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Building a united community: Reading the Johannine concept of unity through the eyes of an Akan

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From the 1960s, African theologians sought to decolonise biblical scholarship, calling for a hermeneutical approach that pays attention to the African sociocultural context – inculturation. One of the undergirding principles of inculturation is that there are African sociocultural questions that the Bible can address through the appropriate interpretative methodology. Thus, this culminated in the application of inculturation on different levels. Similarly, an analysis of Akan aphorisms – the anthology of valuable data on Akan anthropology and communitarian egalitarianism – and the Johannine theology of unity reveals that there are sociocultural maladies that require inculturation. Consequently, the study employed Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics to read the Johannine unity ideation because it facilitates the cross-pollination of ideas – the Johannine unity ideation to critique the Akan culture and the conceptualisation of unity in Akan proverbial lore to enrich the understanding of the Johannine theology of unity. The findings indicated that Akan unity ideation receives its impetus from personal and communal benefits, making sustainability impossible without them. Additionally, it contravenes the tenets of Akan communalism and anthropology. Furthermore, it revealed that Christian unity is grounded on replicating the divine community; therefore, it can fill the lacunae in the Akan concept. Finally, it established that the culture enriches the text.

Contribution: Given that this article is an interactive engagement between the Johannine and Akan concepts of unity, it contributes to the ongoing discussions on contextual theology – the inculturation of the New Testament in the African context. Furthermore, it contributes to the discussions on Akan communalism.

Keywords: inculturation hermeneutics; Akan proverbs; Akan community; ontological equality; functional unity; Johannine community.

Introduction

The ascendency of African biblical hermeneutics over foreign concepts of Bible interpretation in Africa became visible in the 1960s (cf. Bediako 1999:1; Maxey 2009:50; Ossom-Batsa 2007:91–92). Ossom-Batsa (2007:91–92) affirms that biblical hermeneutics followed the Western cultural point of view until this period, where some African theologians launched models of interpretation, with the inculturation of the Bible as the motive. The political milieu around this time made such endeavours conducive because of the wind of colonial liberation that was blowing across the African continent, with its concomitant disconnection from imperialism. The fact that the theological schools used the Western paradigms of interpretation before this new era was enough for some African scholars to question the legitimacy and perpetuation of such methods after independence. Some found the discipline suspicious because of its origin – the colonial powers – and sought to decolonise it (cf. Gatti 2017:46–47).

It is pertinent to note that they were not advocating the outright rejection of hermeneutics; rather, they were calling for the integration of Western methods with a hermeneutical approach that considers the African context (inculturation) to compensate for the hermeneutical deficits in applying western interpretive approaches in Africa – the lack of 'attention to the African socio-cultural context and the questions that arise therefrom' (cf. Ukpong 1995:4–6).

Furthermore, the focus of introducing inculturation was to redefine the African Christian identity (Bediako 1999:1; Maxey 2009:25–28). Redefining their African Christian identity would require

biblical scholarship that attaches significance to the interpreter's context, knowing that the African Christian's identity is inseparable from its context or culture (cf. Adamo 2001:43). Thus, it necessitated the promotion of inculturation as a tool to afford Africans the opportunity to discover and maintain their identity as African Christians (cf. Bediako 1999:1).

Given the ongoing desire to contextualise the Bible through inculturation as an interpretative model, many scholars employ the term on different levels. For instance, Shorter (2006:11) defines inculturation as the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture or the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and culture or cultures. Loba-Mkole (2008:1347–1359) also refers to inculturation as the constructive dialogue between an original biblical culture and a receptive audience. Therefore, in the awareness of the application of inculturation on various levels, this study follows the inculturation hermeneutics of Ukpong (1995). He considers inculturation as an 'interactive engagement between the biblical text and a particular contemporary sociocultural issue' (Ukpong 1995:6). His view suggests that for him, the culture and the text act on or influence each other, thereby enhancing each other. Thus, he adds that 'the gospel message serves as a critique of the culture' and 'the culture enriches the understanding of the text' (cf. Ukpong 1995:6).

