

***Djuankayu*, the Bassa African Creation Story, and the Bassa African Proverbs: An Investigation of the Spiritual Content, Resourcefulness for Bassa African Theology, and Practical Theological Use in the Bassa-Liberian Christian Context**

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## Abstract

The Bassa people, African indigenes of Liberia, adopted Christianity as a new way of interacting with the divine and attribute everything to this divine being, who is the creator, by parables or proverbs contained in the *Djuankayu*.<sup>1</sup> Their adoption of various Christian ideals placed the Christian faith above their indigenous culture. Christianity, because it was introduced as the hallmark of human existence, created a dual personality for Bassa converts. Based on this, being both Bassa (i.e. African) and Christian underscored neglecting certain aspects of indigenous Bassa culture, which considered to be incompatible with Christianity. Living this dual life has always been the reality of African or non-European Christians. Today, Christianity dominates Bassa religious worldview, and it has become the preeminent choice of interacting with God or anything divine. Christianity dominates Bassa aspects and practices of life.

Whether this phenomenon of Christianity's dominance is a good thing or bad thing will be decided by posterity. This study proposes to show that artifacts such as the *Djuankayu* and proverbs can be used in the practice of Christianity, and this is long overdue. When the *Djuankayu* and the parables are used in Christian terms, it will become evident that there is a dynamic interplay between culture and religion and that both are the same. Christianity and African culture are compatible.

The function of the Bassa artifacts in this dissertation, the *Djuankayu* and the proverbs, cuts across cultural limitations. The artifacts bring traditional Bassa life into Christianity and Christianity into Bassa traditional life. Bassa people in Liberia employ

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<sup>1</sup> In Bassa, the word for a parable, proverb, or story is *nohn*. Throughout this study, the use of *nohn* is about *proverbs* and *parables* in Bassa, since there is not specific term that distinguishes parable from proverb. When the term applies to a story, it will be indicated. Thus, the words *parable* and *proverb* are synonymous in this work.

these proverbs in ordinary conversations, and they have also become part of the liturgical life. Knowledge and use of the proverbs are indispensable to the idea of “Bassaness.”



## Acknowledgements

It is a good thing to give thanks to God, and to sing praises to God's name for everything. In countless moments of my life, God has been my strength and shield. With this study, it is God who has directed me and taught me to jot down a few things about my people, the Bassa, Liberia's most populous people. All honor and glory to God, the Giver and Protector. God is good to me, and I am thankful for that goodness and everything else.

The family we come through has a lot to do with our failure or success in life. Although every person should, and will, stand on his/her own by his/his own vine and fig tree, family—people who are related by blood or not—plays a crucial part in one's success or failure. My family, both at home in Liberia and abroad in the United States and Canada, has been the best encouragers of my pursuits in life. They have prayed for me, cried with me, and laughed with me, and they feel for me. I am grateful and thankful to them for who they are and whose they are.

The faculty at St. Thomas University and some staff have also provided guidance along the way. In this final (hopefully) phase of my formal educational endeavors, I am grateful to all the members, including Drs. Bryan, Nat, Mary, Beth, Joe, Ted, and Robert of STVU, Richmond. Thank you for all the help.

The Language Program Director, Ms. Patricia A. Murray, my supervisor at the University Language Center, has been a strong motivator while at St. Thomas. She is a mentor, especially in her supervisory skills and abilities. Thank you, Pat, for believing in me. My colleague, Dr. Marlene Lang, was very helpful. Without these people, life in Miami would have been difficult.

Last, but certainly not least, I am grateful to my wife, Dr. Claudette W. Early, who challenged me to work. I am grateful for her love and time, along with her editorial skills.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to

Mr. Samuel Barbay Gaye, Sr. (1950-2010),  
Counsellor Nathaniel Kpaka Weah, Sr. (1952-2015),  
and Mr. Joseph Cephas Early, Jr. (1946-2015).

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## Chapter One. Introduction

### Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework

This study applies African artifacts to a Christian view of reality to demonstrate their practical application to the faith. It further seeks to establish that God was already in Africa, and Christianity was always embedded in the African experience, even if people did not classify it as such or see themselves as “Christian” or “Christians.” Understanding Christ among the Bassa people in Liberia is based on the role Christ himself is perceived as playing in indigenous life and culture. Considering economic and social factors that hold down indigenous people in rural areas, and faced with suffering, sickness, bad governance, the rising levels of poverty, and the increase in youth population (the “youth bulge”), among other things, Christianity must have a Christ who can play the role of a mediator, a healer, a friend, or one who can or may take away these sufferings. Only the Christ, who Bassa people in Liberia have come to believe in and accept, can help them transcend the vicissitudes of the complex life brought about by wars, political instability, and chaos.

The significance of this subject depends on the relationship between African culture and Christianity. This relationship has centered on whether African culture is valuable to Christianity or to the Gospel of Christ. Furthermore, the concern has been whether African people such as the Bassa can adopt Christianity without any strings attached. This concern has grasped the attention of African scholars such as E. Bolaji Idowu, Kwame Bediako, and Mercy Oduyoye, to name a few. The scholars’ focus is on what Oduyoye calls “the making of an African Christianity.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, “Christianity in Africa,” *International Review of Missions* 84, nos. 332/333 (1995): 77-90.

In this perspective, based on E. Bolaji Idowu's philosophy, "The church has been speaking in Africa and to Africans in strange or partially understood tongues."<sup>3</sup> Idowu's observation underscores that, while Africans are thankful to God for the miracle of grace in Africa, it is important to realize that the "tools of evangelism as employed in this continent are now calling very loudly for a careful overhauling."<sup>4</sup> Idowu and other scholars' efforts were focused on making Christianity African, making Africans "at home in their Christian life by an intensification of the element of celebration and popular participation in liturgy."<sup>5</sup> In Africa, particularly among the Bassa people of Liberia, Christians still maintain colonial practices and scriptural interpretations that operate in their colonial context, thus making Christianity a constant reminder of the colonial past. Although Liberia did not experience European colonialism, the settlers (Americo-Liberians) who emigrated from the United States following slavery have always dominated the sociopolitical climate in Liberia and practiced their own form of colonialism over the indigenous people. African Christianity has responded to colonialism by either collaboration or resistance. The Bassa people responded to the Americo-Liberian forms of colonialism by collaboration. But by the 1940s, the form of colonialism imposed by settlers on them, advanced by and maintained by some missionaries, created a sense of coping with spiritual bewilderment and forming indigenous alliances. The dominance of Christianity in Bassa land also contributed to the loss of Bassa indigenous political autonomy. So, the solution to current Bassa or African

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<sup>3</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu. "Introduction," in *Biblical Revelation & African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingsworth (London, Lutterworth, 1969), 9. Quoted in Joseph M. Y. Edusa-Eyison, "Bolaji Idowu and Indigenisation: The Case of Methodist Church Nigeria," *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 17, no. 3 (2012): 73–99.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph M. Y. Edusa-Eyison. "Bolaji Idowu and Indigenisation: The Case of Methodist Church Nigeria," *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 17, no. 3 (2012): 74.

<sup>5</sup> Oduyoye, "Christianity and Africa," 79.

Christianity survivability over time is to incorporate indigenous and local artifacts such as parables, proverbs, stories, and riddles into the liturgy of the church. How these artifacts will be incorporated into the liturgy and how people will practice their faith will depend on the consciousness of the leadership of the church and how African theologians define African theology. There is no pretense that the church in Africa needs overhauling—or, as Idowu says, “careful overhauling,” positing that “African theologians cannot afford the luxury of fixed ideas or strive to conform to the category of a conservative or a liberal.”<sup>6</sup> Will Bassa Christianity survive with only Western understandings of the faith, or will the Christian faith among the Bassa people employ indigenous cultural artifacts such as proverbs and stories to make the gospel more relevant?

The church has never seen proverbs as an effective ministry tool that could expand or expound on the Christian message. They are viewed only as a pleasant augmentation of an idea, but not the total idea itself. Using Bassa proverbs helps to augment the Christian message. However, I would like to liken the proverbs to interpretation, or *wudu-mu-zaza*, literally, “explaining a word in every aspect, in-and-out.” This is a workable approach for understanding and explaining how Bassa proverbs express the Christian gospel.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Mission efforts among Bassa people in Liberia operated on the assumption that God was absent. Christian missionaries held the same assumption that God was absent from Bassa culture before their arrival. They overlooked the Bassa creation story, the *Djuankayu*, and the other artifacts such as the proverbs, and they successfully created

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<sup>6</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, “The Predicament of the Church in Africa,” in *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, ed. C. G. Baeta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 425.

narratives focused on the Bible and Western culture. For the missionaries, these indigenous artifacts did not talk about God, and they had no religious or theological value. As a result, the Bassa people adopted a Christianity that was culturally coded and exclusively Western. The West was the missionaries' background, so their understanding of African people was limited to what they may have learned or been told. The missionaries had an agenda, and fulfilling that agenda was the priority.

The Supreme Being, known by the name *Gedepoh* or *Bah-ghi*, has always been in the people's lives as a reality. The *Djuankayu* and the proverbs demonstrate the presence of God as Supreme Being. In other words, God existed in the hearts and in the lives of Bassa people, not as contained in the Holy Bible, but as contained in the *Djuankayu*, the proverbs, and other artifacts. Before the arrival of the Holy Bible, the Bassa depended on the lessons contained in the *Djuankayu*, the proverbs, to practice their religious life, intertwined with other aspects of life. When there was no Bible, the community was the text, and it was within the community, and for the benefit of the community, that the *Djuankayu* and the proverbs existed. The Christian faith, however, has helped to solidify the Bassa people's notions of the divine and the relation to the universe.

This study does not focus solely on the African nature of Christianity; it does, however, make the case that Christianity is far more effective if it can use indigenous artifacts such as the *Djuankayu*, proverbs, and stories to bring people to God and the essence of the Christ story.

### **Purpose of the Study**

To understand practical theology in the context of the Bassa people in Liberia, one must use Bassa cultural artifacts to demonstrate that these contain or exude the nature of God, godliness, and spirituality. This study introduces a new way of understanding

theology within an African context, as praxis of people whose God is the Lord and for whom God is love. Thus, a study of this nature will look at ways in which these artifacts bring out the theological message—the religious language embedded in the creation, form, and meaning of the proverbs. While it is true that this study will not be able to study every single Bassa proverb that exists, it is important that we select a handful of the proverbs to study closely, using methods in practical theology and religious studies. The whole study is about cultural artifacts such as proverbs and stories that serve as valuable tools for discovering the message of God. God’s allotted wisdom to the Bassa people—the proverbs—are a genuine medium for the propagation of the Gospel. The nature of the research is to demonstrate that the more inclusive Christianity is, the more effective it can be to the world.

Practical theology is about solving problems, finding new solutions to the human condition, including the elimination of ignorance, disease, and poverty. If African artifacts such as proverbs are not considered genuine means of theological expression, Christianity is then limiting God to its dogmatic enclosures. The proverbs of the Bassa people in Liberia show that God can be expressed in any medium that expresses the people’s lived experience or lived religion.

### **Nature of Study**

Lived religion happens among the Bassa people in the use of proverbs to teach moral lessons. In settings of community matters and in other contexts of daily life, the act of deciphering multiple meanings is ongoing. When one uses a proverb, one must try to bracket or blanket one’s biases to grasp the meaning or to grasp the proper interpretation of the proverb. Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, states that by so doing,

one will not prejudice oneself, but become much objective when making an objective analysis of the material in question.<sup>7</sup>

Husserl aim in his philosophical outlook, relevant for the dissertation is on the “reduction of *presuppositionless*”, which is a way of beginning from absolutism. He believes that there is an ultimate foundation for people’s rational assertions. This provides for them an original institution, in the case of the Bassa people in Liberia, grasping a vision of original intuition which lies in the artifacts, the *Djuankayu* and its attributes.<sup>8</sup>

Hans Georg Gadamer, on the contrary, argues for the “fusion of horizon” in which it is impossible to totally stand “stand outside” of the equation. The idea is that one brings himself or herself to any conversation, and the conversation will be based on one’s idea, preconceived, or developed, or maintained. To understand a text, one cannot divorce oneself from oneself, and there the fusion of horizon occurs. By doing this, one must employ the “fusion of horizon,” because one has brought one’s own world to a new world, so to speak.<sup>9</sup> And it is only with this “fusion of horizons” that we can understand what the author or the text is bringing forth. From these schools of thought, it appears that the most logical way to understand the proverbs is to employ both methods. Using both methods brings a holistic understanding of the proverbs.

Lived religion happens among the Bassa people in the use of proverbs to teach moral lessons. In settings of community matters and in other contexts of daily life, the act

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<sup>7</sup> Edmund E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

of deciphering multiple meanings is ongoing. When one uses a proverb, one must try to *bracket* or blanket one's biases to grasp the meaning or to grasp the proper interpretation of the proverb. Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, states that by so doing, one will not prejudice oneself when making an objective analysis of the material in question.<sup>10</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, on the contrary, argues that to understand a text, one cannot divorce oneself from the material, because one brings himself or herself, as is, to the reading or to the work. By doing this, one must employ the "fusion of horizon," because one has brought one's own world to a new world, so to speak.<sup>11</sup> And it is only with this "fusion of horizons" that we can understand what the author or the text is bringing forth. From these schools of thought, it appears that the most logical way to understand the proverbs is to employ both methods. Using both methods brings a holistic understanding of the proverbs.

The dialogue between indigenous cultures and the Christian faith ought to be mutually inclusive, with the understanding that each has something to offer the other. The dialogue becomes open because the Bassa culture and Bassa Christians can see the value in their artifacts as equal in value to the Bible in Christianity, and this can enhance their acceptance or practice of the faith. With this understanding, the dialogue between African culture and Christianity becomes widened.

### **Use of Social Scientific Resources**

Practical theology accomplishes its goals well with all sciences, life sciences and social sciences, because they complement each other. Why is this important? The life sciences—*anatomy, biology, botany, chemistry, physics, etc.*—collaborate with practical

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<sup>10</sup> Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

theology in maintaining and sustaining life. For example, where the life sciences are focused on providing solutions to health and survival issues, practical theology provides the spiritual focus needed to advance holistic healing. With respect to the social sciences and humanities—anthropology, ethnography, history, sociology, philosophy, etc.—their goal is to engage people’s actual daily experiences. In these daily experiences, practical theology, like ethnography, thrives on people’s religious and spiritual experiences; the practical theologian, like the ethnographer, works well only by living or being with the people. In this sense, the ideas or conclusions of ethnography and practical theology are not made based on written research, but on life among the people. This is important because one can only interpret the conversation between the Bassa *Djuankayu*, including the artifacts, closely by living among Bassa people and by interacting with them on this level of experience.

### **Research Question**

David Tracy, in the *Analogical Imagination*, provides a way that theology and the social sciences can be in dialogue. His emphases on the classic—the person and event of Christ—and the three publics (society, academy, and church) help to blend theology and the social science, a disposition of this dissertation. For Tracy, all theology is public discourse, and it consists of three publics: social realities, or the wider society; the academy, or such things as seminaries and universities; and the church, or denominations and sects. Even though there may be a preference for one public over another, his assertion is that theologians address all three publics.<sup>12</sup> In Tracy also, as it relates to the

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<sup>12</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 237.



Bassa *Djuankayu* and the artifacts, the social realities of life present complexities for theologians, because of “plausibility structures and their internalization.”<sup>13</sup> Bassa indigenous culture incorporates theory and praxis of its tradition and Bassa people’s contemporary life situation. Their adoption of Christianity provides a “mutually critical correlation” of life for the Bassa people.<sup>14</sup> The need for a mutually inclusive dialogue between Bassa culture and the Christian faith is extremely important. This involves studying the *Djuankayu* and the artifacts and studying the Bible in formal and informal settings.

To study the Bassa *Djuankayu* and the artifacts is to critically look at beliefs, ethics, and value systems that serve as a basis for practice. These beliefs, ethics, and value systems are based on traditions handed down over generations. Not only do they constitute a public theology, but their sociological impact affects their perception. The challenge for practical theology in this regard is in how it does its analysis or “judgment” of what ought to be the norms of existence. Stephen Pattison is critical of how traditional religion and thought seem static, and so he advocates reformation that can make practical theology current, relevant, and accessible.<sup>15</sup> His focus is on the examination of the various relationships between ethics and organization, and he has developed a theory that is critical of the values of the corporation. Here the *corporation* may also be an establishment or institution in society that refuses to come to grips with changes of the times. Bringing in the Bassa artifacts provides a clearer picture of Pattison’s theory that theology “constructs or colludes with negative patterns, in how it perpetrates abusive

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<sup>13</sup> Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 237.

<sup>14</sup> Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 240.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007), 11.

ideas in the guise of benevolent doctrine, such as the sacrifice of Christ sanctifying other abuses of power and ideals of victimhood.” Pattison is realistic in expressing that the “Christian tradition is both liberating and oppressive.”<sup>16</sup> The study of the indigenous Bassa culture and the Christian faith will be to identify areas of cooperation and relationship to eliminate hostility.

Practical theology and the social interpretation of Bassa life and culture push the idea that, *contra* John Milbank, theology, especially practical theology, must be in dialogue with the social sciences. Milbank, a Protestant theologian of this century, holds that the social sciences and theology cannot be in dialogue. He believes that theology has the necessary tools to solve theological problems, and the use of social theories undermines the credibility of theological discourse.<sup>17</sup> In order to deconstruct Milbank, Robin Gill proposes that social sciences and theology are important based on the fact that people do hold “societal predispositions.”<sup>18</sup> He bases his argument on Peter Berger’s idea of “religious socialization.”<sup>19</sup> The *Djuankayu* and the Bible are both religious and social documents, at least in their application to daily living. The use of these social tools is necessary for this theological study. Data for this study will be gathered using guidelines from Tracy, Gills, and Pattison.

### **Rationale, Relevance, Significance**

The direction of twenty-first-century African theology is to be more holistic and inclusive of the environment, discussing in earnest how people maintain life. In the essence of Bassa indigenous life and culture, there has been valuable aesthetics that can

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<sup>16</sup> Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology*, 239-240.

<sup>17</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Robin Gill, *Theology in a Social Context* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2012), 22.

<sup>19</sup> Gill, *Theology in a Social Context*, 46.

bring out the various theological themes. Themes such as joy, the importance of children, and the value and benefit of practical wisdom, are entrenched in the *Djuankayu* and in the artifacts. The study of these artifacts in relation to Christianity confirms the universality of the Gospel. It shows the relationship between God and God's people, in this case, the Bassa people of Liberia. Some of the themes of the Bible as mentioned above are also in the *Djuankayu* and the artifacts. The *Djuankayu* is a creation story that is told joyfully and expressively, and it therefore teaches effectively. In this way that the *Djuankayu* and the artifacts provide knowledge of God, or of the presence of a Supreme Being. Thus, the major contribution of this dissertation is exposing the Bassa people to a new way of viewing their indigenous artifacts. In addition to this, the study also demonstrates how indigenous African artifacts can be used in practical Christianity. The *Djuankayu* and the proverbs, as well as other artifacts, expand people's perspective of God's beauty in the written word and the spoken word. This is also expressed in the awareness that the environment or the universe is also God's creation, and its beauty must be maintained.

