

[Article] Theologizing in Context: An Example from the Study of a Ghomala' Christian Hymn



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Introduction¹

Analyzing the effect of theology in African Christian life, Issiaka Coulibaly noted the development of two parallel theological trajectories on the continent (2012). The first consists of formal, written academic theology, easily transmitted by training institutes. A second kind of theological instruction spreads informally through popular channels, resulting in understandings that are vibrant and functional, yet difficult to place neatly in academic categories. Coulibaly elaborates:

Who in contemporary Africa could minimize the profound religious influence, and particularly in Christianity, the reality that African Christianity is full of informal theologies, easily grasped through sermons and other teaching on the ground, and in lyrics sung by innumerable musical groups present in churches. (34)

Evidence suggests that this theology is vibrant and effective, despite the disdain with which academic theologians sometimes regard it. It is a theology that expresses the daily life, experiences, and understandings of God and the Bible from the perspective of "ordinary" Africans in the countryside, the slums, and populous neighborhoods in African cities. This theology nourishes the faith of many more ordinary Christians than the academic theological reflections that seem so rooted in classrooms and books only.

¹ This article was translated from French by Brian Schrag.



In addition, many Christians appear uninterested in formal theology, as Youssouf Dembele remarks:

There is resistance to the serious study of theology. We are content with a trendy theology flowing more from our traditions than the Bible. One can see this especially clearly in the contents of our Christian songs, the majority of which are theologically empty. These are the moralizing songs that affect neither the composer nor the singers. Old heresies are reborn and re-clothed. (2017, 106)

Popular theology is seen in an essentially negative light by Dembele. Though certainly it often propagates heresies, no one can claim that heresy is exclusively tied to popular theologies. Lay Christians have also viewed academic theology as a dangerous activity. In effect, behind every broken, dehumanizing system humanity has endured have been ideologues and theologians who have deftly manipulated the word of God to serve their own heinous purposes.

I suggest that popular theology is just as worthy of our interest as the more academic variety. It expresses theology in simple terms that nourish the faith of God's people, something that academic theology often fails to do. If these two streams of theology each have strengths and weaknesses, then we should approach each more objectively.

As evidence of the strength of local theologies, I present here a study of a popular Ghomala' Christian hymn in Cameroon: "Cyepo Yeso ba Fo yokpa" ("The Lord Jesus Christ Is Our King"). In addition to the appealing rhythm, inspired by traditional dances, which naturally attracts people, the song's lyrics convey a practical theology and proclaim the kingdom of God in a way that is relevant to those who experience it. After recounting the historical context of the arrival of Christianity in the Ghomala'-speaking region, I present the song and a sketch of an analysis, proposing several directions for further research in contextual theology.

When the Ghomala' received the gospel

Soon after the Berlin Conference of 1885, the part of Cameroon that had become a German colony received missionaries from Basel, Switzerland. Before that, slaves liberated from Jamaica, followed later by representatives of the London Missionary Society, had braved tropical dangers such as malaria and other diseases to bring the gospel to Cameroon. But their influence remained negligible beyond Cameroon's coast. From its inception, the Basel Mission translated the Bible into the Mungaka language, spoken approximately 150 kilometers outside of the Ghomala' region. Ghomala' speakers, like other people in the area, were required to study Mungaka to gain access to the gospel message.

Later, under French colonial rule, the Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris (SMEP) chose Medumba, a geographically closer language, for evangelization in the West. The Ghomala' people were thus forced into a second linguistic hegemony in their desire to worship God. This process scarred their dignity as God's image bearers endowed with their own language. Responding to this imposition, they rejected the missionary institution and reclaimed their own language in worship and outreach. This process of reclamation led them to go on strike against the practice of the Lord's Supper. They found it contradictory to enact communion with a God who would not welcome them in their own language. For seven years in the 1940s, people faithfully attended church but refused to gather for communion. It wasn't until the missionaries affirmed the local language as appropriate for worshiping God that people accepted communion and practiced the baptism of converts. Van Slageren (2009) wrote, "In 1949, it was decided to never again provoke conflict by stopping them from taking language-related initiatives, or by imposing a language for churches in a tribe that didn't want it, something that risked them shuttering their doors to us. The Bandjoun [Ghomala'] want books in their language and they'll have them with or without us" (2009, 205).

