

Through a Glass Darkly: Grassroots Theology and the Music of Ghanaian Hip-Life Artist Kofi Kinaata

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Abstract

One scarcely finds Christian Theology, the Arts, and African Tradition linked together or brought into dialogue in any formal way. The very idea that these have anything to do with one another might be seen as anathema by many African arts scholars and practitioners as well as African Christian theologians. In this paper, I utilize the concept of grassroots theology to explore how such theology emerges from what would not ordinarily be considered sources for Christian theological reflection. I do this by dilating on the limitations of traditional sources of theological reflection, and how these limitations hinder a robust engagement with African cultural resources. I then proceed to analyse the lyrics from selected songs in the discography of Ghanaian hip-life artist Kofi Kinaata, identifying salient theological themes, as well as some pointers for future enquiry.

Keywords: Hip Life Music, Christian Theology, Kofi Kinaata, Grassroots Theology

Résumé

On voit rarement la théologie chrétienne, les arts et la tradition africaine interconnectés ou mis en dialogue de manière formelle. L'idée même que ceux-ci ont quoi que ce soit à voir les uns avec les autres pourrait être considérée comme un anathème par de nombreux spécialistes et praticiens des arts africains ainsi que par des théologiens chrétiens africains. Dans cet article, nous utilisons le concept de théologie de la base pour explorer comment une telle théologie émerge de ce qui ne serait pas normalement

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/contjas.v11i1.3>

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considéré comme des sources de réflexion théologique chrétienne. Nous le faisons en nous attendant sur les limites des sources traditionnelles de réflexion théologique et sur la manière dont ces limites entravent un engagement solide avec les ressources culturelles africaines. Nous procédons ensuite à l'analyse des paroles de chansons sélectionnées dans la discographie de l'artiste hip-life ghanéen Kofi Kinaata, en identifiant les thèmes théologiques saillants, ainsi que quelques indications pour une enquête future.

Mots clés: musique Hip-Life, théologie chrétienne, Kofi Kinaata, théologie de la base

Introduction

A critical or even cursory observation of the religious landscape of Africa reveals that the central place of religion in African life generally, and of Christianity in Ghana in particular, is a self-evident reality. Consequently, Christian theology presents an important focus of research for scholars concerned with African thought and life. The arts too are an important aspect of African life. Despite this, one scarcely finds Christian theology, the arts, and African tradition linked together or brought into dialogue in any formal way. The very idea that these have anything to do with one another might be seen as anathema by many African arts scholars and practitioners as well as African Christian theologians. There is little love lost between these academic disciplines, each of which have gatekeepers who resist the idea that these fields have anything to do with one another, much less that their respective traditions would benefit from mutual dialogue. Yet, the extant reality of massive Christian presence in Africa, and the multifaceted engagement of Christian faith with African cultural realities means that the gap between these academic disciplines must be addressed in one way or another. In this paper I attempt to begin bridging this cultural divide from the theological side by identifying a grassroots theology that emerges in the music of a Ghanaian popular artist.

In this paper, I utilise the concept of grassroots theology to explore, in a preliminary way, how such theology emerges from what would not usually be considered a source for Christian theological reflection. I begin by dilating first on the limitations of traditional sources of theological reflection, and how these

limitations hinder a robust engagement with African cultural resources. I discuss the inherently religious or theological nature of some African and African derived music. I then proceed to analyse some lyrics from selected songs in the discography of Ghanaian hiplife artist Kofi Kinaata, identifying salient theological themes, as well as some pointers for future enquiry.

Before delving into the core discussion in the sections below, I note that my aim in this paper is not an in-depth study of hiplife music as previous scholarship on this genre have already covered such terrain (Oduro–Frimpong 2009; Osumare 2012; Weaver–Shipley 2013). This work is rather an exploration of how non-traditional sources like popular music constitute a valid source for theological inquiry, using Kofi Kinaata’s work as an example. The musical genre is thus incidental to the core of my argument. The emphasis is instead on how a focus on scriptural texts as the sole or even primary locus of theological inquiry is limiting, especially in the Ghanaian cultural context where non text-based sources comprise primary and essential modes of communication, including the communication of theological concepts. Thus, while acknowledging that there may be other theological songs (or themes within songs) in various hiplife music, it is not my intention to explore these here.

