*⁴¹ that could be a blessing or a curse depending on the situation (1 Corinthians 11:27-31).⁴² The Ga spirituality of the rites of passage could also inform the over-spiritualization of Christianity and Docetism as it has a direct impact on the physiological, psychosocial as well as socioeconomic well-being of the people. The knowledge of eternal life and the Kingdom of God should never deter Christians from connecting to responsible life on earth. There ought to be a tension between the life of eternity and the life of the present world. Knowledge of Christ's coming in the future should remind Christians to plan well for the final rites of passage into his Kingdom through righteous and holy living on this earth.

Certainly, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ regarding the ultimate rite of passage manifested concretely in history in him may be identical to the rites of passage in the particular context of the Ga people in Ghana. This is true because God cannot deny himself as the Creator of the Ga people. Yes, and acceptance of the identical elements in the rites of passage of the Ga people because the Logos that created all things including the rites of passage for the Ga people for their healing is the same Logos that has been revealed to the world in history as Jesus Christ (Acts 14:16-17, Romans 1:18-32., Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 1:3).⁴³ The connection is

³⁹ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 196-205.

⁴⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III: 412-14.

⁴¹ *Kairos* is seen as God's timing in his providential activity in history with the shaking of its foundations. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III: 369-72; See also Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Dread* translated with introduction and notes by Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1944); Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, translated by Margaret Kohl (St Albans Place, London: SCM Press, 1996), 292-95.

⁴² Field, *Religion and Medicine*, 111-13.

⁴³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I: 16-17.

only natural because the Word which holds the whole creation in place in the power of the Spirit of God is the wisdom of God in Jesus Christ. But how could God in the Holy Spirit revealed in Jesus Christ truly reconcile or accept his creation which has rejected him and which he has also rejected? The answer to the question is Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.⁴⁴

The understanding that Jesus Christ is the epitome of the Ga rites of passage means that the Ga rites share identity with the rites of passage accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, the rites of the Ga people are embraced through the Christian understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Kpelelogy: The Paradoxical Rejection and Acceptance of Ga Rites of Passage in Jesus Christ

The paradox of the question of how God rejects and accepts the Ga rites of passage could be found in Jesus' act of redemption.⁴⁵ In the Christian proclamation, the cardinal element of the redemptive act of God in Jesus Christ is his death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). It must be stated that in the Christian understanding of God's relationship with the world, the role of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is *sine qua non*.

The revelation is that in Jesus Christ as the fully human and fully God without separation and confusion, the retributive justice for the death of all creatures is manifested in his death on the Cross. That very violent death of Jesus which he willingly subjected himself to represents the No and rejection by God of all creation, on one hand. And on the other hand, it represents Jesus's Yes and acceptance of God on behalf of all creation.⁴⁶ By the acceptance of God's offer in his only Begotten Son's death, the retribution and eternal rejection (No) for all the worldly things are atoned for.⁴⁷ The atonement for the rites of passage is on the basis that there is an admission of sin and incapacity and the demonic inherent in

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The Library of Christian Classics, Volume 2: 3.20–4.20. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.24. 1-17; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* translated by Geoffrey William Bromiley and edited by Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance. Vol. 1. 4 vols. (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1956), IV/I, 122-154.

⁴⁵ Walter M. Horton, "Tillich's Rôle in Contemporary Theology," *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, The Library of Living Theology. Volume 1. 4 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 29-33.

⁴⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, §13.58.4.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15.6.

corrupted human culture. It also implies a change from the rebellious nature of the Ga rites of passage, particularly of the worship of deities and the ancestors in contempt of the worship of God. It is a complete denunciation of the deities, ancestors, and demonic powers and all the works of dehumanization, death, and destruction the cultural rites bring to the world.⁴⁸ There has to be repentance from being a channel of deception and falsehood.⁴⁹ Together with God in the knowledge of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, there is a big No to all these elements of cultural rites for their rejection of God. This is what is described by Paul as dying with Jesus Christ in the Spirit as the fulfillment of the will of the Father (Romans 6: 2-19, 2 Corinthians 5:17, 19, 21). Also, it portrays how God's rejection of the rites of passage is mediated in the death of Jesus Christ.