This dissertation contributes to construction of a local theology, a unique Christian collaboration, and a new consciousness for those who adhere to the Christian faith. Some people may consider this study too radical because it addresses something that is not "related" to Christianity, the Bassa artifacts, and that therefore cannot represent God. The ability to show people that God is in everything, and that the love of God can be expressed in everything, make this a worthy exercise. For others who might think that there is theoretical basis for dialogue between Bassa culture and Christianity, the study will provide a new way of understanding the relationship between theory and practice.

This work also contributes to the African or Liberian theological discourse. The overall goal is to establish that Bassa Christianity is deeply rooted in the indigenous artifacts.

### **Definition of Terms**

It is necessary to define or explain some words used in the study because they may have different meanings when used in other contexts. It is more important however, to clarify terms that might be confusing, and that are not generally understood by all readers. Beginning with the title of the dissertation, *Djuankayu, the Bassa African Creation Story, and Bassa Proverbs: An Investigation of Their Spiritual Content, Resourcefulness for Bassa Christian Theology, and Practical Theological Use in the Bassa-Liberian Christian Context*, it is important to mention that the dissertation title represents the work itself and implies its methodology and results. The Bassa word *Djuankayu* [*yoo ahn kah yoo*] is an expression that represents the Bassa past, present, and future. It is the story about the beginning of humanity, from a Bassa perspective, following the line of the biblical creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2.

In the Bassa storytelling tradition, known as the *nohn popo*, the word *nohn* can refer to a story, a parable, or a proverb, or any wise saying or truism. *Popo* in this context refers to telling. It is a broad term that encompasses all these genres. In this study, the words *parable* and *proverb* are used interchangeably because they both translate the same Bassa word, *nohn*. This will make it less complicated than attempting to distinguish within the study whether something is parable or proverb.

*Artifacts*, as used in this work, refer to the Bassa *Djuankayu*, which is a collection of stories, as well as to other indigenous narratives. *Ordinary theology* refers in this study

to the theology of ordinary people, as also emphasized by Jeff Astley.<sup>20</sup> However, this ordinary theology is about the Bassa people in Liberia. *Theology* in this work carries the general meaning of the term, the study of, or about God. It means “God-talk.”

The term *indigenous* in this work refers to the Bassa people specifically, and it also includes other indigenous peoples who were in Liberia prior to 1847, the year of Liberia’s independence. Indigenous is also a synonym of “native people” and “the natives,” as used by other scholars.

The best definition of the term *tradition* is that of Yves Congar, who discusses the difference between “tradition” and “traditions.”<sup>21</sup> Congar defines tradition as “the continual presence of a spirit and of a moral attitude, basically the continuity of an ethos.”<sup>22</sup> In this study, however, the term refers simply to how the Bassa people practiced their living prior to Christianity, and it also refers to how they presently live as Bassa people who are Christians. This definition does not necessarily conform to Congar’s definition, or how the term is generally understood in Christianity. Tradition does not imply an organic assimilation of the past, as Congar presents, and as the term is generally understood.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

The Bible serves as the primary source for references in the study. The main sections of the Bible used in this study include the wisdom literature and the Gospels. These sections are chosen because they constitute the parts of the Bible that show practical wisdom, both from the Hebrew tradition, as in the book of Proverbs, and in

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<sup>20</sup> Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology* (Burlington: Ashgate Publication, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (Ignatius Press, 2004 [1964]); and Yves Congar, *Tradition & Traditions: An Historical and Theological Essay* (London: Burns & Oats, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 15.

Jesus' use of proverbs, as extended use of Jewish wisdom. These sections are used to draw parallels between the Hebrew wisdom literature and the Bassa wisdom literature, and Jesus' parables and Bassa parables. Christian theology is not restricted to the perspective of those who introduced to the faith to others. As a matter of fact, the Christian expression of God's love for humanity through Jesus, the Christ, is more inclusive than an individual or a group's perceptions about God and his people. It is in this light that Christianity is a world-wide faith: this faith does not limit itself to one perspective only, because God's love is inclusive. This study uses African artifacts, which are the wisdom tradition of the Bassa people, to show the similarities or parallels between the Christian wisdom traditions and the Bassa wisdom tradition. It allows for experience, as expressed in these proverbs, to explain the Christian message. By so doing, we hope to argue that the Christian gospel or the message of Christ can be equally found in the Bassa wisdom tradition or proverbs.

### **Organization of the Study**

Joe Holland and Peter Henriot's *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* serves as one of the foundational methodologies of this research, utilizing the pastoral circle. Each step in this method works well in constructing a local theology.

The work is organized around the pastoral circle of Holland and Henriot<sup>23</sup> and so follows the pattern of "see, judge, and act." There are three main parts of the work, adopting the pastoral circle's methodology. The first section is the social analysis, followed by section two, theological reflection, and the final section, which deals with pastoral planning. Each section contains several subsections. Section one constitutes the

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<sup>23</sup>Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Washington, DC: Dove Communications & Orbis Books, 1995).

social analysis of the Bassa people and culture. It begins with a short history of the Bassa people, followed by an introduction of the *Djuankayu*, and the Bassa *nohn popo*. This section also looks at the impact and influence of Christianity on the Bassa people. The impact of Christianity on the Bassa culture is discussed from the perspective of emphasizing the prevalence of Christian life in Bassa culture.

Section two constitutes the theological reflection. It begins with a comparison between Bassa culture and the West. The next subsection follows a similar approach, with a dialogue on the correlation between Bassa proverbs and biblical proverbs. The third subsection deals with dialogue on the correlation between Bassa wisdom and Christian theology. The Bassa death ritual will be presented as an example of practical theology or theology in practice.

In section three, pastoral planning is featured to provide the practical aspect of the work. The artifacts and their sermonic value constitute the first subsection. The next subsection deals with teaching Bassa parables to Christians, which is followed by the Bassa proverbs being used for Christian evangelism. The last subsection deals with the artifacts and their use in Christian worship.

The study does not focus solely on the nature of Christianity, even though it addresses that in various ways, especially as it relates to the nature of Christianity among Bassa people. The case is made that Christianity is far more effective among Bassa people who are Christians, and indeed, indigenous African peoples, if the indigenous artifacts are used in Christian or church setting. Even the indigenous artifacts make it easier for more people to come to God, and to understand the essence and meaning of the Jesus story. In this connection, the dissertation makes use of the 'see, Judge, act' model

as the best possible approach to understanding this connection between indigenous artifacts and Christianity.

The 'see, judge, act' model came out of pope John XXIII's encyclical letter, *mater et magistra*, and reading the signs of the times. In this Encyclical, John XXIII calls on the church to the renewal of their own existence in the world but situation itself in the signs of the times. The process of see, judge and act, is a way of reading and responding the signs of the times. How appropriate for this dissertation, given that the church in Africa, particularly among Bassa Christians in Liberia, to be responding to the signs of the times, using the 'see, judge, act approach! In 1961, John XXIII had this to say: "There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. The concrete situation; judgment; and what can and should be done to effect change. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the terms: observe, judge, act"<sup>24</sup>

For the purposes of this study, chapters 1 and 2 represent the 'see' part or the observing, involving hearing and experiencing, the lived realities of Bassa people in Liberia. The way to 'see' the lived experience of the Bassa people in Liberia is to look at the historical and cultural bases of Bassa life. In these chapters, the dissertation identifies the experiences of Basss Christians, in terms of what is going on with the way they do theology, or the way they study God in practice. It is important to carefully and intentionally examine the social analysis of Bassa people's situation in Christianity, and to lay the groundwork of how they might respond, in context of seeing, or observing. See, leads the way for the second important step: judge. As used in this dissertation, is to

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<sup>24</sup> John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, May 15, 1961, §236, vatican.va.



critically evaluate and analyze the Bassa people spirituality in both their indigenous and Christian traditions. The evaluation that the dissertation provides through this medium involves making an informed analysis based on social examinations and theological reflection, which also form the main argument or approach for Holland and Henriot. The method adopted in this dissertation is based on the analysis of Holland and Henriot.

Chapter 5 and the postscript represent the third approach to Holland and Henriot's, which involves action, aimed at transforming the ways Bassa people practice the Christian faith, using their indigenous artifacts. Careful planning and engaging in actions must be aimed at making transformation in Bassa social structures to understand aspects of injustice and suffering. The injustice and suffering may have developed in mission methods which largely ignored indigenous artifacts as significant. The pastoral cycle, with is the basis for Holland and Henriot, is a better way for Basa Christians to read the signs of the times and to engage in action that lead to justice and transformation, and the maintenance of culture.

A general conclusion of the work helps to summarize all the points in the research and what it means to have a Bassa practical theology that speaks to the Christian faith in general and to Bassa life. The conclusion deals specifically with the indigenous artifacts and the implications for the Christian life. This is also followed by an epilogue, which is a suggested blueprint for using indigenous artifacts for the Christian gospel. The epilogue also challenges others who are interested to build on the dissertation and continue research in how indigenous artifacts, not just from the Bassa people, but from other indigenous people in the United States, Asia, Europe, the Americas – North and

South - and other parts of Africa, can use their artifacts for the Gospel. The epilogue is a suggested pastoral action.

This work has three appendixes. The first appendix is glossary of Bassa terms and expressions, the second is a list of proverbs used in the dissertation, and third is of Bassa parables and proverbs.

## Chapter Two. Review of Literature

### Introduction to the Literature Review

The literature that will inform this research will be pluralistic in nature and scope. The plurality lies in the fact that some are dated materials and others are articles on the Bassa people in various journals. The other aspect of plurality is that the materials not only will be on Bassa proverbs, but also will be a wider look at African proverbs and what some scholars have had to contribute to proverb scholarship. Moreover, the materials will vary between books and journal articles. One recurring theme is postcolonialism.

Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*<sup>25</sup> informs this dissertation in that it provides an opportunity to see Africa from three perspectives: precolonial Africa, colonial Africa, and postcolonial Africa. These perspectives form the three parts of the book. The three parts of Achebe's work speak to the essence of this research in that it allows the research to have some historical trajectory. Although the work here will look mainly at the postcolonial era, an understanding of the role of artifacts during the precolonial and colonial eras is equally important.

Stephen B. Bevans's *Models of Contextual Theology*<sup>26</sup> helps this research to apply the models and approaches of contextual theology to Liberian theology and, specifically, to Bassa theology. Given the focus and use of the postcolonial context as part of this study, Bevans' work informs this research by recognizing that studying theology in a specific cultural context—the Bassa context, for example—is mandatory. In other words, if this study did not reflect some aspect of contextual theological approaches such as

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<sup>25</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Fawcett, 1959).

<sup>26</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992).

inculturation and local theology, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to read such research in the wider Christian scope.

Melville J. Herskovits and Sie Tagbwe's "Kru Proverbs" is a collection of several Kru people's proverbs made in the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> This collection is written in a specific method that helps a non-Kru person understand the context of the proverb as presented. Reading the Kru proverbs helps this study in that said method will also expound on how Bassa proverbs are written. The style of each proverb is like the Kru's because of the close linguistic relationship between the Kru and the Bassa people in Liberia.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In "Political, Theological and Missiological Development among the Bassa in Liberia" Abba Karnga exposes Liberia's elite Christian class and their failure to "deliver" in their relationship with the indigenous Liberians, many of whom had converted to Christianity.<sup>28</sup> In this account of the historical background of the relations between Liberian ruling elites, who are mainly American Liberians, and the indigenous people, many of whom are poor, Karnga recognizes that as Christians, the leaders of Liberia have failed miserably. It is important to consider this understanding in the dissertation because it helps to broaden the context for study. And, given that Karnga himself is a Bassa Christian who has published widely on the Bassa people in Liberia, and who has taught Bassa to numerous persons, including this researcher, it is important to consider his findings and to "compare notes."

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<sup>27</sup> Melville J. Herskovits and Sie Tagbwe, "Kru Proverbs," *Journal of American Folklore* 43, no. 169 (July-August 1930): 225–293.

<sup>28</sup> Abba Karnga, "Political, Theological and Missiological Development Among the Bassa in Liberia," in *African Independent Churches*, ed. David Shank (Elkhart: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1991), 79.

Several other books of his that are relevant for this study include *ABBA: God's Warrior in Liberia*;<sup>29</sup> *Inquest of Bassa Identity Lost in Liberia*;<sup>30</sup> and *My People, the Bassa Tribe*.<sup>31</sup>

### **Review of Research Literature**

Abba Karnga's *Bassa Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching*<sup>32</sup> is Karnga's book most relevant to this study. It uses the Bassa wisdom tradition in parallel with Christian understanding. His method is to employ biblical passages that parallel the Bassa proverb in question. This material is relevant for this research because it provides a primary research tool on the Bassa people.

Robin Gill's *Theology in a Social Context*<sup>33</sup> is important here because, as a practical theologian, he expresses the necessity and ability for social science and theology to be in dialogue with one another. His other relevance is in his intradisciplinary approach that makes it possible for theology and the social sciences—and even the life sciences—to maintain respect within their respective fields, keeping the door open for conversation between or among the various fields.

*Ordinary theology* is a phrase used by Jeff Astley<sup>34</sup> that describes how people without formal training in theology practice their understanding of God. The book is relevant to this discussion because the Bassa Christians who comprise the focus of this study are what Astley would call ordinary theologians. Astley's work confirms that practical theology occurs among ordinary people. The idea of ordinary theology, as

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<sup>29</sup> Abba G. Karnga, *ABBA: God's Warrior in Liberia* (Pasadena: World Wide Missions, 1974).

<sup>30</sup> Abba G. Karnga, *Inquest of Bassa Identity Lost in Liberia* (Buchanan, Liberia: CEFL Productions, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Abba G. Karnga, *My People, the Bassa Tribe* (Pasadena: World Wide Missions, 1975).

<sup>32</sup> Abba G. Karnga, *Bassa Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching* (Accra, Ghana: Asempa, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> Gill, *Theology in a Social Context*.

<sup>34</sup> See note 20.

Astley has noted, provides insights into pastoral reasoning and improving communication.

Johannes Van der Ven's contribution to this study is within the empirical-theological section of *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*, in which the goals of the research determine the definition of the problem.<sup>35</sup> In this dissertation, the problem is mainly the lack of indigenous contribution to Christian practice by indigenous people who have adopted Christianity. Van der Ven creates the awareness that one must encounter a critical discussion of the meaning and relevance of whatever phenomenon is interpreted.<sup>36</sup> Data analysis is a major contribution to the empirical task. Van der Ven's work presents a distinction between the theological problem and the theological goal. By understanding the theological problem and goal, practical theologians utilize available resources.

Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*<sup>37</sup> informs this dissertation by his emphasis on the importance of prejudice as a condition of understanding. Gadamer's "fusion of horizon"<sup>38</sup> is helpful to this study because it serves realistically as one interprets the indigenous artifacts.

The above materials are the primarily ones that have defined the research in helping to situate the materials in a methodological form. The oral aspect of these artifacts is taken into consideration because the materials are not available in books and papers but written in the hearts and minds of the people. It is important therefore in

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<sup>35</sup> Johannes van der Ven, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach* (Bondgeotenlaan, Netherlands: Peeters, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> van der Ven, *Practical Theology*.

<sup>37</sup> See note 11.

<sup>38</sup> Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, 303.

practical theology study for various social analyses from history, anthropology, sociology, and literature to inform the research. As a practical theological study, the work also has relied on resources that are not written, but that are based on the experiences that the Bassa people have had with their artifacts.

## **Chapter Three. Methodology**

### **Social Analysis of the *Djuankayu* and the Bassa People**

Bassa community life and value provide a framework for education. This is a holistic worldview of traditional structures and foundations that place emphasis on the human element and the systematic interplay between life and learning. This section of the study focuses on the Bassa *Djuankayu* and parables as important sources of, and a foundation for, indigenous practical theology. Looking at the *Djuankayu* as the creation story, or as the story which tells the beginnings of life among the Bassa people, and looking at the proverbs, one will see the power of the spoken word in an indigenous pedagogy. It is of immense benefit to use the traditional context of the Bassa or Kwa, while drawing on other local proverbs to show their epistemological importance.

### **Research Design**

As proposed by Holland and Henriot in *Social Analysis*, the idea of “see, judge, and act” entails asking questions and finding answers to those questions. This section presents the Bassa people and their worldview, which underscores the understanding of the creative process of a divine character and nature. Here, the study will consider the *Djuankayu* as the “indigenous Bible” of the Bassa people and how its contents can be used in Christian church practice, that is, those activities and programs that occur in churches and in people’s lives. It refers to the ways and understanding of living the Christian life daily. Since the Bassa *Djuankayu* provides a spiritual basis that enhances Christianity among the Bassa people, it is important to answer the following questions: Who are the Bassa people? What is their history? The sections that follow will help to answer these questions.



## Data and Operationalization of Variables

The *nohn popo* encompasses the entire storytelling tradition of Bassa people. Parables and proverbs are born out of the *nohn popo*. People refer to both parable and proverb as *nohn*, and the same term refers to an actual story. The Bassa *Djuankayu* is the story of, and the beginning of, and the continuation of, all the other types of communication. Below is a list of various types of *nohn popo* or storytelling traditions. The practice of Bassa *nohn popo* is captured in these various narrative traditions.

***Fnon-whodo (deep/creative wisdom).*** This is a test of knowledge in the form of a challenge from one person to another. The expression *fnon-whodo* means “open or clear heart, or clear mind.” This expression is associated with wisdom because people accept the notion that to be wise, one must have a clear heart or mind. This also implies that one must be able to think and act or behave soundly.

***The Dirge (death announcement solo or duet talks or songs).*** When death occurs, a family will select two men—or, occasionally, two women—to take the news to relatives living near and far. The two persons who are selected carry the news about the death through singing or narrating the life of the deceased in the form of a chant. They are telling the life story of the person in their narration as they walk from one village to another.

***Wudu wada-wada (tributes during the mourning period).*** This may occur after the burial ceremony at a special gathering. *Wudu wada-wada* happens after the burial of a deceased, with relatives gathered at a selected location. Each tribute is expected to be as truthful as possible about the deceased’s life. For a female or male chief, the *wudu wada-wada* takes place on day three or day four, respectively.

***Doh de-de*** (ordinary/serious conversation or talk). This involves ordinary conversation between people. It is mentioned here because it also includes formal conversation, as in the settlement of disputes or in legal matters.

***Kpohn houn-houn*** (historical or etiological narrative game). This game is based on one's knowledge of the history of the culture. Such a story may become a part of the *Djuankayu*, depending on the plot and the significance of the story. Many stories of this nature have become common among Bassa people.

***Kohde kho***. These are contests in which two or more contestants vie to determine who answers the most questions about the local history and culture.

***Dee po-po***. These are narrative in which people reveal blood relations or ties.

***Wedde / Wedde bde-bde***. This is the act of singing songs.

***Nohn***. These are the proverbs that form part of the *nohn popo* tradition. They are wise sayings and truisms that people use in everyday life, as will be explained in detail in the dissertation.