Background: the limitations of traditional sources for theology

Part of the title of this paper *Through a Glass Darkly: Grassroots Theology and the Music of Ghanaian Hip-Life Artist Kofi Kinaata* is drawn from a phrase found in the King James version of 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” This passage of scripture comes at the end of the famous Pauline exposition about the nature and primacy of love. In it, the apostle speaks about the illusory nature of knowledge: “we know in part, and we prophesy in part,” he says. Though the apostle writes earlier in the same epistle that it is through the Spirit one might know “the things that are freely given to us by God,” (1 Cor 2:12), he admits here that this knowledge is at best partial, incomplete, and obscured until “that which is perfect is come” (1 Cor 13:10). This ancient text avers what post-modernity has come to embrace: epistemological certainty is unattainable.

The Pauline admonition to epistemic humility is not only post-modern but also primal, for it eschews the rationalist quest for certainty that was the hallmark of modernity, and which displaced earlier modes of conceptualisation. Within modernist frames of thought, knowledge, often equated with truth, exists as an entity independent of persons and is in principle empirically deducible solely

through rational processes of investigation. This conception of knowledge rose to prominence because of the European Enlightenment, particularly in its continental expression. The Christian academy was not immune to the aftershocks of this intellectual revolution. The development of systematic theology, the historical-critical method of biblical studies, and of religious studies as a field of rational inquiry were all consequences of this shift. These developments effectively limited the scope of sources for Christian theology to the biblical texts and exacerbated the division between theology and the cultural life of people. An essentially rationalist, word-centred, scientific, and systematising approach to theology and religious studies has therefore dominated the Euro-Western academy since the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, the limitation of this approach in the matter of interpreting what is essentially a non-rational phenomenon – religion – must be admitted. The same too must be said of the arts, for as the Camille Paglia (1990) observes, “rationalists have their place, but their limited assumptions and methods must be kept out of the arts. Interpretation of poem, dream, or person requires intuition and divination, not science” (p. 222). Neither intuition nor divination are known for their exactness; both are means of seeing “as through a glass – darkly.”

Grassroots Theology

It is difficult to provide a single, formal definition of grassroots theology, but broadly it is a theology (or theologies) that begins “with the people” (Dyrness, 2018, p. 58), with their own experiences, reflections, and expression of their understanding of God and God’s dealings in the world. This is in contradistinction to more formally constructed theologies developed within the academy. For example, the noted Ghanaian theologian, Kwesi Dickson avers that “every Christian theologizes,” and that “theology does not always issue in propositional articulation of the implications of faith” (Dickson, 1984, p.13). Dickson (1984) further asserts that such articulation, derived from reflection upon one’s faith, “may be done in song, in prayer, in action or in meditation” (p. 13–14). Dickson’s assertion is significant as it both displaces the assumption that theological reflection is the sole domain of professionals trained in textual analysis, and in its recognition of the essentially enculturated and contextual nature of the theology. Donald Grigorenko has noted that “theology is a thoughtful human reflection” that “draw[s] on the linguistic and conceptual resources of a particular time, place, and culture.” (Grigorenko, 2018, p. 67). These linguistic and conceptual resources are not bound to religious

