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Split-Level Christianity in Cameroon: Cosmological Discipleship as an Evangelical Response

Le Christianisme à Deux Vitesses au Cameroun: Le Discipulat Cosmologique Comme Réponse Évangélique

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Abstract

This article examines split-level Christianity among the Bakossi people of the South West Region of Cameroon as a case study through which a broader Cameroonian and African missiological problem is explored. The analysis suggests that the phenomenon is not adequately explained as weak faith, deliberate syncretism, or mere nominalism. Rather, it reflects the consequences of historical patterns through which Christianity was mediated that addressed certain theological questions while leaving the middle-level cosmological concerns of Bakossi communities – including questions of spiritual causality, ancestral consciousness, protection, and suffering – comparatively unengaged. Drawing on Bakossi cosmological concepts in the Akoose language, a documented case from the *Bakossi Bible Translation Project* (BBTP), and engagement with Hiebert's excluded-middle thesis, the article proposes cosmological discipleship as a constructive evangelical response. Cosmological discipleship is distinguished from syncretism, deliverance ministry, and generic worldview transformation, and is defined as the intentional formation of Christian communities whose deepest interpretive structures are progressively brought under the authority of Scripture and the lordship of Jesus Christ. The article concludes that the future vitality of evangelical Christianity in Cameroon depends not only on doctrinal orthodoxy and numerical growth but on the depth with which Christ becomes the governing center of a community's imagination, interpretation, and life.

Keywords: Split-level Christianity, Cameroon, cosmological discipleship.

Résumé

Cet article examine le christianisme à double niveau chez le peuple Bakossi de la région du Sud-Ouest du Cameroun, comme étude de cas permettant d'explorer une problématique missiologique plus large au Cameroun et en Afrique. L'analyse suggère que ce phénomène ne s'explique pas adéquatement par une foi faible, un syncrétisme délibéré ou un simple christianisme nominal. Il reflète plutôt les conséquences de schémas historiques par lesquels le christianisme a été transmis de manière à répondre à certaines questions théologiques, tout en laissant relativement sans réponse les préoccupations cosmologiques de niveau intermédiaire des communautés Bakossi – notamment les questions de causalité spirituelle, de conscience ancestrale, de protection et de souffrance. S'appuyant sur des concepts cosmologiques bakossi exprimés dans la langue akoose, sur un cas documenté du Bakossi Bible Translation Project (BBTP), ainsi que sur l'interaction avec la thèse du « milieu exclu » de Hiebert, l'article propose le discipulat cosmologique comme réponse évangélique

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constructive. Le discipulat cosmologique se distingue du syncrétisme, du ministère de délivrance et de la transformation générale de la vision du monde. Il est défini comme la formation intentionnelle de communautés chrétiennes dont les structures interprétatives les plus profondes sont progressivement soumises à l'autorité des Écritures et à la seigneurie de Jésus-Christ. L'article conclut que la vitalité future du christianisme évangélique au Cameroun ne dépend pas seulement de l'orthodoxie doctrinale et de la croissance numérique, mais aussi de la profondeur avec laquelle le Christ devient le centre qui gouverne l'imaginaire, l'interprétation et la vie d'une communauté.

Mots-clés : Christianisme à double niveau, Cameroun, discipulat cosmologique

Introduction

Christianity in Cameroon has experienced remarkable growth over the past century. Churches have multiplied, theological institutions have expanded, and mother-tongue translations of Scripture have made the gospel increasingly accessible across the country's diverse linguistic communities.[2] Yet beneath these encouraging developments lies a persistent theological and pastoral paradox. Many professing Christians faithfully attend church, affirm orthodox doctrines, and participate actively in Christian life while, especially in moments of crisis, interpreting reality through explanatory frameworks shaped by fears of witchcraft, ancestral displeasure, curses, spiritual aggression, or other forms of unseen causality. Illness, infertility, repeated misfortune, unexplained death, crop failure, and relational conflict frequently expose a deep tension between Christian confession and the cosmological structures through which life is actually interpreted.[3]

This article uses the Bakossi people of the South West Region of Cameroon as a contextual case study through which this broader Cameroonian missiological problem is examined. The Bakossi context is not presented as a representative sample of all Cameroonian Christianity. Rather, as a community with a documented translation history, a specific and traceable cosmological world, and a rich body of Akoose-language resources, the Bakossi provide a particular and illuminating window into a problem that extends well beyond their borders. Where the evidence is specifically Bakossi, it is identified as such; where broader Cameroonian or African patterns are invoked, they are supported by comparative literature.

