God in Oral African Theology: Exploring the Spoken Theologies of Afua Kuma and Tope Alabi[1]

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Abstract

In this essay we explore the conceptualizations of God in African oral theology, focusing on the traditions of the Akan people of Ghana and of the Yoruba of Nigeria. We examine the spoken-word works—prayers and songs—of two African women, Afua Kuma and Tope Alabi.[2] Our goal is to lay out an agenda for an intentional Africanization of Christian Theology in Africa and the African Diaspora. On one hand, we honor the spoken theologies of the many Christians on the continent who shape other people's thoughts about God in various ways, while, on the other hand, we highlight the role of African women doing theology.

1. Introduction

Theology is typically defined as the knowledge of God. The term "theology" comes from the Greek word, *theologia* (θεολογία), which comes as a result of combining *theos* (θεός, translated "god") and *logia* (λογία, "utterances, sayings, or oracles"). *Logia* gives us the Greek word *logos* (λόγος, which is generally translated "word, discourse, account, or reasoning"). Its Latin root is *theologia*, which was translated into French as *théologie*, and into German as *theologie* before eventually becoming "theology" in English. In a nutshell, theology is a subject about the knowledge (*Logos*) of God (*Theos*). This *knowledge* is often said to be gained in the process

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2 Afua Kuma was a Ghanaian Christian woman who made use of traditional Akan poetry in public prayer. Tope Alabi is a Nigerian musician and Christian worship leader of Yoruba heritage. More will be said about them in the course of the essay. In this essay, we use "Africa" to describe the continent as a whole and "African" as an all-inclusive way of describing people of the continent, whatever their ethnicity. We do include the African Diaspora in our use of Africa, but we do often spell it out just for clarity's sake. However, when we speak of African cultures, we have in mind mostly the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, which is the part of Africa that has become increasingly Christian in the past century.

Keywords
Afua Kuma, Tope Alabi, oral African theology, African women theologians

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of the *study* of God (or, generally, God's word) which is believed to take place in classrooms, libraries, seminaries, and universities, with the help of numerous textbooks, some hundreds of years old and others currently being written. We agree that this understanding of theology is valid and is important for the development of the Church. However, because of its tendency to hide in books and in academic ivory towers, such a theology lends itself inaccessible to Majority world Christians who are limited in their publication of theological texts with a global reach. Furthermore, its dependence on the interpretation of well-read experts who are historically white and male renders it ineffective for global and contemporary Christian reflection, affecting even disadvantaged groups like women. As a result, we find Agbon Orobator's definition of theology as "talking sensibly about God" helpful and have made it the foundation of our propositions in this essay (Orobator 2008).

We have several convictions that serve as a base for the argument being made in this essay. First, we believe that all Christians do theology. Of course, all Christians have some thoughts (knowledge, reason) about God but, surely, this does not make all Christians theologians (in the professional sense of the word). We do believe that this knowledge about God does not necessarily need a classroom, a library, a seminary, or a professor, but it is, nonetheless, knowledge about God that is for the edification of the body of Christ. In a religious context like that of sub-Saharan Africa, people who do not identify as Christians also hold notions about God that can be said to be expressions of theological thought.[3] Even the religiously unaffiliated[4]—the *nones*—do engage, directly or indirectly, with the 'God-question' prior to committing to either category (Pew Research Center 2011, 24–25; Nnaemedo 2019).[5] We posit that this engagement with the 'God-question'—or, to put it simply, 'thinking and/or talking about God'—is the basic unit of theology.