When Akan Christians read John, they would be more likely to identify the emphasis on communalistic values as an area where the gospel message can critique the culture, and the cultural perspective can enhance the understanding of the text. Communal values are those qualities underpinning and guiding the behaviour that ought to exist between individuals who live together in a community (Gyekye 1996:35). Some communalistic values emphasised in the Johannine and the Akan conceptual scheme that warrant inculturation are love (Jn 13:34–35; Jn 15:12–13, 17; Jn 17:26; Gyekye 1996:70; Opoku 1997:77), service (cf. Opoku 1997:17; Jn 13:3–17) and unity (Jn 17:11, 21–23; Boakye 2018:36; Gyekye 1996:37).

Therefore, the article employs the inculturation hermeneutics proposed by Ukpong (1995) to engage one of these values – unity. Whereas the Akan concept of unity constitutes the contemporary sociocultural issue in this study, the Johannine concept represents the biblical text that engages the former interactively through inculturation hermeneutics. To examine both concepts, the article extrapolates the Akan view on unity from their proverbs. It also studies relevant narratives in John to establish its concept of unity. Finally, it inculturates the Johannine concept in the Akan concept to establish how John critiques the culture and the cultural perspective enhances the understanding of the text (Ukpong 1995:6).

Consequently, the subsequent section examines Akan proverbial sayings for their understanding of unity.

Unity ideation in Akan proverbial lore

Any academic autopsy on Akan epistemology, philosophy of life and communitarian egalitarianism should not neglect their proverbs because they are the anthology or compendium of vital information on Akan anthropology and culture (cf. Boakye 2018:35; Opoku 1997:xviii). In the Akan conceptual scheme, proverbs are sources and enormous residue of knowledge garnered from the real-life experiences of the community (Boakye 2018:35) and summations of knowledge of the surrounding world (Gyekye 1995:14–15; Kyeremateng 2010:28). Against this background, every aspect of their lives is captured in their proverbial sayings (Boakye 2018:35; Mbiti 1997:ix). Consequently, scholars (Appiah, Appiah & Agyeman-Duah 2007:xii; Opoku 1997:xviii) perspicaciously note that it is impossible to appreciate the Akan philosophy of life without studying or recourse to their proverbs.

Similarly, the Akan ideation of unity can be explained by starting with their opinion on a person's place in the community in their aphorisms. The Akan view is that the community does not subsume individuality, because although humans are social beings, they exercise personal will and identity (Gyekye 1996:47). This is the import of the proverb, 'all heads are alike, but the thoughts in them are not the same' (Appiah et al. 2007:275; Opoku 1997:19). Thus, Akans understand unity as distinct individuals working together or in harmony.

Furthermore, the Akan concept of unity receives its impetus from their view of the insufficiency of a human being and the benefits of interdependence. The necessity of unity in Akan communalism is rooted in the notion that human beings are not self-sufficient. Akans express it in the proverb, 'A person is not a palm tree that he should be self-complete or self-sufficient' (Appiah et al. 2007:203; Opoku 1997:12). Opoku (1997:12) clarifies that the palm tree is self-sufficient because its branches surround it (Opoku 1997:12). Because human hands do not envelop the body and work like the palm tree, which has many (more than two hands), they are inadequate; thus, they require cooperating with others to achieve their purpose (cf. Gyekye 1996:45; Opoku 1997:11).

Therefore, the appreciation of the need for cooperation in the Akan community is also grounded on the benefits derived from the community of action that unity affords. This is evident in a plethora of Akan proverbs. Some of these adages are as follows: 'if many people carry God, not one of them will develop a hunchback' (Appiah et al. 2007:204); 'one finger cannot lift a thing' (heavy load); if a person scrapes the bark of a tree for use as medicine, the pieces fall to the ground; when two people carry a log, it does not feel heavy; many hands catch a valiant man; and one person alone cannot build a town (Appiah et al. 2007:19; Gyekye 1996:37; Opoku 1997:13, 17, 83;). These proverbial sayings teach that when community members unite in their actions, work burdens become lighter (Opoku 1997:17).