texts such as the Bible, though of course the Bible remains the key resource for theological reflection. Further, as Grigorenko (2018) aptly captures it, “languages and cultures have preferred ways of expressing thoughts, ideas, and arguments” (p. 64) and these are not always captured in written texts. The ‘texts’ of culture are much broader than what is written down and include the arts. It is unsurprising that Dickson’s insight emerged from Africa where embodied modes of communication, historically instantiated in genres like proverbs, songs, libation prayers, dancing and drumming, continue to predominate, though expressed in different forms. African grassroots theology emerges from the daily engagement of the Christian faith and culture and finds ready expression in the names given to shops, appended to public transport, in dance, and in song. Indeed, while some lament the apparent decline in the practice of traditional art forms, these pre-modern means of communication have persisted and, through the mediums of music and other audio-forms of communication, been transposed into a post-modern key. The advent of internet and mass-media technology has enabled an amplification and enrichment of these traditional forms. This is evidenced in Ghanaian hiplife music which not only incorporates “local beats and rhythms as well as proverbial and indirect forms of speech,” but also draws on “both local and wider transnational cultural flows... as part of the cultural formation... characterized as the ‘Black Atlantic’” (Carl, 2015, p. 2). Thus, the forms and rhythms of Black American¹ urban music, which descend from those of their enslaved African forebears, have reverberated back to the shores of Africa itself.

Music as Source for Grassroots Theology

The dynamism of Black American music is not just rhythmic and linguistic. Black American music has since slavery days, functioned as prophetic speech in that it draws upon an underlying primal spirituality to provide incisive, if at time

1 Some may question my choice of the descriptive category Black American instead of African American or African Diaspora, especially considering trends in contemporary scholarship. These terms are extremely helpful in conveying the commonalities of religious experience and expression, as well as the historical and cultural links that exist between Africans on the continent and those in the United States and elsewhere. Though I recognize this, the use of Black American is intentional and derives primarily from my personal experience and philosophy. While the term African American is frequently used in formal settings, or in conversations with others, in my experience in informal settings Black is still commonly used. More importantly however, the term Black American keeps before us the painful and uniquely American history of race-based slavery and state-sanctioned White supremacy, a system in part fed by deeply rooted European ideas and negative associations of the term black. Finally, it helps distinguish recent 1st and 2nd generation African immigrants to the United States from those descendants of African slaves whose roots in America go back several generations.

indirect and oblique, commentary on social, political, and religious issues. This commentary is almost always theological in the broadest sense, in that it emerges from reflection upon situational reality in the light of one's conception and experience of the divine. It is not only the lyrics that "speak" but the syncopated beats and rhythms of African origin that existed in various American slavery cultures also offered an inherently subversive sociological and indeed theological critique of the White supremacist system itself. The "heavy emphasis on the production and manipulation of rhythm" (Reed, 2012, p. 8) were understood by both the oppressed and oppressor alike to invoke various spiritual presences that empowered them to resist the dehumanising shackles of White supremacy. Indeed, the fact of their engagement with the spirit realm was itself a rebuke of the dehumanising and death-dealing nature of the slavery system, for it is to the human person alone, and not to any other creature, that "the spirit gives life".

Composer James MacMillan has argued that "music is the most spiritual of the arts" because it "seems to get into the crevices of the human-divine experience" (MacMillan, 2000, p. 17). In the case of Black people in the United States, this has meant a theological confrontation between the is and ought of the Christian faith as it was expressed in institutions shot through with the normative assumptions of Eurocentric White supremacy. Not only was the spiritual dimension of Black music realised, but the "communicative power" (Reed, 2012, p. 10) of the dominant African instrument – the drum – was also recognised. To forestall the possibility of these instruments being used to facilitate rebellion, their usage was restricted in law, and denigrated in culture as inherently anti-Christian. For many years, Black and White Christians both frowned upon such music as both uncivilised and unsuitable for use in Christian worship. Many Christians greeted the introduction of drums and other percussive instruments into the church via Black American Pentecostalism with ridicule and saw them as both worldly and primitive. Nevertheless, Gospel music descends from this tradition via the so-called Negro spirituals. So too do rap and hip-hop, to the consternation of many Christians. Despite the misgivings of Christians, however, rap and hip-hop have been identified as "one of the most recent developments in the African American oral tradition that stems from pre-colonial African cultures", whose "preoccupation with worldly suffering makes it distinctly religious." (Dallam, 2007, p. 84–85).