This first conviction leads to the second. While we appreciate the significance of written theology (as we are doing in this paper), we also believe that to understand a people's theology, it is often helpful to get to hear their 'God-talk' in their most natural context—in the stories they tell and the songs they sing. People shaping 'God-talk' in any given community, congregation, or denomination function as theologians, regardless of the quality of their theological formation. It is in this sense that we consider both Afua Kuma and Tope Alabi theologians. They ought to be considered among the ranks of great African women theologians like Mercy Oduyoye, Musa Dube, Esther Mombo, and Isabel Phiri. Although they are all African women theologians, their research emphases render them academically diverse—which is equally important. Of course, the same can be said of African women worship-singers whose lyrics espouse and propagate theological nuggets that go on to live in people's hearts, giving them the words that they use to express their faith. We speak here of the likes of Sinach, Ada Ehi, Mahalia Buchanan, and many others helping Africans believe God fervently. Public theologians like Afua Kuma and Tope Alabi

3 Yes, we do talk about Muslim theologians as well.
4 This includes those who describe their religious identity as "atheist," "agnostic," or "nothing in particular." As of 2010, this group accounted for 16% of the religious distribution of the world, 2% of which was found in sub-Saharan Africa. See Pew Research Center, "Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," The Pew Forum on Religious and Public life (2011, 24–25).

5 Hence, as Nnaemedo rightly posits, "the divergent voices concerning the nature of God as represented by theists, atheists and agnostics" necessarily implies "thinking" about God. See Bartholomew Nnaemedo, "Philosophical Inquiry into God-Definition Question: The Context of Mercy" in I*gwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* (2019, 147).

remain only a footnote in the grand theological discourse shaped in the ivory towers of European and North American seminaries and universities. Thankfully, African theology is seeded ground. In spite of the gradual erosion of popular theology that is infused into African culture and family life,[6] reservoirs of authentic African theology—*written*, *symbolic* and especially, *oral*—still abound (Mbiti 1980, 119). As such, thinking and "talking sensibly about God" (Orobator 2008, 3) in Africa, is oratory, for the most part, usually occurring in *unacademic* contexts. *Oral* African theology, we therefore argue, should inform *written* and *symbolic* African theology, and this should go back to inform oral theology. Both Mbiti and Bediako readily acknowledge that "academics [are] not the only theologians" and, as such, should draw their attention to the "informal or … implicit theology" (Walls 2008, 192–193) found among people of little or no theological education as "song, sermon, teaching, prayer, conversation, and so on" (Mbiti 1980, 119).[7]

Our final conviction is that Africa is—or, at least, *should be*—the principal domain of theology in today's world. The reasons for this are evident in John Mbiti's declaration made back in the 1960s that stating that, "Africans are notoriously religious" (Mbiti 1990, 1). Religion permeates all of African life, thus making *thinking and talking about God* ubiquitous on the continent.[8] In spite of the immense variety that exists within African cosmology and across African ethnicities, religion remains the blood of the African life. Besides, Africa is now the continent with the most Christians (Johnson et al. 2018, 21), much to the astonishment of opposing predictions. At the point of this writing, Africa most likely has 150 million more Christians than Europe. We, therefore, share Andrew Walls's concern about the West's continued dominance of theological discourse around the world. We are further concerned that the influence of Western theological thought shapes a great deal of the theology coming out of Africa.[9] Yet, as the African proverb goes, "Until the lions can tell their side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." It is to this domain of African oral theology that we now turn with the goal of exploring the act of theologizing—specifically regarding the conceptualization of God—by critically engaging with the *oral* works of these two notable, non-academic, female African theologians across two generations: Afua Kuma (from Ghana) and Tope Alabi (from Nigeria).

1.1. Madam Afua Kuma

Afua Kuma[10] (1900–1987) came from the Akan tribe in Ghana (Anyidoho 2000, 71). She joined the Church of Pentecost in her later years where, as a 70-year-old traditional midwife, she began to "sing the praises of Christ in the exalted language of praise songs to traditional rulers" (Walls 2008, 193)—a form of Akan poetry called *Apae*[11] —and this she continued to do

6 Culturally, it is an essential parental duty to pass on the ideas of worship and culture to the children. Through their words and deeds, fathers mentor their sons while mothers mentor their daughters in the trado-religious make-up of their societies. Unfortunately,the increasing rate of globalization, is eroding this channel of theology on the continent.