Additionally, they reveal that unity of action is a prerequisite for mutual benefits and accomplishment of anything worthwhile and extraordinary (Appiah et al. 2007:19; Gyekye 1996:37). This is encapsulated in the meaning of the proverb, 'if unity is not a good thing, look at the black ants as they form a straight line': 'cooperation results in advancement' (Appiah et al. 2007:19). This is also the import of some of the proverbs ('one finger cannot lift a thing' and many hands catch a valiant man). For example, lifting a heavy object requires all fingers, not just one. In this instance, strength, a natural concomitant of numbers, complements their individual inadequacies, thereby overcoming the insurmountable to accomplish the task through the accumulative effects of the collective work (cf. Appiah et al. 2007:19; Gyekye 1996:37). Thus, the proverb highlights the centrality of unity and cooperation in undertaking something remarkable (cf. Appiah et al. 2007:19; Opoku 1997:13).

One proverb that perfectly illustrates the above point is: When you remove one broomstick, it breaks easily, but when combined, they are unbreakable (Boakye 2018:36). The adage reveals that in a group, broomsticks are unbreakable, especially with the hand. However, they are fragile when isolated. The lesson is that there is strength in numbers: thus, being united benefits the individual and the community (Boakye 2018:36).

Moreover, Akan proverbial wisdom portrays 'unity of minds' as an enhancer of decision-making. Employing the human head as a synecdoche for the individual, Akan proverbs demonstrate how unity improves decision-making (cf. Appiah et al. 2007:275; Gyekye 1995:159). One of these is, for instance, 'the head of a single person has no thoughts' (Appiah et al. 2007:19). The adage underscores the difficulty of spawning wise decisions solely on the strength of a person's cognitive ability. However, this does not suggest the belief in the impossibility of taking personal decisions alone, but the problem of making some decisions without taking counsel from others. Consequently, the Akan indicates the necessity of making decisions with the assistance of others in the proverb, 'wisdom is not in the head of one person' (Gyekye 1995:50, 144). Gyekye (1995:50, 144) annotates that the maxim means some equally wise individuals may offer better ideas. Thus, the individual should not consider his opinions superior to others but expect them to assess his positions, thereby augmenting them.

Having examined the Akan ideation of unity, what follows discusses the concept of unity in the Johannine gospel because inculturation hermeneutics requires that a biblical text engages a contemporary African sociocultural issue: the Akan concept of unity.

The concept of unity in John

An informed meaning of the unity theme in John can only be derived from what the Johannine Jesus – the only authoritative expositor – promulgates on the subject (cf. Jn 1:14; Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:6). An analysis of Jesus' teachings on unity reveals that the theological foundation for unity is embedded in one theological term – one (Jn 10:30; Jn 17:11, 21–22; cf. Bauckham 2015:19). Given its theological potency, Jesus employs the word to promulgate the unity between him and the Father and its implications for the community. Since unity is one of the values that the believing community must imbibe from the eternal community, its theological value must be understood. This is only possible when we situate it within its narrative context in John by examining the oneness statements (cg. Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:2, 6).

In the Johannine gospel, the oneness statements emerge from interactions between Jesus and the Jewish ecclesiastical leaders and his farewell prayer for the disciples (cf. Jn 10:30; Jn 17:11, 21–23). Explicating his relationship with the Father to the Jews, Jesus posits that he is one with the Father (Jn 10:30; cf. Jn 17:11, 21–23). Having been accused of blasphemy because of this assertion, he restates his claim, indicating to the Jewish interlocutors that he is in the Father and vice versa (Jn 10:38). Analysing these statements allows the reader to appreciate the Johannine elucidations on unity in the Godhead and its reverberations on the culture of the believing community.