The categorization of rap and hip-hop music as distinctly religious or theological in nature is a striking assertion within an African setting where the lingering impact of missionary education and post-colonial evangelical conservatism conspire to erect a firm wall between anything that can be called Christian and the world of rap, hip-hop, or hiplife music, which are generally characterized as worldly. I do not intend to provide an in-depth theological analysis of these musical forms generally, but merely to highlight how such music may encode a grassroots theology that may be otherwise obscured due to its supposedly ‘secular’ nature. An even cursory look at hiplife music, “a fusion of the [h]ip-hop music of Europe and America and the [h]ighlife music of Africa” (Nkansah, 2021, p. 30), shows this to be the case. For example, the idea that “material wealth and health comes to faithful believers of the word of God” (Nikoi, 2020, p. 1959), is a common theme in hiplife music. Thus far, however, the presence of such grassroot theology appears to have attracted little attention from popular music scholarship in Ghana.

This issue is, of course, the old problem of the engagement, or rather disengagement, of Christianity and culture dressed in new garb. Just as Christian converts were segregated by missionaries into salems to prevent them from being infected by the spiritual contagion of African primal religion, so too many contemporary Christians retreat into musical and artistic salems as a means of keeping themselves “unspotted from the world”. This is even more the case when such music or cultural forms are too closely associated with African religion or spirituality. For some Christians, any art or music that is not explicitly Christian in content is to be avoided entirely. Others are broader-minded, liberally enjoying whatever is on offer, with scarcely any thought as to the spiritual import of what they consume. Most linger somewhere between these extremes. In any case, however, even those who do not consider non-Christian music anathema tend not think of it as an avenue for theological reflection or expression. While this may be prudent and justified from a pastoral perspective, it is unscholarly to exclude swathes of culture as sources of theology merely because they are not explicitly Christian or religious in content.

Salem is related to the Hebrew word for ‘peace’ and those who were invited to live in the salem by the missionaries were those who had presumably found peace with God through Jesus Christ and sought to live at peace with others as well. Life within the salem was intended to reinforce their Christian commitments as well as to insure fidelity to the tenets of the church. Yet, it was also meant to ensure peace of a different kind; that is, peace from the disturbance of the primal African culture that surrounded them, and which

seemed to threaten their Christian existence. Still, just as the Hebrew prophet in Jeremiah 6:14 railed against those who cried ‘peace peace’ when there was no peace, one cannot but wonder if the contemporary distancing of Christian faith from popular culture attempts to silence voices that arise outside the expected boundaries of Christian theological discourse, but which discern the times with a remarkable degree of clarity. In the next section, I explore, in a preliminary way, the music of one of such voices that is one of Ghana’s most well-known hiplife artists, Kofi Kinaata.

Martin King Arthur, popularly known as Kofi Kinaata, is an indigene of Takoradi in the Western Region of Ghana, and the son of a Church of Christ pastor. Kinaata was introduced to rap music through a friend, and he subsequently took up the habit of making different renditions of popular songs and scriptural quotations that he was supposed to memorise during morning devotions. In the course of my ongoing research on Kinaata which involves informal discussions with various youth, the most frequent comment made about him is that they enjoy his music because “he talks about sensible things”; this is no small compliment in the competitive Ghanaian music scene. Beyond this, however, Kinaata makes an interesting subject for study due to his crossover appeal to Christian audiences, evidenced by his winning the 2019 Ghana National Gospel Music Award Hybrid Song of the Year (Ghanaweb, 2020), a feat that was repeated in 2022 (Ghansah, 2022). His work thus straddles the sacred / secular divide.

Kinaata released his first single, “Obi Ni Ba”, in 2011, but it was arguably the 2015 song “Susuka” that catapulted him to stardom. He is known for the poetic quality of his Fante rap lyrics which has earned him the nick name “Fante rap god”. Indeed, the superb literary quality of Kinaata’s work has drawn scholarly attention and this year, for the “third time in six years the English Department at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) has used a body of work from Kofi Kinaata as part of course materials for students” (MyJoyOnline, 2022). Thus far I have spoken only of Kinaata’s use of Mfantse, but his use of Ghanaian Pidgin English is of similar cultural, and indeed theological significance. In recent years, and to the consternation of many, the use of Ghanaian Pidgin English has increased rapidly among Ghanaian youth to the point that it may now be treated as a kind of lingua franca, especially in urban areas (see Time & Pryce, 2021). Ghanaian Pidgin English has made significant inroads in the Ghanaian church as well such that