7 Unfortunately, as Mbiti (1980, 119) rightly observed, such theology is "often unrecorded, often heard only by small groups, and generally lost to libraries and seminaries."

8 While it is not untrue that there are Africans who will self-identify as being a none, it is nothing short of strange. Matthew Parris (2008) says, "As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God."

9 The gravity of this reality dawned on me when, in a recent conversation with two graduates from notable African seminaries, they both admitted to never being exposed to the works of African theologians in their studies.

10 Also known as "Christiana Gyan" (also spelt "Gyane"). For a detailed biography, see Akosua Anyidoho (2000, 71–75), "Techniques of Akan Praise Poetry in Christian Worship: Madam Afua Kuma."

11 Courthouse praise poetry of the Akan folkloric tradition.

until her death seventeen years later. Some of her praise-language prayers were translated and compiled by Jon Kirby into Jesus of the Deep Forest (Kuma 1981).[13]

1.2. Tope Alabi

Tope Alabi was born in 1970, the same year Afua Kuma discovered her gift of praising Jesus *Apae* style. She is a contemporary Nigerian gospel singer, actress, and film music composer from the Yoruba tribe (Odusanya 2018; Shepherd et al. 2003, 171). Unlike Kuma, Alabi is well-educated and is still alive. In 2019, she was crowned as "Queen of Yoruba language" and celebrated for her "vast knowledge in [Yoruba] language as well as her ability to capture the attention of non-Yoruba speaking Nigerians" (OakTV 2019).[14] Except for brief mentions in journal articles (Adeyemi 2004; Ajibade 2007; Oikelome 2010; Adeoye 2013; Koyi 2014; Uwakwe 2015; Endong 2016; Babarinde 2019; Emielu and Donkor 2019), not much had been written of her work in academic contexts in spite of her significant influence both in the world of Yoruba movies (Channels Television 2012a, 2012b; Adeyemi 2004, 51)[15] and in the Christian *Oriki* music genre specifically. This essay will make a novel contribution towards the latter and critically consider the works of these two women with the aim to unpacking an African conceptualization of the Christian God.

2. Conceptualizing God

Sticking with Orobator's definition of theology as "talking sensibly about God," what people like Kuma or Alabi do through their oratory is nothing short of theology. One could not read Kuma's *apae* in *Jesus of the Deep Forest* or listen to Alabi's *oriki* of God in *War* (Alabi and Bello 2019f), *Kabi O Osi* [The Unquestionable One], (2019e) or *Oba Aseda* [The Creator-King] (Alabi 2017) without being led to imagine the images being painted by their word-pictures and what they tell us about God. They communicate, through a very pictorial language, an invitation on a journey which leads their listeners to *think about* God—to *conceptualize* what God is like. Before proceeding to highlight and analyze some excerpts from their works, it needs to be mentioned that both the Akan and the Yoruba generally, besides Kuma and Alabi specifically, share many things in common in terms of cosmology, geography, and identity.

First, both among the Akan and the Yoruba, as among most Africans, not only is belief in God predominant, so is also the belief "that God and other invisible beings are actively engaged in the world of men … [and that] the universe is created and sustained by God" (Mbiti 1982, 196). Indeed, what Paul said of God the Son in his letter to the Colossians is not far removed from an African understanding of God:

> [F]or in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or

13 Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma* (1981), trans. Jon Kirby (Accra: Asempa Publishers). This was compiled originally in Twi language through the help of a Roman Catholic priest, Father Kofi Ron Lange, who knew Afua Kuma personally and recorded her prayers for posterity. A sequel is currently being put together and titled *The Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma II,* the manuscript of which we were privileged to peruse; *Jesus of the Deep Forest* has gone on to become a much-cited work especially in the area of what Oduyoye calls "Oral Christology" in an African context. See Mercy Amber Oduyoye, "Jesus Christ," in *The Cambridge companion to feminist theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 154; see also Anyidoho, "Madam Afua Kuma," 73; Joseph Kwakye and Jon P. Kirby, *The Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma II*.