The more urgent theological question is not whether Bakossi Christians possess a cosmology — every Christian community inhabits a world of meaning. It is whether the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord has penetrated the interpretive structures through which suffering, causality, spiritual power, and human security are understood. The New Testament presents discipleship as more than the transmission of religious information. It calls for the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23) and for believers to continue to live in Christ while resisting rival ways of interpreting reality (Col. 2:6–8).[4] This article argues that the persistence of split-level Christianity among the Bakossi exposes an unfinished discipleship problem — one whose resolution requires what this article terms *cosmological discipleship*: the intentional formation of Christian communities whose deepest interpretive structures are progressively brought under the authority of Scripture and the lordship of Jesus Christ.

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[2]Heinrich Balz, *Where the Faith Has Triumphed: Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, Theological and Historical Essays* (Basel: Mission 21, 2003), 88–105; Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL), *The Impact of Mother-Tongue Scripture Engagement in the Grassfields of Cameroon: A Twenty-Year Retrospective Report* (Yaoundé: CABTAL, 2018) [internal institutional document].

[3]Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology: An International Review* 10, no. 1 (1982): 35–47; Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 114–25.

[4]Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 11–29.

The argument proceeds in seven stages: a conceptual framework examining Hiebert's excluded-middle thesis and the necessary definitions; the historical mediation of Christianity in Cameroon, including the largely overlooked role of Pentecostalism; the specific cosmological world of the Bakossi in Akoose-language categories; a documented case from the BBTP; the constructive proposal of cosmological discipleship; and a brief statement of implications and limitations.

Conceptual Framework: Hiebert, Worldview, Cosmology, and Discipleship

This section establishes the conceptual foundation for the argument by bringing Hiebert's analysis of split-level Christianity into conversation with the related concepts of worldview, cosmology, and discipleship. It first clarifies these terms and then considers the continuing contribution and contextual limits of Hiebert's framework. The purpose is to provide a conceptual basis for understanding why Christian confession may coexist with cosmological patterns of interpretation and why a more comprehensive approach to Christian formation is necessary.

Definition of Terms

Before engaging Hiebert's analysis, it is necessary to distinguish three concepts that are frequently conflated in missiological literature: *worldview*, *cosmology*, and *discipleship*. A worldview is the broad cognitive, affective, and evaluative framework through which a community understands reality — the largely tacit assumptions that shape what appears intelligible, believable, and significant.[5] Cosmology is a more specific concept: it refers to a community's account of the nature, structure, powers, and relationships that constitute reality – particularly the relationships between visible and invisible dimensions of existence, the sources of power and causation, and the moral ordering of the universe.[6] Discipleship, in the New Testament sense, is the comprehensive reorientation of life under the authority and lordship of Jesus Christ – not merely the transmission of religious information but the transformation of perception, imagination, and practice (Matt. 28:19–20; Rom. 12:2).

Cosmological discipleship, as proposed in this article, is therefore distinct from several related but different concepts. It is not *syncretism* – the uncritical blending of Christian and traditional cosmological categories. It is not *deliverance ministry* – a primarily confrontational approach to spiritual powers that often addresses symptoms without engaging the interpretive structures that generate them. It is not *holistic discipleship* in its generic sense, which tends to focus on social and physical dimensions of human flourishing. And it is not merely *theological education*, which addresses the cognitive dimension of formation while leaving the cosmological imagination relatively unengaged. Cosmological discipleship is the intentional, communal, and Scripture-centred process through which the deepest questions of a community's world — questions of causality, suffering, spiritual power, protection, ancestral consciousness, and vulnerability — are brought into sustained critical engagement with the biblical gospel.

Hiebert and the Excluded Middle

Paul Hiebert's analysis of split-level Christianity remains the most influential missiological framework for understanding why Christian confession does not automatically produce comprehensive cosmological transformation. Hiebert argued that modern Western Christianity had inherited a worldview that divided reality into two broad spheres. At the upper level were questions relating to God, salvation, heaven, and ultimate destiny. At the lower level were the concerns of empirical science and everyday material existence. Between these lay what Hiebert

[5] Ibid., 25–30.
[6] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 1–5.

termed the "excluded middle" – the realm in which many non-Western societies located questions concerning spirits, ancestors, curses, witchcraft, healing, fertility, protection, suffering, and unseen causality.[7] This division of reality into two levels – upper and lower – with a neglected middle tier is what Hiebert identified as split-level Christianity.