“it is found in the praise and worship and even choral songs of both mission churches and [African Independent Churches]” (Frimpong, 2012, p. 180–181) which means that it has already become an avenue for theological expression. Aloysius Pieris has noted that, “language is our experience of reality and religion its expression” (Pieris, 1988, p. 70). This is true whatever language is being utilised. Consequently, Kinaata’s use of Ghanaian Pidgin English alongside Mfantse is not only significant as a socio-lingual culture phenomenon, but as a theological one as well.

Kofi Kinaata’s Songs & Grassroots Theology

Kinaata’s work has already drawn the attention of some Christian scholars, particularly his 2019 song “Things Fall Apart”, for reasons which shall become evident. The immediate titular reference is to Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe’s (1958) landmark novel about the Igbo community of the same name, to which Kinaata was likely exposed during his education. Achebe’s work is about the collapse of the Igbo world in the face of confrontation with the new Christian God introduced by missionaries. Yet Kinaata’s song has a further connection to Irishman W.B. Yeats apocalyptic poem “The Second Coming” from which Achebe himself drew inspiration. The first lines of Yeats poem reads: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre, The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” (Yeats, 1920). In Yeats’ metaphor, “the falcon is the speaker, or a human, and the falconer is God,” and the poem is about the “chaotic times where it seems God has left” (Khan, 2015, p. 388), and the chaos that ensues because, in Yeats’ words, “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity” (Yeats, 1920). I shall return to this idea later. Kinaata’s “Things Fall Apart” builds upon and updates Yeats and Achebe within a Ghanaian contextual frame through his use of the mother-tongue refrain “*Nti Nyame som paa na ye le som yi a*” – (“So, is this is how we are worshipping God?”) This phrase provides the lyrical and theological anchor for the entire song.

As is characteristic of hiplife, “Things Fall Apart” draws on “indigenous musico-poetic traditions of allusion and satire” (Obeng, 2015, p. 2) to convey its message, yet the music has a light, almost whimsical quality that belies the gravity of the subject matter treated by the song. The aforementioned refrain poses a rhetorical question to the listener yet simultaneously provides a commentary on the hypocrisy that runs through a highly religious Ghanaian society. His critique begins, as the Bible says, in the house of God. In the first

stanza he points out that the same people who attend Friday all-night services are also those who attend clubs on Saturday. He also refers to the popular saying that the same ships that brought the Bible also brought schnapps: “*Ade ye ship na ode Bible no baa ye no, Nkrofo sie nara nso di schnapp no be ye*”. Kinaata here implies that this phrase is a means by which “people justify their false religiosity” (Boaheng, 2019). After all, “if the same ship that brought the Christian Bible also brought schnapps, then the same person who attended church service... can equally attend club activities (or similar programs) without offending God” (Boaheng, 2019). Throughout the song he highlights various dimensions of this religious hypocrisy. However, he does not limit his critique to only the church, but speaks more broadly, indicting politicians for the dereliction of their duties and lecturers for giving passing marks in exchange for sexual favours. He mentions alcohol abuse among both Christians and Muslims; chastises women who are stuck to other’s husband like a “plaster”; and critiques the covetousness and greed that leads to pastors’ inordinate focus on preaching prosperity, and to others resorting to occult rituals in pursuit of material gain. Yet this incisive commentary is delivered humorously through Kinaata’s lyrical dexterity and use of his Mfantse mother-tongue.