Such an analysis must begin from the Johannine prologue because it is the compendium of vital data on the themes in John (Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:1–2). In the prologue, John establishes how the concept of ontological equivalence and some communal attributes function inextricably to portray the relationship between the Logos and God as a community (cf. Jn 1:1–2; Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:2). Employing the phrase, ἐν ἀρχῇ, he reveals that the Logos and God (the Father) enjoy eternality and coeternity and are, therefore, ontologically equal (cf. Jn 1:1). The Greek preposition that describes the character of the relationship [πρὸς] also distinguishes between the Logos (the Son) and the Father, indicating distinction of persons (Borchert 1996:106; Harris 2015:18–19). However, John ties the personal distinctions in the Godhead, coupled with coeternity and ontological equivalence to an intimate relationship to justify its communalistic character (cf. Jn 1:1–2; Borchert 1996:103; Harris 2015:18; Keener 2003:369).

Consequently, the interpretation of the oneness statement can only be complementary to the idea of eternal distinctions already underscored, given the impact of the prologue on the themes in John (cf. Carson 1991:394). Thus, their oneness and the perichoretic relationship they enjoy do not denote the sameness of persons. The Jewish ecclesiastical authorities did not interpret the communicative force of the statement as the sameness of persons; they understood his oneness with the Father as ontological equality with God (Jn 10:33; cf. Harris 2015:202–203). This is in line with the concept of mutual penetration that the perichoretic union stands for: the unity of being, a relationship that allows the individuality of the eternal distinctions to be maintained while sharing in the life of each other (Köstenberger 2004:431; cf. Carson 1991:494). As a term, 'one' denotes two things: singularity (or individuality) and unity (Bauckham 2015:19). However, in

the community of God, both meanings converge; unity requires a unification of two or more distinct individuals.

The implication is that unity is one of the intrinsic values of the community born out of their ontological unity. The Father and the Son demonstrate unity because they are united in being – it is one of the two compatible sides of the eternal God (Borchert 1996:106; cf. Grenz 2000:112). Their union establishes ontological equality as the reason for participating in the life of each other and unity as a natural concomitant of being one in essence. It further suggests that unity should be the *modus vivendi* of people who enjoy ontological equivalence, not a means to an end. They were ontological coequals eternally before collaborating to create the world (cf. Jn 1:1–3). Thus, their functional unity is only an outflow of what existed ontologically or a manifestation of what is compatible with the divine nature. The oneness of will and task, a unity of purpose producing a community of actions, proceeds from this (cf. Carson 1991:394–395). Jesus attributes the functional unity he enjoys with the Father to his ontological unity and mutual interpenetration with the Father, considering them as products of divine partnership (Jn 10:38; 14:10; cf. Jn 5:17–20).

Similarly, the disciples of the community of God must bear these marks in their expression of unity as a theological and communal value (cf. Carson 1991:394). Thus, Jesus reveals that unity in the believing community is analogous to the community of God (Jn 17:11, 21–22; cf. Carson 1991:568). In the farewell prayer, Jesus prays to the Father for the disciples that they will be one just as he and the Father (Jn 17:11, 21–22). The Greek word καθὼς is both causative and comparative, affirming that divine unity is the cause of Christian unity and that the believing community is analogous to the community of God (Harris 2015:293; cf. Carson 1991:568). What relationship exists between the divine and human communities to warrant the comparison?