Hiebert's contribution rests on a framework of critical realism, which in theological terms corresponds closely to the methodology of critical contextualization. As Hiebert himself argued, every context has its own realities that must be taken seriously – the appropriate metaphor is a map rather than a photograph.[8] His concern was precisely that Western missionaries, operating within a post-Enlightenment worldview, tended to exclude the middle tier of spiritual experience as unscientific, thereby leaving unanswered the very questions most pressing to non-Western communities. Hiebert was therefore not opposed to contextualisation; he was its advocate.

The limitation of Hiebert's framework lies not in its theoretical intent but in its historical application. The question this article pursues is not whether Hiebert's framework allows for contextualisation — it clearly does — but why the application of Christianity in the Bakossi and wider Cameroonian context did not consistently achieve the cosmological engagement Hiebert himself called for. That is a historical and structural question, not a critique of Hiebert's model as such.

Hiebert's Continuing Contribution and Its Contextual Limits

Hiebert's analysis remains significant for at least three reasons. First, as Hiebert himself argued, he placed worldview at the centre of the missiological conversation — Christianity cannot be evaluated solely by church attendance, verbal profession, or doctrinal conformity.[9] Second, he exposed the cultural situatedness of Western Christianity. As Charles Kraft has observed, missionaries frequently carried not only the biblical message but also culturally conditioned assumptions about what counted as legitimate knowledge.[10] Third, Hiebert highlighted the pastoral significance of cosmological questions: questions concerning suffering, spiritual power, protection, illness, and causality are not peripheral curiosities but among the questions through which people experience their most profound vulnerability.[11]

One limitation of applying Hiebert's framework in the Cameroonian context is its level of generality. As John Mbiti has noted, African religious traditions are historically diverse and cannot be reduced to a single framework.[12] The cosmological concerns of the Bakossi cannot simply be assumed identical to those of the Yoruba, Akan, Shona, or Zulu. As Kwame Bediako has maintained, contextual theology requires the kind of particularity that a generalized model of the "African worldview" does not always supply.[13] The second limitation is that framing split-level Christianity primarily as the coexistence of Christianity and traditional religion can imply that the persistence of indigenous explanatory systems is chiefly a problem of divided loyalty or inadequate individual commitment. The more difficult question — and the one this article pursues — is why older cosmological assumptions retain explanatory power even among sincere and theologically informed Christians, and what historical and structural conditions produced that persistence.

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[7] Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 35–47.

[8] Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 11–15. The map/photograph metaphor is developed in Hiebert's discussion of critical realism and critical contextualisation.

[9] Ibid., 26–30.

[10] Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 53–67.

[11] Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 35–47.

[12] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1–5.

[13] Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 224–41.

Christianity, Missionary Mediation, and Cosmological Questions in Cameroon

Mediation Through Missionary and African Agency

The persistence of split-level Christianity among the Bakossi cannot be understood without examining the historical manner in which Christianity was mediated in southwestern Cameroon. As Lamin Sanneh has demonstrated, the transmission of Christianity has always involved cultural and linguistic mediation; it has never arrived in a culturally neutral form.[14] The question is not whether Christianity was authentic, nor whether Bakossi communities simply resisted the gospel. Rather, the question concerns the epistemological forms through which the gospel was mediated, and specifically which questions those forms prioritised.

The Christian missionary encounter with Cameroon unfolded within the wider context of European expansion and colonial administration. As Rudolf Huber and Heinrich Balz have documented, Protestant and Catholic missions established stations, schools, and churches that contributed significantly to literacy, education, and the formation of new Christian communities in the South West region of the country.[15] The spread of Christianity was neither a single event nor the work of European missionaries alone. As Andrew Walls has argued, African agents participated actively and creatively in the growth of the church.[16] That historical reality of African participation must be kept clearly in view.

A more adequate formulation of the historical problem is therefore this: Christianity was mediated through both missionary and African agency, but the institutional and epistemological structures within which this mediation occurred often privileged certain theological questions — salvation, doctrinal orthodoxy, ecclesiastical identity — over the middle-level cosmological concerns of local communities. As David Bosch has observed, the problem arose when historically particular forms of Western Christianity were treated as the universal shape of Christian faith.[17] In practice, this could require the African convert to demonstrate Christian authenticity by distancing his or herself from significant features of the indigenous world, creating a form of religious dislocation in which Christian identity was established while the cosmological structures of indigenous life remained largely unengaged.