### **The Practice of Bassa Storytelling**

The idea of storytelling is important to show that there is a difference between Bassa storytelling and other forms of storytelling. Bassa storytelling happens with a narrator and an audience that is expected to be attentive. In some cases, the audience's attention is necessary because the narrator may involve them directly in the form of call and response. There are four steps in the telling of the story: establishing/creating silence, establishing/creating authenticity through introducing the narrator, telling the story, and concluding the story.

## Categories of Bassa Stories

There are four basic categories of Bassa storytelling. *Nohn vhenee* (actual stories) provide historical and cultural information. The information may be comic or tragic. *Dwuen-nohn* stories also provide information but involve the audience in solving some situation within the story. In *nohn*, from which originate proverbs, the lesson or moral of the story is expressed in a proverb. *Sahn* and *dedhde* are stories about domestic animals, which the narrator uses as a less offensive or less direct way of representing human beings whom the narrator wishes to satirize.<sup>39</sup> Animal stories also may represent human personalities depending on the animal used. For example, to represent a chief or someone significant, a narrator may use a lion or elephant or cow. *Whe-gba wede* (stories with songs) are used mainly in tragedies or tragic narratives where the narrator feels a close connection to the story; by singing he/she is inviting the audience to feel what he/she is feeling. The Bassa dirge is one example of *whe-gba wede* or stories with songs.

## Expected Findings

This chapter emanates out of a concern for the current situation with Bassa Christians in Liberia. There is a difference between the Western perceptions of things and ideas and how they are perceived by the Bassa people. (By “the West” is mainly meant the United States, Canada, and Europe. As observed by Olupona and Anyang, the idea “that European [Western] theology is different from African is a further advantage [to an insider studying his/her culture], because it shows us our own limitations.”<sup>40</sup> As Sir

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<sup>39</sup> *Sahn* is the common word for the trickster character, commonly referred to as “spider,” not the insect, but a ‘spider animal.’ *Daddee* is the name for a deer.

<sup>40</sup> Jacob Olupona and S. S. Nyang, eds., *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti* (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1993), xiii.

Henry (Harry) Johnston further observes, “each mission station is an exercise in colonization.”<sup>41</sup> African Christians are colonized according to the dominant denominations, and so the Bassa people’s experience with Christianity in the early 1900s can be considered an exercise in colonization, because of the multiplicity of denominations today. The Bassa people’s encounter with Christianity became a reality during this time, even though they have had contacts with Europeans since 1611. The Dutch and the French established trading centers in Grand Bassa County. The Bassa people who traded with the West may also have been victims of the Atlantic slave trade. Given the paucity of information about how many African persons from Bassa died, escaped, or were rejected due to medical issues, there is a possibility that some of those who were brought to the Americas were Bassa people from Grand Bassa County. There may have been exposure to Christian teachings during these interactions with Europeans.

Bassa culture today is the result of aggressive Christian influence and the act of manipulation of their spiritual beliefs. In its pristine state, Bassa culture was not without the force and presence of God. The Bassa people recognize the omnipotence and omnipresence of God, not only in church buildings, but also in nature and within themselves. The culture today is a mixture of Bassa and Christian values that continue to function together. Even though this cooperation between the two occurs, it is mainly in the secular world, but not in the church, because the artifacts are considered un-Christian. The Bassa *Djuankayu* and the artifacts represent natural theology because in them God’s truth is present.<sup>42</sup> These artifacts demonstrate the existence of God and other truths about

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<sup>41</sup>Quoted in Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974), 252.

<sup>42</sup>Thomas Aquinas. *The Summa Theologica*, 2nd and rev. ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washburne, 1920–42).

God's reasoning in nature. The importance of God's presence in the *Djuankayu* and the artifacts was sadly missed by the missionaries.

The West, through Christianity, has had an influence on Bassa culture since the nation-state of Liberia was established in 1847. Liberian independence brought together working opportunities between the indigenous Bassa people and missionaries from the United States. The interaction has resulted in net gain for Bassa people because with all its shortcomings, there have been numerous benefits in navigating Western values and Bassa values. Perhaps this demonstrates a method of living in the world that truly represents God. The *Djuankayu* and the indigenous artifacts meet Thomas Aquinas's criteria for a natural theology.<sup>43</sup> Bassa and Western culture share common characteristics, or cultural universals, especially in the use of language and symbols.

Thomas Aquinas was born in the area around present-day Lazio, originally called Roccasecca, Italy. He was educated at the University of Paris and the University of Naples Federico II, and was heavily influenced by many philosophers, especially Aristotle, Augustine, and Plato. He is known for combining theology and philosophy. His most famous work, *Summa Theologica*, is more than a classic. It is one of the basic foundations of theological understanding. In the *Summa*, one area of Aquinas' focus is on the theology of nature or natural theology. An aspect of this theology is that "there are things we can know about God that God has revealed about [Godself], which we can know by reason. On the other hand, there are things that God knows about God, that God alone knows."<sup>44</sup> This idea of God's knowledge is expressed in Deuteronomy 29:29: "The

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<sup>43</sup> Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*.

<sup>44</sup> Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, 75.

secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law.”<sup>45</sup> The Bassa *Djuankayu* and other artifacts reveal God, and we know God exists through that revelation because of God’s role in the creation, as well as the responsibility of love that God holds toward us, the created. Equally so, we (humanity) do know that God does not have a beginning or an end, and no human being can disclose that aspect of God. There are things that God reveals to others, but God knows things that we can never know. Natural theology and the Bassa *Djuankayu*, along with proverbs or parables, do share this common truth about God.

### **Ethical Concerns**

The title *Djuankayu* itself means “endless” or “something that does not end,” an indication that the people will continue. It reveals that we know of the existence of Baghi, the creator of the universe, from natural knowledge. The *Djuankayu* reveals that there is only one creator, and the stories of the *Djuankayu* are already recorded in Scripture, “insofar as Scripture speaks many things which could be discovered by humans without God revealing them.”<sup>46</sup> It is in this similar category we find the *Djuankayu* and other indigenous artifacts, because they show that there is a God and that God is One. This knowledge of God or the supernatural being among the Bassa people as presented in the *Djuankayu* is clear, in the same way as presented in the Bible. While the truth of God’s existence is common to Bassa people’s reasoning in the *Djuankayu*, the Bible demonstrates God through faith. The combination of reason or knowledge on the

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<sup>45</sup> Deuteronomy 29:29 (New Revised Standard Version), 115.

<sup>46</sup> Ralph McInerny, “On Behalf of Natural Theology,” in *Being and Predication* (Washington, DC: American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1980), 63–73.

side of the *Djuankayu* and faith on the side of the Bible demonstrates that God's presence permeates culture.

This is an important distinction in understanding Aquinas' natural theology as the source of religious faith.<sup>47</sup> It is therefore fair to argue that indigenous artifacts such as proverbs, stories, riddles, and the other wise-sayings do reveal the existence of God. And it is important to note, further that every culture acknowledges the existence of God or some Supreme Being. Every society, it is my opinion, has some concept of God, and to believe or think that because people were not Christians their ideas and thoughts of God were not important is a denial of the universality of God. God is present in the *Djuankayu* and in the proverbs.

The aesthetics of Bassa proverbs is exemplified in many of the proverbs. Two of these proverbs are selected to demonstrate the existence of God in them and to discuss them in a natural theological framework. The first proverb, "Won sey wudueh nyoon-yeen," means, "The mouth that does not speak up stinks." The aesthetic value is in the mouth and its use. It is a natural theological phenomenon in that the creator of the mouth, Gedepoh, has a reason for creating the mouth: to talk. The result of the mouth refusing to speak—which is its responsibility or purpose—is that it stinks. This idea falls within the category of natural theology because the proverb has naturally determined the purpose of the human mouth without it being revealed by either the *Djuankayu* or Scripture. The proverb is interesting if one does a word study.

The word for mouth, *won*, refers to the mouth or any small opening. Thus, any opening, such as the ears or the nose, is or may be considered *won*. In this case, the word

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<sup>47</sup> McInerny, "On Behalf of Natural Theology," 73.

does stand for the mouth because of what should happen. The mouth should speak if it is to fulfill its purpose. This is a proverb that also expresses the need for one to exert his or her confidence. But if one is silent, one is responsible for the consequences. The proverb admonishes one to express oneself.

The proverb that says, *Soo sey baah nee, orh sey deh dee*, or “If the chicken does not scratch, it will not eat.” The emphasis here is on work, with the idea of ‘working for results or for survival.’ The proverb uses an animal to show the relationship between survival and work. Such work does not necessarily have to be employment; it can be the fulfillment of one’s purpose in life.



## Chapter Four. Analysis and Results

### The Bassa People in Liberia: A Brief History

The history of the Bassa people in Liberia can be divided into two eras. One is the indigenous, pre-Christian era, up to 1800, and the other the Christian/Western era, from the 1800s to the present. These two eras define what it means today to be a Bassa person, woman or man. Each category has its own historical trajectories. Even though this study investigates from 1800 to the present, it does not totally exclude the pre-Christian era. It is important to note that the Bassa people discussed in this study do not include the Bassa people of Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ghana, or even East Africa, where it is believed Bassa people originated. The study specifically focuses on Bassa people in Liberia.

The indigenous pre-Christian era is the original, the foundation, the “pure” and innocent era of “Bassaness,” or what it means to be Bassa. This era represents a time when Bassa life was considered “innocent” or unpolluted. The era also includes the coming of the Europeans, particularly the Dutch and French traders, along the Atlantic coast of Liberia and into the interior areas of the Bassa people.<sup>48</sup> There is little evidence during this era of a heavy Christian influence among the Bassa people because the traders at that time, although perhaps Christians—speculation considered—were not on a mission to convert people. It was during the next era that Christianity began to make its way, with American and European missionaries, who were both black and white.

The next era covers the nineteenth century, and it is the era of Christian influence. American and European missionaries succeeded in converting many Bassa people to

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<sup>48</sup> The Bassa people live along the coast and interior areas of Liberia in Grand Bassa, Montserrado, Rivercess, Margibi, and Sinoe Counties.

Christianity. Islam did not make such inroads among the Bassa people and their Kwa cohorts. It is fair to say that Islamic missionaries and long-distance traders failed to convert many Bassa or Kwa people. Like the Christian missionaries, the Islamic missionaries succeeded among the Vai people, as well as the Lorma and Mandingo peoples.<sup>49</sup>

Historically there are four different Bassa family groups: Gboo, Geegbahn, Gbahngbon, and Swah. The group one identifies with determines the taboos, totems, and norms a person lives by. It is unclear whether with Christianity, with the Christian “family” model, and with Western education, Bassa people in these areas still see themselves as belonging to any of these groups. It is fair to say that the Bassa family network is like a spider’s web, connected to one primary source, most likely a father.

Bassa people have believed in a Supreme Being since before Christianity dominated. In 1847, for example, when Liberia became a country with settlers from the United States, Bassa people were already believers in one Supreme Being. They governed themselves under their indigenous form of leadership until they became citizens of Liberia in 1904. Prior to this time, missionary influence was limited to Bassa people in Montserrado County and Monrovia, which were the life centers of the new country. It was only after 1904 that Christian missionaries could reach the interior areas where most Bassa people lived.

Bassa religious practice occurred, prior to the church, in the forest and in the *gbaa-mu*. Formal “worship” included settling disputes, conducting marriages, holding

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<sup>49</sup> The Kwa is a classification of related people in Liberia, and it includes Bassa, Belle, Dey, Grebo, Jabo, Krahn, Kru, and Sapo. The relationship is based on cultural similarities or parallels, including language.

memorials for the dead, or welcoming new graduates from the *gaagba*, the indigenous school for boys and men, or the *maagba*, the indigenous school exclusively for girls and women. These practices—when children graduate from *the gaagba* or *maagba*, or at the memorial of a deceased person, among other occasions—occurred with the use of proverbs to carry out the activities mentioned above, recognizing the role and function of the living-dead or the ancestors. The worship always concluded with a solution that satisfied both parties. Rituals of worship were directed to a being that was unseen and could resolve personal or communal conflicts. Such conflicts were resolved by the people involved. Neutral persons who were experienced were invited to help and participate in finding solutions to conflicts.

### **A Descriptive Introduction of the Bassa *Djuankayu***

The Bassa *Djuankayu* is a story of origins, a narrative of etiologies. It tells of the beginnings of life and is narrated by Bassa sages. The *Djuankayu* was once considered an elite literature of the Bassa people, and only men—most especially elderly men—were privileged to know its contents and other stories in it. The *Djuankayu* is a never-ending story of the Bassa people. Only those who are prepared and have been trained in the *gaagba* can continue to tell the story.

The *Djuankayu* is the past because it tells of the origins of humanity, and it gives us the idea of a divine being in the Bassa people's worldview. The *Djuankayu* is also the past because access to it is restricted to men who have been initiated in the *gaagba*. It is the present because of the other artifacts that come out of it and are currently in use. The proverbs are one set of examples of artifacts coming out of the *Djuankayu*. The

*Djuankayu* is also the future because of the potential and the flexibility it must cope with in the present. The stories speak to the future, and that is how it is the future.

There are ten legends or stories of the *Djuankayu*, and each is the beginning of an etiology. The first five are significant to this study because they serve as the original sources of all etiologies. The first legend or story begins with the creation of human beings. This creation narrative is the beginning. According to this story, Gedepoh (the Supreme Being) created the earth because it was dry and there was no water. The created animals and humanity were with Gedepoh above. The next story in the *Djuankayu* tells of God creating human destiny before allowing humanity to inhabit the earth that had been created. The third story deals with destiny, which Gedepoh calls *jae* (pronounced like the name of the letter *J*). Gedepoh gives each person the opportunity to choose his/her own destiny. In this third story, humanity and the animals populated the earth at separate times. Human beings populated the earth by the *jae* each chose and through various relationships, including family and societal relationships. The people and animals came to the earth from Gedepoh by boats or canoes.<sup>50</sup> The first boat was the *wodo whoh*, full of people related by blood.<sup>51</sup> This was followed by the *buee whoh*, the canoe full of people who shared relationships of mutual interests or affinities. This includes relationships through marriage or with in-laws: mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law, brother-in-law, and so on. The second *whoh* was the *noohn whoh*. This *whoh* represents social relationship among people of the same community, ethnicity, or nationality. This last *whoh* contained all peoples related by living together in the same locality. Each *whoh*,

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<sup>50</sup> In Bassa, *boat* and *canoe* are the same. There is no difference. The term *whoh* can refer to either a boat or a canoe.

<sup>51</sup> *Wodo-whoh* simply means a boat or canoe filled with relatives or people related by blood.

according to the *Djuankayu*, is crowded with people. The *Djuankayu* also contains other stories of the inhabitants on these various boats or canoes.

The fifth story concerns a beautiful princess called Dehdyu. She is the daughter of the first two parents, Sahn and Zeemah. The story emphasizes Dehdyu's refusal to marry any of the men who courted her. She did not want an arranged marriage. She wanted to marry a man as handsome as she was beautiful. The story ends tragically because Dehdyu does meet a man as handsome as she is beautiful, but she realizes later that he has borrowed his beauty and is a fake. The essence of this story in the *Djuankayu* is to emphasize choice as significant to the creator. This idea is also carried over in the other story related to Sahn and Zeemah in their need to have a son. The need for Sahn and Zeemah to have a son becomes the plot. The first family has produced only girl children, but they want to have a son. Through consultation with oracles and the gods, they give birth to a set of twin boys. As contained in the *Djuankayu*, these stories or legends present the Bassa people as practical people who find meaning in a Supreme Being who is available in relationships and nature.

In the remaining five narratives, six through ten, the focus is on human interaction through marriage and family. They focus on diviners and midwives—the former being men, and the latter being women. These stories are about the humanity and other creatures Gedepoh has sent to occupy the earth.

The *Djuankayu* continues to create stories, parables, and proverbs over time and even in the present. It does have spiritual significance to Bassa Christians, whether the Bassa people realize it or not, and it also has spiritual value to Bassa culture. More importantly, the *Djuankayu* can be a resource for the construction of a Bassa Christian

theology within a practical theological framework. The *Djuankayu* and the indigenous artifacts, such as proverbs, riddles, and stories, are of significance to everyday Bassa life.

### **Summary**

As this study proposes, utilizing these artifacts in the church will enhance Bassa influence on Christianity in general and spread the gospel more locally. Bassa Christianity is ripe for this sort of dispensation in the faith. The *Djuankayu* provides a spiritual and social foundation that will enhance the interpretation of Scripture and understanding of Christianity among the Bassa people, and possibly other linguistically related ethnic groups, such as Dey, Grebo, Krahn, Kru, and Sapo. The proverbs are a way of expanding knowledge of what Bassa Christians can do with their artifacts that make communication of the Christian gospel possible. The *Djuankayu* is a story of the past, present, and future.

### **Analysis of the Impact and Influence of Christianity on Bassa People**

Christianity has had some impact on Bassa people in Liberia. As considered in the previous section, the storytelling tradition is an important facet of Bassa life, and it is what defines Bassa culture. In this section, it is important to discuss what influence or influences the Christian faith has had on Bassa people and what that might mean. The discussion can be approached in two important ways. One way is to consider the cultural changes that have occurred because of Christianity, specifically the impact that Christianity has had on the Bassa written language, the *vha chede*. The other way is to take into consideration how Christianity is practiced by Bassa people. In this specific context, it is good to look at translated materials, such as hymns or the Bible, and how Bassa people use them in the church.

The Bassa language is both an oral and a written language. Written Bassa, originally called the *vha chede*, has been transformed by missionaries and their cohorts for their own purposes, mainly because they are either too lazy to learn the original *vha chede* script, or they felt that it was not necessary, since it did not use the English alphabet equivalent. They had to invent a script to translate materials by using a Latin alphabet called the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Reclaiming the original script today is difficult, if not impossible, because most of those who were literate in the original written form have died, and only a few are currently alive. Many of those alive are either old or incapacitated.

A brief linguistic description of the Bassa *vha chede* will help to illustrate this point of how Christianity has impacted the Bassa people. The original Bassa *vha chede* came into existence through the efforts of a wise Bassa man named Di-wada. It is unclear when he lived, but his story has become legendary. According to this legend, he was relatively young when he invented the script by writing the alphabet on leaves in the bush. The Bassa word *vha* means to throw something, and *chede* means something written, printed, or a book.

The Bassa language does not use the Latin alphabet. Bassa is a tonal language. The language, or the original language, has twenty-three consonants and seven vowels. Each of the seven vowels has five tones. The IPA conversion adopted all twenty-three consonants and added two additional consonants, making a total of twenty-five; it maintained the seven vowels. The original *vha chede* maintains its twenty-three consonants and has not changed. A Bassa man, Thomas Flo Darwin Gbeinvodoh Lewis (ca. 1895–1940) sought ways to make the written language more accessible to all

Liberians, especially the Bassa people. He used his knowledge and skills, gained through education abroad, to expose the written language to the world. He returned to Liberia following his studies at Syracuse University, where he earned a PhD in chemistry, to teach Liberians science and the Bassa language, using the new IPA script. He opened a school called Sosey-Bahnee Academy. The school was short lived because the Liberian government at the time would not support his efforts. Frustration from fighting to keep the school open led to his early demise, and the institution failed. Lewis's script made it possible to form the English equivalent of the Bassa *vha chede*. Christian literature translators have completely overlooked the original *vha chede*, since it is not feasible by them to translate the Bible or hymns using it. The IPA has become popular, and many Bassa Christians have adopted it, choosing not to bother with the original writing.