My concern, however, is not only the social critique embedded in Kinaata’s music, as the social critique found in “Things Fall Apart” is not a novelty within the hiplife genre. Earlier generations of hiplife artists such as Barima Sidney have similarly embedded social criticism within their music. Popular music in Ghana has often been a medium of socio-political critique (Yankah, 2001), particularly in a cultural context in which direct criticism of certain persons or professions is inappropriate or perhaps even dangerous. In such societies oblique communication through “song is used ... to maintain a spiritually healthy community” (Obeng, 2015: 4) by providing a culturally accepted means of voicing complaint. The use of metaphor and double-entendre as in Barima Sidney’s song “Scenti Noo” (2003) is an example of this. Kinaata employs these techniques as well. My broader interest, however, is in the grassroots theology that both underpins and emerges from his music. In the discussion below, I discuss, in a preliminary way, some of the theological themes that appear in Kinaata’s music.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the broadening of sources of theology to include sources such as the music of a Ghanaian hiplife artist also “requires theologians to start discussing issues of method, data, and theory

in a whole new way” (Prosén, 2020, p. 162). This view departs from traditional methods of theological inquiry that focus primarily on “analyzing and interpreting specific texts” to appreciate “the spiritual experiences of ordinary believers” (Prosén, 2020, p. 162). Of course, one may object that we are not here dealing with the spiritual experiences of ordinary believers, but the lyrics of a hiplife song. Consequently, however valid Kinaata’s social critique may be, his music cannot be considered a valid source for theology. The problem with this view, though, is that it overlooks the fact that “[African] music is intrinsically spiritual, the sacred is intrinsically musical, and both music and the divine permeate every imaginable part of life” (Reed, 2003, p. 5). Thus, music need not be performed in a Christian context, nor contain only explicitly Christian content in order to be considered as a valid source for theology. On this note I now turn to consider some of the theological emphases that have emerged in this preliminary excursion via some of Kofi Kinaata’s songs.

The first is a focus on eschatology, or more specifically, a focus on the physical appearance of God. This emphasis appears in the lyrics of Kinaata’s collaboration with fellow hiplife artist Donzy called “The Crusade” (2019). This song parodies a crusade meeting (as also evident in the music video)¹ wherein the pastor uses an interpreter to convey his sermon to the crowd. Donzy serves as the preacher and Kinaata, his interpreter, mistranslates the sermon into Fante with comedic effect, yet with careful attention to both the sound and rhythm of the original English words. It is in the second verse that Kinaata links the eschaton with the physical appearance of Christ by serially mistranslating Donzy’s English phrase “be Christ-like in your neighbourhood” to “*ɔse se Christ ba aa, ye dze enyiwa bohun*” (“He said when Christ comes we will know/see [him] with our own eyes”). While within the structure of the song this is rendered as a supposed mistranslation, it is, in fact, a way of pairing the admonition to Christlikeness with the return of Christ. Because Christ will return in physical form, one should behave in a Christ-like manner among one’s neighbours. An in-depth theological analysis of this song text must await another day, yet the “radical sense of estrangement and separation from the world and its values” (Hughes: 1992,182) encouraged by the Church of Christ due to the imminence of the return of Christ emerges clearly.

In the second verse of “Things Fall Apart” Kinaata again mentions the return of Christ; yet in this case, the sense of the severity of God’s judgment is more evident. It is in this same verse that the title of the song “things fall apart” is first mentioned which brings us back to the eschatological tenor of W.B. Yeats poem. In Yeats’ poem, “the best lack all conviction” (Yeats, 1920)