The language of syncretism, although sometimes appropriate, is insufficient as a primary pastoral diagnosis. It identifies a religious mixture but does not adequately explain why the mixture persists or what structural conditions produced it. As Hiebert's concept of the excluded middle helps us understand, that space between formal Christian confession and practical cosmological interpretation became structurally unaddressed through the manner in which Christianity was historically mediated in Cameroon.[18]

The Role of Pentecostalism: A Missing Conversation

Any account of split-level Christianity in contemporary Cameroon that ignores the presence of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity is methodologically incomplete. African Pentecostalism has not simply inherited a Western Christianity that ignores cosmology. As J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu has recognized, Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa have actively addressed precisely the questions Hiebert identified as belonging to the excluded

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[14] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 1–10, 51–60.

[15] Rudolf G. Huber, *The Development of the Protestant Church in Cameroon* (Basel: Basel Mission Press, 1971), 45–62; Balz, *Where the Faith Has Triumphed*, 88–105.

[16] Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 4–12. Wall, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.

[17] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 262–65.

[18] Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 42–45.

middle — spirits, witchcraft, ancestral powers, healing, protection, and deliverance.[19] Many Bakossi Christians today are members of Pentecostal or charismatic fellowships that preach regularly about spiritual powers and engage in deliverance ministry.

This observation sharpens the central question of this article. If split-level Christianity persists even where churches explicitly preach about spiritual powers and conduct deliverance ministry, then the problem is not simply the absence of engagement with cosmological questions. The problem is whether the engagement is producing genuine cosmological transformation or merely a different form of cosmological anxiety — one in which deliverance replaces divination as the mechanism through which spiritual vulnerability is managed, without fundamentally altering the interpretive framework through which suffering, causality, and protection are understood. As Ogbu Kalu has argued, the danger is that Pentecostal engagement with spiritual powers can reproduce rather than resolve the fear-driven cosmological orientation that split-level Christianity reflects.[20]

Cosmological discipleship, as proposed in this article, is distinguished from deliverance ministry precisely at this point. Its goal is not the management of spiritual vulnerability through confrontation with spiritual powers but the progressive transformation of the interpretive framework through which a community understands vulnerability, causality, and protection — a transformation centred on Scripture and the lordship of Christ rather than on spiritual confrontation as such.

The Bakossi Cosmological World

The historical argument becomes more intelligible when examined within a specific community. The Bakossi people of the South West Region of Cameroon provide an important context for this study precisely because their cosmological world is accessible through the Akoose language, documented ethnographic study, and the author's own field observation spanning more than two decades of translation and Scripture engagement work among the community. The purpose of this section is not to construct a comprehensive account of Bakossi culture but to identify the cosmological structures most directly relevant to the problem of split-level Christianity, using indigenous Akoose categories wherever possible.[21]

Personhood and the Relational World

Bakossi social existence is fundamentally relational. A person — in Akoose, *mod* — is not understood primarily as an isolated individual but as a member of an interlocking network of family (*túmbé*), lineage (*mbyaa*), village (*dyad*), and intergenerational relationships (*betaa*). Identity is constituted through belonging rather than through individual autonomy.[22]

Within this relational world, two kinds of relationships are foundational. A person from the mother's side is called *nláá* — a term whose closest equivalent in English is "uncle," but whose significance in Bakossi social life far exceeds that translation. For the Bakossi, this maternal relationship is the most valued and most protective of all kinship bonds. The paternal side is equally important: adult men are addressed as *sáá* and adult women as *nyaá*, and peers from a father's side are referred to collectively as *baányaŋ* — brothers. Personhood is therefore not about the individual in isolation; it is traced through several generations into lineage and communal belonging. Elders are respected as living links to the ancestors. A child is simultaneously a child of the parents and a child of the community.

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[19] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Trends within African Pentecostalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 88–105.

[20] Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 169–85.

[21] S. N. Ejedepang-Koge, *The Tradition of a People Bakossi: A Historico-Socio-Anthropological Study of One of Cameroon's Bantu Peoples*, 2nd ed. (Yaoundé: SOPECAM, 1986), 44–62.

[22] Ibid., 44–62.

This relational ontology is captured in a Bakossi proverb: *"myǎnyāā, myǎnyāā mod eehúdéé páá â bám!"* — "when a matter concerns one, no one draws a matchet from its sheath." The proverb communicates that disputes between kinsmen must be resolved by the community from within; no external force should be invoked against a fellow member of the relational network. This proverb illuminates both the depth of relational obligation and the cosmological significance of its disruption: when the equilibrium of the relational world is broken, the consequences are expected to be visible and serious.