The IPA is popular for collaboration with missionaries, who had the motive for their new converts to be able to communicate the Christian faith without hindrance. The missionaries also wanted translation to help them in preparing local leaders in the churches. With translation, the converted Christians could provide literature to be used in the churches and be able to train themselves and take the helm of the church. While these efforts by Lewis and some missionaries are laudable, the original *vha chede* has nearly disappeared. The translation efforts, regardless of the script used, helped to slowly get the indigenous *vha chede* out of its sacred place among indigenous Bassa people.

In their translation efforts, missionaries and their Bassa cohorts have also incorporated English words that had not been part of any Bassa word list or dictionary into Bassa vocabulary. For example, the word *Bible*, pronounced "*baboh*," would stand for the word, but the original Bassa does not have a word for Bible and cannot frame a



name for it except to pronounce the word Bible using a Bassa sound. Technically speaking, it should be this: *Gedepoh chede*, “God’s Book” or “the Book of God,” which would represent the Bible, the Qur’an, or any holy scripture where God, the supreme monotheistic being, is mentioned. Since Bassa people have not in large quantity converted to Islam, the term *Gedepoh chede* specifically stands for the Bible.

The idea of a Supreme Being is not a new concept, but the name *God* is a new concept. The missionaries condemned all beings outside of their own conception of God because they were unable to grasp that the people themselves already had access to God, whom they saw as the Supreme Being. Bassa people believed that some force was responsible for how nature operates, but it was not something or someone they referred to as God. Thus, the missionary translation of the word God is also problematic. There is a problem because of the various attributes of or names for God. The following names for God prove the point: *Gedepoh*, *Yuen-Bah*, *Dyundeo*, *Ba-ghi* and *Boomooe*. Each of these names refers to God and may be used in various contexts.

Bassa, or pure Bassa, as enshrined in the written script, the *vha chede*, is at risk of being completely lost.<sup>52</sup> Most Bassa people in the current generation do not know about its existence, much less its usage. They have not been educated in the aspects of the language, especially in the *Djuankayu* or the proverbs. Unfortunately, the few elders who knew it are dying out, and sooner or later we will have lost a valuable part of our culture, all because we wanted to be *xwi*.<sup>53</sup> Even though the script still exists, its loss might leave

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<sup>52</sup> Deep Bassa refers to the Bassa language in its original form, perhaps prior to the coming of missionaries. It is what makes Bassa what it is. Without a knowledge of Deep Bassa, a person has only a superficial knowledge of Bassa culture.

<sup>53</sup> The Bassa word *xwi* refers to anyone who has obtained some form of Western education, or a white person, such as a missionary. It can also refer to anyone who speaks English.

aspects of religious, historical, and linguistic explanations unresolved. The “growth” and “development of modernity” in Liberia have undermined the potential learning of the language in all its forms by people who are currently living in Bassa. The written script is nearly extinct.

The other impact of Christianity on Bassa people has been in the area of language, specifically in translation. Translation occurs where Christian literature, including the Bible, has been translated to Bassa. Bassa churches use the creeds, the Old and New Testaments, hymns, and other common gospel tracts. These translations help to educate the Bassa Christians about what Christianity is all about. Translation has been beneficial, and it has made the Christian way of life a truth to Bassa people, as well as the Liberian nation. The other side of translation from English to Bassa and vice versa is *grafting*, where the translated material and the language in which the material is translated produce a potentially new material caused by the coming together of both languages. This idea of grafting has already been discussed by Dr. Dorothy Akoto in her work in relation to “the biblical book of proverbs and *Ewe* folk sayings.” She calls attention to the production of something slightly new when both languages are combined.<sup>54</sup> The hermeneutics of grafting is developed out of the agricultural practice. In this study, grafting is seen in the translated materials in Bassa that produce something new if taken literally. On the other hand, translation does not always produce something new.

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<sup>54</sup> Dorothy Akoto, *Proverbs and the African Tree of Life: Grafting Biblical Proverbs on to Ghanaian Ewe Folk Proverbs* (Boston: Brill, 2104), 11.

## Chapter Five. Conclusion

Bassa local theology stimulates the construction of a new way of seeing God through both Bassa and Christian lenses. In the Liberian context, the dominance of Anglo-European theology has defined the “right” way—if not the only way—a local theology can emerge. The mainline denominations followed their own traditions, and the independent churches created their own traditions to do away with mainline traditions. The Christian churches among the Bassa people failed to recognize the revelatory insights in the *Djuankayu*. The missionaries did not accept the *Djuankayu*, and the independent churches did not find the need to incorporate the *Djuankayu* and accept it as relevant Christian material.

Even though the Bassa Christian worship experience tends to universalize the idea of God, it specifically offers its own distinctive qualities embedded in the artifacts. Robert Schreiter, who is an advocate of local theology, shuns the tendency of mainline Christianity—Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Adventists, among others—to universalize theology and worship. The missionaries who interacted with or witnessed to Bassa people were good examples of universalizing the gospel message outside of local theology. The missionaries misread the Scripture which reads, “If anyone will be my disciple, he/she must deny himself or herself and follow me.”<sup>55</sup> In their opinion, to deny oneself meant neglecting one’s original culture and beliefs.

The *Djuankayu* and the proverbs must be treated like a text, and this entire work revolves around translating one cultural context to another, from the Bassa context to the Christian context. The theological reflection draws on the lived experience from these

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<sup>55</sup> Matthew 16:24 (NRSV); Luke 9:23 (NRSV).

indigenous artifacts contained in the *Djuankayu*, with the intention of demonstrating practical actions in how they are used. The essence of this study is to harness the energy of these artifacts for the culture to be maintained. As some scholars have observed, “energies of our civilization are pointed toward destruction—toward destruction of the poor, toward destruction of those who speak for life and justice, toward destruction of family and community, toward destruction of our precious earth, toward destruction of humanity. At their root, these energies of destruction are extinguishing the image of God in humanity and in all creation. They become demonic.”<sup>56</sup> As this statement is much too broad to be applicable only to the Bassa people, aspects of the statement are discussed in this work. The intent of this chapter is to espouse the significance of the Bassa-Liberian *nohn popo* tradition as it relates to issues in the Bible. It is a proverbial truth that proverbs are the “palm oil with which words are eaten,” and they are regarded as wise utterances. The conclusion shall demonstrate how understanding indigenous African proverbs can help elucidate the Bible.<sup>57</sup>

### **Pastoral Planning**

One major challenge for the African church in this century and beyond is in the regular use of indigenous artifacts to the glory of God, especially in the liturgy. This is especially a challenge because African clergy men and women who are “in charge” will consider their own indigenous materials not worthy for use in the church. The teachings of the missionaries, who did not understand or chose not to accept the indigenous ways of life and epistemology, came down or were handed down to the laity and the clergy. The

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<sup>56</sup> Holland and Henriot, *Social Analysis*, xiii.

<sup>57</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1959).

disdain is still evident, even though the missionaries are no longer running the show. This has affected how Africans interpret Scripture.

The third part of the Holland and Henriot's pastoral circle focuses on the practice or action taken when social analysis is done. The action takes the form of applying the artifacts in a church or Christian context or liturgy, to evaluate their effectiveness. Applying specific proverbs to a liturgical activity will demonstrate Christian overtones in the given proverb. A pastoral plan for such a work is to determine how the *Djuankayu* and other artifacts can be used in sermons, Christian education, evangelism, and worship. The pastoral agenda of the African church must engage these segments of Christian theology.

Many African scholars and theologians such as, Kwasi Wiredu have noted that "the modernization of Africa must involve not only Africa's physical resources but its modes of thought as well."<sup>58</sup> He contends that "African traditional thought should, in the first place, only be compared with Western folk thought."<sup>59</sup> The traditional thought must first be embraced by Africans, and taught to Africans, especially the youth. As is well known, in the Christian church most indigenous Africans would find this way of practicing Christianity strange, especially where the current wave of theology is "someone is holding me back" theology, along with the rise of the prosperity gospel. Since this approach to understanding African theology has a lesser focus on the economically driven material worldview, coupled with the aggressive prosperity theology and ecclesiology, a return to original Africanness, so to speak, is not a priority. However,

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<sup>58</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought," in *African Philosophy: Selected Readings*, ed. Albert G. Mosley (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall 1995), 159.

<sup>59</sup> Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought," 167.

it is more of an obligation to posterity to ensure that such a theological disposition and dispensation is possible out of the foundation of life. The message of the artifacts and the message of Christianity focus on love, although with different formulas or approaches to substantiate that claim in both the *Djuankayu* and the Bible. This work falls in line with Wiredu's philosophy of knowing one's own folk-history, and it was emphasized prior to Wiredu by E. Bolagi Idowu, John Pobee, and Mercy Oduyoye.<sup>60</sup>

### **Bassa Parables and the Parables of the Bible**

A parallel study of Bassa proverbs and biblical proverbs will show how biblical and indigenous African wisdom are similar and could be used in the church. The intended focus is not only on the Book of Proverbs, but also other books of the Bible. In addition to that, Rev. Abba Karnga's *Bassa Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching*, a collection of Bassa proverbs, will be used as a resource for locating Bassa proverbs that are discussed here.<sup>61</sup> Several values and virtues are associated with these proverbs and impact the biblical aspects of proverb scholarship. As this section focuses on Karnga's work, it serves also as an essential resource for the Bassa proverbs and Biblical study.

Many Bassa proverbs, in the context of natural theology, are spiritually based and therefore may not need to be understood in a "Christian sense," but rather, more broadly. The nature of Bassa theology does not begin in Christian understandings of God, but in what God or the one Supreme Being did in creation, how the ancestors and forefathers nurtured their children, and how life had been handed down to them. That God, or goodness, is in everything was not a Christian worldview only. Christianity enhanced this understanding.

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<sup>60</sup> Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought."

<sup>61</sup> Karnga, *Bassa Proverbs*.

In his introduction to Rev. Karnga's work, Joshua N. Kudadjie writes, "There are thousands, perhaps millions of African proverbs. New ones are still composed, and old ones are adapted or given new meaning to suit new situations."<sup>62</sup> The goal is not to duplicate other Bassa proverbs, but to provide the relevant interpretation within, or using, a biblical paradigm. The proverbs presented below have this objective.

We will first consider "Dee se gbo-dean hwion dwo" or A stranger does not know the *back road* to the house. This proverb focuses on both stranger and host. The idea is that a person who is a stranger in a place does not usually know his/her way around. In many Bassa towns or villages, interaction between a host and a guest is a common experience because everyone in a village, including visitors, must abide by the rules of that village. Therefore, both stranger and host must work together in cooperation so that the rules are not violated.

There are several passages from the Bible that have similar meaning to this Bassa proverb. One example is John 15:5, which says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and me in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." In this verse, Jesus identifies himself as the vine, and those who follow him are the branches. In short, the vine and the branches are connected. This connection is a feature of both the Bible and the Bassa proverb. As the branches are connected to the vine, so is the stranger connected to the host.

These other Scriptures are related to the Bassa proverb regarding stranger and host in that the stranger should depend on the host. The Scriptures emphasize dependency in the same way as the Bassa proverb presents it. Philippians 4:13 emphasizes that to do

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<sup>62</sup> Joshua N. Kudadjie, Introduction to *Bassa Proverbs for Teaching and Preaching*, by Abba G. Karnga (Accra, Ghana: Asempa, 1990), 11.

all things, we must depend on Christ. Also, in Exodus 7:8-13, Moses and Aaron totally depended on God before Pharaoh and his officials. Dependency is a recurrent theme in both the Bassa proverb and the Biblical passages mentioned.

Another proverb that draws some parallel to the Scriptures is “Dehgea da, ‘Ne hwedein m hwede no vohn’” (The *dehgea* rodent says, “When the rain falls all day, I hold my tail hostage that day”). Hunters have observed that the *dehgea* does not like to come out of its hiding place during the rainy season to find food. Instead, it eats its tail little by little throughout the season. At the end of the rainy season, the *dehgea* is without a tail, and it has a painful sore to deal with.

The deeper meaning of the proverb is to underscore that one cannot evade responsibilities. In other words, evasion of responsibilities does not solve the problem. The purpose of this proverb is to discourage the laziness that leads to self-destruction. The particularity of the rodent in the proverb does not undermine the universality of the message as being applicable to everyone.<sup>63</sup> The *dehgea*'s eating of its tail is an example of self-destruction due to laziness.

Biblical texts that correspond with this proverb focus on work as a significant responsibility for people. For example, in Exodus 20:9 God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. In Ephesians 4:28, the emphasis of the text is on work that is one must do to help needy people. First Corinthians 4:14 emphasizes work with one's own hands. And in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, the command that the one who fails to work will not eat corresponds to the result of slothfulness or laziness.

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<sup>63</sup> Karnga. *Bassa Proverbs*, 19. Regarding this proverb, Rev. Karnga says, “The proverb was drawn from the experience to portray certain people in the community who act like the *dehgea* rat.”



Another proverb is, “Nyon seyn bede deyn kpe gbo, keh je-wey-nyon kohn-wuduae” (Everyone may be concerned with housefly, but the “sore-sick” person controls its moves). The message of the proverb is that everyone may be concerned about flies, but a person who has a sore on his/her foot directs the flies’ movements. Considering this study, this Bassa proverb implies that while scholarship is an ordinarily specific feat, the subject of this study depends on the one conducting the study. In short, the researcher holds the responsibility for the success of this work. A biblical equivalent of this proverb is in Paul’s Letter to the Thessalonians, where he tells them to live a life that pleases God: “Each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable.”<sup>64</sup> The Pauline Scripture is relevant from the perspective of control. The Bassa parable speaks of the sore-sick person being able to control the movement of the flies, since the flies are always trying to light on the wound. In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, he admonishes the believers to control their own bodies; in other words, he instructs them to have self-control.

Numerous Bassa proverbs provide a basis for understanding the Christian message when read in various biblical and theological contexts. And this study cannot illustrate them all. The similarities between the Bassa proverbs used here and biblical proverbs illustrate a clear relationship to Christian theology. Abba Karnga’s efforts to use them for teaching and preaching are extremely helpful. The contribution of scholarship shows the interconnectedness of culture, the Bible, and God.

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<sup>64</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 (NRSV). Especially verse 4.

### **Implications for Practice: The *Djuankayu* as Source of Bassa Theology**

In *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen Bevans argues that “contextualization of theology . . . is a theological imperative.”<sup>65</sup> What Bevans speaks of in this statement is the focus of this study: contextualizing a local theology. Contextualization is a process of placing things or ideas where they fit or belong. In contextualizing indigenous Bassa artifacts as the source of Bassa theology, the Bassa indigenous attributes of God serve as a guiding force in this discussion. The unique relationship between Bassa theology and Christian theology is in the storytelling or *nohn popo* tradition of Bassa culture. The attributes of God explain Bassa theology as reflected in the *Djuankayu*, the source, which evolved over a long period in the history of the Bassa people. In their practice of Christianity, Bassa people have maintained the attributes of God, the divine being, using the indigenous sayings from the *Djuankayu* that represent divine being. They continue to use these attributes of God, based on their perception of or belief in the divine being, depending on the context.

### **Attributes of God in Bassa and Brief Explanation**

These attributes or names can be traced to various sayings from the *Djuankayu* and the proverbs. A brief description of each name is necessary to show that the *Djuankayu* and the artifacts serve as the source of Bassa local theology.

**Boombo Dehbeoi.** This refers to God as a large male figure. The word *deh*, means “thing” or “something.” *Boombo Dehbeoi* means God is bigger than any other gods.

**Cha-bada.** This comes from the proverb “Badahn-bada buahn bada-yee” (Avoiding the mud only makes it bigger). This expression refers to God as the “mud,”

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<sup>65</sup> Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 1.

that is, the thing that no one can go around or avoid. The more one tries to get around God, the bigger God seems. *Cha-bada* is an expression that praises God as one that no one can get around.

**Deehn-deehn Gedepoh.** The name indicates that God is holy. *Deehn-deehn* means attentive or meditative. Gedepoh is the Bassa name for God. The term means a holy, attentive, and meditative God.

**Deyhn-gboin.** This expression means there is nothing that God does not understand, or that God cannot handle. In other words, nothing can be mysterious to the divine, and there nothing that the divine doesn't already know.

**Gedepoh vehne.** The expression simply means “the big God.” The word *vehne*, means someone or something big. With respect to God, the expression refers to God both in the physical and spiritual realms.

**Yuunbah/Yuunde.** This expression means Heavenly Father / Heavenly Mother. Although it is not uncommon to use the expression for Heavenly Father in the church, it is uncommon for the expression for Heavenly Mother to be used.

**Youndeou.** Literally “heavenly storm,” this refers to a thunderstorm, as in the proverb, “Youndeou, mohn kohn wudu wayn sorc dyea” (Heavenly storm, your words crush rocks into dust). This idea is related to the proverb “*Pai m ke dee nyuan ke, goh kpaain gboeh, orh gedeh dudee*” (The relationship that I have with the thunder, if the cedar tree messes with me, its head will break). This attribute recognizes the power of God. The emphasis of this attribute is also in its comparison to the thunder. It brings to bear the fact that God is the “heavenly thunder, and God’s words crush rocks.’

**Zebua-gahn.** This identifies God as the biggest or loudest horn. The entire expression means “big horn.”

The continued use of these attributes from the *Djuankayu* in the church makes it clear that the *Djuankayu* is the source of Bassa theology. The continuation of the use has shown them their appropriateness in the use or enhancement of the Christian story. It also demonstrates that African culture or Bassa culture is not static, but is rather dynamic in its interaction with Christianity.

The common names or attributes of God include Gedepoh, the first and common attribute of a God who is one and who is the Supreme Being. Gedepoh is the equivalent of the Christian God, or the Islamic Allah. According to Peter Paris, “The clearest mark of continuity among Africans everywhere is their mutual belief in the communal devotion to a supreme transcendent being primordially related to them as creator and provider.”<sup>66</sup> Paris provides a broader framework for understanding how African spiritualities relate both on the continent and in the Diaspora. African spiritual practices have survived in the Diaspora among African-Africans and other Diaspora African peoples. In spiritual discussions relative to the divine, Paris believes that African (or Bassa) spirituality is made up of the recognition, reverence, and practices geared toward invoking and maintaining a close relationship with the divine and the universe.<sup>67</sup> Bassa spirituality invokes and maintains that closeness with the universe and the divine, *Gedepoh* or *Ba-ghi*.

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<sup>66</sup> Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 39.

<sup>67</sup> Peter J. Paris. *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

### **Implications for Practice: Constructing a Bassa Liberian Practical Theology**

To construct a Bassa Liberian practical theology, it is important to begin with the *Djuankayu* and the artifacts. What does the *Djuankayu* say about God? What is the theology in the *Djuankayu*? The *Djuankayu* presents Gedepoh or God, as the Supreme Being, the maker of the world. The name, or attribute, *Ba-ghi* answers the first question as to what the *Djuankayu* says about God. *Ba-ghi*, in the *Djuankayu*, is the creator of the universe and is a generous God, toward human beings, animals and plants. This question explains the relationship uniting God and humanity. In the *Djuankayu*, *Ba-ghi* participates in the creative process and continues to be involved in human affairs. Bassa theology is based on those practices embedded in the *Djuankayu* and the artifacts.