This historical case demonstrates that local languages have meaning beyond the simple necessities of communicating verbal information. Language functions for the recognition of identity, allowing individuals not only to transmit messages but also, and even more significantly, to affirm their unique contributions to the universal mosaic of worship that God deserves. This historical, cultural reality provides the context for the relevance of the song, "Cyepo Yeso ba Fo Yokpa."

The song: "Cyepo Yeso ba Fo Yokpa"

"Cyepo Yeso ba Fo Yokpa" is a recent creation of NACAM.² It employs a rhythm from a well-known traditional genre. The song is participatory: a leader sings couplets, and people respond with a refrain. Specifically, when the leader declares *Cyepo Yeso ba Fo yokpa*—"The Lord Jesus is our King"—the people and the chorus respond in unison, *E ba Fo*—"He is indeed King."

Two song categories exist in the Ghomala' church: those translated from Western hymns and introduced by the missionaries, and popular-style songs composed by local Christians. There are obvious differences in how each of these types is performed. Translated hymns are sung without enthusiasm or life—as if they are

² Nouvelle Alliance du Cameroun (NACAM) is a choral group of the l'Eglise Evangélique du Cameroun. It was formed during the 1960s to fight the domination of the Medumba language in the church, and to give its speakers the chance to praise and worship God in their mother tongues. They primarily use the Ghomala' language and its expressive forms and musical rhythms indigenous to this cultural region in their songs and performances.

considered a religious burden. Their musical accompaniment, and instrumental associations such as the organ, have difficulty touching people's emotional cores. Local songs, however, are performed more dynamically, using traditional drums and other instruments. They naturally invite people to dance, and we see a fervor that encompasses the entire being, body and soul.

Looking at the song more closely, we will begin by examining its title. *Cyepo* means "he who is above everyone," best referring to the lordship of God. It consists of the verb *cye*—to surpass or go beyond—and *po*—the plural of *mo*, referring to people.³ No human can claim this attribute, no matter what his or her social status or prestige. The word *Fo* refers to the paramount ruler in the kingdoms of West Cameroon. He holds administrative, political, and religious power over his own people, who are divided into two categories: princes (descendants of royalty) and servants (everyone else). The absolute power that he wielded often resulted in abuses that his people could not resist. For example, he received the best portions of meat from hunts. He could claim sexual privileges with any young woman in his village, and he could banish any citizen or villager who resisted his authority.⁴

Though the *Fo* embodies the unity of the people, he has also, then, become an oppressor. The possessive pronoun *yokpa* (our) includes everyone, in contrast to *yokpu* (ours, we two) or *yok* (ours, all of us). By proclaiming in churches and public places that Jesus Christ is everyone's *Fo*, the church makes a statement that transcends Christian experience and declares the cosmic character of the lordship of Christ. Though Jesus Christ is certainly the Lord of all Christians, his authority in fact covers all social groups, whether or not they are believers.

The song's lyrics

Like all popular expressions, the lyrics of this song become more greatly enriched as people sing it over many years and in various geographical locations. Because of this, we cannot identify all of its current shapes; the song is being created continuously among the Christian community, the participants in this contextualization of the gospel. The version of the song below was transcribed from a 2015 performance at a funeral service in

³ Note that in contrast to other Bantu languages, Ghomala' is essentially monosyllabic. That is, each word comprising more than one syllable is generally a combination of several other words.

⁴ Past descriptions of these characteristics of *Fo* suggest that they no longer obtain in the present. It is important to affirm, however, that the institution of royalty maintains all of its importance. The forms of oppression have become slightly more subtle and sophisticated, taking the form of requirements that people must satisfy in order to gain recognition and influence in the kingdom.