This feature of Bakossi thought is not without points of contact with the biblical witness. The Old Testament repeatedly locates identity within covenantal and genealogical relationships, while the New Testament describes the church as a body and a household (1 Cor. 12:12–27; Eph. 2:19). The theological difficulty arises not in the relational form itself but in where ultimate security is located and how relational disruption is interpreted. Contextual theology must therefore distinguish between the relational form of a culture and the theological meanings attached to that form.

Ancestral Memory and Continuity

Ancestral consciousness occupies an important place within the Bakossi understanding of community and historical identity. The ancestors — *benyaméé* — are not simply kin who lived and died at an old age. They are those whose memories cannot easily fade because of their significant deeds for the community — distinguished from *bad ábe béwédé, "*—those who simply lived and died without particular communal distinction". The memory of the *benyaméé* is connected with the continuity of the lineage, the legitimacy of communal authority, and the moral obligations linking generations.[23]

Ancestral memory is maintained through several practices. The *benyaméé* are invoked during the pouring of libations at important family and communal gatherings, through lineage narratives, and in the seeking of blessing, protection, and abundance. Children born into the community may be named after distinguished ancestors — a practice whose understanding that the child so named will grow up to embody the character and legacy of the ancestor whose name is carried. This naming practice reflects both the desire to maintain ancestral memory and the cosmological conviction that the character of the departed can be transmitted to and expressed through the living.

It is important, however, to observe a distinction that the Bakossi cosmological framework itself contains. Ancestral consciousness — the continuing significance of the ancestors for communal memory, identity, continuity, and moral responsibility — is not automatically equated with the claim that ancestors function as autonomous spiritual mediators whose displeasure must be managed through ritual appeasement. The theological question this article pursues is therefore not whether Bakossi Christians should honour the memory of their ancestors but whether ancestral relationships function as interpretive authorities over the believer's experience of suffering, protection, and spiritual causality in ways that conflict with the unique mediatorial lordship of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 7:25).

The Visible and the Invisible

The most significant feature of the Bakossi cosmological world for the present argument is its integrated understanding of visible and invisible reality. In Akoose, the visible world is *nkŏŋsé* and the invisible world is *ekóm*. Bakossi cosmology does not present these as two completely separate and sealed domains. Rather, they constitute a relational and layered understanding of reality in which the visible world of people, villages, farms, forests, rivers, institutions, and

[23] Ibid., 55–62.

everyday experience is continuously connected with dimensions of reality that cannot always be directly perceived.[24]

The invisible, *ekóm*, is not regarded as remote from ordinary existence. It is associated with spiritual agencies, power, curses, blessing, danger, healing, suffering, protection, and death. For the person who possesses the knowledge to do so, accessing both *nkŏŋsé* and *ekóm* is understood as a real possibility. This is illustrated by a narrative from the author's field experience: during a mass witch hunt by a reputed witch hunter in a Bakossi village, a man was compelled to surrender the paraphernalia he was believed to use to access the *ekóm*. After the items were taken and burnt, he was heard saying: "They have taken the things and destroyed them, but they have not destroyed the herbs in the forest." The statement was understood by the community as a claim that the herbs — accessible in the visible world — were the means by which the invisible world was entered. The statement affirms precisely the cosmological conviction that *nkŏŋsé* and *ekóm* are connected and that access to the one through the other is possible.

A Christian theology that refuses to engage the existence of spiritual reality as experienced and interpreted by Bakossi communities may inadvertently surrender the very questions that shape practical decisions about life. The church must exercise biblical discernment regarding spiritual powers, false worship, and the interpretation of suffering – but that discernment must be engaged rather than evaded. When the church dismisses questions about the *ekóm* as primitive or irrelevant, it does not answer those questions. It leaves them to be answered elsewhere.

Causality and the Search for Meaning

The significance of this cosmological structure becomes clearest in moments of crisis. When prolonged illness, infertility, repeated miscarriage, unexplained death, or persistent misfortune occurs, the Bakossi cosmological framework makes available a distinctive register of causal questions: not only what happened, but why it happened — what relationship may have been disturbed, whether the ancestors have been displeased, whether an unseen agency — an *ekóm*-related force or an enemy of the family — is involved.[25]

In the Bakossi cosmological framework, causality is interpreted relationally and morally. The concern is whether an equilibrium has been disrupted, whether a relationship has been damaged, or whether hostile spiritual action has occurred. When misfortune strikes, the questions that come readily to mind include: "What did I do to someone?"; "Who did this to me?"; "Whom did I offend?" In response, a traditional Bakossi adherent may seek to undertake a cleansing or appeasement ritual to restore the disturbed relational equilibrium.