Such an acceptance of what Jesus Christ has done in history for the redemption of the world connects the Yes of God in Jesus Christ as the eternal Word of God, the ground and mediator of humanity to the cultures. The Yes of God must also be an affirmation of Jesus Christ as Creator and Sustainer of the universe as well as the power behind all meaningful creations, cultures, and beauty. It is a Yes insofar as the Ga rites of passage can be unambiguously founded on *Ataa Naa Nyɔɔmɔ* (Father, Queen Mother God), the *Wɔ Bɔlɔ Mawu* (God our Creator) who is *Okpelejen* (The All-encompassing One).⁵⁰ Again, it is a Yes insofar as the redemptive act of God though distorted through the human element in the culture shines through and gives hope to the Ga people. Furthermore, it is a pointer to the everlasting salvation of God in whom the ultimate rite of passage resides by grace through faith in his Son Jesus Christ. In addition, the rites of passage of the Ga people in Ghana do not only point to Jesus Christ but through the light of Jesus Christ in the Ga rite, the light of the ultimate rite of passage is amplified. This engenders vibrant faith expression in the Ga people. It is a Yes also because it accords the opportunity for the Ga Christians to let those aspects of the rites in the culture rejected by God die in Christ. And by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the new life that is akin to the past is rebirthed just as Christ

⁴⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, §13.58.4.

⁴⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, §13.58.4.

⁵⁰ Kilson, *Kpele Lala*, 7, 18 & 114; Solomon Nii Mensah Adjei, "Nyɔɔmɔ (God) In Ga Tradition And Christian Mission: An Exploration of the Historical Relationship Between the Religious Tradition of the Ga of Southeastern Ghana and Bible Translation and Its Implications for Ga Christian Theology" (Master of Theology Dissertation, University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, 2006); Amarkwei, *An Introduction to Theology in Africa*, 205.

died and rose in newness of life. Here, there is a Yes because there is a mutual expansion of the Christian horizons of its faith expression through the Ga rites of passage on one hand. On the other hand, there is an expansion of the cultural and faith horizons of the Ga people through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Hence the contradiction between the No and Yes of both the full humanity and the full divinity in the one person of Jesus Christ leading to hostility has been overcome without the diminishing of the No and Yes. The contradiction of No and Yes under normal reason is an absurdity. Yet since the contradiction is occasioned and mediated in the triune God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, there is a lot of meaning in the seeming contradiction. It is what Paul the apostle terms as “the knowledge of God” which transcends all understanding. And it is what Paul Tillich describes as thought transcending thought, and reason beyond reason.⁵¹ In the Christian experience, there is a lot of sense made because the rejection and acceptance are transformed into a powerful, meaningful, and ethically sound reality of being in existence (I Corinthians 1:18-31). Furthermore, the transformation which is known as conversion is an ontological transformation because it affects the whole being of the Christian. Thus, the creative aspects of life that include the cultural realm are converted to the service of God. It is the grand plan of God to convert creation and all cultures to serve the purpose of his eternal mission⁵².

This means that aspects of culture such as the Ga rites of passage would be converted by the Christian community which is the bearer of the concept of the New Life and the New Creation in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁵³ The Christian approach to the rites of passage is that the power of Jesus Christ that has possessed the Church has converted and is converting and shall convert the rites of passage to his glorious service. This means that what did not pertain in the Church of Christ in the past in terms of the cultural mode of presenting the gospel is constantly enlarging and must be expected to be enlarged in perpetuity. The church must take on board new cultural forms in fulfilling its mission and that also means the church itself is being transformed more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. The church then must not resist the conversion of the rites of passage of the Ga

⁵¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I: 56-57.

⁵² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III: 298-99.

⁵³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III: 376-77.

people but accept that it must embrace the transformed cultural forms.

All Ga Christians must also understand that just as Christ changed them into new people in him, so will he continue to bring good transformation to the culture of the Ga people. Those aspects of culture that distort the truth must surely be rooted out to pave the way for the new Ga rites of passage in Jesus Christ. The Ga cultural rites of passage then are enlarged and given prominence in another light. It will rather improve the number of people allowing themselves to go through the Ga rites of passage. To ensure the continual celebration of these rites of passage and prevent the diminishing of it, they must be modified neither arbitrarily nor whimsically and capriciously but based on the truth of God in Jesus Christ.