Couplet	Ghomala'	English
1–7: Jesus in Relation to People's Experiences of Reality		
1	<i>Yeso Kristo bə fo yɔkpa</i>	Jesus Christ is our king
Refrain⁵	<i>E bə fo</i>	He is truly king
2	<i>Bə fo bə dɔkta yɔkpa</i>	A king who is our doctor
3	<i>Bə fo bə də ŋkəkɛɔ gə ŋkam</i>	A king who humbles the elites
4	<i>Bə fo bə tá gwɔ̀ŋ pǎmcyə</i>	A king who is the father of all orphans
5	<i>Bə fo bə dé mpfɔk pənjwi</i>	A king who takes care of widows
6	<i>Bə fo nɔmtəma' fo a jo</i>	The king of the paramount ruler of Bandjoun high chief of the Jo
7	<i>Bə fo bə nyap gwuŋ yok e</i>	A king who is the creator of our world
8–15: Biblical Bases for Statements About Jesus		
8	<i>Mo lă m jɔ gó' pā' Yeso a</i>	No one has suffered like Jesus
9	<i>Pu la kwe é thə nta' mbu</i>	He was nailed to pieces of wood
10	<i>Eloi Lama Sabaktani</i>	My God, my God why have you abandoned me?
11	<i>Si a Si a O tak a bi wa</i>	My God, my God why have you abandoned me?
12	<i>E la yɔ go tə mpfú</i>	He suffered until he died
13	<i>Yɔsep sɔ' kwa e ŋgɔ təŋ</i>	Joseph carried him to be buried
14	<i>Nga mo la' bin si pa' Yosep a</i>	May everyone have Joseph's faith in God
15	<i>Nga gɔm yɔsep mu e Arimathé a</i>	I'm speaking of Joseph of Arimathea
16–21: Jesus in Relation to People's Experiences of Reality		
16	<i>Yeso bə fo mu' fo tə wə a</i>	Jesus is a king without equal
17	<i>Yeso Kristo bə fo yɔkpa</i>	Jesus Christ is our king
18	<i>Bə fo tə pə də mo jɔ ŋgó'</i>	He is a king who doesn't torture his subjects
19	<i>Bə fo tə pə ncó' la' mo</i>	He is a king who doesn't banish anyone from his kingdom
20	<i>Bə fo tə pa niŋ mo cɛ</i>	He is a king who doesn't imprison his subjects
21	<i>Bə fo tə pə gɔm biŋ fɛ</i>	He is a king who doesn't go back on his word
22–30: Biblical Bases for Statements About Jesus		
22	<i>A la cyə dzú tyǎ' tá</i>	When three days had passed

⁵ Singers repeat the refrain after each couplet. In order to highlight the overall structure, I have shown only the first instance.

23	<i>Yeso piŋ jam nā vǎ</i>	Jesus rose from the dead
24	<i>Nga ga mo la ɔ̄ mo la yu' e</i>	I say that people saw and listened to him
25	<i>Tomasi gā ndě ɔ̄ ndā piŋ a</i>	Thomas said that he couldn't believe without seeing
26	<i>Yeso sɔ' nte po pyā</i>	Jesus appeared in the midst of his disciples
27	<i>Nga po le mbu mǎ mɔ njɔ</i>	He said to them: Look at my hands and see!
28	<i>Po piŋ de mkwā mǎ mɔ njɔ</i>	Then look at my feet and see!
29	<i>Siŋ pú o njap nā be a</i>	Stretch out your hand and touch my side
30	<i>Nwenyā bi mo ɔ̄ e piŋ tǎ ɔ̄ a</i>	Happy is the one who believes without seeing

Figure 1. “Cyepo/Yeso Kristo bə fo ɔ̄kpa” lyrics.

the village of Bandjoun. Note that this song is sung regularly in churches with a majority of Ghomala' speakers, and in various other contexts where the church has public events.