Two important qualifications must be stated clearly. First, this article does not claim that every Bakossi person interprets every event through a spiritual causal framework. The cosmological framework makes spiritual causation available as an explanatory category; it does not establish that every individual applies it to every experience. Second, and equally important, cosmological discipleship as proposed in this article does not seek to replace one form of cosmological determinism with another. It does not propose that every unexplained event should be assigned a spiritual cause. Rather, it calls for a biblically formed imagination that can hold multiple causal explanations — biological, medical, social, environmental, and spiritual — in appropriate relationship, under the sovereign lordship of Christ. Illness may have a medical cause requiring medical treatment; suffering may occur within a fallen world without

[24] Ejedepang-Koge, *The Tradition of a People Bakossi*, 44–62; Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 39–45.

[25] Ejedepang-Koge, *The Tradition of a People Bakossi*, 44–62.

any hidden spiritual agent; and spiritual realities may indeed be at work in ways that Scripture equips the Christian community to discern and address.

The Akoose New Testament Case: A Documentary Testimony

The conceptual argument becomes more concrete when examined through a documented event associated with the dedication of the Akoose New Testament. This section presents that testimony as a localized case of Scripture engaging a Bakossi cosmological world. It does not treat the event as representative or statistically generalizable; rather, it uses the testimony as primary documentary evidence through which the possibilities and limitations of cosmological engagement through mother-tongue Scripture can be examined.

Methodological Clarification

This section presents a documentary testimony from the Bakossi Bible Translation Project (BBTP) that illustrates what cosmological engagement through Scripture can look like in a specific Bakossi context. Several methodological clarifications are necessary before the testimony is presented.

The testimony was observed and recorded by the author, who served as scribe for the BBTP translation team and subsequently headed the department of translation and Scripture Engagement for the project. In this capacity, the author made it a systematic practice to collect and preserve written records of impact stories and testimonies associated with the Akoose New Testament translation. These impact stories were regularly compiled and sent to project donors to demonstrate the transformative significance of mother-tongue Scripture engagement among the Bakossi. It was from this practice that *From a Head Faith to a Heart Faith* emerged — a self-published documentary testimony collection produced for the BBTP by the author.[26]

This origin requires an explicit acknowledgement of the obvious conflict of perspective: the author is simultaneously the researcher examining this testimony and the compiler of the primary source in which it is preserved. This article does not use the testimony as independent scholarly confirmation of its argument. It is treated as primary documentary evidence — a first-hand account from the translation field that illustrates the theological question under investigation. The significance of the testimony lies not in its statistical representativeness but in its particularity: it provides a concrete, localized narrative in which a cosmological encounter with translated Scripture becomes visible and traceable.

Methodologically, the following is established: the testimony was recorded contemporaneously by the author, who was present at the event. The event itself was public, witnessed by a large gathering of community members, event organisers, and translation team staff. The testimony was oral, delivered in Akoose, and subsequently documented in writing by the author. The subsequent behaviour of the person involved was observed and followed up by the translation team. The public nature of the event means that its occurrence and the man's public declaration were witnessed by community members, event organisers, and translation-team staff; however, the present article does not claim independent verification of the theological interpretation placed upon the event.

The 2010 Akoose New Testament Dedication

The testimony concerns events at the public dedication of the Akoose New Testament in 2010, held at the community grandstand in the presence of a large gathering of witnesses. During the

[26] Nkwelle Ngome Joseph, *from a Head Faith to a Heart Faith: Testimonies and Impact Stories from the Bakossi Bible Translation Project* (self-published documentary testimony collection produced for the Bakossi Bible Translation Project, 2010). Note: the author of this article is also the compiler of this primary source; the testimony is used here as documentary field evidence, not as independent scholarly confirmation.

dedication ceremony, portions of the newly translated Scripture were read publicly in Akoose. After the readings, a man who had been present in the crowd — carrying a traditional bag (*ngwem*) — stepped forward. After a brief exchange with event organisers, he was given the microphone.

The contents of his *ngwem* included a gourd, cowries, barks of trees, and herbs — objects associated with traditional divination practice and, in the Bakossi cosmological framework, with accessing and navigating the *ekóm*, the invisible world. He poured the contents of the bag onto the ground. He then addressed the gathered community in Akoose: "Today, light has come to Bakossiland and darkness must give way. I am calling on those living in darkness that we must let light shine in our land."

The language of this declaration is cosmologically significant. The man did not say simply that he had changed his religious affiliation or decided to attend church. He spoke in terms of the foundational cosmological categories of the Bakossi world — light and darkness, the visible and the invisible — and declared a reorientation of interpretive authority within those categories. The authority of the Word encountered in the mother tongue had become existentially credible within the world in which the question of protection and spiritual access had always been asked.