The *Djuankayu* is important because the Bassa people have a holistic worldview. They do not separate life on earth into spheres that are unrelated; no sphere can be separated from the supernatural. The power of the supernatural affects life on earth and beyond, and human actions on earth have an adverse effect in the realms of the supernatural. To live successfully, which will make a person worthy to be an ancestor after death, is to live in harmony with the supernatural as well as with others in harmony. The major elements of life such as birth, growth, adulthood, relationships, and death uphold the rituals of life and religion. The process of farming, for example, is not merely the planting of seeds, but also applying the spiritually approved techniques and procedures to maintain the harmony between humanity and the supernatural world. Recognition of this harmony results in blessings rather than chaos.

The Bassa people do not, or cannot, separate a specific area of life from the whole of life. Life is holistic, and this whole includes God, the ancestors, the spiritual realm, humanity, animals, and plants—all animate and inanimate things. All human life, in

Bassa world view, exists in this dynamic interdependent relationship. Everything is religion and everything is charged with some power or some force on its own. This force or power is not easily manipulated by human beings for any reason, nor is it something that a human person has control over; therefore, it is not possible to manipulate this realm of existence for any self-aggrandizement or personal gain. All creation contains spiritual force that originates in God, and some spaces are more sacred because they inhabit that spiritual realm. With this world view, it is obvious that the Bassa feel responsible for their concept of time.

The Bassa people view time as a cycle. Time is event or activities oriented. Time cannot be wasted, and time must be consumed, because it is uncontrollable. Time moves from event to event in such situations as planting through harvesting, and back to planting. Repetition of these events, such as the rising of the sun from the east, or the appearance of the moonlight at night, or the stars, among others, does not reach a telos. The cycles, including the human life span, is a natural process in time and one reason why time plays a vital part of the understanding of existence. The concept of time explains Bassa epistemology, the Bassa view of how they come to understand themselves in the sight of God.

Traditionally, Bassa people's knowledge comes from observing nature, learning from experiences, particularly in the interaction with plants and animals, tapping the knowledge of elderly men and women, and from institutions, dreams, and other human experiences. These sources of knowledge provide understanding as humans interact with plants and animals. The main sources of knowledge include nature, humanity, and the supernatural, which came not through revelation but through experience. The knowledge

from proverbs is sometimes subsumed under the corporate experience of the community, especially the elders. Bassa epistemology has a concrete or practical relation in the human experience. If the knowledge is from speculation beyond common knowledge, people consider it superfluous, and the Bassa do not engage in *yabayobo* (superfluous talk).

Considering God's omnipresence, it means that God is everywhere. In the Bassa *Djuankayu*, the narrative reveals that God was not necessarily physically present in the world after creation. The *Djuankayu* holds that when God had created the world, but God was also in the skies, or the heavens, along with humanity and all other creations. The *Djuankayu* does state that God was with humans when he sent the animals to the earth to bring things to plant on the ground. In this story, God had to send the animals to bring the plants before the world could be populated. However, the animals that volunteered kept being disobedient to God.

The *Djuankayu* does not parallel the Biblical creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2. One main difference is that in the Bible, God was present when Adam and Eve violated the code God gave them. The biblical story does not specifically say where God was sitting or standing, but it reveals that when God called Adam, the latter confessed that he was naked. Recognition of his nakedness led God to recognize that Adam and Eve had violated his commandment. In the Bassa *Djuankayu*, the creator God shares the residence with humanity and animals, and then, sets the stage for migration. This is important because considering God's omnipresence, God's sole concern is with the welfare of humanity or of the creation.

A similar argument can be made that God did not necessarily reside in the Garden of Eden but in the heavens. Only Adam and Eve were in the Garden, before the serpent arrived. The arrival of the serpent shows that in the Genesis creation stories, all of creation was already in the world before the fall. Ever since the fall, humanity has continued to experience various challenges and struggles, a form of etiological conclusion for why people are suffering today.

### **Summary of Results: The Artifacts and their Sermonic Value**

What do we mean by sermonic value? The concept of sermonic value lies in the idea that the indigenous Bassa artifacts can preach or are relevant for preachers to create sermons based on the Scriptures. The value of the sermon and the proverb also can go together because of their rhetorical value. Rev. Karnga presents one way of how Bassa proverbs can be used in sermons in the church. His method presents a scriptural equivalent of a proverb that one can preach. Sometimes, he provides a sermon on a specific proverb to illustrate how to preach a sermon or develop a sermon. In this study, I look at one Bassa proverb and formulate a sermon based on a story from the Old Testament. In the process of explaining the dynamics of the proverb and the Scripture in a sermon form, several related proverbs may be presented because it is difficult to explain Bassa proverbs or parables without mentioning other relevant proverbs or parables. This fact underscores that the Bassa *nohn popo* tradition is intertwined with other forms of storytelling such as riddles. However, focusing on the forming of a sermon from the proverb helps to establish that indigenous artifacts also share in teaching us about God and Christ Jesus. The fact that the artifacts were not considered in such things as sermons or Sunday school classes does not devalue their significance. Applying them in sermons



and other church or official occasions could be the norm in churches in a few years to come. That regular application of indigenous artifacts and practices in the liturgy of the church will help to liberate Christianity in Africa by making it more relevant to Africans' daily experiences.

The *Djuankayu* and the parables enhance one's understanding of Bassa Christianity when used in sermons. The two sermons here represent ways of understanding Bassa theological culture. That culture forms part of the detailed analysis which follows each of the stories discussed below.

The story of David and Goliath underscores that "big does not always represent victory." The fact that Christianity was introduced to the Bassa people without consideration of indigenous artifacts, does not mean that the faith could have totally annihilated the ways of life and experiences of the Bassa people. The use of indigenous artifacts as presented in this work, express a wider version of the Christian story.

The idea of David versus Goliath is significant for this dissertation for at least two reasons while will be discussed further. Here, the first notion is embedded in the Bassa proverb which states, *jwe dyu tween-wae daba-goh*, or "a small axe cuts down a big tree." David, in this parable, will symbolize the small axe, while Goliath will symbolize the big tree. The second notion is in the fact that missionaries who introduced Christianity to the indigenous Bassa people did not recognize the value of the indigenous artifacts, and their introduction of the faith relied solely on their own knowledge of Western culture, which may, or may not have been prejudiced, considering that western culture was the only language available to them. In this relationship, however, the disparity is clear, because in overlooking the indigenous artifacts, the missionaries missed a lot and downplayed the

important use of indigenous artifacts. The continuous use of the indigenous ideas in the midst of Christian dominance of the indigenous culture, demonstrate that the lived experiences of the indigenous people cannot die. The other aspect of this relationship is between the Christian faith, the big tree, and the Bassa indigenous tradition, the small axe. The Christian faith has been considered superior to the Bassa culture and the latter is still overlooked. It is possible that the Bassa indigenous culture, or all indigenous culture, may be able to usurp Christianity into their respective traditions. Where the small axe cuts down the big tree is when Bassa indigenous culture can find itself immersed in Christianity were one can barely tell a difference in the practice. The idea of David versus Goliath is always possible in human and intellectual relations, but there comes a time and David gets Goliath. The relationship between the African indigenous artifacts and the Christian faith are in how they catch on to each other when church occurs.

The story of David and Goliath is a good place to begin an exploration or correlation of Bassa proverbs and biblical text for the sermonic value. The biblical text for this sermonic effort is from 1 Samuel 17:45-51. The pericope that directly relates to the Bassa proverb or parable is verse 45: “But David said to the Philistine, ‘You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.’” This sermon focuses on the idea that small and weak things and people can overcome large and powerful things, people, or circumstances.

Several Bassa parables could be used to preach a sermon on this text. One of such parables is “Jue-dyu teenee-wei, daba chu-vehenne or goh” or A small axe cuts down a big tree. David, given his position in society at the time is like the small axe, while

Goliath, the giant, is the *chu vehenne* or *goh* (the big tree). When indigenous Bassa people were introduced to the axe, they saw that, although the axes were small, they could cut down trees bigger than themselves. This is where the parable was born.

The sermon is about David and Goliath and one of the greatest battles in the Bible, one between an anointed shepherd and an arrogant Philistine who tormented God's people. It is a story about *intimidation* and *harassment* against faith and courage.

The text gives us a story about how a small axe can cut down a big tree. Look at how the text puts it: "And so, without a sword, David defeated and killed Goliath with a sling and a stone."<sup>68</sup> Although it would seem scary and frightening to face a person who is nine feet tall, much less to stand up to him in a battle, one must have faith and courage to face such a giant. Goliath was renowned for terrorizing people he did not like, especially in the valley of Elah.<sup>69</sup> His voice alone could create pandemonium in a city. David possessed the faith and the courage in God to challenge and to face Goliath. And he was, based on the faith and courage, able to transform history. He won the battle. The rest of the story offers a valuable lesson for us.

This is the theme of the sermon: something one overlooks or something that seems insignificant may be of grave significance. Given that this is the focus of the sermon, in the process of delivery, the preacher may use additional proverbs to make various points. Thus, the driving proverb, "A small axe cuts down big tree," allows the preacher or the one preaching to go beyond Bassa culture and employ other possible proverbs that may not necessarily have originated from the Bassa or be uniquely Bassa.

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<sup>68</sup> 1 Samuel 17:50 (NRSV).

<sup>69</sup> 1 Samuel 17:19 (NRSV).

However, it may be that these other proverbs may have origins in Liberia or with other ethnic groups or people.

When David relied on God, he could kill Goliath. This brings out clearly the proverb. The saying is fully applicable to the David and Goliath story if we consider who represents the small axe and who the big tree. Then we can look at the significance of a big tree and the small axe. This apparent complexity in interpreting the proverb demonstrates that the saying can be understood in many ways. Applied to David and Goliath, David will be the small axe and Goliath will be the big tree. And even though Goliath took it for granted that David was smaller in size and weight, compared to him, it was clear that a miracle could happen. The small axe, David, with one stone, killed Goliath, the big tree, in an instant.

This is an example of a story that has produced a proverb but itself has theological significance because of the blending of the gospel, the culture, and the church, which are in play in this chapter. In this interaction, the sermon manuscript demonstrates how a specific proverb may be useful in the sermon. The hope is to show that the proverbs are flexible enough to blend the culture and Scripture. By presenting the proverbs in this manner, one can see their theological significance.

Thus, by using the additional proverbs in support of the thematic Bassa proverb, the preacher is displaying his/her understanding of, and familiarity with, how the culture, the church, and the gospel interact concurrently. Another way to understand this parable is to continue the discussion as if the tree represents all big trees. A corresponding proverb considering the above discussion will be “Dwoe bua-dye pu, ke dooh paah ne” (Even though the elephant is big, a little bee can kill it [if it enters its trunk]). This saying

or parable also means that even if a problem is considered big, it must be tackled or embarked on in the correct manner.

Another text that is a good example of sermon with a corresponding message in Bassa theology is Matthew 6:24, “No one can serve two masters.”<sup>70</sup> The Bassa proverb that suits this text is “Dyu dwadooh ne po buen-shon dyedee. Mehn do gboei, do dah seyn (One child cannot roast two pieces of meat at the same time. When he is busy with one, the other one burns). The message is that a person needs to be focused and to make a choice and stick with it.

Mark 10:13–15 says, “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for such is the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>71</sup> This corresponds to the proverb “Dyu menneh whodo ye veoi mohn whodo kpohn (When many children are in a village or town, the town is lively [or alive]). In a sermon format, one may look at the significance of children in both the text and the Bassa proverb. In the text, Jesus is helping the disciples to understand that children are not exempt from God’s kingdom, and, in fact, their behavior, if emulated, can lead one to the kingdom of God. In similar manner, the Bassa proverb says that when children are many in a village, it means the village has life. In both cases, the future of a village or of the kingdom of God depends on how one treats or views little children.

### **Summary of Results: Teaching Bassa Parables to Christians**

Teaching Bassa proverbs to the wider Christian community is another way of expanding on the Christian message and broadening Christian ideas. There are several ways to teach Bassa proverbs to Christians. Sunday school and Bible study are two ways

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<sup>70</sup> Matthew 6:24 (NRSV).

<sup>71</sup> Mark 10:13-15 (NRSV).

in which these proverbs can be taught to Christians. These two ways are preferable because those are the times when most people are already in church. To teach the parables to Christians, one must first be familiar with the Bassa parables or proverbs and how they function in society.

Using current Sunday school materials and juxtaposing them with selected and relevant Bassa proverbs or parables, is effective in showing parallels between the two traditions. This will help to ensure that Bassa wisdom is compatible with Christian practices. Such teaching must be a continuous exercise that illustrates the similarities. The other approach is to use Bible study to identify Bassa proverbs that correspond with the Biblical passages that are being studied at that time. These two approaches may be the most effective ways to teach the proverbs to Christians. Other approaches could include small discussion groups, dissemination of published materials, Bible quizzes and games, and possibly academic settings. Teaching Bassa proverbs to the wider Christian community is another way that Bassa artifacts can expand on the Christian message, looking at biblical texts or passages and attributing a Bassa proverb to the biblical text without compromising the message. The artifacts present a local theology by seeing God in sayings, stories, and riddles born out of ordinary human experiences.

### **Bassa Proverbs and Christian Evangelism**

This work is not a critique of missionary Christianity in Africa but rather of the African response to the rise of Christianity in the twenty-first century. The use of indigenous artifacts such as stories, parables, proverbs, and riddles helps in the recovery of a holistic sense of the indigenous Bassa people's religious and spiritual agencies in their encounter with the divine and with Christianity. What is going on here is a

recalibration of analysis of both indigenous African culture and Christianity in terms of practice, rather than belief or doctrine. The framework adopted here is oriented toward interchange or practice that can more ably encompass the varieties of indigenous African Christianity. The popularity of the prosperity gospel in this century has the potential to undermine indigenous practices as well as legitimate Christian practice. Thus, an evangelistic approach will help to enforce and emphasize the capacity of indigenous culture to negotiate the gospel as genuinely African, and change the notion of rejecting the artifacts within the difficult reality of a neocolonialism or globalization.

This evangelistic approach involves the Bassa people's stories. Using the Bassa stories and artifacts in evangelism makes it more feasible for people to come to God. Familiarity with the indigenous legends as a starting point will encourage more participation in the Christian life, because people will find themselves as part of the story. There will be more willing people, because they can see Christianity better. The concepts are not foreign, and people do not have to make any mental adjustments. Bassa Christian evangelism, using the Bassa proverbs, will help in the understanding of the Bassa sociopolitical structures. The sociopolitical structure that is most common among the Bassa involves individuals who live in village communities. These village communities emphasize the communal aspect of life rather than an individual approach to life.

Bassa proverbs offer a just result for Christian evangelism. Christian evangelism focuses here on the Bassa method of storytelling as a way of bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ alive to people, including believers in Liberia. The Bassa society in Liberia faces a renewed challenge to reconnect its diverse cultures so that it can enable and secure some social cohesion. This is an emerging crisis where people are not able to communicate and

live meaningfully in a multicultural world, even in a small nation such as Liberia. Pluralistic realities in Africa and in Liberia require a way for the church to respond to such challenges. Richard Osmer's *Practical Theology* will be a guide as we strive to establish a suitable methodology for this pluralism.

Theology and anthropology together can introduce and expose Bassa indigenous artifacts as effective tools of evangelism. Ethnography, a branch of anthropology, is best suited when the researcher spends time with locals who know themselves. The ethnographic aspect must be collaborative and must be in a respectful mutual conversation in interpreting indigenous proverbs and Christian teaching. The Scripture, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" and Jesus' response, "Come and see," serve as an example of ethnography and theology together. The framework for this relationship is expressed in this Bassa proverb: "Dyedee nyohn ne whe kpaahn" (The monkey's scent/odor is always present in its bones).

The meaning of this proverb as a tool for evangelism involves living among the Bassa people, spending time to know them. The proverb above shows that the word of God never changes. The word of God is like the monkey's scent: it is always the same, it is always present, or always the same. It is always inspired; its subject is God or Jesus Christ; it always invokes the Spirit of God. In this sense, the word of God is like the monkey's scent, consistently smelling the same.

There can be no effective evangelism without dialogue. With the publication of numerous tracts, technology, and ways to evangelize in this century and beyond, evangelism is made effective through dialogue with people. For Christian love to be effective, people must talk to each other. Jesus himself is the exemplary evangelist. It is



obvious that Jesus opened dialogues with those who were with him, as well as with those who opposed him, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees. But through dialogue Jesus touched each one of them and won their hearts. Here anthropology/ethnography and theology and cultural studies are interdependent in the execution of the pragmatic task of theology.<sup>72</sup>

Liberia's history—or the Bassa people's history—regarding the role of the gospel in non-Western cultures has led to inculturation, dominance, syncretism, and subsequently the rejection of a Western-centered gospel. Benezet Bujo and others hold that “missions with a western cultural agenda distorted, replaced, and destroyed indigenous African cultures.”<sup>73</sup> Bujo's assessment is the result of missionary interaction with Bassa people in Liberia. It is fair to claim that this cultural distortion, replacement, and destruction will continue to come from misguided missionaries and their cohorts. Bevans further notes the fact that “much of many local cultures has been ignored or suppressed,” including the use of indigenous artifacts.<sup>74</sup> The church in Africa in this twenty-first century and beyond, and African Christians around the world, must embrace the use of the indigenous artifacts in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world. Of course, this will require pastoral or ministerial preparations in institutions of higher learning and seminaries to train people in the knowledge, significance, and values of indigenous African proverbs or stories to enhance the spread of the gospel.

If we consider the evangelistic value of indigenous Bassa artifacts without recognizing how it can or will happen, we must consider the attributes of God. Bassa

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<sup>72</sup> Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 173.

<sup>73</sup> Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 45.

<sup>74</sup> Bevans, *Contextual Theology*, 25.

indigenous attributes of God, adopted by Christian missionaries as the equivalent of the Christian God, are names that speak to what God can do, what God has done, and what/who God is. All are attributes that cut across all limitations. The incomprehensibility of God can be applied in these attributes.

What God is, for example, is captured in the names Cha-bada Cha-bada, Deh-gboein, and Yuen-bah. Each attribute relates to the gospel and culture in dialogue. The relevance to evangelism is to reflect on the gospel diversely, and the plurality of Christ's message. Humanity may recognize the complexities of interaction and interrelation, but it may never realize that we are all cut from one cloth, God.

### **Bassa Christian Worship**

The *Djuankayu* serves many purposes for the Bassa people. Using it in Christian worship will help to enhance church or ministry in a local church. Although originally it belongs to the Bassa people in formal settings, its traditional contribution to worship deserves recognition. This is not to say that the *Djuankayu* has never been worship-related material. It is not what the missionaries brought. The missionaries brought the Bible. However, the Bible and the *Djuankayu* contain the message of God. One main difference is the inspiration of the biblical authors, men and women whose writings make up the Bible and who were writing under divine guidance. The *Djuankayu*, on the other hand, was not written by the inspired, but by culturally centered and inspired men, also of God. The *Djuankayu* is a document, a text, a poem, a recitation, defined by its closure to nonmembers, by its internal homogeneity, and by the diversity of its elements for the Bassa people.