14 OakTv crowned Tope Alabi luminary of Yoruba artistry; by her own admission, her preference for singing in Yoruba, besides being versed in the language, is that God speaks to her oftentimes through Yoruba adages and then unpacks the deep meaning of the adage to her. See Channels Television, "Artiste of the week: Singer Tope Alabi talks on her inspiration Part 2," (YouTube, 2012).

15 Prior to becoming a well-known artiste in Nigerian "Gospel Music" genre, she had been involved in composing soundtracks for Yoruba movies—by 2010, she had composed soundtracks for more than 2,000 Nigerian movies.

> powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:16–17 NRSV)

Besides, both the Akan and Yoruba have a similar traditional political structure where, as Anyidoho (2000, 74) submits, "authority [is] vested in the traditional political rulers, the royals, who also occupied the top position in the social hierarchy." Among the Yoruba, Salami (2006, 102) writes, the traditional ruler (usually a king or high chief) is viewed as *"iku baba yeye*" which literally means "*death, father-mother*" (often interpreted as "the awesome power that is the father and mother of death"). It is this king/chief ideology that provides both Kuma and Alabi the framework for conceptualizing deity.

Second, the *apae* among the Akan and *oriki* among the Yoruba serve similar purposes. *Apaes*, for the Akan, are a form of traditional praise appellation performance used for eulogizing political rulers by crediting them with unrivalled powers, obligations, and competencies so that others may revere them. This is done,

> by chronicling their royal ancestry, their military maneuvers and exploits, their unrelenting stand against their enemies, their annihilation of non-conforming subjects, as well as their affluence and magnanimity. (Anyidoho 2000, 78)

Likewise, for the Yoruba, *orikis* carry a similar import. On the one hand, they can be attributive names or appellatives expressing who a child is (or is hoped to become);[16] on the other hand, they can be praise-chants for kings, titled men, and other people containing a recitation of their feats recounted in order to amplify their self-image and sense of identity in themselves or their groups (Akiwowo 1983, 144). These *orikis*, Akiwowo adds, are supposed to incite the recipients to even greater accomplishments. For Kuma and Alabi, therefore, these language tools—the *apae* and *oriki*—become, as Salami (2006, 104) puts it, "the crucible where God is forged."

Third, specifically, both Kuma and Alabi share an identity complex given the peculiarities of their contexts. Kuma lived two-thirds of her life in the colonial era which, virtually everywhere in Africa, influenced the sociocultural make-up of different communities. This undoubtedly necessitated, for Kuma, a negotiation between staying true to her cultural identity with its practices on the one hand and exposing herself to the influence of Western cultures and beliefs (including, of course, embracing the Christian faith) on the other.[17] Alabi, however, grew up in post-colonial Nigeria, albeit in a traditional Yoruba setting in the ancient city of Ibadan (Odusanya 2018). Her education, transition from Catholicism to Pentecostalism, working at Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), and being involved in Nollywood equally demands similar identity negotiation to Kuma's—more so in a context of decolonization. What Anyidoho (2000, 75) says of Kuma, therefore, could be said of both of them, that there is "a simultaneous existence of multiple value systems, beliefs, thoughts, and ways of life … (as indeed can be said of almost all Africans)." This, no doubt, shaped their theologizing process.

16 In this sense, in traditional Yoruba families, there is an oriki for every child born into the family. Mothers and grandmothers tend to be versed in these poetic and highly descriptive adulations which they recite to the child as he grows—sometimes to placate him/her and other times, to remind him/her of his worth.

17 Anyidoho therefore posits, "Her two names, Afua Kuma (by which she was identified in her community) and Christiana Gyan (acquired after her Christian baptism, and which appeared mainly in the church records) are symbolic of the multiple influences in her life." Anyidoho, "Madam Afua Kuma," 74–75.