and this lack of conviction is a harbinger of the Second Coming. In Kinaata's song, it is pastors who lack conviction. In his phrasing "*nokware no woho Nso osɔfo yi ntum wɔ nka*" ("the truth is present, but pastors cannot say it"). They have been compromised by a concern for financial gain and material things, and therefore the power to speak the truth as they should has been lost to them. The implication is that such truth telling has fallen to those who stand apart from the religious establishment and have not been compromised. In this way, Kinaata casts himself in the role of a prophet – one with the people yet one who also stands apart from them to speak the unpleasant truths that others dare not utter. This viewpoint is evident in the music video as well, where Kinaata is pictured as an observer, whilst the action takes place around him (Kofi Kinaata, 2019). Scripturally it recalls prophetic texts like Jeremiah 23.16–17 (ESV) which enjoins the people not to listen to prophets who, despite the misdeeds of the people, promise that "it shall be well with you", thus filling them with false hope. As in Jeremiah, the failure of those whose charge it is to speak truth is a prelude to judgement. Consequently, on the day of final judgement, when God will appear physically, unless God shows consideration, "no one will qualify for heaven; heaven will be empty" (Boaheng, 2019). The judgment presented here is absolute and is a determinant of one's eternal destiny. The reality of this judgment is tempered also with an implied plea for mercy. Kinaata asserts that unless God "considers" then heaven will be empty. To "consider" someone means to extend understanding or mercy to the person, and therefore to suspend the punishment or judgment they deserve. It is a common plea heard in Ghana, and it is thus not unusual that it would find its way into these song lyrics. In this case, Kinaata's lyrics point to the mercy of God, the willingness of God to "consider" as the only possible remedy for the inevitability of a divine judgment that would otherwise see no one qualify for heaven. This recalls the primal sense of human finitude and weakness, the consequent need for the intervention of a superior spiritual power, and of relationship with that power, and the reality of the afterlife (see Turner, 1977).

The same sense of finitude and plea for divine intervention is evident in Kinaata's 2017 hit song "Confession". As does most of his songs, "Confession" utilises a combination of Mfantse/Twi and Ghanaian Pidgin English, a catchy tune, and a memorable refrain, *Awarde bɛgye steer no oo* ("Jesus [come] take the wheel"). "Jesus take the Wheel" is the title of a famous country Christian song performed by Carrie Underwood and released in 2005, and it is likely that Kinaata

borrowed the phrase and at least some of the concept from Underwood's song, though re-contextualised for the Ghanaian situation. Kinaata's song takes, as its major theme, a warning against drunk driving, yet the song has a significant theological subtext of human weakness and the need for divine intervention. The first verse of the song details the unpleasant dilemma faced by those who are drunk when they have to find their way home at the end of the night. Verse two opens with a direct reference to scripture – specifically through an Mfantse paraphrase of the Pauline dilemma captured in Romans 7:19: *Ma me pe deε meye nu me ntum Ma me mpe na miye* (“I do not do the good that I want to do, but the evil I do not want to, this I keep on doing”). This is followed by a paraphrased reference to Matthew 26.41: *Sunsum pe paa na honam no ye weak* (“the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”). Given Kinaata's background as the son of a pastor who has often recalled memorising scripture during family devotions, it is unsurprising that scripture would find its way readily into his music. Kinaata uses this phrase to anchor his plea for divine intervention and mercy. His plea *M'enhwe ma m'aye oo Awurade* (“do not look at what I have done Lord”), mirrors and paraphrases the Psalmist in Psalm 25.7. There is an implicit sense of disgrace and shame that extends beyond the immediate circumstance of drunkenness. The subsequent lines assert that without God's intervention, he may not make it home: *Anhwe na m'enduro fie oo Krack-K. Me Awurade ame mi nyim de aa boil-up* (“Maybe I might not get home Krack-K. My God, I know you are angry”).

Home has two meanings here. The first is within the immediate context of the song and refers to the drunken driver's need to return to his physical home. The larger theological referent, however, is to a spiritual home, that is, a return to God. Yet God is angry, or, as the lyrics say, he knows God has “boil-up” – a pidgin expression that graphically captures the sense of God's anger. Because of God's anger, the artist shifts to a more personal and arguably humbler tone. The term “daddy” appears as a substitute for *Awurade*: *Afe ah, oh daddy I swear walahi. M'aye style biao bi Na emoom sesiaa de. Have mercy, na style n'asi*. (Also, oh daddy I swear *walahi*,² I am every style [I have partaken in every style], but right now, have mercy because the styles have finished”).