Sketch of the analysis of the song's lyrics

Two broad characteristics of the song's lyrics invite reflection. First, each of the 30 couplets comprise one verse followed by the same refrain, “E ba Fo.” In general, refrains provide a moment to reflect on the meaning of the words in the couplet, demonstrating that each verse of this song is rich enough in meaning to require such a reflective pause.

Second, we note that the text alternates between general affirmations and New Testament references to Jesus Christ. In particular, couplets 1–7 and 16–21 present Jesus in relation to people's experiences of reality, reflecting the unique understanding of and relationship between the Ghomala' believers and Jesus Christ. Couplets 8–15 and 22–30, however, establish a biblical basis for this view of Christ. The biblical texts are a reference point that grounds all of the other specific affirmations of Jesus Christ; these lyrics clearly refer to the same Christ worshiped by the universal church. As such, I view this text as expressing a locally contextualized theology. In the analysis that follows, I will identify attributes of Jesus and their specific relevance to the Ghomala' cultural context.

The attributes of Jesus Christ

Reading the lyrics of this song allows us to identify several attributes of the person of Jesus Christ. To begin, it is easy to see that one set derives from reading the gospel accounts, while the other set consists of responses

to contextual realities. In both cases, we observe that all the attributes are based on a coherent biblical foundation.

The attributes drawn directly from scripture

Sixteen couplets in the song have direct scripture references to Jesus. This reveals the composers' concern to keep the gospel in the forefront. The two sections derived from scripture have to do with Jesus's most important miracle, the one that established him as savior of humanity: his death and resurrection.

Crucifixion and death. Couplets 8–15 state the central events of Jesus Christ's life: his passion, death on the cross, and resurrection. Jesus's death speaks to the atonement of sins for those who believe in him. It also touches on the controversy of Jesus's double nature, clearly stating that he was both God and human. If he was not human, he could not have died. As the Apostle Paul argues in his epistles, the cross is at the core of Christian preaching: "The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. . . . It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense" (1 Corinthians 1:18, 22–23).⁶

Resurrection. Couplets 22–30 explore biblical references to Jesus's resurrection, on the third day after his burial. These references reinforce proofs of the efficacy of the resurrection, which comfort people living with Christian hope. In other words, Jesus's resurrection is the reason for our faith. Again, the Apostle Paul affirms, "And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless" (1 Corinthians 15:1). The proclamation of Christ's resurrection in this song introduces a concept that can destabilize and reorient the centuries-old, fundamental religious beliefs of the Ghomala' people.

Ghomala' traditional religion expects the dead to rejoin their ancestors, who remain alive in a different, though still connected, realm. This is why Ghomala' customs demand that several years after an individual's death, people must dig up his or her skull and place it carefully in the family house. The skull then receives regular libations and sacrifices, in order to attract blessings for the living and reduce the anger of the dead person. The proclamation of Christ's resurrection, foreshadowing that of those who believe in him, forces a reevaluation of local beliefs and reflections on practices connected to ancestors. Such reflections ultimately lead people to turn away from mute idols and instead place their confidence in the living God who triumphs

⁶ All scripture quotations are taken from the New Living Translation.

over death. As the song unfolds, the resurrection couplets are increasingly followed by an invitation made to all the listeners—children, youth, and adult men and women—to make certain their place in the Father’s house. Responding to this invitation also leads to a profound transformation of the Christian’s view of the world.

This biblically anchored treatment of Christ in the Ghomala’ context is of utmost importance. Weaving attributes of Christ that respond to local realities together with the biblical foundation of the cross, death, and resurrection forges a connection between the particular and the general in this local theology. In other words, the Ghomala’ experience of Christ does not separate them from all other Christian believers. Rather, it offers the possibility of harmoniously integrating their own cultural realities into their daily Christian walk, in communion with the universal church.

Attributes inspired by the local context

Along with the attributes with explicit biblical foundations, other traits of Christ flow from the cultural experiences of the Ghomala’. These other attributes cannot be understood in sufficient depth without reference to the local context in which they are expressed. Discussion of several of the most prominent of these follows.