A final point of similarity is their blurred distinction between the Persons of the Godhead. Kuma's emphasis is chiefly Christological; the opening words of her book express this clearly:

> We are going to praise the name of Jesus Christ.
> We shall announce his many titles:
> they are true and they suit him well,
> so, it is fitting that we do this. (Kuma 1981, 5)

In the book there is no specific mention of "God the Father" or "God the Holy Spirit" except for a few references to God as "Jehovah" (*Onyankopcn*), hence Young's (2013, 43) assertion that Kuma seemed to have "collapsed the Trinity into an Akan variant of Oneness Pentecostalism," which her robust appellations of Jesus extol.[18] The same could be said of Alabi. While she appears somewhat trinitarian in her songs,[19] she makes overlapping allusions and descriptions such that there is no distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For both Kuma and Alabi, therefore, their conceptualization of God, on one hand, transcends the trinitarian models of systematic theology while, on the other hand, acknowledges the oneness and unity of the three *Persons* of the trinity. Given the abundant materials that have been written based on Kuma's prayer compilation and Alabi's large discography, a lot could be said about their conceptualization of God; however, due to the volume of their respective corpora, only two thoughts are hereby presented.

18 This is corroborated in the yet-to-be-published sequel, "The Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma II," where she writes: "The priests called the name of Jesus, / and the Holy Spirit drew near." See Kwakye and Kirby, *The Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma II*, 26.
19 For example, *Iwo Lawa O Mabo* (It is You We Shall Worship) seemed to have been dedicated to God the Father; *Logan Ti O De* (Immediately He Arrived) to God the Son and *Emi Mimo* (Holy Spirit) to the Holy Ghost.

2.1. Everything Points to God

D.O. Fagunwa's classic, *A Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1968) gives an inkling into the pre-Islamic, pre-Christian, and pre-colonial religious worldview of people who live in such contexts as Kuma's and Alabi's. In both Ghana's Eastern Region and in Southwestern Nigeria, one will find lushly vegetated forested hills with many different birds and animals and a similar cosmology undergirding how people view these creatures and all of life.For instance, the view that farms, forests, water bodies, and air space—while being the domain of farming, hunting, or fishing—are also the domain where spirit-beings are prevalent. Additionally, the view that God can be seen—metaphorically, figuratively, emblematically, or otherwise in everyday items, sceneries, and occurrences—contributes to the common cosmology of the region. Again, this ties into Paul's observation in Ephesians 1:23 where he submits that God is "the one who fills the whole wide universe" (Phillips)—he "fills everything everywhere with Himself." (Amplified Bible). Hence, Salami (2006, 106) writes:

> The Yoruba, like many other people with similar worldview [including the Akan], seek to see and create an invisible world wherein lives God in the structures of the visible in which they live. In other words, the conception of their relation to God is underlain by their concrete material relations in the visible world (as below, so above).

Such a worldview supports the idea that everything—persons, animals, places, or things—can, and should, point humans to God. Bearing this in mind highlights a central theme to the theology of these African voices, namely: God is the ultimate being who finds ultimate expression through anyone and/or anything that has ever commanded man's attention in creation.

Thus, Kuma (1981, 5) says of Jesus:

> The great Rock we hide behind
> the great forest canopy that gives cool shade
> the Big Tree which lifts its vines to peep at the heavens,
> the magnificent Tree whose dripping leaves
> encourage the luxuriant growth below.

She uses word-pictures from her everyday sceneries—rocks, forests, trees, heavens, and fertile forests (Kuma 1981, 39)—and descriptors that reveal that people find their occupation (*kente* weavers, farmers, hunters and, by inference, everyone), security ("the great rock we hide behind"), help (lifted vines … encouraged to grow), and enjoyment ("the great forest canopy that gives cool shade") in the Jesus that she is praising, just as subjects of a ruler find their satisfaction in the security of their ruler's commands. In one of Alabi's eulogies, too, (Alabi and Bello 2019c) the same imagery appears:

> The rain of heaven that truly satisfies
> The brilliant sun keeping everything in its time.