God is not presented as a distant figure but is now referred to in intimate familiar terms that accord more closely with the concept of home. God is not described in abstract terms, but in concrete familial ones. As he continues, the direness and embarrassment of his current state becomes more and more apparent. He begins to doubt his capacity to even recognise the correct path

2 An Arabic term meaning “by God”

that God should take control of the car because of the wind that is coming towards him: *Na me fie junction yi Se me dur aa mehu oo (m'ala); W'aadur yi de kyede w'ala; epia mi to nkyen na car no eba befa.* (“I don’t know if I will recognise the junction to my house when I arrive; Where we are unless you [intervene]... You can push me away and take the car”). This line may be read as an oblique reference to the spirit, symbolised by the wind, taking over the artists’ life – metaphorically the car – so that he can arrive safely home. It is the language of surrender to God considering one’s inability to steer one’s life well.

Despite this language of surrender and plea for God’s intervention in the second verse, the final verse finds the protagonist once again intoxicated, having skipped church to meet friends at Sakumono. He metaphorically compares his lack of interest in church to the perceived fragmented relationship between the music duo Mensah and Wanluv the Kubulor – a reference that would speak with clarity to his predominant audience.³ This verse ends on a despairing note. He has gotten stuck, and he tries to reverse the car which metaphorically represents his life, without looking, that is, without guidance. He has mistaken the road signs and has passed the red light. This is a picture of despair. Importantly there is no plea for God’s intervention in the third verse. The artist seems to have abandoned any hope for change and resigned himself to continuing on the wrong path.

3 Musicians Mensah and Wanluv the Kubulor collaborated on several projects, but later parted ways.

Conclusion

There is far more work to be done but I would like to share some concluding observations. It is interesting to note that nowhere in the songs thus far reviewed does the name Jesus appear, though the songs use a broadly Christian framework. This is not due to any aversion to the use of Christian terminology, as Kinaata frequently employs Christian terminology in his music. I have yet to uncover the reasons for this choice, though it may be a reflection of the need to appeal to a broader audience including Muslims for whom explicit reference to Jesus might be off-putting, but general references to God, or even to Christ might be more acceptable. Theologically speaking, however, what this indicates is that God the Father has a more prominent place in the theology reflected in the songs I have discussed than the person of Jesus. Christ is mentioned most prominently in “Things Fall Apart” but even there only incidentally; the major emphasis is on God. This may perhaps reflect underlying cultural presuppositions about the nature of God that have been carried over into contemporary grassroots theology.

I also note that though the music used in the songs is generally light in keeping with the genre, sin is consistently portrayed as a weighty matter that attracts the judgment of God. Considering that impending judgement, only God’s consideration will make a difference. Sin is also encapsulated in actions, and in particular vices that lead to social disgrace and estrangement from God, thus the heavy emphasis on hypocrisy and shame. This accords with John Mbiti’s (1988) observation that in African religion “a person is a sinner by deed in the context of the community” (p. 64). This gives Kinaata’s music a moralistic tenor, despite the consistent emphasis on God’s mercy. This too may be reflective of the underlying ethical structure of African primal spirituality and religion. There is more that can be gleaned but this is, as mentioned previously, only a preliminary glimpse through the glass of the work of one contemporary musical artist.

Kwesi Dickson (1984) likely did not have hiplife music in mind when he said everyone theologizes. Nevertheless, the artistes whose music resounds in the dancehalls and parties of Africa are not excluded. They are part of the rich tapestry of African culture and therefore may be counted amongst the “immense treasures of stories, myths, folklore, symbols, poetry, songs, visual arts, architecture, music, and dance” that is now adding a “very distinctive voice to Christian theology coming from the deepest yearnings of the peoples of the Third World” (Phan, 2008, p. 39). Culture is not restricted to the precincts of Christian communities nor confined to those with explicitly Christian

commitments. Scholars of Christianity among others, would therefore be remiss to dismiss or set aside music or other artistic expressions as unworthy of theological engagement based on assumptions about their supposedly secular nature. Similarly, the assumption that there is little to be gained from bringing together Christian theology, and African arts and cultural scholarship, must be set aside as simply that – an assumption. Kwame Bediako (2000) has taught us that theology “comes from where faith lives and... reflecting faith in the living God as a present reality in daily life” (p. 17). That faith is often evinced in unexpected ways, but that does not invalidate the theological insights that emerge through a glass darkly.

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BO7s78EWY34>