Divinity. Jesus Christ is fully recognized as God. Cyepo refers exclusively to one God, understood and recognized as the “Most High.” People designated as Fo represent the pinnacle of Ghomala’ social hierarchy, but no one would presume to take on the Cyepo moniker. Cyepo clearly evokes the divine nature of Jesus Christ, and is obviously understood within the context of the triune God.

Compassion. Jesus is repeatedly described as someone who feels and shares the anguish of others. He experienced suffering unto death and so can sympathize with the suffering of humans. Jesus Christ in his compassion is known as “healer of our sicknesses” in couplet 2. We see this same attribute in his positive attitude toward people marginalized by society: he raises the disenfranchised and humble to the status of nobles; he becomes “father” and “husband” to fill the emotional and relational voids experienced by orphans and widows. The Bible reveals God as the one who has compassion for the widow and orphan (Psalm 68:6; Deuteronomy 24:17; James 1:27; Exodus 22:21; among other biblical references). But in this context, God’s compassion resonates uniquely because of the people’s experience of insensitive, oppressive local rulers, and a highly meritorious and competitive social system that scars the dignity of anyone who fails to achieve as expected.

Supremacy. The sixth couplet presents Jesus as the lord of lords of the Bandjoun. Yet he is like a *nomtema'* (an animal that no one attacks, who is unassailable), a designation attributed to no other human in the community. In effect, the king holds the earthly and spiritual powers of the kingdom. Through his initiation before being enthroned, the Ghomala' king receives all the spiritual powers from his ancestors and the notables who are still alive. Because of this, he is above everyone and invincible, due to the protection of the village military and of spirits. But the song proclaims Jesus Christ as Fo beyond the invincible earthly king. It thus imbues new content to the concept of Fo and shows how the earthly king must submit to the authority of the true Fo, Jesus Christ. The song expresses the image of Jesus found in Philippians 2:9–11:

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Creator. The seventh couplet presents Jesus as the creator of the world. This attribute, which is closely linked to his divinity, deconstructs the cosmology traditionally learned from Ghomala' origin myths. Because he is God and creator of the entire universe, Jesus surpasses all other beings and created things. In the Ghomala' sociocultural context, Jesus Christ is the *nyap gwun'* in contrast to *bem*, known generally as the creator god and some sort of alter ego who watches over the individual. Though this god requires sacrifices from his subjects, there is no claim to universality, and he cannot be creator of all. As a result, the attribute of Jesus as “creator” not only affirms the biblical content of Genesis 1 and John 1, but it also forms a foundation on which the Ghomala' can reexamine the spiritual universe and its relationship to Jesus.

Uniqueness. The sixteenth couplet affirms that Jesus is the only one of his type, because he has no equal. Descriptions related to the uniqueness of Christ then follow. In a general sense, Christ is unique in that only he was crucified, died, and rose again. But this distinction has particular significance in the Ghomala' context. As discussed above, leadership's absolute power led to real abuses. The uniqueness of Christ as Fo contrasts starkly with the human Fo who oppress their subjects, imprison them, banish them from the kingdom, and whose words cannot be trusted. In effect, Jesus as Fo introduces a new leadership model, marked by love, care, and genuine interest in his subjects. This is a subtle denunciation of earthly leaders and a plea for a new type of leadership with Jesus as its perfect example.

The relevance of Christ as Fo

In Matthew 16:15, Jesus asks his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” In every generation and each cultural domain, those who hear the gospel are called to formulate their own response to this question. For the Jews, Jesus is the Messiah, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This description of Jesus responds to the Jewish hope for and expectation of a liberator. The Greeks, however, found the concept of Lord, a term already in use in their society, more appropriate to describe the Christ.