A Kpelelogical Interpretation of the Christian Engagement with the Ga Rites of Passage

This system of conversion is not akin to Ga Christian communities alone. Throughout the history of the church, such modification has taken place and enlarged the liturgy of the church in the celebrations on the Christian calendar. Examples of such traditional and liturgical incorporation through modifications include the celebration of Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas. Likewise, in the growth of the church, several aspects of the Ga culture have been transformed already to bring a glorified transformation of the church. Some of these include the use of the Ga religious language to understand God and Jesus Christ in the Ga terms. Professor Laryea has done some work on these already and examples include the use of the *Nyɔɔmɔ*, *Yesu Hɔmɔwɔ Nuɔtsɔ*, *Yesu Wala Amralo*, *Yesu Nyɔɔmɔ Bi*, and others.⁵⁴ Another important contribution includes knowing the cosmic Jesus Christ as *Okpelejeɲ Wulɔmɔ*.⁵⁵

Now in analyzing the Ga Christian engagement with their rites of passage, there is the need to acknowledge some of the results of the engagements. It must be noted that regarding the rites of passage in the Ga, the Ga Christian community has engaged with the rites for outdoorings and naming ceremonies. The rites of marriage have also seen a lot of changes in the Ga customary and traditional marriages. Also, the church has brought transformation in the area of funeral and burial services. In addition to these, the

⁵⁴ Laryea, *Yesu Hɔmɔwɔ Nuɔtsɔ*.

⁵⁵ Amarkwei, *Introducing African Theology*.

rites of widowhood have also seen significant changes. The changes are not only in the Ga traditional rites but also in the liturgy of the Church. In the whole of the Christian traditional liturgy handed down and developed since the missionary years, there was not a liturgy for outdooring and naming ceremonies. There was no liturgy for widowhood rites but today the church has been converted partly by the Ga traditional widowhood rites though the traditional rites have also been converted by the church in Christ.

It has to be observed that the liturgical conversions of the Ga rites of passage in the church have taken out the prayers and rituals that involved the deities and ancestors and replaced them with God in Jesus Christ in the Spirit. The traditional functionaries have also been replaced with the Presbyters, Catechists, and Ministers of the church. The venue is situational and has not been made rigid although it has to represent the Christian position. There has been some situational creativity regarding the items used as well as the rituals performed. It is expected that however contextually the rite is performed, it does not lose the essence of the rite in the Ga tradition while maintaining the Christian essence. Therefore, there must not be a contradiction in the relationship between the essential and existential aspects of the rites of passage. The essential remains constant while the existential may take on a different substance and style⁵⁶ so long as it conforms to the essence of the rite.

Today, I think there are other aspects of Ga culture that the Ga Christian community must embrace. These include *dipo* and other puberty rites. *Dipo* is mentioned because of its importance in the character formation of girls in the Ga and Adangme community at large. What can the church in the Ga community do to ensure that proper formation into womanhood is achieved using the Ga traditional system? How does the church convert the education of girls and transition them through a converted system of *dipo*? With this, it must be realized that the church must go back to the missionary era and learn how in my opinion they converted the *dipo* into the mission girls' school system. In learning, it must be noted that the Ga church must also correct the wrongs of the missionary era whereby the culture and people of Africa were denigrated and improve the system for the future. Those cultural rites such as the outdooring and naming, funerals and burials, widowhood, and marriage which have seen changes and have

⁵⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III: 60-61.

brought changes into the Ga church must be worked on continuously.

Conclusion

In this paper, it is quite clear that Ga rites of passage stand to gain by making inroads into the Ga Christian community through its transformation and the glorification of Jesus Christ in it. It is making the point that the Ga culture has something worthy to be included in the expression of Christianity among the Ga people. Again, the Ga traditional rite of passage mentioned above is also transforming the church more and more into the image of Christ and enlarging the church. This is a win for the Ga cultural rite of passage and a win also for the tradition of Ga rites of passage. It is a win for the Ga cultural rite insofar as its guiding principles and essence are preserved in the Ga Christian expression of it. It means there is mutual respect as well as a mutual critical approach of Christianity to Ga culture and religion.