In the *Djuankayu*, Gedepoh creates humans and other creatures, just as God created all things in the Bible. What ritual of worship will make the *Djuankayu* more

relevant to a Bassa Christian? The basic fact that God is constant in both creation stories helps to make the case that the *Djuankayu* is a religious document.<sup>75</sup> Also, the way God has created the universe, and all the things in the universe, is like God's creative force in the Hebrew Bible. Both the Bible and the *Djuankayu* introduce a creator, God whose concern is with his creation. God, according to the *Djuankayu*, is the maker of "good" and "bad," just as life and death are in the hands of God, the creator, in the Bible.

One reality of Bassa Christian worship is the emphasis on translation of Christian literature into the Bassa language to invite a wider readership. This is a common practice with nearly all Bassa churches in Liberia through the Christian Educational Foundation of Liberia, or CEFL. This group has been vigilant in teaching Bassa Christians about Christian "things" using Bassa. In this study, the Apostles' Creed among the Bassa people is presented as an example of translated material that has made its way into the church. The Creed is recited in most churches, and the rhythmic format makes it more acceptable and easier to memorize.

### **The Apostles' Creed as Recited in a Local Bassa Church**

The translation of the Creed from English by the missionaries and their cohorts into Bassa assisted in indigenizing the gospel of Jesus and spreading the gospel to "all nations and in every tongue."<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, this translation is intended to make it easier to communicate the gospel of Christ, or the eschatological vision of the Gospels.<sup>77</sup> It further helps to fulfill the functions of confessional, doxological, catechetical,

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<sup>75</sup> The expression *both creation stories* refers to the creation narrative of the Bassa people in the *Djuankayu*, and the biblical creation story in Genesis 1–2.

<sup>76</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical & Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 306.

<sup>77</sup> Pelikan, *Credo*, 306.

kerygmatic, apologetic, and integrative faith, with reference to the gospel.<sup>78</sup> Each of these categories can be applied to the Creed among Bassa Christians.

Bassa people recite the Creed in their context. The presumption here for the context is that they do not read the Creed in isolation from other texts. For example, the Creed parallels the Twenty-Third Psalm, or the Lord's Prayer, in that they are memorized. Even hymns such as, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "Blessed Assurance," and "Sweet Hour of Prayer," among others, if they are selected for that Sunday or that occasion, are translated into Bassa. In Bassa Christian culture, the recitation is important in the liturgy. For most indigenous Bassa congregations, the entire liturgy is translated into Bassa.

The translation of the liturgy, including the Apostles' Creed, is not only a cultural reality but also an exercise in local theology. Schreiter observes that cultural patterns affect theological forms.<sup>79</sup> He says, "Not only is it a matter of how meaning is organized in a culture, but also how it is communicated."<sup>80</sup> In the case of the Apostles' Creed, the Bassa cultural patterns do affect how the meaning of the creed comes out. For example, below we see the meaning of words in the creed as something slightly different from what the same words mean in English.

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<sup>78</sup> Roland Modras, "The Functions and Limitations of Creedal Statements," in *An Ecumenical Confession of Faith*, Hans Kung and Jurgen Moltmann, eds. (New York: Seabury, 1979), 36–44.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 31.

<sup>80</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 31.

Table 1. Comparison of English and Bassa Versions of the *Apostles' Creed*

English	Bassa
I believe in God the Father Almighty	I believe in the <b>truth of the Big God</b>
The Maker of Heaven and Earth;	(s/he) makes heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ, his only Son	I believe (s/he) sent the child Jesus;
Our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,	Jesus comes in the <b>Big Spirit</b>
born of the Virgin Mary,	He became <b>Virgin Mary's biological child</b>
suffered under Pontius Pilate,	He suffered; he died in front King Pilate
Was crucified, dead, and buried.	They buried him; he spent two days dead;
On the third day, he rose from the dead	On the third day, he rose again;
And ascended to heaven, and sits at the right hand of God, the father Almighty,	He goes up to Heaven, and sits on God's right hand
	<b>That's where he is now, for our sake;</b>
from whence	I believe that from God's right-hand side
he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.	He will come again to plead on behalf of the world
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy	I believe in <b>the truth of God's Big Spirit;</b>
Catholic Church, the communion of saints,	I believe in <b>the truth of those who talk about God;</b>
The forgiveness of sins,	I believe in <b>the truth of forgiveness of sins;</b>
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.	the rising of the body, forever and ever,
Amen!	Let it be so!

The bold ideas are from the Bassa which, when listed for reading could mean something different from what is in the English version, as in the following examples: *‘The truth of the Big God . . . Jesus comes in the Big Spirit . . . Virgin Mary’s biological child; He suffered, he died in front of King Pilate . . . That’s where he is now, for our sake . . . He will come again to plead on behalf of us (the world) . . . I believe . . . in the truth of God’s Big Spirit; In the truth of those who talk or speak about God . . . in the truth of forgiveness of sins.’*

This confession, this affirmation of their faith in God and in Jesus Christ, allows them to relate to God. In this collective fashion, they see themselves as confessing a collective sin to God. They are expressing confidence in a God who guides them. In this context, the Creed does function as a confessional tool because it calls the people to place God in their individual circumstances, which they believe God hears.

Roland Modras considers the Creed “doxological” because it is a liturgical formula ascribing glory to God.<sup>81</sup> Considering this idea, the Creed, as recited by Bassa Christians, fits the classification of doxology.<sup>82</sup> The Doxology in Bassa usage is sung during the service at the appropriate liturgical moment, and although it has the Trinitarian idea, it is not considered the Apostles’ Creed, nor vice versa.<sup>83</sup> This Trinitarian notion is the only parallel one can draw between the Creed and the Doxology in the Bassa Christian liturgy.

The use of the Creed in Bassa liturgy is particularly restricted to a liturgical moment in the service, not in a catechetical framework. In the branches of the Roman

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<sup>81</sup> Modras, “Creedal Statements,” 36–44; especially 37–38.

<sup>82</sup> Sidney Landau, ed., *Chambers English Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1990), 428.

<sup>83</sup> “Praise God from who all blessings flow/Praise Him all creatures here below/ Praise Him all earthly heavenly host/Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

Catholic Church in which there are Bassa members, this catechetical use, especially as a baptismal formula, is possible. Among Bassa Methodists, for example, *the Book of Worship* provides a liturgical blueprint for each such activities as the Creed, baptism, acceptance of new members in the congregation, funerals, or weddings.<sup>84</sup> Each activity has a unique place in the church, and therefore the Creed is not used for catechetical purposes. The Creed as translated from English to Bassa gives us a newer creed or a creed-like statement. By reciting the Creed, Bassa people not only are involved in an activity of recitation but are telling a story; a narrative comes to life. The occurrence of this narrative makes it clear that, in Bassa Christianity, the Apostles' Creed is an orature, an unwritten text, and a text that people recite, not one that people read. Bassa worship in the Christian church is enhanced by translation of liturgical materials, as demonstrated in the Apostles' Creed.

### **The *Djuankayu* and Its Uses for Christianity**

The *Djuankayu* is a significant tool for augmenting the Christian faith among Bassa peoples in Liberia. Its uses are many. To understand the Bassa Christian faith and how it ties into the *Djuankayu*, it is important to first consider the structure of traditional Bassa society. Traditional Bassa societal structure contains these three structural frameworks that help to provide some clearer picture of how the *Djuankayu* can be useful for Christianity—family, the indigenous society, and the indigenous healers. The Bassa have extended family networks. Indigenous society includes all Bassa people—educated or not—who subscribe to the original forms of worship and practices, even as Christians. The indigenous healers are those who understand and manipulate nature to provide

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<sup>84</sup> This also includes United Methodists, African Methodists, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and Christian Methodists.

mental and physical health to the society. Their importance is in how they communicate within nature. The family, the indigenous lifestyle, and healing among the Bassa people provide a solid foundation for balancing their spirituality and their zeal to function in society. The family structure provides a home, the indigenous society gives the norms and sanctions, and the healing provides an appreciation for nature, and eventually for God in nature. The fourth aspect of Bassa life today is the role Christianity plays in their daily lives.

The *Djuankayu* itself tells of the relationship among the three divisions and demonstrates the interconnections between Bassa life and Bassa society. The creation story in the Bible and the creation story in the *Djuankayu* are similar in that both emphasize God's personal intervention in human life. In the *Djuankayu*, human beings and all creatures were with God in heaven until God could provide "things" to sustain life on earth. In the Bible, God is not directly with humanity in the garden, but is there as an omnipresent being. Even though both stories begin differently, God's presence in human life and God's concern for humanity are the same. God cares for God's creation. In this way, the *Djuankayu* and the Bible tell the same story about God's love for people.

The proverbs also contribute to this discussion, because they fall in line with Christian beliefs and teachings. There are several Bassa proverbs that are interconnected with Biblical teachings. Some correspond with Jesus' parables. In this way, these similarities between the *Djuankayu* and the Bible make it easier for Bassa people to practice the Christian faith without a rejection of their beliefs or feeling lesser because of their indigenous beliefs.



## **Bassa Indigenous Artifacts and the Implications for the Christian Life**

This study demonstrates the significance of using indigenous Bassa artifacts such as proverbs to emphasize that the Good News of Jesus cuts across cultural and international barriers. To justify this idea, it was necessary to look at selected artifacts and their cultural values to Christianity, and how they bring out the Christian message. Jesus' use of parables is a way of infusing culture into religion or using culture to make a religious point. The Bassa artifacts are a new way to look at Christianity as practiced in Bassa churches and in Bassa life.

Indigenous beliefs and Christian beliefs are not two separate things: the *Djuankayu* is compatible with Christianity. Different denominations within Bassa Christianity can find the artifacts useful. It is important to be conscious or aware of the Christian beliefs and the indigenous Bassa practices. Being conscious or aware of both one's Christian beliefs and one's African indigenous beliefs promotes intercultural dialogue, whether it is Jewish wisdom or Bassa wisdom or Biblical wisdom. The dialogue aspect is crucial because an objective of this work is the promotion of dialogue between Christianity and indigenous African culture.

This work is incomplete without any mention of challenges and drawbacks. One of the challenges of such a study is making people conscious or aware that the indigenous artifacts are or can also be elements of Christian worship. This challenge is so because many people hold the idea or belief that things that originate from or in Africa are of no Christian or spiritual value. The challenge is to make people aware of the artifacts and their theological significance. Moreover, the younger generation—millennials, who are now a majority generation—are not interested in studying the indigenous artifacts because they either have not been taught by their parents or institutions, or they are

simply not interested. There may be other factors to this challenge, including, but not limited to, ignorance, illiteracy, or shame.

Another challenge or drawback of putting this into practice is that many persons are not interested in change, and their preference would be not to discuss or consider such a study of indigenous artifacts and the Bible. For such persons, it is a challenge to bring them mentally on board to get an understanding of any theological or social meaning to the study of indigenous proverbs and Christianity. One major limitation in this case is that the dissertation has not provided succinct instruction on how to teach the proverbs and other artifacts and the Bible. Even though this drawback is justified, the nature of this study is not to provide a prescription of how Bassa culture can be taught in Christian churches, but to expose the possibility by demonstrating how such a work can part of regular church practice.

Other drawbacks include a lack of interest in other people. These people may not be interested in such a work because it is considered too scholarly or not practical enough for people to follow. However, such a study is necessary because it exposes other cultural realities that people may not have been aware of. These challenges, however, do not undermine the direction of this study. In local churches among the Bassa people, this will be a way to practice their theology, because it is always difficult to separate a person from his/her culture. Cultural practices are always going to be there, even at the time when a mixture between Christianity and Bassa culture will be difficult to distinguish. In other words, they will be so intertwined that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to tell the origin of a practice.

As Bassa churches begin to incorporate their indigenous cultural artifacts into their Christian practices, Christianity will begin at the grassroots with the local people, where it makes more difference. The spirituality of Bassa people and their acceptance of Christianity is not merely a coincidence, but a connection designed by God for the building of God's kingdom, using indigenous artifacts.

### **Postscript: Agenda for Future Research**

The dissertation, in looking at parallel relationship between inspiration of the Bible and inspiration of the Bassa wisdom tradition, divine inspiration is the common thread. "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."<sup>85</sup> The inspiration of the writers of the Bible and the inspiration of the traditional sayings are related by any standards. How do we know that the artifacts are inspired? Their inspiration comes from the fact that they can reveal to us something about a divine being or existence. Thomas Aquinas provides a better understanding of how the Bassa artifacts may be divinely inspired.

Book 1 of the *Summa*, Aquinas identifies two ways of knowing the truth about God. There are truths about God that exceed the capacity of human reason. This means that there are some things about God which, just by our mere thinking, cannot determine the logic or the rationale. This truth about God is clearly as illustrated in the Trinity. Some might find it difficult to understand the concept of One God in three persons. Aquinas' second way, stating that there are some truths about God that natural reason can attain, for example, that God exists, that God is one, and other truths of that kind, also fits

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<sup>85</sup> 2 Timothy 2:16-17 (NRSV).

the Bassa indigenous profile. The Bassa inspiration in the artifacts exists in this second realm if we consider the artifacts as cultural scriptures. The indigenous artifacts, especially the parables and proverbs, classified as the ‘texts’ of the culture, reveal God without Christian action. The God of inspiration in the Bible can be the God of inspiration of the artifacts.

It follows Aquinas’ *Gratia perfecit naturam*, to show the correlation between an indigenous African (Bassa) saying and a Biblical concept. It is also applicable to the indigenous artifacts because through God’s grace, the nature of the proverbs is made perfect, or the practice of using these artifacts in the church and in society. The presence of God within the parables or proverbs, and those participating in saying them, cannot be denied just because it is not in a Christian context. God’s grace is what perfects the proverbs. This grace is what makes the artifacts inspiration from a divine source. The Second Vatican Council introduced the *nostra aetate*, as a way for Christians to interact with peoples of other faiths. In this context, St. Thomas Aquinas has already laid the groundwork for such a disposition of the church. The correlation between Aquinas and the Pope John Paul II, is relevant here because it finds ways of redefining =g humanity and enhances human dignity.

The dialogue between and among the various religious groups and denominations may be enhanced to demonstrate cooperative human dignity. In Aquinas *nostra aetate*, there is recognition of all humanity and creature rationally subservient and subsistent, and mercy allows a person to thrive in their practice of the faith.

To fulfill the agenda of this research, several other realities that exist must be addressed. The need to preserve Bassa language and culture, especially including the

Bassa *vha* script, which is almost extinct. There is also the challenge of the “prosperity gospel,” and how that promotes “someone holding another person down through evil or witch craft. Furthermore, there is need for translating such scholarly writings, into indigenous Bassa language that the Bassa people themselves may find what is written about them useful. These challenges are not addressed in any detail in this study, because this is laying the groundwork for further study.

One of the best ways to prevent the Bassa language from dying is to increase the number of persons of Bassa and non-Bassa descent—who learn the language. The challenge is that many of the elders who are familiar with the original linguistic realities, and who know the language are dying out. This poses a challenge. Furthermore, the fact that Bassa is not taught in school, means that people who speak the language have only learned from their environment or those around them. The language is not learned in a formal manner or context.

It will be better, for preservation, to teach Bassa people the language, formally, as in a classroom setting. In other contexts, the author of this study has proposed that indigenous language and culture be considered subjects in all schools in all parts of Liberia. Liberia has 15 counties, or political subdivisions. In the US context, each county could be a state. The proposal is that, in all these sub divisions, since they are classified by ethnicities, people or schools in these areas teach the ethnicities in the locations, so that the cultures and language do not die out. By teaching the language from elementary to high school, everyone who attends school in these areas will have the opportunity to learn the indigenous language of that area, and that may provide deeper insight into the culture. Grand Bassa County, for example, is dominated by Bassa speaking Liberians. If

the schools in the county taught Bassa to the students, those who attend school in Grand Bassa County, will know and understand Bassa language and culture. Similar approach or method can happen in other parts of the country. The result will be great for the future of the indigenous peoples.

The other challenge is that of the rise in neo-Pentecostalism in Africa in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and in the earlier part of this 21<sup>st</sup> century. The rise of the neo-Pentecostalism has given rise to prosperity teaching of the Gospel. For example, many churches in Africa today, modeled their preaching and teaching on worship techniques employed by churches like the Joel Olsteens, the Creflo Dollars, the Eddie Longs, and others. The scripture says, “The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. But I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly.”<sup>86</sup> The Prosperity Gospel preaching in Africa uses the second part of the scripture for emphasis. The issue is on ‘abundance,’ which some define in material and technical terms. Luxurious physical flamboyance and wealth is equivalent with God’s blessings upon the individual, who, most often, is the pastor or the clergy. For many of the preachers in this category, “abundance” means bling! This bling mentality contributes to people thinking that someone is out to get them. The prevalence of thinking about witchcrafts and witches make the theology more confusing.

Practical theology is placed in a position of reintroducing the Gospel. The theology and doctrine must be sound, convincing, and pragmatic where actual results can convince people of God’s love for them. The gospel, as introduced by missionaries, cannot, in this age, be convincing to people. It is possible that people’s interest in the

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<sup>86</sup> John 10:10 (NRSV).

practical teachings of Christ and the church will be when that can be blended with indigenous cultural artifacts. The indigenous artifacts can help people understand God's intention of all people. Considering again, Aquinas' *gratia perfectit naturam*, practical theologians can help African Christians understand that God exists in all things and the aspect of Christianity that has a liberating message must be emphasized.

Translation is a challenge of such works. It is important to translate this work and other scholarly works so that the people who are the subjects of such works, can have access to the information, and to know what people are writing about them. It is important because Bassa indigenous artifacts in the church will not simply enhance the faith of those who believe but will also help Bassa Christians realize that the Gospel is not limited to a western materialistic view. The main goal is to help spread the good news to local Bassa Christians, and to help Bassa people understand that the indigenous artifacts are not against God. The efforts to translate this work in Bassa will involve a separate project. Translations of the work into Bassa is a task in and of itself and must be handled in another context. in their actual daily experiences, instead the promise.

Indigenous artifacts can be used to preach a Christian sermon, used in Bible study, or used in Sunday school. Consider this indigenous Bassa saying: *Gedeporh boadyi, ke orh zee faandehdyi*, which means "God is bigger than anything that causes fear." A practical application of this Bassa saying in a local church context will be used to illustrate how this can be accomplished. This agenda is simply intended to open the possibility of applying the indigenous sayings or artifacts in Christian worship. To apply Bassa proverbs or sayings to a biblical passage that fits the contexts of preaching and teaching in the church, Bible study, and Sunday school is the sole purpose of this

epilogue. The statement is suitable for a sermon that focuses on fear or a theme related to fear. In such a sermon, the emphasis will be on fear and God's "bigness."