Akin to the meaning of the oneness of the eternal community, John does not imply the sameness of persons in his applications of the term to the relationships that must characterise the believing community. Such a description would be antithetical to the oneness theology in John, given its application to the community of God and the fact that the believer's goal is to participate in the mission of Jesus: incarnate the eternal community (cf. Jn 10:33; Bauckham 2015:26; Harris 2015:202–203). The kind of unity required of them is akin to the community whose interest it represents (Carson 1991:568). Bauckham (2015:26) affirms that in line with the Johannine theology of the community of God, the term concentrates on the unity of persons. In the farewell discourse where Jesus promulgates unity as a theological value, for instance, he often addresses the disciples employing the second person plural, indicating the plurality of persons (for example, Jn 13:12; Jn 15:3–12). Furthermore, he likens the disciples to the community of God (cf. Jn 17:11, 21–22; Carson 1991:568). Thus, what Jesus requires from the disciples are cultural values redolent of the eternal community – that they

imitate the unity existing between the Father and the Son (cf. Jn 17:11, 21–22).

Therefore, in Johannine theology, oneness is the unification of distinct ontological coequals into one body with a unity of purpose. The ontological unity stems from how God incorporates believers into the community. John indicates that membership is not by blood, by the will of the flesh nor by the will of man (Jn 1:13) – an indication that natural birth does not give the individual the authority to become a member of this community. This is critical because natural birth defines nationality. In a status-conscious social system such as the 1st century Mediterranean world, status is a concomitant feature of natural procreation (cf. Malina 1993:107; Keener 2003:468). Permitting human reproduction as a means of entry is tantamount to allowing the factors that produce social classifications to continue. Spiritual procreation proscribes unity based on social standing because it ushers all believers into a new status despite their social class (Morris 1995:87) or identity (Van der Watt 2000:182). It redefines community as a group of people joined together by ontological equivalence [τέκνα θεοῦ] – people who enjoy an intimate familial relationship with God and share in the community life of God (Van der Watt 2000:182). It is a relationship centred on the 'community of nature,' allowing believers to participate in the divine nature (Vincent 2009:49; Morris 1995:87), that is, the life of the 'social' Trinity (Grenz 1998:49, 2000:112). Consequently, their interpersonal relationships mirror the oneness of the Trinity and not the dictates of their societies plagued by social classifications.

Just like the community of the Trinity, ontological equality must define functional unity – the oneness of will and task. In God's community, ontological unity translates into the oneness of purpose (cf. Jn 10:38; Jn 14:10; Jn 5:17–20; Carson 1991:394–395). John traces Jesus' words and works to his ontological equality with the Father and the relationship of mutual penetration or unity, providing a paradigm for the believing community (cf. Jn 10:38; Jn 14:10; Jn 5:17–20; Carson 1991:394–395). Given that the believing community exists to incarnate the values of the divine community, they must translate ontological equality into the unity of purpose.

What is the significance of the unity of purpose for the disciples? In the narrative context of the prayer, Jesus ties the oneness of the believing community to their participation in the divine activity of *sending* or mission as *going* (Jn 17:18, 20–26). In John, the sent are witnesses who testify about the community – John the Baptist (Jn 1:7–8, 15; Jn 3:26; Jn 5:33), Jesus (Jn 3:11; Jn 8:18), the disciples (Jn 15:27; Jn 17:20) and the Spirit (Jn 15:26). As revealed in the prologue, believers have a responsibility to witness to expand the community (Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:6–7). The foundational principle of genuine Christian expansion is witnessing (Carson 1991:159). Therefore, John calls Christians to unity, given that it is a necessary provision for a productive and God-pleasing mission (Borchert 2002:197). Moreover, because the creation of the believing community was by divine unity, its sustenance requires the oneness of the human community

called to participate in the mission. Thus, Christians must see unity as a prerequisite for witnessing and employ it in this divine mandate.