Or in another where she visualizes God as a highly intoxicating and expensive wine:

> You excite me and You lift up my spirit
> You intoxicate me and I stagger like one drunk with expensive wine
> You rock me back and forth in excitement
> In You I find joyful pleasures, Kabiesi![20]
> My Chief and Bridegroom. (Alabi and Bello 2019d)

The fascination of the Yorubas with intoxicating drinks and their high alcohol-tolerance is not unknown in literature (Neil 1966, 317–319).[21] What is, however, noteworthy is why Alabi chose "expensive wine" over "palm wine" (which could be fermented to varying degrees of alcoholic content). For her, likening the influence of God to palm wine would not be superlative enough because there are far more intoxicating (and more expensive) wines available.

2.2. God as Ultimate Power

The second and most significant point to make about the conceptualization of God by these African women is the power-dimension. The African worldview readily acknowledges that cosmic powers—both good and evil—are involved in regulating the experiences and behavior of humans (Fisher 1998, 100–102). It is, therefore, typical of *apaes* and *orikis* to engage the use of metonyms, metaphors, and similes that describe the recipient (in this case, God) as being the embodiment of superior power—superior in royalty, majesty, reliability, dependability, protective ability, justice, mystery, and relatability. In fact, for the Yoruba, Salami (2006, 106) notes, "God is seen not only as *powerful*, but God is also conceived as *power itself*." A close examination of the works of Alabi and Kuma will reveal that this, in fact, is their motive—to identify God as the ultimate "powers that be" in

20 A word used in saluting Yoruba kings. It literally means "The Unquestionable One" albeit used in the same context as the English will use "Your Royal Majesty."

21 According to Neil (1966, 318), the missionaries that served in Southern Nigeria historically had a major issue with the natives' alcohol use and the very high rate of importation of gins and liquors. This became a disturbing issue for Western missionaries working in the Southern part of Nigeria necessitating the Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1905 and 1907 to raise a debate about this in the House of Lords.

their trado-cultural understanding and amplify God as being transcendent beyond any powers ever known on earth. This feeds into their conception of God as King, Healer, Deliverer, Liberator, Friend, Diviner, to mention but a few.

This conception of God is achieved in a number of ways, only a few of which are highlighted below. First, by comparing praiseworthy earthly figures, ancestors, or divinities (as in the case of Yoruba *orikis*) to God and distinguishing the latter as being incomparable. For example, Kuma (1981, 20) says:

> Mere chiefs and kings are not his equals,
> though filled with glory and power,
> wealth and blessings, and royalty
> in the greatest abundance.
> But of them all, he is the leader,
> and the chiefs with all their glory follow after him.
> He is the one for whom
> women lay down their cloths on the path,
> and pour sweet-smelling oil on his feet.
> They run to and fro amidst shouts of praise before him.
> It is true: Jesus is a Chief!

In this preceding excerpt, not only does Kuma call Jesus "a Chief," she made it clear that he surpasses all human chiefs in glory and power—and this she does without belittling the fact that human chiefs—in her context—are, indeed, very glorious and powerful. In *Ka Bi O Osi*, Alabi recreates a Yoruba coronation event to show that God is far greater than any earthly king:

> You weren't rushed home
> Where they placed the crowning leaves on Your head
> No one had to conspire to crown You King
> Who were those who stood to cast their votes
> Deciding it was Your turn to reign?
> Who are Your King Makers?
> Let them stand to be counted.
> Who is Your forerunner that brought You into heaven?
> Who is that person who suggested,
> That You should come [and] create the earth?
> Can someone please show us Your Father or Mother?
> Impossible!
> You are God unquestionable!
> 'The Ancient of Days',
> 'The Ageless God' is His Name
> You are God unquestionable! (Alabi and Bello 2019e)