### **A Sermon Using the Indigenous Bassa Idea of Fear**

Title/Theme: "*Boh faan pede*" (Don't Be Afraid). Text: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and staff give me comfort."<sup>87</sup> Proposition: You can never live in peace when you are afraid. To live in fear is to doubt God and to put fear above the Lord God Almighty. This is the message for today.

#### **The Message**

Fear is something that we all have experienced. It has gripped us so strongly that we believe our living will be in vain because we will die and this whole world and everything we have worked for will go to waste. We are afraid that our children will not turn out the way we have trained them, and the thought that they may encounter violence in the street is becoming a common fear. We are afraid that our country will end up in chaos and that confusion will capture our hearts and spirits and send all hell breaking loose. Because of all these various fears, we are in a state of abeyance and confusion, and we have neglected the promise of the most-high God.

God has promised us that he will be with us always, even to the end of time.<sup>88</sup> *Boh faan pede* means "Have no fear" or "Do not be afraid." Without fear, believe that anything is possible. One can farm, become a parent, lead his/her people into battle, supervise neighbors, or simply be a better human being. Fear is not simply an abstraction; rather, it is concrete. Fear can be experienced in one's encounter with a snake or a tiger or

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<sup>87</sup> Psalms 23:4 (NRSV).

<sup>88</sup> Matthew 28:20 (NRSV).



any wild animal in the forest, or it can be experienced in one's encounter with other humans who aim to destroy. Animate and inanimate objects may cause fear. The rocks and hills also produce fear. In all these contexts, the saying admonishes us to have no fear. Fear is unnecessary, then, because God is bigger. Although all these contexts for fear exist, God's existence is bigger. We are afraid something will happen to us, but God is bigger. If only we remember that God is bigger than all our fears, we will be fine. And we will be living on the promises of God or living within God's promises.

This is what the saying means in relation to, or as it relates to, fear. This is what Psalm 23:4 reminds us of, that even if we are walking through areas of danger, we should have no fear. Even in places where it seems like no one can help us or can save us from impending danger, we must remember that "God is bigger than fear, or bigger than that which creates fear."

Conclusion: The conclusion of this matter is to remember always that God upholds any promise that God makes. As human beings, we must trust God to come through and squash our fears.

### **A Bible Study Using the Indigenous Bassa Saying on Fear**

In a Bible study setting, the saying can also be considered as a plan to understand how the Bible talks about fear and how indigenous Bassa people talk about fear. In such a setting, one may to define the idea from the perspective of the Bassa and from the perspective of the Bible. Using this method, it will become clear to those involved that the indigenous perceptions of fear are not very different from those of the Bible. It is important to note that in a Bible study setting, the saying should be compared with the contexts from biblical passages on fear. Looking at the study in both contexts can help to

make the saying more practical. In short, the notion of fear will become more concrete through an empirical lens, in that an experience of fear and God's intervention become real.

It is important to mention that while the saying is Bassa, the application of the saying to a Christian teaching of Jesus Christ establishes that the Bassa culture and the Christian church are related. Therefore, if fear comes to mind or heart, one can also refer to this Psalm, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will *fear* no evil, for thou art with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me."<sup>89</sup> Fear no evil is the same as the fear of no evil. Having no fear is crucial to understanding the nature and character of God, as the Bassa saying implies.

In a continuous rethinking of practical theology's role in this correlation, we can look to the model of the dissertation, using Holland and Henriot, in exploring the social realities of fear. Fear is the common theme that combines Bassa people's wisdom tradition to the Biblical wisdom tradition. Fear and God have always existed. To bracket assumptions and biases, it is important to dig up the social analyses of the Bassa people and their understanding of both expressions: *fear* and *God*. The outline below illustrates a practical way of studying fear from both the Bassa and the Christian contexts.

*Gedeporh boadyi, ke orh zee faandehdyi.* God is Bigger Than Anything that Causes Fear.

**Theme: *Faan* = Fear; *Faandeh* = Anything that Causes Fear**

1. *Deh dah za-wudu*, opening statement: Where do we find the idea of fear in the Scripture?

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<sup>89</sup> Psalm 23:4 (NRSV).

2. *Deh moai faandeh keh?* What is fear?

Defining fear in both the Bassa and the Christian contexts

3. Pivotal Scriptures on Fear

Deuteronomy 4:10: “How you once stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, ‘Assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth, and may teach their children so.’”<sup>90</sup>

Psalms 9:20: “Put them in fear, O Lord; let the nations know that they are only human. (Selah).”<sup>91</sup>

2 Timothy 1:7: “For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”<sup>92</sup>

In introducing the texts, it is also important to explain how they will be understood in the Bassa context.

***Hwodo kpain-wudu* or Purpose Statement**

The main purpose of this lesson is to explore the meaning of the theme of *faandeh*, fear.

1. To dispel from the hearts of God’s people the idea of fear as powerful.
2. To encourage leaders of the church to teach that God holds the keys to life, death, and destruction, but *faandeh*, fear, does not hold those keys.
3. To teach leaders that God surpasses fear (2 Timothy 1:7).

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<sup>90</sup> Deuteronomy 4:10 (NRSV); and 2 Timothy 1:7 (NRSV), “For God did not give us a spirit of fear (cowardice), but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

<sup>91</sup> Psalm 9:20 (NRSV).

<sup>92</sup> 2 Timothy 2:17 (NRSV).

### ***Deh dah za-wudu or Opening Statement (Reference Passages)***

These Scriptures can demonstrate in a Bible study context that God is bigger than fear, or bigger than that which creates fear.

Genesis 26:24: “I am the God of Abraham thy father; fear not, for I am with you and will bless you” on this life journey.”<sup>93</sup>

2 Kings 17:13-14: “Fear not . . . the barrel of meal shall not waste; neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.”<sup>94</sup>

2 Timothy 1:7: “For God did not give us a spirit of fear (cowardice), but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”<sup>95</sup>

### **Causes of Fear, or *Faan bede dyaa-deh***

Among Bassa Christians, there still exist the indigenous African norms and sanctions that make them Bassa people, distinct from both other African people and even other Liberians. In connection to fear, the belief in or the teaching about the divine being must also involve teaching about beings that are not so divine, such as Satan, or the devil. These spirits are evil and are contrary to the divine being with whom goodness is associated. The question *Deh bae dya faandeh nyun-yuu feh mu keh?* (What causes fear in a person’s life?) should begin the discussion. This means that the instructor should consider several things that cause *faandeh*, fear, and should emphasize the importance of why fear is not bigger than God. Here, the instructor may also want to clarify what “bigger” means.

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<sup>93</sup> Genesis 26:24 (NRSV).

<sup>94</sup> 2 Kings 17:13-14 (NRSV).

<sup>95</sup> 2 Timothy 1:7 (NRSV).

The Bible study could be enhanced with each participant developing some truth about fear and God. This will show each participant's understanding of the particular lesson.

### **A Sunday School Lesson Using the Indigenous Bassa Idea of Fear**

Fear, as defined in context of this Sunday school lesson, is the act of being afraid of something, someone, or an idea. Fear means weakness, or a demonstration of laziness, against someone or some idea, place, or thing. When teaching the saying "God is bigger than fear" to an adult Sunday School class, it is important to focus on the Bassa saying, since there are many contextual readings of fear in the Bible. In this way, the leader instructs people to express their innermost fear, and the reason for the fear. The leader then identifies Scriptures or stories that show how God is bigger than fear, or bigger than that which creates fear. It is expected that as Christians we are not to exercise fear amid danger. Similarly, in the Bassa, fear is insignificant and is considered something that can be crushed. God is the only Being that should be feared. That is why in the Bassa saying, the expression emphasizes God (Gedeporh) as bigger than fear (*faandeh*). The word *faandeh* literally means "that which brings fear" or "one who brings about fear."

As Christianity expands throughout the world and as it continues to impact human existence, the success of missions and theology must be regarded in a new paradigm that is critically connected to local indigenous artifacts. These artifacts should be explored in research and practice to assess scholarship and pedagogy needs in this area of practical theology. There are many more Bassa proverbs and other wisdom narratives that can be explored in research. In the future, it will be of value to use each proverb with a Christian message that preaches the gospel or explicates a Pauline epistle, bringing out the Bassa

saying's theological correlation to the Bible. The Bassa saying on fear and the biblical passages on fear show similar inspirational concepts.<sup>96</sup> It is established that "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,"<sup>97</sup> and the Bassa also consider the saying about God being bigger than fear as culturally inspired. The inspiration is in recognizing that the natural world projects realities and situations that may bring about fear, but despite that, the fear it produces is not bigger than God.

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<sup>96</sup> "How you once stood before the Lord you God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, 'Assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth, and may teach their children so'" (Deuteronomy 4:10); "Put them in fear, O Lord; let the nations know that they are only human. (Selah)" (Psalm 9:20).

<sup>97</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16 (NRSV).

## Appendix A. Glossary of Bassa Words and Expressions

***Bedehbede*** [*beh deh bede*] = Bedeh's Town; Bedeh's Village; Bedeh's home

***Dahbo*** [*da boh*] = old lady; old woman; grandmother. A synonym is *Nyonon-sua*, or old wife.

***dee-po-po*** [*de popo*] = the act of determining relationships. A way of identifying who is related to whom, and by what means. The word *dee* stands for siblings in this context, though it could be translated as "relative." One's cousins and other relatives may be considered *dee*, in addition to one's brothers and sisters. The best way to understand this idea is to consider all one's relatives as sisters and brothers, whether one knows them or not.

***dyua-deh sey whee-behn*** = a truism meaning, "fun never ends."

***dyu sei gbo-deeden*** = a child who remains behind the house, a euphemism for a child who dies at birth.

***gbaahn-mu*** = a meeting, usually in the bush, at which elders, chiefs, and *zowaduas* gather to discuss issues, settle disputes, and select leaders of the community. The participants are usually seated in a circle. Each speaker moves to the center of the circle and addresses the council, always standing. It is rude and discourteous to the elders to address them while seated.

***gidah*** = masked performer.

***giohn mu-mu*** = death, the process of death, or the world of the dead.

***kpuda-dyu*** = to stink like a turtle, used to taunt a boy, girl, man, or woman who has not been enrolled in the cultural school.

***norh*** = masked performer; traditional diviner; presiding chairperson or judge of the Bassa traditional court system. A *norh* can also be a *gidah* or *peayedeh*, but not vice versa.

***peayedeh*** masked performer; traditional diviner.

***pyeade or peidye norh***= A masked performer or dancer, whose identity remains a mystery to spectators. This *norh* comes in the public only to perform. It is also referred to as Gaeda or Geidah.

***sei wudu ye*** = the final words of a living person who is about to die. These words may be instructions regarding what specific things should happen during the mourning period or after the burial. It is also equivalent to one's last will and testament.

***vahblogbee*** = a chief, a leader, who comes to the throne through his/her relationship to the core lineage. He/she can be a diviner, a mediator between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors.

***whodo-dya zaza*** = the "falling of the heart." The Bassa believe that one's heart is what holds the person together. When a person's heart "falls" or gives up, the person has died.

***whanyongah*** = a male witch or evil man.

***wudu wada-ti*** = "breaking word." A moment during the funeral rites when the public can pay respects, in words, songs, or dirges, to the deceased person.

***xwhe bohn po-po*** = the announcement that someone is dead. The announcement comes through a deer horn or bullhorn, because each can be used as a loudspeaker.

***xwhe bohn*** = an announcement of death. Always sad news.



*zwhe dyoudon za-za* = literally, “taking the dead from the sun”; burying the dead. Bassa bury, rather than cremating, their dead. The common understanding is that a person’s life dwells in the “sun” on earth, and when death occurs, the person is taken from the sun and put in the ground—six feet under.

*xwhea za-za* = a ritual activity that occurs following the burial of a deceased. The wife (wives), children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, nephews/nieces, and sometimes brothers and sisters of the deceased, are clean shaven to drive away evil spirits so that no one else dies during or after the mourning era. These rites are performed to drive away the “spirit of death” from the bereaved family.

*xwhevodo* = “the mat.” This is a place in a house or “kitchen” or any open space where mourners sit to weep. It can also be a place where, following the burial, discussions relevant to the deceased take place.

*xwhe whoh* = the feast that usually occurs after the burial of an important person like the chief or his/her relatives.

*xwhea-dyu* = an orphan. Among the Bassa a child with one parent is also *xwhea-dyu*.

*zoe* = a male or female leader in the traditional school.

*zoe-wadua* = a male graduate of the traditional school.

*zoe-vlehen* = Big Zoe.

## Appendix B. List of Bassa Proverbs in the Dissertation

*Boh sohn ne chen-mu, ke orh ne cee whoh-mu* = One cannot step in a boat with one's two feet.

*Djue yu teenee-wei dhaba goh* = A small axe cuts down a big tree (*goh*).

*Dwoe bua-dye pu, ke dooh paah ne* = Even though the elephant is big, a little bee can kill it.

*Dyedee nyohn ne whe kpaahn* = The monkey's scent/odor is always present in its bones.

*Dyu dwado ne buen sohn deedee. (Orh) mehn do gboein, doh dah seyn* = A little child cannot roast two rats at the same time. (While he/she is tending to one, the other will get burned.) In the Bible, Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will love one and hate the other, or will hate the one, and love the other."

*Dyumenneh whodo ye voei, mohn whodo kpohn* = When many children are in a village or town, the village or town booms, or is lively. In the Bible, Jesus says, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not. For such is the kingdom of God."

*Gedepoh faah dyuae won, dwo deh poh-deh* = The God who opens the mouth of a child knows what to put into it.

*Gedepoh ni zi kpodeh gbo* = God does not take side of the wrong.

*Gedepoh ni zi kpodeh deh gbo* = God does not take the side of the guilty or the foul one. God has a preferential option for the poor.

*Jaah-je John mehn* = John the Baptist died for speaking the truth.

*Nyon blee, mon nyon blee* = Your home is your home. Jesus said, “A prophet is never without honor, except in his/her own home town.”

*Nyon dah gbenneh-kudu dyea, nee kpaahn whoop-geedee* = A person who sees boa constrictor scales will not go farming in the deep bush.

*Nyon seyn bede deyn kpe gbo, keh je-wey-nyon kohn-wuduae* = Everyone may be concerned with the housefly, but the “sore-sick” person controls its moves.

*Payin m ke dee nyua keh, goh kpaan gboei, orh jedeh duduee* = The relationship between the storm and me is so strong, if the tree intervenes, it dies.

*Sosey bahnee, orh sey deh-dee* = If the chicken does not scratch, it will not eat. Jesus said, “I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day, for the night is coming, when no one can work” (Jn. 9:4).

*Won sey wudueh nyoon-yeen* = The mouth that does not speak up stinks.

## Appendix C. A List of Bassa Proverbs

A

*Ah mehn wheh.*

We die before.

Over our dead body.

B

*Badahn bada, buahn-bada-ye.*

Dodging the mud makes the mud bigger.

Avoiding bad things just make them worse.

*Bahn kpaahn buu dyoudon, deh orh ke peeyn?*

Lizard gets bark angry with, where it will sleep?

If the lizard gets angry at the tree bark it sleeps under, where will it sleep?

*Bahn se mu gei.*

Wealth is not divided.

Wealth does not discriminate against wealth.

*Beai po wudu beeyn, whe beai ke zaoh chen.*

Let us put word in the ground before we talk the palaver.

Let us find consensus before we begin the discussion.

*Beedee konin-nyan, orh nan naeen-ni.*

Cow owns front, it drinks water.

The first cow drinks the best water.

***Behn-behn de poo-wheen.***

Equal to equal eat roasted palm nuts.

Only equals can eat palm nuts together.

***Bodwoa-venne jada bodwoa.***

Cutlass big breaks cutlass.

A big cutlass breaks cutlasses.

***Boh son ni chen mu ke orh ne se xwhoun or Boh sohn ne si xwhoun.***

Foot two not together and step in the canoe.

One does not use his/her two feet to step into a canoe.

***Boo-dyo ne na ne channan, ke mon wudu. Ne muen ti-mien kon neen-yeen . . .***

Okra does not suck my oil, and I don't talk. I will press tea spoon on it . . .

When the okra sucks the oil from the stew, I do not complain, because I press my spoon and . . .

***Buee kaia bahn, ho za je.***

Cassava will be rich, ground swelling reveals.

If a cassava will be abundant, the ground swelling reveals it.

**C**

***Cheh-cheh buehn zi bi dyiin.***

Fast rat passes hole.

A rat that moves too fast usually misses its hole.

## D

*Dabo keio kpe kpo keen wheh, kwa-kpa sei bo kohn.*

Old lady wanted to cry first, and then walking stick steps on her foot.

The old lady already wants to cry, and the walking stick hits her foot.

*De bahn-nyon poin orh dyu naan-weyn, boh gah-ye-nyon toei orh dyuea duu.*

Place where rich person advises child, there poor may show child's ear.

Where the rich person advises his/her child is where the poor person admonishes his/her child.

*Decee kpa nyon-sua du gbo-wein.*

Decee carries woman old head door mouth.

A beautiful thing attracts older women.

*Dee ku-sohn ni, orh poein whodo-nyon.*

Stranger strong hand then stranger saves town person.

If a stranger is strong, the stranger may save the host.

*Deh dyedee muehn, nyon boh se de chean.*

Place eyes go, person's foot not reach there.

Where a person's eyes reach, the foot cannot reach there.

*Dei ne bah dyoa-ma kuun.*

Stranger not hand spice woman back.

A stranger does not reveal himself totally.

***Deh po nyonnoh-ba dyodoon weyn, ne po xwhia dyodoon.***<sup>98</sup>

Thing makes wife-man angry, does not make single man (bachelor) angry.

What makes a husband angry does not make a single man (bachelor) angry.

***Deh na-nyon dyeeh, hwede-nyon ni dye-de.***

Thing traveler see, home person not see it.

What a guest sees is not what the host knows, or the host knows more than the guest sees.

***Deh mecheen zea, de gohn zii.***

Where tears pass, there sorry passes.

Where there are tears, apology (sympathy) is needed.

***Deh nia pudehn mu dee ne kpa da?***

Thing what (fly) in storm don't carry it place?

The relationship between the storm and the fly is amazing: the fly is never driven away by the storm.

***Deh-ye kadah, ya sion whodoun [whodo-mu].***

Thing dragging bring dirt town in.

Dragging things around brings lots of dirt in town.

***Deh sey yee yah beehn nye, orh chun-chun mon peeyee.***

Thing can't up go / tree climb, pushing is nothing.

One who refuses to climb up cannot be pushed.

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<sup>98</sup> If a woman were using this proverb, the male attributes would refer to a woman. For example, the word *xwhia* would refer to an unmarried woman or spinster.

***Debee ne po kpoh zwo.***

Snake don't throw old bark thanks.

A snake that sleeps in the bush never thanks the bush.

***Dibii ne wodehen ke orh ni hwohn xweh.***

Deer not born baby and look like baboon.

A deer never gives birth to a baboon.

***Dwoe sohn dyee vohn ni, xwhada sia ni.***

Elephant two when fight, bush hurt.

When two elephants fight, the grass suffers.

***Duun-kuu-nyon ne se dei.***

Head strong person not stay behind.