Following the dedication ceremony, the man was prayed for and followed up by members of the translation team. He subsequently became an active participant in a listening group for the audio version of the Akoose New Testament and later became a committed Christian and member of the Bakossi Presbyterian Choir Association (BAPRESCA) in his village. His surrender of the divination objects was therefore not an isolated momentary gesture. It was the beginning of a sustained reorientation of community and practice.

From Linguistic Access to Cosmological Engagement

The theological significance of this case lies in what it illustrates about the conditions under which Scripture may engage rather than bypass a community's cosmological world. The significance of the Akoose New Testament in this testimony was not simply that the Scriptures had been made linguistically accessible — Christian Scripture had been present in the Bakossi region for many decades before 2010 through other languages. The Scriptures entered a world already structured by questions of spiritual power, causality, and protection, and did so in the language in which those questions were actually formed, experienced, and negotiated.

This observation must not be overstated. The testimony of one individual at one event cannot establish a general causal relationship between mother-tongue translation and cosmological transformation. The church in the Bakossi area continues to face the challenge of split-level Christianity, and this one account cannot serve as evidence that the problem has been resolved. What the case does illuminate is a theological possibility: when Scripture is not merely translated into a language but heard, interpreted, and received within the existential world in which a community's deepest questions are formed, it may enter the very structures through which life is interpreted — and begin to reorient them from within.

Cosmological Discipleship as an Evangelical Response

The Bakossi case suggests that split-level Christianity is not primarily a problem of insincere believers or nominal church membership. Nor is it adequately explained as the simple persistence of traditional religion alongside Christianity. It reveals an unfinished task of Christian discipleship. The issue is not merely whether believers have heard Christian doctrine but whether the interpretive structures through which they understand life have been progressively brought under the lordship of Christ.[27]

[27] Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 35–47; Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 11–29.

This distinction is crucial. If the problem is fundamentally cosmological, the solution cannot consist simply in stronger prohibitions, more doctrinal information, or repeated denunciations of traditional beliefs. Christian formation must engage the deep interpretive structures through which Bakossi Christians understand suffering, causality, spiritual power, fear, protection, and hope. The constructive proposal of this article is therefore cosmological discipleship — a form of Christian formation that brings the deepest questions of a community's cosmological world into sustained and critical engagement with the biblical gospel.[28]

Biblical and Christological Foundation

The New Testament presents discipleship as a comprehensive reorientation of life. Jesus does not merely command his followers to remember a body of religious information; he calls them to follow him, to learn from him, and to live under his authority (Matt. 28:19–20). Paul describes Christian transformation in terms of the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2) and the putting on of a new way of understanding and living (Eph. 4:20–24). As Dallas Willard has argued, Christian formation therefore involves the transformation of perception and imagination, not only of behaviour.[29]

Cosmological discipleship is not a proposal for the uncritical preservation of Bakossi cosmology or for treating culture as a second source of revelation alongside Scripture. Its theological foundation remains the authority of Scripture and the unique mediatorial lordship of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 7:25).[30] The task is to bring the questions of the local cosmological world into sustained and critical engagement with the biblical narrative, allowing Scripture to judge, correct, and redirect the answers the community has historically given to those questions.

In the Bakossi context, this means asking explicitly what Scripture says about suffering, spiritual power, protection, causality, death, and human vulnerability. The question is not simply whether a particular traditional practice is permitted or prohibited. The more fundamental question is what the gospel teaches Christians to believe about the cosmological reality that makes a practice meaningful in the first place. If the church simply condemns divination, it may remove a practice without addressing the fear and uncertainty that made divination attractive. If it denounces ancestral mediation without engaging the Bakossi questions of belonging, protection, and communal continuity, it may leave the believer with a theological prohibition but no adequately formed Christian imagination.

The Communal Character of Cosmological Discipleship

The Bakossi cosmological world — in which personhood is constituted through relational belonging, suffering is interpreted within the moral network of kinship and lineage, and causality is understood communally — challenges any individualistic model of Christian formation.[31] As the relational ontology expressed in the Bakossi concept of *túmbé* (family) and *mbyaa* (lineage) makes clear, cosmological transformation cannot be treated as a private cognitive achievement.

The New Testament itself presents Christian formation as a corporate process. Believers are formed through teaching, mutual exhortation, collective memory, worship, and the practices of the body of Christ (Acts 2:42–47; 1 Cor. 12:12–27; Eph. 4:11–16). The church

[28] Tite Tiénou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa* (Abidjan: Africa Theological Fraternity, 1982), 43–55; Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 224–41.