Mission as *living* is the other aspect of the binary character of mission in John, where God requires unity from the believing community in their relationship with one another. It is a paradigm set by God. John portrays the Father and the Son as distinct ontological coequals preexisting in unity and demonstrating functional unity as a natural concomitant of ontological unity (cf. Jn 1:1–5). Similarly, being disciples requires the believing community to imitate God. Whereas witnessing is their responsibility to the world, being united is their duty to each other. Thus, the oneness of the disciples also entails living in unity with each other (cf. Jn 17:11, 20–22). Jesus makes it a prerequisite for the believing community of all generations by praying this prayer for the successive communities of believers (cf. Jn 17:20–22). The implication for every believing community is that unity is a mark of obedience to the Lord, fulfilment of their communal obligation and testimony of imaging the community of God. When this becomes the motivation, personal benefits and interests do not determine and contaminate the kind of unity undergirding interpersonal relationships.

Having examined the text and context, the subsequent section engages both interactively through inculturation hermeneutics.

Inculturation

In appropriating the abovementioned definition of inculturation hermeneutics by Ukpong, this section examines how the Akan concept of unity enriches the reader's understanding of unity in John and how the text serves as a critique of the Akan culture.

The culture enriches the text

The characterisation of unity in Akan proverbial lore can augment and broaden the understanding of oneness in John in various ways. One of them is, for instance, that it enhances appreciation for the role of oneness in the eternal community's incarnation of the ideal community concept and the significance of unity to the believing community's role in that mission. John ties oneness in the divine community to the collaborative works of its members (Jn 10:38; 14:10; cf. Jn 5:17–20). Additionally, he situates the prayer for unity in the original and future believing communities in a missiological context – their mission to the world (Jn 17:20–22).

The Akan concept deepens the meaning of the Johannine unity concept because it espouses the importance of unison for accomplishing tasks and, therefore, helps to understand it. For instance, the proverbs enumerated and expounded above – concerning the impact of the collective efforts of fingers and the leaflets of the palm trees united as brooms – give the reader an informed understanding of the narrative context of the oneness prayer; they help to appreciate the Johannine significance of making unity a prerequisite for

witnessing, demonstrating how the bond of unity allows Christians to accomplish this worthwhile mission (cf. Opoku 1997:13, 17, 83; Gyekye 1996:37). They also illustrate how Christians can remain unbreakable and fulfil their mission amid hostilities or persecutions (just like how united leaflets of a broom overcome obstacles to perform their role as a natural concomitant of unison).

Furthermore, the Akan depiction of 'unity of minds' as a prerequisite for enhanced decision-making enriches the text because John situates the kind of unity expected of the believing community in missiological and Christian communal living contexts (Jn 17:18, 20–26). Both missions require decision-making, making it imperative for a cross-pollination of ideas to enhance the outcome. Thus, the proverb ('wisdom is not in the head of one person') helps to appreciate the criticality of the call to unity by revealing that mental unity aids the functional unity required for Christian outreach. Furthermore, it enhances the understanding of oneness in John by demonstrating that the character of a relationship redolent of a community of God requires community members to remain one mentally, seeing each other as equally wise or individuals who may have better ideas to offer for the general good. This discourages any form of superiority and inferiority complex in the community because it admonishes individuals not to consider their opinions superior to others (Gyekye 1995:50, 144).

The text critiques the Akan culture

The Akan concept of unity poses some challenges for the Akan Christian. Because the Akan concept of unity receives its impetus from the recognition of human inadequacy and the need for unity to produce anything worthwhile because of this, it makes personal and reciprocal benefits the motivation for building a united community. The problem with this is that when accomplishments become the purpose of unity, community members might naturally become attached to people based on personal interests and the member's ability to help them accomplish their goals. The implication is that human relationships become a means to an end.

Most importantly, this contravenes Akan tenets of communalism. Many proverbs reveal that Akans believe that human beings are even more valuable than material gains and should be enjoyed just for being humans and nothing else – that is, community members must prioritise human fellowship above anything else. For instance, it is a human being that counts (Gyekye 1996:190; Opoku 1997:10), and a human being is more beautiful than gold or money (Gyekye 1996:25; Opoku 1997:12). However, some of the abovementioned aphorisms (e.g. many hands catch a valiant man and one person alone cannot build a town) affirm the Akan proverb, 'a person acts for reward' or benefits (Appiah et al. 2007:203). Because it is also a community where people believe in climbing by pushing down others ('If a fish eats fish, then it grows fat'), what counts in praxis is not always the human being but what he or she can offer (cf. Appiah et al. 2007:104).