A determined person never stays behind.

***Dyi-tei gbe-dyu za hwee-hwee pea.***

Going places dog bring hwee-hwee from the bush.

The dog that goes around the block soon comes home crying.

***Dyueh wei-won dyeni orh monza.***

Child sorrow mouth see rice.

A child's pity gives him/her some rice.

***Dyu pleh se wodoh, ke or dyedee beh ka.***

Baby not born, but its eye big.

The baby is not born yet, but it already has big eyes.



***Dyu dyuado ne po buen sohn dyedee.***

Child one do not put rats two roast.

One child does not attempt to roast two rats at the same time.

***Dyu-menneh whodo-ye voieh, mon whodo-kpohn.***

Children small (in) village plenty, is village on fire (or village boom).

The wealth of a village or town depends on the number of children.

***Dyu dah, de m mee or bee deyeah?***

Child says, thing I what eat.

A child only worries about what to eat.

***Dyu-wodoen poen gbaa.***

Child bearing saves *gbaa*.

Having a child is salvation for the parent (*gbaa*).

***Daah-whoh nyommon paah.***

Call party good celebration.

One celebrates better at a party when invited.

***Deh en (ne) bua-yee, nyon-toi (to-de) sohn son.***

Thing not big, person shows their hands two.

When something is big, you do not have to exaggerate.

***Deeh poein-yi hweh-ke wa kidi teedee.***

Ants together before they bend nest.

Ants work together to make their nest.

***Dehn-seyn saen gede.***

Shame burn snail farm.

A snail is ashamed so it gets caught in the fire.

***Dyu-menne pei, orh ne jedeyen daahn-da.***

Children small play it doesn't end good place.

Children's play never ends well.

***Dabo kee (orh) de-gbe dyae todoeh.***

Old lady and (her) basket load (case) (are) climb hill.

The old lady and her basket are climbing the hill.

***Dyu gboh kpa-pedeh poo, ke orh se veoi dwyo.***

Child small run able, but child not hiding know.

A child can run but doesn't know how to hide.

***Deh-dho se doboeh de-pn. Vooh mon muan deh jaa.***

Eating not full stomach older. Harvest is joy for true.

Eating is not older than being full. The harvest is a joyful time.

***Di-kan-nna deen ke orh zi byn-dyi.***

Health sweeter than wealth.

Health is sweeter than wealth.

***Dyu kpa sohn dyedeeh siin***

Child carry hand fire burns.

A child who puts his hands in the fire gets burned.

***Deh dei se boa.***

Thing eating not big.

Eating is not growth / eating does not make a person grow.

***Da ne sei dyi boa ke nyohn ne dya bo banwohn.***

Where water not large, person not bring bad mouth.

One does not bring confusion in a small town.

***Dyu ke orh ba ne vohn bodoa***

Child and father not fight cutlass.

A child and a father do not fight over a cutlass.

***Dyu ni de-deh, ke orh ni zi bai yi.***

Child not eat and his not pass father.

A child does not eat more than his/her father.

**G**

***Gah ni wheh-xwhadan, gbeh<sup>99</sup> ni sein.***

Man, not present bush, house doesn't burn.

It is impossible for men to be present and have the home burn down.

***Gha-n wah kpa.***

Poverty not break bone.

Poverty does not break the bone.

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<sup>99</sup> *Gbeh* can mean “bed” or “house.” I have used the house context because that is what people generally mean when *gbeh* is used in this proverb.

***Gha ne dabaah nyon.***

Poverty not kill a person.

Poverty does not kill a person.

***Gee se dah neen, deddee waan gbooh-ye.***

Leopard not place at; deer smashes grassy plants.

If the leopard is not present, the deer smashes the plants.

***Gedepoh zaa xwha gboh gbo.***

God takes hand rear end from.

God takes God's hands from one's rear end.

***Gbe za ton-ne dey ni, ke de m kei deeyni whe m kei gbe-ah ton-ne zahn nye, moi deooh keh.***

Dog dried with salt (is) sweet, but thing you eating before dog dried with salt, is the thing.

Dried dog meat is sweet, but what you will eat while the dog meat is being dried, that is the issue.

***Gboun-bua se nyonnon-vneh nyuen.***

Butt big not wife big doing.

Having a big butt does not necessarily make you a good wife, or the head wife.

***Gah ke gah, de gbahn-mu.***

Man to man in the bush.

Only men should be in the bush.

***Gbe da kueh, (orh) se kpedei zaa beeyn de.***

Dog now (strong) old, (it) ways take back.

A dog that is already grown will not learn new tricks.

***Gedeporh ne nyeen nyon gohn, ke nyon ni monh orh kpa dyi.***

God not give person sorry, and person not look for why.

When God gives one the right, no need to look beyond that.

***Gha! Mon a dein kohn-monn gboh.***

Poverty, you bring us wealth.

Poverty, it is because of you that we have wealth.

**H**

***Hwion dyeeh gbahn (ke) zaa.***<sup>100</sup>

Diviner sees sickness takes the sickness.

The diviner who sees the problem cures the problem.

***Hwehn-hwa dah, “Nyon ni dye wannan-deh dyii zieh.”***

*Hwehn-hwa* says, Person not see bug pass.

*Hwehn-hwa* says, “One does not know where a bug may come from into one’s mouth.”

***Hwion dyei gbaan zaa***

Doctor see sickness takes away.

The doctor who diagnoses a case prescribes the healing.

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<sup>100</sup> This is also found in Karnga, *Bassa Proverbs for Preaching*, 116, in a slightly different version.

***Hwion se zudu.***

Doctor not stupid.

Doctors are not stupid people.

***Hodoun-nei i-doke orh ni fohn-nohn.***

Heart on one head not open.

One person's heart is not wise.

**K**

***Ka ti nee ma, ti sei na ni dae***

How time was, time not again like that anymore

time has changed

***Keen-keen daaey nea dee, keh, deh seydea.***

First sweet but the one behind.

The first may be sweeter, but the last is sweetest.

***Kede-kede (eh) yeen ni gba.***

*Keedee* fills waterbed

Little water drops fill the waterbed.

***Kohn-nyon ooh. Orh nyuen-na poo, orh sei doohn-ne kohn-nyonnoh.***

Owner's wife. He's just doing it; it is not one owner wife.

The jealous husband claims to be the husband, but she's not his wife alone.

***Kpe jee ne voin gannah.***

Power leopard not fight strength.

A leopard with authority or power barely uses its strength.

## M

### ***Mon ne youn sahn yon.***

Hunger does not do crazy person.

A crazy person never gets hungry.

### ***Mon fooh-keh, mon-kohn mehnehn kannah-dyi.***

You lazy, you have clean stomach

A lazy person always has clean stomach.

### ***M seo dyede-nayn nee, m be moi-o [mohn-bo] fea-nayn.***

If you are not in the bathing place, you should look in the rubbing room.

If you did not see anything while bathing, observe/see when rubbing lotion or grease on the body.

### ***M koyee peeyin, m sohyee peeyee.***

You sit down nothing, you get out nothing.

If you sit without a reason, you will rise without a reason.

### ***M dyi kwoeh cheen-ehn dwuoo ni, m dieh poo.***

If you know the way to cut an ant, you can eat it.

If you know how to carve an ant, you may eat its intestines.

### ***M se dyeede yee, ke m po kpa?***

You don't eye see, but (and) you send slap?

You don't even see the eye, yet you want to slap (someone)?

### ***M bedee beeyen, deh bedeen (m) buue yee.***

You peep/look hole in, thing peep/look your butt.

While you're looking in the hole, someone else is looking up your butt.

***Mon nyu-m meion xwhe se dyodoun zaa kamma.***

I do myself body not bury hard.

It is not difficult to bury a suicide victim.

***Monin-monin se kuun kohn.***

Me, me, not strong person.

You are not strong alone.

***Maah mon dyu. Gaah mon dyu.***

Girl/woman is child. Boy/man is child.

That woman acts like a child. That man acts like a child.

***Mah ke mah, de neweyn-whea xwhinni***

Woman to woman toward to creek.

Only women should be on the path to the waterside.

***M se mehyn, ke channa dabayn-nee?***

You not dead, but oil kills you?

You claim not to die, but you say that oil kills you.

***M se du yae ke m poh gaa?***

You don't see rope and you fix basket.

If you don't see the rope, can you make a basket?

***M nyenne-nyoon whe m gbeeden vaahn.***

You stink and you hug billy goat.

You're already stinky and you hug a billy goat.

***Mon knhn zenne-je ni kpannan gieh.***



Your dirt business looks at my nakedness.

The decision to clean you caused my nakedness.

***Mannah ni xwhen kohn.***

Blessing is on palm tree.

Blessings on the palm tree.

**N**

***Ni da wooun mu hwedein ni, orh nyu tohn.***

Water mouth in stay long then, it makes spit.

When water stays in the mouth a while, it becomes spit or saliva.

***Duun-nyenne-dyue nyenne-kpo ni boa-dyi.***

Head spoiled child pupu not big.

A stubborn or rude child never defecates big.

***Nooh-dyueh nynnen-kpo ne boi-dyi.***

Refusing child pupu not big.

A child who refuses does not have big feces.

***Ni-n dya todoo.***

Water not climb hill.

Water does not go uphill.

***Nyon po nyon ble mu-doh gaahn.***

Person put person home going clothes bag.

One never worries what clothes one will wear in one's home.

***Nyon deh de yea, de yu se gbo.***

Person set things down, who child remains/stays with.

A person who keeps enough food will always have child/children around.

***Nyon ne di nyon mue-do bei dehen-deh.***

Person not eat person mouth sweet thing.

One does not eat something sweet for another.

***Nyon meon niin bu nommon sammah.***

Person own butt good scratch.

One enjoys scratching one's own butt / It is good to scratch one's own butt.

***Nan je se na je yee seane beh.***

Drinking business is not substitute for walking business.

Being drunk does not relieve one of walking.

***Nyun ni tehmhin dyu dyoa.***

Person not show child elephant.

One does not show an elephant to a child.

***Nyon deh kpohn whodoe, cha xwhada.***

Person thing catches heart, messes (with) bush.

The one who is in need will seek help.

***Nah boh se peeye kohn.***

Walk foot not for nothing have.

Walking is not for nothing.

***Nyon deh kpohn whodoe, cha xwhada.***

Person thing catches heart, messes with bush.

The one committed to a cause finds a solution.

***Ni-peh daba dehn.***<sup>101</sup>

Water cold kill fly.

Even cold water kills A fly.

***Nyon poh gah kohn.***

You cannot add to a man.

People can't add to a man.

***Nyon (ne) deen fuan-mon fede.***

Person not eat with quick rice leaf.

One does not leave the leaf on the rice before eating it.

***Nyon se-dyuo ke zohn zon.***

One not know and day breaks.

One does not know when day breaks.

***Ni debeh nyon mueh, pah nyon bede tebeen mu.***

Water like person gets person own battle.

The water that likes a person will get in his/her bottle.

***Nyonon-je kamma-nyon mon nyenne-buun kpe-nyon.***

Wife business hard person is pupu butt person.

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<sup>101</sup> Also mentioned in A. Doris Banks Henries, *Liberian Folklore*, (London: McMillian Publishers, 1966.

One who is jealous over his wife is as silly as a donkey.

***Nyon ne dwoe mu, ke juene ne kpon-nyon.***

Person's person (relative, confident) not in elephant, and bush cow catch person.

When one has relatives or relations with the bigwigs, one does not suffer much.

***Ne whee pedei, se Fedeh.***

My [*whee*] afraid of, not Fred.<sup>102</sup>

I may be afraid, but I am not afraid of Fred.

***Nyon deh de yea, de yu se gbo.***

Person set things down, who child remains/stays with.

A person who keeps enough food will always have child/children around.

***Nyon ni fa fein, wheh nyon ni gbahn dae.***

Person does not tear leaf, and person does not sew it again.

When a person tears a leaf, the leaf cannot be sewed.

***Ni doh-nahn, see ni doh-wodoe.***

Alone walking is not alone being born.

Walking alone does not mean being born alone.

***Nyon ni mehn, nyon nyon-deoh mehn-bada.***

Person does not die during a person's person death time.

One does not die when a relative has just died.

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<sup>102</sup> "Fred" as used here is a general name given to anyone a person is not afraid of, or of someone for whom one does not have much respect.

*Nyon seyn bede dehn kpe gbo, keh je-weh nyon kohn wuduye.*

Person every has fly business, but sore-sick person controls it.

Everyone must deal with the house fly, but the sore-ridden person controls its movements.

*Nyon ne chen pahn-pahn.*

Person not talk everything.

One does not reveal everything one knows.

*Nyon ne nyehn neen hwek ke nyon ne dieh zimmin.*

Person not hate water then eat the fish.

A person does not eat the fish from a spring he/she does not like.

**O**

*Orh sei gaah ma.*

He not the man, man.

He is incapable.

*Orh sei ne bueh-nyen.*

S/he is not my gun fire.

S/he is not my gun powder.

*Orh se bahn ne, orh kohn koh-badah*

If he/she rich not, he/she owns pre-harvest.

Although he/she is not wealthy, he/she is not begging either.

## **P**

*Payin m ke dee nyua keeh, gho kpaan gboei, orh jedeh druee.*

Play I and storm do, tree minds it, it will lose its top.

The relationship between the storm and me is so strong, if the tree intervenes, it dies.

*Pehn-naan neneen-nyon kohn toh.*

Sleeping place bad person has missing.

A person who sleeps badly can be missed.

*Pleh kpa se nahn.*

Run carrying not walking.

Running is not walking.

*Pee-nyuen ni se hwio xwhandua.*

Play doing not lost evening.

Playing in the day time does not mean one forgets that evening will come.

## **Q**

*Qwa dwadoo jee*

Hand one finger

One finger's hand

## **S**

*Saah se foei.*

Tired not lazy.

To be tired is not to be lazy.

***Seh whoh zea seyn when, m po bo bachu?***

Snake finish passing before you take stick?

The snake is already gone, so why are you grabbing the stick?

***Sohn-kueh mun buda (kpa) naaman.***

Hand strong is cutlass sharp.

When your arms/hands are strong, the cutlass will be sharp.

***Sohn dwado ne fia gbenneh***

Hand one not wrap boa constrictor.

One hand cannot kill or catch a boa constrictor.

***Soo sey baah nee, orh sey deh dee.***

Chicken does not scratch; it will not eat.

A chicken that does not scratch will not eat.

***Sio-keehn [se-bo keehn] tommo-nyon behyn yaayn.***

Step there first shows people wearing pants.

The first to step out shows how the pants are worn.

***Soo zaa gbo-wein baah.***

Chicken takes house mouth scratch (worm or food).

Chicken starts scratching for food from under its house.

***Suu zaa beeh kohn.***

[Su] takes pepper on/down.

[The sound] reduces the heat of the pepper

***Soorh-kpo se yebuah ke vehn mein won.***

Rock not big (grown) and beard grows mouth.

The rock is not yet grown and it already has a beard.

***Se weyn gaa-za-nyon, ke orh se bahn-nyon weyen.***

Lies good looking with warrior, more than rich one.

Lies sound better from a warrior than from a rich person.

**T**

***Todo m seoi yaa, ne dyu me yaa.***

Hill I not climb; my child will/should climb.

The hill/heights that I have not reached my child should/will reach.

**U**

***Um mon goh-goh. Deh ne gee-kpa chen nyen, soo kpa se de chen.***<sup>103</sup>

I am duck. Where my bait can reach, chicken's bait cannot reach there.

I am a duck; a chicken's mouth cannot reach where my mouth can reach.

***Um se kah ye behn, keh gbon-dyu?***<sup>104</sup>

You not able crab, but tadpole?

You can't fight with the crab, but a little tadpole?

***Um peein-mion [kpo] kopo [kebeh-heh] muen, wa zayn se-pian dyeede.***

You cook yourself in cup; people take you from the fire with sticks.

If you cook yourself in a can, they will use sticks to dish you out.

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<sup>103</sup> See also Abba Karnga, *My People, the Bassa Tribe* (Pasadena: World Wide Missions, 1975), 62-77.

<sup>104</sup> Also, in Karnga, *Bassa Proverbs*, 119.



*Um ke neen gah beyhn yee.*

I and my sorrow equal.

My sorrow is equivalent to what I can bear.

*Um mehn vuan-yee ke pei whe-yah.*

You busy with *vuan* a *pei* is finished.

While you have been busy with the *vuan*, the *pei* has vanished.<sup>105</sup>

**W**

*Whodo whada se nyon dyuado bee.*

Town trap not person one sake.

A town trap is not for one person.

*Wheh Kia mehn, ni wohn piun wudu.*

Baboon to die, not hear whistle sound.

The baboon that is about to die never hears (refuses to hear) the whistle.

*Wah du kpa dyedeo, puah-endah, vahn seyn-yoo?*

They say head fall (in) fire, you say, beard burn too.

They said the head is on fire, so why are you asking about the beard?

*Wheh dabahn dyue-won, ke orh se-yee.*

Baboon measures its child's mouth, and the mouth is uneven.

Baboon sees its child with an ugly mouth, and tried to fix it, but made it uneven.

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<sup>105</sup> *Vuan* is the Bassa word for a particular kind of red cherry, and *pei* is a similar kind of cherry, but far sweeter and is believed to be healthier. The idea of this proverb is that one must know how to prioritize.

***Wheh koo sohn ni, kpo-kpo-bachu jadah sohn.***

Baboon strong hand, stick breaks hand.

A baboon is very strong, but a stick can break its hand.

***Wedee-dyu se yah-poh-nyon kohn, orh poei mion yaa.***

Goat small no up push-up person, it pushes itself up.

A small goat does not have anyone to push it up, so it pushes itself up.

***Won se wudueh, nyoon-yeen.***

The mouth that does not speak (lets off or keeps a bad breath) gets stink.

The mouth that will not talk stinks.

***Wudu si widi.***

Word is not money.

A word is not the same as money (and vice versa).

***Weh dye te gba, ke (orh) deyn whea-gba yee.***

Sickness full old basket and set along the road.

Sickness is like an old basket that sits along the road.

***Wodo-wodo mon ni-dukpa, orh ne sorh peenyee.***

Relationship is water head bone, it not leave in bush.

Relationship is like a water table; it is all over.

***Wudu-dyu ne pehn-mohn.***

Talking child not sleep hunger.

A talking child does not sleep hungry.

***Wede weyn (orh) khon-nyon ween.***

Song sweet owner's mouth.

The song sounds sweeter in its composer's mouth.

**X**

***Xweh seeh wodoen sonomon keh?***

How snake born worm how?

How can a snake give birth to a worm?

**Y**

***Yeey-nyan-deh mon yedeee a gbandee.***

Nasty thing is eye's lover.

A yucky thing is the eye's attraction.

***Yon ne zee gon dahyn zaa.***

Person do not pass behind "sorry."

One does not justify an apology / One does not investigate an apology.

**Z**

***Zeen-deh-wonkohn nyuen dytue bonnoh-je, ke orh sei kehn-ye mu.***

Overdoing person does child's getting in the *maagba* but did not attend the opening.

The one who overdoes it will not see the child graduate from the traditional school.

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