In the same way, the Ghomala’ respond that Jesus Christ is Fo. This contextual Christology cannot be understood without reference to these people’s cultural experience, which lays the foundation for deep transformation of their society for the glory of God. As we mentioned above, Fo is an institution and a well-defined cultural reality for the Ghomala’. He is the guarantor of the people’s unity and the mediator between them and the spiritual universe, because of the richness of his temporal and religious powers. As a human institution, Fo also carries the weight of abuse that keeps people from thriving. In adopting the concept of Fo for Christ, the Ghomala’ church introduces a new reference point and a new life-organizing principle for human beings. The concept of Fo as applied to Christ opens new perspectives for believers in the Ghomala’ context.

First, it denounces oppressive leadership and announces Christians’ double citizenship. Administratively and politically, all who sing this song are subjects of a temporal Fo. The proclamation of Jesus Christ as Fo, however, indicates that they henceforth belong to a much better kingdom, one whose reign exhibits completely different traits. Even more, Ghomala’ Christians no longer relate to the spiritual world through a temporal Fo, but through Christ who is the true Fo.

Second, the concept of Jesus Christ as Fo plants the seeds of social transformation toward the kingdom of God. In effect, the church adopts concepts already operating in society to reorient them to the coming of the kingdom of God. They could have rejected existing concepts and introduced a foreign, unknown idea to refer to Christ. This would have been a blank slate approach, risking irrelevance and incorrect understandings. If this had happened, Jesus Christ would not have been relevant to the receivers, corresponding neither to their experience nor imagination. Choosing the concept of Fo allows people to redeem the term, to reshape its semantic content in a way that progressively humanizes leadership in general and kingdoms in particular. In this way, true transformation is essentially a multigenerational process: each future generation will acquaint itself with the characteristics of Christ the Fo, who over time will become their primary reference point for true leadership.

Conclusion

“Cyepo Yeso ba Fo Yokpa” provides an example of the development of a contextualized Christology. Our analytical framework reveals that the church in the Ghomala’ region has tried to be relevant in its cultural context while remaining completely faithful to the biblical tradition of historic Christianity. In fact, it covers practically all of the primary aspects of a theological understanding of Christ, without recourse to theoretical abstraction.

Systematic theology. The attributes of Christ we’ve examined here allow exploration of the themes of creation, man, the Fall and corruption of sin, providence, and so forth, that are essential to the systematic study of theology. Even more, the affirmations related to God, Jesus Christ, and the church understood within the community of believers fall within the purview of dogmatic theology.

Biblical theology. The study of Christ’s attributes reflects the complete biblical revelation. The Old and New Testaments appear harmoniously, providing a coherent biblical base in the song.

Ethics. These songs clearly highlight ethical issues. In revealing Christ as someone whose words never change, they open discussions of truth and lies. As such, they invite the listener to reflect on integrity, a rare virtue—even among the people of God—the absence of which reduces the effectiveness of the church’s mission and compromises its normal growth.

Praxis. Though Joseph of Arimathea often receives only passing mention during Holy Week, he takes a privileged role as a model for the community of Ghomala’ believers. He appreciated the dignity of Christ’s body, organizing a proper funeral by giving up his own tomb. Joseph’s practical commitment is seen here as a model of faith for the Ghomala’ people, who place an unusually high importance on funeral rites. He clearly becomes an example for others to imitate.

Eschatology: The hymn clearly acknowledges the centrality of resurrection in the Christian hope. Paul declares that: “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless” (Romans 15:13–14). By insisting on the resurrection, the hymn opens a perspective on the end of time, the return of Christ, and the resurrection of believers.

Apologetics. From its title, the song declares a defense of the Christian faith. It is a proclamation and declaration of Jesus Christ as above all human systems, savior of everything and everyone.

Theological reflection in context is completely achievable. It engages the whole Christian community, making each person an agent of contextualization. It also involves a deep engagement with God's word and with the cultural realities that have shaped the worldview, values, and belief systems of the theologizing community. When theology is approached from this community standpoint, it becomes an exciting journey. In fact, we have observed that this hymn is alive. As it continues to be sung across in churches and during public events, new insights about Christ are professed, thus making the contextualization an iterative and continuing process that expresses the people's ongoing Christian experience.

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