Thus, John calls the Akan believing community to replicate the eternal community – demonstrate unity that is analogous to the divine community (Jn 17:11, 21–22; cf. Carson 1991:568). This implies seeing unity as a theological value and following John's theology of community. The call to action in the Johannine theology of unity is that unity must be grounded on ontological equality, not human insufficiency. Because Akans consider all humans as theomorphic beings or children of God as a result of having a part of God in them and resulting in their ontological equality, this allows them to revitalise in their community the sense and ideation of unity, challenged by personal interests (Gyekye 1996:24). Furthermore, it encourages unity grounded on the cultivation of human fellowship and not something perceived as a tool to fill the lacuna created by human inadequacies.

Additionally, John's theology of community invites Akan believers to allow their ontological equality to define functional unity. Consequently, rather than considering functional unity merely as an instrument for accomplishing personal and communal goals, the Akan believers must see it as a replication of what is compatible with the divine nature of the eternal community (cf. Borchert 1996:106; Jn 5:17–20; Jn 10:38; Jn 14:10). The call to action also denotes seeing their ontological equivalence as the common denominator and need for cooperation, akin to the divine community.

John calls the believing community to demonstrate unity as the *modus vivendi* of a community of God, not a means to an end. The Johannine prologue casts unity as a way of life before revealing the collaborative action of the divine community that culminated in the creation of the world, enjoining the believing community to do likewise (cf. Jn 1:1–3; Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:2). When unity is demonstrated as a way of life, it is not difficult to build a united community that is not challenged by personal benefits. It can also help to build a community where ontological equality is the substratum of unity, given that unity in this context does not receive its impetus from personal gains.

Furthermore, the text challenges the culture to allow 'eternal gains' to replace personal gains. Given the understanding of the effects of unity on achievements in Akan proverbial lore, applying that motivation in Christian outreaches will expand the community. In this way, personal interests become subservient to the divine mandate and the eternal community gains in the end.

The emphasis on love in the Johannine perspective of unity can help address the challenge of unity based on personal gains by proposing love-impelled functional unity. Jesus reveals that love is the substratum of the functional unity that exists between him and the Father; he only accomplishes what the Father does and reveals to him out of love (Jn 5:19). This culminates in perfect parallelism between the Father and Son's work, that is, love unites the functions so that the product is both the work of the Father and the Son (Jn 5:19; Carson 1991:252; Kysar 1993:43; Vincent 2009:135). In other words, the emphasis is on one task, and the outcome benefits all parties.

Because John calls believers a witnessing community, Jesus' prayer for the unity of believers connects unity to love, knowing the significance of love in functional unity and its concomitant outcome (Jn 17:21–23). Thus, a contextual reading of the concept of unity in John can allow Akan Christians to look at unity through the prism of love and change the focus of functional unity from personal benefits to fulfilling God's purpose for establishing the community of God.

Conclusion

The Akan concept of unity has its own merits and demerits. The characterisation of unity in Akan proverbial lore reveals how unity enhances communal life and the understanding of the text. This is evident in the various proverbs demonstrating that working collectively is a prerequisite for outstanding results – personal and communal benefits. On the other hand, some of these aphorisms expose the lacunae in the Akan conceptual scheme and sociocultural context, requiring Akan believers who consider unity as a theological value to look beyond their proverbial lore for something that can help to re-evaluate their concept of unity. Because John wrote to address challenges like these, the Akan believing community can read the unity ideation in John through inculturation hermeneutics to provide an appropriate biblical response to these sociocultural maladies.

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