[29] Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 3–16.

[30] Tiénou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa*, 43–55.

[31] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 264–70 [for broad African comparative patterns]; Ejedepang-Koge, *The Tradition of a People Bakossi*, 44–62 [for Bakossi-specific evidence].

must become a community in which the deepest questions of life — questions about the *ekóm*, about the *benyaméé*, about the causes of suffering and the location of protection — can be spoken, examined, and interpreted in the light of Scripture. Such questions should not be treated as embarrassing subjects that believers are expected to conceal. They should become subjects of serious Christian teaching and communal pastoral discernment.

The testimony of the diviner at the 2010 dedication ceremony is significant here. His declaration — "light has come to Bakossiland and darkness must give way" — and his subsequent participation in an Akoose Scripture listening group and in the life of his local congregation illustrate the communal and oral dimensions of cosmological discipleship. Scripture did not engage the *ekóm* through private reading. It engaged it through communal, oral, mother-tongue encounter. Cosmological discipleship must therefore ask not only whether Scripture is available in the language of the people but whether Scripture has become the living interpretive vocabulary of the community.

Multi-Causal Suffering and Biblical Discernment

A significant theological danger must be explicitly acknowledged. This article has discussed illness, infertility, miscarriage, death, crop failure, and misfortune as moments when cosmological interpretation becomes acute. The article must therefore state clearly: cosmological discipleship does not propose that every unexplained event has a hidden spiritual agent or cause. The Christian community must be formed to hold in appropriate relationship multiple causal explanations — biological, medical, environmental, economic, psychological, social, political, and spiritual. A church that assigns a spiritual cause to every experience of suffering risks reinforcing the very cosmological anxiety that split-level Christianity reflects, rather than transforming it.

Biblical discernment means forming a community in which illness is taken to a doctor and prayed over; in which death is mourned within a framework of resurrection hope rather than attributed to a hidden enemy; in which persistent misfortune is examined through Scripture rather than immediately referred to ritual specialists. This is the depth of formation that cosmological discipleship seeks — not the replacement of one spiritual determinism with another, but the progressive transformation of the interpretive framework through which all of life's experiences are brought before God.

Implications and Limitations

This article has several implications for evangelical discipleship, Bible translation, and contextual theology in Cameroon. For pastors and church leaders, the concept of cosmological discipleship reframes the pastoral problem of split-level Christianity. The question is not only how to strengthen doctrinal knowledge among Bakossi believers but how to form communities whose interpretive vocabulary for suffering, causality, protection, and hope is shaped by Scripture and the lordship of Christ. For Bible translators and Scripture engagement practitioners, the Akoose case suggests that the movement from translated Scripture to inhabited Scripture — from linguistic access to cosmological engagement — requires intentional communal and oral engagement with the biblical text in the mother tongue.

Several limitations must be acknowledged honestly. First, this article is based on a single documented case from a specific community. The Bakossi evidence illustrates a broader missiological problem but does not establish the universality of the patterns described. Second, the primary documentary source — *From a Head Faith to a Heart Faith* — is a self-published compilation by the author, who is simultaneously the researcher. This conflict of perspective has been acknowledged throughout, but it limits the independence of the evidentiary base. Third, cosmological discipleship as proposed here is a programmatic framework rather than a validated methodology. Its empirical testing through longitudinal community research remains a task for future scholarship.

Conclusion

This article has examined split-level Christianity among the Bakossi of Cameroon as a case study through which a broader missiological problem is explored. The findings demonstrate that the phenomenon reflects not primarily weak faith or deliberate syncretism but the structural consequences of a historical mediation of Christianity that left the middle-level cosmological concerns of Bakossi communities comparatively unengaged, a gap that Pentecostal engagement with spiritual powers has addressed confrontationally but not always transformatively.

The article's contribution is the proposal of cosmological discipleship: a distinct, Scripture-centred, communally embodied form of Christian formation that brings the deepest questions of the Bakossi cosmological world – questions framed in Akoose through concepts such as *ekóm* and *nkŏŋsé*, *benyaméé* and *mbyaa*, *túmbé* and *betaa* – into sustained critical engagement with the biblical gospel. Its Christological centre is the conviction that Jesus Christ, as the unique mediatorial Lord, speaks directly into the cosmological world in which Bakossi believers actually live. The critical question for the future of the evangelical church in Cameroon is not whether Christians confess Christ but whether they have learned to interpret life under his lordship.

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