Another way these African theologians deify God in their chosen instruments of eulogy is to describe him in very colorful terms as the one capable of "astonishing reversals of so-called natural laws and unexpected outcomes of simple actions" (Oduyoye 2002, 154). For Kuma, for instance, Jesus is a hunter whose trap is capable of catching more than mere visible animals; it "catches the wind," which he then bundles up "with lightening and ties the load with the rainbow"—an ordinary rope will not do (Anyidoho 2000, 78). Rather than catch fish from the ocean, he catches them from treetops and rather than hunt for birds on treetops, he catches birds from the ocean. With these and many other allegories, she credits Jesus with supreme power capable of conquering natural forces. Alabi's work is replete with this approach as well. In *War*, she conceptualizes God as a mighty warrior who is capable of illogical feats of power:

> Our powerful warrior!
> Going ahead of us yet shielding our back from the enemy …

The powerful shadow that turns away the day of death.
Your dew softens the enemy's bullet and makes it of no effect
Your rain beats every mountain till they crumble
Yet, you are the everlasting mountain! (Alabi and Bello 2019f)

It makes no logical sense for one warrior to shield his army both from their front and behind nor for dew to turn bullets into soft harmless balls, nor for rain to beat mountains into crumbles momentarily. All of these allegories paint a picture, in Yoruba imagery, of power at its peak.

Another way both Kuma and Alabi conceptualize God as being "ultimate power" in their use of *apae* and *oriki* is often to employ (self-coined) praise names for Jesus (or God) in the dialect of their everyday reality using complex noun formations to create fascinating interesting imageries. For example, Kuma uses words like:

Ôkatakyi—Hero, brave one! (Kuma 1981, 5, 7, 10, 17, 39);
Akyerâkyerâkwan—You-who-show-the-way (1981, 7);
Adubasapôn—Strong-armed One (1981, 7);
Okuruakwaban—Source-of-great-strength (1981, 7);
Owesekramo—the untiring Porter (1981, 9);
Ôdôkôtôbonnuare—Hard-working Farmer (1981, 10);
Okokurokohene—powerful Chief (1981, 11);
Okwatayi-mu-agyabenaa—one who is not limited to a single place (1981, 39);
Woyâ saremusâe—Lion of the grasslands (1981, 46);

while Alabi uses words like:

Olodumare, Ekun Oko Oke—*Olodumare*[22]—The Indomitable Tiger (Alabi and Bello 2019d);
Arugbo-ojo—Ancient of days (2019e);
Ad'agba-ma-tepa—the old one who needs no walking stick (2019e);
Alagbada-ina—one who wears fire as his agbada (2019e);[23]
Alawotele-oorun—one who wears the sun as his underwear (2019e);
Ari-iro-ala—one who needs not know your dream before offering an interpretation (Alabi 2019e).

It needs to be said, however, that these self-coined praise names sometimes have no literal meaning, but brilliant sound mimetics. Their utterance, in spite of their literal meaninglessness, naturally commands a sense of awe and wonder in the listeners, appealing to their "auditory and visual sensibilities" in the hope that it will "appeal to the emotion of their God" (Salami 2006, 115). In revisiting his English translation of Kuma's prayers three decades later, Jon P. Kirby SVD describes the experience as being transported back into the world where he first heard those words and relived "its thrilling staccato beat…, assonance and lingual gymnastics" (Kirby SVD 2006). He notes:

> The Twi is courtly language and often archaic, so readers don't always know exactly what the words mean but their hair stands on end, nonetheless. For them it is not the past; it is their hidden soul. (Kirby SVD 2006)

22 While there is no consensus on the exact meaning of *Olodumare*, a suggested etymology is *Olodu Omo* Are which, put together, could mean "an entity that is very enormous, yet whose location cannot be ascertained." *Odu* means "a very big clay pot"; *Are* means "location unknown."

23 What *kente* is to the Asante people of Ghana, *agbada* is to the Yoruba males. It's a special kind of clothing which speaks of class.

This is a tool Alabi also uses frequently in her eulogies of God. She is known to have used words like:

Gbengbeleku-tin-da-nibi-owu
Atabatubu
Arabata ribiti aribitirabata
Akaba karabata gbaa
Porimapopo-babanlaku-babami-iparekete

While bits and syllables of such compound names mean one thing or the other, the name as a whole is meaningless, but the gesticulation of the performing artiste and the rhythm of the words often portray immense greatness and mystery.

Sometimes, these praise names or eulogies are directly imported from the invocations, incantations, and praise-prayer songs originally intended for historically-known ancestors and/or divinities (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, 34, 240),[24] albeit amplified and Christianized. For example, in *Eru Re To Ba*, Tope Alabi sings:

You are to be dreaded
The king who speaks and fire emerges
You are to be dreaded. (Alabi and Bello 2019b)

A Yoruba listener will readily identify the imagery here being that of Sango, one of the *orisas* (divinities) in Yoruba cosmology[25] who was a monarch—the fourth Alaafin of Oyo (Johnson 1921, 34)—who, in various myths, is described as *Onina-l'enu* [One who could eject fire from his mouth and kill his enemies with lightning] (Lucas 1948, 104). To make the distinction, however, Alabi goes on to use biblical imagery to put this 'Sango-like' God she is praising in a class of his own—a superlative class that will make the Sango of history only of infinitesimal fraction in power.

The God who speaks fire …
You who spoke and the red sea dried …
You who fed a whole king to maggots …
You who made Esther a queen suddenly …
You brought water from a rock
Who is like you? (Alabi and Bello 2019b)

By that rhetorical question, she makes her point: Sango may be powerful, but he is no match for the "King of kings."[26] It makes sense for Alabi—and other Yoruba Christians—to conceptualize God as being both *like* and *much more* powerful *than* ancestors. In conceptualizing God as such, Kuma and Alabi are making the point that, whereas they would have worshipped these ancestors and/or divinities in their pre-Christian past, now they know that all power truly belongs to God. Their listeners are therefore admonished, inconspicuously, not to mistake God for anything less, and not to settle for the worship of anything less; God alone is deserving of worship. An example of this is found in Alabi's *War*:

24 Yoruba traditional religion, for instance, has five fundamental beliefs including a belief in God *(Supreme Being), divinities, ancestors, spirits, and mysterious powers.* As such, the invocations and incantations used in the worship of these deities often include prayer songs which incorporate praise (*oriki*) and petition.
25 Also known as "the deity of thunder and lightning."

26 Another example of this will be *Owo kembe rebi ija* (the one who wears baggy trousers to the war front)—a name Alabi frequently uses which, however, was the *oriki* for Ogunmola, a Yoruba ancestral warrior. See Alabi, Lamidi Kolawole (2017); Alabi, "*Eje Ka Gbadura* Episode 13."

> …You go so far fighting the battle of your children
> that people mistake it for witchcraft …
> The door! The key! The inner chamber! You are the access!
> You are the access to come out and to go into everything.
> You are the way! (Alabi and Bello 2019f)

In this short excerpt, not only is she making the point that witchcraft is a lesser power to God's, but she's also painting the image that everything a witch would do—enter into an "inner chamber" from where they could have spiritual access to someone else's life—finds its truest and purest reality in God.

3. Conclusion: Their Legacy

Through the aforementioned language tools and many others, both Kuma and Alabi are leaving African Christians a legacy of a robust and dynamic African identity such that Africans do not have to stop being African to be Christian—they can be both. Though unschooled in theology, they uphold a reality which must inform the scholarship of *writing* African theologians—and this is already happening. Bediako's (1989, 58) position, for example, that "Christianity in Africa [is] a historical reality in African life," aligns with and celebrates the pioneering work of such oral theologians as Kuma. Together with the cloud of witnesses of African theologians in the land of the living dead—Afua Kuma, Lamin Sanneh, John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Ogbu Kalu, to mention some—the likes of Tope Alabi invite other African Christians to begin to *think* and *talk* sensibly about God consistently with our *Africanness* so that we may continue to speak about the Africanization of Christianity in the same breath as we speak of the Christianization of Africa. May this be so.

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